

# Philosophy of Health in Renaissance Platonism: Between Theory and Practice

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**Abstract:** This research will attempt to show that the relationship between theory and practice of The Health in Renaissance thought, especially Platonist-oriented one(s), is analogous to what Hans-Georg Gadamer says in his text from 1990 - *Philosophy and Practical Medicine*. Here, we primarily refer to his view that it is undeniable that “*classical medicine* on which the research of *modern medicine* is largely based, is only a small sector compared to the human task that the art of healing as a whole should accomplish”. Almost all the significant thinkers of the Renaissance Platonism, among whom we will highlight - Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Erasmus of Rotterdam and Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim – Paracelsus, although aware of the importance of empirical research, especially for the period of humanism and anticipation of the later birth of a *New Science* (1725) never abandoned theory as a guide to practical results when it comes to many fields, including the area of The Health and medicine. This is perhaps best reflected in the words of probably the greatest mystic, naturalist, alchemist, and empiricist in general of all the above thinkers, and that is certainly Paracelsus, who claimed that the source of every disease is in the Nature, and the Healing and the Health lies only in the Spirit.

**Key-words:** philosophy of health; practice; medicine; Renaissance Platonism;

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*So we truly feel health - and that's how the Greeks saw it - as harmony, as measured adequacy (Gadamer 2021, 35).*

## **Introduction: Philosophy and Practical Medicine**

This research will attempt to show that the relationship between theory and practice of The Health in Renaissance thought, especially Platonist-oriented one(s), is analogous to what Hans-Georg Gadamer says in his text from 1990 - *Philosophy and Practical Medicine*. Here, we primarily refer to his view that it is undeniable that “classical medicine on which the research of modern medicine is largely based, is only a small sector compared to the human task that the art of healing as a whole should accomplish” (Gadamer 2021, 30).

In this text, Gadamer is certainly aware that *philosophy is miles away from practice*, but also that science is an omnipresent institution of modern society in which it has confidence, like a patient has confidence in a doctor. However, he also asks here why it was necessary to leave the pre-scientific stage of human life experience, which in many cultures, for a long time, without modern science, provided some kind of care and management of illness? “How can modern science deal with this problem and set these tasks for the doctor in today's society?” (Ibid, 31). It is clear to Gadamer here, as it was to Canguilhem, that it is not just medicine as the science of diseases that is at issue, because there is no disease without health, as that which should be normalized. However, both belong to what the doctor must know or what he seeks to know through the means of modern science. And it is here that we arrive at the unanswered question - *What is The Health?* (Ibid, 31-32). It is roughly known what diseases are, because they have a kind of rebellion of outbursts. As a phenomenon, they are an object, something that offers resistance that needs to be broken, for example, by being put under scrutiny and judged, bearing in mind all the methods available within the framework of objectifying science as a part of modern natural science. However, health is not something that is revealed as such during research; rather, it recedes precisely in this way. So, we are not constantly aware of health, and it does not follow us anxiously like illness.

It is something that calls or warns us of constant self-treatment. It belongs to the miracle of self-forgetfulness. In contrast, theory, pure observation, what does it seek, what does it find? (Ibid, 32).

The goal of this research is to demonstrate how it was possible to approach The Health from both the aforementioned theoretical, and practical sides in the works of thinkers who belonged to the period of Renaissance Platonism.

### **God's Hierarchy of Health in the Thought of Marsilio FICINO (1433-1499)**

“The third highest god is Apollo who, in the metaphysical system of the *Laws*, is the bestowed of identity (ταυτότης) in our sensible world. According to Plethons (1355-1452) hymn dedicated to him, he introduces unity into the things that are mutually different and, moreover, he establishes one harmony' in the universe with many parts. Similarly, in the souls he produces concord, from which prudence and justice originate. For bodies, he is the source of health and beauty” (Hladky 2014, 102).

