Oration on the Dignity of Man

GIOVANNI PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA
1463–1494

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Oratio de hominis dignitate

Translated from the Latin with AI (Claude) and edited



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INTRODUCTION

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola was twenty-three, a count's son who had studied at Bologna, Ferrara, Padua and Paris, when in 1486 he published nine hundred theses drawn from every philosophy he knew — Latin scholastics, Arabs, Greeks, Plato and Aristotle, Hermes Trismegistus, the Chaldeans, the Jewish Cabala — and invited scholars from all over Europe to Rome to debate them, offering to pay their travel. He wrote this speech to open the debate. It never took place: Pope Innocent VIII suspended it, and a papal commission judged thirteen of the theses heretical or suspect. Pico died in Florence in 1494, at thirty-one; his nephew published the speech two years later, and the title by which it is known was added later still.

The opening is one of the most famous passages of the Renaissance. When God had made the world, every place in it was filled; so he made man without a fixed place or nature and told him to shape himself, free to sink to the level of the beasts or to be reborn among the divine. From this Pico goes on to philosophy as the way upward — moral philosophy, dialectic, natural philosophy and theology, the rungs of Jacob's ladder — and finds the same teaching in Moses, the Greek mysteries, Pythagoras and the Chaldeans.

The second half defends the disputation itself: against those who condemned public debates, doubted a young man's competence, or mocked the number of his theses. Pico argues that truth is scattered among all the schools, and describes what his theses offer, from the concord of Plato and Aristotle to natural magic and the Cabala.

The Dignity of Man

Man has no fixed place in creation: God made him free to shape himself, to sink to the brutes or rise to the divine.

[1] I have read, most honored Fathers, in the records of the Arabs, that Abdala the Saracen was asked what he regarded as most to be admired on this stage of the world, so to speak. He replied that nothing more admirable was to be seen than man. With this opinion agrees the saying of Hermes Trismegistus: "Man is a great marvel, Asclepius."[1]

[2] As I pondered the reason for these sayings, I was not fully satisfied by the many arguments that many people put forward for the excellence of human nature. They say that man is the go-between among creatures, familiar with the beings above and king of those below. By the keenness of his senses, the searching of his reason and the light of his understanding, he is the interpreter of nature. He is the interval between fixed eternity and flowing time and, as the Persians say, the bond of the world, or rather its wedding. And, as David testifies, he is only a little lower than the angels.[2]

[3] These are great things, to be sure, but not the chief ones, not those that could rightly claim the privilege of the highest admiration. For why should we not admire the angels themselves and the most blessed choirs of heaven even more? At last I felt I had understood why man is the most fortunate of living creatures,

1 "Saracen" was the medieval term for an Arab or Muslim; Abdala, an Arab author, has not been securely identified. Hermes Trismegistus, the legendary Egyptian sage, says this to his disciple in the dialogue *Asclepius* (6).
2 Psalm 8:5.

and therefore worthy of all admiration. I also understood what, in the end, that condition is which has fallen to his lot in the order of the universe, a condition to be envied not only by the brutes but by the stars, and by the intelligences beyond this world. It is a thing beyond belief, and marvelous. And why not? For it is precisely for this reason that man is rightly called and considered a great marvel, a living creature truly worthy of admiration. But hear what that condition is, Fathers, and in your courtesy grant me this favor with kindly ears.

4 God the supreme Father, the master builder, had already fashioned this house of the world that we see, the most majestic temple of the godhead, by the laws of his hidden wisdom. He had adorned the region above the heavens with intelligences. He had quickened the ethereal spheres with eternal souls. He had filled the parts of the lower world, mere refuse and dregs, with a throng of living creatures of every kind. But when the work was finished, the craftsman longed for someone to weigh the reason of so great a work, to love its beauty and to admire its greatness. Therefore, when all things were already complete (as Moses and Timaeus testify), he last of all considered bringing forth man. But there was nothing among the archetypes from which to shape a new offspring, nothing in his treasuries to bestow on his new son as an inheritance, and no place among the seats of the whole world where this contemplator of the universe might sit. Everything was now full. All things had been distributed among the highest, the middle and the lowest orders.[3] But it was not worthy of the Father's power to fail in his last act of begetting, as though past bearing. It was not worthy of his wisdom to waver, for lack of counsel, in a necessary matter. It was not worthy of his beneficent love that the one who was to praise the divine generosity in others should be forced to condemn it in himself.

3 Moses as the author of Genesis; Timaeus is the speaker of Plato's dialogue on the making of the world.

GOD'S WORDS TO ADAM

God sets man at the center of the world with no fixed nature, free to shape himself.

[5] At last the best of craftsmen decreed that the one to whom nothing of his own could be given should share in whatever had been assigned to each of the others individually. So he took man, a work of indeterminate image, set him at the midpoint of the world, and addressed him thus: "We have given you, Adam, no fixed seat, no form of your own, no function peculiar to you, so that whatever seat, whatever form, whatever functions you yourself choose, these you may have and possess according to your wish and your judgment. The nature of all other beings is defined and confined within laws we have prescribed. You, constrained by no narrow bounds, will determine your nature for yourself, according to your own free will, in whose hand I have placed you. I have set you at the center of the world, so that from there you may more easily look around at whatever is in the world. We have made you neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal, so that, as the free and honored shaper and molder of yourself, you may fashion yourself in whatever form you prefer. You can degenerate into the lower beings, the brutes; you can be reborn, by your soul's judgment, into the higher, the divine."

[6] O supreme generosity of God the Father, O supreme and marvelous happiness of man! To him it is granted to have what he chooses, to be what he wills. The brutes, as soon as they are born, bring with them from their mother's pouch (as Lucilius says) all they will ever possess. The highest spirits were, from the beginning or soon after, what they will be for all eternity. But in man, at his birth, the Father placed seeds of every sort and the sprouts of every kind of life. Whichever of these each person cultivates will grow and bear its fruit in him. If they are vegetative, he will become a plant. If sensual, he will become a brute. If rational, he will turn out a heavenly living creature. If

intellectual, he will be an angel and a son of God. And if, content with the lot of no creature, he withdraws into the center of his own unity, he will become one spirit with God, and, in the solitary darkness of the Father, who is set above all things, he will surpass all things.[4]

7 Who would not admire this chameleon of ours? Or indeed, who would admire anything else more? Not without reason did Asclepius the Athenian say that man, because of this shape-shifting and self-transforming nature, was symbolized in the mysteries by Proteus. Hence those metamorphoses so celebrated among the Hebrews and the Pythagoreans.[5]

8 For the more secret theology of the Hebrews at times transforms holy Enoch into an angel of the godhead, whom they call *malakh hasheckinah* [angel of the Divine Presence], and at times transforms others into other divinities. The Pythagoreans deform wicked men into brutes and, if Empedocles is to be believed, even into plants. Imitating them, Muhammad often had this saying on his lips: whoever departs from the divine law becomes a brute. And rightly so. For it is not the bark that makes a plant, but a dull and unfeeling nature; not the hide that makes a beast of burden, but a brutish and sensual soul; not a spherical body that makes the heavens, but right reason; not separation from the body that makes an angel, but spiritual intelligence. If you see someone given over to his belly, crawling on the ground, it is a shrub, not a man, that you see. If you see someone blinded by the empty illusions of fantasy, as if by Calypso's, softened by its tickling allure and enslaved to the senses, it is a brute, not a man, that you see.[6] If you see a philosopher discerning all things by right reason, revere him: he is a heavenly living creature, not an earthly one. If you see a pure contemplator, unaware of the body, withdrawn into the inner sanctum of the mind, he is

4 Lucilius (2nd century BC), the first great Roman satirist.
5 Proteus, the sea god of Greek myth, could change into any shape.
6 Genesis 5:24 says that God took Enoch; in Jewish tradition he became an angel. Calypso is the nymph who held Odysseus captive with her enchantments.

neither an earthly nor a heavenly living creature. He is a more majestic divinity, clothed in human flesh.

