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## THE RENAISSANCE CONCEPTIONS OF HUMAN DIGNITY\*

In the contemporary philosophical literature the question of human dignity usually emerges in the context of discussions of human rights. The documents of both the United Nations Organization and the Holy See present human dignity as the immediate source of human rights. The constitution of the Second Vatican Council *Gaudium et spes* distinguishes between two aspects of human dignity: the natural and the supernatural. The natural foundations of human dignity are reason, conscience and freedom. In the supernatural aspect, human dignity is grounded in the creation of man in the image and likeness of God and the filiation of man by God through Christ's grace. Let us note that these are precisely the reasons already indicated by the Church Fathers, who drew on the biblical sources and ancient literature. In his research on the history of the notion of *dignitas hominis*, Eugenio Garin established for the first time a close relationship between the concept of human dignity gradually developed by the Italian humanists and the views of the Christian writers living in the first centuries (Gregory of Nyssa, Basil of Caesarea, Nemesius, John Chrysostom).<sup>1</sup> Almost all of the main themes of the renaissance literature on the subject of human dignity can be found in the writings of the Church Fathers, which is not to say, of course, that what we find there is a straightforward revisitation of the same "topoi", no more than a passive reiteration of identical phrases. Some of these "topoi" were accentuated and elaborated on, others presented in a more nuanced way or simply

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<sup>1</sup> Eugenio GARIN, "La 'dignitas hominis' e la letteratura patristica," *La Rinascita* 1, no. 4 (1938): 102–46.

omitted. It was also often the case that their semantic context underwent serious transformations. Stefan Swieżawski writes: “Not only Moses—King David, the Gospels and divine Plato—all suggest the idea of the exceptional greatness of man, but also the ‘new medicine’, astrology and the increased impact of the Neoplatonic, Gnostic and Hermetic traditions mean that the 15th century sees the problem of man as a microcosm and the question of the dignity of human person in an apparently novel way.”<sup>2</sup> Many Renaissance authors developed the question of human dignity in a more comprehensive way than before (Giannozzo Manetti, Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Charles De Bovelles).

The topic of *dignitas hominis*, popular in Renaissance—seen by many historians of philosophy as practically an emblem of the anthropology of the 15th and 16th centuries—did not go unnoticed in Poland. In 1554 Jan of Trzciana (Johannes Arundinensis) published *De natura ac dignitate hominis*, and in 1561 Mikołaj Dłuski published his *Oratio de praestantia et excellentia humanae naturae*. It is true that the Italian Bernardine Hannibal Rosseli, who stayed in Poland between 1581 and 1593, did not write a separate work on the subject of human dignity, but that theme appears frequently in his commentaries to the hermetic writings published in Kraków between 1584 and 1590. All the authors mentioned understand dignity as a collection of features distinguishing man from other creatures, and not a feature distinguishing one social group from another. All these authors believe, too, that the awareness of one’s own dignity—awareness they want to awaken in every man—should go hand in hand with responsibility to act in accordance with that dignity. Nevertheless, each of them propounds a distinct, specific concept of human dignity.

#### 1. JAN OF TRZCIANA

In *De natura ac dignitate hominis*, Jan of Trzciana does not make any reference to the Renaissance works on human dignity, but he might have known at least two of them.<sup>3</sup> The works of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola,

<sup>2</sup> Stefan SWIEŻAWSKI, *Dzieje filozofii europejskiej XV wieku*, vol. 6: *Człowiek* (Warszawa, 1983), 190.

<sup>3</sup> Jan of Trzciana (Arundinensis) was born around 1510. Since 1526 he studied at the University of Kraków, where in 1533 he earned his baccalaureate and in 1539 *magisterium atrium*. He was a lecturer at the University’s faculty of arts between 1539 and 1556. Jan was one of the most prominent figures among the University’s humanists (Szymon Marcjusz, Wojciech Nowopol-

including the famous speech *De hominis dignitate*, were available from the Library of the Collegium Maius at the University of Kraków and were very frequently borrowed by the professors of the faculty of arts<sup>4</sup> in the first half of the 16th century. However, there is no interdependence between the work of Jan of Trzciana and Pico's speech in terms of content. Many ideas similar to those in the treatise in question can be found in Giannozzo Manetti's *De dignitate et excellentia hominis* (published in 1532). The similarities between the texts can be explained though—given the lack of any explicit literal links—by the fact that their authors used the same sources (St Augustine, Cicero, Plato, Aristotle).

Understanding the nature and dignity of man should be, Jan of Trzciana argues, follows from the directive written on the Temple of Apollo: *gnothi seauton*. The directive had, at least from the times of Socrates, a clearly moralistic character. It was underpinned by the idea that you need to know who you are in order to know how you should act. *De natura ac dignitate hominis* is something like a collection of philosophical and religious meditations around the main theme “know thyself”—know your nature and dignity, so that your conduct is worthy of a representative of the human species.

Trzciana's treatise is mainly addressed to the representatives of practical naturalism, to those who do not yet live a life worthy of man, but he also directs his violent attacks at those who represent theoretical naturalism, who are fully conscious of their view; they are called the epicureans. The author also calls on his readers not to succumb to the fallacy of those “who in the commentaries to *De anima* (by Aristotle) claim, that there is one intellect common to all people, nor of those who do not see the difference between

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czyk, Mikołaj Gelasinus). In 1554, he published in Kraków a work written in 1551, entitled *Libellus de natura ac dignitate hominis*. In 1556, he left the University and accepted the position of the cathedral preacher in Lviv, attached to the office of canon at the chapter; between 1565 and 1566 he was also an administrator of the Diocese of Lviv. During that time he wrote an apologetic dialogue *De religion sacrosancta, de ecclesia ac caeremoniis eius* (Köln, 1563) and the posthumously published life of the blessed Michał Giedroyc (*Vita Beati Michaelis Ordinis S. Mariae...* [Kraków, 1605]). He died on March 30, 1567. See JAN OF TRZCIANA (ARUNDINENSIS), *De natura ac dignitate hominis*, ed. Jan Czerkawski, in *Textus et studia historiam theologiae in Polonia excultae spectantia*, vol. II, no. 2 (Warszawa, 1974), 131–72 (the cited edition); JAN OF TRZCIANA, *O naturze i godności człowieka*, trans. Zofia Brzostowska, in *700 Lat Myśli Polskiej. Filozofia i myśl społeczna XVI wieku*, curated and edited by and with an introduction and notes of Lech Szczucki (Warszawa, 1978), 422–33.

<sup>4</sup> See Anna LEWICKA-KAMIŃSKA, *Biblioteka Jagiellońska w latach 1492-1655*, in *Historia Biblioteki Jagiellońskiej*, vol. 1 (Kraków, 1966), 246.

the souls of men and those of animals.”<sup>5</sup> It is a warning against the followers of Averroes and of Alexander. Opposition to the naturalists is one of the traditional themes found in the literature concerning human dignity; it occurs in Manetti, Ficino, Pico and Bovelles.

Arundinensis suggests to both the practical and the theoretical naturalists making the effort of knowing oneself. To know oneself is by no means to capture oneself in oneself, without any reference points. Self-contemplation and an insight into one’s own consciousness and its products do not constitute a perfect realisation of the directive from Apollo’s temple. To know oneself is, in the first place, to establish one’s place in relation to the universe, that is, in relation to the material world, to other people and to God. It is the interpretation of the Apollonian inscription characteristic of the Renaissance neoplatonists.

In the God-created world there is, according to Trzciana, a harmonious unity consisting of several levels of beings hierarchically organised and characterised by different degrees of perfection. To understand the nature of man one has to establish his place within that hierarchy. In man the perfections of the three lower levels of being converge: he exists like minerals, lives like plants, perceives like animals. On top of that, he is capable of intellectual cognition, which elevates him to the fourth tier in the hierarchy. Above man are pure spirits, and the crowning of the whole hierarchy is God.<sup>6</sup> With this Neoplatonist-Augustinian hierarchy of beings in place the universe becomes clear and understandable to us. To be able to answer the question “What is man?” one needs only to specify the place human nature occupies in the universe—that is, to determine it in relation to the lower and higher natures in the hierarchy of beings. Each higher level of the hierarchy encompasses the perfections of the lower levels, perfections proper exclusively to that level, and those by which it, in a way, predicts the existence of a higher tier. All of these qualities of human nature rendering it more perfect than animal nature (a nature that is directly below human nature in the hierarchy of beings) make it great, unique—in other words, full of dignity.

Existence, life and perception are the perfections characterising material beings, one of which is also the human body; the intellectual cognition, on the other hand, by virtue of which man occupies the fourth tier in the hierarchy of beings, is a perfection proper only to spiritual beings. The subject of man’s intellectual acts, the soul, belongs to the category of immaterial and

<sup>5</sup> JAN OF TRZCIANA, *De natura*, 248.

