

## **THE INFLUENCE OF NEOPLATONIC THOUGHT ON FREEMASONRY - Pico della Mirandola and his "Oratio de Hominis Dignitate"**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The diversity of opinions that have been expressed during the last hundred years or so, regarding Freemasonry, and its historical significance, is so vast that in facing it, we are likely to be overwhelmed by confusion. Now, a few of these opinions are quite arbitrary, with reference to the subject matter, and merely reflect the ideas and values of their authors. This will be the umpteenth interpretation of the origins of Masonic thought. I hope, that this work doesn't have the forementioned defects, and that, it will instead provide a better understanding and interpretation, of the "Masonic Universe".

This work takes its starting point from the belief that Freemasonry is: "a system of morality, veiled in allegory, and illustrated by symbols", thus a real ethical code of behaviour, and that, considering the importance of Ethics, and in particular Renaissance Ethics, may help us not only to understand the origins of the particular system of morality resulting in Masonic ethics, but will also help us, to understand other facets of Masonic thought which support its ethics. For it, is in ethics that we find the clearest manifestation, of effective moral relationships between men, anchored in the rules of morality, that is in those rules, which directly reflect the vital interests of social classes and groups, the principles of their reciprocal relationships, and the nature of relationships between the individual and society, in a fixed state, of historical development.

In the ethical doctrines of the past, we find the origins of those ideas, which have for so many years, formed a basis for Masonic morality, but we also find, the origins of those ideas, which give life to the aspirations of men, toward a better future, that is the concepts of freedom, tolerance, harmonic development of personality, in other words, the ideas of human dignity, and the greatness of man, which the works of Pico della Mirandola, so admirably represents. The philosophical basis for Pico's ethics, is found in his famous Oratio de Hominis Dignitate (Oration on the Dignity of Man) and in the Heptaplus. Man constitutes a specific world, the fourth after the subcelestial, the celesteal and the sublunary, and not merely a specific world, so much as a synthesis, of these three worlds. In fact, Pico points out, that the essential peculiarity of human nature, is that of bringing and linking together, the essence of other creations, in our own substance. In this sense, man only resembles God, who brings together in him, the origins of all the various substances.

This essay, forms part of a much greater work on the philosophical origins of Freemasonry. Italian Humanism spread to other countries, in Central and Western Europe, through many channels. The general model seems to have been an "adaptation", rather than a simple imitation, and this may explain why in each country, Humanism has assumed a particular form.

My theory is that, beginning with Pico della Mirandola, (above all from the Oratio de Hominis Dignitate), it is possible to trace a line which passes through the interpretation of Christian Cabbalism, as interpreted by Francesco Zorzi, the Rosacrucianism of Robert Fludd and John Dee and arrives, at the fertile ground represented by the Neoplatonic School of Cambridge.

In England, and this is the point I want to bring to light, some humanists chose Masonic symbolism, to reveal ethical and moral principles, and their particular conception of mankind, giving life to speculative Freemasonry. Within the vast panorama of research, on the origins of Freemasonry, I have concentrated on the studies, which do not hold credible, the theory that modern Freemasonry descended directly from operative masons, and that instead, estimate the birth of speculative Freemasonry, to be in the late 1600's.

In reference to the concept of Renaissance Neoplatonism, I will follow principally, the vision of historian Paul Oscar Kristeller, to whom I give preference, over the traditional inclination, followed by Saitta, Garin and other authoritative scholars, to describe Neoplatonism as just a part, of a phase of Humanism. This traditional interpretation is consistent with the old view, that opposed the Platonism of the Renaissance, to the Aristotelianism of the Middle Ages.

I think there are good reasons for abandoning or modifying these views. Aristotelianism, was as vigorous in the Renaissance as Platonism, and it has been shown, especially by Klibansky, that there was a strong Platonist current, during the Middle Ages, with which Renaissance Platonism was directly connected.

