

I

De foelicitatis desiderio

On the desire for happiness

Cosimo de' Medici to Marsilio Ficino: greetings.

YESTERDAY I went to my estate at Careggi, but for the sake of cultivating my mind and not the estate. Come to us, Marsilio, as soon as possible. Bring with you Plato's book on *The Highest Good*,⁽¹⁾ which I suppose you have translated from Greek into Latin as you promised. I want nothing more wholeheartedly than to know which way leads most surely to happiness.

Farewell. Come, and bring your Orphic lyre with you.



2

Quae sit ad foelicitatem via⁽¹⁾

The way to happiness

Marsilio Ficino to Cosimo de' Medici: greetings.

I SHALL come to you as quickly as I can, most willingly. What could be pleasanter than to be in Careggi, the land of the Graces,⁽²⁾ talking with Cosimo, the father of the Graces. Meanwhile, please accept in these few words what the Platonists say about the most convenient way to happiness. Although I do not think it is necessary to show the way to a man who has already nearly reached the goal, I think your desire must be obeyed, in your absence as well as your presence. All men want to act well, which is to live well. But they live well if they are endowed with as many good things as possible. Now these good things are said to be riches, health,

beauty, strength, nobility of birth, honours, power, prudence, as well as justice, fortitude and temperance, and above all else wisdom, which indeed comprehends the whole essence of happiness. For happiness consists in the successful achievement of the desired goal, but wisdom does this for every activity.

Thus skilled flautists get the best out of their instruments, and learned grammarians best understand what relates to reading and writing. Wise helmsmen also reach a good harbour in their voyage before others do, and the wise general conducts warfare with least danger. The wise doctor can best restore the body's health. Thus with all her strength wisdom gives us mastery of every human activity according to our desire. She never wavers, nor is she ever led astray; otherwise, in truth, she would not be wisdom. Since wisdom is the cause of attaining the goal, necessarily she is all-powerful where happiness is concerned.

It is also said that only they are happy who are endowed with many gifts. But they are not happy before those gifts benefit them, and they never benefit from them unless they use them. Possession without use does not contribute to happiness. Nor is use alone enough; for¹ one can use them badly, and thus be injured rather than helped. So as we have added use to possession, we must add rightfulness to use, for we must not only use our gifts but we must use them rightly. Wisdom alone ensures that we do so. This one can see in the arts, in which only those who are skilled in their art make right use of their material, no less than they do of their tools. So also, wisdom makes sure that we rightly use riches, health, beauty, strength, and the other things which are called good. For this reason knowledge is the cause of good and successful action, in the possession, use and working of every gift. The man who possesses many gifts and uses them without intelligence is injured the more, the more² he possesses, since he has more to misuse. Certainly, the less someone does who is ignorant³ the fewer mistakes does he make. The fewer mistakes he makes, the less is the harm he does. The less harm he does the less⁴ miserable is he. Certainly he does less if he is poor than if he is rich, if he is weak than if he is strong, if he is timid rather than bold, if he is sluggish rather than alert, slow rather than quick, dull rather than clever. Thus none of those qualities which above were called good are good in themselves, for if they are

¹ ms potest enim quis

² ms magis quanto possidet plura pluribus ut abutitur

³ ms abutitur. Sane insipiens

⁴ ms agens minus est

dominated by ignorance they are worse than their opposites, in so far as they can plentifully supply the means of crime to an evil leader. If, on the other hand, prudence and wisdom govern these qualities, then they are so much the better. Thus they are not good or bad in themselves. To the wise man both advantages and difficulties become useful, because he makes good use of them both; but the opposite applies to the ignorant.

Of everything that is ours, wisdom alone is good in itself. Only ignorance is bad in itself. Since therefore we all wish to be happy, and happiness cannot be obtained without the right use of our gifts, and since knowledge reveals their proper use, we should leave all else aside and strive with the full support of philosophy⁵ and religion to become as wise as possible. For thus our soul becomes most like to God, who is wisdom itself. In this likeness, according to Plato, consists the highest state of happiness.

⁵ ms Philosophiae tum



3

Imitatio utilior est quam lectio

Imitation is more useful than reading

Marsilio Ficino to the noble Amerigo Benci: greetings.

TODAY I received from you the dialogues of our Plato, in Greek; certainly a magnificent gift, worthy of your spirit^a and most pleasing to mine. I send you many thanks. May¹ the heavenly Graces soon visit you with their immortal favour.

