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Ways to Learn, Ways to Reshape Knowledge: Pico della Mirandola and the Students' Handbooks

Abstract: This work will explore the influence of textbooks used by students to practice for disputes as possible sources for the *900 Conclusiones* of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (the book the famous introduction to which was the so-called *Oratio de hominis dignitate—Discourse on the Dignity of Man).* This is a decisive topic in Pico's scholarship that has not been directly investigated before. I argue that at least some of its "scholastic" theses can be traced back to these texts, in particular to the *Promptuarium argumentorum*, a textbook used in the teaching of philosophy in universities with the aim of reconciling the disagreement between philosophical schools. The book was intended to provide students with a collection of arguments and counterarguments that could be used in debates and discussions. The arguments were presented in a systematic manner, making it easier for students to memorize them. Beyond the philological data, this finding has several implications for understanding the processes of learning and the transmission and reworking of knowledge in the Renaissance.

1 Introduction: Student Textbooks as Sources

Student textbooks and learning materials as possible sources for original philosophical elaboration have not always been valued highly by scholars. The reasons for this are understandable. One of those reasons is the idea that great thinkers can only dialogue with their peers, an idea that corresponds to a model of cultural history made up of great peaks contemplating the view from above. The transitions between teaching, learning, and elaboration is not made up of such detached stages. Above all, the way in which one learns, the way in which knowledge is transmitted, even among peers, the way in which one is accustomed to dialoguing with texts is decisive and cannot be neglected. In this article, we will try to indicate the connection between a fundamental work by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494) and some "student" sources never analyzed in the literature from this point of view. This allows for twofold consideration: on the one hand, the possibility of better understanding some points of Pico's work and, on the other hand, to look in a different light at the way in which materials intended for scholastic

 https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111452975-010

exercise—in this case handbooks (*promptuarii*) for philosophical discussion—circulated and, in their own way, influenced philosophical elaboration.

2 Pico's Oratio and Conclusiones

The *Oratio de hominis dignitate* (*Discourse on the Dignity of Man*) is a famous oration written by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, the renowned Italian humanist of the 15th century. The *Oratio* has been traditionally regarded as a manifesto of Renaissance humanism and a celebration of the dignity and freedom of man, who is depicted as the center of the universe and the master of his own destiny. However, some recent scholarship, especially by Brian Copenhaver (2019), has challenged this interpretation and argued that the oration is rather concerned with a mystical and intellectual journey that leads man to knowledge of and union with God. Pico's main goal was not to exalt human autonomy and creativity, but to show how man can achieve salvation through a process of purification, illumination, and perfection that involves both natural and supernatural means. The more general point is that Pico had no intention of dedicating that text to the dignity of man. Its title in the manuscript was simply *Oratio quaedam elegantissima.* The emphasis on the dignity of man was first due to 16th-century printers, and then to 20th-century interpreters, but it was in any case a text that did not have wide circulation in its era. It could be argued, however, that contemporaries of Pico's entitled it in that way, suggesting to us what their reading of it was. Neverthless, it is undeniable that this tiny volume has been pivotal for the interpretation of the Renaissance.

But for what purpose was it written? What kind of text was it intended to be, and in what tradition did it fit? The oration was intended as an introduction to a public debate on the *pax philosophica* ("philosophical peace," or better, "harmony"), which Pico planned to hold in Rome in 1487. For this occasion, Pico composed 900 theses (*Conclusiones philosophicae, cabalisticae et theologicae*), drawn from various sources of ancient and medieval philosophy, theology, and mysticism, which he wanted to discuss with the most learned scholars of his time. The use of theses as the basis of philosophical discussion was a core educational device in scholastic philosophy, and so there is little surprise in this. What was astonishing, even to his contemporaries, was the very large number of theses, as many as 900. They were divided first of all into two categories: those "according to the opinions of others," in which Pico reported the thought of previous authors, and those "according to his own opinion," in which the Count of Mirandola expounded some of his personal opinions and philosophical doctrines. The theses were also gathered into thematic groups: according to Latins, Arabs, Greek Peripatetics, Platon-

ists, Zoroaster and his Chaldean commentators, etc.—furthermore, conclusions on magic, cabalistic conclusions confirming the Christian religion, and so on (Farmer 1998). It was a puzzling list. Among other things, Pico suggested that there was a hidden wisdom in the writings of the ancient pagans, especially in Hermes Trismegistus and Zoroaster, who prophesied about Christ and the Christian mysteries. He held that there is no subject more worthy of study than magic and Kabbalah, which reveal the secrets of nature and God.

