

Ficino in the light of alchemy. Heinrich
Khunrath's use of Ficinian metaphysics of
light

Martin Žemla

This article was originally published in

Platonism and its Legacy

*Selected Papers from the Fifteenth Annual Conference
of the International Society for Neoplatonic Studies*

Edited John F. Finamore and Tomáš Nejeschleba

ISBN 978 1 898910 886

Published in 2019 by

The Prometheus Trust, Lydney.

This article is published under the terms of **Creative Commons
Licence BY 4.0**

Attribution — You must give appropriate credit, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.

No additional restrictions — You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.

The Prometheus Trust is a registered UK charity, no. 299648

www.prometheustrust.co.uk

Ficino in the light of alchemy. Heinrich Khunrath's use of Ficinian metaphysics of light¹

Martin Žemla

1. Introduction

Heinrich Khunrath (1560-1605) is an important 16th-century Paracelsian physician, alchemist, and theosopher.² Born in Leipzig, he obtained his doctoral degree in Basel in 1588. He came to Prague in 1591, after he had been appointed personal physician to the Czech nobleman William of Rosenberg, and remained there until the latter's death in 1592. In 1595, Khunrath published the first edition of his *Amphitheatrum sapientiae aeternae* in a limited number of copies. Equipped with four impressive alchemical and theosophical engravings, the book was, formally, a peculiar commentary on a selection of Biblical quotations from the Books of Wisdom and Proverbs. This rather thin and rare publication was to be superseded by a greatly expanded posthumous edition of the *Amphitheatre* in 1609. This much more influential edition included nine engravings with plentiful inscriptions. Between these two editions, Khunrath managed to compose a half dozen other works, showing his keen interest in Paracelsian medicine (*Quaestiones tres per-utiles*, 1607) and spiritual alchemy, or theo-alchemy (besides the *Amphitheatre*, his *Confessio de Chao physico-chemicorum catholico*, 1596, the *Symbolum Physico-Chymicum*, 1598, and *De igne magorum*, 1608), as well as his practical laboratory skills (the remarkable *Treuhertzige Warnungs-Vermanung* appended to the *Von hylealischen Chaos*, 1597, and the *Wahrhafftiger Bericht vom philosophischen Athanor*, 1599). As his works reveal, his chief concern was to bring into hermeneutical unity the “three Divine Books”, i.e. the Bible, nature, and man, as contexts in which God has revealed himself, while showing the manifold layers and modes in

¹ This study is a result of the research funded by the Czech Science Foundation as the project GA ČR 14-37038G “Between Renaissance and Baroque: Philosophy and Knowledge in the Czech Lands within the Wider European Context”.

² This paragraph draws on complementary essays to the new Czech annotated edition of *Amphitheatrum* (2017) on which the author of the present paper was collaborating. See Khunrath (2017) 433 ff.

which they must be “read”, or studied. Though often treated as an alchemist, Khunrath’s ultimate goal is not situated in the realm of the transmutational or medicinal alchemy: his aim is rather spiritual, the deification of man, as he says.³ Thus, his work can be classified as a “mystical branch of alchemical thought”,⁴ or as a “Christian theosophy”⁵ and one of the preludes of the Rosicrucian manifestos.

2. Fire and light

One of the distinct features of Khunrath’s works is the great importance and symbolic value he attaches to fire. Fire gave name to one of his major works, *De igne magorum*, where it is invoked as a “natural-artificial god of alchemists” (*Deus Physico-Artificialis Chymicorum*). In Khunrath’s book on the alchemical furnace, it is presented as a gift donated by Nature to humankind, the eminent instrument to investigate “natural things” which, after all, contain “natural fire” in themselves.⁶ Similarly, the *Amphitheatre* lauds fire as the “most skilful and wise interpreter” that “announces God”.⁷ Indeed, God himself is “fire and spirit”.⁸ And fire is also the element expected to bring about the final, eschatological “remelting” and purifying of the “heaven and earth”, their transformation into their new, “crystalline” form.⁹ A moment, by the way, which Khunrath envisaged to be very close in his own “fiery times”.¹⁰

Such a role of fire is certainly interesting, though, at least to some extent, it may not come as a surprise. Khunrath was, after all, active in the field of alchemy, and its essential part was, of course, a diligent and skilful “work of fire”. It is not my intention here, however, to deal with Khunrath’s obvious predilection for fire, but to take a closer look

³ Khunrath (1609) com. 157.

⁴ Principe - Newman (2001) 387.

