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Pico della Mirandola and the Pre-Socratics

ABSTRACT: Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) decided to study all the ancient and medieval schools of philosophy, including the Pre-Socratics, in order to broaden his scope. Pico showed interest in ancient monists. He commented that only Xenophanes' One is the One simply, while Parmenides' One is not the absolute One, but the oneness of Being. Melissus' One is in extreme correspondence to that of Xenophanes. As for Xenophanes, Pico seems to have fallen victim of ancient sources, who referred to Xenophanes and Parmenides as members of the Eleatic "tribe". In the case of Parmenides Pico draws mainly on the Platonic dialogues *Parmenides* and *Sophist* and not on intermediaries such as the Neoplatonists and other commentators. Despite of Pico's knowledge of Empedocles' philosophy, it is worth noticing that Pico was also strongly influenced by the medieval kabbalistic literature and the pseudo Empedocles. While Neoplatonists, such as Proclus, commented Empedocles and interpreted him according to the Neoplatonic spectrum, Pico's appreciation of the philosophy of Empedocles was mediated through Arab and Jewish mysticism. Pico counted among his sources the Pre-Socratics, but the way he read them was not always direct and consistent. He intentionally chose to interpret them through the spectrum of intermediaries such as the ancient Commentators, the Neoplatonists, the Arabs and Jews mystics.

KEYWORDS: Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Xenophanes, Melissus, Parmenides, Empedocles, Pseudo Empedocles, Pre-socratics, *Kaballah*

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) attempted to enrich his sources by resorting to philosophers and texts that were not well known to 15th-century humanists. In the first half of the 15th century, Diogenes Laertius' *Vitae Philosophorum* was translated in Latin and boosted the interest in Presocratic philosophy. Renaissance scholars could also derive indirect information about the Pre-Socratics from the works of Aristotle and other ancient Greek philosophers, especially the Neoplatonists. Pico decided to study all the ancient and medieval schools of philosophy, including the Pre-Socratics, in order to broaden his scope. This paper seeks to explore the ways in which Giovanni Pico della Mirandola treated, principally in his *Conclusiones nongentae* (1486), the

philosophy of Parmenides, Melissus, Xenophanes and Empedocles. Furthermore, I attempt to identify Pico's sources and correct common misinterpretations of his text.

In the *Conclusiones* Pico returned to the maxim that all things are one:

*Cum tres fuerint qui dicerent omnia esse unum. Zenophanes, Parmenides et Melissus: videbit qui diligenter eorum dicta per scrutabitur. Zenophanis unum illud esse quod est simpliciter unum. Unum Parmenidis non unum absolute ut creditur: Sed ens unum. Unum Melissi esse unum habens ad unum Zenophanis extremalem correspondentiam.*¹

Xenophanes, Parmenides and Melissus were the main proponents of the aforementioned view. Pico appreciated monism and as a consequence he showed interest in ancient monists. Pico commented that only Xenophanes' One is the One simply, while Parmenides' One is not the absolute One, but the oneness of Being. Melissus' One is in extreme correspondence to that of Xenophanes.

As for Xenophanes, Pico seems to have fallen victim of the ancient tradition, Plato and Aristotle, who referred to Xenophanes and Parmenides as members of the Eleatic «tribe».² In addition the pseudo Aristotelian treatise *De Melisso Xenophane Gorgia* reinforced the Aristotelian fallacy: the author of the text interpreted Xenophanes using Parmenidean assumptions.³ Simplicius, a valuable source of Pico, followed Aristotle and pseudo Aristotle, because he lacked the specific passage of Xenophanes poem.⁴

Pico's interpretation of the philosophy of Parmenides is interesting, although open to various interpretations. By declaring that the One of Parmenides is the oneness of Being, Pico stood closer to Plato's *Parmenides* and *Sophist*.⁵ Plato supported in the *Sophist* that the Eleatics held that what is called all-things is

¹ Pico della Mirandola, G., "Conclusiones", 3>70, in <http://cds.library.brown.edu/projects/pico/allSubSection.php?myID=sec203&expand=> (accessed 31/7/2014). See also: Farmer, S. A., *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses (1486), The Evolution of Traditional Religious and Philosophical Systems, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies*, Tempe, 1998.

² Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 986b18-21.; Plato, *Sophist*, 242d.; Bryan, J., *Likeness and Likelihood in the Pre-Socratics and Plato*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012, 93-96.; Kahn, C. H., "Writing Philosophy: Prose and Poetry from Thales to Plato", in Yunis, H. (ed.), *Written Texts and the Rise of Literate Culture in Ancient Greece*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, 155.; Kirk, G. S., Raven, J. E., Schofield, M., *The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selection of Texts*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983, 163-164.

³ DK 21A28.

⁴ DK 21A31.

⁵ Garin, E., *History of Italian Philosophy*, Rodopi, Amsterdam – New York, 2008, v.1, 315.

only one thing⁶ while in the *Parmenides* Socrates says to Parmenides: “you say in your poem that the universe is one”.⁷ Probably Plato used the singular and the plural interchangeably. In addition Pico shared the Aristotelian approach on Being. Aristotle did not ignore the warning of Parmenides about the oneness of Being, but he preferred the plural so that he expresses this key Eleatic assumption.⁸ Pico drew from the original Platonic and Aristotelian tradition as it is obvious from his phrase: *omnia esse unum*.⁹ Pico preferred the plural instead of the original Eleatic singular. Moreover Pico deviated from his common source, the Neoplatonists. Plotinus rejected the Parmenidean assumption of the oneness of Being and claimed that Being is the perfect unity in plurality of the forms.¹⁰ Pico also deviated from the medieval scholastics, who claimed the equation of oneness and Being: *ens et unum convertuntur*.¹¹ As a result it is reasonable to suppose that in the case of Parmenides Pico draws mainly on the Platonic dialogues *Parmenides* and *Sophist* and not on intermediaries such as the Neoplatonists and other commentators. Borghesi suggested that Pico could probably draw from pseudo Dionysius, although he recognised that Pico’s main concern was the demonstration of the compatibility of Platonic and Aristotelian approach on One and Being.¹² In this case Pico was not obliged to resort to other sources besides Plato and Aristotle.

As for Melissus, Pico suggests that his One is in extreme correspondence to that of Xenophanes. Pico agrees with Aristotle that Parmenides and Melissus conceptualize One in a slightly different way.¹³ Melissus substitutes and enriches the Parmenidean εἶναι with ἐόν, a concept closer to that of Xenophanes.¹⁴ Melissus comes even closer to Xenophanes, and probably was inspired by him, when he argues on the changeless of the One.¹⁵ The similarity

⁶ “ὡς ἐνός ὄντος τῶν πάντων καλουμένων”. Plato, *Sophist*, 242d6.

⁷ “ἔν φής εἶναι τό πᾶν”. Plato, *Parmenides*, 128a8-b1.

⁸ Aristotle, *Physics*, 185b7, 185a22.

⁹ Beierwaltes, W., “Das seiende Eine, Zur Neuplatonischen Interpretation der zweiten Hypothese des platonischen Parmenides und deren Fortbestimmung in der christlichen Theologie und in Hegels Logik”, in Beierwaltes, W. (ed.), *Denken des Einen, Studien zur Neuplatonischen Philosophie und ihrer Wirkungsgeschichte*, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt, 1985, 217-219.

¹⁰ Plotinus, *Enneads*, VI.9.2.15-29, VI.8.14-23.

¹¹ Aquinas, *De potentia*, q.9, a.7ad.13.

¹² Borghesi, F., “Interpretations”, in Borghesi, F., Papio, M., Riva, M. (eds.), *Pico della Mirandola, Oration on the Dignity of Man, A New Translation and Commentary*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012, 55-58.

