

**DENNIS L. MERRITT, PH.D.**

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# HERMES, ECOPSYCHOLOGY, AND COMPLEXITY THEORY

THE DAIRY FARMER'S GUIDE  
TO THE UNIVERSE VOLUME III

DENNIS L. MERRITT, PH.D.



***Hermes, Ecopsychology, and Complexity Theory***  
***The Dairy Farmer's Guide to the Universe Volume 3***

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The four volumes of *The Dairy Farmer's Guide to the Universe* offer a comprehensive presentation of Jungian ecopsychology. Volume 1, *Jung and Ecopsychology*, examines the evolution of the Western dysfunctional relationship with the environment, explores the theoretical framework and concepts of Jungian ecopsychology, and describes how it could be applied to psychotherapy, our educational system, and our relationship with indigenous peoples. Volume 2, *The Cry of Merlin: Jung, the Prototypical Ecopsychologist*, reveals how an individual's biography can be treated in an ecopsychological manner and articulates how Jung's life experiences make him the prototypical ecopsychologist. Volume 3, *Hermes, Ecopsychology, and Complexity Theory*, provides an archetypal, mythological and symbolic foundation for Jungian ecopsychology. Volume 4, *Land, Weather, Seasons, Insects: An Archetypal View* describes how a deep, soulful connection can be made with these elements through a Jungian ecopsychological approach. This involves the use of science, myths, symbols, dreams, Native American spirituality, imaginal psychology and the *I Ching*. Together, these volumes provide what I hope will be a useful handbook for psychologists and environmentalists seeking to imagine and enact a healthier relationship with their psyches and the world of which they are a part.





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*To the Great Goddess in her many forms*



Hermes

“For all to whom life is an adventure—whether an adventure of  
love or of spirit—he is the common guide.”

—Karl Kerenyi



## CHAPTER 1

### *Hermes and the Gods*

Hermes may be *the* Western figure for establishing a mythological base for ecopsychology. He illuminates the processes and perspectives that will allow us to develop a psychology of ecology and an ecology of psychology; a psychology of depth, imagination, myth and symbolism in relation to each other and to the environment. Hermes is the god of psychologists and businessmen—two important elements of ecopsychology—and offers a link to Native American spirituality and its connection to the land. He is also important in male sexuality, male spirituality and issues of the body-mind connection. Most significant is Hermes' role in establishing communications and relationships across *all* levels; between the gods and goddesses, between the divine and human, between the living and the spirit world, and between humans and animals. As god of synchronicity, Hermes is about relationships between particulars and levels not encompassed by Western science—electronics, the mind, the imaginal world, organic and inorganic, etc. He fulfills his roles to a large extent due to his personification of the revolutionary mathematics of complexity theory that describes the creation, dynamics and evolution of complex systems from the inorganic realm through human dream activity. Hermes portrays in symbolic and mythic form the human experience of the mathematics of complexity theory.

Hermes/Mercury was the god of alchemy that became Jung's main symbolic system and the historical context for his "confrontation with the unconscious." (volume 2 of *The Dairy Farmer's Guide*) The archetypal energies represented by Hermes were deeply experienced by Jung beginning with his childhood nightmare of a giant phallus on a golden throne. Jung felt we should become familiar with our forgotten or neglected Western roots before wandering off to other parts of the globe for enlightenment. Greece, the source of Western culture, is our mother/father lode here. Three main factors contributed to the

dynamism of this exceptionally rich culture that flourished around 500 BCE.

1. The Greeks in the culturally fertile Mediterranean basin (including Egypt, Crete, and the Middle East) created their own unique synthesis from psychic and cultural "trade." This included a melding of nomadic sky-god cults that infiltrated the earth-bound, agricultural Great Goddess religions. (Graves 1960, p. 17ff)
2. The culture developed on the cusp between nature religions that experienced a plethora of spirits in the natural environment and the laying of the Western foundations for writing, science, mathematics, logic, literature, history and art.
3. Greek society had evolved from tribal culture to kingship to the first forms of Western democracy. (Brown 1969)

Greek culture left us with an abundance of writings, images, marbled archaeological sites and a trail of other cultural influences. The rediscovery and reemphasis of our Greek roots in 16<sup>th</sup> century Italy helped birth the Renaissance which brought Europe out of the Dark Ages. Returning to our pre-Christian roots can help us decipher what went wrong with our philosophical, scientific, educational and religious systems that have led to the current dysfunctional state of our relationship to the environment.

