

PAUL A. RUSSELL

FICINO'S *CONSIGLIO CONTRO LA PESTILENTIA*
IN THE EUROPEAN TRADITION

I have two purposes in this paper: first, to comment on the place of the *Consiglio...* within the European tradition of popular medical writing; second, to address the philosophical problem of Ficino's alleged „confusion and uncertainty” about the proper role of astrology in determining the future as evidenced by this document.

Generally speaking, the study of plague tracts, like Ficino's *Consiglio...* is represented by two groups of scholars: one group of researchers, regardless of national boundaries, simply collected tracts and reported on them. Karl Sudhoff, for example, examined 183 plague tracts, written primarily in Latin and German from 1348 through the sixteenth century, including a few works in Italian, French and Spanish.¹ Dorothy Singer provided information on twenty-two plague tracts, likewise collected from a variety of national literatures.² Other researchers tended to confine themselves to recognized modern national boundaries. Paul Slack identified twenty-three plague tracts, published in England, 1486-1604, estimated to comprise about fifteen percent of the vernacular medical publication there.³ Arturo Castiglioni described seventeen Italian plague tracts written or published, 1348-1617.⁴ Colin Jones has recently provided information on 264 texts, mostly in French or Latin, published in France between 1500-1770.⁵ In order to properly understand and appreciate Ficino's *Consiglio...* within the

¹ Karl Sudhoff, „Pestschriften aus den ersten 150 Jahren nach der Epidemie des 'schwarzen Todes' 1348” *Archiv für Geschichte der Medizin*; 5 (1912) pp. 192-22; 6 (1914) pp. 344-69; 8 (1915) pp. 182-214; 15 (1923) pp. 10-15; 16 (1924) pp. 1-53.

² Dorothy Waley Singer, „Some Plague Tractates (Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries,” *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine* ; 9 (1916), pp. 159-212.

³ Paul Slack, „Mirrors of health and treasures of poor men: the uses of the vernacular medical literature of Tudor England” in: Charles Webster, ed., *Health, medicine and mortality in the sixteenth century*, (Cambridge, 1979), p. 243.

⁴ Arturo Castiglioni „I libri italiani della pestilenza,” in: Arturo Castiglioni, ed., *Il volto di Ippocrate* (Milano, 1925)

⁵ Colin Jones, „Plague and its Metaphors in Early Modern France”, *Representations*; 53 (1996) pp. 97-127.

European tradition, it is necessary to compare it with a broader sample of tracts in Europe, beyond, at least, an artificial Italian national boundary.

Vernacular plague tracts were a Pan-European phenomenon. Medical personnel, usually physicians and surgeons, fled cities infected with the plague, seeking higher ground and better air in an effort to protect themselves. Medical people followed the same inherently selfish rules that the clergy had devised when its ranks were devastated in 1348, as they cared for plague victims: *cito, longe, tarde*: run away, far away and return long after the plague has subsided was the general rule.⁶ Taken from Galen via Foligno's 1348 *Concilium*, this remained the best advice from the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Physicians and surgeons compensated for a troubled conscience with a document left at a printer before making an exit from an infected city.⁷ Published plague tracts followed on the heels of similar manuscript versions, written for the same purpose, that could be recopied and read to interested listeners in towns where the sick had been abandoned to care for themselves. While the length of these publications might vary from a single broadside to four hundred pages, the purpose was always the same: to provide anyone who stayed behind, because they could not afford to run away, with some consolation and directions for dealing with the plague. Such publications also offered the author a conscience less troubled by guilt, especially since city physicians and surgeons were bound by oath not to abandon their clients in distress.

All of these researchers point to the the earliest manuscript examples of plague tracts by Gentile de Foligno (c1290-1348) and papal physician, Guy de Chauliac (c1300-1368) as the common model for later publications, where organization and content were imitated in fifteenth and sixteenth century medical works. As a result, by 1400, the European plague tracts shared common principles of organization and design, which I have divided into four traditional categories:

1. A preface, often preceded by a dedication, in which the author recommends prayers to God, Mary and the saints for deliverance from the plague, the first cause of which is sin.
2. A chapter on the natural origins of the plague giving the opinions of a variety of sources, while, however, always noting astrological changes and the poisoning of the air and the water that results.
3. A list of signs of the disease as well as how to recognize the progress of the infection.

