



Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola (1463-1494)

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Philosopher.

Active 1486-1494 in Italy

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, one of the most celebrated intellectuals of the Renaissance, is best known today for his so-called *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, a title that was chosen after the death of its author. Despite a very short life, he wrote numerous works on philosophy, theology, and poetry. He had wide-ranging interests that went well beyond the ancient and scholastic authoritative texts, including the Jewish, Aramaic and Arabic traditions, and he was one of the first scholars to use the Jewish Kabbalah to support Christian doctrines. Indeed, he had a life-long interest in reconciling philosophies and religions generally considered in opposition and synthesizing them in his concordism project. During his lifetime, he was closely associated with the main intellectuals of his time, including Marsilio Ficino, Angelo Poliziano, and Girolamo Savonarola, and enjoyed the personal protection of Lorenzo de' Medici.

Early Years

Giovanni Pico dei Conti di Mirandola e Concordia was born in the castle of Mirandola on February 24, 1463, when – according to the tale related by his nephew Giovan Francesco – a circle of fire appeared for a split second over his mother's bed. Of his two sisters, Caterina and Lucrezia, the first married Lionello Pio da Carpi in 1473 and the second Pino Oderlaffi da Forlì in 1475. His brothers, Galeotto and Anton Maria, were perpetually fighting over the estate, nurturing a family feud that would one day cost Giovan Francesco his life. When his father died soon after his birth, Giovanni was raised by his mother, Giulia Boiardo, who wanted him to pursue an ecclesiastical career so early in life that Cardinal Gonzaga granted him the title of apostolic protonotary in 1473. He departed for Bologna at the age of fourteen to study canon law according to the wishes of his mother, who died in August 1478. Not interested in the political and financial squabbles that divided his brothers or in canon law, he decided to pursue studies that were closer to his own inclinations. In May 1479, he found himself in Ferrara, where he began to study philosophy at the faculty of arts and also to learn ancient Greek. The intellectual climate of Ferrara offered many attractive disciplines to a curious and refined young gentleman such as Pico: in addition to Latin language and literature, taught by Battista Guarini, the study was Greek, a subject rarely taught regularly in universities, offering greater analytical depth and new texts to the *studia humanitatis*. In Ferrara, Pico also had the opportunity to meet Girolamo Savonarola, who was able to perceive Pico's erudition during the public debate that he as protonotary held with Lorenzo Nogarola.

Fifteen months later, in 1480, Pico was in Padua to broaden his knowledge of philosophy. At the time he was barely eighteen. He remained there for two academic years, making important contacts and studying Aristotle and his commentators, especially Averroës. It was the discovery of Arabo-Judaic thought that led to his close ties

to a group of intellectuals who were actively disseminating such ideas throughout Italy: Girolamo Ramusio and particularly Elijah Delmedigo. Like many Paduan *magistri*, the latter considered Aristotle as “the father of all philosophers” and Averroës as “his truest commentator”. He was therefore thoroughly familiar with a little-known work by Averroës, the *Tahâfut al Tahâfut*, or *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*, which the Islamic philosopher had written in defense of philosophy while engaged in a polemic with the mystic al-Ghazâlî. It was at the request of Pico himself that Delmedigo composed two works in Latin that survive only in an autograph Hebrew version. Both dealt with the unity of the human intellect, a theory circulating in medieval universities that had already raised the suspicions of theologians such as Thomas Aquinas. Delmedigo directed his polemic precisely against these men, who, he felt, had had the capacity to reach a profound understanding of Averroës but had interpreted his thought incorrectly. Attacking these Latin scholars, whom he called “philosophants” rather than “philosophers”, he maintained that there was a single intellectual spirit uniting the entire human race.

Furthermore, at the request of Pico, Delmedigo came up with many *quaestiones* designed to assist the count in his study of difficult texts of Aristotelian philosophy and Judaic culture. Thus Delmedigo guided Pico through the thought of Aristotle and Averroës, a course of study that would remain fundamental for him even after his “discovery” of Plato. There was, however, another debt that Pico owed to Delmedigo, namely, his introduction to the Cabala, an intellectual movement of Jewish gnosis influenced by Neoplatonism, which Pico studied with great enthusiasm from the outset.

