

Continuation of Pico della Mirandola

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 *malakha-shekhinah* and at other times transforms other personages into divinities of other names; while the Pythagoreans transform men guilty of crimes into brutes or even, if we are to believe Empedocles, into plants; and Mohammed, 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for he is a creature of heaven and not of earth; if, finally, a pure contemplator, unmindful of the body, wholly withdrawn into the inner chambers of the mind, here indeed is neither a creature of earth nor a heavenly creature, but some higher divinity, clothed in human flesh.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 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 shinnujim vekammah tebhaoth haj*" --- "man is a living creature of varied, multiform and ever-changing nature."

But what is the purpose of all this? That we may understand --- since we have been born into this condition of being what we choose to be --- that we ought to be sure above all 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 Aspah the Prophet, "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 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 the first places; 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 Thrones stand 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 likeness 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. 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 judgement, 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 judgement of the Thrones. This is the 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 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 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 was rapt into the third heaven. He will answer, according to the interpretation of Dionysius, that he saw them first being purified, then illuminated, and 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. 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 admonish, 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 things which, sleeping in the 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, let us 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 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. 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. Empedocles teaches us that there is in our souls a dual nature; the one bears us upwards toward the heavenly regions; by the other we are dragged downward toward regions infernal, through friendship and discord, war and peace; so witness 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, O 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 establish 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 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 unto 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."

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

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 judge as he enunciates his laws to us who live in the desert solitude of the body: ``Let those who, still unclean, have need of moral philosophy, dwell with the peoples outside the tabernacles, under the open sky, until, like the priests of Thessaly, they shall have cleansed themselves. Those who have already brought order into their lives may be received into the tabernacle, but still may not touch the sacred vessels. Let them rather first, as zealous levites, in the service of dialectic, minister to the holy offices of philosophy. When they shall themselves be admitted to those offices, they may, as priests of philosophy, contemplate the many-colored throne of the higher God, that is the courtly palace of the star-hung heavens, the heavenly candelabrum aflame with seven lights and elements which are the furry veils of this tabernacle; so that, finally, having been permitted to enter, through the merit of sublime theology, into the innermost chambers of the temple, with no veil of images interposing itself, we may enjoy the glory of divinity." This is what Moses beyond a doubt commands us, admonishing, urging and exhorting us to prepare ourselves, while we may, by means of philosophy, a road to future heavenly glory.

In fact, however, the dignity of the liberal arts, which I am about to discuss, and their value to us is attested not only by the Mosaic and Christian mysteries but also by the theologies of the most ancient times. What else is to be understood by the stages through which the initiates must pass in the mysteries of the Greeks? These initiates, after being purified by the arts which we might call expiatory, moral philosophy and dialectic, were granted admission to the mysteries. What could such admission mean but the interpretation of occult nature by means of philosophy? Only after they had been prepared in this way did they receive "*Epopteia*," that is, the immediate vision of divine things by the light of theology. Who would not long to be admitted to such mysteries? Who would not desire, putting all human concerns behind him, holding the goods of fortune in contempt and little minding the goods of the body, thus to become, while still a denizen of earth, a guest at the table of the gods, and, drunk with the nectar of eternity, receive, while still a mortal, the gift of immortality? Who would not wish to be so inspired by those Socratic frenzies which Plato sings in the *Phaedrus* that, swiftly fleeing this place, that is, this world fixed in evil, by the oars, so to say, both of feet and wings, he might reach the heavenly Jerusalem by the swiftest course? Let us be driven, O Fathers, by those Socratic frenzies which lift us to such ecstasy that our intellects and our very selves are united to God. And we shall be moved by them in this way as previously we have done all that it lies in us to do. If, by moral philosophy, the power of our passions shall have been restrained by proper controls so that they achieve harmonious accord; and if, by dialectic, our reason shall have progressed by an ordered advance, then, smitten by the frenzy of the Muses, we shall hear the heavenly harmony with the inward ears of the spirit. Then the leader of the Muses, Bacchus, revealing to us in our moments of philosophy, through his mysteries, that is, the visible signs of nature, the invisible things of God, will make us drunk with the richness of the house of God; and there, if, like Moses, we shall prove entirely faithful, most sacred theology will supervene to inspire us with redoubled ecstasy. For, raised to the most eminent height of theology, whence we shall be able to measure with the rod of indivisible eternity all things that are and that have been; and, grasping the primordial beauty of things, like the seers of Phoebus, we shall become the winged lovers of theology. And at last, smitten by the ineffable love as by a sting, and, like the Seraphim, filled with the godhead, we shall be, no longer ourselves, but the very One who made us.

