MEDITATIONS
ON THE
SOUL

SELECTED
LETTERS OF
MARSILIO
FICINO

Translated from the Latin by members of the
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Contents

Introduction vii

Translators' Note xxi

The Letters

Truth and Virtue 1

Human Nature 23

The Soul 37

Music, Harmony, and Divine Frenzy 57

Knowledge and Philosophy 75

Fortune, Fate, and Happiness 113

Divine Providence and the Good 133

The Planets and Astrology 155

Love, Friendship, and Marriage 171

Worldly Things and Civic Duty 185

Notes on the Letters 209

Notes on Ficino's Correspondents 245

Bibliography 263

Index 269
1

Praise of truth

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

As you say, some letters are being passed around under my name that are written in the style of Aristippus, and to some extent in that of Lucretius, rather than of Plato. If they are mine, Angelo, they are not like that; and if they are like that, they are definitely not mine, but fabricated by my detractors; for, as everyone knows, I have followed the divine Plato from my youth.

But you will easily distinguish my own writings from others in this way: in my letters, as far as in me lies, there is always a purpose relating to morals, natural subjects, or theology. But if occasionally there is anything in them in some way relating to love, it is certainly Platonic and honorable, not Aristippian and wanton.

Moreover, the praises they contain are genuine and such as to encourage and advise, not to flatter; and there are almost no unnecessary words, for I decided at the beginning of my studies always to write as briefly as possible; since in time’s brief span to use words in excess is the mark of a lover of words rather than a lover of wisdom. And since there are very few people with much knowledge, often the loquacious speak falsely or unnecessarily, or both.

All this is alien to the dignity of a man, and very far from the profession of a philosopher.

Farewell. [1.16]

2

A picture of a beautiful body and a beautiful mind

Marsilio Ficino of Florence to his friends.

Philosophers debate, orators declaim, and poets sing at great length to exhort men to the true love of virtue. I admire their works and praise them. Indeed, if I did not praise good things, I would not be a good man. But I consider that if virtue herself were ever to be brought into the open she would encourage everyone to take hold of her far more easily and effectively than would the words of men.
It is pointless for you to praise a maiden to the ears of a young man and describe her in words in order to inflict upon him pangs of love, when you can bring her beautiful form before his eyes. Point, if you can, to her beautiful form; then you have no further need of words. For it is impossible to say how much more easily and powerfully Beauty herself calls forth love than do words.

Therefore, if we bring into the view of men the marvelous sight of Virtue herself, there will be no further need for our persuading words: the vision itself will persuade more quickly than can be conceived.

Picture a man endowed with the most vigorous and acute faculties, a strong body, good health, a handsome form, well-proportioned limbs, and a noble stature. Picture this man moving with alacrity and skill, speaking elegantly, singing sweetly, laughing graciously: you will love no one anywhere, you will admire no one, if you do not love and admire such a man as soon as you see him.

Now, in order to reflect more easily upon the divine aspect of the mind from the corresponding likeness of the beautiful body, refer each aspect of the body to an aspect of the mind. For the body is the shadow of the soul; the form of the body, as best it can, represents the form of the soul; thus liveliness and acuteness of perception in the body represent, in a measure, the wisdom and far-sightedness of the mind; strength of body represents strength of mind; health of body, which consists in the tempering of the humors, signifies a temperate mind. Beauty, which is determined by the proportions of the body and a becoming complexion, shows us the harmony and splendor of justice; also, size shows us liberality and nobility; and stature, magnanimity; in the same way dexterity indicates to us civility and courteousness; fine speaking, oratory; sweet singing, the power of poetry. Finally, gracious laughter represents serene happiness in life and perfect joy, which Virtue herself showers upon us.

