

*Daemones Boni et Mali: The Locus of Evil in Renaissance Hermetic Neoplatonism**

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This article deals with the ways evil was conceptualized in the works of Cornelius Agrippa, the most important German representative of the Renaissance humanist current often labelled as Hermetic Neoplatonism. In a heterodox fashion of blending various Christian and non-Christian concepts developed by Marsilio Ficino, Agrippa attempted to further Christianize some aspects of Hermetic and Neoplatonic theology, cosmology and anthropology. This entailed a new interpretation of pagan deities and demons, which Renaissance Neoplatonists in general sought to disconnect from the exclusive domain of evil. A significant aspect of Agrippa's syncretistic attempt was his interpretation of the origin and locus of evil, which, as I argue, reveals a tense coexistence of the classical Thomist concept of privatio boni and anthropological dualism of possibly Gnostic provenance.

Keywords: *Cornelius Agrippa, Marsilio Ficino, Evil, Body, Soul, Anthropological Dualism*

Marsilio Ficino's Thomist legacy: God as *bonum diffusivum sui* and evil as *privatio boni*

It is well known that Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499), a Florentine humanist, prolific writer and translator supported by the powerful House of Medici, inaugurated a new mode of theological thinking whereby he attempted to reconcile the basic tenets of the Roman Catholic Church with various non-Christian and pre-Christian concepts and traditions, such as astrology, natural magic or Plotinian anthropology. Ficino's philologically-oriented approach to matters of faith inspired a host of bold and inquisitive spirits across Western Europe, among whom one finds highly idiosyncratic thinkers like Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Johann Reuchlin, Lodovico Lazzarelli and Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim, to

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mention but a few. Although scholarship has long discarded, or at least brought into question, the notion of “Ficino’s school” – a clearly delineated and definable social entity in the sense of the “Hermetic movement” postulated by Frances Yates – it is beyond doubt that his mode of philosophizing and theologizing strongly influenced generations of humanists and even inspired some of them, like Agrippa, to develop and surpass their great role model.¹

Ficino, who was an ordained priest, postulated an interpretation of the Christian revelation that would set an entirely new exegetical course among Renaissance humanists; it centered on his doctrine of the parallel traditions of spiritual revelation. This is what Charles Nauert has aptly termed “a myth of a continuous esoteric tradition,” according to which, “the revelation given to Moses supposedly included an esoteric interpretation which passed into cabala of the Jews and into the Hermetic literature of the Egyptians,” and from there into Christianity and the philosophical mysticism of the Pythagoreans and the Platonists.² This is the core of Marsilio Ficino’s Christian perspective, in which he regarded Orpheus, Zoroaster, Plato and the *Corpus Hermeticum* as no less sacred than the Bible in the sense that they also conveyed a divine revelation.³ Given that Ficino explicitly accepted Hermes Trismegistus as a divine prophet and that his reinterpretation of Christian anthropology carried clear Hermetic traits, his philosophy is often termed as Hermetic.⁴ On

¹ For critical assessments of the so-called Yates thesis, see Christopher I. Lehrich, *The Language of Demons and Angels. Cornelius Agrippa’s Occult Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 13–18; Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy. Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 327–34. For a critique of the exact nature of Ficino’s Florentine Academy see James Hankins, “The Myth of the Platonic Academy of Florence,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (1991): 429–75.

² Charles G. Nauert, Jr., “Magic and Skepticism in Agrippa’s Thought,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 18, no. 2 (1957): 161–82, on 167.

³ On Ficino’s synthesis in general see Michael J. B. Allen, Valery Rees, eds., *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy* (Leiden – Boston – Köln: Brill, 2002); Brian P. Copenhaver, “Iamblichus, Synesius, and the Chaldean Oracles in Marsilio Ficino’s *De Vita Libri Tres*: Hermetic Magic or Neoplatonic Magic?,” in *Supplementum Festivum: Studies in Honour of Paul Oskar Kristeller*, eds. James Hankins, John Monfasani and Frederick Purnell, Jr. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 441–55; Paul Oskar Kristeller, “Florentine Platonism and Its Relations with Humanism and Scholasticism,” in *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters III*, ed. Paul Oskar Kristeller (Roma: Edizioni di storia e di letteratura, 1993), 39–48.

⁴ Ficino’s 1471 Latin translation of fourteen Hermetic treatises marks a groundbreaking point in the history of Western reception of the *Hermetica*, which, throughout the Middle Ages, was limited to a Latin translation of the *Asclepius*.

the other side, he was strongly influenced by Plato and the Neoplatonists, particularly by Plotinus, which brought him the label of “Renaissance Neoplatonist.” The fruit of Ficino’s decades-long study of Plato was his theoretical masterpiece *Theologia Platonica* (*Platonic theology*, 1482), in which he elucidated his fundamental belief that Plato’s teachings, in the form in which they had been mediated by late antique Neoplatonism, could be reconciled with the main Christian dogmas. He rounded off his opus magnum in 1492 with the publication of a Latin translation of and extensive commentaries on Plotinus’ *Enneads*.⁵

Ficino’s anthropology is clearly Neoplatonic: throughout his *Platonic Theology* he advocates a radical dualist understanding of man’s nature. The seat of one’s true identity is the heavenly soul (*caelestis animus*), which is trapped in the body like in a prison (*carcer*) and tied to it by “terrestrial chains” (*vincula compedum terrenarum*).⁶ The role of the body is downgraded to being merely a temporary instrument of the soul, which is to be dispensed with as it hinders the soul’s upward movement. Certainly, this goes against the official Roman Catholic doctrine as articulated by Thomas Aquinas, for whom “it is clear that man is not a soul only, but something composed of soul and body.”⁷ The soul is only a part of the hu-

⁵ Ficino’s Neoplatonism has also been qualified as “post-Plotinian,” meaning that it owed a lot to the later generations of Neoplatonists, especially Iamblichus; see Christopher S. Celenza, “Late Antiquity and Florentine Platonism: the «Post-Plotinian» Ficino,” in *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy*, 71–97.

