

Part III of
The Renaissance
Philosophy of Man
by Ernst Cassirer
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Kristeller.

Marsilio Ficino

INTRODUCTION

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AS THE most influential exponent of Platonism in Italy during the fifteenth century, Marsilio Ficino belongs both to the history of the diverse fortunes of that ancient philosophy and to the evolution of those ideas and attitudes which we term "modern." He was born near Florence in 1433, and the Humanistic influences of this environment did much to shape both the style of his writings and the problems with which he was concerned. Under the patronage of Cosimo de' Medici, he devoted himself to the task of reviving Platonism in Italy, not only as a distinct philosophical doctrine, but also as an intellectual movement with the same vitality and community of interest which characterized the ancient school. The first part of this task consisted in making the source material of Platonism easily accessible through Latin translations. Of these, the translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* was completed in 1463, that of Plato's dialogues in 1468, some writings of Porphyry and Proclus in 1489, and those of Dionysius the Areopagite and Plotinus in 1492.

In 1462 Cosimo established what has since been called the Platonic Academy of Florence. Although "academy" only in name, the villa at Careggi gave Ficino an opportunity to promote the study of Platonism among a congenial group of thinkers, artists, and literary men and also to present the fruits of his own thought to a sympathetic and enthusiastic audience. Through this "teaching" at Careggi and through his own writings, particularly his major work, the *Theologia Platonica*, and the short treatises which comprise the *Letters*, Ficino was able to inspire a new attitude toward the Platonic material as a comprehensive framework within which the dominant ideas of

Humanism might be expressed and its dominant problems resolved. It is this attitude and the character of the doctrine which resulted from it, rather than the revival of Platonism as such, which accounts for the popularity and diverse influence of Ficino's work.

What, then, are the distinguishing characteristics of Ficino's Platonic philosophy? According to his own statements, the choice of Platonism as source and framework for a philosophic system was determined by the harmony he believed to exist between it and the Christian faith. The use of Platonic concepts and arguments to support and develop religious beliefs was, of course, not an innovation but rather a return to the tendency of the early Church Fathers. Ficino himself cites Augustine as his guide in judging Platonism to be superior to all other philosophies. However, the earlier writers had either used particular Platonic doctrines divorced from their context or absorbed Platonic ideas in a diluted form from others. Ficino deliberately set out to combine the Platonic doctrine as a whole with the Christian doctrine, itself the result of centuries of incremental development. Such an attempt was possible only after the recovery of the complete and original texts of the Platonic writers. Furthermore, it depends upon a fundamental difference between the earlier evaluation of Platonism and that which is characteristic of Ficino. For instance, in *De doctrina Christiana* Augustine advises that if the Platonists have "by chance" taught anything that is "true and in harmony with our faith," this part of their teaching should be appropriated by the Christian, who must, nevertheless, "separate himself in spirit from the miserable company of these men."¹ Ficino, on the other hand, regards the Platonic doctrine as an authority comparable to that of the divine law and contrasts it, like the latter, to independent philosophical reasoning. Not only is the Platonic tradition itself divinely inspired, its revival is necessary.

1. *De doctrina Christiana* ii. 40.

in order that the Christian religion may be confirmed and rendered sufficiently rational to satisfy the skeptical and atheistical minds of the age.

This change reveals a new conception of the unity and universality of human aspiration, a conception in terms of which certain important characteristics of Ficino's thought may be stated. First, philosophy is no longer taken to be an activity separated from religion, whether as rival or "handmaid." Both are manifestations of spiritual life and, as such, have a single aim—the attainment of the highest good. Each is required by the other, for religion saves philosophy from an inferior notion of this highest good, while philosophy saves religion from ignorance, and without knowledge the goal cannot be reached. Thus for Ficino philosophy must be religious, religion philosophical. Being philosophical, Ficino's system is constructed through the application of universal principles to all levels of being. At the same time, being religious, it is ultimately concerned with a system of the universe only because in that system the glorification of the human soul can be justified and its ability to attain the *summum bonum* can be demonstrated. This concentration of interest upon the unique nature and destiny of the human soul is inherent in the religious tradition. The desire to develop this notion in relation to nature as a whole springs from the tendencies of the new Humanism. The insistence that this be substantiated by rational arguments, as part of a system of speculative thought, shows that in Ficino the religious heritage and the new Humanism have together taken on philosophic form.

