

Oration on the Dignity of Man by

[Giovanni Pico della Mirandola](#)

Most esteemed Fathers, I have read in the ancient writings of the Arabians that Abdala the Saracen on being asked what, on this stage, so to say, of the world, seemed to him most evocative of wonder, replied that there was nothing to be seen more marvelous than man. And that celebrated exclamation of Hermes Trismegistus, "What a great miracle is man, Asclepius" confirms this opinion.

And still, as I reflected upon the basis assigned for these estimations, I was not fully persuaded by the diverse reasons advanced for the pre-eminence of human nature; that man is the intermediary between creatures, that he is the familiar of the gods above him as he is the lord of the beings beneath him; that, by the acuteness of his senses, the inquiry of his reason and the light of his intelligence, he is the interpreter of nature, set midway between the timeless unchanging and the flux of time; the living union (as the Persians say), the very marriage hymn of the world, and, by David's testimony but little lower than the angels. These reasons are all, without question, of great weight; nevertheless, they do not touch the principal reasons, those, that is to say, which justify man's unique right for such unbounded admiration. Why, I asked, should we not admire the angels themselves and the beatific choirs more? At long last, however, I feel that I have come to some understanding of why man is the most fortunate of living things and, consequently, deserving of all admiration; of what may be the condition in the hierarchy of beings assigned to him, which draws upon him the envy, not of the brutes alone, but of the astral beings and of the very intelligences which dwell beyond the confines of the world. A thing surpassing belief and smiting the soul with wonder. Still, how could it be otherwise? For it is on this ground that man is, with complete justice, considered and called a great miracle and a being worthy of all admiration.

Hear then, oh Fathers, precisely what this condition of man is; and in the name of your humanity, grant me your benign audition as I pursue this theme.

God the Father, the Mightiest Architect, had already raised, according to the precepts of His hidden wisdom, this world we see, the cosmic dwelling of divinity, a temple most august. He had already adorned the supercelestial region with Intelligences, infused the heavenly globes with the life of immortal souls and set the fermenting dung-heap of the inferior world teeming with every form of animal life. But when this work was done, the Divine Artificer still longed for some creature which might comprehend the meaning of so vast an achievement, which might be moved with love at its beauty and smitten with awe at its grandeur. When, consequently, all else had been completed (as both Moses and Timaeus testify), in the very last place, He bethought Himself of bringing forth man. Truth was, however, that there remained no archetype according to which He might fashion a new offspring, nor in His treasure-houses the wherewithal to endow a new son with a fitting inheritance, nor any place, among the seats of the universe, where this new creature might dispose himself to contemplate the world. All space was already filled; all

things had been distributed in the highest, the middle and the lowest orders. Still, it was not in the nature of the power of the Father to fail in this last creative élan; nor was it in the nature of that supreme Wisdom to hesitate through lack of counsel in so crucial a matter; nor, finally, in the nature of His beneficent love to compel the creature destined to praise the divine generosity in all other things to find it wanting in himself.

At last, the Supreme Maker decreed that this creature, to whom He could give nothing wholly his own, should have a share in the particular endowment of every other creature. Taking man, therefore, this creature of indeterminate image, He set him in the middle of the world and thus spoke to him:

``We have given you, O Adam, no visage proper to yourself, nor endowment properly your own, in order that whatever place, whatever form, whatever gifts you may, with premeditation, select, these same you may have and possess through your own judgement and decision. The nature of all other creatures is defined and restricted within laws which We have laid down; you, by contrast, impeded by no such restrictions, may, by your own free will, to whose custody We have assigned you, trace for yourself the lineaments of your own nature. I have placed you at the very center of the world, so that from that vantage point you may with greater ease glance round about you on all that the world contains. We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer. It will be in your power to descend to the lower, brutish forms of life; you will be able, through your own decision, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine."

Oh unsurpassed generosity of God the Father, Oh wondrous and unsurpassable felicity of man, to whom it is granted to have what he chooses, to be what he wills to be! The brutes, from the moment of their birth, bring with them, as Lucilius says, ``from their mother's womb" all that they will ever possess. The highest spiritual beings were, from the very moment of creation, or soon thereafter, fixed in the mode of being which would be theirs through measureless eternities. But upon man, at the moment of his creation, God bestowed seeds pregnant with all possibilities, the germs of every form of life. Whichever of these a man shall cultivate, the same will mature and bear fruit in him. If vegetative, he will become a plant; if sensual, he will become brutish; if rational, he will reveal himself a heavenly being; if intellectual, he will be an angel and the son of God. And if, dissatisfied with the lot of all creatures, he should recollect himself into the center of his own unity, he will there become one spirit with God, in the solitary darkness of the Father, Who is set above all things, himself transcend all creatures.

