

THE UPSTREAM ERROR

The Perceptual Ascent, the Regeneration of Explanations, and Why the Correction Must Re-enter at Malkuth

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Abstract

The lightning flash descends the Tree; perception ascends it. This paper takes that structural fact seriously and derives from it a general principle governing where an intervention may be applied and where it cannot. Perception is an ascent from Malkuth, and an error entering the ascent low on the Tree propagates into every sphere above it. Everything above the error is therefore not the fault but the fault's product — and products cannot be corrected, because they are not broken. They are faithful outputs of a broken input. The source-monitoring injury enters at the path of Qoph, where the world becomes perception, and every subsequent stage of the practitioner's suffering is a downstream consequence: the shame is a misattribution the system is obliged to make, the daydream is an explanation the system is obliged to construct, and the verbal argument is an attack on that explanation, four stages above the fault. This paper sets out the cascade stage by stage, in the Qabalistic and the neurological registers together; establishes why the argument cannot win even when it wins; states the upstream error principle formally; classifies every intervention the practitioner has attempted against it; and gives the criterion by which any proposed solution may be tested in advance. The conclusion is one the tradition already held for reasons it could not state: the work begins at Malkuth, and it begins there of necessity.

I. Perception Is an Ascent

The Tree is traversed in two directions, and the two directions are not symmetrical. The lightning flash descends: from Kether through the spheres to Malkuth, the outpouring of the creative act, the order of emanation. But perception runs the other way. The world arrives at Malkuth — the somatic interface, the sensory floor, where the rubber meets the road — and ascends: into the posterior spheres where it is constructed, through Yesod where it is elaborated, along the Middle Pillar to Tiphareth where it is witnessed, and only then into the executive spheres where it is thought about.

This is not a metaphor imported onto the neurology. It is the neurology. Sensory signal enters at

the periphery, is transduced, ascends through thalamus to primary and then association cortex, is bound and elaborated, and only afterward becomes available to the frontal executive. The hierarchy has a direction, and the direction is upward. What is early is low; what is late is high; and the frontal lobes — the seat of everything the practitioner is proudest of — sit at the very top of the ascent, receiving what has already been decided beneath them.

From this single fact everything else in this paper follows. An error that enters the ascent at a low stage does not stay there. It propagates upward, and every stage above it operates faithfully upon corrupted input, producing corrupted output, which the next stage above receives as its input. The predictive-processing literature states this directly: an aberrant prediction error moves up the predictive hierarchy, and the levels above attempt to explain it by revising their models, so that the symptoms observed at each level are generated by the error arriving from below. The symptoms are not the disease. They are the disease's faithful reporting.

II. The Cascade, Stage by Stage

What follows is the sequence, given in both registers at once. The Qabalistic path is named first; the neurological event follows.

Stage 2. [Qoph · Malkuth → Netzach] The world enters perception. Somatic and sensory signal ascends from the body to the right posterior cortex, where the external world is constructed as a world. Here sits the comparator: the mechanism that must distinguish what has arrived from outside from what the organism has generated itself, by checking incoming signal against the prediction issued by the efference copy. This is the interface where the rubber meets the road, and this is where the injury lives. The path of Qoph is the path from the ground to the back of the head, and its trump is The Moon — the card of the uncertain boundary between what is real and what is not. Its collapsed state is the injury's exact portrait.

Stage 2. [at Netzach · the primary misattribution] The comparator fails, and here the neurology fills a gap the practitioner's sketch left open: it explains why the failure produces shame rather than mere confusion. An untagged signal does not become neutral. It defaults to external. The system's account of hallucination is exactly this — internally generated content that fails to be attenuated becomes so salient that it must, on the system's own inference, have emanated from another agent. Apply that to the social-evaluative register, which is Netzach's register, and the derivation is immediate. Internally generated social content that cannot be tagged as self is inferred to have come from another agent, and an unaccounted-for social agent, attending to you, is precisely what shame is the alarm for. The shame is not irrational. It is the correct output of a correct inference from a corrupted premise.

