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New Platonism and Alchemy

A Sketch of the Doctrines and Principal Teachers of the Eclectic or Alexandrian School;
also an Outline of the Interior Doctrines of the Alchemists of the Middle Ages.



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The Eclectic Philosophy

The name by which Ammonias Saccas, designated himself and his disciples, was that of *Philaletheians*, or, lovers of the truth. They were also sometimes denominated *Analogeticists*, because of their practice of interpreting all sacred legends and narratives, myths and mysteries, by a rule or principle of analogy and correspondence, so that events which were related as having occurred in the external world were regarded as expressing operations and experiences of the human soul. It has, however, been usual to speak of them by the designation of *Neoplatonists* or New Platonists, and, indeed, by this name they are generally known.

Writers have generally fixed the time of the development of the Eclectic theosophical system during the third century of the Christian era. It appears to have had a beginning much earlier, and, indeed, is traced by Diogenes Laertius to an Egyptian prophet or priest named Pot-Amun,¹ who flourished in the earlier years of the dynasty of the Ptolemies.

The establishment of the Macedonian kingdom in Egypt had been followed by the opening of schools of science and philosophy at the new capitol. Alexandria soon became celebrated as the metropolis of literature; every faith and sect had representatives there. There had always been communication between the sages of Bactria and upper India and the philosophers of the West. The conquests of Alexander, Selencus and the Romans had increased the acquaintance. The learned men now thronged Alexandria. The Platonists seem to have been most numerous and to have held their ground the longest. Under Philadelphus, Judaism was also planted there, and the Hellenic teachers became rivals of the College of Rabbis of Babylon. The Buddhistic, Vedantic and Magian systems were expounded along with the philosophies of Greece. It was not wonderful that thoughtful men supposed that the strife of words ought to cease, and considered it possible to extract one harmonious system from the various teachings.

There did result an approximation of sentiment. Aristobulus, the Jew, declared that the ethics of Aristotle were derived from the Law of Moses; and Philo, after him, attempted to interpret the Pentateuch in accordance with the doctrines of Pythagoras and the Academy. In Josephus, it is said, that, in the book of the Genesis, Moses wrote philosophically — that is, in the figurative style; and the Essenes of Carmel were reproduced in the Therapeutea of Egypt, who, in turn, were declared by Eusebius to be identical with the Christians, though they actually existed long before the Christian Era. Indeed, in its turn, Christianity also was taught at Alexandria, and underwent an analogous metamorphosis. Panteanus, Athenagoras and Clement were thoroughly instructed in the Platonic philosophy, and comprehended its essential unity with the oriental systems.

Ammonius Saccas, the great teacher, who would seem to have been raised up for the work of reconciling the different systems, was a native of Alexandria, and the son of

¹ This name is Coptic, and signifies one consecrated to Amun, the god or genius of wisdom.



Christian parents, although associating much with those who adhered to the established religion of the empire. He was a man of rare learning and endowments, of blameless life and amiable disposition. His almost superhuman ken and many excellencies won for him the title of Θεοδιδάκτος, *theodidaktos*, or God-taught; but he followed the modest example of Pythagoras, and only assumed the title of *philaletheian*, or, lover of the truth.

The first proposition set forth by Ammonius was that of a primeval system of theosophy, a system which was essentially alike, at first, in all countries. Sir William Jones, in his Lecture upon the Persians, propounded this in the following concise form:

“The primeval religion of Iran, if we may rely on the authorities adduced by Mohsani Fani, was that which Newton calls the oldest (and it may justly be called the noblest) of all religions — a firm belief that ‘One Supreme God made the world by his power, and continually governed it by his providence; a pious fear, love and adoration of him, and due reverence for parents and aged persons; a fraternal affection for the whole human species, and a compassionate tenderness even for the brute creation.’”

It was his aim and purpose to reconcile all sects and peoples, under his common faith, to induce them to lay aside their contentions and quarrels, and unite together as one family, the children of a common mother. A writer in the *Edinburgh Encyclopaedia* says:

“He adopted the doctrines which were received in Egypt concerning the Universe and the Deity, considered as constituting one great whole; concerning the eternity of the world, the nature of souls, the empire of Providence, and the government of the world by demons. He also established a system of moral discipline which allowed the people in general to live according to the laws of their country and the dictates of nature; but required the wise to exalt their minds by contemplation, and to mortify the body, so that they might be capable of enjoying the presence and assistance of the demons, and ascending after death to the presence of the Supreme Parent. In order to reconcile the popular religions, and particularly the Christian, with this new system, he made the whole history of the heathen gods an allegory, maintaining that they were only celestial ministers, entitled to an inferior kind of worship; and he acknowledged that Jesus Christ was an excellent man and the friend of God, but alleged that it was not his design entirely to abolish the worship of demons, and that his only intention was to purify the ancient religion.”

The ecclesiastical historian, Mosheim, declares that

“Ammonius, conceiving that not only the philosophers of Greece, but also all those of the different barbarous nations, were perfectly in unison with each other with regard to every essential point, made it his business so to temper and expound the tenets of all these various sects, as to make it appear they had all of them originated from one and the same source, and all tended to one and the same end.”



Again, Mosheim says that Ammonius taught that

“the religion of the multitude went hand in hand with philosophy, and with her had shared the fate of being by degrees corrupted and obscured with mere human conceits, superstition and lies: that it ought, therefore, to be brought back to its original purity by purging it of this dross and expounding it upon philosophical principles: and that the whole which Christ had in view was to reinstate and restore to its primitive integrity the Wisdom of the ancients, — to reduce within bounds the universally prevailing dominion of superstition — and in part to correct, and in part to exterminate the various errors that had found their way into the different popular religions.”

Ammonius declared that the system of doctrine and moral life, denominated Wisdom, was taught in the Books of Thoth, or Hermes Trismegistus, from which records Pythagoras as well as Plato derived his philosophy. They were regarded by him as being substantially identical with the teachings of the sages of the remote East. As the name *Thoth* means a college or assembly, it is not altogether improbable that the books were so named as being the collected oracles and doctrines of the sacerdotal fraternity of Memphis. Rabbi Wise has suggested a similar hypothesis in relation to the divine utterances recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures. But the Indian writers assert that during the reign of King Kansa, the Yadus or sacred tribe left India and migrated to the west, carrying the four Vedas with them. There was certainly a great resemblance between the philosophical doctrines and religious customs of the Egyptians and Eastern Buddhists; but whether the Hermetic books and the four Vedas were in any sense identical, is not now known.

It is certain, however, that there was, in every ancient country having claims to civilization, an esoteric doctrine, a system which was designated Wisdom;² and those who were devoted to its prosecution were first denominated sages, or wise men. Afterward, the epithet of *philosophers*, or, lovers of wisdom, was adopted. Pythagoras termed this system a γνῶσις τῶν ὄντων, the *Gnosis* or knowledge of things that are. Under the noble designation of Wisdom, the ancient teachers, the sages of India, the magians of Persia and Babylon, the seers and prophets of Israel, the hierophants of Egypt and Arabia, and the philosophers of Greece and the West, included all knowledge which they considered as essentially divine; classifying a part as esoteric and the remainder as exterior. The Hebrew Rabbis called the exterior and secular series

² The writings extant in olden times often personified Wisdom as an emanation and associate of the Creator. Thus we have the Hindoo Buddha, the Babylonian Nebo, the Thoth of Memphis, the Hermes of Greece; also the female divinities, Neitha, Metis, Athena and the Gnostic potency Achomoth or Sophia. The Samaritan Pentateuch denominated the book of Genesis, *Akamauth*, or Wisdom, and two remnants of old treatises, the Wisdom of Solomon and the Wisdom of Jesus, relate to the same matter. The book of *Mashalim* — The Discourses or Proverbs of Solomon, thus personifies wisdom as the auxiliary of the Creator:

“Jehovah possessed me, the beginning of his way,
The fast of his emanations from the time
I proceeded from antiquity, the beginning —
The earliest times of the earth
When there were no deeps I was born —
Even when there were no sources of water.
When he prepared the heavens I was there,
When he described a circle on the face of the deep,
There was I with him, Amun,
And was his delight day by day.”



the *Mercavah*, as being the body or vehicle which contained the higher knowledges. Theology, worship, vaticination, music, astronomy, the healing art, morals and statesmanship were all thus comprised.

