

The Secret of Pico's *Oration*: Cabala and Renaissance Philosophy

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The work of Renaissance philosophy best known in our time is the *Oration* written by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola in 1486. More than half a century after he wrote it, Pico's speech came to be called the *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, and under that title it has been celebrated as the great Renaissance proclamation of a modern ideal of human dignity and freedom.¹ I have argued elsewhere, however, that both the fame of the *Oration* and its attachment to this ideal are products of the Kantian revolution that transformed philosophy and its historiography. Although the celebrity that Pico earned during his brief and dramatic life never waned, it had little to do with the *Oration* before the end of the eighteenth century. For three centuries after he died in 1494, the *Oration* was little more than an entry in lists of Pico's books until post-Kantian historians invented the first elements of the interpretation now common in college textbooks.²

The root opposition in Kant's philosophy is between phenomenal nature and noumenal freedom, a polarity that gives rise to many others, including the distinction between price, on the one hand, and worth or dignity, on the other. Things have their prices, but only people have dignity, and without freedom there can be no dignity. The centrality of such ideas in Kant's thought and the prominence of similar notions in the first few pages of Pico's *Oration* invited post-Kantian historians to read the speech in terms of the critical philosophy, a response that culminated in the extravagantly Kantian story told by Ernst Cassirer in the *Erkenntnisproblem* and later works: Cassirer saw transcendental idealism as the

1. Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964), pp. 54–67; Eugenio Garin, *Italian Humanism: Philosophy and Civic Life in the Renaissance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965), pp. 105–8.

2. Copenhaver, "Magic and the Dignity of Man," in press.

telos of post-Medieval philosophy and Pico's speech as early progress toward that goal. Another Kantian, but a more judicious one, was Paul Kristeller, who created the study of Renaissance philosophy in the United States and in the process brought the Anglo-American picture of Pico into better alignment with history. But Kristeller's Pico, who became the Pico of the textbooks, is still a hero of human dignity and freedom.³

Kristeller first expressed his views on Pico in a work of wide readership in 1948, long before Frances Yates added another page to the philosopher's dossier in 1964. Yates's Pico is a Hermetic freedom-fighter whose advocacy of natural magic anticipated the Scientific Revolution, with all its liberalizing and progressive implications. Yates used the term 'Hermetic' broadly to name a 'tradition' whose main commitments were to types of philosophy (Platonic), theology (gnostic), occultism (natural magic and Cabala), and eirenic, syncretist historiography (the ancient theology). Pico's original contribution to this mixture was Christian Cabala, which he adapted from mystical Jewish approaches to biblical hermeneutics, theological speculation, and practical spirituality that emerged after the twelfth century.⁴

Elsewhere (again) I have argued that Yates misapplied the term "Hermetic" to Marsilio Ficino, one of the key figures in her justly renowned book on the *Hermetic Tradition*, and I will also claim (though I will not argue here) that Pico was even less Hermetic than Ficino.⁵ His *Oration* is not about Hermetic magic, though the practice of natural magic is one of its major recommendations. The speech also promotes Cabala, as Yates recognized. But if Pico was really a champion of human

3. Ernst Cassirer, *Gesammelte Werke, Hamburger Ausgabe*, ed. Birgit Recki, Vol. 2: *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit*, Vol. I (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1999), pp. 81–3, 120–42; "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: A Study in the History of Ideas," in *Renaissance Essays from the Journal of the History of Ideas*, ed. P. O. Kristeller and Philip P. Wiener (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), pp. 11–60; Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers*, pp. 65–8, 70–1.

4. Kristeller, "Introduction," in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, ed. Cassirer, Kristeller, and J. H. Randall, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), pp. 215–22; Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), pp. 84–116. For an introduction to Cabala, whose basic ideas will be assumed but not explained here, see Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1946); *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974); Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

5. Copenhaver, "Scholastic Philosophy and Renaissance Magic in the De vita of Marsilio Ficino," *Renaissance Quarterly*, 37 (1984), 523–54; "Renaissance Magic and Neoplatonic Philosophy: Ennead 4.3–5 in Ficino's *De vita coelitus comparanda*," in *Marsilio Ficino e il ritorno di Platone: Studi e documenti*, ed. G. C. Garfagnini (Florence: Olschki, 1986), 351–69; "Hermes Trismegistus, Proclus and the Question of a Philosophy of Magic in the Renaissance," in *Hermeticism and the Renaissance: Intellectual History and the Occult in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Ingrid Merkel and Allen G. Debus (Washington: The Folger Shakespeare Library, 1988), pp. 75–110; "Hermes Theologus: The Siense Mercury and Ficino's Hermetic Demons," in *Humanity and Divinity in Renaissance and Reformation: Essays in Honor of Charles Trinkaus*, ed. John W. O'Malley et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1993), pp. 149–82; "Lorenzo de' Medici, Marsilio Ficino and the Domesticated Hermes," in *Lorenzo il Magnifico e il suo mondo: Convegno internazionale di studi*, Firenze, 9–13 giugno 1992, ed. G. C. Garfagnini (Florence: Olschki, 1994), pp. 225–57; below, n. 49.

dignity and freedom, as Yates, Kristeller, Cassirer, and many other post-Kantian critics have maintained, how should we account for his occultism, which is not a habit of mind that would seem to promote dignity and freedom?

My answer is that the *Oration* is not about dignity and freedom as any modern or post-modern reader would understand these terms. If the *Oration* does not really deserve the title that Pico did not give it—*On the Dignity of Man*—what should it be called? What is his famous speech about? What follows is a short and simplified answer to this question, supported by only a minimum of documentation and leaving the full case to be made in a book on Pico and his *Oration*.

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Pico wrote the *Oration* when he was in his early twenties and at the peak of the powers of mind and speech that dazzled his peers in Renaissance Florence. He meant it to introduce a public debate in Rome on 900 theses that he drafted for the occasion, but the debate was quashed by the Church, Pico was disgraced, and the *Oration* was never published in his lifetime, though the theses were printed as the *Conclusiones DCCCC* in 1486.⁶ The rest of this essay interprets parts of the *Oration* to show how it makes the case for something quite unlike human dignity and freedom.

“Man is a great wonder, Asclepius.” By placing this phrase near the start of his speech and by linking it with Asclepius, one of the voices of Hermetic wisdom, Pico might have been announcing the human miracle as his theme and his account of this miracle as Hermetic.⁷ But if he meant these words as clues, what follows in the body of the speech makes us ask if they are false clues—not impossible in a text explicitly described as esoteric, as written both to conceal and to reveal.⁸ Although Pico names “the ancient theology of Mercurius Trismegistus” as a source for the 900 theses introduced by his speech, he identifies no other person or idea in the *Oration* as Hermetic; his only other use of the Hermetic writings is silent, and its message makes the human condition repulsive, not miraculous.⁹ After its famous opening, the rest of the speech advises humans to become angels, to leave human nature behind in a flight to union with the divine.

Sages of the Orient and ancient Egypt have said that man is the greatest wonder, Pico declares, pointing to the central and mediating place of humanity in the cosmic order. But he doubts the ancient arguments. Why should angels not amaze us more, he asks, finding his answer in a new story of Genesis, an audacious

6. The standard work on Pico is Eugenio Garin, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Vita e dottrina* (Florence: Felice le Monnier, 1937); for a recent summary of the life and works see Copenhaver, “Pico della Mirandola, Giovanni,” in *Encyclopedia of the Renaissance*, ed. Paul F. Grendler (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1999), V, 16–20; for the philosophy, see Copenhaver and Charles B. Schmitt, *A History of Western Philosophy*, Vol. 3: *Renaissance Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 163–76.

7. My translation of Pico’s *Oration* is based on the Latin text in *Oratio de hominis dignitate*, ed. Eugenio Garin (Pordenone: Edizioni Studio Tesi, 1994), p. 3; *Asclepius* 6.

8. Below, nn. 42, 66.

9. Pico, *Oration*, pp. 18, 56; *Asclepius* 12.

myth of his own construction. Having brought all other creatures into being, God made Adam last to assess and admire his work. But before this final stage of world-making, as Pico tells the story, the Creator had used up his models and filled every vacancy in the universe. Lacking a unique form for this last of his creatures, God took something from all the others, and having no special place to put him, he let Adam find his own location.¹⁰

At first God stations this labile Adam at the center of the universe, not to fix him in the hierarchy but to let him rise—or fall. The prelapsarian Adam is not yet heavenly or earthly, mortal or immortal. His nature is undefined. “You will determine that nature by your own choice,” says the divine Craftsman: “on your own, as molder and maker, duly appointed to decide, you may shape yourself in the form that you prefer.” To crawl with the animals or climb to the gods is the “supreme and wondrous happiness of man, to whom it is given to have what he chooses, to be what he would be!” From “the supreme liberality of God the Father” Adam gets the gift of choice. Unlike spirits on high or beasts of the earth, whose natures confine them, he cultivates the mix of seeds planted in him by the Divine Gardener, selecting from miscellaneous natures assembled in him by the Divine Builder.

