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Re-veiling the Revealed: Insights into the Psychology of “Enlightenment” from the Kabbalah

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I explore psychological aspects of a mystically-awakened state as depicted in the Kabbalah. This awakened state is portrayed using imagery of light and is associated with wisdom. The path towards the state entails intense hermeneutic work, and the core characteristic of the awakened person is the ability to see into that which is concealed—be it in scriptural texts, fellow humans, or the outer world. The primary distinction between this kabbalistic state and awakened states as portrayed in recent psychological and perennialist conceptions is the importance of cognitive and intellectual components in the former. I argue that cultural constructions of spiritual goals are impoverished when such intellectual aspects are omitted, and that these aspects can be viewed in meaningful psychological terms.

Keywords: *awakening; consciousness; mysticism; enlightenment; Zohar; Jewish mysticism; Kabbalah; psychoid; transpersonal psychology*

And the enlightened will shine like the radiance of the sky
(*yazhiru ke-zohar ha-rakiya*; Hebrew Bible, Daniel 12:3)

The major work of the Kabbalah, the Zohar, takes its name from this biblical verse, in which the shining and the radiance are both forms of the Hebrew word *zohar*. The author of the Zohar wrote: “Who are *the enlightened*? The wise one who contemplates, on his own, things that human beings cannot utter. . . . This Zohar, *radiance*, is concealed and not revealed” (Zohar 2:23a; as cited in Matt, 2004-2017, vol. 4, pp. 79–80).¹ For Hellner-Eshed (2009), the Zohar understands the term “sky” in this biblical verse as referring to “a state of consciousness or an aspect of reality whose light is concealed from ordinary states of consciousness” (p. 76).

In common with all spiritual and mystical systems, the Kabbalah posits a transformed human state as one of the goals of its teachings. The radiance associated with the transformed state has a twofold connotation. Both are exemplified in the paradigmatic case of Moses (Exodus 34:29–35): First, the encounter with God eventuates in a palpable emanation of light; Second, the light is veiled (“And the people of Israel saw the face

of Moses, that the skin of Moses’ face shone; and Moses put the veil upon his face again, until he went in to speak with [God]”). It is this second connotation that will be the focus of my paper, since it opens a more psychological discourse. The biblical narrative suggests that the veiling is to protect others. However, the mystical tradition introduces a further aspect: The concealing of the radiance is necessarily intrinsic to revelation itself. As conveyed in the Zohar, the light that is the impulse behind emanation of the divine attributes—that is, the impulse for the unfolding of creation—is a *black light*, a “lamp”, or “spark”, “of adamantine darkness”, translated from the Aramaic *botzina de-kardenuta*² (Wolski & Hecker, 2017, pp. 422, 424).

Through contemplating and enacting the inner workings of creation, the kabbalist “ascends” to embrace the initiating impulse. The experiential encounter with the spark of darkness is identified with knowing the secrets of wisdom (Wolfson, 2007, p. 117). Corbin (1971/1978) identified the black light depicted in Iranian Sufism, which

seems to have parallels with the kabbalistic spark of darkness, with the “divine self” and the workings of “superconsciousness” (pp. 100–101). For Jung (1954/1977), the darkness conveys the role played by the unconscious in the individuation process: “It is a curious paradox that the approach to a region which seems to us the way into utter darkness should yield the light of illumination as its fruit” (p. 508).

The primary sacred text for the Jewish tradition, the Torah, is itself associated with light, for example through the term’s etymological association with the Hebrew *orah*, meaning “light,” a connection made more explicit when the initial “T” was dropped as the religious discourse shifted from Hebrew to Aramaic (Aramaic *Oraita* = Torah) in the Rabbinic phase of Jewish history. Consistent with the above notion of the veiling of light, the Torah is viewed mystically as continually concealing its deepest insights. As the Zohar puts it: “that concealed matter is revealed by the Torah, and immediately clothed in another garment, hidden there and not revealed” (Zohar 2:99a; Matt, 2004-2017, vol. 5, p. 31).

A hallmark of the enlightened state is the mystic’s attainment of wisdom, which confers the ability to penetrate to the concealed core of things. Yet, revealing the concealed cannot be sustained. Wolfson (2005), drawing on the profound Sufi understanding of the veil, conveyed the paradox:

The mystical path is to train the mind so that one removes the veils in order to see truth unveiled, but the greatest of veils to remove is the belief that one can see truth without a veil. To unveil the veil, therefore, is to veil the unveiling, to see the unseeing as the manifestation of the concealment in the concealment of the manifestation, to behold the face of the veil veiling the veiling of the veil of the face. (pp. 232–233)

For ibn Arabi, “the Real becomes manifest by being veiled” (as cited in Wolfson, 2005, p. 231). As Wolfson (2005) emphasized, the symbolism of the veil applies especially to the esoteric hermeneutic that characterizes Sufism and Kabbalah. The mystic—or perhaps better, the esotericist working to attain wisdom—opens deeper meaning in Scriptural passages that had been concealed by what he or

she conceives as their divine Author. Through such unveiling one approaches the Author, yet the only way to truly connect with the Author is by recognizing that the Author is veiled, that all revelation connives to conceal. And hence the Sufi, as does the Kabbalist, garbs insights in the very language of concealment.

