

TWO RESPONSES TO A MOMENT IN THE QUESTION OF TRANSCENDENCE:
A STUDY OF FIRST BOUNDARIES IN PLOTINEAN AND KABBALISTIC
COSMOGONICAL METAPHYSICS

A Thesis

by

CHARLES EUGENE DEBORD

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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Major Subject: Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

Two Responses to a Moment in the Question of Transcendence: A Study of First Boundaries in Plotinean and Kabbalistic Cosmogonical Metaphysics. (May 2004)

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This thesis contrasts the Plotinean attitude towards transcendence at the cosmological level with that of certain Kabbalistic authors of the 13th-17th century. Special emphasis is placed on the different approaches taken by each of the two sides to addressing the origin of otherness. Following a brief introduction to the notion of the question of transcendence, the first major part (chapter II) is dedicated to an exploration of the Plotinean conception of metaphysical “descent” from the One to subsequent hypostases. The second major part (chapter III) focuses on Kabbalistic conceptions of the descent from the indefinite infinite to the finite (limited) realm. Finally, I attempt to illustrate the questions and concerns common to each of the two cosmologies. In so doing, I make use of semiotic concepts to clarify the contrast between the two models.

To Mom.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: A CRISIS OF TRANSCENDENCE

That which is, is other. This is to say that to *be* is to be *something*. The implications of this notion are unrivaled in their scientific essentiality, for out of this foundation rise latent dichotomies definitive of worlds natural and supernatural. In difference is language born, and out of otherness rises form. Rational forming principles involve notions of the different, as definition is conceived through exclusion. As the essential factors involved are compounded or reduced, the notion of the other evinces itself on a variety of fields and in a panoply of moments, each differentiated according to the context of its position.

Of these moments of otherness, perhaps the most fundamentally recognizable is that divide separating “is” from “is not.” This moment has variously been defined in terms of Same and Different, Being and Nonbeing, Presence and Absence. Is/Is-not provides the scaffold for the traditional architectures of Time and Eternity, Space and Singularity, Individual and Community, and Self and Not-Self, to name a few.¹ For itself this distinction is understood linguistically, and language is supposed as a cornerstone even for this critical diremption of that which *is* from that which *is not*. Ironically, however, language is itself a one-sided enterprise, for even the forms binding Is and Is-not may be unwritten in silent mystery. In its nascent formation, *writing* is a

This thesis follows the style and format of *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

scratching, a *tearing*, but just as much is written when eyelids are torn open, much is *mysterious* when they are shut.

Let us cleave to language for the present, and in so doing, let us isolate a moment of otherness on the cosmological level in the guise of an old form and its complement: on one side we are confronted with the form for *perfection*, that is, that which lacks nothing but is complete and total in its presentation of the idea. Opposing perfection is, quite logically, imperfection. Frequently throughout the history of philosophy has the story been told that the perfect is *prior* to the imperfect in some sense, be it logical, ontological, or chronological. The imperfect is *derived* somehow from the perfect.

We have, then, an axiom which details the priority of perfections. Very reasonably, such an articulation of the dialectic of perfection and imperfection frequently entails the corollary notion that the perfect is *unified* in a manner in which the imperfect is not. This secondary notion becomes evident on consideration of the relation of priority: if the imperfect comes after the perfect, and if the imperfect is derived from the perfect, entities are multiplied in the genesis of imperfection. *First*, there is one – i.e. that which is perfect, and *then* there are two – perfect and imperfect. From this it may be seen to follow that that which is utterly perfect is also utterly unified and therefore also first (i.e., there could be nothing that precedes that which contains/embodyes every perfection).

There is at this point a split in the tradition of the description of prime perfection. Under one model for conceptualization, the perfect One, embodying all perfections, must embody the perfection of Form. As such, it is perfectly formed according to some

singular cosmic *logos*. Another way of arriving at the conclusion that the One is formed is to note that, since the One *is*, and since *to be* entails otherness and therefore limit, the One must be defined by some rational principle. This model will be reintroduced and specified later, but let it presently be termed the “finitist” view.

Another conceptualization for prime perfection also begins with the notion of the One as the embodiment of all perfections. However, whereas on the finitist view the perfection in focus was that of Form, here central concern shifts to the perfection of unity. Thus the argument proceeds: the One is the embodiment of all perfections. This entails that the One embodies the perfection of unity. Consider, though, that to posit a finite (formed) nature of the One is to limit the One and so to distinguish it: in saying the One *is* according to *this* way, we imply that the One *is not* according to *that* way. As was seen above, to form is to exclude, to distinguish, and so to imply a multiplicity in the notion of a thing considered for itself. As such, this alternative model for conceptualization of the notion of prime perfection tends to speak of the One as “limitless” and “infinite.” For now, I will call this model the “infinist” view.² It is with this latter view with which I will primarily concern myself here.

The infinite is unified; the finite is multiplied. In formation, a thing is limited, and this limitation entails the absence of some *other* thing. Difference/diversity imply a variety of *logoi*, and in this implication the relation of limitation is compounded. Precision of form is directly proportional to the magnitude of the manifestation of otherness. Above, Being was seen to be identifiable with Other. Said another way, to be is to be diverse. Multiplicity is therefore a prerequisite for existence, and ontological

distinction (particularization) opposes universality just insofar as the one is differentiated more exactly than the other: light is such that it is just light *and not* darkness; *sunlight* is such that it is just *sunlight and not* darkness *and not* firelight *and not* bioluminescence etc. Ultimate unity, however, is amenable to no such definition and so comes not under the governance of the logic of Being, and we may say that absolute infinity (i.e. *qua* prime perfection) transcends existence as we understand it.

The Boundary

There is thus a boundary dividing (on the infinitist view, anyway) the indefinite infinite from limited finitude. This boundary is a chasm: on one side stands those things amenable to linguistic forms (i.e. those things structured by rational principles) and on the other rests boundless perfection. In one sense, then, it is false even to conceive of the infinite (i.e. the unlimited) as infinite *for another*; true infinity would subsume all otherness in its own complete notion. In *this* sense, however, infinity is mistakenly supposed to participate in Being in the same sense as does the finite. It is entirely meaningful to remark that if the present, rational side of the chasm *is*, then the irrational infinite *is not*.

Axiomatic for the discussion, however, is the relation of the *priority* of perfect to imperfect. As such, the question of transcendence presents itself on the cosmological level: how does the perfect *get to* the imperfect? Said another way, how does that which transcends Being itself produce Being? What constitutes the path across the chasm dividing One from Other? This question requires a clear definition of the boundary

separating the two sides from one another, for the limit must be realized before it can be overcome.

The domain of language operates between utter particularity and unqualified universality; lexical forms fail at both ends of the scientific spectrum in question.³ As such, the crisis of transcendence is a crisis of communication and a crisis of *society*. Understood thus, it becomes evident that the moment of transcendence, manifested as it may be on whatever field, constitutes the inception of *dialectic logic*, i.e. of dialogue. At any point of pluralization, the immanent must affix itself to itself via some syntactical relation. The moment of transcendence is the foundation of syntax, whether that syntax operates for the logic of metacosmic ontology, of selfhood, or of the individual's relation to and within the community. An understanding of this moment is therefore critical for comprehension of both sides together.

This essay will be an analysis of two approaches to the crisis of transcendence. It will be instructive to view each relative to its attitude to the moment of communication. First I will take up the metaphysics of Plotinus in an examination of his cosmogony relating *nous* to the One. We will see that for Plotinus, the moment of communication is described as an act: communication (for him, the overflow of the One) is worked out as a predicate of the One and of Intellect. By a two-way path the One socializes with its progeny. The One *proceeds* as Intellect *returns* in an eternal dialectic. These acts constitute the means by which immanence and transcendence are related.

Second, I will examine some cosmological principles of what I will herein term "classical" Kabbalah, i.e. speculation belonging to certain Kabbalists of the thirteenth

through seventeenth centuries. Under the emergent general metaphysical system of these sages, the moment of communication is conceived as *subject* rather than as predicate. They posit an entity known as *keter*, the supreme crown of infinite God, as that which links God in his determinate aspects with His limitlessness. This entity, hypostatic in its conception, is nevertheless always already two-dimensional, with one side of its activity directed toward the infinite as the other directs itself toward the finite.

After having examined each approach to the crisis of transcendence, I will reflect briefly on the yield of each conception: how do the respective ideas of *mediating* and *mediator* impact understanding of the moment of communication? Prime syntax may be seen both as substance and outworking, just as the sign-signified relation presumes both content and form. I will thus attempt, without providing anything like a comprehensive linguistic philosophy, to view the two *metaphysical* solutions in something of a lexical context, a method which will, I believe, clarify both question and answer.

CHAPTER II

THE TWO-WAY PATH

What is the horizon which he will mount above when he appears? He will be above Intellect itself which contemplates him.⁴

Plotinus offers a metaphysical story in which the One, an *arche* of formless infinity, gives birth to Intellect (*nous*), which is itself Being, formed and bound. Here we are presented with a question of transcendence, and this question begets a crisis: how do we get from the one to the other (for this indeed amounts to getting from the One to the “other”)? Upon reflection, we recognize the gulf that separates the two, seemingly irrevocably. As soon as difference is present in its determinacy, unity is fractured beyond repair. Literally, the one cannot be the other. Any attempt for reconciliation annihilates the content of both sides in its entailment of the sublation of otherness.

So in what way does either side reach across the present chasm? How is it possible to relate Intellect to the One? In the present exercise I mean to show that the boundary separating infinite from finite is well-considered in Plotinus, and out of his speculation thereupon coalesces an act which accounts for form and otherness, for logic and existence. I will consider *logos* in Plotinus, but only insofar as it relates to *nous* and to the One. Similarly, this work may be described as a contemplation of contemplation, but only in the sense of the primal glance cast by *nous* toward its father. I offer no critical treatment of the lower hypostases here, for although they are instrumental in filling out the Plotinian picture of the finite realm, they are in an important sense contained in their progenitor, i.e. in Intellect. While unqualified (infinite) multiplicity evinces itself *finally* in unformed *hyle*, in *nous* are finitude and multiplicity first realized.

As such, an understanding of this primary moment of transcendence will provide a scaffold on which an understanding of the transcendental transition between subsequent *hypostases* and other beings may be constructed.

The history of these concepts obviously reaches further back than Plotinus: the problem of the One and the Many is arguably the oldest in the history of Western thought. I begin with a brief analysis of the founding of relevant notions, and this exploration must conceal certain lights if it is to reveal others in relief. In thus grounding the concepts to be discussed, I hope that I may later clarify more lucidly the dialectical tension present in the Plotinian account of the genesis of the intelligible realm. Finally, I mean to resolve this tension by embracing it in a critical description of the emergent two-sided act of creation.

Foundation

In the nascent primacy of Pre-Socratic speculation, Hellenic philosophy seems already to have advanced a concept of utmost perfection. Although others had anticipated aspects of this notion, it was Parmenides who perhaps most fully initialized an articulation of the way of Being. That which transcends mortal opinion was said by the goddess to be “whole and of a single kind and unshaken and perfect.”⁵ He expounds further on the nature of what is: “For you will not find thinking without what is,” and again, “being equal to itself on every side, it lies uniformly within its limits.”⁶ Parmenides offers a picture of perfect Being as an eternal, static sphere, unchanging.

When we consider the above quotes (and others like them from Fragment 8), the notion is enlivened more fully. “Whole” says that Being is not composed of parts – there is no otherness within Being, for Parmenides. “Of a single kind” seems to endorse some sort of monism (at least with respect to the way of “is”). “Unshaken” is a curiously selected modifier; it seems to connote the static nature of Parmenidean Being. In noting that “you will not find thinking without what is,” Parmenides declares that intellection is not (does not exist) outside of Being – Being is a necessary condition for Intellect.⁷

Finally, the declaration that Being is “equal to itself on every side” and “lies uniformly within its limits” is perhaps most important for the present analysis. What is it for Being to have a “side?” In speaking of Being as a sphere,⁸ Parmenides (metaphorically or otherwise) invokes the concept of surface and consequently of boundary. There are “limits” to Being; that is, Being is *defined*. It is not necessary to explore the riddle of Parmenides’ metaphor further here. Relevant to the present discussion is the fact that the notion of ultimate perfection in Hellenic philosophy (here expressed in the words of he who is perhaps its prime founder) is a notion embracing *form*. Being is formed, and its form involves “thinking” and static perfection.⁹

Plotinus inherits the notion of Being from his Hellenic predecessors, and he incorporates it in his idea of *nous*. For Plotinus, Intellect is indeed formed, and thus does it comprise the Forms. R. T. Wallis declares that Plotinean *nous* “appears as the apotheosis of traditional Greek ideas of perfection.”¹⁰ In *nous* are limit, thought, and Being introduced, and all that is is an outpouring of Intellect. A speculative thorn,

however, seems to have prevented Plotinus from affirming *nous* as the highest ideal of perfection.

Throughout his metaphysics, Plotinus operates under the unargued-for assumption that unity is somehow logically (and therefore cosmologically) *prior* to multiplicity – i.e. that unity is in some sense more perfect than multiplicity. Thought entails multiplicity, as is evident in the generation of a progression of ideas by a thinker. There exists more than one Form: Intellect has many (finitely many, but many nonetheless) facets. Plotinus believes this multiplicity to have flowed from some prior unity, one which precedes thought, number, limit, and Being.¹¹ Wallis notes that “the very fact that Intelligence [*nous*] has limits [disqualifies] its claim to be the highest reality.”¹² Form and limit entail difference, and difference entails multiplicity.¹³ Plotinus regards these things as less perfect than ultimate unity, formless and undifferentiated.

Plotinus organizes reality as a hierarchy of Beings descending from the intelligible realm into the sensible.¹⁴ At the top of this chain is *nous*, but above (this preposition will have to suffice at present) Intellect there is One. I will say “*the One*,” because although the presence of the definite article connotes isolation from surrounding existents and in so doing implicitly limits its object of articulation, there seems nevertheless to be an important sense in which *the One* is *not* Intellect. How precisely this differentiation manifests itself will be discussed below. J. M. Rist holds that the One is so called “because it is exactly what it is, an entirely indivisible unity.”¹⁵ Though this comment is in the right spirit, it may be misleading: the point is not that the One

participates in the Form “one” or “unity,” but that the One is prior to Being and as such *is not* amenable to division or multiplicity. In its simplicity, the One transcends such conceptions of whole and part: it is not the kind of *thing* to which those Forms refer (or, more Platonically, which refers to those Forms).

Aristotle posited Intellect as eternal and primary; Plato conceives of Being as the progenitor of the Idea. As is often the case in Plotinus’ metaphysics, he accepts some of each and modifies the rest.¹⁶ The prime *arche* of Plotinus is eternal and also infinite, but as noted above, thought implies multiplicity and cannot therefore be the One.¹⁷ In holding to (his own interpretation of) Parmenides’ statement that “thinking and being are the same,” Plotinus rejects Being as primary, but sets Being and Intellect together as *nous*. As such, he sets out his hierarchy: *nous* comes from the One, and *psyche* in turn comes from *nous*.¹⁸

Plotinus offers a positive definition for the One:

What is it [One], then? The productive power of all things; if it did not exist, neither would all things, nor would Intellect be the first and universal life.¹⁹

Armstrong stresses that “productive power” (*dynamis*) not be interpreted as Aristotelian potentiality, e.g. some divine *hyle* as yet unlimited, waiting on the Forms of Intellect for activation.²⁰ “Power” is eternal act, always already proceeding and returning as limitless source.²¹ Plotinus here declares that Intellect depends on the One for its existence and life. Though the One transcends all things,²² all things depend on the One. What, though, is the essence of this *dynamis*? Plotinus scorns such questions, declaring their structure to be misbegotten.

