The Morality of Rhetoric in Giovanni Pico della Mirandola’s *Oration*

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Note on spelling: I have used an American translation of the *Oration*. Therefore the spelling in quotes follows this source. Elsewhere it follows standard Australian spelling. I have used Italian spelling for the names of Pico and his Italian contemporaries.
Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-94) is remembered as one of the most precocious of Renaissance men, thanks to his wide reading, early death and prolific writing. The rather hagiographic biography written by his nephew, Gianfrancesco Pico, and the biographies of many illustrious contemporaries such as Marsilio Ficino and Lorenzo de Medici created Pico’s reputation as a ‘Phoenix of the wits’\(^1\), which has been amplified by historians like Walter Pater, Paul Oskar Kristeller and Eugenio Garin\(^2\). His use of rhetoric and his approach to philosophy are two of the main reasons for this luminous reputation.

Pico’s *Oration* was written in December 1486, as an introduction to the proposed debate in January 1487 of his nine hundred theses or *Conclusiones*. The theses were drawn from a range of philosophical positions and sources, many of which were thought to be contradictory, or related to controversial topics. Pico suggested answers to these controversies, which he invited interested scholars to discuss. Thirteen of the theses were declared heretical\(^3\) and the debate never eventuated; but the *Oration*, published posthumously, remains one of the best-known texts of Renaissance philosophy: Pico’s integration of scholastic and Cabalist ideas with the more widespread Neoplatonist

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philosophy of such writers as Marsilio Ficino, Cristoforo Landino and Angelo Poliziano makes the *Oration* stand out from much contemporary literature. This thesis, however, will concentrate on perhaps the most frustrating and fascinating aspect of the *Oration*, its masterful use of rhetoric.

Rhetoric and philosophy enjoyed a somewhat awkward relationship in late fifteenth century Italy. Pico’s work shows both the skill and love of eloquence, and the scorn for rhetoric as mere artifice and deceit, which were common attitudes in his milieu. Historians have puzzled over this ambivalent view of rhetoric, especially as it appears in Pico’s correspondence with Ermolao Barbaro in 1485, eighteen months before the *Oration*. Quirinus Breen argues that in the letters Pico was railing not against rhetoric per se but against its abuse. While I concur with Breen’s analysis, the link between Pico’s attitude in the letters and in the *Oration* has not yet been satisfactorily examined. This thesis attempts to clarify the link between the letters’ use of rhetoric and that of the *Oration.* I will argue that the ‘paradoxical’ attitude to rhetoric and philosophy in the letters led Pico to construct a theory in the *Oration* that allowed rhetoric to serve moral ends. This approach continues to be fruitful to debates on the value of rhetoric in modern society. As the title of this thesis suggests, my primary focus is not to analyse ‘the

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rhetoric of morality\textsuperscript{6} but the ‘morality of rhetoric’ in the \textit{Oration}, that is, how Pico negotiated his ambivalence toward rhetoric.

Jerrold Seigel’s account of fifteenth-century Italian intellectual life indicates that much contemporary debate revolved around the problem of rhetoric and philosophy\textsuperscript{7}. Philosophy was disparaged as being based on a poor Latin style and directed to questions that were irrelevant to society. Classical rhetoric, with its foundation in the idea of man as a political animal, appeared to provide a solution to this problem, but it also brought its own moral pitfalls. According to Seigel, the 1450s marked a change in humanist attitudes to philosophy and rhetoric. Before then, the aim had been to ally philosophy to rhetoric after the ideal of Cicero: the rhetor should be a philosopher, so that he could express philosophical truths in such a way as to persuade his audience of their truth. After the 1450s, the humanists divided into adherents of rhetoric, the art of persuasion, and adherents of philosophy, the love of truth\textsuperscript{8}. It could thus be argued that late fifteenth-century rhetoricians tended to see rhetoric as an art, while those who advocated philosophical methods saw rhetoric as deceitful artifice. Both attitudes appear in Pico’s thought, but the \textit{Oration} of 1486 uses extravagant rhetoric and the language of philosophy in a complementary manner.

\textsuperscript{6} W. G. Craven, ‘Style and substance’, studies Pico’s rhetoric from a more linguistic point of view.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 255.
Seigel’s view of the rhetoric-philosophy debates was influenced by his mentor Paul Oskar Kristeller. Kristeller held that rhetoric and philosophy were two distinct disciplines with different aims, and that they existed more or less peacefully alongside each other in Quattrocento academia. Rhetoricians and philologists took it upon themselves to correct the language of the old philosophical treatises, and philosophers like Pico argued over the correct function of rhetoric in society. Although rhetoric and philosophy were seen as separate, they were not necessarily opposed.

Although he was influenced by this separation of the aims of philosophy and rhetoric, Pico seems not to have succeeded in abandoning rhetoric for philosophy. Rather, Pico’s moral ambivalence toward rhetoric led him to use it ironically. In order to provoke reflexive analysis and debate, the *Oration* as well as the letter to Barbaro uses rhetoric as a tool for the presentation of ideas, rather than to persuade others to accept those ideas. This use of the art of rhetoric to draw attention to its artificial aspects constitutes the morality of Pico’s rhetoric in the *Oration*. In the tradition of the Ciceronian ideal, Pico uses rhetoric and philosophy to complement each other.

Anthony Grafton has spoken of the humanists as searching for a ‘moral language’: they tried to develop a public language which stimulated society’s aesthetic sense as well as being morally edifying, and thus inspired their audience emotionally as well as rationally. In his overt juxtaposition of philosophical and rhetorical styles, Pico demonstrates to his

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9 Ibid., ix.
audience how far his language determines their response. Similarly, there is a tendency in modern society to see our aesthetic sensibilities as indicative of our morals, and to express public morals in terms of aesthetics. This view appears in many recent philosophical, biological and linguistic studies. It also necessarily influences the present thesis. The importance of ‘moral language’ to Pico and his contemporaries can be seen as an antecedent of modern debates about language in society.

This thesis has three parts. First I intend to trace the development of the ambivalence toward rhetoric as art and as artifice in the Quattrocento, and outline the direction in which Pico was beginning to negotiate it in the letter to Barbaro. Second, I want to analyse how Pico addressed philosophy and rhetoric in the Oration. Third, I suggest how Pico’s rhetoric in the Oration relates to the development of humanist rhetorical debates, Renaissance historiography, and to contemporary debates around language in the public sphere.

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12 For example, Martin Ball, ‘Once in a lifetime is just about enough’ *The Australian* (September 13, 2004), 9 (a review of Andrea Bocelli focusing on music’s ability to transcend suffering and the importance of Bocelli’s blindness to his public profile); Russell Blackford, ‘Science Fiction, Biotechnology and the Shadow of September 11’, *Quadrant* 46, no. 383 (January-February 2002); Ezra S. Susser, Daniel B. Herman and Barbara Aaron, ‘Combatting the Terror of Terrorism’, *Scientific American* 287, no. 2 (August 2002), 56-61; Mike Leggett, ‘The science and art synapse’, *RealTime* 61 (June-July 2004), 38; Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air: the Experience of Modernity* (Penguin, 1988, first published Simon and Schuster, 1982).
Chapter 1. The historical setting: rhetoric as art and as artifice in fifteenth-century Florence

1.1 An intellectual biography of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola

‘pledged to the doctrines of no man, I have ranged through all the masters of philosophy… in order that, as champion of the beliefs of one, I might not seem fettered to it and appear to place less value on the rest…’ *Oration*¹³.

In this chapter I want to outline Pico’s intellectual climate, and the ideas he was interested in at the time of writing the *Oration*. One of the most impressive features of Pico’s life is that he became so famous at a young age, which influenced the way posterity has remembered him. Pico’s nephew, Gianfrancesco, wrote a biography of Pico soon after he died at the age of thirty-one in 1494. Thomas More’s English translation of this biography records Pico as a genius whose birth was preceded by the usual signs and portents (in Pico’s case, the appearance of ‘a fyery garland’ over his mother’s room¹⁴). More relates how Pico travelled widely, questioning all the masters of his day with such keen insight and phenomenal powers of memory that the reader is reminded of the child Christ in the temple. To the historian, the most fascinating aspect of Pico’s life is that he did not live long enough to fully consolidate his ideas, but nevertheless managed to disseminate them widely enough, and in high enough places, to have left the intellectual

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legacy that he did. Erasmus, Philip Melanchthon, Leibnitz and Descartes, among others, took up and extended Pico’s ideas. Posteriority seems to have judged Pico on his potential rather than his actual achievements. Nevertheless, his achievements were considerable.

Pico was born in 1463 as the youngest child of noble parents. His father, Gianfrancesco, was the count of a small, quiet duchy near the prosperous university towns of Bologna and Padua. ·Under the rule and gouvernaunce of hys moder’, says Thomas More, ‘he was set to masters and to lerning’, receiving the standard classical education of a nobleman’s son of the period. As his mother, Giulia, ‘longed vere sore to haue him preest’, at the age of fourteen (1477) he was sent to study canon law at the University of Bologna. At sixteen, Pico turned his attention to ‘speculation & philosophy as well humane as diuine’, studying at Padua under Nicoletto Vernia and other Paduan Averroists. Pico writes that his six years’ study of the scholastic philosophers began at this time. In the Oration, Pico acknowledges a debt to Duns Scotus, Thomas Aquinas, Giles of Rome, Franciscus de Mayronis, Albertus Magnus, and Henry of Ghent. These philosophers

17 More, Life of Pico, 55.
18 Ibid., 56.
19 Dulles, Princeps Concordiae, 26-9.
21 Pico, Oration, 243.
had in common an interest in natural philosophy and an inclusive, but nonetheless critical, approach to knowledge.\(^{22}\)

Pico also studied Greek at Ferrara in 1481-2 under Baptista Guarino, Manuel Andramythenos, and Demetrius Chalcondyles\(^{23}\), returning to Mirandola in 1482\(^{24}\). It should be borne in mind that Pico generally remained in contact with his teachers and friends after leaving a city, using and copying books from their libraries and keeping up with local ideas\(^{25}\). Thus new concepts, sources and attitudes did not so much supersede Pico’s earlier thought, but were integrated with it.

