

THE WESTERN MYSTICAL TRADITION

A Compilation of Articles from The Mystic's Vision

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Historical Roots of Western Mysticism

From what we presently know, a mystical theology first appeared in India with the writings that were later gathered into the collection that we now call the *Upanishads* (ca. 800-500 B.C.E.), and in the chapter of the epic *Mahabharata* that we know as the *Bhagavad Gita* (ca. 500 B.C.E.). It is possible that this Eastern mystical literature influenced the mysticism of the early Greek philosophers, but it is also possible that a mystical theology arose in Greece independently. There is no way to know for sure. Though the Buddha lived and taught around this same time, there was no Buddhist literary representation until many centuries thereafter; and the Biblical literature of the Middle Eastern Jews, whose culture was somewhat closed to outside influences, shows no clear signs of a mystical strain at any time, until the accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus written by his followers in the first and second centuries—and even then, the mysticism of Jesus was widely unrecognized and misinterpreted. The most easily traced early historical development of a mystical theology is that appearing in Greece in the Platonist and Neoplatonist traditions, and it is that development which we shall here consider.

Since the beginning, men have been gathering knowledge about the world in which they live in the effort to answer such questions as: ‘Where did this world come from?’ ‘Who made it?’ and ‘What is it made of?’ The earliest efforts to formulate a cosmogony came in the form of simple stories, myths, which were necessarily vague. Hesiod’s *Theogony* (7th or 8th century B.C.E.), for example, posited the originating agent as “Chaos”, a primordial abysmal condition from which all else mysteriously arose. But, by the 6th century B.C.E., enquiring minds had become a bit more sophisticated; and as the ancient philosopher, Xenophanes (580-480 B.C.E.) observed, “Not at first did the gods reveal all things to mortals, but in time, by inquiring, they make better discoveries.” And this gathering of knowledge through ‘better

discoveries' tended to be cumulative over the ages, though inquiry led only very slowly and laboriously toward a true understanding.

It had been clear, even to men of more primitive societies, that mind and matter, soul and body, were two very different categories of being. Then, as now, men struggled to understand the nature of the material world and the nature of their minds or souls as well. In answer to the question, 'What is the world made of?' ancient Greek thinkers, like Thales or Anaximenes, became convinced that everything in the sensible world was made from water or from air, respectively. But these theories were unsatisfying, and the search for the ultimate irreducible 'stuff' composing all matter continued in earnest during those early centuries with little success. For some thinkers, it had become increasingly evident that *in addition* to the physical world, the world of 'nature', there had to be an intelligent cause *behind* the manifestation and development of this complex and manifold universe. Matter itself was devoid of life and awareness; there had to be an intelligent Cause of this universe, pervading, guiding and developing the intricacies of its design, and accounting for the inherent life and consciousness of mankind and of all living creatures.

At first, the early poets and mythologizers, such as Hesiod and Homer, dreamed up gods who were styled after mankind, possessing both the noble and the ignoble characteristics of mortal men and women. But there were some who contemplated a God who was incorporeal and all-pervading, an eternal, noumenal Reality whose consciousness filled the entire Cosmos.

Xenophanes (580-480 B.C.E.) was one of those who, whether he had experienced it in vision or simply inferred it through his faculty of reason, thought that there *was* a non-material, i.e., supernatural, cause behind this world of sense experience, who exists within the world as the Intelligent creator, guide and controller. He said:

"There is one God, among gods and men the greatest, not at all like mortals in body or in mind. He sees as a whole and hears as a whole. And without toil He sets everything in motion, by the thought of His mind. And He always remains in the same place, not moving at all, nor is it necessary for Him to change His place at different times." ¹

A contemporary of Xenophanes who knew something of the Divine Thought pervading the universe was Heraclitus (540-480 B.C.E.), who, utilizing the

Greek word, “logos”, to represent that all-pervading Intelligence, gave eloquent expression to his philosophical vision. Indeed, Heraclitus seems to have experienced a personal mystical vision, revealing to him the one Mind whose presence (as *Logos*) fills the entire universe, and who comprises the underlying identity of all men. However, due to the ignorance of unenlightened commentators, of whom there are always plenty, Heraclitus was much misunderstood and maligned, both in his own time and ever since. But judge his vision for yourself; here is a reconstruction of Heraclitus’ thought, based on existing fragments from his book, *On Nature*:

“I have explained the Logos, but men are always incapable of understanding it, both before they have heard it, and after. For, though all things come into being in accordance with the Logos, when men hear it explained—how all things are made of it, and how each thing is separated from another according to its nature—they seem unable to comprehend it. The majority of men are as unaware of what they are doing after they wake from sleep as they are when asleep ²...Everyone is ruled by the Logos, which is common to all; yet, though the Logos is universal, the majority of men live as if they had an identity peculiar to themselves. ³ ...Even when they hear of the Logos, they do not understand it, and even after they have learnt something of it, they cannot comprehend; yet they regard themselves as wise. ⁴

“Those who believe themselves wise regard as real only the appearance of things, but these fashioners of falsehood will have their reward. ⁵ Though men are inseparable from the Logos, yet they are separated in it; and though they encounter it daily, they are alienated from it. ⁶ What intelligence or understanding do they have? They believe the popular orators and are guided by the opinions of the populace; they do not understand that the majority of men are fools, and the wise few. ⁷

“Of all the wise philosophers whose discourses I have heard, I have not found any who have realized the one Intelligence, which is distinct from all things, ⁸ and yet pervades all things. ⁹ That Intelligence is One; to know It is to know the Purpose, which guides all things and is in all things. ¹⁰ Nature has no inherent power of intelligence; Intelligence is the Divine. ¹¹

Without It, the fairest universe is but a randomly scattered dust-heap.¹² If we are to speak with intelligence, we must found our being on THAT which is common to all. ...For that Logos, which governs man, is born of the One, which is Divine. It [the Divine] governs the universe by Its will and is more than sufficient to everyone.¹³

“One should not conjecture at random about the Supreme [Truth].¹⁴ The eyes are better witnesses to the truth than the ears;¹⁵ but the eyes and ears are bad witnesses for men if their souls cannot understand.¹⁶ You could not in your travels find the source or destination of the soul, so deeply hidden is the Logos.¹⁷ [But] I searched for It [and found It] within myself.¹⁸ That hidden Unity is beyond what is visible.¹⁹ All men have this capacity of knowing themselves,²⁰ [for] the soul has the Logos within it, which can be known when the soul is evolved.²¹ What is within us remains the same eternally; It is the same in life and death, waking and sleeping, youth and old age; for, It has become this world, and the world must return to It.²²

“The best of men choose to know the ONE above all else; It is the famous “Eternal” within mortal men. But the majority of men are complacent, like well-fed cattle.²³ They revel in mud;²⁴ like donkeys, they prefer chaff to gold.²⁵ [The Eternal is attained only by those who seek It with all their desire;] for if one does not desire It, one will not find the Desireless, since there is no trail leading to It and no path.²⁶ Such a man is satiated with things seen and kindles his inner light during the night. While living, he is like a dead man; while awake, he is like a man asleep.²⁷ But such men, the best of men, are one in ten thousand.²⁸

