

THE BOOK OF THE SUN (*De sole*)

Marsilio Ficino (1494)

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‘Sol’ from the 15th ms *De Sphaera mundi* (Wikimedia Commons).

Introduction

This text has been published in two versions: a) in *Sphinx, Journal of Archetypal Psychology and the Arts*, vol. 6 (1994), 123-148 and b) in Voss, A. (2006) *Marsilio Ficino*, Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 189-21. The original Latin text is in Ficino (1576). The translators were members of the Latin translation group of the Company of Astrologers, London. There have been small editorial amendments in this new edition.

The Book of the Sun represents the culmination of Ficino's life and work. Published in 1494, five years before his death, it is a supreme example of the very synthesis of astrology, religion and philosophy for which Ficino strived all his life and illustrates his ability to convey the deepest mystical experience within a lucid, authoritative prose. In the 'Dedication' to Piero de' Medici, Ficino tells us that the origin of this work is the metaphor of the Sun in Plato's *Republic*,¹ and that he was inspired by Pseudo-Dionysius on the same subject.² Ficino's new reading of the *Republic* passage was destined for the third edition of his Plato translation, patronised by Piero.

In an 'Apology' to Filippo Valori, Ficino begs Valori, now Florentine Ambassador to the Pope, to defend him against future accusations of heresy stemming from his two little 'solar' works (*De sole* and *De lumine*), for which he had already prepared himself. He precedes the *De sole* with a preface to the reader in which he explains how his book should be interpreted in an allegorical and anagogical (mystical) sense rather than dogmatically (a sentiment echoed in a letter to the Florentine poet Poliziano, dated 20th August 1494). In fact, *De sole* is not lacking in material to invoke the anger of the theologians, and one of their possible accusations is anticipated by Ficino himself in a letter to Bernardo Rucellai³--some of his words on the creation, writes Ficino, could in fact be 'misunderstood' and interpreted as contradicting the text of Genesis (see chapter X).

Proemium

In this book about the Sun and its light there are certain passages which are also found in the other works of Marsilio.⁴ But since the author himself wrote this compendium out of a wish to present it and make it accessible to those who have not been able to obtain the large volume, we have wished to alter nothing.

Preface, to Piero de' Medici⁵

I am daily pursuing a new interpretation of Plato already begun long ago under your auspices, O magnanimous Piero, and (as is not unknown to you) I expound it with rather frequent distinctions of terms and quite long arguments to the extent that the subject itself requires it. Therefore when lately I came to that Platonic mystery where he most exquisitely compares the Sun to God Himself, it seemed right to explain so great a matter somewhat more fully, especially since our Dionysius the Areopagite the first of the Platonists, whose interpretation I hold in my hands, freely embraces a similar comparison of the Sun to God. Therefore while working for many nights, illumined by this Sun as if it were my lamp, I have thought to cull this choice subject from my great work, and to entrust it to its own compendium, and to send this mystery of the Sun—like the gift of Phoebus—to you. To you also, both as the finest student of Phoebus, the leader of the Muses, and as patron of the Muses, this

new complete interpretation of Plato is dedicated, so that meanwhile by this light as if some kind of Moon (just like the Sun to the Moon), you may augur of what nature this whole Platonic opus will be; and if ever you have loved my Plato, or rather yours as he has been for a long time now, henceforth kindled by this light may you love him more ardently, and with your whole mind embrace the beloved.

Chapter I: Marsilio Ficino to the reader, that this book is allegorical and anagogical rather than dogmatic.

O magnanimous Piero, it is a truly divine Pythagorean precept that mysteries and things divine are not fit to be spoken about without light. By which words I think that wise man not only means that nothing should be ventured in things divine unless in so far as the light of God itself has revealed it to inspired minds, but also he appears to advise us not to proceed toward the occult light of divine things, whether to receive or reveal them, without the mediation of the manifest light. Therefore, for the present we will advance from the manifest to the occult, not so much by rational arguments, but through certain correspondences drawn from the light, according to our abilities. But meanwhile, most careful reader, be indulgent to me—just be mindful of the Apollonian and as it were poetic licence before the Sun, while not disallowing me a more serious and (as the Greeks say) dogmatic content. I have promised an allegorical and, to that extent, a mystical exercise of the wits, in the name of Phoebus the oath-orderer, whose gifts these are. The Muses never argue with Apollo, they sing. And indeed, even Mercury himself, the first artisan of argument, although he may discuss weighty matters with Saturn or Jupiter, yet with Apollo he plays, their jests not only fitting but divine. May our play also not be unfitting! But now, having completed this our prelude on light, let us move forth into the light with the fortunate inspiration of goodness itself, that is God on high.

Chapter II: How the light of the Sun is similar to Goodness itself, namely, God.

Nothing recalls the nature of goodness more than light. Firstly, light appears very pure and very exalted in the realm of the senses. Secondly, of all things it is most easily and widely radiated in an instant. Thirdly, it harmlessly encounters everything and penetrates it very gently and pleasantly. Fourthly, it carries with itself a nourishing warmth, that cherishes all things, bestowing life and movement. Fifthly, while it is present and within everything, it is spoiled by nothing and mixed with nothing. Likewise, goodness itself stands above the whole order of things, is spread very widely, and caresses and attracts everything. It forces nothing; like heat, it emanates love as its companion everywhere, by which every single thing is enticed from every direction and willingly admits of its goodness. Penetrating into the innermost parts of things, it mixes with none of them. Finally, just as goodness itself is inestimable and ineffable, so assuredly is light. For not one of the Philosophers until now has explained the following: that nothing anywhere is clearer than light; but that on the other hand nothing appears more obscure, just as goodness is both the most recognised of all things, and equally the least recognised. For this reason, Iamblichus the Platonist finally came to refer to light as a certain active vitality and clear image of divine intelligence. The ray shining forth from the eye is itself the image of vision. So too perhaps is light itself the vision of the heavenly soul, or the action of vision reaching out to exterior things—acting from a distance, yet not leaving the heavens, but ever continuing there unmixed with external things, acting at once by seeing and by touching. At least we are used to speaking of light as a trace of universal light, offering itself to our eyes in a certain proportion; or indeed, as a vital spirit between the soul of the world and the body—but we have already said enough about this in the *Theologia*.⁶ So whenever in your studies you make a serious attempt to postulate that there are many angelic minds beyond heaven, like lights, whose ordering relates them both to each other and to one God, the father of all lights, what will be the point in

