

On the timeliness of the four elements

Christoph Müller

Karlsruhe, E-Mail: [molinarus@web.de](mailto:molinarius@web.de)

Abstract

The long history of the doctrine of the four elements with its aspects of understanding outer nature and human being himself came to an end at the beginning of the 19th century. The reasons were partly immanent to science development. On the other hand the technical infrastructure of modern living environment creates a restricted perception. The subject only perceives what is man made. It remains the illusionistic suggestion of man being dependent only from himself. At present, the four elements have become topical again in the macro area in ecological disaster scenarios; in the micro area in meditation teachings, which revive symbolic correspondences of a micro-macrocosmic kind. For the time being, man remains an earthling. Before he gets lost in a self image of being some kind of an existentialistic project, the human being has to realize in an act of immanent self-transcendence: The basis of my ek-sistence consists in an elementary flow of substances. In the anthropocene, the discourse on alienation must first become elementary again.

Keywords: *Four Elements, Micro-Macrocosmos, Alienation, Anthropocene, Meditation*

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In Europe, there has been a natural-philosophical doctrine of the four elements fire, water, earth and air for about 2,200 years, starting with the pre-Socratic philosopher Empedocles (about 450 B. C.) and ending with Lavoisier (*Traité élémentaire de chimie*, 1789) towards the end of the 18th century.¹ Over time, the quadruple scheme is enhanced by a whole host of micro-macrocosmic equivalents, e.g. on times of the year, planets, bodily fluids, tempers, etc.

Here is a particularly simple form, following Aristotle, in the works of Isidore of Seville (6th/7th century):²



Figure 1. The four elements in the tradition of Aristotle

¹ For the historical part I refer to Gernot Böhme, Hartmut Böhme, *Feuer, Wasser, Erde, Luft. Eine Kulturgeschichte der Elemente*. München 1996, and Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panowsky, Fritz Saxl, *Saturn und Melancholie*, Frankfurt a.M. 1990.

² Figures: Fig.1: Klibansky et.al. 200; Fig.2: Böhme 234; Fig.3 Böhme 138.

In the centre of the earth's cycle there is an inscription reading "Mundus – Annus – Homo", i. e. "World – Year – Man", which indicates the micro-macrocosmic correspondence.

The example above: ignis, i.e. fire. It is dry (siccus), on the left, and warm (calidus) on the right. Correspondences are summer (estas), the yellow bile (colera) and therewith the choleric temperament. The element fire shares the quality of dryness as a common feature with the element earth (terra), and the quality of warmth as a common feature with the element air (aer). By this scheme, two neighbouring elements always have one quality in common, while the opposite elements ignis (fire) vs. aqua (water) and terra (earth) vs. aer (air) do not have any qualities in common.

The endpoint is marked by the 17th century's alchemy, with rather complex micro-macrocosmic references:



Figure 2. The four elements in alchemy

In this didactic diagram, at the four edges we see the four winds and an ocean of clouds. This reminds us, on the one hand, of the chaos from which the world originated, on the other hand of the prima materia (prime matter) and of an energetic principle, the vis vitalis (life force) or, respectively, the spiritus

mundi (spirit of the world) permeating all of creation and its forms up to the centre. In this centre we see the human being as an anima, an individual soul, protected by two angels. At the outer edge of the earth's cycle we see the signs of the zodiac, the months, below there are the four elements, starting from the upper left: earth, fire, air, water. In seven concentric circles (spheres), the word columns indicate the planets including sun and moon, archangels, organs and metals, each of them making up one sphere. Hence, the sun (sol), for instance, with the archangel Michael, with the heart (cor) and the metal gold (aurum) creates a sphere or affiliation of its own.

An example for the enormously rich emblematics, coming from the 17th century, is this one, for the element earth (terra):



Figure 3. Terra (earth) as an emblem

The subscript of the emblem reads: "As all origins of things rise from earth, so all dead things fall back to earth." The development begins on the right side with the egg, then the child follows, then the adult figure of terra in the centre and on the left side a human skeleton. After having lived by and on earth, man himself returns to be earth again. Beside this existential meaning the element earth is related to agriculture and horticulture, for one thing, see the flowers in the right hand of terra; and then again, to architecture – see the town in the left hand. So much for the rich history of the four elements in natural philosophy, cosmology, and visual arts.

With regard to the topic of timeliness of the four elements I would like to present three theses.