The Greek pantheon presents a Western version of fundamental energies and images that are still alive if we have an eye for them. Stories and images of gods and goddesses help bring to consciousness the basic, archetypal dimension of the psyche and the physical world. Gods and goddesses express the basic metaphors, perspectives, and ways of being in the world. Many Greeks knew the gods did not literally exist but were more than real because their powers and influences could be felt as those things that "come over" a person, just happen to one, motivate or depress, etc. The best and deepest expression of the *reality* of human existence is therefore through myth and poetry about the sacred. (Hillman 1975, p. 13-17)

Each divinity is a sort of essence, "a kind of spiritual condensation," of a realm of being. (Kerenyi 1976, p. 47) Each had a dimension of the real world as apprehended from their perspective, "forming a unified totality in its own right." (p. 3) One could think of each species of plant and animal in this manner. Conceiving the human psyche in this



polyvalent, polymorphous way is inherently ecological and lays the foundation for an ecopsychology.

Each god and goddess is like a comprehensive idea or worldview, a mythic gestalt that encloses us and creates our world; an archetype in other words. (Kerenyi 1976, p. 46, 47, 55) Consider how the Cartesian idea of the world as a giant mechanical clock affects our way of "seeing," responding to, and being in the world. That world is made clearer, more conscious, when we call the name of the god or goddess active at the moment and label the experience in their honor. One must know mythology in order to do this. The transpersonal dimension is brought into life when one becomes conscious of what timeless human drama one is enacting in one's personal way. (see Appendix H: Archetypal Psychology and Aphrodite as the Soul of the World)

Hermes is an unusual god in that he personifies the unconscious propensity to produce gods and goddesses. He goes to a level beneath the gods in that he is the source of the gods, in that sense more like the Tao. "As the basis of understanding the world, he is also idea, though one we have not yet fully grasped," as the famous mythologist Karl Kerenyi described it. (Kerenyi 1976, p. 55)(n 1)

Hermes was one of twelve gods in the Greek pantheon and the last to join that hallowed group. His roots go to the phallic core and foundations of the Western psyche. The most basic form he was worshiped as was the Herm, an upright stone that served as a phallic monument. Nature itself offered this object and "the stone pointed to a direct experience of something divine." (Kerenyi 1976, p. 78) Later, stone pillars called "Herms" marked property boundaries and stood in front of Greek houses for protection. (Bolen 1989, p. 163)

The quadratic form of the phallic shaped stone or wooden Herm originated in the Greek province of Arcadia where Hermes was especially honored. (Kerenyi 1976, p. 68) Kellene was the name of the Arcadian mountain where his cult was located. The Hermes cult may be a very ancient one, there when the Arcadians arrived, and the Greeks adopted this ancient indigenous god and gave him a Greek name. (Lopez-Pedraza 1977, p. 1) The Athenian Hermes had a head atop a quadratic pillar bearing an erect phallus, the pillar portion being called the herm. The head symbolized Hermes' self-knowing, self-conscious nature (Kerenyi 1976, p. 78) while the quadratic ground plan is an archetypal expression of totality, incorporating the chthonic dimension of life. (p. 68)

Hermes was also associated with stone heaps, the *hermax*, that were placed along roadsides as landmarks for travelers. (Kerenyi 1976, p. 78) Passers-by would add stones, asking Hermes as Lord of the Roads for protection on their journeys. (Bolen 1989, p. 163; Lopez-Pedraza 1977, p. 3) Graves were often placed beside roads and the stone mounds frequently marked the graves.

