

TRADUTTOLOGIA
RIVISTA DI INTERPRETAZIONE E TRADUZIONE

21-22

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Gli articoli proposti per la pubblicazione sono esaminati da due referees coperti da anonimato. Le eventuali revisioni richieste sono obbligatorie ai fini dell'accettazione.

Con il contributo del Dipartimento di Scienze
Mediche, Orali e Biotecnologie
Università degli Studi Gabriele d'Annunzio di
Chieti-Pescara
Via dei Vestini n. 31 — 66100 Chieti

TRADUTTOLOGIA

ANNO XI (n.s.) – Luglio 2019 - Gennaio 2020 – Fascicoli 21-22

ISSN 2037-4291 - ISBN-978-88-3305-342-4

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SCHEDE DI TRADUZIONE

a cura di Michela Marroni

NOTIZIE SUI COLLABORATORI

ISSN 2037-4291
ISBN-978-88-3305-342-4

© 2019, Gruppo Editoriale Tabula Fati
66100 Chieti - Via Colonna n. 148
Tel. 0871 561806 - 335 6499393

Per acquisti:

www.edizionisolfanelli.it/traduttologia.htm
tabulafatiordini@yahoo.it
Versamento sul c.c. postale 68903921
oppure IBAN IT02Y0708677020000000007164
intestati a Gruppo Editoriale Tabula Fati

Numeri disponibili:

Traduttologia n. 9-10 - Euro 15,00
Traduttologia n. 11-12 - Euro 13,00
Traduttologia n. 13-14 - Euro 15,00
Traduttologia n. 15-16 - Euro 15,00
Traduttologia n. 17 - Euro 15,00
Traduttologia n. 18 - Euro 15,00
Traduttologia n. 19-20 - Euro 15,00

Supplemento al n. 19 di IF (Aut. Trib. Chieti n. 5 del 20/06/2011)
Direttore Responsabile: Carlo Bordoni

Finito di stampare nel mese di Dicembre 2019 dalla Digital Team di Fano (PU)

Peter Carravetta

*The Fourth World:
Hermeneutics and the politics of culture in Pico della
Mirandola*

Who does not wonder at this chameleon that we are.
(*On the Dignity of Man*, p. 5)

I.

Reading Pico in the context of a broader reinterpretation of Humanism and the Renaissance – or, in terms of recent historiographic categories, the Early Modern (Western) period – years ago I was fascinated by Pico’s complex hermeneutic mind and his proposal for a new vision of homo humanus who takes control of his own destiny. To me the *Oration* struck a note that echoed throughout the XIX and XX century, though critics consistently read it as a rhetorical projection that could be explained with reference to a number of traditions or currents ranging from Neoplatonism to syncretism to mysticism and others, but in the end a text of the times, depicting a Pico “uomo del suo tempo”. My interest was instead in a Pico “uomo del mio tempo”, a complex thinker who had something to say to *our* end of the millennium. Being an educator in the postmodern world compels hard reflection: does Pico still speak to us, to my students? And how so? What in his theories and methods is still valid today? And it wasn’t only that Pico participated in the ongoing intellectual struggle in his era later called secularization, though that is in part true. It was the fact that Pico had become keenly aware of a deep connection between ontology and epistemology, between logic and rhetoric, and that behind or above these polar yet *co-enabling* fields there was posited, and assumed to be existing, a human being of no

definable nature – *indiscretæ opus imaginis*¹ –, an elusive, Hermes-like persona whose predicament was to figure out who it was, what its identity might be, how it relates to other theological-metaphysical universes, how to express these insights.

From a hermeneutic perspective, I sought to show the relationship between his neoplatonic theory and his Parisian-inspired rational methods of analysis. We learn in the *Commentary* to Benivieni's canzone, as he was laying down the grounds for his reading, that there exist three modes of being: Casual, Formal, and Participated. The critical text says "Che ogni cosa creata ha lo essere in tre modi", though a variant lectio reported by Eugenio Garin states, "Che ogni cosa si può intendere in tre modi". (*De Hominis* 461). I wrote years ago:

The difference between "having to be" – i.e.: being "must" have three modes of givenness – and "it can be understood (as)" is not slight, for the accepted critical text postulates these three modes of being as categorical, axiomatic we might even say, whereas the variant reveals a less dogmatic and more hypostatic situation, a proleptic tendency where *becoming is more crucial than being*, where interpreting is more fundamental than ontology.²

Thus there is a possibility that the ontology of humans is determined by its coming into relation with a mode of apprehension, *and* with a just as enabling requirement to articulate this in the language of the tribe. Note the crucial point: this human being, this chameleon, dwells in a forest of symbols, of logical schemata, of socio-political realities. He will be changed by that, and constantly. He will have to re-formulate his own essence, his own identity, in each and every expression of a legitimizing message which, on the other hand, as we will see, is taken as *ab initio* perfect (the word of God).

