

LECTURE 2: PLOTINUS & WESTERN ESOTERICISM

The Vallico Academy Lecture Series

0. OPENING CALLBACK

S1

Before we start tonight: quick reminder of where we left off. Last time I told you there's a theory that the brain has two fundamentally different modes of attending to the world, and that this likely has a physiological basis: one narrow, analytical, good at fixing things and bad at meaning; the other broad, holistic, comfortable with paradox, and the only one capable of experiencing awe, beauty, or the sacred. I said Burton looked like a man who let the second mode run his whole life, and that we'd meet this idea again before I finally told you what it's called.

Well, here it is again. Tonight we're going several centuries back, into Plotinus, the Gnostics, the Hermeticists, and the whole esoteric tradition that ran underneath official Western thought for two thousand years. And I want you to notice something as we go: every single one of these systems is built entirely out of the *second* kind of attention. They're holistic, not analytical. They're happy with stuff like the universe containing its own opposite: the One that is also the many, light born out of darkness, God who divides Himself in order to know Himself. None of that survives being run through the narrow, categorising, either-or machinery of the first mode. You either think in that participatory, paradox-tolerant register, or this entire tradition looks like nonsense to you.

None of which is a coincidence, and it is not merely a quirk of these particular systems: it is a clue about *why* this whole tradition eventually lost the argument to the kind of thinking that built the Scientific Revolution. We'll come back to that too. For now: Plotinus.

0B. FIRST, THE GREEKS

S2

Actually, no. Hold on a second. Before we go anywhere near Plotinus, an interlude.

You will remember that at the start of the last lecture I ran a quick straw poll on Richard Burton, and the result was unanimous: not a single one of you had ever heard of him. Which was, in its way, the most encouraging thing that happened all evening, because it meant I hadn't spent two hours telling you things you already knew. But it did give me pause. Because tonight I had been cheerfully planning to open with a third-century Egyptian whose entire career consisted of explaining a fourth-century-BC Athenian, on the confident assumption that we all

knew who the Athenian was, as who doesn't. But then I remembered that progressive teachers don't like classical civilization any more than they like imperialist Victorian explorers - the Greeks and the Romans were white slave owners after all - so perhaps we'd better have a bit of a primer. So today I added an extra slide. This one.

So, Ancient Greece! Who can tell me where Greece is?

Greece is the bit at the bottom of Europe that points at Africa, with Italy on one side and Turkey on the other, and it is mostly islands and rock.

In this context, what does Ancient mean? How many years ago?

Ancient, for tonight's purposes, means somewhere around two and a half thousand years ago. Which is a useless number, obviously. Nobody can hold two and a half thousand years in their head, so don't try. Just take it that everything on this slide happened an extremely long time before anything else I am going to mention this evening.

Three men. Not because there were only three, but because between them they laid out the questions that everybody afterwards is answering, including everybody in the rest of tonight. Anyone heard of them?

The first of them made a career out of buttonholing his fellow citizens and asking them to define whatever it was they had just so confidently asserted. It turns out people mind this enormously. Eventually the city took a vote and made him finish himself off with a cup of hemlock poison, which tells you considerably more about those questions than any summary of them would.

The second was one of the young men standing at the edge of that trial. He wasn't there at the very end, as it happens; he was ill that day, and we only know that because he wrote it down himself years later. And write he did, for the next fifty years, which is the only reason any of this reached us at all. He had an Academy as well.

The third was the second one's pupil for twenty years, disagreed with him about very nearly everything, and went off to sort the entire natural world into categories instead. If anyone ever told you a whale is not a fish, you are downstream of him. He also spent a few years tutoring a certain Macedonian teenager, who then went out and conquered most of the world his tutor had just finished cataloguing.

Now, here is the thing I actually want you to take off this slide, and it isn't the dates.

Plotinus, who turns up in a minute, spent his entire life insisting he was not an original thinker at all: merely a faithful explainer of Plato. And I think when we hear that we picture two men more or less in the same room, contemporaries, one of them holding the other's coat.

They were nothing of the kind. A little over six hundred years separates them. Go back six hundred years from tonight and you are standing in roughly 1400. Chaucer has just died. The Black Death is two generations back. Agincourt hasn't happened. Nobody in England has ever seen a printed book. That is the distance we are talking about. When Plotinus read Plato he was reading a medieval manuscript, in a Greek several centuries older than his own, out of a world with different gods and different money, and he still thought the man had been right, and that working out what he had actually meant was a perfectly reasonable way to spend a life.

The slide lists what they were all after, so I won't read it out to you. But do look at the line in yellow along the bottom, because that is the one that runs under this entire lecture and the two after it. They were particularly concerned with the soul. What is it? Where does it come from? Where does it go? Hold onto that one.

Right. Plotinus.

1. COLD OPEN

S3

Picture this. Alexandria, around 232 AD. Home to one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World: the Pharos lighthouse. The greatest city in the Mediterranean world, not Rome, not Athens, but this one: a library that had held three hundred thousand scrolls, a population of Egyptians, Greeks, Jews, Syrians, and philosophers from every corner of the known world, all living within a few blocks of each other and arguing continuously. If you want to know what the universe actually is, this is where you come.

