



# Marsilio Ficino on Reminiscentia and the Transmigration of Souls

## Citation

Hankins, James. 2005. Marsilio Ficino on Reminiscentia and the transmigration of souls. *Rinascimento* 45: 3-17.

## Published Version

<http://www.rinascimentomeridionale.it/>

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In *Rinascimento*, n.s. XLV (2005), 3-17.

JAMES HANKINS

MARSILIO FICINO ON *REMINISCENTIA*  
AND THE TRANSMIGRATION OF SOULS

In the middle of the eighteenth and last book of his *Platonic Theology* (1482), Marsilio Ficino makes a rather cryptic remark. “In everything we pen,” he says, “we want to affirm, and others to affirm, only what may appear acceptable to a council of Christian theologians.”<sup>1</sup> On the surface this remark appears similar to other disclaimers Ficino issues elsewhere in his writings, for example at the beginning of the *De christiana religione* and at the beginning and end of the *Platonic Theology* itself: “In all I discuss, either here or elsewhere, I wish to maintain only what meets with the approval of the Church.”<sup>2</sup> Ficino uses a similar formula at the end of Book 13 of the *Theology*, after

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<sup>1</sup> *Platonic Theology* (hereafter *PT*) 18.5.4: ‘Nos autem in omnibus, quae scribimus, eatenus affirmari a nobis aliisque volumus, quatenus Christianorum theologorum concilio videatur.’ The book, chapter and paragraph divisions follow that of M. FICINO, *Platonic Theology*, ed. and tr. M. J. B. ALLEN and J. HANKINS, 6 vols., Cambridge, Mass. 2001-6.

<sup>2</sup> *PT*, ed. ALLEN and HANKINS, I, p. 1, and VI, p. 218. ‘In omnibus quae aut hic aut alibi a me tractantur, tantum assertum esse volo quantum ab ecclesia comprobatur.’ Precisely the same phrase is added by hand in some copies of the *editio princeps* of the *De christiana religione* (Florence: Niccolò di Lorenzo, 1476 = HCR 7069, GW 9876), for example the copy in Houghton Library (Harvard University), Inc 6125, sign. a1r, whose

giving a naturalistic Avicennian account of miracles that he probably thought was dangerously close to heterodoxy: “But individual points concerning miracles, points we have discussed from a Platonic viewpoint, we affirm only insofar as they are approved by Christian theologians.”<sup>3</sup>

But the formula in Book 18 is slightly different, and the subjunctive may indicate that Ficino was thinking in terms of a possible future council of Christian theologians rather than simply deferring in a generic way to the magisterium of the Church. Perhaps this allusion to a possible council should even be put next to Pico’s call, some years later, for a grand disputation on 900 theses embracing all religious wisdom ancient and modern, Christian and non-Christian. The disclaimer in Book 18 comes at the end of two chapters, 4 and 5, where Ficino describes the doctrine of the ancient Platonists on the descent of the soul. Ficino knew perfectly well that the idea that the soul pre-existed the body and descended into it at the moment of birth was an Origenist heresy, and he could easily have found out from Peter Lombard’s *Sentences* (Book 2, dist. 17, art. 97) that this

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corrections appear to be in the hand of Ficino’s collaborator Sebastiano Salvini. The same hand makes a few corrections to the text which seem to reveal Ficino’s worries about his reputation for orthodoxy. For example, in Cap. III, the original text (which is also the text of M. FICINO, *Opera Omnia*, Basel 1576, repr. 1983, p. 3) reads: ‘Si non audit haec Deus, est ignorans; si non exaudit, ingratus; crudelis omnino, si vociferari nos compellit quotidie, quos non exaudit.’ The scribe corrects this text to: ‘Si non audit haec Deus, *forte videtur* ignorans; si non exaudit, *forsitan apparebit* ingratus; crudelis *quoddammodo*, si vociferari nos compellit quotidie, quos non exaudit.’

<sup>3</sup> *PT* 15.5.8, ed. ALLEN and HANKINS, IV, p. 216: ‘Singula vero quae de miraculis ex Platoniorum mente disseruimus, ita a nobis affirmata est ut a Christianis theologis approbantur.’

doctrine had been anathematized by the Ecumenical Council of Constantinople in 543.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed he begins chapter 4 by restating the orthodox doctrine:

Truly, since God is present in every place but is outside place, and the soul is not enclosed by place and is created and appears in a moment, properly we should neither say that it descends nor inquire whence it descends. For emanating from God Himself the soul is present to the body, so to speak, as a ray is present to the eye from the sun's light.<sup>5</sup>

But he goes on to say, “Now and then, however, it is pleasant to converse with the ancients” (*delectat interdum una cum priscis confabulari*). Ficino proceeds to review various ancient teachings about aetherial and celestial vehicles of the soul, including those of Zoroaster, the Magi, and Hermes Trismegistus. He assimilates these vehicles to the *hichnos* or *idolum* of Plotinus – the image the soul casts into body, “like the moon projecting its luminescence into a cloud.” He even goes so far as to suggest (*PT* 18.4.2), foreshadowing the modern interpretation of Abraham Bos,<sup>6</sup> that Aristotle too posited the

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<sup>4</sup> H. DENZINGER – A. SCHÖNMETZER, *Enchiridion symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, 34<sup>th</sup> ed., Rome 1967, nos. 403, 456.

