Pico della Mirandola

New Essays

Edited by

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the other hand, given the weakness of human understanding that Pico had explored in his struggle with scholasticism, the identity of the levels of being or of the transcendentals is not a fact but a spiritual challenge. Thus Pico continues to hold, what one Cabalistic thesis had taught: all sin comes from the tree of creation.

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Pico della Mirandola's Philosophy of Religion

Michael Sudduth

Philosophy seeks the truth, theology finds it, and religion possesses it.[1]

In a very broad sense, philosophy may be understood as a habit of rational reflection on perspective, a process of inquiry about "viewpoint" in which basic presuppositions are discovered and examined in terms of their meaning, coherence, and justification. Philosophy is just as much about getting clear about things as it is about offering justifications for our most basic intellectual commitments. The former, of course, is a precondition for the latter. For this reason, philosophy is often thought of as the intellectual habit of asking the right sort of questions, making the right sort of conceptual distinctions, and rightly drawing out the important implications of beliefs. Understood thus, philosophy is less a particular discipline and more a way of thinking about particular disciplines. Philosophy takes on many specific forms as basic questions are raised about different domains of intellectual inquiry, such as philosophy of history, philosophy of knowledge, philosophy of mind, philosophy of science, philosophy of law, and – most relevant to the present paper – philosophy of religion.

On the above understanding of philosophy, *philosophy of religion* refers to a reflective habit of mind directed toward religious or theological beliefs or statements. It includes examining the meaning, coherence, and justification for religious claims as well as tracing out their implications for and relations to other aspects of human life and knowledge. While "philosophy of religion" emerged as a formal academic discipline in the nineteenth century, the spirit and impulse of philosophy of religion – as broadly defined here – has a considerably older and more diverse pedigree. For example, it has been an important part of the world's

[1] Pico della Mirandola, *Opera omnia* (Turin: Bottega D'Erasmo, 1971), 359.

religious traditions, as evidenced by the philosophical work of Shankara (Hinduism), Asvaghosa (Buddhism), Maimonides (Judaism), Avicenna (Islam), and Augustine and Aquinas (Christianity). These thinkers also demonstrate that, while philosophy of religion is often associated with a religiously disinterested or neutral reflective analysis of religion, such an approach is not essential to the nature of philosophical thinking about religion. Some of its most passionate representatives have been devoted adherents of particular religious traditions.

The focus of the present paper is the philosophy of religion of the Renaissance thinker Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–94).[2] Pico is perhaps most widely known for his work *Oratio de dignitate hominis* (*On the Dignity of Man*), which, though written in 1486, was published posthumously. The work is usually regarded as a celebration of the humanist values of freedom and reason. Paul Miller has spoken of Pico's intellectual contributions as disclosing through one individual "the spirit of the Italian Renaissance."[3] Pico's philosophical contributions, however, are situated in and inseparably connected to his own Christian religious or theological framework. His "new philosophy" (*philosophia nova*) must be interpreted in this context. Not surprisingly, some of Pico's most important contributions fall within the domain of the philosophy of religion.

In this paper I survey some of Pico's more important contributions to philosophical reflection on religious belief. Although the Renaissance is often depicted as involving a break from the theological worldview of the medieval tradition, Pico's thought is as much an extension and development of this tradition as it is a departure from it. These continuities and discontinuities play a crucial role in defining Pico's work within the conceptual territory of the philosophy of religion. I begin with Pico's view on the relationship between philosophy and theology and move on to consider the religious implications and presuppositions of his syncretistic

[2] My introductory comments on the nature of philosophy of religion (as I am conceiving this project) were designed in part to circumvent the potential criticism that to speak of Pico's "philosophy of religion" is highly anachronistic. However, if my initial comments are insufficient to alleviate such worries, the reader may parse the paper topic as Pico's "philosophical theology." My main interest here is Pico's rational reflection on religious belief and the relation of this activity to Pico's broader philosophical viewpoint.

[3] Paul Miller, "Introduction," in Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), vii. Quotations from the *Oratio* below are taken from this edition, which also includes Pico's works *De ente et uno* (*On Being and the One*) and *Heptaplus*, from which I also quote.

vision. The central point of the paper emerges here. Although Pico's syncretistic methodology played an important role in his rational reflection on religious and Christian belief, ultimately this philosophical methodology presupposes Pico's deeper religious commitments. In this way, the philosophical methodology that shapes reflective inquiry into religious belief has from the start been shaped to a significant degree by initial religious commitments.

Pico on the Relation between Philosophy and Theology

To start filling out Pico's central insights in the philosophy of religion, we can begin by considering his view on the relationship between philosophy and theology or sacred doctrine. Pico addresses this topic in the first part of his famous *Oratio*. While commonly regarded as an attempt to celebrate the dignity of man, Pico's *Oratio* is really an exercise in praise of philosophy. Although Pico began the work by affirming that freedom constitutes the greatness of the human person,[4] this was in fact a preamble to his extended defense of philosophy in the first part of the *Oratio*. Of course, as a whole the *Oratio* was intended as a methodological and justificatory preface to Pico's primary systematic project, a statement of 900 theses that Pico hoped would represent a synthesis of the diverse religious and philosophical viewpoints of civilization.[5] His defense of philosophy in this context importantly illuminates its relation to theology.

