

TRANSLATED BY BRIAN MCNEILL

Edited by Paul Richard Blum

Philosophers of the Renaissance



PHILOSOPHERS
of the
RENAISSANCE

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Concordia Platonis et Aristotelis became a problem for Ficino himself, in connection with the concept of the immortality of the soul.

Still without having read Plato in the original, Ficino wrote the *Institutiones platonicae* in 1456. This text is now lost; judging by the reactions to it, it was an apology for the great classical philosopher. The intellectual climate in Florence was, however, unpropitious for this work, and the humanist Cristoforo Landino and other benefactors advised Ficino against its publication. Cosimo de' Medici, who had also seen the *Institutiones*, was nevertheless convinced that Ficino possessed philosophical gifts, and he encouraged him to undertake a deeper study of Plato. Although he continued his medical studies for the rest of his life, this was the beginning of Ficino's career as the leading expert on Plato.

In 1463, Cosimo furnished a villa in Careggi for Ficino's studies, and this became the seat of the "Platonic Academy." This "community of the liberal arts" (*liberalium disciplinarum communio*) brought together humanists, philosophers, artists, poets, musicians, physicians, astronomers, and mathematicians.¹ Its illustrious members included such outstanding names as Ficino's benefactor Landino, Leon Battista Alberti, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. The major task entrusted to Ficino by Cosimo, the translation of Plato's entire oeuvre into Latin, was finished circa 1469 (printed in 1484). *De christiana religione*, a work in which Ficino reconstructs history in keeping with a *pia philosophia*, appeared in 1474. Other authors translated by Ficino included Hermes Trismegistus (1471), Plotinus (1492), Dionysius the Areopagite (1496/97), and Iamblichus (1497). He also turned his attention to less well-known philosophers such as Athenagoras, Psellus, Alcinous, Speusippus, Xenocrates, Synesius, Priscianus Lydus, and Hermias of Alexandria, a pupil of Proclus, and wrote commentaries on selected Platonic Dialogues or parts of Dialogues.² His commentary on the *Symposium*, also known under the title *De amore* (1469), is particularly significant, since it forms an important preliminary stage leading to his chef d'oeuvre, the *Theologia Platonica—De immortalitate animarum* (1482). Another preliminary

1. Cf. however Hankins 1991. Ficino's works are cited as *Op.* according to the *Opera* 1576; and as *Platonic Theology* with volume and page numbers in the volumes edited and translated by Raymond Marcel, 1964–1970.

2. Translations of some prefaces are available in Farnell 2006.

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MARSILIO FICINO

(1433–1499)

The Aesthetic of the One in the Soul

Tamara Albertini

INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT: THE
DISCOVERY OF A PHILOSOPHICAL GIFT

Marsilio Ficino was born in Figline Valdarno in 1433. Through his father Diotifeci, who was the personal physician of Cosimo de' Medici, he came as an adolescent into contact with the Medicean circle. His early years were marked by the political rivalries that dominated Florence at that period, and it is probably in this context that we should read the Italian translation of Dante's *De monarchia* which he made in 1468, since the dedication to Bernardo del Nero and Antonio Manetti mentions previous discussions about similar topics. Ficino followed his father's wish and studied medicine. At an early age, he developed a keen interest in Plato. He himself relates that this was connected with the visit of the Byzantine Platonist Georgios Gemistos Plethon, who came to Florence in 1439 with the entourage from Byzantium to the Union Council and who had made a lasting impression on learned Florentine circles through his public lectures on the compatibility of Aristotelian and Platonic philosophy. Later, the question of the

work is the even earlier *De voluptate* (1457), which examines the concept of desire. Ficino's most successful medicinal work was the *De vita libri tres* (1489). Another important source for the study of his philosophy is his volume of correspondence, published in 1495, which attests his fame throughout Europe.

Ficino witnessed much turbulence in his beloved Florence, but despite invitations to work at other courts, he never left this region. In 1478 he experienced the terrible consequences of the Pazzi conspiracy, and in 1494 the renewed exile of the Medici family and the invasion of French troops under Charles VIII. Finally, there was the episode of Girolamo Savonarola (of whom Ficino had no high opinion), culminating in his public burning at the stake in 1498. The deaths of four men who had watched over his early philosophical studies was particularly painful: Lorenzo the Magnificent (1492), Poliziano (1494), Pico della Mirandola (1494), and Landino (1498). There can be no doubt that when he himself died in the Villa Careggi in 1499, the most intellectually stimulating period of the Renaissance came to an end. Even today, his unique position in the history of ideas as the one who brought the Platonic philosophy back into the Western tradition is unchallenged. This position is due not only to his importance as the scholar who made available a wider textual basis for the study of Platonism and Neoplatonism, but also to the fact that Ficino successfully employed Platonism as an instrument to renew philosophy and culture in general.

