

## REVIEWS

THE PHILOSOPHY OF MARSILIO FICINO. By P. O. Kristeller. (Milford; Columbia University Press; 30s.)

The Church does not seek to demolish the individuality, the organic tendencies of a race or a particular civilisation, when she urges all men to submit to the truth of religion, but rather through her doctors and theologians to adapt the expression of Christianity to the requirement of each situation that arises. If therefore Ficino, founder of the Florentine Academy, had through his Platonic philosophy succeeded in extending the appeal of the Faith to the peculiar genius of his age, as he proposed to do, he would have proved himself an original thinker and rendered an invaluable service to the cause of religion; for the attempt of the thirteenth century to support the doctrines of Scripture and tradition by the light of natural reason had been rejected as obsolete and barbarous by the new Humanists. At the same time the scholastic terminology and concepts of Being were still taken for granted in the schools of Europe and even exercised a decisive influence on the Platonic revival; so that Ficino himself naturally followed the peripatetic school of thought, when faced with old and much disputed problems such as that of creation—whether God produced a hierarchy of graded spheres disposed one beside the other and directly related to him, or an order of entities where the lower is always generated by the higher degree through all the species of Being down to primary matter; and in controversies such as that concerning Universals and the problem whether the One and True are to be placed among the Transcendentals, he affected a compromise in favour of the mediaeval tradition.

But while maintaining the letter, he, as it were, subverts the spirit of scholastic cosmology; for having first dethroned the God of St. Thomas's gigantic construction by introducing a concept of Fate and a host of mysterious forces, which rival God in power, Ficino—and this is the characteristic trait of his whole philosophy—proceeds to enhance beyond all proportions the position of the human soul, whom he describes as the centre and bond of the Universe, reconciling through its natural instinct the intellectual and material substances, and grasping through thought the nature of the world; considerations which induce Ficino to exclaim in his *Theologica Platonica*: 'Since man has understood the order of the celestial spheres—from whence they are moved, where and in what measure they proceed, what they produce—who can deny that he is nearly of the same genius as the author of the spheres and that he could in a certain sense make the heavens if he could obtain the instruments and the celestial matter? Because now he is able to produce them though of a different matter, but in a similar order.'

Also in his attitude to Neoplatonism, Ficino shows himself a true son of the Renaissance, if we conceive of that movement as a pagan and naturalistic reaction of human pride against Christian realism and the pious humility of man before God. He does indeed maintain the Platonic epistemology, which St. Augustine taught because it seemed to account most satisfactorily for the immediate dependence of man on God; but then he largely abandons the moral pessimism and that profound view of human nature, so clearly foreshadowing the concept of original sin:—the tender and delicate nostalgia of the soul for the celestial Kingdom, which characterised ancient Platonism and led the Father of Western Christendom to refer to it as ‘that philosophy that comes nearest to Christianity’ (*City of God* : 8, ix); and on the other hand the pseudo-mysticism of Plotinus, I mean the conception of an animated universe full of spiritual symbols, portents, rational intelligences and hidden virtues, where the human soul is described both as an incorporeal substance independent of the body in all its specific functions, and as influenced and determined by the movement of the stars.

Also, as a Christian apologist, he asserts the principles of Humanism against the traditional scale of values: he propounds the Patristic exemplarism and is anxious to avoid any doctrine which might give offence to the ecclesiastical authorities; but there is certainly no place for original sin in his system; as moralist he replaces, out of contempt for the active life and the virtues connected therewith, the command of charity by the Platonic cult of love and friendship and extols the contemplative and philosophical life of the spiritually awakened as compared with the miserable folly of the multitude in its blind passions: the aesthetic-aristocratic ethics of Humanism. And in so far as the human soul was for Ficino the principal object of philosophical speculation, and world-order and Being only in their relation to the soul as the centre of the Universe, he appears as a representative thinker of the Italian Renaissance.

Dr. Kristeller has given a thoroughly learned, if somewhat wordy and repetitive account of the Ficinian philosophy, without attempting an ideological interpretation; although his occasional comments, usually to the effect that this or that concept of Ficino’s had been ‘eliminated’ by Kant’s critique of pure reason or by what he terms the ‘discoveries of natural science,’ clearly betray his bias; and he is obviously on the whole sympathetic to the modernising tendencies of Ficino; which is perhaps inevitable since his adherence to the tradition of so-called ‘objective scholarship’ in literary and historical research—which is one of the last remnants of humanist culture that have survived into our time—must determine his intellectual outlook in the same direction. But that does not seriously affect the validity of Dr. Kristeller’s illuminating exposition, which can be recommended to anyone who wishes to make himself acquainted with Renaissance Platonism.

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