

AMERICAN HERMETIC: AN ACCOUNT OF HUMAN PURPOSE

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ABSTRACT

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Hermetic spirituality combines a reverence for nature with an unapologetic anthropocentrism, which sees human consciousness as containing infinite divine potential. Since its origins in Alexandria of late antiquity, it has become a largely obscure tradition, excluding the intense focus that it received during the Italian Renaissance. However, the trajectory of American philosophy that began with the transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson constitutes a renewal of the core ideas that drove the Hermetic project. Reading Hermeticism alongside the American schools of transcendentalism, pragmatism, and ecstatic naturalism can strengthen the insights of both traditions. The magical spiritual vision of Hermeticism can embolden the American philosophical view of humanity while the American commitment to naturalism can add greater metaphysical integrity to the Hermetic worldview. An Americanized Hermeticism is able to account for the dark and tragic qualities of nature while still retaining a sense of humanity's divine destiny.

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Hermeticism is not something you choose, it is a destiny...

- C.G. Jung¹

If it is not true it is very well imagined.

- Giordano Bruno²

CHAPTER 1

A LOST SPIRITUALITY?

Some of the greatest expressions of Ralph Waldo Emerson's approach to human selfhood appear in his 1841 essay "Self-Reliance." Therein, he wrote that "The relations of the soul to the divine spirit are so pure that it is profane to seek to interpose helps."³ The Emersonian brand of individualism is centered not upon an autonomous self, rigidly distinguished from the rest of society and nature, but rather upon the infinite divine potency internal to individual human experience. Emerson's mastery of writing combined with the boldness of his spiritual teachings have led to him being seen not just as a poet and philosopher but as a seer and sage. The literary critic Harold Bloom has described Emerson as "the mind of America,"⁴ the true prophet of the American religion.

¹ C.G. Jung, *C.G. Jung Letters Volume 1*, ed. Gerhard Adler and Aniela Jaffe, trans. R.F.C. Hull (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), 351.

² Giordano Bruno, *The Heroic Enthusiasts (Gli Eroici Furori): An Ethical Poem, Volume 2*, trans. L. Williams (London: Bernard Quaratch, 1889), 79.

³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance" in *Essays and Lectures* (Digireads.com Publishing, 2009), 138.

⁴ Harold Bloom, "Emerson: The American Religion" in *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 2007), 33.

That religion is a greatly varied phenomenon, comprising a vast plurality of manifestations that Bloom believes share the underlying characteristic of being spiritualities in which “the American spirit learns again in isolation its underlying characteristic of being a spark of God floating in a sea of space.”⁵ In Bloom’s estimation, while the American religion is ostensibly Christian and protestant, its deeper sensibilities are quite different than that of orthodox Christianity, reflecting instead “A blend of ancient heresies and nineteenth-century stresses...”⁶ The ancient heresies that Bloom has in mind are precursors to the American obsession with spiritual experience and the divine within. Concerning the ideas Emerson so exuberantly expressed in *Self-Reliance*, Bloom notices resonance with one occult heresy in particular. If declarations such as “Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind”⁷ have a specific spiritual flavor, it “is essentially Hermetic, not Christian.”⁸ What then is this Hermetic spirituality, whose insights would be echoed so many years later by the sage of Concord?

The Hermetic tradition was born in late antiquity, within the pluralistic Greco-Egyptian culture of the city of Alexandria. The Egyptian god Thoth and the Greek god Hermes were melded into a third figure, one who inspired enough reverence to earn the title of “Trismegistus” (thrice-great). Hermes Trismegistus contained traits of both Thoth and Hermes but was neither a replacement for them nor a straightforward combination of the two. He was a distinct and intriguing figure, considered to be both divine and human,

⁵ Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” in *Essays*, 135.

⁸ Harold Bloom, *Omens of Millennium: The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams, and Resurrection* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996).

inhabiting the mythological roles of philosopher, magician, and king. While it is not known exactly when this syncretism was solidified, after the first few centuries of the common era, Hermeticism had become an established spiritual path.

Around that time, the *Hermetica* emerged, the Hermetic body of sacred writings. While much of the *Hermetica* has been lost to history, some of its major components, the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the *Asclepius*, and the later *Emerald Tablet* (notable for being the source of the most famous Hermetic dictum – “As above, so below”), have survived, and have inspired many spiritual and philosophical seekers throughout the centuries. While the true authors of the *Corpus Hermeticum* and the *Asclepius* are unknown, these texts were attributed to thrice-great Hermes himself. Hermes was not, as was long believed, an actual historical figure, even though thinkers as significant as Augustine and later many great scholars of the Renaissance thought of him as such. Even so, Hermeticism remains the cornerstone of Western esotericism and Hermes one of the most potent figures of spiritual wisdom in Western history.

The grandiose lore about Hermes Trismegistus that accumulated in the centuries following the writing of the *Hermetica* was in large part inspired by the dynamic and magisterial nature of the teachings attributed to him. Versions of Hermes were given such incredible backstories as him having been alive before Noah’s flood, the grandson of Adam, the inventor of hieroglyphics, the builder of the pyramids, a teacher of Abraham, or a contemporary of Moses.⁹ However, although the legends of thrice-great Hermes took

⁹ Gary Lachman, *The Quest for Hermes Trismegistus: From Ancient Egypt to the Modern World* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2011).

such hyperbolic character, casting him as “the mythological creator of civilization,”¹⁰ Hermeticism is ultimately a spirituality not about venerating its central prophet but about the divine potential of all humankind.

The Corpus Hermeticum recounts a series of dialogues, in which either Hermes is receiving a revelation from Nous (the primordial divine mind) or Hermes is similarly instructing a student of his. In the first of the Corpus’ fifteen treatises, Hermes is awakened to the infinite divine light of Nous, who teaches Hermes that humanity has forgotten its spiritual nature. Hermes learns how humankind is unique within the cosmos as creatures equally divine and material, existing within the natural world but having the ability to re-ascend to the higher realms of divinity. These texts have often evoked comparisons with Gnosticism, a tradition with similarities to Hermeticism that developed within the same era. However, though Gnostic and Hermetic spirituality both emphasize human divinity and the quest for deep knowledge of reality, Hermeticism does not share Gnostic pessimism about the material world.

Hermes Trismegistus represents a spiritual vision that elevates humanity without diminishing the rest of nature. Humans have a unique divinity but one that is actualized not by escaping materiality but by transforming it. Gary Lachman, a prolific writer on occult history, summarizes the contrast being Gnosticism and Hermeticism by noting that “for the Gnostics the world was a prison they wished to escape, for the Hermetists it was one they wished to transform into a cathedral.”¹¹ The Hermetica may contain instances of

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Gary Lachman, *The Secret Teachers of the Western World* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher-Penguin, 2015), 135.

Gnostic longing for transcendence but the overall picture is of a world filled with goodness and spiritual light, which humans are in a special position to cultivate. Our status as divine animals is portrayed not as a license to dominate nature nor an impetus to flee from it but rather as denoting a great responsibility to heal its wounds. Lachman describes the Hermetic ideal of humanity acting as “caretakers of the cosmos.”¹² The more we remember the spark of Nous within human nature, the more we are able to actualize our spiritual potential and join with Nous in the ongoing task of caring for the world. That is the human destiny revealed by Hermes Trismegistus.

How Hermes Became Hidden

If the tradition of Hermeticism was initially recognized for its compelling spiritual vision, what accounts for it becoming so obscure in the contemporary world? For much of the Middle-Ages, the Corpus Hermeticum was lost, although it managed to survive those centuries of obscurity, being “shuttled across medieval Egypt, Turkey, and the Middle-East.”¹³ The Asclepius and related works were better known during this period, with some Christian thinkers considering Hermes’ teachings to be a precursor to Christian doctrine. Tertullian considered Hermes to be the greatest of pagan sages, the “teacher of all natural philosophers.”¹⁴ Lactantius praised Hermes’ philosophy as a forebear of Christianity, as they both affirmed divine incarnation into the material world. Conversely, Augustine took a critical, if nuanced, stance on Hermes, whom he believed

¹² Gary Lachman, *The Caretakers of the Cosmos: Living Responsibly in an Unfinished World*, (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2013).

¹³ Lachman, *Quest for Hermes*.

¹⁴ Florian Ebeling, *The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus: Hermeticism from Ancient to Modern Times* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2007), 43.

to be a significant pagan prophet, contemporaneous with Moses. From Augustine's perspective, Hermes was ultimately a false prophet "...compelled by divine influence, on the one hand... and by a diabolical influence, on the other hand..."¹⁵ Despite the existence of a handful of Medieval references to Hermes and the writings attributed to him, it would not be until the Florentine Renaissance that spiritual and philosophical enthusiasm around Hermeticism would return in full force.

In 1463, the Renaissance revival of Hermetic thought began.¹⁶ A copy of the *Corpus Hermeticum* was discovered in Macedonia and brought to Cosimo de' Medici, a Florentine banker with a great interest in philosophy. So excited was Cosimo to have possession of this lost work, that he instructed his scribe Marsilio Ficino, who would go on to become a great Renaissance Neoplatonic thinker, to cease his current task of translating Plato and to instead begin work on translating the *Corpus Hermeticum*. As much as Cosimo had hoped to read Plato before he died, the prospect of being able to read the words of thrice-great Hermes was even more enticing. Following this re-discovery of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, Hermeticism became a vital component of the spiritual and philosophical life of the Renaissance.

Some scholars, such as Ficino, explored the wisdom of Hermetic magic in a way compatible with Christian orthodoxy. Other thinkers, such as Pico della Mirandola and Giordano Bruno would take Hermetic thought to more daring and heretical places. Lachman describes the brand of humanism represented in Pico and Bruno's thought as a "superhumanism", an esoteric form of humanism which sought to "expand the idea of the

¹⁵ Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (Digireads.com Publishing, 2015).

¹⁶ Lachman, *Quest for Hermes*.

human so that it would embrace the godlike.”¹⁷ Whether Christian or esoteric humanist, these Renaissance magicians agreed that the Hermetica was one of the greatest components of Western spiritual heritage and that Hermes truly deserved the title of thrice-great.

The Hermetic component of Renaissance thought was not without controversy. As the years went on, pushback against the efforts of Hermeticists such as Ficino, Pico, and Bruno began to build.¹⁸ The most dramatic example is the execution of Bruno by the Roman Inquisition in 1600. Bruno had been tried and found guilty for heresies, including his denial of several core Christian doctrines, his embrace of a form of pantheism, and his arguments for the infinity of the cosmos. Even Ficino’s ostensibly orthodox embrace of Hermetic magic came under fire (in a less literal sense than Bruno) from several prominent Christian figures, who argued that if Christ alone is sufficient for knowledge of the divine, then even benign explorations of pagan magic and natural philosophy were unnecessary and potentially dangerous distractions.

Hermeticism received significant pressure not only from Christianity but also from more scholastic forms of humanism, concerned less with the expansion of human consciousness and more on rhetoric and classical education.¹⁹ In 1614, the Huguenot scholar Isaac Casaubon’s study of the *Corpus Hermeticum* came to the conclusion that the Hermetica was not a product of the deep past but rather of late antiquity, not having been the inspiration for Plato but vice versa. Whether or not Hermes Trismegistus was

¹⁷ Gary Lachman, *The Secret Teachers of the Western World*, 254.

¹⁸ Lachman, *Quest for Hermes*.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

ever a historical figure, Causabon declared that these texts could not be credibly attributed to him, shattering the misconception that had much to do with the veneration Hermeticism had received throughout the Renaissance. Shortly thereafter, another significant blow landed against esoteric thinking came in the form of the Catholic monk Marin Mersenne's 1623 *Quaestiones Celeberrimae in Genesim*. Mersenne's work was an all-out assault against the Renaissance fascination with esotericism. Not only did he emphasize the incompatibility of occultism with a biblical worldview, he based much of criticism on the supposedly antiquated nature of Hermetic thought. Whereas ancient Hermeticism and its Renaissance revivalists saw the cosmos as teeming with divine potency and agencies, which human consciousness could actively participate in, Mersenne saw the rising modernist worldview as indicating a mechanical cosmos, interpretable through rational thought. Hence, he saw the magical worldview of Hermeticism as being a retrograde mode of thinking, possibly even a sign of psychological unhealth.

