

THE MERCURIUS PRINCIPLE: AN ALCHEMICAL MODEL OF CREATION

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There is one breakthrough idea in alchemy, that once you fully understand it, makes the secretive work of the alchemists an open book. The idea has to do with the true nature of mercury. In his *Lexicon Alchemiae (Dictionary of Alchemy)*, published 1612), German alchemist Martin Ruland Jr. (1569-1611) describes the importance of mercury in the Great Work:

“Mercury is mentioned everywhere, in every alchemical work, and is supposed to perform everything. Everybody wastes his brain and money in endeavoring to produce a quantity of it. Mercury is a thick gluey liquid, yet it does not stick, for it is of a dry nature—Moist and Warm Water inseparably mixed with Earth so that they either remain together or depart together in experiments. In *Speculum Alchimiae (The Mirror of Alchemy)*, published 1597), Roger Bacon states that mercury is a ‘Living Gold’ that kills or makes alive, moistens and dries, warms and cools, and becomes opposite things according to the measure of its regimen.”

Ruland goes on to list over 60 names alchemists used to refer to ordinary mercury, but then he pauses solemnly to caution his readers: “You must always be careful to distinguish what is generally and particularly stated concerning mercury, as to whether it be about ordinary mercury or about Our Mercury. Do not make a mistake; otherwise, the information will be useless.” Rulandus is being rather secretive here, but the “Our Mercury” he is talking

about is Mercurius, the spirit of mercury as mind and imagination, which is at the heart of any alchemical transformation.

Psychologist Carl Jung (1875-1961) clarifies this double meaning in his book *Psychology and Alchemy* (1944), in which he noted that when alchemists spoke of mercury, modern readers assume they were talking about the liquid metal, but in

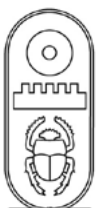
fact they were most often referring to Mercurius, the world-creating spark of consciousness concealed in all matter. This spirit of pure consciousness had the same qualities as liquid mercury and acted like a quicksilver mirror that reflects the world yet flows freely and takes the shape of any container.

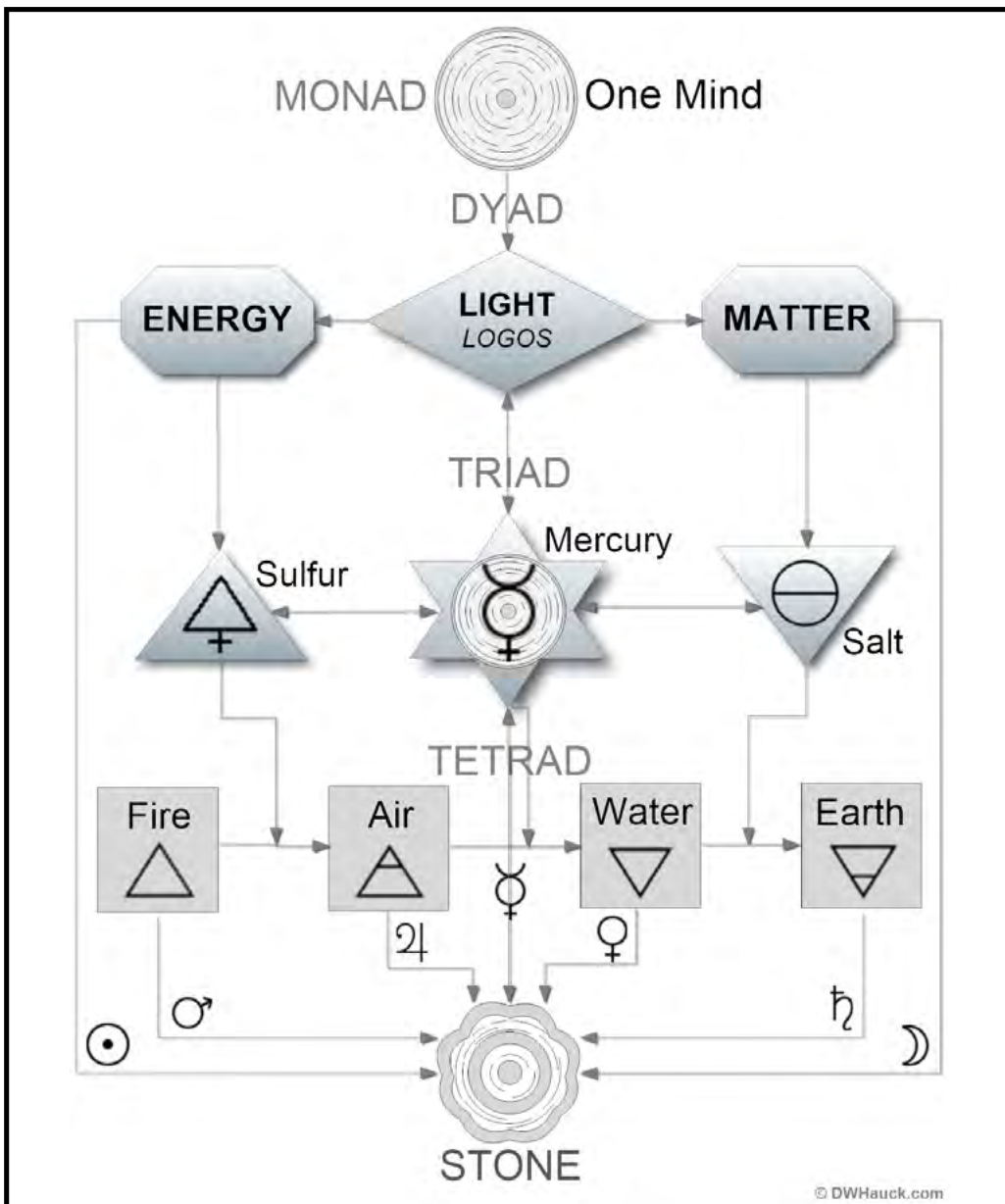
“Mercurius stands at the beginning and end of the Work,” Jung explained. He continued:

It is the *Prima Materia* and *Caput Corvi* (Raven’s Head) of the Nigredo at the beginning. As the dragon Mercurius, it devours itself, and as the dragon it dies, only to rise again in the *Lapis* (Stone). Mercurius is the play of colors in the *Cauda Pavonis* (Peacock’s Tail) and reason for the division into the Four Elements. It is the Hermaphrodite that was at the beginning, who splits into the classical male-female duality that is reunited in the conjunction to appear once again at the end in the radiant form of the *Lumen Novum* (New Light) of the androgenous child that becomes the Philosopher’s Stone. Mercurius is



The Alchemy Exhibit at Rosicrucian Park, San Jose.





all – metallic yet liquid, cold yet fiery, poison yet healing, male yet female, matter yet spirit – a symbolic force uniting all opposites.

Alchemical Cosmology

Mercurius is the most important tool in all of alchemy and the essential ingredient in any transformation. To understand why this archetypal Mercury is at the center of alchemical work, we have to review the cosmology the alchemists believed was behind the creation of the universe. Their belief is based on a mixture of Pythagorean ideas and Hermetic principles. Pythagoras

(570-490 BCE) taught that the universe came into being through emanations originating from an indivisible point of consciousness (or “singularity”) called the Monad, which is sometimes described as the transcendent “One Mind.” It is important to note that the Monad is all there really is. That is the meaning of the alchemist’s famous dictum of “All Is One,” or as Pythagoras put it, the universe is “one Whole of wholes.” In the above chart, I have summarized the alchemical model of creation that emanates from the Monad.

The Monad

At the top of the diagram is a chaotic circle containing a singular point at its center. The Monad singularity is surrounded by the chaotic Abyss or One Thing from which it emerges. In the Hermetic tradition, the first projection of thought into the chaotic Abyss is the divine Word (or Logos) that causes the explosion of light and consciousness that creates our reality. Alchemists believe that primal burst of creative forces – the condensation of light and mind from nothingness – still happens on both the physical and spiritual levels in their laboratories and in their souls.

The Dyad

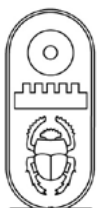
The first and only act of the Monad is the utterance of the Word, the first thought that causes the Big Bang and sets the universe in motion. After that, only the Logos remains, as depicted in our model by the crystallized light in diamond-shaped emanation on the level of the Dyad or Duality. It echoes through spacetime in the Mind of Nature or what Hermeticists call “Mind the Maker.” This emanation from the Monad is embedded in the laws of physics and mathematics.