pursuing your investigations down long winding paths? Just look up at heaven, I pray, O citizen of the heavenly realm, at that heaven whose manifestly perfect order so clearly declares God to be its creator. When you look upwards at heavenly things, the firmament immediately announces the glory of God and the works of his hands through the very rays of the stars, and through the aspects or inclinations of their eyes as they wander. Above all the Sun is most able to signify to you God himself. The Sun offers you signs, and who would dare to call the Sun false? Finally, the invisible things of God, that is to say, the angelic spirits, can be most powerfully seen by the intellect through the stars, and indeed even eternal things—the virtue and divinity of God—can be seen through the Sun.

Chapter III: The Sun, the Light-Giver, Lord and moderator of heavenly things.

The Sun, in that it is clearly lord of the sky, rules and moderates all truly celestial things (I shall omit for the present its enormous size which is thought to be 160 times the earth). Firstly, it infuses light into all the stars, whether they have a tiny light of their own (as some people suspect), or no light at all (as very many think). Next, through the twelve signs of the zodiac, it is called living, as Abraham and Haly say, and that sign which the Sun invigorates actually appears to be alive. Moreover, the Sun fills the two adjacent signs with so much potency, that this space on both sides is called by the Arabs the *ductoria* of the Sun—that is the solar field. When planets pass through them, avoiding being burnt up in the meantime, they acquire a marvellous power, especially if the superior planets, finding themselves in this position, rise before the Sun and the inferior ones after the Sun. The sign in which the Sun is exalted, that is Aries, in this way becomes the head of the signs, signifying the head in any living thing. Also, that sign in which the Sun is domiciled, that is Leo, is the heart of the signs, and so rules the heart in any living thing. For when the Sun enters Leo, it extinguishes in many regions the epidemic of the Python's poison. Moreover the yearly fortune of the whole world will always depend on the entry of the Sun into Aries, and hence from this the nature of any spring may properly be judged; just as the quality of summer is judged from the ingress of the Sun into Cancer, or that of autumn from its entrance into Libra, and from the coming into Capricorn the quality of winter is discovered; these things are gleaned from the figure of the heavens present at that time.⁷ Since time depends on motion, the Sun distinguishes the four seasons of the year through the four cardinal signs. Similarly, when the Sun returns by the exact degree and minute to its place in the nativity of any person, his share of fortune is unfolded through the whole year. It happens in this way because the movement of the Sun as the first and chief of the planets is very simple (as Aristotle says), neither falling away from the middle of the Zodiac as the others do, nor retrograding.

Chapter IV: The conditions of the planets with respect to the Sun.

There appear to be certain definite spaces marked out throughout the heavens by the Sun itself; when the planets pass through them, they quite change their motion and character. For when Saturn, Jupiter and Mars traverse a part of the heaven a third part from the Sun, finding themselves to be in a trine aspect in respect to Sun, they suddenly change direction, and move either forwards or backwards. If they are oriental to the Sun, they go retrograde, if occidental they turn direct.⁸ Venus and Mercury travel through certain shorter but still fixed spaces with respect to the Sun; Venus is prevented from separating beyond 49° and Mercury beyond 28°. The Moon changes her appearance and nature in whatever aspect she makes to the Sun; and as if she were another Sun, she herself has four ages, and

represents the four seasons of the year. And whenever the Moon is joined to the Sun, from that very heavenly configuration and degree of conjunction she announces the nature of the month to come. Whenever any planet first touches the heart of the Sun,⁹ at that time (however short it might be), it dominates the other planets. Otherwise, when close to the Sun they vacate their accustomed office—so that Saturn conjunct the Sun is judged to abandon his pristine rigidity and Mars his accustomed ferocity. In so far as the Sun approaches the superior planets they rise [in their epicycle], and as he separates from them, they descend. Indeed, when conjunct the Sun these planets are at the height of their epicycle, while when they are in opposition to it, they are at their lowest, and when in square, at middle altitude. The Moon is at its highest point in the first two places of its cycle, while in the square aspect it is descending. Venus and Mercury, when conjunct the Sun, if direct, are at their highest; if retrograde,¹⁰ at their lowest. Nor is it possible for the planets to complete the circuit of their epicycle without revisiting, by conjunction, the Sun as if their Lord; it seems quite clear that the superior planets, when they change their course into a trine aspect with the Sun, revere its regal appearance. And therefore, conjunct the Sun they are highest and direct, because during that time they are concordant with the king. Now on the other hand, when discordant—that is, in opposition—they are retrograde and at their lowest point.

When Venus and Mercury touch the Sun, if then they are direct, that is, obeying their Lord, they ascend to their heights. But if they turn aside, they are like rebels, and they are cast down during that time. It ought not to surprise us if the Moon too rises [in its epicycle] when in opposition to the Sun. For what is the light of the Moon if not that self-same light of the Sun sent to her and reflected in the lunar mirror? And at full Moon the light is turned back into the Sun, now in full view. The Moon appears to descend in a square aspect since then she gazes fiercely at her lord. As the Sun does not move backwards, so neither does the Moon, although due to her velocity her epicycle appears to regress. Lastly, when the Moon in the Sun's path seeks the north, a place constituted from the huge head of the dragon,¹¹ she signifies—by virtue of solar power—an increase for the signs situated there. When she seeks the south, marked by the projection of the tail, she brings a decrease. All the planets made oriental or occidental from the Sun change their condition and appellation in either of the two places. They all revere the path of the Sun which the astrologers call the ecliptic. The inferior planets more so and the feminine planets (that is, the Moon and Venus) most of all, therefore they diverge the most by latitude. Indeed, all of the planets placed on that path, moving from there to the north or the south, are thought to change their condition. The Moon, the lady of generation, has no manifest light except from the Sun. When she is in perfect harmony with the Sun, she, takes from it all the celestial powers which are gathered there, as Proclus says, so that she may convey similar powers down to our earth.