Man is not perfect, not defined, though he will constantly yearn for that perfection, and will constantly search for the

¹ *Oration*, 4; *Dignità* 75. Brief analysis of the *Oration* in Carravetta 2004.

² Carravetta 1988.

boundaries of signification. He cannot be reduced, as the vulgate claims,³ to man as the mirror of God, since God cannot be seen or heard or touched directly, but only through a “veil”, which in turn requires positing any statement within an existing allegorical system of correspondences. This is further complicated by the fact that by introducing elements from philosophies and theologies from outside the Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman traditions, we run into an exquisite problem of translation, for each rendering will require adjustments, or rejections, of some of the inherited models of explanation from the two dominant trunks. Pico hopes of disclosing new untried venues, perhaps a “fourth world”.⁴

³ See for example Pignagnoli, who can't bear the notion of a human-chameleon with more than one identity: “c'è qui [ne la *Dignità*]...parecchio di 'retorico.' Giacché l'uomo, ci chiediamo, muta veramente in modo così radicale e totale da perdere la propria *identità*?...se ci riducessimo al mero sentire...perderemmo la nostra identità, tramutandoci in tutte le cose.” (79) The Platonism of the critic and implied fear of panteism pre-empt the possibility of reading *Pico as a critic of theological and platonic fundamenta*.

⁴ P.C. Bovi reminds us, in his excellent *Pluralità delle vie* (29), that there have been two leading trunks in Pico scholarship, one that begins with J. Burckhardt, and with additions and corrections continues through E. Garin, E. Cassirer, P.O. Kristeller, which along the way accepted contributions on the role of magic, astrology, esoterism, Quabbala and syncretism; the other sees “continuity” with the theological tradition anchored to the Bible, Patristics, and Scholasticism. Among these he cites Henri de Lubac and H. Reinhardt, who view Pico's “systematic” thought as “premodern.” Bovi states his intention to provide a new reading of the *Oration* based on the history of its textual editions (30), though in the end, even as he acknowledges that “la libertà secondo Pico è la libertà per svolgere un itinerario, attraverso la riforma di se stessi e la piena espansione della conoscenza,” his aim is “verso l'identità con l'Assoluto.” (93) We are not in either camp, and though we must refer to their philological production, I prefer to investigate Pico as a philosopher concerned with interpreting “being human,” and its place and function in a turmoiled and fast changing world. Allegretti also suggests trying a new method in interpreting Pico, as the apparent “unità dello scritto costituisce un problema, non un principio da cui prendere le mosse” (8). But he also emphasizes strongly the medieval component, as the great relevance of the Hermetica and the Quabbala requires.

II.

Pico's most systematic exegetical work, the *Heptaplus*, can easily be read as a semiotic, a mapping out of signs that indicate points where meaning – contained in the messages that criss cross, and interpenetrate the further up we go in the hierarchy of being – can be generated. I emphasize this sign-symbol producing machine, an *ars combinatoria* avant la lettre. But also a way of translating concepts from “external” or “foreign” sources, and through analogies and correspondences import values and ideas from non-Mediterranean or European cultures: Persians, Druids, Chaldeans, Hindi, other Arabic and east European peoples. But the systematicity seems to overwhelm and is often critiqued.⁵ As if that by itself were a demerit. As we will see, however, beneath the rationalist tables of symbolic correspondences that Pico unfurls, and which were not unfamiliar to a tradition that goes from Boethius to Ramon Lull, and subsequently to Ramus and Leibniz, there are evident signs that the Count was disclosing new pathways by his combining, or cross-breeding, elements coming from different traditions. Typically tossed into the dustbin of syncretism, these apertures signal the dawn of a new hermeneutic, a new way of understanding the world, and man's project in it.

It is time we take syncretism seriously, not just as characterizing certain currents in the Middle Ages and now merely object of specialized research for the dotti, but as a possible hermeneutic horizon where dualism, logical contradictions, presumably incompatible systems of belief (as: between religions, countries, or also in terms of past *vs* present) are made to share their common ground, because this is what takes place in the concourse of social interaction. And this can be a step forward, if we want to think in those terms. That Pico developed and elevated syncretism to philosophical altitudes can only be mentioned in passing in this paper,⁶ but I stress it

⁵ Unsurprisingly, even E. Garin posts some reservations: the *Heptaplus* ought not to be taken as the *summa* of Pico's philosophy owing to its “struttura sistematica,” which makes it the “meno originale” of his works (Garin, *Interpretazioni* 26).

