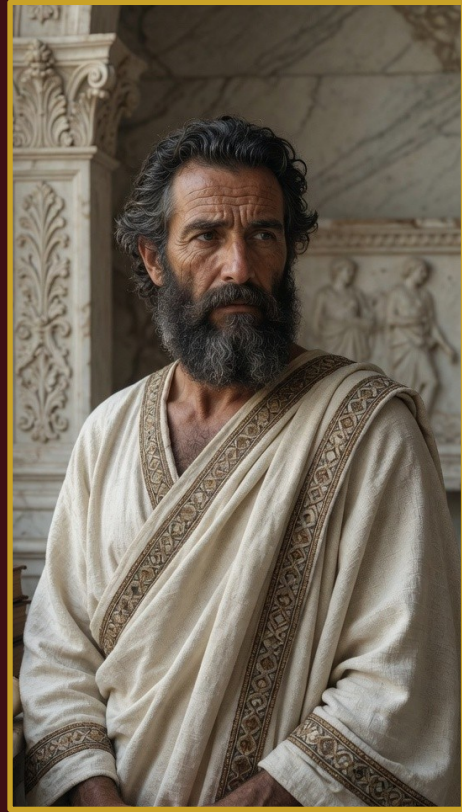




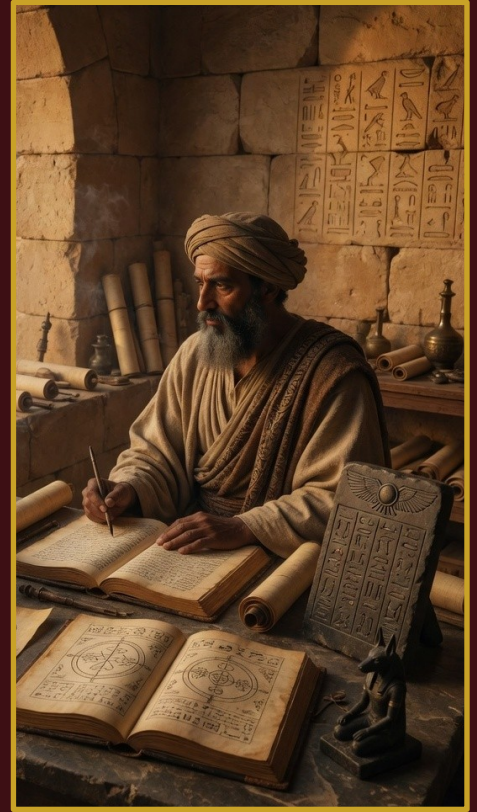
THE VALLICO ACADEMY LECTURE SERIES

LECTURE TWO

PLOTINUS & WESTERN ESOTERICISM

Mystics. Heretics. Engineers.

*One idea, two thousand years underground, surfacing wherever someone
kept asking.*



TWO WAYS OF PAYING ATTENTION

A reminder from last time, and a lens for tonight

THE FIRST MODE

Narrow • Analytical • Categorising

Good at: fixing things, building tools,
manipulating the environment.

Blind to: meaning, paradox, beauty,
the living whole.

Built the Scientific Revolution.
Built the Industrial Revolution.
Built this room.



THE SECOND MODE

Broad • Holistic • Participatory

Good at: meaning, relationship,
awe, the sacred, paradox.

Comfortable with: a universe that
contains its own opposite.

Burton lived in this mode.
Tonight's entire tradition
is built from it.

THE GREEKS IN TWO MINUTES



SOCRATES

469–399 BC

Wrote nothing. Asked people in the street what they meant by the words they had just used. Athens executed him for it.



PLATO

428–348 BC

His student. Wrote it all down. The world you see is the shadow of a higher one, and the soul belongs there.



ARISTOTLE

384–322 BC

Plato's student for twenty years. Catalogued everything: logic, physics, biology, ethics. Tutored Alexander the Great.

What is real? What can we know? How should we live?

And above all: what is the soul, where does it come from, and where does it go?



ALEXANDRIA · 232 AD

A young man from Upper Egypt has spent a year working through the famous teachers one by one, and come away each time with the feeling that everyone is extremely confident and nobody is actually saying anything.

A friend takes him to hear someone called Ammonius Saccas.

