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# Hermetic Roots of Marsilio Ficino's Anthropocentric Thought

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*Marsilio Ficino's relationship to the Hermetic literary tradition has long been a controversial issue in academic discussion. Although Ficino is commonly known as a translator and keen reader of the philosophical Hermetica, his allegiances to the Hermetic ideas have been recognized only in his theory of magic (only to be denied later), while in other cases, in general, scholars tend to deny the impact of Hermetic writings instead of accepting it. This paper explores a topic in which the denial has been particularly harsh, namely Ficino's Promethean philosophy of man, highlighted as the most influential achievement of his thought by previous generations (e.g. by Trinkaus). Despite the neglect, there seems to be some evident convergence worth researching between Ficino's anthropocentric passages and the philosophical Hermetic sources. The comparative analyses may illustrate how Ficino applied Hermetic concepts and vocabulary to construct his anthropocentrism and utilized the name of Trismegistus to support his man-oriented ideals, which were to have a considerable impact on European thought during the following centuries. Furthermore, there are reasons to suggest that the inspiration and reinforcement offered by the philosophical Hermetica encouraged Ficino to exceed the boundaries of scholastic thought and the preceding dignitas hominis tradition.*

**Keywords:** Marsilio Ficino, Hermes Trismegistos, Hermetism, anthropocentrism, Neoplatonism, dignitas hominis genre

## Introduction

During the last few decades the studies concerning occult and esoteric traditions have become increasingly fashionable. The trend has been evident in the case of the Hermetic tradition, whose representatives have been widely studied and translated since the 1980s. The term Hermetic literature – *Hermetica* – refers to a branch of late classical philosophic, magic and soteriologic texts composed in Hellenistic Egypt and attributed to Hermes (Mercurius) Trismegistos (Trismegistus), an Egyptian sage, who until the seventeenth century was believed to have been a historical person and

contemporary of Moses. During the Middle Ages only one influential philosophical Hermetic opus had been circulating in the West, namely the Latin *Asclepius*. The situation changed drastically around 1460 when a Greek manuscript containing fourteen Hermetic dialogues, part of the larger compilation known as *Corpus Hermeticum*, arrived in Florence. [1] A young scholar with a medical background, Marsilio Ficino, keenly interested in 'ancient' sources, was commissioned by Cosimo de' Medici to translate the collection into Latin. The translation, known as *Pimander* after the first treatise of the compilation and completed in April 1463, became one of Ficino's bestsellers and launched a pan-European Hermetic boom.

Despite – or because of – Ficino's crucial role as an influential translator and practitioner of the philosophical *Hermetica*, the relationship between Ficino and the Hermetic literature has always been a controversial issue among scholars. The opposite fronts seem to reflect prior philosophical or religious commitments, whether disapproving or praising, commonly addressed to the Hermetic tradition and its esoteric siblings. In Ficino's case, the Hermetic influence has been recognized only in his theory of magic, while other possible connections have constantly been denied, neglected or condemned by authoritative voices who have regarded the esoteric and magical sources as invaluable, worthless or dubious objects of research. Partially due to this discrimination of which the Hermetic and other esoteric texts suffered until the 1980s, a comprehensive and critical study examining Ficino's philosophical and ideological indebtedness to the philosophical *Hermetica* is still conspicuous by its absence. This article attempts to fill in that gap partly by examining the Hermetic traits in one particular branch of Ficino's philosophy, his philosophy of man, which has been regarded as one of the most outstanding areas of his thought. [2] Naturally the aim is not to insist that *Hermetica* would have been the most eminent source of Ficino's anthropocentrism – on the contrary, his thought appears as a miscellany of influences, and sources like the biblical Genesis, Cicero's *De natura deorum*, the Church Fathers and humanistic writers from Petrarch to Manetti have unquestionably shaped his opinions on man's position in the universe. The purpose is to suggest that the theoretical Hermetic treatises familiar to Ficino might appear valuable when trying to interpret certain tones in his influential man-oriented philosophy and to make justice to the vast polymorphism of his philosophical roots.

### **Ficino's Life and Ideal of Human Autonomy**

Marsilio Ficino was born in Figline near Florence in 1433. His father was a physician working for the Medici family, and also the son was blessed with the traditional scholastic education. After 1455 Marsilio oriented his interests towards Platonic philosophy and started his Greek studies. In the early 1460s, assigned by old Cosimo de' Medici, Ficino began his decade-long project of translating all Plato's works into Latin. For the next thirty years he worked under Medici patronage and performed a notable role in the heart of the Florentine Renaissance as a productive writer, translator and well-known debater. Besides translations – many of them remained the standard Latinizations until the nineteenth century – some of his own works also turned out to be influential. Among these writings were, for example, *De amore*, a commentary of Plato's *Symposium* (1469), the philosophical *opus magnum Theologia Platonica* (c. 1474) and *De vita libri tres* (1489), an astro-medical manual that had a

great impact on later European esotericism. (Copenhaver & Schmitt 1992, 143–149, 159–160.) Ficino has often been mentioned also as the founder and leader of the Florentine Platonic Academy, which has, however, been proven to be a bare myth. (Hankins 1990, 145–146, 153–155.)

The emphasis on the philosophy of man has often been considered one of the most peculiar features of his philosophy. Already Paul Oskar Kristeller had underlined the modernity in Ficino's views on man's central position in the universe, and later Charles Trinkaus saw him as an outstanding representative of the humanistic *dignitas hominis* tradition. According to Trinkaus, Ficino created the most far-reaching ideal of human autonomy of his days, a model that was to be influential during the so-called scientific revolution. Furthermore, David Lea argued that Ficino brought into Neoplatonism a new anthropocentric emphasis underlining man's divine qualities and central position in the universe. Granting man a godlike dominion over the material world, as Lea assumes Ficino does, Ficino may be regarded as a significant milestone in a process by which the attitudes towards the natural environment became utilitarian. (Kristeller 1943, 400–401; Trinkaus 1970, 486–487, 501–503; Lea 1994, 513–524.)