## CHAPTER 2

### *The Genesis of Hermes in the Individual and in our Culture*

The *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* reveals how the Greeks wrestled with the link between human and animal, chthonic and divine in the sixth century BCE. (n 2) These core issues are alive for us today in an in-depth approach to ecopsychology. The Hymn opens with Hermes' conception:

[Maia] awesome, lying with Zeus  
 She kept away from  
 the wonderful company of the gods,  
 and lived in a shady cave.  
 Here the son of Cronus had  
 the nymph with beautiful hair,  
 in the early hours of evening,  
 while sweet sleep held  
 the pale arms of Hera,  
 and where no man  
 and god could see. (Boer 1970, p. 18)

Zeus, ruler of an Olympian pantheon of gods and goddesses, whose activities and intrigues are the mythic dimensions of human experience, sows the seed of Hermes' existence on one of his many sexual escapades. Zeus was not drawn to the known and bright heights of Olympian goddesses, but to a nymph bound up with the Arcadian landscape where she was a type of primordial mother-daughter Goddess. (Kerenyi 1976, p. 19) Hermes will become the only *nymph's* son to have a permanent place in Olympus and "the only one who really knows what underlies the word 'nymph.'" (Lopez-Pedraza 1977, p. 90) Kerenyi sensed in Hermes the essence of the pre-Olympian world, the world of the Titans. (n 3) Hermes entrance into the Olympian world of Zeus integrates Titan energy into the Olympians. (Kerenyi 1976, p. 17, 18)

The integration occurred through the conception and development of Hermes. It reconnected Greek culture with its chthonic roots, to the aspects left out or left behind from its Olympian heights. Maia shunned the sacred congregation of the gods and chose to live in a cave. Perhaps she did not feel at home with the Olympians, did not feel accepted and respected? She may have been unable to relate to those worldviews so unlike or threatening to her.

It was Maia's beautiful hair that attracted and aroused the ruling god's fantasy. Hair, growing out of the head, is associated with thoughts and fantasies. This is a fantasy Zeus can allow himself to entertain under the conditions that no god or mortal will see him: it is night, his jealous wife is asleep, and he is in a dark cave with a nymph who doesn't associate with the gods. Hermes is conceived in the sacred vessel so deep within ourselves it is beyond all the structured ways of looking at and being in the world—beyond even the gods and religions. In that space is complete freedom to play, imagine and fantasize with the uninhibited innocence of a child. It's the space where the active, generative, primal phallic energy (Hexagram 1, The Creative, the yang source in the *I Ching*) conjugates with the unconscious matrix that evokes and attracts it in a secretive and seemingly forbidden (Hermetic) way (Hexagram 44, Coming to Meet). (n 4). Sexual fantasies are included in the Homeric story line. This is the fluid source and uninhibited, uncensored domain from which dreams arise. It is the domain of beginnings and origins; the depth and realm that sages, shamans and seers are cognizant of, giving them oracular powers (Hermes is god of oracles). They see things at their source long before they have developed enough to manifest in the light of consciousness. Dreams serve the same function, and it is Hermes who brings sleep and dreams.

The gestalt of Hermes' conception provides root associations of Hermes with night and the "carrier of dreams," or a "secret agent" usually portrayed as a youth. Hermes is Lord of Roads, protector of travelers, and god of psychologists because he is associated with journeys into and out of the dark depths of psychic existence. To evoke Hermes' name is to ask help to see life as a journey; to loosen psyche's bindings in concretisms, literalisms, rigid positions, collective opinions and dogmas. Hermes' realm is the road and pathway as an existential journey: it is not simply in getting from point A to point B, but one's journey through life. The world-of-the-road has Hermes for its god and is the mythic base of America's love affair with the automobile. Beyond all boundaries, Hermes realm is the source of life's journey. Hermes is

constantly in motion and his ability to volatilize (dissolve forms) gives him access to everything (Kerenyi 1976, p. 14, 15):

With companions of the journey [with Hermes], one experiences openness to the extent of purest nakedness, as though he who is on the journey had left behind every stitch of clothing or covering...Journeying is the best condition for loving. The gorges over which the "volatized one" passes like a ghost can be the abysses of unbelievable love affairs...[where] no chance exists for standing on firm ground. (p. 14)

A psychotherapeutic journey may take months before people can reach this place of Hermes' conception within themselves, months before trust and a relationship is built with the therapist that can contain the energies beneath defenses and character armor. Transformative therapy commences when the analysand can begin to play, to "see" metaphorically, to create.