“You needn’t listen to me; listen to the Logos [within]. When you do, you will agree that all things are One.²⁹ This ordered universe, which is the same for all, was not created by any one of the gods or by man, but always was, is, and shall be, [similar to] an ever-living Flame that is first kindled and then quenched in turn.³⁰ [The universe bursts forth and then is reabsorbed, yet its Source is ever-living, like a Sun that never sets;] and who

can hide from that which never sets? ³¹ [That eternal Intelligence in man] is forever beyond change; ³² [It is God.] To God all things are beautiful, good and just, but men see some things to be just, and others unjust. ³³

“One should understand that the world appears by the opposition of forces; order exists in the world by this play of contraries.³⁴ We would never have heard of “right” if we did not know of “wrong;” ³⁵ whole and not-whole, united-separate, consonant-dissonant, —all these are interdependent.³⁶ [But] in the One, above and below are the same, ³⁷ [just as] beginning and end are one in the circumference of a circle. ³⁸ That, which is in conflict is also in concert; while things differ from one another, they are all contained in the most beautiful Unity. ³⁹

“[Yet the philosophers cannot understand this;] they do not understand how that which contains differences within it is also in harmony, how Unity consists of opposing forces within Itself, just as the strings of a bow or a lyre [produce harmony while being pulled by opposing forces.] ⁴⁰
 “[When one’s mind becomes stilled, the soul separates from the world-appearance;] just as a mixture of wine and barley meal separates when it is not stirred. ⁴¹ [The impulses of the mind must be stilled;] though it is difficult to fight against impulse. [The impulses of desire arise, but] whatever the mind wishes, it purchases at the expense of the soul. ⁴²

[Such desires feed on pride and arrogance, and] it is a greater task to quench one’s own arrogance than it is to quench a raging fire. ⁴³ Pride is the greatest hindrance to the progress of the soul.⁴⁴ Moderation is the greatest virtue, and wisdom is to speak the truth and to act in accordance with nature, while continuously attending to one’s own Self.⁴⁵ [A man should see to his own character,] for a man’s character is his destiny.” ⁴⁶

Not long thereafter, Anaxagoras (500-428 B.C.E.) came to a similar conclusion. The universe, he said, began as a primordial, undifferentiated and chaotic mass—he doesn’t even attempt to guess at its origin; but he states that this chaotic mass was then arranged and organized by “Thought”.

He doesn't say "Divine Thought" or "the Thought of God", but that is clearly what he intended. He speaks of a "limitless and independent Thought" that is:

"the finest of all things and the purest, and it possesses all knowledge about everything, and it has the greatest strength. And Thought has power over all those things, both great and small, which possess soul. ...And Thought knows everything ...what was to be and what was and what now is and what will be. ...Thought has power over whatever exists and now is where the other things also are [i.e., it permeates all things]." ⁴⁷

Socrates (469-399 B.C.E.) was a contemporary of Anaxagoras and was the student and beneficiary of all previous philosophical enquiry. It seems that he had also been the beneficiary of a personal mystical vision in which the Divine had made itself known to him. However, since he wrote nothing, but preferred to teach men face to face, we must rely upon his student, Plato (d. 347 B.C.E.), for our knowledge of his thought. Plato's various *Dialogues* purport to be conversations between Socrates and his many admirers; but it is impossible to separate out the thought of Socrates from the thought of Plato; and so, we must treat them as one.

By the time of Plato, belief in the *Psyche*, or "Soul" as the eternal and incorporeal essence of one's being was implicit, as was the belief in the soul's ability to reincarnate. Plato saw the soul as tripartite, being made up of *logos*, the mind or reason; *thymos*, emotion; and *eros*, or desire. For both Socrates and Plato, Soul was seen as the entire inner consciousness of man, synonymous with the very fact of life. It was soul that gave life to the body, and without which the body was merely a corpse. It was Plato who introduced Socrates' idea that, through introspection, a man's soul was able to ascend in spirit and directly perceive and know the Divinity within himself; and it was for that reason that Socrates had so emphasized the need to care primarily for "the greatest improvement of the soul."

Here are a few illustrative excerpts from the Dialogues of Plato that purport to be the words of Socrates:

"As for the sovereign part of the human soul, we should consider that God gave it to be the Divinity in each one, it being

that which, inasmuch as we are a plant not of an earthly but a heavenly growth, raises us from earth to our brethren in heaven.

“When one is always occupied with the cravings of desire and ambition which he is eagerly striving to satisfy, all his thoughts must be mortal, and, as far as it is possible to become such, he must be mortal every whit, because he has made great his mortal part. But he who has been earnest in the love of knowledge and true wisdom and has exercised his intellect more than any other part, must have thoughts immortal and divine. If he attains Truth, insofar as human nature is capable of sharing in immortality, he must altogether be immortal. And since he is ever cherishing the divine power, and has duly honored the Divinity within, he will be supremely happy.⁴⁸

“The true lover of knowledge is always striving after Being—that is his nature; he will not rest at those multitudinous particular phenomena whose existence is in appearance only, but he will go on—the keen edge will not be blunted, nor the force of his passion abate until he have attained the knowledge of the true nature of all essence by a sympathetic and kindred power in the soul. And by that power, drawing near and becoming one with very Being, ...he will know and truly live and increase. Then, and only then, will he cease from his travail.⁴⁹

“The immortality of the soul is demonstrated by many proofs; but to see it as it really is—not as we now behold it, marred by communion with the body and other miseries—you must contemplate it with the eye of reason in its original purity; and then its beauty will be revealed.⁵⁰ ...When a person starts on the discovery of the Absolute by the light of the reason only, without the assistance of the senses, and never desists until by pure intelligence he arrives at the perception of the absolute Good, he at last finds himself at the end of the intellectual world...⁵¹

“Of that Heaven which is above the heavens what earthly poet ever did or ever will sing worthily? It is such as I will describe; for I must dare to speak the truth, when Truth is my theme. There abides the very Being with which true knowledge is concerned; the colorless, formless, intangible Essence visible

only to mind, the pilot of the soul. ... Every soul which is capable of receiving the food proper to it rejoices at beholding Reality. ...She beholds Knowledge absolute, not in the form of generation or of relation, which men call existence, but Knowledge absolute in Existence absolute. ⁵²

“To find the Father and Maker of this universe is most difficult, and, to declare Him, after having found Him, is impossible.⁵³

“A man must have knowledge of the Universal, formed by collecting into a unity by means of reason the many particulars of sense; this is the recollection of those things which our soul once saw while following God—when, regardless of that which we now call being, it raised its head up towards true Being. And, therefore, the mind of the philosopher alone has wings; and this is just, for he is always, as far as he is able, clinging in recollection to those things in which God abides, and in beholding which, he is what He [God] is. And he who employs aright these memories is ever being initiated into perfect mysteries and he alone becomes truly perfect. But since he stands apart from human interests and is rapt in the Divine, the vulgar deem him mad and do not know he is inspired. ⁵⁴

“He who would be dear to God must, as far as is possible, become like Him. Wherefore the temperate and just man is the friend of God, for he is like Him. And this is the conclusion—that for the good man to ... continually hold converse with God by means of prayers and every kind of service, is the noblest and the best of things, and the most conducive to a happy life. ⁵⁵

“This is that life above all others which man should live, ...holding converse with the true Beauty, simple and divine. In that communion only beholding Beauty with the eye of the mind, he will be enabled to bring forth, not images of beauty, but Reality [Itself]; ...and bringing forth and nourishing true virtue, to become the friend of God and be immortal, if mortal man may. Would that be an ignoble life?” ⁵⁶

For all his high-mindedness, and his great effect on all subsequent philosophy, Plato gives no indication in his writings that he himself had experienced the unitive knowledge of God. In fact, he departed from the

simple ideas of Xenophanes, Heraclitus and Anaxagorus regarding the guidance and direction of the universe by means of Divine Thought, emphasizing instead the theory of the dependence of all objects in the material world upon the intelligible *Forms*, or *Ideas (ideai)*, that he saw as constituting their archetypal essence and reality. This theory was born, however, not of mystical vision, but of Plato's speculative imagination.