Chapter V: The Power of the Sun in generating, and in the seasons, at the time of birth and in all things.

In the birth chart of each person the very position of the Moon itself declares the Lord of the nativity and the moment of conception, and the conjunction or opposition of the Sun and Moon prior to the birth reveals the truth and fortune of the nativity. In any given chart that portion of the sky where the part of fortune falls is called the daemon of the nativity by the ancients, and it portends or governs (as the Egyptians say) the tenor of the whole life. The part of fortune is designated by the space observed between the Sun and Moon, projected from the degree of the Ascendant. Thus, it is through their knowledge of the Sun's motion that astronomers discover and measure the movements of the planets. The Sun in its motion distinguishes days from nights and hours and months and years. Likewise by its light and warmth, it generates, quickens, moves, regenerates, fills with breath and cherishes all things which had been hidden; at its first advent it reveals them, and signals the coming and going of the four seasons of the year; and regions which are too remote from the Sun are likewise remote from life. Indeed, Spring is the best of seasons since it begins with Aries, the kingdom of the Sun. Autumn

is the worst, because it begins with Libra, the fall of the Sun. Finally, a diurnal nativity is thought better than a nocturnal one, the former being judged mainly from the Sun, the latter from the Moon, which is like the Sun's mirror.

The celestial figure at the nativity is divided into twelve parts. Astrologers appoint the ninth part to the Sun, and the third to the Moon (calling the former God, and the latter Goddess), and they believe that wisdom, faith, religion and eternal glory are the greatest gifts of each. For the Sun signifies all these things, and simply all essential truth and prophecy and kingship. It follows from this, that as the Sun ascends to the midheaven it fosters the vital and animal spirits in us in a miraculous way, and as it descends, each spirit is debilitated. This is why David, the trumpet of Almighty God, rising to his lyre at daybreak broke forth into song and exclamation. It is vain for us to get up before dawn, for it is clear that the rising Sun brings us every benefit and revives our spirits, which wonderfully aroused and illumined, are called to sublime things. I shall pass over how (as tradition has it) the Sun, like a prophet, at its rising is thought to bring prophecies to those who sleep. The Moon, which Aristotle calls the lesser Sun, similarly restores the spirit and natural humour when rising, and weakens it when setting. And the more the Moon is full of the Sun's light, the more health she brings to all things. I shall also omit how the Moon, when she is not waning, should be observed in its aspect to the Sun, in each of the signs, signifying the various parts of the body; and so the virtues of all heavenly things are brought down to the limbs from the Sun via the Moon, to be nurtured through medicines ritually prepared at that particular time. But we have already said enough about this in the *Book of Life*.¹²

Chapter VI: The Praises of the Ancients for the Sun, and how the celestial powers are all found in the Sun, and derive from the Sun.

For these reasons Orpheus called Apollo “the vivifying eye of heaven,” and what I am about to say is taken straight from the Hymns of Orpheus: “The Sun is the eternal eye seeing all things, the pre-eminent celestial light, moderating heavenly and worldly things, leading or drawing the harmonious course of the world, the Lord of the world, immortal Jupiter, the eye of the world circling round everywhere, possessing the original imprint in whose image all worldly forms are made. The Moon is pregnant with the stars, the Moon is queen of the stars.”¹³ These things Orpheus says. In Egypt, on the temples of Minerva, this golden inscription could be read: “I am all those things which are, which will be, and which have been. No one has ever turned back my veil. The fruit I have borne is the Sun.”¹⁴ Whence it appears that this Sun born of Minerva - that is, of divine intelligence - is both flower and fruit.

The ancient theologians, with Proclus as witness once again, stated that justice, the queen of all things, proceeds from the middle of the Sun's throne through everything, directing everything, as if the Sun itself could be the moderator of all things. Iamblichus states the opinion of the Egyptians in the following way: Whatever good we have we get from the Sun, that is, either from itself alone, or from another agency as well, in other words either directly from the Sun, or from the Sun through other things. Likewise, the Sun is the lord of all elemental virtues. The Moon by virtue of the Sun is the lady of generation. Therefore, Albumasar said through the Sun and Moon life is infused into all things. Moses thinks the Sun is lord of celestial things in the day and the Moon, like a nocturnal Sun, at night. They all place the Sun as lord in the midst of the world, although for different reasons. The Chaldaeans put the Sun in the middle of the planets, the Egyptians between two five-fold worlds: the five planets above, the Moon and the four elements below. Indeed, they think it is placed by Providence closer to the earth than to the firmament, so that the gross material of the earth and the moisture of the Moon, air and water might be cherished by its fervent spirit and fire. Also, by another theory, the middle place is declared by that prosperity of the planets which requires their disposition to the Sun to be such that Saturn, Jupiter and Mars rise before it and Venus, Mercury and the Moon after it, thereby maintaining the King on the middle path. The others, in proceeding differently, turn out to be weaker.

