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Title: Original sin in Marsilio Ficino's Platonic works

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I. INTRODUCTION

Scholars generally agree that Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) neglects the issue of original sin in his theological works and never mentions it in his Platonic writings.¹ My work will show that not only does Ficino refer to the doctrine of original sin but also that some of his passages make more sense if one were to relate them to this doctrine. I will argue that although Ficino knows the ecclesiastical teachings on the subject, principally via Aquinas (II), he goes beyond his sources and strives to frame them within his own theology. More specifically, to reconstruct Ficino's position, I will look for theological questions in his Platonic works along two perspectives: First, I will search for Biblical passages on original sin (III.1); and secondly, for references to baptism, that is the sacrament reputed to wash away original sin from the human soul (III.2). Next, I will study the role of original sin in Ficino's philosophical anthropology. In particular, I will analyze the relationship Ficino establishes between the Fall of the first parents and the embodiment of the soul and show that the latter is a consequence of the former (IV). The aim of this article is to demonstrate that on the issue of original sin, Ficino was quite innovative and challenged the theology of his time.

¹ Cf. Michael J.B. Allen, *The Platonism of Marsilio Ficino: A Study of his Phaedrus Commentary, Its Sources and Genesis* (Berkeley-Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 183; Alessandro Klein, 'Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) e Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494),' in G. Riconda – M. Ravera – C. Ciancio – G. Cuzzo (eds.), *Il peccato originale nel pensiero moderno* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2009), 158. By the expression "Platonic writings" I mean Ficino's work where Plato or the Neoplatonic philosophers are the principal sources.

II. State of scholarship

Studies of Ficino's theology are scant when compared with those concerning other Ficinian interests. The most recent monograph on Ficino's theology is by Jörg Lauster.² Before Lauster's work, there were only two dated monographs: One written by the Lutheran theologian, Walter Dress, and the other written by the Catholic thinker, Giuseppe Anichini.³ Their respective confessional backgrounds influenced both works: Dress is interested in comparing Ficino with Luther while Anichini compares him with Aquinas. According to Lauster, "from an historical point of view we might be justified in emphasizing the differences, but to do so would not be particularly helpful for understanding Ficino's theology."⁴ I believe that Lauster's opinion is well grounded if we consider the Ficino-Luther relationship, but we cannot underestimate that Ficino is indebted to Aquinas, and his originality may be appreciated when compared with the Dominican Doctor, especially in the case of original sin.⁵ Lauster himself wrote about original sin in Ficino, but he does not completely develop his philosophical analysis, as we shall see. More recently, Amos Edelheit wrote on Ficino's theology, but he does not add anything to Lauster's research on original sin.⁶

These scholars noticed several literal quotations from Aquinas in Ficino's *De Christiana Religione* and *In Epistolas Pauli Commentarius*.⁷ Following Aquinas, Ficino

² Jörg Lauster, *Die Erlösungslehre Marsilio Ficanos: Theologiegeschichtliche Aspekte des Renaissanceplatonismus* (Berlin-New York: de Gruyter, 1998).

³ Walter Dress, *Die Mystik des Marsilio Ficino* (Berlin-Leipzig: de Gruyter, 1929); Giuseppe Anichini, *L'umanesimo e il problema della salvezza in Marsilio Ficino* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1937).

⁴ Jörg Lauster, 'Marsilio Ficino as a Christian thinker,' in M.J.B. Allen – V. Rees – M. Davies (eds.), *Marsilio Ficino: his theology, his philosophy, his legacy* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 45-69, 47.

⁵ Kristeller and Collins have long acknowledged Ficino's borrowings from Aquinas. Paul Oskar Kristeller, 'The Scholastic Background of Marsilio Ficino: With an Edition of Unpublished Texts,' *Traditio* 2 (1944), 257-318; Ardis B. Collins, *The secular is sacred. Platonism and Thomism in Marsilio Ficino's Platonic Theology* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971).

⁶ Edelheit considers only Ficino's *De Christiana Religione*, see Amos Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico and Savonarola. The Evolution of Humanist Theology 1461/2- 1498* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2008), 232f.

⁷ For a comparison of passages taken from the *Summa contra Gentiles* and the *De Christiana Religione* see

considers original sin to be a rebellion against God and His established order. The consequence of such rebellion is disorder, as the body subdues the soul and the senses the reason;⁸ humanity becomes subject to ignorance and wickedness. In this state, it cannot reach its natural goal, namely, God.⁹ Humanity needs Christ and His sacrifice because it cannot be saved by itself. Thanks to this sacrifice, humanity receives the faith to benefit from Christ's merits and to receive the charity to keep their faith alive and active through the virtues, which satisfies God and justifies the believer. In addition, there is a new possibility to unite with God and to reach beatitude in the afterlife; such beatitude can already be experienced, although imperfectly, within this life.¹⁰

A deeper comparison between Ficino and Aquinas could help to nuance judgments like that of Lauster, according to whom, Ficino considers original sin less an historical event and more a structural phenomenon, that is, a perverted inclination for the material sphere that can be found in all human beings. Lauster concludes that Ficino appears a forerunner of such modern Protestant thinkers such as Schleiermacher and Ritschl.¹¹ I think this conclusion can be nuanced. Already in Aquinas we find a description of the 'structural phenomenon' of original sin, without a negation of the historical event.¹² This clarification confirms that Aquinas is an important source for Ficino on original sin, but I will make clear below that he also departs from Aquinas' account.

Lauster's study is the only one that searches for rational arguments in Ficino's doctrine

Étienne Gilson, 'Marsile Ficino et le Contra Gentiles,' *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge* 32 (1957), 100-113.

⁸ Marsilio Ficino, *De Christiana Religione*, in *Opera Omnia* (Basel 1576, repr. Torino 1962), vol. 1, 23: "Rebellavit a Deo primi parentis animus, rebellavit corpus ac sensus ab eo, rebellio prima peccatum fuit, secunda poena quaedam peccati fuit, atque peccatum, quoniam rationi derogavit et Deo."