<sup>6</sup> JAN OF TRZCIANA, 239–40.

immortal beings. Man, in his ontic structure, is neither a purely material nor a purely spiritual being. The body and the soul are ontically independent, they are two distinct substances (the soul is not the substantial form of the body) and they belong to two different orders of being.<sup>7</sup> Ontically, man is the most amazing phenomenon of the universe, because in him all the levels of being are merged, and it blends the realms of material and spiritual beings.

Arundinensis combines the Neoplatonist-Augustinian view of the world with the Aristotelian, teleological outlook. The existence of every being has a specific purpose, and fulfils that purpose by means proper to itself. The lower levels of the hierarchy of beings exist in order to make the existence and development of the higher ones possible. On this view, non-organic beings exist to enable the existence of plants, and the purpose of plants is to make the development of animals possible. The whole material world fulfils the purpose of its existence through man as being with the wonderful capacity for intellectual cognition—the rational soul. The purpose of and at the same time the reason for the existence of the whole sphere of material beings, the human body included, is the spiritual growth of man, with the human body, as a material substance organised, animated and governed by a rational soul, occupying a unique place in the realm of material beings. The purpose of man's existence is his own eternal happiness.<sup>8</sup>

The conception of the universe presented in *De natura ac dignitate hominis* does not deviate radically from the one developed, under the influence of the ancient philosophers, by the Christian thinkers in the Patristic era, one that was variously interpreted in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. In Trzciana's work, however, the conception is set within a new semantic context, with new functions: its only task is that of presenting the astounding and extraordinary position of man in the universe. Trzciana's metaphysical and cosmological deliberations are directly aimed at presenting man as "the king and steward of the world", a creature with exceptional creative powers.

Man is not just the soul, but soul and body. Therefore, an analysis of human dignity—as strongly emphasised by Arundinensis—must necessarily demonstrate the dignity of both the soul and the body. Of the twenty-one qualities of human nature listed by *De natura ac dignitate hominis* as consti-

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<sup>7</sup> JAN OF TRZCIANA, 244–45.

<sup>8</sup> JAN OF TRZCIANA, 296–302.

tuting the basis of its dignity, eight pertain to the body and thirteen belong to the soul.<sup>9</sup>

Trzciana extolls the beauty of the human body with a grand Renaissance panache, he marvels at its excellent proportions, the optimal temperament, the nobleness of the face, the erect posture, the harmony of all its parts, at the perfection of the senses, the agility of the hands. Moreover, he emphasizes the fact that the Son of God, through his incarnation, exalted and ennobled the human body, and that it will be resurrected. While highlighting the perfect nature of the body, Arundinensis is not on the verge of naturalising apotheosis of corporeality. He wants to present man as a creature exceeding in every way all there is otherwise in nature, as the one true steward of the world and God's most excellent work. His intention was not to convince the Sarmatians that their bodies were so wonderful that they should take better care of them. Instead, he wanted, in the first place, to motivate his compatriots to make a greater intellectual effort, break out of the "life of cattle". On the other hand, however, in emphasizing the great dignity of the body, Arundinensis, like Manetti, opposes those currents of Christian spirituality that, under the influence of Manicheism and Neoplatonism, voiced his contempt for the corporeal. He opposes both the naturalistic and the hyper-spiritualistic concepts of man. The former were reinforced by influences from Epicureanism and heterodox Aristotelianism during the Renaissance, and the latter made use of Platonism and Neoplatonism.

While embracing the dualism of soul and body, Trzciana is not a continuator of the anthropology of Orphic and Platonic origin. In that anthropology man was conceived of as an independently existing deity, connected to the body in a completely external way. The human spirit is entirely transcendent in relation to time-space nature—the body is its prison, if only because it impedes spiritual improvement. St Augustine was gravely impressed by such views. Arundinensis adopted the definition of the soul from the author of *Confessions*: "the soul is a rational substance capable of ruling the body".<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> All particular features has been reflected in the titles of she successive chapters of *De natura ac dignitate hominis*: "Prima dignitas hominis a complexione", "2. dignitas a proceritate stature", "3. dignitas a capite", "4. dignitas a vultu", "5. dignitas a sensu", "6. dignitas a creation ad imaginem Dei", "9. dignitas ab immortalitate animae", "10. dignitas a vita", "11. dignitas a cognition animae rationalis", "12. dignitas a memoria", "13. dignitas ab inventione", "14. dignitas ab actione", "15. dignitas ab amore", "16. dignitas a mirabilitate", "17. dignitas a preciositate", "18. dignitas a dominio", "19. dignitas ab immortalitate animae ac iudicio eius", "20. dignitas a resurrection corporum", "21. dignitas a fine qui est duplex: primus vitae, alter mortis dicitur".

<sup>10</sup> JAN OF TRZCIANA, *De natura*, 251.

The soul is therefore an entity in its own right, characterised by two essential features: rationality and ability to direct the body. However, Trzciana understands the rationality of the soul differently to Augustine, linking it closely to genetic empiricism, thus eliminating the Augustinian doctrine of illumination. The senses are the only source of human knowledge. Therefore, the soul can perform actions that are proper to it only in conjunction with the body, not outside of it. The body is not the soul's prison, because the latter is capable of coming into contact, importantly, with other beings only by way of the body; it can improve when conjoined with the body. The immediate cause of every activity manifested by this two-substance being is the soul, but the subject of both cognition and action is man—that is, a body organized and directed by the soul. In this way, on the functional level, Trzciana overcomes the ontic dualism. It is from this perspective that he judges the body, and it is no surprising that his judgement differs from that of the Orphics and the Platonics.

Augustine, whose oeuvre is one of the main sources of inspiration for Trzciana, concluded that God is man's ultimate end, but he also highlighted that man (the soul)—created by God in his image and likeness—is the most perfect of all earthly creatures. How is man an image of God? It is, Augustine says, because man is a mind with three faculties: intellect, will, and memory. These faculties represent the image of the Holy Trinity in the soul.<sup>11</sup> This concept was invoked by—to name only the most well-known authors—Fazio, Manetti, Ficino and Pico.

Human intellect can be likened, after Aristotle, to a blank slate; there are no cognitive images written on it, nor can it directly capture spiritual entities. God created the soul as full of internal dynamism, but its activity can only be actualised once it acquires cognitive content through the senses. Intellectual cognition enables man to acquire the concepts of all beings, and thus he can “become everything”. Just like God unites in Himself all beings as their creator and the one who maintains them, so man can also—by knowing God—unite in himself the whole universe. It is a perfect testimony to his high dignity. Trzciana says, “Many people marvel at the chameleon, which can assume various shapes; they wonder at the electric ray, who electrocutes the hand that touches it; they praise the strength of the elephant, whose enormous body can bear even siege towers with soldiers inside; and at the same time they think little of the human mind, which can assume all cogni-

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<sup>11</sup> Étienne GILSON, *Wprowadzenie do nauki św. Augustyna*, trans. Zygmunt Jakimiak (Warszawa, 1953), 64.

tive forms, all immaterial forms of things, assessing and understanding everything. Not only does the mind slow down ships like a brake or paralyses hands like the ray, but also with reason and with the power of eloquent speech it restrains the violent madness of wars, and not only lifts great weights like an elephant, but embraces the heavenly and the earthly things alike. Indeed, so great is the mobility of the mind that in a blink of an eye—as they say—it covers immeasurable distances, spanning lengths of earth and heavens, across the sea, in the air, in fire, and even in darkness and obscurity, and it unites itself with the immortal God.”<sup>12</sup>

God is and will always be an inexhaustible source of mysteries. An imperfect knowledge of him can be acquired through the study of Scripture and the Church Fathers. The world, in turn, is wide open to the cognitive abilities of man. It was created, as Scripture says, by the measure, weight and number—according to the rational principles. Man, as a creature endowed with reason, has virtually unlimited potential to penetrate that rational structure of the world. Intellectual cognition is not only one of the hallmarks of human dignity, but is also the foundation of his humanisation. He who does not make use of this remarkable opportunity of becoming everything, uniting in himself the whole world, does not live in the human realm but at the level of animal existence.<sup>13</sup>

Arundinensis discusses extensively that activity of the human mind he calls “invention”. In the process of invention all the mental faculties cooperate harmoniously: apart from the intellect and the will also memory takes part in the process. Arundinensis is not interested in the mechanism of the process of invention: he is chiefly interested in the effects of that process, that for him encompasses the entirety of human creative work. Trzciana asks: “Who has given things their names, if not our human spirit? Who has noted in just few letters the sounds seemingly infinite? And who has put a concrete form on the manifold and infinite numbers? Who has studied the many languages if not our spirit? Who has understood the movements of the planets and the paths of the celestial bodies? Who has seen various shapes in the constellations? Who has measured the degrees of heaven and earth? Who has made clothes, houses, defensive walls, states, cities, strongholds, various offices and the culture of living? Who would that be if not the human spirit that invented not only the crafts, but also the liberal arts, sciences, natural and supernatural, medicine, law, and theology? Some for common use, some

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<sup>12</sup> JAN OF TRZCIANA, *De natura*, 285.

