

MAGNUM MIRACULUM EST HOMO.
THE PHENOMENON OF MAN IN ASCLEPIUS SIVE
DIALOGUS HERMETIS TRISMEGISTI

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ABSTRACT. The paper discusses anthropological and eschatological issues in the work of Pseudo-Apuleius entitled *Asclepius, sive dialogus Hermetis Trismegisti*. In this context, the issue of evil in the moral sense and the question of the sources of evil understood in this way are raised.

KEYWORDS: Asclepius, Hermes Trismegistus, Hermetic Philosophy, Hermetic Anthropology.

Philosophy as *sancta religio*

The *Asclepius, sive dialogus Hermetis Trismegisti*,¹ although written in the form of a dialogue, presents in fact something that can be termed as a kind of revelation.²

¹ *Asclepius* is a Latin translation of the lost Greek Hermetic tract *Logos teleios* mentioned at the beginning of the 9th book of C.H. (C.H. IX, 1), and known to Lactantius (Lactantius, *Divinae Institutiones*, IV 6, 4). See: The introduction of A.D. Nock to French translation: Nock - Festugière 1960, 259-295; Festugière 1950-1954, IV, 92-140. According to Scott, “the Latin translation may be dated between 353 and 426” or “between about 280 and 426” (Scott 1993, 79); and “it may safely be said that the translator was either Victorinus or someone who had much in common with him” (Scott 1993, 81). The points of confluence between *Logos teleios* and *Asclepius* are discussed by Moreschini (2000, 74-79, 105-109). On the basis that in *De civitate Dei* Augustine of Hippo quotes *Asclepius* only in Latin, Moreschini 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). According to Ebeling, “the *Asclepius* was probably composed in the second or third century C.E.” (Ebeling 2007, 14). See also: Parri 2005, 15: “Since the Latin passages of Lactantius do not coincide with the corresponding passages of the *Asclepius*, it can be assumed that the translation was made in the period posterior to the *Divinae*

institutiones (304-313). The eighth book (415-416) of the *De civitate Dei* offers the other chronological extreme" (Parri 2005, 15, transl. K.P.). Both texts, the Greek and the Latin one, are also discussed by Reitzenstein (Reitzenstein 1904, 393-411). According to Scott, the *Asclepius* "has been made up putting together three distinct and unconnected documents... : 'Asclepius I (*De homine*)', 'Asclepius II (*De origine mali*)' and 'Asclepius III (*De cultu deorum*)' – and adding a 'prologus' and an 'epilogus'" (Scott 1924, 51). Zielinski distinguished four parts in *Asklepios*, namely chapters 1-14; 14-27; 27-37; 37-41 (Zielinski 1905, 321-372). According to Fowden, "the *Asclepius* is a compilation of materials from various sources, loosely linked together" (Fowden 1993, 38). Ferguson expresses a similar opinion in his *Introduction* to Scott's *Hermetica* (Scott 1936, XXVII). However, Parri has a different opinion: "the *Asclepius* is not a compilation, it is not an anthology, it is not a compendium, but it is within the hermeticism the autonomous and complete proposal of a single author. ... In fact, the Hermetic doctrine presents itself as a revealed mystery. According to this premise, it is not possible to look for a style in the construction of the text that follows the methods and structure of a rational investigation" (Parri 2005, 20). See also: Hunink 1996, 288-299; Siniscaldo 1966-67, 83-116. Scarpi 2014, 650-651.

² Reitzenstein compares *Asclepius* to mystical religion and believes that it presents a kind of initiation resembling initiations characteristic of ancient mysteries (Reitzenstein 1927, 242-243). Scott holds a contrary opinion and does not detect a mystical initiation in this piece of work. According to Scott, *Asclepius* is simply a philosophical treatise which propagates the philosophy of Hermeticism: "religious or philosophic teachings ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus" which are "the modification of a fundamentally Platonic system of thought by an intermixture of Stoic physics" (Scott 1993, 1; 53). However, Scott adds that "some at least of the Hermetic writers felt themselves to be inspired by God" (Scott 1924, 7). Similarly, Broek writes that "In a number of specific Hermetic writings the influence of Greek philosophical ideas is very conspicuous (Broek 1998, 5). But then he adds: "But then one is missing the point, for the central concern of these writings is not philosophical but religious. Their authors were convinced that, in the end, it is not philosophical reasoning but divine revelation that leads to the truth. The philosophical *Hermetica* teach a way by which the soul can ascend to the divine realm above the sphere of the fixed stars from which it has originally come down. There it mingles with the divine powers, comes to see, that is, to know God, which means to become absorbed in God. This deification will be fully attained after death when the soul ascends to God, but it can also be an inner experience during this earthly life, at the end of a process of Hermetic instruction culminating in mystical initiation" (Broek 1998, 5-6). Moreschini, although he does not fully agree with Reitzenstein, also claims that, after all, *Asclepius* is a revelation, offering Gnosis to the initiated, but at the same time it is a theosophical treatise (Moreschini 1985, 117, 118; Moreschini 2000, 156). The novelty of it consists in the optimistic vision of human destiny (Moreschini 1985, 85; Moreschini 2000, 123). Sfamenti Gasparro holds a similar opinion that Hermetic writings contain a kind of philosophical-religious revelation. She interprets the first treatise from *Corpus Hermeticum*, namely *Poimandres*, in the same way – as a revelation (Sfamenti Gasparro 1995, 107-138; see also: Sfamenti Gasparro 2018, 111-139). Yates

The sheer understanding of philosophy in the *Asclepius* creates the atmosphere that would be suitable for revelations and initiations. The philosophy itself is defined by Hermes Trismegistus in a rather noncomplicated way as “holy religion” (*in cognoscenda divinitate frequens obtutus et sancta religio*): “Speaking as a prophet, I will tell you that after us will remain none of that simple regard for philosophy found only in the continuing reflection and holy reverence by which one must recognize divinity” (*Asclepius*, XII).³

A little further on, Hermes alludes to this by saying: “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).⁴

It can be said that Hermes made philosophy equal not to religion or religious cult but instead to spirituality,⁵ or more precisely, with spirituality, the essential elements of which are the contemplation of the harmony of the universe and spiritual communion with God the Creator (*Asclepius*, XIII).⁶ The aim of philosophy

comes to a similar conclusion that Hermetic treatises, and particularly the motifs of the mental contemplation of the world and illumination present in them, can be compared to some sort of philosophical world religion, a purely mental religion that does without temples and religious rites. (Yates 2002, 4-5). See also: Pawlowski 2023, 73-89.