⁹ Marsilio Ficino, *De Christiana Religione*, 22: "Praeterea quoniam a Deo ceciderat potentissimo, sapientissimo, benignissimo, idcirco in imbecillitatem, ignorantiam, malignitatemque corruerat, proptereaque ex pio profanus evadens, ineptus iam penitus erat, ad divinam virtutem imitandam, ad lucem cognoscendam, ad bonitatem denique diligendam."

¹⁰ Marsilio Ficino, *In Epistolas Pauli Commentarius*, in *Opera* I, 459-461.

¹¹ Lauster, *Marsilio Ficino as a Christian thinker*, 52-53.

¹² See Aquinas, *ST*, I-II, q. 82, a. 1, ad 2: "Ad secundum dicendum quod actuale peccatum est inordinatio quaedam actus, originale vero, cum sit peccatum naturae, est quaedam inordinata dispositio ipsius naturae, quae habet rationem culpae in quantum derivatur ex primo parente, ut dictum est. Huiusmodi autem dispositio naturae inordinata habet rationem habitus, sed inordinata dispositio actus non habet rationem habitus. Et propter hoc, peccatum originale potest esse habitus, non autem peccatum actuale."

of original sin. The core of Lauster's interpretation is that Ficino tries to reinterpret the traditional Christian idea of sin in light of his own cosmological and anthropological theory. Lauster states that "it is not the inclination towards the body as such that Ficino calls sin but when that inclination excludes the divine and intellectual affinity of the soul. The soul turns away from God and gives up its divine destination."¹³ This is a very important point that, unfortunately, Lauster leaves undeveloped limiting himself to analyzing the more common Ficinian approach to the doctrine of sin, namely, the theological or "Thomistic" one, as stated in works such *De Christiana Religione* and *In Epistolas Pauli Commentarius*. This oversight leaves room for a deeper analysis of Ficino's works, in particular his *Theologia Platonica*, in order to find more elements of the Ficinian 'rationalization' of original sin.

III. Theological issues in Ficino's Platonic works

The tradition handed down the doctrine of original sin based upon three pillars: 1) the Bible states that Adam sinned; 2) from that moment human nature was corrupted; 3) the sacrament of baptism is necessary to wash away original sin from the human soul. I will devote the next two paragraphs to explore Ficino's consideration on point 1) and 3) in his Platonic works, leaving a deeper discussion of point 2) for the next section.

II.1 Biblical passages on original sin

In *Theologia Platonica*, Ficino does not quote *Genesis 3* and *Romans 5*, which are the Biblical foundations of the doctrine of original sin according to the Catholic tradition. However, there are three references to *Genesis 3*; they are the following:

(T1) What are we to say then about some living creature possessing intellect? The Magi are in no doubt that it too would have survived in its tempered state – as Plato puts it in the *Charmides*, if only the rational soul had persisted in its original, its divine, temperance. For all the harmony or disharmony of the body stems from it. The Mosaic and Christian law teaches exactly the same. However what the universal order once lost because of the inordinate motion of the soul must be restored to it again when order eventually prevails [in the soul]. Not just Moses, but Zoroaster, Hermes Trismegistus, and Plato too, agree on this.¹⁴

¹³ Lauster, *Marsilio Ficino as a Christian thinker*, 52f.

¹⁴ The book, chapter, and paragraph divisions follow that of Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, ed. James Hankins and trans. Michael J.B. Allen, 6 vols., (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001-6) (hereafter *PT*). *PT*, X.3.5, vol. 3, 137.

(T2) In the *Charmides* too he writes that the Magi, those doctors of the soul and body who were disciples of Zalmoxis and Zoroaster, thought that all the goods and evils alike of the body flow from the soul into the body. [...] This opinion held by the Magi seems to be in accord with the teaching of the Hebrews and the Christians; for earlier, when the soul of our first parent Adam was well, all things were well, but later, when it became sick, all things fell sick.¹⁵

(T3) This view certainly accords with that of Zoroaster and in a way with that of Moses when they affirm that the misfortunes of the body arise from the faults of the soul.¹⁶

From the repetition of the same names and ideas, we can infer that the three passages deal with the same topic (i.e., the condition of Adam before and especially after the first sin was committed). Adam's sin was a disordered movement of the soul, which upset the order established by God, and consequently, brought disease in the body. God Himself will restore the lost harmony, as promised.¹⁷ We can analyze each point. Firstly, we analyze the sources quoted or referred to; secondly, we propose an interpretation of Ficino's use of his sources.

II.1.1 Sources

The references to Moses allude to the book of *Genesis*. The mention of Moses as a reference to God cursing the ground and the first parents in *Genesis* 3:14-17; His recanting at 8:21; and then to His covenant with Noah in 9:9-17.

Ficino considers that some of Plato's texts agree with *Genesis* about the consequences of the original sin. Firstly, in a note, the editors state that the expression, "*Charmides* too" in T1 refers to the "*Statesman* 269C-274E and possibly to *Timaeus* 43B-44B."¹⁸ A text from *De Christiana Religione*, which deals with the same topic, and explicitly mentions *Timaeus*, can help to say that it is more than a coincidence Ficino refers to the same work in T1.

(T4) Therefore, this original sin is the source of the rest of the evils of soul and body. Those volumes of the Jews testify to this [...]. Hence that opinion of the Magi, who are descended from Zoroaster, that evidently all the evils of the body originate from evils of the soul, that the rest of the evils [could] be avoided if the soul is taken care of, indeed Plato hints at this in the *Timaeus* and declares [it] in

¹⁵ *PT*, XIII.1.4, vol. 4, 117. Ficino refers to *Charmides* 156e.

¹⁶ *PT*, XVI.7.12, vol. 5, 303.

¹⁷ The passage of T1 dealing with the restoration of the order could be a reference to God's promise to save men in the so-called *protoevangelium*, namely, in *Genesis* 3:15.

