

# Beyond Dignity

Sophia Catalano

## *Magic and the Dignity of Man: Pico della Mirandola and His Oration in Modern Memory*

by Brian Copenhaver

Harvard University Press, 704 pp., \$55.00.

**B**RIAN COPENHAVER HAS devoted twenty years to the study of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola.<sup>1</sup> A distinguished professor of philosophy at the University of California in Los Angeles, Copenhaver has now published *Magic and the Dignity of Man*. It is Pico's famous *Oration (Orazione)* that holds Copenhaver's attention—and ours. Pico never published the *Oration*, and it was, in fact, ignored for centuries, but it is today regarded as a manifesto of Renaissance philosophy, a declaration of modern ideals of human freedom and dignity.

Pico della Mirandola was a philosopher, a classicist, a mystic, a cabalist, a scholar, and an ascetic.<sup>2</sup> For all that, it is the *Oration* that remains the basis for Pico's reputation, and it is a surprise to find Copenhaver arguing that Pico did not invest the *Oration* with the significance it now enjoys. The concept of *dignitas*, Copenhaver argues, was not and could not have been Pico's theme. The champion of human dignity is a recent invention, one that follows a very particular line of interpretation. But for Copenhaver it is not just a matter of proving what Pico's *Oration* is or has not been. The second part of his work is an in-depth commentary on the *Oration*, which reveals the secrets of a work devoted to an ascetic and cabalistic ideal: the annulment of the self in God.

The *Oration* was written as an introduction to the 900 *Theses* that Pico intended to discuss publicly in Rome at the end of 1486. The immediate papal condemnation of thirteen of those theses, and the subsequent banning of the entire book, probably led Gianfrancesco Pico, Giovanni Pico's nephew, to lapse into silence about the work, thus setting a standard for subsequent interpreters. Copenhaver warns us that “[b]efore the nineteenth century, few of them discussed the work for which the prince is now best remembered, his *Oration*.”<sup>3</sup> From that moment on, Pico's fame continued to grow, so much so that “[b]y the end of the twentieth century ... Pico was a fixture in

dozens of textbooks meant to explain Western civilization ... to college students.”<sup>4</sup>

It is Immanuel Kant to whom we owe the rediscovery of Pico's text. Kant's role is both philosophical and historiographic. It was Kant, in fact, who argued that dignity is an “absolute and intrinsic value, possessed only by ... humanity insofar as it is morally capable.”<sup>5</sup> Dignity is thus an exclusive and inalienable possession of human beings as human beings. This is the view adopted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights from 1948—the year, as it happens, of the publication of *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, the text by which Pico reached America.<sup>6</sup>

The word *dignitas* appears only twice in the *Oration*: once when *dignitas* is paired with *gloria* as a prize held by angels, and not humans; and once when *dignitas*

describes the philosophical preparation that precedes the esoteric part of Pico's curriculum. The paring there of *dignitas* with *emolumenta* (“advantages”) also makes this second instance of the word, denoting the *value* [emphasis original] of philosophy, a comparative and relative term.<sup>7</sup>

For Copenhaver, it follows that “in neither case does *dignitas* belong to human persons, except aspirationally, and neither use justifies ‘dignity’ as a translation, with all the Kantian baggage of the modern English word.”

It is not enough for Copenhaver to demonstrate that dignity is not the theme of Pico's *Oration*: he means, as well, to argue that it *could not* have been its theme, since the concept finds no place in the philosophical and cultural context of humanism. As proof, Copenhaver considers Giannozzo Manetti's *De dignitate et excellentia hominis*—“the only finished piece of Latin prose from the Quattrocento that claims to be about *dignitas*.”<sup>8</sup> Unlike Pico, Manetti offers up a distinctly human *dignitas*. But the definition that Manetti offers, Copenhaver observes, is more rhetorical than philosophical: “The word is relative, expressing rank and superiority. The d[ignity] in question is neither unrelatable nor intrinsic nor incomparable.”<sup>9</sup> Even the genuine and, in this case, truly innovative reevaluation of the bodily element, which Manetti presents in support of his position, fades against the background of

the Christian framework in which it fits. Human dignity is dispersed “in the fairy tale of immortality—a timeless paradise populated by bodies too glorious to be avatars of earthly originals.”<sup>10</sup>

But if Pico della Mirandola’s *Oration* does not deal with human dignity, why the widespread presumption that it does? The second part of Copenhaver’s work is dedicated to the reconstruction of this tangled history. Kant is returned to a position of prominence. Pico was retrospectively fortunate in the attention that Wilhelm Gottlieb Tennemann devoted to the *Oration*—a text hitherto almost unknown—and, in particular, his decision to render the Latin *dignitas* by the German *Würde*, thus linking Pico’s work to Kant’s philosophy.

From then on, Pico became “a champion of human dignity and freedom—specifically the modern, worldly freedom to shape one’s character by exploring nature and humanity,”<sup>11</sup> which found its most influential expression in Jacob Burckhardt’s *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*.<sup>12</sup> This view of Pico was enriched after the First World War, and has today become the very expression of humanism as both an idea and an ideal.

Copenhaver follows the flowering of Pico’s influence on two fronts. Ernst Cassirer, Paul Kristeller, and John Herman Randall Jr. stand out among Pico’s English-language interpreters and champions.<sup>13</sup> They figure among the editors of *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*. The reception of Pico’s work in Italy and in Italian was much influenced by the political and ideological issues arising from the *Risorgimento*, when “liberals and nationalists were lighting fires of revolution and feeding the patriotic flames with local history.”<sup>14</sup> Two Italian authors served to transform Pico into a prophet of human dignity. Giovanni Gentile, in his 1916 article “Il concetto dell’uomo nel Rinascimento” (The Concept of Man in the Renaissance), argued that, yes, he could see Pico in Burckhardt’s Renaissance; and Eugenio Garin’s Pico monograph broke with Pico studies in order to champion Gentile and his idea of dignity.<sup>15</sup>

At this point, a question: since the rediscovery of the *Oration* took place in the nineteenth century, how is it, as Copenhaver notes, that Pico’s reputation preceded its rediscovery by three centuries?

