Marsilio Ficino: Platonic Theology. Volume 6, Books XVII–XVIII translated by Michael J. B. Allen. Latin text edited by James Hankins with William Bowen

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Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) lived and worked at a time when the Italian peninsula was brimming with enthusiasm over the discovery and translation of classical Greek manuscripts arriving from the East. It was a time when tired scholastic Aristotelianism found itself face to face with a lively idealistic Platonism mixed with the ebullience of a new Humanism. The fall of Constantinople in 1453 made available a body of literature that, up until that time, had only played an indirect influence on the intellectual maturation of Europe. Ficino himself played a major role in the translation and dissemination of this newly accessible literature. He was not only endowed with an extraordinary capacity to render Greek into Latin quickly and accurately, but he displayed an uncanny ability to remember what he had read in even the minutest of detail.

At an early age, Ficino showed a keen interest not only in literature, but also in the natural sciences, the methods of which were still rather crude at the time. His father was a successful physician, and Ficino's writings show that he was especially familiar with common procedures in the medical arts of the period. Above all, Ficino's education led him more deeply into a practical approach to philosophy that flowed from contemplation, mysticism, and ascetic discipline. Like any learned man of the Renaissance, he was passionately interested in all areas of science and letters, yet he constantly believed knowledge to be at the service of a higher vocation towards unity with the Divine. In Ficino's mind, a firm grasp of the physical sciences was no less important than a deep understanding of speculative philosophy for the attainment of eternal beatitude.

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Yet this Renaissance man also lived before the full flowering of the scientific revolution. He died a half-century before Copernicus' *De revolutionibus* and almost a full century before Newton's *Principia mathematica*. Consequently, while he adheres to much of the science of the past, his reader senses a deep hunger for the scientific progress yet to come.

Thanks to the assiduousness of translator Michael J. B. Allen and editor James Hankins, the I Tatti Renaissance Library has offered a six volume edition of all 18 books of Ficino's masterpiece, *Platonic Theology (Theologia platonica de immortalitate animorum)*. While this work is primarily an attempt to systematize the Platonic tradition's theory of the immortal soul, it holds no little interest for historians of science seeking to understand better the period immediately preceding the scientific revolution of the 16th century. The reader quickly gains a sense of the ersatz intellectual *milieu* characterizing the early Renaissance in which philosophy blends with theology, astronomy with astrology, and scientific theory with the arts of magic. Though I touch upon the more salient aspects of this entire work for the history of science, this review will focus more narrowly on the most recently published sixth and final volume of this handsome set, encompassing books 17 and 18.

Ficino had already well established himself as a premiere scholar in Florence by the time he began writing *Platonic Theology* in 1469. He had always been of a rather delicate constitution, and at that time he had just recovered from a severe bout of melancholy. *Platonic Theology* reveals a certain sense of sobriety towards philosophical methodology, without losing an enthusiasm for Plato and his philosophical legacy. In that same year, Ficino had completed a Latin translation of the Platonic dialogues, which were quickly devoured by the Florentine *literati*, including Ficino's friend and generous patron Lorenzo de' Medici, who had recently acceded to power over the Florentine republic.

Ficino's primary aim in *Platonic Theology* was to present a series of philosophical arguments for the immortality of the soul, a topic that had received surprisingly less attention in the Middle Ages than one would expect. Ficino's broader plan was to realize a comprehensive reconciliation between Platonic philosophy and Christian theology. His cosmology is solidly based on the Plotinian theory of

the world's procession from, and return to, the Divine Head as the source and summit of all being.

The first four books of *Platonic Theology* present an exhaustive series of arguments for the immortality of the soul. In addition to his use of traditional arguments (*rationes*), Ficino also employs confirmations (*confirmationes*) and signs (*signa*). Ficino supports each of these with evidence borrowed from the most authoritative figures in the Platonic tradition, from Proclus to Plotinus to pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. Arguments, confirmations, and signs all depend on the idea that finite immaterial substances are necessarily dependent on an infinite immaterial substance. Though Ficino does not hesitate to use principles drawn from the Aristotelian philosophy of nature when helpful (form/matter, act/potency, substance/accident), he leans more heavily upon Neoplatonic ideas of immaterial dependency and emanation. He avoids arguments along the lines of 'motion' and 'becoming' and focuses rather on substance and being. Ficino consequently favors theoretical notions over empirical methods. He moves in a Neoplatonic fashion from unchangeable nature towards sensible nature.