The first of the thinkers to be discussed is certainly the one who shared a similar fate with Aristotle, since both of their fathers were physicians to the rulers of the time, Nicomachus to Philip II, while Marsilio Ficino's father, Diotifeci, was a doctor to Cosimo de' Medici. Therefore, it is undoubtedly true that his interests in medicine and health came from this source, although in his famous writings *Theologia platonica de immortalitate animorum (Platonic Theology)*, which he had been writing from 1469 to 1474 and published in 1482, it was not until Book XVI term Health was mentioned for the first time. Within the fourth proof, and thus the chapter, entitled: *That the soul may become more blessed*. Ficino argues that *the descent of the soul into the body contributes, furthermore, to the blessedness of the soul itself*. He explains this with exactly what modern phenomenologists and hermeneutics of The Health, as Canguillem and Gadamer only confirmed many centuries later:

“For whoever is dull in his wits and strong in body will not know how to value his good health (*bona valetudo*). One must be sick from

time to time so that by way of comparison at least one may recognize the value of health (*pretium sanitatis*), and with renewed pleasure enjoy one's renewed health (*iterum sanitate*). Man's soul, being more obtuse than all minds, needs this comparison in order to make the most comprehensive judgment about the weightiest matters" (Ficino 2005, 260-261)<sup>2</sup>.

In the last, 18th book, right before the conclusion itself, Ficino goes even further, and through an analogy, connects Health with Transcendence, comparing how:

"just as in ailing bodies, where nature cannot expel the disease and return to health (*sanitatem*) under its own power, nature usually does expel the disease when strengthened by the art of doctors, similarly in minds too, where the natural faculty for purging the corporeal habit and for returning to God is lacking, *the all-powerful Doctor (omnipotentem medicum* - italic by V. T.), either solely through His own power or with the aid of His blessed ministers, blessedly accomplishes both" (Ficino 2006, 215-217).

In addition to the fact that he did this here, and also declared God the Absolute Physician, Ficino also made a connection between Health and Transcendence in the introduction, by saying that the heavenly flavor (*caelestis ille saluberrimusque sapor*), is the one that endows a person with Health (Ibid, 250-251).

However, when it comes to the topic of Health, much more important for Ficino is his later work *De vita libri tres (Three Books on Life)*, which he had been writing from 1480 to 1489, when he published it. The first of these books, entitled *On Caring for the Health of Students or Those Who Work in Letters, Taking Care of Their Good Health*, in twenty-six chapters, he tries to provide practical advice, mainly to take care of the students' physical health, and to advise them on which foods are good for their diet, which are not, as well as to refrain from excessive use of wine (Ficino 1988, 3-36). However, in the last chapter, *we should be guardians*

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<sup>2</sup> Latin terms italicized in brackets by V. T.

*of our spirits*, Ficino again comes to the metaphysical-religious aspect of Health, arguing that:

“There is a saying of the magus’s, and of Plato, that the entire body so hangs from the soul that unless the soul is well the body cannot be well. This is why the founder of medicine, Apollo, decided that Socrates was the wisest of men and not Hippocrates, though Hippocrates was born from Apollo’s own lineage. As much as Hippocrates studied the health of the body, Socrates studied the health of the soul, although what both of these men tried to do only Christ brought about” (Ibid, 35).

After another confirmation that Jesus Christ is the only *Absolute Physician*, in the second book *How To Prolong Your Life* (pp. 37-81)<sup>3</sup>, Ficino also gives some obscure and occult advice, such as that young human blood is very healthy and beneficial for the elderly (Ibid, 58). However, there are also more understandable ones, such as spending time with young people (Ibid, 59), the significance of good air for health (Ibid, 74), and that is use of *fresh mint, healthful for the mind and totally safe for the spirit* (Ibid, 76). In the third, final, and by far the most extensive book *On Making Your Life Agree with the Heavens* (pp. 83-183), in most of his 26 chapters, Ficino relates Health and medicine to the broad field of transcendence. Therefore, in the *Exhortation*, he begins very optimistically with a promise of health to all, but if God permits:

“Good health, honoured guest! Good health to any of you who come to our doorstep hungry for health! I beg you, the guest who is hungry, to see how hospitable I am. For no sooner had you entered than I asked about your health. Anticipating your health, I bid you good health as soon as I saw you. When you entered here, unknown to me, I received you with great pleasure. If you follow my customs, I will give you the health promised (if God allows it)” (Ibid, 85).

