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The Hermetic Way of the Salvation of the Soul
Hermes Trismegistus and the Platonic Tradition

Phd-dissertation

Propositions

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1. Proposition of the problems, aims of the dissertation

1.1. Conditions of the formation of Hermetic literature, questions of defining categories

In my dissertation I would like to work out some points of reference for the solution of some essential problems essential in the history of research. At the same time these problems concerning human existence are fundamental in Hermetic literature, too.

To propose new aspects responding to these questions, we have to clear up the authors' possible intention and clarify the ways of textual history which may throw light on the development of Hermetic literature known for us. Consequently, two elements are predominant in the applied method.

One of them is the philological research: using this way the formulation of Hermetic literature known for us can be revealed. The other one is the conceptual, mainly philosophical analysis, which can elucidate not only the inner content of the texts but analysing the history of some ideas it helps understanding of circumstances in which these texts were elaborated, so it can help to understand the unknown authors' intention. The methods of the examination mentioned above is not unknown in the history of the research of Hermetic literature. Nonetheless, the new accomplishment of this work is not merely repetition of earlier statements, since for the understanding of the history of Hermetic literature is not only the interpretation of the primer sources indispensable but the examination of the testimonies, too, because in this way we can get insight into the process of developing of the Hermetic tradition in which the main authority will be the Egyptian Thot or rather the Thrice-Greatest Hermes.

In the first part of my dissertation I am examining the development of Hermetic literature. My conclusion is as follows.

Although we have no certain evidence that the dialogues attributed to Hermes Trismegistus are transmitting real Egyptian sources, in the tradition the conception is early present that these texts are interpretations of sacred hieroglyphic inscriptions attributed to god Thot. Consequently, the examination of the testimonies elucidates the self-interpretation of depositaries of the Hermetic tradition: pagan authors and Christian writers, too, mean that this literature is the revelation of ancient Egyptian wisdom. Naturally, the problem of the reception of Hermetica in the antiquity deserves additional researches since it allows an insight into the process of the self-interpretation of early Christianity, too. It is a considerable fact that the texts mentioned above are less rejected by the Christian authors than other products of contemporary intellectual tendencies.

Two main conclusions of the above thoughts:

a, Hermetic literature was regarded as a pagan one not as a heresy. It means that they could be used to support the Christian articles of faith opposite the pagan ones; the only fact to be demonstrated was that, owing to the divine foresight, Hermes Trismegistus foresaw and wrote down the truths of Christian faith. For supporting this there are relevant comments by Lactantius and Aurelius Augustinus.

This procedure – mainly in the early times – was aimed not only to gain victory over the pagans but also to convert them.

b, Under these circumstances the Hermetic texts had more chance to survive, since (from pedagogical point of view) they could have attracted the Christian readers' attention.

The analysis of the sources have as a result that the intellectual currents (gnosis, hermetica) appearing as separate categories in philological research are in much closer contact with each other in the late Hellenistic age than we would expect on the base of the scholarly classification. Thus it

is not surprising that elements interpreted by scholars as gnostic ones appear in the Hermetic texts.

The Nag Hammadi library is a good example of these intellectual contacts, its discovery transformed our previous knowledge concerning Hermetic literature significantly: it proves that the Hermetic texts were suitable for religious communities to use them for their cultic aims.

Therefore we cannot exclude that Hermetic communities existed, although we haven't any kind of material evidence and written sources to prove it. We can only state these doubts concerning this question.

To sum up, in the first part of the paper I substantiate the opportunity of the fact that we should be allowed to interpret the examined texts on the basis of Greek philosophy since nothing in the sources points out that their authors had no Greek culture, even if they worked in Egypt.

