

FABLE OR PHILOSOPHICAL CLAIM? THOMAS OF AQUINAS IN PICO'S *ORATIO**

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The present paper aims at reading a famous passage on the freedom of choice from Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *Oratio* in the light that St. Thomas of Aquinas' *De ente et essentia* might cast upon it so as to make room for a fresh reading of the *Oratio*. This attempt is significant, because as far as the critical tradition is concerned the part of Pico's work is entrapped in two extreme views: the one claims that it is a serious philosophical statement, while the other refuting this view notes that it can only be a rhetorical introduction to the main theme of the *Oratio*. Showing the disadvantages of these views, and thus refuting them, I will propose a more accommodating position for the interpretation of the passage, which consists in reading it as a modification of Aquinas' logico-ontological scheme with the objective to show how moral philosophy may help one see the ethical aspect of his life in greater depth.

“He [Pico—Zs. A.] was an admirer of
Saint Thomas, but not a Thomist.”
Paul Oscar Kristeller¹

The present paper aims at reading a famous passage on the freedom of choice from Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *Oratio* in the light that St Thomas of Aquinas' *De ente et essentia* might cast upon it. There have

* The present paper could not have come into being without the generous help of the Hungarian Research Fund (OTKA).

¹ P.O. Kristeller, *Medieval aspects of renaissance learning* (ed. and trans. E.P. Mahoney), Duke University Press, Durham, 1974, p. 72.

been two extreme views on the passage in the critical tradition: one of them says that the passage on the freedom of choice is a philosophical statement, forming thus Pico's central philosophical tenet, his philosophy of man; the other extreme view claims that the passage tells a fable forming, thus, an impressive introduction to the main theme of the *Oratio*. The significance of the choice lies in the fact that if it is a philosophical statement, it must be taken seriously, i.e., it can be compared with other philosophical claims on the same topic, and can be criticized. If, however, it is pure rhetoric, it cannot be thought of as something that can be falsified and the analysis can only focus on the rhetorical quality and attributes of the text. Thus the decision will affect or determine the interpretation of the *Oratio*. Every extreme determining principle will, however, if there is room for hesitation, inevitably run into major difficulties. To avoid these difficulties, I will propose a more accommodating view that aims at releasing the text from the bondage of the philosophical-rhetorical continuum or dichotomy. My objective, thus, is to show that Giovanni Pico encounters St Thomas of Aquinas, but he uses the latter's logico-ontological scheme to emphasize a moral claim: he demonstrates with an illustration how moral philosophy can help one on the way towards the highest peaks of moral life.

For the account, let me first present the passage in the *Oratio* that led to the controversy over which discourse, the rhetorical or the philosophical, one should anchor the text in.

O great liberality of God the Father, great and admirable felicity of man! To him it is given to have what he chooses, to be what he wants. Brutes from their birth bring with them (as Lucilius says) from "their mother's bag" what they are going to possess. Highest spirits since the beginning or a bit later have been what they are going to be in everlasting eternity. In man at his birth, the Father put all sorts of seed and the germs of all types of life. Those that a man cultivates will grow to maturity and bear their fruit in him. If vegetative, he will become a plant, if sensual, he will turn into a brute, if rational, he will become a heavenly animal, if intellectual, he will be an angel and the son of God. And if not contended with created things, he withdraws into the centre of his own unity, made one spirit with God, in the solitary darkness of the Father, who is above all things, and he will excel all.²

² My translation—Zs. A. of <http://www.gmu.edu/departments/fld/CLASSICS/mirandola.oratio.html>.

The overall meaning of this passage is clear and there is no controversy about it. This is a celebration of the human freedom of choice, i.e., it suggests that man is free to choose from different types of life. It is also the common assumption in varying degrees of every interpreter irrespective of their place on the philosophical-rhetorical continuum that it is ethics that is at stake. Kristeller talks about man's "task to overcome the lower forms of life and to elevate himself toward God."³ Craven states, "man is free to choose, for better or for worse, his level of moral existence,"⁴ while Miller writes about "the ethical choice between good and evil."⁵ The controversy concerns the vocabulary, the discourse one anchors the passage.

One convention, and a powerful one for which the representatives may be Walter Pater from the 19th century and Paul Oscar Kristeller from the 20th claims it is a philosophy of man that we read in Pico. Pater states that Pico's writing "helped man onward to the reassertion of himself, that rehabilitation of human nature, the body, the senses, the heart, the intelligence, which the Renaissance fulfils"⁶ as against the Medieval depreciative outlook on man. Kristeller implies—though occasionally talks otherwise⁷—that this is a philosophical statement and its rhetorical undertones do no decrease its anthropological insights. The celebration of human freedom with its limitations is a recurring topic in Pico—as in the *Heptaplus*—criticizing Ficino's view on man, who assigned a fixed place for the human being in the center of the universe. In contrast with Ficino, Pico in this very passage denies a determined location for man in the universe, claiming that his very essence lies in his ability for metamorphosis occupying thus any place, identifying with any being whatsoever.⁸

³ P.O. Kristeller, *Renaissance thought and its sources*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1979, p. 175.

