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# Reading Agrippa von Nettesheim's De Occulta Philosophia Libri Tres: Textual Structure and Central Arguments

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Reading Agrippa von Nettesheim's *De Occulta Philosophia Libri Tres*: Textual Structure and Central Arguments

Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim wrote *De Occulta Philosophia Libri Tres* over the course of several decades, presenting a juvenile draft that circulated in manuscript in 1509 and a final printed version in 1533. He died in 1535 and the book went on to be printed in Latin, German, French, and English well into the eighteenth century. This lengthy and complicated book has simultaneously attracted and eluded scholarly attention, earning efforts by many historians of science, including William Newman, who notably wrote his first published article on Thomas Vaughan as an interpreter of Agrippa's occult philosophy and Vittoria Perrone Compagni, whose edited edition of this text is extremely helpful.<sup>1</sup> Within broader Agrippa scholarship, however, *DOP* has often been shunted to the side in favor of his shorter and—to be frank—more accessible texts. Charles Nauert's *Agrippa and the Crisis of Renaissance Thought* provides a great deal of material to help contextualize *DOP*, but it does not directly address its contents, using it instead as a marker for Agrippa's early intellectual preoccupations and turning to his later works to better understand his changing attitudes toward the Church, religious practice, and natural philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Christopher Lehrich attempts to make sense of it, but he does

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Vittoria Perrone Compagni, ed., *De Occulta Philosophia Libri Tres*, Studies in the History of Christian Traditions, vol. 48 (Leiden: Brill, 1992), introduction; William Newman, "Thomas Vaughan as an Interpreter of Agrippa von Nettesheim," *Ambix* 29: 3 (1982):125-40.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Charles Nauert, *Agrippa and the Crisis of Renaissance Thought*, Illinois Studies in the Social Sciences, vol. 55 (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1965).

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so in a morass of anthropological theory and through the lens of *De vanitate*, thus losing both text and context in his analysis.<sup>3</sup>

My current work addresses the lack of scholarship specifically addressing the content of this text. I contend that DOP must be taken on its own terms to best comprehend both its content and its intellectual importance in Renaissance magic, and that its structure is as important as the content to understanding Agrippa's magical universe.<sup>4</sup> Agrippa is very deliberate in the way he introduces, provides evidence to support, and rounds out his textual universe. The first chapters of Book I contain the primary arguments he is making about the relationship between God and humans, the macrocosm and the microcosm, and the role of magic and systems of sympathy in returning adepts to the forces that motivated the Creation. Those statements are supported from the perspective of natural philosophy—with a bit of astrology thrown in—in the rest of Book I. Book II restates the central argument about the ways in which magic moves among the natural, starry, and divine realms, and provides evidence from astrology and numerology that further supports the claims. It also introduces the principle of harmony and its importance in determining physical and soul compatibility, which is essential to understanding Agrippa's model for the perfect magician. Book III restates the potential for magic to move up from the natural realm to the starry and the divine realms and provides a strong explanation for why that is so, based on an array of theological arguments. It also elaborates on the ingredients required to make a suitably powerful magician and bears the responsibility for elaborating upon the idea introduced and then dropped in the earlier books-that religious practice and faith are essential

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Christopher Lehrich, *The Language of Demons and Angels: Cornelius Agrippa's Occult Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> I am currently hard at work on the book that will produce a clear argument about *DOP* and its place in the intellectual world of sixteenth-century magical cosmology. It is under contract with Cornell University Press, with the manuscript due by the end of May 2021.

to successful magical practice. If one reads *DOP* as a tightly organized argument that makes use of the recognizable framework of natural, astrological/numerological and divine magic to organize the supporting evidence, then the rest of the material is neither an encyclopedia nor a bizarrely organized collection of known secrets, but instead an elegantly supported model of the world. This brief article identifies the arguments proposed in each section of *DOP*, provides some insights into the kinds of evidence Agrippa amasses in support of each component of his thesis, and then combines them into an overarching description of his universe.