¹⁸ *PT*, vol. 3, 350, note 28.

the *Parmenides*.¹⁹

This text is worth noting because, although it belongs to a theological work that presents classic (i.e. Thomistic) account, as seen before, it inserts elements that are new. Here we refer to Marsilio's idea that pagans had their own opinions about original sin and that such opinions were compatible with Christian doctrine. The text underlines three crucial points that will return in Ficino's Platonic commentaries: original sin is the source of evil; bodily evil comes from the soul's evil as already stated by Zoroaster and the Magi; and all evils can be avoided if the soul is properly nurtured, including death.

Plato's *Charmides* (T1 and T2) is the text where Ficino sees the encounter between pagan wisdom and Christian theology on original sin.²⁰ In his short commentary on it, Ficino writes:

(T5) Indeed, the Pythagoreans [...] promise unending health to the soul and body, provided that the soul carefully moderates each of its movements and each movement of the body; [...]. In *Alcibiades* Plato says that the magic art of Zoroaster is nothing other than holy worship, and he adds that it is not only by songs of magic but also by principles of philosophy that the soul is tempered and the body is kept far from death for ever or at least for a long time. [...] It must not be considered wrong to say that the body can be rendered immortal when the soul is fully tempered and that the body falls into diseases and evils when the soul is untempered. For this is in the Mosaic mystery concerning the condition and fall of

¹⁹ Marsilio Ficino, *De Christiana Religione*, 23. English translation is taken from Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico and Savonarola*, 232.

²⁰ In Ficino's Commentary on Pseudo-Dionysius's *Divine Names*, another text coming from the Platonic Tradition, we find a passage very close to T2, where he clearly refers to the original fault: "Again in the *Charmides* Plato supposes, following the Magi, that the goods and evils of human bodies proceed [rather] from the goods or evils of souls. This is very much Moses' view. But whoever objects that bodily destruction, compounded with a sort of original fault (*vitio quodam originali*), contaminates rational souls, should call to mind that, from the very beginning, this very fall came from a certain fault of the rational soul," Marsilio Ficino, *On Dionysius the Areopagite*, vol. II (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015), 69.

our first parent.²¹

According to Ficino, the first sin was due to intemperance and a lack of order. Then, he presents Plato's thesis about how to heal the soul, and consequently, the body. As it seems, Ficino agrees with Plato and believes it is possible to never die, as happened to Elijah and Enoch. What human beings need is a "magical charm," that is a combination of power from God and the principles of philosophy.

II.1.2 Analysis

These texts (T1-T5) do not simply affirm that body and soul are connected, but also that this is a theory to be found in both pagan and Christian sources. Ficino makes a step further: the original sin is soul's evil from which descends body's evil. Ficino has some difficulties in order to manage those traditions, pagan and Christian. Text T4 presents an idea that manifests the encounter between those traditions and that may enlighten the other texts. Despite it coming from the *De Christiana Religione*, a work very different from the *Theologia Platonica*, the sources and the ideas overlap. In T4, Ficino deals with the human body, which the pagans can save from death by using magical arts. This is something that distances Ficino from the tradition of the Church, while bringing him closer to Neoplatonic theurgy.²² If the previous passages (T1-T3) represent the traditional doctrine of the origin of death and sickness caused by original sin,²³ in T4, Ficino pretends to overcome the wall of death without taking into account the sin of the first parents and the subsequent loss of

²¹ Marsilio Ficino, *Opera Omnia*, vol. 2, 1305f. : "Quinetiam Pythagorei [...] si animus prudenter motiones singulas tum sui, tum corporis, moderetur, perpetuam utriusque sanitatem, et diuturnam vitam, corpori pollicentur. [...] Magicen Zoroastis Plato in Alcibiade nihil aliud, quoque divinum cultum esse dicit: hic insuper addidit, non magicis tantum carminibus verum etiam philosophicis rationibus, et temperate animum, et corpus vel semper, vel diu saltem procul a morte servari. [...] Neque vero falsum putari debet corpus sub anima penitus temperata immortale effici posse, et sub intemperata in morbos, et mala labi. Id enim Mosaicum de primi parentis statu atque lapsu mysterium continet." English translation from A. Farndell (ed.), *Gardens of Philosophy. Marsilio Ficino on Plato* (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 2006), 86f; on the argument of the *Charmides*, its sources and relationship with the *Theologia Platonica*, see Maude Vanhaelen, 'Marsile Ficin, lecteur et interprète du *Charmide* de Platon,' *Accademia. Revue de la Société Marsile Ficin* 3 (2001), 23-52, 42-48.

²² On Ficino's appreciation of theurgy, see Maude Vanhaelen, 'Marsilio Ficino and the Irrational,' in M. Israels and L. A. Waldman (eds.), *Renaissance Studies in Honor of Joseph Connors* (Florence: Olschki, 2013), 438-444.

²³ An account of this view may be found in a text that Ficino surely knows, Aquinas, *ST*, II-II, q. 164, a. 1.

immortality. This would have been at odds with Christianity at the time.²⁴ Ficino's account seems to lack the necessity of faith, baptism and Christ's sacrifice to gain the beatific vision. In Ficino's view, it is sufficient to involve God in the process of resurrection and to show agreement between the Christian doctrine and Pagan wisdom.

Another text, from the *Theologia Platonica*, about the resurrection of the body confirms this agreement. Ficino refers to Plato and Zoroaster to argue that Christian doctrine is not contrary to ancient wisdom. Thanks to this passage concerning Adam's *motus inordinatus*, which was neglected by the editors, it is possible to overcome the ostensible lack of discussion of Christ in Ficino's account. It reads:

(T6) But in harmony with an everlasting soul is an everlasting body, such a body, the sacred Scriptures testify, as was given us even from the very beginning of things. This gift, which was intermitted for a while by a sort of unordered motion, will be restored eventually by God who orders the universe for the better.²⁵

Ficino argues that Adam received an immortal soul in harmony with an immortal body. Adam's fault broke the agreement that Christ will restore. This could mean that the "immortal body" Ficino is talking about is the resurrected body after the Last Judgment. Ficino explicitly ascribes to God the role of fixing what sin destroyed by, and more specifically, the role of restoring an immortal body to the human who already has an immortal soul.

