

The Physics of Transfigured Light: The Imaginal Realm and the Hermetic Foundations of Science

By Leon Marvell Ph.D.

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Reveals the Hermetic underpinnings of modern scientific theories

• Offers a full reconsideration of the history of science from Newton to the present day as well as a Platonic-Hermetic perspective on modern technology

• Examines Hermetic resonances among the ideas of Gurdjieff, Robert Fludd, Marsilio Ficino, and cybernetics; Einstein and the Tibetan Bardo; Neoplatonism and artificial intelligence; and Rosicrucianism and the internet

• Shows how Hermetic doctrine is at the heart of what modern physics is now rediscovering: that consciousness permeates everything

Contemporary scientific disciplines such as chaos and complexity theory, artificial intelligence, and cognitive science treat themselves as new fields of inquiry, but many of these ideas can be traced back to Hermeticism, the European intellectual tradition sparked by the rediscovery of the *Corpus Hermeticum* and Platonic texts in the 15th century.

Building a map of the progression of scientific thought across centuries and continents, Leon Marvell examines the ancient roots of Hermeticism, its rise during the Renaissance, and its suppression during the scientific revolution of the Enlightenment. He reveals how three main Hermetic ideas--the divine spark within each individual, the subtle body, and the *anima mundi* or world soul--have continually emerged at the cutting edge of science and philosophy throughout the ages because these ideas represent universal truths recognized by each era of human civilization.

Marvell examines Hermetic resonances among the ideas of Gurdjieff, Robert Fludd, Marsilio Ficino, and cybernetic theory; Einstein and the Tibetan Bardo; and Neoplatonism and the work of AI scientist Christopher Langton. He reveals how the Rosicrucian description of the Invisible College also describes the instant availability of knowledge via the Internet, and he shows how Hermetic thought is at the heart of what modern physics is rediscovering: that consciousness permeates everything and the universe cannot be reduced to the

random play of matter.

Offering a full reconsideration of the history of science from Newton to the present day as well as a Platonic-Hermetic perspective on modern technology, Marvell reveals the pattern that connects the sciences, philosophy, and ancient knowledge and opens a potentially rich field of inquiry for 21st-century science.

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- Sales Rank: #423347 in Books
- Brand: imusti
- Published on: 2016-05-07
- Released on: 2016-05-07
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.00" h x .90" w x 6.00" l, .0 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 352 pages

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Editorial Review

Review
"Follow Leon Marvell into the subdimensions of archetype-land. A stunning, revelatory rumination on the nature of light, the path to enlightenment, and the meaning of life. A cornucopia of esoteric flash." (*Rudy Rucker, author of Infinity and the Mind and White Light*)

"*The Physics of Transfigured Light* is an erudite and thought-provoking contribution to an argument that the worldview of esotericism might constitute a grand unifying model, which could reconcile the traditional wisdom teachings with the insights of contemporary science, art, and postmodern philosophy." (*Gordan Djurdjevic, Ph.D., faculty at the University of British Columbia*)

"An immensely learned and valuable work on how some basic ideas of the esoteric tradition persist into the age of artificial intelligence. It shows that Hermetic concepts such as that of living nature have always been with us and, very likely, will always be with us." (*Richard Smoley, author of The Dice Game of Shiva: How Consciousness Creates the Universe*)

"This is a book of profound erudition and a lifetime of reflection. Like his Hermetic sources, Marvell's writing has its own 'signature,' its own distinct style or poetry that expresses its most remarkable message in form as much as in content. . . . the result is a multidimensional vision of history and science that, like some weird gnostic hologram, floats off the page before the reader's astonished eyes." (*Jeffrey J. Kripal, author of Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred*)

"This remarkable book reminds me of the famous image of time devouring itself. Marvell writes from the rare moment where tails explode in time's mouth--a good history of Hermetic underpinnings of postmodern science meets the inspirational overpinnings of ancient ideas." (*Robert Hodge, Ph.D., professor at the Institute for Culture and Society, University of Western Sydne*)

"Here is an intense exploration of a developmental Hermetic imaginary in conjunction with onto-cosmology, metaphorized as a 'metaphysics of light.' And light it is! Fourth dimensional ideal objects, topological mythologemes, rewritten metahistory, paradigm shifts (or not), morphological deformation, vertigralist hermeneutics, neo-Cartesian technologies, virtual realities, panpsychism, ancient texts, and more, all explored in the context of a Hermetic understanding whose duration pervades the modern and post-modern worlds. Marvell is an astonishing polymath whose 'a new way of looking' challenges the reader to look into the transmogrifying presence of ancient ideas instilling the very heart of contemporary life, from modern science to AI and beyond. Replete with a wide array of sources, disciplines, and intermixed genres, with constant adaptive forms and figures, Marvell's syncretic imaginary is a *tour de force* of creative thinking, poetry, and philosophic splendor. Highly recommended!" (*Lee Irwin, Ph.D., professor of religious studies, College of Charleston*)

Marvell's work highlights how current Western perspectives on scientific reasoning and theory are work of the imagination rather than from an assumed 'pure' perspective unbridled with 'superstitions.' He sees the work of contemporary scientists as a continuation of pre-seventeenth-century natural philosophers where, through empirical and methodical research on parameters of the real, they seek active agency in transmuting physical phenomena into usable material, much like transforming lead into gold. . . . This book is already a classic, a cornerstone of frontline inquiries in the humanities and its relationships with science. Marvell's

masterpiece is a must-read for any serious understanding of contemporary mind struggling with reality and metaphysics. (*J. F. Marc des Jardins, Ph.D., C.M.D., associate professor of religion, Concordia University*)

“Readers interested in Einstein, Gurdjieff, Ficino, Plotinus, the Tibetan *bardo*, surrealism, the history of science, Neoplatonism, the Hermetica, Robert Fludd, Rosicrucianism, chaos and complexity theory, artificial intelligence, or cognitive science will find this book an indispensable adventure.” (*Ronnie Pontiac, contributor to Reality Sandwich*)

About the Author
Leon Marvell, Ph.D., is an associate professor at Deakin University in Australia. For more than 30 years he has researched European and Eastern esotericism and the history of science. He lives in Victoria, Australia.