⁵ See e.g. Hanegraaff (2006) 260 and 321, s.v. “Dorn”; Figala - Priesner (1998) 113, s.v. “Dorn”; Faivre (2000) 7.

⁶ Khunrath (1615) 5 and 54.

⁷ Khunrath (1608) 2; idem (1609) com. 66 and 65 (in the case of the *Amphitheatre*, the quotations follow the second edition, giving the number of the relevant “commentary”, or in case of the final “Epilogues” and “Introductions”, the page).

⁸ Khunrath (1597), 67.

⁹ Khunrath (1597), 77; cf. Rev 4:6; 21:11; 22:1.

¹⁰ Khunrath (1615) 6: *in diesem unserm fewrigen Seculo...*

at another motif which is essentially connected with it, namely, light.¹¹ I believe, the role of light is, as a matter of fact, more significant and more systematically incorporated in his thought than one might assume at first sight.

The fact that light played an important role in the Early Modern alchemical tradition is no big news. Urszula Szulakowska has scrutinized this in her book *Alchemy of Light*, published in 2000. Quite naturally, she also came across Khunrath in this context, and she sketched his sources, naming John Dee (1527-1629), Paracelsus (Theophrastus von Hohenheim, 1493-1541), Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494)¹² and Agrippa of Nettesheim (1486-1535). Plus additional names, as Giambattista della Porta (1535-1615), Hermolao Barbaro (1454-1493), Johannes Trithemius (1462-1516) and Johannes Pontanus (1571-1639), as authorities on which Khunrath relies in his book on fire.¹³

However, one author remained omitted in this context, a name that I believe deserves to be mentioned: Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499).¹⁴ It is my intention to point, firstly, to some significant moments of Ficino's metaphysics of light and, secondly, to show that it has served, directly or indirectly, as a foundation for the theosophical thought of Khunrath. Although at least one alchemical work was later falsely ascribed to Ficino, and although alchemical motifs are, indeed, present in his work (some of them, perhaps, having been adopted by Khunrath¹⁵) – the most intimate point of contact between the alchemist and theosopher

¹¹ Such a connection is rather obvious. How interwoven fire and light were for Khunrath, is evident e.g. from his often used notion of the “sparkle” which is at the same time a “fiery sparkle of the soul” and the “sparkle of the light of nature”; see Khunrath (1597) 54, 63, 65 f., 94 et al. Similarly, we could mention Khunrath's predilection for the Biblical *Urim* (Ex. 28:30), which he conjoins with divine light and fire; see Khunrath (1609), com. 89; idem (1608) 9, 73, 89.

¹² According to Szulakowska (2000) 91, Khunrath dedicated his *Von hylealischen Chaos* to Pico. In fact, the “dedication” (which is no dedication at all) concerns only one page in the end of the foreword (cf. also Khunrath (1609) com. 261).

¹³ Szulakowska (2000) 95, 99.

¹⁴ Szulakowska discusses Ficino in various contexts, but not the relation of his metaphysics of light to Khunrath.

¹⁵ For Ficino's important identification of the *quinta essentia* and *spiritus mundi* see Ficino, *De vita coelitus comparanda*, 3, in: idem (1576) 535; (1998) 254-256; cf. Newman - Grafton (2001) 24; Matton (1993) 123-192. For allusions to this notion see e.g. Khunrath (1609), com. 223, 261 and “Isagoge”, II, 195; idem (1597) 84 and 200; cf. also Töllner (1991) 124 f. and Forshaw (2011).

Khunrath and the Platonist Ficino is, I believe, the metaphysics of light.

3. Ficino's metaphysics of light

Ficino dedicated more than one treatise to the metaphysics of light and solar symbolism explicitly.¹⁶ Demonstrably, these topics had caught his interest since his youth¹⁷ to play a crucial role throughout his mature works.

Ficino hints at certain optical phenomena, such as, for example, the *camera obscura*, refraction of light in water, and the ability of concave burning mirrors to concentrate the heat of sun beams. Yet, what matters to him is not their physical investigation but allegorical interpretation of observations: his aim is to show the relation between the outer world and inner experience, to inquire into light as a means to achieve knowledge and bliss.¹⁸ Moreover, for him, light is not a mere instrument of theoretical interpretation. In his view, its scrutiny and observation deeply transform the soul and the subtle-body (the "spirit", mediating, as the most sublime matter, between body and soul) of man. Ficino does not take light for an immaterial entity alone, for him it is "divine": "God himself is an immense light dwelling in itself" and "light is a visible divinity (*numen*), referring to God and leading us gradually to morality and to divine things".¹⁹

At the same time, light is also the first and the noblest creature of God:²⁰ not as visible light, but as an intelligible light that "immediately radiates" from the "more than intelligible" divine light. From its most sublime form down to the lowest, light interconnects the whole world while manifesting itself in various ways on various levels.