### **Hermes and *Hermetica***

The story of how Hermes Trismegistus became a Renaissance celebrity is long and eventful. Originally Hermes was a Hellenistic interpretation of the Egyptian god Thoth, the divine scribe and later god of knowledge and science, and finally of magic. Hermes Trismegistus, Thrice great Hermes, appeared in Egyptian religious life in late third or second century BC. Through (con)fusions with Hellenism and Judaism, Trismegistus became a mythical sage, sometimes venerated as god of creation, sometimes regarded as a versatile demigod or hero and a contemporary of Moses. (Copenhaver 1992, xiv–xvi; Fowden 1993, 22–25.)

The ancient cult of Hermes produced a great number of texts associated with the name of Trismegistus. Nowadays the Hermetic writings are divided into technical and theoretical *Hermetica* – the terms were introduced by Garth Fowden, who separated between astrological, alchemical and other practical texts and, on the other hand, philosophical and theological writings. The antiquity knew no such distinction. The Hermetic writings we know are written mostly in Greek in Hellenistic Egypt and discuss cosmology, soteriology, theology, magic, astrology, alchemy, medical botanic and stone lore as an intermingled totality, testifying to a vivid cultural debate. In the late antiquity Hermetic texts were probably known all over the ancient world, particularly on Oriental and African soil. Notable authors like Tertullian and Galen cited Hermetic texts, and both Christians (like Lactantius) and pagans (like Ammianus Marcellinus) regarded Trismegistus as a remarkable ancient sage and prophet. Although Augustine later condemned Hermetic texts as false prophecy and heathen idolatry, the association of Hermetism with Christian truths lived on and had later a remarkable role in the Renaissance disputes. (Fowden 1993, e.g. xxi, 1–4, 56–57, 68–69; Copenhaver 1992, xxxii–xliv; Scarborough 1988, 22–24.)

Having been almost forgotten for centuries, Hermetism reappeared in European discussions in the twelfth century, when noteworthy authors like John of Salisbury

and Alain de Lille discussed Hermetic topics known through the Latin *Asclepius*. Due to *Asclepius*, the only influential representative of theoretical Hermetica known at that period, 'Mercurius Trismegistus' was during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries a relatively widely cited author. Particularly the chapters 23–24 and 37–38, which describe how Egyptian priests were able to 'make gods' by summoning divine souls into statues, were target of a vivid dispute, to which all remarkable writers took part.

At the same period one segment of technical *Hermetica* invaded Europe as Latin translations of Arabic manuals of astrology, alchemy and talismanic magic. [3] The tradition of Arabic Hermetism differed from the ancient tradition in many respects. In most of the cases the Arabic treatises written mostly between the seventh and eleventh centuries have not been connected with any particular texts produced by the antiquity. (Copenhaver 1992, xlvi–xlvii.) These short tractates, however, probably reinforced the myth of Mercurius's primordial origin, and, along with the Latin *Asclepius*, formed the late medieval understanding of Hermetic wisdom that Ficino inherited.

Hermes was taken quite seriously by the Italian Renaissance. Petrarch is known to have read *Asclepius*, and Giannozzo Manetti, Ficino's important predecessor in the *dignitas* tradition, cites 'Mercurius' in his *De dignitate et excellentia hominis* (On man's dignity and excellency) completed in 1452 or 1453. Mercurius was, however, due to *Asclepius*'s passage of making gods and Arabic technical *Hermetica*, often associated with astrological magic and demonology. It was Ficino who then re-introduced the ancient philosophical gnosis on a wider scale to the European audience. As the story transmitted by Ficino himself reveals, a Pistoian monk called Leonardo found a Greek manuscript containing a Hermetic compilation in a Macedonian monastery and transported it to Florence. Ficino was immediately commanded to put aside the Platonic corpus and grasp the Hermetic newcomer. Ficino's translation, entitled as *Pimander*, was completed in April 1463 and became later a real bestseller. Young Ficino was still inexperienced as a thinker and translator, and his rather cautious and conservative reinterpretation contains certain oddities. He, for example, refuses to call the human soul 'demonic' as the Greek original requires, and uses instead a Christianized substitute 'angelic'. [4] Ficino's great role as a translator and interpreter of the Hermetic corpus and as a distributor of Hermetic thought cannot, however, be underlined enough. *Pimander* was printed already in 1471, and by 1550 more than twenty editions had seen the light of day. Ficino's *Pimander* remained a standard version of the so-called *Corpus Hermeticum* until the nineteenth century, and because of his efforts the Hermetic tradition was for two centuries a notable player in European intellectual life culminating in Giordano Bruno's great synthesis. (Copenhaver 1992, xlviii–xlix; Scarborough 1988, 20–21.)

The Renaissance had regarded Hermes Trismegistus as a real person or divinity dating back to the days of Moses. The situation changed in 1614, when a Swiss Calvinist Isaac Casaubon proved that the Hermetic texts cannot be from earlier than the Hellenistic age. After Casaubon's revelation the appreciation of the *Hermetica* diminished and the Hermetic tradition sank into the margins of Western culture. However, the change was slow and gradual: Isaac Newton at the end of the seventeenth century and Chevalier Ramsay still in the eighteenth century used

Hermetic texts as valuable historical sources. (Copenhaver 1992, 1–li. Fowden 1993, xxii.)

### **Ficino, *Hermetica* and the Research Tradition**

Garth Fowden summarized the situation quite appositely in 1993 when he stated that ‘historical and sociological questions about Hermetism have usually been regarded as of subordinate interest and important.’ (Fowden 1993, xxi–xxii.) It is still somehow mysterious how problematic a topic the Hermetic tradition has been for scholars since the modern research began at the dawn of the twentieth century. In the first half of the century trends like logical positivism regarded disapprovingly everything that was labelled as irrational, and phenomena like Hermetism and magic were usually seen as unworthy topics for academic research. This enlightened and ‘classical’ attitude dominated also the Ficinian studies for decades. During the first half of the century Trismegistus was never mentioned among Ficino’s sources. For example, Paul Oskar Kristeller and Giuseppe Saitta, who composed influential monographs on Ficino’s life and thought, designated him as a representative of the classical tradition and purely Christian scholastic thought without linkages to Hermetic texts or other esoteric sources. In the 1950s the situation started to change when Eugenio Garin and Warburgian scholars D. P. Walker and Frances Yates, who brought the history of occult sciences into the modern discussion on a larger scale, regarded *Asclepius* and *Corpus Hermeticum* as central sources for Ficino’s magical and astrological thought. [5] The emphasise on the Hermetic influence led to some ambitious and exaggerating claims suggesting that the rise of experimental methodologies and even the whole scientific revolution was partly due to the strong Hermetic vibrations of the sixteenth century. This so-called ‘Yates thesis’ has been highly controversial from the very beginning, but it gained a foothold nevertheless and one can still encounter its echoes in histories of philosophy. [6]

Meanwhile, there were strong academic tendencies to restrict the Hermetic impulse merely to magical and occult thought. These attitudes are manifest in the works of Charles Trinkaus, who in 1970 argued that Ficino and Pico ‘did not need Hermes Trismegistus to show them way’ to delineate the new ideal of human dignity. Trinkaus was convinced that the biblical Genesis, patristic sources and the humanistic tradition were enough to explain the anthropocentric emphasis in Renaissance thought. He saw, in general, Ficino’s anthropocentric philosophy as a classical project that had few if any connections to the occult disciplines like the suspicious and non-European Hermetic tradition. (Trinkaus 1970, 486–87, 501–503.)

