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## **THE OBJECTIVE CHARACTER OF VIRTUES IN MARSILIO FICINO'S *PLATONIC THEOLOGY*<sup>1</sup>**

Marsilio Ficino is widely recognized as a leader of the Renaissance Western Platonism. Not only did he translate the whole *Corpus Platonicum*, the works of Plotinus and other Neoplatonists (Iamblichus, Proclus and Dionysius the Areopagite), but he also referred to these authors often in his own texts and was inspired by them in many of his own conceptions. From the Platonic tradition he derived, *inter alia*, much of his theory of Forms, the structure of being, the theory of knowledge and the construction of the soul<sup>2</sup>. The same can be said about his considerations on the objectivity of virtues in the *Platonic Theology*.

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<sup>2</sup> This of course does not mean that Ficino was a philosopher of exclusively Platonic and Neoplatonic provenance. For many years such an opinion about the Florentine's philosophy, i. e., that it was a particular renovation of Platonism, was diffused amongst readers of his works. Already at the turn of the 20th century some scholars noted this as simplification [Cf. G. Saitta, 1923, p. 79: “It is a widespread prejudice that the philosophy of Marsilio Ficino is nothing but a simple reproduction of Neoplatonism” (All translations, unless a name of a translator is reported, are made by the author of the paper); M. Heitzman, 1936, p. 236: “I consciously do not call this philosophy Platonism, because it is not in hundred percent pure Platonism. This issue is usually simplified and seen in this way rather because of declarations of Ficino himself, who many times calls himself a

Ficino did not write a methodical, complete treatise on ethics<sup>3</sup>, but the ethical questions are discussed in most of his writings (especially in *The Platonic Theology*, his commentaries on Plato and Plotinus, *argumenta* to the texts of these authors<sup>4</sup>, letters)<sup>5</sup>, because one of the Florentine's main interests was to analyze and to present in a convincing, consistent manner the indispensable aspects of human development and well-being (and that is why his moral philosophy is connected to the approach called 'virtue ethics'). In this context, the character and the role of both intellectual and moral virtues in holistic human growth (gaining the highest knowledge as well as achieving happiness) are of the greatest importance in the field of Ficino's ethics.

One of the works most frequently quoted and discussed in relation to the moral discipline is *Commentary on Plato's Symposium on Love (De*

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Platonist and refers to Plato and Platonists.”)], but it was P. O. Kristeller, who first did closer research on other, especially scholastic (Thomistic) sources of Ficino's thought [e. g. Kristeller 1939, 201–211; idem 1944, 257–274; idem 1967,]. Some subsequent researchers continued this direction of study, e. g. A. B. Collins, 1974. Since the middle of the twentieth century studies on the topic have multiplied.

<sup>3</sup> There are some smaller Ficinian treatises or essays specifically regarding ethics (this is not a complete list, I enumerate some of the most significant ones) like e. g.: *De quattuor sectis philosophorum* [Kristeller 1937, II, 9–10], *De virtutibus moralibus*, [Kristeller 1937, vol. II, 1–6], *De voluptate* [Ficino 1561, I, 987–1012], but by no means they can be treated as sources of complete, systematic lecture on ethics.

<sup>4</sup> The most important here is *Argumentum de summo bono* [Kristeller 1937, II, 96–7], which corresponds to the famous letter *De foelicitate* [Ficino 1561, I, 662–665].

<sup>5</sup> To a certain extent this reflects the fact that Ficino did not expound upon his ethical theory in a systematic way. As P. O. Kristeller points out, one cannot find a system of morals in the Florentine's *opera* and in deducing fundamentals of this area, it is necessary to base it on thoughts scattered throughout his writings [Kristeller 1988, 311]. According to G. Galli (even though his articles though were not highly appreciated by Kristeller), there are just some traces of Ficino's ethics in his *opera*, still it is a quite complete, even if not systematic, presentation of it. It can be found in his letters [Galli, 1897, 6–7]. Ficino wrote several letters regarding ethics, the longest one on this topic is the aforementioned *De foelicitate* to Lorenzo de Medici]. On the other hand, Kristeller's expectations can seem inadequate due to the fact that before the Enlightenment it was not the objective of philosophers to develop systems [this is a remark by Catana 2014, 684–685] and this, of course, does not mean that their theories are inconsistent or cannot be interpreted and delineated in a systematic way.

