

DENIS J. J. ROBICHAUD, *PLATO'S PERSONA: MARSILIO FICINO, RENAISSANCE HUMANISM, AND PLATONIC TRADITIONS*, UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA PRESS, PHILADELPHIA 2018, 344 PP., ISBN 9780812249859.\*

VALERY REES

SCHOOL OF PHILOSOPHY AND ECONOMIC SCIENCE, LONDON



This monograph breaks new ground in the field of Ficino studies and is to be welcomed for its fresh focus and clear view. The author has a confident grasp of and respect for the contributions of other scholars present and past, but he has also thought deeply about Ficino as a writer and has come up with fresh insights based on a careful reading of many texts and his own painstaking research, including studies of Ficino's marginalia in the manuscripts he worked with. Besides reviewing past literature, either in the text or in his substantial notes, he has presented a revised reconstruction of the order in which Ficino worked on various texts, examining the role played in the formation of his ideas by Iamblichus, Alcinous and Albinus (patiently distinguishing between the two), by Plotinus, Brotinus, Amelius and a host of others. He has tracked down the presence of those more shadowy figures Eudorus, Philolaus and Aglaophemus, and has given due weight to the crucial influences of Proclus, Porphyry and Dionysius the pseudo-Areopagite. All this has led him to develop a new understanding of Ficino's working strategies across the length of his career. It has also resulted in the observation that Ficino is acutely aware of the dramatic potential of dialogue. As presented in this account, Ficino appreciates the dialogic form of Plato's writings and uses that knowledge, together with his extensive reading in the commentary traditions of antiquity, to penetrate its deepest meanings; he then himself engages in similar strategies to allow different voices to contribute to a progressive elucidation of philosophic views.

---

\* This review was presented at the Philosophical Review Club (University of Leuven) on 6 December 2018.

Central to Robichaud's re-examination of Ficino's work is the symbol of the mask: *prosopon* in Greek, or in Latin, *persona*. He begins, therefore, with a detailed discussion of ancient oratory, including masks, faces and persons, concealment and disclosure. He raises early some fundamental Socratic questions, on the difference between the outward face and the inner person, on whether thinking can be best understood as the soul conversing with itself, and whether there is a prior pre-discursive person – a 'what one really is', as opposed to 'what one thinks one is'. This is in addition to the outwardly dialogic role of the mask in advancing discussion and refutation.

In relation to the idea that the ancients veiled the most profound of their teachings, Ficino is shown to have grasped the important key that only an intelligent use of comparable techniques will allow those innermost truths to be unveiled. The mask, or its virtual equivalent in writing, is thus a device not only for displaying character but for bringing into the reader's presence things that are otherwise not readily seen. Although the original Greek masks have a strongly visual aspect, adoption into the Latin tradition, with the Latin name, *persona*, enhanced the sense of adopting a voice, through the Latin word derivation, *per-sonare*, 'to sound through'. Through *personae* different interlocutors with different voices interact to advance views in different styles. Aside from the traditional grotesque masks of the ancient stage, Robichaud distinguishes three *personae* or *prosopa* in Plato's writings: Plato's own *persona* (with a subsidiary discussion of whether Plato is to be identified with the Athenian stranger), the *persona* of Socrates, and that of Pythagoras. Moving to Ficino's writing he adds two more masks: the *persona* of Plotinus, in whom we are to hear the voice of Plato sounding again, and Ficino's own *persona* as he inserts himself into the Platonic tradition as another mouthpiece for Plato. Ficino certainly developed a Platonic style of his own and this is highlighted here, with frequent reference to material from Ficino's *Letters*, where it is easy to demonstrate Ficino at play with rhetorical techniques – instances of his revival of the Platonic tradition of *serio ludere*, that is, approaching the most serious topics through play. In such passages, along with the use of masks goes the additional technique of *enargeia*, bringing scenes vividly to life. One example of this is the description of Plato's Academy and its inner sanctum presented in a letter to Braccio Martelli and also in the proem to his Plotinus lectures. These are just the kind of dramatic settings that allow the masks to be deployed to good effect. But the use of *personae* and *enargeia* runs throughout his works.

