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# The Hermetic principle of correspondence: history and the limits of analogy

Traditions and Worldviews

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# The Hermetic principle of correspondence: history and the limits of analogy

> *“As above, so below; as below, so above.”*

Three Initiates, The Kybalion, Chapter II, The Principle of Correspondence, the edition read, with 1912 on its title page. Original English wording. The epigraph belongs to this twentieth-century book; it is not presented as a verbatim quotation from the ancient Hermetica.

## About this article

Two photographs are placed side by side: a branching tree and a network of city roads. The resemblance is immediately visible. It is tempting to repeat an ancient formula and consider both systems explained. But what matches — form, origin, function, or only an impression? The article examines the Hermetic principle of correspondence by distinguishing three textual layers: the ancient Hermetica, the alchemical Emerald Tablet, and the twentieth-century Kybalion. We will see why the shared authority of Hermes does not make these texts one unchanging doctrine, and why a philosophical or religious resemblance does not become a physical law. We will then examine analogy as a way to seek questions: what it reveals, what information is needed to move from comparison to a conclusion, and where a transfer becomes a substitution. The practical result is the ability to use an image while preserving its scale. This article neither proves nor disproves the metaphysics of every Hermetic movement. It helps us read particular texts and separate their propositions from contemporary interpretation.

## I. A resemblance does not reveal a cause

Two phenomena can look alike and arise for different reasons. Recognizing a similar form does not establish a shared mechanism. To move further, the observed similarity must be named precisely. “It resembles” opens a question. “It works by the same law” already proposes an answer that needs further grounds.

In our hypothetical example, the tree and the road network branch. Their distribution of routes can be compared, but we cannot conclude that a city grows like a plant, that the same processes design it, or that transport should be treated according to the laws of botany. A similar pattern can help formulate a study. It does not automatically transfer an explanation.



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The more striking the picture, the more useful it is to ask which invisible differences it has left outside the frame.

A similar transition occurs with “as above, so below.” It may express a religious conception of the world's unity, an alchemical way of reading processes, or a modern metaphor. First, however, we must establish who says it and what they are discussing. One recognizable expression does not define the subject of every text that uses it.

The article therefore begins with a history of reading, not a declaration of universal law. Returning the formula to its author and context does not deprive it of meaning. Rather, it makes it possible to understand what work it does in a particular book. Only then can we ask what we ourselves can do with it, without attributing our own conclusion to an ancient author or modern science.

## II. The ancient Hermetica are a particular body of literature

Hermetica names texts associated with the authority of Hermes Trismegistus, not the recovered diary of one securely established historical author. In the available academic account by Antoine Faivre, the Corpus Hermeticum is described as a collection of short Greek treatises from the second and third centuries CE. Faivre distinguishes this corpus from the later history of adaptations. The publisher's Summary with an introductory passage was read, not the whole chapter.

This distinction immediately corrects two familiar images. One treats every book containing the word “Hermetic” as contemporary with the pharaohs. The other considers every text linked to Hermes a single manual with unchanging rules. But the name of a literary tradition, the dating of a particular work, and a later claim to an ancient source raise different questions. They must be answered separately.

A legendary attribution can have religious and philosophical significance. It conveys the line in which an author wants to speak and the authority used to ground a teaching. An attribution within a text, however, does not itself establish an archaeological date. A historian investigates language, transmission, and evidence. A reader can respect a belief while retaining its distinction from a conclusion about the time of composition.

The variety of genres also matters for further reading. A dialogue on knowing God is not an alchemical recipe; an account of revelation is not a modern guide to self-regulation. Searching for one phrase in all these genres may obscure substantial differences. It is better to ask what problem a particular treatise poses and how its form helps develop it. Hermetism then becomes something to read, rather than a label for a predetermined answer.

## III. Pœmandres: from a seen image to understanding

At the beginning of Pœmandres, G. R. S. Mead's translation, §§1–10, the protagonist wants to learn what exists, its nature, and God. The answer first comes as a vision of light, darkness, and moist nature. The teacher then asks whether the meaning of what was seen has been understood, and interprets the relationship between Mind and Word. In §8, nature reproduces the beautiful cosmos through its own elements.