You wished, I think, to imitate the great Cosimo in this as in most other things, for in earlier days he enriched my library with Plato's works in Greek. I praise your gift, Amerigo, and approve the imitation, for imitation is a surer way to virtue than reading. Just¹¹ as harmony has a more

¹ ms magnas. Utinam immortalen

^a animo

powerful effect when actually flowing into our ears than when subsequently recollected, and as a battle stirs us more deeply when watched than when being recounted, so the illustrious deeds of living heroes rouse us more ardently to the pursuit of virtue and fashion us more perfectly for it than do the words of the ancient philosophers discussing moral conduct.



4

Dialogus inter Deum et animam theologicus

A theological dialogue between God and the soul

Marsilio Ficino to Michele Mercati of San Miniato, his beloved fellow philosopher: greetings.

WE have often talked together of moral and natural philosophy, beloved Michele, and even more often of divine philosophy. I remember you used to say again and again that morals¹ are developed through practice, natural things discovered by reason and the divine begged of God by prayer. I have also read in the works of our Plato that the divine is revealed through purity of living rather than taught by verbal instruction. When I seriously considered these things I sometimes began to feel sick at heart, for I had already come to distrust reason but still lacked faith in revelation. From this there arose an intimate conversation between the soul and God. Listen to this, if you please, although I think you may already be nearer to speaking with God than I¹¹

GOD: Why do you grieve so much, my unhappy soul? O my daughter, weep no more. Behold, I, your father, am here with you. I am here, your cure and your salvation.

SOUL: Oh that my father would enter into me. If I believed such a grace could befall me, ah! I should go mad with joy. As it is, I do not see how that can come about; for if, as I thought, the creator of the world created me, his offspring, nearer to himself than his own created world, he who is

¹ ms discrete, moralia usu

them back to the quick by the purgatorial virtues. Thus cleansed, in the third stage they root them out with all their might through the virtues that belong to the purified soul. When these desires have been rooted out, as far as is humanly possible, such men finally are formed by the model virtues which are in God.

Those three kinds of virtue are the steps by which we gradually approach the divine virtues. In time every natural movement can attain its end and everything which has been prepared by nature to take form can finally achieve that form.



20

De sapiente et foelice viro

On the wise and fortunate man

Marsilio Ficino to his fellow philosopher, Antonio Serafico of San Miniato: greetings.

I CONSIDER that man wise and fortunate, who lives happy in the midst of calamities because he depends on God alone; whom fear does not weaken, nor pain torment; who is not corrupted by desire, nor inflamed by passion. Amongst the thickest thorns he gathers delicate and beautiful flowers; from dung he pulls and digs out pearls; he sees in the darkest night; burdened with shackles and bound by chains, he runs on as though unfettered and free; until at length the Holy Spirit breathes upon him.

Imitate then, as you have so begun, Pythagoras, Socrates and Plato; who applied themselves to philosophy no less in action than in discussion, even when fortune seemed against them. Many have paid lip service to philosophy, but these men served it with their whole heart. He tastes nothing, Serafico, who has not tasted for himself.

Farewell; and persevere in your conduct.



21

Bona scribere praestat quam multa

It is better to write good things than many things

Marsilio Ficino to Angelo Poliziano, the Homeric poet: greetings.

WHY do you ask so often for the titles of my books,¹ Angelo? Is it perhaps so that you can praise me in your verse? However, there is no praise in number, but in selection; there is no goodness in quantity, but in quality. Or is it that you may have with you all that is mine? Whatever the reasons, take what you ask, since everything is common among friends.

I have translated from Greek into Latin the *Physics* and *Elements of Theology* of the Platonist Proclus and the four books by Iamblichus of Chalcis about the Pythagorean School, the *Mathematics* of Theophrastus of Smyrna, the *Platonic Definitions* of Speusippus, the *Epitome of Platonism* by Alcimus, the book by Xenocrates on the *Consolation of Death*, the *Hymns* and *Symbols* of Pythagoras, the work of Hermes Trismegistus on the *Power and Wisdom of God*, all the works of Plato.