The constant reference to authors foreign to Christianity and in some cases suspect, the boldness and lack of comprehensibility of many of the propositions, led the Pope, Innocent VIII, to oppose the young aristocrat's project. The public debate never took place and Innocent VIII swiftly appointed a commission of experts to examine the orthodoxy of Pico's propositions. The commission condemned 13 of them as dangerous or heretical, casting a shadow over Pico's entire project and forcing him to flee to France. Meanwhile, Pico wrote an *Apology* to defend himself, in which he set out only a fraction of the arguments he was planning to address in the dispute (Pico 2010a, Copenhaver 2022).

3 Harmony and Obscureness

As its introduction, the *Oratio* is strictly linked to the *Conclusiones:* it can only by understood in the light of this text. But the *Conclusiones* are utterly obscure. Those 900 theses are Pico's own synthesis of his vast erudition and his attempt to reconcile different traditions and doctrines. The project reveals his ingenuity in proposing the *concordia* (concordance) of the preceding theological and philosophical traditions. Pico primarily pursued the (traditional) goal of reconciling the philosophical schools of Plato and Aristotle, driven by his conviction that they employed distinct terminology to convey identical ideas. Starting from there, the Italian humanist wanted to show that everything that had always been considered divergences in or contradictions between philosophical traditions were not such but were rather only the result of misunderstanding and misinterpretation. The truth is true, given that we know how to interpret it correctly. Pico would have shown all the wise men of the world how to do so.

However, the 900 theses, in and of themselves, are only dry propositions without further clarification. They are a skeleton (or better, a collection of bones), not a fully-formed body. Furthermore, they were often strictly technical and sometimes dependent upon bizarre meanings. Take for example one of the first proposition

(1.3): "this is in the fourth mode of speaking *per se:* man is man"[1] or the enigmatic "all before Moses prophesized through the one-horned stag"[2] (Terracciano 2020). It is probable that some of the theses were included only to be refuted and that others were little more than platitudes that would have revealed unexpected truths. Of course, assuming we knew how to interpret them.

Unfortunately, the debate did not take place and reconstructing the arguments that Pico intended to present becomes an exceedingly difficult task as a result. One of the reasons concerns the types of texts Pico used. As mentioned above, along with the classics of theological and philosophical thought (like Aquinas, Duns Scotus, Averroes, etc.), his efforts were directed at rediscovering hidden traditions, which led him to fruitful discoveries, but at the same time to great misunderstandings and outright blunders (suffered and practiced). As is well known, Pico was greatly attracted to the Kabbalah, a form of Jewish mystical and esoteric thought (Wirszubski 1989; Lelli 2014). He therefore sought to obtain those texts, which were considered inaccessible to Christians. Pico relied on teachers. Indeed, to do so, he turned to various Jewish scholars, not all of whom were detached or impartial. Particularly, during the year 1486, Pico assigned to Flavius Mithridates (1450–1489), also known as Raimundo Moncada, a Jewish convert from Sicily, the task of gathering an extensive collection of Kabbalistic literature and translating it from Hebrew to Latin. The translations, however, were rife with deliberate interpolations, reckless remakes of texts, rewritings in alphabets that were difficult to decipher. They remained unexplored for centuries, preserved in the Vatican Library in Rome, but very complicated to read for linguistic reasons. Deciphering the intricate symbolism, complex metaphors, and mystical language of these texts required not only expertise in Hebrew but also a profound understanding of the Kabbalistic tradition itself (Busi 2006; Campanini 2005; Campanini-Jurgan 2012; Campanini 2019). Only the recent publication of these texts is making it possible to understand many of the expressions, problems, and challenges behind the *Conclusiones*, which in turn illuminate the philosophical stakes of the *Oratio.*

But even when not dealing with the notoriously enigmatic Kabbalistic theses, things are no better in the case of the remainder.

1 "*Haec est in quarto modo dicendi per se: homo est homo*" (Farmer 1998, 213, 1.3).

