

Paracelsus on Erfahrung and the Wisdom of Praxis

Michael Doan

Preview

Not only did Paracelsus censure the logic of Aristotelians, but also their Godless approach to questions about nature. He declared that Aristotle was a heathen whose work had rightly been condemned repeatedly in church councils. In this essay the author elucidates the more salient features of Paracelsus' epistemology, and draws parallels between Paracelsus' notion of *experientia* (*Erfahrung*) and the more recent treatment of that topic that Gadamer offers. The author discusses Paracelsus' educational metaphor, elaborates on Paracelsus' creation myth and explores the mysterious doctrine of signatures before closing in on Paracelsus' discussion of the relationship between theory, practice, and experience.

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Paracelsus (1493–1541) was convinced that Aristotelian Scholasticism had to be purged from the schools to allow for progress in the practice of medicine. His impact on the history of medicine was profound and long-lasting, giving James Webster reason to claim that “the first major confrontation of the Scientific Revolution was between Paracelsus and Galen, rather than between Copernicus and Ptolemy.”¹ Paracelsus’s critique was directed against the prevailing educational paradigm and the appropriation of Aristotle’s *Organon* and *Physics* by the Scholastics. In light of the wisdom he had gained through his personal exploration of nature and the practice of medicine, and motivated further by his Christian faith, Paracelsus demanded that the entire Aristotelian corpus be set aside to make way for a new movement in naturalism.

Paracelsus complained that Aristotelian epistemology had prioritized universals, making the individuality of natural bodies incomprehensible, and closing the door to a higher level of precision in the practice of medicine. For Paracelsus there was nothing “accidental” about the idiosyncrasies of natural bodies. Every illness was a concrete situation for him and, as such, needed to be treated by a particular remedy, extracted from a particular herb or mineral, at a particular time, in light of a comprehensive understanding of the cosmos. The physician is not, for Paracelsus, a mere technician, but, rather, a kind of spiritual craftsman. There is no distinguishing between his knowledge, his experience, and his practical wisdom, for they form an indissoluble whole that cannot be abstracted from his life-history. The application of a remedy involves not just

¹ James Webster, *From Paracelsus to Newton: Magic and the Making of Modern Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 3–4.

theory, but a keen moral sensitivity and concern for right action. Through his personal relationship with God, the physician is expected to acquire a thoroughgoing concern for his patients, and the confidence with which he administers his remedies is a function of a life-long quest to cultivate moral and intellectual understanding.

Paracelsus insisted that Aristotelian logic was a “foreign doctrine” that had darkened the Light of Nature, because Galen, Avicenna and the physicians who followed them treated the conclusions of formalized arguments as ironclad truth, eliminating the need for further research. Formal proof had become the primary goal of experimental research and, as a consequence, personal experience was stripped of any value. Against this trend, Paracelsus argued that the methods of logic were not in fact conducive to learning, since the true purpose of proving something is in fact negative: the value of a proof lies in the fact that it may be surmounted in light of new evidence, broadening one’s level of understanding. “There is no life in what they [the Aristotelians] do,” Paracelsus claimed, “for there is no light for them in which they can learn anything.”² Paracelsus fought to hold open the historical horizons of personal experience, and refused to see experience as a mere means to theoretical knowledge. Accordingly, Paracelsus ought to be recognized as a precursor to the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, which draws a similar distinction between experience and theory.

Not only did Paracelsus censure the logic of Aristotelians, but also their Godless approach to questions about nature. He declared that Aristotle was “a heathen whose work had rightly been condemned repeatedly in church councils.”³ He blamed Galen for accepting Aristotelian principles without due criticism. These pagan authorities had to be overcome to make room for the knowledge granted to Adam, which, according to Paracelsus, could be retrieved through the Old Testament and the Hermetic tradition. These diverse sources had preserved the Platonic and pre-Socratic insights that had been forgotten under the influence of Aristotelian Scholasticism. In this regard, Paracelsus was calling for a return to origins. But he was certainly not a dogmatic Platonist. In fact, his Platonic and Biblical influences served primarily as inspiration for his own unique outlook on nature, which is complemented by a radically empirical, magico-religious attitude

² Paracelsus cited in Walter Pagel, *Paracelsus: An Introduction to Philosophical Medicine in the Era of the Renaissance*, 2nd Revised Edition (Basel: Karger, 1982), 58.

³ Allen G. Debus, *The Chemical Philosophy: Paracelsian Science and Medicine in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, 2 vols. (New York: Science History Publications, a division of Neale Watson Academic Publications, Inc, 1977), 66.

toward knowledge. Although Paracelsus was an enemy of Aristotelian Scholasticism, there are several congruencies between his approach to scientific knowledge and Aristotle's approach to moral knowledge. Paracelsus was revolting against the Scholastic notion of *episteme*, not the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis*.