⁶ In his *Syncretism in the West*, S.A. Farmer merely touches on the fact

is overdue for a radical reinterpretation *in view of* what the last century have revealed about trans-disciplinary, boundary & discipline busting researches, perspectivism, distortion (*Verwindung*) present in *any* interpretation or translation, a diminished yet floating notion of subjectivity, and the collapse of macro-systems of legitimation, such as idealism, equality, emancipation, redemption and other ghosts of Modernity. There is, in other words, much in common between Pico and many of the thinkers who brought Modernity to efface itself.⁷

And it is in the multiple semantic attributions to a word and/or expression that Pico's hermeneutic displays, as we will see, the constant awareness that his method is finalized, instrumentalized we might even say, to the end of persuading his audience – the College of cardinals in the 1486 failed presentation of the *900 Thesis*; his animated intellectual cliques in Florence (but also in the major cities like Rome, Paris, Naples, and Milan); and help in converting non-Christians to the Judeo-Christian *oecumene*. This only highlights the *conscious effort* put into this masterwork of interpretation/translation. This is the locus where method and rhetoric become the *recto* and *verso* of the same process, despite the exchange with Ermolao Barbaro whereby there is a distinction to be made

that what may be called a “voluntarist” (107) strain in Pico's thought, in particular his idea of human freedom, has been associated with Sartre's existentialism, but quickly dismisses it – that association was the product of the “historical events that *shattered* traditional beliefs in human dignity”! as if this weren't reason enough to attempt a rescue of Pico, and as if Pico was not aware that his own times were on the verge of some earth-shattering events. Thus Pico is brought back “squarely in the mainstream of medieval theology.” (108). But it is the idea of holding two “conflicting beliefs” about God that should be explored with the aid of concepts that emerged in the XX century (the XIX if we include Nietzsche), both before and after the World Wars. Though I will refer to this huge problematic, I reserve an inquiry for a follow-up paper on the present one.

⁷ I always wondered how it was possible for thinkers of the rank of J. Derrida, H-G Gadamer, M. Foucault, R. Rorty, G. Vattimo and others to have missed Pico's work, and not engage him on the same turf upon which they were inscribing their reinterpretation of Western metaphysics and epistemology. M. Cacciari's recent foray into humanism will be discussed in the continuation to this piece.

between rhetorical and logic discourse:⁸ as I have argued elsewhere, there is no such thing as “unrhetorical” speech, but only variations in style, register, intended ideology, parameters of the projected public or community where the statements would be heard/read and evaluated.⁹

In fact, this aspect of Pico’s interpretive dis-course is precisely the one that allows us to place him, almost against his will, in the tradition of the school of Alexandria, and of Origen in particular.¹⁰ Just recall how for Pico wisdom and enlightenment is but for a few initiates – even the Lord “spoke to few disciples” – (*Works* 71) and how deciphering man and nature means to be open to the magic, to mystery, to prophecy. However, “since the people with their owl-like and unseeing eyes could not endure the light, he used to speak to them with his face veiled” (ib). We must not forget that “mystery is not only a liturgical and epistemological but also a hermeneutic concept” and the same can be said of “prophecy”. (Bruns 153-55). At a historical moment when the pendulum between grammatical interpretation and allegorical interpretation was swinging toward the former (it won’t be long after Pico that Luther will cry: *Sola Scriptura!*),¹¹ effacing the repetitive and tired medieval ventures of the latter, Pico will nevertheless attempt to introduce a disruptive element in what is problematically if not erroneously called the “allegorical method”.

⁸ See Barbaro, *Filosofia o eloquenza?* Francesco Bausi has insisted on a more nuanced interpretation of this so-called critique of rhetoric, “noting that both Barbaro and Poliziano praised Pico for dealing a mortal blow to the ‘barbarian’ philosophers” (David Marsh in his review of Pico’s *Lettere*, Florence, Olschki, 2018, in *Renaissance Quarterly*, LXXIII, 4, p 1320).

⁹ I have developed this thesis in *The Elusive Hermes* (2012), of which the Introduction can be read on my website <http://www.petercarravetta.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Elusive-Hermes-Sample.pdf>

¹⁰ *Contra Celsum* appeared in print in 1481 “e Pico ne possedeva una copia” (Bovi, 38-39). But see also E. Wind, *The revival of Origen*. Important to Pico is that Origen is the author of the *Hexapla*, a possible model for the *Heptaplus*, and of *De Principiis* (which contains a long chapter on free will). See also Ferguson, Ch. 7, “Origen and the Allegorical Method” (1986, pp. 133-149).

¹¹ For a general overview of the slow transition from a predominantly ‘rhetorical’ engagement toward one that is “logical” or “methodic,” see W.J. Ong, *Ramus: method, and the decay of dialogue*. I have read a paper on this

It is no method at all if we understand it rather in terms of its linguisticalness, so to speak, its discursivity, of its having to be put in a language which ultimately intends to prove something (as in logic), or demonstrate a point to be made (as in “rhetoric”), about something, anything. When it comes to the Supreme Being, both theology and philosophy are forced to use images, figuratas, schemes, in other words, the creation of a set of mythemes that can be understood or at least explained to the profanum vulgus. And this means a consciousness of – in true phenomenological mode – the presence, the participation, of *the speaking interpreter, the necessary other between theory and method*, between allegory and exegesis. Let us remember the Underlying principle of signifying figuration, which we can read in Origen, in the *De Principiis*, and which demands that the interpretation account for (as it cannot exist without) the interpreter’s being (its “being-there”, as it were, in XX-century code), his/her “participation” – to use Pico’s term, originally *metexis* in Plato – in the formation of *sense*. Moreover, in this perspective allegoresis is no longer an arbitrary (albeit still through convention and habitus) transposition of meaning (possible with a medieval allegory as semiosis, wherein “this stands for that”), but rather, as Ebeling observed, “a procedure aimed at the very essence of the thing it is investigating”. (Szondi 22-23).

