

The Letters of
MARSILIO FICINO



Translated from the Latin by members of the Language
Department of the School of Economic Science, London

VOLUME 8

being a translation of
Liber IX



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Publisher's Note:

The beehive motif shown on the title page appears on a number of Ficino Manuscripts which were illuminated for Lorenzo de' Medici's library. The endpapers show two pages in Ficino's own hand from a manuscript containing Book I of his *Letters*. This is now in the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence (Cod. Naz. II IX 2)

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Contents

	<i>Page</i>
Acknowledgements	vi
Letter Titles	vii
Introduction	xi
Translators' Note	xxi
The Letters	1
Appendix	35
Notes to the Letters	59
Chronology of Works by Ficino	95
Relevant Works in Ficino's <i>Opera Omnia</i>	97
Notes on Florentine Political Institutions	99
Notes on Astrological Terms	101
Note on the Latin Text	103
Latin Text	105
Biographical Notes	
Notes on Contemporaries	119
Notes on Ancient and Medieval Authorities	135
Medici Family Trees	146
Bibliography	149
Index	157

Letter Titles

Prooemium in librum nonum, die xviii octobris MCCCCLXXXVIII
Preface to the Ninth Book, 19th October, 1488

- I** Descriptio villae salubris
A description of a country house conducive to good health
- 2** Querimonia et consolatio in amicorum obitu
A lament and consolation on the death of friends
- 3** Positio aspectusque planetarum ingenio conferentium
The position and aspects of the planets that contribute to one's nature
- 4** De efficacia loquendi et ratione iocandi
The power of speech and a reason for jesting
- 5** Satis ad unum scribit amicum, qui cunctis simul scribit amicis
He writes fully to one friend who writes for all his friends at one and the same time
- 6** Amicus in animo. Item excusatio de itinere non suscepto
A friend in spirit. An excuse for a journey not undertaken
- 7** Prooemium in Theophrastum de anima
A preface to Theophrastus' book 'On the Soul'
- 8** Prooemium in Iamblichum
Preface to Iamblichus
- 9** Prooemium in Proculum et Porphyrium
A preface to Proclus and Porphyry
- 10** Prooemium in Synesium atque Psellum
Preface to Synesius and Psellus
- 11** Commendatio stili
Excellence of Style

- 12** Responsio petenti platonicam instructionem et librorum numerum
A response to one seeking Platonic instruction and a list of books
- 13** Untitled letter to Pier Leone
- 14** Commendatio levis
A gentle recommendation
- 15** Studium de vita longa
The pursuit of long life
- 16** De stilo poetico in Aphorismis Hippocratis
On poetic style in the 'Aphorisms' of Hippocrates
- 17** Astronomicum auspicium pro libro de vita longa
Astronomical auspices for the book on long life
- 18** Responsio desideranti natalem suum et reliqua
A reply to one who wishes to have my natal chart and much else besides
- 19** Artificiosa commendatio docti viri
An ingenious commendation of a learned man
- 20** Iocosa gratiarum actio
A playful expression of gratitude
- 21** Prooemium in librum de vita longa
Preface to the book on long life
- 22** Ironia in librum suum contra grammaticum detractorem
Ironic words to support his book and to counter a critical grammarian
- 23** Iocosa adversus silentium diuturnum
Humour in the face of long silence
- 24** In librum de vita
The book 'On Life'
- 25** In librum de vita, post libros de somniis et daemonibus
The book 'On Life', which is following the books 'On Dreams' and 'On Daemons'