Plant, animal, heavenly being, and angelic being—these are Adam's first four options, arising from the nutritive, sensitive, rational, and intellectual powers of his soul. But a fifth choice remains “if he is not content with the lot of any creature,” if he wants to exceed the limits of what God has given him from what was meant for every other thing. The way to this fifth level is inward as well as upward: if he “draws himself into the center of his unity, becoming a spirit and one with God, this being who has been placed above all things will transcend them all in the lonely darkness of the Father.” Thus, at the peak of a climb that starts with free choice and rises through terrestrial, celestial, and supercelestial natures, Adam's last movement is withdrawal into himself, and his final goal is mystical extinction in the godhead.¹¹

Ascending sequences of three, four, or five steps give the *Oration* its world-escaping rhythm. Pico introduces this motif in a passage about vegetal, sensual, rational, and intellectual faculties of the soul, perhaps taking it from the *Protrepiticus* of Iamblichus, part of that philosopher's exposition of the Pythagorean life.¹² This educational program and spiritual regimen was nearly 900 years old when Iamblichus wrote in the third or fourth century CE. Plato had probably learned it long before from teachers whose teachers were Pythagoreans of the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. But Pico, like Ficino, condenses this epoch of vast changes into a unity, a coherent ancient wisdom of Chaldaean, Orphic, Hermetic, Pythagorean, Platonic, and other philosophies, a *prisca theologia* of Greek and barbarian doctrines to support the revelations of the Bible. Iamblichus, third of the Neoplatonist masters after Plotinus and Porphyry, shaped the last phase of this tradition. After Iamblichus, its last great pagan voice was Proclus, who laid the groundwork

10. Pico, *Oration*, pp. 2–6.

11. Pico, *Oration*, pp. 6–8.

12. Iamblichus, *Protrepiticus* 5 (*Des Places* 66.9–25).

for its Christian culmination in the mystical and angelic theologies of Dionysius the Areopagite, the name given to a fifth or sixth century writer whom most Christians of Pico's day thought to be a companion of St. Paul.¹³

For the Greek side (there is also a Hebrew side) of the project promoted by the *Oration*, Pico took his primary inspiration from Dionysius and the Neoplatonists. His morality is ascetic, his novel practices are magical (or theurgic), and his aim is mystical, what Dionysius and his predecessors called perfection (*teleiosis*), contemplation (*theoria*), or unification (*henosis*). Because this project requires a curriculum as well as a regimen, philosophy is part of it—but as a means, not an end, a way of purifying the soul and enlightening it before it sinks into the divine abyss at the peak of its spiritual progress. The Christian Dionysius still thought of the soul's perfection or *teleiosis* as the climax of a rite of initiation, like the old pagan cult of Eleusis. The blessing earned by the Eleusinian initiate was to gaze on (*theorein*) a sacred sight, foreshadowing the beatific vision of Christian bliss. For pagan theurge and Christian mystic alike, the ultimate reward was a loss of self, absorption into the divine by becoming one (*henosis*) with God.¹⁴

Having presented the human marvel as striving to enter "the lonely darkness of the Father," Pico next asks "who would not wonder at this chameleon?" The obvious point of amazement is that man can alter his nature as the animal changes its color. According to ancient sources that Pico knew, it looks and behaves like a lizard, combining features of a fish, pig, viper, tortoise, and crocodile into a horrific appearance that masks its harmlessness. Is man such a monstrosity, assembled from parts of other creatures? The reptile's changing colors signified timidity or inconstancy, and ancient magicians found a whole pharmacy of magical substances in its limbs, though the authorities called most of them fakes.¹⁵ With one exception, Pico's other examples of mutability in this section of the *Oration* are as negative or ambiguous as the chameleon—transmigration of criminal souls into animals or plants and the shapeshifting of Proteus, the Old Man of the Sea who fights the noble Menelaus in the *Odyssey*. The only clearly positive transformation is angelic, that of the biblical Enoch into the angel of the *Shekinah* or Divine Presence, an aspect of divinity hypostasized and personalized in Cabalist texts that Pico knew.¹⁶

In the end, says Pico, if one's ambitions are angelic, it is not bodily assets or defects that matter but those of soul and mind. Hence, those who are bound to

13. Pico, *Oration*, p. 56; D. P. Walker, *The Ancient Theology: Studies in Christian Platonism from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (London: Duckworth, 1972), pp. 1–21; R. T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism* (London: Duckworth, 1972), pp. 94–110; Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), pp. 1–17, 159–64; *Denys the Areopagite* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1989), pp. 1–16.

14. Dionysius, *Celestial Hierarchy* 3.1–3, 7.1; Louth, *Origins*, pp. 22–3, 52–60, 162–4; Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 7–11, 43, 69, 88–102, 113–4.

15. Pico, *Oration*, p. 8; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1100^b4–6; *History of Animals* 503^a15–^b29; *Parts of Animals* 692^a20–5; Pliny, *Natural History* 8.120–2; *Desiderii Erasmi Roterdami adagiorum chiliades quatuor et sesquicenturia* (Lyon: Gryphius, 1558), cols. 817–8.

16. Pico, *Oration*, pp. 8–10; Homer, *Odyssey* 4.383–572; Plato, *Ion* 541E; Erasmus, *Adagia*, cols. 480–1; below, nn. 59–65.

the body's sensitive functions, "scratching where it itches and enslaved by the senses," are like Calypso's pigs, bewitched, and those limited to mere feeding are even less human, like plants. But the philosopher's reason lifts him to heaven, while the "pure contemplator, unaware of the body, withdrawn to the sanctuary of the mind, . . . is neither earthly nor heavenly but more majestic, a divinity cloaked in human flesh." Through these four grades, passing beyond nutrition and sensation to reason and contemplation, this being "who transforms, forges and fashions himself in the shape of all flesh" strives to transcend the way of all flesh. He begins with "no image of his own," only a plurality of images that are "many, alien and accidental," as his nature too is "variable, multiple and inconstant." Human mutability is a marvel, declares Pico, but it is also unreliable.¹⁷

Having offered new proof for the old thesis that man is the greatest wonder, having made the case for mutability and choice at the start of the *Oration*, Pico then sets forth the purpose of this choice. It is to exercise "a holy ambition," he says, to "scorn the things of earth, . . . despise those of heaven, and then, leaving behind whatever is of the world, . . . [to] fly up to the hypercosmic court nearest the most exalted divinity, . . . [with the] Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones." The right choice, he asserts, is to despise the earth and flee it, disdaining the heavens as well, to reach for the realm of the angels beyond and "be their rivals for dignity and glory." Man finds his dignity by emulating the angels.¹⁸

Introducing this pivotal point is an elliptical passage that begins clearly enough: man's privileged position and power of choice should not tempt him to forget that the dullest cattle are his relatives; their shepherd and his, as the Psalmist teaches, is death. Less clear is Pico's claim that misapplication of the words of the prophet Asaph—"You are all gods and sons of the Most High"—might abuse God's gift of free choice and make it harmful. Perhaps he means simply that humans must treat this verse as a command to join their angelic kin and rise above their animal cousins. Or perhaps, keeping the Pythagorean rule of silence, Pico has in mind the larger message of Psalm 82, where an angry God judges the angels for their sins:

God stood in the synagogue of the gods,
 In their midst to judge among them . . .
 But these gods know nothing nor do they understand,
 They walk in shadows . . .
 I have declared: you are all gods,
 and sons of the Most High,
 Yet you shall die as men die,
 And you shall fall as one of the princes.¹⁹

Pico praises the angels as godlike with words from a Psalm that condemns them. He also knew a Cabalist text that contrasts man's nearness to the angels in one

17. Pico, *Oration*, pp. 10–12.

18. Pico, *Oration*, p. 12.

19. Ps. 49:10–21; 82.

Psalm with his tie to the animals in another. Whatever this meant to him, his larger aim was to rival the heavenly hosts in their glory. With this purpose established, the *Oration* next asks how to achieve it. “Let us see what . . . life they live,” exhorts Pico, speaking of the angels closest to God, “and if we live that life . . . , we shall have made our chances equal to theirs.”²⁰

These highest angels are the Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones. Only the first two are named in the Hebrew Bible, where they protect, praise, purify, and expiate, mainly in ritual and eschatological contexts. Thrones appear in the Epistles of the New Testament; the elaborated angelology of the Epistles helps explain why Paul came to be linked with Dionysius, whose *Celestial Hierarchy* is the main Christian account of the subject. Others before Dionysius had named nine ranks of angels, but he was the first to organize them in three orders of three, with Thrones, Cherubim, and Seraphim at the top.²¹

Pico focuses on this highest order and arranges its three ranks in a rising hierarchy according to their ways of being (active, contemplative, unitive), their psychological functions (judgment, contemplation, love) and their types of substance (solidity, light, fire). Humans “committed . . . to the active life and concerned . . . with lower things” may aspire to live like Thrones, who are angels of judgment. Others “not . . . employed in active matters” rise higher to contemplation and “gleam with Cherubic light,” while those who reach the summit of love burn with a Seraphic fire that consumes them. The Seraphs are nearest to the God who sits above the Thrones of judgment and hovers over the Cherubs of contemplation, “for the Spirit of the Lord is borne upon the waters . . . above the heavens.” Pico alludes here not only to the first mention of the Spirit in the book of *Genesis* but also to a reading of *shamayim*, the Hebrew word for ‘heavens,’ as containing fire (*esh*) and water (*mayim*), so that the waters of the “Cherubic minds” are above the visible heavens but below the supercelestial fire of the Seraphim. The judgment of Thrones is a great force, and Seraphic love is the greatest of all, “but how can anyone judge or love what is unknown?” asks Pico. Judgment and love both require knowledge, so “the Cherub with its light both prepares us for the Seraphic fire and also enlightens us for the judgment of Thrones.”²²

Thus, the Cherub is the knot that ties the other “primary minds” together. Its angelic order is that of Pallas, goddess of wisdom, and it is the “guardian of contemplative philosophy.” These are the angels that Pico wants us to emulate. “We are to form our lives on the model of the Cherubic life”: this is the conclusion to which the opening sections of the *Oration* lead. This is the point of the free choice that makes humankind a miracle. In principle, the Cherubic life prepares us to move up or down from the level of contemplation, “to be carried off to the

20. Pico, *Oration*, pp. 12–14; Ps. 8:6; 49:21; *Expositio secretorum punctuationis* in Chaim Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola’s Encounter with Jewish Mysticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 222.