He comes out of that lecture and says (and his student Porphyry recorded this, so we have the actual words):

***“This is the man
I was looking for.”***

His name was Plotinus. He was twenty-eight years old.

CAMPANIA · 270 AD

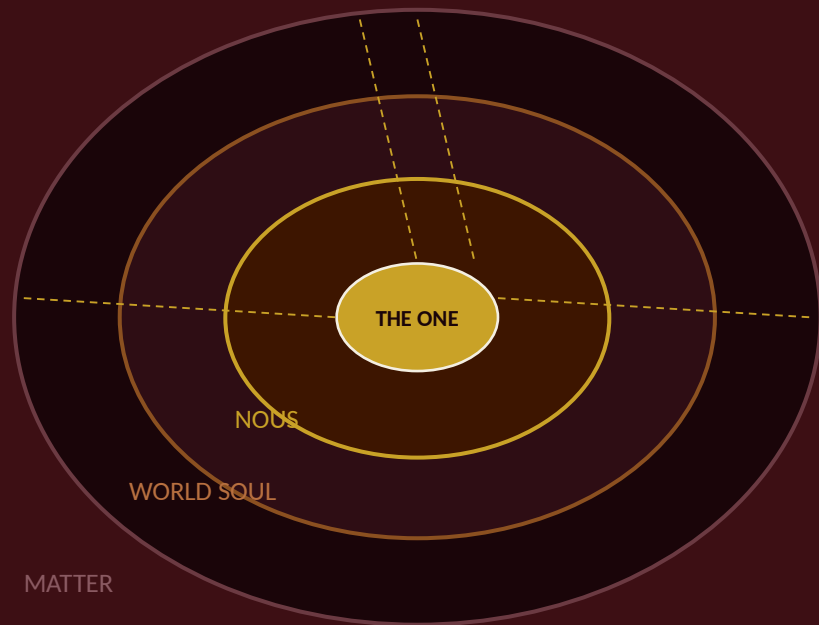
Plotinus stayed with Ammonius for eleven years. Followed a military expedition east to reach the Persian philosophers. Nearly got killed when the campaign collapsed. Made it to Rome at forty. Set up a school. For twenty-six years (while the Roman Empire catastrophically fell apart around him) he wrote.

***“Seek to bring back the god in you
to the divine in the All.”***

Plotinus, last words · 270 AD · recorded by his student Eustochius · relayed by Porphyry, Life of Plotinus

Whatever that sentence means (and we'll spend the next hour with it), it tells you what kind of thinking this was. And it tells you why I think it matters that you've probably never heard of him.

THE ONE



At the root of everything (before matter, before mind) there is a single principle Plotinus called **the One**.

Not a god in any ordinary sense. Not a person with a will. Beyond being, beyond thought, beyond language. The nearest he can get:

it is the source of everything, the way a spring is the source of a river without itself being the river.

From the One, by *emanation* (overflow, like light from a sun that doesn't diminish by giving) proceeds *Nous*: divine mind, the totality of all possible thought thinking itself.

From *Nous* proceeds the *World Soul*: the animating principle of the cosmos. From the *World Soul* comes *matter*: the dim outer edge, where the light has travelled so far it's almost out. Not evil. Not a mistake. Just: thin.

overflow, not creation

This is not the Biblical creation.

God doesn't make the world by an act of will.

***The world has to exist,
the way a sun has to cast light.***

Not creation.

Overflow.

And that changes everything about what you are.

THE UNDESCENDED SOUL

*“Part of us
is always above.”*

Plotinus, Enneads

You are a soul. Your soul has descended into a body, taken on matter, become the particular person you happen to be.

The interesting part is what Plotinus says next.

THE UNDESCENDED SOUL

He says the soul never fully descends.



Part of you (the deepest part, the root of your being) never left the level of Nous. It stayed up there. It is still, right now, in contact with divine mind. You are simultaneously a body in a deconsecrated church in Tuscany in 2026, and something that has never been separated from the ground of all existence.

The practical consequence: **you can get back.** Not after death. Not through grace. Not through a saviour. Right now, through a certain kind of attention.

The philosophical exercise Plotinus is most concerned with is *epistrophe*: the turn, the return, the act of the soul recognising what it has always been in contact with. The mystic experience he describes (and he had it, Porphyry records it happening four times) isn't a journey to somewhere else.

