

God or the Daemon? Platonic Astrology in a Christian Cosmos

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The Renaissance has been described as a time when the sleeping beauty of Platonic philosophy was awakened in the West after her thousand-year slumber;¹ this rebirth of pagan wisdom, particularly in its magical aspects, posed a great intellectual challenge to the prevailing Christian orthodoxy. In this paper I want to look at some of the issues arising from the revival of what was perhaps the most contentious dimension of Neoplatonism —astrological theurgy—in a society that officially condemned it as illicit. The man who negotiated the dangerous path between the two worlds most successfully (although himself only narrowly escaping censure) was Marsilio Ficino in fifteenth-century Florence: a philosopher, priest, astrologer and magus whose life and work were dedicated to re-integrating not only Platonic thinking but also ritual practice into what he saw as the rather sterile and lifeless Christian scholasticism of the medieval followers of Aristotle.² For Ficino, Platonic philosophy was a vital intellectual preparation for the ultimate revelation of the Christian faith, and he believed he had been sent by Divine Providence to revitalise religion through its revival.³ He exhorted all priests to take up the study of philosophy, and all philosophers to follow the path of true religion, for the interpenetration of these two modes of knowledge—divine revelation and human reason—was, for the Platonist, the alchemical goal of philosophical enquiry. It was no less than the way for the human soul to realise its innate divinity, and thus its immortality.⁴ But when it came to active ritual, quite how far ‘true religion’ could legitimately include interacting with a living cosmos and appealing to the daemonic powers of the stars and planets was a problematic question of which Ficino was acutely aware; and as a Christian priest he never challenges the

¹ See John Addington Symonds, ‘Beginning and Progress of the Renaissance (Fourteenth to Sixteenth Century)’, in *The Great Events By Famous Historians*, ed. Rossiter Johnson et al., vol. 7 (London and New York: The National Alumni, 1905), pp. 110-29. This statement should not be taken to imply that the flowering of Neoplatonism in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, particularly in the Islamic world, was an intellectual movement of lesser importance.

² Articulated most eloquently in his Preface to the translations of Plotinus, quoted in J. Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance* (Leiden-New York: Brill, 1991), p.274.

³ See Ficino, letter to Johannes Pannonius, *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, vol. 7, trans. members of the Language Department of the School of Economic Science (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 2003), pp. 21-4.

⁴ See Ficino, *De Christiana religione*, in *Opera omnia* (Basel, 1576, repr. Paris, 2000), p. 1; quoted in Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, p. 289.

authority of orthodox doctrine on magic.⁵ But when he tells us, in the Preface to his commentaries on Plato, that in the heart of his Academy ‘philosophers will come to know their Saturn, contemplating the secrets of the heavens’,⁶ he is quite openly referring to the furthest planet of the known universe as holding the metaphorical key to self-knowledge, gained through veneration of a cosmos mirrored within the individual soul.

Ficino’s ‘internalisation’ of the heavens certainly foreshadowed modern psychological approaches to astrology,⁷ and arose through his assimilation of the Hermetic teachings concerning the soul’s dynamic—and initiatory—relationship to the cosmos in its descent to embodiment and ascent to God through the seven spheres.⁸ Indeed the tradition of the Ancient Theology—the perennial wisdom which was believed to have been transmitted from Zoroaster and Hermes Trismegistus through Pythagoras and Orpheus, reaching ‘absolute perfection’ in the teachings of Plato⁹—was revered precisely because it gave voice to a vital, personal connection between humans and the divine realm through the analogous correspondence of macrocosm and microcosm. Most importantly for the Christian revival of esoteric wisdom, Plato himself had testified to certain truths that would be confirmed by Christ, such as the Providence of God or the supreme being, the salvific purpose of virtue, and - central to Ficino’s project - the immortality of the soul.¹⁰ Even if he and his followers had failed to achieve the supreme insight of Christian theology—the three-in-one of the Holy Trinity—nevertheless, in

⁵ Detailed in B. Copenhaver, ‘Scholastic Philosophy and Renaissance Magic in the *De vita* of Marsilio Ficino’, *Renaissance Quarterly* 37:4 (1984) 523-54.

⁶ Ficino, Preface to the commentaries on Plato, *Opera omnia* pp. 1129-30.

⁷ On Ficino’s astrology, see for example M. Bullard, ‘The Inward Zodiac: A Development in Ficino’s Thought on Astrology’ in *Renaissance Quarterly* 42 (1990) 687-708; T. Moore, *The Planets Within* (1985; repr. Herndon VA: Steiner Books, 1992); Angela Voss, ‘The Astrology of Marsilio Ficino: Divination or Science?’ in *Culture and Cosmos* 4:2 (2000) 29-45; eadem, *Marsilio Ficino* (Berkeley CA: North Atlantic Books, 2006).

⁸ As described in *Corpus Hermeticum* I, trans. B. Copenhaver, *Hermetica* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 1-7.

⁹ Ficino, Preface to the *Corpus Hermeticum*, trans. Copenhaver, p. xlvi.

¹⁰ Ficino’s great exposition of Christian Platonism, the *Platonic Theology* in 13 books (1469-74), is subtitled ‘On the Immortality of Souls’. See Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance* part IV for a comprehensive survey of Ficino’s revival of Plato.

Ficino's opinion, 'Plato had approached as close as the Prophets, as close, that is, as is possible, to a revelation not yet revealed, to a truth not yet tellable'.¹¹

How had he done this? Ficino would say through the vision of his 'third eye', the eye in the centre of his forehead which combined the vision of the two 'natural' and 'human' eyes with that of the intuitive intelligence. This was the eye of contemplative wisdom inherited from the Pythagorean tradition; and, as Michael Allen has described it, '[it] was the counterpart and image of the infinite Orphic eye of the divine mind'.¹² In other words, this was the faculty with which, according to Apuleius, Plato homed in directly to 'the infinite present of intelligible reality',¹³ the eternal, timeless place of the Real beyond past, present and future, the place of prophetic insight, the source of the Ideas, the living reality of God. The division between 'human' and 'divine' modes of vision is central to both Platonic and Christian traditions, fuelling the debate about the provenance of divinatory 'truth' in both camps, as we shall see.¹⁴ The 'divine' reality lies beyond human reason (although it can only be interpreted through rational discourse), and it is most effectively communicated through a mythic, metaphoric or symbolic mode which 'sees through' the literal reality of the created world to its mysterious centre, which is also the centre of the human soul. Here we come to the crux of the problem of astrology, and of the questions that dominated theological debate concerning its legitimacy. Are the stars material *causes*, binding the human soul to an immutable fate? Are they *signs* of divine will, whose symbolic meanings would unlock the destiny of the human soul? Or are they living, daemonic *beings*, to be invoked through prayers and ritual in an attempt to gain their favour or harness their power?