<sup>13</sup> JAN OF TRZCIANA, 278.



for contemplation.”<sup>14</sup> Both practical and theoretical works are a wonderful embodiment of the genius of the human spirit and the hallmark of its dignity.

Man is not only endowed with the intellectual ability of understanding the world and probing the secrets of nature, he also has a creative power of improving it and controlling it. Arundinensis, like Manetti, rejects the myth that goes back to antiquity and that was quite popular in the Renaissance period of the primeval perfection of the world, of the golden age, followed by the silver and the bronze age. Citing Cicero he claims that people living in the distant past led a savage and rough life in wilderness. Only when they invented speech and began communicating were they able to build communities, cultivate the fields, make laws and develop various crafts. Thanks to speech they can transfer the knowledge they gather from one generation to the next and keep adding to it, constantly improve the world, transforming it into one an increasingly beautiful, better serving their purposes.<sup>15</sup> Trzciana views the world as not just a waiting place, but the realm of human creative expansion. Human dignity and creative power are manifested through various languages, alphabets, books, paintings, sculptures, musical pieces, but also cultivated fields, gardens, houses, temples, cities, castles, iron works, and mines. The nature gave man hands—“the servants of reason”. To the hands of the craftsmen we owe our homes, clothes, shoes, food and medicines. All works of the human mind and hands serving to improve this world and subjugate it to man are marvellous testimonies to his greatness and dignity; through these works he fulfils his mission as the king and steward of the world. If all that human invention and the work of human hands had achieved were removed from the world, as Trzciana writes, everything would become ugly and plunge into darkness; chaos and confusion, hatred and wars would reign; people would be like children—helpless and unhappy.<sup>16</sup>

God created man in his image and his likeness. The image of God in man is—as we already know—the mind endowed with intellect, will and memory. But what makes man like his Maker? “Just as God reigns in Heavens, so he wanted man to rule the earth.”<sup>17</sup> Man becomes a likeness of his creator by subjugating the world. The ultimate destination of a Christian is however neither bringing order, beauty and harmony to this world, nor subjugating it. The existential anxieties of Trzciana are a consequence of perceiving man as

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<sup>14</sup> JAN OF TRZCIANA, *De natura*, 280.

<sup>15</sup> JAN OF TRZCIANA, 264.

<sup>16</sup> JAN OF TRZCIANA, 280.

<sup>17</sup> JAN OF TRZCIANA, 288.

a creature limited by time: “it is certain that we will die, but uncertain when and where”.<sup>18</sup> The Christian should live with the awareness that he is destined for the eternal life, he should be guided by the thought that Christ, with his death and resurrection, destined him for the supernatural life, a life that is a path to eternal happiness—the ultimate purpose of his life. Is it not then, from the eternal perspective, that the temporal and transient is completely vain (*vanitas vanitatum*) and contemptible? And, indeed, *De natura ac dignitate hominis* contains the theme of *terrena despicere, amare caelestia*, famous from the *De contemptu mundi* treatises.

Does Trzciana extoll then the creative power of man in order to present, ultimately, the highest value of an attitude characterised by a complete lack of engagement in the worldly matters? Aren't asceticism and retreat from the world the only guarantee of attaining the eternal happiness? Well, they are not. What is earthly deserves contempt only when taken to be of absolute value, when it obscures God. Man should rule the world, not be ruled by the world, that is, he should not ascribe an absolute value to relative and transient things. While emphasizing the role of contemplation in life, Arundinensis expresses a Christian concern for salvation, which is the chief task of the earthly pilgrimage of every Christian. This concern is not, however, at odds with a Christian's activity in the world. Man does not realise the purpose of his existence by employing extraordinary means of asceticism and contempt of the world, but through intellectual activity and acting for the sake of others, and such an activity requires a creative engagement in worldly matters.<sup>19</sup>

The world was created for man and its purpose is to satisfy his various needs. Making use of the world should however always be in accordance with human nature—it should be rational. If an inherently rational creature acts unreasonably, it acts like an animal or—in the words of Trzciana—like a bestialised man (*animalis homo*).<sup>20</sup> Arundinensis encapsulates an idea ingrained in the European culture, that of understanding man as a rational animal. Then, when a human being is deprived of reason, only an animal remains. That whole mental construct we frequently come across in *De natura ac dignitate hominis*, seems to be quite trivial when considered *in abstracto*. Since the ancient times it has been repeated many times over. The idea loses its triviality in the work we are discussing due to the fact that it is an answer to a concrete social phenomenon. Trzciana explicitly points out that more of

<sup>18</sup> JAN OF TRZCIANA, *De natura*, 297.

<sup>19</sup> JAN OF TRZCIANA, 289.

<sup>20</sup> JAN OF TRZCIANA, 273.

his compatriots die of gluttony than by sword; in other words, he passionately condemns the attitude that would later be captured by the maxim “eat, drink and loosen up your belt”.<sup>21</sup> In the times of growing schism within Christianity and increasing polemics between various religious denominations he raises an issue in the light of which those polemics lose some of their severity. Importantly, many people do not live at all a life worthy of man, but limit themselves to satisfying their biological needs and show a hedonistic attitude. By acting so they defile their dignity and doom themselves to eternal damnation. It is extremely urgent to show that people must bring order to their lives by subordinating them to reason and the commandments of Scripture. This can only happen when people attain self-knowledge, when they realise what it means to be a man. It is only on the grounds of such knowledge that building a correct value system is possible.

Trzciana notices also the misery of man, but that misery is not a natural condition of human existence, but something unnatural. Man, by virtue of his nature, is a creature worthy of highest admiration, but his actions should reflect that nature, that is, they should be worthy of a man. The marvellous order of that ideal polity, which man is, can be disturbed by sensual desires. It is so because the corporeal sphere of man has a tendency towards what is irrational and evil. Nevertheless, desires should not be of much concern, because the totality of human being is governed by the rational soul, which is capable of mastering and subordinating them. Only the lack of self-reflection and intellectual indolence may cause a domination of desires in man and reduce him to the level of animal life. Trzciana’s ethical intellectualism is coherent with his concept of man as a body governed by a rational soul. Man is a creature open to good, evil is just a splinter of the unconscious. “Ignorance,” Arundinensis stresses after Plato, “is the source of evil and the madness of the soul.”<sup>22</sup>

According to Trzciana man’s life is not overshadowed by fear and internal fracture, but he has a sense of his own dignity and is inspired by the love for and by trust in the Redeemer. The fact of the Original Sin did not have a decisively destructive influence on the human nature. We all sinned in Adam, but we have also been all redeemed in Christ.<sup>23</sup> The dogma about the fallen human nature is subtly nuanced by accentuating the mystery of Redemption. In *De natura ac dignitate hominis*, the philosophical and religious premises

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<sup>21</sup> JAN OF TRZCIANA, *De natura*, 275.

<sup>22</sup> JAN OF TRZCIANA, 235.

<sup>23</sup> JAN OF TRZCIANA, 300.

all work together to show man as a creature open to good and close to God. It is enough to encourage reflection in an individual—and that is not so difficult, as the knowledge gives man joy—to bring realisation of one's dignity and prevent acting in a way not worthy of man. In the thought of some renaissance thinkers (Francesco Filelfo, Lorenzo Valla, Cristoforo Landino, Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola) one can find a tendency to replace the Christian morality with ethics based not on God's authority but on human dignity. In a more or less conscious way they promoted moral rationalism, speaking of an ideal of virtue entirely natural, understood as acting in accordance with human nature, that is in a way worthy of man.<sup>24</sup> The supreme principle becomes the rule forced also by Trzciana: "Do not do anything unworthy of a man." However, in *De natura ac dignitate hominis* we do not find attempts to replace Christian morality with ethics based solely on human dignity, but a unique placement of accents. Man does not redeem himself, with his own intellectual activity and with his rational actions; it does not mean, though, that redemption is a work of grace obliterating the man. Human perfection and Christian perfection—according to Catholic teaching—are not contradictory, they lie on the same path of man's ascent to God.<sup>25</sup> It is true that an interiorisation of life and acting in a way worthy of man are not on their own sufficient to attain the ultimate end, but interiorisation and dignified conduct—things that were well researched by the ancient philosophers—are the basis of all human perfection, on which Christian perfection can be built. For that reason conduct worthy of a representative of the human species is tremendously important for man.

Arundinensis, inspired mainly by the teachings of St Augustine, extracted from them or added to them beliefs that bring him closer in his understanding of man—despite certain differences—to the Renaissance Neoplatonic thinkers.

He aligns with the Florentine humanists in his belief in intellect and the word. By virtue of intellect man is able to encapsulate the whole universe in himself and to become conscious of his greatness and dignity. Thanks to the word, man can establish a friendly relationship with other people. Like the Florentine humanists, Arundinensis was convinced that man is a free creator of himself and that he realises the ideal of humanity through his own intellectual activity and through acting in a rational way; he is not, however, the

<sup>24</sup> See Raymond MARCEL, introduction to *Théologie Platonicienne de l'immortalité des âmes*, by Marsile Ficin, vol. 1 (Paris, 1964), 12–14.