In this sense, allegory manifests a double possibility: first, it is indeed the formal (semiological) scaffolding of given symbols (which are invariant in principle: Mars means war, Jupiter means the Law, etc.), yet the activation and circulation of this universe (code or codes of signs/symbols) require that an allegorical i.e.: “rhetorical”, “figural” – approach be employed, or in other words a discourse which is intrinsically form-giving, meaning-affirming and therefore hermeneutical: allegories here mean creating a meaning when otherwise there would be confusion, uncertainty, or nothing. What is often forgotten when dealing with allegories is that it is intrinsic to them to be created to be told to an audience, a circle of initiates, a clan, a

topic at the Modern Languages Association annual convention in 2015, titled “Method and Rhetoric between Agricola and Ramus,” and soon to be published.

community: they imply and require *others*, human beings “out there”: it is an interpersonal form of discourse, a genre, or a trope that relies, and indeed depends, upon something called, in the XX century, *intersubjectivity*. No such a perspective is possible if we follow the rationalists, the logicians, the geometrical thinkers (unless exposed to Pythagoreanism!).

III.

In the *Heptaplus* Pico alludes to a phenomenon generally understood, after Nietzsche and Freud, as *Interminable interpretation*. Despite all his efforts to say about the Book of *Genesis* what *none* before him has succeeded in saying, Pico was aware that “the vastness and fertility of the field, however, [is] such that no number of harvesters can be equal to it”. (*Works* 72). Otherwise put, the text – even The Sacred Text – will always be open to future interpretation. Knowing the long and complicated tradition of Biblical exegesis certainly reminds one to be wary of proffering the “definitive” interpretation of anything. Yet Pico cannot hold back his own surprise at being the one to advance such a “new” interpretation, the sense of wonder and amazement he felt when con-fronted with such a multifarious and intrinsically polysemous task, namely “to interpret the entire creation of the world continuously in not merely seven senses, without reference to earlier works, but producing a work completely new from the beginning”. (74) The claim that other references are not invoked must be glossed: whereas for the allegorical exegesis he will indeed consult everyone of the “commentatori dottissimi” of the “vastissimo campo” to see if he could contribute but a few “spighe”, when it comes to focusing on the text of *Genesis* itself he announces he will be on his own. The two tendencies, that of the exegetical imperatives and that of the hermeneutic agency are not in contradiction with each other, nor are they opposite in any manner: if they can be said to be the supplement one of the other, at a higher level of abstraction they can also be thought of as being *complementary*, and in a Viconian sense, *co-enabling*. I will return to this point.

Nevertheless, it is at this juncture that Pico also reveals his only one hermeneutical prejudice, understood in a Gadamerian sense, as the set of pre-existing and almost culturally pre-conscious values one brings to the text. As might be expected, at a time where there was no public discourse which could ignore the presence of the Church (of the “official” religion) and its generally accepted (or imposed) dogma, he states that whatever follows must in the last analysis *not* question God. More specifically, he says he wants to “avoid making the Prophet, or the Holy Spirit through the Prophet, assert anything strange” or “alien” to the nature of things “as they are observed, or to the truth ascertained by the better philosophers which even men of our faith have accepted”.¹² (*Works* 74; *Opere* 183) This is huge question for interpreters and translators especially: for unlike what takes place when dealing with a human author’s text, from Valla to Schleiermacher to most European schools of literary theory, where hypotheses about what the author’s intentions might have been were analyzed, to the point that some critics in the late XIX century went as far as to say they could interpret an author’s works better than what they might have intended themselves (“la boria dei dotti” Vico would say!), in Pico’s case *the author cannot be questioned*, he/it/she *must* be right, cannot have said something wrong or misleading or confused: if this happens, the fault lies with the interpreter, for God cannot be wrong!!! As a result of this, we have a copious tradition of speculation in the Midrash and Haggadah.¹³

¹² From hereon I will cite the *Heptaplus* in English from Pico 1977 as *Works*, as this edition contains also the *Oration* and *De ente et uno*.

