

Co-existence of Classical and Christian Ideas in Giannozzo Manetti's Discourse on the Nature and Dignity of Man

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Abstract

Inspired by W. B. Yeats's concept of interpenetrating gyres, this paper seeks to challenge the commonplace view that the Renaissance marked a complete intellectual severance with the Middle Ages. It examines the continuity of thought between the two epochs through an examination of the work of Florentine humanist philosopher Giannozzo Manetti (1396–1459) on the nature and dignity of humankind. It showcases how Manetti's scholarship represents a true synthesis of pagan and Christian values. In so doing, the paper addresses a significant gap in scholarship wherein Manetti's work has often been ignored despite the fact that his influence can be traced on the works of scholars from varied intellectual tradition including Neoplatonists such as Marsilio Ficino and Pico Della Mirandola, and Aristotelian philosophers, like Pietro Pomponazzi.

Keywords: Giannozzo Manetti, Renaissance, Humanism, Chain of Being, Dignity of Man, Marsilio Ficino, Pico Della Mirandola

Twentieth-century Irish Modernist writer, W. B. Yeats (1865-1939) in his philosophical work, *A Vision* (1925), uses the metaphor of two interpenetrating cones to present his view of history. Yeats envisions the rise of a civilization or era by the outward movement of one gyre. As the one gyre expands outwards, other contracts signifying the waning influence of another civilization or historical era. While Yeats foregrounds the spiralling nature of history which is marked by breakdown of one order and the emergence of a newer, albeit chaotic one, I am fascinated by the juncture wherein two different eras or, rather, two different philosophical worldviews, merge, one such juncture being that between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in European philosophical thought. While it is commonplace to project the Renaissance as ushering in an era of new thought and spirit characterized by complete severance from the Middle Ages, one cannot deny the continuity of thought between the two. This continuity of thought is amply evident in the writing of Florentine humanist philosopher Giannozzo Manetti (1396–1459). Manetti has, until recently, been largely overlooked in most courses and discussions on the Renaissance. The fact that there is a dearth of scholarly material available regarding Manetti's life and contributions can be gauged from Craig Kallendorf's entry in *Oxford Bibliographies* (2017): "Much work remains to be done on Manetti: many of his writings are unedited, there is no full-length modern intellectual biography, and many areas of his scholarship remain largely unexplored with not much available in English." Underscoring this gap in scholarship, Steven Teasdale also writes that Manetti's corpus is "large, varied, and still understudied" (234). Interestingly, two years after Kallendorf's article, David Marsh published *Giannozzo Manetti: The Life of a Florentine Humanist* (2019) which is probably the only full-length "intellectual biography" on the subject (Teasdale 234). This paper examines the confluence between the Middle

Ages, which is characterized by Christian ideology, and the Renaissance, which is marked by resurgence of Classical ideals, in Manetti's writing.

Peeking into Giannozzo Manetti's Diverse Intellectual Influences

David Marsh's book establishes Manetti as a polymath who was not only a philosopher, orator, translator and writer, but also a successful merchant, politician, and an adroit diplomat. Manetti was well versed in both Classical and Christian worldviews. He knew Greek and classical Latin. In addition, he also learnt Hebrew so that he could read the Hebrew Bible and the commentaries of rabbis in the original language. He translated the *New Testament* and the *Hebrew Psalms*. His fascination for the Classical works is palpable for he translated three works of Aristotle namely, *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Eudemian Ethics* and *Magna Moralia*. In addition to Classical languages and culture, Manetti understood the significance of vernacular tongues and literature. Thus, he engaged with the works of Italian writers such as Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio. In doing so, Manetti was expanding the idea of Humanism to include not just the Classical but also the vernacular (Teasdale 235). He also translated many of his own orations from Latin into Italian. Manetti's work counters a prominent misconception that humanists were averse to vernacular languages and intellectuals (Lines 1204). The fact that Manetti was a polyglot enabled him to grasp diverse intellectual and cultural influences thereby preparing the ground that informed the hybridity of his thought. Thus, Manetti's engagement with the Bible and other Christian theologian-philosophers such as St. Augustine, along with Classical thinkers strengthened his conception of humanism which was shaped by both these worldviews. Manetti authored his discourse *On the Dignity and Excellence of Man in Four Books* in 1452. This paper also explores the grounds on which Manetti establishes the dignity and excellence of human beings. Underscoring the significance of Manetti's ideas, the paper also demonstrates how later Neo-Platonists, such as Marsilio Ficino and Pico Della Mirandola, and Aristotelian philosophers, like Pietro Pomponazzi, seem to build upon Manetti's works.