Thus Ammonius found his work ready to his hand. His deep spiritual intuition, his extensive learning, his familiarity with the Christian fathers, Pantaenus, Clement and Athenagoras, and with the most erudite philosophers of the time, all fitted him for the labor which he performed so thoroughly. He was successful in drawing to his views the greatest scholars and public men of the Roman Empire, who had little taste for wasting time in dialectic pursuits or superstitious observances. The results of his ministration are perceptible at the present day in every country of the Christian world; every prominent system of doctrine now bearing the marks of his plastic hand. Every ancient philosophy has had its votaries among the moderns; and even Judaism, oldest of them all, has taken upon itself changes which were suggested by the "God-taught" Alexandrian.

Like Orpheus, Pythagoras, Confucius, Socrates, and Jesus himself, Ammonius committed nothing to writing. Instead, he only inculcated moral truths upon his auditors, while he communicated his more important doctrines to persons duly instructed and disciplined, imposing on them the obligations of secrecy, as was done before him by Zoroaster and Pythagoras, and in the Mysteries. Except a few treatises of his disciples, we have only the declarations of his adversaries from which to ascertain what he actually taught.

This was, however, no exception to the common rule. The older worship, which was preserved in a certain degree in the Mysteries, required an oath from the neophytes or catechumens not to divulge what they had learned. The great Pythagoras divided his teachings into exoteric and esoteric.

The Essenes of Judea and Carmel made similar distinctions, dividing their adherents into neophytes, brethren and the perfect. Pythagoras is said by Iamblichus to have spent time at Carmel. Jesus himself followed the same custom, declaring to his disciples that to them it was given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, whereas to the multitude it was not given, and therefore he spoke in parables which had a two-fold meaning. He justified himself in this by the precept:

"Give not that which is holy to the dogs,
Neither cast ye your pearls before swine;
For the swine will trample the pearls under your feet,
And the dogs will turn and rend you." — *Matthew vii*

The Magians³ of the East received instructions and initiation in the caves and secret lodges of Bactria, and the prophet Daniel is said to have been installed by Nebuchadnezzar as the *Rab Mag*, or chief of the learned order. It would seem from

³ The word *magh*, signifies a wise or learned man. The Magians were the learned and sacerdotal class among the ancient Persians, corresponding to the Brahmans of Hindostan, the Chaldaeans of Babylonia, the Levites of Palestine and the Priests of Egypt. Learning was regarded by the illiterate as endowing its possessors with extraordinary powers: and in process of time, *magic*, or the learning of the magians, was regarded as pertaining to wicked and demoniacal agencies. Yet the prophet Daniel, and, if tradition speaks truly, King Solomon, were proficient in their lore; and several of their number repaired to Bethlehem to adore Jesus.



Josephus, Philo and Moses Maimonides, that the Hebrews were also possessors of secret doctrines. It asserted in Josephus that Moses wrote philosophically or esoterically in the book of Genesis, and Philo attempts to give their interior meaning. Maimonides declares as follows:

“Whoever shall find out the true sense of the book of Genesis ought to take care not to divulge it. This is a maxim which all our sages repeat to us, and above all, respecting the work of the six days. If a person should discover the true meaning of it by himself, or by the aid of another, then he ought to be silent; or, if he speaks of it, he ought to speak of it but obscurely, and in an enigmatical manner, as I do myself, leaving the rest to be guessed by those who can understand me.”

Abraham, whose name has a Brahmin sound to it, is said to have migrated from Ur, a college or commune of the Casdeans or Magians; and Josephus declares that he taught *mathematics*. In the Pythagorean vocabulary, mathematics mean esoteric knowledge. Moses, the *M'usa*,⁴ or great sage of the Israelites, it is said, was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, thus becoming a priest of their religion, and an initiate or adept in their secret learning. Paul declares the story of Abraham and his two sons to be an allegory pre-figuring the Judaical and Christian systems. Clement, who had been initiated into the Eleusinian mysteries, is said to have declared that the doctrines there taught contained in them the end of all instruction, and had been taken from Moses and the prophets.

With a general similarity in the character of the ancient religious and philosophical views, the course would seem to have been indicated for Ammonius to pursue. Countenanced by Clement and Athenagoras in the church, and by learned men of the Synagogue, the Academy and the Grove, he fulfilled his labor by teaching a common doctrine for all. He had but to propound his instructions “according to the ancient pillars of Hermes, which Plato and Pythagoras knew before, and from them constituted their philosophy.” Finding the same sentiments in the prologue of the gospel according to John, he very properly supposed that the purpose of Jesus was to restore the great doctrine of Wisdom in its primitive integrity. The narratives of the Bible and the stories of the gods, he considered to be allegories illustrative of the truth, or else fables to be rejected.

The peculiarity of the Philaletheians, their division into neophytes, initiates and masters, was copied from the Mysteries and philosophical systems. It is recorded that Ammonius obligated his disciples by oath not to divulge his higher doctrines, except to those who had been thoroughly instructed and exercised. How far this condition was proper is easily perceived when we contemplate the peculiar mystical, profound character of such of the doctrines as have escaped from the crypt.

The Eclectic system was characterized by three distinct features, namely: Its theory of the Godhead, its doctrine of the human soul, and its theurgy. Modern writers have commented upon the peculiar views of the New Platonists upon these subjects, sel-

⁴ In the Sanscrit language, the name of Moses would seem to be derived from the words *maha*, great, *wusa*, a sage or wise man. It would be pronounced Musa.



dom representing them correctly, even if this was desired or intended. Besides, the immense difference in the nature of ancient and modern learning has unfitted, to a great degree, students of the later centuries for apprehending properly the predominating elements of the Philaletheian theosophy. The enthusiasm which now-a-days is often considered as piety, would hardly be competent to explore or have anything in common with the enthusiasm of the old mystic philosophers.

The anterior idea of the New Platonists was that of a single Supreme Essence. This is the *Diu*, or “Lord of Heaven,” of the Aryan nations, identical with the Ιαω, *Iao* of the Chaldeans and Hebrews, the *Iabe* of the Samaritans, the *Tiu* or Tuisco of the Northmen, the *Duw* of the Britons, the Zeus of the Thracians, and Jupiter of the Romans. He was the Being, the *Facit*, one and supreme. From him all other beings proceeded by *emanation*. The moderns appear to have substituted for this theory of *evolution*. Perhaps a wiser sage will combine the two hypotheses. These deity-names often seem to have been invented with little or no reference to etymological signification, but principally because of some mystical meaning attached to the numerical signification of the specific letters employed in their orthography.

All the old philosophies contained the doctrine that Θεοι, *theoi*, gods or disposers, angels, demons, and other spiritual agencies, emanated from the Supreme being. Ammonius accepted the doctrine of the Books of Hermes, that from the Divine All proceeded the Divine Wisdom or Amun; that from Wisdom proceeded the Demiurge or Creator; and from the Creator, the subordinate spiritual beings; the world and its peoples being the last. The first is contained in the second, the first and second in the third, and so on through the entire series.⁵

⁵ Akin to this is the doctrine of the Jewish Kabala, which was taught by the Pharsi or Pharisees, who probably borrowed it as their sectarian designation would seem to indicate, from the magians of Persia. It is substantially embodied in the following synopsis.