¹³ In Midrash literature divine words have an existence independent of circumstances and immediate intention, so a text qua text means what it explicitly says and whatever hidden meaning one is able to extract by searching and reframing, and whatever the end result it must have been part of the Divine Plan (Kuger 78). Midrash derives from a root meaning to seek out, to inquire, and to tally results. There is implied a metapractice, a conscious level of selecting and positing a “possible” semanteme or elements of a new figura. It became, historically, an historiographic, canon-building project that served a very disparate community in the post-Rome world. Haggadah means to tell. Everything in Talmud literature which is not halakhah (Jewish Law), including the amplification of Biblical narrative,

Edging further into the *Heptaplus*, we run into the archetype, which corresponds to the Idea. The Idea is *causa sui*, and can only be perceived and understood as one of its instances, as an image participated by man, in short as a *figura*. The *figura* permits a vertical linking of a series of horizontal subsystems of signification. Pico's explanatory strategy rests upon a series of calculated analogies and metaphors which are meant to bring out the sameness in the different, setting up in short a table of correspondences among the various symbolic/semiotic systems which emphasize the structures more than the referents.¹⁴ But let's stay with the method of exposition.

Typically the Count of Mirandola et Concordia will begin with the linguistic sign, find a corresponding symbol at a superior order of discourse, then move on laterally to capture the icons and the stock *figuras*. For example: "the elemental fire burns, the celestial gives life, and the supercelestial loves". (77) He retains the identity principle in the essences – consistently with the later (1491) *De Ente et Uno* – but marks out the differences in the attributes, often conflating Heraclitus with the Platonists. Yet this principle of Unity, and the connected notion of "identity", upon which he insists repeatedly, is ultimately an absent, and unintelligible, legitimizing moment to draw together, toward the center, all that concords and agrees harmoniously, the "hidden alliances of nature". (79) It would correspond to the well known icon of the eye in the center of the triangle, of Egyptian origin, whose fortune in early Modernity can be seen as late as Vico's famous frontispiece to the *New Science*. But approach can be adapted into an epistemological model. (Figure 1)

We noted that this all-seeing, all-gathering eye cannot see in the darkness, since God is so far removed from our capability of intellection, that he in effect can only focus on the other two

fills in gaps in the original narrative, in its parables, legends, didactic tracts and, ultimately, its allegories. See Fornaciari's introduction to *Conclusioni cabalistiche* and *Conclusioni ermetiche*.

¹⁴ Scholars have devoted much research to the role of Kabbala in Pico's thought at this juncture. See note 19 below.

loci, the Formal and the Participated. Here then two possibilities open up:

- A) either we understand this strategy as a reduction of the epistemic triangle to a dichotomous connection between mind and matter, body and soul, or, alternatively,
- B) we “expand” the model to include a fourth angle or locus intrinsic to the interpretive moment.

In the first case, A) by eliminating God the maker we remove also the interpreter, God’s acting and living image on earth, and we are left with a dichotomous formal system of analysis where Idea and Form conflate into one. Touching on a delicate *topos*, this will betray its metaphysical ideology, something which besieges all rationalisms, including that of the Parisian logicians, as they ultimately are anchored in Platonism. In the second case, B) we can leave God alone in his corner to take on the semblance of any Principle or Axiom we choose, but we account for it through the agency of that undefinable being, the indefinite image of man from the *Oration* (“a work of indeterminate form”, 4) that acquires value (semantic, symbolic, cognitively) *as it concretizes in any one of its sociohistorical manifestations*, and who is already related to the three other *loci* of the episteme. However, and this what makes Pico’s position important, this human being is endowed with *libero arbitrio*.¹⁵ The human being is thus still envisioned, four years after the *900 Theses*, as a constant variable, and ever-interpreting, chameleon-like human with agent power.

¹⁵ Once again, though I cannot take this up here in more detail, the inclusion of free will is crucial to the development of the rest of this paper. The freedom of choice accorded to humans is one of the high points of Pico’s philosophizing. Despite the fact that everything stems from God, and that there is predestination, nevertheless humans are the only ones endowed with this peculiar trait, following a line of thought that has Dante and Valla among its precursors. In the *900 Theses* Pico had written: “Licet Dei voluntas consequens semper impleatur, non tamen necessitatem rebus volitis generaliter imposit.” (Even though the will of God is always fulfilled in its consequences, nevertheless it does not necessarily impose necessity upon things.) Cf. *Conclusiones nongentae*, p. 11.

And it is toward this second hypothesis that Pico leans.

The first step is to assess the *status quaestionis*, emphasizing the analogies. Hence celestial or even earthly names are often given to divine things, which are presented figuratively now as stars, now as wheels and animals, now as elements; hence, also, heavenly names are often given to earthly things. [citing Ezekiel 1:16]. Bound by the chains of concord, all these worlds exchange natures as well as names “with mutual liberality”. It is from this principle of generation that flows the science of all allegorical interpretation. The early Fathers could not properly represent certain things, including ideas, Pico argues, by the images proposed by different prophets and theologians, unless trained in interpreting and often directly translating the hidden alliances and affinities of nature with specific Christian symbols ((*Works* 78--79; *Opere* 196-92). That is the very reason why the entire architecture of the *Heptaplus* was erected in the first place. Otherwise there would be no reason why they should have represented this particular thing by this corresponding image, and another by another, rather than each by its “logical” opposite.

