

Perennial Idealism: A Mystical Solution to the Mind-Body Problem

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Introduction

Any metaphysical system will face the challenge of explaining how its fundamentals accommodate phenomena as they appear to us. Among the most salient of such phenomena is that of our conscious minds in apparent interface with what we take to be our bodies and the mind-independent world. This has come to be known as the mind-body problem. Can the metaphysic successfully explain this interface, or fit the mind seamlessly into the world? Important as well is the question of how our metaphysic accommodates the world not only as it appears to our unaided senses, but as it is said to be behind the scenes. Does it do sufficient justice to the array of scientific data, such as that revealed through neuroscience and physics?

Most metaphysical systems will at some point appeal to brute fact. A brute fact is a fact that is not itself being further reduced or explained but which is often relied on to explain other facts. There is nothing wrong in itself with a brute fact. Most, if not all, metaphysical systems will have at least one load-carrying brute fact. The crucial question is where the brute facts are being placed. Are they innocently placed, or are they papering over a crack that marks a critical interface, such as that between mind, world and science? The extent to which such a crack is being papered over is a critical determinant in the viability of a metaphysical system.

Within contemporary metaphysics of mind, the dialectic has been driven by a desire to avoid what are commonly held instances of crack-papering in the competing positions. Most cracks are known well enough to have become named entities — e.g. “the hard problem” for materialism, “the interaction problem” or “the causal exclusion problem” for dualism, “the combination problem” for panpsychism and most recently “the decombination problem” for cosmopsychism. Advocates of each position are devoted to repairing or perhaps denying their system’s fault-lines, which often yields more nuanced versions of their position. To the extent that the cracks are admitted, its advocates are happy to live with them, deeming them less pernicious than those of their rivals. Others, though, see the cracks as imploding

the metaphysic. This drives the dialectic forward, generating new positions that aim to avoid the faults of their predecessors. But then new fault-lines appear.

In what he terms the “Hegelian synthesis argument” — named broadly after Hegel’s dialectical method of identifying thesis, antithesis and problem-avoiding synthesis — David Chalmers (2016a) has recently traced the evolution of the mind-body dialectic through variants of materialism, dualism and panpsychism. The dialectic is heading in a direction that places consciousness ever closer to the ground of all being. The most recent position is a brand of panpsychism called “cosmopsychism” that takes the entire externally specified cosmos to be an internally conscious subject. This paper will propose a radical new successor to cosmopsychism that I call “Perennial Idealism”. In outlining its preliminary dialectic, I will not focus on the details of materialism, dualism and panpsychism but will instead identify their key sticking points, with a view to arguing that Perennial Idealism overcomes them. I suggest that the most promising way forward in the mind-body problem — navigating around all the problems to date — is to renounce the pervasive panpsychist supposition that fundamental consciousness must belong to a subject. This extends the reach and scope of consciousness to ground not merely to the inner nature of the cosmos, but everything we take to be the world, with its subjects and objects.

How are we to understand the notion of a universal world-grounding consciousness that lacks the encompassing perspective of a subject to whom experiences occur? To the extent that such a view is countenanced, little is said about it in contemporary western philosophical literature.¹ It is here that Perennial Idealism takes its cue from the

1. A notable modern exponent of such ideas is integral theorist Ken Wilber (2001). His extensive body of work, however, seeks to develop a *meta-theoretical*, “neo-Perennialist” framework into which the subject matter and methodology of different disciplines can be integrated and understood, rather than a detailed *metaphysical* framework through which the world-grounding aperspectival consciousness can itself be understood. Along a more standardly philosophical vein, Itay Shani and Joachim Keppeler (2018) have recently attempted to ground experience in an aperspectival cosmic consciousness.

writings of esteemed mystics. Remarkably, there appear to be many first-person accounts from people who claim to have experienced and indeed permanently established themselves in aperspectival or non-dual consciousness.² Although often from different traditions and centuries, these mystics are said to have directly “awoken” to their abiding nature as aperspectival consciousness, realising it to be none other than the ultimate ground of what we take to be the world.³ This ground is depicted as unconditioned by such parameters as space, time or sensory and mental qualities. The central metaphysical content of this allegedly recurring insight has been termed by Aldous Huxley (1946) and others as “The Perennial Philosophy”. The name “Perennial Idealism” denotes a philosophical extrapolation from this Perennial Philosophy. Any attempt to articulate the notion of this abiding universal consciousness must thus include reference to the direct, aperspectival *experience* of it by mystics as ultimate and unconditioned. Even if escaping full discursive understanding, we need enough of a handle on the requisite concepts for them to have traction in the context of a philosophical discussion. In introducing Perennial Idealism, I will attempt, by way of a thought experiment, to do just this. What makes the exercise somewhat easier is the fact that if such unconditioned consciousness *is* what it purports to be, then it will not, as many suppose, be utterly divorced from our everyday conscious states. For there are subtle but discernible aspects to our everyday conscious states whose

However, they deliberately leave unspecified the underlying metaphysic, allowing for the possibility that it be interpreted along either double-aspected or idealist lines. And in the final section of Albahari (forthcoming, but written before this one), I sketch a rudimentary precursor to the account on offer here.

2. For purposes of this paper I use the terms ‘aperspectival’ and ‘non-dual’ interchangeably. While both denote an unstructured, undifferentiated consciousness, the term ‘aperspectival’ suggests a useful contrast with the subject-bound “perspectival” mode of consciousness. ‘Non-dual’ is suggestive of being beyond all dualities, particularly that of subject and object, but also that of one’s abiding essence and the ultimate ground.
3. I use the term ‘mystic’ to denote those widely purported to have had an irreversible “awakening” experience, such as along the lines described in this paper.

essence just might turn out to *be* unconditioned consciousness. The trick, then, will be to notice and then extrapolate from them.

Many scholars are sceptical that there is such a thing as the Perennial Philosophy, both in terms of there being genuine convergence over it amongst the reports of mystics, and in terms of any such reports being veridical. The reports, after all, are often expressed in esoteric or theistic language. Additionally, there is a current of thought which contends that there can be no such experience of pure unmediated (or unconditioned) consciousness.⁴ So might mystics across different times and traditions actually be alluding to an unconditioned aperspectival consciousness that is both our abiding nature and the ground of all being? And if so, might they really be right? The quest to present Perennial Idealism as a promising position within the metaphysics of mind now takes on a broader significance. If an independent case can be made for the position's viability, which would include the avoidance of problems besetting its predecessors, then a measure of independent support is given to the mystical reports both in terms of the hypothesis of convergent experience and with respect to their veracity. For, if the proposed metaphysic turns out to be both plausible and experientially accessible, then the likelihood of cross-traditional mystical reports ac-

4. The most influential proponent of such scepticism about a Perennial Philosophy is Steven T. Katz. Katz's central claim is that "*There are NO pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences. Neither mystical experience nor more ordinary forms of experience give any indication, or any grounds for believing, that they are unmediated. ... The notion of unmediated experience seems, if not self-contradictory, at best empty. This epistemological fact seems to me to be true, because of the sorts of beings we are, even with regards to the experiences of those ultimate objects of concern with which mystics have intercourse, e.g., God, Being, nirvāṇa; etc.*" (1978, 26). A central problem with Katz's statement is that in deciding on "the sorts of beings we are", he presupposes *all* human experience to be perspectival, manifesting as objects appearing to a subject. A related criticism is made by Robert Forman (1997, 15–16), who accuses Katz of presupposing that all experience has a constructed (hence conditioned) character. The burden of proof might nevertheless lie with the Perennialist to show that the idea of aperspectival, unconditioned experience is in fact coherent. This paper can be seen as an attempt to demonstrate both the coherence of aperspectival unconditioned experience, and the metaphysic that could be built upon it.

tually converging upon such a reality will be increased. Reciprocally, an internally consistent array of relevant mystical quotations from different times and traditions will provide a measure of independent evidential support for the metaphysic. For if the Perennial Philosophy were both true and experientially accessible, we would expect to encounter multiple internally consistent reports of such experience. This potentially mutual reinforcement of metaphysic and converging data from mystics thus provides further incentive to explore Perennial Idealism as a natural successor to cosmopsychism.

The position is, of course, not without its challenges, two of which can be identified as primary: one positive and one negative. The positive challenge is to show how the world as it appears to us, with its tables, trees, atoms and people, could conceivably be construed as a manifestation from the ground of aperspectival and unconditioned consciousness. Constructing this in detail will be a substantial metaphysical project, which this paper will begin to advance. The physical world and its subjects will be re-cast as a network of co-arising subjects, which turn out to be dispositional perspectives framed by configurations of cognitive and sensory imagery.⁵ What is promising about this idealist avenue is that the brute facts to be built upon are in part observable, not straddling cracks that mysteriously bridge conscious minds with a non-conscious physical substrate. There is no hard problem or interaction/exclusion problem. And as our minds will harbour consciousness in virtue of the aperspectival ground rather than other subjects, combination and decombination problems will be averted. The position also promises to accommodate both common sense and scientific data. There is a way to account for the truth of 'the table is there when we leave the room' in terms of co-arising subjects, whilst not ignoring discoveries about atoms. Unlike Berkeley or the

5. I remain neutral on the issue of whether cognitive imagery (such as that pertaining to the phenomenal feeling of emotions, desires, thoughts, etc.) can be reduced to sensory imagery (such as that pertaining to visual sensations, auditory sensations, proprioceptive sensations, etc.).

British Idealists, Perennial Idealism aims to do this without appeal to an overarching conscious observer such as God or the Absolute.

The negative challenge is to avoid a serious objection that threatens to undermine the position before it gets off the ground. For the exercise of reconstructing our metaphysic from the words of mystics, in a way that does not cherry-pick only what looks kosher, reveals a deep new fault-line. I refer to this as “the problem of the one and the many”.⁶ The problem in fact goes back to ancient times, facing such philosophers as Parmenides and Plotinus, and subsequently Schelling and perhaps his forerunner Spinoza. If the ground, “the One”, is as the mystics say it is – completely unconditioned by such parameters as space, time, imagery and hence plurality – how then can it coherently interface with what we take to be our world, or its imagistic appearance thereof with its many apparent subjects and objects? Conceding the independent reality of a multi-faceted world, even if that world turns out to be complexes of imagery-bound subjects, enforces a boundary between it and the One, undoing the purely unconditioned status of a ground that permits no such boundary. The alternative is austere existence monism, by which the world as we appear to know it does not exist – only the ground does. This would not only defeat the preceding explanation of the world in terms of imagery-bound subjects, but also deny what seems to be the obvious reality of people having experiences. I will suggest a way around the problem that requires a radical rethinking of how we construe reality, implying an unconventional grounding relation between unconditioned consciousness and subjects. The proposed solution takes its cue from mystico-philosophical writings of established figures from within the Advaita Vedānta tradition.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 1 attempts to motivate Perennial Idealism by situating it favourably within the current dialectic. Section 2 presents a range of passages from well-known mystics of different traditions and times, with a view to showing that they can be

6. This is not to be confused with the “Problem of the Many” that is associated with Peter Unger and David Lewis.

read in a way that is consistent with the Perennial Philosophy. Section 3 begins to extrapolate the metaphysic by presenting a thought experiment that attempts to clarify its ground of aperspectival consciousness. It particularly aims to show how such consciousness could be conceivably experienced, in line with mystical reports, as unstructured by subject and object, as unconditioned by space and time, as devoid of mental and sensory imagery, and as metaphysically ultimate. Section 4 begins the positive challenge of building the manifest world out of dispositional imagery-bound subjects that co-arise from unconditioned consciousness. Section 5 addresses the problem of the one and the many.

Section 1: Situating Perennial Idealism within the Current Dialectic

This section situates Perennial Idealism within the dialectic of the current principal positions that have evolved in the western analytic metaphysics of mind. In critiquing them, I will focus less upon their specific details and more upon the trajectory of deeper assumptions held in common by relatively opposing positions, to be renounced under dialectical pressure. Rather than attempt to demonstrate that the problems for the prevalent positions are insurmountable, the strategy will be to identify some of their well-known sticking points, with a view to arguing that, in avoiding them, Perennial Idealism holds a *prima facie* theoretical advantage over its rivals.

Materialism can be broadly characterised as the view that all facts about concrete reality, including those about conscious minds, are grounded in facts that exclude any conscious qualities from their specification.⁷ Depending on the proposed level of fundament, if any, such facts may be either those pertaining to quantum-level phenomena, or those describing the cosmos as a whole. Dualism, by contrast, is the

7. In modern materialism (sometimes called “physicalism”), the grounding is usually spelled out in terms of metaphysical entailment between the fundamental facts and those dependent on them. Hence, if materialism about consciousness is true of the actual world, there is no possible world in which a material duplicate of the actual world lacks the conscious phenomenal properties present within the actual world.

view that facts about concrete reality are grounded in facts that are divided into two metaphysical categories: those pertaining to mind and those pertaining to matter. Dualism and materialism are thus opposed insofar as dualism keeps consciousness out of the physical world while materialism tries to fit consciousness into it. But they both share the deeper assumption that any fundamental constituents of physical reality, whether specified microstructurally or macrocosmically, will exclude from that specification the phenomenal qualities that we associate with consciousness.⁸ This leads to difficulties in reconciling phenomenal with physical properties — either by way of reduction or emergence, as per the materialist, or by way of causal interface, as per the dualist. Each is faced with the prospect of having to posit a load-carrying brute fact to bridge an explanatory gap.

For the materialist, a subject's conscious properties — if not implausibly deflated to something that can be predicted from its non-conscious physical basis — must mysteriously emerge from this basis as high-level unpredictably novel phenomena.⁹ They are left with what Chalmers (1996) calls the "hard problem" of consciousness: that of

8. By "conscious/phenomenal quality/experience" I mean those such that there is, in Nagel's famous (1974) phrase, "something it is like" to have them, usually via the different cognitive or sensory modalities. Examples include the taste of chocolate, the feeling of hope, the smell of a rose, the visual appearance of a sunset or, more broadly, the feeling of being a unified subject who experiences several such qualities at once. Later, I use the term 'cognisensory imagery' to convey the specific qualities associated with the different specific sensory and cognitive modalities. Most broadly, the term 'conscious quality' includes the imageless phenomenal quality pertaining to the nature of pure consciousness itself, about which the paper will later go into detail.
9. While the deflationary view (known as type A materialism) has its defenders, the idea that conscious properties can be predicted from their physical bases comes at the cost of rendering the conscious properties to be functional/behavioural rather than phenomenal, a cost many think is too high. The non-deflationary version of materialism (known as type B materialism) allows the conscious properties to be properly phenomenal, but at the cost of moving the bump to another part of the carpet. They then have to contend, as indicated above, with their brute-necessity emergence from a purely physical basis, generating an explanatory gap that has taken the forms of various epistemic and conceivability problems. For a more detailed account of this, which lists the main proponents of each position, see Chalmers (2016a, 2003).

explaining how something so unexpected as conscious phenomenal qualities could arise from a basis that utterly lacks them. As it seems conceivable that all the neural processes could occur without the co-presence of conscious qualities, it is unclear how such processes could explain their production. In Galen Strawson's words, such brute and unexpected emergence, not to be found anywhere else in the physical world, seems "miraculous" (2006, 18). For the dualist, on the other hand, mystery enshrouds the exact nature of causal interface between two very different types of property or substance. Conscious phenomena appear to have a two-way causal interaction with physical phenomena such as our bodies, but how could this work if one concedes conscious phenomena to lack physical dimensions such as extension or location?¹⁰ The intrusion of non-physical conscious events into the physical world remains at heart a mysterious brute fact, and appears to also violate widely accepted physical principles such as causal closure.¹¹

Such difficulties have motivated a number of philosophers to take an alternative tack, propelling the dialectic away from dualist and materialist positions that keep conscious properties out of material fundamentals, and moving it towards panpsychist positions that sink consciousness into them. Consciousness now enters into the definition of material building blocks, such as via the interior nature of an otherwise externally specified quantum entity, or more recently via the interior nature of an externally specified cosmos. Our minds are conscious by virtue of the consciousness belonging to the fundamentals.