<sup>5</sup> *PT* 18.4.1, ed. ALLEN and HANKINS, VI, p. 102: ‘Revera cum deus extra locum adsit omni loco, et anima non claudatur loco momentoque et creetur et adsit, neque dicendum proprie est eam descendere, neque unde descendat est quaerendum. Sic enim ab ipso deo manans adest corpori, ut ita dixerim, sicut a solis lumine radius oculo.’

<sup>6</sup> A. P. BOS, *The soul and its instrumental body: A reinterpretation of Aristotle's philosophy of living nature*, Leiden 2003.

existence of a fine-material vehicle to support the functions of the intellectual soul, distinct from the organic body, as the latter substrate could only support the lower sensitive and vegetative functions of the soul.

At the beginning of Chapter 5, entitled “In what part of heaven are souls created and from what part do they descend?” Ficino begins by saying it is foolish to ask in what part of heaven souls are created, since souls, being immaterial, are not confined to a place, and he repeats his statement that the soul emanates from God like the ray from the sun. “Yet it is delightful,” he goes on, “to play poetically for a while with the ancients” (*delectat tamen cum antiquis interdum poetice ludere*). The rest of the chapter describes various Platonic theories, from the *Timaeus* and the writings of other Platonists, about the sowing of souls in the stars and planets prior to their descent into human bodies. Although he immediately gives an allegorical/astrological reading of the descent of the soul through Cancer and its return through Capricorn, he seems to take more seriously Iamblichus’s view that souls are allotted various spheres and “after many centuries” descend towards the elements, living daemonic, human and bestial lives before returning to heaven. It is at this point that Ficino adds the remark already quoted that he wants to affirm only what may appear acceptable to a (future?) council of theologians.

It seems to me quite possible that it is Ficino’s intention here to propose, in a careful and tentative way, an alternative to what had become the settled Catholic understanding of the origin of the soul in later medieval theology, namely, that every individual soul is created immediately out of nothing by God at the moment of its unification with the body. This was the doctrine defended by the most authoritative scholastic theologians, including Aquinas, but it had not in Ficino’s day been defined as

an orthodox doctrine by any council or pope, and even today is accepted by the Roman Church only as a *sententia theologicè certa* (as opposed to a doctrine *de fide*).<sup>7</sup> Ficino on the other hand is clearly fascinated by the Platonic teaching that the soul has aetherial and celestial vehicles in addition to its gross corporeal one and that the former are temporally prior to the latter. He expounds it many times in the *Platonic Theology*, in his letters, and in his commentaries on Plato. Even though in the present case he does so in a playful manner, Michael Allen has taught us that Ficino's "playful" discussions ordinarily conceal a serious purpose (*iocari serio*).<sup>8</sup> And Ficino, despite his lack of formal theological training, undoubtedly knows this doctrine to be in contrast with, if not contradictory of, the consensus of late medieval theologians about the origin of the soul. I will suggest later on what it was that led him to revive, and perhaps to advocate, the ancient Platonic understanding of the descent of the soul and its possession of psychic vehicles apart from its gross material body.

Such an experimental, exploratory attitude to Christian doctrines would, I believe, suit Ficino's general profile as a speculative theologian, which in this respect is similar to Pico's. Ficino clearly wants to be considered an orthodox Christian, but at the same time he wishes to influence, reform and redirect Christian theology. His is not a passive orthodoxy. Like Pico and later Erasmus, he wants theological reform, but from within. It

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<sup>7</sup> L. OTT, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, Rockford, Illinois, 1974, p. 100.

