

# Conceptualizing a Revitalized Hermetism

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## 1 History

Modern scholars agree that the *Hermetica* - all texts ascribed to legendary figure Hermes Trismegistus - emerged sometime around the 2nd or 3rd century CE ([Copenhaver, 1992](#)). It seems likely that the teachings found in the *Hermetica* originated as an oral tradition of short sentences in Egypt, which was later written down (in Greek) and expanded upon. The cultural milieu in which the majority of the hermetic texts were written was that of the city of Alexandria. During the 2nd century, Alexandria was an eclectic melting pot of various cultural backgrounds, predominantly Egyptian and Greek. This Greco-Egyptian influence features heavily in the hermetic literature, with many scholars describing the texts as a cultural syncretism ([Bull, 2018](#)). While it is certain that these texts were studied and circulated, it is unclear whether or not there existed a significant hermetic community of students. In his *The Egyptian Hermes*, historian Garth Fowden speculates about the form that these hermetic communities would have taken. Fowden states: “[they would have been] small, informal circles of the literate but not (usually) learned gathered round a holy teacher and given up to study, asceticism and pious fellowship.” Regardless of the existence of hermetic communities, it is important to mention here that the entire hermetic project was likely not a widespread phenomenon, and was instead more of an undercurrent within the broader philosophical school of Middle Platonism. As Alexandria and other pagan centres of learning began to disintegrate, lesser-known traditions such as Hermetism fell into complete obscurity, and any hermetic communities still in existence would have been extinguished. It was not until later, during the Renaissance, that these texts were re-discovered. While the *Hermetica* that we have access to today has been compiled from a variety of sources, a substantial number of texts were preserved by Christian scholars in the Byzantine empire. However, these scholars were selective in which texts they chose to preserve effectively creating what historian Justin Sledge terms the “Byzantine Filter” ([Sledge, 2020](#)). The hermetic texts preserved by these scholars were only those least offensive to Christianity, meaning that many texts were lost. A scribal note found in the Nag Hammadi Library also points to the fact that we are missing a large portion of the hermetic literature that once existed ([Sledge, 2020](#)).

The only text that survived in the Western world past the 4th century was the Latin *Asclepius*, also known as “The Perfect Sermon,” which was read by several church fathers, including Saint Augustine ([Mead, 1906](#); [Greer, 2009](#)). However, at the beginning of the 15th century, a monk working in a Macedonian monastery discovered several old Greek texts that constitute the *Corpus Hermeticum* and brought them to Florence, where distinguished scholar Marsilio Ficino translated them from Greek into Latin. During this time, the re-discovery of the *Corpus Hermeticum* generated much excitement, as people believed it to be much older than we know it to be now. Indeed, Renaissance scholars believed that the *Hermetica* was a key text detailing the *prisca theologia* - “the ancient theology” - that stretched back to the time of Moses ([Wikipedia, 2021](#)). Largely in part to the *Hermetica*’s claim to ancient wisdom, Renaissance scholars studied and wrote on the hermetic texts, creating what we know call “hermeticism.” This is distinguished from “hermetism,” which is the study of the ancient texts directly. This distinction is important because it turns out that Ficino’s first translation was deeply flawed, which caused misinformation and inaccurate ideas to spread in scholarly circles. This means that a lot of so-called “hermetic” scholarship produced during the Renaissance is actually of a different flavour than those ideas espoused in the original texts. Similarly to the popularity of Hermetism itself in 3rd century Alexandria, the hermetic revival during the Renaissance was not a widespread public phenomenon; rather, it is better understood as a sub-current in the larger context of the revival of Platonic ideas (“Platonic Orientalism”) that was occurring during this period ([Hanegraaff, 2018](#)).

Although still very much an obscure topic, scholarship on the hermetic literature continues to this day. Efforts to this end have been supported by the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library in 1945, which contained the *Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth* (DoEN), an important text for understanding Hermetism’s graded initiatory structure. For more information concerning the history of Hermetism, please consult Fowden’s *The Egyptian Hermes*, as well as the introduction to Copenhaver’s *Hermetica*.