Pico was an active member of the Platonic Academy in Florence in 1483-4, along with such luminaries as Marsilio Ficino, Cristoforo Landino, and Angelo Poliziano. The Academy, as is well documented, was a pet project of Lorenzo de’ Medici’s\(^{26}\). Pico’s time in this company of ‘joyous erudition’\(^{27}\) was reflected in the *Oration*, in particular through his study of Greek, his Neoplatonist emphasis on successively higher states of being and his ideal of an aesthetically and morally inspiring theory of knowledge.\(^{28}\)

\(^{22}\) Cf. Dulles, 29-32, 39-44, on Pico’s interest in the teachings of Scotus, Albertus, and de Mayronis; and cf. Maurice de Wulf, 20-1, 25-9, 138 on Albertus, Aquinas, Scotus and Henry of Ghent. Dulles lists the topics of interest to these thinkers (the objects of logic and of natural science, the presentiality of the soul), and de Wulf their methods (weighing syllogisms in combination with each other, observational science). But Pico is much more general. He finds in Scotus ‘something lively and subtle; in Thomas, sound and consistent; in Aegidius [Giles], terse and exact; in Francis[cus], acute and penetrating; in Albert[us], venerable copious, and grand; in Henry… something sublime and to be revered.’ (*Oration*, 243).


\(^{24}\) Kibre, 23.

\(^{25}\) Cf. Kibre, passim.

\(^{26}\) For example, see Anthony Levi, ‘The Florentine Academy’, in Levi (ed) *Renaissance and Reformation: the Intellectual Genesis* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 113, 126. The Academy was instituted by Lorenzo’s grandfather Cosimo, but during Pico’s time Lorenzo was the enthusiastic patron of and contributor to its activities.

\(^{27}\) Grafton, *Bring Out Your Dead*, 15.

Ficino’s well-documented Neoplatonism, which aimed to reconcile Christian thought
with that of the ‘ancient theologians’ Hermes Trismegistus, Orpheus, Pythagoras,
Zoroaster and Moses,\(^\text{29}\) caught the imaginations of many of Ficino’s contemporaries,
including Pico.

Ficino was probably the first to urge Pico to study Aristotle\(^\text{30}\), but another powerful friend
who sought to refine Pico’s style by studying the Greeks was Ermolao Barbaro, Venetian
ambassador to Milan and Rome in the late 1480s and early ’90s, and from 1477 professor
of philosophy at Padua\(^\text{31}\). Pico had studied Averroës and Aristotle at Padua\(^\text{32}\) and possibly
discovered there the scholastics referred to in the *Oration*- Franciscus de Mayronis,
Henry of Ghent, Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, Giles of Rome and Duns Scotus\(^\text{33}\).
The extent of Pico’s involvement with the debate on rhetoric is evident in letters he wrote
to Barbaro in the summer of 1485. Their correspondence was in part a tongue-in-cheek
parlour game, but they debated serious questions of rhetoric and philosophy. Pico
distinguished philosophy from rhetoric, seeing them as two distinct disciplines with
different purposes.

\(^{29}\) D. P. Walker, *The Ancient Theology: Studies in Christian Platonism from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth
\(^{32}\) Levi, ‘The Florentine Academy’, 127; Rebhorn, introduction to Pico’s letter to Barbaro, in Rebhorn (ed.)
*Renaissance Debates on Rhetoric*, 57; Gordon Campbell, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Italian Renaissance*
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 607. On Scholasticism and especially Averroism in Padua, see
Dulles, 26-8; Cassirer, 134-6; Renan, *Averroës et l’Averroïsme*, 6e edit. (Paris, no date), 392, in Cassirer,
130 n. 10.
\(^{33}\) Dulles, 45.
Barbaro’s letter to Pico in April 1485 extolled the Greek philosophers over the scholastic Latins, and the benefits of reading them in the original. Padua University was ‘a bastion of Scholasticism’ in the 1480s, and Pico’s reply, dated June 3rd, defended the scholastics’ ‘rustic’ expressions against his friend’s taunts, albeit in flawless classical rhetoric. Much of what Eugenio Garin calls the new humanist philosophy was written in the form of open letters, elegantly composed and often in the vernacular or ‘a clear and accessible Latin’, as opposed to scholastic Latin, ‘a dreadful initiates’ jargon’. Yet Pico saw value in scholasticism and left for the (predominately scholastic) University of Paris in July 1485.

The idea of publicly defending his philosophy did not come to Pico as a result of his time in Paris but more likely from his Paduan influences, according to Avery Dulles.

However, Pico refers to Paris when discussing one of the most prevalent issues in his work, and particularly in the *Oration*. Pico writes, ‘when I was at Paris almost all the University held’ that wanting to believe a premise does not necessarily enable one to believe it. This idea, with which Pico agreed, may be seen in the importance of both logical explanation and inspirational rhetoric in the *Oration*. It was not enough to make one’s audience *want* to believe one’s point through rhetoric without *enabling* them to agree with it through logic, but Pico’s language in both the letters to Barbaro and the

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38 Dulles is refuting Eugenio Anagnine, who suggests that the idea came to Pico through the example of Franciscus de Mayronis in the previous century (Dulles, 45 n. 32). Dulles contends that de Mayronis was less well known in fifteenth-century Paris than in Padua (43-4) and cites public disputes in the late 1480s and early ’90s amongst the Paduan scholastics (45) as evidence for his view.
39 Dulles, 40.
Oration make it clear that he considered the desire for belief just as necessary as logical plausibility⁴⁰.

On his return to study from Paris in March 1486⁴¹, Pico settled in Florence and began to study Hebrew under Elia del Medigo, whom Pico met at Padua⁴². After only a month, however, Pico gave up Hebrew in favour of Arabic and Aramaic, also taught by Elia, who had apparently introduced Pico to Cabala⁴³, Jewish mysticism, in late November 1486⁴⁴. Much has been made of the strong influence of Cabalism in Pico’s work⁴⁵ and the Oration, composed in December 1486, shows his enthusiasm for the subject. Pico’s

⁴⁰ Dulles sees scholasticism as the main influence on Pico’s thought, and the Oration as rather peripheral to his philosophy because ‘it tends to submerge thought beneath literary form’ (Dulles, 15). Ernst Cassirer disagrees. While he does not dismiss the influence of scholasticism, Cassirer finds the humanist influence a greater one and the Oration the quintessence of Pico’s humanism- particularly in its theme of the dignity of man and its syncretism. Cassirer also seems attracted by Pico’s syncretist rhetoric (Cassirer, ‘Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: A Study’, 319-46), whereas Dulles prefers to focus on philosophy. This thesis contends that Pico took ideas of language from both his scholastic and humanist influences, and did not think of them as mutually exclusive- unlike either Dulles or Cassirer.


⁴² Dulles, 31-2.

⁴³ Variously spelt. I use Kristeller’s spelling.

⁴⁴ Cabala is a system of Jewish mysticism based on the idea that divine knowledge can be transmitted to human minds only through symbols, which can be interpreted only by the system’s initiates (Campbell, 125). ‘In rabbinic literature, the term Kabbalah [sic] is used in two senses. The first refers to the words of the Prophets and the Hagiographa, as opposed to the Pentateuch; the second denoted the tradition of the oral Torah, as distinguished from the written Torah… In the beginning of the thirteenth century, individual sages used the word Kabbalah in reference to particular secrets of tradition that are divulged in private or transmitted by whispering “from mouth to mouth”, or rather from mouth to ear, so that they reach only the elect. The things that are communicated in this way are things that by their very nature cannot be understood by everyone.’ Moshe Hallamish, trans. Ruth Bar-Ilan and Ora Wiskind-Elper, An Introduction to the Kabbalah (Albany: State University of New York, 1999), 4. In the Oration, Pico thus interprets the Old Testament story of the ark of the covenant as an analogy of man’s spiritual journey to enlightenment. (Oration, 232-3).

Del Medigo’s relationship with Pico is outlined in Kibre, Library, 15. Chaim Wirzubski suggests, however, that Flavius Mithridates translated Cabalistic works for Pico between May and November 1486 (Chaim Wirzubski, Pico della Mirandola’s Encounter with Jewish Mysticism (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1989), 5). Wirzubski further contends that Pico used Mithridates’ translations in compiling his Conclusiones, which were complete by November (Wirzubski, 6, 10, 69). Johanan Alemanno, who had an interest in magic and who may have met Pico in 1486 (rather than 1488, as was supposed before Eugenio Garin discovered and published Pico’s Commento Particulare), was another strong influences on Pico’s thought, although Wirzubski does not venture to suggest what Alemanno might have taught Pico formally (256-7).

⁴⁵ Cf. Chaim Wirzubski, Pico’s Encounter.
interest seems to have been mainly in the notion of knowledge coming directly from God and passed on only to those worthy to know. Rhetoric, in the sense of a meaningful system of symbols which both inspires and morally edifies the hearer or reader, is thus an important part of Pico’s worldview. The system of ascending states of being in Cabala also lent itself to integration into Pico’s essentially Neoplatonist metaphysic.

Pico’s 900 theses or Conclusiones were printed on December 7th, 1486, in Rome, a compilation of ideas drawn from several different philosophical and mystical traditions with a view to reconciling them. Pico proposed a grand debate of his theses in Rome the following month, but the debate was not to be. Thirteen of the theses were deemed heretical and after writing an Apologia for the thirteen, which led to the condemnation of all 900 theses by Pope Innocent VIII, Pico fled to France. In 1488 he was arrested at Vincennes, released on the orders of Lorenzo de’ Medici, and returned to Florence.

Several other works followed, on the same themes Pico had already addressed in the Conclusiones and Oration. The Heptaplus of 1489 was a Neoplatonist exposition of the first six days of creation, as outlined in Genesis, the De ente et uno (1492) attempted to reconcile Plato and Aristotle (a major theme of the Conclusiones); and the Disputationes, an enormous treatise attacking astrology, also followed a main theme in the Oration and

46 This system of symbols, in which words are thought to have ‘real, and not conventional, relations to their meanings’, is common to Cabalistic interpretation and to Plato’s Cratylus, an influential Neoplatonic work. D. P. Walker, The Ancient Theology: Studies in Christian Platonism from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century (London: Duckworth, 1972), 25, 101.
47 Pope Innocent VIII appointed a commission to investigate Pico’s theses before the debate. This commission found the thirteen theses heretical. (Kristeller, Introduction to Oration, 217; Avery Dulles, Princeps Concordiae: Pico della Mirandola and the Scholastic Tradition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1941), 14.)
48 Campbell, 607.
Conclusiones. The Oration does not appear to be, as Avery Dulles suggests\(^{49}\), an unimportant document; the ideas Pico expressed in it dominated the rest of his work.