Appendix Letters

- A** Proœmium Marsilii Ficini Florentini in librum de vita ad magnanimum Laurentium Medicem patriae servatorem
The preface of Marsilio Ficino of Florence to the book 'On Life', to the magnanimous Lorenzo de' Medici, the Saviour of his Country
- B** Apologia quaedam. In qua de medicina, astrologia, vita mundi. Item de Magis qui Christum statim natum salutaverunt
A defence treating of medicine, astrology, the life of the cosmos, and also the Magi who greeted the new-born Christ
- C** Quod necessaria sit ad vitam securitas et tranquillitas animi
Freedom from care and peace of mind are necessary to life
- D** Proœmium in librum de vita caelitus comparanda
Preface to the book 'On Obtaining Life from the Heavens'
- E** Marsilio Ficino to the reader
- F** Angelo Poliziano to Marsilio Ficino
- G** Filippo Valori to the ever invincible Matthias, King of Hungary
- H** De cura valitudinis eorum qui incumbunt studio litterarum
Care of the health of those who devote themselves to the study of letters
- I** Ermolao Barbaro to Marsilio Ficino
- J** Ermolao Barbaro to Marsilio Ficino
- K** Ermolao Barbaro to Marsilio Ficino
- L** Angelo Poliziano to Marsilio Ficino
- M** Filippo Valori to Matthias, King of Hungary
- N** Filippo Valori to Piero de' Medici
- O** Filippo Valori to Lorenzo de' Medici
- P** Filippo Valori to Matthias, King of Hungary

Introduction

THIS eighth volume of letters casts a new light on Marsilio Ficino, an extraordinary Renaissance man. Sometimes he has been thought of as an ivory-tower philosopher, who retired from the hurly-burly of city life to contemplate God in the seclusion of his academy. It is true that he was a man of devotion; but when the need was there he could be a highly effective man of action. According to Ficino, to combine both roles was difficult. Yet in this book we see him boldly preparing to defend his philosophy against opposition in the papal curia. His defence was successful. On another front we find him still practising as a doctor in the late 1480s, caring for the body as well as the spirit and soul of others. Thus he united the function of doctor, musician, and priest. He had also taken on the care of his nephews and nieces, whose father had died and who evidently had less frugal tastes than he did.¹

Yet his literary output remained undiminished. Perhaps for that reason this book is the shortest of the twelve books in the collected volume of letters first printed in Venice in 1495. It contains only twenty-five letters. The reason that the collected letters were published in Venice may have been that the fundamentalist priest Savonarola and the party opposed to the Medici, Ficino's patrons, were then powerful in Florence. Lorenzo's son and heir, Piero, had been expelled the previous year. Some material that would have been in this book on chronological grounds was probably excluded for the same reason, or because it had already been published in the *De vita libri tres* in 1489. This material has been included here in the Appendix together with some letters written by others, either to Ficino, or as prefaces added to Ficino's work published at this time. The Appendix is of no less importance than the twenty-five letters printed in the Venice edition, and in some cases the more interesting for having been excluded from it.

The letters cover topics from friendship to healthy living and from the ancient philosophical tradition to new advances in biblical scholarship and medicine; there is discussion of the influence of the stars on human life, recommendations for reading books related to

the Platonic tradition and reflections on the art of good writing and speaking.

His correspondents in this book include Lorenzo de' Medici and his sons Piero and Giovanni: to all of these he dedicates important works. There are several letters to his other patron and great friend, Filippo Valori, and to his fellow philosophers Pico della Mirandola, Pier Leone of Spoleto, Angelo Poliziano and the Venetian scholar-diplomat, Ermolao Barbaro. There is also a new friend and follower in Germany, Martin Prenninger of Constanz, and there are several letters to Hungary, both to Francesco Bandini and to the King, Matthias Corvinus, as well as to the king's librarian, another Italian, Taddeo Ugoletto of Parma.

The great majority of the contents of this volume was written within a period of just over a year, from September 1488 to October 1489. During this period Ficino was exceptionally busy, even by his standards. He had finished his translation of Plato's dialogues (published in 1484) but was still working on the commentaries to some of these. He was also working on *De vita* (published in December, 1489). This was the book which seemed to some to cross the bounds of Christian dogma. In addition he had embarked on the enormous task of translating Plotinus' *Enneads* and was now writing commentaries on these. But he had also been engaged on translating a number of the works of other neo-Platonic writers including Porphyry, *De occasionibus*, Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries of the Egyptians and Assyrians*, Priscian of Lydia, *On Theophrastus*, concerning the Soul, Proclus, *On Sacrifice and Magic*, and Psellus, *On Daemons*.