*amore*; even) written in the 1469. The text contains the virtue theory [Catana 2014, 680–703] and — what is strictly connected to this — the commonly known concept of Socratic or Platonic Love (this is such a characteristic element of Ficino's doctrine, that it is incorporated in monographs regarding his theory and became the topic of many separate studies<sup>6</sup>). However, the *Platonic Theology*, written in 1469–1474 (published in 1482), is the thinker's *opus magnum*, it is a visionary work and his philosophical masterpiece<sup>7</sup>. It discusses essential elements of Ficino's theory, including some important ethical issues. In my paper, I would like to demonstrate that in this treatise the nature of virtues is seen as unchangeable, indivisible and that is why it is objective. This conclusion stems from the metaphysical status of virtues and rational principles (*rationes communes*), on which the philosopher based his conception. Importantly, in such deliberations, Ficino often directly refers to Plato's thought, although — that should be further emphasized — this is not the only source of his inspiration in the aforementioned considerations, since the Neoplatonic tradition, which the Florentine thinker also highly appreciated, was employed by him in the ethical aspects of his doctrine<sup>8</sup>.

The subtitle of Ficino's *Platonic Theology* reads: *de immortalitate animorum* and all the considerations included therein are subordinated to this primary goal, i. e., the demonstration of the immortality of the human soul. The work takes the form similar to a medieval *summa*<sup>9</sup>; to prove the main thesis the author applies a series of various problematically structured arguments that were an object of interest for Renaissance intellectuals<sup>10</sup>. Consequently, ethical questions are woven into the series of

<sup>6</sup> Cf. i. a.: [Kristeller 1988, 274–310; Saitta 1923, 217–272; Devereux 1969, 161–170; Maier-Kapoor 2011a; Eadem 2011b, Collins 1971, 435–442].

<sup>7</sup> Cf. As M. J. B. Allen and J. Warden in their *Introduction to the Platonic Theology* [Ficino 2001–2006, vol. I, p. vii].

<sup>8</sup> This is argued in the above mentioned article by L. Catana regarding *De amore*.

<sup>9</sup> Kristeller 1938, 241–242: “in the fifteenth-century thought (...) the scheme of conceptual doctrine and (...) speculative lecture owes the medieval scholasticism more than something else. (...) «Platonic Theology» in the form of a lecture is more like a medieval «Summa» than humanistic treatise”. Cf. also: [idem 1975, 43].

<sup>10</sup> R. Marcel evaluates the Ficino's decision to subordinate the entire *opus* to one issue in this way (idem 1958, 648): “At first glance, it might seem strange that Ficino reduced his

soul's immortality proofs and are raised on different occasions, which makes it more difficult to analyze them because it is necessary both to gather them, in order to picture Ficinian ethics *en bloc*, and to preserve contexts into which they were put. To present the objective character of virtues in *Platonic Theology* I will invoke their definition, role and status in this *opus* with references to Plato's works. As it is true that Ficino's ethical considerations were indebted to the wide Platonic Tradition, it is worth noting that he often directly refers to Plato's dialogues and letters while expounding his theory.

