

Selected Articles:

Metaphysics and Theology,

1989 - 2024

by

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The Evanescent Press

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ISBN: 978-0-945303-23-7

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HERMETIC ALCHEMY

1989

The writings of the Hermetic Alchemists have exercised a fascination upon the imaginations of scholars and casual seekers alike for centuries. On the one hand, the Hermetic writings have a well deserved reputation for being among the most obscure writings ever penned. But on the other hand, they have also managed to retain their status as some of the most authoritative original sources of ancient wisdom.

Hermetic Alchemy was one of the first branches of esoteric knowledge that I studied in my youth, drawn thither by my studies of Carl Jung, whose researches on Alchemy absorbed his attention throughout most of his later years. Something about the Alchemical symbols spoke to me very powerfully; I understood Jung's thesis that throughout the history of Alchemy, these symbols have welled up from the souls of sensitive people all over the earth, taken from the same ultimate source ~ the "collective unconscious" in the words of Jung.

Alchemy is Change. The Process of Change is the ultimate "Atom" of the ancient Greeks, the original building block of the Cosmos. All of the symbols of Alchemy emphasize the aspect of Change: the transmutation of

the baser metals into Gold through a process of *Solve et Coagula*, *Separatio et Coniunctio* (“disintegrate” and “unite”; “separate” and “join”). Alchemy is the “spagyric art,” from Greek words meaning “to tear apart” and “to bring together.”

Whenever I run across some path for personal growth that seems to suggest that the seeker need only sit on a shelf, meditate on his navel, and suddenly find himself rising ever upward on a linear path towards perfect clarity or Nirvana, I feel all the more strongly how much more power there is in the Alchemical symbols. (I should suggest here an appropriate way to study alchemical texts or any expressed idea of philosophy ~ rather than reading with your blue pencil, deciding what is right or wrong, it is better to try to figure out what true idea the author is trying to convey with his sometimes limited or misleading words. In the case of an exclusive emphasis on the journey inward, for example, the student must supply for himself the complementary ideas which are necessary for the true illumination of wisdom.)

Since the earliest times, Alchemists have been interested in applying their Hermetic wisdom towards the perfecting of the body and soul of Man ~ the quest for Gold being left to the “puffers.” For the Alchemist, the first stage of the *Great Work* is the *Nigredo*, the stage of Blackness, disintegration, chaos, where the material (metal, the soul of Man, or what have you) is reduced to the *prima materia* or formless original stuff, before it can proceed to the second stage, the *Albedo* (whiteness), where the material may be unified once again. The Alchemical process is circular, alternating between *Solve* and *Coagula* on its path towards perfection.

Originally, “Alexandrian Alchemy” had as its purpose the transmutation of the baser metals into Gold. Although this goal was quickly superseded by the loftier notions of the Alchemical Adepts, it is instructive to review the original understanding of the old *Masters of Fire*. Aristotle laid the groundwork with his famous dictum: *Nature strives towards Perfection*. This was an article of faith that defined for proponents of the ancient wisdom the source of the whole underlying pattern of order in the cosmos.

Next, it is necessary to understand that metals were considered to be alive in some sense, and already undergoing a very slow process of gradual evolutionary growth towards perfection. That is, the most primitive form of metal was considered to be Lead (Saturn). If left in the earth on its own, it would eventually evolve its way towards Tin (Jupiter). Centuries later it would grow to become Iron (Mars), followed by Copper (Venus), Quicksilver (Mercury), Silver (the Moon), and finally, at the end of a very long road, it would achieve the ultimate realization of Perfection: Gold (the Sun). This was already happening on its own; nothing at all needed to be done ~ if you had sufficient patience. Now the Alchemist comes along and decides to speed up the natural process: the Art of the Alchemist replaces the Time of Nature.

So Alchemy is not black magic. The Alchemist thought that, by diligent searching into the ways of Nature, he might be able to imitate the natural process in his laboratories in order to realize the perfection of gold in his own lifetime, instead of waiting centuries for the same thing to happen more slowly. So, from the point of view of Hermetic philosophy, it is a

matter of no consequence that the ancients were laboring under mistaken ideas about the nature of metals.

The Four Elements of Fire, Water, Air, and Earth (established by Aristotle) illustrate the four cardinal points of change, of which the four Seasons are the most common analogy. Since the process is circular, we can not really speak of first, but, to start with a new beginning, we start with Fire (“Young Yang” to students of the *I Ching*), corresponding to Spring. This is the stage of “Active Concentration.” At a pivotal point, the energy suddenly changes to “Active Expansion,” Air, Summer (“Old Yang”): COAGULA. The next change is very gradual, as both the activity and the expansion peter out, being followed by “Passive Contraction,” Water, Autumn (“Young Yin”). This accelerates until there is a sudden change at the point where the energy turns to “Passive Expansion,” Earth, Winter (“Old Yin”): SOLVE. The next change is very gradual, as the active yang energy re-asserts itself in a fresh “Active Concentration.”