A corollary of the doctrine of original sin is that the "wages of sin is death,"²⁶ and the first parents would not have experienced death if they had not disobeyed God. This means that the restoration of the universal order mentioned in T1 and T6 is found in the Mosaic texts, but is not yet realized at the time. The covenant with Noah and later with Moses did not reestablish the immortality of the body (except for some cases, such as Enoch and Elijah), which instead will come at the end of time thanks to God's promise of human participation in the resurrection of Christ.

Ficino maintains the Thomistic view by claiming that original sin does not destroy human nature but corrupts our actions. Unlike Lutheran theology, which confesses that

²⁴ See Agostino Paravicini Bagliani, "Rajeunir au moyen âge: Roger Bacon et le mythe de la prolongation de la vie," *Revue médicale de la Suisse romande* 106 (1986), 9-23.

²⁵ *PT*, XVIII.9.13, vol. 6, 177.

²⁶ *Romans* 6:23.

human nature is completely corrupted, Ficino argues that it still has a divine principle that moves it towards goodness.²⁷ After the first *motus inordinatus* made by Adam, humanity (who tends towards disorder) is constantly brought back to their true trajectory by an intrinsic inclination.²⁸ Given this conclusion, it is not possible to interpret Ficino as a forerunner of the Reformation.

III.2 Baptism

There is no study on Ficino's account of baptism. This is not surprising. As a matter of fact, if the Biblical passages hinted at by Ficino give a skeleton outline of the doctrine of original sin, it is even harder to find Ficino's idea of baptism, which is linked with it. Lexical research is fruitless for there is no occurrence of the word 'baptism' in his *Theologia Platonica*. Ficino is able to argue about the fate of the blessed and damned souls all without turning to baptism, which is remarkable given the necessity of this sacrament for the salvation of the soul.

Free will alone can easily solve the case of the blessed and damned without recurring to the doctrine of baptism. Indeed, according to Ficino, some philosophers had already tackled this topic using only reason to solve it.²⁹ A more difficult question was concerning the soul deprived of reason. This category includes babies who died before baptism and those persons deprived of reason (from this time forward referred to as *stolidi*), which Ficino deals with separately. He emphasizes that his arguments are philosophical even though philosophers had not developed those issues deeply enough.³⁰ He refers to two philosophers in particular. The first is Plato, who in his *Republic* told the story of Er, a man who rose from the dead, and described the condition of other rational souls. Notably, Er claimed there was nothing worth remembering about newborns. The second is Avicenna, who believed that

²⁷ *PT*, XVIII.10.2, vol. 6, 182: “[...] animae duo intus motuum principia possident: alterum quidem vel impetum proprium vel iudicium, alterum vero divinae providentiae legem omnino penetralibus insitam. Illo quidem in hos aut illos se transferunt mores; hac autem post mores contractos ipsaemet in loca, supplicia, munera congrua moribus intrinseca quadam et occulta inclinatione perducuntur.”

²⁸ *PT*, XVIII.10.3, vol. 6, 182: “Atque interea universum, quod ex primo animorum motus principio saepissime dissonaret, per secundum hoc principium motionis in suam undique consonantiam restituitur, dum sua singuli motu proprio gradatim merita sortiuntur.”

²⁹ *PT*, XVIII.10.1, vol. 6, 180.

³⁰ *PT*, XVIII.11, vol. 6, 206. It is worth noting that the title of the chapter is “De medio animorum statu, praecipue secundum philosophos.”

those souls who have not yet acquired good or bad habits, receive something good from the abundance of divine clemency.³¹

Ficino elaborates a complex theory of the afterworld based on the principle that God positions several intermediate levels between the two extreme points of heaven and hell. The consequence of this principle in the afterworld is that there is not a rigid bipolarity (with the blessed on the one side and the damned on the other); but rather, a hierarchic scale where there are degrees of blessed souls on one side and damned souls on the other. The series of intermediary substances between God and matter, or the series of faculties between the mind and the body, is reflected in the afterworld by a gradation of souls.³² Even more, the soul is not fixed to its position on the scale forever, but it can improve its state due to the possibility of seeing the Creator more clearly.

Ficino believes that the souls of babies probably occupy the middle of this scale and do not suffer. Even though they have no merits, they are nonetheless saved. More precisely, those souls should not complain about divine justice because though they may be deprived of reaching the highest good, they have also been freed from the hazard of the greatest evil.³³

He then argues that, according to Platonic thought, one could say that God created human souls to enjoy divine light, to know it, and love it. If death deprived those creatures (both babies and the *stolidi*) of knowing and loving God, God Himself, would provide for them. Moreover, those souls, just like the others, can move forward on the scale reaching the blessed status gradually. When they depart from their bodies, dwell in splendor, and recognize the Creator in His creatures, they receive the Light Itself, at a given time. They require time because, as is the case with everyone else, they spent some time in the body, which prevented them from making an instantaneous option for God, as was the case for the angels.³⁴ According to Ficino, the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory supports this theory. His reasoning is clear-cut: “If souls confined to the punishments of purgatory, though they are in a much worse condition and location, nonetheless rise again even to blessedness, then it should not appear surprising that souls placed in the middle region of painlessness, closer as it is to blessedness, can advance all the way to blessedness.”³⁵ Following a Platonic way of

³¹ Ficino refers to Plato, *Republic* 10.615C1; and Avicenna, *Metaphysics* 9.6 (ed. Van Riet, 504).

³² *PT*, XVIII.1.4, vol. 6, 210.

³³ *PT*, XVIII.1.3, vol. 6, 209.