Second, the assertion that Platonism is of divine origin is related to the Humanistic belief in the universal ability of man to envision and attain the highest good. The truth and superiority of the Christian religion is not questioned in Ficino's writings, but this truth and superiority does not depend upon a unique revelation. Rather, Christianity could not be regarded

as the true religion unless all men in all times had a desire for and a capacity to attain that same goal, the pursuit of which it defines as the only way to salvation. It could not be regarded as superior unless it perfected and facilitated the attainment of such a natural aim. Therefore Ficino must find in the nature of man himself a basis for the identification of the highest good with the knowledge and enjoyment of God. The assertion that there is such a basis may then obtain support from the opinions of thinkers of other cultures and of other times. For instance, in the treatise here translated Ficino uses the agreement of the Hermetic, Peripatetic, Platonic, and Persian writers as an argument. In accordance with this, it cannot be said that Ficino as Humanist and Platonist opposes either the Scholastic thinkers of Aristotle and the Aristotelian school. On the contrary, he does not hesitate to use the methods of the former and the ideas of both.² For example, the principles of *primum in aliquo genere* and *appetitus naturalis* are directly related to the medieval Aristotelian tradition. Many of his technical terms are taken from the Scholastic writers without substantial change in signification, and a number of his treatises, including the present one, preserve the form of *quaestiones*.

In *Five Questions concerning the Mind*³ Ficino sets out to demonstrate that the ultimate end of all human desire and activity can be no other than "boundless truth and goodness," that is, God; and that the soul must be able to reach this end and enjoy it forever. The assertion that the soul must be directed toward some end peculiar to it, and be able to attain that end, depends upon the theory of natural movement, or natural desire, *appetitus naturalis*. The assertion that this end of the soul

2. See P. O. Kristeller, "Florentine Platonism and Its Relations with Humanism and Scholasticism," *Church History*, VIII, (1939), 201 ff.

3. Written in 1476, two years after the completion of *Theologia Platonica*, this treatise was incorporated into a collection called *Five Keys of Platonic Wisdom* in 1477, and also into the second book of Ficino's letters, which was first printed in 1495. See *Supplementum Ficinium*, ed. P. O. Kristeller (Florence, 1937), I, xciv ff.

is infinite truth and goodness and that it can be attained only in the after-life depends upon the unique nature of the soul, its universality and dual inclination.

The theory of *appetitus naturalis*⁴ is, for Ficino, both a necessary explanation of the observed facts of orderly change and a consequence of the perfection of God and of His relation to the universe. The observed order of created things results from a tendency or desire inherent in the essence characteristic of each species, a tendency to proceed toward a particular end identified with the good of that species. The origin of any motion is thus found in the essence of the moving thing; the end, in the perfection of that thing. These tendencies are called "natural" because they are directly dependent upon the essence and common to all members of a species at all times. Further, as dependent upon essence, every natural tendency is ultimately related to God. The relation between particular goods and the highest good and that between the order found in particular things and God as the one source of order illustrates the general ontological principle of *primum in aliquo genere*.

According to this principle,⁵ there is in every genus a highest member, or *primum*, which contains through itself the essence characteristic of that genus, whereas all other members must be referred back to the *primum* as cause and source of the attributes they share. The members of every genus are thus organized into a definite hierarchy, from the *primum* which is pure and complete, through descending degrees which participate in the defining essence only partially, and contain other qualities which are alien to that essence. This principle is applied to any plurality of entities which share certain attributes and differ in the possession of others. For instance, the five degrees of Ficino's order of Being are related successively as cause and

4. See P. O. Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino* (New York, 1943), chap. x.

5. *Ibid.*, chap. ix.

effect, so that each degree below God resembles the one above it in some way, differs from it in another; and each is passive in respect to those above it and active in respect to those below it.