Traditionally, astrological practice as handed down via the *Tetrabiblos* of Claudius Ptolemy (90-168 CE) conformed to the Aristotelian mechanistic view of the cosmos as a natural science of causes and effects. This was perfectly acceptable to the Church if the stars' operations

¹¹ M. J. B. Allen, 'Marsilio Ficino on Plato, the Neoplatonists, and the Christian Doctrine of the Trinity', in *Plato's Third Eye: Studies in the Metaphysics of Marsilio Ficino* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1995), IX, pp. 559, 583.

¹² Idem, 'Marsilio Ficino on Plato's Pythagorean Eye', in *Plato's Third Eye*, VII, p.178.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ The division originates in Plato's *Timaeus*, where the two orders of the 'unchanging' and 'changing' respectively embodied in the ecliptic and equator govern the created cosmos and are intrinsic to both the world soul and human soul (34b-38e).

remained firmly in the domain of natural influences on the material world or the human body; but the art of judicial astrology (making judgements from an individual's horoscope) was seen to encroach on the territory of the soul, seeking to determine the free will given by God, and was therefore fiercely condemned.¹⁵ Ficino too would reject such determinism, his project being to show that the 'truth' of astrology is not causal or mechanistic at all, but *metaphoric* and divinatory.¹⁶ If the stars indicate divine will in the manner of omens and oracles, revealing the path of good fortune to those who can engage imaginatively with their patterns, then astrology enters the domain of the sacred, and the stars compete with God as the source of prophetic truth. Indeed, one might say that their revelations are sacred precisely because they facilitate such a level of insight.

Ficino was indeed in a difficult position as he sought to bring such an imaginal awareness to an orthodox Christian perspective that tended to be literal and dogmatic. Furthermore, he was not so much concerned with abstract theory or speculation about the stars, as with the question of *right action* that aimed to 'realise', as it were, the alignment of heaven and earth at particular moments. For example, Ficino understood the two modes of knowledge which the Platonists termed human and divine to be symbolised by the planets Jupiter and Saturn.¹⁷ In November 1484, when they were conjunct in the heavens, Ficino chose to publish his complete translations of Plato, deliberately marking the event as a historical and spiritual nexus in his mission to rekindle the ancient wisdom.¹⁸ He did this, not for some poetic effect, but because he was convinced that understanding the metaphorical significance of heavenly patterns and

¹⁵ E.g. by St Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram*, ii.17, quoted in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II.2, question 95, art.5.

¹⁶ As he clearly does in his unpublished *Disputation against the judgement of the astrologers* of 1477, ed. P.O. Kristeller, in *Supplementum Ficinianum*, vol. 2 (Florence: Olschki, 1937 repr. 1999), pp. 11-76; see extract in Voss, *Marsilio Ficino*, pp. 79-81. I also explore the question of the oracular implications of Ficino's astrology in '*Diligentia et Divina Sorte: the Components of Marsilio Ficino's Astral Magic in De vita coelitus comparanda*' (forthcoming, 2011).

¹⁷ For one of many passages concerning the Saturn/Jupiter relationship see Ficino, *On fitting your life to the heavens* (*De vita coelitus comparanda*, henceforth *DVCC*), ch. 2, trans. C. Kaske & J. Clark, *Three Books on Life* (Binghamton NY: Society of Renaissance Studies, 1989), pp. 248-55. Using a similar metaphor in his *Philebus* commentary, Ficino refers to the right eye as the eye of divine wisdom, and the left as the eye of human knowledge, both together constituting the intelligence of the soul (see Ficino, *The Philebus Commentary*, ed. M.J.B. Allen, [Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1975], p. 164).

¹⁸ On the significance of the 1484 conjunction for Ficino, see J. Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, pp. 302-304; Hankins quotes Ficino (*Platonis opera*, p. 1491, f. 327vb), on the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn as signifying the joining of power and wisdom.

acting accordingly facilitated an alignment of the human soul with the *anima mundi* and thus with the Ideas in the Divine Mind.¹⁹ In combining a symbolic attitude with self-directed participation, Ficino completely reformed the fatalistic astrology of his day and reinstated a divinatory approach to reading the heavens which, as we shall see, could attain the level of prophetic utterance.

Now for the pagan Neoplatonic theurgists such as Iamblichus (250-325 CE) or Proclus (412-485 CE), the ultimate aim of working with the 'occult' or spiritual properties of matter in a ritual context was to achieve the *divinisation* of the soul through aligning and eventually assimilating it with its divine origins.²⁰ Theurgy was 'divine action', not human, initiated by the gods when the 'human' ritual was perfected, and often involving experiences of spirit possession and ecstasy. In this context, which for Iamblichus is essentially divinatory, there could be no 'higher' authority than the gods, whose intelligence partook of the Divine Mind and whose bodies were visible in the heavens. But, although clearly resonating with the divinatory aims of Iamblichus,²¹ Ficino could not as a Christian dare to affirm that the soul could achieve its divine potential by invoking cosmic (or even hyper-cosmic) deities. The Judaeo-Christian God had to be the only source of grace, situated above and beyond the cosmos, His interventions falling strictly within the realm of the miraculous and free from the order of nature.

The question of spiritual agency was a fundamental point of contention in Christian critiques of pagan magic, and Ficino was compelled to defend his astral magic against charges of demon-worship. As a Platonist, he understood the cosmos not only to be the home of the planetary deities, but also to be teeming with intermediary beings subject to them. He was therefore faced with the task of persuading his ecclesiastical critics that these daemons were 'natural forces', not supernatural intelligences.²² But where exactly was the line to be drawn between

¹⁹ The mechanics of this are explained by Ficino in *DVCC* 1 (Kaske & Clark, pp. 242-9) drawing on Plotinus, *Enneads* 4.3.10-11, 3.2.2, 4.4.40, 2.3.14.

