

Prologue

Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache.
 Hans-Georg Gadamer¹

This book is about the search for knowledge, the human experience of being in touch with how things really are.² I will be analyzing a collection of ancient texts that claim to reveal the true nature of reality and describe a way toward liberation from mental delusion. Their anonymous authors referred to such knowledge as *gnōsis* and described it as ultimately inexpressible in human language. And yet they were using language to make such claims, and in writing a book about them I have been doing the same. Can scholars tell the truth about truths beyond scholarship? Or can truth not be told but only experienced? If what we call knowledge is a function of our state of mind, then could there be other ways of knowing than those of reason and the senses?

¹ “Being that can be understood is language.” Gadamer, *Hermeneutik I*, 478. On frequent misunderstandings of this famous quotation and their far-reaching implications, see Di Cesare, *Gadamer*, 155–156; Di Cesare, *Utopia of Understanding*, 4–6 (with reference notably to Gadamer, “Idee des Hegelschen Logik,” 84; Gadamer, “Dialogischer Rückblick,” 286: “But no, I have never thought or said that, that everything is language”).

² Although “to know” is one of the ten most common verbs in English and belongs to the fewer than one hundred words with precise translations in all 6000+ human languages, interestingly enough “we still do not fully understand what knowledge is” (Nagel, *Knowledge*, 6, 116). Like the Greek *gnōsis*, “knowledge” is ultimately derived from the proto-Indo-European **gno-* (“to know”), but English misses the ability to differentiate between propositional knowledge (e.g. German *wissen*, French *savoir*) and knowledge by immediate acquaintance (e.g. German *kennen*, French *connaître*); see Chapter 4, p. 113 note 147.

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These are deep philosophical questions that have inspired me in my work, but to which I do not claim to have the answers. I very much doubt whether anybody does or ever will. My objectives in this book are far more modest in comparison, although admittedly still ambitious. On the first and most obvious surface level, you will be reading a study of the Hermetic literature from Roman Egypt in which I deliberately attempt to change the narrative of what these treatises are all about. On a second level immediately below the surface, this book is concerned with the historical imagination and the powerful effects of telling stories.³ We use words to tell other people about what we have understood or think we have understood, but our language and our way of using it is never just a simple tool of translation and communication – it is always a means of enchantment as well.⁴ All writers try to put a spell on their audience. They attempt to catch and hold their readers' attention, gain influence over their consciousness, and induce them to follow their own lead in preference over others. This is true of the anonymous authors who wrote the Hermetic treatises, and it is no less true of the scholars who studied these texts in depth and whose learned publications dominate academic discourse and the academic imagination. Most obviously, of course, it is true of myself as well. I would not have devoted years of my life to studying the Hermetica and the abundant scholarship about them if I did not wish to convince my readers that a better story was possible and that it needed to be told.

But why does it need to be told? Where does the importance lie? This leads me to a third dimension of my project. In our mediatised culture built on speed and instant gratification, the relevance of a book about ancient Hermetic texts may not be immediately obvious. Yet it is precisely in that fact that the relevance lies. Readers who decide to follow my lead through the Hermetic labyrinth will learn about the spell of *phantasmata*, the unruly stream of mental imagery charged with emotion that fills much of our conscious and unconscious life on a daily basis. How can we trust our own thinking or rely on our faculties of knowledge and rational judgment, as scholars or just as human beings, if we are

³ See Hanegraaff, "Religion and the Historical Imagination." For my central concept of "reified imaginative formations," see Hanegraaff, "Reconstructing Religion," 578–581 (here illustrated at the example of "religion").

⁴ See below, Epilogue. A *locus classicus* is Plato, *Phaedrus* 230d–e, where Lysias' written speech is described as a *pharmakon* or drug of enchantment strong enough to lure even Socrates out of the city (Derrida, *La dissémination*, 87–88; see discussion in Chapter 10, pp. 311–318).

not in control of our own minds? The subtitle of this book refers to the unquestionable fact that human consciousness is not stable and reliable but fluid and susceptible to alteration,⁵ so that what we hold to be “true” must depend very much on how and where we are able (or unable) to direct our attention. Alterations of consciousness result in altered states of knowledge.⁶

