

THE TEMENOS ACADEMY

"The Philosophical Spirit in the Renaissance"

Author: Joseph Milne

Source: Temenos Academy Review 4 (2001)

pp. 20-31

Published by The Temenos Academy

Copyright © Joseph Milne, 2001

The Temenos Academy is a Registered Charity
in the United Kingdom

www.temenosacademy.org

The Philosophical Spirit in the Renaissance*

JOSEPH MILNE

It is well known that the Renaissance was a moment in which the arts flourished all over the Western world. But until recently it has not been so well known that philosophy also flourished. It is perhaps even less known that it was through the rebirth of philosophy that all the arts were given their impulse. So I would like to explore in this lecture the philosophical spirit that lies behind the Renaissance and which inspired the arts and new learning.

It is worth asking at the outset what philosophy really means and what is its aim. In our time it is often thought to be a purely abstract or rational pursuit. It gets confused with logic or with posing imaginary questions. It gets broken up into various schools, such as Idealism or Logical Positivism, and different philosophers tend to identify themselves with one school or another. On top of that it divides up into quite separate aims, such as philosophy of art, social philosophy, philosophy of science, political philosophy and so on. It may well be that all these have their place, but nevertheless it is worth asking what is the primary concern of philosophy. What is it that we might turn to philosophy in hope of? In a way the answer is simple: it is eternal truth. Here is how Ficino puts it in one of his letters:

Some people wonder why we follow Plato with such respect, when he continually seems to be involved with paradoxes and myths. However, in my opinion, they would cease to wonder if they were to consider that divine things alone truly exist, because those things are not impaired by contact with any outside influence, nor do they ever change their state. Physical bodies are not in the least real, but they seem to be since they are afflicted by opposing forces and are constantly undergoing change. However, this is the very reason why they are not true, but are images or shadows of what is true.

Now, while nearly all other philosophers were devoted to natural studies alone and were asleep in these images as if they were true, our Plato, attending to the divine, was the only one awake; or at

* Based on a lecture given at the Temenos Academy on 31 May 2000.

least was much more so than anyone else. That is why I believe it is so much better to follow Plato as a theologian than other philosophers; just as it is better to entrust oneself to helmsmen that are awake, rather than to those that are asleep. (*Letters*, Vol. 1, 41)

This is worth considering. It is nothing like what we might expect to read in the latest post-modern work of philosophy. I do not say that to condemn contemporary philosophy. There are reasons it has become so complex. But what strikes us about Ficino's words is their directness and one-pointed focus on eternal truth. It also strikes us that he sees no division between theology and philosophy. But perhaps what strikes us most of all is the distinction he makes between 'natural studies' and 'attending to the divine'. By the 'divine' he means those things which 'truly exist' and which never undergo change. These eternal realities lie behind the changing appearances of natural things, which are 'images or shadows of what is true'. To attend to these eternal realities is to be awake, while attending to the images and shadows is to sleep.

Now it is worth pausing here a moment. When we hear these things we are likely to adopt one of three positions. In one case we might simply classify such ideas as Idealism. In another case we might consider this as the true doctrine of philosophy and be a bit cross with those who have strayed from it. In another case we might just wonder if these eternal realities can indeed be known, and wonder how they can be known. This third position is the philosophical position. I say this because a fundamental characteristic of Western philosophy is that it is grounded in wonder and remains open always to the yet unknown. Merely to classify or to reduce to doctrines is not to engage in philosophy. If what Ficino says strikes the modern ear as strange it is because of this tendency to classify and reduce to doctrine. What Ficino speaks of in this letter is what he *seeks* to know, not what he claims to know. He portrays Plato as a helmsman, as one more awake than most, and thus he is prepared to follow where Plato leads.

