

ALLA CORRENTE

GIOVANNI PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA (1463–94)

One of the Renaissance philosophers who epitomized philosophical thinking in the period was Pico della Mirandola. When I taught courses on the Renaissance, I always enjoyed teaching his writings and directing students to an understanding of the work of this eclectic thinker. He so well represented the Renaissance's desire to return to Classical philosophy, to models of architecture and of painting, and to Classical literature. He also saw importance in the philosophies of non-Western thinkers who added so much to our understanding of reality and of ultimate questions. Alla Corrente looks at this very important thinker in the history of Western philosophy who was born 552 years ago this month.

GIOVANNI PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA was born on February 24, 1463, to a noble Italian family (the counts of Mirandola and Concordia) near Modena in the Emilia-Romagna area north of Tuscany. The Pico della Mirandola family was closely related to the Sforza, Gonzaga and Este dynasties, and Giovanni's siblings wed the descendants of the hereditary rulers of Corsica, Ferrara, Bologna and Forli.

Giovanni was a precocious child with an amazing memory. He was schooled in Latin, and possibly Greek, at a very early age. His mother pushed for him to be established in a Church position, and so he was named a papal "protonotary" at the age of ten. At fourteen (in 1477), he left for Bologna, where he intended to study canon law, but within two years (with the sudden death of his mother), he left the study of canon law and moved to the University of Ferrara where he began study in philosophy. During a brief trip to Florence during this time, he met Angelo Poliziano, the courtly poet Girolamo Benivieni, and probably the young Dominican monk Girolamo Savonarola. For the rest of his life he remained very close friends with all three of these men, surprisingly including the ascetic and anti-humanist Savonarola.



In 1480 he moved to the University of Padua, which was a major center of the study of Aristotle's philosophy in Italy, where he remained until 1482. Since he was already proficient in Latin and Greek, he studied Hebrew and Arabic with one of his most important teachers, Elia del Medigo, a Jewish philosopher who favored the Averroes interpretation of Aristotle. With Elia del Medigo he read Aramaic manuscripts and also Judaic manuscripts that the philosopher translated for him from Hebrew into Latin. This intellectual relationship between the two continued for a number of years. Pico also wrote sonnets in Latin and Italian, which he destroyed at the end of his life because of the influence of Savonarola, who preached against such frivolities and worldly pleasures [see below].

By the time he left Padua in 1482, he had also felt the attraction of Platonism that was being revived by another famous Italian philosopher, Marsilio Ficino. By 1484, he had returned to Florence and was expanding his intellectual/cultural contacts through correspondence with both Angelo Poliziano and Lorenzo de' Medici (Lorenzo the Great) about poetry.

In 1485 he traveled from Florence to the University of Paris, the most important center in Europe for Scholastic philosophy and theology, and a hotbed of secular Averroism. But before he left Florence, he made his first important contribution to philosophy—a defense of the technical terminology which, since Petrarch’s time, had incited humanist critics of philosophy to attack Scholastic Latin as a barbaric violation of classical norms of the language. Since he had refined his literary talent while developing his philosophical skills, Pico issued his manifesto in the form of a letter to the renowned Ermolao Barbaro, using the occasion and the genre to show, like Plato in the *Phaedrus*, how rhetoric could equip a philosopher to defend his calling against rhetorical assault. It was probably in Paris that Giovanni began his *900 Theses* and conceived the idea of defending them in public debate [see below].



*Ermolao Barbaro
Cardinal of the
Holy Roman Church*



*Giovanni Pico della Mirandola
with Heptaplus*

After a short stay in Paris, Giovanni returned to Florence, and then on to Arezzo while on his way to Rome. While in Arezzo, he caused a scandal when he tried to abduct a young woman named Margherita, who was already married to Giuliano Mariotto de’ Medici (a cousin of Lorenzo de’ Medici). Giovanni had attempted to run off with her, but he was caught, wounded and thrown into prison by her husband. He was released only upon the intervention of Lorenzo himself. The incident is wholly representative of Pico’s often audacious temperament and of the loyalty and affection he nevertheless could inspire in his associates.