[I]t would be absurd to seek to comprehend that boundless nature; for anyone who wants to do this has put himself out of the way of following at all, even the least distance, in its traces; but just as he who wishes to see the intelligible nature will contemplate what is beyond the perceptible if he has no mental image of the perceptible, so he who wishes to contemplate what is beyond the intelligible will contemplate it when he has let all the intelligible go; *he will learn that it is by means of the intelligible, but what it is like by letting the intelligible go.*²³

What is to be made of the precaution against seeking to “comprehend that boundless nature?” When one *comprehends*, one *grasps* a thing *completely*. But the One is amenable neither to grasping nor to being complete; both such predicates imply form and limit. Above I lit flares against such conceptualization, just because the Plotinian One is not the kind of thing that can be isolated, taken as a *this* apart from *others*. To do so, Plotinus instructs, is to lose even any trace of that which is desired. The intelligible (Intellect) attests to the presence of the One, but learning what the One is like cannot be a function of Intellect. Intellect discerns, and the One is not like those things which are discernible.

As is frequently the case in the *Enneads*, Plotinus realizes that his syntax for description is crumbling beneath him, and he attempts apologetically to outrace his language:

But this “what it is like” must indicate that it is “not like:” for there is no “being like” in what is not a “something.” But we in our travail do not know what we ought to say, and are speaking of what cannot be spoken, and give it a name because we want to indicate it to ourselves as best we can.²⁴

Analogy and (by implication) predication, Plotinus contends, fall short at the feet of the One. In the last sentence, he notes that we seem dumbly to point at the One, declaring

the One “to ourselves as best we can.” Plotinus self-consciously proceeds linguistically in his evaluation of the One, for what other analytical tools could he possess?

For his part, Gerson maintains that in denying predication of the One, Plotinus is merely denying any predication that would “imply composition,” i.e. that of essence and existence. He notes that, for example, the One could have no accidental attributes such that accidents are “distinct from their subject,” nor essential attributes, if that which is “essential” is taken in any sense to be apart from that which exists.²⁵ The One, then, would be the absolute unity of essence with existence, a distinction which only arises with Intellect’s in-forming of Being.

Notwithstanding Gerson’s anachronistic use of the essence/existence distinction (an anachronism which he explicitly acknowledges and then chooses to disregard), his position seems correct, if somewhat misleadingly redundant. Predication seems *necessarily* to imply otherness at least: if predicates did nothing more than state identity relations, they would be names, not predicates. Otherness is a clear prerequisite to composition. In the same way, the words “accidental” and “essential” seem to presuppose some composition within an existing thing;²⁶ indeed, attribution itself connotes composition. The One, of course, is said by Plotinus to transcend composition. Predication and attribution, therefore, seem necessarily to entail composition. As such, Gerson’s qualification does not seem to subtract any crucial points from Plotinus’ original statement of the One’s transcendence of predication, but neither does it add much of anything contentious.

Plotinus distinguishes his hypostases in terms of having and wanting. *Psyche* has and wants; *nous* has but does not want; the One neither has nor wants.²⁷ In its perfection, the One lacks nothing. For Plotinus, thought entails Being, and the One transcends thought; therefore it cannot be said to *have* any *thing*. If it did, it would not be unified, for in *having something*, the One would be two: itself, and that which it had.²⁸ Possession and desire are functions of difference, and the One, for Plotinus, is prior to difference. This kind of logic is qualified, though; Plotinus asserts that the One “is not like something senseless; all things belong to it and are in it and with it.”²⁹ The One itself, however, is not possessed of thing-hood. The passage goes on to accord a kind of “life” and “self-consciousness” to the One, noting that it exists in a kind of “everlasting rest.” These kinds of statements seem only to be sensible metaphorically, given that a literal reading would contradict the body of the Plotinian doctrine of the One.

Genesis

The hierarchy is thus established: the One exists prior to Intellect, and Intellect is in some sense caused by the One. This is to say that the limitless and perfect simple unity which transcends all form, boundary, and being somehow gives birth to that which is the beginning of these. To state that the connection linking these two hypostases is not immediately evident would indeed be to state (to understate) the obvious. One critical cosmological aspect of the question of transcendence is here presented: how does

the infinite generate that which is finite? How are limit and logic primordially introduced to and bound up with being?

Though this issue must be addressed, there is a prior concern of no small significance. Before it is asked *how* the One produces Intellect, let us ask *why* it is that the One should produce Intellect, or anything else for that matter. We saw above that the One is perfect. That which is perfect should lack nothing. Plotinus is so far in total agreement. Lacking nothing, though, why should the One produce? It seems to us that that which is perfect is also *complete* (lacking nothing), and in its totality it would have no *reason* to generate anything else.

We may begin approaching this question in a fashion ignored by Plotinus, i.e. by questioning the grounds on which it is posed. The question seeks a *reason* for the production of an other; in something of a Leibnizian way it asks for a principle of sufficient reason explaining why the cosmos acts as it does, cosmogonically speaking. Recall, however, that Plotinus does not endorse such a logical strategy in giving his account of the One. The One is, for Plotinus, not a thing on which logic, language, or limit has a hold. If this approach compromises intelligibility, so be it.³⁰ The One transcends any rational principle,³¹ and in so doing transcends the sense of the question, “why *should* the One produce?”

This answer is partially unsatisfying, though, because the question of *should* can be approached from the other side with results less clean. The query may be phrased, “why should any perfect thing produce?” This question gets closer to the point of inquiry, for the real concern is not with the inner life of the super-rational One, but rather

with the notion that an entity termed “perfect” should seem to engage in the work of production at all. As we know the world, something endeavors to *produce* because there is some other thing that it *lacks*. But the One is such that it is not amenable to notions of otherness or lack (or indeed of endeavor, which implies potency).

Plotinus clarifies. When it is said that the One “produces,” this is not intended to convey the sense that the One works out its potentiality toward some end, as a baker producing bread. Instead, the One generates intellect as a spring overflows onto the ground.³² Plotinus founds his account of the genesis of the finite from the infinite on the organic principle that perfect things overflow, and in overflowing, they produce. “Now when anything else comes to perfection,” he explains, “we see that it produces, and does not endure to remain by itself but makes something else”³³ Such “perfect” things in the sensible world mimic the perfection of the One. Thus Plotinus, as he does frequently in his treatment, approaches the question from the bottom up: we know that all existing things, up to and including intelligible *nous*, are produced by that which is simply perfect in its limitless infinity. Knowing this, how could we suppose that the One would somehow lack the power to generate these things?³⁴ The One *cannot but* overflow.

Deck introduces a qualification that is I think helpful at this point. “The One, being perfect,” he notes, “overflows *as it were*.”³⁵ This *as it were* marks what Deck believes to be Plotinus’ metaphorical attitude toward the One’s generativity. The One may be said to overflow, but only if by “overflow” no corollary assumption is introduced such that all overflowing things must, in their overflowing, reduce themselves. The One’s perfection is eternal, never lacking. In generating Intellect, the One is

“unaffected.” Deck remarks that “the One produces all things by having no need of them.”³⁶ This statement can, I think, be explained as such: insofar as the One subsists beyond (prior to) the necessity of Being, it is the producer of all things possessed of Being and therefore of Being itself.

If “why” is answered well enough by stating that perfect things overflow by nature and the One is a perfect thing, we are left with the first question, that of “how.” What is the semantic significance of “produces?” In answering this, Plotinus, like many speculative accounts of the genesis of the intelligible from the infinite, resorts to analogy. In so doing, he warns against the literal interpretation of time-language. “we must not let coming into being in time be an obstacle to our thought,” he exhorts.³⁷

Furthermore, we must not suppose that the One changes in its production:

[W]hat comes into being from the One does so without the One being moved: for if anything came into being as a result of the One’s being moved, it would be the third starting from the One, not the second, since it would come after the movement.³⁸

Consider the stream of this logic: the One is first; this premise we know prior to any further speculation. A second premise is that *nous* follows immediately from the One. The hypothesis here is that there is no movement in the One’s generation of Intellect. Now suppose that this were not true; i.e., that there were some change or movement in the One. If this were to be so, Plotinus reasons, Movement would itself come into existence prior to whatever it was that was supposed to be second to the One – in our case, *nous*. Intellect, then, could not be the second. Having arrived at an implicit contradiction, Plotinus is able to affirm his conclusion that the One is not moved in its creation of Intellect. This argument is an absolutely critical element in Plotinian

cosmogony, and it hinges on the second premise – that *nous* follows *immediately* from the One. For the truth of this premise, Plotinus seems to provide no noncircular argument.

Below, the semantic problems brought about by his attempt to maintain this immediacy will become evident. The content of the eternal act of emanation from the One seems itself to interrupt the ontological continuity posited by Plotinus. Even as he speaks against movement as a prerequisite for the Being that is Intellect, his cosmogony seems to require this very provision. In describing the acts of *prohodos* and *epistrophē* (i.e. the proceeding of the One for itself and returning of this procession for Intellect), Plotinus may be seen to be attempting an identification of that which is no longer the inner life of the One in itself, but is not yet *nous* conceived in and for itself. The proceeding-and-returning seems to provide the link between finitude and infinity.³⁹

Plotinus turns finally to the analogy of what has been labeled “emanation.” His story:

How did it come to be then, and what are we to think of as surrounding the One in its repose? It must be a radiation from it while it remains unchanged, like the bright light of the sun which, so to speak, runs round it, springing from it continually while it remains unchanged. All things which exist, as long as they remain in being, necessarily produce from their own substances, in dependence on their present power, a surrounding reality directed to what is outside them, a kind of image of the archetypes from which it was produced: fire produces the heat which comes from it; snow does not only keep its cold inside itself.⁴⁰

In a vivid participial depiction, the genesis of Intellect is said to be “surrounding the One in its repose.” The obvious allusion is to sunlight, flowing outward and surrounding an unmoved and undiminished (or so the ancients supposed) unity.⁴¹ Plotinus must tread very lightly here; he is in danger of ascribing multiplicity to the One. Granting him (for

the present) the figurative equivocation he seeks here, we note that he distinguishes between *energeia tēs ousias* (primary act) and *energeia ek tēs ousias* (secondary act). These two acts are present (figuratively, Plotinus must maintain) in the One: the former constitutes the One in itself, a notion devoid of relation. This act is comprised of the eternal residence of the One in its perfect simplicity. The latter act is the One for Intellect and for itself, the overflowing act of the One from which *nous* emerges in and for itself.⁴²

We note this division, Plotinus says, in the sensible realm: there is the fire in itself (the *energeia tēs ousias*), and there is the warmth given off by the fire (the *energeia ek tēs ousias*). The heat of fire is “different from the thing itself,” i.e. the flames of fire.⁴³ Ultimately the two collapse back onto one another, and fire-as-totality is rendered only in the flames *together with* the warmth, or snow *together with* the cold. Strictly speaking, then, I am not warmed by the primary act of fire; I am warmed by the secondary – the flames do not warm me; the heat of the flames warms me. Similarly, the One in itself (*qua* primary act) does not differentiate or relate; differentiation and relation are born of the secondary act of the One.⁴⁴

Of the One in itself we cannot speak; its transcendent simplicity lies beyond the negation and affirmation native to ordinary language.⁴⁵ In treating of the secondary act (*energeia ek tēs ousias*) of the One, Plotinus offers another analogy from the natural world:

For think of a spring which has no other origin, but gives the whole of itself to rivers, and is not used up by the rivers but remains itself at rest, but the rivers that rise from it, before each of them flows in a different direction, remain for a while all together, though each of them knows, in a way, the direction in which it is going to let its

stream flow; or of the life of a huge plant, which goes through the whole of it while its origin remains and is not dispersed over the whole, since it is, as it were, firmly settled in the root. So this origin gives to the plant its whole life in its multiplicity, but remains itself not multiple but the origin of the multiple life.⁴⁶

The upwelling flow of the spring into its rivers represents the secondary act of the One – the flow outward which generates Intellect, the source of varying Forms. The spring “gives the whole of itself,” for if it held a part of itself back, there would be division in the generativity that is the secondary act of the One. At the same time, the rivers are distinctly *other* than the spring, for Plotinus notes paradoxically that although the whole of the spring is given in the generation of rivers, the spring itself “is not used up” and “remains itself at rest.” The whole of the One is invested in the overflow; there is no part of the One that is not overflowing. Coeternally, the One is always already filled without deficiency.

Likewise, the origin in the root of the “huge plant” is the source of the life within it, but the life reaches beyond the root (the primary act). The origin is unchanged even as life flows out from it to the rest of the plant (according to ancient biological principles). The life achieves “multiplicity” as leaf, bark, fruit, and branch, but the source remains “firmly settled.” The life is the secondary act of that source, and so in a sense the origin is to be found in all the diverse points of the plant; indeed, it could be said to be the unifying factor of the plant. The being of the plant is caused by its source-as-life.

Plotinus attempts to guard against the error of supposing that, because the One is said to be the cause of Intellect, certain Forms (i.e. Cause and Being) otherwise posterior to the One are herewith engaged in the secondary act of the One. As such, Cause and

Being would be prior to Intellect, and this is nonsensical, for how can Being be prior to itself? Plotinus explains that in talking about the One as a cause of Intellect, we are actually speaking of Intellect's identity as Being caused.⁴⁷ Thus "causation" is a relational description, but it operates from the side of the finite intelligible and not from the side of the infinite.⁴⁸ Again, we come to a characterization of the secondary act of the One from the side of its effects: Plotinus operates from the bottom up, so to say. Unless there were an effect, we would not say that it were caused. Therefore the One in and for itself is not properly described as a cause, except insofar as Intellect is *essentially* a product of the One's overflow. In this way can we know about the One, i.e. by reflecting from multiplicity to unity and from effect to cause.⁴⁹ Given that the One is not of itself possessed of Being or being-a-cause, Intellect may be said to depend on that which *is not*, but only insofar as this means that the One transcends the dialectical logic of Is/Is-not.⁵⁰

The One is limitless unified simplicity, and from its secondary act results Intellect, a finite, multiplied plurality. Intellect is a "One-Many," a singular *arche* that is *nous* which is, for itself, the finitely numbered pantheon of Forms, each differentiated from an other. Simplicity is thus compromised in the achievement of limit and form.⁵¹ According to the great Plotinian metaphysical assumption, unity is prior to and more perfect than multiplicity.⁵² As the producer is the greater and the product the lesser, and as we know the product (*nous*) to be multiplied, the One must be absolute in its simple unity.⁵³ The question arises, how did multiplicity come from the simplicity that is the One?

Gerson describes Intellect as “coeternal . . . but subordinate” to the One.⁵⁴ Multiplicity does not arise in time; it is a mistake to suppose that the One *was* static *and then began* to produce Intellect as multiplicity.⁵⁵ The One is always already the producer and the production (*qua energeia ek tēs ousias*) of Intellect.⁵⁶ The two exist in an ontological hierarchy that is not described by temporal priority. Gerson holds that “Intellect is generated from the One roughly as a plane figure is generated from a point.”⁵⁷ This image, I think, is an excellent illustration both of the misapprehension of the Plotinian doctrine of emanation as a temporal outworking and also of the crisis of transcendence. While it indeed makes no sense to ask *when* the plane came from the point; still at issue is how something with magnitude could be caused by something without it. The question of how something multiple could be caused from something utterly unified operates in the same way. How is it that, even though both are eternal, the One does not immediately take Intellect back up into itself? Answer: the One is such that it overflows, and this overflow is the birth of Intellect. Although the One is no way dependent on Intellect (for dependence would connote the presence of Being), were the Intellect not to exist, we would not know about the One as it exists in and for itself.