The Divine Being is the All, the Source of all existence, the Infinite; and He cannot be known. The universe reveals Him, and subsists by Him. At the beginning, His effulgence went forth everywhere. Eventually He retired within Himself, and so formed around Him a vacant space. Into this He transmitted His first emanation, a Ray, containing in it the generative and conceptive power, and hence the name IE, or Jah. This, in its turn, produced the *tikkun*, the pattern or *idea* of form; and in this emanation, which also contained the male and female, or generative and conceptive potencies, were the Life. This Tikkun is united to the Ray, or first emanation, and pervaded by it; and in perpetual communication with the infinite source. It is the pattern, the primitive man the Adam Kadmon, the *macrocosm* of Pythagoras and other philosophers. From it proceed the *Sephiroth* — ten emanations, which are not individual existences, but qualities, and names as follows: the Crown, Wisdom, Magnificence, Prudence, Severity, Beauty, Conquest, Glory, Foundation, Dominion. From the ten Sephiroth in turn emanated the four worlds, each proceeding out of the one immediately above it, and the lower one enveloping its superior. These worlds became less pure as they descend in the scale, the lowest in all being the material world. But there is nothing purely material; all subsist through God; the Ray, His first emanation, penetrating through all creations, being the life of life; therefore all is divine. The first world, *Aziluth*, is peopled by the purest emanations; the second, *Beriah*, by a lower order, the servants of the former; the third, *Jezirah*, by the cherubim and seraphim, the Elohim and B’ni Elohim. The fourth world, *Asiah*, is inhabited by the Klipputh, of whom Belial is chief. The human soul derives its elements from the four worlds, spiritual life, intellect, the passions, and corporeal appetites. A conflict having arisen between the inhabitants of the fourth world, *Asiah*, and the higher emanations, evil and disorder have thereby come to exist. Mankind having sinned in their first parent, from whose soul every human soul is an emanation, they are exiled into material bodies to expiate that sin and become proficient in goodness. They will continue to be born in new bodies, one after another, till they become sufficiently pure to enter a higher form of existence. This was called the ἀνάστασις, *anastasis*, or continued existence; also the μετεμψύχωσις, or changes of the soul.

In the epistles of Paul we find these doctrine, inculcated more or less among the churches. Hence such passages as these: “Ye were dead in errors and sins; ye walked according to the *aeon* of this world, according to the *archon* that has the domination of the air.” “We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against the dominations, against potencies, against the lords of darkness, and against the mischievousness of spirits in the empyrean regions.” But Paul was evidently hostile to the effort to blend his gospel with the gnostic ideas of the Hebrew-Egyptian school, as seems to have been attempted at Ephesus: and accordingly wrote to Timothy, his fa-



The worship of these subordinate beings constituted the *idolatry* charged upon the ancients, an imputation not deserved by the philosophers who recognized but one Supreme Being, and professed to understand the *υπόνοια*, *hyponoia* or under-meaning, by which angels, demons and heroes were to be regarded. Epicurus said,

“The gods exist, but they are not what [the] *οι πολλοι*, or common multitude, supposed them to be. He is not an infidel or atheist who denies the existence of the gods whom the multitude worship, but he is such who fastens on these gods the opinions of the multitude.”

Aristotle declares:

“The divine essence pervades the whole world of nature; what are styled *the gods* are only the first principles. The myths and stories were devised to make the religious systems intelligible and attractive to the people, who otherwise would not give them any regard or veneration.”

Thus the stories of Jupiter, the siege of Troy, the wanderings of Ulysses, the adventures of Hercules, were but tales and fables, which had a deep under-meaning.

“All men yearn after the gods,”

says Homer. All the old worships indicate the existence of a single theosophy anterior to them. “The key that is to open one must open all; otherwise it cannot be the right key.”

The Eclectics or Philaletheians accepted substantially these doctrines, the principal difference being in names. They taught, like all the old sages, that all beings and things proceeded from the Supreme Deity in series, or discrete degrees of emanation. There are four orders of existence, says Iamblichus — gods, demons, heroes and souls. This theosophy would explain the declaration of Paul, that “all things came out from God,” and that assertion of Jesus, that “the Kingdom of God is within.” It was not an attempt to oppose Christianity, or resuscitate paganism, as Lloyd, Mosheim, Kingsley and others assert; but to extract from all their most valuable treasures, and, not resting there, to make new investigations. Of course there was no *avatar*.

Plotinus, a native of Lycopolis, in Egypt, was the first great expositor of the Neo-Platonic system. In the year 233, being then twenty-eight years of age, he began the study of Plato and Aristotle at Alexandria, and shortly afterward fell in with the celebrated work of Philostratus, the Life of Apollonius of Tyana, together with the writings of Plutarch and Apuleius. While in the midst of such studies, he became acquainted with Ammonius Saccas. The lessons of that great teacher found in him a worthy disciple. What Plato was to Socrates, and the apostle John to the head of the Christian faith, Plotinus became to the God-taught Ammonius. To Plotinus, Origenes and Longinus we are indebted for what is known of the Philaletheian system. They were duly instructed, initiated and intrusted with the interior doctrines. Of Origenes little has been preserved. Longinus traveled for many years, and finally took up his

vorite disciple, “Keep safe the precious charge intrusted to thee; and reject the new doctrines and the antagonistic principles of the gnosis falsely so-called, of which some have made profession and gone astray from the faith.”



abode at Palmyra. For some time he was the counselor of the celebrated Queen Zenobia. After the conquest of that city, she sought to propitiate the Emperor Aurelian by laying the blame of her action upon Longinus, who was accordingly put to death.

The Jew Malek, commonly known as the distinguished author Porphyry, was a disciple of Plotinus, and collected the works of his master. He also wrote several treatises, giving an allegorical interpretation to parts of the writings of Homer. Iamblichus also wrote a work upon the doctrines taught in the Mysteries, and likewise a biography of Pythagoras. The latter so closely resembles the life of Jesus that it may be taken for a travesty. Diogenes Laertius and Plutarch relate the history of Plato according to a similar style.

Plotinus, when thirty-nine years old, accompanied the army of the Roman Emperor, Gordian, to the East, for the purpose of being instructed directly by the sages of Bactria and India. But the Emperor was killed on the way, and the philosopher narrowly escaped with his life. He returned home and afterward removed to Rome, where he instituted a school for instruction in philosophy by conversations. It was frequented by men and women of all ages and ranks. The emperor and empress held him in high esteem, and his disciples venerated him almost as a superior being. One of them, the Senator Rogentianus, emancipated his slaves and resigned his dignities that he might devote himself to the cultivation of wisdom. So high was the reputation of Plotinus, that he was continually chosen as a guardian for orphan children, and intrusted with the care of large estates. He lived at Rome twenty-eight years, making not a single enemy among those whom he had served.

He taught that the gnosis, or knowledge, has three degrees — opinion, science and illumination.

“The means of instrument of the first is sense, or perception; of the second, dialectics; of the third, intuition. To the last reason is subordinate; it is absolute knowledge, founded on the identification of the mind with the object known.”

The system, it must be acknowledged, provided for the highest spiritual development. Plutarch says,

“The end of the Egyptian rites and mysteries was the knowledge of the One God, who is the Lord of all things, and to be discerned only of the soul. Their theosophy had two meanings — the one holy and symbolical, and the other popular and literal. The figures of animals which abounded in their temples, and which they were supposed to worship, were only so many hieroglyphics to represent the divine qualities.”

These mysteries, it will be remarked, are said to have constituted the basis of the Eclectic system.

The human soul being regarded as the offspring or emanation of the Deity, the whole scope of the Philaletheian system was directed to the development and perfecting of its divine faculties. Plotinus taught that there was in the soul a returning impulse, love, which attracted it inward toward its origin and center, the Eternal Good. While the person who does not understand how the soul contains the Beautiful within itself



will seek by laborious effort to realize beauty without, the wise man recognizes it within himself, develops the idea by withdrawal into himself, concentrating his attention, and so floating upward toward the divine fountain, the stream of which flows within him. The Infinite is not known through the reason, which distinguishes and defines, but by a faculty superior to reason, by entering upon a state in which the individual, so to speak, ceases to be his finite self, in which state divine essence is communicated to him. This is *ecstasy*, which Plotinus defines to be the liberation of the mind from its finite consciousness, becoming one and identified with the Infinite. This sublime condition is not of permanent duration, but is enjoyed at intervals, and its attainment is facilitated and repeated by abstinence, which tends to purify and elevate the mind. The agencies to accomplish it are as follows: Love of beauty in the poet, devotion to science in the philosopher, love and prayer in the devout.

