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How to do magic, and why: philosophical prescriptions

Philosophy, physiology, and medicine

After Marsilio Ficino published it in 1489, his *Three Books on Life* enjoyed great success. Almost thirty editions by 1647 made it the most influential account of magic of its day, perhaps of all Western history.¹ *De vita libri tres* is therefore a monument of Renaissance culture. Like other works of that period, it revives ancient wisdom – the magical learning of ancient Greece and, so Ficino thought, older revelations from Persia and Egypt. But *De vita* applies this primordial knowledge to problems of Ficino's day, showing his contemporaries how to use ordinary natural objects to better themselves in magical ways. Ficino's philosophical magic aims to give people power. But how? To answer that question, we need to know more about the great Platonist and his book.²

"Plotinus the philosopher, our contemporary, seemed ashamed of being in the body."³ This stunning proclamation of ascetic immaterialism opens the *Life* of Plotinus, the first Neoplatonic philosopher, written by Porphyry, his student and successor.³ Ficino, the last major voice of this tradition, learned to think about magic from the Neoplatonists, sharing the Platonic goal of rising beyond the merely physical and temporal to the bodiless and eternal. But Ficino also practiced medicine and theorized about it, using all his five senses to diagnose the ills of diseased and aging bodies. The ailments that Ficino treated were natural particulars, concrete material phenomena, and so were the cures that he used to heal them. Natural objects – people, animals, plants, and stones – were also the primary topic of Aristotelian natural philosophy. Like the ancient Neoplatonists, Ficino assimilated Aristotelian physics and metaphysics and adapted them to Platonic purposes. As for problems of healing, applying scholastic philosophy to medicine had been normal for three centuries, especially in Italy's two great medical schools of Bologna and Padua. Ficino learned his academic medicine at home, however, in the small University of Florence.⁴ After repeated closures of its tiny medical faculty,

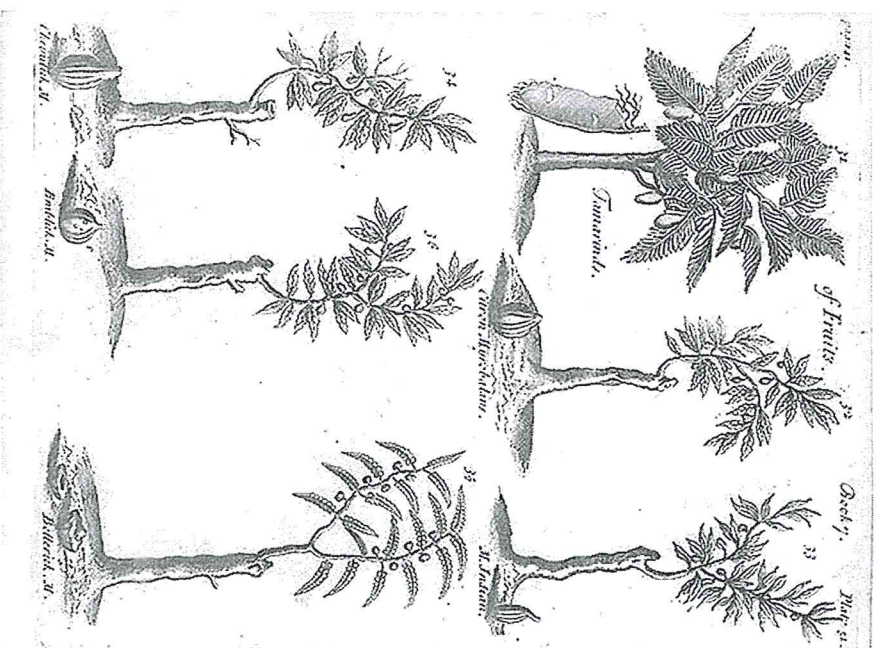


Figure 8.1: Myrobalans

the Medici transferred most medical instruction to Pisa in 1473. Around that time, the young Ficino was one of perhaps three dozen doctors accessible to a city of about 40,000 souls. The scarcity of learned healers gave him more clinical business than his sketchy education justified. And yet much medical knowledge came from outside the classroom, through apprenticeship, professional consultation, and personal experience. Ficino learned in this way from his father, a physician employed by the Medici.⁵

The younger Ficino, practicing a bodily art, became fond of the natural objects called *myrobalans* (Fig. 8.1), one of hundreds of material things recommended as cures in the *Three Books on Life*. Myrobalans are uncommon but natural, unlike some of the fictions that had long sustained belief in magic for educated Europeans: the basilisk, the ship-stopper, and other magical items whose only reality was textual. The ancient Greek word,

μυροβάλανος, probably did not name the drug that Ficino mentions in three varieties – emblic, chebulic, or Indic and belliric – that correspond to the dried fruits of trees native to south and southeast Asia, fruits still used in traditional medicine: *Embilica officinalis*, *Terminalia chebula*, and *Terminalia bellerica*.⁶

Myrobalans appear often in the *Three Books on Life*, the third of which (*De vita* III), called *How to Get Life from the Heavens*, presents a *philosophical theory* of magic along with *practical advice*. Because Ficino thought of magic as a kind of medicine, it is no surprise that myrobalans are ingredients for magical drugs in *De vita* III. They are fruits full of the quintessence, the unearthly substance located beyond the sphere of the Moon; the power of Jupiter and Mercury makes them a tonic for sensation, memory, and intelligence.⁷

Myrobalans are even more prominent in the first two of the *Three Books on Life*. *On Treating People Constantly Involved in Study* (*De vita* I) deals with a large topic – regimen, diet, and drugs – for a small audience: professional scholars and their doctors, people like Ficino himself. The readership for the second book, *On Long Life* (*De vita* II), was even smaller – scholars of a certain age, also like Ficino. When he published *De vita* in 1489, Ficino was almost fifty-six, with ten years still to live, despite his bad horoscope with Saturn in an unfortunate position.⁸ Experience had taught him that astrigent myrobalans are good for the stomach, the blood, and a moist constitution. They protect against cold, putrefaction, sluggishness, and forgetfulness, while promoting regularity, longevity, and intelligence. And because they are effective against melancholy, Ficino includes them in several prescriptions meant to cure that dread disease of the learned.⁹

To keep their minds healthy, scholars need healthy bodies. They depend not only on intelligence but also on brains, hearts, livers, and stomachs and, above all, on spirit, which in Ficino's usage is a tenuous but still physical substance, “a pure vapor of blood, light, warm and clear,” which is the product of a physical process. The stomach and liver receive food from which they make blood by a physical power (*virtus naturalis*). The lightest blood then passes to the heart and its vital power (*virtus vitalis*) to become spirit. Spirit then travels from the heart to the brain, which has the psychic power (*virtus animalis*) of moving and sensing. Because the matter of spirit is pure and fine, it can link these higher bodily functions with the lower faculties of the immaterial soul.¹⁰

Although Ficino thought he was original in writing about the health of scholars, the framework for all of his *Three Books on Life* is traditional medicine based on conventional humoral physiology.¹¹ Unconventionally, however, magic is also a major department of Ficino's medicine. Yet his

medicine is thoroughly natural, and so is the magic in it. His magical medicine is *physica*, physics, the art and science of a *physicus* whose practice is explained by *natural* philosophy.¹² Medicine of this kind acts on matter. Its operations are physical, not ritual or religious. Although the human patient is a body/soul composite, medical treatment by magic starts with the body, even though the body affects the soul and mind by way of spirit.

At the level of *physics*, the concept governing this medicine is physical temperament, the mixture – balanced or unbalanced – of material elements (fire, air, water, earth) and their qualities (hot, cold, wet, dry), the basic components of all earthly things, including human bodies. There are many balanced temperaments or complexions, however, not just one; they differ by time, place, person, and bodily organ. In each case, some right proportion of elemental ingredients will be healthy, and the wrong ones unhealthy.¹³ At the level of *physiology*, the same principle of balance governs the primary fluids that the body needs to live, eat, grow, reproduce, and stay healthy. These four *humors* are products of ingested food, but they also enable the body to take nourishment from what it eats and drinks. The same humors account for physiological complexion, the body's balance in health or imbalance in illness. The *blood* in the veins is mainly humoral blood, but it is mixed with the three other humors: *phlegm*, a secretion coming mainly from the brain, like mucus in color and consistency; *yellow bile*, made by the liver and found in the gall bladder; and *black bile*, whose organ is the spleen.¹⁴

Scholars are vulnerable to special humoral afflictions. Their intense and prolonged mental activity produces black bile (*atra bilis*), also called *melancholia*, while physical inactivity generates phlegm (*pituita*). Phlegm makes scholars sluggish and depressed, while black bile causes anxiety or even insanity. Melancholics dry out and grow cold, losing warmth and moisture – the moisture that sustains natural warmth. Too much thinking dries the brain and chills it. Spirit made hyperactive by thinking also consumes the lightest part of the blood, leaving it heavy and viscous. Eating the wrong food and not exercising – in general, neglecting the body for the mind – makes the sedentary scholar, and especially the philosopher, melancholic.¹⁵ This physiological calamity is what Ficino calls the “human” cause of melancholy, distinct from the “celestial” cause that flows from the planets Mercury and Saturn. To be active investigators, scholars need the agile Mercury, but they also need the constant Saturn to persevere in their inquiries and retain what they discover. This combination of planetary influences is cold and dry, another vector for the disease of black bile. Right from the start, astrology is the key to Ficino's magical medicine and a source of remedies against melancholy.¹⁶

Diseases of black bile are overdetermined and complex. Their causes are several, and several kinds of melancholic humor underlie them. The natural

kind is just “a denser and drier part of the blood,” distinct from the four types of burnt (*adustus*) melancholy, which are combustion products, either of natural melancholy or of the three other humors. All the burnt melancholies are bad, agitating those who think for a living before plunging them into depression – a humoral version of bipolar mental illness. By contrast, natural melancholy usually nourishes wisdom and judgment – though erratically. By itself, untempered by other humors, or in the wrong mix with them, natural melancholy runs to extremes and makes scholars weak, torpid, anxious, feverish, or even mad.¹⁷