<sup>8</sup> M. J. B. ALLEN, *The Second Ficino-Pico Controversy*, in his *Plato's Third Eye: Studies in Marsilio Ficino's Metaphysics and Its Sources*, Aldershot 1995, essay X, pp. 437-39; see also E. WIND, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, rev. edn., New York 1968, p. 236.

is of course difficult to assess the motives which made him insist so vehemently and so often on his orthodoxy. He might simply have been afraid of the Inquisition, which only a few years later, in 1490, did investigate his astrological doctrines.<sup>9</sup> Or he might have been afraid of embarrassing his patron, Lorenzo de' Medici. But the impression one forms from his writings, especially at points where his exposition of Platonism leads him to consider heterodox beliefs, is of a man struggling sincerely to express his distinctive vision of the divine while staying within the bounds of orthodoxy.<sup>10</sup>

This was by no means an easy task, given Ficino's project. Ficino aimed to return Christianity to its ancient Platonic roots, with a view to reuniting piety and wisdom, sundered, as he believed, by corrupt philosophers in the recent past, especially by followers of Averroes and Alexander of Aphrodisias. Ficino recognized and deplored the fact that Christian theology had developed in non-Platonic directions in recent centuries; it was this that led him to apply the powerful Renaissance myth of a decadent Middle Age to the realm of theology.<sup>11</sup> The theological corruption of the Middle Age was not simply a matter of its reliance on Aristotelian philosophy. Aristotelian philosophy was good in its own sphere, the natural world, but it needed to be completed by the more

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<sup>9</sup> P. O. KRISTELLER, *Marsilio Ficino and the Roman Curia*, in *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters*, vol. IV, Rome 1996, pp. 275-76.

<sup>10</sup> A different perspective on Ficino's attitude to reincarnation and its relationship to Catholic orthodoxy is adopted by B. OGREN, *Circularity, the Soul-Vehicle and the Renaissance Rebirth of Reincarnation: Marsilio Ficino and Isaac Abarbanel on the Possibility of Transmigration*, «Accademia», VI, 2004, pp. 63-94.

<sup>11</sup> Most famously in a letter to Janus Pannonius in Book VIII of his *Epistulae*, Venice 1495, ff. CXXXXVv -CXXXXVIv = FICINO, *Opera* I, pp. 871-872.

sublime philosophy of Plato, who had a deeper understanding of the spiritual realities that lay behind appearances. Ficino was, moreover, aware that ancient Platonism for its part was also deeply dependent on Aristotle for its understanding of the natural world, and Plotinus offered him a useful model for how Aristotelian natural philosophy might be incorporated into a broader metaphysical framework drawn from Plato's works. It was rather the case that the particular way in which Aristotelian philosophy had developed, especially since the fourteenth century, was incompatible with the metaphysical commitments of ancient Neoplatonism. In some instances the speculative development of Christian theology had been frozen by dogmatic definitions which represented major obstacles to the re-Platonizing of Christian theology. Today we tend to celebrate those who fight entrenched orthodoxies, but in the Renaissance orthodoxy was armed and dangerous; so the Ficinian project was not without risk.

Ficino found himself struggling against the tide of late medieval theology in a variety of areas. Since the early fourteenth century many Christian theologians, in line with the widespread use of the freedom and omnipotence of God as a tool for speculative thought, had emphasized the contingency of the created order – the possibility that God might have created a world different from the one he had in fact created. Ficino on the other hand, following the *Timaeus* and ancient Platonism generally, preferred the teleological analysis of God's perfect creative work and the Neoplatonic principle of plenitude as his primary speculative tools. So his theology emphasized, in the manner of antiquity, the unique, perfect and ontologically exhaustive character of creation, the shadow of God's perfection. The doctrine of God's freedom to create alternate worlds to the one he has actually created was not defined as Catholic doctrine until the nineteenth



century,<sup>12</sup> and in the fifteenth century the possibility of a general reorientation of Christian theology towards Platonic “optimism” was still a live option, as its defense by later thinkers like Leibniz and Malebranche shows.

Ficino’s project of remaking contemporary theology along Platonic lines also found itself in difficulties over certain doctrines concerning the soul’s relationship to the body. From the time of Augustine until the thirteenth century Christian theology had favored a Platonic account of soul’s relationship to body, but from the early thirteenth century onwards there had been a marked drift to Aristotelian hylomorphism, which emphasized the integrity of the human person as a complex of body and soul. This followed in part from the decision of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 to define the *creatura humana* as “quasi communem ex spiritu et corpore constitutam,”<sup>13</sup> and culminated in the psychology of St. Thomas Aquinas. The Eighth General Council of Constantinople (869-70) had previously rejected the doctrine that human nature was tripartite, consisting of *sarx*, *psyche* and *pneuma*, insisting that “unam animam rationabilem et intellectualem habere hominem.” This seemed to eliminate the possibility that the soul had a separate, fine-material vehicle or the hypothesis that there was a higher pneumatic soul in addition to the lower bodily one.<sup>14</sup> The Council of Vienne (1311-12) condemned as heretical the compromise between Platonic spiritualism and hylomorphism