10. One of the earliest records of this objection is found in Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia's correspondence with Descartes in which she critiqued his interactionist dualism (see Bennett, 2017).
11. The appeal to causal closure forms part of the well-known "causal exclusion" argument against dualism and for materialism. David Papineau, who offers a detailed historical appraisal of the causal closure principle, presents the causal exclusion argument as follows: "(1) Conscious mental occurrences have physical effects ... (2) [causal closure] All physical effects [or their probabilities] are fully caused by purely physical prior histories ... (3) The physical effects of conscious causes aren't always overdetermined by distinct causes." From this he says it follows that conscious mental occurrences are physical occurrences (2002, 16–17).

To motivate their position, panpsychists often propose the following line of argument, inspired by Bertrand Russell (1927):¹² While physics tells us what matter externally *does*, via the abstractable relations that an entity harbours within its own structure as well as to other entities, it does not tell us what matter internally *is*, in terms of the specific concrete or categorical nature that implements those abstractable relations.¹³ This move is accompanied by a rejection of structural or dispositional essentialism — the view that matter can be exhaustively characterised in purely dispositional or abstract terms. Panpsychists then note that while there is no way of determining the kind of categorical nature possessed by the fundamentals — be this micro-entity or cosmos — considerations to do with parsimony favour consciousness to be that candidate. After all, we are already familiar with the interior conscious character of our own abstractly specifiable brain. Rather than multiply types of categorical nature beyond necessity, as well as create another explanatory gap between our consciousness and the inner nature of the inscrutable fundament, why not suppose the material fundamentals to have an interior nature that is on the spectrum of consciousness?¹⁴ Like ourselves, they will be conscious perspectival subjects — albeit with experiences far more primitive (if a micro-subject) or perhaps complex (if a cosmic subject) than our own. As a categorically *conscious* concrete bearer of abstractable relations, each fundament will now fit seamlessly into the causal fabric of material world,

12. For lucid and accessible summaries from defenders of this line of argument, see Strawson (2016), Goff (2017b, 2017c) and Mørch (2017b).

13. The terms ‘intrinsic’ and ‘extrinsic’ are used widely in the literature to convey the inner categorical and outer relational natures of the entities in question. But these terms are misleading insofar as they carry metaphysical connotations of the intrinsic being more fundamental than the extrinsic. While “idealist” versions of Russellian monism do hold the inner conscious nature to ground the abstractable physical relations, “double-aspected” versions regard the categorical and relational properties to be equally fundamental. For a discussion of this, along with a taxonomy of further variants of Russellian monism, see Chalmers (2016a). The terminology I use here is intended to convey a neutrality with regard to these different variants.

14. For this reason, I don’t discuss the position of panprotopsychism, which posits a non-conscious categorical nature for the material entity.

since to be fundamentally material *is* now also and unavoidably to be fundamentally conscious. Whether along these or other lines, several philosophers, including Chalmers (2016a), have proclaimed panpsychism (or a particular brand thereof) to be a “synthesis” that sidesteps the major problems besetting materialism and dualism.

But now new challenges arise. A primary challenge is that of how to explain coherently our macro-mind’s relation to either the fundamental micro-minds or the fundamental cosmic mind. As macro-subjects, we must ultimately acquire our conscious experience and perspectives from those of the fundamentals. However, it is very hard if not impossible to conceive of how this could occur. The problem pertaining to our mind’s interface with micro-fundamentals is known as the “combination problem” for micropsychism, while the problem pertaining to our mind’s interface with the cosmic fundament has been recently described as the “decombination problem” for cosmopsychism. While there are several versions of the combination problem (Chalmers, 2016b), what are known as *subject* combination or decombination problems are widely considered to be the most intractable.¹⁵

To understand how either subject combination or decombination problems play out, we need to first get a handle on what a subject is. It is a notion that, while embellished in different ways, has had a long history across all the major traditions.¹⁶ As a subject we are es-

15. The term ‘combination problem’ is owed to William Seager (1995); for its reverse I endorse the term ‘decombination problem’ (forthcoming), although other terms are sometimes in use. Amongst the first to articulate subject versions of each problem was William James, who posed the combination problem for micropsychism in 1890, and the decombination problem for British and American Idealism in 1909 (for more on the latter, see note 22). I will not discuss any non-subject versions of either problem except to note that none of the proposed solutions are widely accepted.

16. This notion of a subject (and the more embellished notion of self grafted onto it) is operative across the different western as well as eastern traditions, and I discuss it at length in Albahari (2006). Its peculiarly elusive nature — such that it cannot observe itself like just another object — has long been a source of philosophical puzzlement. For, on the one hand, it escapes the target of standard object-directed modes of sensory and mental awareness, as evidenced in this passage from Roderick Chisholm: “The two great traditions of contemporary western philosophy — ‘phenomenology’ and ‘logical analysis’ — seem

essentially a localised conscious and seemingly-embodied *perspective* that is aware of objects, including most immediately those that form the dynamic array of multi-modal sensory and cognitive experiences. I call these experiences “cognisensory imagery”. Being a perspective, the subject presents itself not as a viewable object amongst other cognisensory imagery, but as that to which such imagery is viewed. Any subject’s cognisensory imagery, by virtue of being present to a perspectival locus, seems hermetically sealed into that perspective, unavailable to any other subject. Insofar as the diverse imagery seems simultaneously given to the same perspective, the perspective confers on the subject a sense of conscious phenomenal unity, and insofar as the imagery seems unavailable to any other perspective, the perspective confers on the subject a sense of separation from other subjects.

Under micropsychism, we macro-subjects will ultimately inherit our conscious experience, with its perspectives and imagery, from a combination of micro-entities. The inheritance may be directly from the fundament, or indirectly via combinations of “intermediate” subjects such as atoms or neurons, that would in turn inherit their experience from intermediate or fundamental subjects. But if subjects are hermetic, it is hard to conceive of how the fundamental micro-subjects, or neural subjects (allowing for those of intermediate complexity), could combine in such a way that confers their conscious experiences on a unified macro-subject such as ourselves. This would appear to break the hermetic seal and thus compromise what it takes to be a subject. Yet, as panpsychists must endorse some form of combination, they have proposed a number of ways in which this might happen. Perhaps my macro-conscious perspectival experience is directly partaking in the micro-conscious perspectival experiences as they go

to meet, unfortunately, at the extremes. The point of contact is the thesis according to which one is never aware of a subject of experience” (1969, 94). On the other hand, it seems to impress enough of itself upon our overall experience for the experience to appear dualistic rather than exhausted by object-experiences, as observed by Antonio Damasio: “Like it or not we cannot escape the fact that the mind seems split, like a house divided, between the knower and known” (1999, 191).

about their business, or my conscious experience is something new that causally emerges from theirs. Perhaps the individual conscious subjects are destroyed in the process of combining, or they survive it.

However one thinks of this combination — whether in causal, constitutive or emergent terms — it has an air of the black box to it. For subjects just don’t seem to be the sort of things whose conscious experiences or points of view can combine. They are not like those combinations that we can readily observe or easily imagine, and which appear as *objects* within our conscious purview: coloured dyes that combine to produce a new colour, ingredients that blend into a cake, atoms that compose a molecule, blocks that compose a tower, and so on. At best, we simply have no active conception of how the separate, unified perspectival micro-subjects could combine to yield a unified macro-subject. At worst, the prospect of micro-subjects combining to yield macro-subjects, whilst retaining their perspectival integrity, seems positively incoherent.¹⁷ As none of the attempted solutions to date have been widely recognised as resolving the combination problem, each version is to some extent likely to posit a brute fact that papers over a combinatorial crack. Not wishing to return to its problematic predecessors, some philosophers have taken panpsychism to the next level.

This development, known as “cosmopsychism”, has grown partly out of an attempt to avoid both the combination problem and the pitfalls of its predecessors — dualism and materialism. While panpsychism has traditionally taken on board the common supposition that

17. The subject combination problem has been framed by Goff (2009) and subsequently Chalmers (2016a, 2016b) in terms of a conceivability problem that is analogous to the hard problem of consciousness for materialism. The idea is that we can imagine there being a combination of micro-subjects obtaining without the macro-subject obtaining. However, some think the problem to be more serious than this: that it is not merely conceivable that the relevant combination does not obtain, but inconceivable that it could. For instance, Coleman (2014) argues that the attempt to conceive of micro-subjects combining, by their sharing with us the contents of their perspectives, leads to a contradiction insofar as the micro-subjects cannot coherently maintain their perspectives. An analogous charge is made by Albahari (forthcoming) against cosmopsychism, by way of the decombination problem.

any fundamental entities proposed by an ideal physics will occur at the level of the very small, there has recently been resistance to this assumption. Independent lines of argument have emerged in support of a position known as Priority Monism: the view that there is only one fundamental concrete entity, usually contended to be the cosmos as a whole. A well-known advocate of Priority Monism, Jonathan Schaffer, for instance, holds that “there is a maximal actual concrete object — *the cosmos* — of which all actual concrete objects are parts” (2010, 33). Many versions of cosmopsychism accordingly attempt to unite the virtues of panpsychism with those of Priority Monism by rendering the interior nature of the cosmos to be that of a conscious subject. The conscious subject that is the cosmos in some way grounds the conscious perspectival experiences of human macro-subjects, as well as those of any other entity that we commonly regard as conscious.¹⁸

Without micro-subjects having to combine into larger macro-subjects, there is no longer a combination problem. But a reverse challenge arises, which we can call the “decombination problem”: How can a single conscious subject, such as the cosmos, ground the conscious experiences of the simpler hermetic macro-subjects such as ourselves that are somehow contained within it? Again, so long as the cosmos is rendered as a conscious perspectival subject, in accordance with most versions of cosmopsychism, the proposed solutions will threaten to compromise the perspectival architecture of subjects.

Suppose, for instance, that the cosmic subject confers consciousness on all of us macro-subjects (with our experiences) by having a unifying perspectival experience that subsumes, as part of *its* overall experience, all of our perspectives with their experiences.¹⁹ While I’ve argued elsewhere (forthcoming) that incoherences of content arise

18. Things we do not normally consider conscious, such as stones or atoms, need not be possessed of an independently conscious nature, but their interior natures must nevertheless bear some important relation to the cosmos’ interior nature, such as through existing as a thought or experience within its conscious field.

19. See Goff (2017a, forthcoming) for a defence of this “transparent” cosmopsychism.

from the cosmic subject taking in all the elements of our experience, it is symptomatic of a more basic problem. Just as many versions of micro-psychism violate the architecture of subjects by puncturing their hermetic perspectival boundaries, so too does “transparent” cosmopsychism in supposing that our sensory and cognitive experiences could fall within the purview of another perspective besides our own. It also confuses the basic distinction between subject and object by supposing that the cosmic subject could coherently subsume perspectives as viewable objects within its field of conscious awareness. A perspective, as we saw, is by its very nature not a viewable object, but that *to which* objects — thoughts, sensations, pains, tables and atoms, etc. — are viewed. The history of philosophical thought will testify to a struggle to imagine how a perspective could even be the object of its own purview — let alone that of another’s (see note 16). Other variants of cosmopsychism, sometimes in addressing this problem, insulate macro-subjects from the cosmic perspective by locating them in a region of the cosmic mind that is beyond its conscious purview. But now an analogue of the hard problem of consciousness for materialism arises. For just as with the materialist, our conscious minds and experiences are being grounded in a substratum that lacks consciousness. To claim that our consciousness “just arises” from a non-conscious substratum is to posit a brute fact that papers over a serious crack. This proposed solution to the decombination problem thus does no better than the other versions.²⁰

At this point, a panpsychist of either stripe might dig their heels in and insist: “So much the worse for our standard notion of subject. Cases such as those that arise for micro- or cosmopsychism just go to show that we need to extend our concept of subjecthood to allow for punctured or elastic boundaries or for perspectives to be viewed as

20. See Matthews (2011), Shani (2015) and Kastrup (2017), for variants of “opaque” cosmopsychism that adopt this strategy. Should any of them insist that our minds are located in a region of its *conscious* field that is nevertheless beyond its conscious *purview*, I would confess to have lost any grasp of what they mean by ‘subject’s conscious field’ and proclaim such a manoeuvre ad hoc for the reasons shortly described. I go into this also in Albahari (forthcoming).

objects." While this is a line of argument that some prefer, it is far from an ideal solution. For in being proposed for the sole purpose of resolving the (de)combination problems, such solutions both are ad hoc and risk collapsing the notion of "subject" to the point that it is hard to see how it could meaningfully survive such departures. It is a crack-papering manoeuvre that pays little deference to the notion's central place in the history of thought and its genesis in so many puzzles. While panpsychism thus moves in the right direction by injecting consciousness into the fundamentals, most versions also buy into the underlying assumption that fundamental consciousness must occur in the guise of a perspectival subject. It may be better, then, to leave subjects as they are and abandon instead the supposition that fundamental consciousness must be perspectival.²¹ Why not treat fundamental consciousness as aperspectival? Such a metaphysic, if conceivable, may have considerable dialectic advantage over its rivals. With consciousness intrinsic to the fundament, the hard problem that faces materialists would not arise. Neither would the causal interface problems that beset dualists. And by relinquishing the supposition that fundamental consciousness takes the form of a subject, there would be none of the combination or decombination problems that trouble panpsychists.

