

ORATION ON THE DIGNITY OF ALL

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In December, 1486, an energetic young intellectual named Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (Pico to his friends) distributed in Rome a long list of nine hundred debate topics, with an invitation to scholars to join in a public disputation about them in January, 1487. The debate never happened because some of his ideas had a whiff of heresy to them, but Pico's introductory oration for the debate somehow survived and was published after the young man's early death in 1494. Five hundred years ago this month, Pico's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* was laid as one of the cornerstones of modern humanism.

That unpublished keynote speech written for a conference that was never held has turned out to be one of the most powerful influences upon the modern mind. Its basic messages, that humans are free to choose whatever role they wish to play in life, and that human dignity rests upon the ability to rise mentally above nature, have been repeated so often and in so many forms that they have come to seem like gospel. But they began as heresy from a precocious New Age guru of the early Renaissance. And they are still subject to debate.

One recent manifestation of Pico's debate is in the quarrel between Christian fundamentalists and "secular humanists" over the content of textbooks in public schools. Five centuries have not been enough to change many of the issues Pico argued about: the humanists still insist on the freedom of the human mind to

choose among all of the world's possibilities, and their opponents continue to insist that some heresies should not appear in public. Eavesdropping on their discussions, it is hard to avoid the feeling that both sides are, at least, slightly archaic. Pico and the Pope did it better.

More modern is the fracas between humanists and sociobiologists. Again human freedom and dignity are at stake, for sociobiologists argue that much important human behavior is guided by genetic inheritance, and that humans are more deeply rooted in nature than they are transcendent over it. Just as early humanists declined to be pushed around by popes, their modern counterparts deny that DNA can dictate what they do. Humanists refuse to give up unrestricted freedom of choice and human uniqueness, and they continue to insist, as Pico did, that the earth is humanity's oyster.

Sometimes I wonder what this five hundred year old debate is really about. Are the opponents haggling over what they believe to be true, or over what they prefer to think about the role of humanity on earth? Is it a



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COMMENT

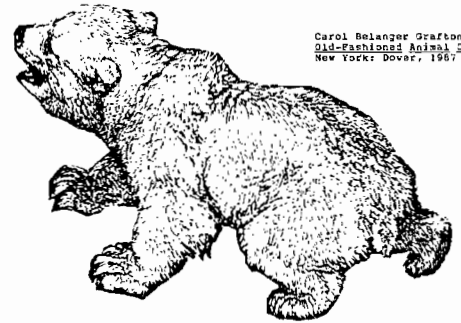
question of taste? A matter of self-image? Or are different persistent parts of old cultural traditions still at war with one another long after their battlefields have gone to weed?

It is hard to believe that the dignity of humanity depends upon the affirmation of absolute freedom of choice. Pico rejoiced over the "most marvelous felicity of man. To him it is granted to have whatever he chooses, to be whatever he wills." Well, yes, but looking back over the past few centuries of people grabbing what they choose and working their will upon the world is like revisiting a woodland of one's childhood that has been paved for a shopping mall. Pico's pride converted easily into merciless exploitation of both the planet and its less powerful people, millions of whom still see precious little evidence of their freedom and dignity. And the earth itself groans under the burden of such a glorified humanity.

Perhaps it is time we had an oration on the dignity of moose. Moose, too, are free to choose among almost endless options; they can have whatever they choose and be whatever they will, provided only that they remain consistent with moose character, biology, and habitat. They tower proudly over the lesser species around them, and they defend themselves effectively against all attacks except the final one of death. Cow moose are careful parents, spending full time in loving companionship with their offspring and encouraging them toward maturity and independence when the time is ripe. Bulls are more contemplative most of the time. They spend countless hours in meditation, perhaps in preparation for the contests of mating season where they display their wit and prowess. Moose seem to strive with every action of

their lives to fulfill the highest standards of moosehood. What more can be asked of any species?

When we have dignified the moose, we can proceed through the taxonomic tables to do the same for all other species. Dignity will come easily for llamas and members of the cat



Carol Belanger Grafton,
Old-Fashioned Animal Books,
New York: Dover, 1967

family, but may be harder to grasp for mosquitos, slugs, crabgrass, and the AIDS virus. The qualifications for dignity, however, will remain the same for all species that live free lives, and they are close to the standards that Pico applied: freedom must be used to realize the full possibilities of one's own nature in a manner that is appropriate to one's time, place, and circumstance. Pico merely made explicit those principles that guide the lives of all wild creatures.

Only those species lacking freedom of choice need to philosophize and to develop strategies to attain it so that they may have a chance to become what they potentially are. Captive creatures in zoos and prisons are endlessly attentive to breaks in the walls or routines that may give them the slightest chance to roam beyond restraint. Farm animals live under looser strictures because much of the need for freedom has been bred out of them by genetic engineering. Pets are those rare and strange creatures who have renounced freedom and have agreed to contribute to the fulfillment of some other species. Pets occupy both ends of Pico's great chain of being, for

they live both as saints and as slaves. Of the million or more species that exist, fewer than thirty have ever been willing to forego freedom in exchange for living as companion with humans. Pico knew what he was talking about when he linked freedom with dignity, but in the half-millennium since he lived we have learned that humans are not the only animals that need and enjoy those gifts.

Philosopher Ernst Cassirer summarized the effects of Pico's *Oration* which helped to transform the Medieval mind into the modern mind: Pico persuaded people to pay attention to the world rather than to the heavens as their source of knowledge, and he exhorted the human ability to distinguish the self from the world. Since Pico's time, we have practiced his prescription profoundly and have absorbed its implications. Flattering though that period has been for our species, it is now evident that its half-truths are not good enough to sustain a high quality of life on earth.

Pico's vision of human dignity has been fulfilled by generations of self-absorbed people like Pico, but only at the cost of lost dignity and freedom for powerless people and for the other creatures and processes of the earth. Those are the wrong prices to pay. Let us declare the five hundred year experiment with modern humanism a success, but let us also declare it ended. The next step can be an affirmation that every form of life is endowed with freedom and dignity, and that the highest power rests in those who fulfill themselves without denying fulfillment to others, human or otherwise. December, 1986, is a good time to begin.

Reprinted from Minding the Earth, December, 1986, by Joseph W. Meeker (Editor)

ANIMALS, ETHICS & SOCIAL POLICY

Conference
January 13 - 15, 1989
Schweitzer Center

co-sponsored by
Center For Ethics & Social Policy
Graduate Theological Union
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