The point of Ficino's physics, then, is to produce the right mix of humors for scholars prone (like Ficino himself) to melancholy. The proper balance of humors will be not an equal but a proportionate amount of each – four parts of humoral blood to one each of yellow and black bile, and the black bile must be very thin. The desired result is a composite of these three humors, with a fourth – a lighter type of phlegm – surrounding and flowing into it. This healthful composite produces spirits which are volatile, like fumes from brandy or grappa. The effect is a quick and lasting intelligence congruent with Mercury and Saturn – Saturn especially, highest of the planets and propitious for the divine philosophizing that invites us to escape the body altogether.¹⁸

The therapy in *De vita 1* is mostly regimen and pharmacy, but Ficino's understanding of regimen is expansive. It includes not only the patient's diet but also the air she breathes, the sounds she hears, the sighs and colors she sees, the clothes she wears, where she lives, and the people with whom she lives. Regimen also overlaps with pharmacy; drugs and foods are both consumed. Some of Ficino's therapies fall outside these two main classes: bleeding is the only surgical intervention; baths and massage come under regimen; and Ficino also prescribes a kind of ethical psychotherapy.¹⁹

No sleep in the afternoon after a big meal; no sex on a full stomach; no hard thinking after eating without rest in between. Excessive intercourse, too much wine, bad food, and lack of sleep are special perils for anyone who lives the life of the mind. Bad regimen puts the humors out of balance and the patient out of alignment with the heavens. A scholar who sleeps late will miss the Sun, Mercury, and Venus in the morning sky.²⁰ The countervailing good regimen is mostly common sense: mix work with relaxation; keep the senses stimulated and the body exercised; breathe clean air and stay warm; avoid cold, fatty, heavy foods; eat lightly, twice a day; and drink light wine.²¹

The theory behind this regimen is physiological: a good humoral complexion will keep the scholar warm and moist, making the spirit healthy enough to do the vital work of linking mind and body. Accordingly, the purpose of Ficino's medications is to eliminate bad humors and restore balance among

the good ones. The drugs he prescribes are mainly botanical, both simple and compound, the latter sometimes including animal and mineral ingredients.²² These drugs may be taken directly, like eating a piece of fruit, or they may be processed and compounded to make pills, potions, syrups, salves, and other preparations, preferably slow-acting, moist, and warm. Their use will be indicated by various symptoms: runny nose, weak vision, headache, forgetfulness, sleeplessness, and unpleasant sensations of taste.²³

In the case of melancholy, Ficino recommends various preparations to provide warmth and moisture against this dry, cold ailment. These include pills to be taken with a syrup twice a year, in spring and fall. One pill, for delicate patients, is “golden or magical, partly imitating the Magi, partly my own invention, compounded under the influence of Jupiter and Venus to draw out phlegm, yellow bile and black bile . . . sharpening and brightening the spirits.” The ingredients, blended with wine for processing, are gold dust or gold leaf, frankincense, myrrh, saffron, aloe, cinnamon, citron, balm, silk, ben, purple rose, red sandalwood, coral, and all three kinds of myrobalans.²⁴

Geriatrics, astrology, and amulets

“Among physicians,” wrote the learned Rhazes, “those are wise who agree that everything relating to times, air, waters, complexions and diseases is changed by the motions of the planets.”²⁵ In 1345, the planets were portentous and malign. Three conjunctions involving Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn, along with an eclipse of the Moon, occurred in March of that year, leading people to look heavenward for the source of the great pestilence that struck in 1347. This and later pandemics seized the attention of European physicians, who produced nearly three hundred treatises on the plague by 1500.²⁶ Ficino added his *Consilium against Pestilence* to this collection in 1481.²⁷

Bad stars and planets make bad air, which breeds plague: this was a common view of the Black Death and of subsequent visitations of that awful disease. A destructive configuration of planets and stars gave doctors and patients a general explanation of the countless deaths, while bad horoscopes and weak complexions distinguished the individual dead from the survivors. Such applications of astrology had been built into Western medicine from the beginning. Astrology was a kind of divination, and so was medical prognostication, which not only recognized larger rhythms of climate and seasons but also noticed smaller details of personal nativities and chronologies of specific diseases – phases of illness tracked through favorable and critical days, keyed to cycles of the Moon and calculated numerologically.²⁸

Plague struck Florence for the eleventh time in 1478, the year when Ficino’s second great patron – Lorenzo de’ Medici (1449–92) – escaped an

unnatural death in the Pazzi conspiracy. “Lorenzo’s good health is the first I would take care of,” wrote Ficino in the prefatory letter to *De vita* 1. And it was Lorenzo who received the dedication of the whole work *On Life* from this priest and philosopher, who was also a physician with “two fathers, the medical Ficino and Cosimo de’ Medici.”²⁹ The practical healer who published a vernacular plague book in 1481 was also thinking about melancholy scholars and their ills – writing the text that would become *De vita* 1. *De vita* 11 had to wait eight years more. Ficino may have intended it to put *De vita* 111, the least traditional of the three books, in a more conventional therapeutic framework.³⁰ That astrology is a theme linking all these works is evident from citations of the *Consilium* in the third book of *On Life*, a more adventurous text on medical magic.³¹ The magic of *De vita* 111, however, is continuous with the physical and physiological theory of *De vita* 1 and 11 and with clinical practices based on it. *De vita* 1 is normal medicine, meant for the special population of scholars, and like most medicine of its day it includes astrological prescriptions. For older scholars, *De vita* 11 offers even more specialized advice, and also more astrology.

Old age begins at forty-nine or fifty, says Ficino, and by age sixty-three or seventy the body’s vital moisture has dried up. Strong remedies are advised. A dry old man should suck milk, stabilized with fennel, from a healthy, happy young girl when the Moon is waxing. He might even drink a little blood from the left arm of a young man, also happy and healthy, in the same phase of the Moon.³² Myrobalans, a less extravagant option,

dry up excessive moisture in an amazing way . . . collecting natural moisture and protecting it against both decay and inflammation, thus prolonging life . . . [they] concentrate, warm and strengthen the natural and psychic power and spirit with astringent and aromatic force. From this anyone would think that the Tree of Life in Paradise might have been a myrobalan.³³

But the theory underlying the use of this wonderful fruit and of Ficino’s more dramatic remedies comes, once again, from conventional physics and physiology. In general, when the blood is too thick or too thin and spirit is deficient or volatile, the best therapy is moderation. Ficino therefore advises his patients to use medicine and astrology to “construct for yourselves the temperament that nature did not provide.”³⁴ How does he know which items to prescribe? By consulting established medical authorities, other physicians and his own experience. One point of consensus among the authorities was that astrology is indispensable, a common view confirmed by Ficino’s practice of his craft.³⁵ Accordingly, we find astrological medicine throughout the *Three Books on Life* but more of it in the second book than in the first and much more in the third.

Some of the astrology in *De vita II* is specific information on preparing medicines or on regimen, and some of it lays out the theory behind the instructions, including the old analogy between the human microcosm and the universal macrocosm that Ficino will repeat and expand in *De vita III*. This ancient topic arises in a discussion of procreation, of which the old must be wary in both its forms – physical and mental, Venereal and Saturnine. Because Venus dissipates the spirit and Saturn suffocates it, the best course will be a mean between them, a therapeutic connection with the Sun and Jupiter, which are above Venus but below Saturn.³⁶ Nonetheless, the god whom Ficino introduces to warn his older patients against Saturn and Venus is Mercury:

Just as I have warned you to beware of crafty Venus with her charms of touch and taste, so you should be wary of Saturn and of taking the same delight in contemplative thought . . . for in that thought Saturn often devours his own children . . . She makes the body fertile . . . and, when the mind is pregnant with his seed, he forces it to give birth . . . Keep using the reins of prudence to restrain the lust for either god's begetting . . . to keep human life in a certain just proportion of soul and body, feeding each with its own foods . . . wine, mint, myrobalan, musk, amber, new ginger, frankincense, aloes, jacinth and stones or plants like them.³⁷

The old must conserve the vital juices that Venus consumes, “gradually draining you through a hidden tube of some kind, begetting another thing and filling it with your fluids, until she leaves you spent on the ground like the old husk of a cicada.”³⁸ Venereal pleasures of touch and taste rank lowest among the seven that Ficino lists (Fig. 8.2), pleasures experienced through the five external senses of the body and two internal faculties of the soul. Touch and taste belong to infancy and youth, the first two of five phases of life, dominated either by sense alone or by sense more than reason. In the last

Ages	Faculties	Planetary gods	Pleasures	Site
1	Sense	Venus	Touch	External
2	Sense > reason	Venus	Taste	External
3	Sense = reason	Mercury	Smell	External
4	Sense < reason	Mercury	Hearing	External
5	Reason	Mercury	Sight	External
		Mercury	Imagination	Internal
		Mercury	Reason	Internal

Figure 8.2: Pleasures and planets

ages, the fourth and fifth, sensation has either bowed to reason or disappeared entirely, excluding Venus and making Mercury the better guide for the elderly.³⁹

Actually, Venus exits the series of pleasures even earlier, when touch and taste in the first two ages give way to smell and hearing in the next. What touch and taste seem to have in common is contact, but in the ordinary psychology of Ficino's day what they share is the same *medium* – the flesh that makes contact with external objects and lies next to the world and the devil.⁴⁰ Pleasures of smell and hearing are higher and safer, and their common medium is air, which is

always and very easily influenced by qualities of things below and in the heavens . . . and converts us to its quality in a wondrous way – our spirit especially . . . Indeed, the quality of this air is of the greatest importance for thinkers whose work depends mainly on spirit of the same kind, which is why choosing pure and luminous air, smells and music concerns them more than anyone else.⁴¹

