

Introduction: The Heterodox Tradition in Western Philosophy

There are two (or three) main highways along which western speculation about the nature of the world and the human soul have traveled: the Platonic dual nature account, the Aristotelian matter-form account, and the Epicurean materialist hypothesis (interrupted for 1500 years and not taken up again until the mid-17th century). But there are also other roads, ones less traveled; some twist and turn in unusual directions, some are cul-de-sacs. They are not so much unorthodox, 'not-right belief', as heterodox, 'other-belief', that is, other than the mainstream. Homeric and ancient Hebrew ideas about the human soul squarely situated its principle and power in the life-force which originated with an individual's birth and vanished with its death. Plato's mature thought marks a watershed, since in the *Phaedrus*, the *Republic* and the *Timaeus*, he builds in an exogenous shamanistic concept of the soul as an immortal, autonomous entity contingently joined with its host's body. As the 'ruling part' (or aspect) of this immensely influential and fruitful doctrine, the Platonic rational soul begins to lead a life of its own (so to speak) and reaches its highest state in a perfectly ordered cosmic hierarchy under Plotinus' mystagogic teaching. Augustine syncretized this divinely 'inspired' soul with NT Christian ideas and propelled it forward through the Renaissance Hermeticism of Ficino and Pico. The Platonic and Augustinian rational soul finds its modern home in Descartes' thinking thing, the human mind elevated to the status of a god in its own domain. Where for Plato the rationality of the rational (*logismos*) soul is the result of its inception in and participation with a divine mind (or power), for Descartes the cognitive power (*vis cognitiva*) of the human mind is due to its attainment of a godlike rationality.

Aristotle's concern to account for the conditions a concrete substance must realize in order to have a soul as its form relied on a matter-form model of explanation. He complained that the 'mystics' expounded only upon the nature of the soul itself and not on the nature of the body that is needed to receive or house the soul. For the mystics, the body might be anything, and thus it would really be irrelevant to its having a soul; in principle the soul might be taken into or housed in any kind of body. In contrast, since Aristotle's idea of the soul is property-like, the soul is dependent upon its body, but not as another bodily part upon the whole body, since the soul is not any kind of body at all. Despite its official dominance in schools for five centuries or longer, it lost ground to the Neo-Platonist innovators and disappeared from the Latin West. Under the curatorship of Arabic and Persian scholars the Aristotelian model was made complete and consistent. This internal philosophical completeness was a distinct advantage when Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas reconciled the matter-form account with the Christian doctrine of

personal immortality. The third stream of tradition about the human soul had its source in Stoic and Epicurean physical theory and materialist ontology. This alternate route was rendered heretical by the Church Fathers for its overt denial of the human soul's immortality and its alleged tendency toward atheism. It was not revived until the early seventeenth century under the tutelage of Pierre Gassendi and Kenelm Digby who thought that some version of atomism was more amenable to the new mechanistic theories of matter in motion.

But there are other less well-remarked paths, trodden usually by the few or the chosen alone. These are the distinctive features of heterodox lines of thought about mind, soul and spirit. (1) They are arcane, esoteric teachings, kept secret from the public, open only to insiders. (2) Their emphasis is not on an explanatory account of nature, but on techniques for the soul's ascent. (3) They are formed in close alliance with magical ideas and lend themselves readily to various occult theories: (a) some aspect of these ideas can be externalized in some form, such as rituals, spells, etc.; (b) these external forms can become detached from the theoretical base which explains them. (4) Their diagnostic, therapeutic and practical effects are achieved by natural and/or demonic magic. One of the earliest and most influential statements of the esoteric, hidden teaching is made by Plato in the 'Second Letter'. Plato said that he would transmit 'a secret teaching' that must be written in riddles in case someone might read the letter while en route. The true doctrine, he said, 'is like this: it is in relation to the king of all things and on his account that everything exists, and that fact is the cause of all that is beautiful. In relation to a second, the second kind of thing exists, and in relation to a third, the third kind' (312e). This enigmatic statement was to become one of the cornerstones of Plotinus' strange philosophy and a key text in the Neo-Platonists' efforts to expound their theurgy, working on the god within each human. In addition to philosophical, natural-scientific and religious texts; the ancient world bequeathed to the early Christian world an abundance of works on magic by Greek, Egyptian and Roman writers. Empirical and medical accounts helped to explain what was possible and impossible in the physical world, at the same time that *fabulae* told stories about magical persons and events; some of the apocryphal texts of the NT also contributed to this magical repertoire.

The Christians writers of the early centuries carried out a continuous diatribe directed against all magical practices, and routinely issued condemnations and prohibitions against such 'evil' and heretical activities. Richard Kieckhefer forcefully argues that the conflict between Christians and pagans rested on their differing notions about magic and its place in society: 'For pagans who opposed magic, it was reprehensible because it was secret and antisocial. It was a force that worked against society, from within society itself, and for that reason it had to be uprooted.' The pagans worshipped their gods in the open and did not call on them for help in carrying out evil deeds; moreover, the pagans were not intolerant of other gods and other forms of devotion than their own. On the other hand, 'for the Christians, magic was reprehensible because it was the work of demons. These were evil spirits, ultimately subject to God, but they paraded as gods and received veneration.' The Christians could not complain about secretive behavior because they themselves were secretive; in addition, they were intolerant of other gods and other forms of devotion except their own. Thus Kieckhefer concludes that, in

sharply distinguishing between Christianity as the true religion and paganism as a parcel of false religions:

early Christian writers in effect introduced a distinction between religion and magic which had not previously been made and which was not easily understood except from a Christian viewpoint. It was a short step from saying that paganism was inauthentic religion to maintaining that it was no religion at all, but mere idolatry and magic ... In short, the pagan definition of magic had a moral and a theological dimension but was grounded in social concerns; the Christian definition had a moral and a social dimension but was explicitly centered on theological concerns. Between these two different models there was little room for discussion.¹