Another noteworthy individual Pico met in Padua was the Aristotelian Nicoletto Vernia, a scholar of Averroës who, unlike Delmedigo, could only read his works in Latin translation. In his approach, Vernia remained true to Thomas Aquinas. Yet his treatise on the intellect revealed the decisive influence of Averroës in that he claimed that the Christian belief in the immortality of the individual soul could not be founded on philosophical arguments. Pico could not have been oblivious to Vernia’s predilection for Greek commentators such as Alexander of Aphrodisias, Themistius, Simplicius, and John Philoponus (although their respective positions were very different), his loyalty to Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas, and especially his attempt to detect harmony in the ideas of the two greatest thinkers of antiquity, Plato and Aristotle.

Florence and the Encounter with Plato

Giovanni Pico spent the summer of 1482 in his castle in Mirandola, departing in the fall for Pavia, where he decided to dedicate himself to the study of philosophy, Greek, and rhetoric. Here he also studied late Aristotelian texts, such as those of the *calculatores*, as were called the students and theorists of logics and language and some of the followers of Richard Swineshead, the fourteenth-century theological master at Oxford.

Through Angelo Poliziano, whom he met in Mantua in 1472, Pico began to take an interest in the Florentine literary movement. Once again under the influence of Delmedigo, he read and meditated on the work of John Philoponus and revised the amorous lyrics that he had begun composing several years earlier. In 1483, an agreement on the division of the family estate having been reached among the brothers, at the age of twenty Giovanni Pico found himself one of the wealthiest men in Italy and free of every practical care.

Pico did not neglect poetry while dedicating himself to philosophy in Padua and Pavia. In May 1483, he sent some of his compositions to Poliziano, who invited him to Florence. A new and decisive stage of the intellectual life of the Count of Mirandola and Concordia was initiated in the city of Lorenzo the Magnificent.

In 1484, Pico read the *Theologia platonica* of Ficino, who later recalled how Pico, seized by enthusiasm, had forced him to tackle Plotinus shortly after he had published his translation of Plato. Nevertheless, Pico took the trouble to assure his friends that he had not deserted the Aristotelian school but was an explorer (*explorator*) of new territory who had not abandoned the ideas of the Ancients. A crowd of various characters gathered around Pico: physicians and Jewish philosophers, Aristotelians, Platonists and poets, scholars of Dante and Petrarch.

Standing out among all these was the protective and generous friendship of Lorenzo de' Medici. Even Delmedigo followed Pico to Florence, where he continued to work for him, translating from Hebrew Averroës' paraphrase of Plato's *Republic* as well as some of his logical *quaestiones*. One of Ficino's letters likewise informs us that Delmedigo often held debates on philosophical and religious matters in Pico's house with a converted Jew, Guglielmo Raimondo de Moncada, also known as Flavius Mithridates.

The latter soon began teaching Hebrew to Pico, who was impatient to learn the language of the Bible. Mithridates was a rather peculiar character with a difficult personality: one day he demanded that, if Pico wished to continue his lessons in Aramaic, he should serve as a mediator for a youth from Faenza named Lancillotto, whom Mithridates desired as a lover.

In 1488, after Pico returned to Florence, he came across another erudite Jew, R. Yohanan Alemanno, a physician raised in Tuscany in a family of bankers. Many scholars consider Alemanno one of the most widely learned Jewish intellectuals among Pico's circle of collaborators, one who found himself writing his commentary on the Song of Songs in a thoroughly homogeneous intellectual climate: Ficino had written his commentary on Plato's *Symposium* and Girolamo Benivieni his *Canzone d'amore*, afterwards annotated by Pico. Love in the latter was presented as a cohesive, cosmic force and energy that elevated man. In his own preface, Alemanno reviewed the qualities and described the intellectual gifts that had graced King Solomon, to whom the Song had been attributed, thereby defining the prototype of the ideal wise man. In determining the merits of the perfect man, Alemanno drew on biblical sources, Talmudic literature, and Arabic philosophical texts to which he had direct access.

Alemanno's commentary met with great success since it dealt with a subject that was much discussed in the cultural milieu of Florence during this period. To it could be added yet another theme, that of the soul's love of God symbolized in the sexual ecstasy of the Sulamite woman and King Solomon. The soul experiences seven stages of ascent to God: the first three are part of a purification process by means of which the soul is cleansed. The fourth introduces the Cabala through mental and vocal prayer capable of capturing celestial virtues. In the fifth stage appears the study of the treatises of Zohar. In the sixth, Alemanno develops the theme of the soul's need to attain heavenly assistance through the mediation of prayer. All these stages prepare the soul to raise itself to a higher sphere since it is ignited by God's love. Pico would not have overlooked the Neoplatonic motif of love's circularity, a theme that Alemanno derived from Jewish culture.