The secret affair in the cave is more than just a sexual romp for Zeus: it fulfills a wish for Zeus and through its fulfillment his "mind" or "insight" achieves its end. (Kerenyi 1976, p. 20). This associates Hermes' phallic nature with light and consciousness. (Jung 1961, p. 13) What is generated in the dark as "just" a thought, idea or fantasy can bring a whole new consciousness into being: (n 5)

when the mind of great Zeus  
was near to completion...  
and he was bringing to light again  
all his great works,  
she produced her child (Boer 1970, p. 18)

After a powerful experience in one's life that journeys the soul along, we have to carry and protect our fantasies in a private, moist, nourishing darkness. A painter cannot receive projections and critiques of her unfinished works. Therapy must be private and confidential. An analyst has the analysand look back nine months in their lives after a dream of giving birth to a child: usually a soul-moving event happened at that time. Psyche keeps its own time. Privately we have to come to terms with new conceptions before the world sees them; ideas must evolve and develop before exposure to Darwin's cruel light.

Hermes was born in the morning on the fourth day of the month, one of his several associations with the number four. (Kerenyi 1976, p.

22) Four was also sacred to Aphrodite with whom he is closely linked. Jung emphasized the association of four with totality—the spirit incarnate.

Constant motion and activity like the unconscious is associated with Hermes, a trait revealed at his moment of birth:

For after he jumped down from  
the immortal loins of his mother  
he couldn't lie still very long (Boer 1970, p. 19)

## CHAPTER 3

### *The Power of Music*

Hermes leapt up and went in search of Apollo's cattle, only to find a mountain tortoise at the entrance to the cave. Hermes exclaimed:

What a great sign,  
 what a help this is for me!  
 I won't ignore it.  
 Hello there,  
 little creature,  
 dancing up and down,  
 companion at festivals,  
 how exciting it is  
 to see you. (Boer 1970, p. 20)

Hermes admires its "kaleidoscopic" shell as he carried "this lovable toy" back home, "stabbed out the life of the turtle," and in the twinkling of an eye came up with the idea of making the first Greek lyre. (Boer 1970, p. 20)

This episode reveals varied aspects of Hermes' character, beginning with his "meeting and finding" nature—the happiness and riches associated with accidental findings. *Hermaion* is the Greek word for windfall. It is also the name of the roadside offerings left at the herms that were stolen by hungry travelers in the spirit of Hermes. Kerenyi sees the Hermetic sanctity of "the accidental find...seized as a thief" in every business undertaking that is not unscrupulous. Here finding and artfully clever thievery occurs in "a no-man's land, a Hermetic intermediate realm that exists between the rigid boundaries of 'mine and yours.'" (Kerenyi 1976, p. 24) It is the clever execution of a deal within the context of the saying, "a fair exchange is no robbery."

In dealing with the turtle we see the quick, inventive mind and restless nature associated with Hermetic energy, a mind that delights in the joy of discovery. A Hermetic moment is in a lucky find, an intuit-

tive insight, a synchronistic event, a transformative happening. It can recognize the beauty and potential in an object or situation. A Hermes' move can take those awkward, rigid, defended turtles of our lives and transform them into the gaiety of a festival and an energetic dance—probably after a few drinks and to the right musical accompaniment. Kerenyi sees in Hermes “the...freedom of soaring flight for which he gives wings to even the most sluggish souls.” (Boer 1970, p. 58)

Hermes under the name Mercury became the god of alchemy, and the transformation of the tortoise into the lyre epitomizes the alchemical process. The slow, heavy tortoise symbolizes the lead in our lives, the raw material, the “*prima materia*” one starts with. In Chinese alchemy, the tortoise was regarded as “‘the starting point of development,’ the beginning of the spiritualization of matter.” (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1994, p. 1018) Hermes told the tortoise: “Alive...you’re good medicine against the pains of black magic. But dead, dead you’ll make great music!” (Boer 1970, p. 20) This is the essence of the alchemical work: antidotes carry an element of the poisonous characteristics in them. (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1994, p. 1018) The feminine symbolism of the tortoise can be negative—its chthonic nature, involutive chaos, regression and sexual attributes, but properly worked with, the introversion and regression to the source within the protective container of the shell can lead to spiritual transformation. (n 6)