Moreover, amongst them those planets are held to be more pre-eminent, which the lord Sun itself ordered to precede it. But let us return to the ancients. The old physicians called the Sun the heart of heaven. Heraclitus called it the fountain of celestial light. Most Platonists located the world soul in the Sun, which, filling the whole sphere of the Sun, poured out through that fiery-like globe just as it poured out spirit-like rays through the heart, and from there through everything, to which it distributed life, feeling and motion universally. For these reasons, perhaps, most astrologers think that just as God alone gave us an intellectual soul, so he alone sends it to us under the influence of the Sun; that is, only in the fourth month after conception. But this is something that concerns them. On the other hand, there is no doubt that Mercury, which signifies the movement of our mind, moves the least far from the Sun. Saturn, signifying the state of the separated mind, departs least from the ecliptic. Moreover, Jupiter and Mars—the former through Sagittarius and the latter through Aries—are concordant with the Apollonian Lion and have obtained their respective gifts: Jupiter signifying religious justice, civil laws and prosperity, and Mars magnanimity, fortitude and victory. The Moon, Venus and Mercury are called the companions of the Sun; the Moon because of its frequent conjunction with the Sun, Venus and Mercury because they do not stray beyond the vicinity of the Sun, on account of their advancing in step with it. Hence, they have received the rulership of universal generation. Accordingly, the Moon, rather humid in conjunction or aspect with the Sun, having absorbed its vital heat, may thereby provide a warming and vital humour to those things to be generated. Moreover, in this process of generation Mercury mixes these two parts with the rest in a certain harmonious proportion. Venus applies seemly forms to mixtures of this kind and adds grace and joy. Thus, the Sun has distributed the whole of the light collected in itself through various stars differing amongst themselves in kind, and thus sets in order virtues in every form, with light that can take any form. From which one may clearly conjecture that there are just as many virtues of the Sun as there are stars existing in the heavens.

Chapter VII: Dispositions of the signs and planets around the Sun and Moon.

The very disposition of the signs of the zodiac clearly declares that the Sun is the king, and the Moon, which is both sister and wife of the Sun, is queen of heavenly things. For Leo, the place of the Sun, and Cancer, the place of the Moon, are next to each other; likewise, are Aries the exaltation of the Sun and Taurus that of the Moon.¹⁵ The other planets each take their seats on both sides around the King and Queen, who are placed in the middle. On one side next to Leo Mercury rules Virgo, on the other side next to Cancer it rules Gemini. Venus, on the one side Libra, on the other Taurus; Mars, Scorpio and Aries; Jupiter, Sagittarius and Pisces; Saturn, Capricorn and Aquarius. But once when I laid out the signs of the planets around the Sun and Moon like this, my friend Bindanio Recasolano, a man of profound judgement, objected thus: “Don't you see, Marsilio, that those same signs, although in a reverse order, have been laid out in the same pattern around the signs of Saturn?” I said, “I see that this arrangement, especially suiting the Sun, relates however to most lofty Saturn too. Is it surprising that Saturn is worthy of honour, since he appears least of all the planets to deviate from the regal path of the Sun?” But let us return to the purpose in hand.

These five planets each have two seats [rulerships]. One following the Sun as if from behind, the other in proximity to the Moon. The former are called occidental to the Sun, the latter oriental to the Moon. The Sun and Moon claim for themselves the whole Zodiac. For the province of the Sun comprises Leo, Virgo, Libra, Scorpio, Sagittarius and Capricorn; the province of the Moon, Aquarius, Pisces, Aries, Taurus, Gemini and Cancer. Perhaps Cancer is called the gateway of men, since there the Sun seems on the point of descending; and Capricorn the gateway of the gods, since there the Sun seems to ascend resolutely.¹⁶ But we have explained these things elsewhere in a different way. Actually, these two signs, together with Aries and Libra, claimed for themselves the dignity of being called cardinal points of heaven, since there the Sun decrees the changes of the four seasons. Since the Sun, when passing through Aries and Libra, holds its middle course between ascent or descent

and balances day with night, the circle produced from Aries to Libra is called amongst the Egyptians the Circle of Minerva, that is, of wisdom and justice. Indeed, so wonderful an order of heavenly things declares that the world is not determined by fortune, but by providence. And a certain reverence of all things for the one Sun, the moderator of the whole, shows that angelic minds and all heavenly things entirely obey the one high up above the heavens, and that our souls ought to be much more obedient to the same.

Chapter VIII: Planets are fortunate when concordant with the Sun and Moon, unfortunate when discordant. How they may pay respect to the Sun and Moon.

Ptolemy considers the Sun and Moon to be the authors of life, in that the Moon supplies that which concerns growth and quickening, and the Sun, that which relates to consciousness. He also considers Jupiter and Venus to be salutary to life, because through a certain harmonious proportion they are consonant with the Sun and Moon.

Jupiter is most harmonious of all with the Sun, and to some extent also with the Moon, and Venus the reverse. However, Saturn and Mars are the opposite, since they disagree with the Sun and Moon— Saturn more with the Sun, Mars more with the Moon. Jupiter is more supportive to life than all the others, since, in blending the lights of the Sun and Moon he unites the powers of both. Nor is it to be overlooked, that the planets obtain new vigour suddenly when they look upon the face of the Sun or Moon as if in greeting, which the Arabs called *almugea*. This happens when, following the Sun, they are as far from it as their sign is from the Sun's sign, or when, preceding the Moon, they approach it by as much as their sign is close to the Moon's sign. Thus Saturn will greet the Sun as often as it is occidental, that is, risen after the Sun, in the sixth sign from the sign of the Sun. Jupiter will give greetings when in the fifth sign from the Sun, Mars when in the fourth, Venus in the third, Mercury in the second. Similarly, they will greet the Moon when, rising before her, they are found at the same distances from her. Again, we find agreement between Jupiter and Venus and the Sun and Moon, disagreement from Mars and Saturn. In fact, Jupiter has placed his seat in Sagittarius in a trine aspect to the sign of Leo, the seat of the Sun, whilst Venus located Libra through a beneficial sextile aspect to Leo. However, Mars placed his seat in Scorpio in a square, dissonant aspect to the Sun, and Saturn placed his in the sixth sign from the Sun, not consonant with it, and in the seventh, totally opposed to it. For he confronts both Leo with Aquarius and Cancer with Capricorn. In a similar fashion Venus establishes Taurus in sextile to Cancer, Jupiter places Pisces in trine, Mars sets Aries in square, Saturn, as we have said, is located in both the sixth and seventh signs from the Moon's. Therefore, Jupiter and Venus are called the fortunes, in as much as they are concordant with the King and Queen of the heavens. Saturn and Mars are the infortunes, since they are discordant with them; but Saturn is the more unfortunate, since he seems to disagree most strongly with the Sun, even more so than Mars does with the Moon. Hence, we can deduce that those minds which are in agreement with divine will be happy, whilst those discordant with it will be miserable.