Democritus (468 B.C.E.-?), though not a mystic, nonetheless plays a minor role in our story. He was a contemporary of Socrates, though not of his circle. He wrote many books, on many subjects, none of which has survived; but he is best known for anticipating our current atomic theory. He, and perhaps his teacher, Leucippus, as well, held that all things are made of tiny entities imperceptible to the senses, that were of many geometric shapes, which he called "atoms"—meaning 'irreducible elements'. Though he had no means of discovering or proving this through empirical means, he nonetheless hit upon a conception that seemed reasonable at the time, and which, only twenty-five hundred years later would be shown to be, if not wholly accurate, an amazingly prescient theory of the atomic nature of matter, the intricacies of which were ferreted out in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of our current era. Of course, Democritus could not have dreamed that these tiny 'irreducible elements' were really electrically charged wave-particles formed of the intense energy generated by the immense burst of divine Light that created the universe.

Philo Judaeus (20 B.C.E. to 40 C.E.), an Alexandrian Jew of the first century, was a follower of Plato; but he didn't subscribe to Plato's concept of the individual *Forms* or *Ideas* underlying each physical object. Rather, he saw the *Idea* of the universe as inhering entire in the Divine Mind, and which, borrowing from Heraclitus and the Stoics, he called the *Logos*. Philo explains, in the Platonist manner, that God has two aspects: the transcendent, of which nothing at all can be said; and the immanent aspect, the *Logos*, by which He is the governing Thought or Idea filling all the material universe:

"God is high above place and time ...He is contained by nothing but transcends all. *But though transcending what He has made, He nonetheless filled the universe with Himself.* [My italics.] ...When, therefore, the God-loving soul searches into the nature of the Existent, he enters on a quest of That which is beyond matter and beyond sight. And out of this quest there accrues to him a great boon—to comprehend the incomprehensible God."

The *Logos*, as Philo describes it, is the Idea in the mind of God which is the archetypal pattern from which the design of all the physically manifested universe is produced. It is, in effect, the directive and organizational Intelligence of God that permeates all matter, bringing all into conformity with Its will and design. For Philo, God *thinks* the universe; He is continually *thinking* the universe. It is this underlying Thought which is the *Logos* of God, the subtle guide and governor of the material universe of our experience.

“The supremely generic is God, the next is the Logos of God; ⁵⁸ ...That which comes after God, even if it were the most venerable of all other things, holds second place, and was called feminine in contrast to the Creator of the universe, who is masculine. ⁵⁹

“That aspect of Him which transcends His powers cannot be conceived of at all in terms of place, but only as pure Being; but that power of His (the Logos) by which He made and ordered all things ...pervades the whole and passes through all the parts of the universe.” ⁶⁰

Philo had experienced the unitive vision, and understood the spiritual foundation of our world; and he knew that that vision was not of his own making, but was a gift of God’s grace:

“Without Divine grace it is impossible to leave the ranks of mortality; [but] when grace fills the soul, it is possessed and inspired, ...and hastens to that most glorious and loveliest of visions, the vision of the Uncreated.⁶¹ The soul, stirred to its depths and maddened by heavenward yearning, [is] drawn by the truly Existent Being and pulled upward by Him. ⁶²

“It is the characteristic of him who would see God not to leave the holy warfare without his crown, but to persevere till he reaps the prize of victory. And what victory garland more fitting or woven of rarer flowers than the clear and unalloyed vision of Him who IS. It is a worthy conflict that lies before the striving soul: to win eyes for the clear vision of Him Whom alone it is worth man’s while to see.⁶³ ...Go up, then, O soul, to the vision of Him who IS—go up quietly, mindfully, willingly, fearlessly, lovingly ⁶⁴...[for] to know God is the highest

happiness, and immortal life. ⁶⁵ ...It is worth more than all wealth, private or public. For if the sight of elders or holy teachers, rulers or parents, moves one to reverence and modesty and zeal for a pure life, how great a support for virtue in our soul shall we find, who have learnt to pass beyond all things created, and to see That which is uncreated and divine, the highest good, the greatest Joy; nay, to speak the truth, That which is greater than the greatest, more beautiful than the greatest beauty, more blessed than the most blessed, more joyful than the joyfulest; aye, more perfect than any words such as these [can tell].” ⁶⁶

The Wisdom of Solomon, an apocryphal book of the Bible, ⁶⁷ written around the same time and place in which Philo flourished, speaks of the governing Spirit of God not as *Logos*, but as *Sophia*, or “Wisdom.” Wisdom, according to the anonymous author of this book, is “the artificer of all; ...[she] pervades and permeates all things...”

“She is an exhalation from the [creative] power of God, a pure effluence from the glory of the Almighty; therefore, nothing tainted insinuates itself into her. She is an effulgence of everlasting light, an unblemished mirror of the active power of God, and an image of His goodness. Though but one, she can do everything, and abiding in herself she renews all things; ...She is brighter than the sun and surpasses every constellation; compared to the light of day she is found more radiant; ...She stretches in might from pole to pole and effectively orders all things.” ⁶⁸

According to this unknown author, *Wisdom* is the breath of God by which the universe comes into being. It is a breath of “everlasting light”, more radiant than the sun and all the constellations, that forms and effectively orders all things. Philo and the author of *The Wisdom of Solomon* are in full agreement that the Divine Mind (as *Logos/Sophia*) directs, orders and controls every facet of the material universe. It is also she who graces the pure-hearted, bringing them to enlightenment through union with herself.

“She is an inexhaustible treasure for mankind, and those who acquire it attain friendship with God, commended by the gift derived from her instruction. ...I learned both what is hidden and what is manifest, for *Wisdom*, the artificer of all, taught me.

⁶⁹ ...Generation by generation she enters into holy souls and renders them friends of God and prophets ...” ⁷⁰

Like Philo, the author of *The Wisdom of Solomon* appears to have been graced with the vision of God, and he had seen that God breathes the universe into being with a tremendous effluence of light that becomes the vast universe. And that God’s very breath has inherent within it the power and wisdom to fashion matter and to bring the cosmos into order, to initiate life and bring intelligence to mankind. According to him, the material universe, formed of God’s light is governed by His inherent *Wisdom*, by which He organized and arranged the universe, and fashioned all life and mankind to His will. In our modern conception as well, informed as it is by empirical science, we may come to understand that God manifested matter through His emanation of light, and permeated that universe of matter by virtue of His omnipresent Spirit, effectively informing all matter, directing its evolution, and fashioning all things according to the coordinated beauty of His design.

