Quintessence of Dust:
A Masonic perspective on the Neoplatonic philosophy of Marsilio Ficino and his *magia naturalis*

In David Stevenson's famous book *The Origins of Freemasonry: Scotland's Century, 1590-1710* (1988) he details the fundamentally important Renaissance influence in the historical origins of the Craft. Following this line of enquiry, this paper is an attempt to present something similar. However, the range of this paper will be distinctively narrower in scope, and perhaps more philosophical than historical in outlook. The aim here is to present something more akin to a 'masonic' analysis of the famous Italian Renaissance scholar and medical magi Marsilio Ficino (1433- 1499) and his distinctly spiritual approach towards a particularly antiquated worldview known as the 'microcosm-macrocosm' model. The model, whilst originating in the syncretic Hellenism of Late Antiquity, was an important basis for Renaissance cosmological understanding and represents essentially a great, yet altogether static hierarchy of being. This paper aims to put forward the case for the model as an important and influential concept for the Craft, and why it may still be of much interest for the modern Mason. The model itself portrays God as the height of a great hierarchy disseminating down through the different orders of angels, elements and planets in various degrees of emanation to the plants, animals and minerals below, hence following the hermetic axiom - 'As above, so below'.[1] Of particular interest to us is the way in which this antiquated model undergoes a dynamic reimagining during the Renaissance, especially so within the Neoplatonic mechanisms inherent in Ficino's own influential and highly syncretic philosophy. By restoring the Neoplatonic notion of the *World-soul*, emphasising a new spiritual importance on the soul and human ontological dignity; Ficino places Man back at the *centre* of the model and thereby offers an alternative philosophical ontology from the dominant Aristotelian scholasticism of his day. Being integral to his theory of *magia naturalis,* Ficino's use of this concept of the *World soul* or *anima mundi* (and as D.P Walker explains, the related *spirtus mundi*) references both the ancient idea of a system of sympathies and antipathies that link the cosmos, as well as introducing the idea of some sort of mediator that enables different parts of the macrocosm-microcosm to respond to one

[1] Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 38.

another.[2] This *World soul* was believed to be an intrinsic connection between all living things, which relates to our world in much the same way as the soul is connected to the human body. Hence, the human soul in its relation to the *World soul* is unique and has access to all levels of spiritual and transcendental knowledge. For Ficino, it is through the agency of this *World soul,* that the soul of Man may, in fact, allow itself to be 'possessed' as it were by the *World soul* and hence achieve a glimpse upwards through the Divine plan of the 'microcosm-macrocosm' and achieve union or reintegration with the divine mind (Nous). This process is achieved by means of what we as freemasons might term as, 'Worldly possession[*s*]'.

The meditative and initiatory implications of Ficino's philosophy were of great interest to his Renaissance audience. This was so much so that the late eminent scholar Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke believed that through Ficino's revised style of Neoplatonic cosmology, he 'initiated a fundamental spiritual revolution in man's self-regard'.[3] Given our subscription to that supposed 'ancient landmark' that the soul is immortal, we as modern freemasons might learn much by properly appreciating this Renaissance 'spiritual revolution' at the heart of Ficino's inherently Neoplatonic philosophy of *magia naturalis,* and the ancient concept of the *World soul* integral to it. The great scholar of the Renaissance, D.P Walker, showed that Ficino, being always concerned to distinguish his *natural* magic from the demonic magic of the Middle-Ages, continuously fell back on his Neoplatonic sources.[4] Walker detailed this with particular insight, showing that by Ficino borrowing from the ancient Neoplatonic cannon of Plotinus, Iamblichus, Porphyry and Proclus for his cosmological basis, he manages to present his *natural* magic as exploiting the connecting sympathies and correspondences of the divine's emanation throughout the universe, enabled by the mediumship of the *World soul* or *anima mundi,* rather than the idolatry of early medieval magic. In the course of this paper, we will chart how the Neoplatonic tradition through the agency of Ficino's pious and influential approach to 'natural magic', helped offer new perspectives on Man and Nature to the early Italian Renaissance, and how these ideas may have manifested themselves within the Masonic tradition.

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[2] D.P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella*, 2nd edn (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), p.12 -13. Walker states that this idea might be Stoic in origin.

[3] Goodrick-Clarke, p. 39.