During this period (1488-93) Pico became a follower of Savonarola, and in 1493 Pope Alexander VI revoked Innocent VIII’s condemnation of Pico’s 900 theses.\(^{50}\) Pico died in 1494, of an unidentified illness, according to More’s translation of Gianfrancesco’s biography. Some sources, however, suggest that Pico was poisoned by a disgruntled servant.\(^{51}\)

1.2 Pico’s correspondence with Ermolao Barbaro of 1485

‘that which procures for an author immortal reputation is a shining and elegant style, at least pure and chaste…’ Barbaro to Pico, April 1485\(^{52}\).

‘Cicero does not desire eloquence in a philosopher, but that he be adequate in his subject matter and teaching.’ Pico to Barbaro, June 1485\(^{53}\).

Pico’s correspondence with Ermolao Barbaro, which occurred just after his studies of Averroism and scholastic writers in Padua, and his engagement with humanist and Neoplatonist writings in Florence, addressed one of Pico’s main concerns at this stage of his career; the relationship between rhetoric and philosophy. The correspondence with Barbaro, in both its language and its attitudes, provides a fascinating insight into Pico’s

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\(^{49}\) Dulles, 15.

\(^{50}\) Campbell, 607.

\(^{51}\) Ibid. More says that Pico ‘was sodenly taken with a feruent axis whiche so fer forth crepte in to the interiore partis of his body yt hit dispysed all medicines & ouercam all remedy and compelled him with in thre daies to satisfie nature and repaye hir the life which he receiued of hir’. (More, 70-1).

\(^{52}\) In Breen, ‘Document: Giovanni Pico’, 393.

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 398.
somewhat paradoxical approach to this issue, and how he integrated it with his new discoveries. In this section I discuss ideas of rhetoric as an art and as artifice, but it should be remembered that while both attitudes were widespread in Quattrocento society, the letters do not represent a simple dialogue between the viewpoints of ‘art’ on one side and ‘artifice’ on the other. Indeed, one of the most puzzling aspects of these letters is that Pico, arguing against rhetoric, does so in a brilliant rhetorical tour de force, while Barbaro’s language in defence of eloquence is quite philosophical in its tone. The paradox may be partly explained by the concern Pico and Barbaro share, and which is fundamental to their exchange, that rhetoric is an innately public and very powerful moral force: a concern that is equally evident in modern society. This section examines their concern with rhetoric in the social sphere.

Barbaro, ten years older than Pico, was a scholar of Greek; credited with reviving the study of Aristotle in Italy. He was also a celebrated philologist, and it was in this capacity that he advised Pico, in a playful, elder-brotherly tone. Barbaro’s first letter, in April 1485, urges Pico to study Greek as well as Latin texts to improve his argumentative technique, as ‘during many centuries there has not stood out a memorable work in good Latin done by anyone who lacked Greek letters.’ This jibe is aimed particularly at the scholastic philosophers Pico had been studying. Pico’s answer defends the scholastics’ ‘dull, rude, uncultured’ language ‘for precisely the reason that in every subject

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55 Barbaro in Breen, 393.
56 Ibid.
concerned with true knowing nothing is more unseemly and detrimental than all that elaborated sort of discourse.'

Barbaro replies with a short note regretting that the letters had been published and promising a counter-argument, which he says pointedly ‘will not be published before you agree and write me to that effect.’ His third letter attacks Pico for defending the scholastics’ austere language with such eloquence. The letters are all written in a friendly, bantering style. The strong sense of community among humanists of the period has been well documented by Renaissance historians; and it appears from reading the letters of Pico and Barbaro that this community of scholars was a strong influence in the forms their debate took as well as on the cultural ideas they developed.

Many classical treatises on how to write an elegant letter had been circulated widely by the 1470s and 80s, and the same applied to textbooks on oratory. Until the mid-fifteenth century, Roman texts on rhetoric dominated, in particular those of Cicero and Quintilian. Aristotle’s Rhetorica had been translated into Latin before the fourteenth century, but ‘was not especially influential.’ After 1465, an explosion of rhetorical treatises appeared in print (thirty-five between 1470 and 1475 alone), beginning with Cicero’s De oratore in 1465 and comprising mostly works by Cicero, Quintilian and

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57 Pico in Breen, 396.
58 Barbaro in Breen, 403.
60 Murphy, ‘Rhetoric in the Fifteenth Century’, 232.
61 Ibid., 228.
Augustine. Later, Greek treatises were printed: a translation of Plato’s *Gorgias* in 1475 and two Latin translations of Aristotle’s *Rhetorica* in 1476 and 1481. It is easy to see why Barbaro urged Pico to study Greek letters as well as the Latin treatises, which had been more commonly used. By the twelfth century, the archetypal letter followed a five-part structure: *salutatio, benevolentiae captatio, narratio, petitio, conclusio*. The formal structure of rhetoric created a sense of community among its practitioners, as can be seen in the 1485 correspondence: Pico and Barbaro used this formal structure, as well as borrowing rhetorical devices from each others’ letters. However, both were concerned about the decline and corruption of rhetoric and its effect on rhetors, and since rhetors influenced society, on society as a whole. One of the main arguments against rhetoric in this period stemmed from philology: that language had become corrupt and decayed. This did not, however, mean that eloquence should be abandoned.

The main conflict in these letters is not between Greek and Latin scholarship but between two attitudes to rhetoric: the perception of it as a creative art per se, or as a political device. Both attitudes are evident in the letters. Barbaro is aware of the social implications of publishing their ‘contention and controversy… concerning the kind of discourse appropriate to philosophers’ He fears ‘we might become the gossip of ignoramuses who would take [the exchange] not as what it is but as… grudge and

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62 Ibid., 231-2.
63 Ibid., 233.
64 Ibid.
65 Barbaro in Breen, 403.
discord\textsuperscript{66}. Accordingly, Barbaro constantly makes light of the disagreement: ‘What a ridiculous thing it is: a barbarous man defends eloquence (making a play on his name) while you, an eloquent man, defend its want.’\textsuperscript{67} To Barbaro, the exercise is creative and pleasurable; it is a competition in arguing well \textit{in utramque partem} (on all sides of an argument), in the Ciceronian tradition popular amongst humanists like Bruni, Alberti and Pontano\textsuperscript{68}.

Pico on the other hand is deeply concerned about the morality of rhetoric in itself. Eloquence, he argues, ‘[distracts] the reader from the very start with a various cadence and harmony, for the very reason that inside [it] is empty and hollow.’\textsuperscript{69} Thus wise audiences come to distrust flowery language: ‘If the hearer is not a fool, what else may he expect from colored language but treachery?’\textsuperscript{70} Therefore, Pico advocates on behalf of the scholastics, ‘We would… attain majesty through rudeness (\textit{horror}) rather than charm through delicateness (\textit{mollitudo})… Let them admire our style’s brevity, pregnant with subject matters many and great.’\textsuperscript{71} He is deeply ambivalent, taking pride in his own brilliance; but as Quirinus Breen remarked\textsuperscript{72}, he is also wary of amoral erudition, which he sees as corrosive of society’s moral and intellectual rigor.

A clue to this ambivalence lies in the fact that Pico, like all fifteenth-century intellectuals, was heavily influenced by Cicero’s attitude to rhetoric, best known in the \textit{De oratore}.

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 402.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{69} Pico in Breen, 397.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 399.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 397.
Cicero held that the ideal orator was both philosopher and rhetorician, using rhetoric to present truth in the public sphere. His ideal was quoted and used by most of the fifteenth-century humanists from Petrarch to Valla, as Jerrold Seigel notes\(^73\). However, Cicero’s attitude was more an influential idea that was approached in different ways and argued about vigorously, than a generally accepted aim.

This atmosphere of debate is reflected in the letters. It is as well to remember here that the threefold aim of classical rhetoric was to move, to entertain and to teach\(^74\). Some humanist scholars, like Barbaro, found scholastic philosophy neither moving nor inspiring, and thus little more than an exercise in self-indulgent pedantry. Others distrusted the fact that rhetoric could just as easily be used to persuade an audience to good or evil ideas. The concern Plato mentions in his Socratic dialogues, that professional orators too often pandered to what their ignorant audience wanted to hear\(^75\), also surfaced in the late fifteenth century\(^76\). In Pico’s letter, this aspect of professional oratory is linked to vanity and immodest posturing.

Both of these attitudes, that rhetoric is an art and that it is synonymous with artifice, are primarily concerned with the ethical aspects of language in the public sphere. The importance of language in the fifteenth century as an instrument of public morals has

\(^{73}\) Cf. Seigel, \textit{Rhetoric and Philosophy from Petrarch to Valla}; Marsh, \textit{The Quattrocento Dialogue}.
been well documented by Renaissance historians\textsuperscript{77}, and Pico’s and Barbaro’s approach to the love of language and to manipulative rhetoric has obvious echoes in modern society. Pico scorns the ‘grammarians and pedagogues’, who prostitute truth for aesthetic beauty and popular acclaim\textsuperscript{78}, and Barbaro calls the barbarian philosophers rude, uncultured and exclusive\textsuperscript{79}. The fundamental preoccupation of both is with the philosopher or orator’s role as a social agent.

The social importance of rhetoric is an issue that seems to have dominated Pico’s and Barbaro’s use of language. Pico’s publication of the first two letters forced Barbaro to write consciously for a wide audience in his reply, thus putting into public practice his aesthetic and philosophical ideals of rhetoric. Renaissance artists and audiences tended to see works primarily as combinations of established components, paying much attention to proportion\textsuperscript{80}. Pico and Barbaro certainly use this concept of proportional harmony in criticizing each others’ approach to rhetoric: Pico rails against the pedants’ over-attention to such trivialities as the number of Niobe’s children\textsuperscript{81}, and Barbaro chides Pico for devoting an entire letter to answering a throwaway comment\textsuperscript{82}. The idea that rhetoric and philosophy have their own proper spheres is an influence of the contemporary dispute between adherents of philosophy and those of rhetoric. However, it appears that Pico and

\textsuperscript{77} For example, Gray, ‘Renaissance Humanism’, passim.
\textsuperscript{78} Pico in Breen, 395-8.
\textsuperscript{79} Barbaro in Breen, 393.
\textsuperscript{80} Clifford Geertz, ‘Art as a Cultural System’, MLN (formerly Modern Language Notes) 91, no. 6 Comparative Literature (December 1976), 1486.
\textsuperscript{81} Pico in Breen, 395.
\textsuperscript{82} Barbaro in Breen, 403. Although Barbaro probably said this for the benefit of the public (his attack was anything but a throwaway comment), the fact that he used the criteria of due proportion to criticise Pico’s argument shows that it was an important one in their circle.
Barbaro were not advocating that either rhetoric or philosophy be entirely abandoned, but that they be reconsidered in the light of their effect on an audience; as social agents.