⁶ Huldrych Koelbing, „The town and state physicians in Switzerland from the 16th to the 18th centuries,” *Wolfenbüttler Forschungen*, 17 (1982), p. 151.

⁷ Colin Jones, „Plague and Its Metaphors in Early Modern France,” p. 102.

4. A series of suggestions for preventing and curing the plague, often including recipes for medicine that could be obtained from an apothecary or physician or concocted at home.

In almost every chapter, the writer cites advice and examples from the ancients, a collection of diverse experts from Hippocrates to Avicenna. Most of the authors include some information from their own experience in curing people of the plague as a means to reassure and reestablish credibility after having abandoned their clients. Inevitably, they would return from exile, long after the plague had disappeared, hoping that enough people had survived to continue medical practice!

Ficino was prompted to write the *Consiglio...* by circumstances that are familiar enough. In fact, he himself had predicted great „tribulation, war and the plague,” after the death of Cosimo de’ Medici.⁸ He reiterates these predictions in the *Consiglio...*, when the conjunction of Mars with Saturn in „the human constellations,” as well as eclipses of the moon in 1478 and 1479 would be natural portents of what would follow.⁹ He was quick to include a supernatural proof of the validity of these predictions: a lost relic of St. Peter, recently found at Volterra, during a Mass at Christmas in 1477, had worked ten great miracles.¹⁰ The following August, a plague followed, such as, according to Ficino, „that had not been seen in a hundred years.”¹¹ In reality, during his lifetime, Ficino had

⁸ Luca Landucci, *A Florentine Diary, 1450-1516* (Reprint, NY, 1969), pp 23-24; the apothecary notes on 14 Sept. 1478: „And on the same day a man died of plague in the Casa del Capitano... in prison; and another man who was sick of the plague was taken out of prison and taken to the hospital of La Scala, where all those sick of the plague were carried. At this time the plague had increased so much, that 40 or more were sick at the hospital and 7 or 8 died every day, and some days even 11.” The plague did not subside. By Christmas eve, he wrote, „And the plague was also causing much mortality; it pleased God to chastise us. And at Christmas-time, what with terror of the war, the plague, and the papal excommunication, the citizens were in sorry plight. They lived in dread, and no one had silk or wool, or only very little, so that all classes suffered.” On 4 Feb. 1479, he wrote, „And now the plague has lessened considerably; God be praised...” but by 18 April he wrote, „The plague had increased to such an extent that I went away to my villa at Dicomano with all my family, leaving my apprentices to attend to the shop.”

⁹ I used an early edition in my primary research: Marsilio Ficino, *Contro Alle Peste/ Il consiglio...* (Florence, Filippo di Giunta, 1523) at the Francis Countway Medical Library in Boston, MA, however, for sake of accessibility, I cite the printed edition of Ficino’s *Consilio contro la Pestilenzia* ed. by Enrico Musacchio, with a superb introduction by Giampaola Moraglia (Bologna, 1983). See Enrico Musaccio, ed., *Consilio...* p. 56: „Vesto vapore velenoso si conrea nell’ aria nelle pestilentie più generali dalle constellationi maligne; maxime dalle coniunctioni di Marte con Saturno negli segni humani & dagli eclipsi de luminari come è la presente peste del 1478 e del 1479. Et maxime offende gli huomini e luoghi li quali hanno l’ascendente infortunato per dette constellationi.”

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, cf. Letter to Sixtus IV, Marsilio Ficino, *Opera* (Basel, 1576), I, p. 813-15; Ficino praises Sixtus for using the Interdict to prevent war and maintain peace, using papal power to prevent the horrible fate predicted by the stars and signified by the miracles at Volterra.