Who then will not look with awe upon this our chameleon, or who, at least, will look with greater admiration on any other being? This creature, man, whom Asclepius the Athenian, by reason of this very mutability, this nature capable of transforming itself, quite rightly said was symbolized in the mysteries by the figure of Proteus. This is the source of those metamorphoses, or transformations, so celebrated among the Hebrews and among the Pythagoreans; for even the esoteric theology of the Hebrews at times transforms the holy Enoch into that angel of divinity which is sometimes called *malakh-ha-shekhinah* and at other times transforms other personages into divinities of other names; while the Pythagoreans transform men guilty of crimes into brutes or even, if we

are to believe Empedocles, into plants; and Mohammed, imitating them, was known frequently to say that the man who deserts the divine law becomes a brute. And he was right; for it is not the bark that makes the tree, but its insensitive and unresponsive nature; nor the hide which makes the beast of burden, but its brute and sensual soul; nor the orbicular form which makes the heavens, but their harmonious order. Finally, it is not freedom from a body, but its spiritual intelligence, which makes the angel. If you see a man dedicated to his stomach, crawling on the ground, you see a plant and not a man; or if you see a man bedazzled by the empty forms of the imagination, as by the wiles of Calypso, and through their alluring solicitations made a slave to his own senses, you see a brute and not a man. If, however, you see a philosopher, judging and distinguishing all things according to the rule of reason, him shall you hold in veneration, for he is a creature of heaven and not of earth; if, finally, a pure contemplator, unmindful of the body, wholly withdrawn into the inner chambers of the mind, here indeed is neither a creature of earth nor a heavenly creature, but some higher divinity, clothed in human flesh.

But what is the purpose of all this? That we may understand --- since we have been born into this condition of being what we choose to be --- that we ought to be sure above all else that it may never be said against us that, born to a high position, we failed to appreciate it, but fell instead to the estate of brutes and uncomprehending beasts of burden; and that the saying of Aspah the Prophet, ``You are all Gods and sons of the Most High," might rather be true; and finally that we may not, through abuse of the generosity of a most indulgent Father, pervert the free option which he has given us from a saving to a damning gift. Let a certain saving ambition invade our souls so that, impatient of mediocrity, we pant after the highest things and (since, if we will, we can) bend all our efforts to their attainment.

How must we proceed and what must we do to realize this ambition? Let us observe what they do, what kind of life they lead. For if we lead this kind of life (and we can) we shall attain their same estate. The Seraphim burns with the fire of charity; from the Cherubim flashes forth the splendor of intelligence; the Thrones stand firm with the firmness of justice. If, consequently, in the pursuit of the active life we govern inferior things by just criteria, we shall be established in the firm position of the Thrones. If, freeing ourselves from active care, we devote our time to contemplation, meditating upon the Creator in His work, and the work in its Creator, we shall be resplendent with the light of the Cherubim. If we burn with love for the Creator only, his consuming fire will quickly transform us into the flaming likeness of the Seraphim. Above the Throne, that is, above the just judge, God sits, judge of the ages.

But how can anyone judge or love what he does not know? Moses loved the God whom he had seen and as judge of his people he administered what he had previously seen in contemplation on the mountain. Therefore the Cherub is the intermediary and by his light equally prepares us for the fire of the Seraphim and the judgement of the Thrones. This is the bond which unites the highest minds, the Palladian order which presides over contemplative philosophy; this is then the bond which before all else we must emulate, embrace and comprehend, whence we may be rapt to the heights of love or descend, well

instructed and prepared, to the duties of the practical life. They can give us the fullest and most reliable testimony concerning these matters because they had an almost domestic and connatural knowledge of them.

Let us ask the Apostle Paul, that vessel of election, in what activity he saw the armies of the Cherubim engaged when he was rapt into the third heaven. He will answer, according to the interpretation of Dionysius, that he saw them first being purified, then illuminated, and finally made perfect. We, therefore, imitating the life of the Cherubim here on earth, by refraining the impulses of our passions through moral science, by dissipating the darkness of reason by dialectic --- thus washing away, so to speak, the filth of ignorance and vice --- may likewise purify our souls, so that the passions may never run rampant, nor reason, lacking restraint, range beyond its natural limits. Then may we suffuse our purified souls with the light of natural philosophy, bringing it to final perfection by the knowledge of divine things.

