

How 'natural' is Ficino's natural magic?

Introduction

Of all Ficino's work, the most pertinent to an understanding of what he termed 'natural magic' is *De vita libri tres* or *Three Books on Life*¹, particularly book three, *De vita coelitus comparanda*², which Copenhaver describes as the most important work on magic of the early modern period (Copenhaver, 1990, p.267).



A number of scholars have noted the presence of theurgic elements in *De vita*. Kaske and Clark, for instance, stress the theurgic content of Ficino's Neoplatonic sources (Kaske and Clark, 1989) pp.46-47), Copenhaver cites the impact of the theurgic magic of Iamblichus, Psellos and the *Chaldean Oracles* (Copenhaver, 1987, p.453), and Voss refers to it as 'a beginner's guide to theurgic ritual under the cloak of a manual on health' (Voss, *Ficino's Natural Magic*, p.2). The book only narrowly escaped being banned (Campion, 2009, p.89) and Ficino published an *Apology* just four months later, restating his position on magic, so it is clear that the more orthodox authorities viewed it with suspicion. However, through infusing the spiritual aims of Neoplatonic philosophy into Christianity, he seems to have reframed the idea of 'natural magic' altogether, extending it into a celestial context and emphasising the 'natural' life-giving properties of the celestial bodies. A complete spiritual and cosmological vision emerges, and perhaps a new understanding of the notion of 'natural magic'.

Natural magic

At the time *De Vita* was published in 1489, magic was generally seen as incompatible with scripture (Campion, 2009, p.88); in particular, any practice which involved the invocation of spirits was considered heretical by the Church. Of the latter, there were two types, theurgy (high spiritual magic) and goetia (witchcraft or sorcery), both involving interaction with spiritual entities of one type or another (Copenhaver, 1990, p.273); and it was this interaction which was central to the Church's prohibition (Campion, 2009, p.94).

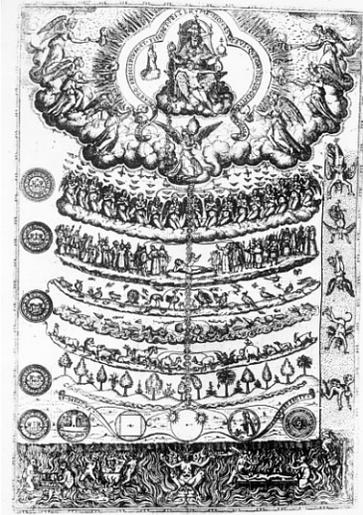
¹ Hereafter referred to as *De vita*.

² Hereafter referred to as *Dvcc*, except in referencing quotes when the full title *Three Books on Life III* has been used.

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Natural magic, by contrast, was acceptable if it contained no demonic or ritual elements but focused itself on harnessing the powers believed to be implanted by God in the natural world for man's use. Here we see the magician as natural philosopher, gaining advantage over his environment through knowledge of its constituents, in activities such as the making of medicines or prediction of the weather (Thomas, 1971, pp.302-303).

We can locate this distinction in the seminal theology of Augustine and Aquinas. Because



of the polarisation between incarnate and divine worlds which emerged in Christianity, the idea of a benign intermediary realm largely disappeared, save for the existence of angels and saints – the deities, daemons and spirits of Greek pagan belief became demonised, excluded from the benefic structure of God's universe as depicted in Valeses' image of the *Great Chain of Being*, left (Voss, *Iamblichus & Theurgy*). For example, the classical notion of calling down a divine presence to inhabit a statue was considered sinful; in addition, Augustine had condemned the idea of theurgic magic in *City of God*:

"Who does not see that all these things are fictions of deceiving demons, unless he be a wretched slave of theirs, and an alien from the grace of the true Liberator? ... For these are the delusive appearances of that spirit who longs to entangle wretched souls in the deceptive worship of many and false gods, and to turn them aside from the true worship of the true God, by whom alone they are cleansed and healed..."