The predicament on the screen is a very modern one: a year of celebrity teachers, and a growing suspicion that confidence and content are two different commodities. The man he gets taken to hear is one of the great enigmas in the history of philosophy. Ammonius Saccas was reputedly a porter from the docks (the nickname may mean 'sack-carrier'), he held no chair, and he wrote nothing down, ever: we know him only through the students who walked out of that room changed. Whatever happened in that lecture, it ended a year of searching on the spot. Porphyry, to whom we owe the whole story, preserved the sentence it produced:

“This is the man I was looking for.”

The slide will give you his name and his age. What it cannot give you is the sound of a man who has just stopped looking.

Did you know that - if you ignore the two great pyramids - the Pharos was the tallest building in the world for over a thousand years. The AI doesn't do it justice in this image. It survived more or less to its full height until it was ruined by an Earthquake in 1303, and the stubby remnant was removed as late as 1480 to build a fort..?

S4

The career is on the slide: eleven years with Ammonius Saccas, one disastrous military expedition to Persia, then Rome. Let me add the man, because Porphyry - the student who put together Plotinus's collected works the *Enneads* - preserved him in oddly modern detail in his biographical sketch. So Plotinus refused ever to sit for a portrait: why make an image, he asked, of the image we already walk around in? He would never celebrate his own birthday, but kept Plato's and Socrates' like feast days. His seminar was packed with Roman senators (one of them, on Plotinus's account, gave away his fortune and his career) and, scandalously for the time, with women. And the expedition matters: he attached himself to the emperor Gordian's Persian campaign not to fight but because he had heard that the philosophers really worth hearing were in Persia and India. When the army murdered its own emperor, the thirty-nine-year-old philosopher ran for his life across the desert to Antioch. He then spent a quarter of a century in Rome writing about the eternal structure of reality while the empire burned through rulers, most of them dying violently. The books never mention any of it.

He died in 270 AD. A doctor called Eustochius was with him at the end. His last words, as Eustochius reported them, were:

“Seek to bring back the god in you to the divine in the All.”

Plotinus, last words · 270 AD · recorded by Eustochius · relayed by Porphyry, Life of Plotinus

I'm not going to translate that sentence for you: we will spend the rest of the evening inside it, and seventeen centuries of readers have argued about every word in it. Here is what I want you to sit with instead. A civilisation's most careful thinker spent his last breath on it, and the odds are that nobody, in your entire education, ever said his name to you. So let's open the drawer!

2. PLOTINUS: THE ONE AND EMANATIONS

S5

Here is the central idea, and I want you to actually hear it rather than file it under “old Greek stuff”:

The diagram on the left is the whole system, and the text beside it is as close as words get, so rather than read it to you I want to walk you round the rings with a physicist's eye. Start at the centre, and notice the first oddity: the centre is not a thing. Every other account of reality you have ever met starts with a something (a god, a particle, a field, a law). Plotinus starts with what he insists is beyond every category that would make it a something, and the rest of the picture is simply what happens as that centre gives itself away. One ring out, you get mind, but look closely: not a mind, not anybody's mind. Thinking, before there is anyone whose thinking it is. Another ring out, and the thought becomes animating: a cosmos that is alive the way a body is alive, all of it, at once. And the outermost ring, the one you and I are standing in, is not made of some second, lesser substance. It is the same radiance, at the greatest distance it can travel from its source.

S6

Let the slide say it plainly while I tell you why it was explosive. In Genesis, creation is a decision: God speaks, and might not have spoken. Plotinus deletes the decision. The One no more chooses to overflow than the sun chooses to shine, and a universe that exists necessarily is a universe that shares its source's nature rather than merely obeying its instructions. Nothing stands between you and the origin of everything except distance.

The material world is not the opposite of God, nor a mistake, nor a prison (as some groups we will meet say it is). It is the last and faintest place the light reaches, and it is still the same light.

And once you have swallowed that, you are not the thing you got up this morning believing you were.

3. THE UNDESCENDED SOUL

S7

Here is the idea I think Plotinus deserves to be remembered for, and almost nobody knows:

The set-up on the slide is the standard picture, and every tradition you know has a version of it: a soul comes down, puts on a body, becomes somebody in particular. If Plotinus had stopped there, he would be a footnote to Plato. He did not stop there.

“Part of us is always above.”

S8

He says the descent is never actually completed.

Take a second with the paragraph on the screen, because it is the most scandalous claim anyone makes all evening, and I want to add three things it does not say. First: this is not a metaphor that got out of hand. Plotinus means it as flatly as a physicist means conservation of energy. The highest part of the soul does not descend, cannot descend; the contact is unbroken as a matter of ontology, whatever your mood was this morning. Second: almost nobody who came after him could stomach it. Within a couple of generations his own successors in the school threw the doctrine out (too much, they said, for creatures as obviously lost as we are), and no church could ever adopt it, for a bluntly institutional reason: a soul that never left needs no rescue, and a religion of no-rescue has nothing to sell. Third, and this is what stops it being merely a charming thought: he was not speculating. Porphyry, who lived alongside him and kept the accounts, records that in his handful of years in the school he watched Plotinus arrive four times. Not believe. Arrive.