¹¹ Enrico Musaccio, ed., *Consilio...*, p. 109 „Nell’anno innanzi al proximo preterito, cioè 1477, nelle feste di Natale, le reliquie di San Pietro Apostolo, di nuovo trovate in Volterra, dimonstrorono, in uno mese, dieci stupendi miracoli, manifesti a tuto el populo. Onde io

seen the plague in Florence in 1449, 1450 and 1456; it had been only thirty years since plague ravished Florence the previous time in the fifteenth century.¹² It is significant that it was a relic of St. Peter at Volterra that accomplished the ten miracles. Given the strained relations between Sixtus IV (1471-84) and Florence, such a commendation could be interpreted as yet another veiled example of contempt for his less enthusiastic patron, Lorenzo de' Medici.¹³ The reference to Volterra is not without significance. Destroyed by Florence for alleged treachery on 18 June 1472, Volterra continued to provide Florence's citizenry with proof of Lorenzo's greedy, war-mongering ambitions. Blame for the attack was assigned to the Duke of Urbino, who ordered a Milanese regiment to sack the city, promising them rich rewards from the spoils. The soldiers demolished the cathedral of St. Peter as well as the bishop's palace inside the fortress at Volterra. Florence then punished Volterra with an occupying army, a severe fine and a special tax on Volterra's important mineral products: salt, alum, copper, sulfur and sulfuric acid, things indispensable for the manufacture of munitions that Lorenzo needed. The tax and the occupation were imposed for three years by Lorenzo, but was later extended by him and other rulers of Florence until 1530.¹⁴ Who managed the trade in minerals at Volterra? Merchants from the famous Pazzi family. All the towers of the fortress at Volterra were destroyed, except the oldest called *il maschio*. The *maschio* became a notorious prison, chosen especially to house the relations of the Pazzi family in 1478, after the failed conspiracy.¹⁵ Ficino's use of the re-discovered relic and its miracles demonstrates the philosopher's contempt for Lorenzo.¹⁶ Normally, a medical practitioner of Ficino's stature would have dedicated this work to Lo-

predissi a più fiorentini: credete a Marsilio Ficino, che s'apparecchia extrema tribulatione di guerre et di peste. Dipoi, el seguente Aprile, addi 26, nacque la crudeltà della feroce guerra, più che mai fussi. Poi, l'agosto, nacque la peste, tale quale non fu già, fà più di cento anni. Questi et simili sono segni di peste propinqua." Cf. Raymond Marcel, *Marsile Ficin*, (Paris, 1958) pp. 447-48. The destruction of Volterra by a Florentine army in 1477 must have weighed heavily on the conscience of Florentines.

¹² cf. Jean-Noël Biraben, *Les hommes et la peste en France et dans les pays européens et méditerranéens*, I (Paris, 1975), pp. 395-96. Biraben reports plague in Florence in 1400, 1410, 1411, 1416, 1430, 1439, 1449, 1450, 1456.

¹³ See Riccardo Fubini, „Ancora su Ficino e i Medici," *Rinascimento*, 27 (1987), pp. 290-91.

¹⁴ See Harold Acton, *The Pazzi Conspiracy: The Plot against the Medici* (London, 1990), p. 60ff. The role of the sack of Volterra is much underestimated by Acton and other English-speaking historians. cf. Lorenzo Aulo Cecina, *Notizie storiche della città di Volterra* (Pisa, 1758; reprint Bologna, 1975) pp. 239-244.

¹⁵ *Memori e Documenti dall' Archivio di Volterra* (Volterra, 1885), pp. 6-8 and Enrico Fiumi, *L'impresa di Lorenzo de' Medici contro Volterra (1472)* (Florence, 1948), pp. 158-71.

¹⁶ Luca Landucci, the Florentine apothecary, noted on 17 January, 1479, while the plague still raged in Florence: „A certain hermit came here to preach and threatened many ills. He had been at Volterra, serving at a leper hospital. He was a lad of twenty-four, barefoot, with a wallet on his back; and he declared that St. John and the Angel Raphaël had appeared to him. And one morning, he went up on to the *ringhiera* of the *Signori* to preach, but the Eight sent him away. And each day some incident happened;" in Luca Landucci, *A Florentine Diary, 1450-1516*, p. 26.