Plotinus (205-270 C.E.) is credited with ushering in a new perspective on Platonism—a “Neoplatonism”, based on his own mystical experience, but utilizing the terminology of Plato to give it a familiar expression. Though Plato had hinted of the ascent of the mind (soul) to God, Plotinus was the first to describe that mystical experience of union with the Divine in great detail. Like everyone else prior to the twentieth century, Plotinus was unclear about the origin and nature of matter, but he clearly delineated the spiritual hierarchy to which Plato had pointed. He reiterates and confirms, from his own unitive vision, a transcendent Godhead, an absolute Source of all Being, which he calls “the One”. Arising from that ineffable Godhead is a creative Power, which he calls *Nous*, “The Divine Mind”. The Divine Mind is the executive power of the One; It is God, the Creator, the initiator of the Light that forms the universe. And from that omniscient and omnipotent Power is emanated an extension of Itself, which Plotinus, like Plato, calls *Psyche*, or “Soul”. Soul is the immanent Divine Spirit that permeates the universe, guiding it, inspiring it, and bringing to it life and awareness, and leading each individual soul to awaken to its essential identity as the Divine Mind, its eternal source and Self.

Here are a few choice quotes from **Plotinus**:

Plotinus On The One

“Deriving then from nothing other, entering into nothing other, in no way a comprised thing, there can be nothing above It. We need not, then, go seeking any other Principles. This—The One and The Good—is our First. Next follows the Divine Mind, [which is] the Primal Thinker. And upon this follows Soul. Such is the order in nature. The Spiritual realm allows no more than these and no fewer.⁷¹

“The One is all things and none of them. The Source of all things is not all things; and yet It is all things in a transcendental sense.⁷²

“It is infinite by right of being a pure Unity with nothing towards which to direct any partial content. Absolutely One, It has never known measure and stands outside of number, and so is under no limit either in regard to any external or within Itself; for any such determination would bring something of the dual into It. And, having no constituent parts, It accepts no pattern, and forms no shape.

“Reason recognizing It as such a nature, you may not hope to see It with mortal eyes, nor in any way that would be imagined by those who make sense the test of reality and so annul the supremely Real. For what [appears to us and] passes for the most truly existent is most truly non-existent—the thing of extension least real of all—while this unseen First is the source and principle of Being and sovereign over Reality.⁷³

“He is the First, the Authentic, immune from chance, from blind effect and happening. God is [the] cause of Himself. For Himself and of Himself, He is what He is, the first Self, the transcendent Self.”⁷⁴

Plotinus On The Divine Mind

“There exists a Principle which transcends Being; this is The One, whose nature we have sought to establish insofar as such matters lend themselves to proof. Upon The One follows immediately the Principle which is at once Being and the

Divine Mind. Third comes the Principle, Soul. ...Thus, our soul, too, is a divine thing, belonging to another order than sense; ...⁷⁵

“From such a Unity as we have declared The One to be, how does anything at all come into substantial existence—any multiplicity, dyad, or number? Why has the Primal not remained self-gathered so that there be none of this profusion of the manifold which we observe in existence and yet are compelled to trace to that absolute Unity? ⁷⁶ ... [In other words, how does there come to be] a universe from an unbroken Unity, in which there appears no diversity, not even duality?

“It is precisely because there is nothing within the One that all things are from It. In order that Being may be brought about, the Source must be no Being but Being’s generator, in what is to be thought of as the primal act of generation. Seeking nothing, possessing nothing, lacking nothing, the One is perfect and, in our metaphor, has overflowed; and Its exuberance has produced something new; [and] this issue has turned again to its begetter and been filled and has become its contemplator and so a Divine Mind.⁷⁷

“Here [in the Divine Mind] is contained all that is immortal: there is nothing here but Divine Mind; all is God; this is the place of every soul. Here is rest unbroken: for how can that seek change, in which all is well? What need that reach to, which holds all within itself? What increase can that desire, which stands utterly achieved? All its content, thus, is perfect, that Itself may be perfect throughout, as holding nothing that is less than the Divine, nothing that is less than Intellective. Its knowing is not by search but by possession, its blessedness inherent, not acquired. For all belongs to it eternally and it holds the authentic Eternity imitated by Time which, circling round the Soul, makes towards the new thing and passes by the old. Soul deals with thing after thing—now Socrates, now a horse: always some one entity from among beings—but the Divine Mind is all and therefore its entire content is

simultaneously present in that identity. This is pure Being in eternal actuality. Nowhere is there any future, for every then is a now; nor is there any past, for nothing there has ever ceased to be. Everything has taken its stand forever, an identity well pleased, we might say, to be as it is. And everything, in that entire content, is Divine Mind and Authentic Existence; and the total of all is Divine Mind entire and Being entire.⁷⁸

“The Divine Mind is the first Act of The Good [the One] and the first Existence; The Good remains stationary within Itself, but the Divine Mind acts in relation to It and, as it were, lives about It. And the Soul, outside, circles around the Divine Mind, and by gazing upon it, seeing into the depths of it, through it, sees God.”⁷⁹

Plotinus On The Soul

“The authentic Reality [the One] gives life to the Intelligible [Spiritual] realm. The Divine Mind is the noblest of Its content, but It contains also souls, since every soul in this lower [earthly] sphere has come from there. *There* is the world of unembodied spirits, while to our world belong those that have entered body and undergone bodily division. *There* the Divine Mind is a concentrated all; nothing of it is distinguished or divided. And in that unitive realm all souls are concentrated also, with no spatial discrimination.

“The Divine Mind is forever repugnant to distinction and to partition; however, Soul, though without distinction and partition there, has a nature lending itself to divisional existence, and this division is secession, entry into body. [And so] in view of this seceding and the ensuing partition we may legitimately speak of it as a partible thing. But if so, how can it still be described as indivisible?

“[It remains indivisible] in that the secession is not of the entire Soul; something of it holds its ground: that in it which recoils from separate existence. The entity described as “both the undivided soul and the soul divided among bodies,” is a Soul

which is at once above and below, attached to the Supreme and yet reaching down to this sphere, like a radius from a center.

“Thus, it is that, entering this [earthly] realm, it possesses still the vision inherent in that superior [indivisible] phase by virtue of which it maintains its integral nature unchanged. Even here [on earth] it is not exclusively the partible soul: it is still the Impartible as well.⁸⁰

Soul, therefore, is, in this definite sense, one and many; the Ideal-Form [soul] residing in the body is many and one. Bodies themselves are exclusively many; the Supreme is exclusively one.⁸¹

“The souls of men ...have entered into that realm in a leap downward from the Supreme. Yet even they are not cut off from their origin, from the Divine Mind. It is not that they have come bringing the Spirit down in their fall; it is that though they have descended even to earth, yet their higher part holds forever above the heavens.⁸²

“Let every soul recall ...the truth that Soul is the author of all living things, that it has breathed the life into them—whatever is nourished by earth and sea, all the creatures of the air, the divine stars in the sky. It is the maker of the sun; itself formed and ordered this vast heaven and conducts all that rhythmic motion. And it is a principle distinct from all these to which it gives law and movement and life, and it must of necessity be more honorable than they, for they gather or dissolve as Soul brings them life or abandons them, but Soul, since it never can abandon itself, is of eternal being.⁸³

“Once pure in the Spirit realm [within the Divine Mind], the soul too possesses that same unchangeableness: for it possesses identity of essence. When it is in that region it must of necessity enter into oneness with the Divine Mind by the sheer fact of its self-orientation, for by that intention all interval disappears; the soul advances and is taken into unison, and in that association, it becomes one with the Divine Mind—but not to its own destruction: the two are one, and [yet] two. In such a state there is no question of stage and change. The soul, motionless, would be intent upon its intellectual act, and in possession,

simultaneously, of its self-awareness; for it has become one simultaneous existence with the Supreme.”⁸⁴

Plotinus On The Return

“That which the soul must seek, That which sheds Its light upon the Divine Mind, leaving Its mark wherever It falls, surely we need not wonder if It has the power to draw [all back] to Itself, calling [the soul] back from every wandering to rest before It. From It came all and so there is nothing mightier; all is feeble before It.”⁸⁵

“This Light [from the Highest] shining within the soul enlightens it; that is, it makes the soul intellectual, working it into likeness with itself, the Light above. Think of the traces of this Light upon the soul, then say to yourself that such, and more beautiful and broader and more radiant, is the Light itself. Thus, you will approach to the nature of the Divine Mind and the Spirit-realm, for it is this Light, Itself lit from above, which gives the soul its brighter life.”⁸⁶

“We may know we have had the vision when the soul has suddenly taken Light. This Light is from the Supreme and is the Supreme. ...The soul remains unlit without that vision; lit, it possesses what it sought. And this is the true end set before the soul, to take that Light, to see the Supreme by the Supreme and not by the light of any other principle: to see the Supreme which is also the means to the vision; for that which illumines the soul is That which it is to see, just as it is by the Sun’s own light that we see the Sun.

