

Alchemy and Prenatal Psychology

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Abstract: It is the thesis of this paper that the *Rosarium* series of pictures not only reveals the secret of the alchemical process of transformation but also the parallel secret of the psychological process of transformation that Jung termed the “individuation process”. The paper treats these two processes of transformation as regressive phenomena which in turn reflect an unconscious process of deep and sustained regression, or *Tiefenregression*, which plays back the whole course of human intrauterine development from primordial germ cell to mature fetus. This is the basic psychobiological pattern of the collective unconscious, whose symbolic expressions are to be found in man’s dreams, art and religion.

Zusammenfassung: *Alchemie und pränatale Psychologie.* Es ist die These dieses Beitrags, daß die Bilderserie des *Rosarium* nicht nur das Geheimnis des alchemistischen Prozesses der Transformation enthüllt, sondern ebenso parallel das Geheimnis des psychologischen Prozesses der Transformation, den Jung als „Individuationsprozess“ bezeichnet. Dieser Beitrag betrachtet diese beiden transformativen Prozesse als regressive Phänomene, die wiederum einen unbewußten Prozeß tiefer und anhaltender Regression oder Tiefenregression widerspiegeln, der den ganzen Verlauf der menschlichen intrauterinen Entwicklung von der anfänglichen Keimzelle bis zum reifen Fötus wieder durchspielt. Dies ist das grundlegende psychobiologische Muster des kollektiven Unbewußten, dessen symbolischer Ausdruck in den Träumen, der Kunst und der Religion des Menschen gefunden werden kann.

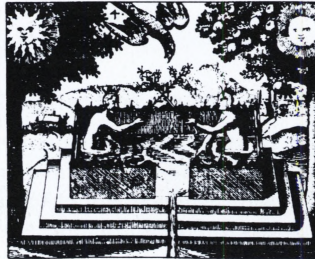
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One of the best and most complete pictorial renderings of the alchemical work (*opus alchymicum*) is the series of woodcuts reproduced in the alchemical treatise *Rosarium philosophorum*, first published in Frankfurt in 1550. This work is a compilation of alchemical texts made by an unknown author and dating from the 14th century (Telle 1992). The 20 woodcuts are likewise of unknown origin, but their inclusion in the treatise makes the *Rosarium philosophorum* one of the oldest illustrated alchemical works of the late middle ages. When in 1622 the German physician and alchemist Johann Daniel Mylius published a condensed version of the *Rosarium* in his *Philosophia reformata*, the Frankfurt engraver Balthazar Schwan furnished him with engraved variants of the original woodcuts. The series

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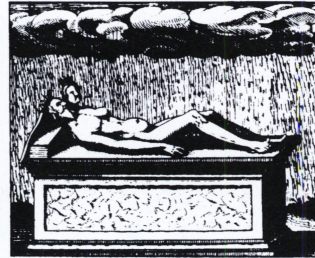
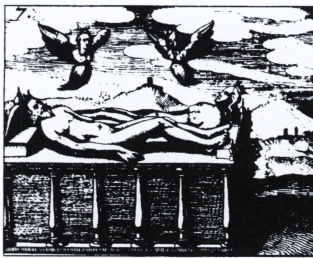
Figs. 1, 2



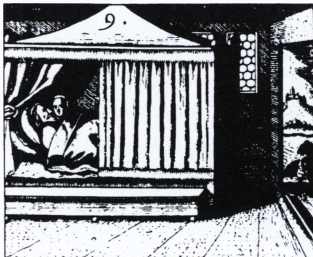
Figs. 3, 4



Figs. 5, 6



Figs. 7, 8



Figs. 9, 10



Figs. 11, 12



Figs. 13, 14



Figs. 15, 16



Figs. 17, 18



Figs. 19, 20

of engravings is reproduced in Figs. 1–20, each of the engravings having been endowed by Schwan with a number in its left upper corner. In spite of several important variations, notably in Figs. 12–16 and 19, a comparison between the two picture series reveals the faithfulness of Schwan to his original.

