

# Navigating the Anthropocene: Insights from the Wisdom of the Corpus Hermeticum

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## Abstract

What is nature? And what is humanity's role in the world? Such questions have been asked for millennia and constitute major themes of philosophical enquiry. However, they take on a special urgency for leaders in the context of the Anthropocene, a new geological era in which "human activities have become so pervasive and profound that they rival the great forces of nature" and have potentially catastrophic consequences for all life on earth.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper we review the characteristics of three meta-narratives that address human-nature relationships: Anthropocentric, Cosmocentric, and Theocentric.<sup>2</sup> We appraise their contested ontologies and epistemologies, or different assumptions about "being" and "knowing", which are embedded in contrasting worldviews, and which profoundly shape how global sustainability problems and solutions are framed and legitimized today.

The paper goes on to explore insights from ancient wisdom, and in particular ideas from the Hermetic tradition. It outlines the Hermetic idea of "The Three Heads of Knowledge": Atum (or God), Cosmos, and Humankind, and argues that such a framework can help establish a more integral worldview today. The Hermetic system presents a broader view of human nature, of Mind (Nous), Soul and Body, with a capacity to have relationships with many planes of being – both spiritual and material; and a higher human purpose, related to fulfilling our spiritual potential.

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<sup>1</sup> Steffen, W., Crutzen, P.J. & McNeill, J.R., (2007), 'The Anthropocene: are humans now overwhelming the great forces of nature' in *AMBIO: A Journal of the Human Environment* 36 (8): 614-621

<sup>2</sup> In this chapter the words 'Cosmocentric' and 'Ecocentric' are used interchangeably.

Hermetic wisdom outlines a spiritual path of “regeneration”, cultivated through quiet contemplative practices and a pious life. This interior journey involves transcending the limitations of time, space and generation, and expanding the consciousness to merge with *Nous* – or the Mind of God. Self-realization implies oneness with the truth of divine intelligible causes, principles and powers. This knowledge is beyond human opinion, and the knowledge of the laws of nature.

We propose that the ancient wisdom of Hermes has several implications for addressing contemporary challenges. Its integral worldview provides a key to reconciling apparently contradictory philosophies and enriches our understanding of the paradox of what it means to be human: “a part of”, as well as “apart from” nature. It also suggests methods of social and ecological regeneration. Unlike most sustainability solutions today, these methods focus on realising humanity's inner spiritual potential and role. These include but go beyond both Anthropocentric and Cosmocentric worldviews.

## 1. The Challenges of the Anthropocene

Scientists claim we have entered a new geological era they have named the Anthropocene, in which “human activities have become so pervasive and profound that they rival the great forces of nature”.<sup>3</sup> We are warned that we face a “perfect storm” of interconnected social, environmental, and economic challenges, which have potentially catastrophic consequences for all life on earth.<sup>4</sup> These challenges relate to:

*Planet.* We are currently using the equivalent of 1.5 planet’s worth of resources to fuel our economic growth, and consumption, generating risks for business.<sup>5</sup> Our fossil fuel based, linear, take-make-waste economy creates climate disruption, biodiversity loss, water shortages, resource scarcity, violent conflicts, and mountains of

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<sup>3</sup> Steffen et al. (2007) Crutzen, P.J. & Stoermer, E.F., (2000), “The “Anthropocene” in *Global Change Newsletter*, 41, 17

<sup>4</sup> Jeanrenaud, S., Jeanrenaud, J-P. & Gosling, J. (eds.) (2017), *Sustainable Business: a one planet approach*, Chichester, UK: Wiley

<sup>5</sup> WWF (2016), *Living Planet Report 2016: Risk and Resilience in a New Era*, Gland, Switzerland: WWF

toxic waste. The “ecological disconnect” between people and nature is undermining our life support systems.<sup>6</sup>

*People.* Wealth is not trickling down. Just eight men own the same wealth as the 3.6 billion people who make up the poorest half of humanity.<sup>7</sup> Power and privilege are skewing the economic system, increasing extreme inequalities, and creating a “social disconnect” between the rich and the rest. This is unethical, unjust, socially divisive, politically corrosive, and ecologically and economically damaging in the long term.<sup>8</sup>

*Profit.* The financial sector is unstable, favouring speculation and “phantom wealth” over investment in real wealth.<sup>9</sup> This “economic disconnect” is driving boom and bust cycles, creating debt, holding governments hostage to corporations and financiers, and undermining efforts to invest in a sustainable economy.

*Power.* Corporations spend billions of dollars a year on lobbying governments, international trade and financial institutions, and influencing decisions relating to taxes, subsidies, trade deals and legislation. These support private gain at the expense of people and planet and threaten democratic processes.<sup>10</sup>

*Person.* Rates of stress and depression are increasing worldwide. Some 1 million people die by suicide each year, and it is the leading cause of death among young people.<sup>11</sup> Materialistic values and consumerism generate chronic dissatisfaction, do not fulfil our human potential, and create an inner ‘spiritual disconnect’.<sup>12</sup>

Countless analysts point to the failure of outdated paradigms and worldviews that shape our perceptions of nature, and our place in the

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<sup>6</sup> Scharmer, O. & Kaufer, K. (2013), *Leading from the Emerging Future. From Ego-System to Eco-System Economics. Applying Theory U to Transforming Business, Society and the Self*, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers

<sup>7</sup> Oxfam (2017), ‘An economy for the 99%’, Oxfam Briefing Paper, January 2017

<sup>8</sup> Scharmer & Kaufer (2013)

<sup>9</sup> Korten, D. (2010), *Agenda for a New Economy: From phantom wealth to real wealth*, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers

<sup>10</sup> Jeanrenaud et al. (2017)

<sup>11</sup> WHO (2014), *Preventing Suicide: a global imperative* (Geneva: WHO)

<sup>12</sup> Scharmer & Kaufer (2013)

world. Many argue for the need to rethink our eco-philosophies and eco-psychologies if we are to survive the Anthropocene.<sup>13</sup>

An influential line of debate is that arrogant anthropocentric mindsets and values need to be replaced with ecocentric approaches – ones which recognize that all life is interconnected and interdependent, and that humans are “part of nature”. Some argue that western religious thought (particularly Christianity)<sup>14</sup> and modernistic philosophies, which have privileged human reason, and justified human control of nature, are the cause of our current ecological predicament.

