

THE SUPREME POLARITY AND THE LIGHTS OF EMANATION

Zhou Dunyi's Taiji Descent and the Lurianic Or Pnimi and Or Makif: A Structural Parallel and Its Limits

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Abstract

This paper sets out a genuine structural parallel between two emanative cosmologies that arose independently and centuries apart: the Taiji descent of the Song Neo-Confucian Zhou Dunyi (1017–1073), as given in his *Taijitu shuo*, and the Lurianic doctrine of emanation in sixteenth-century Kabbalah, with its two lights, Or Pnimi (the inner or penetrating light) and Or Makif (the surrounding or encompassing light). Both schemes describe a graded coming-forth from a limitless source through a first determination into differentiated multiplicity, and both carry a bidirectional, reversing motion rather than a one-way fall. The parallel is real and worth drawing, because it shows the same emanative form that the Catharturgy Corpus renders in the Tree appearing in two unrelated traditions; and it is strengthened by two striking convergences in the Lurianic material with structures this corpus independently developed — the inner light's seven aspects mapped to the seven lower sefirot and the seven colors of the spectrum, and the explicitly wave-based physics by which the two lights are explained. But the paper is equally concerned to mark the limits of the parallel honestly. Zhou Dunyi has no doctrine of the soul's components, no hun-po teaching of the kind sometimes attributed to him; that material is Daoist and folk-religious, and its deflationary form belongs to Zhu Xi, not to Zhou. And Zhou's activity-and-stillness, though it shares the bidirectional and limitless-to-first-determination character of the Lurianic lights, does not contain the distinctively Lurianic machinery of vessels, of the contraction that makes room, or of the breaking of the vessels. The correspondence is emanative-structural, not a shared doctrine of light and vessel. It is offered as a witness, not as a derivation.

I. A Note on What Is, and Is Not, Being Claimed

It is necessary at the outset to set aside a tempting but unfounded route to this comparison. One might suppose that Zhou Dunyi held a doctrine of the soul's components — the three hun and seven po of Chinese tradition — and that this three-over-seven structure of souls could be set beside the three Supernals and seven lower Sephiroth of the Tree. The supposition does not survive examination. The doctrine of three ethereal hun and seven corporeal po is Daoist and folk-

religious in provenance, fixed in its numbering during the Later Han and elaborated in Daoist texts; and where a Neo-Confucian treats hun and po at all, it is Zhu Xi, who deflates the two-soul language into the dynamics of qi, with the spirit of qi called hun and the spirit of jing called po, and no elaborate scheme of three-and-seven at all. Zhou Dunyi himself offers no doctrine of soul-components. To attribute one to him would be to invent a teaching he did not hold. The three-and-seven structure of souls may still be set beside the Tree as a Daoist witness — that is a separate matter, treated elsewhere — but it cannot be routed through Zhou, and it is not the subject of this paper.

What Zhou Dunyi does offer, and what genuinely parallels the Lurianic descent, is not a doctrine of the soul but a cosmology of emanation: the coming-forth of all things from the Supreme Polarity. It is there, in the structure of the descent itself, that the real correspondence lies. The claim of this paper is therefore precise: that the form of Zhou's emanative descent and the form of the Lurianic emanative descent are structurally parallel; that the Lurianic doctrine of the two lights is the specifically Kabbalistic elaboration of that descent; and that this elaboration independently exhibits two features the Catharturgy Corpus developed on its own. The claim is one of structural parallel and convergent witness, not of historical influence and not of shared doctrine.

II. Zhou Dunyi's Taiji Descent

Zhou Dunyi's Taijitu shuo, the Explanation of the Diagram of the Supreme Polarity, became the cornerstone of Neo-Confucian cosmology. Its opening line states the ground: 'Non-polar (wuji) and yet Supreme Polarity (taiji).' The limitless, the wuji, is not a thing among things and not a number; and yet from it, or as it, is the Taiji, the Supreme Polarity, the first determination. The text then gives the generative motion: the Supreme Polarity in activity generates yang, and at the limit of activity it is still; in stillness it generates yin, and at the limit of stillness it is again active; activity and stillness alternate, each becoming the root of the other. From the distinction of yin and yang the Two Modes are established; from their transformation and union come the Five Phases — water, fire, wood, metal, earth — and from these the four seasons and the ten thousand things. The diagram is a series of circles, a graded descent: the limitless ground, the first polarity, the two modes, the five phases, the myriad things.