⁶ Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, Vol. 1, trans. Michael J. B. Allen, ed. James Hankins (London – Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 14–15. In the very first lines of his work Ficino writes: “But I pray that as heavenly souls longing with desire for our heavenly home we may cast off the bonds of our terrestrial chains; cast them off as swiftly as possible, so that, uplifted on Platonic wings and with God as our guide, we may fly unhindered to our ethereal abode.” (*Obsecro, caelestes animi caelestis patriae cupidi, solvamus quamprimum vincula compedum terrenarum, ut alis sublatis platonicis ac Deo duce in sedem aetheream liberius pervolemus*). On the primacy of the soul, see also *Platonic Theology* I 1–6, III 1–2, IV 1, V 1–15, VI 1–16, XII 1–7, XIII 1–10 and XIV 1–8. No doubt, one of Ficino’s direct sources was Plotinus, *Enn.* IV 8, 1–8.

⁷ *Manifestum est quod homo non est anima tantum, sed est aliquid compositum ex anima et corpore* (*Summa theol.* I, *Quest.* 75); all the Latin and English quotes from this work: <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~ST.I.Q6.A2.SC/>, accessed October 18, 2023. The mention of Aquinas is important in this context because, as Frank Klaassen notes, “Aquinas’s corpus formed the core of moral theology (...) and, even for humanists, was very much the standard by which orthodoxy was measured”; see Frank Klaassen, *The Transformations of Magic. Illicit Learned Magic in the Later Middle Ages and Renaissance* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2013), 188.

man being, not a hypostasis or person in itself, and the body is necessary for the action of the intellect.

Anthropology is one of the fields in which Neoplatonic tenets show clear parallels with those of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. While translating this work, Ficino was exposed to a doctrine of anthropological dualism which resonated with that of Plotinus, but which was expressed in much stronger language carrying Gnostic overtones. Thus, for example, Discourse VII speaks of the body as “an odious tunic, a garment of ignorance, a foundation of vice, a dark cage, a living death, a sentient corpse, a portable tomb” that drags one down.⁸ However, it should be emphasized that, despite the influence of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, Ficino restrained from explicitly marking the physical body as evil – a step that would be made by Cornelius Agrippa.

Another area in which Ficino attempted to broaden his synthesis is astrology, which he promoted under the rubric of medicine in his second most important work, *Tres libri de vita* (*Three books on life*, 1490).⁹ Of course, neither of these heterodox insertions was Ficino’s invention: just as anthropological dualism was present throughout the Middle Ages in various heretical groups, so too astrology persisted through the centuries.¹⁰ Ficino’s main contribution was his effort to Christianize it in a Neoplatonic manner, by claiming that the planets and planetary deities are intelligences acting out the will of God – a notion that goes back to Plato’s *Timaeus* 42d–43c, where he describes how the task of creating was relegated by God to “the younger gods” (τοῖς νέοις θεοῖς). Ficino’s religious syncretism compelled him to believe

⁸ *Corpus Hermeticum* VII 16–20 (in Ficino’s translation): *indumentum inscitiae, pravitatis fundamentum, corruptionis vinculum, velamen opacum, vivam mortem, sensitivum cadaver, sepulchrum circumvectile*. The translation is given according to Campanelli’s critical edition: Marsilio Ficino, *Mercurii Trismegisti Pimander sive De Potestate et Sapientia Dei*, ed. Maurizio Campanelli (Torino: Nino Aragno, 2011), 47. This strong anti-corporeal attitude is also found in *Corpus Hermeticum* XIII.

⁹ On the role of astrology in this work see Carol V. Kaske and John R. Clark, “Introduction,” in Marsilio Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, ed. and trans. Carol V. Kaske and John R. Clark (Tempe, AR: Medieval & Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1998), 3–90. See also Ruth Clydesdale, “Jupiter tames Saturn”: Astrology in Ficino’s *Epistulae*, in *Laus Platonici Philosophi. Marsilio Ficino and His Influence*, eds. Stephen Clucas, Peter J. Forshaw and Valery Rees (Brill: Leiden – Boston, 2011), 117–32.

¹⁰ As already Jean Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1953), 43, pointed out, Christianity itself contained astrological elements, and many traces of the Hellenistic and Oriental religions were intertwined at its very roots for it to be able to rid itself of them completely.

in several diverse sets of divinities: the Christian, embracing the Trinity, angels, the Virgin Mary, and the saints; the Neoplatonic, embracing the three hypostases generally known as the One, the Mind, and the World-soul, the supramundane or supercelestial gods, the mundane or celestial gods, the Intelligences of the spheres plus an undefined number of other star-souls and daemons good, bad, and indifferent, both celestial and sublunary.¹¹

This nearly all-inclusive understanding of the celestial hierarchy opened up the possibility for redeeming pagan gods and demons from the age-old stigma of being the mediators of evil, since the Church deemed it sinful to deify the physical world and worship the creation instead of the creator.¹²

On the other side, Ficino's concept of God, as amply demonstrated in his *Platonic Theology*, is Thomist to a large degree, which might come as a surprise given his heterodox outlook.¹³ He adopted those aspects of Aquinas's theology that define God as the supreme good from which "all desired perfections flow as from the first cause."¹⁴ This also entails Aquinas's understanding of evil as "the absence of the good" (*defectus boni*).¹⁵ Ficino did not openly discuss the problem of evil in his works, but his Neoplatonic and Thomist understanding of evil as pure privation and nothingness is apparent from his discussion on the nature of God in *Platonic Theology* II 5–13. In this regard, it is interesting to note that both Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, among other notable humanists of their time, closely followed a dispute on the problem of evil that took place in 1489 between the Dominican Nicolaus de Mirabilibus and the Franciscan Giorgio Benigno Salviati, two theologians and central figures in the intellectual life of Florence during the last decades of the fifteenth

¹¹ Kaske and Clark, "Introduction," 39. See also *Platonic Theology* IV 1.

