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Ficino on the Exalted and Suffering Body: Comparing the *Platonic Theology* and *On the Christian Religion*

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AT a crucial moment in his monumental *Platonic Theology*, Marsilio Ficino asks whether the dead can appear to the living.¹ He has a needle to thread. On the one hand, he has established that the human soul needs the body only for a relatively short span, meaning that an enlightened soul, once separated from the coarse body, will go on to exalt in higher things. He therefore dismisses a heretical doctrine associated with Platonism, namely, the transmigration of souls. On the other hand, he was aware of ancient sources who confirmed that the dead sometimes seek vengeance and return favors. He was also likely aware that prominent authorities of the Catholic Church had endorsed the existence of apparitions. Thomas Aquinas, for example, had allowed that saints could appear whenever they wished; other souls, whether blessed or damned, could manifest themselves for the edification of the living, as long as God willed it.² So Ficino concedes that some ghostly return is possible. Even an enlightened soul ends its earthly life with a habit or disposition inclining it toward the bodily; until this disposition evaporates, the soul may care enough about the mortal coil to visit again. All while remaining invisible, such a soul can move aethereal bodies and «[caution] our reason and our phantasy from day to day by means of thoughts, visions, and signs».³

It is fitting that a ghost story starring Ficino made the rounds in the seventeenth century, and did so in such worthy haunts as Henry More's *The Immortality of the Soul*, and Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique*.⁴ The original source of the story is, of all places, volume six (1595) of Cesare Baronio's monumental church history, *Annales ecclesiastici*.⁵ The story is very simple, especially as presented in More and Bayle. It tells of

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¹ M. FICINO, *Platonic Theology (PT)* 16.5.5-8, ed. and trans. by M.J.B. Allen and J. Hankins, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2001-2006 («I Tatti Renaissance Library»), vol. V, pp. 268-273.

² AQUINAS, *Summa theologiae (ST)*, *Suppl.*, q. 69, a. 3, resp.

³ FICINO, *PT*, 16.5.6 (p. 271). Earlier, Ficino had also conceded, following Plotinus, that «souls take note of human affairs to the extent that a certain habit (*habitus*) or affection (*affectus*) inclining them toward bodily things lingers in them». Once this habit fades away, so does their interest. *Ibidem*, 16.1.23 (p. 253).

⁴ H. MORE, *The Immortality of the Soul*, in *A Collection of Several Philosophical Writings*, London, J. Fleisher, 1662, p. 132. P. BAYLE, *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, Amsterdam, P. Brunel, 1740 (5th ed.), vol. I, pp. 602-603, fn. E. Bayle takes the text of the anecdote directly from Pierre de Saint-Romauld's *Trésor chronologique*. See P. DE SAINT-ROMAULD, *Abrégé chronologique et historique*, Paris, F. Clovzier, 1662, vol. III, pp. 328-329. Regarding the presence of the ghost story in More, I am indebted to A. CORRIAS, *L'immortalità individuale dell'anima nel Commento a Plotino di Marsilio Ficino*, «Bruniana & Campanelliana», XIX, 2013, pp. 21-31 at pp. 22-23.

⁵ C. BARONIO, *Annales ecclesiastici a Christo nato ad annum 1198* (vol. VI), Rome, Congregatio Oratorii, 1595. For ease, I have consulted BARONIO, *Annales* (vol. VI), Barri-Ducis, Guerin, 1866, pp. 585-586. Baronio was a prominent intellectual of the Catholic Church. He became a member of the Congregation for the Index in

how Ficino had made a pact with his friend, the Platonist philosopher Michele Mercati. They promised that whoever died first would return, if possible, to contact the other and give some indication of how things stood in the next world. On the morning of Ficino's death, Mercati was at work in his study when he heard a horse galloping at full speed in the street outside. He then perceived the voice of Ficino crying out that everything they had discussed was true. When Mercati rose and went to the window, he caught a glimpse of his friend racing away, clad in white and mounted on a white steed. Mercati, it must be said, lived far from Florence, where Ficino had died. Thus the story in More and Bayle. But the original telling, as it appears in Baronio, is more polemical, more challenging. To begin with, Baronio claims to have heard it directly from Mercati's grandson, a protonotary of the Church and a man of moral rectitude and learning.⁶ Baronio begins by suggesting that Ficino and Mercati could never really draw enough certainty of the soul's immortality from Plato. Where Platonism tottered, they relied on the «sacraments of Christian faith» to prop it up.⁷ Baronio specifies that Mercati, that early morning, was plunged in «philosophical speculation». We might expect that his friend's triumphant return would only bolster his confidence in the ancient philosophers. On the contrary, Mercati experienced a profound break with his past. He «said goodbye to the discipline of philosophy» to devote himself entirely to «Christian philosophy, loftier than the others». This man, who had once been a renowned philosopher, became «a model of absolute Christian duty».⁸ Ficino's apparition, it seems, effectively rendered his own life's work meaningless; it was an injunction to faith via faith, not via reason. Intentionally or not, Baronio was rather cruel to the man whose Platonic *magnum opus* bore the subtitle *De immortalitate animorum*.