Being, *Logos*, and Otherness

Plotinus urges us to take care when ascribing qualities and predicates to the One. Although some kind of language must be used in human communication *about* the One, the One itself is linguistically isolated only at the peril of conceptual annihilation. Properly, the One should not be said to be “something” or “anything;” still less should it

be taken to be “everything.” Plotinus reasons that “it is impossible to apprehend the One as a particular thing: for then it would not be the principle, but only that particular thing which you said it was.”⁵⁸ By particularizing the One, we would be introducing multiplicity: in saying the One is This, we imply that it is *not* That.

The One transcends the assignment of This-and-not-That precisely because This and That partake of Being. But the One does not: “these things [existing entities] are beings, and being: so it [the One] is “beyond being.”⁵⁹ In its primacy, nothing can be ascribed to the One, and no particular can describe it. Although at some point language must take hold if we as analysts mean to treat of the subject, even the use of “it” as ostensive assignment is, strictly speaking, a violation. As mentioned above, to say “*the* One” is to tread dangerously; the statement “the One is the One” should be reduced to “One is One,” and finally, ridding language of being-talk, simply “One.”⁶⁰ Again, Plotinus requires that the simple which precedes all things not be “mixed with the things which derive from it .”⁶¹ Being itself is derived from the One, as are thought and conceptualization as functions of Intellect. Thus, “there is ‘no concept or knowledge’ of it; it is indeed also said to be ‘beyond being’ .”⁶²

Being is itself a product. It is the case that all things are, and all things that are partake of Being. Said another way, if something participates in Being, then it *is*. The One is prior to the totality of Being (that is, the realm of existing things conceived in Intellect), thus it cannot be said to participate in Being. Therefore it is not the case that the One is; the One *is not*.⁶³ Being and determinacy entail one another: to be is to be

something. The One is undetermined, for determination is posterior to the One. The One is no *thing*, so in what way may it be said to exist?

Wallis says, “a simple affirmation of the One’s existence is therefore permissible, provided this is not understood as predicating Being of the One.”⁶⁴ I confess to being unclear on his meaning here. I have no notion of what it is to exist without being. Wallis chooses not to qualify this statement, and I am left only to determine that he conceives of existence as a state of affairs different from Being. Exactly what this would constitute is to anyone’s guess. For his part, Gerson denounces the denial of the One’s existence as “sheer confusion.”⁶⁵ We can, he says, conceptualize about it without affirming predicates of the One. It seems that he shares Wallis’ distinction regarding Being and existence, although Gerson comes to his conclusion through his doctrine regarding the One as the perfect identity of essence and existence.⁶⁶

Perl, on the other side, believes that these kinds of interpretations attempt to affirm the concept of “infinite being,” a concept which, he says, is “a contradiction in terms.”⁶⁷ His rationale is simple enough: as was shown above, to be is to be determined as something. If the One *is*, then it *is something*. Plotinus will have no such determinacy posited of the limitless infinite. Perl states that “the One, therefore, is not any thing, indeed is Nothing.”⁶⁸

What of this daring suggestion? If by it Perl means to say that “it is not the case that the One is any thing; the One transcends thing-hood” (i.e. to deny the position that the One *is* some thing) then that seems to follow clearly enough from Plotinian metaphysics. It seems entirely another matter, however, to make the positive assertion

(i.e. to affirm the negation) that “the One is Nothing.” Even the capitalization of “Nothing” seems to connote a kind of determinacy of the notion: “Nothing” is itself bounded by some conceptualization. As such, it would seem that the One can *be* “Nothing” no more than the One can be something.

Eugene Bales senses this lexical tension and regards the attempt to reconcile Being and Non-Being with respect to the One as producing an “insoluble dilemma.”⁶⁹ The ontological and the meontological,⁷⁰ he says, are limited each to its own universe of discourse: when an attempt is made to combine positive and negative theology with respect to the infinite One, the boundary between Being and Non-Being confounds language. Thus just as “infinite Being” constitutes an unbounded mixture of negative (“infinite”) and positive (“Being”) discourse (and it is this to which Perl objects), “the One is Nonbeing” itself mixes the positive “is” with the negative “Nonbeing,” resulting in an equally illogical construction.

Thus does a new question arise to the speculative fore: what constitutes permissible One-talk? Plotinus provides guidelines:

We do indeed say something about it, but we certainly do not speak it, and we have neither knowledge or thought of it . . . we have it [knowledge] in such a way that we speak about it, but do not speak it. For we say what it is not, but we do not say what it is: so that we speak about it from what comes after it.⁷¹

The obvious question for the Plotinian analysis is, what significant difference is there between speaking the One and speaking *about* the One? The question is a question of *logos*, that irreducibly complex term connoting word, form, and limit. Indeed, word confers form and in so doing confers limit. To what *logos* should we appeal in this discussion? Is there a *logos* of the One?

The above passage goes a long way toward answering the last question. In his prohibition against speaking the One, Plotinus seems to regard what I will here term such “direct” One-talk to be based in ignorance: “we have neither knowledge or thought of it.” Furthermore, the One is prior to Being, and form (for Plotinus) is born of Being. Thus Plotinus maintains that the One cannot – as has been restated many times here – be constrained by form. Rist remarks that “the Intelligible World itself, Mind and its powers, is a trace of the One. And Mind is Form Hence the One cannot be a Form, a finite Being. Rather it is shapeless and formless. It is the *maker* of Form.”⁷² Thus there can be no *logos* of the One in itself, and so we cannot speak the One.

In speaking *about* the One, however, Plotinus notes that we “speak about it from what comes after it.” Any *logos* relating to the One is subordinate to the One. In fact, Plotinean metaphysics embraces the idea of *logos* as operative among many hypostatic levels of existence in both the sensible and intelligible realms. Since we are here concerned primarily with the infinite’s relation to that first product of genesis, finite *nous*, we want to know whether there is a *logos* for *nous*, and if so, how that would impact thought and speech about the One, for, as Plotinus says, we speak about the One from the standpoint of Intellect, its progeny.

In Wallis’ view, Plotinean *logos* “expresses the relation of an Hypostasis to its source, its products, or simultaneously to both.”⁷³ As such, prime *logos* would in some manner express the relation of *nous* to the One and vice versa. Wallis suggests that this logical expression is analogous to the manner in which the Stoics conceived that the *logos prophorikos* (formed speech) expresses the *logos endiathētos* (thoughts). The

going-forth of Intellect from its origin constitutes one aspect of primal *logos*. The ontology of Intellect is thus delivered through the genesis of a rational forming principle.⁷⁴

John Heiser, in his treatise on *logos* in Plotinus, states that “Plotinus comes habitually to use the term *logos* to designate the mirroring forth on a lower level of what is found more truly at a higher level of things And since *logos* is a mirroring forth of Intellect, each level of *logos* is a higher or lower level of ‘contemplation.’”⁷⁵ So it is the very *logos* of *nous* that relates Intellect to the One. Intellect is the primary instantiation of form at the intelligible level, and thus it is identical with Being in its determinacy. Seemingly, then, *nous* would constitute the very forming principle from which generation occurs: the generated would in a sense be the generator. For indeed how could *nous* be *formed* unless form were ontologically prior? Deck sees Intellect itself as a *logos*, “bringing about a presence of *Nous* in its inferiors.”⁷⁶ Intellect is a *logos* for another; that is well enough, but how may it be said that *nous* is a *logos* for itself? Here I can provide no textually faithful interpretation that does not call critical Plotinean cosmogonical principles into question. The interpretation of these issues will be explored in greater detail below.

Intellect is, and Intellect is Being. To be, as we have seen, is to be determinate.

Perl argues as follows:

If to be is to be determinate, then, necessarily, to be is to be other Determination is the very ground of being and in that sense the cause or maker of that which it determines. Whatever is determinate, and thus whatever is, depends on its determination in order to be.⁷⁷

This passage seems to clarify some of the above concerns: determination-as-forming-principle founds Being-as-Intellect. In saying that it is thus “the cause or maker of that which it determines,” Perl is saying that Form forms Intellect. Unformed, Being is not.⁷⁸ Form, and therefore otherness, is in this sense *presupposed* of Intellect. Consider

Plotinus:

If, then, the truest life is life by thought, and is the same thing as the truest thought, then the truest thought lives, and contemplation, and the object of contemplation . . . are one. So, if the two are one, how is this one many? Because what it contemplates is not one. For when it contemplates the One, it does not contemplate it as one: otherwise it would not become intellect. But beginning as one it did not stay as it began, but, without noticing it, became many, as if heavy [with drunken sleep] . . .⁷⁹

Cryptic and compounded as this offering seems, Plotinus is here revealing the considerations we have been approaching. The crucial element to this explanation is the contention that Intellect “did not stay as it began.” The implication here is one-sided in its determinacy – the One does not differ from anything in its primary act (*energeia tēs ousias*). Intellect differed, for “it did not stay as it began.” The becoming of Intellect is an eternal occurrence, an outworking of motion and otherness.⁸⁰ Plotinus recognized this, and spoke to the very issue.

For there could not be thinking without otherness, and also sameness. These then are primary, Intellect, Being, Otherness, Sameness; but one must also include Motion and Rest. One must include movement if there is thought, and rest that it may think the same; and otherness, that there may be thinker and thought or else, if you take away otherness, it will become one and keep silent; and the objects of thought also, must have otherness in relation to each other. But one must include sameness, because it is one with itself, and all have some common unity; and the distinctive quality of each is otherness.⁸¹

Sameness and Otherness are seen to be prime requisites of formation, and the logic of the genesis of *nous* is governed by principles of unity and of differentiation. Thus

contemplation as the impetus for an identity relation presupposes otherness in its outworking – each difference is a similarity; each similarity a difference.⁸² Intellect is formatively defined in its relief against the One (and not, importantly, the other way around).⁸³ I maintain that such a presupposition of Form as an entity logically prior to Intellect is the position of Plotinus, and I will contend that his description of the relation of *nous* to the One must ultimately admit of the mediation of Form and Differentiation.

Proceeding and Returning

In examining the nature of prime *logos*, let us revisit the genesis of Intellect from the One. We know that Intellect is said to flow directly from the One, and Intellect is caused by the One. Plotinus gives an account of the mechanism of this causation:

In order that Being may exist, the One is not being, but the generator of being. This, we may say, is the first act of generation: the One . . . overflows, as it were, and its superabundance makes something other than itself. This, when it has come into being, turns back upon the One and is filled, and becomes Intellect by looking towards it.⁸⁴

The steps of this process are described as follows: 1) the One, perfect, overflows; 2) in overflowing, it makes an other; 3) once this other is present, it “turns back” to its source “and is filled” 4) the other “becomes” *nous*. Our perpetual precaution is in order here; the genesis of Intellect takes place under an eternal syntax, so time language (“becomes,” “turns,” “overflows”) is potentially misleading. Intellect is always already the product of the One, and its causation is not a temporal act but the suggestion of the logical priority of the One to *nous*. Nonetheless, it is clear that Plotinus regards the making of an “other” as prior to that “other” achieving its identity as Intellect. There is the going forth, and there is the turning back. Upon that turning back, that which went

forth (“went” is, here again, temporal language used to denote logical priority) *is* – eternally – Intellect.

The overflow of the One is not *of itself solely* the generation of Intellect from the One. There is another dimension. “How then does it generate Intellect?” asks Plotinus. “Because by its return to it it sees: and this seeing is Intellect.”⁸⁵ The second side of Intellect’s emanation is the returning of the procession to its source. The One overflows: this is its secondary activity. This overflow proceeds from the One and then *turns back* in contemplation of its source. In this turning back, the Being of Intellect emerges.

Neither the inner life of the One nor the being of Intellect is responsible for the definition of Intellect in and for itself. This is the work of the returning of the procession to its source. Plotinus seems to differentiate that which proceeds from the origin:

Rather, the intellect must return, so to speak, backwards, and give itself up, in a way, to what lies behind it (for it faces both directions); and there, if it wishes to see that First Principle, it must not be altogether intellect.⁸⁶

This passage constitutes a slight variation on the above: in V.1.7, the procession seems to be One until it returns; at that point it “becomes” *nous*. Here, however, Plotinus names the procession “Intellect” *prior* to its return. As was noted above, Plotinus may be grasping at identity for the notion which is not any longer identifiable with the inner life of the One in itself, but is not yet Intellect in and for itself. The going-out and turning-back seems to bridge bounded Intellect and limitless One.

Wallis recognizes Plotinus’ identification of the double nature of this act:

Two stages may therefore be distinguished in the self-creation of Intelligence (and, on a lower level, of Soul); in the former, that of Procession (*prohodos*), a formless, infinite stream of life flows forth from the One; in the latter, that of Reversion (*epistrophē*), it turns back, contemplates the One, and so receives form and order⁸⁷

The side of the act for the One is *prohodos*; the side of the act as Intellect for the One is *epistrophē*. The double act flowing from the One-as-source (*energeia tēs ousias*) is itself the act of the formation of *nous*. Plotinus has presented a foundation for cosmology: the One resides in itself, and flows for itself as a result of perfection. This flow is the secondary act of the One (*energeia ek tēs ousias*), a two-way path the notion of which founds the logic of *nous*, which itself *is* the beginning.

CHAPTER III

THE SUPREME CROWN

Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.⁸⁸

One scarcely begins an analysis of the notions involved within the nature of *keter elyon*, the supreme crown, before one is at once confronted with impenetrability: it is encountered at the spark of blackness within *ein sof*,⁸⁹ within the symbolism of flickering flames, wellsprings, and supernal points, at the articulation of the primal cosmogonical language, and in the riddling eternity of *keter*'s commingling with *ein sof* as a garment "clinging to the substance of the wearer on all sides."⁹⁰ In many such speculative metaphysics, the most primordial root of being seems to commingle closely with nothingness, and the shroud of unknowable God appears in many accounts as void itself.⁹¹ What is more, Kabbalistic reflections can frequently be seen to have derived ontological principles from epistemic claims: the unknowable *is* nothingness. Taken together, these kinds of presuppositions can alternatively obscure and illuminate the subject matter. The present task is a task of definition, and as we will see, such is the task of the first divine emanation. Illuminating or obscuring – shedding light or shedding darkness – is just the semantic issue that here complements the complex metaphysical role of *keter*.

Before beginning to articulate some themes common to Kabbalistic descriptions God's inmost expression, I want to delineate some parameters for discussion. The study here will attempt to limit its scope to philosophical content, as opposed to devoting much

focus to theurgical-magical approaches, ecstatically mystical content, and/or exclusively midrashic or homiletic accounts. While one must surely concede the interrelated nature of such a dialogically vital tradition as Kabbalah, overall, my project is to analyze metaphysical speculation rather than to appreciate moments in religious literature. A good deal of works and commentaries that would otherwise count as “Kabbalistic” will, therefore, be omitted (e.g. early Chariot hymns and the *Shi’ur Komah*). It will nonetheless be evident that the *poiesis* which fundamentally informs such reflection permeates the philosophical/theosophical tradition in question, investing and invigorating the style of the *Zohar* as well as other works. This will perhaps lend an ineffable quality to the notions inherent in some of the texts; while any attempt to “get beyond language” is a philosophically presumptuous move (and that, I think, is being charitable), at some point the ladder of explanatory language must be kicked away.⁹²

A further word regarding domain should be set out. My comments here will revolve around the thirteenth-through-seventeenth-century tradition centered around general ideas common to at least some of the following: Moses of Leon (focusing on, but not limited to, the *Zohar*), Moses Cordovero, Isaac the Blind, Azriel of Gerona, and other leading figures of the schools of Gerona, Provence, and Spain. To some lesser degree I will consider Lurianic ideas, but where this enters my analysis I will attempt to make clear the distinction between the ideas inherited from Isaac Luria (and his pupils) and the mostly earlier European concepts.