²⁰ Two excellent sources on the history and principles of theurgy are G. Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul* (University Park PA: Pennsylvania State Press, 1995) and A. Uzdavinys, *Philosophy and Theurgy in Late Antiquity* (San Rafael CA: Sophia Perennis, 2010).

²¹ Ficino had translated Iamblichus' manifesto of theurgy, *De mysteriis*, along with other Neoplatonic texts by Porphyry, Psellus and Synesius, shortly before composing his own text on astral magic in 1489.

²² Accused of magic in 1489, Ficino was obliged to write an apology to his *DVCC*, in which he argues that his astral magic is simply tapping in to the universal life force in the same way as a farmer cultivates the soil, and does not involve the operation of daemons. See Kaske & Clark, *op. cit.*, pp. 394-401.

daemons as personifications of life forces, part of the natural order of creation, and as spirits with wills of their own, usurping the power of God and his angels?

In 1462, when Ficino was twenty-nine and needing financial support in order to devote his life to the study of Platonic philosophy, he wrote a letter to the great Cosimo de' Medici, ruler of Florence.²³ He had, he said, been singing an Orphic hymn to the Cosmos when a letter from Cosimo was brought to him by his father. In the hymn, Orpheus prays to the Cosmos, 'Cosmos, hear our prayers and grant a quiet life to a pious youth'. The letter from Cosimo granted Ficino his patronage and a villa in which to work, and Ficino concluded that Cosimo must have been writing it at exactly the same time as he was singing the hymn; furthermore, since Cosmos was Greek for Cosmus (the Latin for Cosimo), it seemed as though Orpheus was directing the hymn to Cosimo himself, and that Cosimo, 'through a heavenly incitement', heard 'a certain divine breath' and was moved to grant the request of the hymn. In other words, the cosmic daemon inspired Cosimo through the sympathetic resonance of their names, in response to the musical invocation of Ficino. A playful synchronicity—a 'secret mutual connivance' of inner intent and outer circumstance, as C.G. Jung would put it²⁴—but it raises a serious question. Why should Ficino, as a Christian, be calling on a cosmic daemon in the first place? Why not God, or a Christian saint? And how could it possibly be ascertained by the outcome whether the power that answered the call and moved Cosimo was God himself or an intermediary, beneficent intelligence? Ficino gives no explanation, and his tone is obviously intended to amuse his patron. We know that at this time he was translating and performing the Hymns of Orpheus, pagan texts extolling the virtues of the Olympian deities as well as the spirits of nature, but did not dare to publish them for fear of being accused of 'reviving the ancient cult or worship of the gods and daemons so long and deservedly condemned'.²⁵ Michael Allen has suggested that the assignment of specific incenses for the ritual performance of the hymns would have enhanced the danger, for it had been observed by the Neoplatonic theurgists that daemons could make

²³ 'To Cosimo de' Medici' (*Ad Cosmum Medicem*), trans. A. Voss in *Marsilio Ficino*, pp. 59-60 (original in *Supplementum Ficinianum*, ii.87-8).

²⁴ C.G. Jung, *Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 85.

²⁵ Ficino, *Opera omnia*, p. 1453, quoted in M.J.B. Allen, 'Ficino, Smoke and the Strangled Chickens', in *Plato's Third Eye*, XIV, p. 77.

themselves visible in smoky air.²⁶ Indeed Ficino may well have seen them himself, as he describes them in his Commentary on Plotinus as spherical points of light, 'imitating the circuits of the heavenly stars' in their swift circular motions.²⁷

Nevertheless, although not widely disseminated, the Orphic Hymns were to be revered by Ficino, Pico and their circle for their power in rituals involving music, song and light, rituals that were evidently theurgic and divinatory.²⁸ Furthermore, they offered to the Christian magus a justification for appealing to cosmic powers as differentiations of the supreme One, for in his 'Palinode' Orpheus announces the supremacy of the one Ruler of the universe.²⁹ The reason for their efficacy lay in their symbolism, for the poetic concealment of religious truth in pagan imagery ensured that they would not be taken as a threat to scriptural authority. As Pico observed, 'as was the practice of the ancient theologians, Orpheus covered the mysteries of his doctrines with the wrappings of fables, and disguised them with a poetic garment, so that whoever reads the hymns may believe there is nothing underneath but tales and the purest nonsense'.³⁰

What are these Orphic mysteries? Pico hints here at the numinous essence that he believed to lie at the heart of the ancient wisdom, suggesting that it might only be accessible to those who have ears to hear or eyes to see. Indeed he wrote enigmatically in his 'Orphic Conclusions': 'Anyone who does not know how to intellectualise sensible properties perfectly through the method of secret analogising understands nothing sound from the Orphic Hymns'.³¹ Another question arises here then, which is how one moves from appearing to worship and entreat pagan deities, to 'secret analogising'; and this brings us to the theme of different *modes* or senses of perception. For underlying the question of whether stars are seen as causes or signs is

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 80-81.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 68.

²⁸ Pico della Mirandola wrote in his 'Orphic Conclusions' XXXI, 2: 'Nothing is more effective in natural magic than the Hymns of Orpheus, if the correct music, intent of the soul and other circumstances known to the wise were to be applied'. See S. Farmer, *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses (1486)* (Tempe AZ: Arizona State University, 1998), p. 505.

²⁹ On the Orphic Palinode, see D.P. Walker, 'Orpheus the Theologian and Renaissance Platonists', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 16 (1963) 100-120.

³⁰ Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, trans. C.G. Wallis in *Pico della Mirandola, On the Dignity of Man* trans. C. Carmichael, P.J.W. Miller & C.G. Wallis (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965, repr. Hackett Publishing, 1998), p.33.