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<sup>12</sup> At the provincial synod of Cologne in 1857, condemning the works of the theologian Anton Günther, ‘Hegelianismo infecta.’ see DENZINGER – SCHÖNMETZER, *Enchiridion*, no. 2828.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., no. 800.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. no. 657.

advanced by the Franciscan theologian Peter John Olivi, who taught that the rational soul was not of itself, immediately, the essential form of the body, but only mediately through the *forma sensitiva et vegetiva*, which is really distinct from it. The Council reaffirmed hylomorphism and condemned the view “quod anima rationalis seu intellectiva non sit forma corporis humani per se et essentialiter.”<sup>15</sup> While in some passages Ficino too appears to endorse hylomorphism, elsewhere he seems to be attempting a kind of compromise similar to Olivi’s, arguing in Plotinian fashion that the rational soul indirectly rules the body through its *idolum* and so remains uncontaminated by any material potencies.<sup>16</sup> If my earlier suggestion is accepted – that Ficino wanted to revive the Neoplatonic doctrines of fine-material vehicles for the soul, acquired during its descent into the body – this would represent an even bolder challenge to the later medieval theological consensus around hylomorphism.

I have recently pointed to two other contexts in which Ficino challenges the theological orthodoxies of his time. One concerns his naturalistic account of miracles, drawn from Avicenna, which challenges the Thomistic view that a sharp distinction needs to be made between Christian miracles, performed *in virtute divina*, and non-Christian wonders which have naturalistic explanations.<sup>17</sup> Another is his insistence on the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., no. 902. The doctrine was reasserted at the Fifth Lateran Council (1513) under Leo X: see *ibid.*, no. 1440.

<sup>16</sup> See for example *PT* 9.5.2, ed. ALLEN and HANKINS, III, pp. 56-58, where both tendencies are visible.

<sup>17</sup> J. HANKINS, *Ficino, Avicenna and the occult powers of the rational soul*, in *Tra antica sapienza e filosofia naturale. La magia nell’Europa moderna*, Atti del convegno (Firenze, 2-4 ottobre 2003), a cura di F. MEROI, con la collaborazione di E. SCAPPARONE, 2 vols., Firenze 2006, I, pp. 35-52.

animation of the heavens, a doctrine that had been repeatedly condemned by the magisterium of the Church in the fourteenth century, which embraced instead the more mechanistic Aristotelian-Ptolemaic hypothesis about heavenly motions.<sup>18</sup> Michael Allen too has recently drawn attention to how Ficino's revival of the Platonic notion of cosmic cycles abandoned the rather parochial Augustinian understanding of physical space and historical time and accomplished "the gradual turning away from the medieval sense of scale towards the recognition of the vastness of time and space and thus eventually of an infinitistic cosmology" characteristic of modernity.<sup>19</sup> The rest of this article explores yet another area where Ficino challenged the consensus of medieval theologians, namely in his theories about the pre-existence of the soul and its powers of recollection and memory.

In Plato, as is well known, there is a tight connection between his theories of innate ideas, palingenesis and recollection. Briefly, Plato believes that our ability to reason correctly depends on innate knowledge of the Ideas (functioning here as unhypothesized first principles) which our souls acquired in a previous existence before they entered a physical body at birth. When we learn, as Plato famously demonstrated in the *Meno* (82b-85d), we are recalling what our souls knew in a previous disembodied

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<sup>18</sup> *Ficino and the Animation of the Heavens in Early Modern Theology*, in the proceedings of the conference *Laus Platonici philosophi: Marsilio Ficino and His Influence*, sponsored by Birkbeck College, University of London, 17-19 September 2004.

<sup>19</sup> M. J. B. ALLEN, *Life as a Dead Platonist*, in *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, his Philosophy, his Legacy*, ed. M. J. B. ALLEN and V. REES, with M. DAVIES, Leiden 2002, 159-178 at 177.

state. Living the philosophical life means living a “recollected” life, a life devoted to recovering the lost memories of the Plain of Truth (*Phaedrus* 248c). After 10,000 years and many reincarnations truly philosophical souls can regrow the wings of their souls and return to live with the gods. The unphilosophical are condemned to repeating human life in various forms in accordance with their merits or demerits, or their souls are even made to inhabit the body of beasts. Plato invokes in various places, usually in mythical form, the Pythagorean theories about the transmigration of souls, how they are punished for their sins in this life by being forced to live inferior human lives or by being plunged into the bodies of beasts to live an animal life.<sup>20</sup>

These Platonic doctrines, particularly the doctrine of transmigration, presented Ficino with a major exegetical challenge. Augustine in the *City of God* had said it was “most certain” that Plato had maintained the doctrine of the transmigration of souls into the bodies of beasts,<sup>21</sup> and had compared this teaching unfavorably with the “more honorable” (*honestius*) Christian doctrine of the resurrection. Porphyry had been afraid to hold Plato’s doctrine, says Augustine mockingly, for fear that a mother might come back as a mule and be ridden by her son. There is in fact a whole list of Christian authorities who condemned the doctrine of transmigration, including Aquinas in several places, Gratian and Peter Lombard. A few years after Ficino published the *Platonic Theology* the doctrine of the transmigration of souls was condemned in articles published by the University of Pisa, and Savonarola made sarcastic references to the belief in his sermons,

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<sup>20</sup> *Meno* 81b, *Phaedo* 70c, 81, 113a, *Phaedrus* 248c, *Republic* 10, 617d, *Timaeus* 41e, 90e, *Laws* 10, 903d, 904e.

