

SEARCHING FOR THE ROUTES OF PHILOSOPHY MARSILIO FICINO ON HERACLITUS

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Abstract

Marsilio Ficino is well known for his efforts to expand the philosophical canon of his time. He exhibited great interest in Platonism and Neoplatonism, but also endeavoured to recover understudied philosophical traditions of the ancient world. In his *Theologia platonica de immortalitate animorum*, he commented on the Presocratics. Ficino thought of the Presocratics as authorities and possessors of undisputed wisdom. This article seeks to explore the way in which Ficino treated the philosophy of Heraclitus in the *Theologia platonica* in order to formulate his own philosophical ideas.

Key Words

Presocratics, Heraclitus, Ficino, Renaissance Philosophy.



During the fifteenth century, interest in Presocratic philosophy became more intense in part because of the aversion felt by early humanists towards Scholastic philosophy, but mainly due to the availability of texts and intentional return to classical philosophical thought. Fifteenth century humanists, notably Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494), reappraised the importance of Presocratic philosophy and acknowledged its influence on ancient Greek philosophy. Ficino's work could not possibly lack any references to Presocratic philosophers since the Florentine humanist attempted to broaden his philosophical scope by systematically dealing with Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophical literature. Since the *terminus technicus* 'Presocratic' was a later invention, Ficino commented at length on a number of philosophers who predated Socrates, including the Eleatics and the Pythagoreans. Furthermore, he incorporated into his understanding of Presocratic

philosophy a number of later works attributed to figures who allegedly predate Socrates – including Zoroaster, Hermes Trismegistus, and Orpheus. Ficino considered the Presocratic as authorities to whom he could resort in order to support and strengthen his positions. Moreover, in Ficino's thought, there is clearly an eternal and indestructible continuity entity in knowledge, which starts from the distant past and continues into the future.¹ Namely, Ficino holds that Plato was merely a link in a much older succession of theologians and transmitters of wisdom. The Ionian, Italic, Thracian, Egyptian and Chaldean sources shaped Platonic philosophy.²

In this article, I focus on the *Theologia Platonica de immortalitate animorum* (1482) – Ficino's *opus magnum* – so as to present and analyse the way he deals with the philosophy of Heraclitus, a leading representative of the Ionian school, in order to assess Ficino's approach to Presocratic philosophy. In this study, I will rely predominantly on the *Theologia Platonica* because in this specific book Ficino analytically presented his own philosophical views.

I must admit that Ficino referred to Heraclitus and to other Presocratic thinkers also in his other numerous commentaries and translations; but, in these cases, he primarily reacted to the references of the original author. Here, his comments lack the profundity and the originality of his arguments and insights found in the *Theologia Platonica*, where Ficino articulated his magnificent philosophical synopsis. Thus, the scattered references to the rest of the Ficinian corpus that are included in this article aim rather at the elucidation of his view on Heraclitus in the *Theologia Platonica*, and do not represent an attempt to present a complete record of Ficino's references to the Ephesian philosopher. However, omission does not indicate insignificance, for in addition to his studies, Ficino's admiration for Heraclitus is proved by the fact that he decorated his lodge at Careggi with a painting that depicted Democritus and Heraclitus, where the latter weeps over the misfortunes of humanity.³

¹ MOSHE IDEL, « Prisca Theologia in Marsilio Ficino and some Jewish Treatments », in MICHAEL J. B. ALLEN, VALERY REES, MARTIN DAVIES (eds.), *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy*, Brill, Leiden–Boston–Köln 2002 (Brill's studies in intellectual history, 108), p. 137–158; DANIEL P. WALKER, « Prisca Theologia e Philosophia Perennis: Due temi del Rinascimento italiano e loro fortuna », in GIOVANNANGIOLA TARUGI (ed.), *Il pensiero italiano di Rinascimento e il tempo nostro. Atti del V Convegno internazionale del Centro di studi umanistici. Montepulciano 8-13 agosto 1968*, Leo S. Olschki, Firenze 1970, p. 211–236.

² MICHAEL J. B. ALLEN, « Pythagoras in the Early Renaissance », in CARL A. HUFFMAN (ed.), *A History of Pythagoreanism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2014, p. 435–437, 453; CHRISTOPHER S. CELENZA, *Piety and Pythagoras in Renaissance Florence: The Symbolum Nesianum*, Brill, Leiden 2001 (Studies in the history of Christian thought, 101), p. 2–4, 16–25; DENIS J.-J. ROBICHAUD, *Plato's Persona: Marsilio Ficino, Renaissance Humanism, and Platonic Traditions*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 2018, p. 153.

³ ALBERT BLANKERT, « Heraclitus en Democritus bij Marsilio Ficino », *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, 1/3 (1966–1967), p. 128–135; EUGENIO GARIN, « The Philosopher and the

As it will be shown in this article, Heraclitus's philosophy was crucial for Ficino, because it offered to the Florentine philosopher critical concepts for his metaphysics of light and the understanding of becoming. Since this article is part of a broader research project on the reception of the Presocratics by Ficino, I focus on exemplary cases that allow the reader to draw some preliminary conclusions. In addition, I attempt to trace Ficino's possible sources and evaluate his proper knowledge, understanding, and treatment of the philosophy of Heraclitus.

The extent of his faithfulness to Heraclitus's quotes is crucial, because it provides the opportunity to understand Ficino's approach to the Presocratics. I argue that Ficino did not think of himself as a mere exegete or a commentator; rather he creatively reappraised ancient Greek philosophy so as to reinforce his own views.