³¹ Pico della Mirandola, 'Orphic Conclusions' XXXI, 7, in S. Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, p.507.

the question of literal or symbolic vision, and much of the confusion that arises when attempting to define the limits of astrological or magical practice in relation to religion is due to a muddling of these two levels of discourse.³² As Ficino was acutely aware, it is impossible to square a symbolic mode of 'seeing through' the material world with a hierarchical literalism which insists on the concreteness of its metaphor. Exoteric Christianity, deriving its cosmology from Aristotle, envisioned creation as a ladder, ascending from the mineral, plant and animal worlds, through the human realm, the seven planets, the fixed stars and the angels to the Divine Mind at the top. This image locates God firmly beyond His creation, presiding over all its elements, governing the motions of the spheres, occupying the furthest extreme from the earth. It is certainly true that both Platonic and Christian cosmologies can be hypostasized in this way, and it can easily be seen how such an image gives rise to dualist thinking and the denigration of earthly and bodily reality as inferior to the transcendent spiritual. However, if the planetary spheres are not seen as arranged vertically in a quasi-literal space, but more as a series of onion rings surrounding a central core, then God is immanent, at the centre of all things as the Sun is at the centre of the cosmos, and therefore by the power of analogy, the Sun becomes the supreme symbol for God. These schemes are of course expressions of two different human perspectives and modes of apprehension, but where the former tends towards a metaphysical detachment, the latter perceives the symbolic power of the natural world.³³ The manner of the Neoplatonists, despite our temptation to view their hypostases as a static hierarchy, is always to see through the physical form in a dynamic process of ever deepening perception. This can be seen in Proclus' fourfold exegesis of the Sun, described by Lucas Siorvanes as follows:

³² The early Church Fathers (following the Platonic model) laid out a specific framework of levels of interpretation progressing from the literal to the allegorical, tropological (or moral) and the mystical. This was taken up by Dante in his *Divina Commedia* and expounded by him in his famous letter to Can Grande; it also and deeply informed Renaissance symbolic art. Such a framework also serves to clarify how the deeper levels of meaning implicit in astrological and magical symbolism are perceived. See e.g. G. Cornelius, *The Moment of Astrology* (Bournemouth: Wessex Astrologer, 2003), ch. 14; Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, the Four Senses of Scripture* (repr. London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1998 & 2000). Ficino explicitly uses this framework in his *Book of the Sun* (see p. 18, note 67).

³³ Further on this division, see J. Milne, 'Cosmos as Divine Revelation', in *Metaphysics and the Cosmic Order* (London: Temenos Academy, 2008), ch. 2.

The One is the divine sun. The intellectual Sun is the creator. The supra-cosmic sun which shines in the median levels [of soul and nature] is personified by Apollo. Finally there is the sun as we normally see it. Behind the visible Sun lie the metaphysical, invisible suns, which give it power and substance.³⁴

Thus the Platonic path of knowledge leads to a revisioning of the world which is simultaneously a union with it, because the soul can only 'see' to the extent to which it resonates with what is seen. However, although Christ could be identified with Apollo at the median, or allegorical, level, to see the Sun as God Himself implies the power of the symbolic to lead to a transmutation of nature through a transmutation in vision. From such a level of insight all past, present and future outcomes would be seen as one eternal present, and this is a very different kind of prophetic knowledge from attempts to conjecture and speculate based on merely human powers of reasoning and deduction. A similar distinction is drawn by Christian thinkers, except that for them divine prophecy cannot depend on any mediation of the natural order as a signifier. So let us look a little more closely at the Christian position regarding prophetic insight, as it bears directly on how Ficino was to redefine the limits of astrology.

Thomas Aquinas stipulated two forms of prophecy: divine and natural.³⁵ The former is a gift of the Holy Spirit, received by the Prophet's mind without any mediation of natural causes; while the latter relies on the contact of the imaginative and intellectual faculties of the soul with angelic intelligences. The angelic light, deriving directly from God, says Aquinas, strengthens the mind and allows it to form images of things. 'Natural' here is defined as 'that which a creature performs by its own power': hence, if a prophecy derives from the natural knowledge of an angel, it is natural. 'But,' Aquinas says, 'that which takes its origin from an angel in so far as the angel receives revelation from God is supernatural prophecy.' Divine prophecy on the other hand needs no angelic mediation, and is judged superior, indeed miraculous. Aquinas does not deny that the power of the heavenly bodies might impress on the human imagination some signs of future events, but such prophecy would only extend to

³⁴ L. Siorvanes, *Proclus: Neo-Platonic Philosophy and Science* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p. 242.

³⁵ Aquinas' views on prophecy are cited here from *Summa theologica*, 2.2.171-4.

things which are determined in nature and in any case could not predict 'infallibility', only 'those things that are true for the most part'. A prophetic dream would be considered 'natural', and all such mediated experiences would be only 'an imperfect likeness of divine prophecy'. It is not explained exactly how a miraculous prophecy would be experienced by a human being if not through a dream or vision.

For the Neoplatonist, there is no clear ontological distinction between 'supernatural' and 'natural' realms of influence. The world soul disseminates the power of the divine mind throughout creation, becoming increasingly differentiated and material the further it extends from the absolute or One, but always seeking to return to it. At each stage of emanation it infuses the cosmos with divine life in the form of gods and daemons, before becoming 'hidden' in the material world of animals, plants and minerals. The spiritual circuit is unbroken, and could be considered a 'natural' process in that all elements act in accordance with their own nature. In this sense, the Christian Platonic magus could argue that to harness the powers of cosmic intelligences is to remain within the natural order of correspondence and sympathy, and does not encroach upon the 'supernatural' territory of God. This was indeed to be Ficino's defence of his astral magic.³⁶ But Platonic theurgy goes further than this, as its ultimate goal is initiatory—to achieve *gnosis* or union of the human soul with the divine mind. Here the role of the daemons as intermediaries or activators is central.

As we saw earlier, Ficino playfully implied that his synchronistic experience with Cosimo was engineered by a cosmic daemon. The function of these immaterial beings is described by Socrates in the *Symposium*:

They are the envoys and interpreters that ply between heaven and earth, flying upward with our worship and our prayers, and descending with the heavenly answers and commandments, and since they are between the two estates they weld both sides together and merge them into one great whole. They form the medium of the prophetic arts, of the priestly rites of sacrifice, initiation, and incantation, of divination and of sorcery, for the divine will not mingle directly with the human, and it is only through the mediation of the spirit world that man can have any intercourse, whether waking or sleeping, with the gods.³⁷

³⁶ As in his 'Apology' (see n. 22).