¹³ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 986b10-12, 18-21, 27-34.

¹⁴ DK28 B.8.1-4.

¹⁵ Simplicius, In *Physica*, 111.18-112.15.; Kirk, Raven, Schofield, *Presocratic Philosophers*,

between Xenophanes' and Melissus' One is emphasized in pseudo Aristotle's *De Melisso, Xenophane, Gorgia*, a possible source of Pico.¹⁶ Cardinal Bessarion (1408-1472), for example, seems to know the pseudo Aristotelian tractate, when, in the mid-fifteenth century attacked Aristotle and defended Xenophanes, Melissus and Parmenides in his *Bessarionis Niceni disputatio de infinito pro Xenophane, Melisso, Parmenide adversus Aristotelem*.¹⁷ Xenophanes, Parmenides and Melissus were valuable allies for Pico, who seeks to support that *ens* is subsumed to *unum*.¹⁸

Moreover, Pico, in the *Conclusiones*, commented on Empedocles: *Empedocles per litem et amicitiam in anima nihil aliud intelligit, quam potentiam sursum ductiuam et deorum ductiuam in ea: quas ego credo proportionari in scientia Sephirot aeternitati et decori*.¹⁹ According to Pico strife (νεῖκος) and friendship (φιλία) in the soul means nothing but the power within leading upwards and downwards.²⁰ Pico, under the influence of Kabbalah, adds that he believes that the Empedoclean notion is proportional in the science of the Sephirot to eternity and adornment. In passage 5>5 Pico suggests that Empedocles, when he refers the intelligible Sphere which extended from Venus, meant nothing but the archetypal world extended from the order of first providence, which dwells in itself: *Empedocles per spheram intelligibilem a Venere contentam: nihil aliud intelligit quam mundum archetipum ab ordine intra se manentis primae providentiae contentum*.²¹ Finally, in passage 8>4, Pico attempts to interpret Zoroaster and his Chaldean commentators with the aid of the philosophy of Empedocles. According to Pico, the second saying of Zoroaster mentions the roots of the Earth. Unfortunately, we don't know which specific passage of the *Chaldean Oracles* Pico had in mind, since the collections differ significantly.²² Pico claims that the commentators can only

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¹⁶ *De Melisso, Xenophane, Gorgia*, 974a12-14, 977a23-24.

¹⁷ Le Ferron, A., "Aristotelis liber nunc primum versus, aduersus Xenophanem, Zenonem, et Gorgiam: interprete Arnoldo Ferrono Burdigalensi regio consiliario. Bessarionis Niceni disputatio de infinito pro Xenophane, Melisso, Parmenide adversus Aristotelem", Lugduni: apud Ioan. Tornaesium, 1557.

¹⁸ Garin, *History*, 315.

¹⁹ Pico della Mirandola, G., *Conclusiones*, 3>71. <http://cds.library.brown.edu/projects/pico/allSubSection.php?myID=sec203&expand=> (accessed 31/7/2014).

²⁰ Bori, P.C., "The Historical and Biographical Background of the Oration", in Borghesi, F., Papio, M., Riva, M. (eds.), *Pico della Mirandola, Oration on the Dignity of Man, A New Translation and Commentary*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012, 29.

²¹ Pico della Mirandola, G., *Conclusiones*, 5>5. <http://cds.library.brown.edu/projects/pico/allSubSection.php?myID=sec205&expand=> (accessed 31/7/2014).

²² Borghesi, F., Papio, M., Riva, M. (eds.), *Pico della Mirandola, Oration on the Dignity of*

mean the vegetative life, which conforms to the words of Empedocles, who posits transanimation even into plants: *Ibidem per radices terrae nihil aliud intelligere possunt quam vitam vegetalem: convenienter ad dicta Empedoclis qui ponit transanimationem etiam in plantas.*²³ In all of these references it is possible to trace several principles of Empedocles' philosophy.

