

Natural Magic : Some General Information on a Tradition

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In 1463, Cosimo di Medici commissioned Marsilio Ficino to translate from Greek into Italian a collection of ancient texts known as the *Corpus Hermeticum*. These writings were believed to have been first produced by an author who lived in the times of the Ancient Egyptian Pharaohs and that the author was a contemporary of Moses. If true, they would have been composed long prior to the birth of Christianity and they would have contained wisdom even older than that of the Hebrews. In the 15th century AD in Europe they were believed to contain the essential ideas of the oldest and the original wisdom of humanity. The author of these writings refers to himself as Hermes Trimegistos.

Fragments of these writings had been in circulation since ancient times but the complete collection had been lost to Western Europe since the fall of Rome. Like the rest of the great literature of antiquity, the Muslim world had the authentic Greek manuscripts and had studied them deeply for hundreds of years. In these writings, Hermes claims to have been a priest and philosopher of ancient Egypt and the master of the ancient wisdom of those times. Many legends surrounded this literature. According to some accounts, Ficino had been working on translating the recently recovered works of Plato from Greek manuscripts at the time that de Medici acquired copies of the hermetic writing. de Medici considered the Hermetica so important that he ordered Ficino to stop translating Plato and translate the Hermetica instead.

Modern scholarship has demonstrated that the Hermetic writings could not be more ancient than the second century A.D. Next to nothing is known about the actual author or authors. But, for all the learned people of the 15th century knew, they were every bit as old as the author claimed they were.

The sort of wisdom they contained was not merely an abstract theory about the nature of the universe. It was claimed by its author to be the key to awesome power for whoever could master it. It is not hard to understand why the Medicis wanted it translated immediately.

Much of what is in the texts has to do with various practical arts such as the smelting of metals, the production of precious stones and the dyeing of fabrics. The art is called Alchemy. But there is another side to this art that is mystical. Many symbols are shown in the hermetic writings. Symbols of the various stars and planets, symbols of the various earthly elements, and so on. These alchemical symbols have

to do with more than just metallurgy and heavenly bodies. They are symbols of perfection. They refer to the possibility of spiritual mastery of the human condition and of a restoration of earthly paradise. The essence and ultimate aim of alchemical mysticism is a purification of human nature and a union with God. This would mean regaining the original nobility of human nature. It holds that this aim is achievable because of the kinship that still remains between God and man, in spite of mankind's original sin and fall from God's grace. The attempt by alchemists to transform lead into gold was originally thought of by alchemists as no more than an exercise and a preparation for the alchemical transformation of the human soul from its present state into the original perfect state of Adam's soul as it was when it was first created.

But the hermetic arts do not presuppose either the specific theologies of Christianity, Judaism or Islam. They contain a cosmological perspective that regards the soul as one substance among others that has to be purified, distilled and newly crystallised.

Alchemy is one strand in the tradition known as Natural Magic. The aim of the hermetic magician is to manipulate both the manifest and the occult qualities of earthly things. Aristotelians recognised the two types of qualities and noted that the occult ones are not explicable in terms of the manifest ones. (hot, cold, wet, dry, heavy, light, sweet, sour, coloured, etc.) . The (Christian) aristotelians generally do not develop any elaborate theory of the occult qualities, except to maintain that human beings cannot have any way of using them, since they are impossible for us to comprehend, being unobservable. One should, therefore, spend no time in thinking about them. They are secret for a reason. We were not meant to understand them. If God had meant for us to comprehend them, He would have given us ways of observing them as he has given us sense with which we may learn of the manifest qualities. This attitude stemmed from a very long tradition in the Middle Ages of considering curiosity to be a contemptible vice, directly related to the original sin. God, it was said, made those things that we need to know as wayfarers in the world readily apparent to everyone. Many things have been hidden from us and God must have good reasons for hiding them from us. To persist in a vain and restless curiosity about things that are none of our business in this life is clearly a type of wickedness and is to be strongly discouraged.

In the tradition of natural magic, however, the occult qualities of earthly substances were thought to originally flow from the stars and planets. Many earthly objects possess sympathies and antipathies for one another because of natural kinships they have with specific heavenly bodies. The magicians' favourite example of such relations was the sympathy of the magnet for iron. Many other examples of these

were taken from traditional folklore, including the legend that the corpse of a murdered man will bleed in the presence of its murderer.

The alchemists and the Aristotelians agreed on one point. Such qualities are absolutely unobservable by human senses and they cannot be understood by human Reason. The presence of various types of occult powers can be detected, but only by inferring them from the way that observable things behave in various circumstances. Why a substance possessed the occult powers it did was absolutely mysterious to human beings, even according to the alchemists.. Once it was established that a certain substance had a certain occult power, however, there were secret techniques and arts that could enable one to manipulate these occult powers and to perform extraordinary things for the benefit of mankind. Moreover, the alchemist hoped to go even farther than this and to learn how to tap into and control the streams of influences they believed emanated from the stars and planets. For, example, they believed that one could make certain talismans that would give the one who wore them certain powers or protect them from various types of danger. One had to make the talisman of exactly the right sorts of substances, under the right conjunction of stars and planets, inscribe them with the right symbols and to do this in a ritually performed act, including the singing of certain ancient hymns. The powers of certain heavenly bodies could then be drawn into the talisman.

Alchemy and natural magic in general was an optimistic and positive worldview. The world was considered to be not entirely bad, corrupt and a cause of sorrow and evil. One must acquire a loving sympathy for the connections that bind the earth and heaven together. It is from this act that the magician draws his power. By means of the power of the magician's carefully trained imagination, all things can be made to obey him. He can cause health or sickness in his own or in others' bodies. Many who know of these arts immediately saw the implications: 1) the miracles of Christ were done by natural magic and not even assisted by God. 2) Such deeds were possible for all human beings with knowledge of the same arts by which they had been done.

The response of the Church to the spreading interest in Natural magic was to declare that their arts are ineffective by themselves. Magicians may do marvellous things, but that is because they are diabolical agents in disguise. Only God can work miracles. Demons may perform marvellous deeds. So, human beings can appear to perform marvels, but only if they have the help of demons. Marvellous events can't be caused by any natural means. They are contrary to the order of nature established by God.

The Church attempted to prove its case against natural magic in several ways. One was to prove that there are clear and undeniable cases of demonic activity in the world. For this, they concentrated hardest on building arguments and evidence for the existence of witches. Another strategy was to argue that the deeds of magicians were demonically assisted.

For further reading:

Easlea, Brian. *Witch-Hunting, Magic and the New Philosophy: An Introduction to the Debates of the Scientific Revolution* . Humanities Press, 1980: Atlantic Highlands, NJ

Thomas, Keith, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Penguin, 1973)

Walker, D.P., *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella* ; Notre Dame Press, 1975)