



BRILL

ARIES – JOURNAL FOR THE STUDY  
OF WESTERN ESOTERICISM 17 (2017) 81–118

  
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# Soul Flights

## *Cognitive Ratcheting and the Problem of Comparison*

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### Abstract

Narratives of soul flights are common in ancient Mediterranean literature, sharing many similarities such as the movement of the soul along a vertical path that is associated with life and death. But they also display significant differences such as peculiar accounts of cosmic realms, idiosyncratic reasons for soul flights, and wild diversity of associated rituals. Historical critical studies of soul flights have been unable to address successfully this problem of comparison, which remains unable to explain structures that are engineered consistently in cultural productions. Cognitive explanations are more helpful in this regard. Yet current cognitive explanations struggle to account for the differences. How can both the similarities and the differences be accounted for within the same parameters of the operations of human cognition? This paper presents a model called cognitive ratcheting to address this problem. It is a theoretical formulation of the natural mental process through which concepts take shape and are innovated when they are mentally mapped onto spatial orientations, then ratcheted up with intuitive cognition, and finally elaborated into many cultural variations by reflective thought. This process acknowledges that, at the same time a concept is diversified through reflective elaboration and ratcheted up within different cultural contexts, it retains deep structures, especially with regard to spatial orientations, intuitive processes, and reflective recursion.

### Keywords

spatial orientations – sensory motor schemas – intuitive cognition – dualism – reflective cognition – ratchet effect – soul – spirit – gnostic – ascent – descent

Soul flights are such common narratives in religious literature from the Mediterranean world (ca. 550 BCE–500 CE) that they have been treated as their own genre, even though there are several types of accounts, including descents to the earth and to the underworld, and ascents to the heavens and transcendent worlds. These narratives can feature post-mortem journeys where the soul stays in heaven permanently or pre-mortem journeys where the soul must descend from the heavens and return to the bodily state after its ascent. Narratives of the pre-mortem or post-mortem ascent of the soul are popular in late antique Greco-Roman literature, and early Jewish, Christian, and Gnostic sources. Classic surveys of the literature highlight this diversity, while also trying to offer some explanation for their consistencies.<sup>1</sup> Narratives of the soul's descent to the underworld have been studied less frequently than ascents of the soul into heaven.<sup>2</sup>

Previous studies of narratives of soul flights have been conducted using traditional historical and biblical critical tools, arguing for some version of cultural borrowing or sharing as explanation for their shape and purpose. Unfortunately, the variety of solutions generated in these studies has said more about the scholar's selection of data than where these stories may come from or why they may exist in the forms they do.

When it comes to providing a deep analysis of the consistencies as well as the varieties of soul flights, turning to cognitive studies may prove to be most fruitful.<sup>3</sup> Because we can turn to the highly evolved architecture of cognition itself for explanation, cognitive models can be very compelling when we face narratives that are engineered consistently across different locales and times, such as the case with soul flights. Particularly compelling is a model I call cognitive ratcheting. Cognitive ratcheting is a natural mental process through which concepts take shape and are innovated. This process recognizes that as a concept is innovated and ratcheted up, it also maintains deep recursive structures that secure the concept and keep it from slipping into irrelevance or becoming incomprehensible. This mental process has a long evolutionary history dependent on our use of cognitive sensory motor schemas, intuitive mentalities and the activities of reflective cognition. As a concept develops, it does so out of the interaction of these three levels of cognition. As

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1 Bousset, 'Die Himmelfahrt der Seele'; Segal, 'Heavenly Ascent'; Culianu, *Psychanodia I*; Culianu, *Experiences de l'extase*; Culianu, *Out of this World*.

2 For studies of descent narratives, see Clark, *Catabasis*; Stroumsa, 'Mystical Ascents'; Edmonds, *Myths*.

3 For a fuller treatment of the impact of cognitive studies on historical studies and its integration into historical studies, see DeConick, 'Criticisms, Debates, and Futures'.

we will see, to explain both the uniformity and diversity of narratives like soul flights, cognitive ratcheting as an explanatory model relies on all levels of cognition, from our pre-conceptual perceptions of spatial orientation, to intuitive folk concepts, to rich reflective thinking within particular cultural environments.

## 1 Historical-Critical Studies

### 1.1 *Comparative Historicism*

Analysis of soul flights began when they were examined from a comparative historical approach at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> They became important to the study of religion when they captured the imagination of scholars associated with the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* who were searching for antecedents of Jesus' descent as a redeemer figure in Christian and Gnostic sources.

One of these scholars, Wilhelm Bousset (1865–1920) argued that the most basic feature behind this mythology is the belief in the heavenly journey of the soul after death. Anticipation of this death journey he thought explained the ecstatic journeys of visionaries recorded in the literature produced by Jews and Christians in the Hellenistic world. This mythology, Bousset thought, originated earlier in the Persian context when Jews were seeking visions of God in heaven, given that the Jerusalem temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians, dislodging YHWH from his earthly residence.<sup>5</sup> Bousset saw a big change in Jewish belief and practice during the exile, when, he said, the Jews took on a new concept of the human soul and integrated ideas about the celestial spheres that were common knowledge among the Babylonians.<sup>6</sup>

To explain how this phenomenon informed Jesus' descent and ascent as a redeemer figure, Bousset turned to the work of his colleague Richard Reitzenstein (1861–1931) who had culled Persian sources, which he believed predated the Christian and gnostic stories about Jesus. Reitzenstein used Persian sources to construct what he called a pre-Christian redeemer myth that featured a redeemer figure who descends to earth to reveal the fallen condition of souls and to show the souls the way to ascend back home at death. He claimed that

4 Anz, *Zur Frage nach dem Ursprung des Gnostizismus*, is one of the earliest studies. He looked for the origin of gnostic soul journeys in Babylonian religion (55–58).

5 Bousset, *Die Himmelreise der Seele*, 155–169, 229–233.

6 Bousset, *Die Himmelreise der Seele*.

this Persian myth was the basis for New Testament and Gnostic views of Jesus and salvation.<sup>7</sup> Bousset agreed.<sup>8</sup>

Most subsequent studies on soul journeys in early Judaism and Christianity have also tried to explain the phenomenon as cultural borrowing or sharing, but not necessarily from Persia. An example is the work of Ioan Culianu (1950–1991) who wrote a survey of the evidence from the classical world in 1983. He pointed out that early Greek shamans were involved in ascension practices, so it was not necessary to go all the way to Babylonia to explain the phenomenon.<sup>9</sup> Other scholars have argued for a Platonic or Middle Platonic origin.<sup>10</sup> There have been discussions about how soul journey narratives represent a more general cultural sharing among groups in the Hellenistic world or among peoples across Mesopotamia.<sup>11</sup> Some studies limit the scope of the narratives to narrower data sets in order to argue for cultural sharing among a more specific group, like Hellenistic Jews.<sup>12</sup> It has also been proposed that the soul journey narratives written by early Jews and Christians resulted from the interplay between the human imagination and shared scripture at moments of crisis.<sup>13</sup> There have been a number of studies that examine specific elements of soul flights as phenomena characteristic of late antiquity.<sup>14</sup>

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7 Reitzenstein, *Poimandres*, and *Das iranische Erlösungsmysterium*.

8 Bousset, *Hauptprobleme der Gnosis*, 238.

9 Culianu, *Psychanodia I*, 35–54.

10 Dillon, 'Descent of the Soul', traces soul journeys back to Plato. Colpe, 'Die "Himmelsreise der Seele" ausserhalb und innerhalb der Gnosis', and 'Die "Himmelsreise der Seele" als philosophie- und Religionsgeschichtliches Problem', argues that gnostic narratives of soul flights borrowed the idea that the soul is a microcosm from the Greek-speaking world and Middle Platonism, and this allowed shamanic practices to become high culture.

11 On Mesopotamian culturally sharing: Widengren, *Ascension of the Apostle*. On cultural sharing among Hellenistic communities: Smith, 'Ascent to the Heavens'; Tabor, *Things Unutterable*. See now Collins, 'Traveling Up and Away', who arranges the narratives into typologies shared by Mediterranean cultures.

12 Dean-Otting, *Heavenly Journeys*.

13 Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven*.

14 Cf. Halperin, 'Ascension or Invasion'; Wolfson, *Speculum*, 74–124; Kuyt, 'Chariot'; DeConick, *Seek to See Him*; Wallace, *Snatched into Paradise*. See now coverage of soul flights in medieval Judaism: Idel, *Ascensions*. Collections of essays on soul flights include Collins and Fishbane, *Death, Ecstasy, and Other Worldly Journeys*; Boustan and Reed, *Heavenly Realms*.