Pico argues at length that there is universal testimony to the value of the study of philosophy. Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and ancient Greek religion all affirm the advantages and dignity of philosophy, as do the ancient Greek philosophers. Moral philosophy has the capacity

[4] See below for further discussion on this.

[5] As suggested in a letter shortly before Pico's death, the original or at least intended title of the work was *Oratio ad laudes philosophiae* (*Oration in Praise of Philosophy*). According to S. A. Farmer, *De hominis dignitate* first appeared as the title of the work in a corrupt Strasburg edition of Pico's *Opera* (dated 1504), edited by Jacob Wimpheling and Hieronymus Emser. The absence of Pico's 900 hundred theses from this and other earlier versions of Pico's *Opera* played an important role in decontextualizing the *Oratio* and contributing to its appearance as a purely humanist document of the period. See S. A. Farmer, *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses (1486): The Evolution of Traditional Religious and Philosophical Systems* (Tempe, AZ: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1998), 18–19 n. 50. All references below to Pico's *900 Theses* will refer to the edition found in Farmer's *Syncretism in the West*.

to liberate us from earthly attachments and desires. Dialectic helps us avoid being ensnared by fallacious reasoning. Natural philosophy gives us knowledge of self and the world. Whereas the first two modes of philosophical inquiry purge error from us, the third positively illuminates the mind with truth. Philosophy thus has the power to cure our vices and ignorance. Nonetheless, our ultimate felicity only comes through "the knowledge of divine things" and "theological piety and the most sacred worship of God."[6] Philosophy is thus a preparation for the "vision of divine things by the light of theology."[7] To borrow Pico's use of the biblical imagery of Jacob's ladder, through philosophy we climb the rungs of the ladder in the ascent to God. Pico saw philosophy as a necessary but insufficient element in the evolutionary human journey back to God, the source, support, and end of all things. Pico wrote:

> Natural philosophy, therefore, cannot assure us a true and unshakable peace. To bestow such peace is rather the privilege and office of the queen of the sciences, most holy theology. Natural philosophy will at best point out the way to theology and even accompany us along the path, while theology, seeing us from afar hastening to draw close to her, will call out: "Come unto me you who are spent in labor and I will restore you; come to me and I will give you the peace which the world and nature cannot give."[8]

Pico's view of philosophy is thus governed by a conception of the human person according to which we are created for an end that surpasses the natural order of things. Philosophy, necessary as it may be, can only take us so far. The point is emphasized in the seventh exposition of Pico's *Heptaplus* (1489). "Felicity," Pico says, "I define as the return of each thing to its beginning . . . the end of all things is the same as the beginning of all: one God, omnipotent, and blessed."[9] Since all things have God within them in some way, they are capable of finding a felicity through the perfection of their own natures.

Philosophy is thus capable of producing a natural felicity when it is directed toward finding God within finite, conditioned reality, within the natural order of things. Pico explains,

> Since each nature has God within it in some way, since it has as much of God as it has goodness (and all things which God made are good), it remains for it, when it has perfected its own nature in all parts and has attained its potential, to attain God also within itself; and if the attainment of God is felicity, as we have shown, it is in some way happy in itself. This is the natural felicity, of which more or less is allotted to different things according to their natures.[10]

[6] Pico, *Oratio*, 9, 16.
[7] Pico, *Oratio*, 13.
[8] Pico, *Oratio*, 11.
[9] Pico, *Heptaplus*, seventh exposition, proem, 148.

This natural felicity, however, is only a "shadow of felicity," just as the human person is itself only a shadow of the divine. There is a felicity that is found in God himself, but it transcends the natural order and thus cannot be achieved by any created thing relying on its own strength. It requires the influence of divine grace, which Pico speaks of in Biblical terms as "being led by the Spirit of God."[11] While philosophy may guide us to natural felicity, it is *religion* that "urges, directs, and impels"[12] us toward this supernatural felicity. Philosophy is therefore perfected through religion. Moreover, as Pico sees it, religion involves divine revelation, that is, God's own self-disclosure of himself. Since it is theology that presents this revelation, philosophy can only be a preparation for "a vision of divine things by means of the light of theology."[13] Thus, everything that perfects its nature through attaining its beginning through nature attains its beginning in an imperfect way. Only by transcending the natural order and finding God in himself is any finite thing capable of attaining its beginning in a perfect way. But this is only possible through divine grace, and grace only comes through religion, with its divine revelation. So humans reach ultimate felicity only through the truth that is given in the sacred science of theology.

There are of course clear continuities with the medieval tradition in Pico's dichotomy of nature and grace and his view of philosophy as the handmaiden of theology. It is worth emphasizing here, however, that it is theology that informs Pico's larger view of the human person and his account of the value of philosophy. That the human person's end is supernatural is not a truth derived from philosophy but an implication of Pico's theological beliefs. Consequently, his view of the value and place of philosophy in relation to theology is ultimately based on his fundamental commitment to Christian supernaturalism. I believe this shows an important continuity between Pico and his medieval predecessors, who undertook philosophical inquiry in the larger context of their religious beliefs. Pico does not pretend to stand outside the realm of faith and examine

[10] Pico, *Heptaplus*, seventh exposition, proem, 148.
[11] Romans 8:14.
[12] Pico, *Heptaplus*, 153.
[13] Pico, *Oratio*, 13.

religious belief from a purported neutral perspective. He is a thinker who approaches rational reflection on theological claims within the context of his faith, specifically the Catholic faith, as it existed in fifteenth-century Europe. In step with many of his medieval predecessors, Pico saw human reason as an instrument that is capable of clarifying, developing, and defending the truths articulated by the Catholic faith.[14] Philosophy *seeks* a certain truth already *possessed* by theology and existentially embraced in the religious life. As a consequence, while philosophy informs Pico's rational reflection on religious belief, particular religious commitments inform his understanding of philosophy.