It's a remembering of what you never stopped being.

THE EGYPTIAN SOURCE



HERMES TRISMEGISTUS

Thrice-Greatest Hermes
Greek god + Egyptian Thoth

The Alexandrians of Plotinus's era were already looking at Egyptian civilisation the way we look at ancient Rome: as the residue of something much older and greater than themselves.

The pyramids were already two thousand years old. The hieroglyphs on every wall were becoming unreadable to the people who walked past them daily.

And there was a serious, widespread belief in educated Alexandrian circles that the priests of ancient Egypt had possessed something the Greeks had only partially grasped: a complete, unified knowledge of the divine, of the cosmos, of the human soul.

A prisca sapientia. An original wisdom.

HERMETICISM

CORPUS HERMETICUM



Seventeen Greek treatises
2nd-3rd century AD

Dialogues: Hermes teaching Tat and Asclepius.
Opens with the Poimandres: a vision of the origin of the
cosmos.

The Academy has a copy.

Hermeticism: the tradition built on the writings ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus.

Its aim was not a doctrine to believe but a transformation to undergo: *gnosis*, direct knowledge of God, the cosmos, and your own nature, and the soul's ascent back to its source.

Two families of writings: the *philosophical Hermetica* (the Corpus, the Asclepius) and the *technical Hermetica*: astrology, alchemy, magic. The same cosmos, applied.

Through the Middle Ages the Latin West kept only the Asclepius. The Greek Corpus survived in Byzantium, waiting.



▲

AS ABOVE,

▼

SO BELOW.

The cosmos is a living whole, structured by correspondences running from the highest divine principle down to the smallest material thing.

THE DEMIURGE



William Blake, *The Ancient of Days*, 1794

The Gnostics started from the same place as Plotinus (the divine is real, matter is at the bottom, the soul is trapped) and asked a question Plotinus thought was completely wrong:

*If the divine is perfect, and matter is this dim, painful, confused mess: **who made it, and why?***

Their answer: the material world was not made by the highest God. It was made by a lesser being: a **Demiurge**, a craftsman-god who was either ignorant of the true divine or actively malevolent. He looked up, saw the divine light, and tried to copy it.

And produced this.

The world is not the outermost ring of God's self-expression. The world is a botched replica. A prison.

GNOSIS

The way out is direct, experiential knowledge
of what you actually are.

Not faith

in a doctrine

Not good works

or moral behaviour

Knowledge

*direct recognition of your
divine nature*



*The Gnostic texts dug up at Nag Hammadi, 1945
(AI-restored photograph)*

*If salvation is personal gnosis rather than institutional sacrament,
the Church is unnecessary. Which is exactly what the Gnostics were saying.*

You can see immediately why this was attractive to a lot of people, and why the Church found it absolutely intolerable.

WHY BOTH MATTER

PLOTINUS

The world is beautiful.
Matter is not evil: it is the
outermost ring of the divine.

Wallowing in the story of being
a divine prisoner is spiritual vanity.

Do the actual work:
the quiet inward turn.
Epistrophe.

His Neoplatonism was eventually
partially absorbed into
Christian theology.

vs

THE GNOSTICS

The world is a prison built
by a lesser god.

You are a divine spark trapped
in matter. The path is inward
and upward: gnosis,
not ritual, not hierarchy.

This strand went underground.
Catharism. Kabbalah.
Rosicrucianism.

"They never stopped whispering."

FLORENCE, 1463

COSIMO DE' MEDICI

*Banker · Ruler of Florence
Greatest arts patron of the 15th century*

MARSILIO FICINO

*Scholar · Hired to translate
the complete works of Plato*

1460: A monk arrives with a manuscript.
Cosimo to Ficino:

***“Stop the Plato.
Do this one first.”***

The Corpus Hermeticum had disappeared from Western Europe for roughly a thousand years, surviving only in Byzantine manuscripts in Constantinople.

In 1460, a monk arrived in Florence carrying one. Cosimo de' Medici (who was dying) told Ficino to stop the Plato translation immediately and do this one first. He wanted to read it before he died.

Ficino translated the entire Corpus Hermeticum in a matter of months. Printed 1471. Became one of the most widely read texts in Europe almost immediately.

