The Roots of a Science of Consciousness in Hermetic Alchemy

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Abstract

Alchemy is not only the origin of systematic experimentation and chemistry but also the first attempt to create a cohesive science of consciousness. Those early philosophers of nature treated mental contents as objective phenomena, and they believed the universal operations used in their laboratories could transform a dark leaden mind into a shining golden one. The Hermetic philosophy behind alchemy taught that our thoughts and feelings are the thoughts and feelings of the whole universe, and that intrinsic perspective generated deep insight into the structure of mind. Alchemists viewed consciousness as a natural force that could be harnessed through a marriage of logic and intuition – a union of objective and subjective realities. Like modern seekers of a unified field theory, alchemists sought one true philosophy of universal principles that were as valid in Nature as they were in their own minds and souls, and in the One Mind of the Cosmos. The resulting cauldron of ideas on mind and matter leads to a truer understanding of the Philosopher's Stone – not as an object but a state of mind.

Les racines d'une Science de la Conscience dans l'Alchimie hermétique

par Dennis William Hauck, Ph.D.

Résumé

L'Alchimie n'est pas seulement à l'origine de l'expérimentation systématique et de la chimie, elle constitue également la première tentative de créer une science de la conscience. Ces premiers philosophes de la nature tenaient le contenu du mental pour un phénomène objectif ; ils croyaient en effet que les opérations universelles, qu'ils effectuaient dans leurs laboratoires, étaient en mesure de transformer un esprit sombre de plomb en un d'or resplendissant. La philosophie hermétique, sous-jacente à l'alchimie, enseignait que nos pensées et nos sentiments sont les reflets des pensées et des sentiments de l'univers tout entier, cette vision intrinsèque générant un aperçu profond de la structure du mental. Les Alchimistes énonçaient que la conscience est une force naturelle pouvant être jugulée par un syncrétisme de logique et d'intuition – autrement dit, une union des réalités objective et subjective. À l'instar des actuels chercheurs d'une théorie unifiée de l'Univers, les alchimistes d'antan recherchaient une véritable philosophie de principes universels qui fût autant valable dans la nature, dans le mental et l'âme humaine, que dans le Mental cosmique. Le chaudron de réflexions sur l'esprit et la matière qui en résulta, conduisit à une compréhension plus vraie de la Pierre philosophale – non pas comme un objet, mais comme un état d'esprit.

Las Raíces de una Ciencia de la Conciencia en la Alquimia Hermética

por Dennis Guillermo Hauck, Ph.D.

Resumen

La Alquimia no sólo es el origen de la experimentación sistemática y la química, sino también el primer intento de crear una ciencia cohesiva de la conciencia. Estos primeros filósofos de la naturaleza tratan los contenidos mentales como fenómenos objetivos, y creyeron que las operaciones universales utilizadas en sus laboratorios podría transformar una mente plomiza oscura en una de oro brillante. La filosofía hermética detrás de la alquimia enseñó que nuestros pensamientos y sentimientos son los pensamientos y sentimientos de todo el universo, y que esta perspectiva intrínseca genera un conocimiento profundo en la estructura de la mente. Alquimistas miraron a la conciencia como una fuerza natural que podría ser aprovechada a través de un matrimonio de la lógica y la intuición - una unión de realidades objetivas y subjetivas. Al igual que los buscadores modernos de una teoría del campo unificado, alquimistas buscaban una verdadera filosofía de principios universales que fueran tan válidas tanto en la Naturaleza y en sus propias mentes y almas como también en la Mente del Cosmos. El resultante caldero de las ideas en mente y la materia conduce a una comprensión más verídica de la piedra filosofal - no como un objeto, sino también como un estado de mental.

As Raízes de uma Ciência da Consciência em Alquimia Hermética

por Dennis William Hauck, Ph.D.

Sumário

A Alquimia não é somente a origem de experimentação sistemática e química, mas também é a primeira tentativa de criar uma ciência coesiva de consciência. Os antigos filósofos da natureza tratavam os conteúdos mentais como fenômenos objetivos, e eles acreditavam que as operações universais utilizadas em seus laboratórios poderiam transformar uma mente de chumbo escuro em uma de ouro brilhante. A filosofia hermética por trás da alquimia, nos ensinou que nossos pensamentos e sentimentos são os pensamentos e sentimentos de todo o universo. Essa perspectiva intrínseca gerou um conhecimento profundo sobre a estrutura da mente. Alquimistas viam a consciência como uma força natural que pode ser controlada através de um casamento de lógica e intuição - uma união de realidades objetivas e subjetivas. Assim como os buscadores modernos de uma teoria de campo unificado, alquimistas procuravam uma verdadeira filosofia de princípios universais que seriam tão válidos na Natureza como eram em suas próprias mentes e almas, e na Mente do Cosmos. O caldeirão resultante de idéias sobre a mente e a matéria leva a uma compreensão mais verdadeira da Pedra Filosofal - não como um objeto, mas como um estado de espírito.

Die Wurzeln einer Wissenschaft des Bewusstseins in der Hermetischen Alchymie

Dr. Dennis William Hauck, Ph.D.

Zusammenfassung

Alchymie ist nicht nur der Ursprung systematischen Experimentierens und der Chemie, sondern auch der erste Versuch, eine zusammenhängende Wissenschaft des Bewusstseins zu schaffen. Diese frühen Naturphilosophen behandelten geistige Inhalte als objektive Phänomene, und sie glaubten, mit den in ihren Laboratorien verwendeten universellen Operationen ließe sich ein dunkler bleierner Geist in einen leuchtend goldenen verwandeln. Die der Alchymie zugrunde liegende hermetische Philosophie lehrte, dass unsere Gedanken und Gefühle die Gedanken und Gefühle des ganzen Universums seien, und dass Innenschau tiefe Einblicke in die Struktur des Geistes ermöglicht. Alchymisten betrachteten das Bewusstsein als eine natürliche Kraft, die durch eine Verbindung von Logik und Intuition nutzbar gemacht werden könne – eine Vereinigung von objektiven und subjektiven Realitäten. Wie moderne Forscher sich um eine einheitliche Feldtheorie bemühen, so suchten die Alchymisten nach der einen wahren Philosophie universeller Prinzipien, die nicht nur in der Natur ihre Gültigkeit hätten, sondern ebenso im eigenen Geist und der Seele und darüber hinaus in dem Einen Geist des Kosmos. Die daraus resultierende große Fülle an Ideen über Geist und Materie führt zu einem besseren Verständnis des Steins der Weisen – nicht als Objekt, sondern als Bewusstseinszustand.