21. Gen. 3:24; Exod. 25:18–22; Ps. 18:10–11; Ezek. 9:3, 10:2–22, 11:22; Isa. 6:1–7, 14:29, 30:6, 37:16; Col. 1:16; Karel van der Toorn et al., eds., *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), pp. 189–92, 742–4, 864–6; Louth, *Denys*, pp. 36–7.

22. Pico, *Oration*, pp. 14–16; Gen. 1:2; Wirszubski, *Pico*, p. 180; Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 144.

heights of love and then to descend . . . [to] the duties of action." The rest of the *Oration* confirms, however, that what Pico wants is the journey up to the Seraphim, where even contemplation ends in an ecstatic blaze of assimilation to the deity: "One who is a Seraph—a lover—is in God, and God is in him; or rather, he and God are one." The final miracle of the human condition is to be exalted and consumed in divinity.²³

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Meanwhile, because we "are flesh and smell of the earth," even the lesser life of the Cherubs is beyond our reach; for help we must look to the "ancient fathers." This advice opens the longest part of the *Oration*, occupying a quarter of its length, a seven-part exposition of the Cherubic life as curriculum and regimen, as preparation for Seraphic consummation. At this point, with most of his speech still to come, Pico has finished with the topic of human freedom. He now proposes a method to direct man's choices outside the body, above the world and ultimately beyond the choosing subject toward the holy abnegation of union with God.²⁴

The seven "ancient fathers" whom Pico wants his hearers to consult are Paul, Jacob, Job, Moses, the ancient theologians, Pythagoras, and the Chaldaeans, all of them assisted by other voices of wisdom. In each of these sages or schools, Pico finds instructions for a graded ascent to God, usually in four steps but sometimes in three or five. Partly the idea derives from ancient treatments of the divisions of philosophy that were much debated by the Stoics, and partly it comes from theories of the soul's levels, functions, and destiny derived from Plato. The combined framework was a favorite of the pagan Neoplatonists and their Christian contemporaries.²⁵ Clement of Alexandria, for example, applied it to "the Mosaic philosophy," which he

divided into four parts, into the historical and legislative properly so called, which pertain precisely to ethical activity, while the third part is ritual (*hierourgikon*) and has to do with natural contemplation (*phusikes theorias*), and finally the fourth is theological, the contemplation (*epopteia*) that Plato says belongs to the great mysteries.²⁶

Although the basic idea is triadic—moral purification and mental illumination leading to theological perfection—the initial catharsis often comes in two phases, one to cleanse a lower level of the soul, closer to the body, the other to purify a

23. Pico, *Oration*, pp. 14–16.

24. Pico, *Oration*, p. 16.

25. A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, Vol. I: *Translations of the Principal Sources with Philosophical Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 160–2; Proclus, *Platonic Theology* 1.2 (Saffrey and Westerink 1.10.11–11.26); *Commentary on I Alcibiades* 245.6–246.15 (Segonds); W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Vol. IV; *Plato, The Man and His Dialogues: Earlier Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 421–6; Louth, *Origins*, pp. 52–74.

26. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 1.28.176–9.

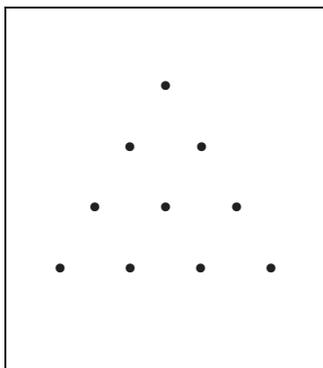


Figure 1. The tetractys.

higher level. The resulting process of four steps claimed an ancient pedigree, represented by the triangular amulet or *tetractys* of the Pythagoreans (Figure 1) and described in a doxography ascribed to Plutarch:

The nature of number is the decad, but the power of ten . . . is in the four and in the tetrad, and the reason is that when one ascends from the monad and adds the numbers up through four, the sum is the number ten . . . This is why the Pythagoreans declared that the tetrad is the mightiest oath and [swore by] . . . “the one who gave our soul the *tetractys* . . .” Our soul is also composed of a tetrad . . . : contemplation (*noun*), knowledge (*epistemen*), opinion (*doxan*), sensation (*aisthesin*).²⁷

Thus, four stages of spiritual ascent correspond to four levels or functions of the soul. In Clement’s scheme, which is both biblical and philosophical, the ethical stage has two phases, historical and legislative, reflecting the travails of ancient Israel and their resolution in the Law, while the third stage is ‘hierurgic’ or ritual and the fourth is theological and mystical.

Clement’s language, based on a tradition that goes back to Plato, respects the pagan mysteries. The *mystes* underwent purification and performed a ritual in order to enjoy the culminating *epopteia*—watching or observing the divine, “the sight of divinity by the light of theology,” in Pico’s words. The ritual stage that Clement calls “natural contemplation” is a kind of natural theology, understanding the Creator by philosophizing about the created universe and thus preparing for mystical contemplation, whose point is intuitive rather than discursive. But the climax of *epopteia* is also the end of a curriculum that progresses from ethics through natural philosophy to theology.²⁸ In fact, the two earlier phases of ethical activity (historical and legislative) in Clement correspond to the first two types of

27. Ps.-Plutarch, *Opinions of the Philosophers* 877A–B.

28. Pico, *Oration*, p. 28; Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris* 382D–E; Louth, *Denys*, p. 40; above, n. 14.

<u>CURRICULAR</u>	<u>PSYCHOLOGICAL</u>	<u>MORAL</u>	<u>MYSTICAL</u>	<u>RITUAL</u>
ethics {	nutrition	politics		
	sensation	catharsis	purification	purification
logic	opinion			
physics	knowledge	} theory {	illumination	performance
theology	contemplation		union	observation

Figure 2. Types of ascent.

virtue (political and cathartic) in the curriculum that the Neoplatonists used to teach Plato's dialogues.

In the first cycle of this *paideia*, after the introductory *I Alcibiades*, students began with a pair of ethical dialogues, the *Gorgias* for political virtue and the *Phaedo* for cathartic. Then, leading up to a summative treatment of the Good in the *Philebus*, they read three pairs of logical (*Cratylus* and *Theaetetus*), physical (*Sophist* and *Statesman*) and theological (*Phaedrus* and *Symposium*) texts, all interpreted as teaching theoretical virtue to those who had moved beyond politics and catharsis. The clearest presentation of this curriculum survives in an anonymous *Prolegomenon* to Platonic philosophy, probably written in the sixth century and much influenced by Iamblichus.²⁹ The curricular, psychological, moral, mystical, and ritual aspects of this conception may be summarized as shown in Figure 2.

In this framework, the body and its activity in this world are at best points of departure for a higher journey, at worst obstacles to that ascent. From the curricular and psychological points of view, the goal is a kind of action, whereby the soul looks upon God in *theoria*—in a theology not so much examined as experienced. From the mystical perspective, however, action ceases for the human agent when *theoria* becomes the final peace of union (*henosis*) or assimilation (*aphomiosis*) with God.³⁰

29. L. G. Westerink, ed. and trans., *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy* (Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing, 1962), pp. xxxix–xl, 48–9; B. D. Larsen, *Jamblique de Chalcis: Exégète et philosophe* (Aarhus: Universitetsforlaget in Aarhus, 1972), pp. 322–40; Lucas Siorvanes, *Proclus: Neo-Platonic Philosophy and Science* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 114–8.