³ Transl. Copenhaver (all English translations of *Asclepius* from: Copenhaver 1992). Quoted text in Latin: *Ego enim tibi quasi praedivinans nullum post nos habiturum dilectum simplicem, qui est philosophiae, quae sola est in cognoscenda divinitate frequens obtutus et sancta religio.*

⁴ Transl. Copenhaver. Quoted text in Latin: *simplici enim mente et anima divinitatem colere eiusque fata venerari, agree etiam dei voluntati gratias, quae est bonitatis sola plenissima, haec est nulla animi inportuna curiositate violata philosophia.* Cf. *Asclepius*, XII and XIX. It is worth adding that such an understanding of philosophy as a kind of spiritual prayer was a familiar idea for Platonists. Cf. Ferrari 2019, 75-92.

⁵ Religious cult did not obtain much of Hermes Trismegistus' approval and the final prayer from *Asclepius* can serve as a testimony of that. Hermes even flinched at Asclepius, when the latter wanted to combine their prayer with some form of external piety and religious service (with the use of fragrant incense). See: *Asclepius*, XLI. Cf. Sfameni Gasparro 2018, 111-139.

⁶ Latin text (*Asclepius*, XIII): *Puram autem philosophiam eamque divina tantum religione pendentem tantum intendere in reliquas oportebit, ut apocatastasis astrorum, stations praefinitas cursumque commutationis numeris constare miretur; terrae vero dimensiones, qualitates, quantitates, maris profunda, ignis vim et horum omnium effectus naturamque cognoscens miretur, adoret atque conlaudat Artem mentemque divinam. Musicen vero nosse nihil aliud est nisi cunctarum omnium rerum ordinem scire quaeque sit divina ratio sortita: ordo enim rerum singularum in unum sonum artifici ratione conlatus concentum quaedam*

understood in such a way is not knowledge itself, but rather man's spiritual transformation and rebirth (*Asclepius*, XI; XXIX).⁷ This is the context in which also theoretical issues, including anthropological and theological ones, shall be pondered over. The main tool of this philosophy is not constituted by theoretical delving (although, in fact, it may also prove meaningful), but contemplation and spiritual sensations connected with it. Contemplation enables people mainly "to know themselves"⁸, what is one of the most important objectives of this philosophy (*Asclepius*, XIII).⁹ However, understanding in purely cognitive sense is not an end in itself, and in that regard Hermes' message is utterly clear. Man's spiritual and moral transformation, that is "rebirth"¹⁰, closely connected with understanding, is of far greater importance. This very "rebirth" is the crucial objective of Hermetic philosophy. It

melo divino dulcissimum verissimumque conficiet. The motif of the contemplation appears in many books of *Corpus Hermeticum*. The very first treatise of C.H. called *Poimandres* starts with a mystical, oneiric epic – a vision of metaphysical history of the world (C.H. I, 1-5). Contemplation is a recurring motif in Hermetic writings which appears therein in a twofold form, either as a contemplation of the universe as a God's creation (cf. C.H. III 3; IV 2-3, 11; V 2-6; XII 21-22), or as an inner contemplation or intellectual vision seen in man's intellect which turns out to be God's as well (cf. C.H. I 4, 7, 8; XI 6; XIII 3). In the latter type of contemplation, the man experiencing it communes with God Himself, somewhat face to face. It is a moment in which a complete Hermetic initiation (God's revelation) takes place. It is at the very same time the beginning of an inner transformation, that is the birth of a new, spiritual man (cf. C.H. XIII 1, 3-7, 13). Contemplation is also connected with the necessity of a kind of ascesis, or, more precisely, separation from sensuality (cf. *Asclepius*, XI; C.H. I, 1; IV 6, 7; X 5; XIII 7). The motif of "divine song" (*melos divinum*) appearing in the text quoted above (*Asclepius*, XIII) is developed in Book XVIII of *Corpus Hermeticum*.

⁷ The theme of rebirth is discussed even more extensively in Book XIII of *Corpus Hermeticum* (C.H. XIII, 1, 3-7). Rebirth, like the one undergone by people initiated in mysteries, is obviously God's creation. In Book XIII of *Corpus Hermeticum* Hermes Trismegistus gives a warning not to spread the word among the crowds, but to reveal the information only to those chosen by God Himself (C.H. XIII, 13; 16). The image of the abovementioned conversion (transformation) can be found in Book XI of *Metamorphoses* by Apuleius Madaurensis. Therein, a donkey undergoes transformation and comes back to its human form. The donkey is a symbol of a sensual man. As a matter of fact, it is all about giving human beings back their original, divine nature.

⁸ The ancient Greek aphorism "know thyself" (*gnothi seauton*) plays a key role in Hermeticism as well. Cf. C.H. I, 19, 21. While getting to know oneself, a man learns in the same cognitive action (that is, in the same spiritual experience) the spiritual dimension of the whole reality. In this spiritual context, he finds the meaning and goal of his existence.

⁹ See footnote 6.

¹⁰ Cf. footnote 7.

is at the same time the key (ground-breaking) moment in the spiritual life of the follower of the philosophy of Hermeticism, for only then can he see beyond all that is material, look with the eyes of his heart (cf. C.H. IV 11) or mind (C.H. V 2) into the spiritual dimension of the nature and the whole world. At that moment he can fully “get to know himself”, and in this way comprehend the meaning and mystery of his own (human) existence. Only spiritual “rebirth” enables that. The importance of “rebirth” in Hermeticism is particularly strongly emphasized in treatise XIII of *Corpus Hermeticum* (C.H. XIII, 9-10). Both rebirth and learning the meaning of human existence are possible only by means of divine illumination. In chapter XXXII of *Asclepius* Hermes Trismegistus implies quite clearly that he has gained such illumination.¹¹ There is one more significant element of Hermetic Philosophy connected with it – mysteriousness and silence (*Asclepius*, I).¹² What is most precious in this philosophy, is experienced in “holy silence”. The mystery of human existence cannot be cognized or expressed with a brain, in a verbal discourse. It can

¹¹ *Asclepius*, XXXII; Cf. CH III, 3 IV, 2, 11; V 2; XI, 6; XIII, 3. The motif of light found therein is noteworthy. Light in Hermeticism is always associated with divine revelation and with God Himself. God is revealed in light. It is a common image in Hermetic writings. Cf. C.H. I, 4, 8, 12, 21, 32; IV, 4-6; VII, 2; X, 5-6; XIII, 3, 18-21. See also: Apuleius, *De deo Socratis*, III 124.