<sup>21</sup> *Civ. Dei* 10.30: ‘Nam Platonem animas hominum post mortem revolvi usque ad corpora bestiarum scripsisse certissimum est.’

remarks that may have had Ficino for their target. Ficino for his part was obsessed with showing that Plato had never really believed this “ridiculous old wives’ tale” (*ridiculam ... fabellam ab anicularum fabulis nihil discrepantem*). Over and over in his writings he repeats that Plato’s references to the doctrine were “poetic”; that he was merely repeating a Pythagorean story which he himself did not believe; that it can be understood prophetically as a proto-Christian version of Purgatory; that it should be understood allegorically as a return of the soul to God; that it should be understood typologically as a prophecy of the resurrection of the body.<sup>22</sup>

Ficino is so worried that his readers will think Plato believed in the doctrine of transmigration in a literal sense that he devotes the greater part of Book 17 of the *Platonic Theology* to showing that this was not the case, and to explaining what Plato’s real views probably were regarding the soul’s metaphysical-temporal relationship with the body. In the process he constructs a highly sophisticated piece of historical, literary and philosophical analysis worthy to stand with the finest examples of Quattrocento humanist criticism.<sup>23</sup>

To make his historical argument, Ficino lays out the history of the ancient (Platonic) theology from its origins in the canonical six ancient theologians (from Zoroaster to Plato) down to the last of the six ancient academies (*PT* 17.1-2). The *prisci* had a correct understanding of the soul/body question, but since they spoke under poetic veils it was possible to interpret them in different ways. The six academies who interpreted the original poetic vision of the six ancient theologians thus took various

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<sup>22</sup> See J. HANKINS, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols., Leiden 1990, I, pp. 358-359.

<sup>23</sup> See the long discussion in M. J. B. ALLEN, *Synoptic Art: Marsilio Ficino on the History of Platonic Interpretation*, Florence 1998, chapter 2.

views of transmigration. The first four understood that Plato was not to be taken literally. But as the original vision faded and the shadows of the Middle Age began to fall, the last two academies – the Roman academy of Plotinus and the Lycian academy of Proclus – misunderstood Plato’s words and tried to take them at face value.<sup>24</sup> Though Ficino does not say so, the spiritually decadent interpretation (Ficino calls it *impia*) of the fifth, Roman academy would explain why Augustine was so sure that Plato had believed in transmigration, and how he had come to so erroneous a view of Plato.

Ficino of course sides with the first four academies who understood the poetic character of Plato’s writing, but here too he makes some distinctions. Carneades and Archesilas, as Ficino correctly understands, had *scepticorum more* seen Plato as a philosopher who asserted nothing dogmatically. The last two academies had erred in the opposite direction by being too literal and dogmatic about Platonic teaching. Ficino prefers the exegetical position of Xenocrates and Ammonius, representatives of the first and fourth academies respectively. Theirs was a middle position: Plato held some things as only verisimilar and probable (in the manner of what today would be called “Academic Skeptics”), but he “affirmed other things as being true and certain.”

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<sup>24</sup> *PT* 17.1.2, ed. ALLEN and HANKINS, VI, pp. 6-8: ‘Verum cum sex fuerint scholae Platoniorum, tres illae Atticae simul atque Aegyptia, quaecumque de animarum circuitu scripta sunt a Platone, aliter quam verba sonarent accipiebant; duae vero sequentes ipsam verborum faciem curiosius observarunt.’ Ficino at *PT* 17.3.10 says that Plotinus, Numenius, Harpocratius and Boethus think the reincarnated soul becomes the soul of the beast’s body, while Hermias, Syrianus and Proclus believe that it unites itself to the beast’s soul and becomes its companion. See also Ficino’s commentary on Plotinus in *FICINO, Opera* II, p. 1737.