30. Dionysius, *Celestial Hierarchy* 3.1, 7.1; Louth, *Denys*, pp. 38–9; *Origins*, pp. 164, 172.

This is the mystical perfection (*teleiosis*) taught by Paul and Dionysius in the first of Pico's seven accounts of the Cherubic life. "As we emulate the Cherubic life on earth," he urges, "checking the impulses of the emotions through moral knowledge, dispelling the mists of reason through dialectic, let us cleanse the soul, . . . [and] then . . . flood [it] . . . with the light of natural philosophy so that finally we may perfect it with knowledge of divinity." In Dionysius, where everything is triadic, this curriculum is the mystic's ascent through purgation (*katharsis*), illumination (*photismos*), and perfection (*teleiosis*), which is also Pico's reply to the question about Paul that opens this part of the *Oration*. Asking what Paul "saw the Cherubim doing when he was raised to the third heaven," Pico learns from Dionysius "that they are cleansed, then enlightened and finally perfected."³¹

The project that Dionysius defines at the start of the *Mystical Theology* is to move inward as well as upward to the divine "darkness of unknowing," a voyage that demands "unqualified and unconditional withdrawal" from the world and finally from the self. The aim of this experiential theology is to be something, not to know something. The mystic forsakes knowledge, abandoning even the light of the Cherubim, to enter God's nameless shadows and enjoy the ecstasy of divine love. Yearning for the divine can be satisfied only by leaving the knowing self behind.³² Although *epopteia*—gazing, contemplating, perceiving, or learning in the Dionysian texts—is the apex of the mystical way, all this activity of the subject dissolves in the assimilation that motivates the various hierarchies. The celestial hierarchy of angels, like the ecclesiastical hierarchy of priests, guides the mystic up to the peace of deification. Disagreements and distinctions fall away as peace comes near. Since Dionysius treats theology as a discipline in the ascetic (not the pedagogical) sense, it is no surprise that he also applies the Neoplatonist term *theourgia*—ritual god-work as opposed to theological god-talk—to the Christian sacraments. Like the pagan mystics, he also regards his theology as an 'occult tradition (*kruphia paradosis*)' open only to the initiated. To publish the deity's unutterable secrets would be to cast sacred pearls before swine. The Dionysian program is an esoteric, ascetic, theurgic, eirenic, and ecstatic mysticism, terms that apply also to Pico's advocacy of the Cherubic life.³³

Having made the mystical theology of Dionysius the basis of his angelic regimen, Pico derives it again from three Bible heroes—Jacob, Job, and Moses. His exposition of their familiar stories links the patriarchs with ancient gentile sages but also with the later speculations of the Cabalists, which were completely unknown to Christians in Pico's day and may seem obscure even now. For this reason, it will be useful to review Pico's words about Jacob as an example of his exegesis:

31. Pico, *Oration*, p. 16; Dionysius, *Celestial Hierarchy* 3.2, 7.3, 10.1; *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 5.1.3; *Divine Names* 4.2; Louth, *Origins*, p. 163.

32. Dionysius, *Mystical Theology* 1; *Celestial Hierarchy* 3.1, 7.1; *Divine Names* 1.5, 7.3, 13.1; Louth, *Denys*, p. 38; *Origins*, pp. 164, 172; above, n. 14.

33. Dionysius, *Celestial Hierarchy* 1.2; 2.2–3.5; 3.3; 4.1.4; 7.2–3; 15.9; *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 1.1; 2.3.8; 3.3.4–6; 7.3.1.3; *Divine Names* 1.1.4.8; 2.1; Louth, *Denys*, pp. 38–40; *Origins*, p. 169; Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (University Park; Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), pp. 4–5; below, n. 42.

Let us consult the patriarch Jacob, whose gleaming image is carved in the seat of glory. As he sleeps in the lower world and watches in the world above, this wisest of fathers will advise us. He will use a figure (everything used to depend on them) to give us his advice: that there is a ladder reaching from earth below to the sky above, marked off in a series of many steps, with the Lord seated at the top. Up and down the ladder angels of contemplation move back and forth. But if we are to do the same as we aspire to the angelic life, who (I ask) will touch the Lord's ladder with dirty feet or hands unclean? If the impure touches the pure, it is sacrilege, as the mysteries teach. What are these feet and hands, then? The foot of the soul, surely, is that worthless part that relies on matter as on the dirt of the ground, a nutritive and feeding power, I mean—tinder for lust and mistress of voluptuary softness. As for the hands of the soul, why not call them the wrathful part that battles to defend the appetites, plundering in heat and dust to snatch something to gorge on while snoozing in the shade? These hands, these feet—the whole sensual part where, so they say, the lure of the body hangs like a noose round the neck of the soul—let us wash them in the living waters of moral philosophy lest we be turned away, desecrated and defiled, from the ladder. But if we want to join the angels speeding up and down Jacob's ladder, this washing will not be enough unless we have first been instructed and well prepared to advance from stage to stage as the rites require, never leaving the way of the ladder nor rushing off two ways at once. After we have completed this preparation through the art of speaking or reasoning, then, animated by the Cherubic spirit, philosophizing through the rungs of the ladder (or nature), passing from center to center through all things, at one moment we will be descending, using a titanic power to tear the one—like Osiris—into many, while at another moment we will be ascending, using the power of Phoebus to gather the many—like the limbs of Osiris—into one, until at last, resting at the top of the ladder in the bosom of the Father, we shall be perfected in theological bliss.³⁴

The later Neoplatonists who influenced Dionysius had described the mystical ascent as “a bridge or a ladder.” Pico's account of Jacob's ladder grounds this metaphor in familiar biblical imagery but also attaches it to strange Cabalist ideas. Jacob sleeps low to the ground but sees angels on high, dreaming of “a ladder standing above the earth with its top touching the sky, and angels of God . . . going up and down it.”³⁵ Thus, he counsels us to forget the lower world and wake to a higher destiny. Like the angels of contemplation, the Cherubim, we may move up or down, but we must first wash the dirty hands and feet that would defile the Lord's ladder. In Pico's terms, we must purge the soul's lower limbs, its nutritive and irascible powers, with moral philosophy. Loathing for the soul's “sensual part” is the message of Pico's vivid phrases, one borrowed from the Hermetic *Asclepius*,

34. Pico, *Oration*, pp. 18–20.

35. Gen. 28:10–22; Iamblichus, *Protrepticus* 1 (Des Places 41.11–24); Synesius, *Dion* 9 (Treu 28.16–30.10).

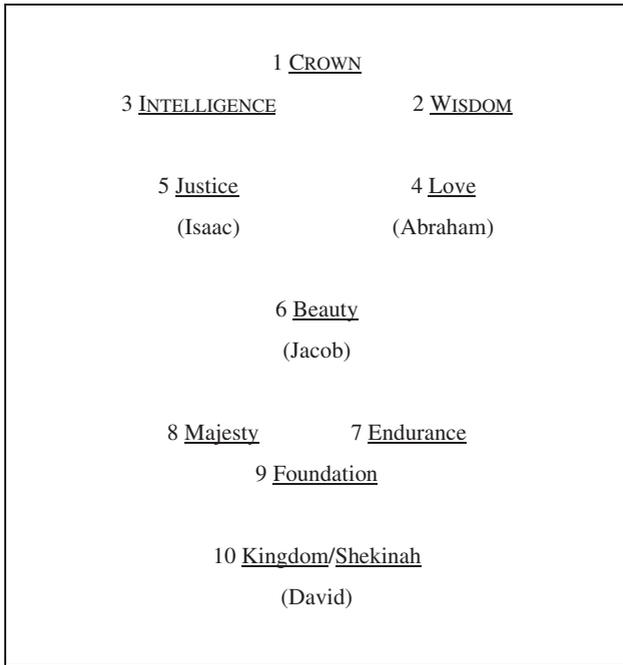


Figure 3. The *Sefirot*.

where “the lure of the body hangs like a noose round the neck of the soul.” Cleansed of such pollutions, we may mount the celestial ladder, which gives a way of proceeding, a logic, to the uninstructed. Overcoming his confusion, the contemplator rises next to physics, and through the myth of Osiris—a cycle of death by division and resurrection by reunification, as Plutarch and Macrobius tell it—he understands the cosmic strife of Titanic plurality against Apollonian unity. Theology is the final stage of the climb, and the reward is peaceful perfection.³⁶

Jacob woke from his dream of angels shouting that he had seen “the house of God and heaven’s gate (*porta caeli*),” a vision that Pico knew from the Bible but also from the *Gates of Justice* by Joseph Gikatilla, a Cabalist work of the thirteenth century translated for him as the *Portae iustitiae*. Here and in the *Gates of Light*, Gikatilla’s more famous work, Jacob stands out among the patriarchs whose stories reveal the secrets of the *Sefirot* (Figure 3), the ten aspects of supernal

36. Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris* 354A,F; 357F–358E; 360E–F; 364E–F; *The E at Delphi*, 388E–89A; Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* 1.12.12; Idel, “The Ladder of Ascension: The Reverberations of a Medieval Motif in the Renaissance,” in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, vol. 2, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 88; Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967), pp. 133–5, 174–5; above, n. 9.

divinity that constitute the basic framework of Cabalist theosophy.³⁷ In Gikatilla's version, one of these biblical tales begins

when Adam sinned [and] a blemish was placed upon him and he was made susceptible—like dough—to all the ministers, and even the powers of impurity on the outside, for all of them spewed their acid on him, and this is the same filth that the primordial snake spewed on Eve, . . . [and] this pollution did not separate from Adam's body until it was gradually refined from the righteous of subsequent generations.