This chapter recognizes the validity of such perspectives and agrees that they make important contributions to expanded awareness. However, in this chapter we argue that such positions can be further enriched by the wisdom of the ancients, which goes beyond anthropocentric and ecocentric worldviews, to embrace spiritual dimensions. We explore insights from the *Corpus Hermeticum* which help “re-member” deeper ways of seeing and being,<sup>15</sup> which may provide new outlooks for navigating the Anthropocene.

## 2. People Nature Narratives

What is “nature”? What is humanity’s role in the world? And why do these questions matter? Such questions have been asked for millennia and constitute major themes of philosophical enquiry. Today, there are many contrasting and contested schools of thought, which have become the rich subject matter of eco-philosophy. This field of scholarship draws from philosophy, anthropology, ecology, ethics, psychology, linguistics, arts and theology.

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<sup>13</sup> Heikkurinen, P., Rinkinen, J., Jarvensivu, T., Wile, K., Ruuska (2016) ‘Organising in the Anthropocene: an ontological outline for ecocentric theorizing’ in *Journal of Cleaner Production*. Vol. 113: 705-714; Montuori, A., Purser, R., Park, C. (1995) ‘Limits to Anthropocentricism: Towards an Ecocentric Organization Paradigm’ in *The Academy of Management Review* 20(4):1053-1089

<sup>14</sup> White, L. (1967) ‘The Historical Roots of Ecological Crisis’ in *Science* Vol. 155:1203-1207

<sup>15</sup> We use the verb to ‘re-member’ to mean to reintegrate separated parts, and to recall our essential nature.

It is not the intention of this paper to examine the roots and variety of eco-philosophies in detail, which are well reviewed elsewhere (for example see Pepper, 1989, 1996). Rather, this section will outline three broad meta-narratives, which lie beneath this diversity, namely: the Anthropocentric, Cosmocentric and Theocentric. See Table 1 for examples of diverse people-nature narratives.

Table 1. Examples of Contemporary People-Nature Narratives

**Deep Ecology:** nature has intrinsic value that transcends human values (Naess, 1973).

**Animal Liberation:** non-human beings are part of the moral community with rights (Singer, 1975).

**Social Ecology:** ecological and social problems are rooted in problems of social hierarchy (Bookchin, 1980).

**Ecofeminism:** the Scientific Revolution is involved in the ecological crisis and the devaluation of women (Merchant, 1980).

**Political Ecology:** ecology is shaped by politics, economy, and society (Blaikie, 1985).

**Spiritual Ecology:** The universe is a communion of subjects rather than a collection of objects (Berry, 1988).

**Ecological Modernization:** the economy will benefit if economy and ecology are combined (Hajer, 1995).

**Eco-Paganism:** religious rituals and practices based on reverence for nature (Taylor 1995).

**Indigenous Wisdom:** indigenous cultures and knowledge are critical to the protection of biodiversity (Posey, 1999).

**Environmentalism of the Poor:** protecting nature is involved in the liberation movements of the poor (Guha, 1999).

**Bright Green:** sustainability solutions can be found through eco-technological design & social innovation (Steffen, 2003).

**Panpsychism:** sees the world as a communicative presence in its own right, capable of a dialogical congress with us (Mathews, 2003).

**Dark Ecology:** humans are waking up to their enmeshment with other beings as a result of the Anthropocene. 'Nature', as an idea, is no longer relevant (Morton, 2009, 2016).

### Three Meta-Narratives

Jeanrenaud (1998) outlined three meta-narratives, or contrasting eco-philosophies, to help interpret diverse perspectives influencing international conservation policies and practices.<sup>16</sup> These help to expose different ontologies and epistemologies shaping ideas about what we think nature “is”, and how we “know” it. They also help explain why sustainability problems and solutions are framed and legitimized in such diverse ways today. These are:

- i. Anthropocentric: the view that nature and god are contained in humans.
- ii. Cosmocentric: the view that humans and god are contained in nature.
- iii. Theocentric: the view that humans and nature are contained in god or father-mother mind.

#### i. Anthropocentric

*“Humans know nature through socially-constructed science. Nature per se does not exist. Nature is only the name given to a certain contemporary state of science.”*<sup>17</sup>

The Anthropocentric narrative puts “humans” centre stage. Humans are usually seen as apart from nature, due to human attributes of self-consciousness and reason. Some of its more technological roots can be traced back to the scientific revolution and the image of “nature as a machine”, and Baconian scientific rationalism.<sup>18</sup>

More recently, constructivist philosophers have argued that what we consider to be “nature” and “natural” varies across cultures, and that we cannot know nature or god independently of a cultural lens. Rather, we make them in our image. We ascribe meanings to nature

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<sup>16</sup> Jeanrenaud, S. (1998) *‘Can the Leopard Change its Spots? Exploring People-Oriented Conservation in WWF’*, PhD Monograph, School of International Development, University of East Anglia; Jeanrenaud, S. (2002) *People-Oriented Conservation in Global Conservation. Is the Leopard Changing its Spots?* London: IIED & Brighton: IISD

<sup>17</sup> Larrère, C. (1996) ‘Ethics, politics, science, and the environment concerning the natural contract’, in J. Baird Callicott and Fernando J. R. da Rocha (eds.) 1996 *Earth Summit Ethics Toward a Reconstructive Postmodern Philosophy of Environmental Education*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> Pepper, D. (1989) *The Roots of Modern Environmentalism*, London: Routledge

and interact with it on the basis of those meanings.<sup>19</sup> Such perspectives do not necessarily appeal to objective science for the facts in defining sustainability problems. Rather they are inclined to ask, “what *counts* as a problem, and to whom?”.