The sacred names of Apollo, to anyone who penetrates their meanings and the mysteries they conceal, clearly show that God is a philosopher no less than a seer; but since Ammonius has amply treated this theme, there is no occasion for me to expound it anew. Nevertheless, O Fathers, we cannot fail to recall those three Delphic precepts which are so very necessary for everyone about to enter the most holy and august temple, not of the false, but of the true Apollo who illumines every soul as it enters this world. You will see that they exhort us to nothing else but to embrace with all our powers this tripartite philosophy which we are now discussing. As a matter of fact that aphorism: *meden agan*, this is: "Nothing in excess," duly prescribes a measure and rule for all the virtues through the concept of the "Mean" of which moral philosophy treats. In like manner, that other aphorism *gnothi seauton*, that is, "Know thyself," invites and exhorts us to the study of the whole nature of which the nature of man is the connecting link and the "mixed potion"; for he who knows himself knows all things in himself, as Zoroaster first and after him Plato, in the *Alcibiades*, wrote. Finally, enlightened by this knowledge, through the aid of natural philosophy, being already close to God, employing the theological salutation *ei*, that is "Thou art," we shall blissfully address the true Apollo on intimate terms.

- Let us also seek the opinion of [Pythagoras](#), that wisest of men, known as a wise man precisely because he never thought himself worthy of that name. His first precept to us will be: ``Never sit on a bushel"; never, that is, through slothful inaction to lose our power of reason, that faculty by which the mind examines, judges and measures all things; but rather unremittingly by the rule and exercise of dialectic, to direct it and keep it agile. Next he will warn us of two things to be avoided at all costs: Neither to make water facing the sun, nor to cut our nails while offering sacrifice. Only when, by moral philosophy, we shall have evacuated the weakening appetites of our too-abundant pleasures and pared away, like nail clippings, the sharp points of anger and wrath in our souls, shall we finally begin to take part in the sacred rites, that is, the mysteries of Bacchus of which we have spoken and to dedicate ourselves to that contemplation of which the Sun is rightly called the father and the guide. Finally, Pythagoras will command us to ``Feed the cock"; that is, to nourish the divine part of our soul with the knowledge of divine things as with substantial food and heavenly ambrosia. This is the cock whose visage is the lion, that is, all earthly power, holds in fear and awe. This is the cock to whom, as we read in [Job](#), all understanding was given. At this cock's crowing, erring man returns to his senses. This is the cock which every day, in the morning twilight, with the stars of morning, raises a *Te Deum* to heaven. This is the cock which Socrates, at the hour of his death, when he hoped he was about to join the divinity of his spirit to the divinity of the higher world and when he was already beyond danger of any bodily illness, said that he owed to Asclepius, that is, the healer of souls.

Let us also pass in review the records of the Chaldeans; there we shall see (if they are to be believed) that the road to happiness, for mortals, lies through these same arts. The Chaldean interpreters write that it was a saying of Zoroaster that the soul is a winged creature. When her wings fall from her, she is plunged into the body; but when they grow strong again, she flies back to the supernal regions. And when his disciples asked him how they might insure that their souls might be well plumed and hence swift in flight he replied: "Water them well with the waters of life." And when they persisted, asking whence they might obtain these waters of life, he answered (as he was wont) in a parable: "The Paradise of God is bathed and watered by four rivers; from these same sources you may draw the waters which will save you. The name of the river which flows from the north is Pischon which means, 'the Right.' That which flows from the west is Gichon, that is, 'Expiation.' The river flowing from the east is named Chiddekel, that is, 'Light,' while that, finally, from the south is Perath, which may be understood as 'Compassion.'" Consider carefully and with full attention, O Fathers, what these deliverances of Zoroaster might mean. Obviously, they can only mean that we should, by moral science, as by western waves, wash the uncleanness from our eyes; that, by dialectic, as by a reading taken by the northern star, our gaze must be aligned with the right. Then, that we should become accustomed to bear, in the contemplation of nature, the still feeble light of truth, like the first rays of the rising sun, so that finally we may, through theological piety and the most holy cult of God, become able, like the eagles of heaven, to bear the effulgent splendor of the noonday sun. These are, perhaps, those "morning, midday and evening thoughts" which David first celebrated and on which St. Augustine later expatiated. This is the noonday light which inflames the Seraphim toward their goal and equally illuminates the Cherubim. This is the promised land toward which our ancient father Abraham was ever advancing; this the region where, as the teachings of the Cabalists and the Moors tell us, there is no place for unclean spirits. And if we may be permitted, even in the form of a riddle, to say anything publicly about the deeper mysteries: since the precipitous fall of man has left his mind in a vertiginous whirl and since according to [Jeremiah](#), death has come in through the windows to infect our hearts and bowels with evil, let us call upon Raphael, the heavenly healer that by moral philosophy and dialectic, as with healing drugs, he may release us. When we shall have been restored to health, Gabriel, the strength of God, will abide in us. Leading us through the marvels of nature and pointing out to us everywhere the power and the goodness of God, he will deliver us finally to the care of the High Priest Michael. He, in turn, will adorn those who have successfully completed their service to philosophy with the priesthood of theology as with a crown of precious stones.

