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## **Marsilio Ficino and Frane Petrić** **on the “Ontological Priority” of Matter and Space\***

### **Abstract**

*This paper is a comparison of some of the central ontological claims on the nature of prime matter of the Renaissance Platonist Marsilio Ficino, and the nature of space of Frane Petrić, the sixteenth century Platonist from the town of Cres. In it I argue that there are two respects in which the natural philosophies of both Platonists resemble one another, especially when it comes to the ontological status of the most basic substrate of the material world. First, both Ficino and Petrić argue for the basic existence of matter and space. Second, both philosophers attribute an “ontological priority” to matter and space over what are seen as the fleeting qualities of the material world.*

### **Key words**

Marsilio Ficino, Frane Petrić, matter, space, ontology

### **Introduction**

The fifteenth century Florentine Platonist Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) exercised a powerful influence on aspects of the philosophical vision of Frane Petrić (1529–1597). In a 1587 letter to Baccio Valori, Frane Petrić attributes his initial conversion to Platonism to reading Marsilio Ficino’s *Platonic Theology* years earlier. The young Petrić, who was disillusioned as a student at the University of Padua, discovered in Ficino “la via di Platone,” which served for him as an antidote to the rank Scholastic Aristotelianism that dominated the university curriculum at that time.<sup>1</sup> It is not surprising, then, that significant elements of Marsilio Ficino’s Platonism are discernable in Petrić’s mature philosophical vision.<sup>2</sup> This influence has been especially well-documented

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For a discussion of this letter specifically, and of Marsilio Ficino’s influence on Frane Petrić more generally, see Maria Muccillo, “Marsilio Ficino e Francesco Patrizi da Cherso”, in: *Marsilio Ficino e il ritorno di Platone*, Volume 2, Olschki, Firenze, 1986, pp. 615–679. Francesco Patrizi da Cherso, *Lettere ed Opuscoli inediti*, a cura di Danilo Aguzzi Barbagli,

Istituto nazionale di studi sul Rinascimento, Firenze 1975, p. 47: “E fra tanto sentendo un frate di S. Francesco sostentar conclusioni platoniche, se ne innamorò, e fatto poi seco amicizia dimandogli che lo inuiasse per la via di Platone. Gli propose come per via ottima la Teologia del Ficino, a che si diede con grande avidità. E tale fu il principio di quello studio che poi sempre ha seguitato.”

2

In this paper I limit my discussion mainly to the *Nova de universis philosophia* (1591) and *Emendationes*, rather than the *Discussiones peripateticæ* (1581). However, I do distinguish the text of the *Nova philosophia* from



when it comes to Petrić’s endorsement of the *prisca theologia*, his belief in the existence of an *anima mundi*, and in his acceptance of other Hermetic and Neoplatonic doctrines and themes.<sup>3</sup>

It is not my aim in this paper to dispute Ficino’s influence on Petrić. Rather, I hope to enlarge the scope of our understanding of Ficino’s possible influence on him. The Florentine Platonist’s influence on Petrić has not been viewed as especially strong when it comes to his philosophy of nature, or his theory of matter and body. In this paper I aim to demonstrate that Ficino’s view of matter and body did have an influence on Petrić’s conception of space. At the very least, I hope to show that there are certain distinctive features that the ontologies of both Platonists share in common. I hope to accomplish this by comparing one of the core principles of the natural philosophies of the two. Specifically, I will argue that there are at least two further possible respects in which Ficino influenced Petrić that concern each Platonist’s conception of the most basic material substrate. First, even though Petrić abandons the Aristotelian analysis of material things into their matter, form and privation, whereas Ficino does not, Petrić’s argument for the existence of space in the *Pancosmia*, the fourth tome of the *Nova de universis philosophia*, in addition to what he says about some of its central characteristics, resembles Ficino’s discussion of prime matter in the *Platonic Theology* in several salient respects.<sup>4</sup> Essentially, for both Ficino and Petrić, matter and space represent robust realities that exist in themselves, and not in any derivative sense, as some Scholastic philosophers had previously argued.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, both matter and space exist for Ficino and Petrić in an impassible state that stands beneath and that supports the sundry bodies and qualities that occupy the material world, functioning as the foundational condition of their very existence and subsistence.

