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Microcosm and Macrocosm in the Renaissance



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Abstract

The idea of a microcosm-macrocosm correspondence is fundamental in the Renaissance interpretation of the world. To reach a better understanding of Renaissance natural philosophy, but also astrology, medicine, and in general the strong relation between many different sciences, is important to know how microcosm, plants, minerals, and animals, and macrocosm, planets and stars, are related. In medicine, in particular, the human body is considered a microcosm in its own right and knowing the correspondence between its parts and macrocosm was a fundamental requirement for the healing process.

Introduction

The idea of a correspondence between the celestial world and the elements on Earth is really important in Renaissance philosophy. This kind of relation is traced between two ordered and complex systems, two *cosmoi*, one very big and one very small, a *Macrocosm* and a *Microcosm*,

and between the similarities that can be found in them. Usually Earth is considered a microcosm related with the rest of the universe, the macrocosm; but in many cases also man can be depicted as a microcosm in its own right, connected with the rest of the universe, including the Earth.

Heritage and Continuity with the Tradition

The Chaldean-Babylonians were probably the first to formulate this idea: the skies, the stars, and planets, their position and their movements are strictly connected to the movements and the life of everything on Earth. However, the most important connection for the Chaldeans was that between the movements of the stars and the planets and the human life, that's why they are conventionally known as the fathers of astrology.

Indeed, the idea behind astrology is a correspondence between macrocosm and microcosm: the life of the universe is mirrored in the life of the human being, an independent microcosm to all effects that gathers in itself the influences from stars and planets. Starting from this way of conceiving the universe, the study of celestial bodies' movements is the most relevant tool to reach a better understanding of the life and the destinies of men. From the Chaldeans' age to the Middle age, during the whole Renaissance and much of the Modern age, astrology was acknowledged as one of the most important sciences and that's because

of the idea of a precise correspondence between the life of the universe and the life of the microcosm human being (Tittley 1937).

Another important science is rooted in the macrocosm/microcosm correspondence: alchemy. In the Emerald Tablet, attributed to the mythical founder of alchemy, Hermes Trismegistus, is written: "What is below resembles that which is above." "Below" is the sublunary world, saying it with Aristotelian words, and "above" is the celestial world. This is one of the fundamental teachings for the alchemist apprentice, because you had to understand the connections that go across the whole universe before being able to dominate its elements. Alchemy's origins are more various and composed than those of astrology: the technical and scientific notions enshrined by Egyptian priests for centuries have been enriched with elements from Greek and Hebrew culture. It is through the biblical book of *Genesis* that the idea of macrocosm-microcosm correspondence became acceptable and then important in the Christian Western culture: the universe is mirrored in terrestrial nature just like the image of God is mirrored in the human being and it is because of the development of God's project in the process of creation (Partington 1961).

Impact and Legacy

During the Renaissance, the idea of macrocosm-microcosm correspondence became even more important. Philosophy of Nature in the Renaissance is different from that inherited from Aristotle because there cannot always be found a clear and unbridgeable distinction between celestial and sublunary world. For a Renaissance philosopher, the key for Nature's secrets and the dominion over it is in the connections that bond together earth and sky, in the laws that regulate both of them. The ability to see the analogy between what is big and what is small is fundamental for the astrologer, for the alchemist, but also for the physician and that is one of the reasons why in the Renaissance it was necessary being a good philosopher to be an effective scientist, in every field of science. To properly understand and profit

from, e.g., the healing powers of a plant, you have to know its relation with a certain planet or a certain star and then through the relation between that certain planet or star and a specific part of human body you can properly connect that plant and that human body's part.

The invention of the telescope at the beginning of 1600 has been one of the most important scientific inventions of Modern age. It changed radically the relation between the macrocosm and its observer and was fundamental to reach a better and more detailed understanding of it. The same can be said for the later invention of the microscope. For the Renaissance and Early Modern scholar, a more detailed knowledge of both macrocosm and microcosm is necessary to understand the whole world and the invention of telescope and microscope was a great help for those kinds of Nature's investigators but also a consequence of their way of thinking (Turner 1985).

The medical philosophy of Theophrastus Paracelsus (1493–1541) is an important step in the development of modern medicine and one of the main ideas behind it is the correspondence between macrocosm and microcosm. Paracelsus conceived an idea of medicine in contrast with galenic medicine, based on iatrochemistry, a new kind of alchemy with the aim of preparing medicines, and mostly on a different way of thinking man. The man is a copy of the macrocosm, in his body every part of the whole universe is somehow represented. Speaking in these terms, the human being turns out as the culmination of the whole creation and the most important and complete subject of study. Thus, it should be known how minerals grow to understand how illnesses spread into the human body and how to face them; and also the correspondence between stars and planets, minerals, plants and human body's parts to combine effectively ingredients in a medicine. According to Paracelsus, medicine is one of the most important sciences, because its aim is the health of human race but also because it collects and unites in itself the knowledge of the other sciences, studying the human being, mirror of the whole universe (Pagel 1982).

The idea of macrocosm-microcosm correspondence in the interpretation and analysis of the

world pervades Renaissance philosophy and is behind the interdisciplinarity that characterizes the Renaissance philosophers: to fully understand an interconnected world, a philosopher is required who may analyze every field of science, and who can interpret the interconnections that run through every item of the universe.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Alchemy](#)
- ▶ [Astrology](#)
- ▶ [Hermes Trismegistus](#)
- ▶ [Hermetism](#)
- ▶ [Paracelsus](#)

- ▶ [Renaissance Medicine](#)
- ▶ [Telescope](#)

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