These are the reasons, most reverend Fathers, which not only led, but even compelled me, to the study of philosophy. And I should not have undertaken to expound them, except to reply to those who are wont to condemn the study of philosophy, especially among men of high rank, but also among those of modest station. For the whole study of philosophy (such is the unhappy plight of our time) is occasion for contempt and contumely, rather than honor and glory. The deadly and monstrous persuasion has invaded practically all minds, that philosophy ought not to be studied at all or by very few people; as though it were a thing of little worth to have before our eyes and at our finger-tips, as matters we have searched out with greatest care, the causes of things, the ways of nature and the plan of the universe, God's counsels and the mysteries of heaven and earth, unless by such knowledge one might procure some profit or favor for oneself. Thus we have reached the point, it is painful to recognize, where the only persons accounted wise are those who can reduce the pursuit of wisdom to a profitable traffic; and chaste Pallas, who dwells among men only by the generosity of the gods, is rejected, hooted, whistled at in scorn, with no one to love or befriend her unless, by prostituting herself, she is able to pay back into the strongbox of her lover the ill-procured price of her deflowered virginity. I address all these complaints, with the greatest regret and indignation, not against the princes of our times, but against the philosophers who believe and assert that philosophy should not be pursued because no monetary value or reward is assigned it, unmindful that by this sign they disqualify themselves as philosophers. Since their whole life is concentrated on gain and ambition, they never embrace the knowledge of the truth for its own sake. This much will I say for myself --- and on this point I do not blush for praising myself --- that I have never philosophized save for the sake of philosophy, nor have I ever desired or hoped to secure from my studies and my laborious researches any profit or fruit save cultivation of mind and knowledge of the truth --- things I esteem more and more with the passage of time. I have also been so avid for this knowledge and so enamored of it that I have set aside all private and public concerns to devote myself completely to contemplation; and from it no calumny of jealous persons, nor any invective from enemies of wisdom has ever been able to detach me. Philosophy has taught me to rely on my own convictions rather than on the judgements of others and to concern myself less with whether I am well thought of than whether what I do or say is evil.

I was not unaware, most revered Fathers, that this present disputation of mine would be as acceptable and as pleasing to you, who favor all the good arts and who have consented to grace it with your presence, as it would be irritating and offensive to many others. I am also aware that there is no dearth of those who have condemned my undertaking before this and continue to do so on a number of grounds. But this has always been the case: works which are well-intentioned and sincerely directed to virtue have always had no fewer --- not to say more --- detractors than those undertaken for questionable motives and for devious ends. Some persons disapprove the present type of disputation in general and this method of disputing in public about learned matters; they assert that they serve only the exhibition of talent and the display of opinion, rather than the increase of learning. Others do not disapprove this type of exercise, but resent the fact that at my age, a mere twenty-four years, I have dared to propose a disputation concerning the most subtle mysteries of Christian theology, the most debated points of philosophy and unfamiliar branches of learning; and that I have done so here, in this most renowned of cities, before a large assembly of very learned men, in the presence of the Apostolic Senate. Still others have ceded my right so to dispute, but have not conceded that I might dispute nine hundred theses, asserting that such a project is superfluous, over-ambitious and beyond my powers. I should have acceded to these objections willingly and immediately, if the philosophy which I profess had so counseled me. Nor should I now undertake to reply to them, as my philosophy urges me to do, if I believed that this disputation between us were undertaken for purposes of mere altercation and litigation. Therefore, let all intention of denigration and exasperation be purged from our minds and with it that malice which, as Plato writes, is never present in the angelic choirs. Let us amicably decide whether it be admissible for me to proceed with my disputation and whether I should venture so large a number of questions.

I shall not, in the first place, have much to say against those who disapprove this type of public disputation. It is a crime, --- if it be a crime --- which I share with all you, most excellent doctors, who have engaged in such exercises on many occasions to the enhancement of your reputations, as well as with Plato and Aristotle and all the most esteemed philosophers of every age. These philosophers of the past all thought that nothing could profit them more in their search for wisdom than frequent participation in public disputation. Just as the powers of the body are made stronger through gymnastic, the powers of the mind grow in strength and vigor in this arena of learning. I am inclined to believe that the poets, when they sang of the arms of Pallas and the Hebrews, when they called the *barzel*, that is, the sword, the symbol of men of wisdom, could have meant nothing by these symbols but this type of contest, at once so necessary and so honorable for the acquisition of knowledge. This may also be the reason why the Chaldeans, at the birth of a man destined to be a philosopher, described a horoscope in which Mars confronted Mercury from three distinct angles. This is as much as to say that should these assemblies and these contests be abandoned, all philosophy would become sluggish and dormant.