³⁷ Plato, *Symposium* 202e, trans. M. Joyce in *Plato, The Collected Dialogues*, eds E. Hamilton & H. Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p.555.

In the *De amore*, his Commentary on the *Symposium*, Ficino elaborates on the role of the daemons, assigning them the task of transmitting seven gifts to the incarnating soul as it descended towards the earth 'wrapped in a special transparent and astral body'.³⁸ These gifts derived from the symbolic qualities of the seven planets, from Saturn to the Moon, from skill in contemplation to fertility and generation. Thus daemons, cosmos and human soul are interlinked and interpenetrating; daemons are both 'within' and 'without', acting according to the humours and temperaments of the bodies which the souls inhabit yet also participating in the *anima mundi* that pervades creation. Ficino, following Plotinus, understood the ranks of these intelligences to correspond to the two parts of the soul, the divine and unchanging and the discursive and temporal. The higher daemons were identified with the angelic, corresponding to the divine mind, their mode of knowledge being direct revelation. The lower daemons then had varying degrees of identity and conformity with the human condition and nature, and Platonically thinking, each individual human will resonate with the daemon to whom his soul corresponds. But they are not evil in any dualist sense, simply more or less material.³⁹

This differs radically from the orthodox Christian view of the cosmos established by the ecclesiastical authorities of the Middle Ages, particularly Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, in relation to the role of the daemonic.⁴⁰ For the Christian, the coming of the Saviour effectively removed the spiritual powers of the cosmos as agents of revelation. The angels, as the new mediators between the divine and human realms, lost all association with nature or the cosmos, whilst the pagan daemons were severed into two opposing groups, those bound to matter and leading men astray, and those metamorphosed into the hierarchies of angelic beings. For the Neoplatonic theurgist, all daemons could be agents of divine revelation through sacred ritual, divination and invocation.⁴¹ The Christian orthodox position however, represented by Aquinas, states that the only agent for divine revelation is God Himself, and in

³⁸ Ficino, *De amore* VI.4, trans. S. Jayne, *Marsilio Ficino, Commentary on Plato's Symposium on Love* (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1985), p. 112.

³⁹ On Ficino's relationship with the daemons and the principles of Neoplatonic daemonology, see M.J.B. Allen, 'Ficino, Smoke and the Strangled Chickens', op.cit.

⁴⁰ See Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram*, 2. 17; *City of God*, Book IX; Aquinas, *ST* 2.2.95.

⁴¹ On the role of daemons in theurgy, see Iamblichus, *De mysteriis*, Book II, trans. E. Clarke, J. Dillon & J. Herschbell, *Iamblichus, On the Mysteries* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), pp. 83-117.

his *Summa Theologica* we find the statement: 'If anyone presumes to foreknow or foretell such like future things by any means whatever, except by divine revelation, he manifestly usurps what belongs to God.'⁴² Such diviners only *pretend* to be 'filled with the Godhead', and Aquinas defines as 'divination' an act which somehow presumes to 'cause' something divine: that is, a human usurping divine knowledge for themselves and not receiving it through revelation. Foretelling future events is therefore legitimate only (a) if it occurs through rational deduction, or (b) if it is revealed directly from God. Aquinas pronounces all divinations to be unlawful 'if they be extended beyond the limits set according to the order of nature or of divine providence'.⁴³

We may note that Aquinas does not deny that divinations and omens may arise through the workings of Providence; but he does not tell us how to distinguish between a divine revelation, and a divinatory insight given by a fraudulent demon—for either, it appears, may be 'true'. The problem is the ambiguous 'middle ground' of the Neoplatonists for whom divine revelation is a *seeing through*, not a *rising above*, nature. Both Platonists and Christians acknowledge that human reason is severely limited and to be distinguished from the revelations of divine truth, but for the Christian the intelligent life of the pagan cosmos, which mediates between the two realms, has become suspect and misleading: man must strive to go as far as he can according to his reason, then await revelation of the world beyond the stars through grace—there cannot be divine intelligence *within* creation that is apprehended through the human intellect as revelation, as in a divinatory interpretation. Divinatory methods in themselves *cannot* facilitate a divine revelation because this would confuse two orders of being. In other words, the interpretation of a symbol or sign cannot lead to an apprehension of meaning beyond the human realm—it cannot be prophetic, because it arises from human reason, or through the influence of evil demons. Augustine suggests that if diviners such as astrologers do 'get it right' in their pronouncements, this is due to the intervention of 'unclean and lying spirit' hidden in their minds.⁴⁴

⁴² Aquinas, *ST* 2.2.95, 1-8 on divination. This quotation, art. 1.

⁴³ *Ibid.* art. 7

⁴⁴ Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram*, ii.17. Somewhat ironically, Augustine's own conversion to Christianity was prompted by an omen; he heard children's voices calling 'take up and read' and interpreted this as a sign to take up the Bible and read the first passage that fell open. For an analysis of the divinatory

Plato too is quick to condemn practitioners of divination who rely on their own limited opinions and conjectures, just as he criticises the artists who make copies of copies which only serve to keep the prisoners in the cave bound to their illusions.⁴⁵ In the *Phaedrus* he distinguishes between the truly prophetic utterance of the individual possessed by a god and in a state of 'divine madness', and the merely human assumptions of the 'sane prophets' who 'inquire into the future by means of birds and other signs'.⁴⁶ Such a diviner, says Plato, 'attained understanding and information by a purely human activity of thought belonging to his own intelligence' whereas 'the prophecy of inspiration' is of 'superior perfection and value'. However, Plato does not insist that 'human' divination is necessarily wrong or illicit, nor that the 'possessed ones' cannot achieve their knowledge through divinatory practices as such—indeed he cites the enraptured state of the Pythia and priestesses at the oracles of Delphi and Dodona as examples of god-possession.⁴⁷ In a famous passage in *Ion* he equates the inspired poet with the prophetic diviner, implying that the artist too may become a receptacle for divine revelation, and that the voice of the gods may be heard through poetic narrative:

Herein lies the reason why the deity has bereft them of their senses, and uses them as ministers, along with soothsayers and godly seers; it is in order that we listeners may know that it is not they who utter these precious revelations while their mind is not within them, but that it is the god himself who speaks, and through them becomes articulate to us.⁴⁸

Later Neoplatonists took up the question of divine possession in different ways, the theurgists such as Iamblichus and Proclus following the path of ritual ecstasy, whilst Plotinus offered a more sober intellectual explanation for divinatory insight. For Plotinus, the cosmos is like a great ballet, all the different parts moving, interacting with and affecting each other in a

implications of this episode see G. Cornelius, 'Field of Omens', Ph.D. thesis, University of Kent, 2010, pp. 389-96.