I will divide this exposition into five parts, each of which will consider both general principles of agreement as well as critical points of contention or intra-canonical

dissent about *keter* among Kabbalists of the 400 or so years in consideration. The points of disagreement will prove, I hope, as illuminating as the general principles upon which most of the sages seem to agree. The most critical aspects of a given philosophy are frequently the most heavily debated, and Kabbalistic metaphysics are no exception.

General Principles of *keter elyon*

Without a cursory understanding of the fundamental ideas of God and the *sephirot*, a discussion of *keter* will obviously come across as insurmountably obscure. Given that, even with a scholar's grasp of these metaphysical tenets, vagueness and ambiguity nevertheless cloud the nature and notion of the first emanation, we should seek to clear away as much conceptual mist as possible. Briefly, I will offer a sketch of the cosmological model in question.⁹³ The earliest account of *sephirot* as ten cosmic elements (for lack of a more precise term) comes from the *Sefer ha-Yetzirah*, 1:3-7:

³Ten Sephirot Belimah according to the number of ten fingers. Five opposite five . . . ⁴Ten and not nine. Ten and not eleven . . . ⁵Their measure without end. Depth of beginning. Depth of end. Depth of *Tov* [goodness] . . . ⁶their apparition as lightning; their aim has no end. Its utterance with [or, in] them with its course and return and when its word is like the tempest they descend in front of the throne and they carouse . . . ⁷Their end is fixed at the beginning, their beginning at their end.⁹⁴

This mystifyingly brief and virtually impenetrable text predates both the Kabbalistic schools of Provence and the writing of the *Sefer ha-Bahir*.⁹⁵ The precise time of its origin is as unrevealed as its content: varying scholarship dates the work, which features obvious Hellenistic influences, between the second and sixth centuries.⁹⁶

The passage here describes ten *sephirot* as cosmogonical elements, and the remainder of the first short chapter details their alphanumeric metaphysical significance.

Kabbalistic doctrine since the *Sefer ha-Yetzirah* has embraced the idea of ten cosmic hypostases emanating from the infinity of unknowable God. At some primordial point, *ein sof* (a hypostatization denoting concealed God as “limitless”) emanates these ten gems of light⁹⁷ as the first determinate content of the cosmos.⁹⁸ Without attempting a thorough explication of the role of the *sephirot* in the creation of the world, it may be stated that in some basic sense, these emanations act as a bridge of sorts from God in His infinity to man in his finitude. Indeed, given that the chief concerns of Kabbalah involve the distinction between God in Himself and God for man, it is unsurprising that central stress is laid on the manner in which it can be said that God relates *ontologically* to His creations.⁹⁹ It is evident that the *sephirot* are considered, though not described as, nonphysical entities. The word-images used to speak of the *sephirot* in Kabbalah are themselves vividly and potently philosophically suggestive: the entities are variously described as *ma'amarot* (“sayings” – this nomenclature occurs throughout the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, conceptually supplemented with the term “*logoi*,”¹⁰⁰ the philosophical significance of which can hardly be overstated), *shemot* (“names”), *marot* (“mirrors”), and *sitrin* (“aspects,” “powers,” or “levels”), to name a few of many.¹⁰¹

The purpose of the *sephirot*, then, is to act not only as conduits for the vitality of eternal God but also as negations of the infinite; that is, as foundations for determinacy. Though *ein sof* exists (if such a thing can be said) eternally in the utter concealment of its own limitlessness, through the emanation of the *sephirot* God’s power takes on a

differentiated character as it begins to act according to context. Consequently, both unities and distinctions begin to appear. Difference is the first result of the emanation (being itself the nature of that emanation), always already accompanied by will, thought, understanding, love, judgment, and beauty. Thus the full notion of divinity is realized only upon the negation of its concealed and infinite nature.

The questions and presuppositions implicit in this abbreviated account will now be scrutinized through the lens of the first of all emanations, which is the simultaneous differentiation-birth of name, form, and will. Through an examination of the general principles of *keter*, an understanding of the transcendent role of the *sephirot* may be more surely grasped. It is this very transcendent role which constitutes in Kabbalah the role of transcendence; therefore such may also be understood once a full foundation of the notion of the first archetype has been constructed. We turn now to the first principle.

First of All Emanations

When confronted by the spectrum of different speculative accounts of the nature of the first emanation,¹⁰² it is evident that the above statement will not do as a general rule, even within the confines of so-called “classical” Kabbalah. Rather, it should be revised to read something like,

I₁. In those accounts in which *keter* is mentioned as one of the ten *sephirot*, *keter* is defined as the first of all emanations.

It is unclear whether the time-language of Kabbalistic cosmogony should be taken literally or figuratively, and this exegetical question seems to have provoked different answers depending on the context in which it is posed. Where *keter* is mentioned,

however, it seems to embrace a kind of ontological priority as the cause of the rest of the *sephirot*.

Still, the manner in which this influence is understood is by no means a foregone conclusion. I want to declare one interpretive generalization at the outset of this analysis, lest the conclusions reached here come under the accusation of having required an unstated hypothesis. *Keter* is not the only name used to denote the first emanation, and I want clearly to delineate which words I take to be referring to *keter* and which I take to be referring to something else.

As a general rule, I take *hokhmah*, the second emanation that is *wisdom*, always to be distinct from *keter*. Some accounts (mostly earlier in the classical period) take *keter* to be identifiable with *ein sof*, and to this issue we will later return.¹⁰³ Suffice it to note that in accounts in which *keter* is not distinguished ontologically from *ein sof*, *hokhmah* frequently takes the place of the first distinct emanation of *ein sof*. In no instance I have encountered does *hokhmah* seem to me to be simply a terminological variation for *keter*. However interrelated the seminal purposes of these two *sephirot* may be, the fact that most accounts feature both *keter* and *hokhmah* with the latter having been caused by the former is sufficient reason to believe that, whatever the ontological status of *keter* relative to *ein sof*, the notion of *hokhmah* differs quite markedly from that of *keter*.¹⁰⁴

Variations on the name *keter elyon* that seem to refer to the same metaphysical entity include *rum ma'alah*, *ehyeh*, *bozina di-kardinuta* (*kav ha-midah*), and *attika kadisha* (*attika attikin*), to name some of the most common. *Rum ma'alah* ("highest

point above” or “supernal point”) denotes the status of *keter* as the utmost *distinguished* entity that *is*. *Ehyeh* (“I shall be,” “I am”) reinforces this concept of all paths of being leading ultimately to this source.¹⁰⁵ *Bozina di-kardinuta* (“spark of blackness”) is an image utilized for cosmogonical principles in the Zohar; its further explanation is *kav ha-midah* (“standard of measure”).¹⁰⁶ *Attika kadisha* (“the Holy Ancient One”) is a reverent identification of the divine status of the first emanation.¹⁰⁷ The sense of the term *ayin* (“nothingness”) will be discussed at length below; it seems, however, that the semantics of identification with *keter* are, to say the least, more complex in that case.

We revise I₁ to the following:

I₂. In those accounts in which *keter* is either mentioned or apparently referenced under another name as one of the ten *sephirot*, *keter* is defined as the first of all emanations.

I₂ is not intended as a groundbreaking commentary on metaphysics of the divine. It merely tells us that if *keter* or something reasonably like it is a feature of some metaphysic of classical Kabbalah, *keter* takes the role of the first emanation of that system. This, I think, is a reasonably catholic and relatively historically mild assertion. It is of crucial importance, however, to emphasize that I have not yet commented on whether classical Kabbalah considers *keter* to be metaphysically distinct from *ein sof*, and if so, to what extent. This matter, obviously of critical importance, will be considered as one of the five points of contention enumerated below.

***Keter* as Source**

If *keter* is not identical to *hokhmah* (divine wisdom), then two ramifications of such differentiation are evident. Immediately, this nonidentity implies that *keter* is in some sense *not* wisdom. Consequently, this implies that, if they are both *sephirot*, there exists some definable relationship between the two – a longer leap than the first claim, to be sure, but ultimately a defensible one, I believe. Furthermore, the relationship of *keter* to the rest of the *sephirot* cannot be understood only through its immediate successor. Reference to the third sephira (*binah* – divine understanding), at least, must be made to explain the nature of both the first and the second. The relationship among *ein sof*, *keter*, *hokhmah*, and *binah* is expressed in the *Zohar* thus:

En-Sof cannot be known, and does not produce end or beginning like the primal *Ayin* (nothing), which does bring forth beginning and end. What is beginning? The supernal point, which is the beginning of all, concealed and resting within thought and producing end that is called “The end of the matter” (Ecclesiastes 12:13).¹⁰⁸

Cordovero elucidates the relationship as follows:

Afterward, Ein Sof emanated one point from itself, one emanation. This is Keter, called *Ayin*, Nothingness, on account of its extreme subtlety, its cleaving to its source, such that being cannot be posited of it. From Keter a second point emanated in a second revelation. This is Hokhmah (Wisdom), called *Yesh*, Being, for it is the beginning of revelation and existence. It is called *yesh me-ayin*, “being from nothingness.” Because it is the beginning of being and not being itself, it required a third point to reveal what exists. This is Binah (Understanding).¹⁰⁹

Here we have the first emanation as primary to both “existence” and “beginning.” One obvious question asked by Kabbalists was, if *keter* precedes existence and beginning, in what way can *keter* be said to *be*? Later Kabbalists would attempt to resolve the paradox of the nothingness of *keter* by positing an external aspect, called *da'at* (“knowledge”).

Here we need only note that in classical Kabbalah, the root of the tree of the *sephirot* begins with *keter* before the differentiations of existence and beginning take metaphysical hold.¹¹⁰ As such, *keter* is the source of existence, beginning and end, thought, wisdom, and understanding, *but it is not itself constituted by any of these predicates.*

As the *sephirot* emanate, God is further differentiated into various aspects of the divine character. This is not to say that Kabbalah is polytheistic: far from endorsing a pantheon of multiple divinities, the *sephirot* are constantly integrated with one another: relationships between each *sephira* with each and all of the others is just as crucial to Kabbalistic cosmology as the isolation of any one by itself. *Keter* is particularly indicative of the relational character of Kabbalistic metaphysics: seemingly, less is said about *keter* in-itself than is said about *keter* as the first point, different from *ein sof*, which *enables* the beginning of the externality of God.¹¹¹ There is a real sense in which *keter* is the turning-out of God; as the beginning of limitation, it constitutes the negation of *ein sof* in determinacy. This point will be further explored when the concepts of *nothingness* and distinction from *ein sof* are examined below.

If *keter* precedes wisdom, understanding, love, judgment, and beauty, it cannot be said to be identical with any of these, but there must be some sense in which these predicates are implicit in its articulation. There is a relationship of ontological priority among the *sephirot* such that each emanation is rooted in the preceding one.¹¹² Therefore, though *keter* is itself unformed by e.g. beauty, it *founds* divine beauty in its notion. That is to say that if the logic of *keter* is fully understood, the logic of all of its

successors will be equally fully comprehended. *Keter* is, in *this* sense, quite essentially the forming principle of the cosmos: it provides for the inception of individual formation, the beginning of beginnings. It does not itself turn from *ein sof*, but in its differentiating expression of the will of God,¹¹³ it provides a cosmogonical axis on which divine wisdom and understanding begin to fulfill the revolution that is revelation. It is a point: not itself a *shape*, determinate, but the absolute dawn of the twin concepts of *limitation* and *differentiation* in the essence of God. This step is a step toward form and a step toward immanence, though the notion of *keter*, in its “extreme subtlety,” is still one of utter transcendence.

Cosmogonical Foundation, Cosmological Bridge

The Zohar portrays the contrast between *ein sof* and the *sephirot* as follows:

[E]very *sephira* has a known name, an attribute, a *limit*, and an area. Through these names the Master of the world extends Himself, and He rules by them, *receives His titles from them*, conceals Himself in them, and dwells within them, like the soul with the limbs of the body . . . one should not call it by a single name, or two, or three, saying that it is “wise” or “discerning” . . . one should not assign him a known place or give him names . . .¹¹⁴ [italics mine]

The contrast involves the distinguishedness, the distinctive knowability of the *sephirot* as opposed to the infinite concealment of *ein sof* (God in-Himself). It is implied here that *ein sof* (“Master of the world”) exercises dominion by/through the *sephirot*, with each individual *sephira* acting as an archetype for at least one aspect of the nature of God. No attributes may be predicated of *ein sof*; such predication would evacuate the notion of some *sephira* as well as diminish the seamless simplicity of the infinity of *ein sof*.

Ein sof engages, according to the passage, in five activities through the *sephirot*. Three of these are unmistakably active, the first and last being reflexively so: “extends,” “rules,” and “conceals” imply the action of *ein sof* on the whole of creation. One of the actions is neutral: “dwells” implies a kind of existential passivity of *ein sof* and the *sephirot*. Perhaps the most interesting of the acts of *ein sof*, however, is that the limitless “receives His titles from them.” None of the other actions stated in the above passage alludes to the reciprocal character of the relationship of infinite God to His hypostases. “Receiving” denotes the active character of the *sephirot* themselves as well as the relational capacity of the archetypes to God in-Himself.

“Titles” seems to have a pair of connotations. On one hand, succeeding “rules,” “titles” bears the regal sense of “rights of lordship.” Under this reading, it could be reasoned that *ein sof* is reckoned “Master of the world” insofar as his powers, exercised through the *sephirot*, give him dominion over all creation.¹¹⁵ It is the *sephirot* that grant the title “Master” to *ein sof*: given that there can be no predication of God-in-Himself, without the differentiated cosmologically governing attributes of the *sephirot*, God-in-Himself rules nothing. Said another way, if God relates to nothing (and indeed *ein sof* does not), God rules nothing: God-as-Master presumes to itself God-as-relates.

A slightly different reading of “titles” would convey the sense of “archetypical name.” It is in this sense that it may be said that the *title* of the first human creature was “Adam.” “Adam” is “man” just as Adam was *a* man. Thus it could be reasoned that *ein sof* is only titled (named) insofar as the *sephirot* posit metaphysical opposition to it in some way.¹¹⁶ Consider that God-in-Himself can sensibly be said to be *limitless* (*ein sof*)

only if there exists a *limit* or *limited*. God is only “Master” if there exists at least one thing that is *mastered*. Accordingly, this is one sense in which *ein sof* can be said to “dwell within them”: in Kabbalah, metaphysical significance seems to be caught up in semantic significance. The existence of *ein sof* is posited just insofar as the *sephirot* can be said in some way to oppose it.

So much for predication on limitless God-in-Himself. What, though, of *keter*? As we have seen, *keter* is the first *sephira* emanated from the infinite. Its form acts as a principle for all subsequent emanations: it is the concealed beginning of beginnings. Just as *keter* presents the turning-away from limitless infinity (while yet cleaving to that infinity)¹¹⁷, it likewise presents a turning-toward the determinacy beginning in divine wisdom (*hokhmah*). There is thus a sense in which all determinate opposition present in the *sephirot* is implicit in the notion of *keter*. The above principles taken together impose crucial semantic (and therefore metaphysical) significance on the first *sephira*: *keter* is the first to be named,¹¹⁸ and thus it titles *ein sof* after itself. Its role is essentially relational and always already negative: *keter* is the route by which the *sephirot* transcend determinacy to be taken up into the limitless mastery of *ein sof*.¹¹⁹ *Ein sof*, is, for its part, granted such mastery strictly on the opposition present in *keter*: its mastery, therefore, is subject to this negation. We will revisit this very issue when the concept of *keter* as *ayin* is explored, below.