Pico spent several months in Perugia and nearby Fratta, recovering from his injuries. It was in Perugia that he was introduced to the mystical Hebrew Kabbalah, which fascinated him, as did the late Classical Hermetic writers, such as Hermes Trismegistus. The Kabbalah and the Hermetica were thought

in Pico’s time to be as ancient as the Old Testament, and for that reason, Giovanni accorded them an almost scriptural status. It had always been Pico’s intention to walk completely around a topic and look at it from many possible angles in order to derive the truest possible vision of the thing itself. “Syncretism,” for Pico, was seeing the same absolute from many different points of view, which was a Scholastic approach that added a strong modern resonance.

Pico based his ideas chiefly on Plato, as did his teacher, Marsilio Ficino, but retained a deep respect for Aristotle. Although he was a product of the Studia Humanitatis (Humanistic Studies), Pico was constitutionally an eclectic, and in some respects he represented a reaction against the exaggerations of pure humanism, defending what he believed to be the best of the medieval and Islamic commentators on Aristotle. It was always Pico’s aim to reconcile the schools of Plato and Aristotle since he believed both philosophers used different words to express the same concepts. It was perhaps for this reason that his friends called him “Princeps Concordiae,” or “Prince of Harmony” (a pun on Prince of Concordia, one of his family’s holdings). Similarly, Pico believed that an educated person should also study the Hebrew and Talmudic sources, as well as the Hermetics, because he felt these represented the same view of God as seen in the Old Testament, but using different words.



*Paulus Riccius’s
‘Portae Lucis’ (1516).*

While in Rome, Giovanni planned to underwrite a magnificent conference on this theme of “Philosophical Harmony” early in 1487, and in preparation he assembled *900 Theses* from numerous authorities—ancient and medieval, pagan and Christian, Moslem and Jewish. He had the *900 Theses* printed in Rome at the end of 1486, and to introduce them he composed the work that would become his most famous work, the *Oration on the Dignity of Man*—as it came to be called. He offered to pay the expenses of any scholars who came to Rome to debate him on the *Theses* publicly at the conference.

Intervention by Pope Innocent VIII derailed Pico’s plans and blocked the conference. The Pope appointed a Commission that first declared six of the *Theses* suspect of heresy and condemned seven others as outright heretical. Then, the Commission rejected Pico’s clarifications and repudiated all thirteen of the *Theses* as absolutely heretical. After this hastily published *Apology* (dedicated to Lorenzo de’ Medici) that Pico wrote to defend his ideas, Innocent refused to accept it and ultimately denounced all *900 Theses*.