In this paper, I identify some psychological connotations of this concealment-revealing-concealment trope. What might the trope imply for an understanding of the dynamic between what are termed conscious and unconscious processes? And how might such a psychological discourse contribute to understanding the purported goals of kabbalistic practice—to attain wisdom and enlightenment? The Zohar conveys its conception of such higher, mystical states of consciousness using the imagery of awakening; those who are unable to gaze into the concealed levels are asleep, and the path toward awakening entails complex hermeneutical and intellectual work. To awaken is to become alive to the levels of meaning inherent in the veiling, and to grasp the imperative to re-veil the revealed.

My aim in the following is twofold. First, I contribute to recent discussions on the psychology of spiritual awakening. Second—as the foregoing introductory considerations imply—I delve into the portrayal of such awakening as given in one specific mystical tradition, that of the Kabbalah as formulated in the Zohar. The aims are effectively united since my intention for the second aim is to mine this school of Kabbalah for those insights that can usefully contribute to the psychology of awakening.

I begin in the next section by considering recent advances in the psychological study of those who claim to have experienced spiritual awakening. The awakened state portrayed through recent phenomenological studies differs in key respects from that conveyed in a work such as the Zohar. In particular, whilst the former attenuates intellectual content, the latter views the intellect as the very ground of enlightenment. How might we understand these differences? Critical to my argument is a recognition that spiritual goals are not unchanging absolutes but are rather constructs of

a given cultural canon. Phenomenological study of self-proclaimed awakened individuals in first-world countries serves to identify dominant features of spiritual goals as construed in their cultural canon. By presenting such features as essential components of a perennial view of spiritual goals, the rich variety of spiritual traditions, each with distinctive nuances in their aims, becomes compromised. Returning to the particular aspect of mysticism on which I focus, there is a danger that intellectual features are squeezed out in a vicious cycle in which psychologists are complicit in promulgating culture- and time-bound trends as universal goals.

In subsequent sections I flesh out what is meant by intellectual mysticism, illustrating the ways in which its purported goals may be constructively viewed through a psychological lens with a view to generating heuristic models of mental processes. Of relevance to this project are empirical psychological data in addition to scholarly analyses by academics who have worked on the relevant kabbalistic texts. To the extent that awakening is viewed as an emptying of structured and cognitive content, the role of psychology becomes limited. A psychological model might include an optimistic arrow pointing to “nothingness” or “union with the divine” but further discussion of these notions must be left to metaphysicians, theologians and possibly philosophers. There we reach the limits of psychology as an *explanatory* and *empirical* discipline.

Finally, I return to the Zohar’s portrayal of awakening and enlightenment. The enigmatic concealment-revealing-concealment paradigm is complemented by imagery depicting the origins of both mind and matter. For the author of the Zohar, the kabbalist’s aim becomes a state in which these twin origins are said to be known experientially. Again, the richness of the imagery encourages one to advance explanations that carry significant psychological content.

A Contemporary Psychology of Awakening

The above brief introduction to a view of enlightenment as conveyed in kabbalistic thought represents one approach to understanding features of supposed enlightened states. This hermeneutic

approach draws on texts relating to the enlightened state in one or more wisdom traditions, together with scholarly analyses of the texts. A second approach involves working with those who believe they have undergone the kind of change identified as *awakening*, or *enlightenment*, in the present. The latter approach has the obvious advantage that the claimant can be prodded and probed through dialogue and by using instrumentation. Having such a person in one’s sights, as it were, enables us to shape our research approaches in relation to contemporary issues. Moreover, from the perspective of psychological science, this second approach has the advantage of drawing on the established scientific methods that have enabled academic psychology to flourish.

Psychometric approaches (Friedman, 1983; Hood, 1975; MacDonald, 2011) have distilled key aspects of spiritual or mystical states, and neurocognitive studies have identified changes associated with meditative and other spiritual practices (see Cahn & Polich, 2006; Chiesa & Serretti, 2010; Edwards, Peres, Monti, & Newberg, 2012; Lancaster, 2016; Lutz, Slagter, Dunne, & Davidson, 2008; MacDonald, Walsh, & Shapiro, 2013; Malinowski, 2013). More directly relevant to the specific idea of awakening, some phenomenological studies have identified core characteristics of the changes accompanying states of awakening (Taylor, 2016). For example, Taylor (2016) adduced four major characteristics of the state, namely a “heightened sense of connection,” “intensified perception,” “increased focus on the present,” and “enhanced wellbeing” (p. 26). Subsidiary themes included a less materialistic attitude, increased altruism, decreased cognitive activity, a reduced fear of death, and a form of letting go or stepping back in which the person was no longer pushing to make things happen.

Taylor (2016) noted parallels between the characteristics of the awakened state in those claiming to have attained it and a number of commonalities amongst the transformed state as depicted in the world’s major spiritual traditions. These commonalities have been identified by many authors stressing that core, or perennial, features may be distilled across spiritual traditions (e.g.,

Marshall, 2005; Rose, 2016; Smith, 1987). Taylor further suggested that an immanent *spiritual force* may account for the commonalities. The spiritual force is viewed as fundamental, all-pervading and as constituting the essence of all that exists. It is “built into the fabric of reality, as a universal force” (Taylor, 2016, p. 34).