Introduction

Western alchemy was syncretized from a blend of practical and spiritual traditions by Alexandrian scholars. Between 300 BCE and 50 BCE, Egyptian, Greek, Arabian, and Jewish alchemists assembled in Alexandria to work out the principles of transformation that made alchemy possible. What emerged was a coherent philosophy of matter based on physical observations and philosophical interpretations.[1]

That it took nearly two hundred and fifty years for scholars to formalize a discipline of alchemy should not be surprising. The ancient world moved at a very slow pace.

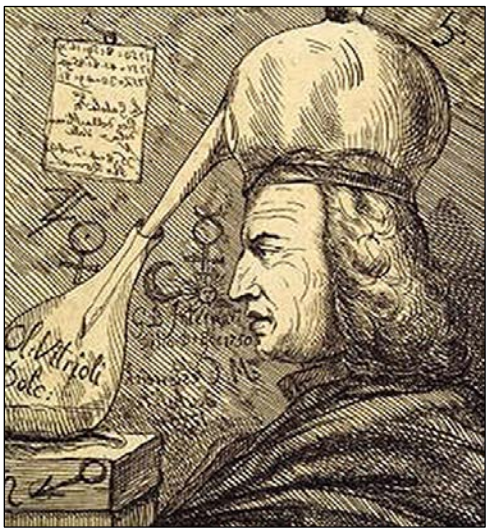

Figure 1. "Vitriol" by Piero Leone Ghezzi (1750)

Communication was based on letters, books, and first person accounts. Travel was dangerous and time consuming, although many scholars who came to Alexandria stayed there to have access to the latest manuscripts and discoveries. Discussions on basic topics went on for decades.

For instance, the earliest version of the theory of elements was a philosophical model in which matter arose from three idealized elements known as Liquid, Solid, and Air. Fire was considered the agent of change between them. This view was based on the philosophy of Plato (428-348 BCE) and Aristotle (384-322 BCE), who postulated that the constantly changing world of our senses is based on an unchanging, invisible world of perfect forms.[2]

Then, around 270 BCE, resistance to the Platonic view from practicing alchemists and physicians led to a more empirical Four Elements theory that included Fire as an elemental substance, along with Water, Earth, and Air. This school of thought focused on experimental evidence instead of hidden causes, and the arguments in Alexandria turned from philosophical to practical.[3]

One example of the new empirical approach is the way in which the order of creation of the elements was established. It was generally agreed that Fire came first, then Air, but there was great debate over which came next, Earth or Water. The correct order was determined by the Water Demonstration Experiment in which a beaker of water was allowed to evaporate, leaving behind solid residue. Thus Water contains Earth and was created before it.

During the final fifty years BCE, there was a backlash against the empiricists that culminated in the establishment of a more metaphysical view of the Four Elements. In this Hermetic interpretation, alchemists combined the fire of nature with the fire of mind as the single agent of change in the universe. Their manifesto was the ancient Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus, which described the dynamic relationship between the One Mind of the universe and the One Thing of the manifested world.[4]

The new perspective on the role of consciousness in the universe inspired alchemists around the world and was responsible for the flourishing of the protoscience of alchemy. The teachings spread from Alexandria to other Mediterranean countries, the Arabian lands, and on to India and China. They reached Europe with the Moorish invasion of Spain in the eighth century.

Figure 2. De Dokter - Theodorus de Bry 1580

In the six hundred years from 1200 to 1800, more books were written about alchemy than any other subject, and nearly every alchemist kept a copy of the Emerald Tablet to use as a guide. Admittedly, the new perspective enabled the rise of puffers and charlatans who claimed to change lead into gold, but it was also the first step toward a science of mind and matter free of cultural and religious dogma.[5]

Consciousness as a Force of Nature

The idea that consciousness is a force of nature, and that it plays an integral role in the evolution of the universe, is one of the central principles of alchemy. All consciousness originates from a single point, which lies outside of time and space yet is the source of the universe and is everywhere present within it.

The concept evolved from Plato's theory of ideal forms existing in the infinite consciousness of the divine mind. The transition from perfect forms to manifested physical objects was accomplished through an intermediary deity Plato named "Mind the Maker." In alchemical

philosophy, this was interpreted as the mind of Nature, which fashions the physical world from the light of the One Mind.

Philo of Alexandria (20 BCE – 50 CE) associated the Logos (or divine Word) with both Plato's Maker deity and the Angel of the Lord described in the Hebrew Bible. He viewed the Logos as the tool of creation, a cohesive vibration that brought order out of chaos. "The Logos is the bond of everything," he wrote, "holding all things together and binding all the parts, and prevents them from being dissolved and separated."[6]

By the Renaissance, the Hermetic concept of the One Mind had evolved into a detailed explanation of how the universe was created and how transformation takes place within it. These principles are consolidated in a stunning Rosicrucian engraving called *Tabula Smaragdina* ("The Emerald Tablet"). It depicts the realm of mind Above and the duality of matter Below.[7]

Figure 3. Tabula Smaragdina (Emerald Tablet) by Matthieu Merian 1618

An essential feature of this engraving is often overlooked. If we examine the realm Above, we see two great suns rising over the horizon. The larger sun in the background is the ineffable One Mind, whose rays encompass the whole universe. But in front of it is the smaller sun of Mind the Maker. It can be thought of as the matrix of reality behind the laws of physics and biology. These laws are the crystallized thoughts symbolized by the archetypal angels embedded in the smaller sun.

