

A Book on Life Divided into  
Three Books  
*De vita libri tres*  
(excerpts)\*

Marsilio Ficino

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**The Words of Marsilio Ficino  
to the Reader of the Following Book**

Hail, intellectual guest! Hail to you, too, whosoever you are who approaches our threshold desiring health! See, eager guest, first of all, how hospitable I am. For certainly it was the role of the visitor, to first salute the hostelry; but I, before you could salute me, have saluted you as soon as I saw you. I have gladly welcomed you while you were entering and as yet unknown. And if you stay with me awhile, I will give you, please God, the health [*salute*] I promised you. You have gained a lodging friendly to all and now full of love towards you. If by chance you bring with you anything contrary to love, if you have any hate, please dispose of it first, before you approach the life-giving medicines here. For it was the love and pleasure

of your parents that gave you life. Conversely, hate and displeasure take away life. Therefore the person who harbors disagreeable resentment, has no share in life-giving medicine. So from now on I address you not only as my guest but as my friend.



## **Book One, On a Healthy Life**

### **Chapter I**

#### **The Nine Guides of Scholars**

Anyone who enters upon that rough, arduous, and long journey which barely, at the last, by continual hardship leads through to the high temple of the nine Muses, seems to need exactly nine guides in this journey. The first three lead us in the heavens, the next three in the soul, the last three on earth.

To begin with, in the heavens, Mercury either impels or exhorts us that we should undertake the

journey in search of the Muses, since to Mercury is attributed the charge of every investigation. Next is Phoebus, who so illuminates the seeking souls and the things sought with copious light, that we find clearly what we sought. Gracious Venus is added, the mother of the graces; and with her all-bountiful and joyful rays she so enhances and adorns the material, that whatever both by Mercury's instigation has been sought and by Phoebus's showing has been found, is invested with Venus's wonderful and health-giving charm and always delights and profits.

There follow three guides of this journey in the soul—that is, a fierce and firm will, sharpness of intelligence, and a tenacious memory.

The last three are on earth—a prudent father, a thoroughly accredited teacher, and a thoroughly experienced physician (*prudentissimus paterfamilias, probatissimus praeceptor, medicus peritissimus*). And without these nine guides, no man either has been or ever will be able to get all the way to the temple of the nine Muses. God omnipotent and nature, indeed, assigned the other guides to us from the beginning;

the last three, however, are summoned by our diligence (*nostra adhibet diligentia*). But the precepts and duties appertaining to the father and the teacher in literary studies have been treated by many wise authors of antiquity, especially my author Plato, often elsewhere but most exhaustively in his books *On the Republic* and *On the Laws*, then Aristotle in his *Politics*, Plutarch also, and Quintilian unusually well. Only a physician is as yet a desideratum for literary scholars—one who might reach a hand to them as they go, and help with salutary counsels and medicines those who already have the heavens, the mind, the father, and the teacher. Since I pity the burdensome lot of those who make the difficult journey of Minerva who shrinks the sinews, I am the first to attend as a physician sick and invalid scholars; but would that my ability were as sound as my will is dedicated! Rise up, now, God leading, those of you who are still lively adolescents! Rise up, young people and mature people enervated by too fierce pursuit of Minerva! Gladly approach the physician who will dispense to you (God revealing and helping) salut-

ary counsels and remedies for the accomplishment of your purpose!

## Chapter II

### What Diligent Care We Should Take of the Brain, the Heart, the Stomach, and the Spirit

In the first place, as much care as runners habitually take of their legs, athletes of their arms, musicians of their voice, even so it behooves literary scholars to have at least as much concern for their brain and heart, their liver and stomach—and indeed so much the more, in proportion as the latter parts are more excellent than are the former and literary scholars use their parts more frequently and for more important things than the former people do theirs. Moreover, an expert craftsman takes most diligent care of his instruments—a painter his pencils, a coppersmith his hammers and anvils, a soldier his horses and arms, a hunter his dogs and birds, a lute-player his lute, and the same goes for anyone and the tools of his trade. But only the priests of the Muses, only the hunters after the highest good and truth, are so negligent (oh