Writing his Church history in the 1580s and 90s, Baronio conveys something of the debates that had occupied intellectuals throughout the sixteenth century. The relationship between philosophy and theology, especially their consonance or dissonance on the question of human immortality, was a signal concern. Ficino had of course sought to bring Plato into the fray against the Averroist philosophy that had gained a solid foothold in the universities. Platonic philosophy, Ficino thought, was uniquely capable of supporting Christian doctrine on the question of the soul's immortality.⁹ Yet for Baronio, Ficino was neither a great ally nor a great enemy. He was a philosopher among others, and he relied on the Catholic sacraments for the most difficult points of faith. This emphasis on the sacraments is perhaps to be expected, since the Council of Trent had reaffirmed that salvation was impossible without them.¹⁰ But whether Baronio knew it or not, the sacraments were almost completely absent

1596, the same year he was named Cardinal by Pope Clement VIII. The following year, he was also named Prefect of the Vatican Library. See *Catholic Church and Modern Science: Documents from the Archives of the Roman Congregation*, ed. by U. Baldini and L. Spruit, Rome, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2009, vol. I, pp. 2799-2800.

⁶ *Ibidem*, 586. Mercati's grandson was also named Michele Mercati. He was a physician and prefect of the Vatican Botanical Garden, and is remembered for his work as a botanist and antiquarian.

⁷ *Ibidem*: «Accidit autem aliquando, ut ex more, quidam post obitum supersit homini, ex eiusdem Platonis sententia, sed non sine tamen trepidatione deducerent, quae labantia Christianae fidei sacramentis suffulcienda essent [...]». Unless a published translation is cited, all translations are my own.

⁸ *Ibidem*: «Quid tum ipse? licet enim antiquae probitatis vir esset, innoxiamque et proficuum omnibus vitam hactenus excoluisset (prout decebat vere philosophum) ex eo tamen tempore, vale dicens philosophicis disciplinis, solius Christianae philosophiae caeteris eminentioris propensior cultor effectus, quod reliquum fuit temporis, mundo defunctus, soli vitae futurae vixit, specimen edens absolutissimi omnibus muneris Christiani, qui inter philosophos sui temporis magna cum laude claruerat nulli secundus».

⁹ The Fifth Lateran Council decreed afterwards in 1513 that philosophy must support Catholic doctrine on immortality.

¹⁰ The Council saw itself as combatting Protestant beliefs on *sola fide* and the purely natural or ceremonial nature of the sacraments. See P. WALTER, *Sacraments in the Council of Trent and Sixteenth Century Catholic*

from Ficino's major treatise on Christian theology proper, the *De christiane religione* (1476), written as he was finishing up the first version of the *Platonic Theology*, which was later revised and published in 1482.¹¹ Perhaps this omission makes sense. Aquinas had laid out various reasons why the sacraments are indispensable to salvation, but they reduce to a fundamental point: human nature needs corporeal and sensible things to lead it upward to spiritual and intelligible knowledge.¹² For Ficino, philosophy seems more or less sufficient to raise the intellect.¹³ It would not be absurd to read a work like the *Platonic Theology* and conclude, as Kristeller did, that intellectual excellence and a well-trained will¹⁴ are there the sole and necessary conditions for salvation.¹⁵ In this vein, the doctrine of resurrection also seems an awkward fit with the general orientation of Ficino's philosophy.¹⁶ Over and over in the *Platonic Theology*, through an awe-inspiring variety of demonstrations, we learn that the telos of the rational soul is separation from the material and a return to the purely immaterial. And yet the end result of Catholic salvation must be the reuniting of a soul with its perfected and eternal body.

Beginning with a ghost story, we reach one of the more intractable problems in Ficino's thought: the place of the body, and specifically the human body. This issue is central. To borrow a term from mathematics, we could ask whether Ficino's Platonic theology and his Christian theology are isomorphic. Does every point in one field map onto a point in the other, so that we can go back and forth without losing the underlying structures? If there *is* a mismatch, the question of the body might be a good place to look. My goal will be more modest. I would like to compare the *Platonic Theology* and the *De christiana religione* on this one issue: the significance of the body. In doing so, I would like to detail how these two works support one another. I would then like to suggest how they might not perfectly correspond: the body of a Christian carries in its suffering a significance that falls outside the metaphysical horizon of the *Platonic Theology*.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL BODY

WHY, in a perfectly ordered cosmos, should the human soul have been saddled with an elemental body in the first place?¹⁷ Unsurprisingly, Ficino makes the body an indispensable helpmate to intellectual development. Doing so, he establishes, as it were, the initial goodness

Theology, in *The Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology*, ed. by H. Boersma and M. Levering, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 313-328, esp. pp. 316-317.

¹¹ J. LAUSTER, *Marsilio Ficino as a Christian Thinker*, in *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy*, ed. by M.J.B. Allen, V. Rees, M. Davies, Leiden, Brill, pp. 45-69 at p. 68: «Obviously, [Ficino's] concentration on the experience of the soul gave his theology a very individual character. He hardly deals with the Sacraments, for example, and not at all with theories concerning the Church». On the composition of the *De christiana religione*, see C. VASOLI, *Il De christiana religione di Marsilio Ficino. Parole chiave: religione, sapienza, profezia, vita civile, ebrei*, «Bruniana & Campanelliana», XIII, 2007, pp. 403-428 at pp. 403-406. I will refer to the *De christiana religione* by its Latin title, since the English «On the Christian Religion» quickly becomes unwieldy.

¹² AQUINAS, ST, III, q. 61, a. 1, resp.

¹³ I will touch upon Ficino and the sacraments in the following section.

