

## The Astrology of Marsilio Ficino: Divination or Science?

Angela Voss

In 1477 the Florentine philosopher Marsilio Ficino wrote, but did not publish, a vehement attack on the practices of astrologers; his *Disputatio contra iudicium astrologorum*.<sup>1</sup> Anyone reading this text would assume that the author found the very foundations of traditional astrology ready for demolition by the power of Reason and the authority of God's Providence. 'All this is poetic metaphor' exclaims Ficino, surveying the absurdity of astrological terminology, 'not reason or knowledge' (*totum hoc poetica metaphora est, non ratio vel scientia*).<sup>2</sup> Astrologers, he asserts, use 'silly similitudes' (*pueriles similitudines*), they fabricate rules - often inconsistently - attribute imaginary powers to the stars and claim to predict concrete events.<sup>3</sup> But how, asks Ficino, can they know what will happen in ten years' time, when they do not know what they themselves will be doing today?<sup>4</sup>

Yet in the following year Ficino himself wrote to Pope Sixtus IV, as one 'equally devoted to both prophecy and astrology', predicting various misfortunes over the coming two years from specific astrological configurations.<sup>5</sup> Indeed there is hardly a single letter amongst his vast correspondence in which he does not refer to the influence of planets on his own and his friends' natal charts, on past, present and future events.<sup>6</sup> His deep familiarity with the traditional language of astrology springs from every page, and later in his life he was to develop this knowledge into a full system of astrological magic, in the third part of his *Liber de vita*. So why do we find Ficino, in 1494, writing to his friend Poliziano in firm support of Pico's attack on astrology, emphasising that 'on no occasion' does he affirm astrological portents, and that, like Pico, he despises the 'superstitious vanity' of the astrologers?<sup>7</sup>

How do we understand this apparent anomaly? Recent scholars have referred to Ficino's 'oscillations', 'inconsistent views', 'self-contradiction', 'somewhat double-faced attitude', 'vacillation on the subject of judicial astrology', 'peculiar adaptations of astrology' and even his 'relapse into superstition' in an attempt to account for it.<sup>8</sup> Such opinions hardly do justice to the philosophical stature of a man who sought to penetrate to the essential unity of human existence. In this paper I hope to demonstrate that Ficino's understanding and use of astrology derived from a direct apprehension of the ground of human knowledge, reaching much further than the internal oppositions implied in the above observations; that he is moving towards an understanding of the function of symbol as a means by which human beings may extend their powers of perception not only outwardly to the visible universe, but simultaneously, inwardly - into the human psyche as a mirror of the cosmos. In this way, Ficino would claim, they may potentially 'see' with the eye of God.<sup>9</sup>

We cannot hope to grasp Ficino's position unless we attempt to enter it and ask fundamental questions about the nature of astrology. Do we define it as a magical art, or a natural science? What exactly do we mean by magic and science? It would seem to us that there are two very different modes of perceiving reality, modes which could generally be defined as 'mystical' and 'rational'. One would seem to depend on subjective experience, the other on objective observation. Contemporary astrology is claimed by both camps, yet struggles to find its natural authority in either. But if we look at the various traditions that informed the Renaissance's claim of magic to be the highest form of natural science, we

begin to see that such a distinction is superficial. The question of man's relationship to the stars has always been at the heart of his quest for wisdom, whether soothsayer or philosopher, and to approach this with integrity we must ask serious questions about the *kind* of knowledge to which magical and astrological systems and practices were in service.

By the fifteenth century, the tradition of classical astrology as a rational system of apprehending the workings of the cosmos was fully established in the West, based on the Aristotelian model of celestial causation. Greek and Arabic textbooks on astrology were passed down via Latin translations, definitively illustrated in the *Tetrabiblos* of Claudius Ptolemy, a late Hellenistic work which provides us with an exposition of the conceptual framework of astrology. This model implies the correlation of effects from the heavens in an 'objective time' with those on earth, unfolding in a predetermined way like the cogs in a great machine of destiny. Ptolemaic astrology firmly upholds a natural process of causation, and introduces the concept of ether, an airy all-pervading substance suffused throughout creation whose quality depends on the heavenly bodies. Ptolemy promised man the ability to understand human temperament and predict events through examination of the ether, and established the primacy of the 'seed' moment or moment of origin, such as birth itself, at which time the heavens stamped an impression which would indelibly mark the individual.<sup>10</sup> Now such a conception of direct, quantifiable astral influence presupposes an omniscient astrologer who observes objectively a fixed pattern; indeed it appears to allow him to give an irrevocable judgement on the 'fate' sealed by the birth moment. It also implies a linear unfolding of time and paves the way for modern 'scientific' astrological research, based on statistical analysis, quantitative measurement and empirical observation of phenomena.