Transmigration falls into the class of verisimilar and probable things. In fact it is Ficino's view that Plato, rather like the Deists of the eighteenth century, affirmed very few positive theological doctrines: above all the Providence of God, the immortality of the soul, and the certainty of judgement after death.<sup>25</sup> There are also some cases where he may have held affirmative doctrines but we cannot be sure what they are. Ficino argues that Plato believed the world to have been created in time, or at least does not "forbid us putting our trust" in this doctrine "common to the Hebrews, Christians and Arabs" (*PT* 18.1.1). More to the point, Plato's statements about the priority of souls to bodies, Ficino suggests, are to be understood in terms of ontological rather than temporal priority.

Much of Ficino's argument about what Plato really meant relies on a literary analysis of his works. It was a mistake for the later academies to read Plato's writings *curiosius*, in too labored and literal a way, rather than as poetry and intellectual play. One needs also to pay attention to the age and status of the interlocutors and take inconclusive arguments with a grain of salt. Special weight should be given to doctrines spoken by Plato *in propria persona*, i.e. in the *Letters* or as the "Athenian Stranger" of the *Laws*. Socrates' doubts and tentative, storytelling manner in his discussions of transmigration are a clue to Plato's own doubts. Plato's use of animal symbolism in *Republic* 9 suggested to Ficino that the animal language of the transmigration myths elsewhere in his writings was also symbolical in character. Probably Plato had only meant that our souls had bestial capacities in them, just as they had angelic ones. "But if the beasts are within

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<sup>25</sup> *PT* 17.4.6, ed. ALLEN and HANKINS, VI, p. 52: "Num ergo nihil de divinis affirmat Plato? Quaedam proculdubio: deum scilicet humana curare atque animae immortalis operum praemia reddere vel supplicia. Aliud vero affirmat nihil."

us, then we cross over from man to beast and from beast to beast inside ourselves too, not outside” (*PT* 17.4.11). Above all, Ficino says, one needs to weigh carefully Plato’s statement in his letter to Dionysius, when, as “a very old man, he declared that he had never written anything about matters divine and that no work of Plato existed on these matters or would ever exist.”<sup>26</sup>

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Since Ficino was convinced the whole idea of reincarnation and the endless cycling of souls through an infinite number of bodies was a thoroughly un-Platonic doctrine, he was compelled to elaborate a different understanding of the Platonic theory of recollection as well. If the discussions of *reminiscentia* in the *Meno*, *Phaedo* and elsewhere weren’t about recalling the soul’s experience in a disembodied state before its present life, what did they mean?

Ficino’s starting points for interpreting Plato’s doctrine of recollection are taken, like so much in Ficino, from Augustine, who had faced the same exegetical challenges eleven centuries before. In his earlier writings, indeed, Augustine seems to have accepted the preëxistence of the soul outright while rejecting transmigration; he held that “the soul existed prior to its embodiment and brought with it into this life a knowledge of all the arts.”<sup>27</sup> In a key letter of 389 to his friend Nebridius (*Ep.* 7.1.2) he attacks critics of “the

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<sup>26</sup> *Second Letter* 314C. See also Ficino’s epitome of this text (FICINO, *Opera*, II, pp. 1530-32).

<sup>27</sup> R. TESKE, *Augustine’s philosophy of memory*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. E. STUMP and N. KRETZMANN, Cambridge 2001, p. 148.



most noble Socratic discovery” that learning is recollection: “They do not notice that that vision [of past events in the memory] is past because we formerly saw these things by the mind and that, because we have flowed down from them and began to see other things in another way, we see them again by remembering, that is, through memory.” It is possible even that Augustine continued to hold this unorthodox view as late as 397, the year he wrote his *Confessions*. Robert O’Connell in his monograph on that work suggests that the underlying theme of the work is the soul’s fall into mortal bodies from a state of happiness, its wandering here in a state of mingled forgetfulness and memory of former happiness, and its gradual return to God.<sup>28</sup> It is possible that it was the reading of Augustine’s early works that encouraged Ficino also to entertain more seriously the view that the soul existed before it was embodied.

In any case, by the time the *Confessions* was written most of Augustine’s mature philosophy of memory had been formulated. Telling against O’Connell’s interpretation is the fact that Augustine feels compelled in that work to reinterpret the Platonic theory of recollection, as though the previous existence of the soul was not a source of knowledge. In a nutshell, he changes the process of recollection from a temporal into an ontological process. Instead of the truth-standards hidden in memory being buried memories of a former life, they are evidence that God dwells within us and provides his illumination in every process of reasoning. In *Confessions* 10.8.5 Augustine describes memory as “a

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<sup>28</sup> R. J. O’CONNELL, *St. Augustine’s Confessions: The Odyssey of Soul*, Cambridge, Mass., 1969. O’Connell’s view that the early Augustine accepted preexistence is critiqued by G. O’DALY, *Did St Augustine Ever Believe in the Soul’s Pre-Existence?* «Augustinian Studies», V, 1974, pp. 227-35.

vast and unlimited inner chamber” formally identical with the mind as a whole.<sup>29</sup> We can recognize through contemplation that the mind’s ability to know truth, to find standards of truth and beauty, does not come from our own soul and its experience, but must come directly from divine illumination. Memory is conceived as a infinitely expandable inner chamber lit by God’s light.