The Zohar describes *keter* as “a sacred name engraved in [God’s] extremities.”¹²⁰ Naming, speech, form, and thought all originate from the same supernal point: that is the

eternal existential ramification of *ehyeh* (“I am”). This cosmogonical logic is caught up in the notion of the name, about which the Zohar says:

This voice [composed by *binah*, the third *sephira*] comprised all the other powers. And this voice governs speech, and produces a word in its correct form, since the voice was sent forth from the place of the spirit, and came to govern the word, to produce correct words. And if you examine the levels . . . it is all one, and thought is the beginning of all, and there is no division . . . for it is actual thought connected with *Ayin*, and it is forever inseparable.¹²¹

Beginning early in classical Kabbalah and continuing throughout the era, the idea of names and language is caught up in the theory of emanation: the process by which the *sephirot* are determined is the selfsame process as that by which divine language reveals itself in creation.¹²² In the above passage, the voice of God (comprised of the fourth, fifth, and sixth *sephirot*) “came to govern the word, to produce correct words.” This is to say that the inception of the divine language was a codification of a forming principle for language and speech as well as for creation. It is from *keter* that the voice gains its dialectical significance. The voice is described as “actual thought connected with *Ayin* . . . forever inseparable.”¹²³ Consider further:

[A] mystical symbol of this [Torah] is “the name YHVH” (Genesis 16:13, and often): “name” is one, YHVH is one, and the whole is a single unity; for there is a name, and there is a name: *a name above, which is inscribed by that which is not known and not susceptible to knowledge at all, and this is called the “supernal point”*; a name below, which is called *shem* (name), “from one end of heaven to the other end of heaven” (Deuteronomy 4:32), because the end of the heavens is called “remembrance,” and this name is the “lower point,” a name for that “remembrance” which is the end of the heavens and receives all life in the realms above, and this is the end of the heavens below, and its name is the “lower point.”¹²⁴ [italics mine]

Here *keter* is described as the “supernal point” that is “the name above.” Thus the very logic of naming is given its foundation in the first emanation. The “lower name” is a “remembrance” of the “name above” in that *keter* is archetypal for all subsequent

emanations, and therefore for all subsequent names. The divine language begun in YHVH is a crucial point in Kabbalistic cosmology: it marks the upper bound of the possibilities for contemplation of God's nature. To attempt intellectual penetration of the primordially linguistic character of *keter* is to dis-order (that is, to disrupt the proper order of) one's cosmology: intellection and understanding are limited at points below *keter*. Thus, although the first hypostasis *grounds* naming, form, and semantics, it is, because of its generative status, not approachable by these means.

Ein sof is infinite, indeterminate, and limitless. None may (with any kind of truthfulness) speculate on the inward nature of *ein sof*;¹²⁵ to *name* it in this fashion is to annihilate its content.¹²⁶ God-in-Himself is thus unapproachable from the perspective of the created order. Contrariwise, the *sephirot* are defined by their determinate contents; indeed, their archetypal names are *titles* as discussed above. Such differentiation serves two opposing purposes: first, it distinguishes one *sephira* from another, and second, it unifies the notion of *that sephira* with itself. The cosmic gulf between the unified-differentiated and the infinite-indefinite is bridged by *keter*.

Keter, as mentioned above, turns simultaneously away from the infinite dark-light of its emanator¹²⁷ and toward the determinate contents of the rest of the *sephirot*. As such, its place is vague, both epistemically and ontologically. It is the *foundation*, the metaphysical axiom, on which are built the notions of beginning, difference, logic, and thought. Its character is close to that of its maker, though; the light of the one is spread throughout the other.¹²⁸ This *otherness*, though, is just what gives rise to the cosmic language which defines the rest of the Godhead. Without the distinction of *keter*, the

supernal limit bridging infinity and unity, there could be no sense in which the light of God fills the rest of the *sephirot*. Even lit, the rest of the *sephirot* overflow with divine illumination, while *ein sof* never contains itself in any sense with which to begin. Only *keter*, primal syntax, is perfectly primordially structured so as to contain the light of God and not itself be shattered.¹²⁹ It therefore “does not lack and does not change.”¹³⁰

The Differentiated Will of God

A critical point of contention for classical Kabbalists had to do with the distinction of *keter* from *ein sof*. Was the first *sephira* metaphysically distinct from the indefinite infinite? A puzzle immediately confronts the speculative ontologist: if *keter* be semantically distinguished from *ein sof*, in what way can its relative characteristics be commensurable with those of its infinitely simple originator – that is, how can the determinately unified originate from the limitless infinite? If, on the other hand, *keter* is accorded a meaning too close to that of *ein sof*, *keter* loses its distinct identity altogether. This is the ancient Neoplatonic dilemma of accounting for the primal crisis of multiplicity. In Kabbalah, the question takes on the form: how does God get from *ein sof* to *sephirot*?

This paradox of transcendence is compounded by the problem of *keter*'s utter contemplative impenetrability. It is above intellection and “fills more than the mind can conceive.”¹³¹ In this respect it is like *ein sof*, whose inward nature is beyond any sort of contemplation.¹³² *Keter* in itself is similarly beyond predication: Kabbalists recognize that the tetragrammaton only hints of the nature of this first hypostasis, leaving *keter*

itself untitled.¹³³ As such, generalizations about the complete notion of *keter* always stress its close metaphysical similarity (closer than any other *sephira*) to *ein sof*. *Keter* is frequently described as cosmic “air,” “ether,” or a kind of luminous envelope bound up with *ein sof*.¹³⁴ Such physical metaphors are obviously helpful only to a point. At least, they seem to convey the idea that *keter* is sensibly indistinguishable from *ein sof*. Knowledge of such a differentiation comes only through a kind of deduction-by-negation (see below).

At many points, the Zohar alludes to the closeness of *keter* and *ein sof*,¹³⁵ frequently mingling the two in its imagery, as here:

What does “with (*be*)*reshit* [(in) the beginning]” mean? With wisdom (*hokhmah*) . . . They [the *sephiroi*] were created from here. Who created them? He who is not mentioned, that hidden one who is unknowable.¹³⁶

There is no mention of the foundations of beginning in *keter* here: beginning is associated with *hokhmah*, and the creator of beginning is “that hidden one who is unknowable.” Certainly this phrase remarks in some way on God-in-Himself. It is only by examination of the use of the demonstrative “that” that one may realize that *keter* is here being described: *ein sof* would be amenable to no such ostensive description. Both *ein sof* and *keter* are reckoned to be hidden, but only the latter may, given its uniquely relational (for-another) status, reasonably be termed “creator.”¹³⁷

Cordovero attests to the nonidentity of *keter* and *ein sof*, saying that “*ein sof* is not identical with *keter*, as many have thought. Rather, *ein sof* is the cause of *keter*; *keter* is caused by *ein sof*, cause of causes . . . *keter* is the first to derive from it.”¹³⁸ *Keter* “derives” its causal priority from the ontological notion of *ein sof*. It is this

relationship of metaphysical subordination by which the two are distinguished.

According to the model of the tree, *ein sof* relates only to *keter*, which itself relates to the rest of the ten.¹³⁹ There would be no harmony of divine hypostases without this initial derivation. The careful reader here is moved to comment: it is well enough to say “initial derivation,” but how may we say that this unique, primordial relation is *expressed*? Through what capacity is differentiation *pressed-out* from that which is, in its immediacy, an indeterminate infinity?

It was reasoned that this prime act of differentiation was accomplished through the eternal emergence and action of the will of God.¹⁴⁰ In *keter*, the divine will manifests its expression, an expression primary to thought, wisdom, word, and understanding. Before the craft of word, there is the necessity of will. For many Kabbalists, difference implies will just as will implies difference: given the fact that nothing may be sensibly predicated of *ein sof*, it is the case that the primal act of God, the first act of will, entails the distinction of some hypostasis nonidentical to *ein sof*.¹⁴¹ That is, if some entity *wills*, that entity must not be *ein sof*, since *ein sof* neither wills nor fails to will. In action, the infinity of *ein sof* posits a determinate content. This determinate content always already exercises its own essential nature (will), resulting in lower emanations. As such, its transcendent and impenetrable character constitutes the beginning of beginnings. Once the second (subsequent) *sephira* begins, the content of *keter* is taken up again into the notion of *ein sof*, thus constituting a determinate and transcendent *external* infinity.¹⁴² For Kabbalists, the outworking of the Will of God as

keter, distinct from *ein sof*, allows for the philosophical maintenance of the simplicity and static ineffability of the latter.¹⁴³

Let us return from such speculation to the texts of Kabbalah. Cordovero asserts that the “forehead of the Will [*keter*] constantly accepts and soothes the harsh powers, reintegrating them.”¹⁴⁴ Thus *keter* humbly and charitably¹⁴⁵ *reintegrates* subordinate powers, acting as an ordering principle over the distinguished hypostases of the divine. The Zohar expresses the unity of divine will with *ein sof* thus:

When the supernal will in the highest realms rests upon the will that cannot ever be known or grasped, the most recondite head in the world above – and this head produced what it produced, which is not known, and illumined what it illumined, and all in secrecy – the desire of the supernal thought is to pursue it and be illumined by it.¹⁴⁶

The “supernal will” is *ein sof*, which dwells in the expression of *keter*.¹⁴⁷ *Hokhmah* (“supernal thought”) yearns for its perfected source: word and wisdom seek after ineffable divine will. In its illumination, the universe is ordered harmoniously after the fashion of the will of God. Thus the Zohar remarks, “[w]hen this *Atika*, the Will of wills, reveals itself, everything shines, and everything experiences perfect joy.”¹⁴⁸ It seems that in its turning *from* its source (*ein sof*), *keter* transmits the divine light to all of its metaphysical subordinates. This transmission, a kind of differentiated refraction, constitutes the first ontological revelation of God from God. *Keter*, not itself identical to *ein sof*, nonetheless acts as “a garment clinging to the substance of the wearer on all sides,” ex-pressing the notion of the infinite as essential divine will.¹⁴⁹

Nothingness (*ayin*)

Having presented the syntactic structure for primordial expression, we now turn inward to an examination of the semantics of *ein sof*'s relationship to *keter*. Dialectical self-negation characterizes the out-working of unknowable God's primal act, and this is taken up in Kabbalah as *ayin*, mystical nothingness. The foundation of the notion of *ayin* lies in the Kabbalistic belief that certain levels of reality are unreachable by thought.¹⁵⁰ This epistemic position was extended to the ontological, thereby founding the idea that there exists a cosmic nothingness by which God defines Himself. Thus Joseph Gikatilla remarks:

The depth of primordial being is called Boundless. Because of its concealment from all creatures above and below, it is also called Nothingness. If one asks, "What is it?" the answer is, "Nothing," meaning: No one can understand anything about it. It is negated of every conception. No one can know anything about it – except the belief that it exists. Its existence cannot be grasped by anyone other than it. Therefore its name is "I am becoming."¹⁵¹

This philosophically rich and complex passage hints at the epistemic-ontological conflation implicit in the view of existence as a predicate. Consider: if the Boundless is unknowable, then there is no sense in which an epistemic agent could predicate anything of it. If existence is a predicate, then it cannot be said by any agent (except *keter* itself, in order to maintain self-identity) that *keter* exists. If this cannot be said, then quite reasonably the answer to the question "What is it?" becomes "Nothing." If existence is implicitly *posited* of *keter* (and it must be, given that it is the source of *hokhmah*), there is a sense in which "nothingness" does not imply nonexistence. But if there is no semantics of being for *keter*-in-itself, its existence can only be deduced from relational statements involving other cosmic entities.¹⁵² Therefore any interpretation of *keter*

involves its active causal essence (both as cause and effect). This process is just that of *keter*'s "becoming:" the eternal dynamics of revolution for revelation.

Images abound in Kabbalah regarding the unknowable and impenetrable nature of *keter*. Each *sephira* is assigned a respective color; *keter* has three. It is variously white, black, or clear: the white color connotes its merciful humility,¹⁵³ black signifies its hidden communion with *ein sof*, and clear pertains to its impenetrability from the perspective of subsequent emanations.¹⁵⁴ Each *sephira* also has numeric significance. Given that *hokhmah* constitutes the cosmic beginning, it is *one*, the primordial point. Preceding *hokhmah* is ineffable *keter*; therefore *keter* is assigned *zero* according to its "nothingness."¹⁵⁵ These images testify to the relative emptiness of the content of *keter*.

I say "relative" since, if *keter* is nothing-for-subsequents, *ein sof* is *absolute conceptual evacuation*. In its infinity; taking up all essences in its simplicity, *ein sof* is indescribable. It is for this reason that *keter* clothes it outwardly (see above). From these premises, Kabbalah presents another explanation of the nothingness of *keter* by moving dialectically from limitless infinity to the first emanation. The Kabbalistic explanations of the mechanics of cosmogony relative to *keter*'s inception are varied and sometimes inconsistent with each other. I want to stress some grounding principles for these accounts, however, that are, I believe, essential to each. This will take on the form of a kind of generic account, an interpretation endorsed partially by most every classical Kabbalistic metaphysician and in its entirety by none.

One of the primary questions regarding the first emanation was whether it proceeds *from* God or whether it returned *into* God.¹⁵⁶ The Kabbalists realized the

obvious: if the hypostatization *ein sof* was to carry any meaning, there must be some metaphysical sense in which it is *limitless* and *infinite*. *Prima facie*, this would seem to imply a kind of untransgressable *sine qua non* for divine qualification: if *ein sof* is *everything*, then anything that is *not ein sof* has to be *nothing*. Lurianic Kabbalah describes the mechanics of this process as a kind of divine back-drawing of *ein sof* into itself, leaving a void into which creation can begin (with *hokhmah*).¹⁵⁷ The void is *keter*, the foundation for beginning. This process marks a kind of turning away from infinity, but the irony of this cosmic drama consists in the fact that revelation necessitates this very move. The concept of contrast is fundamental to the primordial ontology of Kabbalah. The Zohar declares of *ein sof* that “no light can look upon Him without becoming dark”¹⁵⁸ and that *keter* presents “the spark of blackness”¹⁵⁹ from which the beginning begins.

The meaning of these passages is caught up in the primal dialectic of source and emanation: *ein sof* is infinite light, but without contrast (and according to its unknowable character), it may as well be utter darkness. It is only when *keter* is set up as a contrast (semantic, epistemic, and metaphysical) to the limitless that the light of infinite God is seen to be as bright as it is. Cordovero describes it thus:

When powerful light is concealed and clothed in a garment, it is revealed. Though concealed, the light is actually revealed, for were it not concealed, it could not be revealed. This is like wishing to gaze at the dazzling sun. Its dazzle conceals it, for you cannot look at its overwhelming brilliance. Yet when you conceal it – looking at it through screens – you can see and not be harmed. So it is with emanation: by concealing and clothing itself, it reveals itself.¹⁶⁰

Brilliantly, Cordovero analogizes the unknowability of *ein sof* to the blinding light of the sun: its brightness is so intense that it may as well be complete blackness. Only once the

brightness has been cloaked in the cosmic garment that is *keter* can it be revealed to creation. Limitless infinity is posited, but the utter inaccessibility of the notion evacuates the content of the position. As such, infinity is negated by its own abstract character. This negation itself becomes (and is the becoming of) determinate, and the differentiation of the always already posited negation (*keter*) from the original abstract infinity (*ein sof*) constitutes *contrast*: each is negated by the other, and it is only in this double movement that the determinate whole of supernal divinity simultaneously maintains its infinity and presents (clothes) itself for subsequent emanations and the whole of creation. Hence it is of little if any consequence whether one describes *ayin* as *ein sof* or as *keter*: the reciprocity of prime negation allows each to stand for the other.¹⁶¹

It is for this reason that a sage instructs:

You may be asked: “How did God bring forth being from nothingness? Is there not an immense difference between being and nothingness?” Answer as follows: “Being is in nothingness in the mode of nothingness, and nothingness is in being in the mode of being.” Nothingness is being, and being is nothingness.¹⁶²

This passage presents a succinct (albeit obscure) condensation of the above dialectical progression. In the cosmic ground that “engenders everything that is,”¹⁶³ being is always already the becoming of nothing and nothing the becoming of being.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION: COMPREHENSION

Plotinus addresses the cosmogonical moment of the crisis of transcendence in his attempt to bridge primordial infinity to essential *nous*. Above, we saw that in his treatment of the movement from boundlessness to formation, he employs the notion of a mediating act, an act to which he ascribes the double movement of proceeding from the One (*prohodos*) and returning to the source (*epistrophē*). He resists, however, the assertion that there exists any *arche* logically prior to Intellect but subordinate to the One. I submit that the maintenance of an unmediated relation of Intellect to the One is incompatible with the generative story given by Plotinus. As such, I offer here an interpretation of Plotinean cosmogony which examines the mechanism of mediation as a syntactical foundation for Being.