Stage 3. [Yesod · the secondary explanation] The alarm now demands an account of itself, and the default mode network is the organ that supplies accounts. It constructs a top-down cognitive explanation for the aberrant salience — and the literature is emphatic that such explanations are imbued with the psychodynamic themes belonging to the individual who constructs them. The practitioner's themes are social exposure and being found out. So the explanation his system

builds is a social tribunal: a figure, a judgment, a case to answer. The daydream is not idle. It is the explanation the system is obliged to generate for a signal it cannot otherwise account for. In the formal literature this layer is called secondary — the misattribution is primary, the explanation that follows it is derivative — and that ordering matters enormously for what follows.

Stage 4. [Samech · Yesod → Tiphareth] The elaborated content ascends the Middle Pillar along the path of Temperance — which is, in the anatomical register, the cingulate axis running from the posterior cingulate at Yesod forward to the anterior cingulate at Tiphareth. The scene arrives in salience. Only now does the practitioner become conscious of anything at all, and what he becomes conscious of is not the fault, and not even the alarm, but the explanation of the alarm: a social scene, already fully formed, already under way.

Stage 5. [Tiphareth → Geburah · the tertiary argument] The solar centre, finding a problem, hands it to the executive. And Geburah does what Geburah is for: it builds a case. The practitioner begins to explain, with fluency and rigour and genuine intelligence, why the shame is unwarranted. He is now four stages above the fault, arguing with a secondary phenomenon, using the last faculty in the chain.

Stage 6. [the attempted descent] And the case must now travel back down to have any effect — and it fails three times over. It fails anatomically, because the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex has no dense direct projection to the alarm, and must relay through structures that address it ten times more loudly than it can answer. It fails temporally, because the alarm completed before consciousness arrived. And it fails, most fundamentally, by aiming at the wrong object: it attacks the explanation, and the explanation is not the fault.

III. Why the Argument Cannot Win Even When It Wins

This is the finding that closes the case, and it is worth stating with some force, because it dissolves a hope the practitioner has been quietly holding for decades — the hope that a sufficiently good argument would one day land.

The daydream is an explanation of a signal. Explanations of this kind are documented to be peculiarly resistant to rational counter-argument, and the reason is not that the sufferer is irrational. It is that the signal being explained is still arriving. Demolish the explanation — win the argument, dismantle the imagined judge, prove beyond dispute that the shame is unwarranted — and the underlying prediction error is still firing at Stage 1, unchanged and unaddressed. And a system that must explain a persisting signal will simply build another explanation.

The practitioner has therefore been engaged in an activity with a guaranteed structure: he wins, and it regenerates; he wins again, and it regenerates again. Every victory is real and every victory is worthless, because he is destroying explanations while the thing being explained continues to happen. One cannot argue away the explanation of a signal that is still being received. The explanation is not the problem. The explanation is the symptom of the problem, and it will be reissued, in a new form, as often as required, for as long as the signal persists.

The formal statement. An explanation regenerates as long as the thing it explains keeps occurring. Therefore no attack upon an explanation can be curative. It can only be repeated — and since each repetition is a retrieval, and brief unsupported retrieval restrengthens what it retrieves, the repetition is not neutral. It is iatrogenic. The practitioner has not merely been failing to solve the problem. He has been rehearsing it, thousands of times, with great skill.

IV. The Upstream Error Principle

The general rule may now be stated, and it holds far beyond the present injury.

The Upstream Error Principle. An error entering a processing hierarchy at stage N propagates into every stage above N. The stages above N are not broken; they are functioning correctly upon corrupted input, and their outputs are therefore faithful products of the error rather than instances of it. It follows that no intervention applied above stage N can be curative, because there is nothing above N to cure. Such an intervention can only manage products — and where the management requires rehearsing the product, it actively strengthens the condition it means to relieve. A curative intervention must act at or below stage N: at the error itself, or at its input.

Two corollaries follow immediately, and both are practical.

The first is that distress is a poor guide to location. The pain is loudest where the products are richest — in consciousness, in the imagined scene, in the argument — and quietest at the fault, which is pre-conscious and silent. The practitioner’s attention is therefore drawn systematically away from the site of the injury and toward its consequences. He has been treating the smoke because the smoke is where the visibility is.

