Marsilio Ficino (1433–99) was doubtless one of the most interesting and accomplished figures of the Italian Renaissance. Although others before him had translated one or more of the dialogues of Plato, it was Ficino who published translations of all the known dialogues from Greek into Latin. That achievement would have rightly earned him a place in the history of scholarship and in the history of Western philosophy. But he did substantially more. First of all, he provided commentaries, some long and some short, for the various dialogues. Secondly, he attempted to formulate an overview of the dialogues that would present a focus and also provide a basis for putting the dialogues into a particular ordering. That is to say, the seeming inconsistencies among the dialogues would be overcome by Ficino’s discerning certain key notions in some of the dialogues. And thirdly he provided translations of works of two leading figures in the history of Neoplatonism, namely Plotinus and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite.

But what seems to be played down in recent scholarship regarding Ficino is that he wished to be and attempted to be a Platonic philosopher. What I wish to suggest is that it is a mistake to characterize Ficino primarily or essentially as an exegete of Plato and the Platonic tradition. He surely did know many sources in the Platonic tradition (which was heavily Neoplatonic) as it extended from late antiquity down through the Middle Ages to Ficino’s own time. Indeed Ficino is well aware of that history and attempts to place himself in it.¹ Nonetheless Ficino does not aim simply to translate Plato and others he considers to be Platonists—Plotinus and the Pseudo-Dionysius. The major work of Ficino’s life was not, I would emphasize, his translations or his commentaries but his *Theologia Platonica*. I will therefore first attempt to place Ficino in the context

¹ The following abbreviation will be used: *Op.* = Marsilio Ficino, *Opera Omnia* (Basel, 1576). He speaks of the Platonic tradition in e.g. his 1489 letter to Martin Prenninger, *Op.* 899.
of the various projects of translating Plato that took place during the Renaissance. Then I will attempt very briefly to state something about the order among the dialogues that Ficino discerns. But my emphasis will be on setting forth in brief fashion Ficino’s position and line of reasoning regarding three major topics that are central to Plato and the Platonic tradition and that are intrinsically interesting, namely: (1) metaphysical hierarchy and the use of spatial language; (2) innatism; and (3) the moral basis of political life. Ficino certainly considered himself to be operating as a Platonic philosopher and that we must recognize. Nonetheless we must also recognize that it is evident that at times he goes beyond the texts of Plato and Neoplatonism and borrows from the medieval tradition.

1. Ficino—The Exegete of Plato

From the turn of the fifteenth century and throughout the fifteenth century there was an explosion of translations of Plato. Others beside Ficino had provided translations of some of Plato’s dialogues. These translations have been carefully studied in James Hankins’ magisterial study, Plato in the Italian Renaissance. Leonardo Bruni translated the Phaedo, but his translation did not communicate knowledge of the dialogue’s philosophical contents in a clear fashion. He also translated the Apology, the Crito (twice), the Gorgias, the Letters and part of the Phaedrus, and a heavily corrected version of the Alcibiades speech in the Symposium. Rinuccio Aretino translated the Crito and the Euthyphro. Francesco Filelfo translated the Euthyphro and three of the Letters. Uberto Decembrio and Manuel Chrysoloras are responsible for a not wholly successful translation of the Republic, one which was used selectively by Uberto in his own dialogues De republica libri IV to justify the signorial rule of the Visconti at Milan. Uberto was not in fact a committed Platonist and he understood neither the metaphysical doctrine nor the theory of knowledge of Plato. Uberto’s son, Pier Candido Decembrio, authored a somewhat more literal

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3 Ibid., 47.
4 Ibid., 51, 53, 67, 74, and 80.
5 Ibid., 85–87.
6 Ibid., 89.
7 Ibid., 106–17.