1485

Biographers have often emphasised Giovanni Pico's grand entrance on the Italian cultural scene in 1485 with his polemic against Ermolao Barbaro, who taught Aristotle in Padua. Toward the end of 1482, Pico wrote him a letter expressing his admiration for the man's learning and his regret that he had not had a chance to meet him during his sojourn in Padua (Barbaro had been in Venice at the time). The two began exchanging letters, which led to Barbaro's critique of the so-called barbarous philosophers, who used plain, overly technical, and dry language. Nowadays Pico's response is viewed as one of the greatest examples of Renaissance rhetoric: it is the celebrated letter entitled *De genere dicendi philosophorum*, in which Pico proclaimed that philosophical research need not conform to a single, harmonious style if this impeded the pursuit of truth.

Pico likewise dealt with the relationship between content and form in a long missive to Lorenzo de' Medici, in which he eulogized him for a collection of poems written in the vernacular. Having exalted the poetical works of the young prince, Pico set up a confrontation between Dante and Petrarch. Here it is possible to discern a hint of Pico's literary bent: stylistic analysis grants us a glimpse of his critique of ideas and content. Inasmuch as Petrarch was lacking in content and Dante in form, the author of the letter clearly expressed his preference for Dante. Indeed, Petrarch comes across as a virtuoso, an artist, but not as a thinker; he was too self-satisfied, whereas Dante, who exhibited a very different nature, presented his material with vehemence. Initially

fascinating, Petrarch's poetry ultimately proved less satisfying than Dante's profundity. Pico's argument appeared to be based on the philosophical leanings of all three authors. In Lorenzo, Pico praised not so much the poet as the man who could expound Aristotle's *Physics*, *Ethics*, and *De anima*, as well as the ideas of the Platonists. In addition, Pico laid stress on the analytical aspects of Lorenzo's annotations in prose that appeared in the margins of his sonnets, which were meant not so much to delight as to heighten consciousness. Ultimately, Pico expresses a preference for the poetry of Lorenzo over that of Dante and Petrarch.

Constantly on the move, Pico appeared in Paris in July 1485, at the Sorbonne, where he remained until the beginning of the following year. Although information on this period is scarce, the experience of studying in the most important university in the Western world was no doubt a positive one, so much so that Pico often boasted of his skill at using the disputative style of the "*celebratissimorum Parisiensium disputatorum*". It is not unreasonable to assume that it was in Paris that Pico came up with the idea of putting his own philosophical and theological positions as well as his political project to the test in a public debate, even though such an event would have differed from traditional university debates in terms of scope and significance.

1486: An Extraordinary Year

Pico's reentry into Florence marked what could be called the most tormented period of his brief life. In fact, 1486 was an extraordinary year for the young scholar. Having just completed his studies in Paris, the twenty-three-year-old returned in March to Florence, where he stayed among his friends – Lorenzo de' Medici, Poliziano, Ficino, and Benivieni – until May 8, when he left for Rome. Two days later he caused a major scandal in Arezzo when he attempted to abduct Margherita, wife of Giuliano di Mariotto de' Medici, from her home. Distressed by the experience, he retired to Perugia, whence he proceeded to Fratta on account of the plague. Here he finally succeeded in overcoming the bitterness and shame of the deplorable affair through work and penitence.

Throughout this year, Pico wrote a commentary on a *canzone* written by his friend Benivieni. He collected 900 theses, or *Conclusiones*, meant to be discussed at a conference on philosophical peace that was to be held in Rome in January 1487, to which scholars would be invited at his expense. He also composed an *Oratio* as an introduction to the *Conclusiones*. By December 7, he was in Rome, where the *Conclusiones* were set in print. At this point, another scandal erupted: Pope Innocent VIII canceled the conference. The commission appointed to examine the theses condemned some of them. Pico defended himself in the *Apologia*, into which he incorporated large sections of the *Oratio*. By this time, however, the productive year of 1486 had drawn to a close.