The old, who find solid food hard to digest, can take nourishment from its odor, from vapors of wine and from the air itself, which is like spirit. Moreover, since we sense sounds through the same airy and spiritual medium that carries vapors and odors, Ficino locates music in this same gradient of therapeutic pleasures governed by Mercury.⁴²

Ficino moves easily from this astro-mythical theorizing to catalogs of pharmaceuticals. Like all the *Three Books on Life*, *De vita II* gives the reader an abundance of practical advice – recipes, prescriptions, instructions, and shopping-lists. Although plants outnumber other substances, gems and metals also appear. Gold is a favorite ingredient: along with silver, coral, electrum, and other precious stones and metals, it has the double property of temperately expanding and condensing the spirit while also brightening it. Since these minerals were formed deep within the earth by heavenly power, that same power is strong enough to stay with them and keep them connected to the heavens.⁴³ Myrobalans, whose astringent force condenses the spirit, have the power of fruit from Paradise, but it was gold that the Magi carried to Christ. “All authorities recommend gold above everything else,” Ficino claims, “consecrated to the Sun because of brightness and to Jupiter for balance, so that it has an amazing ability to regulate natural heat with moisture and introduce solar and jovial power into the spirits and limbs.”⁴⁴ Despite its marvelous properties, however, gold is a hard substance, like all metals and gems, and special steps must be taken when introducing hard things into the body's soft tissues and fluids. Ficino prescribes gold leaf or gold dust cooked in wine with sugar and various plants

"when the Moon is coming into Leo, Aries or Sagittarius in the aspect of the Sun and Jupiter."⁴⁵

Such celestial configurations were thought to govern the body in many ways. Knowing that astrologers had often devised planetary patterns of hours, days, and months, Ficino recommended another temporal arrangement to his older patients, applying the sequence of Moon (1), Mercury (2), Venus (3), Sun (4), Mars (5), Jupiter (6) and Saturn (7) to the first seven years of life and then repeating it. Septenary years ruled from afar by Saturn will be dangerous because that planet is so remote from earthly affairs and because descending from so high up in one year, and down so low to the Moon in the next, will be abrupt. Although these climacteric years are special hazards for the old, the authorities agree that fate fixes no term of life that cannot be adjusted by "the devices of astrology and help from physicians." Hence, Ficino's advice near the end of *De vita II* is "to ask the doctors what diet suits you naturally and the astrologers what star favors your life. When this star is well situated, and the Moon with it, combine the ingredients that you have learned to be good for you . . . Besides all this," he adds, "Ptolemy and other teachers of astronomy promise a long and prosperous life from certain images made from various stones and metals under a particular star."⁴⁶

This new topic of astrological images leads Ficino to the last of his *Three Books on Life* and its daring exploration of talismanic and musical magic. The risks in discussing images, much less recommending them, were several: from tradition, ethics, and philosophy. To grasp these dangers, we need a distinction among objects of three kinds: let us call them *stones*, *amulets*, and *talismans*, stipulating that the first are any small bits of hard mineral; the second undecorated stones worn on the body; and the third amulets decorated with words or pictures.⁴⁷

To be cured by a stone – a piece of crystalline salt, for example – Ficino's patient might either consume it or wear it. Ingested as medicine, the stone would be an ordinary drug like any other, morally harmless. But the long tradition of Christian teaching since St. Augustine had registered strong suspicion of stones worn on the body.⁴⁸ If a stone is not swallowed, how can it act on the body? Perhaps by contact or proximity or by a link with some other physical object, like a star or planet. Ficino preferred the last answer, of course.⁴⁹ But others saw demons lurking behind objects used by goddess heathens to protect themselves from disease and devils. Even in all innocence and with the best intentions, wearing an amulet might invite a demon to invade the body of the person wearing it.

If the dangers of amulets were obvious, carving words or images on a stone was even worse. To whom are words on talismans addressed? These special messages are not meant for living humans. And if God or angels or saints

are addressed, talismans will need to be blessed by the Church. The only other nonhuman persons available to receive messages are Satan and his demons. If images without words decorate talismans, the parallel question arises: images of whom or what and approved by whom? Images of the old gods, including planetary gods, are idolatrous, like statues in a pagan temple. Animal images may also be idols since beasts had been worshipped by the pagans.

Hence, from the point of view of the Christian doctrine that shaped Ficino's conduct, amulets were bad and talismans worse. Natural philosophy and metaphysics might complicate these problems or, as Ficino hoped, resolve them. To what physical or metaphysical category does an image on a stone belong? Are there purely natural ways to make connections with stars and planets by using amulets or talismans? Since words communicate with other persons, who are the persons addressed by words engraved on a stone? And what consequences follow from putting words in songs? For music and song are also therapies in the risky magical medicine of *De vita II*. "You who want to lengthen life in the body should first of all refine the spirit," advised Ficino. "Enrich the blood with enriching foods for blood that is tempered and clear; always keep it warm with the best air; nourish it daily with sweet smells; and delight it with sounds and songs." Song is delightful, but also dangerous. Its words, like those of a hymn or a prayer, are spoken to someone. Who is that someone?⁵⁰

Astrology, magic, and medicine

Ficino's aim in *De vita III* is to show doctors and patients how to get life from the heavens. The operative principle for accomplishing this is that "at the right times heavenly things can be attracted to humans through lower things that sympathize with those above." And behind this principle is a "Platonic statement" of theory, that "the structure of the universe is so interconnected that heavenly things exist on earth in an earthly condition and earthly things in turn exist in heaven at a heavenly level."⁵¹ Everywhere up and down the cosmic strata, like attracts like. The source of this Platonic wisdom is a tract on magic by Proclus, the last major Greek thinker in a tradition that Ficino traced back through an "ancient theology" to Zoroaster and Hermes Trismegistus. Proclus taught that natural forces of likeness and sympathy were enough to link heaven and earth magically, but he also said that the same forces enabled "the ancient sages to bring divine powers into the region of mortals."⁵²

Ficino, Plato's translator, was the great pioneering Hellenist of his age. He also studied and Latinized works by the ancient Neoplatonists – Proclus, Synesius, Iamblichus, Porphyry, and their master, Plotinus – which had not

been read in Western Europe for more than a millennium. In these venerable texts he found a view of reality that was appealing to him yet threatening to his Christian faith: that nature and supernature form a continuum. This notion was the paradoxical product of a philosophy so awed by God's transcendence that it produced thousands of pages of theology while striving not to speak of Divinity itself, the ineffable One. All space, both physical and metaphysical, between the One on high and Earth far below is full of lesser gods, who are always already there in the world of nature. The magician cannot conjure or command them, strictly speaking, and has no need to try. He need only find or rearrange the natural things, places, and times where the gods will act and sometimes show themselves.⁵³

By manipulating natural objects, the magus discovers the divine but does not cause it, strictly speaking. Nonetheless, from a Christian point of view, any magic that claims to "bring divine powers into the region of mortals," in the looser language used by Proclus, will break the first commandment. Better than any of his readers who lacked access to the Neoplatonic philosophers, Ficino understood the problem: that "supercelstial things can be made to favor us or perhaps even enter us."⁵⁴ The continuum of divinity rises from terrestrial through celestial to even higher entities that might be identified either abstractly, as Forms and Ideas, or concretely, as mythic personalities. But the genial Jupiter and the angry Mars, gods of ancient Greece and Rome, had become demons in the new Christian religion. The holy images in their temples had turned into idols. Gems bearing such images might also be idols, as Ficino feared.⁵⁵

Ficino's predicament was that the same respected authorities who taught him physics, physiology and clinical practice had approved astrological images.⁵⁶ His response to this perplexity in *De vita III* makes it a characteristically Renaissance text. Vexed by a Christian's dilemma, he turns for answers to an ancient Greek – to Plotinus – and then he interprets Plotinus as imitating another sage whom he thought to be much older, Hermes Trismegistus.⁵⁷

Ficino is thinking of an analogy between statues in particular and material things in general that Plotinus used to explain how magic operates. Although the divine is everywhere, its presence will work best for mortals who prepare appropriate receptacles (statues, for example), which are like mirrors reflecting divine images. *Every physical thing*, in fact, is an image in matter of a lower form which in turn mirrors a higher form, making all natural objects ingredients for the magician, who puts them together to receive divine gifts from above. Since the *Asclepius*, a text ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus, had briefly described statue-making of this kind in ancient Egypt, Ficino concludes that Plotinus took his magic from the Egyptian Hermes.⁵⁸

How to do magic, and why

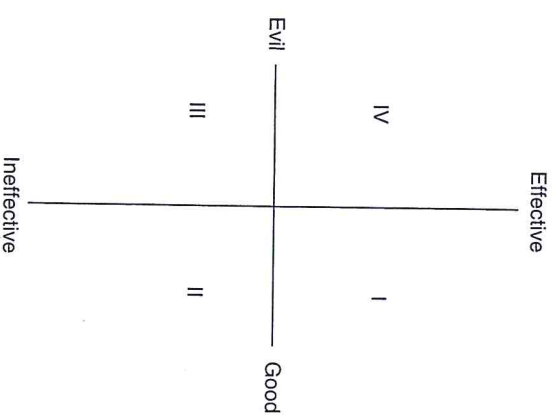


Figure 8.3: Evaluating magic

Even before *De vita III* appeared in print, Ficino had to defend his magic, using the old distinction between the natural and the demonic. "Wicked magic is based on worshipping demons," he maintains, while "natural magic gets help from the heavens for the body's good health." He categorically rejects demonic magic and attributes it to Satan. But there is also a nondemonic magic that only "brings natural materials under natural causes at the right moment to form them in a wondrous way." Another distinction between kinds of nondemonic magic then follows. "There are two types of this art," says Ficino; "one goes to extremes, but the other is of great importance. The former concocts useless marvels for show . . . and we must flee far from it since it is worthless and harmful to health. But we must hold on to the important type that links medicine with astrology."⁵⁹

Ficino's magic can go right or wrong along two axes (Fig. 8.3): one between *good* and *evil*, the other between the *effective* and the *ineffective*; the first belongs to moral philosophy, the other to natural philosophy. Magic will be both effective and good (I), for example, if it uses an earthly object (myrobalan) to get power from the right heavenly object (Jupiter, the planet) in order to invigorate the elderly. Using the same earthly object for the same purpose to get power from the wrong heavenly object (Venus) will still be good, but not effective (II). Suppose we use a different object (a talisman) not to tap a planet's power spontaneously but to communicate with a person (Jupiter, the planetary demon), and suppose the person ignores us? Our magic

will be ineffective but still evil (III) because trying to deal with demons is sinful. Worst of all is evil magic that works (IV): using a heavenly object (Jupiter again) to make prayer more powerful with the unintended result of inviting a different demon to attack.⁶⁰ This simplified system of two axes omits other oppositions (natural/artificial, genuine/false, serious/frivolous, transitive/intransitive) that would extend the graph into more dimensions.