As is it is well known, one of the most popular topics for Renaissance thinkers (especially for Platonics) was *diginitas hominis*, which was notably based on the concepts of the uniqueness and divinity of the human soul analyzed in respect to the world of nature, with an emphasis on the liberty of our actions and our capacity as creators<sup>11</sup>. In this respect, Platonic philosophers stressed the human capability, or faculty of a man, to determine his/her own choices, so also his/her moral destiny [Cf. Rist 1994, 457]. However, it is true as well that for ancient and Renaissance followers of Platonism there is an objective point of reference of a human's own moral formation, i. e., an external order, the unchanging reality of beings that does not have just certain metaphysical properties, but also definite moral characteristics. What is worth mentioning, in the Neoplatonic system — as J. M. Rist points out in his article — the human soul cannot only choose something opposite to the good and wants to be something more than the world soul, but it is able to establish a particular model of its personal good. What is more, as Rist states, the classic Neoplatonic approach is formally incapable of clearly distinguishing

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theology to the question, which seemed to narrow its limits. However, in fact it was a clever way to pose the problem. In proposing the study of the immortality of 'souls', Ficino knew that the immortality of the human soul is put in this set, the actions on which will lead theology to consider all issues of its interest and these issues demanded a solution in the spirit of the philosopher's contemporaries".

<sup>11</sup> According to P. R. Blum (Idem 2007, 213) human immortality was the subject of humanistic rhetoric of human dignity. According to P. O. Kristeller (idem 1986, 28) in Ficino's system the question of immortality occupies a prime position and it is for him the cosmological and metaphysical extension of human dignity.

human possibility of producing physical objects from producing moral norms: and so being able to determine by himself/herself what is wrong by a human being seems to be a challenge for Plotinus' conception [Rist 1994, 463, 466, 462]. In the Christian Platonism of the thinkers of the Renaissance, there is a great emphasis on human liberty and creativity but, at the same time, one can find a claim that humans discover moral and aesthetic values and do not devise or construct them. It is evident when Ficino's conception is taken into consideration — his thought is set in the aforementioned intellectual movement, as he often uses Plato's texts (understood by him in accordance with the Christian faith) while discussing the nature of intellectual and moral values and from these considerations one can conclude that values have an objective character. Simultaneously, the Florentine drew extensively from *Enneads* and other Neoplatonic texts.

Among many arguments expounded upon for the main purpose of *Platonic Theology*, one refers to the soul with respect to its intellective part (the contents of the entire eighth book of the work), and in proving that one reasoning, out of sixteen, points to the fact that this part of the soul is immortal because it is indivisible. Ficino postulates the indivisibility as a criterion of the immortality in the earlier fragments of *Theology*, namely in the fifth book, which deals with the immortality of the soul explained by rational principles. In the 6th chapter of this book, he argues that it is impossible for an indivisible soul to receive divisible (or corporeal) qualities, because there is no way in which an indivisible thing could make a contact with a divisible thing. Thus the soul cannot be corrupted by anything divisible, as it cannot be touched by it; no corporeal form has access to the soul. What is more, the soul is also not corrupted by anything indivisible, since this kind of things can only perfect that which receives them. This is observed, for instance, in the case of indivisible images of things received by water, by mirrors and by soul (this is explained at length below) [Ficino 2001–2006, vol. II, V.6, 34–36]. In the eighth book, the philosopher justifies the indivisibility of the intellective part of the soul by using a number of detailed arguments, including (in the chapter 3) the proof that both intellectual and moral virtues, being indivisible, cannot be

the qualities of the body but have to be the qualities of the soul<sup>12</sup>. Once again Ficino says that because the soul is indivisible, it can be in contact with indivisible things only and – this is what he specifies here (in the fifth book he expounds upon it on a higher level of generality, taking into consideration indivisible forms *en masse*<sup>13</sup>) — virtues are exactly of the same nature.

This is how the thinker presents the reasoning mentioned above; he explains (1) why virtue is a quality of the soul and (2) why it is indivisible. The first is evident, as the soul is of a peculiar character because of the presence of a virtue and the soul continues to exist even if there is no particular virtue in it. The second is more complex; the considerations employed for demonstrating it are tantamount to confirming the objectivity of virtues.