Is there a connection to be made between the course of events that occurred from May to the autumn of 1486 and Pico's exceptional intellectual performance during this period? Reviewing the facts in greater detail, beginning with the "Arezzo incident", can provide the outline for an answer. In 1486, Margherita was left a wealthy widow and was remarried to Giuliano di Mariotto de' Medici, a tax collector in Arezzo, where she came to live. According to a letter of May 12, 1486, written to Duke Ercole I by Aldobrandino Guidoni, an orator in the service of the Este in Florence, Pico had expressed the wish to go to Rome several days earlier and had proceeded to send his baggage to Perugia. Having departed with his large retinue, he had stopped in Arezzo and tried to abduct Margherita. According to Giuliano, the injured husband, she had been abducted against her will on May 10. To his cousin Lorenzo de' Medici, Giuliano wrote that the Lord of Mirandola had arrived in Arezzo with his convoy the night before with the express intention of abducting Margherita. Giuliano likewise lamented the betrayal of his young dependent, who had stolen over eighty florins from him.

According to Aldobrandino Guidoni's version, on the contrary, the woman had escaped the walls of Arezzo voluntarily in order to follow the count, with whom she was in love. Another witness informed Lorenzo de' Medici that the woman had spontaneously and at her own volition mounted the horse which had carried her off.

In a letter to fra' Girolamo di Piacenza, Pico's sister, Costanza Bentivoglio, too, wrote that the lady had followed her brother voluntarily.

The accounts of subsequent events in various sources seem to concur. Filippo Carducci, captain and *podestà* of Arezzo, set the alarm to pursue the count by striking the city's bells; nearly two hundred of his men volunteered. The count was seized near Marciano, within the boundaries of Siena, and certain witnesses related that Pico lost eighteen men from his retinue and was lucky not to have died himself.

Back in Arezzo, it was arranged that Pico and his secretary, Cristoforo da Casalmaggiore, remain under surveillance while they waited for judgment to be passed. Shortly afterwards, however, the count was set free by his jailer, who received a hundred florins in compensation. Had this involved a different person, the Medici would have handled the insult to their family very differently. One gets a sense of Pico's privileged treatment in Lorenzo's correspondence to the Signoria of Arezzo, in which he expressed his regret at the injustice done to Giuliano de' Medici without even naming the responsible party. Lorenzo's desire to pardon and protect his young friend was shared by Ercole I. Replying to Aldobrandino Guidoni, he lamented the turn of events because he "tenderly loved this magnificent Count Zohane", begged his orator to spare no effort to have him released as if he were their "brother", and finally pardoned him on the basis of biblical precedent.

As for Margherita, we merely know that she was handed back to her husband. Nevertheless, it seems from a comment by Flavius Mithridates— Pico's sole collaborator, who laced his translations of Cabalistic texts with poignant personal observations — that Margherita, possibly pregnant, could still have reached the count in Rome if she had cared to do so at the end of 1486 and the beginning of 1487. For Pico, however, much had changed in the months in between.

After a period of silence lasting until September of that year, a resumption in correspondence once again provides news of his activity. On September 8, 1486, Ficino wrote to Pico, asking him to return his Arabic Koran. Pico replied with a promise to go back to it shortly, as soon as he could return to Perugia, which he had left on account of the plague. He also discussed his linguistic studies with great enthusiasm. Having acquired a fair knowledge of Hebrew (adequate, he claimed, to have written a letter), he was making progress in Arabic and Chaldean. Pico claimed that such extraordinary things were not happening to him by chance; they were occasioned by divine will and by the favor of a divinity that assisted him benevolently in his studies. All this was the product of work, diligence, and the leap of his soul — and had occurred despite certain physical weaknesses. He was zealously reading the works of Chaldean sages, who helped clarify what the Hellenic tradition had presented in an incomplete and imperfect form.

Pico read Arabic authors such as Mohammed of Toledo and Abulgal, who had heard Averroës, as well as the questions of a certain Adelando, who had studied philosophy under Ammonius, Plotinus's teacher in Egypt. There were subjects that excited him, ones full of Pythagorean and ancient notions and esoteric disciplines. These convinced him to study the language in which they had been written so that he could have direct access to their texts. As for Plotinus (to whom Ficino apparently referred), Pico vowed that he had not abandoned him and would continue to study his works.

In a long letter to Andrea Corneo, dated October 15, Pico discussed the events of the previous May. Rejecting his friend's advice to dedicate himself more to the active life, he defended the contemplative life, arguing that the practice of philosophy befitted a man of his class — a prince, not a paid professor. His friend would soon see the extraordinary, public, and even clamorous results of Pico's studies.