I

In addition to Plato and the Neoplatonists, Ficino was interested in almost all influential ancient intellectual traditions, including magic and mysticism. Ficino's works marked a new and innovative reading of the Presocratics.

In the very first pages of the *Theologia Platonica*, there are already references to Heraclitus. More specifically, while investigating immortality, Ficino attempted to prove that, apart from the inert mass of the bodies – to which the followers of Democritus, Cyrenaics, and Epicurus restricted their thinking – there is an active quality or power towards which the Stoics and Cynics oriented their research. Furthermore, apart from this quality, which is divisible according to the dimensions of matter and is subject to all modes of change, there is a higher sort of form, which does not promote the division in the body despite being variable in some aspect. According to Ficino, the ancient theologians held that this form constitutes the seat of the rational soul.⁴ Ficino argued that a similar view is found in the works of Heraclitus, Marcus Varro, and Marcus Manilius. Lucia Saudelli argues that Ficino resorted to Heraclitus in order to substantiate his view that the soul is placed in the center of the physical universe and the metaphysical order.⁵

Magus », in EUGENIO GARIN (ed.), *Renaissance Characters*, trans. LYDIA G. COCHRANE, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1991, p. 125; PAUL O. KRISTELLER, *Marsilio Ficino and His Work after Five Hundred Years*, Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1987 (Istituto nazionale di studi sul Rinascimento. Quaderni di Rinascimento, 7), p. 11; JOHN L. LEPAGE, *The Revival of Antique Philosophy in the Renaissance*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2012, p. 106.

⁴ MARSILIUS FICINUS. *Theologia Platonica*, I.1.2 (= MARSILIO FICINO, *Platonic Theology*, ed. JAMES HANKINS and trans. MICHAEL J. B. ALLEN, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2001); CHRISTIAN K. KLEINBUB, *Vision and the Visionary in Raphael*; Penn State Press, University Park, PA 2011, p. 65–66.

⁵ LUCIA SAUDELLI, « Lux sicca Marsile Ficin exegete d'Héraclite », *Accademia*, 10 (2008), p. 38.

According to Michael J. B. Allen and James Hankins,⁶ Ficino's position was based on Aristotle's *De Anima*.⁷ In Aristotle's text, Heraclitus seems to argue that the soul flows and moves. According to Ficino, this movement was interpreted as a kind of change. It is important to clarify here that the Aristotelian text refers to the soul and not to the Heraclitean Logos (Λόγος), which is a concept that could be interpreted as a unifying or symmetrical arrangement of things, but also as a real component of physical objects that has the same area of application as the primary cosmic element, namely fire.⁸

Ficino continued along the same lines. Specifically, he stated that the essence of the rational soul remains unchanged, which can be proved by stability of memory and the will. However, the soul practically tends to change because it thinks everything over gradually and not instantaneously. The same happens with its contribution to the growth of the body: physical power remains unchanged because it grows constantly neither being able to increase nor to disappear. Nonetheless, acquired power changes because it is moved from potentiality to actuality, and from actuality to habit, and so on. Once more, Ficino considered this to be the position of Heraclitus, Marcus Terentius Varro (116–127 BC), and Marcus Manilius (1st century AD).⁹

Heraclitus actually thought that the soul is mutable since it originates from humidity, falls into fire in its proper functioning and ends as liquid in the phase of its decline. In addition, the soul moves within the body. According to Heraclitus, the human intellect should be located in the soul.¹⁰ However, a more careful study of Ficino's text shows that the Florentine philosopher does not faithfully interpret Heraclitus's views. In particular, Ficino understands Heraclitus's soul as the seat of

⁶ FICINO, *Platonic Theology*, p. 323.

⁷ ARISTOTELES, *De anima*, 405a28–31: καὶ Ἡράκλειτος δὲ τὴν ἀρχὴν εἶναι φησι ψυχὴν, εἴπερ τὴν ἀναθυμίασιν, ἐξ ἧς τὰλλα συνίστησιν· καὶ ἀσωματώτατόν τε καὶ βέον ἀεὶ τὸ δὲ κινούμενον κινουμένῳ γινώσκεισθαι· ἐν κινήσει δ' εἶναι τὰ ὄντα κάκεινος ᾤετο καὶ οἱ πολλοί.

⁸ THEODOROS CHRISTIDIS, DEMETRIUS ATHANASSAKIS, « On Heraclitus' Concept of Λόγος », *Philosophical Inquiry*, 32 (2010), p. 61–71; ARISTOTELES, *Physics Book VIII*, ed. DANIEL W. GRAHAM, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1999, p. 66–67, 155; GEOFFREY S. KIRK, JOHN E. RAVEN, MALCOM SCHOFIELD, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995, p. 204; ADAM DROZDEK, *Greek Philosophers as Theologians: The Divine Arche*, Ashgate, Aldershot 2007, p. 31–32; RONALD POLANSKY, *Aristotle's De Anima: A Critical Commentary*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007, p. 79; KEVIN ROBB, « Psyche and Logos in the Fragments of Heraclitus », *The Monist*, 69 (1986), p. 315–351; THOMAS M. ROBINSON, « Heraclitus on Soul », *The Monist*, 69 (1986), p. 305–314; Id., « Heraclitus and Logos – again », *ΣΧΟΛΗ: Ancient Philosophy and The Classical Tradition*, 7 (2013), p. 318–326.

⁹ FICINUS, *Theologia Platonica*, I.5.1.

