A Debate Concerning the Intellect and the Will

1 Questions of Historiography and Method

This chapter does not aim to be conclusive; it merely wishes to present one case-study and place it in the wider context of the relations between humanism and scholasticism in late fifteenth-century Florence. As I have already argued, while the story of Renaissance humanism and humanists has been at the centre of many studies, the story of the Florentine Republic’s scholastic theologians of the period of Ficino, Pico, Poliziano, Landino, and Scala, for instance (many of whom had close relations with these humanists), has not been studied with sufficient attention.\(^1\) I shall argue here that the relations

\(^1\) The importance of the scholastic philosophers in Florence and the need for detailed studies of their texts can be regarded as one of the implied proposals of Hankins’ ‘Lorenzo de’ Medici as a Patron of Philosophy’, in his *Humanism and Platonism in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols. (Rome 2003–2004), vol. 2, pp. 273–316. In this chapter, I shall try to present a picture of the fifteenth-century debates between humanists and scholastics which is somewhat different from the one which can be found in Erika Rummel, *The Humanist-Scholastic Debate in the Renaissance and Reformation* (Harvard 1995), pp. 1–18. The two greatest scholars of Renaissance philosophy, or intellectual history, in the twentieth century, Eugenio Garin and Paul Oskar Kristeller, tried in their many studies to present a synthesis of Renaissance thought and novelty, also in regard to scholastic philosophy. Despite the fact that they both also made extraordinary contributions to the empirical work of editing texts, we still have texts of Ficino and Pico, as well as of other humanists, which have not been edited so far. In the case of the scholastic contemporary philosophers the situation is much worse: texts by Lorenzo Pisano (on whom see Chapter Eight in the present volume) or Antonio degli Agli, for instance, compared with the authoritative figure of St. Antoninus and his *Summa theologica* (on whom see Chapter Four in the present volume), are some of the works which are essential for the understanding of Florentine intellectual history in the late 1450s and the early 1460s, crucial years for the development of the young Ficino. All these texts and many others are still unstudied, and some are extant only in manuscript form. It is my conviction that detailed studies of these texts might change our general perspective of the epoch. On the importance of this context see Kristeller, ‘The Scholastic Background of Marsilio Ficino’, in *Traditio* II (1944), pp. 257–318, especially p. 263, and see his important remark on pp. 273–274: “This scholastic element is Aristotelian rather than Platonic in character, and it is obviously due to Ficino’s early training at the University of Florence. The specific sources of this element are difficult to verify as long as the philosophical and theological environment of fifteenth-century Italy is not more thoroughly investigated. For it is among the Italian scholastics of the fourteenth and the early fifteenth century that we have to look for Ficino’s teachers, not among the philosophers connected with the French schools of the twelfth and thirteenth
between the Florentine humanists and their scholastic contemporaries were rather complex, and that mutual influences existed between these two groups of intellectuals. This is why it is not always easy to distinguish between them and, more significantly, why we cannot reach a full understanding of these well-known humanist-oriented philosophers without detailed studies of contemporary scholastic philosophy.

The context of scholastic philosophy and theology in the Florentine Renaissance has been surprisingly neglected by most modern historians. Theology is not exactly a popular or an easy discipline. Besides, who is interested in the Renaissance by reason of its scholastic, doctrinal, and ‘medieval’ aspects? Accepted images and preconceptions still exercise a considerable influence on many students of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The idea that the Renaissance was a modern and secular phenomenon became ingrained in intellectual history at least since Burckhardt. Thus, modern assumptions and conceptions regarding philosophy on the one hand, and conclusions based on an unreliable historiography of scholasticism on the other, have combined in presenting, in the best case, a problematic picture in regard to the relation between humanist philosophers and scholastic philosophers.2

In order to deal with this issue more adequately, as I shall argue here, we ought to avoid using modern terminology like ‘rational metaphysics’. Instead, we should locate Ficino and his ideas on specific philosophical and theological issues in their historical context: in the case of the question of the superiority of the intellect or the will, in fourteenth-century doctrinal discussions. Thus, as recent studies have shown, there is no one single Dominican or Franciscan doctrine, but rather a rich and complicated tradition which develops and differs from Thomas or Scotus, at the hands of individual theologians over a period of one hundred and fifty years.4 So, for instance, someone like Durandus of the fourteenth century, who have so far attracted most of the interest of competent medievalists”. And see also Field, *The Origins of the Platonic Academy of Florence*, pp. 129–174, especially p. 136; and Celenza’s introduction to his *Piety and Pythagoras in Renaissance Florence—The Symbolum Nesianum*, pp. 26–27.

2 On many of these fallacies, with further references, see Monfasani, ‘The Renaissance as the Concluding Phase of the Middle Ages’.


4 For a presentation of the complicated philosophical problem of evil, which is related also to the intellect and the will, with further references, see Kent, ‘Evil in Later Medieval Philosophy’; see also her *Virtues of the Will: The Transformation of Ethics in the Late Thirteenth Century* (Washington D.C. 1995), especially chapters two and three.