shame!) and so unfortunate, that they seem wholly to neglect that instrument with which they are able in a way to measure and grasp the whole world. This instrument is the spirit, which is defined by doctors as a vapor of blood—pure, subtle, hot, and clear. After 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. Now the blood is made by that natural power which flourishes in the liver and the stomach. The lightest part of the blood flows into the fountain of the heart, where flourishes the vital power. The spirits generated from this ascend to the citadels of the brain and (as I might say) of Pallas; in these [citadels, i.e., the brain] the animal force, that is, the power of sense and motion, dominates. Thus, undoubtedly the contemplation is usually as good as is the compliance of the sense; the sense is as good as is the spirit; the spirit is as good as is both the blood and those three forces which we mentioned—

i.e., the natural, vital, and animal, by which, through which, and in which the spirits themselves are conceived, born, and nourished.

### Chapter III

#### **Learned People Are Subject to Phlegm and Black Bile (*melancholia*)**

Not only should learned people take very diligent care of those members and of the powers and of the spirits, but also they are told always scrupulously to avoid phlegm and black bile (*μελαγχολία*), even as sailors do Scylla and Charybdis. For just as they are inactive in the rest of the body, so they are busy in the brain and the mind. From the former circumstance they are compelled to secrete pituita, which the Greeks call phlegm, and from the latter, black bile, which they call melancholy. Phlegm dulls and suffocates the intelligence, while melancholy, if it is too abundant or vehement, vexes the mind with continual care and frequent absurdities and unsettles the judgment. Hence it can justly be said that learned people would even be unusually healthy, were they



not burdened by phlegm, and the happiest and wisest of mortals, were they not driven by the bad effects of black bile to depression and even sometimes to folly.

**Chapter IV**  
**How Many Things Cause Learned People**  
**Either To Be Melancholy or To Eventually**  
**Become So**

In the main, three kinds of causes make learned people melancholics. The first is celestial, the second natural, and the third human. The celestial: because both Mercury, who invites us to investigate doctrines, and Saturn, who makes us persevere in investigating doctrines and retain them when discovered, are said by astronomers to be somewhat cold and dry (or if it should happen to be true that Mercury is not cold, he is nonetheless often very dry by virtue of his nearness to the Sun), just like the melancholic nature, according to physicians. And this same nature Mercury and Saturn impart from birth to their followers, learned people, and preserve and augment it day by day.

The natural cause seems to be that for the pursuit of the sciences, especially the difficult ones, the soul must draw in upon itself from external things to internal as from the circumference to the center, and while it speculates, it must stay immovably, so to speak, at the very center of man (*in ipso hominis centro stabilissime permanere*). Now to collect oneself from the circumference to the center, and to be fixed in the center, is above all the property of the Earth itself, to which black bile is analogous.

Therefore black bile continually incites the soul both to collect itself together into one and to dwell on itself and to contemplate itself. And being analogous to the world's center, it forces the investigation to the center of individual subjects, and it carries one to the contemplation of whatever is highest, since, indeed, it is most congruent with Saturn, the highest of planets. Contemplation itself, in its turn, by a continual recollection and compression, as it were, brings on a nature similar to black bile.

The human cause, that which comes from ourselves, is as follows: Because frequent agitation of

the mind greatly dries up the brain, therefore, when the moisture has been mostly consumed—moisture being the support of the natural heat—the heat also is usually extinguished; and from this chain of events, the nature of the brain becomes dry and cold, which is known as the earthy and melancholic quality. Moreover, on account of the repeated movements of inquiry, the spirits continually move and get dispersed. But when the spirits are dispersed, they have to be restored out of the more subtle blood. And hence, when the more subtle and clear parts of the blood frequently get used up, the rest of the blood is necessarily rendered dense, dry and black. On top of this, nature in contemplation is directed wholly to the brain and heart and deserts the stomach and liver. For this reason foods, especially the more fatty or harsh foods, are poorly digested, and as a result the blood is rendered cold, thick, and black. Finally, with too little physical exercise, superfluities are not carried off and the thick, dense, clinging, dusky vapors do not exhale. All these things characteristically make the spirit melancholy and the soul sad and

fearful—since, indeed, interior darkness much more than exterior overcomes the soul with sadness and terrifies it. But of all learned people, those especially are oppressed by black bile, who, being sedulously devoted to the study of philosophy, recall their mind from the body and corporeal things and apply it to incorporeal things. The cause is, first, that the more difficult the work, the greater concentration of mind it requires; and second, that the more they apply their mind to incorporeal truth, the more they are compelled to disjoin it from the body. Hence their body is often rendered as if it were half-alive and often melancholic. My author Plato signified this in the *Timaeus*; he said that the soul contemplating divine things assiduously and intently grows up so much on food of this kind and becomes so powerful, that it overreaches its body above what the corporeal nature can endure; and sometimes in its too vehement agitation, it either in a way flies out of it or sometimes seems as if to disintegrate it.