renzo. However, the *Consiglio...* remains without a dedication, unusual enough in the European tradition.¹⁷ Florence was a turbulent place while the *Consiglio...* was in progress; it was almost constantly at war, under papal interdict, threatened by international intrigue against it and invaded by a constant stream of refugees from neighboring states.¹⁸ Moreover, plague was almost constantly present in Florence from 1478 to 1482. It is evident, therefore, that Ficino wrote the *Consiglio...* in the shadow of Florence's darkest days.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Ficino's primary motivation for writing the *Consiglio...* was likely the same as that of any other medical practitioner, compassion for his Tuscan countrymen. Did Ficino flee Florence and abandon his patients as was the custom? Following Ficino's footsteps through the plague years, 1478 to 1481, is not easy: many of his letters are dated, but few indicate the place from which they were written. However, it is clear that during some of the worst months of the plague, for example, September to December 1479, he was outside Florence at Careggi and Regnano. He does make reference to his absence from Florence in a letter to Bernardo Bembo (1433-1519) dated 3 September 1480 in which, quoting Hippocrates, he would prefer being „like Democritus laughing from the high mountain at the madness, than Heraclitus in his tower weeping for the dying Ephesians...”¹⁹ Now, it is not clear exactly when the manuscript for the *Consiglio...* was written. Kristeller thinks that it was written in 1479, in response to the 1478 plague. Whereas some think 1480 was the year it was written, others feel that the *Consiglio...* was composed in the late winter of 1481, when Ficino returned to Florence and was published there in July of the same year.²⁰ I would suggest that Ficino began the work in September, 1478, when he may have cured of the plague a woman whom he mentions in the *Consiglio...*²¹ He likely continued

¹⁷ In P.O. Kristeller's *Supplementum Ficinianum*, 2 vols. (Florence, 1937) Kristeller alludes to a possible dedication to Ficino's father who died in 1478, p. 86 „Liber quasi memoriae Ficini patris dedicatus esse videtur...” however the mention of the memory of his father is far from a proper Renaissance dedication.

¹⁸ cf. Michael Allen, *Nuptial Arithmetic, Marsilio Ficino's Commentary on the Fatal Number in Book VIII of Plato's 'Republic,'* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, CA, 1994) pp. 115-16.

¹⁹ Raymond Marcel, *Marsilio Ficino*, p. 453.

²⁰ Kristeller thinks 1479 [cf. P.O. Kristeller, ed., *Supplementum Ficinianum*, I (Florence, 1937), pp. 86-87 and again in his „Ficino as a man of Letters,” in *Renaissance Quarterly*, 36:1 (1983), p. 19] ; Raymond Marcel [cf. R. Marcel, *Marsilio Ficino*, p. 453] indicates that Ficino cured a woman of the plague at Florence in September, 1480, since he mentions it in Chapter 22 or the *Consiglio...* which would date the writing in the Winter of 1481.

²¹ cf. Luca Landucci, *A Florentine Diary, 1450-1516*, p. 24; on 29 September 1479, the apothecary writes „At this time there were between sixty and seventy sick of the plague in the hospital and district together, and it as spreading to the camp [ref. soldiers' camp] also. Ficino notes in the *Consiglio...* that he cured a woman in September, which might indicate that he began writing in September, 1478, when the plague first began. He later mentions a Florentine whom he saw „this spring,” which was probably a reference to the spring of 1480, when from his letters he was clearly in Florence or possibly the spring of 1481, when he also seems to

to work on it at various times throughout 1479, 1480 and 1481. At any rate, it was July, 1481 before the work actually was printed. That summer, plague continued to affect citizens in Florence. It was probably the persistence of the plague for so long in Florence that encouraged Ficino to finish his work. Therefore, it is likely that the *Consiglio...* was written over a period of years, while Ficino was outside of Florence.

The outline of the *Consiglio...* fits perfectly the model for a typical European plague tract: after a brief preface, Ficino devotes three chapters to the natural origins of the plague, one to the signs of the plague and the other nineteen chapters to prevention and cure of the plague. Compared with this Pan-European model, Ficino's *Consiglio...* is hardly a remarkable document. Nor is much of the content of the document generally different from the content of the model in use in France, Spain, Britain or the Empire. After the first edition of the *Consiglio...* appeared in Florence in August, 1481, it was translated into Latin much later for physicians in Northern Europe and printed in Augsburg in 1518; it was again republished in Tuscan in 1523, when Florence was once again threatened by the plague. It was printed together with the much earlier plague tract of Tomaso DelGarbo, the reason for which is unclear: Ficino's work by far surpasses the earlier work of DelGarbo in quality and content. Ficino presents the usual definition for the epidemic caused directly by poisonous vapors which, in times of maligned planets and stars, arise from the earth to combine with hot, humid air where it can enter the open pores of humans. This was particularly dangerous for females, who by nature were more moist than males, according to Ficino, especially women of a sanguine or phlegmatic „complexion.” Choleric and melancholics were less likely hosts for the plague. In contrast to some scholars, who think that they discover in Ficino's explanation for the plague an early form of germ-contagion theory, Enrico Musacchio thinks, and rightly so, that Ficino's ideas were taken primarily from Hippocrates. He finds Ficino's theory of causation more a catalogue of possibilities than a scientific breakthrough. He writes that Ficino's thought „suffers from vacillation that shows a particular openness to the experience of many.”²² Although this demonstrates no particular insight, it does call attention to Ficino's openness to a variety of possible explanations and cures. He cites „Greeks, Latins and barbarian [Arab] doctors” to support his conclusions: among the most frequently cited are Aristotle, Galen, Hippocrates and Serapion among the most ancient; Avicenna, Rhases, Averroès, Al-Mansur among the barbarians; Raymon Lull, Arnold of Villanova, Gentile di Foligno, Pietro de Tosignano