The interval between vision and understanding matters. The protagonist has seen something extraordinary, but the question of meaning is not yet settled. The account retains both stages: the image becomes a subject of explanation. A shining image cannot simply be taken and every strong impression called completed knowledge. The passage's composition includes an interlocutor, a question, and an answer. The connection with the higher takes shape in unfolding instruction, not in an isolated formula saying everything resembles everything.

The image of reproduction also makes correspondence more specific. There is a pattern and that which receives form; these sides are related without ceasing to differ. This differs from claiming that every outward resemblance permits every property to be transferred. In our analytical reading, the direction of the relationship matters. We need to ask what provides the ground and what it explains. A random pair of beautiful photographs does not yet offer this structure.

A difficulty for a contemporary reader can be seen here. If “mind” is taken in advance to mean only human thinking, the account begins to look like instructions for imagining the desired outcome. But the protagonist's question concerns what exists and God. Changing the subject turns the instruction into a different thought. Before using it in our own reasoning, it helps to preserve the subject and then name the new question explicitly. We can then discuss our transfer without presenting it as the ancient interlocutor's answer.

This way of reading has practical value even without accepting the cosmogony. It shows that an expressive image and a clear relationship are different achievements. An image can draw attention; a relationship lets us understand an argument's structure. In the Hermetic passage, the teacher's explanation joins them. We are reading this scene in an English translation from 1906; the Greek terms were not investigated separately. Yet the available sequence already helps distinguish a question of knowledge from a promise to control external events. This is the difference to carry into other texts where a similar formula has another task.

## IV. The Emerald Tablet: another setting for the formula

The Emerald Tablet cannot simply be substituted for Pœmandres. The studied Keynes MS.28 preserves an English rendering, a Latin text, and Isaac Newton's alchemical commentary. The formula's setting concerns the transformation of matter, separation, and combination. This is particular evidence of alchemical reading, not modern instructions for attracting events through the power of thought.

The electronic edition of The Chymistry of Isaac Newton, edited by William R. Newman, lets the tablet's text be distinguished from a later reader's work. Both layers matter historically: an inherited formula and the questions brought to it at a particular time. The edition's terms are given in the bibliography.

Compare two tasks: explaining the cosmos through revelation and understanding the transformation of matter. In the second, a similar image is not all that matters. What receives the action and what change is intended are essential. Separate and combine are verbs of work on a subject. If only the advice “sort yourself out, then put yourself together” remains, the result is a modern metaphor. It may be expressive, but it changes the subject: actions on matter become an account of an inner state.

This is why the alchemical setting cannot be discarded once words about above and below are recognized. The reader's question must follow the operation: what is connected, what is distinguished, what transformation is being understood? We do not propose carrying out a historical process. We examine how a subject gives words their meaning. This way of explaining differs from the instructional scene in Pœmandres: not every movement between levels describes the same relationship, even when language permits an attractive comparison.

Newton's example is especially appealing because of his scientific name. But assessing a thought requires examining this work, not transferring the authority of another one to it. In a hypothetical contemporary case, an engineer may write poetry and build bridges. Their competence does not require the poem to be read as a load calculation; its poetic force does not confirm the structure's strength either. This analogy explains the different criteria and supplies no new biographical detail about Newton.

The tablet's research context here is thus transformation and later alchemical reading. Its detailed Arabic and Latin history has not been reconstructed in the article. This scale is sufficient for a substantive distinction: we compare subjects and the work of the formula, rather than treating one name as proof of a single law. The next text, The Kybalion, will present another claim — to explain relationships between several planes of existence.

## V. The Kybalion: universality as the book's position

The Kybalion offers a system of its own: seven principles, with correspondence in second place. In Chapter II, the authors under the name Three Initiates extend it to material, mental, and spiritual planes. Chapter VIII discusses these planes further. This is a particular twentieth-century book's proposition. Its account of ancient origins is not independent historical evidence.