Thus, in this simpler scheme, natural magic can be good (e.g. for healing) or evil (e.g. for harming), as well as effective or ineffective, depending on intentions and results. All demonic magic is evil, however, whatever its effect or intent. But both natural and demonic magic can be fraudulent or frivolous, falsely claiming to produce true wonders or producing them for trivial purposes. Finally, both natural and demonic magic can use artifice: setting a gem in gold, for example, or carving words on the gem. Ficino's reasons for thinking that some natural magic is good, sincere, serious, and effective were of three kinds: *historical*, *empirical*, and *theoretical*.

Mytho-historical might be a better label than *historical* for reasons of the first type, which refer not only to real persons like Plotinus but also to mythic figures like Hermes Trismegistus. As an architect of a culture that revered the past, Ficino would naturally honor the authority of Aristotle, Albumasar, Aquinas, and other sages, but he also amplified the power of history with a special historiography – the ancient theology – which he discovered in the Church Fathers and revived for Renaissance Europe. Just as Moses first received the divine wisdom revealed to the prophets, apostles, and evangelists of sacred scripture, so Zoroaster and Hermes inaugurated a tradition of pagan wisdom that culminated in Plato and continued with Plotinus, Proclus, and the other Neoplatonists.⁶¹

No one could appreciate better than Ficino the place of Hermes in this lineage, especially on the topic of magic. One of his earliest works was the *Pimander*, the first Latin version of fourteen Greek treatises of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, which was unknown in the medieval West. Ficino cites this material nowhere in the *Three Books on Life*, probably because it deals with theology and spirituality, not magic. In fact, *De vita* gives serious, though small, attention only to the Latin *Asclepius*, a Hermetic writing that Ficino did not need to translate; outside the single chapter that condemns the *Asclepius* for demonolatry, he mentions Hermes as an author of Hermetic texts only four times in passing.⁶² Moreover, Ficino's brief remarks comparing Egypt's cult statues with the magical images of Plotinus are not kind to Hermes. If the famous statues actually moved and spoke, it was not astral power but demonic deceit that animated them. When Egyptian priests lured demons into statues, their motive was to trick people into honoring false gods. Oracles delivered through the statues were fraudulent. The just verdict of Iamblichus was to “condemn the Egyptians because they not only accepted

demons as steps to be followed toward the gods above but also very often adored them.”⁶³

Introducing the book that closes with this indecisive chapter on Plotinus and Hermes, Ficino had announced that “the ancient philosophers, having examined the powers of things celestial and those below with the utmost care, . . . rightly seem to have turned their whole inquiry toward getting life for themselves from the heavens.” He then lists Pythagoras, Democritus, and Apollonius of Tyana – but not Hermes – among “those who were the most devoted students of this topic,” and the omission is unsurprising. Ficino's magical philosophizing might be called many things, but surely not Hermetic. Hermes helped him find a pedigree for magic, but gave no philosophical account of it.⁶⁴

Empirical evidence for thinking magic good and effective might seem scarcer than historical authority, but it is plentiful in the *Three Books on Life*. Magic can be good when it is useful, and evidence of such utility is copious in Ficino's medical lore. His prior moral argument is that a decision not to abandon the body for the care of the soul alone – a real option for Christians of his day – entails caring for the body's health, which is the task of medicine and medical magic.⁶⁵ To learn these arts, to compile the hundreds of concrete and detailed recipes in his book, Ficino consulted ancient and medieval authorities, but he also learned personally from contemporaries and from his own experience. In fact, personal effort and experience are a conspicuous theme of *De vita* III, where it underwrites the problematic use of images.⁶⁶

Everyone knows that hellbore is a purge, says Ficino. The plant's manifest power along with its occult property enables it to rejuvenate spirit, body, and mind. Myrobolans also preserve youth in this way. And astrologers think that images on stones do the same.⁶⁷ Are they right? Rhazes says that the egg-like eagle-stone amulet – perhaps a small geode, undecorated (Fig. 8.4) – speeds childbirth. By claiming personal experience of the stone's effect, Rhazes encourages his readers to consult their own clinical experience.⁶⁸ Having read authorities like Rhazes who themselves relied on personal experience and effort, Ficino will then collect his own clinical data. “My experience,” he writes, “is that medicine hardly acts at all when the Moon is in conjunction with Venus,” and “*we* have found that night air is unfriendly to the spirits.”⁶⁹

Taking up the harder topic of images, Ficino remembers that he had a plan to test them. He wanted to carve the constellation Ursa into a piece of magnetite and hang it around his neck with iron thread when the Moon's position was favorable. He found that the Bear was governed by Mars and Saturn, however, and he had read that evil demons inhabit its northern skies, so he seems not to have actually tried this test. But he witnessed a trial of a different image. The Indian dragon-stone that he describes, “marked with

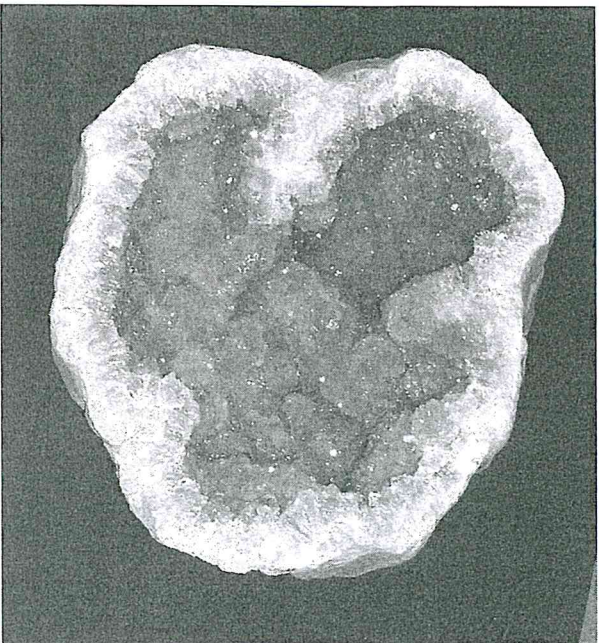


Figure 8.4: Geode

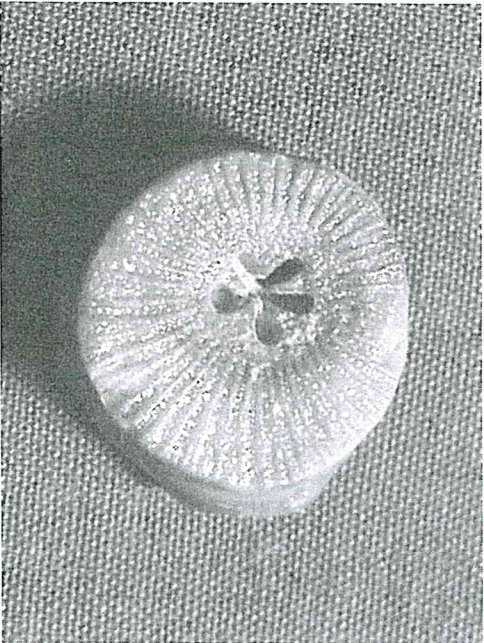


Figure 8.5: Crinoid stem

many little starlike dots in a row,” was probably a calcified marine fossil – a crinoid stem (Fig. 8.5). Soaked with strong vinegar, the apparently lifeless stone bubbled and moved about, giving a striking demonstration of power.

In the stone’s markings and motions, Ficino saw the tracks of Draco, a celestial source for the object’s liveliness. The dragon-stone fascinated him

because the image on it was natural and thus perhaps exempt from worries about talismans.⁷⁰ But he also described another more dubious image of a lion “in gold, using his feet to roll a stone in the shape of the sun” (Fig. 8.6). This image vaguely resembles the talismans of the *Picatrix*, a Latinized manual of Arab astrology so notorious that Ficino used it without naming it. This solar and leonine talisman, made when Leo is ascendant, was a cure for kidney disease, “approved by Pietro d’Abano and confirmed by experience.” The experience claimed here was Pietro’s and thus long past. But Ficino had also heard about the lion talisman from Mengo Bianchelli da Faenza, a physician of his circle who used it to cure Giovanni Marliani, a more famous physician.⁷¹ Ficino had plenty of empirical evidence – personal and vicarious, past and present, physical and textual – for the usefulness of astrological images.

The original arguments of *De vita III* for talismans and other magical cures are *theoretical*, however, rather than empirical or historical. The theories in play overlap the medical content of *De vita I* and II, but the distinctive theory in *De vita III* is cosmological, physical, metaphysical, linguistic, and moral, and the aim that motivates much of it is to exclude action at a distance. Ficino’s universe is Aristotelian and Ptolemaic, the familiar geocentric cosmos of concentric spheres (Fig. 8.7). All physical action in this universe requires sustained contact, turning common cases, like the flight of a projectile, into puzzles, and making uncommon phenomena like magnetism still more enigmatic. Since stars and planets are a long way off, how can they act on earthly objects like amulets and talismans?