2 "*Omnes ante Moysen prophetarunt per cervam unicornem*" (Farmer 1998, 353, 28.16).

4 Scholastic Theses

The novelty of a number of sources that Pico brought, above all the Kabbalah, resulted in the latter being the most studied in recent years. But although the Kabbalah has long been considered the most intriguing facet of his work, this does not mean that the other sections of the *Conclusiones* do not hold surprises. The first series of theses—centered on scholastic philosophy—have remained more in the shadows, as simply the result of an almost obligatory quotation of the canonical authors. They are, however, more interesting than that. First, they suggest which cards Pico intends to play and which threads he intends to unravel. Indeed, in his introduction (the *Oratio*), Pico states that one of the hidden meanings of the *Conclusiones* is in a secret concatenation (*concatenatio*) of relations and reasonings. What matters is discovering the intimate connection that unites the individual theses. In that case, starting from the beginning may certainly be helpful.

Furthermore, the first series of the *Conclusiones* represents the richest evidence of Pico's relationship with medieval sources, because it contains an extensive review of philosophical *auctoritates*, such as Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, etc. It should be noted how crucial in the same definition of humanistic and Renaissance philosophy was the departure from or, instead, the debt to the medieval tradition. Certainly, this is a factor that has weighed on the correct evaluation of those texts. In the critical tradition of the past decades, Pico's relationship with these sources has strongly affected judgment of the project of the *Conclusiones* and the entire trajectory of Pico's thought. On the one hand, a portion of scholars, inspired by the notion of humanism as a precursor to "modernity," underestimated Pico's indebtedness to the scholastic tradition. On the other hand, those who acknowledged this debt ran the risk of flattening Pico on those sources, thus overlooking his originality.

It remains a fact: Pico was a profound connoisseur not only of Platonism and mysticism, but also of Scholasticism and Latin Averroism. Indeed, this was one of the main elements that differentiated him from Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) and much of the Florentine cultural *milieu*. Starting again from the texts is the best thing to do. However, the same task of identifying the texts that Pico draws on, and consequently the debates in which he wants to immerse himself, is complicated. When Pico died, he left one of the largest private library collections of the 15th century, consisting of over 1200 volumes in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic (Calori Cesis 1897; Kibre 1934; Murano 2023). In this ocean, one of the challenges that scholars face when studying the *Conclusiones* is to identify and analyze the sources that he used to formulate his theses. Pico did not always cite his sources explicitly, and sometimes he mixed and modified them according

to his own interests and purposes. Moreover, some of the works that he attributed to these philosophers are now considered spurious or doubtful, and some of the manuscripts that he consulted no longer exist or are otherwise not accessible. Therefore, the task at issue requires careful and critical examination of the contexts and traditions that influenced Pico's intellectual project—that is, to reconstruct the origins and meanings of his philosophical claims.

Very recently, there has been new interest in these texts, in more specific research of their sources and their meaning, especially by Amos Edelheit (2021) and Brian Copenhaver (2022; 2023; 2024). Edelheit directly and extremely accurately tackles the scholastic theses and their sources, but—in order to delimitate his truly herculean task—looks exclusively for the authors that Pico cites directly. Where Pico attributes a position to Thomas Aquinas, Edelheit looks through the totality of Thomist writings for a possible place to situate that reference. This seems a common-sense choice, but, as we shall demonstrate, it is misleading with respect to the reality of the facts and does not help us understand the reasons behind Pico's choices. If we look closely at the first two series of theses, which are those "according to Albert" and those "according to Thomas", we realize that very often Pico was not quoting directly from the texts of the two authors. Let us be clear: there is no doubt that he knew them and had pondered them at length. His own library testifies to the number of scholastic volumes he possessed. And, of course, it is certainly possible to track many of those theses back to Albert's and Aquinas' books. But to understand how and why Pico constructed his dossier and discourse, the cases in which this task is not feasible are much more significant and offer us keys to all the others. Already Caroti (2005) and in detail now Copenhaver (2024) have shown how Pico made use rather of intermediate texts, summaries and arguments from authors who were perhaps less well-known but more useful for his purpose. Copenhaver in particular has persuasively demonstrated the provenance of many scholastic theses from Cabrol, a Thomist author that Pico makes extensive use of in his *Apologia.* Many, not all, as we shall see.