In what follows I will elucidate the more salient features of Paracelsus's epistemology. This is a difficult task because Paracelsus was by no means a systematic thinker, and it is not clear that he intended to lay out a theory of knowledge at all. Nevertheless, several distinctive images emerge from the chaos of his written works, and when we hold them up together we will be able to catch a glimpse of the depth of his insight into human understanding. I will also draw parallels between Paracelsus's notion of *experientia* (*Erfahrung*) and the more recent treatment of that topic that Gadamer offers. I will show that Gadamer's understanding of *Erfahrung* has strong ties to Paracelsian thought and the alchemical tradition in general. The foundations for my essay will be laid through a discussion of Paracelsus's educational metaphor. I will then elaborate on Paracelsus's creation myth in order to present a more comprehensive picture of his naturalistic dualism and the doctrine of correspondences. I will explore the mysterious doctrine of signatures before closing in on Paracelsus's discussion of the relationship between theory, practice, and experience.

The Education of the *Physicus*

In order to make sense of Paracelsus's epistemology it is best to examine his attitudes toward the education of the physician. He does not offer a separate treatise on learning and knowledge, and his commentaries on these topics are scattered throughout his written works. We must therefore familiarize ourselves with the physician's "teachers" and the "schools" in which he carries out his studies in order to be able to appreciate the broader curriculum at issue. The educational metaphor will help shed light on the faculties that the physician has to work with and the sources from which he gathers his knowledge.

Paracelsus claims that there are two kinds of knowledge that correspond to the dual faculties of human reason: the *angelic* and the *animal*. He writes that, "The angelic reason is eternal, and comes from God, and belongs to God,"⁴ and

⁴ Paracelsus, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. K. Sudhoff and W. Mattheissen, part I: *Medizinische, naturwissenschaftliche und philosophische Schriften*, vols. 10–14 (Munich, Berlin: R. Oldenbourg, 1928–33), vol. 13, 310–11. Translations by A. E. Waite, *The Hermetic and Alchemical Writings of*

the eternal wisdom that it possesses is drawn directly from the Holy Spirit in the Light of Revelation.⁵ The first teacher of eternal wisdom is God, for the words of the Scriptures were not invented by man but revealed to him when God so desired. The apostles and prophets are teachers of eternity in a derivative sense since their written works bear witness to His divine Word.⁶ The wisdom given by God through the Light of Revelation is flawless and unchanging. It instills an abiding sense of compassion in the physician, helping him to distinguish good from evil.

On the other hand, “God has also given us the animal reason ...[and] it is not eternal, for the body dies, and it dies with the body.”⁷ The perishable wisdom of the animal reason originates in the Light of Nature, which radiates through all natural objects and is the source of implicit knowledge in every man.⁸ Mother Nature herself is the teacher of earthly wisdom as she instructs the physician on everything in her domain. But since the wisdom acquired through the Light of Nature is perishable, it does not enjoy the apodicticity of the teachings of Revelation. Perishable wisdom may serve both good and evil, and, as a consequence, the physician must always consult eternal wisdom to check the legitimacy of nature’s teachings.

Paracelsus emphasizes that both kinds of wisdom share divine origins. “What is there in us, mortals, that has not come to us from God?” he asks. “He who teaches us the eternal also teaches us the perishable; for both spring from God.”⁹ But while the Holy Spirit shares His eternal wisdom directly through the Light of Revelation, perishable wisdom can only be unearthed through the autonomous research of man. As Paracelsus explains, “The angels possess wisdom in themselves, but man does not. For him wisdom lies in nature, in nature he must seek it. His harvest is stored up in nature. Through nature God’s power

Aureolus Philippus Theophrastus Bombast, of Hohenheim, called Paracelsus the Great, 2 vols.(New York: University Books Inc, 1967).

⁵ Paracelsus, *Werke*, I, 12, 8–9.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Paracelsus, *Werke*, I, 13, 310–11.

⁸ The light of nature demonstrates the Platonic influence on Paracelsus, for the “implicit knowledge” that it supplies is strikingly similar to Plato’s doctrine of the recollection of the Forms. However, as we shall see, Paracelsus claims that we have an implicit knowledge of particulars, not universals.

⁹ Paracelsus *Werke*, I, 11, 130.

is revealed to man, through nature he enters into his Father's heritage, in wisdom and in the arts."¹⁰

The invisible "virtues" of natural objects are supernatural, and it is the religious duty of the physician to bring them to light through his works, since God put them there for the benefit of the sick and infirm.¹¹ By searching out nature's secrets the physician is fostering a stronger relationship with the Father, uniting in his psyche all the wisdom that existed prior to the act of creation.