## 1.2 *Structuralism*

While any number of these scenarios provide useful information for understanding soul flight narratives, they all suffer because the choice of the data—whether to include or exclude certain sets of narratives—determines the outcomes. To make matters even more problematic, there is little attempt to identify exactly what is consistent or inconsistent about the narratives. In order to provide an explanation for the assumed consistencies, all authors discussed so far rely on an imprecise notion of sociocultural influences, backgrounds and dependencies, as if being part of a shared culture is enough of an explanation.

The one study that wrestles with this problem most attentively is the paper published by Alan Segal (1945–2011) in 1980.<sup>15</sup> While the title of his article, “Heavenly Ascent in Hellenistic Judaism, Early Christianity and Their Environment,” hints at another thesis of cultural borrowing, his work takes a structuralist turn. To accomplish this, Segal returns the discussion of soul journeys to the question of the myth of Jesus as a redeemer in New Testament and gnostic literature. While Segal does not find any evidence for a pre-Christian redeemer myth from Persia or anywhere else, he does conclude that the mythology of Jesus as redeemer shares its mythic structure with ascension myths in antiquity. In other words, Segal thinks that the mythology about Jesus as a redeemer is a permutation of heavenly soul journeys commonly found in Jewish and Christian literature.

There is a problem here, which Segal recognizes. Jesus’ story as a redeemer is about his descent to earth. It is not about his ascent to heaven, except as a return after his job is done on earth. Segal acknowledges that the direction of movement is opposite. In the case of Jesus’ myth, the redeemer comes down. In the case of the heavenly soul journeys, the soul goes up.

Segal resolves this difference by using the simple operation in structural theory called “transformation.” According to Lévi-Strauss, the human mind generates structures for myths in much the same way as it generates the deep structures of language. Both the structures of myth and language operate by a handful of rules.<sup>16</sup> One such operation, transformation, is applied by Segal to the katabasis and anabasis myths. While katabasis features a descending movement and anabasis an ascending movement, both are about the same binary mythic structure: the divine and human worlds (which are binaries or

15 Segal, ‘Heavenly Ascent’.

16 Cf. Lévi-Strauss *Savage Mind; Structural Anthropology; From Honey to Ashes; Raw and the Cooked*.



Descent of redeemer = Ascent of the soul

FIGURE 1 *Structural equivalency*

opposites) are bridged by some kind of mediating figure. The down and up patterns are simply transformations of this same mythic structure, Segal says (Figure 1).<sup>17</sup>

The power of this structure in antiquity was its ability to express the late classical world's desire for immortality.<sup>18</sup> At the end of the day, the heavenly journey of the soul is a mythic pattern tailored to meet the needs of different peoples in antiquity, says Segal, although he fears that understanding this pattern "as the inevitable result of the structure of the mind is perhaps too grandiose."<sup>19</sup>

While Segal's analysis is refreshing because it tries to push beyond imprecise explanations of cultural borrowing, it depends on structuralist theory, which is highly contested on its own grounds. In Segal's application, it is not at all clear that we are dealing with the same mediatory mythic structure or that this structure is integrating ascent and descent binaries. While we might argue that the redeemer myth features a mediator who brings down salvation or special knowledge to share with humanity, the soul as a mediator figure is more difficult to see in narratives of ascent, especially in post-mortem journeys where the soul stays put forever beyond the earth. So are these two movements— ascent and descent—really equivalent expressions of the same mythic structure, so that the myth of the redeemer's descent reflects the myth of the soul's ascent? Or, as I surmise, are we dealing with two completely different myths—the myth of a redeemer and the myth of the soul journey—which may share a similar up-down structure?

### 1.3 *Intertextuality*

Another study that recognizes the need for explanation beyond cultural borrowings is the later work of Ioan Culianu, *Out of this World*, published posthumously.<sup>20</sup> In this book, Culianu begins with the premise that the phenomenon

17 Segal, 'Heavenly Ascent', 1339.

18 Segal, 'Heavenly Ascent', 1388.

19 Segal, 'Heavenly Ascent', 1388.

20 Culianu, *Out of this World*.

of soul journeys is so widespread in the historical literature that it can be called universal. But how can this universality be explained? He thinks that this universality can only be explained as indicative of human cognition.

Consequently he argues that the universality of soul flight narratives is the result of the complicated play between human memory, imagination and written sources. He calls this “intertextuality.” Narratives about soul journeys written by early Jews and Christians share so much detail because they are intertextual productions created by people who share a very close cultural and memorial heritage.<sup>21</sup> But they also share so much because, he says, for as long as humans have existed, human cognition has been limited to a simple set of rules that generate within our minds similar narrative results. According to Culianu, these rules might be that there is another world which is located in heaven, that humans consist of bodies and souls, that the body dies while the soul goes to heaven. The narratives of different cultures grow out of these rules. In terms of soul flights, he believed that these rules were dependent on shamanism. They probably were derived from shamanic practices and represented altered states of consciousness.<sup>22</sup>

## 2 Cognitive Ratcheting

It is unfortunate that cognitive studies were not more advanced when Culianu was alive. The tools were not yet available for him to make the cognitive case, although his intuitions were spot on. While the old historical method and biblical critical tools rely on sociocultural explanations for narratives like soul journeys, integrating a cognitive perspective has the advantage of augmenting these sociocultural explanations with deeper cognitive ones. Cognitive studies over the last two decades has been fostering an interdisciplinary approach germane to the humanities.<sup>23</sup> This approach focuses on how human thought is produced, how meaning is produced, and how thought and meaning is then reproduced.

Integrating these kinds of studies into sociocultural and historical explanations is very useful when trying to explain certain conceptual patterns that are engineered consistently in cultural productions like soul flight narratives, perhaps even transculturally and transhistorically. All human beings have had

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21 Culianu, *Out of this World*, 7–8.

22 Culianu, *Out of this World*, 1–11.

23 Cf. Slingerland, *What Science Offers the Humanities*.

the 'same brain' that relies on the same highly evolved cognitive processes.<sup>24</sup> Because of this, a cognitive perspective can help explain uniformity and consistency in the narratives with reference to the deep architecture of cognition itself, that is, in the role that mentality and embodiment play in concept-building.<sup>25</sup>

Current cognitive theories have stressed explanations for cross-cultural regularities rather than differences in religion, suggesting that the human mind selects the types of concepts and practices that are a good fit for the way the human mind processes information.<sup>26</sup> This theory of the cultural spread of shared beliefs is usually dependent on Dan Sperber's (1942–) model of cultural epidemiology, which suggests that some ideas go viral.<sup>27</sup> Scholars who study religion from cognitive perspectives generally point to four reasons why some concepts spread widely in populations. First the concept is relevant rather than nonsensical. Second it is attention-grabbing, even counter-intuitive. Third it is simple to remember so that it can be transmitted easily across populations. And fourth it provides some type of evolutionary fitness benefit.<sup>28</sup>

When faced with explaining the regularities in soul flight narratives, such as the movement of the soul along a vertical path that is associated with life and death, these four explanations are not fully adequate. Soul flight narratives may be more or less relevant to different individuals or groups of people. While the narratives have striking elements, it is their wild variations that are attention-grabbing, not so much the regularity that a soul could make a journey back to the place from which it had originally come. In terms of memorial ease, the beliefs and practices associated with soul flights are highly complex and varied, especially when it comes to mythologies and rituals. There is very little about them that would be easy to recall or transmit uniformly from one generation to the next. While we might be able to view soul flight practices as relevant to social bonding and group cohesion, and soul flight narratives as by-products of the theory of mind, evolutionary fitness is not itself a sufficient explanation for their popularity and consistency.

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24 Tooby and Cosmides, 'Psychological Foundations'; Tremlin, *Minds and Gods*.

25 Boyer, *Religion Explained*; Atran, *In Gods We Trust*; Kövecses, *Metaphor in Culture*; Tremlin, *Minds and Gods*.

26 Dawkins, *Selfish Gene*, has even suggested that concepts are gene-like organisms called "memes" which spread throughout populations because they are a good fit to human cognition.

27 Sperber, *Explaining Culture*.

28 Boyer *Religion Explained*; Boyer, *Naturalness of Religious Ideas*; Atran, *In Gods We Trust*; Barrett, *Shape of Thought*; Slone, 'Evolutionary Psychology and Religion'.



In terms of cognitive theory, something more is needed to explain the regularities and wide distribution of these religious narratives and practices. The same is true in terms of their differences, which cognitive studies have been less robust theorizing. Because any deep explanation of a concept or practice must also be able to account for conceptual diversity within the same parameters of the operations of human cognition, it is necessary for us to construct a consistent cognitive model that can account for both similarities and differences.

