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## Epistemological Aspects of Ficino's Platonic Theology

It is obviously impossible not to be enchanted by this stringency of Marsilio Ficino's defense of transcendence throughout his work. In order to understand somewhat better Ficino's way of proceeding I suggest to take a look at the epistemological aspects of his work.

Ficino's major work was his Platonic Theology Concerning the Immortality of Souls, dedicated to Lorenzo de' Medici. The dedication starts with trumpeting that Plato was (and actually is) "the father of philosophers", for he taught the basic insight "that our minds bear the same relationship to God as our sight to the light of the Sun", so that "as the human mind receives everything from God, so it should restore everything to God."<sup>1</sup> Apart from the fact that this is Neoplatonic imagery we should ask ourselves in which sense sight returns anything to the sun. So we have to note that Ficino operates with suggestive metaphorical rhetoric that deserves to be interpreted. The remaining 18 books of the Platonic Theology unravel the implications of the opening statement. The proem to Lorenzo maintains that Plato encourages piety, and as such his doctrine is "theology" that turns everything "quickly" into "the contemplation and worship of God" (*pium cogniti dei cultum* – literally: "the pious worship of the cognized God"). From this follows – and it is important to emphasize that it is not the other way around – that Plato's philosophy contains two messages "of utmost importance: the worship of God with piety and understanding, and the divinity of the souls." [pp.9–11] Let us recapitulate: Plato teaches a mutual relationship between God and soul, which is filled with universal receiving and restoring, an all-and-everything that passes hither and thither between the human soul and God. From that follow two fundamental statements about Platonism, philosophy, or religion (as though there were no difference between these): first, that they consist in the performance of worship; second, that the soul is divine.

Philosophy, then, is a combination of performance and metaphysical claims, while it is unclear at this point, which is first. Even more, worship is a combination of piety and understanding, and philosophy is the praxis of

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<sup>1</sup> Ficino 2001, volume 1, Proem, p.9.

worshipping what has been understood intellectually. A little bit further Ficino seems to reiterate the standard program of natural theology: “that in the divinity of the created mind, as in a mirror at the center of all things, we should first observe the works of the Creator, and then contemplate and worship the mind of the Creator.” [p. 11] The traditional element lies in the interchangeability of God’s works and understanding God. Ficino’s innovation is to interpolate the human mind that serves as a looking glass and medium (*speculo rerum omnium medio*). Obviously Ficino transposes natural theology from contemplating the works for the sake of contemplating the maker (nowadays best known as the watchmaker metaphor) to the analysis of the *finite* mind towards an understanding of the *perfect* mind. In this shift of perspective he resembles somewhat Nicholas of Cusa, although I would maintain that Nicholas aims at and achieves rather a critique of human reason than a new theology. Nevertheless, for Ficino the operation of the mind is not purely intellectual but worship, praxis. Ficino’s claim is followed by an amalgamation of Platonism with religion and philosophy. For “those arguments of the Platonists (...) fully reinforce the claims of religion”, and to “contemplate the higher objects which transcend the senses, and [to] find happiness in putting things themselves before their shadows (...) is what Almighty God especially demands.” [p. 11]

We should not be mistaken, the last statement is not a theological, nor a philosophical one; for that would be dull, being just a Neoplatonic expression of Christian belief. Rather, talking about praxis, the claim that Platonic claims coincide with Christian claims is politics. For embedded in this perspective Ficino voices his conviction to be the chosen one by divine providence (“a trust that is not vain” – *nec vana fides*) “in imitation of Plato” to show that “many who are wrong-headed and unwilling to yield to the authority of divine law alone would at least accept those arguments of the Platonists which fully reinforce the claims of religion; and that irreligious men who divorce the study of philosophy from sacred religion will come to realize that they are making the same sort of mistake as someone who divorces love of wisdom from respect for that wisdom, or who separates true understanding from the will to do what is right.” [p. 11]

At this point it would be tempting to make a comparison with Augustine, who is duly invoked in this poem. Ficino pledges to have been encouraged by the works of the church father to “paint a portrait of Plato as close as possible to the Christian truth”. [p. 11] But the case could be made that Augustine ultimately rejects Platonism and, moreover, that Augustine, as opposed to Ficino, does not emphasize rationality in Christian belief, he rather strives at transcending human reasoning, which was also Cusanus’ primary aim. Certainly both philosopher-theologians did not transform worship into converting others,

whereas Ficino's love for Platonic philosophy urges him to convert nonbelievers. In his later letter that introduced the Plotinus translation he even more outspokenly addressed his intended audience as those who are recklessly Aristotelians and hence corrupt.<sup>2</sup> To interpret intellectual satisfaction as worship towards the object of intellection necessarily turns contemplation into action, or philosophy into religious policy.