The second similarity that I examine involves both philosophers’ broader vision of the nature of the material world itself, and the ontological status that is accorded to the ordinary objects that occupy it. Ficino and Petrić both hold what I call the “ontological priority” of matter and space over the protean qualities of material things, which are, for both philosophers, really just fleeting accidents.<sup>6</sup> This view amounts to asserting the basic entitative reality of matter and space over the transient qualities that use them as their receptacle of becoming. This view of things is likely grounded in a Platonic suspicion of the material world, and the superiority of the intelligible world over it, that is prominent in both Plato’s dialogues themselves, as well as in Plotinus’ Neoplatonic interpretation of Plato.<sup>7</sup> Ficino argues that the prime matter of the cosmos is essentially more stable, and even more real, than the quantities and qualities that exist in it like “mere shadows that come and go like the reflections of lofty trees in a rushing stream”.<sup>8</sup> Prime matter exists on its own, independently of the existence of anything else. In similar fashion, Petrić argues that space is *the* principle of the material world, and the condition whereby all other material things can possibly come to be. In this respect, then, Petrić elevates the concept of space over the individual material things that it contains as a receptacle. For Petrić, the qualities and forms of the material world are sustained by space, while space itself requires nothing, in addition, to sustain it. Both Renaissance Platonists, then, argued for the existence of the most basic principle of the material world. Also, I will argue that this view is not without certain consequences, for both Ficino and Petrić, regarding the ontological status of ordinary objects.

In spite of these resemblances, the correspondence between Ficino and Petrić on the nature of matter and space is certainly not seamless. Petrić’s concept

of space admittedly goes beyond to include elements that are completely foreign to Ficino’s concept of prime matter. For one, Petrić did not argue that space contains the forms of all things in a state of potency, as Ficino held that prime matter does in his *Platonic Theology*. Petrić thought that the forms of all things exist in potency in *fluori*, not in space. Moreover, there is no concept of mathematical space in Ficino that is comparable to the concept that Petrić develops in *De nova universa philosophia*. Ficino did not engage in mathematical studies and speculations that are in anyway comparable to Petrić. Notwithstanding these differences, however, both Ficino and Petrić both argue for the real existence of the most basic substrate of the material world, and they are both committed to a view of the status of individual material things in the systems of both Platonists.<sup>9</sup>

the *Emendationes*, which Petrić wrote under pressure from the Inquisition. This focus will be most evident below in the sections titled “The ‘Ontological Priority’ of Matter and Space”.

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Charles B. Schmitt, “Perennial Philosophy from Agostino Steuco to Leibniz”, *The Journal of the History of Ideas* 27 (1966), pp. 505–532; Cesare Vasoli, “Aristotele e i ‘filosofi antiquiores’ nelle ‘Discussiones Peripateticae’ di Francesco Patrizi”, *Atti e memorie dell’Accademia Petrarca di lettere, arti e scienze* 44 (1981), pp. 205–233; M. Muccillo, “Marsilio Ficino e Francesco Patrizi da Cherso”; Maria Muccillo, *Platonismo, ermetismo e “prisca theologia”*, II, Olschki, Firenze 1996; Thomas Leinkauf, *Il neoplatonismo di Francesco Patrizi come presupposto della sua critica ad Aristotele*, La nuova Italia, Firenze 1990; and Luc Deitz, “Space, Light and Soul in Francesco Patrizi’s *Nova de universis philosophia*”, in: Anthony Grafton (ed.), *Natural Particulars*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1995, pp. 139–169, n. 70.

4

Abandoning the concept of *materia prima* grows more common in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries among modern natural philosophers, although there are philosophers who make use of the concept. Petrić calls attention to the contradictions that are embedded in the Scholastic concept, as well as the concept that Ficino avails himself of in the *Theologia Platonica*. In this way, Patrizi anticipates and clears the way for modern philosophical criticisms. Ficino, on the contrary, does not, and by and large his philosophical vision stands in opposition to the modern mechanistic worldview. See Frane Petrić, *Nova de universis philosophia: materiali per un’edizione emendata*, a cura di Anna Laura Puliafito Bleuel, Olschki, Firenze 1993, pp. 22–31. On the philosophical critique of *materia prima* in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, also see Chapter Six of Rene Descartes, *Treatise on the World*; and Part I, espe-

cially sections 11 and 1, in George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*.

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See especially Thomas Aquinas, *De principiis naturae*. Here Aquinas argues that prime matter does not exist, except incompletely when combined with form, and that it is completely unintelligible except through an analogy with some form-matter composite.