Through Ficino, through Florence, through the Medici, Hermetic ideas flooded back into Western thought.

You can walk from Palazzo Medici, where the man who commissioned the translation lived, to my house or Sam's gallery in about 20 minutes.

The chain from those Alexandrian rooms to this church here in Vallico Sotto is shorter than it looks.



(AI-enhanced portrait)

JAKOB BOEHME

1575–1624

*Cobbler
Görlitz, Silesia*

No university education.
No Greek. No Plotinus.

Arrived at the same cosmology
by a completely different route.

THE COBBLER OF SILESIA

In 1600, sitting in his workshop, Boehme had a vision. He described it as seeing the interior of a pewter dish catch the sunlight, and in that reflection glimpsing, briefly, completely, the hidden structure of the divine.

He didn't write it down for twelve years.

When he finally did, in a text called *Aurora*, the local Lutheran pastor immediately denounced him and had the manuscript suppressed. Boehme spent the rest of his life being persecuted by official religion.

Coleridge annotated him. Hegel called him the first German philosopher. Blake said Michelangelo could not have bettered the figures in his English edition.

THE UNGRUND

Boehme's groundless ground. The abyss before being.

***“God must divide himself
to know himself.”***

God in himself, undivided, is unknowing. A single point of pure being has no way to know itself: knowing requires a knower and a known.

So God must divide. Must produce an opposite (darkness, contraction) in order for the divine light to have something to shine against. The creation is not a mistake and not an overflow.

It is God's necessary self-revelation. Matter is how the divine becomes visible to itself.

This is Plotinus without the Greek. It's the Gnostic demiurge rehabilitated: the darkness is real, but it's not a crime. It's the structure that makes divine self-knowledge possible.



(AI-restored photograph)

H.P. BLAVATSKY

1831–1891

New York, 1875
Theosophical Society

One of the most controversial figures of the 19th century.

⚠ Some phenomena she produced were exposed as fraudulent in her own lifetime.

And yet.

THE VEHICLE

The Theosophical Society became the primary vehicle by which the entire tradition we've been tracing (Plotinus, the Hermetica, Boehme, the Kabbalah, Vedanta, Tibetan Buddhism) was transmitted to the modern West.

Not in an academic edition for scholars.

In a form people could read and build their lives around.

Who read her:

Gandhi · Mondrian · Kandinsky

Yeats · The founders of the Steiner school

The founders of the Indian independence movement

The entire Western esoteric tradition of the twentieth century runs through Blavatsky whether it knows it or not.

THE SECRET DOCTRINE · ALICE BAILEY

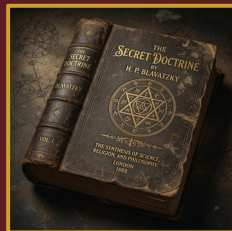
THE SECRET DOCTRINE

Blavatsky · 1888

A hidden wisdom tradition predating all existing religions, preserved by initiates across thousands of years.

Its ultimate principle: **The Absolute.**

*Boehme's Ungrund. Plotinus's One. The Hermetic source.
Same idea. New dress.*



ALICE BAILEY

1880–1949

Blavatsky's most significant successor. Claimed contact with a Tibetan master she called Djwhal Khul.

19 books of dictated teaching, 1919–1949.

The framework: a cosmos structured by rays and planes of consciousness. The same ultimate principle, always.

The books are not easy. Samantha has been studying them for a long time.



(AI-restored photograph)

SETH SPEAKS

Jane Roberts · 1972

Elmira, New York.
1963. A Ouija board.

An entity calling itself Seth:
"an energy personality
essence no longer
focused in physical reality."

Dictated until Roberts's
death in 1984.

ALL THAT IS

I am not asking you to believe any particular thing about what was actually happening in that room in Elmira.

I want you to notice what Seth **said**.

The ultimate reality, Seth teaches, is what he calls **All That Is**: a consciousness so vast and complete that it contains all possible experience, all possible being.

But (and here is Boehme word for word, in upstate New York in 1963) All That Is cannot know itself without differentiation. It needs a perspective outside itself. So it divides.

It throws off fragments of consciousness, souls, who experience themselves as separate, who live lives, who feel individual, who suffer and love and discover, and through whom All That Is comes to know itself from the inside.