1.2. Style of the texts, characteristics of the Hermetic dialogue

In the next chapter I demonstrate how the exploration of the formal aspects of the dialogues support the understanding of the authors' intention, since it shows that the external form of a text is not based on the writers' choice but it is subjected to the topic and to the philosophical demonstration. In this respect the Hermetic literature has close connections with the Greek philosophical tradition. By the exploration of the antecedents I analyse the Platonic dialogue, the Aristotelian popularising philosophical writings based on the evidence of the fragments and the Epicurean letters to present how does appear the problem of the form in the Greek philosophy. The aim of the written text is to help the reader in acquiring the suitable order of the method of revealing problems. The method itself has a special role because only the correct application of it can lead to the possibility of grasping the truth.

Summarizing: Greek written philosophical texts preserve the characteristics of an oral debate, and they expect the reader's participation acquiring the truth. Examining the Hermetic texts from this point of view, that is presupposing the dialogue form is not a mere literary form, so the dialogues appear as devices which are necessary for the acquisition of knowledge. The thorough examination of the dialogues reveals the structure of the knowledge on which these texts are based. According to this we can reach the highest intelligible knowledge gradually from the world's sensual view through the particular order of learning. That means learning is a process in which the master can guide the initiated person by his active participation. On the evidence of the survived texts there are three grades of learning in the Hermetic literature.

1, introductory teaching with a general character. It deals with the traditional problems of philosophy (the nature of beings, cosmology) drawing mostly from the single branches of the Greek philosophical tradition (Platonism, Stoicism).

2, detailed teachings which presuppose the preliminary knowledge. The aim is to understand the fact why God's nature is unknowable with the help of discursive thinking.

3, the personal experience of knowledge, i.e. the perfect intelligible knowledge. This can be attained only by the student himself.

In the next chapter of the dissertation I prove how the formal questions are connected to the problem of the usage of the philosophical terms. I demonstrate with examples how the authors apply intentional single terms to the description of the nature of beings, of God and of knowledge. This leads to the understanding of the authors' intention since by exploring the usage of concepts and their sense, at the same time it can also be explored that the authors of the Hermetic texts are able to elect the possible

external literary form consciously, moreover to arrange the given substance for the sake of their above mentioned aim (i.e. the correct manner of imparting the knowledge).

On the evidence of the foregoing we can summarize our results as follows:

1, to outline the formation of the Hermetic tradition by means of the Hermetic sources and the testimonies.

2, the exploration of the formal aspects of the Hermetic dialogue which represents at the same time the aim of the texts, and the circle of their usability.

3, I described the grades of the Hermetic knowledge and the structure of it which determines the frameworks of the interpretation of the texts, thus we were able to reveal the original Hermetic interpretation of the relation between the master and his pupil.

The significance of these statements can be compared to the earlier results of the philological researches.

This kind of theory of the dialogue is unfamiliar in modern research, since the Hermetic texts were regarded – if they were explained from the Greek philosophy – mostly as the vulgar interpretation of the Greek scientific results, so the opportunity of considering the texts as important examples of the philosophical dialogue was excluded. According to this concept their typical characteristic is that the decline of the Greek creating spirit can be observed in them.

In contrast, if the texts are regarded as living dialogues, their character and their aim get into other illumination since it becomes clear that they are the heirs of the Greek philosophical tradition as their endeavour is to expound the central seed of their teaching according to a definite order. The aim of the next chapter is to explore the main points of this teaching.

2, The object of Hermetic knowledge: the salvation of the soul

In the second part of my paper I analyse the redemption concept which can be considered as the central element of the Hermetic teaching, furthermore I prove how this concept can be explored concerning the Greek philosophical tradition. Parallel with it I show how the idea of the *irrational* (important in Hermetic literature, too) appears in classical Greek philosophy that is considered as the most relevant example of the rational (i.e. discursive or dialectical) thought.

Since the central idea of the concept of redemption is to liberate the inner intelligible human part from the material world, this chapter has two main sections: the representation of Hermetic cosmology and anthropology.