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Luc Deitz uses the phrase ‘ontological priority’ in his article, “Space, Light, and Soul in Francesco Patrizi’s *Nova de universis philosophia* (1591)”, in: A. Grafton (ed.), *Natural Particulars*, p. 146. I came to use this term to describe the relationship between matter and quality in Ficino’s philosophy independently of Deitz’s mentioning the ontological priority of space in Petrić’s natural philosophy.

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Plato generally makes two arguments for the unreality of the material world. The first argument is metaphysical and is found in the *Timaeus*, where Plato argues that true being belongs to ideas and becoming to sensible things. Plato, *Timaeus* 28a. The second argument is normative, and is found, for instance, in the *Phaedo*. Here Plato has Socrates complain about the condition of the embodied mind, which is one of confusion and dreams. Plato, *Phaedo* 64c–66a. Also see Plotinus, *The Enneads*, II.4 and III.6. This view of the status of ordinary objects is also, one should note, found in Book I of Lucretius’ *De rerum natura*. See I.450–482.

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Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, Michael J. B. Allen, and James Hankins with William Bowen (eds.), Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2001–2006, 1.3.5.

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Examining the views of Ficino and Petrić on matter and space is helpful for elucidating the theory of prime and corporeal matter of Ficino, which has gone mostly unexamined.



## Ficino and Petrić on the reality of matter and space

Marsilio Ficino has a lot to say about the nature of matter and the material world in the opening book of the *Platonic Theology*. The central aim of this discussion is to establish a metaphysical picture of the material world that grounds the primacy of Platonic ideas, a vitalistic view of nature, and, finally, that serves as a premise in the larger argument for the immortality of the soul.<sup>10</sup> Ficino aims to establish that material objects are in actuality fleeting and insubstantial, and, by extension, that the immaterial world of ideas and souls is more real, and more good.

An incorporeal *materia prima* is the first principle in Ficino’s analysis of the material world. It stands next to nothing, awkwardly, at the very bottom of the hierarchy of being. It exists in a state completely devoid of form, and yet, at the same time, it lends itself readily to being formed, and thereby contributes to the goodness of the overall material world. In the *Platonic Theology*, Ficino distinguishes between prime and corporeal matter (*materia corporealis*): Prime matter, Ficino argues, is completely passive, inert, and it exists in a state that is completely devoid of any quality or determination. Prime matter stands on the far pole of the great chain of being, existing as the very negation of God. Corporeal matter, on the other hand, comes after prime matter, and it is at the very least a composite of prime matter and quantitative extension.<sup>11</sup> The epistemic status of prime matter is equally awkward. Ficino denies that the human mind can know prime matter’s nature with any clarity and distinctness; instead, it must affirm that it exists, and discern its nature, by some spurious chain of reasoning, and whatever can be drawn from a comparison of the various *hypostases* of the great chain of being.<sup>12</sup>

From these considerations, however, Ficino does not, in the end, conclude that prime matter is itself unreal, absolutely nothing, or some fictive and illegitimate abstraction of the human intellect, as some Scholastic Aristotelians had previously held.<sup>13</sup> On the contrary, Ficino argues that there is a grade of existence that belongs uniquely to those things, such as prime matter, that are brought into existence directly from nothing by God. Ficino explains this general view of existence in Book V, Chapter XIII of the *Platonic Theology*, in the following way: “The existence that comes after nothing is called absolute [*absolutum*] existence. For immediately after nothing comes existence in its simplicity [*esse hoc aut illud*].”<sup>14</sup> The particular things that one comes across in the material world, Ficino argues, “cannot become this or that or such unless it exists prior to becoming this or that or such. So this or that or such an existence does not follow immediately upon nothing, but comes after simple and absolute existence.”<sup>15</sup> The grade of existence that prime matter possesses, which is called the “absolute” mode of existence, is distinguished by Ficino from the “particular” mode of existence that belongs to individual material things.<sup>16</sup> The striking point is that Ficino is arguing that prime matter exists, and not just as a fictive abstraction of the human mind.

Prime matter must exist, according to Ficino, since it was created by God to function as the material foundation of individual material things, and as the very condition for them becoming a particular this or that.<sup>17</sup> One should note that the absolute grade of existence that prime matter enjoys is independent of the existence of anything else, in Ficino’s estimation, with the exception of God, of course.<sup>18</sup> The distinction between absolute and particular existence, according to Ficino, corresponds to the distinction between prime and corporeal matter. Prime matter exists in the absolute mode, and corporeal matter, which is some composite of matter and form, exists in the particular mode.