The scheme is not new, being rather consistent with late medieval theories of allegory. But there subsists a need to go beyond it. Thus, whereas here and elsewhere Pico reiterates the divine triadic subdivisions of Perfect, Imperfect and Mixture, and so on, in the passage that follows immediately after the one quoted he will open up the triangle to a quadrilateral configuration, in this fashion: (Figura 2)

The arrows point to the shift in the different articulations of this existing human being in the society, away from God and the One. This raises a problem. There were presupposed four worlds in Moses (79), but the Neoplatonic tradition required speaking in terms of the triad: the One (Supercelestial), the Celestial, and then the Sublunary, where humans dwelt.¹⁶ But

¹⁶ On this quaternary structure, see *On the Being and the One*, ch.8, “which declares how these four, being, one, true, and good, are in all things that are after God,” (55) which is standard knowledge in his audience, However by Ch. 10 he has turned to the reality of life and politics, introducing

in this synthesis (a clear syncretic move) we can locate this reconceptualized notion of a human being endowed with free will and freedom of choice: humans are social, historical beings, what is at the center of the triangle is no longer God. There is a world of humans in which God (or Absolute Being) is but one possibility, a dominant one to be sure, but ranking in importance to how the mind works (epistemology, or gnoseology in his day) and what is the purpose of living (ethics), what the political reality of man is or can be (biopolitics). He thus couches his remarks in a cautious tone:

Man is not so much a fourth world, like some creature, as he is the bond and union of the three already described (*Works*, 134 [*Heptaplus* 5,6])

But man is now the center of the universe, meaning the World. We are not talking about the earth, but a world.¹⁷ There are four worlds but humans elect which one to inhabit and valorise.

IV.

In my reading of the *Heptaplus* I had summarized the movement in each Exposition, I looked not so much at how Neoplatonic it is, or how he pulls quotes from various traditions, translating them himself, but at the junctures where the acting interpretive intellect shows preferences, modalities of incorporating the discourse of the other, the necessity to re-read the allegories in terms of whom they were directed and how there exist analogies in the system of beliefs that speak to a newer a broader more inclusive human project.

an agent enmeshed in history (in those same religions Pico was studying; in the same regional warring factions): “in which the whole argument turns to the ordering of life and the improvement of conduct.” (60). The interpreter Pico is pulling away in part from rigid (though also complex) epistemologies and is opening up to discursive, inter-subjective, relational forms of knowledge, concerns upon which he may intervene, through his free will. In that he speaks, at least in principle, to a contemporary sensibility.

¹⁷ I discussed this in Carravetta 2018.

As I referred above to how rhetoric and method are really two sides of the same coin, let us then sketch out Pico's working principles of interpretation, bearing in mind both, the restrictions imposed by his default ontology of the One, but also as we argued the weakening of this paradigm in order to account for a new, or at least altered, idea of the human.

Methodologically, the treatise self-consciously, metacritically, moves along these steps (*Works*, 80; [*Heptaplus*, second Proem]). My comments in parenthesis:

A) Whatever is contained in any of the worlds under investigation, an equivalent "like" must be contained in the world we are interpreting from (the "must" suggests that we have to look for it, we must want to find a common denominator; also, the presentism of the interpreter, their *Lifeworld*);

B) Whatever is written in Moses' text we interpret in relation to the angelic and invisible world, making no mention whatever of the others (a systematic, methodological imperative to restrict the field and the path);

C) Everything is interpreted with relation to the Celestial world (legitimizing Center, the *Theos* of Immutable Theory);

D) We then interpret with relation to the sublunary and corruptible world (the new apex, *the fourth world*, of the epistemic quadrangle described above); and finally,

E) we interpret in relation to the nature of man (the independent historical variable, the undefinable creature who is now the centerpiece of the human project; this is the most challenging claim made by Pico that signals a rupture with his predecessors and a critique of contemporaries)

Subsequently, Pico introduces

F) a fifth level of exposition because some natures, by which he means that some people, have "peculiar rights", an acknowledgment of what today we call diversity; thus

the *scriba dei* is now turning his gaze upon a real world of social organization and values); there follows,
G) a sixth level within which he can show “fifteen ways to link the things mentioned” (where we can perceive once again the common terrain of semiotics and hermeneutics but where the first offers the material and the second interprets in the general terms of understanding (*Verstehen*) the world as endless perspectives on meaning); and last but definitely not least, a
H) seventh level, or “day”, in which the circle closes upon itself by returning to the beginning, in which Pico demonstrates how all things flow back unto God (in this he tops Origen, who had glossed “only” the six days of the text!)

It’s a coherent textbook summary of the work. However, when he introduces the notion of “felicity”, which corresponds to eternal life – a very “Christian” thing to state, – he reiterates that man is supremely situated to achieve happiness because he is endowed with *intelligence* and *freedom of choice* (*Works*, 149; *Heptaplus* 7, Proem]).