The most famous theory of the composition of the metals held that all metals were some sort of compound (“marriage”) of Sulphur and Mercury (the King and the Queen, the Sun and the Moon, the Fixed and the Volatile, the Tiger and the Dragon, etc.). Then, along about the sixteenth century, Paracelsus, a famous Swiss Alchemist and Physician (the real father of holistic medicine) introduced Salt as a third essential ingredient in the work. Paracelsus was one of the most stunning Alchemical writers of all time. His ideas must have been rubbed fresh from the “collective unconscious” because they were immediately absorbed into the dogma of orthodox Alchemy.

The esoteric significance of the number three has impressed occult philosophers since time immemorial. The Sulphur and Mercury theory expressed the polarity of Yang and Yin, but the introduction of Salt elevated the theory to the heights of classic occult metaphysics.

The same fundamental ideas keep turning up in one's readings, but it is not all the same idea. There are many expressions for the most primary ideas of occult philosophy, but the numbers of mathematics suggest the most logical catalog of primary mysteries. According to this idea (dating from Pythagoras), the number "One" expresses the highest mystery, about which nothing more can be said. (Wittgenstein: "Whatever can be said at all can be said clearly; whereof one cannot speak, thereon must one be silent.") The number "Two" represents a mystery that can be spoken of: it is the Distinction between undifferentiated primal Unity expressed as Yang and Yin, Expansion and Contraction, Solve et Coagula, etc. But it is the number "Three" which suggests the point of perspective which separates the two complimentary illusions that are the consequence of every distinction.

Does this make any sense yet? Let me present one of my favorite analogies to occult metaphysics: the origin of the Cosmos *ex nihilo* as a consequence of God laughing at His original Joke: the Distinction between Zero and Infinity. First, I quote from the beginning of the *Tao Te Ching* by Lao Tzu (D. C. Lau translation):

"The Way that can be spoken of is not the constant Way; the Name that can be named is not the constant Name. The nameless was the beginning of Heaven and Earth; the named was the mother of the myriad creatures. Hence always rid yourself of desires in order to observe its Secrets, but always allow yourself to have desires in order to observe its

Manifestations. These two are the same, but diverge in Name as they issue forth. Being the same, they are called Mysteries. Mystery upon Mystery, the gateway of the manifold secrets.”

In order to understand how the Universe was created, it is necessary to have an understanding of the fundamental nature of Reality. We start with the Perfection of God, at rest, at a Point at the Center. The whole concept is meaningless, of course, until it is contrasted with the concept of Error, or movement away from the Center. This corresponds with old notions of the Devil as distance from God, moving away from the Perfection at the Center. Now, in order to maintain the existence of any deviation from the Center of Perfection, an alternate and complimentary deviation in another direction must be simultaneously sustained. There it is in a nutshell, the whole secret to the existence of the Manifest Cosmos as a Knot in the Æther composed of an intricate Field of Vibration of opposing concepts which, taken altogether suggests the illusion of our visible world. All of the energy of the Cosmos taken together adds up to Zero (or Infinity).

Zero and *Infinity* are examples of a Distinction created out of an undifferentiated sameness through the process of applying divergent names. Zero and Infinity both represent absolute states which can not even be imagined precisely, since they are beyond the consciousness of finite man. They seem to represent two different concepts only because we can only conceive of them at all by means of a process of movement between them. We can imagine a very large sphere which we expand mentally until our impoverished imagination fails us; likewise, we can imagine a dot vanishing towards nothing. But at the approach to the limit in each case, the last to go is nothing but location: the point where the dot is vanishing, or the center of

the sphere which is trying to become all-encompassing. So there is the Joke: you establish two Names which are really the same thing at the Limit, but then by alternating between them you set up a Field of Vibration which presents the Illusion of finite Manifestation (“the Gateway of the manifold Secrets”)! Hilarious. So when God made this Joke, the vibration alternating between *Zero* and *Infinity* was the *Laughter of God* which created the finite Universe.

The most famous original source of Hermetic Alchemy is the *Emerald Tablet* of Hermes Trismegistus. While there are lots of writings attributed to “Hermes,” there is little agreement about the actual authorship of any of these writings. However, the author of the *Emerald Tablet*, whoever he may have been, is the Hermes who has given his name to “Hermetic Philosophy.” The basic Hermetic axiom is expressed there: *As Above, So Below*. This line has more than one meaning. In the first place, it suggests that the laws of the Cosmos may be found mirrored in Man: as the Macrocosm, so the Microcosm. But many other ideas are linked by the doctrine of correspondence. For example, there is a plane of pure energy, magnetism, or electrical field “above” that corresponds to the physical body of Man “below.” Even Plato voiced a similar idea: the Form of the Good (for example) exists “above” in correspondence to some physical reality of some good thing “below.” We might go on: Astrology posits the movements of the Heavenly bodies to exert corresponding influences on earthly events.

Likewise, Sympathetic Magic is the art of establishing associative correspondence between objects not demonstrably connected (as in Tarot cards or Voodoo dolls).