I have written a commentary on the Gospels, one on Plato's *Phaedrus*,¹ one on his *Philebus*, about the Highest Good, and one on the *Symposium* about love. I have written a book on *Physiognomy* and on the *Principles of Platonic discipline* to Cristoforo Landino, which I later amended; also a compendium on *The Opinions of the Philosophers on God and the Soul*, on *Economics*, on *Pleasure*, on *The Four Schools of Philosophy*, on *Magnanimity*, *Happiness*, *Justice*, *Divine Frenzy*, on *Consolation for Parents on the Death of a Son*, on *Desire*, a *Theological Prayer to God*, a *Theological Dialogue between God and the Soul*, a *Theology on the Immortality of Souls* in 18 books, a work on *The Christian Religion*, *Arguments against the Opinions of Astrologers*, on *the Rapture of Paul into the Third Heaven*, on *Light*, *The Principles of Platonic Theology*, *The Life and Teaching of Plato*, *Five Questions about Mind*, and a volume of *Philosophic Letters*.

¹ ms. Evangelia, Commentarium in Phaedrum Platonis, Commentarium in Platonis Philebum de Summo.

bite, how sharply you kiss! You mingle a magic sweetness with the sharp, and a sharpness with the sweet, as does Nature in the most succulent tastes. And as your sharpness grows more bitter, so, like wine vinegar, it smells more sweet.

What fault do you find in me, stringent accuser, most stringent lover? Is it not brevity? But you are the cause: The scale of your affairs makes me brief, but the greatness of your love makes me appear briefer still. You accuse my silence, suspecting that it springs from forgetfulness, and forgetfulness from absence. But you ought to remember that if Lorenzo is not absent, neither is Marsilio, for Marsilio dwells in Lorenzo if the soul is everywhere at the same time, as you yourself truly proved in your recent letter.

How, therefore, does the divine Christopher prevent me from seeing you? Especially since he is clear and transparent, and in Christopher I see Lorenzo, just as through Lorenzo I see and embrace Christopher. Do you want me to confess the truth? The eclipse which prevents me from seeing or being heard is not caused by the interposition of Christopher. No, it is you with your flashing lightning and thunderclaps that have stunned me, and rendered me blind and speechless.

Ah! Impudent young man, you triumph overmuch in your victory, however fairly won; for what more do you leave for yourself, or anyone else? For you, that you conquer yourself; for others that they allow themselves to be conquered with equanimity. Certainly, if I may speak for myself, I rejoice at being overcome by you almost as much as you rejoice at overcoming me and others.

What shall I say of the rest? The morning sun gathers the clouds, and the mid-day sun disperses them. Youthful virtue arouses envy, but virtue in a mature man dissolves it and overcomes that jealousy which previously dominated every other idea. You have converted almost everyone's envy to admiration. Many now openly praise Lorenzo who previously envied him. But although hardly anyone who praises Lorenzo speaks falsely, no-one except the Platonists praise him justly. Since the Aristotelians see Lorenzo so successful in whatever he does, they praise him in all things; on the other hand the Platonists praise all things in him. For when they consider how quickly he has become master of each art, they realise that these arts have not been acquired by labour, but supplied by nature and granted from God.

And so it is that I esteem your character in myself, and I love my own in you. I praise you in art, and I value art in you. I honour you in nature, and

I marvel at nature in you. I revere you through God, and I reverence God through you. And so to God alone be all glory sung from age to age² by everyone.

Farewell.

² *ms aevu canatur in aevum*



Iocosa ad Ioannem invitatio ad reditum, per dissimulationem

A playful inducement to Giovanni to return, by means of dissimulation

Marsilio Ficino to Giovanni Cavalcanti, his unique friend: greetings.

TONIGHT I had decided to write to you in the morning like this: 'Come back, my hero! Hurry!¹ Fly to me, I beg you!'

Then, on more mature reflection, I deemed it wiser to dissemble my longing so that you would return all the more speedily, thinking me angry. Well, I am! But what's the point? Will anger stir him whom love has not moved? I don't think so. So I don't know which way to turn—to entreaty or to scolding.

Ah! Now I have found a refuge. I shall trust in that heroic heart of yours which usually moves more quickly of its own volition than when spurred. Meanwhile, how shall I stop myself grumbling at you just a little, you who are so unmindful of me? But I shall hold back my complaints and, not to bore you with the same old tunes, I shall embark on matters of greater moment. I shall write about affairs of state. You ask what is going on in town. Serious matters are afoot. Listen! But tell no one! Many of the chiet citizens are saying: 'Oh Marsilio! why have you been alone in town for so long?'