The question that arises for us is: How does this philosophical pursuit of the eternal realities give rise to Renaissance art and the new learning? There seems no obvious connection. Historians have tended to explain the new art simply as a revival of antiquity, of imitating Greek and Roman art or retelling their myths. In part this is true, but there is another factor that is easily overlooked. This factor concerns

the relation between the world of sense or appearance and the eternal realities. Here we might formulate a principle. When the relation between the eternal and the natural becomes severed, then art and learning decline, culture disintegrates and there is no common artistic language. It was the sense of the relation between the eternal and the natural that was lost by the close of the Middle Ages. This is most obviously represented in the emergence of Nominalism, 'the view which regards universals or abstract concepts as mere names without any corresponding reality' (OED). In many ways we live now in an age of Nominalism, in the sense that philosophical concepts are frequently taken to be no more than concepts. There is a divorce between the names of things and their existence. A good example is the name God. Another is the notion that 'truth' is just a personal view or opinion. Thus, when the relation between the eternal and the natural becomes severed so also the relation of language to the actual becomes severed. A culture loses its power of naming, or of hearing the names of things.

So how did Ficino and the Renaissance philosophers find a way to reconnect the eternal with the natural, the invisible with the visible?

The essential shift lies in the understanding of Divine emanation. By this I mean the understanding that the visible world is a manifestation of the Divine, a Ray from the eternal substance of God, existing within God yet appearing outside God. It is worth observing that within Christianity there has always been a struggle between the 'emanationists' and the 'creationists'. The creationists regard the universe as existing outside God and completely independent of God its creator. This view attempts to account for its mortality and inferior status to the creator. It is, generally speaking, the view of our own times, and thus the world is regarded as wholly distinct from God the creator. But within Christianity there has always been a more mystical strand that sought the unity between the eternal and the created. And this strand has also been the one that sought to lift the human vision to behold the Divine directly, the one that sought the transcendent. One finds it in early Christian writers such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen, and then later in the Desert Fathers, and later again in the founding of the monastic tradition. The creationists tend to the 'naturalist' view of reality, while the emanationist tends to a theophanic view of reality, that is to say, a view that perceives the Divine disclosed within the creation, and the creation as disclosing eternal realities. We find this in Bonaventure for example, who perceived the visible things as 'traces'

or semblances of divine realities, in particular of the Blessed Trinity. Through contemplation of these traces of the Trinity the mind is led back into its own image, and through that image to the presence of God.

It is to this more mystical view of the creation that Ficino turns in his reconciliation of the newly discovered dialogues of Plato with Christian theology. And the key is emanation. To understand emanation it is necessary to understand the unity of everything grounded in the Divine Unity itself, the Platonic One. Here is how Ficino describes the unity within the created order:

It was the chief work of the divine Plato, as the dialogues of Parmenides and Epinomis show, to reveal the principle of unity in all things, which he called appropriately the One itself. He also asserted that in all things there is one truth, that is the light of the One itself, the light of God, which is poured into all minds and forms, presenting the forms to the minds and joining the minds to the forms. Whoever wishes to profess the study of Plato should therefore honour the one truth, which is the single ray of the one God. This ray passes through angels, souls, the heavens and other bodies. As we discussed in the book on love, its splendour shines in every individual thing according to its nature and is called grace and beauty; and where it shines more clearly, it especially attracts the man who is watching, stimulates him who thinks, and catches and possesses him who draws near to it. This ray also compels him to revere its splendour more than all else, as if it were a divine spirit, and, once his former nature has been cast aside, to strive for nothing else but to become this splendour.

Thus the Divine ray which descends from the One through the Angelic realm, through souls and finally through bodies is the unifying principle of all things. It is perceived in the grace and beauty that shines in various degrees in all things. Through the perception of that grace and beauty, the mind is led upward through the hierarchy of the created order back to the One itself, which Ficino understands as the true end and cause of all desire and philosophy. This is the truth loved by the philosopher. The attractiveness of the things of sense resides in the attraction to the One through the ray of grace and beauty. It awakens love in the soul, and love can find no rest but in

rising to the One, with which it unites. The 'former nature' which is cast aside in this ascent is that nature which, forgetting the One, the unity, falsely attributes reality to the forms instead of to the Divine ray which shines through them all.