¹⁴ *Habitus* or *consuetudo* are two of the terms preferred by Ficino for describing the disposition of a poorly or well-conditioned will. See *PT*, 18.10 (pp. 187-199), especially the discussion of continence and temperance. See J. HANKINS, *Iamblichus, Ficino and Schleiermacher on the Sources of Religious Knowledge*, «Erudition and the Republic of Letters», I, 2016, pp. 1-12 at p. 2.

¹⁵ P.O. KRISTELLER, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, Gloucester (MA), Peter Smith, 1964 [1948], pp. 214-218. For the unity of philosophy and theology in Ficino, see A.B. COLLINS, *The Secular is Sacred: Platonism and Thomism in Marsilio Ficino's Platonic Theology*, The Hague, Nijhoff, 1974, pp. 1-7.

¹⁶ See M.J.B. ALLEN, «*Quisque in sphaera sua*»: Plato's Statesman, Marsilio Ficino's Platonic Theology, and the Resurrection of the Body, «Rinascimento», XLVII, 2007, pp. 25-48.

¹⁷ Kristeller emphasizes the perfection of the Ficinean world. See KRISTELLER, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, cit., pp. 60-74.

of the body and thus departs dramatically from Plotinus. It would be worth looking briefly at Ficino's arguments.¹⁸ When God contemplates His essence, Ficino begins, He contemplates all of being: all genera, species and individuals. Angels, on the other hand, must receive some ideas from God, some forms (*formae*) and models (*exemplaria*). The loftiest angels receive very few such ideas, but benefit from the simplest and most powerful ray of intellectual light. Since their minds are so active, they deduce immediately the nature of species and individuals. These highest minds are like the best doctors, arriving «through a single symptom at a prognosis for a sick person, whereas an unskilled doctor needs many more symptoms to make a diagnosis».¹⁹ The intellectual ray complexifies as it travels away from its source. As minds grow weaker (from angelic to heroic and demonic), they receive more and more ideas to compensate for their increasing passivity. Finally, «that divine ray, the form-giver of minds», traverses «countless degrees of intermediary spirits» to arrive at the «the very lowest minds», the property of the human soul.²⁰ The human mind, therefore, receives many ideas corresponding to the species of things. Unlike angelic minds, however, it is too feeble to divide these universals into particulars. If it persisted in this state, with nothing but its *a priori* inheritance, it would remain in confusion and deprivation, a kind of undignified myopia.

Hence, we reach a key moment of the *Platonic Theology* where we learn why human souls must spend time in a body,²¹ a body that seems otherwise in Ficino's writing to be the source of immense spiritual danger. The human soul has an intellectual need for sensory experience; it needs, through sense and fantasy, to be filled with a diversity of individual forms. Through education and training or long custom (*per diuturnam consuetudinem*), the soul learns to fit individuals to universals, bringing knowledge to its perfection in the divine forms. Once separated from body, it can easily «distribute the universal Ideas of the mind into particular notions».²² Ficino makes the ladder of knowledge²³ — from sense to imagination, to phantasy and finally to understanding — the very process that justifies the soul's embodiment in the first place. As I have mentioned, this is a quite substantial departure from Plotinus, for whom the descent of the soul is self-inflicted punishment for a moral error.²⁴ Plotinus does grant that some good can come of the descent, however, as long as the soul extricates itself from bodily attachments; the soul acquires knowledge of evil and vice, bringing into actuality certain powers that would have remained dormant had it stayed in the incorporeal world.²⁵ Ficino would perhaps agree on these points, but certainly not on the wickedness of the body. Rather, the body provides a necessary service to the weakest of intellects. Ficino thus motivates, clearly and simply, the place of the body in a Christian Platonism.

Or he nearly does. Because the body in Christianity is not like a raft to leave behind once the soul has arrived at other shores. On the contrary, the resurrection of an eternal body is a central point of Catholic faith. Michael Allen has underlined this difference between Ficino's interest in the immortality of the soul and that of the Catholic Church.²⁶ Throughout

¹⁸ Ficino, *PT*, 16.1 (vol. V, pp. 228-255).

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 239. For Ficino and medicine, see T. Katinis in this volume.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 237. V. Comacchi and D.J.-J. Robichaud also discuss in this volume the place of intermediary spirits in Ficino.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 245. In addition, we also learn why the lower powers of the soul are necessary — those powers of phantasy, sense and nutrition tied to bodily functions. *Ibidem*, pp. 263-265.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 251.

²³ Described clearly in *PT*, 8.1 (vol. II, pp. 262-273).

²⁴ PLOTINUS, *Enneads*, ed. by L.P. Gerson, translated by G. Boys-Stones et al., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, IV.8.4-5 (pp. 516-519).

²⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 518-519.

²⁶ Allen, *Quisque in sphaera sua*, cit., p. 30

most (although not all) of the *Platonic Theology*, we find that the mission of the rational soul is to free itself from the body. For the Church, on the other hand, the resurrection of the *body* is central, arguably more so than the immortality of the soul. No mention of soul is made, for example, in the Apostles' Creed, the basis of the Roman Catechism composed in the aftermath of the Council of Trent. Instead, the Creed ends with an assertion of the body's resurrection and eternal life.²⁷ Aquinas had argued that the human soul, immortal and immaterial, does not rise to the level of substance on its own; the human substance is soul *and* body united.²⁸ This became the standard position of the church. Ficino lays out a similar set of arguments drawn, he says, from the «Christian theologians» (Aquinas foremost) and emphasizing the soul's instinct and inclination toward the body.²⁹ Moreover, without bodily resurrection, a whole or complete divine justice would prove impossible: eternal joy or suffering are experienced *completely*, meaning that joy and suffering must also be corporeal; the body is an essential site of divine justice. Ficino concurred: «Therefore, in order to participate with [the soul] simultaneously in the rewards or in the punishments too, the body is restored eventually to the soul».³⁰