¹² Hermetic initiations are ever connected with mystery and silence (“holy silence”: C.H. X, 5; XIII, 2, 8, 16), in a twofold meaning: firstly, because initiation per se is an experience of mystic nature, secondly, because it results not in some special arcane knowledge, but in transformation, rebirth (to learn more on the topic of rebirth see in particular: C.H. XIII). It is mainly related to the conversion of awareness. There are of course some elements of the so-called “arcane knowledge” present here, yet the focus is put on the fact that the most vital mysteries concerning man and God are inexpressible (and so is God Himself). They are the constituents of spiritual life, higher feelings (like love), and not of logical discourse. Besides, this mysteriousness is a kind of allegory of the great mystery of human life and human beings, namely the mystery of the divinity (spirituality) of their spiritual inside incomprehensible in rational categories. Initiations reveal that in his soul, man is “god” (a spiritual being), related to God Supreme, or that he even carries God inside. Mystery and holy silence are recurring motifs in many of the books of *Corpus Hermeticum*, and they are accentuated in Book XIII (see also: C.H. I 16; X 5, 6). Odo Casel writes beautifully about it: Casel 1967, 95-100. Casel refers to Hermetic silence as “mystic silence” – *silentium mysticum* (therein, p. 100). Refraining from revealing mysteries to wider audience is a fixed motif of Hermeticism. Cf. C.H. XIII, 13, 16 – therein, silence pertains to the mystery of rebirth (C.H. XIII, 13), as well as to Hermetic prayer (C.H. XIII, 16). Getting to know God, as written by Hermes in Book X of *Corpus Hermeticum*, involves silence, or holy silence (CH X, 5-6). Cf. C.H. I, 16; XIII, 2, 8). Besides, only those people who were endowed with an intellect by God (a spiritual intellect, capable of undergoing mystic experiences) are able to learn divine mysteries. Cf. C.H. I, 21-22; IV, 2-6; VIII, 5; XII, 12-13.

only be experienced, just as everything that truly gives human life some deeper meaning. In short, the philosophy of Hermeticism cannot be learnt. The only path leading to it are initiations (cf. C.H. V 1).

Therefore, it can be stated that Hermes Trismegistus' philosophy shows some qualities of initiation characteristic of mysteries of those times¹³, but also of the philosophy of the Platonism (the Middle Platonism), which was in full bloom in approximately the same time as Hermeticism.¹⁴ Besides, it is a characteristic feature of all books of *Corpus Hermeticum*, which can be treated as a means of conveying "a revelation" of a kind ("revelation" understood in Hermetic categories, of course).¹⁵ The essence of Hermetic initiation resides in experiencing the mystery of God and his fatherly love.¹⁶ God is the ultimate goal of Hermetic initiations (Cf. C.H. I, 26). Getting to know God leads to man's ultimate salvation, (Cf. C.H. X, 15) for man is born to God and created in his image (*Asclepius*, X).¹⁷

¹³ Cf. Burkert 1990; Meyer 1986, 157-253; Turchi 1987, 96-211.

¹⁴ Cf. Barra-Pannuti 1962-1963, 81-141; Dillon 1996, 114-340; Dillon 2010, 154-384; Dodds 2004, 73-98; Hunink 1996, 288-308; Invernizzi 1976; Mantenero 1970, 63-111; Moreschini 1978; Reale 1999, 323-377.

¹⁵ Cf. C.H. I, 1-5. See also: C.H. I, 30; X 5. *Poimandres* (C.H. I, 1-5) starts with a description of a mystic dream vision. The described event most probably happened in a dream, what is rather characteristic of mysterial initiations since during sleep the bodily senses remain dormant while mind is activated together with its primal, spiritual dispositions. A similar image is presented by Apuleius in Book XI of *Metamorphoses*, in which the author describes his initiations (Apuleius Madaurensis, *Metamorphoses or the Golden Ass*, XI 23). See also: Plutarch, *De defectu oraculorum*, 22; Dion of Prusa, *The Olympic Oration, or the Original Concept of God*, IV 33. On the topic of ancient mysteries: Bianchi 1975, 208-238; Bowden 2010; Burkert 1990; Casadio, Johnston (ed.) 2009; Meyer 1999; Mylonas 1961; Turchi 1987; Wilh 1944, 61-105. See also: Albert 1980, 96-108.

¹⁶ The motif of God as a Father, together with his fatherly goodness and love, is characteristic of Hermeticism (Cf. C.H. II, 15-17; VI, 3-5).

¹⁷ See also: C.H. I, 12. Here God - the Intellect, the father of all beings, creates man in his image: "Mind, the father of all, who is life and light, gave birth to a man like himself whom he loved as his own child" (transl. Copenhaver). In C.H. X, 25 and XII, 1 Hermes refers to men as "mortal gods", and to gods as "immortal men": "For the good demon has said that gods are immortal (humans) and humans are mortal gods" (transl. Copenhaver). See also: C.H. X, 25. According to C.H. VIII, 5, man is created in the image of the world which, in turn, was created in the image of God Himself (C.H. VIII, 2). The world, in *Corpus Hermeticum*, is the image of God (C.H. I, 31; VIII, 2; XII, 15). Moreover, in Book XI of *Corpus Hermeticum* (C.H. XI, 15) the cosmos is the image of eternity. Man can be found in the third position in this hierarchy: Creator God, Cosmos, Man.

The phenomenon of man

This utterly “unscientific” notion of philosophy as the “holy religion” includes an equally “unscientific” anthropology by Hermes Trismegistus.¹⁸ It contains, just as his understanding of philosophy, certain Platonic motifs, present in Apuleius’ writings. In *Asclepius* Trismegistus eulogizes over man acknowledging him as a great miracle (*magnum miraculum*), a creature worthy of the highest reverence and glory (*animal adorandum atque honorandum*):

“Because of this, Asclepius, a human being is a great wonder, a living thing to be worshipped and honored: for he changes his nature into a god's, as if he were a god; he knows the demonic kind inasmuch as he recognizes that he originated among them; he despises the part of him that is human nature, having put his trust in the divinity of his other part. How much happier is the blend of human nature! Conjoined to the gods by a kindred divinity, he despises inwardly that part of him in which he is earthly. All others he draws close to him in a bond of affection, recognizing his relation to them by heaven's disposition. He looks up to heaven. He has been put in the happier place of middle status so that he might cherish those beneath him and be cherished by those above him. He cultivates the earth; he swiftly mixes into the elements; he plumbs the depths of the sea in the keenness of his mind. Everything is permitted him: heaven itself seems not too high, for he measures it in his clever thinking as if it were nearby. No misty air dims the concentration of his thought; no thick earth obstructs his work; no abysmal deep of water blocks his lofty view. He is everything, and he is everywhere” (*Asclepius*, VI).¹⁹

¹⁸ See *Asclepius*, VI-X.

