

The Hermetic Path

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When the call of spiritual evolution is strong enough, ordinary life among the masses becomes less than enough. One begins to see the activities and motives of himself and others as meaningless trappings, caught in the ebb and flow of nature. We wonder how we have gotten so caught up in pursuing things that we don't really want. It may begin to dawn that there is a way out of this twilight existence, and subsequently there is a quiet call to action. The way that one charts, if he is brave enough to heed the silent voice, will always be of his own choice. There are many systems that aid in spiritual self discovery, and some pitfalls as well. This paper concerns the Hermetic path, the general approach of the Western Esoteric Tradition.

The discipline of the path of Hermes is aided by activity that is very formal and heavily aided by structure. There are definite rules set down, presumably by those who have made it through the discipline, and they are followed meticulously. It therefore involves particularly intellectual study and formal ritual. Picture as an example here the magician, such as Faust, in his study, conducting scientific experiments. The idea is that the appearance and substance of this world are not to be ignored but can be so structured and utilized as to steer one toward inner experience of the Divine. The intellect is used scientifically to mold and reshape unenlightened and misguided perceptions.

Naturally this requires a teacher who has already made some success for himself on the path. Otherwise the aspirant would at first be flying blind, having only vague and misguided notions about what to do. He would likely just stumble blindly in the dark , following advice from both credible and bogus sources, not making much progress.

Unlike the Mystic, the Hermetic practitioner does not abstain from participating in the outside world of physical laws and other illusions. He instead uses them to steer a course toward inner realization. On the Hermetic path, a person's natural ability to organize the material world with symbols is used as a tool to bring about enlightenment.

That which is frequently regarded as evil and illusion by mystics, the world we create with our five senses, is consciously shaped and utilized with symbolic correspondences to create a vehicle of consciousness. Habits formed and modes of perception established are actually experienced as a structure that extends beyond the physical realm. This "chariot," so to speak, carries the aspiring ceremonial magician to his goal.

Symbolism

The ability to symbolize is the key factor for the path of Hermes. As the Golden Dawn's Neophyte ritual says, "By names and images are all powers awakened and re-awakened." Symbols properly utilized point beyond themselves into a realm where symbolism and thought are inapplicable. From this realm comes the magician's power, and likewise the

power that perpetuates the physical realm. The magician uses symbolism to tap into this realm and then checks his symbols at the door. Once contact is made, his tools can be dispensed with if desired.

The big question is: What would we see if the ability to symbolize were not operative? If we didn't attach significance to occurrences in our environment via labels, meaning, conditioned responses, and associations, how would they appear to us? If we discard our opinions, notions, and associations regarding things seen, what then do we see? The same thing? A seamless whole? Nothing? This can be a very difficult question to answer, and yet it is essential that anyone on a spiritual path be able to eventually do just that, to see and experience without symbolizing, conceptualizing, and compartmentalizing their world.

When this is possible, at least in some shaky fashion, then true knowledge of how the world is created begins to emerge. The magician discovers that perception is the foundation of his reality. All forms are mental forms, whether they be physical, imagined, or seemingly independent spiritual entities.

That which we experience when we turn off our automatic ability to symbolize is really not conceivable in verbal consciousness. That's why mystics end up rambling, why Quantum physicists end up spouting poetry, and why Hermeticists come up with bizarre occult systems which are of little use to anyone but themselves. But still, this being a Hermetic paper, we will here use the word "Chaos" for the time being in order to label what cannot be labeled (As the Hermeticist does, we will use verbal "training wheels" until we do not need them anymore).

When one is able to set aside the natural human ability to symbolize, one experiences reality face to face, and its appearance is chaos. It is devoid of categories, labels, and verbal boxes. It has no barrier and no structure--at least not in any way that we are able to comprehend--and therefore, for our purposes here, we call it Chaos.

Why would the Hermeticist, so well known for his use of labels, be fond of setting them aside? One answer is that when one actually does this, he gains the realization that his symbolizing ability is extremely powerful. It only is required that he use it consciously. For most people this ability is unrecognized and seemingly independent of the personality. It creates a threatening reality for them. Like the fundamentalist who sees sexual images in Disney cartoons, they may end up blaming others for things that they themselves are responsible for perceiving. Statements like, "You make me feel. . .," are typical of people who do not claim their own perception of others as an ability that is under their own control.

The Hermeticist works with this ability consciously and therefore discovers that his own happiness is largely under his influence. Using a reference with the knowledge that it isn't real, makes for great power, because he can move without fear of loss. Since nothing in the mind is real, then nothing that he perceives can be lost. Since there is nothing to lose, he can create anything he needs (since it doesn't exist anyway). One discovers that all around is a sea of chaos and pure potentiality, waiting for him to organize and shape it via symbolism and mental frameworks into a reality that expresses one's innate happiness.

