

PHILOSOPHY AS 'HOLY RELIGION' (*SANCTA RELIGIO*).
THE ESSENCE OF HERMETIC PHILOSOPHY IN *ASCLEPIUS*,
SIVE DIALOGUS HERMETIS TRISMEGISTI

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ABSTRACT. The paper deals with the concept of Hermetic philosophy presented in Pseudo-Apuleius' dialogue *Asclepius, sive dialogus Hermetis Trismegisti*. The attempt is made to describe the special characteristic of this philosophy and its spiritual dimension. Hermetic philosophy is not about solving complicated theoretical problems. Hermetic philosophy only wants to inspire and arouse the natural spiritual sensibility of its adept and open his mind to receiving the divine Mind (God).

KEYWORDS: *Asclepius*, Hermes Trismegistus, Hermetism, Hermetic Philosophy.

Introduction

The Hermetic text *Asclepius, sive dialogus Hermetis Trismegisti* is a Latin translation of the lost Greek Hermetic treatise *Logos teleios*, known to Lactantius (cf. Lactantius, *Divinae Institutiones*, IV 6, 4).¹ The Latin dialogue has come down to us

¹ The Greek *Logos teleios* is mentioned at the beginning of the 9th book of *Corpus Hermeticum* (C.H. IX, 1). See: The introduction of A.D. Nock to French translation: Nock - Festugière 1960, 259-295. See also: Festugière 1954, IV, 92-140. Moreschini 1985, 71-73; Moreschini 2000, 74-79; 105-109; Parri 2005, 14-16; Reitzenstein 1904, 393-411; Scott 1924, 49-81. Scott also writes that "this Latin *dialogue* is a translation of a Greek original, which was known to Lactantius and others, but is now lost." (Scott, 1924, 49). According to Scott, "Latin *Asclepius* was known to Lactantius, under the title *Logos teleios*, about A.D. 310" (Schott 1924, 77). Ebeling also thinks that *Asclepius* is "the most complete version we have is a Latin translation of the Greek original, which bore the title "Perfect Discourse" (*logos teleios*), and which is preserved only in fragments and also occurs in partial Coptic translation". (Ebeling 2007, 14). See also: Heiduk 2007, 30-40; Hunink 1996, 291, 292; Parri 2005, 14-16; Scarpi 2014, 650-651; Scotti 2000, 396-416; Siniscaldo 1966-67, 83-116.

in the corpus of work of Apuleius of Madaura, but contemporary scholars, however, question Apuleius' authorship.²

Outstanding researcher of the Hermetic writings Walter Scott distinguishes three parts in *Asclepius*: '*Asclepius I (De homine)*', '*Asclepius II (De origine mali)*' and '*Asclepius III (De cultu deorum)*'.³ According to Scott, the author of *Asclepius I* was probably an Egyptian, who had received a Hellenic education in Alexandria.⁴ Scott is inclined to think that the author was a contemporary of Clement of Alexandria, who was teaching in that city between A.D. 190 and 200 (Scott 1924, 55). Scott is convinced that "the religious fervour of the writer is characteristic of his Egyptian nationality; but there is nothing in his dogmas that cannot be derived from Greek philosophy" (Scott 1924, 54). Scott suggested that this Greek writer may have been one of Ammonios Saccas' disciples. In the Introduction to his *Hermetica* Scott wrote: "There is no external evidence that Ammonius Saccas was in any way connected with the Hermetism; but seeing that (1) Plotinus is known to have been strongly influenced by Ammonius Saccas, and (2) there is much in the teachings recorded in the *Hermetica* that approximates to the philosophic religion of Plotinus, we may fairly put these two facts together, and infer that the Hermetic teachers were men of the same type as Ammonius Saccas. Indeed, it is

² See: Barra, 1966, 128; Hunink 1996, 288-308; Moreschini 1978, 193-218; Moreschini 1985, 71-73; Moreschini 2000, 105-109; Parri 2005, 14-16; Redfors 1960, 114. Reitzenstein 1904, 393-411; Scott 1924, 49-81.

³ Scott 1924, 51: "It appears from internal evidence that the dialogue has been made up putting together three distinct and unconnected documents – which I (Scott) have named respectively '*Asclepius I (De homine)*', '*Asclepius II (De origine mali)*' and '*Asclepius III (De cultu deorum)*' – and adding a 'prologus' and an 'epilogus'. In his introduction to the *Hermetica* Scott writes: "There can, I think, be little doubt that the Greek original of *Asclepius I* at first existed as separate document, of the same type as the *Hermes to Asclepius* libelli preserved in the *Corpus*; and it may be presumed that it once formed part of the collection of discourses known to Stobaeus as τὰ Ἑρμοῦ πρὸς τὸν Ἀσκληπιόν." (Scott 1924, 52). Zielinski distinguished four parts in *Asclepius*, namely chapters 1-14; 14-27; 27-37; 37-41 (Zielinski 1905, 321-372). See also Parri 2005, 17-20.