The root causes of sustainability problems are framed in social, political or economic terms. For example, they highlight how social inequalities and injustices are driving some forms of environmental degradation. Sustainability solutions are likewise framed in these sociological terms, and emphasise cultural, economic and political answers.<sup>20</sup> From this perspective it can be argued that *nature and god are contained in people, and it is culture that mediates nature and god.*

On the positive side, Anthropocentrists are receptive to plural knowledge systems; analyze the inter-connections between social and ecological issues, and importantly, expose the link between knowledge and power. However, from an extreme post-modern epistemological position, nature appears to have no value or significance beyond our perception of it, and all knowledge systems become equal. Critics have pointed out that this over-socialized view of nature can be used to justify a hubristic pursuit of human interests at the expense of all other life forms, a trend which some claim is undermining planetary life support systems.<sup>21</sup>

ii. Cosmocentric

“ . . . *the truth is we ARE nature. In fact, biomimicry works precisely because there is no difference between what we do and what other organisms do – the boundary between us and the rest of the natural world is a false one and dissolves when you consider what’s really important, what makes life worth living.*”<sup>22</sup>

The Cosmocentric narrative puts “nature” centre stage. Pepper outlines how some early cosmocentric streams of thought shaped

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<sup>19</sup> Evernden, N. (1992) *The Social Creation of Nature*, London: John Hopkins University Press; Seeland, K. (ed.) (1997) *Nature is Culture: Indigenous Knowledge and Socio-cultural Aspect of Trees and Forests in Non-European Cultures*, London: Intermediate Technology Publication

<sup>20</sup> Bookchin, M. (1980) *Toward an Ecological Society*, Montreal: Black Rose Books; Merchant (1980); Blaikie, P. (1985) *The Political Ecology of Soil Erosion in Developing Countries*, New York: Longman

<sup>21</sup> Benton, T. (1994) ‘Biology and Social Theory in the Environmental Debate’ in *Social Theory and the Global Environment*, Redclift, M. & Benton, T. (eds.)

<sup>22</sup> Benyus, J. (2012) p. 10

nineteenth century romanticism, and poetic conceptions of nature.<sup>23</sup> The influential philosophy of “deep ecology”<sup>24</sup> claims that nature has intrinsic value that transcends human values, and that our estrangement from nature is a root cause of environmental problems. More recently, and influenced by the evolution of systems thinking, Cosmocentric philosophers claim that humans are part of nature, the product of evolution and subject to the same laws as the rest of nature, and that there is no dividing line between humans and non-humans.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, our self-realization is dependent on recognizing our interdependence and oneness with nature. More recently, anthropocentric categories of thought have been critiqued for separating humans from nature, suggesting that even the concept of “nature” is redundant.<sup>26</sup>

Cosmocentric solutions to global sustainability problems focus on the need for humans to live in ways that do not to exceed the earth’s carrying capacity or transgress planetary boundaries. It is argued that we need to reclaim our connection with non-human nature and develop ecocentric ontologies<sup>27</sup>. From a Cosmocentric standpoint, it can be argued that *god and people are contained in nature*, and that it is *nature that mediates humanity and god*.

On the positive side Cosmocentrics challenge the arrogance of the Anthropocentric position, and our separation from nature. They promote an understanding of the interdependent character of natural systems, and foster respect for other life forms. However, where Cosmocentrics stick narrowly to the science of the material realms, they tend to overlook the socially constructed nature of knowledge, and the knowledge of transcendent or spiritual planes. Taken to an extreme, such views can support biological determinism (we are simply products of nature or our genes), which has been used to justify and excuse any human behaviour, including violence and

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<sup>23</sup> Pepper (1996)

<sup>24</sup> Naess, A. (1973) ‘The shallow and the deep long range ecology movement, a summary’ in *Inquiry* 16: 1-4

<sup>25</sup> e.g. Benyus (2012)

<sup>26</sup> Mathews, F. (2003) *For Love of Matter, a Contemporary Panpsychism*, Albany NY: SUNY Press; Morton, T. (2009) *Ecology without Nature, Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press; Morton, T. (2016) *Dark Ecology: for a Logic of Future Co-existence*, New York: Columbia University Press

<sup>27</sup> Heikkurinen et al. (2016)



euthanasia. It is also critiqued for its undertones of paganism, and association with quasi-fascist Aryan movements.<sup>28</sup>

iii. Theocentric

*“In our inner world there is something not bound by the laws of nature, by the laws of time and space. In the inmost of our soul there is the world of spirit, and the world of spirit is free.”*<sup>29</sup>

The Theocentric narrative puts God or Divinity centre stage. It assumes the subsistence of a spiritual source, preserver and goal of all life, which is a reality behind and beyond existence. This transcendent and immanent reality is beyond time, without boundaries, and non-material, but is the cause of all finite and corporeal beings. Nature is valued because it is an outward expression and symbol of God. Humanity has the capacity to know and relate to this realm through spiritual insight or noesis.<sup>30</sup> Sustainability problems are seen as the result of inner human perversions, such as greed, aversion or delusion.<sup>31</sup> Sustainability solutions are framed in terms of inner work, purification and transformation, and living in conformity with the Way, the Dhamma, or Divine Wisdom. From this perspective it can be argued that *people and nature are contained in God*, and that it is *God that mediates people and nature*.

On the positive side, Theocentrics challenge the scientific materialism of both Anthro- and Cosmo-centric positions, and have ideas, which resonate increasingly with post-material science.<sup>32</sup> Theocentric approaches foster a reverence for the sacredness and mystery of life and see the transcendent reflected in nature. However, when taken to an extreme, deferral to God, or an over-emphasis on the impermanence of existence, can undermine responsibility towards manifested nature, and produce limiting fatalistic attitudes with

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<sup>28</sup> Schwartz, W. (2009) ‘Obituary: Arne Naess’ in *The Guardian* Thursday 15th January 2009 <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2009/jan/15/obituary-arne-naess> (accessed 8/11/17)

<sup>29</sup> Mascaro, J. (1965) *The Upanishads*, London: Penguin, p. 20

<sup>30</sup> Mascaro, J. (1965)

<sup>31</sup> Batchelor, S. (1992) ‘The Sands of the Ganges. Notes towards a Buddhist and Ecological Philosophy’ in *Buddhism and Ecology*, Batchelor, M. & Brown, K. (eds.), London: Cassell

<sup>32</sup> Beauregard et al. (2014)

respect to environmental degradation. Emphasis on reforming “interior” nature can be used to excuse passivity in relation to “exterior” nature. Furthermore, a doctrinaire approach, at the expense of reason, can support unchallenged religious dogmas, which support repressive theocratic political regimes.