Of course, the most eminent source of light in this world is the Sun. Yet sunlight is very specific, according to Ficino.

Each "star" has its own natural light. But this light is very weak and invisible to us; it is "dark", so to speak. Even the strong visible light of

¹⁶ Namely, his *De lumine* (1492) and *De sole* (1494), working upon previous works *Quid sit lumen* and *De comparatione solis ad Deum*.

¹⁷ Cf. Garin (2007) 230; Matton (1981) 33.

¹⁸ Cf. Matton (1981) 34 f.

¹⁹ Ficino, *De lumine* 16 (heading). Cf. the 8th engraving of *Khunrath's Amphitheatre*, the "School of Nature", where light radiating from God is pictured, bearing the inscription: *cum numine lumen, et in lumine numen*.

²⁰ Ficino, *De sole* 10.

the Sun does not come from the Sun itself, but was added “from above”, from “God himself”.²¹ This divine light from the Sun spreads through many stars upon which the Sun is shedding the light they lack in themselves, and through them, the Sun is also diffusing its animating, forming powers.²²

Now, it is clear that the nature of solar rays differs radically from rays of common earthly lights:

De vita coelitus comparanda 16²³

For they are not inanimate like the rays of a lamp, but living and perceiving, since they shine forth through the eyes of a living body, and they bring with them marvellous gifts from the imaginations and minds of the celestials. They are not unanimated as the rays of lamps; rather, they are living and perceiving as eyes shining in living bodies. They bring gifts, power and force from divine imagination and from the minds...
(tr. Kaske - Clark)

The Sun itself is an “eternal, all-seeing eye”.²⁴

Thus, all light from the Sun as well as from stars is not only a natural image of the invisible divine intellective light, but it is divine – not in a sense of analogy, but really, through its origin. Light is not just an image of knowledge, but its cause.²⁵ Light is a link between spiritual and corporeal realm, a “bond of the world” (*vinculum universi*). Similarly to the spirit, it is a mediator between the body and the soul.²⁶

The description of light in Ficino’s commentary on Plato’s *Timaeus* summarizes in a complex way his concept of the world as a living, animated being, where light plays an important role:

In Timaeum commentarium 37²⁷

Being corporeal and possessing unlimited power, light fills all things instantaneously without ever becoming tainted. To

²¹ Ficino, *De sole* 11; cf. idem, *Appendix commentariorum in Timaeum* 20, in: Ficino (1576) 1468.

²² Ficino, *De sole* 2 and 6.

²³ Ficino (1576) 553; (1998) 323.

²⁴ Ficino, *De sole* 6.

²⁵ Ficino, *De sole* 12.

²⁶ Ficino, *De lumine* 9 and 11.

²⁷ Ficino (1576) 1462; (2010) 80 f.

everything it gives birth, life, movement, and expression. There is thus nothing more divine than this light. It is wholly within the Sun and wholly within the firmament, but in the Sun it is concentrated, while in the firmament it is diffused. [...] Yet in addition to this light which is apparent to the eyes there is another light which lies hidden within the whole fabric of the heavens, within the more exalted stars, and within the Moon. [...] The manifest light comes from the Sun and passes through all things, and in a similar way the unmanifest light comes from the firmament and passes through all things. [...] light is the spirit and image of the world-soul, diffusing the life of the world-soul and its perceptive faculties and its powers throughout all the limbs of this world-being. The head of this being is the firmament [...] it] moves through all things by means of its starry eyes. Its heart is the Sun, which holds and unfolds the fullness of its life-giving power. Its liver is the Moon, which spreads its natural vigour through all things.²⁸ (tr. Farndell)

4. Khunrath's Sun and light

Now, let us turn to Heinrich Khunrath whose speculations reflect, or presuppose, Ficino's concepts. If Khunrath knew them directly, or perhaps via other sources, as Paracelsus or Agrippa, is another question. We know Khunrath was quoting from Ficino's translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* in his *Amphitheatre*,²⁹ and some hints let us suppose that his reading of the Florentine Platonist was not limited to this.

