

GIOVANNI PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA

# ORATION ON THE DIGNITY OF MAN

Translated by A. Robert Caponigri

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1998 printing.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Published in the United States by  
Regnery Publishing, Inc.  
An Eagle Publishing Company  
One Massachusetts Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20001

Distributed to the trade by  
National Book Network  
4720-A Boston Way  
Lanham, MD 20706

Printed on acid-free paper.  
Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Books are available in quantity for promotional or premium use. Write to Director of Special Sales, Regnery Publishing, Inc., One Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20001, for information on discounts and terms or call (202) 216-0600.



*A Gateway Edition*  
REGNERY PUBLISHING, INC.  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

Most esteemed Fathers, I have read in the ancient writings of the Arabians that Abdala the Saracen<sup>1</sup> on being asked what, on this stage, so to say, of the world, seemed to him most evocative of wonder, replied that there was nothing to be seen more marvelous than man. And that celebrated exclamation of Hermes Trismegistus, "What a great miracle is man, Asclepius"<sup>2</sup> confirms this opinion.

And still, as I reflected upon the basis assigned for these estimations, I was not fully persuaded by the diverse reasons advanced by a variety of persons for the pre-eminence of human nature; for example: that man is the intermediary between creatures, that he is the familiar of the gods above him as he is lord of the beings beneath him; that, by the acuteness of his senses, the inquiry of his reason and the light of his intelligence, he is the interpreter of nature, set midway between the

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timeless unchanging and the flux of time; the living union (as the Persians say), the very marriage hymn of the world, and, by David's testimony<sup>3</sup> but little lower than the angels. These reasons are all, without question, of great weight; nevertheless, they do not touch the principal reasons, those, that is to say, which justify man's unique right to such unbounded admiration. Why, I asked, should we not admire the angels themselves and the beatific choirs more? At long last, however, I feel that I have come to some understanding of why man is the most fortunate of living things and, consequently, deserving of all admiration; of what may be the condition in the hierarchy of beings assigned to him, which draws upon him the envy, not of the brutes alone, but of the astral beings and of the very intelligences which dwell beyond the confines of the world. A thing surpassing belief and smiting the soul with wonder. Still, how could it be otherwise? For it is on this ground that man is, with complete justice, considered and called a great mir-

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acle and a being worthy of all admiration.

Hear then, oh Fathers, precisely what this condition of man is; and in the name of your humanity, grant me your benign audition as I pursue this theme.

God the Father, the Mightiest Architect, had already raised, according to the precepts of His hidden wisdom, this world we see, the cosmic dwelling of divinity, a temple most august. He had already adorned the supercelestial region with Intelligences, infused the heavenly globes with the life of immortal souls and set the fermenting dung-heap of the inferior world teeming with every form of animal life. But when this work was done, the Divine Artificer still longed for some creature which might comprehend the meaning of so vast an achievement, which might be moved with love at its beauty and smitten with awe at its grandeur. When, consequently, all else had been completed (as both Moses and Timaeus testify),<sup>4</sup> in the very last place, He bethought Himself of bringing forth man. Truth was, however, that

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there remained no archetype according to which He might fashion a new offspring, nor in His treasure-houses the wherewithal to endow a new son with a fitting inheritance, nor any place, among the seats of the universe, where this new creature might dispose himself to contemplate the world. All space was already filled; all things had been distributed in the highest, the middle and the lowest orders. Still, it was not in the nature of the power of the Father to fail in this last creative élan; nor was it in the nature of that supreme Wisdom to hesitate through lack of counsel in so crucial a matter; nor, finally, in the nature of His beneficent love to compel the creature destined to praise the divine generosity in all other things to find it wanting in himself.

At last, the Supreme Maker decreed that this creature, to whom He could give nothing wholly his own, should have a share in the particular endowment of every other creature. Taking man, therefore, this creature of indeterminate image, He set him in

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the middle of the world and thus spoke to him:

"We have given you, Oh Adam, no visage proper to yourself, nor any endowment properly your own, in order that whatever place, whatever form, whatever gifts you may, with premeditation, select, these same you may have and possess through your own judgment and decision. The nature of all other creatures is defined and restricted within laws which We have laid down; you, by contrast, impeded by no such restrictions, may, by your own free will, to whose custody We have assigned you, trace for yourself the lineaments of your own nature. I have placed you at the very center of the world, so that from that vantage point you may with greater ease glance round about you on all that the world contains. We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer. It will be in your power to

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descend to the lower, brutish forms of life; you will be able, through your own decision, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine."