Tracing Continuities and Shifts from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance

Following on the heels of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance is marked by the birth of the philosophy of Humanism which emphasizes the human potential for individual achievement and stresses the idea that man is a rational being capable of making his own destiny by exercising freedom of action. Paul Oskar Kristeller emphasizes that the age of Renaissance must to a large extent be regarded as "a direct continuation of the Middle Ages" (*Renaissance Thought* 38). One reason for this could be as many of the issues such as the condition of Man, of soul, and Man's relationship with God that were foregrounded during the Renaissance were also raised earlier during the Middle Ages. However, one notices a subtle shift in the orientation when scholars engage with the same subjects during the Renaissance: Man's attitude towards himself and the world changes. Jacob Burkhardt argues that the Renaissance, as a historical event, marks a transition from medieval times, during which the focus of all life had been religion, to modern times, in which that focus expanded to include learning, rationality, and realism. Humanists were primarily concerned with the development of a cultural and educational ideal, namely, 'Studia Humanitatis' which was based on the study and imitation of classical texts and of disciplines like rhetoric, history, poetry and moral philosophy. Kristeller explores the link between 'Studia Humanitatis' and the emerging discourse on man. He says that Humanists justified the significance of their Classical studies by claiming that "these studies contribute to the formation of a desirable

human being and hence are of vital concern for man as man” (97). While in the Middle Ages, religious salvation had occupied the position of utmost importance, during the Renaissance, philosophy of Humanism stressed the need for individuals to reach their full potential in this world. This rose up to accompany and rival the goal of salvation that was championed earlier. The Middle Ages perceived humans predominantly as a sinner and looked at life on Earth as a preparation for life in the other world. As opposed to this, the Renaissance is marked by a self-reflexive and introspective turn which propelled man to consciously meditate upon himself. This led to a new evaluation of human life, of their place in the universe and a celebration of human life on Earth as he was now seen as a source of infinite possibilities. These concerns were raised in a new discourse that deals with the ‘Dignity of Man.’

Understanding the Context of Manetti’s Work on Human Dignity

On Alfonso of Aragon’s (King of Naples) behest Manetti wrote *On the Dignity and Excellence of Man* in 1452 (Marsh 86). It is pertinent to note that Manetti did not pen his ideas in a vacuum. He was both drawing from and responding to several intellectuals who were writing on the subject of human condition from a variety of perspectives. Highlighting the Renaissance’s diversity, Professor Shirshendu Chakraborty, in his lectures on the Renaissance, described the Renaissance as an age of “inclusive contradictoriness.” While Manetti’s work extolls human beings, it is important to point out that not all Renaissance thinkers emphasized the dignity of human beings but there were many others like Poggio Braccioloni, John Calvin and Martin Luther who insisted on the depravity, sinfulness and miseries of Mankind. For instance, scholars like Luther argued that human nature was wholly corrupted by original sin that makes humans incapable of making any contribution to achieve salvation. He stresses Man’s complete dependence on Christ to attain redemption. It could be argued that Manetti was writing in opposition to other intellectuals such as Lotario dei Conti di Segni, later known as Pope Innocent III. He voiced the Church’s overt disgust with the human body and human behaviour in his *On the Misery of the Human Condition* (c. 1200). He believed that man was “conceived in guilt” and he is “weak, egocentric and sinful” (qtd. in Perry 8). He derided the propensity of humans to develop sins like pride and greed. It is believed that the Pope aimed to write another tract on the dignity of Man to complement the one on Man’s misery but it seems that he did not author any such text eventually. Much before Manetti, it was Italian poet Francesco Petrarch (1304-74), known primarily for his sonnet sequence, who countered Segni’s arguments in his work, *On the Remedies for Good and Bad Fortune* (c. 1360). Instead of thinking of misery as a fixed human condition, Petrarch views it as a mental state and thus something which could be subjected to human will and agency. Secondly, he engaged with St. Augustine’s work at length. Like most Christian thinkers, Petrarch foregrounds life after death and eternal happiness that humans can enjoy in their afterlife. It is then safe to argue that Petrarch attempts to weave in two diverse strains of intellectual thoughts and becomes, what John Humphreys Whitfield calls, “a stubborn advocate of the continuity between Classical culture and the Christian message.” Three years before Manetti it was Bartolomeo Facio (c.1400-57) who wrote *On the Excellence and Pre-eminence of Man* as a counterstatement to Pope Innocent’s text. Marsh contends that Facio was also building on the works of scholars such as Cicero, Lactantius and Petrarch to write his tract. He draws from Cicero’s praise of the human body and like Petrarch speaks at length about “the joys of the afterlife- enumerated as twelve blessings and six joys” (Marsh 87). Manetti read Facio’s work while being in Naples and admired the work observing that it deserved to be celebrated and acknowledged.