Philosopher, humanist, celebrity? Only the last description holds securely for Pico, whose fame has been manipulated and distorted for 500 years, sometimes with malice. His nephew, when he put Pico’s writings in print, manipulated his uncle’s letter to match the pious *Life* that he wrote—a family hagiography. After the prince’s sainthood was revoked in the Enlightenment and Voltaire called him a lunatic, others restored his honor by turning him into a Cartesian liberator and then a proleptic Kantian, flying a banner of human dignity and modernity. Later a Jesuit propagandist (Oreglia) debased his memory by smearing it with the blood libel, before another philosopher (Gentile)

sanitized the tale again by updating the Kantian Pico for Italian Hegelians.<sup>16</sup>

It would seem that before the nineteenth century, Pico della Mirandola’s fame was derived from his extraordinary stance against astrology and, above all, from his invention of the Christian Kabbalah.

The interpretation of the *Oration* that Copenhaver provides in the last three chapters of his book follows the lead of Chaim Wirszubski—the first scholar, Copenhaver writes, “to unlock the mysteries of the celebrated speech.”<sup>17</sup> Mysteries? Why mysteries? Copenhaver assumes that the *Oration* was a text constructed to hide its message from those not prepared to accept it. Message? What message? That men must set out on an ascetic path that leads them to abandon human nature, and, through the imitation of the life of the cherubim, to unite with the divine. We are far away, therefore, from the idea of a specifically human dignity, that is to say, traceable to the corporeal and earthly existence of human beings. Dignity, if anything, is realized when human beings are renounced. In the *Oration* and *900 Theses*, Pico describes a path of study that is constructed in successive stages. “The whole program is a regimen, not just instruction for students, but also transformation for initiates,”<sup>18</sup> which is both theoretical and practical and which from ethics and dialectics develop through natural philosophy, theology, and magic, to reach the “Kabbalah’s deeper intimations of divinity at higher levels of experience.”<sup>19</sup>

With this work, Copenhaver has added a new and important chapter to studies of the Jewish and Kabbalistic tradition in the work of Pico. These studies began with Wirszubski at the end of the 1980s, continued in the critical edition of the *Oration* edited by Francesco Bausi, and flourished in the studies carried out by Giulio Busi and other scholars in *The Kabbalist Library of Pico della Mirandola*.<sup>20</sup> But this volume, Copenhaver’s volume, stands out because it makes Pico della Mirandola a mirror of distinctly modern mistakes and errors, the more so because we have so contributed to the mythography of the Renaissance. In particular, Copenhaver emphasizes that lingering misunderstandings of the *Oration* are, in fact, symptomatic of a wider confusion in the modern era surrounding the concept of dignity and its relation to humanism. The *Oration* remains a text that may easily provoke its own misreading.

*Translated and adapted from the Italian by the editors.*

*Sophia Catalano is Cultrice della Materia in Philosophy at the Department of Humanities at the University of Trento.*



1. For a review of Copenhaver’s previous contributions on Pico della Mirandola, see Fabrizio Meroi, “Pico, l’Oratio e

- la 'dignità dell'uomo': Una recente interpretazione (Pico, the Oration and the 'Dignity of Man': A Recent Interpretation)," *Rinascimento* 57 (2017): 379–95.
2. Brian Copenhaver, *Magic and the Dignity of Man: Pico della Mirandola and his Oration in Modern Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 3.
  3. Copenhaver, *Magic and the Dignity of Man*, 21.
  4. Copenhaver, *Magic and the Dignity of Man*, 23.
  5. Copenhaver, *Magic and the Dignity of Man*, 25.
  6. *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man: Selections in Translation*, ed. Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and John Herman Randall (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948).
  7. Copenhaver, *Magic and the Dignity of Man*, 28.
  8. Copenhaver, *Magic and the Dignity of Man*, 32.
  9. Copenhaver, *Magic and the Dignity of Man*, 50.
  10. Copenhaver, *Magic and the Dignity of Man*, 55.
  11. Copenhaver, *Magic and the Dignity of Man*, 88.
  12. Copenhaver, *Magic and the Dignity of Man*, 88. Jacob Burckhardt, *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* (Basel: Schweighauser, 1860).
  13. Copenhaver, *Magic and the Dignity of Man*, 311–36.
  14. Copenhaver, *Magic and the Dignity of Man*, 95; 92–158.
  15. Giovanni Gentile, "Il concetto di uomo nel Rinascimento (The Concept of Man in the Renaissance)," *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 67 (1916): 17–75. Eugenio Garin, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Vita e dottrina* (Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Life and Doctrine) (Florence: Le Monnier, 1937). Copenhaver broadly and critically discusses Garin's studies of Pico, deepening the developments after 1937. See Copenhaver, *Magic and the Dignity of Man*, 128–58.
  16. Copenhaver, *Magic and the Dignity of Man*, 157.
  17. Copenhaver, *Magic and the Dignity of Man*, 336. Chaim Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).
  18. Copenhaver, *Magic and the Dignity of Man*, 361.
  19. Copenhaver, *Magic and the Dignity of Man*, 427.
  20. Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism*. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Discorso sulla dignità dell'uomo* (Discourse on the Dignity of Man), ed. Francesco Bausi (Parma: Guanda, 2014). *The Kabbalistic Library of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola*, ed. Giulio Busi (Turin: Nino Aragno Editore, 2004–).