In Book XVIII of the *Platonic Theology*, Ficino deals specifically with the bodies of pure and impure souls.³¹ Of the pure, we learn that they enjoy a «double felicity», an intellectual joy of the soul in God and a felicity of the body. What is this body like? It is like the eye: round, shining, incredibly responsive. It immediately perceives the desires manifest in others and perceives itself in the reflection that it casts, just as the eye catches its reflection in the eyes of another:

Like the eyes [the bodies of pure souls] are therefore round, clear, brilliant, superlatively quick in their motion; and everywhere they look around at all things with the utmost ease. They declare the desires and thoughts of their own rational souls, and it is easy for them to indicate these to the rest of the souls by a sort of wink.³²

Having discussed the ancient, Platonic view on the soul's body after death, Ficino then comes to the Christian doctrine of resurrection. When the mind is conjoined to God, the intellect and the will «together transfuse their wonderful splendor and capacity for motion entirely to the body», and elevate the body to the «clarity and power of celestial bodies».³³ Ficino even suggests that the blessed body will rise up and take its place in the aethereal region.³⁴ He does not seem to have in mind a resurrected body including blood, hair and nails, as Aquinas thought it must have,³⁵ but rather a spherical, stellar body.

Whether he knows it or not, he here skirts an ancient heresy. The doctrine of a resurrected body as literally a celestial body had been condemned by the Second Council of Constantinople in 553, as Nicephorus records: «If somebody says or believes that at the

²⁷ Likewise, in the Roman Catechism, the brief discussion on the soul's immortality is ensconced within a wider exposition on bodily resurrection. See article XI on «The Resurrection of the Body» in *The Catechism of the Council of Trent*, trans. by J. Donovan, Dublin, W. Folds and Son, 1829, pp. 115-126, esp. 118-119.

²⁸ AQUINAS, ST, I, q. 75, esp. a. 2 and a. 3.

²⁹ Ficino emphasizes that the soul's internal nature requires that it be joined to its particular body. *PT*, 18.9 (p. 173): «No soul will ever be blessed unless, having recovered its body, it is led back (or hopes to be led back) to the whole».

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ *PT*, 18.9-10 (vol. VI, pp. 165-207).

³² *PT*, 18.9.2 (p. 179).

³³ *PT*, 18.9.15 (p. 179).

³⁴ *Ibidem*: «In penetrating [the aether], the purest body neither damages the aether nor is itself damaged, having now been rendered aethereal in power and quality».

³⁵ AQUINAS, ST, *Suppl.*, q. 80, a. 2 and 3.

resurrection the human body will be round and spherical [...] let him be cursed».³⁶ In whatever case, it is abundantly clear that the resurrected body is more or less the spiritual or «pneumatic» body that plays a starring role in the *De vita libri tres* (1489), a book devoted to the health of this spiritual body, the glowing intermediary between the soul and its elemental carriage.³⁷ There, Ficino advises his readers on how they can channel the *spiritus mundi*, mediated through stellar rays, to restore vitality and balance to their bodies and passions.³⁸ In a very literal sense, the care of this spirit is a care for the vehicle of the soul that, at death, will spring upwards toward the aether. This casts into doubt any thought that Ficino held to a literal reunion of soul with some grosser body. Instead, the resurrected body is the luminous, barely corporeal emanation of a pure soul.

Now, the *Platonic Theology* also discusses the plight of impure souls, those that have been poorly trained, habituated into incontinence or intemperance. Both the incontinent and intemperate have given into what from Ficino's perspective is the fundamental sin, submitting to sensual, corporeal desire rather than to the intellect of God. There is a glimmer of hope for the incontinent, though, and that glimmer makes all the difference. During life, their reason had achieved some capacity, however limited, for overtaking the corporeal passions. After death, they live a kind of nightmare, but it is a nightmare that acts as purgatory, allowing reason to reclaim complete dominance. Unfortunately, this capacity is altogether lacking in the intemperate: their vagary will be eternal. Because of their intensely perverted love — a love purely for the corporeal — the rational soul at death cannot, by its own light, fuel the upward ascent of the spiritual body. Instead, «the soul weaves another body for itself as soon as possible from the vapors of the elements».³⁹ These vaporous bodies take bestial shape, and through these bodies lost souls feed on «passions of the flesh» (*passiones corporis*). Damnation, then, is an eternal fever dream, a clinging to the elemental body, a haunting of the elemental world for the sake of never-ending sensual pleasure. Ficino has naturalized, in his way, the lots of the blessed and damned. He explicitly adds one theological point to the mix: «Theologians of the Christians», he writes, will say that the damned also recognize their eternal separation from God and the weight of their own fault, and so their agony is even more acute.⁴⁰

I would emphasize that the health of the spiritual body in life seems to be marked by a kind of moderate pleasure, a pleasure found by the soul when it is in its proper abode, when the intellect follows God, and the body and senses follow the soul; we will see in a moment

³⁶ NICEPHORUS, *Historiae Ecclesiasticae libri XVIII*, Book 17, chap. 28. I have quoted from the Frankfurt 1618 edition, p. 1082.