Why is the divine domain separated into two aspects? It implies that the ultimate One Mind is outside our world and does not directly participate in it. Instead, the Logos, or information of creation, was projected into our reality as Mind the Maker. Therefore, we can only know God through nature or what the Emerald Tablet called the "Operation of the Sun." This revelation was a basic part of the Renaissance *zeitgeist* and helped spread a more objective way of looking at reality.

Insights into the human condition are revealed in the lower half of the engraving. The duality of our existence is symbolized in two opposing paths in the manifested world. On the left is the daytime world of aggressive solar energy and masculine symbols. On the right is the nighttime world of passive lunar energy and feminine symbols. Only by uniting masculine rationality with feminine feelings – the *quantia* and *qualia* of our consciousness – can we free ourselves from the clouds of unknowing and enter the hidden dimension Above. This balanced state of consciousness is personified by the hermaphroditic alchemist at the center.

In addition to the vertical axis of spiritual and material realms and the horizontal axis of the duality of light and darkness, there is a third axis projecting out from the center of the drawing toward the viewer. The seven-layered ball of light at the center is the birth of the Philosopher's Stone as it leaves heaven and enters the material realm. To achieve this alchemical state of consciousness, one must progress through the seven layers leading to the Philosopher's Stone. This is a strange, ouroboric journey that unites the opposing forces of masculine and feminine, inner and outer, Above and Below.[8]

The journey begins in the outer ring with our leaving the planetary influences of our immediate environment and returning home to the stars. The next ring is a journey through time from earthly routines to the infinite time scale of the universe. The next three rings bring awareness of the basic trinity of the forces of creation – Sulfur, Mercury, and Salt – what modern science refers to as energy, light, and matter.[9]

The sixth ring contains a direct message to the seeker: *Ignes Quatuor ad opus reperuntur* ("Four grades of Fire are required for the Work"). This is the key that unlocks the seventh and innermost circle. Within a central upward-pointing triangle of Fire is inscribed a cipher for the Philosopher's Stone or the ultimate knowledge of reality.

The Secret Fire

Among alchemists, Fire was always a point of friction and debate, because it was not only a sensory experience but also deeply symbolic of invisible natural energy. Fire was also associated with health, metabolism, and aging, and the light of fire represented thinking, inspiration, and enlightenment.

In working out an acceptable theory of Fire, one of the biggest stumbling blocks was that the ancients had no clear concept of energy. They referred to energetic interactions and unseen forces as "spirits," which existed independently in the physical world, as well as in the human body and mind.

Medieval alchemists were fascinated by fire and referred to themselves as "Philosophers of Fire." They recognized four grades of fire: Elementary Fire, Central Fire, Celestial Fire, and Secret Fire. Elementary Fire is the physical fire of everyday life. Central Fire is the archetypal source of Mind the Maker that burns at the heart of every material thing. Celestial Fire is the eternal, non-burning white light of the One Mind.

Secret Fire is the hidden fire that burns in the human mind. Antoine-Joseph Pernety (1716-1796) describes it in his work *The Great Art*: "In allegories and fables, the philosophers have given to this Secret Fire names such as the sword or knife, but they have also described it as the fire that Prometheus stole from heaven or Vulcan used to create the thunderbolts of Jupiter." Pernety concluded that this discerning fire is "external to matter," yet is somehow able to change it or "cause its corruption."[10]

In his book *Alchemy*, Hermetic scholar Franz Hartman (1838-1912) warned that this fiery state of consciousness could be dangerous: "The Secret Fire of the alchemists is an electric, fiery, hidden power, the great pristine form which underlies all organic and inorganic matter. It is an electro-spiritual force, a creative power which, when aroused into action, can as easily destroy as it can create."[11]

In the Hermetic tradition, the Secret Fire is often associated with vitriol, which is a thick oily form of sulfuric acid – a powerful corrosive that can eat through just about anything. In spiritual work, vitriol is seen as a kind of liquid fire that burns away impurities in the soul. In personal work, it is a ruthless and self-deprecating inspection of one's thoughts and motives. Brutal vitriolic objectivity became a useful tool in the alchemists' fight against lies and dogma, and the word eventually entered the vernacular as a synonym for harsh, biting criticism.

Adepts in alchemy believed the vitriolic inner fire could be intensified and refocused using the same methods they followed in their laboratory work. These universal operations pass through three stages known as the Black Phase of purification, the White Phase of clarity in which the essential ingredients are identified, and the final Red Phase of projection and transmutation.

Experimental Study of Consciousness

Figure 4. Paracelsus (1493-1541)

Paracelsus was a controversial Swiss alchemist and physician whose laboratory work was guided by the principle that the new matter of alchemical transmutations was somehow present in the Secret Fire of the alchemist's own consciousness: "The Matter is contained in the Secret Fire and comes into being in the occult Vessel."[12]

Paracelsus was convinced a disciplined imagination was the unexpected key to transforming reality. "Imagination is a great power," he wrote, "and if the world knew what strange things can be produced by the power of the imagination, the public authorities would force idle people to stop daydreaming and keep busy at work."[13]

According to Paracelsus, transformation was possible by stripping away the outer form of a substance to reveal its First Matter, and then projecting the light of pure consciousness to transform it into something new. The reason this is possible is that the microcosm and macrocosm are united within the light of One Mind, and the human mind is the focal point through which nature manifests.