## 2 Core Beliefs

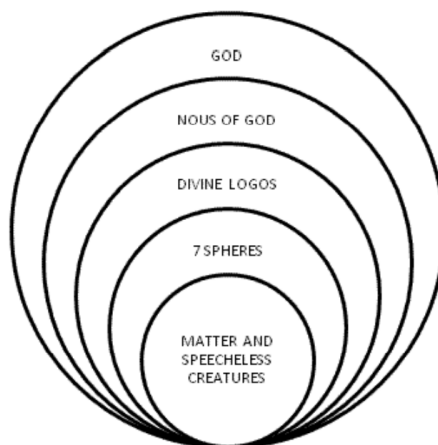
The hermetic texts have been divided, somewhat artificially, by modern scholars into two main categories: the technical *Hermetica*, and the philosophical *Hermetica*. The former deals mainly with alchemy, magic and astronomy, while the latter deals mostly with salvation, good and

evil, the origin of the cosmos, and other various abstract topics. Of the two categories, it is the philosophical *Hermetica* that is more popular, and includes texts such as the Stobean Fragments, the Armenian Definitions, the *Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth* found at Nag Hammadi, and the Latin *Asclepius*. However, one text stands above the rest in terms of its recognition: The *Corpus Hermeticum* (CH). Consisting of 18 tractates of various length, this compendium is the main authoritative source on what we know about hermetic belief ([Horman, 1973](#)). The content of the CH is scattered and rarely cohesive, often covering a wide range of topics in just a single tractate. This lack of cohesion is especially evident in the first topic I will cover here, which is the hermetic cosmology.

(For the remainder of this paper, I will try to quote from the original texts as much as possible, in order to give the reader a better understanding of the style and content of these ancient sources.)

## 2.1 Cosmology

The majority of what is known of the hermetic account of the structure of the universe is given in the first tractate of the CH, the “Pymander.” In the Pymander, a divine mind approaches Hermes, and gives him a vision of the creation of the cosmos. In this vision, the first, ever-present being is god, and he speaks a light- giving word, which is mind itself, and the son of god. Mind (*nous*), working with god, then creates, organizes and animates the material universe. This tiered structure with god at the top and materiality at the bottom can be thought of as a series of emanations. Indeed, in his PhD thesis, Ronaldo Guilherme provides a diagram of the full account given in the Pymander:



Another point of confusion in the CH is whether the cosmos is fundamentally one (monistic,

all comes from god) or two (dualistic, matter is distinct from god). Interestingly, there are direct quotes throughout the tractates that support both of these positions. On the side of dualism, materiality and its associated vices are often contrasted against incorporeality and goodness.

Bad things are the more open to sight, but the good is invisible to what can be seen.

For the good has neither shape nor outline. (tractate 4 section 9)

The good is in god alone, then, or god himself is the good. Therefore, Asclepius, only the name of the good exists among mankind - never the fact. It cannot exist here. Material body, squeezed on all sides by vice, sufferings, pains, longings, angry feelings, delusions and mindless opinions, has no room for the good. (tractate 6 section 3)

The cosmos, which is beautiful but not good. For it is material and easily affected ... (tractate 10 section 10)

the human, because he moves and is mortal, is evil ... (tractate 10 section 12)

On the side of monism, the CH contends that all things exist within god himself, which means that everything is of a singular origin.

Mind as a whole wholly enclosing itself, free of all body, unerring, unaffected, untouched, at rest in itself, *capable of containing all things and preserving all that exists*, and its rays (as it were) are the good, the truth, the archetype of spirit, the archetype of soul. (tractate 2 section 12, my emphasis)

Often, hermetic monism takes on a panentheistic quality; this is the idea that all is god, yet god is still more than this, so that all things are contained within him. To this effect, Hermes states in tractate 16:

This established, I shall open the discourse by invoking god, the master, maker, father and container of the whole universe, the all who is one and the one who is all. For the plenitude of all things is one and is in one, not because the one duplicates itself but because both are one.

Regarding monism and dualism, it is possible that these two positions are not mutually exclusive, and are somehow both true. There is evidence for this apparent paradox in tractate 14, where Hermes states:

[...] what come to be [materiality] and who makes it [god]. Between them there is nothing, no third thing [...] For the two are all there is, what comes to be and what makes it, and it is impossible to separate one from the other. No maker can exist without something that comes to be. Each of the two is just what it is; therefore, one is not to be parted from the other nor from itself [...] Thus, if one agrees that there exist two entities, what comes to be and what makes it, they are one in their unification, an antecedent and a consequent.

