

Book 12

Hermes to Tat

1. **Hermes** ~ *Nous*, O Tat, comes from God's essence, if indeed He has essence. What sort of thing this essence is, He alone knows fully. In fact, *Nous* is not separate from God's true essence, but is, as it were, spread out from it just like the light of the sun. In men this *Nous* is God; thus some men are gods, and then humanity is akin to divinity; in fact, *Agathos Daimon* called gods immortal men, and men mortal gods. But in irrational creatures there is just nature.
2. Now wherever there is soul, there also is *Nous*; likewise, wherever there is life, there also is soul. However, in irrational creatures the soul is life devoid of *Nous*. *Nous* is the benefactor for human souls, for it moves them to the Supreme Good. In irrational creatures it works in the nature of each, whereas in men's souls it counteracts that nature. For every soul on being born in a body is immediately corrupted by both pain and pleasure. Since the body is composed of different parts, both pleasure and pain seethe within it like juices in a stew, and the soul, when it enters into these, is drowned.
3. In souls where *Nous* governs, its light is revealed, acting in opposition to all they have previously acquired. Just as a good physician causes pain by burning or cutting the body that has been gripped by disease, in the same manner *Nous* causes pain to the soul by drawing it away from pleasure, from which every disease of the soul is born.

The great disease of the soul is denial of God, next is belief in appearances, and accompanying these are all evils and nothing good. But then *Nous*, acting in opposition to the disease, secures good for the soul, just as the physician secures health for the body.

4. Human souls that are not governed by *Nous* suffer the same as the souls of irrational creatures, for *Nous* merely powers these souls and gives them up to desires. The souls are carried to desires by the force of appetite, which leads to loss of reason. Just as it is with the unreasonable nature of beasts, such souls do not cease being unreasonably angered and unreasonably desirous, nor can they have enough of these evils. For anger and desires are evils without reason, without limit; and it is for these souls that God set up the law as a punishment and as a test.
5. **Tat** ~ Father, then the previous teaching that you gave me about destiny risks contradiction. For if it is decreed by destiny that someone commits adultery or sacrilege or some other evil, is he who has done the deed under destiny's compulsion also punished?
H. ~ Everything is the work of destiny, my son, and apart from that nothing of the physical realm exists, nor do good and evil arise. It has been ordained that even the one who has done good is affected, and he acts to experience the results of his action.
6. But we are not discussing evil and destiny, and we have spoken about those elsewhere. The present subject is *Nous*, its powers and variations. We have said that it is one thing in men, but another in irrational creatures. Again, in other creatures it is not beneficent. In each man, as it quells passion and desire, it acts differently and it is necessary to realize that there are some men who possess reason (*logos*) and others who do not. But all men are subject to destiny, both birth and death, for these two are the beginning and end of destiny.
7. All men suffer what has been ordained, but those with reason who, as we have said, are led by *Nous*, do not suffer as others do being themselves not evil, they suffer as men who have been released from evil.
T. ~ Again, what do you mean, father? The adulterer is not evil? The murderer and all the rest are not evil?

H. ~ They are, but the suffering of the one with reason will not be as an adulterer, but as if an adulterer, not as a murderer, but as if a murderer. It is impossible to escape the state of death, just as it is impossible to escape the state of birth. But for the one who has *Nous* it is possible to escape evil.

8. Let me tell you what I have always heard *Agathos Daimon* say. If he had set this forth in writing he would have greatly helped the race of men, for he alone, my son, as the first-born god, looking down upon all things, truly spoke divine words. I once heard him say that all is one, and especially spiritual beings; that we live in power, in energy and in eternity; and that the *Nous* of this One is supremely good and also is its very soul. This being so, there is no separation among spiritual beings. Since it rules all things and is the soul of God, *Nous* is able to do just as it wills.
9. Realise this and refer this teaching to the question that you asked me earlier, I mean about destiny and *Nous*. For if you carefully lay aside captious arguments, my son, you will find that *Nous*, the soul of God, truly rules over all: destiny, law and all other things; and nothing is impossible for *Nous*, neither to raise a human soul above destiny, nor, if the soul has been negligent, as happens, to subject it to destiny. And let this, the finest teaching that has been spoken by *Agathos Daimon* suffice for now.

T. ~ Father, you have spoken divinely, truly, and for the benefit of all.

10. But make this clear to me. You said that *Nous* acts as nature in irrational creatures, working in their instincts. And the instincts of these creatures are, as I believe, things that change. And if *Nous* works in the instincts and instincts are things that change, is *Nous* then also subject to change, as it is associated with things that change?

11. H. ~ Well said, my son. Your enquiry is excellent and it is right for me to answer.

All the incorporeal elements in the body, my son, are liable to change, indeed they constitute the very experience of change. Now every incorporeal element causes movement and all things that are moved are bodies, and in turn the incorporeal is moved by *Nous*. Movement is a change. Both the incorporeal and corporeal suffer change. One governs it and the other is subject to it. Release from the body is release from change; or rather, my son, nothing is free from change, all suffer it. The experience of change is different from what suffers it. The former is active and the latter passive.

Physical bodies act according to their nature; they either are stiff or they move. In both cases, however, there is the experience of change. The incorporeal elements are always being acted upon, so because of this they are liable to change. Now do not let these terms disturb you. For both action and experience of change are the same thing. And it does no harm to employ the more appropriate term.