Hold on to how sunlit this picture is: nothing lost, nothing needing rescue, only a turn to make, the epistrophe.

4. HERMES TRISMEGISTUS AND THE EGYPTIAN SOURCE

S9

Before we go further into what Plotinus built, I want to tell you about the thing he thought he was recovering.

Some of this audience can read the right-hand text with your own discipline in mind, because this is an archaeological situation: a civilisation living inside the monuments of a greater one, and losing, generation by generation, the ability to read them. Within two centuries of tonight's story, someone would carve the last hieroglyphic inscription anywhere on earth, on an island temple far up the Nile, and the script would then be silent for fourteen hundred years. And here is the thing about a monumental past you can see but cannot read: it does not shrink, it grows. Every unreadable wall becomes a receipt for lost knowledge. The Greeks of Alexandria, the most literate people in the Mediterranean, walked past those walls every day and drew the conclusion people in that position always draw: the ancients knew something we do not.

The vehicle for this belief was a body of texts attributed to a figure called Hermes Trismegistus: Hermes the Thrice-Great. A fusion of the Greek messenger-god Hermes and the Egyptian god of writing and wisdom, who was called Thoth. The texts themselves, the *Corpus Hermeticum*, were almost certainly being written down in Alexandria at almost exactly the moment Plotinus was working there. But they were presented, and largely believed, as translations of something vastly more ancient.

S10

Hermes Trismegistus. The *Corpus Hermeticum*. The word itself has earned its slide: Hermeticism, the tradition that grew up around these writings. What I want you to feel is how unlike a philosophy course the texts are. Each one is a scene, usually an initiation: the god-sage teaching one pupil at a time, and the pupil being changed rather than informed. In the thirteenth treatise the pupil asks to be reborn, and by the end of the dialogue he is; that is the point of the whole literature. Not a doctrine you subscribe to but an operation you undergo, on the working assumption that if the cosmos and the soul share one structure, then knowing the structure is climbing it. And alongside the elevated dialogues there is a workshop shelf, practical stuff like star-lore, alchemy, talismans. The same picture of the world, applied with both hands. One housekeeping note with a payoff later: when the Roman West fell apart, its Latin readers kept exactly one of these books, the *Asclepius*, and lost the rest. The Greek treatises did not die; they went east and slept in Byzantine libraries for a thousand years. Remember that. It becomes a plot point. And when you want the real thing, the Academy's copy is on the shelf of the classical education library; it is a stranger and more beautiful book than any summary of it.

S11

The four words on the screen are the entire Hermetic cosmology, and the caption beneath them is its one doctrine at full length; everything else follows from it.

The same pattern at every level. Understand the pattern at one level, and you understand it at all levels, which is why astrology, alchemy, and magic made complete rational sense within this

framework. They're not superstition. They're applied Hermetic cosmology: the stars and the metals and the human body and the divine mind are all expressions of the same underlying structure, and if you know the structure, you can work with the correspondences.

This sounds like mysticism. It is mysticism. It also sounds, to a physicist's ear, a little like a pre-mathematical intuition of what we'd now call scale invariance: the same structures repeating at different levels of organisation. I'm not claiming the ancient Egyptians had string theory. I'm saying the intuition that the universe is patterned all the way down, and that those patterns connect the cosmic and the intimate, is not obviously wrong. We'll come back to that in Lecture 3.

5. THE GNOSTIC DIVERGENCE

S12

Here is where it gets interesting. Because Plotinus wasn't working in a vacuum: he was working in a city absolutely full of people who had taken the same basic framework and reached a completely opposite conclusion. They had drawn a prison, where he had drawn an overflow. And it made him furious. His angriest surviving pages are about them.

Their cosmology is on the slide, in their own terms (and remember that 'the Gnostics' is a loose label over dozens of squabbling schools; this is the shared skeleton). I want to give you two things around it. The first is how we know it at all. For most of history the Gnostics existed only in quotation: in the sneering summaries of the Church fathers who burned their books. Then in 1945 an Egyptian farmer digging for fertiliser near a town called Nag Hammadi hauled a sealed jar out of the ground, and inside it were thirteen leather-bound books: a whole buried library of their own scriptures. After fifteen centuries of being described by their enemies, they finally got to speak for themselves. The second thing is the emotional logic, because you can feel the pull of it even now. The world was not made by God, as such, but by a lowlier creature called the Demiurge. Look at what the Demiurge move actually achieves: it answers the oldest objection to religion, the problem of evil, with a demotion. The world hurts and children get cancer not because God is cruel or absent, but because the thing that built it was not God. Your grief becomes evidence. Every disappointment confirms the doctrine. It is a theology with the explanatory appetite of a conspiracy theory, and I do not mean that entirely as an insult.

Above the Demiurge: the true God, hidden, silent, the *Pleroma*, the fullness, the realm of pure divine light that has nothing to do with this mess. And in each human being: a *spark* of that original divine light, trapped in matter, trying to find its way home.