The wisdom acquired through the Light of Nature is complex, so while the physician has two primary teachers (*viz.*, God and Mother Nature), these teachers must offer him training in three different schools: "[The physician] should send the elemental or material body to the elemental school, the sidereal or ethereal body to the sidereal school, and the eternal or luminous body to the school of eternity. For three lights burn in man, and accordingly three doctrines are prescribed to him. Only all three together make man perfect."¹² The eternal body is educated by the Holy Spirit in the Light of Revelation, as noted above. The material body is "elemental" in the sense that it is composed of the earthly elements, water and earth. Paracelsus tells us that "these two elements constitute the body in its transient, animal life, which man as a natural being received from divine creation."¹³ In the elemental school the physician is trained in the methods of chemistry and alchemy in order to acquire knowledge about the external aspects of natural bodies, including the ways in which materials are separated and combined. He will also learn about the anatomy and physiology of animate bodies by investigating the structure and function of the organs, flesh, and blood. The material natures of things are comprehended through sensation and conscious, rational thought, so the elemental school is open to believers and non-believers alike.

Natural bodies also have a "sidereal" side that consists of the ethereal elements, air and fire. Paracelsus considers the ethereal elements to be of a material nature, although they are "as subtle as the light of the Sun"¹⁴ and are not always visible to the naked eye. He claims that the sidereal body "is also bound to the animal life of man," and, therefore, the mortal body of man consists of all

¹⁰ Paracelsus *Werke*, I, 13, 304–5.

¹¹ Pagel, *Paracelsus*, 54.

¹² Paracelsus *Werke*, I, 12, 197–98.

¹³ Paracelsus *Werke*, I, 14, 597–98.

¹⁴ Paracelsus, cited in *Paracelsus: Selected Writings*, ed. Jolande Jacobi, trans. Guterman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), 249.

four elements, “water, earth, fire, and air.”¹⁵ In the sidereal school the physician learns about the internal aspects of natural bodies, including feelings, the imagination, and, in man, the dual faculties of reason. He will study the constellations of the stars and discover how they “cook” the virtues of all natural bodies, and he will learn how his astral imagination can exert a reciprocal influence over the celestial bodies. For this purpose, the physician must be trained in the practice of natural magic, for only the true *Magus* is able to affect the “sympathetic” interaction of celestial forces. Sidereal knowledge is not achieved through purely sensory means, nor is it achieved through conscious, rational thought. Rather, it must be approached by way of dream-states, trances, and mystical experiences, fortified by a powerful imagination and faith in God.¹⁶

This kind of magico-religious knowledge, whose objects lie in the invisible, sidereal realm, and whose operative faculty is the imagination, was either discredited and marginalized or simply ignored both by Paracelsus’s predecessors (Aristotelian Scholastics) and his successors (Baconians and Cartesians). Interestingly enough, it is prioritized by Paracelsus, as he holds that knowledge of a thing’s invisible, inner nature is more direct than sensing and/or reasoning about its external attributes.

In the following section I will give a more comprehensive account of his dualism of material and sidereal realms. I offer an abridged rendition of Paracelsus’s creation myth, which was originally inspired by the Scriptures and contains the most significant features of his doctrine of correspondences. I then tackle his doctrine of divine signatures and attempt to determine how it fits in to the broader context of his epistemology.

The Visible and the Invisible

According to Paracelsus, God created the material, visible components of all natural bodies which include heaven and earth, minerals, plants, animals and man out of a primordial matrix of water. This matrix is invisible but God dwelt alongside it; it carried Him prior to the act of creation.¹⁷ In the beginning, God created the four elements and the three substances¹⁸ (mercury, sulfur, and salt) the

¹⁵ Paracelsus *Werke*, I, 14, 597–98.

¹⁶ Pagel, *Paracelsus*, 50.

¹⁷ Paracelsus, *Werke*, I, 9, 190–91.

¹⁸ Paracelsus also refers to the three substances as the three “principles,” but I will use “substances” to avoid confusion.

formal and substantial properties of all material bodies, respectively. The elements and substances persisted in a whirl of chaos called the *prima materia* (prime matter). From out of this initial state of chaos, God created the earth and the seas, the stars and the heavens, and then “took out, drew out, and separated [*separatio*] all His creatures from one mass and material,”¹⁹ leaving no residue behind.