The million-dollar question, of course, is whether the metaphysic *is* properly conceivable without the intrusion of crack-papering problems that are as bad as or worse than those of the predecessors. It might immediately be objected, for instance, that just as altering the established parameters of a subject is problematic, so too is the idea

21. In their variant of cosmopsychism, Nagasawa and Wager (2016) proclaim to be neutral on the assumption that the conscious cosmos is a subject. But as they offer no positive account of cosmic consciousness, it is hard to see how their grounding relation could work. More recently (as mentioned in note 1), Shani and Keppler (forthcoming) have proposed a variant of cosmopsychism upon which the fundamental consciousness is aperspectival and quite possibly double-aspected insofar as can be described in equal measures as physical and conscious. In being in equal measure physical and conscious, this cosmic variant of Russellian monism would depart from the thoroughly idealist rendering that is being proposed in this paper. A critique of the double-aspected approach is offered in Section 4.

of introducing a grounding consciousness that altogether lacks a perspective. Isn't it similarly ad hoc to suppose that there could be such a thing — and that the notion could make even rudimentary sense? It is here that the appeal to mystical literature becomes dialectically relevant. For, as indicated in the Introduction, renowned mystics from across different traditions claim to have undergone transformative experiences whose central insight, arguably, appears commensurate with that of apprehending a universal aperspectival consciousness. Such mystical consciousness is further proclaimed, by Perennialists, to reveal what would appear to be a metaphysically ultimate ground that is unconditioned by the parameters of space and time. As such, the mystical literature could not only offer a vital source of evidence for such a metaphysic, but shed further light on its conceivability. For instance, while appearing to concur with cosmopsychism that fundamental consciousness is universal rather than micro-level, the mystics also depart from a presupposition held by many modern cosmopsychists: that the cosmos is in equal measures (externally) physical and (internally) conscious. In proclaiming all manifestation to be grounded in consciousness, their idealist stance bears a closer resemblance to the 19th-century forerunners of cosmopsychism, British and American idealism, although these latter positions still adhere to the assumption of a cosmic subject.²² It is an out-and-out idealist metaphysic,

22. Proponents of British or American Idealism include such figures as Bradley (1893), Royce (1908) and, more recently, Sprigge (2006). Their cosmic subject or "absolute" is generally identified as the whole universe with pantheistic attributes, whose omnipresent experience subsumes all the complexities of our finite experiences and perspectives. (For a good comparative survey of British Idealism, see Mander, 2011). As mentioned in note 15, William James was the forerunner of not only the combination problem for micropsychism but the decombination problem for cosmopsychism. In criticising the British and American Idealists, he wrote: "It is impossible to reconcile the peculiarities of our experience with our being only the absolute's mental objects. ... They are there only for their thinker, and only as he thinks them. How, then, can they become severally alive on their own accounts and think themselves quite otherwise than as he [the absolute] thinks them? It is as if the characters in a novel were to get up from the pages, and walk away and transact business of their own outside of the author's story" (1909, Lecture V).

built upon fundamental aperspectival universal consciousness and informed by mystical literature, that will be the proposed successor to cosmopsychism.

Section 2: Mystical Passages Consistent with the Perennial Philosophy

To go forward, the argument requires some initial evidence that a range of well-known mystical figures did appear — as the Perennialists contend — to undergo a direct experience of their abiding nature as none other than universal aperspectival consciousness. In this section, I will offer a selection of such passages from prominent mystics across different traditions and times. There will be no presumption that they do all unequivocally allude to such a fundament. The aim at this stage is merely to show that they can be read in a way that is at least consistent with such an idea. For the purposes of our argument, that is all we need.

As the cited mystics are from different ages and traditions, we cannot expect them to utilize the same terminology. Mystics from the Abrahamic traditions such as Christianity or Islam are likely to convey the fundament in theological terms such as ‘Allah’ or ‘God’, while the eastern tradition of Advaita Vedānta will speak of “*Brahman*” or “*Self*”. Before presenting the mystical passages, it will thus help to have some clues as to how, in spite of the idiosyncratic terminology, they could conceivably be alluding to a fundament of pure consciousness that is aperspectival (non-dual); unconditioned by space, time and sensory-mental quality; experientially realisable; and the essence of what one truly is. Its casting as a *fundament* is hinted at through such terms as ‘absolute’, ‘supreme’ and ‘fundamental’. The fundament’s purportedly *aperspectival* (non-dual) aspect may come through in its conveyance as the nature of a pure unity or oneness that lacks differentiation, including, most especially, that between subject/object, self/other, knower/known, seer/seen. Such distinctions, indicative of a supposed separation between our abiding nature and that of the ultimate, are commonly depicted as illusory, obscuring apprehension of identity with the ground. The clue that the fundament is of the nature of *consciousness* (as

well as aperspectival) may come through in reports of it being directly knowable as one’s innermost nature, sometimes expressed in terms of a pure seeing or knowing without the subject-verb-object structure of seer, seeing, seen, or knower, knowing, known. Its purported status as *unconditioned* may be conveyed not only through its being an undifferentiated unity, but through its being beyond space and time, ungraspable by the senses and intellect — the modes through which our conditioned world is described and cognised. It is experienced, some say, as a timeless presence.²³

The oldest record of mysticism comes from the *Upaniṣads* — authored by anonymous forest seers who lived in India around 2,500 years ago. From the *Mandūkya Upaniṣad* we find one of the more explicit renderings of the metaphysic:

Beyond the senses, beyond the understanding, beyond all expression ... is the pure unitary consciousness, wherein awareness of the world and of multiplicity is completely obliterated. It is ineffable peace. It is the Supreme Good. It is One without a second. It is the Self. Know it alone! [Stace, 1969, 20].

The 9th-century mystic-philosopher Adi Śaṅkara was the leading historical proponent of Advaita Vedānta. He was famous for emphasising the non-dual (*Advaita* means literally “not-two”) character of the upaniṣadic teachings, by which the dichotomy of knower and known is transcended. *Māyā*, a term that frequently appears in his writings, refers to the veiling power of ignorance and illusion by which knowledge of ultimate reality is obscured, making the world appear, in its intrinsic nature, to be differentiated and divided. The following is from *Vivekachūḍāmaṇi* (*The Crest Jewel of Discrimination*), a text traditionally ascribed to him:

23. For a more detailed defence of these unconditioned attributes being inferred from the mystical passages, see Albahari (2019).

Brahman is supreme. It is the reality — the one without a second. It is pure consciousness, free from any taint. [It] is tranquillity itself. [It] has neither beginning nor end. [It] does not change. [It] is joy forever.

[It] transcends appearance of the manifold, created by *Māyā*. [It] is eternal, forever beyond the reach of pain, not to be divided, not to be measured, without form, without name, undifferentiated, immutable. [It] shines with [Its] own light. [It] is everything that can be experienced in this universe.

The illuminated seers know [It] as the uttermost reality, infinite, absolute, without parts — the pure consciousness. In [It] they find that knower, knowledge and known have become one.

They know [It] as the reality which can neither be cast aside (since [It] is ever-present within the human soul) nor grasped (since [It] is beyond the power of mind and speech). They know [It as] immeasurable, beginningless, endless, supreme, in glory. They realise the truth: “I am *Brahman*.” [1968, 84–85]

In modern times there have been renowned mystics within the Advaita Vedānta tradition who are said to have awoken to this same ultimate reality. Nisargadatta Maharaj (1897–1981) is considered by many to be a prominent such figure within the 20th century:

Understand that it is not the individual which has consciousness, it is the consciousness which assumes innumerable forms. [1997, 26]

Because of mistaken identity we think of personalised consciousness but it is actually vast and limitless. ... The source of [personalised] consciousness is prior to time and space. ... Manifestation needs time and space, but the source of [personalised] consciousness was there before manifestation took place. ... There are millions

of varieties of forms in the total manifestation, but the source of all is the [impersonal] consciousness. [1997, 86]

Once the concept “I am” arises, the fundamental unity gets notionally separated, as subject and object, in duality. ... The mistaken identity is precisely the “bondage” from which liberation is to be sought. [Balsekar (summarising Maharaj), 1990, 66–67]

The most renowned of Advaitic mystics in modern times was Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950), who was said to have spontaneously awoken to this reality at the age of sixteen. He said:

In reality, saying, “We must see *Brahman* in everything and everywhere” is also not quite correct. Only that stage is final where there is no seeing, where there is no time or space. There will be no seer, seeing and an object to see. What exists then is only the infinite eye. [Mudaliar, 1977, 166]

The “infinite eye” is the nature of pure consciousness in its capacity of pure apprehension that is beyond the tripartite distinction of seer/seeing/seen. Hence it is a mode in which no forms are discerned as separate objects. Ramana says:

If the eye that sees be the eye of flesh, then gross forms are seen; if the eye be assisted by lenses, then even invisible things are seen to have form; if the mind be that eye, then subtle forms are seen; thus the seeing eye and the objects seen are of the same nature; that is, if the eye be itself a form, it sees nothing but forms. But neither the physical eye nor the mind has any power of vision of its own. The real Eye is the Self; as He is formless, being the pure infinite consciousness, the reality, He does not see forms. [‘Who’, 1973, p. 72]²⁴

24. Readers wishing to follow up Ramana’s theme of the “infinite eye” can consult

Turning to western traditions, one of the most famous (and, in his time, controversial) Christian mystics was Meister Eckhart (circa 1260–1329). Born in Germany, he wrote that our nature carries in itself the divine essence that is beyond all distinctions:

There is in the soul something which is above the soul, Divine, simple, a pure nothing; rather nameless than named, unknown than known. ... It is absolute and free from all names and all forms, just as God is free and absolute in Himself. ... It is higher than knowledge, higher than love, higher than grace. For in these there is still distinction. [Happold, 1970, 49, 67]

The knower and the known are one. Simple people imagine they should see God, as if He stood there, and they here. God and I, we are one in knowledge. [Happold, 1970, 67]

... The eye with which I see God is the same as that with which he sees me: my eye and God's eye are one eye, one seeing, one knowing, and one love. [Sermon 57, Walshe, 298]

Nothing hinders the soul's knowledge of God as much as time and space, for time and space are fragments, whereas God is one! And therefore, if the soul is to know God, it must know him above time and outside of space; for God is neither this nor that, as are these manifold things. God is One! [Stace, 1960, 153]

Moyhiddin Ibn Arabi is known in Arabic as "The Greatest Master". Born in 12th-century Spain, he is one of the most widely known mystical figures in the Sufi world. His writings had much influence in the

Muruganar (2004), where these passages appear, amongst others, in a chapter called 'Seer and Seen'. Ramana will be returned to in Section 5.

Christian and the Islamic world, and he was particularly well-known for his contribution to Sufi mysticism. In the piece "The Treatise on Singleness", he wrote:

Glory to Allah, before the oneness that knows no predecessor other than Allah who is that first. With Him there is no before nor after, no high nor low, no near nor far, neither how, what, nor where, no state or succession of moments, no time, no space, no becoming. He is as He was, the One, the Subduer without Oneness. ...

... By this the prophet means, he who kills his selfhood, that is he who knows himself, sees that all his existence is Allah's existence. He sees no change in his inmost nature or in his attributes. He sees no necessity for his attributes becoming Allah's, for he has understood that he was not himself the existence of his own inmost nature and that he was ignorant of his selfhood and of his fundamental being. When you get to know what is your selfhood, you are freed from your dualism, and you will know that you are not other than Allah. [1981, 70, 73]²⁵

I have thus presented a range of quotations from prominent mystics associated with different traditions and times.²⁶ Although relatively

25. The editors of *The Mountain Path*, where this piece appears, include a forward that reads: "This work, sometimes known as 'The Treatise on Self Knowledge' or 'The epistle concerning knowledge of the Lord by knowledge of oneself', is traditionally ascribed to him, although there are other claimants for the authorship. It is one of the most monistic works to come out of the Islamic world, and ever since its appearance, it has been widely circulated and read in Sufi circles" (1981, 70).

26. I have not included any quotations from Buddhist mystics (including the historical Buddha himself), as the emphasis of Buddhist teachings is to focus on letting go one's attachment to conditioned objects rather than to realise one's abiding nature as the unconditioned ground. However, there are telling passages within the Buddhist canons that allude to an element that is unconditioned, such as: "There is, *bhikkhus*, a not-born, a not-brought-to-being, a not-made, a not-conditioned. If ... there were no ... not-conditioned, no escape would be discerned from what is born, brought-to-being, made, conditioned" (Ireland, 1997, *Iti*, 2.16). While I contend the Buddhist suttas

small in sample, I believe there is enough substance in them to allay initial fears that the proposal of pure aperspectival consciousness, as an ultimate and unconditioned ground, must be *as ad hoc* as supposing that subjects can combine or decombine. For the quotations are, on the face of it, at least *consistent* with the hypothesis of their culture-transcendent convergence and their veridicality with respect to a deeper reality. They are at least open to being read in such a way that appears to point, in accordance with the Perennial Philosophy, to an ultimate timeless ground of pure aperspectival consciousness that can be realised as our abiding nature once the deep-seated illusion of our separation from it is dispelled.²⁷

(discourses) to be thoroughly compatible with the above mystical passages, many contemporary Buddhist philosophers, such as Evan Thompson (2015), would take exception to this. They take the Buddha to have forcefully rejected the upaniṣadic notions of *Ātman* (our abiding nature, translated as ‘Self’) and *Brahman* (the unconditioned ground), pitching the Buddha’s message to be at odds with such passages as those from Śaṅkara. I have argued extensively elsewhere (e.g. in Albahari, 2002, 2006, 2019), that this is both scripturally and philosophically unfounded. For example, Buddhist philosophers often spuriously attribute to the Buddha a rejection of *Ātman* (in the sense of our unconditioned abiding nature as aperspectival consciousness) through equating this notion with notions of *Ātman* that allude to a personalised eternal self (such as in SN 22, transl. Bhikkhu Bodhi). But the personalised eternal self is a subject-bound entity that both the Buddha and Śaṅkara would deny.

27. The ingenious work of neo-Platonic philosopher Plotinus (in *The Six Enneads*, 250 A. C.E.) might also be read in a way that has some resonance with the Perennial Philosophy. However, while Plotinus was purported to have undergone mystical experiences, much of his metaphysical system was articulated within a neo-Platonic framework, and so it is not clear the extent to which his writings are owed to theoretical commitment as opposed to direct mystical insight. (For more on Plotinus, see note 60.) It should be noted that while Śaṅkara was engaging in debate with proponents of the Indian philosophical tradition, the writings attributed to him (such as those above) are far more suggestive of someone attempting to articulate his own mystical insight in relation to other “seers” who appear to have shared it (such as those within the upaniṣadic tradition) than of someone extrapolating from it to build a metaphysical system with heavily speculative components. The relevance of this to my argument will become salient in Section 5.

Since it is of course premature and indeed question-begging to conclude that they *are* in fact to be read in this way, I turn now to the strategy which will occupy the rest of this paper. It will work towards seeing if a plausible metaphysic, “Perennial Idealism”, can be independently extrapolated from the surmised “Perennial Philosophy”. If a coherent metaphysic can be extrapolated, one that doesn’t introduce problems on a par with or worse than those of its predecessors, then it will provide an independent measure of support for the hypotheses of their convergence and veridicality. The quotations will in turn support the proposed metaphysic through becoming a more serious source of evidence for it. Now I say “work towards seeing”, as it is well beyond the scope of this paper to present what would be a fully articulated account of Perennial Idealism. The aim, rather, will be to lay out the foundational structures of the position with a view to showing that it withstands a major earthquake and is worthy of further construction. The two basic questions I address are: “What, in most basic terms, would such an idealist metaphysic look like, such that it may account for how the world appears?” (Sections 3 and 4), and “Can the metaphysic survive a major challenge to its conceivability?” (Section 5).