³⁷ Outside of his translations, book three of the *De vita* was arguably the most influential of Ficino's writings in the sixteenth century, given its extraordinarily wide reception in some of the most original natural philosophies. Walker's *Spiritual and Demonic Magic* remains a very useful overview of this sixteenth-century reception. D.P. WALKER, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic: From Ficino to Campanella*, University Park, PA, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000 [1958]. *Spiritus* in this sense is something like the first corporeal emanation of the soul. Highly refined and barely material, it mediates between the immaterial soul and the material body. Ficino's conception of *spiritus* is a synthesis of the Neoplatonic astral body and the medical spirits of Galenic medicine. On *spiritus*, see *PT*, 7.6.1-2 (vol. II, pp. 234-239), and M. FICINO, *Three Books on Life*, ed. and trans. by C.V. Kaske and J.R. Clark, Tempe, Arizona, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1998 [1989], III.3, pp. 254-257, and p. 27 of Kaske and Clark's introduction, where they write: «Ficino's unusual insertion of a world-spirit analogous to our medical spirits between the World-soul and matter represents his personal addition to Plotinus».

³⁸ On the relationship between *spiritus* and stellar rays, see H.D. RUTKIN, «The Physics and Metaphysics of Talismans (*Imagines Astronomicae*) in Marsilio Ficino's *De vita libri tres*: A Case Study in (Neo)Platonism, Aristotelianism and the Esoteric Tradition», in *Platonismus und Esoterik in byzantinischem Mittelalter und italienischer Renaissance*, ed. by H. Seng, Heidelberg, Universitätsverlag Winter, 2003, pp. 149-173 at pp. 151-160. Also see Rutkin's essay in this volume.

³⁹ *PT*, 18.10.11 (p. 193).

⁴⁰ *PT*, 18.10.20 (p. 205).

how Ficino conceives of this relationship. Ficino's view of physical pleasure is complex, but the kinds of nourishing and tempering activities described in the *De vita*, from music to exercise, are essentially harmonious with the fabric of the world and with the healthy ideal of humanity. Ficino is very open about the need for these kinds of pleasure, along with the enjoyment of odors, food, wine, gems, colors, and the physical beauty of human bodies. But all of this comes with a caveat: the kinds of physical pleasures that derive from sexual love are extremely dangerous. Ejaculation drains the male body of «youth, life, and sense», leaving a man as if he were «an old skin of a cicada drained upon the ground».⁴¹ Furthermore, in the *De amore*, Ficino describes how the physiology of romantic love, the transfer of *spiritus* between the eyes of the lover and the beloved, can result in the blood of the beloved colonizing the lover's body.⁴² Just as risky is the possibility that the lover sends out his own soul, wrapped in spiritual light, toward the eyes of the beloved, only to find a closed door and a subsequent homelessness. Ficino, despite his views on the toxicity of romantic love, still advises in the *ad lectorem* to Book III of *De vita*: «If by chance you bring with you anything contrary to love, if you have any hate, please dispose of it first, before you approach the life-giving medicines here. For it was the love and pleasures (*voluptas*) of your parents that gave you life. Conversely, hate and displeasure (*dolor*) take away life».⁴³

THE CHRISTIAN BODY

I would like to turn away from the questions of the body's metaphysical significance and discuss the suffering human body as we find it in the *De christiana religione*. It would first be worthwhile to make a few general comments on that work. Its most famous claim is that religion, as a universal human instinct, marks the essential difference between humans and animals:⁴⁴

Sometime, we see in certain beasts the particular gifts of the human genus, at least a certain resemblance, except regarding religion. Beasts do not put forth any sign of religion [...] and the adoration of the divine is altogether as natural to men as neighing to horses and barking to dogs.⁴⁵

We sacrifice so much of this worldly life for «love or fear of God» (*Dei vel amore, vel metu*), says Ficino. No other animal abstains from so many present goods in the hope for a better future after this life. And what about the pangs of conscience and fear of divine vengeance that torment us horribly?: «If then (as we have mentioned) religion is in vain, there is definitely no animal crazier and unhappier than man».⁴⁶ But God could not deceive us. And since God would never deceive us, and since nature has instilled in all humanity a reverence

⁴¹ FICINO, *Three Books on Life*, II.15 (pp. 209-211). See also his advice to scholars at *De vita* I.7. For Ficino on sexuality, see W.J. HANEGRAAFF, *Under the Mantle of Love: The Mystical Eroticism of Marsilio Ficino and Giordano Bruno*, in *Hidden Intercourse: Eros and Sexuality in the History of Western Esotericism*, ed. by W.J. Hanegraaf and J. Kripal, New York, Fordham University Press, 2008, pp. 175-207. The literature on Ficino's theory of love is vast. For a concise overview of the theory and its context, see J. KRAYE, *The Transformation of Platonic Love in the Italian Renaissance*, in *Platonism and the English Imagination*, ed. by A. Baldwin and S. Hutton, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 76-85.

⁴² M. FICINO, *Marsilio Ficino's Commentary on Plato's Symposium*, trans. by S.R. Jayne, Woodstock, CT, Spring Publications, pp. 221-224 (seventh speech, ch. 4).

⁴³ *De vita* III, *Ad lectorem*, p. 239.

⁴⁴ On this point, see VASOLI, *Il De christiana religione*, cit., pp. 407-408. Also see, J. HANKINS, *Ficino and the Religion of the Philosophers*, «Rinascimento», XLVIII, 2008, pp. 101-121 at p. 107.