Ficino holds on to the traditional division and writes that there are two kinds of virtues: (I) the speculative, which are acquired through speculation and which are defined as *claritas intellectus* ('intellect's clarity') and (II) the moral, which are acquired by custom and their definition is: *fervor stabilis appetitus ab intellectus claritate succensus* ('unchanging flame of desire lit by the intellect's clarity') [Ficino 2001–2006, II, VIII.3, 288; translation by M. Allen and J. Warden, p. 289] and *voluntas quaedam constans quodcumque ratio dictaverit eligendi* ('an unwavering will to choose whatever reason dictates') [Ficino 2001–2006, II, VIII.3, 290; translation 291].

Because the topic of this paper is connected to the moral virtues, it is necessary to focus on the analysis of them and not on the speculative ones. It should be stressed, however, that Ficino discusses the latter ones parallel to the former ones and it is often indispensable to recall considerations regarding both of them to clarify the subject matter. What can be concluded from these definitions is that they display dependence of the will on the intellect, which can be seen as a reference to Aquinas

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<sup>12</sup> The title of this chapter is: *virtus animae, quia indivisibilis est, corporis qualitas esse nequit* [Ficino 2001–2006, vol. II, VIII.3, 286].

<sup>13</sup> In the sixth chapter of the fifth book Ficino uses words: 'form' and 'quality', but there is not the word 'virtue'.

intellectualism. It must be stressed, however, Ficino's conception is complex and it is also regarded as a voluntarist one (in this case it is postulated that he accepted Duns Scotus' doctrine) or the Florentine is seen as a thinker, who accepted the equal role of the two faculties<sup>14</sup>. The undisputed fact is that in discussing the nature of virtues the philosopher usually first analyzes the intellectual ones and then presents the similar characteristic of moral ones (or just saying: *Eadem est de mortalibus virtutibus ratio* [Ficino 2001–2006, vol. II, VIII.3, 292]).

It should also be noted here that an obvious sign of objectivity of virtues inheres in quoted explanations, namely in the words employed:

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<sup>14</sup> According to G. Saitta [idem 1923, 217–227] the will prevails, but he also stresses the interdependence of the will and the intellect. References to some studies on the intellect and will in Ficino's thought are given by M. J. B. Allen [idem 1984, 50–51]. The researcher mentions that authors such as M. Heitzman and P. O. Kristeller concentrate on texts in which Ficino stresses the importance of will and S. R. Jayne and M. J. B. Allen focus on texts where the philosopher accentuates the role of intellect (though all four authors expose ambiguities in Ficino's concept; the references: [Heitzman 1936a, 69–74; Kristeller 1965, ] 463–494; idem 1967, 106–125; Sears 1963, 56–76; Allen 1975, 35–48]. Ch. Trinkaus [Idem 1970, 467, 778–779], referring to the same studies by Kristeller and quoted by Allen, writes that in Ficino “the will must play at least an equal role to that of the intellect”. According to A. Edelheit (idem 2008, 216–217), Ficino opts for an equal role of the will and the intellect, although he adds that this is especially true in social life. The most recent comprehensive research on the problem (it is also quoted by A. Edelheit) is the article by T. Albertini [eadem 2001, 203–225]. Albertini stresses the changing significance of the will and the intellect in the Florentine's philosophical project. She concludes (p. 225) that in the later period of Ficino's activity “even though the relationship of the intellect and the will remains asymmetric, the two powers of the mind are nevertheless described as developed parallel and complementary epistemic forces”. In regard to *The Platonic Theology* itself, Albertini, following Kristeller, postulates (p. 207) the domination of the will in this *opus*. It can be concluded that it is the will that (slightly) dominates [cf. e. g. *Argumentum to Platonic Theology*, in: Ficino 2001–2006. vol. VI, 240–242; ibidem vol. I, II.11, 174; I.6, 86–90], nevertheless, there are passages proving the importance of both of the powers [cf. e. g. Ibidem, vol. III, X.8, 186–192; vol. IV, XIV.3, 246–248], even if a closer examination of them leads to the confirmation of the pre-eminence of the will [cf. Albertini 2001, 213–215]. *Summa summarum*, in his *opus magnum* Ficino approaches the position of the parallel role of both faculties, but it must be stressed that he remains inconsistent in this topic. Once his considerations can be read as supporting intellectualism, another time — voluntarism.



