Reflections On The Stone

by Robert Bolton

> Therefore thus says the Lord God,
> Behold I am laying in Zion for a foundation a stone,
> a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation:
> He who believes will not be in haste.
> (*Isaiah* Ch. 28, v.16 R.S.V.)

Tradition, Philosophy and Gnosis

The orthodox interpretation of the above text in Christian tradition is always that the stone represents Christ, the promised Messiah, as is also the case in comparable texts, such as "the stone which the builders rejected," in the Psalms. This symbolism of the stone was adopted from more ancient uses, however, and the latter may be the means of connecting it with the so-called Philosophers' Stone, especially as historical revelation will normally correspond to a universal and atemporal order. The idea of the "stone" naturally evokes the idea of philosophy and its creative endeavours in a traditional context, and we may wonder what place it has there.

For most of those who follow the ideas of Guénon and Schuon, the emphasis in traditionist thought is overwhelmingly on gnosis, rather than on either philosophy or empirical knowledge, because the modern deviation from tradition is attributable to the reduction of metaphysical truths first to matters of individual speculation, and then finally to the fads of public opinion. There is no doubt that changes of this kind have taken place, and their negative results are only too well known, so that advocacy of more human forms of knowledge may seem to be in conflict with the restoration of tradition.

To some, there may appear something absurd about the implicit claim

that gnosis is not enough. How should the highest and completest knowledge need to be supplemented? One answer to this can be seen to lie in the very exactitude and finality of gnosis, which link it inseparably to the realm of the finite, a defect which indicates that it needs to be completed by something else, since man was made for the infinite. (This finitude characterizes the mode of being of gnosis, not its theoretical content, of course; these two things should not be confused). Conversely, while the outreach of philosophical thought lacks the ordered perfection of gnosis, it does answer to man's dynamic relation to the infinite. There should thus be an overall equality between the two, that is, between a precise and complete, but knowledge, and one which is untidy and ever-incomplete, but adapted to the infinite in its operation. The distinction highlighted by this simple dichotomy comprises something which must always be felt as long as mankind is in a temporal state.

These reflections are prompted by what has been written on this subject by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in recent years, especially where he says that gnosis alone is he negation of philosophy for the reasons just mentioned, that philosophy is a pursuit of truth where the results are never predictable or final. It this expresses a conjunction between knowledge and the flowing process of life live in time, whence it is adequate to the whole human state of its temporal and intellectual levels. Quite apart from the weight we allow to theoretical comparisons between philosophy and gnosis, there remains the undoubted fact that philosophy was always a part of both Christian and Moslem civilizations throughout the Middle Ages, where it existed alongside both gnosis and religious belief. We do not need to rely on theory to show that philosophy was always a part of both Christian and Moslem civilizations throughout the Middle Ages, where it existed alongside both gnosis and religious belief.

In view of its role in the traditions alone, then, we should not have the right to equate philosophy as a whole with the purely individualistic exploration of reality without the revelation which it has become today. But if we are to allow that it is ultimately a dimension of the spirit without being gnosis, what would its validity derive from? There is no doubt that for the traditions it was the expression of a substantial reality, which was called the Philosophers' Stone or the lapis, and a good many other things besides, such as the Unique (or One) Thing, the Divine Water, the Lion, and the Sodic Hydrolith. Under this diversity of names it was not

distinguished from the prima materia, as I shall try to show. Attempts to explain what these terms mean always run the risk of ending up in a quagmire of obscurities which has to some extent been caused deliberately, but the attempt is necessary if we are to clarify the spiritual role of philosophy, that is, its relation to revealed religion in a traditional context.

This subject would become less obscure if it could be shown to be connected with a generally acknowledged reality, albeit one which is usually thought of only in connection with gnosis. Despite the references in scripture like the one under the heading, the lapis (understood as the philosophers' stone) is not so much conveyed by revelation as presupposed by it, as the receive which corresponds by nature to the Divine initiative. It is something more than a creature, but equally it is not God, an idea which is familiar in traditional thought where it is a question of an element in the human soul which transcends creation and relates directly to God. This is frequently to be found in Eckhart, as where he says:

> there is an agent in the sole such that if the soul were wholly this, it would be uncreated.[1]

A modern expression of the same idea is given by Philip Sherrard where he says that patristic theologians do recognize the presence in man of something which, if it is not divine, is yet not undivine; which if it is not uncreated, is yet not created. [2]

Sherrard is emphasising the point that this principle is not just another name for God, as simplistic ways of thinking might take it to be. On the contrary, the peculiar nature of the consequences which follow from it is owing to the fact that it is neither God nor nature, but something sharing the atrributes of both, and that human nature can be to varying degrees conformed to it. If we cannot be precise about it, it is still necessary to look at some of the things that have been said about it, so that we may be able to understand its role in the life of the spirit.