It is more difficult for me, however, to find a line of defense against those who tell me that I am unequal to the undertaking. If I say that I *am* equal to it, I shall appear to entertain an immodestly high opinion of myself. If I admit that I am unequal to it, while persisting in it, I shall certainly risk being called temerarious and imprudent. You see the difficulties into which I have fallen, the position in which I am placed. I cannot, without censure, promise something about myself, nor, without equal censure, fail in what I promise. Perhaps I can invoke that saying of Job: "[The spirit is in all men](#)" or take consolation in what was said to Timothy: "[Let no man despise your youth.](#)" But to speak from my own conscience, I might say with greater truth that there is nothing singular about me. I admit that I am devoted to study and eager in the pursuit of the good arts. Nevertheless, I do not assume nor arrogate to myself the title learned. If, consequently, I have taken such a great burden on my shoulders, it is not because I am ignorant of my own weaknesses. Rather, it is because I understand that in this kind of learned contest the real victory lies in being vanquished. Even the weakest, consequently, ought not to shun them, but should seek them out, as well they may. For the one who is bested receives from his conqueror, not an injury but a benefit; he returns to his house richer than he left, that is, more learned and better armed for future contests. Inspired by such hope, though myself but a weak soldier, I have not been afraid to enter so dangerous a contest even against the very strongest and vigorous opponents. Whether, in doing so, I have acted foolishly or not might better be judged from the outcome of the contest than from my age.

I must, in the third place, answer those who are scandalized by the large number of propositions and the variety of topics I have proposed for disputation, as though the burden, however great it may be, rested on their shoulders and not, as it does, on mine. Surely it is unbecoming and captious to want to set limits to another's efforts and, as Cicero says, to desire mediocrity in those things in which the rule should be: the more the better. In undertaking so great a venture only one alternative confronted me: success or failure. If I should succeed, I do not see how it would be more praiseworthy to succeed in defending ten theses than in defending nine hundred. If I should fail, those who hate me will have grounds for disparagement, while those who love me will have an occasion to excuse me. In so large and important an undertaking it would seem that a young man who fails through weakness of talent or want of learning deserves indulgence rather than censure. For as the [poet](#) says,

if powers fail, there shall be praise for daring; and in great undertaking, to have willed is enough.

In our own day, many scholars, imitating Gorgias of Leontini, have been accustomed to dispute, not nine hundred questions merely, but the whole range of questions concerning all the arts and have been praised for it. Why should not I, then, without incurring criticism, be permitted to discuss a large number of questions indeed, but questions which are clear and determined in their scope? They reply, this is superfluous and ambitious. I protest that, in my case, no superfluity is involved, but that all is necessary. If they consider the method of my philosophy they will feel compelled, even against their inclinations, to recognize this necessity. All those who attach themselves to one or another of the philosophers, to [Thomas](#), for instance or [Scotus](#), who at present enjoy the widest following, can indeed test their doctrine in a discussion of a few questions. By contrast, I have so trained myself that, committed to the teachings of no one man, I have ranged through all the masters of philosophy, examined all their works, become acquainted with all schools. As a consequence, I have had to introduce all of them into the discussion lest, defending a doctrine peculiar to one, I might seem committed to it and thus to deprecate the rest. While a few of the theses proposed concern individual philosophers, it was inevitable that a great number should concern all of them together. Nor should anyone condemn me on the grounds that "wherever the storm blows me, there I remain as a guest." For it was a rule among the ancients, in the case of all writers, never to leave unread any commentaries which might be available. Aristotle observed this rule so carefully that Plato called him: *auagnooies*, that is, "the reader." It is certainly a mark of excessive narrowness of mind to enclose oneself within one Porch or Academy; nor can anyone reasonably attach himself to one school or philosopher, unless he has previously become familiar with them all. In addition, there is in each school some distinctive characteristic which it does not share with any other.

To begin with the men of our own faith to whom philosophy came last, there is in Duns Scotus both vigor and distinction, in Thomas solidity and sense of balance, in Egidius, lucidity and precision, in Francis, depth and acuteness, in Albertus [Magnus] a sense of ultimate issues, all-embracing and grand, in Henry, as it has seemed to me, always an element of sublimity which inspires reverence. Among the Arabians, there is in Averroës something solid and unshaken, in Avempace, as in Al-Farabi, something serious and deeply meditated; in Avicenna, something divine and platonic. Among the Greeks philosophy was always brilliant and, among the earliest, even chaste: in Simplicus it is rich and abundant, in Themistius elegant and compendious, in Alexander, learned and self-consistent, in Theophrastus, worked out with great reflection, in Ammonius, smooth and pleasing. If you turn to the [Platonists](#), to mention but a few, you will, in Porphyry, be delighted by the wealth of matter and by his preoccupation with many aspects of religion; in Iamblichus, you will be awed by his knowledge of occult philosophy and the mysteries of the barbarian peoples; in Plotinus, you will find it impossible to single out one thing for admiration, because he is admirable under every aspect. Platonists themselves, sweating over his pages, understand him only with the greatest difficulty when, in his oblique style, he teaches divinely about divine things and far more than humanly about things human. I shall pass over the more recent figures, Proclus, and those others who derive from him, Damacius, Olympiodorus and many more in whom that *to theion*, that is, that divine something which is the special mark of the Platonists, always shines out.