¹² However, as in the case of astrology, Ficino was not entirely consistent in his mission of redeeming ancient deities; thus, for instance, in *Tres libri de vita*, I 6, he used the word "demon" in the orthodox bad sense; see Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, 122–23.

¹³ See especially *Platonic Theology* II 5–13. See also Kaske and Clark, "Introduction," 41.

¹⁴ *Respondeo dicendum quod Deus est summum bonum simpliciter (...) inquantum omnes perfectiones desideratae effluunt ab eo, sicut a prima causa* (*Summa Theol.* I^a q. 6 a. 2 co.).

¹⁵ *Summa Theol.* I^a q. 49 a. 1 co. Following Aquinas, Ficino took care to emphasize that the principle of self-diffusion does not abolish God's divine will by compelling him to create (*Platonic Theology* II 12). On this theological problem see Bernhard-Thomas Blankenhorn, O.P., "The Good as Self-Diffusive in Thomas Aquinas," *Angelicum* 79, no. 4 (2002): 803–37.

century.¹⁶ Although the sources do not give any details about Ficino's role in the debate, the context strongly suggests that both he and Pico took sides with the Dominican, who mostly espoused the traditional Thomist view that keeps the dichotomic separation between God, the absolute good, and evil. In other words, Nicolaus de Mirabilibus defended a "weak" sense of evil (evil that has no independent existence and is identified with error or ignorance) against a "strong" one (evil that stems from a free-willing agent who is conscious of his actions), advocated by the Scotist Benigno Salviati.¹⁷

Agrippa's ambivalent demonology

Taking over the main elements of Marsilio Ficino's synthesis, Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486–1535) attempted to further Christianize some aspects of Hermetic and Neoplatonic theology, cosmology and anthropology. In his largest and most important work *De occulta philosophia libri tres* (*Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, 1510/1533), usually characterized as a sort of magical encyclopaedia, Agrippa strongly relied on Ficino's Neoplatonic image of a living, hierarchically structured universe created by God in the process of outpouring his divine substance, thus also inheriting Aquinas's concept of *bonum diffusivum sui*.¹⁸ Agrippa studied Ficino's *Platonic Theology* with great diligence: in her critical edition of the *Occult Philosophy*, Vittoria Perrone Compagni tracks down at least a hundred mostly uncredited references to Ficino, many of them coming from the *Platonic Theology*.¹⁹ It is no surprise then that Agrippa's

¹⁶ See Amos Edelheit, *Scholastic Florence: Moral Psychology in the Quattrocento* (Brill: Leiden, 2014), 33–81.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 37.

¹⁸ Note the opening sentence of the work: "Seeing that there is a threefold world, elementary, celestial, and intellectual, and that every inferior is governed by its superior and receives the influence of the virtues thereof, so that the very original and chief Worker of all does by angels, heavens, stars, elements, animals, plants, metals, and stones convey from himself the virtues of his omnipotence upon us..." (*Cum triplex sit mundus, elementalís, coelestis et intellectualis, et quisque inferior a superiori regatur ac suarum virium suscipiat influxum ita ut ipse Archetypus et summus Opifex per angelos, coelos, stellas, elementa, animalia, plantas, metalla, lapides, Suae omnipotentiae virtutes exinde in nos transfundat...*); Cornelius Agrippa, *De occulta philosophia libri tres*, ed. Vittoria Perrone Compagni (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 85; the English translation: Henry Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, trans. John French, ed. Donald Tyson (St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2000), 3.

¹⁹ Agrippa, *De occulta philosophia libri tres*, ed. Perrone Compagni (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 636, *Index nominum*, s.v. Ficinus Marsilius.

own synthesis of spiritual traditions is based on anthropological dualism and a belief in a large number of mediating non-human entities.²⁰

In some instances the scope of Agrippa's syncretism is astounding, such as when he, in the *Occult Philosophy* III 1, metaphorically refers to Christ as "that supercelestial Bacchus" (*supercoelestem illum Bacchum*), who is "the supreme ruler of the gods and priests, the author of regeneration, whom the old poets sang was twice born" (*summum deorum et sacerdotum antistitem, regenerationis autorem, quem bis natum veteres cecinere poëtae*).²¹ Entirely disregarding the diabolical connotations of Dionysus in Christian tradition, Agrippa chose him of all Greek gods as a metonymy for Christ, which must have sounded outright sacrilegious to his contemporaries. However, he based his metaphor on two crucial principles: the Ficinian notion of multiple revelations, which surpasses the traditional dichotomies of true and false, sacred and diabolical, good and evil, and the notion of spiritual rebirth, for which Dionysus's and Christ's resurrection served, in Agrippa's view, as archetypal role models.²² It should be added that this metaphor was a further development of the term "celestial Bacchus" that Agrippa used in the second book of the *Occult Philosophy* (II 58). According to him, this term derives from the Orphic hymns and denotes, in an allegorical language, the cognitive aspect of celestial souls.²³ One also finds the mention of Bacchus in Ficino's opening Proem attached to the beginning of his *Three Books on Life* and dedicated to Lorenzo de' Medici.²⁴ Here, however, Ficino compares the Greek god with priests, who are born twice upon accepting their ordination. It took