For a philosopher the question remains: what makes God so attractive? Given Ficino's programmatic approach we can expect that he will have a peculiar way of ascending to the existence of God, if not proving it, which is indeed the main theme of the first book of Platonic Theology, where he describes the access to the divine as an ontological, intellectual, and logical development. Starting with the body as the lowest level of the ontological hierarchy he arrives at the soul, which he then describes in terms of motion and stability. Therefore in book 1 chapter 5 he defines the soul as that "whose external activity wanders over intervals of time, and whose life, that is, internal activity, is dispersed as it were in a flood", and hence he infers that we need to "posit another form, more sublime, whose activity is constant and whose life is at once whole and united."<sup>3</sup> Philologically speaking, Ficino is taking up Plato's determination of the soul in his Phaedrus and also in book 10 of his Laws;<sup>4</sup> but this is not the point here, although it is striking that both in Plato and in Ficino the ultimate aim is political and moral and not 'just' metaphysical. Ficino then contaminates this reasoning with another pattern of thought that is best known from Thomas Aquinas's Fourth Way [Summa Theologiae I q. 2, a. 3 c.], namely, to speculate about degrees of perfection. Since the soul as being in motion, although with a certain stability, is less perfect than anything that is described as "whole and united", there must be something that meets this description. In a long series of variations on the same theme and with references to various authorities Ficino establishes that there must be something like Angel, that meets these requirements, and which at the same time is the ultimate design of the "all-powerful Creator of the universe" [p. 77], namely, an ontological level that is "most like Himself in that He has taken the pure minds, which of all things are most like Himself, and has exalted and extended them over and about the forms that are combined with matter by an immeasurable space (...)." [p. 77] The following chapter 6 then declares that the soul as being in motion "passes

<sup>2</sup> Ficino 1983 vol. 2, 1537, preface to Plotinus. On this see Gentile 1994; Vasoli 1999, 23–50; Blum 2004, 171–174.

<sup>3</sup> Ficino 2001, vol. 1, 1, 5, p. 61.

<sup>4</sup> See his commentaries on Laws 10, Ficino 1983, vol. 2, 1517; on Phaedrus, chapters 5–8, pp. 1366–1369. Cf. Michael J.B. Allen, *The Platonism of Marsilio Ficino*, Berkeley 1984, 68–85.

from one thing to another” and consequently it contains the variety of things it cognizes. Now at this point Ficino does not immediately prove that the Angel is a motionless plurality, but he logically infers that there must be something which is motionless and yet not unity. Ficino does not develop or defend this thought, hence he evidently relies upon a genuine scholastic formal approach to the four concepts of: unity, plurality, stability, and motion. “But since in every respect these two are the opposite of each other, they cannot come one immediately after the other.” [Book 1, chapter 6, p. 79]

unity	plurality
immobility	mobility

That is to say Ficino operates with a quadrangle of opposites, in which there is no way to move from mobility-plus-plurality to immobility-plus-unity without passing through either mobility-plus-unity or plurality-plus-immobility (the latter option is obviously paradoxical and impossible). “It remains then that angel is motionless plurality.” [p. 81] The postulated plurality in Angel is that of “a plurality appropriate to intellect, that is, one that has as its essence and being the power of understanding, the act of understanding, and the many species of things understood.” [p. 81] It is not at all clear at this point of the treatise how the understanding of the angel and the presence of the species in the angel is different from the presence of the species of the human intellect. The only difference could be that the human intellect would acquire the species from the operation of cognition which will be the theme of book 8 of Platonic Theology. It is critical to note that Ficino here seems to have no quandaries about the epistemological implications; he boldly concludes that “something else must exist above angel that is not only motionless but entirely one and simple. This is God (...).” [p. 81] This statement is now followed by arguments that, indeed, God has to be simple and hence also one. We learn soon [p. 83] that this is the first of a series of “proofs” that God is a necessary postulate beyond Angel.<sup>5</sup> Let us remember that the existence of the angel was a postulate itself; therefore I must confess that the validity of these arguments escapes me.