The seventy ministers who bedevil Adam's heirs are constellations in the heavens and nations on the earth. They afflict Israel, but their power wanes as the six generations after Adam (Seth, Enoch, Noah, Shem, Abraham, and Isaac) become gradually purer. Still,

there is some pollution found in Abraham and in Isaac which gives the ministers a place to connect, and that is why you find Abraham and Isaac on opposite sides facing the ministers on the right and on the left . . . Jacob, however, who is pure and without refuse, is in the middle between Abraham and Isaac.

Right, left, and middle here are directions in theosophical space, regions in the standard deployment of the *Sefirot*, where Gikatilla connects Abraham with the fourth *Sefirah* (Love, Compassion, or Greatness) on the right, Isaac with the fifth (Justice, Fear, or Power) on the left, and Jacob with the sixth (Beauty, Truth, or Knowledge) between them. Although the promise of a covenant lets Abraham foresee where his seed will spread, Jacob hears a stronger pledge in his dream when God tells him that his seed will "burst forth" in every direction. His inheritance breaks the bounds that confine his less sanctified forefathers. In mystical terms, Jacob as Beauty or the sixth *Sefirah* is "the only one that ascends . . . to reach *Keter* (Crown)," while Isaac (Justice) and Abraham (Love) stay hemmed in below by the seventy ministers.³⁸

In one grouping, Jacob and his two ancestors form "a throne for the divine constellation"; the middle triad of *Sefirot*, in other words, supports the supreme triad. In another configuration, all seven of the lower *Sefirot* make up the chariot (*Merkabah*) in which the higher triad rides or the throne on which it sits. Knowing that "the patriarchs are the chariot," Cabalists thought of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in their linkage with Love, Justice, and Beauty. To supply a fourth wheel for

37. Gen. 28:17; Scholem, *Kabbalah*, pp. 96–116. For Gikatilla's *Gates of Justice*, one of the Cabalist texts translated for Pico by Flavius Mithridates, see Wirszubski, *Pico*, pp. 13, 56–7, 74–5, 111–12; the *Gates of Light* is available in a complete English translation: *Sha'are Orah: Gates of Light*, trans. Avi Weinstein (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 1994).

38. Gikatilla, *Gates of Light*, pp. 8, 209, 223–31, 235, 326; Fischel Lachower, Isaiah Tishby, and David Goldstein, ed. and trans., *The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts* (London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1949), I, 348.

the chariot or a fourth leg for the throne, they also connected David with Kingdom. But this last of the *Sefirot*, through which the Creator touches his creation, is also his Presence (*Shekinah*) in the world. Since emanation from the Infinite terminates in the divine Presence, the *Shekinah* can stand for the whole of the seven lower *Sefirot*, the Throne of Glory in its entirety. Jacob as Beauty, also called the husband of the *Shekinah*, stands at the center of the throne, governing the “middle line” that goes straight up through the Crown toward the Infinite. The *Shekinah* ascends through this middle line or “central pillar, and her descent was also that way . . . It is, therefore, called ‘a ladder.’” On earth she dwells in the place where Jacob had his dream, called Beth El or the House of God.³⁹

When Pico writes that Jacob’s “image is carved in the seat of glory,” he is using a Cabalist metaphor (*galaph*, carving) for the Sefirotic emanation of divinity out of its hidden depths, and he is describing the patriarch’s privileged position among the *Sefirot*. Jacob’s theosophic primacy gave Pico reason to put him first among the biblical elders who show the way to the Cherubic life. Since Pico’s goal was to climb “to the top of the ladder in the bosom of the Father,” the direct route from Jacob’s central place to the Sefirotic summit—where a Cherub rides the chariot—was an attractive path. On these points, Pico could have learned from the earliest work of Cabala, called the *Bahir*, from earlier *midrashim*, as well as from Gikatilla and, directly or indirectly, from the *Zohar*. These authorities along with other Cabalists that Pico knew in Latin translation were of great help to him, but so were the Jewish mystics of his own day.⁴⁰

One of them was Yohanan Alemanno, who offered other perspectives on the ascent. Like Pico, he saw philosophy as preliminary to a curriculum whose advanced stage is theurgy, and he believed that theurgy enables the mystic to unite with divinity itself. He departed from the program of the *Oration* not in the method of his mysticism but in its aim, which was altruistic, concerned less with elevating and transforming the human person than with redeeming the entire universe. From one point of view, he imagined the worlds of mind, soul, and matter as a hierarchy of concentric spheres, with matter at the bottom. From another, he used an alternative geometry that depicts soul or nature as a ladder used by angels and humans to move up and down between matter and mind. This latter image of “two circles and a straight line,” which Alemanno took from an Arabic source, appears cryptically in the *Oration* as “philosophizing through the rungs of the ladder (or nature) [and] passing from center to center through all things, at one moment . . . descending, . . . at another . . . ascending.” The learned inquiries of Moshe Idel have revealed this to modern scholars, but to Renaissance Christians such secrets were sealed until Pico himself began to open them.⁴¹

This pattern holds throughout Pico’s presentation of the Cherubic life: various Cabalist authorities support his program, but they are obscure or invisible

39. Lachower et al., *Zohar*, I, 288, 402, II, 571–2, 588–90.

40. *The Bahir*, ed. and trans. Aryeh Kaplan (York Beach: Samuel Weiser, 1979), pp. 49–50, 75 (135, 190); Scholem, *Origins*, pp. 144–6, 213, 267, 317; *Trends*, p. 113.

41. Pico, *Oration*, p. 20; Idel, “Ladder,” pp. 84–7; “The Anthropology of Yohanan Alemanno, Sources and Influences,” *Topoi*, 7 (1988), 201–20.

to the Christian audience of the *Oration*, which is in keeping with Pico's esoteric intentions. When he finally makes his Cabala explicit toward the end of the speech, what he reveals is its history and its habit of concealment. "To disclose . . . the more secret mysteries, the arcana of supreme divinity," he insists, would be "to give the sacrament to dogs and to cast pearls before swine. Hence it was a matter of divine command, not human judgment, to keep secret from the populace what must be told to the perfect."⁴²

Like the vision of Jacob, the tale of Job holds keys to hidden Cabalist treasures, including the notion of *gilgul* or transmigration of souls, understood by Pico as showing human nature to be polymorphous, "lifting us up to heaven" or "plunging us down to hell." The conclusion that Pico draws from the story of "Job the just" is that the goal of theological peace is actually a kind of death—in Cabalist terms the holy "death of the kiss" bestowed by God on Jacob and other patriarchs. Pico closes his treatment of Job with a line from Psalm 116, the scriptural source of this idea, that "the death of the saints is most precious" in the sight of God. Dionysius cites the same text to show that the saints are dead only to this world, having risen to the "peaceful oneness of the One" by discarding the earthly lusts and enmities that excluded them from the "unified and undivided life." In this respect, Dionysius had learned from Plato and his successors that the body is a tomb for the soul, that the world is a prison from which the soul escapes, and that philosophy is a preparation for the death that the wise man desires. "We should make all speed to take flight from this world to the other": these words of Plato's also describe Pico's purpose in proposing a Cherubic *askesis* based on Greek, Jewish, and Christian wisdom.⁴³

The same fugitive program, visible to Christians at one level but veiled in the enigmas of Cabala at another, is what Pico derives from Moses, the third Hebrew patriarch in his elucidation of the Cherubic life. Dionysius treats Moses as ascending toward "the darkness of unknowing" but never really seeing God in his theophanies of physical vision and cognitive contemplation. Pico presents Moses in a different role, as hierophant rather than initiate, the guide of souls through the chambers of the Tabernacle as described in Exodus. In Cabalist terms, "the Tabernacle and its instruments are . . . material images in which may be contemplated superior images which are their models . . . It consists of three parts: within the veil, without the veil, and the court." Accordingly, Moses first gives the moral law to souls dwelling in "the lonely desert of the body"; then admits them by logic and natural philosophy to various grades of ritual service within the sanctuary but outside the veil; and finally conducts them by theology inside the veil to the Tabernacle's Holy of Holies. After purifying themselves ethically like gentile "priests of Thessaly" outside the court of the Tabernacle and then mastering

42. Pico, *Oration*, p. 70; Matt. 7:6; Dionysius, *Celestial Hierarchy*, 2.5.

43. Pico, *Oration*, pp. 20–6; Ps. 116:15; Dionysius, *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 3.3.9; Plato, *Phaedo* 64A, 81A–B, *Theatetus* 173D–174A, *Phaedrus* 250C, *Gorgias* 493A, *Republic* 515C–17C; Wirszubski, *Pico*, pp. 153–60; Scholem, *Origins*, p. 385; *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead: Basic Concepts in the Kabbalah*, ed. J. Chipman, trans. J. Neugroschel (New York: Schocken Books, 1991), pp. 208–19, 226–8.

dialectic inside as “diligent Levites,” the elect join the priesthood of philosophy to complete their preparation for a “journey to the heavenly glory to come.”⁴⁴

