

Trombley, Tristin

Professor Marcello Bellini

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Abstract

This essay will discuss the topic of Renaissance humanism along with its most influential writers, Petrarch and Pico, using information from the course's reader. The ideology within humanism will be explained in depth, as well as the influence Petrarch and Pico had over the time period. A few of their works will be analyzed and I will give my own thoughts and opinions on the subject matter.

With the revival of ancient Greek and Latin literature during the 14th century, ideals of classical writers such as Cicero and Virgil were used to explain man's place in the universe from an individualistic perspective. Before this point in time, the purpose of man, in my opinion, was about obedience. They were expected to live their lives worshiping God and followed the church's guiding principles in order to go to heaven. It was reasonable for scholars to want to question their autonomy, and thus they shifted their understanding of the universe from superstition and the afterlife to present life on Earth.

Scholars translated Latin texts and combined their knowledge of religion and education to develop one of the leading movements of the Renaissance: humanism. This ideology encouraged man to act and think for himself and expressed individualism. One of these humanist scholars was Francesco Petrarch, often referred to as the "Father of Humanism". His philosophies sparked the early Renaissance, and influenced intellectual beliefs about the power and value of the individual without entirely rejecting Catholicism.

Petrarch was a prime example of Renaissance humanism acting as a Catholic response to heretical tendencies seen within medieval Aristotelianism. His writings portray the aspects of individualism, self-consciousness, self-reflection, solitude, and many other themes within humanism. Petrarch received influence from religious monks and hermits in which he adopted a strong sense of solitude stemming from medieval monasticism. Another common characteristic of his humanistic philosophy is that man and his problems should be the main concern of all thought, thus putting an emphasis on moral philosophy.

I was intrigued to read Petrarch's themes of self-awareness. His writings embody the idea of looking to and working on oneself in order to reach salvation. In one of his letters to Francesco Bruni, a papal secretary in Avignon in 1362, he claims multiple aspects of his identity.

He claims he is a “fellow who never quits school”, a “lover of learning”, and even goes as poetic to say he is a “backwoodsman who is roaming around through the lofty beech trees all alone”.

What struck me the most was his honest awareness of doubt. As he states, “I throw myself into the embrace of doubt instead of truth”, he adopts the philosophies of Cicero and shifts away from medieval thought. I believe this theology of doubting everything was the leading ignition for the birth of humanism, and Petrarch was ahead of his time in looking both to the past and present to discover more about himself.

I also noticed a sense of humbleness and unpretentiousness from him in “Letter to Posterity”, as he is very honest about his upbringing, poverty, and more. However, I do understand why many people disliked him and claimed he was self-centered. Oftentimes his hyper-awareness of himself comes across as self-deprecating and narcissistic. He refers to himself as insignificant while also claiming that the greatest kings of the age have loved him. It is interesting to hear him talk about himself with such dynamics, and it is easy to gain insight as to why/how he moved around and thought what he thought.

Another prime figure of Renaissance humanism is Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. Similarly to Petrarch’s synthesis of scholastic and religious philosophy, Pico is known for his syncretism of Platonism and Christianity and more specifically, agreement between Plato and Aristotle. He believed that although opposites, the two views could coexist. He also advocated for the idea that truth could be found in many places, across multiple religions and theologies. I was very impressed by his perspective of religion in which there is not the existence of a single true faith. His “Oration on the Dignity of Man” portrayed human potential and the ability of man to ascend to divine knowledge, which is a groundbreaking concept of philosophy I believe to be ahead of its time.

It is interesting to see his struggles between science and superstition. I found that his undying devotion to God prevented him from fully analyzing scientific thought. Although he accepted natural magic, he rejected astrology. His impulse to attack astrological ideology was mostly religious and not scientific, as he viewed it as an enemy to the church. I see parallels in his philosophy to people I know today, rejecting science out of ignorance and clinging to religion as sole means for justification. I would be curious to read the finished work on his ideas about astrology, however he died too young to complete most of his works.

Petrarch and Pico exemplify humanism by acknowledging and celebrating the purpose of man and his potential. From the 1300s to the 1600s, revived interest in ancient Greek and Latin text displayed a new sense of importance upon man, altering the way philosophers viewed themselves and mankind as a whole. Humanism impacted society beyond the Renaissance as intellectuals questioned the systems they lived in and developed ideas of secularism.