The model that I have been developing to address regularities and irregularities in religious narratives and ritual is called cognitive ratcheting. This model was inspired initially by Michael Tomasello's (1950–) description of the “ratchet effect,” which is the process of cumulative cultural evolution. The concept was created by Tomasello to explain inventions and their later improvements as they are modified incrementally over time. Each time the new and improved tool, for instance, is modified, it preserves somewhat faithfully its previous form, so that the process works like a ratchet to innovate and move forward while preventing slippage backward.<sup>29</sup> The ratchet mechanism is an explanation that can account for an increase in the complexity of cognition that is more directed in its development than standard definitions of evolution usually permit.<sup>30</sup>

The cognitive ratcheting model that I am proposing is a natural process by which mental concepts begin to take shape by mapping onto spatial orientations, and then are ratcheted up with intuitive cognition, and finally elaborated into many cultural variations by reflective thought. This process acknowledges that, at the same time a concept is elaborated and ratcheted up, it retains deep structures, being built up from our spatial orientations and intuitive processes. These mental structures secure the concept and keep it from slipping into irrelevance or becoming incomprehensible. They are structures that also tend to be more universally shared. Cognitive ratcheting provides us with a model that can account for consistent structure of ideas and practices, as well as striking differences in the way the structure is elaborated reflectively with deliberate reference to the cultural environment.

### 2.1 *Spatial Orientations and Schemas*

In the most general sense, cognition includes the many ways that we perceive, recognize and understand our experiences of our world. Cognition represents the mental states and the processes like perception, recognition, reasoning

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29 Tomasello, Kruger and Ratner, ‘Cultural Learning’; Tomasello, *Cultural Origins*, 5.

30 Riegler, ‘Cognitive Ratchet’.

and memory that give rise to understanding, signification, decision-making, calculation, categorization, prediction, and problem solving. Cognition can be conscious or unconscious. It can be intentional or not. It can be aimed at physical or imaginary objects.<sup>31</sup>

When cognition was first theorized by scientists in the 1960s, it was done so as a computational process that followed designated steps governed by rules. While this might explain how a human being performs calculations, it was quickly recognized that the computational process cannot explain how we solve other types of problems or process other types of information, especially when we factor in the interaction of these mental processes with our bodies and environment. Because of this, cognition is becoming understood today more and more in terms of embodiment, as mental processes that generate knowledge and understanding dependent on the diverse dimensions of the human body and its interaction with its environment.<sup>32</sup>

Appreciating the significance that embodiment plays in our cognitive processes has led us to the recognition that the most basic form of human cognition emerges from the way that we are spatially oriented. Spatial orientations themselves arise from the fact that we have particular sorts of bodies that function in particular ways in our environment.<sup>33</sup> For instance, our vertical orientation is something that we constantly experience, from our sense of standing upright to climbing stairs, from perceiving a skyscraper to gazing at a tree, from watching our children grow to pouring milk into a glass.<sup>34</sup> Other examples of our spatial orientations include our perceptions of in and out, front and back, walking along a path, and feeling the cyclic rise and fall of our chests as we breathe.

From these and other spatial orientations emerge pre-conceptual scaffolding or basic cognitive frames upon which the human mind builds concepts. They are called variously by scholars “sensory-motor schema,” “image schema,” and “pre-conceptual patterns.”<sup>35</sup> At this basic level, these schema are not very

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31 Seok, ‘Embodied Cognition’.

32 Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, *Embodied Mind*; Wilson and Foglia, ‘Embodied Cognition’; Day, ‘Religion, Off-Line Cognition and the Extended Mind’; Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind*; Gibbs, *Embodiment*; Clark, *Supersizing*; Wilson and Clark, ‘How to Situate Cognition’; Robbins and Aydede, *Cambridge Handbook of Situated Cognition*; Shapiro, *Embodied Cognition*.

33 Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*; Johnson, *Body in the Mind*; Boers, *Spatial Prepositions*.

34 Johnson, *Body in the Mind*, xiv–xv.

35 Evans and Green, *Cognitive Linguistics*, 176–205.

rich in terms of content, but are more reminiscent of scaffolds upon which fuller concepts are built. They make up cognition ground zero.

How do they work? Let's take the UP-DOWN or VERTICALITY schema as an example, since it grounds the narratives of soul flights at their most basic level. This orientation means that our thoughts are structured with certain pre-conceptual patterns that derive from our experiences of verticality.<sup>36</sup> We know without thinking about it that UP IS MORE because of our experience with quantity, that as we stack more books in a pile, the level goes up. And the reverse, DOWN IS LESS, because, as we drink a glass of water, the level goes down. Also, since we associate drooping postures with sadness and depression, and erect posture with happiness and joy, we naturally feel that UP IS HAPPY and DOWN IS SAD. For the same reasons we think that UP IS GOOD and DOWN IS BAD. This plays into our natural tendency to think that UP IS VIRTUE and DOWN IS DEPRAVITY. We also experience an asymmetry to the verticality of our bodies, since we have a head at the top of our bodies and feet at the bottom. So we feel that UP IS TOP and DOWN IS BOTTOM. All of these are very primary metaphors for us: UP IS MORE, HAPPY, GOOD, VIRTUE, TOP and DOWN IS LESS, SAD, BAD, DEPRAVITY, BOTTOM. These metaphors provide a baseline for the way we think about everything, including that salvation is heavenward and damnation is downward.

But there is even more to the VERTICALITY schema. Consider sleeping. We sleep lying down and we stand up when awake. For us, UP IS CONSCIOUS and DOWN IS UNCONSCIOUS. The same is true of illness and death, where we are forced to lie down or drop dead. This means that our natural perceptions include HEALTH and LIFE as UP, while SICKNESS and DEATH as DOWN.

Our experience with force comes into play too. Since stronger people are typically bigger people, and the victor in fights is typically on top, we naturally associate HAVING CONTROL OR FORCE as UP, while BEING SUBJECT TO CONTROL OR FORCE as DOWN. Why do we feel that HIGH STATUS IS UP and LOW STATUS IS DOWN? Because status is associated with social and physical power, and POWER IS UP. Why do we operate from the perspective that UP IS RATIONAL and DOWN IS EMOTIONAL? If UP IS CONTROL, UP must also be about using reason to control, suppress or hold-down our out-of-control emotions.<sup>37</sup>

When we put this all together, it is evident that humans share a pre-conceptual UP-DOWN schema where these embodied associations are automatically present as primal metaphors (Table 1).

36 Johnson, *Body in the Mind*, xiv.

37 Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 14–17.

TABLE 1 *Verticality schema*

<b>UP is</b>	<b>DOWN is</b>
MORE	LESS
TOP	BOTTOM
HAPPY	SAD
GOOD	BAD
VIRTUE	DEPRAVITY
CONSCIOUSNESS	UNCONSCIOUSNESS
HEALTH	SICKNESS
LIFE	DEATH
HAVING CONTROL OR FORCE	BEING CONTROLLED OR FORCED
HIGH STATUS	LOW STATUS
RATIONAL	EMOTIONAL

Cognitive linguists have demonstrated that simple spatial schemas like *VERTICALITY*, *CONTAINER*, *PATH* and *CYCLE* serve to organize entire systems of our thought with respect to one another.<sup>38</sup> Metaphors that emerge from these simple spatial orientations are the concepts that we live by in the most fundamental way.<sup>39</sup> They serve as simple scaffolds or frames, providing structure upon which to build richer concepts and systems. These more detailed concepts are constructed by mapping or projecting analogous information from our experiences onto the spatial schemas.

This means that different cultures may build up these primal metaphors in distinct ways and apply them to different situations, which can alter the metaphor and produce variation even at this basic level. So it would be incorrect to think that all metaphors we live by are shared universally in some absolute sense.<sup>40</sup> While they are shared, they may have different applications as concepts are built up in different environments.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, very rich concepts and systems are not necessarily built on single schemas, but combinations of schema. Narratives of soul flights, for instance, are not just structured on the binary *UP-DOWN*. They are also built on the spatial schemas called the *CYCLE*, the *PATH* and the *CONTAINER*.

38 Johnson, *Body in the Mind*, 119–121; Fauconnier and Turner, *Way We Think*.

39 Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 56–57.

40 Cf. Henrich, Heine and Norenzayan, 'Weirdest People'.

41 Boers, *Spatial Prepositions*, 27; Kövecses, *Metaphor in Culture*.

At the most basic sensory level, we experience our world as embedded within temporal cyclic processes that are repetitive, like the seasons and the revolutions of heavenly bodies, or our heartbeat and breathing, where the actual beginning and end of the cycles are difficult to determine. However, our observations of the course of life from birth to death, which we intuit as cyclic in terms of generations, factors into this schema.