[4] Walker, pp. 36 - 44.

Giotto's circle: A historical context encompassed

Our principle focus being Marsilio Ficino and the Neoplatonism of his 'natural magic', it follows that our primary sources regarding this will be Book Three of his *Libre de vita* or *De vita triplici* (1489) known as *De vita coelitus comparanda* (*On Making Your Life Agree with the Heavens*) and his *Theologia Platonica de immortalitate animae* (1482). However, it might be beneficial in our preliminary task of establishing a proper historical context, to begin with, reference to one other rather incidental but highly illuminating Renaissance source - Giorgio Vasari's (1511- 1574) *Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, ed architettori* (*The Lives of the Artists*) (1550). Regarded as the world's first book of Art History, Vasari's *Lives* tells a typically anecdotal account of the life of the great artist Giotto di Bondone (1266-1337).Vasari relates a story of Pope Benedict IX and his papal envoy on a visit to Giotto's studio. Requesting an example of work, Giotto obliges - he draws freehand a perfect circle. Puzzled, the perplexed envoy returns to the papal court. The court and learned Pope, perhaps with Plato's *Timaeus* in mind, at once realises the pious gesture, skill and perfection of the drawing, leaving the poor envoy bemused.[5] Hailed by Vasari, Giotto and his art are presented as representative of a definitive break from an 'ignorant and incompetent age', as having 'revived through God's grace what had fallen into an evil state'.[6] While Florentine Platonists of a hundred years later may have no doubt approved, (given of course the Platonic significant of geometric shapes) this anecdotal sample of Vasari's veneration of the Artist is of value to us as it is a contemporary example of the value attributed to acts of individuality, genius, dignity, of the elevation of human endeavour, which was of course what historian Jacob Burckhardt was so concerned with - the conscious beginnings indicative of a new age; a Renaissance.

In the introduction to their translation of *The Lives of the Artists*, Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondella make the point that 'Vasari does not employ the contemporary Italian word *artista* ('artist') in his *Lives,* nor does he consistently use the perhaps more accurate term *artigiano* ('artisan'). Instead, he usually refers to his subject as an *atrefice* ('artificer', from the Latin *artifex,* often used to refer to God the Creator in theological writings) [i.e the world's

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[5] In the *Timaeus*, the composition of the four elements that constitute the physical universe is described. Timaeus ascribes each of the elements to a certain geometric shape or *Platonic solid.* The element of earth is a cube, air an octahedron, of water an icosahedron, and of fire a tetrahedron. The fifth element; the dodecahedron, was taken to represent the shape of the Universe, possibly because it most approximates a sphere.

[6] Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, trans. by Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondella (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 15.

first artificer]'.[7] Whether conscious or not of his anecdote's Platonic undertones, Vasari is speaking in 1550 of a recognisable new age, as seen (according to some definitions) in its own time through the lens of artistic achievement. If we consider the work of historian Jacob Burckhardt, he often makes similar assumptions about the emergence of the 'Individual' and the general emergence of the merits of human dignity during the Renaissance.

> In the Middle Ages […] man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation – only some general category. In Italy, this veil first melted into air; an objective treatment of the state and all the things of this world became possible. The subjective side at the same time asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man became a spiritual individual, and recognised himself as such.[8]

Where Vasari was concerned with the development of Art, Burckhardt is concerned with the development of the Individual. As we shall see, in many ways so is Ficino - all three are concerned with an ontological revaluation. Denys Hays quotes a helpful contemporary source, that of Matteo Plamier (1406-75)

> Where was the painter's art till Giotto tardily restored it? A caricature of the art of Human delineation! Sculpture and architecture, for long years such to merest travesty of art, are only today in process of rescue from obscurity; only now are they being brought to a new pitch of perfection by men of genius and erudition.[9]

Again, while concerned with purely artistic achievement, it would not be a twisting of the historical record to suggest these contemporary examples are emblematical of a more fundamental cultural, artistic, architectural and spiritual change starting to swell. For Renaissance intellectuals it seems to be evident that when Giotto draws his famous circle, without the aid of a compass, it somehow comes to represent the growing recognition of a

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[7] Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, trans. by Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondella (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. xii.

[8] Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. by S. G. C Middlemore (London: Penguin, 1990), pp. 98.

