

On Recasting the Philosopher's Stone

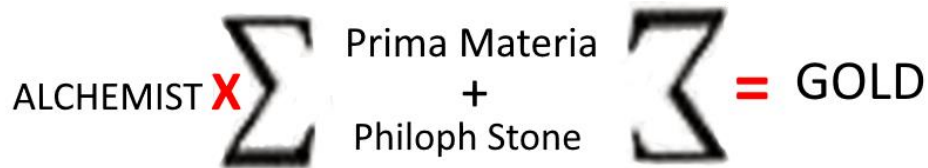
Searching recently for a possible plot line for a story, I began exploring the myth of the Philosopher's Stone, involving the discovery of an ancient buried temple in the Egyptian Valley of the Kings. But then this set me to seriously meditate on what could possibly be a modern meaning for this fabled alchemical substance. Hence this essay.

First some historical background. The philosopher's stone (Arabic: *hajar al-falāsifa*, Latin: *lapis philosophorum*), is a mythic alchemical substance capable of turning base metals into gold. It has also been called the Elixir of Life, useful for rejuvenation and even for achieving immortality.

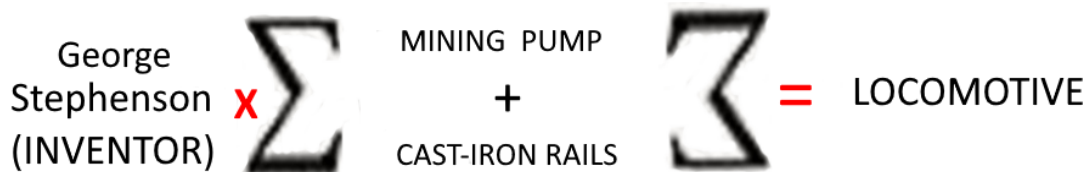
For many centuries, the philosopher's stone was the most sought-after goal in alchemy. It was the central symbol of the mystical terminology of alchemy, symbolizing perfection, enlightenment and heavenly bliss. Efforts to discover the philosopher's stone were known as the *Magnum Opus* (or "the Great Work").

The theoretical roots outlining the stone's creation can be traced to Greek philosophy. Alchemists later used the Creation myths presented in texts like Plato's *Timaeus* as analogies for their process. According to Plato, the four elements of antiquity (earth, water, air and fire) were derived from a common source or *prima materia* (first matter), associated with chaos. *Prima materia* is also the name alchemists assign to the starting ingredient for the creation of the philosophers' stone. *

At the risk of being accused of being formulaic, here is a schematic presentation of the original *Magnum Opus* transmutation:



However, I believe we should first redefine the concept of "Philosopher's Stone" using approximately equivalent terms our contemporaries may better understand. So, for the word "philosopher" as it was used in antiquity, we substitute "sage," "scientist" or "doctor." And for the word "stone," we substitute "substance" or perhaps "raw material." Furthermore, it seems advisable to differentiate the two powers of said Stone: that of transmutation from that of rejuvenation. I shall tackle the former rather than the latter.



The first known civilization to use gold as a form of currency was the Kingdom of Lydia, when Lydian merchants produced the first coins around 700 B.C.E. So, I will baptize

these wise merchants as the first “alchemists” who transmuted a shiny metal into a magical creator of wealth. **

It is something of a cliché to refer to central bankers and financiers as alchemists because of their apparent ability to conjure money out of nothing. However, the name is not far from the truth –our modern system of banking was actually inspired by alchemy.

However, as the quest for things like the elixir of life or a philosopher’s stone that could transmute a base metal into gold proved elusive, some alchemists turned their attention to another way of producing infinite wealth: banking. Chief among these financial magicians was a group known as the Hartlibians. They were a group of social reformers, natural philosophers and utopians who formed around Samuel Hartlib (c. 1600–1662), a noted promoter and writer in fields that included science, medicine, agriculture, politics and education.

The Hartlibians’ broad range of intellectual interests included alchemy and finance, and they were among the first to see credit as a kind of financial philosopher’s stone. The basic idea of these schemes was that the ‘base metal’ of things like land or goods or future earnings could be converted into the ‘gold’ of money through the magic of credit. For example, suppose back in the 17th century you had a valuable plot of land but needed access to money in order to pursue a business venture – one approach would be to sell the land, but perhaps you don’t want to, and even if you did it would take a long time. ***

However, it seems unfair to start the history of alchemy in the VIII century B.C.E., as sages and wizards have existed for tens of thousands of years, ever since the first Neanderthal struck a flint stone to light a fire; and ever since her great great grand children first used fire and clay to make pottery: the first artisans who created industry out of mere mud, water and fire.

So, we learn of great scientists like Sir Isaac Newton who formulated the laws of physics, but no one hails the farmer who planted the apple tree that provoked the former’s eureka. We learn of Hippocrates of Kos (c. 460 – c. 370 BCE), known in the West as the “Father of Medicine,” but who can name the Amazon rainforest shaman who healed his people with secret medical herbs for centuries?

Thus, the Magnum Opus is in your own mind’s ability to transmute simple ideas into wonderful and immortal creations, ... or into terrible weapons of apocalyptic annihilation.

* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosopher%27s_stone

** <https://bebusinessed.com/history/the-history-of-gold/>

*** A financial philosopher’s stone by David Orrell, April 30, 2020, in <https://www.worldfinance.com/markets/a-financial-philosophers-stone>

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