Oh unsurpassed generosity of God the Father, Oh wondrous and unsurpassable felicity of man, to whom it is granted to have what he chooses, to be what he wills to be! The brutes, from the moment of their birth, bring with them, as Lucilius says,<sup>6</sup> "from their mother's womb" all that they will ever possess. The highest spiritual beings were, from the very moment of creation, or soon thereafter, fixed in the mode of being which would be theirs through measureless eternities. But upon man, at the moment of his creation, God bestowed seeds pregnant with all possibilities, the germs of every form of life. Whichever of these a man shall cultivate, the same will mature and bear fruit in him. If vegetative, he will become a plant; if sensual, he will become brutish; if rational, he will reveal himself a heavenly being; if intellectual, he will be an angel and the

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son of God. And if, dissatisfied with the lot of all creatures, he should recollect himself into the center of his own unity, he will there, become one spirit with God, in the solitary darkness of the Father, Who is set above all things, himself transcend all creatures.

Who then will not look with awe upon this our chameleon, or who, at least, will look with greater admiration on any other being? This creature, man, whom Asclepius the Athenian, by reason of this very mutability, this nature capable of transforming itself, quite rightly said was symbolized in the mysteries by the figure of Proteus. This is the source of those metamorphoses, or transformations, so celebrated among the Hebrews and among the Pythagoreans; for even the esoteric theology of the Hebrews at times transforms the holy Enoch into that angel of divinity which is sometimes called "*malakh-ha-shekhinali*"<sup>6</sup> and at other times transforms other personages into divinities of other names;<sup>7</sup> while the Pythagoreans transform

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men guilty of crimes into brutes or even, if we are to believe Empedocles, into plants; and Mohamet, imitating them, was known frequently to say that the man who deserts the divine law becomes a brute. And he was right; for it is not the bark that makes the tree, but its insensitive and unresponsive nature; nor the hide which makes the beast of burden, but its brute and sensual soul; nor the orbicular form which makes the heavens, but their harmonious order. Finally, it is not freedom from a body, but its spiritual intelligence, which makes the angel. If you see a man dedicated to his stomach, crawling on the ground, you see a plant and not a man; or if you see a man bedazzled by the empty forms of the imagination, as by the wiles of Calypso, and through their alluring solicitations made a slave to his own senses, you see a brute and not a man. If, however, you see a philosopher, judging and distinguishing all things according to the rule of reason, him shall you hold in veneration, for he is a creature of heaven and not of earth; if, finally, a

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pure contemplator, unmindful of the body, wholly withdrawn into the inner chambers of the mind, here indeed is neither a creature of earth nor a heavenly creature, but some higher divinity, clothed with human flesh.

Who then will not look with wonder upon man, upon man who, not without reason, in the sacred Mosaic and Christian writings, is designated sometimes by the term "all flesh" and sometimes by the term "every creature," because he molds, fashions and transforms himself into the likeness of all flesh and assumes the characteristic power of every form of life? This is why Evantes the Persian<sup>8</sup> in his exposition of the Chaldean theology, writes that man has no inborn and proper semblance, but many which are extraneous and adventitious: whence the Chaldean saying: "*Enosh hu shinujim vekammah tebhaath haj*"—"man is a living creature of varied, multiform and ever-changing nature."<sup>9</sup>

But what is the purpose of all this? That we may understand—since we have been

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born into this condition of being what we choose to be—that we ought to be sure above else that it may never be said against us that, born to a high position, we failed to appreciate it, but fell instead to the estate of brutes and uncomprehending beasts of burden; and that the saying of Asaph the Prophet,<sup>10</sup> "You are all Gods and sons of the Most High," might rather be true; and finally that we may not, through abuse of the generosity of a most indulgent Father, pervert the free option which He has given us from a saving to a damning gift. Let a certain saving ambition invade our souls so that, impatient of mediocrity, we pant after the highest things and (since, if we will, we can) bend all our efforts to their attainment. Let us disdain the things of earth, hold as little worth even the astral orders and, putting behind us all the things of this world, hasten to that court beyond the world, closest to the most exalted Godhead. There, as the sacred mysteries tell us, the Seraphim, Cherubim and Thrones occupy

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the first places;<sup>11</sup> but, unable to yield to them, and impatient of any second place, let us emulate their dignity and glory. And, if we will it, we shall be inferior to them in nothing.