That this broad field of transcendence includes not only religion, and in large part the gods of Roman polytheism, but also, most

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<sup>3</sup> *On Prolonging the Life of Scholars* as an alternative name.

significantly, to the importance of astrology, Ficino points out in the words: *Finally, let us conclude with Galen that astrology is necessary for the doctor. Galen, arguing about critical days, once said:*

“There is a certain saying of the Egyptians, that the Moon marks the affections from day to day, both for the sick and the healthy, so that if the rays of Jove and Venus are mixed with the Moon, both the sick and the healthy will be helped” (Ibid, 115).

However, the quote from this book that most appropriately concludes this chapter and shows how Ficino actually believed that God had a clearly structured hierarchy of Health is the following:

“If you admit that God has put marvellous powers in things beneath the Moon, admit that they are even more marvellous in heavenly things; and if you think that it is all right for a man to use the lower things for his health, think, too, that it is all right to use the higher things. The rule should be, from the lower to the higher, tempering them with the art of the doctor, as they were tempered from the beginning by God” (Ibid, 136).

### **Platonic, Polytheistic, and Monotheistic Sources of Health in Works of Giovanni Pico della MIRANDOLA (1463-1494)**

*Magnum, o Asclepi, miraculum est homo – Mercurri – Asclepius – hermetic tractatus from the IV century (Mirandola 1994, 26-27)*

In his two most famous texts from 1486 - *Oratio de hominis dignitate (Oration on the Dignity of Man)*, and in *Conclusiones Nongentae publicae disputandae (900 theses)* Platonic sources can be discerned in Mirandola when one seeks to explore his understanding of Health. So he, in *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, quoted Plato from his remarkable dialogue when he said:

“In the *Charmides*<sup>4</sup> he will answer that the magic of Zamolxis is the medicine of the soul, because it brings temperance to the soul as medicine brings health to the body. Later Charondas, Damigeron, Apollonius, Osthane and Dardanus continued in their footsteps, as

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<sup>4</sup> Footnote n. 41. refer to: Plato *Charmides* 156d, 157a.

did Homer, of whom we shall some time prove, in a "poetic theology" we propose to write, that he concealed this doctrine, symbolically, in the wanderings of his Ulysses, just as he did all other learned doctrines" (Mirandola 1956, 55-56).

In 900 theses, in his trying to explain how:

"20.14. Just as accidental happiness demands attention, so substantial happiness not only is not lost, but is strengthened, by a neglect of attention. (240)

20.15. A man who has finally reached happiness will not be held back from that by frenzy or lethargy". Pico's source for 20.15 is apparently *Enneads 1.4.3ff.*

The idea in the original is that the *soul's happiness* is independent of the body's state of health or disease. The normal scholastic view of "frenzy" and "lethargy", on the other hand, was that such extreme psychological states impeded the soul's cognitive powers" (Mirandola 2003, 301). Then in the rest of this book in the paragraphs:

"22.7. Just as Apollo is the solar intellect, so Aesculapius is the lunar intellect.

22.8. From the preceding conclusion I deduce why the moon in a scending gives health at birth" (Mirandola 2003, 55-56).

Mirandola was adapting some statements from Proclus In *Timaeum* (Diehl 1:147, 159), which pits Porphyry against Iamblichus. "The first of many theses involving astrological correspondences. It is important to note that none of these endorses the horoscopic types of astrology attacked most sharply in the Disputations". Especially in 22.7, "Apollo's 'solar intellect' = Pico's "total" or "angelic" intellect; "Aesculapius"/"lunar intellect" = the passive intellect or "reason" (cf 5>19)—throwing light on Pico's mystical riddle in 22.8. Other theses with astrological elements include 23.7, 5>9-12, 5>34, 7a>74, 11>72, and also contains many others in Pico's magical and Cabalistic theses (Mirandola 2003, 307).

