
I

⟨Discourse⟩ of Hermes Trismegistus: Poimandres

[1] Once, when thought came to me of the things that are and my thinking soared high and my bodily senses were restrained, like someone heavy with sleep from too much eating or toil of the body, an enormous being completely unbounded in size seemed to appear to me and call my name and say to me: “What do you want to hear and see; what do you want to learn and know from your understanding?”

[2] “Who are you?” I asked.

“I am Poimandres,” he said, “mind of sovereignty; I know what you want, and I am with you everywhere.”

[3] I said, “I wish to learn about the things that are, to understand their nature and to know god. How much I want to hear!” I said.

Then he said to me: “Keep in mind all that you wish to learn, and I will teach you.”

[4] Saying this, he changed his appearance, and in an instant everything was immediately opened to me. I saw an endless vision in which everything became light – clear and joyful – and in seeing the vision I came to love it. After a little while, darkness arose separately and descended – fearful and gloomy – coiling sinuously so that it looked to me like a ⟨snake⟩. Then the darkness changed into something of a watery nature, indescribably agitated and smoking like a fire; it produced an unspeakable wailing roar. Then an inarticulate cry like the voice of fire came forth from it. [5] But from the light . . . a holy word mounted upon the ⟨watery⟩ nature, and untempered fire leapt up from the watery nature to the height above. The fire was nimble and piercing and active as well, and because the air was light it followed after spirit and rose up to the fire away from earth and water so that it seemed suspended from the fire. Earth and water stayed behind, mixed with one another, so that ⟨earth⟩ could not be distinguished from water, but they were stirred to hear by the spiritual word that moved upon them.

[6] Poimandres said to me, "Have you understood what this vision means?"

"I shall come to know," said I.

"I am the light you saw, mind, your god," he said, "who existed before the watery nature that appeared out of darkness. The lightgiving word who comes from mind is the son of god."

"Go on," I said.

"This is what you must know: that in you which sees and hears is the word of the lord, but your mind is god the father; they are not divided from one another for their union is life."

"Thank you," I said.

"Understand the light, then, and recognize it." [7] After he said this, he looked me in the face for such a long time that I trembled at his appearance. But when he raised his head, I saw in my mind the light of powers beyond number and a boundless cosmos that had come to be. The fire, encompassed by great power and subdued, kept its place fixed. In the vision I had because of the discourse of Poimandres, these were my thoughts. [8] Since I was terrified, out of my wits, he spoke to me again. "In your mind you have seen the archetypal form, the preprinciple that exists before a beginning without end." This was what Poimandres said to me.

"The elements of nature – whence have they arisen?" I asked.

And he answered: "From the counsel of god which, having taken in the word and having seen the beautiful cosmos, imitated it, having become a cosmos through its own elements and its progeny of souls. [9] The mind who is god, being androgyne and existing as life and light, by speaking gave birth to a second mind, a craftsman, who, as god of fire and spirit, crafted seven governors; they encompass the sensible world in circles, and their government is called fate."

[10] "From the elements [] that weigh downwards, the word of god leapt straight up to the pure craftwork of nature and united with the craftsman-mind (for the word was of the same substance). The weighty elements of nature were left behind, bereft of reason, so as to be mere matter. [11] The craftsman-mind, together with the word, encompassing the circles and whirling them about with a rush, turned his craftworks

about, letting them turn from an endless beginning to a limitless end, for it starts where it stops. Revolving as mind wished them to, the circles brought forth from the weighty elements living things without reason (for they no longer kept the word with them); and the air brought forth winged things; the water things that swim. Earth and water had been separated from one another as mind wished, and (earth) brought forth from herself the living things that she held within, four-footed beasts (and) crawling things, wild animals and tame.”

[12] “Mind, the father of all, who is life and light, gave birth to a man like himself whom he loved as his own child. The man was most fair: he had the father’s image; and god, who was really in love with his own form, bestowed on him all his craftworks. [13] And after the man had observed what the craftsman had created with the father’s help, he also wished to make some craftwork, and the father agreed to this. Entering the craftsman’s sphere, where he was to have all authority, the man observed his brother’s craftworks; the governors loved the man, and each gave a share of his own order. Learning well their essence and sharing in their nature, the man wished to break through the circumference of the circles to observe the rule of the one given power over the fire.”