⁴ Scott 1924, 56: "The author of *Asclepius I* was probably an Egyptian by race. He can hardly have been a priest; for he takes no interest in theurgic ritual; and the worship of 'daemons' (i.e. temple-gods) is, in his eyes, a comparatively low form of religion, thought better than none. It may be inferred that he had not been trained in the schools of the Egyptian priests but had received a Hellenic education in Alexandria. Perhaps he had attended the lectures of one of the professional teachers of Platonism in that city, and is speaking from his own experience when he complains that such teachers put difficulties in the way of seeker after God by including in their curriculum a compulsory course of mathematics".

not impossible that in some few of the extant *Hermetica* we have specimens of the teaching of Ammonius Saccas, set down in writing (and ascribed to Hermes) by one of his pupils. There is no evidence for that; but at any rate we are justified in saying that the teaching of Ammonius Saccas must have closely resembled that which we find in some of the *Hermetica*." (Scott 1924, 2). Some researchers believe that in Alexandria there was the religious community of the followers of the Philosophy of Hermes Trismegistus.⁵

According to Scott, "the Latin translation may be dated between 353 and 426" or "between about 280 and 426".⁶ Scott is inclined to think that "the translator was either Victorinus or someone of who had much in common with him".⁷

According to Fowden, "the *Asclepius* is a compilation of materials from various sources, loosely linked together".⁸ Ferguson expresses a similar opinion in his Introduction to Scott's *Hermetica* (vol. IV).⁹ According to Parri, however, the *Asclepius* is not any compilation, but it is the autonomous and complete proposal of a single author.¹⁰

⁵ See: Broek 2000, 9-26; Helderman 2000, 261-290. Earlier Reitzenstein wrote about the existence of hermetic communities: Reitzenstein 1904, *Poimandres*, p. 248. According to Quispel, "owing to the new Hermetic writings that were discovered near Nag Hammadi in 1945, it has become certain that the Hermetic Gnosis was rooted in a secret society in Alexandria, a sort of Masonic lodge, with certain rites like a kiss of peace, a baptism of rebirth in the Spirit and a sacred meal of the brethren." Quispel 1998, 69-78 (78). See also: Heiduk 2007, 47; Pearson 1981, 336-348; Pearson 1990, 136-147; Sfameni Gasparro 2018, 111-139 (117-118).

⁶ Scott 1924, 79. According to Scott, "the terminus *ante quem* for the Latin translation is given by fact that Augustine quotes from it in his *De civitate Dei*, about A.D. 413-426" (Scott 1924, 79). Ebeling writes that "the *Asclepius* was probably composed in the second or third century C.E." (Ebeling 2007, 14). According to Parri, the translation was made in the period between 304-313 (after *Divinae institutiones* by Lactantius) and 415-416 (before the eighth book of the *De civitate Dei* by Augustinus came out). (Parri 2005, 15: "Poiché i brani latini di Lattanzio non coincidono con i corrispondenti passi dell' *Ascepius* si può presumere che la traduzione sia stata compiuta in epoca posteriore alle *Divinae institutiones* (304-313). L'ottavo libro (415-416) del *De civitate Dei* offer l'altro estremo cronologico").

⁷ Scott 1924, 81. See also: Hunink 1996, 291-292; Parri 2002, 15-16.

⁸ Fowden 1993, 38.

⁹ See: Scott 1936, XXVII.

¹⁰ Parri 2005, 20: "*L'Ascepius* non è una compilazione, non è un florilegio, non è un compendio, ma è in seno all'ermetismo la proposta autonoma e compiuta di un singolo autore. ... La dottrina ermetica si presenta infatti come un mistero rivelato. In accordo a questa premessa non si può cercare nella costruzione del testo uno stile che ricalchi i modi e la struttura di una indagine razionale" (Parri 2005, 20). It seems difficult to disa-

The analysis of the *Asclepius*, as far as the philosophical content of the dialogue is concerned, leads to a conclusion that handwriting tradition which includes this writing among the works of Apuleius (a philosopher, a mage and a poet) is not entirely in the wrong. Augustine of Hippo was probably of a similar opinion. As Moreschini noted, Augustine quotes the *Asclepius* as part of a polemical discourse with Apuleius.¹¹ The Italian scholar supports Carcopino's and Mahé's thesis saying that the author of the Latin translation was of North African origin.¹² Fowden holds a similar opinion.¹³

Generally speaking, a large portion of the philosophical content in the *Asclepius* fits in with the Apuleius' Middle Platonism philosophy.¹⁴ Also, the very understanding of philosophy expressed in *Asclepius*, as well as its overall message, is close to the spirituality of both Apuleius and Middle Platonism in general. Plenty of philosophical concepts from the *Asclepius*, both of greater and lesser importance, especially anthropological, theological (including a close to Hermetic philosophy doctrine of mysterious, intangible, incomprehensible God) and ethical ones (together with "*homoiosis theo*", all Platonists' principal doctrine), can be found in the texts written by the philosopher from Madaura.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the

gree. Parri believes that the Hermetic doctrine in the *Asclepius* presents itself as a revealed mystery.