In the remainder of the chapter Ficino proceeds thus: he stresses that mind and its object are different, they are distinct not only ontologically but also in dignity. Hence follows that truth, order, and the good are located beyond the intellect. All this amounts to the conclusion “that all things take their origin from

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Michael J.B. Allen, *Plato’s Third Eye. Studies in Marsilio Ficino’s Metaphysics and Its Sources*, Aldershot 1995, chapter 1.

it [the highest good, i. e., God] as from their father, and that all things aspire to it as for their fatherland.” [p.91] A few details of this reasoning are worth mentioning. On his way to argue that truth lies ahead of mind Ficino construed an experiment, in which the entire body becomes an eye and thus improves sight indefinitely, and analogously mind as such leaves all other functions of the soul behind (i. e. such functions that tie the soul to the body), then, he says, the “remaining sole, uncontaminated mind will be angel.” [p.83] This passage corroborates our suspicion that ‘angel’ is merely a postulate in the process of abstraction, which appears to be experimental or hypothetical. On the epistemological level it is noteworthy that for Ficino this mental experiment yields a difference between truth and mind, or intellect and its object. A distinction which immediately turns into a metaphysical one, incidentally supported by a quotation from Plethon's Chaldean Oracles: “Beware that the intelligible lies outside the mind.” [p. 83; nr. 28a, ed. Tambrun-Krasker.]

Following the Platonic method of supereminence the postulate of a coincidence of truth in mind is not far away. In a first step Ficino argues that truth is not only an intellectual feature but something that pervades even matter in so far as it is “truly called matter and truly it is the substrate of all natural objects.” In a reversal of this argument it follows immediately, that truth is not without mind: “But if truth is superior to mind, and because it is superior does not lack inferior goods, then truth does not lack the clarity of mind.” [p. 85] So, the proportional analogy is this:

matter – intellect <is proportionate to> mind – truth

Intellect or mind (two denominations for the same thing, the first stressing its operations, the second its essence) deals with truth when it finds and processes it in any object of cognition. However, there exists no truth in matter. Truth as such lies beyond or above mind. But for the sake of analogy, although truth is not mind it cannot be ‘mindless’. The key argument is an application of the principle of participation, according to which “what is superior is not destitute of what is inferior.”<sup>6</sup> If inferior levels in some way participate the dignity of the superior ones, in our case matter somehow is true, then on the contrary the lower levels are embedded in the higher ones – this is their epistemological and metaphysical power. And that is what makes God attractive for the mind. The only detail that needs to be clarified is that in God truth and clarity are indistinct

<sup>6</sup> P. 84: *quod superius est, non caret bonis inferioribus* (my translation); the Latin text establishes a rule, and not – as Allen's translation suggests – a particular property or state of affairs.

although clarity is the feature with which the mind cognizes truth. God is “simplest truth, truth not hidden from itself.” [p. 85] What follows in this paragraph is the preparation of the convergence of the transcendentals, unity, truth, and goodness, which opens book 2 of the Platonic Theology.

This is not the place to debate the role of transcendentals in Ficino; we shall, rather, take a look into the further development of book 2. First of all there is no further proof of the existence of God in this ‘Platonic theology’. Ficino prefers to discuss the oneness and power of God. This includes His intellectuality that is even bolstered by an apocryphal quotation from Orpheus that employs a key Platonic term, εἶδος: “Jupiter, form of all.”<sup>7</sup> For Ficino’s epistemology it is critical that God is both the Platonic Form, to be understood as the intellectual and metaphysical origin of everything, and paramount of everything that is known. For this reason Ficino translates εἶδος as ‘species’. For, as he explains in chapter 9 of the same book, “God understands Himself first and every individual thing too.” [p. 149] In order to make that thought palpable Ficino applies the principle of affinity that guarantees mutual enclosure of mind and thought, for which again he switches track between epistemology and ontology by maintaining that “the way something reaches the point of being intelligible is the same way it reaches the point of being intellect.” [p. 149] To understand what is material acquires the metaphysical meaning of transforming it into something intellectual with the ultimate end of transformation into mind. The conclusion is obvious: “Because nobody is further removed from matter than God, so nobody understands more perfectly than God.” [p. 149.] By now it is no surprise that in the next step understanding is qualified as “desirable as a good”. [p. 149] For that explains why God is both self-sufficient and at the top of the hierarchy, the last preceding stage being – as we have seen – Angel. Since the angelic level of intellect operated in multitude Ficino now specifies the difference between angelic and divine knowledge. Angel cognizes through forms, whereas God is above such kind of mind. The general epistemological rule is this: “whatever intellect does it does through its own nature and thus it acts through understanding. Therefore, whatever it makes, it understands.”<sup>8</sup> Hence follows that God whose “being and understanding are identical (...) acts by understanding.” [p. 153] Epistemologically speaking, “God’s knowledge and activity

<sup>7</sup> Book 2, chapter 11, pp. 162/163. There is no such Orphic saying, according to the commentary, p. 329, note 31.