So the CYCLE does not just mean to us repetition, but is conceived as a temporal circle with an initial state that proceeds through a series of related events and ends where it started. The CYCLE means to us the return to the original state. Often we will identify some climatic moment when the CYCLE matures only to wane. The CYCLE schema is one of our most basic patterns for experiencing and understanding temporality and event sequences.<sup>42</sup> The movement of the CYCLE is ever forward in a sequence of events that are temporally related and contiguous. Backtracking is not allowed because our bodies never travel back in time, only forward to the end, which is also the beginning.<sup>43</sup>

Consider how this schema structures narratives of soul flights, where the soul journeys down to earth and returns to heaven along the same route it originally took down. This journey is cyclic, reflecting our experiences of the CYCLE of birth and death, when the soul is thought to enter and exit the material body and world. Some narratives may tune in to only half of this cycle, but the complete cycle remains in the background noise.

The PATH schema is also involved in the baseline structure of these narratives. We cannot live a day without being bound bodily to paths that connect up our spatial world. Everywhere we go we face paths that both liberate and constrain us, that involve our movement from one place to another, whether physical or imaginary.

The schematic of the PATH is consistently made up of a starting point, a goal, and a sequence of contiguous locations that connect the beginning to the end.<sup>44</sup> This schematic leaves us with a progressive sense that we must pass gradually through intermediate spaces to get to the end of the line. It also means that we tend to experience paths as directional, even though they may not be, and temporal so that we move along the path and end at a time later than when we started.<sup>45</sup> It is the PATH schema that underlies narratives of soul

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42 Johnson, *Body in the Mind*, 121.

43 Johnson, *Body in the Mind*, 119.

44 Johnson, *Body in the Mind*, 113.

45 Johnson, *Body in the Mind*, 114.

journeys, as they tell the story of the movement of soul progressively from a starting point to an endpoint, and all of its experiences along the way.

Finally, a word about the CONTAINER or IN-OUT schema, which develops out of our perception that things have insides and outsides with boundaries in between. This is one of the most pervasive features of human experience. We constantly are contained in our physical environment and surroundings, moving in and out of rooms, clothing, vehicles, and more. We constantly are putting objects into things like boxes, cups, and bags, and taking things out of them.<sup>46</sup> This means that we naturally structure concepts as containers that can either be moved 'into' or 'out of'.

This schema is certainly connected to our sense that our own bodies are boundaries with insides and outsides. Because we perceive ourselves as looking outward, we think of ourselves as contained within the body. Thus we have as a constant feature in narratives of soul journeys the IN-OUT dimension, that the soul is contained in the body, but it can leave the body and go on a journey. It can either return into the body that is still living, or it can stay in heaven when the body dies.

When we look to spatial orientations as the most basic feature that scaffolds human thought, it makes sense that these provide a uniform structure to narratives of the soul flight.<sup>47</sup> This structure is not mythic, but pre-mythic or, better, pre-conceptual, going back to the very foundations of how humans think. In the case of soul journeys, these narratives whether Persian, Jewish, Christian, Greek, Roman, Egyptian or gnostic find their most basic structure in the UP-DOWN and IN-OUT orientations, combined with our sense of CYCLE and PATH. These narratives fundamentally are about the soul moving in and out of the body and the material world, and up and down the cosmic axis. The movement always reflects a beginning and an end. It is described as a progressive movement, at some level always keyed to the cycle of birth and death, even in cases of ecstatic journeys, which assume the same life and death entries, exits and routes that postmortem journeys assume.

## 2.2 *Intuitive Cognition*

While primal metaphors based on cognition ground zero—sensory motor schemas like VERTICALITY, CONTAINER, CYCLE and PATH—are very basic, we have noted that they are not in themselves very rich.<sup>48</sup> Yet these basic

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46 Johnson, *Body in the Mind*, 21.

47 See now Tappenden, *Resurrection in Paul*, who analyzes Paul's concept of the resurrection as structured from these same spatial schemas.

48 Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 61.

spatial schemas serve as templates for us, enabling us to think about more abstract and non-visible domains by analogically mapping other concepts onto the spatial schemas.<sup>49</sup> In this way, we mentally build integrated systems of concepts through which we come to understand and communicate about our world in both intuitive and reflective arenas of cognition.

How does the metaphorical or analogous mapping of intuitive cognitive processes onto spatial schemas work? This mapping begins to flesh out the skeletal spatial schema, so that concepts begin to take on deeper meaning, although not necessarily reflecting very much cultural variety yet. At this level, we are still dealing with thought patterns that have a long evolutionary history and, thus, tend to be shared uniformly among humans, although these intuitions may be applied to different schemas depending on the cultural environment.<sup>50</sup>

Intuitively conceived metaphors built on these types of simple spatial orientations have a ‘rightness’ to them that we tend not to notice or question, unless they are brought to our conscious attention. They are automatic, our default mode.<sup>51</sup> Intuitive concepts are immediate, requiring little to no reasoning. They are instant responses to our experiences of the environment around us. Because they are derived experientially—from our experience living in the everyday world—they are emotionally linked and inferentially rich.<sup>52</sup> They include things that we intuit as true or self-evident, rather than deliberately reflecting or reasoning about them.<sup>53</sup> They are the foundational modules, which structure the more abstract reflective concepts of deliberate complex thinking.<sup>54</sup> They go a long way to explain the types of consistent structures that underlie well-attested concepts such as souls and other supernatural agents like personified gods.<sup>55</sup>

Intuitive concepts reflect how our brain processes instantly react to our world in terms of physics, biology, sociology, and psychology. Folk physics reflects our assumption that physical objects are solid and cohesive, and causality is mechanical. Folk biology focuses on the principle that living things are animate and have an essence that defines them as a particular natural kind. Folk sociology identifies similar social attributes to create social categories and

49 Fauconnier, *Mappings*; Slingerland, *What Science Offers the Humanities*, 152.

50 Cf. Boyer, *Religions Explained*; Atran, *In Gods We Trust*.

51 Tremlin, *Minds and Gods*, 179–180.

52 Tremlin, *Minds and Gods*, 180–181.

53 Sperber, *Explaining Culture*, 92–94.

54 Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 19. Pyysiäinen, *Supernatural Agents*, 8: costly prescribed ideas develop on the basis of more intuitive ones.

55 Pyysiäinen, *Supernatural Agents*.

criteria for membership in groups.<sup>56</sup> Folk psychology is the most important to understand in terms of narratives of soul flights. The foundation of folk psychology is theory of mind. This is when we attribute intentional states of mind to others because we feel that we have them ourselves. Our common understanding of mental states is that we have them, that other people have them, and that they are caused internally rather than from a physical stimuli external to us.

In other words, we separate agency from the physical body. We feel that we are not a body but that we are agents who occupy a body. This belief in intentional states of mind is linked to the way that we have schematized the IN-OUT spatial orientation discussed previously. Consider how this plays out in concepts of the body and the self. We describe our bodies as possessions of our selves. It is 'my' hand that types on the computer keyboard, 'my' foot that taps the floor, 'my' brain that thinks. The naturalness of this dichotomy between self and brain is very early in childhood development. Psychologists find that if you tell five-year old children who know that people cannot think without a brain a story about a human brain transplanted into a pig's head, they will say that the pig will be as smart as a person now. But the pig will keep all its pig memories, personality and essence.<sup>57</sup> Children don't identify the brain with the mental self.

Experiments on early childhood development have demonstrated that children are dualists in the same way that they are essentialists, realists and moralists.<sup>58</sup> They think that the world contains two domains: physical objects and real events; and mental states and mental entities.<sup>59</sup> One of the consequences of these folk psychology intuitions is that both children and adults are intuitive dualists primed to think that humans and animals consist of bodies and souls.<sup>60</sup>

This has ramifications for how humans think about everything from personal identity to death and the afterlife. If we were intuitive materialists instead of intuitive dualists, the idea of an afterlife would make little sense.<sup>61</sup> In fact, it may never have emerged as a human concept in the first place. If we simply identified consciousness and intelligence with our biological processes, when we die, we die. But since it is natural for us to identify our essence with our

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56 Sørensen, *Cognitive Theory of Magic*, 33–39.

57 Bloom, *Descartes' Baby*, 199–200.

58 Bloom, *Descartes' Baby*, 199.

59 Wellman, *Child's Theory of the Mind*.

60 Bloom, *Descartes' Baby*.

61 Bloom, *Descartes' Baby*, 205.



mentality, the dead body is often viewed as a corpse that no longer contains our essence. This essence of the deceased must go somewhere. And this somewhere becomes the destination of narratives of soul flights.