(Augustine, *City of God*, chapter 10).

Aquinas similarly warned against any practice which summoned demons or offered worship to pagan deities (Copenhaver, 1990, p.274 and 1984, pp.531-2). He also condemned 'judicial' astrology (the reading of horoscopes with a view to foretelling the future) where this acknowledged the planets as causal agents, denying free will (Campion, 2009, p.156).

Theurgic magic

Theurgy can be defined literally as 'divine working' or 'divine action'. It describes a ritual practice designed to invoke divine presence and achieve the goal of henosis, unity with the One. As Thomas describes it, "spiritual magic or theurgy was based on the idea that one could reach God in an ascent up the scale of creation made possible by a rigorous course of prayer, fasting and devotional preparation" (Thomas, 1971, p.320). As Proclus tells us:

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"(Theurgy is) a power higher than all human wisdom embracing the blessings of divination, the purifying powers of initiation and in a word all the operations of divine possession".

(Proclus, *Theologia Platonica*, 1.26.63, in Dodds, 1951)

Theurgy is central to the work of the Neoplatonist Iamblichus, later to have a significant influence on Ficino (Voss, *Iamblichus and Theurgy*, p.1). Iamblichus taught a form of theurgic practice which he describes in his book *De Mysteriis* as "ritualised cosmogony" – in other words a re-enactment of, and reconnection to, the divine source (Collins, 2010, p.17). The theurgist worked with sympathetic resonance, beginning with the divine correspondences to be found within matter and moving upwards, tracing the signatures through the levels of being until eventually reaching a point where the soul unites with the One. For Iamblichus, matter contains innate divinity and one must work with it as the beginning of the spiritual journey; through acts of religious ritual, the world becomes ordered as a reflection of its divine counterpart.

Iamblichus stresses that the divine cannot be reached through contemplation alone (Voss, *Iamblichus and Theurgy*, p.1-4; and Shaw, 2003, pp.58-59).

"The perfect efficacy of ineffable works, which are divinely performed in a way surpassing all intelligence, and the power of inexplicable symbols, which are known only to the Gods, impart theurgic union..."

(Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis* 96-97, in Taylor, 1821).

Further, the gods are not separate from us but are "coexistent with our very essence" (Voss, 'Iamblichus and Theurgy', p.4-5); in other words, the human soul contains the divine spark, and is intrinsic to the hierarchy, being, in the words of Gregory Shaw:

"an agent of cosmogenesis through whom the gods express themselves in the soul's theurgic activity, and the specific faculty of the soul in which these theurgies occur is the *phantasikon*, the soul's power of imagination".

(Shaw, 2003, p.69)

Iamblichus is clear about the role played by daemons in theurgic work:

"By daimons, I mean the generative and creative powers of the gods in the furthest extremity of their emanations and in the last stages of division... One must assign to daimons productive powers that oversee nature and *the bond uniting souls to bodies*"

(Iamblichus, *De mysteriis* II.1, in in Taylor, 1821 [my italics]).

I highlight the final words in this quote since it is a theme to which we will return – the idea of daimonic intelligence as a force uniting 'soul to body' has a parallel in Ficino's

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magic. Iamblichus speaks of echelons of cosmic beings – archons, heroes, daemons, angels, archangels and gods – numbered according to sacred mathematics, able to communicate divine knowledge and accessible through prayers and offerings. Despite this polytheistic aspect, however, it is essentially a monotheistic vision – everything in the cosmos is an emanation of the One (Campion, 2009, p.88).

Ficino's magic: the beneficial powers of the heavenly bodies

"Using natural objects, natural magic captures the beneficial powers of the heavenly bodies to bring good health. This means of action must surely be conceded to those who use their talents lawfully, just as it is in medicine and farming...One practices agriculture, another mundiculture....Just as the farmer tempers his field to the weather to give sustenance to man, so this wise man, this priest, for the sake of man's safety tempers the lower objects of the cosmos to the higher...[Natural magic] puts natural materials in a correct relationship with natural causes".