And now the picture on the left of the slide, because it is not decoration. That is William Blake's *The Ancient of Days*, painted in 1794: the creator crouched inside the sun, reaching down into the dark with a pair of compasses to set limits on the deep. Blake knew exactly which god he was painting. In his private mythology the figure is Urizen, the cosmic architect

and lawgiver, and he is not the Almighty; he is Blake's own Demiurge, a bounded intelligence that mistakes ruling lines for creating truth. Blake worked most of this out for himself, which should be starting to sound familiar.

And the boldest thing the Gnostic reading ever did was open the Bible and apply the idea there: read the Old and New Testaments side by side, some of them said, and you are plainly reading about two different beings. The first - in the old Testament - is the Demiurge: he's arrogant, ignorant of anything above himself, obsessed with obedience and tribal law; the god who sends she-bears to maul children for mocking a bald prophet, who lets Job be tortured to settle a wager, who turns a woman into a pillar of salt for looking back at her burning home. The second - in the New Testament - is the transcendent, unknowable God of love and mercy that Jesus arrived to reveal.

Marcion of Sinope built the first Christian canon - the list of books allowed to be in the bible - on exactly that split. He wanted to get rid of the Old Testament completely because he considered it 'Jewish contamination'! The church expelled him almost at once, because the implication is fatal to the whole enterprise: if the two are different beings, the point of religion is no longer to obey the architect. It is to get past him. Which brings us to the word on the next slide.

S13

The way out, in the Gnostic framework, is *gnosis*. And the word is doing something specific: not a thing you accept, not a thing you practise, not a thing you perform, but a thing you find out about yourself, at first hand, the way you find out you have burned your fingers. the sudden recognition that the spark in you is divine, that the Demiurge who built this prison doesn't have the final say, and that the path home is inward, not upward through any official religious hierarchy.

Follow the slide's logic one step further and you can predict the next thousand years of religious history. A church is, among other things, a monopoly on the means of salvation: sacraments, priesthood, absolution, the whole apparatus of the official ladder. Gnosis is a fire escape. No monopoly survives a fire escape, and the institution understood that perfectly; which is why, of all the rivals early Christianity faced, this was the one it worked hardest to erase.

Now, Plotinus read this, and wrote an entire treatise in response. Ennead II.9, known as "Against the Gnostics." It is, by the standards of ancient philosophical writing, a remarkably bad-tempered document. His objections are precise:

First: the world is *not* evil. It is beautiful. A man who cannot see that the material cosmos is the magnificent expression of divine intelligence that it is has not looked hard enough. Second: the Demiurge is not a malevolent fool. The ordering of matter by intelligence is itself a divine act. And third, the most interesting objection, wallowing in the drama of being a spark of light

imprisoned by an evil creator is a form of spiritual *vanity*. You are telling yourself a story in which you are a divine prisoner, which feels very important and very special, when the actual work (the *epistrophe*, the return, the quiet inward turn) requires you to stop performing and start paying attention.

It's a genuinely useful criticism. It's also the criticism of a man who found the Gnostic story too dark, too dualist, too willing to write the material world off as a mistake. Plotinus loved the world. He just didn't want you to stop there.

S14

Here's why I'm telling you both versions rather than just picking one: the Gnostic tradition is, historically, the more *generative* one. Plotinus's more luminous, world-affirming Neoplatonism influenced Christian theology and eventually got partially absorbed into it. The Gnostic strand (darker, more dualist, more insistent that official religion is run by the wrong god) went underground. Catharism, whose practitioners all ended up being exterminated on the orders of the Pope. The Kabbalah's more dualist currents. Rosicrucianism. And, as we'll see, its themes resurface, unbidden, in the man we're going to meet next.

The Gnostics lost the argument publicly, but they never stopped whispering.

6. FLORENCE: THE BOOKS COME BACK

S15

One stop before we meet him. The books themselves have to come home first, and their homecoming has a date, a city, and a deathbed.

The scene is on the slide; savour the priorities. In 1463, Plato himself (the complete dialogues, most of them unread in the West for a thousand years, finally recovered) is sitting on Marsilio Ficino's desk, half translated. And the most powerful man in Italy looks at a newly arrived bundle of Greek pages and says: that one first. It is one of history's most revealing queue-jumps. Cosimo was not confused about what Plato was worth. He was dying, and he believed the new manuscript was older than Plato, closer to the source: the original wisdom of which Plato was merely an heir. Ficino delivered the translation in April 1463; Cosimo had a little over a year left to read it.

Ficino had the whole thing out of the Greek before the year was over. The press got hold of it in 1471, and after that you could hardly move in educated Europe for copies. So by way of one scholar, one city and one dying banker, the Hermetic material came pouring back into the bloodstream of Western thinking: the correspondence between macrocosm and microcosm, the divine nature of the human soul, the idea that ancient wisdom had been lost and could be recovered.

From the lecture room of Ammonius Saccas to Cosimo's deathbed is twelve hundred years, and the idea crossed that whole span as a physical object: a bundle of pages in a monk's luggage,

part of the salvage of a collapsing Byzantium. From Cosimo's palazzo to our front door in Florence is a walk across town, and five and a half centuries. Twelve hundred years and a morning's walk: that is the whole distance, which is rather marvellous. Then a short car ride to Vallico Sotto.

