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Title*
Agrippa, Heinrich Cornelius

Alternate names (if there are any)

Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim

Dates and places of birth and death*

Born: 14 September 1486, Nettesheim (Cologne)

Died: 18 February 1535, Grenoble

Abstract*

Agrippa was the main expounder of the occult philosophy, which is the knowledge of the hidden causes of things and is finalized to their manipulation by magic. Magic, in turn, is the highest form and the end of philosophy. According to his *De occulta philosophia*, magic is threefold: natural (concerning sub-lunar world), celestial (concerning stars and heavenly intelligences) and divine (concerning God and higher angels). It consists of the manipulation of concrete objects and of the summoning of intelligences and God, which is performed on the basis of the precepts of the Kabbalah. Agrippa's overall aim was to purify magic from its necromantic and irrational components: this would enable the restoration of the pre-lapsarian condition of man (in accordance with the Hermetic ideal of deification), and a Christian reform of culture. The critique of philosophical knowledge and of every science, presented in Agrippa's *De vanitate*, and his critique to the subordination of woman typical of Scholastic theology, contained in the *De nobilitate foeminei sexus*, are functional to these ends.

Biography*

Cornelius Agrippa was born in 1486 near Cologne, where he studied from 1499 and became *magister artium* in 1502. After his graduation, he joined the imperial army and travelled to Spain (1508) and to France, where he started his academic activities in Dôle, teaching Johannes Reuchlin's *De verbo mirifico*, and wrote his *De nobilitate et praecellentia foeminae sexus*. In the same years, he completed the first version of his *De occulta philosophia* (Agrippa 1992). In 1509 or 1510 he left Dôle after having been accused of 'Judaizing heresy', as Reuchlin's *De verbo mirifico* relies on a Cabalistic exegesis of the Jewish Bible and on Jewish scholarship to argue for the nature of Jesus as Messiah (Zika 1976; Lehrich 2003, 26; Perrone Compagni 2005, 16; Nauert 2011). Afterwards he travelled in Germany, Netherlands and England, serving Maximilian I as diplomat,

and from 1511 in Italy. At the University of Pavia Agrippa taught Plato's *Symposium* and the *Pimander* (part of the *Corpus Hermeticum*) and in Turin he taught theology. In 1518 he moved again to France and became public *advocatus* in Metz, where he clashed with the local inquisitor while defending a woman accused of witchcraft, and entered in a dispute with the Dominicans, as he denied a legend on the marriages of St. Anne (Agrippa 1534). He thus left Metz and practiced medicine in Geneva, Fribourg (1521-1523) and at the French court in Lyon from 1524 on, where he held the position of physician of Louise, the mother of the King. In Lyon, Agrippa suffered financial and personal problems as he could not obtain support from his patroness Marguerite of Alençon. Eventually he left the French court and became, in 1528, imperial historiographer in Antwerp, but he lost this position after having published his *De vanitate* (1530), containing an attack to the Mendicant orders which led the governor of the Netherlands, Margaret of Austria, to report it to the theological faculty of Louvain. Finally, in 1532 he came into service of the Archbishop of Bonn, but was again attacked by the Dominicans, as he was about to publish the full version of his *De occulta philosophia* that they considered heretical. This edition was intended to provide a complete presentation and defence of his work, as only a manuscript version (1510) was circulating. Eventually, this edition appeared in 1533. In 1534-1535 he moved again to France, and died in 1535 in Grenoble. (Van der Poel 1997, 15-49; Lehrich 2003; 25-42; Blum and Müller-Jahncke 2010; Nauert 2011).

Heritage and rupture with the tradition

Agrippa was the main expounder of occult philosophy, i.e. the knowledge of the hidden properties of things that makes possible their manipulation by the techniques of magic, which is the highest form and the end of philosophy. His overall aim was to purify magic from its necromantic and irrational aspects, which would enable the deification of man and the restoration of the pre-lapsarian unity with God (Perrone Compagni 2000). Being interested in occult philosophy since he had read Albertus Magnus's *Speculum astronomiae*, containing a defence of the influence of stars on bodies (Zambelli 1992b), in his *De occulta philosophia* Agrippa divides magic into three kinds: natural, which is the manipulation of concrete objects (Lehrich 2003, 44-97) and of the world spirit that underpins their occult properties (Nauert 2011); celestial or mathematical magic, which concerns the powers of stars and the intelligences (as lower angels) governing them, summoned by numeric formulas and images (Lehrich 2003, 97-113); divine or ceremonial magic, which consists of theurgical rites – such as the use of the name of higher angels and God – based on the contents of the Kabbalah, which Agrippa knew in the Christianized version of Giovanni Pico, Reuchlin and Francesco Giorgio Veneto (Perrone Compagni 1982). In his *De vanitate*, on the other hand, Agrippa distinguishes between natural magic – which is natural philosophy itself – and ritual magic, which has a demonic character (Zambelli 1992a and 2007, 13-34). The apparent contradiction with his *De occulta philosophia* can be explained in the light of his program of a Christian reform of culture (influenced by Erasmus: Zambelli 1970; Van der Poel 1997), to which his purging of magic was functional. In his *De vanitate* he uses sceptical arguments to criticize all sciences, only in order to show that these are less reliable than faith in guiding man to the knowledge of God (Van der Poel 1997, 112-115), and to establish a *prisca theologia* where faith and reason are perfectly balanced and the original harmony with God is restored (Perrone Compagni 1997, 2000 and 2009). Such ideal of harmony and deification was inspired by Platonism and Hermetic philosophy, underlying also his *De homine* and *De triplici ratione cognoscendi Deum* (Perrone Compagni 2005). Agrippa's criticisms are moreover directed against scholastic philosophy and theology, which are the main targets of his *De nobilitate foeminei sexus*, where the canonical interpretation of Eve's sin is disregarded as authoritarian, and equality of sexes is devised as part of the re-appropriation of the pre-lapsarian condition (Perrone Compagni 2006).

Cross-References (if there are any; please include a list of other entries in this encyclopedia

that may be of further interest to your readers.)

Reuchlin, Johannes
Natural Magic
Theology
Plato (in the Renaissance)
Renaissance Jewish Philosophy
Women writing
Daimon
Angels
Occult properties
World Soul
Scepticism
Erasmus, Desiderius
Hermes Trismegistus and Hermeticism
Science and religion
Manuscript
Renaissance Kabbalah
Albertism
Spirit - Renaissance Philosophy

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