There are a number of aspects to Taylor’s (2016) soft perennialism, as he termed it, that have been critiqued (see Ferrer, 2017; Hartelius, 2016). Criticisms included the privileging of experientialism and apophatic spiritual practices, reliance on controversial notions of essentialism in mystical traditions, and concern over the way in which metaphysics is introduced through the back door of phenomenology. In addition to these criticisms, I would add that soft perennialism cannot accommodate *theurgic* features of mystical traditions. Theurgy connotes mystics participating in what they understand as the divine mystery in order to influence the beneficial flow from the divine into the world. It places the mystic in a significantly more active role vis-à-vis any spiritual presence than soft perennialism suggests.³ Notwithstanding these criticisms of soft perennialism, there is of course considerable value in the thematic analysis of those claiming to have transformed through awakening. Of critical interest for the arguments in the present paper, such analysis gives insight into how spiritual goals are being expressed in the contemporary cultural canon.

Returning to the divide between these two approaches, the one historical and text-based, and the other working with participants in the present, the advantage of the live aspect of the latter has to be weighed against the price paid in terms of authenticity and circularity. This is not to imply that historical texts portray states that necessarily carry some kind of universal authenticity, nor that the states portrayed are not constituted on the basis of the assumptions implicit in the given tradition. On the contrary, the states cultivated by a given mystical tradition are undoubtedly relative to the teachings and aspirations of the community from which they arise. I would claim, however, that the rigor of the commentarial tradition over centuries provides significant checks against simplistic constructions, and that accordingly psychological analysis of the

states portrayed carries validity in the limited sense that it pertains to a subset of potential states, viewed as authentic within a specific cultural context.

Neurocognitive research largely avoids the problems of authenticity and circularity since the legitimate questions concern the effects of having practiced a given technique for a prolonged time. There is no need to rely on claims made by the participants. Indeed, from my own encounters with participants in such studies, I rather doubt that these participants would make claims to have reached enlightenment (a sure test of their advanced state, perhaps)! The problem arises more specifically when research focuses on participants who have been selected specifically on the basis of their claims to some kind of transformed status. One could envisage a range of psychological dynamics, for example, at work in such claims, and the authenticity of their awakened status is inevitably problematic. The circularity comes in the extent to which their claims and reflections mirror the teachings and values they have imbibed.⁴ It is for these reasons that I consider the insights deriving from phenomenological analysis to tell us more about the construction of spiritual goals within our contemporary cultural canon than they do about the value of perennialism itself, whether *hard* or *soft*.

Clarifying the details of shifting cultural constructs around notions of spiritual awakening is important. As an example, I would cite the rise in what has been termed *self-spirituality* (Heelas, 1996). The rise of individualism as a value in society has irrepressibly sculpted the goals of religion towards individual transformation. Indeed, the very shift in valence of the terms *religion* and *spirituality* articulates this change. Transpersonal psychology has a key role to play in chronicling such shifts and evaluating their many ramifications.

It would be naïve, however, to think that transpersonal psychologists have restricted themselves to such a chronicling role. In many cases, their work can be seen as contributing to the changing construction of spirituality, and as leading to privileging of certain kinds of spiritual practice over others. It is this role of transpersonal psychology as an agent of the changing construction of spirituality, and arbiter—even if unwittingly—of what may

constitute preferred ways to follow a spiritual path, that becomes a challenge for the parent discipline of psychology. The boundary between the proverbial detached psychologist coolly observing phenomena and the priest giving spiritual advice has become blurred.

Taylor's (2016) position epitomizes the conundrum: On the one hand, his research into the experiences and views of those who claim to be awakened contributes to documenting changes in cultural expressions of spirituality characterizing the current age. On the other hand, his postulation of an all-pervading spiritual force as a fundamental of reality places him as an agent of the changes moving forward. Of course, these two roles blend into one another—there is no hard dichotomy here. Data gathering inevitably impacts on what may be perceived as constructive ways forward. It is not my intention to criticize transpersonal psychologists being active agents of change; it is effectively intrinsic to our scope. The issue concerns the legitimacy of the metaphysical claims we make as psychologists (Ferrer, 2014).

Cognitive Mysticism

The primary purpose of this paper is to bring a broader context to the construction of spirituality than that generally promoted through phenomenological study of awakening. Given, as argued above, that we are not merely chroniclers of cultural changes in expressions of spirituality, then it seems to me that we carry responsibilities in shaping this cultural construction of what may constitute the psychological aspects of spiritual awakening or enlightenment. Based on my interest in what might be described as hermeneutically-oriented mysticism, or *cognitive mysticism* (Lancaster, 2000; Werblowsky, 1966), I would argue that the form of spirituality we are bequeathing to future generations may be unduly anti-intellectual. This anti-intellectualism is strongly evident in the constructions of awakening arising from phenomenological research to which I have referred. As noted above, perception may be intensified, but cognitive activity is decreased. Indicators of spiritual progress are more concerned with feelings than with thoughts. Mindfulness focuses on presence above wisdom. And there

is something of a vicious cycle inasmuch as contemporary reports of awakening that downplay the intellectual component become selected into prescriptions for spiritual progress, which in turn impact on subsequent reports, and so on.