Plotinus professes to have realized this sublime ecstasy six times; and Porphyry declares that Apollonius of Tyana was four times thus united to the Deity in his interior life, and he himself once when over sixty years old.⁶

The efflux from the Divine Being was imparted to the human spirit in unreserved abundance, accomplishing for the soul a union with the divine, and enabling it while in the body to be partaker of the life which is not of the body. Thus, says Iamblichus, the soul, in contemplating blessed spectacles, acquires another life, operates according to another energy, and is thus rightly considered as no longer ranking in the common order of mankind. Frequently, likewise, abandoning her own life, she exchanges it for the most felicitous energy of celestial beings. By supplicating, we are led to the object of supplication; we acquire its similitude from this intimacy, and gradually attain divine perfection. Being thus adapted to participate in the divine nature, we possess God himself.

This is a transcript from the very words of Plato:

“Prayer is the ardent turning of the soul toward God; not to ask any particular good, but for good itself — for the Universal supreme Good. We often mistake what is pernicious and dangerous for what is useful and desirable. Therefore remain silent in the presence of the divine ones, till they remove the clouds from thy eyes, and enable thee to see by the light which issues from themselves, not what appears as good to thee, but what is really good.”

Plotinus also taught that every person has the interior sense or faculty denominated *intuitio*, or spiritual instinct, which is developed by proper cultivation, and enables to perceive and apprehend actual and absolute fact more perfectly than can be done through the mere exercising of the reasoning powers and outward sensibility. It is a projecting of the consciousness from the subjective into the objective, so that what pertains to the selfhood of the person — what is in the mind and heart — is made to appear as constituting the things which may be seen around him. In this way, dreams are constituted; we see and converse with persons around us, and observe objects and events — all of them being but the creation of our own mind, or the re-

⁶ Kingsley, in the 25th chapter of “Hypatia.” and Bulwer in the 4th book of “Zanoni,” treat of this same psychological or hypnotic condition.



flection from our mind into a medium analogous to a surrounding mirror. Persons have detected themselves, while awake, seemingly in earnest conversation with an invisible being, but presently perceived that it was only a talking with themselves or a process of ratiocination, which was really subjective, while it seemed to be objective.

“There is a faculty of the human mind,”

says Iamblichus,

“which is superior to all which is born or begotten. Through it we are enabled to attain union with the superior intelligences, of being transported beyond the scenes and arrangements of this world, and of partaking the higher life and peculiar powers of the heavenly ones. By this faculty we are made free from the domination of Fate, and are made, so to speak, the arbiters of our own destinies. For, when the more excellent parts of us become filled with energy, and the soul is elevated to natures loftier than itself, it becomes separated from those conditions which keep it under the dominion of the present every-day life of the world, exchanges the present for another life, and abandons the conventional habits belonging to the external order of things, to give and mingle itself with the order which pertains to the higher life.”

We begin with instinct; the end is omniscience. It is as a direct beholding; what Schelling denominates a realization of the identity of subject and object in the individual, which blends him with that identity of subject and object called Deity; so that, transported out of himself, so to speak, he thinks divine thoughts, views all things from their highest point of view, and, to use an expression of Emerson, “becomes recipient of the soul of the world.” Plato himself expressed the idea more concisely.

“The light and spirit of the Deity are as wings to the soul, raising it into communion with himself and above the earth, with which the mind of man is prone to bemire itself.”

“To be like God is to be holy, just and wise. This is the end for which man was born, and should be his aim in the pursuit of knowledge.”

The power of vaticination, popularly denominating “second sight,” appears to have been possessed by these men. Apollonius asserts his own possession of the faculty as follows:

“I can see the present and the future in a clear mirror. The sage need not wait for the vapors of the earth and the corruption of the air to foresee plagues and fevers; he must know them later than God, but earlier than the people. The *theoi* or gods see the future; common men, the present; sages, that which is about to take place. My peculiar abstemious mode of life produces such an acuteness of the senses, or creates some other faculty, so that the greatest and most remarkable things may be performed.”

This is what may be termed *spiritual photography*. The soul is the camera in which facts and events, future, past, and present, are alike fixed; and the mind becomes conscious of them. Beyond our every-day world of limits, all is as one day or state —



the past and future comprised in the present. Probably this is the “great day,” the “last day,” the “day of the Lord,” of the Bible writers — the day into which everyone passes by death or *exstasis*. Then the soul is freed from the constraint of the body, and its nobler part is united to higher nature and becomes partaker in the wisdom and foreknowledge of the higher beings.

The disciples of Plotinus ascribed to him miraculous power. They affirmed that he could read the secret thoughts of men; when Porphyry was contemplating suicide he perceived it without having received any outward intimation. A robbery was committed in the house and he called the domestics together and pointed out the guilty one. He did not discountenance the popular religious worship; but when one of his friends asked him to attend at the public services, he answered:

“It is for them to come to me.”

When Jesus declared that the son of man is lord of the Sabbath, he uttered the very idea which Plotinus repeated in demanding that the sacrifices should come to him.

Plotinus, Iamblichus and Apollonius of Tyana, are said to have possessed miraculous powers of prediction and healing. The former art had been cultivated by the Essenes and *B'no Nabim* among the Hebrews, as well as at the pagan oracles.

“I am not a prophet, nor the son of a prophet,”

said Amos, when accused of predicting untoward things,

“but the Lord called me.”

Apollonius is declared, by his biographer, Philostratus, to have healed the sick and raised the dead, and others of those days were reported to have done extraordinary cures.

“That which especially distinguished the fraternity,”

said a German writer,

“was their marvelous knowledge of all the resources of medical art. They wrought not by charms, but by simples.”

Perhaps often their skill in healing won them the reputation of performing miracles.

It is more than probable; however, that they employed the agency so commonly known as animal magnetism. It was usual to exercise it by gently placing the hand on or near the diseased part, stroking it gently and uttering a chant or incantation. It has become fashionable to declaim about these practices as charlatanism, but they appear to have existed in all ages and among different peoples. Demons and diseases were supposed anciently to be overcome by sacred chanting.

It is apparent that these mystics were proficient in the art of medicine, and familiar with herbal science; but their discoveries were lost through the destruction of the Alexandrian library. Perhaps, but for this, there would have been an Eclectic school of medicine in the world, the offspring of the knowledge of these “wise men from the



East.”⁷ Instead of it, however, they left an alchemy, or mystical philosophy, which subsequent inquirers, construing too literally, lost sight of the allegorical meaning, and, prosecuting the matter further, brought into existence the science of chemistry.

Iamblichus transcended the other Eclectics, and added to their theosophy the doctrine of a theurgy. He taught that the individual must be elevated to association with spiritual and celestial beings, the possession of their knowledge and will, and the ability to control as a god inferior natures. He appears to have been thoroughly familiar with the phenomena of the mesmeric trance and clairvoyance, and describes them with great exactness. He taught that the idea of God was imprinted in the soul, not by reason or ratiocination, but by a spiritual conception which is eternal and contemporary with the soul. The different orders of spiritual beings are mediators between God and man. Their prescience extends over everything and fills everything capable of it. They also give intimations during the waking hours, and impart to the soul the power of a wider perception of things, the gift of healing, the faculty of discovering arts and new truths. There are different degrees of this inspiration; sometimes it is possessed in the highest, sometimes in an intermediate, and sometimes only in the lowest degree.