God created heaven and earth from a single primordial substance,²⁰ which the Scriptures refer to as the *limus terrae*, or “clay” of the Great Maker. Paracelsus explains that “the *limus terrae* is an extract of the firmament, of the universe of stars, and at the same time of all the elements.”²¹ Heaven and earth make up the Great World or “macrocosm,” a closed system that encompasses all of God’s creation, to which nothing may be added and from which nothing may escape.²² God created man from out of the same substance as heaven and earth, forming the *compositio humana* from the *limus terrae*. Just as the Great World is all-encompassing, the substance of man cannot be mixed with anything outside, for his body forms a self-contained unit.²³ The structure and substance of the Great World or macrocosm is mirrored in man, the Little World or “microcosm,” as “the Great World remains completely undisturbed in its husk ... and similarly man in his house, that is to say, his skin.”²⁴ They are analogous in every respect, as every part of the universe is somehow reflected in the body of man.

Paracelsus claims that “just as the Great World is built upon the three substances, so man, the Little World, was composed of the same substances.”²⁵ The material, tangible components of all things in nature come from the earth, and are composed of the three substances in various ratios. The different combinations of the three substances manifest a number of formal characteristics which are represented by the four elements. For instance, a body that is mostly composed of salt, like a quartz crystal, will resemble the form of earth. In contrast, a body

¹⁹ Paracelsus *Werke*, I, 9, 150–51.

²⁰ This is a different, and perhaps even metaphorical, use of the word “substance.” The *limus terrae* should be distinguished from the “three substances” (mercury, sulfur, and salt) which are, for Paracelsus, the ultimate material constituents or in other words, “atoms” of the cosmos. This said, it is not at all clear that Paracelsus uses the term “substance” in a consistent manner.

²¹ Paracelsus *Werke*, I, 12, 33.

²² Paracelsus *Werke*, I, 9, 178.

²³ Paracelsus *Werke*, I, 9, 178.

²⁴ Paracelsus *Werke*, I, 9, 178.

²⁵ Paracelsus *Werke*, I, 8, 280.

that is dominated by sulfur, like a puff of smoke from a furnace, takes on a vaporous form and is more closely related to air. “Matter was at the beginning of all things,” writes Paracelsus, “and only after it had been created was it endowed with the spirit of life, so that this spirit might unfold in and through the bodies as God had willed.”²⁶ The world is not only made up of tangible and perceptible components, but also of those that are invisible and imperceptible: the active, vital forces at work in all natural bodies. These latter, which Paracelsus calls the “virtues,” were received by the earth from the heavens and are direct emanations from God, which existed in Him prior to the act of creation.

Just as the material components of all natural bodies are composed of the three substances, the sidereal components consist of three basic ingredients, namely feeling, wisdom, and art.²⁷ These virtues are the supernatural dimensions in man and all other natural bodies. They endow a given thing with *scientia* or *sapientia*, which is the hidden intelligence that allows it to fulfill its nature. This *scientia* is obviously quite different than what we might call “scientific knowledge,” for it is an innate, unconscious form of wisdom. For example, the *scientia* of an acorn is what teaches it to become an oak tree, and the *scientia* of a bumblebee is what shows it how to pollinate a flower.²⁸

Walter Pagel has provided a particularly lucid summary of Paracelsian anthropology: “Man is anchored in two worlds the visible and the invisible, the elemental and the celestial, the world of matter, which serves the body, and the world of action and power, which serves his spirit and mind. Man as a whole is a ‘fifth essence’ (*quinta essentia*) extracted from both worlds and wrought into one being. He has received wisdom, reason and the organic composition of his body (the “wisdom of the firmament”) from the *Astrum*, and flesh and blood from the elements.”²⁹

The “fifth essence” that Pagel speaks of is another way Paracelsus refers to the virtue or active principle inherent in natural bodies. According to Paracelsus, each of the four elements contains a “quintessential” ethereal element that originates in God and which endows all natural bodies with spirit and life.

²⁶ Paracelsus *Werke*, I, 12, 14–15.

²⁷ Paracelsus *Werke*, I, 12, 14–15.

²⁸ *Scientia* differs from Aristotle’s *entelecheia* in (at least) one important respect: Aristotle held that only *living things* could strive to reach their final cause *sua sponte*, but Paracelsus argued that *all* things in Nature possessed *scientia*, even so-called “inanimate” objects like minerals.

²⁹ Pagel, *Paracelsus*, 65.

The fifth essence is what binds the material and sidereal components together, making natural bodies into organic wholes.

We are presented with a vision of the cosmos that is founded upon two basic principles:

1. All natural bodies are made up of two components: a material body and a sidereal body.
2. Man is a small replica of the entire universe, and all of his parts correspond to features of the world as a whole.