⁴ W.G. Craven, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Symbol of his age: Modern interpretations of a renaissance philosopher*, Librairie Droz, Geneve, 1981, p. 34.

⁵ P.J.W. Miller, 'Introduction', in Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *On the dignity of Man, on Being and the One, Heptaplus* (trans. C.G. Wallis, P.J.W. Miller, D. Carmichael), Hackett Publishing, Indianapolis & Cambridge, 1998, pp. vii–xxviii, p. xvi.

⁶ W. Pater, *The renaissance*, The Mentor Books, Chicago, 1959, p. 41.

⁷ P.O. Kristeller, 'Introduction', in E. Kassirer, P.O. Kristeller, J.H. Randall Jr. (eds.), *The renaissance philosophy of man*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 1948, pp. 215–222, p. 222.

⁸ Cf. Kristeller (1979: 174f).

If Pico's claims are anchored in a philosophical, anthropo-ontological scheme, however, one has to face difficulties as is convincingly shown by William Craven. There is no room to relate all his arguments, but three will suffice for my intention. First and foremost, man's being severed from the structure of the universe can hardly be reconciled with the *Heptaplus* where man has a realm to occupy in the universe on his own, the fourth besides the angelic and invisible, the celestial, and the elemental worlds. As refuting Kristeller, Craven states that "man in *Heptaplus* is certainly part of the system, firmly tied to it by correspondences. [...] His position on the cosmic ladder is clearly defined; man has his proper place in the hierarchy of being."⁹ Secondly, if the view in the *Oratio* is to be construed as a philosophical statement, then it contradicts the *Heptaplus* on another ground as well, i.e., on the idea of man. As Craven notes the contrast "between a dynamic view on man who is potentially all [*Oratio*—Zs. A.], and a static view of man who is actually all [*Heptaplus*—Zs. A.]" seems irreconcilable.¹⁰ Thirdly, most readers misunderstand the entire *Oratio* when they believe that it is about human dignity, for the largest part of the speech is concerned with philosophy, and only the first few pages discuss the dignity of man. Thus, the celebration of "our chameleon" is there to prepare the audience for how to use this freedom well with the help of philosophy and theology. It follows then that "the theme of the first part of the *Oratio* is not the dignity of man, but the dignity of philosophy."¹¹ In conclusion, Craven notes that if presupposing the philosophical discourse leads to problems of irreconcilability with other philosophically charged writings of Pico, and with the entire claim of the *Oratio*, one should abandon the presupposition and false image, and should construe the passage as "a metaphor,"¹² "a rhetorical argument for the educational effectiveness of philosophy and theology,"¹³ "a fable,"¹⁴ i.e., a "story with a moral,"¹⁵ and not "a philosophical statement,"¹⁶ and it is a mistake "to speak of a 'philosophy of man' in his writings."¹⁷

⁹ Craven (1981: 30).

¹⁰ Craven (*ibid.*: 31).

¹¹ Craven (*ibid.*: 36).

¹² Craven (*ibid.*: 35).

¹³ Craven (*ibid.*: 45).

¹⁴ Craven (*ibid.*: 34).

¹⁵ Craven (*ibid.*: 34).

¹⁶ Craven (*ibid.*: 32).

¹⁷ Craven (*ibid.*: 45).

The emphasis on the rhetorical quality of the *Oratio* seems to be appropriate with respect to the context of the writing. The *Oratio* must bear the strong marks of rhetoric, as it was originally intended to be a speech, the opening speech of an international conference on nine hundred theses put together by Pico. The speech however, was not delivered, as there was nothing to be opened, since Pope Innocent VIII cancelled the conference due to 13 seemingly heretic theses. The speech, thus, being undelivered and yet of interest, was posthumously published by Giovanni Pico's nephew, Gianfrancesco as the *Oratio*. The fame of the speech grew to such extent that it has been published frequently and slowly the qualification, *de dignitate hominis* appeared on the title page, and soon the qualification pushed the word *oratio* out of the title. As a speech, thus, it must have been rhetorically constructed.

The rhetorical quality of the speech does not, however, entail necessarily that the ideas should only be taken as metaphors if the text is seriously contextualized with respect to the conference, to the writings immediately surrounding it, and to the tradition the text identifies itself with. The conference was intended not for poets or orators, but for serious philosophers and theologians of the time. Furthermore, as is noted by Craven three writings of Pico: a letter to Ermolao Barbaro (1485), a letter to Andrea Corneo (1486) and the *Oratio* (1486) share an element of Pico's self-fashioning. In these writings, Pico aimed at representing "himself as a philosopher in terms of the ancient debate: a philosopher in contrast to a rhetorician."¹⁸ These contexts, i.e., that of the conference, and Pico's endeavours to fashion himself as a philosopher in contrast to a rhetorician cast serious doubts on the view that what we read is nothing else but rhetoric.