Thesis 1

We contemporaries, too, keep on living in an absolute dependence on the four elements.

EARTH

All material things surrounding us – houses, furniture, devices and so on – are made from or out of earthly materials, e. g. stone, wood, metal, plastics. Our food grows out of the earth, we eat it, and our excretions become earth again. And at the end, when you are dead, you yourself will become earth again. In the strictest sense, we are earthlings. Therefore: earth – that’s you!

WATER

The ocean covers about 70 percent of the earth’s surface. If you’re looking for candidates for extraterrestrial life, you will first search for water. Our body consists of 60 percent water; you have to drink about two litres every day. After four days without water, you are dead. Water? That is you!

AIR

You breathe continuously, at the end of the day about 10.000 litres of air, but normally you don’t even notice it. We are all surrounded by the same air, there is (still) a global communism of air. If we all had run out of air to breathe in this room, we would be dead within about seven minutes. Breathing and air: that’s you!

FIRE

Let’s talk about the sun. This is where the light here in this room comes from. Without the ongoing energy supply from the sun there would be no plants, no life on earth. The fossil energy sources are stored solar energy, and without these we would not have made our way to this city. Life is energy metabolism. And when you are dead, you are cold. Energy, fire: that’s you!

In sum: We, You and me, just absolutely depend on earth, water, air, and solar energy – in this very moment.

Thesis 2

Our dependence is hidden by our living environment. In this sense, we are living in a wrong, or at least: very narrow minded consciousness.

I will give only two reasons for that:

1. We are, to a great extent, surrounded by artefacts and infrastructures. As early as 1956, this living environment was called a “macrodevice” (Makrogerät) by Günther Anders, and later on a

“technotope” by the philosopher of technology Günter Ropohl. We see the man-made part only and overlook that every material thing goes back to its origin from nature. This is even true for every immaterial thing. No computer programme works without hardware, there is no artificial intelligence and no virtual reality without matter as there is no genetic information without DNA – and in the end the material for this comes from earth. But this simple fact is hidden for us, as we give attention only to the man-made part in constructing and manufacturing the final product – and this man-made part is more and more immaterial.

2. A second reason for the disappearance of the four elements in our consciousness can be found in our scientific education. Even if we are not life scientists we know that water is not an element in the sense of analytical chemistry, but a compound of hydrogen and oxygen. The middle and visible segment of the material world, the mesocosmos, has been devalued with the progress of science into often invisible, minor segments. If we ask ourselves: “What are the elements of nature”, we think of the elements of the periodic system and of elementary particles. In this intellectual habitus of “seeing through” by reduction we somehow take hydrogen and oxygen (or the atomic models of the elements) for more fundamental or essential and, thus, more real than the water we drink.

In a materialistic reversal of Plato’s allegory of the cave, one could say: We live in a civilizational cave that systematically hides the reliance on the four elements from us. This systematic concealing of reality starts in the supermarket, where the children believe the milk to come from, and ends on a larger scale in our sensual relation to cosmic space. In history, the ether or cosmic space, respectively, has widely been viewed as the fifth element. In all the cities, however, the night sky is not even visible anymore because of the light pollution. We watch Star Trek and do not see the sky any more. For that reason alone we have no experience of correspondence between inner and outer cosmos.

We live in a wrong consciousness, and this wrong consciousness is growing more and more, along with two global megatrends: digitalisation and urbanisation. In 2008, half of the world population



has been living in cities, and the percentage is growing from year to year, especially in Asia and Africa. With regard to our dependence on the four elements and nature, the narrow minded consciousness in the cave of urbanised technotopes is growing faster and faster. At the same time we can state:

Thesis 3

Today there is a new timeliness of elementistic topics in the macro and micro range.

As for the macro:

Since the sixties of the past century, the metaphor of the “spaceship earth” became popular, and in the beginning of this millennium the Dutch atmospheric researcher Paul Crutzen suggested calling the present geological era the “anthropocene”. This is a geological era in which man has become the most important influential factor concerning biological, geological and atmospheric processes on earth. To give some examples I just mention: Soil erosion, loss of species, littering of the seas, acidification of waters, rise of the sea level, power consumption, climate change.

Here we easily recognize the spheres or the old realms of earth, water, air, and fire.