In any case, the importance of this concept of duality, which pits materiality and evil against god and goodness, will become evident as the present discussion moves into the nature of humanity.

## 2.2 Nature of Man

Also discussed in the Pymander are the origins of man. After creating the cosmos, divine *nous* creates an androgyne man, but only in form. To this form all of the incorporeal beings bestow a portion of their authority, which gave man the ability to reason. With this new power, man peered through the cosmic framework, thus displaying himself (and thus also the image of god, since man is made in his image) to lower Nature (materiality). When man saw his own form in a body of water, he loved it and wished to inhabit it. Nature and the form of man then co-mingle and became lovers, and man's desire was fulfilled. This is how man, who is fundamentally mind, like god, acquired his material body. This myth is core to the hermetic belief about the nature of man, since it highlights man's duality: he is both mortal/material and immortal/incorporeal.

Because of this, unlike any other living thing on earth, mankind is twofold - in the body mortal but immortal in the essential man. Even though he is immortal and has authority over all things, mankind is affected by mortality because he is subject to fate; thus, although man is above the cosmic framework, he became a slave within it. (Pymander, section 15)

Due to the association of materiality with vice and evil, and of incorporeality with goodness and virtue, the CH teaches that man is neither fundamentally evil or good, for he is necessarily both. In addition, one cannot be both evil and good simultaneously, he must choose either one or the other:

“Unless you first hate your body, my child, you cannot love yourself, but when you have loved yourself, you will possess mind, and if you have mind, you will also have

a share in the way to learn.”

“What do you mean by this, father?”

“My child, it is impossible to be engaged in both realms, the mortal and the divine. Since there are two kinds of entities, corporeal and incorporeal, corresponding to mortal and divine, one is left to choose one or the other, if choice is desired. One cannot have both together when one is left to choose, but lessening the one reveals the activity of the other.” (tractate 4 section 6)

Unfortunately, Hermes also states that the majority of people are ignorant, choosing not to have incorporeal mind, and instead pursue pleasures of the material body. This ignorance towards mind (and therefore goodness also) is thus also irreverence for god, who is goodness itself, and mind also. Irreverence in the CH is considered to be the worst of all sins, since it is a denial of god.

The vice of soul is ignorance [...] The virtue of soul, by contrast, is knowledge; for one who knows is good and reverent and already divine. (tractate 10 section 8-9)

If you ask about god, you ask also about the beautiful. Only one road travels from here to the beautiful - reverence combined with knowledge. (tractate 6 section 5)

Consequently, to be a good person by the hermetic account is to be knowledgeable and reverent towards god. It is sensible, then, to ask how one might go about being reverent and becoming knowledgeable about god. The answer to this question lies in man’s final purpose, which is to know god ultimately.

## 2.3 Man’s Final Purpose

In accordance with what is considered good, namely knowledge of god and reverence for him, the ultimate purpose for man is first to achieve *gnosis*, which is enlightenment and divine understanding of god and his nature. (This *gnosis* is achieved through prayer and study of the hermetic texts.) Then, man’s soul must leave his body, and ascend through the cosmic framework into the eight planetary sphere, which is the Ogdoad (heaven). Finally, after a sufficient length of time, the soul will ascend to the ninth and final sphere, which is god himself. From god man once came, and to him he must return (tractate 1 section 21). It is this general ascending scheme that Mahé and Fowden have termed “The Way of Hermes,” and there are

many passages throughout the CH that support it (Mahé et al., 2004; Bull, 2018). A clear example is given at the end of the Pyramander:

First, in releasing the material body you give the body itself over to alteration, and the form that you used to have vanishes. To the demon you give over your temperament, now inactive. The body's senses rise up and flow back to their particular sources, becoming separate parts and mingling again with the energies. And feeling and longing go on toward irrational nature. Thence the human being rushes up through the cosmic framework, at the first zone surrendering the energy of increase and decrease [...] And then, stripped of the effects of the cosmic framework, the human enters the region of the ogdoad; he has his own proper power, and along with the blessed he hymns the father. Those present there rejoice together in his presence, and, having become like his companions, he also hears certain powers that exist beyond the ogdoadic region and hymn god with sweet voice. They rise up to the father in order and surrender themselves to the powers, and, having become powers, they enter into god. This is the final good for those who have received knowledge: to be made god.