“Alchemy” is usually understood as the Western Alchemical tradition which may have come from the Arabs of the Middle East and reached its highest development in the famous European Alchemists, but it is very interesting to notice that a parallel alchemical tradition has flourished in China with no perceivable connection to the Western Alchemical tradition, but which has symbols that are strikingly familiar. In *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, for example, there is described a process of evolution towards perfection featuring a “circulation of the light” that is practically a translation of the Emerald Tablet (from the Emerald Tablet: “It rises from Earth to Heaven, and then it descends again to the Earth, and receives Power from Above and from Below.”) But this is, finally, not really surprising. I quote from another Chinese philosopher, Ko Ch’ang:

. . . it may be objected that this method (Taoist Yoga) is practically the same as that of the Zen Buddhists. To this I reply that under Heaven there are no two ways, and the wise are ever of the same heart.

§

How to Measure Spiritual Growth

June, 2004

I remember reading about “Spiritual Materialism,” which refers to the pride that comes from spiritual growth and spiritual attainments. After practicing yoga for years, or working on your path of spiritual growth, there is a common tendency to feel a kind of satisfaction in your accomplishment. For some people, it even becomes impossible not to play the game of being “more spiritual than thou.” This, of course, is very funny, so I would like to share a true measure of spiritual growth that works magically and inexorably to transcend this problem.

First, I have to prepare the ground with some discussion of a fundamental principle of philosophy. There are basically two directions of energy flow ~ inwards, towards the center, and outwards, away from the center. The typical Western style (“the rat race”) is a movement reaching ever outward, grasping towards more and more. The Eastern wisdom, on the other hand, stresses the opposite direction ~ a movement back towards the center, within. It sounds simple enough ~ “Oh, yes, I get it ~ moving outward is bad; moving inward is good.” But it is not at all so simple. I am especially fond of the alchemical symbols for personal growth, because they stress a balance between both directions. The basic alchemical dictum which summarizes the whole art is “SOLVE ET COAGULA.” This means, literally, “to separate, and to unite.” Break apart, and bring together. It is the

alternation between these two directions which comprises the “process towards perfection” which the study of alchemy is all about.

Let’s start with the movement towards the center. There is a point at the center which is a point of perfect balance, peace, and clarity. Moving away from this point goes towards, in the first place, greater novelty and complexity, but ultimately it leads to confusion and chaos. The movie *Bonnie and Clyde* is a perfect model of this process. Bonnie and Clyde pursue a career of violence and greed which leads to greater and greater confusion and chaos. As the movie progresses, they become crazier and crazier, moving faster and faster, and when they are finally blown apart, literally, in an explosion of chaos, it is inevitable and obvious. Is your life like that (even a little bit)? Then you need to see an Indian guru who will give you a calming mantra and help you to compose yourself and begin the long journey back to the center.

But the lesson of the alchemical symbols is that the fastest way to the center is not to attempt to go there all at once, in one non-stop instant ride (that, of course, is the Western model ~ we want it all NOW, so that we can attain Nirvana before lunch). No, the fastest way to the center is, like breathing, to alternate going in with going out. Both directions are meaningful and valuable.

Some people consider that God is this point of perfection and balance at the center and “the Devil is distance from God” (to use a famous definition). It gets complicated here, because I have to make a small digression, advising the reader always to look very carefully at an idea in order to discover the meaning of the idea, which may lie beneath the surface, rather than simply to judge an idea as right or wrong. There are many ways

to use words, and the same words may be used in different ways at different times to express the truth. So, that concept may be illuminating (that God is Perfection at the Center, and the Devil is movement away from that point), but I prefer to consider that both directions are aspects of “God.” The movement away from the center is the Creative aspect (Yang, if you like), while the movement towards the center is the Receptive aspect (Yin).

A good example of all of this may be found on the chess board. Those of you who play chess may understand the distinction between “Positional Chess” and “Combinational Chess.” Positional chess follows the direction towards the center, as the game simplifies towards the inertia inherent in the position, while combinational chess strives to throw the game outward again into chaos and confusion, out of which the player hopes to extract a new inertia favoring the pieces of his color. So the movement away from the center is the road to change, but it is only brought to completion when it returns back to the direction towards the center.

That’s enough philosophy ~ it’s almost lunch time, after all. So now that we are on this path towards the center, via *Solve et Coagula*, how can we tell which of us is approaching closest to the center? As we get closer and closer to the center, everything converges. The center is a point of clarity, balance, peace, and infinite love. So the closer one is to this point at the center, the more one will feel the spirit of infinite love. This is obvious ~ look at any spiritual teacher you can think of ~ all of the really advanced spiritual teachers radiate an energy of peace and love. You can feel it and you can see it.

Now for the funny part! Everyone is invited to play the game of being “more spiritual than thou” ! Everyone who wants to show how advanced

they are spiritually only has to work on radiating infinite love! The funny part is that it actually works. No matter where you are on the spiritual hierarchy, the more you practice infinite love, the closer you will come to perfect clarity. So go ahead; impress your friends; be the first on your block to manifest infinite love, and spread this measure of spiritual growth far and wide. And do it quickly, because this world needs all the peace and love it can get, and it needs it soon.

PATTERNS OF ILLUSION
AND CHANGE

by

John Roland Stahl



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