'Because the man who never leaves me on my own, so wishes it.'

'He has not returned, then?'

¹ *ms Heros, propria quasso*

'Not yet.'

I have nothing more² to write to you at present. I have written about the state of affairs in town; now it is for you to write about the country. Stay! I have blundered! I do not require you to write, but to speak of them. If we speak together, my hero, we speak about the same things; if we write, we write about different ones; I write from memory, Giovanni, and you from forgetfulness.

Now I wish I had not said that. My friend has not forgotten me because he has not forgotten himself. Look, he has already granted my prayer. Here he comes. Yes, he comes! Run to meet him, lucky feet. Embrace him, fortunate arms.

² ms habeo ad praesens.



31

Epistola genialis de heroibus

A letter about heroes written as the spirit moved^a

Marsilio Ficino to Giovanni Cavalcanti, his unique friend: greetings.

I RECEIVED a letter from Carlo Marsuppini. As soon as I began to reply and wanted to write 'Marsilio sends greetings to Carlo,' a spirit^b deflected my pen from this purpose,¹ so that I wrote 'Giovanni' instead of 'Carlo'. Receive, then, a letter, written as the spirit moved me.^c

God thought it wrong, when I was away, for me to write to anyone, before I wrote to a hero. I believe that the heavenly powers² protect heroes since, in Plato's view, heroes are born from the love of the gods.¹¹¹ And I know by direct experience that philosophers are reborn from the love of heroes.

Farewell.

1st May, 1473.

¹ ms praeter sententiam ita

² ms favere superos. Quoniam

^a genialis

^b genius

^c genialem

32

Quod gratis fit,¹ gratus est, quam quod ex debito

What is done freely is more pleasing than an act of obligation

Marsilio Ficino to Giovanni Cavalcanti, his unique friend: greetings.

THE hand could not guide the pen were it not itself moved by the soul. Marsilio could not now write to his hero were he not first so invited by his hero. But, one thing that troubles me more than anything else is that you write to me because you promised; and that I attribute to a bargain and not to love.

I desire letters of love, not of barter; or² are you really mine by contract? Because I am yours through love, I wish you to be mine through love too.

Farewell.

5th June, 1474.

¹ ms gratis fit, gratus

² ms an ne es



33

Provocatio ad scribendum

A challenge to write

Marsilio Ficino to Giovanni Cavalcanti, his unique friend: greetings.

MY FRIEND, why do we rival one another so long in silence? What gain is there for the victor in that? What loss to the vanquished? Indeed, I

heroes, Socrates and Plato, our divine guides. So let that be enough on this subject; indeed it is more than enough for now.
Farewell.



48

Negue amor sine religione, neque religio sine amore laudatur

*Love is not praised without religion, nor religion
praised without love*

Marsilio Ficino to Filippo Contromi of Lucca: greetings.

I AM sending you my book on love as I promised and also my book on religion, so that you may appreciate that my love is religious and my religion full of love. Indeed, creation is so ordered that there is no true love that is not religious, nor is there any true religion but that sustained by love.

Angelo Manetti, the son of the orator Giannozzo, and the heir to his father's virtue, sends you his greetings.



49

De tolleranda iniuria

On bearing injury

Marsilio Ficino to Giovanni Cavalcanti, his unique friend: greetings.

You say that one of your relatives felt injured the other day by the insults of some impudent people. The man who acts unjustly, Giovanni, does in-

justice to himself; for he upsets the mind and stamps it with the mark of an evil disposition. Because of his dishonourable conduct he suffers hatred, danger and misfortune. He who accepts injury receives it from himself and not from the offender. For the rational soul—which is man himself—cannot be offended unless he considers the injustice as bad for him; and this depends on our judgment. Let therefore no man blame another, but himself; for no man can be offended but by himself, and let him who complains think how he may punish himself, that is by discipline and correction, instead of hatching punishment for the offender.

Have you not seen puppies snapping at a stone that has been thrown at them, even though it has not hit them? Although they have not been hurt by the stone they hurt their teeth when they bite it. In the same way the imprudent, when kicked by a donkey, flay the animal with their fists, or rather flay themselves. Indeed, from their opinions they receive many injuries which like balls rebound against the thrower. You will perhaps say that it is difficult not to desire vengeance. But be in no doubt that if men forgive, the most just God will settle the balance a little later. What could be easier, what more glorious than reliance on God as one's Lord and avenger, and to earn as much goodness from Him by patience, as the wicked meant to inflict injury, and thus to transform evil into good? O what a precious gift forbearance is! Socrates, the wisest among the Greeks, practised this virtue alone, and Christ, the master of life, practised it above all others. Indeed, it is said that He descended amongst men virtually just for this.