¹⁹ Transl. Copenhaver. Latin text: *Propter haec, o Asclepi, magnum miraculum est homo, animal adorandum atque honorandum. hoc enim in naturam dei transit, quasi ipse sit deus, hoc daemonum genus novit, utpote qui cum isdem se ortum esse cognoscat, hoc humanae naturae partem se ipse despicit, alterius partis divinitate confisus. O hominum quanto est natura temperata felicius! Diis cognata divinitate coniunctus est; partem sui, qua terrenus est, intra se despicit; cetera omnia, quibus se necessarium esse caelesti dispositione cognoscit, nexu secum caritatis adstringit, suspicit caelura. sic ergo feliciore loco medietatis est positus, ut, quae infra ae sunt, diligit, ipse a se superioribus diligatur. Colit terram, elementis velocitate miscetur, acumine mentis in maris profunda descendit. Omnia illi licent, non caelum videtur altissimum; quasi e proximo enim animi sagacitate metitur. Intentionem animi eius nulla aëris caligo confundit, non densitas terrae operam eius impedit, non aquae altitudo profunda despectum eius obtundit.* Hermes similarly expresses about man in Book XXII of *Asclepius*: “In short, god made mankind good and capable of immortality through his two natures, divine and mortal, and so god willed the arrangement whereby mankind was ordained to be better than the gods, who were formed only from the immortal nature, and better than all other mortals as well. Consequently, since he is conjoined to them in kinship, mankind honors the gods with reverent and holy mind; the gods also show concern

This text recalls Apuleius who elevated a man in a similar (although less profuse) way in the *De Platone et eius dogmate*. However, in the *De deo Socratis* he was rather critical of man (this time from a moral point of view).²⁰

People owe their excellence to their double, spiritual-physical nature, thanks to which they can commune both with purely physical earthly creatures, as well as purely spiritual heavenly gods. Men were created twofold by God Supreme so that they were up to the twofold task he assigned to them. One part of the task was to care for and rule over physical creatures, lower in rank than men.²¹ The other – to

for all things human and watch over them in faithful affection” (transl. Copenhaver). In latin: *Denique et bonum hominem et qui posset immortalis esse ex utraque natura conposuit. Divina atque mortali, et sic conpositum est per voluntatem dei hominem constitutum est esse meliorem et diis, qui sunt ex sola immortalis natura formati, et omnium mortalium. Propter quod homo diis cognatione coniunctus ipsos religionem et sancta mente veneratur diique etiam pio affectu humana omni a respiciunt atque custodiunt.* See also: C.H. I, 15; VIII, 5; X, 12-19; 24. Cf. *Asclepius*, V-VI, VIII, XXIX. It is a well-known motif in Hermetic writings: C.H. I 15; VIII 5; X 25. In C.H. X, 25 man is referred to as “a mortal god” while God is called “an immortal man”: “... the human on earth is a mortal god but that god in heaven is an immortal human” (transl. Copenhaver). See also C.H. XII, 1. It can be found in Middle Platonism as well: Apuleius, *De Platone et eius dogmate*, I, XII 207 (see footnote below). A similar motif is also present in Xenophon’s *The Memorabilia* (*The Memorabilia. Recollections of Socrates*, I 4, 13). However, in CH 10, 12 the man, as a changeable and mortal being, was defined as evil: “But the human, because he moves and is mortal, is evil” (transl. Copenhaver). Similarly in SH 11,3: “What is humanity? Changing evil” (transl. Litwa).

²⁰ See: Apuleius, *De Platone et eius dogmate*, I, XII, 207: “Omnium vero terrenorum nihil homine praestabilius providentia dedit.” In his last philosophical work, *De deo Socratis*, Apuleius is more restrained in assessing man’s nature. Admittedly, he confirms: “In qua praecipuum animal homines sumus, quamquam plerique se incuria uerae disciplinae ita omnibus erroribus ac piacularibus deprauauerint, sceleribus inbuerint et prope exesa mansuetudine generis sui inmane efferarint, ut possit uideri nullum animal in terris homine postremius” (*De deo Socratis*, III, 125). For the record, however, it needs to be added that the philosopher from Madauros, somewhat adept at life (*De deo Socratis* was written later than *De Platone et eius dogmate*), writes about man’s moral constitution (being clearly troubled by him), while in *De Platone et eius dogmate* he referred to man’s metaphysical status against other creatures. Obviously, Hermes Trismegistus also writes about man’s status among other living creatures, including demons.

²¹ Cf. C.H. III 3: “The gods sowed the generations of humans to know the works of god; to be a working witness to nature; to increase the number of mankind; to master all things under heaven; to discern the things that are good; to increase by increasing and multiply by multiplying. And through the wonder-working course of the cycling gods they created every soul incarnate to contemplate heaven, the course of the heavenly gods, the works of god and the working of nature; to examine things that are good; to know divine power; to

worship God (*Asclepius*, VIII, IX, X, XI). Man was sufficiently trained by the Maker to fulfil both parts of the task. A man is the image of God Supreme (yet second in rank, since the first place is occupied by the world which, similarly to man, embodies God as well). Thanks to his hard work on earth he takes part in the divine act of creation:

“The master of eternity is the first God, the world is second, mankind is third. God is maker of the world and all it contains, governing all things along with mankind, who governs what is composite. Taking responsibility for the whole of this – the proper concern of his attentiveness - mankind brings it about that he and the world are ornaments to one another so that, on account of mankind's divine composition, it seems right to call him a well-ordered world, though *kosmos* in Greek would be better” (*Asclepius*, X).²²

What is more, similarly to Creator God, man created gods. And he created them in his image (what makes him alike God): “Always mindful of its nature and origin, humanity persists in imitating divinity, representing its gods in semblance of its own features, just as the father and master made his gods eternal to resemble him” (*Asclepius*, XXIII).²³

know the whirling changes of fair and foul; and to discover every means of working skillfully with things that are good” (transl. Copenhagen). In *Corpus Hermeticum*, the topic of the creation of man appears often due to the need to contemplate the works of God (cf. *Asclepius*, VIII; C.H. IV 2, 5; V 1-6; XI 6, 7; SH). God reveals himself in the world he created. God is present and visible in all his creatures. Therefore, by contemplating the world, we come to know God (see especially: C.H. V 1-10; XI 20-22; XII 20-21).