It should be added that any school which attacks the more established truths and by clever slander ridicules the valid arguments of reason confirms, rather than weakens, the truth itself, which, like embers, is fanned to life, rather than extinguished by stirring. These considerations have motivated me in my determination to bring to men's attention the opinions of all schools rather than the doctrine of some one or other (as some might have preferred), for it seems to me that by the confrontation of many schools and the discussion of many philosophical systems that "effulgence of truth" of which Plato writes in his letters might illuminate our minds more clearly, like the sun rising from the sea. What should have been our plight had only the philosophical thought of the Latin authors, that is, Albert, Thomas, Scotus, Egidius, Francis and Henry, been discussed, while that of the Greeks and the Arabs was passed over, since all the thought of the barbarian nations was inherited by the Greeks and from the Greeks came down to us? For this reason, our thinkers have always been satisfied, in the field of philosophy, to rest on the discoveries of foreigners and simply to perfect the work of others. What profit would have derived from discussing natural philosophy with the [Peripatetics](#), if the Academy of the Platonists had not also participated in the exchange, for the doctrine of the latter, even when it touched on divine matters, has always (as St. Augustine bears witness) been esteemed the most elevated of all philosophies? And this in turn has been the reason why I have, for the first time after many centuries of neglect (and there is nothing invidious in my saying so) brought it forth again for public examination and discussion. And what would it have profited us if, having discussed the opinions of innumerable others, like [asymboli](#), at the banquet of wise men, we should contribute nothing of our own, nothing conceived and elaborated in our own mind? Indeed, it is the characteristic of the impotent (as Seneca writes) to have their knowledge all written down in their note-books, as though the discoveries of those who preceded us had closed the path to our own efforts, as though the power of nature had become effete in us and could bring forth nothing which, if it could not demonstrate the truth, might at least point to it from afar. The farmer hates sterility in his field and the husband deplors it in his wife; even more than must the divine mind hate the sterile mind with which it is joined and associated, because it hopes from that source to have offspring of such a high nature.

For these reasons, I have not been content to repeat well-worn doctrines, but have proposed for disputation many points of the early theology of Hermes Trismegistus, many theses drawn from the teachings of the Chaldeans and the Pythagoreans, from the occult mysteries of the Hebrews and, finally, a considerable number of propositions concerning both nature and God which we ourselves have discovered and worked out. In the first place, we have proposed a harmony between Plato and Aristotle, such as many before this time indeed believed to exist but which no one has satisfactorily established. Boethius, among Latin writers, promised to compose such a harmony, but he never carried his proposal to completion. St. Augustine also writes, in his *Contra Academicos*, that many others tried to prove the same thing, that is, that the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle were identical, and by the most subtle arguments. For example, John the Grammarian held that Aristotle differed from Plato only for those who did not grasp Plato's thought; but he left it to posterity to prove it. We have, in addition, adduced a great number of passages in which Scotus and Thomas, and others in which Averroës and Avicenna, have heretofore been thought to disagree, but which I assert are in harmony with one another.

In the second place, along with my own reflections on and developments of both the Aristotelian and the Platonic philosophies, I have adduced seventy-two theses in physics and metaphysics. If I am not mistaken (and this will become clearer in the course of the proposed disputation) anyone subscribing to these theses will be able to resolve any question proposed to him in natural philosophy or theology on a principle quite other than that taught us in the philosophy which is at present to be learned in the schools and is taught by the masters of the present generation. Nor ought anyone to be surprised, that in my early years, at a tender age at which I should hardly be permitted to read the writings of others (as some have insinuated) I should wish to propose a new philosophy. They ought rather to praise this new philosophy, if it is well defended, or reject it, if it is refuted. Finally, since it will be their task to judge my discoveries and my scholarship, they ought to look to the merit or demerit of these and not to the age of their author.