¹¹ Moreschini 1985, 71; Moreschini 2000, p. 105. See also: Scott 1924, 78-80. The points of confluence between *Logos teleios* and *Asclepius* are more extensively discussed by Moreschini (Moreschini 2000, 74-79, 105-109). On the basis that in *De civitate Dei* Augustine of Hippo quotes *Asclepius* only in Latin, the Italian scholar treats the times of the *De civitate Dei* of Augustine of Hippo (about 413) as *terminus ante quem* of the origin of the Latin translation of *Logos teleios* (Moreschini 2000, 75, 105-109; Moreschini 1985, 71-73; cf. also: Parri 2005, 15-16; Scott 1924, 79-81). Both texts, the Greek and the Latin one, are also discussed by Reitzenstein (Reitzenstein 1904, 393-411).

¹² Moreschini 2000, 106.

¹³ Fowden 1993, 198-199. See also: Moreschini 2000, 106.

¹⁴ See Apuleius' philosophical writings: *De Platone et eius dogmate*, *De deo Socratis*, as well as *De mundo*. According to Scott, „the influence of Plato is manifest throughout. The fundamental articles of the writer's creed – the doctrine of a supracosmic God, who is maker and ruler of the universe, and that of supracosmic element in the human soul – have been transmitted to him from Plato; and verbal echoes of phrases used by Plato may be recognized (see for instance of dependence on Greek writers of later date than Plato.” (Scott 1924, 53; 59).

¹⁵ In ancient Christian tradition Apuleius is known mainly as a mage and demonologist (Lactantius, *Div. Inst.* V, 3, 7; Augustinus, *Letter 136*, 1; *Letter 137*, 13; *Letter 138*, 18). Augustine disputes with Apuleius' demonology in *De civitate dei* (books VIII and IX). Apuleius, as we already know from his *Apology* (his defence speech), was accused of using

abovementioned concurrences do not evidence that Apuleius was the author of the Latin translation, particularly if we consider easily noticeable language differences which do not support this idea.¹⁶ These concurrences, however, can point to shared spiritual and philosophical heritage, something like “cultural koine of platonic-stoic type” (“*koiné culturale pagana tipo platonico-stoico*”), as defined by Moreschini¹⁷, and possibly also to certain ideological interlinkage among these currents, specifically between Middle Platonism and Hermetic Philosophy.¹⁸

The meaning and essence of philosophy in the *Asclepius*

In Chapter XIV of *Asclepius*, Hermes Trismegistus describes in one sentence how Hermetism defines philosophy: “To adore the godhead with simple mind and soul and to honor his works, also to give thanks to god's will (which alone is completely filled with good), this is a philosophy unprofaned by relentlessly curious thinking” (*Asclepius*, XIV).¹⁹

magic, and although he managed to clear himself of charges, it must have been present in his life in some form. In the *Apology...* Apuleius mentions a mysterious cult figurine, which he allegedly treated sacredly, and which supposedly showed Hermes himself as a patron of magic. Most probably, though, this was not Hermes Trismegistus, the main character in the *Asclepius* (it is unknown whether the followers of the Hermetic philosophy worshipped the figurine of Hermes Trismegistus), but instead gods' well-known messenger from Greek mythology. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that Apuleius, known for his philosophical and religious interests, could also familiarize himself to a certain extent with this mysterious philosophical-religious current called Hermetism. He initiated himself with great relish in various mysteries, including the Egyptian Mysteries of Isis and Osiris, in which he attained higher levels of initiations, what he refers to in the last book of his extraordinary, poetic work *Metamorphoses, or the Golden Ass*. The mysteriousness of Hermetism could be appealing for the author of *Metamorphoses*, which is a work full of mysterious and magical motives. Hunink is of the same opinion (Hunink 1996, 293-295, 299).

¹⁶ Cf. Moreschini 1978, 193-218; Parri 2005, 15-16; Scott 1924, 78. Hunink is of a different opinion. According to Hunink, “the various objections made to the Apuleian authorship of the *Asclepius* are based on foundations which appear not very solid” (Hunink 1996, 293). He writes that “as a translation, the *Asclepius* would fit perfectly into Apuleius' oeuvre” (Hunink 1996, 296, 299). But his proposal does not seem to have found wide acceptance. See: Moreschini 2000, 55; Parri 2005, 16.

¹⁷ Moreschini 2000, 79-80.

¹⁸ Cf. Moreschini 1985, 99; Moreschini 2000, 137; Scott 1993, 53, 59. See also: Ebeling 2007, 28-30.

¹⁹ Trans. B. P. Copenhaver. Quoted text in Latin: *simplici enim mente et anima divinitatem colere eiusque fata venerari, agree etiam dei voluntati gratias, quae est bonitatis sola*

A bit earlier, in Chapter XII, he says that philosophy consists only in perpetual contemplation of the divinity and “holy religion”: *quae sola est in cognoscenda divinitate frequens obtutus et sancta religio* (*Asclepius*, XII).

