

## ASTROLOGY'S HIDDEN LIGHT Reflections on Marsilio Ficino's *De Sole*

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Socrates, inspired since boyhood by a Phoebean daemon, was accustomed to venerate the Sun above all...but I would dare to affirm that Socrates in his state of ecstasy admired not just the visible Sun, but its other, hidden aspect.  
- Marsilio Ficino *De Sole*, XIII

My theme is Astrology, and the light cast upon it by our reading of Marsilio Ficino. As *De Sole* makes abundantly clear, astrology is at the heart of his project, and to understand that project we must follow his astrology. I would also like the reader who sees in Ficino the renaissance precursor of archetypal psychology to take pause at the dilemma presented to us by his subtle advocacy of astrology's symbols and its practice. How does our contemporary rendering of the imagination stand with respect to the modern practice of astrology? Outside a small circle astrology as a moving power of the soul hardly features for cultured and sophisticated people, or if it does, only as a sideshow. The light of astrology as a discipline of the imaginal is veiled. Yet Ficino may move our understanding. The moment we step beyond arm's-length aesthetics or disengaged scholarship, the moment we believe his imagination *matters* to us, then this question of astrology will matter to us, as well. But first we must see how astrology worked for Ficino, and here we are faced with what appear at first sight to be puzzling contradictions.

The dilemma of astrology for the Florentine neo-Platonists is most starkly presented by the juxtaposition of two texts in the same year, 1494. It is in this year that Ficino wrote his astrological and philo-

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sophical hymn to the Sun, *De Sole*, and it is at the beginning of the same year that his most illustrious pupil, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, completed his influential "Disputations against Divinatory Astrology" (*Disputationes adversus Astrologiam divinatricem*). The contrast in style could hardly be greater. Pico's polemic is fierce, dry and rationalistic. Its major explicit task is to deconstruct traditional astrology's claim to found truthful horoscope judgments in a science of celestial causes. The core argument concerns the confusion of the astrologers who join universal causes, such as light, heat and motion from the heavens, with particular and differentiated effects upon the individual. Specific differences between individuals are the result of immediate causes, not celestial ones - men make a living through fishing or sailing because they are born on the coast, not because the heavens have put a watery mark on their horoscopes. This line of argument was hardly a new one, but it was effectively marshalled by Pico, and supported by a series of supplementary arguments. Significant amongst these is his discussion of the psychology of belief in astrology, and his description of signs of the zodiac as imaginative projections. Pico condemns the astrologers for their absurd fantasies, "profaning the heavens, the portico of God's temple, with a menagerie of inane animals". As far as Pico is concerned, when it comes to astrology there is no place, except as delusion, for imagination and the poetry of symbol.

It has been suggested that Pico, preparing himself for Holy Orders, was influenced in his polemic by Savonarola. It was this zealous monk who announced Pico's critique from the pulpit in 1494, championing him as the 'Prince against the Astrologers'. Pico's earlier development as a magician and cabbalist certainly makes his attitude to astrology an intriguing issue in its own right. His attack also has considerable historical importance and set the pattern for later assaults on astrology for two hundred years. Even the manner of his demise in the autumn of 1494 clings round our theme. The infamous legend arose that his death, before the completion of the 32nd year of his life, had been predicted for him by three astrologers of Florence, thus answering his charge against their art

by demonstrating its most terrible power. However, I will not here take up either Pico's views or this chilling fable, except to posit his *Disputationes* as a curious shadow to *De Sole*. What Sun is it that casts this dark shadow?

There is more to this than meets the eye: light and shade are fully in play in Ficino's attitude to astrology, and, compared with this, Pico's work is a naïve production. Behind the younger man's polemic stands Ficino's own "Disputation against the Judgment of Astrologers" (*Disputatio contra Iudicium Astrologorum*). This was written around 1477, but not published. I believe it represents Ficino's period of struggle with astrology, stimulated by the censures of Plotinus against astrological determinism. The text follows Plotinus closely on the issue of the false logic which binds human free will to the stars by directly connecting universal celestial causes with particular effects. This is the very same method of deconstruction later used by Pico. Indeed just as Ficino commended Pico's text, so Pico in his "Disputations" acknowledges the lineage of his own anti-astrology from Ficino, "following in the traces of Plotinus."