In this way Ficino unites Platonic emanation with the theological desire for truth and for union with God. He unites them by bringing together Christian love (*agape*) and Platonic love (*eros*). These he calls the two faces of Venus – a theme taken up by Shakespeare.

The question arises: What in the human soul can know the One? Ficino's answer is the Intellect, or the Angelic Mind. This is an important connection. Ficino is clearly drawing upon Medieval theology here, and in particular upon Thomas Aquinas. The Medieval theologians distinguished between the Reason and the Intellect. The Reason is the faculty which grasps the diversity of things and works to find the order, relations or unity in them. It works upon the things perceived by the senses and moves towards their essences or their real being. The Intellect, on the other hand, was understood to intuit unity or essence directly, and to understand how this unity or essence informed the diverse natures of things. Thus the Reason moves from the diverse towards the One, and the Intellect from the One to the diverse. This power of Intellect Aquinas calls Angelic. It is the highest power of the soul and the nearest to God and is always at rest, while the Reason is always in motion. But the highest Intellect lies above the particular Intellect of the soul, and it is this highest Intellect that is properly called the Angelic. Ficino also calls it Angelic Mind, as we read in his Commentary on Plato's *Symposium*:

But since before motion there must be rest, for rest is more perfect than motion, there must be found above the changeable thinking of the soul some motionless intelligence which is intelligence in its entirety, and intelligence always completely actualised. For the soul does not understand with its whole self or continuously, but only with a certain part of itself and at certain times, and it does not possess a sure power of understanding but only an ambiguous one. Therefore, in order that what is more perfect may take precedence over that which is less perfect, above the intellect of the soul, which is changeable, partial, intermittent, and doubtful, must be placed the Intellect of the Angel, which is motionless, complete, continuous, and absolutely certain; so that just as the soul, which is moved by

itself, precedes the body, which is moved by something else, so the intellect, which is motionless in itself, precedes the soul, which is moved by itself. And just as the body is capable of self-motion only by virtue of the soul, and therefore not all bodies, but only those which have souls seem to move of their own accord, so the soul is always capable of understanding only by virtue of the intellect. For if intellect were present in the soul of its own nature, intellect would be found in all souls, even of beasts, like the power of self-moving. Therefore intellect does not belong to the soul of itself and from the beginning. Therefore a being which possesses intellect of itself and from the beginning must be superior to the soul. The Angel is this kind of being; it is superior to souls.

But above the Angelic Mind there must necessarily be that beginning of things and the highest Good, which Plato, in the *Parmenides*, calls the One itself. Certainly above every multiplicity of a composite thing must be the one itself, simple by nature. For number is derived from one, and all compositeness is derived from simples. The Angelic Mind, although it is motionless, is nevertheless not in itself, single, pure, and simple. For it understands itself. Here there seem to be these three things which are different from each other in some way: what understands, what is understood, and understanding. For its reason is one thing insofar as it understands, another in so far as it is understood, and another in so far as it is understanding. Moreover, it has a potency of cognition which, before the act of cognition, is in itself completely unformed, and is given form in the act of cognition. Which potency, in the process of understanding, desires the light of truth and receives it, which it seems to have lacked before it understood. Moreover, it contains in itself the multiplicity of all the Ideas.¹

But notice, as near as Angelic Mind is to the One, it is not itself One but multiple in several significant ways. It is in some sense act, even though motionless, and in some sense in potential because it is receptive of the One above itself. Its own self-understanding is mysteriously divided into three, 'what understands, what is understood, and understanding. For its reason is one thing insofar as it understands, another insofar as it is understood, and another insofar as it is understanding'. Remember this is said of its understanding or knowing of itself. This