The consequence:

In anthropocene, the binary thought pattern of nature versus culture or wilderness versus civilization is queried. In the strictest sense there is no wilderness any more, wilderness understood as a region without any influence of civilisation. What happens in the big cities has an impact on the rainforest, and what happens in the rainforest has an impact on the cities. The globe as a whole has become an “artificial nature”. What we traditionally call civilization is evolving into a second level artificial nature.

In the context of mechanisation and environmental problems there is also a revival of an age-old topic taking place: After their domestication, the four elements come back as catastrophic forces, for instance in the form of storms, floods, and conflagrations. Apocalyptic and disaster movies such as the ‘Sinking of the Titanic’ (1953 and later) up to ‘The day after tomorrow’ (2004), where whole cities and areas become destroyed by flood and cold in the beginning of a new ice age, have become a genre of its own.

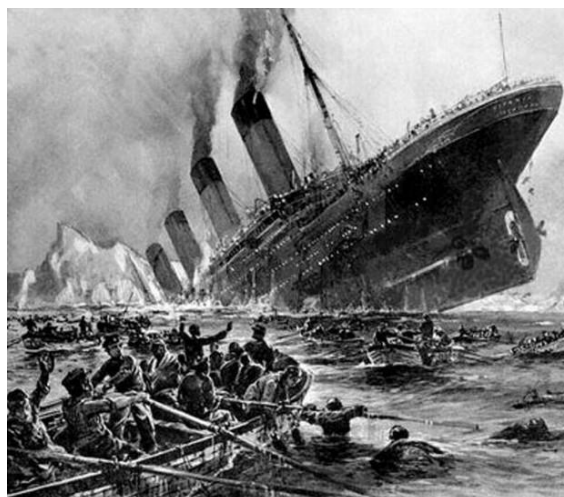


Figure 4. Titanic sinking, painting by Willy Stöwer, 1912

As for the micro range:

We now find a very great attention for issues of dietetics and personal care in the Western world. The range of these endeavours extends from care for physical health up to quasi-religious ideals of pureness. As an example I just mention the yoga boom. Via tantric influences you will find the old idea of micro-macrocosmic relations there, as for instance in the teaching of the seven psycho-physic energy centres (chakras) in the body. Five of them are related to the old elements.



Figure 5. Coloured Chakras



The four lower chakras correspond (from the bottom to the top) to the elements earth, water, fire, and air. The fifth chakra (vishuddha chakra) in the region of the neck corresponds to the fifth element akasha, which means ether and space at the same time. In this context we find the full program of assigning a certain colour, geometric figure, a planet, an animal, a sound, a state of mind and a deity to each chakra. But note: The main intention is not to give an explanation for psycho-physical or psychological phenomena, but to give support for visualisation techniques in meditation.³

This import from India shows that the yearning to include bodily and material things into spiritual aspirations and to restore the micro-macrocosmic references is going on – even in contrast to modern science, something that can easily be demonstrated with two other main concepts in yoga for instance, as e. g. the *prana* as something like *life force* corresponding to vitalism in western biology in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and the already mentioned ether as the fifth element, which in western science used to have a long tradition in the field of physics beginning with Aristotle's celestial mechanics, and came to an end with Einstein's special theory of relativity. But taken as a meditation technique with strong aspects of self-exploration and mental, emotional and spiritual self-shaping it should be noticed that the chakra-teaching presents something like an inner architecture and a localisation of psycho-physic states of mind, beginning at the bottom of the body and ending at the top of the skull (seventh or sahasrara chakra), corresponding to outer forces, powers, and energies. Therefore, this form of psycho-physical introspection, self-exploration and self-imagination is very concrete, pictorial and *spacy*. What is our internal reality? At least what we think it to be.

Outlook

What can the theses presented here mean for an old, tradition-steeped topic of natural philosophy at an event that mainly deals with architecture and arts? Here are just some brief suggestions:

1. When it comes to questions concerning the good life, the environmental issue is always to be considered. Sorry: Innocence has got lost definitely.
2. Anything that might strengthen the consciousness about our connection to the four elements has to be supported. This is also about sensual education programmes.
3. The embrace of material things, which I am at least part of as well, could have a downright spiritual dimension in a living environment that only seemingly dematerialises itself more and more.