²² Transl. Copenhagen. Latin text: *Aeternitatis dominus deus primus est, secundus est mundus, homo est tertius. Effector mundi deus et eorum, quae insunt, omnium, simul cuncta gubernando cum homine ipso, gubernatore conpositi. Quod totum suscipiens homo, id est curam propriam diligentiae suae, efficit, ut sit ipse et mundus uterque ornamento sibi, ut ex hac hominis divina compositione mundus Graece rectius kosmos dictus esse videatur.* Cf. C.H. IV, 1-2: “Because he is good, it was (not) for himself alone that he wished to make this offering and to adorn the earth; so he sent the man below, an adornment of the divine body, mortal life from life immortal” (transl. Copenhagen). See also: *Asclepius*, XI: “Seeing that the world is god's work, one who attentively preserves and enriches its beauty conjoins his own work with god's will when, lending his body in daily work and care, he arranges the scene formed by god's divine intention” (Transl. Copenhagen). This text in Latin: *siquidem, cum dei opera sit mundus, eius pulchritudinem qui diligentia servat atque auget, operam suam cum dei voluntate coniungit, cum speciem, quam ille divina intentione formavit, adminiculo sui corporis diuron opera curaque conponit.*

²³ Transl. Copenhagen. Latin text: *Ita humanitas semper memor naturae et originis suae in illa divinitatis imitatione perseverat, ut, sicuti pater et dominus, ut sui similes essent, deos fecit aeternos, ita humanitas deos suos ex sui vultus similitudine figuraret.*

Admittedly, the gods created by man have the form of statues, nevertheless, they possess real divine power: they can tell the future, prophesize, and heal (cf. *Asclepius*, XXIII-XXIV and XXXVII-XXXVIII).

Men were created as spiritual-physical creatures. They are mortal in their physical structure. Trismegistus defines death as a decomposition of body and the cessation of bodily functions:

“Death results from the disintegration of a body worn out with work, after the time has passed when the body's members fit into a single mechanism with vital functions. The body dies, in fact, when it can no longer support a person's vital processes. This is death, then: the body's disintegration and the extinction of bodily consciousness. Worrying about it is pointless” (*Asclepius*, XXVII).²⁴

In their spiritual structures, people are immortal. This is where Hermes Trismegistus' anthropology and eschatology, supported by the study of the migration of souls (see: *Asclepius*, XII)²⁵, have their point of convergence (see: *Asclepius*, XXVIII-XXIX and XI and XII). Certain well-known Platonic motifs can be found therein as well (cf. Plato, *Gorgias*, 523 A–527 E; *Phaedo*, 80 C–84 B; 107 A–115 A; *Republic*, 614 B–621 D), however, Trismegistus' disquisition is not as rich and vivid as Platonic eschatological myths, treated by Plato himself as didactic and moral parables (Plato, *Gorgias*, 523 A). According to Trismegistus, every man after his death will be judged by the highest demon and will receive a proper sentence – either eternal purgatory somewhere between heaven and earth, or admission to the heavens (*Asclepius*, XXVIII-XXIX). In chapter XII Trismegistus sentences wicked souls to renewed incarnations (*Asclepius*, XII). The factor deciding on soul's destiny after it leaves a mortal body is its moral condition. Similarly, in chapter XXVIII:

“Listen then, Asclepius. When soul withdraws from the body, it passes to the jurisdiction of the chief demon who weighs and judges its merit, and if he finds it faithful and upright, he lets it stay in places suitable to it. But if he sees the soul smeared with the stains of wrongdoing and dirtied with vice, he sends it tumbling down from on high to the depths below and consigns it to the storms and whirlpools of air, fire, and water in their ceaseless clashing - its endless punishment to be swept back and forth between

²⁴ Transl. Copenhaver. Latin text: *Mors enim efficitur dissolutione corporis labore defessi et numeri completi, quo corporis membra in unam machinam ad usus vitalis aptantur. Moritur enim corpus, quando hominis vitalia ferre posse destiterit. Haec est ergo mors corporis dissoiutio et corporalis sensus interitus, de qua sollicitudo supervacua est.* Cf. C.H. VIII, 1; XI, 14; XII, 16.

²⁵ Regarding the fate of the soul after death, see also: C.H. I, 14; 24-26; II, 17; X, 7, 8, 19. In C.H. II, 17 and X, 7, Hermes talks about reincarnation. A similar motif of incarnation can be found in: S.H. 23, 38-42.

heaven and earth in the streams of matter. Then the soul's bane is its own eternity, for an undying sentence oppresses it with eternal torment" (*Asclepius*, XXVIII).²⁶

The image portrayed here by Trismegistus is rather terrifying, yet still to a far lesser extent than Plato's eschatological visions.²⁷ It cannot be ruled out, however, that the terror depicted in this image makes for a peculiar incentive to moral improvement, the more effective, the more expressive as a message and impact on the recipients (similarly, Plato's abovementioned eschatological myths can be interpreted in didactic-moral convention as a kind of parables²⁸, and they are usually located in ethical contexts, just as in the *Gorgias* (523 A–527 A) or the *Republic* (614 B–621 D)²⁹, or in the context of a discourse on soul, as in the *Phaedo* (107 D–115 A). Trismegistus' conclusion seems to support this idea: "To escape this snare, let us recognize what we must fear, dread, and avoid. After they have done wrong, the unbelievers will be forced to believe, not by words but by example, not threats but real suffering of punishment" (*Asclepius*, XXVIII).³⁰

²⁶ Transl. Copenhagen. Latin text: *Audi ergo, o Asclepi. Cum fuerit animae e corpore facta discessio, tunc arbitrium examenque meriti eius transiet in summi daemonis potestatem, isque eam cum piam iustamque perviderit, in sibi competentibus locis manere permittit; sin autem delictorum inlitam maculis vitiisque oblitam viderit, desuper ad ima deturbans procellis turbibusque aëris, ignis et aquae saepe discordantibus tradit, ut inter caelum et terram mundanis fluctibus in diversa semper aeternis poenis agitata rapiatur, ut hoc animae obsit aeternitas, quod sit immortalis sententia aeterno supplicio subiugata.* Cf. CH X, 20–24. The motif of a demon avenger can be also found in CH X, 23.

²⁷ Cf. Plato, *Phaedo*, 107 C - 115 E; *Gorgias*, 523 A - 527 A. In the *Asclepius*, XII there are issues of soul incarnations and metempsychosis discussed. Apuleius did not use his eschatological myths in his philosophical writings, however, in the *De Platone et eius dogmate* he writes about man's post-mortem moral responsibility, yet in a very toned-down manner, without resorting to any eschatological paintings. Cf. Apuleius, *De Platone et eius dogmate*, II, XX 249; XXIII 255.