Pico's Syncretistic Approach

One of the more frequently commented-on aspects of Pico's thought has been his so-called "syncretistic method." In reading through Pico's works, one is struck by the overarching theme of achieving a synthesis of diverse religious and philosophical viewpoints. This is particularly true regarding his reflections on religious belief, where constructive synthesis of diverse viewpoints plays an important role in his reflections on God and creation as well as his defense of Christian belief. The following serve as some important illustrations of Pico's syncretistic methodology, which are also relevant to his rational reflections on religious belief.

Pico was convinced that the theologically directed conception of philosophy articulated in the *Oratio* is a truth articulated in the world's diverse religious and philosophical traditions. For example, Pico sees it symbolically revealed through the Mosaic account of the Tabernacle in the wilderness and the various laws governing the worship of God at the Tabernacle. As Pico sees it, the account implies an approach to God that comes though stages of purification and priestly service, but this corresponds to the progression from philosophy (moral, dialectic, and natural) to the knowledge of divine things in which the soul is increasingly purified and illuminated.[15] The Delphic precepts among the Greeks (moderation, know thyself, and know God) also imply this same progression. The Chaldaeans have a similar understanding, for their prophet Zoroaster

[14] This point has been underscored by Avery Dulles in his *Princeps Concordiae: Pico della Mirandola and the Scholastic Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1941), 144–5.

[15] As Pico says, "Moses gives us these distinct commands, and in giving them he advises us, arouses us, urges us to make ready our way through philosophy to future celestial glory, while we can" (*Oratio*, 13).

speaks of the soul growing wings to take flight into the heavens after the wings have been moistened with waters from the four corners of the world. Pico interprets this as expressing through figurative language the necessity of the liberal arts for preparing the soul for its return to God.[16]

In the *Heptaplus* (1489), Pico presented a systematic exposition of the Mosaic account of creation in the book of Genesis. Relying on various conventions of allegorical interpretation, including insights from Cabalistic Judaism, Pico attempts to reconcile the Mosaic account of creation and pagan views on the origin of the world as presented in sources as diverse as Plato's *Timaeus* and Zoroastrianism. It is worth noting that Pico goes as far as to see a sanction for his own Neoplatonist emanationist scheme in Moses. "He [Moses] buried the treasures of all true philosophy as in a field" and "philosophizes on the emanation of all things from God."[17] Pico, however, is just as keen on arguing for the harmony of Judaism and Christianity. While the Mosaic account of creation is a truth revealed by God in the Hebrew scriptures, Pico argues that Moses's writings contain hidden references to the advent of Christ, the increase of the church, and the calling of the Gentiles.[18] For example, God's resting after the work of creation symbolizes the spiritual rest of people through Christ the mediator, and the doctrine of the Trinity is secretly expressed by the three forms of unity of things in creation articulated in the opening chapter of Genesis.[19] Once again, utilizing a rigorous method of allegorical interpretation, Pico argues that Moses spoke of the truths that would be more explicitly asserted in the Christian dispensation. Hence, Moses spoke not only of man's supernatural end but also of the Christian revelation.

In his *De ente et uno* (1491), the reconciliation of Aristotelianism and Platonism proves essential to Pico's reflections on the nature of God, specifically his unpacking the wholly transcendent and *sui generis* nature of God as the pure, unlimited act of existence. Pico sets out to reconcile the Aristotelian claim that the One and Being are the same and the Platonist contention that the One is prior to Being. Pico explains that the

[16] I have already noted above that the *Oratio* was contextually a preamble to Pico's *900 Theses*. Inasmuch as his defense of philosophy in the *Oratio* was carried out with support from diverse religious and philosophical traditions, the preamble to the *900 Theses* confers a kind of universal sanction to the syncretistic vision he will develop systematically by way of his collection of theses.

[17] Pico, *Heptaplus*, first proem, 71.

[18] Pico, *Heptaplus*, second proem, 81.

[19] See the second proem (80–1, 84) and the seventh exposition (147–69) of the *Heptaplus* for Pico's account of the Gospel message contained secretly in Moses's writings, and the sixth exposition, proem (139), for his account of the Trinity in creation.

term *being* can be taken in two senses. According to the first, *being* signifies "all that which is outside nothing." That which is nonbeing is nothing. According to the second, *being* signifies that which participates in existence (*esse*). Pico argues that when Aristotle identified Being and the One, he assumed Being in the former sense. He did not intend to assert that the One participates in Being, as, for example, luminosity participates in light. Hence, Aristotle's view is compatible with the view advocated among Platonists. Pico explains, "For God, who is the plentitude of all existence, is of this nature. He alone is of himself, and from him alone, with no interposing medium, all things proceed to existence."[20] Pico's view here reproduces the Thomistic position that God is *ipsum esse*, the act of existence of itself.[21]