Elsewhere, I have presented principles on which the philosophical foundations of *keter* were constructed by classical Kabbalists of the 13th-17th centuries. Admittedly, any textual engagement is itself solely an interpretive exercise. There is, however, a recognizable difference between interpretation bound by an attempt at exegetical validity (that is, what the principles *meant*) and interpretation focused on hermeneutical speculation (what the principles *mean*). I believe that I have attempted the former above (relative both to Plotinus and the Kabbalistic passages), and I intend now to engage the latter exercise. After an interpretation of the outworking of the Plotinean answer to the question of transcendence, I purpose to address *keter* as an outworking similar in aim but dramatically divergent in construction.

Both the twofold act of Plotinus – described by *prohodos* and *epistrophē* – and *keter* offer bridges across the critical gulf, and insofar as these answers are syntactical, they are in the same way soteriological: the mediating act/entity is the prime *ordering* principle for subsequent beings, a principle which itself offers a logic of *deliverance*, not of any one side from itself, but deliverance of the dyad from utter self-diremption. For without some rational link, each side of this moment of the crisis (i.e. both infinite and finite) is *wholly* separate from any other, even from itself for itself. In this way is the gulf made meaningless, but whereas in the bridging of one to other the chasm is *engaged* and *overcome* in formal, dialectical understanding, utter severance is a pyrrhic triumph: by disengaging each side from its opposite, knowledge is emptied of relational content, and thus the present side fails even in its understanding of itself for itself.¹⁶⁴

Finally I will turn to a semiotic analysis of these answers to the question of transcendence. My intention in engaging in such an exercise is to elucidate better the linguistic dimensions of *keter* and *prohodos/epistrophē* in their relations of infinite to finite and vice versa. An understanding of these lexical elements, I believe, enlivens the conception of the metaphysical role of each respective bridge-answer. This in turn will, I hope, clarify both crisis and response relative to the cosmological moment of transcendence as conceived by both classical Kabbalists and Plotinus.

Plotinean Syntactical Mechanics

Recall that the Plotinean One is the act of production as well as that which remains in eternal “repose.” The latter Plotinus calls the primary activity of the One

(*energeia tēs ousias*); the former is the One's secondary activity (*energeia ek tēs ousias*). Thus in distinguishing primary from secondary activity I make no distinction not introduced by Plotinus himself. It would seem, however, that one consequence of this distinction is the introduction of multiplicity in the notion of the One. This, I submit, is a semantic problem for Plotinus which he attempts to address through talk of proceeding (*prohodos*) and returning (*epistrophē*). Based on his comments, I assert that Plotinian ontology relative to the generation of Intellect must include more than *simply* the One as absolute unity and *nous* as finite product. Far-fetched as this interpretation may seem *prima facie*, I do not think its spirit departs in the least from the Plotinian answer to the question of transcendence. By this I mean that in order to get from the absolute unity of the One to the prime formation that is Intellect, mediating bridging acts anticipated and described by Plotinus must be asserted as subsisting in themselves, notionally identical neither with the One in itself nor Intellect in itself.

It is, as I mentioned above, correct in Plotinian metaphysics to affirm that Intellect is caused by the secondary act of the One. Thus the secondary act of the One is producer just insofar as it is the eternal act of the production of *nous*.¹⁶⁵ Consider that, for Plotinus, the generative aspect of the One is its overflow, the procession of infinite perfection. This *energeia ek tēs ousias* turns back toward the One, and thus is Intellect formed:

In order that Being may exist, the One is not being, but the generator of being. This, we may say, is the first act of generation: the One . . . overflows, as it were, and its superabundance makes something other than itself. This, when it has come into being, turns back upon the One and is filled, and becomes Intellect by looking towards it.¹⁶⁶

In its perfection, the One “overflows.” A crucial point of my interpretive strategy relative to Plotinean cosmological syntax involves the fact that Plotinus does *not* say, “the One . . . overflows, as it were, and the One makes something other than itself.” It is *not* the primary act of the One which is immediately responsible for the existence of Intellect. Were there no *energeia ek tēs ousias* of the One, there would be no *nous*, for it is the “superabundance” which “makes something other than itself.” It seems evident from the text that neither the One *qua energeia tēs ousias* nor *nous* is identifiable with this superabundance. It is not identifiable with the former insofar as Plotinus himself distinguishes between primary and secondary act,¹⁶⁷ and it is not identifiable with the latter, given this passage’s statement that the creation of the superabundance is “other” than the superabundance.

Note that, subsequent to the primary act of the One (the One in itself) and prior to Intellect’s realization, two elements are recognized: there is the overflow of the superabundance – this constitutes the secondary act of the One – and there is the turning back of the superabundance toward its source (the primary act of the One). Plotinus compounds the problem of sorting out his ontology by qualifying the act of the overflow of superabundance, noting that “when it has come into being” it returns to the source from whence it came. In outlining the earliest stages of Plotinean cosmogony (above), I noted the seeming identity of Being with Intellect.

It seems here that we are presented with two options for interpretation of the above selection from V.2.1. On one hand, it could be that the return is identical to Intellect. This would sort well with the Plotinean interpretation of Parmenides’ dictum,

“thinking and being are the same.” Thus there would be the two acts of the One – such distinction within the One is still a problem for Plotinus – and there would be Intellect. This interpretation, however, seems inconsistent with Plotinus’ assertion that the return (*epistrophē*)¹⁶⁸ “becomes” Intellect. I cannot make sense of the concept of something *becoming* exactly that which it already is. For this reason, I reject the first interpretation in favor of the second. Plotinus seems elsewhere to make a similar distinction between *epistrophē* and *nous*:

Rather, the intellect must return, so to speak, backwards, and give itself up, in a way, to what lies behind it (for it faces both directions); and there, if it wishes to see that First Principle, it must not be altogether intellect.¹⁶⁹

It seems to me that this passage could be taken to support the first interpretation of V.2.1 above, but such an argument would likely be based on the assertion that Plotinus is calling that which returns “Intellect.” This is not, I think, a valid argument against my interpretation of Plotinian ontology described in V.2.1; rather, it is, I propose, an inadequacy in the availability of other terms to Plotinus for description of this act of generation. In many places, Plotinus is forceful in his attempt to limit hypostases prior to *psyche* to two – Intellect and the One. This is why III.8.9 seems mysterious: Plotinus says that “intellect must return,” for what else *could* he say? Certainly the One cannot be said to return to *itself*; that would imply multiplicity even more clearly than does his distinction of *energeia tēs ousias* from *energeia ek tēs ousias* with respect to the One. All that remains, ontologically, is Intellect, even though in the return, Plotinus admits that “it must not be altogether intellect.” It is this last statement

which perhaps best demonstrates Plotinus' recognition of a distinction between the generative return (*epistrophē*) and its product (*nous*).

The difference between Intellect and the One (a difference that is, Plotinus holds, a product of *nous* – Intellect differs from the One; the One does not differ) is the chasm separating finite from infinite: in the birth of an other – in this case, Intellect – that other is, quite necessarily, irretrievably severed from utter unity. No bridge can erase this severance; an answer to the question of transcendence may indeed *link* one side to the other, but the answer does not render the crisis indistinguishable, else to what is it any longer an answer? For Plotinus, the secondary act of the One (the One conceived as *energeia ek tēs ousias*) is severance and return. How could the One, that which is unified beyond limit, be said to *be severance*? Does such language not imply that the One is the other – that the One is identifiable in some sense with the primary cosmic example of “otherness?” Certainly (and perhaps cardinally), Plotinus is not interested in introducing otherness into the notion of the One. It seems, though, that Plotinus nonetheless views otherness as a prerequisite for Intellect's existence:

For there could not be thinking without otherness, and also sameness. These then are primary, Intellect, Being, Otherness, Sameness; but one must also include Motion and Rest. One must include movement if there is thought, and rest that it may think the same; and otherness, that there may be thinker and thought or else, if you take away otherness, it will become one and keep silent; and the objects of thought also, must have otherness in relation to each other. But one must include sameness, because it is one with itself, and all have some common unity; and the distinctive quality of each is otherness.¹⁷⁰

Notwithstanding his position of an unmediated relation of Intellect to the One, there seem to be a number of notions on which Intellect is founded that are not posited anywhere in Plotinus of the One in itself. Plotinus notes Intellect, Being, Motion, Rest,

Sameness, and Otherness as “primary.” He says, however, that “there could not be thinking without otherness, and also sameness.” Given his interpretive endorsement of the Parmenidean saying “thinking and being are the same,” one may deduce that for Plotinus, there is no Being without Sameness and Otherness.¹⁷¹

This can be taken in one of three senses: Sameness and Otherness are logically *prior* to *nous*, Sameness and Otherness occur logically coextensively with *nous*, or Sameness and Otherness are identical to *nous*. The last has been discounted above. I believe we may discount the second, given the asymmetrical dependence relation between the elements involved: consider that while Intellect and Being are identifiable only through notions of Sameness and Otherness, Sameness and Otherness are identifiable regardless of Intellect or Being. While it could nevertheless be maintained that, in spite of this observation, it is logically possible that e.g. Sameness could simply occur whenever Intellect occurs and vice versa, I fail to see how such a state of affairs would differ from an identity relation.

I interpret the above passage, therefore, to be asserting the logical subordination of Intellect and Being to Sameness and Otherness. The One is prior to all; that is fundamental to Neoplatonic metaphysics. Otherness and Sameness, therefore, are subordinate to absolute unity but prior to Intellect. At what point do Otherness and Sameness begin? It would seem that the inception of these notions is identifiable at the point of overflow: at the diremption of the *energeia ek tēs ousias* of the One (that is, the twofold act described by *prohodos* and *epistrophē*) from the *energeia tēs ousias*, Otherness is introduced. While to say that the One is other than itself would, as noted

above, constitute a contradiction in terms, it may be remarked that *if* the superabundance of the One were conceived as ontologically distinct from the One in itself (and I have no concept of how else to conceive of it), the positing of a difference relation would be logically permissible. Furthermore, the symmetric relation denied of Intellect and Otherness may be affirmed of Otherness and the superabundance: it seems clear enough that the superabundance is only identifiable as such by virtue of the notion of Otherness. However, whereas above it was evident that Otherness may exist prior to Intellect, it may be posited that Otherness *cannot* exist prior to the superabundance, for prior to the superabundance there is only the One, and Otherness in the unity of the One in itself has been seen to be an illogical conceptualization. Seeing no other viable option for the introduction of Otherness into Plotinian ontology, I submit therefore that the “superabundance” which Plotinus treats as the secondary act of the One is itself the beginning of all difference, and thus in the same wise of all similarity.

There is another issue to be addressed: the superabundance is identical to primal Otherness, but may it be properly said to *exist*? That is, is there reason to posit Being of the superabundance that is Otherness? Perl writes, “Being proceeds from, or is produced by, the One in that it receives the One as its determination or ‘definer.’”¹⁷² This statement is correct in its general spirit, but imprecise in its choice of terms. Strictly, the One in itself is not the determination of anything: this implies Being and determinacy with respect to the notion of the One as *energeia tēs ousias*, and as such it is a lexical violation in Plotinian treatment. Note that it is, rather, the superabundance of the One that is directly responsible for the fact that *nous* exists. This does not say that the One is

the definer, but that Intellect is and is defined by virtue of what is, for Plotinus, the secondary activity of the One. The fire does not warm me; I am warm because of the fire-heat. It is not necessary to posit existence of the generative *energeia ek tēs ousias*; indeed, to do so would only serve to push the crisis of transcendence back a step further. There seems to me to be no reason to create another interpretive difficulty, given that Plotinus is at multiple points adamant in his interpretation of “thinking and being are the same.” Being may still, under the above interpretation, be said to begin with *nous*.

I do not take the eternal act that is the superabundance of the One to be a two-part act; it is rather a *double* act which is always already facing progeny and ancestor, so to speak. It cannot be the case that the superabundance proceeds *and then* returns, if “and then” be taken to imply any sort of chronology, for Plotinus does not speak of hypostases operating in time until the cosmological descent has reached the level of *psyche*.¹⁷³ Nonetheless, the vector of *prohodos* is the opposite of that of *epistrophē*. It is clear that if the image is to have any meaning, we may reason that while returning requires there to have been procession, procession requires, in itself, no return. Logically, then, procession would seem to be prior to return. The question would then arise, at what crux would the superabundance turn back to the One? Ontologically, there seems to be no point at which this return should be triggered. Must we posit some irrational metaphysical “point” at which *energeia ek tēs ousias* returns to its source? This physical image, I hold, is a misconception of Plotinus’ view of the secondary act of the One.

Plotinus asserts that the superabundance of the One, “when it has come into being,” returns. I take this to mean that, as soon as the superabundance realizes itself *for* itself (that is, as soon as it is *other* than the One in itself), it is always already the return of itself to its source. Thus that which returns is ontologically indistinguishable from that which goes forth. *Prohodos* and *epistrophē* seem to me to be best conceived not as a rock thrown up in the air which, when it reaches some calculable point, changes its path according to an opposite vector, but as something very like a substance coming into consciousness of itself: consider that a consciousness – here, *via analogia*, the One – exists in itself until the moment of self-reflection, at which point consciousness seems in a sense to depart from itself and subsist as *object*, as consciousness *for* itself. The departure, however, is unrecognizable without the *immediate* act of self-reflection, by which consciousness achieves self-identity in and for itself. In like manner, the One subsists eternally, always already engaged in the self-realizing act of its superabundance (*energeia ek tēs ousias*). The procession of the secondary act from the primary is only recognizable as such on its return. It is in *this* sense that our present interpretation takes the mediating overflow not as an act of two *parts*, but as a double, or *two-sided*, act.

Note that in the eternity of cosmogonical life, the vector of *prohodos* is not *interrupted* by *epistrophē*; rather, it is merely thus *compounded*. It “faces both directions,” says Plotinus. Procession and return are two sides of the logical notion by which Intellect is *formed*. Otherness and Sameness (respectively) are titles of this act – each presents one side of the chasm for the other. The One in itself is subject to no relation, so it cannot be said to be related to Intellect. Gerson contends that “its activity

is not in another, because this would imply exactly such a relation. Its second activity is the existence of *other* things.”¹⁷⁴ In its double nature, this act is procession for the One (that is Otherness) and returning for Intellect (that is Sameness).

Thus is the secondary act of itself, as otherness, constitutes the establishment of a syntax for determination, form, and being. It provides the formal ground for semantic investment. This act-as-alterity thus posits the chasm separating the infinite from the finite, and in so positing, it bridges it. Perl’s point that “The answer to the question, ‘Why does being proceed from the One?’ or ‘How does the One produce being?’ is: the One,”¹⁷⁵ should be modified such that his answer appreciates *both* sides of the distinguishing act bridging the gulf between limit and boundlessness. It seems that, according to this interpretation, the answer to the first is the vector describable as the going-forth of the One from itself for itself: “Why does being proceed from the One? Because the secondary act is *prohodos*.” The answer to the second is the vector which is the outworking of the becoming of *nous*:¹⁷⁶ “How does the One produce being? Because the secondary act is *epistrophē*.” In its differentiation from the One in itself, primordial superabundance is identifiable with Otherness. In distinction, formation begins.