¹⁰ ARYEH FINKELBERG, *Heraclitus and Thales' Conceptual Scheme: A Historical Study*, Brill, Leiden–Boston 2017 (Jerusalem Studies in Religion and Culture, 23), p. 84–125; GEOFFREY S. KIRK, *Heraclitus: The Cosmic Fragments*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1954, p. 339–342; GABOR BETEGH, « On the Physical Aspect of Heraclitus' Psychology », *Phronesis*, 52 (2007), p. 3–32.

rational soul, not as the soul *per se*, as Heraclitus had suggested.¹¹ Furthermore, according to Ficino, the angelic mind – which is the only mind, which remains unchanged – exists beyond the rational soul.

Heraclitus does not understand the Logos according to the Neoplatonic way in which Ficino understands the rational soul or the angelic mind. It is a matter of one concept with different semantic content; indeed the Logos may even constitute the composing element of material things. On the other hand, Heraclitus's soul – which has no limits – cannot be separated from the human mind.¹² Thus, Ficino's interpretation is not entirely consistent with Heraclitus's philosophy.

Furthermore, Ficino resorted to Heraclitus on other different topics related to the soul.¹³ In particular, Ficino used Heraclitus's quote: *ἀύγη ξηρή, ψυχή σοφωτάτη*.¹⁴ Ficino's translation is: « dry light, the wisest soul » (*Lux sicca, anima sapientissima*). It is worth noting that Ficino does not reproduce the most common variations¹⁵ of the Heraclitean quote (*ἀύγη ξηρή ψυχή σοφωτάτη καὶ ἀρίστη* and *αὕη ψυχή σοφωτάτη καὶ ἀρίστη*)¹⁶ and draws instead from the Neoplatonist Hermias (5th cent. AD), namely, the only author who separates the phrase with a comma and presents a shorter variation of the quote.¹⁷ The Florentine Platonist prefers the same translation (*Lux sicca, anima sapientissima*) of the Heraclitean passage in his *De vita libri tres* (1489).¹⁸

¹¹ MARK JOHNSTONE, « On 'Logos' in Heraclitus », in BRAD INWOOD (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, vol. XLVII, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014, p. 18–19.

¹² PAUL S. MACDONALD, *History of the Concept of Mind*, vol. I: *Speculations About Soul, Mind and Spirit from Homer to Hume*, Routledge, Abington 2017, p. 28–35; GIANNIS STAMATELOS, *Plotinus and the Presocratics: A Philosophical Study of Presocratic Influences in Plotinus' Enneads*, State University of New York Press, Albany 2012 (SUNY Series in Ancient Greek Philosophy), p. 174.

¹³ FICINUS, *Theologia Platonica*, VI.2.20.

¹⁴ DK12 B118.

¹⁵ ROBERT B. ENGLISH, « Heraclitus and the Soul », *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, 44 (1913), p. 176–177. The Byzantine scholar Michael Glykas (12th century) gives a different version of the Heraclitean quote: *ψυχή ξηροτέρη σοφωτέρη*. SERGE MOURAVIEV, *Héraclite d'Éphèse. La tradition antique et médiévale*, vol. IV: *De Maxime le Confesseur à Marsilio Ficino*, Academia Verlag, Sankt Augustin 2003 (Heraclitea. 2: Traditio. A. Témoignages et citations), p. 826.

¹⁶ SAUDELLI, « *Lux sicca* », p. 32.

¹⁷ HERMIAS, *In Platonis Phaedrum scholia*, 1.29.28; MICHAEL J. B. ALLEN, « Two commentaries on the Phaedrus: Ficino's indebtedness to Hermias », *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 43 (1980), p. 110–129; ID., « The Soul as Rhapsode: Marsilio Ficino's Interpretation of Plato's Ion », in JOHN W. O'MALLEY, THOMAS M. IZBICKI, GERALD CHRISTIANSON (eds.), *Humanity and Divinity in Renaissance and Reformation: Essays in Honor of Charles Trinkaus*, Brill, Leiden 1993 (Studies in the History of Christian Thought, 51), p. 132; ANNE SHEPPARD, « The Influence of Hermias on Marsilio Ficino's Doctrine of Inspiration », *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 43 (1980), p. 97–109.

¹⁸ MARSILIO FICINO, *Three Books on Life*, I.5, ed. CAROL V. KASKE, JOHN R. CLARK, Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, Tempe, AZ 1998 (Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 57), p. 74–75.

According to the vast majority of the ancient scholars who commented on Heraclitus' quote, the Ephesian philosopher intended to show that the dry soul is the wisest and best. It is obvious that Ficino's view on Heraclitus is mediated by the approach of the Neoplatonists. Nevertheless, Ficino's aim here is to prove that souls exist in heavenly orbits and are enclosed spheres of light. Thus, Ficino misinterprets Heraclitus's philosophy, following Hermias's, Galen's and Macrobius's interpretation of the Heraclitean quote.¹⁹

The Greek philosopher argued that the dry soul is the wisest and the best, and likewise the burning soul is capable and active. The liquid soul loses much of its ability.²⁰ Conversely, Ficino puts Heraclitus's position in the frame of a Neoplatonic type of metaphysics of light. In particular, he claims that nothing offers more pleasure to the soul than light. Even during its dwelling on earth, it craves the light of spiritual beings.

Ficino's inaccurate interpretation of the specific passage from Heraclitus is repeated later when Ficino states that, according to Orpheus's disciples and to Heraclitus, « light is nothing else than the visible soul (all things return to life because of this) and the soul is invisible light ».²¹ This particular argument is used by Ficino to prove the invariance of the mind. Once more, Ficino interprets Heraclitus's passage with a very loose and inaccurate way in order to adapt it to what he desired to support.