The connection between Hermetic sources and Ficino’s theory of magic served as a paradigmatic view until the 1980s, when Brian P. Copenhaver published notable studies on the topic. Besides attacking harshly the Yates thesis he proved, convincingly enough, that the theoretical Hermetic texts familiar to Ficino offered little if any material that was usable for the theory of magic, and that the real sources for Ficino’s magic should be searched among scholastic philosophers and late classical Neoplatonists, such as Plotinus, Porphyrius, Iamblichus and Proclus. Later, Carol Kaske agreed with this view. (Copenhaver 1984, 523–554; 1986, 351–369; 1988, 79–110; Kaske 1998, 47–48.) Besides, when Michael J. B. Allen in 1990

argued that Ficino 'never became, or at least remained, a committed Hermetist, and the impact of the *Corpus Hermeticum* upon his thought was early and limited' (Allen 1990, 47), it seemed that the supposed connections between *Hermetica* and Ficino's thought – both magical and philosophical – had been largely demolished.

Since then there have been only a few efforts to re-examine Ficino's Hermetic linkages. In 2002 Clement Salaman, working within Allen's sphere of influence, tried to establish nexuses between Ficino's theoretical philosophy and some Hermetic conceptions of Egyptian origin. The parallels he highlighted, for example the sun as a symbol of divine light, are obvious, though the conceptions in question are not exclusively Hermetic but more likely common features in all Neoplatonic literature, a point that makes it challenging to identify the specific sources. (Salaman 2002, 115–135.)[7] What is remarkable in Salamans's study, however, is his cautious assumption of continuous Hermetic influence on Ficino throughout his career, not limited to magic but spread also across the fields of philosophy.

### **Ficino's Theoretical *Hermetica*: *Asclepius* and *Pimander***

Ficino knew two remarkable representatives of the theoretical *Hermetica*. A Hermetic compilation known as *Asclepius* is a philosophical and theological dialogue consisting of forty-one chapters. The treatise was originally written in Greek in the second or third century AD entitled as *Logos teleios*, the Perfect Sermon. The Latin name *Asclepius* derives from Greek Asklepios, a Hellenistic interpretation of the Egyptian god Imhotep or Imouthes, who appears as one of the characters of the dialogue. Lactantius seems to have known the Greek original that did not survive. The Latin translation, which was falsely attributed to the Apuleius of Madaura, the famous author of *Metamorphoses*, was mentioned in Augustine's *City of God* at the beginning of the fifth century. The themes that the treatise deals with are, according to John Scarborough, typical of the third-century pagan philosophical debates. *Asclepius* discusses the doctrine of elements, the origin of forms and matter as well as the mortality and immortality of living things. Man as a reflection of God with God's attributes and man's ranking behind God are also substantial themes. (Copenhaver 1992, xiii, xliii–xliv; Scarborough 1988, 25.) Anthropocentric tones culminate in chapters 6 and 8, which praise the divinity of the human soul and the variety of human skills. The manuscript Ficino used has not been identified, but the Latin *Asclepius* appears as a notable source of citations throughout his career. The impact is most conspicuous in *Theologia Platonica* and *De vita*, but certain choices in his *Pimander* translation indicate that he was probably well acquainted with the Latin *Asclepius* already in 1462.

Because *Pimander* is often confused with the so-called *Corpus Hermeticum*, some explicatory notions might be necessary. *Corpus Hermeticum* is a Greek compilation consisting of seventeen books formed by sixteenth century editors. *Pimander* is Ficino's Latin translation of the first fourteen books, and it is based on only one Greek manuscript brought from Macedonia. The title, *Pimander*, is a Latinized form of Poimandres, the protagonist of the dialogue. The compilation translated by Ficino in 1462–63 – as well as the whole *Corpus Hermeticum* – represents a different textual tradition than the survived examples of the ancient *Hermetica*. The oldest surviving

manuscript containing texts of the modern *Corpus* is the one used by Ficino (Plut. 71.33 in the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence), which derives from the fourteenth century. According to some estimations, medieval Byzantine scholars are responsible for the creation of the collections, maybe famous Mikael Psellos who is known to have been familiar with Hermetic ideas. The obscurity of the medieval tradition makes it, however, impossible to decipher to what extent the texts migrated to Europe represent the 'original' and 'authentic' Hermetic culture of ancient Egypt. Probably the anonymous Byzantine editors emphasized the convergences with Christian doctrines and excluded occult and heretic elements, which makes the content less esoteric compared to other exemplars of the theoretical *Hermetica*. (Scarborough 1988, 23–24; Copenhaver 1992, xl–xliii.)

Formally and contentually the compilation is very much like *Asclepius*. It is a dialogue presenting a revelation, in which a divinity called Poimandres explains sacred mysteries to his disciple Hermes. Anthropocentric themes are condensed in chapters 10–12, which discuss the limitless capacities of the human mind. Ficino's translation, already discussed above, is an inaccurate rendering that resembles sometimes more a free reinterpretation than a literal translation. Careless printed editions made since 1471 multiplied *Pimander's* contentual incorrectness, but the text served as the standard Latin version of the first fourteen books of *Corpus Hermeticum* for centuries.