There is however one outstanding difference in the intention of these critiques. Ficino is an astrologer, Pico is not. By saying that Ficino is an astrologer, I mean no more and no less than that throughout his life he experienced symbolic reality in the forms presented by the craft methods of astrology. In his scourging of the "petty ogres" who judge fates from horoscopes Pico remains wholly uncompromising, while Ficino is qualified. Pico locates his stance in the simple primary argument against the false logic of stellar causation and from that point on condemns all other possibilities as a species of illusion. Ficino is explicit in exposing the same falsehood but offers by implicit contrast a hidden light in astrology.

Unless we are alert to this subtlety it is easy to lose sight of Ficino's intention, especially as he was characteristically cautious about expressing his opinion on matters potentially heretical. His letter to Bernardo Bembo describing his "Disputation" is typical. It is headed "To the very degree that astronomers measure, astrologers misrepresent". This unpromising message for astrology is explained as follows:

...I am composing a book on the providence of God and the freedom of human will, in which I refute, to the best of my ability, those pronouncements of the astrologers which remove providence and freedom. Indeed, as carefully as true astronomers measure the heavens, so do vain astrologers misrepresent human affairs. - *Letters Liber IV* (1477)

For the reader who wants to damn astrology, the broad sweep of these words can be turned to this end. But look for the coded message. *Some* pronouncements of the astrologers do not remove providence and free will, and these Marsilio will not refute; *some* astrologers, who are not vain, may truly represent human affairs, and those astrologers he will not refute. But where are these model men? The legend of the three who predicted against Pico is probably a fair representation of the attitude of most astrologers of the day. Despite this Ficino writes as if the major traditional authors from Ptolemy to the Arabs are above censure. Unlike Pico he honours the astrological tradition, and regularly practised the symbolic craft that it teaches. Further, astrology is fundamental to his music theory, and informs his practice of medicine. All the while we are invited to imagine what this great discipline could and should be, if understood in its true light. Consistent with his desire for wholeness and integration, Ficino re-visioned astrology in the light of his great project, the transmission of the ancient wisdom, the *Prisca Theologia*. This assimilation of astrology to religion and magic is found throughout his mature writings, and has been convincingly established through the recent studies of Angela Voss. It is one of the pillars of the major work written after the struggle with astrology indicated by his "Disputation", the *Three Books on Life* (*Liber de Vita*).

Ficino's final position is presented in *De Sole*, and it is to the question of the exalted status of astrology in this work that I will now turn. Three main conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, the thematic metaphor in *De Sole* is not simply astronomical, nor even celestial: it is astrological. Secondly, as I have already indicated, the mainstream European astrological tradition is located within the sacred transmission of the *Prisca Theologia*. And thirdly, Ficino wishes us to be in no doubt that judicial astrology, the judgment of horoscopes,

is to be employed by the magus in order to discern the inner light of things.

Ficino opens his text by referring to his poetic style, which is allegorical and mystical, but which will nevertheless carry a serious and 'dogmatic' content. He also establishes his method, which will be to work from the manifest to the occult, from the Sun and its light as we perceive them with our senses, to the Sun and its light in the higher realm of the intellect. It is typical of Ficino's eclecticism that right here, in establishing the way in which he will proceed, he creates the chaotic twining of different pantheons in one and the same metaphor: *...Mercurius cum Saturno vel Iove tractat gravia, tamen cum Apollo ludit* – "Mercury discusses weighty matters with Saturn or Jupiter, yet he plays with Apollo." Like an astrologer Ficino combines the planetary Saturn, Mercury and Jupiter using their Latin names, but then he joins them with the Greek Apollo, who in the myths knows all about the games of Hermes. Roman Saturn has no place with the Olympians, and Hermes never had anything to discuss with him. The Gods talk like this only when they are planets.

Chapters III through to VIII, well over a third of the essay, are explicitly astrological and could with little amendment be taken as a primer in mediaeval astrology. The author scarcely bothers to distance himself as if he were commenting on "what the astrologers say"; Ficino is the astrologer, this is what *he* says.

He would have had no special problem creating an extended celestial metaphor around the Sun, allied to the mythology of the planetary Gods but at the same time free of the trappings of classical astrology, had he so wished. Beautiful though it is, and effectively described by Ficino, he nevertheless did not need to evoke the specialised symbolism of the planetary rulerships (chapter VII), and the related doctrine of aspects (chapter VIII), unless he wished to allegorise the theme of the Sun's dominion on the basis of astrological symbology. There is a good knowledge of astronomy involved in Ficino's development of his metaphor of the Sun, but in the main it is that type of astronomy that is required to serve astrology. Indeed, once he moves beyond the simple descriptions of light and

heat from the Sun (chapter II), the elegant nuances of the interpretation can only be appreciated by the reader who is also an astrologer.