After enough sustained criticism from those varying perspectives, Hermeticism was stripped of much of its intellectual credibility and esotericism transitioned into a more underground mode of spirituality. Occult theory and practice have in recent centuries been continued by secret societies but only traces of esoteric thought remain in the mainstream. Today, the name of Hermes Trismegistus is scarcely recognized, with Hermetic spirituality receiving little treatment outside of historians of Western esotericism. The same stigmas that discredited Hermeticism in the 17th century remain prominent cultural factors. The esoteric dream of human divinity is still often dismissed by orthodox religion as heresy, by mainstream humanism as foolishness, and by

rationalist science as superstition. Interest in magic may thrive in popular culture but the deep insights of the great occult traditions are often neglected, with the sustained intellectual attention previously afforded them now a thing of the past.

A Third Hermeticism?

There may be an overlooked third chapter to the experiment of Hermetic philosophy, in addition to its Alexandrian inception and Renaissance revival. As indicated by Harold Bloom's sharp reading of Emerson and the American religion he represents, strong resonances of the Hermetic legacy can be found throughout the ethos of American spirituality. As within Hermeticism, the Emersonian expression of the American religion combines an openness to the rich fecundity of the natural world with a dedication to the divine spark of God that is the best and oldest part of the human self. Bloom engages in a project of "religious criticism", surveying specific movements and groups that throughout American history have reflected the quest for the divine within. However, not only does Emerson represent a magnificent literary expression of American religiosity, he is also a central figure of the trajectory of American philosophy. Although Bloom has tended to identify the overall character of American spirituality as fundamentally Gnostic, it may be that Hermeticism comes closer to the portrait of humanity, nature, and divinity that is put forth in that philosophical trajectory.

Since the time of Emerson, great American philosophers have taken inspiration from his spiritual teachings, often blending the zeal of American spirituality with a heavier emphasis on philosophical inquiry than is often found in the poetic Emerson. Bloom names William James as being another paradigmatic figure for American religious criticism. Like Emerson, James' writings are able to discern the heart of American

spirituality, displaying a remarkable degree of personal investment in exploration of the heights of human experience and the transformative powers of nature. James was influenced by Emerson, while diverging from him in terms of both method and content in important ways. While James' metaphysics of pragmatism was far more cautious and pluralistic than that of Emerson's transcendentalism, both men emphasized nature as the site of core spiritual truths and centralized experience as a key philosophical category.

Pragmatism thus succeeded transcendentalism as a significant school of American philosophy, with Charles Sanders Peirce²⁰ and John Dewey being the other leading voices of the movement. Largely inspired by the insights of Darwin, the pragmatists recognized nature as constantly evolving and inescapably complex. Although their conclusions differed, they sought to explore questions of cosmology, epistemology, consciousness, and spirituality in terms of the impetus for practical action that the intellectual exercise of philosophy can provide. While the Hermetic congruency with aspects of pragmatism may be less starkly obvious than its resonance with Emersonian transcendentalism, the insights of pragmatists are often related to that same aspect of American religiosity that is driven by the pursuit of intense encounters with divinity.

Certainly, there is a world of difference between the ambitious and magisterial spirituality of the Hermeticists and the philosophical approach of the pragmatists, which was grounded in naturalism and empirically-oriented. Yet James' commitment to human experience led him to an idea of humanity that has traces of the revelation of thrice-great

²⁰ Peirce was a brilliant thinker with essential contributions to the project of American philosophy. His notions of agapism and evolutionary love are well worth engaging with the esoteric tradition and are only omitted in this thesis for reasons of space.

Hermes. The God imagined by William James was one who actively needs human help, just as the Hermetica tells us that humanity has a vital role to play in the task of cultivating the cosmos. If it is even more difficult to imagine the atheistic Dewey being congenial to esoteric thought, it is worth considering how Dewey's politics foreground the rights and dignity of all individuals. In much the same way, Renaissance Hermeticists such as Pico and Bruno interpreted the Hermetica as teaching that all humankind possesses divinely granted worth. Indeed, a comparison with Dewey, often considered the greatest philosopher of American liberalism, is conducive to drawing out the underappreciated political aspects of the project of Renaissance esotericism.

More recently Robert Corrington's ecstatic naturalism has emerged as a new American school of philosophy, one that draws upon the insights of both transcendentalism and pragmatism. The metaphysics of ecstatic naturalism state that the word "nature" has no actual correlate. Rather than representing any kind of totality or whole, what is understood by "nature" must be thought of in terms of the ontological distinction between *natura naturans* (nature naturing) and *natura naturata* (nature natured), defined as "nature perennially creating itself out of itself alone" and "the innumerable orders of the world."²¹ Corrington reads *natura naturans* as the unconscious underside of nature, which ecstatically emanates the world's infinite natural complexes. While Emerson had a sense of *natura naturans* and James (psychologist as well philosopher) had a sense of both the personal and collective unconscious, Corrington traces the line between these realities. Ecstatic naturalism articulates the path from nature

²¹ Robert S. Corrington, *Deep Pantheism: Toward a New Transcendentalism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), x.

naturing, to the collective unconscious, to the personal unconscious, to self-consciousness.

Corrington's account of selving, "the overall arc and trajectory of the human process,"²² describes the movement of the self out of undifferentiated unconsciousness to increased self-awareness. In order for selving to proceed in a healthy manner, one must open themselves to integration of the various ecstatic powers of nature. Through this deep work of integration, humans are able to move toward psychological and spiritual health, interacting with the powers and forces of nature in a mature and creative manner. The movement of channeling unconsciousness (in its various layers of depth) into conscious human experience is reminiscent of the Hermetic injunction to recall the spark of divine mind that lies deep within human selfhood. The concept of *natura naturans* as the unconscious of nature has vital implications for esoterically-inspired metaphysics, as it can help develop a more sophisticated idea of what the Hermeticists were interacting with when they sought the revelation of Nous.

Together, transcendentalism, pragmatism, and ecstatic naturalism form a trajectory of American philosophy that contains spiritually vital insights which reflect those of both Alexandrian and Renaissance Hermeticism. For all their differences, the thinkers from these schools of thought share the ability to affirm the untapped spiritual potential of human consciousness in a way that glorifies rather than denigrates the rest of nature. While almost none of these American thinkers were readers of the Hermetic writings (Emerson was familiar with them but wrote little about them, though his brief mentions

²² Robert S. Corrington, *Nature's Sublime: An Essay in Aesthetic Naturalism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), 32.

are appreciative), what is important is that they responded to the sacred depths of both nature and the self in the same spirit as the Hermeticists. As sadly obscure as Hermes Trismegistus has become, his mission is continued in the project of American philosophy.

Viewed in this light, American philosophy can be spiritually emboldened, while conversely sharpening the metaphysical integrity of Hermeticism. While the aforementioned American thinkers have a more developed sense of the dark and tragic aspects of reality than the Hermeticists, Hermetic magic has a greater sense of human divinity than dreamt of in most spiritualities and philosophies. Together, a coherent paradigm begins to emerge amidst the diverse perspectives of these magicians and thinkers, of a humanism grounded in the esoteric knowledge of human potential and responsibility. A humanism that foregrounds ecstatic experiences of divinity and the wonders of nature, looking to the wisdom of philosophy, science and ancient spiritual traditions. American Hermeticism is a project of spiritual philosophy, pointing toward the human destiny of becoming caretakers of the cosmos.

CHAPTER 2:
THE METAPHYSICS OF NOUS

Hermetic spirituality begins with the revelation from Nous. The first discourse of the Corpus Hermeticum, arguably its most important, begins with Hermes in a meditative state when "...an enormous being, completely unbounded in size..." appears to him, introducing itself as Poimandres, "mind of sovereignty"²³. Poimandres offers to teach Hermes the deepest secrets of reality, showing him a dazzling vision that demonstrates the creation of the world and the true nature of humanity. It is his openness to the knowledge offered by Poimandres, the divine mind personified, that gives Hermes his exalted thrice-great status. While the thematic focus of the Hermetica is the spiritual journey that humans can undergo to awaken to their godlike status, these texts also introduce a vibrant portrait of the cosmos, in which all of nature is emanated from Nous. The Hermeticists saw the world as divided into a series of planetary realms which separate the earth from the realm of Nous and through which humanity must travel in order to reclaim our divine power.

In order to understand Hermeticism's account of humanity and subsequent vision for civilization, the metaphysical paradigm of the Hermetica must first be examined. How did the followers of thrice-great Hermes conceptualize the divine mind that they longed to return to? What did they expect to experience on their spiritual ascension to the

²³ Brian P. Copenhaver, *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1.

primordial realm from which earth is emanated? And how is it that humanity came to be separated from its origins, divided between materiality and higher consciousness? All those aspects of the Hermetic worldview are explicated within the aforementioned first discourse of the Corpus Hermeticum (often referred to as “the Poimandres” or “Pimander”), and clarified in other portions of the Hermetica. While the Hermetic cosmology is not nearly as convoluted and busy as its Gnostic cousin,²⁴ it paints a compelling metaphysical paradigm, the details of which are relevant to understanding the insights of the Hermetica.

After providing an overview of the ancient Hermetic worldview, it is possible to track the key metaphysical currents of the various historical manifestations of Hermeticism. In particular, the development of the Neoplatonic aspects of Hermeticism are worth paying attention to. Emanationism, the divine overflow of Nous which creates the material world, is an essential aspect of any form of Hermetic thought. Just as the anonymous Alexandrian authors of the Hermetica display Neoplatonic resonances, the central Hermetic thinkers of the Renaissance were all Neoplatonists of some variety, and some of Emerson’s most powerful moments of spiritual writing contains strong echoes of both Hermeticism and Neoplatonism.

Coming to Corrington’s ecstatic naturalism, the opportunity arises to compare and contrast the notion of Nous, nature’s divine mind, with nature naturing, the unconscious of nature. Corrington’s Jungian interpretation of *natura naturans* adds a greater metaphysical precision to the Hermetic schema. In the new form of transcendentalism

²⁴ Lachman, *Quest for Hermes*.

that Corrington introduces, “the sense of the tragic is deepened,”²⁵ opening up to both the beautiful and horrific aspects of the ecstatic powers of nature. While the Hermeticists spoke of Nous in terms of pure glory and goodness, both Emerson and Corrington’s brands of transcendentalism display a greater willingness to think of the deepest parts of nature in terms of darkness in addition to light. The combination of Hermetic spiritual confidence with the pragmatism of American thought reveals an idea of nature that does justice to both its divine heights and its unconscious depths.

The Hermetic Cosmos

When Hermes expresses to Poimandres his desire to learn the secret truths behind reality, he is first shown a creation story. Recounting his vision, Hermes says that Poimandres “changed his appearance, and in an instant everything opened up to me. I saw an endless vision in which everything became light...”²⁶ From there, he witnesses how the universe was borne out of Nous. The infinite light of Nous produces a “fearful and gloomy”²⁷ darkness, which forms a watery substance, emitting a holy word that is described as the “son of god.”²⁸ The elements separate, the water blending with earth as both air and a powerful flame rise to great heights. Poimandres then identifies himself as that original light, which is the divine light of God. He tells Hermes that both God the father and the word of God (which “are not divided from one another”)²⁹ are within Hermes.

²⁵ Corrington, *Deep Pantheism*, 100.