<sup>25</sup> JAN OF TRZCIANA, *De natura*, 306–8.

maker of the ontic foundations of his dignity—they are a gift from the Creator. When compared to the Neoplatonics, Trzciana clearly shows a greater appreciation for the practical activity of man; for him, the ideal is not the divinisation of man, but his maximal humanisation. Self-reflection is the best cure for being lost in the external, it is the best way to find one's place in the world. Man, however, does not realise the idea of humanity only in intellectual activity directed towards himself, but also in practical activity—by subjugating the world and acting for the welfare of other people. Trzciana's ideal is neither a strong individual fully devoted to the active life, nor a socially isolated contemplator, but a man combining contemplative and active lifestyles. Contemplative knowledge is an active formation of one's self and prepares the individual both for being in the world and for eternal life. It perfects man's morality and, at the same time, prepares him for acting for the good of others, shaping individuals "useful for the Republic".<sup>26</sup>

The optimistic Renaissance conception of man is reflected like in a mirror in *De natura ac dignitate*, that lofty hymn in praise of man, who is the most wondrous phenomenon of the universe, an active and creative being. We have drawn attention to the elements linking Trzciana to the Florentine humanists. We cannot, however, ignore the fact that between the time of Ficino and Pico and the time of Arundinensis new experiences were gathered, expressed by Erasmus. Metaphysical investigations of the nature of the universe, man and God are rather alien to Erasmus, bringing Trzciana closer to the Renaissance thinkers. The type of religiousness proposed by Trzciana, on the other hand, is clearly influenced by the Rotterdam thinker. His ideal is man who creates culture and a person of deep inner devotion, a Christian changing the face of the world and an avid reader of Scripture, of the Church Fathers and the classics of ancient literature, a lover of peace that strengthens love among men. Various motives of the teachings on the subject of man are integrated in *De natura ac dignitate hominis*, because they are dominated by the humanistic idea of the overall development of man and a serene affirmation of the world: striving brotherhood of men, which can only be made reality when people's actions are worthy of rational and free beings.

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<sup>26</sup> JAN OF TRZCIANA, *De natura*, 285.

## 2. MIKOŁAJ DŁUSKI

The 16th century saw an event that should be deemed crucial for the whole century—the Reformation. This period brought a profound change in the history of Europe, its influence is visible in every sphere of life and culture, it changed fundamentally the Renaissance mindset, not only in the domain of religion, but also in philosophy, the philosophy of man in particular. Under the influence of the Reformation thinkers, we see more and more questions like: Isn't showing the greatness and dignity of man a manifestation of human pride? Shouldn't we speak of the misery of human condition in the first place?

Luther often refers to Augustine. His standpoint is, however, very different from that of the author of *Confessions*. In the works of Augustine, we don't find that relentless condemnation of the human nature, defiled by the original sin, that appears constantly on the pages of the German reformer's writings. Gilson believes that "the fallen nature is so beautiful in his eyes, so good and so great, that he did not hesitate to say that if God had created it the way it was after the Original Sin, it would still suffice to prove the infinite wisdom of its Author."<sup>27</sup> Therefore one of the features of genuine Augustinianism can be called a "praise of the fallen nature". And, above all, the nature of the human mind is good and wonderful. Luther radically rejects this reading. It is important to note though, that the subject of Luther's negation is not the human nature *per se*, but the religious value of the nature in a state of sin; but as such, the negation is indeed absolute.<sup>28</sup> Man cannot cooperate with God in the work of salvation; salvation is available to him somewhat in spite of worldliness—*sola fide et sola gratia*. Luther did not deny that there exists in man a natural light of reason, that man is capable of philosophical investigations of nature. A true Christian knows, however, that those investigations are of no real importance, that reason is completely helpless in the face of what ultimately matters: God and salvation. Luther does not claim that the original sin deprived man of capability of making free choices. Man can choose between many courses of action, but retains the freedom of will only in relation to what is below him, what is not concerned with God and salvation. Knowledge and will are two manifestations of the same human nature and they are indicators of the state of that nature.

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<sup>27</sup> Étienne GILSON, *Christianity and Philosophy*, trans. Ralph MacDonald (New York: C.S.B., 1939), 8. [Étienne GILSON, *Chrystianizm a filozofia*, trans. Andrzej Więckowski (Warszawa, 1958), 11.]

<sup>28</sup> GILSON, 13.

Because of the catastrophic effects of the original sin human nature cannot by any means lead to God, as it is tainted and evil. From that fact follows the radical powerlessness of reason in the face of the truths of faith.

Even on the first pages of *Institutio Christianae religionis* Calvin points out, that there is in fact no science that could help us on our way to God. The products of reason, as such, have some value. Therefore, learning the liberal arts is not anything wrong, and even is an indication of the fact that the light of God is not completely extinguished in man, in spite of being tainted by the original sin. Calvin says: “If we recognize the spirit of God as the unique fountain of truth,” says Calvin, “we will not despise truth wherever it appears, unless we would want to wrong the Spirit of God.”<sup>29</sup> Still the essence of the problem is the rigoristic differentiation between understanding the temporal and eternal things. The human reason tainted by the original sin is entirely powerless when it comes to the matters of God and eternal life. In this respect, Calvin is just as firm as Luther.<sup>30</sup>

Mikołaj Dłuski, an ardent Calvinist, wrote a short work entitled *Oratio de praestantia et excellentia humanae naturae*.<sup>31</sup> The speech begins with an appeal to the listeners to try to seek self-knowledge. Dłuski, similarly to Arundinensis, observes the universal deterioration of morality. The cause of this state of affairs is the fact that many people don’t care about self-knowledge and “forget the dignity and grandeur of their own nature”.<sup>32</sup> These are the typical *loci communes* of the 16th century literature on human dignity.

One of the themes that appear in the writings of almost all of the Renaissance authors dealing with dignity of man is this: man’s anatomical build reflects his excellence; man is the only of all living creatures on Earth to walk in the upright position and can see the stars and the sky—the place of his origin and his destination.<sup>33</sup> This theme, an elaboration on the maxim attributed to Empedocles, can be found in Plato, in Cicero and especially in

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in GILSON, 16.

<sup>30</sup> GILSON, 18.

<sup>31</sup> Mikołaj Dłuski was born around 1540 in a family of the nobility and connected with Calvinism. Between 1555 and 1560, he studied in Switzerland. Having returned to Poland at the end of 1560 he wrote *Oratio de praestantia et excellentia humanae naturae*, which appeared in print the following year. He died in 1584. See Lech SZCZUCKI, “Per la storia della fortuna del pensiero di Giovanni Pico della Mirandola nel’500: Nicola Dłuski e la sua ‘Oratio’,” *Rinascimento* 14 (1974): 266–76; Mikołaj DŁUSKI, “Mowa o wzniosłości i wspaniałości natury ludzkiej,” trans. Zofia Brzostowska (the cited edition), in *700 Lat Myśli Polskiej. Filozofia i myśl społeczna*, 434–43.

<sup>32</sup> DŁUSKI, *Mowa*, 437.

<sup>33</sup> Lionello SOZZI, “La ‘dignitas’ dans la littérature française de la Renaissance,” in *Humanism in France* (Manchester, 1970), 179–98.

the lines from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* quoted by Dłuski.<sup>34</sup> It was adopted from the classical tradition by *Corpus hermeticum* and by the Christian writers from the first centuries. The French authors from the 12th century, and then the 15th-century Italian humanists would employ it either in order to emphasize the magnificence of man on Earth, or to accentuate the heavenly origin and destiny of human existence. In the first half of the 16th century, French writers employ this theme to show man as an investigator of sublime things and as the king and master of everything on earth. Around the middle of the 16th century, this theme is considerably reinterpreted. It becomes more closely linked to the doctrine of the misery of human condition. Some interpreters emphasize only the contemplative purpose of man and the necessity of getting rid of all earthly aspirations, while others, particularly the protestant authors, speak against those who, putting emphasis on the greatness and dignity of man, make use of arguments that reflect the vainglory and pride of man.

Many people, in Dłuski's opinion, do not respect their own dignity in their behaviour, therefore there is a pressing need to make them aware of dignity and greatness of human nature. The author of the Oration wonders whether it is, however, necessary to write on the subject of dignity of man, if an excellent text on this had already been written by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (*De hominis dignitate*). Well, there are two reasons why he embarked on the subject: "Firstly, I would like to present to the studying youth a summary and an outline of Pico's speech on human condition; secondly, I want to show whether anything in his speech—as some learned and pious men think—deserves a reprimand."<sup>35</sup> Dłuski does not intend to speak only about dignity of man, but—as he himself underscores—about "the true dignity of man". Such an attitude implies taking a critical stance towards the views of the author of *De hominis dignitate*.

In what way did the young Polish nobleman, educated at the Calvinist university in Basel, present the contents of the programmatic work of one of the most prominent Italian humanists? What did he extract from it and what did he omit? What views did he criticize? These questions are of great interest from the point of view of the Renaissance history of the concept of human dignity.