Chapter VIII grounds universality in the common source of manifestations: since everything arises from one ground, the book extends the same principles to different planes. The reader needs to notice this move, not merely the final formula. Unity of origin serves as the premise for the transfer. We can accept the question of a common ground and still ask which properties move between differing phenomena. If the difference is substantial, the premise about origins alone may be insufficient.

The book itself includes a detail that promotional retellings easily lose: the division into planes is acknowledged as conventional, for thought and study. This is not identical to a contemporary classification of physical quantities. The book's terms make sense within its worldview model. They can be analyzed and compared without becoming measurable parameters simply because “law” appears nearby.

We use the available edition with 1912 on its title page and do not establish the identity of all the concealed authors through an unverified account. This limit does not impoverish the main question. The book remains a real primary source for its system; it can be read seriously while being distinguished from antiquity. A late text does not lose cultural significance because of its date. It should simply not receive someone else's historical biography for added authority.

## VI. An analogy can be precise in one respect

A resemblance need not be superficial. Two systems can share a formal order that helps research. But matching structure does not imply matching every property. The question concerns which relationships are preserved and under what conditions a conclusion can be transferred.

In Models in Science, Roman Frigg and Stephan Hartmann discuss different analogies, including the matching mathematical descriptions of a pendulum and an oscillating electrical circuit. The reference article also distinguishes matching, nonmatching, and still unclear properties. These examples concern the philosophy of scientific models; they are not a scientific test of Hermetism. We use them to clarify our own method of comparison.

In practice, this gives three questions. What exactly matches? What clearly differs? What remains unknown? The third is especially useful: the unknown does not have to be immediately

assigned to resemblance. It may become a subject of research. Not every gap confirms a secret unity; sometimes it means data is still missing.

Return to the two photographs. The visible branching can be described precisely, with the different processes of formation noted separately. A question about the distribution of flows can then be formulated if appropriate. A working hypothesis replaces a universal explanation. The result sounds less solemn but strengthens the analogy: it begins to lead toward a checkable next step instead of ending the search with the claim that the ancient formula already tells us everything.

Another check concerns the direction of transfer. If a model helps us understand a particular process, it does not mean every piece of information about the process can now be carried back into the model. A drawn map shows routes, but traffic does not change the paper in the same way it changes the city. The direction of the connection needs naming. A formula of mutual correspondence in a religious text does not replace this explanation in empirical research.

In ordinary conversation, the mistake often looks harmless. “The team resembles an orchestra” helps us speak about coordination. But it does not imply that every manager should behave like a conductor or that participants must play a predetermined score. A team may have other ways of deciding, and discussion may change its tasks. When an image begins prescribing the structure of relationships, what it transfers and what it leaves out must be checked.

## VII. Unity within a worldview differs from a causal conclusion

A person can believe in the unity of reality and carefully investigate the causes of particular events at the same time. These pursuits need not be enemies, but neither replaces the other. A general proposition about unity does not imply the specific mechanism of every connection. How exactly one process affects another, and which conditions change the result, must be shown.

A hypothetical person notices that meetings go better on days when they feel calm. A connection with behavior can be proposed: the voice sounds different, requests are more precise, difficulties are discussed more calmly. A good meeting may also improve mood. But the observation cannot immediately establish that the universe mirrors and carries out an inner state. One coincidence, without considering alternatives, is insufficient for that conclusion.

The opposite extreme does not help either. If the metaphor of the world as a mirror makes someone notice their part in a conflict, this may be a meaningful personal result. It does not become proof of metaphysics. The useful question can be kept without being expanded into a promise to control events. Responsibility for available action then remains alongside recognition of circumstances and other people's actions.

The boundary matters especially in difficult situations. Trouble cannot be declared the consequence of a “low” inner state solely on the principle of correspondence. This is a transfer for which the source supplies no verified causal mechanism. It can replace investigating causes with blaming the person harmed. A meaningful spiritual interpretation must remain identified as an interpretation and must not take away a person's right to understand the actual circumstances of their life.

