

Humanism

Pico on Man's Place in Nature

I once read that Abdala the Muslim, when asked what was most worthy of awe and wonder in this theater of the world, answered, "There is nothing to see more wonderful than man!" Hermes Trismegistus concurs with this opinion: "A great miracle, Asclepius, is man!"

However, when I began to consider the reasons for these opinions, all these reasons given for the magnificence of human nature failed to convince me: that man is the intermediary between creatures, close to the gods, master of all the lower creatures, with the sharpness of his senses, the acuity of his reason, and the brilliance of his intelligence the interpreter of nature, the nodal point between eternity and time, and, as the Persians say, the intimate bond or marriage song of the world, just a little lower than angels as David tells us. I concede these are magnificent reasons, but they do not seem to go to the heart of the matter, that is, those reasons which truly claim admiration. For, if these are all the reasons we can come up with, why should we not admire angels more than we do ourselves? After thinking a long time, I have figured out why man is the most fortunate of all creatures and as a result worthy of the highest admiration and earning his rank on the chain of being, a rank to be envied not merely by the beasts but by the stars themselves and by the spiritual natures beyond and above this world. This miracle goes past faith and wonder. And why not? It is for this reason that man is rightfully named a magnificent miracle and a wondrous creation.

What is this rank on the chain of being? God the Father, Supreme Architect of the Universe, built this home, this universe we see all around us, a venerable temple of his godhead, through the sublime laws of his ineffable Mind. The expanse above the heavens he decorated with Intelligences, the spheres of heaven with living, eternal souls. The scabrous and dirty lower worlds he filled with animals of every kind. However, when the work was finished, the Great Artisan desired that there be some creature to think on the plan of his great work, and love its infinite beauty, and stand in awe at its immenseness. Therefore, when all was finished, as Moses and Timaeus tell us, He began to think about the creation of man. But he had no Archetype from which to fashion some new child, nor could he find in his vast treasure-houses anything which He might give to His new son, nor did the universe contain a single place from which the whole of creation might be surveyed. All was perfected, all created things stood in their proper place, the highest things in the highest places, the midmost things in the midmost places, and the lowest things in the lowest places. But God the Father would not fail, exhausted and defeated, in this last creative act. God's wisdom would not falter for lack of counsel in this need. God's love would not permit that he whose duty it was to praise God's creation should be forced to condemn himself as a creation of God.

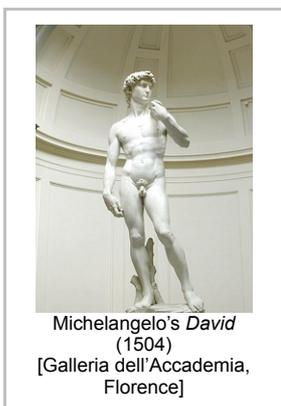
Finally, the Great Artisan mandated that this creature who would receive nothing proper to himself shall have joint possession of whatever nature had been given to any other creature. He made man a creature of indeterminate and indifferent nature, and, placing him in the middle of the world, said to him:

"Adam, we give you no fixed place to live, no form that is peculiar to you, nor any function that is yours alone. According to your desires and judgment, you will have and possess whatever place to live, whatever form, and whatever functions you yourself choose. All other things have a limited and fixed nature prescribed and bounded by our laws. You, with no limit or no bound, may choose for yourself the limits and bounds of your nature. We have placed you at the world's center so that you may survey everything else in the world. We have made you neither of heavenly nor of earthly stuff, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with free choice and dignity, you may fashion yourself into whatever form you choose. To you is granted the power of degrading yourself into the lower forms of life, the beasts, and to you is granted the power, contained in your intellect and judgment, to be reborn into the higher forms, the



divine.”

Imagine! The great generosity of God! The happiness of man! To man it is allowed to be whatever he chooses to be! As soon as an animal is born, it brings out of its mother's womb all that it will ever possess. Spiritual beings from the beginning become what they are to be for all eternity. Man, when he entered life, the Father gave the seeds of every kind and every way of life possible. Whatever seeds each man sows and cultivates will grow and bear him their proper fruit. If these seeds are vegetative, he will be like a plant. If these seeds are sensitive, he will be like an animal. If these seeds are intellectual, he will be an angel and the son of God. And if, satisfied with no created thing, he removes himself to the center of his own unity, his spiritual soul, united with God, alone in the darkness of God, who is above all things, he will surpass every created thing. Who could not help but admire this great shape-shifter? In fact, how could one admire anything else? [...]