While prime matter exists without any quality or determination, corporeal matter exists on account of the possession of at least some limited degree of form – either quantitative extension alone, or quantitative extension and some complex of qualities. Both these distinctions function in this way in Ficino’s metaphysics of nature: Prime matter, which exists absolutely, can exist on its own, without any form at all, but corporeal matter, which exists particularly, cannot, since it is a composite of matter and some quality, and depends on the

For a discussion of Marsilio Ficino’s theory of prime matter, see James G. Snyder, “The Theory of *materia prima* in Marsilio Ficino’s *Platonic Theology*”, *Vivarium* 46 (2008), pp. 192–221. Also see, James G. Snyder’s doctoral dissertation, “Matter and Method in the Platonic Theology of Marsilio Ficino,” The CUNY Graduate Center, 2008.

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See especially the Proem to the *Platonic Theology*. He explains: “Finally, I believe that those for whom the objects of thought are confined to the objects of bodily sensation and who in their wretchedness prefer the shadows of things to things themselves, once they are impressed by the arguments of Plato, will contemplate the higher objects which transcend the senses, and find happiness in putting things themselves before their shadows.”

11

See Book I, Chapter II of the *Platonic Theology* for Ficino’s definition of corpus. In Book V, Chapter V, Ficino also explains: “For the first subject exposed to passion is matter, and through matter both quantity (which is embedded in matter) and quality (which cleaves to quantity) are exposed to passion.”

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See Book X, Chapter III of the *Platonic Theology*. In this chapter Ficino appeals to the various comparisons that can be made between prime matter, on the one hand, and soul, and God, on the other. From these comparisons he draws comparisons about each. Plotinus describes the way in which we know matter as the way the eye knows darkness. Also see *The Enneads*, II.4.10. Plotinus writes, “If, then, each thing is known by concept and thought, but in this case concept states about matter what it does in fact state what it does in fact state, that which wants to be a thought about it will not be a thought but a sort of thoughtlessness.” Plotinus, *The Enneads*, Vol. II, A. H. Armstrong (trans.), Loeb Classic Library, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1966.

13

Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 7.3, 1028b–1029a28. Also see Thomas Aquinas, *De principiis naturae*. Here Aquinas explains that prime matter: “And note that although matter in its nature is neither formed nor formless ... it never exists stripped of form and lack of

form, but sometimes takes on one form and sometimes another. By itself it can never exist for it has no form of its own and so – because actual existence comes with forms – matter by itself never exists actually but only potentially. Nothing existent then can be called ultimate [i.e., prime] matter.” Thomas Aquinas, *De principiis naturae*, Timothy McDermott (trans.), in: *Selected Philosophical Writings*, Oxford University Press, New York 1993, p. 70. There was a tradition among Franciscan Scholastic philosophers, however, that argued for the reality of matter, in particular Bonaventure and John Duns Scotus.

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M. Ficino, *Platonic Theology* 5.13.4.

15

*Ibid.*, p. 81.

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In Book V, Chapter IV, Ficino explains: “Since things inferior to God do not possess absolute existence, but only qualified existence—such or such existence—, they do not have the power to abolish existence completely, but only a particular mode of existence. . . Natural agents cannot make something out of nothing. For to make something out of something existing is easier than to make it out of nothing.” *Ibid.*, 5.6.4. In Chapter XIII, Ficino argues about the distinction between absolute and particular existence: “Therefore, since it is God’s alone to give to all creatures this common and absolute existence, but since this existence comes after nothing and before all modes of existing, then it will be the office of God alone to bring something into existence from nothing . . .” *Ibid.*, 5.13.4.

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Ficino gives at least three arguments for the existence of matter in Book V, Chapter IV of the *Platonic Theology*. See J. G. Snyder, “The Theory of *materia prima* in Marsilio Ficino’s *Platonic Theology*”, pp. 14–19.

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Prime matter, like anything else that shares in this absolute existence, does not exist without an efficient and a final cause, namely God, according to Ficino. Ficino explains in Book V, Chapter V of the *Platonic Theology*: “So nothing will be found other than God which can properly be said to exist through itself such that it has neither efficient cause nor end.” *Ibid.*, 5.5.1.



presence of these forms for its particular existence.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, the existence that prime matter uniquely enjoys, according to Ficino, is not parasitic on the existence of form, as corporeal matter is. One can begin to see, then, that prime matter has a robust and entitative reality for Ficino, and not just a partial, or spectral one, as some previous Scholastic philosophers had argued.