What impelled Ficino to undertake this great task? Like many others of his time, he felt that the key to knowledge lay in the tradition of the ancient past. Ficino believed that the common basis of true philosophy and religion lay in a *prisca theologia*, a venerable teaching that came from God and was passed down through a number of teacher/disciple relationships (the disciple in one generation becoming the teacher in the next). He felt that knowledge of this ancient teaching is the highest happiness for mankind for it leads to the knowledge of the soul, that divine self lying at the heart of every human being, and constituting the unity between man and man. Knowledge of that common root must be the best hope for reconciling the various branches of religion and philosophy. Since the soul was at the mid-point of creation, in coming to know the

soul one would come to know all things. Hence the instruction on the temple of Apollo at Delphi, 'Know Thyself'.

For Ficino, the Universe was one living whole, but in this whole were different levels. Surely human life on earth could be greatly assisted if one could use substances belonging to a higher level to assist life at a terrestrial level: for instance, by wearing solar metals or gems or eating solar food one could attract to oneself the qualities of the Sun. Even making images of the planetary gods might similarly be of assistance. These issues are raised in *De vita libri tres*. Originally the three books constituting *De vita* had not been intended to form a single volume. The first book, *On a healthy life*, was going to be a preface to Book VII of the Letters. But it became too long. The head was going to grow bigger than the body! The second, *On a long life*, was partly inspired by Martin Prenninger, Ficino's illustrious friend from Germany (Letter 18). The text was influenced by Arnald of Villanova, and perhaps by Roger Bacon, but the Arnald text was difficult to read and in a corrupt state. There appears to have been no Church opposition to these first two sections of *De vita*. But the third was a different matter. The title of this was *On obtaining life from the heavens*.

For Ficino, to make use of substances and forms carrying celestial influences could in no way abrogate the omnipotence of Almighty God. God was simply working through such agencies, as He might work through individual men and women. Ficino would have considered astrological indications or causes in a similar way: God manifests His will through the stars. What God wills is instantly effected.

However, Ficino was well aware that others would not see the matter in the same light. In his letter to 'the three Peters' (Appendix B), he states the kind of questions he anticipates, or indeed has already encountered. 'One person will say, "Is not Ficino a priest? What business have priests with medicine? Or what business with astrology?" Similarly another person will say, "What business has a Christian with magic or talismans?" Yet another, himself unworthy of life, will deny that there is life in the heavens.' These charges are summarised by the 'severe ecclesiastical prelate' referred to in *De vita*, III, 25: he condemns 'whatever detracts from our free will, whatever derogates from the worship of the one God.' Ficino answers, 'With you I not only condemn these things but even bitterly curse them.'² Strong language!

However, predictive astrology does appear to take away at least partially the free will of humans and, for that matter, of God. Ficino

seems to imply prediction. For instance, in Appendix D he predicts a 'sufficiently long life' for King Matthias of Hungary, but the king died within the year. Ficino also predicted a long life for Ermolao Barbaro, who died in 1493 when he was still in his thirties. But Ficino did predict accurately that Lorenzo de' Medici's son, Giovanni, would become Pope, which he did in 1513. One does wonder how seriously Ficino and his addressees took such predictions. Perhaps they were rather given and received in the spirit with which Persian courtiers in ancient times used to greet the Great King, 'O King, live for ever!'

Ficino's philosophical consideration of astrology does seem to be moving towards a more semiological interpretation. In his letter to Ficino in this volume Poliziano, the poet and grammarian, expresses his pleasure that Ficino's views on astrology are now the same as Pico della Mirandola's (Appendix L). Pico was increasingly influenced at the time by the views of the reforming Dominican monk, Girolamo Savonarola, and he therefore would not accept any form of predictive astrology in relation to human affairs.

Another serious accusation made against Ficino was that of worshipping daemons. A Christian was not allowed even to address them, yet Ficino had recently summoned Porphyry, now a spirit himself, to elucidate what he had just heard from the spirit of Plotinus. Could Ficino have passed off these and similar references as mere metaphor? Porphyry had actually written a treatise of fifteen books against Christianity!

Ficino successfully avoided trouble. In a later book of letters (Book X) he acknowledges his gratitude to Rinaldo Orsini, the Archbishop of Florence. Ermolao Barbaro, the expert on Aristotle and soon to become Patriarch of Aquileia, also claims to have helped his cause in Rome and even states that Pope Innocent VIII would like to see him. Perhaps Ficino might have been wary of such a meeting, bearing in mind the persecution inflicted by the Pope on Ficino's friend, the scholar Pico.