Most important, though, was Pico's proposal, at age 23, to dispute his 900 theses on philosophy and theology in Rome.[22] His goal was to assemble representatives of the diverse schools of thought relevant to his 900 theses in an extended public disputation. Pico had intended to open the debate with a formal oration that would underscore the importance of locating common ground in diverse viewpoints, not only within the Catholic faith but common ground between Christian and non-Christian thought. The debate never materialized, being suspended by Pope Innocent VIII, whose suspicions about Pico's orthodoxy had been sufficiently aroused. As noted above, far from being a celebration of the spirit of Renaissance humanism, the *Oratio* was a propaedeutic to Pico's main syncretistic project. In these theses, we find a broad range of mini-syncretistic projects systematically brought together, from the reconciliation of Plato and Aristotle to the harmony of Hebrew scripture and the Christian revelation. Architecturally, Pico's theses divide into 400 quasi-historical theses and 500 theses according to his own opinion. It is in this second half of the work that we find Pico attempting to resolve various conflicts in scholastic theology, launching criticisms of Thomas Aquinas, and concluding with the use of Cabalistic insights to confirm truths of the Christian religion.

As suggested in several of the illustrations above, to actualize his syncretistic vision, it was necessary for Pico to affirm (1) a level of meaning beneath the surface of the texts whose ideas he tried to reconcile and unify and (2) an interpretive method for deriving these hidden truths from the

[20] Pico, *On Being and the One*, 44.
[21] See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 4, a. 2, corp.
[22] For an account of the history of Pico's proposed Roman disputation, see Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, chap. 1.

texts. Pico's syncretistic project relies heavily on the concept of "mystery." The truth is concealed in various ways and must be recovered by means of principles of allegorical interpretation. Pico emphasizes this throughout the *Heptaplus* in his effort to harmonize both the Mosaic account of creation and the philosophy of Plato's *Timaeus* as well as to derive Christian truths from the Hebrew scriptures. "Moses had to speak with a veiled face, lest those whom he was undertaking to enlighten be blinded by so much light."[23] Of course, it is not just Moses but all ancient writers who speak the truth in a mystery. "The custom of the ancients," he says, was to write "occultly and figuratively."[24] Even the philosophers do this: "Plato himself concealed his doctrines beneath coverings of allegory, veils of myth, mathematical images, and unintelligible signs of fugitive reasoning."[25] This principle of truth concealment is crucial to Pico's syncretistic approach, for the surface meaning of the texts Pico handles either underdetermines the truths he wishes to deduce or presents otherwise prima facie irreconcilable inconsistencies.

Pico is explicit that the basis for his method of allegorical interpretation is a metaphysical principle of the mutual containment of all levels of reality: "whatever is in any of the worlds is contained in each."[26] Pico distinguished between the ultramundane, celestial, and sublunary worlds. The last world is the one inhabited by all living things on earth. The first is the angelic realm (as described by theologians) or the intelligible realm (as described by Platonists). The celestial world is the realm above the earth, embracing the stars and planets, but below the ultramundane world. To these three worlds, Pico adds a fourth: the human person. According to Pico, "Bound by chains of concord, all these worlds exchange natures as well as names with mutual liberality. From this principle . . . flows the science of all allegorical interpretation."[27] It is because all things are contained in each other that discourse about any one level of reality is bound to involve reference to other levels of reality. But this can only be accomplished by using language in such a way that words simultaneously have different meanings. Consequently, texts will always have a literal and figurative meaning. The method of allegorical interpretation will bring out the multiplicity of truths expressed in this way.

[23] Pico, *Heptaplus*, second exposition, proem, 94.
[24] Pico, *Heptaplus*, second exposition, proem, 94.
[25] Pico, *Heptaplus*, first proem, 69.
[26] Pico, *Heptaplus*, second proem, 80.
[27] Pico, *Heptaplus*, second proem, 78–9.

The Religious Contours of Pico's Syncretistic Method

While Pico utilizes his syncretistic method to derive philosophically robust conclusions about religion in general and the Christian religion in particular, the justification for this method seems to depend on some of Pico's basic religious beliefs. If the dependency is not just apparent, the method he utilized in developing a philosophy of religion was inspired, at least in part, by his own religious convictions. A more detailed examination of Pico's justification of the syncretistic approach will bring this into better resolution.

A. The Defense of Philosophy and Human Freedom

As explained above, Pico's defense of philosophy (as a preamble to his syncretistic project) rests firmly on religious, specifically Christian, presuppositions. He clearly assumes Christian supernaturalism throughout, though he attempts, through the use of allegorical interpretation, to tease out the preparatory role of philosophy in the soul's journey back to God from non-Christian religious and philosophical traditions. The same must be said concerning Pico's opening discussion of freedom, so frequently transformed (incorrectly, I think) into the main theme of the *Oratio.*

Pico begins the *Oratio* with an inquiry into the grounds of the greatness of the human person. As Pico explains, while several of the reasons adduced for the wonderful nature of the human person are valid, the best reason is that which sets the human person completely apart from the rest of created things. According to Pico, this must be the *freedom* of the human person to fashion and transform himself into that which he is not. The greatness of the human person lies not in a fixed essence or nature that places the human person above the rest of the created order but in the possibilities open to the human person. The medieval background to Pico's proposal here is important. In medieval metaphysics, all created things have a fixed ontological status in the universe. Created beings form a hierarchy (the so-called "Great Chain of Being"), ascending from a lower to a higher status based on their ontological composition – broadly their composition of matter and spirit.[28] This chain of created being originates from uncreated being, God. In this hierarchical conception of the universe, the human person is in a fixed position between the angelic