Studied in this context, the conceptual framework shifts from one of established aesthetic conventions as ‘elaborate mechanisms for defining social relationships, sustaining social rules, and strengthening social values’\(^\text{83}\), to the formation of aesthetic sensibilities. This is helpful in looking at Pico’s writing, because the letters and the *Oration* can be seen as the formation of a new aesthetic ideal, born of Pico’s moral dissatisfaction with current attitudes to rhetoric and philosophy while remaining heavily influenced by them.

1. 3 *The use of rhetoric in the correspondence*

   ‘I could not see why you should spoil that flowing and flowery style of yours, why you should resort to me who has to creep along the ground following a poor and overtenuous thread of discourse.’ Barbaro to Pico\(^\text{84}\).

   ‘there is that style of yours, to which you are devoted even to a fault; it is marvellous how it affects and delights me… Let them admire how in everyday expressions we put the furthest reaches of our ideas… how skilful we are… by mind-bending syllogisms to weaken the false and confirm the true.’ Pico to Barbaro\(^\text{85}\).

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\(^{83}\) Geertz, ‘Art as a Cultural System’, 1486.
\(^{84}\) Breen, 392.
\(^{85}\) Breen, 394, 397.
The previous section outlined the late fifteenth century separation of rhetorical art and artifice, and the importance of reconciling this problem in light of the social function of rhetoric. This section examines the separation of rhetorical art from artifice in Pico’s thought, examining how Pico’s moral ambivalence toward rhetoric in the letters helped form his ideal of a ‘moral rhetoric’ in the later *Oration*.

Certainly Pico’s and Barbaro’s correspondence used the long-established conventions of the epistolary genre, but the correspondents’ skill was such that Pico and Barbaro both used the language of philosophy and of rhetoric in the course of their arguments. Barbaro commented gleefully that Pico seemed to have been unable to defend plain speaking without using extravagant rhetoric. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Pico was not merely defending austere speech, which he could have done in scholastic terms to a limited audience, but trying to advocate a scholastic approach to language for learned men generally. Pico was thus addressing a much wider audience than just Barbaro, and his language accordingly became more incendiary.

This use of different styles of language in the same moral argument is one developed by Pico in the *Oration*, although Barbaro seems to have been much better at it in the letters. The above quotations are a sample of how Pico and Barbaro used rhetoric, and show why historians have been puzzled by it: as earlier remarked, Barbaro’s language in defence of eloquence is sober, while Pico’s argument for sobriety of discourse is indeed ‘flowing and flowery’. A clue to explaining this division of roles can be derived from the

86 Barbaro in Breen, 404.
communal attempt at what Grafton called a ‘moral language’: the humanist link between aesthetics and morals.

Pico’s letter follows the rhetorical format of what the barbarian (scholastic) philosophers might say in their defence if they were as eloquent as the humanists. In this way it manages to attack rhetoric by using rhetorical devices. For example, Pico compares rhetoric to sodomy, associating them both with artifice: ‘A speech with long locks is always wanton.’

This is a rather overblown piece of rhetoric in itself. Pico’s point is that elaborate expression can only conceal truth. This overt use of rhetoric to draw attention to itself anticipates Pico’s use of language in the *Oration*. The argument against rhetoric falters, however, after Pico distinguishes rhetoric as appropriate and clear expression from rhetoric in the pejorative sense of artifice or deception. Perhaps the most important sentence in the letter is one of the concluding ones:

> ‘Well, dear Ermolao, the above is perhaps what those philosophers might present in defense of their barbarism; if they got subtle, their arguments might be a lot better. *I do not fully agree with their opinions, nor do I think their case will set on fire a noble and liberal mind.*’

Pico elaborates: ‘Had I thought the Barbarians right in their neglect of eloquence I should not almost wholly have left off studying them; I should not a short time ago have taken

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87 Pico in Breen, 396. Rebhorn translates the phrase as ‘a long-haired speech is always sodomitical’. The Latin is *cinaedus*, which according to Rebhorn ‘typically refers to the passive partner, usually a youth, in a homosexual relationship.’ (Rebhorn (ed), *Renaissance Debates on Rhetoric*, 58 and n. 3).

88 Pico in Breen, 402.
up Greek letters... While he did have serious moral objections to rhetoric as an artificial device for persuasion, Pico was unable to discount it completely. In other words, Pico was still ambivalent about rhetoric and philosophy and had not yet come to a definite conclusion.

In his reply, Barbaro appropriates Pico’s device of using an invented third person, a scholastic from Padua (where Pico first was attracted by scholastic philosophy) to reject Pico’s defence of a certain kind of language. Barbaro substitutes his own argument in the language of philosophical debate:

‘if all philosophy pertains to the perfection of our mind, and if rhetoric does not so pertain to it, then a syllogism of the second figure would result, which is deceptive; that some philosophy is not philosophy... But if the mind is perfected by eloquence, what ill-will is it to contend that the same person be both a philosopher and eloquent?’

Barbaro’s letters focus on rhetoric as an art form. The aesthetic fitness of language to its subject was just as important to Barbaro as the ethical appropriateness of the subject to the audience was to Pico.

Pico’s letter sets up a dichotomy between philosophy, which sought truth, and rhetoric, which Pico saw as artifice. This led Eugenio Garin to claim that Pico ‘fails to grasp the

89 Ibid.
90 Barbaro in Breen, 407.
deeper values in the humanists’ linguistic positions’. The exaggerated style of the letter might well suggest that Pico held a simplistic view of rhetoric as artifice, but the fact that he was using humanist rhetorical forms and devices to frame his argument in defence of scholastic language suggests much more. At least on a subconscious level, Pico seems to have found the humanist aesthetic as necessary to ethical discussion as scholastic ethics were to humanist oratory. Being apparently unable to dispense with rhetoric completely, Pico needed to construct a ‘moral language’ to satisfy his philosophical ideal.

Barbaro is scornful of Pico’s eloquent defence of barbarism, because it is a contradiction in terms. According to Barbaro, to be so eloquently defended made philosophy appear too weak to stand on its own terms, and Pico’s argument would thus offend the philosophers. Barbaro’s reply aims to prove the misapplication, the inappropriateness, of Pico’s technique; just as Pico’s letter tries to show the inappropriateness of Barbaro’s rhetorical manipulations to philosophy. While Barbaro’s criticisms stem from an aesthetic view of rhetoric, Pico’s are grounded in an ethical concern.

Barbaro’s criticism would be valid if Pico had thought of rhetoric in terms of artifice; to defend clarity with rhetorical sleight of hand would certainly undermine Pico’s argument that philosophy can stand alone. I suspect, however, that Pico’s style in the letter represents his own form of Cicero’s ideal marriage of philosophy and rhetoric. Pico

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92 Barbaro in Breen, 403-5; 412.
93 Ibid., 403-4.
94 Pico in Breen, 396-8.
seems not to have really wanted to separate philosophy and rhetoric, as Quirinus Breen argues\textsuperscript{95}, but to realign them in relation to each other.

Two ideas of fit proportion are competing here: Barbaro represents the view that language should match its subject, and misplaced rhetoric is an offence against the humanist sense of aesthetic proportion: ‘Since he has lots of pepper, he puts some even in the salad.’\textsuperscript{96} Pico insists that rhetoric is all very well in its proper place- the theatre\textsuperscript{97}- but must be tied to the quest for truth in a sphere where the audience is likely to take it seriously. This explains the rhetoric used in the letters: Barbaro endeavours to fit his language to the atmosphere of a humanist debate\textit{ in utramque partem}, and Pico is very firm about his rhetoric being tied to the love of wisdom. The letters, like the later\textit{ Oration}, were written for public consumption. Importantly, Pico was the one to publish the letters. This suggests that Pico wanted to put his ideas and methods into the public sphere, and we should not ignore the aspect of performance in the letters and\textit{ Oration}.

\textsuperscript{95} Breen, ‘Document- Giovanni Pico’, 386.
\textsuperscript{96} Barbaro in Breen, 412.
\textsuperscript{97} Pico in Breen, 397.
Chapter 2. Pico’s *Oration as a moral use of rhetoric*

2.1 *Pico’s theory of knowledge in the Oration*

‘This is that friendship which the Pythagoreans say is above all philosophy. This is that peace which God creates in the heavens, which the angels descending to earth proclaimed to men of good will, that through it men might ascend to heaven and become angels. Let us wish this peace for our friends, for our century.’

*Oration* 98

The *Oration* was written as a public exposition of Pico’s philosophy. As such, it presents an opportunity to observe Pico’s attitude to rhetoric and public speaking in practice. As we saw in the letters, Pico thought rhetoric more fitting to the theatre and to ‘those questions raised in forums’ 99 than to philosophy. In the *Oration*, Pico’s sense of theatre is essential to his philosophy. Man can make of himself what he will, and man’s free will, through moral philosophy, can bring each individual into spiritual harmony with the universe and with God; wherein lies ‘the dignity of man’. Pico’s ideal is a social one and he uses rhetoric to inspire his audience with this ideal of self-directed harmony. Rhetoric and philosophy are thus complementary forms of communication in Pico’s ideal.

The *Oration* is divided into thirty-eight parts, the first twenty of which outline Pico’s ideal, while the last eighteen defend it. Pico begins with an outline of his overarching

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98 *Oration*, 232.
99 Pico in Breen, 396.
philosophy of the dignity of man, a popular theme in humanist literature. Pico’s answer to
the question, ‘what is the essential dignity which sets man apart from other created
beings?’ is based on a Neoplatonist scheme of creation, which sets up a hierarchy of
creatures, with plants at the bottom, then animals, man, celestial bodies, angels, and God
at the top. For Pico, what makes man unique is the potential to either rise higher or sink
lower in this scale of being. In particular, it is man’s potential to rise above angels to
achieve atonement with God- since even angels move in a set harmonic order and man
has the greater dignity of free will. Pico identifies the ultimate goal of philosophy as
atonement with God through man’s free will.