In Ficino's own opinion Trismegistus was always a notable author. He accompanied the traditional accounts classifying Hermes as equal to biblical prophets and other sages of the classical tradition and the predecessor to Platonic wisdom. He followed, for example, Cicero, who characterized Trismegistus as the inventor of alphabets, and Lactantius, who paralleled him with sibyls as a witness of Christ's coming. (Yates 1964, 1–2, 7–9; Copenhaver 1992, xxix–xxxi.) In general, the Egyptian sage had in Ficino's writings almost the same status as canonized philosophical authors like Plato, Plotinus, Augustine and Aquinas. Although the Hermetic impact on Ficino's philosophy is not as extensive as that of the authors mentioned above, probably due to the small quantity of sources, he seems to have held Trismegistus's argumentation in equally high esteem as that of the classical writers and Biblical authorities. For example, in the preface of *Pimander* he simply passes Augustine's condemnation in favour of Hermes (*Op. Om.* 1836, BML Plut. 21.8, ff. 1–2.), and in his gigantic *Theologia Platonica* he often parallels Trismegistus both with the Platonic and Mosaic tradition when promoting his syncretistic vision of the philosophical-religious amalgamation of learned ancient theology, the *Prisca theologia*:

*However what the universal order once lost because of the inordinate motion of the soul must be restored to it again when order eventually prevails. Not just Moses, But Zoroaster, Hermes Trismegistos, and Plato too, agree on this. (Th. Pl.10.3.5. Platonic Theology iii, 136–137. Transl. Allen, Michael J. B.)*

In Ficino's thought *Prisca Theologia* forms a sequence of philosophers and their disciples ending in Plato. Trismegistus appears usually as the first or second link of the sequence and as the founder of all sciences and human wisdom. (*Op. Om.* 1836.

*Th. Pl.* 6.1.7, 12.1.4. About *Prisca theologia*, see Copenhaver & Schmitt 1992, 134–148.) The placing is a rather illustrating one regarding Trismegistus's position in Ficino's works in general. The Hermetic opuscles are cited or quoted broadly seventy-five times in *Theologia Platonica*, and the name of Hermes is mentioned around twenty-five times, always as a venerable author with whom the Florentine philosopher willingly agrees.

### ***Theologia Platonica* 13: the Heyday of Ficino's Anthropocentrism as a Miscellany of Hermetic Ideas**

Ficino's connections to the theoretical *Hermetica* have often been searched through his popular and easily accessible works like *De amore* and *De vita* as well as his letters and minor treatises. Time after time these alleged connections have proven to be weak or questionable. A more comprehensive view can be found if one examines *Theologia Platonica de immortalitate animorum*, Ficino's monolithic philosophical masterpiece written between 1469 and 1474. As the whole title suggests, Ficino treats questions involved with the immortality of souls both in a religious and philosophical context and tries, meanwhile, to reconcile Christian truths with the entire tradition of Platonic philosophy. Ficino also uses the opportunity to present his knowledge of the classical tradition including historiography, mythology, poetry and art, and to promote his *prisca theologia* sequence originating from Trismegistus and Zoroaster.

*Theologia Platonica* is also known as the climax of Ficino's philosophy of man. Next I am going to compare certain passages containing praise of human capacities with similar sections in his *Pimander* and the Latin *Asclepius*. [8] The most famous passage is undoubtedly the Promethean proclamation included in *Theologia Platonica* 13.3, which has often been treated as the basic manifestation of Ficino's anthropocentrism. The passage has been cited by several authors, for instance Charles Trinkaus, who sees Ficino's description as part of the humanistic *dignitas hominis* genre dating back to Petrarch and deriving from the biblical Genesis and patristic literature as well as from secular philosophy, like Aristotle's *De anima* and Cicero's *De natura deorum*. In Trinkaus's outlook Ficino's *Theologia* is the culmination of the evolution. (Trinkaus 1970, 173–174, 181–186, 484; 1986, 141–153.) In the above-mentioned passage Ficino, with enthusiastic rhetoric, describes man as the only earthly being capable, by his divine arts, of exploiting all four elements, moving his position limitlessly, comprehending and measuring the universe and ruling over the material world. In doing this man takes godlike rights, performs the role and office of God and is therefore 'a kind of god' himself.

Ficino, who usually relies heavily on recognized authors, mentions no sources in the passage. Comparative investigation, however, reveals that a great number of themes discussed here might have been inspired by Hermetic models. For example, the conception of man as the only user and governor of all the elements recurs in a Hermetic passage that forms part of the twelfth book of *Corpus Hermeticum*. In the following excerpts Ficino's Latin translation of the Greek original is paralleled with *Theologia Platonica*. Convergences are indicated by italics in the Latin texts.

Pimander: *I would like you to on ponder this in the first place: the rest of the living species populate one province of the globe: moist creatures inhabit the water, terrestrial the earth, flying the air. But only man uses them all earth, water, air and fire: he looks up at the heaven and comes in contact with it by his reason; he really is a god simultaneously surrounding everything and for everything. He is the initiator and the virtue of everything [...]* (Transl. Ockenström.)

*'Illud autem in primis animadvertas fili mi velim; quod unumquodque genus viventium reliquorum, propriam mundi provinciam habitat: humida quidem aquam, terrestria terram, aerem volatilia: homo autem his omnibus utitur, terra, aqua, aereque & igne: coelum suspicit, sensuque illud attingit: Deus vero circa omnia simul atque per omnia. Actus enim est omnium atque potestas [...]*' (BML 21.8, 34v. BML 21.21 33r. CH 12.20.)

Theologia Platonica: *[...] one can observe how man uses all the world's materials and uses them everywhere as though they were all subject to him: he uses the elements, stones, metals, plants, and animals, fashioning them into many forms and figures, which the beasts never do. Nor is he content with just one of the elements or with particular elements like the brutes: he employs them all as though he were the lord of all. He tramples on the earth, furrows the water ascends into the air in the tallest towers [...] He kindles fire and he alone uses and delights especially in the familial hearth.* (Transl. Allen.)

*... animadvertere licet, quemadmodum homo et omnes et undique tractat mundi materias, quasi homini omnes subiiciantur. Tractat, inquam, elementa, lapides, metalla, plantas et animalia, et in multas traducit formas atque figuras, quod numquam bestiae faciunt. Neque uno est elemento contentus aut quibusdam ut bruta, sed utitur omnibus, quasi sit omnium dominus. Terram calcat, sulcat aquam, altissimis turribus conscendit in aerem [...] Accendit ignem et foco familiariter utitur et delectatur praecipue ipse solus.* (Th. Pl. 13.3.3, *Platonic Theology* iv, 172–173.)