The idea of 'likeness' is strongly prevalent in Ficino's analysis. Scientists after Ficino began to pay more attention to similar physical behaviors of worldly phenomena. In particular, attention toward quantitative change allowed for measurement (facilitated by the use of more precise instruments of measurement), which opened the door to the possibility of discovering universal abstract laws expressed in mathematical formulae. However, Ficino stresses that similarity primarily and more perfectly consists in the realm of the super-sensible. Like resembles like not in a quantifiable or measurable way, but precisely in the type of perfection constitutive of immaterial substances. Mathematical principles are not arrived at through repeated observation and measurement, but rather *a priori* through the mind's similarity to the divine substance.

In a way, such an approach sufficed for the artistic culture surrounding Ficino. Wisdom (*sophia*) was pursed through the humanities rather than the empirical sciences as understood today. In many ways, Ficino represents a culture that subordinated practical to aesthetic ends. A resurgence of interest in the relationship between

the practical arts and speculative philosophy during the early Renaissance has inspired some fascinating studies [cf. King 2000]. Architects, for example, frantically devised methods of construction that would allow aesthetic aspirations to be realized more easily. Large cathedrals topped with enormous domes were undoubtedly sought in order to showcase political prowess and imitate the magnificent achievements of Greco-Roman civilization, but the philosophical ideas of a chain of being, divine emanation, and the perfection of numerical ratios drove the pursuits of both scientists and artists.

Books 6 and 7 of *Platonic Philosophy* turn to more particular arguments for the immateriality of the soul and its divine similitude. Ficino returns to Aristotelian natural philosophy, though clearly in its more Platonic elements. Ficino reviews Aristotle's arguments for the soul's immateriality with an eye toward how the latter would have addressed specific groups within the atomist and Stoic schools. Ficino evinces a great harmony between Plato and Aristotle on these points as he proceeds to reconsider Plato's analogy of the cave in book 6 of the *Republic*. Only later did philosophers begin to point out the differences between Plato and Aristotle in natural philosophy. Ficino shows he is not ignorant of Aristotle's difference with Plato over the metaphysical status of the Forms, but the difference has considerably less import for him than it does for philosophers today. Science (in the sense of *episteme*), Ficino remarks, strives for a knowledge of causes, in the writings of both Plato and Aristotle. Aristotle recognized the soul and other immaterial substances as ultimate causal principles, and to this extent he was much indebted to Plato.

In books 9 and 10, we find that Ficino emphasizes the more Platonic elements of other ancient philosophers, both those who preceded Plato and those following him. He refutes the materialism of Epicurus and Lucretius as untenable, relying once more on the notion of 'fittingness' that is most characteristic of immaterial substances. In these books, Ficino paves the way for a scientific view of reality based on *logos*. Though the empirical sciences had not yet advanced to a stage where evidence for *logos* emerged from mathematical laws of physical phenomena, Ficino is confident that a principle of order must logically exist on account of the divine similarity of the created world. In demonstrating the existence of the immateriality and immortality of the soul, Ficino implicitly opens up the possibility of abstract, 'immaterial' laws that govern inanimate things. Whereas

Ficino flirts with pantheism throughout *Platonic Theology*, his more general idea of a rational order pervading the world strongly suggests that abstract laws of motion would easily be found at some time in the future.

In books 14 and following, Ficino in fact presents a detailed argument of caution. He does not want to lead the reader into an Averroist understanding of the world in which one soul unites all intellectual substances. Ficino returns to the medieval debate over the relationship between the 'passive' and 'active' intellect. The basis for this distinction, which is enigmatic in Aristotle, is that the mind both apprehends and understands. It both receives and acts. In philosophical terms, it is both a *mens mensurans* and a *mens mensurata* (a measuring mind and a measured mind). Averroës (1126–1198) had purported a metaphysics that made it impossible for a plurality of intellects to understand universal principles identically without a corresponding understanding principle identical in itself; hence the need for a single agent intellect to explain all universal knowledge. Individual subjects are able to receive the sensible properties of things as individuals, but a universal understanding of the things displaying those properties can only be explained by a unified understanding principle.

Ficino's refutation of Averroës, based on clear Thomist lines of reasoning, shows that Ficino had not left Scholastic arguments behind. He rather re-appropriated them within his Neoplatonic framework, emphasizing the difference between the Ideas separate from the world and the ideas apprehended by the human mind. Though the latter may only be a shadow of the former, individual knowing subjects have the power to understand the latter precisely because of the human mind's assimilation to the divine source behind the former. Furthermore, Ficino realized that any doctrine undermining the proper autonomous existence of the soul placed his religious orthodoxy in question. He ardently desired to maintain his Christian orthodoxy throughout *Platonic Theology*, as he concludes this work with the inscription, '*in omnibus quae aut hic aut alibi a me tractantur, tantum assertum esse volo quantum ab Ecclesia comprobatur*' ('in all I discuss, either here or elsewhere, I wish to maintain only what meets with the approval of the Church').