Chapter IX: The Sun is the image of God. Comparison of the Sun to God.

Having very diligently considered these things, our divine Plato named the Sun the visible son of Goodness itself. He also thought that the Sun was the manifest symbol of God, placed by God himself in this worldly temple so that everyone everywhere could admire it above all else. Plato and Plotinus said that the ancients venerated this Sun as God. The ancient gentile theologians placed all their gods in the Sun, to which Iamblichus, Julian and Macrobius testify. Certainly whoever does not view the Sun in the world as the image and minister of God, has certainly never reflected upon the night, nor looked upon the rising Sun; nor has he thought how extraordinary this is, nor how suddenly those things which were thought to be dead return to life. Nor has he recognised the gifts of the Sun through which it alone accomplishes that which the surrounding stars cannot. Therefore, also consider,

together with the Platonists and Dionysius, that Phoebus, the chief intelligence of the Muses, is the visible image of God. Also, that Phoebe, that is, the Moon, is the image of Phoebus almost in the same way that he is of God; and as Hipparchus says, she is the mirror of the Sun in that light falling on her from the Sun deflects onto us. It is not appropriate to discuss it at present, but we must not overlook that Platonic comparison which I have described more fully elsewhere.

In the same manner as the Sun generates both eyes and colours, giving the eyes the power by which they may see, and colours the potency by which they are seen, and joining both of them together with a uniting light, so God is thought to be with respect to all meanings and intelligible things. God in fact created the intelligible species of things and intellects, giving them an appropriate natural power. Moreover, the Sun daily pours out a universal light through which it excites to mutual action the virtues of both the intelligible and intellectual realms and joins them together through action. Plato calls this light truth with respect to intelligible things, and knowledge with respect to the mind of man. He thinks moreover that the Good itself, that is God, surpasses all these things, just as the Sun is superior to light, eyes and colours. But when Plato says that the Sun prevails over the whole visible realm, doubtless he alludes to an incorporeal Sun above the corporeal one—that is, the divine intellect. Seeing that it really is possible to ascend to the archetypal pattern partly by the taking away of that which is worse and partly by the adding of what is better, take from the Sun—from whom Averroes took gross physical matter all definite quantity. But leave it with the potency of light, so that there will remain the light itself, cleansed by miraculous power, defined neither by a definite quantity nor by any definite shape, filling with its presence a space immense with respect to the imagination. This pure light exceeds the intelligence just as in itself sunlight surpasses the acuity of the eyes. In this way, in proportion to the strength you receive from the Sun, you will almost seem to have found God, who placed his tabernacle in the Sun. Finally, just as nothing is more alien to the divine light than utterly formless matter, so nothing is more different from the light of the Sun than the earth.

Therefore, since bodies in which the earthly condition prevails are most unsuited to light, they accept no light within. This is not because the light may be powerless to penetrate—for while this light cannot illuminate inside wool or a leaf, it may however penetrate a crystal in a moment, which cannot be easily penetrated by anything else. In this way the divine light also shines in the darkness of the soul, but the darkness comprehends it not. Is this not also similar to God, who first sows knowledge of divine things in angelic and blessed minds, and then love? Indeed, God kindles a love for us believers here which purifies and converts, before it bestows the intelligence of divine things. Thus, the Sun completely fills with light clear and pure natures everywhere, as if they are now, for a moment, heavenly; while those opaque and material natures it first warms and kindles with its light, then refines, and soon illuminates. In addition, sometimes it elevates to the heights through heat and light this matter now made light and accessible. Hence Apollo pierces the dense body of the Python with the stings of his rays, purges it, dissolves it and raises it up. Nor must we forget that in whatever manner we hope that Christ will finally come into his kingdom, resurrecting human bodies from the earth with the splendour of his own body, similarly after the yearly dead winter, we look forward to the Sun's reign in Aries, which will recall to life seeds of things on earth, as if suddenly reviving dead or half-alive animals to life and beauty. Hence Mercurius, as the arms-bearer of the Sun, is said to excite those who sleep with his caduceus, and Plato describes an almost similar resurrection in his book on the Kingdom.¹⁷

Chapter X: The Sun was created first and placed in the Midheaven.