Since the totality of Being is conceived as a kind of genus, God, as Being itself and Goodness itself, may be called the *primum* of that genus. Thus all things below God receive being and goodness from Him. From this it follows that all natural desires are related to God, both with respect to origin and to end. God as the cause of all being is the source of the essence upon which the desire of each created thing is based. The end of every desire is a good, and God is Goodness itself, so that all desire "takes its beginning" from God as the highest end. Finally, since order is the result of natural desire, order of any kind is derived from God.

The attainment of the appropriate end is guaranteed by this relationship between God and created being. Just as the order and goodness found in particular things is ultimately dependent upon God, so the perfection of the whole order is a necessary consequence of the perfection of God. No created thing can exist which does not contribute to the order and good of the whole. A natural desire unaccompanied by the power to achieve its proper end would be worthless in this respect and therefore contrary to the "order of nature."

Since all less perfect things are directed toward ends in which they are perfected, the soul must likewise possess a natural desire for an end identified with its good. This desire, like all others, must be grounded in the nature of the desiring thing. Therefore, the specification of the ultimate end and good of the soul is based upon the doctrine of the unique metaphysical position of the soul, and the characteristics which result from this position. In Ficino's hierarchy of Being the soul is the third or middle essence⁶ and the "fountain of motion." Because

6. Cf. *Theologia Platonica* iii. 2, trans. in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, V (1944), 227 ff.

of its central position, it has an affinity with all things above and below it; because of its self-motion, it is able to move in either direction. Therefore, through the intellect the soul strives to know all things, through the will it strives to enjoy all things. This desire for all truth and goodness cannot be satisfied except by the possession of that infinite truth and goodness which is the source of all others, that is, God.

Like all other things, the soul must be able to attain this desired end. Unlike all others, its attainment of this end does not follow inevitably from the presence of its natural desire. By virtue of its central position, the soul of man is of a dual nature. With lower forms of life man shares the powers of generation, nutrition, and sensation, and these comprise the lower or irrational soul. The higher soul includes both the power of contemplation ("mind" in the strict sense), which man shares with the angels and God, and the discursive power of reason which is peculiar to him alone. In accordance with this, the soul itself has two tendencies, one toward the body and associated with sense, the other toward God and associated with the rational soul. Because human reason is free, it can either oppose the senses or be misled by them; but in neither case can it attain its own end and good or let the lower soul find satisfaction. The result of this is the paradox which Ficino expresses through the Humanistic interpretation of the myth of Prometheus.⁷ Because of reason, the nature or essence of man is more perfect than that of all other beings below God and the angels, that is, of all things characterized by motion, and thus possessing some determinate desire. Also because of reason, man is unable to attain happiness, that is, final perfection. This conclusion not only compromises the perfection of man but also contradicts the general ontological principle that no natural desire can be

7. For similar interpretations of the Prometheus myth in literature and painting see Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology* (New York, 1939), pp. 50-51, esp. n. 53.

in vain. Therefore, referring to this principle, Ficino asserts that the human soul must attain knowledge and enjoyment of God, if not in this life, then in the after-life. However, in thus attaining the end of one inclination, that toward God, the soul cannot abandon the other, that toward the body, for this is also "natural." The final end, therefore, can be attained only when this second inclination is satisfied through the possession of its own body "made everlasting." In this most natural condition the soul finds eternal rest.⁸

8. This argument for the resurrection of the body is reminiscent of that of Thomas Aquinas *Summa contra Gentiles* iv. lxxix.

FIVE QUESTIONS CONCERNING THE MIND*

FIVE questions concerning the mind: first, whether or not the motion of the mind is directed toward some definite end; second, whether the end of this motion of the mind is motion or rest; third, whether this [end] is something particular or universal; fourth, whether the mind is ever able to attain its desired end; fifth, whether, after it has obtained the end, it ever loses it.

