

Later Platonists and Their Heirs among Christians, Jews, and Muslims

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Reading Theophrastus' Mind: Marsilio Ficino's Reception of Priscian of Lydia

Anna Corrias

1 Priscian of Lydia and His Metaphrasis of Theophrastus' *On the Soul*

Little is known about Priscian of Lydia. The Byzantine historian Agathias (c. 536–c. 582) tells us that he was one of the seven Platonic philosophers who sought refuge with Chosroes I, the king of Persia, when in 529 the Roman emperor Justinian suppressed the philosophical schools in Athens.¹ When Chosroes and Justinian concluded a peace treaty in 533, the philosophers were allowed to return to Athens. Apart from his exile and return, we have no other precise information about Priscian's life. Nor is much known about his literary output. In fact, only two works are known: the *Solutiones eorum de quibus dubitavit Chosroes Persarum rex* and the *Metaphrasis in Theophrastum*.² The *Solutiones*, as the title suggests, are the responses to questions allegedly posed by the Persian king on different philosophical topics during the time that Priscian and his fellow philosophers were at his court.³ The work survives only in a Latin translation dating from the sixth or seventh century.

Priscian's other known work is the *Metaphrasis in Theophrastum*, which is based on the fourth and fifth books of Theophrastus' eight-book *Physica*, of which only a few extracts survive, but which is listed among Theophrastus' writings in Diogenes Laertius' *Lives* 5.42–50. The fourth and fifth books form part of what must have been Theophrastus' commentary on Aristotle's *On the Soul*, of which some fragments are preserved in Priscian's *Metaphrasis* and in Themistius' paraphrase of *On the Soul*; other minor sources are Iamblichus, Simplicius, and Philoponus. In the Middle Ages, Theophrastus' psychology was referred to by Averroes and Albert the Great, though their reliability is disputed. Following the order in the *De anima* and presumably in Theophrastus' *Physics*,

1 Agathias, *Historiae* 2.30.3. On Agathias, see Cameron 1969; 1969–1970; 1970.

2 Boissier and Steel 1972 have claimed that Priscian was also the author of the commentary on Aristotle's *De anima* attributed to Simplicius, but the issue is far from settled.

3 Priscian of Lydia, *Solutiones ad Chosroem*, ed. Bywater (Priscian 1886); trans. Huby (Priscian 2016).

the *Metaphrasis* is divided into three sections: sense perception, imagination, and intellect.⁴ Many of the passages quoted by Priscian coincide with those given by Themistius, which confirms Priscian's accuracy.

Characteristic of the *Metaphrasis* is its eclectic character.⁵ In fact, Priscian's exposition is far from faithful to Theophrastus' account of Aristotle's psychology. Though he no doubt intended to study Theophrastus' commentary with a view to gaining a better understanding of the more obscure passages of Aristotle's *De anima*, his attempts to clarify the obscurities often lead to further obscurities, because of his constant deployment of language and concepts found in the late ancient Platonic tradition, especially Iamblichus, from whom he constantly draws in order to explain the most puzzling passages in Theophrastus' text. This is how Priscian explains his exegetical approach:

Τοιοῦτος ὁ τρόπος τῆς περὶ ἐκάστην αἴσθησιν θεωρίας, ἐν δεῖ μάλιστα ἐκ τῶν Ἰαμβλίχῳ ἐν τοῖς περὶ ψυχῆς πεφιλοσοφημένων ἀναλαμβάνειν, ἐξ ὧν καὶ νῦν ἡμεῖς ταῦτα συνηρημένως γεγράφαμεν τὸν τύπον ὑπογράψαι τῆς ἀκριβοῦς περὶ ἐκάστην θεωρίας βουλόμενοι· ἐπεὶ οὐ τοῦτο νῦν ἡμῖν πρόκειται ἐπεξιέναι τῇ περὶ αὐτῶν διαρθρώσει, ἀλλὰ τὰ τοῦ Θεοφράστου, εἴ τί τε ἐπὶ πλεόν τῆς Ἀριστοτέλους παραδόσεως προστίθῃσι συναιρεῖν, καὶ εἴ τι ἀπορῶν προτείνει ἐπεξεργάζεσθαι κατὰ δύναμιν.

Such is the method of inquiry about each sense, which one must take over above all from the philosophical results of Iamblichus in his [books] *On the Soul*, from which we too now, wishing to sketch the outline of his precise enquiry about each [sense], have written these things briefly; since our present project is not this, to go in detail through his dissection of them, but [to study] the works of Theophrastus, [aiming] both, if he adds anything beyond what Aristotle has handed down, to bring it together, and, if he offers us anything by his raising of difficulties, to work it out as well as we can.⁶

4 Apart from a few *lacunae* here and there, there is a large gap starting in the section on the imagination and continuing into the section on intellect. Furthermore, a note written by the copyist at the end of the manuscript, saying "look out for the rest", suggests that the end of the *Metaphrasis* has not come down to us. See Huby 2013, 4.

5 See Schmitt 1976, 76.

6 Priscian, *Metaphrasis*, ed. Bywater (Priscian 1886b, 7), trans. Huby (Priscian 2013, 15). See Huby 2013, 4: "The result is that we have to use some detective work to establish what is going on, but I am inclined to think that what we have in Priscian is quite a large amount of fairly pure Iamblichus".

The result of this syncretic method is a Theophrastus transformed by Iamblichus, that is, a Platonising Aristotelian who agrees with Plotinus that the individual human mind retains a degree of possession of the divine. This was the Theophrastus who was revealed to his fifteenth-century translator, the Florentine humanist philosopher Marsilio Ficino, who in 1497 published a Latin version of and a commentary on Priscian's *Metaphrasis*.