Prayer, abstinence — in some instances amounting to asceticism — and contemplation are among the means of discipline required for the theurgist. Iamblichus discourses on prayer with all the earnestness of a Christian divine. The supernaturalism, however repugnant to the popular idea, is no more than is set forth in the Bible, and was also peculiar to the Jewish Essenes, who are said by Pliny to have been established on the shores of the Dead Sea *per seculorum millia*, for thousands of ages. The legitimate effect was not to develop the practice of thaumaturgy, sorcery, necromancy, and fortune-telling, but the higher faculties and sentiments. Bulwer, who appears to have been a thorough student of Neo-Platonism and kindred topics, practically depicts its operation and influence:

⁷ A French writer cited in the *Journal of Psychological Medicine*, imputed to the New Platonists the use of charms and thaumaturgical arts, in the treatment of the sick. But Plotinus, in his treatise against the Gnostics, entirely acquits his associates of this accusation. He says:

“They (the Gnostics) likewise pretend that they can expel disease. If they to accomplish this by temperance and an orderly mode of life, they speak rightly, and like philosophers. But now, when they assert that diseases are demons, and that they are able to expel these by words, and proclaim that they have this power, they may, perhaps, appear to be more worthy of reverence to the multitude, who admire the powers of magicians; but they will not induce intelligent persons to believe that diseases have not their causes from excessive labors, or satiety, or insufficient nourishment, or putrefaction, and, in short, from mutations which have either an external or an internal origin. This, however, is manifest from the manner of the cure of diseases. For disease is deduced downward so as to pass away externally through a flux of the bowels, or the operation of medicine. Disease is also cured by letting off blood and fasting.”

“Perhaps, however, they will say that the demon is then hungry, and the medicine causes him to waste away; but that sometimes is suddenly obtained through the demon departing, or remaining within the body. But, if this is effected while the demon still remains within, why, while he is within, is the person no longer diseased? And, if he departs, what is the cause of his departure? For what did he disease? The disease, then, was something different from the demon.

“In the next place, if the demon enters without any cause, why is not the body always diseased? But, if he enters when the cause of the disease is present, why is the demon necessary in order to the body becoming diseased? The cause is sufficient to produce the fever. The idea is ridiculous, that, as soon as the cause of the disease exists, the demon should immediately be present, as if subsisting in conjunction with the cause.”



“At last from this dimness, upon some eyes, the light broke; but think not that to those over whom the Origin of Evil held a sway, that dawning was vouchsafed. It could be given then, as now, only to the purest ecstasies of imagination and intellect, undistracted by the cares of a vulgar life, the appetites of the common clay. Far from descending to the assistance of a fiend, theirs was but the august ambition to approach nearer to the Fount of Good; the more they emancipated themselves from this Limbo of the planets, the more they were penetrated by the splendor and beneficence of God. And if they sought, and at last discovered, how to the eye of the spirit all the subtler modifications of being and of matter might be made apparent; if they discovered how, for the wings of the spirit, all space might be annihilated; and while the body stood heavy and solid here, the freed *Idea* might wander from star to star: if such discoveries became in truth their own, the sublimest luxury of their knowledge was but this — to wonder, to venerate, and adore!”

Proclus was the last great teacher of the Eclectic school. His writings are, if possible, more thorough and elaborate than those of his predecessors. He refines upon the theurgy of Iamblichus, and as that writer extols prayer as a means of spiritual attainment, he extols faith.

According to Proclus, the doctrines of Orpheus were the origin of the systems afterward promulgated. He says:

“What Orpheus delivered in hidden allegories, Pythagoras learned when he was initiated into the Orphic mysteries; and Plato next received a perfect knowledge of them from Orphic and Pythagorean writings.”

He also repeats the words of Aristotle:

“There are many inferior *theoi* but only one Mover. All that is concerning the human shape and attributes of these deities is mere fiction, invented to instruct the common people and secure their obedience to wholesome laws. But the First Principle is neither fire, nor earth, nor water, nor anything that is the object of sense. A spiritual substance is the cause of the Universe, and the source of all order, all beauty, all the motions and all the forms which are so much admired in it. All must be led up to this one primitive substance, which governs in subordination to the First. This is the general doctrine of the ancients, which has, happily, escaped the wreck of truth amid the rocks of popular errors and poetic fables.”

“After death, the soul continueth in the aerial body till it is entirely purified from all angry and voluptuous passions; then doth it put off, by a second dying, the aerial body as it did the earthly one. Wherefore, the ancients say that there is celestial body always joined with the soul, which is immortal, luminous and starlike.”

Proclus elaborated the entire theosophy and theurgy of his predecessors into a complete system. Like the Rabbis and Gnostics, he cherished a perfect reverence for the *Abraxas*, the venerable name, or Word; and he believed with Iamblichus in the attaining of a divine power, which overcoming the mundane life, rendered the individual an organ of the Deity, speaking a wisdom which he did not comprehend, and be-



coming the utterance of a superior will. He even supposed that there might be mystic pass-words that would carry a person from one order of spiritual beings to another, higher and higher, till he arrived at the absolute divine. Faith, he inculcated, would make one the possessor of this talisman.

The Eclectics flourished for several centuries, and comprised within their ranks the ablest and most learned men of their time. Their doctrines were adopted by pagans and Christians in Asia and Europe, and for a season everything seemed favorable for a general fusion of religious belief. The Emperors Alexander Severus and Julian embraced them. Their predominating influence upon religious ideas excited the jealousy of the Christians of Alexandria. Hypatia, the celebrated lecturer, the teacher of the bishop Synesius, and daughter of Theon, was set upon by a mob, headed by an ecclesiastic, dragged to a church and brutally murdered. The school was removed to Athens, and finally closed by the Emperor Justinian. Its professors withdrew to Persia, where they made many disciples.

The influences of these great teachers existed through all the subsequent centuries. At different periods of the mediaeval age, arose remarkable men, who propounded one or other of the cardinal Hermetic doctrines. The Mystics and Quietists, Sufis and theosophers of every grade draw liberally on the treasure which the Philaletheian Neo-Platonists had filled so liberally. Emanuel Swedenborg and Jacob Bohmen do not seem to have been exceptions; and Madame Guyon would have made a glorious counterpart of Iamblichus. Hardly a religious creed exists in the Christian world which has not thus been enriched; and literature has thence derived its choicest embellishment.

As ought to be expected of persons holding so refined a system of doctrines, their characters corresponded with it most beautifully. Plotinus was everywhere honored for his probity, Apollonius for his almost preternatural purity of manners, Ammonius for his amiableness, Iamblichus for his piety, and Proclus for his serene temper. Their moral code is well depicted in this language of M. Matter, in his Treatise on Gnosticism:

“The morality which the Gnosis prescribed for man answered perfectly to his condition. To supply the body with what it needs, and to restrict it in everything superfluous; to nourish the spirit with whatever can enlighten it, strengthen it, and render it like God, of whom it is the image; to make it one with God, of whom it is an emanation — this is that morality. It is that of Platonism, and it is that of Christianity.”

Whatever the apparent demerits of the Philaletheian doctrines, there must be general approval of the great underlying ideas of Human Brotherhood and perfectibility. Their proper aim was the complete establishment of the rule of peace on earth, instead of that dominion of the sword which had served in former ages, and which was destined, in subsequent centuries, to array millions of human beings in mortal warfare against each other, and depopulate countries and districts in the name of religion.



Alchemy or the Hermetic Philosophy

A century has passed since the compilers of the French Encyclopaedia infused skepticism into the blood of the civilized world, and made it disreputable to believe in the actual existence of anything that cannot be tested in crucibles or demonstrated by critical reasoning. Even now, it requires candor as well as courage to venture to treat upon a subject which has been for many years discarded and contemned, because it has not been well or correctly understood. The person must be bold who accounts the Hermetic philosophy to be other than a pretense of science, and, so believing, demands for its enunciation a patient hearing. Yet its professors were once the princes of learned investigation, and heroes among common men. Besides, nothing is to be despised which men have reverently believed; and disdain for the earnest convictions of others is, itself the token of ignorance, and of an ungenerous mind.

The opinion has become almost universal that Alchemy was a pretended science, by which gold and silver were to be produced by transmutation of the elements of the baser metals; and its professors are at this day regarded as the dupes of imposture, and as having been themselves impostors and charlatans. In these classes they are placed by the writers of books; and the prejudice has been so long cherished, that, for the present, there is small ground for hope of its uprooting. The peculiar language employed by the alchemists is now commonly denominated “jargon,” and this epithet appears to be conclusive logic with those whose convictions are chiefly produced by the employment of opprobrious names.