When we turn our attention to Khunrath's *De igne magorum* it will reveal some motifs and notions common to both authors. In this work, Khunrath promises to teach a "philosophical doctrine of the light of

²⁸ The triad head – heart – liver stems from medical context in which these three parts played an important role. They were also connected with three different "spirits": *spiritus naturales* (liver and stomach; the most material spirits), *spiritus vitales* (heart), *spiritus animales* (head; the most sublime spirits responsible for the transmission of perception and acts of will). Ficino elaborates on this theory (and practice) in his *De vita libri tres* (1489).

²⁹ Khunrath (1609) com. 336. The quotation is from the beginning of the "Mercurii Trismegisti Liber de potestate" in Ficino's *Pimander*, i.e. his translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* (1471).

Sun”.³⁰ He resorts not only to some Classical and Biblical *loci* to find support, but mainly to two Renaissance authors, Agrippa of Nettesheim and Paracelsus: Agrippa’s *Occult Philosophy* is mentioned four times with explicit references,³¹ while Paracelsus’ name appears a dozen times, with references to ten distinct texts.³² But as far as they relate to the metaphysics of light, they can be, basically, reduced to what we find in Ficino, and sometimes they draw on him directly. Such is the case of the explicit reference to chapter 32, book 2 of the *Occult Philosophy*, which, in fact, tacitly quotes Ficino’s *De sole* 6, including his opinion that “many of the Platonists located the soul of the world chiefly in the Sun”.³³ And as another example, Khunrath mentions the words of Paracelsus that “the Sun produces fruits of all elements, so as a hen sits on its eggs”, but again, a similar statement can be found in Ficino, only in the context of his metaphysics of light.³⁴

³⁰ Khunrath (1608) 9: *Quod diligenter notandum propter doctrinas de Igne Solari sequentes philosophicas, welches fleißig in acht zunehmen wegen nachfolgender Philosophischen Lehre vom Sonnen Feuer.*

³¹ Khunrath (1608) 29-31, refers to the book I, chap. 5; book II, chap. 21 and 32 of the *De occulta philosophia*.

³² Khunrath (1608), 26-28, 59-61, 72, 74, 79-81, gives following references: *De natura rerum* VII; Commentary on the 14th *Aphorism* of Hippocrates; *Philosophia sagax* I,6 and IV,5; *Labyrinthus medicorum errantium* 4; *Liber de tempore laboris et requiei*; “Concerning Simple Fire” (in “Concerning the Spirits of the Planets”); *Archidoxa* X; *De thermis piperinis* VII; *Liber Paragranum* 3. These texts are mostly concerned with fecundating power of elemental fire; cf. Szulakowska (2000) 98 and note 30 with details on the quotations from Paracelsus.

³³ Khunrath (1608) 32.

³⁴ Cf. Ficino (1576) 571; (1998) 386: *Subicit Magus terrena coelestibus, immo inferiora passim superioribus, ut proprias ubique feminas suis maribus fecundandas ... ut ovum ipsum gallinae fovendum*). On other occasions, Ficino uses the analogy of eyes emitting visual rays and stars emitting their luminous rays, hinting at a similar example for an egg and explaining that it is action at a distance of the animating rays. Cf. Ficino (1576) 544; (1998) 290; *Theologia Platonica* 13,4, in: Ficino (1576) 300; *Apologia* 116, in: Ficino (1576) 574; (1998) 400. In the *Apologia*, Ficino explains that heaven “gave life and a vivifying look to the ostrich” (*dedit avi strutho vitam aspectumque vivificum*); while Kaske - Clark translate *strutho* as “to the sparrow”, emendation is needed here, because Ficino obviously means *strutii*, i.e. the rays by means of which the heaven “does not have intercourse with its wife [i.e. the Earth]; but by the rays of its stars alone as if with the rays of its eyes, it illuminates her on all sides; it fertilizes her by its illumination and procreates living things” (*solis siderum suorum quasi oculorum radiis undique lustrat uxorem; lustrando fecundat procreatque viventia*; tr. Kaske - Clark).

In fact, Khunrath's overall conception of the divine Sun and its divine light seems to stem from Ficino primarily. Like Ficino, Khunrath calls the Sun the heavenly "Phoebus" and the "visible eye",³⁵ and in his somewhat talkative manner he says:

De igne magorum 32

[The Sun is the] visible, fiery, catholic, i.e. universal instrument by which God [...] was universally and in all manner naturally working in the catholic laboratory of the great world since the moment of the Creation and by which he is mightily working even today.³⁶

God is working in the lower world through the Sun, its heat and powers. This enables its practical use for those who understand it. Khunrath suggests repeatedly the fire of the alchemical work is ignited by means of a burning mirror. The fire set aflame this way has substantially different qualities than any terrestrial fire, as Khunrath says with reference to the fire of Roman Vestal virgins, as Ficino also pointed out in the same context in his *De lumine*.³⁷ Such a fire is vivifying.³⁸ This is no allegory or symbol but the real instrument of the alchemical *opus* – as testified, for example, by the large collection of burning mirrors once present in the imperial *Kunstammer* of Rudolf II. Here, I believe, Ficino's metaphysics of light is obviously present.