2 Marsilio Ficino and Priscian's *Metaphrasis*

Marsilio Ficino is certainly familiar to students of Renaissance philosophy and those working in the history of Platonic scholarship. Ficino was the first to translate, under the auspices of the Medici family, the whole corpus of Platonic dialogues into Latin, as well as the *Corpus hermeticum*, Plotinus' *Enneads*, Iamblichus' *De mysteriis*, and other late Platonic works. An accomplished classical scholar and Hellenist, but also a physician and a priest, Ficino devoted his life to excavating the truth of Platonism for his Latin readers. His revival of Plato, he believed, would reveal the continuity of a philosophical tradition in which pagan heritage coincided with Christian doctrine. As Michael Allen puts it:

Ficino's lifelong commitment was in fact to revelation: to the steadfast conviction that his enemies could be repulsed by the labour of the word, of perpetual analysis and elucidation, of iteration and reiteration; to the triumphant recognition that Platonism itself, in its history as an intellectual republic under attack from the world without and from traducing enemies within, had already established for its devotees an extensive and seemingly impregnable bulwark of defensive arguments.⁷

Indeed, the goal of Ficino's life and career was to reveal that the *via Platonica* would lead to the same truth as Christianity—that is, the divine and immortal nature of the individual human soul.

Despite his lifelong commitment to Platonism, however, Ficino was a great admirer of Aristotle. In fact, Aristotle is a constant, though often only implicit, presence in Ficino's writings. Ficino was convinced that, although Aristotle had been depicted as a sort of traitor, the “anti-Platonic” philosopher *par excellence*, he in fact never departed from the teachings of his master Plato, especially as

⁷ Allen 1998, xi.

regards the immortality of the soul. In Ficino's view, the false paradigm of "Plato versus Aristotle" was due especially to two commentators: Alexander of Aphrodisias, who gave a mortalist interpretation of the *De anima*, and Averroes, because of his view that with the death of the body we perish as individuals but survive as undifferentiated parts of the *nous pathêtikos*, which is one and the same for all mankind, a position known as monopsychism.⁸ In a passage from one of his letters to John of Hungary, which can also be found in the proem to his Latin translation of Plotinus, Ficino writes:

Nos ergo in theologis superioribus apud Platonem atque Plotinum traducendis, et explanandis elaboravimus: ut hac Theologia in lucem prodeunte, et poetae desinant gesta mysteriaque pietatis impie fabulis suis annumerare: et Peripatetici quamplurimi, id est, philosophi pene omnes amoveantur, non esse de religione saltem communi tanquam de anilibus fabulis sentiendum. Totus enim ferme terrarum orbis a Peripateticis occupatus in duas plurimum sectas divisus est: Alexandrinam et Averroicam; illi quidem intellectum nostrum esse mortalem existimant; hi vero unicum esse contendunt. Utrique religionem omnem funditus aequo tollunt.

We, therefore, who have toiled until this time to translate and expound the earlier theologians, are now daily working in the same way on the books of Plotinus. We have been chosen for this work by divine Providence, just as they were for theirs, so that, when this Theology emerges into the light, the poets will stop the irreligious inclusion of the rites and mysteries of religion in their stories, and the Aristotelians, I mean all philosophers, will be reminded that it is wrong to consider religion, at least religion in general, as a collection of old wives' tales. For the whole world has been seized by the Aristotelians and divided for the most part into two schools of thought, the Alexandrian and the Averroist. The Alexandrians consider our intellect to be subject to death, while the Averroists maintain that there is only one intellect. They both equally undermine the whole of religion.⁹

Contra Alexander and Averroes, Ficino believed that the mind described by Aristotle in the *De anima* is only one and was immortal.¹⁰ During embodied

8 For a detailed account of Ficino's criticism of Alexander and Averroes, see Corrias 2020, 53–110.

9 Ficino 1975–, 7:22. See Ficino 1576a, 872; id. 1576c, 1537, and Corrias 2020, 8.

10 On the unity of intellect in Aristotle's *De anima*, see Gerson 2004 and Wedin 1988.

life, it operates on different levels of epistemological perfection, depending on whether it performs contemplation of Ideas (i.e. it uses “intellect”, *intellectus*) or discursive thinking (i.e. it uses “reason”, *ratio*). What then does Aristotle mean when he postulates a difference between a mind that “makes all things”, the so-called *nous poiêtikos*, and a mind that “becomes all things”¹¹ and “has no actual existence until it thinks”,¹² that is, the *nous pathêtikos*? In what follows I shall discuss Ficino’s answer to this question, based on his interpretation of Priscianus’ Theophrastus.

Ficino’s “commitment to revealment”¹³ was not only to the revealment of Plato, but also, as we said, to the revealment of the original Aristotle—more specifically, Aristotle’s original view of the human mind. At the core of Ficino’s concern was the notion of potentiality. For if our intellect “becomes all things”, as Aristotle famously said in *De anima* 430a14–15 and if, as Lloyd Gerson has it, “becomes” is a gloss for “in potency”,¹⁴ the true nature of the intellect is not its being a thinking substance but is rather the mere possibility of a thinking substance. Indeed, Aristotle’s ambiguous wording here gave rise to conflicting interpretations, in which the human mind ended up being considered precisely the opposite of what Aristotle, in Ficino’s view, had conceived it to be: not intrinsically intellectual, but potentially so. This misleading analysis, Ficino believed, found its champion in Averroes, who not only postulated the horrifying possibility of a super-individual immortality, but had also described the *nous pathêtikos* as unable on its own to produce knowledge *in act*. For Averroes, the *nous pathêtikos*, as a pure cognitive potentiality, becomes capable of intellection only when joined with the agent intellect, which makes the forms in the *nous pathêtikos* (forms which the *nous pathêtikos* is unable to understand by itself) intelligible. In other words, for Averroes, the *nous pathêtikos*, operates “according to its capacity for receptivity, not according to an ability to form concepts or abstractions”.¹⁵