The first section of the Oration outlines how exactly this is to be done, using analogies
and metaphors from different theologies to illustrate the argument. Philosophy and debate
are essential to this process. Moral philosophy and dialectic help us to purge the chaos of
life, natural philosophy illuminates us with love, and theology finally grants peace in
atonement with God. The second part of the Oration defends Pico’s study of philosophy
and his proposed debate of the theses as a way of achieving this metaphysical ideal.
Language also has an essential part in this aim, in two ways. Firstly, the exercise of
dialectic, by its nature, involves argument and oratory- a critical engagement with
rhetoric. Secondly, rhetoric serves as an inspiring veil behind which are hidden the
mysterious harmonies Pico holds up to his audience, as the ultimate aim to which man
should aspire.
The intertwining of different philosophies in the *Oration* can perhaps best be understood by reading it as a cumulative argument. ‘Man is’, begins Pico, ‘the most fortunate of creatures and consequently worthy of all admiration… not only by brutes but even by the stars and by minds beyond this world.’\(^{100}\) This honour was given to man after the creation. When the world was complete and ‘all things had been assigned to the highest, the middle, and the lowest orders’, \(^{101}\) God wished for ‘someone to ponder the plan of so great a work, to love its beauty, and to wonder at its vastness.’\(^{102}\) Accordingly, God told man that

> ‘constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hand we have placed thee… with freedom of choice and with honour, as though the maker and molder of thyself, thou mayst fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer.’\(^{103}\)

‘Beasts’ and ‘spiritual beings’ alike have predestined natures, but ‘if, happy in the lot of no created thing, [man] withdraws into the center of his own unity, his spirit, made one with God, shall surpass them all.’\(^{104}\) Hebrew, Pythagorean, and Islam authorities all refer to good men being transformed into angels or bad men into brutes, for not the outward form but the state of the soul determines what one appears and actually is.\(^{105}\) Mosaic and Chaldean theology refer to man as a manifold and inconstant being- whose role it is, however, to achieve the greatest potential:

\(^{100}\) *Oration*, 223.
\(^{101}\) Ibid., 224.
\(^{102}\) Ibid.
\(^{103}\) Ibid., 225.
\(^{104}\) Ibid.
\(^{105}\) Ibid., 226.
‘we may not, by abusing the most indulgent generosity of the father, make... that freedom of choice He has given us into something harmful instead of salutary. Let a certain holy ambition invade our souls, so that, not content with the mediocre, we shall pant after the highest...’

Pico goes on to state that the ‘sacred mysteries relate’ that seraphim, cherubim, and thrones occupy places nearest to God; and that men, ‘incapable of yielding to them, and intolerant of a lower place, [man] emulate their dignity and their glory.’ He then outlines how this lofty goal is to be attained: each spiritual entity corresponds to a quality which man must develop in himself to the highest degree, in order to rise to their heights. Seraphs correspond to love, cherubs to intelligence, and thrones to judgement. Filling the duties of an active life and taking care of the lower beings endows man with the judgement of thrones; leisured contemplation of ‘the Creator in the creature and the creature in the creator’ gives us the intelligence of cherubs; and ‘[i]f we long with love for the Creator himself alone’, we become like to seraphs, and ‘Whoso is a seraph, that is, a lover, is in God and God in him’.

‘But’, Pico asks, ‘by what means is one able either to judge or to love things unknown?’ The answer lies in interpretation of ‘the ancient fathers’, who saw these things first hand. Accordingly, Pico cites Pseudo-Dionysus’ interpretation of a Pauline text as

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106 Ibid., 227.
107 Ibid.
108 Ibid.
109 Ibid., 228. This idea has been cited as a main theme of Ficino’s work, which also permeates Pico’s later writing. Cf. Garin, Italian Humanism, 99.
110 Oration, 228.
describing cherubs ‘being purified, then being illuminated, and at last being made
perfect.’ This is the process around which Pico bases his philosophy and theology; and
his rhetoric. Moral philosophy and dialectic purify the soul of ignorance, vice and chaos.
Jacob’s ladder serves Pico as a metaphor for the spiritual ascent he is outlining. ‘[T]he
art of discourse or reasoning’ disciplines the mind to stay on this mystical ladder. Then
once this discipline has been attained,

‘inspired by the cherubic spirit [the contemplation of nature]… we shall
sometimes descend, …rendering the unity into many parts, and we shall sometimes
ascend, …collecting the parts… into a unity, until, resting at last in the bosom of
the Father who is above the ladder, we shall be made perfect…”

The purpose of descending the spiritual ladder is that in being plunged into chaos like
Job, we are reminded that while dialectic can calm the inner tumults of the mind and
natural philosophy can ‘allay… the differences of opinion which vex… the spirit from all
sides’, nature, being innately changing, can never bring peace. Theology alone bestows
this peace as an act of grace. The story of the tabernacle, and the ‘mysteries of the
Greeks’ (that is, the Eleusinian mysteries) both refer to this process.

111 Ibid., 229. Pseudo-Dionysus, or Dionysus the Areopagite, was an unknown author whose writings of c.
AD 500 were for a long time attributed to Dionysus the disciple of Paul, and hence acquired considerable
authority. (Elizabeth Livermore Forbes, in Oration, 229 n. 12).
112 Ibid.
113 Ibid., 230.
114 Ibid., 230-1.
115 Ibid., 231.
116 Ibid., 232.
117 Ibid., 232-3.
‘[Men] arrived at a perception only when they had first been purified through… moral philosophy and dialectic. What else can that perception possibly be than an interpretation of occult nature by means of philosophy? Then at length to those who were so disposed came… the observation of things divine by the light of theology.’

This argument perfectly illustrates the twofold role of rhetoric as dialectic and as a veil for ‘things divine’ in Pico’s thought. This is why he defends the study of philosophy and advocates that it be as wide-ranging as possible, and why he defends the debate of so great and varied a number of Conclusiones. Dialectic is necessary as mental gymnastics, to strengthen the mind and spirit\(^{119}\), and omnivorous study is necessary because wisdom is composite and reveals its mysteries in different rhetorical guises, none of which ought to be threatening to the earnest seeker after knowledge.

Dialectic and the contemplation of nature, and most of all the desire for truth, are for Pico essential reasons to study ‘the highest topics of philosophy and unfamiliar branches of knowledge’\(^{120}\), and to debate them in public. Extrapolating from Chaldean astrology, Pico says, ‘If these assemblies, these disputations, were to be given up, then all philosophy would become sluggish and drowsy’\(^{121}\) Men would degenerate into beasts, because of their ‘inconstant nature’. Thus, ‘even the most feeble are by right able and bound… to court [such disputes]’. It is important to study all schools of thought, for ‘it is the part of a narrow mind to confine itself within a single Porch or Academy… there is in each school

\(^{118}\) Ibid., 233.
\(^{119}\) Ibid., 240.
\(^{120}\) Ibid., 239.
\(^{121}\) Ibid., 240.
something distinctive’. In this way Pico urges society as a whole to engage in both kinds of rhetoric, dialectic and exegesis, to fulfil the potential that is their birthright. He then lists the topics of his Conclusiones: ‘a harmony between Plato and Aristotle’\textsuperscript{122}, numerology\textsuperscript{123}, magic\textsuperscript{124}, Cabala\textsuperscript{125}, and the writings of Orpheus and Zoroaster\textsuperscript{126}. The Oration concludes with an invitation to begin the debate ‘not without great delight… as to the sound of a trumpet of war’\textsuperscript{127}.

### 2.2 An analysis of the Oration’s rhetoric and its influences

‘lest we be satisfied with those of our faith, let us consult the patriarch… whose form gleams carved on the throne of glory.’ … ‘And since the middle order expounds to the lower orders the counsel of the highest order, let Empedocles the philosopher expound to us the words of Job the theologian.’ \textit{Oration}\textsuperscript{128}

At the beginning of this thesis, I suggested that the separation of rhetoric as art and as artifice in the fifteenth century left Pico with a moral conflict between the two aspects of language, as well as the desire to construct a moral language. Chapter One outlined the presence of this conflict in Pico’s life and in his correspondence with Barbaro, showing how Pico’s moral ambivalence led him to use rhetoric to draw attention to itself. Pico’s language in the letters challenges his audience, overtly demonstrating the power of

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 245. 
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 246. 
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 246-7. 
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 249-52. 
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 253. 
\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 254. 
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 229-30.
rhetoric to present information in any light. In this section, I want to show how this overt use of rhetoric to provoke dialectic served Pico’s moral ideal in the *Oration*.

In accordance with the role of rhetoric in the spiritual journey of the *Oration*, both in facilitating dialectic and in creating ‘a poetic veil’\(^{129}\) concealing profound and wonderful truths, Pico erects the *Oration* as an inspiring edifice of words, a façade not in the sense of artifice but in the sense of architecture.

In his letter to Ermolao Barbaro, Pico writes that rhetoric

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\text{‘belongs to those questions raised in forums… to those whose business is not in the academy but rather in that commonwealth where things done and things said are weighed in a public scale under the eye of one to whom flowers weigh much more than fruits.’}^{130}
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When composing the *Oration*, Pico evidently thought of himself as an *orator*, whose job was to introduce ‘the sacred stories, written rustically rather than elegantly’\(^{131}\) to an audience of theologians of his own day. The element of performance in the exercise necessitates that it be couched in rhetorical terms, and this did not contradict Pico’s principles of the letter. In the *Oration*, rhetoric and philosophy were intertwined.

Pico’s syncretistic use of ‘mystic’ and ‘Socratic’ language implies syncretism of the philosophers’ and orators’ attitudes to rhetoric. The first part of the oration, where Pico

\(^{129}\) Ibid., 254.
expounds his ideal of the dignity of man and its place in a largely Neoplatonist
metaphysic, is not just enthusiastic or even persuasive, but an exhortation. The emotive
language reflects the Aristotelian view of rhetoric as a way of influencing people to
consider philosophical truths. Contrariwise, when Pico defends the proposed debate of
his theses, enthusiasm is replaced by pre-emptive defensiveness. Much more attention is
paid to rebutting possible objections and alternately attacking and defending the proposal
than in the earlier section. The rhetorical forms resemble those used in scholastic
disputes. This defensiveness sits well with Platonic scepticism about whether fickle
language can be a fit vehicle for philosophical truths. Interestingly, one of the ideas
Pico defended was that Plato and Aristotle were not necessarily at odds. The dichotomy
between Plato and Aristotle on the subject of rhetoric was a common source of conflict
among the humanists, but Pico uses rhetoric in ways typical of both Platonist and
Aristotelian attitudes in the same argument.