THE ORGANIC WORLDVIEW:
MAN AS "INTELLECTUAL HERO"

Ficino looks at the world with a physician's eyes. Just as all the organs of the body affect one another, so too the parts of this world "all depend, like the limbs of a living being, on one Author and are connected with each other through the nature which they share" (*De amore* 6.10. p. 243f.). He describes nature as a female being that is self-sustaining. It is endowed with an inner creative life; it gives birth "spontaneously" to offspring and nourishes them.³ Man is embedded in the totality of the world, and this means that he is exposed not only to physical, but also to mental and spiritual in-

3. *Platonic Theology* 4, 1, vol. 1: 144f.

fluences. Like a child in its mother's womb, he absorbs all the currents; he "pulsates," so to speak, in the rhythm of the great world-organism. Nevertheless, Ficino sees Man as a being who moves freely in the relational web of Nature (since all bodies are linked), of Fate (since souls refer to one another), and of Providence (since all rational beings form a fellowship). Thanks to his soul, Man influences the bodily world. Through his mind (*mens*), he rules the intellectual world and ultimately his own self.⁴ Typically, the image of this "sovereignty" is the figure of Hercules. His twelve labors not only crown him as "the conqueror of the Earth, the favorite of the stars," but also represent the conquest of the twelve houses of the zodiac system, which makes him the one who overcomes fate. Hercules is interpreted as an intellectual hero who, precisely because he is united to everything, understands the world and thereby necessarily also transcends it. Despite many points of contact in the anthropology, this is certainly very different from the mostly nonmetaphysical orientation of humanism.

PSYCHOLOGY: THE SOUL AS
"THE MIDPOINT OF EVERYTHING"

Although Ficino's philosophy is concerned with the assimilation of the soul to the mind, the center of attention is the soul rather than the mind. He writes that through its unifying movement between the individual and the universal, the soul "reestablishes the world which once was shaken."⁵ The rational soul is able to achieve this because it is the midpoint of a world which, from an epistemological perspective, otherwise falls apart into antitheses. Ficino operates in several passages with gradations of orders which usually begin with matter and ascend to God. In all these sequences, the soul is regarded as the one movable member: its rational activity ensures the continuity between everything that exists. The *descensus-ascensus* motif of late antiquity, which is employed here in a wider context, strengthens the idea that the soul, which links everything to everything else, ultimately reflects the entire universe and thus represents the universe in itself. The fivefold sequence that is introduced at the very

4. *Platonic Theology* 13, 2, vol. 2: 206-14.

5. *Platonic Theology* 16, 3, vol. 3: 1118.

beginning of the *Theologia Platonica* has the preeminent position: "We shall compare these five stages of all things with one another, namely the bodily matter, the quality, the soul, the angel, and God. Since however the species of the rational soul occupies the middle place between these stages and can be seen to be that which binds together the whole of nature, ruling the qualities and the bodies and uniting itself to the angel and to God, we shall show that it is entirely indissoluble, as it unites all the stages of nature; that it is the most excellent of all things, as it heads the structure of the world; and that it is the most blessed of all things, as it joins itself to the divine."⁶ Accordingly, the soul fulfills its true function when it unites everything with everything else from a middle position—and thereby breaks open the hierarchically gradated order of being. We find a similar sequence of five members in the early *De amore*, where matter, nature, the soul, and the angelic mind are presented as concentric circles that all revolve around the divine midpoint and endeavor to become like it. The motive force that sets everything in motion is the soul, which resides in the very center and thereby mediates between the immortal (God, angel) and the mortal (nature, matter). Ficino's commentary on the *Timaeus* shows that he favors a sequence of five members not only because this permits a numerical midpoint; it is thus linked, for example, to the number of the five Platonic species (being, identity, otherness, rest, and movement). Ficino also emphasizes that since the soul is the center of the universe—which is symbolized by the "ten"—it is best represented by the midpoint of this number.⁷

EPISTEMOLOGY: THE MIND AS
"INFINITE POWER"

Ficino reverses the Aristotelian principle that nothing can be in the reason without first having been in the senses. He affirms that without the intellectual measure that is already present in the act of perception, nothing can be grasped. Thus the human mind receives "from the bodies the occasion [*ocasio*] for knowledge"⁸ and learns thereby how to relate the

6. *Platonic Theology* 1, 1, vol. 1: 39.

8. *Platonic Theology* 15, 2, vol. 3:19.