The second is that competence at a downstream stage is a liability. The better one is at Geburah, the more compelling the downstream management becomes, the more time is spent there, and the more thoroughly the underlying error is rehearsed. Skill at the wrong stage does not merely fail to help. It entrenches. This is the precise sense in which the practitioner’s greatest strength has been working against him for decades.

V. Every Intervention, Classified

The principle allows every tool the practitioner has attempted to be located exactly, and the pattern is stark once laid out.

INTERVENTION	ACTS AT	RELATIVE TO FAULT	RESULT
Verbal case against the shame	Geburah · Stage 4	Four stages above	Futile. Attacks a regenerating explanation.

			Rehearses; iatrogenic.
Silencing inner speech	Hod · Stage 4	Above, wrong side	No effect. Supplies no external term to the comparison.
The Observation Principle	Tiphareth · Stage 3	Three stages above	Reaches the daydream, which is content, and can tag it. Cannot touch the fault, which is machinery.
THC (lowering the salience gate)	Stage 3, extending sight downward	Above — and degrades the comparator	Reveals the fault. Cannot repair it: it works by loosening precision, and loosened precision is the injury.
The planted foot	Qoph · Stage 0	AT the fault	Curative. Supplies the comparator with incorruptible external input and runs it.

Every intervention the practitioner devised over three decades acts above the fault. This is not a series of unlucky choices. It is the systematic consequence of the first corollary: the pain is upstairs, so that is where he looked.

VI. The Criterion of a Solution

The principle yields a test that any proposed remedy may be put to before it is attempted, which is worth a great deal to someone who has spent decades attempting remedies.

A proposed intervention is curative if and only if it satisfies three conditions together. First, it must act at or below the stage of the error — not upon the error's products, however vivid or however painful those products are. Second, its channel must lie outside the error's jurisdiction: it must supply the system with something the fault cannot corrupt, since a corrupted instrument cannot measure its own corruption. Third, it must perform the operation the object requires — content is met by observation, machinery is met by load — and no quantity of the wrong class will ever become the right one.

The planted foot satisfies all three, and it is the only thing the practitioner has tried that does. It acts at Stage 0, the path of Qoph itself. Its channel is ground reaction force, which no internal process can counterfeit and which physics rather than the nervous system guarantees. And it performs load rather than observation, which is what a comparator requires in order to run at all. That it works is therefore not a happy accident. It was the only candidate.

VII. The General Method

The foregoing generalises, and this is its chief value to the Corpus, since it is not really about one injury at all.

First: locate the stage of the error. Not where the pain is; not where the symptom is loudest; not where consciousness first encounters the trouble. Locate the earliest point at which something went wrong, and understand that this point will almost certainly be silent, pre-conscious, and undramatic, while its products will be loud.

Second: recognise everything above that point as product. The distress is product. The explanation is product. The narrative, the imagined figures, the arguments and counter-arguments — all product. None of them is the disease and none of them can be cured, because none of them is broken.

Third: find an intervention at or below the error, whose channel the error cannot corrupt, and whose operation matches the object's class.

Fourth: expect the products to subside without being addressed. This is the part that is hardest to trust and easiest to verify. When the fault stops firing, the explanations stop being commissioned. The tribunal does not need to be defeated. It needs only to stop receiving its brief.

VIII. Why the Tradition Was Right About Malkuth

One consequence deserves to be drawn out, because it vindicates something the tradition has always insisted upon without being able to say why.

The grades begin at Malkuth. The Zelator work is done first, and it is done completely, before the paths above it are opened. This has always been presented as a matter of discipline or of humility — the beginner must not reach above his station. But the upstream error principle gives it a structural justification that has nothing to do with humility. Perception ascends from Malkuth. An error at Malkuth, or at the paths immediately above it, propagates into every sphere the practitioner will subsequently attempt to work in — and no work performed in those higher spheres can correct it, because they are not where it lives. A practitioner who ascends the Tree carrying an uncorrected fault at its foot will find that fault reproduced, faithfully, at every level he reaches, and will spend his ascent addressing its products under the impression that he is addressing his soul.