In the medieval period orthodox Christianity found no problem with a natural astrology which understood the correspondences between the heavens and the material world, and used this knowledge in such fields as agriculture and medicine. But for denying human freewill, and for attributing to the astrologer the omnipotence of God, judicial astrology was roundly condemned. We find Thomas Aquinas defining all human attempts to foretell events, whether through dreams, astrology or occult practices as divination, and sinful; for the only legitimate means of foreknowledge must be through Divine Revelation.<sup>11</sup> Divination, he claims, is initiated by man and will always fail or attract evil demons, whereas Divine Revelation is received by man according to the will of God. Even if it were possible to predict astral effects on bodily senses, since these were subject to his Reason, man could counter them through appealing to his higher faculty of freewill. The fact that astrologers did seem to get it right sometimes was attributed to their being influenced by 'unclean and lying spirits' as St Augustine put it.<sup>12</sup>

From this position, there can never be the possibility that divine knowledge may arise through human effort or activity. The stars cannot be signs in any other way than they are effects of causes; all true insight into the workings of Providence must depend on an act of grace, on the prayerful submission of the individual's will to God's. Now in his *Disputatio* Ficino clearly sets out to fully endorse this view, condemning the type of astrology which depends solely on human ingenuity and limited judgement. 'I am composing a book on the providence of God and the freedom of human will', he wrote to

Bernardo Bembo, in which I refute, to the best of my ability, those pronouncements of the astrologers which remove providence and freedom.<sup>13</sup> He sent the preface to Francesco Ippoliti, infuriated at the 'empty pronouncements' (*vana iudicia*) of the 'petty ogres' (*nefarios gigantulos*) who deny the sovereignty of God, the justice of the angels and the freewill of men. He urges the philosophers to gather forces against them, so, he ends 'that we may triumph over the diviners, albeit not divine but mightily profane, who have for so long been shackling us to their illusions.'<sup>14</sup>

This would appear to be a definitive statement of allegiance to the orthodox position. The *Disputatio*, calling on the authority of Aristotelian, Platonic and Christian sources to refute the subjection of human reason to the stars, reiterates the objections of Aquinas with regard to the dangers of demonic intervention and the astrologers' lack of piety. Yet on a closer reading we find something new. It becomes apparent that although Ficino rejects certain claims of astrologers, he does not deny the possibility that divinatory techniques in themselves may work. Indeed, he suggests that there are three kinds of foreseeing; through the infusion of divine knowledge, which may be received through magical means and the 'divining of the spheres'; through natural means, such as a melancholic temperament which more easily allows the soul contact with its own divine nature; and through what he calls the 'observation of heavenly patterns'.<sup>15</sup> In all these, he says, judgement is very difficult. But it is not illicit. Just as the physician may form a prognosis through the observation of an illness, so the augurs, says Ficino, 'are led to penetrate all appearances of things to be apprehended here and there in single moments.' Perhaps, he speculates, these things are grasped 'more completely out of a certain quality of the soul [*dos animae*] than through judgement [*iudicia*].'<sup>16</sup> Something important is emerging, something which leads us to question whether the problem is not the astrology, but the astrologers' misuse of their *iudicia*. Ficino is clearly talking about an insight more akin to Revelation than human reason, yet this is not a Revelation directly from God to a passive recipient - it demands the active participation of the individual through the particular way he perceives patterns and signs in nature.<sup>17</sup> This mode of perception is available to anyone, anywhere; it implies the closing of the divide between the human and the divine.

Let us now go back in history, to the earliest astrologers of Mesopotamia long before astrology was 'rationalised' by the Greeks.<sup>18</sup> These astrologers were omen-readers, looking to the heavens for indications of the gods' will, in the same spirit as they looked at entrails and made sacrifices. Divinatory techniques in these early societies were not primarily concerned with foretelling the future, but with invoking the guidance of the unseen powers in human actions. The human initiative, linked to ritual observance, was defined by the Greeks as the *katarche* (which passed into Latin as *auspice* and *augury*), and its success depended on the right relationship of man and god. In their continual interaction, there were choices available; destiny was negotiable. There could be no fixed decree from on high; the omen appeared, either bidden or unbidden, and its significance depended on the ability of the individual to interpret, along with the import of his current concerns. In other words, it was only significant if it was recognised as such, not through a theory or technique, but through the intuitive perception of a sign.<sup>19</sup>

As man grew more distant from his gods, so divination lost its sacred dimension and became the domain of earthly prediction of events. In astrology it survived into the early centuries