I have, in addition, introduced a new method of philosophizing on the basis of numbers. This method is, in fact, very old, for it was cultivated by the ancient theologians, by Pythagoras, in the first place, but also by Aglaophamos, Philolaus and Plato, as well as by the earliest Platonists; however, like other illustrious achievements of the past, it has through lack of interest on the part of succeeding generations, fallen into such desuetude, that hardly any vestiges of it are to be found. Plato writes in *Epinomis* that among all the liberal arts and contemplative sciences, the science of number is supreme and most divine. And in another place, asking why man is the wisest of animals, he replies, because he knows how to count. Similarly, Aristotle, in his *Problems* repeats this opinion. Abumasar writes that it was a favorite saying of Avenzoar of Babylon that the man who knows how to count, knows everything else as well. These opinions are certainly devoid of any truth if by the art of number they intend that art in which today merchants excel all other men; Plato adds his testimony to this view, admonishing us emphatically not to confuse this divine arithmetic with the arithmetic of the merchants. When, consequently, after long nights of study I seemed to myself to have thoroughly penetrated this Arithmetic, which is thus so highly extolled, I promised myself that in order to test the matter, I would try to solve by means of this method of number seventy-four questions which are considered, by common consent, among the most important in physics and divinity.

I have also proposed certain theses concerning magic, in which I have indicated that magic has two forms. One consists wholly in the operations and powers of demons, and consequently this appears to me, as God is my witness, an execrable and monstrous thing. The other proves, when thoroughly investigated, to be nothing else but the highest realization of natural philosophy. The Greeks noted both these forms. However, because they considered the first form wholly undeserving the name magic they called it *goeteia*, reserving the term *mageia*, to the second, and understanding by it the highest and most perfect wisdom. The term "magus" in the Persian tongue, according to Porphyry, means the same as "interpreter" and "worshipper of the divine" in our language. Moreover, Fathers, the disparity and dissimilarity between these arts is the greatest that can be imagined. Not the Christian religion alone, but all legal codes and every well-governed commonwealth execrates and condemns the first; the second, by contrast, is approved and embraced by all wise men and by all peoples solicitous of heavenly and divine things. The first is the most deceitful of arts; the second, a higher and holier philosophy. The former is vain and disappointing; the latter, firm, solid and satisfying. The practitioner of the first always tries to conceal his addiction, because it always rebounds to shame and reproach, while the cultivation of the second, both in antiquity and at almost all periods, has been the source of the highest renown and glory in the field of learning. No philosopher of any worth, eager in pursuit of the good arts, was ever a student of the former, but to learn the latter, Pythagoras, Empedocles, Plato and Democritus crossed the seas. Returning to their homes, they, in turn, taught it to others and considered it a treasure to be closely guarded. The former, since it is supported by no true arguments, is defended by no

writers of reputation; the latter, honored, as it were, in its illustrious progenitors, counts two principal authors: Zamolxis, who was imitated by Abaris the Hyperborean, and Zoroaster; not, indeed, the Zoroaster who may immediately come to your minds, but that other Zoroaster, the son of Oromasius. If we should ask Plato the nature of each of these forms of magic, he will respond in the *Alcibiades* that the magic of Zoroaster is nothing else than that science of divine things in which the kings of the Persians had their sons educated to that they might learn to rule their commonwealth on the pattern of the commonwealth of the universe. In the *Charmides* he will answer that the magic of Zamolxis is the medicine of the soul, because it brings temperance to the soul as medicine brings health to the body. Later Charondas, Damigeron, Apollonius, Osthanes and Dardanus continued in their footsteps, as did Homer, of whom we shall sometime prove, in a "poetic theology" we propose to write, that he concealed this doctrine, symbolically, in the wanderings of his Ulysses, just as he did all other learned doctrines. They were also followed by Eudoxus and Hermippus, as well as by practically all those who studied the Pythagorean and Platonic mysteries. Of later philosophers, I find that three had ferreted it out: the Arabian, Al-Kindi, Roger Bacon, and William of Paris. [Plotinus](#) also gives signs that he was aware of it in the passage in which he shows that the magician is the minister of nature and not merely its artful imitator. This very wise man approves and maintains this magic, while so abhorring that other that once, when he was invited to take part in rites of evil spirits, he said that they ought rather to come to him, than he to go to them; and he spoke well. Just as that first form of magic makes man a slave and pawn of evil powers, the latter makes him their lord and master. That first form of magic cannot justify any claim to being either an art or a science while the latter, filled as it is with mysteries, embraces the most profound contemplation of the deepest secrets of things and finally the knowledge of the whole of nature. This beneficent magic, in calling forth, as it were, from their hiding places into the light the powers which the largess of God has sown and planted in the world, does not itself work miracles, so much as sedulously serve nature as she works her wonders. Scrutinizing, with greater penetration, that harmony of the universe which the Greeks with greater aptness of terms called *sympatheia* and grasping the mutual affinity of things, she applies to each thing those inducements (called the *iugges* of the magicians), most suited to its nature. Thus it draws forth into public notice the miracles which lie hidden in the recesses of the world, in the womb of nature, in the storehouses and secret vaults of God, as though she herself were their artificer. As the farmer weds his elms to the vines, so the "magus" unites earth to heaven, that is, the lower orders to the endowments and powers of the higher. Hence it is that this latter magic appears the more divine and salutary, as the former presents a monstrous and destructive visage. But the deepest reason for the difference is the fact that that first magic, delivering man over to the enemies of God, alienates him from God, while the second, beneficent magic, excites in him an admiration for the works of God which flowers naturally into [charity, faith and hope](#). For nothing so surely impels us to the worship of God than the assiduous contemplation of His miracles and when, by means of this natural magic, we shall have examined these wonders more deeply, we shall more ardently be moved to love and worship Him in his works, until finally we shall be compelled to burst into song: "The heavens, all of the earth, is filled with the majesty of your glory." But enough about magic. I have been led to say even this much because I know that there are many persons who condemn and hate it, because they do not understand it, just as dogs always bay at strangers.