The existence that all other individual things enjoy, however, is dependent upon the existence of prime matter, according to Ficino, in such a way that prime matter functions as the ultimate substrate of all material things. It constitutes one of the causes through which all other things exist. Prime matter also persists throughout all of the substantial and accidental changes that occur in nature. It persists throughout these changes impassibly, and it is itself incapable of becoming something other than itself, unless it should become something else. Ficino explains: “Matter cannot be changed from what it is except by being changed into nothing. Nature does not permit anything to be turned into nothing. So matter does not pass away.”<sup>20</sup> Prime matter is also one of the very causes through which all material things can possibly exist. Were it corrupted, Ficino argues, “the whole world structure would collapse”, since it “is the foundation of all corporeal nature”.<sup>21</sup> Individual corporeal things, on the other hand, do not exist in equally a robust and absolute manner, according to Ficino. Furthermore, while the prime matter of the cosmos exists *per se*, all other material forms and qualities exist what Ficino calls “*per aliud*”, that is, through another. Things are said to exist through themselves, Ficino argues, based on whether or not they exist without one of the four Aristotelian causes.

Therefore, Ficino maintains that corporeal matter, and the natural bodies that it composes exist “entirely through something else, because it includes the four causes simultaneously”.<sup>22</sup> Ficino also explains that if quality is such a thing that “cannot sustain itself,” then “much less can it exist on its own”.<sup>23</sup> Prime matter, on the other hand, exists through itself when compared to the existence of corporeal matter, since it only requires God as its efficient and final cause. Thus, in this respect, prime matter enjoys a grade of existence that can be described as “robust”, and even more real than the existence that individual forms and qualities participate in.

### **The “Ontological Priority” of Matter and Space**

Of course one cannot ignore the fact that Frane Petrić rejects the traditional concept of *materia prima*, along with Aristotle’s hylomorphic principles of matter, form, and privation in his *Nova de universis philosophia*.<sup>24</sup> Petrić was vehemently anti-Aristotelian, and he replaces the Aristotelian triad with his own principles that includes space, light, heat and fluidity. Petrić argues that his quartet of principles better explains the nature of things, and coming to be in the material world. Also, in the *Pancosmia*, Petrić thinks that space is something distinct from the traditional concept of prime matter, since he conceives of it as existing prior to anything that is even remotely material.

Petrić generally argues that the traditional concept of prime matter is hopelessly vague, incoherent, and even contradictory. Petrić claims that the ambiguous and awkward fashion in which Scholastic philosophers asserted that it exists, that is, as a *potentia pura*, is contradictory because if it is not anything, then it is really just nothing at all.<sup>25</sup> Petrić exposes the awkward ontological status of prime matter in Scholastic philosophies, and rejects them as

deeply incoherent. Moreover, Petrić rejects the existence of anything that is absolutely formless and inchoate.<sup>26</sup> Such a thing, he concludes, is really just a non-entity in the end. Petrić reasons that one might as well be talking about nothing.

Even though Petrić rejects the traditional concept of prime matter as incoherent, in his *Pancosmia* he nonetheless appears to endorse elements of Ficino’s theory of prime matter. This is especially evident when it comes to Petrić’s endorsement of the existence of space. Similarly Ficino argues for the existence of prime matter, Petrić argues that space must be counted among the things that exist, and not those things that exist only as a pure potentially, or in another derivative sense – that is, Petrić argues that space is actually an *ens*.<sup>27</sup> For Petrić, the question is not whether or not space exists as part of bodies (as prime matter was thought to exist as a part of form-matter composites by some Scholastic philosophers), but “is there any other Space apart from what is in particular bodies, that is, which is not a property of some body?” – a question that he answers in the affirmative.<sup>28</sup> Concerning the existence of space, Petrić explains: “If anything is, it is a being (*ens*); it is not, it is nothing. For the latter is excluded from the class of beings (*entia*), just as the former is counted among them.”<sup>29</sup> Referencing the awkward ontological status of prime

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This distinction is consistently drawn throughout the *Platonic Theology*. However, Ficino will often use the word ‘matter’ to signify both prime and corporeal matter, adding to some confusion concerning the ontological status of matter according to his natural philosophy. This distinction is evident in the first paragraph – where Ficino defines ‘body’ – of Book I, Chapter II of the *Platonic Theology*.

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*Ibid.*, p. 27. This point seems to be drawn from Plotinus. See *The Enneads*, III.6.10. There Plotinus explains, “Matter, then, is incorporeal, since body is posterior and a composite, and matter with something else produces body.”

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*Ibid.*, p. 23.