But how is this to be accomplished?

Let all else go.”⁸⁷

“Suppose the soul to have attained: The Highest has come to her, or rather has revealed Its presence; she has turned away from all about her and made herself apt, beautiful to the utmost, brought into likeness with the Divine by those preparings and adornings which come unbidden to those growing ready for the vision. She has seen that presence suddenly manifesting within

her, for there is nothing between. Here is no longer a duality but a two-in-one; for, so long as the presence holds, all distinction fades. It is as lover and beloved here [on earth], in a copy of that union, long to blend. The soul has now no further awareness of being in body and will give herself no foreign name, not man, not living being, not Being, not All. Any observation of such things falls away; the soul has neither time nor taste for them. This she sought and This she has found and on This she looks and not upon herself; and who she is that looks she has not leisure to know.

“Once There she will barter for This nothing the universe holds; not though one would make over the heavens entire to her. There is nothing higher than this, nothing of more good. Above This there is no passing; all the rest, however lofty, lies on the downward path. She is of perfect judgment and knows that This was her quest, that nothing is higher. Here can be no deceit; where could she come upon [something that is] truer than the Truth? And the Truth that she affirms, she is herself; but all the affirmation is later and is silent. In this happiness she knows beyond delusion that she is happy; for this is no affirmation of an excited body but of a soul become again what she was in the time of her early joy. All that she had welcomed of old—office, power, wealth, beauty, knowledge—of all she tells her scorn as she never could, had she not found their better. Linked to This she can fear no disaster, not even if she has had the vision but once. Let everything about her fall to pieces, she wouldn’t mind if only she might be wholly with This, so huge [is] the happiness she has won to.”⁸⁸

It was these early figures, then, who helped to establish the foundations of Western mystical theology that would be reiterated and expanded upon by the Christian and Islamic mystics of later centuries.

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* * *

The Mystical Tradition of Platonism

The twentieth century philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead, said that “all philosophy is but so many footnotes to Plato”—and it’s certainly true that Plato furnished many of the core ideas upon which all subsequent Western philosophy draws. Plato’s main teacher and predecessor, Socrates (469-399 B.C.E.), himself drawing on the Orphic and Pythagorean teachings, had apparently been disinclined to set his thoughts in writing; rather, it was his student, Plato (427-347 B.C.E.), who, by putting his master’s teachings into the form of written conversations, or dialogues, gave voice to the Spiritual philosophy that has come to be known as Platonism.

Plato established the notion of the immortality of the Spirit, or soul, and its distinction from the body, in his Dialogue, *Phaedo*, where Socrates, while awaiting execution, assures his companions that his impending departure, as a soul, from the body was not a matter for sadness or regret:

Socrates: "In this present life, I reckon that we make the nearest approach to knowledge when we have the least possible intercourse or communion with the body, and are not surfeited with the bodily nature, but keep ourselves pure until the hour when God himself is pleased to release us. And thus, having got rid of the foolishness of the body, we shall be pure and hold converse with the pure, and know of ourselves the clear light everywhere, which is no other than 'the light of truth.'

"...But O my friend, if this be true, there is great reason to hope that, going whither I go, when I have come to the end of my journey, I shall attain that which has been the pursuit of my life. And therefore, I go on my way rejoicing, and not I only, but every other man who believes that his mind has been made ready and that he is in a manner purified."

"Certainly," replied Simmias.

"And what is purification but the separation of the soul from the body, as I was saying before; the habit of the soul gathering and collecting herself into herself from all sides out of the body; the dwelling in her own place alone, as in another life, so also in this, as far as she can; —the release of the soul from the chains of the body?"

"Very true," he said.

"...And the true philosophers, and they only, are ever seeking to release the soul. Is not the separation and release of the soul from the body their especial study?"

"That is true."

"And, as I was saying at first, there would be a ridiculous contradiction in men studying to live as nearly as they can in a state of death, and yet repining when it comes upon them." ¹

While here and there throughout the meandering Dialogues of Plato we may find sparkling jewels of mystical insight, we find nothing like a systematic metaphysics, or even a clear outline of a consistent metaphysical vision. But, more than five hundred and fifty years after the death of Plato, the great

mystic-philosopher, Plotinus (205-270 C.E.), born in Lycopolis, Egypt, and transplanted to Rome, would formulate a more comprehensive metaphysics, a spiritual perspective, based, not only upon the teachings of Socrates cum Plato, but upon his own visionary experience as well. It is this mystical perspective which would ultimately be labeled by scholars as *Neoplatonism* ("the new Platonism").

In the centuries prior to Plotinus, the subject of the human experience of the Divine had always been shrouded in secrecy. In ancient Greek and Roman societies, the rare and subtle experience referred to as 'mystical experience' was regarded as belonging exclusively to the secret 'mystery' schools such as the Eleusinian, Mithraic, and Orphic mystery schools. Teachings about mysticism or mystical experience could be found only among the Adepts and initiates of those secret schools. Plotinus, living in Rome in the third century of the Current Era, repeated the ancient warning that matters relating to mystical experience were "Not to be told, not to be written." The obvious reason for this is that, in the hands of the unlearned, the uninitiated, mystical knowledge is very likely to be misinterpreted and misrepresented, and those who spoke of it ran the risk of being persecuted by the ignorant. No doubt, in those times, the example of Jesus was a strong deterrent to any mystics who might have thought of going public.

Though his own interior experience was certainly comparable to that of Jesus, Plotinus (only a couple of centuries after him) knew that he could not openly announce his mystical experience to the commoners of Rome; rather, he spoke of his own mystical experience with only a few close students of philosophy, and his circle was very exclusive and very secret. Even to this day, only the few, the elite among spiritual seekers, are able to access, appreciate, and find joy in the great spiritual wisdom of Plotinus. And yet, it seems to me, there is so much benefit to be had by the entire society through an open sharing of spiritual knowledge by those to whom it is revealed, and so much loss accrued to the whole society without it, that I believe the benefit of sharing this knowledge greatly outweighs the risk of its corruption by the foolish. Great, liberating, knowledge is not to be hidden and relegated to whispers behind doors. The more it is shared, the more accepted it will become, and understanding will increase in

even greater circles, expanding to benefit more of those who would, otherwise, suffer in the dark and lonely blindness of ignorance. It seems to me that the world has already done that for long enough!