The Logos as the Mind of Nature can only be expressed in terms of duality, which is depicted in the diagram by the two opposing positive and negative poles shown with the first created opposites of energy and matter. The divine Word only be expressed in duality because – since the universe was created from nothing – it must always add up to zero. This is a fundamental law of both Hermetic philosophy and science. So, every positive thing must be neutralized with its opposite negative thing, and every particle of matter must have its corresponding particle of antimatter. Everything must add up to zero. Thus, the first principle of natural law is this oppositional duality in everything.

The primal opposites of energy and matter are connected through the Logos of light, as shown in our diagram. Energy is expressed in fields of force or waves, while matter is expressed in particles and solid objects. Psychologically, energy is associated with the masculine archetypes of aggressive expansion and spirit, while matter is associated with the feminine archetypes of passive contraction and soul. These are the alchemical icons of the Solar King and Lunar Queen.



An illustration of the Solar King and Lunar Queen from the fifteenth-century text Splendor Solis.



The Triad

The Triad or third level of emanation in our model is the Three Essentials, the three forces of Sulfur, Mercury, and Salt. These forces of creation are engendered through the primal opposites of energy and matter through the intermediary of light. Sulfur is carried in the upward-pointing triangle of Fire, and Salt is carried in the downward-pointing triangle of Water. Thus, Sulfur is a manifestation of energy, Salt is a manifestation of matter, and Mercury is a manifestation of light. These ancient concepts have the mathematical relationship of $E=mc^2$. In our diagram, Sulfur as energy and Salt as matter are shown as opposing forces balanced by Mercury as light at the center.

Mercury is represented by the star-shaped figure made by merging the triangle symbols of Fire and Water. Just as Dr. John Dee placed Mercury at the center of his elegant *Hieroglyphic Monad* cipher, Mercury stands at the heart of our model. The circle at the center of Mercury is a repetition of the singularity in the Monad. In other words, Mercury shares the same kind of consciousness as the One Mind of creation.

Furthermore, Mercury sits at the center of the vertical axis of reality or *Axis Mundi* (World Axis). This reflects the Hermetic concept that Mercury can access all levels of reality from heaven Above to the myriad of manifested things Below and everything in between. That is to say, our reflected consciousness can reach any level of the embedded divine consciousness in the universe using contemplation, concentration, meditation, imagination, and other tools of mind.

The Tetrad

In the Tetrad emanation, we find the Four Elements (Fire, Air, Water, and Earth) of physical reality. They are created from the interaction of the Three



Frontispiece of the Monas Hieroglyphica by John Dee, printed by Willem Silvius in Antwerp, 1564.

Essentials. Fire and Air are influenced by the force of Sulfur (energy). Air and Water are influenced by Mercury (light), and Water and Earth by Salt (matter). The original thought or Word is fulfilled in materialization. Or as the Emerald Tablet puts it: “Its inherent strength is perfected if it is turned into Earth.”

The alchemical philosophers postulated that the emanations of the Four Elements are filtered through seven planetary archetypes culminating in a new embodiment of consciousness or “stone.” A stone could be spiritual (such as a powerful thought or astral body) or physical (such as a chemical precipitate, a rock, or a planet). The crystallized Stone at the bottom of our diagram is the manifestation of thought in our model. The multi-layered object represents the



The Alchemist by David Teniers (1649).

cosmological completion of the Word. Matter in our universe still contains the original spark of consciousness that created it, but it is also shaped by the external forces around it.

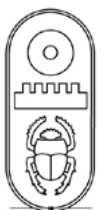
The seven archetypal forces shaping the Stone in our diagram represent the seven planetary influences of Hermetic philosophy. These are indicated by their corresponding alchemical cipher. The primal opposites of energy and matter are the Sun and Moon, while the Four Elements are expressed archetypally as Mars (Fire), Venus (Water), Jupiter (Air), and Saturn (Earth).