²⁰ On Agrippa's anthropology in connection with his theory of magic, see Noel Putnik, "Operari per fidem: The Role of Faith in Agrippa's Magic," in *Civilizations of the Supernatural. Witchcraft, Ritual, and Religious Experience in Late Antique, Medieval, and Renaissance Traditions*, ed. Fabrizio Conti (Trivent Publishing: Budapest, 2020), 287–311. In addition to the *Platonic Theology* I, of particular importance for Agrippa's anthropological views were the following parts of Ficino's work: III 1–2, IV 1, V 1–15, VI 1–16, XII 1–7, XIII 1–10, XIV 1–8 ("Why are rational souls imprisoned in earthly bodies?") and XVII 1–4 ("What is the soul's status before it approaches the body, and what after it leaves?").

²¹ Agrippa, *De occulta phillosophia*, 402–3; *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, 441.

²² As Wouter Hanegraaff, "Better than Magic. Cornelius Agrippa and Lazzarellian Hermetism," *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 4, no. 1 (Summer, 2009): 1–25, points out, Agrippa's understanding of spiritual regeneration was less shaped by Ficino and more by Lodovico Lazzarelli, whose teachings also influenced Agrippa concerning man's constitution and the problem of evil.

²³ Agrippa, *De occulta phillosophia*, 387.

²⁴ Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, 102–3.

an extraordinarily bold step, which Agrippa made, to amplify the metaphor so as to include the resurrected Christ.

This type of allegorical and poetic recasting of pagan Greek gods, so characteristic of Ficino, in Agrippa's case went hand in hand with a vindication of demons, which consequently led to a relocation of the locus of evil. Throughout the third book of his *Occult Philosophy* Agrippa discusses various forms and categories of incorporeal entities, some of whom he terms *daemones*. Once the mediators of evil, in Agrippa's Neoplatonic worldview they become either good or bad spiritual entities in the cosmic hierarchy, as clearly articulated in the *Occult Philosophy* III 20:

It is the common opinion of theologians that all evil demons are of such nature that they hate God as well as men; therefore divine providence has set over us more pure demons, with whom he has entrusted us as with shepherds and governors, that they should daily help us and drive away evil demons from us, and curb and restrain them, that they should not hurt us as much as they would.²⁵

These “more pure demons” (*daemones puriores*) are in chapter III 22 described as “a threefold good demon, a proper keeper of every man” (*triplex unicuique homini daemon bonus, proprius custos*) by whose aid we avoid the malignity of fate (*huius auxilio possumus malignitatem fati devitare*).²⁶ Agrippa further discusses the names and powers of demons, their connections with the stars and elements, and ends this section with a chapter titled “How good demons may be called up by us, and how evil demons may be overcome by us” (*Quomodo alliciantur a nobis boni daemones et quomodo mali daemones a nobis convincantur*, III 32).

In other words, it is evident that Agrippa disconnected the traditional Christian signification of the term “demon” from its pre-Christian

²⁵ *Est theologorum communis sententia daemones malos omnes eius esse naturae, ut deos pariter oderint et homines: iccirco divina providentia daemones nobis puriores praefecit propinquos, quibus nos tanquam pastoribus seu rectoribus commendavit ut nos quotidie adiuvant daemonesque malos arceant, compescant et religant ne noceant nobis quantum vellent* (Agrippa, *De occulta philosophia*, 459; *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, 521). Here I slightly modify John French's translation: French (1616–1657), an English physician and chemist who first translated Agrippa's work into English, quite expectedly rendered the Latin *daemones* as “spirits” – for how can a demon be good?

²⁶ Agrippa, *De occulta philosophia*, 464–65. Triplicity refers to three kinds of spiritual guides assigned to every man: a “holy demon” of the soul, assigned directly by God, “who presides over demons” (*daemonum praeside*), the demon of the nativity, whom Agrippa identifies with the Genius, and the demon of profession, both assigned to the soul through a particular celestial constellation.

Greek usage and meanings, which he restored and integrated into his cosmology and anthropology. To do so, he did not even have to make a humanist leap *ad fontes*, since the ambiguity had been present throughout the Middle Ages.²⁷

In pre-Christian writers, as it is well known, δαίμων simply denoted a higher, divine power, even a god, and it is etymologically related to the verb δαίωμα, “to distribute.” Hence, a demon was literally a “distributor” of fate,²⁸ an intermediary in the actualization of God’s will. Thus, from an individual’s point of view, it could be either good or bad. It was already Hesiod who clearly demarcated four genera of rational beings: gods, demons, heroes, and humans, and among humans he distinguished those from the golden age, who pass into the race of many good demons, and demigods, who pass into the race of heroes (*Op.* 122; 159–60). A *locus classicus* in Plato is his definition of demon in the *Symposium* (202d–203a) as “a great divinity,” since “the whole realm of divinities is intermediate between god and mortal.” In Diotima’s words,

[Eros as an intermediary is in charge of] interpreting and conveying things from men to gods and things from gods to men, prayers and sacrifices from the one, commands and requitals in exchange for sacrifices from the other (...). Through this realm moves all prophetic art and the art of priests having to do with sacrifices and rituals and spells, and all power of prophecy and enchantment. God does not mingle with man, but all intercourse and conversation (...) are through this realm.²⁹

Along with Plato, the likely main source of the concept of demons as intermediaries is Xenocrates, Plato’s student and second successor at the head of the Academy. He developed Plato’s views from the *Symposium* and the *Phaedo* about demons as mediators between gods and humans

²⁷ See Benedek Láng, *Unlocked Books. Manuscripts of Learned Magic in the Medieval Libraries of Central Europe* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 21. As Láng points out, there was clearly a confusion throughout the Middle Ages caused by the fact that “the medieval concept of «demon» was born of two different traditions: the Christian notion of «demon» as a fallen angel working under the Devil, and the Greco-Roman concept of a more material «daimon,» who is a neutral (even occasionally benign), powerful, and knowledgeable spirit who, in certain circumstances, may obey its invoker.”