Section 3: Elucidating the Ground of Aperspectival Unconditioned Consciousness

The first step will be to elucidate the central notion of an aperspectival unconditioned consciousness, one that may serve as the ground for the idealist metaphysic. If mystics have alluded to such consciousness, it will have been accessed experientially. Such a mode of experience will appear, in its essence, to lack any sensory or cognitive objects that could structure consciousness and suggest differentiation. It will present as a mode of pure objectless experience that seems to be unconditioned by parameters such as space, time and cognisensory quality.

It is indeed claimed by contemplatives that, with enough practice, one can enter into a mode of consciousness in which there would appear to be no objects present. Whether they are right in describing this consciousness as being truly objectless is a question I put aside for

now. Instead, I will propose a thought experiment which attempts to simulate the end result (although not method) of a thoroughly objectless meditation, one in which consciousness presents itself as aperspectival and unconditioned.²⁸ If consciousness can conceivably be experienced as aperspectival and unconditioned, then, being inherently experiential, it will conceivably *be* aperspectival and unconditioned.

I will then attempt to make sense of how, in keeping with mystical literature, such consciousness could continue to present itself as an unconditioned underlay, once phenomena appear to be registered again. For mystics do not appear to stay forever immersed in an objectless meditation. They would appear to come out of it, to interact again with objects in the world, and to speak of their experience. Of interest to us here are those experiences that depict an irreversible and unfading insight into what presents as the unconditioned ground for all conditioned phenomena. It is the lever that we need to use to start conceiving of an aperspectival unconditioned consciousness in its capacity as the ground.

The exercise will, along the way, utilize various conjectures about the architecture of minds, some of which I have argued for elsewhere. Sceptical readers should be reminded that the argument is largely an exercise in conceivability, with the case for its plausibility ultimately

28. The thought experiment is merely a heuristic device to help explicate the notion of aperspectival consciousness and should not be thought of as emulating the far more nuanced meditative methods through which the objectless mode is usually said to be reached. Such methods traditionally aim to eradicate the deep-seated psychological structures that generate subtle objects subtending our sense of a self/other boundary — a boundary that mystics claim inhibits our apprehension of the ground. Truly objectless consciousness would arguably require the complete irreversible destruction of these boundaries — a process that is not passive, as depicted in the thought experiment. In this way, my theory is at odds with Robert Forman's notion of a "Pure Conscious Experience", which he describes as a "relatively common" state that is neither ultimate nor salvific (1997, 8–9). I suspect that Forman could be conflating what might be a state that appears to lack sensory and mental imagery, but in fact harbours a background sense of self (with subtle peripheral cognitive imagery feeding into the phenomenology), with a mode that is truly aperspectival and thus free from a dualistic structure. For more on this theme, see Albahari (2019).

resting upon the extent to which the proposal is more coherent, and less problematic, than its predecessors.

To arrive at a coherent conception of non-dual, unconditioned consciousness that could possibly fit Perennial Idealism, we thus need to conceive of (although not perceptually imagine) undergoing an experience of consciousness that could appear to meet the following *desiderata*:

- (a) beyond subject/object division,
- (b) beyond space, time, and (cognisensory) qualitative limitations,
- (c) the self-subsistent ground of all being.

What is the subject/object division? A subject, as defined earlier, is minimally a localised conscious perspective that is aware of objects, including most immediately those objects that form the dynamic array of multi-modal sensory and cognitive imagery. A subject can thus be thought of as having at least two defining aspects: consciousness, and a perspective from which the consciousness appears and to which objects are presented. An object is, broadly, anything that can in principle impinge attentively or inattentively on a subject's awareness, whether via or as the multi-modal cognisensory imagery.²⁹

How might we identify in our own minds the subject's *modus operandi* of consciousness, or what I've elsewhere (2009) referred to as "witness-consciousness"? G.E. Moore alluded to it as "diaphanous" yet detectable if "we look attentively enough" (1903, 450). Witness-consciousness is diaphanous because, rather than being just another object to be found within the conscious field, it is the field of awareness itself. It is that percipient aspect of mind which automatically observes the coming and going of objects from within its field, whether

29. In Albahari (2006) I defined an object as anything that could in principle be viewed attentively, but have since been persuaded otherwise by Galen Strawson (2011). He contends that the conscious aspect to a subject can attend reflexively to itself, although not as an object. I now define 'object' in accordance with the above description.

attentively or inattentively. Witness-consciousness carries an intrinsic phenomenal character, which might be described as a luminosity that is unborrowed from any particular sensory or cognitive modality. The metaphor of light to describe consciousness, commonly deployed across traditions, is for instance used contrastively by western philosophers when describing philosophical zombies (behavioural duplicates of us that lack any inner conscious life) as “all dark inside”. Yet while taking in various sensory or cognitive imagery as direct objects of its illumination, witnessing does not illuminate itself as such an object, but is nevertheless immediately aware of its own presence as the source. Like the shining sun, self-effulgent witness-consciousness automatically reveals and knows itself simply by being itself. In philosophical parlance we can say that such immediate and objectless knowing is both reflexive and intransitive. It is reflexive insofar as it is self-revealing, including when revealing other objects. It is intransitive insofar as it implicitly reveals itself not as a discrete sensory or mental object or reified subject, but rather more basically as subjectivity, a luminous sense of present-moment being. In sum, witness-consciousness is percipient, object-revealing luminous presence that imbues all our conscious life, immediately knowing itself by being itself.³⁰

With objects in its purview, witness-consciousness does not present as a view from nowhere, but “looks out” through an embodied psycho-physical perspective that, when identified with, becomes reified as a sense of self (Albahari, 2006). It looks out onto a structured field we call “the world”, whose external character appears spatio-temporal in nature. The subject is a definitive perspectival locus on the world: a

30. For a detailed exposition and defence of witness-consciousness as a basic element of subjecthood, see Albahari (2009). The notion has also been developed (although not always by that name) in Brentyn Ramm (2019), Evan Thompson (2015), Galen Strawson (2011), Wolfgang Fasching (2011), Ken Wilber (2001), Bina Gupta (1998), Robert K. C. Forman (1998), Arthur Deikman (1996), Jonathan Shear (1996) and David Woodruff Smith (1986). Variants and aspects of this notion of witness-consciousness have been extensively discussed in the phenomenological tradition (e.g. in Dan Zahavi’s studies of Husserl, such as his 2005) as well as in the Advaita Vedānta and other mystical traditions.

standpoint that provides the point of view that must characterise any subject, whether its objects are outer or inner, waking or dreaming.

We might now ask: What, from a phenomenal standpoint, immediately cues us into the sense of occupying the perspective of a psycho-physical subject or self in a spatio-temporal world? It is a vastly complex array of multi-modal sensory and mental object-imagery that appears within one’s field of consciousness, attentively or inattentively. Cuing us right now into a sense of being in an external spatial world are sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches, proprioceptions, and cognitive phenomenology. Cuing us right now into the sense of being a self are proprioceptions, thoughts, memories, desires, imaginings, etc. Cuing us right now into the impression of passing time is the flow of imagery in all the modalities. The imagery can include the phenomenal character of a representing vehicle (such as a sensation of colour or a taste), or that of cognitively grasping what its content is about. The aim is not yet to tell a story of what more distally causes the appearance to us of these sensory and cognitive objects in the medium of space or time.³¹ It is rather to make clearer the extent to which such cognisensory objects seem to immediately and phenomenally partake in our perspectival sense of being an embodied subject in a spatio-temporal world. For example, with no visual, auditory or tactile imagery — or similar if dreaming — would we have any sense of being in a wider spatial world? With no changing imagery in our purview, could we harbour an impression of passing time? The claim, then, is

31. For example, it could turn out that our sense of passing time is innately imposed by the structure of consciousness, as many philosophers in the phenomenological tradition uphold. The aim at this stage is not to rule out such a possibility, but rather to show that such an impression as that of passing time seems at least to require (and conceivably amounts to) the coming and going of phenomenal objects within one’s conscious purview. The reader should be reminded again that this is meant as a step in the exercise of conceiving of an objectless consciousness that, in line with mystical claims, lacks any impression of passing time, etc. As it will soon become apparent, I don’t claim to have definitively shown that such an experience as that of pure objectless, timeless consciousness is a real psychological possibility. I only claim to have provided enough of a conception of it for the notion to have traction in the discussion to come.

that the delimiting parameters or “walls” of our localised perspective as subjects are, conceivably and plausibly, immediately built by cognisensory imagery: the multi-modal mental and sensory objects that are apprehended by witness-consciousness.

This suggests a strategy for conceiving of aperspectival and unconditioned consciousness. Witness-consciousness minus the cognisensory imagery that lends to it perspective would be perspective-less, and hence, subject-less. Can we conceive of a scenario wherein one comes to experience what is an objectless mode of witness-consciousness, such that it presents as subjectless and aperspectival? And might such a mode of pure witnessing also present as being unconfined by spatial, temporal and imagistic parameters, as well as hyper-real in a way that is suggestive of its ultimacy? I believe that it could. To this end I now introduce a thought experiment.³²

Enter the Cognisensory Deprivation Tank (CDT). First, each bit of conscious sensory-perceptual imagery — sight, touch, sound, taste, smell, proprioception — winks out, one by one. We can imagine witnessing such a wink-out. But this is no mere sensory deprivation tank. Following the disappearance of sensory imagery, each bit of conscious cognitive imagery, attentive or inattentive, goes too: every thought, memory, desire, imagining and felt emotion that lurks under the bonnet of “self”. With the disappearance of each successive object, it is conceivable that witness-consciousness stays present. Finally, we get to the last remaining object. What happens when it too disappears? Intuitions here are less clear. The thought experiment now enters the zone of what Chalmers (2002) calls “*prima facie* negative conceivability”.³³ Those who hold that consciousness must always be object-directed will resist the intuition that with the exit of the final

32. I also describe the thought experiment, in lesser detail, in Albahari (2019 and forthcoming).

33. In Chalmers’ parlance, a scenario is *prima facie* negatively conceivable if, on first appearances, no obvious contradictions are revealed. This is contrasted with ideal positive conceivability, in which the scenario withstands rational reflection and can in some robust sense be positively envisaged (rather than simply not ruled out).

object, consciousness remains. They will insist that consciousness must exit too.³⁴ However, their position has not been proved. Like an unproven mathematical statement that still makes *prima facie* sense, we are in the don’t-know territory. Here is what we can say: while careful reflection has still to prove things one way or another, there is no obvious contradiction in the idea that consciousness stays with the exit of the final object. It is not like imagining a square circle. The *prima facie* negative conceivability of pure objectless consciousness may not be ideal positive conceivability, but it gives the notion enough traction to do the work it needs in the discussion to follow.

There are no objects now left in the field of consciousness, hence nothing to immediately cue witnessing into the sense of occupying a perspective. The subject has vanished, but consciousness has not.³⁵ It remains as an active presence. It is a subjectless and objectless “field”

34. We can see this assumption at work in Hegel’s criticism of the Hindu notion of *Brahman* (the unconditioned ground of all being) as being completely abstract and outside the realm of possible experience. Hegel accurately depicts the yogic meditative practice as like a Cognisensory Deprivation Tank: “a giving up of all attention to external objects, and the activity of the senses, a silencing of all internal sentiments, desire, hope or fear, a silencing of all tendencies and passion as well as an absence of every image, idea and definite thought” (Hegel, quoted in Viyagappa, 1980, 123). However, Hegel accuses it of being “abstract devotion” because (quoting Viyagappa) “it falls into a complete contentlessness of subject and object and thereby leads to a loss of consciousness” (1980, 123–124).

35. Galen Strawson insists that any conscious subjective experience, including that of pure conscious experience, must logically imply the presence of a subject that the experience is for. He thinks that this subject need not be perspectival, intending ‘subject of experience’ to be taken in a “minimal”, “thin”, “ontologically non-committal” way, namely “as something ‘inner’, something mental, the ‘self’, if you like, the inner ‘locus’ of consciousness considered just as such” (2011, 276). However, it would seem that the word ‘locus’ betrays a minimal subject that is implicitly positioned, and hence perspectival — as that to which the experiences are presented. (See note 42 for further discussion on this point.) But it is precisely the lack of a perspectival locus that the mystical traditions say characterises pure non-dual subjectivity. If, on the other hand, Strawson intends for the term ‘subject’ to include within its scope an aperspectival ground that reflexively experiences itself, then the dispute becomes terminological, since that is not how the term ‘subject’ is being used by the Advaitins or other mystics when they speak of non-dual consciousness. It would correspond, instead, to their use of the term *Ātman* (Self).

of subjectivity which, in the absence of objects to witness, can be referred to more neutrally as “conscious awareness”. Conceivably, it is experienced as thoroughly aperspectival. Now, even in modes where objects are witnessed, consciousness presents as an intransitively and reflexively known sense of presence — an aperspectival dimension to experience that goes largely unnoticed while object-directed. When those objects are removed, how might conscious presence conceivably manifest? With no objects to cue it into the sense of occupying a spatio-temporal or psycho-physical perspective, conscious awareness could well present reflexively as unbounded by default: as timeless, spaceless and hyper-real.

For instance, with the absence of both a localised perspective and the flow of objects, conscious presence will lack those cues that would phenomenally mark the passage of time. Hence, it may well appear, in its purely reflexive and intransitive default mode, as timelessly ever-present, just as the mystics say. Without objects or their differentiated qualities to confine it to a sense of spatial or psychological boundary, the field of conscious awareness could also conceivably present as an undifferentiated and infinitely expansive unity, although not along any spatial or cognisensory dimension. Conscious awareness could further present in its default mode as hyper-real: as a self-subsistent and potentially ultimate ground of being. It could do so, first, by virtue of appearing to lack the delimiting object-governing strictures of space, time and qualitative imagery. Second, it would appear as the *sole* reality, with no objects to contrastively suggest its potential absence or co-dependence. Third, a reflexive sense of its indubitability may accompany the fact that its seemingly aperspectival mode of presentation would allow no cognitive room for doubt as to its nature, thus amplifying its sense of hyper-reality as unmediated knowing-by-being. (A feeling of doubt requires the dual structure of a subject who is able to cognise and hence doubt the validity of its object.)

