Oration on the Dignity of Man

By Pico della Mirandola, 15th century

This piece is considered the “manifesto” of the new philosophy of the Renaissance, called “humanism.” Renaissance celebrated the potential of human beings, and the dignity of all human beings, based in their ability to reason between right and wrong.

Why, I asked, should we not admire the angels themselves and the beatific (beautiful) choirs more? At long last, however, I feel that I have come to some understanding of why man is the most fortunate of living things and which draws upon him the envy, not of the brutes (animals) alone, but of the astral (heavenly) beings and of the very intelligences (angels) which dwell beyond the confines of the world. A thing surpassing belief and smiting the soul with wonder. Still, how could it be otherwise? For it is on this ground that man is, with complete justice, considered and called a great miracle and a being worthy of all admiration.

Hear then, oh Fathers, precisely what this condition of man is…

God the Father, the Mightiest Architect, had already raised, according to the precepts of His hidden wisdom, this world we see, the cosmic dwelling of divinity, a temple most august (dignified). He had already adorned the supercelestial region (heaven) with Intelligences, infused the heavenly globes with the life of immortal souls and set the fermenting dung-heap of the inferior world teeming with every form of animal life. But when this work was done, the Divine Artificer (God) still longed for some creature which might comprehend the meaning of so vast an achievement, which might be moved with love at its beauty and smitten with awe at its grandeur. When, consequently, all else had been completed (as both Moses and Timaeus testify), in the very last place, He bethought Himself of bringing forth man. Truth was, however, that there remained no archetype (model) according to which He might fashion a new offspring. All space was already filled; all things had been distributed in the highest, the middle and the lowest orders. Still, it was not in the nature of the power of the Father to fail in this last creative venture; nor was it in the nature of that supreme Wisdom to hesitate through lack of counsel in so crucial a matter; nor, finally, in the nature of His beneficent love to compel the creature destined to praise the divine generosity in all other things to find it wanting in himself.

At last, the Supreme Maker decreed that this creature, to whom He could give nothing wholly his own, should have a share in the particular endowment of every other creature. Taking man, therefore, this creature of indeterminate image, He set him in the middle of the world and thus spoke to him:

``We have given you, O Adam, that whatever place, whatever form, whatever gifts you may, with premeditation, select, these same you may have and possess through your own judgement and decision. The nature of all other creatures is defined and restricted within laws which We have laid down; you, by contrast, impeded (blocked) by no such restrictions, may, by your own free will, to whose custody We have assigned you, trace for yourself the lineaments (features) of your own nature. I have placed you at the very center of the world, so that from that vantage point you may with greater ease glance round about you on all that the world contains. We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer. It will be in your power to descend to the lower, brutish forms of life; you will be able, through your own decision, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine.''

Oh unsurpassed generosity of God the Father, Oh wondrous and unsurpassable felicity of man, to whom it is granted to have what he chooses, to be what he wills to be! But upon man, at the moment of his creation, God bestowed seeds pregnant with all possibilities, the germs of every form of life. Whichever of these a man shall cultivate, the same will mature and bear fruit in him. If vegetative, he will become a plant; if sensual, he will become brutish; if rational, he will reveal himself a heavenly being; if intellectual, he will be an angel and the son of God.

*\*\*In the rest of his Oration, Mirandella references Plato, Pythagorus, Augustine, Moses, Avenzoar of Babylon, Aristotle, Cicero, Apostle Paul, Jesus Christ, and others to prove his point.*

This is some deep stuff! Let’s dissect it.

According to Mirandella…

1. Who is considered “better” and “worthy of admiration:” human beings, or angels?

2. What sorts of things did God do before man was created? What was the quality of those actions?

3. Does man belong to heaven or to earth?

4. What is the gift that is given to man?

5. What are the four possible fates awaiting man?

If he is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ he will be \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

What does this mean?

If he is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ he will be \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

What does this mean?

If he is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ he will be \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

What does this mean?

If he is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ he will be \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

What does this mean?