1. Marsilio Ficino, *Commentary on Plato's Symposium on Love*, translated by Sears Jayne, Connecticut, 1985.

idea of a threefold self-differentiation comes from Augustine's understanding of the Divine Trinity which he understood as reflected in the powers of the soul. There is thus a final step from the threefold unity of the Angelic Mind to the One itself, where knowledge, knowing and known are completely identical. That is to say, God's knowing of Himself *is* Himself. Similarly with the potential of the Angelic Mind. In the One there is no distinction between full actualisation and potential. Here even the Ideas – the Platonic Forms – are not distinct from one another as they are in the Angelic Mind. Once again, this view is not peculiar to Ficino but found in the Christian theologians. For example, Meister Eckhart talks of how all creatures are one and indistinct in the mind of God, though even there, as the Ideas, they are distinct in their own apprehension of themselves and one another.

We observe in all this high theology how the soul or the mind may ascend into the presence of the One. It is this simple coming into the presence of the One that distinguishes Ficino's elaboration of these subtle matters. But also notice that in this ascent to the presence of the One, the mind has receded into its own nature and presence. Thus Ficino has linked the discernment of the unity that manifests all things and the contemplation of the One itself with self-knowledge. That is to say, when the soul contemplates the unity of all things it necessarily calls upon its own highest powers, and by calling upon its own highest powers it enters the deepest part of itself, and that deepest part of itself, in which resides its own power of being or self-motion, lies nearest to the One.

Yet this movement is, curiously, a movement both within and without. It is a movement within in so far as it is a journey to the ground of the soul, and it is a movement without in so far as it is a contemplation commencing in the appearances of created things. For to come to the Ideas of things is to see their essences, and yet these essences are also within the Angelic Mind itself. However, perception goes beyond the power of the physical senses and calls upon the highest powers of the inmost intelligence, which perceives the inmost intelligence of things. It beholds not simply the forms of things, but what *informs* them, and not merely the motions of things, but what moves them. In this there is, I suggest, a key to the arts. By this I mean a way of beholding the things of sense which leads the mind to the contemplation of the eternal.

Here I believe we have a key to the visual arts and to the so-called

'realism' of Renaissance painting. It has often been argued that this move to realism is a decline from the sacred art of the Middle Ages. Certainly it is a profound change. It is a new way of looking upon the world or the creation itself *as manifesting the One*. This is certainly a departure from the Middle Ages. It is a very interesting difference, for I would say they are both looking to the Divine but in two different ways. The symbolic and allegorical art of the Middle Ages presupposes an access to the world of Mind. It is not interested in the world of sense as such. It is, so to speak, purely celestial. But that vision had been lost, and ended in creating a divide between the natural world and the eternal. And this division led to a degradation of the natural world. And so Ficino took the emanationist theology which lay latent in Christianity and married it with the Platonic understanding of Absolute Beauty which shines by degrees in all created things, indicating in their very sensory presence a ray of the infinite, by following which the mind would be led back from the particular to the universal, and from the objects of sense to the inner being of the soul. Suddenly the created world is no longer a region infinitely distant from the Creator, a dark, fallen world, but rather a creation worthy of the infinite goodness of God filled with light and reflecting the grace of God in its infinite forms and beauty, which are the glory and abundance of God. The world is God disclosing Himself, a sacred theophany.

Now, it is not my area of knowledge, but I would suggest that the geometry and the perspective employed in Renaissance painting, as well as the musical ratios, were deliberately placed behind the forms, invisible unless searched out, to resonate with the innate knowledge of the soul of the perceiver, so as to lift the intelligence from the immediate sensory level to some apprehension of the eternal Ideas. But this is merely a suggestion which others in this series of talks may be better able to discuss.

However, I will apply this notion where I am better acquainted, and that is to Shakespeare. I will first suggest that the love comedies of Shakespeare trace the ascent of the soul to the One through the power of Divine Beauty and Grace, which we spoke of earlier. In all the love comedies we witness various stages of love, and these, put briefly, involve a step by step refinement of the perception, by the lover, of the nature of the Beautiful which he beholds in the beloved. This refinement of perception involves, simultaneously, a journey into self-knowledge, for the love of the beloved cannot attain its final union

without a transformation in self-knowledge. Or, in the words of Ficino quoted earlier, 'This ray also compels him to revere its splendour more than all else, as if it were a divine spirit, and, once his former nature has been cast aside, to strive for nothing else but to become this splendour.'