<sup>8</sup> P. 153. The latter sentence is my translation of: *Ergo, quaecumque facit, intellegit*. Allen translates: ‘Therefore it must understand everything it creates.’ The modifier ‘must’ deflects from the convertibility of understanding and making, whereby acting is transformed into producing. For the principle applies not only to God but to every intellection.

are coextensive” whereas ontologically and cosmologically speaking, His knowledge reaches exactly as far as his operation.<sup>9</sup>

Now I suggest examining a similar move to conflate epistemology and metaphysics in Ficino's famous commentary on Plato's Parmenides.

Ficino inserted in his extensive commentary on Parmenides a series of discourses (discursus) in which he proves the superiority of the One over Being. In the first discourse he maintains that something one is partly distinct from others, partly subsumed with them under some union. This statement is obviously of ontological content, therefore it is surprising that it is immediately followed by a linguistic observation, namely, that “to say ‘essence’, or to say ‘one’ does not yet constitute a proposition, but only ‘essence is one’ is a proposition.”<sup>10</sup> This raises the question why Ficino bolsters the metaphysics of the One with oneness by predication, to which he also had referred in his Plotinus commentary. The answer can be taken from the conclusion of this discourse: “The One itself is said to be beyond essence, not because of some deficiency, but because of excess; for it is better than essence or it exists in essence as its apex.” [ibid. p.1158] Obviously predication requires uniting essence and oneness, from whence it follows conversely that essence has to be subordinate with respect to oneness. Such subordination or hierarchy may not be of propositional, but only of ontological nature; hence follows the ascent from essence to the one, in a metaphysical sense. If such wordplay is allowed, Ficino has the transcendental ‘one’ transcend into transcendence. Predication, combined with ontological arguments, facilitates that transformation.

Unfailingly Ficino offers also the return to finite things by maintaining that this goodness and oneness is endowed with communicability that tends to spread over everything.<sup>11</sup> Although it is well known Scholastic teaching that the good expands by itself (*bonum est diffusivum sui*), nested in epistemology and Platonic hierarchy, it serves as a moral appeal to strive for knowing God. Yet, the most surprising turn in this chapter is still to come. After reiterating that all shortcomings or privations, all changes, and even the formless matter participate in some way in oneness and goodness, and that they, of course, aspire to unite with the Good, Ficino ventures to say that we “conjecture” (*coniectamus*) the existence of the One and the Good as the principle of everything. Not only does

<sup>9</sup> P. 153. The quotation is Allen's translation; the cosmological interpretation is my literal translation of the same sentence: *Eatenus vero cognitio eius extenditur quatenus operatio*. This is to highlight the ambivalence of Ficino's language.

<sup>10</sup> Ficino 1983, In Parmenidem, chapter 41, p.1157: ... *quaelibet res ... est unum aliquid partim in se ab aliis distinctum, partim subiens cum caeteris unionem. Rursus dicere essentiam, vel dicere unum nondum et sermo, sed dicere essentiam unum, iam est sermo.*

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.: ... *ad primum ... pertinet et communicabilitas per omnia se diffundens.*

he employ a key term of Cusanus's epistemology, he also risks jeopardizing the entire metaphysical claim of his discourses on the One by downgrading his arguments to conjectures, however necessary and coherent. Ficino's discourses on the One may be read as analytical, a priori judgments on the meaning of essence and the transcendentals. The terminology of inference and conjecture, however, pertains to the realm of a posteriori argumentation, even if the basis of conclusions is not sense data but concepts. It is in this section that Ficino makes his famous remark about Giovanni Pico to have failed to heed the lessons of those discourses.