With these principles in place we can now apply the basic elements of Paracelsus's theory of knowledge. According to the educational metaphor, the physician acquires perishable wisdom about the two components of natural bodies through the Light of Nature by receiving training in the elemental and sidereal schools. This training involves practical instruction in the methods of chemistry, alchemy, anatomy and physiology, supplemented by lessons in the unconscious art of natural magic. The physician is versed in the nature of the Great World as a whole by acquiring knowledge about its material constituents and their invisible virtues. Once he has begun to fathom the macrocosm in all of its complexity, the physician is then ready to relate the parts of the Great World to the corresponding parts in man, and these analogies play a vital role in the diagnosis and treatment of disease.

The correspondences between macrocosm and microcosm and the study of nature in general offer the physician a kind of universal knowledge about human nature, for the parts of all men are mirrored in the Great World. Yet as Pagel observes, in Paracelsus's doctrine of correspondences "the concept of specificity, so essential to his ideas in general, seems to be abandoned."³⁰ This is a problem for Paracelsus, given that he criticized Aristotelian Scholasticism for advocating an overly abstract theory of knowledge, which apparently could not account for the irreducible individuality of every natural body. In the sections that follow I will explain how Paracelsus attempted to compensate for the generality of the doctrine of correspondences. To this end we must examine his doctrine of signatures, and the "uncertain arts" that are used for divining the dynamic natures of individuals.

³⁰ Pagel, *Paracelsus*, 104.

The Signs of Individuality

The uncreated virtues are offered by Paracelsus as the means through which the Creator impressed natural bodies with divine “signatures.” The invisible, sidereal forces are the active principles in all natural bodies, which have the power to “sign” the external features of their material components. “For the sculptor of Nature is so artful,” writes Paracelsus, “that he does not mould the soul to fit the form, but the form to fit the soul.”³¹ This is why chemistry and alchemy were so important to Paracelsus, for when the three substances (mercury, sulfur, and salt) are brought to a state of absolute purity, their virtues may be recognized with relative ease. It is noteworthy that Paracelsus’s material atomism was based upon a form of *qualitative* (rather than *quantitative*) analysis, where the most significant qualities (i.e., the divine virtues) were thought to be beyond the reach of the human senses. Conducting experiments over the transformative heat of the fire was a way of reenacting the *separatio* of the Creator, and imaginatively unveiling the invisible components of the substances that underlie everything in the created order. Although every natural body was assumed to possess its own unique virtue, and this assumption blocked the possibility of understanding the virtue of a whole in terms of the virtues of its material constituents, there was still something important about divining the most basic active principles at work in nature. Incidentally, Paracelsus is widely recognized for being one of the first (if not *the* first) physicians to have prescribed the ingestion of inorganic substances (e.g., mercury) as a treatment for disease.

For Paracelsus the universe is a living organism in which occult or magical forces are everywhere at work, and the true *Magus* is performing a service to the Creator by uncovering His divine secrets. “It is not God’s will that all He has created for the benefit of man and has given him as his own should remain hidden ... And even if He did conceal some things, He left nothing unmarked, but provided all things with outward, visible marks, with special traits just as a man who has buried a treasure marks the spot in order that he may find it again.”³² Since the sidereal body is responsible for “impressing upon” the outward material form, the specific virtue of a natural body may be recognized by analyzing the visible contours of its exterior. For, “Nature is the sculptor,” writes

³¹ Paracelsus *Werke*, I, 12, 91–93.

³² Paracelsus *Werke*, I, 11, 393.

Paracelsus, and “she endows everything with the form which is also the essence, and thus the form reveals the essence.”³³

It was clear to Paracelsus and his followers that the divine signatures of natural bodies had to be discovered and their internal virtues determined, for it was assumed that the virtues were the principles at work in all forms of medicine. In order to prepare an effective cure the physician must consider the particular virtues that inhere in his patients and remedies, “for God has carefully differentiated all His creation from the beginning, and has never given to different things the same shape and form.”³⁴ Only when he has united his knowledge of the particular and the universal (the latter knowledge springs from the doctrine of correspondences) will he know which remedy to apply, for a particular remedy is required for a particular patient, and these conditions can only be determined in light of the universal analogies that exist between the greater planets and the (sidereal) “planets in man.”

The celestial bodies need to be properly aligned for the *Magus*/physician to affect “sympathetic action” over the body of his patient, so the abstract knowledge gained through the doctrine of correspondences is absolutely vital. However, this knowledge is useless to the physician if he is unable to specify the hidden virtues of the natural bodies at hand, for these must also match the circumstances. The physician has to take all of the variables into account, from the moral disposition of the patient to the current phase of the stars to the age and potency of his herbs and minerals. All of this information has to be divined by “reading” the signatures, revealing the invisible through the visible.