How are folk concepts of the soul constructed? Again, they are related to inferences we make about our direct experiences of our world. We experience that the erect conscious body is the breathing body. We experience that the dead body has no breath and lies prone incapable of movement or thought. We experience that when the newborn baby takes a breath, she comes to life. We experience the old man dying when he exhales his last breath. We identify breath and consciousness. Since we breathe in and out air or wind, we also identify breath and wind. These two identifications are developed in the ancient literature, for instance: the *pneuma* as the breath of vitality and the *psyche* as the consciousness and mental abilities. This intuitive conceptualization of the soul is augmented further with agency, both personal (as in the case of the soul as a 'self') and supernatural (as in the case of the soul as a godlike power).<sup>62</sup> This is how we can imagine humans began to intuitively conceptualize the soul as it is preserved in Mediterranean narratives of soul flights.

As cognition is ratcheted up, the narratives of soul journeys show how these folk understandings of the soul are mapped onto the spatial orientation of VERTICALITY and take on all its pre-conceptual associations (Table 2). In these narratives, the soul is from UP, a far away place beyond our cosmos. It exists in this transcendent region as a GOOD and VIRTUOUS entity, a POWER IN CONTROL OF ITSELF. It is REASON and LIFE. When it falls DOWN, it leaves the transcendent world and drops into the cosmos and the human body. It experiences this fall because it becomes faulty or DEPRAVED, and on the way DOWN through the celestial spheres, it is augmented with EMOTION, irrationality and desire. When it is contained in the human body, it becomes UNCONSCIOUS, asleep and ignorant. Its embodiment is its incarceration, when it LOOSES CONTROL OF ITSELF. It has become trapped in the CYCLE OF LIFE AND DEATH, bound in its upward and downward movement with each new death and birth. It journeys along a PATH, seeking the end of its suffering and release from the temporal CYCLE.

This is the narrative behind the narratives, the 'master' narrative upon which the soul journey narratives depend. Even those narratives that focus on ecstasy and the pre-mortem journeys into the underworld, heavens or transcendent realms, assume this master narrative.

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62 Cf. Pyysiäinen, *Supernatural Agents*, 57–94.

TABLE 2 *Mapping folk psychology concepts of the soul on verticality schema*

Movement of soul UP is	Movement of soul DOWN is
MORE	LESS
TOP	BOTTOM
HAPPY	SAD
GOOD	BAD
VIRTUE	DEPRAVITY
CONSCIOUSNESS	UNCONSCIOUSNESS
HEALTH	SICKNESS
LIFE	DEATH
HAVING CONTROL OR FORCE	BEING CONTROLLED OR FORCED
HIGH STATUS	LOW STATUS
RATIONAL	EMOTIONAL

That said, there is a complication in this master narrative that needs to be recognized. Ancient people did not always believe that the afterlife residence of the person's essence would be in the heavens. There is another older version of the master narrative that places the residence of the deceased in the underworld. This reflects the fact that corpses were often interred in the earth in these cultures. So the realm of the dead exists below the earth's surface, accessible through caves and other such natural portals. While the journey of the deceased is still DOWN into the bowels of hell, there is no heavenly ascension. So the UP-DOWN schema, while in play, is not the major frame that structures these narratives. Rather, the PATH schema has a bigger role, orienting the journey to the west, to follow the setting of the sun to the realm of the dead. While this version of the master narrative is older, it does not blip out when the master narrative is remodeled to account for newer belief in the heavenly origin of the soul. Elements of the older narrative never cease, but blend with the new. Which is why soul journeys to the underworld continue to be referenced in literature that also features heavenly ascents.<sup>63</sup>

Up to now, we have been focused on trying to understand the basic cognitive frame that structures narratives of soul flights.<sup>64</sup> We have seen that this

63 Stroumsa, 'Mystical Descents'. Cf. Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell*.

64 On cognitive frames, see Fillmore, 'Frame Semantics'; Coulson, *Semantic Leaps*. Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, calls these idealized cognitive models.

basic cognitive frame has four fundamental components that develop out of intuitive concepts of body and soul, as well as the spatial schemas discussed previously.

1. The frame is built largely on the UP-DOWN spatial orientation. The frame highlights the soul's journey up and down the cosmic axis, through any of three locations: the underworld, earth and heavens. The frame links the soul's movement UP to life, goodness, virtue, power and health. In fact, the higher the better. The movement DOWN is associated with death, evil, vice, weakness and sickness. The lower the worse.
2. The frame also depends on the IN-OUT spatial orientation. The frame features the soul moving in and out of the body and the material world. The soul can move in and out of any of the three cosmic locations: the underworld, earth, and heavens.
3. The frame is also contingent on our spatial sense of PATH. The movement always has a beginning and an end. Depending on the objective of a particular narrative, the movement may start and end at any of the three cosmic locations. The frame depicts the soul's movement as progressive, through levels of heavens or other cosmic locations.
4. The frame depends on the CYCLE schema, assuming that the soul is following some leg of the route associated with the cycle of birth and death, using the same entries, exits and paths that it does when it enters the body at the beginning of life and leaves it at death.

### 2.3 *Reflective Cognition*

Given this basic cognitive frame, how do we then account for the differences in the narratives, which are many? Here reflective cognition plays a major role. Reflective thinking is theorized as one aspect of our system of cognitive processing. The system is dual, with the two different aspects of cognition variously labeled intuitive versus deliberate, implicit versus analytic, reflexive versus reflective, experimental versus rational, A-system versus B-system.<sup>65</sup> The reflective system often generates solutions to problems created by the intuitive system and its folk biases. It works in abstract information and is strategic. The reflective system corresponds to more deliberate and explanatory thought, thoroughly manipulating symbols and deriving knowledge from language and

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65 For an overview of dual-processing, see Pyysiäinen, 'Dual-Process Theories', 617–618; Pyysiäinen, 'Intuitive and Explicit'.

culture.<sup>66</sup> In fact, the deliberate and strategic interaction with society and cultural knowledge is one of the main features of reflective thinking.<sup>67</sup>

While we have already discussed the intuitive aspect of human cognition, we have not weighed in on the reflective aspect and how its processes play a role in the cognitive ratcheting of concepts. While the reflective system has been less theorized than the intuitive system in terms of how its processes affect conceptualization, there are four areas of research that can offer us some initial assistance.

First, *reflective cognition is embodied cognition* in its most deliberate semblance.<sup>68</sup> It represents our deliberate interaction with our environment and culture, including our learning processes.<sup>69</sup> But it also specifies the ways that we extend cognition into our environment, what scholars refer to as the *extended mind* thesis.<sup>70</sup> We extend cognition by offloading accumulated knowledge onto artifacts. We then rely on these artifacts as cognitive anchors to continue to ratchet up concepts and practices, and transmit them from person to person or generation to generation.

Second, the field of cognitive linguistics is demonstrating that, like all other levels of cognition, *reflective cognition has its processes and its constraints, which limit and structure the ways we conceptualize*.<sup>71</sup> As personal and cultural needs flavor the new conceptual blends, the innovations are still constrained by modes of processing and links of relationality within mental networks of inferences. Reflective thinking still happens through analogy and congruence. Even at the level of deliberate thought, we live by metaphors.<sup>72</sup> We think and produce meaning by recruiting and mapping frames or idealized categories (highly structured forms of knowledge we already know) onto an experience we perceive to be analogous to the recruited material.<sup>73</sup>

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66 Sloman, 'Empirical Case for Two Systems of Reasoning'.

67 Cf. Pyysiäinen, 'Intuitive and Explicit', 133–136.

68 Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, *Embodied Mind*; Wilson and Foglia, 'Embodied Cognition'; Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind*; Gibbs, *Embodiment*; Clark, *Supersizing*; Wilson and Clark, 'How to Situate Cognition'; Robbins and Aydede, *Cambridge Handbook of Situated Cognition*; Shapiro, *Embodied Cognition*.

69 Tomasello, Kruger, Ratner, 'Cultural Learning'.

70 Clark and Chalmers, 'Extended Mind'; Day, 'Religion, Off-Line Cognition and the Extended Mind'; Menary, *Extended Mind*.

71 Fauconnier, *Mental Spaces; Mappings*; Fauconnier and Turner, *Way We Think*; Evans and Green, *Cognitive Linguistics*.

72 Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*.