This view was repellent to Ficino, who believed that the human mind is intellectual *by nature*, and intrinsically capable of conceptualisation and abstraction. For him, potentiality and actuality do not pertain to two different intellects—one passive and the other active—but instead refer to different stages of epistemological sophistication *within* the human mind. In the *Platonic Theology* (1482), he writes:

11 Aristotle, *De anima* 3.5,430a14–15.

12 Aristotle, *De anima* 3.4,429a23–24.

13 See n.7 above.

14 Gerson 2005, 155.

15 Hendrix 2012, 6.

Virtus quidem solis universalis hunc hominem, qui est particularis effectus, non producit nisi per hominem alium, tamquam particularem causam atque propriam. Eadem ratione mens illa agens universalis non producet affectum hunc aut illum speciei intelligentiaeque in mente capace sine mente quadam agente particulari quae intra nos habitat. Sicut enim pro arbitrio nostro utimur ad intellegendum mente capace quasi forma quadam familiari, ita, prout liber, per efficacem mentem species fabricamus, quasi per artem propriam nobis et insita.

The universal power of the sun does not produce this man, who is a particular effect, except by way of another man as the particular and proper cause. For the same reason the universal agent intellect will not produce in the receptive mind this or that effect of a species or understanding without a particular agent mind that can dwell inside us. For just as, in accordance with our judgement, we use the receptive mind as if it were a familiar form in order to understand, so also, as we please, do we fashion species through the effective mind, as through an art proper to and innate in us.¹⁶

Hence, by splitting the nature of intellection into two and by making the human mind metaphysically equivalent to matter, Averroes—according to Ficino—failed to interpret *De anima* correctly. The only way in which the potentiality of the intellect compares with that of matter, Ficino says in the *Platonic Theology*, is analogically: *Quod si dicatur sic se habere ad formas intellegibiles, sicut materia se ad sensibiles habet, exemplum quidem hoc erit, utcumque poterit, verum, non tamen coget mentis essentiam esse totius actus expertem.*¹⁷ In other words, this analogy helps to explain how intellect perfects itself by gaining access to the intelligible Forms, but does not deprive it of its substan-

16 Ficino, *Platonic Theology* 15.11.11 (2001–2006, 5:132–134). See also 15.11.3 (5:1 24): *Intellectum agentem apud illos esse actu substantiam quandam, postquam agit aliquid, non est dubium neque nos contra pugnamus. Quod autem adiungunt capacem quoque intellectum esse substantiam alteram ac talem ut mera potentia sit non aliter quam materia prima, non probamus.* (With the Averroists, the agent intellect is a particular substance in act since it does something, and there is no doubt about this and we do not challenge them. However, when they add that the receptive intellect is another substance, and of such a kind that is pure potency like prime matter, we do not agree).

17 Ficino, *Platonic Theology* 15.11.7 (2001–2006, 5:128): “Were you to suggest that its relationship to intelligible forms resembles that of matter to sensible forms, it would be a true analogy insofar as it went, yet it would not require the essence of mind to be empty of all act”.

tiality and agency. Since the early days of his Aristotelian studies, Ficino was absolutely sure that when Aristotle speaks of the part of the soul καθάπερ ᾧ ἐπιστάμεθα,¹⁸ he is referring to the human soul's innate capacity for intellection, which is individually possessed by each single human being. For *Quod autem plurali utitur numero, ostendit non separatum quiddam, sed nos proprie intellegere. Atque in ipsa hominis anima intellectum tum agentem collocat, tum capacem.*¹⁹

Ficino's belief was that if we want to get to the bare bones of Aristotle's view of a mind that "has no characteristic except its capacity to receive"²⁰ and "has no actual existence until it thinks,"²¹ it is not to Averroes that we must appeal, but to Aristotle's devoted student Theophrastus, who replaced him as the head of the Lyceum. Already in the *Platonic Theology* Ficino claimed that "Theophrastus and Themistius also acknowledge that the intellect is united with us from the beginning and is implanted in our soul."²² When, in later life Ficino gained access to Priscian's *Metaphrasis*, he thereby also gained access to Theophrastus' view of the nous pathêtikos. As I said, we do not possess Theophrastus' view in its entirety, but for Ficino the fragments preserved in the *Metaphrasis* were enough to prove Averroes wrong. In Ficino's eyes, there was no doubt that Theophrastus' words reflected Aristotle's thought more faithfully than did any other interpreter after him. As he wrote to his friend Filippo Valori on 25 March 1489:

Incidi denique divina quadam sorte in librum Theophrasti De anima a Prisciano quodam Lydo breviter quidem, sed tamen diligenter expositum ea potissimum ratione, qua Plutarchus et Iamblichus, Platonici Peripatetici insignes, Aristotelicam de anima sententiam explicaverant. Cum igitur in

18 "Whereby we know". Aristotle, *De anima* 1.2.414a5–6.

19 Ficino, *Platonic Theology* 15.7.9 (2001–2006, 5:91): "The fact that he [Aristotle] uses the plural 'we' shows us that understanding is not something separate, but is properly ourselves. And in the soul of man he locates both the active and the receptive intellect". Cf. 15.12.11 (5:135): *Scite Aristoteles mentem agentem atque capacem numquam duas essentias appellavit neque posuit super animam, sed vocavit animae partes dixitque eas duas esse differentes vires in anima. Si quis autem averroicam mentem appellaverit animam, is animae vocabulo abutetur* ("Bear in mind that Aristotle never called the agent and receptive minds two essences, nor did he put them above the soul: he called them the soul's parts, and said they were two different powers in the soul. But should anyone call that Averroistic mind a soul, he would be abusing the word 'soul'").