Table 2. People, Nature and God in Different Meta-Narratives

	Anthropocentric	Cosmocentric	Theocentric
Ontology	Subjective being	Objective being	Spiritual being
Epistemology	Socially constructed	Positivist science	Noesis
Human position	Apart <i>from</i> nature	A part <i>of</i> nature	Humans engage with spiritual and material realms
Value of nature	Use Values	Intrinsic value Scientific value	Sacred value
Sustainability Problems	Social-political-economic injustice	Transgressing planetary boundaries	Inner transgressions; greed, hate, delusion
Sustainability Solutions	Social-political-economic reform	Protection of nature; nature based solution	Spiritual / Inner transformations

While such eco-philosophies rarely constitute pressing everyday concerns for decision-makers, they are deeply embedded in the ways we see ourselves and the world, and shape leadership and management approaches. How we perceive nature is not ethically neutral. Philosophical subtexts contain moral and normative arguments with different political and economic agendas, which drive social movements, influence policy and funding decisions, and affect lives. They therefore need to be made visible and carefully examined.

For example, WWF’s mission is to “achieve the conservation of nature” and “to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature”.<sup>33</sup> But conservation practitioners interpret the concepts of “nature”, and how to “live in harmony with nature” in contrasting ways. Conservation history reveals that ideas about what constitutes a threat to nature, how to protect it, and how conservation is legitimized have evolved over time, privileging the interests of some groups over others.<sup>34</sup>

The three meta-narratives confront us with several versions of reality and ways of knowing. Each narrative appears true in certain senses. Our experiences may draw us to each worldview, yet the extremes of each seem repelling. To hold one perspective seems to deny the truth of the other. From the standpoint of contemporary science, and logical argumentation, they can’t all be true. Can such views ever be reconciled? The next section explores insights from ancient wisdom, with a focus on the Hermetic tradition, a perennial philosophy, which helps establish a more integral model.

### 3. Insights from the Hermetic Teachings

#### 3.1 Background to the Hermetic Tradition

This section outlines a theoretical framework inspired by the Hermetic Tradition, one of the world’s oldest wisdom traditions, which may offer fresh perspectives on how to navigate the contemporary Anthropocene. The Hermetic texts were compiled in the early centuries CE but their origins are lost in antiquity. Scholarship believes the Hermetic writings to be based on oral wisdom teachings originally derived from ancient Egypt.<sup>35</sup>

These wisdom teachings are attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, also known as Thrice Greatest Thoth (the Ibis-headed Egyptian god). The Greeks of the classical and Hellenistic period considered Thoth and Hermes to be one and the same.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> WWF (2016)

<sup>34</sup> Jeanrenaud (2002); Corry (2015)

<sup>35</sup> Salaman, C. van Oyen & Wharton, W.D. (1999) *The Way of Hermes. The Corpus Hermeticum*, London: Gerald Duckworth & Co.

<sup>36</sup> Hart, G. (2005) *The Routledge Dictionary of Egyptian Gods and Goddesses*, London: Routledge

The teachings were originally never written down, but the precepts and axioms were later collected together in narrative-style. The major philosophical or religious texts of the Hermetic doctrine include:

The *Corpus Hermeticum*, which consists of seventeen short texts composed in Greek, and which are presented in dialogue form between three generations of teachers and disciples.

The *Asclepius* (or *The Perfect Sermon*), composed in Latin.

The *Definitions of Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius*, composed in Armenian.

The *Emerald Tablet*.

It is widely accepted that the *Corpus Hermeticum* was produced between the first and third centuries AD in Alexandria, a then cosmopolitan city including a mix of Greek, Egyptian, Jewish and other traditions. The origin and authenticity of the texts have been much debated, with some scholars rejecting the works as a miscellany of Hellenistic thought ascribed to an ancient Egyptian sage, but with little native Egyptian origin. More recent scholars have recognized the specific contributions of Egyptian thought to the texts.<sup>37</sup>

A Greek manuscript of the *Corpus* was translated into Latin by Ficino in 1471, where it subsequently had influence on Renaissance thinking. There have been several English translations including the first by Dr. John Everard in 1650; J.D. Chambers in 1882; W.W. Westcott in 1894; G.R.S. Mead in 1906; Nock and Festugière 1946; Copenhaver 1992; and Salaman, van Oyen & Wharton, 1999; Freke, T. & Gandy, P. 2008. There have also been various arrangements of the *Corpus*, including one by the Editors of *The Shrine of Wisdom*, First Edition 1923, based on several of the earlier translations. This arrangement has shaped the conceptual framework presented in this paper.

The Hermetic tradition greatly influenced early Christian and Renaissance thought and science, although its main principles can be found in all the world religions. The teachings are not associated with any particular religion or creed, but are considered a “Master Key”, which opens the doors to the mysteries.<sup>38</sup> The Christian Church later

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<sup>37</sup> Quispel, G. (1999) ‘Preface’ in Salaman, C. van Oyen & Wharton, W.D. (1999) *The Way of Hermes. The Corpus Hermeticum*, London: Gerald Duckworth & Co.

<sup>38</sup> Three Initiates (1940) *The Kybalion: Hermetic Philosophy*, London: Yogi Publications Society.

distanced itself from Hermetic philosophy, and it subsequently went underground and became associated with esoteric and secret societies and teachings.

There are many good reasons for bringing this profound philosophy to light in the context of current global sustainability challenges. One powerful idea – that of an “integral world view” – is explored below. Section 3.2 outlines its major features; while section 3.3 considers some of its implications, and perhaps fresh perspectives for navigating the challenges of the Anthropocene.

### 3.2 An Integral Worldview

Hermetic wisdom provides a basis for developing an integral worldview based on its model of Three Heads of Knowledge, which provides a key to understanding, and perhaps even a reconciling of divergent eco-philosophies.

