

THE FOOD ITSELF

A Delve into *Quattrocento* Rebirth
for
An Image in the Work on Health

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TO NOURISH A DEEP CURIOSITY
THE HUMAN BEING

The human being has to do with everything he or she knows. One sees the light, feels the bodies, and finally, everything is under the sign of one's alliance. An individual needs a place to be contained within – time to last, motion to live, elements to make it up, heat, air to breathe, and food to be nourished on.⁹ The human being is for oneself the most marvelous object of nature, for one cannot conceive of what the body is and even less about what the spirit is, and hardly at all that something such as the body can be united with the spirit. This seems to be the culmination of human understanding, and yet this is the human being.¹⁰

What is missing in all of this is a third mediating factor, the soul. Albeit soul is not simply a way of bringing together the two worlds. It unites indeed spirit and matter, but in its way, by adapting itself to both. Like Janus – the two-faced favorite image of Ficino, the soul draws unique qualities from the spiritual realm (mind) and the world of matter (body), creating its own style.

Ficino's most important original writings include *De triplici vita* [Three books on life]. The first printed edition [*editio princeps*], with illuminations by Attavante Attavanti, was printed in Florence by Antonio Miscomini on December 3, 1489. *De triplici vita* consists of three books: *De vita sana* [On healthy life], dedicated to Ficino's patron, *Lorenzo il Magnifico* (Lorenzo de' Medici (1449–92)), which was meant to help scholars achieve a healthy life through proper diet and habits; *De vita longa* [On long life], dedicated to Filippo Valori, a famous Florentine and protégé of Lorenzo, which provides similar advice to the elderly for health and longevity, and *De vita coelitus comparanda* [On obtaining life from the heavens], dedicated to King Matthias Corvinus of Hungary (1443–90), which delves into the possibility of drawing down strength on Earth from celestial objects.

On the whole, Ficino's *De Vita libri tres* are about physical and psychological life and health, and abound in suggestions for healthy living as well as warnings against certain inadvisable practices.



Janus Bifrons statue in the Vatican Museums <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Janus>>



Marsilio Ficino, De vita libri tres, preface of the third book *De vita coelitus comparanda*, (1489) in ms. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. 73.39, c. 80r. Source: Collection Bibliotheca Corviniana. Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana - Scaffale Digitale (bmlonline.it)

So, what Ficino advised is to design ourselves an environment for the soul, an arrangement of external life to match the soul's requirements. And this is vital for understanding the importance of a material world perceived and shaped for the well-being of soul.

To better understand Ficino's idea and to not be puzzled by his Neoplatonic descendance, we must firstly clarify the way he makes use of 'spirit'. In the Platonic tradition, the notion of spirit equates with the highest region of the threefold cosmos: body, soul, and spirit. Only that the Platonic spiritual realm is something different from the 'spirit' introduced by Ficino, which is an element essential to all psychological life. Just as soul is the link between mind and body, so is the spirit between soul and the world.

In particular, we must be warned that 'spirit' is used by Ficino in its special medical sense:

[S]pirit, which is defined by doctors as a vapor of blood—pure, subtle, hot, and clear [a]fter being generated by the heat of the heart out of the more subtle blood, it flies to the brain; and there the soul uses it continually for the exercise of the interior as well as the exterior senses. This is why the blood subserves the spirit; the spirit, the senses; and finally, the senses, reason.¹¹

And he continued explicating that while spirit is like a subtle, invisible vapor and cannot be seen because it is not something physical, it can be however felt, being perceived by the senses:

Spirit is a very tenuous body, as if now it were soul and not body, and now body and not soul. In its power there is very little of the earthy nature, but more of the watery, more likewise of the airy, and again the greatest proportion of the stellar fire.¹²

For Ficino, spirit is a usual phenomenon indispensable to all life. And even in the modern world we do not take it too seriously, we may get the idea also from common language that spirit is like air and can be felt like an emanation, a subtle essence that emerges from both bodies and situations.¹³

More important is Ficino's belief that for soul to thrive, it needs spirit in all its variety. He refers to spirit as **the food of the soul**; through spirit, soul is nourished and thus continuously being created. The essential point for an individual is to relate everyday experience to the soul's unfathomable life. And to make these connections, one must cultivate that essential faculty of the human soul – imagination,

which allows of a vision that breaks through the surface of things and grasps certain images of importance to the soul. Thus, the soul feeds on images because they are the source of spirit.

In Ficino's system, matter is spiritual as far as various material objects are capable of providing as many different kinds of spirit, and that variety nourishes the soul:

Finally, every spirit – since on account of its somewhat fiery, completely airy, clear and mobile nature it is similar to lights and thus to colors and to voices, which are made of air, and to odors and to motions of the mind – every spirit is therefore instantly moved one way or the other and formed by these things.¹⁴

From this it is deducible that those things in the environment that have such **subtle properties and significance, like fire, light, air, odor, song** are important sources of spirit and consequently they are nourishing the soul.