The problem of dignity that is due to man calls for, according to Dłuski, a reflection on two questions: the sole fact of the amazing creation of man and

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<sup>34</sup> DŁUSKI, *Mowa*, 437.

<sup>35</sup> DŁUSKI, 438.



the path leading man towards a state of perfect happiness.<sup>36</sup> The first matter is explored by Dłuski based on motives chosen from Pico's work; he considers them in the light of some elements of Calvinist theology. The other matter is essentially a polemic with Pico's views.

God, according to Dłuski, created the material world from nothing, thus demonstrating his wisdom, power and goodness (these are the attributes of God that Calvin emphasizes). God created it not for the sake of man, but for his own sake, in accordance with one of the fundamental Calvinist principles: *solī Deo Gloria*. Drawing on Pico's work, the author of the *Oration* claims that the material world would be imperfect if no creature had been created capable of knowing it spiritually and thus crowning divine creation and reading the signs of divine wisdom, power and goodness. This creature is Man, who in serving that purpose was called by the sages of old "an intermediary between the creatures akin to the higher beings, the ruler of the lower ones, interpreter of nature, the marital knot of the world".<sup>37</sup> Elaborating on that motive Dłuski employs a doctrine of the four-tier hierarchy of beings, very popular in the Renaissance and expounded by Pico in *Heptaplus*. Man exists in the form of non-organic beings, lives like plants, is capable of sensory cognition like animals and of intellectual cognition like angels and God. For this reason, man was called "a microcosm" by the ancient sages and "a great miracle" by Hermes Trismegistos. The Scripture describes the creation of man in a unique way, saying, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness" (Gen 1:26). All other creatures are deprived of this privilege. No wonder, then, that "the Word ... became neither an angel, nor any living being but a man."<sup>38</sup>

Dłuski extracted from Pico's *De hominis dignitate* these motives in which the Italian humanist had shown the creation of man as the culmination of God's creative action, and omitted altogether those in which man was presented as a being endowed with freedom to shape himself, as a being that lacks a strictly defined nature and therefore capable of shaping freely his own humanity. In other words, he ignored those of Pico's beliefs that make the thought of the author of *De hominis dignitate* specific and original, and he chose those belonging to the category of most widely used motives of the renaissance literature on the subject of human dignity.

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<sup>36</sup> DŁUSKI, *Mowa*, 439.

<sup>37</sup> DŁUSKI, 439.

<sup>38</sup> DŁUSKI, 440.

Having summed up Pico's work so distinctively, the final conclusion Dłuski arrives at is this: "Those grand words portray the nature and the loftiness of man's condition; however, graced with so many gifts, having eaten the deadly fruit as a result of the machinations of the cunning Monster, he was deprived of them."<sup>39</sup> So the loftiness and greatness of human nature that Pico alludes to should be attributed to the original condition of man, to the state of original innocence. Renaissance humanists did not deny the fact of the original sin, but in general they would think much of it. Luther and Calvin emphasised the weight of the original sin and man's innate tendency towards sin. The reformer from Geneva, elaborating on the postulate "know thyself", points out that this knowledge has to be related to both the state of human nature before the Fall and afterwards.<sup>40</sup> At the root of the original sin there was pride, a desire to match God's dignity, an attempt made by Adam and Eve to usurp the glory due only to God. Dłuski assesses Pico's views from the perspective of that very doctrine of Calvin's.

Pico sought the truth in all philosophical and religious doctrines. He divided philosophy, in accordance with the Platonic-Stoic tradition, into three parts: ethics, dialectics and physics. These parts constitute at the same time the three levels of initiation to the "Temple of Philosophy".<sup>41</sup> Ethics brings peace to the soul, it eliminates desires; dialectics calms down the mind haunted by doubts; physics—or more precisely, the philosophy of nature—guides man by letting him understand the macro- and the microcosm, towards the contemplation of the Creator, thanks to which man becomes more like God, becomes a "divine creature", happy and perfect. It is true that Pico does point out sometimes that philosophy can only bring us nearer to the end that we can attain only through religion, but he accentuated the cognitive character of religion, and even found its essence to lie in the knowledge of God and divine matters.<sup>42</sup> The road to perfection leading through ethics, dialectics and philosophy of nature, as proposed by Pico, is believed by Dłuski to be "gathering coal instead of treasure".<sup>43</sup>

<sup>39</sup> DŁUSKI, *Mowa*, 440.

<sup>40</sup> See Stanisław PIWKO, "Jan Kalwin: problem zła—zarys teodycei," *Archiwum Historii Filozofii i Myśli Społecznej* 31 (1986): 110.

<sup>41</sup> See Marie T. D'ALVERNY, "Quelques aspects du symbolisme de la "Sapientia" chez les humanistes," in *Umanesimo e esoterismo* (Padova, 1960), 325.

<sup>42</sup> See Stefan SWIEŻAWSKI, *Dzieje filozofii europejskiej w XV wieku*, vol. 2, *Wiedza* (Warszawa, 1974), 28.

<sup>43</sup> DŁUSKI, *Mowa*, 441.

In Christianity, human dignity derives chiefly from the fact that man was created in the image and likeness of God, redeemed and destined for the supernatural life. For the pagan thinkers man was of absolute value, human nature did not need any external justification. The Neoplatonics of the Renaissance, Pico among them, strived for reconciliation of the pagan vision of man with the Christian one. In the ancient thought they accentuated all that could lend itself to some interpretation in the Christian spirit, but in Christianity they attenuated those elements that in some way resisted nature. Somewhat programmatically, they blurred the line between the supernatural and the natural. The reformers, conversely, strived to clarify that which the Neoplatonists notoriously mixed up, that is to make a radical separation of the natural order from the supernatural. There is a specific order of faith, to which neither Hermes Trismegistos, nor Zoroaster, Plato, Aristotle or Plotinus can be assigned.

In Dłuski's opinion, philosophers admittedly knew that human nature is evil and disposed to vice, yet they did not know the real cause of this state of affairs. Therefore, they suggested wrong counter-measures. They sought the way to perfection in philosophy, treating it as the guide of human life. Only one way enables man to return to the state of original perfection:

This way is Christ, the beloved Son of God, whom only God commanded us to obey, speaking to us from Heaven. It is Christ who, with his precious blood, cleansed of sins those committed to him by the Father before the creation of the world? One should not, therefore, credit that work to mortal philosophers, for people received the Holy Spirit through the intercession of the Risen Christ, and so illuminated they follow the path to perfection. No dialectics, physics or metaphysics can compare to this gift... Man's greatest glory is in being so beloved by God that He did not even spare His only Son; that he was so beloved by Christ, who assumed the nature of a servant; that he was so exalted by the Holy Spirit, which chose him as a temple to live in.<sup>44</sup>

Philosopher as such is not up to the task he is faced with, because he is not capable of understanding the actual condition of man. To explain human life it is necessary to refer to the knowledge surpassing all natural cognition. The actual situation of man can only be understood in the light of faith. For man, living in a state of fallen and redeemed nature, philosophy has no real value. Dialectics, physics and metaphysics, strictly speaking, do not belong

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<sup>44</sup> DŁUSKI, *Mowa*, 441.

to Christianity at all, as they do not bring man closer to God. It is only through faith that man finds the truth about himself, about his creation and destiny, and also about his dignity. Dignity of man is a value in the order of faith. The ultimate rationale of that dignity is Christ; it is through the Incarnation and Resurrection that human nature was risen in its dignity above all other creatures.

The awareness of one's own dignity should, in Dłuski's opinion, go hand in hand with a responsibility to act consistently with that dignity. In the final passage of his speech, Dłuski stresses that "every one of us is obliged ... to forego the world and the lures of its pleasures, and constantly strive for a complete obedience to the commandments of Scripture."<sup>45</sup> His stance is not, however, of extreme pessimism. He encourages the youth to study the humanities diligently, to give philosophy due respect, emphasising at the same time, in line with Calvin, that theology should be separated from all other disciplines. What Arundinensis links closely, Dłuski opposes radically.

### 3. HANNIBAL ROSSELI

Hannibal Rosseli is an author of commentaries to hermetic writings, *Corpus hermeticorum* and *Asclepius*.<sup>46</sup> According to the treatises of *Corpus hermeticorum*, man is primarily a rational soul (*nous, mens*). The whole Platonic tradition conceives the soul as an immaterial substance, immutable in its essence, simple and immortal. The attributes of the soul are the same as those pertaining to ideas and to God. In the first treatise, the Platonic attributes of the soul are presented in a form of a myth of the birth of "Heavenly Man". According to the thirteenth treatise, the soul is a part of God's sub-

<sup>45</sup> DŁUSKI, *Mowa*, 442.