The Stone in Tradition

Traditional accounts of the Stone do not always distinguish it from the prima material, as where both are referred to as the Unica Res (the unique

1. Defense IX, 3.
2. The Rape of Man and Nature, Ch.1,p.32

or only thing) and "Adam and Microcosm." [3] This implies that the usage of Hermetic thought differs here from that of Neoplatonism, for which mater is the lowest of realities, a mere empty and unstable receptivity. Instead, it is said to be "the first hyle of the wise, the prima materia of the perfect body" and is said to be a substance in which everything is contained in a positive way, by which it has a creative power as a source principle in nature.[4]

Jung quotes Mylius' statement that it is "the pure subject and the unity of forms," with both passive and active aspects. We are also told that this mysterious substance is called "radix ipsius (root of itself). Because it roots in itself it is autonomous and dependent on nothing." [5]
But the supremacy it has in relation to other creatures does not include any question of its creating the world or itself; it has therefore an autonomy in relation to nature, as well as to God in a different way. There are obviously close analogies between it and both God and the world, as might be expected of something with microcosmic potential:

> The definition of this spherical being as… 'the most serene God,' sheds a special light on the perfect 'round' nature of the lapis which arises from and constitutes the primal sphere; hence the prima materia is often called lapis. [6]

The above does not help us to understand why, in view of its subtlety,"stone" should have been so prominent among the names used for thissubject, when in its religious context it never had a name at all, except where it was referred to as the "divine spark" in an unofficial manner. James Hillman's explanation [7] is that this is because, like a physical stone, it has a power to force its presence on our attention by its impenetrable and irreducible quality. Everything in nature from flowing water to roots of trees has to yield to the presence of stones, which combine a certain power with inactivity. They can often punish those who ignore their presence. Stone-lie properties, he says, are an emblem of freedom from subjectivity, and not merely as a quantity of hard and enduring material, but as a unique individuality, different from that of

3. C.G. Jung, Psychology and Alchemy, III, Ch.4,i.
4. Jung, ibid., III, Ch.1,iii.
5. Jung, ibid., III, Ch.4, ii.
6. ibid. III, Ch.4,iii
7. see: Concerning the Stone—[see: *Sphinx No.5*]

every other stone. Thus it evokes the idea of the monad.

The last point shows that it is not too much of a paradox that a very subtle reality could force itself on our attention as a stone does. The essential point here is individuation. Persons or souls encounter one another as quasi-atomic realities, which is why the soul is referred to in philosophy as a "simple substance." Just as the physical stone shows the qualities of impenetrability and irreducibility, so the individual soul is impenetrable inasmuch as it is the container of all natural forces in its representation of the world, to which it is not itself external.

Here, then are some representative observations about the Stone, which must now be linked with what was said above about the quasi-divine principle in the soul, and the resulting implications for philosophy. If this "naturally supernatural" principle, as Schuon would call it, were considered, not in relation to God, but as a normative principle for both man and nature, much that has been said of the lapis would be relevant to it. Contradictory attributes like those of "stone" and "water" would not be surprising in something which was an archetype and an epitome of the complex range of realities which make up the natural order. On the one hand, a deepening understanding of this interior reflection of the divine must be implicitly redemptive, as historically it was taken to be, while on the other, the redemption and regeneration brought by revealed religion must, inter alia, bring the individual into a closer communion with this same interior reality. These two movements of the soul, far from being exclusive, have always been conceived as working together in the same persons, at least when they were involved in Hermeticism.

The Lapis and the Monad

This brings us to a significant double meaning in this interior agency: because the lapis mediates between God and creation, it can be seen with equal reason as either the base of a mystical or gnostic ascensus to God, or as the apex of an integrating movement in the natural order. Such a conception would suffice to connect the mysterious, protean Stone with a basic idea which is accepted in most forms of traditional wisdom. The duality involved in this idea is no more than what is implied in the duality of the human state, consisting as it does of body and soul, and residing on the boundary of nature and the supernatural. On this basis,

I shall try to account for some consequences which would naturally be realised by the creative work of philosophy.