On this subject we might ask, what most powerful thing did God create in the beginning? Moses answered, light. Rightly so, for light emanates immediately from the divine—or rather intelligible—light itself, which of all things is most similar to God. Indeed, the intelligible light is in the incorporeal world above us, that is, extremely pure intellect. However, the sensible light is in the corporeal world, that is, the solar light itself. But light in its first stage, as on the first day, was

established simply to shine within and illuminate without. At the second stage it strengthened itself by its own power of heat, then it quickened everything else. At the third stage, it propagated itself in matter by its own efficacy and by the command of God. Lastly at the fourth stage of its nature and order, as if on the fourth day, it was allotted its spherical form, whence the light of divine intelligence having been diffused, it was reflected back onto itself. Therefore, Moses declared that on the first day simply light itself was created; whereas on the fourth day light for the solar, that is, spherical form, was provided. Also, Plato twice refers to the dual constitution of the Sun in the *Timaeus*, first placing it amongst the planets as their companion, secondly presenting it as divine, with a light miraculous beyond all things and with a regal authority. The majority of astronomers place the Sun, at the beginning of the world, on the horizon in Aries, which is its kingdom, in the midst of the heaven which it would have occupied like a citadel and capital in the guise of a king. Also where Moses says that one day was completed, he did not mean morning then evening, but the other way around, indicating that after midday, in which the Sun was lit up, the newly-born day declined towards evening and must complete itself with the following morning. He certainly confirmed the regal authority of the Sun, when he assigned the first day, that is the solar, to the Lord, For if God indeed completed the world in six days, and rested on the seventh, undoubtedly he seems to have begun the world from the very day of the Sun, or rather under the auspices of the Sun's authority. Whereas he judged Saturn to be very remote from the Sun, unfavourable in generation and action, when he commanded a cessation of activity on the day of Saturn. Surely too Christ, the source of life, for whom the Sun mourned with covered face at midday, rose again from the dead at the hour and in the day of the Sun, and will restore to us intelligible light in the same way as the Sun gives us visible light?

Chapter XI: The two lights of the Sun. The gift of Apollo. The degrees of the lights. The Sun renders all things Divine.

If we think of the Sun in its pristine nature, which it was allotted at the first moment of its creation, just as it were numbered in common fellowship with the planets, we will recognise that its first natural light was not as great as it was soon to become. For it does not exceed the other stars in magnitude as much as in light. In fact, it is less than twice the size of Jupiter, but perhaps a hundred times greater in light. Of course, these quantities are evaluated by comparison to the earth—indeed we said at the beginning how many times the Sun could contain the earth, and Jupiter is thought to be 95 times greater than the earth. Therefore, this other immense light is entirely poured forth from another place, added from above to the natural light of the Sun. Clearly all heavenly things have brought with them their own light at their birth, but it escapes our notice, being either infinitesimal, or hidden from us through a certain fineness and brilliance, or for another reason. The Sun from the beginning appears to have brought with itself a certain similar light slightly greater in proportion to its magnitude. Indeed, the Sun offers that innate light, which is somewhat obscure, then immediately another light most evident to the eyes like a visible image of divine intelligence and infinite goodness. God, as our theologians relate, gave a double light to our minds. The first they consider to be natural. The second was added freely from above according to merit through grace, and it renders minds blessed with a miraculous bountifulness. Therefore, since the stars are images of minds, it is fitting that these stars likewise carry two lights. In whatever way God has wonderfully added this immense light to the first light of the Sun, so the Sun, at once the representative of God in this office, adds this second light to the innate light of the stars. Indeed, just as we are accustomed to call the light which appears in the Moon not the Moon's own, but the Sun's, transmitted all the way down to us through the Moon, so with respect to the most secret doctrine of the Platonists we shall say that such a great splendour revealed in the Sun proceeds not from itself, but from God through the Sun to all things; just as light reaches our eyes not from the Sun's globe, but from God himself. God, while he filled the solar globe, a tiny particle of heaven, with such great splendour that brilliance flowed out into all

things from it, without doubt made it clear both that the small body of the Sun received such an incomparable gift not from itself, but from above, and that out of the one God, the whole goodness of the Sun was propagated throughout everything.

Indeed in the same way that this sensible light is experienced by the senses, illuminating, invigorating and forming all sensible things and faculties of sense and converting them to higher planes, so a certain intelligible light in the soul of the Sun illuminates, kindles and recalls the inner spiritual eye. I think for this reason the Sun was called Apollo by the ancient Theologians; creator of all harmony, and leader of the Muses, since he releases minds from a certain confused turmoil, not so much by visible but by hidden influxes of rays, and he tempers them proportionately, and finally leads them to understanding. Nor should it be thought that this most full and efficacious light, given to and extended among worldly things as the most perfect gift, takes its origin from the small body of the Sun, but from the good itself as the father of lights, in whom whatever is of light is certainly beyond intelligence and quite surpassing all understanding. From there descending into the divine or angelic intellect it becomes intelligible, and then reaching the mind of the world soul it becomes intellectual and imaginal, and then passing into heaven it becomes both sensual and sensible, finally being sent down to the lower regions (as if now divided) it becomes sensory in the eyes of living creatures and in sensible objects, and keeps both characteristics in a few creatures which can see in the dark. But let us return to where we were.

According to the Platonists there are three principles: the good itself, the divine intellect and the World-Soul. Only light clearly contains all of them in itself. It reveals the good itself, since while it surpasses wonderfully all things, it also spreads itself through all things, and recalls them to sublime planes at the same time with its miraculously preserved excellence and purity. It reveals the divine intellect because it declares, distinguishes and adorns everything, and the world soul, because it generates, warms and moves everything with a vital heat. And in the same way that it descends into heaven from the three supra-celestial principles and then manifests them under the heavens, the Sun in the middle heaven represents the good itself, and the divine intellect, or rather the plenitude of ideas manifest through the firmament full of stars, and finally the world soul through the mutable light of the Moon. Similarly, below the heavens the first principle is represented through fire, the second through air and the third through water. Finally, as the superior stars are illuminated by the Sun steadily, and the Moon receives the Sun's light mutably, so the angels receive it unchangingly, and souls are illuminated in a changeable way.

Chapter XII: Similitude of the Sun to the Divine Trinity and the nine orders of Angels, likewise of the nine spirits in the Sun and of the nine Muses around the Sun.