How must we proceed and what must we do to realize this ambition? Let us observe what they do, what kind of life they lead. For if we lead this kind of life (and we can) we shall attain their same estate. The Seraphim burns with the fire of charity; from the Cherubim flashes forth the splendor of intelligence; the Throne stands firm with the firmness of justice. If, consequently, in the pursuit of the active life we govern inferior things by just criteria, we shall be established in the firm position of the Thrones. If, freeing ourselves from active care, we devote our time to contemplation, meditating upon the Creator in His work, and the work in its Creator, we shall be resplendent with the light of the Cherubim. If we burn with love for the Creator only, His consuming fire will quickly transform us into the flaming like-

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ness of the Seraphim. Above the Throne, that is, above the just judge, God sits, judge of the ages. Above the Cherub, that is, the contemplative spirit, He spreads His wings, nourishing him, as it were, with an enveloping warmth. For the spirit of the Lord moves upon the waters, those waters which are above the heavens and which, according to Job, praise the Lord in pre-aurorial hymns.<sup>12</sup> Whoever is a Seraph, that is a lover, is in God and God is in him; even, it may be said, God and he are one. Great is the power of the Thrones which we attain by right judgment, highest of all the sublimity of the Seraphim which we attain by loving.

But how can anyone judge or love what he does not know? Moses loved the God whom he had seen and as judge of his people he administered what he had previously seen in contemplation on the mountain. Therefore the Cherub is the intermediary and by his light equally prepares us for the fire of the Seraphim and the judgment of the Thrones. This is the

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bond which unites the highest minds, the Palladian order which presides over contemplative philosophy; this is then the bond which before all else we must emulate, embrace and comprehend, whence we may be rapt to the heights of love or descend, well instructed and prepared, to the duties of the practical life. But certainly it is worth the effort, if we are to form our life on the model of the life of the Cherubim, to have familiarly before our eyes both its nature and its quality as well as the duties and the functions proper to it. Since it is not granted to us, flesh as we are and knowledgeable only of the things of earth, to attain such knowledge by our own efforts, let us have recourse to the ancient Fathers. They can give us the fullest and most reliable testimony concerning these matters because they had an almost domestic and connatural knowledge of them.

Let us ask the Apostle Paul, that vessel of election, in what activity he saw the armies of the Cherubim engaged when he



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was rapt to the third heaven. He will answer, according to the interpretation of Dionysius, that he saw them first being purified, then illuminated, then finally made perfect. We, therefore, imitating the life of the Cherubim here on earth, by refraining the impulses of our passions through moral science, by dissipating the darkness of reason by dialectic—thus washing away, so to speak, the filth of ignorance and vice—may likewise purify our souls, so that the passions may never run rampant, nor reason, lacking restraint, range beyond its natural limits. Then may we suffuse our purified souls with the light of natural philosophy, bringing it to final perfection by the knowledge of divine things.

Lest we be satisfied to consult only those of our own faith and tradition, let us also have recourse to the patriarch, Jacob, whose likeness, carved on the throne of glory, shines out before us.<sup>16</sup> This wisest of the Fathers who though sleeping in the lower world, still has his eyes fixed on the world above, will admonish us. He will ad-

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monish us, however, in a figure, for all things appeared in figures to the men of those times: a ladder rises by many rungs from earth to the height of heaven and at its summit sits the Lord, while over its rungs the contemplative angels move, alternately ascending and descending. If this is what we, who wish to imitate the angelic life, must do in our turn, who, I ask, would dare set muddied feet or soiled hands to the ladder of the Lord? It is forbidden, as the mysteries teach, for the impure to touch what is pure. But what are these hands, these feet, of which we speak? The feet, to be sure, of the soul: that is, its most despicable portion by which the soul is held fast to earth as a root to the ground; I mean to say, its alimentary and nutritive faculty where lust ferments and voluptuous softness is fostered. And why may we not call "the hand" that irascible power of the soul, which is the warrior of the appetitive faculty, fighting for it and foraging for it in the dust and the sun, seizing for it all the things which, sleeping in the

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shade, it will devour? Let us bathe in moral philosophy as in a living stream, these hands, that is, the whole sensual part in which the lusts of the body have their seat and which, as the saying is, holds the soul by the scruff of the neck, lest we be flung back from that ladder as profane and polluted intruders. Even this, however, will not be enough, if we wish to be the companions of the angels who traverse the ladder of Jacob, unless we are first instructed and rendered able to advance on that ladder duly, step by step, at no point to stray from it and to complete the alternate ascensions and descents. When we shall have been so prepared by the art of discourse or of reason, then, inspired by the spirit of the Cherubim, exercising philosophy through all the rungs of the ladder—that is, of nature—we shall penetrate being from its center to its surface and from its surface to its center. At one time we shall descend, dismembering with titanic force the “unity” of the “many,” like the members of Osiris; at another time we

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shall ascend, recollecting those same members, by the power of Phoebus, into their original unity. Finally, in the bosom of the Father, who reigns above the ladder, we shall find perfection and peace in the felicity of theological knowledge.