Manetti's Engagement with the Human Condition

Unlike Pope Innocent III, Manetti stressed the dignity of human beings and not their depravity or agony. Manetti announces the subject of his work in the preface by saying that the first three books deal with “the great endowments of the human body,” “the particular privileges of the rational soul” and “the admirable properties of the whole man” (qtd. in Trinkaus 67) respectively. In the fourth book he intends to “confute” those authors “who lauded death and wrote of the misery of human existence” (qtd. in Trinkaus 67). Thus, Manetti begins Book One by celebrating human form and proceeds to engage with the sublimity of the human soul in Book Two. Book Three engages with the union of the body and soul in this wondrous creation. Manetti emphasizes extraordinary endowments and rare privileges of human beings. He exemplifies the spirit of the Renaissance by foregrounding human agency and free will of human beings.

As observed earlier, Manetti's work showcases a syncreticism of Classical and Christian viewpoints. In order to prove the dignity of human beings, Manetti uses the arguments provided not only by the Classical writers such as Aristotle and Cicero but also draws from religious writers like St. Augustine and Lactantius. Manetti's style of writing is very pointed and well-organized. He firstly states in detail the viewpoint of those he wishes to dismantle then he proceeds to refute their arguments point by point. His method is very similar to that of a logician. Manetti shows “internal contradictions” in Solomon's *Ecclesiastes* on human misery to show how the opposite can be proved from it. For example, he shows that “I praised the dead that are already dead more than the living that are yet alive” (*Ecclesiastes* 4:4) is in “direct contradiction” with *Ecclesiastes* 9:4 which says: “A living dog is better than a dead lion” (qtd. in Trinkaus 87). Furthermore, Manetti dismantles the entire foundation on which Pope Innocent's arguments about human misery rests in order to assert the beauty and pleasures of human life. Innocent argues that “all are born weeping and in this they express the misery of our nature” (qtd. in Trinkaus 89). He further argues that at the moment of birth the male child says ‘ha’ while the female says ‘hue’, therefore, Eve according to him means ‘hue, ha’ – the expressions one uses to express the “extremity of sorrow” (qtd. in Trinkaus 89). Innocent contends that after the “great female sin she deserves to be called Eve.” Manetti dismantles this argument by quoting *Genesis* 4:20: “Man called his wife's name Eve; because she was the mother of all living” (qtd. in Trinkaus 89). Manetti uses his knowledge of Greek, Latin and Hebrew to demonstrate that in Hebrew Eve was called “Hisca” because she was taken out of ‘Hisc’ which means “man” (qtd. in Trinkaus 90). Thus, Manetti deploys Aristotelian tools of rhetoric such as ethos, that is credibility, and logos, that is logic, to undercut Innocent's views on the deplorable state of humankind.

Celebration of the Human Form and Pleasure

In order to investigate the grounds on which Manetti establishes the dignity of human beings, one can begin by his views about the supremacy of the human body and “perfect formation of human nature” (Manetti qtd. in Trinkaus 231). In doing so, Manetti voices a predominant Renaissance thought which is marked by the celebration of the human body. Manetti believes that the human body surpasses that of all other beings in beauty and symmetry as it reflects the divine image on which it is modeled. He argues that no creature is “more beautiful than the human” for which reason the ancients portrayed “the gods in the likeness of Man” (Book I qtd. in Trinkaus 233). Appreciating the Creator and his vision, Manetti lauds the human body which is not only aesthetically elegant and pleasing but is also