Impatience should be condemned as much as patience should be praised. Apart from other things impatience disturbs the soul, erases past good, taints the present and constricts the future. One should not listen to the voice of the worthless crowd if it urges one to vengeance. What is the crowd? A kind of polypus,^[1] that is some multilegged beast without a head.

The magnanimous man in his greatness sets small value on small things. Trivial and fleeting are all temporal things, for the past is no more, the future does not yet exist and the present is indivisible; it starts and ends at the same time.

He is not strong who succumbs to injustice, but he who overcomes injustice is. For injustice to be conquered a man has to stand firm so that he is not moved from his place by its onslaught.

Read this letter to your relative and tell him to find his remedy in reason and not expect it from time. For time is a pernicious doctor and

daily misleads the sick by their hope of the future, and before he heals old sores he adds new sorrows. Thus day by day time accumulates evil and leads man to death in a fallacious hope for life. We must live today, since he who lives for tomorrow never lives. If you desire to live now, live for God, in whom yesterday and tomorrow are nothing else but today.

Farewell.

30th March, 1474.



50

De constantia adversus fortunam comparanda

On constancy in the face of fortune

Marsilio Ficino to Giovanni Cavalcanti, his unique friend: greetings.

In Plato's book *Theaetetus on Knowledge*,⁽¹⁾ Socrates strengthened his friend Theodore the Geometer to resist boldly the blows of fortune, not, as was usual, with iron arms, but with arms of gold.

'It is impossible, Theodore,' he said, 'to eradicate evils altogether, for there must always be that which opposes goodness. Amongst the gods evil cannot exist, but of necessity it surrounds¹ this mortal nature, this lower region. We must therefore endeavour to escape as quickly as possible from the latter to the former.² But by escape I mean to render ourselves, as far as we can, similar to God. Now a man is rendered like God through prudence, piety and justice.'

How this divine principle of our Plato ought to be truly understood you shall hear in a few words. Just as God, who is the Creator of our souls, also regulates them, so is the universe both the begetter and controller of our bodies. Since the soul is the son of God³ and the body is a limb of the universe, our souls are moved gently and easily by God, as though by a

¹ *ms* necessario circumlunt. Ideo

² *ms* hinc illuc quam

³ *ms* vero Dei filius

father, through the laws of providence; but our bodies are dragged by the universal body through the forces of fate, as a single particle is dragged by the total mass of which it is a part, under some violent⁴ movement. Yet the force of fate does not penetrate the mind unless the mind of its own accord has first become submerged⁵ in the body, which is subject to fate. For this reason no one ought so to trust in his own opinion and strength as to hope he may entirely avoid disease of the body and the loss of possessions. Every soul should withdraw from the encumbrance of the body and become centred in the mind, for then fate will discharge its force upon the body without touching the soul. The wise man will not struggle pointlessly with fate. He will rather resist it by flight. You cannot rout misfortune, so flee yourself. That is why Plato advises us to retreat from 'here' to 'there'—that is, from attachment to the body and involvement with worldly affairs, to the cultivation of the soul. Otherwise we cannot avoid evil.

He adds 'as quickly as possible'—I suppose for this reason, that we should from a tender age begin to separate the soul from intercourse with the body before it is submerged by daily habit. Be sure that by this escape the soul is deservedly restored to divine likeness, for it becomes like God, free from bodily taint.

Such freedom we gain principally through the three virtues of prudence, justice and piety. Prudence recognises what we owe to God and what to the world. Justice gives its due to the world, and piety its due to God. Thus the man of prudence yields his body, as a limb of the world, to the turmoil of the world wherever it happens to move it. But his soul, the offspring of God, he removes from all dealings with the body and freely commits to the guidance⁶ of divine providence.