<sup>46</sup> Hannibal Rosseli (a Bernardine friar) was born in 1525 in Gimiliano (Calabria). He studied philosophy in Naples and theology in Lovanium. Between 1571 and 1581, he was a lector in a Bernardine monastery in Mons Sanctus, near Todi (Umbria), and it is also there that he wrote the commentaries to the writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistos. In 1581, he came to Kraków, where he also filled the post of a lector in a Bernardine cloister and where he gave lectures at the faculty of theology at the University of Kraków. He died in 1593 in Kraków. When using the name *Commentary* we shall mean the following writings of Rosseli: *Pymander Mercurii Trismegisto cum comment F. Hannibalis Rosseli Calabri*, vol. I, Kraków, 1585; vol. III, 1586; vol. IV, 1584 (sic!); vol. V 1586; vol. VI *Asclepius Mercurii Trismegisti cum comment...*, Kraków, 1590 (to refer to these works I use an abbreviation *Com.*, noting the volume with the roman numeral and the page with the Arabic number). See Jan CZERKAWSKI, "Hannibala Rosselego koncepcja 'pia philosophia'," *Archiwum Historii Filozofii i Myśli Społecznej* 15 (1969): 107–24.

stance, and similarly in the fourth one the human mind (*mens*) is the same substance as God (*Mens*). In the twelfth treatise the relation of God to the soul was shown as a comparison to the sun and sunrays, the soul is *Lumen Dei*. And according to the *Asclepius* man is a creature similar both to God (the soul) and to the world (the body). Man is a creature partly divine and partly earthly, intermediate between animals and God.

The amalgamation of the earthly and the divine in man makes him “everything”. He is “a great miracle”, “an earthly god” and he “can become whatever he wishes”. Man can also transfer divine powers to statues and by their means exert influence on people and predict the future.

The hermetic writings contain two unreconcilable concepts of the world, man and God. According to the first one, called optimistic, the world is suffused with the divine, it is a manifestation of God Himself. Therefore, through a proper knowledge of the world man can acquire knowledge of God and in this way become a divine, perfect being. But according to outlook, the world is inherently evil, it is not a work of God, at least not of the first God, because the first God is infinitely removed from matter. It is therefore possible to reach God by shunning matter, by means of cult and magical practices.<sup>47</sup> In both of these concepts, however, the human soul is considered a divine creature and freeing itself from all connections with the material world is thought to be its deliverance. “O Asclepius, what a great miracle is man, a being worthy of reverence and honour. For he partakes in divine nature, as though he were himself a god; he is familiar with the race of demons, knowing that he is descended from the same origin; he despises that part of his nature which is only human, for he has put his hope in the divinity of the other part.”<sup>48</sup> The human soul belongs to the same kind of beings as the astral demons. Having been joined with the body it comes under the influence of stars, but can free himself from their power through hermetic religious practices and thus regain its original divinity. In the description of the creation of the world from the first treatise of *Corpus hermeticum* the Demiurg first created the “Seven Rulers” of the sensible world, and then man. Human soul is a reflection of God’s mind and it contains in itself all the powers of the Rulers. Joined with the body, human mind does not lose its divinity; that divinity remains, however, hidden and can be

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<sup>47</sup> See André J. FESTUGIÈRE, *Hermétisme et mystique païenne* (Paris, 1967), 38–50; Frances A. YATES, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London, 1964), 15–32.

<sup>48</sup> Quote after Frances A. YATES, “The Art of Memory,” in Frances A. YATES, *Selected Works* (London, 1999), 3: 147 [Frances A. YATES, *Sztuka pamięci*, tłum. Witold Radwański (Warszawa, 1977), 54].

regained through cult practices. Rosseli does not commend, of course, any such practices. He was a Christian and tried to reconcile the teachings of Hermes Trismegistos with the Christian doctrine. He also does not suggest seeking esoteric communication with daemons, as Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, Johannes Trithemius, Giordano Bruno or John Dee would do.<sup>49</sup> Instead, he suggests pursuing philosophy, which has as its objective leading the soul to the state of perfection and happiness.

The starting point for his investigations of man is for Rosseli placing him within the hierarchical structure of the universe. Man unites in himself the perfections of all the levels in the hierarchy of beings: he exists like nonorganic creatures, lives like plants, is capable of sensory cognition like animals and of intellectual cognition like pure spirits and God.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, Asclepius justly claims that *homo est omnia, omnis creatura est homo*, or that *totus mundus in homine*, in other words, that man is a microcosm.<sup>51</sup> He can also be called “the knot of the world”, because he is a creature that unites in itself the four different levels of the hierarchy of beings. By participating in the first three levels, he is an image of the world, he has a corporeal and mortal nature. By being part of the fourth tier he is an image of God, he has a divine, immortal nature.

What is the relationship between the two natures constituting a human being? “These two natures,” claims Rosseli, “make one man, and not that he is composed of both soul and clothes, but substantially.”<sup>52</sup> In a justification of the ontic unity of a human being Rosseli makes use of the concept developed by Albert the Great. The soul as such is a substance of spiritual nature, simple and immortal, but if viewed in relation to the body it enlivens, it is its form. Under the influence of Aquinas, in turn, he supports the theory whereby man is constituted by one form only, that form being the rational soul, due to which a human being receives *esse*.<sup>53</sup> This doctrine of the ontic structure of man, so specific to Aquinas, Rosseli ascribes to Hermes, pointing out, that Trismegistos differentiates between the “lower man” and the “higher man”. The lower man is the soul in its role of the substantial form of the body; this man was properly characterised by Aristotle. The higher man, in contrast, is the same soul but in its functions proper to the mind; this man, according to the teachings of Hermes, was described by Plato and the Platonics.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>49</sup> YATES, “The Art of Memory,” 211.

<sup>50</sup> *Com.*, VI, 80.

<sup>51</sup> *Com.*, I, 237; III, 2–14; V, 626–38; VI, 80–86.

<sup>52</sup> *Com.*, VI, 279.

<sup>53</sup> *Com.*, VI, 70.

<sup>54</sup> *Com.*, VI, 3–11.

One of the most fundamental concepts of Rosseli's philosophy is the notion of *mens*. We will not delve into the complicated history of the ways this concept was understood and of its relation to the notions of *animus* and *anima*, but we need to note that the main anthropological discussions of the 15th and 16th centuries revolved this concept. They concerned, in the first place, the question of whether the *mens* of man is part of God's *Mens*, or a substance distinct from God; and secondly, the question of whether there exists one *mens* common to all people, or every man has his own, individual *mens*. As to the first point in the discussion, one needs to cite two hermetic texts: *Deus mens non est, at vero ut sit mens causa est*<sup>55</sup> and *Deus in hominibus est mens, in irrationalibus est natura*.<sup>56</sup> The first text expresses beliefs typical for the pessimist tendency, it emphasises the transcendence of God, whereas the second text follows the optimist (pantheist) tradition. Rosseli often calls the soul *pars Dei* or *lumen Dei*, and he does not always explain the meaning of these expressions—hence the danger of misunderstanding this element of his view. Talking explicitly about the relation of the rational soul to God he states: "The rational soul is not made of God's substance, but is a neighbour (*vicina*) to God's substance. It is something invisible, it governs the body, moves the limbs, guides the senses, and is capable of intellectual cognition. Indeed, since the human soul has a potentiality of intellectual cognition, and acquires knowledge from external things, and since God, on the other hand, is a pure act and does not need anything else to possess knowledge, then the soul cannot be a part of God's substance. Were the rational soul part of God's substance, God would have parts and would not be a simple but a complex being. And were the soul made of the whole of God's substance, it would be an immortal, eternal, all-powerful god, which is absurd".<sup>57</sup> It clearly follows that, in Rosseli's opinion, Hermes calls the soul "a part of God" in a metaphorical sense, to emphasise the fact that it is a divine creature, that is, spiritual and immortal substance.

There is yet another vital problem concerning the ontic status of the human soul left for consideration: Do all people have one common rational soul—as Averroes claimed—or every man has his own rational soul? In the context of this question two texts from *Asclepius* need to be quoted. *Homo mortalis sit, immortalis humanitas*.<sup>58</sup> Rosseli ignores this passage completely,

<sup>55</sup> *Mercurii Trismegisti Pymander* (Basileae, 1532), 9.

<sup>56</sup> *Mercurii Trismegisti*, 37.

<sup>57</sup> *Com.*, VI, 50–51, 280–81.