Ficino might not have got off so easily if he had not had substantial support from within Florence; and he was very active in mobilising this. The three Peters that Ficino summoned in Appendix B were all distinguished men. Pietro del Nero was a classical scholar and, perhaps more to the point, a lawyer. Piero Soderini in 1502 was given the post of Gonfaloniere for life, and Piero Guicciardini was a member of one of the most influential families in Florence. Guicciardini is asked to 'fetch' Poliziano. Ficino often addresses Poliziano as 'Hercules,' much

to Poliziano's annoyance, as he was of small stature, but Ficino really did need a Hercules now! Nero was asked to go to the poet Cristoforo Landino: 'That Amphion of ours with his wonderful charm will swiftly soften the stony hearts of our enemies.'

Ficino also sends a letter to the three 'Cs' (Appendix C): Bernardo Canigiani, Giovanni Canacci, and Amerigo Corsini. These were all leading citizens. A phrase has been added in the printed edition which, if it was actually used, is of some interest. In this addition Ficino addresses 'the three Cs' as 'keen-scented hounds of the Academy'. This seems to indicate that the Academy had some special rôle to play in supporting Ficino against the Dominican Savonarola; the Dominicans themselves were known as *Domini canes*, hounds of the Lord. Canigiani was a close friend of Ficino, and Corsini had been his pupil.

Another interesting feature of this letter is that, while he needed a vigorous response to the anticipated charge of heresy, he did not want an over-response. Canacci, in particular, seems to be reminded that 'those who consider their studies and business too precisely and always break them down into the smallest possible particles are at the same time wearing away their own life.' A little earlier in the same letter he writes to all of them, 'I now entrust you the tasks I wish you to undertake, but not the cares attendant upon them.' Ficino then invites them, if they hear any 'wolves howling', to put the matter to Benigno Salviati, the notable Franciscan preacher, for he 'will easily put all the wolves to flight ... and at a stroke, relieve me of anxiety and you of trouble.' In both letters (Appendix B and C) Ficino is not only asking for the support of his friends but he is asking them to obtain help from specific influential individuals. It is a campaign.

In his defence Ficino made good use of the books he had recently worked on, or was still working on. In fifteen of the twenty-five letters in this book the translations of these works are mentioned, or promised to the recipients. By reading these Platonic works they could be expected to gain a clearer understanding and greater sympathy with Ficino's philosophy.

The most powerful person in Florence was Lorenzo de' Medici. Ficino still regarded him as his patron, although due to a deteriorating financial position he had not for some time paid for Ficino's books to be published. In Appendix A Ficino writes to Lorenzo largely in allegories relating to rebirth. 'Rebirth' was a term used by the early Christians to mean a spiritual rebirth in the wisdom of God. It is not a

term employed much by Ficino. It refers to a very profound experience described in the first book that Ficino ever translated from the Greek. This work, ascribed to the legendary Egyptian Hermes Trismegistus, was entitled *The Poimander*; now known as the *Corpus Hermeticum*. In this the disciple is beside himself because Hermes has not bestowed upon him second birth. Hermes tells him:

‘O Son, spiritual wisdom lies in the womb of silence and the seed is truth and the supreme good...’

‘What kind of man is born, O Father?’

‘He who is born from God is of a different kind; he is a son of God, and himself God, in all he is the All, composed of all powers.’

Towards the end of this letter to Lorenzo, Ficino writes these words: ‘Accept therefore, most worthy Lorenzo, after those books on the soul, these books on the body also, and graciously breathe life into those earlier ones.’ Ficino had already sent Lorenzo the translations of Plato and the work on The Immortality of the Soul. Now Lorenzo is to breathe life into The Book on Life. Given the opening topic of the letter, the implication is that the *De vita* will have its full power only if Lorenzo breathes upon it and it gains second birth. As well as deliverance from the immediate threat, Ficino is hoping for a rebirth of wisdom among the Florentines led by a re-inspired Lorenzo.