While the lapis is unique in itself, it exists in as many instances as there are persons, so that something qualitatively equivalent to the Whole exists in every being which forms part of the Whole, giving a special meaning to the idea that "all is one." In this case, the One would in some sense be present in every part of the All, an idea which Leibniz expresses in the Monadology where he says that souls are "living mirrors of the universe of created things, . . each mind being as it were a little divinity in its own department." [8] This matches the idea that "the *sulphur philosophorum* is substance in which everything is contained." [9]

Such an interpenetrating view of the one and the any has always found a place in Christian cultures, because the doctrine of the Eurcharist follows a similar patter. Each consecrated host becomes the Body of the Lord, and at the same time, so does each particle of each host; the unique One is infinitely multiplied, and not merely as a symbol. At the same time, the Incarnation and the Ascension reflect the relation between the divine and the material which is a model for human life inasmuch as it is true to its destiny. Leibniz' philosophy is deeply influenced by the Hermetic tradition, which is distinguished as a meeting place of philosophy and magic, with its idea of a reality which is microcosmic through and through. Parts not only reflect the whole, but have powers of attraction and influence among themselves in proportion to the similarities between the ways in which they reflect the world and the degrees to which they do so. From thence come the evocative powers of magic and the influences of astrology.

> Each portion of matter may be conceived as a garden full of plants, and as a pond full of fish. But ever branch of each plant, every member of each animal, and every drop of their liquid parts is itself likewise a similar garden or pond.[10]

This power of reflecting the whole of things has also implications which are relevant to the idea of the lapis, because the soul, in reflecting a naturally indestructible universe will itself be indestructible in the same

8. Leibniz, Monadology 83
9. Jung, ibid., III,Ch.1,iii
10. Monadology 67
11. ibid. 77

way [11,] in a way which belongs among the stone-like properties. Similarly, this goes with a certain impenetrability, which results simply from the fact that it is in a real sense a whole and not a part, and so cannot be directly subject to external natural agencies in the way that the contents of sense-perception are. By definition, then, souls or monads can be subject only to God in a direct sense, while their interactions could only take place by the indirect way of interior changes which create new sets of relations or weaken or strengthen existing relation among them.

Such properties as the above are the context in which philosophy becomes a condition for the realization of the human state as such, not least because the subject of philosophy is reality as a whole, while a representation of the world as a whole is part of the essence of each rational being. Such is a primary aspect of the spiritual soul, as compared with souls of animals, which relate only to parts of the world and so are necessarily peripheral to the human state. A microcosmic being must philosophize (judge reality as a whole) in order to be itself, therefore. This has consequences for religion because the perspective of faith also places man in relation to reality as a whole just as much as to God. Both faith and philosophy involve a positive relation to infinite.

Implications for the Esoteric

The above consequences apply in particular to a feature which both exoteric and exoteric religion strangely have in common. However much they differ in other ways, they both see the individual person as a negation, or as a blank to be filled in, so to speak. Thus both are equally dominated by the view that God is everything and man is nothing, even though there are doubts as to how literally this is meant. This applies to both cases for different reasons. In exoteric religion this is because here the central place belongs to the personal relationship between God and the individual, which could not really be a relationship if it was between a reality and a true nothing, though it could be if the "nothing" was a relative one. In esoteric religion, this view of God and man is strange because here we have access to a deeper conscious understanding, for which simplifications should not be necessary.

The relation to God is not the problem in the esoteric, because it is thought of here only in conjunction with non-personal realities which are meant to overcome our usual limitations. The reason for this simi-

larities which are meant to overcome our usual limitations. The reason for this similarity with the exoteric in regard to the individual may well result from nothing deeper than the modern world. That they have such an aspect is undeniable, and under this aspect they clearly are negligible in relation to the Whole. But the objection to this from a Hermetic point of view is that it springs from a quantitative way of looking at the world, which is usually an unconscious side-effect of modern science. Thus one ignores the qualitative infinity in beings which are only parts in an external way. The more we shall be free from defeatist views about the value of the individual as such. This makes it much easier to understand the truth that the things which individuals intend, do, and refrain from doing, have an effect on the world which goes far beyond anything they are able to perceive.

This reflects the idea that only like can truly act on like, as in this case it is the rational being who is in a real sense equivalent to a world who can therefore act significantly on the world of which he is outwardly a part. Conversely, the actions of animals have no such independent power over nature because they are solely parts in relation to the Whole. There are both spiritual and magical implications for this kind of relation which mankind has to its world, connected with the idea that there is a point at which religion, philosophy psychology and magic have a region in common. The reality of some such convergence as this was believed in by Jung, and it was the basis of his idea of the necessary role of the individual, to which he opposed collectivistic beliefs. He regarded the latter as irrational, because no religion, philosophy, or ideology could exist without consciousness, and the individual person is the only possible vehicle fro consciousness. Consequently, all systems which downgrade the individual are ultimately self-defeating; neither collective entities nor mystical systems can of themselves supply the consciousness necessary to make them work. Equally, the higher forms of knowledge can have no direct power over individual consciousness, but only what the latter can see it right to concede. To some, this may appear only too obvious, but there are many who are so blinded by the external and quantitative aspect of things that they hardly see it at all, or regard it as a delusion.