In *Confessions* 11 memory is also described as a power of mind, again not really distinct from it. It is the power of memory that creates our sense of time as flowing. Time is created by the mind’s ability to stretch out into the past and into the future (*distensio mentis*): so memory is the power to distend the moment of consciousness into past and future, as understanding is the power to focus consciousness at different levels of being. Memory is “essentially duration and a spiritual power that both transcends and spiritualizes space and time.”<sup>30</sup> A material body in itself can only have consciousness of a single moment, but through the spiritual power of memory ensouled bodies can extend time-consciousness into past and future.

This conception relies on Iamblichus’ distinction between static and flowing time. True time as created by the One is static, always the same, yet causes flowing time in mutable things; lower, flowing time participates in higher static time.<sup>31</sup>

This in turn is an interpretation of the famous dictum in Plato’s *Timaeus* that “Time is the

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<sup>29</sup> The whole passage contains numerous metaphors for memory: “venio in campos et lata praetoria memoriae,” “grandis memoriae recessus,” “in aula ingenti memoriae meae,” “Magna ista vis est memoriae, magna nimis, deus, penetrare amplum et infinitum.”

<sup>30</sup> TESKE, *Augustine’s philosophy*, p. 149.

<sup>31</sup> See the discussion in R. SORABJI, *Time, Creation and the Continuum: Theories in Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, Ithaca 1983, pp. 37-38.

moving image of eternity (37e).” For Augustine (*Confessions* 11.20, 26, 27), flowing time is not fully real. Past, present and future are simply states of mind. They are a function of the false consciousness of mutable beings; the soul immersed in flowing time sees all of time as divisible whereas in fact it is unitary. Time sense is dependent on motion and change, so when mind rises above the mutable world it can potentially achieve a timeless consciousness like God’s. The conception was well known in the Middle Ages and Renaissance not only via Augustine but also via Boethius, who used the conception of static and flowing time to reconcile human freedom and the providence of God.<sup>32</sup>

All of these conceptions reappear in Ficino’s *Platonic Theology* as well as his other works: the illumination theory for example at 12.7.5-7; the memory as a power of gathering past and present *in aeternum momentum* at 13.3.10; the sense of memory as an unlimited inner chamber at 13.3.9. In the latter passage Ficino goes on to argue that the unlimited storage capacity of the mind shows that it could not be based *in fluxa labilique materia* – Ficino obviously had never heard of the microchip! – but needs the *amplissimo stabilissimoque divini animi receptaculo*. In 11.8 he uses illumination theory to demonstrate immortality.<sup>33</sup> In his argument to the *Meno* Ficino clearly sees recollection in a Plotinian-Augustinian optic as a turning within to higher forms of consciousness,

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<sup>32</sup> *Consolation of Philosophy*, Book 5. See SORABJI, *Time*, pp. 255-256.

<sup>33</sup> *PT* 11.8.5, ed. ALLEN and HANKINS, p. 330-331: ‘Ex omnibus iis Augustinus confici arbitratur, quod et Plato in epistola ad Syracusanos docet, ut veritates ipsae rerum mentem nostram familiariter habitent ostendantque sua illam familiaritate perpetuam.’ (“From all this Augustine concludes what Plato too tells us in his letter to the Syracusans [*Ep.* 7, 341CD]: namely that the very truths of things make their home in our mind, and in dwelling there demonstrate that the mind is everlasting.”)

allegorically indicated by the recovery of the wings of the soul.<sup>34</sup>

But Ficino's conception of *reminiscentia* goes beyond and alters the Augustinian doctrine of memory in several crucial respects. For Ficino *reminiscentia* is not just an unlimited place in the mind lit by the divine light or a power of temporal distension. Ficino combines his Augustinian theory of memory with the Plotinian conception of the identity between higher mental states and higher ontological realities. *Reminiscentia* thus becomes a broadening out of the *acies mentis*, consciousness, to embrace all of reality from a higher metaphysical plane. It is a psychic power enabling our escape from all the limitations of corporeal life. At the highest point of consciousness, in noetic experience, it ceases to be *reminiscentia*; we become fully recollected. In this state the mind has immediate, active knowledge of all things, past, present and future.<sup>35</sup> Forgetting, by contrast, is the constriction of consciousness within the body. Remembering and forgetting take place in the soul, situated as it is between mind and body. In contrast with

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<sup>34</sup> FICINO, *Opera* (Argumentum in *Menonem*) II, pp. 120-21: 'Sapientia quidem natura, est enim aeterna rationum omnium in mente complexio, perpetuusque ueritatis intuitus. Scientia per doctrinam philosophiae quae reminiscentiam praestat, acquiritur, dum ratio quae pennas olim abiecit, ad mentem conversa reminiscendo iterum alas recuperat.'