MARSILIO FICINO TO HIS FELLOW-PHILOSOPHERS
SENDS GREETING

Wisdom, sprung from the crown of the head¹ of Jove, creator of all, warns her philosophical lovers that if they truly desire ever to gain possession of their beloved, they should always seek the highest summits of things rather than the lowest places; for Pallas, the divine offspring sent down from the high heavens, herself frequents the high citadels which she has established.² She shows, furthermore, that we cannot reach the highest summits of things unless, first, taking less account of the inferior parts of the soul, we ascend to the highest part, the mind. She promises, finally, that if we have concentrated our powers in this most fruitful part of the soul, then without doubt

* *Epistolae*, Book ii, No. 1 (ed. Venice, 1495 [Hain 7059]), fols. xxxviii ff. Cf. *Opera* (ed. Basel, 1576), pp. 675 ff.

1. [*Summam caput*. Literally, the "highest part of the head," this phrase is also used frequently to refer to the highest part or summit of a mountain. Thus Ficino applies it to the head of Jove and, by implication, to the summit of Mount Cellano, also figuratively, to the highest realm of being, and the highest part of the soul.]

2. ["Pallas enim Divina progenies quae coelo demittitur alto: Altas ipsa colit quas et condidit arces." Cf. Virgil, *Eclague IV*, l. 7: "iam nova progenies caelo demittitur alto"; and *Eclague II*, l. 61: "Pallas quas condidit arces ipsa colat".]

by means of this highest part itself, that is, by means of mind, we shall ourselves have the power of creating mind;³ mind which, I say, is the companion of Minerva herself and the foster-child of highest Jove. So then, O best of my fellow-philosophers, not long ago on Monte Cellano I may perhaps have created, in a night's work, a mind of this kind, by means of mind; and this mind I would now introduce among you in order that you yourselves, who are far more fruitful than Marsilio, prompted by a kind of rivalry, as I might say, may at some time bring forth an offspring more worthy of the sight of Jove and Pallas.

THE MOTION⁴ OF EACH NATURAL SPECIES, BECAUSE IT IS DIRECTED IN A CERTAIN ORDERLY MANNER, IS KNOWN TO BE DIRECTED AND TO PROCEED FROM SOME DEFINITE ORIGIN TO SOME CERTAIN END

The motion of each of all the natural species proceeds according to a certain principle. Different species are moved in different ways, and each species always preserves the same course in its motion so that it always proceeds from this place to that place and, in turn, recedes from the latter to the former, in a certain most harmonious manner. We inquire particularly from what source motion receives order of this kind.

According to the philosophers, the limits of motion are two, namely, that from which it flows and that to which it flows. From these limits motion obtains its order. Therefore, a motion

3. [*Mente mentem procreaturas*. Mind, as the highest faculty of the soul, creates the contemplative or highest state of the soul. This is here figuratively identified with the philosophical treatise produced by mind. Cf. Plotinus *Ennead III* viii. 5 and Ficino's Latin translation iii. viii 4: "[The higher soul's] contemplation and natural disposition, which is desirous for learning and eager for inquiry, and further, the present birth pangs caused by those things of which it has gained knowledge, and its complete fruitfulness, bring it about that, itself completely made into a thing contemplated (*contemplamen*), it may produce another thing contemplated."]

4. [Motion in the sense of change from one condition to another as well as from one place to another.]

does not wander from one uncertain and disorderly state to another but is directed from a certain and orderly state [its origin] to a certain and orderly state [its end], harmonizing with that origin. Certainly, everything returns to its own place rather than to that which belongs to another. If this were not so, different species of things would sometimes move in the same manner, and the same species in a different manner; and, similarly, the same species would be set in motion in different ways at different times, and different species often in the same way. Further, if this were not the case, the orderly sequence of motion would have been destroyed—the sequence by which a motion gradually flows forth at a certain time through many appropriate steps and seemly forms and, by turns, flows back after a definite interval of time. Add to this that, if each motion did not proceed according to a certain principle, it would not be directed to one determined region, or quality, or substance, rather than to any other whatsoever.