We should also bear in mind that Pico was about to hold a lengthy discussion on the entirety of philosophical knowledge, embarking on subtle arguments on often extremely technical points. It was a discussion on an abnormally large number of theses, as he himself acknowledged (Pico 2021, 57). Moreover, in the last months before the dispute, as we know, he was immersed in the study of the complicated Hebrew volumes that Mithridates had prepared for him. It was absolutely necessary, almost inevitable, that where he could, he would resort to summaries and compendia. Outlines and compendia were, after all, typical of the philosophical genre he had decided to use. From this point of view, it is also beneficial for us to bring into play an element that we have neglected until now and that usually remains aloof in Pico's intellectual biography. Pico immediately became one of

the brightest stars of Renaissance culture: he proposed his grandiose disputation at 24, and he died young at the age of 31. By virtue of his precocity, one tends to overlook the fact that in his first work he had just completed his philosophical apprenticeship and had recently shed his role as a university student. Certainly, Pico was a peculiar student, very well off, with the possibility of moving between his favorite universities and to reserve for himself the teachers of his liking.

The phases of his studies are largely known, but the traces left by his path as a student in his philosophical synthesis have not been sufficiently investigated. Pico undertook legal studies in 1477–78 in Bologna, probably for the purposes of an ecclesiastical career, but later left them due to his preference for "*studia humanitatis*" and philosophy. For this, he went to Ferrara (1479) and then stayed briefly in Florence (perhaps meeting Ficino and Poliziano for the first time). The following year, Pico moved to the University of Padua to further his philosophical studies. His stay, which lasted until the summer of 1482, meant his encounter with Averroes and Averroism: in Padua, in fact, Pico had the opportunity to listen to Nicoletto Vernia (1428–1499) and meet the Jewish philosopher Elia del Medigo (1458–1493). In the following years, he moved on to the University of Pavia and later to the University of Paris. Returning from France at the end of 1484, he finally returned to Florence. After the immersion of his Paduan and Parisian years in the profound study of the peripatetic tradition and knowledge of the various interpretations, especially of Averroism, he now felt the need to get to know Plato and the neo-Platonic tradition in depth (Bacchelli 2015). His Florentine stay is pivotal, but, indeed, must not make one forget his long tenure as a student around Italian and European universities. And further, it is in his wanderings between universities that Pico acquired not only a wealth of knowledge, but also a part of his conspicuous library (Murano 2023). Let us therefore try to think of Pico as a student, albeit a brilliant one, embarking on this vast project, the *Conclusiones.*

5 Albertists and Thomists

Thesis 24 "according to Thomas" states that "a subject and an accident proper to it are really distinguished."[3] Edelheit (2021, 245) has generally reconstructed the framework of Aristotelian and Thomist issues within which this expression makes sense, without being able to identify the specific source. Thus, according to Aristotle, alterations belong to those things that are subject by themselves to sensible qualities. The commentary by Thomas provides clarification regarding

3 "*Subiectum et propria passio realiter distinguuntur*" (Farmer 1998, 226, 2.24).

the nature of change and in particular the nature of a secondary change (*alteratio*) in the sensual qualities of a substance. He asserts that any object undergoing change does so in accordance with its sensory qualities. Consequently, change can solely occur in entities that possess an inherent capacity to endure and manifest these sensory qualities. Thomas then analyzes the notions of form and shape and of quality (*passio*) and subject (*subiectum*) to explain secondary changes. In entities susceptible to change, a clear distinction is drawn between the subject and the quality, leading to the conclusion that change does not occur within forms and shapes themselves, but solely at the level of sensory qualities.[4]

Considering Aquinas alone, the thesis remains somewhat obscure because it does not clarify for us the issue of the actual distinction between subject and *passio.* Nor does it seem to be exactly found in Cabrol's work (the typical intermediate source he uses there), if I have seen it correctly. Moreover, this type of explanation tells us almost nothing about how Pico would have wanted to use it in the exposition of his general project and specifically how it would have served to demonstrate the concordance of authors and knowledge. Edelheit (2021, 246), in order to make the conclusion more intelligible, tries to link it to other possible sources, in particular to a passage from Ockham referring to the analogy between the relation between being and One, on the one hand, and between *passio* and subject on the other. There is a reason: the relation between being and One is the issue of the preceding thesis (number 2.23 "One adds to being only the privation of division"[5]), and it is a pivotal theme for Pico, who will devote to this issue his *De Ente et Uno* (1490–1491), but no philosophical or textual cues suggesting a specific reference to Ockham. Anyway, Edelheit only intends to show an interesting similarity and eventually concludes: "this might also be a reminder that Pico uses many different sources, some in a direct and a straightforward fashion and some in an indirect fashion" (Edelheit 2021, 246). A good reminder, but we will try to see where this tricky proposition comes from.