I agree with Kristeller, that: " Renaissance Platonism had many sources, interests, and ideas that clearly, set it off from humanism, as a distinct movement. It was linked, with medieval scholasticism, as

well as, with Augustinian piety and mysticism, and it was concerned, with metaphysical and cosmological speculation, that were quite foreign, to the humanists of the preceding generations, or even of its own time. In its approach to antiquity, it drew, on the philosophical thought of Plato, and of the Neoplatonists, and added to it the theological speculations, attributed to Orpheus, Zoroaster, and Hermes Trismegistus, as well as, the Jewish Cabala.”(1)

In the sixteenth century, Platonism persisted, as a separate current, that was distinct, from humanism, in its content and its diffusion. As an intellectual movement, it had, a markedly narrower, but deeper effect. In addition, some of the Platonists, were accused of paganism, because they attached so much importance, to pagan sources. But most of their representatives, insisted on a basic harmony, between Platonic philosophy and Christian theology, much more emphatically than, the average humanist had done. And in stressing, that the truth could be found in various philosophical and religious traditions, they laid the ground, for later doctrines of natural religion and of universal tolerance. (1) Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters*, Vol. II°, pag. 14, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Roma 1985.

## RENAISSANCE NEOPLATANISM

Why, the choice of Neoplatonic philosophy, as the foundation of Masonic thought? Which of the Neoplatonic concepts, do we find in the philosophy upon which, Masonic allegories and symbolism, are based? Let us begin, with one the most beautiful images, that Neoplatonism has given us: the "openness to contemplation". This concept, finds perhaps its most effective translation, in the German word, "aufgehen", to disclose, to open one's self.

In effect, this idea is diametrically opposed, to natural science and scientific discipline, and it is for Neoplatonists, a sinking into the unfolding of nature, a model for the experience of being, and a metaphysical archetype.

When, during the Ceremony of the second degree, the Worshipful Master turns to the candidate, and declares: "...you are now permitted, to extend your researches, into the hidden mysteries of Nature and Science", the spiritual condition of the Brother, must be one of predisposition, to contemplation, to this "aufgehen", an opening of the eyes. Now he begins to see, that which, was always visible. We can say, that the use of this expression, is tied to a remarkable strengthening of faculties of observation. In reference to ritual approach, we can see that in Neoplatonism, the subject involved in the rite, is comparable to the spectator of Greek Theatre, who was not passive, but a member of a community of worship, where, attendance at a theatre performance, was seen as a true opening to 'contemplation'. Now, in Masonic ritual, there is no separation between the actor and the observer, between the candidate and the initiate. We, together with the protagonist, are absorbed in this ritual. We leave behind, our everyday anxieties, enraptured by the present moment. All this, for the Freemason, as for the Neoplatonist, comes to the 'One', the Great Architect of the Universe, to the transcendent. It is a true, upward climb, towards the 'One'.

At this point, we can begin to speak, about the famous concept, of 'emanation', the springing of everything, from one source. In this case, the source from which springs the 'nous' (spirit), is really our own soul; we are absorbed by contemplation, we are no longer ourselves, while we contemplate, but all this happens also within ourselves.

The Platonism of the Italian Renaissance, as it culminated in Marsilio Ficino, the leader of the Florentine Academy, and his friend and pupil Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, was, in many respects, an offshoot of the humanistic movement. Both Ficino and Pico, had enjoyed, a thorough humanistic education, and were imbued, with the stylistic and classicist standards of the humanists. Their preference for Plato, had its antecedents in Petrarch, and in other early humanists. Ficini's endeavour, to translate and to expound the works of Plato and of the ancient Neoplatonist, was comparable to the work done, by the humanists, on other classical authors.

However, as Kristeller reminds: "Renaissance Platonism, had other roots, outside the tradition, and interest, of early humanism. One of these roots, was the Aristotelianism, or scholasticism, of the later Middle Ages, which continued to dominate, the teaching of philosophy, at the universities and other schools."(1)

Ficino, does not condemn or menemize, the practical activities of life, but he states, with great emphasis, that the main purpose of human life is contemplation. By contemplation, he understands a spiritual experience, which begin with a detachment of our mind, from the outside world, which then proceed, through various degrees of knowledge and desire, and finally, culminates in the immediate vision and enjoyment of God. For the Florentine Platonist, the concept of man and his dignity, was not merely limited, to the solitary experience and to the personal relationship of individuals, but it also led, to

the conscious awareness, of a solidarity of all men, which imposed, definite moral and intellectual obligation, upon each individual.