³⁴ *PT*, XVIII.1.5, vol. 6, 213.

³⁵ *PT*, XVIII.1.5, vol. 6, 213. On the conflation of “Platonic purgation” and the Christian doctrine of Purgatory, see also *PT*, XVII.4.8, vol.6, 55.

thinking, Ficino overcomes the limit of philosophers, and thus, grants the possibility of beatitude to those souls.

Ficino's idea of an evolution of the soul after death comes from Origen. In the sixth chapter of his *De Principiis*, Origen stresses that the consummation of the world "should not be understood to happen suddenly, but gradually and by steps, as the endless and enormous ages slip by, and the process of improvement and correction advances by degrees in different individuals."³⁶ Ficino reworks this Origenistic position but does not solve the aporias of his source (i.e. the problem of the existence of time in the afterworld, the chance of a second Fall, and so on). In Ficino's view, the salvation of all souls is a hope and a likely probability; while according to Origen, salvation is necessary without which the work of Christ would remain unfinished.³⁷

It is not surprising that when Ficino comments on Plato's text, he remains faithful to his account without any further speculation and leaves the babies' souls in the middle of the scale. In his commentary on the myth of Er in the *Republic*, Ficino says that according to Plato's followers, those souls are in a light that is merely natural, the blessed are above natural light, and the damned below it. This occurs because they have not formed inclination.³⁸ Indeed, it is the capacity of choice and a developed attitude towards good or evil that places a soul within a particular status in the afterworld.

Compared to that of his medieval predecessors, Ficino's view is very innovative. He is far from Augustine's drastic position, who held that infants who die without baptism are consigned to hell.³⁹ Ficino seems closer to the Thomistic view that unbaptised children feel no pain at all or even that they enjoy a full natural happiness through their union with God in

³⁶ *De Principiis* 3.6.6. For the English translation and a study on this and similar passages, see Brian E. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church. A Handbook of Patristic Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 49.

³⁷ See Panayiotis Tzamalikos, *Origen: Philosophy of History and Eschatology* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 265. On Origen in the Renaissance, see Pasquale Terracciano, *Omnia in figura. L'impronta di Origene tra '400 e '500* (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2012).

³⁸ Marsilio Ficino, *Opera Omnia*, vol. 2, 427: "Item in eiusmodi pratum diutissime residere animas secundum Platonicos, eorum qui in infantia decesserunt: de quibus Herus quedam memoria parum digna recensuit. Quia cum in neutra partem declinaverint eligendo, neque obdlexerint habitum. Platonici eas in lumine tantum naturali relinquunt. At vero beatos, quidem super naturale lumen, miseros autem infra id lumen positos esse putant."

³⁹ See *De peccatorum meritis et remissione et de baptismo parvulorum*, 1.16.21 (CSEL 60, 20f.); *Sermo* 294.3, (PL 38, 1337); *Contra Iulianum* 5.11.44 (PL 44, 809).

all natural goods.⁴⁰ However, none of the medieval hypotheses renders the optimism of Ficino's approach. Even when theologians adopted such a view of natural happiness, they considered the privation of the beatific vision as an affliction, or "punishment," within the divine economy. Instead, Ficino holds not only that these souls do not feel pain, but also grants them a supernatural happiness supplied by God and not by the sacrament of baptism – as was generally accepted. Ficino's optimism does not come directly from Platonic sources because a faithful reading of Plato does not allow for optimism about the destiny of those souls. Nevertheless, Ficino believes that the solution to the problem lies in a Platonic way of thinking. Ficino does not place the souls of babies who die before baptism in limbo; but rather, he harmonizes this state through his metaphysical presuppositions. The overwhelming goodness of the First Principle and the inability of those souls to choose evil (because they did not have time to do so) are enough to overcome the effect of original sin.

The situation of the *stolidi*, or unreasoning men, is even more complicated because unlike babies, they have lived on earth, focused on matter, and are without any possibility to turn themselves towards God. Ficino questions whether this presents a good reason for their condemnation, and his answer is negative. An Aristotelian, he says, would assert that because of their use of imagination and their lack of reason, the *stolidi* could not develop cognitive habits. Accordingly, when death arrives and the soul and body's disconnection occurs, the perversion of the faculties, which is due to original sin, disappears and does not warrant any condemnation.⁴¹ A Platonist instead holds that even though the *stolidi* use only imagination, they develop a habit, which is destroyed before the soul reaches God. This does not prevent divine providence from acting. Just as sick people cannot be healed by themselves but require a doctor, the *stolidi* likewise will be healed by God, who will show manifestly His mercy through their salvation.⁴²

At the end of the paragraph, Ficino tries to moderate his philosophical speculation. He reminds us that, in matters of faith, it is better to trust the ecclesiastical authority in order not to be deceived by erroneous philosophical reasoning.⁴³ Ficino is also aware of the human natural defect due to original sin, which requires a surplus of mercy for those who cannot

⁴⁰ Aquinas, *II Sent.*, dist. 33, q. 2, a. 2; *De malo*, q. 5, a. 3.

⁴¹ *PT*, XVIII.1.7, vol. 6, 214.

⁴² *PT*, XVIII.1.7, vol. 6, 214.216.

⁴³ *PT*, XVIII.1.7, vol. 6, 216: "Huc nos ferme coniecturalis philosophorum ducit via, sed quoniam humana coniectio circa divina saepe multumque fallitur, multo satius totiusque censemus, nos sanctoribus apud Christianos ducibus obedienti humilitate committere."

decide on their own how to live. This account is defective, but it is not in conflict with Catholic tradition or arguments for the necessity of baptism. This defect becomes reasonable if we keep in mind Ficino's aim, namely, not just proposing the orthodoxy of faith but harmonizing the elements of different religious traditions. This means that he stresses what is in common in these traditions and withholds the differences.

