

# Johann Otto von Hellwig, *The Hellwigian Subject of the Philosopher's Stone, which is misunderstood and therefore unwisely dismissed by the Uninformed* (1710)

## Abstract

Johann Otto von Hellwig (1654–1698) was a widely traveled German physician, alchemist, and author. He had a life-long fascination with the philosopher's stone (*Lapis Philosophorum*), which was supposed to transform metallic substances such as mercury into gold or silver. In the third question of his treatise, Hellwig criticizes court alchemists who practiced alchemy only to make gold. Throughout this excerpt, he disparages court alchemists as laboratory technicians [*Laboranten*], as opposed to true practitioners of alchemy, who, in his mind, were motivated not by greed or profit but rather by a desire to understand God's secrets in nature.

## Source

[...]

### Third question:

Finally, the third question that has been posed to me is easy to address. Because the question is none other than: What should one make of the laboratory technicians and gold seekers—in short, alchemists—who are at court? For one thing is certain: in the hopes of creating gold, the prince or ruler will let those in the laboratory waste a great deal of assorted valuable metals, minerals, plants, animals, ovens, coal, and instruments at great expense. Now, he who works in the laboratory knows nothing about making gold (for truly throughout his whole life, he has not possessed a single prerequisite for this art other than the strong will shared by all those Icaruses who fly into the Mineral Sun with their waxy wings and finally plunge into a sea of despair), and he is of no use to his lord, to whom he so often gives false assurances regarding his expertise. Philosophers (scientists) should not go to their sovereigns on account of expense. Poor people can obtain stone materials [*lapidis*] more effectively and more easily than princes. For a complete preparation from start to finish, a whole pound of mercury [*Mercurii Philosophorum*] costs no more than one thaler; great sums of money are spent in vain here: because the inexpensive procedure using raw materials to produce a quantity of fine pure gold can be done without processing any metals or minerals, and only requires time and work for the artist's fermentation. If he has nothing to eat, and on account of poverty, cannot expect to successfully complete his masterpiece, he nonetheless possesses the universal material (philosopher's stone), which, in a simple preparation with the appropriate medicaments, will optimally deliver genuine gold, drinkable silver, and pure tincture of gold. No patient who wishes to be healthy would refuse to pay him a little gold or silver, and he is suddenly rich with one and a half or even a dozen coins. From now on, if he diligently continues in this way, there will always be daily bread at his home. Tailoring is a poor profession, but what prince would be so ignorant as to give a person who knows nothing about sewing clothes, other than what he has read and heard, an expensive piece of cloth and ask him to make an elegant woman's dress from it? And in many places, it is believed that if a fellow cannot cure someone from a four-day fever with his apothecary arts, and has never attempted a purely metallic cure, then he should try using a universal medicament

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and gold-making substance. Despite being as poor as Iru, through him, his lord hopes to become as rich as Croesus. If the laboratory scientist could modify salt lye or fixed alkali, and without additives, make them lively, active and volatile; if he could dissolve gold without heating it to a rolling boil; or create metal out of thin air with no additional ingredients (and all without expenses), then I would hold him in high regard. Then, with such work, he could hope to advance from apprentice alchemist to at least journeyman, if not master. However, apprentice-level work is not enough for great men in the laboratory. For them, the work must be only with and about gold. In the court laboratories, it is not knowledge but only an excess of money that counts. Everyone is after gold: the lords seek it from the laboratory technicians and the laboratory technicians seek it from their lords, and in most cases, little or no attention is paid to wisdom, through whose temple doors genuine wealth is found. Whoever truly masters this art, or genuine science, would never reveal it to a prince or a great sovereign, unless long conversations with the prince and a careful study of his disposition reveal that he is more of a loyal, respectable, and Christian-minded friend than a typical distinguished lord. This is the only way for the core knowledge of nature [*Natur-centri*] to make its way to a prince. A righteous “priest” of nature can make offerings to nature without presenting gold, flames, and fire, and nature speaks to him not through burning flames; rather they both avail themselves of a very subtle, non-corrosive fire that is found in the same pit as the true matter. The artist, however, separates these, places the matter in a flask and hangs it over a powerful, glorious, and gently penetrating flame to bring about separation and coagulation in the glass flask. Once this fire is properly set, it will burn for several months where no one may observe it. Afterward, it is agitated once more. The masterwork of this chemistry is to obtain gold, mercury, and fire from the same pit and matter, while using nothing more than a hidden oven and a flask. And where are all of these laboratory technicians now, with their special ovens, instruments, precious materials, and poisonous work? Where are the great sovereigns who have lost so many thousands of ducats? **Note: This work is extremely simple and circumscribed and requires few additions.** Most laboratory technicians are true enemies of nature, always abusing it with their devilish flames, and I believe they even wish to turn it into a hell, if they could. *Auri sacra fames, quid non mortalia cogis pectora?* (Accursed thirst for gold, what dost thou not compel mortals to do?). Therefore, everyone should beware of this foolishness and frenzy and take care that such a gold-worm does not infect your mind, and cause chaos. Its universal effect is a general and complete deterioration of reason, honor, and goodness. The particulars are of little consequence since they are like scraps left in the kitchen. One ridicules every supporter of this corrupt sect and steers clear of these practitioners of the black arts (because most of them look like chimney sweeps), as if they were the devil himself. Once such a louse infests the fur and tastes sweat and blood, you cannot get rid of it. It will produce nothing but manure, and find 1,000 loopholes for long, clever, and disingenuous alibis with which to escape threatening hands. **Note: All the matter in the whole world can be defended before the “universal” one, though some are better than others.** And the authors can be manipulated like wax noses. All the laboratory technicians find the same pleasure in the *Geber* and the *Turba*—and whatever their other atrocious books are called—as the heretics do in the Bible. Knowledge about genuine matter does not come from God through books, and they are never of use to anyone if they cannot be judged without flattery in valid demonstrations. Should they be the ones who judge our work? Dreadful! Everything is futile because of their dark arts. One reads with prejudice, and if our minds have caught the vitriol or mercury, then we will perceive all that we read as vitriolic or mercurial, in either a literal or interpretive sense. That which we like to hear, will be quickly believed. There once was a Dutch carpenter in the East Indies who flattered himself to think that he could become General Director of all the royal Dutch lands and territories there. This was because, after a long time and at an advanced age, another ship’s master carpenter had attained a very high position. It was through luck and bravery during a battle at sea, and after all the officers had been killed. The ambitious carpenter thought that he was at least as brilliant as the other, and in the mirror he saw someone even more admirable and worthy of respect. However, he died a wretched man. If someone in his career has extra time and money, he should spend that time at church in self-reflection and give the money to the poor.

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Thus will he collect treasure for his soul in Heaven—that which cannot be ruined by moths or frost, and is neither sought nor stolen by thieves. One has more than enough opportunity to observe God's wonderful works, and should not give in to deceitful deeds, especially since one thaler in the purse is better than uncertain hopes for 1,000. Here, I must end, because my time and my undertakings do not permit me to go any further.

May the Lord Jesus's love and mercy be with us all!

What God does not grant through prayer and work no man can bring about with money.

Source: Johann Otto von Hellwig, *Das Von den Unverständigen übelverstandene und dannenhero vergeblich verworffene Hellwigische Subjectum des Steins der Weisen; Welches hiermit Philosophicè gerettet und erklärt wird: Nebst Zweyen curiösen und nützlichen Schreiben vom Stein der Weisen*. [Nachdruck] Heidelberg, 1710, pp. 41–48. Available online at: <http://resolver.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/SBB00018C0300000000>

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