The aspect of Shakespeare I wish to draw attention to for the moment is his 'realism'. We may notice in Shakespeare's plays, moving from the early comedies to his later works, a gradual abandonment of any allegory which he had adopted from the Middle Ages. Allegorical devices, like towers, gardens, rope ladders and so on which we find in such plays as *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, adopted from the *Romance of the Rose*, gradually disappear from his plays and are replaced with more realistic and more powerful disclosures of the inner nature of the soul. By this I do not mean merely the psychological motives or moods of his characters, but rather the deepest ground of the human soul itself, the causes of motives and the passions, and a distillation of their essences. These are very subtle, yet we feel them in the very presence of such characters as Hamlet or Cordelia. They are so deep that they touch our own deepest humanity. And precisely because they are not allegories or psychological types we cannot pin them down – any more than we can pin ourselves down. We are shown Humanity, and we are called upon to bear witness as Humanity. This distillation of essence is discernible in the language too. Somehow we know the very manner of speaking of Shakespeare's great characters. We could never confuse the words of two great tragic heroes like Hamlet and Coriolanus, for example. They speak with their own distinct voices which belong to their own distinct worlds. But to get to their essence we should not look to what motives or passions they embody, but rather to where they speak from, where their very essence speaks from, because there lies their humanity and universality.

This 'realism' is not a realism in the modern sense, which limits the real to what Ficino would call appearances. It is a realism grounded in the Renaissance understanding of the soul itself, for it is soul that moves all things in the life of man. There is another important factor which encompasses all Shakespeare's plays, one which can almost immediately open up the meaning to us. The 'stage' on which these dramas unfold is the world or the universe itself, and this is not neutral or a mere backdrop to the human drama. On the contrary, it is what draws man to action, and what casts him in his role. The world is itself

like a living soul, but in this case it manifests in such powers as providence, grace, justice, destiny and fate. The journey of the soul in the world is either a journey towards the highest reality and to self-knowledge, or a journey away from reality and into darkness. To put that another way, Shakespeare has transformed the Medieval stage in which reality is presented on three tiers – Heaven, Earth and Hell – into direct relations with the cosmos. Thus whatever the human heart sets itself upon has a lawful destiny, because the very fabric of the cosmos is living powers. This living cosmos is what Shakespeare frequently calls 'nature', as when Hamlet says the dramatist holds up the mirror to nature.

To understand this realism a little more clearly we need to take a leap back to a view of the nature of reality that has been lost since the Renaissance. Now, I want to put this rather carefully because it is not easy to understand clearly.

When Ficino was reconciling Plato with Christianity there was one thing he could take for granted. Since the Pre-Socratics and right through the Middle Ages it was understood that 'the real' was the essence of things, and what was most real was the being of all things in the mind of God. This is very far from the meaning of the modern phrase 'the real world'. In fact it is the opposite. What is now called the 'real world' is what once was universally regarded as the appearances of things, or the outward forms. Now this reversal is not simply a theoretical one. It is not a matter of one ideology replacing another. It is far deeper than that, and it lies in how man disposes or orients himself towards reality and towards self-knowledge.

The key lies in the question of self-knowledge. Here is the difference. In our age we hear of modern man in search of self. There is a whole vocabulary about 'self-image', of finding the lost person within, of gender identity, of being a victim of history, an oppressed minority and so on. Now all such talk would have been impossible in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance since it was understood then that every being was grounded in unmediated self-knowledge, and this unmediated self-knowledge, *this being present to one's own being*, was the ground of the proximity of the soul to God. In other words, the closest thing to one's own being was the Divine, in which one's being had its root. The soul was understood as immediately immanent from God, and God was understood as Absolute Being Itself.