*stabilis* (firm, steady, stable) and *constans* (constant, unchanging, immovable, secure, steadfast, resolute, steady, stable, unwavering). The connection between stability and objectivity is evident: for the quality of a thing to be objective this thing of necessity must be unchanging in its nature and so in its definition, too. In this case, the meaning of the latter part of the explanation is twofold: (1) the aforementioned definitions are stable, since throughout *Platonic Theology* the author does not employ characterizations of virtues different from or incoherent with them; (2) the content itself of the definitions includes the terms denoting steadiness which condition being a virtue.

But let us get back to Ficino's own line of reasoning with respect to the indivisibility of virtues. He explains the consecutive stages of the process of acquiring intellectual virtues. He argues that such an inquiry may take a long time, but this search is topped off by an act of intuitive flash, in which the knowledge of things comes immediately and is holistic, undivided, actual. The Florentine explicitly states (he does not always indicate the real sources of his considerations) that this explanation comes from Plato's Seventh Letter. In its famous epistemological digression the Greek philosopher describes the final phase of gaining knowledge precluded by a diversified propaedeutic course as a sudden blaze in mind [Plato, *Seventh Letter*, 341c–d]. As N. P. White writes: "the actual discovery — the coming to view Forms — is described as though it were a sort of illumination, as though a light were kindled" [White 1976, 205]. Consequently, a person has or does not have knowledge — *tertium non datur*; to know a thing means to have complete, absolute understanding. What is important, Ficino does not limit this description to intellectual virtues. He continues delineating the same character of moral virtues: if in someone lacks even the smallest thing to arouse or inflame (*ad accendendum*) stable and rational ardor of the appetite, this person does not have moral virtue. The flame of the appetite adequate for a virtue will blaze out suddenly at some point after a long habituation. Therefore, there is no possibility to acquire a part of virtue, the virtue is present or it is not at all. As Ficino states, we cannot know a part of a truth about a thing and not know another part of it, because at the same time we would know and not know the same thing. The same is said about moral virtue: if it could



come gradually, a part of it would be present and another would be absent, but is impossible for the will to want and not want something at the same time [Ficino 2001–2006, vol. II, VIII.3, 288–290]. The conclusion is: “the clarity of the truth in the intellect is equally sudden, and the flame in the desire that springs from it is sudden”<sup>15</sup>.

The argumentation for the indivisibility of both moral and intellectual virtues continues: Ficino claims (following ancient ethical considerations) that virtues condition one other. They are “tied together in this way that each virtue is contained in every separate virtue”<sup>16</sup>. Admittedly, — here I take into account just moral virtues — he enumerates and defines them, i.e., he explains justice, courage and temperance in accordance with Plato's definitions (explicitly stating that they are described in such a way by Plato)<sup>17</sup>, he indeed states that: “once one of them is acquired, you immediately possess all the others”<sup>18</sup>. This also enhances the virtues' indivisibility and objectivity: as they depend on one other, they have something in common, they share something — in the case of moral virtues it is, of course, the conception of objective good that binds them all; the good that makes them beneficial for the human soul and comes from the best causes. Here is why the process of acquiring them is profitable. The goal of moral virtue is the purification and separation of the soul from the divisible body<sup>19</sup>. This is beneficial for many reasons, but in this particular context, acknowledging the used words, it can be concluded, that it is such, because everything which is divisible, being subject to

<sup>15</sup> Ficino 2001–2006, vol. II, VIII.3, 291 (p. 290: *Non aliter subita in intellectu claritas veritatis, subita inde in appetitu flagrantia*).

