



From Giovanni Pico della Mirandola  
preliminary remarks to the free mason's  
thought?



By Giovanni Caminiti



Giovanni Pico Lord of Mirandola and Count of Concordia was born on 24 February 1463. He lived his short life at the height of the Italian Renaissance, close to some of his most famous contemporaries, becoming well famous and appreciated not only in Italy, but also all round Europe.

When he was only 14, his mother urged him to go to Bologna to study at the local university. Six years later, he already was in cultural relations with Marsilio Ficino and Angelo Poliziano; in 1485 he already was a strong defensor of philosophical speculation, as a letter sent to Ermolao Barbaro testifies.

He was accused for heresy by Innocenzo VIII, then arrested in Savoy (his imprisonment lasted only a month thanks to Lorenzo de' Medici and Carlo VIII of France), and finally acquitted by Alessandro VI.

The vicissitudes of life and ideas he faced made him a man who expressed and tried to go beyond his time. But, even short, his life allowed him to develop his work in the space of only a decade, between 1483 (he was only twenty years old!) and 1494.

So, he never managed to complete many topics he just began to treat, outlined and schematized.

This is the reason why many people handled his work in a self-important manner, as if it was the production of a young, rich and arrogant man; probably, it is also the reason why the restricted myth of his exceptional memory arose, as if the Mirandolan was simply a freak. However he had a great deal of admirers among his contemporaries and the modern criticism has objectively revalued his image.

Today, Pico della Mirandola is considered an important figure in the cultural context of Italian Renaissance and over.

But where do Pico's philosophical, cultural and religious roots put themselves down? What is the background the development of his ideas is based on?

We have to remember that, in the 15th century, the scholars took into the best consideration the most 'distant' classics, because they thought they were closer to the described realities. Consequently, a sacred book or a book dealing with sacred subjects was considered as much truthful as much remote it was.

So, a great importance is given, for example, to the *Corpus ermeticum* (deeply loved by some of modern Masons, too)



Agostino attributed this work to Ermete Trismegisto, the consideration that its author was one of Moses' contemporaries gave it a primary importance.

This work bears such an important philosophical and mystical message that also Christian authors gave it a very high value.

Lattanzio recognized its prophetic authority about topics of Christian religion; Quodvultdeus (a Saint and Bishop of Caltagirone) found in it supports to defend the dogma of Trinity.<sup>1</sup>

Then, Ermete, called "Pagan prophet of Christ's coming", was supposed to have imposed his influence on posterity, by influencing Pitagora and his school, and, through it, left his mark on Plato's philosophy.

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<sup>1</sup> Un banchiere quattrocentesco e un industriale moderno – Ida Giovanna Rao – Biblioteche oggi, Dicembre 1999, pp 76-77

This explains the reason why Marsilio Ficino, Pico's friend and master, made a 'fast' translation of Ermete's works (ndr, Marsilio Ficino considered him 'the root of any other knowledge') before devoting himself to Plato's works, even if the latter were already at his disposal.<sup>2</sup>

And this notwithstanding that Ficino considered Plato the 'absolute best' because he succeeded in joining together the two roads taking to happiness: the road of philosophy and the sacerdotal road.

(But it is not to forget that also other reasons could have taken Ficino to this work: when he finished his translation he got a villa in Careggi by Cosimo de' Medici!).



As a matter of fact, the origins of ermetism are not known. Likely there was an arrangement of the doctrine in the Ptolemaic age (about in the 3rd century b.C.); while the organization of the texts we know has to be dated back to a period between the 1st and the 2nd century b.C.

Going back to Pico: he thought clearly about many things concerning morals, God, religion; he professed himself an out-and-out Christian, nonetheless he was charged of heresy (like other philosophers of his time).

He held Plato in high esteem, as one of the greatest philosophers, but as much as him he esteemed Aristotle, too, to the point that he theorized the complementarity of their philosophy. Everyone was in search of a philosophical ecumenism, but the element in common among all those philosophers smacking of heresy was the attempt of bringing into harmony the pre-Christian philosophy and religion with the Roman Catholic creed of their time.

And this happened because they attributed a great value to the pre-Christian thought, both religious and philosophical; they were sure that part of the religious truth had been described through the ancient doctrines. Pico's work aimed at proving that the Truth is only one, while different are the ways to get it. Then any philosophical and religious attempt ended up by grasping only a part of it and so turning out to be defective.