⁴⁵ Ficino, *De christiana religione*, ch. 1, p. 2: «Singulas generis humani dotes videmus in bestiis quibusdam saltem secundum quamdam similitudinem excepta religione, aliquando apparere. Nullum bruta prae se ferunt religionis indicium [...] cultusque divinus, ita ferme hominibus naturalis, quaemadmodum equis hinnitus, canibus latratus».

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*: «Si ergo religio, (ut diximus) vana est, nullum est animal dementius & infelicius homine [...]».

for the divine and a belief in a life after this one, our instinct must be correct. Just as animals can sense a coming change of weather, and so act in accordance, humans sense the presence of a creator, of a life after this life, and act *religiously*:

We must especially be mindful that a prophecy which belongs to an entire species of animal, by a universal and particular instinct, is true. When, at sunrise, snakes slither out of cavities in the earth, this portends fog. At dusk, when flocks of crows fly from a certain region of air, this announces winds. There are innumerable other examples of this sort. Likewise, by the universal prophecy of man, religion is true, because all people everywhere worship God for the sake of a future life.⁴⁷

Hence, Ficino lays the foundation for a natural religion common to mankind. It began with the Hebrew prophets, flowed through the ancient philosophers and mages, and culminated in Christ.

The treatise begins with a disquisition on how, at the beginnings of religious thought and practice, God reserved the treatment of divine mysteries for «lovers of wisdom» (*amatores sapientiae*), that is, philosophers.⁴⁸ I have asked whether any of these mysteries might elude philosophy. At the conclusion of his treatise, Ficino suggests that since the teachings of faith are divine, it makes sense that they exceed us. Even here, Ficino appeals to the ancient philosophers: «Faith, as Aristotle suggested, is the foundation of science. Only through faith, as the Platonists demonstrate, do we have access to God».⁴⁹ Yet *what* teachings or points of faith does Ficino have in mind? What does he consider to surpass his intellect, or his philosophy, this in a treatise where he has devoted pages to showing how Christ's relationship to the Father fits within the emanationist scheme that we find in the *Platonic Theology*?⁵⁰ One answer is suggested by recent literature on Ficino's reception of Iamblichus. It seems that Ficino endorsed a few critical Iamblichian innovations: that the human soul was in fundamental contact with the divine (this contact being the basis of the human religious instinct); that theurgical rites, which Ficino translated as *sacramenta* in the *De mysteriis Aegyptiorum* (1497), are not essentially of an intellectual nature; and that divine union transcended the intellectual and could not be *caused* by human activity, even if sages could prepare themselves.⁵¹ All of this is to say that, once again, Platonic theology and Christian theology were one and the same for Ficino. After all, he believed that «the mysteries of Numenius, Philo, Plotinus, Iamblichus and Proclus» were taken from «John, Paul, Hierotheus and Dionysius the Areopagite».⁵²

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*: «[...] quod a tota aliqua animalium specie sit, quia universalis, particularisque naturae sit instinctu, verum existere. Reptilia multa, oriente sole, e terrae sinu surrepunt, aëris caligo portendit, cornicum plurima turba vespere a certa aëris plaga pervolat, venti praenunciantur, & alia eiusdem generis innumerabilia. Communi quoque hominum vaticinio religio vera est, omnes namque semper ubique colunt Deum, vitae futurae gratia».

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, prooemium, p. 1.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, ch. 37, p. 77: «Fides, ut vult Aristoteles, est scientiae fundamentum, fide sola, ut Platonici probant, ad Deum accedimus».

⁵⁰ See VASOLI, *Il De christiana religione*, cit., pp. 413-417.

⁵¹ G. GIGLIONI, *Theurgy and Philosophy in Marsilio Ficino's Paraphrase of Iamblichus's De mysteriis aegyptiorum*, «Rinascimento», LII, 2012, pp. 3-36, esp. 23-30. HANKINS, *Iamblichus, Ficino and Schleiermacher*, cit. p. 4. Denis Robichaud extends the Iamblichean influence to *De vita*; see D.J.-J. ROBICHAUD, *Ficino on Force, Magic, and Prayers: Neoplatonic and Hermetic Influences in Ficino's Three Books on Life*, «Renaissance Quarterly», LXX, 2017, pp. 44-87. Robichaud also argues for a wide Iamblichean dimension to Ficino's thought in ROBICHAUD, *Plato's Persona: Marsilio Ficino, Renaissance Humanism, and Platonic Traditions*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018, pp. 187-229, also p. 241. Also see Robichaud's and Rutkin's essays in this volume.

⁵² Ficino, of course, believed that Christ represented the flowering of the ancient Pythagorean tradition. *De christiane religione*, ch. 22, p. 15. See GIGLIONI, *Theurgy and Philosophy*, cit., p. 5.

