

The Alchemy of Being: Hermetic Thought, Ontology, and the Poetic Path to Liberation

But each of these philosophers, who no longer wants to accept Homer as the ultimate truth, is trying to think through what everything is, and does it by taking some aspect of being and projecting it over the whole of being. Fire—everything is fire. Or water—everything is water. What does fire mean? It means everything is volatile, everything's changing. Water—everything is flowing. Earth—everything is solid. So you have different philosophers. Each one takes one of those, replaces the whole, and creates a total picture of what is.

When you get to Parmenides, he doesn't do that. He just says “being.”

Hey, this is Adam Nox, and welcome to another episode of *The Cult of You*, and yet another “interview with the devil.” I get to speak to the author of *The Light of Hermes Trismegistus*, Mr. Charles Stein. Charles is an interesting individual—an expert in his field with a PhD in literature and a bachelor's in Ancient Greek. This was a classic piece that he worked on for many years. In fact, there are approximately seven ancient Hermetic texts that he translated, attempting to contradict and expand on other translations of the time—to open them up to different perspectives.

Charles is also a practitioner in Zen and a long-time explorer of mystical traditions, including the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. One of the beauties of his work is the poetic language with which he translates—undoubtedly influenced by his background as a poet and literary author.

His work offers us an exploration of the harmony between mystical perspectives.

Hermeticism, in his view, offers a path to cognitive understanding—the cognitive life of the practitioner. Our discussion explores not only these forms and doctrines of correspondence but also how to shatter through them—to escape the traps embedded in every ontology or model of reality.

Even I found this challenging at times. Charles patiently helped break through those paradigms, and I truly enjoyed it. I hope you will too. Sit back, relax, and remember to live deliciously.

You know, when you practice Zen, one of the first things they have you do is sit down and try to find the self. You quickly discover it's not physical, not sensual. The self doesn't have visual or tactile properties. There's nothing substantial about it. All phenomena are impermanent. Nothing lasts—even for a quarter of a second. The discovery of the self becomes, in Buddhism, the main work. It's a stripping away of every illusion, every spontaneous belief in identity.

We do this to the elements, and then to see that the elements themselves don't have any substantiality. So the ultimate principle is what Buddhists call emptiness. Emptiness doesn't mean nonexistence. It means non-identity—no permanent, fixed entity. Yet, paradoxically, it's the very condition under which any appearance appears.

Being itself is paradox. Reason tries to resolve paradox through consistent terminology. Plato set the tone for this—ideal consistency of language as a path to truth. But being is already paradoxical. The closer you get to the real you, the more you discover it's not a set of characteristics. It's not your intentions, potentialities, or history. Those are all appearances. Appearance isn't just a fleeting image—it tells you what something is. The being of a thing is bound up in its appearance. But if we mistake appearance for reality, we lose being altogether. Being has no appearance. “The Tao that can be named is not the true Tao.” That ancient insight is echoed by Parmenides: “Being is.” All else appears to be.

Rational thought tries to fix inconsistencies, but mystical traditions like alchemy do the opposite. They use many words to point to one ineffable meaning. The Philosopher's Stone. Prime matter. Quintessence. They all point back to you. Esoteric traditions in every religion do this. They contradict the outer dogma to open into paradox—the heart of the mystery. Language pushed beyond its limit tries to say what cannot be said. Terms like soul or self are culturally loaded. Even Jung's archetypes ultimately point beyond appearance, to the cause of appearance.

Each philosopher tried to impose a total theory—everything is fire, water, earth. But Parmenides just said “being,” as if you reached the top of the mountain and there was nothing else. Plato then began constructing consistent language. And that set the Western tradition of philosophy in motion.

We got obsessed with form. But the deeper truth might be in becoming. In the divine name at the burning bush: not “I am that I am,” but “I will be what I will be.”

This opens up deeper mystical and somatic truths. The body remembers things that the intellect can't access. Trauma, unity, separation—all of it can be felt before it's thought.

Our current culture tries to define everything—AI, ChatGPT, metrics, language. But the now has no properties. It is always now. The present changes, but the now itself doesn't. It's the same with being. The real self is not a thing. It's the space in which things appear. That's satori—when the apparent flips, and everything becomes present to presence.

Hermetic magic initiates you into the mystery of appearance—and into the un-ensnaring from appearance. That's the paradox. Magic is not about control. It's liberation. Crowley was right—true magic is liberation from magic.

We create ontologies and get trapped in them. Trying to escape one paradigm with another is just business as usual. The magician learns to exit the matrix—not patch it.

Language is a mirror of being. It can create appearance. That's magic. But it can also deceive. The true magician sees through it all. Practices like sound poetry, mantras, and barbarous words in ritual break syntax and engage the deeper somatic power of language. Sound becomes the tool of liberation.

This is the interface between rational meaning and magical meaning. Between representation and presence. The babble of the child is the same energy as the voice of the magician.

Alchemy takes Platonism's paradox and makes it a principle. You reach the highest through the lowest. Matter receives the forms. The formless has form. The body, the earth, the physical act—they become the site of awakening.

We once believed the planets moved in perfect circles—divine geometry. But we've since abandoned those forms. Now, we can stand anywhere in the cosmos. The circles are gone, but the correspondences remain—as metaphor, ritual, symbol. Not as science, but as art. And through art, poetry, sound, and sacred ritual, the magician configures the world—not to control it, but to liberate themselves from it.

Poetry becomes the noetic language. The language that reveals and dissolves. The sacred act of naming and un-naming. Of creating and returning to silence.

And this, perhaps, is the purest form of Hermeticism: not a system, but a dissolution of systems. Not doctrine, but paradox. Not control, but release. The art of being—not as appearance, but as presence.