It seems to notice in these ideas the mason's ecumenism and tolerance: even if there are some *landmarks*, every positive conception is respectable because it could bear a part of the Truth.

Ecumenism and tolerance that, both in the present and in the past, were not usual customs, especially towards those who devoted themselves to philosophy.

*"By now all this philosophize (and this is really one of the misfortunes of our time) is handled with contempt and insulted, rather than being held in honour and glory. So much this fatal and monstrous conviction took over the minds of the majority that either nobody could philosophize or only a minority had to. As if having ... the reason of things ... in view or to hand, was a thing of no importance, unless it was possible, through it, seeking after any kind of power or profit."*<sup>3</sup>

Afterwards the Count adds (by means of a thought that should involve the reader empathically):

*"On the contrary – without any shame on me for singing my own praises in this regard - I'll take all the credit on myself for having ever philosophized with no other interest than that one of being just a philosopher and for having neither*

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<sup>2</sup> According to Isaac Casaubon, the "Corpus" contains works from different authors belonging to the Greek culture of the East, who lived a long time after Plato, between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 3<sup>rd</sup> century a. C.

<sup>3</sup> G. Pico - *De hominis dignitate* – paragraph 24

*expected from my efforts, from my watches of the night, any other reward or result than the nourishment of my soul and of the knowledge of Truth (that I've always pursued above all), nor asked for it. And I've always been eager of Truth, I've always loved it very much, so much that ... no slander from envious people, no malicious gossip from the enemies of wisdom succeeded in getting me away from it up to now, neither it will ever do. And just philosophy taught me to depend on my conscience more than on the opinions of other people and not to think my behaviour too much over because it makes people speak not too well of me, better still, to think on the way how not to talk behind people's back and not to do harm I myself.”<sup>4</sup>*

Ms. Fumagalli Beonio Brocchieri writes: “*The young count, ..., asserts ... he philosophizes only through his love for philosophy aiming at the forming and the elevation of his soul and at the meditation upon Truth.*”<sup>5</sup>

These are ideas inferred by a literature scholar from a 15th century man's writings; and yet it seems to listen to the concepts typical of Freemasonry in any time: the elevation of the Soul and the search after Truth; the attention towards one's own conscience, the only judge of the individual, that makes him superior to the worries rising from the neighbour's opinions, that



are not always sincere and disinterested; the search after the Good and after the right behaviour, forerunning some important passages of “Philosophy of Freemasonry” by Fichte; the wish to be intellectually free, behaving accordingly, but also undertaking to be respectable, apart from other people's judgement.

Pico “*would be one of the main ‘starters’, one of the first prophets of the “free thought” and of the huge immanentist movement that, in its different forms, marks our time out.*”<sup>6</sup>

Back to Pico's cultural origins, we have to notice that, in his time, Aristotelian and Platonic philosophies, together with Augustinian mysticism were followed by a lot of people; the ancient theology, ascribed to Ermete Trismegisto or to Zoroaster, wasn't disregarded at all; and the Jewish Kabala influenced the freethinkers of that time, too, and Pico, in particular, was such a passionate Kabala scholar that he developed an idea of Christian Kabala.

In his effort to create a religious ecumenism, the Mirandolan didn't fail to study the ancients, such as the Arabs, in particular Averroes, who was convinced that each religious and philosophic tradition held a part of the universal Truth.

It is typical of the Count to assume a “theoric pluralistic” attitude, by considering reality in its different aspects, from different points of view and by checking the effectiveness of the different authors' conceptions, both contemporaries and ancients. In the “*Conclusiones*” the word “*secundum*” (i.e., ‘according to Plato’, ‘according to Aristotle’, ‘according to Tommaso’...) is really frequent.

And just this effort to get a philosophic-religious ecumenism through the continuity between past and present led some Renaissance philosophers to the universal tolerance. As the same, the ideas of freedom (in particular), tolerance and harmonic development of personality can be considered ‘pillars’ of Pico's philosophy, too. On these basic elements Pico developed, in his

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem* - - paragraph 25

<sup>5</sup> M. Fumagalli B.B. - *Pico della Mirandola* – Piemme, p.127

<sup>6</sup> H. de Lubac – *Pico della Mirandola* – Jaca Book, p.21

*Oratio de Hominis Dignitate* and also in *Heptaplus*, those ideas on which human greatness and dignity are based.