capable of performing gruelling tasks. He quotes from Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods* and Lactantius' *On the Handwork of God* in order to argue that Man's erect posture, which is unique among all living beings, allows him to observe and contemplate the heavens. Manetti compares the body of a human being to the best-designed houses. He also admires not only how God has endowed humans with five senses. For instance, the nose and ears are located in the upper part of the human body to enhance his/her consciousness of the world around. Furthermore, he also praises the manner in which the organs have been placed in relation to each other. The above-mentioned delicate organs are placed away from the bodily equivalent of the drains that are relegated to the rear. Manetti goes on to refute Pope Innocent's arguments about the baseness of the human body which is made of mud while other creatures are made up of "more mobile" (qtd. in Trinkaus 70) elements like fire and air. Manetti argues that the human body is "more excellent" as it is "more capable of operating" – "it is capable of speaking and understanding" (qtd. in Trinkaus 81). Since speech and mobility are the functions that other animals cannot perform, Manetti stresses their relevance and uniqueness to underscore the special status of human beings in the Chain of Being.

Many thinkers such as Pope Innocent and Pliny have denounced humans for being born naked. Manetti counters Pope Innocent's arguments against human nudity by arguing that it was "necessary" for man to be born nude because of "his grace and beauty." He asserts that Nature would never have "concealed" the beauties of the human body with "deforming and inappropriate veils" (qtd. in Trinkaus 91). In addition to Pope Innocent, Classical writers like Pliny (in *Naturalis Historia*) have also argued that Nature has been a stepmother to man as he alone is born without fur or any other protection. Moreover, his body is weak and frail (Manetti in Trinkaus 70). Cicero also believed that "Nature has given us weak bodies" that are affected by "diseases that are incurable" (69). Manetti undercuts both Pliny and Cicero's views by arguing that Nature has nonetheless "furnished us abundantly with many remedies for their weakness and fragilities" (81). Manetti further bolsters his arguments concerning the dignity of Man by citing God's incarnation as Man and not as angel or as an animal. He claims that even if the Fall had not occurred, Christ would still have descended to Earth in order to "honour and glorify Man" by taking on "human flesh" (Book III qtd. in Trinkaus 253). Thus, he uses Incarnation as a central argument to establish the dignity of human beings.

Upholding the Divinity of the Human Soul

Manetti proceeds in Book Four to establish the excellence of the humans by foregrounding the dignity of the human soul. In doing so, not only does he refute the perspective of philosophers like Dicaearchus who deny the existence of the soul, he also negates the arguments concerning the "vileness" of the human soul. For instance, he also rejects the authority of the Epicureans who believe that the soul, like the body, suffers from a variety of diseases. To challenge these views Manetti quotes Cicero. Cicero, he observes, highlights the unique qualities of the human soul: "the soul has no terrestrial origin, because there is nothing mixed or composite in the soul" (83). He also quotes Aristotle who establishes that there is a fifth nature from which the soul is born. Building on Aristotelian arguments, Manetti stresses the "divine endowments" (80) of the human soul that can come only from God. It has "the power of memory, of mind, of thought, the capacity to retain the past, to predict the future and to embrace the present" (83). He argues that anyone who has the capacity to feel, know, possess vigour and lives "is celestial and divine and necessarily eternal" (83). Manetti further stresses the excellence of the soul by arguing that it is immortal.

Mantetti also upholds the life-affirming view of the Renaissance. He critiques Marcus Tullius Cicero, who talks about the miseries of human life. He also rejects the view that philosophers like Socrates and Cato preferred to die than to live. Alluding to the Platonic theory of the immortality of the soul, Manetti argues that they died in hope of achieving immortality rather than to escape the trials of life as many authors argue (86). He again quotes Aristotle in Book Four to contend that pleasures outweigh pain in human life. He demonstrates that death is not the “supreme good of Man” (74) as the “nature which is capable of feeling, even suffering is superior to the stone which cannot suffer” as it “lacks reason and sense” (85). Ficino in *Platonic Theology* (1474) seems to build on Manetti’s ideas while talking about the divinity of the human soul. In his scheme of the universal hierarchy, the human soul occupies a privileged central place: “God, Angelic Mind, Rational Soul, Quality and Body” (qtd. in Kristeller 100). Like Manetti, Ficino also emphasizes that the immortality of the soul is an essential part of man's dignity and divinity and without it man would be inferior to the animals (Kristeller *Marsilio Ficino* 344-45).