(Ficino, *Three Books on Life* III, in Copenhaver, 1990, p.281)

Here Ficino speaks in terms of medicine and agriculture. Natural magic, he implies, is like good husbandry – a farmer wouldn't sow his crop in the snow or in poor soil; by the same token, we cannot expect good health if we do not pay attention to the 'natural causes' emanating from the 'higher objects of the cosmos'. Thus, it is legitimate for the magician to harness this power, as the farmer harnesses the power of the sun or the rain, each at the appropriate time. As Copenhaver states, for Ficino his magic was 'natural' because of these innate connections between "terrestrial, celestial and higher entities" – no commerce with demons need be involved. (Copenhaver 1990, p.271). If we are to "draw down favour from the heavens", we must align our lives to the celestial picture:

'With this in mind, agriculture prepares the field and the seed for celestial gifts and by grafting prolongs the life of the shoot and refashions it into another and better species. The doctor, the natural philosopher, and the surgeon achieve similar effects in our bodies to strengthen our own nature and to obtain more productively the nature of the universe. The philosopher who knows about natural objects and stars, whom we rightly call a Magus, does the very same things: he seasonably introduces the celestial into the earthly by particular lures just as the farmer interested in grafting brings the fresh graft onto the old stock'.

(Ficino, *Three Books on Life* III.26, in Voss (2006) p.174)

But we see here a movement away from the Church's definition of natural magic. In Ficino's vision, the magus seeks to understand the hidden correspondences between heaven and earth, which requires working with the occult properties of the planets:

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"Nor do I affirm here a single word about profane magic which depends upon the worship of daemons, but I am speaking of natural magic, which, by natural things, seeks to obtain the services of the celestials for the prosperous health of our bodies".

(Ficino, *Apologia*, in Kaske & Clark, 1989, p.397)

Campion echoes this when he says that the rediscovery of Platonic, Neoplatonic and Hermetic texts gave rise to nothing less than a "reordering of the soul's relationship to the cosmos...Ficino put Platonism and Christianity together in a fully-fledged astrology of the soul" founded on the perceived connection between the soul and the stars, with mankind at the centre of the cosmic order (Campion, 2009, p.85-87). With this in mind, we can explore any theurgic elements in Ficino, at the same time reflecting on his own justifications for a 'natural' magic.

The philosophical foundation of Ficino's work

Ficino wrote *Dvcc* as part of his commentaries on Plotinus, having additionally translated Plato and several Neoplatonic works (Synesius, Proclus and Iamblichus, along with the Orphic Hymns). He had also translated the *Corpus Hermeticum*, deemed to be of ancient and divine origin, in which it is recounted that Nous, the Divine Mind, teaches his pupil Hermes the secrets of the cosmos, including the divine spark within man, the immortality of the soul and its ascent through the planetary spheres after death (Goodrick-Clarke, N. in Voss, 2006, p.ix). The *Hermeticum* is hardly mentioned in *Dvcc*, but Copenhaver reminds us that it was still likely to have been very influential – it chimed with the Christian doctrine of man's fall from grace but the possibility of return to God (Copenhaver, 1990, p.268). The Neoplatonists offered a similar cosmology, rooted in the platonic ideals of self-knowledge and personal enlightenment.

For Ficino, the Church's endless debate over doctrinal minutiae had led to a lifeless Christianity (Tarnas, 1991, p.212); Plato's divinely-inspired vision, he felt, might re-invigorate the faith. (Voss, *Renaissance Rebirth of Plato*, p.2-4). The intertwining of religion and philosophy was a particular goal – the creation of "a Platonic Theology, a 'divine medicine' sent by God to renew Christendom" (Voss, *Renaissance Rebirth of Plato*, p.6).