Despite of Pico's knowledge of the philosophy of Empedocles it is worth noticing that Pico was also strongly influenced by the medieval kabbalistic literature and the pseudo Empedocles. Several texts of pseudo Empedocles were probably written by Arab authors, under the influence of Neo-Platonic, Gnostic and kabbalistic sources, and was crucial for medieval kabbalists.²⁴ According to pseudo-Empedocles there is a spiritual, primal matter in which every creature participates with the exception of God. The five substances are, besides primal matter, intellect, soul, nature and second matter.²⁵ In the pseudo Empedoclian *Book of the Five Substances*, which influenced Solomon Ibn Gabirol and other Jew scholars,²⁶ strife and friendship are attributed to primal matter and not to the Sphere, as Empedocles does.²⁷ The author of the *Book of the Five Substances* finds a prosperous field in psychology. The authentic and pseudo Empedocles supported the preexistence of the soul.²⁸ According to pseudo Empedocles the human soul lives an Elysian life in the divine Sphere, where friendship reigns. In a certain time it descends to nature, the kingdom of strife. There it becomes corporeal, an alienation of its spirituality. Soul struggles to reunite with the divine mind so that it enjoys happiness. The only precondition is its purification through ascetic life and the guidance of friend-

Man, A New Translation and Commentary, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012, 133.

²³ Pico della Mirandola, G., Conclusiones, 8>4. <http://cds.library.brown.edu/projects/pico/all-SubSection.php?myID=sec208&expand=> (accessed 31/7/2014).

²⁴ De Smet, D., *Empedocles Arabus, Une lecture neoplatonicienne tardive, Paleis der Academiën*, Brussels, 1998; Rudolph, U. (ed.), *Kitāb Amūniyūs fī ārāx al-falāsifa*, *Die Doxographie des Pseudo-Ammonius. Ein Beitrag zur neuplatonischen Überlieferung im Islam*, F. Steiner, Stuttgart, 1989.; Sezgin, F., Amawi, M., Ehrig-Eggert, C., Neubauer, E. (eds.), *(Pseudo) Empedocles in the Arabic Tradition, Texts and Studies*, Institute for the History of Arabic-Islamic Science at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, Frankfurt, 2000.

²⁵ Palacios, M. A., *The Mystical Philosophy of Ibn Masarra and His Followers*, Brill, Leiden, 1978, 65-67.

²⁶ Altmann, A., *Von der mittelalterlichen zur modernen Aufklärung: Studien zur jüdischen Geistesgeschichte*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, 1987, 29. ; Altmann, A., Stern, S., Isaac Israeli: *A Neoplatonic Philosopher of the Early Tenth Century*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 2010, 150.; Kraemer, J., *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam: The Cultural Revival During the Buyid Age*, Brill, Leiden, 1992, 143.

²⁷ DK31 A.52a, DK31 B.27a, DK31 B.29a.

²⁸ DK31 B.115, DK31 B.115a, DK31 B.115b, DK31 B.115c.

ship. The contemplation of the divine, even in the present life, is the reward for purification. The soul of the pious enjoys happiness in the afterlife in the Sphere, under the reign of friendship, until it becomes immortal.²⁹ It is obvious that pseudo Empedocles' psychology is based on Neoplatonism and Pico was heavily influenced by pseudo Empedocles.