Pico indeed had something else in mind. Tied to the issue of Being and One, the thesis is better understood within the dispute between Thomists and Albertists. This was in fact one of the points of disagreement between the two schools in the debates that marked the turn of beginning of the century. The proposition can in fact be found, rather pointedly, in a *Promptuarium argumentorum*, an anonymous text composed of 68 *conclusiones*, written to help students prepare their debates (*disputationes*). The *Promptuarium* was designed to help students learn how to argue effectively and provided them with a comprehensive collection of arguments

4 Aquinas 1965, VII, 5.

5 "*Unum supra ens non addit nisi privationem divisionis*" (Farmer 1998, 226, 2.23).

that they could use in discussions. Through two lists of intertwined theses belonging to two fictional students, Lilius and Spineus—one a follower of Albertus, the other of Thomas—, the *Promptuarium* offers valuable insights into the nature of academic debates during its time.

Before delving into the thesis and the text, we must first make a few clarifications with respect to the nature of philosophical debates at universities in that period.

6 Philosophical Debates

Late medieval university culture—and certainly the culture of the 15th century as well—was characterized by the rapid circulation of knowledge between different academic institutions. The intellectual landscape underwent a significant transformation with the emergence of several universities, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe. This proliferation of universities brought about a notable change in the educational map and the intellectual climate of the time. Each new university developed its own unique character, decisively altering the local intellectual and cultural scenery. While it is true that the oldest and most renowned universities, such as Paris, Oxford, or Padua, continued to influence debates, it should not be assumed that the circulation of ideas flowed in only one direction (Hoenen 1995, 329–330). Pico had studied between Bologna, Padua, and Paris, but he must also have been receptive to themes from these new poles.

The multiplication of universities was strongly connected with the emergence of rival schools of thought, exemplified by the "*via moderna*" and the "*via antiqua*" (the modern and the ancient ways) and the ensuing conflict between them. This debate was about different methods of reading the *corpus aristotelicum.* In that context, the term "*via*" encompasses a method of interpreting Aristotle that is characteristic of a particular school of thought. Essentially, it denotes the manner in which the text is approached and expounded. Within this framework, "*via*" also refers to the authoritative works cited and employed as points of reference throughout a given commentary. By employing the term "*via*" in this manner, the author of the commentary indicated their alignment with a specific school of thought or, alternatively, how they were classified by others within that intellectual community. During the early 15th century, the term "modern," in this context, acquired a doctrinal significance, as it came to be associated with a specific group of scholars that aligned themselves with a particular interpretation of Aristotle that diverged from the traditional views espoused by Thomas Aquinas, Albertus Magnus, or Duns Scotus. Instead, they preferred more recent authors, such as John Buridan and Marsilius of Inghen, who were themselves regarded as followers

of William of Ockham. The "modern" way was closely linked to nominalism, the doctrine which rejected the existence of universals outside the human mind.

Scholars and thinkers from each school engaged in intellectual debates and arguments, defending their respective philosophical positions and challenging the validity of their opponents' ideas. As Maarten Hoenen put it,

> the formation of schools was intimately connected with the reading of set texts at the universities and the studia of the religious orders. Debates between schools were chiefly concerned with interpretations of Aristotle. Each school had its preferred reading of the corpus aristotelicum. The stimulus for the establishment of philosophical schools, therefore, was the scholastic educational system. (Hoenen 2002, 3)

The contrast was not only between the "*via moderna*" and the "*via antiqua*," but also within the "*via antiqua*" itself. At the beginning of the 15th century, an Albertist school was formed that contrasted in some points the thought of Thomas Aquinas, defending the Aristotelian interpretation proposed by Albertus Magnus. The status of logic, the role of universals, and the distinction between essence and existence, among other issues, were the principal topics of division and confrontation between the two schools.