²⁸ Compare Greek adjectives εὐδαίμων, “fortunate” (lit. “one who has a good demon”) and κακοδαίμων, “unlucky” (“one who has a bad demon”).

²⁹ *The Dialogues of Plato. Volume II: The Symposium*, trans. Reginald Edgar Allen (Yale University Press: New Haven – London, 1993), 146.

into a complete doctrine and thus paved the way for the philosophical belief in demons that would become common in late antiquity. It is very possible that Xenocrates, who was inclined towards Pythagoreanism, also developed the idea of demons as administrators of oracles.³⁰ Plutarch inherited this concept and discussed it at great length in some of his essays (especially *De defectu oraculorum* and *De daimonio Socratis*), although his demonology appears to reflect an important development from the old Hesiodic-Platonic concept of demons as mediators between humans and gods to the interiorization of the concept: as discussed in *De daemónio Socratis* (590B–592E), demon is also interpreted as a transcendent aspect of the soul, which immerses its lower part in the body and becomes irrational, while it strives with its higher part toward the suprarational.

The Platonic notion of demon developed in late antiquity and the Middle Ages into a rich repertoire of beliefs about the “guardian angel,” as I already pointed out in Agrippa’s case.³¹ There was, thus, a long heterodox tradition on which Agrippa could rely in his vindication of the genus of demons. However, it opened up the problem of interpretation of the origin and nature of *daemones mali* and hence of evil itself. Malevolent demons could not be part of the divine dispensation and that was the ultimate limit of Agrippa’s Platonic interpretation of Christianity. It presented a problem for him, as it is well known that he attempted, even more persistently than Ficino, to Christianize his heterodox teachings.³²

³⁰ See Stephan Schröder, “Plutarch on oracles and divine inspiration”, in Plutarch, *On the Daimonion of Socrates*, ed. Heinz-Günther Nesselrath (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 145–68, on 156.

³¹ Some of the variations are Iamblichus’ “personal demon” (οἰκεῖος δαίμων), Porphyry’s “master of the house” (οἰκοδεσπότης) or Jewish “guardian angel” (*maggid*); see Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1971), 218–19; Dorian Gieseler Greenbaum, *The Daimon in Hellenistic Astrology* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 236–75; Peter Schäfer, “Jewish Magic Literature in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 41, 1 (1990): 75–91.

³² See Perrone Compagni, “*Dispersa Intentio*. Alchemy, Magic and Scepticism in Agrippa,” *Early Science and Medicine* 5, no. 2 (2000): 160–77; Noel Putnik, “To Be Born (Again) from God: Scriptural Obscurity as a Theological Way Out for Cornelius Agrippa,” in *Obscurity in Medieval Texts*, eds. Lucie Doležalová, Jeff Rider and Alessandro Zironi (Krems: Medium Aevum Quotidianum, 2013), 145–56; Marc van der Poel, *Cornelius Agrippa, the Humanist Theologian and his Declamations* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 57–58.

Agrippa's attack on scholasticism: a shift to a "strong" sense of evil?

In order to cope with the problem, Agrippa developed an eclectic interpretation of evil that he presented in several smaller theological treatises: *On Three Ways of Knowing God* (*De triplici ratione cognoscendi Deum*, 1516), *A Dialogue on Man* (*Dialogus de homine*, 1515/1516) and *On Original Sin* (*De originali peccato disputabilis opinionis declamatio*, 1518). It is important to note that in these treatises he frequently employs the term "sin" (*peccatum*), which does not figure as a fully developed theological and ethical concept either in the Neoplatonic or the Hermetic accounts of the fall and embodiment. It indicates a predominantly Christian context of Agrippa's interpretations, despite a highly unorthodox manner in which he understood Christianity.

In his treatise *On Three Ways of Knowing God* Agrippa centers his discussion around the problem of epistemology, namely how man actually comes to know God. In his view, it occurs not on the basis of theoretical knowledge (*scientia*, ἐπιστήμη) but as an inner, experienced realization of the divine realm (*cognitio*, γνῶσις).³³ Agrippa's preference for *cognitio* over *scientia* led him to fiercely attack scholastic theologians, whose custom of vain and ostentatious disputation he openly proclaimed diabolical: the *theologistae* and *sophistae*, as he calls them, have "hijacked" the true, sacred theology (*sanctum theologiae nomen furto et rapina sibi temere usurpant*).³⁴ It is a striking twist in a common humanist critique of scholasticism: the main problem, the author argues, rests in a conscious evil intention on the part of scholastic theologians. Thus, in order to provide a philosophical rationale for the misdoings of the learned clergymen, Agrippa blends the metaphysical, epistemological and moral aspects of the problem of evil. The link between epistemology and evil is underlined by his claim that the devil himself was the father of scholastic theology.³⁵ Such

³³ *De triplici ratione* V 14, in Perrone Compagni, *Ermetismo e Cristianesimo in Agrippa. Il "De triplici ratione cognoscendi Deum"* (Firenze: Edizioni Polistampa 2005), 134–36.