73 Fillmore, 'Frame Semantics'; Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*; Coulson, *Sematic Leaps*.

Related to the second is the third: *reflective cognition involves creativity*.<sup>74</sup> It is not just a matter of reasoning and reiteration. Reflective thought can be irrational and idiosyncratic, not to mention highly imaginative and innovative. So reflective thought is often a matter of integrating important information and inferences from originally separate domains of knowledge to construct new meaning. Cognitive linguists are modeling the processes of creativity, showing that there are times when cognition is so innovative that it results in the formation of a new knowledge domain or emergent structure.<sup>75</sup> Emergent structures are not in themselves present in the initial domains although, as we will see later, they remain constrained due to recursive operations.

Fourth, *reflective cognition involves operating memory with its governing principles: compression and decompression*. This means that the constructive processes of individual and social memory are implicated.<sup>76</sup> Reflective thought, because it is dependent on human memory, is perpetually constructive and revisionary. As a general category or frame is created and maintained, the process is largely unidirectional, in the direction of loss of attribution and difference. When we construct mental categories, the process engages the running average of a concept not the many variances. This means that we tend to think using generalized structures as our points of comparison.<sup>77</sup>

This may be the by-product of compression, the main governing principle of cognition. It is the propensity of our thought processes to bring big knowledge down to human scale, to capture global insight in the smallest bits possible. Compression results in the reduction of the one from the many, the elimination of details, and the condensation of the diffuse.<sup>78</sup> I like to compare compression with computer systems that reduce information into strings of binaries clustered into eight bits or a byte. This data can be condensed even further when we allow shorter strings of bits to stand in for longer strings of bits, like when we compress a file into a zip drive.

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74 Turner, *Artful Mind and Origin of Ideas*; Borkent, Dancygier, and Hinnell, *Language and the Creative Mind*.

75 Fauconnier, *Mappings*; Fauconnier and Turner, *Way We Think*.

76 The literature on memory is vast, including the operations of individual memory and social memory. Bartlett, *Remembering*, was one of the first to champion the constructive process of memory, while Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, was the pioneer of the study of social memory. Most recently Anastasio, Ehrenberger, Watson and Zhang, *Individual and Collective Memory*, have argued that individual and social memory rely on parallel cognitive processes.

77 Anastasio, Ehrenberger, Watson and Zhang, *Individual and Collective Memory*, 129.

78 Fauconnier and Turner 2002, *Way We Think*.

If unchecked, this tendency toward reduction and generalization of knowledge would result in oversimplification and useless information. So the reflective thought process has its correctives. For instance, to correct overgeneralization, our minds constantly specify by working to divide and subdivide the big category, to break it down into a number of more precise frames that can be applied to more local situations. Our minds modulate frames so that different details of a stable frame are emphasized to suit particular social contexts.<sup>79</sup>

Our ability to specify and modulate information is linked to decompression, the mental operation corresponding to compression. Knowledge doesn't remain compressed. When recruited, it is decompressed like the opening of a zip drive. When this happens, the scaled down structure is opened back into the bigger mental network of related concepts, inferences and elaborations that remained linked to the structure even when it was in its compressed state. In this process, specific inferential links are recruited and meaning is roused, giving us more particular insight.<sup>80</sup>

To thoroughly understand the processes of reflective cognition, more research and modeling will need to be done in the future. That said, a few examples of the main revisionary operations of reflective cognition can be delineated. Since gnostic narratives of soul flights are the most complex when compared to other groups of narratives from the Mediterranean world, we will use them as test cases for these reflective operations.<sup>81</sup> Here I exercise my construction of gnostic(ism) as a newly emergent form of spirituality in the first and second centuries CE, that engages multiple religious affiliations, reforming existing religions and generating new religious movements.<sup>82</sup> As a spirituality, it is transtheistic in its theological orientation. God is transcendent (beyond the cosmos and beyond all other gods) and only knowable through direct experience prompted by particular rites of initiation. The human spirit is understood to be an innate extension of this transcendent God, and thus capable of know-

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79 Anastasio, Ehrenberger, Watson and Zhang, *Individual and Collective Memory*, 127–129, 144–146.

80 Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*; Fauconnier, *Mappings*, and *Mental Spaces*; Coulson, *Semantic Leaps*; Fauconnier and Turner, *Way We Think*, 119, 323–332.

81 Gnostic narratives of soul flights can be found in several ancient collections including the Nag Hammadi, Berlin, Bruce, Askew, and Tchacos codices. Some, like myself, might include also the Corpus Hermeticum. Gnostic soul flight narratives are also discussed in the heresiological literature. See the recent book on gnostic apocalypses, which covers the soul's journey in Sethian gnostic texts: Burns, *Apocalypse of the Alien God*.

82 DeConick, *Gnostic New Age*. For a more detailed presentation of this thesis, see DeConick, 'Crafting Gnosis'.

ing him. These gnostic groups have left behind a variety of stories about the fall of the soul and spirit and sets of rituals they believed transported the soul and spirit back to their sources, when the divided self can be reunited with its transcendent source.

#### 2.4 *Contemporaneity*

The revision process moves in the direction of applicability to the present situation, so that the needs of the present—both personal and communal— affect and remodel the old frame.<sup>83</sup> The revision of concepts generally reflects a story of progress and betterment.<sup>84</sup> New knowledge is linked to old knowledge as if it were always part of the story. The linkage of old knowledge to new knowledge ensures relevance, as well as continuity with the past. It may be viewed as a rational or intellectual corrective to folk intuitions or older forms of knowledge.

The outstanding peculiarity of gnostic narratives of soul flights is that they tend to feature not only the soul, but also the spirit. Gnostic authors are inclined to bifurcate the mental essence of the person, so that the soul or psyche refers to the emotive, moral and rational self, while the spirit or pneuma refers to the intuitive and imaginative faculty of the mind that is able to discern the truth and directly experience God.<sup>85</sup> The spirit, not the soul, is the authentic self that will survive death permanently.

How did gnostics come up with the concept that the spirit is the intellectual organ that allows us access to knowledge beyond what we can reason or learn from our corporeal senses? The gnostic spirit is what ancient philosophers call nous or mind.<sup>86</sup> It is very likely that the bifurcation of spirit and soul was the direct result of a gnostic leader or community engaging in philosophical discussions about anthropology, and trying to correct the traditional concept of the soul so that it reflected what they considered to be the most learned understanding of the human self at the time. To put it another way, the gnostic spirit is a concept that came from reasoned reflection and argument, in order to link

83 Anastasio, Ehrenberger, Watson and Zhang, *Individual and Collective Memory*. For a broader discussion of this operation in terms of social memory, start with the classic study by Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*.

84 Anastasio, Ehrenberger, Watson and Zhang, *Individual and Collective Memory*, 167–168.

85 Mandaean switch this around so that the soul is the higher aspect of the self which ascends into the world of light, while the human spirit must be harnessed. Manicheans see the soul as the divine aspect of the human, which functions like a vehicle carrying the dispersed “light” back to the kingdom of light.

86 Roig Lanzillotta, ‘Spirit, Soul and Body’; DeConick, *Gnostic New Age*, 60–67.

new knowledge to the old as if it had always been so. There is nothing cognitively intuitive about this shift. This division of a person's mental essence into soul and spirit is the consequence of a simple twist of the cognitive ratchet, when intuitive anthropology meets reflective thought within a particular cultural buffer.

## 2.5 *Coherence or Sensibility*

Reflective cognition pushes toward coherence or sensibility. We make sense of events we experience, or as Frederic Bartlett (1886–1969) put it, human thought is the “effort after meaning.”<sup>87</sup> Humans are more tolerant of memory inaccuracy than we are of incoherence or insensibility.<sup>88</sup> This may explain why we prefer to reduce cognitive dissonance, even if this means rationalizations or justifications of irrational thoughts and behaviors.<sup>89</sup> It also may explain why reflective thought operates in teleological directions, that we understand our experiences as purposeful, as relevant beyond random chance.<sup>90</sup>

As gnostics locked onto the bifurcation of the spirit and soul, they were forced to make sense of its many logical implications. If the soul is not the permanent aspect of the self capable of salvation, then what about the spirit? If the soul comes from the celestial spheres, created by the God who rules these spheres as Jews and Christians say, where does the spirit come from? These types of reflective questions were embedded within on-going philosophical discussions about the nature of the God beyond Mind and Being, helping gnostics imagine transcendent realms as the residence for their God of worship, the supreme God of existence, realms that are the true home of the human spirit.<sup>91</sup> This turn of the cognitive ratchet expanded reality to include a transcendent world, which is both the origin and destination of the spirit.

This resulted in more implications, and more cognitive push to make sense of the expanded reality. As the cognitive ratchet turned, it levered gnostics to populate the new transcendent world with angels and other divine entities, imagining them as emanations or productions of the supreme God Who Exists. From Barbelo to Horos, various gnostics imagine these transcendent populations differently, as well as their interface with the cosmic spheres and human world. These differences represent continual reflective cognition within very specific socio-cultural buffers.

