

THE TWO AXES AND THE CONFLATION OF THE TRADITION

Ontological and Existential Order in Color, Element, and the Tree

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Abstract

This treatise resolves a confusion that runs through the Western esoteric tradition, and through the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in particular: the conflation of two perpendicular relationships that ought to be kept distinct. The first is the ontological axis — the vertical relationship of degree of being, the kenotic descent from the rarefied to the dense, carried on the Tree of Life by the descending triads. The second is the existential axis — the lateral relationship of polarity and motion, the cyclic complementarity of the moving world. The tradition repeatedly took a relationship belonging to one axis and treated it as though it belonged to the other, and many of its apparent inconsistencies dissolve once the two axes are separated. The treatise demonstrates this through two worked cases. In color, the Golden Dawn ran its scales as a vertical descent from light to dark, when the light-and-dark polarity is in fact lateral and existential — the Yin and Yang of the supernal poles — while the genuinely kenotic descent is carried vertically by the triads; a correction that, with a recoloring of the supernal triad and a closed spectrum of hue, yields a coherent chromatic metaphysics. In the elements, the tradition orders them Fire, Water, Air, Earth — the order of the zodiac in reverse, which is the existential and lateral order of cyclic motion — and treats this as fundamental, when the ontological and vertical order, by rarefaction and density, is Fire, Air, Water, Earth. In each case the resolution is the same: two perpendicular axes, long superimposed on a single line, drawn apart. The treatise closes by noting that this is the perpendicular ontology of the Corpus doing diagnostic work upon the tradition that preceded it.

The Ontological Axis · The Existential Axis · Perpendicularity · The Golden Dawn · The Color Scales · Yin and Yang · The Queen Scale · The Four Elements · Fire Air Water Earth · Kenotic Descent · The Descending Triads · Catharturgy

I. Two Relationships, Long Confused

There are, in the structure of the Tree of Life and in the symbolic systems mapped upon it, two distinct relationships that the Western esoteric tradition has persistently confused. The Corpus has named them elsewhere as the two perpendicular axes, and the distinction is simple to state. The ontological axis is vertical: it is the relationship of degree of being, the descent from the

rarefied to the dense, from the subtle to the gross, from the source toward the manifest. On the Tree this descent is carried by the descending triads — the supernal triad, the moral triad, the lower triad, and the final sphere — each a register, the whole a kenotic outpouring downward. The existential axis is lateral: it is the relationship of polarity and motion, the complementarity of opposed poles whose interplay is the life of the moving world. On the Tree this is carried across the pillars — the relationship between the sides, not the descent between the levels.

These two axes are perpendicular. A point on the one does not correspond to a point on the other; they meet only where they cross. And precisely because they are perpendicular and not parallel, a relationship that belongs to one cannot be read off the other without confusion. Yet this is exactly the confusion the tradition made, repeatedly: it took a relationship of lateral polarity or cyclic motion — an existential relationship — and treated it as though it were the vertical relationship of being, or it ran a vertical descent along an axis where the real relationship was lateral. The result is a body of symbolism rich in content but flattened in structure, in which two perpendicular relationships are superimposed on a single line and their distinct logics tangled. The present treatise separates them, and shows in two worked cases — color and element — how much dissolves once they are drawn apart.

Two perpendicular relationships, long confused: the ontological axis (vertical, the descent of being, carried by the descending triads) and the existential axis (lateral, the polarity and motion of the world, carried across the pillars). A relationship belonging to one cannot be read off the other. The tradition superimposed them on a single line; this treatise draws them apart.

II. The First Case: Color

The Golden Dawn assigned colors to the Sephiroth and paths through its four scales, of which the Queen scale gives the colors of the Sephiroth as displayed. In the supernal triad the Queen scale runs a procession: white at Kether, grey at Chokmah, black at Binah — a graded descent from light to dark. And herein lies the confusion, for this treats the relationship of light and dark as a vertical descent, a procession down the triad from brilliance to blackness. The instinct was not baseless: color does diminish, and the tradition rightly felt that color expressed a kind of kenotic descent from light. But the light-and-dark relationship is not vertical. It is lateral. Light and dark are not a procession down the triad but the two poles of the supernal polarity across it — which is to say, they are Yin and Yang.

The correction is a recoloring. Let Kether be not a flat grey-toward-white but Taiji — the supreme polarity, the generative unity that holds and turns the two poles, as the taijitu holds black and white in dynamic relation. Let Chokmah be white — the pole of light, of radiance and dispersal and reach: Yang. Let Binah be black — the pole of darkness, of gathering and receptivity: Yin. The supernal triad is then no longer a graded descent from white through grey to black, but the taijitu itself: the unity at the crown holding the two poles of light and dark across the pillars. The grey of the Queen scale was a blend, a midpoint, and so it read as a stage in a descent; white and black are poles, and so they read, correctly, as a lateral polarity. The recoloring converts a false vertical procession into the true lateral polarity it always was.