Both Jesus and Plotinus had experienced the union of the soul with God. Jesus attempted to explain his experience in the language and context of his Judaic heritage; Plotinus attempted to explain it in the language and context of Platonist philosophy. Plotinus had experienced ‘the vision of God’, and, in his attempt to explain it, he formulated a metaphysics relying heavily upon the terminology of Plato that was still current at the time. However, it is not a metaphysics based *solely* on a prior metaphysics or on rational speculation, like some others, but one that is based primarily on his own unitary vision in the contemplative state, which vision he is said to have experienced on at least four occasions.

Following Plato’s metaphysical lead, Plotinus describes the one Spirit as emanating or radiating itself in every direction to inhabit the subtle and manifest universe. He describes the successive realms of Spirit as three: The One, The Divine Mind (*Nous*), and Soul, in a manner analogous to the successive stages of radiation expanding from the Sun. Here are his own words:

"There exists a Principle which transcends Being; this is The One, ... Upon the One follows immediately the Principle which is at once Being and the Divine Mind. Third comes the Principle, Soul. ... Thus, our soul, too, is a divine thing, belonging to another order than sense; ²

"There is, we may say, something that is the Center; about It, a circle of light shed from It; then, around Center and first circle alike, another circle, light from light ..." ³

It must be noted that, in this representation by Plotinus, these three “principles” are not to be thought of as separate, independent entities; it is a *causal* progression only. It is the One whose creative Power is called ‘the Divine Mind’; and it is the creative Power of the One whose radiance spreads as Soul. Despite the names given to these “layers”, there is never anything but the One, and only the One, filling all.

‘The One’ represents for Plotinus the transcendent Absolute, the Unmanifest Ground. It is prior to the creative activity of the Divine Mind; and so, in the One, the universe of time and space does not even exist. The One is the absolute Void, the indescribable Godhead. It is the ultimate Identity of all. In the Vedic tradition, It is called “Brahman”, in the Taoist tradition, the “Tao,” and in the Christian writings of Meister Eckhart, “*Gottheit*”. The *active* principle, the creative Power of the One, Plotinus calls ‘The Divine Mind’ (*Nous*). And ‘Soul’ (*psyche*) is the radiation of the Divine Mind into the intelligible as well as the phenomenal universe.

Plotinus pointed out in his *Enneads* that the Absolute, who is the ultimate Source and foundation of all, cannot be described or even named accurately, since He/It is prior to all qualities, prior even to the designation of ‘Being’. Nonetheless, he names It “the One”, or he uses Plato’s previous designation, “the Good.” But he is always quick to stipulate that any descriptive name limits and qualifies the Absolute, and thereby misrepresents It:

"The All-Transcendent, utterly void of multiplicity, is Unity’s Self, independent of all else... It is the great Beginning, wholly and truly One. All life belongs to It. ⁴ ...The One is, in truth, beyond all statement; whatever you say would limit It; the All Transcendent has no name. ⁵ ... [It] is That which is the truly Existent. ... It is the Source from which all that appears to exist derives that appearance.⁶

"... Everywhere one and whole, It is at rest throughout. But, ... in Its very non-action It magnificently operates and in Its very self-being It produces everything by Its Power. ⁷

"... This Absolute is none of the things of which It is the Source; Its nature is that nothing can be affirmed of It—not existence, not essence, not life—It transcends all these. But possess yourself of It by the very elimination of [individual] being, and you hold a marvel! Thrusting forward to This, attaining, and resting in Its content, seek to grasp It more and more, understanding It by that intuitive thrust alone, but knowing Its greatness by the beings that follow upon It and exist by Its power." ⁸

Today, we use the word “Godhead”, after Meister Eckhart’s *Gottheit*, to represent the Absolute, ineffable One, with the understanding that this too is merely a shorthand pointer to That which can never be conceived or

expressed by the human mind. God may be directly *experienced*, but never adequately captured in thought or language. For this reason, a clear and rational comprehension or description of the One is concealed from our understanding. An ancient saying, quoted by both Plato and Saint Paul, reminds us that “We see now but vaguely, as through a darkened glass; but then (meaning: when we have direct *vision* of God) we shall see as though face to face.”

While the One cannot be described or clearly comprehended by the intellect, nonetheless, we can get a sense of It by analogy with our own nature, since we are made in Its image. Like the eternal Consciousness, our own individual consciousness is one and unchanging, while the energetic outpouring of thought is multiple and subject to flux. Our thoughts are contained as potentiality in our own consciousness, which is their substratum and source, and yet these thoughts, even when given expression, do not in any way affect that consciousness, any more than clouds passing through the sky alters or affects the sky. This, I believe, is analogous to the unity of the One and Its Creative Power; for while the One remains transcendent, unaltered, and unaffected, Its energetic outpouring of creativity continues apace.

And so, we are able to recognize these two aspects of our own minds as in some way comparable to the two aspects of God: The One (the pure Absolute), and His Creative Power. They are not two separate entities, of course, any more than those two aspects of our own minds are separated. They are one, yet they have a semblance of duality, since one is causally primary to the other, just as, while the Sun and the light it radiates are one, the Sun is primary to its radiance.

"The Divine Mind is the first Act of The One and the first Existence; The One remains stationary within Itself, but the Divine Mind acts in relation to It and, as it were, lives about It. And the Soul, outside, circles around the Divine Mind, and by gazing upon it, seeing into the depths of it, through it sees God." ⁹

According to Plotinus, we may think of Soul as a spreading Field radiating from the Divine Mind. It is the outspreading light of Divine Intelligence, the invisible radiation of the Divine Consciousness, that manifests as the intelligible (spiritual) world. Soul is one undivided radiance, and though it contains souls, they are as yet unmanifest, undifferentiated. We must

remember that, for Plotinus, Soul does not consist of an ethereal substance; it is a projection of the conscious intelligence of the Divine Mind.

Unlike the conception of Moses, in which God's Spirit, or Soul, had been imparted to man alone, Plotinus regarded Soul as a radiation of God's Spirit imparted to the entire universe, permeating and residing in every existent form. Here is Plotinus' vision of this Divine Soul emanation in his own words:

"Let every soul recall, then, at the outset the truth that soul is the author of all living things, that it has breathed the life into them all, whatever is nourished by earth and sea, all the creatures of the air, the divine stars in the sky; it is the maker of the sun; itself formed and ordered this vast heaven and conducts all that rhythmic motion; and it is a principle distinct from all these to which it gives law and movement and life, and it must of necessity be more honorable than they, for they gather or dissolve as soul brings them life or abandons them, but soul, since it never can abandon itself, is of eternal being.

"How life was purveyed to the universe of things and to the separate beings in it may be thus conceived:

"...Let not merely the enveloping body be at peace, body's turmoils stilled, but all that lies around, earth at peace, and sea at peace, and air and the very heavens. Into that heaven, all at rest, let the great Soul be conceived to roll inward at every point, penetrating, permeating, from all sides pouring in its light. As the rays of the sun throwing their brilliance upon a lowering cloud make it gleam all gold, so the Soul entering the material expanse of the heavens has given life, has given immortality. What was abject it has lifted up; and the heavenly system, moved now in endless motion by the Soul that leads it in wisdom, has become a living and a blessed thing. The Soul domiciled within, it takes worth where, before the Soul, it was stark body—clay and water—or, rather, the blankness of Matter, the absence of Being...

"The Soul's nature and power will be brought out more clearly, more brilliantly, if we consider how it envelops the heavenly

system and guides all to its purposes: for it has bestowed itself upon all that huge expanse so that every interval, small and great alike, all has been ensouled.