And the ideas in those rooms are what tonight is actually about.

Let's pause for another dumbness test. Who or why or what is Byzantium?

It's what is now Istanbul, the capital of Turkey. Originally a Greek colony called Byzantium, it became important when Constantine I - the first Christian emperor of the Roman empire - moved the capital there from Rome. He originally called it New Rome, it was quickly renamed Constantinopolis/Constantinople in his honour. The empire was split into Western and Eastern halves, and after the fall of Rome in 476AD, the Eastern half known as the Byzantine empire, and colloquially as Byzantium carried on as the centre of Christian civilization until it was conquered by the Moslems in 1453.

7. JAKOB BOEHME

S16

From Florence, the lineage jumps the Alps and a hundred and forty years: to a small town in Silesia, and a man who had none of the equipment. No degree, no classical languages, no way into the Neoplatonist literature at all. He got to the same place anyway, along a road nobody else had used.

The dates and the vision are on the slide; here is what the slide cannot show you. Görlitz was a prosperous little trading town on the River Neisse, and Jakob Boehme was a respectable tradesman in it: a master shoemaker with a stall by the bridge, a wife, sons, a business. Nothing about the man predicts the books. When *Aurora* leaked out in manuscript copies, the town's chief pastor denounced him from the pulpit by name, the council confiscated the manuscript, and the cobbler was ordered never to write again. He obeyed for about six years. Then the ideas won; and for the rest of his life he gave up the bench, traded in yarn and gloves to keep the household, and wrote in secret, while the manuscripts travelled hand to hand among precisely the educated readers who were supposed to know better. They called him the Philosophus Teutonicus: the German philosopher. Hold that phrase in mind.

Coleridge the poet filled the margins of his copy of Boehme with notes. Hegel the philosopher gave him the credit for starting German philosophy outright, and Hegel's dialectic, that endless engine of opposites resolving into higher unities, is basically Boehme translated into academic philosophy. Blake the painter looked at the illustrations in the English edition and said Michelangelo himself could not have improved on them. And one woman in the nineteenth century read him so thoroughly that she essentially rebuilt the entire tradition around him for a modern audience.

S17

The doctrine is on the slide, and the sentence in the red box is the whole of it; everything else Boehme ever wrote is commentary on those seven words. "God must divide himself to know himself". What I want you to hear is how strange it is that a Lutheran tradesman said them at all. In 1600, the official God of every confession in Europe was perfect, complete, self-sufficient: a being in need of nothing. Boehme looked into a pewter dish and saw a God who *needs*. Needs an opposite. Needs darkness, resistance, a world that pushes back, because without an other there is nothing to know and no one to be. He wrote it in the only vocabularies he had, the workshop and the Bible and the alchemists: salt and sulphur, wrath and love, fire and light. The books are nearly unreadable and completely unforgettable.

And place him carefully between the two systems we met in Alexandria, because he splits the difference in a way neither of them managed. Gentler than the Gnostics: the darkness is real, but nobody is to blame for it. Harder than Plotinus: the world is not a serene overflow, it is something the divine goes through, at cost, in order to become known to itself. I'll have more to say about that in the fourth lecture. This is creation as autobiography, written the hard way.

8. BLAVATSKY, BAILEY, AND SETH

S18

Almost nobody in the nineteenth century divided opinion like Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, and I want to be honest with you about that upfront: some of what she claimed about herself is almost certainly fabricated, her two major books are chaotic and often internally inconsistent, and more than one of the marvels she staged as proof of her powers was caught out while she was still alive to answer for it.

And yet.

I will let the slide carry the claim and the roll-call, because the names do the arguing better than I can. What I will add is what the names have in common: none of these people were fools, and none of them came to her for the séances. They came because she was doing something nobody else in 1875 was doing: taking the entire non-Christian metaphysical inheritance of the human race seriously, in English, in public, in a form you could build a life or an art movement around. If you wanted Vedanta, or Tibetan Buddhism, or the Kabbalah, or our whole buried lineage from tonight, and you wanted it outside a university and without apology, then for about half a century there was essentially one shop.

The slide mentions the Steiner schools, founded by Rudolf Steiner, another very interesting man; fun fact that (my son) Jamie will start attending the Steiner school in Florence in September!

So Blavatsky's central claim, in her book *The Secret Doctrine*, is that there is an ancient wisdom tradition (the *Philosophia Perennis*, the perennial philosophy) that predates all existing

religions, was preserved by a hierarchy of initiates across thousands of years, and is now being partially disclosed to the modern world. She calls its ultimate principle *the Absolute*, which is Boehme's Ungrund, which is Plotinus's One, which is the Hermetic divine source. Consciousness is primary. Matter is its expression.

S19

Blavatsky's most significant successor was Alice Bailey, who claimed contact with her own Tibetan master, whom she called Djwhal Khul, and between 1919 and 1949 produced nineteen books of dictated teaching, dense enough that even committed students typically spend decades with them. Samantha has. The framework is an elaboration of the Theosophical one: a universe organised into graded planes, with consciousness running through them as a set of distinct rays, an evolving hierarchy of souls, and an ultimate principle that will be recognisable by now: consciousness as the ground of everything, matter as its expression. The books are not easy. They are also not going away.