[9] Matteo Plamier, *Della vita civile*, ed. by F. Battaglia (Bologna: Scrittori politici Italiani, 1944), pp. 36-37, trans. from W. H Woodward, *Studies in Education during the Age of the Renaissance* (Cambridge: [Cambridge University Press (?)] 1906), p.67. from Denys Hay, *The Italian Renaissance in its Historical Background*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 12.

man's innate ability to circumscribe and keep within bounds with all Mankind while elevating himself towards genius, erudition and a revaluation of Mankind, as well as his own rebirth. This notion of a groundswell of progress and of a forward moving spiritual and intellectual momentum is often used in both contemporary and secondary sources when defining the period that has come to be retrospectively known as the Renaissance. While we should be careful not to make generalisations, most would agree that this emphasis on the dignity and elevation of Man and Soul (at least as a literary and moral aspiration if not in reality) is distinct. Kristeller is of the opinion that through the restored Neoplatonism of Ficino these ideas eventually find something of an ontological 'sanction'.[10] His assistant Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) turned them into an official declaration with his *Oration on the Dignity of Man* in 1486. If Freemasonry is indeed a system of morality veiled in allegory, then ultimately the dignity of Man is what the system is trying to achieve. For the Craft, of course, this is achieved by a desire for proximity with God or rather The Great Architect of the Universe. In Neoplatonism, the human soul can achieve this proximity by its ability to ascend both toward God and towards the world, through the mediation (or mediumship) of the *World Soul*. These ideas are completely embodied by Ficino's revised scheme of the 'microcosm-macrocosm' model, in which, the soul of Man attains a privileged central place by this process – the soul is placed as it were in or at the *centre*.

Renaissance Syncretism: Plato, Christ, Hermes & Aristotle

The habit of describing the Renaissance in terms of Platonic progression and the Middle-Ages as Aristotelian status quo should be avoided. As James Hankins illustrates, there is no doubt Plato's contribution is both seminal and evident, even more so with Ficino's efforts, but Aristotelian thinking is ever present throughout the entire Renaissance, even in the background of Ficino's own philosophy. This is important when trying to construct an accurate historical context to assess Ficino's Neoplatonic contribution. Platonism is an important factor to our understanding of Ficino's historical context, as well as to Neoplatonism and of course to Ficino's philosophy of natural magic itself - but as Hankins indicates, it is still just one historical factor among many that define the intellectual climate of the Renaissance, and in turn Ficino and his natural magic. Indeed, the importance of Hermetic philosophy cannot be underestimated. Yates goes so far as state the whole of *De vita coelitus comparanda* is 'a

[10] Kristeller, p. 48.

commentary only secondarily on Plotinus and primarily on Trismegistus'.[11] Hankins' argument is an informed appreciation of the contemporary intellectual milieu and it highlights the marginality of Plato even within the Humanist circles of the time. Particular attention should be drawn to his references towards the work of Charles B. Schmitt. Although, what scholar Arthur Versluis would call somewhat 'reductionist' in his approach, Schmitt presents statistical records of Renaissance printing pertaining to the production of Aristotelian literature with comparisons to Plato.[12] Renaissance commentaries on Aristotle outnumbered Plato ten to one.[13] In support of both the work of Hankins and Kristeller, Schmitt's work helps expand on the dense intellectual climate of the Renaissance by clearly emphasising the evidence of differing types of Aristotelian thought practised. Comparing the later work of Jacopo Zabarella (1533-1589) and Cesare Cremonini (1552- 1631), both eminent Aristotelians of their time, Schmitt illustrates that we must not think of Renaissance Aristotelianism as one cohesive body of thought, but rather a grouping of various forms of Aristotelianisms.[14] This is of course, no less so for Platonism, Neoplatonism or any assertions made of Ficino's rejection of Aristotelian thought as such. Subsequently, Ficino and his magic and indeed the Renaissance as a term itself should be perceived as deeply syncretic in nature.

