

Extract on Pico and the so-called freedom of will problem, from S.A. [Steve] Farmer, *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses (1486): The Evolution of Traditional Religious and Philosophical Systems* (Tempe, Ariz.: MRTS, 1998). See <http://www.safarmer.com/pico>.

iii. *"Freedom of the Will"? Pico's Mysticism and the Syncretic Origins of Some Ancient Religious Paradoxes*

Pico's theory of knowledge was closely tied to his views of the relative powers of the intellect and will—a topic discussed continuously, and with little significant development, from ancient times through the Renaissance. Scholars earlier in this century made much of supposed Renaissance innovations in these discussions,

confusing premodern with nineteenth-century views of the will and led by the belief, to quote the thesis of one representative scholar, that "the Italian Renaissance, conceived essentially along Burckhardian lines, was accompanied by a powerful assertion of a philosophy of will by leading representatives of Italian humanism and among philosophical circles influenced by them."¹⁷

Pico's ideas on the will can hardly remain undiscussed in any study of his work, since he has so often been represented as the archetypal Renaissance voluntarist or "philosopher of will." That view, supported by misreadings of the *Oration*, or rather its first few pages, is ironic, since in many ways Pico leaned heavily towards the opposing intellectualist camp. One of his theological conclusions was, in fact, judged "erroneous and savoring of heresy" by the papal commission precisely for claiming that not even religious dogmas could be accepted by a pure act of will, but first had to pass intellectual tests.¹⁸

We earlier glimpsed part of Pico's apparent intellectualism in the *Oration*, where it played a key role in the defense of philosophy that he planned to make in opening his debate. The will is indeed "free"—we will look later at ambiguities in Pico's use of the term—but the will cannot love or judge what it does not know; it is for this that we must study philosophy, directing the will in its mystical ascent or worldly rule.¹⁹ Pico similarly emphasized the will's blindness and dependence on cognition for its direction in the *Commento*, *Heptaplus*, *Commentary on the Psalms*, and elsewhere.²⁰ Pico even attributed similar views, which were linked closely to the Platonic tradition, to the Aristotelian whom he most regularly attacked in the theses—St. Thomas Aquinas:

5>46. When Plato says that only the unwilling sins, he only means what

¹⁷ Trinkaus (1970: 1:xx). The confusion is between premodern views of the will as a faculty of desire or choice and romantic and existentialist views of it as an unconditioned creative power. The latter views have no genuine medieval or Renaissance antecedents other than those involving God's creative powers. This confusion was prominent in studies of Renaissance views of man (the latter supposedly voluntaristic in a modern sense) expressed earlier in this century by Gentile, Cassirer, Semprini, Garin, Kristeller, Haydn, Trinkaus, Rice, Yates, and other scholars in the Burckhardian tradition.

¹⁸ See thesis 4>18 and note.

¹⁹ See above, pp. 39ff.

²⁰ For one especially clear expression of Pico's intellectualism, see the *Commento* (Garin, *Scritti vari*, 491–93), which was composed about the same time as the *Oration*.

Thomas maintains, namely that there can be no sin in the will, unless there is a defect in reason.²¹

As is common in syncretic systems, however, things do not end here so simply, and Pico cannot any more be classified as a simple intellectualist than as a voluntarist. A broader perspective on his views comes in a series of theses that deals with the traditional theological question of whether man's greatest "felicity" (or happiness) exists in the intellect or the will. Once again, Pico's ideas here can be predicted immediately from the principles of his "new philosophy": Since faculties interpenetrate as we rise in the hierarchy of being, at the top of that hierarchy distinctions between the intellect and will are devoid of meaning; man's "greatest happiness" is achieved only when the participated unity of the soul is fully absorbed into the absolute unity of God. This view is succinctly expressed in a key mystic thesis, quoted earlier for different purposes, that shows up in Pico's "paradoxical dogmatizing conclusions":

3>43. The act by which the angelic and rational nature is bestowed with the greatest happiness [literally, "felicitated with the greatest felicity"] is an act neither of the intellect nor of the will, but is the union of the unity that exists in the otherness of the soul with the unity that exists without otherness.