While Neoplatonists, such as Proclus,³⁰ Simplicius and John Philoponus, commented Empedocles and interpreted him according to the Neoplatonic spectrum, Pico's appreciation of the philosophy of Empedocles in this specific passage was mediated through Arab and Jewish mysticism. Pico placed friendship and strife in the soul in accordance not to the authentic Empedocles but to pseudo Empedocles.³¹ The similarities between Pico and pseudo Empedocles, as presented by al-Shahraṣṭānī (1086-1153) in his *Kitāb al-Milāl wa al-Nihāl*, are obvious:

*That noblest part of the universal soul is the prophet sent in each century or each revolution of the spheres..... In these ways he liberates the particular noble souls which were seduced by the illusions of the two organic souls, (vegetative and sensual) and removes them from their vain illusion and treacherous deviation. Sometimes (the prophet) reclothes the two inferior souls with the dress of the noble soul. Then the concupiscent appetite turns into love, love of the good, of truth and sincerity, even as the irascible appetite turns into hate, but hate of evil, error and the lie. Consequently, the particular noble soul ascends to the world of spiritual beings, taking with him those two souls which come to be his body in that world as they have been before in this world.*³²

*The vegetative soul is the shell of the animal and vital soul, which is the shell of the rational soul, which is the shell of the intellectual soul. All that is below is shell of what is above, and that which is above is pulp or medulla. [Empedocles] sometimes designates the shell and the medulla with the words body and spirit. Thus he says that the vegetative soul is the body of the vital soul, and that the latter is the spirit of the former; and so on successively until it reaches the intellect.*³³

Similar passages could also be found in the works of al-Shahrazūrī (13th century), who was heavily influenced by pseudo-Empedocles.³⁴

Moreover Pico combined Empedocles with Kabbalah, as his reference to the Sephiroth proved. That was a common trend in the Gerona school of Ka-

²⁹ Palacios, *Mystical*, 53-72.

³⁰ Proclus, In *Timaeum*, II, 18.6ff, II, 69.23ff.

³¹ Palacios, *Mystical*, 56.

³² Palacios, *Mystical*, 56-57.

³³ Palacios, *Mystical*, 54-55.

³⁴ Palacios, *Mystical*, 54.

ballah, which exercised strong influence on the philosophy of Pico.³⁵ Eternity and adornment are the symbols for the seventh and eight Sefirah and they symbolize the upward and downward movement.³⁶

As for the Sphere, I would agree that Pico was allegorizing Empedocles. In fact he interpreted Empedocles so that the Presocratic philosopher supported his arguments. It is dubious whether Empedocles would agree that the Sphere is solely intelligible.³⁷ Rather Proclus presented the Sphere of friendship as a description of the intelligible world.³⁸ Syrianus also supported that Empedocles named Sphere the intelligible world.³⁹ Hippolytus, a Christian theologian of the 3rd century, wrote that according to Empedocles there is the intelligible cosmos ordered by friendship and the evil cosmos ordered by strife.⁴⁰ The Neoplatonists projected their principles in the Pre-Socratics: the Neoplatonists believed in two everlasting realms of existence, the sensible and the intelligible. Simplicius and Philoponus thought that Empedocles presented an early adumbration of the Platonic ontology, in which the Sphere represented the intelligible.⁴¹ Pico interpreted Empedocles through the eyes of the Neoplatonists.

Pico thought that Empedocles' Sphere is the *mundum archetipum*, the intellectual nature. Pico also separated God (*primae providentiae*) from the Sphere. Instead Empedocles described the Sphere as the union of the four roots, which were united by friendship, the Venus of Pico.⁴² Empedocles lauded Sphere as God, but he considered it as mortal. In addition Empedocles injected friendship and strife into the Sphere. Pico's interpretation once again lay under the influence of the philosophy of Neoplatonism, namely of Plotinus.⁴³ The correlation of Empedocles with the notion of providence is attributed to Plutarch, who correlates providence with the Empedoclean notions of friendship, Venus

³⁵ Bláha, J., *Reflections on Jewish Mysticism*, Marek Konečný, Praha, 2013, 210; Scholem, G. G., *Origins of the Kabbalah*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1991, 327-328.

³⁶ Kenton, W., Halevi, Z.b.S., *The Way of Kabbalah*, Weiser Books, Newburyport MA, 1976, 31-32.