## VIII. Other traditions offer connections with different grounds

Connections between a part and a whole appear in different languages, but a matching question does not create a shared doctrine. Ngāi Tahu explains whakapapa through relationships of descent and the world. The Catholic catechism describes the communion of saints through the Church and Christ. Both sources help us think about connection, but neither can simply be called an illustration of The Kybalion.

The difference concerns the ground itself. In one case, particular kinship and the iwi's position matter; in another, a particular Church teaching; in a third, a system of cosmic planes. Removing these grounds and keeping “unity” would produce a very short text. But we would stop understanding why the connection matters to each side and which actions follow from it.

Reception history shows that figures from other traditions could indeed be reinterpreted. The introduction by Macris, Soler, and Van den Kerchove discusses how authors from different religious settings appropriated and transformed authoritative figures of the past. This is an academic field of inquiry, not evidence of universal agreement. Adaptation itself shows differences at work, not their disappearance.

For this article, the useful response is not to avoid comparisons but to make them checkable. Both sides, the feature, its grounds, and its limit need naming. We can say that both positions discuss a continuing connection, but one does so through descent and the other through ecclesial communion. Such a comparison opens a conversation. Claiming that all religions always taught one Hermetic law closes it before the sources can explain themselves.

The distinction matters in translation too. Words rendered as “mind,” “order,” or “unity” can have different origins and places in an argument. A reader may notice a verbal echo, but it does not prove the concepts identical. A reliable comparison turns to the word's role in a particular passage: which question it answers, which other concepts it connects with, and what the author sets against it.

The history of translations is therefore not a technical appendix to the real thought. Translators choose a language that makes particular relationships visible. We read Mead through English words and then offer our own Russian translation of a short passage. This chain does not prevent understanding; it indicates where further work would be needed if a future conclusion

began to depend on a Greek term's meaning. At that point, it is better to turn to the original and scholarly commentary than to expand confidence through an attractive phrase.

## IX. Scale can be transferred only with its conditions

The small is not always a ready-made copy of the large. An observation in a family does not automatically explain a state; one organization's scheme does not necessarily describe society. Scale changes the number of participants, the possibilities for coordination, and the consequences of decisions. A particular relationship should therefore be transferred with its differences in view, rather than the whole familiar image at once.

In a hypothetical working group, a manager notices that personal example helps people keep agreements. A hypothesis about a leader's behavior can be drawn from this. But a large conflict cannot be concluded to yield to one personal virtue, nor an institution to have no need of procedures. The levels of analysis differ. A personal action matters, but it does not exhaust the distribution of authority, resources, and information.

This check of scale also helps in reading the Hermetic formula. If correspondence is understood as an invitation to look for connections, the question stays open. If it promises complete transfer from one level to another, an explanation is needed of why the differences change nothing. Repeating “universal” is insufficient. Even within a discussion of worldviews, an argument improves when conditions are named rather than dissolved in the formula's grandeur.

Creative freedom can be preserved here. A metaphor helps reveal a problem from another side, devise a story, or pose a question about one's own participation. It need not become a law to have value. The quality of its use depends on whether the image helps clarify action and leaves room for facts that do not fit. If every result is declared confirmation in advance, the analogy stops teaching us anything new.

The consequences of a transfer also need checking. One comparison helps find words for personal experience. Another justifies a decision affecting people, money, or health. In the second case, the grounds must match the consequences. This does not mean imagination should be banned; it means an image must not quietly replace the knowledge a particular action requires.

Consider a hypothetical example without medical promises. A person compares fatigue to a drained battery and decides to set aside time for rest. The image helped notice a state but did not establish its cause. If the battery scheme begins explaining every difficulty, differences disappear. The useful formulation can be kept while actual conditions are sought: length of work, conflicts, the organization of the day. Questions restore the metaphor's proper scale instead of making it the only explanation.