87 Bartlett, *Remembering*.

88 Anastasio, Ehrenberger, Watson and Zhang, *Individual and Collective Memory*, 167–168.

89 Festinger, *Cognitive Dissonance*.

90 Tremlin, *Minds and Gods*, 102–103.

91 Whittaker. 'Epekeina Nou Kai Ousias'.



Gnostic narratives of soul journeys then include a new territory, the transcendent world, as well as a new mental entity, the spirit. This means that we not only have examples of the soul traveling through the underworld and the celestial spheres in gnostic literature. We also have examples of the spirit shedding the soul body and journeying into the transcendent spheres to return to its divine origins and be transformed into a transcendent divinity or be deified.

This ascent to transformation or deification is another development within the realm of reflective cognition, again a consequence of the mental push toward coherence and the construction of meaning. It presupposes that descent harmed or incarcerated the soul and spirit, and that ascent is necessary to heal the damage. Gnostic ascent narratives are not about acquiring secret information from the angels or God, such as one might see in Jewish apocalyptic and Hekhalot narratives. Gnostic ascent narratives are about therapy for the spirit, which gnostics believed must be integrated with its divine source in order to be made whole. Gnosis was for them the direct experience of the supreme God, which transformed their spirits and made them “immortal men” with the power to heal others of disease.<sup>92</sup> This therapeutic orientation was worked out as a path of religious initiation, complete with a variety of rituals that were believed to awaken and release the soul from the body, purge it of its demonic rulers, mature the spirit into a self-sustaining divinity, and integrate it into God in the transcendent realms.<sup>93</sup>

## 2.6 *Recursion*

The revisionary process is recursive because it embeds new cultural information within old reoccurring knowledge structures.<sup>94</sup> We might think of recursive structures as ratchet effects, when knowledge becomes a repeatable structure rather than a regressive one. So the way in which old knowledge is already structured determines how the new cultural knowledge will be structured, even in cases where we are dealing with cognitive blending and emergent structures. The old recursive categories influence the structuring of new experiences and behaviors, thus perpetually re-embedding the old structures, whether partially or wholly.

Cognitive recursion is comparable to Bourdieu’s idea of “habitus,” that the knowledge we have as a society is self-reinforcing and self-sustaining. Bourdieu understood that current practices and knowledge structures are shaped by past

92 Plotinus, *Ennead* 2.14. Cf. Adamson, ‘Astrological Medicine’.

93 For more details and descriptions of initiatory activities of different gnostic groups, see DeConick, *Gnostic New Age*, 163–227.

94 Anastasio, Ehrenberger, Watson and Zhang, *Individual and Collective Memory*, 155–156.

events and the ways in which our thoughts and feelings have been structured as propensities or dispositions.<sup>95</sup>

In the case of gnostic flights, recursion is most prominent in their rituals. While it is impossible in this limited article to make an exhaustive survey of gnostic ritual performances associated with soul flights, let us turn to a few examples of water and oil lustrations to demonstrate their recursive operation.

In the case of the Sethians, water lustration is their main ritual. The origins of the first Sethians have long been debated, but when all is taken into consideration, the general consensus is that their immediate ancestors emerged out of an apocalyptic baptismal group that had been operating along the Jordan, a group like the one that had been led by John the Baptist.<sup>96</sup> While the emergent Sethians continued to use baptism as their main initiatory rite, they embedded baptism within a new network of religious concepts and narratives that portrayed the biblical creator and ruler of this world as a fallen god, even a demon. While the baptismal structure is recursive, its linkage to a different mythology, cosmology and theology resulted in a unique system of salvation.

The Sethians used water lustration in all three of their levels of initiation. In the old Sethian text, *Trimorphic Protennoia*, we learn that the first mystery involves a descent into the underworld where Protennoia, a female savior, calls out to her children in whom the spirit dwells. Protennoia shakes up the underworld by destroying the bonds of the demons who had chained her children there. She awakens and liberates their spirits from Chaos.<sup>97</sup> In the *Apocryphon of John*, her children are immersed in water, sealed with the five seals of immortality.<sup>98</sup> Sethian groups also used water lustration to assist the ascent of the soul through the celestial spheres, baptizing the initiate at each celestial level.<sup>99</sup> Once the initiate had successfully ascended out of the cosmos and into the transcendent realms, the baptisms continued, gradually transforming the spirit

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95 Bourdieu, *Outline*.

96 Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism*, 242–247. See now Burns, *Apocalypse of the Alien God*, although there is no reason to think that the originating group had to be Christian. See my reply to Burns: DeConick, 'Review'. On lustration rites in antiquity more generally, see Ferguson, *Baptism*; Hellholm et al., *Abulation*.

97 *Trimorphic Protennoia* NHC XIII,1 36.4–26, 40.30–37 (Hedrick, *Nag Hammadi Codices XI, XII, XIII*, 404–405, 412–413).

98 *Apocryphon of John* NHC II,1 30.33–31.25 (Waldstein and Wisse, *Apocryphon of John*, 171–175).

99 See Pearson, 'Baptism'; Turner, 'Baptismal Vision'.

into a god worthy of praise. In the Sethian text, *Zostrianos* the initiate, braves at least twenty-two baptisms in the journey back to God through the underworld, celestial realms and transcendent levels.

Valentinian groups used both water and oil lustration as their main initiatory rites.<sup>100</sup> The Valentinian use of ritual is most demonstrative of recursion because the Valentinians originally were ensconced in emerging catholic churches that baptized its members and anointed them. After Valentinus lost the election for bishop of Rome in the mid-second century, he and his followers formed a counter catholic church with dual levels: a beginner's level for baptized "psychic" Christians and an advanced level for anointed "pneumatic" Christians.<sup>101</sup>

While Valentinians considered water baptism a "first" rite that represented initiation into the Christian church more generally, they augmented this with a "second" baptism with oil, a ceremony they called redemption. Irenaeus describes a redemption ceremony that was used in Marcus' church. The goal of this ceremony was to release the soul from the body so that the initiate could embark on an ecstatic journey through the celestial spheres, flying past the demiurge's seat of judgment. To start, the initiate reclined on a bridal bed as the leader prayed, "In the name of the unknown Father of the universe, in Truth the Mother of everything, in he who descended into Jesus, (may you go) into union, redemption, and companionship with the Powers."<sup>102</sup> The initiate was smeared with the ointment of mercy, a mixture of oil and water, while the leader recited a second prayer in Hebrew or Aramaic.<sup>103</sup> Although the words are garbled in Irenaeus' account, we can make out from the account that the prayer summoned the invisible Spirit, asking for protection from the demiurge, the God of Judgment and his militia. The prayer is invoked in the hidden Name of Jesus. As the soul is freed from the body, it is given the invisibility helmet of Hades which protects it from the demiurge and his soldiers.<sup>104</sup> With this, the initiate is snatched up by Sophia and conducted into the transcendent realm, where the initiate unites with an angelic counterpart and becomes

100 Cf. *Gospel of Philip* NHC II,3 57.22–28; 67.2–9; 69.5–14; 78.1–10; 85.21–86.18 (Layton, *Nag Hammadi Codex II*, 2–7, 154–155, 174–175, 178–181, 198–199, 212–215); *A Valentinian Exposition* NHC XI,2A 40,1–29 (Hedrick, *Nag Hammadi Codices XI, XII, XIII*, 140–143).

101 For details about this dual gnostic church, see DeConick, *Gnostic New Age*, 229–258.

102 Irenaeus, *Heresies* 1.21.3 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, *Irénée de Lyon*, 298–303). English translation mine.

103 For the reference to the ointment of mercy, see *Gospel of Truth* NHC I,3 36.14–20 (Attridge, *Nag Hammadi Codex I*, 5, 108–109).

104 The helmet of Hades may be a special vestment in the Marcasian ritual. See Irenaeus, *Heresies* 1.13.6 (Rousseau-Doutreleau, *Irénée de Lyon*, 200–205).

whole. Some Valentinians performed the last act of the Redemption ceremony at death as last rites. They reserved for the end of life the ultimate words that would defeat the demiurge, whispering them into the ear of the dying person as his soul faced judgment.<sup>105</sup>

Valentinian rites were so recursive, embedding catholic rites into their own gnostic networks and inferences, that Irenaeus complains bitterly about it. He said that the Valentinians often used the same prayers and rites as the catholics, while teaching their followers about their secret spiritual meanings. Since this secret meaning differed from the meaning that catholics associated with the same prayers and rites, the Valentinian prayers and practices ended up causing confusion among Christians who did not know to watch out for the differences.<sup>106</sup>

These two exemplars show recursion at work. While these examples of water and oil lustrations differentiate wildly in terms of the cultural details of their performance, attached meaning, and inferential links, the ritual structures and the general conceptualizations of their efficacy remain stable. In these cases, water and oil lustrations work to purify and release the soul so that it can journey from the underworld through the celestial spheres back to the transcendent house of God.