³⁷ O'Brien, D., *Empedocles' Cosmic Cycle*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1969, 3, 199; Roecklein, R. J., *Plato versus Parmenides: The Debate over Coming-into-Being in Greek Philosophy*, Lexington Books, Lanham, 2010, 67-68.; Sisko, J. E., "Anaxagoras and Empedocles in the Shadow of Elea", in Sheffield, F., Warren, J. (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Ancient Philosophy*, Routledge, New York, 2013, 61.

³⁸ Proclus, In *Timaeum*, II, 69,23ff.

³⁹ Syrianus, In *Metaphysica*, 44.8-12, 43.34, 43.37.

⁴⁰ Hippolytus, *Elenchos*, 7.31.3.

⁴¹ Guthrie, W. K. C., *A History of Greek Philosophy: Volume 2, The Presocratic Tradition from Parmenides to Democritus*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1978, 181.

⁴² DK31 A32.

⁴³ Plotinus, *Enneads*, V.9.

and Eros.⁴⁴ Empedocles' position on friendship and strife was crucial for Pico: in the *Oratio* he supported that they symbolize the dual nature of the human soul, "one of them lifts us upwards...the other drags us down".⁴⁵

As for the attribution to Empedocles of the transanimation even to plants, Pico seemed once again to have followed pseudo Empedocles and the Arab and Jewish mystics. While this passage could be explained in the pattern of Pico's philosophy and its ancient Greek sources, namely Aristotelian psychology, we should reconsider the prevalent interpretation. Brian Ogren commented on this passage and suggested that the transmigration into lower or higher ontologically beings is possible due to man's universal nature. Man is tripartite reflecting the tripartite nature of the universe. Man is comprised by an immaterial soul, an earthly body which is composed from the four elements and the *spiritus*, the bond between soul and body.⁴⁶ Pico held similar views in the *Oratio*.⁴⁷

In his *Commento*⁴⁸ Pico further elaborates his views:

*The next part in Man is the vegetative part, by which the second or corruptible body is procreated, is nourished, and grows, and the first or eternal body lives with everlasting life. The third part of Man is the sensitive or moving part, through which he corresponds to the irrational animals, and which is believed by the Latin Aristotelians to be the highest and noblest part of the soul. Actually, however, still higher than the rational part is the intellectual and angelic part, through which Man corresponds to the beasts. The apex of this intellectual part the Platonists call the "unity" of the soul, and they say that it is the part through which Man is joined directly with God, and, as it were, corresponds to God, just as through the vegetative part he corresponds to the plants.*⁴⁹

The similarities of this passage with the aforementioned passage from pseudo Empedocles are obvious. Pico confused Empedocles with pseudo Empedocles, who is more akin to the Neoplatonic tradition, with which Pico was familiar enough.

In sum, Pico attempted to enlarge the scope of medieval philosophy. He counted among his sources the Pre-Socratics, but the way he read them was not always direct and consistent. He intentionally chose to interpret them

⁴⁴ Plutarch, *Moralia*, 926d-927a.

⁴⁵ Pico della Mirandola, *Oratio*, 149.

⁴⁶ Ogren, B., *Renaissance and rebirth: reincarnation in early modern Italian Kabbalah*, Brill, Leiden 2009, 225-229.

⁴⁷ Pico della Mirandola, *Oratio*, 125.

⁴⁸ Garin, E. (ed.), « De hominis dignitate, Heptaplus, De ente et uno, e scritti vari a cura di Eugenio Garin », Edizione nazionale dei classici del pensiero italiano, Firenze, 1942, 479.

⁴⁹ Ogren, *Renaissance*, 226.

through the spectrum of intermediaries such as the ancient Commentators, the Neoplatonists, the Arabs and Jews mystics. As a result he presented a distorted version of the Presocratic philosophy so that he defended his syncretism. He chose not to rely on the primary sources and study them in depth. His synthesis is magnificent and unique, but is occasionally based on insecure arguments.

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