"...By the power of the Soul the manifold and diverse heavenly system is a unit; through Soul this universe is a god. And the sun is a god because it is ensouled; so too the stars; and whatsoever we ourselves may be, it is all in virtue of Soul...

"This, by which the gods are divine, must be the oldest God of them all: and our own soul is of that same Ideal nature, so that to consider it, purified, freed from all accrument, is to recognize in ourselves that same value which we have found Soul to be, honorable above all that is bodily." ¹⁰

For us, the most obvious manifestation of God's Spirit, or Soul, is our very life and consciousness; but if Plotinus is correct—that Soul is the guiding Intelligence in all of creation—then Spirit, or Soul, must be regarded as a presence informing the very evolution of matter and the cosmos from the Beginning. For Plotinus, Soul is the intelligent organizing principle that impresses its order upon all the matter in the universe. In the language of contemporary knowledge, we would say that Soul is the all-pervading Intelligence that coalesces wave-particles into structures such as atoms, molecules, cells; and organizes them into microbiological structures such as amoeba and bacteria, into photosynthesizing vegetation and aquatic creatures, becoming the very life-pulse of all that lives and moves. Matter alone has no abilities such as these; it is Soul that permeates the expanding heavens and earth, bringing living organization into matter and enabling replication and evolutionary change. Soul is the guiding intelligence, the evolutionary force, and the breath of Life permeating all the universe.

The organizing influence of Soul in the structuring of the material universe, on either the microcosmic or macrocosmic level, is not empirically evident; but cumulatively, the various "fine-tuned" developments in the ordering of the simplest atoms to the grandest galaxies leads us to discern a purposeful intelligence at work that has been recognized even by hardened empiricists, who have dubbed it "the anthropic principle". This principle derives from the increasing recognition on the part of scientific observers that nature appears from the beginning, at every step, and in countless ways, to be teleologically structured with an innate intention toward the emergence of human life-forms. May we not accept this principle as evidence of the

presence of an invisible guiding intelligence such as that Plotinus labeled “Soul”?

We may also wonder if Soul, the all-pervading Intelligence of God, is, indeed, the “unified force” responsible for the manifestation of the weak, strong, electromagnetic, and gravitational forces, binding the elements of this universe together. Could it also explain the phenomenon of quantum interconnectedness known as ‘quantum entanglement’, which requires a medium of transmission allowing for the instantaneous relaying of information? Mightn’t this currently unexplained phenomenon also be attributable to an all-pervading consciousness extending throughout the universe, such as that Plotinus refers to as ‘Soul’?

An all-pervading consciousness permeating all the universe may be difficult to recognize in what we regard as *inert* matter, but what of living forms? A mother’s ovum becomes impregnated by the father’s sperm, and a single cell is formed in her uterus. The cell divides and divides again and again. Some of the cells become eyes; others become fingers; others become brain cells, others blood or ears. Who tells each cell what it is to become? How does it know where to go, and what form it is to take? Biologists haven’t a clue. Perhaps it is an invisible intelligence that operates within each cell of the nascent embryo to direct and guide its formation—something akin to what we’ve described as an all-pervasive Soul.

And if that conscious Soul lives throughout the universe, in the billions of galaxies, and in the countless stars and planets, then our own soul is connected to and part of that universal Soul. No doubt, it will one day be universally understood that the archetypal energies and angular relationships of the proximate heavenly bodies do indeed correspond meaningfully to the physical and psychical activities of humanity on earth through the medium of an all-pervasive Soul. Such correspondences do not operate by any law of physics, but by a universal sympathy too subtle for physical measurement. There have always been a few who have been aware of and understood these meaningful correspondences, but the universal comprehension of their full significance we must leave to future generations.

What is currently apparent to most of us, however, is that Soul is the life-force that transforms inert matter into living, breathing entities; and that Soul is the conscious intelligence that stirs the minds of men, acting as an evolutionary force to lead them to the knowledge of their true source and being, their own all-pervading Divine Self. This pervasion of the material

universe by Soul is at the foundation of Plotinus' metaphysical vision. In his vision, Soul, emanated from the Divine Mind, has no physical parameters; It does not consist of mass or energy; It is not a substance that extends as a radiation into space. It is entirely beyond comparison with physical spatio-temporal phenomena. And yet, because our language is grounded in phenomenal temporality, and we have only these language tools in use when attempting to convey the concept of a noumenal Soul, we are often at a loss to even formulate a clear conception of Soul.

One might reasonably ask, "Is it even necessary for God to extend throughout space as Soul in order to manifest in bodies? Isn't He already all-pervasive, and inherent in everything that exists?" And the answer is "Yes, He is all-pervasive throughout the universe—and it is just this all-pervasiveness of God that we call 'Soul'".

Unfortunately, however, "Soul" is a word that carries with it some negative overtones for many of us. To many, it suggests a distinct personal entity; or we may be reminded of the misty imaginings conjured up during the religious instructions of our childhood. It is a word that has dwindled from our modern vocabulary due to such associations, and due also to its seeming vagueness. But let us understand "Soul", as Plotinus did, as a term intended to represent the ineffable Intelligence that wafts from the Divine Mind, pervading everything, invisibly present in every place, enlivening every life-form, imbuing us with vitality, consciousness and intelligence; and constituting the medium connecting us to God. Soul is invisible and immaterial; it cannot even be conceived of or imagined, and yet it is impossible to deny that such a Divine principle exists, and operates, and rules over all. It is in fact the one Consciousness in which the universe and all its contents resides. And so, if we must represent this Divine universal presence with a word, let us agree to call it "Soul."

Soul pervades, and it is the universe of time, space and form that is pervaded; and that too is His production. But, unlike Soul, which is the eternal radiance of God's very Consciousness and Being, the material universe is made of a transient form-producing burst of Divine Energy.

So, we must see that, in Plotinus' vision, as well as that of the Judaic scriptures, it is not the material form that constitutes our true and eternal identity, but it is, rather, the Divine Soul that is our eternal source of life and joy, and is indeed a ray of the one eternal Consciousness, and the link by

which we are connected to the one eternal Self, by which we may, with His grace, ascend to the knowledge of our identity with that highest Divinity.

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The Hermetics

One of the authentic mystical traditions, which historians now include under the heading of “Gnostic”, is the Hermetic tradition. While the Hermetic tradition appears to have originated in Egypt, it had its greatest influence on the scholars and philosophers of the West. Up until the 17th century, when a Greek scholar named Isaac Casaubon (d. 1614 C.E.), corrected their dating, the body of writings called the *Corpus Hermetica* was considered to be of very ancient origin. They are purportedly the writings of Hermes (the Egyptian Thoth, identified with Mercury), who is usually given the title, “Trismegistus” (thrice great). He was said to be a great mystic and prophet, descended from Atlas and Prometheus, who lived only shortly after Moses (ca. 1200 B.C.E.). This ancient genealogy was believed to be accurate even by such Christian notables as Lactantius and, later, St. Augustine. It is now clear, however, that *the writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistus were written during that mystically prolific period from the 1st*

to the 3rd centuries of the Current Era. Therefore, they must be regarded as a portion, though a distinct one, of the Gnostic movement of that time; and their author must be considered to have had access to the writings of Philo, and perhaps even to the Neoplatonist writings of their contemporary, Plotinus.

