

Lecture notes: Renaissance & Hermeticism

What happens after Ptolemy? As we have seen, Greek science, philosophy, and medicine was fairly advanced by the time of Ptolemy, in the second century AD. This sophisticated knowledge was preserved and expanded by advanced civilizations, especially that of the Roman empire. But the Roman empire was in decline for many years before the fall of Rome itself in 410, and science and philosophy declined with it. Europe enters the medieval period (often called the "Middle Ages"), in which "classical" (= Greek and Roman) science, art, political structure, and art are no longer valued, and the institutional support for them vanishes. The remaining scribes (often monks) copy almost exclusively religious texts. As a result, most of the ideas of the ancient period basically disappear from Western Europe for centuries.

Recovery of ancient texts: 'Re-birth' of classical knowledge. The time period known as the Renaissance is the transitional period between the medieval period and the (early) modern period. The word 'Renaissance' is just the French word for *re-birth*. One thing that is re-born during this transitional period is the knowledge of Greek and Roman antiquity. Where did these texts come from? Some were found in monastary libraries, and many came from the East: the East had not fallen into the tribal/ feudal system of social organization as the West had, and thus could support scholarly activities. The Islamic world had kept the writings of Aristotle and others alive during the European medieval times. When Byzantium, one of the centers of Eastern civilization, fell in 1453, many of the classically-inclined scholars headed west, thereby speeding up the recovery of Greek and Latin texts.

[Note: the Renaissance is not merely (nor caused merely by) the recovery of classical texts; this is one facet of the Renaissance. Also, as you might guess, such recovery occurs in different places at different times.]

Hermeticism

Who is Hermes Trismegistus? One set of writings recovered and translated during the Renaissance were the doctrines of someone the Greeks called Hermes Trismegistus. 'Trismegistus' means thrice-greatest: this Hermes was 1. a prophet, 2. a healer, and 3. a philosopher who understood the secrets of nature. Hermes was supposed to be from Egypt, where his name was 'Thoth' -- and the Greeks of the classical period considered Egypt the birthplace and storehouse of ancient wisdom. These texts, though they came down to Renaissance scholars in the Greek language, were supposedly written originally in Egyptian many centuries before by Hermes himself or a disciple, and passed down through the generations of Egyptian priests.

Hermes a myth. However, all evidence now indicates that these documents (the Hermetic corpus) were written (in Greek) during the first two centuries AD, **not** by Egyptian priests centuries before Plato. Those Greek authors may have sincerely believed that they were accurately describing and preserving the ancient doctrines of an actual historical figure Hermes Trismegistus/ Thoth. Because certain parts of the Hermetic Corpus sound very similar to New Testament claims, many scholars today believe that

these works were written to establish the cultural and historical priority of Christian beliefs. Christianity was not yet dominant in western Europe, and to demonstrate its superiority over rival religions, these texts show that Christian doctrine was foreshadowed in the most ancient wisdom around -- that of the Egyptians.

Poimandres, or Shepherd of Men. [[Read it](#)] This is a creation story. It closely resembles the Genesis I story in many ways (also note similarities and differences with the *Timaeus*):

1. In the beginning, water, earth, air and fire were completely mixed up, moving chaotically, and covered in darkness.
2. Then the one high god (or father god, shepherd of men) separates out the air and fire from the water and earth, and then the earth from the water.
3. The creation of the universe was accomplished via the high god's Word. (Recall Genesis 1: "God SAID 'Let there be light.' And there was light" etc.; and John 1:1: "In the beginning was the Word") (Here 'Word' = Greek *logos*, from which we get our *logical* as well as the suffix *-logy*, e.g. biology, sociology). Logos, the text tells us, is unique to humans and higher beings, and it is through logos that we understand things. 'Reason' is a decent synonym for logos in this case.
4. The high god created humans in his own image, giving humans many of His powers.

There are differences with the Genesis story as well:

1. In *Poimandres*, the high god explicitly calls himself 'Mind.' Within Mind exist the "Archetypal Forms that exist before the beginning of time" -- which sounds just like the Platonic Forms. So the Forms exist in God's mind.
2. The Word or logos is the SON of the high god. So the high god did not directly create the world himself. It is the second god who imposes order on the chaos, and who makes the stars and planets rotate.

Asclepius. Asclepius is the name of the Greek god of healing. This book claims to record the practices and rites of ancient Egyptian priests. One section describes how priests can bring spirits/ souls into statues, giving them the power of reason. The priest or magus can do this because he understands what nature is *really* like, since he understands how the world was created, he can *imitate* god's actions in creating the world. If you bring together all the materials the god used, and say the exact words the gods used, you should be able to reproduce the effect the god produced.

Quotations from *Asclepius*:

"A human not only receives the light of divine life, but gives it also; he not only makes his way upward to God, but he even fashions gods."

"How great is the power and and might of a human" ... a good transition to Pico...

Pico Della Mirandola

Pico della Mirandola is often held up as the paradigmatic Renaissance thinker, because he had several traits that we think of as typical of the Renaissance.

1. Focus on classical knowledge. Pico, like his teacher Marsilio Ficino, spent much of his time studying, translating, and commenting on the ancient texts that were being re-introduced to the European west. Plato, in particular, received special attention.

2. Belief in humans' intellectual abilities. In part because of the stunningly advanced classical texts he is studying, Pico believes that humans' mental abilities and capacities know virtually no limit. He thinks of humans as nearly divine. This viewpoint is often called 'humanism.' If you want to find out what God is like, Pico suggests, you should examine your own soul -- for at the level of UNDERSTANDING, though not acting, we are god's equal. (That is, we can fully comprehend how the cosmos was created, even if we are not powerful enough to create new stars ourselves.)

3. A uniter, not a divider. Pico aimed to synthesize **all** human knowledge, ancient and contemporary, Christian, Jewish, and pagan, Plato and Aristotle, and so on. The Hermetic doctrines were an important part of this grand synthesis. He developed a great interest in the Kabbalah (recently brought to public attention through Madonna and others). The Kabbalists originally wrote in 12th and 13th century Spain; their aim was to understand god more intimately via mystical contemplation on the text of Genesis. Pico, following the Kabbalists, thinks that because God created the world using words (in Hebrew), those words must have a special, creative power. Pico aims to unlock that power and tap it; this is a form of magic -- **symbolic** (specifically, linguistic) magic. Pico considers this better than "natural" magic, which merely aims to manipulate the natural world via natural causes. Pico thought, for example, that if you knew the name of the particular angelic being whose help you needed (the lesser gods in Hermetic, Platonic, and Kabbalistic writings), you could use that being's powers for your own purposes.