12. T. ~ You have given the teaching most clearly, father.

H. ~ And see this, my son. God has endowed man beyond all mortal creatures with these two gifts: *Nous* and speech, both as much valued as immortality. Man has the spoken word. If he uses those gifts rightly, he will be no different from the immortals, and on departing from the body he will be guided by both to the realm of the gods and the blessed ones.

13. T. ~ But do not other creatures have speech, father?

H. ~ No, they make sounds, and speech differs greatly from sounds. For speech is common to all men, while each kind of creature has its own sound.

T. ~ But is this not true of men, father; that the speech of each nation differs?

H. ~ It is different, my son; but mankind is one, and therefore speech is one. Although it is translated, it is found to be the same in Egypt, Persia and Greece. You seem to me, my son, to be ignorant of the excellence and greatness of speech. For *Agathos Daimon*, that blessed god, has said that soul is in body, *Nous* in soul, and the Word in *Nous*, and that God is the Father of these.

14. The Word is an image of *Nous*, and *Nous* is an image of God; just as the body is an image of an idea, and the idea is an image of the soul. Thus the finest part of matter is air, of air, soul, of soul, *Nous*, and of *Nous*, God. And God encompasses all and is through all, and *Nous* encompasses souls, and soul, air, and air, matter. Necessity, providence and nature are instruments by which the cosmos is governed and by which matter is set in order. Now each of the spiritual beings is an essence and this essence is unchanging identity. Each body in the universe is manifold, and compound bodies, while holding this identity change into each other. Yet they always preserve that indestructible identity.
15. Furthermore, in each and every compound body there is number. For without number it is impossible for combination, composition or dissolution to occur. The One in each brings forth number and increases it, and again dissolving it, receives it into itself, while matter remains one. This entire cosmos, this great god which is an image of the greater, with whom it is united, preserves the order and will of the Father and is the abundance of life. In this cosmos, throughout the eternal cycle of ages, which issues from the Father, there is nothing, neither of the whole nor of any part that does not live. In the cosmos not one dead thing has come to be, is, or will be. For the Father willed that as long as it exists it should be a living being. Therefore the cosmos must needs be a god also.
16. How then, my son, could there be in this god, in the image of the All, in the abundance of life, anything dead? For to die is to perish and to perish is to be destroyed. How then can a part of the imperishable perish or any part of God be destroyed?

T. ~ But, father, do not the creatures in Him, which are parts of Him, die?

H. ~ You cannot say that, my son! You are misled by terms describing that which comes into being. For the creatures do not die, but as compound bodies, they are dissolved; and dissolution is not death, but is the dissolution of a mixture. They are dissolved not to be destroyed, but that new creatures may come to be. After all, what is the activity of life? Is it not movement? What, then in the cosmos is unmoving? Nothing, my son.
17. T. ~ Does not the earth seem to you unmoving, Father?

H. ~ No, my son. It is the only thing full of movement, and at the same time stationary. Would it not be absurd for the nourisher of all things, the producer and begetter of all, to be motionless? It is impossible for one who brings forth to do so without movement. It is most absurd to ask whether the fourth element earth is idle, for an unmoving body signifies nothing but idleness.
18. Then know, my son, that without exception everything in the cosmos that is, is moving, whether decreasing or increasing, and that, which moves is alive. But every living creature is not necessarily always the same, for while the cosmos as a whole is unchanging, my son, all its parts are changing, but nothing can perish or be destroyed. These terms confound men, for life is not birth, but perception; and death is not change, but forgetting. Therefore all is immortal; matter, life, spirit, soul, and *Nous*, from which every living creature has been composed.
19. Now every living creature is immortal by virtue of *Nous*; man above all, for he can receive God and he shares God's essence. God communicates with this creature alone; through dreams by night and through signs by day. Through all these he foretells to men the future; through birds, entrails, inspirations, and the sacred oak. Thus man proclaims that he knows the past, present and future.
20. See this, my son, that each of the living creatures returns again and again to one part of the cosmos; aquatic creatures to the water, terrestrial creatures to the earth, and winged creatures to the air. But man makes use of all these – earth, water, air, fire – and he sees heaven, and touches even this with his mind. God is both around all and through all, he is activity and power, and so to experience God's presence is not difficult, my son.

21. If you wish to contemplate Him, behold the arrangement of the cosmos and the fine order of this array, and behold how all that is visible is so by necessity, how all that has happened and now happens is through providence. Observe matter, most full of life, this god of such magnitude, being moved with all that is good and beautiful; gods, spirits and men.

T. ~ But what you are describing, father, are activities.

H. ~ If they are just activities, my son, by whom are they set in motion? By another god? Or do you not know that just as heaven, water, earth and air are parts of the cosmos, in the same manner life, immortality, blood, necessity, providence, nature, soul, and *Nous* are His limbs; and that the permanence of all these is what is called the Supreme Good? So there is nothing that comes into being or has come into being anywhere that is not God.

22. T. ~ He is in matter then, father?

H. ~ Yes, for if matter, my son, is apart from God, then what sort of place will you give it? What do you think it could be other than a formless heap if it is not set in motion?

But as it is in motion, by whom is it set in motion? For we said that that activity is an aspect of God. So by whom are all living creatures brought to life? By whom are immortals made immortal? By whom is the changing changed? Whether you speak of matter, body or essence, know that these are themselves activities of God, that the activity that is matter is His material nature, the activity that is body is His bodily nature, and the activity that is essence is His essential nature and this is God – the All.

23. And in the All there is nothing that is not. And so there is neither size, place, quality, shape nor time outside God, for He is All; and the All pervades and encompasses everything.