There is nothing in the world more like the divine trinity than the Sun. For in the one substance of the Sun a certain three-foldness exists, distinct in its parts yet united. Firstly, a natural fecundity which is completely hidden from our senses, secondly, a manifest light flowing out of this fecundity, ever equal to it, and thirdly a heating virtue quite equal to both. The fecundity represents the Father; light, likened to intelligence, represents the Son conceived of intelligence; heat stands for the loving spirit. Around this divine Trinity our theologians discovered three hierarchies of angels, each one containing three orders. The first consecrated to the Father, the second to the Son, the third to the Spirit. Also, around the solar Trinity we find similar three-fold and nine-fold orders, since out of that very fertile nature of the Sun, three natural fecundities are generated through everything. The first of them is found in celestial nature, the second in the simple nature of the elements and the third in the nature of mixed things. Furthermore, beyond these natures both life and that three-fold order are propagated far and wide from the vital heat of the Sun. The first is vegetable as in plant-forms, the second is responsive but immobile as in zoophytes [plant-like animals], the third is responsive and purposively mobile as in more perfect living things, that is, animals.

Next, from the light of the Sun, three kinds of brightness are derived, both in and below the heavens: the light is either completely white, or completely red, or mixed. Indeed, since light is found to be very similar to the dawning of perception, especially that of the senses, it is appropriate that to the three kinds of light there seem to correspond also three types of sense. To the red, the wholly corporeal senses of taste and touch; to the white the most incorporeal senses of imagination and sight; but to the mixed light correspond the senses in the middle between the incorporeal and corporeal, of hearing and smell. In this, the light of the Sun is not only the image of things of this kind, but also their cause. Indeed it is the sole image of pure intelligence, for just as pure intelligence pierces through instantly and penetrates deeply, and reveals things, mixing with nothing in its sublime existence, so light itself radiates through all things in a moment, and discloses particular things, whilst still remaining indivisible and whole, mixed with nothing else. Accordingly, as the Sun sets, no light lingers in the air, not even for a moment, but everywhere accompanies departing Phoebus. But since—I know not how—I am here under Apollo as if a poet (even if not a good one), let me tell a little story. Firstly, then concerning the higher gods (to speak Platonically), and the nine Muses, the ancients placed these divinities in the Sun. We may contemplate the substance or the powers of the Sun in its substance, essence, life, intelligence. In the manner of the ancients, we identify essence in the heavens, life in Rhea, intelligence in Saturn. If we contemplate the powers of the Sun after its substance, we will call its fecundity Jove and Juno, its light Apollo and Minerva, and its heat Venus and Bacchus. Indeed the ancients always represented Phoebus and Bacchus—who reign more gloriously in the Sun than the others—as youths, and if anyone were to experience the light and heat of the Sun with the sincerity and appropriateness by which they exist there, to take it up for their own use and to accommodate its properties, he would achieve eternal youth, or at least would live to be one hundred and twenty.

After these nine divinities inside the Sun let us move on to the nine Muses around the Sun. Now why nine Muses around the Sun, unless they mean nine types of Apollonian godhead distributed through the nine spheres of the cosmos? At first the ancients only recognised eight heavens. Later, under the celestial fire, they added pure air as the ninth heaven, which was heavenly with respect to its quality and motion. Indeed, in each sphere they distributed divine spirits hidden from the eyes, each dedicated to a particular star, which Proclus called angels and Iamblichus archangels and principalities. But whichever ones amongst them are especially solar, the more ancient people called them Muses presiding over all knowledge, especially poetry, music, medicine, atonements, oracles and prophecies. Now let us return to the Sun. We inept ones admire too much certain very insignificant things, if only because they are very rare; but blind and ungrateful, we have long since stopped admiring the very great things we used to respect. No one wonders at fire, burning just like the Sun of heaven, pure without being mixed, perpetually in motion, most splendid, which makes a very great show out of nothing, reducing everything to itself. No one wonders at the Sun to the extent that it is right to do so, ruling as it does over everything incomparably, the father and moderator of all things, healing sadness, vivifying things not yet alive and reviving things now dead. Indeed if once every year the home of omnipotent Olympus were to be thrown open, so great a splendour would suddenly be contemplated that everyone would most likely admire the Sun more than they do; they would humbly adore the Sun as the highest God, or at least they would hardly doubt its divine providence. They would thank God daily as much as possible, as the hidden author of so great a gift. Therefore the Platonists Iamblichus and Julian commanded us to imagine the night without any light from the Moon or stars (by which the gift of the Sun is also manifest) so that we might realise more clearly what we would be without the supernal Sun, and how much we should owe to it.

Chapter XIII: That the Sun is not to be worshipped as the Author of all Things.

When he was in military service Socrates often used to stand in amazement watching the rising Sun, motionless, his eyes fixed like a statue, to greet the return of the heavenly body. The Platonists,

influenced by these and similar signs, would perhaps say that Socrates, inspired since boyhood by a Phoeboean daemon, was accustomed to venerate the Sun above all, and for the same reason was judged by the oracle of Apollo to be the wisest of all the Greeks. I will omit at present a discussion about whether the daemon of Socrates was particularly a genius or an angel—but I certainly would dare to affirm that Socrates in his state of ecstasy had admired not just the visible Sun, but its other, hidden aspect. For since novelty alone encourages admiration, why would Socrates be so amazed at what he saw everyday, whose movement and all power mathematics and physics have for a long time comprehended? According to Plato, he called the Sun not God himself but the son of God; and I say not the first son of God, but a second, and moreover visible son. For the first son of God is not this visible Sun, but another far superior intellect, namely the first one which only the intellect can contemplate. Therefore Socrates, having been awakened by the celestial Sun, surmised a supercelestial Sun, and he contemplated attentively its majesty, and inspired, would admire the incomprehensible bounty of the Father. James the Apostle called this Father the father of light; light, I say, more than celestial, in which there is no change or shadow. For he supposes that these supercelestial things are naturally mutable, that the many celestial things are doubtless shadowed in some fashion, and that sub-celestial things are shadowed daily. For which reason every very good thing naturally sown in the mind, every perfect gift beyond natural gifts, does not come down from this Sun and from the mundane stars, but from even higher, from the father of light. With the powers of the intelligence, as if by means of not celestial but super celestial steps, we raise ourselves beyond the heavens, to the place where we know, love and venerate many things superior to the heavens, and especially the Maker of heaven himself. In any case, with our intelligence we would not be able to understand anything at all incorporeal, superior to the heavens, if our intelligence only came to us from the heavens. However, lest anyone should admire and adore the Sun, Moon and stars too much and venerate them as creators and fathers of intellectual gifts, James prudently reminded us that this Sun is not the beginning of the universe. I will not explain now the reasons why, according to our theology, the origin of the universe cannot be either body, soul or intellect, but something infinitely loftier from which indeed the heavenly Sun is most distant, and of which the Sun seems more like a shadow than an image. Instead I shall briefly review here James's arguments.