Ficino was an arch-syncretist, both from his nature and from his philosophy. He always worked to bring people to harmony following the words of Psalm 133 quoted in *Letters*, 4, 42 and the Preface to *Letters*, 6, ‘How good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity.’ In Letter 6 of this volume he stresses the importance of unity. According to Giovanni Corsi, his contemporary biographer, he practised what he spoke. He had no desires to accumulate possessions and left the whole of his inheritance to his brothers. ‘He would take great pains to reconcile friends. He was a model of dutiful conduct towards parents, relatives, friends and the dead, but particularly towards his mother Alessandra, whose life he prolonged by remarkable care and attention, to her eighty-fourth year, even though she was an invalid.’ (*Letters*, 3, ‘The life of Marsilio Ficino by Giovanni Corsi,’ p.145). In his collected letters there is hardly a request for himself but many commendations for others.

There are frequent references to the work of Theophrastus and that of Priscian of Lydia who strove to discover the essential unity of view

held by both Aristotle and Plato. It is also interesting that in this volume he speaks highly of a leading Dominican, Niccolò de Mirabilibus and also of a leading Franciscan, Benigno Salviati (Letters 3 and 19). This was at a time when there was considerable rivalry between the two orders (as there was between the Aristotelians and Platonists).

Ficino also saw a link between Christianity and the teachings of Zoroaster. He points out that the three wise men who came to the infant Christ were in fact the first three Christians! Even more, that they had been led by the very kind of white magic that Ficino advocates (Appendix B). In the preface to Plotinus, Zoroaster is actually honoured as the first founder of the *prisca theologia*.

Ficino also sought to resolve the differences between those who took the spiritual path through religion, who primarily worked through the heart, and those who worked through the head and took the path of philosophy. Back in the 1470s he had written, 'Lawful philosophy is no different from true religion and lawful religion exactly the same as true philosophy.' (*Letters*, 1, 123). He asserts in *Letters*, 7, 20 that philosophy is necessary for 'men with keen and philosophically inclined minds.' He says that reason will lead them to the same place as faith has led those of a religious nature. He points out in this volume in Letter 12 that amongst the early sages there had been exemplars of both the religious and the philosophic life. Plato had gloriously combined them both.

The idea of Platonic Love has passed into common parlance as a love independent of physical attraction, a love central to Ficino's concept of friendship. In this volume we are presented with a clear picture of how such friends lived and what was the basis of their friendship. Angelo Poliziano, a famous poet and grammarian in his day, writes to him (Appendix L):

I hope you will not disdain this little country cottage of ours at Fiesole when your place at Careggi gets too hot in August. For here we have many streams, as in a valley, very little sun and a breeze that never fails us. Then the secluded little house itself, although almost hidden by a small wood, commands a view of the whole of Florence. And although there is a great throng nearby, in my house there is always pure solitude, such as detachment indeed loves.

Then he mentions that Ficino's friend, Pico della Mirandola, often drops in and takes him with him 'for the kind of supper you

are familiar with, a supper that is frugal but witty, and always full of cheerful conversation and jokes.’

They thought of themselves as doing the same work. Poliziano writes in the same letter, ‘What of the fact that we all devote ourselves to promoting true studies each in our own way? And we always do this encouraged not by any reward, but by love of the work itself; yet the duties are divided among us in such a way that absolutely no part of them is left out. For Pico ... is expounding all the scriptures... and he arrives bearing the olive branch between Aristotle, who is currently mine, and Plato, who is ever yours.’

Ficino writes not infrequently that he works to express the glory of the age. There is a universality of view about these fifteenth-century humanists. It is not surprising that this volume of Ficino’s letters dwells so much upon the One. He was working on the Plotinus Commentaries during the period in which these letters were written, and Plotinus dwells on the One even more consistently than Plato does. It is the unity of God recognised in the human being that constitutes the basis of friendship.

Those who have the same guiding spirit and listen to it have a single mind and single will. ‘If mind and will are one there is always but one man’ (*Letters*, 6, 10). When Ficino writes to King Matthias of Hungary, having earlier declined the king’s invitation to visit his country, it is not just a rhetorical flourish for him to say that he will be visiting it in the body of Filippo Valori, who is Ficino’s new patron and his alter ego (Letter 6). The mind which is common to friends seems to relate to the mind of God, who is always the third friend.³