²⁸ This is what Plato says about them (through Socrates' mouth): Plato, *Gorgias*, 523 A: "Give ear then, as they say, to a right fine story, which you will regard as a fable, I fancy, but I as an actual account." (trans. W.R.M. Lamb); therein, 527A: "Possibly, however, you regard this as an old wife's tale, and despise it." (trans. W.R.M. Lamb); *Respublica*, 330D-E: "The tales that are told of the world below..." (trans. W.R.M. Lamb). See also: Plato, *Phaedo*, 114 D; *Phaedrus*, 252 C; *Respublica*, 621 C.

²⁹ Similar eschatological myths can be found among Plutarch's writings: *On the Daimonion of Socrates*, 22 (Timarch's story); *On the Delay of the Divine Vengeance*, 563 D – 568 F (Thespius' story).

³⁰ Transl. Copenhagen. Latin text: *Ergo ne his implicemur, verendum, timendum cavendumque esse cognosce. Incredibiles enim post delicta cogentur credere non verbis sed exemplis, nec minis sed ipsa passione poenarum.*

Regardless of the didactic message behind Hermes' eschatological vision, its thesis on man's moral responsibility remains in good standing. The fate of people who do not qualify for heavens is not clear in Hermes' eschatology. As this is what he states (in chapter XII): "For the unfaithful it goes differently: return to heaven is denied them, and a vile migration unworthy of a holy soul puts them in other bodies" (*Asclepius*, XII).³¹

In other words, they will be cast back into the circle of reincarnations, known from beliefs not restricted solely to Orphic ones. It is hard to affirm whether the abovementioned agonies, that await the wicked between heaven and earth after their bodies perish, are this "vile migration" (*foeda migratio*). It is not entirely clear. What one can be sure about, though, is that "those who piously subordinate their lives to God and live to help the world" will get their deserved "prize" (*Asclepius*, XII).³² And the reward must be truly grand. Hermes Trismegistus speaks about it as following:

"Therefore, given that mankind was made and shaped in this way and that the supreme god appointed him to such duty and service, if he observes the worldly order in an orderly way, if he adores God faithfully, complying duly and worthily with god's will in both its aspects, with what prize do you believe such a being should be presented? (Seeing that the world is god's work, one who attentively preserves and enriches its beauty conjoins his own work with god's will when, lending his body in daily work and care, he arranges the scene formed by god's divine intention.) Is it not the prize our parents had, the one we wish - in most faithful prayer - may be presented to us as well if it be agreeable to divine fidelity: the prize, that is, of discharge and release from worldly custody, of losing the bonds of mortality so that god may restore us, pure and holy, to the nature of our higher part, to the divine?" (*Asclepius*, XI).³³

³¹ Transl. Copenhaver. Latin text: *Secus enim in pieque qui vixerint, et reditus denegatur in caelum et constituitur in corpora alia indigna animo sancto et foeda migratio*. See also: CH II, 17; X, 7, 8, 19. Man's fate after his death depends on his moral condition (while being alive). Righteous souls regain their divine nature. Wicked souls reincarnate, that is they are sentenced to "vile migration" (*foeda migratio*) from body to body, a phenomenon called incarnation and metempsychosis. Apuleius does not tackle the issue of metempsychosis in his works, whereas Plato brings it up on multiple occasions - see for example *Phaedo*, 80 C - 81 E; *Timaeus*, 41 D, 42 B, C; *Leges* 903 D; *Respublica*, X, 617 E - 620 E.

³² See also: C.H. I, 24-26; IV, 8; X, 18-19; XII, 12. The said deserved reward is the return to God.

³³ Transl. Copenhaver. Text in Latin: *Hunc ergo sic effectum conformatumque et tali ministerio obsequioque praepositum a summo deo, eumque [conpetenter] munde mundum servando, deum pie colendo, digneet conpetenter in utroque dei voluntati parentem, talem*

Therefore, this dream and longed-for land of eternal happiness are the divine spheres where God resides. In order to enter it, one needs to be holy and pure. Thus, it is required of a soul to be purified. The purification – as it has been already stated herein – is reached through philosophy and “contemplating the divine” (*Asclepius*, XI).³⁴ This enables the soul to feel elevated above the carnal matters (*Asclepius*, XII). For holiness and goodness, which consist in restraint and separation from physical lust, are a measure of a man (*Asclepius*, XI). Unabatedly, philosophical contemplation, mentioned above, remains the leading motif. It is the driving force of man’s moral conversion – in the perspective of immortal issues, worldly things are brought back to their proper status and become what they are supposed to be out of their nature, and this is what the elevated spiritual condition consists in: “When he has seen the light of reason as if with his eyes, every good person is enlightened by fidelity, reverence, wisdom, worship and respect for god, and the confidence of his belief puts him as far from humanity as the sun outshines the stars” (*Asclepius*, XXIX).³⁵

Contrary to appearances, Hermes does not depreciate corporality, he only positions it appropriately and thereby ennobles. Maybe even boosts its value and sublimates its natural procreation power possessed by all living beings, including God.³⁶ In Trismegistus’ vision, the eroticism connected with the sphere of sex and procreation takes on the proportions of both noble and enchanting mysteries of love. This is how Hermes Trismegistus expresses this thought:

quo munere credis esse munerandum – siquidem, cum dei opera sit mundus, eius pulchritudinem qui diligentia servat atque auget, operam suam cum dei voluntate coniungit, cum speciem, quam ille divina, intentione formavit, adminiculo sui corporis diurno opere curaque componit – nisi eo, quo parentes nostri munerati sunt, quo etiam nos quoque munerari, si foret divinae pietati conpiacitum, optamus piissimis votis, id est ut emeritos atque exutos mundana custodia, nexibus mortalitatis absolutos, naturae superioris partis, id est divinae, puros sanctosque restituat?. See also: C.H. I, 24-26; X, 21-22. Similar motifs can be found in Apuleius’ writings: Apuleius, *De Platone et eius dogmate*, II XX 249: *Nam vinculis liberata corporeis, sapientis anima remigrat ad deos et pro merito vitae purius castiusque transactae hoc ipso usu deorum se condicioni conciliat.*

³⁴ This is a well-known and developed motif of philosophical purifications.