The discovery of the DoEN at Nag Hammadi was also critical for the characterization of this Way of Hermes.

... they [people in the general sense] should submit to the law of God, without having transgressed at all, but in purity asking God for wisdom and knowledge [...] Rather, by *stages* he advances and enters into the way of immortality. And thus he enters into the understanding of the eighth that reveals the ninth.

And it is right for you to remember the progress that came to you as wisdom in the books, my son. Compare yourself to the early years of life. As children (do), you have posed senseless, unintelligent questions [...] This is what you call the beauty of the soul, the edification that came to you in *stages*. May the understanding come to you, and you will teach. (my emphasis)

This message concerning salvation through *gnosis* is undoubtedly the central thrust of the philosophical *Hermetica*. Dr. Justin Sledge puts this succinctly when he states that Hermetism is “philosophy in the service of salvation, and to misunderstand that priority is to fundamentally misunderstand the *Corpus Hermeticum*” (Sledge, 2020). However, in the remainder of this

paper, I want to show that there is more to the hermetic system than just *gnosis*. To be sure, there are many passages in the *Hermetica* that do not deal with salvation, but instead other, more immediate topics.

### 3 Beyond *Gnosis*

While it must be maintained that salvation through *gnosis* is man's final purpose, it is also worthwhile to note that this process is not something that someone can just do immediately, in an act of divine passion. Instead, it is a very slow, gradual process. Hermes himself acknowledges this in tractate 4, where he says:

Do you see how many bodies we must pass through, my child, how many troops of demons, (cosmic) connections and stellar circuits in order to hasten toward the one and only?

The process is so gradual, in fact, that it takes many lifetimes to achieve. Keeping in line with this fact, Hermetism is in support of reincarnation, which allows those seekers of god to continue their spiritual journey in successive lifetimes.

If the cosmos is a second god and an immortal living thing, it is impossible for any part of this immortal living thing to die. All things in the cosmos are parts of the cosmos, but especially mankind, the living thing that reasons. (tractate 8 section 1)

Death is not the destruction of things that have been combined but the dissolution of their union. They say that change is death because the body is dissolved and life passes on to the unseen. (tractate 11 section 15)

... [the things that live in the cosmos] do not die, my child; as composite bodies they are only dissolved. Dissolution is not death but the dissolution of an alloy. They are dissolved not to be destroyed but to become new. (tractate 12 section 16)

In addition, some people's souls are not destined to receive mind and begin their spiritual journey in the foreseeable future, and thus all they have is the material world. If these people are not able to spend their energies pursuing *gnosis*, then the CH must also say something of them, and how they ought to live.

Some very small number of these humans, endowed with pure mind, have been allotted the honored duty of looking up to heaven. But those who lagged behind



(at) a lower reach of understanding, under the body's bulk and because theirs is a mingled twofold nature, have been appointed to care for the elements and these lower objects. (*Asclepius* section 9)

If indeed it does require many lifetimes to properly achieve Hermetic rebirth (especially for those who are not destined to achieve it for some long time), then there must be some way of life, some way of being in the world that is proper to humanity. Certainly, this is the case. The disciple should not isolate himself upon dedicating himself to seeking after god, as he has an obligation to do good onto other people.

All others he draws close to him in a bond of affection, recognizing his relation to them by heaven's disposition. (*Asclepius* section 6)

Therefore, my son, it is necessary for you to recognize your brothers and to honor them rightly and properly, because they come from the same father. (DoEN)

With the idea of this Hermetic Ethics being established, I will now survey a variety of non-salvation-related topics discussed by the CH in an attempt to outline a "hermetic way of life" that is proper to the disciple and ignorant person alike.

### 3.1 Virtues & Vices

In tractate 8, a disciple of Hermes, Tat, asks Hermes if he has any "tormentors" in him. In response, Hermes provides a list of twelve vices:

This **ignorance**, my child, is the first torment; the second is **grief**; the third is **incontinence**; the fourth, **lust**; the fifth, **injustice**; the sixth, **greed**; the seventh, **deceit**; the eighth, **envy**; the ninth, **treachery**; the tenth, **anger**; the eleventh, **recklessness**; the twelfth, **malice**. These are twelve in number, but under them are many more besides, my child, and they use the prison of the body to torture the inward person with the sufferings of sense.