Hay states, 'I accept as fact that there was a Renaissance in the period […] between 1350 and 1700'.[15] If contrasted with the renaissance of the twelfth century and its emphasis on classical texts of mainly scientific, philosophical, and mathematical concern as ably described by Haskins, the fifteenth century had a greater emphasis placed on the recovery of philosophical and literary works, of which Plato was eminent and Ficino at the forefront.[16] With the growth of the Italian vernacular, learning becomes more widespread in the fifteenth-century, at least among the already educated classes. It might be suggested that this gave place to a context of importance towards the humanities and liberal arts, unseen in the Middle- Ages and possibly bestowing the period with a particular receptiveness for Ficino's brand of

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[11] Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1964), p. 66.

[12] Arthur Versluis, '*What is Esoteric? Methods in the Study of Western Esotericism', Esoterica, IV (2002)* <www.esoteric.msu.edu/VolumeIV/Methods.htm> [accessed 20 December 2011] (para. 19 of 53)

[13] Charles B. Schmitt, *Aristotle and the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 154-155.

[14] Schmitt, p. 8.

[15] Denys Hay, *The Italian Renaissance in its Historical Background*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p.1.

[16] Charles Homer Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (Ohio: The World Publishing Company, 1957), pp. 303-337.

Neoplatonism. When again we contrast the science of the twelfth-century with that of the fifteenth there is a marked difference. This is something Allen G. Debus recognises in his *Man and Nature in the Renaissance*, although his dates are limited to 1450 to 1650. Debus concentrates on the science of the Renaissance and highlights its receptiveness towards the spiritualism and mysticism presented by Ficino, something again not indicative of the Middle-Ages.

> But Renaissance humanism cannot simply be reduced to a recovery of a pure Aristotle, Ptolemy or Galen. No less influential on the development of modern science – and certainly part of the same humanistic movement – was the revival of the Neo-Platonic, cabalistic and Hermetic texts of late antiquity.[17]
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> We shall find that controversies over natural magic and the truth of the macrocosm - microcosm analogy were then as important as the better- remembered debates over the acceptance of the heliocentric system or the circulation of the blood.[18]

It would follow then, that in regards to Ficino's historical context and how scholars have sought to define it, and consequentially how it came to foster an environment in which freemasonry evolved, we can start by saying that Ficino's philosophy is a dynamic response to a time when such aspirations as promised by his blend of Neoplatonism were eagerly received. Byzantine migration and medieval scholasticism had culminated to such an extent during the fifteenth century, that the successive influx of Greek learning that followed the fall of Constantinople (1453) enjoyed a revolutionary level of patronage in the Latin West that would rival antiquity.[19] Encouraged by both the mercantile wealth of the medieval Italian city-states and the particular receptiveness of the Florentine state with its fertile Humanist tendencies, this revelatory Greek influx generated a great deal of interest in classical literature. Culminating with Ficino in 1484, this literary increase is believed to generate something of a Platonic revival and an increased dissemination of Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy, thus rendering the intellectual pursuits of the early Italian Renaissance with a distinctly Platonic, rather than Aristotelian character.[20] In art, literature and science, the medieval conventions were poised in nostalgic anticipation for these treasures of antiquity that the steady dissemination of Greek learning had promised and that Ficino had delivered with his

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[17] Debus, Allen G., *Man and Nature in the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 7–8.

[18] Debus, p. 2.

[19] Goodrick-Clarke, p. 34.

[20] Hankins, p. 4.

translations. The historical context appears to suggest that Ficino's particular brand of Neoplatonism, with its emphasis on the uniqueness and immortality of the soul and the individual, had a detectable pre-eminence at this time and that the environment in which it was received was both receptive and reverential. Yet, strangely, for all his veneration, very little direct Platonic literature was actually available in Latin before Ficino's translations. With the exception of the only Platonic text available in Latin, *Timaeus,* Hankins states the Middle-Ages added only three dialogues to the Platonic corpus - some very poor twelfth century translations of the *Phaedo* and the *Meno* by Henricus Alistippus in Scilly and then in the later thirteenth century a limited version of the *Parmendies*, translated by William of Moerbeke.[21] Clearly, it is only through the new translations from the original Greek in Florence by Ficino, that the other works of Plato and any of the works of the Neoplatonist Plotinus became available in the West. St Augustine, Macrobius' *Commentarius in somnium scipionis*, Boethius' *Consolatio philosophiae*; Martianus Capella's *De nuptiis philologiae et mercurii*, John Scottus Eriugena and the School of Chartres all stand as indicative of the very thin dissemination of Platonism and Neoplatonism from Late Antiquity.[22]