While Allen and Hankins believe that, at this point, Ficino freely reproduces the aforementioned passage from Aristotle's *De Anima*,²² there is another possible interpretation. Since Ficino refers, in the same paragraph, to the spiritual, intangible sunlight, which originates from the soul of the sun, it is likely that the connection that Ficino is trying to make to Heraclitus's philosophy comes from the passage from Diogenes Laertius where the soul is attributed to the sun.²³ Similarly,

¹⁹ SAUDELLI, « *Lux sicca* », p. 32–33.

²⁰ JONATHAN BARNES, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, Routledge, London–New York 1982, p. 43–62; FINKELBERG, *Heraclitus and Thales*, p. 85–87; CHARLES H. KAHN, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1981, p. 245–246; RICHARD D. MCKIRAHAN, *Philosophy Before Socrates: An Introduction with Texts and Commentary*, Hackett Publishing, Indianapolis–Cambridge 2011, p. 139–141; MARTHA NUSSBAUM, « Psychê in Heraclitus », *Phronesis*, 17 (1972), p. 1–16, 153–70; Heraclitus, *Fragments, A Text and Translation with a Commentary*, ed. THOMAS M. ROBINSON, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 1991, p. 158–159.

²¹ FICINUS. *Theologia Platonica*, VIII.13.1.

²² ARISTOTELES. *De anima*, 405a28–31.

²³ DK12 A1 56.12–13: ὅτι τε ὁ ἥλιός ἐστι τὸ μέγεθος οἷος φαίνεται. λέγεται δὲ καὶ ἄψυχός [...]. ἔχει ALEXANDER MOURELATOS, *The Pre-Socratics: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2014, p. 223–224. Ficino, in *De sole*, supported that Heraclitus called the sun fountain of celestial light (cf. Marsilio Ficino, *Liber de sole et lumine*, VI, Antonio di Bartolommeo Miscomini, Florence 1493).

the distinction that Ficino attempts to make between the immaterial and material light is attributed to Heraclitus by Clement of Alexandria.²⁴

Saudelli maintains that although Ficino draws from pre-Platonic sources, he interprets them through the lens of Christian Platonism so to establish his « psychology of the light ». ²⁵ It is well known that the Light is a key concept of Ficino's metaphysics. Heraclitus's views on the soul enable the Florentine philosopher to explain the diffusion of light in the created universe within the broader context of his theology.

Later on, dealing with Plato's positions on the soul, Ficino asserts that the Athenian philosopher expressed truths related to the soul. However, the way Plato interpreted the paths of the soul was poetic and metaphorical, and hence the true meaning, hidden behind the words, must be sought. Indeed, Ficino notes that Plato was not the one who conceived these paths; rather, he simply reproduced them. The first ones to speak about the soul's paths were the Egyptian priests who defined them through the process of the purification of the soul. Orpheus, Empedocles, and Heraclitus held similar views, in a poetic and lyrical way.²⁶

According to Heraclitus's philosophy, the soul constitutes the vehicle of personal identity and character, and it is the center that coordinates people's thoughts and actions. In fact, the soul constitutes the essence of man. Death cannot exist as a permanent condition. Instead, it is an instantaneous phase in an ultimate limit of the cycle. Life and death are the same since, when these change, others happen and when other change, these happen, as Heraclitus characteristically states.²⁷ Death could mean the advanced decay of the body and mind, even in case the human being has not actually died. On the contrary, the kind of death that occurs heroically in the peak of life is not thought of as death because the soul continues to exist in an excellent condition. The corpse – a body without a soul – has absolutely no value and is equated with compost.²⁸ According to Heraclitus, the soul is simultaneously mortal and immortal; also, it is continuously subject to death and can get back to life at any time.²⁹ Consequently, Ficino's interpretation

²⁴ CLEMENS ALEXANDRINUS. *Paedagogus*, II.10.99.5.: *Λήσεται μὲν γὰρ ἴσως τὸ αἰσθητὸν φῶς τις, τὸ δὲ νοητὸν ἀδύνατον ἔστιν, ἢ ὡς φησιν Ἡράκλειτος: τὸ μὴ δύνόν ποτε πῶς ἂν τις λάθοι;* JAAP MANSFELD, « On Two Fragments of Heraclitus in Clement of Alexandria », *Mnemosyne*, 37 (1984), p. 447–451.

²⁵ SAUDELLI, « *Lux Sicca* », p. 39–41.

²⁶ FICINUS. *Theologia Platonica*, XVII.4.1; DK12 A15 ARIST. *De anima* A 2. 405a 24: *καὶ Ἡ. δὲ τὴν ἀρχὴν εἶναί φησι ψυχὴν* (wie Diogenes 64 A 20), *εἴπερ τὴν ἀναθυμίασιν* [B 12], *ἐξ ἧς τᾶλλα συνίστησιν.* MACROB. *S. Scip.* 14, 19 (*animam*) *H. physicus scintillam stellaris essentiae.* ΑἸΤ. IV 3, 12 (D. 389) *Ἡ. τὴν μὲν τοῦ κόσμου ψυχὴν ἀναθυμίασιν ἐκ τῶν ἐν αὐτῷ ὑγρῶν, τὴν δὲ ἐν τοῖς ζώοις ἀπὸ τῆς ἐκτός καὶ τῆς ἐν αὐτοῖς ἀναθυμιάσεως, ὁμογενῆ.*

