

Humanities Institute
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A book on Life Divided into three books (1489)

Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499)

Author Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) is arguably an archetype of the Renaissance mind, announcing in itself the outset of new perspectives onto 'modern man'. The late fifteenth century marks a turn toward modernity in western man's self-discovery, on the turbulent road toward self-awareness, and toward those extremes of self-consciousness which pervade the culture of our present moment. In the following pages we will look briefly into one text by Ficino, his *Book on Life Divided into three books*.

Introduction Ficino's *Book on Life* opens with a preface by Ficino himself, offered passionately to the reader. The author offers love to any who come through this verbal portal into the presence of his care and good will, and he strongly advises any who bear hatred to stay away from his home. A more attentive welcome could hardly be imagined, and it can hardly surprise the courted reader to learn that the welcoming text before him is intended as a guide to heavenly ascent and to the governing ground rules of the created world. Nine governing principles are gathered for the use of the pilgrim.

The nine guides: the first set Nine guides will lead us toward our highest destination—the high temple of the nine Muses; the home of beauty and its splendor. (In the spirit of Neoplatonism, which emerges from the center of Ficino's thought, the aesthetic and the godly will invariably be twinned; the moral will be a resultant of beauty and divinity joined.) The first three of the nine guides, with which we journey upward on Ficino's wings, 'lead us in the heavens, the next three in the soul, the last three on earth.'

Gods as guides Mercury, Venus, and Phoebus Apollo conduct the individual through the supernal realms, serving in order as guide to the realm of the Muses. (A guide book of the heavens, in other words, is composed by the welcoming author who is present to lead his reader to beauty and bliss.) Inside this guide book, the pilgrim soul is housed and oriented. This housing is 'religious' in the sense that the pilgrim is being guided by 'gods,' the culture gods of ancient Greece, to be sure, but metaphysical gods, in the sense that the wandering soul is organizing itself within 'being,' as it follows its proffered guidance, Christianity, transformed and Christo-centric, is a constant theme within guidance.

The nine guides: the second set The second set of guides directs mankind in the journey he takes through the soul. (The first guide was to the realm of the heavens, the second to that of the soul.) Elements of this guide are *powerful memory, unshakable will power, keen intelligence*. One begins to see the direction of this entire tableau of orientations for the pilgrim on earth. First, a guide through the heavens, then a guide through the soul, then a guide to the body.

The nine guides: the third set The first guidance instructions played out in the heavens, the second in the soul, the third on earth, where one's basic living conditions are given. Essential, towards a fruitful life on earth, are a *wise father, a learned teacher, and an excellent physician*. Ficino himself offers to serve as that physician—his role has been paternal, from the preface on—and takes as his supremely needy pilgrim the 'literary scholar,' the man central to the culture. (In an age of the printing press, the splendor of painting and architecture, the literary scholar acquires a key importance.

The mindset of Ficino The universe, for this Renaissance Neoplatonist, is not exactly the universe of Plato, the fourth century B.C. ancient Greek student of Aristotle. Although Ficino is best known for his complete translation of Plato, into Latin, Ficino works Platonic 'themes'—the world-guiding centrality of love, the healing properties of valid thought; the unity of morality with erudition—but not precisely as a disciple of Plato, but rather as a fellow striver toward *the origins*, in company with Plato. Like Pico de la Mirandola, his contemporary, Ficino views the whole creation as in a state of increasing consciousness,

intelligibility, and consequently health and bliss. It is the religious-philosophical-healing role of the individual to support this cosmic growth.

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The mind of the literary scholar Ficino is concerned with three different journeys of the individual consciousness, en route toward the supernal pastures of beauty and grace. For Ficino the physician, the intricate implications of spirit, brain, heart, and kidneys makes for a elegant imbrication, which is the very definition of the third or bodily condition of the human journey; the literary scholar is deeply concerned with his kidneys, or other organs, as the presence they make of his being-here is an intricate element of his life journey. There is no separation, in Ficino's map of the body world, between the journey in materiality and the quest search for the highest work of mind. The blood is the fluid constant, in which the functioning of the organs leads the brain upward, and qualifies it for the highest lucubrations of arrival.

The perfusion of body with mind To be a physician was natural to Ficino—as it was for another voluminous Renaissance writer—Rabelais. The body was in mediaeval medical thinking an intimate and articulate element in the life journey of the soul. For Ficino the physician, learned men's greatest plague was black bile, the source of melancholy and depression; the first responsibility of the physician was to disperse bodily phlegm which generate black bile and depression. Care for the interfunctioning of body parts was the essential launchpad for Ficino, toward higher bodily health, toward brilliance of spirit, and toward a healthy old age.

The perfusion of Ficino's Neoplatonism, into his culture Like his own cosmic thinking, Ficino's life famously entered the blood flow of his own culture. In the sophisticated milieu of later fifteenth century Florence, Ficino found that passion for the arts, that love of subtle conversation, and a much needed support system, to aid him in his studies of language and literature. Though not of a wealthy family—Ficino's dad was a capable country physician, steeped not only in the 'modern' versions of healing, but in imaginative folk healing traditions. Ficino was favored by his father's medical services to one of Europe's wealthiest merchants, the Florentine Cosimo dei Medici. It was thanks to this acquaintance, and to this man's generous property grant to Ficino, that the young man was enabled to set up and establish one or more 'clubhouses,' in Florence, where he could host a smallish circle of coequal intellectuals. It was this setting, locally called by the name of the 'Platonic Academy,' that enabled spiritual discourse among the intellectually daring of Florence, young men like Pico de la Mirandola, who speculated on morals and their cosmic foundations, and who helped Florence with its reputation for a growing world center of speculation and culture.

The place of philosophy in the work of Ficino After the often rigid, and logically sequential, thinking of the Middle Ages, Aristotelian and then Thomistic, the openness of Neoplatonism offered a welcome site for looser and more imaginative speculation. While Christian doctrine was still firmly entrenched, it presented itself under diverse, sectarian guises—sources of turmoil and war throughout the seventeenth century—and among the elite, like Ficino and Pico, the Christian emphasis on grace and compassion bled over into a sympathetic world picture—note the intelligibility of the Greek gods—in which aesthetic-ethical-moral optics joined in sustaining the powerful notion of sources and origins.

The visionary in Ficino the philosopher Ficino is less a philosopher than a fellow visionary, who joins cohorts of self-investigative thinkers, in western Europe, to open up mind to broad new horizons of world-interpretation. To the critical philosophers of the eighteenth century, Ficino was to seem part of a loose movement developing within culture, rather than as a rigorous philosopher, as in fact the Plato he translated was both rigorous and robust. Ficino's own answer was of course built into his whole world vision; that Plato, like Ficino himself, was simply a stage by which the universe comes to consciousness of itself.