[9] Who would not admire man? Not without reason is he called in the sacred writings of Moses and of the Christians now "all flesh," now "every creature," since he molds, fashions and transforms himself into the shape of all flesh and the character of every creature. For this reason Evantes the Persian, where he expounds the Chaldean theology, writes that man has no native image of his own, but many that are foreign and acquired from outside. Hence the saying of the Chaldeans: *Enosh hu shinnuim vekammah tebhaoth baal haj*, that is, man is a living creature of varied, multiform and ever-changing nature.[7]

7 Genesis 6:12 and Mark 16:15.

The Ladder of Philosophy

Moral philosophy, dialectic, natural philosophy and theology as the rungs of Jacob's ladder, confirmed by Job, Moses, the Greek mysteries, Pythagoras and the Chaldeans.

10 But what is the point of all this? It is that we should understand this: since we have been born with this condition, that we are what we will to be, we ought above all to take care that it may not be said of us, "When they were in honor, they did not know it, and became like the brutes and senseless beasts of burden." Let us rather live up to the saying of the prophet Asaph: "You are gods, and all of you sons of the Most High." Otherwise, abusing the most indulgent generosity of the Father, we will turn the free choice he gave us from a saving gift into a harmful one. Let a certain sacred ambition invade our minds, so that, not content with the middling, we pant after the highest things and strive with all our strength to attain them, since we can if we will. Let us disdain earthly things, look down even on heavenly things, and finally, leaving behind whatever belongs to this world, fly up to the court beyond the world, nearest to the most exalted godhead.[1] There, as the sacred mysteries relate, the Seraphim, Cherubim and Thrones hold the first places. Let us, who cannot bear to yield to them and will not suffer second place, emulate their dignity and glory. If we will it, we shall be in no way inferior to them.

1 Psalm 49:12 and Psalm 82:6, a psalm ascribed to Asaph.

LIVING THE LIFE OF THE ANGELS

Burning with love, contemplating and judging, we can equal the Seraphim, Cherubim and Thrones.

11 But by what means, or by doing what? Let us see what they do, what life they live. If we too live that life (for we can), we shall already have equaled their lot. The Seraph burns with the fire of charity; the Cherub shines with the splendor of intelligence; the Throne stands in the steadfastness of judgment. So if, devoted to the active life, we take on the care of lower things with right discernment, we shall be made firm with the settled solidity of the Thrones. If, at leisure from action, we meditate on the craftsman in his work and on the work in its craftsman, and so are busy in the leisure of contemplation, we shall flash on every side with the light of the Cherubim. If with charity we burn for the craftsman alone, we shall suddenly be set aflame by his devouring fire into the likeness of the Seraphim. Upon the Throne, that is, the just judge, sits God, the judge of the ages. Above the Cherub, that is, the contemplator, he flies, and cherishes him as though brooding over him. For the Spirit of the Lord moves over the waters—those waters, I mean, which are above the heavens, and which in Job praise the Lord with hymns before dawn.[2] Whoever is a Seraph, that is, a lover, is in God and God in him; indeed, God and he are one. Great is the power of the Thrones, which we attain by judging; supreme is the loftiness of the Seraphim, which we attain by loving.

12 But how can anyone judge or love what he does not know? Moses loved the God whom he saw, and as judge he administered among the people what he had first seen as a contemplator on the mountain. So the Cherub, standing in the middle, prepares us by his light for the fire of the Seraphim and likewise illuminates us for the judgment of the Thrones. This is the bond of the first intelligences, the order of Pallas, the guardian of con-

2 Genesis 1:2; the waters above the heavens are from Psalm 148:4, and the hymns before dawn echo Job 38:7.

templative philosophy. This is the one we must first emulate and court, and then grasp completely, so that from there we may be carried up to the heights of love and come down, well instructed and prepared, to the duties of action. But if our life is to be formed on the model of the Cherubic life, it is well worth our while to have clearly before our eyes what that life is and of what kind, what their actions are, what their works.[3] Since we cannot achieve this by ourselves, who are flesh and savor the things of earth, let us go to the ancient fathers. They can give us the richest and surest testimony about these things, which were familiar and akin to them. Let us ask the apostle Paul, the chosen vessel, what he saw the armies of the Cherubim doing when he was raised to the third heaven. He will answer, with Dionysius as interpreter, that they are purified, then illuminated, and finally perfected.[4]

13 So let us too emulate the Cherubic life on earth. Let us curb the onrush of the passions by moral science, dispel the darkness of reason by dialectic, and so purify the soul, washing away, as it were, the filth of ignorance and vice, so that the passions may not rage recklessly, nor reason, losing its judgment, sometimes rave. Then let us flood the soul, now well ordered and cleansed, with the light of natural philosophy, so that we may at last perfect it with the knowledge of divine things.

JACOB'S LADDER

Jacob's ladder figures the steps of philosophy, from purification by moral philosophy to rest in theology.

14 And so that we do not rely on our own authorities alone, let us consult the patriarch Jacob, whose image shines carved on the seat of glory. This wisest of fathers, who sleeps in the world below but keeps watch in the world above, will admonish us. But he will admonish us through a figure (for so everything

3 Pallas Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom.

4 Acts 9:15 and 2 Corinthians 12:2. Dionysius the Areopagite, author of *The Celestial Hierarchy*, was then believed to be Paul's Athenian convert.

came to them): there is a ladder stretching from the lowest ground to the heights of heaven, divided into a series of many steps; the Lord sits at the top; and contemplating angels go up and down it by turns.[5]

15 If we, who aspire to the angelic life, must do the same, who, I ask, will touch the Lord's ladder with a soiled foot or unclean hands? As the mysteries have it, it is forbidden for the impure to touch the pure. But what are these feet? What are these hands? The foot of the soul is surely that most despicable part by which it rests on matter as on the soil of the earth: I mean the power that nourishes and feeds, the tinder of lust and the teacher of soft pleasure. And why should we not call the hands of the soul its irascible power? It fights as the champion of the appetite, and as a plunderer it seizes, in the dust and the sun, the prey that the appetite will devour as it dozes in the shade. These hands, these feet—that is, the whole sensual part, where the allure of the body resides and holds the soul, as the saying goes, in a stranglehold—let us wash in moral philosophy as in a living stream, so that we may not be thrust back from the ladder as profane and polluted.[6] Yet even this will not be enough, if we wish to be companions of the angels running up and down Jacob's ladder, unless we have first been well fitted and trained to advance duly from step to step, never to stray from the path of the ladder, and to make the journey back and forth. When we have achieved this through the art of discourse or reasoning, then, animated by the spirit of the Cherubim, philosophizing along the steps of the ladder, that is, of nature, and passing through all things from center to center, we shall at times descend, tearing the one into the many with Titanic force, like Osiris, and at times ascend, gathering the many into the one with the force of Phoebus, like the limbs of Osiris. At last, rest-

5 Genesis 28:12; Jewish tradition held that Jacob's image is engraved on God's throne of glory. "In a figure" echoes 1 Corinthians 10:11.