With the poles set, the rest of the chromatic field follows as the differentiation of the polarity. The hue spectrum runs from red, the long wavelength, to blue, the short. Red is the pole of Yang: the long wave spreads, reaches, and penetrates — the long wavelengths pass through where the short are scattered and caught, as the red of sunset penetrates the long atmospheric path that scatters the blue across the whole sky. Blue is the pole of Yin: the short wave, higher in energy yet more limited in its passage, scattered and gathered rather than far-reaching. Red reaches and disperses; blue is caught and contracted. And the spectrum is closed into a wheel not through the spectral colors, which do not wrap, but through the non-spectral purples and magentas — the colors the eye and mind generate where the spectrum has no single wavelength to give — by the paths of Silence and Courage, which carry blue back to red through the magentas in either direction. The closure of the wheel is made through the colors that are themselves syntheses rather than pure wavelengths, which is fitting for the paths that complete it.

The recoloring: Kether as Taiji (the unity holding the poles), Chokmah white (Yang, the reaching dispersing light), Binah black (Yin, the gathering dark). Red is Yang — the long wave that penetrates and spreads; blue is Yin — the short wave, scattered and contracted. The spectrum closes into a wheel through the non-spectral magentas, by the paths of Silence and Courage. A false vertical descent becomes the true lateral polarity.

Two further features complete the system, and both turn on keeping the axes distinct. The first is the octave. The same hue may appear at many degrees of brightness, lighter and darker, as a note recurs at many octaves of the keyboard — the darker the lower octave, the lighter the higher — so that one may travel in two directions: around the wheel through the hues, or up and down through the octaves of brightness. The second is the assignment of the axes themselves. The colors and their poles — light and dark, red and blue, Yang and Yin — are the lateral, existential polarity; they represent the complementarity of the moving world. The kenotic descent, the vertical relationship of being, is carried not by the colors but by the descending triads. The Golden Dawn's error was to run color as a vertical light-to-dark descent, conflating the lateral color-polarity with the vertical kenotic descent; once the descent is given to the triads and the polarity to the colors, both are clarified. And because the color-polarity is existential and lateral, the category of privation has no place in it: privation is a disease of the vertical kenotic order, the collapse of a function onto finite fixation, whereas the lateral polarity of light and dark is the healthy complementarity of two good poles. The dark pole, Binah and Yin, is not a privation but a pole; contraction here is the receptive gathering of Yin, not the contraction of the fall. The two senses of contraction belong to different axes and must not be confused — which is the same lesson, again.

III. The Second Case: The Elements

The same confusion governs the ordering of the four elements, and exposing it shows that the error was a pattern and not an isolated slip. The Golden Dawn, and much of the tradition, orders the elements Fire, Water, Air, Earth. This ordering follows the procession of the zodiac in reverse — the elements as they cycle through the turning wheel of the signs. But the procession of the zodiac is the cycle of the moving year, the turning of the seasons: it is a relationship of motion and cyclic recurrence. The order Fire, Water, Air, Earth is therefore the existential and lateral order —

the elements as they move through the cyclic wheel, the complementarity of the turning world. The tradition takes this cyclic order as though it were fundamental, the basic structure of the elements as such.

But there is another ordering, and it is the ontological one. By degree of rarefaction and density — from the most subtle and active to the most dense and passive — the elements descend Fire, Air, Water, Earth: Fire the most rarefied, Air beneath it, Water denser still, Earth the most dense and gross. This is the vertical order, the order of degree of being, the kenotic descent from the subtle toward the manifest. It is not the order of the zodiacal cycle; it is the order of ontological descent. And so the elements, like the colors, answer to two perpendicular orderings: Fire, Air, Water, Earth on the ontological and vertical axis of rarefaction, and Fire, Water, Air, Earth on the existential and lateral axis of cyclic motion. The tradition took the existential, cyclic order — Fire, Water, Air, Earth — and used it as if it were the ontological structure, which is precisely the same conflation it made with color: a lateral, moving relationship treated as the vertical relationship of being.

The elements answer to two perpendicular orderings. Fire, Air, Water, Earth is ontological and vertical — the descent by rarefaction and density, the subtle to the gross, the order of being. Fire, Water, Air, Earth is existential and lateral — the order of the zodiac in reverse, the cyclic motion of the turning world. The tradition used the cyclic order as if it were the ontological one: the same conflation as with color.