²⁷ DK12 B88: *Ε ταῦτό τ' ἔνι ζῶν καὶ τεθνηκός καὶ [τὸ] ἐγγηγορός καὶ καθεῦδον καὶ νέον καὶ γηραιόν· τάδε γὰρ μεταπεσόντα ἐκεῖνά ἐστι κάκεῖνα πάλιν μεταπεσόντα ταῦτα.*

²⁸ DK12 B96: *νέκυες γὰρ κοπρίων ἐκβλητότεροι.*

²⁹ DK12 B62: *ἀθάνατοι θνητοί, θνητοὶ ἀθάνατοι, ζῶντες τὸν ἐκείνων θάνατον, τὸν δὲ ἐκείνων βίον τεθνεῶτες.*

is designated to the side that relates Heraclitus's philosophy to Plato's concerning the immortality of the soul. Of course, all these are in the broader context of the philosophical thought of Heraclitus and Plato, since, in the details, their opinions do not coincide with Ficino's.

Ficino seems to differ again from the ancient sources, since he claims that Heraclitus's poetic mood, in his works, is more efficient. This is not correct, since Heraclitus – unlike Empedocles and Parmenides – does not seem to articulate his philosophy in verse form. Moreover, it is well known that Heraclitus had repeatedly disputed the poets.³⁰

On the topic of the invisibly articulated and allusive philosophy of Heraclitus, Ficino follows the ancient sources. Particularly, Diogenes Laertius, Timon Phliasius and Cicero³¹ referred, among many others, to Heraclitus's secrecy since his aim was that powerful and influential people understand his work, not the mob.

Nonetheless, the indirect association of Heraclitus with the Egyptian priests and Orpheus is interesting. This demonstrates that Ficino thought of Heraclitus as a mystic and continuer of hidden religious currents of the popular Greek religion.³²

II

Apart from psychology, Ficino regarded Heraclitus as a valuable ally to prove that the mind is the subject of eternal truth and connects to an eternal object, accepting the immaterial kind and the eternal rational principles. This view of Ficino was based on the volatility of the natural world. In particular, Ficino held that the starry night sky fills a stream with the images of its stars reflected on water. Even though the ignorant ones considered that the images of the stars remain unchanged in water, they were actually continuously renewed as the water changes. Similarly, God, congested with Ideas, emanates images of his Ideas in constantly changing matter. According to the Platonists,³³ these Ideas remain simply images, and not true species, although some natural philosophers believe

³⁰ GLENN MOST, « What Ancient Quarrel between Philosophy and Poetry? », in PIERRE DESTRIÉE, FRITZ-GREGOR HERRMANN (eds.), *Plato and the Poets*, Brill, Leiden 2011 (Mnemosyne. Supplementum, 328), p. 5.

³¹ CICERO, *De Finibus*, II.15: « quod duobus modis sine reprehensione fit, si aut de industria facias, ut Heraclitus, 'cognomento qui skoteinpw perhibetur, quia de natura nimis obscure memoravit', aut cum rerum obscuritas, non verborum, facit ut non intellegatur oratio, qualis est in Timaeo Platonis »; DK12 A1, 54.42–55.4: τὸ δὲ φερόμενον αὐτοῦ βιβλίον ἐστὶ μὲν ἀπὸ τοῦ συνέχοντος Περὶ φύσεως, διήρηται δὲ εἰς τρεῖς λόγους, εἷς τε τὸν περὶ τοῦ παντός καὶ πολιτικὸν καὶ θεολογικόν. ἀνέθηκε δ' αὐτὸ εἰς τὸ τῆς Ἀρτέμιδος ἱερόν, ὡς μὲν τινες, ἐπιτηδεύσας ἀσαφέστερον γράψαι, ὅπως οἱ δυνάμενοι <μόνοι> προσίοιεν αὐτῶι καὶ μὴ ἐκ τοῦ δημόδου εὐκαταφρόνητον ἦι. τοῦτον δὲ καὶ ὁ Τίμων [fr. 43 D.] ὑπογράφει λέγων· 'τοῖς δ' ἔνι κοκκυστῆς ὄχλολοῖδορος Ἡράκλειτος αἰνικτῆς ἀνόρουσε.

³² Censorinus (3rd c. AD) also connected Heraclitus to Orpheus. Cf. KIRK, *Heraclitus*, 300.

³³ DIONYSIUS PSEUDO AREOPAGITA, *De divinis nominibus*, 869D.

that they are true species.³⁴ Ficino resorts to Heraclitus so as to prove that even these images do not remain constant; rather, they constantly change since matter – despite the beliefs of the ignorant ones – constantly changes.³⁵

A few paragraphs later Ficino returns to the same subject.³⁶ Specifically, Ficino claims that, according to Heraclitus, we cannot pass through the same water of a river twice or similarly touch the same place of a moving wheel; thus, the disposition of the body does not remain stable from one moment to another.³⁷ Ficino cites Plutarch³⁸ and Proclus³⁹ as proponents of this view. In Allen and Hankins's edition, it is wrongly indicated that Ficino copies at this point from Plato's *Cratylus*⁴⁰ and *Theaetetus*⁴¹ where the famous view of Heraclitus is explained. Ficino's wording, associated with Heraclitus's philosophy, suggests that we cannot enter twice in the same waters, but we can enter twice in the same river. The river will be the same while the waters will have changed. According to Daniel W. Graham's interpretation of the passages A6, B12, B49a and B91a from Heraclitus, some things can remain the same while changing. Had the water of the river not changed, it would no longer be a river, but a lake.⁴² This interpretation leads us to a more careful reading, which demonstrates that not only does Ficino base his wordings on Plato's *Cratylus*, but also on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.⁴³