[14] “Having all authority over the cosmos of mortals and unreasoning animals, the man broke through the vault and stooped to look through the cosmic framework, thus displaying to lower nature the fair form of god. Nature smiled for love when she saw him whose fairness brings no surfeit (and) who holds in himself all the energy of the governors and the form of god, for in the water she saw the shape of the man’s fairest form and upon the earth its shadow. When the man saw in the water the form like himself as it was in nature, he loved it and wished to inhabit it; wish and action came in the same moment, and he inhabited the unreasoning form. Nature took hold of her beloved, hugged him all about and embraced him, for they were lovers.”

[15] “Because of this, unlike any other living thing on earth, mankind is twofold – in the body mortal but immortal in the essential man. Even though he is immortal and has authority over all things, mankind is affected by mortality because he is subject to fate; thus, although man is above the cosmic framework, he became a slave within it. He is androgyne because he comes from an androgyne father, and he never sleeps because he comes from one who is sleepless. (Yet love and sleep are his) masters.”

[16] And after this: “. . ., o my mind. I love the word also.”

Poimandres said: "This is the mystery that has been kept hidden until this very day. When nature made love with the man, she bore a wonder most wondrous. In him he had the nature of the cosmic framework of the seven, who are made of fire and spirit, as I told you, and without delay nature at once gave birth to seven men, androgyne and exalted, whose natures were like those of the seven governors."

And after this: "O Poimandres, now I have come into a great longing, and I yearn to hear; so do not digress."

And Poimandres said, "Be silent; I have not yet unfolded to you the first discourse."

"As you see, I am silent," said I.

[17] "As I said, then, the birth of the seven was as follows. (Earth) was the female. Water did the fertilizing. Fire was the maturing force. Nature took spirit from the ether and brought forth bodies in the shape of the man. From life and light the man became soul and mind; from life came soul, from light came mind, and all things in the cosmos of the senses remained thus until a cycle ended (and) kinds of things began to be."

[18] "Hear the rest, the word you yearn to hear. When the cycle was completed, the bond among all things was sundered by the counsel of god. All living things, which had been androgyne, were sundered into two parts – humans along with them – and part of them became male, part likewise female. But god immediately spoke a holy speech: 'Increase in increasing and multiply in multitude, all you creatures and craftworks, and let him (who) is mindful recognize that he is immortal, that desire is the cause of death, and let him recognize all that exists.'"

[19] "After god said this, providence, through fate and through the cosmic framework, caused acts of intercourse and set in train acts of birth; and all things were multiplied according to kind. The one who recognized himself attained the chosen good, but the one who loved the body that came from the error of desire goes on in darkness, errant, suffering sensibly the effects of death."

[20] "Those who lack knowledge, what great wrong have they done," I asked, "that they should be deprived of immortality?"

"You behave like a person who has not given thought to what he has heard. Did I not tell you to think?"

"I am thinking; I remember; and I am grateful as well."

“If you have understood, tell me: why do they deserve death who are in death?”

“Because what first gives rise to each person’s body is the hateful darkness, from which comes the watery nature, from which the body was constituted in the sensible cosmos, from which death drinks.”

[21] “Truly you have understood. But why is it that ‘he who has understood himself advances toward god,’ as god’s discourse has it?”

“Because,” I said, “the father of all things was constituted of light and life, and from him the man came to be.”

“You say your speech well. Life and light are god and father, from whom the man came to be. So if you learn that you are from light and life and that you happen to come from them, you shall advance to life once again.” This is what Poimandres said.

“But tell me again,” I asked, “how shall I advance to life, O my mind? For god says, ‘Let the person who is mindful recognize himself.’ [22] All people have mind, do they not?”