It still needs to be shown how consciousness, if appearing in the objectless mode as inherently unconditioned, aperspectival and hyper-real, could conceivably continue to present as such upon

emersion from that mode. The reappearance of perspective-framing objects — arguably experienced in real life after the emergence from a deep objectless meditation — may well mark a paradigm shift in how the world is cognised.³⁶ An analogy will help: Someone is raised in a square windowless room, tacitly assuming space to be intrinsically confined to the shape of that room. Relocation to an outside landscape will disabuse him or her of the notion that space is intrinsically confined, making it impossible to view space in that way again even after returning to the square-shaped room.

I propose that it may be similar upon returning to “normality” after an experience of (or as) pure aperspectival consciousness. Most of us have only ever experienced consciousness through the portal of an object-viewing subject. Hence, it is natural to assume that its intrinsic nature is part of a subject-bound entity that beholds, in addition to its thoughts and perceptions, an external spatio-temporal world of mind-independent objects as well as other subjects. Upon emergence from a mode in which consciousness had directly viewed itself as appearing unconstrained by space, time, quality and perspective, it might well be that it can never go back to viewing itself as dependent upon such parameters. Although the world of objects and other subjects would nominally appear again through the portal of an object-viewing subject, the raft of assumptions tied up with its supposed limitation might well disappear. Consciousness could well continue, intransitively and reflexively, to present itself as intrinsically aperspectival, unconditioned, and hyper-real. In so doing, it may well appear, quite naturally, to ground all (conditioned) manifestation to

36. According to the many major meditative traditions, the paradigm shift that attends truly objectless consciousness would require the permanent dissolution of cognitive structures subtending the sense of self — a process far more complex than that depicted by the CDT (see note 28 for more on this). It is also important to keep in mind that I am not purporting to show here that consciousness is genuinely unconditioned by such parameters as space and time. (I explicitly caution against drawing such conclusions in Albahari, 2019.) All that I’m intending to demonstrate is a scenario by which one could conceivably undergo an experience in which consciousness appears, and hence could conceivably be, unconditioned.

which it used to seem opposed.³⁷ By appearing as grounded in consciousness, “external” manifestation would naturally, in turn, seem to alter its assumed metaphysical status from that of mind-independent object to mind-dependent imagery (more on this in the next section). We can thus start to make better sense of what mystics could mean when they speak, as they commonly do, of coming to apprehend the unity or “oneness” underlying all existence.³⁸ In the words of Christian mystic Meister Eckhart: “Here [i.e., in this experience] all blades of grass, wood, and stone, all things are One” (Stace, 1960, 16). Most of us, lacking this insight, might thus be described as “unity-blind”.

But perhaps we are not completely unity-blind. We have just given reasons for supposing that consciousness could conceivably be, in its intrinsic nature, aperspectival and unconditioned. Suppose now that consciousness is indeed this way. In its being so, we might expect some aspects of it to shine through in our ordinary conscious states. Such aspects, if revealed, wouldn’t show that consciousness is unconditioned, but they could serve as further evidence that it might be. And indeed there is such evidence, if we know where to look. It tends to show up in puzzling observations or intuitions that have not been easy to explain away. We have already pointed to an aperspectival dimension within our usual states: that of witness-consciousness in its capacity as reflexive and intransitive presence. This may account for

37. That said, the analogy is silent on the mechanism of transformation. Whereas the person returning to the room can remember the experience of vast empty space, it is not clear how a returning subject could remember a mode of pure subjectless and objectless conscious being. There seems nothing for memory to latch onto. And if nothing is remembered, how could the non-dual “experience” be transformative? This objection and a response are discussed in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on Mysticism (Gellman, 2018). To adapt Gellman’s response: The pure conscious experience could reflexively and intransitively carry its own noetic character that doesn’t depend upon any dualistic structures (such as memory), and remains unaffected by the subsequent reappearance of objects.

38. Such apprehension of non-dual consciousness grounding the world corresponds to what Stace (1960, 15–17) calls an “extrovertive” mystical experience (and what Advaitins call *sahaja samādhi*), as opposed to what he would call “introvertive” mystical experience while in the CDT, which Advaitins refer to as *nirvikalpa samādhi*.

those puzzles around the elusive nature of the subject, such as those alluded to in note 16. Other possible imprints of unconditioned consciousness could lurk behind further puzzling features that crop up in different areas of philosophy. As the intuitions behind them may of course turn out to be misleading, the following should again be seen as just an exercise in conceivability.

A timeless dimension to consciousness could conceivably lie behind puzzling intuitions about the present moment, such as that of conscious experience always seeming to occur in the present, or the present seeming more real than past and future, or it always being the present.³⁹ While philosophers of time commonly describe our experience of the present as dynamic, there seems to be an unmoving aspect to present-moment experience that does not come or go and which infuses experience with reality. We might thus ask: To which side of experience — subject or object — is this unmoving “it’s always now” aspect seemingly owed? Not to the diverse individual objects that fleetingly come and go. What about the observed flow of experience itself, which, while diverse in its individual contents, is as a whole like a waterfall, ceaselessly present in its capacity as a flow? That does not yet exhaust the intuition. There seems to be an element yet more static, through which the flow of experienced objects can be observed. The element appears to lie within the subject that observes the flow — in its *modus operandi* of witness-consciousness. The puzzling sense of perpetual unmoving presence, that seems to attach itself to conscious experience and be more real than past or future, is thus one route through which we can identify what may turn out, in essence, to be a timeless dimension to consciousness.⁴⁰

39. Even philosophers who deny reality to the present moment, such as D.H. Mellor, note that “[b]eing present seems essential to any experience, i.e. essential to its being an experience” (Mellor, 1998, 40). He sees explaining the apparent presence of experience (to which he devotes a chapter of his book) as one of the challenges to his “tenseless” theory.

40. The Advaita Vedanta tradition supposes that there is no obvious contradiction in the idea of witness-consciousness staying present during dreamless sleep or anaesthesia, where thoughts and cognised objects become quiescent

Our experience might also reflect a dimension to consciousness that is inherently unconditioned by any spatial or cognisensory parameters. It could shine through as the synchronic phenomenal unity of consciousness, another feature to have long perplexed philosophers. In ordinary conscious states, such unity pertains to that aspect in which distinct objects, no matter how diverse in their qualitative or represented spatial characteristics, seem simultaneously to appear within the same conscious field of a given subject.⁴¹ The field, insofar as it can harbour any diversity of cognisensory objects, does not itself present as tinged with such qualities. While our identification as a localised subject will appear to hive off our field of consciousness into a private, spatially delineated perspective, its unity may nevertheless be owed to an inherent nature that lacks any spatio-qualitative dimension.

Finally, the status of consciousness as self-subsistent may underpin our impression that consciousness underlies and is not dependent upon cognisensory objects in the way that its objects depend upon it. It could partially explain the pervasive intuition behind what Dennett (1991) alludes to disparagingly as the “Cartesian Theater”. It may also bear that flint of indubitability which fed into Descartes’ famous touchstone: “I think therefore I am.” While identification as a thinking perspective reifies the “I am-ness” into a narrower bounded self, the

(although I would contend that there is still subtle peripheral cognitive imagery subtending the sense of self). For an excellent discussion of consciousness during dreamless sleep, see Thompson (2015).

41. A clear articulation of the phenomenal unity of consciousness can be found in this passage by Bayne and Chalmers: “At any given time, a subject has a multiplicity of conscious experiences. A subject might simultaneously have visual experiences of a red book and a green tree, auditory experiences of birds singing, bodily sensations of a faint hunger and a sharp pain in the shoulder, the emotional experience of a certain melancholy, while having a stream of conscious thoughts about the nature of reality. These experiences are distinct from each other: a subject could experience the red book without the singing birds, and could experience the singing birds without the red book. But at the same time, the experiences seem to be tied together in a deep way. They seem to be unified, by being aspects of a single encompassing state of consciousness” (2003, 23).

background sense of its raw being might still be a portal to its nature as self-subsistent.

Our first step in the exercise of conceivability is now complete. We have arrived at a coherent notion of aperspectival, unconditioned consciousness that can fit the strictures of Perennial Idealism: an experience of consciousness that could conceivably appear, and hence be, (a) beyond subject/object division; (b) beyond space, time and qualitative limitations; and (c) the self-subsistent ground of all being.

Section 4: Building the World from the Ground Up

In developing Perennial idealism, the next step is to show how a ground of aperspectival, unconditioned consciousness could conceivably yield *manifestation*: what we take to be our familiar spatio-temporal world with its subjects and objects. To be successful, the account must meet at least the following *desiderata*:

- (d) make sense of how our familiar manifest world, with its subjects and objects, could be grounded in aperspectival, unconditioned consciousness,
- (e) avoid solipsism, the idea that we are the only subject, and account for the powerful intuition that objects are somehow present when human and animal subjects are not observing them,
- (f) be compatible with scientific discoveries, such that it accommodates law-like regularities in nature and enables prediction.

While foundational brute facts are permitted, they should not paper over cracks that demand obvious explanation, such as the ones between mind and body, or between appearance and ultimate reality. For instance, in renouncing the common “Russellian” panpsychist supposition that consciousness is the inner subjective nature of an otherwise structurally specifiable fundament, can the idealist metaphysic do enough to account for the appearance of our physical world? In

what follows, I will sketch some of the foundations upon which such a metaphysic might be built, which not only replaces but substantially improves upon the Russellian model.

The Cognisensory Deprivation Tank provides a mechanism not only for conceiving of an objectless and aperspectival consciousness, but also for imagining, upon being reverse-engineered, how our world could be constructed. The imagery, we saw, can plausibly convey all the complexity that cues one into the sense of occupying a qualitatively rich, spatio-temporal world. And viewing the world as mind-dependent imagery as opposed to mind-independent objects, we saw, was the most natural way to construe how someone emerging from an objectless mode and apprehending consciousness as ultimate could reframe the appearance of phenomena as being grounded in it. The central proposal is thus that what appears as our concrete world is in fact built from constellations of cognisensory imagery that frame a subject's perspective.

Under Perennial Idealism, then, the basic brute fact upon which manifestation is to be built is the appearing of subjects, viz., imagery-to-a-perspective, from the ground of aperspectival, unconditioned consciousness. Just as Berkeley claimed, the metaphysic permits no objects that are not perceived by a subject. There can be no free-floating imagery. If there is any imagery, a perspective will necessarily come for free (although there will not necessarily be a sense of identity with it). This has some support from the widespread intuition that it makes little sense to suppose that there could be concrete localised imagery, such as a headache, thought or sensation of red without some minimal localised point of view to which it appears.⁴² The CDT

42. This principle, for instance, has some support in Strawson (2010, 166–168), who also cites Frege and Shoemaker as endorsing it. David Armstrong employs the principle in an argument against Hume's bundle theory, saying that to suppose that there could be unowned pains would be like supposing that there could be a grin without a face. "Is it meaningful," he asks, "to conceive of a single twinge of pain, a single sense-perception, a single after-image, a single thought or a single feeling of grief existing by itself independently of anything else? ... [T]he twinge of pain demands some further background, for something to *have* the twinge of pain. But to say this is to go beyond 'Bundle'

also suggests the converse option, upon which there can be no perspectival subject without the imagery that lends to it the perspective. Subject and object-imagery are thus two sides of a coin: there can be no imagery without a perspective and no perspective without the imagery. They co-manifest. Subjects, viz., imagery-to-a-perspective, are thus the basic units of manifestation.

What about our brute-fact appearance as subjects from within the ground of aperspectival, unconditioned consciousness? Is this not papering over a controversial crack? Some have suggested that it is at least as troublesome as the hard problem, interaction problem or (de) combination problem to suppose that imagery of such orderly complexity could simply appear from a ground that supposedly lacks it.⁴³ Various components to this worry will be addressed at further junctures in the paper, but we can immediately point to a notable asymmetry. Even if we cannot further explain the mystery of how or why complex subjects should appear from the ground, we can at least *observe* our own manifestation as a subject whose conscious field could conceivably turn out, in essence, to be aperspectival and unconditioned. We are, after all, a constant witness to the flux of changing imagery to our conscious perspective. The consciousness in which the imagery appears presents as discernibly reflexive and intransitive and, to that extent, aperspectival. It bears the further hallmarks (such as unity and ever-presence) of what could turn out to be an unconditioned consciousness. The CDT shows consciousness to furthermore be conceivably experienceable as purely unconditioned and aperspectival. It could conceivably continue to be experienced as such upon

Dualism, which admits nothing but the experiences. ... Mental experiences, I am arguing, like grins ... require something further [a mind] to have them" (1968, 22). That the mind or subject is perspectival is not explicitly specified by these philosophers. But there is good reason to suppose this to be a minimal requirement for the notion of an object-experiencing "subject" to have traction beyond its just being a logico-grammatical entity. Although my own account develops perspectivalness in relation to witness-consciousness, it need not carry a deeper metaphysical commitment. It can, as Strawson (2011, 276) contends, be "minimal", "thin", an "inner locus" of consciousness.

43. I thank David Chalmers for pushing me on this point.

the reappearance of objects. It is on this raft of observable fact and conceivable extrapolation from it that the metaphysic is built, with no obvious gaps in its initial rendering. By contrast, the brute facts that buttress the foundations of materialism, dualism and panpsychism (micro or cosmic) are not only mysterious, but unobservable. We cannot observe or properly conceive of the emergence of conscious experience from non-conscious neurological entities, or the interaction of non-material minds (or properties) with material brains, or the (de) combination of macro- from micro- or cosmic subjects. The brute facts needed to bridge the gaps in each position are precariously speculative. In this respect, the foundations of each position are far more tenuous than those of Perennial Idealism.

But still there lies ahead a considerable challenge. Anyone who has had vivid enough dreams will note it well within the realm of conceivability to suppose that this “waking” world, too, could be a dream, with the dreamer being the only subject in existence. While it may avoid problems of its rivals, it is a cheap metaphysic that lacks the resources to account for the apparently striking difference between waking world and dream world. For it seems, at least from the waking perspective, that objects and other subjects in the dream world depend entirely on the experiencing subject, whereas many objects and all other subjects in the waking world are, in an important sense, independent of a particular experiencing subject. Does Perennial Idealism have the resources to avoid such solipsism and declare, in line with common sense, that the table is in the room when it leaves our consciousness? Can the metaphysic be built to bear the apparent asymmetry between dreaming and waking? I believe it can, and in a way that departs from Berkeley and those British and American idealists who relied upon God or an Absolute to do the job.

From ordinary experience we surmise that some of the items that appear as objects to our perspective — via imagery in the form of other people or animals — signify other subjects. The current proposal begins by extending the ordinary-experience scenario to suppose that not only humans and animals, but also plants and all the other objects we

observe, signify subjects, or aggregates of subjects, or part of a wider subject. I say “signify” as we cannot observe other subjects directly as subjects. A subject, we saw, can directly access only itself in its capacity as an imagery-bound perspective. We directly register ourselves as subjects via the dynamic constellations of cognisensory imagery that immediately frame our perspective. Our registration of other subjects, if it occurs, must occur indirectly. The proposal under Perennial Idealism is that our registration of other subjects occurs indirectly whenever we directly experience in our conscious field some cognisensory imagery. What manifests to us as imagery is the direct registration of ourselves as subjects as we go about indirectly registering other subjects. Our imagery, in other words, is the inward appearance of our own unified subjecthood, along with the outward appearance of other subjects that manifest from the ground. As these object-images must constitutively *be* the simultaneous registration of ourselves and other subjects, there cannot, on this picture, be a lone solipsistic subject that takes into its purview the object-images.

