

Lecture 6: Renaissance Magic, Medicine & Alchemy

Ficino, Agrippa, and Paracelsus

I. What is magic?

Very rough definition. Pulling a rabbit out of a hat or card tricks are not the kind of magic we're interested in for this class. One rough characterization:

Magic is *extraordinary control over hidden forces/ powers*.

Question: how is magic, on this characterization, any different from *technology*? Arthur C. Clarke said "Any sufficiently developed technology is indistinguishable from magic."

Classifying magic (esp. in the Renaissance). There are different ways to classify various kinds of magic, and different magically-inclined thinkers in the Renaissance drew the boundaries in somewhat different ways. Here is one way, that follows Agrippa fairly closely (though this is not in the assigned Agrippa readings):

1. Control over the hidden powers of *earthly things* (includes **alchemy**, which deals specifically with minerals and metals)
2. Control over the hidden powers of *celestial things* (includes kinds of **astrology**)
3. Control over the hidden powers of *spiritual things* such as angels and daemons (includes Pico's symbolic magic)

Magic's place in the Renaissance. Certain currents of thought in the Renaissance supported magic, while other currents rejected it.

~ Friends: Magic's supposition that humans can control cosmic forces fits in well with the Renaissance's higher estimation of human capacities, in contrast to Medieval humility.

~ Foes: The Renaissance was still in many ways a very Christian era, and magic's foes saw it as

- (i) an attempt to put yourself in God's place and/ or
- (ii) a subversion of God's will for the world (because magic causes events that are *extraordinary or fantastic*, it changes the natural course of events that God ordained).

II. Marsilio Ficino

Biography. Ficino was an Italian working at the end of the 1400s. He translated several works of Plato for Cosimo de Medici -- but when Cosimo heard that Hermetic Writings were coming to the area, he demanded Ficino stop working on Plato and translate the Hermetic corpus instead. Ficino was also a friend of Pico de Mirandola, discussed last lecture.

Neoplatonism in the Renaissance. Ficino and Agrippa's writings, as well as the Hermetic Corpus, all share certain ideas that we call *Neoplatonic*. Various thinkers articulate somewhat different versions of these ideas, but a common framework can be constructed. The basic picture is of multi-layered "levels of

reality," with Forms/ Souls [Note: the Form of a person is her (rational) soul] towards the top, and anything material or related to material at the bottom:

1. Divine Mind [God], which contains the (Platonic) Forms or Ideas
2. The World-Soul or Spirit of the World, which contains one seminal reason corresponding to each Form
(These 'seminal reasons' are often emitted from planets and stars)
3. Humans
4. Terrestrial matter

These are the most basic divisions; as we shall see, different thinkers draw the divisions in a more fine-grained way.

Ficino's astrological magic & medicine. Ficino puts this Neoplatonic framework to therapeutic use. The basic idea is to "capture" whichever celestial influences would be most beneficial to a given patient. This is done by attempting to "lure" the particular seminal reason down with a "bait." One analogy (but it is only an analogy!) for thinking about this idea is a radio and radio waves: all sorts of radio wave are passing through this room at any given moment. They are always there, but to hear your favorite program, you have to have a radio with the dial turned to the right number. Analogously, the Renaissance magus thinks the celestial influences are always bombarding the Earth, but we have to be wearing and ingesting the right things, and thinking the right things, in order to 'amplify' the signal from the celestial body enough to change our health.

How to capture celestial influences.

~ Basic principle: like attracts like. See reading (c): To collect or amplify the influence of the Sun, you should surround yourself with things that resemble the Sun.

~ What sorts of things could attract celestial influences? From lowest to highest:

1. Stones and metals
2. Plants and other organic matter
3. Vapors/ smells
4. Sounds, words & songs
5. Acts of imagination
6. Acts of reason
7. Acts of contemplation

Items 1. and 2. can include magical objects such as *amulets* (stones or plants worn around the body) and *talismans* (amulets with inscriptions on them). The inscription on a talisman is also chosen according to the 'like attracts like' principle: the writing must somehow conform or correspond to the Form/ seminal reason you are trying to bring down.

Note that our minds/ souls are stronger attractors of celestial influences than material things. (See reading (d).) So if you start thinking melancholy thoughts, you open yourself up more to Saturn's influence.

Is astrological magic compatible with Christian doctrine? (See reading section (p).)

- (i) This astrological magic is presented to help and heal the sick.
- (ii) Ficino claims he is not recommending magic, only describing it.
- (iii) The magic presented here is not demonic or spiritual magic, but *natural* magic -- and the aim of 'natural magic' is to "subject natural things to natural causes to be formed in a wonderful way," and to use "natural things ... to obtain the services of the celestials."
- (iv) A magus is really just like a farmer: as a farmer cultivates plants in soil, the magus cultivates the

world by adjusting "the lower parts of the world to the upper." This is an answer to the critic of magic (mentioned above) who says that the magician is subverting God's plan for the world: The magician is subverting God's plan no more than the farmer.