The young University of Cologne, formed according to the Parisian model ("*secundum ritum Parisiensem*") played a decisive role in this context. The polemical context of the disputes, the pedagogical innovations concerning the teaching of students in the Faculty of Arts, and the methods used to facilitate their learning shaped the revival of Thomism in the early 15th century and created the conditions for a particularly vibrant philosophical mood.

Several treatises published in Cologne explicitly address these debates between Thomists and Albertists. One of the most notable works is Heymeric de Campo's *Tractatus problematicus vel Problemata inter Albertum Magnum et sanctum Thomam*, written in the mid-1420s. Heymeric (1395–1460) was trained in Paris and in his *Tractatus* reports the controversy between the schools from an Albertistic point of view in 18 "*quaestiones disputatae.*" Other works that are of great importance for understanding the debates between Thomists and Albertists and their philosophical background is certainly Gerardus de Monte's *Tractatus ostendens concordiam S. Thomae Aquinatis et Alberti Magni* (1456). Gerardus de Monte (c. 1400–1480), pupil of Henry of Gorkum (c. 1378–1431), wrote, in the form of his book, the Thomist response to the Heymeric book. Heymeric and Gerardus were after all the regent masters of the two most significant opposing colleges (*bursae*; in particular the *bursa Laurentiana* and the *bursa Montana*) that housed the university students. The University of Cologne did in fact accept teaching through different ways (*viae*) but stipulated that students who chose an approach should be housed in different buildings (Hoenen 1995, 333). The *bursae*

had a significant impact on the emergence and growth of different philosophical schools and traditions, notably Thomism and Albertism. These places indeed offered a stable and institutional environment, ensuring continuity and fostering personal connections necessary for the development of specific schools. This is the context from which the *Promptuarium argumentorum* (Cologne 1492) originates, together with other books of similar theme and layout, like the *Reparationes librorum totius naturalis philosophiae* (Cologne 1494) and *De proprietatibus elementorum* (Cologne 1496).

What concerns us in the moment is that we find these kinds of volumes among Pico's surviving books. Among his "scholastic" books, there was indeed mention of a *Concordiae … Thome et Alberti* (Cesis 1887, 45, no. 604; Kibre 1936, 203; this is presumably the text by Gerardus de Monte) and another unattributed text entitled *Questiones de anima secundum Albertum et Tomam* (Kibre 1936, 289; Murano 2018, 234–235). Moreover, it has never been noticed that from the very first thesis of the *Conclusiones*, which states "that intelligible images are not necessary, and it is not fitting for good Aristotelianism to posit them,"[6] Pico refers very often to issues that were debated within these texts. Without going into the specifics of the philosophical discourse pursued there, the first thesis is originated in *De Anima* 3.7. 431a17–18, in which Aristotle states that the soul never thinks without images. Such images would be produced by the agent intellect from images stored in memory or reworked from the senses. Seen through Albertus' texts—which argue that the active intellect is the author of cognitive content, dropping the functionality of the *species intelligibiles* (*De Anima* III, t.2, cap. 15, 199)—Pico's proposition certainly appears to be a legitimate deduction. But it is worth noting that this was also a point debated between Heymeric de Campo and Gerardus de Monte, i. e., one of the points where Albert and Thomas were to be brought into concord.[7]

What I hypothesize, then, is that in his attempt to restore concord between all the philosophical schools of antiquity and modernity, Pico began with the most recent, and which were addressed in his university education—not between Albert and Thomas, but between Albertists and Thomists, not on the texts of the 13th century, but with the polemical books of his century.

Another thesis "according to Albert" provides a further example. In this case, it is not an obscure proposition or difficult to place within Albert's work: it states that a "moveable body is the subject of natural science."[8] For Albert, it is little

6 "*Species intelligibiles non sunt necessariae, et eas ponere non est bonis peripateticis consentaneum*" (Farmer 212, 1.1).

7 de Campo 1496, q. 13 contrarietatem: "*An intellectus humanus posset aliquid sine phantasmata intelligere*"; de Monte 1480, q. 13.