There are two other aspects of Hermetic inventiveness. On one hand Hermes can personify the creative source of scientific musings in areas of basic research (on the decline in America). The second aspect is that “necessity is the mother of invention.” Hermes’ quickness in immediately recognizing that the turtle can be a help to him is “just as a thought runs quick through the heart of a man whose troubles pile up and shake him.” (Boer 1970, p. 21) This aspect of Hermes’ nature can be high in basic survival values—one of many traits he shares with the Greek god Eros. (n 7)

Hermes reveals the ambivalent nature of a divine and a cruel Titanic self in his dealing with the turtle. He can “see through” the living turtle to a divine instrument that can be constructed from its dead form. This “seeing through” is the divine standpoint offered the spectators of a Greek tragedy that allows them to participate in the play with a penetrating vision of what’s really happening. (Kerenyi 1976, p. 26) It is the perspective of an analyst or therapist who can “see through” to the dynamics of a neurotic complex and sense the mythic story line the patient is living.



Kerenyi highlights Hermes' roughish and Titanically cruel nature that laughs at the turtle while clearly pointing to the violent death he will inflict upon it to transform it into a lyre. The divine side shines through as well, "for out of his victim's death he conjures music, the unique way for a mortal human to transform the harshness of existence into Phaiakian mildness." (Kerenyi 1976, p. 26)

As Hermes started to play the lyre he created from the turtle,

It sounded terrible!  
The god tried to improvise,  
singing along beautifully,  
as teen-age boys do,  
mockingly, at festivals  
making their smart cracks.

He sang about  
Zeus, the son of Cronus,  
and Maia in her beautiful shoes,  
how they talked during their love affair,  
a boast about  
his own glorious origin.  
And he honored the servants  
of the nymph  
and her magnificent house. (Boer 1970, p. 21, 22)

Boastful, roguish, adolescent males embody an aspect of a Hermes' mentality that knows no shame. A mentality that can sing of the pillow talk of his parents on the night of his conception; unbounded sexual fantasy indeed! A mythical world away from Pauline Christianity and a virgin birth via a spirit! That prominent erection, the head atop the ithyphallic herm, symbolizes a self-consciousness that can go back to the primal sexual scene: No Freudian trauma here. Some Buddhists believe a soul is drawn to reincarnate by seeing the conjugal act of its parents-to-be. Kerenyi said *The Hymn to Hermes* "may be called a highly literary monument to phallic shamelessness." (Kerenyi 1976, p. 29 ) His chthonic, phallic nature is associated more with Titanic, pre-Olympian roots (p. 32) while "finding and thieving in the realm of love are also Hermetic traits." (p. 28)

Another dimension of Hermes is revealed in his shameless song. The Greek word *genee* is rendered as "begetting" in Hermes' "tale of his begetting." It involves the abstract origins presented by mythology, "the basic reasons for everything that exists" or will exist. "In the

genealogy, ancestors of ‘famous names’” (*geneen onomakluton*) occupy the place of origin, as emergence proceeds forth from the primordial depths. The genealogy turns the great original mythic theme into a family tree.” We see this in Genesis in the Bible and in ancient Chinese culture with the reverence of ancestors and the mythological founders of dynasties. “The family tree must begin, of course, with the earliest gods...[Hermes’] impudence is the consciousness of his own origin and reason for being, an unbroken and linear consciousness of his development which is...a...characteristic feature of Hermes.” (Kerenyi 1976, p. 30) In psychoanalysis, this is seeing through to the archetypal base of the complexes, naming the eternal gods or goddesses as the root/originating elements at play in the patient’s life. (see Appendix H) In ecopsychology and deep ecology, it is discerning the archetypal base of our dysfunctional relationship with the environment.

With his singing and playing Hermes honored the feminine, the mother source; the rich unconscious matrix symbolized by the “magnificent house in a cave.” He also honored the servants of his mother and becomes the god of servants because he serves the gods. (n 8) He is not the heroic super hero—he never engaged in battle. (Kerenyi 1976, p. 8) Hermes uses craft, wit and music to avert and subvert the heroic stance, as we shall see in his dealings with Apollo. Jesus assumed the servant role when he washed the feet of his disciples, and rejected Satan’s offer to rule the world.