The seventh planetary archetype in the creation of the Stone is Mercury, which is the light of consciousness that originated in the One Mind Above and is reflected in Mercury Below – in the personal monad or individual world each of us creates for ourselves. That original spark of light and consciousness from the level of the Monad is projected through the Logos and transmitted by the mercurial light

in all sentient beings. In other words, we create our personal reality in much the same way the universe was created. Synching inner reality with outer reality in the pattern of universal conscious creation filtered through the planetary archetypes is the *modus operandi* alchemists use in their transformational work.

Mercurius in You

The spirit of Mercurius exists in all of us, but it is only expressed in pure awareness freed from the inner bureaucracy of ego and the endless chatter of thoughts that flood our minds. When Hermeticists speak of the “mind’s eye” or “seeing with the eyes of spirit” or “using the true imagination,” they are referring to Mercurius capturing the “Seed of the World” as the divine mind dreams it. Paracelsus believed the mercurial mind envisions the divine source of anything, which can then be explored and even altered through pure, focused contemplation. “The true imagination,” he summarized, “leads life back to its spiritual reality, and it then takes on the name of



meditation.” For him, true imagination is the ability to envision what transformation looks like and work with it in the light of mind. Carl Jung elaborated on this idea in his *Psychology and Alchemy*:

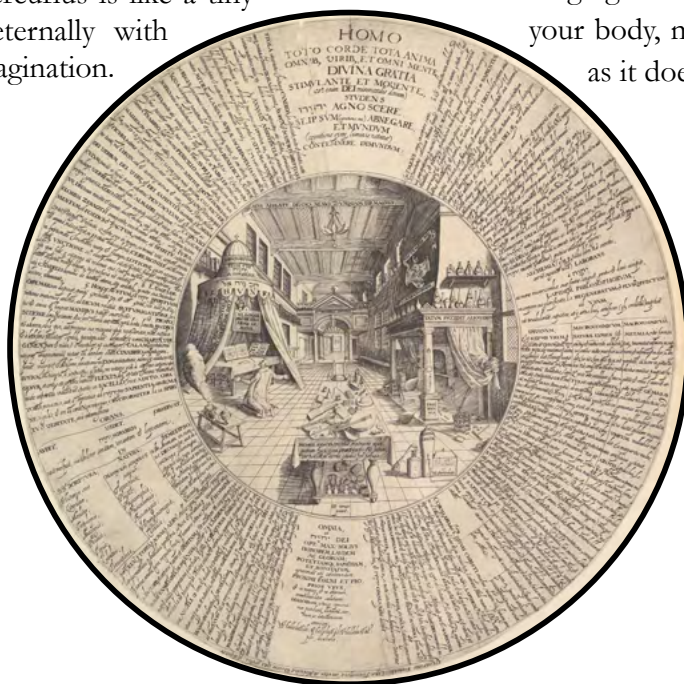
The alchemists’ concept of imagination is the most important key to understanding the Opus. We have to conceive of their imaginal processes not as the immaterial phantoms that we take fantasy pictures to be, but as something corporeal—a subtle body. The act of imagining was like a physical ingredient that could be fitted into the cycle of material changes in the lab. The alchemist related himself not only to his unconscious but directly to the substance he hoped to transform through the power of imagination. The alchemical act of imagining is therefore a concentrated extract of life forces that produces a subtle body, a psychoid hybrid of the physical with the psychic.

Mercurius and the patterns of consciousness it contains originates from the monadic One Mind, but it becomes an *independent* force in our world. In each one of us, Mercurius is like a tiny star shining eternally with pure, living imagination.

Problems arise when the microcosm we create from our personal Logos becomes salted and frozen in time, when the quintessential Mercurius that enlivens us no longer shines through.

The solution is to reanimate or mercurize your mind. Let consciousness flow again like a child’s by desalting yourself. Alchemize your life and live with the imaginative integrity of Mercurius. Get out from under the constant cascade of irrelevant thoughts that pollute your mind and focus on the One Thing in your life that shines directly from your heart. The power of your projection in the world will be determined by the clarity of your mind – by what you do not think about.

The game of life is never the same from one generation to the next, so rise above it. Extract your consciousness from supporting the world view of others whose vision you do not share and focus on the greater reality of the alchemical universe within you. Be mindful and reflective and flow freely into life with the light of Mercurius surging unobstructed through your body, mind, and spirit – as it does in the universe.



The Alchemist’s Laboratory, attributed to Peter van der Doort (sixteenth century).