#### **Book I: Natural Magic and the Natural World**

Agrippa's cosmology depends on three essential principles. First, that the Godhead imagined the universe into being at the Creation. It seeded the starry and natural realms with shadows of the forms in the divine mind linked to the originals through shared virtues. Second, that those virtues can be manipulated through systems of sympathy to create change across the realms of the natural, starry, and heavenly. Third, that the trend toward perfection will allow for natural things to become more like the original forms over time, permitting them to eventually rejoin their originals in the Godhead. The second premise was, for his time, a revolutionary idea: that change does not solely occur from the top down, with magicians making use of sympathetic forces from the heavens to create change on earth, but instead that magical work can begin at the natural world and affect the higher realms. The opposite had long been accepted by Neoplatonic natural philosophers whose central premise was that the universe worked like a series of nested dolls with the divine realm shaping all the others and occult forces percolating from the top down to influence the natural world through a series of nested spheres. This idea, which was certainly accepted by Agrippa's contemporaries in Renaissance natural philosophy, would have been

recognizable and unremarkable for most early modern readers.<sup>5</sup> Agrippa clearly accepted the traditional version, but *DOP* develops an argument for the radical one. He begins his efforts to establish this principle immediately in Book I, chapter 1:

Wise men conceive it in no way irrationall that it should be possible for us to ascend by the same degrees through each World, to the same very original World itself, the Maker of all things, and first Cause, from whence all things are, and proceed; and also to enjoy not only these vertues, which are already in the more excellent kind of things, but also beside these, to draw new vertues from above.<sup>6</sup>

Agrippa's twist was to contend that the realms of natural, mathematical/astrological, and divine were not nested together with change occurring only from the divine realm downward, but that they co-existed in a linked chain in which change in any one realm could produce change in the others. This relied on the idea that everything in the realms below the divine one is always in the process of becoming more perfect. Human beings were the exceptions to this rule, since free will permitted them to choose either to behave in ways that permitted their improvement or ruined them. Magicians whose work requires that they maintain an elevated soul and a disciplined practice, strive toward perfection, with their souls and their intellects becoming more like the original form over time so that they might eventually rejoin the Godhead. Their shared virtues

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> See for example Margaret J. Osler, *Reconfiguring the World: Nature, God, and Human Understanding from the Middle Ages to Early Modern Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); D. P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000; Dane T. Daniel, "Invisible Wombs: Rethinking Paracelsus' Concept of Body and Matter," *Ambix* 53(2) 2006: 129-42; William R. Newman, *Promethean Ambitions: Alchemy and the Quest to Perfect Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Agrippa von Nettesheim, *De Occulta Philosophia Libri Tres*, trans. J. F. (London: Gregory Moule, 1650/1651), 1:1.

with those original forms and with their elevated but less perfect iterations in the starry realms permit the magician to slowly use magic to climb back toward the divine mind.<sup>7</sup>

Agrippa's model of the universe gives great power to magic capable of producing change in any of the realms and even improving the catalogue and quality of virtues available in the natural realm. Before he goes on to define and discuss magic in Book I, chapter 2, he describes the parallel between his book's structure and that of the universe: "The order and process of all these [the virtues and disciplines concerning their manipulation of the natural, celestial, and divine realms] I shall endeavor to deliver in these three Books."<sup>8</sup> He proposes that natural philosophy and physic, the focus of Book I, allow adepts to understand and harness the virtues of the natural world. He then contends astrology and mathematics, the focus of Book II, permit magicians to draw down the virtues of the celestial world into the natural realm where they can be manipulated. Finally, in Book III, he defines the importance of religious ceremonies and belief to draw down the virtues from the divine realm through the intervening realms and to the earth itself. He does not repeat the more revolutionary claim here of using magic to ascend from the natural into the celestial and divine realms. That instead becomes an argument that reemerges across the Books, surfacing in different chapters and requiring a closer reading to identify than the first argument, just described, about magical work being available to operate in both directions.