²⁶ Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

Hermes inquires how this creation actually took place, and Poimandres informs him that Nous gave birth to a second part of itself, a craftsman tasked with forming nature. The craftsman-mind created the various planetary spheres, culminating with earth, which was made to team with various forms of life. After the forming of the earth, Nous makes humanity, who initially inhabits the highest divine realm. Humanity is called the most beautiful of Nous' creations, adored by the divine mind because we bear its image more than anything in nature. Humanity decides to participate in the ongoing project of creation, entering into the realms made by the craftsman-mind.

Poimandres describes to Hermes how humanity gradually descended from our home with Nous down through the planetary spheres. Between the earth (also referred to as “nature” or “lower nature” in the Hermetic text) and the realm of Nous are the realms of the seven “planets” (the moon, the sun, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn), which are called the governors, the rulers of fate within nature. Each of the governors loves humanity, as does the craftsman-mind, who Poimandres calls our brother. From each of the governors, we are bestowed a gift, gleaning some of each of their essences. Eventually, we came to a place of being able to see the earth and then “broke through the vault and stooped to look through the cosmic framework.”³⁰

Nature looked upward at humanity and fell in love, being entranced by the energy of Nous and the governors that humanity carries. Gazing down at nature, humanity saw our own reflection in the waters of the earth and became captivated by the image of us within this lowest realm. Humanity and nature embraced each other as lovers, humanity

³⁰ Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 3.

becoming entangled in the realm of the earth. Poimandres tells Hermes that when humanity was embedded within nature, we became the one creature in the cosmos whose body is mortal but has an immortal essential nature, remaining divine but now subject to rule by fate. Our descent from Nous to the earth is presented here as both tragic and beautiful. Humanity has fallen into sleep, forgetful of our beginnings and the power that we carry. However, Poimandres says that “When nature made love with them man, she bore a wonder most wondrous.”³¹ In being made mortal, humanity became the only aspect of reality that is equally material and divine, a unique earthly manifestation of the glory of Nous.

After giving Hermes this knowledge of humanity’s origins, Poimandres reveals “the mystery that has been kept hidden to this very day,”³² the secret truth that humanity can re-ascend to Nous. In focusing on the divine light within us, we are able to reclaim our true nature and again make the journey through the planetary spheres. Just as each of the governors gifted us with a specific virtue during our descent, we must relinquish various vices at each stage of our re-ascent, becoming more in touch with the sacred spark of Nous within us. Ascending above the planetary realms, we enter an eighth sphere, between the governors and Nous. There we sing praises to Nous, hearing the sounds of the ninth and highest sphere. Finally, we are able to re-enter the primordial spiritual realm from which we came, merging once again with the divine mind. Poimandres tells

³¹ Ibid., 4.

³² Ibid,

Hermes, “This is the final good for those who have received knowledge: To be made god.”³³

There is a sense of urgency to the conclusion of this Hermetic treatise. Immediately after finishing telling Hermes about this spiritual journey that humans have the ability to undergo, Poimandres asks him “Why do you still delay? Having learned all this should you not become guide to the worthy so that through you the human race might be saved by god?”³⁴ Poimandres then dissipates back into the higher realms, with Hermes now commissioned as a prophet of humanity’s true nature. Hermes describes how he began to proclaim the things he had heard, with some people responding with scorn and mockery while others are initiated into the Hermetic path. “Having made them rise, I became guide to my race, teaching them the words – how to be saved and in what manner - and I sowed the words of wisdom among them, and they were nourished from the ambrosial water.”³⁵

The cosmic framework established in this first treatise provides the backdrop for the spiritual teachings of the rest of the Hermetica. It is the most narratively focused of the Hermetic texts, with the remainder of the Corpus Hermeticum as well as the Asclepius being dialogues between Hermes and Nous or Hermes and a disciple. Those dialogues explicate upon the worldview established in the Hermetic creation myth, describing in detail the nature of God, the cosmos, and humanity. While the spiritual ideas proclaimed by these texts are largely consistent, Francis Yates, in her masterful survey of ancient and

³³ Ibid., 6.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

Renaissance Hermeticism, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, notes an interesting variation within the dialogues of the Corpus Hermeticum. Each describes the Hermetic quest for gnosis, a re-awakening the divine mind within ourselves, described by Lachman as “immediate, direct, non-discursive cognition of reality.”³⁶ However, there is some discrepancy within the treatises about how that seeking of gnosis is framed. Yates distinguishes between pessimist gnosis and optimist gnosis.

For the pessimist (or dualist) Gnostic, the material world heavily impregnated with the fatal influence of the stars is in itself evil; it must be escaped from by an ascetic way of life, which avoids as much as possible all contact with matter, until the lightened soul rises up through the spheres of the planets, casting off their evil influences as it ascends, to its true home in the immaterial divine world. For the optimist gnostic, matter is impregnated with the divine, the earth lives, moves, with a divine life, the stars are living divine animals, the sun burns with a divine power, there is no part of Nature which is not good for all are parts of God.³⁷

More than any other chapter, the first treatise of the Corpus Hermeticum blends these two perspectives. The Gnostic sense of the need to escape the bounds of the material world is evident in the description of how humans can rise above nature to return to Nous. However, the text also establishes the Hermetic sense that the entry of humanity into the realm of nature was an opportunity rather than a purely negative event. While a few chapters of the Corpus discuss the material world in more purely negative terms (mostly related to the need for humanity to re-ascend to Nous) the optimist paradigm seems to prevail overall, establishing Hermeticism as more nature-friendly alternative to Gnosticism. While the Gnostics tend to vilify the demiurge who created the material

³⁶ Lachman *Quest for Hermes*.

³⁷ Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition. Vol. II. Frances Yates: Selected Works* (New York: Routledge, 1964).

world, the craftsman-mind is spoken of by the Hermeticists as a loving brother to humankind.

The Hermetica is at its most spiritually powerful when it explicitly praises both humanity and the natural world, as such passages strongly draw out the Hermetic conception of our spiritual worth and purpose – an anthropocentrism not about the domination of nature but rather of our unique ability to care for it, aiding the ongoing project of its creation. The Asclepius in particular contains many passages where Hermes makes the point that true attention to human consciousness will result in the veneration of nature and vice versa. He instructs his disciple that humanity is neither a material creature or a spiritual being but rather “has been put in the happier place of middle status so that he might cherish those beneath him and be cherished by those above him. He cultivates the earth; he swiftly mixes into the elements; he plumbs the depth of the sea in the keenness of his mind.”³⁸ Although the Hermetic cosmology hierarchically places nature below the higher spiritual realms, the divinization of humanity sought by Hermes and his followers is not a negation of nature but rather an infusion of spirit into matter via the human process.

Varieties of Neoplatonism

A key aspect of the metaphysics implicit within the Hermetic creation story is that nature is not created out of nothing but rather emanated from Nous. The divine mind is an infinite light out of which darkness, logos, and the elements arise. The Hermetic emphasis on emanationism has led to strong historical associations with Neoplatonism.

³⁸ Ibid., 69 – 70.

While the authors of the Hermetica were inspired by Plato rather than the inverse (which was originally assumed by those who considered Hermes Trismegistus to be a historical figure of the deep past), Neoplatonic thinkers of various eras have been interested in Hermeticism and found strong resonance between these two schools of thought. From classical Neoplatonism, to Renaissance Neoplatonists, to the transcendental Neoplatonist tendencies of Emerson, emanation, the divine overflow which creates nature, has been a central influence upon Hermetic spirituality.

Among the most noteworthy of Neoplatonic thinkers to take Hermeticism seriously was Iamblichus.³⁹ Florian Ebeling notes that in his exploration of theurgy in *On the Mysteries*, Iamblichus celebrates thrice-great Hermes as the most significant figure of Egyptian philosophy. From the Hermetic texts, Iamblichus draws upon the idea of the singularity of Nous; that the cosmos is a material multiplicity that unfolded from a primordial divine unity. The Hermetic texts contain a deeper resonance with the Neoplatonism of Iamblichus than that of Plotinus, in that Iamblichus came closer to affirming the true extent of the spiritual value of nature. Marilyn Lawrence explains how Iamblichus' view differs from the Plotinian total focus on the divine One.

“The self's experience is fully in the world and temporal, so, for Iamblichus, we cannot simply turn our gaze upward in Plotinian contemplation to find wholeness and unity with our source. Plotinus' personal experience of the divine, described by Porphyry as instantaneous moments of mystical union, was purely intellectual and tied to a rejection of the body. But for Iamblichus and other Neoplatonic theurgists such as Proclus, we're emplaced in a natural world and must work with natural objects and surroundings, with sensations and with symbolic artifacts to aid the soul's ascent.”⁴⁰

³⁹ Ebeling, *Secret History of Hermes*, 19 – 21.

⁴⁰ Marilyn Lawrence, *Neoplatonic Theurgists as Aesthetic Naturalists*, paper read at the Fourth Congress on Ecstatic Naturalism, April 11 – 12, 2014.

The Hermetic texts share the affirmation of emanation espoused by both Plotinus and Iamblichus while being more nature-oriented than either. Even though Iamblichus had a sense of human embeddedness within the natural world, the *Hermetica* goes further in indicating that humanity's spiritual destiny has to do with transforming the cosmos rather than simply ascending above it to the higher realms. Ebeling describes how Iamblichus believed that "one may discern the spiritual in the material, the divine in the earthly."⁴¹ At the same time, "The divine manifests itself in the material and is symbolized in it, not as the divine itself but as an indication of its transcendent origin."⁴² While Iamblichus saw clues to divinity within the material world, the Hermetic view is not quite as hierarchical, seeing earthly human experience as the locus from which the power of *Nous* can more fully enter into nature. The divine mind is still a transcendent oneness but the Hermeticist ascends to *Nous* not to flee nature but to gain the power to fully care for it.

The confluence of Hermeticism and Neoplatonism continued in the Renaissance. Five years after translating the *Corpus Hermeticum*, reintroducing it into Western intellectual life, Marsilio Ficino translated the dialogues of Plato. Plato and Hermes Trismegistus would remain Ficino's great inspirations, with him attempting to bring their insights into the purview of Christian orthodoxy. Siding with Lactantius and Tertullian rather than Augustine, he interpreted Hermes as a great pagan prophet, whose ideas were forerunners of the revelation of Christ. In agreement with Augustine, he saw Platonism as "superior to all other philosophies."⁴³ For Ficino, Hermeticism and Platonism were two

⁴¹ Ebeling, *Secret History of Hermes*, 20.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Josephine L. Burroughs, *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man: Selections in Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 186.

closely related expressions of divinely revealed knowledge, indispensable to the task of understanding God and the cosmos. Ficino's Neoplatonism declared that "the ultimate end of human desire and activity can be no other than 'boundless truth and goodness,' that is, God"⁴⁴ and that "...all things below God receive being and goodness from him."⁴⁵

Ficino was a powerful influence over the Florentine Renaissance. His readings of Plato and Hermes did much to emphasize the importance of the human soul in the intellectual climate of the day. Through his Christian interpretation of Hermeticism, he was able to put forth esoteric magic as a viable and respectable pursuit, a benign way of cultivating the health of the soul. Paul Oskar Kristeller and John Herman Randall Jr. see Ficino's work as the impetus for a temporary turn in Renaissance thought from a more scholastic humanism, associated with figures such as Francesco Petrarca and Lorenza Valla, toward a more metaphysically-oriented Neoplatonic form of humanistic thought.⁴⁶

Ficino's greatest student, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, would carry forth that trend. While Ficino managed to stay in the Church's good graces, despite his somewhat daring claims that Hermeticism is indispensable to Christianity and that Hermetic magic could "repair" parts of the world that had fallen from grace,⁴⁷ Pico's still bolder moves would be less well received. The approach to magic purposed by Pico was far grander than the "natural magic" spoken of by Ficino, aiming "to bring human consciousness to the very source of being itself."⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Ibid., 188.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 189.