This is a key point. The magician stops believing in the world he creates. He no longer takes so seriously the thoughts that ramble through his mind. The thoughts are the creators of his reality, but they are not the reality itself. One of the most effective ways to be miserable is for him to believe them. One of the most effective ways to be miserable is to believe the words that come out of his own mouth or out of the mouths of others. So he simply stops.

Verbal consciousness, one of the mediums of symbolism, is very often mistaken for the reality to which it refers. It is only a mirror and therefore a tool. In other words, the map is not the territory. It can take much, much work on a spiritual path to finally turn this indicative axiom into a true realization. Once we realize through and through that the map of reality in our heads is not the reality to which it refers, we are more free to change that map and use it more effectively. We work from the inside out instead of from the outside in. Rather than waiting for our physical world to change our reality map for us, we change our reality map at will. Why wait for permission? Just do it.

This point is so obvious that it is almost ludicrous to mention it, but still, time and time again, we find ourselves miserable because we habitually mistake our personal versions of the universe for the universe itself. Imagine the frustration inherent in such a scheme. But then again we don't have to imagine it--we know what it is like.

So why do we do it? The best answer we can give here is that it is a natural ability to create imaginative frameworks in our minds that represent reality. It is an ability that is almost always up and running because the five senses, its chief assets, are constantly at work. Out of habit we continuously allow our senses to create miniturized versions of reality in our own minds. It is virtually unavoidable to stop this from happening, and there is no reason to loathe it or to utterly stop it.

This automatic symbolizing and perceiving is the chief instrument we use to cause suffering for ourselves, but that doesn't mean that it inherently causes suffering. In reality it is the unconscious misuse of the ability that causes suffering, nothing more. The task of the spiritual aspirant is to see through the phantasm of his own reality-map, to catch himself in the act of creating it, and to consciously take control of the ability to do so. With training, he changes from a man whose map is created by external conditions into a man whose reality map is changed by his own will. When that will is free of conditioning, when the map in his head no longer controlled by physical circumstance, but it is controlled by the inner Will. He is empowered to create his own beliefs, symbols, and maps--and correspondingly to create his own reality!

I have mentioned above that the ability to symbolize is almost always active. So if it is, then what are we doing with it now, right at this moment? Look at people around you. Look at the local government, the news, TV commercials, and coworkers. Look at yourself. Do you like what we are collectively creating? Do the people around you enjoy the world in which they are participating? Another question: If our own faculties are constantly at work in our lives creating an overall unhappy scheme, who is in control of those faculties? Who is running the show? It is like a runaway phenomena, the reigns of which are dangling. It is a power unharnessed, undirected by the one who is gifted with it. We are left at the whim of undirected forces whirling in the ebb and flow of nature.

Science

With the advent of science, and the scientific method, the world was introduced full-force to the essence of Hermeticism. The scientific method involves formulating explanations of how things happen--mirrors of reality--testing them thoroughly, and then adjusting or discarding them based on the evidence. In other words, it acknowledges that we all have versions of reality up and running in our minds, but it mandates that we test and adjust them to be more accurate and to get them to yield desirable results. Imagine turning this amazing discipline toward the goal of happiness and spiritual attainment. That is the Hermetic path.

It is not surprising that our world today barely at all uses the scientific method for spiritual pursuits. It is usually instead geared toward just the physical life, toward creating utopia exclusively on Earth. This world is full of luxury and conveniences that modern technology have provided. We try to enjoy these fruits of science, but there is always something nagging us from within. The real issues are continuously unaddressed. The resulting uneasiness is the result of trying to escape from problems by avoiding them or suppressing them--by fixing the outsides of things rather than dealing with the behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, and complexes that create them. Just look at Western medicine. It speaks almost completely in terms of the suppression of symptoms, discomfort and suffering. Anti-depressants, anti-histamines, anti-inflammatory, anti-etc..

The downfall of science as it is currently practiced is that it almost never uses its discipline to delve deeply into how ailments emerge. It tends to ignore how we create our reality with our beliefs and corresponding behaviors. What good does it do you to combat physical suffering if, at the same time, you are still creating it? Worse yet, the very things that need science applied to them--beliefs, complexes, and behaviors--are the very things that are in charge of scientific pursuits. Not surprisingly, the world is filled with high tech weapons and drugs that numb us to reality. What we do with modern science pales in significance to what the original inventors of the scientific method intended for it. We put it in the service of desires and needs which do not produce a desirable reality. In other words, the world we are creating today with science is largely created by our own demons. When you do not take ownership of your ability to create your own version of reality, that ability fall into that hands of psychological complexes. Fear and desire are still the strongest motives for research and progress.

As individuals, it is up to each one of us to break this chain. Before we use our Hermetic abilities to create a "comfortable" life for ourselves here on the physical, we must first use it to weed out those things in our own personal programming that are blindly causing us suffering. If we cannot do this, then the awesome power of science falls into the hands of our blind, infantile subconscious complexes.