The merely rhetorical disposition of the text is also undermined by Pico's recalling the philosophy of St Thomas of Aquinas, who was one of Pico's favourite philosophers, if there were any. Gianfrancesco Pico asserted that Giovanni opposed only three or four of the ten thousand propositions of Thomas.¹⁹ In addition, the international conference for which the *Oratio* was composed was supposed to discuss forty-five theses originating from Thomas out of the nine hundred. (No other thinker could claim for himself more than 45.)²⁰ If Pico was such an admirer of Thomas it is worth reading his text with an eye on Thomas's

¹⁸ Craven (*ibid.* : 42).

¹⁹ Cf. Miller (1998 : xxi).

²⁰ Cf. Miller (1998 : xxi).

De ente et essentia,²¹ and more particularly on the part where Thomas discusses the three modes substances have *essences* (*Invenitur enim triplex modus habendi essentiam in substantiis*).²² because of the parallels between the two texts.

The three modes according to which substances can have their essences classify beings into three categories: the first mode pertains to God, the second to created intellectual substances, the third to substances composed of matter and form. The first mode belongs to God alone, because he is distinguished among beings in as much as His essence is his very existence itself (*cuius essentia est ipsummet suum esse*),²³ in whom essence is identical with his existence, for example because he described himself to Moses as “*Qui est*,” and which identification means “rich totality”²⁴ signifying God’s perfection, the perfection that can only be attributed to God. The second mode belongs to created intellectual substances (*substantiae creatae intellectuales*) comprising intelligences (*intelligentiae*) and the human soul (*anima humana*). The third mode of having an essence relates to those substances that are composed of matter and form (*substantiae compositae ex materia et forma*) including according to Thomas animals (*animalia*), beings that are between animals and plants (*quae sunt media inter animalia et plantas*), and lastly plants. The similarity between the two latter modes in contrast to the first mode lies in the fact that in both cases existence is something external to the essence to the extent that they are not identical, but are in “intrinsic union [...] in a concrete existing thing.”²⁵ What differentiates the two latter modes is that in the case of the second mode the essence consists in the form only, while that of the third mode in the composition of matter and form. Substances, categorized this way, are further qualified with respect to their share of actuality: God is supreme to all other beings through his being pure actuality (*actus purus*), as his essence lies in his existence, consequently

²¹ All references pertain to S. Thomae Aquinantis, ‘De ente et essentia’, in S. Thomae Aquinantis, *Opera Omnia* vol. 3. (Ed. Robert Busa), Friedrich Frommann Verlag Günther Holzboog KG, Stuttgart & Bad Cannstadt, 1980, pp. 583–587.

²² S. Thomae Aquinantis, ‘De ente et essentia,’ 586.

²³ S. Thomae Aquinantis, ‘De ente et essentia,’ 586.

²⁴ Though I used Anthony Kenny’s term (A. Kenny, *Aquinas*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1980, p. 59), I do not agree with him when he says that “even the most sympathetic treatment of these doctrines cannot wholly succeed in acquitting them of the charge of sophistry and illusion” (p. 60).

²⁵ E. Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas of Aquinas*, (transl. L.K. Shook), University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, 1994, p. 38.

no potentiality can enter his being. The next category, created intellectual substances have less actuality, as their existence is received from God, but they still have more actuality than the composite substances, since the latter cannot be conceived without matter, the principle of potentiality.

Though the result of the classification may well invoke what is loosely termed as the "medieval ladder of beings" it must be noted that the intention of the text is not the description of the structure of the physical universe. Though the classification of beings into a hierarchical structure beginning with God through Intelligences via the human soul, through animals to plants seemingly structures the universe, it is clear that Thomas did not want to give a catalogue of substances so as to describe the world. It has to be mentioned, here, that the catalogue is strictly speaking not complete, since the word *homo* was not applied at all. His sole intention then was to analyze the relationship between existence and essence in beings and to account for what results from the relationship with respect to notions of genus and species. Thus the description in its claims is rather a logico-ontological study, in as much as ontology follows from and is subsumed to the logico-linguistic investigation of how terms be related in certain statements. Therefore, the image of the "ladder" is misleading, as it invokes spatial distribution, physical arrangement of substances as against what there is in Thomas, namely a logico-ontological investigation.