⁴⁶ Paul Oskar Kristeller and John Herman Randall Jr., *Renaissance Philosophy*, 7.

⁴⁷ Lachman, *Quest for Hermes*.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

In delving deep into various forms of magical practice (being enthusiastic about the Kabbalah), Pico hoped to learn how humanity could achieve the Hermetic dream of ascending beyond the planetary spheres and reconnecting with the mind of God. He proposed a grand spiritual syncretism, which “argued that there was fundamental agreement among the various traditions of intellectual history, which included the Greek philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, the Judeo-Christian tradition of the Bible and its theological interpretation of the works of Thomas Aquinas, and the esoteric traditions of Cabala, Hermeticism, and Arab philosophy.”⁴⁹ Pico’s most important work, *The Oration on the Dignity of Man*, which has been referred to as both “the manifesto of humanism” and “the manifesto of the Renaissance,” opens with an instruction from Hermes Trismegistus to his disciple - “A great miracle, Asclepius, is man.”⁵⁰ Although Pico argued that his magical pursuits actually could provide further evidence for the divinity of Christ, his work earned the harsh condemnation of Pope Innocent VIII. He attempted to flee Italy to escape the wrath of the Church but was eventually caught and imprisoned, dying unhappily at the age of 31 after his release.

The next iconic Renaissance figure to take up the mantle of the Hermetic quest was Giordano Bruno. While Ficino and Pico greatly drew upon Hermetic resources, Bruno embraced Hermetic ideals far more thoroughly than either, wishing to replace Christianity with what he saw as “the magical Egyptian religion of the world.”⁵¹ Just as Pico was inspired by Ficino, so was Bruno convicted by Pico’s esoteric brand of humanism. Within these three, a trajectory appears in the radicalism of Renaissance

⁴⁹ Ebeling, *Secret History*, 65.

⁵⁰ Kristeller and Randall, *Renaissance Philosophy*, 223.

⁵¹ Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, 11.

Neoplatonism; from Ficino's Christianity which made use of 'benign' magic, to Pico's universal spirituality which was still grounded in the Christian worldview, to Bruno's full-on replacement of Christ with Hermes.

Among Bruno's most important insights was his championing of Copernicus's heliocentric view of the universe, which he saw as far more compatible with Hermetic spirituality than the Ptolemaic geocentric model. Bruno took the emanationist tendencies of Neoplatonism and Hermeticism and concluded that the divine overflow must produce an infinite universe, filled with infinite worlds. His cosmology was inspired by that of Alexandrian Hermeticism but far more expansive and dynamic and less hierarchical, containing noticeable resonance with the contemporary scientific picture of the cosmos. He described in the form of poetry a mystical vision in which he broke through the veil of a layered and fixed cosmos and saw the universe in its true boundlessness –

Yet I affix these wings, leap into the air,
And plow the skies, 'til in the infinite I stand,
Leaving my globe behind to join the others,
As I travel farther in the infinite field,
I leave what I have already seen far behind me⁵²

Within the writings of Bruno, the full ambition of esoteric humanism comes into view. With no restraints from orthodox doctrine or Christological presuppositions, he enthusiastically embraced the view that nature and human consciousness are fully and equally infinite – As above, so below. His turn to Hermes away from Christ was because “For Bruno, Christo-centrism distorts the nature of the world by restricting the range of

⁵² Giordano Bruno, *On the Infinite, the Universe, & the Worlds: Five Cosmological Dialogues*, trans. Scott Gosnell, Vol. 2. Giordano Bruno Collected Works (United States: Huginn, Munnin & Co., 2014).

what can be potentially valuable, powerful, or true to a particular image of mediation... This view is not so much against incarnationism as it is for a kind of radically plural ‘animist’ incarnationism, a panoply of natural spirits rather than a central human figure.”⁵³ The essentiality of thrice-great Hermes in Bruno’s Egyptian-inspired religion of the world is as a symbol for the divine potential of every human being and the plurality of spiritual powers that enliven the infinite cosmos. If there is any kind of center to Bruno’s cosmology of infinitude, it is the magician himself, at the moment of gnosis, becoming one with the mind of God.

Bruno traveled throughout Europe spreading this message in the later years of the sixteenth-century. His arrogant and abrasive personality earned him many enemies and few friends and eventually he was imprisoned by the Church and convicted of a multitude of charges of heresy. Although he eventually was persuaded to recant some of his many offenses against Christian dogma, he could not bring himself to relinquish his treasured idea of an infinite cosmos. For the crime of believing in a vast plurality of worlds, Bruno was burned at the stake. The execution of Bruno, the greatest of the Renaissance magicians, was a deep blow to the Hermetic project and the other aforementioned attacks on the credibility of Hermes and his writings followed shortly thereafter.

In what I am purposing as an American third chapter of Hermeticism, Emerson expressed spiritual ambitions that match those of Bruno. His sense of humanity’s forgetfulness of its vast spiritual capability is reminiscent of both Hermes and the Neoplatonic Renaissance esoteric humanists –

⁵³ Joshua Ramey, *The Hermetic Deleuze: Philosophy and the Spiritual Ordeal* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 63-64.

Man is the dwarf of himself. Once he was permeated and dissolved by spirit. He filled nature with his overflowing currents. Out from him sprang the sun and moon; from man, the sun; from woman, the moon. The laws of his mind, the periods of his actions externized themselves into day and night, into the year and the seasons. But, having made for himself this huge shell, his waters retired; he no longer fills the veins and veinlets; he is shrunk to a drop. He sees, that the structure still fits him, but fits him colossally. Say, rather, once it fitted him, now it corresponds to him from far and on high.⁵⁴

Bloom reads this passage as a Hermetic vision, "...Americanized by Emerson."⁵⁵

Although Emerson differs from Bruno in that the Hermetic texts were not a particularly significant conscious influence upon him, he is similar to Bruno in that he echoes the emanationism of the Hermetica while making the infinite of nature more explicit.

Corrington reads Emerson as having a "...Neo-Platonic sense of unending self-emanating for nature as a 'whole.'"⁵⁶ Emerson's portrait of nature is closer to Corrington's ecstatic naturalism than the classical Neoplatonists, both because of his heightened sense of the ontological parity (the equal reality) of the emanated realms and their transcendental source and because of his dedication to the endlessness of nature's emanations. "For Emerson, nature never rests on its laurels but instead pours forth its infinite energies into the world of manifold orders."⁵⁷ Such a sentiment resonates with the description of *Nous* in the eleventh treatise of the *Corpus Hermeticum* – "God is not idle, else everything would be idle, for each and every thing is full of god. Nowhere in the cosmos nor in any

⁵⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature" in *Essays and Lectures* (Digireads.com Publishing, 2009), 28.

⁵⁵ Harold Bloom, *The Daemon Knows: Literary Greatness and the American Sublime* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015) 157.

⁵⁶ Corrington, *Deep Pantheism*, xi.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

other thing is there idleness. Said of the one who makes or of one who comes into being, idleness is an empty word.”⁵⁸

Corrington and Bloom both draw attention to Emerson’s late essay *Circles*, which is among the most metaphysically dynamic texts ever penned by the sage of Concord. The opening paragraph of *Circles* establishes Emerson’s breathtaking tribute to the ceaselessness of nature’s scale and scope.

The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end. It is the highest emblem in the cipher of the world. St. Augustine described the nature of God as a circle whose centre was everywhere, and its circumference nowhere. We are all our lifetime reading the copious sense of this first of forms. One moral we have already deduced, in considering the circular or compensatory character of every human action. Another analogy we shall now trace; that every action admits of being outdone. Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth, that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep a lower deep opens.⁵⁹

Corrington interprets the essay as positing that the human process is internally infinite in its divine potency but externally constrained to finite horizons, while nature itself is a multitude of countless circles. Bloom praises *Circles* as Emerson’s “wildest performance... a prose poem chanted by his daemon”⁶⁰ He also catches Emerson’s crafty move of interpreting Augustine’s description of God in a manner conducive to Emerson’s own transcendentalist break from orthodoxy, echoing the Hermetic notion of the divine infinite.

⁵⁸ Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 38.

⁵⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Circles” in *Essays and Lectures* (Digireads.com Publishing, 2009), 209.

⁶⁰ Bloom, *Daemon Knows*, 169.

While Corrington correctly notes that an Emersonian world of endlessly interwoven circles “does not contain either a bottom or post-circular telos of all *teloi*,”⁶¹ Bloom’s Hermetic reading of Emerson has the capacity to open up new ways of thinking through the intersections of esotericism, transcendentalism, and ecstatic naturalism. The framework of ecstatic naturalism is careful not to succumb to the perennial philosophical temptation to project anthropomorphic narratives unto the workings of nature. Yet from a Hermetic perspective, responding to the spiritual forces which goad us toward the endless depths of our consciousness is not a move which casts constraints unto nature but rather the only way for us to truly honor nature’s infinity. Bloom sees the essential American view of humanity, manifested clearly in Emerson’s writings, as evoking an American Adam “the God-Man of the New World. He was self-created and if he ever fell it was in the act of initial creation.”⁶²

The idea of humankind shared by the ancient Hermeticists, the Renaissance Neoplatonists, and later the American Emerson (along with his kindred spirits) is of a microcosm of the endless cosmos. To awaken to one’s own divinity is not to project the human ego as the model of nature but to look beneath the ego to see nature’s infinity as the truth of the self. Is it possible to embrace the unapologetic anthropocentrism of Hermetic spirituality without compromising ecstatic naturalism’s strong commitment to the darkness and tragedy of a Darwinian model of nature? To better answer that question, it is helpful to examine a reality which Corrington believes Emerson understood well – *natura naturans*, nature naturing.

⁶¹ Corrington, *Deep Pantheism*, 14.

⁶² Bloom, *Daemon Knows*, 4.

The Ecstatic Unconscious of Nature

A central metaphysical insight of ecstatic naturalism is that in order to understand nature (or at least gain a heightened sense of its workings), rather than look “upward” toward some transcendent divinity that determines all of nature, one must instead probe “downward” into nature’s unruly depths. If ecstatic naturalism (and its theological equivalent, deep pantheism) also affirms the idea of nature being emanated by some primordial source, what distinguishes nature naturing from the classical Neoplatonic and Hermetic account of *Nous*? While both concepts indicate a hidden source of nature, which eternally (or “perennially”, as Corrington prefers) creates the orders of the world, Corrington makes the crucial move of thinking of the depths of nature in terms of unconsciousness.

Ecstatic naturalism puts forth a paradigm of ordinal psychoanalysis. The ordinal brand of psychoanalysis may be distinguished from classical psychoanalysis both in that it begins from the principle of ontological parity (that all that exists is equally real, in whatever way it happens to be real) and that it has a sense of the various layers of unconsciousness that prevail as part of nature. Corrington’s approach to psychoanalysis seeks both “a phenomenology of the unconscious of nature and of the human unconscious that is rooted in nature’s unconscious.”⁶³ The rootedness of the personal unconscious within the unconscious of nature is mediated by the collective unconscious that was described by Carl Gustav Jung, a key figure for ecstatic naturalism. Jung described the collective unconscious thusly –

⁶³ Robert Corrington, *Nature's Sublime*, 3.

...in addition to our immediate consciousness, which is of a thoroughly personal nature and which we believe to be the only empirical psyche (even if we tack on the personal unconscious as an appendix), there exists a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. This collective unconscious does not develop individually but is inherited. It consists of pre-existent forms, the archetypes, which can only become conscious secondarily and which give definite form to certain psychic contents.⁶⁴

Corrington affirms this Jungian insight, deepening the framework, so that three rather than two broad categories of unconsciousness can be ordinally explored.