My dearest Giovanni, if we follow this golden rule of our Plato, with the wind of heaven behind us we shall circumnavigate successfully this vast whirlpool of fortune, and, quite untroubled, sail safely into harbour. Farewell!⁽²⁾

⁴ *ms* mole violenti quodam

⁵ *ms* subiectum immerserit. Nemo

⁶ *ms* arbitrio gubernandam. Hoc



bear a price. All praise to him who has learned without reserve, and who teaches without jealousy. Whatever flows out from the pupils, flows back to the teacher. I beseech you, teach without stint. We may count our pupils as our spiritual^a sons. And if fathers beget their bodily children with pleasure, why should not teachers also beget their spiritual^a offspring with joy?

Show in yourself an example of good conduct. Purity of life engenders reverence for the teaching. The young eagerly take up the example of their elders. Those who corrupt a younger man, or indeed the mind of anyone at all, whether by words or conduct, must be held guilty of sacrilege. Finally, do according to Pythagoras⁽¹⁾ and Apollonius of Alabanda⁽²⁾ who, in the tradition of the Indian philosophers did not admit any young men to their discipline except those of fortunate birth and the best education. For it is not fit that the Muses become either ministers of wantonness or the tools of inquiry.

Farewell, and convey my good wishes to Albertino of Cremona, a true philosopher, that is, a model of learning and honesty.

^a animae



110

Cognitio et reverentia sui ipsius omnium optima

Knowledge and reverence of oneself are best of all

Marsilio Ficino speaks of mankind's salvation, which is knowledge and reverence of oneself.

KNOW yourself,⁽¹⁾ offspring of God in mortal clothing. I pray you, uncover yourself. Separate the soul from the body, reason from sensual desires; separate them as much as you can; and your ability depends on your endeavour. When the earthly grime has been removed you will at once see pure gold, and when the clouds have been dispersed, you will see

the clear sky. Then, believe me, you will revere yourself as an eternal ray of the divine sun and, moreover, you will not venture to contemplate or undertake any base or worthless action in your own presence. Nothing at all can be hidden from God, through whom alone is revealed everything that is revealed. Nothing of yours lies hidden from the mind, the everliving image of God who lives everywhere.

If the venerable countenance of a monarch of old inspires awe, you should always and everywhere reverence the wondrous presence of God, the king over all; and of mind, the queen over the body. Rightly therefore did divine Pythagoras give the instruction, 'Honour thyself'.⁽²⁾ But he who, in the presence of himself, is not ashamed to think of worthless things and suffers the soul, which is by nature divine, to serve its servant the body, and plunges this divine pearl into the mire, such a man surely seems ignorant of his own worth and has not considered that divine saying: 'Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels',⁽³⁾ and the words which follow. Again: 'I have said, Ye are gods, and all of you are children of the most High.'⁽⁴⁾ Alas most ignorant minds! Alas blind hearts! I beseech you, arise now from this deep slumber; come to yourself one day, I beg you. For if you come to yourselves you will live happily. Why have you been looking at the ground¹ for so long, divine men? Look up, citizens of the heavenly country, denizens of the earth. Man is an earthly star enveloped in a cloud; but a star is a heavenly man.

O soul, you are mighty, if² small things do not satisfy you. You are most virtuous when evil displeases you; most beautiful when you shun what is base. When you set small value on the transient you are indeed eternal. Since your nature is such, if you wish to discover yourself I pray you seek yourself where such things are. Truly the great is only found in that place where no limit is imposed; the best where no adversity reaches; the beautiful where exists no disharmony; and the eternal where there is no flaw.

Therefore seek yourself beyond the world. To do so and to come to yourself you must fly beyond the world and look back on it. For you are beyond the world while you yourself comprehend it. But you believe yourself to be in the abyss of this world simply because you do not discern yourself flying above the heavens, but see your shadow, the body, in the abyss. It is as if a boy leaning over a well were to imagine himself at the bottom, although it is only his shadow he sees reflected there, until he

¹ ins quid humi tandiu

² ms anima si te

turns³ his gaze back to himself. Or it is as if a bird flying in the air and watching its shadow were to believe it flew on the earth.

Therefore leaving behind the narrow confines of this shadow, return to yourself; for thus will you return to spaciousness. Remember that there is immeasurable space in the spirit, but in the body one could say infinite constriction. This indeed you can see from the fact that numbers, which are akin to the nature of spirit, increase without limit, but do not so diminish; whereas there is a limit to the expansion of the physical, to its contraction¹⁵ there is no limit.

³ ms alicui non convertit



III

De divinitate animi ac religione

On the divinity of the soul and on religion

Marsilio Ficino to Francesco Bandini: greetings.