7. *Op.* 2, ch. 28, 145f.

particularity that is established through the knowledge of the senses to the universality that is present in itself. Ficino gives a vivid description of this "intellectual art" (*ars intellectualis*) in an optical example (which must be reconstructed from the text). Two spherical lights touch each other: one represents the transition from the universal to the individual, the other the path from the individual to the universal. The point at which the tips of the two spheres meet represents the rational soul, which does not simply link the two, but has the function of "contracting" the universal to form something particular, and "sees" the universal through the particular. The mind possesses the universal in the form of "imprints" (*sigilla*) or (to use Augustinian language) *formulae* that "tend toward" the individual. The act of knowing has recourse to these imprints or formulae when it tests the sensuous images (*simulacra*) to see whether they are "congruent" with the universal. In the light of these formulae, the mind sees not only true objects, but also "makes the truth."⁹ Confronted with both individual and universal, the mind makes its own images (*species*), through which it visually assimilates the world to itself. It also applies its congenital formulae to its own self, in this way undertaking self-evaluations and self-corrections. As with Nicholas of Cusa, therefore, we can observe in Ficino an epistemological turning point, or an "epistemological overthrow." It is not the spirit that follows the objects; rather, the objects are accommodated to the cognitive power that measures them in an act of comparison. However, the mind does not hold fast to what it has once recognized. It tests it again and again by means of its congenital "formulae." In this way, the mind continuously renews "the face of things" and ultimately discovers itself as the infinite epistemic power in the infinite relational context that it itself has created: "It is quite certain that this power has no specific stage of order in nature, since this power itself pulsates upwards and downwards through all the stages of order. It has no specific location, since it never stands still anywhere. Its power is not determined (in the sense of 'limited'), since it has the same effect upon all things. And if I may say so, this seems to me to be the principal proof of the unlimited power of the mind: it discovers that infinity itself exists, it defines what infinity is and how infinity is."¹⁰

9. *Platonic Theology* 12, 2, vol. 2: 159.

10. *Platonic Theology* 8, 16, vol. 1: 330.

METAPHYSICS: THE MIND-SOUL AS
"INTELLECT AND WILL"

Ficino's metaphysics, which mediates between the inner world and the outer world, is based on a unified theory of the intellect. The distinction, deriving from the Aristotelian tradition, between the active and the receptive intellect is superseded by understanding these as parts of one and the same process, which presents objects in a luminous manner: "If we want a handy illustration of these two powers of the intellect and of how they are united, we can consider the eye of a cat as it chases mice. In this eye—almost in the same way as in our mind—there are likewise two powers, a crystal-clear brightness and the gleam of the look. The former is receptive power, the latter active power. The gleam of the look radiates into the night and takes from the bodies which it encounters an image of one color or another and imprints this image upon the receptive brightness of the cat's eye, which sees the entire body through its act of looking."¹¹ The text goes on to say that the mind sees itself in its own ray of knowledge which reflects the objects. A characteristic element in Ficino's theory of the intellect is that it also includes the will. This is implicitly present in the hunting cat, since its brilliant act of looking, which represents the optic beam of the mind, has a volitional orientation. This brings us to what Ficino regards as the real conceptual challenge: not how to unite intellectual activity and passivity, but how to describe the antithetical powers of the intellect and the will as dynamic and complementary epistemological powers. In the first version of his commentary on the *Philebus*, he writes: "The former [the intellect] draws the objects to itself, the latter [the will] is drawn by the objects. For the intellect does not grasp the objects as they are in themselves, but in its own manner: it grasps many objects in one way, it grasps the mobile objects in a stationary manner, it grasps the individual objects in a general manner, etc. And with its formulae, it straightens out whatever is defective in the objects. The will, on the other hand, tends to possess the objects as they are in themselves, and it is captivated by them after the idea has been conceived. It does not change them; rather, it itself is changed and leaves its rest for movement."¹² Ficino elaborates different ways of present-

11. *Platonic Theology* 11, 2, vol. 2: 96.

12. 1 ch. 37. *Op.* 2, 1251.

ing these antithetically operating powers. The intellect separates, interiorizes, "sees," and preserves the necessary optic distance from the objects; its mode of knowledge is presented by means of optic constructions. The will is the exact opposite of this: it unites, it moves outward, it "desires," it overcomes the distance from the objects, and thus Ficino very appropriately makes use of innumerable metaphors of love to describe the epistemological power that makes for the objects.¹³ Throughout his lifetime, Ficino pondered the question which of these two intellectual powers had the primacy. Initially, he gave the preference to the intellect, but later he spoke in favor of the will. Finally, he sought a solution that would do equal justice to both powers, and he succeeded in portraying this equality in his commentary on the *Timaeus*, where he locates the two intellectual powers in a harmonious triangle and writes: "Although we have spoken elsewhere of the same relationships in the soul, we did not mean an *arithmetical parity*, but *harmonious equality*."¹⁴ Unlike medieval thinkers who were also preoccupied with the problem of the superiority of the intellect or the will, Ficino translates it into the question whether the inner or the outer dimension has precedence. In other words, do the intellectual formulae have supremacy over the objects, or does the world of objects have supremacy over the mind that measures them? As a subtle metaphysician, Ficino could not renounce either of these possibilities. The only solution lay in the harmonization of subjective and objective ordering.¹⁵