Unconsciousness does not stop at the level of humanity's collective psyche but extends below to the churning underside of nature itself. In terms of the ontological difference of nature, the fissuring abyss that separates *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, individual human unconsciousness prevails as part of the innumerable orders of the world, while nature's unconscious is identified with nature naturing. The collective unconscious is a fascinating case, straddling the natural difference in its own way, as its powers more directly manifest the emanations of nature naturing than perhaps any other aspect of nature natured, yet the archetypes that compose it are particular natural complexes (the ordinally located orders of the world).

The goal of ordinal psychoanalysis is the undergoing of selving, the process of moving from undifferentiated unconsciousness to mature individual self-consciousness. Selving is closely related to the Jungian concept of individuation, "the quest for wholeness under finite conditions."⁶⁵ In order for individuation to take place, one must attempt to integrate into their conscious experience "...the potencies of nature and the

⁶⁴ Carl Jung, *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

⁶⁵ Corrington, *Deep Pantheism*, 59.

archetypes of the collective unconscious, along with the complexes of the personal unconscious...”⁶⁶

Corrington’s account of a metaphysical division in nature between *natura naturata* and *natura naturans* takes great inspiration from Spinoza and Schopenhauer, although the distinction was affirmed by earlier thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas. Spinoza claimed that “The divide or cleft *between* nature naturing and nature natured unfolds perennially to internally separate the sheer generative power of nature naturing from its products.”⁶⁷ He rejected the Thomistic identification of nature naturing with God, instead positing that “God, as self-standing free cause, is that infinity which is co-extensive with nature ‘itself’.”⁶⁸ Corrington reads Spinoza as an ecstatic naturalist, albeit one with an incomplete metaphysics of nature naturing. Schopenhauer comes closer to Corrington’s perspective on the natural difference, through his metaphysics of the Will, which sees “the dimension of nature naturing as an active energy that molds and shapes the orders of nature natured. The *Will* is the noumenal potency that ripples through the human process both consciously and within the unconscious of the self-in-process.”⁶⁹

Returning to the prophet of the American religion, Corrington names Emerson as having “had an uncanny ability to enter into and respond to the depth rhythms of nature...”⁷⁰ Emerson’s transcendental American experience of nature is among the greatest foundations for the ecstatic naturalist and deep pantheist account of nature

⁶⁶ Corrington, *Nature’s Sublime*, 47.

⁶⁷ Corrington, *Deep Pantheism*, 8.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

naturing. His Americanized Neoplatonist emanationism allowed him to recognize that “That rushing stream will not stop to be observed. We can never surprise nature in a corner; never find the end of a thread; never tell where to set the first stone. The bird hastens to lay her egg: the egg hastens to be a bird. The wholeness we admire in the order of the world, is the result of infinite distribution.”⁷¹ His openness to nature’s perennial pattern of infinite emanations was grounded in the same metaphysical distinction established by Spinoza and Schopenhauer, radicalizing it as a transcendental philosophy of nature through his Hermetic experience as a prelapsarian American Adam.

“...let us not longer omit our homage to the Efficient Nature, *natura naturans*, the quick cause, before which all forms flee as the driven snows, itself secret, its works driven before it in flocks and multitudes, (as the ancient represented nature by Proteus, a shepherd,) and in undescrivable variety. It publishes itself in creatures, reaching from particles and spicula, through transformation on transformation to the highest symmetries, arriving at consummate results without a shock or a leap.”⁷²

Ecstatic naturalism reads this metaphysical trajectory which culminates in Emerson alongside the Jungian approach to unconsciousness. While Emerson had a tremendous sense of the emanating underside of nature, he lacked the psychoanalytic resources to attend to the personal human unconscious. The selving process requires both a metaphysics of the natural difference and ordinal exploration of the varied layers of unconsciousness. If one is able to holistically attend to the complexes of the individual unconscious, the archetypal realities of the collective unconscious must also be accounted for. By following the insights of Emerson and others and recognizing a depth dimension

⁷¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Method of Nature” in *Essays and Lectures* (Digireads.com Publishing, 2009), 64.

⁷² Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature” in *Essays and Lectures* (Digireads.com Publishing, 2009), 281.

that undergirds not just the collective human process but nature itself, Corrington discerns that nature naturing is prior to even the collective unconscious, as the deepest form of unconsciousness.

What does all of this metaphysical exploration mean for the revelation of Poimandres to thrice-great Hermes? The Hermeticists and Neoplatonists have long recognized that nature has a primordial emanating source, which, as later re-articulated by Spinoza and Schopenhauer, permeates the world with noumenal currents. The transcendental Emersonian sense of the divine infinite of nature that is matched by the divine infinite of human subjectivity has its clearest predecessor in Alexandrian Hermeticism and the Renaissance Hermetic magic of Pico and Bruno. Corrington's division of nature naturing into both potencies as well emanations also parallels the Hermetica's division of the divine mind into the original Nous and the demiurgic craftsman-mind. The raw potencies of *natura naturans* reflect the primal spiritual reality of Nous while its emanations create the innumerable orders of *natura naturata*, just as the craftsman-mind is tasked with creating the cosmos. Although there are great similarities, there are two crucial distinctions between Nous and the ecstatic naturalist account of nature naturing. A careful explication of both these differences may yield constructive in-roads to an articulation of the project of American Hermeticism. The first of these discrepancies has to do with Jung and the second with Darwin (two non-American figures who are critical to the trajectory of American philosophy).

Hermeticism has traditionally emphasized divine consciousness, while Corrington follows Jung in emphasizing unconsciousness in his metaphysics. Psyche, thought, mind, and knowledge are major categories for Hermeticists, who seek direct comprehension of

reality through gnosis. Nous is described throughout the Hermetica as the mind of God, a conscious force who can appear personified to Hermes as Poimandres and is also described as God the Father.⁷³ In contrast, nature naturing is a significantly less personal force. Although its emanations and potencies are channeled into numinous complexes of nature natured, such as god-ing energy (“a pulsation or microburst of energy that seems to come from a supernatural (or vagrantly natural) realm”⁷⁴) or sacred folds (“intensified semiotic fields that fold in on themselves over and over again increasing the depth and power of meaning with each unfolding”⁷⁵), which humans often encounter as intensely personal, nature naturing itself is not the conscious mind of God but a vast unconscious that includes divine powers and potencies.

By not privileging either the concept of Nous or of nature naturing over each other but instead considering them in tandem, both concepts can be rendered more robust. The Jungian turn to unconsciousness allows for some crucial nuancing of Alexandrian and Renaissance Hermeticism. If Nous is not necessarily a conscious being but rather the incomprehensible depths of nature that enables consciousness to manifest, then the world appears significantly less hierarchical than as it is described in the Hermetica. Although the Hermetic view of Nous does not privilege spirit over matter in the way classical Neoplatonism does, the Hermetica still makes eminently clear that the earth is the ‘lowest’ realm of reality and humanity must ascend back to Nous to reclaim our divinity. While Bruno was inspired by the Hermetica to envision the cosmos as infinite,

⁷³ Although the Corpus Hermeticum uses distinctly trinitarian language it is unclear whether the Hermeticists or Christians were first to use such terminology. See, Lachman, *Quest for Hermes*.

⁷⁴ Corrington, *Nature's Sublime*, 132.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

Corrington's Jungian reading of nature naturing establishes a detailed metaphysics that foregrounds nature's hidden ceaselessly generative dimension as well as the innumerability of the orders of *natura naturata*, which has no top, bottom, or center.

Ecstatic naturalism brings together the Jungian idea of unconsciousness as a collective ocean out of which individual streams of consciousness emerge with Emerson's anti-foundational reading of emanationism, crafting a careful paradigm of naturalism in which the world is not emanated 'downward' from a transcendent self-conscious mind but rather 'upward' from reality's unconscious depths. An Americanized Hermeticism thus inverts the traditional Hermetic cosmology while retaining many of its spiritual insights. Reading Hermes through Emerson, Jung, and Corrington does not negate the Hermetic vision of the human capacity to undergo the spiritual journey.

Jung himself was greatly aware of "the Hermetic chain of alchemist, mystics, magicians, and esotericists with which...[he] felt a deep affinity."⁷⁶ Jung's approach to psychoanalysis, a critical forerunner of ordinal psychoanalysis, famously broke with Freud's by being willing to consider the occult and paranormal aspects of reality. He even produced works, most notably *The Red Book* and *Seven Sermons to the Dead*, which describe his descents into the archetypal world of unconsciousness, journeys as spiritually dazzling as anything in the Hermetica. Again, the Jungian aspect of ecstatic naturalism can nuance the Hermetic account of what it means to experience *Nous*, in that while the Hermetica frequently represents the divine mind through metaphors of infinite light, ordinal psychoanalysis reveals that unconsciousness contains the potential for goodness,

⁷⁶ Gary Lachman, *Jung the Mystic: The Esoteric Dimensions of Carl Jung's Life and Teachings: A New Biography* (New York, NY: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2010), 7.

wholeness, and beauty but is often also the site of repressed complexes, darkness, and trauma. Conversely, the history of Hermeticists achieving gnosis through esoteric practice may strengthen ecstatic naturalism's sense of the human ability to access the depths of nature naturing. Nature's unconscious, being on the other side of the ontological divide, may be even harder to probe than the personal and collective unconscious (themselves often inaccessible to conscious awareness) but the revelation received by thrice-great Hermes is that all human minds contain within them an aspect of the deepest component of reality.

If Jungianism challenges classical esotericism by introducing unconsciousness, Darwinism does so by demonstrating that biological evolution has no driving teleology. Ecstatic naturalism is grounded in Darwin, accepting the reality that the evolutionary history from which our species emerged is characterized by violence, extinction, and wastefulness. If one of the most important processes in nature is not guided by an overarching purpose and contains a strong possibility for tragic outcomes, then the Hermetic optimism about human destiny is called into question. While the Hermetica speaks of nature as filled with the benevolence of Nous, Corrington's metaphysics accounts for totalizing nothingness, which is "to encounter the total eclipse of the human process and to sink into the permeating sense of nature's total indifference and primal uncaring aspect."⁷⁷ Is the Hermetic commitment to human divinity congruent with the evolutionary fragility of the human process? Can the infinite light of Nous be pushing us

⁷⁷ Robert S. Corrington, *Nature and Nothingness: An Essay in Ordinal Phenomenology* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 27.

toward our destiny as a species to be caretakers of the cosmos if “horror lies at the basis of evolution and human interaction, from warfare, to genocide, to terrorism”⁷⁸?

Hermetic anthropocentrism may survive Darwinism, even if it is significantly modified by it. One need not erroneously claim that biological evolution has an inherent teleological drive toward human self-consciousness to see a greater purpose unfolding in the momentum between nature naturing and nature natured. Jung is essential here, as the process of psychological emergence from unconsciousness to self-consciousness can be differentiated from the awesome and terrifying non-teleological force of Darwinian evolution. Corrington notes that “For Jung...the psyche is deeply teleological and driven from within and without toward wholeness...”⁷⁹ The physical world may not have a natural tendency toward the advent of consciousness but there is an inherent telos within unconsciousness toward conscious awareness. There was no guarantee that life would evolve on earth in such a way as to produce the human species but among the infinite potentials of nature naturing, there has always been the possibility of a creature who experiences subjective self-consciousness.

One of Jung’s most important concepts is synchronicity, which “links physical and psychic events through what one perceives as meaningful conditions.”⁸⁰ Synchronicity is experienced in the human process as a meaningful coincidence, which can help one overcome psychological obstacles that block aspects of selfing. Jung’s favorite example was an instance where he was treating a young woman who “proved to be

⁷⁸ Ibid., 54.

⁷⁹ Corrington, *Deep Pantheism*, 58.