With these observations it becomes clear that we seriously need to look at Ficino's epistemology as suggested in book 8 of his Platonic Theology. In describing the operation of the human intellect, Ficino draws upon the standard hierarchy of abstraction from sense perception via representation to intelligence, but he divides the operation that retains the sense perception into "imagination" and "phantasy".<sup>12</sup> This allows him to keep the operation of data processing, such as recognition and primary judgment ('this is so and so'), on a lower level of mental operation: "particular concepts of the phantasy are called ... the bodiless intentions of bodies".<sup>13</sup> True abstract knowledge ascends "to the divine idea", whereby the universals of Aristotelian terminology are understood as immaterial realities.<sup>14</sup> This Platonic turn of the process of abstraction leads to the notion that cognition, even that of particulars, is a process of comparing and referring things to the intellect itself, i. e. a reflexive or transcendental intuition of reality based on absolute ideas, to the effect that the intellect itself is absolute and uncontaminated of the particulars it cognizes.<sup>15</sup> Concepts have their 'place' or 'seat' exclusively in the intellect, never in a body.<sup>16</sup> On this basis Ficino is able to argue that the intellect, by its very act of operation, is to be defined as incorporeal: "Clearly, then, the intellect is not only incorporeal but immortal too, since it always forms and perfects itself through itself by its own activity,

<sup>12</sup> Ficino, Platonic Theology, vol. 2, book 8, chapter 1, n.2, p.262: *Ascendit enim per sensum, imaginationem, phantasiam, intelligentiam. Imaginatio*, here, takes the place traditionally assigned to memory. Cf. Jörg Hardy, *Die unsterbliche, erkenntnisfähige Seele bei Platon und Ficino*, in: Matthias and Burkhard Mojsisch (eds.), *Potentiale des menschlichen Geistes: Freiheit und Kreativität*, Wiesbaden 2003, 25–60.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* n. 3, p. 265. The terminology alludes at the scholastic 'second intentions'.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* n. 6, p. 269.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* n. 8, pp. 270/272: *intellectum ... particularem quoque cognoscere ... quando omnes comparat ad seipsum. ... Quam quidem vim a virtute intellectus in quo et a quo est adipiscitur, quasi intellectus ipse sit absolutus. ... Inde discursu quodam per actum speciemque in simulacrum, quo incitante species concepta fuerat, sese reflectens, particulare iam prospicit.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* chapter 4, *passim*.



forever understanding and willing.”<sup>17</sup> Ficino's method is to appropriate Aristotelian epistemology into a Platonic framework that endows abstract notions with an ontological status of spiritual reality, which he spells out in his work through systems of hierarchies and interferences between the various degrees of soul as we have seen at the beginning. From Ficino's description of the operation of the intellect it becomes clear that for him cognition is an act that takes place within the realm of spirituality, understood purely metaphysically. We may conclude that any act of intellection, even of the basest objects, by way of retracing the Forms in the intellect itself, takes place in that metaphysical realm or hypostasis. This is good news, for – as is evident – it makes plausible that man can, should, and will ascend to God as the ultimate source of this forms. However, the basic method is not at all logic, nor metaphysics, and it is more than rhetoric: it is analogical or proportional thinking. This method has been applied successfully wherever conjectures were needed in order to describe a realm that eludes description. It is dangerous, however, to believe in it, for in that case the analogy collapses as soon as any of the elements of the proportion prove to be inexistent. That's why I had emphasized the precarious status of the angelic mind, and the same may be said about the status of truth in the proportional analogy of matter-intellect-mind-truth. “Any idea in our mind draws its origin from the senses on the occasion that the movements in our brain give the soul the occasion to form various ideas.”<sup>18</sup> That's how the Cartesians Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole expressed it. Neoplatonic metaphysics of spirituality can easily turn into rationalism.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. chapter 15, n. 2. Cf. Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Il pensiero filosofico di Marsilio Ficino*, Florence 1988, chapter 2, 5.

<sup>18</sup> Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, *La logique ou L'art de penser*, ed. Pierre Clair and François Girbal, Paris 1993, p.46: “... on peut dire au-contre, que nulle idée qui est dans notre esprit ne tire son origine des sens, sinon par occasion, en ce que les mouvemens, qui se font dans notre cerveau, qui est tout ce que peuvent faire nos sens, donnent occasion à l'ame de se former diverses idées qu'elle ne se formeroit pas sans cela, quoique presque toûjours ces idées n'ayent rien de semblable à ce qui se fait dans les sens et dans le cerveau, et qu'il y ait de plus un très-grand nombre d'idées, qui ne tenant rien du-tout d'aucune image corporelle, ne peuvent sans une absurdité visible être rapportées à nos sens.”