Just as Ficino was unusual in taking on the task of translating the entire Platonic corpus and the later traditions of Platonism, so is Robichaud unusual in tacking the broad sweep of all Ficino's works, placing them in their wider context in the history of thought. He stresses the interconnectedness of all Plato's dialogues throughout Ficino's work, and his use of a full range of late-antique commentators even in the early stages of his work, though he did not publish his translations of them until much later. For all its complexity, this book therefore provides an exceptionally fine introduction for early students of Renaissance philosophy or literature to Ficino as a writer and thinker. In this context, it is to be regretted that a number of philosophical terms are used without explanation (e.g. diegetic, agon, thiasus, prolepsis) although others, such as *enargeia* are explained really well.

In separate chapters (3, 4 and 5), he examines the use of three particular masks or mouthpieces, those of Socrates, Pythagoras and Plato. Robichaud reminds us that when Plato presents ideas through the masks of the former two, it is perhaps because they themselves left nothing written and much unsaid. Meanwhile the character of Ficino's beloved 'divine Plato' is also seen as a mask, and in some contexts this Plato merges with the anonymous Athenian Stranger of the *Laws* and the *Epinomis*. One effect of this triple examination is the emergence of an especially strong Pythagorean voice in Ficino's readings of Plato. An appendix lists 28 different Pythagoreans to whom Ficino makes allusion. The method of counting is not perfect, but Robichaud notes that the 22 Pythagoreans living before Plato, or contemporary with him, are named on 428 pages of Ficino's *Opera omnia*. A further 57 page-mentions cover the later Pythagoreans. These compare with 117 references to Hermes, 148 to Orpheus and 83 to Zoroaster. Of the 428 earlier Pythagorean mentions, Pythagoras *ipse* accounts for only 133 pages, but the others include Parmenides, with 97 and Timaeus with 86, both perhaps speaking through the pages of Plato. It is at any rate clear that there is an emphatic point being made about the Pythagorean character of Ficino's Platonism, and perhaps even Platonism itself.

A Platonic motif that appears frequently in Ficino's writing and is correctly emphasised by Robichaud, is the notion of a sense of family among groups of philosophers, be it the *prisci theolog*i, Plato's family or Ficino's own Academy. Related to this are the notions of begetting books as children, playing the midwife, and arguably, too, the concept of the *alter ego*, a role assigned to several of Ficino's so-called 'special friends', including Giovanni

Cavalcanti, Pier Leone da Spoleto, Martin Prenninger and Filippo Valori. Ficino sometimes even refers to himself as being discernible within their masks. He also sets great store by the idea that we learn about ourselves through our contact and conversation with the soul of another. Ficino certainly valued the conversations that allowed him to shape very precisely the eventual written forms of his teachings, whether he mentions them playfully as masks for himself or not. Two of his valued fellow philosophers, Giorgio Antonio Vespucci and Cristoforo Landino, generally escape the playful touch: one senses Ficino's highly-developed sensitivity to appropriateness of occasion.

There are further passages Robichaud has collected dealing with instances of one person speaking *sub persona* of another, including the use of a Dionysian mask in the dedication letter to his commentary on the *Mystical Theology*. Employing a deliberate confusion between Dionysus the god and Dionysius the philosopher (a person already wearing a mask as Paul's convert, though Ficino seems to have been unaware of that additional twist), he speaks of the latter as reaching an ecstatic state, « surpassing the natural limits of understanding » and being « wondrously transformed into the beloved god », an accomplishment that makes his apparently drunken dithyrambic utterances permissible even in a Christian context (p. 61).