The brief account of the symbolic action of each picture presented below is followed by an interpretation of the symbolic pattern of the entire series of pictures. The conclusion drawn is that the best and simplest interpretation of the symbolic structure of the *opus alchymicum* is an interpretation which views the alchemical work as a sustained regression into the psychobiological depths of the unconscious, a *Tiefenregression* during which the imprints of man's perinatal and prenatal experiences are revived in symbolic form (Fabricius 1976/1989). This regressive play-back of man's drama of creation is the fuel of the individuation process, or the interplay of conscious and unconscious forces which gradually forms the individual and so helps to develop the self.

The alchemical work begins with Fig. 1 in which the elements convey an atmosphere of bewilderment, anxiety and confusion. The two-headed mercurial serpent spews out the poisonous fumes of the *prima materia* which contain the seven planets or metals in an evil and disordered mixture. At the same time, the mercurial fountain overflows with the waters of the "primal matter", eagerly drunk by a small party of alchemists in the foreground of the picture because, as the fountain bubbles, "Both rich and poor I make healthy, and yet I am poisonous and deadly". In the background, a number of alchemists walk into the dark crevices of the mountain in order to wrest the primal matter from the rock and later refine its impure metals into silver and gold. This descent into the bowels of the earth (*descensus ad inferos*) in the midst of confusion and chaos is the underlying movement of the opening work.

In the subterranean darkness of Fig. 2, the alchemist happens upon the two protagonists of the *opus alchymicum*, the king and queen, who on the backs of two fusing lions – emblems of royal incestuous love – reach out for each other to realize a regressive and tabooed passion that is blessed by a descending bird carrying the quintessential star. In Fig. 3, the king and queen shed their clothes while hastening to the incestuous sheets of their marriage bed. The alchemist's roaring fire has now brought royal love to its dynamic but also frightening stage, where the partners are profoundly transformed.

Figure 4 describes the opening act of the alchemical marriage in which the king descends into the mercurial well, identified in the text by reference to the sexual parts of the queen: "Then Beya [the queen] rises up over Gabricus [the king] and encloses him in her womb, so that nothing more of him is to be seen. She then embraced Gabricus with so much love that she utterly consumed him". The king's coitive descent into the queen's well is a traumatic event which exposes him to the terrors of drowning and absorption, hence his ritual cry in alchemy, "Whoso shall deliver me shall obtain the great reward".

In Fig. 5, the king reaches the bottom of the well where he fuses into hermaphroditic unity with his queen or mother, both enjoying their oceanic love in a bed formed from a mussel. The text explains: "They that were two are [here] made one, as though of one body". This act is termed *coniunctio sive coitus* – an "intercourse or conjunction [of opposites]" – and the event signifies the first *con-*

iunctio oppositorum of the alchemical work which takes place in the bowels of the earth and in the depths of the sea. The union of the sun and moon, emblems of the king and queen, is threatened in the background of Fig. 5, however, by two ravens devouring the royal bodies and inaugurating the “black” phase of the work, the so-called *nigredo*, which follows upon the glory of the first *coniunctio*.

In Fig. 6, the royal hermaphrodite expires in a marriage bed turned sarcophagus and tomb. “Here the king and queen are lying dead”, the text explains, “in great distress the soul is sped”. Devil and Death stand guard at the royal coffin which contains the putrefying bodies of their incestuous reunion. In Fig. 7, the king and queen are reduced to mummies in the desert, their soul and spirit having been “extracted” from their bodies in a culminating bout of depression and despair.

As the darkest hour is before the dawn, so Fig. 8 brings the turning of the tide. The royal hermaphrodite quickens with the “falling of the heavenly dew, abluting the black body in the grave” and thus promising a new pregnancy and a new birth. Figure 9 depicts the traumatic nature of this renewed conjunction of the royal partners, who are now engaged in an act of rebirth which rivals the king’s descent into the queen’s well, though assuming, this time, a more sublimated form. As, according to the text, “the soul [here] descends from on high to quicken the corpse we strove to purify”, the queen unites with the king in the form of a wingless bird receiving her mate in the background of the picture. Here she kills and devours him in an act of reunion spelling death, absorption and transfiguration for both partners.

After suffering death in the cruel beak of his bird-queen, the bird-king is finally united with the nest from which he came and reborn as the bird-man depicted in Fig. 10. The original *Rosarium* woodcut endows the figure of the king and queen with angel’s wings, while Schwan’s version shows the resurrected hermaphrodite holding the bird of royal copulation in its right hand while its left hand clutches a cup with three mercurial serpents symbolizing fertilization. The serpents in the figure have developed together with the fruits of the moon tree (*arbor lunae*) which shine like gleaming eggs. With the attainment of the state of the full moon, the second act of conjunction of the *opus alchymicum* has been realized and the phase of the *albedo* or “whiteness” has been brought to its triumphant and silvery conclusion.