Secrecy, exclusiveness and 'right-opinion' (orthodoxy) help to define the criteria that allowed for the separation of (true) religion and magic; the hidden (occult), dynamic and unnatural helped to define the criteria that separated the demonic, spiritual dimension from the natural dimension.² The distinction between ordinary, manifest powers and occult powers could be subjective, that is, a power that is little known and arouses wonder, unlike those powers that are well known and taken for granted. But it could also be a power in a more objective sense, that is, one that resides in the object itself and which cannot be explained, but only educed through spells and charms. Natural magic was the 'science' of such occult powers and was strictly segregated from demonic magic which invoked the assistance of spiritual agents in bringing about the desired changes: 'That which makes an action magical is the type of power it invokes: if it relies on divine action or the manifest power of nature it is not magical, while if it uses demonic aid or occult powers in nature it is magical.' There is an alternate way of defining magic in terms of the intended action the operations are designed to elicit instead of the powers they invoke. According to this theoretical approach, the central feature of religion is that it *supplicates* God or the gods, and the main feature of magic is that it attempts to *coerce* spiritual beings or hidden forces.³

The history of magic is above all a crossing-point where the exploitation of natural forces and the invocation of demonic powers intersect. One could summarize the history of medieval magic in capsule form by saying that at the popular level the tendency was to conceive magic as natural, while among the intellectuals there were three competing lines of thought: [1] an assumption, developed in the early centuries of Christianity, that all magic involved at least an implicit reliance on demons; [2] a grudging recognition, fostered especially by the influx of Arabic learning in the twelfth century, that much magic was in fact natural; and [3] a fear, stimulated in the later Middle Ages by the very real exercise of necromancy, that magic involved an all too explicit invocation of demons even when it pretended to be innocent.⁴

One could distinguish between the wisdom of the magus and the learning of the philosopher, but they are actually interdependent aspects of the same enterprise.

¹ Kieckhefer 1990 pp. 35–7.

² Conditions of secrecy are emphasized by Stroumsa 1996 pp. 1–7.

³ Kieckhefer rejects this approach for several reasons, 1990 pp. 15–16.

⁴ Kieckhefer 1992 pp. 16–17; also Jolly 2001 pp. 13–26.

According to Angela Voss, ‘the *magus* is a scientist, as he investigates the hidden laws of the cosmos, learns of the correspondences between all things, and seeks to understand the world from the perspective of the Creator himself. But he is also a diviner, as he does this through action, perfecting the techniques and rituals which may lead him to the deeper level of insight required to reap divine gifts.’⁵ Marsilio Ficino declared, ‘the perfect efficacy of ineffable works, which are divinely performed in a way surpassing all intelligence, and the power of inexplicable symbols, which are known only to the gods, impart theurgic union.’⁶ Voss draws a salutary lesson from this attitude:

Thus images, prayers, invocations, talismans – in whatever ritual use appropriate for the particular condition of the individual – may all contribute to the process of realigning his or her soul. It is important to understand that divination does not originate from the energies used in everyday life, or from human fabrications or ingenuity. Rather, the devotion, intent and desire of the operator will allow a superior power to ‘perfect’ the ritual and impart its authority to it. In other words, human beings may partake of Divine Revelation through their own efforts.

In their final summary statement about Giordano Bruno, Copenhaver and Schmitt admirably characterize the central attitude of the magic-inspired heterodox view of human nature. They claim that Bruno did not care about individual human beings, but thought that particular things of any kind were no more distinct than ripples in the calm sea of being. ‘Nature thrives and breeds transitory forms out of living matter through her own internal force of soul. The single universal form is the world-soul that drives things from within as their principle. Causes that act externally are superficial; a deeper dynamism belongs to principles that move inside. Matter and form unite in the infinite substance that comprehends all ... Individual souls ... cannot be discrete specific forms because soul is really one; what enlivens a human and a fly are fragments of the same world-soul, which is like a light reflected in a shattered mirror whose splinters are the souls of particular beings.’⁸ Or, as Philip Batz said in 1876, in a now forgotten book, ‘humans are fragments of a desperate god who destroyed himself at the beginning of time; universal history is the shadowy death throes of those fragments.’⁹

The Cartesian-Galilean understanding of the mathematical order of the natural world and the mechanical laws that govern change and motion would definitively overthrow the fundamental principles of the late medieval and Renaissance picture of a dynamic, spiritual nature. The model of a world-machine would supplant the model of a world-spirit, imbued with celestial and terrestrial intelligences that could be intuited and handled by wisdom-seekers. Wisdom would no longer be the special endowment or privilege of a few initiates, but a collective achievement that can be realized through cooperative endeavors, pieces of which can become available to anyone with the right scientific education. The occult philosophy and its many

⁵ Voss 2001 p. 5.

⁶ Ficino, quoted in Voss 2001 p. 5.

⁷ Voss 2001 p. 7.

⁸ Copenhaver & Schmitt 1992 p. 315.

⁹ Philip Batz quoted in Culianou 1992 p. 56.

heterodox variants are not so much driven underground as channeled into side-roads, away from the main highway; dusty roads traveled by amateur alchemists, juridical astrologers, counterfeiters, and the other conjurers and tricksters commonly satirized by the Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights. This work investigates both the richness and the strangeness of these less well-traveled paths in their speculations about the nature, function and structure of the human mind and soul.