20 Aristotle, *De anima* 3.4.429a21–22.

21 Aristotle, *De anima* 3.4.429a23–24.

22 Ficino, *Platonic Theology* 15.7.11 (2001–2006, 5:92): *Theophrastus quoque et Themistius intellectum ab initio coniungi nobis atque esse animae nostrae insitum confitentur.*

his legendis Platonicos Peripateticosque esse concordēs animadverterem, habui ferme tota quod mente petebam. Atque ut et caeteri quam primum habeant, librum hunc e Graeca lingua transtulimus in Latinam.

Eventually, by some divine chance, I came upon Theophrastus' book *De anima*, explained briefly yet thoroughly by a certain Priscian of Lydia. He chiefly employed the argument by which Plutarch and Iamblichus, who were distinguished Platonists and Peripatetics, had explained the Aristotelian view of the soul. So, when I became aware in reading these works that the Platonists and Peripatetics were in accord, I had everything my heart desired. And so that others may also have the same satisfaction as soon as possible, I have translated this book from the Greek language into Latin.²³

For Ficino, Theophrastus had apprehended Aristotle's view of the mind from Aristotle's own voice when he was a student at the Lyceum. There was no reason to doubt Theophrastus' judgement. Of course, as is clear in the quotation above, Ficino was aware that in the *Metaphrasis* Theophrastus is speaking through Priscian and that Priscian was highly indebted to Iamblichus. However, in his view, this did not cast any doubt on the loyalty that the text reveals on the part of Theophrastus to his master. For Ficino, Theophrastus was, like Aristotle, a Platonist at heart: Priscian simply helped to dig out the Platonic lineage of the theory of mind of both philosophers.

In explaining the relationship between the nous poiêtikos and the nous pathêtikos, Theophrastus rules out the possibility that the latter could be seen as pure potentiality, and hence analogous to matter. Instead, like Ficino in the *Platonic Theology*, he speaks of analogy:²⁴

Τάχα δ' ἂν φαινείη καὶ τοῦτο ἄτοπον εἰ ὁ νοῦς ἔχει ὕλης φύσιν μηδὲν ὦν ἅπαντα δὲ δυνατός. οὐχ οὕτω δὲ ληπτέον οὐδὲ πάντα νοῦν, ἀλλὰ δεῖ διελεῖν. ποῖος οὖν καὶ τίς ἡ διαίρεσις; ἢ μὲν γὰρ ὕλη οὐ τόδε τι, ὁ δὲ νοῦς εἰ μὴ οὕτω, τί ἂν ἕτερον; κατὰ ἀναλογίαν οὖν καὶ τὸ δυνάμει ληπτέον ἐπὶ τοῦ ψυχικοῦ νοῦ.

Perhaps this too would seem to be absurd, if the intellect has the nature of matter, being nothing, but capable of [being] everything. But it must not be taken in this way, nor of all intellect, but it is necessary to make

23 Ficino, *Prefatory Letter* (Ficino 1576b, 1801; critical edition in Schmitt 1976, 78); my trans.

24 See n.17 above.

distinctions. Of what kind, then [is it], and what is [the basis of] the distinction? For matter is not a “this something”²⁵ but intellect, if it is not like this, what else [would it be]? We must therefore take the “potentially” also analogically, with regard to the intellect that is connected with the soul.²⁶

Priscian comments on this passage using an unequivocally Iamblichean image. He says that the only reason why the nous pathêtikos can be said to be potential is because the Forms it contains have lost their brightness and are no longer “self-illuminating”, as they are in the separate intellect.²⁷ This is because, being distracted from the buzz of material life, the potential intellect is no longer present to its objects, a condition that Priscian describes by speaking of a “continuity between the two” which “has been loosened”.²⁸ In order to emerge from obscurity and for thinking to take place, the intelligible Forms in the nous pathêtikos need the intelligible light that comes from the nous poiêtikos. However, Priscian makes clear that although the process by which conscious thinking takes place relies on the intellect in actuality, it is initiated and performed by the nous pathêtikos. He says:

Ἐπεὶ δὲ αὐτὸς ἑαυτὸν τελειοῖ ἀφ' ἑαυτοῦ τε ἐγειρόμενος καὶ ἑαυτὸν συνάπτων τῷ ἐνεργείᾳ νῷ καὶ τὴν ἀπ' ἐκείνου τελειότητα αὐτενεργήτως δεχόμενος, καὶ ἐπειδὴ μὴ παντελῶς τοῦ ἐνεργείᾳ ἐκπεφοίτηκε νοῦ, ἀλλά, καίτοι ὑπόβας, συνήπται ὁμως πρὸς ἐκείνον ἅτε νοῦς ὢν καὶ αὐτός.

It [i.e. the nous pathêtikos] *itself* brings *itself* into perfection both by being aroused of *itself* and by fitting *itself* to the intellect in actuality, and by receiving its perfection from that through *its own activity*, and since it has not entirely gone out from the intellect in actuality, but, although descended, is joined to it even so, in that it is itself also intellect.²⁹

25 In Greek, a τόδε τι—that is, for Aristotle, a separate individual substance.

26 Priscian, *Metaphrasis*, ed. Bywater (Priscian 1886, 26), trans. Huby (Priscian 2013, 35). Priscian's Theophrastus refers to the nous pathêtikos with the expression *psuchikos nous*, i.e. “psychic intellect”, which he most likely derived from Aristotle, *De anima* 3.4.429a22–23. On Theophrastus' view of the mind, see Barbotin 1954, 241; Devereux 1992; Merlan 1967; Moraux 1942, 5.

27 Priscian, *Metaphrasis* (1886b, 26–27).

28 Priscian, *Metaphrasis*, ed. Bywater (Priscian 1886b, 26), trans. Huby (Priscian 2013, 35). On this passage and Priscian's debt to Iamblichus, see Finamore 2018, 106–107.