have been in Florence. The fact that in order in the *Consiglio...* September precedes his reference to the spring in his practice also speaks for a work written over a longer period of time.

²²Enrico Musacchio, ed., *Consilio...* p. 24, „...il pensiero del Ficino soffre alcune oscillazioni che mostrano una apertura, pur se dubitativa, verso le sperienze di molti.”

among the moderns. Ficino creates a separate category for the advice of Spanish and Catalan physicians. All of this, he mediates through his own experience as a medical practitioner, although only twice does he mention personal contact with plague victims. Ficino demonstrates no particular prejudice for the medical theories of the ancients, barbarians or moderns. He is not party to the considerable enthusiasm that the Greek or Arab revivals evoked somewhat later in the fifteenth century, described well by Gerhard Baader.²³ This openness is not peculiar to Ficino, but is a general characteristic of fifteenth century European medical writing still dominated by Aristotelian philosophy and dependent on Galen and Hippocrates, as known in Latin translation from Arabic, not Greek, though Averroës and Avicenna.

Although Ficino's primary motive in writing the *Consiglio...* was compassion for his fellow Tuscans, it was clearly written for another more professional audience, barber-surgeons, bathhouse-personnel, midwives and apothecaries. His preventive measures-blood-letting, purgations and enemas are typical of this time. However, they could not be implemented by the unskilled. Many of the surgical remedies-lancing, cauterizing, leeching and cupping-could be carried out only by persons of considerable skill. For his cures, he recommends most often the traditional Theriac and the plague pills. For the poor who have little money for expensive medicines to prevent them from contracting the plague, he recommends „pieces of toasted bread, soaked in vinegar with a little rue, eaten together with raw onion, accompanied by good wine” (which the poor apparently could afford!).” In the same manner, to those who care for the sick, he recommends the use of emeralds; the nurse should „...hold an emerald in the mouth, wear one around the neck and drink (pulverized) emeralds.” The poor, who could not afford emeralds, would have to make do with radishes „...to dry out the blood and work against the poison.”²⁴

The *Consiglio...* is certainly Ficino's least philosophical work. Neoplatonic influence is only implicit, never explicit.²⁵ Thus the *Consiglio...* is primarily

²³ Gerhard Baader, „Die Antikerezeption in der Entwicklung der medizinischen Wissenschaft während der Renaissance,” in: *Humanismus und Medizin*, Rudolf Schmitz and Gundolf Keil eds., (Hildesheim, 1984), p. 54; cf. Donald Campbell, *Arabian Medicine and its influence on the Middle Ages* (London, 1926), I, pp. 186f.

²⁴ Enrico Musacchio, ed., *Consilio...*, p. 107: „Due cose singolari do, per conservare: a' ricchi, lo smeraldo per bere, per toccare et per tenere in bocca et al collo... A' poveri do el rafano salvatico cioè radice salvatica, un poco per volta, acciochè non infiami el sangue, che è di tanta virtù contra 'l veleno...”