Reading signatures is a complicated art that takes the physician far beyond any sort of logical method. As Paracelsus tells us:

³³ Paracelsus *Werke*, I, 12, 174–77, emphasis mine. The doctrine of the signatures was not based solely on metaphysical speculation, but also on experimental evidence involving the resuscitation of plants from their ashes (a form of *palingenesis*). A Paracelsian physician named Joseph Duchesne (ca. 1544–1609) performed an experiment in which he burned nettles and dissolved their ashes in a caustic fluid. The substance that he produced was cooled until the onset of freezing, and Duchesne noted the jagged spikes of ice that began to form on the surface. He argued that through the influence of its “invisible virtues,” the nettle’s ashes had resurrected their original form. The experiment supposedly proved that the virtues of natural bodies could not be affected by the heat of fire, for a virtue is entirely spiritual in nature. The material body of the plant was apparently just a shell for the indestructible active principle, which could re-impress its characteristic form at any time.

³⁴ Paracelsus *Werke*, I, 13, 376.

There are four ways by which the nature of man and of all living things can be discovered ... First, chiromancy; it concerns the extreme parts of man's limbs, namely the hands and feet ... Second, physiognomics; it concerns the face and the whole head ... Third, the *substantina*, which refers to the whole shape of the body ... And fourth, the customs and usages, that is to say, manners and gestures in which man appears and shows himself ... These four belong together; they provide us with a complete knowledge of the hidden, inward man, and of all things that grow in nature.³⁵

The physician must familiarize himself with these uncertain arts (*artes incertae*) so that he will be able to grasp the hidden activity of a given animal, herb, or mineral. According to Paracelsus, these methods of divination do not come from eternal wisdom, but through the works of man. "They were kept secret and taught secretly. For the students of these arts devoted their time to inner contemplation and faith, and by such means they discovered and proved many great things. But the men of today have no longer such capacity for imagination and faith ... These arts are uncertain today because man is uncertain in himself."³⁶

Since the uncertain arts function by means of unconscious psychic processes, they are easily misused and can often be deceptive. This is why faith is so important for the physician, because only when he feels secure with the light that God has given him will he be able to achieve a sufficient level of confidence in his craft. The uncertain arts are not shrouded in secrecy because they are incommunicable in fact, Paracelsus wrote extensively on the principles of chiromancy and physiognomics. The real issue is that accessing the hidden world requires a kind of intuitive grasp of the virtues, and this intuition has to be cultivated through experience.³⁷ Even when a physician has memorized the texts that are associated with the uncertain arts, there is no guarantee that his sidereal body is prepared for communion with the invisible realm.

It is difficult to understand how the physician manages to cross the boundary between the visible and the invisible, the signature and the signified, but however this step is taken it does not involve logical methods. As Pagel reminds us, the mind of the physician "is endowed with strata that are deeper and more powerful than reasoning and that are indissolubly bound up with his personality

³⁵ Paracelsus *Werke*, I, 12, 174–77.

³⁶ Paracelsus *Werke*, I, 12, 485.

³⁷ Pagel, *Paracelsus*, 204.

as a whole and specific to the individual in contrast to reason, which ... appears to be valid to everybody.”³⁸ This is why Paracelsus insisted that personal experience was so important for the physician, for divining the virtues involves a kind of mystical, religious union with the forces that dwell in the spiritual realm. In the final section of this paper I will offer an interpretation of Paracelsian *experientia* (*erfahrung*), drawing parallels with Gadamer’s hermeneutics.

***Erfahrung* and Practical Wisdom**

Paracelsus rejected the dominant educational paradigm of his time because it emphasized logic and book learning, undermining the relevance of practical wisdom and first-hand experience: “The art of medicine cannot be inherited, nor can it be copied from books; it must be digested many times and many times spat out; one must always re-chew it and knead it thoroughly, and one must be alert while learning it, one must not doze like peasants turning over pears in the sun.”³⁹

The physician will not master his craft by perfecting a certain methodology or memorizing a theoretical model, but he cannot acquire knowledge through haphazard experimentation either. True knowledge is *experientia*, something that is known with overwhelming confidence, by contrast with the contingent facts discovered through experimentation.⁴⁰ An experiment reveals nothing about nature when it is divorced from the background of a person’s historical and theoretical understanding, so the physician needs to be working with some kind of framework in mind (be it implicit or explicit) when he is out in the field. Since it would be irresponsible to accept a theory on authority, he must allow his theories to emerge out of the context of his own exploration of nature.

Paracelsus maintains that “theory should be derived from practice,”⁴¹ rather than basing practice upon the dominant theories of a given epoch. Paracelsus’s distrust of tradition was typical of the age leading up to the Enlightenment. And yet, at the same time, Paracelsus extols the virtues of a rich life-history an altogether different form of tradition and claims that one’s practice should form the bedrock beneath any theoretical musings. He is not skeptical about the communal sense of tradition because he considers it to be irrational or

³⁸ Pagel, *Paracelsus*, 62.