Hermetic practitioners believed that the horizon of human consciousness could not just be expanded but could be transcended altogether, resulting in those states of absolute knowledge and direct insight to which they referred as *gnōsis*. As may be inferred from the opening sentences of my Prologue, this conviction would have made them deeply sceptical about a book like this. They would have argued that scholarly or academic knowledge of any kind (empirical, historical, phenomenological, hermeneutic, exegetical, rational, critical, and so on) could never be more than the product of a comparatively low-level, low-quality, altered, narrowed, reduced, and therefore ultimately untrustworthy type of consciousness. Of course, the easiest way for me to respond to such scepticism would be to flip the argument around – as almost all scholars in this field have done – by assuming implicitly, or stating explicitly, that not *my* reliance on scholarly methods but *their* belief in *gnōsis* must be an irrational illusion, a pious “mystical” dogma without any true foundation. In making such an argument, I would be dismissing their most basic core

⁵ E.g. Barušs, *Alterations of Consciousness*, 4–11. In terms of Barušs’s four-part typology, when I speak of “consciousness” in general terms I mean his *consciousness*₃. The Hermetic treatises contain descriptions of *subjective consciousness*₂ (the stream of events experienced by individual minds) and of *behavioral consciousness*₂ (first-person accounts). Hence when I speak of consciousness as fluid and susceptible to alteration, I mean the experiential stream of *subjective consciousness*₂ (phenomenal consciousness in terms of Dainton, *Stream of Consciousness*, 2–4). While the processes of *consciousness*₂ are always present and active, their neurological modes of functioning are less immediately relevant for research in the humanities.

⁶ In this regard I sympathize with Charles T. Tart’s radical concept of knowledge as “state-specific”: see Tart, “States of Consciousness” (1972; updated versions in Tart, *States of Consciousness*, 206–228 [1983] and “Investigating Altered States” [1998]; see also his response to a few critics in [Diverse authors], “State-Specific Sciences,” 1007–1008 and short remarks in “Preface,” xvi–xviii). Hermetic spirituality as analyzed in this book may be seen in terms of “state-specific *technologies*, operated in the service of a priori belief systems,” whereas state-specific *sciences* (which I take to include scholarly research in the humanities) would be defined by the investigator’s commitment “to reexamine constantly his own belief system and to question the ‘obvious,’ in spite of its intellectual or emotional appeal to him” (*States of Consciousness*, 217–218; “Investigating Altered States,” 111). Whether state-specific *sciences* are possible or not, the relevant point for me is that different modalities of consciousness imply different types of knowledge.

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conviction, the central assumption on which all their endeavors were built. I would be taking it for granted that only the type of sober consciousness required for scholarly work can be relied on for gaining *true* knowledge, so that the radical altered states of Hermetic practitioners must be some kind of delusion or aberration.

I am not making that assumption. This book as a whole (and here I reach the fourth dimension of my argument) exemplifies a perspective of *radical methodological agnosticism*, which means that I neither affirm nor deny the ultimate truth of Hermetic beliefs.⁷ The *gnōsis* that they considered possible I see as beyond either verification or falsification. Agnosticism does not reflect an attitude of intellectual laziness or indifference on my part, as when in common parlance we say “whatever...!” because we do not wish to engage with an argument although we privately think of it as nonsense. On the contrary, it rests on a fundamental conviction about the limits of human knowledge and understanding.⁸ The authors of the spiritual Hermetica claimed to have attained perfect knowledge of realities far beyond the scope of what most scholars would consider possible, and I see no reason not to take them seriously. After all, what do I know? I have not been there. The divine *nous* has not appeared to me, my body has not been exorcized, my soul has not been reborn, nor have I ever traveled in my mind to an utterly nondual reality of pure spiritual bliss. As will be seen, Hermetic practitioners claim that they did experience all those things and that it radically changed their lives. I cannot claim to know for sure whether they made it all up, or

⁷ Hanegraaff, “Empirical Method,” 100–108; Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 357–358; Hanegraaff, “Power of Ideas,” 2–5. Methodological agnosticism in my understanding is broadly congenial to the radical empiricism associated with William James (see Lamberth, *William James*, 9–60) and I find myself in sympathy with its recent discussion in Davis, *High Weirdness*, 8–30. I share the latter’s “dissatisfaction with the idealism of religious and mystical thinking, on the one hand, and the stinginess of the usual reductionism on the other” and his search for “a middle way, a hybrid path” (*ibid.*, 8). On the history of “agnosticism,” see Asprem, *Problem of Disenchantment*, 289–308; regarding *methodological* agnosticism, as my methods and objectives are not explanatory but hermeneutic, the objections formulated in Asprem, *ibid.*, 85 note 118 do not apply.