Dvcc is thus inspired by the metaphysics of Plotinus (Campion, 2009, pp.89-90) and we know that Iamblichus' *De Mysteriis* also had a profound influence on Ficino (Voss, *Iamblichus & Theurgy*). We read in Chapter I that:

"The world-soul possesses by divine power precisely as many seminal reasons of things as there are Ideas in the Divine Mind. By these seminal reasons she

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fashions the same number of species in matter. That is why every single species corresponds through its own seminal reason to its own Idea and oftentimes through this reason it can easily receive something from the Idea since indeed it was made through the reason from the Idea".

(Ficino, Three Books on Life, in Voss (2006), p.111).

The world-soul mediates between God and the world, attracted to both and "(turning) to each by desire, at the same time as she is wholly and simultaneously everywhere". In matter, she sows the 'seminal reasons', derived from the Ideas in the Divine Mind, thereby producing all worldly forms or species. As Ficino goes on to say, the correspondences of forms to the reasons in the world-soul are 'divine lures' or 'magical baits'. Only the gifts which are particular to a species can be drawn by it from the world-soul – thus, by recognising these correspondences, tracing each back to its own particular star and daemon, and working through the rays of that star and daemon, one can draw down gifts from the world-soul. For Ficino, the cosmos is a "an animal more unified than any other animal" (*Dvcc* Chapter II) – both the material world and the human soul are linked to the world-soul, the material to the celestial, and thence to God. As Campion puts it, Ficino's way of working drew on the "operational potential of the Great Chain of Being" in which all things in the cosmos are linked by sympathy (Campion, 2009, p.91), with the planets too as emanations of the Divine Mind.

One of the characteristics of Iamblichan theurgy is that it requires active participation, not just in ritual action but in total commitment to a way of life which will facilitate spiritual ascent – through meditation, fasting, prayer and morality. This is echoed in Ficino's own magic, where the goal of divine connection "could never be achieved without immense personal effort" (Campion, 2009, p.93).

"Whoever therefore wants to have the heavens propitious, let him undertake above all this work, this way of life; let him pursue it zealously, for the heavens favour his undertakings".

(Ficino, Three Books on Life III.23 in Voss, 2006, p.163)

Iamblichus followed Plato in believing that desire – *eros* – was the force which connected the human and cosmic souls – an active attraction drawing one to the other (Voss, *Iamblichus & Theurgy*, p.2). Similarly for Ficino, desire was a fundamental force in magic, allowing the world-soul to connect the divine and the transient (as described in Chapter I of *Dvcc*), and underlying the principle of sympathetic resonance:

"The Arabs say that when we fashion images rightly, our spirit, if it has been intent upon the work and upon the stars through imagination and emotion (*affectus*), is joined together with the very spirit of the world and with the rays of

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the stars through which the world-spirit acts. And when our spirit has been so joined, it too becomes a cause why...a particular spirit of any given star, that is, a certain vital power, is poured into the image – especially a power that is consistent with the operator".

(Ficino, *Three Books on Life* III.20, in Voss, 2006. p.150)

In Ficino's astral or celestial magic therefore, in order to receive the gifts of the heavens we need to actively seek them, via the agencies of imagination and emotion.

Ficino's astrology

Astrology and music are at the heart of Ficino's magic; in *Dvcc*, he outlines a vision which combines both, creating a unique form of magical practice (Voss, 1992, p.1). As Campion suggests, he directly advocates the performance of astrological rituals and the singing of Orphic songs – for Ficino, such participatory action was needed since "the goal of the philosopher should be to change the world not just to study it" (Campion, 2009) pp.88-89).

An understanding of planetary symbolism allows the practitioner to align their life in continual imitation of the heavens; out of this arises the health of body, mind and soul. For instance, only medicines made in accordance with the heavens have true efficacy – as wine is to water, so is celestially-imbued medicine to that made without astrological election (Ficino, *Three Books on Life* III.3 in Voss, 2006, p.109). For as we have seen, the stars also emanate from the divine mind; thus a medicine made or an action taken at the right moment, when a planet is most powerful in the heavens, will draw on the life-giving properties of that planet:

"...just as a given thing is fortunately born and coalesces and is preserved not elsewhere than here nor at any other time but just then, so also such or such a material action, motion, or event does not obtain full or perfect efficacy except when the celestial harmony conduces to it from all sides".