## X. A strong analogy withstands the possibility of rejection

The best test of a comparison is the ability to name a case in which it does not work. This is not the idea's defeat. It clarifies its subject. An image that can be limited becomes available for discussion; an image that explains everything often stops distinguishing anything.

Consider an author comparing inner discipline with tending a garden. The resemblance helps discuss regular work and conditions for growth. The difference matters too: a person can revise aims, speak, and reject the proposed order. Forgetting this makes the garden metaphor begin to justify managing someone as a passive object. Naming the limit preserves the useful part of the image and stops an unwanted transfer.

Rejection has another function: it helps us notice our own choice of examples. Authors often show only matches because these lead to the desired ending. The reader then receives selected confirmations rather than an investigation of a comparison. It helps to seek an awkward pair in which a familiar form goes with a clearly different relationship. This may force a change in wording, and sometimes abandoning the article's initial subject.

The photographs of the tree and roads can be revisited in the same way. After this reading, they still resemble one another, but the resemblance no longer looks like the end of the inquiry. The author can caption the image more precisely, choose one feature, and find material about processes. The reader gains the right to ask why the comparison is appropriate. The ancient formula no longer acts as a seal forbidding a question.

Hermetic correspondence deserves serious reading precisely when it is not turned into universal technical instructions. An ancient dialogue, alchemical evidence, and a twentieth-century book have their own voices. History and possible lines of interpretation lie between them, but one slogan cannot reconstruct these. Meeting them can expand imagination and discipline of thought together. We learn to seek connections while preserving the difference between a connection found, a belief, and a conclusion that still needs grounding.

## What this means in practice

Take one analogy you often use: a family as a state, the world as a mirror, work as a garden. Write down the two subjects compared and the relationship the image reveals. Avoid “everything.” Then name one substantial difference and one question the analogy does not yet answer.

If you infer a practical action, check the transition. “The image reminds me to set aside time” differs from “The image proves the result is guaranteed.” The first can be applied to your own

schedule. The second needs grounds concerning the result. Every personal benefit need not be declared confirmation of the worldview system from which you borrowed the phrase.

When reading Hermetism, record the book, edition, translator, and location of the passage. The Kybalion should be discussed under its own name. For the Corpus Hermeticum, name a particular treatise. For the Emerald Tablet, specify the edition and context. If a source's origins have not been checked, do not assign it an era from its cover.

An analogy can also be examined as a small written argument. First, record the initial claim: for example, “The part repeats the structure of the whole.” Then specify which part and which whole are being considered. In architecture, this may concern the form of a facade and a building; in an organization, the distribution of decisions between a department and the institution. These examples from the authors do not claim an identical law for buildings and people. They show how many different thoughts one short slogan can contain.

The next question concerns what “repeats” means. Does the pattern match, the proportion, the direction of the connection, or merely the observer's impression? Several similar windows do not imply that one window contains the building's entire plan. A department reproducing some institutional rules does not necessarily possess all the institution's authority. Such negative cases help: they force limits on the initial formula instead of declaring every difference a hidden confirmation.

Finally, check the conclusion. An outward resemblance suggests looking more closely at the second area. It does not yet establish the cause of events or permission to intervene in someone else's life. A hypothesis can be proposed and checked through separate evidence. Correspondence can be read as a religious symbol while retaining its place within a worldview. A beautiful image can be recognized as apt for a poem. These ways of handling a thought have different criteria. The reader gains from distinguishing them: a metaphor need not impersonate an experiment, and an experiment need not confirm an entire spiritual picture of the world. At this point, historical acquaintance becomes a skill of argument. The formula retains its force, but its persuasiveness can no longer be obtained by quietly substituting the task.

Finish the exercise with a small, checkable step: read the original paragraph, check a particular fact, or change your own wording. Sometimes the image will have to be left behind. Sometimes it will become more precise. In either case, thought gains freedom: it need neither worship a beautiful comparison nor reject it whole to keep working.

