

Malkhut and the Mind

Kabbalistic Levels, Projection and the Dissolution of the Mind–Body Problem

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ABSTRACT The Kabbalistic tradition describes reality as a descent of levels from the infinite, *Ein Sof*, through ten *sefirot* to *Malkhut*, the manifest world, and describes the soul as a ladder whose ascent is a departure from Malkhut. This paper reads that map through projection realism, the thesis that the world of experience is the projection of a state with more components than space and time, and through the related thesis that consciousness belongs to the components the projection discards. So read, Malkhut corresponds to the phenomenon and the worlds above it to the noumenon. I argue that the reading dissolves, rather than solves, the interaction problem that Elisabeth of Bohemia put to Descartes in 1643: mind and body are not two substances that must act on one another but one reality presented in two ways, as the two correlated particles of an entangled pair are one state observed through two windows. The position is close to Spinoza's, and the projection account supplies what Spinoza's lacks, a reason why one aspect is visible and the other is not. I close with a speculative consequence, anticipated in Lurianic teaching, that one consciousness may be projected into the three-dimensional world in more than one form, and with the limits of the reading.

KEYWORDS Kabbalah; sefirot; Malkhut; tzimtzum; levels of the soul; Descartes; Elisabeth of Bohemia; interaction problem; Spinoza; dual-aspect monism; projection

I. INTRODUCTION

Philosophers have usually approached Kabbalah, if at all, as a chapter in the history of religion. The approach is proper; the tradition is religious, and its meaning for those who composed and lived it is the business of the historian (Scholem 1941; Scholem 1974). The present paper has a different and more limited aim. It treats the Kabbalistic scheme of levels as a *map*, that is, as a structured description of the relation between a world that is manifest and a reality that is not, and it asks what the map says when laid over a contemporary philosophical account of the same relation. I shall argue that the two agree in structure, and that their agreement bears on the oldest problem in modern philosophy of mind.

Section 2 summarises the account of projection on which the argument depends. Section 3 presents the Kabbalistic map. Section 4 reads Malkhut as the phenomenon. Section 5 turns to the levels of the soul. Section 6 states Descartes' problem, and Section 7 dissolves it. Section 8 compares the result with Spinoza and with Bohm. Section 9 draws a speculative consequence, and Section 10 states the limits of the reading.

2. PROJECTION AND CONSCIOUSNESS

Projection realism holds that observed states are projections of states with more independent components than the four of space and time, and that the projection discards information. It

is motivated by cases in which a paradox dissolves when the space of description is enlarged: the “imaginary” roots of a real quadratic, which are real points of a plane; the velocity of a body, invisible in any instant; and the correlations of an entangled pair, which no account in terms of two separately equipped particles can reproduce (Bell 1964) and which are naturally read as one state seen through two windows.

A companion thesis concerns the mind: consciousness belongs to the components that the projection into three-dimensional space discards. It is therefore not to be found among objects in space, where we find only its correlates; it is perceived in others only as intention; and brain and mind are one reality presented in two ways (Chalmers 1995; Brentano 1874; Bohm 1980). In the terms of Kant’s distinction, reinterpreted, the three-dimensional world is the phenomenon and consciousness belongs to the noumenon (Kant 1781/1787).

3. THE KABBALISTIC MAP

The scheme of ten *sefirot* appears first in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, a short and ancient text of disputed date (Kaplan 1990), and receives its classical elaboration in the *Zohar*, composed in Castile in the late thirteenth century (Matt 2004; Scholem 1941). Above all things is *Ein Sof*, “without end”, the infinite of which nothing can be predicated. From it proceed the ten sefirot: Keter (crown), Chokhmah (wisdom), Binah (understanding), Chesed (loving kindness), Gevurah (strength), Tiferet (beauty), Netzach (endurance), Hod (splendour), Yesod (foundation) and Malkhut (kingdom).

A second scheme, systematised in later Kabbalah, arranges reality in four worlds: Atzilut (emanation), Beriah (creation), Yetzirah (formation) and Assiah (action), the last of which contains the physical world. Each world is an image of the one above it, more determinate and more divided. In sixteenth-century Safed, Isaac Luria added the doctrine of *tzimtzum*: that for finite worlds to exist at all, the infinite contracted, withdrawing so as to leave a space in which limited things could appear (Vital, *Etz Chaim*; Fine 2003). Luria’s further doctrines, of the breaking of the vessels, of the sparks scattered in the lower worlds and of their restoration, *tikkun*, will concern us in Section 9.

4. MALKHUT AS PHENOMENON

Malkhut is the sefirah of manifestation. The tradition characterises it as receptive: it has nothing of its own and receives from all the sefirot above it, and it is in Malkhut that what is above becomes actual and visible. The world of Assiah is similarly the most constrained of the four, the world of bodies and actions.

Laid over projection realism, the correspondence is close. The three-dimensional world of experience is, on that account, the image of a state with more components, and has nothing that is not the projection of something in the larger space. It “receives” everything and originates nothing. Luria’s *tzimtzum* has the structure of the projection itself: the finite world exists because most of reality is withheld from it. Malkhut, in short, is the phenomenon; the worlds and sefirot above it are the noumenon. I do not claim that the Kabbalists meant this. I claim that their map and the projection account describe the same structure: a manifest level at the bottom, wholly dependent on levels it cannot perceive.