Specifically, Paracelsus believed a person could achieve union with the divine mind by focusing on the infinite nature of his or her own consciousness and moving from the realm of worldly illusion to that of permanent truth. "Only when the illusion of self has disappeared from my heart and mind," he wrote in *Liber De Occulta Philosophia*, "and my consciousness risen to that state in which there is no more personal self, then, will I not be the doer of works and will not that spirit of wisdom perform its wonders through my instrumentality?"[14]

Figure 5. Jakob Boehme (1575-1624)

A similar method of emptying the self of worldly attachments was described by German alchemist and mystic Jakob Boehme. He proclaimed that all objective reality arises from a formless void he called the *Ungrund* ("the place without ground"). "The Supersensual Abyss," he said, "hath no Ground to stand on and there is no Place to dwell in. It may fitly be compared to Nothing; for it is deeper than any Thing, and is as Nothing with respect to All Things, for as much as it is not comprehensible by any of them. And because it is Nothing, it is therefore free from All Things. A person cannot express or utter what it is; there being Nothing to which it may be compared."[15]

This primordial Abyss, which resonates with the alchemists' First Matter or modern ideas of the quantum foam, is brought to manifestation by the primordial urge of the divine mind to become aware of itself. Boehme believed this deeper reality could be directly experienced by purifying consciousness to a state "before nature and creature." To do so, we must "extricate our consciousness from all that is the effect of our time and place."[16]

What remains is a state of absolute simplicity, an abiding and enduring sense of contentment and deep humility. Boehme faced relentless persecution from the Church for his ideas, yet he never let his ego get in the way of the truth he experienced. "My writings are only for those who are willing to receive the truth in a simple and childlike state of mind," he said, "for it is they who are to possess the kingdom of God. I have written only for those who seek truth; to the cunning and world-wise, I have nothing to say."[17]

Figure 6. Robert Fludd (1574-1637)

Robert Fludd, Rosicrucian Grand Master of England, was a practicing alchemist and mathematician who also felt consciousness is embedded in the universe, but he believed it could be studied objectively. He suggested the presence of consciousness in the external world could be demonstrated by studying parallel actions that remained linked by sympathetic or synchronistic forces created at their inception. He argued that two or more identical actions performed simultaneously under the same conditions should share a conscious bond whose effects could be observed.

Fludd also theorized that thoughts from the divine Mind acted like waves or vibrations to create physical reality and link the human mind with divine consciousness. In 1618, he invented two single-string musical instruments (monochords) based on his theory. His Mundane Monochord played microcosmic or terrestrial sounds, while his Divine Monochord played macrocosmic or celestial sounds.

Atoms of Consciousness

Alchemical cosmology is a form of panpsychism, which views consciousness as a property of every created thing. But the alchemists went a step further and treated consciousness as part of the fabric of space from which the universe emerges continuously in every moment – a force of nature amenable to experimentation and even manipulation.

Several leading Renaissance alchemists tried to create a science of consciousness by resurrecting the Pythagorean notion that the universe was created through the generation of an archetypal series of numbers. According to Pythagoras, the indivisible source from which the universe evolves is the Monad or singularity. The Dyad (duality) is born through the division of the Monad, an act which creates the plurality of numbers. From numbers are derived the point, the line, two-dimensional objects, and three-dimensional bodies. From manifested bodies come the Four Elements, which make up the basis of physical reality.

Figure 7. John Dee (1527-1608)

John Dee was an English mathematician and alchemist who thought the Pythagorean system offered a way of using mathematics to explain the role of mind in the universe. He entered Cambridge at the age of fifteen and was soon recognized as one of England's greatest geniuses. He extended the boundariesof the mathematics of his day by building a firm footing in arithmetic and inventing an elaborate geometric hierarchy of new applications and terminology.[18]

Dee conceived of the Monad as the first being or idea that contained the totality of all things, and at the age of 30, set out to conceptualize this universal force in mathematical terms. Finally, in 1564, after seven years of intense effort, he completed a step-by-step proof and published it under the title *The Hieroglyphic Monad*.[19]

Figure 9. Giordano Bruno (1548-1600)

Using Euclidean geometry, Dee created a single symbol to embody the power of the Monad. Using just a compass and square, he constructed a cipher that included all the archetypal planetary forces in their proper relationships. He was so sure he encapsulated all the information necessary for the creation of the Cosmos, that he advised astronomers to stop peering into the heavens to understand the universe and instead meditate on his Monad. If his Hieroglyphic Monad were dropped into an ocean of First Matter at the beginning of time, the universe as we know it would emerge.

Figure 8. Dee's Monad

Another mathematician and alchemist who viewed the universe as an infinite living presence that possessed a monadic mind was the Italian Giordano Bruno. He described three basic types of monads. The first was the One Mind, the ultimate Monad that contained all other monads. The second class of monads were human souls. Each of us lives in our own monad – our own little world – which is a microcosmic replica of the properties of the divine Monad. Finally, there exist the lowest monads of matter or "minima," which are invisible atoms and nearly unconscious bridges between mind and matter.[20]

Bruno believed that the One Mind was not logically knowable and that only by combining qualitative and quantitative approaches could deeper truths be realized. Fascinated by the workings of the mind and how memories were formed, Bruno experimented with elaborate mnemonic systems and invented a geometry of language to try to deepen the power of human understanding. His geometric language was a kind of *poesis* that attempted to ground ephemeral intuitions and intimations into earthly forms humans could grasp.

His multi-layered prose used verbal patterns that opened layers of greater sensitivity to the ideas being discussed. Virtual designs of circles, curves, angles, points, and lines in the subtext created linguistic images that communicate deeper – and sometimes impossible to articulate – levels of meaning.[21]

At his public lectures, Bruno asserted that the sun is the center of our planetary system, and the stars are really distant suns with their own planets, which may also harbor intelligent life. In his *Fifth Dialogue*, Bruno declared: "The universe is one, infinite, immobile. It is not capable of comprehension and therefore is endless and limitless, and to that extent infinite and indeterminable, and consequently immobile."[22]

In 1592, the Church imprisoned Bruno and insisted he recant his heresies, but he steadfastly refused. Finally, on February 8, 1600, after seven years of merciless torture, the Inquisitors tied a gag tightly around his tongue and took him to Campo de Fiori Square in Rome, where – unable to speak to the crowd or cry out he – was burned alive.

Figure 10. Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716)

Bruno's and Dee's work with monads was significantly expanded by German mathematician, alchemist, and philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. He published details of his theory in *Monadology*, in which he postulated the existence of atoms of consciousness present everywhere throughout the universe.[23]

Leibniz reasoned that all substances are material things that can be divided into smaller units, but at some point in this infinite process we get to an ultimate essence that can no longer be rationally understood. Therefore, the basis of physical reality is not an objective particle but a subjective perceptive presence. Leibniz' monads are similar to elementary particles, but they

are units of consciousness and have their own subjective impressions that create reality at that level.