Moving away from any mathematical disciplines²⁰, Hermes brings philosophy into the realm of mental contemplation of the harmony of the universe and spiritual communion with God, the creator of this universe (*Asclepius*, XIII).²¹ It is not difficult to surmise that the ambitions of philosophy understood in such a way go far beyond the borders of theories and doctrines, which are scientific to lesser or greater extent, stepping into the deepest and most secret areas of human personality, into the territory of its divine spirit. They also go beyond – a thing worth noting – the abilities of ordinary earthly creatures. Nonetheless, according to Hermes Trismegistus, a human being is neither an ordinary creature, nor an earthly one, even though he or she lives on Earth temporarily. Hermes Trismegistus’ philosophy, however greatly it may value human cognition and knowledge, finds its essence in spiritual experience. For the aim of this philosophy is not to complete education but reach heaven (*Asclepius*, XI).

plenissima, haec est nulla animi inportuna curiositate violata philosophia. See also: *Asclepius*, XII and XIX. It is worth adding at this point that such an understanding of philosophy as a kind of spiritual prayer was also not foreign to Platonists. Cf. Ferrari 2019, 75-92.

²⁰ This is an obvious attack on Pythagorean and Platonic mathematics, which attempts to describe all structures and phenomena in mathematical terms. A little further, however, Trismegistus himself will succumb to the Pythagorean convention while contemplating the harmony of the universe and savouring the sweetness and truth of the divine song of the cosmic concert (*Asclepius*, XIII). The motif of “divine song” (*melos divinum*) is elaborated on in Book XVIII of *Corpus Hermeticum*.

²¹ The motif of contemplation recurs in hermetic writings, either as a contemplation of cosmos as a God’s creation (cf. C.H. III, 3; IV, 2-3; V, 5, 6; XII, 21-22), or as an inner contemplation, or an intellectual vision seen in human intellect which turns out to be God’s intellect as well (cf. C.H. I, 4, 7, 8; XI, 6; XIII, 3). In the latter type of contemplation, a man experiencing it communes somewhat face to face with God himself. It is a moment, in which a full hermetic initiation takes place (God’s revelation). It is also the beginning of an inner transformation, a birth of a new, spiritual man (cf. C.H. XIII, 3, 7). One more thing connected to contemplation is the necessity of ascesis, or rather separation from sensuality (cf. *Asclepius*, XI; C.H. I, 1; IV, 3; X 5; XIII, 7). We can find the image of the abovementioned conversion (transformation) in Book XI of Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*. Therein, a donkey undergoes a transformation and returns as a human. The donkey here is a symbol of a sensual human being. It is about giving back to a man his original, divine nature.

Philosophising in Trismegistus' manner – if one can put it that way – has its starting point in discovering and experiencing human divinity (*Asclepius*, X).²² At the same time, discovering and experiencing one's own divinity solves the problem, vague up to this point, of human peculiar longing for plenitude and happiness. It finally becomes explicit that it is longing for one's own spiritual divinity, deeply hidden in bodily structures. Another thing that clarifies is the human feeling of strange unfamiliarity towards one's own body and everything connected with it (cf. *Asclepius*, VI - XII).²³ Simultaneously, the human final vocation becomes clear – it aims at spiritual heavenly Kingdom (cf. *Asclepius*, XI). At the same time, Hermes is aware that not everyone will be able to discover and fulfil their divine vocation, for a variety of reasons, but mostly as a consequence of surrendering to the domination of senses, a result of human ignorance and lack of awareness (*Asclepius*, XXII).²⁴

Admittedly, gaining knowledge, metaphysical and theological in particular, is part of philosophy propagated by Trismegistus. The essence of this philosophy, however, as well as its primary tool, is the contemplation of immortal matters. Hermes supplements this contemplation with an admiration for cosmic harmony (*Asclepius*, XIII).²⁵ Nevertheless, this contemplation is in no way a means of gain-

²² It refers to getting to know oneself – one of the fundamental themes of Hermetic philosophy – and, at the same time, getting to know God (cf. CH I, 18-19, 21; IV, 4; XIII, 10). Man can fully comprehend himself only with reference to God. Comprehending oneself leads to recognizing God as the Father in ourselves, and simultaneously learning about our divine nature. Such possibility is available only to those who were gifted with intellect by God. (cf. CH I, 21-22; IV, 3-4; IX, 5).

²³ In Chapters VI and XI, Trismegistus speaks of man's disdain for the tangible part of himself felt after experiencing his own divinity. However, this does not equal to an utter depreciation of man's bodily structures. They still deserve respect since they were given to man by God with a particular aim of taking care of sensual creatures, which could not be reached if a man was a purely spiritual being. Evil does not rest in sheer bodily structures but in overly aroused desire.

²⁴ See also: CH I, 19- 20; VII, 1; X, 8; XI, 21; XIII, 7. In spite of being clearly antihedonistic (see in particular: *Asclepius*, XI), Trismegistus expresses his positive attitude towards erotic love and the pleasure connected with it. He treats it, especially the act of procreation, as a peculiar kind of mystery involving joy, mirth and love delight. (see: *Asclepius*, XXI).