Turning to Khunrath's *Amphitheatre* we can hear similar echoes. For example, the Biblical quote (Ecclesiastes 11:7): "Light is sweet, and it pleases the eyes to see the sun", is explained by Khunrath on the grounds that:

Amphitheatrum com. 89

The highest, purest and immaculate light is God; the true light and sun of justice is Christ; the light and radiance of Wisdom is

³⁵ Khunrath (1608) 49; Khunrath (1609) com. 170. Cf. Ficino, *De lumine*, "Proemium" and *De sole* 6, where Apollo/Phoebus is called "an animating eye of heaven"; cf. also *De vita coelitus comparanda* 24.

³⁶ Khunrath (1608) 32: *Die Sonne ein sichtbar / Fewriges Universale Instrumentum oder Catholischer / das ist Allgemeiner werckzeug / durch welches Gott der HERR im Catholischen LABORATORIO der grossen Welt / von Erster derselben Erschaffung ahn / allenthalben und allgemein Natürlich laborirt hat wie auch noch heut zu tage Er also krefftiglich wuercket...*

³⁷ Cf. Khunrath (1608) 20, where Roman Vestal virgins are mentioned, similarly to Ficino, *De lumine* 9 and 14, who also adduces them in relation with fire.

³⁸ Khunrath (1608) 25: *Lebendigmachende Feuer*. Also, see note 10.

the Holy Spirit. Light is an angel, light is truth, life and joy.
Light is the attire and the gown of God.

And what's more,³⁹ "Wisdom [...] is being transmitted unto us through the influence, light and movement of the Sun".

Because, as we already said, God himself is light and fire, also Divine Wisdom radiating from God is "light", and divine emanations in this world can be called "sparks" and "rays" of God.⁴⁰ The "catholic sparks" or – to quote Khunrath again – the "special fiery little sparks of the catholic or universal, most secret fiery spirit of the world" are emitted through the soul of the world from the divine fire.⁴¹ One of them is also the conscience of man,⁴² who must be "ignited by the light and movement of the divine Sun and stimulated in love to the Good".⁴³

Further evidence that Khunrath was acquainted with Ficino's work is an inscription on the fourth engraving of the *Amphitheatre*. It says: *Ne loquaris de deo absque lumine* – "do not speak of God without light".⁴⁴ Similarly, at the beginning of Ficino's little work *On Sun*, we read: "we cannot speak of divine things and secrets without light".⁴⁵ Ficino claims the meaning of these words to be the invitation and warning "not to approach the hidden light of divine things, which we want to see or discover, without its comparison with the visible light". But, as he remarks, not "by means of rational speculations" but "by means of similes taken from light" and by means of "allegorical and anagogical spiritual exercises".

Side note: The allegorical exegesis and the use of analogies, so familiar to all Platonists, certainly appeal also to Khunrath. He can see a "wonderful harmony" (*wunderbare harmonia*) or a "contrafactual harmony" between Christ as the Son of the microcosm, and the

³⁹ Khunrath (1609) com. 261.

⁴⁰ Khunrath (1609) com. 72 and 137.

⁴¹ Khunrath (1609) com. 261; idem (1599) 20 f.

⁴² Khunrath (1609) com. 254.

⁴³ Khunrath (1609) "Epilogue", 216.

⁴⁴ Peter Forshaw (2010) 174 refers to the Pythagorean roots of this idea and takes the *De occulta philosophia* by Agrippa of Nettesheim as likely source of the quotation.

⁴⁵ Ficino, *De sole* 1. The words appear in Iamblichus, *De vita Pythagorica* XVIII,84 and XXIII,105.

Philosophers' Stone, as the Son of the macrocosm.⁴⁶ But he is careful not to speak about "allegorical" interpretations, as, for him, it obviously implies something "fanciful", something not fully *real*.