6. So…why is man more important than any other creatures? What is so great about him?

### Disputation of Doctor Martin Luther on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences

## More commonly known as “The 95 Theses”

**by Dr. Martin Luther (1517)**

**Published in:**

*Works of Martin Luther: Adolph Spaeth, L.D. Reed, Henry Eyster Jacobs, et Al., Trans. & Eds. (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman Company, 1915), Vol.1, pp. 29-38*

Vocabulary words:

**Indulgence**: a grant (that could be bought with money) by the pope of partial forgiveness of the consequences of a sin

**Sin**: an act, thought, or behavior that goes against the law or teachings of a particular religion

**Papal**: from the Pope

**Pardon**: forgiveness

Out of love for the truth and the desire to bring it to light, the following propositions will be discussed at Wittenberg, under the presidency of the Reverend Father Martin Luther, Master of Arts and of Sacred Theology, and Lecturer in Ordinary on the same at that place. Wherefore he requests that those who are unable to be present and debate orally with us, may do so by letter.

32. They will be condemned eternally, together with their teachers, who believe themselves sure of their salvation because they have letters of pardon.

32b. People who believe that indulgences will let them live in salvation will always be damned - along with those who teach it.

33. Men must be on their guard against those who say that the pope's pardons are that inestimable gift of God by which man is reconciled to Him;

33b. Do not believe those who say that a papal indulgence is a wonderful gift which allows salvation.

34. For these "graces of pardon" concern only the penalties of sacramental satisfaction, and these are appointed by man.

34b. Indulgences only offer Man something which has been agreed to by Man.

36. Every truly repentant Christian has a right to full remission of penalty and guilt, even without letters of pardon.

36b. A man can be free of sin if he sincerely repents - an indulgence is not needed.

37. Every true Christian, whether living or dead, has part in all the blessings of Christ and the Church; and this is granted him by God, even without letters of pardon.

37b. Any Christian - dead or alive - can gain the benefit and love of Christ without an indulgence.

43. Christians are to be taught that he who gives to the poor or lends to the needy does a better work than buying pardons;

43b. A Christian who gives to the poor or lends to those in need is doing better in God’s eyes than one who buys 'forgiveness'.

44. Because love grows by works of love, and man becomes better; but by pardons man does not grow better, only more free from penalty.

44b. This is because of loving others, love grows and you become a better person. A person buying an indulgence does not become a better person.

62. The true treasure of the Church is the Most Holy Gospel of the glory and the grace of God.

62b. The main treasure of the church should be the Gospels and the grace of God.

63. But this treasure is naturally most odious, for it makes the first to be last.

63b. Thinking the treasure is the Gospels and the grace of God makes people angry, because it means the rich/upper class have no advantage over the poor/lower class.

64. On the other hand, the treasure of indulgences is naturally most acceptable, for it makes the last to be first.

64b. Therefore evil seems good without penance or forgiveness

65. Therefore the treasures of the Gospel are nets with which they formerly were wont to fish for men of riches.

65b. The treasured items in the Gospels are the nets used by the workers.

66. The treasures of the indulgences are nets with which they now fish for the riches of men.

66b. Indulgences are used to net an income for the wealthy.

86. Again: -- "Why does not the pope, whose wealth is to-day greater than the riches of the richest, build just this one church of St. Peter with his own money, rather than with the money of poor believers?"

86b. The pope should re-build St. Peter’s with his own money.

# 95 Theses Analysis Questions

After reading these theses of protest by Martin Luther, make a list that answers the following questions:

I. What sorts of things are going on in the Catholic church that makes Martin Luther and others want to reform the Catholic church?

II. Which thesis (by number) addresses this issue?

III. What is the consequence (whether a real physical consequence or in the minds and behavior of people) of this action the church is taking? (Hint: you may have to use your imagination for part III).

What the Catholic Church is doing Thesis No. Effect of this action on people/society

Does it seem like Martin Luther wants to fully separate from the Catholic Church at the time he wrote his 95 Theses? What makes you think so?

Can you see any impact of the “Reformation” that Martin Luther started in the 1517 in our world today? What is it? Does it impact your life directly?