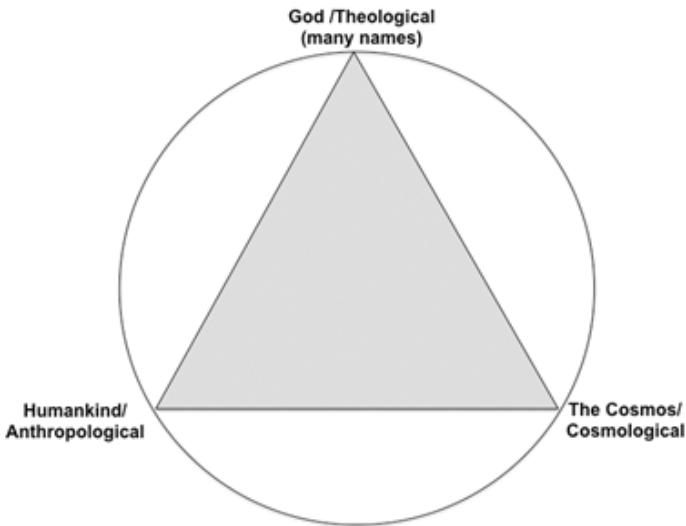


Fig 1. The Three Heads of Knowledge

The Hermetic wisdom presents three fundamental and interrelated philosophical principles of reality, within *one worldview* (rather than competing worldviews). These have been called the Three Heads of Knowledge; Three Worlds; or Spheres of Being; the Theological, Cosmological and Anthropological; or God, Cosmos, and Humankind. In fact, the Hermetic tradition is perhaps the earliest

known doctrine to philosophically distinguish between these ideas. It includes the three ideas of God, the Cosmos and Humankind as one interconnected and interdependent whole. *God (many names)*. The Hermetic tradition recognizes a non-material reality that substands, and lies hidden behind, the manifested universe, but is also mirrored and manifested within it. Some writers describe it as an “Infinite Living Mind”, which transcends our ordinary understanding of life and mind.<sup>39</sup> It is an ineffable but intelligible source, beyond names, although it has been called Atum; the One; the ALL; Light and Life; Father-Mother Mind; God (many different names). It is considered Eternal (outside time); Infinite (without boundaries); Immutable (not subject to change). It is prior to all things, but it is also immanent within the manifested, materialized Cosmos. While it is an undifferentiated unity, beyond categories and distinctions, it is within all particularized things. It is the creative source of being, the power of life, and the intelligible principle of all things, upon which all things depend and by which they are sustained. It interpenetrates all things, and yet retains an eternal, exempt transcendence. It moves all things, but is Itself neither moved nor subject to birth, decay, and death.

*The Cosmos*. In Greek, the idea of Cosmos literally denotes order and beauty (in contrast to Chaos meaning empty and void), but it is also often associated with the actual material world contacted by the senses. In the Hermetic tradition the Cosmos can be contemplated as an all-inclusive unific idea, as well as a multiplicity of diverse existences, lives, and intelligences. It *subsists* as a oneness, which some call the Cosmic Mind, or the image of God; and *exists* as the physical cosmos, which is a perfect reflection of this unity. The Cosmos is the principle by which all lives proceed and are manifested, held together and related to each other, and to their ends. It is the totality of all that is objective to God. It is filled with the energy of God, which it expresses and manifests in an infinite variety of existences. It gives rise to an outer world of change, time, space, generation and decay; but is distinct from the everlasting and creative source of all manifestation, which is beyond time, space and motion.

*Humankind*. In the Hermetic system, humankind is endowed with Mind (or Nous), Soul and Body. Humans are said to be microcosms of the macrocosm – a blend of both spiritual and corporeal principles.

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<sup>39</sup> Three Initiates (1940), p. 65

As said in the *Corpus Hermeticum*: “From Life and Light, Man became Soul and Nous; from Life – Soul, and from Light – Nous.”<sup>40</sup> The Soul is considered to be the non-material life-force of human beings. Nous is the power of Mind, the light of intellect, through which humans come to know the Cosmos and God. Both Nous and Soul are of the same immortal essence as God. Humankind also has Body, made of physical elements, which is mortal and subject to birth, growth, decay and death.

Humans have a unique blend of both matter and spirit, with both a mortal and immortal nature, which gives them a position as intermediary, a “blessed station in the midst”<sup>41</sup>, and the capacity to participate in both the material and spiritual worlds. They are the only physical beings said to be able to bridge these dimensions, which gives humankind special roles and responsibilities.

Humans can be distinguished from other creatures because they possess the potential to participate in higher mind (Nous, or the Mind of God). The Hermetic spiritual journey focuses on participating in higher levels of mind and consciousness, and on understanding the mirrored relationships between the spiritual and the concrete phases of reality. This participation can only be achieved by purifying the mind and life, by living piously, through contemplative practices, and by developing right knowledge (*gnosis*), speech (*logos*) and mind (*nous*). Indeed, it is said that humankind can embrace the whole Cosmos through Nous, and was created to appreciate and wisely tend and embellish the beauty of creation.

It is important to emphasise that the Hermetic system presents three Heads of Knowledge as interdependent principles in one integral worldview, or plural-unity, rather than as contested or competing worldviews. This is why they are presented diagrammatically as three points within one circle in Figure 1, and in “*logoi*” terms, rather than in “*centric*” terms, which tend to prioritize one worldview over the others (i.e. *Anthropological*, rather than as *Anthropocentric*).

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<sup>40</sup> *Corpus Hermeticum*, Ch. I:17

<sup>41</sup> The Shrine of Wisdom (eds.) ([1923] 2015) p.49

Extracts on the Three Heads of Knowledge from Hermetic Texts

Atum (God)

*God as Unmanifest:* “But the unmanifest for ever is. Because it has no need to manifest, being eternal, it is that which makes all other things manifest. It makes all things manifest, but is never itself manifest, and generates without itself being generated, and makes all things apparent but itself is unapparent. For appearance is only in things which are brought into being. For coming into being is nothing other than appearance.” (*Corpus Hermeticum*, 5:1 Hermes to Tat)

*God as Most Manifest:* “God is always immanent in His work, being Himself that which He creates. For if they were separate from Him, all things would collapse, all would perish of necessity, since there would be no life. But if all things are living, and life is one, then God is one.” (*Corpus Hermeticum*, 11:14 Nous to Hermes)

*God as the Unmanifest-and-the-Most-Manifest:* “This is God, greater than any name. This is the unmanifest, this the most manifest. He is that which is contemplated by Nous, yet which may be seen by the eyes. He is the incorporeal, the many-bodied, or rather the all-bodied. There is nothing, which He is not. For all that is, He also is. And for this reason He possesses all names as they are from one Father, and because of this He has no name, because He is the Father of all things.” (*Corpus Hermeticum*, 5:10 Hermes to Tat)

*Relationships between God, Cosmos and Man:* “So there are these three: firstly, God, Father and the Supreme Good. Secondly the Cosmos. And thirdly, Man. God contains the Cosmos, and the cosmos man. The Cosmos is the son of God, and Man the son of the cosmos, and as it were the grandson of God.” (*Corpus Hermeticum*, 10:14)