III. Agrippa

Elaborating the Neoplatonist picture. Agrippa accepts the basic Neoplatonic framework sketched above. God has the Forms in his mind. God created "Angelical and Celestial secondary causes," beings Agrippa also calls the "Intelligences," and God "gives the seal of His Ideas to the Intelligences." The Intelligences then use the "heavens and stars as instruments" to send these copies of the Forms down to humans on the Earth. In exactly the way our souls/intellecets control our bodies, the Intelligences -- the Celestial souls -- control the body (=the matter) of the universe. So just as my mind "sends commands" to my body in order for the mind to achieve its aims, so too do the Intelligences/ celestial souls use the stars to achieve their ends. Thus Agrippa agrees with Avicen[na], who says "whatever things are done here, must have been before in the motions and conceptions of the stars and orbes." Agrippa says that "quintessence" -- Aristotle's 5th element, aether -- is what conveys the Intelligences' power to material stuffs: the spirit is contained in "the rays of the stars."

What are "occult" qualities? There are two kinds of properties/ qualities: (1) Occult (=hidden) and (2) Manifest (=observable). Examples of occult qualities include (see (ch. xiii)): magnetism (the "loadstone") and static electricity (amber rubbed). We can (in some sense) SEE why the soccer ball moves away from my foot after I kick it -- but we do not see why the positively charged ends of 2 magnets move away from each other, or why my hair rises up when it gets near a blanket that is charged with static electricity. A third example is the gravity: we see its effects, just as with static electricity and magnets, but we do not see gravity itself.

Explaining occult qualities. So how do we explain why or how the magnet can do such things? ~ Agrippa first considers the answer of "Alexander the Peripatetic": the MATTER of these things is responsible for these effects. However, Agrippa replies, we see two things that appear to be very similar in their matter (i.e., in their proportions of the 4 terrestrial elements), and yet behave very differently. [Think of a piece of ordinary iron ore and a piece of magnetized iron ore (called magnetite).] If the material/ elemental qualities were the cause of the occult qualities, then 2 bodies with (nearly) the same material constitution should have (nearly) the same occult qualities. But we observe exceptions to this. ~ Agrippa then gives his own answer: occult qualities come ultimately from the Forms, via the celestial souls sending out the seminal reasons in stars' rays. So in some sense, the magnetized iron ore has a different *soul* than the plain-vanilla iron ore, and that difference in soul explains why one has the occult property of magnetism and the other doesn't. Agrippa goes on to suggest that everything on the Earth, since it is all exposed to celestial influences via stars' rays, has a bit of soul in it.

Alchemy and the Philosopher's Stone. (Finally, we reach Harry Potter.) Agrippa suggests that for medicine and technology, we should use things that have captured and stored up a large amount of a single kind of soul, since that will have the 'most' of that particular Form/Idea reflected in it.

Furthermore, Agrippa asks, could we perhaps extract the spirit from stones, minerals, and herbs? Agrippa says that this is exactly the aim of **alchemy**. One aim of many alchemists is to turn lead into gold; any substance that could do this was called the *philosopher's stone*. The way to do this, Agrippa says, is to extract the spirit/soul of gold, and implant it in another material, e.g. lead. This notion of extracting the pure soul or spirit of an object was the forerunner of modern chemistry's need to work with chemically pure substances.

IV. Paracelsus

Paracelsus' disputes with the medical establishment.

The dominant theories in physiology and medicine in the mid-1500s, when Paracelsus was working, were based on Hippocratic texts and the writings of Galen, another physician from antiquity. (He differed from the Hippocratics on some points, but there was substantial overlap as well, and the differences will not matter for our purposes.)

1. Paracelsus was skeptical of the 4-element theory of the ancients (Genesis never mentions God creating fire, so it must not be a basic element). He forwarded his own set of material principles for minerals and metals, though:

- (i) sulfur: active, burning
- (ii) mercury: passive, liquid
- (iii) salt: stable, solid, inert

2. Paracelsus embraced some **Hermetic/ mystical/ Neoplatonist ideas**. He believed that metals are literally born in the earth, when the proper seminal reason or "astral seed" meets and combines with the right material matrix, and the metal then undergoes a period of gestation, like an animal embryo.

3. Paracelsus valued the study of **alchemy and chemistry**, independent of any 4-element theory, very highly. Whereas Hippocratic/ Galenic cures used organic matter -- primarily plants -- Paracelsus would prescribe metals and minerals (including mercury, antimony, and lead).

4. Paracelsus rejected the Greek notion of disease as an overall, holistic imbalance of humors in the body. Rather, he thought (most) diseases were **localized** to a particular organ. He thought of each organ as a little alchemist, distilling out the impurities of the material presented to it (e.g., the stomach separates the nutrients from the waste). Also, Paracelsus rejected the health-as-balance viewpoint on the grounds of his belief that *like cures like* (under the right circumstances). That is, instead of prescribing something cold for a patient with a fever (as a Hippocratic-inspired physician would do, to restore balance), Paracelsus would prescribe something hot -- but this hot thing would have to be subjected to chemical purification and distillation procedures, in order to remove harmful impurities.