29 Priscian, *Metaphrasis*, ed. Bywater (Priscian 1886b, 27); trans. Huby (Priscian 2013, 37).

Priscian's interpretation provided Ficino with what he believed to have been Aristotle's account of the mind as a thinking substance *by nature* and the only source of its own activity. This becomes clear when he comments on the passage from Priscian quoted above:

Intellectus noster qui possibilis dicitur—id est ab intellectu primo formabilis—habet innatum actum proprium et liberum per quem ex se convertitur primo ad se speciesque innatas deinde quatenus ad se speciesque suas convertitur eatenus ad intellectum primum speciesque illius. Quo et quibus formatur ipse speciesque suae, id est, ipse fit perspicacior et illae lucidiores et hic eis quam unitissimus intellectus noster est consubstantiale aliquid animae, simile dicunt de actu libero, quo angeli convertuntur ad se et per se ad Deum, signum quod species sunt innatae et quod intellectus hic nostri est naturaliter divino coniunctus, quoniam conversus ad se invenit omnia et perficitur divino ... Quando dicimus intellectum possibilem ab agente formari non intelligimus accipere formas sed illo praesente formis suis efficacius et copulatus uti. Intellectu possibili nullus est motus, nulla passio proprie dicta.

Our intellect, which is called “possible”—that is, formable by the first intellect—has an *inborn and free act of its own*, by means of which it first is *from itself* turned to *itself* and to its inborn forms; then, to the extent that it is turned to itself and its own forms, to that extent it is turned to the first intellect and its forms. From the first intellect and its forms this same intellect and its forms are formed, that is, this [i.e. the intellect] becomes more discerning and those [i.e. the forms] become brighter. United as closely as possible with these [i.e. the forms], this intellect of ours is something of the same nature of the soul. They speak of a similar free act through which angels are turned to themselves, and through themselves to God. This is proof that the forms are inborn and that this intellect of ours is naturally joined with the divine, because once it is turned to itself it finds all things and is made perfect by the divine ... When we say that the potential intellect is formed by the agent intellect we do not mean that it receives the forms, but that in the presence of the agent intellect it uses its own forms *more efficiently* and *more penetratingly*. In the potential intellect there is no motion, no passion as such.³⁰

³⁰ Ficino, *Explanatio in Prisciani Lydi interpretationem super Theophrastum* (1576b, 1817); my trans. and italics.

The transition from potentiality to actuality occurs *ex se* (from itself) and *ad se* (to itself), which locates the power of agency entirely within the nous pathêtikos. The expression *actum proprium et liberum* in the first line serves precisely this purpose. Indeed, the nous pathêtikos, Ficino explains, is the locus of Forms. When it is in the luminous presence of the nous pathêtikos, it uses these forms in a more efficient and penetrating manner (*efficacius et copulatius*). However, this does not mean that at other times the nous pathêtikos does not access the Forms; it does still access them, which means that it still thinks, though it thinks less efficaciously and penetratingly.

When turned downwards towards the imagination and away from the needs of bodily life, the mind is capable only of fragmentary knowledge, far removed from the immediacy and purity of the intellect in act. However, for Ficino, a committed “Plotinist”, the imagination plays no small role in helping the soul to disidentify itself from sensory perception and to access its own thoughts. This latter task in particular facilitates the intellect’s—autonomous—emergence into actuality.

3 *Tamquam Prometheus, vel Cameleon: The Imagination*

The imagination is a prominent faculty in post-Platonic epistemology, and is often given a leading role in the complex system of interactions which characterises the embodied life of the soul. For it is through images that sense perception is dephysicalised and raised to the level of incorporeal forms. Whereas the senses are thought to rely completely on the material presence of the object of perception, the imagination works on the image of the object, and this image persists even in the absence of the object. As Ficino remarks: *Imaginatio convenit cum sensu quia particularia percipit. Superat sensum quia etiam nullo movente imagines edit.*³¹

31 Marsilio Ficino, *Explanatio in Prisciani Lydi interpretationem super Theophrastum* (1576b, 1825): “The imagination agrees with the senses, because it perceives particular things. It goes beyond the senses, because it produces images even when it is not moved by any object”. Ficino had already made this difference clear in various works, especially the *Platonic Theology* and the *Commentary on Plotinus*. See e.g. *Platonic Theology* 8.1.2 (Ficino 2001–2006, 5:263): “The imagination rises above matter higher than sensation, both because in order to think about bodies it does not need their presence, and also because as one faculty it can do whatever all the five senses do”. See also *Commentary on Plotinus* (Ficino 2017–, 5:405): *Quando in sensu memoriam ponimus, hanc in sensu interiore: id est, imaginatione, locamus. Haec enim absentia repetit et conservat; et ubi haec potentior*

Given the prominent role that the imagination plays in Ficino's epistemology, one would have expected a long and elaborated commentary on Priscian's account of this faculty, yet Ficino's remarks are concise and seem not to add anything new to his own view of the imagination.³² Nevertheless, the *Metaphrasis* confirmed his view that images do not merely produce the first form of immateriality out of the data of sensory perception, but also are the channel through which the intellect communicates with the other psychic faculties and with the body. In fact, Priscian's Theophrastus claims that the imagination has a twofold movement, from bodily to intellectual life and from intellectual to bodily life, a position which resonates closely with Plotinus' celebrated doctrine of a double imagination and his view that without images of thoughts the thinking process would remain unconscious.³³ Plotinus had claimed that the soul acquires consciousness only of those thoughts which are reflected by the imagination. See, for example, what he says in *Enneads* 1.4.9:

The apprehension would seem to exist or to occur when the thought bends back upon itself and the activity which is the life of the soul is in a way reflected back just as in a mirror which has a smooth, bright, and still surface. In these circumstances, then, when the mirror is present, the image occurs, but when is not present or the circumstances are not right, that of which the image is an image is still present. In the same way, for the soul, too, when this sort of thing in us in which images of discursive thinking and of intellect are reflected is still, they are seen and, in a way, like sense-perception, known with the prior knowledge that it is intellect and discursive thinking that are active ... so thinking comes to be in this way when something is thought with imagination, even though thinking itself is not imagination.³⁴

est, memoria est etiam validior, praesertim si corporis qualitas et meditatio conducat ad idem. (When we place memory in sense, we situate it in the inner sense: that is, the imagination, for the latter revisits and preserves absent things. Where imagination is more powerful, memory is stronger, especially if quality of body and meditation contribute to the same effect).