**Freedom and tolerance:** important ‘pillars’ of Pico’s human dignity such as of the behavioural attitude that each Freemason should maintain.

‘This’ Man is not considered as made in God’s own image and likeness, but as made with the opportunity to give himself his own image.

***“I didn’t give you any nature, or any place of your own, or any exclusive gift, o Adam, so that you can long for, achieve and possess your nature, your place and your gifts by yourself.”***<sup>7</sup>

According to Pico, all created things got a direction; even the Angels received perfection: Man is called to build it up by himself.

He chooses his way of living and, according to these free choices, takes his own place in the universal hierarchy.

Man, responsible for himself through the ‘free will’, gets carried away by that contemplation taking to the insight of the deep secrets of Nature and not simply to the sight of it all around him.

Contemplation is – according to Marsilio Ficino, in harmony with Pico – a spiritual experience starting with the detachment from the material world and taking by degrees to the sight and enjoyment of God.

This is an initiatory journey! It’s pointed out a project of human growth, that, in the context of all created things, is a world apart and Giovanni Pico expresses “*a deep faith in human spirit, in the search of reason*”<sup>8</sup> [...] “*fulfilment of philosophy, as a means to get the ultimate aim that philosophy itself can only pave us the way to.*”<sup>9</sup>

*“The supreme good for Man is the perfection he can achieve through the speculative knowledge.”*<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, the Freemason sets out on an initiatory journey and, by degrees, learns how to contemplate nature and then how to prepare himself for his own death.

The hub of human Dignity is the free will, the ability to tell good from evil.

In Pico’s work, God says to Man:

*“You will determine your nature according to your free will, without being enclosed within narrow boundaries. **I placed you in the centre of the universe** so that, from there, you can see all what is in the universe more easily. I made you neither celestial nor earthly, nor even mortal or immortal, so that you can mould your shape by yourself as you prefer, like a **free and noble modeller and forger** of yourself”*<sup>11</sup>.

Here is the Man who is placed **in the centre**, and we have to remember that the centre is the very point from which a Freemason Master can’t wander; then, Man – being **free in his thought and able to tell good from evil** – is, as a consequence, “free and has a good reputation”; moreover he is the **forger** of himself, in Tubalcain’s footsteps.



<sup>7</sup> from “*Horatio de hominis dignitate*”

<sup>8</sup> Garin 1937, p. 237

<sup>9</sup> Kristeller 1967, p. 310

<sup>10</sup> G. Pico – *Conclusiones nongentae* – L.S.O. editore - 1995 - p.27

<sup>11</sup> G. Pico - *De hominis dignitate*

*“Human nature is, you see, the bond and heart of the world”; it (ndr., nature) has been placed “in the centre of the universe and, like any other centre, it shares the bounds, as to say that man, with all his different parts, shares and bears relations with all the parts making the world; for this reason we usually call it ‘Microcosm’, that is little world.”<sup>12</sup>*

Here it is another freemason conception: that one referred to ‘the one’ containing ‘the whole’ and ‘the whole’ containing ‘the one’.

In that period, it was widespread a theory according to which there were an intelligible or angelic world, a celestial world and a sublunary world, the latter inhabited by mankind. Pico considered that *“I’m only one because what is in all the worlds is also in each one of them, and there is not a world in which there is not all what is in each one of the others.”*

The Count goes on:

*“if we should like to be companions of those angels who go up and down Jacob’s ladder,” we had to be “prepared and well-instructed in order to be duly promoted, by degrees, never leaving the course of the ladder but facing, at the same time, the reciprocal movements. And when we’ll get this point thanks to the art of thinking, animated by the cherubic spirit by now, that is philosophizing according to the degrees of nature, penetrating everything from the centre to the centre, now we’ll come down splitting up the one in the many with titanic violence, like Osiride; and then we’ll go up again gathering the many in the one with Apollonian strength, like Osiride limbs, until, resting in the womb of the Father – who is at the top of the ladder - , we’ll become perfect in the theological happiness.”<sup>13</sup>*

In these few lines there is a “treatise It strikes one immediately the symbolic appearing from the very first degree of Then we find the idea of “course”, that, initiatory journey.



about Freemasonry” ante litteram. use of “Jacob’s ladder”, a symbol Freemasonry.

made along Jacob’s ladder, is an

A journey that needs a good training. you have a suitable training.