(Ficino, *Three Books on Life* III.12, in Voss, 1992, p.1).

Ficino offers a detailed description of each planet and its correspondences, encompassing everything from the material to the psychological, and framing them as celestial principles with whom one can communicate through appropriate gestures and rituals – and this 'internal' presence of the planets, and the inextricable links between celestial, psychological and physical realms, is what marks his work as a departure from the perspective of Aquinas (Campion, 2009, p.90).

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This emphasis on a 'natural' system of sympathetic resonance, is one of the ways Ficino addresses the problem of being seen as advocating the attraction of celestial spirits; and in this, he offers a potential answer to the rigid either/or of orthodox Christianity (that if one is appealing to anything other than a Christian saint or angel, one must of necessity be invoking pagan gods or evil spirits). He is at pains to point out that the planets are not causal agents – they do not make things happen, but are signs to facilitate spiritual ascent (Voss, 2006, p.24). In this, he reflects the orthodox Augustinian and Thomist view, and indeed that of Plotinus, that the stars are signs, not causes. In Ficino's case though, it is the theory of correspondence that leads to this conclusion – the planets cannot be final causes because they reflect the Ideas of the Divine Mind. Ficino thus effects a reintegration of the pagan gods, as celestial and psychological principles:

"But it is not only those who flee to Jupiter who escape the noxious influence of Saturn and undergo his propitious influence; it is also those who give themselves over with their whole mind to the divine contemplation signified by Saturn himself.

(Ficino, Three Books on Life III.22, in Voss, 2006. p.61)

As Voss points out, "it is a vision of the cosmos which is mirrored deep in the soul and which can only be accessed by the key of 'seeing' with an inner eye" (Voss, *Renaissance Rebirth of Plato*, p.4). Ficino's emphasis is on the practitioner's capacity to use intuition to perceive a different order of reality, beginning with a realisation that the planets are as much within as without. For instance, in his later work, *De Sole*, he describes the dual nature of the influence of the Sun and stars – the "two lights" which are their obvious and hidden influences, the one perceived by the physical senses but the other a kind "ray" which affects us through the *spirit* that he believed mediates between body and soul. This hidden "ray" equates to the synchronous connection between earth and heaven which reveals itself through astrology (Voss, 1992, p.1).

One wonders if Ficino would have convinced Aquinas of the 'naturalness' of his astrological practice, despite the agreement of the two men that the stars have no will of their own. For Aquinas, any form of divination must be regarded as sinful since no planet can bring revelation – only God can grant this. As Voss points out, "no 'human' art or technique using natural phenomena could be acceptable" (Voss, 2006, p.36).

Ficino's music

"According to the followers of Plato, divine music is twofold. One kind, they say, exists entirely in the eternal mind of God. The second is in the motions and order of the heavens, by which the heavenly spheres and their orbits make a marvellous harmony. In both of these our soul took part before it was imprisoned in our bodies.... By the ears... the soul receives the echoes of that incomparable

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music, by which it is led back to the deep and silent memory of the harmony which it previously enjoyed. The whole soul then kindles with desire to fly back to its rightful home, so that it may enjoy that true music again....".