And although all previous sources included Platonism, as well as Greek polytheism, Pico cannot be disputed with the Judeo-Christian

position in the origin of Health (from *Oratio de hominis dignitate*), which comes from the Hebrew etymology of Archangel Raphael:

“This is the promised land toward which our ancient father Abraham was ever advancing; this the region where, as the teachings of the Cabahsts and the Moorstell us, there is no place for unclean spirits. And if we may be permitted, even in the form of a riddle, to say anything publicly about the deeper mysteries: since the precipitous fall of man from heaven has left his mind in a vertiginous whirl and since according to Jeremiah<sup>5</sup>, death has come in through the windows to infect our hearts and bowels with evil, let us call upon Raphael, the heavenly healer that by moral philosophy and dialectic, as with healing drugs, he may release us. When we shall have been restored to health, Gabriel, the strength of God, will abide in us (Mirandola 1956, 33)”.

Considering everything presented so far, it is easy to conclude that Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's philosophy of health mainly, if not exclusively, relied on theoretical-transcendence insights, which is similar to the divine-hierarchical position of health in Marsilio Ficino, with the difference that in Pico's thought, practice and empiricism are only presupposed consequences of such a position.

### **ERASMUS of Rotterdam (1466-1536): Humanist-Christian and Platonist-Renaissance Thinker of *the Health of the Others***

“May you be able to sin as long as possible? You pray to be rich, and you do not know how to use riches: are you not then praying for your own destruction? *You pray for good health, and you abuse it: is not your piety then impiety?*” – Holborn (Alken 1994, 80).

„*Singing about hope, the lark creates it.* For Leonardo da Vinci, she is a prophetess and healer (*Notes by Leonardo da Vinci*): “It is said that a lark, when brought to a sick person who is about to die, averts its gaze from him... But *if the sick person needs to recover, the bird does*

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<sup>5</sup> Footnote n. 25: *Jeremiah 9:21*.

*not take its eyes off him and thanks to her he recovers" – Leonardo (Bašlar 2001, 106).*

Although Erasmus is best known as an author for his *Praise of Folly (Moriae encomium)*, written in 1509, for about two weeks in the home of Thomas More (1478-1595), which first saw the light of day in Paris in 1511, those who are more familiar with his character and work, such as Alken, are aware that the deeper meaning of his faith, which as an inner Christianity represents an incentive for the Reformation of the Church, contemporary with, but perhaps even before, Luther (Alken 1994, 180-196), is already presented in the *Handbook of the Christian Knight* from 1501 (1503). In this work, he sees Christ, who according to the Gospel is the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6), unambiguously as the "only way (to) Health" (Erasmus 2006, 121), and on whose *Cross is the Health of all others* (Ibid, 273). He first of all advocated that one should care for the health of the soul and spirit (Ibid, 8, 10, 12, 57, 141, 143, 157), and only then the body (Ibid, 24, 143, 232, 253, 266). He also cites interesting motifs of a healthy blade and helmet, which, if present on the head of every warrior of Christ, make one fearless (Ibid, 72).

However, in him, similarly to Augustine, there is also another, *earthly health*, which most resembles the Stoic one, because he clearly claims that it is by its nature one of the indifferent things (Ibid, 130, 134), but also one of the natural gifts (Ibid, 132). Erasmus suggests that if it, as desired, is absent as a useful value in life, then perhaps it even comes to the point that respect for God becomes dishonouring Him (Ibid, 137). In other words, in the sense of the above, but also the fact that Christ himself, after performing many miracles, including healing ones, on the Cross still says that if he does not bodily leave this world, the Holy Spirit will not come, Erasmus concludes: "Christ's bodily presence is unprofitable (useless) for health" (Ibid, 158). Therefore, he establishes a clear rule that is necessary for the final establishment of the concept of *Health of the Others*:

"This rule is, therefore, that the mind of him who imposes and labours for Christ, varies as much as possible both from the deeds and opinions of ordinary laymen, and that the example of piety is set for nothing else than Christ: for he is the only and chief patron and the only ruling example or form of life, from whom everyone

departs who deviates even an inch in width from the right path and wanders from it" (Ibid, 184).