### **PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA AND HIS "ORATIO DE HOMINIS DIGNITATAE"**

In this chapter, we shall attempt to find references, within the thought and work of Pico, through which, to demonstrate, the link with the Masonic project of the "construction of man". Among the numerous definitions of Freemasonry in circulation, I must confess that few seem to me to be comprehensive. In my opinion, Freemasonry is not an "orthodoxy"; instead, it has the characteristics of an "orthopraxy", a code, to personal and social conduct, based on ethico-moral principals, substantially separated by a real theoretical essence.

In the light of such a statement, where can we find the connection, with the thought of Pico? The answer, is to be found, by analysing, Pico's concept of "Dignity". If Freemasonry, is a code of conduct, the dignity of man is a journey, a route, which may lead to the transcendent, to God, or rather, to the Great Architect of the Universe. So, Freemasonry, is a code of conduct, but has a transcendent aspect to it, due, to its desire for identification, to become nearer to an absolute, irrepresentable. This absolute irrepresentable, is the Great Architect of the Universe

In the Neoplatonic thought, the human soul, is directed, both toward God, and toward the body, that is, both toward the intellegible, and toward the corporeal world. These ideas are embodied in Ficino's scheme of a universal hierarchy, in which, the human soul occupies a privileged, central, place: God, the Angelic Mind, the Rational Soul, Quality and Body.

The same ideas, are taken up, and further developed by Pico, in his famous Oratio of the Dignity of Man. Pico stresses, especially, man's freedom, to choose his way of life. Consequently, man no longer occupies any fixed place, in the universal hierarchy, not even the privileged central place, but he is entirely detached, from that hierarchy and constitutes, a world in himself." I have given thee, Adam, no fixed seat, no form of thy very own, no gift peculiarly thine... In conformity with thy free judgment in whose hands I have placed thee, thou art confined by no bonds, and thou wilt fix the limits of thy nature for thyself.... Neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal have We made thee. Thou... art the moulder and maker of thyself... Thou canst grow downward into the lower natures which are brutes. Thou canst again grow upward from the mind's reason into the higher natures which are divine".(1) Pico's originality of thought, comes stems from his hermeneutic approach, which is not to be found in any other thinker of his time. In fact, his interdisciplinarity, is a unique case in the history of Renaissance philosophy, with his attempts to find "agreement", between Platonism and Aristotelianism, and the religious syncretism, present in his own, Christian Cabbalism.

Pico, goes even further, and emphasizes that all religious and philosophical tradition, have a share in a common, universal truth. Pagan, Jewish, and Christian theologians, and also all philosophers, who supposedly contradict each other, Plato and Aristotle, Avicenna, and Averroes, Thomas and Scotus, and many others, have had a good many insights into truth. When Pico included, proposition from all these authors, among his nine hundred theses, it was his underlying intention, to illustrate this universality of truth, which justified his endeavor to incorporate and defend doctrines, from so many different sources. This syncretism of Pico, really provided the foundation, for a broad conception, of religious and philosophical tolerance.

There are essentially three principal concepts, which form the basis of Pico's thought: 1) the principle of "docta ignorantia", 2) the "coincidentia oppositorum" and, what interests us most of all, for the purposes of such a study, 3) the "consciousness, of an approach to God, through symbols". It is precisely the thinking in terms of symbols, which makes the methodology of Pico, similar to the philosophical approach to the Divine, which is peculiar to the Freemason. The Freemason aspires to perfection, and his aspiring, this is the point, the attainment of the divine perfection, the image and resemblance of God, is not innate, but the project which man himself, must undertake, precisely through a journey, made up of symbols and allegory. It becomes evident here, that those concepts of "creation" and "emanation", cannot be used in the philosophy of Pico nor in Masonic philosophy. In fact, in creation as in emanation, the individual appears, as a being produced through, the free action of an entity, which is alien to him, whilst in the conception of free will common to Pico and Freemasonry, man slowly gains his own identity, and his own being, through his own conduct.