<sup>35</sup> See Ficino's commentary on Plotinus in FICINO, *Opera* II, p. 1739: 'In intellectu non est reminiscentia, quia nihil novi illic accidit vel extrinsecus vel intrinsecus, quod conservandum sit atque recolendum. Nec ulla de potentia in actum ibi fit commutatio, sed recordationis officium ad animam pertinet.' See also *ibid*, pp. 1570-73, where Ficino, commenting on Plotinus, describes the timelessness of the perfect contemplative act, especially on p. 1573: 'Denique ipsum praesens aeternitatis non esse idem quod et temporis praesens, nam in tempore multa praesentia, individuaeque momenta sic se habent, ut aliud sit extra aliud. In aeternitate vero praesens est unicum, omnia praesentia temporis simul includens.'

Augustine, through *reminiscentia* the purified mind in Ficino's account also acquires the power available to those whose mind dwells in the higher realms of reality, power to see the future, to do miracles, raise winds, change weather, convert souls to philosophy and perform other works of angelic magic.<sup>36</sup> Ficino understands the process of *reminiscentia* and the acquiring of higher forms of consciousness in terms of the late scholastic theory of intension and remission of forms: through *purgatio* the soul can remit its presence in the body and extend itself to dwell in higher realms of reality.<sup>37</sup> There it acquires heroic, daemonic and angelic powers. Activated by beauty and powered by love, it becomes super-powered and is filled with divinity, *hinc divinitate prorsus impletur*.

This emphasis on the powers the soul acquires through recollection and higher forms of spiritual awareness gives us a clue to the question which began this inquiry: whether and why Ficino wants to defend some kind of preexistence for the soul and its possession of aetherial and celestial vehicles apart from the body, which according to Iamblichan theory were acquired during the soul's descent into the body. It would be a long business to prove this in detail, but my hypothesis is that Ficino is deeply committed to recovering, as part of his Platonic project, the magical powers of the soul which are in part exercised through the higher pneumatic or fine-material vehicles of the soul. And the even higher, non-material powers of soul depend, according to Timaeon theory, on a geometrical generative process whereby the soul begins from (or is created as) a point, extends into a line, and finally achieves its definitive planar form, the form in which it can relate to and control the solid form of the body through a series of harmonic

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<sup>36</sup> See HANKINS, *Ficino, Avicenna*, pp. 00-00.

<sup>37</sup> See Ficino's *Phaedrus* commentary, edited in M. J. B. ALLEN, *Marsilio Ficino and the Phaedran Charioteer*, Berkeley—Los Angeles 1981, pp. 163-4.

proportions.<sup>38</sup> But its access to higher forms of reality, and thus to the magical powers of the angelic mind beyond the material and pneumatic worlds, requires it to recapitulate its generative process, moving from the planar realm of bodily care, to the linear world of ratiocination and finally to the point of intuition. This geometric unfolding of soul has to be seen as a kind of physical process taking place at least partly in flowing time, since flowing time is presupposed by the linear process of ratiocination which precedes processually the planar existence of the soul in the body. The creation of planar soul from punctual and linear mind is inevitably a temporal process. It is not instantaneous, as the scholastic theology of the late medieval period had posited. The soul is already in time before it begins its corporeal existence, just as it will still be in time after it leaves the body at death.

So Ficino's theory of memory, though based in part on Augustine, in the end goes far beyond him, the chief difference being, in my view, the focus in Ficino's theology on increasing the power and divinity of the soul. Ficino wants to harness the power of divinity, to step out of the body and into the great onrush of spiritual power sweeping down creatively and up again to its source. He wants to divinize the self, achieve *homoiosis theô*, but his purpose is not merely purgation, illumination and mystical union, as in the medieval mystical tradition. Ficino also wants to acquire divine power for humanity to use. Like Pico, one aim of Ficino's new Platonic theology is the conversion of divine science from a contemplative science to an source of active power in and over the world: theology as magic. His goal is not just personal redemption in the next life,

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<sup>38</sup> M. J. B. ALLEN, *Nuptial Arithmetic: Marsilio Ficino's Commentary on the Fatal Number in Book VIII of Plato's "Republic"*, Berkeley—Los Angeles, 1994, pp. 93-96.

but power over nature in this one. That is what makes his theology a Renaissance theology, a genuinely new departure in the history of Christian theology.