Pico also uses the Neoplatonist figure of the ladder of being as a conceptual framework
for the whole *Oration*. Neoplatonist ideas of the period governed the late fifteenth-
century focus on Greek authors, particularly Plato, Plotinus, and Dionysus the
Areopagite, and approached this Greek literature as the *ur*-text of both false Hebrew
and true Christian teachings. When expounding mystical ideas such as these, Pico uses

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130 Pico in Breen, 396.
131 Ibid.
132 Cf. Plato, *Republic* and *Gorgias*. An influential humanist work arguing in support of Plato’s view was
Lorenzo Valla’s *Dialecticae disputationes*, notwithstanding its scholastic-sounding title. Campbell, 690.
133 In this reconciliation of Plato and Aristotle, Pico was probably influenced by Cristoforo Landino.
134 Elizabeth Livermore Forbes, in *Oration*, 229 n. 12; Campbell, ‘Plato in the Renaissance’, in Campbell, 622.
bipartite and tripartite sentences, repetition and strong adjectives to create a sense of soaring proportion:

‘Man is the intermediary between creatures, the intimate of the gods, the king of the lower beings, by the acuteness of his senses, by the discernment of his reason, and by the light of his intelligence the interpreter of nature, the interval between fixed eternity and fleeting time, and (as the Persians say) the bond, nay, rather the marriage song of the world, on David’s testimony but little lower than the angels’.  

The emotive choice of nouns- ‘intimate of the gods’, ‘fixed eternity’, ‘testimony’ - render the idea inspiring. Pico rhetorically emphasises his deliberate preference of emotive language in replacing ‘bond’ with ‘marriage song’. The inspiring tone is further reinforced by the suggestion that we are ‘but little lower than the angels’. Umberto Eco argues that this soaring proportion was an essential part of the medieval and Renaissance notion of beauty. In this sentence, as throughout the first half of the *Oration*, Pico groups his clauses in threes: man occupies three positions, by virtue of three corresponding qualities, which give him three metaphysical functions. The importance of the number three in Pico’s metaphysic is a central tenet of Neoplatonism, and its use in his language, coupled with the repetitive structure of phrases, reinforces the sense of metaphysical proportion in the *Oration’s* aesthetic.

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135 In linguistics, the common ancestor of several languages. The epithet has connotations of being the first and simplest or purest form of something.

136 *Oration*, 223.

In the second part of the *Oration*, the rhetoric shifts from persuasive to argumentative; from proposal to rebuttal. From the beginning of the *Oration*, Pico uses the language of dialectic to support his proposition. His apparent rejection of the conventional ‘wonder of man’—‘Admittedly great though these reasons be, they are not the principal grounds…’—is couched in the language of philosophy. His sentences are also much shorter and he speaks to the audience more directly. The second half of the *Oration*, which was incorporated almost verbatim in the *Apologia*, is written in the first person and addresses the audience in Rome, rather than in the third person and addressing mankind in general.

Paradoxically, when debating in the scholastic tradition Pico exploits humanist rhetorical fashions to present his ideas; using rhetoric not as an emotive device but to throw conflicting ideas into relief. This included parodying the artificial forms of expression he hated, (as he had done in the letter to Barbaro) as well as using standard persuasive devices for the ideas he felt would not be well received, including that of the debate itself:

‘reverend Fathers, I was not unaware that this very disputation of mine would be as grateful and pleasing to you who favour all good sciences, and have been willing to honour it with your most august presence, as it would be offensive and annoying to many others.’

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138 *Oration*, 223.
139 Ibid., 237, 239, 243, 247, 254.
140 Ibid., 239.
When introducing Greek and Jewish mysticism, with which some of the ‘reverend fathers’ may not have been familiar, Pico continues to flatter his audience’s wide knowledge and open minds- ‘Fathers, three Delphic precepts may suggest themselves to your minds…’¹⁴¹, ‘I come now to the things I have elicited from the ancient mysteries of the Hebrews and have cited for the confirmation of the inviolable Catholic faith¹⁴².

The practice of introducing a new course of lectures and/or debates with an oration was a scholastic tradition unusual among the humanists¹⁴³. But perhaps the strongest influence of the scholastics on Pico’s Oration was the idea of debate and comparison of many sources as a method of attaining wisdom¹⁴⁴. Philology, in the sense of a forerunner to structural linguistics¹⁴⁵, was a popular pursuit among Pico’s friends¹⁴⁶, but the attitude of wisdom as a composite of ‘nuggets of truth’, scattered among different sources and attainable by rational man, is one that Pico takes from his study of the scholastics¹⁴⁷.

This attitude appears in the Oration when Pico addresses his audience in defending his proposed debate: he hopes ‘all rational souls… shall come into harmony in the one mind which is above all minds¹⁴⁸. To this end, Pico quotes Moses, who is ‘but little removed

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 234.
¹⁴² Ibid., 249.
¹⁴³ Kristeller, Introduction to Oration, 217.
¹⁴⁴ Campbell sees this as the definitive characteristic of scholasticism. Campbell, 690.
¹⁴⁶ For example, Barbaro and Poliziano. Cf. Garin, Italian Humanism, 70-2.
¹⁴⁷ Dulles contends that Pico’s teacher Nicoletto Vernia ‘professed… that the object of logic was the rational and in no sense the real- a view to which Pico also subscribed.’ (Dulles, 29-30) Although scholastics were divided on this point, it was a common topic of discussion among them, and Dulles’ explanation suggests that Pico was influenced in the matter by his study of the scholastics under Vernia.
¹⁴⁸ Oration, 232.
from the holy and unspeakable wisdom\textsuperscript{149}, but in the end dismisses ‘the grievous misrepresentations of the Hebrews’\textsuperscript{150}, after utilising them ‘for the confirmation of the inviolable Catholic faith’\textsuperscript{151}. The same applied to the Greek sources: the Christian God is ‘the true Apollo’\textsuperscript{152}, and the wine of Bacchus is the ecstasy of atonement with God\textsuperscript{153}. Each piece of traditional wisdom has a place in Pico’s composite theology, and he appeals to the audience’s rational sense when arguing his points: ‘What else can that perception possibly be but…?’ The collection of scholastic ‘nuggets of truth’ is made to create a logical and harmonious whole.

Pico’s presentation of his compilation of ideas is based on a scholastic principle: knowledge not for its own sake but in order to perfect humanity to the point of being ‘on intimate terms’ with God. This is borne out by Pico’s interpretation of the three Delphic precepts: first, to gain a thorough knowledge of the world, second, to know oneself, and finally, to know God. Wide reading and debate were to the scholastics (perhaps more than to the humanists) an essential part of this process, and Pico utilizes rhetoric to promote the study of scholasticism as well as to practice it.

Pico’s recent introduction to Cabala in the year preceding the writing of the \textit{Oration} is likewise evident in both the \textit{Oration’s} attitudes and rhetorical figures. One of Pico’s ‘nuggets of truth’ is the Cabalist story of the seventy occult books of scripture, which

\footnotesize
\begin{tabular}{ll}
\textsuperscript{149} & Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{150} & Ibid., 249. \\
\textsuperscript{151} & Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{152} & Ibid., 234. \\
\textsuperscript{153} & Ibid. \\
\end{tabular}
Pico refers to when expounding his ideal of the dignity of man\textsuperscript{154}. The idea of divine wisdom cloaked in rhetoric, using obscure analogies to prevent it being understood by those not morally worthy to know, obviously appealed to Pico. It was the habit of Orpheus, for example, to ‘protect the mysteries of his dogmas with the coverings of fables, and conceal them beneath a poetic veil\textsuperscript{155}; and Pico, following Orpheus and the ‘ancient theologians’, constantly argues from analogy.

Man’s spiritual journey is illustrated in the creation\textsuperscript{156}, the Greek festivals\textsuperscript{157}, Pythagorean\textsuperscript{158} and Zoroastrian\textsuperscript{159} doctrines regarding right living, Jacob’s ladder\textsuperscript{160}, the tabernacle of the Pentateuch\textsuperscript{161}, and the Gospel doctrine of the church as bride of Christ, in which Pico substitutes the soul for the church\textsuperscript{162}. While such imagery of ‘the secrets of the universe’ is appealing to Pico and, he imagines, to his audience, he evidently does not subscribe to the idea that they should remain hidden. This attitude is more scholastic\textsuperscript{163} than Cabalist and Neoplatonist. Scholastics, as well as Cabalists and Neoplatonists, see divine knowledge as a goal, but whereas scholasticism uses logic to try to understand the physical and metaphysical universe, Cabalism and Neoplatonism both try to achieve atonement with God emotionally, holding that only the spiritually pure are worthy to comprehend these mysteries. Hence the need for rhetoric and symbolism.

\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., 251-3.
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., 254.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 224-5.
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 233-4.
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., 235.
\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 236.
\textsuperscript{160} Ibid., 229-30.
\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., 232-3.
\textsuperscript{162} Ibid., 232.
Pico’s syncretism of different doctrines has been well documented: his assertion that his ideal is supported by *many* apparently diverse sources implies that it is supported by *all* branches of knowledge. Pico uses grandiloquent oratory and sober philosophical discourse to make the same points, which suggests to his audience that rhetoric and philosophical dialectic, rather than being opposite ways of thinking, are in fact complementary. Thus, rhetoric plays an integral part in Pico’s philosophy. Whether rhetorical and philosophical attitudes could legitimately be seen as complementary is discussed in the next chapter.
Chapter 3. The relevance of the *Oration* to the study of Renaissance humanism

3.1 Scholastic and humanist oratory

‘this crime, if it is a crime, is shared with me not only by all of you, excellent
doctors, who have rather frequently engaged in this office not without the highest
praise and glory, but also… by the most worthy philosophers of every age.’

*Oration*\(^{164}\)

Jerrold Seigel’s survey of the conflict of ‘scholastic’ logical dispute and ‘humanist’
philology and antiquarianism in the late fifteenth century suggests that ‘humanism’ did
not replace ‘scholastic’ philosophy entirely\(^ {165}\), and Paul Oskar Kristeller supports this
view\(^ {166}\), although both differentiate between humanist and scholastic ways of thinking.
Thus history portrays humanism and scholasticism as two separate schools of thought
existing awkwardly together and often bitterly opposed, particularly on the subject of
rhetoric. However, the conflict appears to be one of methods, rather than of aims. In this
chapter I want to examine humanist and scholastic attitudes to oratory and the function of
aesthetics in society, and I find them more similar than they have sometimes been made
out to be.