²⁵ See: also: CH III, 3; IV, 2-3; V, 5-6; XII 21-22). Philosophical theoretical knowledge, especially metaphysical and theological, is vital, since it bears understanding of various matters significant for a man. For that reason, Trismegistus devotes a lot of attention to it in *Asclepius*. Nevertheless, contemplation and related spiritual experiences are far more important for him. They lay the grounds for man's spiritual and personal conversion –

ing theoretical knowledge. It is mainly a tool of man's spiritual conversion. Focusing fully on spiritual and divine reality, as this is what contemplation consists in, leads to discovering and comprehending one's own spirituality and divinity, and, as a result, to spiritual conversion and transformation, rebirth (cf. *Asclepius*, XI; XXIX).²⁶ Within such a meaning, contemplation, as well as philosophy in general, has cathartic power. It can purge man's soul of all sensual addictions, and consequently bring him only one step away from salvation, from the heavens. Thereby, Trismegistus' philosophy had been dressed in mysterial array. It is worth repeating that philosophy became a spiritual mystery, one in which the purification of soul (eradicating sensual addictions) and, at the same time, the transformation of a man into a divine creature take effect. This transformation, though, does not consist in dressing man in certain externally imposed "divine attire"; it is a completely self-triggered process based on discovering one's own divinity and exposing it on top of one's own personality. For man has been god from the very outset of his existence, yet his divinity has been drowned out by senses run amuck. God – as highlighted by Trismegistus – has been supporting man in the process of spiritual conversion: according to Trismegistus, he willingly reveals himself in front of all people. Although he does not reveal his nature, neither his place of dwelling, he still enlightens them with the intelligence of his mind. However, he behaves in such a way only towards those who turned their back on sin and live in hope for future immortality (*Asclepius*, XXIX; XXII). God bestows himself on man in the act of illumination, but only to an extent that is necessary for man's spiritual development. Whereby the need for man's ethical preparation for such illumination is clearly pointed out therein, what is mainly connected with a kind of separation from the world of sensual desires.²⁷

It is not difficult to notice that Trismegistus is not the originator of the above-mentioned philosophical motifs. They were present as early as in Platonism, in-

the primary objective of Trismegistus' philosophy. Furthermore, the full comprehension of metaphysical and spiritual reality can only be reached through the act of spiritual contemplation, by means of divine enlightenment. In the final part of *Asclepius*, Trismegistus seems to suggest that he has been bestowed with such enlightenment (*Asclepius*, XXXII; cf. CH XI, 6; XIII, 3; IV, 2; III, 3).

²⁶ It is even more clearly stated in Book XIII of *Corpus Hermeticum* CH XIII, 3-7. The rebirth, similar to the one experienced by people initiated in mysteries, is naturally the work of God. A depiction of such a rebirth (conversion) can be found in Book XI of *Metamorphoses* by Apuleius of Madaura. In Book XIII of *Corpus Hermeticum* Hermes Trismegistus gives a warning not to spread the word to crowds, but only to those who were chosen by God Himself (CH XIII, 13; 16).

²⁷ It is mentioned in different parts of *Corpus Hermeticum* (CH IV, 6)

cluding the Platonism of Apuleius.²⁸ Platonism possibly emphasizes the need for intellectual preparation for philosophy more strongly than Hermetism, and, together with illumination, placed in the range of noesis, it introduces love delight, which for Plato becomes a fully-fledged tool of philosophy, while for Trismegistus it is not noticed in such a role at all. It is love discussed here but the meaning of it is different from Plato's. Hermes replaces the whole existing cult religion— immersed in its rites and essentially having little in common with God – with reciprocal love, the one felt by people for gods (cf. *Asclepius*, XLI).²⁹ As a personal relation bonding man with God, love (the religious one) plays a substantial part in man's spiritual life, yet it is not a tool of philosophy, rather its consequence. Owing to philosophical contemplation, man discovers God, admires and falls in love with him. In Platonism, however, it is love, love for beauty, at first in its sensual, and then spiritual emanation, leads to God as the absolute beauty.³⁰ It is the other way round for Trismegistus, though. Love for God and his creatures is born from the cognition, or rather the experience of God. While getting to know God, we get to know his Beauty and Goodness. God is the sublimation of all beauty and goodness (*Asclepius*, XX).³¹

Hermes Trismegistus' philosophy has got one particular feature, though, which cannot be found in Plato's or Apuleius' philosophy and which distinguishes the former from the latter. It stands out from the very first pages of *Asclepius*. Namely, Trismegistus' philosophy is not his creation. God (there is Cupid mentioned in the text) only used the philosopher's lips (*Asclepius*, I). Trismegistus reveals here what God allowed him to reveal. Trismegistus himself seems to suggest it as well at the beginning of Chapter XIX, when he says that he reveals

²⁸ See: Barra-Pannuti 1962-1963, 81-141; Mantenero 1970, 63-111.

²⁹ It can be perceived as an attempt at reforming a ceremonial religion fully immersed, and, additionally, in an extremely pedantic way, in its sacrifices, prophecies, and other similar rites.

³⁰ See: "mysteries of Eros" in Plato's *Symposium*. For Plato, the experience of God and a personal union with him (acting as personal and absolute Beauty) in the act of ecstasy is the climax of love. Knowing nothing of God, he can be approached through love for beauty, but he can also be reached following the path of noesis, starting from learning the metaphysical structures of the worldly things, and ending with Him as an ultimate metaphysical reason behind all of these things.

³¹ In Book VI of *Corpus Hermeticum* God's goodness and beauty is discussed in a specific way. C.H. VI, 1, 3, 4, 5; por. X 4, 5, 6. The mystic vision of God as a plenitude of Goodness and Beauty is mentioned here. Hermes emphasizes that he who got to know God once, can contemplate nothing but God, neither can he become interested in anything else than God. (C.H. X, 6).