WHEN others are writing to Marsilio Ficino and his Achates, Giovanni Cavalcanti, they write two letters, assuming that where they see two bodies therein must also be two wills. But Bandini, who, so to speak, has eyes like a lynx, perceiving only one, wrote a letter to only one. In his letter he calls Marsilio immortal and divine, since he does not consider the fleshly covering, but sees through to the inner man, to his very soul, which being given from God to man is immortal and divine. O Bandini, how penetrating you are; for, in one moment of insight, you perceive what first took me ten years to discover, by way of long and tortuous paths, and then five years to write about in eighteen books.¹¹ The opening of this work begins to reveal, step by step, the divine nature of the soul, which you seem to understand already. It starts with these words: 'Since Man, with his restless mind, feeble frame, and desire for everything, leads a harder life on earth than the very beasts, then, if nature were to appoint

for him exactly the same limit of life as for other creatures, no animal could have a sadder lot than he. But it is not possible that Man, who by worship of God comes nearest of all creatures to God, the source of happiness, could be the least happy of all. Therefore it is only after the death of the body that his greater happiness may be achieved; and it surely follows that when our souls leave this prison some measure of light survives.¹²

But enough of this Bandini; continue as far as you can to look at the inner nature of everything. Then you will never be deluded. Just looking at the surface reveals only shadows and dreams. The centre¹ is the pivot and substance of things.

You promise to honour us as soon as you can. Some while ago you honoured the divine Plato and his followers in magnificent style. With your promise you honour us already. For when a truthful man, such as Bandini, makes a promise, it is already fulfilled.

Farewell.

¹ ms somnia. Centrum est



III2

Consolatio in alicuius obitu

Consolation on someone's death

Marsilio Ficino speaks words of divine consolation to Antonio degli Agli, the theologian and Bishop of Volterra.

If it were appropriate to console someone who can and does console others, I would now write a letter of consolation to you on the passing of your brothers. However, I shall not console Antonio; I shall plead with him. I implore you, reverend father, by God Himself, the life of all that lives, be not so much concerned for the earthly death of your brothers, as for their heavenly life. Nor should you follow your own will so much as the divine, a ready consent to which is indeed the only duty, true wisdom

and supreme happiness. Events which are necessary and unfavourable for others become voluntary and favourable for the man who submits to the will of the universal ruler.

But how could I be so foolish as to offer medicines to Hippocrates? Physician, heal thyself, or rather entrust yourself to God's care, since you know full well that there is no remedy against the poison of earthly death except ardent love and continual contemplation of the heavenly life and the life beyond heaven.

Farewell.

28th April, 1474.

Florence.



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Contra mendaces et impios detractores

Against liars and impious slanderers

Marsilio Ficino to Bernardo Pulci:¹ greetings.

You say² that your brother is a great disgrace to you because everyone regards him as deceitful and unreliable. I cannot deny that a man is a liar who exercises a venomous tongue and pen irreverently and insolently against the divine majesty, which is truth itself. Men assert nothing more truly of him therefore than that he is a liar. But why do I not find him unreliable? Because he is so persistently reliable in his ways that he has already grown old in his unreliability and spite.

Correct your brother's faults if you can, although to cure so long-standing a disease is very difficult, and to correct so abominable a vice perhaps impossible; for that angel who is said to have fallen for rebelling only once against God never rose again. If you cannot correct them, at

¹ ms Marsilius Ficinus Bernardo Pulcio saluam

² ms *Ais fratrem*

least bear those faults patiently; for God tolerates his insults, perhaps because He knows that the man does not understand what he is talking about.

Your brother's vices do not hide your virtues, Bernardo,³ but highlight them: for your whiteness shines more brightly beside his blackness. Do not therefore be less constant yourself in good conduct than your brother is in bad, so that you may do good as successfully as he does ill.

³ ms *garric. Bernarde, non*



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Contra mendaces et impios detractores

Against liars and impious slanderers

Marsilio Ficino to the distinguished Bernardo Rucellai: greetings.

Do not be too disturbed! Bernardo, if giant Pulci² snarls ferociously at everybody. A dog barks because of his nature and habit, and a quarrelsome fellow like this only ceases to bark when he ceases to live unless, perhaps, he joins Cerberus in barking even after he is dead!