When Justian closed the Athenian Academy in 529AD, the writings of the early Church Fathers and Pseudo-Dionysus the Areopagite passed Platonic philosophy down to the Middle- Ages.[23] As with Plotinus, Dionysus' philosophy is that God is 'beyond being', unknowable and ineffable; God is 'beyond negation and affirmation'. Dionysus describes God as 'Cause' in a Neoplatonic manner to avoid making God into another being besides his creatures. He employs Plato's notion of the good God in a notably Christian sense.[24]Platonism becomes, due also to the efforts of St Augustine and Boethius, representative of a syncretic blend of pagan philosophy and Christianity.[25] As Cees Leijenhorst states, 'the most conspicuous characteristic of the reception of Plato was the fusion between the cosmology and natural philosophy of the *Timaeus* and the Christian theology'.[26] Arguably one of his most influential works, Plato's *Timaeus* presents an

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[21] Hankins, p. 4.

[22] Cees Leijenhorst, 'Neoplatonism II: Middle Ages', in *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff with Antoine Faivre, Roelof van den Broek and Jean-Pierre Brach (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005), p. 837.

[23] Hankins, p. 4

[24] *The Works of Dionysus the Areopagite, Part 1. Divine Names, Mystic Theology, Letters & c.*, trans. by Rev. John Parker, M.A, (Merrick, New York: Richwood Publishing, 1976), pp. 32-72.

[25] Leijenhorst, p. 837.

[26] Ibid, p. 837.

elaborate creation story of the universe and the origins of its apparent beauty and order. Plato suggests the universe was created by a rational being, who is both beneficent and purposeful. This being is presented as a divine Craftsman (Demiurge) or Great Architect, who brings mathematical order to the chaos of the universe. This is, of course, a major element, not just of Ficino as a Catholic priest, but for most in their veneration of Platonic philosophy and is endemic of the inherited Platonic legacy and the continued endeavour to synchronise Platonic philosophy and Christian theology of the time. The Platonic tradition from Antiquity onwards is deeply syncretic and complex. Indeed, a large part of Platonic literature was even presented under the name of Aristotle as secret teachings of Plato.[27] This is no less so during the Renaissance. Thus being composed of Hermeticism, Christianity, Neoplatonism and Aristotelian ideas, this perpetuated the view that Ficino and his contemporaries had of Plato - as being that of *prisca theologia* or as an ancient theology. This theology was viewed as a great chain of initiates including Moses, Zoroaster, Hermes Trismegistus, Plato and Orpheus and was venerated as such.[28] This, in turn, facilitates a related transmission of methods of hermeneutical interpretation and hence the allegorical aspects of Plato were considered as *integumenta* and *involucre*, meaning as Leijenhorst explains 'words that concealed a deeper, hidden meaning that had to be dug up by the philosopher'.[29] Accordingly, Platonic cosmology continued to be debated and reinterpreted, the lack of any direct Platonic literature helped facilitate medieval examples of Platonic thought becoming essentially corruptions of what we would later describe as Middle and Neoplatonism. The Medieval and Renaissance mind made no such distinction. Ficino translated Plato and other writers with Platonic themes, with deeply Neoplatonic tendencies and often writes Neoplatonic ideas back into his translations of Plato.[35] Never the less, as Ficino comes to represent the pinnacle of an important but slow dissemination of Greek learning, it is his translations alone that truly open up, first Plato and then later; Neoplatonism. Hankins states 'the period from Petrarch to Ficino was, in fact, a time when the philosophy of Plato was valued and studied more than any other time'.[30]

Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke explains that this slow dissemination of Renaissance Neoplatonism and its Hermetic and Cabalistic interpretations first entered Northern Europe

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[27] Ibid, p. 837.

[28] Goodrick-Clarke, p. 7.

[29] Leijenhorst, p. 836

[35]Ibid, p. 836.