²⁵ See Giancarlo Zanier, *La medicina astrologica et la sua teoria: Marsilio Ficino e i suoi critici contemporanei* (Rome, 1977), p. 23; Ficino does use the term „spirit,” in reference to the vital spirit of the body, distinct from the four humors, in the Neoplatonic sense, but this plays a remarkably minor role here; cf. James L. Bono, *The Word of God and Languages of Man; Interpreting Nature in Early Modern Science and Medicine* (Madison, WI, 1994) p. 34: „Ficino draws upon both

a practical work, filled with recommendations for curing the plague, through bloodletting, purging and medicines, together with a good measure of the astrological occult. Little makes it different from the already well-established tradition of European plague tracts. Is Ficino's *Consiglio...* unusual in any way? The answer must be, yes: there is no place for prayer or meditation as part of a regimen to prevent or cure the disease. This is proven by an unusual absence of divine causes for the plague or even the customary divine solutions. As a clergyman, he maintains an unusual religious distance. Moreover, just as in *De Triplici Vita* [begun in 1482] but published later, Ficino includes nothing relative to the pleasures of the afterlife. He likewise excludes anything that would remotely assure his readers that either prayers would help the present situation in plague time or that the rewards for an untimely, un-prepared-for death might be a blissful reception in heaven. Ficino's tract, therefore differs from other early published plague tracts, whose authors were careful to include such reassurances and prayers.²⁶

As a literary work, in style, the *Consiglio...* is unusual for its many homely analogies. For example, Ficino compares the spread of the plague, to phosphorous and its ability to spread fire or to the progress of rabies in animals. Rather than isolate any particular theory of contagion as his preferred explanation, he uses imagery that most medical practitioners would understand in order to encourage them to avoid both the places of contagion, as well as the body and personal effects of persons killed by the epidemic. In the astrological forecast for 1478 he uses no negative predictions as popular propaganda to encourage more responsible behavior among his readers. Most medical writers eager to flatter a patron and encourage reform could not resist this common feature of contemporary medical treatises. By contrast, Ficino was far more concerned with the actual prevention and cures, to which ninety-five percent of this work is devoted, than to continued speculation in the midst of an already depressing contemporary predicament, in the aftermath of the Pazzi Conspiracy and papal interdict.

Also unusual in the *Consiglio...* is the amount of text devoted to surgery and the actual number of medical prescriptions provided. Of the twenty-three chapters in the *Consiglio...*, almost half are devoted to surgery on or poultices to apply to the plague boils. Here Ficino reveals his debt to his father, a surgeon, but not a physician. This may be the reason for

traditional medical sources and the legacies of Neoplatonic speculation and medieval astrology to associate orthodox medical spirits with the far broader conception of a pervasive *spiritus* linking the macrocosm of the heavens and sublunar sphere with the microcosm of man." cf. D.P. Walker, *Spiritual Magic from Ficino to Campanella* (London, 1958), pp. 1-12 and Michael J.B. Allen, *Nuptial Arithmetic*, pp. 97-99.

²⁶ cf. Giancarlo Zanier, *La medicina astrologica*, p. 85.

the unusual concentration on surgery in this work.²⁷ It may also reflect the elevated status of surgery in Italy. Unlike in the rest of Europe, surgery in the Italian states was a discipline taught at university; Padua had two faculty chairs in surgery in the late fifteenth-century.²⁸ It could also be studied at the universities in Florence and Bologna. No other plague tract of this time devotes so much effort as does Ficino's to caring for, lancing, cupping, cauterizing and healing plague boils. Here Ficino evidently makes a genuinely special contribution to the world of plague literature. The number of recipes for prevention and cures culled from incredibly diverse sources could fill a guidebook for apothecaries. Ficino made a serious effort to provide a definitive catalogue of recipes with enormous choice for anyone interested in tending plague victims.

In the *Consiglio...*, its compilation of recipes for treating the plague clearly reveals Ficino's love for the occult. In a recommendation, to be repeated later in *De Vita Triplici*, he advises his readers to imitate: ...the Magi [who] advised the king that in order to defend himself against all poison, he should make an engraving on hematite of a man standing with knees bent, wrapped in a snake, holding the tail of the snake in his left hand and the head in his right, set in a gold ring and under the stone the beard of a serpent.²⁹

He also advises carving on a ring the image of a scorpion moving toward the moon and looking toward a rising sun. He notes how this same miraculous ring helped to save the great palace of Cordova at the beginning of an ancient war.³⁰ However, such recommendations are only part of a catalogue of advice from the ancients, barbarians and moderns. In addition, he includes Averroès' recommendation for preventing the plague by using the odor of goat urine as well as drinking gold in suspension, or eating and drinking pulverized gemstones. These occult remedies are all also part of the catalogue of potential preventions and cures, drawn from Persian sources.