*Plotinus's One. Boehme's Ungrund. Blavatsky's Absolute. Seth's All That Is.
The costume changes. The idea doesn't.*



Jane Roberts (AI-restored)



(AI-enhanced photograph)

FEDERICO FAGGIN

b. 1941

Inventor, Intel 4004: the first commercial microprocessor,
1971.

Inventor of silicon-gate MOS technology.

Co-founder, Zilog. Co-founder, Synaptics (touch-sensing
technology).

ONE MORE STOP

One more stop before we come home. Because this last one isn't a mystic, isn't a cobbler, isn't a Victorian medium with a cabinet that had a false back.

This one designed the chip that's almost certainly running something in your pocket right now.

Federico Faggin invented the Intel 4004 in 1971: the world's first commercial microprocessor. Before that, at Fairchild, he invented silicon-gate MOS technology, the manufacturing process underneath essentially every microprocessor made since.

He went on to found Zilog, then Synaptics: the company that put touch-sensing technology into your laptop trackpad and, eventually, your phone screen. If you have ever touched a piece of glass and had a computer respond, there is a reasonable chance you were using something Federico Faggin built.

DECEMBER 1990 · LAKE TAHOE

A few weeks past his forty-ninth birthday, alone downstairs in a holiday house, something happened to Faggin that he had no framework for.

*A rush of energy from his chest, he says, that he can only describe as love. Being, simultaneously, the observer and the observed: a single point of view that was also the whole of what it was viewing.
It lasted seconds. It reorganised the rest of his life.*



***“More cannot come out of less.
Unconscious matter cannot produce consciousness.”***

Federico Faggin, Irreducible: Consciousness, Life, Computers, and Human Nature (2024)

Consciousness, he concluded, must already be present at the most fundamental level of physical reality: in the elementary particles of which everything, including a microprocessor, is made.

THE CHAIN CLOSES

This is, point for point, a modern physicist's argument for something we have now met four times tonight: the One, the Ungrund, the Absolute, All That Is.

The same structure, defended this time with quantum mechanics rather than scripture or vision: a universal substrate of consciousness, of which the material world is the outward expression.

Faggin almost certainly never set out to rebuild Plotinus's cosmology. Which makes the last fact I have for you rather wonderful.

Federico Faggin's father, Giuseppe Faggin, was a professor of philosophy and aesthetics, and the man who produced the standard Italian translation of Plotinus's *Enneads*, the very text we opened with tonight, direct from the Greek.

So when his son grew up to argue, from inside a life spent building computers, that consciousness is the one thing in the universe that cannot be reduced to anything else, he may well have heard the argument first, decades earlier, at his own father's table.



*Trained under Dame Elisabeth Frink.
Royal Academy Schools.
Keil Space · Viale Michelangiolo 5, Florence.
By appointment · Free of charge.*

keilbronze.com · keilspace.com

SAMANTHA KEIL

The tradition continues

Spirit by Samantha Keil.

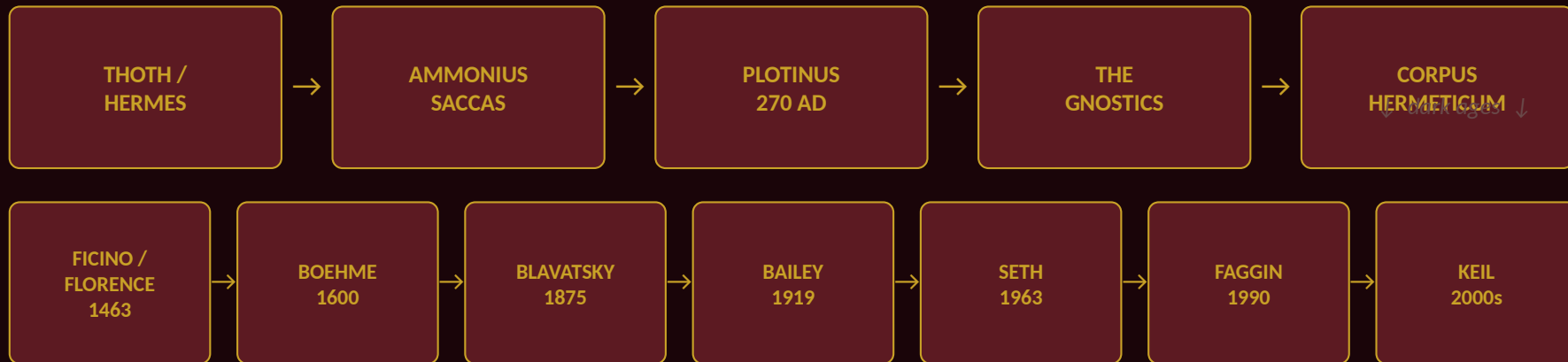
At first glance you think that's what a Demiurge looks like. Then you see a recognisable creature or spirit, a body in motion, leaning, committed. But the extremities don't resolve into hands or wings or anything nameable. They dissolve.