[28] See Edward P. Mahoney, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Origen on Humans, Choice, and Hierarchy," *Vivens homo* 5 (1994): 359–76, at 360–1, 373–6.

and animal worlds. The human person was created "a little lower than the angels," to quote the Psalmist. While retaining much of this general medieval metaphysics, Pico's departs from it in a crucial respect. The ontological status of the human person is not fixed. The essence of the human person (if we can use the term "essence") is freedom. Unlike the rest of creation, the human person has the capacity to become what he or she chooses to become. As Pico explains, "Oh great and wonderful happiness of man! It is given him to have that which he chooses and to be that which he wills. . . . At man's birth, the Father placed in him every sort of seed and sprouts of every kind of life."[29] Pico depicts God as speaking to Adam as follows:

> A limited nature in other creatures is confined within the laws written down by Us. In conformity with thy free judgment, in whose hands I have placed thee, thou art confined by no bounds; and thou wilt fix limits of nature for thyself. I have placed thee at the center of the world, that from there thou mayest more conveniently look around and see whatsoever is in the world. Neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal have We made thee. Thou, like a judge appointed for being honorable, art the molder and maker of thyself; thou mayest sculpt thyself into whatever shape thou dost prefer. Thou canst grow downward into the lower natures which are brutes. Thou canst again grow upward from thy soul's reason into higher natures which are divine.[30]

The human person is thus a "chameleon," having a nature capable of transforming itself into lower or higher forms in the Great Chain of Being.

Pico's insistence on the freedom of the human person to fashion himself for better or worse was by no means a novel suggestion when Pico proposed it. The idea was common among Neoplatonists of the day.[31] Indeed, Pico spends considerable time arguing that the Hebrews, Greeks, Chaldeans, and Arabs accepted this idea. Not surprisingly, the idea is explicitly or implicitly found within several of the world's religious and philosophical traditions. So Pico does not consider himself to be offering

[29] Pico, *Oratio*, 5.

[30] Pico, *Oratio*, 4–5.

[31] The idea had been emphasized in the metaphysics of the Platonist Academy at Florence where Pico spent time studying. Neoplatonists such as Marsilio Ficino placed the "human soul" in the middle of the Great Chain of Being: Body → Quality → Soul → Angel → God. Being located in the middle, the human person was capable of descending to lower forms or ascending to higher forms depending on the exercise of his free will.

a new idea as much as newly presenting an old idea.[32] He is bringing clarity to a point of importance already at least implicitly recognized by people of different cultures and religious creeds.

The significance, however, of Pico's opening "freedom" motif is derived from its immediate context. Human freedom, though constituting the greatness of the human person, does not by itself produce felicity, natural or supernatural. It is for this reason that Pico follows up his comments on freedom with his defense of philosophy. Freedom is a power, a power that can be used to lower the human person to the level of a brute or to raise him to the level of angels or the divine nature. Something must direct our choices if we are to choose well, and this must be knowledge. But as already noted, while the knowledge that comes through philosophy can prepare the soul to transcend itself, we reach our ultimate felicity only through the knowledge of God that comes through theology. So Pico's notion of freedom is situated within a theological teleology. The purpose of this freedom is to allow the human person to ascend to a higher place, ultimately to become one with God the creator, where this is mediated by the knowledge given by theology as well as the preparatory purification and knowledge given by philosophy. Thus, Pico's account of freedom is shaped by his theological convictions.

B. Many Perspectives in Search of One Truth

Pico's philosophy of the human person, specifically his notion of freedom, connects to his syncretistic approach in an interesting way that further illuminates his own theological presuppositions. The above ontology of the human person implies not only the freedom to pursue truth and engage in rational inquiry but also the potential for diverse viewpoints. While our choices presuppose knowledge, knowledge also presupposes choices. The human person is capable, by virtue of his freedom, of viewing the world from different perspectives.[33] Freedom of thought implies what we might call "perspectival diversity." The ontology of the human person thus has epistemological implications. Of course, for Pico, multiplicity is more broadly grounded in the very nature of things. The universe is an

[32] For a discussion of the patristic and medieval background of this notion, see Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 2:506–7.

[33] I do not mean to suggest any direct voluntary control over our perspective. Rather, our choices *indirectly* influence, or shape in the long run, the view of the world we naturally acquire.

emanation of the One, God, through a succession of intermediaries. Perspectival multiplicity is thus grounded in both human freedom and the larger ontological structure of things. But behind it all is the perspective of the One.