The Unfinished Self:

The Renaissance conceives of human beings as being composed by both flesh and spirit. In Book Three, Manetti marvels how the “two natures so diverse and so distinct and contrary to each other, namely the corporeal and the spiritual, have been admirably and divinely filled together into one” (Book III qtd. in Trinkaus 243). In Manetti’s thought, the uniqueness of Man’s nature is associated with the Original Sin in at least two ways. First, Manetti establishes that bodily weakness, diseases and other discomforts are contracted not because of “Man’s nature” but because of the Original Sin (79). Instead of considering this as an impediment, Manetti, however, maintains that this “delicate constitution” is the “most appropriate receptacle for the human soul” (81). This fragility gestures towards human capacity for growth, mobility, and perennial transformation, which is the prerogative of the ‘unfinished’ during the Renaissance. This is linked to the concept of the dual nature of humans. Manetti quotes Cicero to explicate this concept which is the hallmark of the Renaissance: Man is born with a nature that he shares with other beings but unlike other creatures, Man is capable of “fashioning another nature...within the bounds and precincts of one we have” (Book II qtd. in Trinkaus 248). This ability to create a second nature is linked to Man’s free will and ability to choose. The Renaissance, unlike the Middle Ages, displays immense confidence in human agency. Manetti argues that the dignity of Man lies in his ability to mould his own fate by “the many operations of intelligence and will” (qtd. in Trinkaus 193). He says that through the exercise of “free choice of will” we are “able to flee from evils and desire and choose goods” (Manetti qtd. in Trinkaus 243). Interestingly, Manetti argues that humans are “in part mortal because of the first parent’s Sin and in part capable of becoming immortal should it refrain from sin” (78). On the one hand, he upholds Christian doctrine in speaking of the Sin committed by Adam and Eve which led to the introduction of death into the human world. On the other hand, Manetti also stresses Man’s capacity to attain immortality by choosing to act virtuously. Thus, he again seamlessly weaves the Christian worldview with the Renaissance ideals while making a case for human dignity.

This confluence of the Classical and the Christian is also evident in the manner in which Manetti concludes his text. Throughout the text Manetti strives to give sustained arguments establishing human dignity but the text ends with the final beatific vision: He urges his fellow men to follow the Ten Commandments. He quotes Psalms to relate all the

good things that have been kept in store for Man if he leads a virtuous life. He says that Man would be blessed with eternal healthy, youth, beauty, immortality, uninterrupted peace and everlasting joy (95-96) while those who are damned will undergo torture and will be “deprived of the vision of God” (99) and their damnation will be for “eternity” (99). He also talks about the punishments and pains of the damned.

Unifying the Contradictions

Manetti's ideas have a long afterlife. For instance, Pomponazzi in *The Immortality of the Soul* (1516) seems to build on Manetti's work when he talks about man as an intermediary. He says “Man is clearly not of simple but of multiple, not of certain but of ambiguous nature, and he is to be placed between mortal and immortal things.” Man partakes of both eternal and temporal natures and is given the “power to assume whichever nature he wishes” (393). Years later Pico in *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486), which is often considered to be the manifesto of Renaissance actually seems to echo Manetti especially when he argues that Man is a great miracle because his place in the great chain of being is not fixed. He is a creature of “undetermined nature” (478) whose place is determined by his actions. Man by an act of exercise of free will can either descend to the level of “brute beasts” (479) or can rise above the level of humanity and embrace divinity. Man, unlike other creatures, is “constrained by no limits” and is “moulder and maker” of his own nature (490).

This paper explored how Classical and Christian ideas co-existed, often in tense simultaneity, during the Renaissance. This confluence, I argued, is visible in Manetti's scholarship which shows a true synthesis of pagan and Christian values. He never challenges the theological doctrines of sin and salvation or the Biblical idea that Man has been created in the image of God. However, his discourse on Man's dignity is based on his praise of human agency and rational capacity as he argues that the fruits of Man's labour are that of his intellect. He emphasizes “the operative and functional side of Man rather than the static ingredients of his nature” (Trinkaus 240). Manetti's treatment of this theme is remarkable as he is able to find theological support for the Renaissance view of man as doer and moulder of his life. Since the secular and the sacred co-exist in Manetti's discourse on the dignity and excellence of man, he demonstrated the compatibility of the Classical ideas with Christian faith and values.

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