“I don’t quite see,” Ficino asserts, “that images have *any* effect on a distant object, though I suspect they have some effect on those who wear them.”⁷² But things were not so simple. First, every physician knew that lepers and plague victims infect others not just by physical contact but also by proximity: carriers of these diseases spread them just by looking at healthy people.⁷³ Moreover, the great Plotinus, as Ficino knew, had been threatened by a more remote transmission of magical force – star-casting. When a jealous competitor tried to aim a star at Plotinus, focusing its rays like light from a concave mirror, the philosopher bounced the astral power back at his attacker, causing convulsions and wasting. The harm seemed real enough, like the toxic effects of the basilisk or the evil eye, which act at a distance.⁷⁴ Ficino might just have labeled such effects *magical* without trying to explain their causes, treating the phenomena as outside nature, uncovered by the prohibition of action at a distance and other physical laws. But to make his magic nondemonic, Ficino wanted to keep it within natural limits. He therefore turned to the microcosm/macrocosm analogy, maintaining that the whole World has a Soul just as every animal has a soul. Natural objects in the world – rocks, plants, beasts, people, and stars – are distant *from one*



Figure 8.6: Lion demon

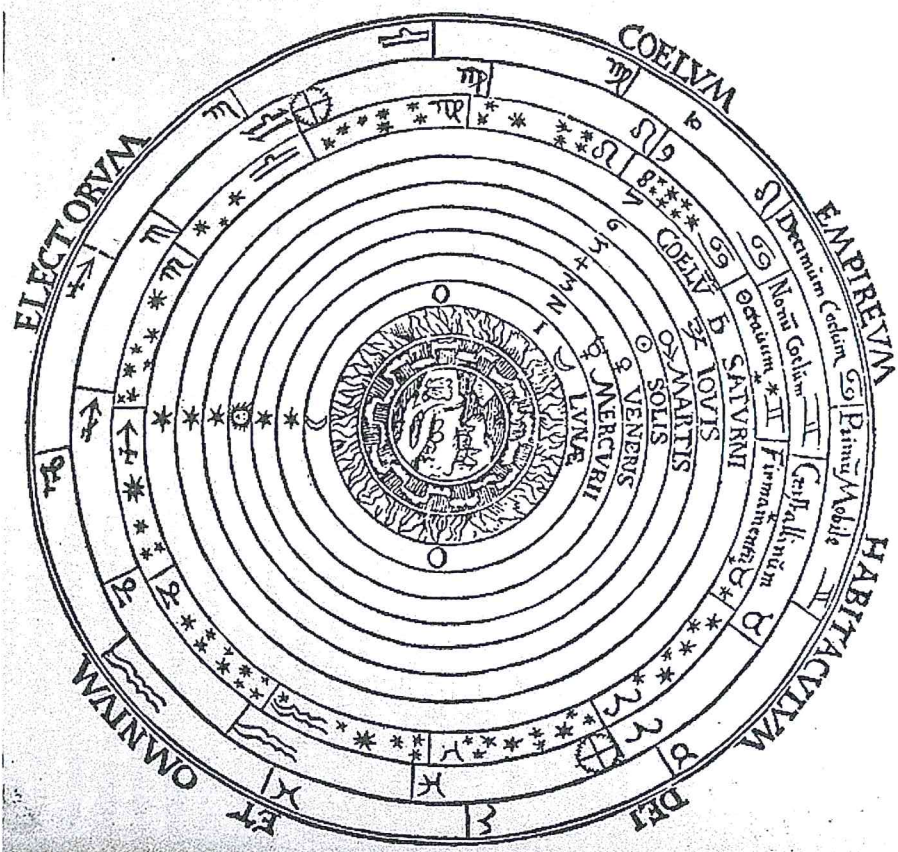


Figure 8.7: Concentric spheres

another, but the World Soul is not distant *from them*. It animates them all and unites them, opening channels for magical action.⁷⁵

Ficino's Cosmos has a Mind and a Body and a Soul to connect them. In cosmological terms, the Soul is the *primum mobile*, the animate sphere that surrounds and moves the sphere of the fixed stars and the seven lower planetary spheres (see Fig. 8.7). Corresponding to each *Idea* in the world's Mind is a *form* in its Soul. These forms are called *seminal reasons* because they are the seeds from which *species* grow, so that each species in the material world, which is the Body of the cosmos, corresponds to a seminal reason in its Soul. Every *individual* natural object is a member of a species. Take an object of one species and connect it with other individuals of different species: if all the species involved are connected with the same *Idea*, this

is a metaphysical recipe for magic, for drawing power down from that super-celestial Idea.⁷⁶

The World Soul made the *figures* that we see in the heavens; figures are patterns of stars and planets joined by rays of light and force emitted by heavenly bodies. Stored in these celestial structures are all lower species. The metaphysics of Ideas and forms, made visible in these configurations, shows how the Soul uses seminal reasons to make the *specific forms* embodied in physical objects.⁷⁷ Talismans and magic statues, just because they are objects in a cosmos of such objects, connect with these circuits of power. But Christians had to avoid statue magic because statues that move and speak are idols and receptacles for demons. Alert to this danger, Ficino countered with the view of Plotinus

that everything can be done with the help of the World Soul in that it produces and activates forms of natural objects through certain seminal reasons divinely implanted in it . . . [and] never abandoned by the Ideas of the supreme Mind . . . Through these reasons Soul can easily affect the material objects to which it gave form in the beginning through those same reasons if, at the right moment, a magician or priest applies forms of things, having correctly assembled them – forms that are each related to one reason or another.⁷⁸

As a physician, Ficino knew that drugs acquire new forms when heated by the heavens through rays from stars and planets. As a scholar, he discovered the Neoplatonic metaphysics that gave new depth to this traditional medicine and that might also exculpate his magic.⁷⁹

Accordingly, Ficino urged his fellow physicians to “do careful research on which of the metals fits best in an order of some star and which stone is highest in this order . . . so that you can borrow the heavenly things which are in sympathy with such a receptacle.” Without much explanation, he is talking about a *taxis* or *series*, another Neoplatonic construct. To close the gap between the bodiless One and the embodied many, the later Neoplatonists filled it with intermediates in graded chains that rise from matter to the immaterial and transmit power from above to below. Ficino describes the bottom end of one such series, a solar *taxis*, where “the cock or hawk has the highest place among animals, balsam or laurel among plants, gold among metals, and carbuncle or pantaurus among stones.”⁸⁰ Because this series is solar, power flows to the lowest objects in it from solar Ideas on high, down through solar forms, seminal reasons and the Sun to earthly forms or species embodied as physical things. At its upper end, a *taxis* is disembodied, headed by immaterial forms that Proclus called monads and henads. These metaphysical chains bind the cosmos together, and spirit does the same, reinforced by celestial *rays* and *figures*. Spirit, rays, and figures all

provide physical and cosmological solutions to the problem of action at a distance.

Since the World’s Body lives, moves and generates other bodies, it obviously has a Soul and also spirit to connect Soul with Body. This cosmic spirit is “a better body, a non-body, as it were,” through which the World Soul makes all natural things live and breed. But gems and metals fail to generate other gems and metals: dense matter occludes the productive spirit in them. Yet when alchemists liberate that spirit by sublimation, art causes base metals to produce gold, releasing the latent power of the earthly spirit that differs from the cosmic kind – the quintessence – only in deriving from the four elements. Still, little of the spirit in earthbound humans is earth, more is water, much is air, and most is fire, making it akin to the celestial fifth element. Like the cosmic spirit, ours is “a very thin body, as if somehow not body when it is soul, and likewise somehow not soul when it is body.” This peculiar substance pervades the universe, making it coherent by connecting the separate objects in it. We can use it “to acquire the occult forces of the stars.”⁸¹

Bound together physically and metaphysically, the parts of the world constitute “a living thing more unified than any other,” a cosmic organism. Since the limbs and organs of any animal affect one another, the influence of every part of this perfect organism on all other parts will be even stronger, helping the world’s Body to move, live, and breathe. Its breath is the cosmic spirit which, when applied to our spirit, connects us with the animate heavens. By opening these magical channels and acting as part of the universal organism, humans get life and power from above.⁸²

Heaven is far away, however, and “does not touch earth . . . [except] by the rays of the stars, which are like its eyes.”⁸³ Just as earthly fire warms, penetrates and changes other natural things, these much stronger rays penetrate the whole mass of the earth to form gems and metals deep inside it. Since talismans are made of the same gems and metals, the rays that first formed these minerals will penetrate talismans instantly. Their hardness is no obstacle, much less the softer material of the human body and spirit. In fact, stones and metals are excellent receptacles (like magical capacitors) for rays because their hard matter insulates and stores the occult powers that rays transmit.⁸⁴

Rays are also organic and alive. When Ficino says that they come from the eyes of the world’s Body, he is thinking not only of animal and human figures in the zodiac but also, by analogy, of earthly creatures like the basilisk as well as people who project harm from their evil eyes.⁸⁵ Alkindi had taught that rays run in both directions between any two (or more) objects – between the basilisk and its victim, reciprocally, but also between a planet, the stars in a constellation, and an astrologer gazing at the heavens. Planets are said to be in various *aspects* (trine, quartile, sextile), meaning degrees of circular

distance from one another, but an *aspectus* is also a “looking at.” Just as we look at the planets and stars, those mighty living beings also look at each other and at us: “with the rays of their eyes, the heavenly bodies instantly work wonders on our bodies by gazing at them and making contract.”⁸⁶

Rays streaming from stars and planets make up figures.⁸⁷ Some, like the zodiacal constellations, are visible to anyone who sees the night sky, but others are the arcana of astrology and less conspicuous. To the untraced eye it will not be obvious, for example, just when “the Moon is located under the watery signs, Cancer, Pisces and Scorpio, with the rays of Jupiter shining upon it,” a collocation that Ficino describes as good for a patient who needs purging.⁸⁸ These two planets and three constellations make a celestial figure, whose analog can be made on Earth by carving a stone with images of Jupiter and the Moon, a crab, two fish, and a scorpion, producing a watery talisman. If the stone is a watery mineral (aquamarine, perhaps) set in gold (a jovial metal), the talisman will be stronger because “the elemental power in its matter matches the specific power naturally innate in it, and then this matches the other specific power taken from the heavens through a figure.”⁸⁹ Assuming that the matter of the talisman conforms to the watery figure in the heavens, that *natural* celestial figure will augment the power of the *artificial* figure carved in the stone, which should be done when the heavenly figure rules the sky. The effect will be like music produced by one lyre resonating with another lyre but not touching it.⁹⁰

This ancient musical analogy is crucial to Ficino’s defense of natural magic.⁹¹ Humans make artificial things, like lyres and talismans, but only God made natural objects, like stones, which therefore share in the divine goodness. Moreover, a human artificer can be held responsible for human artifice, but not for God’s creation. Hence, to the extent that magic is meant to do good and is done with the natural objects which are God’s creatures, the magician will be blameless. To pile up evidence for this argument, Ficino extended his theorizing about spirit, rays, and figures with models and mechanisms for magic that exploit the powers of natural objects. Besides the resonance of lyres in attunement, Ficino also discusses seeds, grafts, baits, kindling, reflection, attraction, impregnation, and fetal development as physical models of magical action.