It is the empirical fact of perspectival diversity that presents the challenge of finding unity in diversity. For Pico, although there is a multiplicity of perspectives, truth is ultimately one. This of course reflects the deeper unity of things, as all multiplicity has originated from the One. In Pico's Neoplatonist cosmological scheme, all things ultimately return to the One. It is not surprising, then, to find Pico placing emphasis on the epistemological plane; we must work through the multiplicity of perspectives to locate a deeper unity of perspective and ultimately the one truth. The epistemological trajectory of human thought thus mirrors the actual ontological evolution of the universe, with the many arising from the One and returning again to the One. The truth is one and it is "out there," but, given the diversity of perspectives, we must work to find it. Pico explains:

> Further, if there is a school which attacks truer doctrines and ridicules with calumny the good causes of thought, it strengthens rather than weakens truth, and as by motion it excites the flame rather than extinguishing it. Moved by this reasoning, I have wished to bring into view the things taught not merely according to one doctrine (as some would desire), but things taught according to every sort of doctrine, that by this comparison of very many sects and by the discussion of manifold philosophy, that radiance of truth which Plato mentions in his *Letters* might shine more clearly upon our minds, like the sun rising from the deep.[34]

The process of discovery, therefore, requires the dialectical engagement of diverse perspectives.

C. Religious Contours

Why is it important to find the one truth? It is bound up in Pico's understanding that our ultimate felicity depends on the knowledge of God, the knowledge of the One, which, as I argued above, may be traced to his Christian supernaturalism. The happiness of human beings must transcend the natural order of things because a supernatural God is the creator and humans were created for union with this God. Philosophically, happiness, as Pico stated in his *De ente et uno*, is "the return to the Origin."

[34] Pico, *Oratio*, 23.

This return to the Origin is a return to the One. Hence, all perspectives must be traced to their single origin. But as in all Christianized forms of Platonism, this ontology is baptized in a religious vision, the vision of human redemption. Pico's syncretistic project is thus intimately tied to a redemptive or soteriological vision that is supplied by his Christian presuppositions. Seeing the unity of things brings us not only knowledge of reality but knowledge of God.

The religious contours of Pico's syncretistic method may be seen from another angle. Pico's syncretism presupposes perspectival diversity and the rational accessibility of the one truth contained in all. Perspectival diversity by itself can easily lead to skepticism, as demonstrated by Renaissance skepticism and early modern thinkers like Michel de Montaigne (1533–92). The rational possibility of synthesis of viewpoint arises from the fact of perspectival pluralism and the philosophical assumption that the universe (literally, one truth) is rationally penetrable. It is Pico's notion that we can find common ground in diverse viewpoints, and the correlated notion that truth is discovered by a clash of viewpoints allows him to take the possibility of Renaissance skepticism to a different conclusion. So there is optimism about the ability of human reason to know that the world has an underlying unity and that we can discover it. This optimism I would suggest is rooted in Pico's Christian theism. The universe is rational because a rational God has created it. It is rationally penetrable to humans because it has been created for them and is – like the human person – an icon of their maker.

Syncretism and the Problem of Religious Pluralism

In this final section, I want to draw a contrast between the kind of syncretism we find in Pico and the sort that is exhibited in contemporary philosophy of religion. I think this contrast provides a final, compelling vision of the extent to which Pico's syncretism is shaped by prior theological commitments, specifically his Christian religious commitments.

A. Syncretism and Contemporary Philosophy of Religion

One of the apparent virtues of syncretism is that it would seem to address one of the basic problems encountered in philosophy of religion, namely, the so-called "problem of religious diversity." Simply stated, if there is one God, why are there so many different religious traditions, many of which teach prima facie incompatible doctrines about the divine and human salvation? The syncretist has a straightforward answer. Religious

diversity is not the fundamental fact. The fundamental fact is a single truth (or system of truths) *expressed* through multiple human ideas and language forms.[35] From here we find many of the "comparative religion" projects that have often dominated late nineteenth-century and twentieth-century philosophy of religion. Such projects are typically aimed at carving through the doctrinal distinctions among the world's different religious traditions and locating some more fundamental truth held in common between these traditions.

Two examples should suffice. To begin with, Oxford philosophical theologian Keith Ward sees "the discernment of the infinite in and through the finite"[36] (what he calls the "iconic vision") as a basic point of convergence between the traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Reflectively, this takes the form of what Ward calls "dual-aspect theism," the conjunction of two apparently conflicting ideas: God as simultaneously wholly transcendent (and thus unrelated to anything and beyond all human description) and wholly immanent (and thus related to all things and capable of being described). In this way, God is both the inaccessible Divine Infinite Being and the Divine Activity present in and accessible to all finite things. Ward sees this dialectical tension as crucial for instilling the faith and worship acts that define the practical axis of religion.

As a second example, John Hick has argued in several different books for what he calls "religious pluralism." Religious pluralism claims that no religious tradition is superior to any other religious tradition (the egalitarianism principle) and that each of the world's religious traditions provides its own path to and conditions of salvation for its adherents (the equal access principle).[37] Hick's pluralism is based on broadly Kantian themes, principally the distinction between noumena (things in themselves) and phenomena (things as they appear to us). For Hick, religious traditions and their various doctrines represent diverse appearances of the divine. This does not preclude Hick from affirming some sort of ultimate reality behind these various appearances framed through human concepts and

[35] For a syncretist such as Pico, religious diversity is precisely what one would expect, for this is what the world should look like in a universe operating according to Neoplatonist principles. Emanation and freedom together generate perspectival diversity.

[36] Keith Ward, *Concepts of God: Images of the Divine in Five Religious Traditions* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1998), 153.