(Ficino: On divine frenzy, *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, Volume 1)

For Ficino, music offered the ultimate means of achieving the Platonic goal of unity – and central to his music are his translations of the Orphic Hymns, which Voss describes as "invocations to the gods and daemons of the cosmic and elemental realms" (Voss, 2006, p.7). Ficino revered Orpheus as one of the *prisca theologi*, pre-Christian exponents of the one true theology; thus the Hymns were seen as sacred poetry, concealing the deepest spiritual meanings. The words came, so it was believed, from this divinely-inspired poet; the music arose *extempore* from the skill of the musician working according to astrological correspondence and Pythagorean principles of sacred number. Like the active participation required of the theurgist, their full power manifested itself in performance, bringing the soul of the player or listener into contact with the divine through Plato's 'poetic frenzy':

"(Poetry) does what is also proper to divine harmony. It expresses with fire the most profound and, as a poet would say, prophetic meanings, in the numbers of voice and movement. Thus not only does it delight the ear, but brings to the mind the finest nourishment, most like the food of the gods; and so seems to come very close to God".

(Ficino: On divine frenzy, *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, Volume 1)

It is the Orphic Hymns which contain the most obvious tones of theurgic practice. Allen suggests that Ficino considered the goal of his Orphic music to be "hieratic rapture: if not theurgy or god-making, then certainly the transformation of oneself in the perfect instrument or medium for the divine presence" (Allen, 1995, p.76) – he also quotes Walker, who suggests their performance may have resembled something like "enraptured psalm-singing...or a religious rite" (Walker, in Allen, 1995, p.75). Certainly Chapter XXII offers the means by which one might enter such a state of rapture, through effort and divine intervention, as Ficino describes:

"...tones first chosen by the rule of the stars and then combined according to the congruity of those stars with each other make a sort of common form, and in it a celestial power arises. It is indeed very difficult to judge exactly what combinations of tones are suitable for what sorts of stars, what combinations of tones especially accord with what sorts of constellations and aspects. But we can attain this, partly through our own efforts, partly by some divine destiny".

(Ficino, *Three Books on Life* III.21 in Voss, 2006, p.154).

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"Our own efforts" are spelt out clearly in the three prerequisites for performance: the solar power of the individual (which for Ficino signified a clarity of spirit reflecting the deeper meaning of the Sun as a symbol of the divine essence), correct timing (in accordance with the movements of planets as reflections of the divine mind), and intention (the serious focus of the practitioner, whose passionate desire for gnosis fuels the work). Thus the musician himself must be a fit vessel, developing his "Phoebean" (solar) nature, for the music has the power to affect very deeply the spirit of both singer and listener – as Ficino says in Chapter XXI, these things together bring forth a song "conceived in the power of your spirit", with the ability even to cure diseases of the mind and body through their "wondrous power".

Of course, he is at pains to make clear that this musical practice is dependent on the *natural* influence of the stars, not on causality or the action of planetary deities:

"...be warned beforehand not to think we are speaking here of worshipping the stars, but rather of imitating them and thereby trying to capture them. And do not believe that we are dealing with gifts which the stars are going to give by their own election but rather by a natural influence".

(Ficino, Three Books on Life III.21, in Voss, 2006. p.154)

In resonance with the idea of magic as good husbandry, he likens this process to receiving the light and heat of the Sun – and then, of course, "it is the wise man alone who adapts himself to the occult and wonderful gifts of this influence".

However, we come back to the powerful link being made with the celestial realm. In Chapter XVII, Ficino describes how images made to reflect celestial figures are a simple mirror – "when one lute sounds, does not another echo it?" – and he returns to this analogy when describing the effects of song in Chapter XXI:

"Accordingly, you will win over one of these four [Jupiter, Venus, Sun and Mercury] to yourself by using their songs, especially if you supply musical notes that fit their songs. When at the right astrological hour you declaim aloud by singing and playing in the manners we have specified for the four gods, *they seem to be just about to answer you like an echo* or like a string in a lute trembling to the vibration of another which has been similar tuned".

(Ficino, Three Books on Life III.21, in Voss, 2006, p.157 [my italics])

He quickly reminds us that "this will happen to you from heaven as naturally, say Plotinus and Iamblichus, as a tremor re-echoes from a lute or an echo arises from an opposite wall" – but it would not be too hard to imagine that the planetary deities have

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indeed answered in response to the music. Later in Chapter XXII he tells us that "the Chaldaeans, Egyptians, and Platonists....believe the celestials are not empty bodies, but bodies divinely animated and ruled moreover by divine Intelligences" – we see again the idea of conscious connection to living celestial powers, achieved through the imagination as it engages in the ritual performance of music according to divine principles.