⁴⁵ See Plato, *Republic* X, 598, and the allegory of the cave, *Republic* VII, 514-518 (trans. P. Shorey in *Plato, The Collected Dialogues*, pp.832 and 747-751).

⁴⁶ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 244a-e (trans. R. Hackforth in *Plato, The Collected Dialogues*, p.491).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Plato, *Ion*, 534 c-d (trans. L. Cooper in *Plato, The Collected Dialogues*, p.220).

single harmonious display, and the magician is the one who knows how to enter into this 'play of forces' and consciously work with and manipulate them for the greater good.⁴⁹ But he is not out of his mind with frenzy, rather he has cultivated a knowledge of the laws of creation through intellectual contemplation and knows how to disengage from their effects. The magician is the one who knows how to enter and withdraw at will: 'He pulls knowing the pull of everything toward any other thing in the living system.'⁵⁰

Plotinus is concerned with raising consciousness towards what he termed the higher part of the soul, the part which contemplates divine reality directly and remains unaffected by the spells or fascinations that enchant the ordinary man, who remains bound to the lower, 'unreasoning' element of his soul. The wise man is 'immune from magic' and has no use for rituals or techniques. From Ficino's point of view, Plotinus offered a theory for astrology that was safely compatible with Christian doctrine since it required no daemonic agency or determinist mechanism. In his *On fitting your life to the heavens* he relies heavily on Plotinus' tractate 'Are the Stars Causes?' (*Enneads* II.3) in which Plotinus dismisses any notion that planets or stars literally 'cause' either events on earth or personality traits, but stresses that everything in the cosmos will have the function of *signification* by virtue of the fact that it is part of a whole organism: 'All teems with symbol,' he says; 'the wise man is the man who in any one thing can read another, a process familiar to all of us in not a few examples of everyday experience.'⁵¹

The stars as signs may be interpreted in the same way as any other part of the cosmos by the diviner or augur, as pointing to the underlying divine pattern of things:

We can but believe that their circuit is for the protection of the entirety of things while they furnish the incidental service of being letters on which the augur, acquainted with that alphabet, may look and read the future from their pattern - arriving at the thing signified by such analogies as that a soaring bird tells of some lofty event.⁵²

⁴⁹ See Plotinus, *Ennead* IV.4.40 on the theory of magical attraction (trans. S. MacKenna in *Plotinus, The Enneads* [London: Faber & Faber 1956, rev. 1969]), p. 323.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Plotinus, *Enneads* II.3.7, trans. S. MacKenna, p.96. See also *Enneads* III.1.5-6 on astrology as divination.

⁵² Plotinus, *Enneads* III.1.6, trans. S. MacKenna, p. 158.

For Plotinus, divination is thus the art of understanding the hidden workings of the cosmos, whilst the stars themselves are deprived of all agency or will. It is most effectively accomplished by one who has raised his mind to the level of the gods (i.e. fully identified with his higher soul) and thus attained the level of prophetic insight.

Ficino takes up the question of human and divine levels of knowledge related to astrological practice in his *Disputation against the Judgement of Astrologers* of 1477.⁵³ The 'human' astrologers think they are practicing some form of natural science, where planets and stars literally cause predictable effects. These 'petty ogres' make fated pronouncements and bind the soul to a fixed fate, precisely *because* they remain at the literal level of understanding and can go no further than their limited power of thinking allows – thus subjecting their clients to a similar limitation of thought and action. They make the terrible mistake of reducing the symbolic to the literal, to 'silly similitudes' as Ficino puts it, and thus deprive it of its power to move the soul.⁵⁴ Having dismissed these astrologers and their beliefs, however, Ficino then makes a very bold move. Challenging Aquinas, he suggests that astrology may be understood quite differently, as a *divinatory* method. The diviner may receive a revelation via the stars that is indeed prophetic, in three ways: by means of 'divine infusion' by daemons, by 'natural instinct' (such as via a melancholy temperament), or by 'art' - astrology and augury being two instances of this last. The augur or diviner needs technique, needs to know the rules, but his or her insight comes from another place, it is a divine inspiration, a 'gift of the soul' through which true prophecy may flow.⁵⁵ Thus the wise astrologers read the signs to reveal God's Providence. This is a radical assertion indeed: that astrological practice may lead to divine knowledge, and that this knowledge is already sown in the soul's very fabric. Truth in astrological judgment, says Ficino, comes 'not so much through inspecting the stars as through a certain foreknowledge innate to you'.⁵⁶ In support of this statement he quotes the *Centiloquium* of pseudo-Ptolemy, with the suggestion that the Platonic third eye of intuitive intelligence—the

⁵³ See n. 16.

⁵⁴ Ficino, *Disputatio* in Kristeller, *Supplementum Ficinianum* ii.43, 68.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 50; trans in A. Voss, *Marsilio Ficino*, p.80.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

divine eye—is activated by reading signs in the world, and interprets them not through any human conjecture but through the immortal, all-seeing part of the soul.