## Chapter XXVI

### Care for the Corporeal Spirit; Cultivate the Incorporeal, and Lastly, Venerate the Truth.

#### Medicine Takes Care of the First, Moral Discipline, the Second, but Religion, the Third

If lovers of truth ought to care for the corporeal spirit with such great efforts of doctors lest it either, if entirely neglected, prove a hindrance in their pursuit of truth, or else serve them inadequately, then no doubt they must try still harder to cultivate with the teachings of moral philosophy the incorporeal spirit, i.e., the intellect, by which alone truth, being itself incorporeal, is apprehended. For it is wrong to cherish only the slave of the soul, the body, and to neglect the soul, the lord and ruler of the body, especially since the Magi and Plato assert that the entire body depends upon the soul in such a way that if the soul is not well, the body cannot be well. This is why Apollo, the founder of medicine, decided the wisest man was not Hippocrates, though born of his own race, but Socrates, since, while Hippocrates strove to

heal the body, Socrates strove to heal the soul. But Christ alone accomplished what those men attempted.

Thus, if we are enjoined by Socrates to cultivate our mind by behaving in the best way to the end that with a serene mind we may the more easily acquire the light and truth which we sought by the instinct of nature, how much more is it right to venerate above all that divine truth by holy religion? The mind was created for seeking and receiving it no less than the eye was created for beholding the light of the Sun. And as my author Plato says, just as the eyesight nowhere sees anything visible except in the radiance of the highest thing visible, that is, the Sun itself, so the human intellect apprehends nothing intelligible, except in the light of the highest thing intelligible, that is, in the light of God, which is always and everywhere present for us—in the light, I say, which lights every man coming into this world, in the light of which David sings, “in your light shall we see light.”

## **Book Two, On a Long Life**

### **Chapter I**

#### **To Perfect Your Knowledge, You Need a Long Life;**

#### **One Way to Procure It Is by Effort**

Neither a teachable intelligence nor firmness of memory leads us to perfect skill and knowledge so much as does the discrimination of a prudent judgment. But judgment, because of the ambiguity created by the diversity of conjectures, is so difficult that it must be confirmed by the requisite experience. Experience is also deceptive both because of the difficulty of judgment itself and because of the fleeting brevity of the opportune time for apprehending the experience. This is why we are certainly right to conclude with Hippocrates that art is long and we can only attain it by a long life. But a long life is not just something the fates promise once for all from the beginning, but something that is procured by our effort. This is both acknowledged by astrologers, when they deal with elections and images, and confirmed

by the careful concern and the experience of physicians. Through this foresight not only do people who are strong by nature very often attain a long life but also sometimes the weakest, so that it is not surprising that a man named Herodicus, as Plato and Aristotle declare, a scholar and the feeblest of all the men of his age, by foresight of this sort lived to be almost a hundred. Plutarch reports that many people who were otherwise physically infirm have attained a long life just by taking care of themselves. I pass over for now the many sickly people I myself know of who have lived longer than the strongest people by the gift of prudence. It would therefore be profitable and fruitful, after the book I composed *On Caring for the Health of Learned People*, to put forward besides, for minds that are yearning for knowledge, some precepts conducive to a long life. But I have no wish to impart these instructions to indolent and lazy people. For why should we wish those people to live long who do not even live, as if we were nourishing drones and not bees? Nor do I wish them to be divulged to people who are dissolute through their corrupt



passion for pleasures, fools who far prefer the brief pleasure that lasts only a day; nor disclosed to the wicked and unjust whose life is the death of good men; but only to prudent and temperate people of sophisticated intelligence who will benefit mankind, whether in the private or the public sphere.