The resounding lyre is a critical case because lyres, like talismans, are artificial things whose natural components (wood, catgut, metal, stone) are physically effective and, at worst, morally neutral. Thomas Aquinas, to whom Ficino defers in sensitive passages of *De vita III*, therefore confirms “those effects that the heavens ordinarily cause through . . . natural objects.” A talisman, however, is more than the sum of its parts. It works only as “a composite already located in some particular species of the artificial,” given

that “constellations provide the order of being and persisting not only for natural things but also for the artificial.” By *composite* Thomas means a *natural* object, the combination of a form with matter which is a physical particular, like a gem. But Thomas also says that the image on a gem works “not so much because some figure is in the matter” as because the figured composite has been put – by its figure – in a species of *artificial* things.⁹² This is Ficino’s account of Thomas’s position, which in the *Summa theologica* actually seems less generous: no celestial power flows to talismans “insofar as they are artificial, but only because of their natural matter.”⁹³

For both Ficino and Thomas, carving a scorpion on a gem will make the stone a member of the species of artificial scorpions – which includes drawings, paintings, statues, toys, and so on. But for Ficino, a scorpion-gem will also belong to the *taxis* that includes the arachnid on Earth, Scorpio in the sky, and a supercelestial Scorpion among the henads (Fig. 8.8).

Power flows to the gem because a figure plugs it into a metaphysical circuit – a stronger version of what, according to Ficino, Thomas had permitted stars to do for artificial things. But in words that Ficino did not explain, Thomas had also said that “images in artificial objects are like substantial forms,” namely, the forms that make a natural composite what it is, a member of a *natural* species. “Nothing precludes . . . heavenly influence coming . . . from the arrangement of the figure that gives the image its species,” Thomas concluded, “not insofar as [the figure] is a figure, but insofar

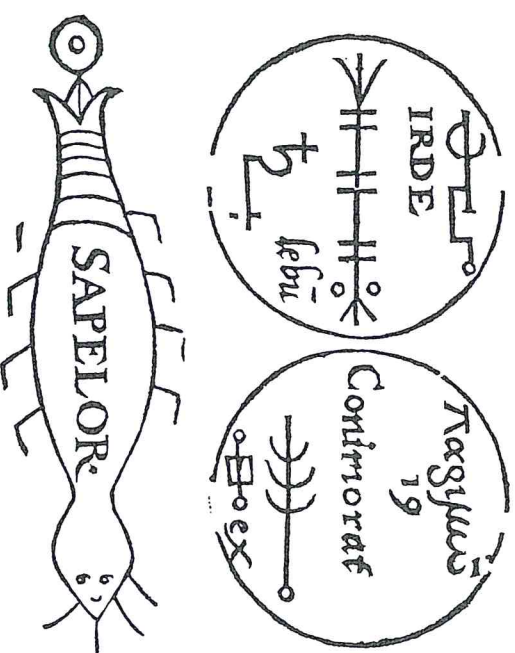


Figure 8.8: Design for a scorpion talisman

as it causes the species of what is artificially made and gets power from the stars.⁹⁴

Since Ficino cites several texts by Thomas about magic and images, including the one that describes images as quasi-substantial forms and thus quasi-natural, his failure to make more of this attractive argument is puzzling. Thinking it “obvious that even lifeless bodies acquire certain powers and abilities from the heavenly bodies . . . beyond those of the . . . qualities of the elements,” Thomas reasoned that if “various stones and plants acquire other occult powers . . . nothing prevents a human from getting an ability from the influence of a heavenly body to do certain physical things – for a physician to heal, for example.”⁹⁵ Despite the openings given him, perhaps Ficino thought it provocative to enlist the saint so persuasively in so dubious a cause. His own reasoning about images as figures, at any rate, is careful and convoluted, leading to the conclusion that

figures . . . have a property which is peculiar and inseparable from species inasmuch as they have been fixed by the heavens together with species. In fact, they also have a very strong linkage with Ideas in the . . . Mind of the world. And since these same figures are a type of . . . species . . . they get their own powers there.⁹⁶

The forms, figures and species of physical objects connect them and their users not only with heavenly bodies but also with divine and supercelestial Ideas – an alluring but dangerous prospect. By using physical models to explain the same process, Ficino brings his metaphysical magic down to earth and makes it less threatening.

Comparing astrology with farming, for example, makes stargazing seem practical and credible. Just as the farmer sows seed in a field to make it fertile or puts a graft into a plant to improve its species, so the magus will collect influences from above to insert them into natural objects below and empower them.⁹⁷ Females of all kinds, says Ficino, animal, vegetable and mineral, are subjected to the corresponding males for impregnation: when “the magus subjects terrestrial things to celestials” to make them magical, then, it is just like the male magnet making the female iron attractive.⁹⁸ Since everything is alive in a world that “desires its parts to be married together,” natural attractions – between heavy things and the Earth’s center, light things and the Moon, moist things and the roots of plants – are sexual, and magic will emulate the loving Nature which is “everywhere the sorceress.”⁹⁹ Nature supplies all the materials for magical action, which becomes artificial only when humans intervene to rearrange the natural objects that suffice for doing magic.

Spirit “is a kind of bait or kindling for linking Soul to Body in the cosmos,” writes Ficino, “and Soul is also a kind of kindling in the spirit and Body of the world.” Spirit is bait for higher powers when nature uses a fetus to draw

down the spirit which will then attract a soul. Taken from Proclus, the kindling analogy for Soul’s activity is more complex. For both Body and spirit, Soul is the force that draws them up to Mind. In detail, the model is dry wood (Body) penetrated by oil (spirit) to sustain the heat and fire (Soul) which is the vehicle of light (Mind): “kindling” is Ficino’s term here for the whole apparatus of flaming, oil-soaked wood.¹⁰⁰ A related analogy substitutes sulfur under a flame for the burning oily wood. Vapors from the sulfur rise, like ascending spirit, before they burst into flame from an incendiary cause that works on them from above to below.¹⁰¹

In simpler terms, “wherever some type of matter is exposed to the celestials as a glass mirror is to your face or the wall opposite you to your voice, the matter is immediately affected from on high by a very powerful agent.”¹⁰² The reflection of an image in a mirror is an intuitive model of an instantaneous effect happening at a distance, like the astral Leo’s immediate influence on a leonine drug. But sound reflected from a wall recalls a problem already posed by the model of the resonating lyre. Sounds make music, music can be sung with meaningful words, and meanings can be addressed only to minds, one’s own mind or another’s. But whose mind is it? Angel or demon?¹⁰³

Discussing “the power of words and song to get help from the heavens,” Ficino recommends learning the virtues of heavenly bodies and then “inserting them into the meanings of our words.”¹⁰⁴ Clearly, part of his medical magic is astral song containing meaningful speech. To evaluate this music and other magical therapies, he provides a ranking (Fig. 8-9) of various means of healing – material and mental – and the planets associated with them, calling his schema “seven levels where attraction proceeds from higher entities to those below” and putting music in the middle with the Sun.¹⁰⁵

Stones and metals fall to the bottom of the list with the Moon. Their hardness makes it difficult to get at the power stored inside them, and

Levels	Means of healing	Planets
7	Intelligence	Saturn
6	Reason	Jupiter
5	Imagination	Mars
4	Sound, music, song	Sun
3	Powders, vapors, odors	Venus
2	Plants, animals	Mercury
1	Stones, metals	Moon

Figure 8.9: Planetary levels of healing

moral problems arise if they carry images. Plants, animals, powders, vapors, and odors at levels 2 and 3 are all within the range of conventional medicine and not as impressive as Ficino's magical remedies. His major innovation comes at level 4 with sound, music, and song. Above this level, the higher remedies are no longer material and thus beyond the scope of *De vita III*. Like the lower therapies, the solar cures at level 4 are still material because air, the medium that transmits them, is a kind of matter.¹⁰⁶

"The very matter of song is much purer and more like the heavens than the matter of medicines," Ficino explains, "for it is hot or warm air, still breathing, in fact." This living matter "even carries meaning like a mind." Moreover, if song is "filled with spirit and meaning . . . and corresponds to one or another of the heavenly bodies, it has no less power than any other composite medicine, projecting power into the singer and then from this person into the listener nearby." In fact, song is just "another spirit": like the evil eye that emits vapors to harm a victim, singing is therefore infectious in the medical sense.¹⁰⁷ Such dangers multiply with every line of Ficino's chapter on astral song, which runs the risk not only of demonolatry but also of negligent magical assault on innocent bystanders.