²⁷ cf. Raymond Marcel, *Marsilio Ficino*, p. 127: „Pater meus Ficinus Chirurgus Florentiae suo seculo singularis...”

²⁸ See Katherine Park, *Doctors and Medicine in Early Renaissance Florence* (Princeton, NJ, 1985) pp. 63f; on surgery in Padua, see Jerome J. Bylebyl, „Padua and humanistic medicine” in: Charles Webster, Ed., *Health, Medicine & Mortality in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1979). pp. 355f.

²⁹ Enrico Musacchio, ed., *Consilio...*, p. 73; cf. Marsilio Ficino *Three Books on Life*, eds. Carol V. Kaske & John R. Clark (Binghamton, NY, 1989), p. 317-319: „There is also near Scorpio the Serpentarius (=Ophiucus), as it were a man girded with a serpent, holding the head of the serpent with his right hand, his tail with his left, with knees somewhat bent, his head bent back a bit. I have read, in fact, that the Magi counseled the Persian king that he should engrave this image on the stone haematite, and set it in a golden ring, but in such a way that between the gem and the gold they would insert the root of the snake-weed. For when wearing this ring you would be safe from poison and poisonous diseases, provided, of course, you make it when the Moon aspects Serpentarius.”

³⁰ Marsilio Ficino *Consilio...*, ed. Musacchio, p. 108.

In addition to revealing Ficino's interest in the occult, the *Consiglio...* also unveils his commitment to astrology. The question arises, does the *Consiglio...* shed any light on the philosophical problem of Ficino's alleged „confusion and uncertainty” about the proper role of astrology in determining the future? Earlier scholars, Thorndike and Kristeller, describe Ficino's use of astrology and his concurrent defense of free will against astrological determinism as signs of indecision and confusion or at best, inconsistency. More recent scholars, Giancarlo Zanier, for example, have been much more apologetic, describing Ficino's confusion and uncertainty as part of a general, contemporary philosophical malaise.³¹ Zanier notes both the confusion and ambivalence in Ficino's applications of astrological causes, at times defending human free-will and at other times writing as if one's horoscope indeed determined destiny. He writes „...it is strange in Ficino's case, in contrast to the greater body of Christian thought, that he did not avert this danger.”³²

As social historians increasingly help us to see practice as well as theory in our understanding of past cultures, we need to come to terms with the importance of forecasting horoscopes as a means, not only of providing the individual with necessary knowledge of physical human weaknesses and psychological strengths, but also, on a higher level, serving as a cornerstone of medieval scientific knowledge. In Ficino's time, the unity of the cosmos was the foundation upon which medical science rested. For Ficino to discredit this foundation would be tantamount to someone in our own time daring to question the truth of a theory of viral contagion. In fact, our contemporary AIDS researchers seldom leave the tradition behind, as they free themselves to speculate on the activity of a virus that defies the rules of science. Can we therefore expect Ficino to be any more capable of abandoning the foundation of medical truth in his own time? In the *Consiglio...* the very thought that the plague could be cured, and he gives examples of this, confirms the human ability to alter the course of fate written in the stars. Ficino's own early calling as a medical practitioner is confirmation of such hope that fate could be altered.

The homocentric cosmological norm of the fifteenth century fits perfectly Ficino's world-view in the *Consiglio...* Defended long into the sixteenth century by the Veronese physician Girolamo Fracastoro (1483-1553), who was the author of a work on the subject, it conceives of the universe as a system of planetary spheres with the earth at its center.³³ Aristotelian in conception, it was elaborated on by Averroës and became particularly

³¹ See Melissa M. Bullard, „The Inward Zodiac: A Development in Ficino's Thought on Astrology,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 43:4 (1990), pp. 687 ff.