The ladder can be climbed only if

It can be achieved only by degrees, so there is again the idea of a progression step by step (not a linear and uninterrupted way, but a sequence of initiatory degrees).

More exactly, “philosophizing according to the degrees of nature”: by studying nature the esoteric Freemason can pass from the first to the third degree!

Soon after, there are the idea of “centre” and – with a strong call to the ancient Egyptian religion (a topic really loved by some Freemasons) - the conception of the one splitting up and recomposing.

All this in order to achieve the final purpose, which the Master will aim at: getting the top of the ladder, resting in the Father’s womb (a female attribute?!), becoming perfect (or, more ‘freemasonly’, aiming at perfection).

The *Oratio* gives rise to a creature summarizing all the elements of nature and being “*beyond nature*”, a creature “*with only a limit: God.*”<sup>14</sup>

Man is a microcosm contributing to form the macrocosm but also containing it in itself, and this makes him able to become whatever he wants.

But his real purpose is not that one.

<sup>12</sup> H. de Lubac – *Pico della Mirandola* – Jaca Book – p.82

<sup>13</sup> G. Pico - *De hominis dignitate* – paragraph 15

<sup>14</sup> H. de Lubac – *Pico della Mirandola* – Jaca Book – p.85

“Man’s supreme good is the perfection that can be achieved through the speculative knowledge by philosophizing according to the degrees of nature”. But this is not enough. This is not the way to climb up Jacob’s ladder. The observation of nature and the meditation on its essentiality, will led to the contemplation, to the transcendence of material reality, up to the achievement of the union with the one Who is at the top of the ladder.

But Man is microcosm and macrocosm together; he is in the centre of the universe and, as a consequence, in the centre of What or Who is at the top of the ladder; but, at the same time, this Essence is inside Man himself and it is in his own centre.

Only by getting his own Centre and finding the reality of the self, Man will find the mystical union with the Being and so will get the control over all created things.

As the same, the freemason method (more ‘civil’ than freemason, I’d say) of the tolerant and fair comparison of ideas is foretold by the Mirandolan.

Sound comparisons of ideas that, at their end, all get a positive result.

*“ ... This kind of intellectual struggles, in which the loss is actually a profit. As a consequence, the weakest ones cannot and mustn’t shirk this kind of struggles, rather they have to look for them by full right. Since the loser receives a benefit from the winner, rather than an offence, he comes back home richer than before, that is, more learned and ready to engage in future struggles.”<sup>15</sup>*

At last, you have to notice how Giovanni Pico – when he couched his ideas – made use of an expressive technique already used by the great men of the past and that many others have used after him and others more still use today: the reserved, secrete transmission of Mysteries, both of nature and of God.

A “language using ‘figures, symbols and metaphors’ to talk about the deepness of mysteries”<sup>16</sup> because this “is of use in order to defend them *a vitae*, that is from an inadequate, generic and wrong comprehension”<sup>17</sup>

As it is done in that system of moral veiled over with allegories<sup>18</sup> and represented through Symbols<sup>19</sup> that is the Freemasonry!

How can we answer, in the end, to the question asked in the title: ‘Are there any preliminary remarks to the free mason’s thought in Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola way of thinking?’

I’d say that Pico, a fifteenth century personality, interpreted the thought of his time, got over it in an innovative burst and voiced conceptions that are drawn on and acquired by the Freemasonry.

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<sup>15</sup> G. Pico - *De hominis dignitate* – paragraph 28

<sup>16</sup> M. Fumagalli B.B. - *Pico della Mirandola* – Piemme, p.117

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem

<sup>18</sup> “Statements, narrations in which a different meaning, as important as the literal one, is intentionally hidden.”

<sup>19</sup> It is not considered for ‘what’ it is in itself, but it is considered because it can represent, through a certain analogical correspondence, another thing; in particular, a real figure used to represent an abstract or ideal concept..



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