\(^{164}\) *Oration*, 240.
\(^{166}\) Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic, and Humanistic Strains* (New York: Harper and Brothers), 99-101.Kristeller’s argument here is that humanism was did not really have an active role in
Kristeller describes scholastic orations as usually introducing a debate on philosophical matters. While this tradition goes back to Plato’s *Gorgias*, Kristeller relates it to practices in the medieval universities. These orations would often begin by outlining a general philosophical theme, go on to specify the particular topics to be debated, and end by justifying the proposed debate.\(^{167}\) Maurice de Wulf in his survey of scholastic philosophy suggests a sense of aesthetic composition in the scholastics’ arrangement of ideas and of language: although scholastics’ opinions differed,

‘Scholasticism… [was] the issue of a specific eclecticism. Its borrowed materials are arranged in a new setting and incorporated into an independent and original structure.’\(^{168}\)

In this structure, language was of great importance in teaching students how to understand truth. One written example, which we can take as similar to the university orations\(^{169}\), is the preface to Peter Abelard’s *Sic et Non*, a textbook consisting of contradictory quotes from the Bible and church fathers. The preface states that it was compiled

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\(^{167}\) Kristeller, *Introduction to Oration*, 217.

\(^{168}\) De Wulf, Maurice, trans. P. Coffey. *Introduction to Scholastic Philosophy* (New York: Dover, 1956), 78.

‘[i]n order that the way be not blocked and posterity deprived of the healthy labor of treating and debating difficult questions of language and style… This questioning excites young readers to the maximum of effort in inquiring into the truth, and such inquiry… is the first key to wisdom’\textsuperscript{170}.

These debates predate the humanist debates with the same aim, which I shall discuss later.

Abelard assembled a collection of differing premisses to create a unified conclusion- ‘the truth’. This aesthetic, noticeably similar to Pico’s ‘nuggets of truth’ doctrine, was common to the scholastic methods of teaching commentaries on texts (and often critical commentaries\textsuperscript{171}), systematic treatises such as the \textit{Sic et Non} and \textit{Questiones Quodlibetales}. Moreover, it was taught orally- as indeed was every discipline\textsuperscript{172}.

Scholastic expositions and debates on theological and philosophical matters necessitated a language ‘sober, lucid and pure in form… If its formulas are complex, they possess in turn the advantage of precision and richness.’\textsuperscript{173} This style grew directly out of the subject matter. Its precise syllogisms and debates over philology and semantics, Abelard’s ‘difficult questions of language and style’, show the scholastic ideals of proportion and harmony in word and thought which David Luscombe in 1971, anticipating Grafton thirty years later, calls ‘a carefully formulated moral language’\textsuperscript{174}.

\textsuperscript{170} Abelard, preface to \textit{Sic et Non} (‘Yes and No’) in Brian Tierney (ed.) \textit{The Middle Ages}, 174.
\textsuperscript{171} De Wulf, \textit{Introduction to Scholastic Philosophy}, 24.
\textsuperscript{172} Ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{173} Ibid., 23.
It is easy to see in these debates the danger of vainglorious erudition, as Pico remarked at the end of his *Oration*, the most consistently ‘scholastic’ section. Like many humanists, Pico was aware of the scholastics’ reputation for inelegantly expressed, irrelevant point-scoring\(^{175}\) - as evinced in his correspondence with Barbaro. As previously mentioned, the innate elements of dialogue and performance, and their role in scholastic *disputatio*, also occurred in the humanist dialogues of two and three centuries after twelfth-century scholasticism.

David Marsh observes the social and thus political function of rhetoric in the fifteenth century in *The Quattrocento Dialogue*. The chancellor of Florence in the late fourteenth century, Coluccio Salutati, appears at the beginning of Leonardo Bruni’s *Dialogus 1*, composed in 1401, as a mouthpiece for Bruni to outline his support of the humanist debate. Salutati, speaking for Bruni, contends that skill in debating was one of the hallmarks of the civilised man\(^{176}\). Thus Bruni anticipates Ermolao Barbaro’s attitude in his letter to Pico. This moral importance of rhetoric was one that pervaded fifteenth century humanism, although lively debates existed as to the most moral way of using rhetoric\(^{177}\).

Angelo Poliziano (1454-94) Cristoforo Landino (1424-1504) and Ficino (1433-99) all considered rhetoric essential to the development of the good citizen. Poliziano, a great

\(^{175}\) Seigel portrays this well in his article ‘The Teachings of Argyropoulos and the Rhetoric of the First Humanists’. Many medieval historians, of course, disagree with the contemporary view - for example Maurice De Wulf, Etienne Gilson and R. W. Southern- but it appears from sources such as Bruni, Barbaro and Lorenzo Valla’s *Dialecticae disputationes* that the scholastics certainly were considered crude, at least by some Quattrocento humanists.

friend of Pico’s and Barbaro’s, found that ‘There is nothing more fertile and useful than to persuade one’s fellow-citizens by means of words… [to] perform actions advantageous to the state and refrain from those that are damaging.’ Poliziano was also interested in developing ‘a grammar of thought’: not the dialectic that Pico praises in the Oration, but a means of understanding how thoughts are expressed in language. For Landino, Cicero’s rhetoric was of most use when it embodied ideas and made them immortal, valid to every human being. Reams have been written about Ficino’s treatises intertwining love and beauty, that is, aesthetic beauty and Platonic or philosophical love. I have mentioned Anthony Grafton’s contention that the humanists linked aesthetics with morals, and particularly in the realm of oratory. Pico’s Oration, with its ambitious moral ideal and use of aesthetically pleasing rhetoric to achieve this ideal, can be seen to arise from the attitudes of his contemporaries Landino, Ficino and Poliziano; in its aim if not in its form.

Leonardo Bruni, Lorenzo Valla, Poggio Bracciolini and Girolamo Pontano, along with Pico’s circle at Florence, all published dialogues as an art form. The dialogues usually discussed the merits and demerits of two or three opposite views on some ethical question. Paul Oskar Kristeller comments that humanists discussed philosophical

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179 Ibid., 70.  
180 Ibid., 85.  
questions in terms of the science of rhetoric\textsuperscript{183}, just as it could be said that the scholastics had discussed semantic questions in terms of philosophy\textsuperscript{184}. However, scholastics as well as humanists applied the same ethical and aesthetic aims to both rhetoric and philosophy. Whether it was used primarily in arguing logically ‘to persuade one’s fellow-citizens directly’ or as an art form, rhetoric, for scholastic and humanist thinkers, is a necessary element of man’s aspiration to atonement with God. In all these cases, aesthetics, particularly of language, are a moral force. Thus the humanists, however varied may have been their views on the use of rhetoric, tended to link the aesthetics of rhetoric with moral philosophy. This link applied to rhetoric in art as well as in politics.

Umberto Eco outlines the medieval aesthetic as one of ‘moral harmony or metaphysical splendor’\textsuperscript{185} (Eco’s italics), contingent on integrity or perfection, proportion, and clarity or brightness\textsuperscript{186}. Eco is discussing the aesthetic aspects of Thomas Aquinas’ philosophy, but Pico’s theory in the \textit{Oration} has the same aesthetic aims. His syncretism is all-inclusive, proportionate (rhetorical and philosophical language all have their assigned place in the \textit{Oration}, as do the various philosophies Pico takes his analogies from), and is clear and bright in the audience’s mind, largely because of the elevated rhetoric. In the \textit{Oration}, Pico seems to weave a ‘humanist’ idea of the dignity of man into a ‘medieval’ aesthetic.

\textsuperscript{183} Kristeller, ‘Humanism and Scholasticism’, 101.
\textsuperscript{184} Cf. Garin, \textit{Italian Humanism}, 15-7, 163.
\textsuperscript{186} Ibid., 65.
Pico’s philosophy as outlined in the *Oration* was that we should make the most of our free will and spiritual potential. This was no subject for a dry homily and Pico wanted his audience to debate his nine hundred theses, not his metaphysical scheme: thus his primary aim was to inspire them. Pico’s use of many different sources to support the same statement is aimed at creating a sense of wholeness (not to say inclusiveness)\(^{187}\) and harmony\(^{188}\); another essential aspect of beauty\(^{189}\). Pico seems to be aware that this grand architecture of language can easily create the impression of mere abstract idealism\(^{190}\). He therefore tempers his more florid expositions with sober philosophical language. This serves Pico’s philosophical aim as well as his rhetorical one: the aesthetic effect of different kinds of language creates the impression of a composite and unified destiny, in which Pico believes. Secondly, it is attractive to his audience.

Seigel’s view of a split between rhetoric and philosophy in fifteenth-century opinion should not be entirely discounted, but there is a danger of extrapolating a similar split to that between ‘scholastic’ and ‘humanist’ aesthetics. Such a dichotomy is not analogous to the rhetoric versus philosophy debate, and is far less clear-cut: the aesthetic ideals of scholastic and humanist oratory appear to have been in fact quite similar to each other, particularly in their optimism about the value of speech to elevate an audience morally. Only the approaches and methods used to achieve it are different.

\(^{187}\) Ibid., 31.
\(^{188}\) *Oration*, 244.
\(^{189}\) Eco, 85-7.
\(^{190}\) *Oration*, 223, 227, 228, 237.
3.2 Pico’s Oration and Renaissance humanism

‘But indeed not only the Mosaic and Christian mysteries but also the theology of the ancients show us the benefits and value of the liberal arts.’ Oration¹⁹¹.

Pico’s use of both scholastic and rhetorical forms of argument in the Oration presents an interesting negotiation of the state of intellectual flux in which fifteenth-century rhetoricians worked. Historians have posited several different relationships between rhetoric and philosophy at this time; and as shown in the writings of Pico’s contemporaries, common conceptions of how rhetoric and philosophy should be used were anything but fixed. Grafton’s portrayal of the ideal ‘moral language’ does seem, however, to be borne out: although intellectual society may not have agreed on what made language moral, the ‘grammarians and pedagogues’ and ‘barbaric philosophers’ alike shared this social aim.

Paul Oskar Kristeller contended that as scholasticism was concerned with philosophical and scientific questions and ‘[t]he humanist movement… arose in that of grammatical and rhetorical studies’, humanism should not be thought of as replacing scholasticism or even competing with it, except as a rival faculty in the universities. Thus ‘the Italian humanists on the whole were neither good nor bad philosophers, but no philosophers at all.’¹⁹² That is to say, that philosophy was not the focus of most of their work because they had no new ideas to offer; as their expertise and enthusiasm was in rhetoric, they

¹⁹¹ Oration, 233.
saw philosophy in terms of the aims of rhetoric: to excite people’s emotions as well as minds, about ideas that were useful to society. The scholastic philosophy that immediately preceded humanism was often found wanting in these respects—many humanists criticized it as irrelevant and uninspiring. Pico’s letter to Barbaro is a defence of scholastic philosophy against these criticisms. Hence Kristeller’s suggestion that by and large, the humanists, including Pico, seem to have seen philosophy through a rhetorical frame of reference.