5. Two divine lights

There is a specific legacy of the Ficinian metaphysics of light which can be found in Paracelsus and Paracelsians in general. It is the concept of "two divine lights", the "light of nature" and the "light of mercy".⁴⁷

In Paracelsus' view, based on the Bible, man is both "dust of the ground" and the divine "breath" (Gen 2:7), the "image of God" (Gen 1:26 f.).⁴⁸ Both parts are worth investigating, and their examination must be done by means of two "lights" relating to each of them respectively. And what is more, both lights are "divine".

Of course, the very notion of two lights is present also in medieval epistemology,⁴⁹ but that does not seem to have had a major bearing on Paracelsus. A more significant source is Ficino and his idea of the "natural or inborn light" (*lumen naturale sive ingenitum*) and the "divine or infused light" (*lumen divinum et infusum*) as two "wings" of the soul.⁵⁰ Now, the soul is a kind of light (*lux*), and thus it is akin to

⁴⁶ Cf. Khunrath (1597) 28 and 241; on p. 287, Khunrath announces his (now lost) book *De harmonia IHSVH Christi & Lapidis Philosophorum admiranda*, dedicated to this topic; see also Khunrath (1609) com. 137 and II,197; idem (1599) 30 and 57; cf. Forshaw (2010) 171; idem (2006) 129.

⁴⁷ Cf. e.g. the exposition in Croll (1609) 65-70, where the influential heterodox Lutheran theologian Valentin Weigel (1533-1588) is also mentioned.

⁴⁸ Paracelsus (1922 ff.) XII, 287 f.

⁴⁹ See e.g. Tauler (1910) 329,15 ff. (Predigt 61); Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio super Isaiam ad litteram* I,1: *lumen naturae – lumen gratiae – lumen gloriae*; Luther, *De servo arbitrio*, idem (1883 ff) XVIII,785.

⁵⁰ Ficino, *De amore* IV,4-5, in: idem (1576) 1332 f.; (1964-1970) 172 ff.; cf. *De sole* 11. For the two lights, "natural" and "spiritual", see idem, *De raptu Pauli*, in: idem (1576) 705; cf. Albertini (2002) 216 f. See also Ficino's letter to Paolo Orlandini (November 13, 1496), in: Ficino (2000) 487: *Duplicem esse mentis nostrae processum: alterum quidem naturalem, alterum vero supra naturam, quem proprie nominamus excessum. In illo quidem processu intellectus luce quadam naturaliter insita voluntatem ducit quasi comitem. [...] In hoc autem excessu nova lux virtusque infusa divinitus non prius intellectum divino splendore complet quam amore mirifico accenderit voluntatem.* – W.-E. Peuckert chose the motif of the two wings of the soul as hermeneutical key in his *Pansophie. Ein*

stars. Similarly to stars, it has its own “inborn light” as well as the other, divinely infused light.⁵¹ As the visible light illuminates our bodily eyes, so the invisible light illuminates the “inner eyes of the soul”.⁵² And both lights stem from the Sun, both the visible and the invisible, intelligible and divine light, residing, as Ficino remarks, “in the very soul of the Sun”.

Therefore, Ficino’s theory implies that the two “lights” are not just a metaphorical description of two modes of knowledge, but real manifestations of divine light which are present on both the macrocosmic and the microcosmic level. Ficino’s favoured image for the synergy of the two realms is the “eye” because, for him, its act of seeing results from the cooperation between the outer light rays and the inner visual rays emitted from the eye.⁵³

Similarly, for Paracelsus, the “light of nature” does not simply mean “reason”. The light of nature is both an inner and outer reality,⁵⁴ a concept that seems intelligible only inside the Ficinian metaphysical structure.

In fact, not everyone among the followers of Paracelsus understood the “light of nature” exactly this way. For example, the heterodox Lutheran theologian and Paracelsian, Valentin Weigel (1533-1588), who also influenced Khunrath, identified the light of nature simply with reason. But for Khunrath, the “light of nature” is by no means a mere metaphor for the “light of reason”. The divine light is manifested everywhere in the – as he says – “sparks of divine justice”, which twinkle in the “three divine books”, nature, the Holy Scripture, and the conscience of man⁵⁵ – so not, primarily, in reason. “The oil of the Holy Spirit for the lamps of your minds,” as Khunrath remarks, is ignited “by the light of the Father of Lights”⁵⁶ – but also “the light of nature” is of divine origin.⁵⁷ Thus Khunrath writes in his *Amphitheatre*:

Versuch zur Geschichte der weissen und schwarzen Magie (1936), in which he was also using it to interpret Paracelsus and Paracelsians.

⁵¹ Ficino, *De lumine* 15.

⁵² Ficino, *De sole* 11.