As an antidote to these vices, Hermes lists ten virtues:

To us has come **knowledge of god**, and when it comes, my child, ignorance has been expelled. To us has come knowledge of **joy**, and when it arrives, grief will fly off to those who give way to it. The power that I summon after joy is **continence**. O sweetest power! Let us receive her too, most gladly, child. As soon as she arrives,

how she has repulsed incontinence! Now in fourth place I summon **perseverance**, the power opposed to lust. This next level, my child, is the seat of **justice**. See how she has expelled injustice, without a judgment. With injustice gone, my child, we have been made just. The sixth power that I summon to us is the one opposed to greed - **liberality**. And when greed has departed, I summon another, **truth**, who puts deceit to flight. And truth arrives. See how the good has been fulfilled, my child, when truth arrives. For envy has withdrawn from us, but **the good**, together with **life** and **light** has followed after truth, and no torment any longer attacks from the darkness. Vanquished, they have flown away in a flapping of wings.

After naming these things, Hermes makes it clear that the expulsion of these twelve vices by the ten virtues is a necessary condition for spiritual rebirth, meaning that proper moral conduct is still in the service of the salvation. However, as previously mentioned, this is a good starting place for those people who are not immediately destined for *gnosis*.

(Largely due to the inclusion of these two lists, and also due to the lack of any explicit prescriptive rules concerning moral conduct, it would be sensible to argue that Hermetism advocates (at least implicitly) for virtue ethics (as opposed to deontology or consequentialism).)

While the effort in this discussion has been to leave behind *gnosis* and other similar notions of spiritual knowledge, these two things are not completely separable from moral conduct in the CH. For example, in tractate 10, knowledge of god is said to be the foremost virtue of the soul, and something that leads to proper moral conduct in other areas as well:

The vice of soul is ignorance. For the soul, when it is blind and discerns none of the things that are nor their nature nor the good, is shaken by the bodily passions, and the wretched thing becomes - in ignorance of itself - a slave to vile and monstrous bodies, bearing the body like a burden, not ruling but being ruled. This is the vice of soul. The virtue of soul, by contrast, is knowledge; for one who knows is good and reverent and already divine. Who is this person, father? One who says little and hears little. He fights with shadows, my son, who wastes time on talking and listening to talk.

And again in tractate 11:

To be ignorant of the divine is the ultimate vice, but to be able to know, to will and to hope is the straight and easy way leading to the good.

It is possible, then, that one cannot possibly be virtuous without also having at least some level of knowledge of god and the divine.

Alongside these virtues, there is also certainly some level of asceticism that is promoted within Hermetism (this was briefly mentioned previously, in the section on duality). The basic idea here is that one should hate desire and the material body, as it is prone to evil and vice. Instead of engaging with the pleasures of the body, one should - in the very least - use moderation, and better still, deny these pleasures entirely.

Because what first gives rise to each person's body is the hateful darkness, from which comes the watery nature, from which the body was constituted in the sensible cosmos, from which death drinks [...] Before giving up the body to its proper death, they loathe the senses for they see their effects [...] [an evil] person does not cease longing after insatiable appetites, struggling in the darkness without satisfaction. This tortures him and makes the fire grow upon him all the more. (Pymander, section 20-23)

Every soul, as soon as it has come to be in the body, is depraved by pain and pleasure. For in a composite body pain and pleasure seethe like juices; once immersed in them, the soul drowns. (tractate 12 section 2)

To a similar effect, Hermes is explicit when he says that desire is the cause of death.

The one who recognized himself attained the chosen good, but the one who loved the body that came from the error of desire goes on in darkness, errant, suffering sensibly the effects of death. (Pymander, section 19)

... but where there is passion, there is no good to be found, and, where the good is, there is not a single passion ... (tractate 6 section 2)

Goodness is deemed perfect only when fortified by the virtue of disdain, which repels desire for every alien thing. (*Asclepius* section 11)

Clearly, in whatever right action is required of a hermetist, denial of the body and its sensations is a necessary inclusion.

### 3.2 Prayer

While not often mentioned explicitly, prayer is undeniably a central aspect of the hermetic practice. At several points during the CH (tractates 1, 13 & 18), and also during the *Asclepius*

as well as the DoEN, Hermes offers a “speech offering,” or prayer, to god. The content of these prayers are statements of reverence, acknowledging god’s supreme power and goodness. Interestingly, sometimes these prayers are not speech offerings at all, but are thoughts given to god in silence, almost like meditation.