While we may concede that the imagery we take to signify people and animals is the appearance of other subjects, what about that imagery which appears to signify not subjects, but non-conscious objects such as tables, atoms, rocks and planets? If such imagery is actually also the outward registration of other subjects, then what, in outward terms, might those subjects turn out to be? Here, Perennial Idealism can defer to the panpsychist. The subjects turn out to be whatever is individuated by the most plausible criteria for subjecthood, be this at the micro, macro or cosmic level. The micropsychist argues that (sub)atomic phenomena are likely candidates; the cosmopsychist deems it to be the cosmos. Both allow for mid-level subjects such as ourselves, with room for other subjective unities such as cells or molecules. All that matters for our purposes is that what we take to be ordinary objects, via our cognisensory imagery, are in fact the outward

appearance of *some* conscious subject or group of subjects, however they are individuated.⁴⁴

Have we returned to panpsychism? Certainly not. We can reap the benefits without the burdens. As a subject will inherit neither consciousness nor experience from that of other subjects, no hermetic boundaries are punctured, thus generating no combination or decomposition problems. As subjects, we partake in consciousness that is endemic to the aperspectival ground; our experience is the inward registration of ourselves as we outwardly register other subjects arising from that ground. The table we leave behind when we exit the room does not vanish. Likely it does not manifest as a unified conscious table-subject, as tables are not high up on the list of preferred candidates for panpsychist subjecthood. On the micropsychist criterion, we would leave behind a constellation of micro-subjects whose collective interaction externally appears to us, without magnification, as a table, and, under magnification, as micro-entities such as atoms. Importantly, they would appear to one another as simple imagery, framing each other's perspectives. Should the table turn out to be part of a wider cosmic subject, then it may contribute to cognisensory imagery that frames the cosmic perspective.

The position offers an improvement upon Russellian monism, which we can recall as being recruited in the argument for panpsychism. Most brands of (subject) panpsychism claim each material fundament, along with a range of other entities such as ourselves, to have both an interior and exterior aspect, the interior being that of a conscious subject, and the exterior being that of an abstract relational structure. I contend that this model under-describes the phenomenal structure of our actual encounters with other subject-entities. Suppose

44. For example, on the micropsychist front, Chalmers (1996, 297) considers the informational state of a thermostat or electron as a more likely locus for subjective consciousness than that of a rock. More recently, Giulio Tononi's Integrated Information Theory of consciousness associates centres of conscious activity (subjects) with a precise mathematical quantity called Φ ("phi"). This also favours the ascription of consciousness to electrons, atoms and molecules over rocks and tables. For an accessible summary of Tononi's theory, see Mørch (2017a).

I am experientially aware of another subject-entity such as a person, or a group of atomic subject-entities in the form of a table, or a part of the cosmic subject-entity. My experience of the person, the table or the cosmos does not immediately present itself to me as any of their inaccessible interior natures: what it is like to be the other person, the table-forming atoms or the cosmos. Nor does it immediately present to me as a bare abstract structure — as if nature were outwardly to appear to us, skeleton-like, as a book of formulae. The subject-entities do not immediately present to me either as *me*, viz., as my own first-person imagery-framed perspective on the world as a subject, although this is getting closer to the mark.⁴⁵ Rather, my experience of the other subjects presents to me in the form of structured arrays of cognisensory imagery that appear *to* my perspective — a feature captured concisely by the metaphysic of Perennial Idealism. For this cognisensory imagery will simply *be* the outward registration of other subjects to my inner subjective perspective that the imagery is directly registering. It is from this perspectival imagery — taking the immediate form of neither subjects nor abstract structure — that we go on to make inferences about abstract structures and other subjects. Perennial Idealism is thus preferable to Russellian monism insofar as it captures the actual phenomenological structure of our acquaintance with what we *infer* to be other subject-entities.⁴⁶

There is further reason to suppose that cognisensory imagery could, in line with Perennial Idealism, be the outer appearance of other subjects. Many have noted a mysterious but striking similarity between subjects and the standard "secondary qualities" such as those listed

45. Thus Russell writes: "What a physiologist sees when he examines a brain is in the physiologist, not in the brain he is examining" (1927, 320).

46. In note 13, I pointed to Chalmers' observation that Russellian monism can be given (at least) a double-aspected or idealist rendering. The idealist rendering, whilst not as explicit as Perennial Idealism in capturing the phenomenological structure of our acquaintance with other subjects, is more compatible with it than the double-aspected rendering. For the grounding of abstractable relations in perspectival subjects would better fit with their presentation to us as subjects, in the form of structured cognisensory imagery.

by Locke. Subjects and qualities (such as redness), while not the same, both have a dimension to them that outstrips abstract description, underpinning the kind of intuitions that drove Frank Jackson's famous Knowledge Argument (1986). By casting qualities as the outer appearance of subjects to one another's perspective, Perennial Idealism neatly and naturally accounts for this similarity. They are similar because they are two sides of the same coin.⁴⁷

This imagery will be registering our own brains and bodies under different modes of cognition and magnification. Consider, for example, the cognisensory imagery comprising our inner thoughts and bodily sensations. Most immediately, such imagery contributes to the direct registration of ourselves as single unified subjects. Yet any imagery, presenting to us as an object, must simultaneously be the outward registration of other subjects, or a wider subject. A micropsychist criterion of subjecthood can offer a natural, scientifically motivated candidate as to what those subjects might be. Our thoughts and bodily feelings may be imagery that registers not only ourselves as subjects, but also indirectly a collection of subjects that externally and visually appear to us, under magnification, as neural and cellular networks. As a node within the network, each neuron or cell may itself be a subject whose conscious interactive commerce with other cells and neurons (as well as with what appear to us as external atoms, photons, etc.) is being collectively registered in our field of awareness as the familiar inner cognitions. On this picture, then, our inner thoughts and sensations are, in part, the outer unmagnified appearance to us of neurophysiological networks, each node of which is itself an aware subject that would visually appear to us, under magnification, as a neuron or cell.⁴⁸

47. The similarity between secondary qualities and subjects has motivated a brand of panprotopsychism known as "panqualityism". This suggests the intrinsic nature of fundamentals to be that of qualities, with conscious subjects emerging from them. Unsurprisingly, the position incurs the sizeable explanatory gap of deriving conscious subjects from non-conscious qualities. For a discussion of panqualityism, see Chalmers (2016a).

48. On a more abstract level, Paul Oppenheimer has pointed out to me that this aspect of the metaphysic bears some resemblance to Leibniz's monadology

Such an approach, on the micropsychist criterion for subjecthood, provides a neat way to distinguish waking from dreaming life. Waking-world imagery is elicited by a wider array of subjects. When I see a table while awake, I am registering not only a collection of subjects that would visually appear to me under magnification as neurons — in keeping with the observation that neural activity is implicated in all perceptual imagery, not just that of thoughts — but also a collection of subjects that would visually appear to me under magnification as table-atoms, photons and so forth. When I dream of seeing a table, however, I am registering mainly the collection of subjects that would, in a waking state, visually appear to me as neural networks located in my own body. Subjects that would appear as table-atoms or photons are thus not directly implicated in the generation of the dream-imagery, even though the cognisensory experience might, in a vivid enough dream, be indistinguishable from that of waking experience. This would help explain why waking states are usually more stable than dream states. Waking states register a far wider network of subjects in their perspective: subjects, such as atoms and photons, that would outwardly appear to us as relatively independent of our organism.

(1740). Monads — similar to subjects — are extensionless, unified, perspectival, simple but qualitatively distinct mind-like substances, whose inner changing perceptual states vary vastly in degrees of complexity. What we take to be extensional physical objects in motion, including our own bodies, are also intentional objects that are the contents of various monadic perceptions (including our own). The order we perceive in the natural physical world — such as that of body, organ, cell, atom — corresponds to a hierarchy of monads, whose overall place in the order of things is reflected in the complexity and clarity of its perceptions. A "dominant monad", such as that "had" by our human body, will subordinate monads that are "had" by our organs, whose dominant monad will in turn reign over those that physically appear to us as cells, and so on. Unlike on the current position, however, Leibniz treats the monads as individual substances that are emanated by a creator-God, from which they are created or destroyed, and which serve to explain all appearance of law-like regularity and interaction between them. They don't influence each other. If one were to consider the monads as having interactive "windows" onto each other, then Leibniz's view would be closer to Whitehead's process philosophy (1929/1985), which in this respect more closely resembles Perennial Idealism, although his theistic elements are again at odds with the position.

Object-imagery appears, to a waking subject, to form a world that is orderly. It is structured in space and time, comprising entities that causally interact in a law-like fashion, enabling accurate predictions to be made. How might Perennial Idealism account for the orderliness, which we might call the “Principle of Regularity”? This relates back to the earlier sceptical challenge that asked how imagery, arising from the ground, could be so complex and orderly. One way forward might be to posit independent laws of nature that somehow issue from the ground in tandem with subjects they govern, ensuring predictable imagery. This is an unpromising way to go. The ground would now unparsimoniously yield not one, but two sorts of manifestation – subjects *and* laws. Worse, it would undercut the idealist underlay of the position: rather than the physical world being an appearance that depends upon subjects, subjects would then be entities acted upon by external physical forces.

There is, however, another way to construe the Principle of Regularity which, rather than introducing a new and extrinsically operative kind of manifestation, keeps the Principle intrinsic to the subjects themselves. We can construe the subject as inherently dispositional, prone to eliciting ordered imagery when either registering other subjects to itself or being registered by other subjects. On this picture, any appearance of orderliness issues from how the intrinsic dispositions of subjects are collectively manifesting to any given subject’s perspective. In keeping with Schopenhauer, I suggest that the dispositions are felt subjectively and primally as will, drive or desire: the will to move, to get something, remove something, become something. Dispositions drive the ever-changing display of the imagery.

It is helpful to talk about “inner” and “outer” sides of the disposition-coin. With regard to the outer side, every subject carries a disposition to outwardly elicit in another subject particular object-imagery. The particular kind of imagery that a given subject, let’s say an atom, elicits in another subject, let’s say a human, depends not only on the given subject’s own disposition – conferred at least partly by its co-registration of other subjects – but also upon what other subjects are being

co-registered by the subject into whose perspective the given subject impinges. For example, suppose that impinging and co-aware subjects, which we would microscopically and visually identify as atoms, appear to me in the form of a table. These micro-subjects are disposed to appear in that particular table-ish way only in tandem with the other particular subjects that are collectively impinging into my perspective, such as those we recognise outwardly as neurons, photons and so on. Those very same subjects appearing to me as a table are disposed to elicit very different imagery to the perspective of a cat, or to an ant, or to other atoms and so on.

And yet the way that a table or anything else appears to me right now is not determined wholly and passively by the impinging network of subjects’ dispositions that are currently manifesting as objects within each other’s and my perspective. My object-imagery is – and is disposed to be – generated by myself as a unified subject in response to the co-registration of the other subjects. This is the “inner” side of the disposition coin: the disposition of a subject, in its capacity as a unified perspective, to register itself as it takes in the entire field of impinging subjects. In this capacity, it is disposed to elicit a particular range and type of cognisensory object imagery that typifies the kind of subject that it is. The way that I see a table, for instance, is an imagistic manifestation that depends not only on the dispositions of those impinging subjects that would appear to me under magnification as (say) atoms, photons, neurons, etc. – and how those subjects are in turn registering to one another as object-imagery – but also on how I, as unified subject, am registering myself as I take in the entire network of impinging subjects. Insofar as such imagery must appear temporally, we can say that a subject is disposed to continue manifesting as that subject in the same overall way, through generating a similar range of imagery to its perspective in its registration of other subjects, all of which are themselves disposed to generate, to *their* overall perspectives, similar imagery.⁴⁹

49. I am inclined to suppose, in accordance with Leibniz’s view (see note 48), that there is top-down influence from subjects of greater inner complexity

The intersubjective co-manifestation of dispositions, on both “inner” and “outer” sides of the disposition-coin, ensures an orderly, law-like appearance of both a subject to itself and the world that appears to it. As C. B. Martin (2007) points out in his system of dispositional ontology, from which this aspect of the account is inspired, there is an indefinite, perhaps infinite number of ways that each “disposition partner”, as he calls it, can potentially manifest — depending on what other partners it teams up with.⁵⁰ The subjects anchoring our experience of a table, as we just noted, will appear very differently to the perspective of an ant, another atom, a cat and so forth. And yet if an infinity, it is a bounded, selective infinity. For there are, as Martin says, also a possibly infinite number of manifestations that a given disposition partner, together with other partners, is not disposed to elicit, or is disposed to prohibit. Suppose that a “neural” micro-subject is a disposition partner to the elicited manifestation of my feeling of understanding “there’s a square peg”. It is not disposed, in tandem with its partnering micro-subjects, to elicit such a feeling of understanding in the cat or the ant. Such subjects that are disposed to collectively elicit

(such as ourselves) to those with lesser complexity (such as neurons, if they are subjects), although a measure of influence must also work the other way. Future work on this project will develop a model for thinking further about causal influence.

50. Martin (2007) proposes the substratum — the fundamental bearer of properties that is not a property itself — to be space-time, from which objects arise as propertyed regions. Each property is “Janus-faced” in being ontologically identical to both a disposition and a quality, which may be mental or non-mental. Each object is disposed, together with other objects whose properties Martin terms “reciprocal disposition partners”, to “mutually manifest” in a possibly infinite number of ways. Every manifestation is the concrete qualitative coming-into-contact of reciprocal disposition partners. To take one of Martin’s examples, a manifestation of salt dissolving in water is a coming-into-contact of reciprocal disposition partners that include salt and water. Prior to dissolution, both the salt and water carry a dispositional “directedness” towards each other to manifest in that particular way. Under Perennial Idealism, the “substratum” is not space-time, but aperspectival consciousness, although, for reasons that will become apparent, it is not to be thought of as a straightforward bearer of properties. The basic manifestations are analogous to Martin’s properties insofar as they are “Janus-faced” subject-disposition identities, as opposed to quality-disposition identities.

in me the visual imagery of a square peg are also disposed to prohibit a simultaneous visual appearance to me of them fitting through a round hole of the same size. We can thus start to get a sense of how dispositions could introduce a degree of orderliness into the appearances, enabling predictions accurate enough to navigate the world and conduct scientific inquiry.⁵¹

There is, of course, much more that needs saying, but I hope to have provided enough of the basics to show Perennial Idealism to be a metaphysical system eminently worth exploring. It is one that I believe not only avoids the problems of its predecessors, but shows real promise in actively accounting for the appearance of our law-governed world. Given its origin in the mystical literature, we might now wonder if any of it is suggestive of this extrapolation. Indeed it is. The Advaitic mystic Nisargadatta Maharaj was recorded to have endorsed the following:

Any manifestation, any functioning, any witnessing, can only take place in duality. There has to be a subject and an object, they are two, but they are not two, they are two ends of the same thing. When consciousness stirs, duality arises. There are millions of objects, but each object, when it sees another, assumes the subjectivity of the Absolute [1985, 76]

An approved translator and spokesperson on Maharaj’s teachings, Ramesh Balsekar, elaborates:

51. However, as Martin cautions, the counterfactual or subjunctive statements in which we express such predictions and laws should be understood as “awkward linguistic gestures towards these multiple readiesses” (2007, 31). While useful, they are not stating essences about an independently law-governed reality that grounds dispositions; it is rather that the dispositional nature of each subject grounds the law-like statements as their truth-makers, all indexed to the perspective of a subject. Such statements, if understood as idealised approximations that conveniently isolate particular dispositionalities, are useful guides to navigating the world as a subject. (On a related point, see also Heil, 2017).