Since stillness, as the first principle and end of movement is the most perfect of all movements, God, beginning and regulator of everything, cannot himself be in movement. The Sun is in motion every day. Moreover, the power of the first principle, being immense, touches everything with its power and it cannot be restrained in any way. On the other hand, the force of the Sun, working through its rays, is variously impeded by the obstacle opposed to its rays, diminishes through the opposition of the Moon, is often held back by clouds, is pushed back by the density of the Earth, is weakened by spatial distance. The Sun itself is only a small part of the world; it is contained within a narrow space, it is pulled around from its sphere, it is always carried backwards from the sphere above against the motion of its own sphere, it is obstructed by contrary signs and adverse stars, and, if I may speak thus, weakened by aspects of the malefics. Lastly the first principle of the universe operates everything always, everywhere and in everything. The Sun on the other hand does not create the globes of the cosmos, nor can it affect whatever is cold or moist or dense, or similar things its own power. Nor if there are similar powers in the heavens, do they derive their origin from the Sun. Moreover, although the Sun is exceedingly far removed from the Creator of the world, nevertheless all celestial things appear by divine law to lead back to the one Sun, the Lord and regulator of the heavens. We are made fully aware from this that things which are in heaven, and under heaven, and above heaven, are similarly referred back to the one beginning of all things. Finally considering that, let us worship this one first principle with that same ritual observance that all celestial things give to the Sun.

¹ Plato, *Republic* 507b–509c.

² Ficino refers to the following authorities in the course of this text:

1. **Abumasar** Abu Ma'shar, 787-886 CE. Arabic astrologer who had become an authority in the medieval period through his *Greater Introduction to Astronomy*, twice translated into Latin in the 12th century CE.
2. **Averroes:** Abu al-Walid Muhammed ibn Ahmad, 1126-1198 CE. Islamic Spain's renowned philosopher, physician and astronomer, best known in medieval and Renaissance Europe for his Commentaries on Aristotle.
3. **Claudius Ptolemy**, fl.121-151 CE. Astronomer, astrologer and mathematician in Alexandria.
4. **Dionysius the Areopagite**, Christian neoplatonist, 350-500 CE. Ficino translated his *Celestial Hierarchies* and *Divine Names*.
5. **Haly:** the Arabic astrologer Haly Abenrudian (Abu Jafar Ahman b. Yusuf b. al-Dayah) fl. C. 920 CE. His commentary on the Pseudo-Ptolemy *Centiloquium* was available in the Renaissance via the translation of Hugh of Santalla.
6. **Heraclitus**, c. 500 BCE. Greek sage who spoke in riddles.
7. **Hipparchus:** b. 190 BCE. Greek astronomer who improved the estimates of sizes and distances of the Sun and Moon.
8. **Iamblichus of Chalcis** c. 250-325 CE. Neoplatonist interested in the practical rituals of theurgy. Ficino summarised his text *De mysteriis Aegyptorum*.
9. **Julian the Apostate:** b. 332 CE. Actively repudiated Christianity in favour of pagan rites and sun worship. Ficino would have been familiar with his 'Hymn to King Helios'.
10. **Macrobius:** fl. 400 CE. Neoplatonist whose *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* was the most important source of Platonic thought in the Latin West.
11. **Proclus Diadochus**, 410-485 CE. Head of the Athenian neoplatonic school. Ficino translated his *De sacrificio et magia*.

³ Ficino (1576) *Opera omnia*, Basle, 958.

⁴ See in particular, 'Orphica comparatione Sole ad Deum', *Opera omnia*, 825f.

⁵ Piero de' Medici (1471–1503), Italian merchant prince. He succeeded his father, Lorenzo de' Medici as head of the Medici family and as leader of the Florentine state.

⁶ Ficino, *Theologia Platonica*, trans. M. Allen & J. Hankins, 2001-2006, 6 vols, Harvard: Harvard University Press.

⁷ That is, a horoscope cast for the moment of the equinoxes and solstices.

⁸ Oriental: rising before the Sun. Occidental: setting after the Sun.

⁹ That is, when any planet is at the same degree and minute of longitude as the Sun's centre.

¹⁰ Retrograde: the apparent backwards motion of planets in the tropical zodiac.

¹¹ This is most likely to refer to the lunar node: the intersection of the lunar orbit with the ecliptic.

¹² Ficino, *De vita libri tres*, trans. C. Kaske & J. Clark (1989) *Marsilio Ficino, Three Books on Life*, Binghamton, New York: Society of Renaissance Studies.

¹³ On Ficino's translation of the Orphic Hymns, see I. Klutstein (1987), *Marsilio Ficino et la Théologie Ancienne*, Florence: Olschki. This quotation is from the Orphic Hymns to Helios and Selene.

¹⁴ Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris*, 9, 354c.

¹⁵ Apart from rulership, planets are strengthened in certain signs.

¹⁶ Ficino is referring to the solstices, when the Sun reaches its maximum northern and southern declinations.

¹⁷ Evidently an apocryphal work.