If the *Oratio* is considered from this point of view, it becomes clear that it is not a metaphysical structuring of the universe focusing on man's place in it and on human nature. Though Pico refers to different beings, ranging from God (*Deus*), through the angel (*angelus*), via heavenly being (*caeleste animal*), to brutes (*bruta*) to plant (*planta*), but the structure is significant from man's relation to them in as much as the different beings signify various qualities of life, and are defined with respect to human activity. A man's life is identified with that of a plant, if he acts according to the vegetative principles (*vegetalia*), brutes if according to the sensual principles (*sensualia*), heavenly being if rational (*rationalia*), angel if *intellectualia* and God, if made one spirit with God (*unus cum Deo spiritus factus*). The element of hierarchy is also implied in the construction, as it is not all the same which quality of life is lived. Therefore, instead of the logico-ontological term "act," and consequently the degree of existence that organizes the elements, it is the degree of moral quality that is the organizing principle.

The similarities between Pico's *Oratio* and Thomas of Aquinas' *De ente et essentia* are numerous. Pico's classification follows almost *verbatim* that of Thomas, as most of the items in the list correspond to the ones in *De ente et essentia* with the exception of the human soul:

in Pico: *Deus*—*angelus & caeleste animal*—*bruta*—*planta*

in Thomas: *Deus*—*intelligentiae*—*animalia*—*planta*.

This close correspondence implies that if it was misleading to construe Thomas's investigation as if it had something to do with the "ladder of beings," then it is misleading in Pico as well. It is not a spatially oriented arrangement that can be found in Pico, but a quality centred one. It is useless to speak about man being outside the structure, since there are no spatial references, there is no reason to talk about localities. Consequently, the speech is not about where man is in the structure of beings, it is about what man should do. Furthermore, the rigor of the application of a single principle—though different in the two authors: moral *versus* logico-ontological—for the categorization equals in Pico with that of Thomas.

We may say then with Kristeller that Pico was a great admirer of Thomas, but we also have to make clear in harmony with Kristeller that he was not a Thomist. This qualification is substantiated with the modification of the objective: the logico-ontological investigation of Thomas of Aquinas is modified radically by Pico through giving the arrangement of beings an ethical turn. This ethical orientation is not only simply an ethical exhortation, but precisely due to the logico-ontological point of reference against which the ethical quality is emphasized the reader's attention is drawn to the ethical aspect of human life. The emphatic ethical charge receives its highlighted prominence precisely because of its being a modification.

The heightened ethical load points toward another *locus* in the *Oratio*. When discussing the means by which one can arrive at God, Pico assigns tasks to natural philosophy, moral philosophy, dialectics and finally to theology. Moral philosophy is supposed to purge man from his sins. Thus, it has, as other disciplines, its own way of contribution to ascending to God. This purgative power is foreshadowed in the opening of the speech in the passage under discussion, when Thomas's logico-ontological inquiry has been turned into the investigation of the moral perspective for man.

As we have contextualized Pico's passage and reviewed the advantages and disadvantages of whether it is mere philosophy or rhetoric, we are supposed to decide on one of them against the other. But, precisely it is the analysis that destabilizes the act of decision. The text is rather philosophical in exploring the moral aspect of the human beings via deploying the Platonic-Aristotelian psychology in a Christian context qualified by the logico-ontological analysis of Thomas of Aquinas. Nevertheless, this is only one side of the coin as all these philosophical insights are only implied and not discussed straightforwardly. Furthermore, it is not only the explicit encounter with these philosophical traditions that is veiled but also the ontological statements are removed from their original context and redirected towards a moralizing one. And thirdly, what we have is not so much a rigorous abstract ethical meditation but rather the representation of the way moral philosophy may help one towards the heights of moral life, and this very representation needs something else than mere plain teaching. This rhetorical aspect of the text, however, does not allow the reader to extend the discussion towards aims and claims that are not projected by the propositions of the text, such as the philosophy of man, the nature of man, the structure of the universe, whether individuals are as free as they are implied or what kind of qualifications or limitations Pico may have thought of.

It follows then that Pico's text is both philosophical and rhetorical and neither at the same time. Consequently, the problem is not where one should locate Pico's text on the rhetorical—philosophical continuum, but the problem is there already in the question. If there is no further criterion, the interpreter must assume that Pico balanced on the borderline between what we now conceive as philosophy and rhetoric, and also that Pico is to be celebrated for that. It is a great achievement to render Thomas's technically constructed logico-ontological scheme into a rhetorically acceptable form and into an illustration for moral philosophy in action.

We began this mediation emphasizing the necessity of anchoring a text in a tradition for an interpretation. The stages of the inquiry have shown, however, that whichever direction the interpreter chooses, the result will be misunderstanding, which has resulted in the destruction of the original choice posed in the title. What is the fruit of the

destruction of the initial claim, then? The fruit lies in the destruction itself, when a false question is thoroughly destroyed, enabling the reader to restart the interpretation by reading the *Oratio* once, freed from the original error.