2. 1. *Cosmology*

The aim of cosmology, as it can be read in the Hermetic texts, is to reveal the nature of the material world for the person to be initiated, since they who know the construction of the world and the characteristics of the human fate (i.e. the influence of the celestial body on human existence) can prepare himself for experiencing the gnosis. It becomes intelligible at this stage why astrology is an important point of Hermetic cosmology. A human being is since his birth under the authority of the caelestial bodies and the powers connected with them: daimones and decans. One can find the way of salvation only when he knows how he can gain victory over these powers, in consequence of which he can become independent of them. That means his liberty.

As in the Hermetic treatises a consistent cosmology cannot be read and there can be differences between the texts I demonstrate the variances in the tractates describing the cosmos.

I take the most considerable ideas one by one. At first I present what (1) does mean the concept of the materiality of the cosmos , then how (2) does appear the idea of the bad cosmos, finally what is the significance (3) of the idea of the living universe.

(1) The description of the material world is a widespread idea in the Greek philosophical thought. In this part of the chapter I show the ideas of the Platonic philosophy which had great influence on the Hermetic cosmological descriptions. On the evidence of these facts the connection between the two groups of texts can be demonstrated convincingly.

The Timaeus has an outstanding role among the Platonic texts. In connection with this dialogue I present those cosmological principles which point beyond the Platonic text itself and appear as essential components of even more systems of thought (e.g. Hermetism, Gnosis). Another considerable concept is connected with this, i.e. the examination of the idea of time, since time and eternity are also important cosmological ideas playing a role in the appearance of the material world.

(2) By the description of the bad cosmos I have double purpose. After proposing how it can be explained in the Hermetic treatises I am showing, too, in what respect is this idea specific compared to those gnostic systems the central seed of which is the idea of the bad material world created by the bad creator.

Whereas, the Hermetic world concept is fundamentally optimistic, as the cosmos –even if it is bad – appears as a being which can be recognized by a man. The comparison of the gnostic and the Hermetic cosmology is suitable

for us to present what the sharp difference is between the intellectual forms developing almost at same time, even if their basic ideas are identical. It is just here where the significance of the concept of the irrational becomes evident. Already Plato presupposes in several dialogues (e.g. Timaius, Laws) that the material world is submitted to rules that may not originate from the divine creation. This is the disordered motion of the Receptacle that can be experienced incessant in the created world. This is the irrational element that is not the part of the creating activity of the divine mind, the aim of which is to regulate the disorderly motion of the matter of the cosmos. The parallels of this can be observed by the description of the human soul.

(3) The next part is dealing with the idea of the living cosmos. The characteristic of this is that the cosmos is a created but immortal living being, all parts of it are populated by gods or divine spirits. I present the Hermetic concept of the living cosmos on the basis of two texts, namely the Latin Asclepius and Kore Kosmou which is a longer fragment remained in the Anthology of Stobaeus. As in the previous part of the chapter the presentation of similar ideas and sources (e.g. chaldean system) play a special role.

The main results of this chapter are:

a, the fundamental concepts of Hermetic cosmology can be found already in the Platonic philosophy, even in Plato's works. The fragments of Plato's direct followers, Xenokrates and Speusippos can be considered as relevant sources.

b, Hermetic cosmology basically shows an optimistic world concept since it calls the initiated persons's attention that the world is recognizable, and the opportunity of redemption is open to the person who makes a step by means

of knowledge. This could be the merit of the chosen ones because the mind gifted by the highest God (i.e. the ability of intelligible understanding) is available for everybody.

c, recognizing this one will be able to overcome the power of the the material world (that is Fate) that reigns over him, since he is able to use the divine element in himself which is something different from the nature of the material body.

2. 2. The Hermetic doctrine of the soul

The fundamental endeavour of Hermetic teaching is the definition of man's place in the universe. As we have seen, for doing this it is necessary to describe the structure of the world and the different levels of existence. Man has a special role in this system as he is not only one of the existing beings, but the honoured creation of God, the creature who holds a part of deity in himself. This part is classified as the substantial nature of a human being which is the principal side of the cognitive ability, i.e. the intelligible mind.