In Fig. 11, the winged hermaphrodite leaves the earth prepared for its nesting descent and takes off on its flight from the moon toward the sun. The *Rosarium* terms this phase a “fermentation” of the royal body of rebirth and says that “Sol is here being buried and overflowed with *Mercurius philosophorum*”. Figure 12 renders the repetition of this process of mortification by showing the descent (or ascent) of the sun-king into a tubelike well, outside of which his lunar queen is about to cleave or kill him with her arrow of love (a feature not depicted in the original woodcut). The painful “illumination” referred to in the text at this stage of Hermetic transformation is explained by the “yellowing” work (*citrinitas*) which is now under way as the flying hermaphrodite approaches the sun.

The scorching heat of this dangerous ascent is depicted in Fig. 13 where the text informs us that “Here Sol is turned black as it becomes with *Mercurius philosophorum* one heart”, a state depicted in the original woodcut by the image of the hermaphrodite’s wings folded in the shape of a heart around its body. In Schwan’s

engraved version, the “blackened” hermaphrodite is guarded by the winged god of alchemy, symbolically appearing in front of the philosophers’ rose garden. The hermaphrodite’s blackened condition is also termed “nourishment” (*nutrimentum*) by the text, which here refers to the red or solar sulphur digested by the silvery or mercurial moon as it is slowly transformed into a golden body.

In Fig. 14, the eagle of Zeus snatches the entombed hermaphrodite, like Ganymede carried to heaven on powerful wings of ascension. The text informs us that “Here the lunar life completely ends, the spirit into heaven deftly ascends”, a condition depicted in the original woodcut by the image of a naked woman winging into heaven while rendering the “fixation” of the yellowing transformation process. In Fig. 15, the wonders of solar life appear with the falling of the heavenly rain of “multiplication”, “once more giving the earth its water to drink”. In the process, Sol and Luna are rejuvenated and now appear as small children led by their Great Mother while being fertilized by their heavenly Father.

In Fig. 16, Sol and Luna leave the tubelike well entered in Fig. 12 and set forth on foot on the pelican’s soil of death and rebirth. This is the bird sacrificing herself by plucking her breast in order to nourish her young with her blood. The original woodcut and its text shows the “revival” or “resurrection” (*revificatio*) of the entombed hermaphrodite, now redeemed by “the soul coming from heaven” in the shape of a naked woman.

The final rebirth of the royal couple is shown in Fig. 17 which depicts the third conjunction of the *opus alchymicum* or the “heavenly marriage”. The resurrected hermaphrodite triumphs on top of the solar hill or mountain (*mons solis*) and basks in the light of the shining fruits of the sun tree (*arbor solis*). The united king and queen lead the chained lion of their incestuous passion by their left hand, while with a stick in their right hand, they crush the three-headed mercurial serpent, thus symbolizing the final death of the procreative principle. On the original woodcut the hermaphrodite is endowed with enormous bat-wings (designed for falling flight) and is accompanied by a long verse of royal reunion and rebirth, all subsumed under the title of *perfectionis ostensio* – the “display of perfection” in heaven. With this new birth in the sun, the third act of conjunction of the *opus alchymicum* has been realized and so the phase of the *citrinitas* or “yellowing” has been brought to its triumphant and golden conclusion.

In Fig. 18, the heavenly conjunction is followed by yet another phase of death and putrefaction. The “golden lion” is now turned “green” (and studded with stars in Schwan’s engraved version) as it devours the sun and moon. In the belly of this cosmic lion, the sun and moon then separate and are cruelly extinguished. In the original *Rosarium* woodcut in Fig. 19, the departure of the soul from the body is depicted in the assumption and coronation of Mary, who unites with the Holy Trinity – a symbol of the departed spirit and its espousal to the soul “in heaven”. Meanwhile, the dead body lies in the tomb of Christ awaiting there its Easter morning. In Schwan’s engraved variant, the philosopher’s son, standing between his royal parents, is crowned with a crown too big for his small head. The son separated from his father and mother symbolizes the leaving of his soul (queen) and spirit (king) which must be returned to his dwindled body in the act of resurrection. This implies his growth into parental stature and his conquest of the

hermaphroditic crown, identical with his final reunion with the king and queen in one parental, hermaphroditic figure.