Perhaps you noticed: When talking about our “absolute dependence” on the four elements I quoted the theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, who regarded the “feeling of an absolute dependence” a fundamental dimension of religious sentiment.⁴ And when I just as frequently used the expression “that is you”, this is a translation of the old “Tat tvam asi”, named in the Indian Vedas⁵ to teach the identity of the true essence of an individual (ātman) and the primordial substance of the universe (brahman).⁶ Becoming aware of this substantial correspondence or even identity, and feeling absolute dependent in a relationship is definitely not the same – but anyway: reflecting the four elements today could have a metanoetical dimension as well.

Postscript: Horizontal transcendence

The above lecture was held as something short to think about at the symposion ‘Artificial Natures’ in Venice, May 2018. For obvious reasons, one objec-

⁴ „Das gemeinsame aller noch so verschiedenen Aeußerungen der Frömmigkeit, wodurch diese sich zugleich von allen andern Gefühlen unterscheiden, ... ist dieses, daß wir unsrer selbst als schlechthin abhängig, oder, was dasselbe sagen will, als in Beziehung mit Gott bewußt sind.“ Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, Der christliche Glaube nach den Grundsätzen der evangelischen Kirche im Zusammenhange dargestellt. Zweite Aufl. (1830/31), hg. von Rolf Schäfer (= Krit. GA, Abt. I, Bd.13, Tb.1), Berlin–New York 2003, 32 f. (§ 4).

⁵ E.g. Chāndogya-Upaniṣad 6.8.7.

⁶ With these English translations I refer to the German translation of „ātman“ as „Wesenskern“ and „brahman“ as „Urgrund“ by the indologist Walter Slaje, Upanischaden. Arkanum des Veda. Aus dem Sanskrit übersetzt und herausgegeben von W.S. Frankfurt a.M., Leipzig 2009. See „Namen- und Sachregister“ 642 f. For a „hylozoic“ interpretation of the mentioned identity see Walter Slaje, Water and Salt (II): 'Material' Causality and Hylozoic Thought in the Yājñavalkya-Maitreyī Dialogue?, in: Indo-Iranian Journal 44. 2001, 299-327.

³ For more details see Haresh Johari, Chakras, Körperzentren der Transformation, Basel 1992, 63-114. (American original 1987).



tion to this is that a human being is *more* than earth, water, air and fire – whatever this *more* may be, e.g. an organic structure having a mind; a sociocultural being; a relationship to himself; a project of himself ... Yes, of course. But at the same time we have to establish that our way of seeing ourselves nearly exclusively is determined by this *more*. In contrast to this, here it is suggested to realize our fundamental dependence of the four elements – that is, to become aware, in a really fundamental sense, of our material substance, which is more than experiencing a certain correspondence or resonance between an inner and an outer reality. For the scientifically educated mind it is a nearly trivial establishment that the human body exists by metabolism. But it is something different if you realize: while feeling myself as a stable and confined structure, my body is a transit space for material flows entering as air, water, and solid substances, producing heat and life energy within me, and leaving me in a different form. It means to realize that the foundation of my presence is a material flow by which I am directly connected with my surroundings and with the globe as whole. Note the difference of the material incorporation of substantial flows to the perception of our surroundings by the senses which always constitute a difference between me and the thing over there that is not me, especially by seeing. And note as well: These flows (especially breathing) are more likely something that happens to you than that you are doing it. You do not run *your* metabolism, you do not constitute an I-id-relation to your breathing even if it is voluntarily influenced. And, last but not least: You share this form of a flowed-through being with nearly all other living beings – but unlike most other living beings you can realize this for yourself and feel an affinity to others. You might call this kind of realizing an act of accompanying *con-consciousness*.

These remarks may be embedded in the broader context of the discourse on alienation which follows the progress of modernity like a shadow. Due to the present ecological problems, this discourse currently seems to have taken a turn towards the materialistic in the strictest sense. Seventy years ago, Horkheimer and Adorno analysed the ‘dialectics of enlightenment’, not least as a turn of a functional and positivistic attitude towards outer nature to a functional and positivistic attitude against man himself, resul-

ting in a suppression of his (or her) inner nature, and constituting a general relationship of coldness.⁷ In view of the ecological problems it’s amazing how non-philosophical, non-sociological, non-psychological, how materialistic and, in a certain sense, primitive the dialectic turn has become with the rise of the sea level (*pars pro toto*). This situation asks, among other things, for technical solutions but also for the change of the individual and the collective consciousness, which should be ready to understand the bodily presence as a flowed-through being, which therefore is transcendent in the horizontal dimension.

⁷ Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, Frankfurt 1972, e.g. 40-42.



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