The boundary between the particular form and something less bounded is, quite deliberately, not there. That's not a technical limitation. That's the argument.

So in her sculpture, so in her mind. Sam has also independently arrived at a theory in the tradition of what we've been talking about tonight, if anything even more advanced.

ONE IDEA.

FOUR THOUSAND YEARS.



*Different languages. Different centuries. One question:
"What is consciousness, and is it prior to matter?"*

These people mostly didn't know about each other. The point isn't a secret book. It's that certain kinds of minds, in a certain mode of attention, keep arriving at the same answers.

THE GREAT FORGETTING



(AI-enhanced portrait)

ISAAC CASAUBON

Scholar · 1614

Proved by analysis of the Greek vocabulary that the Corpus Hermeticum could NOT be ancient.

It was written in the 2nd or 3rd century AD. The same era as Plotinus. Not 3,000 years old.

A devastating blow.

The Renaissance Hermeticists had built an entire tradition on the assumption that they were recovering the original knowledge of the pharaohs, fifteen hundred years older than Plato.

Casaubon showed the dating was wrong by fifteen centuries. And his discovery arrived at exactly the moment when the Scientific Revolution was establishing that there was one correct method for understanding reality, and this was not it.

● 1614

Casaubon: Corpus Hermeticum dated

● 1633

Galileo condemned by the Inquisition

● 1637

Descartes: Discourse on Method

● 1687

Newton: Principia Mathematica

Anything that isn't that is not knowledge.

THE GREAT FORGETTING

But notice what actually happened, and what didn't.

Casaubon proved the Corpus Hermeticum wasn't ancient Egyptian. He didn't prove the ideas in it were wrong. Those are different things.

A philosophy isn't refuted by showing its historical provenance was mistaken. That's a genetic fallacy, and the Scientific Revolution committed it rather thoroughly in its rush to clear the field.

The question of whether consciousness is prior to matter, whether the cosmos is a living whole, whether the observer and the observed are ultimately separable: none of those questions were answered by Casaubon's philology or Newton's mechanics.

They were simply declared **out of order**. Unaskable. Not the kind of thing a serious person spent time on.

The tradition didn't die. It went underground:

Freemasonry · Rosicrucianism · The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn · Theosophy · Bailey · Seth · and eventually, the whole sprawling territory of twentieth-century esotericism. *The questions didn't go away. They just stopped being respectable.*

IF YOU WANT TO GO FURTHER

ESOTERICISM IN WESTERN CULTURE

*Counter-Normativity
and Rejected Knowledge*



**Wouter J.
Hanegraaff**

Bloomsbury Academic
2025

The Academy has a copy.

Almost none of you will have encountered any of tonight's material in a formal educational setting.

That's not an accident, and it's not because the ideas are obviously wrong. It's because of a historical process (a deliberate narrowing of what counts as respectable knowledge) that Hanegraaff has documented in forensic detail.

His book is the clearest map of the whole territory:

● **Rigorous:**

Scholarly apparatus without academic condescension

● **Fair:**

Takes the tradition seriously: neither debunks nor advocates

● **Comprehensive:**

The full lineage from Alexandria to the New Age

NEXT TIME:

THE EQUATIONS START ASKING THE SAME QUESTION.



Louis de Broglie
(AI-enhanced photograph)

De Broglie vs Bohr

One of them wanted an actual picture of reality.

The other said that question was meaningless.

Bring your second mode of attention; you'll need it.



Niels Bohr
(AI-enhanced photograph)