Let us also cite Moses himself, who is but little removed from the living well-spring of the most holy and ineffable understanding by whose nectar the angels are inebriated. Let us listen to the venerable judge as he enunciates his laws to us who live in the desert solitude of the body: "Let those who, still unclean, have need of moral philosophy, dwell with the peoples outside the tabernacles, under the open sky, until, like the priests of Thessaly, they shall have cleansed themselves. Those who have already brought order into their lives may be received into the tabernacle, but still may not touch the sacred vessels. Let them rather first, as zealous levites, in the service of dialectic, minister to the holy offices of philosophy. When they shall themselves be admitted to those offices, they may, as priests of philosophy, contemplate the many-colored throne of the higher God, that is the courtly palace of the star-hung heavens, the heavenly candelabrum aflame with seven lights and elements which are the furry veils of this tabernacle; so that, finally, having been permitted to enter, through the merit of sublime theology, into the innermost chambers of the temple, with no veil of images interposing itself, we may enjoy the glory of divinity." This is what Moses beyond a doubt commands us, admonishing, urging and exhorting us to prepare ourselves, while we may, by means of philosophy, a road to future heavenly glory.

In fact, however, the dignity of the liberal arts, which I am about to discuss, and their value to us is attested not only by the Mosaic and Christian mysteries but also by the theologies of the most ancient times. What else is to be understood by the stages through which the initiates must pass in the mysteries of the Greeks? These initiates, after being purified by the arts which we might call expiatory, moral philosophy and dialectic, were granted admission to the mysteries. What could such admission mean but the interpretation of occult nature by means of philosophy? Only after they had been prepared in this way did they receive "Epopteia," that is, the immediate vision of divine things by the light of theology. Who would not long to be admitted to such mysteries? Who would not desire, putting all human concerns behind him, holding the goods of fortune in contempt and little minding the goods of the body, thus to become, while still a denizen of earth, a guest at the table of the gods, and, drunk with the nectar of eternity, receive, while still a mortal, the gift of immortality? Who would not wish to be so

inspired by those Socratic frenzies which Plato sings in the *Phaedrus* that, swiftly fleeing this place, that is, this world fixed in evil, by the oars, so to say, both of feet and wings, he might reach the heavenly Jerusalem by the swiftest course? Let us be driven, O Fathers, by those Socratic frenzies which lift us to such ecstasy that our intellects and our very selves are united to God. And we shall be moved by them in this way as previously we have done all that it lies in us to do. If, by moral philosophy, the power of our passions shall have been restrained by proper controls so that they achieve harmonious accord; and if, by dialectic, our reason shall have progressed by an ordered advance, then, smitten by the frenzy of the Muses, we shall hear the heavenly harmony with the inward ears of the spirit. Then the leader of the Muses, Bacchus, revealing to us in our moments of philosophy, through his mysteries, that is, the visible signs of nature, the invisible things of God, will make us drunk with the richness of the house of God; and there, if, like Moses, we shall prove entirely faithful, most sacred theology will supervene to inspire us with redoubled ecstasy. For, raised to the most eminent height of theology, whence we shall be able to measure with the rod of indivisible eternity all things that are and that have been; and, grasping the primordial beauty of things, like the seers of Phoebus, we shall become the winged lovers of theology. And at last, smitten by the ineffable love as by a sting, and, like the Seraphim, filled with the godhead, we shall be, no longer ourselves, but the very One who made us.

Let us also seek the opinion of [Pythagoras](#), that wisest of men, known as a wise man precisely because he never thought himself worthy of that name. His first precept to us will be: "Never sit on a bushel"; never, that is, through slothful inaction to lose our power of reason, that faculty by which the mind examines, judges and measures all things; but rather unremittingly by the rule and exercise of dialectic, to direct it and keep it agile. Next he will warn us of two things to be avoided at all costs: Neither to make water facing the sun, nor to cut our nails while offering sacrifice. Only when, by moral philosophy, we shall have evacuated the weakening appetites of our too-abundant pleasures and pared away, like nail clippings, the sharp points of anger and wrath in our souls, shall we finally begin to take part in the sacred rites, that is, the mysteries of Bacchus of which we have spoken and to dedicate ourselves to that contemplation of which the Sun is rightly called the father and the guide. Finally, Pythagoras will command us to "Feed the cock"; that is, to nourish the divine part of our soul with the knowledge of divine things as with substantial food and heavenly ambrosia. This is the cock whose visage is the lion, that is, all earthly power, holds in fear and awe. This is the cock to whom, as we read in [Job](#), all understanding was given. At this cock's crowing, erring man returns to his senses. This is the cock which every day, in the morning twilight, with the stars of morning, raises a *Te Deum* to heaven. This is the cock which Socrates, at the hour of his death, when he hoped he was about to join the divinity of his spirit to the divinity of the higher world and when he was already beyond danger of any bodily illness, said that he owed to Asclepius, that is, the healer of souls.