6 The maxim that the impure may not touch the pure is quoted in Plato's *Phaedo* (67b).

ing in the bosom of the Father, who is above the ladder, we shall be made perfect in theological happiness.[7]

[16] Let us also question just Job, who made a covenant with the God of life before he himself was brought forth into life. Let us ask him what the supreme God most desires among those ten hundred thousand who stand before him. He will certainly answer: peace, as we read in his book: "He who makes peace in the high places." And since the middle order interprets the admonitions of the highest order to the lower ones, let Empedocles the philosopher interpret for us the words of Job the theologian. As his poems testify, he signifies to us a twofold nature set in our souls: by the one we are raised upward to the heavens, by the other we are thrust downward to the lower world, through strife and friendship, or war and peace. In these poems he laments that he is driven by strife and discord like one out of his mind, a fugitive from the gods, tossed about on the deep.[8]

[17] Many indeed, Fathers, are the discords within us. We have grave wars inside our own house, worse than civil wars. If we wish to be rid of them, if we aspire to that peace which will raise us so high that we are placed among the exalted ones of the Lord, philosophy alone will wholly quell and calm them in us. First moral philosophy: if the man within us seeks only a truce from his enemies, it will crush the unbridled sallies of the many-headed beast and the brawls, rages and passions of the lion. Then, if we take wiser counsel for ourselves and desire the security of lasting peace, it will be at hand and will generously fulfill our wishes: having slain both beasts, like a sow struck down in sacrifice, it will seal an inviolable pact of most holy peace between the flesh and the spirit. Dialectic will calm the disturbances of reason, which is anxiously tossed amid the contradictions of arguments and the snares of syllogisms. Natural

7 In Egyptian myth Osiris was torn apart and his limbs gathered again; Pico gives the tearing to the Titans and the gathering to Phoebus Apollo.

8 Job 25:2; the ten hundred thousand who stand before God are from Daniel 7:10. Empedocles (5th century BC) made Love and Strife the moving forces of the cosmos.

philosophy will calm the strife and dissension of opinion that vex, divide and tear the restless soul on every side.[9] But it will calm them in such a way as to bid us remember that nature, according to Heraclitus, is born of war, and for that reason was called "strife" by Homer. Therefore natural philosophy cannot offer us true quiet and solid peace; that is the office and privilege of its mistress, most holy theology. To her it will show us the way and lead us as a companion. And theology, seeing us hastening from afar, will cry out: "Come to me, you who have labored; come, and I will refresh you; come to me, and I will give you the peace that the world and nature cannot give you."[10]

18 So sweetly called, so kindly invited, we shall fly up on winged feet, like earthly Mercuries, into the embrace of our most blessed mother, and enjoy the peace we longed for: most holy peace, an indivisible bond, a friendship of one soul, in which all minds do not merely agree in the one mind that is above every mind, but in some ineffable way become wholly one. This is the friendship that the Pythagoreans say is the goal of all philosophy. This is the peace that God makes in his high places, which the angels, descending to earth, announced to men of good will, so that through it men themselves, ascending into heaven, might become angels.[11] Let us wish this peace for our friends, for our age; let us wish it for every house we enter; let us wish it for our own soul, so that through it the soul itself may become the house of God. Then, once it has shaken off its filth through moral philosophy and dialectic, adorned itself with manifold philosophy as with the splendor of a court, and crowned the tops of its gates with the garlands of theology, the King of glory may descend and, coming with the Father, make his dwelling with it.[12] If the soul shows itself worthy of so great a

9 The many-headed beast and the lion stand for the appetites and the spirited part of the soul in Plato's *Republic* (588c–e). Romans sealed treaties by striking down a sow.

10 Heraclitus called war "the father of all"; Homer's line is *Iliad* 18.107. Theology's call echoes Matthew 11:28 and John 14:27.

11 Luke 2:14. Mercury, messenger of the gods, wore winged sandals.

12 Psalm 24:7–10 and John 14:23.

guest, then, such is his boundless clemency, clothed in golden raiment as in a wedding garment and wrapped in the manifold variety of the sciences, it will receive its beautiful guest no longer as a guest but as a bridegroom. So as never to be parted from him, it will long to be parted from its own people; forgetting its father's house and even itself, it will long to die in itself so as to live in the bridegroom. In his sight the death of his saints is precious indeed—that death, I mean, if the fullness of life should be called death, whose meditation, the wise have said, is the study of philosophy.[13]

MOSES AND THE TABERNACLE

Moses' laws for the tabernacle are read as the stages of moral philosophy, dialectic, natural philosophy and theology.

[19] Let us also summon Moses himself, only a little below the overflowing fountain of the sacrosanct and ineffable intelligence, whose nectar makes the angels drunk. We shall hear the venerable judge proclaim these laws to us, who dwell in the desert solitude of this body: "Let those who are still polluted and in need of moral philosophy live with the common people outside the tabernacle, under the open sky, purifying themselves meanwhile like the Thessalian priests. Let those who have already set their conduct in order be received into the sanctuary, but let them not yet handle the sacred things; first let them serve the rites as zealous Levites of philosophy, in the service of dialectic. Then, admitted to the rites themselves, let them contemplate, in the priesthood of philosophy, now the many-colored robe of the palace of God on high, that is, the starry adornment of his court, now the heavenly candlestick with its seven lights, now the elements in their coverings of skin. So at last, received through the merits of theology's sublimity into the inner sanctuary of the temple, with no veil of image between,

13 Psalm 45:10–13 and Psalm 116:15. In Plato's *Phaedo* (67e, 81a) philosophy is the practice of dying.

let them enjoy the glory of the godhead."[14] This, surely, is what Moses commands us, and in commanding, admonishes, rouses and urges us: that while we can, we should prepare our way through philosophy to the heavenly glory to come.

[20] But it is not only the Mosaic or Christian mysteries: the ancient theology too shows us the benefits and the dignity of these liberal arts about which I have come to dispute. For what else is meant by the grades of initiates observed in the secret rites of the Greeks? The initiates were first purified by those arts we have called purgative, as it were, moral philosophy and dialectic; then they received the mysteries. And what else can that be but the interpretation of nature's hidden things through philosophy? Then at last, to those so prepared, came the *epopteia*, that is, the beholding of divine things through the light of theology. Who would not long to be initiated into such rites? Who would not long, setting all human things aside, scorning the goods of fortune and neglecting those of the body, to become a guest at the table of the gods while still living on earth, and, drenched in the nectar of eternity, to receive, though a mortal living creature, the gift of immortality?[15] Who would not wish to be so inspired by those Socratic frenzies sung by Plato in the *Phaedrus* that, fleeing swiftly from here—that is, from the world, which is set in wickedness—with wings and feet for oars, he might be carried at the swiftest pace to the heavenly Jerusalem? Let us be driven, Fathers, let us be driven by the Socratic frenzies, which will put us so far outside our mind as to put our mind, and ourselves, in God. We shall indeed be driven by them, if we have first done what lies in our own power. For if, through moral philosophy, the powers of the passions have been tuned in due proportion to their measures, so that they sound together in unshaken concord, and if, through dialectic, reason has moved forward in rhythm, then, stirred by the frenzy of the

14 The imagery is that of the tabernacle in Exodus 25–26, whose coverings of skins (26:14) Pico reads as the elements.

15 The "ancient theology" (*prisca theologia*) is Pico's name for a supposed tradition of divine wisdom running from Hermes, Zoroaster, Orpheus and Pythagoras to Plato, in harmony with Christian truth.