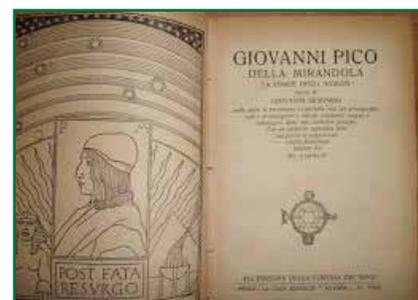
Pope Innocent VIII



Lorenzo de’ Medici

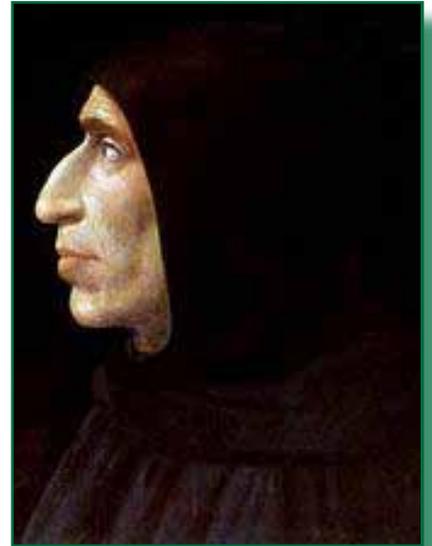
Because of this action, the audacious Giovanni left Rome for Paris, but at the Pope’s request, he was arrested by Philip II of Savoy and briefly jailed. Through the intercession of several Italian princes—at the instigation of Lorenzo de’ Medici—in the summer of 1488, King Charles VIII had him released, and the Pope was persuaded to allow Pico to move to Florence and to live under Lorenzo’s protection at Fiesole. In 1489 Pico dedicated a short work called *Heptaplus, the Sevenfold Account of the Six Days of Genesis* to his patron and protector, Lorenzo. (In defiance of the Pope’s position that his writings were heretical, the *Heptaplus* was greatly influenced by Kabbalist interpretation of the Old Testament book). But he was not cleared of the papal censures and restrictions until 1493, after the accession of Pope Alexander VI (Rodrigo Borgia) and a year after Lorenzo’s death.

Since 1483 Pico had received a third of the income produced by his family’s estates, which along with his Mirandola property, he transferred in 1491 to his nephew, Gianfrancesco. This nephew was to become an important philosopher in his own right and an early voice for the revival of skepticism as an instrument of Christian faith. At this time, however, even after the dust had settled on the provocative *Theses*, contemporaries were unsure of Giovanni’s orthodoxy, and the Kabbalist exegesis of Genesis in the *Heptaplus*—tame though it was by Pico’s earlier standards—could scarcely restore their confidence. Meanwhile, Giovanni pursued safer philological inquiries with Poliziano, who received the dedication of a fragment of *De Ente et Uno (On Being and the One)* in 1492. Even though this fragment was meant as the first installment of the great work Pico was planning that would prove Plato’s thought in concord with Aristotle’s, not everyone accepted his position without criticism—especially Antonio Cittadini, a Pisan professor who was still fighting about it with Gianfrancesco Pico two years after his uncle’s death.



Pico was deeply shaken by the experience of prison and the attacks of the Church on his writings as heretical. By the time of his pardon by Alexander VI, he had grown close to Savonarola who had become Prior of the Dominican Convent of San Marco in Florence. It had been at Pico's persuasion that Lorenzo had invited Savonarola to Florence to this Dominican position. Pico had known him for some time, but Savonarola was now on his way to establishing a theocratic tyranny in Florence. After the death of Lorenzo in 1492, Pico moved to Ferrara, although he continued to visit Florence. In Florence, political instability gave rise to the increasing influence of Savonarola, whose reactionary opposition to Renaissance expansion and style had already brought about conflict with the Medici family (they eventually were expelled from Florence) and would lead to the wholesale destruction of books and paintings.

Nevertheless, Pico became a follower of Savonarola. Determined to become a monk, he dismissed his former interest in Egyptian and Chaldean texts, destroyed his own poetry, and disposed of much of his property, some to the Church and some to his family. But Pico, even after all of this, never renounced his syncretistic convictions.



Girolamo Savonarola

He was working hard on another huge project, the unfinished *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricium* (*Treatise Against Predictive Astrology*), when he died on November 17, 1494. (Savonarola delivered his funeral oration and he was buried in San Marco Basilica). At the same time, Poliziano died mysteriously as well. (Rumor had it at the time that both men were poisoned). Florence fell to the French armies of Charles VIII on the same day as his death, ending the short-lived dazzling age of Florentine culture that Pico's genius had made all the brighter.

(Recent research done after his body and the body of Poliziano were exhumed from San Marco in Florence in 2007 by Bologna Professor Giorgio Gruppioni shows, through the use of modern forensic science, that both Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Poliziano died of arsenic poisoning, probably at the order of Lorenzo de' Medici's son and successor, Piero de' Medici).

Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD, from Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, On-line Edition of Encyclopedia Britannica, On-line Edition of Catholic Encyclopedia, and Wikipedia.