AD, particularly in horary and inceptional techniques, but was losing hold to the influence of Stoic and Aristotelian philosophy, which demanded a reformulation of what had been a participatory experience into a theoretical structure. The great science of astrology was born. But did what we might call the 'divinatory attitude' survive, and if so, how? It can of course be found in the whole domain of magic and so-called 'occult' practices which proliferated in the Hellenistic era, but with the Church's condemnation of any experience of the sacred outside its own portals it could hardly flourish overtly. We have to look elsewhere, to a tradition which would both hold and protect its vulnerable core in an overmantle of philosophical enquiry. Here it was not only preserved; it was reflected upon and articulated in the language of myth, poetry, revelation and metaphysics, for those who could hear it, and this was the tradition revered by Ficino as the Ancient Theology.

From an early age, Ficino tells us, he felt a great affinity with Platonic philosophy, rather than with the followers and teachers of Aristotle, whom he regarded as "wholly destructive of religion".<sup>20</sup> Against parental opposition he persevered in Platonic studies, for in Plato he found a unity of philosophy and poetry which in its very language aroused in him an apprehension of the numinous. 'I consider Plato's style is more like that of a divine oracle than any human eloquence' he exclaims, 'ever encompassing the secrets of heaven... now his words thunder like those of a seer, now they flow gently, and all the while they obey no human power but one that is prophetic and divine.'<sup>21</sup> Plato speaks as an oracle, he speaks from a level of knowledge which has penetrated the very nature of divinity - according to Ficino, the whole dialogue *Parmenides* was received through divine revelation.<sup>22</sup> It would seem that, underlying rigorous dialectic, Ficino detected a contact with a spiritual reality which was at once dynamic and creative, and which could lead an individual to begin a process of purification which would eventually lead to knowledge of themselves and of God.

But Plato was not alone in speaking as a 'sacred oracle'; indeed Ficino understood him to be the culmination and perfection of an ancient lineage of wise men whose power of eloquence derived from their calling as philosopher-priests. In 1463, when Ficino had just embarked on his Platonic *opus*, Cosimo de' Medici presented him with another manuscript and requested its immediate translation into Latin. This was the *Corpus Hermeticum* of Hermes Trismegistus, who Ficino believed to be the very first of the Ancient Theologians, living in Egypt a few generations after Moses.<sup>23</sup> Although we now know these texts were composed in the Hellenistic period, recent scholarship is confirming their authentic Egyptian content, and certainly for Ficino and his contemporaries Egyptian wisdom was understood to be the source of Greek philosophy.<sup>24</sup> The Hermetic corpus is about spiritual initiation through the individual's realisation of his own immortality, and this 'secret' doctrine, Ficino was convinced, was handed down in a line of descent through Orpheus, Pythagoras and Philolaus to the 'divine Plato', continuing through his later interpreters Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus and Proclus. Now what did Ficino find of such import in the way these sages wrote? Nothing less than a combination of 'learning and keenness of mind' and 'sanctity of life and reverence for the divine'; in other words, a combination of intellectual penetration and religious devotion.<sup>25</sup>

In Hermes' revelation his teacher Poimandres tells a creation myth of the Fall of Man as he unites with the powers of Nature. Using the metaphor of a symbolic cosmos, we learn how Man is created by the supreme Mind or *nous*, and receives the qualities of the seven

planets, which govern his destiny on earth. But Man, who shares the essence of Mind, also partakes of its absolute freedom, and he wills to 'break through the circumference of the spheres' and come to know his Maker.<sup>26</sup> In other words, as soon as he desires to overcome fate, he can, by realising and acting from the immortal part of his soul. All men are governed by Destiny, says Poimandres, but those who are led by *Nous* (the divine Mind), do not suffer as others do.<sup>27</sup> Man is a god, he only has to recognise it, and this very recognition can change his relationship with fate. This dangerous but exhilarating message was to be the key to Ficino's transformation of astrology.

