Laus Platonici Philosophi


‘Laus Platonici Philosophi: Marsilio Ficino and his Influence’ originated from a conference held in September 2004 at Birkbeck College (University of London). Despite the title, this book is much more than a praise of Marsilio Ficino as a Platonic philosopher and a translator of the corpus of Platonic works. It adds a significant contribution not only to the field of Ficinian studies, but also to Platonic scholarship in general and to Renaissance intellectual history. It can be seen, in many different ways, as a sequel of *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy*, (ed. by M. J. B. Allen, V. Rees and M. Davies, Brill 2002), which has proved to be a fundamental work for all scholars working on Ficino, and which *Laus Platonici philosophi* complements with original and inspiring discussions on Ficino’s intellectual personality as well as on his sources and later influence.

The volume is divided into two sections. The first section examines some aspects of Ficino’s philosophy and the ways in which it developed from the study of some important ancient sources. The second section explores the influence of his thought in some aspects of European intellectual history and on specific authors. The book starts with an essay by John Dillon (pp. 13-24), which investigates Ficino’s interpretation of the One—understood by the Neoplatonist philosophers as a divine nature beyond Being and beyond the Intellect—in the light of his own belief in the God of Christianity, who, by contrast, is said to exist everywhere and to be able of self-thinking. Dillon shows how Ficino, in his *Platonic Theology* (1484), handles this topic in a cautious and skilful way by turning strategically to Plotinus who, in some treatises of the *Enneads* (i.e., *Enneads* vi.4-5), had toned down the supra-essential and supra-noetic nature of the first principle. With his philosophical acumen and his wide knowledge of the sources, Dillon gives a clear and interesting account of Ficino’s controversial engagement with one of the central aspects of Neoplatonic metaphysics. However, Ficino’s commentary on the *Enneads*, published in 1492—where Ficino writes extensively on Plotinus’s view of the One—, should have been taken into account. The articles by Sarah Klitenic Wear (pp. 133-148) and Stéphane Toussaint (pp. 105-115) explore two neglected aspects of Ficino’s fascination with religious magic and with rituals: his use of musical theurgy and his doctrine of levitation. By exploring some important passages from both Ficino’s *De vita libri tres* (1489) and his translation of an extract from Proclus’s *On Hieratic Art* (which he entitled *De sacrificio et magia*), Klitenic Wear describes the important role played by hymn-singing in...
promoting the theurgic union of the soul with the divine. Ficino was obviously
enticed by the exciting possibilities offered by theurgy, one of which was levita-
tion of the body by means of the divine light reflected into the soul. Toussaint
gives a detailed account of Ficino’s interest in this doctrine by exploring the
influence of both Georgios Gemistos Pletho—who, despite the little attention
received insofar by Ficino scholars, played a significant role in the formation of
Ficino’s Platonism, as is shown by Paul Richard Blum (pp. 89-104)—and Jean
Gerson. Toussaint refers also to the ancient Neoplatonic theory of the vehicle
or spiritual body which was said to house the soul in its descent from the heav-
ens to earth and which the soul retained during its embodied life and even
after death. This theory, which is central in Ficino’s metaphysics and psychol-
ogy, proved to be highly influential for later Platonic authors, especially for the
Cambridge Platonists. David Leech explores Henry More’s indebtedness to
Ficino’s interpretation of the role of the vehicle in assuring the soul’s immor-
tality (pp. 301-316). In her essay (pp. 45-66), Valery Rees examines an almost
unexplored aspect of Ficino’s personality: his use of praise, both as encourage-
ment or flattery at the personal level and as reverence and love for the divine.
She claims, very convincingly, that Ficino’s use of praise served to support oth-
ers, but also to reconnect with the supercelestial world, in order for the soul ‘to
participate fully in the flow and return of divine love’ (p. 65). Ficino’s engage-
ment with love has been largely explored in the past. However, Unn Irene
Aasdalen examines it from a new perspective, that is, by taking into account
Giovanni Pico’s criticism of Ficino’s interpretation of Plato’s Symposium (pp.
67-88). Likewise, in her analysis of Ficino’s use of astrological material, Ruth
Clydesdale concentrates on Ficino’s correspondence rather than on the widely
known passages from De vita libri tres (pp. 117-131). As pointed out in the intro-
duction, the presence of Ficino ‘as a teacher in Florence served as an inspira-
tion to many, and helped to generate those transformations in understanding
that were to enliven so much of the literature of ensuing generations’ (p. 3).
The influence of Ficino’s work on his contemporaries is explored by Brian
Copenhaver (pp. 151-198), who examines the correspondence of Giovanni Pico
della Mirandola, which he also arranges in a proper chronological order.

In addition to being a great inspiration to his contemporaries, Ficino left
an enduring impression on Western philosophy. From the analysis of different
attitudes towards Platonic love during the period of reformation and counter-
reformation in Italy (pp. 199-226) to the influence of the third book of De vita
on Sixteenth and Seventeenth century alchemical schools (pp. 249-271), to the
reaction to the Neoplatonic tradition in the second half of the sixteenth century
(pp. 317-342) this book gives a convincing evidence for the impact of Ficino’s
works on later thought. James Hankins’s claim that Robert Burton’s belief in a
connection between religious diseases—for example, absence of love and fear for God in the appropriate measure—and bodily disorders—the presence of melancholic humor—is rooted in a well-established tradition of which Ficino was one of the most important representatives proves how influential Ficino’s medical theories had been on seventeenth century interpretations of ‘melancholic’ states. The legacy of the more ‘scientific’ aspects of Ficino’s natural philosophy, such as his considerations on the nature of matter and on the origins of life, is explored by Hiro Hirai by examining Fortunio Liceti’s criticism of Ficino’s positions (pp. 273-299). Finally, the essay by Stephen Clucas, which focuses on John Dee’s annotations to Ficino’s translation of Plato (pp. 227-247), confirms the circulation of Ficino’s works in Europe in the late sixteenth century. At the same time, it proves the actual influence of Platonic philosophy on Dee’s thought and his direct knowledge of Platonic literature.

This coherent study on Ficino’s philosophical personality and on his later influence has successfully proved the importance of the Renaissance period in the history of Western philosophy. It also helps to trace the development of Platonic metaphysics, theology and natural philosophy from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century and to assess the historical continuity of Platonism throughout time. For all these reasons, it represents a most useful contribution to both scholars of ancient and early modern Platonism, for which we should all be grateful.

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