By looking toward the One, Intellect is realized. In this sense, *epistrophē* constitutes the *formation* of *nous*. Recall Rist’s statement that “Mind is Form” and the One is “the *maker* of Form.”¹⁷⁷ This, on the present interpretation, turns out to be an oversimplification, but is nonetheless correct in a sense. Properly, *Intellect* is not Form, but the *intellection* of Intellect is Form. Thus, Form forms Mind. The One is the maker

of Form in the following way: the One flows, and this flow, when turning back on the One itself, seems to be the *forming principle* of Intellect. That is to say that that which is, for Plotinus, the *energeia ek tēs ousias* of the One is identifiable with prime formation in this secondary act's turning in contemplation of the primary. In so turning, the inner life and being of this contemplation is always already Intellect.¹⁷⁸

The One is not itself formed, and the One in itself subsists logically prior to Form. I submit that the superabundance of the One – which is itself, as remarked above, Otherness – differentiates and thus forms. Seemingly, this generative principle, in its reflection on its source, becomes *nous*, and in so doing forms the facets of itself (Forms). Intellect is always already born in superabundance's eternal contemplation of its source (*energeia tēs ousias*) as *different* from itself (*energeia ek tēs ousias*). Though the difference comes not from the One in itself, it is present *to* the One *qua* forming principle. Primordial overflow, in the cosmogonical fashioning of *nous*, presents the inception of Otherness, as it is the first departure from the inner life of the One.

Kabbalistic Principles Interpreted

As we have seen above, there is in this Neoplatonic metaphysical philosophy a concern with *limit*, with *boundary*. Specifically, there is the realm of objects immanent, present to epistemological and lexico-logical mastery. Contrarily, there is the transcendent: it is that which is bound by no linguistic, cognitive, or ontological structure. Form and meaning begin and end at the boundary between the two. The crisis of transcendence is the recognition of this limit, and one instance in the question of

transcendence presented itself above in the context of Plotinian cosmology – what is the nature of the relation linking *nous* to the One? At the moment of connection – linguistic connection – with the immanent, the content of the transcendent seems to be annihilated: Plotinus attempts a conception of the One as two-sided, but in so doing, I argued, he cannot help but introduce multiplicity prior even to *nous*. This interpretation seems to me to provide a necessary explication of Otherness, for to maintain a two-sided One is to concede a violent diremption in which unity in and for itself is destroyed. Above I contended that ultimately, for Plotinus, a double act of procession and return bridges the chasm dividing unformed boundlessness and differentiated finitude.

The *sephirot* are a Kabbalistic bridge between the mortal world of finitude and infinite *ein sof*. We have seen that *keter* is the first emanation of infinite *ein sof*, from which are derived divine wisdom, understanding, knowledge, love, judgment, and beauty. It is crucial to recognize the predicability of all emanations below the first: they have been written, and as such, they begin to be infused with the language of the immanent. For instance, one names the second *sephira hokhmah* because it is wisdom; *hokhmah* says of God that God is wise. The predication of such an attribute itself limits the *sephira*. Consider that in calling a thing “wisdom” or “wise,” one is in some sense announcing the supremacy or essentiality of a certain predicate of that thing, and in announcing the presence of one essential quality, one negatively proclaims the absence of another – notwithstanding essential interaction among the ten *sephirot*, *hokhmah* is wise in a sense in which it is not beautiful, just as *tifereth* is beautiful as it is not wise. This Kabbalistic *de*-description of the *sephirot* is a self-critical struggle – to write them

down, but in writing them down, not to write them out of the moment of transcendence. As such, there is a maddening ambiguity as to the relation of God to these his vessels: are the *sephirot* God? If so, they transcend finitude, but in so doing they are immediately taken up into *ein sof*, whose simplicity and unity are unequivocal for Kabbalists: God is God, and there are no other Gods before God. If the *sephirot* are not God, then they can certainly relate to the finite realm, but how then are they any more transcendent than e.g. the soul of a man?

The position of *keter* is an(other) attempt at balancing infinite and finite, one and many, transcendent and immanent. Above, we witnessed repeated efforts in Kabbalistic accounts to shrug off predication relative to *keter*: it seems that the Kabbalists had got some hint of the fact that the light shed by semantic limitation is identical to the gravity which pulls the *sephirot* away from *ein sof*: these words of description are binding threads; they write the *sephira down*; they write them *out*, eliminating them as superabundant formation eliminates the notion of *nous* from the One, thrusting generative overflow out of the house of limitlessness. *Keter* is a diverse principle, acting in contrast to the static notions of *ein sof* and the lower *sephirot*. Whereas the latter two are, respectively, bound upward in ineffable infinity and bound downward by lexical mastery, *keter* is the Kabbalistic expression of the turning from one to other – *keter* is not itself bound by finitude or infinity, but is always already the hypostatization of the turning of the finite toward the infinite and the turning of the infinite to the finite.

Like *prohodos* and *epistrophē*, the subsistence of *keter* is vectorial: *keter is-for*. This is to say that the nature of *keter* depends entirely on the perspective from which it is

assigned: as we saw above, *keter-for-sephirot* is concealment in deepest darkness, it is primordial. *Keter* precedes beginning as an I-know-not-what (precisely because it is an I-say-not-what). From the other side, *keter-for-ein sof* is luminous revelation. *Keter* is a topological principle for *ein sof*, and whereas the lower *sephirot* succeed only in describing God, *keter* seeks to *inscribe* God, that is, to *write on* God in exactly the same sense as a garment writes on the wearer.¹⁷⁹ *Keter* is the bridge linking *ein sof* and *sephirot*, and its eternal act is relative: from each side of the chasm, it hints at the alterity of the side beyond and in so doing *assigns* the other side to that which is present – it marks the absent for the present, whether the present be finitude or infinity.

Keter initializes metaphysical/semantic difference, and this presentation is accomplished as/by the eternal act of divine will. In God's self-assignment (i.e. the inscription on *ein sof*), *keter* is itself the syntactical foundation for the beginning of words, names, and forms. I submit that, just as the overflow of the One is itself the foundation of Otherness and Sameness, *keter* is the first differentiation and the first unity, the founding for the first *not* and the first *thus* together, each with respect to the direction of *keter*'s presentation (toward the finite or the infinite). According to this dialectical definition, *keter* is the supernally original *logos*. Through systematic (i.e. systematizing) inclusion and exclusion, *keter* provides a syntax for the cosmic vocabulary present in the lower *sephirot*. So it may be said that notions of form, word, and name are founded in *keter*, form-of-forms.

Insofar as it is the will that grounds limit, word, and difference, *keter* negates *ein sof*; one must stand apart from the other. But insofar as *keter* turns from the semantic

enclosures characterizing the lexically mastered *sephirot*, *keter* re-presents *ein sof*: one stands *for* the other. Crucially, the first emanation's linguistic nature is essentially trivalent: *keter* signs/writes some entity *to/for another* – *keter*'s identity is a function of the present side of the chasm separating one and many, and as such its notion is subjective inasmuch as *ein sof* and the other *sephirot* are objective/bivalent – each of these latter are one-sided for all.¹⁸⁰

The act of bridging immanent finitude and transcendent infinity is not *exhausted* in the first emanation: it should be emphasized that while utter differentiation of unified knowability and limitless, concealed infinity is *accomplished* in the tree of ten *sephirot as a whole*, it is *dialectically conceived* in the notion of *keter*, i.e. in the turning of the finite toward infinity and vice versa. For the “classical” Kabbalists, each *sephira* is divine, and the *sephirot* may flow together in various combinations of divine character.¹⁸¹ In predicating of the lower nine, however, the Kabbalists imply the fulfillment of the logically prior requirement of the *predicability* of these *sephirot*. The fact that “wise” is said (written) *in hokhmah* indicates its *descriptive* character. As we have seen, to *describe* is literally to write down and to write out. Where *keter* inscribes *ein sof* (i.e. writes on the indefinite infinite, thereby laying the foundation for syntax), the other *sephirot* describe, laying claim to this *logos* and investing it with semantic relations. *Hokhmah* says of God “God is wise;” *keter* says of God that “God is ____.”

Obviously the latter statement could not exist without the former, and so it is that from the predicable side of the chasm, *keter* appears just as *ein sof*: a boundless infinity. Without some semantic investment, there is no such thing as a sign, only a sign-vehicle

(that is, the graphic possibility of a sign). Just so, *keter-for-sephirot* (when excluded from the lower nine) is the limitless linguistic potentiality of multitudinous cosmic phonemes or serifs, meaning at once everything and nothing, exactly like its progenitor, *ein sof*. From the other side, however, *keter* is the laying of a foundation: *keter* is *logos* for *sephirot* (and indeed for all creation) in a sense in which *ein sof* unmistakably is not.¹⁸²

Semiotic Relations of Mediating Notions

Thus far I have examined and interpreted two answers to a moment in the question of transcendence. The Plotinian answer involves the eternal act of *prohodos* and *epistrophē*, whereas the Kabbalistic response here examined looks to *keter*, an hypostatized, two-sided subject. I now mean briefly to set each answer in the context of a generic semiotic interpretation and thereby to compare the semantics of each system with the other. This analysis of how each means will, I believe, clarify both responses to the crisis. A semiotic model will serve also to draw out differences between the concepts of each.

We have supposed a chasm dividing infinite and finite. Each side refuses to concede the crossing thereof: the philosophical schemata examined above both suppose that perfect limitlessness is such that it *does* generate formation in some way, and the formed, in order to achieve identity, must look back to the boundless source. In order that it may be identifiable as itself, each side must present a sign of itself such that it is distinguished for the other. Let us begin with present finitude. Common to the side of

the limited, as seen above, is the notion of Form, which is itself undertaken in Otherness. This Otherness *is not* the infinite, and as it *is not*, it so serves as a sign to the infinite. This sign, as act, is the *generative overflow* in Plotinean cosmogony and is *keter-for-ein-sof* as interpreted of Kabbalistic sources – that is, as the syntactical foundation for lower emanations. Thus the sign of the finite is a one-sided conception of the bridge, i.e. the inception of determinacy.

More perplexing seems to be the question: what sign could the infinite present? In *sign*, formation is presupposed, and this implies multiplicity in that which is, *ex hypothesi*, absolutely unified. The simplicity of the One/*ein sof* can only be transgressed at the expense of the system itself. It is a mistake to suppose that the infinite *could* give a sign of itself, because this would suppose a reflexive relation to hold true of the limitless One. Such a relation has been seen to have been denied in both metaphysical systems in question; the infinite has been said not relate at all, even to itself. “Infinite itself” is, in fact, inconsistent conceptualization. The infinite is indistinguishable from anything, including Being in its essentiality. Certainly the finite can give no sign of the infinite, for it is its opposite and is *presented* a sign only in its own otherness. From this observation, however, does a solution arise. The very bridge which constituted the Otherness of finitude is, from the other side, the sign of infinity. Infinity gives no sign of itself, and so it is left to the mediating act/substance to serve as a sign thereof.¹⁸³

The bridge, in Plotinean cosmogony, is presented as a two-place predicate of two sides. It is said that superabundance *proceeds from* the One in itself (*prohodos*) and that superabundance *returns* to its source (*epistrophē*). Plotinus does not hypostatize this

two-way path; for him, it is identifiable as the secondary act of the One (*energeia ek tēs ousias*). The purpose of the above interpretation was, in large part, an effort to resolve the implicit threat of multiplicity in the notion of the One, a threat borne on the language of Plotinus himself. As such, it is important to emphasize that nowhere does Plotinus speak explicitly of the superabundance as substance, and clearly it does not, for him, constitute an *arche* like *nous* or the One. *Prohodos/epistrophē* is an act; it is for Plotinus the relation of *nous* to the One as well as (quite problematically) the identification of the One with itself.¹⁸⁴

Let us suppose that by *sign* I mean the system constituted by a sign-vehicle invested with some relation to a thing signified. As there are two dimensions to the Plotinian act that I recognize as Otherness, there are two functions of this act in the semiotic relation of Otherness to the One. I submit that in *prohodos*, we are presented with the inscription of a sign-vehicle. This inscription is itself the foundation for Form and Limit, a ratio-nal principle identifiable in its essential universality. As yet, this essence is only an essence of *form*, empty of significance. We have not reached language or sign; at this arbitrary point¹⁸⁵ *prohodos* merely determines the *scratching* on which writing is founded. Some formed *thing* is thus objectified, and where *once*¹⁸⁶ the One in itself resided in an absolute conceptual vacuum, there is *now* one side of a description.

On the other side of the bi-vectorial act, *epistrophē* constitutes the investment of a sign-vehicle with significance. In the going-forth, meaning is not yet present. The sign-vehicle is being inscribed. However, just as (above) we saw that the return of the

Plotinean superabundance is to be conceived as occurring identifiably with its procession, the inscription of a sign involves the simultaneous formal de-scription of the vehicle as well as the semantic investment thereof. I interpret the Plotinean semiotic relation's logical flow thus: the One resides devoid of position or sign. As the mediating superabundance flows forth, a sign-vehicle is inscribed. Analogous to the movement of self-consciousness,¹⁸⁷ however, *prohodos* in no way precedes *epistrophē*: in the inscription of that which is, in itself, mere sign-vehicle, the opposite investment of semantic significance works to create a whole sign. What, then, is that which is signified? The sign is bi-directional: for the infinite in itself (the Plotinean One *qua energieia tēs ousias*), the sign is the Otherness which signals the formation of *nous*. Here, then, the sign that is Otherness is not that *to* which it signals (the One), but neither is it that *for* which it signals (Intellect). For finite Intellect, the sign is a sign of the infinity from which it comes and on which it now reflects, receiving thus its own identity in and for itself – the sign is a sign of Sameness for *nous*.

The Kabbalistic conception of *keter* here discussed is like and unlike that of Plotinean superabundance. Both concepts are two-sided, relating finite to infinite and vice versa. I contend that *keter* is thus a non-static principle, in that it does not resolve itself in a single direction, as does *ein sof* or the lower *sephirot*. Whereas *prohodos* and *epistrophē* may be conceived as a sort of two-sided predicate, *keter* is best conceived, I hold, as subject. In the Kabbalistic texts examined above, *keter* seems to have been reckoned as a *substance*, hypostatic in and for itself. *Keter* is reckoned as one of the *sephirot*, which may also be described as divine substances possessed of properties. So

it is that for the Kabbalists examined here, the bridge is itself conceived as a *subject* described by its acts rather than as the acts of some other *arche*. The semiotic outworking of the role of the supreme crown, then, differs intriguingly from that of the Plotinian two-way path.

Viewed from the side of *ein sof*, *keter* constitutes the sign of formation and limit that themselves begin with *hokhmah*. *Keter* could therefore be said to be the sign of logic, language, and boundary – a rational forming principle for subsequent emanation. For *ein sof*, *keter* is essential to the constitution of the whole notion of that which *ein sof* is *not*. As remarked in the above discussion of *ayin*, *keter* is defined for limitless God as that which is *not* limitlessness and is therefore the negation of the *everything* that is in *ein sof*.¹⁸⁸ As such, the signification of *keter* may be said to be iconic: the Otherness signified is apparent in the presentation of *keter* as primal other. Such iconography collapses, however, for *insofar as keter* signifies Otherness, since it does so first of all, it is itself the Otherness it signifies. Thus, as a sign of an other, *keter* is self-signifying. As this Otherness, *keter* is, secondarily, a sign of that which is to begin on *keter*'s foundations: *keter* signals the advent of the beginning of knowledge and of Being in *hokhmah*.