Two features of this descent matter for the comparison. The first is the movement from the limitless to the first determination — wuji to taiji — which is the passage from the unbounded, numberless ground to the first definite principle from which differentiation proceeds. The Catharturgy Corpus has already identified this passage with the zero and the one at the center of the Kether glyph: the limitless white field as the wuji, the first black point as the taiji. The second feature is the reciprocal, reversing character of the motion: activity and stillness do not run in one direction but generate each other, each arising at the other's extreme, each the basis of the other. The descent is not a single fall away from the source but a dynamic in which the poles continually give rise to one another. It is this bidirectional character, as much as the graded descent, that will find its counterpart in the Lurianic lights.

III. The Lurianic Descent and the Two Lights

The Lurianic cosmology likewise describes a graded descent from a limitless source, but elaborates it with a doctrine of light and vessel that has no equal in Zhou. From the Or Ein Sof, the Infinite Light, and after the tzimtzum — the primordial contraction by which the Infinite withdraws to make room for the worlds — a first ray, the Kav, is drawn into the vacated space, and from it the sefirot and worlds descend. Within this descent the tradition distinguishes two lights. Or Pnimi, the inner or penetrating light, is the divine light that a vessel can internalize according to its measure; it is drawn in a manner of straightness and gradation from above to below, entering and clothing the vessels in their inner dimension, illumining each world according to its level — the light called Filling All Worlds. Or Makif, the surrounding or encompassing light, is the divine light that transcends the vessel's capacity and therefore cannot enter it; it surrounds from beyond, the light called Surrounding All Worlds, rooted in the transcendence that precedes the contraction.

The descent of this light is not one-directional. The inner light descends as direct light, Or Yashar; and it can be reflected back toward its source as reflected light, Or Chozer. Indeed the tradition holds that the descent of direct light comes in response to the ascent from below of reflected light — a reaching down that answers a reaching up. Here is the bidirectional motion that parallels Zhou's activity-and-stillness: not a single fall, but a descending and an ascending light, a giving from above met by a returning from below. The relation of the two lights amounts to the relation between the divine light that transcends the vessel's capacity, and so cannot enter, and the divine light the vessel can internalize according to its measure — creation absorbing only a fraction of what emanates from the Infinite, the rest remaining beyond as the surrounding light.

IV. The Parallel, Stated Precisely

Set side by side, the two descents share three features of form. First, both proceed from a limitless source through a first determination: wuji to taiji in Zhou, the Infinite through the contraction to the first ray, the Kav, in Luria. In both, the unbounded is not itself one of the things that follow, and the first definite principle is the hinge between the limitless and the differentiated — the very passage the Corpus marks as zero becoming one at the heart of the Kether glyph. Second, both are graded descents through nested degrees: Zhou's circles from the limitless through polarity and the Five Phases to the myriad things, and the Lurianic descent of the sefirot from one level to another through many contractions. Third, and most distinctively, both carry a bidirectional, reversing motion. Zhou's poles generate each other, each arising at the other's extreme; the Lurianic light descends as direct light and returns as reflected light, the descent itself answering an ascent from below. Neither cosmology is a one-way emanation away from a source that does not respond; both are dynamic, reciprocal, and alive with a motion that runs in both directions along the vertical.

This threefold formal agreement is the substance of the parallel. It is the same emanative shape that the Catharturgy Corpus renders in the Tree — a limitless ground, a first point, a graded descent, and a vertical that is travelled in both directions — appearing in two traditions that did

not borrow it from one another. That two independent cosmologies, Song Confucian and Safed Kabbalistic, should arrive at so similar a form is itself the kind of convergence that lends weight to the structure the Corpus takes as fundamental.

V. Two Convergences with the Cathartes Scale

The Lurianic elaboration is strengthened, for the purposes of this corpus, by two features that converge remarkably with structures developed independently in the Cathartes Scale. They are noted here not as proof but as corroboration — the kind of unlooked-for agreement that suggests a real structure is being touched from more than one side.

