

**GIOVANNI PICO  
DELLA MIRANDOLA**

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Giovanni Pico della Mirandola by Thomas More

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**THOMAS MORE**

**GIOVANNI PICO  
DELLA MIRANDOLA**



# GIOVANNI PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA:

HIS LIFE BY HIS NEPHEW GIOVANNI

FRANCESCO PICO:

ALSO THREE OF HIS LETTERS; HIS INTERPRE-  
TATION OF PSALM XVI; HIS TWELVE RULES  
OF A CHRISTIAN LIFE; HIS TWELVE  
POINTS OF A PERFECT LOVER;  
AND HIS DEPRECATORY  
HYMN TO GOD.

TRANSLATED FROM THE LATIN BY  
SIR THOMAS MORE.

EDITED WITH INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

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OF LINCOLN'S INN, BARRISTER-AT-LAW.

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## INTRODUCTION.



IOVANNI PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA, "the Phoenix of the wits," is one of those writers whose personality will always count for a great deal more than their works. His extreme, almost feminine beauty, high rank, and chivalrous character, his immense energy and versatility, his insatiable thirst for knowledge, his passion for theorizing, his rare combination of intellectual hardihood with genuine devoutness of spirit, his extraordinary precocity, and his premature death, make up a personality so engaging that his name at any rate, and the record of his brief life, must always excite the interest and enlist the sympathy of mankind, though none but those, few in any generation, who love to loiter curiously in the bypaths of literature and philosophy, will ever care to follow his eager spirit through the labyrinths of recondite speculation which it once thriddled with such high and generous hope.

For us, indeed, of the latter end of the nineteenth century, trained in the exact methods, guided by the steady light of modern philosophy and criticism, it is no easy matter to enter sympathetically into the thoughts of

men who lived while as yet these were not, men who spent their strength in errant efforts, in blind gropings in the dark, on abortive half-solutions or no-solutions of problems too difficult for them, mere *ignes fatui*, it would seem, or at best mere brilliant meteor stars illuminating the intellectual firmament with a transitory trail of light, and then vanishing to leave the darkness more visible, yet without whose mistakes and failures and apparently futile waste of power philosophy and criticism would not have come into being.

Among such wandering meteoric apparitions not the least brilliant was Pico della Mirandola. Born in 1463, he grew to manhood in time to witness and participate in the effectual revival of Greek learning in Italy; yet his earliest bias was scholastic, and a schoolman in grain he remained to the day of his death. How strongly he had felt the influence of the schoolmen, how little disposed he was to follow the humanistic hue and cry of indiscriminate condemnation, may be judged from the eloquent apology for them which, in the shape of a letter to his friend Ermolao Barbaro, he published in 1485. It was the fashion to stigmatize the schoolmen as barbarians because they knew no Greek and could not write classical Latin. That was the head and front of their offending in the eyes of men who had no idea of a better method of philosophizing than theirs, nor indeed any interest in philosophy, mere rhetoricians, grammarians, and pedagogues, while at any rate the schoolmen, however rude their style, were serious thinkers, who in grappling with the deepest problems of science human and divine displayed the rarest patience, sagacity, subtlety and ingenuity. Such is the gist of Pico's plea on behalf of the "barbarians," in urging which he exhausts the resources of rhetoric, and the ingenuity of

the advocate ; nor is there reason to doubt that it represents at least the embers of a very genuine enthusiasm. That challenge, also, which he issued at Rome, and in every university in Italy in the winter of 1486-7, summoning as if by clarion call every intellectual knight-errant in the peninsula to try conclusions with him in public disputation in the eternal city after the feast of Epiphany, does it not recall the celebrated exploit of Duns Scotus at Paris, when, according to the tradition, he won the title of Doctor Subtilis by refuting two hundred objections to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary in a single day? Only, as befitted "a great lord of Italy," Pico's tournament is to be on a grander scale. Duns had but one thesis to defend ; Pico offers to maintain nine hundred, and lest poverty should reduce the number of his antagonists he offers to pay their travelling expenses. Moreover, to Duns, Aquinas, and other of the schoolmen, Pico is beholden for not a few of his theses ; of the rest, some are drawn direct from Plato, others from Neo-Pythagorean, Neo-Platonic and syncretist writers, while a certain number appear to be original. Pico, however, was not so fortunate as Duns : the church smelt heresy in his propositions, and Pope Innocent VIII., though he had at first authorised, was induced to prohibit their discussion. (Bull dated 4th August, 1487). Thirteen were selected for examination by a special commission and were pronounced heretical. Pico, however, so far from bowing to its decision, wrote in hot haste an elaborate "Apologia" or defence of his orthodoxy, which, had it not been more ingenious than conclusive, might perhaps have been accepted ; as it was, it only brought him into further trouble.