Those who wander from that Path, in his opinion, are certainly those who are carried away by sorcery and prayers invented by some pious impostors for vanity or for the sake of acquiring money, promising not only Health, but also the nearest place with Christ in heaven (Erasmus, 2019, 88). Apart from the harsh criticism directed at these serious offenders, he also does not value the figure of the Physician of his time, nor the legal profession, to which he compares in the manner of Plato, much, because he responsibly claims that: "the more impudent, frivolous and ignorant these officials are, the more they are appreciated among the wealthy strata of society", who shower them with expensive gifts. For this reason, he equates (bad) medical skill (similarly to Plato) with rhetoric, because both are "nothing else but a special kind of flattery" (Ibid, 78). In contrast, Erasmus, again in the Augustinian spirit, offers as an alternative perhaps the greatest gifts of God to people - free will and grace, the correspondence of which he saw as analogous to the motif of a *healthy eye*:

„ For even a healthy eye cannot see in darkness, and a blind eye cannot see even in the light. Likewise, free will cannot do anything if grace is withdrawn. Likewise, even someone with healthy eyes can close his eyes to a flash of light and see nothing more" (Alken 1994, 191).

Therefore, Erasmus, who in his writings exhibited exceptional expertise on Greek and the Bible, and as such profiled himself as one of the pioneers of Renaissance philosophy and the history of philosophy, like Hegel before Hegel, ends his *Praise of Folly* in the style of Seneca - *Vale - Be good!*, a greeting that, apart from at the end of the famous lectures from the *History of Philosophy* (Hegel 1970, 542), the famous German for whom Rotterdam somewhat paved the way in the field of philosophy, also appears in the *Acts of the Apostles* and which reads:

"Stay (with me) healthy!" adding: "glorious devotees of *Folly*, applaud, live, drink!" (Erasmus 2019, 154).

As stated in the final sentence:

“Applause, live, drink – in ancient Roman comedy the actor called on the audience with the words: applaud! Here Madness adds on its part: live, drink!” (Ibid, 197).

After a speech about Erasmus's understanding of Health, which, as has once again been shown, is primarily theoretical, it is imperative to finally present the most comprehensive Renaissance genius of the theory and practice of Health.

**Captain of the Renaissance Philosophy of Health Team:  
Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim  
- PARACELSUS (1493-1541)**

*Der höchste Grund der Arznei ist die Liebe - The highest reason for  
medicine is love* (Thaller 1938, 220).

Right at the beginning of this chapter, there is a dilemma about how to present in such a small space everything that Paracelsus's genius achieved when it comes to *medicine as a practice*, but also the *Philosophy of Health* as a theory. However, if he could be very concise in his writings, such as the one from 1527, *De Vita Longa (On the Long Life)*, then a few sentences about his life and work could be said in that way. Namely, although Paracelsus was a sincere and convinced Christian who accepted all the Christian sacred mysteries (especially the Eucharist) with both heart and mind, this did not prevent him from boldly developing Neoplatonist and Gnostic ideas when it came to theology, or the philosophy of religion, as well as being a perfect empiricist, relating to nature like a pantheist with worship, especially when it came to practical medicine and medical skill (Jerotić 1987, 115). Although he received a degree from an official medical school, his understanding of this science was largely based on the knowledge and great respect he had for other disciplines (Jerotić 2022, 286). Therefore, in one of his treatises on the Physician, after drawing a clear parallel between this profession and God, according to which he is expected to discover the endless wonders of the Lord and to remain a Christian in everything, he also reveals the five basic pillars of