Each one of us, as a phenomenon, is merely an appearance in the consciousness of those who perceive us, and, therefore, what we appear to be is a phenomenon – temporal, finite and perceptible to the senses, whereas what we are, what we have always been and always will be, without name and form, is the noumenon – timeless, spaceless imperceptible being. [Balsekar, 1990, 76]

This again brings to the fore the critic's puzzle of how the timeless ground, being without structure or qualities, could be the repository of such richness. I suspect that part of the puzzle stems from the ground's inevitable specification in negating terms. Because it is described as lacking any of the spatial, temporal or qualitative parameters that qualify conditioned phenomena, the temptation is to strip consciousness of any positive dimension at all, supposing it to be barren and vacuum-like. This is mistaken. The mystics commonly speak of the ground as a storehouse of infinite potentiality that cannot be added to or taken away from.⁵² Under Perennial Idealism, it can be thought of as the unmanifest source of all the manifesting subject-bound dispositions. Here is Balsekar (summarising Maharaj) again:

The substratum is the noumenon, which is total potentiality. With the arising of "I-am-ness" it *mirrors* itself into the phenomenal universe which only appears to be exterior to the noumenon. In order to see itself, noumenon objectifies itself into phenomenon, and for this objectivization

52. The theme of the ground or "Absolute" being of inexhaustible yet unmanifest plenitude can be found in mystical literature from many sources, including the Tao Te Ching, Plotinus and the *Upaniṣads*. See, for example, this well-known verse from the *Isha Upaniṣad*:

pūrṇamadah pūrṇamādāya pūrṇāt pūrṇamudacyate
pūrṇasya pūrṇamādāya pūrṇamevāśiṣyate

"The invisible [Brahman] is the Fullness; the visible [the world] too is the Fullness. From the Fullness [Brahman], the Fullness [the visible] universe has come. The Fullness [Brahman] remains the same, even after the Fullness [the visible universe] has come out of the Fullness [Brahman]" (Swami Nirvikarananda, transl. 2018).

to take place, space and time are the necessary concepts (in which phenomena are extended in volume and duration). Phenomenon, therefore, is not something different from noumenon, but it is noumenon itself when objectified. It is necessary to understand – and never to forget – this essential identity. [Balsekar, 1990, 66–67]

This of course raises new questions regarding how we are to further understand the interface between unmanifest ground and manifest phenomena. It will in fact form the most serious objection to the position. This will be addressed in the next section. I will close here by reviewing three implications of the metaphysic so far elucidated, since these will prove important in addressing the final objection. First, although what we have called "subjects" and "objects" depend upon each other, subjects are the more basic units of manifestation. Object-imagery can never exist in isolation but must always manifest to a subject's perspective. Second, as the perspective of a subject itself requires cognisensory object-imagery to "wall it in", the immediate perspective-lending world around us with which we are directly acquainted, and which we assume to be spatio-temporal and mind-independent, is, actually, part of what structures ourselves as subjects. Notions of a spatio-temporal world have no meaning except from within the framework of a subject. Third, as the imagery that walls in a subject is itself the outward appearance of other subjects, which are in turn walled in by yet other subjects, one subject, like a partition in a giant honeycomb, implicates all subjects.⁵³ Like Indra's net, subjects are deeply interdependent.

Section 5: The Problem of the One and the Many, and a Proposed Solution

The problem of the one and the many, as I refer to it, goes back to ancient times. It arises in connection with any metaphysic, whether

53. This again is resonant with Leibniz: "... each monad has features that are given to it in the light of features of every other monad" (*Monadology*, §60).

idealist or not, that proposes a ground that is completely infinite and unconditioned. To be completely infinite and unconditioned is to be unbounded by any parameters whatsoever, including those that distinguish the ground from whatever is grounded. The question then arises: How can the one fundament coherently interface with what we take to be our conditioned world, or its imagistic appearance, which contains its many apparently law-governed subjects and objects? Conceding any reality to a multi-faceted world enforces a boundary between it and the fundament. This undoes the purely unconditioned status of the ground, which permits no such boundary. The problem remains, irrespective of whether the finite manifestation is to be thought of as outside of the ground, such as its causal product, or inside of the ground, such that it is a part or a property of it. This problem was, for instance, historically grappled with by the German Idealist Friedrich Schelling. Goaded by critics including Hegel, who was also attempting to tackle the problem, Schelling made numerous attempts to formulate what Frederick Beiser (2002) calls his “Parmenidean vision”. This evolved from a Spinozian-inspired “Absolute” that was in essence a pure indivisible unity: infinite, undifferentiated and self-subsistent.⁵⁴ But this ground kept threatening to be compromised

54. While strikingly similar in many ways, the “Absolute” of German Idealism (with its representative thinkers Schelling and Hegel) is not that of Perennial Idealism, at least if we are to agree with the interpretation of Beiser (2002). For their Absolute is not fundamentally that of consciousness. Instead, in their scheme, our universe is conceived of as a self-sufficient organism that is dynamically evolving along a rational trajectory through which, following Spinoza, both “subjective” (e.g. mental) and “objective” (e.g. material) elements are appearances or attributes. Its highest degree of development occurs through the human exercise of “intellectual intuition”. Here, one rationally and non-discursively grasps one’s identity with the objective universe as a whole, with nature apprehended as acting *through* them as a mode of the Absolute’s self-knowledge. This does not fit the description of “awakening” that I speculatively ascribe to the earlier-cited mystics. Its immediate content, however profound, is not that of pure aperspectival unconditioned consciousness reflexively apprehending its own nature. It does not seem that unconditioned consciousness is the nature of Spinoza’s monistic God, either, at least on one key interpretation. Beiser points out that the notion of Spinoza’s God as a substance possessed of infinite attributes (of which we humans have only thought and extension) is “notoriously ambiguous” (2002,

by the appearance of the finite and multitudinous world.⁵⁵ On this, Beiser writes:

On the one hand it is necessary to exclude the realm of the finite from the absolute, because the finite and the absolute contradict one another; more specifically, the absolute is independent and indivisible while the finite is dependent and divisible.

On the other hand, however, it is also necessary to include the realm of the finite in the absolute, because, as the whole of all reality, the absolute cannot be limited by something outside itself An absolute that excludes the finite becomes, just by that token, a finite absolute, and so not really an absolute at all. [2002, 567–568]

And yet the alternative of not conceding reality to the manifest, finite world — in our case prohibiting the appearance of an imagery-bound world to our perspectives — seems to entail embracing an austere existence monism on which only the undifferentiated ground exists.⁵⁶ This self-defeatingly denies not only the very existence of the subject’s perspective from which the metaphysic is posited, but the whole metaphysic of subjects built upon the fundament. Such implications have been noted in connection with the ancient philosopher Parmenides of Elea, who also inspired Schelling. Parmenides wrote a poem in which a youth, taken to be Parmenides himself, travels through the heavens

570). Are the attributes merely that which the intellect perceives, and hence subjective appearances, or do they objectively constitute God’s essence? The objective reading would clearly not fit with that of unconditioned consciousness. For rather than being possessed of an infinity of discernible attributes, unconditioned consciousness is depicted by mystics as not manifesting any attributes.

55. For an informative account of Schelling’s various attempts to tackle the problem of the one and the many in his different works, see Beiser (2002, 565–595).

56. In Existence Monism there is exactly one concrete token. In the earlier-mentioned Priority Monism there is exactly one fundamental concrete token, but not necessarily only one concrete token (Schaffer, 2014).

to meet an unnamed goddess who reveals to him the basics of “reality” and “opinion”. Reality is that which is uncreated, indestructible, indivisible and complete, whereas ‘opinion’ denotes the workings of our ordinary world.⁵⁷ While Parmenides seemed to endorse only the existence of “reality” and deny the existence of the world espoused by “opinion”, several scholars, including the author of the relevant entry in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, remain reluctant to attribute to him this “mad” position:

Not only is the external world experienced by mortal senses denied reality, the very beings who are supposed to be misled by their senses are also denied existence, including Parmenides himself! Thus, this view results in the “mad,” self-denying position that Descartes would famously show later was the one thing we could never deny as thinkers — our own existence. If there is to be any didactic purpose to the poem overall — that is, the youth is to learn how to not fall into the errors of other mortals — the existence of mortals must be a given; since this view entails they do not exist, the poem’s apparent purpose is entirely undercut. Surely this blatant contradiction could not have escaped Parmenides’ notice. [De Long, 2018]

Even sceptical Hume, who denied the existence of a Cartesian thinker, did not doubt the reality of the fluxing bundle of sensory and mental impressions that appeared to his own or others’ purview.⁵⁸ There seems to us something undeniably, objectively and indeed ultimately real about the very event of the diverse images appearing to our perspective. There also seems something disturbingly self-defeating

57. Parmenides, “On Nature”
<<http://platonian-philosophy.org/files/Parmenides%20-%20Poem.pdf>>

58. “But setting aside some metaphysicians of this kind, I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement” (Hume, 1739, sec VI, Bk 1, Part 4).

about denying the very imagery-built world that the metaphysic was at pains to elaborate in the first place.

The problem of the one and the many thus presents Perennial Idealism with what appears to be a vicious dilemma: If the manifest world of subjects is real, it irrevocably undercuts the purely unconditioned nature of the ground by imposing boundaries between subjects and the ground. If only the ground is real, we have the seemingly absurd consequence of denying reality to what seems undeniably existent. Hence, far from being an innocent brute fact, the notion of subjects arising from unconditioned consciousness seems potentially a far more dangerous crack to paper over than those of its philosophical predecessors. It appears like a chasm, threatening to swallow up the metaphysic before it can get off the ground.

I believe that Perennial Idealism has the resources to tackle the problem. A central clue to its potential resolution can be found in the following passages from one of the celebrated modern mystics we cited earlier, Sri Ramana Maharshi. Elaborating on a Sanskrit verse (*Kārikā*, ch. 2, v. 32) composed by Gauḍapāda (circa 700 CE), a much earlier Advaitic mystic, Sri Ramana says:

Nothing exists except the one reality. There is no birth or death, no projection [of the world] or drawing in [of it] ... no *mumuṣū* [seeker of liberation], no *mukta* [liberated one], no bondage, no liberation. The one unity alone exists ever.

To such as find it difficult to grasp this truth and who ask, “How can we ignore this solid world we see all around us?” the dream experience is pointed out and they are told, “All that you see depends on the seer. Apart from the seer, there is no seen.” [Muruganar, 2008, 50 (originally in Mudaliar 1977, 149–50)]

Ramana is expressing what is known in Advaita Vedānta as the *ajāta* doctrine, which means “not created, not caused”.⁵⁹ The *ajāta* doctrine 59. The *ajāta* doctrine is also alluded to by Maharaj (1997, 26): “That *something*

was expounded in the mystico-philosophical writings of the two most distinguished early exponents of Advaita Vedānta: Gauḍapāda and Śaṅkara (Nikhilānanda, 1949). I use the term ‘mystico-philosophical’ to describe a notable claim made about the *ajāta* doctrine. Unlike most metaphysical doctrines, which are purely speculative, the *ajāta* doctrine is claimed to be true of the direct experience of one who is, as they sometimes put it, established in the ground. This is no less true of Sri Ramana Maharshi. One of his closest disciples, the poet and philosopher Muruganar, wrote: “Though Guru Ramana ... expounded numerous doctrines ... you should know that what we have heard him affirm to intimate devotees in private ... as his own true experience, is only the doctrine of *ajāta* [non-creation]” (verse 100, 48, 2008). And in an additional comment on the above Gauḍapāda verse, Ramana said: “One who is established in the Self [Ground] sees this by his knowledge of reality” (Godman, 2005, 240). When applied to Perennial Idealism, which recognises the centrality of direct experiential “awakening” to its metaphysic, I believe the *ajāta* doctrine can resolve the problem of the one and the many.⁶⁰

which is born and which will die is purely imaginary” [my italics]. An informative analysis of the *ajāta* doctrine in Ramana’s teachings can be found in blog posts by Michael James (2016) and David Godman (2008), both of whom are recognised authorities on the teachings of Ramana Maharshi.

60. From what I can discern, other metaphysical systems positing an unconditioned ground, such as those of Parmenides, Plotinus, Spinoza and Schelling, don’t speak explicitly of an “awakening” from the dualistic and illusory structure of self and manifest world to one’s identity as the ground. Hence, they lack the specific resources to address the problem of the one and the many in the way that is being proposed here. Plotinus’ system, for instance, proposes an ultimate unity of being, called the “One”, from which multiplicity timelessly emanates through descending orders of unity: Intellect (Nous), Soul, figures in the material world. The nature of emanation between levels of being is not made clear. The logic is rather one that follows a metaphysical principle held widely in his time: that the more unity something has, encompassing beauty, goodness and harmony, the more real it is. Plotinus uses this principle to reason that composite entities must owe their existence to elements that exemplify a higher order of unity. This culminates, ultimately, in the undifferentiated One as the source of all being: “Untouched by multiplicity, it will be wholly self-sufficing, an absolute First, whereas any not-first demands its earlier, and any non-simplex needs the simplicities within itself as the very

The *ajāta* doctrine appears, in line with the above quotation, to deny objective existence to the world of subjects and objects. In doing so, it denies that there could be such a situation as the ground causing their existence in the form of things or events. The ontological status of the world of subjects (seers) and objects (seen), along with their implied differentia, is thus compared to dream items. As dream items don’t really exist, there cannot be a real boundary between them and the ground. And yet the dream items do exist within the dream.

