
The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus: Hermeticism from Ancient to Modern Times by Florian Ebeling. Foreword by Jan Assmann. Translated from German by David Lorton

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The work under review here is the first survey of ‘Hermeticism’ from antiquity until the present. No one has previously attempted such a comprehensive summary of this subject in the form of a book. The present review deals solely with the English version, translated from a German original that I have not seen [Ebeling 2005].¹

After a foreword by Jan Assmann, the book is organized by chapters along an increasingly specific chronological framework: early origins and ancient *Hermetica*, followed by chapters on the *Hermetica* in the Middle Ages, in the Renaissance, in the 17th century, in the 18th and 19th centuries, and in the 20th century. The treatment is most convincing, and contributes the most, in the half of the book comprising the third, fourth, and fifth chapters: Hermeticism from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment is clearly the author’s strength.

The subject is difficult because, as Ebeling acknowledges, historians have not succeeded in defining Hermeticism decisively. The ancient Greek texts attributed to the Egyptian sage Hermes Trismegistus had influence in several different times and places, but the nature of that influence varied widely according to the conditions and needs of those receiving the texts and their interpretations of them. Therefore, ‘the goal is to offer an impression of the multiplicity of conceptual worlds handed down to us under the rubric of Hermeticism’

¹ I cannot see why the *Geheimnis* of the original title was rendered as ‘Secret History’ and not as ‘Mystery’, a word that has importance in Ebeling’s treatment [104–107]. There is nothing secret about this history.

without getting lost ‘in exhaustive detail’ [1]. These words at the beginning of the book not only alert the reader to the highly variable nature of this thing called ‘Hermeticism’, but also cast doubt on the coherence of the category forming the basis of the whole narrative. Ebeling states that his discussion will be based on works ascribed to Hermes or that rely on Hermes’ authority, a commendable approach. What follows is, appropriately, in large part a history of reception, interpretation, and innovation. This initial definition of the project gives it validity.

However, a problem immediately arises in the application of these plans to the whole history. Ebeling has already begun with the assumption of a category of ‘Hermeticism’, as an ‘ism’, for all the periods and places treated, instead of following the lead of the texts. It is legitimate to speak of Hermeticism for 17th-century Europe, when philosophers, like Benedictus Figulus in 1608, could write of ‘this Hermetic philosophy of ours . . . , which includes true astronomy, alchemy, and magic, and also Cabala’ [76]. In western Europe of this period, authors explicitly regarded their program as Hermetic as such. However, it is unsound for historians to borrow such terms from the 16th and 17th centuries and to apply them uncritically to earlier periods and other places. The results are confusing.

Chapter 1 presupposes that Hermeticism as such existed in ancient times. Ebeling asks ‘What was ancient Hermeticism?’ and ‘What was the essence of Hermeticism?’, and then goes on to explain how vaguely defined it must have been. Newcomers to the subject will perhaps benefit from the summaries of the contents of influential ancient *Hermetica* provided in this chapter; but, in asking such questions about ‘Hermeticism’, we have already lost sight of the cautious approach stated at the outset. Without much regard for chronology beyond the designation ‘ancient’, this chapter tries to paint a picture of who Hermes Trismegistus was thought to be and what the basis of ‘ancient Hermeticism’ was, and then finds it a difficult matter to discover consistency behind them. This difficulty signals problems in the categories and approaches employed.

The generalizations offered here about the *Hermetica* in antiquity are sometimes incorrect. For example, Ebeling proposes that ‘in antiquity it was not important whether Hermes was a historical figure’ [8]. In fact, Hermes Trismegistus appears in several Christian histories and chronicles as a historical figure, and his alleged

historicity and, in particular, his antiquity were an important part of Hermes' authority. Ebeling describes the supposed eclecticism of the Greek *Hermetica* by drawing from several (sometimes conflicting) theories held by previous scholars. Thus, the *Hermetica* present 'a conglomeration of Aristotelian, Platonic, Stoic, and Pythagorean doctrines, interspersed with motifs from Egyptian mythology and themes of Jewish and Iranian origin' [31]. This conclusion is obviously unhelpful, particularly for the beginner. Similarly problematic is the assertion that the intellectual climate of late antiquity can be 'characterized by an attitude of "anything goes"' [9].