Were this the only concern, then it might effectively be countered by stressing that the decline in traditional religion has been accompanied by a lowering of interest in scriptural texts, resulting in less emphasis on the kinds of intellectual connotations of enlightenment exemplified by the Kabbalah, with its complex hermeneutic foundations. There is, however, a second concern that relates specifically to psychological approaches to spirituality and enlightenment. This second concern is that contemporary approaches to awakening emphasize features that are beyond effective psychological analysis. We risk compromising the epistemological core of what constitutes a valid psychology.

I refer here to notions of *oneness* and *nondual* states. I am not intending to downplay the importance of such notions in any mature form of mysticism. The unity of all things and the potential for humans to attain some form of union with the “unitary source of all” lie at the core of mysticism. The issue that concerns me is that these absolutes cannot be analyzed in psychological terms where the intention would be to provide explanations of heuristic value. This is a critical point, and I would like to emphasize its limits. I am not saying that psychology should have nothing to do with such absolutes. It is certainly valid to investigate how people relate to such notions, their impact on social cohesion, for example, or on constructs such as well-being. It may indeed be the case that having the sense that one has experienced a nondual state carries positive benefits, an important and legitimate subject of psychological study. To take another example, such experience may enhance one's social circumstances—being able to reflect on nondual states may be the dream ticket for many kinds of New Age groups! But moving from these kinds of psychological insights towards specifying the *ontic* nature of the nondual leads to speculation that is inevitably non-psychological.

My interest here is fundamentally in the *nature of mind*—building operational models that

articulate the processes entailed in psycho-spiritual transformation. It is from this specific perspective that I believe that analysis of classical mystical texts can enrich the role that psychology might play in the study of mysticism (Lancaster, 2015).

A parallel with research into the nature of consciousness may be instructive. I think there are good reasons for viewing consciousness as a fundamental and irreducible property of the universe (see Barušs, 2010; Chalmers, 1995). Given its irreducible status, consciousness itself cannot be understood in terms of its being generated by neural—or other, material—processes. That statement pertains to what we might construe as the *essence* of consciousness. Human states entailing conscious or unconscious processes may be viewed as building on that essence, and certainly involve psychological and neural activity. The essence is present as the fundamental basis of the states, but psychology—as opposed to philosophy or theology, for example—can say nothing about that essence itself. Of course, psychology has much to contribute about the “building on,” the processing structures that shape experiences of that essence. But consciousness in itself simply *is* (Lancaster, 1991, 2004).

My task as the kind of psychologist interested in modeling content-rich cognitive and psychodynamic processes is to focus on the rich hermeneutic world of the mystic. Attaining states of oneness may be uplifting in many ways, but beyond stating that nothingness *is*, what more can one say that would be of psychological worth? In terms of modeling the mind, the psychology of emptiness remains empty!

Intellectual Mysticism

Werblowsky (1966) contrasted the apophatic mysticism typified by St. John of the Cross, which eschews the intellectual faculty, with what he termed cognitive mysticism. The latter is characterized by insights that are “discursive, objective and detailed” (p. 177), and takes on a more “scientific” quality by comparison with the former. In the present context, Werblowsky’s point about the scientific quality of this form of mysticism is critical. I have argued elsewhere (Lancaster, 2011)

that undue focus on the experiential and ultimate features of mystical states stymies the psychological study of mysticism; the more speculative insights in mystical systems—the *cognitive* in Werblowsky’s terms—can play a role in the generation of models of psychological processes which form the bedrock of psychological science. Focus on experience leads to a kind of academic “no-man’s land” in which neither psychologists nor scholars of mysticism see value in our approach. Idel (1988a), for example, noted—I believe correctly—that “the psychological processes described by mystical literature as unitive experiences are beyond the scope of academic research” (p. 36). It would be wrong, however, to generalize from this limitation to assert that all psychological approaches tend towards a reductionism that loses essential features of mysticism.

Werblowsky’s (1966) characterization of cognitive mysticism applies to the term more generally adopted, namely *intellectual mysticism* (e.g., Jantzen, 1995). Two aspects come to the fore in defining this term. First, the practices by means of which the mystic aspires to the tradition’s goals draw significantly on intellectual learning, particularly in terms of hermeneutic principles; and second, the explanatory systems that facilitate discourse about mystical states—including those that pertain to the present discussion about enlightenment—emphasize levels of the intellect.

A term such as intellectual mysticism is inevitably of only partial applicability. No mystic proactively segregated their experiences and formulations into the categories that scholars may find useful. Thus, one of the foremost representatives of this intellectual approach in Christianity, Meister Eckhart is equally well-known for his apophatic emphasis. Kabbalists, whose contributions to this intellectual aspect I shall explore below, invariably acknowledged the apophatic approach to the *Ein Sof* (limitless divine essence) that cannot be known to us other than as nothingness (Matt, 1995). Nevertheless, the term intellectual is appropriate to the extent that the mystical end-stage that may entail trans-rational contemplation of the divine essence, as they viewed it, is predicated on stages of intense intellectual striving. Thus, Maimonides’

blending of Sufi and Jewish sources emphasizes the long and tedious intellectual work of knowing God as He is manifest in creation as the scaffold for the ideal of continuous contemplation of God (Blumenthal, 2009). Analysis of what mysticism brings to contemporary notions of spiritual goals must include all aspects, including the apophatic role of nothingness. But my claim here is that for the purposes of advancing our psychological understanding of awakening, it is the intellectual formulations that are paramount.