This brings us to a major point of interpretation running through the whole book: the assumption, for which ample grounds are given, that the philosophy of the ancients can be brought into practical use in a Christian context. This is presented in several ways. The first is through a discussion of virtue ethics. Points are raised in relation to various texts and authors to show that right action leads to *eudaimonia*, in the sense of personal happiness and well-being. But Ficino is keen to pursue much further the connection with the Christian life. In discussing the goal of philosophy as early as his *De amore* (1469) and the very first pair of letters in his collection, and as reiterated on many occasions throughout his works, Ficino presents the goal of Platonism as one of becoming godlike, and reaching a state of bliss. « Philosophy », says Robichaud (p. 83) « prepares the inborn qualities of the intellect to receive the infused light of divine power or virtue to help it assimilate to God ». All the stages of a Platonic education lead in this direction, from the principles of mathematics to the study of astronomy, which inculcates a sense of wonder. From wonder will come a passion to learn and the desire to be « initiated into the true and real mysteries by

receiving wisdom in her unity, in mind which is itself a unity » (p. 207). The glorious realities will then be seen « face to face ».

This argument reaches its culmination in relation to the *Epinomis*. Robichaud says, « The *Epinomis* confirms a thesis at the heart of Ficino's hermeneutical framework for interpreting Plato's corpus, namely that the goal of Platonism is the divinization of man » (p. 206). The *Epinomis* was not regarded as vital by Plotinus, nor even as definitely authentic by Proclus, but for Ficino it seems to have embodied a fully ordered approach to knowledge of divine certainties in a sense that appears also to have been apprehended by Iamblichus (p. 212). Thus, the *skopos* of the *Epinomis* as stated by Ficino, is that « once the intellect has undergone all of this [dialectical training], and once it is united to itself, and through itself returns in unity with God, he [Plato] says that it will be as happy (*beatam*) as it can according to its capacities, and that in the afterlife it will be altogether blissful ». (Ficino reuses *beatam*, though Robichaud has varied the translation to underline his point). *Henosis* is thus the aim, and virtue ethics and dialectic both lead there. The kind of divine happiness in question can be achieved in the present life, as Plotinus had shown by example on at least four occasions. Robichaud therefore maintains that Ficino, while maintaining a great reverence for Augustine, goes far beyond Augustine, who rejected Platonism as a path to anything a Christian could recognise as divine (p. 217–218).

There is much detailed discussion of particular works of Ficino, as well as useful sections confirming their dating. But the main thrust of Robichaud's argument is to point up Ficino's own overriding concern, namely, to show how philosophy serves to purify the mind and convert it towards contemplation. Discursive exercises can lead to noetic contact with divine truth, and such contact, being a contact with divine light, brings to life in the individual qualities that were innate but previously undeveloped. Here Ficino is drawing especially on the vocabulary of Iamblichus, an author Robichaud has shown to be significant from the very start of his career. This contact with the divine light and fire may ultimately lead to a level of understanding that cannot be expressed in speech. In the *argumentum* to Plato's second letter, Ficino speaks of the different styles, the highest of which is that which aims at a sacred silence (p. 223). This, too, is the silence and darkness which Dionysius extols.

As Robichaud points out, Ficino sometimes treads « the exegetical fault line between orthodoxy and heterodoxy » (p. 203). Ficino himself seems

constantly aware of this, and another great merit of Robichaud's work is his sensitivity to Ficino's own concerns. Robichaud makes a full investigation of how Ficino contrives to bring the incarnation back into his philosophical arguments, using the expression '*si deus fiat homo*' – a textual variant – to enable him to do so. This is discussed with especial reference to the letter entitled *Concordia Mosis et Platonis* (p. 195–200) and, together with the *Confirmatio Christianorum per Socratica*, it provides some degree of support for the suggestion that the Platonists somehow foresaw the coming of Christ. So although it would appear that the incarnation has a very low profile in Ficino's writings, because they are based on Plato and the Platonic commentators, this does not detract from the centrality of Christian orientation in his whole approach. One might similarly observe an absence of commentary on the passion, the concept of sin and several other Christian doctrines, yet it would be wholly wrong to regard Ficino as a thinker for whom Christianity mattered less than Platonic philosophy.

In sum, this is a work of outstanding scholarship. It does of course contain much that is already known to scholars in the field, all of which is duly acknowledged and appropriately referenced. But it also adds the fruits of Robichaud's own prior articles. He succeeds in bringing together an impressive amount of material in a fresh, useful and enlivening way, and without ever allowing the main lines of argument to be buried in the considerable mass of detail. This is a substantial achievement for a first monograph, and Robichaud deserves congratulation.