So when Ficino talks of divinatory knowledge as 'a gift of the soul' we can see a similarity in Hermes' suggestion that divination itself is a means of participating in *nous*, of knowing as God knows. Through 'dreams and signs' such as 'birds, entrails, inspiration and the sacred oak' divinatory practices would seem to facilitate a mode of knowing which is at once temporal, in that man is observing an event in time, and eternal, in that his *faculty of perception* transcends time and space.<sup>28</sup> In the divinatory moment, these two orders would seem to be aligned as the physical event coincides with an insight which is deeply meaningful for that person, at that time, allowing him to 'see' at a level which transcends and thus unites subjective and objective categories of experience. For Ficino, the cultivation of this unitive apprehension was the supreme task of mankind, who is uniquely placed as the intermediary of temporal and eternal things, and thus 'is so close to God that insinuating itself into the secrets of the divine mind it knows this work of God, namely the order of the universe.'<sup>29</sup>

I would like to explore further the importance of this mode of perception, which Ficino expressed in terms of a union of Mind and Soul, for it is a mode quite absent, I would suggest, from the conceptual thought processes which govern post-enlightenment rationalism. The ability to see past, present and future as *one* may now be seen as the result of a convergence of two different realities, each with their own laws. The experience is one of suspension of linear time, whose movement is now more faithfully described as circular. As Hermes tells Asclepius, 'This is eternity, then, which can neither begin to be nor cease being, which turns round and round in everlasting motion under the fixed and unchanging law of its cycle, its parts rising and falling time and again so that as time changes the same parts that had fallen rise anew.'<sup>30</sup> Now with specific reference to astrology, this mode of perception will not regard stars and planets as causal agents, but as symbols which reflect back to the human soul its inextricable correspondence with the cosmos, as the signification of the astrological insight can in no way be determined by the physical configuration, but will depend on the ability, and desire, of the individual to 'tune in'. Ficino describes it as incorporeal, adding 'if one pays attention to this signification, it is the thought of God who speaks that one comprehends.' He observes that in speaking, signification is a product of soul, that it is direct, unmediated, and cannot be related to sensible things.<sup>31</sup>

In 1484, under a conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter, the great signifiers of reason and faith, Ficino chose to publish his translations of Plato. The very day of publication, Ficino tells us, Pico della Mirandola came to Florence, and persuaded him to translate Plotinus. It is typical of Ficino to attribute great importance to the astrological symbolism at play between himself and Pico; 'It would seem to be divinely brought about' he says, 'that whilst Plato was, so to speak, being re-born, Pico was born under Saturn in Aquarius. In fact I too was

born thirty years earlier under the same sign. And so, arriving in Florence on the day our Plato was produced, that old wish of the hero Cosimo [to translate Plotinus] which had previously been hidden from me, was divinely inspired in Pico, and through Pico in me.<sup>32</sup> It was to be in the writings of the Neoplatonists that Ficino found the most eloquent philosophical justification for symbolic astrology and practical magic, brought to fruition in the third part of his *Liber de vita* of 1489, which was entitled *de vita coelitus comparanda*, or 'on fitting your life to the heavens'.<sup>33</sup>

Ficino included much of his *Disputatio* in his Commentaries on Plotinus' *Enneads*, and it is easy to see why, for Plotinus' analysis of astrological effect is a clear refutation of causal thinking. Here, Ficino found confirmation of astrology as divination. In divining from the heavens, says Plotinus, people can know the nature of the All, because the stars are signs: 'We may think of the stars as letters perpetually being inscribed on the heavens or inscribed once and for all' he says, and 'those who know how to read this sort of writing ...can read the future from their patterns, discovering what is signified by the systematic use of analogy.'<sup>34</sup> And 'All teems with symbol: the wise man is the man who in any one thing can read another.'<sup>35</sup> What we see conveys the unseen; and this is the mystery at the heart of Platonism. For Plotinus the wise man is the self-directed man, who, aligned with the higher part of his soul, has developed 'another way of seeing, that all have but few use'.<sup>36</sup> The Plotinian cosmos is a ballet, all parts interdependent, the hierarchies of being corresponding and mirroring each other in a cosmic energy-field of *anima mundi*. It is the Soul, as the intermediary between intellect and body, which connects all things, sowing itself as 'bait' in material forms which will naturally attract, by affinity, the soul of the human being. As it emanates from the supreme One, soul disposes the configurations of the stars, so that life experiences are announced, not caused, by their patterns - but whilst Providence rules the entire process for the Good, those who are identified with their lower, material soul will not experience its law as a liberation. Rather, they will remain fate-bound.