Yet a candid and critical examination of the Hermetic writers, we think, will entirely disabuse the mind of any intelligent person. It is plain enough, that their directions in relation to transmuting metals are scarcely at all to be connected with any known manipulations now known as *chemical*. Yet it would be presumptuous to vilify such men as Roger Bacon, Boerhave, and Van Helmont, as ignorant, or to accuse them of imposture. We propose, therefore in this essay, to direct inquiry in another quarter for the purpose of indicating what was really the scope of the science or philosophy, formerly extant under the name of Alchemy.

The first appearance of this system is not known. Some writers declare that Adam was the first adept; others, that the “sons of God,” spoken of in the sixth chapter of Genesis, who took wives of the daughters of men, communicated to them the knowledge of the strange mysteries of the created world. Moses and Solomon are also assigned the first rank in the knowledge of Hermetic learning — the former, because he has learned “all the wisdom of the Egyptians”: and the other, as being the wisest of men, and able, by his mystic seal and pass-word, to command spirits. We find expressions in ancient writers indicating the existence of such science. “Its cradle,” says Olaus Borrichius, “is to be sought in the most distant times,” Clement of Alexandria makes mention of it. Democritus of Abdera was also a Hermetic philosopher. But it is hardly necessary to quote at greater length.

Under the old title of *magic*, a Persian term signifying knowledge, was included every science, natural or metaphysical, which was cultivated. The sacerdotal and learned class were styled magians or magicians. We find them also called Chaldeans. The pa-



triarch Abraham, it will be remembered, was said to be a Chaldean or Casdean: and according to Josephus, he taught *mathematics*, or esoteric knowledge in Egypt. Astral literature was also cultivated as a part of the ancient learning: and the magian was probably an astrologer also.

Alchemy, however, can hardly be regarded as a part of the old learning of the Magians and Chaldeans. It seems rather to have succeeded to their inheritance. William Godwin, the author of the celebrated treatise on "Political Justice," and father of the late Mrs. Shelley, has given an outline of its earlier history.

"Among the different pursuits,"

says he,

"which engaged the curiosity of active minds in these unenlightened ages, was that of the transmutation of the ordinary metals into gold and silver. This art, though not properly of necromantic nature, was, however, elevated by its professors, by means of an imaginary connection between it and astrology, and even between it and an intercourse with invisible spirits. They believed that their investigations could not be successfully prosecuted but under favorable aspects of the planets, and that it was even indispensable to them to obtain supernatural aid."

The first authentic record on this subject is an edict of Dioclesian, about three hundred years after Christ, ordering a diligent search to be made in Egypt for all the ancient books which treated of the art of making gold and silver, that they might, without distinction, be consigned to the flames. This edict, however, necessarily presumes a certain antiquity to the pursuit; and fabulous history has recorded Solomon, Pythagoras and Hermes among its distinguished votaries.⁸

⁸ The study of alchemy, whatever it was, was even more universal than the several writers upon it appear to have known, and was always the auxiliary, if not identical, with the occult sciences of magic, necromancy and astrology, probably from the same fact that they were originally but forms of a spiritualism which was generally extant in all ages of human history. In October, 1868, at the meeting of the Oriental Society, at New Haven, Connecticut, Rev. William A.P. Martin, of Peking, read a paper on the "Study of Alchemy in China," After tracing briefly the connection between alchemy and chemistry, the paper proceeded to its main object, namely, to demonstrate that the origin of European alchemy was to be sought in China. In support of this view the following considerations were adduced, and illustrated by citations from Chinese and other works:

1. The study of alchemy had been in full vigor in China for at least six centuries before it made its appearance in Europe. It did not appear in Europe until the fourth century, when intercourse with the far East had become somewhat frequent. It appeared first at Byzantium and Alexandria, where the commerce of the East chiefly centered, and was subsequently revived in Europe by the Saracenus, whose most famous school of alchemy was at Bagdad, where intercourse with Eastern Asia was frequent.
2. The objects of pursuit in both schools were identical, and in either case twofold — immortality and gold. In Europe the former was the less prominent, because the people, being in possession of Christianity, had a vivid faith in a future life to satisfy their longings on that head.
3. In either school there were two elixirs, the greater and the less, and the properties ascribed to them closely correspond.
4. The principles underlying both systems are identical the composite nature of the metals and their vegetation from a seminal germ. Indeed, the characters *tsing* for the germ, and *t'an* for the matrix, which constantly occur in the writings of Chinese alchemists, might be taken for the translation of terms in the vocabulary of the Western school, if their higher antiquity did not forbid the hypothesis.
5. The ends in view being the same, the means by which they were pursued were nearly identical — mercury and lead being as conspicuous in the laboratories of the East as mercury and sulphur were in those of the West. It is of less significance to add that many other substances were common to both schools than to note the remarkable coincidence that in Chinese, as in European alchemy, the names of the two principal re-agents are used in a mystical sense.



“From this period the study seems to have slept till it was revived among the Arabians, after a lapse of five or six hundred years. It is well known, however, how eagerly it was cultivated in various countries of the world after it was divulged by Geber. Men of the most wonderful talents devoted their lives to the investigation, and in multiplied instances the discovery was said to have been accomplished.”

Two noticeable circumstances are indicated in this brief sketch: that alchemy had pretensions to a great antiquity, and that it was to be traced to those countries where the new Platonic philosophy had flourished. Added to these is the remarkable fact, that the students in alchemy professed to be disciples of the same great masters, of Apollonius, Plotinus, Porphyry and Iamblichus, and to believe the same doctrines. As the mythical personage, Hermes,⁹ “the three times greatest,” whom we suppose, from his Egyptian name *Thoth* (an assembly), to be but the embodiment of the collective voice of the sacerdotal caste of Egypt, is regarded by alchemists to be one of their original teachers, it requires no great stretch of imagination to presume that there was a close relationship between the two, and perhaps an actual identity. Certain is it that the mystic, the philosopher, the so-called magician, the astrologist and the alchemist, during the middle ages, appear to have occupied the same field of thought, to have held very similar opinions, and to have employed a form of speech very similar, although differing in technology.

6. Both schools, or at least individuals in both schools held the doctrine of a cycle of changes, in the course of which the precious metals revert to their base elements.

7. Both are closely interwoven with astrology.

8. Both led to the practice of magical arts and unbounded charlatanism.

9. Both deal, in language of equal extravagance and the style of European alchemists, so unlike the sobriety of thought characteristic of the Western mind, would, if consider alone, give us no very uncertain indication of its origin in the fervid fancy of the Orient.

⁹ Hermes Trismegistus is the celebrated personage of Egyptian and Phoenician story, to whom is attributed the preservation of the remains of the old religion. Several treatises are imputed to him, among them the Smaragdine Tablet — which Avicenna declares was taken from his dead body at Hebron by Sarah, the wife of the Patriarch Abraham. The following is a translation:

1. I speak not fictitious things, but what is true and most certain.

2. As is below is like that which is above, and what is above is similar to that which is below to accomplish the wonders of one thing.

3. As all things are produced by the mediation of one being, so all things were produced from this one thing by adaptation.

4. Its father is the Sun: its mother is the moon.

5. It is the cause of all perfection throughout the whole earth.

6. Its power is perfect if it is changed into earth.

7. Separate the earth from the fire, the subtile from the gross, acting prudently and with judgment.

8. Ascend with the greatest sagacity from the earth to heaven, and then descend again to earth, and unite together the power of all things inferior and superior; thus you will possess the light of the whole world, and all obscurity will fly away from you.

9. This thing has more fortitude than fortitude itself, because it will overcome every subtile thing and penetrate every solid thing.

10. By it the world was formed.

11. Hence proceed wonderful things, which in this manner were established.

12. For this reason, I am called Hermes the thrice greatest, because I possess those parts of the philosophy of the whole world.

13. What I had to say about the operation of the Sun is complete.



Snidas, in his Lexicon, thus expounds the Golden Fleece:

“Δέρμας (deras) — the golden fleece, which Jason and the Argonauts, after a voyage through the Black Sea to Colchis, took, together with Medea, daughter of Aetes, the King. But this is not what the poets represent, but a treatise written on skins (δέρμασι), teaching how gold might be prepared by chemistry. Probably it is called golden by those who lived at that time, on account of its great importance.”