The tradition placed the ground first because the ground is first. That is all. And a practitioner who has spent decades working in Hod and Geburah while the foot was off the floor has, in the most precise sense available, been building upward from a foundation he had never laid.

IX. Grading and Limits

In the Corpus's grading: the ascending direction of the perceptual hierarchy; the upward propagation of prediction error through that hierarchy and the generation of symptoms at the levels above; the corollary-discharge account of source monitoring and the default of untagged signal to external attribution; the account of secondary explanations as top-down constructions imposed upon aberrant salience and imbued with the individual's own themes; the documented resistance of such explanations to rational counter-argument; the ten-to-one amygdalo-cortical projection asymmetry; and the reconsolidation dynamics by which brief unsupported retrieval restrengthens — all Found.

The mapping onto the Tree — perception as the ascent, Qoph as the interface at which the injury sits, Yesod as the organ of secondary explanation, Samech as the cingulate ascent to the solar witness, and Geburah as the seat of the tertiary argument — is this Corpus's synthesis, graded Constructed. The Upstream Error Principle itself is a formalisation of a well-established feature of hierarchical systems, applied here to the Tree; its statement is Constructed, its underlying logic is not in dispute.

One clarification is owed and it is not a small one. The mechanism described here — misattribution of internally generated content, followed by the construction of an explanation — is the mechanism by which delusions are currently understood to form. The practitioner is not deluded, and the difference is exactly the one his own Shared Hinge and the Dividing Line identifies: insight is retained. He knows the figure is not there. The explanation-generating machinery is running, but the belief-fixing machinery is not, and that is the whole distance between the obsessional and the psychotic side of the shared hinge. It is worth knowing that one is running a psychosis-adjacent mechanism with insight intact, both because it is true and because

insight is the thing that makes the ritual possible at all.

The efficacy of the remedy remains one person's report of one person's injury. What is offered here is not a result but a criterion — a way of testing a proposed solution before spending years on it. That, at least, can be inspected by anyone.

Notes on Sources

The upward propagation of aberrant prediction error through the predictive hierarchy, and the generation of distinct symptoms at the levels through which it passes, follow Fletcher and Frith (2009), Adams et al. (2015), and Sterzer et al. (2018). The account of primary misattribution — that internally generated content which fails to be attenuated by corollary discharge acquires such salience that it is inferred to have emanated from another agent — is Kapur's (2003), with the corollary-discharge mechanism following Feinberg (1978) and Frith and Done (1989). The account of secondary explanation — that the resulting construction is a top-down cognitive explanation imposed upon aberrant salience, imbued with the psychodynamic themes of the individual — is likewise Kapur (2003), developed by Corlett et al. (2010) and Fletcher and Frith (2009), who characterise such explanations as Bayes-optimal posteriors that explain away persisting prediction error, and who note their peculiar resistance to rational counter-argument. Kapur's framework has been substantively criticised in its dopaminergic specifics (see the twenty-year review, *Am. J. Psychiatry*, 2024); the structural claim used here — primary misattribution followed by secondary explanation — is not what is contested.

The ten-to-one asymmetry of amygdalo-cortical against cortico-amygdalar projection is LeDoux (1996). The absence of dense direct DLPFC-amygdala projection, and the relay of frontal regulation through the anterior cingulate and the ventral axis, are established in this Corpus's *The Structure of the Human Soul and The Ventral Axis*. The reconsolidation dynamics of retrieval are developed in *The Repair of Memory*. The injury itself, the collapse of Qoph and Tzaddi at Netzach, the content-versus-machinery distinction, and the ritual that acts at Stage 0 are set out in *The Planted Foot*; the coping loop and its refusal are treated in *The Tribunal of No One*. The insight-retention criterion distinguishing the obsessional from the psychotic presentation is developed in *The Shared Hinge and the Dividing Line*.

This paper is a work of theoretical synthesis in philosophical theology and its neurological correspondence. It is not clinical guidance, not a diagnosis, and not a substitute for professional care.