The Cosmos

“Therefore Eternity is in God; the Cosmos is in Eternity; Time is in the Cosmos; Generation is in time . . . Therefore the source of all things is God; Eternity is their essence; and the Cosmos is their matter. The power of God is Eternity; the work of Eternity is the Cosmos, which has never come into being, but is forever coming into being through Eternity. Therefore the Cosmos will never be destroyed (for Eternity is indestructible), nor will anything in it cease to be, for the Cosmos is encompassed by Eternity.” (*Corpus Hermeticum*, 11: 5, 7-9)

“Everything must always be begotten at exactly the right place. The Creator is in everything. He does not dwell just in one thing, nor does He



create in one. He begets them all. His power being active is not separate from what He has begotten, for all that is begotten exists by reason of Him. Through me (said the Pymander) behold the Cosmos open to your vision and contemplate deeply its beauty; its body without taint. Nothing is more ancient. It is ever new and ever in prime; indeed it exceeds its prime.” Salaman, C. van Oyen & Wharton, W.D. (1999) (*Corpus Hermeticum*, 11:6).

### Humankind

“Nous, the Father of all, who is life and light, brought forth Man, the same as himself, whom he loved as his own child, for Man was very beautiful, bearing an image of his Father. It was really his own form that God loved, and he handed him over to all his creatures.” Salaman, C. van Oyen & Wharton, W.D. (1999) (*Corpus Hermeticum*, 1:12)

“Man beyond all living things on Earth, is twofold: mortal because of his body, but immortal through the Essential (i.e. Archetypal) Man. For though he is immortal and has authority over all things, yet he suffers the conditions of mortals, being subject to Fate.” Salaman, C. van Oyen & Wharton, W.D. (1999) (*Corpus Hermeticum*, 1:15 Nous to Hermes)

“Man is a mighty wonder for he passes into God's Nature as though he were himself divine. How happy is the blend of human nature. Joined to God by his resemblance to Divinity, he looks down upon the part by which he is common with the earth. Man has his place in the blessed station of the midst; so that he loves those below himself, and, in turn, is loved by those above. Heaven seems not too high for him; for it is measured by the wisdom of his Mind (Nous) as though it were quite near.” Salaman, C. van Oyen & Wharton, W.D. (1999) (The Perfect Sermon, *Corpus Hermeticum*, 5. 1-2)

The Pymander to Hermes: “Grow to immeasurable size. Be free from every body, transcend all time. Become eternity and thus you will understand God. Suppose nothing to be impossible for yourself. Consider yourself to be immortal and able to understand everything; all arts, sciences and the nature of every living creature. Become higher than all heights, lower than all depths. Sense as one within yourself the entire creation: fire, water, dry, moist. Conceive yourself to be in all places at the same time: in earth, in the sea, in heaven; that you are not yet born, that you are within the womb, that you are young, old, dead; that you are beyond death. Conceive all things at once: times, places, actions, qualities, quantities; then you can understand God.” Salaman, C. van Oyen & Wharton, W.D. (1999) (*Corpus Hermeticum*, 11:20)

But why is it significant to differentiate Three Heads of Knowledge?

Firstly, teasing out three principles expands the field of science and ideas, to include: the spiritual and concrete worlds, the noumenal as well as the phenomenal, the incorporeal as well as the corporeal. It thus helps avoid the limitations of either predominantly spiritual or materialist worldviews. This approach resonates with the emerging field of post materialist science, in which “Mind represents an aspect of reality as primordial as the physical world. Mind is fundamental in the universe, i.e. it cannot be derived from matter and reduced to anything more basic.”<sup>42</sup>

Secondly, it helps avoid confusion between principles. If these principles are conflated with each other, the field of thought, and science, narrows; and insights into important phases of being, and their relationships are overlooked. The very fact that we can distinguish between Humankind, the Cosmos, and God reveals these fundamental distinctions. Indeed, even the act of asserting that ‘they are one’, implies that they are intuitively perceived separately. But:

Humankind is not God, because otherwise humans would be omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent, which they clearly are not.

Humankind is not the Cosmos, because humans are self-conscious and self-determining and can decide to consciously work with (or against) the laws of the Cosmos.

God is not the Cosmos, because this would make God the totality of finite, changeable and mortal existences, without infinite, immutable and immortal essence and attributes.

God is not the Soul or Life-Force of the Cosmos, because it would make God a huge animal, with the Cosmos as a body, subject to birth, decay and death.

The Cosmos is not God, because it is not the eternal source of Being, Life and Intellect, beyond time, space and motion.

The Cosmos is not the Soul, because the Cosmos contains matter, and the Soul is non-material and unitary.

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<sup>42</sup> Beauregard, M., Schartz, G.E., Miller, M., Dossey, L., Moreira-Ameida, A., Schlitz, M., Sheldrake, R. & C. Tart (2014): ‘Manifesto for a Post-Materialist Science’ in *Explore: The Journal of Science and Healing*, 10 (5): 272–274

Thirdly, the Hermetic tradition also presents the correspondences and inter-relations between these principles. While they may be considered distinct ideas or heads of knowledge for the sake of analysis, in certain senses they can all be seen as part of each other. God contains the Cosmos, and the Cosmos contains Humankind (see Figure 2). However, in the Hermetic framework, while Humanity is within the Cosmos, it is distinct from it, just as God is within the Cosmos but distinct from it.

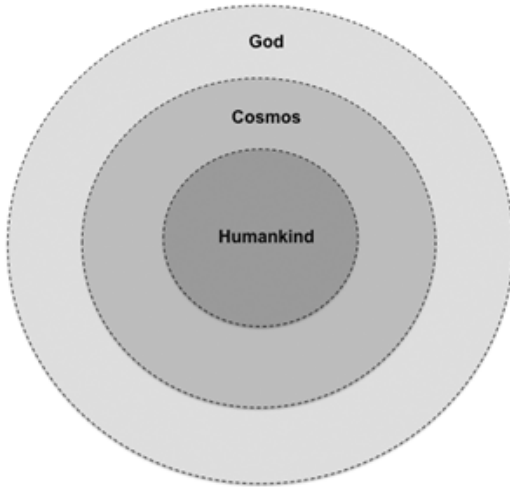


Fig. 2 Correspondences Between the Three Heads

The Hermetic framework presents manifested worlds as mirrors of an intelligible, eternal Divine reality, and presents inter-related planes of truth as subjective and objective to each other, in a cascading spectrum. The Hermetic axiom, “As Above, so Below; As Below, so Above”, suggests one set of universal principles, but operative in different phases of manifestation. In the Hermetic system, it is humankind’s prerogative to penetrate to worlds beyond the Cosmos, through participating in Mind or Nous (see Figure 3).