Embedded in space and time, monads are arranged in hierarchies or levels of consciousness, ranging from the highest awareness of the divine Monad that contains all other monads to the lowest, proto-conscious monad at the border between mind and matter. Monads at the lowest level are unconscious, unaware, and without memory, but they possess the potential to become conscious.

Leibniz' theory of atoms of consciousness provided alchemists with a mechanism for transmutation. If human consciousness could be projected into the primal monadic layer, then the atoms of creation might reflect the mind of the observer. Alchemists refer to this kind of thought projection as "animating the Mercury."

As a philosopher, Leibniz found himself in the middle between Descartes (1596-1650), who taught the mechanistic view that matter was inert, and Spinoza (1632-1677), who taught that all matter had a spiritual core and God was the only substance in the universe. Like his fellow alchemists, Leibniz believed that consciousness was omnipresent, but ridiculed the idea of an anthropomorphic deity and instead supported the concept of an abstract universal mind. He actually prepared an ontological proof that such a being was a necessary part of reality.

Azoth of the Philosophers

Figure 11. Azoth des Philosophes - Basil Valentine 1659

An intuitive interpretation of Monad theory can be found in a Rosicrucian meditative emblem known as the *Azoth* (shown at left). It first appeared as an illustration for the book *Azoth of the Philosophers* attributed to the legendary Swiss alchemist Basil Valentine (1394-1450).[24]

At the center is the monadic mind of the alchemist inscribed in a circle. The downward-pointing triangle superimposed over his face is the cipher for Water or divine grace. So, within the triangle is the divine Monad merging with the mind of the alchemist.

The idea that the human mind and the One Mind of the universe could unite in meditation was a central tenet of medieval alchemy. In fact, prayer and meditation were considered a necessary part of successful transformations in the laboratory. The *Azoth* diagram shows the stages of spiritual purification necessary to reach that highest level of consciousness.[25]

The marriage of human and divine – a state of consciousness known to initiates as the Philosopher's Stone – is created by the Secret Fire. "Our universal secret," said Paracelsus,

"needs only the most Secret Fire of the philosophers. The Secret Fire therefore and the *Azoth* are sufficient."[26]

The *Azoth* is an ancient concept developed by Alexandrian alchemists. The Latin word is a stylized form of *azoc*, an Arabian poetic word for mercury that refers to the higher, idealized archetype from which common mercury derives it characteristics. Alchemists sometimes refer to it as philosophical mercury or "Sophic Mercury." The word "Azoth" is made up of the first letter ("A") of the Latin, Greek, and Hebrew alphabets, then the final letter ("Z") of the Latin alphabet, followed by the final letters ("O") of the Greek and ("T") of the Hebrew alphabets.

The spelling of the word implies that *Azoth* is a universal solvent for anything from A to Z – everything in the alpha-omega of our existence from mental contents to physical substances. Just as common mercury flows freely and has the power to dissolve metals, so does the *Azoth* possess the power to break down or assimilate anything in the world.

It was also referred to as the "Universal Solvent" or *Alkahest* that digests all things, including human ego, worldly concerns, fears, habits, and judgments. After the application of the *Azoth* on the personal level, only a pure mind is present. The overall process depicted in this drawing is the dissolution of everything human to create a sacred space that will be filled with the divine mind, just as Paracelsus described.

Hermetic philosophy postulates seven levels of consciousness based on the planetary archetypes – from dark leaden Saturn to the brilliant golden Sun. The seven rays emanating out from the monad of the alchemist indicate these levels that must be traversed to achieve enlightenment. Following each ray is a roundel, which is a circle containing a scene that elaborates on the meaning of the operation necessary at each stage.

Before the work of transformation begins, the alchemist must become centered on the cross of the elements. His body is shown in perfect balance with the Four Elements as depicted by his arms and legs. His right foot is firmly planted on Earth and his left is in Water. In his right hand is a torch of Fire and in his left hand an ostrich feather symbolizing Air.

The alchemist also stands balanced between the masculine and feminine powers. Sol, the Sun King of logic and thought, is seated on a lion to his right. Luna, the Moon Queen of intuition and emotions, is seated on a great fish in the ocean to his left. With his mind and body in a state of perfect equilibrium and repose, the disruptive and challenging application of the *Azoth* can proceed.

The driving force behind this transformation is the Secret Fire, the liquid fire of alchemical Vitriol. In the *Azoth* drawing, all the Latin words contained in the outer ring connecting the rays spell out a sentence that describes the search for the Philosopher's Stone: *Visita Interiora Terrae Rectificando Invenies Occultum Lapidem* ("Visit the innermost parts of the earth; and by setting things right, you will find the hidden Stone"). The first letter of each of the seven Latin words in the outer ring spells out a new word, "VITRIOL." As mentioned earlier, this is sulfuric acid, a powerful corrosive that is symbolic of the energy that drives the whole wheel of transformation.

Vitriol is both the fundamental liquid fire that causes chemical changes in the laboratory and the mercurial Secret Fire that brings about the spiritual perfection of the alchemist.

When the relentless dissolving power of Vitriol is applied to the contents of mind, thoughts, emotions, habits, and memories fade away. That results in a flowing, clarified state of pure consciousness that can be intensely focused. For alchemists, the Philosopher's Stone was mundane consciousness brought to its highest and most objective level. The hidden Stone of the Philosophers is the self-contained monad of awareness each of us carries that has the potential to become a brilliant star – a gateway to the cosmic Mind.

Three Forces of Creation

The energies driving alchemical transformation are the same forces that created the universe. They are represented at the apexes of a large inverted triangle behind the central emblem and are labeled *Spiritus* (Spirit), *Anima* (Soul), and *Corpus* (Body). These are the *Tria Prima*, the primordial forces that the alchemists named Sulfur, Mercury, and Salt. Of course, these are not the common materials of the same name but idealized principles based on their characteristics. As noted earlier, such archetypal forces are often referred as philosophical or "Sophic" substances.