## Key quotation

> *“I long to learn the things that are”*

Corpus Hermeticum I, Pœmandres, §3, translated by G. R. S. Mead, Thrice-Greatest Hermes, Vol. 2, 1906, p. 4. Original short English fragment. The rest of the sentence concerns the nature of what exists and knowing God; this is a religious and philosophical request, not a modern research protocol.

## Connections between traditions

The rows below are our analytical comparisons, except for the explicitly discussed history of later reception; historical independence or influence is not assumed automatically.

| Positions | Basis of the connection and its limit |
|---|---|
| Pœmandres, §§1–10 ↔ The Kybalion, II and VIII | World and knowledge are connected in both books; antiquity's revelatory dialogue is not the twentieth century's system of seven principles. |
| Keynes MS.28 ↔ The Kybalion, II | There is a recognizable formula of correspondence; an alchemical context does not equal universal transfer between mental and spiritual planes. |
| Frigg and Hartmann: analogies ↔ The Kybalion, VIII | Both readings discuss movement between representations; scientific analogy needs particular grounds and does not confirm the book's metaphysics. |
| Ngāi Tahu: whakapapa ↔ Pœmandres, §8 | Both explain connection through a particular relationship, not accidental resemblance: descent and belonging in the first case, a pattern and reproduction of the cosmos in the second. A particular iwi's kinship connection is not copying a cosmic pattern. |
| Catechism, §§946–958 ↔ The Kybalion, II | Connections between levels of being and participants are discussed; the Church's unity in Christ is not a Hermetic law of planes. |
| The Analects, XIII.3: rectification of names ↔ The Kybalion, VIII: the meaning of “plane” | Both connect the use of a name with subsequent reasoning; Confucius's social order and the book's classification of cosmic manifestations concern different subjects. Clarifying a word helps us read an argument, but does not confirm an identical picture of the world. |

## Primary sources

1. Three Initiates. The Kybalion, edition with 1912 on the title page; Project Gutenberg eBook 14209. Primary source of a modern system; title page, introduction, Chapters I–II, passages from V, and Chapter VIII were read.

2. Corpus Hermeticum I: Pœmandres, English translation by G. R. S. Mead, Thrice-Greatest Hermes, Vol. 2, 1906, §§1–10. Primary text through a historical translation; the Greek original and entire corpus were not read separately.

3. Antoine Faivre. Renaissance Hermetism, The Cambridge Handbook of Western Mysticism and Esotericism, 2016, pp. 133–142. Scholarly reference: the public Summary with an introductory passage was read, not the full chapter.

4. Isaac Newton. Keynes MS.28, The Chymistry of Isaac Newton, editor William R. Newman, transcription John A. Johnson, electronic edition June 2010. Folios 2r–v and 6r–7r were read; context of alchemical reading. Project and terms of use; the transcription is not reprinted.

5. Roman Frigg, Stephan Hartmann. Models in Science, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, revision of April 2, 2025. Introduction and §1 were read; philosophical reference on scientific analogies.

6. Constantinos Macris, Joëlle Soler, Anna Van den Kerchove. Appropriations monothéistes de figures «païennes», Revue de l'histoire des religions 4/2019, pp. 651–655; online 2021. The complete short introduction on reception, not every article in the thematic issue.

7. Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu. Ngāi Tahu. Primary account of a particular iwi; limited comparison, not a Hermetic reading of another tradition.

8. Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§946–958. Primary source of Catholic teaching, a limit on the comparison of unity.

9. Confucius. The Analects, XIII.3, translated by James Legge. Primary passage through an English translation; precision of names, not a universal theory of analogy.

Accessed: October 3, 2026. Limits of actual reading and rights are retained in detail in the research notes.

## Tags

Hermetism, Hermetica, Corpus Hermeticum, Hermes Trismegistus, Pœmandres, Mead, Faivre, Emerald Tablet, Tabula Smaragdina, alchemy, Newton, Keynes MS.28, The Kybalion, Three Initiates, correspondence, analogy, metaphor, model, knowledge, mind, cosmology, religion, philosophy, reception history, causality, scale, proof, hypothesis, scientific models, comparison between traditions, limits of transfer, responsibility

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