³⁹ Paracelsus *Werke*, I, 10, 29.

⁴⁰ Pagel, *Paracelsus*, 60.

⁴¹ Paracelsus *Werke*, I, 11, 183.

methodologically unsound (as Descartes was later to argue). Rather, it is simply that tradition is old, and if it is to survive it will be because its principles are reaffirmed by a new generation of scientists. Paracelsus insists that the physician must get his hands dirty while digging up his own herbs and minerals; he should learn to extract their virtues by putting in the hours over the furnace. Once all the work has been done and he has wiped the sweat from his brow, then and only then will he be ready to step back and reflect upon the words that might explain his labor. Then and only then will he be in a position to cast judgment on tradition, by seeing whether it measures up to his own experience.

Paracelsus has a free-thinking approach to medicine (he was widely known as the “Luther of Medicine”) which is founded upon his religious outlook. He emphasizes a personal relationship to God that could only be strengthened through a life-long pursuit of nature’s secrets. He did not accept an orthodox account of creation, but fashioned his own cosmology by incorporating what he had learned in his travels and through the application of his craft. Paracelsus offers a cosmology that is comprehensive enough to provide a background for experimental research, but loose enough to allow for amendments without any disturbance to its religious core. He argues that “theory and practice should together form one, and should remain undivided.”⁴² All men possess the Light of Nature; therefore the physician nurtures his God-given wisdom by perfecting his art. “For every theory is also a kind of speculative practice, and is no more and no less true than active practice.”⁴³ This is not so much a deflation of theory as it is a celebration of the value of personal experience. Paracelsus thought that the physician’s life-history was just as relevant and possibly even more important than a comprehensive theoretical outlook.

Paracelsus thought that if physicians were open-minded enough to experience the healing powers of magic it would be difficult for them to adhere to a theory that is contradicted by evidence. “Experience is the judge; if a thing stands the test of experience, it should be accepted; if it does not stand this test, it should be rejected.”⁴⁴ But physicians usually reject the idea of magic precisely because it contradicts the assumptions of a given theory or (as was more common at the time) the tenets of the prevailing religious orthodoxy. Paracelsus challenges us to abandon our dogmatic attitudes and live in the divine light of experience, for

⁴² Paracelsus *Werke*, I, 6, 314.

⁴³ Paracelsus *Werke*, I, 6, 314.

⁴⁴ Paracelsus *Werke*, I, 6, 314.

he claims that practical wisdom always outruns knowledge that can be written in a formula and recorded in a textbook.

This attitude toward experience (*Erfahrung*) and practical wisdom is echoed in Gadamer's *Truth and Method*. Gadamer writes:

The perfection of [the 'experienced' person's] experience ... does not consist in the fact that someone already knows everything and knows better than anyone else. Rather, the experienced person proves to be, on the contrary, someone who is radically undogmatic; who, because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them. *The dialectic of experience has its own fulfillment not in definitive knowledge, but in that openness to experience that is encouraged by experience itself.*⁴⁵

In other words, to be “experienced” requires that one be open to the possibility of novelty. Indeed, it is to be open to the kind of experiences that might shatter the presumptions of a cherished theory or a well-worn methodology. The experienced man does not find his fulfillment by acquiring “methodological sureness.”⁴⁶ Instead, he thrives on the possibility of disappointment, and on the fact that he can never achieve perfection, for, “every experience worthy of the name runs counter to our expectation.”⁴⁷ But the experienced man is also a tremendous reservoir of knowledge, whether or not he is prepared to admit it.

Consider the following example. A veteran sea captain awakens from his nightly slumber. He walks out onto the main deck, feels the waves crashing against the bow and examines the colors of the clouds, while listening to the breeze as it tosses the rigging. It is a beautiful morning, but within the span of that moment he has determined that there is rain in store, and he gives orders to his crew to prepare for it. His first mate asks him to explain the prediction. What was it about the water, the clouds and the breeze that clued the captain in to the impending storm? How did he divine the weather in a single glance? The captain gives his mate a mysterious look and chuckles to himself before returning to his quarters. He could not explain his reasoning even if he wanted to. The years have

⁴⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer. *Truth and Method*. (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), 319, emphasis mine.

⁴⁶ Gadamer, 325.

⁴⁷ Gadamer, 319.

taught him things that cannot be perfunctorily communicated to a fellow seaman. He might tell his mate that the Sirens whisper the weather in his ear, but this would be a feeble attempt to rationalize the situation. And yet no one questions the captain's orders, for he is rarely mistaken about the weather and has never steered a ship awry in all his years at the helm.