The Three Alchemic Agents

The agents sought for and praised by all true alchemists were three, namely: first, the Philosopher's Stone, by which metals were said to be transmuted; second, the Alcahest, or universal solvent; and third, the Elixir Vitae, by which human life was capable of being prolonged indefinitely.

The possibility of reducing the elements to their primal form, as they are supposed to have existed in the igneous mass from which the earth-crust is believed to have been formed, is not considered by physicists to be so absurd an idea as has been intimated. There is a relationship between metals often so close as to indicate an original identity. Persons called alchemists may, therefore, have devoted their energies to investigations into these matters as Lavoisier, Davy, Faraday, and others of our day have explained the mysteries of chemistry.

But Alchemy, we apprehend, was a different affair; its professors and adepts only employed the peculiar dialect or "jargon" as a species of figurative language, to cover an esoteric meaning of a far different character. The philosopher's stone, the alcahest and the elixir were names of one and the same thing, and were supposed to accomplish an identical operation. Baptista Porta, in his treatise on Natural Magic, declares as much:

"I do not promise any golden mountains, nor yet that philosopher's stone which the world hath so great an opinion of, which hath been bragged of in so many ages and happily attained unto by some; neither yet do I promise here that golden liquor, whereof if any man do drink, it is supposed that it will render him immortal. But it is a mere dream;¹⁰ for, since the world is mutable and subject to alterations, therefore whatsoever the world produceth is subject to destruction."

Such was the real belief of all genuine alchemists.

The reason for the employment of a peculiar mystic form of speech was the great peril which was incurred for religious dissent. Learned men, generally, who were imprudent in the expression of their convictions, were punished during the middle

¹⁰ The *Memoire Historiques*, printed in 1687, contain the following tale:

"In the year 1681, a stranger, who called himself Signor Gauldi, went to reside in Venice, and there attracted attention by his apparently universe knowledge, his beautiful and valuable collection of paintings, and the singular circumstance that he was never known to write or receive a letter, to desire credit, or to make use of notes or bills in exchange. He paid for everything in ready money, and lived in a very respectable style. A nobleman, who was a remarkable good judge of pictures, applied for permission to see the collection of Signor Gauldi, which request was at once complied with. Over the door hung a portrait of Gauldi himself. The nobleman remarked:

"This picture is a portrait of yourself."

Gauldi bowed assent.

"You look, sir, to be no more than fifty; but I know that painting to be by the hand of Titian, who has been dead one hundred and thirty years. How is this possible?"

"It is not easy to know all things that are possible," replied Gauldi, "but there is certainly no crime in the fact that I am like a picture by the hand of Titian."

"The nobleman forebore to speak more on the subject; but afterward, mentioning the circumstance to several of his acquaintances, they determined to examine the picture the next day. Before they could put their design into execution, Signor Gauldi had removed to Vienna."



ages, as in the case of Galileo, Copernicus and numerous others. They were all classed by the ignorant, among dealers in the “black art,” having intercourse with spirits and demons; and were, as occasion served, burned at the stake, broken on the wheel, or disjoined on the rack, for disregarding the current belief and endeavoring to instruct the common people. Like the *nahash* or serpent of Eden, for showing men how to be as the Aleim, they were “cursed above all cattle,” and doomed to “eat dust” — suffer abuse — all the days of their life; because, in the language of Goethe,

“Out of their heart’s pulses they needs must gabble,
And show their thoughts and feelings to the rabble.”

Hence Irenaeus Philalethes Cosmopolita, an English alchemist, or Hermetic writer, in his book published in 1659, makes the following allusion to persecutions:

“Many who are strangers to the art believe that if they should enjoy it, they would do such and such things; so also even we did formerly believe, but being grown more wary, by the hazard we have run, we have chosen a more secret method. For whosoever hath escaped imminent peril of his life, he will become more wise for the time to come.”

It was very likely, when a man, for differing in religious faith, was branded as an infidel and punished as an outlaw; when scientific knowledge was stigmatized as witchcraft, that men cultivating ideas out of the common order would invent a dialect of symbols and passwords by which to communicate with one another, and yet remain unknown by their bloodthirsty adversaries. Besides, there was another reason, the one adopted by the psalmist, who “opened his mouth in a parable and uttered dark sayings of old,” and imitated by Jesus, Geber, the Arabian, thus discloses it:

“If we have concealed anything, ye sons of learning, wonder not; for we have not concealed it from you, but have delivered it in such language as that it may be hid from evil men, and that the unjust and vile might not know it. But, ye sons of truth, search and you shall find this most excellent gift of God, which he has reserved for you. Ye sons of folly, impiety and profanity, avoid you the seeking after this knowledge; it will be destructive to you, and precipitate you into contempt and misery.”

Alchemy, therefore, we believe to have been a spiritual philosophy, and not a physical science. The wonderful transmutation of baser metals into gold was a figurative expression of the transformation of man from his natural evils and infirmities into a regenerate condition, a partaker of the divine nature. The philosopher’s stone is well enough indicated by Aristotle, in his address to Alexander;

“It is no stone; it is in every man and in every place, and at all seasons, and is called the *end* of all philosophers.”

The alcahest is but the *al-geist*, or divine spirit, which removes every grosser nature, that its holier principles may be removed. The *elixir vitae* is accordingly the water of life, which is, to borrow the language of Godwin,

“a universal medicine, have the quality of renewing the youth of man, and causing him to live forever.”



Doctor Kopp, of Germany, who published a *History of Chemistry* a quarter of a century ago, after alluding to alchemy in its peculiar character of precursor to that science, made use of this significant expression, which the Pythagorean and Platonist will instantly comprehend:

“If by the world is understood the *microcosm* which man represents, the interpretation will be easy of the writings of alchemists.”

The Hindu story relates that Chrisna commanded his fostermother to look into his mouth. She did so, and beheld there the whole universe. This was a figure of speech, indicating that in man the microcosm, or little world, is mirrored all things pertaining to the entire creation. The alchemist denominated the philosopher’s stone *microcosmos*, and Weidenfield declares as follows:

“The Most High God hath made us partakers of all the blessings contained in the greater world, for which reason man is called microcosm; for it has been revealed to us by divine inspiration, that the virtues and potencies of all things animal, vegetable and mineral, are in man.”

Irenaeus Philalethes declares:

“Our stone is the representative of the great world (or macrocosm), and hath the virtues of that great fabric, comprised or collected in this little system. In it there is a virtue magnetical, attractive of its like in the whole world. It is a celestial virtue, expounded universally in the whole creation, but epitomised in this small map or abridgment.”

In a book; purporting to be a translation of the writings of Alipili, the following passage occurs:

“He that hath the knowledge of the microcosm, cannot long be ignorant of the knowledge of the macrocosm. This is that which the Egyptian industrious searchers of nature so often said and loudly proclaimed, that every one should know himself. This speech, their dull disciples, the Greeks, took in a moral sense, and in ignorance affixed it to their temples. But I admonish thee, whosoever thou art, that desirest to dive into the inmost parts of nature, if that which thou seekest thou findest not within thee, thou wilt never find it without thee. He who desires the first place among the students of nature, will nowhere find a greater or better field of study than himself. Therefore, will I here follow the example of the Egyptians, and from my whole heart, and certain true experience proved by me, speak to my neighbor in the words of the Egyptians, and with a loud voice do now proclaim: Oh, man, know thyself; for in thee is hidden the treasure of treasures.”

Cornelius Agrippa, perhaps the most generally known of the magicians and alchemists, carries this idea further, and says:

“There is one thing by God created, the subject of all wonderfulness in earth and in heaven; it is actually animal, vegetable and mineral; found everywhere, known by few, by none expressed by his proper name, but hid in numbers, figures and riddles, without which neither alchemy nor natural magic can attain their perfect end.”