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, 295; p. 294: *Sunt ergo virtutes istae ita connexae invicem, ut in una sint omnes et quaelibet virtus tota comprehendatur in singulis (...)*.

<sup>17</sup> As M. J. B. Allen and J. Warden suggest (Ibidem, 389), Ficino may refer especially to Plato's definitions of justice, courage and temperance in *Republic* 4.429A–435C. Ficino 2001–2006, vol. II, VIII.3 288: *In eo genere [virtutum — JP] sunt iustitia, quae suum cuique tribuit; fortitudo, quae ad opera opera honesta promptior, abicit a nobis timoris impedimentum; temperantia, quae libidinis mollitiem, quod alterum honestum impedimentum est, repellit. Hae quidem sunt apud Platonem virtutum descriptiones.*

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, 294: *Nam acquista illarum una [i. e. virtus moralis — JP] statim omnes habentur.*

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, 292: *Moralis quidem finis, animam a corpore divisibile purgare atque seiungere.* Cf. Kristeller 1988, 312.

corruption, is worse than that which is indivisible, i.e., free from dissolution (in contrast to the body). But, more importantly the beneficial character of virtues also is connected to their status or provenance as decisive for their character, power and results for the soul. As it was stated above (p. 4), moral virtues are qualities. Ficino explains that no form or quality introduced to the soul is harmful for it. A self-subsisting form is created separately from the soul and some power poured into the soul is beneficial for it, as it comes from the best causes, i.e., from God and angels. Virtues are of this kind, their power is to perfect soul, not to endanger it. God made them indivisible and advantageous (*beneficae*) for the soul and this is why they are its preservers (*conservatrices*) [Cf. Ficino 2001–2006, vol. II, V.7, 36]. The good that “draws the soul to itself through the will”<sup>20</sup> and perfects it is essential in the constitution of the moral virtues. It comes from God himself. As the order of nature requires, writes the philosopher, there exist: (I) a pure good, (II) an intellectual good (a pure intellect), (III) an ensouled intellect (a pure soul), and (IV) a corporeal soul. The first is God, the second — angel, the third — rational soul and the fourth — irrational soul<sup>21</sup>. Hence, the primary and the fundamental source of anything good is God (Ficino follows the traditional identification of God and the Good<sup>22</sup>) and the good that joins the moral virtues comes from Him and depends upon Him, not upon anything changeable or arbitrary.

<sup>20</sup> Ficino 2001–2006, vol. III, XI.4, 251 (p. 250 (...) *bonum vero per voluntatem potius ad seipsum animam trahere*).

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem, vol. V, XV.2, 36: *Requirat insuper ordo naturae ut sit bonum purum et bonum intellectuale (intellectus purus) et intellectus animalis (anima pura) et anima corporalis. Primum deus est, secundum angelus, tertium anima rationalis. Anima vero irrationalis est quartum.*

<sup>22</sup>Cf. e. g. (it is not a complete “catalogue” of quotations regarding God as the Goodness or the Good) Ibidem, vol. I, II.2, 96: *Quam ob rem ipsa unitas, veritas, bonitas, quam invenimus super angelum, ex mente Platonis omnium est principium, deus unus, verus et bonus* (Ficino often points out that Platonists or Plato himself equate the highest good with God); vol. I, II.2, 102–104: *Iterum est unus deus tertia ratione Platoniorum qui summa est bonitas*; vol. III, XI.4, p. 251: *Ipsam quidem bonum Plato in Epistolis deum patrem nominat, ipsum vero intellegibile deum filium. Cf. Plato's The Sixth Letter 323d; Ficino 2001–2006, vol. IV, XII.1, 22: Ipsam vero bonitatem et veritatem esse deum ambigit nemo; ibidem, vol. IV, XIV.2, p.*

If God is the highest goodness and goodness by its very nature wholly communicates itself, then God imparts Himself to all things. Hence all seek the good, because, since they were born from the good, they seek out their origin, in order to be perfected there whence they arose [Ficino 2001–2006, vol. I, II.7, 133].