The respect Ficino gives to astrological symbolism is reflected in his attitude to its tradition. He is at ease with the Arabic astrological doctrines that had become the accepted foundation of late mediaeval practice. Apart from the ubiquitous Ptolemy, Albumasar and Albohazen Haly appear on the roll of honour, and this latter is paired with the Biblical Abraham, believed to be the first astrologer. Ficino sees astrology's revelation going back to remote antiquity, but brought to us by the Arabs.

The same respect is extended without reserve to astrology's practical application, and Ficino goes out of his way to emphasise the specific characteristics of several conventional horoscope techniques. These range from judgments on "the yearly fortune of the whole world" derived from horoscopes of the equinoxes and solstices, to predictions on the destiny of the native derived from the birth chart. Whatever Ficino may elsewhere declare against the 'petty ogres', he nevertheless pointedly allows his philosophical treatise on the Sun to authorise and validate judicial astrology, which is the signification of particular natural circumstances and individual human destinies from the movements of the stars. Let us be in no doubt that the Sun of *de Sole* is through-and-through *astrological* as much as it is natural or philosophical. The Sun's dominion in the horoscope is the metaphor for the one great Light of creation.

Establishing this primary status granted by Ficino to the practice of astrology clears the ground for my main theme, which is how his vision illuminates astrology's way of working. One of the most important ideas conveyed in *De Sole* is the distinction of the Sun's two lights, the manifest and the occult. This expresses the Platonic distinction between the reality of the ideal world open to intellect and the relativity and illusion of the transient world conveyed by the senses. Ficino refers to Plato on the "dual constitution of the Sun...firstly placing it amongst the planets as their companion, secondly representing it as divine, with a light miraculous beyond all things". Further, the light of the Sun and of the stars shines both for our senses and in our imagination, for God has given a double light

to our minds (chapter XI). The first light of the mind is natural, but the second is granted through grace and "renders minds blessed with a miraculous bountifulness". The intuitive faculty which can perceive the hidden and essential light of all things is elsewhere characterised by Ficino as *notio*, in contrast to the rational faculty of *notitia*, which comprises our mental conceptions built up from sensory experience. This is the ground for Ficino's interpretation of the story of Socrates and his veneration of the Sun. The wisest of men was inspired not simply by the appearance of the visible luminary, but, says Ficino, by the glorious experience of its super-abundant occult light, "its other, hidden aspect".

Before we go further on the path from that which is manifest to that which is occult, it is well to bear in mind the very different context of astrology in Ficino's time, when compared with our modern imagination of the heavens. His celestial metaphors will not carry the same resonance for us as they did for him, because we live under the spell of a different cosmology. Ficino belongs to the last years of an age which inhabited an ordered Cosmos of the heavenly spheres. This is Ptolemy's universe, the universe of Aristotle, Aquinas and Dante, and it still carried the force of the mediaeval conception where heavenly influences pour down on us from God's abode, the heavens – and God's place is quite literally "up" there. Further, the whole concept of causation, ultimately traceable to Aristotle, was bound up with the motion of the cosmos. This placed astrology, as a qualitative interpretation of celestial motions, in a unique category. The physical heavens open to the senses were at one and the same time a symbol of divine order and unity. The separation of symbolism and science, so obvious for us, was less possible for the mediaeval or renaissance imagination.

This identity of physical and symbolic worlds was the strength of classical astrology but carried a penalty to the extent that astrologers identified their art as a science of causes rather than as a play of symbols. Rooted in an Aristotelian conception brought to perfection by Ptolemy, the tradition of astrology tended to justify its symbolic and prophetic interpretations in a natural-science model. It is this fate-laden rationalisation that earns the censure of Pico,

and of Ficino in his own "Disputation". In explaining *notio* by means of *notitia*, astrology falls into the grievous habit of recognising only the lower and sensible Sun, blind to the Sun of imagination.

Against the grain of the conventional tradition, Ficino follows the Plotinian interpretation of astrology as divination, evoking the heavenly Sign against the concept of the determining celestial Cause. It is in this Neoplatonic stream that we come face to face with the obscure possibility of the *daimones*, a motive force in the operation of astrology.