⁵³ See e.g. Ficino, *De sole* 2; idem, *De amore* II,2, in: Ficino (1576) 1324.

⁵⁴ Cf. Pagel (1979) 58 ff.

⁵⁵ Khunrath (1609) com. 35.

⁵⁶ Khunrath (1609) com. 57, cf. ibidem com. 78 etc.

⁵⁷ Cf. Khunrath (1599) 23.

Amphitheatrum com. 89⁵⁸

How pleasant it is to behold this eternal and immense light by the eyes of mind, to grasp it with the mind! How pleasant it is to comprehend this uncreated and incarnated light through faith in the Saviour, to see created light in angels, to admire its radiance in the macrocosmic light of nature, in heavenly bodies and to awaken its radiance in the microcosmic soul and to see this [...] in the blessed Stone, the Sun of the Philosophers!

Even though reason is a reflection of the “light of nature”, it is not identical with it. All of nature is illuminated by God who is fire and spirit. *Ruach Elohim*, the “Divine Spirit”, is the giver of living forces, “radiating and luminous”.⁵⁹ So, as for Ficino, the light of nature is also the life of the world, the light which “has always been searched for by all lovers of divine and natural secrets since the beginning of the world.”

This light illuminates those who study nature, and only those who are illuminated by God can understand the light of truth in nature.⁶⁰ The “light of nature” is, indeed, everywhere. Even metals contain “tinging sparks and rays of the light of nature” which can be released when the metals are transformed into their primal matter.⁶¹ In the created world, it is fire that refers to the Divine, not only symbolically, but also practically, “natural-chymically”, in the words of Khunrath, because it “opens the light of nature to us”.

Von hylealischen Chaos 67

Truly, nature is the most wise, self-moving, self-animating, the mightiest and wonderworking light and fire, the mighty spirit or spiritual power, flowing from the most wise, eternal, living, almighty and wonderful triune God (who is fire and spirit) ...

So, we are coming back to the motif with which we started, when Khunrath claims:

⁵⁸ Cf. *ibidem* com. 261.

⁵⁹ Khunrath (1609) com. 134.

⁶⁰ Cf. Khunrath (1609) “Epilogue”, II,216; *idem* (1597) 69 f., 67 f., 71; cf. Töllner (1991) 119 f. and 220.

⁶¹ Khunrath (1597) 317 f.

Von hylealischen Chaos 299 f.

Those who have not diligently studied fire, that alchemically teaches everything in the laboratory, remain blind in both natural and supernatural secrets of the light of nature...⁶²

6. Conclusion

Even though other specific theoretical points of contact between Heinrich Khunrath and Marsilio Ficino may exist, the most fundamental and important link is, I believe, the metaphysics of light. I have argued that Khunrath knew and accepted Ficino's concept of light as divine and of the Sun as radiating source of the divine animating light in this world. Furthermore, Khunrath's use of burning mirrors as sources of "living fire", so important in his alchemy, must be seen and interpreted against this backdrop. Similarly, the specific notion of the "light of nature", as used by Khunrath and other Paracelsians, becomes more understandable on the grounds of Ficino's metaphysics and epistemology of light.

Bibliography

Croll, Oswald (1609), *Basilica Chymica*, Frankfurt a.M.

Ficino, Marsilio (1576), *Opera omnia*, Basel (reprint Torino 1962).

----- (1964-1970), *Théologie platonicienne*, I-III, ed. and transl. R. Marcel, Paris.

----- (1998), *Three Books on Life. A Critical Edition and Translation with Introduction and Notes*, ed. and transl. C. V. Kaske, J. R. Clark, Tempe (AZ).

----- (2000), *Marsilio Ficino. The Philebus Commentary. A Critical Edition and Translation*, ed. M. Allen, Tempe, AZ.

Khunrath, Heinrich (1597), *Von hylealischen, das ist primaterialischen catholischen oder algemeinen natürlichen Chaos ... alchymisch und rechtlehrende philosophische Confessio*, Straßburg.

----- (1599), *Magnesia catholica philosophorum*, Magdeburg.

----- (1608), *De igne magorum philosophorumque secreto externo et visibili*, Straßburg.

⁶² Khunrath (1597) 299 f.