This is re-iterated by another, often neglected, spokesman for the practice of divination - the Neoplatonist Iamblichus. Ficino paraphrased his *De mysteriis* shortly before completing the *De vita*, and was clearly influenced by Iamblichus' philosophical arguments for the ritual practices of theurgy. Iamblichus' treatise on the nature of Egyptian, Chaldaean and Assyrian religion seeks to penetrate to the essence of divination, in the context of answering a critique by Plotinus' follower Porphyry. 'There is one correct definition and principle for all forms of divination', says Iamblichus, 'and it has nothing to do with irresponsibly divining the future with things that lack foreknowledge. Rather, it is to view from the perspective of the gods - who contain in themselves the limits of the entire knowledge of reality ...'<sup>37</sup> To this end, all aspects of the material and immaterial cosmos could be used ritually and symbolically to enable the human soul to 'lift' itself back to the all-knowing, divine condition it once enjoyed, before its descent to the material world. Unlike Plotinus, for whom the soul was already at one with the gods, Iamblichus recognised the need for the embodied soul to use its very conditions of embodiment to begin a re-ascent. For this, it needed the help of the gods, and this would only become available once the theurgist began to actively engage in a process of stripping off his habitual, encrusted ways of conceptual thinking to come into contact with 'an innate knowledge of the gods co-existent with our very essence.'<sup>38</sup> Now this innate knowledge Ficino was to translate as *notio*, and he dwells at length on its implications.<sup>39</sup> He sees it as a pre-eminent, intuitive, experiential contact with the

profoundest level of being, quite distinct from any conceptual mental activity - 'reason and demonstration' as Iamblichus puts it.<sup>40</sup> Conjecture, opinion and logical reasoning will never lead to a *realisation* of one's own divinity, rather, 'the perfect efficacy of ineffable works, which are divinely performed in a way surpassing all intelligence, and the power of inexplicable symbols, which are known only to the Gods, impart theurgic union.'<sup>41</sup> Thus images, prayers, invocations, talismans - in whatever ritual use appropriate for the particular condition of the individual, may all contribute to the process of re-aligning his or her soul. It is important to understand that divination does not originate from the energies used in everyday life, or from human fabrications or ingenuity. Rather, the devotion, intent and desire of the operator will allow a superior power to 'perfect' the ritual and impart its authority to it. In other words, human beings may partake of Divine Revelation through their own efforts. It is pointless, says Iamblichus to his critic Porphyry, to try to understand these things from a human perspective - for even to state 'it must be granted that there are Gods' immediately removes oneself from them.<sup>42</sup> Theurgy turns away from the 'intellectual energising' of dialectic discussion and the assumption that divination can be analysed theoretically, towards a creative act of participation. Astrology, for Iamblichus, becomes such an act, an act of becoming conscious of the cosmic forces at work on the lower, 'fate-bound' levels of being. For only then may the freewill, aligned with the divine providence, understand the essential goodness and integrity of all heavenly powers and become liberated from identification with limit, passion and fear. When we have achieved this condition, Iamblichus suggests that the 'enumeration of canons' and 'art of divining' will no longer be required - the rituals, the techniques, the images may all be left behind.<sup>43</sup>

But most people have not reached this stage, and it would seem that with this in mind Ficino in *de vita coelitus comparanda* presents us with the first steps in the cultivation of *notio* - implicit in a fully elaborated system of 'natural' magic.<sup>44</sup> Using Plotinus' ensouled cosmos as a philosophical framework, and drawing on Hermetic, Pythagorean, Platonic, Arabic and Christian sources, Ficino affirms that there is a way of achieving physical and psychological equilibrium using technical skill (whether medical, astrological or musical) to recognise and contact the hidden, but natural, powers of the universe, from mineral to star to immaterial motions of Mind. This can be done, in Ficinian magic, through trusting the imagination as the soul's organ of perception. Ficino as a Christian treads carefully - Iamblichean divination has now become natural magic, the gods are planetary spirits; but their gifts are 'captured' by the same theurgic process of sympathetic resonance with the refined human spirit (we may note that Ficino suggests, but would not dare to assert, that 'higher gifts' may also descend from the Divine Mind itself).<sup>45</sup> The magician, says Ficino, is one who uses his knowledge of astrological correspondence to fashion a remedy, image or sing an invocation at a particular time when the cosmos is aligned with the activity; indeed, he says 'a material action, motion, or event does not obtain full or perfect efficacy *except* when the celestial harmony conduces to it from all sides.'<sup>46</sup> Through appropriate ritual, the human spirit becomes aligned with the planetary spirit and will then automatically and naturally receive the gifts of that planet as it vibrates in sympathy, like two strings of a lute. This is not a result of invoking or worshipping demons, but of spiritual purification. 'When at the right astrological hour' says Ficino, 'you declaim aloud by singing and playing in the manners we have specified for the four gods, they seem to be just about to answer you like an echo or like a string in a lute trembling to the vibration of another which has been similarly tuned.'<sup>47</sup> The magus knows how to prepare a material vehicle as a 'bait' for 'tuning