The mysticism of the Zohar epitomizes the first connotation of intellectual mysticism—hermeneutic skill as mystical practice (Lancaster, 2015). The exegesis enlivening the pages of the Zohar becomes “a performative mystical act with salient experiential—transformational—consequences” (Katz, 2000, p. 57). As Fishbane (2000) put it, “The spiritual transformation of the exegete *through exegesis* is the profound truth repeatedly dramatized in the Zohar” (p. 105). And, for Wolski (2010):

The Zohar invites the reader to actively participate in its mythical adventure. . . . [It] has the unique capacity to draw us into its world and, most importantly, to bring us into contact with and consciousness of the flow of divinity. This performative aspect is pivotal, for the Zohar is not merely a work about Jewish mysticism but is a work written from within the horizons of mystical experience that aims to regenerate our mystical awareness of God, Torah, and reality as a whole. (p. 2)

The exegetical twists and turns required for the reader to engage with this performative function—and thereby to be transformed and awakened—demand considerable intellectual astuteness. The exegetical framework is erected on the foundations of rabbinic discourse, meaning that considerable knowledge is needed to follow the allusions. Moreover, the transformative function will be activated only in a reader who has a capacity for a rich, fluid imagination that can integrate textual exploration with experiential knowing of mystical states of consciousness (Hellner-Eshed, 2009).

All the above-cited authors include plentiful

examples from the texts of the Zohar to illustrate this point. In Lancaster (2015), for example, I demonstrate how the Zohar’s play on the Hebrew root *Sh- -r*, which gives rise to words meaning “dawn”, “black”, and “search”, unfolds into a profound meditation on stages encountered on the mystic’s path. Again, the journey to encountering the experiential meaning entails a supple imagination operating within an intellectual framework.

The second connotation of intellectual mysticism—the explanatory systems that stress levels of the intellect—enters the Kabbalah through the philosophy of Maimonides, in turn heavily influenced by the great Islamic philosophers’ transmission of Aristotelian principles. Blumenthal (2009) characterized Maimonides as a “philosophic mystic who uses Sufi vocabulary, an intellectual mystic who provided a space within rabbinic, rationalist, *halakhic* (legal) Judaism for persons with intense spiritual practice” (p. xxi). For Maimonides, and kabbalists whose mysticism draws fundamentally on Maimonides’ thought, the highest mystical state—identified as *prophetic consciousness*—is attained when the human intellect merges with the divine mind. The divine realm of prophetic encounter is the *Active Intellect*, Aristotle’s term generally understood in Islamic and Jewish philosophical tradition as the final celestial intelligence emanated from God. The human intellect is an overflow from the Active Intellect. Given that “God . . . is the intellect as well as the intellectually cognizing subject and the intellectually cognized object . . . one single notion in which there is no multiplicity” (Maimonides, 1963, p. 163), it is the intellect that is the locus for union. During the mystical/prophetic experience the lower, human intellect is united with the Active Intellect; in classical terms, knowledge, the knower, and the known become one. Meister Eckhart’s intellectual orientation is expressed along similar lines: “The contemplative state, constituted as it is in *Divine Knowledge*, is a realization of the *Knower* as subject and the *Known* as object and *Knowledge* itself as the relation” (Kelley, 1977, p. 212).

The 13th century kabbalist Isaac of Akko elaborated the intellectual scheme whereby the human-divine union is attained (Fishbane 2009).

From *above*, in the emanative process, the divine intellect *descends and arrives* at the Active Intellect, which in turn descends through successive intellectual spheres to the level of soul. The mystic aspires in the opposite direction:

And when you contemplate this issue from below to above you will see that when the human being separates himself from the vanities of this world, and attaches his mind and his soul to the *Supernal* realms with an ongoing constancy, *his soul will be called by the name of the rung from among the Supernal rungs which it has reached and become attached to . . .* If the soul of the meditator . . . merits to reach and to attach to the Active Intellect, it itself becomes in fact the Active Intellect. (Isaac of Akko, as cited in Fishbane, 2009, pp. 278–279)

Finally, in this scheme, the soul transcends even the Active Intellect, attaching to the divine intellect. “At root, this is a comprehensive monism, a veritable great chain of Being: the Divine becomes human, and the human divine” (Fishbane, 2009, p. 280).