Having extracted this message four times from the “Mosaic and Christian mysteries” in Paul (or Dionysius), Jacob, Job, and Moses, Pico turns next to the ancient pagan theologians to examine “those liberal arts that we have come to debate” and to interpret them as “stages of initiation . . . in the secret rites of the Greeks.” The goal of this next exposition of the Cherubic regimen remains the same, a “fast trip . . . to the heavenly Jerusalem” after purification through moral and dialectic arts, ritual performance through natural philosophy, and then “the sight of divinity by the light of theology.”⁴⁵

“These are the reasons,” Pico writes, “that have not only excited me to study philosophy but have also forced me to it.” He must learn philosophy because moral, logical, and physical lessons are prerequisite to theology, the highest form of discursive knowing that leads in turn to the experience of contemplation and union. As angels of contemplation, the Cherubs live at this summit of divinity, but their way of life reaches down to the first ethical exercises required of those who emulate them. Thus, having chosen the Cherubic life as the best way to form a formless human nature, Pico finds himself at the lower philosophical stages of an ascetic and mystical ascent to ecstasy. Once he has made this choice, philosophy is his obligation: this is his answer to those who condemn his commitment to it.⁴⁶

* * * * *

About halfway through the speech, having explained what the Cherubic life is and how philosophy prepares the way for it, Pico’s purpose changes to a defense of his claim to the title of philosopher. He pledges himself to an ambitious and original program of philosophizing. Not content with the “common doctrines,” he boasts of using arcane material from Hermetic, Chaldaean, Pythagorean, and Cabalist sources and adds “many things that I have discovered and devised on topics natural and divine.” The fullest expression of this plan survives in the *Nine Hundred Conclusions*, but the *Oration* provides a partial preview, summarizing several new themes:

- “the concord between Plato and Aristotle”
- “novel concepts in physics and metaphysics . . . using a method much different from the philosophy . . . read in the schools”
- “another novel method that philosophizes with numbers”
- “theorems about magic”
- “the ancient mysteries of the Hebrews . . . [that] confirm the . . . Catholic faith”
- “views on interpreting the poems of Orpheus and Zoroaster.”⁴⁷

44. Pico, *Oration*, p. 26; Exod. 25–7, 35–6; Lachower et al., *Zohar*, III, 867–78; Dionysius, *Mystical Theology* 1.3; Wirszubski, *Pico*, pp. 247–8, translating a passage from a *Commentary on the Pentateuch* by Bahya ben Asher at Exod. 25:9; Louth, *Origins*, p. 173.

45. Pico, *Oration*, p. 28.

46. Pico, *Oration*, p. 38.

47. Pico, *Oration*, pp. 56–62, 68, 76.

Two of these subjects—magic and Cabala—occupy most of the remainder of the *Oration*.

Pico's novel theorems about *magia* apply that word in two senses: one corresponds to *goeteia* (sorcery) in Greek and must be repudiated as the work of evil demons; the other, called *mageia* by the Greeks, is to be revered as wisdom and piety. As the one is vain, fraudulent, and shameful, banned by governments and ignored by the learned, so the other is solid, honest, and honorable, prized by sages and supported by their authority.

Plotinus, the last of twenty experts on magic whom Pico names, "mentions it when he shows that the magus is nature's minister, not her artificer." Pico refers here to the most extensive discussion of magic in the *Enneads*, where Plotinus claims that magic is always already there in nature. Magicians, who cannot cause magical effects, know where to find them in the world and how to exploit them for good or ill. Although Plotinus recognizes the fact of magic, he regards it as a detour from the ascent, a distraction that leads down to the world of matter. Natural magic is a reality, but it does no good for salvation. By the same token, "contemplation (*theoria*) alone stands untouched by magic," while the soul that stays involved in nature is prey to sorcery. Since the only escape from nature and magic is philosophical ascent to contemplation and union, Plotinus neither used ritual (theurgy) as a way up to the One nor feared magic as a snare for the philosopher. In fact, theurgy had no place in Neoplatonic spirituality until Porphyry, a student of Plotinus, introduced it as an alternative to the risky practice of sorcery (*goeteia*) and to the rigor of education in the virtues. But he still confined real magic to the world of nature and thought it useless for reaching the realm above.⁴⁸

For Plotinus, then, philosophy was the only way to ascend, and for Porphyry it was still primary. But Iamblichus had less confidence in philosophy. The contemplation (*noesis*) that philosophy can sustain by itself will not lead to union, he concluded; *noesis* is necessary for the ascent but not sufficient, and it is less effective than theurgic ritual, which touches the higher soul. Theurgy—literally, "god-working"—is the work of gods who reach down through actions (rites) and objects that transmit divine energy on their own: they are always linked to the gods by the force of amity (*philia*) that these higher beings project through lower things. Amity from on high also causes the sympathy (*sympatheia*) that operates in nature. Some rituals are merely a lower theurgy that taps this sympathy but cannot lead the soul up to union. Only a higher theurgy empowered by divine amity can make the final leap. But amity also causes the sympathy that mortals perceive as natural magic, which is like lower theurgy, and both these lesser practices may be steps toward higher theurgy and eventual union. Unlike Porphyry's theurgy, which is an alternative to virtue, the higher theurgy of Iamblichus requires prior education in the virtues. Although such a theurgy based on divine friendship must be good in

48. Pico, *Oration*, p. 64; Plotinus, *Enneads* 4.4.40–4; Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, pp. 70–2, 108–10; Andrew Smith, *Porphyry's Place in the Neoplatonic Tradition* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1974), pp. 70, 74, 122, 128, 134–40, 147–8.

itself, Iamblichus admits that it can also be dangerous if the impure attempt it or if evil demons interfere.⁴⁹

To make his case for natural magic, Pico cites Porphyry but not Iamblichus, and it is Plotinus who gets most of his overt attention. The disdain of Plotinus for lesser demons, celebrated in Porphyry's *Life* of his master, reinforces the antithesis between natural and demonic magic, which is Pico's theme. One is bondage, the other mastery. One is neither art nor science, "while the other is full of the deepest mysteries, . . . leading at last to the knowledge of all nature." Stressing another point from Plotinus, Pico emphasizes that this knowledge is applied "not so much by working wonders as by diligently serving nature as she works them." The forces that the magus uses are already at play in the world.⁵⁰

Pico's account of natural magic so far is Plotinian, but then he makes a Christian point about grace and the virtues. By uncovering the world's marvels, natural magic "excites man to that wonderment at God's works of which faith, hope and a ready love are sure and certain effects." Thus, while the old pagan magic had come to depend on the four natural virtues, as Plato taught, the three theological virtues are within reach of Pico's new Christian magic that "by a constant contemplation of God's wonders" will move us to a love so ardent that "we cannot hold back the song, 'Full are the heavens, full is the whole earth with the greatness of your glory'." This hymn that natural magic compels us to sing is the music of the Seraphim, part of the triple blessing chanted by the fiery angels in the book of Isaiah. Magic—at least the good natural magic that Pico defends—drives us up to join these highest angels in their hymn of blazing, self-consuming love. Natural magic thus plays the same role as natural philosophy in Pico's angelic curriculum, preparing us for theology and ultimately for union. This is what Pico means when he says that magic is "the final realization of natural philosophy." Reflecting the aims of the later Neoplatonists, his goal is not to control the world of nature but to escape and rise above it.⁵¹

Accordingly, what closes his account of magic is the supernal song of the Seraphim, and what comes next is Cabala. Since we are now near the peak of theology and contemplation, raised to this height by natural magic and headed for mystical union, the place of Cabala in the ascent ought to be higher than magic, and so it is. What Pico discovers in the books of the Cabalists is "a stream of intellect, or an ineffable theology of supersubstantial divinity; a fount of wisdom, or an exact metaphysics of intelligible and angelic forms; and a river of knowledge, or a most certain philosophy of nature." Here he embellishes the end of the seventh vision in *2 Esdras*, where God tells Ezra how he had instructed Moses on Sinai in

49. Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, pp. 99–100, 120–3; Smith, *Porphyry's Place*, pp. 59–61, 83–98, 105–10, 134–40, 148; Shaw, *Theurgy*, pp. 4–5, 85, 110–12, 123, 129, 150–5, 169; "Copenhaver, Iamblichus, Synesius, and the *Chaldaean Oracles* in Marsilio Ficino's *De vita libri tres*: Hermetic Magic or Neoplatonic Magic?" in *Supplementum Festivum: Studies in Honor of Paul Oskar Kristeller*, ed. J. Hankins et al., "Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies" (Binghamton: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1987), pp. 448–50.

50. Pico, *Oration*, pp. 64–6; Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, 10.

51. Pico, *Oration*, pp. 62, 66–8; Isa. 6:2–3; Plato, *I Alcibiades* 121E–122A; Smith, *Porphyry's Place*, pp. 59–61, 134–48.