Thus we arrive at the key passage, a condensed tour de force in exegesis-cum-hermeneutics. In the explication of the first word/sentence of *Genesis*, “In the beginning”..., Pico takes the Hebrew text, the word “*Beresit*” and performs an anagrammatic decipherment of it. He employs the newly acquired knowledge of the Kabbala, and glosses each particle contained in it, teasing out a network of semantic values, but conceptually relying on the previous seven expositions of *Genesis* 1-17. The exercise proves again, if it were still necessary to do so, that a translation cannot ever be rendered word for word, or by pairing minor parts of speech, for their function are always different in the different languages. A translation is a complete remake in an often entirely different semiotic universe. To truly capture what’s contained in God’s word, it requires that a rich tapestry of signifying loci, of symbols present in the receiving culture, be summoned, and organized on the basis not only of what the target idiom syntactically permits, but also at the rhetorical level of what message, or ideology, one wishes to

bring across. The end result of this translation/interpretation/explanation,¹⁸ is remarkable:

The Father, in the Son and through the Son, the beginning and the end of the rest, created the head, the fire, and the foundation of the great man with a good pact". (*Works* 172-74; *Opere* 374-83; *Allegretti* 47-50)¹⁹

What a difference! A thorough analysis of this ex-egetical marvel would require a lengthy separate study, one in which Biblical scholarship and its various strands, especially the Kabbala, be compared and evaluated for accuracy first of all.²⁰ But it can be shown that, syncretic to a fault, Pico fuses here Platonism, Old Testament theology, Patristic theology, and Jewish mysticism (the commentaries), with a sensitivity for – and willing adoption of – most of the tenets of the contemporary disciplines of astrology, memes and epistemes from his interest

¹⁸ In Palmer's *Hermeneutics* we read that the word *hermeneuin* in ancient Greek could have meant three things: to say, to explain, to translate.

¹⁹ According to Arthur Leslie, Pico's first teacher was Elijah del Medigo, an Averroist natural philosopher from Crete, whom Pico met in Padua during 1480-1482 and continued to know to the end of 1486, translated Averroes' commentary on Plato's *Republic* from Hebrew to Latin and gave opinions to Pico about Averroes and the Kabbala. Then there was Flavius Mithridates, a converted Sicilian Jew, who translated voluminous Kabbalistic, philosophical and exegetical Hebrew books for Pico by 1486 and taught him Hebrew, Arabic and Aramaic. In addition, Pico relied on Yohanan Alemanno, consultant from 1488 until Pico's death. Alemanno wrote a 400 page commentary in Hebrew in which he records the experience of how he fine tuned Pico's understanding of the Jewish interpretive tradition. Lesly believes that "Alemanno also would serve as model for the kind of reader Pico intended to convert by the *Heptaplus*, through its "implied reader," a Jew, versed in Bible, midrash, Talmud, and law, who was accustomed to biblical commentary written by philosophers, some of whom accepted kabbalistic interpretations" (from a private email exchange with author).

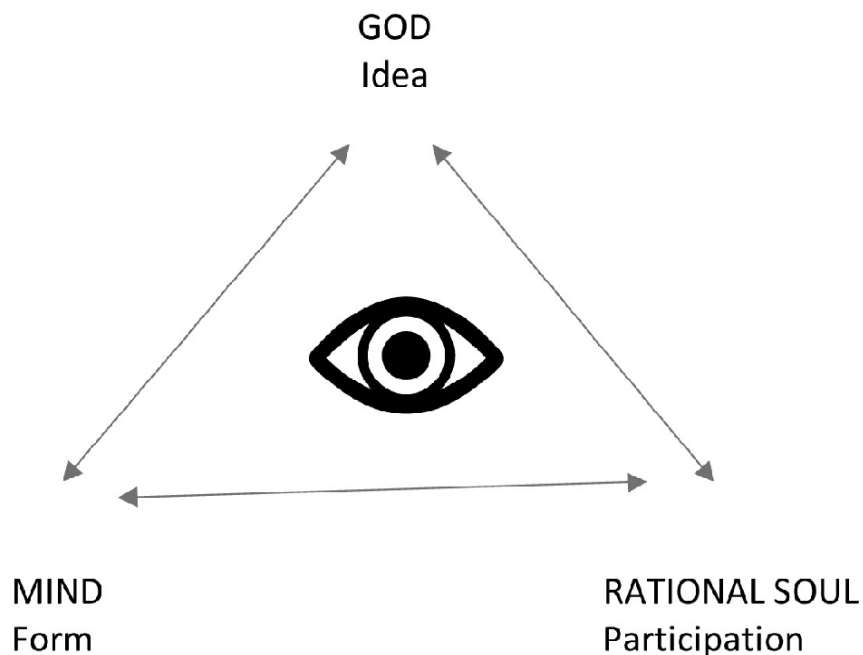
²⁰ The remarkable feat was made possible by the fact, according to experts in the field, that he read the text without the 51 diacritical signs which were added to the Torah between the VI and the IX century by the Masorites, which indicate vowels (16), voice inflections (30), and modified consonants (4). It is likely that Pico double checked all his extrapolations against the Hebrew and Aramaic in constant consultation with the named Jewish scholars.