IV. Original sin in Ficino's anthropology

The second path along which it is possible to find traces of the doctrine of original sin is Ficino's writing on anthropology. In the previous paragraphs, we stated that Adam's sin upset the order between the body, soul, and among the faculties. In this section, I will demonstrate that the Fall of Adam caused the embodiment of the soul and that this event is considered a sort of 'fall of the soul' into the body. In his article, Robert Klein held that the tendency to describe the embodiment of the soul as a fall was normal in the Neoplatonic period; a thesis close to this is the Gnostic idea that the creation of the material world was a consequence of Adam's sin.⁴⁴ This notion comes from Origen, who is an important source for Ficino in topics like Hell, damnation, and the eternity of punishment, as mentioned above. Unfortunately, Klein does not clarify his views and does not quote texts to support his thesis. This oversight leaves room for an analysis of Ficino's writings.

IV.1 The Fall of Adam and the fall of the human soul

Ficino refers to the Platonic doctrine that the soul pre-existed the body and descended into it at the moment of birth, which is where the concept of the 'fall of the soul' comes from. The embodiment of the soul, however, is a difficult issue for Ficino because the Church condemned this doctrine. Ficino had problems between balancing his obedience to the teachings of the Church and his desire to "converse with the ancients."⁴⁵ Moreover, this doctrine was correlated to the idea of the transmigration of the souls, a doctrine harshly criticized by Christians. In the *Theologia Platonica* XVIII.3, Ficino proves the orthodox

⁴⁴ Robert Klein, 'L'inferno del Ficino,' in R. Klein (ed.), *La forma e l'intelligibile: scritti sul Rinascimento e l'arte moderna*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1975), 85f.

⁴⁵ *PT*, XVIII.4.1, vol. 6, 102.

theory that souls were not created before their bodies; however, in XVIII.4, he tries to justify the ancient belief in the pre-existence of souls. Ficino offers several justifications but two in particular are significant: First, the pre-existence of the soul can be understood prophetically as a proto-Christian version of Purgatory; and second, it can be understood allegorically as the soul's return to God or even typologically as a prophecy for the resurrection of the body.⁴⁶ Scholars disagreed about the reasons why Ficino defended some kind of pre-existence of the soul. According to Michael Allen, even though it is not clear whether Ficino was speaking for himself or as an ancient, this doctrine is connected to his consideration on the soul's vehicle.⁴⁷ James Hankins has argued he could have been interested in the magical powers exercised through the "vehicle of the soul."⁴⁸ Finally, Brian Ogren states that Ficino could have believed in the possibility of a transmigration of the soul from man to man through the 'spirit' (*spiritus*).⁴⁹ Without dismissing such hypotheses, we suggest that there may be another reason why Ficino maintains the preexistence of the soul: it is his philosophical way to explain the embodiment of the soul as a consequence of original sin.

Ficino's description of the embodiment of the soul is very close to the description of the Fall of Adam in the passages quoted in previous paragraphs. Consider the following text:

(T7) If a wispy vapor [i.e. black bile, melancholy] has such power over us, if such a delicate motion moves us so violently, then how much more, one must suppose, does our celestial and immortal rational soul depart from its state of rest, as the Platonists believe, at the moment when it falls away from the original purity of its creation – that is, when it is imprisoned in the lightless dungeon of the earthly and mortal body.⁵⁰

Ficino claims that the descent of the soul is a Platonic doctrine. The 'original purity' at the moment of creation contrasts with darkness, and the negativity of such a statement is stressed by the verb "imprisoned," which is used to designate the embodiment of the soul. Such original purity can recall T6 and the state of original accord between the soul and the

⁴⁶ See James Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1990), I, 358f.

⁴⁷ Michael J.B. Allen, 'Quisque in sphaera sua: Plato's Statesman, Marsilio Ficino's *Platonic Theology* and the Resurrection of the Body,' *Rinascimento* n.s. 47 (2007): 31-36.

⁴⁸ James Hankins, 'Marsilio Ficino on Reminiscentia and transmigration of soul,' *Rinascimento* n.s. 45 (2005): 15. Ficino refers to the Neoplatonic doctrine that the rational soul has one or more vehicles, i.e. bodies of a semi-material nature, which it acquires before its descent into the body; see *PT*, XVIII.5.7, vol. 6, 111.

⁴⁹ Brian Ogren, 'Circularity, the Soul-Vehicle and the Renaissance Rebirth of Reincarnation: Marsilio Ficino and Asaac Abarbanel on the Possibility of Transmigration,' *Accademia. Revue de la Société Marsile Ficin* 6 (2004): 63-94, at 73-79. The spirit is one of the three vehicles of soul.

⁵⁰ *PT*, XIV.7.7, vol. 4, 277.

body but before the Fall, which states “in harmony with an everlasting soul is an everlasting body.”

Another text from the *Theologia Platonica* is very close to T7. It is important for several reasons and it states:

(T8) In the seventh book of the *Republic* Plato thinks that the soul falling into the body plunges suddenly from the summit of light into pitch darkness, so that it is no wonder that for the longest time it remains blind and perturbed. [...] The Platonists propose the following order among souls. Some never descend into generation, that is, into a body subject to generation. [...] Other souls descend, but as soon as they do so they are in a way polluted; yet they can be purified again and can restore themselves to what is better.[...] In our souls, however, action can be corrupted, but not essence.⁵¹

First, its context is significant. The text is taken from paragraphs five and six of chapter seven. In paragraph twelve of the same chapter, we find T3, which as we have seen refers to original sin. Secondly, there is a connection to T7 in that the fall of the soul is associated with the image of moving from light to darkness. Thirdly, the classification of souls in paragraph seven manifests a hierarchy of happiness where souls that have been generated exhibit signs of unhappiness. Finally, the last sentence is taken from Aquinas’s account of original sin.⁵² Now we have enough evidence to be sure that T7 and T8 refer to original sin.