THE MOST ORDERLY MOTION OF THE COSMOS IS DIRECTED BY DIVINE PROVIDENCE TO A DETERMINED END

If individual motions are brought to completion according to such a wonderful order, then certainly the universal motion of the cosmos itself cannot be lacking in perfect order. Indeed, just as the individual motions are derived from and contribute to universal motion, so from the order of universal motion they receive order and to the order of universal motion they contribute order. In this common order of the whole, all things, no matter how diverse, are brought back to unity according to a single determined harmony and rational plan. Therefore, we conclude that all things are led by one certain orderer who is most full of reason. Indeed, a supremely rational order flows from the highest reason and wisdom of a mind; and the particular ends to which single things are directed have been prescribed by that mind; certainly, the common end of the whole to which the single ends are led must also be prescribed by that mind.

CONCERNING THE ENDS OF THE MOTION OF THE
ELEMENTS, OF PLANTS, AND OF BRUTES

We are not in doubt concerning the ends of the motion of the elements and plants and irrational animals. Certainly, some elements, because of a certain heaviness, descend to the center of the universe; while others, because of their lightness, ascend to the vault of the superior sphere. It is clear also that the motion of plants originates from the powers of nutrition and generation and is terminated in the sufficient nourishment of the plant itself and reproduction of its kind. The same is true of the powers which we and the brutes have in common with the plants. The motion of irrational animals, which characteristically pertains to sense, arises from the sensible form and the need of nature and, by means of that which is perceived from without, moves toward the fulfilment of bodily needs. The same is true of that nature which we ourselves have in common with all animals. Certainly, it must be recognized that all these motions which we have just mentioned, because they strive toward some particular thing, are the result of a particular power and, further, that in those ends which we have described they achieve sufficient rest and are perfected as much as their natures require.

FIVE QUESTIONS CONCERNING THE MOTION OF THE MIND

It remains for us to inquire concerning the motion of the human mind: first, whether or not the mind strives toward some end; second, whether the end of its motion is motion or rest; third, whether this good [toward which the mind strives] is something particular or something universal; fourth, whether the mind is strong enough eventually to attain its desired end, that is, the highest good; fifth, whether, after it has attained the perfect end, it ever loses it.

THE MOTION OF THE MIND LOOKS TOWARD A CERTAIN END

If other things do not wander upward and downward in a foolish accidental way but are directed according to a certain

rational order toward something which is in the highest degree peculiar and appropriate to them and in which they are entirely perfected, then certainly mind,⁵ which is the receptacle of wisdom,⁶ which comprehends the order and ends of natural things, which orders its daily affairs in a rational manner to a certain end, and which is more perfect than all the others we have mentioned; mind, I say, must be directed in a far greater degree to some ordered end in which it is perfected according to its earnest desire. Just as the single parts of life⁷ [of man], that is, deliberations, choices, and abilities, refer to single ends (for any one of these looks toward its own end, as it were, its own good); so in like manner the whole life [of man] looks toward the universal end and good. Now, since the parts of anything serve the whole, it follows that the order which is inherent in them in relation to each other is subordinate to their order in relation to the whole.⁸ It follows further that their order in relation to particular ends depends upon a certain common order of the whole—an order which especially contributes to the common end of the whole. Indeed, if any mover whatsoever moves for its own benefit, then it is reasonable to suppose that mind brings any of its own [parts] to their proper ends only because they contribute to the common end and good of the mind. Finally, who is so weak in mind that he believes it possible for the mind to strive, both by nature and by plan, to give diverse and single things an order in relation to one thing, without the mind itself having an order in relation to one thing? Furthermore, the ultimate common end moves the rest everywhere (for all other things are desired for the sake of that which is desired first).

5. ["Mind" here is used in the broader sense, meaning the rational soul, and its achievements are listed in order of perfection, according to the familiar threefold division of knowledge into *scientia divina*, *scientia naturalis*, and *scientia humana*.]

6. [For *spiae* read *sapientiae*.]

7. [*Singulae vitae partes* and *universa vita*, the parts and whole of human life, considered as the activity of the soul.]

8. [The order immanent in the parts, being lower and less perfect, depends upon the order of the whole which transcends the parts.]