“divine mysteries” (*divina mysteria*). In Chapter XXXII he thanks God for the light by which divinity can be seen (*Asclepius*, XXXII).³² Before the conversation he makes it clear that it is not intended for other people (*Asclepius*, I; XXXII).³³ It can be gathered particularly from the way the conversation is announced, but also from the place where it is held among Hermes, Asclepius and King Ammon – a kind of unspecified sanctuary, dedicated most probably to God the Creator himself. Hermes announces the conversation as something momentous and sacred. Aware of the weightiness of the secrets he is about to disclose to his interlocutors, he forbids Asclepius to invite strangers to it (his cautiousness is similar to Plato’s discretion, known from *Letter VII*, in revealing his views to wider audience (Plato, *Epistulae*, VII, 341 E)³⁴, as well as the mysteriousness of Mysteries (*Asclepius* I; XXXII).³⁵ The conversation, almost entirely in a form of Hermes Trismegistus’ lec-

³² In Hermetic writings light is associated mainly with God. God manifests himself in light. The motif of vision appears frequently in hermetic writings. Cf. CH I, 4-8, 12, 21, 32; IV, 4-6; VII, 2; X, 5-6; XIII, 3, 18-21.

³³ Mysteriousness and secrecy is an integral part of Hermetic spirituality. Hermetic initiations always involve being silent (holy silence: CH X, 5; XIII, 8; 2), in a twofold meaning: 1) because the initiation itself is of mystic character; 2) because the result of it is not some kind of unique lore, but conversion, rebirth (for more on the topic of rebirth see in particular: CH XIII). It entails the transformation of consciousness in the first place. The elements of the so-called lore are present here as well, but the main issue is that the most important mysteries pertaining to man and God are unspeakable (just like God Himself). They are the constituents of spiritual life, higher feelings (such as love), not a logical discourse. Besides, this mysteriousness is a kind of an allegory of a great mystery concealed by human life and man himself, namely the mystery of divinity (spirituality) of his spiritual inner life, incomprehensible in rational categories. Initiations reveal that in his most secret structures man is god (a spiritual being), related to God Almighty, or that he might even carry God inside. The thread of the mystery and holy silence recurs in many of the books of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and most clearly in Book XIII (see also: CH I 16; X 5, 6). See also: Casel 1967, 95-101. In his book *De philosophorum Graecorum silentio mystico* Casel writes about “mysticum silentium Hermeticum”: “Recte tamen silentium Hermeticum vocamus Mysticum, hac voce sensu translato et philosophico accepta” (Casel 1967, 100).

³⁴ Plato, *Epistulae*, VII, 341 E. I omit the issue of the authenticity of the *VII Letter*. Admittedly, some scholars have doubts about this, but as Michael Erler rightly pointed out, “no decisive argument has yet been raised.” (Erler 2015, 49).

³⁵ Refraining oneself from revealing secrets is an ever-present motif of Hermetic writings. Cf. CH XIII, 13, 16 – therein (CH XIII) the first one pertains to the mystery of rebirth (CH XIII, 13), the second one – the hermetic prayer (CH XIII, 16). According to Hermes’ words in Book X of *Corpus Hermeticum*, getting to know God means “holy silence” (CH X,

ture, culminates in a thanksgiving prayer to God Almighty and God the Father, what confirms its divine and sacred character. The prayer takes on the proportions of an example of genuine piety. Trismegistus clearly snorted at Asclepius when the latter had set his mind on offering up traditional sacrifice, and then showed him that for God it is sufficient to receive man's love and admiration. Love and thanksgiving prayers – this is how piety propounded by Hermes should be manifested. The prayer preached by him is of thanksgiving character:

"We thank you, supreme and most high god, by whose grace alone we have attained the light of your knowledge; holy name that must be honored, the one name by which our ancestral faith blesses god alone, we thank you who deign to grant to all a father's fidelity, reverence and love, along with any power that is sweeter, by giving us the gift of consciousness, reason and understanding: consciousness, by which we may know you; reason, by which we may seek you in our dim suppositions; knowledge, by which we may rejoice in knowing you. And we who are saved by your power do indeed rejoice because you have shown yourself to us wholly. We rejoice that you have deigned to make us gods for eternity even while we depend on the body. For this is mankind's only means of giving thanks: knowledge of your majesty. We have known you, the vast light perceived only by reason. We have understood you, true life of life, the womb pregnant with all coming-to-be. We have known you, who persist eternally by conceiving all coming to be in its perfect fullness. Worshipping with this entire prayer the good of your goodness, we ask only this, that you wish us to persist in the love of your knowledge and that we never be cut off from such a life as this" (*Asclepius*, XLI).³⁶

5-6). Cf. CH I, 16; XIII, 2, 8. It is partly connected with the conviction that only people endowed with an intellect are able to comprehend divine secrets. Cf. CH I, 21-22; IV, 2-6; VIII, 5; XII, 12-13.