**Book Three, On Obtaining Life from the Heavens,  
Which He Composed among His Commentaries  
on Plotinus'**

**Chapter I**

**In What, According to Plotinus, the Power of  
Attracting Favor from the Heavens Consists,  
Namely, That Well-adapted Physical Forms Can  
Easily Allure the World-soul and the Souls of the  
Stars and the Daemons**

If there were only these two things in the universe—on one side the Intellect, on the other the Body—but no Soul, then neither would the Intellect be attracted to the Body (for Intellect is absolutely motionless,

without affect, which is the principle of motion, and very far away from the Body), nor would the Body be drawn to the Intellect (for Body is in itself powerless, unsuited for motion, and far removed from the Intellect). But if a Soul which conforms to both were placed between them, an attraction will easily occur to each one on either side. In the first place, Soul is led most easily of all, since she is the *Primum Mobile* and movable of herself, of her own accord. Moreover, since, as I have said, she is the mean of things, in her own fashion she contains all things and is proportionally [Intellect:Soul::Soul:Body] near to both. Therefore she is equally connected with everything, even with those things which are at a distance from one other, because they are not at a distance from her. For besides the fact that on the one side she conforms to the divine and on the other side to the transient, and even turns to each by desire, at the same time she is wholly and simultaneously everywhere.

In addition, the World-soul possesses by divine power precisely as many seminal reasons of things as there are Ideas in the Divine Mind. By these seminal

reasons she fashions the same number of species in matter. That is why every single species corresponds through its own seminal reason to its own Idea and oftentimes through this reason it can easily receive something from the Idea since indeed it was made through the reason from the Idea. This is why, if at any time the species degenerates from its proper form, it can be formed again with the reason as the proximate intermediary and, through the Idea as intermediary, can then be easily reformed. And if in the proper manner you bring to bear on a species, or on some individual in it, many things which are dispersed but which conform to the same Idea, into this material thus suitably adapted you will soon draw a particular gift from the Idea, through the seminal reason of the Soul; for, properly speaking, it is not Intellect itself which is led, but Soul. And so let no one think that any divinities wholly separate from matter are being attracted by any given mundane materials, but that daemons rather are being attracted and gifts from the ensouled world and from the living stars. Again, let no man wonder that Soul can be allured

as it were by material forms, since indeed she herself has created baits of this kind suitable to herself, to be allured thereby, and she always and willingly dwells in them. There is nothing to be found in this whole living world so deformed that Soul does not attend it, that a gift of the Soul is not in it. Therefore Zoroaster called such correspondences of forms to the reasons existing in the World-soul “divine lures” and Synesius corroborated that they are magical baits.

Finally, let no one believe that absolutely all gifts are drawn from the Soul to any one particular species of matter at a specific time, but rather at the right moment only those gifts of that one seed from which such a species has grown, and of seeds that are similar to it. Accordingly, the person who has employed only human things, will thence claim for himself not the gifts proper to fish or to birds but the human gifts and similar ones. But if he employs things which pertain to such and such a star and daemon, he undergoes the peculiar influence of this star and daemon, like a piece of wood treated with sulfur for a flame that is everywhere present. And he under-

goes this influence not only through the rays of the star and the daemon themselves, but also through the very Soul of the World everywhere present. For the reason of any star and daemon flourishes in her. It is partly a seminal reason so that she can generate, and partly an exemplary reason so that she can know. For according to the more ancient Platonists, from her reasons, the World-soul constructed in the heavens besides the stars, figures and such parts of them as are also themselves figures of a sort; and she impressed properties on all these. In the stars, moreover—in their figures, parts and properties—are contained all the species of things below and their properties. She arranged 48 universal figures: 12 in the zodiac and 36 outside it; likewise she placed 36 more figures in the zodiac according to the number of its faces. Again she arranged in the Zodiac 360 more figures according to the number of its degrees—for in each degree whatsoever there are many stars that make up images there. Similarly the images [constellations] outside the zodiac she divided into many figures [*paranattelonta*] according to the number of the Zodiacal faces

and degrees. Finally, she established certain relations and proportions of the latter universal images to the former universal images—relations and proportions which themselves are also images out there. Figures of this kind each have their own coherence from the rays of their stars directed toward each other by their own special property. On these well-ordered forms the forms of lower things depend; they are ordered by them. But even those celestial forms, being [spatially] set apart from each other, proceed from reasons of the Soul that are joined together; and being forms somewhat changeable, they proceed from the reasons which are stable. But the reasons, insofar as they do not make up a unity, are traced back to the Forms in the Intellect—the intellect in Soul and the higher Intellect—which do make up a unity; and these Forms, being multiples, are reduced to the perfectly simple One and Good, just as the celestial figures diminish to a point at the Pole.