S20

Jane Roberts was a poet and fiction writer living in Elmira, New York. In 1963, she and her husband Rob were experimenting with a Ouija board when contact was established with an entity calling itself Seth, described as "an energy personality essence no longer focused in physical reality." From 1963 until Roberts's death in 1984, Seth dictated, through Roberts in trance, a series of books that sold millions of copies and remain in print today.

Everything doctrinal is on the slide, and I would like you to read the right-hand paragraph twice, because it is the entire second half of tonight's lecture arriving from the least respectable address imaginable. What I can add is the part the slide compresses. Jane Roberts did not ask for this material and never fully made her peace with it: she was a working writer with a science-fiction career to build, and by her own account she remained uneasy about the whole business to the end of her life. She had, as far as anyone has ever established, no Boehme on her shelves and no German. And yet what comes through her in trance is not vaguely Boehme-flavoured; it is his actual logical sequence, step for step: the undivided whole, the impossibility of self-knowledge without an other, the deliberate fragmentation, the long return. Either a poet at a kitchen table in upstate New York reinvented seventeenth-century German mysticism from a standing start, or the questions themselves have a shape that certain minds, in a certain mode, keep tracing. I know which way I lean. But notice that tonight's thesis survives on either branch.

Seth's All That Is. Blavatsky's Absolute. Boehme's Ungrund. And behind the lot of them, Plotinus's One.

The costume may change but the idea doesn't.

9. FEDERICO FAGGIN: THE CHAIN CLOSES

S21

The credentials are on the slide, so let me tell you the story the slide compresses. In 1970 a Japanese calculator company ordered a set of custom chips from Intel, and the young physicist handed the job - a certain Federico Faggin - decided instead to put a computer's entire processing unit onto one piece of silicon, which at the time sat somewhere between a shortcut and a heresy. It took him about nine months. Two thousand three hundred transistors; and he signed the die the way a Renaissance craftsman signs a bronze, with his initials etched into the corner: F.F. Every processor since is that chip's descendant, and the touch screens came later, from another of his companies. I labour the point for one reason. When this particular man tells you that consciousness cannot be computed, he is not underrating computers. There is no one alive with less excuse for underrating computers.

S22

December 1990. Faggin is forty-nine. What the slide describes lasted a handful of seconds, and I want to dwell not on the experience but on his response to it, because the response is the physicist's signature. He did not found a movement. He did not write a memoir. He treated it the way you treat an anomalous reading in a laboratory: as a data point his entire model of reality had failed to predict. And then he went looking for the failure.

He spent the next three decades doing what you'd expect from a physicist: trying to build a rigorous explanation rather than just having a feeling about it. The conclusion he eventually published, in his 2024 book *Irreducible* - available in the academy library! - is this: consciousness cannot emerge from unconscious matter, for the same reason you cannot get a positive number by adding up only negative ones.

“More cannot come out of less. Unconscious matter cannot produce consciousness.”

Federico Faggin, Irreducible: Consciousness, Life, Computers, and Human Nature (2024)

So in the book, Faggin calls the totality of what exists 'the One', and it is irreducible, dynamic, holistic, creative and possesses consciousness and free will. Its fundamental urge is to know / experience itself. From the One's acts of self-knowing emerge "consciousness units" which he calls "seities" or conscious quantum fields - part-wholes that are inseparable from the One yet have unique identity, consciousness, and agency.

And notice where the argument goes. It does not make consciousness rarer, some crown reserved for brains; it makes it universal. If consciousness cannot be assembled out of parts that lack it, then it was never assembled. It was there from the start, all the way down.

S23

The summary is on the slide and the red box is the punchline, so read the box slowly; I have been saving it all evening. And now let me tell you who Giuseppe Faggin actually was, because it is better even than the box suggests. He taught philosophy for decades at the classical liceo in Vicenza, and his life's work maps onto tonight's lecture with almost indecent precision. The

first Italian translation of the *Enneads*, Greek text facing: his. A monograph on Meister Eckhart and the German mystics, the tradition that flows into Boehme: his. Studies of the Renaissance occultists, the heirs of Ficino's Florence: his too. The man's bookshelf was, more or less, tonight's running order.

So picture the household. The father downstairs, rendering the One and its emanations into Italian; the son upstairs, wanting none of it, wanting to build things, off to electronics and physics as if to escape the whole inheritance. The son builds the most first-mode object of the twentieth century. And fifty years later, from inside that life, he publishes his father's cosmology, re-derived in the language of quantum physics. You do not have to believe in fate to enjoy that. You only have to believe in dinner tables.

The chain doesn't just continue. It closes.

10. THE TRADITION CONTINUES

S24

I want to end this bit with someone in this room. Because the tradition I've just described (consciousness as primary, matter as its expression, a field underlying both that can't be seen but is inescapably felt) didn't end with Federico Faggin building circuits in Silicon Valley. It is still happening, in people who have never read Plotinus, and who have arrived at the same territory entirely from the inside.

