

Pico della Mirandola: from *Oration on the Dignity of Man*

(Donald Weinstein, tr.)

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463—1494) distinguished himself during his brief career by the precocity of his learning and the boldness of his ideas in philosophy and theology. His motto, De omni re scibili (“Of all things that one can know”), asserted that he knew all there was to be known. Though a doubt is permissible on that score, the claim itself seems to reflect a characteristic attitude of his time in which the borders between confidence and foolhardiness were very ill defined.

In the writings of the Arabs I have read, oh reverend Fathers [of the Church], that when someone asked the Saracen Abdalah what seemed to him the most wonderful thing in this theater of the world, he replied that nothing seemed more wonderful than man. The opinion of Mercury agrees with this: “What a miracle, oh Asciepius, is man!” As I was pondering the meaning of these words, the opinions which many had advanced about the greatness of human nature did not satisfy me—that man is the mediator of all creatures, the servant of superior beings, the lord of inferior ones, that he is the interpreter of nature by the keenness of his senses, by rational inquiry, by the light of his intellect; the intermediary between time and eternity, and, as the Persians say, the nexus of the world, its very wedding song; according to David a little lower than the angels. These are great reasons, to be sure, but they are not the most important. It is not those which give man the privilege of unlimited admiration to men. Indeed, why not, therefore admire the angels and the blessed heavenly choirs even more?

But at last it seems that I have understood why man is the most fortunate of creatures and therefore worthy of all admiration, and what is the position which has been granted him in the universal order, so that not only the beasts but even the stars and the other worldly intelligences envy him. Incredible and marvelous! And why not, if it is indeed for that that he is considered to be a great miracle and a wonderful creature? But what this position is, listen, oh Fathers, if you please, to my discourse and grant it a favorable hearing.

The most high Father, God the Creator, had wrought this worldly home which we see, this august temple of divinity, according to the laws of his secret wisdom. He furnished the supercelestial region with intelligences, the celestial sphere he provided with eternal souls, the filthy and disgusting parts of the lower world he populated with a great assortment of creatures of every species. But, when the work was finished, the Creator wanted some one to

reflect upon the reason behind such a great creation, who might love its beauty and marvel over its grandeur. And therefore, when everything was finished, as Moses and Timaeus attest, he thought at last of creating man. However, there was not one model left by which he might fashion a new offspring; there was nothing left in the treasury with which he could endow this new son. There was no station in all the world where this contemplator of the universe could sit. All were full; everything had been distributed to the highest, the middle and the lowest orders. But it was not fitting of the paternal power to have been worn out in the last act of creation. It was not worthy of his wisdom to have been left perplexed over an important problem. Nor was it fitting to his provident love that the creature who was to have praised his divine liberality to others was compelled to complain of the lack of it to himself. At last that excellent creator decided that he to whom he was to give nothing for his own could share everything which had been given individually to the others. Thus he took man as the product of an undetermined nature and placed him in the middle of the world and said to him: "I have not given you, oh Adam, a definite seat or a special appearance, or any function of your own. The seat or the appearance or the function which you want, you may have and keep by your own desire and your own counsel.

"The other creatures have a defined nature which is fixed within limits prescribed by me. You, unhampered, may determine your own limits according to your own will, into whose power I have placed you. I have set you in the center of the world; from there you can better see whatever is in the world. I have made you neither heavenly nor terrestrial, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that, like a free and sovereign artificer, you can fashion your own form out of your own substance. You can degenerate to the lower orders of the brutes; you can, according to your own will, recreate yourself in those higher creatures which are divine."

Oh supreme generosity of God the Father! Oh supreme and wonderful felicity of man, to whom it is granted to have what he desires, to be what he wishes! The brutes receive all that they have from their mother's womb when they are born, as Lucullus says. The supreme spirits become either immediately or soon afterward that which they were destined to be for all eternity. At the time of man's birth the Father plants every kind of seed and the germs of every kind of existence; and the ones which each man cultivates are the ones which will grow, and they will bear their fruit in him. If they are vegetative, he will be a plant; if animal, he will be a brute; if they are rational, he will become a celestial creature; if intellectual, he will be an angel and the son of God. But if, not content with the lot of any kind of creature, he draws into the center of his own unity, his spirit will become one with God. In the solitary darkness of the Father he who has been set above all things will stand above all things. Who will not admire our chameleon? Or rather, who will admire anything more? Of him Asclepius the Athenian said, with justice, that, in religious rites, because of his versatility and his changeable nature, he symbolized Proteus. Hence those famous metamorphoses among the Hebrews and the Pythagoreans. In fact, the esoteric theology of the Jews at one moment transforms St. Enoch into an angel of divinity. Then, others into other divine spirits. The Pythagoreans changed wicked men into beasts and (if Empedocles is to be believed) even into plants. In imitation of that Mahomet frequently repeated, and rightly, that he who retreated from the sacred law became a brute. For it is not the bark which makes the tree but the stupid and insensitive

nature; not the hide which makes the mule but the brutish and sensual soul. It is not separation from the body that makes an angel, but spiritual intelligence. If you see someone who is a slave of his stomach, crawling on the ground, it is a plant that you see, not a man. If you see someone blinded like Calypso by vain illusions of fantasy and imprisoned by dark allurements, the slave of his senses, he is a brute, not a man. If he is a philosopher who looks at everything with reason, you will revere him: he is a heavenly creature, not an earthbound one. If he is a pure contemplative, unaware of his body, given over to mental perceptions, he is not an earthly nor a celestial creature, he is a more exalted spirit, surrounded by human flesh. And who would not admire the man who in the Old and New Testament is called, and rightly, first with the name of all flesh, then with the name of every creature, because he shapes, creates, and transforms himself into the appearance of every kind of flesh and into the nature of every kind of creature. So the Persian, Evantes writes, where he explains Chaldaean theology, that man does not have any image of his very own but many exterior and foreign ones. Hence the saying of the Chaldeans that man is an animal of varying nature, multiform and inconstant. What of all this? It is that we may understand that from the time that we are born in this condition we are what we wish to be. We should take care that it be not said of us that, being honored, we did not realize we have become similar to brutes and foolish jackasses. Let rather the words of Asaph be repeated: ““You are Gods, and you are all children of heaven,” lest, abusing the indulgent generosity of the Father, we render harmful rather than salutary that choice liberty which he has given us. Let a sacred ambition enter our souls so that we do not satisfy ourselves with mediocre things, but aspire to the highest things, and strive with all our strength to reach them. From the moment that we wish it, we can. Let us despise earthly objects, let us disdain celestial ones, and leaving aside whatever is worldly, let us soar to that supramundane court which is close to the most high divinity. There, according to the sacred mysteries, the Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones have the primacy. Unable to give up, and impatient of second place, let us emulate their dignity and glory and, if we desire it, we shall be in no way inferior to them.