Paracelsus defined the *Tria Prima* by how they behave in fire. In the burning of wood, for example, Sulfur is the potential energy or fuel that is consumed in the fire; Mercury is the light, heat, and vapors emitted by the fire; and Salt is the ash left behind. Sulfur is the solar, energetic, masculine principle of spirit that gives a substance its active properties and identity in relationship to other substances. Mercury is the lunar, passive, feminine principle of soul that represents the eternal source of life and consciousness.

Alchemists referred to Mercury as the "Mother of the Stone" and felt it was the mediator between Sulfur and Salt in the creation of new compounds and life forms. Salt represents materialization, crystallization, precipitation, and the formation of bodies in general.


Figure 12. Francis Bacon (1561-1626)

English alchemist and Rosicrucian philosopher Francis Bacon accepted the Paracelsian view that all manifested things arise from the interaction of the three forces of Sulfur, Salt, and Mercury. But Bacon eliminated Salt and theorized that it was created later, through the interaction of Sulfur and Mercury. He associated Sulfur with the Fire Element, which he described as a kind of intelligent energy. Mercury had a dual nature combining the elemental characteristics of Water and Air. Mercury in its watery aspect produced flowing, volatile, morphing phenomena. In its airy aspect, it was the source of etheric forces, such as the life force and mental phenomena.

Bacon worked out a complicated system to explain how the different kinds of matter came from the union of Sulfur and Mercury, but he kept his theory secret because he could not find

a way to prove it. This frustration may be what prompted him to develop a systematic way of finding the truth behind all natural phenomena. In *Of the Interpretation of Nature*, he described his method as a "new light in nature which should illuminate all the border-regions of our present knowledge; and so, spreading further and further should disclose and bring into sight all that is most hidden and secret in the world."[27]

Bacon's new light in nature became the modern scientific method, which transmuted alchemy itself into the new regimen of chemistry. But many of the alchemists' intuitive insights are being confirmed in contemporary disciplines, most notably psychology and quantum physics. And, as stated previously, the three forces of creation recognized by the alchemists (Sulfur, Mercury, and Salt) are the same forces of creation (energy, light, and matter) recognized by modern cosmologists.

Mind and Matter: The Philosopher's Stone

The Philosopher's Stone is the central mystery of alchemy. "Receive this Stone which is not a stone," said the Alexandrian alchemist Zosimos (ca. 300 AD), "a precious thing that has no value, a thing of many shapes that has no shape, this unknown which is known by all." Zosimos surmised that the "Stone of the Wise" was simply human consciousness – a mercurial thing of many shapes that has no shape of its own.[28]

Figure 13. Robert Boyle (1627-1691)

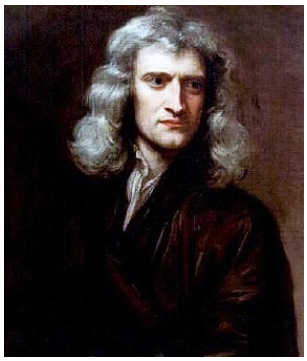

Figure 14. Isaac Newton (1643-1727)

Paracelsus described the Philosopher's Stone as a state of higher consciousness that revealed the true nature of reality to anyone who possessed it. John Dee thought of the Philosopher's Stone as a physical object – possibly the human brain – that was "the force behind the evolution of life and the universal binding power which unites minds and souls in human oneness."[29]

One alchemist who spent his life searching for the Philosopher's Stone was Robert Boyle, an Irishman. He was a high-minded scientist who tried to free alchemy of its secrecy and open it up to shared research. Boyle held frequent meetings with fellow alchemists, including Isaac Newton, Gottfried Leibniz, John Locke, and fellow members of the Royal Society. He also set up active correspondence with other alchemists throughout Europe. His network of cooperating alchemists became known as the "Invisible College."

But two years before his death, Boyle announced he had made strides in creating the Philosopher's Stone that required he spend more time alone in his laboratory. He stopped scheduling meetings with other alchemists and cut back his participation in the Invisible College. He explained the products of his work on the Stone were exhibiting mysterious properties that should not or could not be shared publicly: "The full and complete uses cannot

be mentioned, partly because, in spite of my previous philanthropy, I am now engaged to secrecy."[30]

Like Boyle, English alchemist and mathematician Isaac Newton sought to create the Philosopher's Stone. Newton is revered as one of the most important scientists in history, yet his personal philosophy was based on a literal interpretation of the Bible. He wanted to go back before the Fall to a perfect state of knowing, and he believed angels came to Adam with a way to return to that purest state of mind. The Emerald Tablet described that path, and Newton viewed alchemists as holy adepts in the Great Work of returning mankind to the splendor of the Garden.

Newton believed the Philosopher's Stone would enable direct communication with angels, who embodied the thoughts of God. His efforts to decipher those divine thoughts may have inspired his universal equations on force and gravity and guided his experiments with light. From the beginning of Newton's research into the nature of light, he sensed the divine mind at work. He was against the corpuscular theory of light because it "robbed matter of its divine essence." He speculated in his private journals that light might possess the dual nature of Mercury, existing as both particles of matter and waves of energy. But such an idea, he noted, would never be accepted by the scientists of his time. It would be another two hundred years before the dual nature of light would be proven.

In the competition between alchemy and the emerging field of chemistry, Newton sided firmly with the alchemists. He believed that the spiritual state of the experimenter was intimately connected with the outcome of the experiment. Newton's appointment as President of the Royal Society and Master of the Royal Mint confirmed that the upper echelon of scientists at the time believed alchemy was a more complete view of the world than chemistry.

Conclusion

An underappreciated aspect of alchemy is how much of a revolutionary movement it was. Throughout history, alchemists were intellectual rebels at constant odds with authority. Not torture nor threats of death nor eternal damnation could dissuade them from speaking out about the true nature of the universe as they saw it. Their inner passion, the Secret Fire that burned in their souls, prevented them from abandoning the search for truth.