Samantha began sculpting about the age of 18 months or something ridiculous, and very quickly graduated from Play-Doh to bronze, she had rigorous training at the Royal Academy Schools in London, even though she didn't really need it as her talent comes out of the aether somewhere.. She learned the violin under Yehudi Menuhin's methodology, which matters, because musical mechanics became the underlying principle of her bronze sculpture.

The slide will tell you what to look at; let me tell you what you are looking *through*. Bronze is the least likely material on earth for this argument. It is cast, which means every dissolving edge you can see was first modelled deliberately, by hand, in wax, and then survived molten metal at a thousand degrees. Nothing here is accident, erosion, or damage. A sculptor who can render a hand perfectly chose, at each extremity, the exact point at which the hand should stop being claimable as a hand. And the title does the remaining work: not *a* spirit, not *the* spirit of anything in particular. Just *Spirit*.

And the sculpture is not the only place this evening's picture shows up in her. Sam has worked her own way, entirely independently, to a theory squarely in tonight's tradition, and in some respects out ahead of it. Let's keep that for later; tonight it is enough that you have seen what it looks like when it is cast in bronze.

You heard about Sam's gallery, Keil Space, last time in my poetical description of the horrors of dealing with Italian construction workers when we were building it. It's on Viale Michelangiolo, the road that climbs from the Arno up towards Florence's balcony, Piazzale Michelangelo: twenty minutes' walk from the Palazzo Medici, where the man who commissioned Ficino's translation lived. The chain, as I said, is shorter than it looks.

The gallery is painted entirely black. Six rooms. Visits are by appointment only, one person at a time, and entirely free of charge. Samantha designed it this way deliberately: and here's the thing, the whole space (and particularly the multisensory room, which engages sight, sound, and scent simultaneously) was built specifically to engage the second mode of attention, the one this whole evening has been about. Not as a theory. As an engineered environment with a measurable effect.

At the end of every visit, a videoed interview is conducted with the visitor. The words they use have been professionally and statistically analysed. The results show consistent, significant positive effects on mood, focus, and emotional state: strongest in the multisensory room. This is not mysticism. This is an experiment with data.

The website states the mission is 'to explore the depth of perception, and the mechanism that integrates the physical universe with the mental plane.' As I said she has, alongside this, a theoretical framework of her own (a universe-wide field, consciousness prior to matter, the particular and the universal in continuous dynamic relationship). We'll be working this summer on the best way to communicate this.

In four thousand years of people arriving independently at the same intuition (from the priests of Thoth to a cobbler in Silesia to a poet in upstate New York), Sam is the most recent example. She didn't read her way there. She thought her way there.

11. THE LINEAGE

S25

I want to pause on this for a moment, because the chain looks tidier than it actually was. For the most part these are strangers to one another. Boehme almost certainly hadn't read Plotinus. Jane Roberts had almost certainly never heard of Boehme. Blavatsky had read everything, but Seth came through a Ouija board in upstate New York to a woman whose primary literary ambition was to write science fiction novels.

The point isn't that they were all reading from the same secret book. The point is that when certain kinds of minds, in certain modes of attention, turn toward the deepest questions (what is the universe actually made of, what is consciousness, is matter primary or derivative), they keep arriving at recognisably similar answers. Independently. Across four thousand years.

That either tells you something about the tradition, or it tells you something about the questions. Possibly both.

12. WHY IT GOT BURIED

S26

In 1614, fourteen years after Boehme's vision in the cobbler's workshop, a Swiss scholar called Isaac Casaubon did something that changed the history of ideas. He looked carefully at the *Corpus Hermeticum* and proved, by comparing the Greek vocabulary to dateable texts, that it could not be ancient Egyptian wisdom. The language placed it firmly in Plotinus's own lifetime, give or take, and in his own city. It wasn't ancient. It wasn't the *prisca sapientia*. It was a sophisticated philosophical confection wearing an Egyptian costume.

The slide gives you the demolition; let me give you the demolition man, because he was not even aiming at this target. Isaac Casaubon was a Huguenot refugee scholar, reckoned by many the most learned man in Europe, working in England for James I, and his real assignment was to demolish a great Catholic history of the Church that had leaned on Hermes Trismegistus as a pagan prophet of Christ. His method was brand new and brutally simple: read the Greek as Greek. The vocabulary was late. The philosophical furniture was late. There were echoes of ideas that did not exist before Plato, let alone before Moses. Fifteen centuries of misdating collapsed under a word-list; one of the great precision strikes in the history of scholarship, and it hit a tradition the marksman barely cared about.

Look at those four dates. Within a single lifetime the tradition's founding text is exposed, and the new method gets its martyr, its manifesto, and its monument.

The cosmos - in this new world - is not a living whole shot through with correspondences. It is matter in motion, governed by mathematical laws, knowable by experiment and calculation alone. And the door closes behind that sentence: whatever will not go through it stops counting as something you can know at all.

S27

Now hold on, because the usual moral drawn from this is the wrong one.