Daemons and spirits

"Some regard the spirits of the stars as wonderful celestial forces, while others regard them as daemons attendant upon this or that star"

(Ficino, *Three Books on Life* III.20, in Voss, 2006, p.150)

Ficino is also on difficult territory with his references to daemons, often only just holding the line, it would seem, between the notion of 'natural' planetary resonance in a chain of cosmic sympathy and the direct invocation of celestial beings (Voss, *Ficino's Natural Magic*, p.2). For instance, the Orphic Hymns are accompanied by fumigatory instructions, with each deity allotted a specific incense. As Allen points out, fumigation was intrinsic to pagan religious rituals, lending themselves to the manifestation of celestial entities in the smoky air – and he postulates that Ficino may have used the fumigations as a means of allowing daemons to take form in the same way. (Allen, 1995, p.79-80). In view of Ficino's belief in daemons (Allen, 1995, pp.82-3), the idea is intriguing.

For Allen, it explains Ficino's reluctance to publish his translation of the Orphic Hymns – although his aim would have been to allow the worshipper to contemplate the highest intellectual form of each deity, there would always have been the possibility of attracting 'lower' daemons in the process:

"No wonder that Ficino's own Orphic recitals were such rapturous but also, I believe, carefully planned and premeditated affairs; for they were the rituals of a Platonic priest who had inwardly purged his spirit, and was not to be caught by a daemonic presence unawares."

(Allen, 1995, p.82).

Image-making provides equally dangerous ground. In Chapter XIII of *Dvcc*, Ficino recounts the ancient practice of making astronomical images and calling daemons into them, in the somewhat deflective 'commentary' style of writing which he often adopts. He is careful not to state a personal belief in such figures, instead reporting what the ancient philosophers thought. But as Copenhaver suggests, tagging the names of the later Neoplatonists on to the end of a list which began with the respected 'ancient' sages such as Hermes lent them doxographic legitimacy – if it was good enough for Hermes

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and Zoroaster, then why would one question the actions of their spiritual successors?
(Copenhaver, 1990, p.270-1).

From the Thomist perspective, an undecorated talisman or amulet could be considered non-demonic, its power coming entirely from its 'substantial form' or innate properties (Copenhaver, 1990, p.274). This gave Ficino a legitimate framework, because he could locate the origin (or correspondence) of such properties in the heavens, extending the definition of 'natural' beyond the material world:

"Who does not know that the occult virtues of things, which are called 'specific' by physicians, come not from an elementary nature but from a celestial one? Therefore,... [rays] from the heavens can impress on images wondrous and occult powers...Will you then deny that celestial bodies can perform wonders with the rays of their eyes that gaze on us?"

(Ficino, Three Books on Life III, in Copenhaver, p.275-6).

We hear in Chapter XVIII of *Dvcc* how the ancient astrologers created images of the planets and constellations, and the power which they attributed to these; in Chapter XX also, he talks further about the power of images. But he is quick to explain this in more orthodox terms. In Chapter XVIII for instance, he concurs with Aquinas ("our leader in theology") that it is not so much what is imprinted on an object which carries the power as the stuff of which it is made, since it 'naturally' resonates to the planet with which it has affinity. Aquinas "seems to give little credit even to the images themselves, however they are made" and Ficino responds "and insofar as he requires it, I give them no credit at all". Better, he says, to trust oneself to medicines than to images (Chapter XVIII). It is an argument to which he returns in the *Apology*, where he delineates between demonic and natural magic – the former is "practised by those who unite themselves to daemons" but the latter is "practised by those who seasonably subject natural materials to natural causes to be formed in a wondrous way", further dividing between those who use their magic for ostentation and show, and those who, like himself, as priest and doctor, join "astrology with medicine" – medicines which are "strengthened by the heavens".