And that can be achieved by acquiring virtues, as their primary goal is to perfect the soul.

It should be stressed here that Ficino emphasizes human free activity (one of arguments for the immortality of the soul is its independence from the body demonstrated i. a. by a reasoning which proves that the soul acts freely<sup>23</sup>) and he even calls the human soul the author of his blessedness<sup>24</sup>. In no way, however, does this contradict the objective character of the good. The philosopher lists four possibilities of possessing the good. God has His own good from Himself, the corporeal beings possess their good only from God, but the angel and the rational soul have it from God and from themselves, because they furnish good to themselves. The difference between them is that the angel does this eternally and the soul — temporally<sup>25</sup>. To the former, probably, divine joys are assigned by God naturally. The latter is responsible for its blessedness in such a way that acquires it by its own efforts<sup>26</sup>. Thus the soul can bow

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226: *Omne autem verum et omne bonum deus ipse est, qui primum verum est primumque bonum.*

<sup>23</sup> Ficino 2001–2006, vol. III, IX.4, 30–56; the title this chapter *Anima libere operatur*. On freedom in Ficino see: Heitzman 1937, 59–82; Saitta 1923, 227–235; Kristeller 1988, especially chapter: *Volontà e amor divino*, 274–309; Ficino's concept of concept is strongly connected to his concept of love (cf. e. g. Saitta 1923, 227, 235; Edelheit 2014, 167–169 (according to Edelheit, in Ficino's thought the notion of *amor* replaced the notion of love).

<sup>24</sup> Ficino 2001–2006, vol. V, XVI.4, 260: (...) *ne (...) inferiores spiritus contemnantur, cum ipsimet sibi sint beatudinis auctores*. Ficino calls man's souls "lower spirits" and angels — "sublime spirits". Ibidem.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem, 262: *Ita quatuor in bono gradus reperiuntur. Deus a se tantum bonum habet suum, corpora ab alio tantum, angelus et animus non modo ab alio, quia a deo, verum etiam a se, quia sibimet bonum praestant, sed angelus actu aeterno, animus temporalis.*

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, 260: *Forsitan et ipse deus instituit divina gaudia superioribus quidem mentium gradibus natura obtingere, ordini vero inferiori laboribus comparari, ut essent et qui nascendo beati fierent, et qui se vivendo beatos efficerent (...).*

down to the lowest evil or come to the highest good like angels<sup>27</sup> and the good itself does not depend on it.

In *The Platonic Theology* (book XIV, ch. VI), we can also read that the human soul pursues four cardinal virtues as gifts of God. Human mind tries to acquire divine prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. They are divine, because they are the highest rational principles all of things, and so are in God, and our mind seeks exactly for them. Ficino accepts the Neoplatonic scheme of four levels of virtues: the civic, the purgatorial, the already-purged soul and the exemplary level [cf. Catana 2014, 5–6] and ascertains that we are capable of being formed by the exemplary virtues in God. This is possible, because God, being the exemplary virtue, makes the human soul able to prepare itself for receiving the principal forms exactly thanks to the three preparatory levels of humans virtues. The philosopher defends the statement by deducing that: (I) these virtues are sown and quickened in us by the divine, (II) through them the divine ones are recognized, (III) they ascend to the divine, (IV) they affect us so that we move towards the divine [Ficino 2001–2006, vol. IV, XIV.6, 262–268]. “It follows both that God must some day take the species of the soul and form it with the immortal habit of divine virtue and that the species of the soul can be formed”<sup>28</sup>. Consequently, there is not only an order of virtues adequate especially for humans, but there is the kind of virtues that pertains to God directly<sup>29</sup> and makes people godlike. Ficino says it explicitly in the succeeding fragment of his *opus magnum* (book XIV, ch. X)