These are the reasons, most reverend Fathers, which not only led, but even compelled me, to the study of philosophy. And I should not have undertaken to expound them, except to reply to those who are wont to condemn the study of philosophy, especially among men

of high rank, but also among those of modest station. For the whole study of philosophy (such is the unhappy plight of our time) is occasion for contempt and contumely, rather than honor and glory. The deadly and monstrous persuasion has invaded practically all minds, that philosophy ought not to be studied at all or by very few people; as though it were a thing of little worth to have before our eyes and at our finger-tips, as matters we have searched out with greatest care, the causes of things, the ways of nature and the plan of the universe, God's counsels and the mysteries of heaven and earth, unless by such knowledge on might procure some profit or favor for oneself. Thus we have reached the point, it is painful to recognize, where the only persons accounted wise are those who can reduce the pursuit of wisdom to a profitable traffic; and chaste Pallas, who dwells among men only by the generosity of the gods, is rejected, hooted, whistled at in scorn, with no one to love or befriend her unless, by prostituting herself, she is able to pay back into the strongbox of her lover the ill-procured price of her deflowered virginity. I address all these complaints, with the greatest regret and indignation, not against the princes of our times, but against the philosophers who believe and assert that philosophy should not be pursued because no monetary value or reward is assigned it, unmindful that by this sign they disqualify themselves as philosophers. Since their whole life is concentrated on gain and ambition, they never embrace the knowledge of the truth for its own sake. This much will I say for myself --- and on this point I do not blush for praising myself --- that I have never philosophized save for the sake of philosophy, nor have I ever desired or hoped to secure from my studies and my laborious researches any profit or fruit save cultivation of mind and knowledge of the truth --- things I esteem more and more with the passage of time. I have also been so avid for this knowledge and so enamored of it that I have set aside all private and public concerns to devote myself completely to contemplation; and from it no calumny of jealous persons, nor any invective from enemies of wisdom has ever been able to detach me. Philosophy has taught me to rely on my own convictions rather than on the judgements of others and to concern myself less with whether I am well thought of than whether what I do or say is evil.

I was not unaware, most revered Fathers, that this present disputation of mine would be as acceptable and as pleasing to you, who favor all the good arts and who have consented to grace it with your presence, as it would be irritating and offensive to many others. I am also aware that there is no dearth of those who have condemned my undertaking before this and continue to do so on a number of grounds. But this has always been the case: works which are well-intentioned and sincerely directed to virtue have always had no fewer --- not to say more --- detractors than those undertaken for questionable motives and for devious ends. Some persons disapprove the present type of disputation in general and this method of disputing in public about learned matters; they assert that they serve only the exhibition of talent and the display of opinion, rather than the increase of learning. Others do not disapprove this type of exercise, but resent the fact that at my age, a mere twenty-four years, I have dared to propose a disputation concerning the most subtle mysteries of Christian theology, the most debated points of philosophy and unfamiliar branches of learning; and that I have done so here, in this most renowned of cities, before a large assembly of very learned men, in the presence of the Apostolic Senate. Still others have ceded my right so to dispute, but have not conceded that I might dispute nine hundred theses, asserting that such a project is superfluous, over-ambitious

and beyond my powers. I should have acceded to these objections willingly and immediately, if the philosophy which I profess had so counseled me. Nor should I now undertake to reply to them, as my philosophy urges me to do, if I believed that this disputation between us were undertaken for purposes of mere altercation and litigation. Therefore, let all intention of denigration and exasperation be purged from our minds and with it that malice which, as Plato writes, is never present in the angelic choirs. Let us amicably decide whether it be admissible for me to proceed with my disputation and whether I should venture so large a number of questions.

I shall not, in the first place, have much to say against those who disapprove this type of public disputation. It is a crime, --- if it be a crime --- which I share with all you, most excellent doctors, who have engaged in such exercises on many occasions to the enhancement of your reputations, as well as with Plato and Aristotle and all the most esteemed philosophers of every age. These philosophers of the past all thought that nothing could profit them more in their search for wisdom than frequent participation in public disputation. Just as the powers of the body are made stronger through gymnastic, the powers of the mind grow in strength and vigor in this arena of learning. I am inclined to believe that the poets, when they sang of the arms of Pallas and the Hebrews, when they called the *barzel*, that is, the sword, the symbol of men of wisdom, could have meant nothing by these symbols but this type of contest, at once so necessary and so honorable for the acquisition of knowledge.

If I am not mistaken (and this will become clearer in the course of the proposed disputation) anyone subscribing to these theses will be able to resolve any question proposed to him in natural philosophy or theology on a principle quite other than that taught us in the philosophy which is at present to be learned in the schools and is taught by the masters of the present generation. Nor ought anyone to be surprised, that in my early years, at a tender age at which I should hardly be permitted to read the writings of others (as some have insinuated) I should wish to propose a new philosophy. They ought rather to praise this new philosophy, if it is well defended, or reject it, if it is refuted. Finally, since it will be their task to judge my discoveries and my scholarship, they ought to look to the merit or demerit of these and not to the age of their author.

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