<sup>58</sup> *Mercurii Trismegisti*, 154.

whose doctrinal meaning seems to align with the teachings of the Averroists, but comments extensively on the following fragment: *Mundus unus, anima una, Deus unus*. He does notice convergences between the views expressed in this text and the doctrine of Averroes, but in quoting other hermetic texts he demonstrates that Trismegistos speaks here about the soul of the world (*anima mundi*), not about the human soul.<sup>59</sup>

Engaging in a broad polemic with the Averroist position, Rosseli makes use of the views expounded by Aquinas in the treatise *De unitate intellectus contra averroistas*. Here, Aquinas, followed by Rosseli, refers to the immediate experience of our own cognitive activity. Not only do we acquire the knowledge of the objects of that activity, but also of the activity itself, and we see ourselves as its principle. Our being for ourselves and in the world, which is the source of our life of cognition, is at the same time both corporeal and spiritual. Acts of thinking contain a moment of transcendence, but they belong to every individual man. Every man is the principle of his own cognitive activity, and therefore everyone has to have the faculty capable of performing that activity. And since that activity is spiritual in nature, then necessarily every man possesses the principle—belonging to the same ontic order—that is the basis of his acts of thinking. The intellect is this principle, the intellect that is one of the faculties of the soul. Man is a substantial unity composed of spirit and matter, he unites in himself two different categories of reality. One God in three Persons, Rosseli emphasises, wanting to demonstrate His triune nature, created three kinds of beings: 1) angels, who are spiritual forms free of connection with the matter; 2) things purely material; 3) men, consisting of the soul and the body, thus being partly divine and partly earthly.<sup>60</sup>

“Man, claims Rosseli, is a great miracle, because he is a mortal god on earth, as Hermes says in *Pymander*, and God in heaven is an immortal man. He is therefore a creature intermediate between what is animal and what is divine, and he can become anything he wants. The animals are not like this: they are headed from birth towards one end assigned to them by nature. The angels, on the other hand, soon after their creation fell in love with what they will always love. Only man received germs of life of all kinds from God; consequently, his nature and likeness follows from what man has perfected in himself.”<sup>61</sup> With that paraphrase of Pico’s views from *De hominis*

<sup>59</sup> *Com.*, VI, 53–54.

<sup>60</sup> *Com.*, VI, 52.

<sup>61</sup> *Com.*, VI, 12, see also VI, 79; III, 2.



*dignitate*, Rosseli proceeds from “man is everything” to “man can be everything”. The freedom in shaping one’s own nature is that feature of the human being that distinguishes him from all other creatures and at the same time one that constitutes the fundament of human dignity. Man is a potentialised being, he is everything in a germinal form, undeveloped, but he has the potential to actualise his own nature and thanks to that potential he is the creator of himself. The thesis “man can become everything” is eventually reduced by Rosseli to two basic possible options: man can become an animal or a divine being. By shaping his nature in the likeness of that of an animal in performing actions typical for that level in the hierarchy of beings, man is degenerates his own humanity; conversely, increasing one’s similarity to God means a realisation of the ideal of humanity.

Rosseli bases his teaching on human dignity, drawing on Pico della Mirandola, on both the hermetic texts and the famous biblical fragment speaking of man as an image and likeness of God. The notion of man as an image of God became, in a natural way, something common to various Christian doctrines. The discrepancies between these doctrines made themselves apparent once it became necessary to specify what being an image of God entails. Still, even in this respect there was some consensus: the picture of God in man is that which is the most perfect. The ultimate boundary between the doctrines was taking either the reason or the will to be the most perfect element in man.<sup>62</sup> Rosseli writes “Reason is the highest indication of the dignity of our nature. Thanks to reason man creates societies, sails the seas, cultivates the land, invents innumerable crafts, differs from animals, and first and foremost gets to know his Maker—God. Thanks to reason man acquires virtues and knows good from evil. What a marvellous and useful gift! Oh immortal and venerable reason! You only praise God, receive revelations, attain knowledge of what is obscure and unspeakable. Upon you revolves the earth, the sky, the sun and the stars, the moon, the alterations and successions of time. O venerable and hallowed reason! For you are the trees and the whole world of animals. To you speak prophets and apostles.”<sup>63</sup> In that laudatory hymn in praise of human reason Rosseli included many themes typical to the renaissance literature on the subject of human dignity; these are the *loci communes* extracted from the ancient and the Patristic literature we have already encountered in the work of Jan of Trzciana. In accordance with that tradition he emphasises the fact that man was created in God’s

<sup>62</sup> See Étienne GILSON, *Duch filozofii średniowiecznej*, trans. Jan Rybałt (Warszawa, 1958), 112.

<sup>63</sup> *Com.*, VI, 365.

image to be the Creator's plenipotentiary on earth, to rule all the creatures as the only rightful *rex mundi*. Rosseli praises man also as a creator and inventor, as one who discovers new islands, builds houses and founds cities, and thus improves the world. Nevertheless, all these motivations of human dignity he finds ultimately secondary to the human ability of knowing God.

Rosseli claims, drawing on Hermes Trismegistos, that "man is a creature worthy of admiration and veneration."<sup>64</sup> To sum up the rather lengthy and exalted explanations of the commentator of hermetic writings of that text, we can say briefly: man is a totally unique creature, because he is capable of attaining knowledge of God; and he is capable of attaining knowledge of God because he is endowed with reason. The cognitive faculty characteristic to man and to him only—setting him apart from both creatures lower in the hierarchy of beings and from those higher in the hierarchy—is reason. "The main function of reason," writes Rosseli, "is to know discursively and investigate the causes of beings. And indeed there is nothing, not only in man but in whole heavens and the whole earth, more divine than reason. Reason, when it grows in strength and perfection, is justly named wisdom, which is the Lady and Queen of everything."<sup>65</sup> Wisdom is not the highest moral virtue, a practical skill useful in life; nor is it knowledge built upon rational cognition; it is intelligence, that is, contemplation of God. Our mind is capable of transforming our rational knowledge of the world into knowledge of God, which is wisdom.

In line with the main currents of Greek thought Rosseli finds the cognitive activity the most worthy of man. Cognition is the most perfect manifestation of the activity of the human being. Life as fully human as possible is an intellectual life, it is cognition. This view Rosseli links closely with the thesis accepted *implicite* in Hermetism and in Neoplatonism, according to which the mode of cognition determines the mode of being. What the process of cognition involves is not simply making intellect comply with the object of cognition, but improving the subject; the object of cognitive activity is an ontic transformation of the subject of cognition.

In spite of his hesitation and many inconsistencies, Rosseli accepts the position of genetic empiricism. Since the body is equipped with sensory organs, the soul is a spirit existing in the world of material things. Contact with this world underlies any cognitive activity of man. The rational soul is capable—because of its ontic status—of cognitive acts either on the level of

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<sup>64</sup> *Com.*, VI, 37.

<sup>65</sup> *Com.*, VI, 364.

sensory cognition or purely spiritual cognition. The ontic status of the human being depends on the mode of its cognition. If man limits his cognitive abilities to the material things only, he lives a life of an animal, shapes his nature on the level of animal nature. He has, however, the power to ascend from the knowledge of material things to the knowledge of the cause of those things—God—and of the forms of these things that exist in God (and are identical with Him). In God there is an archetype of the material world, and in that archetype things exist divinely, therefore much more perfectly than in themselves. Human mind, having known the divine ideas, perceives the world from God's perspective, and thus becomes more like God, becomes a divine creature, reaches the highest level of perfection and happiness.<sup>66</sup> On the level of sensory cognition, man is part of the material world, but on the level of purely spiritual cognition, he is part of the spiritual world. The process of separation of the soul from the body is analogous to the process of spiritualisation of the object of cognition. The soul, knowing God as the cause of the world, acquires the perfection of the object of that knowledge, it alludes all material influences (*sapiens dominatur astris*),<sup>67</sup> ascends to a higher level of being. Rosseli follows Hermes in saying: "Magnum miraculum est homo, animal adorandum et honorandum, hoc in naturam Dei transit, quasi ipse sit Deus."<sup>68</sup> In this way, every flaw of the human being is finally overcome, and the longing for the perfect man—the deification of human nature—finds fulfilment.

Rosseli is under the influence of the optimist tendency of the hermetic writings—enriched by some elements of Neoplatonic philosophy, according to which man is capable of reconstruction of the original unity of the world. That reconstruction requires a recreation of the cosmic scenario. A sage knows that in the beginning everything was one, that is everything was God. That unity first brought into being the relative plurality (the world of pure spirits), and then the plurality of things of the material world. The crowning of the process of unity turning into plurality is man—a being both material and spiritual. Thanks to man the whole cosmic process can come full circle: from the plurality of the material world it can return to the original unity of the spiritual world. Everything that is relative needs to be finally overcome, it must return to its source and ultimate end. The sage is, according to Rosseli, "Hymenaios who ennobles all creatures by connecting them to their

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<sup>66</sup> *Com.*, III, 3–13; VI, 52–55.

<sup>67</sup> *Com.*, VI, 11.

