

Abstract

Faith, imagination and skepticism in Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola.

The Ph. D. dissertation proposes a hypothesis for interpreting the philosophical works of Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, in order to determine patterns and conceptual issues relevant to account for the continuity or discontinuity between Pico's different writings, and then in order to establish the 'role' of these speculative works in the history of Renaissance philosophy.

The dissertation is composed by three chapters.

The first chapter is devoted to an introduction to the settings of Gianfrancesco's philosophy. A brief overview of the textual evidence found in the writings he composed in his literary activity shows that Pico can be considered as an apologist of Christian religion, who despises philosophy and human knowledge. Then in the chapter, they are explored the links between this approach and the work of Girolamo Savonarola, Giovanni Pico and Marsilio Ficino, in order to establish the affinity (in the case of Savonarola) and the diversity (in the case of Giovanni Pico and Ficino) that determine Pico's philosophical vocation. In the second part of the chapter they are analyzed the *De studio divinae et humanae philosophiae*, Pico's first work, devoted to the question of the role of the teachings of *literae gentiles* for Christian education, and the first book of Gianfrancesco's best-known work, the *Examen vanitatis doctrinae Gentium et veritatis Christianae disciplinae*, based on a review of the history of ancient philosophy, presented under the mark of the *dissensio philosophorum*.

The second chapter begins with the question of the origin of this anti-intellectualism, that is, with the attempt to understand why Pico chooses to become an apologist of the Christian religion against philosophy. The idea explored in this chapter is that the origin of Pico's anti-philosophical attitude is related to some questions concerning the relationship between imagination and faith. In the consideration of some dangers for the Christian faith, the *imaginatio* (described as a representative capacity, that produces mental images) seems to be Pico's real fear or obsession, in two different ways. Imagination is considered a decisive factor of all cognitive processes related to theoretical and moral mistakes: all the ills of Christian life (heresy and sinful behavior, especially) are caused, according Pico, by the imagination. Then, a particular conception of *vis imaginandi* is regarded as dangerous for the truth of Christian religion. The theoretical framework that justifies the first assertion is found in a work dating back to 1500, entitled *De Imaginatione*, that is analyzed in the first part of

this chapter. The idea of middle position of the imagination, placed between sensitivity and intellect, already attributed by Aristotle to the *fantasia*, has recovered and developed by Pico into a conceptual framework that suggests a total dependence of men's actions from the suggestions of the images. The *imaginatio* can present to the soul an absent object as an object worthy of be desired; only the image, because of its double nature, brings with it both the information essential for the establishment of the cognitive desire (you can not want, in fact, what you do not know) and the ability to move body, with the activation of the affections of soul's sensitive powers for the achievement of what man and animal desire and want.

But imagination, even if it is essential for the practical action, is still regarded by Pico as an irrational power. Unless it is led by a higher faculty, it will tend to present as desirable only deceptive things or dangerous objects. If we consider that also the soul's higher powers (reason and intellect) are presented as dependent from images, we understand the danger here figured and the solution proposed: Gianfrancesco contends that only the imagination can 'heal' itself. For the edification of Christian people, for example, Pico suggests a technique which consists in replacing images that determine evil passions with other – 'good' – images (derived from Holy Scripture).

The ideas perceived as harmful for the purposes of Christian apologetics rely, instead, to a particular conception of the powers of imagination, analyzed during the middle part of the chapter. The medical literature, some passages from Avicenna's *Liber de Anima* and the reflections of natural magic's philosophers (as Ficino) design a theoretical framework in which a real power of changing external bodies and world's matter is assigned to imagination: according a view largely spread in Renaissance philosophy, a fixed attention at the image of what is desired, along with a vehement affection and a firm persuasion (*fides*), were identified as causes, as well as of common and known psychosomatic processes (such as alterations in body's temperament), of 'transitive' actions, not limited in their effects to the matter of the subject who conceives mental images.