⁸⁰ Thomas T. Lawson, *Carl Jung: Darwin of the Mind* (London: Karnac Books Ltd, 2008), 23.

psychologically inaccessible” because of her “highly polished Cartesian rationalism.”⁸¹ She described to Jung a vivid dream in which she had been given “a golden scarab – a costly piece of jewelry.” In the course of her recounting this dream, Jung heard a tapping on the window. Upon opening the window, an insect flew in, which he caught and saw to be a close regional equivalent to the golden scarab. The mysteriousness of that moment, in which the unconscious effected physical reality, was enough to break down the woman’s defensiveness and allow her treatment to proceed.

Although its particular archetypes have evolved alongside humanity, the collective unconscious itself long predates human self-consciousness, allowing for the possibility that psychological evolution has unfolded in such a way as to influence the otherwise non-teleological momentum of Darwinian nature. Just as synchronicity can act as impetus in the personal selfing processes, it can perhaps also work similarly with regard to the ‘overall’ selfing process of nature. Corrington has written of engrams, “memories in each object of the unruly ground, the ground from which they have been ejected.”⁸² If every complex within nature has always contained a trace of its unconscious origins then it seems that the collective unconscious, “that dimension of the unconscious that reaches down into the underconscious of nature,”⁸³ has long had opportunity to put selective pressure on the cosmos through synchronicity.

⁸¹ Carl Jung, *Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle*, trans R. F. C. Hull, *Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, 8. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

⁸² Robert Corrington, *A Semiotic Theory of Theology and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 202.

⁸³ *Ibid.* 83.

It would go far beyond the phenomenological evidence to imply that the collective unconscious had the ability to literally ‘plan’ or actively ‘work toward’ the human species. Such a claim would also ignore the ubiquity of violence in evolution, the randomness inherent to the process, and the way the experience of totalizing nothingness reminds us of the very real threat of extinction. The *Hermetica* even demonstrates a sense of that insight in the way its creation story casts the human manifestation on earth as an unplanned event. The two claims being advanced here are that the personal unconscious’ teleological drive toward consciousness is rooted in the broader teleological movement of the collective unconscious (and thus the unconscious of nature) and that that movement has had limited but meaningful interactions with the physical world that made the advent of self-conscious creatures more likely, though not guaranteed.

The *Hermetica* tells us that humanity once existed alongside *Nous* and that even on earth we can re-connect with our divine origins. The ecstatic naturalist version of that claim is that the potential for self-consciousness has always been present within the ceaseless force of nature naturing and that human consciousness is the only known order of reality that can become self-aware of its beginnings within nature’s unconscious. What does this imply about the relationship between consciousness and the physical world? In what way is humanity meant to function as caretakers of the cosmos? And most importantly, if our past began in the depth dimension of reality, what is our future? What destiny does this ecstatic movement of psychical evolution that the Hermeticists had such an intense sense of have in store for us?

CHAPTER 3
THE HUMAN MISSION

Neoplatonic and Hermetic conceptions of *Nous* again resonate through Emerson in his 1841 essay, “The Over-Soul”. Therein, Emerson discusses the qualities of the individual human soul, which transcends the ego, and the spiritual source which transcends and unifies them all. “...within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE.”⁸⁴ That paradigm of human nature and nature more generally is characteristically optimistic on Emerson’s part. However, Corrington points out how “As Emerson and his work matured, he came to see the demonic depths of the nature he so clearly loved,”⁸⁵ as exemplified by essays such as “Fate,” which display a strong awareness of tragedy. Emerson thus alters the Hermetic schema not just in clarifying the true infinity of nature but in discerning that in addition to the light of *Nous*/the Over-Soul, there is “a shadow lying just beneath the surface of nature” which is also “deeply entwined with the orders of nature natured.”⁸⁶

Just as Americanized Hermeticism shifts the schema of classic Hermeticism by seeing nature as emanated from below rather than above, it also raises the stakes of the human experience. The Hermetica has its own sense of immediacy, in its imperative that people remember their spiritual heritage. However, the risk of the human experience

⁸⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “*The Over-Soul*” in *Essays and Lectures* (Digireads.com Publishing, 2009), 200.

⁸⁵ Corrington, *Deep Pantheism*, 44.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 98.

presented there is one of a lost opportunity; the chance that humanity may not remember its potential and thus never rejoin the craftsman-mind in the task of creating and cultivating nature. As compelling as that narrative may be, it still presupposes that the transcendent ground of reality is pure divine goodness and beauty. While the optimism of this vision resonates with the American ethos, American philosophy has the capability of further deepening the urgency of the spiritual journey. While Emerson's sense of nature's shadow ("We must see that the world is rough and surly, and will not mind drowning a man or a woman; but swallows your ship like a grain of dust."),⁸⁷ is helpful in that regard, the pragmatist thought of William James does even more to clarify what it means for humanity to act as cosmic caretaker.

Between transcendentalism and ecstatic naturalism, pragmatism is the other essential chapter in the trajectory of American philosophy, a school of thought whose ethos is most embodied by James.⁸⁸ James described pragmatism as the "attitude of looking away from first things, principles, 'categories,' supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts."⁸⁹ Pragmatism is a philosophy of action, foregrounding a search for which beliefs are most helpful in advancing human ability to navigate the complexities of the world. Much of James' work had to do with careful

⁸⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Fate" in *Essays and Lectures* (Digireads.com Publishing, 2009), 495.

⁸⁸ Although the most detailed and sophisticated metaphysics to be developed from this tradition was that of Peirce.

⁸⁹ William James, "Pragmatism" In *The Complete Works of William James* (Minerva Classics, 2013), <https://www.amazon.com/Complete-Works-William-James-ebook/dp/B00EM20AX4>.

empirical study of spiritual experiences, being attentive to how they arise differently from varying contexts and the plurality of ways in which they impact the human experience.

While the scientifically minded and psychologically grounded work of James displays far more reticence about making strong spiritual claims than Emerson's grandiose transcendentalism, James' pluralistic cosmology provides a perspective on divinity and consciousness which display further Hermetic traces within American philosophy. Although he often held back from fully embracing his bolder spiritual intuitions, his commitment to a philosophy of lived experience led him to important insights about the human relation to nature and to God. James' pragmatic nuancing of certain transcendentalist tendencies is also helpful in considering an essential move made within Corrington's deep pantheism – the chastening of the transcendent Emersonian Over-Soul into the finite and evolving Wisdom.

Filtering the Hermetic view of human capability through the nuance of American metaphysics retains the idea of humanity's spiritual journey while re-orienting it. Hermeticism has claimed that our path is one of descent followed by re-ascension, that we come from a realm of consciousness and benevolent light to which we must learn to return. Americanizing this idea is to say that we have ascended from an unconscious realm that contains both darkness and light and we must learn to continue our ascent, toward a golden age that may be to yet to come. In our station, as beings just remembering our own nature, there is much work to do. Our task is the understanding and cultivation of the potencies of human consciousness. That is a mission not just for individuals but (as we shall see with the help of James' fellow pragmatist John Dewey) a journey for civilization as a whole.

A Nature that Needs Us

James possessed a strong intuition that an important aspect of the human experience is our sense of moral purpose. He saw the ability to take part in the struggle of good against evil as a vital source of meaning, giving us direction and motivation. “If this life be not a real fight, in which something is eternally gained for the universe by success, it is no better than a game of private theatricals from which one may withdraw at will. But it *feels* like a real fight.”⁹⁰ As much as James’ admired Emerson and was influenced by his work, he felt that the transcendentalist stress upon the unity of the human soul with the divine risks obscuring the way that conflict and the possibility of failure are integral to life.

For James, Emerson was an example what he called the healthy-minded (or “once-born”) personality, which he contrasted with the sick-souled (or “twice-born”). The healthy-minded person is the one for whom “happiness is congenital and irreclaimable. ‘Cosmic emotion’ inevitably takes in them the form of enthusiasm and freedom... We find such persons in every age, passionately flinging themselves upon their sense of the goodness of life...”⁹¹ Conversely, the sick-soul feels that something is deeply wrong within the world, being one “for whom evil is no mere relation of the subject to particular outer things, but something more radical and general, a wrongness or vice in his essential nature, which no alteration of the environment, or any superficial rearrangement of the

⁹⁰ William James, “Is Life Worth Living?” in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1912), 28.

⁹¹ William James, “*The Varieties of Religious Experience*” In *The Complete Works of William James* (Minerva Classics, 2013).

inner self, can cure...”⁹² While James recognized that the healthy-minded are more likely to live joyful and contented lives, he saw the sick-soul as having access to insights about the world that the healthy-minded may be blind to. The horrific parts of existence that the optimistic temperament may fail to acknowledge are “a genuine portion of reality; and they may after all be the best key to life’s significance, and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth.”⁹³

James personally dealt with intense bouts of depression and so his philosophy of pragmatism brings important sick-souled insights into American philosophy. However, his reply to the optimism of transcendentalism was not pessimism but rather the nuanced approach of meliorism, which “treats salvation as neither inevitable nor impossible. It treats it as a possibility, which becomes more and more of a probability the more numerous the actual conditions of salvation become.”⁹⁴ James was concerned that either optimism or pessimism could breed complacency, while pragmatic meliorism would emphasize that the future of the world really could go either way, depending both upon human action as well as factors outside of our control.

James’ meliorism was the lens through which he came to conceptualize the human relation to God. While his studies of religious experience left him confident in the existence of divine forces that exceed the scope of the human process, it was important for him to think of divinity in a way that does not contradict the pragmatic human sense of reality as multifaceted and risky. If nature is indeed both pluralistic and melioristic,

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ James, “Pragmatism” in *Complete Works of William James*.

then God and humanity must be mutually involved in the task of advancing goodness and opposing evil (resonant with the Hermetica's account of humanity as the beloved brother of the craftman-mind). James wrote that "God himself, in short, may draw vital strength and increase of very being from our fidelity. For my own part, I do not know what the sweat and blood and tragedy of this life mean, if they mean anything short of this."⁹⁵ To honor the experiences of tragedy, suffering, and evil that are present in the world, James proposes that a positive outcome for reality is not a foregone conclusion but rather a possibility that can only be achieved if we are willing to fight for it.

Although James' metaphysics are more pluralistic and less spiritually speculative than that of the esoteric tradition, his view of the human role in nature is not unlike that of the Hermetic ideal of us being the caretakers of the cosmos. The Hermetica tells us that the 'fall' of humanity into nature is only tragic in that we too often forget who we really are and thus abdicate our spiritual responsibility. Just as James emphasizes that truly eternal matters are at stake in the human earthly experience, the Hermetica tells us that we are here in nature for an important reason. We left the realm of Nous behind because of the love shared between humanity and nature, a love that gave birth to the wonder of us becoming creatures fully natural and fully divine. Our capacity to set our sights to higher realms of spiritual consciousness allows us to care for nature in a unique and vital way. Nous has granted us "...but not to any other mortal animal...these two things; mind and reasoned speech, which are worth as much is immortality."⁹⁶ Through our gifts of self-consciousness and reason, we bring the image of Nous (or nature naturing) into the world

⁹⁵ James, "Life Worth Living,"

⁹⁶ Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 45.

in a deeper way than any other order of nature. In cultivating our own spiritual development and awareness, we inject the world with a meaningfulness that only a self-conscious creature can provide.

Although James' temperament was not conducive to making broad metaphysical claims, the theory of consciousness that he came to affirm is compatible with Hermetic thought. In his often overlooked 1908 work, *Final Impressions of a Psychological Researcher*, James articulated what he saw as an inescapable conclusion of an honest empirical study of the quality and capacities of the human psyche; a compelling anticipation of what Jung would come to call the collective unconscious –

...we with our lives are like islands in the sea, or like trees in the forest. The maple and the pine may whisper to each other with their leaves. ... But the trees also commingle their roots in the darkness underground, and the islands also hang together through the ocean's bottom. Just so there is a continuum of cosmic consciousness, against which our individuality builds but accidental fences, and into which our several minds plunge as into a mother-sea or reservoir.⁹⁷

While that is the conclusion that James is openly, if cautiously, willing to endorse, he also offers what he calls a hypothetical 'dramatic' account of the origins of human consciousness, which he says falls "into line with ancient human traditions."⁹⁸

If there were in the universe a lot of diffuse soul-stuff, unable of itself to get into consistent personal form, or to take permanent possession of an organism, yet always craving to do so, it might get its head into the air, parasitically, so to speak, by profiting by weak spots in the armor of human minds, and slipping in and stirring up there the sleeping tendency to personate.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ William James, "Final Impressions of a Psychological Researcher" In *The Complete Works of William James* (Minerva Classics, 2013).