But let us return to the Soul. When, therefore, the Soul gives birth to the specific forms and the powers pertaining to the species of things below, she makes

them through their respective reasons with the aid of the stars and the celestial forms. But she produces the endowments peculiar to individuals (which are often in some individuals as marvelous as they habitually are in the species themselves) likewise through the seminal reasons, but not so much with the aid of celestial forms and figures as by the location of the individual stars and the relation of the motions and aspects of the planets both among themselves and with respect to the stars which are above the planets. Now our own soul beyond the particular forces of our members puts forth a general force of life everywhere within us—especially through the heart as the source of the fire which is the nearest thing to the soul. In the same way the World-soul, which is active everywhere, unfolds in every place its power of universal life principally through the Sun. Accordingly, some thinkers say the entire Soul, both in us and in the universe, dwells in any member but most of all in the heart and in the sun.

Always remember, though, that just as the power of our soul is brought to bear on our members

through the spirit, so the force of the World-soul is spread under the World-soul through all things through the quintessence, which is active everywhere, as the spirit inside the World's Body, but that this power is instilled especially into those things which have absorbed the most of this kind of spirit. This quintessence can be ingested by us more and more if a person knows how best to separate it, mixed in as it is with other elements, or at least how to use those things often which are filled with it, especially in its purer form. Such things are: choice wine, sugar, balsam, gold, precious stones, myrobalans, and things which smell most sweet and which shine, and especially things which have in a subtle substance a quality hot, moist, and clear; such, besides wine, is the whitest sugar, especially if you add to it gold and the odor of cinnamon and roses. Then too, just as foods we eat in the right way, although not themselves alive, are converted through our spirit to the form of our life, so also our bodies rightly accommodated to the body and spirit of the world (that is through cosmic things and through our spirit) drink



in as much as possible from the life of the world.

If you want your food to take the form of your brain above all, or of your liver, or of your stomach, eat as much as you can of like food, that is, of the brain, liver, and stomach of animals which are not far removed from the nature of man. If you want your body and spirit to receive power from some member of the cosmos, say from the Sun, seek the things which above all are most Solar among metals and gems, still more among plants, and more yet among animals, especially human beings; for surely things which are more similar to you confer more of it. These must both be brought to bear externally and, so far as possible, taken internally, especially in the day and the hour of the Sun and while the Sun is dominant in a theme of the heavens.\* Solar things are: all those gems and flowers which are called heliotrope because they turn towards the Sun, likewise gold, orpiment and golden colors, chrysolite, carbuncle, myrrh, frankincense, musk, amber, balsam, yellow honey, sweet calamus, saffron, spikenard, cinnamon, aloe-wood and the rest of the spices; the ram,

the hawk, the cock, the swan, the lion, the scarab beetle, the crocodile, and people who are blond, curly-haired, prone to baldness, and magnanimous. The above-mentioned things can be adapted partly to foods, partly to ointments and fumigations, partly to usages and habits. You should frequently perceive and think about these things and love them above all; you should also get a lot of light.

If you suspect that your belly is being deprived of the heat of the liver, draw the power of the liver to the belly both by rubbing and by fomentations made from things which agree with the liver, namely from chicory, endive, spodium, agrimony, hepatica, and livers. In the same way, so that your body may not be deprived of Jupiter, take physical exercise in Jupiter's day and hour and when he is reigning; and in the meantime use Jovial things such as silver, jacinth, topaz, coral, crystal, beryl, spodium, sapphire, green and aery colors, wine, sugar, white honey; and entertain thoughts and feelings which are especially Jovial, that is, steadfast, composed, religious, and law-abiding; and you will keep company with men of the

same kind—men who are sanguine, handsome, and venerable. But remember to mix those first things on my list, since they are cold, with gold, wine, mint, saffron, cinnamon and doricum; remember too that the lamb, the peacock, the eagle, and the young bullock are Jovial animals.

But how the power of Venus may be attracted by turtle-doves, pigeons, white water wag-tails, and the rest, modesty forbids me to reveal.



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