Muses, we shall drink in the heavenly harmony with our inward ears.[16] Then Bacchus, leader of the Muses, showing us as we philosophize the invisible things of God in his mysteries, that is, in the visible signs of nature, will make us drunk with the abundance of the house of God. And if, like Moses, we are faithful in all that house, most sacred theology will come and animate us with a twofold frenzy. For, raised to her most exalted watchtower, we shall measure from there, with indivisible eternity, what is, what will be and what has been, and gaze up at the primal beauty; of the one we shall be seers of Phoebus, of the other winged lovers. And finally, stirred by ineffable charity as by a gadfly, set outside ourselves like burning Seraphim and filled with the godhead, we shall no longer be ourselves, but he himself who made us.[17]

APOLLO AND PYTHAGORAS

The Delphic maxims and the riddling precepts of Pythagoras teach the same threefold philosophy.

21 The sacred names of Apollo, if one examines their meanings and hidden mysteries, show clearly enough that that god is no less a philosopher than a seer. Since Ammonius has treated this sufficiently, there is no reason for me to handle it differently now. But call to mind, Fathers, the three Delphic precepts, which are most necessary for those about to enter the sacrosanct and most majestic temple not of a fictitious but of the true Apollo, who enlightens every soul coming into this world. You will see that they urge us to nothing other than to embrace with all our strength this threefold philosophy, which is the subject of the present disputation. For that *meden agan,* that is, "nothing too much," rightly prescribes the norm and rule of all the virtues through the principle of the mean, which is the sub-

16 Plato, *Phaedrus* 244a–245c and 249c–d; "set in wickedness" is from 1 John 5:19.
17 Psalm 36:8, Numbers 12:7 and Romans 1:20.

ject of moral philosophy.[18] Then that *gnothi seauton*, that is, "know yourself," rouses and urges us to the knowledge of the whole of nature, of which the nature of man is both the interval and, as it were, the blend. For whoever knows himself knows all things in himself, as Zoroaster first wrote, and then Plato in the *Alcibiades*. Finally, illuminated by this knowledge through natural philosophy and now close to God, we shall address the true Apollo familiarly, and therefore happily, with the theological greeting *ei*, that is, "you are."[19]

22 Let us consult Pythagoras too, the wisest of men, wise above all because he never thought himself worthy of the name of wise man. First he will command us not to sit on the bushel: that is, not to lose through idle sloth the rational part, by which the soul measures, judges and examines all things, but to direct and rouse it constantly by the exercise and rule of dialectic. Then he will point out two things we must above all avoid: making water facing the sun, and cutting our nails during a sacrifice. But when, through moral philosophy, we have voided the loose appetites of overflowing pleasures, and pared away, like nail clippings, the sharp points of anger and the stings of the passions, then at last let us begin to take part in the sacred rites, that is, the mysteries of Bacchus we have mentioned, and to devote ourselves to contemplation, whose father and leader the sun is rightly said to be.[20] Finally, he will admonish us to feed the cock: that is, to nourish the divine part of our soul with the knowledge of divine things, as with solid food and heavenly ambrosia. This is the cock whose sight the lion, that is, every earthly power, fears and reveres. This is the cock to whom, as we read in Job, understanding was given. When this cock crows, the man who has gone astray comes to his senses. This cock, in

18 The maxims were inscribed at Apollo's temple at Delphi; Ammonius, Plutarch's teacher, speaks on Apollo's names in Plutarch's *On the E at Delphi*. "Enlightens every soul" adapts John 1:9.

19 Plutarch's *On the E at Delphi* reads the letter E carved on Apollo's temple as *ei*, "you are," a greeting to the god as true being.

20 These are Pythagorean "symbols," riddling precepts read allegorically since antiquity.

the twilight of morning, joins every day in harmony with the morning stars as they praise God. This is the cock that Socrates, as he was dying, hoping to join the divinity of his mind to the divinity of the greater world and already beyond all danger of sickness, said he owed to Asclepius, that is, to the physician of souls.[21]

ZOROASTER AND THE RIVERS OF PARADISE

Zoroaster's winged soul and the four rivers of paradise point again to the same path.

[23] Let us also review the records of the Chaldeans: we shall see (if they are to be believed) that the way to happiness lies open to mortals through these same arts. The Chaldean interpreters write that it was a saying of Zoroaster that the soul is winged; when its wings fall away, it plunges headlong into the body, and when they grow again, it flies back to the heavens. When his disciples asked him how they might obtain souls able to fly, with well-feathered wings, he said: "Water your wings with the waters of life." When they asked again where they should seek these waters, he answered them with a parable, as was his custom: "The paradise of God is washed and watered by four rivers. From there draw your saving waters. The name of the one from the north is *Pischon*, which means 'the right'; of the one from the west, *Gichon*, which signifies 'expiation'; of the one from the east, *Chiddekel*, which means 'light'; of the one from the south, *Perath*, which we may interpret as 'piety.'"[22] Pay attention, Fathers, and consider carefully what these doctrines of Zoroaster mean. Surely nothing else than this: that we should wash the filth from our eyes with moral science, as with the waves of Iberia; that with dialectic, as with a northern rule, we should draw their sight straight; that then, in the contemplation of

21 Job 38:36 in the Latin Bible and Job 38:7; Socrates' last words, in Plato's *Phaedo* (118a), were that he owed a cock to Asclepius, the god of healing.

22 The four rivers of paradise in Genesis 2:10–14 (Pishon, Gihon, Tigris and Euphrates), here given their Hebrew names.

nature, we should grow used to bearing the still feeble light of truth, like the cradle of the rising sun; so that at last, through theological piety and the most sacred worship of God, we may, like heavenly eagles, bravely endure the dazzling radiance of the midday sun. These perhaps are the morning, midday and evening knowledges first sung by David and later explained more fully by Augustine. This is the noonday light that sets the Seraphim precisely aflame and likewise illuminates the Cherubim. This is the region toward which the ancient father Abraham was always journeying. This is the place where, as the doctrines of both the Kabbalists and the Moors have taught, there is no place for unclean spirits.[23] And if it is permitted to bring even a little of the more secret mysteries into public, though under a riddle: since the sudden fall from heaven has condemned the head of our man to dizziness, and, as Jeremiah says, death has come in through the windows and afflicted the liver and breast, let us summon Raphael, the heavenly physician, to set us free with the saving medicines of moral philosophy and dialectic. Then, when we are restored to good health, Gabriel, the strength of God, will dwell in us. He will lead us through the marvels of nature, showing us everywhere the virtue and power of God, and at last hand us over to Michael, the high priest. And Michael, once we have served out our term in the campaigns of philosophy, will decorate us with the priesthood of theology as with a crown of precious stone.[24]

PHILOSOPHY DESPISED

Pico complains that his age scorns philosophy unless it brings profit, and says he studies it for itself.