<sup>68</sup> *Com.*, VI, 34.

source—the Oneness.”<sup>69</sup> He is the end of the circular motion of the universe, through him happens the restoration of the original unity of the world, and this unity makes it a divine being. The process was described very vividly and enigmatically in the first treatise of the *Corpus hermeticum*, and, perhaps with less erudition than in the *Commentary* but more subtly and speculatively by Pico della Mirandola, from whose oeuvre Rosseli drew when writing on human dignity.<sup>70</sup>

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King Alfonso of Aragon, a lover of philosophical meditations—according to the chronicler Vespasiano da Bisticci—supposedly convinced Bartolomeo Facio (1400–1457) to write a treatise on destiny of man. In response to the monarch’s wish, he wrote *De excellentia ac praestantia hominis*, in which Facio emphasised the problem of human dignity. The author himself gives a different account of the work’s origins: it was the realisation of Pope Innocent III’s intentions. Deacon Lotario—later Pope Innocent III—wrote a famous treatise *De contemptu mundi sive de miseria conditionis humanae*. The treatise proposes a programme of contempt for the world and the misery of the human condition is poignantly depicted. However, after that lesson in humility Lotario intended to write a work on the subject of dignity of man, a work he most probably did not eventually write. Two and a half a century later, Facio justified that fact by the busy pontificate of Innocent III. *De excellentia ac praestantia hominis* was intended to be—according to his own assertions—a realisation of the pope’s intentions. Vespasiano da Bisticci, on the other hand, claims that Facio’s work did not earn Alfonso of Aragon’s praise and that the king turned with the questions troubling him to Gianozzo Manetti (1396–1458). The Florentine humanist responded to the king’s existential anxieties in the four extensive books of *De dignitate et excellentia hominis*. The last book was dedicated to the polemic with the main theses of Lotario’s treatise.

The wide promotion of the theme-slogan *dignitas hominis* was best helped by Pico della Mirandola’s *Oration*. The oration was to be an introduction to an international congress of philosophers and theologians repre-

<sup>69</sup> *Com.*, VI, 3.

<sup>70</sup> See Eugenio GARIN, *Filozofia odrodzenia we Wloszech*, trans. Krzysztof Żaboklicki (Warszawa, 1969), 86; Giuseppe SAITTA, *Il pensiero italiano nell’Umanesimo e nel Rinascimento*, (Florence, 1961), 1:475–519.

senting various schools of thought and religions that Pico planned for 1487. At the beginning of the 16th century, the oration was titled after the first of two themes taken up by Pico: *De hominis dignitate*.<sup>71</sup>

Renaissance literature on man discussing the grade of perfection due to him, offers various philosophical and theological rationales for human dignity. The philosophical ones can be reduced to five most frequently mentioned: 1) the central place in the universe occupied by man, 2) a more in-depth understanding of man as a microcosm, 3) the creative abilities that set man apart, 4) the radical freedom of self-determination, 5) the immortality of the soul. Similarly, the most frequently listed theological premises are: 1) the creation of man in the image and likeness of God, 2) the Incarnation, 3) the Redemption, 4) the resurrection of bodies, 5) man's destination for eternal life.<sup>72</sup>

Jan of Trzciana takes into account all those philosophical and theological rationales of human dignity. He particularly emphasises the central place in the universe occupied by man and man's creative abilities, the Redemption and destination for life in the kingdom of God; he understands freedom essentially at the level of *liberum arbitrium*, barely mentioning the microcosm theory of man. In *De natura ac dignitate hominis* he is looking for the answers to a few fundamental and closely linked questions: How to live not to lose in life that which makes us human? How to make our life worthy of a thinking, responsible person? How to live our life creatively? These are not, of course, new questions at the time when Jan of Trzciana lived and worked, because they belong to the category of "eternal questions" of humanity. We know, however, that there are no eternal answers to the eternal questions, that every generation should take the trouble to seek its own propositions. In the light of our analyses Arundinensis appears to us as a Christian humanist from mid-sixteenth century, endowed with a considerable sensitivity to the current philosophical and theological issues. His views are dominated by the preoccupation with an all-around development of man, release of the spiritual potential thanks to which man is capable of realising his humanity; these views are deeply rooted in a Christian and at the same time authentically humanist order of values.

Mikołaj Dłuski, under the influence of Calvin's teachings, introduces a significant correction of the renaissance concepts of dignity of man. The objective of his *Oratio de praestantia et excellentia humanae naturae* is by no means a popularisation of Pico's views contained in *De hominis digni-*

<sup>71</sup> GARIN, *Filozofia odrodzenia*, 146.

<sup>72</sup> SWIEŻAWSKI, *Dzieje*, 6:185–204.

*tate*, but their critical assessment. That critique may also be directed at Rosseti's views. The commentator of the hermetic writings remains essentially on the level of philosophical investigations, therefore he does not take into the account the theological premises of human dignity. Based on Hermetism, Neoplatonism and Pico's views, he accentuated primarily the central place in the universe occupied by man and man's freedom in shaping his own nature. The human being contains in itself an element enabling him to transcend the natural world and be in communion with the divine world. That element is reason, being the noblest faculty of the human soul; it is reason that constitutes the foundation of human dignity. Dignity is given to man as a gift and as a task. Ultimately man, through a rational cognition of the world, is given the task of perfecting the world, elevating it to the spiritual kingdom and thus undergo divinisation—become a happy and perfect being.

This typically hermetic apotheosis of man and his cognitive abilities is subject to Dłuski's critical assessment. In line with his Calvinist stance, he emphasises the effects of the original sin disastrous to men. Although Pico notes that man in the state of the original sin can fulfil the role of the "knot of the world" only through Christ, that theme was neither accentuated nor developed by him.<sup>73</sup> And, above all, the Italian humanist—like Manetti and Trzciana—does not apply the philosophical rationales of human dignity to the state before the original sin, which Dłuski does. All the rationales of greatness and dignity of man in his present state are reduced by him to the theological ones (incarnation, illumination by the Holy Spirit). Dłuski, therefore, does not belong to the Renaissance tradition in his way of understanding human dignity. The representatives of that tradition, even if they emphasised the weight of the first parents' sin, thought at the same time that the sin did not ruin the natural grandeur, marvel and dignity of man.

What Luther and Calvin have in common with Montaigne—despite huge differences between them—is scepticism, although its origins are very different. Contrary to the humanists, who placed man at the centre of the universe and thought man is an indispensable intermediary in the hierarchical world, Montaigne came to the conclusion, that man is not "above the events", because he *is* one of the events. Self-knowledge has no corrective sense, it can only be a sober assessment of human condition. Montaigne writes:

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<sup>73</sup> SWIEŻAWSKI, 195; Charles TRINKAUS, *In our image and Likeness. Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought* (London, 1970), 523.

Let him show me the force of his reasoning, whereby he has built those great advantages he thinks he has over other creatures. What has made him believe that this wondrous movement of the heavens, the eternal light of those planets and stars that circulate so proudly above him, the fearful motions of that infinite ocean, were established and have continued since time immemorial, in man's service and for his convenience? Can one imagine anything as preposterous as that this wretched and fragile creature, who is not even a master of himself but exposed to the abuses of all elements and phenomena, should call himself the ruler and emperor of the world, lacking the strength to know the tiniest part of it, much less to command it?<sup>74</sup>

These beautiful yet dramatic words declaring man's dethronement indicate the crisis of the Renaissance humanism, the decay of its way of thinking and evaluating.

The lack of trust in the cognitive abilities of man gives rise to despair and pessimism. The new way of perceiving man, the world and God is splendidly captured by Mikołaj Sęp Szarzyński.

Man, shamedly sired, painfully  
Born, but a moment bides this earth,  
Aye, midst change, misery, fear;  
A shadow void of sun, he dies.<sup>75</sup>

The uniqueness of man acquires in the writings of Szarzyński a new dimension: man's desires outstrip his abilities.<sup>76</sup> And that is why human condition is tragic. Even faith does not alleviate the torments of being man, it only releases and multiplies the fear of that which is unknowable.

'Tis hard to love not, yet to love  
Be sad joy, if by lust misled  
Thoughts too sweetly gaze on things  
That perforce must change and decay.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Michel DE MONTAIGNE, *Essays*, trans. Charles Cotton (London, 1877), 2:152–53 [*Próby*, vol.2, Warszawa, 1957), 148].

<sup>75</sup> Mikołaj SĘP-SZARZYŃSKI, in Richard SOKOŁOSKI, *The Poetry of Mikołaj Sęp-Szarzyński* (Wiesbaden, 1990), 71 [Mikołaj SĘP-SZARZYŃSKI, *Rytmy albo Wiersze polskie* (Wrocław, 1973), 23].

<sup>76</sup> See Jan BŁOŃSKI, *Mikołaj Sęp-Szarzyński a początki polskiego baroku* (Kraków, 1967), 198–202.

<sup>77</sup> SĘP-SZARZYŃSKI, in SOKOŁOSKI, *The Poetry of Mikołaj Sęp-Szarzyński*, 73.

Jan of Trzciana—and similarly Rosseli—did not have the slightest doubt that one should love and knew what is worthy of that love. The infinite goodness of God did not doom us to suffering, we have been called to peaceful contemplation and to creative engagement in the matters of this world. It is enough to transcend the sphere of sensory cognition, ascend to the level of intellectual cognition and make the effort of self-reflection so that the intellect, capable of penetrating the earth, the depths of the sea and the skies, can show the will what it should adhere to, what is worthy of its love. The power of human intellect eliminates the tragic dilemma. The appearance of the tragic dimension of self-knowledge—as a dominating *topos*—predicts the end of a particular way man used to think about himself—the end of the Renaissance.

*Translated by Joanna Frydrych*

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