However, Ficino's notion of 'spirit' as an intermediary force between the body of the world and its soul (in Chapter IV) offers an understanding of daemons as something other than questionable entities, whilst honouring Iamblichus' belief in the importance of the daemonic realm in mediating between earth and heaven (Voss, *Iamblichus & Theurgy*, p.5). As Ficino describes it, the stars and daemons exist within the world-spirit and by means of it, as a kind of cosmic life-force – by this token, the stars and their

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daemons are reaffirmed as emanations of the divine. We can draw celestial gifts to us through the medium of the world-spirit, particularly if we make ourselves fit for this by making our own spirit "more akin to it by art, that is, if it becomes in the highest degree celestial" (Ficino, Three Books on Life III.4, in Voss, 2006, p.122). And since the spirit partakes of the nature of Jupiter, the Sun, Venus and Mercury, it can express itself strongly through harmonious music, which is also of the nature of these planets – thus music is reinforced as a powerful medium for divine connection.

Towards a platonic theology

"In all things which I discuss here or elsewhere, I intend to assert only so much as is approved by the Church".

(Ficino, Three Books on Life III.3, in Voss, 2006, p.110)

The task Ficino set himself was to bring Plato's spiritual vision into orthodox Christianity. The work led him into challenging territory, where the line between Christian priest and ritual magician seems not always distinct. But as Allen points out, whatever fascination daemons may have held, Ficino's goal was not the 'lower' components of theurgic ritual, but a revival of Plato's 'theology'. The two strands of pagan and Christian practice were, for Ficino, united in the *prisca theologia* – the one true religion which he believed had "been devised in Persia with Zoroaster and in Greece by Hermes, revived and developed by Orpheus and Pythagoras and perfected by Plato" (Campion, 2009, p.88). Thus he aimed to unite religion and philosophy:

How long can we bear the miserable lot of this iron age? O ye citizens of your celestial fatherland, O ye inhabitants of the earth, let us finally, I beg of you, liberate philosophy, the divine gift of God, from impiety, if we can – and we can if we will, and let us redeem holy religion, as far as strength permits, from abominable ignorance. I therefore exhort and implore all philosophers to reach out and embrace religion firmly, and all priests to devote themselves diligently to the study of legitimate philosophy.

(Ficino, Prologue to *De Christiana religione*, in Voss, 2006, p.5)

His task was made easier by the fact that the God of the hermetic and platonic writings was:

"...One, good and supreme, exactly like the Christian one. In fact, as Ronald Hutton has convincingly demonstrated, all the pagan philosophers whose works Ficino introduced to the Christian West were good monotheists".

(Campion, 2009, p.88)

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But his work is also suffused with the Neoplatonic idea that there is continual potential for divine connection. It could be argued that the practices he advocates in *Dvcc* contain distinct elements of Neoplatonically-inspired theurgic magic; his natural magic certainly seems to be more accurately a celestial magic of body, mind and soul, designed to bring about spiritual awakening in the practitioner. It perhaps offers what Keith Thomas describes as magic as 'holy quest', the personal search for gnosis (Thomas, 1971, p.320). In this, we might contemplate another distinction between two different types of magic – one in which the magician stands outside the cosmos and manipulates it to his own purpose, and another where the identity of the magician merges with the cosmos in a "perhaps ecstatic union" (Campion, 2009, p. 94).

As Allen describes it:

"[Ficino's] audacious attempt to reconcile Platonism with Christianity in the event went far beyond Platonism: it became a life-long ecumenical quest to introduce into orthodoxy an encyclopaedic range of unorthodox spiritual, magical and occult beliefs keyed to the theme of the soul's ascent from the cave of illusion, and keyed too to what was always a fundamentally Plotinian search for the 'flower' in the mind, the oneness that is for him the object of intellectual and of spiritual ascent."

(Allen, 2008, p.43)

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