“the secrets of the ages and the end of time, and . . . what to make public and what to keep hidden.” Ezra receives a revelation whose public part fills twenty-four books, “but the last seventy books are to be kept back and given to none but the wise.”⁵²

Most of what Pico says about Cabala in the *Oration* is historical or apologetic. The history recounts and justifies the distinction between exoteric and esoteric revelation, the latter transmitted by Jewish tradition and reinforced by pagans and Christians. Pico's apologetic (and prudential) motive is “to do battle for the faith against the relentless slanders of the Hebrews.” To convince Christians to turn the alien force of Cabala against the Jews, he puts it on the level of Pythagorean and Platonic philosophy. Even more compelling is its theological authority, which Pico describes schematically in his brief elaboration of Ezra's vision. Explicating the prophet's simple promise of “a stream of intellect and a fount of wisdom and a river of knowledge” flowing from the seventy secret books, Pico finds in them his “ineffable theology . . . , exact metaphysics . . . , and . . . most certain philosophy of nature.” Whatever he meant to convey by his compressed account of this arcane and abstruse topic, the progression from physical nature through metaphysical forms to the inexpressible godhead mirrors the program of mystical ascent that his speech recommends. Moreover, if Cabala was a theurgy as well as a theosophy, as indicated by the distinction between practical and speculative Cabala in Pico's *Conclusiones*, its grounding in a preparatory magic would confirm the similar ideas of the later Neoplatonists. In fact, a major influence on Pico's Cabala was the thirteenth century mystic, Abraham Abulafia, whose work was available to him in Latin, and Abulafia's Cabala was aggressively theurgic.⁵³

Abulafia centered his Cabala on prophecy and divine names: ‘prophecy’ is his term for the ecstasy that culminates in mystical union; meditation on the sacred names is the technique recommended to achieve this goal. Repeating the letters that make up the names of God, either in speech or in writing, combining them with other letters from other words of power, chanting their sounds, breathing correctly, moving the head in certain patterns, matching the numerical values of letters and words with their meanings—such practices are Abulafia's way to ecstasy, starting with God's holiest name, the unutterable Tetragrammaton. “Begin by combining this name,” he writes, “namely, YHWH, at the beginning alone, and examine all its combinations and move it and turn it about like a wheel returning around, front and back, like a scroll, and do not let it rest.” Abulafia called this practice *Ma'aseh Merkabah* or the ‘Work of the Chariot’, a term used by other Cabalists

52. Pico, *Oration*, p. 74; 2 Esdras 14:3–6, 42–8.

53. Pico, *Oration*, pp. 68, 74; Matt. 13:11; Lk 8:10; Origen, *Against Celsus* 1.7; Plato, *Phaedo* 69C–D, *Phaedrus* 249C–50C, 209E–11D; Iamblichus, *Protrepticus* 21 (Des Places 131.16–135.10); *The Pythagorean Life* 103–5; Guthrie, *History*, IV, pp. 348–40; Dominic J. O'Meara, *Pythagoras Revived: Mathematics and Philosophy in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 39; Burkert, *Love and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), pp. 176–80; Wirszubski, *Pico*, pp. 60–5; Scholem, *Trends*, pp. 56–7, 144–6; Idel, *Kabbalah*, pp. 41–2, 101; *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, trans. J. Chipman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), pp. 18–19.

to denote theosophical speculation on the highest mysteries of revealed divinity, as distinct from *Ma'aseh Bereshit* or the 'Work of Genesis' indicating the cosmological secrets of creation. What Pico calls "revolving the alphabet" in the *Conclusiones* corresponds to Abulafia's use of the sacred names and letters for ecstatic meditation, and Abulafia's designation of this practice as *Ma'aseh Merkabah* accords with Pico's presentation of alphabetic meditation as the first of four divisions of speculative Cabala, the other three being the "triple Merchiava, corresponding to a triple philosophy in parts dealing with divine, intermediate and sensible natures."⁵⁴

Meditation to induce ecstasy is the use of the holy names characteristic of Abulafia, but he and other Cabalists taught that the names also enlarge theological understanding and reveal sources of magical power: theory and practice both start with the names. Since Pico also describes Cabala as both practical and speculative, linking the former with divine names and the latter with the *Sefirot*, he may have been making a concession to a magical application of Cabala. In any case, that the names of God and the letters of the sacred language have a role to play in his speculative Cabala is plausible.⁵⁵

The nature of Pico's practical Cabala is less clear. He says in the *Conclusiones* that it "puts into practice all of formal metaphysics and lower theology." The latter might be a theology inferior to 'supersubstantial divinity', the former an 'exact metaphysics of intelligible and angelic forms', two of the three terms in the *Oration's* definition of Cabala. The third term is missing, however: 'a most certain philosophy of nature'. Its absence implies that Pico's practical Cabala was not a magic meant to act on the natural world. Moreover, setting 'intelligible and angelic forms' apart from a 'lower theology' indicates that the practice of Cabala aims high—perhaps as far as the *Sefirot*. Another possibility is that Pico meant to bring both the *Sefirot* (a theology expressed in names and hence lower than the 'ineffable' theology) and the *Merkabah* (forms, angels, intelligences, what Maimonides called 'metaphysics') into his practical Cabala.⁵⁶

In the end, Pico's telegraphic taxonomy of Cabala raises more questions than it answers, but whatever he learned from Abulafia and other Jewish mystics must have seemed both enticing and forbidding. Like Plotinus, who "lived as if he were ashamed of being in the body," like the *Hermetica* in their many world-hating moments, like Christians who sometimes forgot that the Word was made flesh, Abulafia understood prophetic ecstasy as salvation *from* a degraded and defiled human condition:

We are born through harlotry and lust and menstrual blood and urine. And we are a fetid drop at the time of our creation, and so we are today, fetid

54. Pico, *Conclusiones nongentae: Le novecento tesi dell'anno 1486*, ed. Albano Biondi (Florence: Olschki, 1995), p. 126; Wirszubski, *Pico*, pp. 137–8; Idel, *Abulafia*, pp. 8–9, 14, 21; Scholem, *Kabbalah*, pp. 6, 11–12, 23.

55. Wirszubski, *Pico*, p. 139.

56. Pico, *Conclusiones*, p. 126; Wirszubski, *Pico*, pp. 137, 140; above, n. 52.

and besmirched with filth and mud and vomit and excrement so that there is no clean place . . . And we shall be dead carcasses, putrid and crushed in fire, like rubbish . . .

Although his technique was ecstatic rather than ascetic, Abulafia demanded that the mystic abandon this repulsive world in order to be saved from it. The aim of his Cabala was “that human beings shall turn into separate angels” by reaching the ecstatic state called prophecy “and . . . be saved by this from natural death on the day of [their] . . . death and live forever.” “The Torah is not preserved except by one who kills himself in the tents of wisdom”: for Abulafia this maxim from Maimonides was the equivalent of the Platonic directive to practice death and of the Neoplatonic desire for the soul to exit the body deliberately.⁵⁷

“One who works in Cabala without mixing in the extraneous and stays at the work a long time,” according to Pico’s *Conclusiones*, “will die the death of the kiss.” What sounds like an admonition is actually an invitation, for this is the good death that Pico wants, while avoiding the ghastly end of the magus who makes mistakes in Cabala. If he “goes wrong in the work or comes to it unpurified, he will be devoured by Azazel,” warns the second half of the same conclusion. Frightful demons lurk where angels sing, which is why Pico needs the proper technique to protect his ascent to the One. A righteous theurgy, cleared of demonic snares, will summon the good angel Metatron to fight his fallen cousins, even the sinister Samael, the Cabalist counterpart of Satan. One use of practical Cabala, then, is for counter-magic against unclean spirits, a magic powered by Abulafia’s theories about the letters of the Hebrew alphabet.⁵⁸

The secrets of the sacred letters shape the numerological architecture of Pico’s *Conclusiones*, whose terse assertions are often obscure in themselves and connect with one another even more obscurely. To be worth reading, Pico believed that he had to write in riddles, and the *Oration* describes his Cabala in just such teasing terms, as “divine matters that are published and not published.” Pico intended his account of Cabala to be enigmatic, requiring his hearers to make what they could of the puzzles set for them. Even before introducing Cabala toward the end of the *Oration*, he had left a clue to its mysteries near the start of the speech while discussing the problematic mutability of the human chameleon: “the Hebrews with their more secret theology,” he writes, “sometimes transform the blessed Enoch into an angel of divinity, which they call *malach haShekinah*, and sometimes they change others into other divine powers.” From the latter part of the speech, we learn that this “more secret theology” is Cabala. The words *malach*

57. Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus* 1; Copenhaver, *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation with Notes and Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. xxxix, lii, 24, 74, 102–3, 144–6, 152–3; Idel, *Abulafia*, pp. 141–5; above, n. 9.

58. Pico, *Conclusiones*, p. 128; Wirszubski, *Pico*, pp. 159–60; Copenhaver, “Number, Shape and Meaning in Pico’s Christian Cabala: The Upright *Tsade*, the Closed *Mem* and the Gaping Jaws of Azazel,” in *Natural Particulars: Nature and the Disciplines in Renaissance Europe*, ed. Anthony Grafton and Nancy Siraisi (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999), pp. 25–76.

haShekinah mean the “angel of God’s presence,” the divine height to which Pico taught that humans must ascend.⁵⁹

In one way, then, practical Cabala was a defense, to invoke the mighty Metatron as protection against Azazel, the malign demon who invented magic and waited to devour any who used that art wrongly. But Cabala could do more, Pico believed. He even claimed in the *Conclusiones* that “no knowledge gives us more certainty of Christ’s divinity than magic and Cabala,” though the Church condemned this conclusion, despite the pains that he took to distinguish his good magic and salvific theurgy from demonic magic.⁶⁰ Like Ficino, he wished to base a learned and beneficial occultism on the remains of ancient wisdom, sacred and secular, so the threat of dying in the jaws of Azazel was a matter of special risk for him. The aid that he sought from Metatron, however, was not just to protect his life. What he wanted was the good ecstatic death, the death of the kiss, that frees the soul from the body for its angelic destiny and divine union.