The mysticism of Abraham Abulafia (1240—after 1291) epitomizes the conjoining of *intellectual practice* with the scheme that sees ultimate reality as the successive unfolding of *intellectual spheres*. Despite the *ecstatic* orientation of the practices Abulafia taught (Idel, 1988b), his teachings are solidly founded on Maimonides’ conceptualizations of the human path towards the divine intellect. Abulafia teaches that mystical enlightenment is “a state of cognitive perfection in which the human intellect unites with the Active Intellect” (Tirosch-Samuels, 2010, p. 411). The practices taught by Abulafia are founded on the mystical significance of the Hebrew letters and the Hebrew names of God, and assume a rich grasp of intellectual associations on the part of the practitioner. The complex practices incorporate a range of trance-inducing features including breath control, chanting, and embodied movement, all brought to bear on the central concern—that of atomizing language to its elemental letters, and permuting and combining Hebrew letters and the divine names (Idel, 1988c). These practices are intended to bring about a prophetic state of consciousness and mystical union:

The [place of the] beginning of the real prophecy is the inner intellectual faculty which is created in the heart . . . by the 22 sacred letters, . . . and by the [Active Intellect], which is divine, religious and prophetic [The emanation resulting from this work of letter combinations will rise from faculty to faculty until it reaches] the [Active Intellect] and will unite with it after many hard, strong and mighty exercises, until the particular and personal prophetic [faculty] will turn universal, permanent, and everlasting like the essence of its cause, and he and He [i.e., the mystic and God] will become one entity. (Abulafia, as cited in Idel, 1988b, p. 6)

The intellectual aspect of these practices is evident from the complex range of associations that Abulafia explores, using arcane codes and cryptic allusions. One could hardly imagine practices further removed from the apophatic ideal of emptying the mind.

These two features of intellectual mysticism—practices elaborated from a hermeneutic foundation and explanations conveyed in terms of higher intellectual realms—lend themselves to psychological analysis (Drob, 2010; Lancaster, 2004, 2011, 2015). Given the role of language in constructions of self and of the world as perceived, the linguistic core of the practices may be understood as re-structuring our grasp of reality, especially in terms of self-oriented processing. The various explanatory realms can be conceived in terms of levels of the psyche, with the Active Intellect corresponding to a *higher unconscious*,⁵ for example. My critical claim is that these are not simply bland correspondences, in which contemporary-sounding terms are substituted for archaic ones. Rather, my analysis models psychological processes that are proposed to underpin mystical experiences and the “higher” states attained. It is beyond the scope of this article to explore these models in detail; suffice it to say that in the references cited, I have shown how operationally-defined neurocognitive processes could advance our understanding of key elements of intellectual and ecstatic kabbalistic mysticism. The modelling of these elements contributes to the whole notion of awakening, or enlightenment, in psychological terms since it operationalizes

notions such as detachment from habitual self-related processing, and incorporation of imaginative associations into cognitive processing. Importantly, such definitions are not reductive in the sense of asserting that mystical states are nothing but brain states (Arzy & Idel, 2015), but they offer a heuristic framework for the interpenetration of psychological, transpersonal and mystical levels of explanation.

On the Goals of Kabbalistic Mysticism

Until now, engraved paths of this mystery have been explained. From here onward: mystery of mysteries of the perfect unity, as is fitting—measure that has no measure, calibrating and measuring on all sides. . . .

Spark of Adamantine darkness, Concealed of all Concealed. . . . He who attains this mystery and knows it, merits to know the wisdom of his Master. Happy is his portion in this world and in the world that is coming. (Zohar adash 57a; Wolski & Hecker, 2017, pp. 417, 424)

The above extract concerns two recondite concepts—the *line of measure* and the *spark of darkness*. They constitute the twin aspects of the initiating impulse that brings into being the array of *sefirot*⁶ manifesting the divine essence through the process of creation. Their relevance in this context is that the Zohar presents them as the ultimate point of contact between humans and the unmanifest Being of the divine. If the term enlightenment were to be applied to the mystic's aspiration as conceived by the Zohar, it would lie here—in the encounter with the initiating impulse, with the light source that is not light and the measuring instrument that has no measure. As Wolski and Hecker (2017) commented, “knowing the mystery of the *Qav ha-Middah* (line of measure) and acquiring mastery over it are the kabbalist's twin goals” (p. 243).

To distil the single aim of a tradition spanning centuries, and which has been profoundly influenced by diverse contacts in widespread places, is at best problematic. To propose a common goal across spiritual traditions, as in the perennialist ideal, inevitably entails major distortions of the aims articulated in the specific traditions. A psychology of awakening begs the question, awakening

according to whom? If the label is self-applied, then, as I argued above, phenomenological analysis is valuable for understanding the cultural evolution of spirituality as a construct, but it may contribute little to understanding the more complex psychological aspects of spiritually advanced states.

In this final section, I wish to explore the complex of meanings conveyed by the Zohar's terms line of measure and spark of darkness, for I believe that this complex yields fruitful material for understanding the psychology of the specific advanced mystical state in which the Zohar is interested. Whether this state has any bearing on more widespread notions of enlightenment is not my immediate concern. My limited claim is that for a specific text canonized within a specific tradition, the complex of meanings to be explored seems instructive for considering psychological features within what that text construes as an advanced mystical state.

We saw above in the formulation of Isaac of Akko that the *descending* logic of emanation is of interest because the mystic's *ascending* path is viewed as tracing the same scheme in reverse. Indeed, this idea is foundational to all kabbalistic speculation. The kabbalist who encounters the spark of darkness—who, in the above quoted words, “attains this mystery”—has traced the emanative impulse backwards to a level beyond which nothing could be known. The mystical ascent through the agency of the Active Intellect is thus compared by the Gaon of Vilna (1720–1797) to the descent of the spark of darkness (Giller, 2001, pp. 80–81). The mystic then “knows the wisdom of his Master” (Zohar adash 57a; Wolski & Hecker, 2017, p. 424) because the first manifestation of the emanative impulse arises in the *sefirah* called *wisdom*. In this sense, wisdom represents the inception of an idea prior to it ramifying into details. For Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezeritch (1704–1742), this level is pre- (or un-) conscious (Hurwitz, 1968; Lancaster, 2004; Scholem, 1975).