A Meaning for Autonomy

What has been said about the basis of individuality can be linked to the

question of whether the person or monad can be said to have autonomy. This issue can be seen in the fact that two pillars of received wisdom are that man must be open and receptive to whatever Providence may send or allow, and that he is responsible for the control of his own thoughts. It seems that there is a flat contradiction between these two precepts, although they can be reconciled by the fact that the operative principle is *radix ipsius* while for all that, it did not create itself. The aspect of autonomy is necessary for philosophy, for obvious reasons, and it remains to delineate some of the features of the human mind which express what has been said theoretically about it.

An obvious feature of this kind can be seen where every mind is ac tive in selecting its objects, at least as much as it is passive in receiving them, while there are many differences possible in the proportions between the two. The more the active power of selection is developed, the greater the degree of free will, since the freedom of the will is in practice dependent on the sphere in which it operates, even though in principle it is present in everyone. The complexities of this function can be seen from the fact that not only are there many degrees of this selective activity, there are at the same time innumerable criteria by which it can operate. The process of selection is thus a form of "self-expression' in a quite exact sense of the word. The least effective form of it follows the broadest of all criteria, that of pleasure, but without trying to judge the reasons why it is pleasurable or to compare different kinds of pleasure. Whatever its degree or quality, this expression of autonomy is not just a matter of culture, but is characteristic of mind as such, in the light of the foregoing. It is reflected only partially by the senses, because on the one hand they automatically continue to convey to us the same things as long as we are present to them, regardless of our choice; in this respect they are passive, while on the other hand choice must depend on the removal either of the objects or of one's physical presence.

As the mind makes its selections among the contents of the world it has a representation of, these choices of object not only express and reinforce the quality it already has, but they also have a determining influence on the objects which will come to it, as it were ab extra, at future times. While there is a clear common sense distinction between things we choose to perceive and think about, and things which come to us unbidden and without warning, this is only because the latter seem

not to be chosen, but nevertheless they are chosen in the same sense that we choose the experiences comprised in a journey simply by our initial decision to travel from A to B. In a more subtle way, the things we occupy the mind with at a given time will place the mind in the "qualitative locality" of those things, so that others coherent with them will later be encountered, apparently by accident. The more purposive our selection of mental objects or stimuli, the more clearly this effect on future experience will be felt, while in proportion as we fall short in this respect, the more future events will assume a random character.

The contents of the world appear in the mind as so many different determinations of it, rather as clay is made into innumerable pieces of pottery. The mind is in effect an infinite substance which receives an infinity of modifications ranging from basic sensations to the subtlest kinds of insight. If it should still appear that the autonomy attributed to it is contradicted by experience, the relation of the mind to its world must be seen in the light of the different possibilities offered by the power of control. Practical life is full of examples of apparently uncontrolled happenings which are in reality under exactly as much control as are orderly and constructive ones, only with the difference that in the former it is an ignorant and foolish use of control. So with the human mind and its relation to life in the world; even its worst failures never amount to loss of its directing role. The autonomy it has in relation to its world finds a typical expression in philosophy, and this does not imply any conflict with the authority of religion, because orthodox religious teachings, if lived our, lead to the same stated of freedom in relation to nature.

The Relation to Grace

The traditional role of philosophy, based on the above properties of mind, has implication which are not consistent with the majority views of tradition today, even though it does not coincide with gnosis. It would imply that a spiritual realization which was solely universal, as is maintained by Ananda Coomaraswamy [12], for example, would be no more of an ideal than one which was solely individual. Instead, individuality would have spiritual potentialities just as much as the profane ones it is usually associated with, while conversely there would be nothing to pre-

12. see: The Pertinence of Philosophy. *(Sacred Web 1)*

vent anti-individualistic systems from serving profane delusions as well as wisdom, as modern history shows.

Finally, what has been said in regard to the potentialities of the individual has been said from a specifically human point of view, that is, without its being directly related to God, who alone can act on the human will. But the fact that man is nevertheless dependent on grace to make positive choices has not been referred to, only because the factor of Divine causality does not detract anything from the reality of an independent principle in mankind, nor from the fact that every tendency to realize it increases the natural autonomy of the person. Neither does it call for any modification to the idea that each soul or monad contains a representation of its world, which is as it were the theater of its spiritual progress. There is a point at which man's control coincides with that of God, as might be expected from the nature of the lapis, inasmuch as it is said to be "the water which rule everything, in which errors are made and in which the error itself is corrected." [13] What these things imply about human nature appear to be so profoundly part of it that it expresses the plan of creation—not a result of the Fall—and is thus a perfect cooperation with the will of God.

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13. C. G. Jung, Psychology and Alchemy, III, Ch. 1, iii.