[30] Hankins, p. 4.

with the work of Johannes Reuchlin (1455–1522).[31] It was as a young jurist for the Duke of Eberhand of Wurttemberg that Reuchlin first visits Florence and encounters Marsilio Ficino and his distinctly spiritual approach to the microcosm-macrocosm model. In 1490 Reuchlin meets Ficino's assistant Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494). Pico is often referred to as the first Christian Cabbalist, and his importance to the dissemination of cabbalistic ideas is without doubt seminal. Influenced by Pico's *Cabalistic Conclusions* and the tradition of *prisca theologia,* Reuchlin becomes interested in Kabbalah as a means of 'vindicating Christianity as the true religion based on an esoteric interpretation of Hebrew mystical lore'.[32] Praising the influence of Pico, Reuchlin in his first cabalistic study *De verdo mirifico* (1494) becomes, as Goodrick-Clarke states, 'a towering figure of German Humanist circles'.[33] He influences Johann Trithemius (1462-1516) and his brand of angel magic. Trithemius' treatise *Steganographia* (1606) written around 1500 was dedicated to numerology and astrology. Interested in gaining power and knowledge over angelic entities, Trithemius himself, influenced by Reuchlin, Pico and Ficino, becomes part of an ever expanding intellectual legacy that had started to develop. Inspiring the famous Henry Cornelius Agrippa von Netteshem (1486-1539), Paracelsus (1493-1541) and Paulus Ricius; a Jew who converted to Christianity and translated *Sha'are Orah (Portae lucis)* (1515) of Joseph Gikatilla; the first work of Kabblatic philosophy in any European language. Evidently this Germanic grounding is fertilised further with the Reformation. The seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries see a sharp increase in Christian theosophy (Christian Platonism) and Pietism in reaction to Lutheran Orthodoxy. Jacob Boehme (1575- 1624) becomes 'the leading Protestant mystic' and the intellectual heritage of which Coudert speaks seems to take shape.[34] Frances Yates states 'the increase of Cabalist studies seems to me to be a feature of the Hermetic-Cabalist tradition in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries'.[35] All these factors contribute to an intellectual atmosphere in which David Stevenson's states freemasonry emerged. Donald R. Dickson's book*, The Tessera of Antila: Utopian Brotherhoods and Secret Societies in the Early Seventeenth Century* (1998) essentially reflects the central theme of Stevenson's research by detailing how William Schaw was the first to formalise the Scottish Craft and 'endowed it with a new stature and meaning'.[36] Margaret C. Jacob's book

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[31] Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 49.

[32] Goodrick-Clarke, p. 51.

[33] Goodrick-Clarke, p. 50.

[34] Goodrick-Clarke, p. 87.

[35] Francis Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (London: Routledge 1972), p. 287

[36] Dickson*,* p. 212.

Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe (1991) does the same, as she states; 'William Schaw...was imbued with the reforming and mystical Hermeticism of the late Renaissance'. It is a reforming and mystical 'Hermeticism' that is essentially Platonic. It is a Platonism that clearly owes a great deal to Ficino.

A Very Ancient Landmark - Plato's Immortality of the Soul

Ficino is described as being 'repelled' by the Aristotelian thought of his time for its denial of the immortality of the soul, hence Platonism, as it existed, was a natural draw.[37] Ficino states in his *Theologia Platonica de immortalitate animae*; 'were the soul not immortal no creature would be more miserable than man'.[38] That Ficino's Neoplatonic framework, with its reintroduction of the *World soul* in cosmological terms, helped provide new perspectives on notions already being recognised as reactionary during the Renaissance is interesting. However, no masonic discussion on Ficino's veneration of Platonic ideas regarding the Immortality of the Soul would suffice without drawing passing reference to Plato's ideas regarding *myelos* or 'marrow'. As Master Masons, the following passage from Plato's *Timaeus* may prove enlightening -

> The marrow itself is created out of other materials: God took such of the primary triangles as were straight and smooth, and were adapted by their perfection to produce fire and water, and air and earth-these, I say, he separated from their kinds, and mingling them in due proportions with one another, made the marrow out of them to be a universal seed of the whole race of mankind; and in this seed he then planted and enclosed the souls, and in the original distribution gave to the marrow as many and various forms as the different kinds of souls were hereafter to receive. That which, like a field, was to receive the divine seed, he made round every way, and called that portion of the marrow, brain, intending that, when an animal was perfected, the vessel containing this substance should be the head; but that which was intended to contain the remaining and mortal part of the soul he distributed into figures at once around and elongated, and he called them all by the name 'marrow'; and to these, as to anchors, fastening the bonds of the whole soul, he proceeded to fashion around them the entire

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[37] Goodrick-Clarke, p. 38.