When evening came and the sun’s light began to disappear entirely, I commanded them to give thanks to god, and when each completed the thanksgiving, he turned to his own bed. (Pymander, section 29)

You then, Tat, my child, pray first to the lord, the father, the only, who is not one but from whom the one comes; ask him the grace to enable you to understand so great a god, to permit even one ray of his to illuminate your thinking. (tractate 5 section 2)

Therefore, my child, one who gives thanks to god must pray to acquire a good mind. The soul can then pass over into something greater but not into any lesser thing. (tractate 10 section 22)

It is advantageous from now on, that we keep silence in a reverent posture. Do not speak about the vision from now on. It is proper to sing a hymn to the father until the day to quit (the) body. What you sing, my father, I too want to sing. I am singing a hymn within myself. While you rest yourself, be active in praise. For you have found what you seek. (DoEN)

It seems then that both styles of prayer are in line with the hermetic practice, those of rational statements about god (“speech offerings”) as well as meditation on god’s essence.

### **3.3 Intentionality**

Considering the section above, what is required of humanity in regards to ethical orientation has become plain. However, it is yet unanswered how one ought to act or feel after making a mistake in upholding the virtues. Hermes suggests that because the body is prone to evil and vice, one should not condemn another who genuinely attempts to act in accordance with the doctrine, but fails.

But no one ever blames the musician for an accident that happened to his instrument. And the more they reproach the instrument, the more they extol the musician when

he strikes the string and hits the right tone ... so the audience feels even friendlier to the musician and finds nothing to blame him for, after all [...] With us it is the same. Let no spectator irreverently find fault with our kind for weakness that belongs to the body. (tractate 18 section 3-5)

[...] it is fitting that praise should rise up from ten thousand mouths and voices, even if one can say nothing worthy of him [god] because our speech is no match for him; the newborn cannot sing a hymn worthy of their father, yet if they render him as much of his due as their strength permits, then they also will be forgiven [...] Praising god is in our nature as humans because we happen to be in some sense his descendants, but we must ask forgiveness even if for the most part it comes from the father before the asking. A father cannot turn away newborn infants because they lack strength; no, he delights in their coming to know him; in the same way, the knowledge of the universe that confers on everything life as well as the praise of god that god has presented to us ... (tractate 18 section 12-13)

It would seem that the hermetic god is not one of wrath and punishment, but is instead forgiving and understanding. Moreover, one should not worry about the outcomes of their actions (consequentialism), because it is the intent behind the action that matters more. So long as your “heart is in the right place,” so to speak, then you are blameless in the eyes of god.

### 3.4 Children & Creation

Due to the ascetic nature of the hermetic practice, one might be surprised to find that Hermetism also supports sex and procreation. It is important to recognize, however, that it is not sex itself that is seen as good, but rather its effects. Child-bearing is mentioned in a positive manner several times in the CH:

But god immediately spoke a holy speech: 'Increase in increasing and multiply in multitude, all you creatures and craftworks ... (Pymander, section 18)

The gods sowed the generations of humans to know the works of god; to be a working witness to nature; to increase the number of mankind; to master all things under heaven; to discern the things that are good; to increase by increasing and multiply by multiplying. (tractate 3 section 3)

However, it goes even further than this. Those people who do not bear children, Hermes says, will be cursed by god.

God's other name is 'father' because he is capable of making all things. Making is characteristic of a father. Prudent people therefore regard the making of children as a duty in life to be taken most seriously and greatly revered, and should any human being pass away childless, they see it as the worst misfortune and irreverence. After death such a person suffers retribution from demons. This is his punishment: the soul of the childless one is sentenced to a body that has neither a man's nature nor a woman's - a thing accursed under the sun. Most assuredly then, Asclepius, you should never congratulate a childless person. On the contrary, show pity for his calamity, knowing what punishment awaits him. (tractate 2 section 17)

These harsh words in support of child-bearing make sense in Hermetism, considering the way in which this tradition understands god. The god of Hermetism is a creator deity, and thus by creating something ourselves, we are likening ourselves to god.