8 "*Corpus mobile est subiectum scientiae naturalis*" (Farmer 1998, 216, 1. 14).

more than an obvious observation, and *prima facie* it is not clear what role it should have in Pico's speculation. The issue was debated because Thomas had stated that the subject of physics was rather the *ens mobile*, rejecting Albert's doctrine.[9] Thomas' subtle argument is that every science must presuppose its own subject, but since physics demonstrates that every mobile thing is a body, the mobile body cannot be the presupposed principle, but rather the presupposed principle is the existence of motion, suggested to all by experience. In both Heymeric de Campo's *Problemata* and Gerardus da Monte's *Tractatus ostendens concordiam*, the question is subjected to intense discussion. Heymeric, in asserting the centrality of corporeality, clarifies that motion belongs to the *genus* of continuous quantities and this essential characteristic of motion finds justification in corporeal nature (Donati 1989, 123–124; *Problemata* f. d. 3v). Gerardus' thesis questions whether the "*ens mobile*" is the subject of physics ("Utrum *ens mobile* sit subiectum scientiae naturalis"; the Latin is almost identical in Pico's thesis: "*Corpus mobile* est subiectum scientiae naturalis"). Gerardus explains how Thomas' choice stems from the priority he gives in his Aristotelian commentaries to the order of knowledge and the need not to assume what must be demonstrated: however, the discord between the Albertian and Thomist positions is only apparent because Thomas refers to the *corpus mobile* in other places in his work. Moreover, this issue is placed in Gerardus' list in relation to Albert's other theses (in particular the doctrine of the *inchoatio formae*), which would suggest a possible development of the arguments.

Pico' s probably derives this topic from Nicoletto Vernia, who wrote a *Questio an ens mobile sit totius naturalis philosophie subiectum* (1480). However, it seems to me much more likely that Pico is not referring directly to Albert's work but drawing from "intermediate" texts, which served to make the two interpretations agree (which was, after all, the primary purpose of Pico's project). However, what Pico is interested in here is probably not the "hidden connection" with the subsequent theses, but rather to show his ability to make Albert and Thomas agree: an operation probably also facilitated by these volumes and manuals discussed in the University of Cologne we have just seen.

7 The Promptuarium argumentorum

Let us come therefore to the *Promptuarium argumentorum.* The book was first published in Cologne in 1490 but presumably written in the mid-1400s (Hoenen 1995, 335) and drew its inspiration from the already cited *Tractatus problematicus*

9 Aquinas 1965, I, 1.

by Heymeric de Campo. The *Promptuarium* was a kind of university textbook, an examination compendium (Hoenen 1995, 340), which probably came from the *bursa Laurentiana.* The label *Promptuarium* finds usage in various works spanning the 15th, 16th, and even later centuries. However, despite the diversity of subjects, these works share common characteristics. The collected materials are not the original work of the compiler but rather gathered from a variety of sources. The two-page preface of the *Promptuarium* provides crucial information regarding the book's objectives. Its main intention is to present a platform for the two disputants. This practice of engaging in disputes was commonly regarded as an effective method for acquiring comprehensive knowledge and testing one's own intellectual prowess. The anonymous author introduces Lilius and Spineus as students who embraced lively debates during times of academic vacation (it might be noted that the Pico's *Conclusiones* would have been debated on Epiphany). The names of the students are evocative of a lily, the one representing Albert's position, and the other a thorn, the one carrying forward Aquinas' arguments. The book was therefore a versatile resource for constructing persuasive arguments and successfully navigating academic disputes, but it also aimed to show instances of agreement between the two sources: the disputation is, after all, also a scholastic method for reconciling contradictory authorities.

Returning to the thesis that interests us, in the *Promptuarium*'s articulation, the issue of the real distinction of the subject and its proper predicate is posed from a proposition (n. 22) which states that "Being, One, truth, and goodness have themselves as subject and their own predicate (*passio*)"[10] and continues with three further *conclusiones* (n. 23–25): the first, the objection of the Thomist Spineus, "that the properties of the entity are not really distinct from it" (n. 23) and two "Albertist" theses: "the subject is the effective cause of its own properties" (n. 24) and "the subject and its specific property are together" (n. 25). The issue again returns in n. 30: "the separation of the property from the subject does not imply contradiction."[11]

These are the theses that, in turn, had to be developed, but already show the thread of the discourse, with the objections and counter-objections (and evidently, such argumentation is not found in Thomas' text). It is the type of discourse that Pico probably wanted to conduct and makes clear the fact that each of his thesis (or group of theses) conceals others.