³⁴ *De triplici ratione* V 18, in idem, *Ermetismo e Cristianesimo*, 154. For the entire diatribe see *ibidem*, 154–65. Note also Agrippa's criticism of scholastic theology in Chapter 97 of his second major work, *On the Uncertainty and Vanity of Sciences and Arts, and the Excellence of the Word of God* (*De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum et artium atque excellentia verbi Dei*, 1526) where he regards it as impious and in some aspects even heretical; see Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim, *Opera II* (Hildesheim – New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1970), 282–86.

³⁵ Perrone Compagni, *Ermetismo e Cristianesimo*, 160: *Inventor autem huius tam pestiferae facultatis diabolus, primus ille callidus et perniciosus sophista*. It is important to add

a grave accusation should be viewed in the broader context of Agrippa's call for the restoration of "genuine" Christianity, discussed throughout his writings.³⁶

In order to bring home his point, Agrippa briefly relates the account of the fall, which is mostly based on Biblical references (Gen. 3.1–8, Lk. 10.18 and 2 Pet. 2.4): not content with their sublime position, ambitiously striving for more, some angels, led by Satan, rebelled against God and had to be expelled from their divine abode. Man followed Satan's example: created to obey God's will, which was the source of his perpetual life, man was tempted by Satan and decided to go after him, thus becoming a transgressor himself. As a consequence, God expelled him from the "garden of bliss" into the "valley of misery," where he became subject to death.³⁷ Thus, in his criticism of scholastic theologians, Agrippa delineates another type of evil in addition to the Thomist concept of *privatio boni* – pure evil in the form of "evil will which leads to evil actions (...) out of an evil intention or purpose on the part of an agent who is fully aware and conscious of the evil results of his actions."³⁸ Based on all the above, it appears that Agrippa was not entirely satisfied with the "weak" Neoplatonic understanding of evil that he received through Ficino's doctrine of divine emanation. For him, evil had essence and existence of its own; moreover, it exerted a strong influence even within the Church.

Gnostic overtones: Matter as the source of evil

Agrippa's shift from the Thomist understanding of evil as pure privation and nothingness, which was echoed by Ficino, towards a view that evil is something concrete, real and related to human will may have been, at least partly, influenced by the Scotists' criticism of the weak sense of evil.³⁹

that Agrippa conceived this work as a serious theological treatise, not as a satirical diatribe, although he based it on humanist rhetoric; see Perrone Compagni's introduction in *Ermetismo e Cristianesimo*, 1–84.

³⁶ See Noel Putnik, "Agrippa's Magical Piety and the Insufficiency of the Revelation," in *Fidele Signaculum. Writings in Honour of György Endre Szönyi*, eds. Atilla Kiss, Ágnes Matuska, Róbert Péter (Szeged: University of Szeged, 2022), 849–66.

³⁷ Perrone Compagni, *Ermetismo e Cristianesimo*, 94–6: *Homo autem, creatus (...) ut divinae obsequeretur voluntati, ex quo (...) vita perpetua donatus est, petitus est a diabolo infesta tentatione; quem auscultans, similiter divinae voluntatis transgressor effectus est. Quare etiam ipse pulsus ex hoc delictiarum horto in hanc vallem miseriae.*

³⁸ Edelheit, *Scholastic Florence*, 35.

³⁹ On the influence that the abovementioned debate on evil between the Thomist Nicolaus de Mirabilibus and the Scotist Benigno Salviati had on the humanists of

It can also be seen as part of Agrippa's pessimistic outlook concerning human nature, which he most strikingly expressed in his declamation *On the Uncertainty and Vanity of Sciences and Arts*. In this bitter work, which brought him condemnations of heresy by the Faculties of Sorbonne and Louvain, Agrippa expressed his belief that man is so fallen due to his willful acceptance of evil that it is impossible for human reason to reach any positive knowledge about the Absolute.⁴⁰

In Agrippa's eclectic perspective, this belief is strongly associated with the idea of man's composite nature: he puts the human fallen state into a broader context of anthropological dualism based on Ficino's Neoplatonic and Hermetic dichotomy of body and soul. However, Agrippa takes this idea to its ultimate ontological consequences by viewing the body and matter as evil.⁴¹ This is clearly hinted at in his *Occult Philosophy*, where he fully subscribes to the Plotinian concept of the soul as a partly descended spiritual entity that is trapped in a physical body and must find its way back to transcendence.⁴² Here Agrippa stops short of calling the body evil, but he strongly relies on Plotinus in his description of the process of embodiment (Ch. III 37): in tune with the ancient philosopher, he characterizes this process as the soul's incarceration in the body.⁴³ Agrippa's treatment of the problem is in full concordance with Plotinus's view of the fall as "the casting of the wings, the enchaining in body," whereby "the soul is at the chain: debarred from expressing itself now through its intellectual phase (...) it is a captive; this is the burial, the encavernment, of the soul."⁴⁴

Ficino's circle, see *Ibidem*, 37–39, 47–48.

⁴⁰ "Every human being is a liar" (*omnis homo mendax*), declares Agrippa in chapter 59 of *The Uncertainty and Vanity of Sciences and Arts* (Agrippa, *Opera II*, 109–10), referring to Rom. 3.4.

⁴¹ On evil identified with matter, see Plotinus, *Enn.* II, 4, 4; III, 6, 11; Simplicius, *In Aristotelis physicorum libros quattuor priores commentaria* I, 9 (249 and 256, ed. Diels); Proclus, *In Cratylum commentaria* 30.7. See also Edelheit, *Scholastic Florence*, 34.

⁴² See the opening sentence of the work, note 19. On the idea of the partly descended soul in Plotinus, see *Enn.* IV, 8, 4; on the analogous idea in the *Occult Philosophy*, see Putnik, "Operari per fidem", 289–94.