in Eastern cultures, and strong Neoplatonism in the academies. This could not have boded him well, and in fact he risked getting arrested and tried for heresy if he had not fled for his life to Paris. Thanks to Lorenzo, however, he soon got back to Florence. It was radical to propose that different faiths – historically at each other’s throats whenever the opportunity presented itself – can share some principles, that a foreign symbology can be transplanted into another as complementary, not as negation or agon. Things were heating up: Savonarola was getting louder, the King of France may decide to cross the Alps, the King of Naples is scouring for allies north of Rome. Nevertheless his project is to integrate all or most of the hermeneutic topologies of the past into one coherent vision, since (if) there is one God, different people express it and interpret his message in different ways. Is this not a late XX century issue? Thus we can read allegories critically and creatively in view of diversity and tolerance, but being human is common to all the races of the earth. Pico offers living proof of the dilemma he had envisioned and perceived all about, that human beings are shifty and shapeless and yet at any one moment they can enact and guide their own actions...almost as if they were little gods. Humans create, project, act toward an end. The chameleon can be caught in action in any one of its colorations. And be a real, historical figure.

The “new” man, the dweller of the “fourth world”, is an intrinsically hermeneutic creature, an image-building, meaning-producing, translation/migration prone human agent signified in its being-with-others in a given place, perhaps “thrown into existing” but nevertheless “situated” in a Sartrean sort of way. Or engaged “in his particular circumstance”, Ortega y Gasset would say. *This is consistent with having an indefinite essence: only existence and specific interactions can create and confer an essence, an identity, a reality to interpersonal relations.* It’s not that this did not happen before and in fact since forever, but Pico proposes a different way of looking at the world that promotes ideas and capabilities that were either taboo or discredited or ignored before. For instance, trying to see what the Chaldeans, the Hebrews, the Greeks, had in common (typically, a severe idea of the Supreme being) that could still

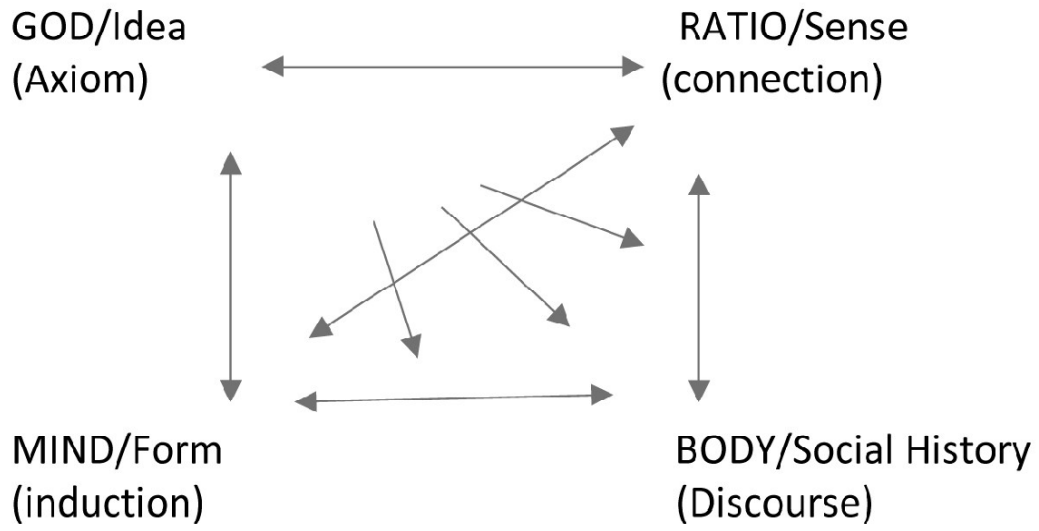
be entertained and admitted under the mantle of Christianity. Perhaps taking the word catholic both literally and allegorically. But the emphasis on the body is significant also, as it pushes God out of the picture somewhat, as schematized in Figure 2. Moreover, this human envisioned by Pico is not to be identified with *brute matter* – “the earth, that is, matter, is void by its nature unless it is filled with forms from another source” (141) – *nor with God* [my emphasis], but with “body and rational soul”, (118) contained in a flux where *relation, movement, action and belief are (pre)given*, where there arises *the necessity of resolution, of resolving a question or problem or contest*. This idealized new human capable of importing knowledges from faraway places and who has finally realized he is in control of his own destiny, his worldly reality, is a dangerous creature. He wants to make a perfect world for a free individual.²¹

Figura 1.



²¹ In the *900 Theses* Pico’s most important interlocutors are Aquinas, Scotus, Averroes and Avicenna. In the final instalment of these reflections on Pico I will argue that Pico’s philosophy of interpretation of man in history is required background to both T. More and N. Machiavelli, and the debate between Luther and Erasmus that followed a few years after Pico’s death.

Figura 2.



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