³⁶ Trans. Copenhaver. Quoted text in Latin: *Gratias tibi summe, exsuperantissime. Tua enim gratia tantum sumus cognitionis tuae lumen consecuti, nomen sanctum et honorandum, nomen unum, quo solus deus est benedicendus religione paterna, quoniam omnibus paternam pietatem et religionem et amorem et quaecumque est dulcior efficacia, praeberere dignaris condonans nos sensu, ratione, intelligentia: sensu, ut te cognoverimus; ratione, ut te suspicionibus indagemus; cognition, ut te cognoscentes gaudeamus. Ac numine salvati tuo gaudemus, quod te nobis ostenderit totum; gaudemus, quod nos in corporibus sitos aeternitati fueris consecrare dignatus. Haec est enim humana sola gratulatio, cognitio maiestatis tuae. Cognovimus te, lumen maximum solo intellectu sensibile; intellegimus te, o vitae vera vita, o naturarum omnium fecunda praegnatio; cognovimus te, totius naturae tuo conceptu plenissimae aeterna perseveration. In omni enim ista oratione bonum bonitatis tuae hoc tantum deprecamur, ut nos velis servare perseverantes in amore cognitionis tuae et numquam ab hoc vitae genere separari. Haec optantes convertimus nos ad puram et sine*

It can be presumed that this unique aspect of Trismegistus' philosophy was bestowed upon it by the author of the *Asclepius*, who sanctified the views included therein and gave them the features of a divine revelation. It is characteristic motive of all books of *Corpus Hermeticum*. The Hermetic philosophy appears here as a divine revelation (cf. CH I, 1-5).³⁷ This makes the essence of hermetic initiation become the experience of the Mystery of God, the mystery of his existence and goodness (God's paternal goodness is a recurring motif of Greek *Corpus Hermeticum*³⁸), and also the mystery of man (the mystery of his divine, spiritual nature)³⁹. It is naturally connected with contemplation (CH I, 1-5)⁴⁰ and silence, "ho-

animalibus cenam. Cf. also prayers from *Corpus Hermeticum*: CH I, 31; V, 10-11; XIII, 17-20. Prayer (eulogy) from Book XIII is recommended for reading outdoors at sunset (with eyes looking to the south) and sunrise (with eyes looking to the east). In the prayer from Book V there is no particular place or direction of the prayer indicated since God is omnipresent and there is no place in the universe without Him. (CH V, 10).

³⁷ See also: C.H. I, 30; X 5. *Poimandres* (CH I, 1-5) starts with a description of a mystic vision. It can be assumed that this event happened in a dream. Such situation is fairly characteristic of mysterial initiations, as in one's sleep bodily senses remain dormant while mind is activated and gets a call from its primal, divine nature. Dream has always been an element of initiations. A similar image is offered by Apuleius in Book XI of *Metamorphoses*, in which he describes his initiations: "I came to the boundary of death and treading Proserpine's threshold I returned having traversed all the elements; at midnight I saw the sun shining with brilliant light; I approached the gods below and the gods above face to face and worshipped them in their actual presence." (trans. E.J. Kenny). In *De defectu oraculorum*, 22 Plutarch writes "The best of our initiatory rites here below are the dreamy shadow of that spectacle" (trans. C.W. King). See also: Dion of Prusa, *The Olympic Oration, or the Original Concept of God*, IV 33. Dream is an allegory of death and awakening is an allegory of rebirth, which takes effect as a result of God's action. On the topic of ancient mysteries: Bianchi 1975, 208-238; Bowden 2010; Burkert 1990; Casadio, Johnston (ed.) 2009; Meyer 1999; Mylonas 1961; Turchi 1987; Wili 1944, 61-105. See also: Albert 1980, 96-108.

³⁸ Cf. CH II, 15-17; VI, 3-5.

³⁹ See also: CH I, 12. In C.H. XII, 1 Hermes refers to men as "mortal gods", and to gods as "immortal men". See also: CH X, 25. In the CH VIII, 5, man is created in the image of the world which, in turn, was created in the image of the God Himself (CH VIII, 2). The world, in CH, is the image of God (CH I, 31; VIII, 2; XII, 15) or eternity (CH XI, 15). Man can be found in the third position in this hierarchy: Creator God, Cosmos, Man.

⁴⁰ Herein God created people so that they would contemplate heaven); IV, 2; V, 5-6; X, 6; XI, 6; 20; XII, 19-21; XIII, 3.

ly silence" (cf. CH I, 30; X, 5; XIII, 8; 2)⁴¹, and the necessity of keeping the secret (cf. CH I, 16; X, 5-6). This leads to getting to know oneself which naturally entails getting to know God (cf. CH I, 19-22; XIII, 19).⁴²

For all that, Hermes Trismegistus' revelation neither revokes, nor diminishes the cognitive abilities of individuals, a thing worth noting. Instead, it appreciates people's education and upbringing (see: *Asclepius*, XXII). Trismegistus highly esteems man's cognitive abilities, also as far as recognizing ethical goodness and evil is concerned (see: *Asclepius*, VI-VII; X-XIII; XVI; XVIII; XXII). He does not even shut for a man the opportunity to get to know God, although he rather saves it for the sake of the act of illumination, and only in respect of a limited extent of divinity (*Asclepius*, XXIX).⁴³

Although *Asclepius* takes the form of a dialogue, it in fact presents something that can be called a revelation. Reitzenstein compares it to mysteries and thinks that it portrays a certain kind of initiation, very similar to those characteristic of ancient mysteries.⁴⁴ Contrary to that, Scott does not recognize any initiation in this work, but rather "religious or philosophic teachings ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus" which are "the modification of a fundamentally Platonic system of

⁴¹ Plutarch also writes about silence in Greek Mysteries, referring to Herodotus: *De defectu oraculorum*, 14: "Now with respect to matters belonging to the Mysteries, in which one can obtain the plainest manifestations, and hints of the truth respecting daemons, 'let a bridle be set upon my tongue,' as Herodotus hath it" (trans. C.W. King).