But tell me, Bernardo, how can his barking harm anyone? It even makes people more watchful and cautious; and since it is common knowledge that he always abuses the upright either from envy or dissimilarity, the man will be thought most upright whom Pulci³ has most abused. I would certainly rather be censured by the words of an unjust man than by the facts themselves; but an unjust man in fact censures anyone he praises in words, for such a man is taken to be his friend and like him.

Every man who disparages others, necessarily disparages himself first, for he is guilty of envy and slander. So far does a man degrade the tongue who uses it for evil purposes! Evil speakers may defile their mouths with

¹ ms *ninium perturbari, Bernarde*

² ms *si giges pulcius adversus*

³ ms *maxime pulcius improba verit*

curses, but we may not defile ours. If we detest bad smells, we should know that nothing smells worse than a bad mouth,⁴ and that it is more important to remove dirt from our mouths than from our clothes; foul talk is a sign of a corrupt mind. Therefore we must take great care lest we are infected by evil example. We should not care what the small-minded say of us but what men say, and less about that than what truth itself says. If something false is thrown at you, despise it, have confidence in the truth; but if it is true, turn the abuses of your enemy to your improvement. Do not turn to the idle breath of common gossip whether favourable or unfavourable. The divine soul should depend on nothing except God.

Now you are striving in vain to correct that lost soul, the giant Pulci,⁵ for the madman neither hears nor listens to reason. That wicked man will never spare good men, for he has never respected God. How can a madman, who hates God, love men who are the images of God? You ask me to correct him with whatever principles I can. You ask me to plough the sea shore. No one attacks divine matters more aggressively nor more foolishly than the little man!⁶ You ask me to correct. That Thersites⁷ should be punished rather than corrected. What an abomination, that he should with impunity discharge such invective from his venomous mouth against God! And what a mouth is this! One that was created by God for God's praise.

I need not accuse our present generation of anything, Bernardo, except that it has produced this small but evil portent.⁸ It is said that in ancient times a presumptuous war was declared by the Giants against Jupiter, but in these times a pathetic war has been declared by dwarves against the most high God.

You commend⁷ the wretched monster⁸ to my discipline. Assuredly, if he had had a brain as well as energy he would have been utterly poisonous to the human race. Hercules might have overlooked this man from contempt. Marsilio rejects him because he sinks.

Farewell and next time ask for something easier.

⁴ ms ore malum. Non tam a veste quam ab ore detergendae

⁵ ms conaris gigam pulcium

⁶ ms quod portentum istud

⁷ ms Pigmæis. Commendas meae

⁸ ms disciplinae monstrum miserabile



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*Quid est foelicitas, quod habet gradus, quod est aeterna
What happiness is; that it has degrees; that it is eternal*

Marsilio Ficino to the magnanimous Lorenzo de' Medici: greetings.

At Careggi recently, when you and I had discussed at length many aspects of happiness, we eventually arrived through reason at the same conclusion. You then perceptively discovered fresh proofs why happiness lies in the action of will rather than the action of intellect. You wanted to set down that discussion in verse, and wished me to do so in prose. You have just fulfilled your duty with an elegant poem,¹ and so, God willing, I will now carry out my task as briefly as possible.

There are reckoned to be three kinds of human good.² These are of course the benefits of fortune, of the body and of the soul. The benefits of fortune consist in wealth, honour, favour and power. And so to begin at the beginning; wealth is not the highest good, as Midas believed, for it is sought and acquired not for its own sake but for the convenience of the body and soul. Nor are honour and favour the highest good, as Augustus used to say, since they are at the discretion of another and are often not experienced by us; and very often, they are bestowed or withdrawn irrespective of merit. Nor is power the highest good, as Caesar maintained, since the more people we control, the more acutely are we harassed by worries, the more dangers we are subject to, the more men and the more business we have to serve, and the more enemies we have.

The benefits of the body consist in strength, health and beauty. Strength and health are not the supreme good, as Milo of Crotona seemed to think, for we are cast down¹ by the most trifling discomforts; nor is beauty,² so much honoured by Herillus the Sceptic. No one, however beautiful, could live content in this alone, and beauty is a benefit for others rather than for the beautiful themselves.

Some benefits belong to the irrational and others to the rational part of the soul.³ The benefits of the irrational part are the keenness of the senses and their enjoyment. Aristippus thought that the highest good lay in both of these. We believe that happiness lies in neither; not in keenness of sense,

¹ ms offensivaculis subicitur. Neque

² ms Neque enim pulchritudo, qua Scepnicus