The difficulties encountered by Ficino in relating this to an orthodox Christian position are addressed in a letter to Federico, Duke of Urbino in 1482.⁵⁷ His theme here is to dismiss the idea that Christian law could be in any way ‘caused’ by the heavens, and we see him holding in balance literal and imaginal conceptions of the cosmos. On the one hand, Ficino evokes the established order of the planetary spheres with God beyond, ruling their movements; and on the other, the intelligible but hidden meanings which they may reveal to the ‘wise or divine man’. As we have seen, the former conception required an order of being ‘above’ the stars which operated directly through Divine Providence, manifesting as miraculous events on earth. God may give *signs* through his creation or initiate miracles independently of it, but such a miracle cannot be part and parcel of the natural order of planetary cycles as it derives from a superior order entirely. This view clashes directly with the Sun analogy of Proclus given earlier, and so prevents Ficino, as a Christian, from suggesting that the Star of the Magi may have been, for example, both a ‘natural’ conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn *and* a miracle.⁵⁸ For the pagan diviners, on the other hand, there could be *no further* miraculous level beyond the theophany of the sign itself, and we can see by this that orthodox theology, in seeking to establish a level of operation *beyond* what the stars may reveal, has distorted the revelatory function of the cosmos as understood by the Platonists. Ficino thus found himself bound by a cosmos of hierarchical weighting which had to give way to the primacy of the ultimate Revelation of Christ, but within which the revelation of omens and signs was experienced as prophetic; furthermore, the natural order of the cosmos with its stars and planets was also simultaneously a divine intelligence—as illustrated in Ficino’s letter to Cosimo. In actual *practice*, the gods announced their authority, which is precisely why they had to be outlawed. Ficino of course leaves this question unresolved, always managing skillfully to negotiate the two perspectives, never allowing ‘what the Platonists say’ to assume the status of definitive truth. But we are left with a

⁵⁷ *Divina lex fieri a caelo non potest, sed forte significari*, in *Opera*, pp. 849-853, trans. In *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, vol. 6 (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 1999), pp. 23-31.

⁵⁸ See Ficino, ‘The Star of the Magi’, trans. T. Moore in A. Voss, *Marsilio Ficino*, pp. 95-101.

paradox that touches the quick of the exoteric/esoteric divide in Western metaphysics—or perhaps we should say the transcendent/theophanic divide.

In Ficino's *On fitting your life to the heavens*, the tension is felt again in the distinction he is compelled to make between 'natural magic' and any sort of stellar worship or invocation: 'Nor do I affirm here a single word about profane magic which depends upon the worship of daemons, but I mention natural magic, which, by natural things, seeks to obtain the services of the celestials for the prosperous health of our bodies.'⁵⁹ But he was nervous, and continually re-assures us (and any over-anxious prelate) that he is never overstepping the mark of orthodoxy.⁶⁰ Drawing on Plotinus and Hermes Trismegistus as his chief authorities for the sympathetic resonance of macrocosm and microcosm, Ficino insists that the invocation of planetary spirits and the collaboration with one's guardian daemon are all part of working with the natural, if occult, powers of the cosmos. But to return to the question raised by Ficino's letter to Cosimo: when does an occult property become a living presence, and how far does 'enticing the gifts of celestial or angelic souls to human souls through free will and affection' imply worship?⁶¹ It is a fine line. Plotinus may call his 'seminal reasons' 'gods' and thus give them philosophical sanction, but Plotinus was not interested in active ritual, and Ficino here is advocating singing hymns to planetary spirits.⁶² As we have seen, Iamblichean theurgy aimed very high indeed, and was not just concerned with alignment to the cosmic order, but with the divinization of the soul—man becoming God. Ficino knew this, of course, and hints at the 'higher gifts' that may descend through ritual activity, quickly assuring the reader that he will be discussing 'the impure superstition of the heathen' and the 'pure piety of the Gospel' at another time.⁶³ When Ficino speculates with Iamblichus that invoking supercelestial divinities may redeem us from fate, he is certainly pushing the boundaries of what a Christian would consider 'natural' beyond their limits.⁶⁴ The harmless natural philosopher, playing cosmic music and

⁵⁹ Ficino, 'Apology' in Kaske & Clark, *Three Books on Life*, p.397.

⁶⁰ See Ficino, *Dvcc*, ch. XXV, Kaske & Clark, *Three Books on Life*, pp. 380-383.

⁶¹ Ficino, *Dvcc*, ch. XXII, Kaske & Clark, *Three Books on Life*, p. 369.

⁶² As described in Ficino, *Dvcc*, ch. XXI, Kaske & Clark, *Three Books on Life*, pp. 354-363. Further on Ficino's performance practice, see A. Voss, 'Father Time and Orpheus' in *The Imaginal Cosmos: Astrology, Divination and the Sacred*, ed. J. Hinson Lall & A. Voss (Canterbury: University of Kent, 2007), pp. 139-56.

⁶³ Ficino, *Dvcc*, ch. XXVI, Kaske & Clark, *Three Books on Life*, p. 393.

⁶⁴ Ficino, *Dvcc*, ch. XXII, Kaske & Clark, *Three Books on Life*, p.369.

wearing his talismanic jewel, has suddenly become high priest, creating a channel through to a forbidden world.

In 1494, the same year when Pico's vehement attack on astrology was published, and Savonarola was launching his polemics against Platonic philosophy,⁶⁵ Ficino wrote *The Book of the Sun*, a short treatise that can be seen as his most potent attempt to bring the Platonic vision in line with a Christian metaphysics – and also a clear demonstration of the ultimate impossibility of such a synthesis.⁶⁶ Taking the Sun as his central symbolic image, Ficino states at the outset that 'this book is allegorical and anagogical rather than dogmatic' and that his method will be 'to advance from the manifest to the occult' not through rational argument, but through 'certain correspondences drawn from the light, according to our abilities'.⁶⁷ Here is a deliberate use of the medieval hermeneutic of the four senses to move, in the manner of Proclus, through the different stages of vision, but in this case understanding the Sun as the symbol for the Christian God, rather than for the Neoplatonic One.⁶⁸ The starting point in the journey is the simple, direct, visual experience of the physical universe, of the Sun and its movements through the constellations of the zodiac, and the end is the vision of the 'supercelestial' Sun to which the visible Sun points. But Ficino cannot go as far as Proclus and declare the simultaneous identity of the Sun with God, although he comes very close. Beginning with observation of the Sun's movements, he moves to the level of allegory (the astrological interpretations to which they give rise, and the Sun seen as *similar* to God). In keeping with the fourfold hermeneutic, the next stage is to see the Sun as the *image* of God - that is, a symbol, where a hidden or occult light is perceived which is its 'virtue and divinity'.⁶⁹ The two lights of the Sun, natural and divine, are explained as related to the senses and the 'inner spiritual eye' respectively, and the divine Sun is identified as Apollo who leads men's minds to the truth

⁶⁵ G. Pico della Mirandola, *Disputatio adversus astrologiam divinatricem*, published c. 1496 by his nephew Gianfrancesco Pico. See S. Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, ch. 4.