32 We must also keep in mind that, as I mentioned above, a large part of the section on the imagination has been lost, and so it is shorter than the other parts.

33 See Plotinus, *Enn.* 1.4.10; 4.3.29.

34 Plotinus, *Enn.* 1.4.9 (2018, 80–81). See also Warren 1966, 278: "Plotinus makes clear that is the true point of contact between man and his orientations πρὸς τὸ ἄνω καὶ πρὸς τὸ κάτω when he explains that sensible imagination intellectualizes (unifies) οἶον νοερόν, and that conceptual imagination sensifies (divides), οἶον αἰσθητόν".

According to Priscian, Iamblichus held the same view. In the *Metaphrasis*, he first presents Theophrastus' position, who, following Aristotle, claims that the imagination is "a corporeal form of life and one that is not active without the bodily organs".³⁵ He then presents the view of Iamblichus, who believed that the imagination is also able to represent the life and activity of the intellect in more or less immaterial representations—from the visualisation of thoughts, which has little or no effect on the body, to the material impressions of imaginative forms into the anatomical structures of the body.³⁶ As an example, he refers to the facial effects that represent in the body the process of reasoning:

καὶ ἐναργῶς δὲ πολλάκις τοῦ σώματος συγκινουμένου ταῖς φαντασίαις καὶ κατ' αὐτὰς διατιθεμένου ἐμφαίνεσθαι σύμφημι καὶ ἐν τῷ αἰσθητηρίῳ τὰ φαντάσματα, ἀλλ' οὐχ ὡς αἰσθητικῶ (διὸ οὐκ ἔξωθεν) οὐδὲ ὡς ὑπὸ σωμαίων τινῶν δρώντων μεταβαλλομένῳ, ἀλλ' ὡς τὰ φανταστὰ δεχομένῳ εἶδη. καὶ οὐ θαυμαστόν· ἐπεὶ καὶ τῆς λογικῆς ἡμῶν ἐνεργείας ἐμφάσεις τινὲς εἰς τὸ σῶμα καθήκουσιν, ὡς αἰ συστροφαὶ δηλοῦσι τῶν ὀμμάτων καὶ αἰ τῶν ὀφρύων συναγωγαὶ ἐν ταῖς ζητήσεσι.

It is often the case that when the body is moved together with the images, and disposed in accordance with them, the images also appear in the sense-organ, but [in the organ] not as being connected with sense (hence not from outside), nor as undergoing a change by the action of some bodies, but as receiving the forms connected to the imagination. And that is not surprising: since even some sort of representative images of our reasoning activity come down into our body, as is shown by the turning inwards of our eyes and the knitting of our brows in our studying.³⁷

The connection between thinking and imagination and the imagination's bidirectional movement (from the body to the mind and from the mind to the body) is obviously indebted to the famous passages in the *De anima* where

35 See Priscian, *Metaphrasis*, ed. Bywater (Priscian 1886b, 23), trans. Huby (Priscian 2013, 32).

36 The same view is ascribed to Iamblichus by pseudo-Simplicius in his *Commentary on De anima*, 214.19, which suggests that the view that the imagination receives images from both sensation and thought is authentically Iamblichean. See Dillon and Finamore in Iamblichus 2002, 261. See also Huby 1993, 6–7.

37 See Priscian, *Metaphrasis*, ed. Bywater (Priscian 1886b, 24–25), trans. Huby (Priscian 2013, 34).

Aristotle claimed that in “the thinking soul images take the place of sense perception ... hence the soul never thinks without a mental image”³⁸ and that “the imagination is some sort of thinking process”.³⁹ I shall not discuss these much-debated claims here, as eminent scholars have done so already.⁴⁰ For the sake of our discussion it is enough to say that Aristotle does not identify the imagination with thinking (at least not with thinking as *dianoia* and *noein*),⁴¹ but with “a phase in the process of coming to think”.⁴² Nor was such an identification made by Plotinus and Iamblichus. Plotinus’ view was that the imagination helps the embodied soul to visualise—and become conscious of—thoughts, which, however, exist regardless of the soul’s imagining them. Hence, for Plotinus the imagination is the *conditio sine qua non* for the *embodied* soul’s thinking, not for thinking *tout court*. Iamblichus likewise thought that the imagination mirrors noetic entities. Neither position seems to be too far from what Aristotle said; however, Priscian is at pains in trying to reconcile Iamblichus and Aristotle on the topic. On the one hand, he acknowledges that both Aristotle and Theophrastus adumbrate an intimate connection between imagining and thinking:

εοίκασι δὲ οἱ ἄνδρες οὗτοι, καὶ Ἀριστοτέλης καὶ ὁ Θεόφραστος, ὅπερ καὶ ἤδη ἔφαμεν, νοῦν ἐνίστε καὶ πᾶσαν τὴν λογικὴν προσαγορεύειν ζῶν, ὅπου γε καὶ μέχρη φαντασίας τὸ τοῦ νοῦ διατείνουσιν ὄνομα.