Ficino’s view in his *Theologia Platonica* is coherent with that which is expressed in his other Platonic works. In a short passage from the *Commentary on Plato’s Symposium*, Ficino writes that the soul has two lights – one supernatural and the other natural. Our soul fell into the body when it left the divine light and turned to the natural one. This event is presented as positive because even the lowest part of the Universe, or Earth, is filled with rationality, which is an image of the Creator.⁵³ However, Ficino uses a negative vocabulary to describe the fall of the soul as paralleling the Fall of the first parents.

(T9) But our soul fell into the body when, neglecting the divine light, it used its own light alone and began to be content with itself. Only God, to whom nothing is

⁵¹ *PT*, XVI.7.5-6, vol. 5, 293.295. The title of the chapter is “The third question: If rational souls are divine why are they afflicted with tumultuous emotions?”

⁵² See Aquinas, *ST*, I-II, q. 85, a. 2, resp.: “Respondeo dicendum quod, sicut dictum est, bonum naturae quod per peccatum diminuitur, est naturalis inclinatio ad virtutem. [...] Per peccatum autem non potest totaliter ab homine tolli quod sit rationalis, quia iam non esset capax peccati.”

⁵³ Marsilio Ficino, *Commentary on Plato’s Symposium on Love*, trans. Sears R. Jayne (Woodstock: Spring Publications, 2000), 76.

lacking, above whom there is nothing, remains content with Himself, sufficient to Himself.⁵⁴

The soul claimed to be like God when it was satisfied in itself, and that caused its fall into the body. This is a traditional position that Ficino could have learned from Aquinas.⁵⁵ Once again, Ficino borrows doctrines from the tradition but transforms them from the inside where the expulsion from Eden becomes, in a Platonic sense, the reason for the embodiment of souls, and Adam becomes an allegory of the soul that loses its orientation to God.

One last text that confirms that the embodiment of the soul is the consequence of the original sin, comes from a topic slightly different, i.e., the sin of fallen angels. Some angels, according to the Bible, committed one definitive sin and thus fell as demons. In the *Commentary on Plotinus*, Ennead IV, Ficino faces the argument “on the soul’s descent into bodies”. For Ficino, the punishment for their sin is their turning from being pure, incorporeal intelligences to animals.

(T10) Dionysius in discussing daemons also says this, for there he seems to postulate daemons as ensouled beings (*animalia*), just as Basil and most of the Greek theologians thought them to be. Moreover, if the Damascene’s statement that only the lowest angels fell is true and that the fallen daemons did turn into ensouled beings, then the Platonic fall of souls will be very similar to the falling daemons mentioned by the Hebrews and the Christians.⁵⁶

The editor correctly points out that Ficino, again, refers to Aquinas and this reference helps to understand better his words. Ficino’s doubt (as it appears by the use of “if”) recalls Aquinas’s hypothesis about which kind of angels fell among the nine orders in the celestial hierarchy. Aquinas presents two opinions. According to Damascene, some angels among the lowest order fell, whilst according to Gregory the Great, the angel in the higher orders had more reasons to sin. Aquinas believes that both opinions can be true but he prefers the second.⁵⁷ Ficino does not mention Gregory’s hypothesis and concludes that if Damascene’s is right and daemons are ensouled beings, then their sin is the cause of their embodiment.

IV.2 Positive aspects of the Fall

We conclude this chapter trying to find some elements to harmonize the positive and negative aspects of the fall of the soul, and consequently, of the Fall of the first parents in

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ See Aquinas, *ST*, II-II, q. 163, a. 2, resp.

⁵⁶ Marsilio Ficino, *Commentary on Plotinus*, vol. V, 543.

⁵⁷ See Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 63, a.7, resp.

Ficino's thought. My hypothesis is that Ficino had in mind the doctrine of *felix culpa*, namely, the traditional doctrine that underlines the positive consequences of original sin because it allowed for human beings to be saved by Christ.⁵⁸ To prove my point, I present a text from *Theologia Platonica* and Ficino's position in a public theological debate.

In *Theologia Platonica* XVI.1-6, Ficino explains in detail the positive aspects of the union of the rational soul and the body. For example, this union grants the power to know specific things or allows the world to be adorned and God worshipped. More importantly, the union of the soul and the body is the cause of happiness of the soul in Heaven – for as one must be sick to recognize the value of health, so the soul needs to be in a worse condition (that is, united to the body) to appreciate the blessing of being in Heaven. This last reason shows already an ambiguity. For the soul, being in a body is a positive condition only in view of being outside of the body. This means that the embodiment of the soul is not positive *per se* but only an accident since it allows us to further appreciate the state of our soul in Heaven.

An episode of Ficino's life could corroborate the hypothesis that the negative aspects of original sin may be regarded positively in view of the soul's return to God after this life. On 30 June 1489, Lorenzo the Magnificent organized a theological symposium on the theme "Whether God is the cause of evil."⁵⁹ Two opponents were invited, a Franciscan and a Dominican, along with Ficino, Poliziano, and Pico. Little is known about Ficino's participation in the debate except that he agreed with the position of the Franciscan, Giorgio Benigno. According to this friar, all evils come from Adam's sin, but the possibility of our first father's disobedience is due to God who created the chance to sin. We have to note that the source is partisan, and unfortunately, we do not have the report of the Dominican friar, Niccolò de' Mirabili, on Ficino's position.

In Ficino's view, God gives human beings the freedom to sin and that is why the soul descends into the body after original sin. Nevertheless, this is not negative because God gave humanity this possibility. Following Ficino's train of thought, we could argue that the positive aspect of the Fall is that it later permits a better condition for human beings in Heaven. Humanity's perverted orientation towards the sensible sphere is abolished, and the

⁵⁸ It comes from the *Praeconium Paschale*, known as *Exultet*, where it is stated: "O certe necessarium Adæ peccatum, quod Christi morte delétum est! O felix culpa, quæ talem ac tantum méruit habére Redemptórem!"