The *Conclusiones* and the Roman Condemnation of 1487

As Pico resumed his studies with increased commitment, Delmedigo joined him in order to discuss Avicenna's

and Averroës' theories on the One, on Being, and on Essence. Soon Flavius Mithridates arrived in their midst as well. Pico studied a multitude of Arabic, Jewish, and Hermetic texts at the sides of his two teachers. He immersed himself particularly in the study of the Cabala, perfecting his knowledge to the point that he became the first Latin scholar to make explicit mention of the actual Cabala. In effect, he has come to be considered the founder of the Christian Cabala, a pious, theosophical, and mystical approach to the Cabalistic tradition, which involved not only a philosopher's technical competence but also his internal commitment.

Pico felt that he had much to offer the Church of Rome and believed that his theorizing in no way ran counter to the principles of Christian theology. Fortified by these convictions and by the confidence of youth, Pico dedicated himself to the preparation of the Roman event.

By November 1486, the *Conclusiones* were ready. The text was published on December 7 in Rome at the press of Eucharius Silber. Pico invited theologians and philosophers for the days following the Epiphany of 1487. Nevertheless, his arrival in Rome was immediately complicated by voices of dissent, which convinced the Pope to suspend the debate. The papal brief, *Cum injunctio nobis*, of February 20, 1487, granted Giovanni Monisart, Bishop of Tournai, the task of organizing a commission of seven bishops (among whom was Pedro Garcia), two generals of religious orders, and eight theologians and canons. The commission convened from the second to the thirteenth of March 1487. Pico was present at the debate, but only until the fifth day. After that he was no longer invited to participate. Seven theses were immediately condemned, then another six. After a more thorough analysis, the first seven were condemned absolutely, while the other six were only censored. The records of the trial, kept by Johannes Cordier, a theologian from the Sorbonne, and the ailing Marco de Mirolodo, were not favorably disposed to Pico.

Exasperated and convinced of the correctness of his own reasoning, Pico quickly drafted an apologia in which he treated and clarified the thirteen contested theses. Once again, the effect was not what he hoped for, and the Roman Curia viewed the publication of the *Apologia* on May 31, 1487, as an act of insubordination. In a brief dated June 6, Innocent VIII summoned the tribunal of the Inquisition, and on July 31, Pico signed an act of submission that granted permission for the copies of the *Conclusiones* to be burnt at the stake, but the bull *Et si injuncto nobis*, dated August 4, absolved him personally of all condemnation. The bull, however, was publicized only on December 15, together with the mandate for his arrest. Pico saw no alternative but to flee Rome. He was arrested at the beginning of 1488 between Grenoble and Lyon, whence he was escorted to Paris under the supervision of papal nuncios. All the same, he was protected by the king, who locked him up in the castle of Vincennes so that he would not be left in the hands of the Vatican. In the end, Pico was able to leave France unharmed, thanks to a special royal permit. He returned to Florence in April of the same year.

Final Years

The *Oratio* and the *Apologia* were composed only a few months apart: the first in November 1486, shortly before Pico's arrival in Rome, the second in the spring of 1487, after the Roman censure. Only the *Apologia* was printed, with a dedication to Lorenzo de' Medici. In it appeared lengthy passages literally drawn from the *Oratio* – so much so that in his *argumentum* introducing the *Oratio* in the edition of his uncle's works published in 1496, Giovan Francesco alerted the reader to the rapport between the two texts. Both the *Oratio* and, to a greater measure, the *Apologia* reflected the events of Rome and the climate of suspicion that surrounded Pico on the eve of the dispute that never took place. As Eugenio Garin demonstrated when he published a manuscript copy of the *Oratio* (Palatino 885) – the only one known to this day – the work as it has come down to us was composed in two stages, with significant additions being made at the same time as the *Conclusiones* were being prepared.

With his return to Florence, Pico entered an extremely productive period that would result in the publication of the *Heptaplus* and *De ente et uno*, as well as the composition of the *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem* and the great moral letters to his nephew Giovan Francesco. Most likely this new impetus in his

studies was motivated by his need to overcome the bitter vicissitudes of Rome and perhaps also by his desire for spiritual redemption. Both in a 1489 letter to Andrea Corneo and in the preface to the *Heptaplus*, he announced that he was working on a systematic commentary of the Psalms, which, however, he never carried to completion. The *Heptaplus* came out in print in the summer of 1489 and was financed by Roberto Salviati. The idea behind this work is that the seven days of creation contain all of nature's secrets and that in his books Moses had revealed all of human wisdom and all that the spirit of God had told him. The arguments of those who dismissed the value of the book of Moses as if it were something crude and trivial were invalid, since these men failed to consider the fact that all the great wise men, including Christ, had frequently masked their wisdom, revealing themselves only through a "veiled" countenance. Pico's goal in this work was to interpret the creation of the whole world without the help of any previous commentaries – and not in a single sense but on seven levels – without ever losing the thread of his argument and without attributing to Moses ideas that conflicted with the truth that had been recovered by the best philosophers and accepted even by Christians.