Ficino expresses in *Theologia* the equivalent idea and occasionally with the same wording (*omnibus utitur*) as in his translation. While other creatures make use of one or two elements, man exploits them all and governs them with his godlike capacities. The conception is found also in *Asclepius* 6, and somewhat later in *Theologia* Ficino repeats it, praising the capacities of *magi* or priests who 'command the elements, rouse winds, compel clouds to rain'. (Th. Pl. 13.4.1. *Platonic Theology*, iv, 182–185. Transl. Allen.) Although Ficino refers more to the Neoplatonic Iamblichean theurgy than to theoretical *Hermetica* and appeals to Trismegistos merely as a witness to religious miracles, the passage also reflects the Hermetic attitudes of man as a godlike demiurge capable of shaping material reality. The idea of man as the only consumer and governor of all the elements appeared already in Giannozzo Manetti's *De dignitate et excellentia hominis*, but the textual comparison indicates that *Pimander* has in all likelihood been Ficino's most essential source of inspiration. [9]

Another feature that appears in both sources is the idea of man's divinity. In governing all the elements and animals man becomes godlike, actually a god on earth, as Ficino puts it. The idea is manifest also in *Pimander*:

*Pimander: Man really is a divine animal, not equal to the brute beasts on Earth but to the celestial gods [...] for this reason one must dare to call him an earthly and mortal god and also a celestial and immortal god. (Transl. Ockenström.)*

*Homo siquidem animal est divinum, nec est cum terrenis brutis, sed cum diis celestibus comparandus. [...] Quamobrem audendum est dicere, hominem quidem terrenum deum esse mortalem, Deum vero celestem immortalem hominem. (BML 21.8, 26v. BML 21.21, 25r. CH 10.24.)*

*Theologia Platonica: In justice only a celestial animal delights in the celestial element. [...] So man who universally provides for all living and non-living things is a kind of god. [...] He who rules over the body in so many and in such important ways, and who performs the role of immortal God is undoubtedly himself immortal. (Transl. Allen.)*

*Merito caelesti elemento solum caeleste animal delectatur; [...] Homo igitur qui universaliter cunctis et viventibus et non viventibus providet est quidam deus. [...] Qui tot tantisque in rebus corpori dominator et immortalis dei gerit vicem est proculdubio immortalis. (Th. Pl. 13.3.3. Platonic Theology iv, 172–175.)*

An essential backup is, again, provided by the Latin *Asclepius*:

*a human being is a great wonder, a living thing to be worshipped and honored: for he changes his nature into a god's, as if he were a god. (Transl. Brian B. Copenhaver.)*

*magnum miraculum est homo, animal adorandum, & honorandum: hoc enim in naturam Dei transit, quasi ipse sit Deus. (Asclepius 6. Hermetica, 69.)*

In these extracts the Hermetic man, elevated above other earthly creatures, is compared to heavenly and immortal gods. In *Pimander* man is called a divine animal (*animal divinum*), comparable to celestial gods (*diis celestibus*), while *Theologia's* human being is called a celestial animal (*animal caeleste*) and a kind of god (*quidam deus*) who rules over the realm of nature. Man's divinity was naturally a common topos in the literary tradition, and there was a vast multitude of sources for Ficino to follow, but these affinities both in vocabulary and content support the assumption that the *Hermetica* has been one of Ficino's main inspirers.

There are some cases in which Ficino's indebtedness to the vocabulary of his *Pimander* translation and *Asclepius* is even more conspicuous. The third conception we can adhere to is man's ability to measure the heavens, by which Ficino refers to man's contemplative and mental capacities to comprehend the divine ideas and

reproduce the structure and dimensions of the universe in artificial works. As we have seen, Ficino's man, as a celestial animal, ascends to heaven and measures it with his celestial virtues. The idea can be traced back to the phraseology of *Pimander*:

*Pimander: But the man ascends to heaven and measures it, and yet he does not abandon lower things or sublime things. [...] without leaving Earth he ascends to heaven, so vast is the virtue of the human nature.* (Transl. Ockenström.)

*Homo autem ascendit in coelum illudque metitur, nec eum fugit, quae ima sint, quaeve sublimia, ... terram quidem haud dimittens in coelum attollitur, tam ampla est humanae naturae potestas.* (BML 21.8, 26v. BML 21.21, 25r. CH 10.25.)

*Theologia Platonica: with heavenly power he [man] ascends and measures the heavens; and with his superheavenly mind he transcends the heavens.* (Transl. Allen.)

*Caelesti virtute ascendit caelum atque metitur. Supercaelesti mente transcendit caelum.* (*Th. Pl.* 13.3.3. *Platonic Theology* iv, 172–173.)

In *Pimander* the verb *metitur* is a translation for *μετρεῖ*. (*Corpus Hermeticum* I, 126.) Ficino's solution is obvious, but there is also a possibility that he was led by an existing model, the Latin *Asclepius* 6, where an anonymous author has used the same wording (*caelum ... animi sagacitate metitur*) to signify the measuring of the heavens. It seems therefore plausible that Ficino used the Hermetic model provided by *Asclepius* as an exemplar when rendering the Greek *Corpus* into Latin, and later made use of the same vocabulary when discussing the topic in *Theologia Platonica*.

Man's capacity to transcend the heavens with his supercelestial mind is not without importance either. What Ficino means, in a nutshell, is that man, using his mind granted as a divine gift, can contemplate divine ideas. This is one of the basic assumptions of the whole Neoplatonic tradition, but it is also apparent in theoretical *Hermetica*. In *Pimander* one encounters the idea at least twice: in the first book, the so-called *Hermetic Genesis*, the new-born man transcends the heavens and penetrates the supercelestial level where he has complete authority over unreasoning animals. [11] In the eleventh book of *Corpus Hermeticum* the author also argues that man is permitted to transcend the heavens and investigate what is beyond them. (*CH* 1.13–14, 11.19.)