in' to the hidden powers of the cosmos, whether this be through engraving an image, mixing a potion, or focussing sound; and, like the diviner, he does this with the express purpose of knowing the part he must play in creation. Like the diviner also, the ritual container must be perfected before the alignment occurs. Thus Ficino's astrological framework is specific and his instructions technical - not only must one study the nature of the planets, but be able to calculate their movements and observe their configurations. But to appropriate the significance, actively, of a planet or star as a symbolic image - that is, to perceive it as a dynamic presence - something else is required, and like Iamblichus, Ficino constantly draws the reader to the means by which he may experience a deepening of his perception: namely, through a deliberate act of choice, followed by the focussing of desire:

by an application of our spirit to the spirit of the cosmos, achieved both through physical knowledge (*artem physicam*) and our emotion (*affectum*), celestial goods pass to our soul and body. This happens from down here through our spirit within us which is a mediator, strengthened then by the spirit of the cosmos, and from above by way of the rays of the stars acting favorably on our spirit, which not only is similar to the rays by nature but also then makes itself more like celestial things.<sup>48</sup>

There is no area of life which cannot be enriched by not just recognising, but acting upon, its congruence with the continual movements of the heavens, if it is desired, and the very word desire, from the latin *de-sidere* ('from the star') evokes an inextricable connection between human longing and the cosmos.<sup>49</sup>

It is from this ground that Ficino was able to look at his own horoscope and effectively transform its traditional interpretation. The malefic planet Saturn, positioned on his ascendant, would, he tells us normally indicate a 'brutish' life, bowed down with the extreme of misery.<sup>50</sup> But the god Saturn, reaching to the intelligible realm of divine knowledge, would promise something quite different. He has 'taken over the things which transcend the physical' and is propitious to those who have laid aside an ordinary, worldly life in preference for a contemplative recollection of divine matters.<sup>51</sup> In other words, the experience of Saturn would depend on the corresponding level of the individual's identification with matter. The more one is freed from the literal, the less one's soul is limited by definitions. Paradoxically, Ficino discovered that through entering into the depths of his melancholy, it began to transform into something else. It had to, because human freedom of will and initiative, for the Platonist, meant following one's destiny willingly - allowing the gods to announce their true nature. As Ficino wrote to Giovanni Cavalcanti 'what shall I do? I shall seek a shift; either I shall say that a nature of this kind does not issue from Saturn; or, if it should be necessary that it does issue from Saturn, I shall ... say that this nature itself is a unique and divine gift.'<sup>52</sup>

I think we can begin to see that what we understand as a 'scientific' approach has very little to do with the unitive vision of Ficino's creative imagination. *Scientia*, for the pre-modern mind, cannot be divorced from the study of ultimate metaphysical truths, and thus can only be preparatory to mystical union. In this sense, the *magus* is a scientist, as he investigates the hidden laws of the cosmos, learns of the correspondences between all things, and seeks to understand the world from the perspective of the Creator himself. But he is also a diviner, as he does this through action, perfecting the techniques and rituals which may lead him to the deeper level of insight required to reap divine gifts. Very early in his career, Ficino playfully associated the singing of an Orphic Hymn to the Cosmos with the gift of a

benefice from his patron Cosimo, and this is only one of many examples of his natural ability to 'read the signs' and find meaningful significance in the coincidence of events.<sup>53</sup>

Astrology for Ficino could only be justified if it was used in this way, if its framework of techniques and the physical reality of its symbols provided the ritual 'container' for the human soul to free itself from the limitations of a material consciousness, and begin to know itself as an image of God. Astrology is then in service to philosophy, and indeed becomes for Ficino the primary activity of his Platonic Academy. In the innermost sanctum of the Academy, he says, 'philosophers will come to know their Saturn, contemplating the secrets of the heavens'.<sup>54</sup> Astrology, for Ficino, is indeed a poetic metaphor - but it has been transformed from the flimsy superstition of the 'petty ogres' condemned in the *Disputatio* to a vehicle for the deepening of human consciousness. This is nowhere better illustrated than in one of his last works, the *Liber de sole*, where the levels of literal and symbolic reality are brought together in a triumphant conjunction of astronomy and astrology, philosophy and poetry, the divine and the human to produce a truly anagogic apprehension of unity.<sup>55</sup> The scientist and the diviner are one.

## References

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<sup>1</sup> *Supplementum Ficinianum*, ed. P.O. Kristeller, 2 vols. (Florence, 1949), vol. 2, pp.11-76 [hereafter, *Supp. Fic.*]; See also *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, trans. School of Economic Science, vol.3 (London, 1981), pp.63-64, 75-77 [hereafter, *Letters*].

<sup>2</sup> *Supp. Fic.* p.43; also p. 68 where Ficino reiterates 'astrologia non est scientia'.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.37.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.34.