The French theologian Henri De Lubac (who, along with other Catholic scholars, has violently attacked neo-Burckhardtian readings of Pico) has argued that this thesis demonstrates Pico's total indifference to the "superficial" medieval intellect/will debate.²² In fact, however, the thesis refers only to the soul's state at the height of mystical union. For man still in search of God—for the *viator* or

²¹ Pico also represented Aquinas as an intellectualist in a number of other theses; see note to 2.12.

²² De Lubac (1974: 175–76). Other Catholic scholars who have similarly attacked the dominant neo-Burckhardtian image of Pico include Dulles (1941), Di Napoli (1965), Craven (1981), and Roulier (1989). Many of their criticisms of this tradition have been valid; unfortunately, the result of their works has been the creation of an image of an orthodox or even Thomistic Pico that is no less distant from the historical reality. In contrast, one other Catholic historian, Englebert Monnerjahn (1960), argued for the opposing view that Pico's unorthodox views helped pave the way for the Protestant Reformation. What is clear in all this is that historians of many persuasions have been able to hang their hats on Pico's work—in large part because of the inherent ambiguities in the nine hundred theses.

"pilgrim"—distinctions between the intellect and will were real ones, and Pico believed that they had to be considered in the mystical ascent. De Lubac aside, Pico accordingly included several dozen theses in his text that directly related to this issue.²³

In respect to the lowest levels of the mystical ascent, as we saw earlier, Pico appears to be a straightforward intellectualist: The will is blind and totally dependent on some cognitive power for its direction. As the soul climbs upwards, however, and faculties begin to interpenetrate, Pico's position becomes increasingly difficult to classify. This problem is nicely illustrated in two of Pico's theological theses, where for the sake of debate he temporarily adopts the "common way" on mystical happiness:

4>24. Holding to the common way of theologians, that happiness exists in the intellect or in the will, I state two conclusions, of which the first is this: The intellect could not attain happiness unless an act of will existed, which in this is more powerful than that act of intellect.

4>25. The second conclusion is this: Granted that an act of intellect formally attains the essence of an object bestowing happiness, because its act concerning that is an act of happiness, formally it possesses it from an act of will.

Carefully worked ambiguities like these, which were always handy in reconciling authorities, show up again in Pico's resolution of the related question of the roles played by free will and grace in achieving salvation. Renaissance scholars here too (or, at least, those in the Burckhardian tradition) have regularly represented Pico as a voluntarist or even Pelagian.²⁴ In fact, however, the compromise that Pico struck on this issue placed him squarely in the mainstream of medieval theology, which was forced on dogmatic grounds to uphold the conflicting beliefs that God was omnipotent and omnibenevolent but that man was nonetheless

²³ The most important of these are listed in my note to thesis 2.12.

²⁴ As an extreme example, Haydn (1950: 349–50) found in Pico a concept of human freedom "as autonomous as in Sartre's Existentialism" and "as free as the Pelagian heresy"—one that recognized "no restraint in its determination almost literally to storm the ultimate citadel." It is interesting to note that such readings of Pico became especially popular between the World Wars; like Sartre's views of freedom, the popularity of such claims can partially be considered a reaction to historical events that *shattered* traditional beliefs in human dignity.

morally responsible for his own salvation or damnation. Despite his supposed special interests in human freedom, nowhere does Pico show much interest in the paradoxes involved in the simultaneous acceptance of these views.²⁵

Pico's most typical compromise on this issue can be followed in a series of theses interpreting the words of 1 Tim. 2:4 that "God wills [or 'desires'] that all men be saved" (*deus vult omnes homines salvos fieri*). This text provided a standard forum for discussion of the free will/divine omnipotence problem from ancient through medieval times, receiving special attention in Peter Lombard's twelfth-century *Sentences*, which (as suggested in Pico's theses) remained the standard theological textbook well into the Renaissance.²⁶ Scholastic reconciliations of 1 Tim. 2:4 with other Scriptures stressing man's responsibility for his own salvation predictably ended in fine distinctions being drawn between different acts of willing (or different "wills") in God. The fact that Pico planned to follow well-worn paths in resolving this question is suggested in the following theses from his theological conclusions. It is noteworthy that the orthodoxy of these theses, unlike those of an intellectualist cast, was never questioned by the papal commission:

4>21. Not every [act of] will of God's benevolence is effective.