I come now to those matters which I have drawn from the ancient mysteries of the Hebrews and here adduce in confirmation of the inviolable Catholic faith. Lest these matters be thought, by those to whom they are unfamiliar, bubbles of the imagination and tales of charlatans, I want everyone to understand what they are and what their true character is; whence they are drawn and who are the illustrious writers who testifying to them; how mysterious they are, and divine and necessary to men of our faith for the propagation of our religion in the face of the persistent calumnies of the Hebrews. Not famous Hebrew teachers alone, but, from among those of our own persuasion, Esdras, Hilary and Origen all write that Moses, in addition to the law of the five books which he handed down to posterity, when on the mount, received from God a more secret and true explanation of the law. They also say that God commanded Moses to make the law known to the people, but not to write down its interpretation or to divulge it, but to communicate it only to Jesu Nave who, in turn, was to reveal it to succeeding high priests under a strict obligation of silence. It was enough to indicate, through simple historical narrative, the power of God, his wrath against the unjust, his mercy toward the good, his justice toward all and to educate the people, by divine and salutary commands, to live well and blessedly and to worship in the true religion. Openly to reveal to the people the hidden mysteries and the secret intentions of the highest divinity, which lay concealed under the hard shell of the law and the rough vesture of language, what else could this be but to throw holy things to dogs and to strew gems among swine? The decision, consequently, to keep such things hidden from the vulgar and to communicate them only to the initiate, among whom alone, as Paul says, wisdom speaks, was not a counsel of human prudence but a divine command. And the philosophers of antiquity scrupulously observed this caution. Pythagoras wrote nothing but a few trifles which he confided to his daughter Dama, on his deathbed. The Sphinxes, which are carved on the temples of the Egyptians, warned that the mystic doctrines must be kept inviolate from the profane multitude by means of riddles. Plato, writing certain things to Dionysius concerning the highest substances, explained that he had to write in riddles "lest the letter fall into other hands and others come to know the things I have intended for you." Aristotle used to say that the books of the *Metaphysics* in which he treats of divine matters were both published and unpublished. Is there any need for further instances? Origen asserts that Jesus Christ, the Teacher of Life, revealed many things to His disciples which they in turn were unwilling to commit to writing lest they become the common possession of the crowd. Dionysius the Areopagite gives powerful confirmation to this assertion when he writes that the more secret mysteries were transmitted by the founders of our religion *ek nou eis vouv dia mesov logov*, that is, from mind to mind, without commitment to writing, through the medium of the spoken word alone. Because the true interpretation of the law given to Moses was, by God's command, revealed in almost precisely this way, it was called "Cabala," which in Hebrew means the same as our word "reception." The precise point is, of course, that the doctrine was received by one man from another not through written documents but, as a hereditary right, through a regular succession of revelations.