The first argument—that the realms are interconnected and the manipulation of shared virtues can produce change in linked items across the realms—is central to his presentation of evidence in Books I and II. He relies on the accepted premise, with change occurring from the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Agrippa von Nettesheim, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, 2:60; 3:38.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Agrippa von Nettesheim, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, 1:1.

top down, and slowly adds support for his own, more radical interpretation. He does so in pieces, producing prisms of evidence to demonstrate the ways in which the natural and astrological realms are connected. To accomplish this, he presents "known truths" of natural philosophy, astrology, and mathematics bringing the reader along through examples that produce agreement with familiar things until the weight of the agreements themselves make the final conclusion easier (perhaps almost inevitable) to accept. The repetition of the central argument is so consistent, and so easy to identify in all three Books, that a careful modern reader familiar with early modern natural philosophy can locate it through a slow and consistent approach to DOP. This means that it would likely have been extremely accessible to early modern readers, especially those familiar with the material and sources Agrippa amasses to support his ideas. Intensive reading, the process by which we think early modern scholars regularly engaged with texts like DOP, would have allowed readers to trace these ideas across the entire text without getting lost in the evidence. They would have been able to move across the individual books, taking notes on each chapter and then organizing them by theme. This permits all of DOP to be broken down into its constituent ideas. Given the scholarly capabilities and habits of educated men reading natural philosophy during this period-most of whom had a university education and/or worked in monasteries, as did Agrippa's mentor Trithemius---these readers would have had the tools to mark the arguments as they were presented and perhaps even generate counterarguments of their own, much as we see in medieval and early modern marginalia and even the tradition of biblical commentaries.<sup>9</sup> Commonplacing would also have been an

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> See for example, Kate Narveon, *Bible Readers and Lay Writers in Early Modern England: Gender and Self-Definition in an Emergent Writing Culture* (London: Routledge, 2012); Nancy G. Siraisi, *History, Medicine, and the Traditions of Renaissance Learning* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2010); Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500-1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

interesting way to integrate different parts of Agrippa's book with, for example, contemporary works by Ficino and Paracelsus. I have not yet encountered this kind of work, but it is certainly within the bounds of imagination.

# **Book III: A Lesson in Magic**

Even among occult philosophers, declaring yourself capable of manipulating the divine realm was a significant reach. If one begins reading *DOP* at Book III, however, one understands the second major tenet of Agrippa's argument: that God placed magic in the world so that people who had the talent, discipline, and faith to find and use it would be able to defend the divine order. In Agrippa's version of divine intent, God welcomes adepts to use the forces he embedded into the universe to create change through systems of sympathy and the manipulation of virtues across linked realms. The argument that either magic or the existence of invisible forces that humans could manipulate to create change was a part of God's original plan is a brave one, but it was not inherently heretical in the early sixteenth century. The publication of Ficino's translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* in 1463 made magic an accepted part of Renaissance humanist thought.<sup>10</sup> This text's widespread acceptance was partially due to its incorrect dating, but since

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> The *Corpus Hermeticum* was a falsely dated text (probably written between the first and fourth centuries C. E.) that was attributed to Hermes Trismegistus. It is a series of eighteen treatises originally written in Greek and Latin, including the Poimander and the Emerald Table. The first of these is a foundational text for Renaissance Neoplatonic thought, and the second part of the foundation for Renaissance alchemy. Ficino translated these texts at the behest of Cosimo de Medici beginning in 1463; they were published in 1471. While recent scholarship demonstrates that the translation was not accurately printed and that the many editions only made the errors worse, most scholars still agree that this work opened the door for Renaissance humanism to include magic and alchemy without being automatically deemed heretical. For that recent scholarship, see Christopher S. Celenza, "Marsilio Ficino," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2017), ed. Edward N. Zalta, et al. Center for the Study of Language and Information, Stanford University. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/ficino/>. For an excellent English translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, see Brian P. Copenhaver,

no one knew that the dating was incorrect at the time, that is no reason to ignore the intellectual effects of its publication on European occult philosophy. For Agrippa—and I think for Ficino and Paracelsus as well—the *Corpus Hermeticum* opened the door to thinking about a sort of magical theology in which magic was the highest art form available to humans interested in understanding divine intent.<sup>11</sup> If theology was the study of God's word and religion the means to transmit it, magical theology was a step above: the study of God's will and the means by which to imitate it. Very few occult philosophers went this far, but the small efflorescence of magical texts from scholars such as Agrippa and Paracelsus during this period suggests to me that it was a logical extension of the material they had at hand.