In the various allusions to concealed mysteries, the author of the Zohar strove to convey what lies at the limit of human experience, the very source of mind and matter. This seems to me to be the reason why there are two aspects in the initial

impulse towards the unfolding of structure—the source of light that manifests as mind and the source of measurement relating to matter. In this ultimate mystical state, the oneness prior to differentiation is encountered. In the emanative sequence, the spark of darkness is the agent that allows the “pure, undifferentiated oneness of the transcendent God to emanate into the differentiated plurality of the created world” (Giller, 2001, p. 72). In the ladder of ascent, the mystic plunges back towards that undifferentiated state, holding on—as it were—to the line of measure and the spark of darkness. The mystic accesses the undifferentiated fount of the psyche but is protected from being lost in an egoless flood by grasping the core progenitors of mind and matter.

I have argued in detail elsewhere (Lancaster, 2004) that mystical states may arise as the mystic becomes aware of normally preconscious processes that precede mundane ego consciousness. Mystical states depend on a “turning around” of the normal process of perception or thought (Hunt, 1984). The scheme of the Zohar provides the same fundamental pattern whereby the mystic re-traces a process, but the process of interest in the case of Jewish mysticism is that of creation. It is the stages of creation that are “turned around,” or re-traced, by the mystic. In perception or thought, the more primitive, preconscious aspects of the cognitive processes entail dynamic associations that arise from the unconscious matrix (Lancaster, 2000). In the re-tracing the mystic therefore aspires to these unconscious roots of being. The mystical experience entails becoming conscious of that which is normally preconscious—especially in the sense of being outside of the orb of the everyday experience of self, the “I” that references mundane perceptions, thoughts, and memories—and the more enduring enlightened state is one of openness to the matrix where neither mind nor matter are separately structured.

Returning to the Zohar’s terminology, in the emanative sequence the spark of darkness and the line of measure connotes the very beginning of differentiation, and in their connotation for the mystical ascent, they depict some form of awareness of the primordial elements of the psyche. The enlightened state is identified as wisdom on account

of the resultant ability to see beyond the immediacy of outward form. According to this scheme, the kabbalist develops skills in the hermeneutic play operating where the concealed, or in psychological terms, the unconscious, arises from its source and unfolds through levels of thought.

These connotations of the spark of darkness and line of measure may be further substantiated through additional imagery in the Zohar that connects them with the origination of the elements of language—vowels, cantillation notes, and the letters. Wolfson (1995) demonstrated that the spark of darkness, or *hardened spark*, as he translated the Aramaic, is also conceived as a kind of stylus bringing the linguistic elements into being. Throughout kabbalistic discourse, the Hebrew letters are assigned transcendental significance—they are the divine agents through which creation is achieved, and they are the principal means through which contemplation and ecstatic practice can align one with the Godhead. The primary act of engraving the letters is therefore not derivative but of the very essence of the initial stirrings of creation. The opening of the Zohar, which is a commentary on the first word of the Hebrew Bible (“By means of a beginning”), depicts the spark of darkness as “engraving engravings in the supernal lustre” (Zohar 1:15a; as cited in Wolfson, 1995, p. 60). That these engravings are linguistic is substantiated by a zoharic passage in which the “twenty-two points and notes,” corresponding to the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, “are the secret of the hardened spark, the measure of everything. . . . In this mystery is every measure in length, width, depth, and height” (Zohar adash 105a, as cited in Wolfson, 1995, p. 61).

Wolfson (1995) further demonstrated that the *botzina de-kardinuta* has a phallic connotation: The engraving in the supernal lustre equating to penetration, and to semen initiating the further unfolding of the creative pattern. Both Wolfson (1995) and Giller (2001) elucidated, as it were, the “phallic eroticism” (Giller, 2001, p. 85) projected onto the divine play (*sha’ashua*) that kabbalistic sources hold to have preceded creation. The role of play becomes foundational, and the juxtaposition of phallic play with the play of language

opens the rich panorama of eroticism combined with hermeneutic exploration that permeates the Kabbalah.

The various strands of imagery that revolve around the spark of darkness and the line of measure all converge on notions of creativity, or generativity, at the primordial core of all things. The allusions to mind (“light”) and matter (“measure”) convey the confluence of potential arising in an undifferentiated matrix, perhaps corresponding to the biblical *tohu va-bohu* (“formless and void,” Genesis 1:2).

In this context, it is worth noting that this confluence of the progenitors of mind and matter has become central to scientific conceptions of reality in our time (Bohm, 1980; Peat, 1987). It constituted the focus of the extended dialogue between Jung and Pauli (Gieser, 2005; Meier, 2001), through which Jung came to conceive of the archetypes as engendering form in both mind and physical reality. This notion of a continuum, rather than a chasm, between mind and matter underpinned his view that a meaningful but acausal relation pertains between mental and physical events—*synchronicity* (Jung, 1952/1969). The fount of being is *psychoïd*, to use Jung’s term to convey this notion of a continuum of mind and matter.