In this chapter I am dealing with the double (material-intelligible) nature of man demonstrating how this double disposition is presented in the Hermetic dialogues where there are two kinds of description of this situation.

One of them is the mythical story of Primal Man getting into a material world, its most mature depiction is known from the first piece of the Hermetic corpus (Poimandres). This dialogue reveals how and why the Primal Man descended from his original divine home and how his soul can return there after his death. In connection with this text I examine the relevant problems concerning our topic, i.e. the description of the act of the creation of the material cosmos and of man. It is notable that according to the text the appearance of Man in the cosmos is the result of God's conscious act, an

action the result of which will be that Primal Man becomes equal with the cosmos in his existence. Then I analyse the fatal choice of Man in consequence of which he descends voluntarily into the material nature to share its characteristics, also mortality.

Another important consequence of this cosmic event is at (the same time it was the pledge of man's freedom) that man receives a special task: he has to supervise the existing living beings, and has to ensure his own redemption. We can read the way of redemption in the text, too: the human soul gives back all the characteristics that he got from them at his birth to the rulers of nature (that is for the astral powers). Thus he gets rid of their authority. The fundamental role of Hermetic astrology comes to the front again. Therefore I briefly sketch the most typical features of this astrology with special regard to the doctrine of the Decans, the formulation of which is a newer specific element of the texts attributed to Hermes Trismegistus.

After the characterisation of Hermetic astrology I am examining the other typical form of the description of the soul. This is in close connection with the classical Greek philosophical traditions which reveals the construction of the soul with the help of conceptual analysis. As in the previous chapters I take the philosophical sources, prototypes one by one, mostly the relevant Platonic texts, then I show that as in the case of cosmology the concept of irrationality plays special role in the Hermetic psychology, too. This is the term which can be applied to the passionate and desiring part of the soul at Plato, which concerns the disposition that appears as the effect of the material world in the human soul.

We have to emphasize that the authors are making consistent conceptual distinctions at this point which indicate that by the description of the soul their treatment is the conscious application of the philosophical terminology.

The most important elements of this kind of description are:

The human soul consists of four parts. The lowest is the vital principle (*pneuma*), this is followed by the passionate and whimsical *psyche*. Superior to this is *logos* serving as a device for discursive cognition while the highest part of human nature is *nous*, the gift of God, for intelligible understanding. As this is a potentiality for understanding, man's activity is necessary to supply the purpose of its function. An idea, significantly different from the gnostic systems can be caught here because in this case the opportunity of salvation is available for anyone, but not everyone takes the opportunity if he does not recognize the method of employing of the divine mind in himself.

At the end of the dissertation I present how this eschatological psychology can be derived from the Platonic philosophy where the theory of the structured soul also plays a considerable role. Moreover the idea that the human soul originated from a higher entity (world soul) is a principle of life which, by the consequence of the proper –philosophical – conduct of life in the material world, will return to his original celestial home has a special significance too.

On the basis of all these we could form conception of the ethical aspect of the Hermetic doctrine since the redemption of the soul presupposes man's free decision as a result of which he will get to knowledge by the way of Hermes.

3. Appendix: the translation of the Corpus Hermeticum

I enclose the translation of the collection known as Corpus Hermeticum with explanations to the paper. The significance of this is that till now an interpretation of scientific claim based on the authoritative critical edition for these texts did not exist. I intended to give the opportunity to the reader to meet these texts which are not easy to attain, as an attachment of the paper.

I supplied the dialogues simply with a short introductory part since I refer to several questions in the main text.

The aim of my paper was to manifest the consistent endeavour that concerns the central seed of the Hermetic teaching namely that the soul can be redeemed from the power of destiny defined by the characteristics of the material world despite the potential contradictions which can be found in the texts.

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