⁵⁹ See Armando Verde, *Lo Studio Fiorentino 1473-1503: Ricerche e Documenti* (Firenze: Olschki, 1985), vol. 4, 822-831.

soul can achieve its aim (i.e. the vision of God) thanks to the embodiment of the pre-existent *Logos*.⁶⁰ Therefore, it is true that Ficino prefers to highlight the optimistic interpretation of the emanatory process, but this is only possible because of the Fall. The darker is the descent, the brighter is the climbing. Here again, Ficino follows and reinterprets the tradition particularly the idea that the Fall is positive not in and of itself but through the work of the Redeemer.⁶¹

V. Conclusion

Ficino does not merely repeat the doctrine of original sin as accounted by the theologians of the previous centuries, but he puts it into dialogue with the *prisca theologia*. This dialogue is present in Ficino's religious works, but it becomes more evident in his Platonic and Neoplatonic writings. We analyzed passages that deal explicitly or implicitly with the condition of Adam before and after his sin; and according to Ficino, pagans had opinions about original sin that were compatible with Christian. Ficino's operation is to show that the negative aspects of the connection between body and soul, acknowledged by both Christians and pagans, are caused by the original sin because the embodiment of the soul is the direct consequence of the original sin.

Ficino's doctrine of baptism shows that divine providence compensates only for those who cannot develop any *habitus* such as babies and the *stolidi*. The choice implies that even though original sin marks human being, he is still free to be damned. Far from Lutheran theology's claim that human nature is completely corrupted, Ficino holds that it still has a divine principle that moves it towards goodness.⁶² After the first *motus inordinatus* made by Adam, man (who tends towards disorder) is constantly brought back to his aim by an intrinsic inclination.⁶³

⁶⁰ Lauster, *Marsilio Ficino as a Christian thinker*, 56, 67.

⁶¹ See Aquinas, *ST*, III, q. 1, a. 3, ad3.

⁶² *PT*, XVIII.10.2, vol. 6, p. 182: "[...] animae duo intus motuum principia possident: alterum quidem vel impetum proprium vel iudicium, alterum vero divinae providentiae legem omnino penetralibus insitam. Illo quidem in hos aut illos se transferunt mores; hac autem post mores contractos ipsaemet in loca, supplicia, munera congrua moribus intrinseca quadam et occulta inclinatione perducuntur."

⁶³ *PT*, XVIII.10.3, vol. 6, p. 182: "Atque interea universum, quod ex primo animorum motus principio saepissime dissonaret, per secundum hoc principium motionis in suam undique consonantiam restituitur,

A final remark can explain our interest on this unusual topic in Ficino's scholarship. One of the most influential Catholic philosophers of our times, Robert Spaemann, has argued that a thinker's way of theorizing about reality as a whole follows from the way in which the Fall is conceived; the Fall determines what kind of philosopher one is.⁶⁴ His thesis is that the negation of original sin is the main feature of modernity. Finding Ficino's position in modernity, as conceived by Spaemann, is not obvious. Because of his awareness of *natura lapsa* and his call to trust Revelation more than philosophy on these tricky theological matters, we can place Ficino in the wake of the tradition. Scholars, however, know that this kind of declaration could simply be a way to defend himself from suspicions of heresy. Two elements are innovative in Ficino's philosophical account on original sin. First, Ficino believes that philosophy along with God's Grace is a mean to overcome the defect of human nature caused by the original sin (T5). This aspect seems to open the path to modern philosophers who created a *novum organum* to restore human dominion over nature.⁶⁵ Second, Ficino hold that babies who die before baptism may enjoy a supernatural happiness, as recently stated by the International Theological Commission.⁶⁶

In the end, Ficino dealt with a traditional theological topic recurring in two traditions: Christian (through Aquinas more than Augustine) and pagan and put them in dialogue both in his theological manifesto, *De Christiana Religione*, and in the Platonic writings. The result is the loss of Christ's centrality and what is related to Redemption (Grace, baptism, faith).⁶⁷

dum sua singuli motu proprio gradatim merita sortiuntur.”

⁶⁴ Holger Zaborowsky, *Robert Spaemann's Philosophy of the Human Person. Nature, Freedom, and the Critique of Modernity* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), 130. This idea was already in the work of the Italian thinker A. Del Noce, *Il problema dell'ateismo: il concetto di ateismo e la storia della filosofia come problema* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1970³), 355ff.

⁶⁵ Peter Harrison, 'Original Sin and the Problem of Knowledge in Early Modern Europe,' *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63 (2002), 239-59; Harrison showed that both the Cartesian method and Bacon's empirical method were considered a way to overcome the limitations of the fallen intellectual faculties of Adam.

⁶⁶ See *The Hope of Salvation for Infants who Die Without Being Baptized*, Vatican 2007, n.102: "Our conclusion is that the many factors that we have considered above give serious theological and liturgical grounds for hope that unbaptised infants who die will be saved and enjoy the Beatific Vision. We emphasize that these are reasons for prayerful *hope*, rather than grounds for sure knowledge."

⁶⁷ We agree with Vasoli who states: "Ma, a ben vedere, anche l'avvento di Cristo, la sua predicazione e la sua morte sembrano spesso assumere la figura di momenti, sia pure decisivi, di un eterno processo che si svolge oltre il tempo, nel perenne procedere e nel perenne ritorno di tutte le cose create alla Monade eterna che le ha generate [...]" Cesare Vasoli, *Quasi sit deus. Studi su Marsilio Ficino* (Lecce: Conte Editore, 1999), 49.

Hankins has pointed to three issues in which Ficino challenges the theological orthodoxy of his time: the aforementioned pre-existence of the soul to the body; a naturalistic account of miracles; and the animation of the heavens.⁶⁸ We can add the doctrine of original sin to this list.

68 See Hankins, *Marsilio Ficino on Reminiscentia*, 9f. As has been pointed out, Ficino has a “tendency to stretch the boundaries of orthodoxy,” see Christopher S. Celenza, *The Lost Italian Renaissance. Humanists, Historians and Latin’s Legacy* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2004), 113.