5. THE LEVELS OF THE SOUL AND THE ASCENT

An early midrash gives the soul five names: *nefesh*, *ruach*, *neshamah*, *chayah* and *yechidah* (*Genesis Rabbah* 14:9). Kabbalistic literature develops them into a ladder, from the vital soul bound to the body to the single soul nearest the source, and describes contemplative practice as an ascent through them. The ascent is described as a departure: consciousness turns away from Malkhut, where it is bound to the manifest, towards the worlds above, where it is nearer to what it is.

On the noumenal thesis this is what one should expect. Consciousness belongs to the higher levels; in Malkhut it appears only partially, as the life of the body, as feeling, and as the intentions by which persons recognise one another. The tradition's word for the directed attention of prayer is *kavanah*, intention. It is a notable coincidence of vocabulary that intention should be both the form in which consciousness is visible in the projection and the practice by which it is said to rise out of it.

6. DESCARTES' PROBLEM

In the *Meditations* Descartes argued that the mind is a thinking and unextended thing and the body an extended and unthinking one (Descartes 1641). In May 1643 Elisabeth of Bohemia put to him the question that has accompanied the view ever since: since the soul is not extended and the body is moved only by contact, how can the soul of a human being, being only a thinking substance, determine the bodily spirits to perform voluntary actions (Shapiro 2007)? Descartes' replies did not satisfy her. In *The Passions of the Soul* he located the site of interaction in the pineal gland (Descartes 1649), which relocated the problem without resolving it.

The subsequent history of the problem is familiar. Occasionalism denied that mind and body act on each other at all; Leibniz's pre-established harmony made their agreement a matter of coordination; materialism denied that the mind is a second thing; and property dualism reintroduced the difficulty at the level of properties. Each position either keeps two things and cannot connect them, or keeps one and cannot find the mind in it.

7. A DISSOLUTION

The projection account suggests that the problem has been posed in too few dimensions. Consider again the entangled pair. Seen in space, two particles in two places exhibit perfectly correlated outcomes without any signal between them, and the natural question is how one acts on the other. The question has no good answer because it has a false presupposition: that there are two things. There is one state, projected twice.

Mind and body stand in the same relation. The question of how the mind moves the body presupposes that there are two things between which something must pass. On the account defended here there is one reality, which in the projection into three dimensions is presented as a body and which is known from within as a mind. Nothing passes between them, because they are not two. The pineal gland was a search for the wire between two screens; in Bohm's image of the fish filmed by two cameras, there is no wire, because there is one fish (Bohm 1980).

The positive conclusion can be stated plainly. *We are mind*, and the body is the form in which mind appears in a limited, three-dimensional, projected world. Descartes was right that the mind

is not extended and wrong to conclude that it is a second substance beside the body; it is the reality of which the body is the extended appearance.

8. SPINOZA AND BOHM

The closest historical precedent is Spinoza. In the *Ethics* there is one substance, of which thought and extension are attributes; the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things, and mind and body are one and the same thing, conceived now under the attribute of thought and now under the attribute of extension (Spinoza 1677). The present account agrees, and adds something Spinoza does not supply: a reason why, of the two aspects, one is presented to perception and the other is not. Extension is what the projection shows; thought is what it discards.

Bohm's implicate order is a second precedent (Bohm 1980). Bohm held that the explicate world of separate objects in space is an unfolding of a higher-dimensional order in which they are not separate, and suggested that consciousness belongs to the implicate order. The present account generalises the structure beyond quantum physics and connects it with the Kabbalistic map, which describes the same relation between an unfolded, manifest level and the levels from which it unfolds.

9. ONE CONSCIOUSNESS, MORE THAN ONE FORM

If an entangled state is one thing presented in the three-dimensional world as two, nothing in the projection account confines this possibility to particles. If consciousness belongs to the noumenal components, then what appears in the projection as one person need not be its only presentation: one consciousness could be projected into the world in more than one form, and, seen from within the projection, the forms would appear as separate beings in unaccountable accord.

Lurianic Kabbalah contains a doctrine of this shape. All human souls derive from a single primordial soul, which was broken, and whose sparks, *nitzotzot*, are scattered through the lower worlds; the task of each life is to gather and restore its sparks (Vital, *Etz Chaim*; Scholem 1941). Read as a map, the doctrine says that the many persons of Malkhut are projections of fewer, or of one, in the worlds above. I present this not as a result but as what the account permits and what a careful tradition had already described. Its evaluation would require an account of personal identity that this paper does not attempt.

10. LIMITS OF THE READING

Three limits should be stated. First, the reading is philosophical, not historical. The sefirot are not coordinates and the four worlds are not dimensions in the physicist's sense, and nothing in this paper is a claim about what the Kabbalists intended (Scholem 1974). The claim is structural: that the map and the projection account describe the same relation between a manifest level and levels it cannot perceive.

Second, the dissolution of Descartes' problem is conditional on the noumenal thesis, which

is a philosophical hypothesis supported by the shape of the evidence and not demonstrated by it. If consciousness is a pattern within the three-dimensional projection, the dissolution fails, and the older options return.

Third, the appeal to entanglement concerns structure only. Entanglement does not transmit signals, and nothing in the argument implies that thoughts or persons can be transmitted by it. What it provides is an established case in which what appears as two correlated things is one thing seen twice. That structure is all the argument requires.

II. CONCLUSION

The Kabbalistic map places the manifest world at the bottom of a descent of levels and describes the ascent of consciousness as a departure from it. Projection realism places the three-dimensional world at the bottom of a projection and locates consciousness in what the projection discards. Laid one over the other, the two describe the same structure, and together they suggest that the mind-body problem has been posed in too few dimensions. We are not minds attached to bodies. We are minds, presented in three dimensions as bodies, in a world that, like Malkhut, receives all it has from what it cannot see.

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