From the other side, *keter-for-sephiroth* signifies *ein sof*. In so doing, it transcends all iconography. Limitlessness cannot be bound by forms of language, but in this hypostatic bridge, the ineffable yields itself up to be cloaked in lexical determinacy. Thus infinite God is not bounded, but from the side of the finite, the nascent inception of boundary signals the unknowable limitlessness which lies beyond. As a reflective

principle, *keter* is sign-vehicle *inscribing* onto God,¹⁸⁹ but since that which is signified cannot be isolated linguistically of itself, the sign-vehicle *keter* is, when viewed from the finite side, indistinguishable from *ein sof*. Thus the bridge directed toward infinity does not *re-present* God; *keter presents ein sof*. To conceive in semiotic terms is to apprehend limits, and infinity is not amenable to such definition. *Keter*, to the finite side, is *ein sof*, and so any *linguistic* attempt to access the signified *ein sof* terminates inevitably in a return to the sign-vehicle, *keter*.

NOTES

¹ Notwithstanding the empirical order in which these moments happen to be encountered (i.e. whether e.g. Individual *against* Community is comprehended prior to Being and Non-Being), it is nonetheless true that Is/Is not enjoys a *logical* priority over any of its issues.

² While it is evident that these two views of Ultimate perfection have been taken up throughout the history of thought in the West, it is not evident that the proponents of these views came by their conceptions through a process explicitly the same as the arguments explained here. In introducing them as simplistically as I have, I mean only to ground interpretive principles used throughout this essay. Having noted this *caveat*, however, I do not think it compromises the philosophical validity of present expression.

³ This was observed by Hegel; cf. *Phenomenology of Spirit* trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), §97ff.

⁴ *Ennead* V.5.6. All citations from the *Enneads* of Plotinus come from Plotinus, *Enneads* trans. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1966, 1967, 1984).

⁵ Fr. 8, from G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven, and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 248.

⁶ *Ibid*, 252ff.

⁷ He identifies Intellect and Being more directly in his dictum, “thinking and being are the same,” quoted by Plotinus at I.4.10, III.8.8, and V.1.8. As Armstrong notes, an analysis of Plotinus’s position does not require certainty of Parmenides’ intended meaning for this puzzling statement.

⁸ Kirk et al., 252.

⁹ As we will see, Plotinus affirms the idea that motion is necessary for intellection; therefore he rejects the concept of thinking as static.

¹⁰ *Neoplatonism*, (London: Duckworth Ltd., 1972), 56ff.

¹¹ *Ennead* V.1.5.

¹² Wallis, 56.

¹³ The difference entailment evinces itself in analysis of Parmenides as the riddle of what exists *outside* of Being: if Being has a surface, a limit, there seems (*prima facie*) to be something that is *not* Being.

¹⁴ Wallis, 48.

¹⁵ *Plotinus: The Road to Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 25.

¹⁶ My contention is not that Plotinus *consciously* embraced an eclectic approach. It is not clear to me that he thought himself to be doing anything other than embracing and expounding on Plato’s philosophy.

¹⁷ Lloyd P. Gerson, *Plotinus* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 25.

¹⁸ *Ennead* V.1.8.

¹⁹ *Ennead* III.8.10.

²⁰ cf. Armstrong, vol. III, 394 n. 1.

²¹ See below.

²² Wallis, 60.

²³ *Ennead* V.5.6 (italics mine).

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Gerson, 15.

²⁶ Regarding the existence of the One, see below.

²⁷ Unformed matter, though not an hypostasis for Plotinus, could be said to complete the fourfold distinction as that which does not have but wants.

²⁸ John N. Deck, *Nature, Contemplation, and the One: A Study in the Philosophy of Plotinus* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), 10-11.

²⁹ *Ennead* V.4.2.

³⁰ In fact, as has been discussed above, Plotinus admits the non-intelligibility of the One and even warns against approaching it as if it were an intelligible thing (cf. *Ennead* V.5.6).

³¹ See below.

³² Plotinus inherits this model of production-as-overflow from the *Timaeus*, 29e-30c (ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997). All citations from dialogues of Plato may be found in this volume).

³³ *Ennead* V.4.1.

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ Deck, 13.

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ *Ennead* V.1.6.

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ See below.

⁴⁰ *ibid.* cf. also *Ennead* V.4.2.

⁴¹ Of course, given the analogous nature of the argument, it is irrelevant whether the sun is *actually* undiminished in its activity of generating light; it is enough that we merely are able to imagine that such could be the case.

⁴² Cf. Gerson, 23.

⁴³ *Ennead* V.4.2.

⁴⁴ It is my contention that even this distinction between secondary and primary acts of the One falls short of finishing the work to be done for Plotinian cosmology; in addition to making a distinction between primary and secondary acts, Plotinus must further distinguish the proceeding (*prohodos*) of the secondary act from its return to its source (*epistrophē*).

⁴⁵ Cf. John Bussanich, “On the Inner Life of the One,” in *Ancient Philosophy* 7 (1987), 163-189, here from 163ff.

⁴⁶ *Ennead* III.8.10. See above note on the *Timaeus*.

⁴⁷ *Ennead* VI.9.3.

⁴⁸ Cf. Wallis, 60.

⁴⁹ Gerson, 16.

⁵⁰ Cf. Eric D. Perl, “‘The Power of All Things’: The One as Pure Giving in Plotinus,” in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 71 (1997), 301-313, here from 306.

⁵¹ *Ennead* V.4.1.

⁵² Wallis, *op. cit.*, 57. The assumption that the perfect is prior to the imperfect is not original to Plotinus. Cf. Aristotle, “De Cælo,” in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), 269a 19ff. Where Plotinus departs from Aristotle, as mentioned above, is in his estimation of the infinite as more perfect than the finite.

⁵³ Wallis, 60.

⁵⁴ Gerson, 46.

⁵⁵ Cf. Deck, 12.

⁵⁶ See interpretation below.

⁵⁷ Gerson, 46.

⁵⁸ *Ennead* V.5.6.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*

⁶⁰ Cf. *Sophist*, 244b-245d; see also *Parmenides* 137c-142a.

⁶¹ *Ennead* V.4.1.

⁶² *Ibid*

⁶³ cf. Perl, 305. I interpret his use of “is not” in the transcendental sense I mentioned above; see below.

⁶⁴ Wallis, 57-58.

⁶⁵ Gerson, 15.

⁶⁶ Ibid

⁶⁷ Perl, 305 n. 19.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 304.

⁶⁹ "Plotinus' Theory of the One," in *The Structure of Being: a Neoplatonic Approach* ed. R. Baine Harris (Albany: State University of New York, 1982), 40-50, here in 47ff.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 41.

⁷¹ *Ennead* V.3.14. cf. Maimonides: "Every attribute . . . is therefore an attribute of His action and not an attribute of His essence . . ." *The Guide of the Perplexed* trans. S. Pines (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), ch. 53.

⁷² Rist, 27.

⁷³ Wallis, 68.

⁷⁴ See below.

⁷⁵ *Logos and Language in the Philosophy of Plotinus* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), 17.

⁷⁶ Deck, 57.

⁷⁷ Perl, 303.

⁷⁸ The meaning of this statement is, I think, valid for at least two senses: 1) *Unformed?* Being is not. 2) *Unformed*, Being *is not*.

⁷⁹ *Ennead* III.8.8.

⁸⁰ Motion and Otherness, I will argue below, constitute the double act of prime formation.

⁸¹ *Ennead* V.1.4.

⁸² Cf. Perl, 301.

⁸³ Ibid, 308.

⁸⁴ *Ennead* V.2.1.

⁸⁵ *Ennead* V.1.7.

⁸⁶ *Ennead* III.8.9.

⁸⁷ Wallis, 66.

⁸⁸ Daniel 12:3, NRSV.

⁸⁹ Zohar I 15a-15b (All Zoharic selections here have been taken from Isaiah Tishby, ed., *The Wisdom of the Zohar* trans. David Goldstein (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).).

⁹⁰ Isaac ibn Latif, quoted in Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: Meridian, 1978), 93.

⁹¹ Asher b. David (1200's), quoted in Ephraim Gottlieb, *Ha-Qabbalah be-Khitevei Babbenu Bahya ben Asher* (Jerusalem: Kiryath Sepher, 1970), 84, trans. and quoted in Daniel C. Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah: The Heart of Jewish Mysticism* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), 66.

⁹² And, as is equally applicable, “*Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen.*” (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* ed. C. K. Ogden (New York: Routledge, 1990), §7.

⁹³ The subsequent discussion is supplemented scripturally at numerous points throughout the Zohar, notably II:239a, I:22b, II:42b-43a, I:15a-15b, I:18a, and I:50b-51b. It is best supplemented in contemporary sources in Scholem, *op. cit.*, 88-105, 128-144 & passim.

⁹⁴ *The Sepher Yetsira*, ed. and trans. Carlo Suares (Boulder: Shambhala, 1976), 70-71.

⁹⁵ Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* ed. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, trans. Allan Arkush (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 35-53.

⁹⁶ Scholem, *Origins*, 25.

⁹⁷ *Seppir* is etymologically related to “sapphire” rather than to “sphere.” Cf. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 99.

⁹⁸ In a clearly Platonic move, this emanation is said to precede the creation of the physical universe. Regarding views on other pre-existing emanations, see Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 116ff.

⁹⁹ Cf. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 88 & passim.

¹⁰⁰ Scholem, *Origins*, 114.

¹⁰¹ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 100. Cf. also Tishby, 269.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 90.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, 92.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 106-107.

¹⁰⁵ Tishby, 269-270. See interpretation, below.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 271. See Zohar I:15a-15b. I attempt a deeper treatment of the issue of blackness/whiteness and the semantics of divine light below.

¹⁰⁷ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 106-107. See Zohar III:135a-135b, 289b-290a.

¹⁰⁸ II:239a.

¹⁰⁹ *Or Ne'erav*, ed. Yehuda Z. Brandwein, in Matt, 41.

¹¹⁰ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 106ff.

¹¹¹ cf. Tishby, 269-270.

¹¹² Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 107 & passim.

¹¹³ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 91-93; cf. also Tishby, 270. I discuss the concept of *keter* as the will of God more fully below.

¹¹⁴ III:275b-285a.

¹¹⁵ cf. *Tikkunei ha-Zohar*, 17a-17b in Matt, 50-51. Also cf. Tishby, 259-260.

¹¹⁶ It is exactly this sense that accounts for much of the connotation of *keter* as *ayin*. See below.

¹¹⁷ Cordovero, *Or Ne'erav*, in Matt, 41.

¹¹⁸ It may be noted that Cordovero explicitly opposes this point in *Or Ne'erav*, but it is also the case that he grants that when *keter* is taken as *da'at* (knowledge), it acts just as would any other *sephira* (see Matt, 40). As I stated above, I am allowing for the externalization of *keter-as-da'at* to be covered under the general title *keter*.

¹¹⁹ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 100.

¹²⁰ I:15a-15b.

¹²¹ I:246b.

¹²² Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 99.

¹²³ *Ayin* here represents *keter*. See Tishby, 326, n. 186.

¹²⁴ Zohar II:200a.

¹²⁵ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 88.

¹²⁶ Cf. Cordovero, *Or Ne'erav*, in Matt, 40.

¹²⁷ See below.

¹²⁸ Cordovero, *Or Ne'erav*, in Matt, 47.

¹²⁹ Hayyim Vital, "On the World of Emanation" (16th cent.) in Matt, *op. cit.*, 95.

¹³⁰ Cordovero, *Or Ne'erav*, in Matt, 46.

¹³¹ Moses Nahmanides (13th cent.), *Commentary on Sefer Yetsirah* ed. Scholem (1929) in Matt, 93.

¹³² Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 88.

¹³³ Note, however, that this does not divest *keter* of its status as the *originator* of the foundations for naming, voice, and reason (see above). Cf. Tishby, 334 n. 265.

¹³⁴ Cf. Zohar I:16b-17a, Scholem, *op. cit.*, 103, and Tishby, 265 n. 3, respectively.

¹³⁵ For a robust account of this, cf. Tishby, 242-246.

¹³⁶ I:3b-4a.

¹³⁷ Cf. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 90.

¹³⁸ *Or Ne'erav*, in Matt, 40.

¹³⁹ Cf. Scholem, *op. cit.*, 146 & passim.

¹⁴⁰ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 91-93.

¹⁴¹ See above note.

¹⁴² Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 92.

¹⁴³ Tishby, 242.

¹⁴⁴ *Tomer Devorah*, in Matt, 84-85.

¹⁴⁵ This accounts for its white color. See below.

¹⁴⁶ I:65a.

¹⁴⁷ cf. Tishby, 324 n. 157.

¹⁴⁸ III:290a.

¹⁴⁹ From Ibn Gabriol in Scholem, *op. cit.*, 93.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 94.

¹⁵¹ *Sha'arei Orah* in Matt, 67.

¹⁵² Cf. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 89. The same concept applies to *ein sof*, given its similarly unknowable character. I discuss the conflation of *ein sof* and *keter* as *ayin* below.

¹⁵³ Cf. Zohar III:135a-135b & passim., in which *keter* is called the “white head.”

¹⁵⁴ Cordovero, *Or Ne'erav*, in Matt, 47.

¹⁵⁵ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 109.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 91.

- ¹⁵⁷ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 129ff.
- ¹⁵⁸ III:225a.
- ¹⁵⁹ III:135b.
- ¹⁶⁰ *Pardes Rimmonim*, in Matt, 91.
- ¹⁶¹ Cf. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 94, also 147.
- ¹⁶² Azriel of Gerona, *Derekh ha-Emunah ve-Derekh ha Kefirah* in Matt, 68.
- ¹⁶³ Moses de León (13th century), *Sheqel ha-Qodesh* in Matt, 69.
- ¹⁶⁴ Cf. Hegel, §96-97, also §111.
- ¹⁶⁵ Cf. Perl, 306-307.
- ¹⁶⁶ *Ennead* V.2.1.
- ¹⁶⁷ Cf. *Ennead* V.4.2 & above comments thereon.
- ¹⁶⁸ Cf. Wallis, 66.
- ¹⁶⁹ *Ennead* III.8.9.
- ¹⁷⁰ *Ennead* V.1.4.
- ¹⁷¹ Cf. *Parmenides* 142b-157a.
- ¹⁷² Perl, 304.
- ¹⁷³ Cf. *Ennead* III.7.10.
- ¹⁷⁴ Gerson, 34 [italics mine].
- ¹⁷⁵ Perl, 309.
- ¹⁷⁶ Cf. *Ennead* V.2.1 above; the return “becomes intellect by looking toward it [the One].”
- ¹⁷⁷ Rist, 27.
- ¹⁷⁸ Cf. *Ennead* III.8.8.
- ¹⁷⁹ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 104.
- ¹⁸⁰ This reads as follows: *ein sof presents infinity; sephirot present unified natures.*
- ¹⁸¹ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 107ff.
- ¹⁸² Cf. my comments on the relativity of cosmological nothingness (*ayin*), above.

¹⁸³ Cf. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 104. See below my interpretation of *keter* as a sign of *ein sof*.

¹⁸⁴ See above.

¹⁸⁵ I am not here contradicting my above contention regarding the simultaneity of *prohodos* and *epistrophē* (see below); this “point” is arbitrary and present only in this abstraction. When the act is comprehended as a unified whole, the point is laid bare in its emptiness and so it is reduced to nothing.

¹⁸⁶ Although I will utilize time-language such as “now,” “once,” and “yet” in reference to the semiotic relationships here in question, I do not mean to suggest a chronology of events so much as I do a logical sequence of argument.

¹⁸⁷ See above.

¹⁸⁸ This dialectical movement seems remarkably similar to Hegel’s treatment of the definition of the object via negation (Hegel, §96).

¹⁸⁹ See above interpretation.

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Areas of Competence

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