⁴² God is the ultimate goal in hermetic philosophy (cf. CH I, 26). Getting to know God brings man's final deliverance (cf. CH X, 15). Man is brought into the world by God in His image (cf. CH I, 12; XII, 1 – here in CH XII, 1, people are referred to as "mortal gods," while gods are called "immortal people").

⁴³ *Asclepius* offers an almost identical theology as Apuleius' works. The only difference is that God in *Asclepius*, apart from the attributes ascribed to him in *De Platone et eius dogmate* and other works by Apuleius, has got one additional feature which is substantial – he is androgynous like other creatures in Trismegistus' lecture (*Asclepius*, XX – XXI). God reveals himself (or more precisely – reveals a little part of himself) to some people and enlightens their minds. However, he emerges only in front of those who, freed from the influence of their mortal nature, managed to reach the highest level of morality and spirituality. (*Asclepius*, XXIX 313) Nevertheless, God remains unspeakable, indefinable, and, all in all, unknowable in his very essence (*Asclepius*, XX). That is why the experience of God is in fact the experience of the Mystery of God's goodness, not his nature. In *Asclepius* God's goodness is also emphasized (*Asclepius*, XXVI).

⁴⁴ Reitzenstein 1927, 242-243.

thought by an intermixture of Stoic physics”.⁴⁵ But Scott also thinks that “some at least of the Hermetic writers felt themselves to be inspired by God.”⁴⁶

Moreschini, though not fully agreeing with Reitzenstein, holds the opinion that the *Asclepius* is indeed a revelation, one that offers gnosis to those being initiated, but that it is also a theosophical treatise,⁴⁷ yet – as he adds later – not in a traditional sense.⁴⁸ According to the words of the Italian scholar, it mainly shows “a revelation, gnosis, salvation, reserved for the fair ones”.⁴⁹ What is new in it, as the Italian scholar continues, consists mostly in the optimistic vision of man’s destiny and nature the work depicts.⁵⁰ Also Sfamanti Gasparro believes that Hermetic treaties contain a kind of philosophical and religious revelation.⁵¹ Frances Yates writes in his famous book that:

„The Hermetic treatises, which often take the form of dialogues between master and disciple, usually culminate in a kind of ecstasy in which the adept is satisfied that he has received an illumination and breaks out into hymns of praise. He seems to reach this illumination through contemplation of the world or the cosmos, or rather through contemplation of the cosmos as reflected in his own *Nous*

⁴⁵ Scott 1924, 1, 53. See also: Scott 1924, 9. But at the same time the Hermetic writers, as Scott writes, “were ready enough to accept suggestions from others (mostly from the Platonist), and there is little in these documents that had not been thought of by some one else before. But if a Hermetist has adopted his beliefs from others, they are non the less his own beliefs; and his writing is not a mere repetition of traditional formulas. He may have accepted the thought from some one else, but he has thought it over afresh, and felt its truth in his own person.” (Scott 1924, 7)

⁴⁶ Scott 1924, 7. According to Scott, “Comparing the *Hermetica* with other writings of the period on the same object, we find that there are two things that are ‘conspicuous by their absence’ in these documents. In the first place, the Hermetic writers recognize no inspired and infallible Scripture; and there is, for them, no written text with the words of which all that they say must be to conform”. (Scott 1924, 6, 7) “And the second thing to be noted is the absence of *theurgia* – that is, of ritualism, or sacramentalism.” (Scott 1924, 8) In contrast to the Christianity – as Scott rightly writes – „the Hermetists have no Christ, and no equivalent for Christ. In the view of the Hermetists, every man is (potentially at least) what the Christians held Christ, but Christ alone, to be; for the Hermetists said that each and every man is a being whose origin and home is the world above, and who has come down to earth and been incarnated for a time, but (if he lives aright on earth) return to the home above from which he came” (Scott 1924, 12).

⁴⁷ Moreschini 1985, 81-83; Moreschini 2000, 116-119.

⁴⁸ Moreschini 1985, 117; Moreschini 2000, 156.

⁴⁹ Moreschini 1985, 118; Moreschini 2000, 156.

⁵⁰ Moreschini 1985, 85; Moreschini 2000, 123. Parri 2005, 20.

⁵¹ Sfamanti Gasparro 1993, 107-138; Sfamanti Gasparro 2018, 111-139.

or *mens* which separates out for him its divine meaning and gives him a spiritual mastery over it, as in the familiar gnostic revelation or experience of the ascent of the soul through the sphere of the planets to become immersed in the divine."⁵²

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⁵² Yates 2002, 4-5.

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