Michelangelo's *David*
(1504)
[Galleria dell'Accademia,
Florence]

For the mystic philosophy of the Hebrews transforms Enoch into an angel called “Mal’akh Adonay Shebaoth,” and sometimes transforms other humans into different sorts of divine beings. The Pythagoreans abuse villainous men by having them reborn as animals and, according to Empedocles, even plants. Muhammed also said frequently, “Those who deviate from the heavenly law become animals.” Bark does not make a plant a plant, rather its senseless and mindless nature does. The hide does not make an animal an animal, but rather its irrational but sensitive soul. The spherical form does not make the heavens the heavens, rather their unchanging order. It is not a lack of body that makes an angel an angel, rather it is his spiritual intelligence. If you see a person totally subject to his appetites, crawling miserably on the ground, you are looking at a plant, not a man. If you see

a person blinded by empty illusions and images, and made soft by their tender beguilements, completely subject to his senses, you are looking at an animal, not a man. If you see a philosopher judging things through his reason, admire and follow him: he is from heaven, not the earth. If you see a person living in deep contemplation, unaware of his body and dwelling in the inmost reaches of his mind, he is neither from heaven nor earth, he is divinity clothed in flesh.

Who would not admire man, who is called by Moses and the Gospels “all flesh” and “every creature,” because he fashions and transforms himself into any fleshly form and assumes the character of any creature whatsoever? For this reason, Euanthes the Persian in his description of Chaldaean theology, writes that man has no inborn, proper form, but that many things that humans resemble are outside and foreign to them, from which arises the Chaldaean saying: *Enosh hu shinnujim vekammah tebhaoth haj* — “man is a living creature of varied, multiform and ever-changing nature.”

Why do I emphasize this? Considering that we are born with this condition, that is, that we can become whatever we choose to become, we need to understand that we must take earnest care about this, so that it will never be said to our disadvantage that we were born to a privileged position but failed to realize it and became animals and senseless beasts. Instead, the saying of Asaph the prophet should be said of us, “You are all angels of the Most High.” Above all, we should not make that freedom of choice God gave us into something harmful, for it was intended to be to our advantage. Let a holy ambition enter into our souls; let us not be content with mediocrity, but rather strive after the highest and expend all our strength in achieving it.

Let us disdain earthly things, and despise the things of heaven, and, judging little of what is in the world, fly to the court beyond the world and next to God. In that court, as the mystic writings tell us, are the Seraphim, Cherubim, and Ophanim in the foremost places; let us not even yield place to them, the highest of the angelic orders, and not be content with a lower place, imitate them in all their glory and dignity. If we choose to, we will not be second to them in anything. [...]

— From Pico della Mirandola, “Oration on the Dignity of Man”

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) was an Italian Platonist philosopher and polymath. In 1486, Pico proposed to defend 900 theses on religion, philosophy, natural science, and magic, and the above selection comes from the introduction to those theses, entitled De hominis dignitate [On the Dignity of Man]. (Based on the translation by Richard Hooker.)

Finding Eternity in the Individual

Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374), an Italian scholar and poet, grew up in Florence, the cradle of the Italian Renaissance, and Petrarch was a leading force of this renaissance, this re-birth of humanity's sense of itself — a kind of Christian humanism aimed at recovering, understanding, and assimilating the literature and values of ancient Greece and Rome.



Francesco Petrarch
Florence, 1304-1374

Petrarch believed that a Christian life required not merely faith and ceremonies but moral practice as well, and that such morality could only be achieved by a richer understanding of what it meant to be human that drew not merely on scripture but on the moral models of antiquity. In sharp contrast to the asceticism of late medieval Christianity, he thus sought to revivify the love of honor and beauty as preeminent human motives. While his thought remained generally Christian, he envisioned a new kind of man with new virtues, not a citizen of a city-state or a republic, but an autarchic individual being who was whole and complete in himself. Petrarch recognized that such individuals might surround themselves with friends or join with others as citizens, but he was convinced that they could only do so effectively if they were autonomous individuals first. It was this ideal of human individuality that inspired the humanist movement. [Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, pp. 30-31]



Marcus Tullius Cicero
106-43 BCE
[Louvre, Paris]

Petrarch's two greatest influences were the great Roman orator and philosopher Marcus Cicero (106-43 BCE) and the early Christian church father Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE). From **Cicero**, he learned Latin composition and philosophy; from **Augustine**, he developed his understanding of how human beings should relate to the divine.

Petrarch's study of the ancients turned him toward the human world (rather than toward God or nature), and his study of Augustine focussed his attention on the individual human as a self-sufficient, autonomous being. Unlike the Greeks and Latins, Petrarch believed neither in a natural end for humans,

nor that humans were essentially social. Our greatest achievement was to be ourselves, and each of us can become whatever we choose to be, unconfined by any natural or pre-ordained end or fate.

Petrarch has been called the first "Modern Man," in part because of a certain experience while climbing Mt. Ventoux in southern France — this was April 26, 1336 — a climb undertaken simply for pleasure, and an account of which was given in a letter Petrarch wrote to his spiritual advisor, an Augustinian monk by the name of Dionigi da Borgo San Sepolcro. In Petrarch's words...