The last theme we could seize upon is the praise of human arts and achievements. Ficino describes flowingly how man 'tramples the earth, furrows the water, ascends into air in the tallest towers'. A bit later he admires in an enthusiastic way the human activity and constructions on Earth, such as buildings, cities and irrigation, without neglecting disciplines like magic and literary arts. (*Th. Pl.* 13.3.3. *Platonic Theology* iv, 172–173.) Already in the previous chapter he had praised the artistic achievements of the ancients, referring, for example, to Zeuxis, Apelles and Praxiteles. (*Th. Pl.* 13.3.1. *Platonic Theology* iv, 168–171.) Making such catalogues had been part of the tradition since Cicero's *De natura deorum* 2.60, which presented a list of ways of

human dominion over the creation. Giannozzo Manetti, Ficino's Florentine predecessor, had imitated Cicero's style in the catalogue included in his *De dignitate et excellentia hominis*. Ficino certainly took advantage of both Cicero and Manetti's descriptions [12], which seem to have left some traces in his own lists. Nevertheless, it seems plausible that Manetti and Ficino had a common source, that is, the eighth book of the Latin *Asclepius*, which mentions agriculture, construction, navigation and communication as disciplines with which man governs and completes the lower elements:

*Just now, speaking about the mortal things, I mean to speak not about water and earth, those two of the four elements that nature has made subject to humans, but about humans make of those elements or in them – agriculture, pasturage, building, harbors, navigation, social intercourse, reciprocal exchange – the strongest bonds among humans or between humanity and the parts of the world that are water and earth. Learning the arts and sciences and using them preserves this earthly part of the world; god willed it that the world would be incomplete without them. (Transl. Copenhaver. *Asclepius* 8. *Corpus Hermeticum* ii, 306. *Hermetica*, 71.)*

The comparison indicates that Ficino's description owes more to *Asclepius* than to Cicero, while Manetti's catalogue appears more as a synthesis of both of them. Similarly with the Hermetic exemplar, Ficino mentions agriculture, construction and liberal arts and disciplines. He might have also been influenced by *Pimander*, which in certain passages underlines man's capacities to master all the arts and disciplines. (*CH* 10.22, 11.20.)

### **Divinity of the Human Soul and the Impact of the Latin *Asclepius***

The fourteenth book of *Theologia* continues discussing anthropocentric themes. Unlike in the cited passage in the thirteenth book, Ficino now mentions the name of Trismegistus several times in an anthropocentric context and cites the philosophical *Hermetica* in philosophically crucial contexts. In these chapters Ficino tries to examine the ways in which the human soul is – or strives to become – godlike. This is a part of the theological project inherent in *Theologia Platonica*, that is, proving the soul's immortality by emphasizing its divine origin. Although Ficino introduced many non-Christian and unorthodox, mostly Neoplatonic, traits to his religious thought, he was also a priest who made huge efforts to confine his project to a Christian framework to avoid conflict with the Church. In doing this he seems to regard Trismegistus, a *priscus theologus* comparable with biblical prophets, as a suitable author to adduce in support of these partly heretic and hybrid reflections.

Two important references originate from the sixth book of *Asclepius*. The first one, mentioned already in the previous chapter, was highlighted later by Pico in his famous essay on human dignity:

*Theologia Platonica: Every man's soul in a way makes trial of all these in itself, although different souls do so in different ways, and thus human*

*kind strives to be all things, since as a genus it lives the lives of all. Hermes Trismegistus was struck with wonder by this and declares, 'Man is a great miracle, an animal meet to be worshipped and adored; he knows the race of the demons, being naturally their kin, and turns into God as though he himself were God'. (Th. Pl. 14.3.2. Platonic Theology iv, 241–243. Transl. Allen.)*

Another citation discusses the same philosophical subjects, that is, the human desire to be like God, to be everywhere and to become all things:

*Asclepius: [...] he swiftly mixes into the elements; he plumbs the depths of the sea in the keenness of his mind. Everything is permitted to him: heaven itself seem not too high [non caelum videtur altissimum], for he measures it in his clever thinking as if it were nearby. No misty air dims the concentration of his thought; not thick earth obstructs his work; no abysmal deep of water blocks his lofty view. He is everything, and he is everywhere. (Asclepius 6. Corpus Hermeticum ii, 302. Hermetica, 70. Transl. Copenhaver.)*

*Theologia Platonica: Furthermore, God is everywhere and is always. But man longs to be everywhere. For he uses the four elements, as we said. He measures the earth and the sky and he examines the hidden depths of Tartarus. To him the sky does not appear superlatively high [non illi caelum videtur altissimum] – to use Mercurius' words – nor deep the center of the earth. The intervals of time and place do not prevent him from coursing through all that exists in whatever time or place. No wall blocks or checks his gaze; no boundaries suffice to him. He studies to rule everywhere, everywhere to be praised. And thus he strives to be, like God, everywhere. (Th. Pl. 14.5.1. Platonic Theology iv 250–253. Transl. Allen.)*

As one can see, Ficino has modified the texts, but the sources are easily identifiable. In the latter case the direct citation '*non caelum videtur altissimum*' binds the passages together. [13] The idea of an omnipotent man who is capable of surpassing all resistance formed by nature and the material world is also manifest in *Pimander*, where the topic is discussed with similar terms. (cf. *CH* 11.19.)

*Asclepius* 6, partially quoted above, can be considered the most anthropocentric paragraph in the *Hermetica* known in fifteenth century Florence, and hence it is not a surprise that it had an influence on humanistic philosophy. In Ficino's *Theologia* there is, along with the cited extracts from the thirteenth and fourteenth books, a famous and frequently quoted passage that possibly contains Hermetic tones. I am referring to the paragraph, already highlighted by Kristeller, in which the author emphasizes the position of the rational soul as the 'knot and bond of the world', and as the middle one of the five ontological hypostases of his Neo-Platonic metaphysics. A closer examination alludes to certain contentual connections between the passage and *Hermetica*. I suggest that almost all philosophical themes present in Ficino's argumentation can be traced back to *Asclepius* 6, and that even some resemblances in

the vocabulary are identifiable. It is worthwhile, therefore, to present the whole passage of *Theologia* and the equivalents in *Asclepius*:

*Theologia Platonica: And because it [Soul] control bodies while it also clings things divine, it is the mistress of bodies, not their companion [14] This is the greatest miracle in nature. For the remaining things below God are each individually something singular in themselves, but in this essence is all things together. It possesses within itself images of things divine on which it depends, [...] Because it is the universal mean, it possesses the powers of all. If this is so, it passes into all. And since it is the true bond of everything in the universe, when it passes into some things, it does not abandon others, but it moves into individuals while forever preserving all things. It can with justice, accordingly, be called nature's center, the mean of everything in the universe, the succession or chain of the world, the countenance of all things, and the knot and bond of the world. (Transl. Michael J. B. Allen with John Warden.)*