## **Taking the Books Together**

If we accept that magical theology was a means by which Agrippa could legitimize his original claim and that he was interested in proposing a world view in which God created a world complete with magical potential, then the central arguments of Books I and III are deeply intertwined. It seems no coincidence either that these major claims are made immediately at the beginning of both books, and the remainder of the books are devoted to providing evidence to support them. The evidence in Book III is as exhaustive as that from Book I, but rather than providing an array of natural philosophy authorities to shore up his claim, Book III combines biblical exegesis with references to accepted theologians that help to support a significant sub-

Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a new English translation with notes and introduction (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992, repr., 2008).

<sup>11</sup> D. P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000). No one has yet published on this in Paracelsus, but Dane T. Daniel is still working on a book about Paracelsian theology and magic.

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thesis that carries a great deal of weight and brings the book back into the realm of heresy. For Agrippa, faith itself had power. He writes:

Whosoever therefore in his Religion, though false, yet beleeveth most strongly that it is true, and elevates his spirit by reason of this credulity, until it be affirmed to thos spirits who are the chief leaders of that Religion, may work those things which natural and reason discern not.<sup>12</sup>

Whether faith was combined with ritual to produce superstition or it was combined with religious orthodoxy to produce practice, true belief combined with action commanded power. As Michael Bailey convincingly argues in his discussion of the greater similarities than differences between superstition and magic in late medieval Europe, the power of belief itself was broadly accepted during this period of time and the kinds of practice that were deemed acceptable were constantly under negotiation by the public and the Church.<sup>13</sup> Agrippa capitalized on this and made faith—especially practiced by a trained, disciplined, and talented adept—the driving force behind magical work. He did not need to spend a great deal of time convincing readers that magic worked or showing them how to do it because, as Richard Kieckhefer argued in his 1994 article on the rationality of medieval magic, people were willing to accept that it did.<sup>14</sup> As a result, he amassed evidence showing the place of magic in the divinely created universe, the roles of preternatural agents in accomplishing magical change, and the ways in which humans could

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Agrippa von Nettesheim, *De Occulta Philosophia Libri Tres* (London: Gregory Moule, 1650/1), 3:4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Michael D. Bailey, *Fearful Spirits, Reasoned Follies: The Boundaries of Superstition in Late Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Richard Kieckhefer, "The Specific Rationality of Medieval Magic," *The American Historical Review* 99, no. 3 (1994): 813-36.

manipulate existing forces to accomplish their desired ends. He also defined the acceptable limits for magical work, daring even to discuss necromancy and other dark arts in order to demonstrate that no true adept would be interested in committing acts that so sullied the divine order of life and death.

And this is the extremely interesting part about Book III. It both presents the argument that powerful magic is available to adepts whose faith and practice can be combined to wield it, and that magic is sufficiently potent to destabilize the original order of the world. It even promises adepts the chance to re-enter the Godhead. The potential for these magicians to manipulate the original forces behind Creation means that adepts must be exceptionally disciplined individuals whose actions would enhance rather than disturb the world. In order to shape these individuals into magical masters, the process of becoming an adept takes up quite a bit of space in Book III. For Agrippa, magi must be born at the right time. The alignment of the stars heralds the matching of their puissant and nearly perfect souls with suitable bodies. The process continues through strenuous intellectual development and physical deprivation and ends only after death when enlightened adepts might have the chance to leave their physical bodies and the limits of the natural realm for the Godhead.<sup>15</sup> Adepts who practice through religion alone, rather than concentrating also on natural and celestial magic, will be taken up into the divine intelligence much more quickly: "But whosoever without the mixture of other powers worketh by Religion alone, if he shall persevere long in the work, is swallowed up by the Divine power and cannot live long."<sup>16</sup> It also seems that he leaves the door open for highly skilled adepts to move between realms, especially as they mature. Those capable of doing so might

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Agrippa von Nettesheim, De Occulta Philosophia Libri Tres, 3:6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Agrippa von Nettesheim, *De Occulta Philosophia Libri Tres*, 3:6.

leave their bodies for a place in the Godhead even while still physically alive, though that begs the question of why anyone would wish to return. Much of Book III is devoted to significant details about the powers of the many ranks of angels and demons, none of which were especially novel but all of which are interesting if understood as evidence for Agrippa's second thesis: that God embedded magic into the world as a tool that could be used by adepts to enlist angelic help and enhance their ability to maintain the divine order.<sup>17</sup> Demons were a known threat whose characteristics must be understood in order to effectively combat their potential to seduce humans into destabilizing the world's natural balance.<sup>18</sup> And though he does not dwell on this, Agrippa repeats it sufficiently to make it clear that humans can be extremely powerful when they turn their minds to committing magical acts. The emphasis he places on adepts rigorously maintaining disciplined faith and practice demonstrates the centrality of self-control in making a good magician.