⁴³ Agrippa, *De occulta philosophia*, 514–15; see also 506–9 and 521–44.

⁴⁴ Plotinus, *Enn.* IV, 8, 4; the translation: Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna, with notes by John Dillon (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 338–39. The casting of the wings is a reference to *Phaedr.* 246C. Note also Plotinus's characterization of nature as a "demon enchantress" (*Enn.* IV 4, 43–44).

Significantly, in his account of embodiment Agrippa uses the image of dressing (*induere*), as well as the phrase “corporeal man” (*homo corporeus*), which both underline his notion of the duality of human being and the soul’s primacy: “Therefore it was necessary that the soul of man, thus sealed by the Word of God, should put on (*induere*) the corporeal man.”⁴⁵ Here Agrippa closely follows the *Poimandres*, the first discourse of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, which offers the Hermetic account of man’s creation and fall. According to the *Poimandres* (I 12), man is equal with God (ἐαυτῷ ἴσος), immortal, and entirely spiritual in nature: God “gave birth to a man like Himself” and man “had the father’s image.”⁴⁶ He lost his immortality after the fall, as a result of which he became twofold in nature: mortal in the body, but immortal as the “essential man” (τὸν οὐσιώδη ἄνθρωπον; in Ficino’s translation *homo substantialis*).⁴⁷ The crucial expression here is “the essential man,” which implies that the “true” man is the one that existed prior to the fall, and that he is mortal only “in the body” (διὰ τὸ σῶμα). Agrippa’s indebtedness to the *Corpus Hermeticum* is evident from the wording, as the writer of the *Corpus* uses the metaphor of dressing and speaks of “undressing” the body (see below).⁴⁸

However, as Wouter Hanegraaff points out, the Hermetic image of the garment is intermingled with yet another one, “that of possession by a sinister demonic entity operating from within. In their embodied condition, human beings carry some kind of malevolent «criminal» with them that is secretly poisoning their consciousness while filling them with lusts.”⁴⁹ The evil agency of that demon and the garment itself, which

⁴⁵ *Animum igitur hominis, sic verbo Dei sigillatum, necesse fuit etiam corporeum hominem (...) induere* (Agrippa, *De occulta philosophia*, 508; *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, 579).

⁴⁶ ἀπεκόησεν ἄνθρωπον ἐαυτῷ ἴσον (...) τὴν τοῦ πατρὸς εἰκόνα ἔχων; see *CORPVS HERMETICVM, Tome I, Traité I-XII*, texte établi par Arthur Darby Nock et traduit par André-Jean Festugière (Paris: Société d’édition «Les belles lettres», 1945), 10; the translation: Brian P. Copenhaver, *Hermetica. The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 3.

⁴⁷ *CORPVS HERMETICVM*, ed. Nock, 11; see Ficino’s translation in Campanelli, *Mercurii Trismegisti Pimander*, 12.

⁴⁸ *CORPVS HERMETICVM*, ed. Nock, 81–82 (VII 2–3); the exact word is περιρῆξασθαι, which Ficino renders as *exuere* – a verb of the same root as *induere*.

⁴⁹ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Hermetic Spirituality and the Historical Imagination: Altered States of Knowledge in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 152.

“poisons” the soul, is clearly indicated in the following words of the seventh discourse:

Such is the odious tunic you have put on. It strangles you and drags you down with it so that you will not hate its viciousness, not look up and see the fair vision of truth and the good that lies within, so that you will not look up and see the beauty [and] not understand the plot it has plotted against you.⁵⁰

In his elaboration of the Hermetic account of the fall, Hanegraaff emphasizes that the soul descends not just partially but completely.⁵¹ This difference has a significant implication, i.e. that philosophical contemplation is not enough for redemption and deification; theurgy and divine intervention are required too. In Agrippa’s case the picture is not that clear: as I have argued elsewhere, he tends to conflate the Hermetic paradigm of the complete fall with Plotinus’s idea of a partial descent.⁵² However, both convictions lead to anthropological dualism.⁵³

The ethical foundation of Agrippa’s anthropological dualism is even more clearly articulated in his exegetical treatise *On Original Sin*. Right from the start, he introduces two ontological opposites that he calls “the inner man” (*homo interior*) and man’s “garment” (*indumentum*).⁵⁴ Here again we see the legacy of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, its notion of the essential man and the metaphor of dressing. The inner man is defined by Agrippa as the soul that puts on a bodily garment. The man whom God created after his image according to Gen. 1:26 is precisely that “inner man,” i.e. the soul, whereas the fallen man, whom God vivified by blowing the breath of life into his nostrils according to the alternative account of creation in Gen. 2:7, is a compound made of the inner man and the corporeal garment, joined together by the celestial spirit. The entire treatise is permeated with hostility toward corporeality (mostly termed *sensualitas*), which Agrippa allegorically identifies with the Biblical serpent: the

⁵⁰ *Hermetica*, tr. Copenhaver, 24; *CORPVS HERMETICVM*, ed. Nox, 82 (VII 3). Hanegraaff translates the word κακίαν here as “evil”, which seems more appropriate than Copenhaver’s “viciousness”, Hanegraaff, *Hermetic Spirituality and the Historical Imagination*, 152.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, 149.

⁵² Putnik, “Operari per fidem”, 287–311.

⁵³ See also *CORPVS HERMETICVM*, ed. Nox, 116–18 (X 8–10). The soul is blind as long as she is trapped in the body. Since true knowledge is incorporeal (ἄσώματος), the embodied soul’s ignorance amounts to evil (κακία).