³² This is the origin of the term „homocentric” having the same center. See Giancarlo Zanier, *La medicina astrologica...*, p. 58

³³ Girolamo Fracastoro, *Homocentrica* (Venice, 1538)

popular among the medical community for its reliance on the astrological origins of both human complexions and the healing capability of plants and elements. Homocentrists divided the heavens into three levels: the airy, just above earth, where there were birds and clouds, the sidereal, where there were planets and stars and the *empyrean*, where God reigned eternally with his saints.³⁴ Human beings were alternatively subject to all three levels. At the highest level, Providence determined everything; on the sidereal level, the stars and planets carried out Providence's grand design, by providing signs and portents for the future. On the lowest level, imperfect humans used their free will to mediate, by whatever means possible, the signs in the heavens with the weaknesses and strengths given them at birth by God and sealed in their „complexions“. They could do this by preserving their bodies through good living and curing themselves by the use of natural medicines, God's cures hidden in nature. Since no perfect knowledge of the Divine plan could be attained by humans because of original sin, the old Augustinian formula *simul justus et peccator* [used to describe the human condition in theological terms] was mirrored in a similar medical mystery: from a technical point of view, human beings were similarly *simul fato profugus et liber*. They stood between fate written in the stars and the cures, implicit alterations to fate, that God had provided and which they accepted by their own free will. Just as priests mediated salvation through the mystery of the incarnation, so astrologers and medical practitioners mediated fate through *Deus absconditus*, God hidden in nature.³⁵ Fifteenth century advocates of this cosmology pursued a unique eclecticism, striving to „blend occult sciences, Averroism and Neoplatonism.“³⁶ This same blend is exactly what Ficino represents in his medical theory. Melissa Bullard came closer to this solution to the problem of Ficino's „inconsistency“ when she noted: „Ficino stresses a person's freedom and ability to utilize the heavens and the medicines and talismans associated with individual planets, in order to draw upon their particular influences, or conversely to avoid them.“³⁷ Still, the temptation to impose a modern system of logic and order on Ficino leads many scholars to dismiss him as actively indecisive or passively confused.³⁸ One can agree with James Bono's summary, that „Ficino rearticulated in Neoplatonic

³⁴ See James M. Lattis, *Between Copernicus and Galileo* (Chicago, 1994), p. 96

³⁵ cf. Michael Allen, *Nuptial Arithmetic*, pp. 116f., „The taproot that sustained this equivocal approach to stellar agency... was his medical or... psycho-therapeutic, training and orientation, and his inability to conceive, like the vast majority of his contemporaries, of an effective regimen, let alone a pharmacopoeia, that was not governed by planetary influences. We might even contend that he was never fully able to liberate himself from his medical, and therefore from his astrological, education and experience.“

³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 87.

³⁷ Melissa Meriam Bullard, „The Inward Zodiac: A Development in Ficino's Thought on Astrology“ in *Renaissance Quarterly*, 43:4 (1990), p. 700.

³⁸ The best summary of more recent apologists for Ficino can be found in Michael Allen, *Nuptial Arithmetic...*, pp. 106-07, n2.

guise the idea of the created universe as mirroring the divine ideas in order to fashion...[a] system of astrological medicine and spiritual magic... [able] to harness the hidden forces of nature through talismans, images, and words..." However, it must be noted that this general system is hardly peculiar to Ficino. It was common to the medical profession and provided a framework for most medical writing before the late sixteenth century. Miguel Granada sees Ficino's astrology as essentially anti-Christian and pagan, but Granada fails to appreciate the Aristotelian unity in a homocentric cosmos that still dominated medical thought in the fifteenth century. I believe that there is no inherent contradiction in Ficino's astrological interests and the principles of medieval Christianity as mediated through the Aristotelian tradition.³⁹ What some have seen as „confusion” or „indecision” in Ficino's dualistic advocacy of astrological determinism and free will (described by some as the result of his own melancholy nature!) is derived from a common cosmological blend of ideas that fits entirely the homocentric world-view of Renaissance medical practitioners.⁴⁰

³⁹ cf. Miguel Granada, *Cosmología, religión y política en el Renacimiento. Ficino, Savonarola, Pomponazzi, Maquiavelo* [Pensamiento crítico/Pensamiento utópico, 35] (Barcelona, 1988), where the author concludes that Ficino as well as Pomponazzi and Machiavelli demonstrated anti-Christian attitudes in their cosmology, essentially hostile to both religion and prophecy.

⁴⁰ cf. Melissa M. Bullard, „The Inward Zodiac...” p. 706, „Ficino's vision of an inner zodiac, what we might call his astrological psychology...was wrestled out only gradually over the years, fruit of a difficult process filled with uncertainty and waverings”.