Now bring into one whole each single part and attribute of Virtue, which we have mentioned; you will at once see clearly a spectacle to be admired and venerated. How worthy of love, how worthy of admiration, is this form of the soul, whose shadow is the form of the body so loved and admired by everyone. But just as Virtue, when she is seen, instantly draws each man to herself by her lovely form so, without doubt, will Vice, if clearly seen, immediately terrify by his deformity and drive everyone away.

Come, friends. Let us always hold before our eyes the divine idea and form of Virtue. She will at once draw us to herself by the grace of her splendor, unceasingly delight us with the sweetness of her proportion and harmony, and completely fill us with an abundance of all that is good. [4.51]

3

The definition, function and end of the virtues

Marsilio Ficino to Antonio Calderini: greetings.

You often ask me, Antonio, to define the virtues for you, expecting from me perhaps those very detailed analyses of the Aristotelians and Stoics. Calderini, this is not the way of our school of Plato. Surely the power of virtue lies in unity rather than in division. Hence the Pythagoreans held that unity belonged to the good, diversity to evil. So I shall be very brief in my definition, especially as it is better to practice the virtues than to know about them.

Virtue is a quality of the soul which leads a man by discrimination to bliss. Of the virtues there are two kinds. There are those in the intellect and there are those in the heart, which may or may not be governed by reason. The first are called reflective virtues and the second moral. The first are so called because they are developed in reflection and once developed are used for this purpose. The moral virtues are so called because they are acquired by practice and custom and, once acquired, are based on moral conduct and useful works.

Among the reflective virtues are wisdom, contemplation of the divine, science, which is knowledge of natural laws; prudence, that is, an awareness of the proper ordering of private and public affairs; and lastly art, which is the true measure in accomplishing any work. Among the moral virtues are justice, which freely gives each man his own; courage which, ever ready for true work, casts from us the burden of fear; and lastly, temperance, which dispels the wanton desire for pleasure, the other obstacle to true work. Justice is accompanied by generosity and magnanimity, and the other virtues likewise have their companions.

To sum up, reflective virtue is simply an acquired clarity of the intellect, and moral virtue is a constant warmth of heart kindled by that clarity. We should remember that of the human virtues none is more precious than
discrimination. As Plato observes in the Republic, to buy this one should sell everything else. For everything is an obstacle and nothing of use to a man who cannot distinguish the good from the bad and separate the bad from the good.

Do we not wish to attain this faculty of discrimination? Then in all matters we should consult elder and more proven men. First of all we should consult time. For among temporal things what is more ancient or better proven than time? But we consult time if we consider well and often the events of the past. For the past is master of the present and future. And consideration of the future instructs the present. For it is very difficult to deal properly with events of the present if you do not consider the end and issue of each action. Consider what is appropriate and leave the rest to God. Whatever follows, welcome as an action of God. For whoever rejects divine governance is rejected by God. Since God is indeed the beginning and end of all things, we are born not for ourselves but for God. Those virtues that have been described above are virtues to the extent that they are practiced by us for the sake of worshiping, imitating, and realizing God. The worship of God is therefore the virtue of virtues. But the reward of the virtues is the realization of God. [1.106]

4

No one is happy unless he rejoices truly;
no one rejoices truly unless he rejoices in the truth

Marsilio Ficino to Giovanni Cavalcanti, his unique friend: true joy.

Since my brother has only just told me that he will be passing your way, I have been unable to find anything that I could give him for you. But I have suddenly thought of giving you that one thing beyond which there is nothing to be found, or even sought. Though all mortals seek this, no one who seeks shall find it by mortal means. I have just been reading the following definition of happiness in the Confessions of our Augustine, whose divine footsteps I frequently follow, as far as I am able. To live happily is simply to rejoice in the truth; this very joy in the truth is happiness itself. Be happy, my good Giovanni; but to be happy, rejoice truly; and that you may rejoice truly, rejoice in the truth. Absolute truth is in itself the light of God. The truth of things is the splendor of God in those things.

So, if you wish to rejoice in the truth, love, seek, and consider God for His own sake, and everything else for the sake of God. [2.20]