<sup>5</sup> See *Letters*, vol. 5 (London, 1994), pp.15-19: 'applying ourselves to astrology, we carefully considered the last conjunction of Saturn and Mars in Virgo, and the next one. We also considered the next entrance of the Sun into Aries and the beginnings of the quarters of the whole year. In addition, we considered the eclipses of the Moon in Aquarius, as well as the future eclipses of the Sun in Leo and other eclipses of the following year. Finally, we considered the discordant combinations of Mars and Jupiter, besides much else.' (p.15).

<sup>6</sup> See for example *Letters*, vol.1 (London, 1975), pp.196-8; vol.2 (London, 1978), pp.15-16,30, 31-2, 33-4; vol.3 pp.32-48, 50-51; vol.4 (London, 1988), pp.60-3.

<sup>7</sup> M. Ficino, *Opera omnia* (Basle, 1576), p.958 [hereafter, *Op.om.*].

<sup>8</sup> See D.P. Walker, 'Marsilio Ficino and Astrology', *Marsilio Ficino e il Ritorno di Platone*, 2 vols. ed. G. Garfagnini (Florence, 1986), pp.341-2; C.Kaske, 'Ficino's shifting attitude towards astrology in the *De vita coelitus comparanda*, the Letter to Poliziano, and the *Apologia* to the Cardinals', *Marsilio Ficino e il Ritorni de Platone*, pp.372, ref.2; 376; L.Thorndike, 'Ficino the Philosophaster', *History of Magic and Experimental Science*, 8 vols. (New York, 1923-58), vol.IV, p.572; J.Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance* (Leiden & New York, 1991), p.282. For a more balanced consideration of Ficino's astrological views, see M. Bullard, 'The Inward Zodiac: A Development in Ficino's Thought on Astrology', *Renaissance Quarterly*, no. 42, 1990, pp.687-708.

<sup>9</sup> See Ficino's letter 'Orphic Comparison of the Sun to God', *Letters*, vol.5, pp.44-7; M.Allen, 'Marsilio Ficino on Plato's Pythagorean Eye', *Plato's Third Eye* (Aldershot, 1995), VII, pp.171-82.

<sup>10</sup> Claudius Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, ed. G.P.Goold (Cambridge, Mass.1980) I.2 See also G. Cornelius, *The Moment of Astrology: Origins in Divination* (Harmondsworth, 1994), ch.5, pp.86-105.

<sup>11</sup> See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II.2, 'Whether Divination is a Sin', question 95, articles 1,3,5.