Ficino's views on the Fall and the sacrificial passion of Christ also conform to the outlines of his Platonic theology. The Fall was an intellectual rebellion:

The soul is the life of the body; God is the life of the soul. The order of nature requires that the body obey the soul and the soul God. The order of justice requires that if the soul dissents from God, by proportionate punishment, the body shall dissent from the soul, and sense from reason. Our first parent rebelled against God. His body and senses rebelled against him. [...] A rebel complexion (*complexio*) and affection (*affectio*) flowed like a certain odor (*sapor*) from the first parent into everybody who issued from him like a stream from a fount. This original sin is the origin of all the other illnesses of the soul and body.⁵³

Ficino resorts to «complexion», which refers to the balance of opposing humoral qualities, to describe what exactly was corrupted in the human and transmitted from generation to generation. Original sin flowed from the will of Adam into his body, then into the entire species; it is the unique sin that is not dependent on personal choice but common to all. In sum, the willful intellectual rebellion caused imbalances down the entire chain of being. Ficino then establishes the agreement of the ancients, Hebrews and Zoroastrian mages, on this point: the sickness of the body comes from the sickness of the soul; to avoid disease, the soul must be healed first. This rebellion, Ficino goes on to say, was a mistake of infinite consequence, because it was a mistake against the infinite. Since holiness receded, after the Fall, to a point infinitely distant from human capacity, only God could restore humanity to good standing. Here, Ficino addresses the necessity, then, that God should suffer physically, as a human, to redeem humanity:

Sin is committed through pleasure; the sin must be purged through the contrary of pleasure, pain. All human nature sinned at once in that man who bore the lot of all the others. Likewise, they all needed to suffer at once in one man who also bore the lot of all, one who agreed with God much more than the first man dissented. [...] [Christ] was thus God and man together. He was God, so that he could embrace all and absolve the infinite crime, and he was man so that he could suffer for the crime as man would suffer, since man had sinned.⁵⁴

At this point, then, we may conclude that Christ was, among other things, a philosophical martyr, restoring the possibility of the mind's intellectual reunion with the divine.⁵⁵

Later in the treatise, Ficino explains that Christ's passion removed the «obstacle of original sin» (*obstaculum culpae originalis*), throwing open the gates of the celestial paradise

⁵³ FICINO, *De christiane religione*, ch. 20, p. 23: «Vita corporis anima est, animae vita Deus. Naturae ordo exigit, ut corpus animae, anima Deo pareat, justitiae ordo requirit, ut si à Deo dissentit animus, talionis poena dissentia corpus ab anima, atque sensus a ratione. Rebella vit a Deo primi parentis animus, rebella vit corpus ac sensus ab eo, rebellio prima peccatum fuit, secunda poena quaedam peccati fuit, atque peccatum, quoniam rationi derogavit et Deo. Complexio affectioque rebellis a primo quasi sapor quidam profluxit in omnes, qui inde quasi rivuli a fonte manarunt. Hoc igitur originale vitium est caeterorum malorum animae corporisque origo [...]».

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*: «Per voluptatem commissum est peccatum, per contrarium voluptatis dolorem purgandum. Peccavit semel omnis quodammodo humana natura in homine illo, qui vicem gerebat omnium, pati similiter semel quodammodo debet omnis in aliquo, qui vicem quoque omnium gerat, qui longe magis cum Deo consentiat, quam ille dissenserit. Omnium vero vicem post Adam solus ille gerere potuit, qui Deo penitus iunctus esset omnium conditori. Fuit igitur Deus simul & homo, Deus, ut omnes complecteretur, infinitamque culpam posset diluere, homo, ut pati pro culpa posset, atque ut pateretur homo, quemadmodum peccaverat homo».

⁵⁵ Robichaud argues that Ficino is open to the possibility of this union with the divine without Christ, such that Christ is a sufficient but not necessary condition. See D.J.-J. ROBICHAUD, *Plato's Persona*, cit., pp. 187-229, also p. 241. In addition, Robichaud argues that the transfigured body is available to philosophers outside of the Church's sacraments, *Ibidem*, pp. 213-229.

to humanity.⁵⁶ Here we reach an important point. Ficino emphasizes that the spiritual gifts of Christ concern the mind and the will, *not the body*.⁵⁷ Even after Christ's sacrifice, we still eat our bread by the sweat of the brow and give birth in pain. Corporeal suffering serves as a continued warning against breaking the commandments of God and an injunction to practice moral virtue. But it also represents a byproduct of that first sin. Bodily corruption, and the wider corruption of nature, were not undone by Christ, says Ficino. These punishments of original sin remain, passed down in the human body from generation to generation. In turn, the corrupted body can reinfect the soul, not through its own activity, but through the love that the soul bears for it. The lower part of the soul, quite necessarily, loves the body, caring for it and striving for its preservation. The higher part of the soul loves and frequently obeys the lower. Hence, through a strong love toward the body, the individual soul lapses into original sin.⁵⁸ In other words: should reason, in its misdirected love, stoop down to the lower faculties, it replays the tragedy of Eden. The difference, after Christ's coming, is that this sin does not entail an absolute sentence.

But the suffering of the human body does not completely reduce to a means of punishment and expiation, nor to a reminder for humans to turn away from corporeal lust. Here we see in the *De christiana religione* a major point of influence deriving from Paul. The Christian of the Pauline epistles is besieged by danger, cares, and physical pain. There is no better literary example than in II *Corinthians* 11, where Paul asks his readers to allow him a little boasting and then recounts his traumas: he was given thirty-nine lashes five times, was beaten thrice, pelted with stones once; he survived three shipwrecks and one day and night on the open sea; he faced danger from rivers, bandits, Jews and Gentiles, in the city and in the country. Paul meant his litany of suffering and forbearance to show his credentials, over and against the false apostles that had lately caught the ear of the Corinthians. He also establishes a connection between physical vulnerability and preference in the eyes of God. Just after the description of his trials, he tells the Corinthians about his elevation to the «third heaven» to hear *arcana verba quae non licet homini loqui*. Ficino commented upon this passage, embedding it in his metaphysics of light and spiritual ascent.⁵⁹ But Paul's ascent to heaven was not all sunbeams and bliss. So that Paul should remain humble, he was given a thorn in his flesh, a messenger of Satan or *angelus Satanae*. Paul does not say what this thorn was, only that it pained him greatly. He asked God to remove this thorn, but God replied, *Sufficit tibi gratia mea: nam virtus in infirmitate perficitur* («My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness».) In the lengthy chapter six of the *De christiana religione*, Ficino pieces together a mosaic of quotations from the Pauline letters: *Romans*, I and II *Corinthians*, *Philippians*, *Colossians*, I and II *Thessalonians*, *Galatians*, *Hebrews*, I and II *Timothy*.⁶⁰ The combined effect is to celebrate the exaltation of Christ «in the body»: *semper*