As Cassirer notes, this is the peculiarity which elevates him and singles him out, from other beings, above him in the hierarchy: "right from the very start of their creation, the angels and divine beings, were given their nature, and their perfection: man only, has this perfection, in that, he gains it himself, after he has freely, decided to do so".(2)

In my opinion, to attempt to create an order in Pico's thought, would be a difficult and dangerous operation. It would be difficult, because the material available is vast yet incomplete, and was waiting to

be reordered but, because of his early death, this had never been possible. It would be dangerous, because to make Pico's thought hang, on one single principle subject, would be detrimental, to the richness and multiplicity, of his interests, which are a result of his own original method of interpretation that, we might call "interdisciplinary", something completely new for his times. In fact, Pico's efforts, as the great scholar Eugenio Garin points out: "were thus turned to demonstrating the universality of truth through, the multiplicity of his expressions, and the integrability of his efforts, towards this but also the limitations of the various positions, and thus, the need to overcome them realising conflicts of the intellect: *contradictoria in natura intellectuali se compatiuntur.*" And in short, this was the significance, that the terms, "Peace" and "Concordance" have come to assume, in the thought of Pico.

The activity of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola was short, being developed during a single decade, from 1483 to 1494, and let us not forget, that the works are the product of a young man between the ages, of 20 and 30 years. If we are to find, a common thread, in the course of Pico's thought, I should talk about, an attempt to revive Christianity, which would have involved, the whole of humanity, in a project taking in philosophy of love, poetic theology, the concord of doctrines, the universal synthesis of knowledge, and the dignity of man.

Three works, the *Oratio*, the *Conclusiones* and the *Apologia*, are, in many aspects one single work, and cannot be taken individually, even if they, were written at various times (but more or less, in a single year, between the spring of 1486 and that of 1487).

What is possible to find, in the philosophical vision of man, in Freemasonry, appertaining to the thought of Pico, is the fact that the two subjects, the dignity of man and peace between doctrines, dominate a programme of spiritual reconstruction of men.

The Oration, was supposed, to be solemnly delivered, at the convention of Rome, which was never held and was subsequently published posthumously, at the end of the century. As the great Eugenio Garin recalls: "there are only a few pages, but they mark an era, ancient and still contemporary. They ask for peace between doctrines, a concordance of beliefs; they tell of the continuity and convergence of man's efforts, to pursue the light; they realise the significance of man in the world, and of his vocation. Man's importance is in his responsibility, in his freedom. Man is the only being in reality that chooses his own destiny; only he affects history and frees himself from the conditions of nature; he dominates nature... The conscious image of man typical of the modern world comes from there: man is involved in the act which constitutes him, and has the ability to set himself free. In this concept there is the condemnation of every oppression, slavery and conditioning.(3)

According to Pico, God did not create man, in his own image, as the catholic orthodox theologians stated; rather, he gave man, the faculty to create his own image. This extolling, of man's creative faculties, of his chosen freedom has led many scholars, to identify, within the concept of "free will", which distinguishes man, from the rest of humanity, the most important concept in the thought of Pico about man.

But, what interests us most of all for the purposes of this essay, is the ethical thought of Pico, and without doubt the Oration can be defined, as the quintessence of Pico's ethico-moral speculation. The fundamental similarity, between the three fundamental stages, on man's path of accession to the supreme good, found in the Oration and the three degrees, on the Masonic path to perfection of the individual (Entered Apprentice, Fellow of the Craft and Master Mason) is one of the key points, of our belief, in the influence of Pico's ethics, on Masonic philosophy. If in fact for Pico, the first of his three stages is the "purification of vices with the help of ethics", for Freemasonry the first of its three degrees is characterised, by "principles of morality and virtue" and we can therefore, rightly define it as a degree of ethics. The second stage of Pico's path is the "perfection of reason, by means of dialect, and natural philosophy", which corresponds to the second Masonic degree, that of Fellow of the Craft. In fact we see, in the Ceremony of Passing from the degree of Entered Apprentice, to that of Fellow of the Craft, the Worshipful Master turns to the Brother and says: "as you learned the principles of moral Truth and Virtue in the previous degree, now you may extend your enquiries to the hidden mysteries of Nature and Science".

