

DARIO GURASHI, *IN DEIFICO SPECULO. AGRIPPA'S HUMANISM*, TRANSLATED FROM ITALIAN BY BRIAN McNEIL, BRILL – WILHELM FINK, PADERBORN 2021 (HUMANISTISCHE BIBLIOTHEK, I; ABHANDLUNGEN, 67), 218 PP., ISBN: 9783770566518.

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This book by Dario Gurashi takes the intriguing figure of Henry Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim – better known as Cornelius Agrippa – and his work *Dialogus de homine* (1515–16) as a case study carefully analyzed throughout almost 200 pages that embrace an introduction and six chapters. The origin of the book traces back to Gurashi's doctoral thesis, submitted in 2018, and develops a detailed analysis of the *Dialogus de homine*, a youthful work in which Cornelius Agrippa unfolds a reflection on the human condition deeply influenced by Renaissance Neo-Platonism, Hermetics and Kabbalistic theories. Gurashi investigates the genesis, structure, content and interpretation of the *Dialogue*, contextualizing the text as a coherent piece in the intellectual progression of the author as well as within a more expanded field that includes Agrippa's *De occulta philosophia* (1510, published in 1533) and also *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum* (1526–30). Ultimately, Dario Gurashi offers a critical reconstruction and philological transcription of the original Latin text of the *Dialogue*. That said, the main objective of the present book is to explore the theoretical foundations of Agrippa's humanism, examining the historical-philosophical sources that nourish the *Dialogus de homine* and help articulate Agrippa's intellectual project entailing the renewal of humankind and knowledge by means of the spiritual restoration of magic.

### I. Agrippa's Dispersa Intentio

Born in Cologne in 1486, Cornelius Agrippa's life was marked by numerous trips and exiles, demonstrating an intense mobility in both geographical and intellectual terms. Gurashi explains that the education of Agrippa as a humanist was enriched by his travels through Europe, which were made possible through his diplomatic and military work for Maximilian I of Habsburg. Agrippa also served as an ambassador, legal counselor, physician to the court of Louise of Savoy, and archivist and imperial counselor to Margaret of Austria. From 1511 to 1518, he was stationed in Italy for official duties, during which time he pursued further

research and reading. His main interests at that time were Plotinus, Ficino, the *Corpus Hermeticum*, Ramon Llull, and prominent German authors such as Trithemius and Reuchlin. Not in vain, when Agrippa was only 23, he presented his *De Occulta Philosophia* manuscript to the great occultist Abbot Johannes Trithemius, who encouraged him to continue his intellectual pursuits.

However, in *De Incertitudine* – as Gurashi remarks – Agrippa appears to renounce and openly condemn magical, astrological, and alchemical disciplines, which he had previously addressed in *De Occulta Philosophia*: « [...] in other words, he would seem to be aiming to deny what he simultaneously admits to profess » (p. XLI). This apparent conflict between skeptical reason, faith, and magic began to arise in Agrippa's mind. Gurashi emphasizes the inherent ambiguity in both Agrippa's thinking and written work, which frequently remains elusive and hinders exegetical understanding. Nevertheless, this sort of incoherence does not necessarily mean a contradiction within Agrippa's intellectual project. As Gurashi suggests, the *vindicatio magiae* is always at the basis of Agrippa's conceptual proposal and theoretical framework. « Once again, it seems too difficult to identify the philosopher's *dispersa intentio* » (p. XLI). In other words, Agrippa's fundamental idea consists of introducing magic as the necessary link between faith and reason because he believed that reason alone is insufficient to reach true knowledge, as it also requires enlightenment and revelation. In such a situation:

Agrippa seems to be a classic case of the divided consciousness. On the one hand he believed in the power of the occult to gain control over the universe, on the other he was skeptical of knowing anything at all. How do we reconcile – or do we – these two sides of his personality?»<sup>1</sup>

According to Dario Gurashi, this dilemma is not truly problematic given that it exists solely within a rigid classification and interpretation of the philosopher's texts. Critics and contemporary readers of Agrippa have usually distinguished two separated periods: the first one related to *De incertitudine*, considered a profession of skepticism (Cassirer) and the second, linked to *De occulta philosophia*, which is seen from an anti-rationalist orientation and as an example of Renaissance occultism (Hayden). In this scenario, what is interesting about Gurashi's contribution is that he states the unnecessary contradiction of both periods. Despite being apparently irreconcilable, they are actually consequent and consistent, so critical readings of Agrippa do not have to choose one period instead of the other as if it were the philosopher's true thinking. This is particularly applicable to the *Dialogus de homine*. In this respect, authors in line with Gurashi

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<sup>1</sup> HENRICUS CORNELIUS AGRIPPA, *Declamation on the Nobility and Preeminence of the Female Sex*, ed. ALBERT RABIL JR., University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1996, p. 10.

are R. H. Popkin and especially F. A. Yates, who supports the continuity of Agrippa's magical interests.