4>22. The words of the Apostle stating that *God wills that all men be saved* should be understood in a positive sense [only] of the antecedent will of the benevolence of God.

4>23. The antecedent will can be described like this: The antecedent will of God is that by which God gives to someone the natural or antecedent powers by which he can achieve something. With him God is prepared to co-act if the other wills it, nor will he manifest the contrary to him with the command or advice to do it, permitting him freely to will to achieve his own salvation.

By the time of Pico's proposed Vatican debate, the exegetically convenient concept of divine "co-action" was well over a thousand years old. We must in-

²⁵ At Rome he planned to resolve conflicts between freedom and necessity in a traditional hierarchical or modal fashion; see the conclusions listed in my note to thesis 24.2.

²⁶ *Sentences* 1, d. 46. The slow demise of the influence of the *Sentences* is a complicated issue—tied to questions involving Renaissance classicism, the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, and the printing revolution—that has never been satisfactorily discussed. The fact that no English translation has ever been published of this extraordinary work, which was one of the most commented upon texts in human history, is remarkable.

deed prepare ourselves for grace by "doing what is in us"—to recall Pico's words in the *Oration*—but the natural power to prepare ourselves comes itself from a previous act of grace.²⁷ Pico's views here do not depart significantly even from those of St. Thomas Aquinas, whose wonderfully ambiguous formula can be recalled from the *Summa*:

When man is said "to do what is in him," this is said to be in man's power as he is moved by God. . . . It is the part of man to prepare his soul, since he does this through his own free will. And yet he does not do this without the help of God moving him, and drawing him to himself.²⁸

Other sides of Pico's mysticism must be pieced together from evidence scattered widely in the theses, confirmed again by discussions in other of his works. The mystical ascent takes place in seven steps, corresponding to the seven days of creation, seven ages of cosmic history, and seven grades of beauty that Pico found in the universe. Ascent of these steps involves a progressive interiorization of knowledge—"reflexive knowledge," in Pico's terms—with a steplike shift in the soul from the sensual to rational to intellectual faculties. Pico's inclusion of exactly nine hundred theses, it will be remembered, was meant to symbolize this general movement of the "excited soul turning back into itself through the frenzy of the muses"—that is, through the guidance of philosophical studies.

In the *Commento*, Pico distinguishes seven stages of the mystical ascent, presenting his interpretation of the traditional Platonic ladder of love.²⁹ In the first step, the particular beauty of an object is perceived by the senses and is desired for itself. In the second step, this sensual beauty is made more spiritual by the soul's inner powers but still remains distant from its source. In the third step, the soul separates concrete images from all their particularities and "considers the proper nature of corporeal beauty in itself," contemplating the "universal beauty of all bodies understood together." Many Latin Aristotelians, Pico tells us, believed that so long as the soul was attached to the body it could not achieve a more perfect knowledge than this. But he promised that in his council (*concilio*)—his Vatican

²⁷ On the medieval doctrine of the *facere quod in se est*, see above, p. 39 n. 109.

²⁸ *Summa* q. 109, art. 6, ad 2, 4: "Cum dicitur homo facere quod in se est, dicitur hoc esse in potestate hominis secundum quod est motus a deo. . . . Hominis est preparare animum, quia hoc facit per liberum arbitrium: sed tamen hoc non facit sine auxilio dei moventis et ad se attrahentis."