[24] These, most honored Fathers, are the things that have not only encouraged but compelled me to the study of philosophy. I cer-

23 Genesis 12:9 has Abraham journeying toward the south. The Kabbalah is the Jewish mystical tradition of interpreting Scripture, whose name Pico explains in § 41.

24 Jeremiah 9:21. Raphael's name means "God heals."

tainly would not have spoken of them if I were not answering those who habitually condemn the study of philosophy, especially in men of rank, or indeed in anyone of modest means. For all this philosophizing—such is the misfortune of our age—now leads to contempt and insult rather than honor and glory. This deadly and monstrous conviction has invaded almost everyone's mind: that no one, or only a few, should philosophize. As if it were nothing at all to have before our eyes and in our hands, thoroughly explored, the causes of things, the ways of nature, the plan of the universe, the counsels of God, the mysteries of heaven and earth—unless one could thereby win some favor or make some profit. Indeed, it has come to this—alas!—that no one is thought wise except those who make the pursuit of wisdom a paid trade. So one may see chaste Pallas, who dwells among men as a gift of the gods, cast out, hooted off, hissed away, with no one to love or favor her—unless, as if selling herself and taking a paltry fee for her lost virginity, she brings the ill-gotten money back to her lover's strongbox.

In Defense of the Disputation

Pico answers those who attack public debate, his youth and the number of his theses, and argues for learning from every school.

[25] All this I say with the deepest grief and indignation, not against the princes of this age but against its philosophers. They believe and proclaim that one should not philosophize because no reward, no prizes are set for philosophers—as if by this one fact they did not show that they are not philosophers. Since their whole life is set on gain or ambition, they do not embrace the knowledge of truth for its own sake. I will grant myself this, and will not blush to praise myself on this point: I have never philosophized for any other reason than to philosophize. From my studies and my nights of labor I have neither hoped for nor sought any reward or fruit other than the cultivation of my mind and the knowledge of the truth, which I have always desired above all. I have always been so eager for truth and so in love with it that I have laid aside all care for private and public affairs and given myself wholly to the leisure of contemplation. From it no disparagement by the envious, no curses of the enemies of wisdom, have been able to deter me until now, nor will they be able to in the future. Philosophy herself has taught me to depend on my own conscience rather than on the judgments of others, and always to take care not so much that no ill is spoken of me as that I myself speak or do no ill.

[26] I was not unaware, most honored Fathers, that this very disputation of mine would be welcome and pleasant to all of you who favor good learning and have wished to honor it with your

most majestic presence, but burdensome and annoying to many others. And I know there are people who have condemned my undertaking before now, and condemn it at present on many grounds. So it usually goes: things done well and in holiness for the sake of virtue have no fewer detractors barking at them—not to say more—than things done wickedly and wrongly for the sake of vice. There are some who do not approve of this whole kind of disputation, or of this practice of debating learned matters in public. They assert that it serves to show off talent and learning rather than to acquire erudition. There are others who do not disapprove of this kind of exercise, but in no way approve of it in me. At my age—I am only in my twenty-fourth year—I have dared to propose a disputation on the sublime mysteries of Christian theology, on the loftiest topics of philosophy, on unknown disciplines, in the most celebrated of cities, before a vast assembly of the most learned men, in the apostolic senate. Still others grant me the right to dispute, but will not grant that I dispute on nine hundred questions, slandering it as a thing done superfluously and ambitiously, and beyond my powers. I would have surrendered at once to their objections, had the philosophy I profess so taught me. And even now, with philosophy teaching me as it does, I would not answer them, if I believed this debate between us had been arranged for the purpose of quarreling and wrangling.[1] So let every intention to disparage and provoke depart from our minds, and with it envy, which, as Plato writes, is always absent from the divine choir; and let us inquire in friendship whether I should dispute, and whether on so many questions as well.[2]

IN DEFENSE OF PUBLIC DEBATE

Disputation strengthens the mind, as the practice of Plato, Aristotle and the Fathers themselves shows.

[27] First, I will not say much to those who slander this custom of public disputation. For this fault, if it is judged a fault, I share

1 The apostolic senate is the papal court, the College of Cardinals.

not only with all of you, most excellent doctors, who have often performed this office, not without the highest praise and glory, but with Plato, with Aristotle, and with the most esteemed philosophers of every age. They were quite certain that nothing served them better for attaining the knowledge of truth they sought than to engage in the exercise of disputation as often as possible. For just as the strength of the body grows firmer through gymnastics, so without doubt, in this literary wrestling ground, the strength of the mind becomes far stronger and more vigorous. Nor would I believe that the poets, by the celebrated arms of Pallas, or the Hebrews, when they say that *barzel*, iron, is the symbol of the wise, meant anything other than that such contests, most honorable as they are, are utterly necessary for gaining wisdom. Perhaps this is why the Chaldeans too, in the horoscope of one who is to be a philosopher, require that Mars look upon Mercury in trine aspect—as if, should you take away these encounters, these wars, all philosophy would grow drowsy and fall asleep.[3]

[28] But with those who say I am unequal to this task, my defense is more difficult. If I say I am equal to it, I shall seem to incur the charge of immodesty and conceit; if I admit I am unequal, the charge of rashness and imprudence. See what straits I have fallen into, what a position I am in: I cannot without blame promise of myself what, soon after, I cannot without blame fail to deliver. Perhaps I could cite that saying of Job, that there is a spirit, a spirit in all men, and hear with Timothy: "Let no one despise your youth." But I would say this more truly from my own conscience: there is nothing great or singular in me. I will not deny that I am perhaps studious and eager for good learning, but I neither take nor claim the name of a learned man.[4] So I placed so great a burden on my shoulders, not because I was unaware of my weakness, but because I knew

2 Plato, *Phaedrus* 247a.
3 In astrology a trine aspect, when two planets stand 120 degrees apart, is favorable.
4 Job 32:8 and 1 Timothy 4:12.

that this kind of battle, the literary kind, has this peculiarity: in it, to be defeated is a gain. Thus even the weakest of men may rightly, and should, not only not shun such battles but actually seek them out. For whoever is defeated receives from the victor a benefit, not an injury, since through him he goes home richer, that is, more learned, and better equipped for future battles. Encouraged by this hope, I, a weak soldier, have not been afraid to fight so serious a battle with the bravest and most vigorous of all. Whether this was done rashly or not, anyone can more rightly judge from the outcome of the battle than from my age.

WHY SO MANY THESES

Pico defends the number of his theses: he draws on every school, since each has something of its own.