In its Greek form, the *Corpus Hermetica* was known and widely influential during those early centuries, but fell into obscurity during later centuries, until it was translated from a Greek manuscript into Latin by Marcilio Ficino in 1463. Ficino brought the Hermetic writings into great prominence during the early Renaissance period, still believing it to be the work of a pre-Christian and pre-Socratic Egyptian sage of great antiquity. The diverse body of writings known as *Hermetica* is divided into two main books: *Asclepius* (“On The Divine Will”) and *Poimander* (“On The Power And Wisdom Of God”). They vary in content from purely mystical theology to the lore of magic and astrology. It is not within our province to examine here the astrological and magical elements of the *Corpus Hermetica*, but the mystical portions, among the most noteworthy writings of this period, deserve extensive quotation. The dialogues between God and Hermes and between Hermes and his son in *Poimander* are some of the most beautiful and authentic mystical utterances ever written.

Unlike the degenerate forms of Gnosticism, in which a Dualistic cosmology is asserted, the Hermetic writings are predominantly Nondual, and are based on genuine mystical vision. In the *Poimander*, Hermes experiences God as an infinite Light, which he describes as “That which is unpolluted, which has no limit, no color, no form, is motionless, naked, shining, which can only be apprehended by Itself, the unalterable Good, the Incorporeal.” That infinite Light is the Divine Mind (*Nous*), which speaks to Hermes, telling him, “This Light is I, Myself, thy God ... and the luminous Word (*Logos*) issuing from Me is the Son of God.”¹ This characterization of the creative Power of God as “the Son” is also mentioned in *Asclepius*:

“The Lord and Creator of all things, whom we have the right to call God, ... made the second God [the *Logos*] visible and sensible... He made him first, and alone, and one only; and he appeared to Him beautiful, and most full of good things; and He hallowed him and altogether loved him as His own Son.”²

As we have seen, the designation of God’s creative Power as God’s “only begotten Son” did not originate with the early Christians but was a

designation popular since Philo; and is merely another analogical attempt to differentiate the creative Impulse of God from the primal Essence, universally designated as the “Father” of all. The “Son” is that divine creative Power which, in many other traditions, is called the “Mother”; but, of course, these designations of gender are figurative only, being merely arbitrary symbols of That which is beyond all gender. They represent the mystic’s attempt to portray, with anthropomorphic symbols, the bond of relationship existing between the primal Source and Its Creative Power.

The Divine Mind, continuing to speak to Hermes, explains how It manifests the world through Its Logos:

“The eternal [Logos] is the Power of God, and the work of the eternal [Logos] is the world, which has no beginning, but is continually becoming by the activity of the eternal [Logos]. Therefore, nothing that constitutes the world will ever perish or be destroyed, for the eternal [Logos] is imperishable. All this great body of the world is a Soul, full of intellect and of God, who fills it within and without and vivifies everything.

“Contemplate through Me [the Divine Mind], the world and consider its beauty. ... See that all things are full of light. See the earth, settled in the midst of all, the great nurse who nourishes all earthly creatures. All is full of Soul, and all beings are in movement. Who has created these things? The one God, for God is one. You see that the world is always one, the Sun, one; the moon, one; the divine activity, one; God, too, is one. And since all is living, and Life is also one, God is certainly one. It is by the action of God that all things come into being...

“...All that is, He contains within Himself like thoughts: the world, Himself, the All. Therefore, unless you make yourself equal to God, you cannot understand God; for like is not intelligible save to the like. Make yourself grow to a greatness beyond measure; by a leap [of intellect], free yourself from the body; raise yourself above all time, become Eternity; then you will understand God.

“Believe that nothing is impossible for you; think yourself immortal and capable of understanding all, all arts, all sciences,

the nature of every living being. Mount higher than the highest height; descend lower than the lowest depth. Draw into yourself all sensations of everything created, fire and water, the dry and the moist, imagining that you are everywhere, on earth, in the sea, in the sky; that you are not yet born, in the maternal womb, adolescent, old, dead, beyond death. If you embrace in your thought all things at once—all times, places, substances, qualities, quantities—you may understand God. Say no longer that God is invisible. Do not speak thus, for what is more manifest than God? He has created all only that you may see it through the beings. For that is the miraculous power of God, to show Himself through all beings. For nothing is invisible, not even the incorporeal. The intellect makes itself visible in the act of thinking; God makes Himself visible in the act of creating.”³

In yet another dialogue, this time between Hermes and his son, Tat, the identity of God, man, and the world is further elucidated:

“HERMES: The intellect, O Tat, is drawn from the very substance of God. In men, this intellect is God; and so, some men are gods, and their humanity is near to the Divine. When man is not guided by intellect, he falls below himself into an animal state. All men are subject to Destiny, but those in possession of the Logos, which commands the intellect from within, are not under it in the same manner as others. God’s two gifts to man of intellect and the Logos have the same value as immortality. If man makes right use of these, he differs in no way from the immortals.

“The world, too, is a god, image of a greater God. United to Him and performing the order and will of the Father, it is the totality of life. There is nothing in it, through all the duration of the cyclic return willed by the Father, which is not alive. The Father has willed that the world should be living so long as it keeps its cohesion; hence the world is necessarily God. How then could it be that, in that which is God, the image of the One, there should be dead things? For death is corruption, and corruption is destruction, and it is impossible that anything of God could be destroyed.

“TAT: Do not the living beings in the world die, O father, although they are parts of the world?”

“HERMES: Hush, my child, for you are led into error by the appearance of the phenomenon. Living beings do not die, but, being composite bodies, they are dissolved; this is not death but the dissolution of a mixture. If they are dissolved, it is not to be destroyed but to be renewed... Contemplate then the beautiful arrangement of the world and see that it is alive, and that all matter is full of life.

“TAT: Is God then in matter, O father?”

“HERMES: Where could matter be placed if it existed apart from God [who is infinite]? Would it not be but a confused mass, unless it were ordered? And if it is ordered, by whom is it ordered? The energies which operate in it are parts of God. Whether you speak of matter or bodies or substance, know that all these are the energy of God, of the God who is all. In the All there is nothing which is not God. Adore this teaching, my child, and hold it sacred.”⁴

This teaching is, indeed, the perennial teaching of all mystics; we find it in the Upanishads, in the words of the Buddha, Jesus, and all others who have seen the unitive Truth of all existence. And while these teachings, attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, are not as ancient as once believed, they are nonetheless remarkable for their brilliant clarity, depth of knowledge, and uncompromising wisdom. Many times, throughout the course of history, they have been rediscovered, reexamined, and re-appreciated; and, even today, they wield great fascination for students of mystical theology. However, we still know very little about the real Hermes—if he existed at all, and nothing of the 2nd or 3rd century author who wrote such magnificent examples of the perennial philosophy under his name. We cannot even be certain of whether he was an Egyptian, Greek, or Jew. But we are grateful for his testimonies and count him among the greatest and wisest of the seers of God, whose teachings have served to illumine countless generations along the way.

NOTES:

1. *Corpus Hermeticum, Poimander*: 1.11; based on Yates, Frances A., *Giordano Bruno And The Hermetic Tradition*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1964; p. 23.
2. *Ibid.*, *Corpus Hermeticum, Asclepius*: II; pp. 42-43.
3. *Ibid.*, *Corpus Hermeticum, Poimander*: 1.11; pp. 31-32.
4. *Ibid.*, *Corpus Hermeticum, Poimander*: 1.12; pp. 33-34.

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