Seeing the *Hermetica* as part of a vague, 'broad literary field' [35] and simultaneously as the basis of an ancient 'Hermeticism' distracts from the effort to locate the meaning of the ancient *Hermetica* either individually or according to a specific social context. Ebeling could have made better use here of Garth Fowden's standard work [1993] on the early *Hermetica* in their Egyptian *milieu* (cited in the bibliography). Emphasizing the amorphous and ungraspable character of ancient 'Hermeticism' only demonstrates the inapplicability of the early modern category to antiquity.

The treatment in chapter 2 of 'Hermeticism' in the Middle Ages is similarly problematic. We begin with an outdated and Eurocentric notion that the 'ancient world' came to an end in the sixth century and that 'after Clovis converted to Christianity, the geopolitical center of gravity shifted north of the Alps' (!) [37–38]. 'With the end of the ancient tradition, the survival of Hermeticism was endangered' [38]. After having been told in chapter 1 that ancient Hermeticism was such an ill-defined thing, what exactly can the reader think was endangered?

The description of medieval theologians' treatment of the *Hermetica*, based on those of the church fathers, is quite clear. Christian apologists such as Lactantius regarded the *Hermetica* as affirming Christianity, while other Christian writers treated the doctrines of *Hermetica* such as the *Asclepius* as potentially dangerous. These views were formative for the later reception of the Greek *Hermetica* in the Italian Renaissance.

The treatment of Arabic 'Hermeticism' (though there is no such word or concept in premodern Arabic) is a valiant effort, given how little of the relevant material has been published. Fortunately, Ebeling

has excellent German scholarship, such as that of Manfred Ullmann, for a guide. In these eight pages we catch a glimpse of a few important Arabic *Hermetica*. Ebeling briefly describes the widespread Arabic myth of three separate ancient sages named Hermes. Unfortunately, there is no sense of the meaning of these texts to their Arabic-speaking audiences across North Africa and western Asia. They are not treated as a part of any social or historical context. There is no reference to the important recent studies of the Graeco-Arabic translations of the eighth to 10th centuries, the background against which the appearance of Arabic *Hermetica* must be understood. By contrast, the medieval Latin *Hermetica* under discussion are situated in a chronological and intellectual context.

There are, in fact, many more works of Hermes in Arabic manuscripts than those discussed in this survey. The real problem here is not, however, the lack of information, for which a specialist in European languages might not be held accountable, but rather the narrative treatment of the Arabic *Hermetica* as just a 'medieval' phenomenon, important only in so far as they came to the attention of later Europeans, an incidental step in the transition from the ancient to the Renaissance *Hermetica*. Ebeling thinks that 'few of these [Arabic] texts were of lasting effect and enduring significance for western Hermeticism' [49]. Scholars have not yet proven this to be the case. Moreover, the tradition of Hermetic texts outside of Europe, parallel to and contemporary with the Hermetic movement in later Europe, awaits further research. But, in so far as this is an introductory survey that is heavily reliant on earlier studies similarly focused on western Europe, it is not the source of the oversight, though it demonstrates the imbalance in the scholarship.

Once we get to Italy in the 1460s [chapter 3], the book is on much firmer ground and becomes an excellent treatment of its European subject. The coverage of Ficino's translation and interpretation of the Greek *Hermetica* is clear. Ficino understood them in the context of the pre-existing medieval Latin interpretations of Hermes. The influence of the Greek *Hermetica* on such philosophers as Pico, Bruno, and Patrizi comes under discussion. Yet here Ebeling is, with good reason, less willing to describe automatically anyone who read the *Hermetica* as a 'Hermetist'.

In Germany, during the 16th and 17th centuries, the alchemical movement of Paracelsus developed, drawing on the authority of Hermes for its legitimation. These alchemists called their practice the Hermetic Art, working mostly independently of the reception of the *Hermetica* in Italy.

Notwithstanding some connections, neither the discourse of the *Ars Hermetica* nor its origin and theological and natural philosophical legitimation can be understood as deriving from Renaissance humanism. [70]

Here the Emerald Tablet, a short text translated from Arabic, became an important common point of reference. The followers of Paracelsus (d. 1541) saw him as a new Hermes, reviving the pristine natural philosophy. This movement reacted against the Aristotelianism of the schools and wanted to promote their true philosophy as more ancient and Egyptian in origin. Here at last we have a movement that is self-consciously Hermetic, a true Hermeticism. Ebeling hints at further Arabic sources for an important work of this movement, the *Liber Apokalypsis Hermetis* [81], but the connections between Arabic alchemy and German Hermeticism evidently will have to await future studies. The discussion of these German alchemists side-by-side with the Italian philosophers demonstrates two different Hermetic currents moving simultaneously in Europe. The northern current has not hitherto received much attention.