It is of no surprise that Agrippa dove into such issues, in view of his growing pessimism and deep mistrust in the power of reason, so finally his skepticism led him to a conceptual approach to magic. This state of affairs lets Gurashi develop a theoretical positioning notable for its transversality and holistic approach. This phenomenon results in a contemporary re-reading of the dichotomy skepticism-occultism in Cornelius Agrippa's work « in the light of a zigzag » (p. XLVIII), which constitutes one of the most significant novelties of this book.

## II. Agrippa's Reform of Knowledge: Between Faith and Magic

Keeping the above in mind, Gurashi expands Agrippa's procedure. Particularly his aim to develop the encounter between *docta religio* and *pia philosophia*, through which the German thinker synthesizes relevant figures coming from anti-scholastic spiritualism, such as Moses, Hermes Trismegistus and Plato, and locates them in the context of a reform of knowledge and culture. Specifically, Cornelius Agrippa's humanistic program pursued an ambitious mission which consisted in helping others to achieve true knowledge, that is, the contemplation of the essence of the most secret things including the inner order of nature. Since Agrippa embraced this « sacred philosophy », he took that mission as his most precious duty. He certainly did not propose an ascetical path reserved for just a few chosen ones. The « true wise man » makes use of his knowledge in order to help the world, in this sense he is a « collaborator of God ». He combines faith and philosophy and articulates them into works. In this way, he claims to be the *medietas* between heaven and earth. Gurashi says that this is the « modal point of Agrippa's reflection » (p. 13). As a consequence, the German philosopher saw himself as a *magus* playing the part of a priest, a Hermetic-Christian magician in the role of a prophet. « To dedicate oneself to the knowledge of magic thus signified cultivating religion with the aim of preserving for the community a relationship of devotion to God » (p. 21). Interestingly, Gurashi notes that Agrippa differs from Marsilio Ficino's notion of philosopher-priest, which was theorized from the perspective of « *terram caelo maritat* » in a medical-astrological level. However, in line with his friend Trithemius and the German context of the time, Agrippa reformulated the idea of the magician which is not solely a mediator, a minister of God that regulates his holy will in the world, but a man that assimilates and embodies the nature of Christ (*assimilatio ad Deum*).

Within the framework of this divinization process that Cornelius Agrippa wanted to extend to every single human being, magic becomes a key part that brings together an ensemble of knowledge according to the revelation of God. Hence, magic constitutes a sort of « *totius nobilissimae philosophiae absoluta*

*consummatio* » (p. 18). In Agrippa's view, magical knowledge reunites all the disciplines and matters, and teaches how to love God and how to contemplate him, so the human being could finally be regenerated by wisdom and saved by faith. Such process of salvation entails the procedure through which humans ascend to the Mind of God. This procedure clearly distinguishes between *Mens* and *Ratio*. Bypassing the level of the second, which represents reason, the mind reaches the first, which means the mind that contemplates the true wisdom through faith. Gurashi insists on this point: « Magic combines in itself the highest contribution of the human faculties and the comprehension of the religious mysteries that belongs to the *mens* » (p. 17). So this is perhaps the most characteristic feature that can be found in Agrippa's work: magic is the holistic wisdom that helps reason and faith. In fact, only faith, the sovereign of mediation between the divine entities and the earthly world, elevates the soul to real wisdom. « It is faith that allows the reason to reach the purity of the *mens* » (p. 57). Through faith, the reason dissipates misgivings and dedicates itself wholly to the union with God in such a way that empowers human beings. « The soul that is regenerated by faith makes itself worthy of God's aid, and thus delights in his wisdom and shares in his power » (p. 57). Thus the level of faith coincides with the intellect, being therefore the most elevated level of consciousness that wise men get. And ultimately, it is all thanks to magic: « For Agrippa, in reality, it will be possible to realize a cultural and religious reform only by means of a *vindicatio magiae* » (p. 20).

### III. Agrippa's Humanism

Consequently, Dario Gurashi suggests that the humanist project by Agrippa combines theological *dignificatio* and hermetic deification so as to proclaim the excellencies of man. In his book *Dialogus de homine*, Agrippa looks into the relation between the human being and God and defines human beings as *imagines Dei*: « The condition of *imago Dei* describes human nature in terms of a mirror character *vis-à-vis* God that the human being contains within himself as a divine possession » (p. 46). According to this, God and the individual who bears inside the imprint of God are alike. Here, surely, lies one of the most significant contributions of Cornelius Agrippa and the key point that helps him validate the dignity of human beings. Thus, it is because of the cultivation of virtues through magic, and due to the specificity of reason and faith, that humans deserve recognition. So it has been proved that human's nature is divine, equal to God's. « Agrippa's magic, its roots and its purpose, incessantly reveal one and the same theoretical concern, namely, the problem of human dignity (*dignitas hominis*) » (p. LIV). In this sense, Gurashi says that Agrippa took over from Pico della Mirandola the idea that human beings have a chameleon-like and proteiform nature with the ability to transform them into gods. It is no coincidence that the influence of Pico on Agrippa's oeuvre is

considerable in order to explain human dignity. This addresses the order of cosmos into three levels: (1) *mundus intellectualis*, also defined as *angelicus*, (2) *mundus lucis et igneus*, or *mundus coelestis*, which is the mediator with (3) the sublunary world where bodies and composed matter are. Human nature contains the three worlds and thus constitutes a sort of divine microcosm. The soul is created by God, then descends the three levels and finally reaches the human body, infiltrating all its members.