Thus, unless you make yourself equal to god, you cannot understand god; like is understood by like. (tractate 11 section 20)

Just as you are no longer a living being if you are idle at your affairs, so, if god is idle, he is no longer god - though it is not right to say so. If it has been proven that (you) can(not) be without (making) something, how much truer is this of god? (tractate 11 section 12)

Indeed, the act of creation is likened to divine goodness:

This is how the cosmos is good, in that it also makes all things; thus, it is good with respect to the making that it does. (tractate 6 section 2)

The father, receiving the appetite for the good, by way of the sun, causes the begetting and rearing of his children, for the good is the principle of making. (tractate 10 section 3)

Although this act of creation is often likened to sex and child-bearing in the CH, it is likely that the concept extends beyond this to encompass all acts of creation, including art and the products of labour. Thus, it would be insufficient for one to solely uphold the virtues, as the true

hermetic disciple must also be involved in acts of creation, so that they may better understand god's nature.

### 3.5 Admiration of Creation and Possible Connection to Science

Alongside reverence for god and procreation, the admiration of creation is also mentioned as one of humanity's purposes for existing on earth (tractate 3 section 3). There are many quotes throughout the CH to this effect:

The gods sowed the generations of humans to know the works of god; to be a working witness to nature; to increase the number of mankind; to master all things under heaven; to discern the things that are good; to increase by increasing and multiply by multiplying. (tractate 3 section 3)

The man became a spectator of god's work. He looked at it in astonishment and recognized its maker. (tractate 4 section 2)

If you want to see god, consider the sun, consider the circuit of the moon, consider the order of the stars. Who keeps this order? (tractate 5 section 3)

No one claims that a statue or a picture has been produced unless there is a sculptor or a painter. Has this craftwork been produced without a craftsman, then? Oh, how full of blindness, how full of irreverence, how full of ignorance! Tat, my child, never deprive the craftworks of their craftsman ... (tractate 5 section 7)

Having conceived that nothing is impossible to you, consider yourself immortal and able to understand everything, all art, all learning, the temper of every living thing. [...] And when you have understood all these at once - times, places, things, qualities, quantities - then you can understand god. (tractate 11 section 20)

And do you say, 'god is unseen'? Hold your tongue! Who is more visible than god? This is why he made all things: so that through them all you might look on him. This is the goodness of god, this is his excellence: that he is visible through all things. (tractate 11 section 22)

If you wish also to gaze upon him, look at the order of the cosmos and the careful arrangement of this order; look at the necessity of the heavenly phenomena and the providence in what has come to be and what comes to be; look at matter, completely

full of life, and a great god moving along with all beings good and fair - gods and demons and humans. (tractate 12 section 21)

Because the consideration of the material world is deemed a positive pursuit, it would be sensible to assume that science - insofar as it discovers the inner workings of this material world - could be seen as a form of worship and reverence towards god. Indeed, some passages from the *Asclepius* seem to support this view:

Learning the arts and sciences and using them preserves this earthly part of the world; god willed it that the world would be incomplete without them. (*Asclepius*, section 8)

Therefore, given that mankind was made and shaped in this way and that the supreme god appointed him to such duty and service, if he observes the worldly order in an orderly way, if he adores god faithfully, complying duly and worthily with god's will in both its aspects, with what prize do you believe such a being should be presented? [...] Yes, this is the payment for those who live faithfully under god, who live attentively with the world. (*Asclepius*, section 11-12)

It has been declared rightly, then, that humanity should not only uphold the ten virtues and participate in creation, but admire god's physical creation as well.

## 4 Conclusion

Hermetism is an old and obscure philosophical system that prioritizes eternal salvation through divine *gnosis*. While this process of spiritual ascension may take many lifetimes, it is every person's final destiny, and all right action should be undertaken with this final goal in mind. It is precisely because of this process' gradual nature that Hermetism must have something to say about the correct way to be in the world while one has yet to achieve salvation. In the second half of the present discussion, it has been shown that this is indeed the case. Aside from its central thrust, Hermetism promotes a system of virtue ethics, in which one acts in moderation and denies the sensations of the material body. In addition, the student should also admire god's creation and participate in creation himself, as these things are considered righteous by god, and aid the student in understanding him. If one should fail at any one of these things, they will be forgiven, so long as there is genuine intent towards pursuing the good.



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