- Khunrath, Heinrich (1609), *Amphitheatrum Sapientiæ Æternæ, Solis Veræ: Christiano-Kabalisticum, Divino-Magicum, nec non Physico-Chymicum, Tertriumum, Catholicon*, Hanau.
- (1615), *Wahrhafftiger Bericht vom philosophischen Athanore*, Magdeburg.
- Luther, Martin (1883 ff), *D. Martin Luthers Werke, 80 vols*, Weimar.
- Paracelsus (1922 ff.), *Sämtliche Werke. Medizinische, naturwissenschaftliche und philosophische Schriften*, ed. Karl Sudhoff, München - Berlin.
- Tauler, Johannes (1910), *Predigten*, ed. Johannes Vetter, Berlin.

Translations

- Ficino, Marsilio (1576), *Opera omnia*, Basel (reprint Torino 1962).
- (1964-1970), *Théologie platonicienne*, I-III, ed. and transl. R. Marcel, Paris.
- (1998), *Three Books on Life. A Critical Edition and Translation with Introduction and Notes*, ed. and transl. C. V. Kaske, J. R. Clark, Tempe (AZ).
- (2000), *Marsilio Ficino. The Philebus Commentary. A Critical Edition and Translation*, ed. M. Allen, Tempe, AZ.
- (2010), *All Things Natural. Ficino on Plato's Timaeus*, transl. Arthur Farndell, London.
- Khunrath, Heinrich (2017), *Divadlo věčné Moudrosti*, transl. J. Hlaváček, comm. V. Karpenko, I. Purš, M. Žemla, Prague.

Secondary sources

- Albertini, Tamara (2002), Intellect and Will in Marsilio Ficino. Two Correlatives of a Renaissance, in: J. B. Allen, V. Rees, M. Davies (eds.), *Marsilio Ficino. His Theology His Philosophy, His Legacy*, Leiden, 203-225.
- Allen, Michael J. (1982), Ficino's Theory of the Five Substances and the Neplatonists' Parmenides, in: *The Journal of Medieval & Renaissance Studies* 12, 19-44.
- (1994), *The Platonism of Marsilio Ficino. A Study of his 'Phaedrus' Commentary, its Sources and Genesis*, Berkeley.
- Faivre, Antoine (2000), *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition. Studies in Western Esotericism*, Albany.

- Forshaw, Peter (2006), Curious Knowledge and Wonder-Working Wisdom in the Occult Works of Heinrich Khunrath, in: R. J. W. Evans, A. Marr (eds.), *Curiosity and Wonder from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, London, 107-129.
- (2010), *Oratorium – Auditorium – Laboratorium: Early Modern Improvisations on Cabala, Music, and Alchemy*, in: *Aries* 10.2, 169-195.
- (2011), “Marsilio Ficino And The Chemical Art”, in: Stephen Clucas, Peter Forshaw, Valery Rees, eds., *Laus Platonici Philosophi. Marsilio Ficino and His Influence*, Brill: Leiden, 249-272.
- Garin, Eugenio (2007), *History of Italian Philosophy*, 2 vols., Amsterdam - New York.
- Hanegraaf, Wouter, ed. (2006), *Dictionary of Western Esotericism*, Leiden.
- Matton, Sylvain (1981), En marge du *De lumine*. Splendeur et mélancolie chez Marsile Ficin, in: A. Faivre et al. (ed.), *Lumière et cosmos. Courants occultes de la philosophie de la Nature*, Paris, 31-54.
- (1993), Marsile Ficin et l’alchimie, sa position, son influence, in: J.-C. Margolin, S. Matton (eds.), *Alchimie et philosophie*, Paris, 123-192.
- Newman, William, Grafton, Anthony (eds.) (2001), *Secrets of Nature. Astrology and Alchemy in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge, Mass.
- Pagel, Walter (1979), Paracelsus als ‚Naturmystiker‘, in: A. Faivre, R. Ch. Zimmermann (eds.), *Epochen der Naturmystik. Hermetische Tradition im wissenschaftlichen Fortschritt*, Berlin, 52-104.
- Priesner, Klaus, Figala, Karin, eds. (1998), *Alchemie. Lexikon einer hermetischen Wissenschaft*, München.
- Principe, Lawrence M., Newman, William (2001), Some Problems with the Historiography of Alchemy, in: W. Newman, L. Principe (eds.), *Secrets of Nature. Astrology and Alchemy in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge.
- Szulakowska, Urszula (2000), *The Alchemy of Light. Geometry and Optics in Late Renaissance Alchemical Illustration*, Leiden - Boston - Köln.
- Töllner, Ralf (1991), *Der unendliche Kommentar. Untersuchungen zu vier ausgewählten Kupferstichen aus Heinrich Khunraths „Amphitheatrum Sapientiae Aeternae Solius Verae“ (Hanau 1609)*, Ammersbek am Hamburg.