[37] See John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), and Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralist Age*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006).

in human language: "the noumenal Real is experienced and thought by different human mentalities, forming and formed by different religious traditions, as the range of gods and absolutes within the phenomenology of religion reports."[38] Hence, there is a divine reality, the Real in itself, which stands behind all religious traditions. Hick's religious syncretism involves subtracting all substantive concepts from a tradition's discourse about God, stripping religious traditions down to some mythological, as opposed to literal, truth. So for Hick, traditional Christian ideas such as the doctrine of the incarnation and the correlated belief in the divinity of Christ, as well as Christ's bodily resurrection from the dead, must be deconstructed as metaphors expressing the same truth about the divine found in all religious traditions.

B. Pico's Christosyncretism

It should be apparent that Pico's syncretism looks very different than the syncretism of John Hick and other contemporary philosophers of religion who locate common ground between diverse religious traditions in some abstract form of theism. Pico accepts that there is a natural felicity possible for all people. He also accepts the idea that all religious and philosophical traditions contain truth, even the fundamental truth that is instrumental in humans' achieving their ultimate felicity. But neither of these facts entail that humans can be saved independently of faith in the redemptive work of Christ. Pico explicitly rejects such an idea. The central theme of the seventh exposition of the *Heptaplus* is that ultimate felicity (eternal life) is ratified by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and the efficacy of Christ's redemptive work is transmitted through the sacrament of baptism. Christ is the focal point of a historically situated redemptive plan, explicitly revealed in the Christian revelation. Speaking of the patriarchs who lived before Christ, Pico says, "Then after the ineffable sacrifice performed on the altar of the cross, when Christ had come down to them, he swept them to freedom like the moving power of a whirlwind and carried them up to the level of highest felicity."[39] Indeed, Pico argues that those who have been confronted with the claims of the Christian message about the work of Christ and do not place their faith in him defile their natures and make it impossible even to achieve natural felicity.[40] Pico clearly believes

[38] Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 242.
[39] Pico, *Heptaplus*, seventh exposition, proem, 153.
[40] See Pico, *Heptaplus*, 153.

that human redemption supervenes on the death of Christ as an actual historic event. He also accepts traditional Catholic beliefs about Christ's divinity and bodily resurrection. In short, Pico retains the Christocentric theology that is patently rejected by pluralists like John Hick.

Hick contrasts his own pluralist position with what he calls "religious exclusivism" and "religious inclusivism." A religious exclusivist sees his religion as the correct religion and other religions, despite having some religious truth, as not the correct religion. The religious exclusivist privileges his own tradition's account of God and human salvation. Thus a Christian exclusivist maintains that, while other religions might contain divine truths, people are saved only through Christ. The religious inclusivist, in contrast, privileges his own religious tradition but allows the possibility that people outside his religious tradition can experience salvation. The Christian exclusivist and inclusivist both regard the death of Christ as essential to human salvation, but the latter loosens the degree to which a person must be an explicit adherent of the Christian faith to experience the redemptive benefits of Christ's death. Using Hick's distinction, Pico appears to be an exclusivist Christian, which of course would have been the common position of Catholic Christians in the fifteenth century.[41]

To the question of what separates the syncretism of Pico from a pluralistic syncretism of philosophers of religion like Hick, I propose a fairly straightforward answer. Pico takes the Christian faith as his point of reference when it comes to finding truth hidden in diverse religious traditions. In this way, we see how Pico's syncretistic approach is shaped by his distinctly Christian presuppositions. For Pico, the mysteries of Christ and the Christian Church are contained symbolically in the various religious and philosophical traditions. The theism that is contained in the ancient religious thinkers and philosophers is ultimately a Christotheism. Consequently, Pico is not standing outside the Christian faith and looking for a very general truth found in all. His syncretistic project is, for all its Neoplatonist elements, very much Christologically tethered. It is a *Christosyncretism*, because the common truth hidden in various religious

[41] My qualification of Pico's syncretism as Christocentric is an interpretation not inconsonant with the work of other commentators on Pico. Recently Moshe Idel has argued against those who contend that Pico treats Christian, Cabbalistic, and Hermetic views as equal elements within a syncretic project. See Idel, "Kabbalah and Hermeticism in Dame Frances A. Yates's Renaissance," in *Ésotérisme, gnoses et imaginaire symbolique*, ed. Richard Caron et al. (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 71–90, esp. 74–6, 88.

and philosophical viewpoints is essentially Christian truth, or at least points in this direction. It is for this reason that Pico can argue without embarrassment that the truths of non-Christian religious traditions confirm Christian truth in various ways.[42]

John Hick does not and cannot take the Christian faith as his point of reference by virtue of his radical perspectivalist assumptions. Pico accepts the fact of perspectival diversity and even the limits of human language in describing the divine, but he does not infer from this the sort of theological agnosticism and normative religious relativism that infects many post-Kantian philosophers of religion. Hick's philosophical assumptions preclude his regarding Christianity as anything more than one expression of the human response to the Real. Consequently, rather than it being that all religious and philosophical viewpoints contain the mystery of the Christ, there is some non-Christian religious truth expressed in diverse ways, resulting in Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and so on.