medicine. These are under *a) The Foundations* that he wants to find in philosophy, astronomy, and alchemy. Under *b) Philosophy* is contained in the fact that the type of disease (which is a *being* in itself), matter, and property, with the essence of all of them together, are understood from it... Because disease comes from nature, medicine comes from nature, not from a doctor. Under *c)* there is *Microcosmic Astronomy*, because in human, there is a rejuvenated sky, that is, all the planets in man have a corresponding copy. Under *d)* the third foundation on which medicine rests is *Alchemy*. The true meaning of alchemy is not the arrival of precious metals, but "Create *arcana* and turn them against disease!". In this lies the path of healing and recovery. All this is made possible by alchemy, without which nothing happens. And under *e)* Paracelsus did not overlook *Medical Ethics* as the foundation and pillar of medicine, because a physician should not only be devoted to a true faith, but also be pure and blameless, so it should not be surprising that a few chapters later, he proposed innovating the *Hippocratic Oath*. This genius advocated more than anything else for practice and the naturalistic and empirical method in medicine, because a doctor's most important book should be his patients. Simply - empirically and rationally - *Experimenta ac ratio!* (Paracelzus 2014, 42-53).

According to Alexandre Koyre, Paracelsus was faithful to the principle of the gradual development of an undifferentiated intensive unit into an extensive multitude of individual forms, and therefore he posits as the foundation, origin and root of the world, something that he calls by various names, the most frequent of which are: *Chaos*, *Yilaster* and *Mysterium Magnum*. The latter term thus represents the egg from which the world is born, and every being has this own germ from which it emerges and the active power that guides it and governs its evolution, while *Yilaster* or *Yilader* is the first realization, or rather the first concrete materialization of the *Mysterium Magnum* of life, the weft from which the world will be created (Koare 2001, 83-84).

The great Serbian author and admirer of Paracelsus, Vladeta Jerotić, then concluded synchronously with previously said, that according to the great thinker's teachings, there are three levels of being in man: *the elementary body*, *the sidereal body*, and *the logos-spirit*. The elementary body would thus correspond to what is usually called *matter*, and the sidereal would be located *between the elementary and the logos*, and according to the description, would most closely correspond to the mixture

of the so-called etheric and astral bodies of *Hermetic literature* (Jerotić 2022, 287). Simply put, for Paracelsus, *the human is an image of the universe* and is created in two ways: from above, the divine image, the spirit, is imprinted in him, while from below, he is given a body. However, this thinker believes that he is given a tincture that transforms him, just as some other tincture transforms the metals it acts on. “Christ, the God-man, is our tincture. The New Adam transforms us and gives us a spiritual body, just as the *philosopher’s stone* transforms and transforms metals” (Koare 2001, 88-89).

So, now we come to the point where it becomes clear that no matter how much Paracelsus worried about the empirical repercussions of health and disease, the sovereign source of health lies solely in the Triune God and Christ as the healer of soul and body. Therefore, in the end, the words of the great Carl Gustav Jung, who wrote about Paracelsus, should not come as a surprise:

“Christian and primitive pagan man lived in him strangely and magnificently in one conflicting whole, as in many great men of the Renaissance. Although he already carried within himself a fatal conflict, he was spared that painful split between knowledge and faith that befell later epochs” (Jung 1987, 106).

**Instead of conclusion:**

**Did the Great Men of the Renaissance *crack open the door to Health for us, and how?***

“In later life, it is only then that such experiences accumulate that make it clearer that what is truly special lies not so much in illness as in the miracle of health” (Gadamer 2021, 39).

Considering all the contradictions we have discussed, such as *the theory in which there is no difference between it and practice, but in practice there is*, the Platonic duality of heavenly and earthly, spiritual and physical, and illness and health, don't they seem to be simply inseparable from each other to us? It's like when, after a magnificent feast that abounded in delicious gastronomic delicacies, there is a pile of accumulated dishes that *indeed we need to wash* - if we cannot even theoretically imagine that

cleanliness after washing, the greater the likelihood that we will procrastinate, but the sooner we *imagine* it, the sooner we will be free from it. The same is true with Gadamer's *hiddenness of Health*, and whether the answer to the question posed in the title is affirmative, judge for yourself!

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