“Hold your tongue, fellow. Enough talk. I myself, the mind, am present to the blessed and good and pure and merciful – to the reverent – and my presence becomes a help; they quickly recognize everything, and they propitiate the father lovingly and give thanks, praising and singing hymns affectionately and in the order appropriate to him. Before giving up the body to its proper death, they loathe the senses for they see their effects. Or rather I, the mind, will not permit the effects of the body to strike and work their results on them. As gatekeeper, I will refuse entry to the evil and shameful effects, cutting off the anxieties that come from them. [23] But from these I remain distant – the thoughtless and evil and wicked and envious and greedy and violent and irreverent – giving way to the avenging demon who {wounds the evil person}, assailing him sensibly with the piercing fire and thus arming him the better for lawless deeds so that greater vengeance may befall him. Such a person does not cease longing after insatiable appetites, struggling in the darkness without satisfaction. {This} tortures him and makes the fire grow upon him all the more.”

[24] “You have taught me all things well, o mind, just as I wanted. But tell me again (about) the way up; tell me how it happens.”

To this Poimandres said: “First, in releasing the material body you give the body itself over to alteration, and the form that you used to have vanishes. To the demon you give over your temperament, now

inactive. The body's senses rise up and flow back to their particular sources, becoming separate parts and mingling again with the energies. And feeling and longing go on toward irrational nature. [25] Thence the human being rushes up through the cosmic framework, at the first zone surrendering the energy of increase and decrease; at the second evil machination, a device now inactive; at the third the illusion of longing, now inactive; at the fourth the ruler's arrogance, now freed of excess; at the fifth unholy presumption and daring recklessness; at the sixth the evil impulses that come from wealth, now inactive; and at the seventh zone the deceit that lies in ambush. [26] And then, stripped of the effects of the cosmic framework, the human enters the region of the ogdoad; he has his own proper power, and along with the blessed he hymns the father. Those present there rejoice together in his presence, and, having become like his companions, he also hears certain powers that exist beyond the ogdoadic region and hymn god with sweet voice. They rise up to the father in order and surrender themselves to the powers, and, having become powers, they enter into god. This is the final good for those who have received knowledge: to be made god. Why do you still delay? Having learned all this, should you not become guide to the worthy so that through you the human race might be saved by god?"

[27] As he was saying this to me, Poimandres joined with the powers. Then he sent me forth, empowered and instructed on the nature of the universe and on the supreme vision, after I had given thanks to the father of all and praised him. And I began proclaiming to mankind the beauty of reverence and knowledge: "People, earthborn men, you who have surrendered yourselves to drunkenness and sleep and ignorance of god, make yourselves sober and end your drunken sickness, for you are bewitched in unreasoning sleep."

[28] When they heard, they gathered round with one accord. And I said, "Why have you surrendered yourselves to death, earthborn men, since you have the right to share in immortality? You who have journeyed with error, who have partnered with ignorance, think again: escape the shadowy light; leave corruption behind and take a share in immortality."

[29] Some of them, who had surrendered themselves to the way of death, resumed their mocking and withdrew, while those who desired to be taught cast themselves at my feet. Having made them rise, I became guide to my race, teaching them the words – how to be saved and in what manner – and I sowed the words of wisdom among them, and they were nourished from the ambrosial water. When evening came and the sun's light began to disappear entirely, I commanded them to give thanks

to god, and when each completed the thanksgiving, he turned to his own bed.

[30] Within myself I recorded the kindness of Poimandres, and I was deeply happy because I was filled with what I wished, for the sleep of my body became sobriety of soul, the closing of my eyes became true vision, my silence became pregnant with good, and the birthing of the word became a progeny of goods. This happened to me because I was receptive of mind – of Poimandres, that is, the word of sovereignty. I have arrived, inspired with the divine breath of truth. Therefore, I give praise to god the father from my soul and with all my might:

[31] Holy is god, the father of all;

Holy is god, whose counsel is done by his own powers;

Holy is god, who wishes to be known and is known by his own people;

Holy are you, who by the word have constituted all things that are;

Holy are you, from whom all nature was born as image;

Holy are you, of whom nature has not made a like figure;

Holy are you, who are stronger than every power;

Holy are you, who surpass every excellence;

Holy are you, mightier than praises.

You whom we address in silence, the unspeakable, the unsayable, accept pure speech offerings from a heart and soul that reach up to you. [32] Grant my request not to fail in the knowledge that befits our essence; give me power; and with this gift I shall enlighten those who are in ignorance, brothers of my race, but your sons. Thus I believe and I bear witness; I advance to life and light. Blessed are you, father. He who is your man wishes to join you in the work of sanctification since you have provided him all authority.