In chapter XII of *De Sole* Ficino brings out the imagery of the hierarchies of angels, in effect Christianised daemones, which surround the Sun and carry its potency into every part of creation. However, it is in the magical and astrological third of the *Liber De Vita* that he gives his most explicit indication of the ways in which the signs of astrology and the intelligence of the daemon may combine to assist us:

...follow the auspices of the lord of your geniture, especially if that Platonic doctrine is true...that every person has at birth one certain daemon, the guardian of his life, assigned by his own personal star, which helps him to that very task to which the celestials summoned him when he was born. *De Vita* III ch 23

The *daimones* are the agents of an intermediate divine realm between Gods and men, and the soul encounters them as its perception rises in the *notio*. They are therefore seen in the hidden light. They help mankind with their spiritual intelligence and their power to bring things to pass, and they communicate in signs and showings, including the showings of astrology. The defining story of antiquity is of Socrates, whose daemon or genius prompted him with omens on various occasions throughout his life. Ficino tells us this was a solar (Phoeborean) daemon, who therefore inspired Socrates to venerate the Sun.

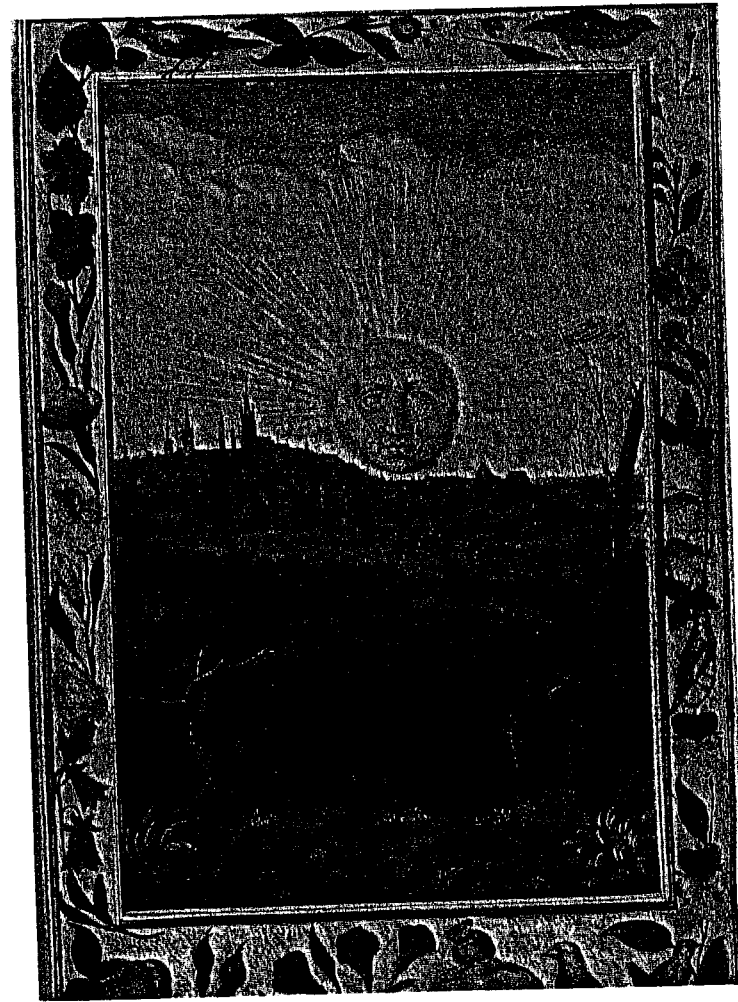
If we take Ficino's astrological metaphor in *De Sole* seriously, then we understand that Sun, Moon and planets are visible in two lights, and not one; the world of sense, where they may be measured by

the astronomer, and the world of imagination, where they reveal their hidden light to the astrologer. The knowledge of this light brings us into accord with the unity and harmony of things. "...[Apollo] 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". The practice of astrology seeks the occult light in the world and in the course of human life. Craft-work with horoscopes is practical mysticism and high ritual in one; it is no less than an equivalent or metaphor for "that same ritual observance that all celestial things give to the Sun". By participating in astrology's symbolism we open the powers of the soul.

Ficino has things to say that step across the centuries. His vision of astrology, essential to his whole life's work, certainly has the potential to live and influence a modern generation. I believe we underestimate the role of divination in the imaginal, and this has gone along with the decline of astrology. What I hope can be restored is the possibility of astrology as a primary divinatory medium of Western culture and a true craft of the imaginal.

## THE BOOK OF THE SUN (DE SOLE)

MARSILIO FICINO



Translated by Geoffrey Cornelius, Darby Costello,  
Graeme Tobyn, Angela Voss & Vernon Wells