The distinction on the slide is worth a whole philosophy seminar, so let me give you the sixty-second version with a different example. Suppose a scholar proved tomorrow that the *Tao Te Ching* - the foundational text of Taoism, traditionally credited to the Chinese sage Laozi - was written eight centuries later than tradition says, by a committee. Interesting; it changes the history books. Now: is '*the way that can be spoken is not the true way*' thereby false? You can feel that the two questions do not touch. That untouched gap is exactly what the seventeenth century paved over.

And be precise about the mechanism, because nobody ever published a refutation. There was no experiment the tradition failed, no theorem against it. What changed was the admissions

policy: the new institutions of knowledge, the academies, the societies, the journals, simply stopped accepting the questions. A question that cannot be settled by measurement was reclassified from profound to meaningless, and the reclassification was enforced by embarrassment rather than argument. Embarrassment turns out to be a remarkably effective instrument of intellectual policy.

The slide's list of where it went repays a look: notice that every name on it is a society. Membership, initiation, degrees, secrecy. That is what happens to a body of thought when the universities will not have it: it does not evaporate, it incorporates. Note also - and this is important - a tradition that survives by initiation rather than publication pays a price: no peer review, no pruning, so the profound and the preposterous travel together in the same lodge. So a serious scholar of Renaissance hermeticism is forced to walk side by side with lunatic hippies with crystals in their hair going to Glastonbury and wittering on about how spiritual they are. Keep that in mind whenever tonight's material embarrasses you slightly. The embarrassment was engineered; but it was not entirely unearned.

So, look, nobody stopped asking. They just learned to do it somewhere other than a university.

S28

Here is a test you can run on your own education. Tonight you met a Roman-era philosopher whose system organised a thousand years of theology, a text that helped drive the Renaissance, and a tradition that shaped Gandhi, Yeats, and abstract art. Ask yourself how many minutes of formal schooling you ever received on any of it. The slide says why: the syllabus you were given is itself a historical artefact, with a construction date, and Wouter Hanegraaff is the scholar who excavated the site.

His book *Esotericism in Western Culture: Counter-Normativity and Rejected Knowledge* does for this whole landscape what a good survey does for a country you have only ever crossed at night: scholarly without being sniffy, and willing to take the material seriously without ever selling it to you. It came out in 2025 and supersedes the guide he wrote a dozen years earlier (*Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed*), so it is the one to read. The Academy library has a copy. I'd recommend it without reservation. Though the first chapter does go on a bit and is very slow getting to the point.

13. CLOSING: FORWARD POINTER TO LECTURE 3

S29

I said at the start of this evening that the tradition we've been tracing lost the official argument to the kind of thinking that built the Scientific Revolution. What I didn't say (because I'm saying it now) is that the argument isn't over.

In the twentieth century, working from the equations of quantum mechanics rather than from mystical intuition or philosophical reasoning, a small number of physicists started arriving at

conclusions that the tradition we've been discussing tonight would have found entirely familiar. A universal field underlying visible reality. The observer and the observed entangled in ways that can't be undone. Consciousness not obviously separable from the system being measured.

They were not popular for saying so. One of them was told by his colleagues to stop. Another spent thirty years developing his ideas in dialogue with a philosopher (a man Plotinus would have recognised immediately) and published them under a title that could almost serve as the subtitle of tonight's lecture: *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*.

Next time, we meet them.

Bring your second mode of attention; you'll need it.

NOTES AND SOURCES

Four places where the record is thinner, or more interesting, than the talk had time for. Slide numbers refer to the markers in the right margin.

Plotinus on matter (S4). Strictly, Ennead I.8 identifies matter with evil as privation: the complete absence of form and of the good. But Ennead II.9, *Against the Gnostics*, is a sustained defence of the beauty and divinity of the material cosmos against those who despise it. He says both, and the line in the talk is true to the spirit of II.9 and to the contrast drawn at S12: the difference from the Gnostics is that for Plotinus the world is not a crime scene. Even I.8's "evil" is an absence, the fading edge of the good, not a hostile artefact with a maker.

The Alexandrian library in 232 AD (S2). The three-hundred-thousand-scroll figure is a traditional estimate for the Ptolemaic peak; ancient sources give figures from forty thousand to seven hundred thousand, which is why the talk says the library had HELD three hundred thousand rather than that it still did. By Plotinus's day the institution was long past that peak: losses in Caesar's fire of 48 BC (Plutarch, *Life of Caesar*), slow decline under Roman rule, and the centre of gravity shifting to the Serapeum, itself destroyed in 391 AD. The story that the Arab conquest destroyed it is a much later legend. The library declined over centuries rather than dying in one fire.

Newton and Boehme (S14). Newton is often said to have read Boehme. The claim originates with William Law's circle in the eighteenth century, and modern Newton scholarship has found no trace of Boehme in his surviving papers or library. What is verified is the rest of the influence: Coleridge's annotated copies are real and published in his *Marginalia*; Hegel called Boehme the first German philosopher in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*; and Crabb Robinson's diary for 10 December 1825 records Blake praising the Freher figures in the William Law edition, saying Michelangelo could not have done better.

Görlitz and "Silesia" (S14). Görlitz sits in Upper Lusatia. "Silesia" is the conventional loose usage in the older Boehme literature, and the talk keeps the conventional form.