These men, namely Aristotle and Theophrastus, appear, as we have indeed already said, to call intellect sometimes even the whole rational life, where at any rate they extend the name of intellect even as far as the imagination.⁴³

On the other hand, he takes the view that “imagination always implies perception”⁴⁴ (hence, as Schofield puts it, imagination is a kind of “non-paradigmatic sensory experience”⁴⁵) as the very cornerstone of Aristotle’s doctrine of the imagination:

38 Aristotle, *De anima* 3.7,431a15–17, trans. Hett (Aristotle 1957, 177). See also *De memoria*, 449b31–450a1.

39 Aristotle, *De anima* 3.7,433a11, trans. Hett (Aristotle 1957, 187).

40 See e.g. Gerson 2004; 2005, 148–149 and 172; Kahan 1992; Lowe 1983; Schofield 1992; Wedin 1988.

41 Schofield 1992, 272.

42 See Gerson 2004, 148; Schofield 1992, 273.

43 Priscian, *Metaphrasis*, ed. Bywater (Priscian 1886b, 29), trans. Huby (Priscian 2013, 38).

44 Aristotle, *De anima* 3.3,427b16, trans. Hett (Aristotle 1957, 157).

45 Schofield 1992, 255, n.20: “visualizing is not normal sensory experience (for normal sens-

Ἄλλ' εἰ καὶ τὰς ἄλλας ἀποτυποῦται ζωὰς κατὰ τὸν Ἰάμβλιχον καὶ αὐτὰς τὰς λογικὰς τε καὶ νοεράς ἐνεργείας, πῶς ἔτι ἀληθές τὸ Ἀριστοτελικόν, τὸ ὑπὸ τῶν αἰσθητικῶν εἰδῶν κινεῖσθαι τὴν φαντασίαν;

But if, as Iamblichus says, it also represents in itself the other lives and the rational and intellectual activities themselves, how is what Aristotle says still true, that imagination is moved by sensible forms?⁴⁶

Priscian tries to resolve the apparent disagreement by saying that for Aristotle too intellectual forms are imagined, so to speak, as material forms, that is, according to their shape and as divided up.⁴⁷ In other words, images spiritualise sense perception and materialise thoughts. We often have access to abstract knowledge through visual representations, such as shapes, numbers, operation signs, and symbols of a different nature:

ἢ εἰ καὶ τὰς κρείττους ἀποτυποῦται ἐνεργείας πάσας, ὅμως κατὰ τὰ αἰσθητικὰ ἀπεικονίζεται εἶδη μορφωτικῶς καὶ μεριστῶς καὶ κατὰ τὴν πρὸς τὰ αἰσθητὰ ἀναφορὰν, ὥστε καὶ τὰς κρείττους ἀποτυποῦται ἐνεργείας ἢ ὑπὸ τῶν αἰσθητικῶν κινεῖται εἰδῶν.

Is it that even if it represents all the superior activities, it is still made into images in accordance with the sensible forms in shape, and as divided up, and in accordance with the reference to the object of sense, so that it represents even the superior activities by the fact that it is moved by the sensible forms?⁴⁸

Ficino certainly found in Priscian's account of Theophrastus' *phantasia* a confirmation of the Plotinian view of the imagination as a versatile faculty, able to go back and forth through the epistemological steps, from the lowermost activities of the body to visualised thinking:

Imaginatio actiones rationis effingit sub rerum sensibilibus conditione, ac potest ultra sensuum actus latius phantasmata promere. Imaginatio con-

ory experience requires, as it does not, that we keep our eyes and ears open etc.) but is sufficiently like and sufficiently closely connected with normal sensory experience to be thought of as a non-standard form of it".

46 Priscian, *Metaphrasis*, ed. Bywater (Priscian 1886b, 24), trans. Huby (Priscian 2013, 33).

47 See Aristotle, *De anima* 3.8, 432a8–9.

48 Priscian of Lydia, *Metaphrasis*, ed. Bywater (Priscian 1886b, 24), trans. Huby (Priscian 2013, 33).

venit cum sensu, quia particularia percipit. Superat sensum, quia etiam nullo movente imagines edit. Imaginatio est tamquam Protheus, vel Cameleon.

The imagination shapes the actions of reason according to the condition of sensible things, and is able to bring forth images more extensively beyond the acts of the senses. The imagination agrees with the senses because it perceives particular things. It goes beyond the senses, since it produces images even when it is not moved by any object. It is, so to speak, a Proteus or a chameleon.⁴⁹

Certainly, the imagination, Ficino believes, has a shape-shifting potential and the ability to act effectively at a prenoetic level—it is “the last trace of intelligence” (*ultimum vestigium intelligentiae*).⁵⁰ In fact, Priscian confirms that Theophrastus also believed that Aristotle treated visualising as an essential step in the acquisition of knowledge. However, Ficino’s view of the imagination goes beyond Priscian and Theophrastus. In his Plotinian hermeneutics, this faculty has a seminal role in the development of self-awareness. As we noted above, it allows the embodied soul to access its identity as an independent intelligible substance. This, as we saw in the first part of this essay, was a central concern for Ficino. Even though Priscian does not make a connection between imagination and the soul’s awareness, the view that Ficino was progressively disclosing as he advanced in his translation was that for Theophrastus (read: Aristotle), just as for the Platonists, the imagination has a great deal of responsibility in making the embodied soul recognise thinking as “my thinking”, and thus helps build a relationship of self-identity between the mind and its thoughts. In his *Commentary on Plotinus*, Ficino writes:

sicut oculus facie continetur, sic ratio mente atque sicut oculus nec videt faciem neque motum eius advertit, nisi quando in speculum certo modo nobis oppositum lineares faciei radii diriguntur atque inde per similes angulos reflectuntur ad oculum, et speculum ita ostentat imaginem, si quam modo habet imaginem. Simili quodam pacto ratio velut oculus neque videt

49 Ficino 1576c, 1825; my trans. Ficino’s idea of the imagination as the ever-changing sea god Proteus and a multicoloured chameleon has been long celebrated. Some scholars even believed that it inspired Giovanni Pico della Mirandola’s famous analogy—“Who will not wonder at this chameleon of ours?”—in his *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (Pico della Mirandola 2012, 123). See Garin 1989, 307.