AESTHETICS: THE SOUL AS "ARTIST"

According to Ficino, human beings are endowed with an appreciation of proportions, symmetry, and regular forms, and that is linked to the intellectual formulae: "Every mind praises at once the round form which it sees in the objects, and does not know why it praises. In the same way, when it sees buildings, it praises the rectangularity of the rooms, the evenness [*aequalitas*] of the walls, or the arrangement [*dispositio*] of the stones, the corners which match one another, the form and the position of the windows. It also praises in the same way a certain proportion [*proportio*] in the

13. Albertini 1997, 246.

14. *Op.* 2, ch. 34, 1460.

15. Albertini 2001.

limbs of the human body, or the harmony [*concordia*] of rhythms and voices."¹⁶ Despite the great importance that Ficino attaches to the intellectually attractive proportions, he states clearly that the well-shaped form (*figura*) is not per se beautiful; nevertheless, it is the precondition of beauty (*pulchritudo*). The primary aesthetic object for Ficino (as for the artists of his day) is the natural body, especially the human body, which he conceptualizes as a physician by stating that the rational soul can form only the healthy body in which the fluids are "well tempered." In keeping with the principles laid down by Vitruvius, he then points out: "This means for example that three times the length of the nose amount to the length of the face as a whole, and that the two half-circles of the ears, taken together, are equal to the circle of the opened mouth; the same should be true of the eyebrows when they are joined together. The length of the nose should be equal to the length of the lip and likewise to the length of the ear. The two curves of the eyes should be equal to the opening of the mouth. Eight times the length of the head, and likewise the extension of the arms and legs, should equal the length of the entire body" (*De amore* 5, 6, 155). Symmetries and proportions serve the predisposition of the body, so that beauty can shine in it. Since it is an expression of the divine goodness in the world, it is also described as a ray of light or as luminous splendor. Quoting an Orphic poem that calls the Graces *Splendor* (luminous splendor), *Viriditas* (the bloom of youth), and *Laetitia* (cheerfulness), Ficino comments that "luminous splendor" refers to the attractiveness and beauty of the soul, "the bloom of youth" refers to the gracefulness of figure and color, and "cheerfulness" denotes the joy that is given by music. Although beauty transcends the mathematical formulation of the principles that govern the aesthetic order, it nevertheless remains dependent on them. Beauty consists "in a certain actuality, liveliness, and gracefulness" (*ibid.*), and can therefore be detached from the bodily appearance.

It is impossible to emphasize too strongly the aesthetic dimension of Ficino's philosophy, which goes beyond the contemplation of the beautiful to embrace epistemology and metaphysics as well. The mind-soul, which measures everything and compares everything with everything else, implicitly brings about a restoration of the beautiful. Ficino's thinking, which

16. *Platonic Theology* 11, 5, vol. 2: 128.

is presented in optic-geometrical figures, can itself be seen as active and living, and thus as *graceful*.

THE HISTORY OF THE RECEPTION OF FICINO

Even during his own lifetime, Ficino was famous far beyond the borders of Italy. He received letters from Spain, France, England, Germany, and Hungary. The most celebrated visitors to the Academy included Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples, John Colet, and Johannes Reuchlin. Ficino's philosophy enjoyed a long-lasting reception. It would be difficult to find any philosophical text of the sixteenth or even the seventeenth century—whether Aristotelian or Platonic in its approach—that shows no traces of influence by Ficino.¹⁷ Giambattista Vico (1668–1744) recommends him in his autobiography as a model metaphysician. Not only philosophers, but also physicians, astronomers, historians, artists, musicians, men of letters, and poets found much to stimulate them in his work. His most influential text is undoubtedly the *De amore*, without which much of the Renaissance Italian and French literature would be simply unthinkable.

17. Cf. Mahoney 1982.

Note: For further reading see Fardell 2006; Shaw 1978. For Ficino's Commentaries on Plato see Ficino 1975; Allen 1981, 1989, 1994; Ficino 1985. See also the works by Accademia; Albertini; Allen; Blum 1999; Chastel; Edelheit; Fardell; Garfagnini; Gentile, Niccoli, and Viti; Gentile and Toussaint; Granada; Hankins; Kristeller; Mahoney 1982; Marcel; Otto; Toussaint 2002; and Vasoli 1999.