This Apology "elucubrated," as he tells, "properante



stilo" in twenty nights, Pico dedicated to Lorenzo de' Medici, modestly describing it as "exiguum sane munus, sed fidei meae, sed observantiae profecto in omne tempus erga te maxime non leve testimonium," "a trifling gift indeed, but as far as possible from being a slight token of my loyalty, nay, of my devotion to you." Hasty though its composition was, it certainly displays no lack of either ingenuity, subtlety, acuteness, learning, or style. Evidently written out of a full mind, it represents Pico's mature judgment upon the abstruse topics which it handles, and is a veritable masterpiece of scholastic argumentation. After a brief prologue detailing the circumstances which gave occasion to the work Pico proceeds to discuss *seriatim* the thirteen "damnatae conclusiones," and the several objections which had been made to them. The tone throughout is severe and dry and singularly free from heat or asperity. Some of the theses are treated at considerable length, others dismissed in a page or two, or even less. Altogether, when the rapidity of its composition is borne in mind, the treatise appears little less a prodigy.

The obnoxious theses were as follows:—(1) That Christ did not truly and in real presence, but only *quoad effectum*, descend into hell; (2) that a mortal sin of finite duration is not deserving of eternal but only of temporal punishment; (3) that neither the cross of Christ, nor any image, ought to be adored in the way of worship; (4) that God cannot assume a nature of any kind whatsoever, but only a rational nature; (5) that no science affords a better assurance of the divinity of Christ than magical and cabalistic science; (6) that assuming the truth of the ordinary doctrine that God can take upon himself the nature of any creature whatsoever, it is pos-

sible for the body of Christ to be present on the altar without the conversion of the substance of the bread or the annihilation of "pancity;" (7) that it is more rational to believe that Origen is saved than that he is damned; (8) that as no one's opinions are just such as he wills them to be, so no one's beliefs are just such as he wills them to be; (9) that the inseparability of subject and accident may be maintained consistently with the doctrine of transubstantiation; (10) that the words "hoc est corpus" pronounced during the consecration of the bread are to be taken "materialiter" (i.e., as a mere recital) and not "significative" (i.e., as denoting an actual fact); (11) that the miracles of Christ are a most certain proof of his divinity, by reason not of the works themselves, but of his manner of doing them; (12) that it is more improper to say of God that he is intelligent, or intellect, than of an angel that it is a rational soul; (13) that the soul knows nothing in act and distinctly but itself.

It is undeniable that some of these propositions smack somewhat rankly of heresy, and Pico's ingenuity is taxed to the uttermost to give them even a semblance of congruity with the doctrines of the Church. The following, however, is the gist of his defence. Christ, he argues, did actually descend into hell, but only in spirit, not in bodily presence; eternal punishment is inflicted on the finally impenitent sinner not for his sins done in the flesh, which are finite, but for his impenitence, which is necessarily infinite; the cross is to be adored, but only as a symbol, not in and for itself, for which he cites Scotus, admitting that St. Thomas is against him. The thesis that God cannot take upon himself a nature of any kind whatsoever, but only a rational nature, must be understood without prejudice to the omnipotence of God, which is

not in question ; God cannot assume the nature of any irrational creature, because by the very act of so doing he necessarily raises it to himself, endows it with a rational nature. The thesis that no science gives us better assurance of the divinity of Christ than magical and cabalistic science referred to such sciences only as do not rest on revelation, and among them to the science of natural magic, which treats of the virtues and activities of natural agents and their relations *inter se*, and that branch only of cabalistic science which is concerned with the virtues of celestial bodies ; which of all natural sciences furnish the most convincing proof of the divinity of Christ, because they show that his miracles could not have been performed by natural agencies. The sixth thesis must not be understood as if Pico maintained that the bread was not converted into the body of Christ, but only that it is possible that the bread and the body may be mysteriously linked together without the one being converted into the other, which would be quite consistent with the words of St. Paul, 1 Cor. x. 16 : " The bread which we break is it not the communion of the body of Christ ? " if interpreted figuratively. With regard to the salvation of Origen, Pico plunges with evident zest into the old controversy as to the authenticity of the heretical passages in that writer's works, and urges that his damnation can at most be no more than a pious opinion. In justification of the position that belief is not a mere matter of will he cites the authority of Aristotle and St. Augustine, adding a brief summary of the evidences of the Christian faith, to wit, prophecy, the harmony of the Scriptures, the authority of their authors, the reasonableness of their contents, the unreasonableness of their contents, the unreasonableness of particular heresies, the stability of the Church, the