Jerrold Seigel’s survey generally agrees with Kristeller\(^{193}\), his mentor\(^{194}\). In Seigel’s view, although humanist philology did not replace scholastic philosophy, there was a shift in thinking during the Trecento and the first half of the Quattrocento. From allying eloquence and wisdom after the ideal of Cicero, many humanists came to hold rhetoric subordinate to philosophy. Lorenzo Valla expressed this most strongly in the \textit{Dialecticae Disputationes}, but Seigel sees Pico too as sharing Valla’s attitude, quoting the letter to Barbaro\(^{195}\). The problem with Cicero’s ideal, according to Seigel, was a moral one\(^{196}\)—either one didn’t apply philosophical rigor to social morals, or one lost touch with one’s audience. However, the popularity of such preachers as San Bernardino suggested that scholastic ideas and in particular, scholastic morality, were not considered irrelevant by the audiences themselves\(^{197}\).

\(^{192}\) Kristeller, ‘Humanism and Scholasticism’, 561.
\(^{194}\) Ibid., ix.
\(^{195}\) Ibid., 258.
\(^{196}\) Ibid., 251.
\(^{197}\) Ibid., 244-5.
Garin argues that ‘The humanists disliked that… philosophy which deals with every problem under the sun… which organizes and delimits every possibility within the pattern of a pre-established order.’ In fact ‘the humanists wanted to destroy… the grand ‘cathedrals of ideas’, the great logico-theological systematisations’¹⁹⁸, and in Garin’s view they succeeded in replacing the ‘cathedrals of ideas’ with a broader view of life based on philology rather than axioms. Garin sees the humanists’ rhetorical frame of reference as a legitimate philosophy in itself:

‘This philology is an altogether new method of looking at problems, and is therefore not, as some [for example Kristeller] have believed, to be considered side by side with traditional philosophy… It was essentially an effective philosophical method.’¹⁹⁹

Pico’s *Oration* suggests two further metaphors from the building world: if the scholastics erected ‘cathedrals of ideas’ ‘mortared’ with philosophy, the humanists used philology to uncover the ruins of these ‘cathedrals’, and to re-evaluate their authenticity. Rhetoric served to construct these ‘cathedrals’ anew for a Renaissance audience, providing them with glorious facades hinting at the deep and powerful concepts within.

At the time of writing the *Oration*, Pico was in the process of deciding to abandon rhetoric in favour of a philosophical approach to language in the scholastic tradition; striving for clarity in expression as well as in perception by the process of debate. In this context, rhetoric became a tool for clear communication of ideas as well as a way of

jarring his audience into thinking differently about the ideas they were presented with.

The presence of both philosophical and rhetorical language in the *Oration* suggests that Pico equated the philosophers’ truth with the rhetors’ ideal. ‘The value of the liberal arts’, according to Pico, is in that they enable us to ‘bathe in moral philosophy as if in a living river’. Moral and natural philosophy and dialectic such as the scholastics practised allow us to think cohesively:

> ‘if through moral philosophy the forces of our passions have by a fitting agreement become so intent on harmony that they can sing together in undisturbed concord, and if through dialectic our reason has moved progressively in a rhythmical measure, then we shall… drink the heavenly harmony with our inmost hearing.’

Philology, that is the analysis of language in a wide range of literature, is essential to interpreting the hidden truth of ancient metaphors and figures:

> ‘If anyone investigates the holy names of Apollo, their meanings and hidden mysteries, these amply show that that god is no less a philosopher than a seer; but, since Ammonius has sufficiently examined this subject, there is no reason why I should now treat it otherwise.’

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199 Ibid., 4.
200 *Oration*, 230.
201 Ibid., 234.
202 Ibid.
It appears that for Pico philology is a subset of philosophy, and oratory a means of bringing ‘the forces of our passions’ into that harmony which is both the rhetor’s and the philosopher’s ideal.

In Pico’s thought, philosophy, or more specifically the spiritual benefits it brought, was subordinate to theology and its spiritual benefits, ‘since the middle order expounds to the lower orders the counsel of the highest order’\textsuperscript{203}. This concept is a useful rhetorical form, since it allows Pico to set out ideas in a clear relation to each other and creates an optimistic, upward-looking mood. It also means that many diverse sources could be utilised, since Pico thought of all ‘true’ philosophies as leading to the same ultimate goal. However, his opinion was not shared by many of the ‘excellent doctors’ Pico was addressing, and he is constantly on the defensive about this point.

Pico does seem to have thought about rhetoric in terms of artifice; but in the \textit{Oration} he used its techniques to demonstrate a philosophical argument- not the austere statements of fact and premise he thought appropriate to philosophy in the letter to Barbaro, but illustrations of them to an audience. Pico was evidently worried about losing touch with his audience by imposing his ideal morality on to theirs, as evinced by Pico’s juxtapositions of high-flown and sober language, inspiration and interpretation. By expressing his ‘philosophical justification of this Humanist procedure’, as Kristeller calls it\textsuperscript{204}, in rhetorical terms, Pico addresses the moral dilemma that faced Cicero. Rhetoric

\textsuperscript{203} Ibid., 230.
\textsuperscript{204} Kristeller, Introduction to \textit{Oration}, 222.
and philology are thus morally elevating forces *in society*, and as such are integral to Pico’s philosophical ideal.
Conclusions: *Pico’s Oration and recent concepts of rhetoric*

‘this deadly and monstrous conviction has come to pervade the minds of well-nigh all- that philosophy either must be studied not at all or by few persons, as if it were absolutely nothing to have… before our eyes and before our hands, … the ways of nature, the plan of the universe, the purposes of God, and the mysteries of heaven and earth; unless one may… make money…’ *Oration*²⁰⁵

In Pico’s syncretist mind, different methods suggest an ultimate harmony, not a competition. What is perhaps surprising is that this syncretism, itself a product of the humanist atmosphere in the Florentine Academy, should not have suggested the same harmony to Pico’s contemporaries. There are two possible answers to this observation. One is that harmony between philosophy and rhetoric did suggest itself to some humanists, such as Landino. The other is that influential polemics like Valla’s, and the natural competition between disciplines in the universities, meant that rhetoric and philosophy were generally perceived as having different aims: respectively, to please an audience and to discover a truth which was above fickle human opinion. This idea of rhetoric and philosophy persists to this day in both the historiography of humanism and in general society.

Pico had come a certain distance from the pejorative view of rhetoric that appears in his letters to Barbaro, which seem to advocate the divorce of eloquence from wisdom²⁰⁶. His

²⁰⁵ *Oration*, 237-8.
²⁰⁶ Pico in Breen, 395.
use of eloquence to inspire *philosophia*, the love of wisdom, and provoke philological and dialectic discussion, fits into both the Ciceronian social context of rhetoric and the Neoplatonist metaphysic of ascending from the active earthly life, which in the *Oration* comprises natural and moral philosophy, to the contemplative life; the state of love and wisdom.

It appears that Pico did subscribe to the contemporary idea that philosophy and rhetoric had appropriate uses. Seigel, Garin and Kristeller have examined this idea in different ways, asserting different dynamics between rhetoricians and philosophers in the fifteenth century. While it is obviously helpful to study texts such as Pico’s letters and *Oration* in the context of their historical setting, these works show a unique combination of influences that suggest they be studied in the context of their intellectual, rather than just chronological, precedents.

What is outstanding about the *Oration* is not that the ideas which form its major concerns are taken from a range of sources, but that the sources are obviously conflicting with each other in Pico’s thought, and his attempt to resolve the conflicts is what makes the *Oration* individual. Like the *Oration’s* components - scholastic forms of argument, Neoplatonist metaphysics and Cabalist metaphors- the components of Pico’s method- his link between aesthetics and morals, his separation of philosophy from rhetoric, and his concern with language in society- were already circulating among his contemporaries. Pico’s contribution lies in his use of these components.
The juxtaposition of different kinds of language in the *Oration* presents Pico’s audience with their own aesthetic reactions to language as part of the dynamic between philosophy and rhetoric, and the fifteenth century negotiations of that dynamic. Pico demonstrates that both philosophy and rhetoric are necessary to ‘teach, entertain and to move’. The letter to Barbaro functions in the same way in a private sphere, and publishing the exchange suggests that Pico was already thinking of applying his use of rhetoric in the public domain.

As mentioned in the introduction, Pico’s letters and *Oration* are interesting both historically and philosophically. They provide an antecedent to the postmodern separation of rhetoric as an art from rhetoric as politically motivated deceit, and simultaneously provide a way of seeing art and artifice as equally necessary elements of the human search for inspiration and enlightenment. Pico’s struggle for ‘a moral language’ is not simply an attempt to make language moral which was doomed to failure, but a clever use of the semiotics of rhetoric to bring the aesthetic sensibilities of the humanists into a philosophical debate about language and morals in society; a debate that underlies much technical and popular discussion today.

This aspect of language is one that creates a separation of art from politics in our society as much as in Pico’s. In the realm of art, rhetoric is seen as morally as well as aesthetically inspiring. In politics, rhetoric is perceived as ‘spin’, a way of disguising the truth from one’s audience. Modern writers from Norman Mailer\(^\text{207}\) to Don Watson\(^\text{208}\)

have argued for the application of ‘inspiring’ rather than ‘deceitful’ rhetoric to politics, but the perceived dichotomy between rhetoric as art and as artifice remains as strong as it was in Pico’s day. The moral problem of rhetoric, stemming from the perception of rhetoric and philosophy as separate and often mutually exclusive pursuits, can be seen in Cicero, among the fifteenth century humanists, and in our own society. Pico’s moral use of rhetoric rests on the concept of rhetoric and philosophy as two necessary elements of the composite pursuit of wisdom.

This juxtaposition of ostensibly opposed ideas and styles has potential applications in education and professional writing. Were rhetoric used to present opposing points as such, rather than to persuade us to agree with one or another point, audiences may grow more discerning and those presenting information may feel less pressure to force an opinion; often counterintuitive. The ‘History Wars’ dispute, which followed Keith Windschuttle’s 2003 book *The Killing of History*, is one recent example of the modern concept, and hence use, of rhetoric as a pejorative device, employed ‘for the purpose of quarrelling and scolding’ or else as a deceptive artifice to put a certain ‘spin’ on the point at issue. Pico’s *Oration* shows that rhetoric in dialectic or mental gymnastics, and rhetoric as a façade for the ‘cathedral of ideas’ erected to inspire such dialectic, can work in harmony.

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209 *Oration*, 239.
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