It is this drama which is symbolized in Fig. 20, where the resurrection of Christ from his tomb on Easter morning is portrayed. In Schwan's engraved variant, the hermaphrodite king rises from his primordial *cella*, chamber or coffin in an act rendering the final rebirth experienced in connection with the fourth and final conjunction of the *opus alchymicum*. With the return of the spirit as the Holy Spirit uniting Father and Son, and with the return of the soul as the Queen of Heaven espousing Son and Mother, the dead body of the hermaphrodite is resurrected in its final form as the glorified and incorruptible body of Christ. This is the *rubedo* or "reddening" – the alchemist's supreme act of rebirth in the sun. Here ends the Hermetic work after a long process of transformation including the four stages of conjunction (Figs. 5, 10, 17 and 20) which are preceded by the four traumatic acts of rebirth (Figs. 4, 9, 16 and 19).

Psychobiological Unity of the Individuation Process

It is the thesis of this paper that the *Rosarium* series of pictures not only reveals the secret of the alchemical process of transformation, but also the parallel secret of the psychological process of transformation that Jung called the "individuation process" (Jung 1960). Both are deeply regressive processes whose symbolic expressions are only to be understood as a revival of peri- and prenatal experiences engraved into the unconscious with the archetypal power of evolutionary creation. The *Tiefenregression* postulated in this paper plays back the whole course of man's psychobiological development to its very beginning or most basic point of creation, which is the primordial germ cell.

Following nature's creation of the fully grown individual and the "vessel" of human consciousness at about the age of 18, the progressive pull or push of the unconscious in human development so far appears to change into a regressive pull, thereby following a universal rhythm of exhalation and inhalation, diastole and systole, day and night. This reversal of unconscious energies in the prime of youth is shocked into action by an archetypal event in the history of every individual which one might suggest be called the *Jugendkrise*, or "crisis of one's youth", an event usually taking place in a man's or woman's twenties. I have described this crisis in detail in the case of Shakespeare (Faöricius 1989). Its features are so all-encompassing and profound that they involve areas of evolutionary significance such as the ego's choice of a partner and choice of an occupation. The painful and chaotic opening of the alchemical work discussed here symbolizes this crisis of an ego overwhelmed by problems and choices, waverings and indecisions, fears and conflicts, and, most painfully of all, confronted consciously for the first time with its own shadowy side (Jung 1944).

The final paralysis of the ego in the typical *Jugendkrise* paves the way for an eruption of the "primal matter", or the unconscious, and for the regressive pull of the unconscious self, or *Mercurius philosophorum* (Jung 1948). As this undercurrent catches the ego, the individual is made to pass through the stages of his youth and childhood in a transformation process rendered symbolically by Figs. 1–4 of the *Rosarium*. Here the king is whirled back through the conflicts of adolescence,

Oedipal love, separation-individuation, symbiosis and autism to the vortex of the birth trauma, expressed in Fig. 4 with the king's descent into the well of his queen. This act is followed by his rebirth in Fig. 5, in which the individuation process at length hits upon the grooves of intrauterine existence, where the acts of rebirth and conjunction reflect the symbiotic unity of fetus and mother.

The subsequent "putrefaction" of the royal hermaphrodite in Figs. 6–8 reflects the regressive dissolution of the fetus into increasingly embryonic and primitive forms. This is the darkness of the *nigredo*, which reflects the regressive change from fetus to embryo. At the end of this road, the libido finally encounters the neurological memory imprints of implantation or "nesting" in the womb (*nidatio*). This is a critical operation in the evolution of the libido comparable to the critical operation of birth and, hence, constituting a second "trauma of birth".

In nesting, the fertilized egg or *morula* ("mulberry") burrows down like a seed in the nourishing earth of the uterus, there to begin its course of embryonic growth. The embedded morula is a cluster of cells which, increasing to many thousands and changing every hour, is transformed during the following weeks into a distinctly human creature with a primitive brain, heart, eyes, and limbs. In reversing this process of embryonic growth, the regressing libido suffers a traumatic process of dissolution, aptly rendered by the alchemical motif in Fig. 9 of the royal birds uniting with each other while tearing each other to pieces.