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*Ibid.*, p. 29.

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*Ibid.*, p. 31.

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For a discussion of Frane Petrić’s criticism of Aristotle, see Cesare Vasoli, “La critica di Francesco Patrizi ai ‘principia’ aristotelici”, *Rivista di storia della filosofia* 51 (1996), pp. 713–787.

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See, for instance, F. Petrić, *Nova de universis philosophia: materiali per un’edizione emendata*, pp. 22–23. Petrić writes: “Si dicatur in potentia, tum dicemus nos ens nondum est. Si nondum est, pure potentia non est. Nam si non est, nihil est.”

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*Ibid.*, pp. 24–25. Petrić writes, “Si non eadem haec et illae constant, ergo duabus constabunt materiis. Si duabus, ergo inter se differentibus. Differentia omnis, et essentialis et accidentalis, ab actu, a forma est. Ergo binaque materia formata, formata est coelestis a duabus his differens. Tres ergo materiae, et non una. Et singulae formatae. Ergo nulla materia est informis.”

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For an account of his argument, see L. Deitz, “Space, Light, and Soul in Francesco Patrizi’s *Nova de universis philosophia* (1591)”, pp. 148–149. In the *Pancosmia*, Petrić argues in the following way: “Are being and non-being (*ens et non ens*) the same, or not the same? If the same, then anything both is and is not. This, however, is impossible, as philosophers agree. And there is likewise agreement on the following: If anything is, it is a being (*ens*); if it is not, then it is nothing. For the latter is excluded from the class of beings (*entia*), just as the former is counted among them. Space, therefore, cannot be something and be counted among beings, and at the same time not be something, and be excluded from that class. Hence Space – and distance – which in man extends from head to feet, belongs to the class of beings and is something. And the same is true of any other expression of interval.” Frane Petrić, “On Physical Space”, trans. Benjamin Brickman, in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 4 (1943), p. 227.

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*Ibid.*, p. 229.

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*Ibid.*, p. 227.

matter on Scholastic natural philosophies, Petrić reasons that space “cannot be something and be counted among beings, and at the same time not be something, and be excluded from that class”.<sup>30</sup> If space is something, Petrić reasons, then it belongs to the class of things that exist and are beings, and not to the class of things that do not exist, or that exist only as a pure potentiality. “Hence space”, Petrić concludes, “belongs to the class of beings that is something.”<sup>31</sup> In this respect, at least, one finds Petrić, like Ficino, asserting the entitative reality of the most basic principle of his ontology. Both prime matter and space, therefore, do not exist in a spectral or derivative sense, for Ficino or Petrić; rather, they both exist in their own right.<sup>32</sup> Like Ficino in the *Platonic Theology*, Petrić further explains in the *Pancosmia* that space is the very foundation of all existence, the only thing “which could itself exist without any other things”, and that “when it is present all other things can be, when absent, all others are destroyed”.<sup>33</sup> For both Ficino and Petrić, then, the most basic principle of the material world exists as the “indifferent receptacle” of all things.

Not only is space counted among the things that exist, according to Petrić, but space is further much more than “nothing more but an aptitude” to hold a given body. Petrić argued that space is, in a certain sense, above all to be called “substance,” since it “requires nothing to sustain it,” whereas all other things do.<sup>34</sup> Space exists through itself, subsists in itself, and sustains all other things in a unique way. As a result, Petrić concludes that space is “substantial extension, subsisting *per se*, inhering in nothing else”.<sup>35</sup> All other material things, on the other hand, are more properly understood as accidents of space, according to Petrić. What philosophers have traditionally called substance, then, “are for it accidents”, since “all things come to be in it, so are they accidental to it; so that not only what are listed in the categories, but also what is there called substance, are for it accidents”.<sup>36</sup> Space, Petrić concludes, “is the accident of no earthly thing, whether body or not body, whether substance or accident – it is prior to them all”.<sup>37</sup>

For Petrić, therefore, space is *the* principle of the material world that exists *per se*, and all other things – all bodies and non-bodies, all substances and accidents – come to be in space, and exist through it. One finds, therefore, both of these Renaissance Platonists arguing that the most basic substrate of the material world – either prime matter or space – possess a substantive and robust *per se* existence that is not dependent upon the existence of anything else.