[29] It remains for me to answer, in the third place, those who are offended by the great number of propositions put forward—as if this burden sat on their shoulders, and not rather on me alone, who must toil through the labor, however great it is. Surely it is unseemly and overly peevish to want to set a limit to another's industry and, as Cicero says, to desire moderation in a thing that is the better the greater it is. In so great a venture I had either to fail or to succeed. If I succeeded, I do not see why what is praiseworthy to achieve in ten questions should be thought blameworthy to have achieved in nine hundred as well. If I failed, they will have grounds to accuse me if they hate me, and to excuse me if they love me. For if a young man, with slender talent and scant learning, has failed in a matter so serious and so great, he will deserve pardon rather than accusation. Indeed, as the poet says: "If strength fails, boldness at least will earn praise: in great things, to have willed is enough." And if in our age many, imitating Gorgias of Leontini, have been accustomed, and not without praise, to propose disputations not only on nine hundred questions but on all the questions of all the arts, why should I not be

allowed, even without blame, to dispute on many questions, it is true, but definite and determined ones?[5]

30 But this, they say, is superfluous and ambitious. I, on the contrary, contend that I did this not superfluously but of necessity; and if they considered the method of philosophizing with me, they would have to admit it plainly, even against their will. Those who have attached themselves to one of the philosophical schools—to Thomas, say, or to Scotus, who are now most widely read—can indeed test their doctrine by discussing a few questions. But I have trained myself, sworn to the words of no master, to range through all the masters of philosophy, examine all their writings, and come to know all the schools. Since I had to speak about all of them, and did not want to seem bound to a single doctrine by defending it and neglecting the rest, the points brought forward about all of them together could not fail to be very many, even if only a few were proposed about each.[6] Nor let anyone condemn me because I go as a guest wherever the storm carries me. For all the ancients made it their practice, in reading every kind of writer, to pass over no treatise they could lay hands on without reading it; and above all Aristotle, who for that reason was called by Plato the *anagnostes*, that is, "the reader." And surely it is the mark of a narrow mind to confine oneself within a single Porch or Academy. Nor can anyone rightly choose his own school from among them all who has not first come to know them all well. Add that in each school there is something distinctive that it does not share with the others.[7]

31 To begin now with our own thinkers, to whom philosophy came last: in John Scotus there is something vigorous and incisive; in Thomas, something solid and balanced; in Giles, something polished and precise; in Francis, something sharp and acute; in Albert, something ancient, broad and grand; in Henry,

5 Propertius 2.10.5–6. Gorgias of Leontini, the 5th-century BC sophist, offered to answer any question put to him.

6 Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus, the leading scholastic masters. "Sworn to the words of no master" is from Horace, *Epistles* 1.1.14.

7 Horace, *Epistles* 1.1.15. The Porch (the Stoa) was the Stoic school; the Academy was Plato's.

as it has seemed to me, something always sublime and venerable. Among the Arabs, there is in Averroes something firm and unshakable; in Avempace and in Alfarabi, something weighty and considered; in Avicenna, something divine and Platonic. Among the Greeks, philosophy is in general lucid, and above all chaste: in Simplicius it is rich and abundant; in Themistius, elegant and concise; in Alexander, consistent and learned; in Theophrastus, weightily worked out; in Ammonius, smooth and graceful.[8] And if you turn to the Platonists, to review only a few: in Porphyry you will delight in the wealth of subject matter and his many-sided religion; in Iamblichus you will revere a more secret philosophy and the mysteries of the non-Greek peoples; in Plotinus there is no single thing to admire, for he shows himself admirable in every part. He speaks divinely of divine things and, of human things, far above the human, with such learned obliquity of style that the Platonists, sweating over him, barely understand him. I pass over the more recent ones: Proclus, luxuriant with Asiatic fertility, and those who flowed from him, Hermias, Damascius, Olympiodorus and many others. In all of them there always shines that *to theion*, that is, "the divine," the distinctive emblem of the Platonists.

32 Moreover, if there is any sect that attacks the truer doctrines and mocks good causes with the cavils of its wit, it strengthens the truth rather than weakens it; like a flame shaken by motion, it rouses the truth rather than extinguishes it. Moved by this reason, I wished to bring forward the tenets not of one doctrine only (as some would have liked) but of every kind. In this way, by comparing many sects and discussing a manifold philosophy, that radiance of truth which Plato mentions in his *Letters* might shine more clearly on our minds, like the sun rising from on high. What would it have been if only the philosophy of the Latins had been treated—that is, of Albert, Thomas, Scotus, Giles, Francis and Henry—leaving out the Greek

8 Giles of Rome, Francis of Meyronnes, Albert the Great and Henry of Ghent were scholastics of the 13th–14th centuries AD. Alexander is Alexander of Aphrodisias, the ancient commentator on Aristotle.

and Arab philosophers? For all wisdom flowed from the non-Greek peoples to the Greeks, and from the Greeks to us. So our own people, in their method of philosophizing, have always thought it enough to rely on foreign discoveries and to cultivate what belonged to others.[9] What would it have been to treat natural things with the Peripatetics, unless the Academy of the Platonists were summoned too? Their doctrine, even concerning divine things, has always been held the holiest of all philosophies, as Augustine testifies; and now, for the first time as far as I know (be it said without envy), after many centuries, I have brought it into public to be examined in disputation. What would it have been to treat the opinions of all the others, however many they were, if we came to the banquet of the wise without our share, bringing nothing of our own, born and worked out by our own mind? Surely it is ignoble (as Seneca says) to be wise only from a notebook, as if the discoveries of our forebears had closed the way to our own industry, as if the force of nature were exhausted in us and could bring forth nothing of itself that, if it does not demonstrate the truth, at least hints at it, even from afar.[10] For if the farmer hates barrenness in his field, and the husband in his wife, surely the divine mind, bound and joined to a barren soul, will hate it all the more, since it desires from it a far nobler offspring.

9 Plato, *Seventh Letter* 341c–d.

10 The Peripatetics were the followers of Aristotle. Augustine praises the Platonists in *City of God* 8.5; Seneca's remark is in *Letters* 33.7.

The Nine Hundred Theses

What his theses offer: the concord of Plato and Aristotle, new doctrines, philosophy by numbers, natural magic, the Cabala, Orpheus and Zoroaster.

[33] For this reason I was not content, besides the common doctrines, to add much on the ancient theology of Hermes Trismegistus, much on the teachings of the Chaldeans and of Pythagoras, much on the more secret mysteries of the Hebrews. I have also proposed for disputation a great many things about natural and divine matters that I discovered and thought out myself.

[34] First, we have proposed the concord of Plato and Aristotle, believed by many before now but adequately proved by no one. Boethius, among the Latins, promised to do it, but is not found ever to have done what he always wished to do. Simplicius, among the Greeks, professed the same—would that he delivered as much as he promises! Augustine too writes in *Against the Academics* that there were many who tried in their most subtle disputations to prove the same thing, namely that the philosophy of Plato and that of Aristotle are one and the same. John the Grammarian likewise says that Plato differs from Aristotle only for those who do not understand Plato's words, yet he left the proof of this to posterity. We have also added many passages in which we assert that the opinions of Scotus and Thomas, and many in which those of Averroes and Avicenna, which are thought to be discordant, are in agreement.[1]

1 John the Grammarian is John Philoponus (6th century AD). Augustine: *Against the Academics* 3.19.42.

35 In the second place, we have set out what we ourselves have devised in both Aristotelian and Platonic philosophy, and then seventy-two new doctrines in physics and metaphysics. Whoever holds them will be able, unless I am mistaken—and this will soon be clear to me—to resolve any question proposed about natural and divine things by a method very different from the one taught us by the philosophy that is read in the schools and cultivated by the doctors of this age. Nor, Fathers, should anyone so much wonder that in my first years, at a tender age, when I could scarcely (as some claim) have read the commentaries of others, I should wish to bring forward a new philosophy. Rather, let him praise it if it is defended, or condemn it if it is refuted. And finally, since they are to judge these discoveries and writings of ours, let them count not the author's years but rather their merits or demerits.