## The Instruments of Magic: Book II

The second book in *DOP* acts as an amplifier, providing support for Agrippa's main arguments and providing further evidence from astrology and numerology the sphere whose magic it describes. Sandwiched between the natural philosophy of Book I and the magical theology of Book III, Book II must respond to both realms, be capable of producing change in both, and be an effective channel of magical energy between them. The occult powers of numbers, imbued with divine meaning, can produce change in the natural world by channeling

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Agrippa von Nettesheim, *De Occulta Philosophia Libri Tres*, 3:14-17.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Agrippa von Nettesheim, *De Occulta Philosophia Libri Tres*, 3:18-3:20.

magical energy from the divine sphere down to the natural world. This reflects the close ties between numbers and the forms in the divine mind:

Severinus Boethius saith, that all things which were first made by the nature of things in its first Age, seem to be formed by the proportion of numbers, for this was the principall pattern in the mind of the Creator.<sup>19</sup>

Boethius is among the many early philosophers cited in *DOP*, and it could be considered part of the material Agrippa accumulated to provide a Christian framework for his broader argument about magic. Interestingly he does not cite Roger Bacon, whose mathematics would have been a logical addition to this conclusion. The medieval academic tradition was certainly an important part of Agrippa's intellectual framework.

Numbers and harmony are powerful in the natural and divine realms, and they permit magicians to draw down divine perfection into their work. Magical efforts that combine numbers with their signs or figures permit adepts to influence all the realms of the universe captured in the microcosm they want to change: "Hence it is that numbers do work very much upon the soul, figures upon the body, and harmony upon the whole animall."<sup>20</sup> Chapters four through fourteen of Book III provide detailed explanations of the powers and associations of the numbers one through twelve, complete with scales for each one showing its specific areas of power in the various realms. The transition to astrological magic occurs through an elaboration of the discussion of harmony, with the stars passing divine intent and the "seeds" of the divine imagination to earth. The remainder of Book II is devoted to the signs, symbols, and figures of the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Agrippa von Nettesheim, *De Occulta Philosophia Libri Tres*, 2:2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Agrippa von Nettesheim, De Occulta Philosophia Libri Tres, 2:3

planets, their various arenas of responsibility, and the ways in which they can be manipulated. Harmony itself becomes a subject of interest since the harmony of the universe mirrors the perfection of the divine imagination and is also reflected in the human body. Bodies and souls that are most balanced and born under planets presaging wisdom and self-discipline are those destined to become magicians. Others may strive to overcome the limits of their birth, but those born to magic will find it easiest to achieve.

## Conclusion

Agrippa's decades of work on DOP are reflected in the changes that occurred between the 1509 juvenile manuscript and the final version. The most significant changes, as Perrone Compagni notes, occurred in the sections on alchemy and astronomy, and they are additions to content.<sup>21</sup> The central arguments of the DOP did not change over time, but Agrippa added to the evidence he compiled to support his claims. As a result, DOP grew a bit [much] like the caterpillar in Alice in Wonderland moves: with the head going one way and the tail sometimes following and sometimes pulling in another direction entirely, while the middle got squished and extended in between. My point is this: the substance of *DOP* is introduced in the first chapter of Book I, which says that change can occur from top down and bottom up. The second thesis and perhaps the greater argument is best articulated in Book III: God created the universe to include magic that could be accessible by humans to allow them to have the ability to truly shape their worlds. He did so in the knowledge that this could only be accessible to the most disciplined and talented adepts, whose wisdom would allow them to rejoin the divine mind either quickly—should they practice only ceremonial magic-or in the fullness of time, if their magical work was balanced among the realms.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Perrone Compagni, ed. De Occulta Philosophia Libri Tres, introduction.

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