The first concerns the seven and the spectrum. The inner light, Or Pnimi, is said to have seven aspects, and these are mapped to the seven lower sefirot — Chesed, Gevurah, Tiferet, Netzach, Hod, Yesod, and Malkuth — and, expressly, to the seven colors of the rainbow, the tradition itself drawing the analogy that just as physical light is composed of seven colors, so its spiritual counterpart has seven aspects answering to the seven lower sefirot, which the Zohar in turn links to the colors of the rainbow. This is precisely the structure of the Cathartes Scale: the seven lower spheres carrying the chromatic spectrum, the supernal three standing apart above them. The Corpus did not derive its spectrum-on-the-lower-seven from the Lurianic light doctrine; that the same mapping should appear there independently is a convergence worth marking.

The second concerns the wave. The tradition explains the two lights by appeal to the behavior of waves and particles: the surrounding light is likened to the diffraction of a wave, which bends around an obstacle and envelops what stands in its path, while the inner light is likened to particles, some of which penetrate the object they meet and some of which are reflected back. The two lights are thus distinguished by the two classical behaviors of light — the wave that surrounds and the ray that penetrates or reflects. The Cathartes Scale grounds its identity of color and tone in just this wave-periodicity, the single periodic structure that Newton and Helmholtz traced through both the spectrum and the musical scale. That the Lurianic doctrine reaches for wave behavior to explain its lights, as the Scale reaches for wave-periodicity to unite color and tone, is the second convergence — again unlooked-for, and again touching the same ground.

VI. The Limits of the Parallel

Honesty about the parallel requires equal clarity about where it ends, for the temptation to press a real correspondence past its evidence is precisely what discredits such comparisons. Three limits must be stated.

First, Zhou Dunyi has no doctrine of the two lights, nor of vessels, nor of any light internalized according to a vessel's measure against a light that cannot be contained. His scheme is the generation of yin and yang and the Five Phases; the language of light and vessel is wholly Lurianic and must not be read back into him. Second, and most decisively, the distinctively Lurianic machinery has no counterpart in Zhou. There is in Zhou no *tzimtzum*, no contraction by which the

source withdraws to make room; no vessels formed of a thicker light to hold a purer one; and above all no shevirat ha-qelim, no breaking of the vessels under a light they could not contain, from whose shards the husks and the material world are formed. This machinery — contraction, vessel, and breaking — is the heart of the Lurianic account and the source of its drama, and Zhou's activity-and-stillness contains nothing answering to it. Third, the parallel is one of structural form, not of historical influence: there is no contact between Song China and Safed, and none is alleged. The two descents are independent, and their agreement is the agreement of form, not the agreement of a shared or transmitted doctrine.

What remains, when these limits are observed, is exactly the claim with which this paper began: that the form of the emanative descent — limitless ground, first determination, graded and bidirectional descent — is shared between Zhou's Taiji cosmology and the Lurianic emanation, and that the Lurianic elaboration of that descent in the two lights independently exhibits the spectrum-on-the-seven and the wave-grounding that the Cathartes Scale developed on its own. The parallel is a witness to the structure, offered alongside the others the Corpus gathers, and bounded honestly by what the sources will bear.

VII. Conclusion

Zhou Dunyi's Supreme Polarity and the Lurianic lights describe, in idioms that never met, a single emanative form: the limitless giving rise to a first determination, and from it a graded descent travelled in both directions, downward as the giving of light or the generation of the modes, upward as the reflected light that the descent answers. The Catharturgy Corpus renders this same form in the Tree, and has already set the limitless and the first point as the zero and one at the center of the Kether glyph. The Lurianic doctrine of Or Pnimi and Or Makif is the specifically Kabbalistic elaboration of the descent, and it carries, unbidden, two of the Corpus's own signatures — the seven lower spheres as the seven colors of the spectrum, and the wave by which light is understood. Set against the honest limits of the comparison — that Zhou has no hun-po doctrine, no two lights, and none of the Lurianic machinery of contraction, vessel, and breaking — the parallel stands as what it is: not a derivation, not an influence, but a witness, from two unconnected traditions, to the emanative structure the Corpus takes as fundamental.

References

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