³⁵ Transl. Copenhagen. Text in Latin: *Unus enim quisque pietate, religione, prudentia, cultu et veneratione dei clarescit quasi oculis vera ratione perspecta et fiducia credulitatis suae tantum inter homines quantum sol lumine ceteris astris.*

³⁶ In Book II of *Corpus Hermeticum*, Hermes proclaims that procreation and having offspring is highly desired, even holy. The soul of a man who will die without leaving any descendants will be punished by a demon and sentenced to reincarnation into non-human bodies, possibly even into bodies of creatures “accursed beneath the sun”. Cf. C.H. II, 17.

“I say that sensation and growth are also in the nature of things, that the world contains growth within it and preserves all that have come to be. For each sex is full of fecundity, and the linking of the two or, more accurately, their union is incomprehensible. If you call it Cupid or Venus or both, you will be correct. Grasp this in your mind as truer and plainer than anything else: that God, this master of the whole of nature, devised and granted to all things this mystery of procreation unto eternity, in which arose the greatest affection, pleasure, gaiety, desire and love divine. One should explain how great is the force and compulsion of this mystery, were it not that each individual already knows from contemplation and inward consciousness. For if you take note of that final moment to which we come after constant rubbing when each of the two natures pours its issue into the other and one hungrily snatches (love) from the other and buries it deeper, finally at that moment from the common coupling females gain the potency of males and males are exhausted with the lethargy of females. Therefore, the act of this mystery, so sweet and vital, is done in secret so that the divinity that arises in both natures from the sexual coupling should not be forced to feel the shame that would come from the laughter of the ignorant if it happened in public or, much worse, if it were open to the sight of irreverent people” (*Asclepius*, XXI).³⁷

Evil in moral sense

The problem of evil is incorporated into the anthropological issues developed by Hermes Trismegistus in the *Asclepius*. The point is that there are few good, pious people, as claimed by Trismegistus. So few they can be easily counted.³⁸ This, generally trivial, statement made by Hermes does not surprise. What does surprise, however, is the description of reasons for people falling into evil. According to Hermes, moral evil buds in human souls due to the lack of reason and metaphysical

³⁷ Transl. Copenhaver. Latin text: *Ego enim et naturam et sensum et naturam et mundum dico in se continere naturam et nata omnia conservare. Procreatione enim uterque plenus est sexus et eius utriusque conexio aut, quod est verius, unitas inconprehensibilis est, quem sive Cupidinem sive Venerem sive utrumque recte poteris nuncupare. Hoc ergo omni vero verius manifestiusque mente percipito, quod ex [omni] illo totius naturae deo hoc sit cunctis in aeternam procreandi inventum tributumque mysterium, cui aumma caritas, laetitia, hilaritas, cupiditas amorque divinus iunatus est. et dicendum foret, quanta sit eius mysterii vis atque necessitas, nisi ex sui contemplatione unicuique ex intimo sensu nota esse potuisset. Si enim illud extremum temporis, quo ex crebro adritu prurimus, ut itaque in utramque fundat natura progeniem, animadvertas, ut altex'a avide alterius <semen> rapiat interiusque recondat, denique eo tempore ex commixtione communi et virtutem feminae marum adipiscuntur et mares femineo torpore lassescunt. Effectus itaque huius tam blandi necessariiue mysterii in occulto perpetratur, ne vulgo inidentibus inperitis utriusque naturae divinitas ex commixtione sexus cogatur erubescere, multo magis etiam si visibus inreligiosorum bonum subiciantur.*

³⁸ *Asclepius*, XXII.

knowledge of things existing around people in the world (*defectu prudentiae scientiaeque rerum omnium, quae sunt*):

“The reverent are not many, in any case, no more than a few whose number in the world can be counted, whence it happens that evil remains in the many because they lack wisdom and knowledge of all the things that are. Scorn for the vices of the whole world – and a cure for those vices – comes from understanding the divine plan upon which all things have been based. But when ignorance and folly persist, all vices thrive and wound the soul with incurable disorders. Tainted and corrupted by them, the soul grows inflamed as if poisoned – except the souls of those who have the sovereign remedy of learning and understanding” (*Asclepius*, XXII).³⁹

This is an extremely interesting and at the same time accurate diagnosis, obviously in the context of Trismegistus’ philosophy. In other words, people’s moral condition depends on their self-awareness. Being aware of oneself and the world around, and, most importantly, understanding one’s own status in this world, makes the decisive impact on one’s whole life. What defines people in ethical sense is not their material or social status, but their self-awareness. This is a thesis to which subscribes the entirety of Platonic ethics and anthropology, saying the proper creator of man, in moral sense, and his whole life, is his self-awareness and spirituality. It is also perfectly inscribed in Socratic-Platonic pedagogy, having at its core the conviction of man’s ability to moral development, and, at the same time, pedagogic work. Besides, Platonism had its Renaissance at the same time as Hermeticism. Platonic ethics revives with it, and its principal ethical motto, and at the same time the most creatively affecting moral ideal, is the ideal of “likeness to God” (*homoiosis theo*) and “follow God” (*hepu theo*) which replace “follow nature”, the ideal of the Stoic and Epicurean moralists of the Hellenistic era.⁴⁰ In this

³⁹ Transl. Copenhaver. Latin text: *Sunt autem non multi aut admodum pauci, ita ut numerari etiam in mundo possint, religiosi. Unde contingit in multis remanere malitiam defectu prudentiae scientiaeque rerum omnium, quae sunt. Ex intellectu enim rationis divinae, qua constituta sunt omnia, contemptus medelaque nascitur vitiorum mundi totius. Perseverante autem inperitia atque inscientia vitia omnia convalescent vulnerantque animam insanabilibus vitiis, quae infecta isdem atque vitiata quasi venenis tumescit nisi eorum, quorum animarum disciplina et intellectus summa curatio est.* A similar diagnosis of moral evil can be found in other treatises C.H.: C.H. I, 20, 28; IV 5, 6; VII, 1, 2; IX, 4; XI, 21; XII, 3. According to C.H. I, 20 and 28, the ignorance of man is the reason why he cannot participate in immortality.

⁴⁰ On the ideal of “likeness to God” in Middle Platonism see: Alcinous, *Didaskalikos*, XXVIII; Apuleius, *De Platone et eius dogmate*, II, XXIII, 252-253; Plutarch, *De sera numinis*

way, the ethics regains its spiritual foundation. As can be seen, these motifs, proclaimed by all Platonists, are present in Hermes Trismegistus' revelation as well.