*Et quia dum corpora regit, haeret quoque divinis, corporum domina est, non comes. Hoc maximum est in natura miraculum. Reliqua enim sub deo unum quiddam in se singula sunt, haec omnia simul. Imagines in se possidet divinatorum [...] Et cum media omnium sit, vires possidet omnium. Si ita est, transit in omnia. Et quia ipsa vera est universorum connexio, dum in alia migrat, non deserit alia, sed migrat in singula ac semper cuncta conservat, ut merito dici possit centrum naturae, universorum medium, mundi series, vultus omnium nodusque et copula mundi. (Th. Pl. 3.2.6. Platonic Theology, i, 242–43.)*

*Asclepius: Because of this, Asclepius, human being is a great wonder, a living thing to be worshipped and honored: for he changes his nature into a god's, as if he were a god; ... Conjoined to the gods by a kindred divinity, he despises inwardly that part of him in which he is earthly. All others he draws close to him in a bond of affection, recognizing his relation to them by heaven's disposition. He looks up to heaven. He has been put in the happier place of middle status so that he might cherish those beneath him and be cherished by those above him. [...] Everything is permitted to him. [...] He is everything, and he is everywhere. (Transl. Copenhaver.)*

*Propter haec, o Asclepi, magnum miraculum est homo, animal adorandum atque honorandum. hoc enim naturam dei transit, quasi ipse sit deus; [...] diis cognata divinitate coniunctus est; partem sui, qua terrenus est, intra se despicit; cetera omnia quibus se necessarium esse caelesti dispositione cognoscit, nexu secum caritatis adstringit; suspicit caelum. sic ergo felice loco medietatis est positus, ut, quae infra se sunt, diligit, ipse a se superioribus diligatur. [...] omnia illi licet. [...] omnia idem est et ubique idem est. (Asclepius 6. Nock & Festugière ii, 301–302; *Hermetica*, 69–70.)*

In this excerpt Ficino grants the Soul, associated strongly with the human soul, three groups of qualities recognizable also in *Asclepius* 6. [15] First of all, unlike the other entities, the soul can be all the things simultaneously; secondly, the soul can move limitlessly, be everywhere and participate in all forms of life; and thirdly – which is maybe the most outstanding notion – the soul is the middle hypostasis, that is, the centre of the world, a ‘medium of universes’ that, composed both of divine and earthly nature, is able to look and move both downwards and upwards. In addition to these interfaces we can, as already mentioned, perceive Ficino exploiting the solemn rhetoric of *Asclepius* by calling man the greatest miracle of the creation. We cannot, of course, take it for granted that these Hermetic traces in Ficino's text would be direct quotations from *Asclepius* 6. Man's position as the middle hypostasis and central link of the universe, for example, derives, according to Michael Allen, from Neoplatonic philosophy and particularly from Proclus and the *Parmenides* commentary tradition, where the Soul sometimes appears as the middle one of the five hypostases. (Allen 1982, 42–43.) It is certainly true that the theoretical framework of the metaphysical scheme Ficino uses derives more likely from the late classical Neo-Platonists suggested by Allen than from *Hermetica*, which often proves to be philosophically rather flimsy. Ficino's attitude, rhetoric and aesthetic emphases, however, exude Hermetic undertones, and the great liberality with which he praises the (human) soul seems to pay remarkable homage to the Hermetic exemplars that have provided Ficino not only with terminology but also an authoritative confirmation of his fifteenth-century earthly endeavours and Renaissance worldliness. If we keep in mind the great respect Ficino felt for Trismegistus's authority and the evident Hermetic influence on the anthropocentric passages of *Theologia Platonica*, it would not be an anomaly if Ficino had adapted and exploited Hermetic conceptions of *Asclepius*, a source he thoroughly knew, in his praise of the human soul.

## Conclusion

As Copenhaver argued, the philosophical *Hermetica* did not affect Ficino's theory of magic significantly. Also those voices claiming to have found a Hermetic impact in the genealogy of modern scientific mentality may have been seeking from the wrong place. It seems more probable that the legacy of the philosophical Hermetic texts that late-quattrocento Florence knew is most eminent in the fields of philosophy of man and the humanistic discussion on man's dignity, through which it left long-lasting and influential traces in Western ideas of man. In Ficino's case the comparison indicates that the Hermetic compilation he translated as *Pimander* and the Latin *Asclepius* influenced, at least to a certain extent, both the terminology and contents of the anthropocentric passages in the third, thirteenth and fourteenth books of Ficino's principal philosophical work. One could also argue that the influence of Trismegistus on Ficino's thought was continuous throughout his career, being strongest in a product of Ficino's mature period, *Theologia Platonica*.

We cannot assume that the *Hermetica* would have been Ficino's main inspirer, but the research also indicates that the Hermetic impact should not be neglected when studying the sources of Ficino's philosophy of man. Whatever the truth is, the examination makes some segments of Ficino's attitude to shine through: he seemingly felt that it was useful and safe to appeal to Trismegistus's name in order to support his

anthropocentric arguments and to promote the truths of ancient wisdom. The method shares some similarities with the custom Ficino utilized in the third book of *De vita*, where he dubiously describes the making and use of magical talismans only to interpret Plotinus or report what ancients have said. [16] In *Theologia Platonica*, albeit in this case agreeing more openly with the original source, Ficino calls man godlike or a god more readily employing 'Trismegistus's words' than his own. It is also noteworthy to recognize that Trismegistus is the only author Ficino quotes by name in his anthropocentric passages, and that most of the traceable echoes seem to derive from theoretical Hermetic writings. Thus Ficino seems deliberately to have chosen Trismegistus in support of his ideal of man's central position in the universe.