Hence, although Ficino spends most of his worry in *De vita III* on talismans, the magical singing that bothers him less is actually the greater threat. Words in songs, like those on talismans, are a moral trap because they speak to uninvited and malignant minds. Unlike songs, however, talismans are unlikely transmitters of injury to others. Whatever they receive from above will be insulated by their dense, heavy matter, so different from the light and airy stuff of song, through which harmful forces can easily spread from the singer's spirit to the listener's. "The amazing power in spirit that sings excitedly" will be the more dangerous magic, *physically* for those who hear the song and *morally* for the singer, especially if the singing harmonizes with the music of the spheres.¹⁰⁸

Although all seven planets have voices, only the Sun, Mercury, Venus, and Jupiter can sing. "When your playing and singing reverberates as theirs does, they are seen to reply right away," according to Ficino, "as naturally as a vibration resounding from a lute or an echo from a wall."¹⁰⁹ But if the singers in the celestial quarter are planetary gods, exchanging musical messages with them will be sinful, especially since Ficino specifies that magical communication runs between souls as well as bodies. To make matters worse, while harmonic forces sent down by heavenly souls sometimes descend indirectly, carried by rays, they also sometimes arrive straight from the celestials, "by a choice of free will."¹¹⁰ If magic needs a numinous act of will from on high, human will may also be complicit, and magic loses the camouflage of unwillful natural action.

"I can call spirits from the vasty deep," the wizard brags, and then the cynic asks "But will they come?"¹¹¹ Whether spiritual persons actually arrive or not, the magus who summons them, intentionally or unintentionally, is in moral trouble unless the Church has blessed the message – when godparents renounce Satan at baptism, for example, or when a priest exorcizes demons. Nonetheless, Ficino thinks he can avoid the danger of astral singing, or perhaps diminish it, by downgrading planetary gods to demons. The demons who hear Ficino's songs, however, are not the ordinary unclean spirits or fallen angels of Christian demonology, who are always evil. In Greek religion generally, and also for the Neoplatonists, a demon is a mighty being, lower than the gods but still higher than humans and not evil as such. In the hierarchies of Neoplatonic theology, deities and demons come in many grades, and Ficino fixes on those that are low enough not to be "completely separate from matter" while still sharing the vitality of the World Soul. These *cosmic* demons are embodied, unlike the bodiless *hypercosmic* gods, and their bodies are stars and planets.¹¹²

Ficino's cosmic demons have three key properties: they are not high gods; they are not evil; and their bodies are the heavenly bodies of astrology. Since the Neoplatonists placed many Jupiters, Mercuries, and other Olympians at all levels of their elaborate theology, it was easy for Ficino to take the cue and turn the planetary gods into lesser demons.¹¹³ Having demoted the sky gods, he also sanitized them by exploiting the kinship between the tutelary or personal demon of the Neoplatonists, with all its astrological associations, and the Christian guardian angel. The lord of geniture in every person's horoscope is an avatar of this protective demon. The natural talent (*ingenium*) that a horoscope reveals corresponds to a divinity (*genius*) within. "To every person born," says Ficino, "a particular demon and guardian of life has been allotted by his very own star."¹¹⁴

He also mentions that an inferior *aerial* demon of the cosmic type may be present beforehand in the matter of natural objects that the magician uses. If an aerial demon were just an impersonal force, like a magical ray, or a type of matter, like spirit, Ficino might be off the hook, morally and theologically. But the "airy spirit" of *The Tempest*, to cite a familiar example, is no such thing. "Come with a thought, I thank thee, Ariel, come," says Prospero, and Ariel enters: "Thy thoughts I cleave to. What's thy pleasure?"¹¹⁵

A demonic mind cleaving to human thoughts and desires is just what Ficino needs to avoid, which is why he wants "a natural force of divinity" built into magical objects. He attributes the notion to Hermes, but this allusion to the Hermetic *Asclepius* occurs in the same passage where "Iamblichus condemns the Egyptians" for demonolatry – the Iamblichus who is actually Ficino's main source for the doctrine of cosmic and hypercosmic demons.¹¹⁶ From

Iamblichus two things should have been clear to him: that lower demons and high gods alike are persons with souls and minds, not just inert forces or peculiar kinds of matter; and that the magic of natural objects is always in the service of divine persons.¹¹⁷ In the end, the labyrinth of Platonic theology gave Ficino no place to hide.

Perhaps for that reason, his philosophical theory of magic is a tour de force of caution and evasion. Although a few confident claims can be found in *De vita III*, hedges and hesitations are numerous.¹¹⁸ Ficino seldom tells us what *he thinks* about magic in a clear, straightforward way, but the following statement on talismans has the ring of an official, public position:

I believe it would be safer to trust oneself to medicines than to images, and that the arguments about heavenly power that I gave in favor of images can have force in the case of medicines rather than figures. For if images have power, the likelihood is not so much that they have acquired it recently through a figure as that they possess it naturally through matter treated in this way . . . not so much by coming to have a figure as by the heating that comes from hammering. If the hammering and heating happen harmonically, in consonance with the celestial harmony that once infused power into the matter, it excites that same power and makes it strong . . . So maybe it is just some kind of hammering and heating that draws out power latent in the matter – when the time is right, obviously. Taking advantage of the celestial moment certainly helps in compounding medicines. But if anyone should want to use metals and stones, it is best just to hammer and heat them without making any figure. For apart from my suspicion that figures are worthless, we should not rashly permit even the shadow of idolatry.¹¹⁹

Ficino's bottom line is prudential and conventional: "never try anything at all that religion forbids."¹²⁰

Long before he wrote *De vita III*, he knew the risks that such a project would bring. He had drafted a tract against predictive astrology in 1477, before writing his plague book and *De vita I*.¹²¹ As *De vita III* circulated in Florence, he pricked up his ears for the predictable questions. Are medicine and astrology fit callings for a priest? Is astrology not a threat to free will? How can the heavens be alive if pantheism is heresy? Surely the demonolatry implied by magical images of pagan gods is a grave sin against religion.¹²² Answering his inquisitors playfully and sarcastically was one way to dodge their complaints. When the attacks grew more pointed, he suggested a more direct approach, a scholar's rhetorical dodge, to his protectors: "tell them that magic or images are not really approved by Marsilio but described while he interprets Plotinus."¹²³ Nevertheless, Ficino knew full well that *De vita*, with all its learned philosophizing, was also a compilation of recipes, a medical advice book. If doctors and patients took his advice, he was responsible for the physical or moral harm done to them. This is why, when speaking of a love talisman that

resembles an image from the disreputable *Picatrix*, he mentions "many minute observations about stars and words which I do not propose to repeat since my topic is medicine, not spells."¹²⁴ These words draw an unusually sharp line between medicine and magic, evidence that their author understands the ethical burden of his prescriptions. But Ficino's moral response to magic was not as convincing as his natural philosophy and metaphysics. In its framework of Neoplatonized Aristotelianism, *De vita* succeeds as a philosophical account of magic's *effectiveness* (Fig. 8-3), which may explain why the book stayed in print for more than a hundred and fifty years. The magic went too far, however, always overreaching from the domain of natural objects into the realm of personal spirits. If Ficino's many readers were persuaded that his magic was effective, they ought not to have been convinced that it was also *good* for good Christians.

NOTES

1. Ficino 1989; quotations from Ficino 1989 follow the Kaske/Clark text, but the translations are mine; for editions and manuscripts, see Kaske's introduction, 6–12. For the topics covered in these notes, the non-English, especially the Italian, bibliography is immense and indispensable, but I have avoided reference to it for reasons of space; see especially the writings of Eugenio Garin, Cesare Vasoli, Paola Zambelli, and Giancarlo Zanier. I am grateful to the editor of this volume and to Michael Allen for their criticisms and comments.
2. For a summary, see Allen 1999. The standard accounts of Ficino's philosophy are Kristeller 1943; Hankins 1990a; and the many books and articles by Allen and Hankins on specific works and themes. Ficino's major work of philosophy, his *Platonic Theology*, can now be read in English in Ficino 2001–6. On the philosophy of the period, see Copenhaver and Schmitt 1992.
3. Porphyry, *De vita Plotini* 1.
4. Siraisi 1990, 21–6, 48–77; Grendler 2002, 3–40, 77–82, 314–28.
5. Park 1985, 54–65, 199–209; Grendler 2002, 77–82.
6. Ficino 1989, 190; Dioscorides, 1.109; Pliny, *Natural History* 12.100, 13.18; for "myrobalsam" see the *Encyclopedia Britannica*; for the ship-stopper, the basilisk, and related items, see Copenhaver 1991.
7. Ficino 1989, 136–40, 144, 148–50, 154, 158, 178, 184, 190–4, 202, 214, 218, 228–30, 246, 294, 300–2, 350.
8. Ficino 1989, 106, 508–10; Kaske's introduction, 7, 17–21.
9. Above, n. 7.
10. Ficino 1989, 110; I almost always use the words "spirit" and "spirits" to translate Ficino's *spiritus*, which almost always corresponds to the Greek *pneuma*. It is important not to confuse this odd material substance with the unusual immaterial persons called "spirits" in English. The most important treatment of Ficino's *spiritus* is Walker 1958, 3–59, 75–84; on the larger issues of astrology and magic, see also Thornidike 1923–58; Yates 1964, 62–83; Garin 1983, 29–112; Copenhaver 1988a; Copenhaver 2006.
11. Ficino 1989, 108.