In the *De studio divinae et humanae philosophiae* and, especially, in the *Theoremata de fide et ordine credendi*, Gianfrancesco seems grasp the explosive potential of these ideas: all the miraculous or extraordinary events, useful to certify the existence of the supernatural dimension, that characterized Christian religion, can be considered as natural events, so it is useless to appeal to a divine causality, and Christian faith can be regarded as a purely emotional and imaginative attitude.

The refutation of this – dangerous – idea can be found in the *De rerum praenotione*. In this work, Gianfrancesco argues that every magic action is a product of a pact between men

and evil demons, and refuses the existence of a natural magic. So, if one considers that the natural magic has as its own 'vehicle' in the imagination, we understand how to exclude such a technique means the exclusion of the theories about the great powers of the imaginative faculty, and allows to preserve the exceptional nature of miracles that although (in some cases) are not realized by a divine causality, should be attributed to an illegal commerce with demons and would not therefore be regarded as natural events.

The third and final chapter of the Ph. D. dissertation is based on the analysis of the *Examen vanitatis doctrinae Gentium et veritatis Christianae disciplinae*, the Gianfrancesco's best-known work, a treatise composed by six books, directed to show the inconsistency of pagan philosophy, in comparison to the Christian religion's truth. The purpose of this chapter is to show how the *Examen* marks a changing in the methods of Christian apologetics, no longer directed – as in the *De studio* or in the *De rerum praenotione* – to bear out the religion, showing its full adherence to the *criteria* of consistency and true demonstration claimed by philosophical reason, but to 'discredit' philosophy, arguing about the vanity of all the logical tools it uses.

The occasion for this changing of attitude is offered by the rediscovery of the writings of Ancient Skepticism who Gianfrancesco is the first author to bring again in the Latin West. In the *Examen's* first two books the classical theme of *dissensio philosophorum* is, through the arguments of Sextus Empiricus, directed to demolish philosophical reason: the ancient philosophy – Pico argues – is a collection of conflicting opinions, a succession of *sectae* in mutual contrast, held together only by the loyalty of disciples to their masters, but this difficulty – he adds – is merely a specific historical manifestation of the more general inability of human reason to give substantial foundation of its argumentation or knowledge.

Reading the texts of Sextus Empiricus, Pico uses, against the philosophy, the skeptical argument of *diallele*. So, the diversity of schools is considered as the result of the 'proliferation' of different *criteria*, each one rationally equivalent to another one.

The last three books of the *Examen vanitatis* are directed against Aristotle's philosophy. Skepticism and Aristotelism philosophy come out, from the *Examen*, as alternative philosophical views. Sextus Empiricus is the best ally, for Gianfrancesco, in the struggle against human philosophy, Aristotle is the most insidious enemy because he has codified, in the *Posterior Analytics*, a method that seems to concede to philosophical reason the ability to demonstrate its own logical criteria to achieve reliable knowledge of the external world and its objects. Against the theory of scientific demonstration of the *Analytics*, Pico conceives an articulate rebuttal examined in the final paragraph of this Ph. D. dissertation's third chapter.

From this analysis it comes out that – through an empiricist reading of Aristotle's epistemology, interpreted as relying upon sensitive impressions (regarded as the only criterion of truth) – Pico repeats, with the skeptics, that the information provided by sensitive power, even if is related to the same object, will ever change, depending on the circumstances of the perception and status of the perceiver. This variety - he adds - is erratic and uncontrollable, because of the difficulty of establishing a shared view and of demonstrating which sensation reflect the actual constitution of the perceived object.

Finally, the skeptical attitude of the *Examen* determines the mode of presentation of Christian religion's truth. The thesis shows how the *doctrina Christiana* is regarded, by Pico, as a source of knowledge different from natural philosophy, and more reliable than human reason, because it is based on a criterion of truth (the *fides*) that is not involved into skeptical criticism.