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- <sup>12</sup> St. Augustine of Hippo, *De Genesi ad litteram*, ii.17, quoted in Aquinas, *S.T.*, II.2, question 95, art.5.
- <sup>13</sup> *Letters*, vol.3, pp.48-9.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.75-6
- <sup>15</sup> *Supp.Fic.*, II, p.49.
- <sup>16</sup> M. Ficino, *Op.om.*, p.1626.
- <sup>17</sup> On stars as signs rather than causes, see Ficino's letter to the Duke of Urbino, 'Divine Law cannot be made by the heavens, but may perhaps be indicated by them', *Letters*, vol.6 (London, 1999), pp.23-31.
- <sup>18</sup> It is course a great oversimplification to draw a historical distinction between modes of astrological practice in the ancient world, but in general terms it is fair to say that astrology in the mainstream began to move in a different direction under the influence of the Greek Academy.
- <sup>19</sup> See G.Cornelius, *The Moment of Astrology*, ch.7, pp.135-152, on the nature of augury and the *katarche*.
- <sup>20</sup> *Op.om.*, p.1537; on Ficino's being a Platonist from his youth see a letter to A. Poliziano, *Letters*, vol.1, p.55.; on Ficino's objections to scholasticism in general, see J. Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance* (Leiden & New York, 1991), pp.271-8.
- <sup>21</sup> *Op.om.*, p.1129.
- <sup>22</sup> On Ficino's interpretation of the *Parmenides* as a sacred text see M. Allen, 'The Second Ficino-Pico Controversy' in *Plato's Third Eye* (Aldershot, 1995), X, pp.444-8; J. Hankins, p.356.
- <sup>23</sup> Ficino's Latin translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* in *Op.om.*, pp.1836-57 [hereafter *C.H.*]. In the Preface Ficino gives the genealogy of ancient theologians as Hermes Trismegistus, Orpheus, Aglaophemus, Pythagoras, Philolaus, Plato. He was later to remove Philolaus and insert Zoroaster before Hermes (in the *Commentary on the Philebus* of 1469, 1,17 and 26). On the origins and significance of the genealogy see M. Allen, *Synoptic Art* (Florence, 1998), pp.24-32.
- <sup>24</sup> Michael Allen points out that Ficino 'fully credited the ancient biographical tradition that Plato had deliberately voyaged to Egypt in order to sit at the feet of the priests whose wisdom derived from Hermes' (M. Allen, 'Marsilio Ficino, Hermes Trismegistus and the Corpus Hermeticum' in *Plato's Third Eye*, XII, pp.38-9). On Egyptian elements in the C.H. see P. Kingsley, 'Poimandres: The Etymology of the name and the origins of the Hermetica', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, no.56, 1-24.
- <sup>25</sup> Ficino, Preface to the C.H., translated B. Copenhaver, *Hermetica* (Cambridge, 1992), p.xlviii.
- <sup>26</sup> *C.H.*, I.13, translated C. Salaman, D. van Oyen, W. Wharton, *The Way of Hermes* (London, 1999).
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, I.22-23.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, XII.19.
- <sup>29</sup> Ficino, *Theologica Platonica*, ed. R. Marcel (Paris, 1964), vol.II, p.276. Translated in C. Trinkaus, *In our Image and Likeness* (London, 1970), vol.II, p.496.
- <sup>30</sup> *Asclepius*, 40 (translated B. Copenhaver, *Hermetica*).
- <sup>31</sup> *Op.om.*, pp.234-5. See P. Moffit Watts, 'Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and three Renaissance Neoplatonists Cusanus, Ficino, and Pico on Mind and Cosmos', *Supplementum Festivum: Studies in Honour of P.O. Kristeller*, ed. J. Hankins, (Binghamton, New York, 1987), pp.279-98.
- <sup>32</sup> Ficino, Preface to Commentary on Plotinus, *Op.om.*, p.1537 (unpublished translation by the School of Economic Science).
- <sup>33</sup> Translated C. Kaske and J. Clark, Ficino, *Three Books on Life* (Binghamton, 1989).
- <sup>34</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, II.3.7, trans. S. MacKenna (London, 1962).
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, II.3.7.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, I.6.8. trans. A.H. Armstrong, Plotinus (Cambridge, Mass. 1981) vol.1

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<sup>37</sup> Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 101,15-21 [hereafter *D.M.*]; this quotation translated by G. Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (Pennsylvania Univ. Press, 1995), p.233.

<sup>38</sup> Iamblichus, *D.M.*, 7,13-14, translated by Thomas Taylor, *Iamblichus on the Mysteries of the Egyptians, Assyrians, Chaldaeans* (1818, reprint Frome, Somerset 1999).

<sup>39</sup> See A. Voss 'On the Knowledge of Divine Things: Ficino's Concept of Notio: Divinatory versus 'Scientific' Astrology', *Sphinx: A Journal for Archetypal Psychology and the Arts*, vol.6, 1994, pp.149-72. Ficino's version of *D.M.* is found in *Op.om.*, pp.1873-1908.

<sup>40</sup> *D.M.*, 7,13-15.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 96,15-18. See also G. Shaw, ch. 7, 'The Constraints of Embodiment', pp.81-7, and ch.14, 'Ritual as Cosmogony', pp.153-61.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 7,12-13. Iamblichus' treatise was written in reply to Porphyry's letter questioning the legitimacy and efficacy of theurgic practices.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 97,4; 276,14-17.

<sup>44</sup> Translated as 'On Obtaining Life from the Heavens' in C.Kaske and J. Clark, pp.242-393.

<sup>45</sup> 'Sometimes it can happen that when you bring seminal reasons to bear on forms, higher gifts too may descend, since reasons in the Anima Mundi are conjoined to the intellectual forms in her and through these to the Ideas of the Divine Mind', *ibid.*, 3.XXVI, p.391.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.XII, p.305.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.XXI, p.361.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.II, p.255.

<sup>49</sup> For example, Ficino says: 'if anyone uses a rightly made medicine, and yearns vehemently to get help from it and believes with all his heart and hopes with all his strength, he surely will get a great deal more help from it.', *ibid.*, 3.XX, p.353.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.II, p.251.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.XXII, p.365.

<sup>52</sup> *Letters*, vol. 2, p.34.

<sup>53</sup> *Sup.Fic.*, II, pp.87-8.

<sup>54</sup> Ficino, Proemium to Commentaries on Plato, *Op.om.*, p.1130 (unpublished translated by the School of Economic Science).

<sup>55</sup> *Op.om.*, pp.965-75, translated by G. Cornelius, D. Costello, G. Tobbyn, A. Voss & V. Wells, in *Sphinx*, 6, pp.124-148.

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