This contrast between Pico and Hick is not trivial. It has important implications for how philosophy in general and philosophy of religion in particular are carried out. In Pico's view, philosophy of religion, like philosophy in general, is placed in the service of a particular faith that is nonnegotiable. For Hick, philosophy of religion is placed in the service of all faiths in the effort to find something that is nonnegotiable, however conceptually thin it might be.[43] While Pico seeks a vindication of the Christian faith, Hick seeks a vindication of a fairly abstract and

[42] Consider, for example, Pico's claim that "I come now to those things that I have dug up from the ancient mysteries of the Hebrews and have brought forward in order to confirm the holy and Catholic faith" (*Oratio*, 29; cf. 33). Pico's *900 Theses* end with "seventy-one Cabalistic conclusions according to my own opinion, strongly confirming the Christian religion using the Hebrew wisemen's own principles" (Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 517). See also the entire seventh exposition of the *Heptaplus* for Pico's defense of the Christian faith from the Hebrew scriptures.

[43] My view here argues against those who view Pico's project as an early representative of modern-style syncretic projects. Consider the account of Cesare Vasoli, who writes, "Pico saw himself as searching for the deepest common truth, where *sapientia* and its various temporal manifestations might reside, untroubled by doctrinal squabbles." Vasoli, "The Renaissance Concept of Philosophy," in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. Charles Schmitt et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 57–74, at 68. For a critical assessment of works that present Pico as a modern-style syncretist, the account of William G. Craven can be read with profit; see chapter 5 of his *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Symbol of His Age: Modern Interpretations of a Renaissance Philosopher* (Geneva: Libraire Droz, 1981).

truncated form of theism, of which Christianity is just another manifestation. For Hick, traditional Christianity must be deconstructed in terms of non-Christian philosophical assumptions to find the truth. For Pico, other religious traditions must be deconstructed in the light of basic Christian presuppositions about God, the world, and human nature. Put otherwise, Pico is a son of the medieval tradition and Hick is a child of the Enlightenment. While Hick is a philosopher of religion, Pico is a philosopher of the Christian religion.

This is not to say, of course, that Hick's approach to philosophy of religion is not governed by certain religious presuppositions or that Pico's approach is not governed by philosophical presuppositions. It is simply to say that Pico self-consciously appropriated his religious presuppositions as a philosopher, and the combination of his Christian presuppositions and Neoplatonist philosophy produced a particular kind of philosophy of religion. Hick's starting point is quite different, philosophically and religiously, and results in a very different sort of philosophy of religion. This shows that the assessment of any philosophy of religion must always be made in connection with a deeper set of pretheoretical commitments and that a philosopher's ultimate conclusions are, if consistent, ultimately delimited by such commitments.

Concluding Remarks

Pico's syncretistic methodology played a crucial role in shaping his rational reflections on the existence of God, the world, the human person, and the relations between them. While there are various specific points of continuity between Pico's philosophy of religion and the medieval tradition, perhaps the more important general continuity lies in the way in which Pico's reflection on his Christian beliefs, as well as the beliefs of other religious traditions, was informed by his Christian faith, or to be more precise, his Neoplatonist version of the Christian faith. Pico's defense of philosophy, his notion of human freedom, and his broader syncretistic program – all intimately connected – were shaped by his fundamental religious presuppositions, a form of Christian supernaturalism that defined Roman Catholic theology in the fifteenth century. Consequently, while Pico's syncretism gets some important work accomplished in the philosophy of religion, the path eventually leads back to theology and a religious vision. Finally, I argued that Pico's Christian framework sets his syncretistic project distinct from similar projects that have

emerged in twentieth-century philosophy of religion. Pico has an answer to those who try to reconcile the diversity of religious traditions with the existence of one truth and one Supreme Being, but Pico's is a distinctly Christian answer: "Surely if all things agree with the truth, as Aristotle says, all things ought to agree with Christ, who is the truth itself."[44]

[44] Pico, *Heptaplus*, seventh exposition, chap. 5, 165–6.

5

The Birth Day of Venus

Pico as Platonic Exegete in the Commento *and the* Heptaplus

Michael J. B. Allen

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–94) was the wunderkind among Italian Renaissance philosophers and a key figure, along with Cusanus, Bessarion, and Ficino, in the revival of Platonic metaphysics, though he was not a devout Neoplatonist like Ficino but rather an Aristotelian by training and in many ways an eclectic by conviction. Nonetheless, he plunged as hardly more than a youth into the works of Plato, Plotinus, Proclus, and other Neoplatonists, notably in the fifteen months or so he spent in Florence from the spring of 1484 to the summer of 1485, where he acquired a rare understanding of the Platonists' methodology, central postulates, and metaphysical distinctions. This Platonic education was succeeded by nine months in Paris (July 1485 to March 1486) and was subsequently harnessed to an encyclopedic, ambitious, essentially Aristotelian plan. This was to gather together an array of Egyptian, Chaldean, Greek, Hebrew (including Cabalistic), patristic, and scholastic (including Arab) propositions rather than arguments or proofs as such – an array which eventually amounted to 900 conclusions, 900 being the numerological symbol of the soul's ecstatic return to itself in philosophical study – and to defend them in Rome. The event would take place early in 1487 in what he called a "council" but which would be in effect a grand Parisian *disputatio*, and it would include, he hoped, the pope, the College of Cardinals, and a number of eminent theologians and philosophers (whose expenses he would cover!). While this breathtaking proposal by a brilliant twenty-three-year-old had a positivistic dimension to it inasmuch as a number of the theses either concerned nature or had implications for any consideration of the natural world, and a