## 2.7 Retention

While reflective cognition can result in substantive innovations that serve as distinctive identity markers for different groups, the reflective process can also become a disadvantage. The blending of innovation upon innovation can ratchet up the concept, sometimes resulting in extreme discontinuity with its intuitive roots. Because each new blend moves the concept further and further away from its ground zero and intuitive cognitive roots, it can become more and more difficult to grasp and retain. The greater the amount of abstraction and cognitive load, the more costly the concept becomes mentally. This may explain why there is a tension between intuitive forms of religion that are cognitively optimal and reflective forms of religion that are more costly to maintain.<sup>107</sup> If the religious concepts become too ratcheted as in the case of philosophically derived theology, there is a real risk that people will fall back into more intuitively derived folk theology, abandoning the reasoned.<sup>108</sup>

105 Hippolytus, *Ref.* 6.41.2–5 (Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 258–259).

106 Irenaeus, *Heresies* 4.33.3 (Rousseau, Hemmerdinger, Doutreleau, and Mercier, *Irénée de Lyon*, 808–810).

107 Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity*.

108 Pyysiäinen, *Supernatural Agents*, 132.

Because of this, reflective concepts can become difficult to maintain and transmit intergenerationally without extended instruction and extended cognitive offloading onto physical artifacts like books, illustrations, and other material objects that serve as material anchors and function as an extension of the mind.<sup>109</sup> This explains why gnostics implement material anchors to help them remember the intricacy of the realms and mark their progress through them. Since the concepts are so enriched with the experiential and cultural interface of reflective thought, the ideas and practices become too complicated to transmit without an extreme amount of offloading onto the environment. Gnostics were prolific writers of instructional books, sermons, letters, and ritual handbooks. This literature is focused on telling the story of the journey of the spirit—how it got here—and what must be done so that the spirit can journey back the way it came. They used material objects infused with meaning to jog their memories and assist their ascents, including carved gems, amulets, maps, illustrated seals, water, holy oil, incense, clothing, plant matter, and other items.<sup>110</sup>

As our basic cognitive frames are mapped with more and more reflective reasoning, and are innovatively blended again and again, we must turn to environmental offloading and instructive practices to maintain the ratcheted concepts and practices. In the case of gnostic groups, the innovations within and across groups became so ratcheted that it took an entire lifetime of instruction and performance during progressive initiation ceremonies for a single lost spirit to liberate itself from the cycle of life and death and find wholeness in the transcendent realm. At least this was the case with the rites of Marcus the Valentinian who waited until the deathbed to whisper the final secret password into the ear of the dying gnostic.<sup>111</sup>

Yet offloading is not simply a matter of the long term storage of complex memories for instructional purposes and subsequent transmission. In terms of cognitive ratcheting, it is what allows for the accumulation of knowledge and concept-building across generations without slippage backward. It is what Isaac Newton referred to when he famously wrote Robert Hooke (1676), 'If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.'<sup>112</sup> This is

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109 On material anchors, see Hutchins, 'Material Anchors'. For discussions of anchors and the extended mind, see Clark and Chalmers, 'Extended Mind'; Day, 'Religion, Off-Line Cognition and the Extended Mind'; Menary, *Extended Mind*.

110 Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.31 (Borret, *Origène contre Celse*, 254–258); Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.38–40 (Borret, *Origène contre Celse*, 270–274).

111 Hippolytus, *Ref.* 6.41.2–5 (Marcovich, *Hippolytus*, 258–259).

112 Day, 'Religion, Off-Line Cognition and the Extended Mind'.

why human culture has been able to ratchet up its concepts in ways that other animals have not.<sup>113</sup> Offloading concepts onto artifacts allows future generations to continue to develop concepts starting from their previously ratcheted states. This means that reflective thinking accretes as it is offloaded and reused by people in other places and times. Its interface with culture becomes more and more complex as offloaded concepts are engaged over and over again within multiple environments that may or may not have immediate chronological or historical connections. In such cases, epidemiology takes the back seat to the purposeful preservation of artifacts and the introduction of lost artifacts into new populations.

### 3 Comparative Work

The work of this paper suggests that a cognitive model like cognitive ratcheting is a necessary augment to traditional historical studies that have been limited by their heavy reliance on cultural borrowing to analyze and explain narratives of soul flights in ancient Mediterranean literature. The limitations of cultural borrowing have led scholars to abandon the historical comparative project more generally, especially in transcultural and transhistorical instances, which cannot be explained by cultural borrowing. These limitations have restricted us, refocusing our attention on writing thick descriptions of single texts and on trying to explain cultural borrowing, when we see evidence of it, in terms of conscious cultural appropriation.

Cognitive ratcheting as a model has the advantage of explaining similar narrative structures as expressions of basic cognitive frames that humans share due to the way our evolved brains and bodies operate. These basic shared frames are built on pre-conceptual spatial schemas and concepts informed by folk intuitions.

In the case of soul flights, the basic frame highlights the soul's journey up and down the cosmic axis, through the underworld and the heavens. The soul's movement up is considered for the best, associated with life, goodness, virtue, power and health. The soul's movement down is the opposite. It is associated with death, evil, vice, weakness and sickness. The soul's condition worsens the lower it sinks in its descent. In order to make the soul flight, the soul must be released or freed from the body and move in and out of various cosmic locations. The soul's movement always is progressive, having

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113 Barrett, *Shape of Thought*, 224–226.

a beginning and an end. The movement may start and end at any cosmic location as it progressively ascends or descends through these cosmic spaces. This movement is assumed to follow some segment of the birth and death cycle. This basic frame is shared across the Mediterranean literature (500 BCE–500 CE), in the narratives of soul flights from the Bible to the Hekhalot, from the New Testament to Nag Hammadi, from Plato to Plotinus.

These pre-conceptual and automatic structures, however, form only the basic scaffolding for these narratives. When this basic cognitive frame built on the sensory motor schemas and intuitive folk concepts is broken open or adjusted to reflect reasoned thought or argument, this leads to a level of specificity in the concept that echoes deeper cultural flavors and concerns. As concepts are mapped with more and more abstract constructs, they begin to communicate more specific information about the concept.

This type of conceptual development based on reflective cognition is a natural mental process that creates narratives that reflect more specifically local cultural environments. While narratives like soul flights may be structured similarly because they have engaged the same spatial patterns and intuitive concepts, the basic cognitive frame is always extended into more abstract, imaginative and localized domains, resulting in significant difference and substantial innovations. They are ratcheted up conceptually with the operations of reflective thought, when deliberate interaction with language and culture take place. These processes of reflective thought are largely constructive and revisionary, pushing the remodeling of concepts and practices toward contemporaneity and coherence, while continuing to embed recursive structures as ratchet effects.

These reflective operations account for the vast differences in soul flight narratives, everything from the names of the gods and entities that populate the realms of travel to justifications for soul flights, especially those undertaken before death. It is the ratcheting of reflective thought that is responsible for the truly distinct aspects of the narratives of soul flights in the ancient Mediterranean literature, such as in the case of the gnostics with their bifurcation of the soul and the spirit, the addition of a transcendent realm to the conventional cosmos, and the intense focus on ritual therapy to release, purify, and return the spirit to its transcendent home.

Reflective cognition, then, leads to concepts and practices that can become so differentiated and modulated in terms of cultural variables that they become ratcheted to the extreme. They can become so highly ratcheted and cognitively costly, as in the case of gnostic narratives and rituals, that they require offloading and material anchors in order to be maintained and transmitted. This move to offload is very significant because it allows concepts to continue

to be ratcheted from a starting point that is already ratcheted. This allows reflective cognition to accumulate and interface with culture in increasingly complex ways without slipping backwards or starting over.

Although the cognitive ratcheting model goes a long way to help us understand the persistence and diversification of certain structures in narratives of soul flights, this is only one small application. The real power of this model is its explanatory potential to do comparative work in other contexts. Because it is a theoretical model grounded in cognitive science, evolutionary psychology and linguistics, it can help us understand more systematically and thoroughly everything from the operation of magic to the formation of theological beliefs. While deliberate cultural appropriation does occur, it is not a substitute for a robust scientifically grounded theory of comparison like the one proposed in this article. As an augment to historical critical methods, cognitive ratcheting can help us respond cogently to the persistent problem of comparison.

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