In this point, Gurashi specifies that Agrippa's conception of human dignity is not simply an experience of dematerialization, condemnation or separation from the body. Quite the contrary, the author explains that Agrippa closely followed kabbalistic ideas about the hermetic body that weaves the meditation on the members and the kabbalistic letters, as if bodily members were sephirotic emanations. In this line, all human limbs are invested with a sacred function. This entails a magico-anatomical description of the human body and introduces the interesting notion of the « bodylines of God ». Agrippa's original intention was then to recognize, alongside the dignity of the soul, the dignity and divine condition of the body. In sum, human dignity becomes the cognitive path that leads from the senses to the *mens*. That said, Agrippa warns, though, against any possible misinterpretation. As Gurashi remarks: «The detachment from the body and the consolidation of devotion in God are necessary ingredients for the soul, if it is to enter into communion with God and share in his power of working miracles » (p. 146). So the holiness of human body contemplates true wisdom only provided that it is free from the sins of the flesh. Agrippa thus distinguishes the « wedding of the flesh » (*nuptiae carnis*), referring to the carnal union between man and woman directed to procreation, which is displeasing to God, and the « wedding of virginity » (*nuptiae virginitatis*), which gives birth to spiritual generation in the spirit of God. It is noteworthy that Dario Gurashi does not mention a necessary comparison with Marsilio Ficino's commentary on *Symposium* and the myth of Aphrodite Pandemos and Aphrodite Urania. Agrippa also revisits Ficino when arguing the superiority of human beings over the angels, because human dignity was revealed in Christ's incarnation. Therefore, the dignity of human beings is based on such « hermetic sacrament of regeneration », a phenomenon of rebirth through a path of interiorization that implies becoming detached from the body, that is, from the passions (not the *furores*), while empowering the mind at the same time. « When God takes on human nature, he portrays and prescribes for human beings a journey that goes in exactly the opposite direction – namely, the capacity of the human being to take on the nature of God » (p. 103). This is the divine nature that makes the human being similar to God. This is, in brief, the sacred destination that the human being must fulfill. Agrippa's humanism is committed with the need for helping others to do that. Gurashi explains it as follows:

The spiritual generation is consecrated in their self-awareness, and when this is empowered, they come to know themselves as sons of God, completely assimilated to God, and absorbed into the Mens. This self-awareness transmutes a mental experience of concentration on oneself and of alienation from bodylines into a loftily sapiential process in which the procreator and the procreated embrace each other, and the mind of the human being is joined mystically to the Mind of God. (p. 166)

It would have been interesting that the book would have considered as well this spiritual and mental self-awareness in the case of women. This is particularly pertinent regarding Cornelius Agrippa, inasmuch as his vision of humanism cannot be understood without the vindication of women. Although there were many humanists who wrote against women, he did just the opposite. The result was *De nobilitate et praecellentia faemini sexus*, a declamation in favour of women written in 1509 and published in 1529. As can be seen, this work coincides in time with those books by Agrippa previously mentioned: it is contemporary with Agrippa's *magnum opus*, *De occulta philosophia*, and precedes the *Dialogus de homine*. So it could be said that Agrippa took seriously the reflection about the dignity of women in the time he was developing his humanist project. From this perspective, the dignity pursued through his regeneration program was not only aimed at men, especially because Agrippa located the origin of the sacred incarnation that dignifies humans in women: Christ took a male form because it was men who need redeeming inasmuch as the original sin really came into the world through Adam. Christ also chose to be born of a woman without a man, and he appeared first to women after his resurrection.

Under such circumstances, in a book whose methodological nucleus is the identifying of the crucial value of humanism in Agrippa's thinking, a valorization of the dignity of women would have been a necessary aspect. It would then be possible to develop a new facet of Cornelius Agrippa's humanism not sufficiently explored in Dario Gurashi's analysis. The denunciation that Agrippa made to report the cultural abuse and mistreats suffered by women plays a crucial part in his idea of humanism and its urgent restoration. What is more, Agrippa himself had serious confrontations with the Inquisition, one of these when he defended a woman accused of witchcraft. Agrippa managed to save her from the bonfire, but he had to go into exile with his family. When the Inquisitor cited the *Malleus Maleficarum* for his accusations, Agrippa accused him in turn. He wrote that women were created in Paradise (rather than outside as Adam was) from a superior material (part of Adam rather than dirt), also claimed for the positive qualities of female sexuality, pregnancy and menstruation, and highlighted women's remarkable superior eloquence in as far as they invented all the liberal arts. Due to these ideas, Agrippa had considerable influence in the *querelle des femmes*. This

aspect would have enriched the transversal analysis of the *Dialogus de homine* and helped expand the contemporary reception of Cornelius Agrippa's humanism, which is undoubtedly one of the most relevant goals of the book by Dario Gurashi.