After suffering the trauma of rebirth produced by a reversed act of embryonic growth and implantation, the regressing libido finally "extracts" itself from the womb in the shape of the winged hermaphrodite in Fig. 10. This figure symbolizes the conjunction between the "winged" morula and the receiving uterus, the former landing on the surface of the latter, as a flying seed lands on the surface of the nourishing earth. If the winged hermaphrodite in the full moon symbolizes the fusing moment of nidation, the fruits of the lunar tree and the wriggling mercurial serpents symbolize the ovulated eggs and the male sperm teeming in the uterine tube.

The act of royal separation depicted in Fig. 11 symbolizes the "withdrawal" of the morula from its maternal soil and its winged "ascent" (or "descent") into the *tuba uterina* in a continued act of libidinal regression. This is the act symbolized by the king's winged descent into the tubelike well in Fig. 12, where his lunar queen before joining him kills or cleaves him with the bow and arrow of Diana. This remarkable aspect of the descent of the king and queen into the tubelike well reflects the cleavage divisions of the fertilized egg as it drifts through the uterine tube as a "mulberry" cluster of dividing cells. The slow wafting of the egg toward the uterus by a gentle current of maternal fluids within the uterine tube is further symbolized by Fig. 13 where the hermaphrodite, soaring with the winged *Mercurius philosophorum*, rests under a tree belonging to the "rose garden of the philosophers", which symbolizes the ovary.

The departure of the spirit and soul from the putrefying body of the hermaphrodite in Fig. 14 reflects the ever-dwindling form of the "mulberry" as the regressing libido "dissolves" into 32 cells, 16 cells, 8 cells, 4 cells, 2 cells and – the fertilized egg. This is the crucial moment depicted in Fig. 15 in which Sol and Luna as little children (the parent cells) are united by their great mother (the

egg) while a fertilizing rain from their heavenly father (the sperm) soaks all three of them.

As the egg is fertilized immediately after its ejection or ovulation into the uterine tube, one might expect the alchemical “play-back” of the film of life to render a reversed act of ovulation immediately after the moment of conception. This indeed occurs in Fig. 16 where Sol and Luna climb out of the tubelike well seen in Fig. 12. This act symbolizes the “trauma of ovulation” when the ripe egg bursts out of the ovary and falls into the trumpet-shaped opening of the uterine tube. As Sol and Luna set foot on the gory soil of the breast-pecking pelican, they return to the soil of the ovary in a reversed menstrual cycle transforming the rupturing follicle into a receiving follicle and the ovulated egg into an egg embedding itself in the “egg hill” (*cumulus oophorus*) of the mature follicle. (In a parallel and analogous “masculine” movement of transformation, the libido returns as a seed into the phallus, there embedding itself as a sperm cell in the semineferous tubules of the testicles.)

This action of heavenly return is symbolized by Fig. 17 which renders the third conjunction of the opus alchymicum and the celestial rebirth of the king and queen touching down on the solar hill of the yellow sun (*citrinitas*). The mercurial serpents crushed and expiring at the foot of the hill symbolize the male sperm disappearing and expiring at the top of the uterine tube simultaneously with the “withdrawal” of the egg into its follicular cavity. The bat-wings of the royal hermaphrodite in the *Rosarium* woodcut of Fig. 17 symbolize the capability of the mature egg for ovulation or for falling flight into the eerie well of the uterine tube, where the egg is shocked into life by the “trauma of ovulation and fertilization” rendered in Figs. 15 and 16.

The dramatic sequel to the third conjunction is depicted by the devouring lion of Fig. 18. The lion’s movements symbolize the first maturation division (meiosis), which is a crucial process in the evolution of the growing egg. By a halving or reduction of the egg’s 46 paternal and maternal chromosomes (Sol and Luna) it is transformed into a proper sex-cell whose nucleus of 23 chromosomes will later fuse with the sperm’s 23 chromosomes, thus making up the 46 chromosomes of the new individual. The reversal of this “sexualization” of the growing egg cell (or sperm cell) aims at the restoration of the full-chromosomatic unity of the primordial, sexless germ cell.