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

Here we have another Americanized version of the Hermetic narrative, where humanity is indeed the culmination of a deep part of nature, but one that arises from below rather than descends from above. Interpreting *Nous* through Emerson and Corrington's account of nature naturing brings a similar result but James is especially helpful in emphasizing that the advent of human consciousness is so that we may accomplish something that could not otherwise take place within nature. The "cosmic consciousness" or "soul-stuff" that predates humanity needs the particular biological makeup of the human being in order to enter into self-awareness.

The panpsychist view that James advances is different from other models of panpsychism in that it is not based on idealism but on neutral monism, the idea that neither psyche nor matter are reducible to each other but both are derived from a prior more generic substance of nature. Mind (though not necessarily fully conscious mind) is distributed throughout nature but nature 'itself' cannot be identified as mental. James' view of this matter is compatible with the previously articulated Jungian ecstatic naturalist interpretation of the Hermetic narrative – that a teleological movement that begins with nature's unconscious is responsible for human consciousness but consciousness remains a hard-won non-inevitable product of biological evolution.

Such a perspective is helpful not just for esoteric explorations but for mainstream philosophical consideration of consciousness. The analytic philosopher of mind David Chalmers is famous for his presentation of the hard problem of consciousness. The hard problem is distinct because it deals not with questions of "How does the brain process environmental stimulation? How does it integrate information? How do we produce

reports on inner states?”¹⁰⁰ but rather asks – “Why is all this processing accompanied by an experienced inner life?”¹⁰¹ Chalmers’ point is that no amount of analysis of the physical workings of the brain can explain why those brain states are correlated with a subjective ‘inner’ experience of consciousness. While it is impossible to answer that question with a strong degree of certainty, he has posited that the hard problem suggests that consciousness is in some sense “a fundamental property of the world.”¹⁰² He has cited the Jamesian form of neutral monist panpsychism as an inspiration for his own guess as to the nature of consciousness.¹⁰³

As the “religion of the mind,”¹⁰⁴ Hermeticism has much to say about this issue of consciousness. If one accepts that some form of panpsychism may be necessary to account for the existence of subjective experience, then the teleological aspect of nature becomes more plausible. The notion of consciousness as a fundamental principle of nature has long been known by esoteric practitioners before being re-affirmed by thinkers such as James and Jung. Indeed, Jung put forth a similar argument to Chalmers when he claimed that consciousness is not “a result of biochemical processes in the brain cells” but rather “a category of existence *per se*”.¹⁰⁵ Just as the Hermeticists and Neoplatonists

¹⁰⁰ David Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), xi.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² David Chalmers, “David Chalmers – Why is Emergence Significant?” YouTube video, posted by “Closer To Truth,” March 26, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QjPxBS4sIxQ>

¹⁰³ David J. Chalmers, “Panpsychism and Protopanpsychism,” in *Consciousness and the Physical World: Perspectives on Russellian Monism*, ed. Torin Alter and Yujin Nagasawa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹⁰⁴ Lachman, *Quest for Hermes*.

¹⁰⁵ Carl Jung, *Psychology and Religion: West and East*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

saw Nous as the source of all nature and eventually of human consciousness, Jung saw the collective unconscious as an integral part of nature which eventually individuated into human psyche, an insight we can extend to the unconscious of nature.

Having risen from the depths of nature, where does our ascent take us from here? If James is correct that the future of reality depends on human action, what is it that we are fighting to do? Both Jung's psychoanalytic method and James' pragmatic meliorism chasten the concepts of both the Hermetic Nous and the Emersonian Over-Soul, in that the source of reality is unconsciousness rather than a conscious mind and in that there is no guarantee that it will become consciously realized in nature through the human process. However, if the human experience is the method by which the image of Nous enters into the cosmos, then the transcendentalist idea of a transcendent Over-Soul need not be discarded but rather reoriented. It may be that the and benevolent divine light and unity that thrice-great Hermes and Emerson both spoke of is a reality better read prescriptively than descriptively, located primarily not in the past but in the future.

Corrington's deep pantheism extends the notion of individuation to entail not just particular human selving processes but an eventual opening into the Wisdom, a version of Emerson's Over-Soul. While Emerson was not wrong in his description of what it is for humans to experience contact with the Over-Soul, his metaphysics had a tendency toward triumphalism. Channeling the Jamesian pragmatic insight that a victory for the forces of goodness and light in the cosmos are possible but not guaranteed, Corrington tells us that the Wisdom is finite and evolving even as reflects beauty and discernment back onto the evolving human journey. "Quite literally, it can make us wiser and grant us deeper insight to the natural difference between nature naturing and nature natured...It is wise beyond

our understanding even if itself is on its way to more wisdom. . . . It is not a mind of minds so much as a deep well of insight that is passed onto the human process.”¹⁰⁶ James’ pragmatic concept that “Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events,”¹⁰⁷ seems to apply to the Over-Soul itself.

While Corrington’s application of the ordinal method to the idea of the Over-Soul greatly strengthens the concept’s metaphysical integrity, the Hermetic openness to the purposeful rhythms of nature and the human capability of entering into (indeed, sometimes directing) those patterns can help clarify how the Wisdom is embedded within the overall process of reality. The human selving process exists in the fragile and risky intersection of these two larger psychic realities, the collective unconscious and the Wisdom. The collective unconscious is prior to individual self-consciousness while the Wisdom may be on its way toward a form of ‘actual’ collective consciousness. The collective unconscious is by turns both deadly and life-giving, containing demonic energies as well as great wonders, while the Wisdom is closer to the bountiful loving energy of Nous. Indeed, the classical conception of Nous can be seen as a conflation of these two expansive spiritually-charged realities that bookend the spiritual journey.

While James’ wrote about “cosmic consciousness” rather than Jung’s “collective unconscious”, both these terms are helpful. For it is within the human process that the collective unconscious is experienced as a cosmic consciousness, as tangible and personal, as Jung himself did in his mystical journeys through the archetypal realms. The

¹⁰⁶ Corrington, *Deep Pantheism*, 87.

¹⁰⁷ James, “*Pragmatism*” in *Complete Works of William James*.

human struggle that James had such a deep sense of is our opportunity to introduce the Wisdom (or the Over-Soul, depending on which term is preferred) into nature. By undergoing our individual spiritual journeys, we feed into this unified human destiny, this healing mirror of the collective unconscious. American Hermeticism recognizes humankind as the creature with two natures, a spiritual being manifested on the earth with a mission to accomplish, a mission often fraught with danger. Tasked with the cultivation of divine love, we are also faced with the possibility of extinction and the experience of totalizing nothingness.

In achieving moments of gnosis, we not only reach heightened knowledge of reality but often experience a sense of benevolence and compassion that seems to extend through all of nature. While American philosophy chastens Hermeticism by bringing it closer to naturalism, it upgrades the station of humanity even further by recognizing that is within our consciousness that the undifferentiated churning energies of nature naturing are channeled as divine love and compassion into nature natured. James once called human brains “colored lenses in the wall of nature, admitting light from the super-solar source, but at the same time tingeing and restricting it.”¹⁰⁸ In contrast with the Gnostics, the Hermeticists know that our earthly residence not a prison but a *prism*, nature’s opportunity to give rise to the cosmic consciousness of the Wisdom through the fleshly particularities of the human experience.

Hermeticism as Liberalism

¹⁰⁸ James, “Human Immortality: Two Supposed Objections to the Doctrine” In *The Complete Works of William James* (Minerva Classics 2013).

As an ideal of the collective destiny of humankind, American Hermeticism must attend to the project of civilization. Hermetic thinkers have yielded spiritual wisdom that is related not only to individual selving and but also to politics, the selving process of society. Although explorations of mysticism and magic often inspire radical politics, critical of modernity as a whole, Renaissance esoteric humanism contains strong affinities with the values of liberal democracy. While there are political dimensions to the writings of both James and Emerson (who was persuaded by his friend Thoreau to advocate for the abolition of slavery), the new transcendentalism sought by Corrington's deep pantheism would much more forcefully emphasize the call to transform "the conditions of *both* the self and society."¹⁰⁹ The pragmatist figure most central to the political vision of ecstatic naturalism and deep pantheism is John Dewey, "often referred to as *the* philosopher of democracy."¹¹⁰

Corrington's Deweyan ideal of civilization is an opposition to barbarism, a division framed not as a conflict between different societies but as a split within all cultures as well as every individual. Barbarism, a primal "rage toward destruction" is "one of the profounder forces in history."¹¹¹ An intense resistance to the selving process on a personal level, barbarism when applied politically displays a pathological loathing of art, scientific inquiry, and cultural pluralism. Civilization represents the human ability to direct society in a way that suppresses our perennial tendency toward barbarism. While barbarism is often a result of an inability to accept the chaotic and unpredictable qualities of nature, civilization welcomes these aspects of reality, seeking to creatively express the

¹⁰⁹ Corrington, *Deep Pantheism*, 99.

¹¹⁰ Corrington, *Nature and Nothingness*, 110.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 95.

multifaceted human experience of nature as beautiful and sublime. Art and science are both valued and protected within healthy civilizations, known to be important methods of advancing the social serving process.

Following Dewey, Corrington emphasizes how a robust model of education is necessary for civilization, which includes children being “trained in problem solving and communication skills on all levels...”¹¹² A sustained effort toward such education can lead to especially mature civilizations that are characterized by an “anti-colonial and non-violent stance”¹¹³ and a tendency towards post-tribalism as manifested through an openness to factors such as spiritual diversity and international alliances. While the distinction between advanced civilization and barbarism can be dangerously used to justify imperialist outlooks, Corrington carefully notes how differing societies (including those that are Christian, Islamic, or secularist) all have displayed tendencies toward both civilization and barbarism in numerous ways.

Dewey described his belief in the worth of liberal democracy as a “buoyant, crusading, and militant faith,” even though the goal of a deep democracy has never been “*adequately realized in any country at any time.*”¹¹⁴ His gravitation toward liberal democratic efforts toward social change, as opposed to other more ‘radical’ forms of leftism, was because of what he saw as the central principle of democracy – “that the ends of freedom and individuality for all can only be obtained by means which accord

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid., 104.

¹¹⁴ John Dewey, “Democracy is Radical,” in *The Essential Dewey Volume 1: Pragmatism, Education, Democracy*, ed. Larry A. Hickman and Thomas M. Alexander (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 339.

with those ends.”¹¹⁵ He also viewed the right-wing notion of freedom, consisting primarily in the maximization of individuality and minimization of social control, as stale and un compelling, attempting to instead envision a democratic ideal with a more positive conception of freedom, a progressive sense of purpose that could be communally strived toward.

For all the historical ethical failures of America, Dewey felt that American culture presents a unique opportunity for the advancement of the greatest aspects of liberal democracy. While he was well aware of how active and powerful “the forces of bigotry and intolerance”¹¹⁶ were in his day, he found hope in the fact that activists for peace and justice were beginning to lean into what he saw as a necessary vision of “positive international cooperation.”¹¹⁷ Dewey echoed the Jamesian sensibility of meliorism, viewing the political situation in America as a complex mix of discouraging and encouraging signs, indicating tenuous but real possibilities for social progress. While taking a clear-eyed view of American shortcomings, Dewey held on to the belief that the American ethos of individual potential combined with collective responsibility is a distinctive culture that represents a truly New World. For Dewey, the American experiment is an attempt to discern whether a post-tribal ideal of democracy could eventually be embraced on a global scale. While he thought of the advent of particular

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 338.