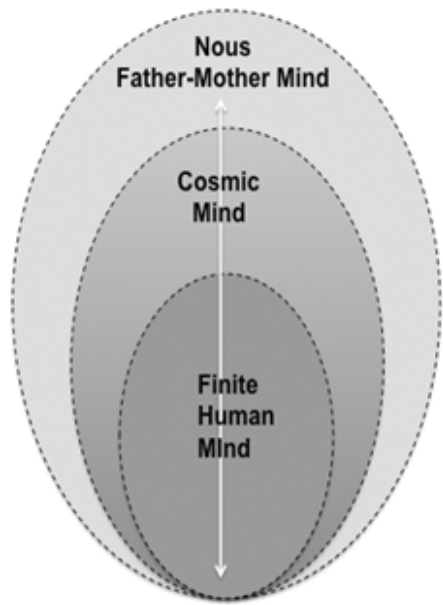


Fig. 3 Humankind’s potential to expand consciousness

### 3.3 Some Implications of an Integral Worldview

#### 3.3.1 Source of all Eco-Philosophies

One consequence of an integral worldview is that every particular eco-philosophy can rediscover its roots within it, and learn to appreciate the contribution of the others.

The Anthropocentric perspective, which focuses on Humanity, is one which recognizes the self-conscious, self-determined and creative power of humans, to imagine and construct their own worlds. But, without recognizing its interrelationships with theological and cosmological principles, humanity's infinite potential is limited, as is the harmony and prosperity that would result from living in accordance with cosmic laws.

The Cosmocentric perspective, which focuses on Nature, is one which recognizes the inter-relationships and inter-dependencies of life in all its diversity, and the wisdom of living according to life principles in solidarity with all other beings. But when it does not acknowledge its interrelationships with anthropological and theological principles, it reduces human beings to just another species among many, and fails to recognize humans' unique attributes and roles, which give humans the capacity to make ethical choices in the light of reason. It risks remaining limited to materialist approaches.

The Theocentric perspective, which focuses on God, is one which recognizes the eternal transcendent source of all being, life and intelligence, and which fosters reverence and a recognition of the sacredness of creation. But without recognizing its interrelationships with the anthropological and cosmological principles, it risks seeing humans as fallen and in need of salvation, and can result in transcendentalism, which fails to see God immanent *in* humans and *in* nature.

When each is considered in isolation it is difficult to reconcile these different ontologies and epistemologies scientifically. Science relies on rules of thought based on the "law of excluded middle term", which states that "a thing either is, or is not another thing". Those who see reality under only one aspect are inclined to disagree with those who see it under another, supposing their worldview to be contradictory, rather than complementary.

However, from an integral perspective, if any one Head of Knowledge is taken alone, the truth becomes one-sided.

Hermeticism suggests a way of reconciling these diverse ontologies and epistemologies because it recognizes different planes of being and ways of knowing them. From the perspective of Three Heads of Knowledge, it is not a matter of choosing “either/or”, but rather of choosing “and/and”, by applying the law of paradox, which states that “a thing is and at the same time is not, in different senses”. For example, by integrating the three perspectives, we may understand that humanity is paradoxically both “part of nature”, as well as “apart from” nature.

Cosmocentrics might claim that it is this latter way of thinking that has encouraged a sense of separation from nature, which is at the root of our current ecological crisis. The fact that we do not see ourselves as part of nature is the reason that nature has been abused and degraded. However, drawing distinctions between the principles of God, Cosmos and Humankind is *not* the real problem, rather it is how humanity is living in the absence of an integrating worldview, and is therefore not fulfilling its spiritual role.

### 3.3.2 The Spiritual Path to Enlightenment

Another consequence of integrating Three Heads of Knowledge, is that human enlightenment and final liberation is conceived of at the highest level: as oneness with Nous or Divine Mind.

The Hermetic concept of human “regeneration” or “rebirth” involves an expansion of consciousness above the realms of time and space, and the laws of nature. It includes, but goes beyond the Cosmos and self-realization “in nature”.

The human mind can turn in two directions, towards matter and towards spirit. When turned outwards the consciousness can gather knowledge of the material and phenomenal realms through the senses. But by contemplating inwards and upwards, the human consciousness can transcend the material planes and come to understand more subtle intelligible layers of reality, including the primal nature of being, life and intelligence itself.

This expansion takes place in the silence of profound contemplative practice, in which the consciousness ultimately enters eternity and understands all things at once.

The key to the ascent to Nous is undertaking the deep work of inner purification, and overcoming all the hindrances, which keep humankind attached to the mundane worlds. In the *Corpus Hermeticum*

these hindrances are known as the Twelve Tormentors, which cause humans to suffer and include: ignorance, grief, lack of self-control, desire, injustice, greed, deceit, envy, treachery, anger, rashness, and malice. But they can all be transmuted by becoming “God-like” through the contemplation of the beauty of Primal Goodness, “for like is intelligible only to like”.<sup>43</sup> As it says in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, only pious souls enter Nous. Nous is set up as ‘a prize before Souls’.<sup>44</sup>

The Alchemists always insisted that the art of transmutation depended upon the transforming influence of a superior principle. For example, hate can only be transmuted by love; divine knowledge casts out ignorance; joy replaces grief; intemperance is expelled by temperance; falsehood by truth, as so on. The Twelve Tormentors, are said to be driven out by the ten powers of the Decad (a Divine number containing the keys to all creation). The alchemical stories of ‘turning base metal into gold’ can be seen as allegories of the inner spiritual work that needs to be done for the Soul to know God. In relation to the self, the greatest obstacle was seen as covetousness, or put a different way, attachment to one's own limited ego in thrall to passion<sup>45</sup>.

Finally, as Hermes declares: “Nous enters the pious Soul and leads it into the light of divine knowledge”. Once regenerated in Nous, it is said that the Soul never tires of hymning praises and gratitude to God, “and pouring blessings upon humankind, both in words and deeds – in imitation of its own Divine Father-Mother”.