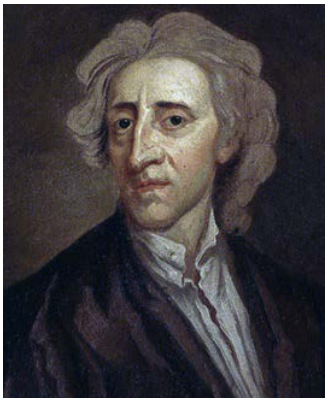

Figure 15. John Locke (1632-1704)

That fire can be felt in the words of Giordano Bruno: "The fools of the world have been those who established religions, ceremonies, laws, faith, and artificial rules of life. The greatest asses of the world are those who, lacking all understanding, rot in perpetual pedantry."[31]

Many alchemists were martyrs in the struggle for freedom of consciousness, and the champion of their cause was John Locke, an English statesman and member of Boyle's Invisible College of alchemists. Locke believed that the fundamental human right to think and discuss new ideas should be implemented on all levels of government and culture. Known as the "Father of

Liberalism," he insisted that tolerance, respect for ideas, and freedom of speech should become the laws of the land.

Locke's writings inspired the Enlightenment, a late seventeenth-century movement that placed rational reasoning as the source of authority above the Church and monarchies.[32] Moreover, he showed that an objective understanding of the principles of clear thinking was necessary to scientific investigation. His work led to the birth of formal logic, as mathematicians throughout Europe tried to systemize the process of rational thought.

In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke analyzed how the human mind acquires knowledge. He offered a straightforward explanation of how ideas originate from sensory experience, and how our mind examines, compares, classifies, and combines these ideas into related concepts. According to Locke, knowledge arises from awareness of the relationships between different concepts.

The last great genius of the Renaissance, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, not only defended freedom of consciousness but also tried to define and formalize how knowledge is acquired by the mind. Along with his contemporaries Immanuel Kant and Georg Hegel, Goethe's ideas about the nature and workings of the mind became the basis for modern epistemology.

Figure 16. Goethe (1749-1832)

As a youth, Goethe was deeply influenced by texts from Basil Valentine, Paracelsus, and other alchemists, and he channeled his enthusiasm into a stream of poetic, mystical, and scientific works that presented alchemical ideas from a variety of viewpoints. He maintained a large alchemy lab at his home in Weimar, Germany, and applied alchemical symbolism in nearly all his works, including his play, *Faust*, which is considered one of the most powerful works in German literature.

Goethe believed the essence of truth can be found in its contradictions, and he developed a method of cognition that consisted of "holding two opposing truths in two hands and walking forward" in stubborn contemplation. He also extolled the importance of achieving a beginner's mind and being selective of the material that fills the mind.

"Beware of dissipating your powers," he warned other seekers, "and strive to concentrate them. Focus your powers for something good, and give up everything that can produce no result of consequence to you, and is not suited to you. Fortify your creative toolkit with the most elevated works of the past upon which to build your own contribution. For you must be something in order to do something."[33]

That advice applies to anyone engaged in the search for truth, especially those at the cutting edge of knowledge. To remain free of cultural and scholarly biases, we must keep the Secret Fire burning within. That is especially important in the current struggle in consciousness studies between materialists, who believe consciousness is a physical process taking place only in the

brain, and phenomalists, who believe consciousness is the primary reality and physical objects are mental constructs.

In the tension between these two diametrically opposed viewpoints the truth can be discerned. As Goethe advised, "we must hold the two truths in two hands and walk forward." Our minds must remain mercurial and free flowing until that moment when truth shapes us into "something in order to do something" – until that moment when we become the Philosopher's Stone.

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[1] Gottlieb Latz, *Die Alchemie*, Bonn 1869. Reprinted by Kosmet Verlag 2003. ISBN 3-89836-342-2. Sections translated by Dennis William Hauck, *Secret of the Emerald Tablet* (Holmes First Editions 1993); (Malibu: Athanor Books, 2005), 17-18. ISBN 0-9637914-4-3

[2] The First Alexandrian School was a merging of Egyptian and Hellenistic cultures based on the writings of Plato and Aristotle. It was the source of the Dogmatics, a group of alchemists and physicians founded around 400 BCE by Thessalus, the son of Hippocrates.

[3] The Second Alexandrian School appeared around 270 BCE and reflected the influence of Jewish scholars. Also known as the Empiric School, it was founded by Serapion of Alexandria. The group emphasized experience over speculation.

[4] The Third Alexandrian School was organized around 50 BCE, but its roots are shrouded in mystery. It probably had its origin in ancient sects of Thoth and Asclepius, whose doctrines were set down by the scribe Manetho, Apollonius of Tyana, and in writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistus. The Methodists group of physicians is also associated with this school.

[5] Sean Martin, *Alchemy & Alchemists* (Edison NJ: Chartwell Books, 2009), 13. A complete listing of alchemy books would have over 150,000 titles and still not include thousands of unknown manuscripts lost in the burnings of the Alexandrian Library and Emperor Diocletian's ban on books about alchemy in 300 CE.

[6] Philo, *De Profugis*, cited in Gerald Friedlander, *Hellenism and Christianity* (London: P. Vallentine & Sons, 1912), 114. The Gnostic Valentinius (100-160 CE) associated Philo's Logos and Plato's Mind the Maker with the "Demiurge," which controlled the physical world but worked against anything spiritual.

[7] The *Tabula Smaragdina* engraving was first published in Daniel Mylius's *Opus Medico-Chymicum* ("The Medical-Chemical Work") in 1618. It was created by artist Matthieu Merian.

[8] The ouroboros is an ancient Egyptian circular symbol depicting a snake or dragon swallowing its tail. It is an emblem of self-creation or infinite rebirth whose dynamics are expressed in the legend of the immortal Phoenix that survives in cycles that begin anew as soon as they end. The term originated during the realm of Akhenaten in the 14th century BCE. The earliest surviving image of an ouroboros was found in the tomb of his son, Tutankhamen, in Funerary Text KV62.