²⁹ Pico's ideas here were put forward as a sketch for his projected commentary on the *Symposium*, planned as part of his general polemics against Ficino. See above, p. 69 n. 34.

debate—he would demonstrate that this view was “alien from the mind of Aristotle and from almost all Arabic and Greek Peripatetics.”³⁰

Corporeal beauty plays a role in only these first three steps. In the fourth of the seven steps, the soul considers the vision of universal corporeal beauty that it obtained in the last step, and noting that everything corporeal is particular,

concludes that this universality does not proceed from a sensible exterior object but from its own intrinsic light and power. Hence it speaks to itself: “If this beauty only appears to me in the shadowy mirrors of natural phantasms through the strength of my own light, certainly it is reasonable that looking in the mirror of my own substance, divested of all clouds and dark material, I ought to see all such things more clearly.” And so, turning into itself, it sees the image of ideal beauty that it participates from the intellect . . . ; and this is the fourth step, the perfect image of celestial love.³¹

In the fifth step, building on this interior or “reflexive” knowledge, the soul rises from its rational to its intellectual part, and the “celestial Venus” (the intellect or angelic mind) reveals herself to it in her own image—although not yet with the “total plenitude of her beauty,” since this cannot be contained in the soul’s particular or “partial” intellect. Finally, through love (or will) the soul unites its partial intellect to the universal intellect or angelic mind, the “first of creatures, the ultimate and universal lodging of ideal beauty.” And achieving this union in the sixth step

its journey ends, nor is it permitted to move further into the seventh—as it were, the Sabbath of celestial love—but there, as at its one end, it ought to rest blissfully at the side of the first Father, the source of beauty.³²

The *Commento*, which repeatedly sidesteps sensitive theological issues, gives few hints as to the nature of this “Sabbath” of the soul that lies at the top of, or transcends, the ladder of love. In one passage, however, Pico suggests that the Platonists believed that at the summit of man’s intellect the soul “immediately

³⁰ Garin, *Scritti vari*, 567–68. Pico attributes the power of abstraction here to the active intellect, contradicting views that he developed in the theses; see above, p. 103. However, he repeatedly stressed that the opinions in the *Commento* were aimed at a popular audience—and were hence largely meant to be noncontroversial.

³¹ Garin, *Scritti vari*, 568–69.

³² Garin, *Scritti vari*, 569.

conjoins with God"; similarly, in the *Oration* we find that in his highest mystical state man is "made one spirit with God," that "God and he are one," or that in that state "we shall not be ourselves, but he himself who made us."³³ The implication is that the Sabbath of the soul refers to a final quietistic union with God that comes to us once we have "done what is in us" and can achieve no more through our own powers.³⁴

That a final quietism was integral to Pico's mysticism is further suggested by his sudden shifts from active to passive language whenever he describes the higher stages of the mystical ascent. There the soul is "drawn," "possessed," "intoxicated," "consumed," "inspired," "illuminated," "perfected," or even—as we found earlier—"felicitated" by God. Further support for this interpretation is found in the following thesis on the *Protagoras*, which was one of Pico's main sources for his famous opening myth in the *Oration*. The six (or seven) steps to which the thesis refers by now should have a familiar ring:

5>58. That hunt (*venatio*) of Socrates in the *Protagoras* can be appropriately divided this way into six grades: so that the first is the existence of external matter, the second particular immaterial existence, the third universal existence, the fourth rational existence, the fifth particular intellectual existence, the sixth total intellectual existence. In the seventh, in the Sabbath, as it were, one must desist from the hunt.

§

One final side of Pico's mysticism merits extended comment. Pico claimed that in its highest mystical state the soul was totally fused with God; even beneath that state, to recall the *Oration*, we find the mystic attaining "the friendship of one soul through which all souls not only concord in one mind which is over every mind, but in a certain ineffable mode become fully one."³⁵ Fifteenth-century theology left much room for poetic license, and Pico's contemporaries would have found these words no more daring than the equally metaphorical claim in the *Commento* that the mystic might eventually rest "blissfully at the side of the first Father."

³³ *Commento*, in Garin, *Scritti vari*, 479; *Oration*, in *Opera*, 315, 316, 320; Garin, *Scritti vari*, 106, 112, 124.

³⁴ Cf. above, pp. 39ff.

³⁵ Quoted above, p. 41.