Let us also inquire of the just Job, who made his covenant with the God of life even before he entered into life, what, above all else, the supreme God desires of those tens of thousands of beings which surround Him. He will answer, without a doubt: peace, just as it is written in the pages of Job: He establishes peace in the high reaches of heaven.<sup>14</sup> And since the middle order interprets the admonitions of the higher to the lower orders, the words of Job the theologian may well be interpreted for us by Empedocles the philosopher.<sup>15</sup> Empedocles teaches us that there is in our souls a dual nature; the one bears us upward toward the heavenly regions; by the other we are dragged downward toward regions infernal, through friendship and discord, war and peace; so witness

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those verses in which he laments that, torn by strife and discord, like a madman, in flight from the gods, he is driven into the depths of the sea. For it is a patent thing, oh Fathers, that many forces strive within us, in grave, intestine warfare, worse than the civil wars of states. Equally clear is it that, if we are to overcome this warfare, if we are to achieve that peace which must establish us finally among the exalted of God, philosophy alone can compose and allay that strife. In the first place, if our man seeks only truce with his enemies, moral philosophy will restrain the unreasoning drives of the protean brute, the passionate violence and wrath of the lion within us. If, acting on wiser counsel, we should seek to secure an unbroken peace, moral philosophy will still be at hand to fulfill our desires abundantly; and having slain either beast, like sacrificed sows, it will establish an inviolable compact of peace between the flesh and the spirit. Dialectic will compose the disorders of reason torn by anxiety and uncertainty

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amid the conflicting hordes of words and captious reasonings. Natural philosophy will reduce the conflict of opinions and the endless debates which from every side vex, distract and lacerate the disturbed mind. It will compose this conflict, however, in such a manner as to remind us that nature, as Heraclitus wrote, is generated by war and for this reason is called by Homer, "strife." Natural philosophy, therefore, cannot assure us a true and unshakable peace. To bestow such peace is rather the privilege and office of the queen of the sciences, most holy theology. Natural philosophy will at best point out the way to theology and even accompany us along the path, while theology, seeing us from afar hastening to draw close to her, will call out: "Come to me you who are spent in labor and I will restore you; come to me and I will give you the peace which the world and nature cannot give."<sup>16</sup>

Summoned in such consoling tones and invited with such kindness, like earthly Mercuries, we shall fly on winged feet to

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embrace that most blessed mother and there enjoy the peace we have longed for: that most holy peace, that indivisible union, that seamless friendship through which all souls will not only be at one in that one mind which is above every mind, but, in a manner which passes expression, will really be one, in the most profound depths of being. This is the friendship which the Pythagoreans say is the purpose of all philosophy. This is the peace which God established in the high places of the heaven and which the angels, descending to earth, announced to men of good will, so that men, ascending through this peace to heaven, might become angels. This is the peace which we would wish for our friends, for our age, for every house into which we enter and for our own soul, that through this peace it may become the dwelling of God; so that, too, when the soul, by means of moral philosophy and dialectic shall have purged herself of her uncleanness, adorned herself with the many disciplines of philosophy as

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with the raiment of a prince's court and crowned the pediments of her doors with the garlands of theology, the King of Glory may descend and, coming with the Father, take up his abode with her. If she prove worthy of so great a guest, she will, through his boundless clemency, arrayed in the golden vesture of the many sciences as in a nuptial gown, receive him, not as a guest merely, but as a spouse. And rather than be parted from him, she will prefer to leave her own people and her father's house. Forgetful of her very self she will desire to die to herself in order to live in her spouse, in whose eyes the death of his saints is infinitely precious: I mean that death—if the very plenitude of life can be called death—whose meditation wise men have always held to be the special study of philosophy.<sup>17</sup>

Let us also cite Moses himself, who is but little removed from the living well-spring of the most holy and ineffable understanding by whose nectar the angels are inebriated. Let us listen to the venerable