Paracelsus thinks that a physician can acquire a kind of intuitive understanding of nature, just as the sea captain divines the weather. The rain that is to come is not a tangible something exhibited by the waves and clouds, just as the virtue of an herb is not literally worn on its leaves. Paracelsus writes that "*Praesagium*" or forecasting "is a thing by which one shows something that is not this thing."⁴⁸ The contours of material phenomena signify the "not" by pointing to the invisible forces at work in the sidereal realm. The only way for the captain or physician to gain access to this hidden world is to have faith in the light that God has given him, and by trusting that he might "overhear" (*Ablauschen*) the *scientia* of the objects in his environment. As Pagel explains, "Experience" as needed by the naturalist and physician consists entirely in making himself part of the object and understanding it by listening to its inner mechanism. It cannot be acquired by those who lack the ability to identify themselves with natural objects."⁴⁹ The captain does not divine the weather by writing down his observations, consulting a manual and calculating the outcome: he does not distance himself from his situation in this scientific sense. He cannot give an account of the reasoning behind his predictions precisely because there was no explicit deduction, no self-conscious application of method. He has absorbed the *scientia* of the things in his environment deep into the unconscious strata of his psyche, by simply "knocking at the door" of nature and listening for the echo throughout the course of countless years at sea. "*Scientia* is contained in the object in which God has provided it," writes Paracelsus, and, "*Experientia* is knowledge of cases in which *scientia* has been put to the test."⁵⁰ When the echo sounds in the form of a downpour, the captain is confident that he overheard the *scientia* of the sea in making his prediction, even though there is no obvious explanation for his success.

While all men inherit the ability to fathom God's wisdom through the Light of Nature, not all of us are able to take full advantage of our natural endowments. We lack faith in our instincts and treat them as base or animal. Our

⁴⁸ Paracelsus, cited in *Paracelsus*, ed. Jacobi, 259, emphasis mine.

⁴⁹ Pagel, *Paracelsus*, 62, emphasis mine.

⁵⁰ Paracelsus, cited in Pagel, *Paracelsus*, 60.

instincts can certainly deceive us, as is the case with all “perishable wisdom” all “uncertain arts.” The uncertain arts can be vague and untrustworthy, but only because “man is uncertain in himself.” That is why faith in eternal wisdom is so important, because it supplies the physician with a secure moral compass on which to train his experience. It is important for the physician to understand that his instincts are responsible for divining the virtues, for only then will he feel confident when administering a particular remedy. We all share God’s heritage in His creation, but “according to how we invest, use, and administer our heritage,” Paracelsus writes, “we obtain much or little from it; and yet it belongs to all of us, and it is in all of us.”⁵¹ Therefore, the physician must take full advantage of what God has given him and trust all of his faculties, for only then will he be able to amass the experience that is required for reading the signatures, allowing him to unite all of the virtues of the macrocosm in himself.

In the wake of the Enlightenment, Gadamer targeted similar pretenses of the natural sciences, and pointed out their relationship to teleological accounts of experience. “The main deficiency in theory of experience hitherto,” he writes, “is that it is entirely oriented toward science and hence takes no account of the inner historicity of experience.”⁵² Gadamer claims that the notion that experience is perfected by knowledge is “the unattainable ideal of the Enlightenment.”⁵³ The experienced man is the one who, like Paracelsus, is always open to new experiences and understands himself to be a historical being. The experienced student of nature is always pressed by new questions. His goal is to become confident in the application of his craft, realizing that certainty is something of a mirage.

In his notion of *experientia* Paracelsus’s alchemical influences are revealed. He teaches us that the obscurity associated with the alchemical tradition is not necessarily the result of a deliberate attempt to conceal or mislead. For how could an alchemist tell the story of the hands that added that extra bit of know-how to affect the transmutation of a metal? Since an alchemist does not work under the guidance of a comprehensive theory indeed, since it is the entire purpose of alchemy to prove one’s worth through a personal struggle, through the persistent striving after *Bildung* how could we expect him to document his journey in a way that would do justice to his experiences? He is reduced to a language of symbolism that can only gesture to the invisible narrative of a

⁵¹ Paracelsus *Werke*, I, 13, 294–95.

⁵² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 310–11.

⁵³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 324.

lifelong quest: a quest that forced him to muster all of his energy to become the best possible scientist he could be. Experience means learning to ask the right questions of the world: learning to “knock at the door” of nature, and knowing how to listen for a reply. For Paracelus being a student of nature means following tirelessly in the footsteps of the Creator, without ever pretending to have finally deciphered nature’s code. It means recognizing the irreducible individuality of every natural body, and being responsive to the novelty inherent in every encounter.