Modern scholars have interpreted these lines more literally, however, with Edgar Wind, for one, making much of Pico's supposed "doctrine of mystical self-annihilation" or "self-destruction."³⁶ Others, including Bruno Nardi and Eugenio Garin, have stressed the links between Pico's views and Averroes's concept of the "unity of the intellect"—the idea that the powers of the intellect are not differentiated in individuals. This view was heatedly attacked by Christian philosophers from Thomas Aquinas to Marsilio Ficino for its apparent denial of the soul's personal immortality; one of the main goals of Ficino's *Platonic Theology* was, in fact, to refute Averroes's authority on precisely these grounds.³⁷

Recalling Pico's frequent opposition to both Aquinas and Ficino, it is not surprising to find him boasting that in his Vatican council he planned to reconcile Averroes's concept of the unity of intellect totally with Christian orthodoxy. The following theses show up in Pico's forty-one conclusions *secundum Averroem*. Although not explicitly presented as Pico's own opinion, the views expressed here go far beyond anything found in Averroes's own writings, and judging from Pico's wording, his personal endorsement of these views appears to be certain. Along the way, Pico attacks the fourteenth-century Averroist John of Jandun—the leading commentator on the Commentator—whose views of Averroes were still much in vogue in the fifteenth century:

7.2. The intellective soul is one in all men.

7.3. Man's greatest happiness is achieved when the active intellect is conjoined to the possible intellect as its form. This conjunction has been perversely and incorrectly understood by the other Latins whom I have read, and especially by John of Jandun, who not only in this, but in almost all questions in philosophy, totally corrupted and twisted the doctrine of Averroes.

7.4. It is possible, upholding the unity of the intellect, that my soul, so particularly mine that it is not shared by me with all, remains after death.

Pico apparently viewed his planned reconciliation of Averroism and Christianity as one of the high points of his Vatican council; if his position can be reconstructed, we would expect evidence for it in that section of the theses where he

³⁶ Wind (1968: 63).

³⁷ Nardi (1949), Garin (1937). For Ficino's arguments, see *Theologia Platonica*, bk. 15

planned to introduce his "new philosophy." And indeed, buried deep in his "paradoxical dogmatizing conclusions," we find one particularly strangely worded thesis that seems a likely candidate to achieve that goal. The conclusion pertains to what Pico labeled the *ipseitas* or "self-identity" of created beings. Insofar as it can be translated at all into meaningful English, it reads:

3>20. The self-identity (*ipseitas*) of each and every thing is then most itself (*ipsa*) when in itself all things exist in such a way that in itself all things *are* itself.

As is suggested in several related theses, this conclusion refers to the "true" substance of created beings in the intellectual nature, where everything exists most fully in a state of "reciprocal penetration." It is in that nature, to quote a nearby conclusion on Anaxagoras, that "the greatest mixture coincides with the greatest simplicity."

It is not difficult to see how Pico could apply this thesis to reconcile the unity of the intellect with Christian views of personal immortality: In Pico's system, the soul's *ipseitas* or self-identity is paradoxically *most* preserved when it *loses* that identity in the intellectual nature—where "all things exist in such a way that in itself all things *are* itself." Here internal contradictions are reconciled even to the point that personal identity and intelligible unity—Anaxagoras's "mixed" and "unmixed"—are one and the same. One reason why Pico labeled these propositions "paradoxical conclusions" at this point becomes all too painfully clear. His method of reconciling conflicting doctrines was based as usual on what from a modern, if not from a premodern, perspective appears to be a simple linguistic trick.³⁸

Beyond the unity of intellect, it will be recalled, Pico posited a final "Sabbath of the soul," where the individual was fully absorbed in God's nature. No evidence has survived as to how Pico planned to reconcile this view with the orthodox Christian concept of personal immortality. By this point, however, it should be clear that if pressed on this point, Pico had available an extensive arsenal of syncretic techniques that would have allowed him harmonize the most flagrant doctrine of self-annihilation with what he would claim was a wholly orthodox concept of personal immortality. In Pico's syncretic universe, identity and non-identity, multiplicity and unity, mystical self-annihilation and personal immortality, in some prodigious way could always be shown to be one and the same.

³⁸ For other approaches to the unity of intellect question, see 7.2–4 note.