It has been suggested by many scholars that Ficino formulated a more optimistic vision of man's capacities than any scholar before him. To some extent it is easy to agree. For instance, Giannozzo Manetti's description of the dignity of man from the early 1450s is slightly more cautious than Ficino's ecstatic outpouring: Manetti reminds the reader frequently about the limits and vices of man, while Ficino emphasizes particularly man's limitless possibilities and godlike capacities. It is therefore possible that the arrival around 1460 of a new *Corpus*, the Hermetic boom it initiated and the new data it made available inspired and encouraged Ficino to go further than his predecessors in humanistic philosophy had dared. The Latin *Asclepius* had been known throughout the Middle Ages, but the new manuscript found in Macedonia confirmed various ideas and arguments manifest in *Asclepius* and strengthened the confidence in Trismegistus's not only magical but also philosophical authority. Hence, it could be assumed that Ficino would not have brought his anthropocentric thought as far as he did if he had not been supported by Hermetic texts, both the already familiar *Asclepius* and the newly found Greek compilation. At least we can state that Ficino, and later his successor Pico, utilized in particular the name of Hermes Trismegistus when postulating the new, optimistic philosophy focused openly on man's capacities in the natural world. Although the status of *Hermetica* collapsed in the seventeenth century and the Hermetic tradition faded away from the mainstream of European philosophy, it probably had managed to leave, through Ficino and his successors, enduring traces in the history of Western thought.

Kirjoittaja viimeistelee väitöskirjaansa hermeettisen perinteen ja magian historiasta Jyväskylän yliopistossa Taiteen ja kulttuurin tutkimuksen laitoksessa

## Endnotes

[1] The standard editions of *Asclepius* and *Corpus Hermeticum* are still those of Nock and Festugière (Paris 1945–54.) The most reliable English translation is Copenhaver's *Hermetica* (see Sources).

[2] The results of this article are largely based on my Master's thesis *Hermeettisten Corpus Hermeticumin ja Asclepiuksen vaikutus Marsilio Ficinon ihmiskeskeiseen ajatteluun*. Department of History and Ethnology, University of Jyväskylä, 2007.

[3] A list of sources of Latin magical Hermetism of the Middle Ages is given in Lucenti, Paolo and Perrone Compagni, Vittoria. 2001. *I testi e i codici di Ermete nel medioevo*. Florence: Edizione Polistampa.

[4] For further examples, see my article 'Ficino's human demiurge and its sources: The case of *Hermetica*'. In A. Musco-G. Musotto (eds.) 2012, *Coesistenza e Cooperazione nel Medioevo. In memoriam Leonard E. Boyle (1923-1999). IV Congresso Europeo di studi Medievali della Fédération Internationale des Instituts d'Études Médiévales (F.I.D.E.M.) Palermo 23–27 giugno 2009*. Palermo: Biblioteca dell'Officina di Studi Medievali, 993–1002.

[5] See, for example Walker, Daniel Pickering 1958. *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella*. London: Warburg Institute, University of London: Yates 1964 (see below); Garin, Eugenio. 1982 [1976 ]. *Zodiaco della vita*. Bari: Laterza, and Garin 1988. *Ermetismo del Rinascimento*. Rome.

[6] A brief history of the Yates thesis is given in Zambelli 2007, 218–232. Zambelli comes across as a cautious defender of Yates.

[7] Besides some lack of coherence, Salaman repeatedly refers to the sixteenth and seventeenth books of *Corpus Hermeticum* that Ficino did not know. See, for example, Salaman 2002, 121, 125–127.

[8] Since *Pimander* has not been critically edited and the basic edition of Ficino's works, the Basel edition of *Opera omnia* (1576), is heavily corrupted and full of disastrous errors, I have exploited some early manuscripts to edit the extracts cited in the article.

[9] Manetti, Giannozzo. *De dignitate et excellentia hominis libri quattuor*, 2.21. 'Rest of the living things make use of three rather weighty and terrestrial element, while only human being uses fire, which is a light, sublime and celestial element, in his everyday life, and he could not live without it'. Transl. Ockenström. ('Cetere animantes tribus dumtaxat elementis quasi ponderosis ac terrestribus utuntur, solus vero homo ignem utpote leve et sublime ac celeste elementum, sin quo vivere non posset, in quotidianum vite sue usum assumit'.) Also Manetti has possibly used *Asclepius* 6 as his source.

[10] The argument is repeated in *Th. Pl.* 16.6.7. Cf. endnote 15.

[11] I discuss the theme of the Hermetic Genesis and its impact on Ficino in "Ficino's human Demiurge and its sources". See endnote 4.

[12] Irrigation is probably reminiscent from Cicero. In addition, Ficino's statement that he excludes pyramids and buildings of Romans and Greeks (*Th. Pl.* 13.3.1) refers possibly to Manetti who had discussed those topics in his treatise. For Manetti, see *De dignitate et excellentia* 2.38–40 and 3.20.

[13] Michael J. B. Allen suggests that the passage is a reference to *CH* 10.25. (*Platonic Theology* iv, 360, n34.) As we have seen, there is a notion of measuring the

heavens, but as the comparison suggests, the citation should rather be traced back to *Asclepius* 6.

[14] The reference to the soul (*anima*) as the mistress, not the companion (*comes*) of bodies, is a pun referring to the ancient poem *Animula vagula blandula* where the soul is called the *comes* of the body.

[15] That Ficino connects the same properties to a human individual becomes obvious from the preceding excerpts from the thirteenth and fourteenth books of *Theologia*. Later, in the sixteenth book, Ficino confirms the connection between the human soul and the soul praised in *Th. Pl.* 3.2.6.: 'Whatsoever the earth is, man is its master. He is surely a god on earth. Nor must one suppose man's rational soul [*animus*] to be any less divine because it is enclosed in a fragile body. Rather for that reason it is utterly divine, since, even in the filth of this earth [...] it nonetheless accomplishes divine tasks, such as ruling over things inferior it never departs from higher things.' *Th. Pl.* 16.6.7. *Platonic Theology* v, 283. Transl. Allen.

[16] E. g. *De vita* 3.15: '[...] were it not that all the antiquity and all astrologers think they have a wonderful power, I would deny it [the celestial power of images] [...] you must not think I approve the use of images, [I] only recount it'. Ficino, *Three books on the life*, 320–321. Transl. Kaske, Carol and Clark, John R.

## Abbreviations

*Th. Pl.*: *Theologia Platonica* (when referred to a paragraph)

*CH*: *Corpus Hermeticum* (when referred to a paragraph)

*Op. Om.*: Ficino, Marsilio. *Opera omnia*. Basel 1576.

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