Initially, Ficino differs from Plato's *Cratylus* not only in the syntax, but also in what refers to the water of the river and not to the river itself. Plato uses the optative mood, namely potential optative, which indicates the possible. Conversely, Aristotle chooses a syntax – verb and infinitive – where absolute certainty is highlighted. Ficino follows Aristotle's syntax (*non possumus bis intrare*). In his own version, Aristotle argues that, according to the fifth-century philosopher Cratylus, you cannot enter even once into the same river, while Plato, in the dialogue *Cratylus*, holds that you cannot enter into the same river twice,

³⁴ FICINUS. *Theologia Platonica*, XI.4.15.

³⁵ PLATO. *Cratylus*, 402a8–10: λέγει που Ἡράκλειτος ὅτι “πάντα χωρεῖ καὶ οὐδὲν μένει,” καὶ ποταμοῦ ῥοῆ ἀπεικάζων τὰ ὄντα λέγει ὡς “δὶς ἐς τὸν αὐτὸν ποταμὸν οὐκ ἂν ἐμβαίης”.

³⁶ FICINUS. *Theologia Platonica*, XI.6.4

³⁷ FICINO, *Platonic Theology*, vol. III, p. 301.

³⁸ PLUTARCHUS. *De E apud Delphos*, 392b7–c1: ποταμῶ γὰρ οὐκ ἔστιν ἐμβῆναι δις τῷ αὐτῷ καθ' Ἡράκλειτον οὐδὲ θνητῆς οὐσίας δις ἄψασθαι κατὰ ἕξιν· ἀλλ' ὀξύτητι καὶ τάχει μεταβολῆς σκίδνησι καὶ πάλιν συνάγει, μᾶλλον δ' οὐδὲ πάλιν οὐδ' ὕστερον ἀλλ' ἅμα συνίσταται καὶ ἀπολείπει καὶ πρόσσεισι καὶ ἄπεισιν.

³⁹ PROCLUS. *In Platonis Cratylum commentaria*, 142.1–11.

⁴⁰ PLATO. *Cratylus*, 402a8–10.

⁴¹ PLATO. *Theaetetus*, 160d6–8: κατὰ μὲν Ὅμηρον καὶ Ἡράκλειτον καὶ πᾶν τὸ τοιοῦτον φύλον οἷον ρεύματα κινεῖσθαι τὰ πάντα.

⁴² DANIEL W. GRAHAM, « Heraclitus », *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2011 Edition), E. N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/heraclitus/>> (Accessed October 2018).

⁴³ ARISTOTELES. *Metaphysica*, 1010a13–15: ἀλλὰ τὸν δάκτυλον ἐκίνει μόνον, καὶ Ἡρακλείτῳ ἐπετίμα εἰπόντι ὅτι δις τῷ αὐτῷ ποταμῷ οὐκ ἔστιν ἐμβῆναι· αὐτὸς γὰρ ᾤετο οὐδ' ἄπαξ.

without making reference to the water of the river. Ficino copies the syntax of Aristotle, but departs conceptually from both Aristotle and Plato. Plutarch, whom Ficino mentions, also follows the syntax of Aristotle.⁴⁴

Moreover, a byzantine *Scholion in Plutarchum* follows the interpretation of Heraclitus's quote, according to which we cannot enter twice the same river.⁴⁵ It is worth noting that Ficino's view is in agreement with the author of the *Scholion in Georgium Pachymerem*, who claims that, according to Heraclitus, we cannot put our finger twice into the same water of a river.⁴⁶ Thomas Aquinas, from his part, supports that « Heraclitus dixit quod non est possibile aquam fluvii currentis bis tangere ». ⁴⁷ Furthermore, in his *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics* Aquinas presents a slightly different version of the Heraclitean quote, which lies closer to the Ficinian version: « non potest homo bis intrare in eodem flumine, quia antequam intret secundo, aqua quae erat fluminis iam defluserat ». ⁴⁸ In the fourteenth century, also Petrarch comments on Heraclitus passage. His translation is: « in ipsum flumen bis descendimus et non descendimus ». Petrarch resorts to Seneca's comments in order to hold that the river is the same, while the water has changed.⁴⁹

Several scholars⁵⁰ think it is very likely that Aristotle's variation, the syntax of which Ficino follows, is not necessarily based on the version of Plato's *Cratylus*; rather, it is based on the same source of the version of Arius Didymus, a Stoic philosopher of the first century BC, as it was delivered to us by Eusebius (260/65–339/40) in *Evangelical Preparation*.⁵¹ The Platonic version of the sentence indicates that the river is not the same for two consecutive moments and everything in nature resembles the river, since everything is in constantly flux. In the wording of Arius Didymus, the river is the same, but different. The wording of Arius Didymus is consistent with other passages from Heraclitus where the philosopher supports the concurrence of opposites. However, even from a literature point of view, the version of Arius Didymus seems more authentic. The versions of Plato and Arius Didymus lead to the conclusion that Heraclitus meant that the world remains the same while its constituent parts change incessantly.⁵²

⁴⁴ PLUTARCHUS. *De E apud Delphos*, 392b8: "ποταμῶ γὰρ οὐκ ἔστιν ἐμβῆναι δις τῶ αὐτῶ" καθ' Ἡράκλειτον.