50 Ficino 1576b, 1827.

mentem neque agere illam animadvertit, quamvis semper agat, nisi actus eius agat nonnihil in imaginationem aliunde diversam, illuc vero conversam.

Just as the eye is enclosed by the face, so too reason is enclosed by the mind. And just as the eye does not see the face, nor does it perceive the motions of the face unless the rays of the face are directed to a mirror positioned at a certain angle in front of us, and from there the mirror displays an image (if the mirror can be said to have an image), so too reason, like the eye, does not see the mind, nor does it perceive that the mind is acting (although the mind is always in action), unless its activity causes some changes in the imagination, which, although different with respect to its origins, has turned towards that act.⁵¹

Here it should be pointed out that in Averroes' psychology as well the imagination is assigned the important task of making thinking individual and conscious. Averroes claims that each single act of understanding occurs through episodic contacts between images in the human mind (*phantasmata*) and the intelligible forms in the material intellect; these contacts are put into effect by the separate agent intellect, which remains solely responsible for individual thinking. Ficino acknowledges the similarity of the views of Averroes and Plotinus on the role of imagination in enabling conscious thinking:

Denique memento, Averroem et si non idem, tamen simile aliquid induxisse: ubi ait, intellectum nostrum intelligentiam duplicem in se habere: alteram eternam, alteram temporalem: illam quidem per suum esse, hanc vero per nostras imagines exercere. Ac nos illam nunquam animadvert[re], quia nihil cum imaginatione nostra communicet, hanc autem agnoscere, quoniam illius formae cum imaginationis nostrae imaginibus congruant.

Finally, remember that Averroes introduced something similar, though not identical [to Plotinus' view], when he says that our Intellect has in itself a double intelligence: the one eternal, the other temporal. It employs the first through its own being, the latter, by contrast, through our images. We never become aware of the first, as it shares nothing with our imagination; on the other hand, we acknowledge the latter because the forms in it correspond with the images of our imagination.⁵²

51 Ficino 1576c, 1569; my trans.

52 Ficino 1576c, 1569; my trans. See Corrias 2020, 102, n.34.

In Ficino's view, however, for Plotinus, Iamblichus, Priscian, and Theophrastus it was the *embodied* soul which relies on the imagination to access its true nature as an individual thinking substance; the intellect, understood as a "pure contemplator", completely emancipated from the hustle and bustle of bodily life, has no need of images. Averroes, by contrast, absurdly reverses the direction of the cognitive process when he claims that the agent intellect—which eternally enjoys the fulness of knowledge and being separately from the human mind—downgrades, and degrades, to the level of our imagination in order to produce individual thinking. In the *Platonic Theology* Ficino writes:

Neque ulterius nobis obiiciant congregatum illud ideo intellegere, quia phantasia offerat intellectui quaecumque sit intellecturus. Sic enim animal quoddam similiter constituetur ex lumine atque spiritu, quod vocabitur visivum animal totumque videre affirmabitur, quia lumen spiritui offert quod videat. Resipiscant igitur quandoque Averroici et cum Aristotele suo consentiant illud, quo quid actionem propriam exercet, formam esse eius propriam specieique effectricem.

Nor can the Averroists further object to us that the aggregate understands, on the grounds that the imagination offers intellect whatever it is going to understand. For with this argument, a sort of animal will be similarly constituted from light and [visual] spirit: it will be called a visual animal, and the whole animal will be declared to see, since light offers the spirit what it sees. May the Averroists recover their senses at some point, therefore, and agree with their beloved Aristotle's view that what enacts its own action is its own form and is the producer of the species.⁵³

In Ficino's view, Averroes describes individual thinking as a sort of fall from the actuality of imageless contemplation to the potentiality of discursive reason, which strongly relies on the imagination. If it is absurd to believe that the mind needs the action of a separate intellect to pass from potency to act, even more absurd is to claim that once it is in act the mind needs the imagination to make thinking personal. The former claim denies the substantiality of the mind, the latter its individuality. Both, in Ficino's eyes, pervert the true spirit of the *De anima* which, as Priscian certified, is Platonic.

53 Ficino, *Platonic Theology* 15.7.9 (2001–2006, 5:89–91).

For Ficino, Aristotle's analysis of human thinking is precisely as Theophrastus reports it: no second intellect is ever introduced. Each mind, individually owned by each human being, is a τὸδε τι that is able to actualise itself by an "inborn and free act of its own".⁵⁴ The imagination plays a key role in this process of self-actualisation: by reflecting both sense perceptions and thoughts as "in a picture", it allows the mind to become aware of itself *as itself*. However, the action of the imagination is limited to the first phase of this process of self-actualisation, when the mind accesses itself as itself through images derived from sense perception and thoughts. For Ficino, this stage corresponds to discursive thinking, which is what Aristotle calls nous pathêtikos. The second phase, *pace* Averroes, does not involve the action of one mind upon another that is unable to think by itself; on the contrary, the mind is still one and still the same, and so is its action of thinking. The only difference is that now thinking is "pure", that is, it is without images.

Priscian's *Metaphrasis*, which Ficino read and translated at the end of his life, provided him with Theophrastus' (read: Aristotle's) account of thinking which, in being committedly late Platonic, was also, for Ficino, genuinely Aristotelian. In his view, Priscian confirms that Plato and Aristotle hold the same key to an understanding of the human mind, which is never truly passive, but active, self-actualising, and intelligising *by nature*.

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⁵⁴ See p. 423 above.

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