Figure 3 (see above) indicates that in the ascent to Nous, the human mind can expand interiorly beyond the limitations of the finite mind and penetrate deeper and higher layers of consciousness into what is called Cosmic Mind, and then Father-Mother Mind, the root and eternal source of all perfections, principles and powers.

### 3.3.3 Ecological and Social Regeneration

Our final consideration is whether humankind can use Hermetic wisdom to serve and heal people and the planet, in the context of the Anthropocene. Can humankind borrow Hermetic principles to transform wider ecological and social sustainability challenges?

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<sup>43</sup> *Corpus Hermeticum*, 11:20

<sup>44</sup> *Corpus Hermeticum*, 4:3

<sup>45</sup> Burckhardt, T. (1997) *Alchemy, Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*, Kentucky: Fons Vitae

Hermetic wisdom suggests that hindrances can only be transmuted through the transforming influence of a superior principle. But if a cosmocentric worldview is adopted and humans are seen simply “as part of nature” (as many eco-philosophers suggest today); or if an anthropocentric worldview is maintained, and humans are viewed as the supreme intelligence, we will continue to be the victims of our partial views of reality. Rather, a Hermetic perspective suggests that social and ecological regeneration ultimately depends upon recognizing a principle superior to both humans and nature – the third Head of Knowledge – the Theological.

Hermetic wisdom also suggests that the path of regeneration and rebirth begins with a simple life coupled with inner contemplative practices on the nature of the Divine. This proposes a radically different approach to sustainability, which usually focuses on solving problems “out there”. We would argue, however, that learning to cultivate the inner-place from which we operate, through such reflective practices, is key to achieving a deeper and lasting shift in mindsets and values. Put simply, we need to change from the ‘inside-out’ and restore the balance between being and doing.<sup>46</sup>

The inner journey and ascent to Nous brings wisdom, imbues life with higher purpose, and a conscious awareness of the non-material but intelligible, causes, archetypes, prototypes and paradigms informing nature. It may help develop humanity’s potential for cooperation with these higher principles or cosmic intelligences. As a consequence, humans would become more effective healers of, and co-creators with, nature.

The Hermetic tradition teaches that humankind is meant to wisely tend the beauty of the Cosmos; and that nature is incomplete and waiting for humanity to play its part in its upliftment. If humanity works with higher purpose, purity of intention, and knowledge of a wider sphere of principles and intelligences, it could work to transform current challenges into opportunities, overcoming the cycles of poverty, and the degradation of the natural world, by mimicking the abundance and power of the divine (Theomimicry).

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<sup>46</sup> Jeanrenaud, S. & Jeanrenaud, J-P. (2017) ‘The Mindful Promise: Leading with Integrity for a Sustainable Future’ in Mabey, C., & Knights, D., (eds.) (2018) *Leadership Matters: Finding Voice, Connection and Meaning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, New York and London: Routledge

Burckhardt emphasizes that such alchemical work requires purity of intention, and the aspiration to benefit wider creation. As he puts it:

...the requirement that the pupil of Hermes must only seek to transmute elements in order to help the poor – or nature herself – in need, recalls the Buddhist vow to seek the highest enlightenment only with a view to the salvation of all creatures. Compassion alone delivers us from the artfulness of ego, which in its every action seeks only to mirror itself.<sup>47</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion: “Re-Membering” the Way

Can Hermetic wisdom teach us anything today, to help us navigate the challenges of the Anthropocene? We draw the following conclusions:

1. Hermetic wisdom provides a key for establishing an Integral Worldview, rather than competing worldviews. The Three Heads of Knowledge: God, Cosmos and Humanity expand the field of science and ideas. It provides the basis for understanding relationships between different sets of principles, and for reconciling contested eco-philosophies, which tend to prioritize one principle only. From an integral worldview, each eco-philosophy contains an element of truth, but not the whole truth. Each errs when taken to an extreme, or when considered alone. The Three Heads of Knowledge need to be reintegrated or re-membered.

2. Hermetic wisdom presents a larger view of human nature as Mind, Soul and Body, and explains that humankind uniquely blends spirit and matter. This perspective helps reconcile a current contention about whether humans are ‘part of nature’ or ‘apart from nature’. Each statement is true, but only a half-truth; we need to integrate these two dimensions of human nature. We cannot hold this point of view in either/or terms (law of excluded middle term); but it can be held in the mind through the law of paradox.

3. The Hermetic tradition emphasizes a spiritual path of personal regeneration, involving participation in Nous or the Mind of God. We all have the potential to access this higher knowledge, but the path requires right intention, inner purification and contemplative practices. The inner journey leads to liberation and bliss, as well as to

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<sup>47</sup> Burckhardt (1997) p. 32



a knowledge of Divine Archetypes, Prototypes, and Paradigms, which underpin all life principles. Hermetic wisdom suggests that we need to 're-mind' ourselves of our potential, and of *who* we truly are.

4. We suggest that Hermetic wisdom also has relevance in the wider work of ecological and social regeneration in the context of the Anthropocene. Hermetic tradition teaches that the art of transmutation involves the transforming influence of superior spiritual principles. From this perspective, we need to reintegrate the Divine Head of Knowledge, and consciously cooperate with all levels of being, life and intellect for the regeneration of all. In other words, to successfully navigate the Anthropocene we need to ultimately go beyond the principles of the Anthropos and the Cosmos.

Finally, we agree with Lamborn *et al* who propose that we need a new sacred contract between God, Cosmos and Man, in their book *Green Hermeticism, Alchemy and Ecology*: they explore the idea that we need a new universal, ecological, ecumenical, holistic culture in which humanity, nature and the divine renew their collaboration in the sacred work of earth.<sup>48</sup>

## Glossary

Anthropos Human beings

Cosmos The Universe considered as an ordered whole.

Nature From the latin 'nasci' – that which 'is born', and is subject to generation and dissolution.

Nous Usually associated higher or spiritual mind, that knows truth by being at one with it. (In the system of Plotinus it is presented as comprising of Being, Life and Intellect)

Noesis Intuitive, direct cognition of truth, without the process of discursive reason.

Soul The animating and formative principle of the Universe and of humanity, which is self-motive, self-vital, and self-subsistent.

God The indefinable, infinite, immutable source of all being, life and intelligence.

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<sup>48</sup> Wilson, P.L., Bamford, C. & Townley, K. (2007) *Green Hermeticism. Alchemy and Ecology*, Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Books

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