⁵⁴ *De originali peccato disputabilis opinionis declamatio*, in Agrippa, *Opera* II, 551–52.

tempting of Adam and Eve – who stand for two aspects of the soul, *mens* and *ratio* – means nothing else but the act of the soul willingly accepting the evil principle of materiality. Quite extraordinarily, Agrippa explicitly links the fall of the inner man into the mortal senses with concupiscence, i.e. sexual intercourse, which led some scholars to assume Gnostic and even Cathar influences on Agrippa.⁵⁵ Such assumptions are justified inasmuch as some discourses of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, especially I, VII and XIII, bear clear marks of Gnostic influences, not to mention the (still insufficiently explored) possibility that Agrippa came in direct touch with the legacy of medieval gnostic heresies.⁵⁶

The most explicit exposition of Agrippa's belief that matter is the principal locus of evil is found in his small, unfinished *Dialogue on Man*, where he again offers a Christian-Hermetic exegesis of man's creation and fall: man became mortal once he transgressed divine commands and "embraced the body" (*corpus amplectens*).⁵⁷ And again, this time referring to Hermes Trismegistus directly, Agrippa reverts to the Hermetic clothing image and the Ficinian wording: "You should, as Hermes says, undress that garment (*exuere vestem*) that you wear around yourself."⁵⁸ Moreover, he almost verbatim cites the same lines from the *Corpus Hermeticum* VII that I mentioned above, strongly arguing for the *corpus animae carcer* doctrine, and in a stunning exegetical move he adds Christ's words to those of Hermes:

You must take down that garment that you wear, the foundation of ignorance and evil, the bonds of corruption, the living death, the sentient corpse, the portable tomb, the inner enemy of whom Christ says:

⁵⁵ See Van der Poel, *Cornelius Agrippa*, 228. See also Agrippa, *De originali peccato*, 554: *Ipsa autem opinio nostra talis est non aliud fuisse originale peccatum quam carnalem copulam viri et mulieris* ("My own opinion is that the original sin was nothing else but carnal copulation between man and woman."), my translation.

⁵⁶ Certainly, possible contemporary influences should not be ignored too: Wouter Hanegraaff argues that Agrippa's understanding of the fall depends considerably on Lodovico Lazzarelli (1447–1500), an Italian philosopher and translator of several Hermetic treatises; see Henegraaff, "Better Than Magic", 1–25. Perrone Compagni points to Pico's influence (*Ermetismo e Cristianesimo*, 37–51).

⁵⁷ Cornelius Agrippa, *Dialogus de homine*, ed. Paola Zambelli, *Rivista critica di storia della filosofia*, XIII (1958): 47–71, on 67.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, 68: *Oportet autem te, ut inquit hermes, vestem quam circumfers exuere*.

“If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me”.⁵⁹

This leads Agrippa to the climax of his argument and anti-corporeal sentiment: in his interpretation, Christ’s cross is nothing else but “this material body, which we wear as a sort of cross. We should get rid of it and leave it, so that we could return to the pristine immortality together with Christ.”⁶⁰ Finally, in order to corroborate his exceptionally heterodox interpretation, he refers to the Apostle Paul (Phil. 1.23): “But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart (*cupio dissolvi*) and be with Christ, for that is very much better.” In Agrippa’s view, the implication is clear: to be with Christ, one has to take down the garment of one’s body and restore one’s original spiritual identity.

Conclusion

In this brief analysis I attempted to elucidate the ways in which some Renaissance humanists deeply devoted to religion tried to cope with the problem of evil in a divinely created world. My analysis concerns the two iconic figures of the widespread fifteenth- and sixteenth-century current of Hermetic Neoplatonism: Marsilio Ficino as its “founding father” and Cornelius Agrippa as an influential thinker who took some of its main tenets to their ultimate philosophical and theological consequences. *Si Deus, unde malum* was probably the toughest question they had to cope with in their attempts to present a divinely ordered universe in which their proposed theurgic methods of ascension would not be condemned as diabolical. It was especially Agrippa, the proponent of astral and ceremonial magic, who faced the grave problem of the discernment of spirits (*dicretio spirituum*) – the need to be able to distinguish between *daemones boni* and *daemones mali*, as well as to be able to explain what it is exactly that makes the latter *mali*.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, 68–69: *Indumentum, inscitie pravitatis fundamentum, corruptionis vinculum, vivam mortem, sentivum cadaver, sepulcrum circumfertile, domesticum inimicum de quo ait Christus: “qui post me vult venire, abneget semetipsum ac tollat crucem suam, et sequatur me.”* Translation mine, except for the passage from Mt. 16.24, which is given according to the New American Standard Bible. The paraphrased passage is from *Corpus Hermeticum* VII 2–3 (*CORPVS HERMETICVM*, ed. Nock, 81–82).

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, 69: *quo crux nil aliud est quam corpus hoc materiale, quod in similitudine crucis geritur. Hoc nos abnegare et relinquere oportet, ut cum christo ad pristinam immortalitatem revertamur.*

As I demonstrated, their answers were variable and inconsistent, in tune with their broad, syncretistic and eclectic interpretations of Christianity. On the other hand, they pinpointed some of the most important achievements in the centuries-long discussions about the nature of evil and integrated diverse traditions, from the Platonic, Hermetic and Gnostic to the Thomist and Scotist ones. Whereas Marsilio Ficino did not delve into the problem of evil with much curiosity and remained content with the Neoplatonic notion of *privatio boni*, Agrippa's restless nature compelled him to explore various alleys and directions, often finding himself in opposite theological camps. However, despite their inconsistency, his erratic solutions to the problem of the nature and origin of evil perhaps point to an unsettling possibility that an unequivocal answer to this question will forever remain beyond man's reach.