⁴⁵ MOURAVIEV, *Héraclite*, p. 884.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 889.

⁴⁷ THOMAS DE AQUINO. *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 84, art. 1 and 3.

⁴⁸ *Id.* In *Arist. Metaph. Expos.* IV.12, 684.

⁴⁹ MOURAVIEV, *Héraclite*, p. 945–948.

⁵⁰ KIRK, *Heraclitus*, p. 366–384; LEONARDO TARÁN, « Heraclitus: The River Fragments and Their Implications », *Elenchos*, 20 (1999), p. 9–52.

⁵¹ DK12 B12: ποταμοῖσι τοῖσιν αὐτοῖσιν ἐμβαίνουσιν ἕτερα καὶ ἕτερα ὕδατα ἐπιρρεῖ.

⁵² BARNES, *The Presocratic*, p. 49–52; FRANCESCO FRONTEROTTA, « Heraclitus, the Becoming and the Platonic-Aristotelian Doxography », *Archai: Revista de Estudos Sobre as Origens Do Pensamento Ocidental*, 15 (2015), p. 117–128; DANIEL W. GRAHAM, « Heraclitus: Flux, Order, and Knowledge », in

From his side, Ficino argues that, within temporality, the heavens continue moving forward without stopping although the super-celestials remain unchanged in their eternity. According to Ficino, since the heavenly order does not remain constant, the same phenomenon is observed with a greater intensity in the sublunary world under the influence of the heavens. Consequently, the location of the body can never remain exactly the same or similar as time goes by. Therefore, one quality said to exist, could at the same time been said not to exist. It switches instantly from non-being to non-being. Since time is running faster than language and thought, at the time when something is said, it exists and does not exist. Therefore, change and becoming, in the manner described above, seem to actually exist and not exist.

The rest of Ficino's argument proves that the Italian philosopher deals with the views of the philosopher Cratylus, whose interpretation Aristotle reproduces in his *Metaphysics*. The former had argued that the continuous flow was associated also with the language that made communication difficult.⁵³ In other words, Cratylus did endorse an early form of skepticism, which Ficino does not seem to accept. It is clear then that Cratylus's view misinterprets and distorts Heraclitus's philosophy. In fact, Ficino approaches, without probably realizing it, the deeper meaning of the philosophy of Heraclitus who does not challenge the senses at any point in the rest of his surviving or attributable work; rather, he considers their cooperation with the mind as necessary for the formation of knowledge. Heraclitus appears to argue that he prefers what is learnt by sight and hearing, and that people, who seek wisdom, must investigate many things.⁵⁴ Human experience cannot be exceeded.⁵⁵

In reality, Ficino distances himself, on this point, from Plato's reading of Heraclitus's philosophy in the *Cratylus*. Ficino is closer, than anyone before him, to the authentic and unmediated ontology of the Ephesian. Heraclitus argued that everything is an eternal fire and everything ends up in fire through visible but not real changes, as demonstrated by Jonathan Barnes.⁵⁶ The world as a whole is a huge

PATRICIA CURD, DANIEL W. GRAHAM (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Presocratic Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, New York 2008, p. 169–188; MARY M. MACKENZIE, « Heraclitus and the Art of Paradox », in JULIA ANNAS (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, vol. VI, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1988, p. 1–37; DAVID G. STERN, « Heraclitus' and Wittgenstein's River Images: Stepping Twice into the Same River », *The Monist*, 74 (1991), p. 579–604.

⁵³ PLATO. *Cratylus*, 435d–440e; BRIAN CALVERT, « Forms and Flux in Plato's *Cratylus* », *Phronesis*, 15 (1970), p. 26–47; BERNARD WILLIAMS, « Cratylus' theory of names and its refutation », in MALCOM SCHOFIELD, MARTHA NUSSBAUM (eds.), *Language and Logos*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2009, p. 83–93.

⁵⁴ DK12 B35.

⁵⁵ DK12 B3, B102; EDWARD HUSSEY, « Heraclitus », in ANTHONY A. LONG (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999 (Cambridge Companions to Philosophy), p. 93–94.

⁵⁶ BARNES, *The Presocratic*, p. 45–48.

fire whose parts are switched on, while others respectively are switched off, such as the entire fire does not burn simultaneously.⁵⁷ Not only does the fire ensure the contrast of the opposites, but it also ensures their unity through competition. The other cosmic composing elements, namely water, air, the ethereal fire and earth, are considered as forms of fire – *πυρός τροπαί* – as Heraclitus puts it.⁵⁸ In *De Caelo*, Aristotle expresses in the strongest possible way Heraclitus's view that, while other things are in the process of creation and flow and no one subsists in one specific way, only one thing continues to exist as a substrate and all the other things undergo its natural reconstitution.⁵⁹ Logos never changes; it is eternal because changes do not disrupt the overall ratio, and the Logos is closely related to the fire. Across the range of secular change, one quantity of equivalent fire remains continually alive. Heraclitus tried to discern the way with which people perceive things by their true nature; Ficino attempted to do exactly the same.

III

Furthermore, Ficino dealt with the life of Heraclitus.⁶⁰ Namely, he asserted that Heraclitus, like many other great philosophers, had tendencies of seclusion. In particular, he abandoned civic life due to the intensity of his study. Ficino presented his own version of the story, which is entirely different from that of Diogenes Laertius whose work is the most important and extensive source available about Heraclitus's life and philosophical teachings. Diogenes Laertius explains his departure because of his aversion of the politically organized life in Ephesus and of people in general.⁶¹ Ficino deliberately misinterprets Diogenes Laertius's report in order to support his general argument on the Greek philosophers and their aversion to the material life. I could argue that Ficino interprets Heraclitus in correspondence to the testimonies of Neoplatonists from the life of Plotinus and other proponents of this stream.