## Conclusion

Given this picture of the ontological status of prime matter and space, one can begin to appreciate how material qualities themselves assume, for both Ficino and Petrić, a tenuous and even spectral status. The ontological status of matter and space has significant philosophical consequences for the status of what were traditionally called “primary substances” by philosophers who considered themselves part of either the Platonic or Aristotelian traditions. Both Ficino and Petrić argue that the most basic substrate of the material world actually exists in an impassible state, and that the various qualities and bodies that each contains are less real. Petrić argues that space is most truly substance, but Ficino is reluctant to draw this conclusion. This represents a radical inversion of the Scholastic view of the nature of things. While a philosopher such as Thomas Aquinas argued that prime matter is a principle of the material world, he did not think that it existed in any substantive sense in



the absence of some form. The basic unit of reality, according to many Scholastic Aristotelians, are the individual material substances that are composites of matter and form. On this view, forms are what make things definable, and cause them to be an actual this or that.

Both Ficino and Petrić, on the contrary, elevate the reality of matter and space over the transient forms of individual material things. That is to say that there is an “ontological priority” of prime matter and space over the various material things that are generated and corrupted. By ontological priority, I mean to suggest that matter and space assume for Ficino and Petrić a prominent position, both in terms of their primacy as first principles, and in terms of their lasting and permanent existence. It is the forms and qualities of material things that become more fleeting and transient on the ontologies of both Ficino and Petrić. For Ficino, material forms are judged to be only quasi-forms. That is, they are much less real than purely immaterial forms. Prime matter, on the other hand, is viewed as more stable and self-subsistent than individual material things. Ficino goes so far as to claim that the pure nature of immaterial forms are “contaminated” when they are taken into the “bosom of matter”. Ficino argues that while immaterial forms are active, and swift to act, by contrast material forms are “clumsy and incompetent”.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, they have no independent subsistence apart from the sustaining prime matter of the cosmos, since “that which lies fallow in something else ... is certainly dependent on that something” – which amounts to asserting that the existence of all material things are dependent, at least in part, on prime matter.<sup>39</sup> In Ficino’s final analysis, then, material forms have no subsistence apart from the material substrate, and if they are separated from matter, they perish. The same does not hold for prime matter, since it exists *per se*. Material qualities, therefore, are less real and more fleeting for Ficino than the primary material substrate itself.

In his *Pancosmia*, Petrić goes beyond Ficino’s conception of prime matter, and he introduces elements that are wholly foreign to Ficino’s understanding of material things. Perhaps most importantly, Petrić introduces the notion of resistance or “*antitypia*” into his analysis, and this is not discoverable

30

*Ibid.*

31

*Ibid.*

32

In the *Pancosmia*, Petrić makes space prior to and more primary than unformed matter: “And if God should make once again new heavens and a new earth ... Space preexists that can hold the new heavens and earth. Before this world that we inhabit was made by God, there was the empty Space, in which either atoms floated hither and you, chaos was rolled around, or unformed matter was rolled about in irregular movements. Therefore Space was there before the formation of the world. Therefore Space is by its nature prior to the world, and the first of all things in the world, before which there was nothing and after which, everything.” *Ibid.*, pp. 224–245.

33

*Ibid.*, p. 225.

34

In this way, Frane Petrić seems to indicate a very anti-Aristotelian line of argument. For instance, in the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle argues that matter is not substance, since it is not really a determinate this. Although Petrić is speaking about space, and not matter, one can see that he is indicating that the most basic substrate, through which the world exists, is actually substance most of all.

35

*Ibid.*, p. 241.

36

*Ibid.*, p. 240–241.

37

*Ibid.*, p. 240.

38

M. Ficino, *Platonic Theology* 1.3.1.

39

*Ibid.*, p. 31.

anywhere in Ficino’s *Platonic Theology*. While material things must have an incorporeal form or habit, according to Ficino, he does not introduce any idea of “*antitypia*” into his analysis. Also, Ficino is still working within the framework of Scholastic terminology, while Petrić shows a greater degree of independence from traditional philosophical principles. Nonetheless, Petrić in fact holds a similar view to Ficino concerning the ontological status of space in relation to individual material things. For Petrić, material things come to assume an accidental quality. He is even more direct in drawing his conclusions than Ficino is, since the Florentine remains somewhat tentative and unclear about the precise status of individual material things. Petrić argues that “space is prior to all these other degrees of things” since “they need it to exist, while Space itself needs none of them to exist”.<sup>40</sup> Petrić further explains that while space “[i]s the accident of no earthly thing, whether body or not body, whether substance or accident – it is prior to them. As all things come to be in it, so are they accidental to it.”<sup>41</sup>