That the same confusion appears twice, in two of the tradition's most basic symbol-sets, shows that it is structural rather than incidental. The tradition possessed, in its colors and its elements alike, two perpendicular relationships — one of vertical being, one of lateral motion — and lacking the distinction between the axes, it superimposed them, now reading a lateral polarity as a vertical descent, now using a cyclic order as an ontological one. The richness of the material was never in question; what was missing was the structural distinction that would keep its two relationships from being run together on a single line.

IV. The Resolution and Its Source

The resolution of both cases is the one distinction: the ontological axis and the existential axis are perpendicular, and the relationships that belong to each must be kept to their own axis. In color, the vertical kenotic descent belongs to the descending triads, and the lateral polarity of light and dark, red and blue, Yang and Yin, belongs to the colors; the Golden Dawn ran the polarity as a descent and tangled them. In the elements, the vertical order of being is Fire, Air, Water, Earth, and the lateral order of cyclic motion is Fire, Water, Air, Earth; the tradition used the cyclic order as the ontological one. Separate the axes, and each system clarifies: the colors become a coherent chromatic metaphysics of polarity and octave, and the elements take their two proper orderings, each answering to its own relationship.

This is the perpendicular ontology of the Corpus performing diagnostic work upon the tradition from which it inherited so much. The doctrine that distinct registers of being are substantially

distinct and related by perpendicular intersection — that there are genuinely different axes, meeting only where they cross — is exactly the instrument needed to untangle the tradition's confusions, because those confusions are, in every case, the superimposition of two perpendicular axes upon one line. What the tradition felt but could not articulate — that color expresses a descent and also a polarity, that the elements have an order of being and also an order of motion — the Corpus can now state precisely: these are two axes, not one, and the appearance of inconsistency was the unmarked presence of both. The resolution does not discard the tradition's symbolism; it grants it the structure it always implicitly had, and in doing so settles a confusion long felt and not, until the axes were distinguished, resolved. The color and the elements are two worked cases of a confusion far wider than themselves; its general statement, and its gravest instance in the dualist miscasting of evil, are given in the foundational treatise 'The Conflation of the Existential and the Ontological,' of which this treatise is an application to the symbolism of the tradition.

References and Related Papers

Etter, Christopher E. The Perpendicular Axes (the ontological and existential axes); Perpendicular Ontology (substantial distinctness and dimensional intersection); The Two Registers of Elemental Being; The Perpendicular Qualities of Matter; Wuji, Taiji, and the Limitless Ground (the Yin/Yang polarity and the supernal recoloring). Catharturgy Corpus, 2026.

The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn: the four color scales (King, Queen, Emperor, Empress) and the attribution of the elements to the Tree and the zodiac. With the standard elemental orderings, ontological (Fire, Air, Water, Earth) and zodiacal-cyclic (Fire, Water, Air, Earth).

Note on the Supernal Colors (Reconciliation)

The recoloring of the supernal triad proposed in this paper — Kether as the Taiji holding the poles, Chokmah white, and Binah black — is established as corpus doctrine in The Luminous Pillars: Light, Color, and Octave on the Tree of Life, which should be taken as the governing source. There the white-Chokmah / black-Binah assignment is grounded in the two primordial values of light, the crown is figured as the Taiji glyph of Zhou Dunyi (an undivided white wuji center bearing the black point of the Monad, surrounded by reversing rings of Chokmah-white and Binah-black), and the brightening (Chokmah, mercy) and darkening (Binah, severity) directionality of the hidden circuit is shown to correspond to a real asymmetry in scotopic vision (the Purkinje shift). The procession reported here from the displayed Queen scale — white at Kether, grey at Chokmah, black at Binah — is the inherited convention this corpus corrects: grey at Chokmah is replaced by white, and the crown's flat value is replaced by the Taiji.

Note on the Color Scale (Reconciliation)

Where this paper invokes the King and Queen scales of the Golden Dawn, those scales are superseded in the corpus by the Cathartes Scale, established in The Cathartes Scale: The Chromatic and Tonal Spectrum of the Tree of Life, which should be taken as the governing source

for all color and tonal correspondence. The Cathartes Scale — the original 2002 design of the system — replaces the inherited scales entirely with a generative one: Kether the Taiji, Chokmah white, Binah black, the lower spheres carrying the spectrum (Geburah red, Hod orange, Tiphareth yellow, Netzach green, Chesed blue, Yesod violet), and the paths the gradients between them. The same circuit carries the tonal spectrum — the whole-tone stations G–A–B–C♯–D♯–F and the semitones on the connecting paths — so that color and note, shade and octave, are one structure.

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