Ebeling also discusses the role of the *Hermetica* in Christian religion of this period. Specifically, several authors, such as Sebastian Franck (d. 1543), saw the *Hermetica* as a valid revelation on par with the Bible. Christianity could, therefore, be explained as a religion of nature in harmony with the teachings of Hermes, Zoroaster, and other sages. Ebeling sees this as part of an argument in favor of religious tolerance. How this could be so in the writing of Philippe de Mornay (d. 1623), one of Ebeling's main examples, is hard to say, given the title of his book *Treatise on the Truth of the Christian Religion, against the Atheists, Epicureans, Pagans, Jews, Mohammedans, and Other Unbelievers*. Nevertheless, Ebeling claims that Mornay was not 'concerned with distinction or exclusion' and 'promoted tolerance' thanks to Hermeticism [85–86].

Chapter 4, on Hermeticism in 17th-century Europe, deals primarily with the important scholarly critiques of the Hermetic movements of that time. Casaubon (wr. 1614) showed that the Greek *Hermetica* were dated to the early Roman period, not to the antiquity of the patriarchs. In 1648, Hermann Conring published a work attacking the claimed connection of the Paracelsian philosophers with Hermes. Criticisms like these attenuated the appeal of Hermes and his works. Meanwhile, as Ebeling shows, the 'Hermetic' alchemy remained, in the eyes of many, a basis for true science at harmony with their Christian beliefs. Theologians like Colberg (d. 1698) nevertheless attacked what they saw as a heretical 'Platonic-Hermetic Christianity'.

Chapter 5 deals with the 18th and 19th centuries, during which Hermeticism remained strongly identified with alchemy. At the same time, the society of the Freemasons, through the agency of figures such as Ignaz Edler von Born, adopted some of the imagery, language, and mythology of the *Hermetica*, including the Hermetic alchemy, as part of their own invented ancient heritage. Scholars of the 19th century included discussions of the *Hermetica* in an attempt to comprehend a universal, idealistic philosophy.

Chapter 6, the last and shortest, describes how, in the 20th century, the alchemical Hermeticism and its rich symbolism provided material for philosophers and literary critics to discuss affectedly symbolic or deliberately incomprehensible works of art and literature. The word 'Hermetic' comes to have its modern significances: it refers to alchemy, to veils of symbols behind which are mysteries or perhaps nothing at all, and to a supposed counter-current of 'irrational' philosophy. Critics like Umberto Eco adopt the term 'hermetic' as a part of their own technical vocabulary having little relationship to earlier applications of the word.

There is no conclusion, just a timeline to recapitulate the main points (assigning Abū Ma'shar, d. 886, to the eighth century). A few problems in the book have already been discussed. One might add a small quibble about unexplained jargon perhaps not appropriate for an introductory text, such as 'philosophemes' and 'theologoumena' (not in the glossary at the end). Other faults of the work are not the author's. The translator has clearly distorted some proper names. More serious is the decision of Cornell University Press not to require a fuller scholarly apparatus, including fuller documentation, or

a more extensive guide for further reading of the kind appropriate to an introductory scholarly work. The select, general bibliography lists only 21 items, mostly in German, though some more references for specific points can be found in the footnotes to the text. This is a symptom of the current general trend of American university presses toward popularizing their work at the expense of learned content. Ebeling's own extensive research does not get the credit that it deserves.

There are two main contributions of this book, both praiseworthy. The first is its attempt at a comprehensive survey of literature associated with Hermes. Despite the shortcomings entailed in its realization in the first part, there definitely is value in looking at the entire history of these texts. In this regard it provides something otherwise unavailable. The second, and more important, contribution is the discussion of German Hermeticism and the incorporation of the Paracelsian, alchemical current into the overall narrative. Both students and scholars will benefit from this aspect of the work. I would readily use chapters 3–5 as readings in an introductory course on the subject. The fresh collection of information on European Hermeticism may spur new research. It is hoped that Ebeling will provide another, and much more detailed, study of early modern German Hermeticism.

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