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Chapter 2

Spirit of the Beehive Hermetic Resonances in Cybernetics, AI, and Cyberspace

VORTICES OF THE HERMETIC IMAGINARY

Artificial Intelligence researchers are unwittingly engaged in a project that is inextricably linked with an imaginary that includes such seemingly disparate elements as the “electrical myths” of Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein and eccentric eighteenth century theologian Oetinger’s “electrical theology,” as well as the pneumatic anthropologies of Kabbalistic, Neo-Platonic, and Hermetic thought. At the least, the emphasis on psyche or mind at the center of the AI project indicates an unacknowledged desire to transcend the boundaries of a strictly mechanical science.

Mathematician and author of several influential science fiction novels, Vernor Vinge imagines an apocalyptic catastrophe point upon the computational curve that signals the emergence of what he calls the *Singularity*, a super-human intelligence. This point is actually a break, a disjunctive moment when all that has gone before is irretrievably jettisoned. The Singularity, as the name implies, will be utterly unique and unprecedented. Within the AI project the disjunctive moment of the Singularity signals the idea of, and desire for, the form of psychic transport
particularly associated with the ecstatic. Deriving from the original Greek, ek-stasis, ecstasy literally refers to the experience of “standing outside one-self.” The term is linked with a lexical family of words such as displacement, change, deviation, alienation, or délire. The ecstatic state implies a radical discontinuity of perception, a breaking off from one world to another. There is, as Nietzsche has averred, a world of difference between the Apollonian and Dionysian consciousness, yet the moment when the one becomes the other--in terms of the ecstatic ritual or practice--oscillates around something like the “specious present,” the nonmoment where the two fields are united.

It may at first seem quite odd to think of the studious demeanor of the computer scientist as being in some way equivalent to the aspirations of a participant in the Dionysian cults. I agree that it is a monstrous conceit--but it evokes powerful and useful analogies. The ecstatic state can in part be characterized by the experience of the loss of the self, of subjective consciousness. Implicit within modernist science we observe the same desire: the search for an instrumentality that will erase the subjectivity of the observer and reveal the Real. For both the ecstatic and the scientist, reality is that which is revealed when there is no observer. What is missing from the computer scientist or laboratory scientist’s pursuit however--but ever inheres in the Dionysiac’s quest--is simply the experience of the “open” relationship to the phenomenal that characterizes the ecstatic state: the bodily and intellectual sense of “flow” or “streaming” within a sensory economy that makes little distinction between self and world. At a certain level of description the embodied experience is

primarily one of moving through a streaming space, attenuated with sensations/communications produced by an essentially open relationship to the phenomenal field. Accordingly, the boundedness of the human bodily experience--the Cartesian paradigm--is really only a secondary, after-the-fact reconstruction.

The “smuggling in” of incoherent echoes of this pre-modern, pre-Faustian worldview is a signal characteristic of contemporary AI research. Much of the bad thinking associated with this project is the result of computer scientists’ ignorance of the proximity their ideas and aspirations bear to the way of thinking that could illuminate their work: the Hermetic tradition.

The key term in Vinge’s Singularity, a word that simultaneously defines and undermines his visions, is the word *awake*. According to Vinge, one day a computing machine will simply “wake up.” This implies, of course, that all machines like it had previously only been asleep. Clearly for Vinge all contemporary computing devices are sleeping, their potential powers lying dormant.

What is interesting about the word awake is its initiatic character. The mystery cults, particularly those most influential on Western thought--the Mysteries of Eleusis and the Chaldean Mysteries--had as their central symbol the idea that the initiate would undergo symbolic death and resurrection into a second life. Previous to this death and rebirth, the initiate was considered to be “asleep.”

In the early twentieth century the teacher G. I. Gurdjieff was particularly fond of the idea that most human beings were--despite appearances to the contrary--asleep and that the most urgent spiritual task that could confront the seeker was to endeavour to become awake:

A man may be born, but in order to be born he must first die, and in order to die he must first awake. . . .When a man awakes he can die; when he dies he can be born.

These words of Gurdjieff summarize a long tradition that sees spiritual transformation as depending upon a pivotal experience of awakening or rebirth. Rather infamously, Gurdjieff tried many tactics to shock his followers into this state of wakefulness. According to Gurdjieff most people had no central, supervenient principle that could be called a soul; most people were simply a succession of discontinuous processes (impressions, desires, activities) in time. A central soul could be constructed however, and the key to this construction was first to become awake. He qualifies his conception of being awake in this manner:

It is impossible to awaken completely all at once. One must first awaken for short moments. But one must die all at once and forever after having made a certain effort . . . [after] a certain decision from which there is no going back. This would be difficult, even impossible, for a man, were it not for the slow and gradual awakening that precedes it.

Gurdjieff ’s model of becoming spiritually awake is clearly modeled on phenomenal experience. Before fully waking up individuals usually experience a period of hypnopompic activity; before being fully asleep they usually pass through the hypnagogic state. We gradually accede to consciousness, as Gurdjieff says--we do not abruptly attain instant consciousness under any circumstances.

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