⁶⁶ Ficino, *Liber de Sole*, trans. G. Cornelius et al., 'The Book of the Sun' in A. Voss, *Marsilio Ficino*, pp. 189-213. See also G. Cornelius, 'Astrology's Hidden Light: Reflections on Ficino's *De Sole*', *Sphinx* 6 (1994) 114-22.

⁶⁷ Ficino, 'The Book of the Sun', ch. 1, in A. Voss, *Marsilio Ficino*, p. 190.

⁶⁸ See p.8, n. 32 for sources on the fourfold hermeneutic.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, ch. 2, p. 192.

through oracles, poetry and music.⁷⁰ Lastly, when proceeding to the anagogic or mystical level of perception, Ficino relates the fecundity, light and heat of the Sun to the threefold order of angelic beings and to the Divine Trinity of Father, Son and Spirit. Finally, the visible Sun unites with the symbolic Sun as Ficino draws the distinction between idolatry, which is the worship of the literal aspect alone, and the veneration of the supercelestial, spiritual Sun which is the 'bounty of the Father'.⁷¹ But in the end, even such a Sun as this must bow down before a mightier and more primordial power. If, Ficino speculates, 'once every year the home of omnipotent Olympus were to be thrown open', the splendor of the Sun would be so overwhelming that it would be adored 'as the highest God',⁷² but this is as far as he can go. In the final chapter of the treatise, we are reminded that the Maker of heaven is beyond the heavens; God as the origin of the universe is 'something infinitely loftier' than even the heavenly Sun, reducing it to a shadow.⁷³ We have necessarily returned to the orthodox model: God above the heavens, and the Sun far removed from the Creator of the world—for in Genesis God creates the Sun as a secondary light after the first primordial separation of light and dark.⁷⁴ God as first principle is to be worshipped 'with the same ritual observance that all celestial things give to the Sun',⁷⁵ but He is most definitely not to be identified with it.

I hope I have managed to convey something of the impossibility of resolving these two modes of metaphysical understanding which characterize the Platonic and orthodox Christian conceptions of the cosmos. Ficino understood only too well the dangers of interpreting the Platonic vision literally, and it is remarkable how, in the *De vita*, he is able skillfully to negotiate a path of symbolic discourse to allow his magical operations to be seen as 'natural', whilst fully understanding them as the first steps of theurgy. By revisioning astrology as poetic metaphor that freed the imagination and paved the way for prophetic insight, Ficino firmly located it within a programme of Platonic *paideia*, but could never explicitly align it to a

⁷⁰ Ibid., ch. 11, p. 207.

⁷¹ Ibid., ch. 13, p. 212. Plutarch too explains the difference between conflating Apollo with the physical Sun, and understanding the divinity as the creative source of the physical manifestation (*On the E at Delphi*, XXI).

⁷² Ibid., ch. 12, p. 211.

⁷³ Ibid., ch. 13, pp. 212-13.

⁷⁴ Genesis 1:16.

⁷⁵ Ficino, 'The Book of the Sun', ch. 13, in A.Voss, *Marsilio Ficino*, p. 213.

theurgic context of divinization. But despite his caution, it is evident that by 1494 Ficino felt under considerable strain, and possibly attack. He wrote to his friend the poet Poliziano firmly disavowing that he ever approved of or taught astrology or endorsed the opinions of the Platonists, and praises Pico's condemnation of divinatory astrology, 'rejoicing that the superstitious vanity of the astrologers was extinguished'.⁷⁶ The fundamentalist regime of Savonarola had taken hold in Florence, casting a dark and menacing shadow over the Platonic Sun, and even Ficino appears to have felt its ominous presence.⁷⁷

As a postscript, we make a leap forward to seventeenth-century England, where William Lilly, one of the last astrologers to uphold the Platonic idea of the inextricable connection between the piety of the astrologer and his ability to make true judgments, wrote his great *Christian Astrology* in 1647.⁷⁸ After Lilly, astrology would sink into a decline as the new scientific world view stripped the cosmos of intelligence and sundered the human rational soul from its ground in a divine unity of being.

In his comprehensive textbook of divinatory (or horary) astrology, Lilly affirms the prophetic possibilities of astrology, but only when the astrologer speaks from the higher level of the soul, thus achieving insight into Divine Providence and confirming astrology as a religious, i.e. Christian, practice. I will give him the last word, as he advises the student of astrology:

In the first place, consider and admire thy Creator, and be thankful unto him, be thou humble, and let no natural knowledge, how profound and transcendent soever it be, elate thy minde to neglect that divine Providence, by whose all-seeing order and appointment, all things heavenly and earthly, have their constant motion, but the more thy knowledge is enlarged, the more do thou magnifie the power and wisdom of Almighty God, and strive to preserve thy self in his favour; being confident, the more holy thou art, and more neer to God, the purer Judgment thou shalt give.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Ficino, 'What He Thinks of Astrology', trans. A. Voss in *Marsilio Ficino*, pp. 215-17. This quotation, p. 216.

⁷⁷ After Savonarola's death, Ficino condemned him as the Antichrist in 'Apologia contra Savonarolam', in ed. P.O. Kristeller, *Supplementum Ficinianum*, vol. 2, pp. 76-8.

⁷⁸ W. Lilly, *Christian Astrology* (1647, repr. London: Regulus Press, 1985). See A. Geneva. *Astrology and the Seventeenth Century Mind: William Lilly and the Language of the Stars* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).

⁷⁹ W. Lilly, 'Letter to the Student in Astrology', in *Christian Astrology*, Introduction.