⁸ For critique of the *ignorabimus* thesis, see Asprem, *Problem of Disenchantment*, 304–306. I would respond that the *aporias* of knowledge, the limits of human horizons, and the biological conditioning of human brains make the alternative *cognoscemus* or *cognoverimus* (“we will get to know,” “we will have come to know”) even far more implausible. In this respect, the classical concept of disenchantment is based not on knowledge but on beliefs, assumptions or presuppositions (Weber, *Wissenschaft als Beruf*; Asprem, *Problem of Disenchantment*, 33–34). In terms of the authors discussed in this book, methodological agnosticism seems remarkably congenial to Iamblichus’ perspective of radical embodiment as analyzed in Chapter 4.

were deluding themselves, or whether some of them might actually have been experiencing such things. If I hypothesize that they did, as I am willing to do, still I cannot claim to possess some superior level of insight that would allow me to explain with any certainty what really happened to them. And so I do not.

What I do know is that these authors left us a series of fascinating texts in which they speak about their beliefs, their practices, and their experiences. I consider it my job as a scholar to do what I can to *understand* what they were trying to tell their readers. That brings me back to the beginning, and to my fifth and final core concern in this book, the mysteries of language and translation. What does it mean to put something – anything – in words? What is involved in using language to describe an experience as “unspeakable”? Does it make a difference in this regard whether our words are spoken or written down? Can written sources like the *Hermetica* ever transmit to us what the authors wanted to say, or do they consist of nothing but empty signifiers at the mercy of our own discourse? Is it possible for linguistic meaning to *not* get lost in translation? If so, what does it mean to practice the art of *hermēneia*, the interpretation of texts? What are its limits and its potentials? By forcing us to ask such questions, the Hermetic discourse of *gnōsis* and *noēsis* (direct “noetic” perception of ultimate reality) confronts us with the unavoidable *aporias* of human understanding.

Summing up, the texture of this book is woven from five different strands. The argument about language and hermeneutics speaks to my broader vision of what *the humanities* are or should be all about, for reasons that I discuss at the end of Chapter 10. A practice of radical empiricism and methodological agnosticism is central to my understanding of *the study of religion* as a neither religionist nor reductionist field of research.⁹ My interest in the historical imagination and the effects of narratives and storytelling, to which I will return in the Epilogue, is a further development of my work about *Western esotericism* as the reified imaginal product of discursive dynamics through which dominant academic traditions define their identity by way of contrast with a negative wastebasket category of “rejected knowledge.”¹⁰ My focus on consciousness comes from my earlier work on entheogenic esotericism

⁹ See also Hanegraaff, “Reconstructing ‘Religion’ from the Bottom Up”; Hanegraaff, “Imagining the Future Study of Religion and Spirituality.”

¹⁰ Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*. For the notion of “imaginal,” see below, Epilogue.

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(*sensu lato* and *sensu stricto*) and on alterations of consciousness as a neglected core dimension of religion and spirituality.¹¹ Finally, the so-called Hermetic tradition has been an object of fascination for me throughout my professional life;¹² but whereas my earlier work was focused on the Renaissance revival of the Hermetica, in this book I travel back all the way to the sources in Roman Egypt.

As regards questions of theory and method, I largely adopt a “show, don’t tell” approach. Rather than presenting these five dimensions separately as theoretical perspectives explained in general or abstract terms, I have adopted a deliberately narrative procedure in that I allow them, like the characters of a novel, to unfold and unveil themselves gradually over the course of ten chapters. Such a linear storytelling style of scholarly writing has peculiar advantages and attractions, which I hope my readers will appreciate, but I am aware that it carries risks as well. Rather than revealing all my plots and subplots in advance or giving you the benefit of a bird’s-eye view, dear reader, I ask you to step right into the narrative and enjoy the pleasures of discovering or unraveling its secrets step by step, as you make your way forward while staying close to the ground. Unless you are blessed with an extraordinary memory, be warned that by the time you reach the final pages, you may need to go back and read the whole thing again to pull the various strands together. Again, the best analogy is a novel. Readers may not understand why the protagonist acts the way she does in the first chapters, as the author deliberately keeps them in the dark; so only at rereading the story with the benefit of hindsight, what initially seemed puzzling may begin to make sense. Or at least, so one hopes. This is how my book is written and so this is how it wants to be read. Formulated differently, it requires a reading practice of hermeneutic circularity: while the argument as a whole is built up from its component parts, presented one by one in linear succession, to understand those parts you need a synthetic view of the whole.¹³

Specialists of late antiquity will notice quickly that my approach to Hermetic spirituality is somewhat different from the usual one. Most

¹¹ Hanegraaff, “Teaching Experiential Dimensions”; Hanegraaff, “Entheogenic Esotericism”; Hanegraaff, “Gnosis”; Hanegraaff, “Theosophical Imagination.” As regards late antiquity, the present book wholly supersedes my first attempt in this direction, “Altered States of Knowledge.” The present work I see as my mature statement on these topics.

