

Radical Moisture

Elisabeth Moreau

Department of History, Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, Fonds de la Recherche Scientifique – FNRS/Université Libre de Bruxelles, Brussels, Belgium

Abstract

The radical moisture is a Galenic physiological concept developed by medieval Arabo-Latin medicine, referring to an inborn moisture specific to living beings. Illustrated by the metaphor of the oil lamp, it is compared to an oily wick consumed by the flame of innate heat, whose extinction is synonymous with death. The vital moisture is involved in the physiological discussion on spirit and innate heat regarding the conservation of life. It also provides abundant parallels in chymistry developed by Platonic and Paracelsian physicians.

Synonyms

[Humidum radicale/primigenium](#); [Primitive moisture/humor](#)

Heritage and Rupture with the Tradition

The definition of radical moisture is based on a medieval concept from Arabic medicine, inspired by Aristotelian natural philosophy and Galenic medicine (McVaugh 1974). In the tenth century, Isaac Israeli and Haly Abbas shaped the notion of secondary humors, including the alimentary humors and the radical moisture (Jacquart 2006; Lyndon Reynolds 1999). Avicenna theorized the idea of the radical moisture in a general account of life, fever, aging, and death in his *Canon of Medicine*. The Galenic and Avicennian theory was then transmitted to Western Europe in the eleventh and twelfth centuries through Latin translators from Salerno and Toledo, e.g., Constantine the African and Gerard of Cremona. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the medical debate on the radical moisture was explored in natural philosophy, alchemy, and theology, especially in the works of Albert the Great, Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, Arnold of Villanova, and Ramon Llull (Crisciani 2005; Crisciani and Ferrari 2010). From this medieval context, the decisive role of radical moisture in the conservation of life has given rise to various debates on its possible maintenance, decreasing or storing, in order to preserve the innate heat.

Scholastic physicians defined the radical moisture as a fatty humor feeding the spirit and innate heat. Received at birth alongside the spirit and innate heat, it is derived from the airy portion of the seed and the fleshy maternal blood substance. Within the human body, the vital moisture is in charge of fueling the innate heat, while the spirit is maintained and refreshed by breathing. Given its fixed quantity received at birth, the radical moisture undergoes a slow consumption, reflected by the aging process and mortality (Marinozzi 2010; Schäfer 2012). Moreover, corruption or premature consumption of the radical moisture may lead to specific diseases such as withering and hectic fever (Demaitre 1992; Niebyl 1971).

Among the traditional medieval topics related to the radical moisture, late Renaissance physiology concentrated on the metaphor of the oil lamp, as well as the relation between longevity, aging, and the inexorable consumption of the radical moisture (Fernel 1567; Hall 1971). Fernel underplayed the possibility of restoring the vital moisture through dietetic or chymical means, though he conceded

the influence of nutrition on the preservation of radical moisture. Nevertheless, the chymical question of prolongevity through the restoration or the extraction of a vital substance would continue through Paracelsian medicine, as evidenced by the concept of balsam and vital sulfur (Severinus 1571; Hirai 2005; Bianchi 1982).

Cross-References

- ▶ [Fernel, Jean](#)
- ▶ [Galen and Galenism](#)
- ▶ [Innate Heat](#)
- ▶ [Physiology: Renaissance Philosophy](#)

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