It is a quality of some of the humanists that Ficino corresponds with in this volume that they seem to move closer to each other in their thought as though they were not bound to their opinions. Poliziano writes to Ficino in 1494 (Appendix L): ‘So far as concerns astrologers, about whom you have written me a most beautiful letter, I rejoice greatly because you also are now for the first time taking a stand with our Pico, or have already taken this stand in the past ... Changing one’s view is not a disgrace for a philosopher.’ But Poliziano also seems to be modifying his own views. Having been a staunch Aristotelian, he now writes as a ‘neophyte’ in Ficino’s philosophy. Ermolao Barbaro, another famous Aristotelian, shortly to be appointed Patriarch of Aquileia by the pope, writes (Appendix J), ‘We are aligning part of our philosophy to some extent with yours:

we are giving ourselves encouragement and turning what is given man as a punishment into praise.’

In surveying the letters in this volume one realises what a master Ficino was of the now almost forgotten art of letter writing. There does not seem to be a word out of place. In Letter 11 Ficino replies to a letter from Andrea Cambini, who has sent Ficino three speeches written by a relative of Cambini’s. Ficino praises them highly. He writes: ‘The qualities I look for above all others in speeches are these: meanings that are clear and not hidden, fullness without excess, brevity without defect, but whole and measured, and lastly appropriate and fine choice of words.’ Ficino might have been describing the qualities of his own letters. These qualities point to the Plotinian mean, the mid-point in creation, the still centre. They reflect the words which formed part of the inscription written on the walls of his Academy: ‘Avoid excess, avoid activity. Rejoice in the present’.⁴ Such advice leads to the fulfilment of human life.

Clement Salaman
Editor

1 *Letters*, 7, 24.

2 The difficulties that Ficino had are well summarised by Kaske and Clark in the introduction to *Marsilio Ficino: Three Books on Life* (See Bibliography).

3 The 12th-century Cordoban philosopher Averroes had postulated the notion of a common mind. This was declared heretical by the Church, but St Thomas Aquinas stated that there was indeed a common mind, that is, the mind of God. This view was accepted.

4 *Letters*, 1, 5.

Translators' Note

THIS volume contains Ficino's ninth book of letters, comprising letters written in 1488 and 1489, with a preface added in the summer of 1490. In addition, four important letters were written in 1489 which were not included in the printed edition of his letters published in 1495. This is no doubt because they concern Ficino's *Three Books on Life (De vita)* and were in fact published with it, together with a note to the reader printed there. These four letters were included in the one extant manuscript (Mo2), and the reader's note is alluded to there, but not given in full. All five of these items have now been appended to the present volume (Appendices A to E) as they help to complete the record of Ficino's engagement with other scholars at this period.

In addition, some letters have been provided from his various correspondents: Appendix F is Poliziano's reply to a request for help, G is a letter from Valori, and H is the covering letter Ficino wrote at the time he composed Book I of *De vita*, which had originally been intended as a letter, but outgrew its context (see our previous volume, *Letters*, 7). Appendix letters I to K are from Ermolao Barbaro, presenting the other side of the correspondence between him and Ficino. They date from 1484, 1488 and 1491 but are given together here for the sake of convenience. Appendix L presents another letter from Poliziano to Ficino, and M to P are letters of dedication written by Filippo Valori for presentation copies of Ficino's work discussed in this volume. Valori personally paid for these presentation copies and for the publication in print of *De vita*.

Textual Sources

For Book IX, besides the printed edition of Venice, 1495, there is only one manuscript. It is not known who wrote this manuscript or under what circumstances. It contains all of the letters from this book, and the

following books, stopping early in Book XII, and these are followed by some letters of Bartolomeo Scala from an earlier period.

The 1495 printed edition was published in Venice by Matteo Capcasa of Parma. The copy in the library of the University of Durham (SR. 2.C.22), used here, has some corrections in the hand of Ficino Ficini, Ficino's nephew.

The manuscript, siglum Mo2, is Munich, Staatsbibliothek, MS lat. 10781.

This manuscript also served as the main textual source for the Appendix letters connected with *De vita* (A to E, and H), collated with the earliest printed editions of this work:

1489, Antonio Miscomini, Florence

c. 1492, Georg Wolf, Paris

1498, Venice.

The Latin texts of the remaining Appendix letters are all found in Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Supplementum Ficinianum*, 2 vols., Florence, 1937, volume II, for which page numbers are given in each case.

THE TRANSLATORS