For all his desire to remain with the limits of Christian orthodoxy, Ficino was held under considerable suspicion by church authorities

both during and after his lifetime. Ironically, he was eventually held under just as much suspicion by scientists, including Galileo, who found themselves at odds with the Church. *Platonic Theology* shows that, in many ways, they shared the same mission, though the inspiration was literary in the case of Ficino and scientific in the case of Galileo.

Allen's translation of Ficino's work is a crucial contribution to Renaissance studies. Though Ficino had few ingenious insights to offer into the nature of scientific methodology and autonomy in respect to speculative principles, his work helps us to appreciate the revolutionary changes taking place between the mid-14th and 16th centuries. The sources of learning changed considerably, but the passion for learning was very much the same. Scholars must be careful not to dismiss Ficino on account of his primitive views of science. As one reads *Platonic Theology*, it can be quite shocking to find the author moving from a finely-tuned analysis of difficult philosophical principles to bizarre references to magic, astrology, alchemy, and the occult. Yet we could easily find other such startling contrasts in any intellectual period preceding or following the early Renaissance.

A closer reading of this work reveals that Ficino's fascination with Platonism stems from more than just a voracious appetite for rediscovered Greek manuscripts: the Aristotelianism of the Scholastic period was gradually losing its appeal, and was increasingly despised as an arid approach to arcane questions. On more than one occasion, ecclesiastical authorities, such as the saintly Archbishop of Florence, Antoninus, tried in vain to persuade the cleric (Ficino was ordained a priest in 1473) to concentrate more on Thomas Aquinas and less on Plato. Yet, in his writings, Ficino drops hints that he not only finds Platonism more appealing from a philosophical point of view, but that he recognizes several serious shortcomings in Aristotle's natural science. The Stagirite had a monumental influence on medieval, and especially Thomist, metaphysics; but towards the beginning of the 14th century, this influence had the adverse effect of encouraging a dogmatic approach to Aristotle's entire corpus.

One example may be found in the enduring respect paid to Aristotle's laws of motion, which were repeatedly revisited and reworked before finally being abandoned. Most egregious, however, was Aristotle's astronomy, which, because it denied the existence of empty

space, proposed an explanation of planetary motion that was overly cumbersome.

Of course, Ficino was not quite able to find more satisfying explanatory principles of the physical world in the works of Plato. Indeed, most of Aristotle's errors were the result of his direct indebtedness to Pythagoras and Plato at the time he developed his physical theory. *Platonic Theology*, however, reveals that it was not so much dissatisfaction with Aristotle *per se* as disillusionment with the methods of Scholastic interpreters during the late Middle Ages that spurred Ficino to search for alternative explanations. Many aspects of Ficino's theory of the soul are actually quite Aristotelian, in as far as he relies on the Peripatetic to help him refute the Averroist doctrine of a single intellect permeating all intelligent beings. Yet Ficino's attraction to simplified explanations of both the universe and the individual soul based on circular motion shows that Ficino viewed Plato as a promising alternative to the various dogmatic approaches to Aristotelian science emerging especially in the late Middle Ages.

In book 15, chapter 7 of *Platonic Theology*, for example, Ficino unhesitatingly adopts Aristotle's theory of act and potency to illustrate the relationship of soul to body. In book 14, chapter 2, however, he shows caution in the way he draws upon Aristotle's law of motion to support his own Platonic theory of the soul's inclination toward the good and the true.

Platonic Theology manifests a continuing fascination with mathematical explanations of worldly phenomena that had begun with Pythagoras and was passed on through both Plato and Aristotle. Although there were enormous strides during the early Renaissance towards a greater understanding of human anatomy, experimental methods in the physical sciences had yet to be developed. Consequently, though Ficino and his contemporaries vastly expanded their knowledge of human physiology, they were less inclined to question the numerical basis of earthly and heavenly motions explained in terms of more and less 'perfect' numerical proportions. For this reason, Ficino is closely associated with the advancement of art—Botticelli, Raphael, Titian, and Michaelangelo were all directly inspired by the Platonic Academy in Florence—but not with progress in the physical sciences. Ficino tended to move from abstract number to physical reality in his attempt to understand the world, just as Plato tended to move from the ideal to the real.

English translations of Ficino's works have the notorious reputation for quickly going out of print. It would be sad if the same destiny were in store for Allen's translation. His translation renders a daunting neo-Latin style into elegant English. It will provide readers unfamiliar with Latin a glimpse of a period both glorious in its artistic achievements yet in many ways quite rudimentary in its scientific understanding of the world. Familiarity with Ficino and other humanists may not considerably increase our understanding of scientific methods, but it will enhance our appreciation of the ways in which theoretical and speculative philosophy influence our scientific way of looking at the world.

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