Following this logic, Ficino prescribed for those who want to live longer to augment their spirit with nutrients that strengthen the blood. Firstly, **blood must be stimulated with an air of excellent quality, it must be then fed every day with sweet scents and delighted with sounds and songs.**¹⁵

About odors, Ficino explained that they are the most subtle part of a certain body and those which are most nourishing come from food that is itself nourishing. His examples include **aromatic fruits** (as pear or peach are), **fresh hot bread, roasted meat, and most of all wine.** These aromas please the body and induce its quickest nourishment so they point toward the spirit. From all the aromas, Ficino stressed on that of the wine, which he believed nourishes the spirit deeply. He referred to a particular wine that is 'hot, moist, odorous, and clear', which quickly nourishes the body and also 'affects senses with pleasure'. In the same category, Ficino placed also sugar (very pure and white), cinnamon, doricum, anise, or sweet fennel.¹⁶ And his examples and prescriptions do not stop here.

Ah me, so wine lives longer than miserable man.
So let us be merry. Wine is life. I put on real wine of.

Petronius (*Satyricon*)¹⁷

VITA VINUM EST
[LIFE IS WINE]

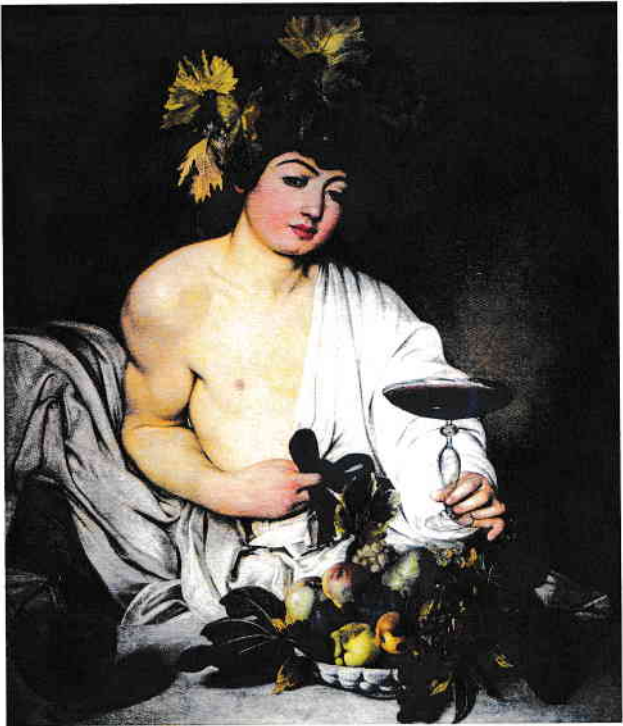
Ficino considered wine as 'the gift of Bacchus, begotten by the kindness of Apollo' and he advised drinking wine twice a day and taking each day equal portions of wine and light while avoiding their sides effects: 'neither sweat or dehydration nor drunkenness'. And to recreate one's spirit he recommended to absorb more often wine odor.¹⁸

We have seen that one of the best ways of absorbing spirit from the world around us is to surround ourselves with fertile sources of spirit (objects or activities) and to process them in some food for the soul.

In Ficino's view, wine is an image for those things which break up our literal perspectives and bring pleasure – which means time-out for our active projects and an open door for psychological participation in life. Ficino insisted that although wine affects the soul, its aroma is more appropriate to the nature of soul itself.

Aromas and fragrances are both considered stimulants and symbols for memory – a soul's faculty we continue to engage with.¹⁹ So, it can be concluded that scented objects have a relationship with memory. We already know that odors have an unexplained power to bring up memories of events long forgotten. For example, a proper combination of food cooking in the oven can take us back to childhood experiences and feelings. These stories are images of the past and have their aroma, and thus they nourish the soul, or in other words, memories are nourishing the soul because they are the substance of the *psyche*.

As Thomas Moore reminds us, our preference for the visual leads us to expect psychological imagery to appear as pictures and we do **not** see that our body is a true source for this imagery. **An image is therefore a total sensation:** seen, heard, felt, smelled, and intuited, and an alert body is a body ready for imaging.²⁰



Bacchus (c. 1596) by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571–1610)

Oil on canvas. The Uffizi, Florence <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bacchus_by_Caravaggio_1.jpg>



Apollo, God of Light, Eloquence, Poetry and the Fine Arts with Urania, Muse of Astronomy (1798), by Charles Meynier (1768–1832)

Oil on canvas. Severance and Greta Millikin Purchase Fund 2003.6.3

The Cleveland Museum of Art <<https://www.clevelandart.org/art/2003.6.3>>