12. Straisi 1990, 21.
13. *Ibid.*, 101–4.
14. *Ibid.*, 104–6.
15. Ficino 1989, 112.
16. *Ibid.*, 112–14; classic studies of melancholy are Burton 1972; and Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl 1964; for more recent accounts of astrology, see Barton 1994; Grafton 1999, 1–70; Grafton and Newman 2001.
17. Ficino 1989, 116–20.
18. *Ibid.*, 118–22.
19. *Ibid.*, 130, 134–6, 146, 150–2, 160–2; Straisi 1990, 121–2, 136–41.
20. Ficino 1989, 122–8, 138.
21. *Ibid.*, 128–38.
22. *Ibid.*, 138–40; Straisi 1990, 141–52.
23. Ficino 1989, 140–8, 156–60.
24. *Ibid.*, 148.
25. Rhazes 1544, 524; Straisi 1990, 123, 209.
26. Smoller 1994, 76, 179, n. 103; Straisi 1990, 128.
27. Ficino 1481; Kaskel's introduction to Ficino 1989, 25.
28. Straisi 1990, 128–30, 133–6.
29. Ficino 1989, 102, 106; Connell 1999; Park 1985, 4–5.
30. Kaskel's introduction to Ficino 1989, 6–8, 24–31.
31. Ficino 1989, 184, 228, 312, 326.
32. *Ibid.*, 188, 196–8.
33. *Ibid.*, 192.
34. *Ibid.*, 174–8, 226.
35. Ficino names about seventy distinct authorities – ancient, medieval, and a few contemporaries; see the list in Kaskel's second index in Ficino 1989, 485–92; Straisi 1990, 68–9, 123–36.
36. Ficino 1989, 216.
37. *Ibid.*, 212.
38. *Ibid.*, 208–10.
39. *Ibid.*, 208–12.
40. Aristotle, *De anima* 423b17–26; Ephesians 6:11–12, which became “the world, the flesh and the devil” in the litany of the Anglican prayer book.
41. Ficino 1989, 222–4; Walker 1958, 6–7.
42. Ficino 1989, 220–2.
43. *Ibid.*, 206; below, n. 84.
44. *Ibid.*, 194, 228–30.
45. *Ibid.*, 194.
46. *Ibid.*, 232.
47. These definitions of “stone,” “amulet,” and “talisman” are mine by stipulation, not normal lexical items; cf. Walker 1958, 14–15.
48. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 2.23.36, 29.45.
49. For the philosophy that supported Ficino's preference, see Copenhagen 1984; Copenhagen 1986; Copenhagen 1987; Copenhagen 1988a; Copenhagen 1988b; Copenhagen 2006.
50. Ficino 1989, 224; my account of messages, song and music derives from Walker 1958, 5–24, 42–4, 48–53, 75–84; Tomlinson 1993, 101–44, presents an important challenge to Walker's view and mine. The answer to Tomlinson's argument is that Ficino cites the chapter from Aquinas (*Summa contra gentiles* 3.105.2–6; below, n. 94) which shows that the magician's words are invitations to demons just because they are signs that can only be addressed to a mind: “Magicians in their works use various vocal sounds that are meaningful and produce certain effects. But insofar as vocal sound is meaningful, it has no power except from some mind, either the mind of the one speaking or the mind of the one to whom it is spoken . . . But it cannot be said that . . . the effect is *from* the mind of the one speaking . . . What is left, then, is that actions of this sort are accomplished through some mind *to which* the speech of the one speaking the vocal sounds . . . is directed. A sign of this is that the meaningful vocal sounds used by magicians are appeals, entreaties, promises or even commands, as of one person addressing another.”
51. Ficino 1989, 318.
52. The treatise by Proclus, translated by Ficino as *De sacrificio*, appears with the Greek text and an English translation in Copenhagen 1988b, 102–10; Walker 1958, 36–7; Storvanes 1996, 51–6. On the ancient theology, see Allen 1998, 24–49; Walker 1972, 1–21; Copenhagen 1993, 149–82; Yates 1964, 1–43.
53. Wallis 1972, 110–34; Copenhagen 1987, 452–5.
54. Ficino 1989, 318; Proclus, *De sacrificio*, above, n. 52.
55. Clark 1997 examines demonology from the point of view of witchcraft, mainly after Ficino's time; for gods, idols and demons in earlier times, see Flint 1991, 3–35; 204–16; Kieckhefer 1990, 8–28, 102–5; Storvanes 1996, 264–71.
56. Ficino 1989, 278, 320.
57. *Ibid.*, 232, 236–8, 242, 384, 388.
58. Plotinus, *Enneads* 4.3.11; *Asclepius*, 23–4, 37–8, in Hermes Trismegistus (pseudo) 1992, xxxviii, 62, 80–1, 89–90, 208, 236–41, 254–7; below, n. 62.
59. Ficino 1989, 396–8.
60. *Ibid.*, 208–10, 281, 300, 399.
61. Above, n. 52.
62. Ficino 1989, 134, 276, 306, 312; one of these references is to the material on statues from the *Asclepius* mentioned above, n. 58; only one of the others might come from the *Corpus Hermeticum*; the other two cite “technical” medieval Hermetica, which are catalogs of astrological, alchemical, and other recipes, not the “theoretical” Hermetica for which Ficino admired Hermes; Hermes Trismegistus (pseudo) 1992, xxxii–xlv; cf. Walker 1958, 40–1, 45; Yates 1964, 20–61.
63. Ficino 1989, 388; Walker 1958, 42.
64. Ficino 1989, 236; Frances Yates made an eloquent case for Ficino's magic as Hermetic in Yates 1964, 1–83, provoking a torrent of reaction that continues to this day; see Hermes Trismegistus (pseudo) 1992, xlv–lxi; Copenhagen 1988b; Copenhagen 1993; Copenhagen 1990; Copenhagen 1994; Allen 1995, article xii.
65. Ficino 1989, 382.
66. *Ibid.*, 374; below, nn. 67–70.
67. *Ibid.*, 348–50.
68. *Ibid.*, 300; Pliny, *Natural History* 10.12–13; 30.131; 36.149–51.
69. Ficino 1989, 268, 290, 356.
70. *Ibid.*, 316; Copenhagen 1988b, 88–90.

71. Ficino 1989, 336, and Kaske's notes, 448–9, citing *Picatrix*; Anon. 1986, 82–3 (2.12.39, 44). Leonine demons appear frequently as amulets, but the illustration shown here is from the *Corpus inscriptionum et monumentorum religionis mihriacae* 1956–60, 543; Ulansey 1989, 46–54, explains that in its original context the sphere under the lion's feet is cosmic rather than solar, showing the intersection of the ecliptic with the celestial equator.
72. Ficino 1989, 350.
73. *Ibid.*, 376.
74. *Ibid.*, 324, 340, 350; Porphyry, *De vita Plotini* 10; Allen 1995, article XIV; Copenhaver 1991.
75. Ficino 1989, 244.
76. *Ibid.*, 242.
77. *Ibid.*, 244–6.
78. *Ibid.*, 390.
79. *Ibid.*, 318.
80. *Ibid.*, 308; Proclus, *De sacrificio*, in Copenhaver 1988b; *ibid.*, 85–6; Proclus 1963, 39, 71–2, 79, 140–5, 189, with notes by E. R. Dodds at 208–9, 222–3, 263, 267, 344–5; Iamblichus, *De mysteriis*, 2.11, 5.7, 12, 23; Dodds 1968, 287, 291–5; Storvanes 1996, 167–89; above, n. 53.
81. Ficino 1989, 254–6, 362–4, 376.
82. *Ibid.*, 250, 254–8.
83. *Ibid.*, 318, 400.
84. *Ibid.*, 320–2, 368; above, n. 43.
85. *Ibid.*, 322–4; Copenhaver 1991.
86. *Ibid.*, 324, 354; Alkindi 1975; Barron 1994, 98–102.
87. Ficino 1989, 244.
88. *Ibid.*, 270–2.
89. *Ibid.*, 328.
90. *Ibid.*, 330–2.
91. *Ibid.*, 356–62; Plato, *Phaedo* 85E–86D; Arist. *De anima* 407b27–32; Plotinus, *Enneads* 4.4.41; below, n. 105.
92. Ficino 1989, 340.
93. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* II–II.96.2 ad 2; Copenhaver 1984, 531–46.
94. Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* III.105.12; above, nn. 77–9.
95. Ficino 1989, 280; Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* III.92.8; for other passages, see *Life*, 340, 382, 390; Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* III.92, 99, 104–5; *Summa theologiae* 1.65.4, 91.2, 110.1, 115.3; *De oculis operibus naturae*, 9–11, 14, 17–20; [*De fato*] 5; Walker 1958, 42–4; and above, nn. 93–4.
96. Ficino 1989, 318, 328–30.
97. *Ibid.*, 386.
98. *Ibid.*
99. *Ibid.*, 384–6; Plotinus, *Enneads* 4.4.40, 43–4; Copenhaver 1988b, 86–8.
100. *Ibid.*, 384; Proclus, *De sacrificio*, in Copenhaver 1988b.
101. *Ibid.*, 386.
102. *Ibid.*, 388.
103. Above, nn. 50 and 90–1.
104. Ficino 1989, 354–8; Walker 1958, 17; above, n. 50.
105. Ficino 1989, 354–6; Walker 1958, 15.
106. Ficino 1989, 354–6.
107. *Ibid.*, 358–60.
108. *Ibid.*, 360; above, n. 50.
109. *Ibid.*, 360; Walker 1958, 17–18; above, nn. 90–1.
110. *Ibid.*, 364, 368.
111. Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part I*, III.i.53–5.
112. Ficino 1989, 244, 388; Iamblichus, *De mysteriis*, 57.4–58.8, 271.10–12; Shaw 1995, 89, 133–42, 150–61; cf. Walker 1958, 45–53.
113. Michael Allen has illuminated many cases of Ficino's philosophical uses of the elaborate Neoplatonic theologies, but see especially Allen 1981 and 1984; also Lambertton 1986; Bisson 2004.
114. Ficino 1989, 370; Iamblichus, *De mysteriis*, 278.15–284.10.
115. Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, IV.i.164–5.
116. Ficino 1989, 388; Iamblichus, *De mysteriis*, 32.8–33.11.
117. Copenhaver 1987.
118. Ficino 1989, 248, 276–80, 354, 362–8.
119. *Ibid.*, 342; Walker 1958, 53.
120. *Ibid.*, 280.
121. Allen 1999, 354.
122. Ficino 1989, 380, 394.
123. *Ibid.*, 396.
124. *Ibid.*, 354; Walker 1958, 25, 30.