The words, as well as the numbers (which may not be a coincidence), suggest that the *Promptuarium* could have been the source from which Pico drew a good

10 "*Ens, unum, verum et bonum habent se sicut subiectum et propria passio*" (Hoenen 1995, 365).
11 23. "*Passiones entis non sunt realiter ab ipso distinctae*"; 24."*Subiectum est causa effectiva suarum passionum*"; 25. "*Subiectum et sua propria passio sunt simul*"; 30. "*Separatio passionis a subiecto non implicat contradditionem*" (Hoenen 1995, 365).

part of his list. Indeed, number 24 of Pico's thesis ("a subject and its specific property are really distinguished;" "*Subiectum et propria passio realiter distinguuntur*") could be placed between thesis 23 and 25 of the *Promptuarium.* The Latin text is revealing: "*Passiones entis non sunt realiter ab ipso distinctae*" and, most evidently, "*Subiectum et sua propria passio sunt simul*," which is the opposite of Pico's thesis.

It does not seem to be a mere coincidence. Once again, I do not intend to argue that Pico was not familiar with the texts of Thomas and Albert, or that he did not also follow other authors in the development of his arguments, such as the aforementioned Cabrol, who is present in almost all of the theses according to Thomas. But what seems certain to me beyond reasonable doubt is that in selecting the theses he intended to debate "according to Albertus" and "according to Thomas," Pico was referring not to their original texts but to the way in which debates on their concordance were set out in the university of the mid-15th century.

Pico's surviving library do not mention the *Promptuarium argumentorum* which, although very probably already written before the *Conclusiones*, was printed later. This must lead us to some caution, but it is not in itself an insurmountable obstacle. The *Promptuarium* was indeed conceivably written in sometime between c. 1430 and 1490 (the date of the first printed edition), and no manuscript has survived. However, it probably circulated among students before it was printed. The success it had in print (three editions within a span of six years, 1490 – 1496) makes it highly plausible that it was a popular philosophical teaching tool, and that it was popular before going into print. After all, even the *Tractatus Problematicus* of Heymeric da Campo, written in 1423 and certainly quite widespread, was only printed in 1496. Furthermore, it is highly likely that the *Promptuarium* was not only intended for the local market in Cologne but also targeted markets abroad (Hoenen 1995, 336 – 337). At the time, the circulation of these texts between different universities in different countries was quite common.

At most, it is more difficult to rule out the possibility that the same theses were not also in other such "handbooks," other such "*promptuarii*," which may certainly be the case. The blatant assonances found in the theses prompts further investigation of the connection between "student" texts such as the *Promptuarium* and the *Conclusiones.* As mentioned above, by the time Pico wrote the 900 theses—immersed, moreover, in the study of Hebrew, Arabic, and Kabbalistic culture—and memorized their arguments, he had to resort to intermediate summaries, to commentators who had summarized the main points of contention between the authors. His purpose, after all, was to show the harmony between all traditions, and thus, first of all, to reconcile the rift that had arisen in the *via antiqua* between Albertists and Thomists. It has been shown that the *Promptuarium argumentorum*, and the context in which it was designed, is a perfect candidate source for this purpose.

8 Conclusions: Pico's Desk

The hypothesis, now corroborated by a number of textual and contextual clues, that Pico dealt with some specific student texts provides us with a decisive key to how he would presumably have carried out his arguments. The discovery of his intermediate sources allows us indeed to understand first of all how Pico worked in those frenetic months. But moreover, it helps us to understand where he follows a more or less codified or submerged tradition, and where instead he is original (also in choosing his themes: trinity, predestination, etc.). From this point of view, this kind of work on intermediate sources offers fundamental clues for working on the concatenation of the *Conclusiones*, of which only a few examples could be shown here. At the same time, this makes it possible to show the importance of these textbooks, which are too little studied, in accurately grasping the intellectual trajectories of late medieval and early modern philosophers. These ways of learning were also ways of debating and became ways of reshaping knowledge.

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