The difference lies not only in the starting-point – the givenness of

self-presence – but in *knowledge* instead of *perception*. That is to say, the relationship between man and the universe was one of knowledge and not of perception. For knowledge is grounded in being or self-hood, or another term is essence. The universe is an interrelation of essences, not of objects. Thus it was held that the soul could know the essences of all things. More than this, the cosmos is created in such a way that it disposes itself to being known essentially.

Now this orientation of the world to being known, of disclosing its essence, and the recognition of the powers of the soul as equal to this knowing, because man is the being called to know, became confused and lost after the Renaissance through a single idea. It was this. Philosophers turned from enquiry into knowledge to enquiry into perception. That is to say, the central question of all Western philosophy, the question of the knowledge of being, was displaced by the question of the perception of objects. Thus metaphysics vanished, so to speak. How this happened I do not know. How does man lose knowledge? Who knows? But we can certainly see that it happened in Descartes and explicitly in Kant. For Kant dismisses the knowledge of being as an 'empty' and 'tautological' question (Kant: *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*). This is what lies behind the famous statement of Kant that 'nothing can be known in itself'. What that really means is that no amount of study of objects as objects can disclose their essence. Well, obviously, the senses cannot know essence, and essences are not objects. Notice what has happened here. Knowledge as communion between essence with essence has been replaced with the attempt to grasp the nature of things by perception of their exterior forms. Knowing is no longer an engagement with nature but, on the contrary, an attempt to stand outside nature as an anonymous impartial observer that never reflects on its own being. The directly givenness of reality to itself, its revelatory power, has been relegated to a mistake in philosophy. Once we see what has happened in the thinking of Western man it is quite logical that, with the loss of the question of essence, philosophy should finally articulate itself as the denial of essence, as we find in Sartre.

Such is the prevailing view of reality in our age. What was once the directly knowable – the self and the essence of things and their ground in God – has now become the unknown and unknowable. It is no wonder then, that modern man goes in search of self, even though that is what is most near and most to be known.

Please do not misunderstand my point here. I am not meaning to

condemn. Rather I am trying to point to a fundamental change of orientation in human knowing. Nothing will change by condemning that change. And nothing can be accomplished by putting some dogmatic doctrine in its place. On the contrary, what is needed is to understand what has happened in our culture and thinking, which means trying to understand its essence, for it too is an event in the human soul. There is, however, one thing we can do. We can reconnect with the manner of knowing within which the ancient philosophers and artists work, and in particular we can make the imaginative leap out of the limited view of our age to the more spacious view of the Renaissance. I believe we can do this because, despite the confusions of our times, it is as natural to us now as it always was to turn our gaze towards the eternal, for the eternal is what the mind naturally seeks and it is what is always actually present everywhere. The soul is not tethered to the untrue in the end. So let me close with some final words of Ficino taken from his Commentary on the *Symposium* which will serve to summarise what I have attempted to say and will serve as a key to the lectures on the Renaissance that follow:

[In the same way] God creates the soul and gives it the intellect, which is the faculty of understanding. The intellect would be empty and dark unless the light of God were present to it, in which it sees the Reasons of all things. Thus the intellect understands by means of the light of God, and it actually knows only that divine light itself. However it seems to know different things because it perceives the divine light in the form of the various Ideas and Reasons of things. When anyone sees a man with his eyes, he creates an image of the man in his imagination and then ponders for a long time, trying to judge that image. Then he raises the eye of his intellect to look up to the Reason of Man which is present in the divine light. Then suddenly from the divine light a spark shines forth to his intellect and the true nature itself of Man is understood. And it happens in the same way with all other things. And so we understand all things through the light of God. But the pure light itself and its source we cannot see in this life. The whole fertility of the soul clearly consists in this: that in its inner being shines that eternal light of God charged with the Reasons and Ideas of all things; the soul can turn to this light whenever it wishes, through purity of life and intense concentration of desire, and when it has so turned, it shines with the sparks of the Ideas.