I believe it is appropriate to see the Zohar’s conceptualization of the initiating spark along similar lines, and that the mystic’s goal of knowing, and acquiring mastery over, the spark and its twin, the line of measure, should be understood in terms of what I can best formulate as an ability to be intimate with the deepest level of the psyche. The Zohar’s characterization of advanced kabbalists sees them having fluid experience of that which is dark and that which is light, of that which is formless and that which has form. And, critically for this strand of mysticism, the path towards such mastery of—what we call—the unconscious depths of mind is hermeneutic virtuosity. Mastery over the spark of darkness and the line of measure places the accomplished mystic in the place where mind and matter interpenetrate, where the implicate is ever unfolding into the explicate and the explicate enfolding into the implicate (Bohm, 1980), and therefore confers knowledge of the interconnectedness of all.

Re-veiling the revealed

The superordinate focus of the Kabbalah, and especially its pre-eminent literary masterpiece, the Zohar, on mysteries and concealment, together with its hermeneutic emphasis that coheres around the dynamics of re-veiling the concealed secret that the adept revealed, is perhaps as close as we come to any notion of a goal. The qualifying ability of the *enlightened one*, the *maskil*, is hermeneutic acumen:

All concealed things that the blessed holy One does He has placed within the holy Torah; all is found there. That concealed matter is revealed by Torah, and immediately clothed in another garment, hidden there and not revealed. The wise who are full of eyes—although that matter is concealed there in its garment—see it through the garment. And when that matter is revealed, before entering its garment, they cast an open eye upon it, although immediately concealed, it is not lost to their sight. (Zohar 2:98b; as cited in Matt, 2004-2017, vol. 5, pp. 31)

As Wolfson (2007) noted, “The function of the garment, paradoxically, is to concomitantly conceal and reveal; the secret is hidden from everyone by the garment, but it is only from within the garment that the secret is revealed to the wise” (p. 73). Wolfson clarified that the goal is not simply that of uncovering the secret but rather of gaining the skill of observing the interpenetration of levels—the secret is on the surface for the one who has the eye to see it, and therefore the surface *is* the secret; “the literal is metaphorical and the metaphorical literal” (Wolfson, 2005, p. 223). To give an apt analogy, the meaning of the dream is not to be found as a nugget at its core, as it were waiting to be uncovered, but in the quest initiated when the dream’s immediate narrative challenges, and engages, the mind when awake. The dream is a call to engage with the hermeneutic process of the psyche, just as the Torah is a call to the mystic to a kind of disciplined play with levels of meaning and the fluidity of associations. There is no final achievement, when the meaning would be laid bare; there is only the ever-deepening process of knowing, of flowing with the dynamic

of uncovering and recovering. Enlightenment, for the Zohar, is not an end-state, but the hallmark of one who enters and exits the depths in peace, who flows with the rhythms of the psyche, be they conscious or what has come to be described as unconscious. For the kabbalist who has touched the psychoid, the “essence of all reality” as the sixteenth century kabbalist Cordevero described the spark of darkness (as cited in Giller, 2001, p. 80), there are no divisions.

Notes

1. The change from plural to singular is in the original Aramaic. It may be intentional, implying that the pursuit of wisdom—the path of enlightenment—is ultimately a solitary one, as emphasized by reference to contemplation “on his own.”
2. There are a number of different translations of this Aramaic term. Most are variations on this idea of a source of dark light. However, Wolfson (1995) noted that *kardenuta* may convey the idea of *hardness*, thereby giving the connotation of a *hardened spark*. Wolski and Hecker (2017) noted that variations in the Aramaic term in diverse texts suggest that omitting the connotation of darkness would be inappropriate and combine the two possible meanings of *kardenuta* in their phrase *adamantine darkness*.
3. The term theurgic connotes the mystic’s role in promoting change in the immanent divine, especially as developed in the Kabbalah (Idel, 1988). Whilst the specific orientation of this term to theism may be inappropriate to much contemporary thinking about awakening, the notion that the awakening entails responsibilities to the “spiritual force” is of contemporary relevance, as evidenced in deep, or transpersonal, ecology, for example.
4. Taylor (2016) helpfully addressed these issues, expressing his own concerns over the authenticity of the claimed spiritually transformative experiences. On balance, he regarded at least some of the phenomenological reports as *genuine* inasmuch as he doubted that the participants had been influenced by the popularization of spiritual narratives.

Unfortunately, this is not an easy matter to resolve, and the weight of evidence tends towards not only the construction of experience in the first place, but also the ongoing reconstruction of experience in memory. It would be challenging to assert that neither the initial construction, nor the ongoing reconstruction, were not influenced by culturally determined expectations.

5. See Lancaster (2011) for detail of this correspondence, and specification of what the term higher unconscious connotes.
6. The term *sefirot* (singular, *sefirah*) applies to the divine potencies that are emanated from the divine source. They have a dual connotation: in the process of creation, they depict the stages through which the initiating impulse gives rise to the created realm; at the same time, they are understood as human psychological principles.

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