In this same period, he also conceived and wrote *De ente et uno*, which circulated in Florence in manuscript form. This work was dedicated by Pico to his friend Poliziano, who had insistently asked him to intervene in a dispute between the Platonists – in the persons of Lorenzo de' Medici and Marsilio Ficino – and the Peripatetics or those who, like Poliziano, had always studied the texts of Aristotle. In reality, Pico seemed to disagree with the very principles of the debate and used the invitation as an occasion to articulate his theories on concord in public. To set Plato against Aristotle had been one of the most arduous intellectual tasks for a long time, so much so that the ideology of humanism had come up with two diverse cultural strategies for dealing with, and certainly two different models of understanding, the two philosophers. Pico did not succeed in bringing the enterprise to a conclusion, but in *De ente et uno* he left a very interesting model of how he would have proceeded.

The question confronted in *De ente et uno* was not a new one for Pico, who had discussed it already with Delmedigo, among others. If the actual thesis of *De ente et uno* contained nothing new, certainly new was his reevaluation of the *Parmenides*, the *Sophist*, and the *Philebus*, as well as Simplicius's commentaries on Aristotle. Pico's sophisticated project to read Plato not only through Plotinus and Proclus but also through Aristotle and medieval theologians also remained unpublished.

Before passing on to Pico's final works, it is worth mentioning the two important moral letters written by him to his nephew Giovan Francesco, the first from Ferrara, dated May 15, 1492, the second written on July 2, which was followed by a third on November 27. In these letters (written in a rather different style from all others), Pico laid out the balance of existence itself and attempted to summarize all its precepts: it was not the world that was the adversary here, but those things in it, such as ignorance, insanity, and greed, that needlessly wore out man's soul. One had to know how to liberate oneself from these afflictions. This essentially was meant to be the uncle's advice to his nephew.

In the final years of his life, Pico seems to have directed his intellectual energy towards theological and spiritual studies, the mystery of life and grace, and the figure of the cross. He followed the sermons of Savonarola, to whose coming to Florence he himself had contributed. Pico's final work was conceived in the silence and solitude of his villa in Fiesole. This was the unfinished *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem*, the most comprehensive of all his projects. Published posthumously by his nephew Giovan Francesco in the 1496 edition of Pico's works, the *Disputationes* did not fail to rouse interest and stimulate much discussion. The subject was at the center of the period's cultural debates: Savonarola immediately prepared a compendium in Italian, Giovanni Mainardi and Agrippa von Nettesheim praised it, while others, such as Giovanni Pontano, Luca Bellanti, Girolamo Torrella, Pietro Pomponazzi, and Jean Bodin, criticized it in various ways, sometimes severely.

The *Disputationes* appeared just as interest in astrology was being reawakened. In this work, Pico first reviewed all that had been written on the subject. In the first book, he took a stand against astrology as a form of divination or aid to judgment and distinguished it from astronomy, which was more mathematical, hence

scientific. In the second book, he tried to demonstrate the uselessness and deception of astrology and referred to concrete examples of the ignorance of astrologers, whose predictions never came to pass except by accident. In the third book, Pico confronted the problem fully and examined the bases of astrological science. If the properties of heaven were motion and light, if heaven was a universal cause, that is, remote, how could one derive from it – as if from a secondary cause – the events of the world?

The book closes with a well-known page in which Pico demonstrates that the traits of a man such as Aristotle that are produced by nature are determined by secondary causes and not the stars, while his genius is the product of the free and infinite self-creation of the human spirit.

Giovanni Pico died in Florence on November 17, 1494, with Girolamo Savonarola at his side. By this point, his estate had been granted to charitable institutions and his nephews, his well-stocked library to his brother Anton Maria. On the same day, Charles VIII of France entered Florence, setting in motion the opening phase of the Italian Wars.

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