This is a radical claim that needs some unpacking. With regard to the lack of a real boundary, let us suppose that Jim dreams of seeing a mountain. We would be making a category error if we were to claim that the mountain is grounded in Jim’s consciousness. There is no real mountain to be grounded in Jim’s consciousness. However, most of us would not deny Jim’s experience to be real enough. He really seems to see a mountain. If he merely hallucinated a mountain, the same logic would apply. Even if there is no real mountain, there is real cognitive mountain imagery. The event of this imagery appearing to Jim’s perspective, or its being grounded in his consciousness, is objectively real. The perspectival experiencing of the dream imagery (or a hallucination) is indeed just as real as it would be if Jim were awake and seeing a mountain. However, if we then claim that the event of Jim’s perspectival imagery literally arises from the ground of unconditioned consciousness, we trigger the problem of the one and the many. As soon as we admit the objective reality of Jim’s perspectival imagery, whether waking or dreaming, we are allowing into our ontology a real event whose existence forms a boundary with the unconditioned ground. This is where the *ajāta* doctrine comes in. For it is precisely such “events” as Jim’s experiencing imagery to his perspective that are allocated the status of a dream item. In other words, to say that *Jim’s*

foundations of its composite existence” (250 A.C.E., V.4.1). Yet even if we grant Plotinus this principle, it is hard to see how his system adequately resolves the problem of the one and the many. For he presents the first level of emanation, Intellect, as objectively real, thus imposing a boundary between it and the unbounded One.

experiencing imagery to his perspective is grounded in unconditioned consciousness is as much a category error as saying that *the mountain* is grounded in Jim's consciousness. Both have the same dream-like status. Were this to be the case, we wouldn't have to worry about a boundary between subjects and ground any more than a boundary between a mountain and Jim's consciousness. Yet how could it be the case?

To answer this, we must look more closely at the relation that is being posited to hold, problematically, between the subjects and the ground. When we normally talk about the relation between a ground and what is grounded in it (or, if people prefer, the fundament and what depends or supervenes on it),⁶¹ from what standpoint is the relation being considered? In such considerations there is the tacit assumption of a legitimate outside and neutral *sub specie aeternitatis* point of reference from which it is possible to envisage and assess the relation that pertains between ground and grounded. Even if we realise that we can never escape our subjective viewpoint in making judgements about the world, we tacitly assume the existence of a validating external point of view. The background assumption is that peculiarities pertaining to our points of view — including the very fact that such judgements are being made *from* a perspective — are not entering into the contents of what we assume to be ultimate reality. We are making claims that purport to reveal facts about objective reality that don't in themselves depend in any way upon the perspectives of those making the judgement — claims that fit into such templates as "truths about the grounded facts hold in virtue of the truths about the grounding facts" or "facts about what is grounded depend upon facts about the ground". Let us call this idealised neutral vantage-point, from which such statements are made, the "Objective Standpoint".

The Objective Standpoint fails to apply to the framework of Perennial Idealism. To try to conceive of a relation between subjects and

61. Readers who don't like the notion of grounding can, for these purposes, construe the term synecdochically, to cover the general set of dependency relations of which technical grounding is a member.

the ground from the Objective Standpoint is to construe matters from within a framework that doesn't fit the case at hand. We might, to use a common analogy, be visualising subjects as analogous to whirlpools and the ground as analogous to the ocean and then trying to envisage the relation between "ocean" and "whirlpools". But this is to make a category error. For there is no such Objective Standpoint from which either subjects or universal consciousness could be said to exist, and hence no such standpoint from which a problematic relation between them could legitimately apply. But why is this?

Consider, first, unconditioned consciousness. Since it doesn't sustain distinctions, talk of a neutral point of reference from outside of it, relating it to subjects, is not applicable. Consider now a subject: a conscious perspective framed by imagery. Can we speak of an idealised Objective Standpoint from outside any subject's perspective, which relates a subject, or a network of subjects, to the ground? Here we draw upon the implications with which we closed the previous section. The imagery, which cues us into the sense of being in a spatio-temporal world, cannot manifest without the perspective to which it appears, and the perspective cannot manifest without the imagery to frame it. As all the distinguishing features of a subject and its world, with its dispositional relations, only manifest from inside the subject-imagery network, there are no outward markers by which a subject, or web of internally co-dependent subjects, could discernibly register as an objective item or event. The very happening of the subject's existence has nothing to signal its ontological reality beyond the imagistic content available from *inside* a given subject's perspective, whether this be a subject's direct registration of itself or its indirect registration of or by another subject(s). Subjects can thus not exist as objective *relata* that externally interface with the ground.

In failing to manifest from a neutral outside standpoint, are we to say, then, that subjects (or, for that matter, universal consciousness) don't objectively exist? That is not, strictly speaking, correct either. Rather, it is that the conditions under which a subject or the universal consciousness could be said to objectively exist or not exist, which

would imply a legitimacy of the Objective Standpoint, fail to obtain. Thus, the preconditions for an objective relation holding between subject and ground also fail to obtain. That is why the idea of subjects being grounded in universal consciousness is a category error, on a par with the mountain being grounded in Jim's consciousness. It also shows that the position cannot be described as an unqualified existence monism, which would suppose that only the fundament, and not the subjects, objectively exist.

Puzzles remain. If we can't ascribe objective reality to either subjects or aperspectival consciousness, how then are we to accommodate the central "Perennialist" postulate that aperspectival consciousness, our abiding nature, is the ultimate ground of all being? How are we to talk about the metaphysic at all? Here we get to the second part of the *ajāta* doctrine: the analogy to dream items existing from within the dream. In renouncing the Objective Standpoint, we do not have to renounce all talk about the world and reality. But we do have to relativise the truth of any such statements to the standpoint of a subject, recognising no objective reality beyond this. This is not just the trivial claim that we cannot escape our perspective in making judgements about the world. It is the far more robust claim that peculiarities pertaining to perspectives, including our status *as* perspectives, are entering into the content of all our judgements and facts about the world, including everything being written now.⁶² We can stand by our earlier reasoning that attempted to show the conceivable ultimacy of aperspectival consciousness. But such reasoning, implying distinctions, can only hold true relative to a standpoint from which distinctions could legitimately apply. It cannot hold true from an Objective Standpoint, as there is no such thing. It would also be invalidated from the standpoint of one established in the ground, who declares there to be nothing but the ground, recognising no real distinctions sustained

62. This does not, of course, licence a sloppy, anything-goes line of thought such as, 'It seems to me subjectively to be P, therefore P.' Perennial Idealism will have standards of relative objectivity that depend on intersubjective verification.

by subjects, their reasoning, or the world in relation to the ground. I will elaborate on this later in the paper. Somewhat paradoxically, even *their* statements — to the effect that there are no distinctions — would be self-defeating insofar as they are expressed in terms that imply distinctions.⁶³

What of our foundational "brute fact" statement that we subjects can observe our own manifestation in a conscious field that could conceivably turn out to be unconditioned? Again, we are free to state such a fact so long as we recognise it to be a subject-relative rather than objective truth, if it is true at all. Insofar as we appear to be a subject manifesting in consciousness, we exist both from within our own interior perspective and from within the perspectives of those subjects into which we impinge. But no subjects or their networks exist *simpliciter*. It is only relative to our subjective perspective, from within the dream, as it were, that we can meaningfully assert our own existence, map the architecture of our image-bound world⁶⁴ and proclaim ourselves and it to be "grounded" in what we can conceivably extrapolate to be unconditioned consciousness. It is not an ordinary grounding relation. Grounding relations, as we saw, are normally expressed in terms that are validated from the Objective Standpoint. Such judgements imply a commensurability between levels of reality, legitimising such statements as 'Facts about what is grounded depend upon facts

63. After expounding on the *ajāta* doctrine, Ramana says, "This [explanation] is all from the point of view of the current conversation. In reality, there is only the *Ātman*. Because this is so, there is nothing to know and nothing to be known" (Godman, 2005, 262).

64. What are we to make of the tables left behind upon exiting the room? Again, our statements to this effect have an objective purport which, under Perennial Idealism, doesn't match reality. For even when we recast tables as co-arising atomic subjects that are aware of one another, there is no Objective Standpoint from which this configuration of subjects could be said to exist. The most we can say is that each table-atom as a subject exists (i) directly to its own perspective, and (ii) indirectly to any other perspective into which it impinges as imagery. Even saying this much, as it is couched in distinctions that themselves have objective purport, holds true from neither the Objective Standpoint, nor the ultimate standpoint that doesn't admit of real distinctions. Hence the statement lacks validity beyond the standpoint of a subject who makes it.

about the ground.' Philosophers, taking the Objective Standpoint, go on to analyse various dependency relations, yielding such reasoning as Chalmers' conceivability argument against materialism. The same cannot be done here. One would be committing a category error by supposing that one could investigate whether or not there could be a possible world, identical to this one in its ground, but with different manifestations obtaining. Some might therefore insist that 'grounding' is the wrong term to apply to the pseudo-relation between aperspectival consciousness and subjects. While here is not the place to enter into the thorny topic of grounding, I will for now choose to retain the term 'ground' for unconditioned consciousness, since it preserves its most important elements. These are its uncompromising ultimacy and the dependency that subjects have on it, insofar as subjects can be said to exist from within their own perspectives. It is an unconventional grounding.

While I have laboured to make analytic sense of the *ajāta* doctrine, Ramana Maharshi did not arrive at it by doing philosophy. There remains the epistemic puzzle of how such a pervasive assumption about the world's objective status could come to seem invalidated by one who has awoken from it. In alluding to a bounded subject as "the knower", Ramana said:

... one who is properly established in the *Ātman* [one's abiding nature as the ground] knows that nothing happens in this world, and that nothing is ever destroyed. Something is felt to be happening only when we are in the state of *prāmatā*, the knower. This state is not one's real nature. For the *jñāni* [one who has awakened] who has given up the idea of the knower, nothing ever happens.

... The world seen on the previous day was not real. It was the knowledge of an unreal knower. In the same way, the world of the next day is also the knowledge of an unreal knower. For the *ajñāni* [one who has not awakened] the world is experienced at these times [yesterday and

today]. But for the *jñāni* the world is not there at any time, past, present or future. What appears separate from us is called by us "the world". It appears separate from us due to ego-consciousness [*ahankāra*]. When *ahankāra* goes there is nothing separate; there is no world. Time also arises from *prāmatā*, the knower. Because *prāmatā* is not real, time is also not real. [Godman, 2005, 238, 252–253]

Let us be reminded of just how radical this insight would be. It is not just that the deep-seated assumption of an "outside" world as mind-independent would be invalidated as it comes to be seen, at least on my extrapolation, as subject-dependent imagery. It is also that the very appearing of the diverse and temporal imagery to a bounded perspective ("the knower") would itself be apprehended as non-ultimate, as not really happening. These would be on a par with dream items. The term 'awakening' is thus far from empty. It literally denotes a waking up from spatio-temporal and qualitative distinctions, from a multiplicity that we have assumed all our lives to be as real as anything can be. Following this line of reasoning, it can be said that the ordinarily experienced waking state is to the *jñāni* what the dream state is to us.

So how could a *jñāni* be said to regard the incommensurate world, with all its multiplicity, as dream-like? The following passage, in which Ramana alludes to the teaching of the pre-eminent Advaitic exemplar Śaṅkara, sheds further light:

He [Śaṅkara] said that (1) *Brahman* [the ground] is real, (2) The universe is unreal, and (3) *Brahman* is the universe. He did not stop at the second, because the third explains the other two. It signifies that the universe is real if perceived as the Self [Ground], and unreal if perceived apart from the Self. [Cohen, 1980, 65]

In view of what has been said, this may be interpreted as follows: To perceive the universe, with its subjects and objects and distinctions, apart from Self (the ground) is to perceive it in the way most of us

do, assuming an ultimacy of distinctions that are erroneously superimposed upon the ground. To perceive the universe as Self is to apprehend it as one's abiding essence, from the awakened standpoint, as none other than unconditioned consciousness, seeing clearly that distinctions lack their purported ultimacy and are on par with dream objects. The words 'perceive' and 'standpoint' should not mislead us into supposing that such "seeing" occurs through the localised psychophysical perspective of a distinct subject. As mentioned previously, the *jñāni*, one who has awakened, does not view consciousness as intrinsically limited to a perspective. Hence the *jñāni's* standpoint is not that of a perspective-bound subject having object-knowledge of the ultimate; there is only the non-dual (aperspectival) knowing, or *jñāna*, beyond the subject/object distinction.⁶⁵ As Ramana once expressed it: "There is no *jñāni*, *jñāna* alone is" (Vishnu, 1966, 101). It is impossible to imagine. I suggested earlier that we may be unity-blind in as far as we automatically view reality as ultimately conditioned and divided rather than as unconditioned and undifferentiated. Although a vestige of unity may shine through in our ordinary conscious states, we are like the person who cannot help assuming space to be intrinsically the shape of the room. If Perennial Idealism is right, the problem of the one and the many only appears to arise, both existentially and philosophically, because we automatically assume the dualistic perspective of the unity-blind through which reality is viewed as ultimately differentiated, reified and hence estranged from its ground.

Supposing that Ramana was truly awakened, we may wonder what it was that could have precipitated the awakening. This is a topic for a new paper,⁶⁶ but it is instructive to finish on this theme, as it gets to the heart of the *ajāta* doctrine. A spontaneous act of enquiry into the source of the perspectival seer was said to be the immediate prior cause of Ramana's awakening. It was an enquiry of such potency that

65. In Sanskrit, *jñāna* denotes true non-dual (aperspectival) knowledge, and the *jñāni* is the one who knows it.

66. It is in fact the topic of David Godman's 2019 piece that I quote from at the conclusion of this paper.

it purportedly cut off all thought and imagery at its root, annihilating the reciprocal assumption of being a bounded subject. It was analogous to being in the Cognisensory Deprivation Tank. Ramana himself stressed the importance of this act of enquiry when he wrote *circa* 1913–1914 about his awakening in the first part of *Arunachala Ashtakam*, verse two:

When I scrutinised within the mind "Who is the seer?" the seer became non-existent and I saw that which remained. The mind does not [now] rise to say "I saw"; how [therefore] can the mind [a bounded perspective] rise to say "I did not see"? [2007, 151]

Commenting on this, David Godman writes:

This is a *sutra*-like summary of the experience in which Ramana boiled down the whole [awakening] narrative into its essence. He asked himself "Who is the one who sees objects?" He focused on that entity, saw it disappear into its source, and from that moment on the individual perceiving "I" never rose or functioned in him again. [Godman, 2019]

The experience occurred when Ramana was sixteen, before any awareness of the Advaitic tradition through which his teachings came to be expressed. He went on to live for another fifty-four years, and his life was widely documented. From all accounts, the psychological transformation that took place was extraordinary and permanent, seemingly consistent in all manners of affect and behaviour with one who no longer accepted that he occupied a body with its limiting perspective.⁶⁷ The idea that it was precipitated by an insight into his abiding nature

67. In Albahari (2014) I propose that the epistemology of awakening involves "doxastic integration", whereupon one's rational judgements about not being a localised self become deeply aligned with one's affect and behaviour.

as the ground of all being is one that I hope can now be seen as worthy of serious philosophical enquiry.⁶⁸

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