[9] The second concentric ring at the center of the *Tabula Smaragdina* engraving is inscribed with three Latin phrases meaning "Year of the Winds," "Year of the Sun," and "Year of the Stars." The third ring describes the three kinds of Mercury (Common Mercury, Bodily Mercury, and Philosophical Mercury). The fourth ring names the three kinds of Sulfur (Combustible Sulfur, Fixed Sulfur, and Volatile or Ethereal Sulfur). The fifth ring lists the three types of Salt (Elementary Salt, Salt of the Earth, and Central Salt).

[10] Antoine-Joseph Pernety was a Benedictine monk and alchemist. The material in this section was written in 1758 and is taken from his *An Alchemical Treatise on the Great Art* (Boston: Occult Publishing Co., 1898); (York Beach ME: Samuel Weiser Inc. 1995), 80.

[11] Franz Hartman, *Alchemy* (Sequim WA: Holmes Publishing Group, 1984), 54. ISBN 0916411249

[12] Paracelsus, *Of The Chymical Transmutation, Genealogy And Generation Of Metals And Minerals.* Translated by Robert Turner (London: Printed for Rich : Moon at the seven Stars, and Hen : Fletcher at the three gilt Cups in Paul's Church-yard, 1657), 31.
https://books.google.com/books/about/Paracelsus_of_the_Chymical_Transmutation.html?id=GjpH5vU1_VAC.

[13] Paracelsus, *Liber de Imaginibus*, Bonn 1531. Original manuscript listed by Paracelsus' real name of Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim. Cap. XII. p. 76.

[14] Paracelsus, *Liber de Occulta Philosophia*, 1686. Original attributed to Paracelsus. Also in Franz Hartman's *Paracelsus and the Substance of His Teachings* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1888), 286.

[15] Jakob Boehme, *Dialogues on the Supersensual Life*, trans. William Law (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1957), 48. https://archive.org/details/dialoguesonsuper00be.
[16] Franz Hartman, *The Life and Doctrines of Jacob Boehme* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1891).
[17] Joscelyn Godwin, *Robert Fludd: Hermetic Philosopher and Surveyor of Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids: Phanes Press, 1991), 70. ISBN 0933999690
[18] John Dee, *The Mathematicall Praeface to the Elements of Geometry of Euclid of Megara* (London, 1570). See also a modern version: with introduction by Allen Debus (New York: Science History Publications, 1975). Dee presented his modernization of mathematics in a 50-page preface to this first English translation of *The Elements of Euclid*.
[19] John Dee, *The Hieroglyphic Monad* (London 1564). New edition: (San Francisco: Red Wheel-Weiser, 2001). ISBN 157863203X. An in-depth discussion of Dee's Monad can be found in my article "The Philosopher's Stone," *Rosicrucian Digest* 91-1 (2013): 22-25.
[20] Giordano Bruno, *De monade numero et figura* ("On the Monad, Number, and Figure"), (Frankfurt, 1591), 278. Para. 80.
[21] Arielle Saiber, *Giordano Bruno and the Geometry of Language* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2005), 18-24. ISBN 0754633217
[22] Giordano Bruno, *Fifth Dialogue* (Venice, 1588); *On the Infinite Universe and Worlds* (Venice, 1584). See also Paul Harrison, *Elements of Pantheism: A Spirituality of Nature and the Universe* (Seattle: CreateSpace, 2013), 28. ISBN 1490494936
[23] Gottlieb Leibniz, *Monadology*, (Paris, 1714). A public domain audio recording can be found at https://librivox.org/the-monadology-by-gottfried-wilhelm-leibniz/ and an online print version at http://home.datacomm.ch/kerguelen/monadology.
[24] The identity of Basil Valentine is in dispute. It is believed the real author lived in the early 1400s and kept his work anonymous to avoid persecution by the Church. Research by scholars in the eighteenth century suggests that a German alchemist named Johann Thölde (1565-1624) had discovered five lost manuscripts and published them under the pseudonym "Basil Valentine."
[25] This process is described in some detail in Dennis William Hauck, "Searching for the Cosmic Quintessence: How Alchemists Meditated in the Middle Ages and Renaissance," *Rose+Croix Journal*, 10 (2014): 2-24.
[26] Paracelsus, *Of The Chymical Transmutation, Genealogy and Generation Of Metals And Minerals*, trans. Robert Turner (London : Printed for Rich : Moon at the seven Stars, and Hen : Fletcher at the three gilt Cups in Paul's Church-yard. 1657), 29. https://archive.org/details/ofchymicaltransm00para.
[27] Francis Bacon, *Of the Interpretation of Nature* (London, 1603), 205. New Edition: (Bottom of the Hill Publishing, 2012), 205. ISBN 1612034500
[28] Gary Lachman, *The Quest for Hermes Trismegistus* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2011), 118. ISBN 0863158498. See also John Henry, *Knowledge is Power: How Magic, the Government and an Apocalyptic Vision Inspired Francis Bacon to Create Modern Science* (Cambridge: Icon Books 2002), 106.
[29] Dennis William Hauck, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Alchemy* (New York: Penguin Alpha 2008), 108. ISBN 9978-159257-4
[30] Tracy R. Twyman, "Robert Boyle and the Invisible College," *Dagobert's Revenge Magazine* 1 (1998).
[31] Giordano Bruno, *Cabal of the Cheval Pegasus*, trans. Sidney Sondergard and Madison Sowell, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 94. ISBN 0-300-09217-2
[32]John Locke, *An Early Draft of Locke's Essay*, eds. R. Aaron, J. Gibb (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), 4-5. Locke's famous *Essay* is widely considered to be the founding document of the Enlightenment. First published in *Bibliotheque Universelle et Historique* in 1689, his controversial *Essay* dominated philosophical and political discussions for the next fifty years.
[33] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Johann Peter Eckermann, *Conversations of Goethe with Johann Peter Eckermann*, trans. John Oxenford; ed. J.K. Moorhead; intro. Havelock Ellis. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998), 74. ISBN 0306808811