PHILOSOPHY BY NUMBERS

Pico revives the ancient method of philosophizing through numbers and offers to answer seventy-four questions by it.

36 Besides that philosophy, there is another that we have brought forward: a new method of philosophizing through numbers. It is in fact an ancient one, observed by the ancient theologians, especially by Pythagoras, Aglaophamus, Philolaus, Plato and the earlier Platonists. But in our time, like other splendid things, it has so fallen out of use through the neglect of later generations that scarcely any trace of it is to be found. Plato writes in the *Epinomis* that among all the liberal arts and contemplative sciences, the science of number is the chief and the most divine. Likewise, asking why man is the wisest of living creatures, he answers: "Because he knows how to count." Aristotle too mentions this opinion in the *Problems*. Abumasar writes that it was a saying of Avenzoar of Babylon that whoever knew how to count knew everything.[2] These statements cannot possibly be true if

2 Aglaophamus was held to be the Orphic teacher of Pythagoras. Abumasar is Abu Ma'shar, the 9th-century AD Persian astrologer.

by the art of counting they meant the art in which merchants are now especially skilled. Plato himself testifies to this, warning us plainly not to take this divine arithmetic for the arithmetic of merchants. So, since after many nights of study I believe I have thoroughly mastered that arithmetic which is so extolled, I have publicly promised, to put the matter to the test, to answer by means of numbers seventy-four questions that are considered among the chief ones in natural and divine philosophy.

TWO KINDS OF MAGIC

Pico condemns demonic magic and praises natural magic as the perfection of natural philosophy.

[37] We have also proposed theses on magic, in which we have indicated that there are two kinds of magic. One consists wholly in the work and authority of demons—a thing, so help me heaven, abominable and monstrous. The other, when properly examined, is nothing other than the absolute perfection of natural philosophy. The Greeks mention both. The first they do not dignify with the name of magic at all, calling it *goeteia* [sorcery]; the second they call by its own proper name, *mageia*, as if to say perfect and supreme wisdom. For, as Porphyry says, in the Persian language *magus* means what among us is an interpreter and worshipper of divine things. Great, indeed the greatest, Fathers, is the disparity and dissimilarity between these arts. The first is condemned and abhorred not only by the Christian religion but by all laws and every well-ordered state. The second is approved and embraced by all the wise and by all nations devoted to heavenly and divine things. The first is the most deceitful of arts; the second, a higher and holier philosophy. The first is fruitless and empty; the second, firm, trustworthy and solid. Whoever practiced the first always concealed it, since it brought disgrace and shame on its practitioner; from the second, in antiquity and almost always, men sought the highest renown and glory in learning. No philosopher, no one eager to learn good arts, was

ever devoted to the first; to learn the second, Pythagoras, Empedocles, Democritus and Plato sailed abroad, preached it on their return, and held it chief among their secret teachings. The first, as it is supported by no reasons, so it is supported by no reliable authors. The second, honored as if by most illustrious parents, has two principal authors: Zamolxis, whom Abaris the Hyperborean imitated, and Zoroaster—not the one you may perhaps think, but the son of Oromasius.[3] If we ask Plato what the magic of each of them is, he will answer in the *Alcibiades* that the magic of Zoroaster is nothing other than the knowledge of divine things, in which the kings of the Persians instructed their sons, so that they might learn to rule their own commonwealth on the model of the commonwealth of the world. He will answer in the *Charmides* that the magic of Zamolxis is the medicine of the soul, by which temperance is procured for the soul, as health is procured for the body by the other kind of medicine.

38 Later, Charondas, Damigeron, Apollonius, Osthanes and Dardanus followed in their footsteps. So did Homer, who, as we shall prove someday in our *Poetic Theology*, concealed this wisdom, like all the others, beneath the wanderings of his Ulysses. So did Eudoxus and Hermippus. So did almost all who searched out the Pythagorean and Platonic mysteries. Among more recent writers I find three who caught the scent of it: Alkindi the Arab, Roger Bacon and William of Paris. Plotinus too mentions it, where he shows that the magus is the minister of nature and not its craftsman. This wisest of men approves and affirms this magic, while so abhorring the other that, when he was invited to the rites of evil demons, he said it was more fitting for them to come to him than for him to go to them—and rightly so. For as the first makes man subject and enslaved to wicked powers, so the second makes him their prince and lord.[4] Finally, the first cannot claim the name of either art or science. The second, full

3 Zamolxis was a Thracian sage and Abaris a legendary priest of Apollo from the far north. In Plato's *Alcibiades* (122a) Zoroaster is the son of Oromazes, the Persian supreme god.

4 Pico's projected *Poetic Theology* was never written. The Plotinus anecdote comes from Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus* (10).

of the loftiest mysteries, embraces the most profound contemplation of the most secret things and, in the end, the knowledge of the whole of nature. Among the powers scattered and sown in the world by God's kindness, it calls them forth into the light, as if from hiding places, and does not so much work marvels as sedulously serve nature as she works them. It has searched deeply into the harmony of the universe, which the Greeks more expressively call *sympatheia* [fellow-feeling], and has clearly grasped the mutual affinity of natures. Applying to each thing its own innate allurements, which are called the *iunges* [charms] of the magi, it brings forth into public, as if it were itself their maker, the marvels hidden in the recesses of the world, in the bosom of nature, in the storehouses and secret places of God. And as the farmer weds elms to vines, so the magus weds earth to heaven, that is, lower things to the gifts and powers of higher ones. Hence the second appears as divine and salutary as the first appears monstrous and harmful. This is above all because the first, enslaving man to the enemies of God, calls him away from God, while the second rouses him to that admiration of God's works which is most surely followed by ready charity, faith and hope. For nothing promotes religion and the worship of God more than constant contemplation of God's wonders. When we have explored them well through this natural magic we are discussing, we shall be moved more ardently to worship and love the craftsman, and shall be compelled to sing: "The heavens are full, all the earth is full of the majesty of your glory." And that is enough about magic. I have said this much because I know there are many who, just as dogs always bark at strangers, often condemn and hate what they do not understand.[5]

5 Isaiah 6:3, as sung in the Latin liturgy.

THE KABBALAH

Pico describes the secret teaching Moses received and finds Christian doctrine in the Kabbalist books.

39 I come now to the things I have dug out of the ancient mysteries of the Hebrews and brought forward to confirm the sacrosanct and Catholic faith. Those unfamiliar with them may perhaps take them for invented trifles or the tales of wandering charlatans. So I want everyone to understand what they are and of what kind, where they come from, by which authors they are confirmed and how illustrious those authors are, how hidden, how divine, and how necessary they are to our people for defending religion against the insistent accusations of the Hebrews.