⁵⁶ FICINO, *De christiane religione*, ch. 33, p. 64. Had Adam never sinned, he and his kin would have lived perpetually in terrestrial paradise, not celestial paradise. The coming of God, in the person of Christ, allowed humans to enter celestial paradise. Ficino adds that Adam's sin did not doom humanity to hell, but simply barred us from terrestrial paradise. Christ defends against hell and makes celestial paradise possible.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 63: «Sic passione veraque Christi fide originale illud peccatum ablatum fuit, quantum videlicet ad culpam spectat, quae beatitudinem ultimam impedit, laboriosa vero illa relicta sunt, quae non modo non impediunt, sed conducunt».

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 63-64.

⁵⁹ See FICINO, *Opera omnia*, vol. 1, p. 425 («*Ascensus ad tertium coelum, ad Paulum intelligendum*»). Ficino also wrote a treatise on Paul's rapture, the *De raptu Pauli*. See C. VASOLI, *Considerazioni sul De raptu Pauli*, in IDEM, *Quasi sit Deus: studi su Marsilio Ficino*, Lecce, Conte, 1999, pp. 241-261.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, ch. 6, pp. 5-7. In identifying these *New Testament* sources, I have relied on the sixteenth-century French translation of *De christiana religione*. There, biblical sources are cited in the margins. M. FICINO, *De la religion chrestienne, par Marsile Ficin Philosophe, Medecin & Theologien* [...], trans. by Guy le Fevre de la Boderie, Paris, G. Beis, 1578, pp. 21-35.

& nunc exaltabitur Christus in corpore meo, sive per vitam, sive per mortem.⁶¹ This bodily exaltation of Christ is characterized by suffering and endurance.⁶² Christians carry the stigmata of Christ (*Gal.* 6), manifesting in their living bodies the mortification of Christ, and in their dying, martyred bodies the life of Christ (*II Cor.* 4).⁶³ Paraphrasing *I Corinthians* 15:29-30, Ficino quite abruptly connects Christian suffering with the promise of resurrection: *Si mortui non resurgunt, cur nos periclitamur omni hora?*: «If the dead did not return to life, why at every hour are we imperiled?»⁶⁴ As closely as the metaphysical (or Platonic) body and the Christian body seem to match, the suffering of the Christian bears an extra sense. It is a sign, a manifestation, of Christ.

Moreover, I would suggest that bodily suffering is for Ficino what embeds the Christian here on Earth in the history of the Church, from the vulnerabilities and persecutions of its beginnings, to its eventual triumph. As James Hankins has emphasized, Ficino relies on historical argument to establish Christianity's preeminence in the *De christiana religione*.⁶⁵ So, Ficino devotes a chapter to why Christianity does not depend on astrological conditions, that is, why Christianity is not a consequence of natural and, we might say, social conditions.⁶⁶ An «infinite number» of men from all nations, he explains, have exposed themselves to wounds and to death «solely for the love of divine holiness». When, he asks rhetorically, has celestial movement ever produced such struggles? The chapter ends on the following note: «Since [Christianity] was born and grew through a certain extreme and long adversity, it will necessarily be nourished and perfected by this same adversity».⁶⁷ Of course, the historical template is Christ's personal history: his physical passion, then resurrection. This template undergirds the history of the Church, the earthly body of Christ. Ficino suggests that, even at the level of the individual Christian, the vulnerability and suffering of the body constitute a sign of religious preeminence and a promise of resurrection. In this way, his Platonic theology, where salvation is a matter of discipline and intellectual excellence, does not fully capture the historical significance of physical suffering, of the tribulations and redemptions manifest in the history of the Church and in the bodies of individual Christians.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

⁶² Not to mention, in Paul's case, by relentless travel.

⁶³ *Ibidem*, pp. 5-6: «Similiter Corinthiis: Semper mortificationem Jesu in corpore nostro circumferimus, ut et vita Jesu in corporibus nostris manifestetur. Semper enim nos qui vivimus, in mortem tradimur propter Jesum, ut & vita Jesu manifestetur in carne nostra mortali. Unde Galathis: Ego stygmata domini Jesu in corpore meo porto».

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 6. Compare with the original of *I Corinthians* 15: 29-30: «Alioquin quid facient qui baptizantur pro mortuis, si omnino mortui non resurgunt? ut quid et baptizantur pro illis? ut quid et nos periclitamur omni hora?»

⁶⁵ HANKINS, *Ficino and the Religion of the Philosophers*, cit., p. 118: «In the *De christiana religione* [Ficino] argues that Christianity has to be true because otherwise there can be no earthly explanation for why it has succeeded».

⁶⁶ Ficino, *De christiana religione*, ch. 9, pp. 12-13.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 13: «Nam cum extrema quadam, & diuturna adversitate quondam orta, adultaque fuerit, eadem necessario nutrietur, ac prorsus implebitur».