⁵⁷ DK12 B30.

⁵⁸ DK12 B31, B90; RICHARD NEELS, «Elements and Opposites in Heraclitus», *Apeiron*, 4 (2018), Retrieved 18 Oct. 2018, from doi:10.1515/apeiron-2017-0029.

⁵⁹ ARISTOTELES. *De caelo*, 298b29–32: Οἱ δὲ τὰ μὲν ἄλλα πάντα γίνεσθαι φασὶ καὶ ρεῖν, εἶναι δὲ παγίως οὐθέν, ἔν δέ τι μόνον ὑπομένειν, ἐξ οὗ τὰ ἅπαντα μετασχηματίζεσθαι πέφυκεν· ὅπερ εἰκόσαι βούλεσθαι λέγειν ἄλλοι τε πολλοὶ καὶ Ἡράκλειτος ὁ Ἐφεσῖος.

⁶⁰ FICINUS. *Theologia Platonica*, XIII.2.2.

⁶¹ DIOGENES LAERTIUS. *Vitae Philosophorum*, 9.3: κεκρατήσθαι τῇ πονηρᾷ πολιτείᾳ τὴν πόλιν. ἀναχωρήσας δ' εἰς τὸ ἱερόν τῆς Ἀρτέμιδος μετὰ τῶν παίδων ἡστραγάλιζε· περιστάντων δ' αὐτὸν τῶν Ἐφεσίων, “τί, ὦ κάκιστοι, θαυμάζετε;”, εἶπεν· “ἢ οὐ κρείττον τοῦτο ποιεῖν ἢ μεθ' ὑμῶν πολιτεύεσθαι;” Καὶ τέλος μισανθρωπήσας καὶ ἐκπατήσας ἐν τοῖς ὄρεσι διητᾶτο, πόας σιτούμενος καὶ βοτάνας. καὶ μέντοι καὶ διὰ τοῦτο περιτραπεῖς εἰς ὕδρον κατῆλθεν εἰς ἄστου καὶ τῶν ἰατρῶν αἰνιγματωδῶς ἐπυνθάνετο εἰ δύναϊντο ἐξ ἐπομβρίας ἀχύμῶν ποιῆσαι· τῶν δὲ μὴ συνιέντων, αὐτὸν εἰς βούστασιν κατορύξας τῇ τῶν βολίτων ἀλέᾳ ἤλπισεν ἐξατμισθῆσεσθαι. οὐδὲν δ' ἀνύων οὐδ' οὕτως, ἐτελεύτα βιοῦς ἔτη ἐξήκοντα.

Moreover, Ficino argues that many people who excel in some art are melancholic by their nature, like Heraclitus, Aristotle and Chryssipus or they become so, like Democritus, Zeno of Citium, Avempace the Arab and Averroes.⁶² Ficino's source is a passage from Diogenes Laertius.⁶³ It is clear that Ficino misinterprets once more. Following Aristotle's interpretation of the word melancholy, Theophrastus does not grant it the meaning intended by Ficino.⁶⁴ When referring to melancholy, Aristotle and Theophrastus mean impulsivity, which Heraclitus understood as such.⁶⁵

IV

In conclusion, it is worth noting that Ficino resorted to Heraclitus in order to renew and enrich his philosophy. In this endeavor, he resorted mainly to Neoplatonic commentaries and Diogenes Laertius. His predilection for Hermias's version of the Heraclitean passage on the soul is indicative. Furthermore, Ficino interpreted the philosophy of Heraclitus through a Neoplatonic lens, because he wished to have his Platonism vindicated. He used the Presocratics as authority, as sages of the ancient world who confirmed his philosophy, something that exuded a strong flavor of Platonism and Neoplatonism. As a result, Ficino's philosophical insights on Heraclitus are partial as he missed the chance to evaluate Heraclitus's thought *per se*. Although Ficino had the opportunity to examine in depth ancient philosophical traditions and offer new interpretations that would have advance philosophical discussions, – as it is demonstrated by his comments on Heraclitus and Cratylus – he was not always interested in such an endeavor. Going as far as justifying his own Platonism through authority of the Presocratics was more than enough for him. Pico della Mirandola would only come later to make the first attempts to incorporate Presocratic thought in a concrete philosophy.

⁶² FICINUS. *Theologia Platonica*, XIV.10.5; Ficino commented on Heraclitus's alleged melancholy also in his letters (cf. LEPAGE, *The Revival*, p. 106–107).

⁶³ DIOGENES LAERTIUS. *Vitae Philosophorum*, 9.6.4–9: τοῦτον δὲ καὶ ὁ Τίμων ὑπογράφει λέγων τοῖς δ' ἔνι κοκκυστῆς, ὀχλολοῖδος Ἡράκλειτος, αἰνικτῆς ἀνόρουσε. Θεόφραστος δὲ φησιν ὑπὸ μελαγχολίας τὰ μὲν ἡμιτελῆ, τὰ δ' ἄλλοτε ἄλλως ἔχοντα γράψαι.

⁶⁴ JAMES HANKINS, « 'Major Melancholy': Ficino and the Physiological Cause of Atheism », *Rinascimento*, 47 (2007), p. 3–23.

⁶⁵ ARISTOTELES. *Ethica Nicomachea*, 1150b25.

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