40 Not only the renowned Hebrew doctors, but also, among our own writers, Esdras, Hilary and Origen write that Moses received on the mountain from God not only the law, which he left to posterity written in five books, but also a more secret and true explanation of the law. God commanded him to publish the law to the people, but neither to commit the interpretation of the law to writing nor to divulge it. He was to reveal it only to Joshua, son of Nun, and Joshua in turn to the high priests who succeeded him, one after another, under a solemn obligation of silence. It was enough for the people, through the plain narrative, to recognize now the power of God, now his wrath against the wicked, his mercy toward the good, his justice toward all, and to be instructed through divine and saving precepts in living well and happily and in the worship of true religion.[6] But to make public to the common people the more secret mysteries, the hidden truths of the highest godhead, concealed beneath the bark of the law and the rough covering of its words—what would

6 Esdras (Ezra) is here the reputed author of the apocryphal 4 Esdras; Hilary of Poitiers and Origen were Fathers of the Church.

that have been but to give what is holy to dogs and cast pearls before swine?[7]

41 So keeping these things hidden from the common people, to be shared only with the perfect, among whom alone Paul says he speaks wisdom, was a matter not of human counsel but of divine command. The ancient philosophers observed this custom most scrupulously. Pythagoras wrote nothing except a few small works, which on his deathbed he entrusted to his daughter Damo. The Sphinxes carved on the temples of the Egyptians warned that mystic doctrines should be kept inviolate from the profane multitude by the knots of riddles. Plato, writing to Dionysius about the supreme substances, says: "It must be said in riddles, so that if the letter should happen to fall into other hands, what we write to you may not be understood by others." Aristotle used to say that his books of *Metaphysics*, in which he treats of divine things, were both published and not published. What more need I say? Origen asserts that Jesus Christ, the teacher of life, revealed many things to his disciples which they refused to write down, lest they become common property of the crowd.[8] This is strongly confirmed by Dionysius the Areopagite, who says that the more secret mysteries were passed on by the founders of our religion *ek nou eis noun dia meson logon*, that is, from mind to mind, without writing, through the medium of the spoken word. In exactly the same way, when that true interpretation of the law, given by God to Moses, was revealed at God's command, it was called Kabbalah, which is the same in Hebrew as "reception" in our language. It was so called because one person received that teaching from another not through written records but by an ordered succession of revelations, as if by right of inheritance.

42 But after the Hebrews had been restored from the Babylonian captivity by Cyrus, and the temple had been rebuilt under Zerubbabel, they turned their minds to restoring the law. Esdras, then head of the congregation, corrected the book of

7 Matthew 7:6.

8 1 Corinthians 2:6; Plato, *Second Letter* 312d.

Moses. He clearly recognized that, because of the exiles, massacres, flights and captivity of the people of Israel, the custom established by their ancestors of handing down the teaching from hand to hand could not be preserved, and that the secrets of the heavenly teaching granted them by God would perish, since their memory could not long endure without written commentaries. So he decided to call together the wise men who still survived; each was to bring forward what he remembered of the mysteries of the law, and with scribes present it was to be set down in seventy volumes (for there were about that many wise men in the Sanhedrin). And so that you need not rely on me alone in this matter, Fathers, hear Esdras himself speaking thus: "When forty days had passed, the Most High spoke, saying:[9] 'Make public the first books you have written, and let the worthy and the unworthy read them; but keep the last seventy books, so as to hand them over to the wise among your people. For in them is the vein of understanding, the fountain of wisdom and the river of knowledge.' And so I did." These are Esdras's exact words. These are the books of the science of the Kabbalah. In these books, as Esdras rightly proclaimed in a clear voice, is the vein of understanding, that is, the ineffable theology of the supersubstantial deity; the fountain of wisdom, that is, the exact metaphysics of the intelligible and angelic forms; and the river of knowledge, that is, the most solid philosophy of natural things.

[43] Sixtus IV, the Supreme Pontiff, immediate predecessor of Innocent VIII, under whom we now happily live, took the greatest care and pains to have these books translated into Latin for the public benefit of our faith. When he died, three of them had already reached the Latins. Among the Hebrews these books are held in such reverence today that no one is allowed to touch them unless he is forty years old. When I had acquired these books at no small expense and had read them through with the utmost diligence and unwearied labor, I saw in them

9 The passage that follows is 4 Esdras 14:45–47.

(God is my witness) a religion not so much Mosaic as Christian.[10] There is the mystery of the Trinity, there the incarnation of the Word, there the divinity of the Messiah. There I read about original sin and its expiation through Christ, about the heavenly Jerusalem, the fall of the demons, the orders of angels, purgatory and the punishments of hell—the same things we read every day in Paul and Dionysius, in Jerome and Augustine. And in matters of philosophy, you would think you were hearing Pythagoras and Plato themselves, whose doctrines are so akin to the Christian faith that our Augustine gives boundless thanks to God that the books of the Platonists came into his hands.[11]

44 In short, there is hardly any point in dispute between us and the Hebrews on which they cannot be so refuted and convinced from the books of the Kabbalists that not even a corner is left for them to hide in. Of this I have a most weighty witness in Antonius Chronicus, a very learned man. When I was dining at his house, he heard with his own ears Dactylus, a Hebrew skilled in this science, come round wholeheartedly to the Christian view of the Trinity.

ORPHEUS, ZOROASTER AND THE CLOSE

Pico mentions his theses on Orpheus and Zoroaster, answers his critics, and calls the doctors to debate.

45 But to return to reviewing the theses of my disputation: we have also put forward our view on interpreting the poems of Orpheus and Zoroaster. Orpheus is read among the Greeks almost complete; Zoroaster, among them, in fragments, but more fully among the Chaldeans. Both are held to be fathers and founders of the ancient wisdom. For, to say nothing of Zoroaster, who is often mentioned among the Platonists and always with the greatest veneration, Iamblichus of Chalcis writes that Pythagoras took the Orphic theology as the model on which he shaped and formed his own philosophy. Indeed, they say that

10 Sixtus IV was pope from 1471 to 1484, Innocent VIII from 1484 to 1492.
11 Augustine, *Confessions* 7.9.

the sayings of Pythagoras are called sacred for this reason alone, that they flowed from the teachings of Orpheus. From there flowed, as from its first source, the secret doctrine of numbers and whatever was great and sublime in Greek philosophy. But, as was the custom of the ancient theologians, Orpheus so wove the mysteries of his doctrines into the wrappings of fables and disguised them under a poetic veil that anyone reading his hymns would think there was nothing beneath them but tales and the purest nonsense. I wanted to say this so that it might be known how great my labor was, how great the difficulty, in digging out the meanings of secret philosophy hidden in the deliberate tangles of riddles and the hiding places of fables—especially since, in a matter so serious, so hidden and unexplored, I had no help from the work and diligence of other interpreters. And yet my dogs have barked that I heaped up trifling, light matters to make a show of numbers. As if I had not put forward all the most ambiguous and controversial questions, over which the principal schools fight it out! As if I had not brought forward many things wholly unknown and untried even by those very men who carp at my work and think themselves the princes of philosophers!

[46] In fact, I am so far from this fault that I have taken care to compress the disputation into as few theses as I could. Had I wished, as others usually do, to divide it into its parts and cut it to pieces, it would surely have grown to a countless number. And to say nothing of the rest, who does not know that a single one of the nine hundred doctrines, the one on reconciling the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, I could have spun out, without any suspicion of seeking great numbers, into six hundred theses, not to say more, by listing one by one all the passages in which others think they disagree and I think they agree? But certainly—for I will say it, though it is neither modest nor in keeping with my character—I will say it nonetheless, because the envious force me to, my detractors force me: I wished by this encounter of mine to show, not so much that I knew many things, as that I knew things many do not know.

[47] So that this may now become clear to you in fact, most honored Fathers, and so that my speech may delay no longer the desire of you, most excellent doctors, whom I see, not without great pleasure, ready and girded, awaiting the contest, let us now, as at the sound of the trumpet, join battle—and may good fortune and success attend it.