¹² Hanegraaff, *Het einde van de hermetische traditie*; Hanegraaff and Bouthoorn, *Lodovico Lazzarelli (1447–1500): The Hermetic Writings and Related Documents*; Hanegraaff, “Better than Magic”; Hanegraaff, “Hermetism”; Hanegraaff, “How Hermetic was Renaissance Hermetism?”; Hanegraaff, “Hermes Trismegistus & Hermetism.”

¹³ See the quotation by Gadamer at the very end of Chapter 10 (pp. 350–351).

scholarship in this domain is ultimately less concerned with meaning and the understanding of content than with tracing the genealogy of separate elements from a historical and comparative perspective. Thus when the Hermetica use a certain term or describe a certain concept, the first thing that most scholars will ask themselves is “where does this originally come from?” and “where else do we find this in the literature of the period?” This approach has led to voluminous commentaries filled with invaluable information about parallels and origins, and I am deeply indebted to the precious information they contain. However, the methodology carries considerable risks of misinterpretation, as may be illustrated by an example from contemporary culture. Imagine a historian from the remote future who discovers a lost archive of American self-help books. She finds that a certain Deepak Chopra wrote a best-selling book about a mysterious practice called “quantum healing.”¹⁴ What does that mean? Our historian dives into the archives and writes a learned commentary to this ancient book. She describes the early twentieth-century origins of this practice in a long-superseded scientific field known as quantum physics and presents a mountain of evidence for textual parallels about quanta in contemporary scientific periodicals. All of that is enormously interesting. But does it help us understand what Chopra meant? Did he actually write about quanta at all? Is it adequate to situate him in the history of quantum physics (and then blame him for so often misunderstanding its concepts)? Shouldn’t we rather begin by asking what quantum healing meant *for him*, within *his* discourse, rather than what quanta “really” meant in the twentieth century or what they meant for others?¹⁵

Few scholars would disagree with the principle that an adequate *historical* approach to Hermetic spirituality, as to any other religious or spiritual phenomenon, must begin with studying the relevant primary sources in their own right and on their own terms. But the implication is that *not* unless we first manage to understand, as well as possible, what they actually mean – what their authors were trying to say *and* what we

¹⁴ Chopra, *Quantum Healing*.

¹⁵ This approach is basic to all my work. When my *New Age Religion and Western Culture* was published in 1996, it was virtually the first academic study (for the exception see *ibid.*, 3 note 11) based on actually reading the primary sources of the New Age, focusing on their *contents* and trying to understand what the authors meant to say. Almost all existing scholarship at that time showed far more interest in making the New Age fit already-existing theoretical frameworks that made sense to academics than in finding out what made sense to New Agers.

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can tell from the texts themselves¹⁶ – will it even become possible for us to determine the historical trajectories and contexts of comparison in which they must be situated.¹⁷ For instance, a major red thread that runs through my book concerns the Hermetic understanding of *nous* – a term that is perfectly common in ancient Greek philosophical discourse. Instead of assuming that I already know what this word means (something like “mind” or “intellect,” as every dictionary will tell us), I want the authors of the *Hermetica* to tell me *what it meant for them*. As will be seen, their answers are surprising to say the least, and the implications are considerable. If their understanding of *nous* is in fact different from what we commonly take it to mean, can we still be so sure about those standard translations on which we normally rely? Formulated differently, is the Hermetic *nous* a conceptual anomaly, or should it lead us to reconsider our assumptions about what we take to mean “mind” or “intellect” in ancient philosophy?

As I argue at greater length at the end of Chapter 5, scholars are no exception to the rule that humans tend to explain the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar, the unknown in terms of the known. In academic research, this has profoundly conservative effects. It privileges conventional understandings of how things are, while blinding us to whatever is *different* and does not comfortably fit our established paradigms.¹⁸ In this book I take exactly the opposite approach. As my central concern is with

¹⁶ I am referring to the core principle of modern hermeneutics that the meaning of texts is not exhausted by an explication of authorial intent (e.g. Simms, *Hans-Georg Gadamer*, 1). For my basic position on textual research and non-eclectic historiography, see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 364–367, 377–379.

¹⁷ Smith, “In Comparison a Magic Dwells,” 34: “Who would disagree? We must describe what we are comparing before we compare.” I concur, although with the Gadamerian proviso that any description is already an interpretation, informed by comparison with what falls within the reader’s hermeneutic horizon. See also George Steiner’s programmatic statement about the historian’s task: “The historian must ‘get it right.’ He must determine not only *what* was said (which may prove exceedingly difficult given the state of documents and the conflicts of testimony), but what was *meant* to be said and at what diverse levels of understanding the saying was to be received” (*After Babel*, 141).