## CHAPTER 4

### *Hermes and the Cows*

Evening approached as Hermes finished playing the lyre, and he had a hunger of pre-Olympian dimensions. The Greek phrase *kreion eratidzon* translates as “being extremely greedy for meat”; the phrase applied to a lion’s hunger in the *Iliad* and denoting a craving aspect of Hermes’ nature. (Kerenyi 1976, p. 32) (n 9) Hermes bounded out of the cave a second time, “working on a shrewd trick in his head, like those done by robber types who operate at this hour of the dark night” [Hermes as thief and highwayman]. (Boer 1970, p. 22) His plan? To steal 50 of Apollo’s cows: Apollo, an Olympic god, Zeus’s favorite son and right hand man! Here’s a baby with balls! That’s Hermes.

Far-sighted Apollo, god of a distanced and reasoned approach and logical thought, could look into the very mind of God to see the structure of the universe and the fates of men. Apollo the archer was straight as an arrow whose trajectory could be calculated with Newtonian linearity. Here we have the Greek god of science, the Apollo space program, and “scientific” university psychology programs. Is this not perfection? Yet the Greek genius perceived an archetypal need to complement the Apollonian worldview. It conceived of a Hermetic mind-set that ingenuously steals in the dark from Apollo’s vulnerable cow side; that sees in the dark beyond the bright, dominant worldview. This is what Zeus had “in mind” when he “stole off” in the dark to mate with Maia.

Hermes made off with 50 of Apollo’s cows leaving behind the black bull and four dogs. The bull and the dog have associations with archetypal masculine, so Hermes’ choice emphasizes his countering Apollo through Apollo’s vulnerable feminine/cow side. Fifty was an important lunar (archetypal feminine) number for the Greeks, there being 50 lunations between Olympic games and 50 priestesses in various Moon-Goddess cults (with associations to the erotic and the human). (De Vries 1974, p. 182)

The worldview from Hermes' perspective is like seeing life from the reverse, backward side—the unconscious, also associated with the unpredictable nature of Hermes' steps. Hermes displayed his tricky nature by turning the front hooves of the cattle backward and the back hooves frontward. He bounded along backwards on sandals made by twisting together tamarisk and myrtle branches tied to his feet. The sandals were precursors to his winged golden sandals by which he effortlessly covers great distances in his messenger role. These sandals were “indescribable, unimaginable, they were marvelous creations,” demonstrating Hermes' inventive and enchanting nature. He “avoid[ed] a wearisome trip by wearing such original shoes.” (Boer 1970, p. 24) One association with shoes is one's standpoint in life. Our standpoint/ viewpoint has a lot to do with whether or not we see life's journey as being wearisome or we bring something creative and enchanting to it.

The psychic ancestress of the Hermetic standpoint is his mother's “beautiful shoes” which would represent the roots of a tree for a tree nymph. Myrtle is a plant associated with death: we are dealing with “swift as death” Hermes here and that which destroys forms. A quickness and cleverness associated with death transforms one of Aphrodite's animals (the tortoise) into a musical instrumental and root-shoes into indescribable sandals. Stagnant, restricted old forms must be killed off for new forms to be created, establishing creativity's link with death. (n 10)

Hermes drove the cows to a secret stable where he invented the art of fire making by rubbing sticks together. Then he dragged out two cows and “filled with great power” threw them onto their backs and sacrificed them. (Kerenyi 1976, p. 26) (n 11) He divided the finest meat into twelve parts as gift offerings to the gods, counting himself as one of the gods. The delicious smells tempted Hermes to eat the sacred meat:

His noble heart  
persuaded him, however,  
not to let them pass  
down his own divine gullet,  
though he wanted to,  
badly. (Boer 1970, p. 27) (n 12)

The fire myth that a culture lives out will produce two diametrically opposed results depending on the myth. Fire from the god Hermes is associated with arousal and sacrifice of the flesh as an equal offering to *all* the gods, thereby being accepted by the gods. Such an act avoids

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