Ficino and Petrić both articulate an ontology of the material world that departs radically from Scholastic natural philosophies. These two Renaissance Platonists both argue respectively for the existence of matter and space, and in such a way that matter and space do not exist in a thin or parasitic sense. Matter and space exist in themselves, and not on account of anything else. This view of the ontological status of material things is most likely grounded in their shared Platonism. Plato argues in the *Timaeus* that the receptacle of becoming is real and is independent of sensible things; Plotinus argues that prime matter, although it is in the end only the “tendency towards substantial existence”, and “the things that which seem to come to be in it are frivolities, nothing but phantoms in a phantom, like something in a mirror which really exists in one place but is reflected in another”.<sup>42</sup> These material qualities, according to Plotinus, “seem to act on it, but do nothing, for they are wraith-like and feeble and have no thrust”.<sup>43</sup> According to this view of things, which Ficino and Petrić adopt, the most basic principle of the material world is more real than the shadowy figures that come and go in it.

**James G. Snyder**

**Marsilio Ficino i Frane Petrić**  
**o »ontološkom prioritetu« materije i prostora**

**Sažetak**

*Ovaj članak je usporedba nekih od centralnih ontoloških stavova o naravi prve materije renesansnog platonista Marsilia Ficina te naravi prostora Frane Petrića, platonista 16. stoljeća iz grada Cresa. U njemu tvrdim da postoje dva aspekta u kojima prirodne filozofije oba platonista nalikuju jedna drugoj, naročito po pitanju ontološkog statusa najtemeljnijeg supstrata materijalnog svijeta. Kao prvo, i Ficino i Petrić se zalažu za temeljnu egzistenciju materije i prostora. Kao drugo, oba filozofa pridaju »ontološki prioritet« materiji i prostoru nad onim što se smatra da su prolazne kvalitete materijalnog svijeta.*

**Ključne riječi**

Marsilio Ficino, Frane Petrić, materija, prostor, ontologija

**James G. Snyder**

**Marsilio Ficino und Frane Petrić  
zur „ontologischen Priorität“ von Materie und Raum**

**Zusammenfassung**

*Dieser Artikel ist ein Vergleich einiger der signifikanten ontologischen Behauptungen über die Natur der ersten Materie des renaissancistischen Platonikers Marsilio Ficino und über das Gepräge des Raums Frane Petrićs, eines aus der Stadt Cres stammenden Platonikers des 16. Jahrhunderts. Darin vertrete ich die Ansicht, es bestünden zwei Hinsichten, in denen die natürlichen Philosophien beider Platoniker einander ähnelten, speziell in puncto ontologischer Sachlage des grundlegendsten Substrats der materiellen Welt. Zuerst treten sowohl Ficino wie auch Petrić für eine fundamentale Existenz der Materie und des Raums ein. Zweitens messen die beiden Philosophen der Materie und dem Raum eine „ontologische Priorität“ zu über die als flüchtig erachteten Qualitäten der materiellen Welt.*

**Schlüsselwörter**

Marsilio Ficino, Frane Petrić, Materie, Raum, Ontologie

**James G. Snyder**

**Marsilio Ficino et Frane Petrić à propos  
de la « priorité ontologique » de la matière et de l'espace**

**Résumé**

*Cet article est une comparaison de certaines affirmations ontologiques sur la nature de la matière première chez le platonicien de la Renaissance Marsilio Ficino et sur la nature de l'espace chez Frane Petrić, platonicien du XVIème siècle issu de la ville de Cres. J'y soutiens que les philosophies naturelles des deux platoniciens se ressemblent à deux égards, notamment en ce qui concerne le statut ontologique du substrat le plus fondamental du monde matériel. D'abord, Ficino comme Petrić soutiennent l'existence fondamentale de la matière et de l'espace. Deuxièmement, les deux philosophes attribuent la « priorité ontologique » à la matière et à l'espace sur ce qui est considéré comme qualités éphémères du monde matériel.*

**Mots-clés**

Marsilio Ficino, Frane Petrić, matière, espace, ontologie

40

F. Petrić, “On Physical Space,” p. 226.

41

*Ibid.*, pp. 240–241.

42

Plotinus, *The Enneads* III.6.7, p. 243.

43

*Ibid.* Also see, Plato, *Timaeus* 49A ff; L. P. Gerson explains: “Plotinus frequently employs the metaphor of a mirror, the main point being that like a mirror matter is unaffected by that which is reflected in it.” Lloyd P. Gerson, *Plotinus*, Routledge, London 1994, p. 112.