¹⁸ For a fundamental critique of established practice in the study of ancient religions, see the chapter “On Comparison” in Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 36–53, esp. 47–48 (with reference to a crucial quotation from Smith, *To Take Place*, 14) and see Smith, “In Comparison a Magic Dwells,” 21–22: what counts as “comparison” is usually little more than a scholar’s spontaneous experience of being reminded of “something like it,” followed by the projection of that subjective experience “as an objective connection through some theory of influence, diffusion, borrowing, or the like.” In such a “homeopathic magic” of comparison built on erudition, the issue of difference tends to be forgotten (*ibid.*, 21, 35). Among countless examples of this fallacy in scholarship of the

difference, I try to understand the unfamiliar and explore the unknown, allowing it to *defamiliarize* the scholarly knowledge that we tend to take for granted. This leads me back to my opening sentences. If knowledge is the experience of being in touch with how things are, procedures of questioning and destabilizing our certainties in this regard may lead to altered states of knowledge. Only if we *first* understand what we are really dealing with, in these strange Hermetic treatises, can we establish what to compare them with or where to look for their historical origins.

The object of study in this book is neither “the Hermetic tradition” nor “the Hermetic literature” *per se*. The former I see as a scholarly construct of considerable popular appeal but questionable validity, while the latter refers to a collection of clearly disparate texts that have sometimes little else in common than mere references to Hermes Trismegistus as a figure of authority.¹⁹ The focus is instead on what I call “Hermetic spirituality,” for reasons discussed in Chapter 1; and I explain there why this implies a new way of categorizing the relevant materials. Chapter 2 is meant to introduce my readers to Roman Egypt in the first centuries CE and discusses the importance in that context of private spiritual experiences. Having set the scene in these first two chapters, in Chapter 3, I introduce my readers to the basic Hermetic worldview by focusing on the *Logos Teleios* and its Latin and Coptic translations. Chapter 4 is about the only three practitioners of Hermetic spirituality who are still known to us by name: the alchemist Zosimos of Panopolis and his associate Theosebeia, and the Platonic theurgist Iamblichus of Chalcis. To prepare for my in-depth analysis of Hermetic spirituality in the second half of the book, Chapter 5 discusses the problems of textual transmission and my strategies for confronting the task of reconstruction and interpretation.

In the next four chapters, I dive deeply into the texts. Chapter 6 is focused on CH I, the famous “Poimandres,” and discusses the basic Hermetic concern with healing the soul from its contamination by the

Hermetica, see for instance the obsession with biblical or early Christian “parallels” in Dodd, *Bible and the Greeks* or Grese, *Corpus Hermeticum XIII*; and discussion of the “Fall of Man” projected on CH I, pp. 170–175.

¹⁹ On the problematics of a reified “Hermetic tradition,” see e.g. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 327–334 (focusing on Frances Yates); van Bladel, *Arabic Hermes*, 17–22 (for the Arabic context). Generally on the construction or invention of tradition, see e.g. Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 85–200; many contributions in Kilcher, *Constructing Tradition* and Lewis and Hammer, *Invention of Sacred Tradition*. On the lack of coherence that results from defining our corpus as “Hermetic” merely because texts mention Hermes Trismegistus, see Hanegraaff, Review of Lucentini-Parri-Perrone Compagni.

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negative passions. Chapter 7 discusses the essential Hermetic virtue of reverence (*eusebeia*) in connection with learning to “open one’s heart” to divine beauty, and culminates in a discussion of what it meant to “become the *aiōn*” as described in CH XI. Chapter 8 is about the crucial treatise known as CH XIII, the account of rebirth, in which Hermes helps his pupil Tat to get liberated from the powers of darkness that have taken possession of his body. In Chapter 9, we see how Tat after being reborn is led to a supreme hypercosmic experience of the Ogdoad, the dimension of divinized souls, the Ennead of noetic powers, and even the *pēgē*, the supreme Source of all manifestation. In Chapter 10, finally, we return to earth and explore the question of what it means to transmit such experiences through the medium of language. Can the unspeakable be spoken or transmitted through writing? We end up with the art and practice of *hermēneia*, interpretation or understanding, that takes its name from Hermes.

Hermetic spirituality was a joyful path that celebrated life and light. Its purpose was to heal the soul from negativity, free it from such powerful influences as fear and aggression, and open its eyes to the beauty of existence. It was not concerned with domination but with knowledge and understanding – or, more precisely, with knowledge *as* understanding. It is in such a thoroughly positive spirit, inspired by *enthousiasmos*, that I offer this book to my readers for their pleasure and education.