George Ripley, a monk, who wrote of alchemy, thus explains the philosopher's stone:

“For as of one mass was made all thing,
Right so must it in our practice be;
All our sects of one image must spring:
In philosophers' books, therefore, who wishes may see,
Our stone is called the less-world, one and three.”

In a dialogue published in the *Alchemist's Enchiridion*, in 1672, the matter is made more distinct:

“Now, in this discourse I will manifest to thee the natural condition of the stone of the philosophers, appareled with a triple garment, even this stone of riches and charity, the strong relief from languishment, in which is contained every secret; being a divine mystery and gift of God, than which there is nothing in this world more sublime. Therefore, diligently observe what I say, namely that 'tis appareled with a triple garment, that is to say, with a body, soul and spirit.”

Moses, the great Hebrew law-giver, differed not widely from these mystics when he enunciated:

“The word, or ineffable Name, is not in heaven nor beyond the sea, that thou shouldst send messengers to seek it; it is very nigh thee, in thy mouth and in thy heart.”

The peculiar diction of the alchemical writers occasioned much of the general misunderstanding of their teachings. They treated of salt, sulphur mercury, lead, antimony, and the transmutation of metals; and probably large number of persons, not comprehending them aright, attempted to follow out their instructions literally, in quest of a fortune by the production of gold. Paracelsus, who does not seem to be well comprehended by contemporaries or posterity, declaring himself a student of alchemy, ventured to employ the substance named to cure diseases. But it is plain that alchemists themselves did not regard the knowledge of the material substances as a part of their science. Espagnet declares as follows:

“A studious tyro of a quick wit, constant mind, inflamed with the love of philosophy, of a pure heart, perfect in morals, mightily devoted to God — even though ignorant of practical chemistry, may with confidence enter the highway of nature, and peruse the books of the best philosophers.”

Irenaeus Philalethes also remarks:

“In the world our writings shall prove as a curious-edged knife; to some they shall carve out dainties, but to others they shall only serve to cut their fingers: yet we are not to be blamed, for we do seriously admonish all who shall attempt this work that they undertaketh the highest piece of philosophy in Nature: and though we write in English, yet our matter will be hard as Greek to some, who will think, nevertheless, that they understand as well, when they misconstrue our meaning most perversely; for is it imaginable that they who are fools in nature should be wise in books, which are testimonies unto Nature?”



Espagnet also gives this caution:

“Let a lover of truth make use of but a few authors, but of best note and experienced truth; let him suspect things that are quickly understood, especially in mystical names and secret operations; for truth lies hid in obscurity; nor do philosophers ever write more deceitfully than when plainly, nor ever more truly than when obscurely.”

Roger Bacon, in his Treatise on the Admirable Force of Art and Nature, devotes the first part of his work to natural facts. He gives us hints of gunpowder, and predicts the use of steam as a propelling power. The hydraulic press, the diving bell and kaleidoscope are all described; and he foretells the making of

“instruments to fly withal, so that one sitting in the midst of the instrument and turning about an engine by which the wings, being artificially composed, may beat the air after the manner of a flying bird.”

He then defends himself and other alchemists for using secret writing.

“The cause of this concealment among all wise men is the contempt and neglect of the secrets of wisdom by the vulgar sort, who know not how to use those things that are most excellent, or if they do conceive any worthy thing, it is altogether by chance and fortune, and they do exceedingly abuse their knowledge, to the great damage and hurt of many men, yea, even of whole societies; so that he is worse than mad that publisheth any secret, unless he conceal it from the multitude, and in such wise deliver it that even the studious and learned shall hardly understand it.”

“Some have hidden their secrets by their modes of writing; as namely, by consonants only: so that no man can read them unless he knows the signification of the words; and this is usual among the Jews, Chaldeans, Syrians and Arabians, yea, and the Grecians too; and, therefore, there is great concealing with them, but especially with the Jews.”

The elixir was supposed, according the Hermetic belief, to have not so much the power of transmuting specifically base metals into gold and silver, as the power generally of bringing to its highest perfection any substance to which it was applied; indeed, the philosopher’s stone was itself the universal medicine — the *all-geist* or all-pervading spirit. Ashmole says:

“Unless the medicine be qualified as it ought, it is death to taste the least atom of it, because its nature is so highly vigorous and strong above that of man; for if its least parts are able to strike so fiercely and thoroughly into the body of a base and corrupt metal as to tinge and convert it into so high a degree as perfect gold, how less able is the body of man to resist such a force when its greatest strength is far inferior to the weakest metal? I do believe that many philosophers, having a desire to enjoy perfect health, have destroyed themselves in attempting to take the medicine inwardly ere they knew the true use thereof, or how to qualify it to be received by the nature of man without destruction.”



The Conclusion

The problem of alchemy, therefore, was, but in another form, the riddle of the Sphinx: and the answer is the same:

“That which hath been is that which shall be; and that which hath been is named already — and it is known that it is man.”

The real mystery, most familiar and at the same time most unfamiliar to every man, into which he must be initiated or perish as an atheist, is himself. For him is the elixir of life, to quaff which before the discovery of the philosopher’s stone, is to drink the beverage of death, while it confers on the adept and the epopt the true immortality. He may know truth as it really is Αλήθεια, the breath of God.

This is the alcahest which dissolves all things.

There have doubtless been charlatans who pretended to be alchemists, as there have been impostors professing the gift of prophecy, and quacks claiming knowledge beyond others of the healing art; but that is not superior ken which therefore declares all physicians, sages and gifted men to be but quacks and mountebanks. In the end, Wisdom is justified of her children.



Spiritual Philosophy by H.P. Blavatsky¹¹

Men and parties, sects and schools are but the mere ephemera of the world's day. TRUTH, high-seated upon its rock of adamant, is alone eternal and supreme.¹²

Centuries of subjection have not quite congealed the lifeblood of men into crystals around the nucleus of blind faith; . . . Our work, then, is a plea for the recognition of the Hermetic philosophy, the anciently universal Wisdom-Religion, as the only possible key to the Absolute in science and theology.¹³

For many a long year the “great orphan,” Humanity, has been crying aloud in the darkness for guidance and for light. Amid the increasing splendors of a progress purely material, of a science that nourished the intellect, but left the spirit to starve, Humanity, dimly feeling its origin and presaging its destiny, has stretched out towards the East empty hands that only a *spiritual* philosophy can fill. Aching from the divisions, the jealousies, the hatreds, that rend its very life, it has cried for some sure foundation on which to build the solidarity it senses, some metaphysical basis from which its loftiest social ideals may rise secure. Only the Masters of the Eastern wisdom can set that foundation, can satisfy at once the intellect and the spirit, can guide Humanity safely through the night to “the dawn of a larger day.”

Such is the goal which Theosophy has set itself to attain; such is the history of the modern movement; such is the work which Theosophy has already accomplished in this nineteenth century.

At least we may claim to have placed before the thinking public a logical, coherent, and philosophical scheme of man's origin, destiny, and evolution — a scheme pre-eminent above all for its rigorous adherence to justice. And, that we may broaden our criterion of truth, our research extends to an inquiry into the nature of the less known forces, cosmic and psychical. Upon such themes many of our books have been written, and many of our reprints of ancient works, with or without commentaries, have been selected with reference to the light they throw upon these *quaestiones vexatae*.

In one word, our whole aim and desire are to help, in at least some degree, toward arriving at correct scientific views upon the nature of man, which carry with them the means of reconstructing for the present generation the deductive metaphysical or transcendental philosophy which alone is the firm, unshakable foundation of every religious philosophy. Theosophy, the universal solvent, is fulfilling its mission; the opalescent tints of the dawn of modern psychology are blending together, and will all be merged into the perfect daylight of truth, when the sun-orb of Eastern esotericism has mounted to its noon-stage.¹⁴

¹¹ Selections from the writings of H.P. Blavatsky placed after the “Conclusion” in the Wizards Bookshelf edition.

¹² *Isis Unveiled*, I p. v

¹³ *Ibid.* I p. vii

¹⁴ *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, (RECENT PROGRESS IN THEOSOPHY) XII pp. 307-8