The first step then is to find a system of symbols which encompasses and explains our demons and how they arise. That way, they can be dealt with. There are many such schemes of the cosmos. The Golden Dawn, for instance, uses the Kabbalah and the Tree of Life as a map of the interior make-up of man. The Glyph of the Tree charts the recesses of his body, mind, and spirit supposedly all the way to the source of existence. Placing symbols on this diagram he can personally identify how his mind works by how

the symbols relate to each other. He discovers painfully how he creates suffering for himself. He applies symbols and various symbolic techniques, such as in ritual, to restructure his interior and exterior make-up. Gradually, with the assistance of a teacher, he undoes the automatic complexes that hold prisoner his creativity.

Hermes/Mercury

A way to better get a handle on our ability to perceptualize is to recognize this faculty with a new label. Let's call it Mercury. We will use both the planet and god, Mercury, to delineate what it is we are talking about. Mercury is a agile god who represents the power of the intellect. Under Mercury comes the mind, mediation, transmission, and translation--mental and nervous processes, speech and writing, dexterity, ambivalence, and the distribution of energies. Mercury is superficial. It is the moving ego mind that is capable of knowing about things externally. It shapes itself to whatever subject or stimulus is presented before it, creating therefrom all kinds of corresponding conclusions and belief systems in the blink of an eye.

Likewise, the chameleon quality of Mercury, the planet, makes it take on whatever zodiac sign it is in and enhance it with intelligence. Moreover, if it is close to another planet in a chart it will adopt that planets function and add a sharpness to it. Mercury represents the mutable aspects of man's nature. It is the intelligence that is book-learned. It covers its subjects, but it does not really live them or become one with them. By its very nature of superficiality and ability to cover things, our Mercury-nature is the very thing which lies to us about reality. Because it so readily assumes the shape of our experiences, creating dysfunctional maps of reality based on them, it is the very thing that keeps us isolated and apart from creation. Our experiences prod our Mercurial intelligence and fashion from it beliefs, complexes, fears, and patterns of behavior that keep us locked up in the fantasy world of the ego. It is interesting to note that the Sephirah that corresponds to Mercury is Hod whose virtue is truth and whose vice is falsehood. Our maps of reality may be truthful and serve us well or they may be deceitful and lead us time and again into suffering. We have a choice.

The god Mercury is regarded as the psychopompus, the soul conductor of heaven, the messenger of the gods, the instructor and guide to the Hermetic mysteries. Thought of as an initiator into occult schools, especially ritualistic ones involving full ceremonial. Our Mercurial quality when properly utilized becomes not an imprisoning pattern but a vehicle by which we experience deeper and more liberated states of consciousness.

Language

Hermes Trismegistus, a historical/mythical magus that is identified with both the gods Thoth and Mercury, is fancifully celebrated as the inventor of language and writing. Language is the biggest and foremost outgrowth of the hermetic mind. Some say that human beings have a natural instinct to form language.

What would humans be like without language? It is almost impossible to say, since we would imagine it most likely by using concepts and mental descriptions involving language. Language has the power to shape our mercurial mind in a way that allows us to

create fixed areas or concepts. Concepts help us to organized knowledge, to pull facts together in meaningful ways which explain things. We all develop, knowingly or unknowingly, conceptual frameworks which help us understand the world.

Language is a Hermetic skill very much mis-used by the unenlightened mind. We tend to actually believe words as if they were the very object to which they refer. We tend to actually believe the things that we say. The Mercurial mind is so mutable that it jumps to conclusions based on very little experience. We start saying things like "Men are pigs!" or "He always. . ." and we end up believing it.

We end up treating ourselves and others accordingly, running into misunderstandings and conflicts when our word-versions of reality do not match with experience. The next man you meet may have brute-like qualities mixed with a very gentle, artistic soul. But will you notice, if "Men are pigs."?

On the Hermetic path to enlightenment, the aspirant develops what S. I. Hayakawa calls *extensional orientation*. Extensional orientation is the state of mind that is prone to use words that refer to the environment without any interpretations or judgments about it. It maintains language reflecting the environment, rather than language imposing meanings on things and then wrestling with the meanings as if they were the things themselves. There are no such things as good and bad, nigger or Jew. There are no such things as human being and love. No such things as angels and demons. There is just what is and the labels we use to get by. Nothing more. And, of course, that which actually is cannot be conveyed by speech or image or label. It can only be referred to in that way by the Hermetic mind, and then that which is beyond mind will do the rest.

So, by employing language to refer to that which is beyond language, we are on the Hermetic path. The activity of the mind is turned against itself. It examines itself and modifies its ability to perceive. It undoes itself so that that which is beyond it can become the locus of control. The ego relinquishes its position and becomes an aggregate of biological and psychological traits centered, as it were, around the influence of that which is beyond the known.

The mind finally then matures and becomes humble. The mature mind knows that words never say all about anything, and such a mind is therefore adjusted to uncertainty. Whatever challenges the world thrusts upon us, we are then at least free from those of our own making.