¹¹⁶ John Dewey, “A Critique of American Civilization,” in *The Essential Dewey Volume 1: Pragmatism, Education, Democracy*, ed. Larry A. Hickman and Thomas M. Alexander (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 317.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 320.

liberal democratic nation states as a positive step in human development, he believed in the eventually necessity of an “international state of federated humanity.”¹¹⁸

In considering the political dimension of American Hermeticism, the drive toward globalism and collectively realized individual freedom lies not only on the American side of the equation. While the democratic American ideal is most readily associated with Enlightenment thinking, the earlier humanists of the Renaissance advocated a perspective that anticipated the liberal commitment to the rights of all people. Pico’s famous Renaissance manifesto, *The Oration on the Dignity of Man*, is a stirring defense of the unique glories of the human experience. While it possibly mistitled (with Pico later saying it would have been more properly called “Oration in Praise of Philosophy”), its discussion of the divinely granted value of all human beings still resonates with the democratic defense of human dignity.

Pico intriguingly argues that it is not just human potential that makes us special but also our changeability. We are created outside of the chain of being and thus possess a multifaceted nature. “Are there any who would not admire man, who... molds, fashions, and changes himself into the form of all flesh and into the character of every creature?”¹¹⁹ The Hermetic theme of the human duality, of being both heavenly and earthly at the same time, is radicalized by Pico, who stresses that we can descend to the lowest forms of animal behavior or alternatively ascend to the heights of spiritual consciousness. He

¹¹⁸ John Dewey “Civil Society and the Political State” in *The Middle Works: 1899 - 1924, Volume 5: 1908*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, (Carbondale: Southern Ill. University Press, 1978) 431.

¹¹⁹ Pico Della Mirandola, “Oration on the Dignity of Man,” trans. Elizabeth Livermore Forbes, in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man: Selections in Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 225.

imagines God telling Adam of this gift of self-determination that is granted to humanity – “We have made thee neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with freedom of choice and with honor, as though the maker and molder of thyself, thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer.”¹²⁰ To use Corrington’s terminology, Pico is describing the vast difference between our barbaric and civilized tendencies and the astonishing distinction between what humanity looks like when it chooses to embrace one or the other.

Giordano Bruno’s message contained an often-overlooked political component. As a dedicated follower of Hermes Trismegistus, he knew Hermes to be not just a philosopher and magician but also a king and so had a deep sense of the political injunction implicit within the Hermetica. The basic character of Hermeticism as a spirituality based on the divinity of every human mind imbues it with a universal drive. In the first discourse of the Corpus Hermeticum, Poimandres stresses to Hermes that all of humanity must be saved through the Hermetic revelation and Hermes recounts how he then attempted to spread the message to all the world. Just as Dewey supported global democracy because of his commitment to human unity, Hermes told his disciple Tat in the twelfth treatise of the Corpus that national differences do not truly divide humankind, for “humanity is one.”¹²¹

Inspired by such Hermetic texts, Bruno embraced Egyptian spirituality as a religion of the world. As opposed to the Christocentrism of orthodoxy, he thought the particularity of Hermetic symbolism and lore could truly open into a universality that

¹²⁰ Ibid., 224.

¹²¹ Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 46.

could encompass varying nations and cultures. The political vision he derived from his esoteric pursuits strike some noticeably Deweyan notes, as he articulated an ethic of “a rule of law and order which encourages peaceful and useful activities, and from which warring between seas is banished.”¹²² As cosmic and esoteric as Bruno’s spiritual message was, he wished it to be made tangible in “acts of justice and mercy, and the conservation and increase of the public good.”¹²³

Bruno’s esoteric Renaissance humanism is an important precursor to Dewey and Corrington’s description of civilization. The martyr for the infinite cosmos hoped that thrice-great Hermes could inspire society to “protect the poor and weak, control tyrants, encourage arts, learning and sciences to be applied for the benefit of the community.”¹²⁴ Dewey would later write on each of those points in much greater detail, crafting a robust philosophy of liberal democracy. Yet Pico and Bruno bring an essential spiritual dimension to the idea of human dignity, one that the atheistic descriptive naturalist Dewey lacked. From these proto-liberal Hermetic humanists, a connection is drawn between the intrinsic rights of all individuals and the godlike possibilities of human consciousness.

The American experiment would later be founded on a similar insight. Statements from the Founding Fathers such as Alexander Hamilton’s claim that “The sacred rights of mankind are...written, as with a sunbeam, in the whole volume of human nature, by the

¹²² Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, 227.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 226.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 225.

hand of the divinity itself; and can never be erased or obscured by mortal power,”¹²⁵ echo the Renaissance association between human freedom and divinely imbued worth.

Emerson would later affirm the sacred American mission to live up to its founding ideals as a truly free society, inspiring the rest of humanity toward those same principles. In essay entitled *American Civilization*, where he strongly spoke out against the horrors of slavery, he also emphasized the wondrous possibilities of American society “America is another word for Opportunity. Our whole history appears like a last effort of the Divine Providence in behalf of the human race...”¹²⁶

Emphasizing the congruency between Renaissance magical cultivation of human consciousness and the dream of America further strengthens Dewey’s conception of democracy. The aims Dewey sought to accomplish through his educational model all advance the collective selving process’ movement into Wisdom/the Over-Soul. By rejecting barbarism and striving for civilization, we ascend (however slowly) into the Wisdom’s healing divine light. In this way, the Wisdom can be thought of as not just a chastened reading of Emerson’s spirituality but also as an emboldened reading of Dewey’s politics. Not only can Hermetic spirituality contribute to the liberal account of human rights but a Deweyan commitment to democracy and pluralism can help guard against temptations toward conquest and hegemony, which is the shadow side of the drive toward universalism. The global society envisioned by Hermes, Bruno, and Dewey,

¹²⁵ Alexander Hamilton, “The Farmer Refuted” in *The Revolutionary Writings of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Richard B. Vernier (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2011).

¹²⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “American Civilization” in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Delphi Classics, 2015).

if achieved through democratic means, may be the very civilization the Wisdom calls us to; spiritual and cultural plurality secured through political unity.

Any embrace of the idea of a uniquely American spiritual destiny must be made cautiously, as American history (and its lived reality) is implicated in bloody realities of white supremacy, institutionalized racism, and other forms of oppression. Yet it is still possible to speak honestly about the pervasiveness of such atrocities and their implications while still affirming the post-tribal aims of liberal democracy as the best hope for human society and seeing America as having a special responsibility to strive for such goals. In an age of resurgent authoritarian white nationalism across Western society, multicultural internationalist liberalism remains the greatest bulwark against such barbarism. Spiritually reinvigorating liberal democracy through naming its resonance with the deep spiritual wisdom of Western esotericism may be a crucial method of salvaging its present fragility. It may yet be found that America shares with Hermeticism the capability of being a particularity that can act as catalyst for our species' universal ascent into Wisdom.

CONCLUSION:
AMERICAN HERMES

The spirit of thrice-great Hermes is alive in America. We began with Bloom's observation that American spirituality is the journey in which the American soul comes to discover itself as a spark of God in a sea of space. However, although the American religion's possession of the American individualistic spirit has certainly sounded that Gnostic note, the Hermetic magic of both Alexandria and the Renaissance are even truer precursors to the American soul. While the practitioner of the American religion do find an uncreated spark of God deep within themselves, that divine indwelling is not a repudiation of the rest of nature but a confirmation of its wonders, the mutual fulfillment of the internal and external infinity. Emerson wrote that "The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood. His intercourse with heaven and earth, becomes part of his daily food," echoing Nous' instruction to Hermes that "Inwardly, a soul full of mind and god fills this universal body in which all bodies exist, but outwardly soul surrounds the universe and brings it to life. Outwardly, the universe is this great and perfect living thing, the cosmos; inwardly, it is all living things."¹²⁷

The esoteric component of American spirituality is not just an aspect of our religious culture but also an indispensable part of American intellectual history, as evidenced by the trajectory of American philosophy. Together, the interrelated insights of

¹²⁷Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 38

transcendentalism, pragmatism, and ecstatic naturalism bring forth a vision of nature and humanity's place within it that re-affirms the daring claims of the Hermetic tradition while imbuing it with a distinctly American flavor. While the Hermetica speaks of a lost origin that we must return to, the American spirit is driven toward a possible divine glory within a future that is uncertain but nonetheless calls us forward. We are not re-ascending into the realm from which we came but ascending into an unknown realm of consciousness, bringing something truly new into existence. The transcendentalist knowledge of the grace within nature combines with the pragmatist sense of reality being a real fight to reveal a paradigm in which humanity is moving toward a divinely-ordained spiritual destiny, the journey to which is perilous and possibly tragic.

The esoteric humanism continued by American philosophy is not just a psychoanalytic and spiritual project but a political one. The civilization that liberal democracy seeks to inaugurate echoes both the vibrant pluralism of the Greco-Egyptian Alexandrian culture that melded Thoth and Hermes and the spiritually-charged multi-faceted inquiry conducted by the Renaissance humanists. America is an attempt to forge a culture that is not a tribal identity but rather held together by shared values, values espoused by esoteric magicians long before they were by our own national icons. To accomplish the Deweyan dream of global democracy, the unifying spirituality of the religion of the mind may be necessary. Of course, it remains yet to be seen whether America can successfully undergo the deep work of confronting the demons of its past and winning the ongoing struggle between civilization against barbarism in the present. As uncertain as that outcome is, the society that may yet emerge from that process, one immersed in the transformative and liberating energies of the Wisdom, makes it a possibility that is worth the struggle.

The anthropocentrism of American Hermeticism is not based upon hubris but upon responsibility. To pay full respect to the awesome powers of nature, we must accept rather than shun our privileged place within it. Likewise, to truly understand the vast untapped potential of human consciousness, we must be willing to honestly expose ourselves to innumerable orders of nature, the depths of nature's unconscious, the light of the Wisdom, and the myriad spiritual forces in nature that push us forward in our journeys of individuation. Our American Hermetic sense of "nature" is grounded in the ecological realities that surround us but not limited by them, as the spiritual journey of consciousness involves many other realms of reality. Lachman, speaking of our role as caretakers of the cosmos, asks "Save the planet? Yes, assuredly. But why stop there? Why not save the universe while we're at it?" It is the ambition of American Hermeticism to do just that.

Although it flips the script of the original Hermetic dictum, turning "As above, so below" into "As below, so above," the Americanized version of esoteric spirituality retains the longing for gnosis, that immediate knowledge of the primal divinity which emanates reality. We transmit the undifferentiated unconscious powers of nature naturing into our species' emerging Over-Soul by seeking realization of the immediacy of the divine within and around us, letting those moments of realization inform our cultivation of civilization.

Nous taught Hermes Trismegistus that –

...unless you make yourself equal to God, you cannot understand God; like is understood by like. Make yourself grow to immeasurable immensity, outleap all body, outstrip all time, become eternity and you will understand God. 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. Go

higher than every height and lower than every depth. Collect in yourself all the sensations of what has been made, of fire and water, dry and wet; be everywhere at once, on land, in the sea, in heaven; be not yet born, be in the womb, be young, old, dead, beyond death. And when you have understood all these at once -- times, places, things, qualities, quantities -- then you can understand God."¹²⁸

Separated from ancient Alexandria by large gulfs of time and space, the prophet of the American religion would come to take up that challenge. "Standing on the bare ground, — my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite spaces, — all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God."¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Ibid., 41.

¹²⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature" in *Essays and Lectures* (Digireads.com Publishing, 2009), 8 - 9.

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