While Hermes is discoursing upon anthropology and eschatology, the main character of the dialogue, Asclepius, notices that such (Hermes') anthropological and eschatological conceptions are of little interest to people. Most of them do not believe in conceptions of such kind, whereas some even ridicule them. Asclepius explains that the reasons for that is that people are too attached to the physical sides of life what makes them indifferent towards spiritual matters. That is why they are unable to commit themselves to the type of philosophy focused on spiritual issues (*Asclepius*, XII). Asclepius' reflection seems to be the proof that the author of the *Asclepius* reckoned quite hard-headedly the chances of Hermes Trismegistus' teachings becoming successful. Hermeticism, for scientific reasons fairly interesting as a spiritual phenomenon, was a truly elitist current.⁴¹

The sources of evil in the world

Hermes takes up the difficult topic of the sources of evil in the world. It might be a trace of discussions held on the matter. Naturally, the age-old question still rankling people and somewhat intended for Creator God to answer had to arise at this point: *non poterat deus incidere atque avertere a rerum natura malitiam?* (*Asclepius*, XVI).⁴²

vindicta, 550 d-e. See also: Plato, *Theaetetus*, 176 a-b; *Respublica*, 360 c, 500 c-d, 613 a; *Phaedrus*, 248 a, 253 a; *Leges*, 716 b-c; *Timaeus*, 90 d. Cf. Dillon 1996, 192-193, 299-300, 335; Dillon 2010, 230-231, 341, 377-378; Pawłowski 2019, 252-258.

⁴¹ See: Broek 2000, 9-26. Broek, contrary to Festugière (Festugière 1950-1954, I 81-85), claims that in Alexandria there was a community of the followers of Hermeticism, and, according to him, there is evidence for that in *Corpus Hermeticum* predominantly in the form of hymns and prayers, but also guidelines pertaining to the ritual of initiations. Helderma is another scholar convinced about the existence of a community of the followers of Hermeticism: Helderma 2000, 261-290 (265, 266, 287). Before him, the same topic of Hermetic communities was taken up by Reitzenstein (1904a, 248). Quispel even thinks that "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." See: Quispel 1998, 69-78, (p. 74). See also: Sfameni Gasparro 2018, 111-139; Heiduk 2007, 47.

⁴² "Was god not able to put an end to evil and banish it from nature?" (Transl. Copenhagen).

Neither in Hermetic nor in Middle Platonic circles was there anybody having doubts about the materiality of things being the dwelling of evil – matter was considered the seedbed for all erosion, including moral erosion blamed on soul as its active generator. The only doubt could be encapsulated in the question: “*non poterat deus ...?*” Platonists used to answer assuredly: the problem of evil is not connected to metaphysics; it is a purely moral issue since soul emerges as the only area of influence here. They used to say bluntly: evil is nothing else but the disease of soul. Hermes Trismegistus, however, did not show such confidence. He may have been aware of the concepts of Gnostics who did not hesitate to recognize evil running rampant in the world as being enrooted in something person-like, in some malevolent constructor or demiurge of this world. Nevertheless, he does not propound this Gnostic and anti-Platonic doctrine in his lecture.⁴³ Moreover, his Creator God has distinctive features of a Platonic Demiurge. Evil, as in Platonic ethics, is the condition of a human soul. All the same, the problem of the origins of evil remains unsolved, while the thesis that matter is the dwelling of evil is maintained (*sicuti enim in natura materiae qualitas fecunda est, sic et malignitatis eadem est aequae fecunda*): “Just as there is a fertile quality in the nature of matter, so also is the same matter equally fertile malice” (*Asclepius*, XV).⁴⁴

Evil can penetrate soul because of the latter being in contact with material body which can be the carrier of evil due to its very materiality. For all that, when man’s natural needs, mainly physical ones, are not satisfied, when they go beyond any limits and possess the soul, only then does the evil appear in it. Hermes does not answer the question whether God could have rooted out evil from the world. He claims, however, that man was given by Creator God a fine weapon against evil aiming at possessing his soul. This weapon is man’s intellect and his whole mental sphere:

“Acting as reasonably as possible, the supreme god took care to provide against evil when he deigned to endow human minds with consciousness, learning and understanding, for it is these gifts alone, by which we surpass other living things, that enable us to avoid the tricks, snares and vices of evil. He that avoids them on sight, before they

⁴³ This thesis was attacked particularly by Plotinus in treatise IX of *Ennead*. According to the English translator of *Ennead*, A.H. Armstrong, the criticism expressed by Plotinus was directed at Numenius’ of Apamea views: Plotinus, vol. II, translated by A.H. Armstrong, London 1990, p. 244. Armstrong, A. H. (transl.) *Plotinus* – Loeb Classical Library – vols. I–II. (London: 1978-90).

⁴⁴ Transl. Copenhaver.

entangle him, that person has been fortified by divine understanding and foresight, for the foundation of learning resides in the highest good" (*Asclepius*, XVI).⁴⁵

The mind, finding out what impact evil makes on a soul, teaches it how to overcome this evil and therefore proves to be man's biggest blessing. Human being is the only creature on earth enjoying such a great endowment (*Asclepius*, XXXII).⁴⁶

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⁴⁵ Transl. Copenhaver. Quoted text in Latin: *Provisum cautumque est, quantum rationabiliter potuisset a summo deo, tunc, cum sensu, disciplina, intellegentia mentes hominum est munerare dignatus. Hisce enim rebus, quibus ceteris antistamus animalibus, solis possumus malitiae fraudes, dolos vitiaque vitare. Ea enim qui, antequam his implicatus est, ex aspectu vitarit, is homo est divina intellegentia prudentiaque munitus; fundamentum est enim disciplinae in summa bonitate consistens.* However, in chapter XXIII, he clearly suggests that not everyone has received this gift (intellect): "But one may say this only of the few people endowed with faithful mind" (*Asclepius*, XXIII, transl. Copenhaver). A similar idea can be found in: C.H. I 21-22; IV 3; IX 5; XII 3, 4.

⁴⁶ See also: C.H. I, 21-23; IV, 3; X, 13, 18, 21, 22, 24; XII, 1, 2, 4. Cf.: S.H. 4, 1-3; S.H. 3, 8. Nonetheless, man's cognitive condition per se is rather limited. It becomes excellent, though, thanks to persistence of human memory (*ex memoriae tenacitate*) (*Asclepius*, XXXII). Man learns about nature and world's properties thanks to the information gathered through senses (*ibid.*). The last-mentioned thesis makes Hermes's stance different from Platonian epistemology, according to which man's whole cognitive power lies in his mind and it does not share this power with senses. At the same time, Hermes (that is - the author of *Asclepius*) is aware of the fallaciousness inscribed in human cognition due to its sensual character. He is also mindful of the limitations of human cognition. According to him, the insurmountable limit of human cognition is marked out by the mystery of the divinity (*ibid.*).

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