This attempt at a parental reunion of the separated chromosomal halves within the egg itself is symbolized by Fig. 19 in which the philosopher’s son attempts to fuse with his separated parents, just as the Holy Spirit of the Son attempts to fuse with his Heavenly Mother and Father in the parallel action of the *Rosarium* woodcut of Fig. 19. The final “maturation” of the primordial germ cell is symbolized by Fig. 20 in which the hermaphroditic king opens the *cella* (“chamber”) of his first beginning or primordial “birth”. At this stage the libido attains its non-sexual unity in the full-chromosomatic primordial germ cell, which shares the nature and functions of the normal biological cell – the “cornerstone” of creation. At the same time as the libido acquires the sexual indifference of the normal body cell (Buddha’s *nirvana* principle), it acquires the “immortality” of the primordial germ cell which is a potential sex cell endowed with the potentialities of continuing the

eternal thread of life. This is the Great Stone of alchemy compared by the adepts to the incorruptible body of the risen Christ (*rubedo*) (Fabricius 1976/1989).

A Diagram of the Individuation Process

Figure 21 shows a diagram of the alchemical process of transformation which is identified in this paper with the individuation process. The diagram is purely schematic, based on an average life-span of 70 years, and follows the traditional division of life into periods of 7 years. The phantom sun to the left represents the biological completion of the individual around the age of 18 after four major periods of prenatal change and four major periods of postnatal change. These include: 1) gametogenesis; 2) ovulation, fertilization, morula-blastocyst formation and implantation; 3) embryonic development; 4) fetal development and birth; 5) infancy and early childhood; 6) middle childhood; 7) prepuberty; and 8) adolescence. This entire development is subsumed under the title *progressive individuation*.

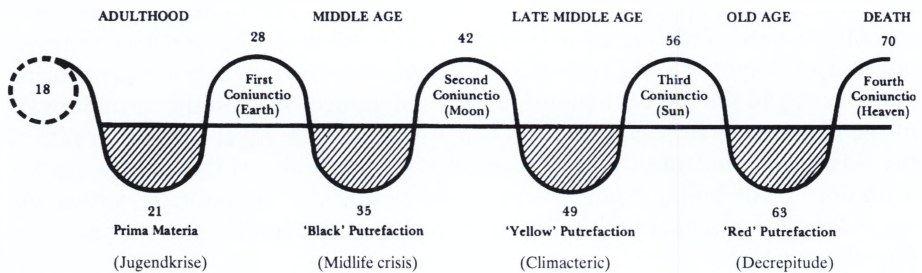


Fig. 21.

The diagram shows the other half of the individuation process, that which is termed *regressive individuation* and which comprises four major periods of psychobiological change: 1) adulthood; 2) middle age; 3) late middle age; and 4) old age and death. Each of these maturational stages is preceded by a critical period involving a process of profound psychobiological transformation. These critical periods are shown by the hatched troughs of the sun, in which the individual has to make fundamental psychic as well as physiological adjustments. During these transitional stages, unconscious symbols found in dreams will conform to the alchemical patterns of mortification and putrefaction – later to change into symbols of death and rebirth as the individuation process moves out of its chrysalis stages, into its butterfly stages.

The complicated structure of the *opus alchymicum* has been interpreted above as the symbolic expression of an inner transformation process at work in man's unconscious psyche. The subtle pattern of this cosmic process reverberating in the depths of the unconscious aims at establishing the unity of man and nature, conscious and unconscious, ego and self. The way in which this reunion of Man and God is brought about is through a reversal of the path of evolution, a "play-back" of the film of life, a *Tiefenregression* reviving the imprints of man's entire creation.

The unity of psychological and biological patterns experienced during this process confirms the wisdom of "The Emerald Table of Hermes" which states that

sicut superius, sicut inferius, “as above, so below” – as psychology, so biology. The same idea is expressed by Spinoza in his famous thesis that *Ordo et connexio idearum idem est ac ordo et connexio rerum* – “the order and connection of ideas corresponds to the order and connection of things”. This is the principle of the reciprocal validity of man’s biological and psychological means of grasping nature’s basic design (Alexander 1923). He can observe this design in the world of nature or he can experience it within himself. If his observations and experiences are correct, they will lead him to the same result, this being the only true way of control and verification: *Sicut superius, sicut inferius*.

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