After Cyrus had delivered the Hebrews from the Babylonian captivity, and the Temple had been restored under Zorobabel, the Hebrews bethought themselves of restoring the Law. Esdras, who was head of the church [*sic!*] at the time, amended the book of Moses. He readily realized, moreover, that because of the exiles, the massacres, the flights and the captivity of the people of Israel, the practice established by the ancients of handing down the doctrines by word of mouth could not be maintained. Unless they were committed to writing, the heavenly teachings divinely handed down must inevitably perish, for the memory of them would not long endure. He decided, consequently, that all of the wise men still alive should be convened and that each should communicate to the convention all that he remembered about the mysteries of the Law. Their communications were then to be collected by scribes into seventy volumes (approximately the same number as there were members of the Sanhedrin). So that you need not accept my testimony alone, O Fathers, hear Esdras himself speaking: "After forty days had passed, the All-Highest spoke and said: The first things which you wrote publish openly so that the worthy and unworthy alike may read; but the last seventy books conserve so that you may hand them on to the wise men among your people, for in these reside the spring of understanding, the fountain of wisdom and the river of knowledge. And I did these things." These are the very words of Esdras. These are the books of cabalistic wisdom. In these books, as Esdras unmistakably states, resides the springs of understanding, that is, the ineffable theology of the supersubstantial deity; the fountain of wisdom, that is, the precise metaphysical doctrine concerning intelligible and angelic forms; and the stream of wisdom, that is, the best established philosophy concerning nature. Pope Sixtus the Fourth, the immediate predecessor of our present pope, Innocent the Eighth, under whose happy reign we are living, took all possible measures to ensure that these books would be translated into Latin for the public benefit of our faith and at the time of his death, three of them had already appeared. The Hebrews hold these same books in such reverence that no one under forty years of age is permitted even to touch them. I acquired these books at considerable expense and, reading them from beginning to end with the greatest attention and with unrelenting toil, I discovered in them (as God is my witness) not so much the Mosaic as the Christian religion. There was to be found the mystery of the Trinity, the Incarnation of the Word, the divinity of the Messiah; there one might also read of original sin, of its expiation by the Christ, of the heavenly Jerusalem, of the fall of the demons, of the orders of the angels, of the pains of purgatory and of hell. There I read the same things which we read every day in the pages of Paul and of Dionysius, Jerome and Augustine. In philosophical matters, it were as though one were listening to Pythagoras and Plato, whose doctrines bear so close an affinity to the Christian faith that our [Augustine offered endless thanks to God that the books of the Platonists had fallen into his hands](#). In a word, there is no point of controversy between the Hebrews and ourselves on which the Hebrews cannot be confuted and convinced out the cabalistic writings, so that no corner is left for them to hide in. On this point I can cite a witness of the very greatest authority, the most learned Antonius Chronicus; on the occasion of a banquet in his house, at which I was also present, with his own ears he heard the Hebrew, Dactylus, a profound scholar of this lore, come round completely to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

To return, however, to our review of the chief points of my disputation: I have also adduced my conception of the manner in which the poems of Orpheus and Zoroaster ought to be interpreted. Orpheus is read by the Greeks in a text which is practically complete; Zoroaster is known to them in a corrupt text, while in Chaldea he is read in a form more nearly complete. Both are considered as the authors and fathers of ancient wisdom. I shall say nothing about Zoroaster who is mentioned so frequently by the Platonists and always with the greatest respect. Of Pythagoras, however, Iamblicus the Chaldean writes that he took the Orphic theology as the model on which he shaped and formed his own philosophy. For this precise reason the sayings of Pythagoras are called sacred, because, and to the degree that, they derive from the Orphic teachings. For from this source that occult doctrine of numbers and everything else that was great and sublime in Greek philosophy flowed as from its primitive source. Orpheus, however (and this was the case with all the ancient theologians) so wove the mysteries of his doctrines into the fabric of myths and so wrapped them about in veils of poetry, that one reading his hymns might well believe that there was nothing in them but fables and the veriest commonplaces. I have said this so that it might be known what labor was mine, what difficulty was involved, in drawing out the secret meanings of the occult philosophy from the deliberate tangles of riddles and the recesses of fable in which they were hidden; difficulty made all the greater by the fact that in a matter so weighty, abstruse and unexplored, I could count on no help from the work and efforts of other interpreters. And still like dogs they have come barking after me, saying that I have brought together an accumulation of trifles in order to make a great display by their sheer number. As though all did not concern

ambiguous questions, subjects of sharpest controversy, over which the most important schools confront each other like gladiators. As though I had not brought to light many things quite unknown and unsuspected by these very men who now carp at me while styling themselves the leaders of philosophy. As a matter of fact, I am so completely free of the fault they attribute to me that I have tried to confine the discussion to fewer points than I might have raised. Had I wished, (as others are wont) to divide these questions into their constituent parts, and to dismember them, their number might well have increased to a point past counting. To say nothing of other matters, who is unaware that one of these nine hundred theses, that, namely, concerning the reconciliation of the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle might have been developed, without arousing any suspicion that I was affecting mere number, into six hundred or more by enumerating in due order those points on which others think that these philosophies differ and I, that they agree? For a certainty I shall speak out (though in a manner which is neither modest in itself nor conformable to my character), I shall speak out because those who envy me and detract me, force me to speak out. I have wanted to make clear in disputation, not only that I know a great many things, but also that I know a great many things which others do not know.

And now, reverend Fathers, in order that this claim may be vindicated by the fact, and in order that my address may no longer delay the satisfaction of your desire --- for I see, reverend doctors, with the greatest pleasure that you are girded and ready for the contest --- let us now, with the prayer that the outcome may be fortunate and favorable, as to the sound of trumpets, join battle.