Augustine of Hippo
354-430 CE
[Musée des Arts Decoratifs, Paris]

Today I made the ascent of the highest mountain in this region, which is not improperly called Ventosum. My only motive was the wish to see what so great an elevation had to offer. I have had the expedition in mind for many years; for, as you know, I have lived in this region from infancy, having been cast here by that fate which determines the affairs of men. Consequently the mountain, which is visible from a great distance, was ever before my eyes, and I conceived the plan of some time doing what I have at last accomplished today. [...]



Mount Ventoux

At the time fixed we left the house, and by evening reached Malaucène, which lies at the foot of the mountain, to the north. Having rested there a day, we finally made the ascent this morning, with no companions except two servants; and a most difficult task it was. The mountain is a very steep and almost inaccessible mass of stony soil. But, as the poet has well said, "Remorseless toil conquers all." It was a long day, the air fine. We enjoyed the advantages of vigor of mind and strength and agility of body, and everything else essential to those engaged in such an undertaking, and so had no other difficulties to face than those of the region itself.

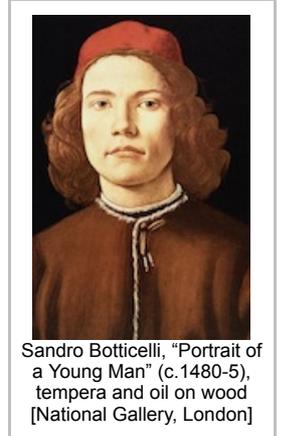
Some scholars have questioned whether Petrarch ever made this climb, given the strong allegorical nature he places on this story:

While my brother chose a direct path straight up the ridge, I weakly took an easier one which really descended. When I was called back, and the right road was shown me, I replied that I hoped to find a better way round on the other side, and that I did not mind going farther if the path were only less steep. This was just an excuse for my laziness and when the others had already reached a considerable height I was still wandering in the valleys. I had failed to find an easier path, and had only increased the distance and difficulty of the ascent. [...] I was simply trying to avoid the exertion of the ascent; but no human ingenuity can alter the nature of things, or cause anything

to reach a height by going down. [...] I finally sat down in a valley and transferred my winged thoughts from things corporeal to the immaterial, addressing myself as follows: “What thou hast repeatedly experienced today in the ascent of this mountain, happens to thee, as to many, in the journey toward the blessed life. But this is not so readily perceived by men, since the motions of the body are obvious and external while those of the soul are invisible and hidden.”

Once he reached the summit, Petrarch pulled out his copy of Augustine’s *Confessions*, opening it at random to the words: “And men go about to wonder at the heights of the mountains, and the mighty waves of the sea, and the wide sweep of rivers, and the circuit of the ocean, and the revolution of the stars, but themselves they consider not.” This Petrarch took as a personal chastisement:

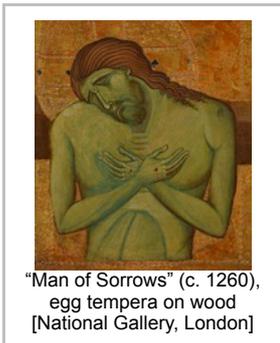
I closed the book, angry with myself that I should still be admiring earthly things who might long ago have learned from even the pagan philosophers that nothing is wonderful but the soul, which, when great itself, finds nothing great outside itself. Then, in truth, I was satisfied that I had seen enough of the mountain; I turned my inward eye upon myself, and from that time not a syllable fell from my lips until we reached the bottom again. [...] I thought in silence of the lack of good counsel in us mortals, who neglect what is noblest in ourselves, scatter our energies in all directions, and waste ourselves in a vain show, because we look about us for what is to be found only within. I wondered at the natural nobility of our soul, save when it debases itself of its own free will, and deserts its original estate, turning what God has given it for its honor into dishonor. How many times, think you, did I turn back that day, to glance at the summit of the mountain, which seemed scarcely a cubit high compared with the range of human contemplation, — when it is not immersed in the foul mire of earth? [Petrarch, *Epistolae de Rebus Familiaribus et Variis*, vol. 4]



The Individual in Art

In the Middle Ages... [m]an was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation — only through some general category. In Italy this veil first melted into air; an *objective* treatment and consideration of the state and of all the things of this world became possible. The *subjective* side at the same time asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man became a spiritual *individual*, recognized himself as such.

— Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860; English transl., 1904), p. 129.



There was a radical change in the way individuals were represented in the visual arts at Florence. Freestanding, larger-than-life-size statues of human beings were sculpted for the first time since antiquity. The use of linear perspective resulted in representations of human beings that conformed with measurements of the space around them. And there also developed at Florence a tradition of domestic portraiture, both painted and sculpted, that treated not only saints and statesmen but also merchants and their families. These were and remain impressive historical changes, and there is nothing surprising in the fact that one hundred years after Burckhardt such scholars as Hans Baron and Erwin Panofsky were still attempting general syntheses that saw these developments as aspects of a new attitude toward the individual that developed in Renaissance Florence. In the words of Panofsky (as quoted by Ernst Gombrich), “Something must have happened.”



— William J. Connell, *Society and Individual in Renaissance Florence* (Univ. California Press, 2002), p. 3.