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<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, 262: *Neque mirari debemus animum posse non modo ad extremum digredi malum sicut miseri, sed etiam ad summum progredi bonum sicut angeli.*

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, 269 (p. 268: *Ergo et deus immortalis divinae virtutis habitu animae speciem formare quandoque debet et animae speciem formari potest.*)

<sup>29</sup> It does not mean that a part of virtues concerning human activities does not pertain to God, as He governs the whole world. In caring for the whole, He does not neglect its parts. The philosopher explains this referring to Plato's *Laws* (here Ficino also expresses his source apparently) Ibidem, XIV.10, 322: *Neque putandum est hanc iustitiae partem, quae humana respicit, ad deum non pertinere, ad quem pertinet mundi totius administratio. In quo singula intelligendo amandoque facit, ut Plato vult, sequitur ut faciendo intellegat ametque singula, atque in toto curando partes — quibus non curatis non curatur totum — non negligat. Haec in Legibus Plato. Cf. Laws 10.900c–d; 902e–903d (Ficino 2001–2006, vol. IV, M. J. B. Allen's notes to translation, 364).*

referring (explicitly) to Plato: “in the last book of the *Republic* Plato proves that through virtue the rational soul becomes like God and accordingly God's friend (...)”<sup>30</sup>.

The likeness of the soul to God is reflected in Ficino's explanation of the reward for the true probity. But the probity is “an indestructible good”, so “it will always act in the same way”<sup>31</sup>. Hence, the reward has to be eternal and it is “the everlasting possession of the measureless good”<sup>32</sup>. The highest virtue is in God himself, God is the Good itself, therefore a really pious soul is like Him in possessing everlasting good<sup>33</sup>. The Florentine philosopher admits that some adversities happen to good men in this life (and by contrast prosperous things — to bad people), but they are just elements of the whole process, which is administrated by the divine justice, and it only reveals that there exists another life where justice is put according to our merits<sup>34</sup>. Thus, as we can conclude, using mostly the Platonic sources and putting them in a Christian dimension, Ficino developed the theory of virtues being objective and independent of changing human opinions.

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<sup>30</sup> Ficino 2001–2006, vol. IV, XIV.10, 325. Probably, he especially draws on *Republic* 611e–612a.

<sup>31</sup> Ficino 2001–2006, vol. IV, XIV.10, 321: *indelebile bonum; semper similier agit*.

<sup>32</sup> Ibidem: *Est igitur eius [i. e. sanctitatis — JP] praemium immensi boni sempiterna possessio*].

<sup>33</sup> Analogical reasoning is applied to explain the eternal punishment suffered by the impious souls. These explanations are used for the (umpteenth) confirmation of the immortality of every human soul.

<sup>34</sup> Ficino 2001–2006, vol. IV, XIV.10, 322.

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*Unà cum Gnomologia, hoc est, Sententiarum ex iisdem operibus collectarum farragine copiosissima in calce totius voluminis adiecta*, Basileae 1561, vols. I-II, reprint Turin 1983.

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **THE OBJECTIVE CHARACTER OF VIRTUES IN MARSILIO FICINO'S *PLATONIC THEOLOGY***

Marsilio Ficino did not write a methodical, complete treatise on ethics, but the ethical questions are discussed in most of his writings, including his *opus magnum* entitled *Theologia Platonica*. The most important sources for Ficino's ethical considerations are Platonic and Neoplatonic texts and this is strongly reflected in *Theologia*; one of the aspects of this dependence regards the nature of virtues: they are seen as unchangeable, indivisible and that is why they are objective. The main purpose of the paper is to present the objective character of virtues in *Platonic Theology* by invoking their definition, role and status with references to Plato's works.

**KEYWORDS:** Marsilio Ficino, Platonism, Neoplatonism, ethics, virtue ethics