[38] Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, trans. and ed. by Micheal J.B. Allen and James Hankins, 6 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001-2006), I, 15.

framework of our body, constructing for the marrow, first of all a complete covering of bone.

Conclusion

Ficino's later translations of Plotinus and the other Neoplatonists represent a highly complex tradition which he goes on to adopt with several others to form a distinctly spiritual and pious spiritual reality. His philosophy, as Goodrick-Clarke states 'attributed the active influence love and thought to the Soul, which could reach out and embrace all things'.[39] Ficino in *De vita coelitus comparanda* states 'this is because, as I have said, it contains in itself all the middles of things'.[40] Man's soul is placed at the centre of the universe in Ficino's magic. 'It conforms to divine things, and to things fallen, and it verges on each with its effect, and is everywhere all the same'.[41] Thus enabling him to act on nature and reinvigorating the microcosm-macrocosm in a dynamic and pious framework. This power to act, indicative of the human soul's possession by the newly reintroduced *World soul*, exploits the correspondences inherent in the universe. Through the emanations of God, as they descended the hierarchy of planes, Man can transcend. 'The soul of the world, the anima mundi, divinely contains at least as many seminal reasons for things as there are ideas in the divine mind'. [42] The *magia naturalis* of Ficino's *De vita coelitus comparanda* is indicative of Renaissance Neoplatonism with its emphasis on the 'all-pervading spirit'; the anima mundi.[43] Faivre describes this concept as 'the principle of universal interdependence'.[44] He continues, 'the

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[39] Goodrick-Clarke, p. 7.

[40] Marsilio Ficino, *Marsilio Ficino: The Book of Life,* trans. by Charles Boer (Woodstock, CT: Spring Publications, 1996), p. 86.

[41] Ibid, p. 86.

Ibid, p. 86. These ideas of the animating principle of the cosmos, mediation and inherent cosmic correspondences are dealt with in great detail by Antoine Faivre in his *Access to Western Esotericism* (1994). A translation of two works previously published as *Accès de l'Esoterisme occidental* and *L'Esoterisme*, clear connections between these aspects of Ficino's philosophy and elements within Faivre's six fundamental characteristics of esoteric philosophy exist.[42] Faivre's approach, although sometimes criticised on the basis of being an 'ideal' typology for his own specialist Renaissance studies, consists of four fundamental components: *correspondences*, *living Nature*, *imagination and mediations*, *the experience of Transmutation* and two secondary components: *The practice of concordance* and *Transmission.* Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), pp. 10-15.

[43] Goodrick-Clarke, p. 39.

[44] Faivre, p. 10.

"magic" is simultaneously the knowledge of the networks of sympathies or antipathies that link the things of Nature '.[45] This, in turn, places Nature as well as Man in an essential and central ontology. Nature is the means by which Man might learn the divine signs of God's emanations and the ability to ascend and descend the celestial ladder. Through the mediation of Nature and the virtues of different parts of the microcosm – macrocosm analogy, Man's soul might sympathetically engage with the Universal and God. This relationship between Man and Nature is indicative of the new perspectives Neoplatonism, in the guise of Marsilio Ficino, offered to the early Italian Renaissance. It follows then, that in the dense intellectual climate of the Renaissance, Marsilio Ficino and his distinctly spiritual approach to the microcosm-macrocosm model help introduce a new dynamic reimagining of the model through the Neoplatonic mechanisms of his philosophy. Providing an alternative philosophical ontology from that of the dominant Aristotelian scholasticism of his day, he presents an ontological 'sanction' for reactionary ideas. Reintroducing the Neoplatonic *World soul* in cosmological terms, he initiates a fundamental reform in notions of spiritual reality and transcendence and suggests a greater role for Mankind in the celestial hierarchy. Above all is his belief in Neoplatonism and it synchronism with the contemporary world surrounding him. This enables Ficino to present his theory of *magia naturalis*. Ficino's use of the syncretic heritage of the Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition to rediscover the physical and spiritual world around him is emblematical of the entire Platonic tradition. Through Plotinus and the other Neoplatonists, Ficino achieves a fundamental revolution in Renaissance perceptions of Man's relationship to the soul, Nature and the Universe.

[45] Ibid, p. 10.