The great risk in Pico’s project was not bodily death but loss of the soul from the theurgic excesses of the Cabalists, who dared not only to call spirits down from heaven and turn humans into angels but even to change the configuration of the Godhead by causing the *Sefirot* to rearrange themselves. That Pico wished to redraw the blueprint of divinity is unlikely, though he knew that Cabala presented such temptations. Danger lay closer in the magic needed to summon Metatron, the angelic prince described by Abulafia in a Latin text available to Pico:

What takes our intellect from potency to act is an intellect separated from all matter and called by many different names in our language . . . For it is called *hu saro sel aholam* or ‘he is the prince of the world’ and it is ‘Mattatron prince of the faces,’ in Hebrew . . . *mattatron sar appanim* . . . And his real name is just like the name of his master, which is *sadai* . . . And the wise . . . call him . . . *sechel appoel* or ‘agent intellect’ . . . , and he has many other names besides, . . . and he rules over the hierarchy of angels called *hisim* . . . Therefore the intellect or intelligence in our language is called . . . *malach* or ‘angel’ or *cherub* . . . Therefore our wise men often call him . . . Henoah, and they say that Henoah is Mattatron.⁶¹

In its least provocative form, the entity described here is the agent intellect of Aristotelian philosophy, usually treated in the Greek and Latin tradition as an internal faculty of the human psyche that activates higher mental processes. Moslem and Jewish philosophers, however, moved the agent intellect from the human microcosm to the macrocosm and placed it last (hence closest to the lower world) among ten emanations from the One. In this cosmic and hypercosmic framework, contacting the agent intellect is no longer just an act of human psychology. It is a theological adventure—the metaphysical basis of prophecy for

59. Pico, *Oration*, pp. 8–10, 70; Copenhaver, “Number,” pp. 41–60; above, n. 16.

60. Pico, *Conclusiones*, p. 118.

61. Wirszubski, *Pico*, p. 231; Idel, *Messianic Mystics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 88–9.

Abulafia, whose usual name for the agent intellect is Metatron. Pico knew the sources of this idea: conventional scholastic Aristotelianism; the Averroist challenge to that philosophy; and the Cabalist apotheosis of the agent intellect.⁶²

To become Metatron in Abulafia's Cabala is a type of mystical union and thus an eradication of the self. The self withers away not only in the One but also in favor of the other because Abulafia's prophecy is Messianic as well as ecstatic. The agent intellect is the *Mashiyah*, the Anointed, and through angelic ecstasy the Messianic mystic becomes a savior. The physical force of this transformation penetrates Abulafia's imagery when he describes the mystic's experience: "it will appear to him as if his entire body . . . has been anointed with the oil of anointing, . . . and he will be called 'the angel of the Lord' [*mal'akh ha-'elohim*]." Numerological calculation (gematria) also relates this supreme angel's name "to that of his Master, which is Shaddai," one of the names of God in the Hebrew Bible. Metatron, Messiah, Shaddai—these and other sacred names raise Abulafia's Cabala to the highest levels of spirituality and thereby expose its practitioner to the gravest danger.⁶³

According to the Latin Abulafia, another of Metatron's names is "*ruuah accodex* or 'Holy Spirit' and . . . *xechina*, which means 'divinity' or 'dweller'."⁶⁴ The *Shekinah* or Presence of God acts as the Creator's lowest attribute and first point of contact with creation. This commonplace of Cabala was a discovery for Pico but a riddle to his Christian contemporaries. Thus, when he mentioned Enoch's becoming the angel of the *Shekinah* or Metatron, the allusion could only mystify Christians, though it was well known to Jews since the early medieval period:

R. Ishmael said: 'I asked Metatron and said to him: "Why art thou called by the name of thy Creator, by seventy names?"' . . . He answered: . . . "Because I am Enoch, the son of Jared. For when the generation of the flood sinned and were confounded in their deeds, . . . then the Holy One . . . removed me from their midst to be a witness against them . . . Hence the Holy One . . . lifted me up . . . [and] assigned me for a prince . . . among the ministering angels . . . In that hour three of the ministering angels, 'Uzza, 'Azza and 'Azrael came forth and brought charges against me . . . [But] the Holy One . . . answered: . . . "I delight in this one more than in all of you, and hence he shall be a prince . . . over you in the high heavens . . ." When the Holy One . . . went out and went in . . . to the Garden of Eden then all . . . beheld the splendour of his Shekina, and they were not injured until the time of Enosh who was the head of all idol worshippers . . . And they erected the idols . . . and . . . brought down the sun, the moon, planets and constellations . . . to

62. Wirszubski, *Pico*, pp. 86, 101, 193, 200; Idel, *Mystics*, p. 85; Oliver Leaman, *An Introduction to Medieval Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 87–107; Averroes and His Philosophy (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 82–103; John Marenbon, *Later Medieval Philosophy (1150–1350)* (London: Routledge, 1987), pp. 94–128.

63. Idel, *Mystics*, pp. 65–8, 72, 85.

64. Wirszubski, *Pico*, p. 232.

attend them . . . They would not have been able to bring them down but for ‘Uzza, ‘Azza and ‘Azziel who taught them sorceries.’⁶⁵

Man’s angelic potential was a great prize to Pico, but it was also a great peril, for Cabalist (and earlier) speculations on Metatron not only confirmed Pico’s fear of demonic magic and ratified his confidence in angelic theurgy but also reached into regions that good Christians must reserve for orthodox theology and the spirituality sanctioned by the Church. That Enoch becomes Metatron, that practical Cabala turns humans into angels, is astounding enough. Beyond astonishment is Metatron’s appearance as Shaddai, Messiah, and *Shekinah*, an angelic appropriation of the Trinity.

The safer consequence of Pico’s Cabala, the Christianized Jewish mysticism sketched so faintly in his great speech, is that using secret names of God in Abulafia’s ecstatic method is another application of the moral theory of the *Oration*, where the best choice is to choose the Cherubic life in order to die the best kind of death. No wonder that Pico passes over the worst dangers of a Christian Cabala, the temptations of a Trinitarian theurgy. Rather than betray the hazards of his project, he devotes most of his account of Cabala to justifying its secret ways. The sphinxes of Egypt, the silence of Pythagoras and the riddles of Plato support the wisdom of the Jews who treat the books of Cabala with such reverence that “they permit no one below the age of forty to touch them”—a caution that Pico in his early twenties ignored.⁶⁶

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What might the practice of philosophy achieve? Does it create a body of wisdom that ought to be a public good? Or does it build a body of learning whose technical difficulty makes it the private property of philosophers? The latter state of affairs, whether asserted or conceded, seems to be the condition of philosophy in post-modern times. If philosophy ends up being private, however, in the sense that few people know much about it, it still has no secrets. On the contrary, like other kinds of higher learning, philosophy authenticates itself by offering itself in print and in speech to public scrutiny. Without this test, open in principle to anyone, philosophy cannot be authentic. A secret philosophy in our day is no philosophy at all.

Our commitment to public examination is itself not much examined. We take it for granted that philosophy has no secrets to keep, taking little notice, for example, of the deeper meaning of the verb “to publish.” Pico made no such assumptions. He did not publish the *Oration*, and he lodged his claim to be a philosopher in this same speech that makes so much of secrecy. He meant the speech to introduce a public event, a scholastic disputation on a grand scale, but his plan failed, keeping the *Oration* out of wide circulation during his lifetime. This

65. *3 Enoch or the Hebrew Book of Enoch*, ed. and trans. Hugo Odeberg (New York, Ktav Publishing House, 1973), pp. 8–16 (chaps. 4–5).

66. Pico, *Oration*, pp. 70–4.

temporary silence, an accident of his remarkable biography, is less important than the purposeful, Pythagorean silence that Pico practices as a first principle of his way of philosophizing.

Pico's speech, as noted above, has been called the most famous product of Renaissance philosophy. But that part of Western philosophy—the period between Occam and Descartes—is the least studied and the least understood in the whole of the discipline's history. Much about the *Oration*, given its status in this context, might explain why post-Cartesian philosophers have taken so little account of their immediate pre-Cartesian ancestry: written in Latin, expressed in recondite allusions to classical and biblical texts, and dependent on sources even more arcane, the *Oration* could be read as the antithesis of what Descartes wanted philosophy to become: divorced from history and philology and obligated to clarity as an ideal. The esoteric character of Pico's thought widens the gulf between his philosophy and the discipline as practiced since the Cartesian revolution. But the same alien quality is a valuable object of historical understanding, specifically of the historical understanding of philosophy's past.