Therefore in this second degree, the Freemason perfects his consciousness, through "human reason". The third and final stage of Pico's ethical thought, contained in the Oration, is the consciousness of the Divine, which corresponds, to the third degree of Freemasonry, that of Master Mason, which concludes the esoteric path of Freemasonry. In fact, we read in the ritual, that the Worshipful Master says to the Brother: "advancing further, still guiding your progress, by the principles of moral truth, may you be steered into the second degree, to see the intellectual faculty of it, and track your development in it, through the paths of celestial science, unto the throne of God himself". And he continues, "allow me now, to point out, to you, that the light of a Master Mason is visible darkness, which serves only to express that shadow, which shrouds future prospects. That is the mysterious veil, which the eye of

human reason cannot penetrate, without the help of the Light, which comes from above". Therefore, a degree which leaves us, facing the man-God relationship.

But, that is not all. The nature of man's progressive perfection, in his quest for supreme good, is underlined in the allegorical example of "Jacob's patriarchal ladder", which "rises by many rungs to the height of heaven" symbolising man's path in life. And as if we were in a river, notes Pico, through climbing this ladder, we cleanse the sensitive part of our soul, in which is locked, the temptation of the body, thus by "exercising philosophy, through all the rung, of the ladder, and that is of nature", we shall begin to analyse and synthesise the meaning of things; "in the bosom of the Father, who reigns above the ladder, we shall find perfection and peace, in the felicity of the theological knowledge".

We can conclude that, just as in Masonic thought, ethics, the philosophy of nature, and the approach to the Divine, also represent, the principal degrees of consciousness in Pico's ethics, through which man must pass. A first preparatory stage of consciousness, represented by Ethics, that is moral science, requires that man be set free by a passion for pleasure. For Pico, it is only through Ethics, that the destruction of men between different states may be ended, and long-lasting peace be established on earth. In the next stage, the *Philosophia Moralis* gives way to the *Philosophia Naturalis*, which leads man, along the road to consciousness of reality. It is through philosophy, that the secrets of nature are revealed to man, and this is the principle function of philosophy. The final stage, is that in which human reasoning, prepared and educated by philosophy, will reveal a consciousness of the deepest secrets, concerning the system of the universe.

Who, in philosophy, has represented better than Pico, the fundamental Masonic allegory of course stone, after hard work, being turned into smooth stone? Throughout the Oration, man is portrayed, as moulder of himself, in an absolutely arbitrary way: "sui ipsius quasi arbitrarius honorariusque plastes et factor", a real moulder who must create and sculpt his own form.

To conclude, I should like to point out how Pico, may have marvellously anticipated Lessing in "Conversations on Freemasonry between Ernst and Falk". For the Mirandolian in fact, man's happiness does not come from the possession of truth, but solely for its pursuit the typical platonic concept of Eros. For Pico and for the Freemason, it is not the possessing the truth that is important, but its pursuit, the enquiry that we undertake, in order to investigate it, and it is in this extreme display of free will, that one's spiritual power is demonstrated. In light of this, any constraint in religion according to Pico, is absolutely reprehensible and the *Libertas credendi* is essential, because true faith can only be borne out of freedom. According to Pico, "even man's sin, does not constitute, an uncancellable defect in his nature, because in his nature one can only see, the correlative and the opposite of something different, and superior. It was necessary that man, be capable of sin, so that he may become, capable of good. Pico's fundamental concept is that man, in good as in evil, is never concluded; he may never rest secure, in good, and is never in the power of evil, without hope of redemption. Lives, which lead to good and evil, are never precluded from one another, and the decision lies in his own hands:"(4) Thus, according to a follower of Pico, man's sin, is not merely a fault, on the contrary it is an expression of that force, which makes the same man, capable of doing good, and his freedom, may demonstrate all its power, only when he is capable of moulding his own existence, and to do this, it is necessary to pass through the various stages of existence.

Freemasonry guides and supports us throughout this broad journey.

#### Endnotes

- 1) G. Pico della Mirandola, *De Hominis Dignitate*, ed E. Garin, Firenze, 1942, pp.104-106.
- 2) Ernst Cassirer, *Dall'Umanesimo all'Illuminismo*, La Nuova Italia, 1967, pag.80
- 3) Eugenio Garin, *Ritratti di Umanisti*, 1967 Sansoni, ristampa Bompiani 2001, pag.217-218
- 4) Ernst Cassirer, *ibidem*, pag.89