

PART II

Forms of Panpsychism



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BEYOND COSMOPSYCHISM AND THE GREAT I AM

How the World Might be Grounded in Universal 'Advaitic' Consciousness

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Manifestation needs time and space, but the source of [personalised] consciousness was there before manifestation took place.

(Maharaj 1985: 86)

It is because consciousness is unborn and undying that the millions of forms get created and destroyed; it is a continuous process. . . . Please understand that . . . you are the formless, timeless unborn. It is because of your identification with the body as an entity that your consciousness, which is universal consciousness, thinks that it is dying. Nobody is dying, because nobody was born. . . . Only that in which consciousness manifests itself is limited and created and destroyed. The total potential of consciousness remains. It is unlimited.

(Maharaj 1994: 32–3)

1. Introduction

In 1946, Aldous Huxley proceeded to collate what he took to be evidence for an 'inexhaustible' and 'perennial' theme first expressed in writing 25 centuries ago and subsequently recurring from within the ambit of many religious traditions, including those of Christian mysticism, Taoism, Hinduism and Buddhism. This theme, says Huxley, expresses a metaphysics that:

recognises a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being – the thing is immemorial and universal.

(1946: 9)

The core ideas have arguably found their most explicit articulation within the Advaita Vedanta tradition, whose Upanisadic origins owe their particular formulation to 8th-century figure Adi Sankara, and whose philosophy has found expression in the words of recent figures acclaimed to have awoken to its ultimate reality (the opening quotes by Nisargadatta Maharaj are from such a figure). From the

body of Advaitic writings can be extrapolated four main tenets which, following Huxley, I allude to as the ‘Perennial Philosophy’:

1. All that appears as concrete reality – the spatio-temporal universe with its furniture of tables, pebbles, stars, atoms, cats, human beings – is fundamentally grounded in ‘universal consciousness’, which is beyond the subject/object division, beyond the bounds of space and time, completely self-subsistent.
2. Universal consciousness forms the common backdrop to all individual conscious experience.
3. What inhibits full direct realisation of our conscious nature as identical to universal consciousness as ground of all being is the sense of being a separate self, or ‘I’. The self is a cognitive illusion that makes the nature of consciousness appear intrinsically confined to the focal perspective of a personal subject.
4. It is possible, via meditation techniques, to eliminate the illusion of self, such that one fully, directly and non-discursively realises one’s fundamental grounding as universal consciousness. While post-realised perception continues to nominally operate via a subject/object framework, there is no longer an *identity* with the confines of a subject. The realisation involves a permanent transformative experience that axiologically and noetically forms the apex of human potential, unleashing native capacities for boundless happiness, benevolence and compassion.

Taken together these four tenets, expounding a form of idealism, would be extraordinary if true. Yet there has been no real investigation or defence of the Advaitic/Perennialist position within Western philosophy.¹ While a notion of universal consciousness was expressed through variants of sometimes pantheistic absolute idealism prevalent in the latter part of the 19th century (e.g. in Bradley), such consciousness was never linked to any radically transformative experience or methodology that would make it fully and non-discursively available to the human mind.² And while universal consciousness has found a recent revival in a non-pantheistic variant called ‘cosmopsychism’, the consciousness, bestowed to the cosmos, is again not generally touted as epistemically fully available to humans.³ Cosmopsychism also differs from Perennialism by virtue of the fact that universal consciousness, as with many idealist predecessors, is usually cast as belonging to a fundamental cosmic mind or subject which directly experiences or somehow grounds our conscious lives as its objectual content.⁴ (We can take ‘subject’ to mean ‘conscious focal perspective’; and ‘object’ to broadly mean anything a subject can focus on within its perspective – more later). By contrast, Perennialism casts universal consciousness as (1) beyond any duality between subject and object – ‘Advaita’ literally means ‘non-dual’ – (2) not attributable to the cosmos; it grounds it, so is beyond space and time, and (3) fully and non-discursively available to the human mind via deep transformative experience.

While Western philosophy has developed notions of universal consciousness, the field has also independently harboured some excellent scholarly accounts of Advaita Vedanta, which sometimes compare it to the writings of other traditions and thinkers.⁵ But to my knowledge there has yet to be a serious Western philosophical attempt to bring the ideas of Advaita Vedanta and universal consciousness together, through fully investigating or defending the four Perennialist pillars as a stand-alone metaphysical system.⁶ By sketching a metaphysical outline for the Perennialist position, partly in response to difficulties raised by the cosmopsychic alternative, this chapter attempts to redress the balance.

As addressing all four tenets is well outside the scope of a single chapter, I will be endeavouring to sketch an outline for tenets 1 and 2 – that the world is grounded in a non-dual universal consciousness that forms the background to our own conscious experience. Tenets 3 and 4 will nevertheless serve to constrain the kind of outline that can be sketched. Universal consciousness must be construed in a way that makes it possible to be humanly experienced; the story has to make *psychological* as well as logical sense. With this in mind, the chapter will proceed as follows. Section 1 will set

out what I think are some serious troubles for cosmopsychism and some of its idealist predecessors. I will close by suggesting that these troubles can be overcome by a Perennialist approach, which will bring its own challenges. Section 2 will attempt to make conceptual sense of a universal ‘non-dual’ consciousness. Section 3 will sketch the outline of a metaphysical model for how the appearance of concrete objects could be grounded in such consciousness. I will conclude with some cautionary remarks about the limits of discursive thought in relation to Perennialist claims about grounding.

2. Troubles for Cosmopsychism

This anthology is testament to the fact that panpsychism has made a revival. Its most prevalent version is the pluralist view that consciousness belongs fundamentally to the micro-physical ultimates, perhaps qualifying their categorical nature. The most intractable difficulty with the position, in what is known as the ‘combination problem’, asks how micro-subjects, in virtue of their conscious properties, could combine to form macro-subjects such as ourselves. Nothing about their individual phenomenal natures seems to necessitate the fact that, when combined in a particular way, they will form a larger unitary subject; it seems an utter mystery.⁷ It is largely in response to this difficulty that a successor to absolute idealism has resurfaced in the form of cosmopsychism. Strictly speaking, cosmopsychism is not fully-fledged idealism, as consciousness does not ground the cosmos; rather, it characterises the deep intrinsic nature of this fundamental material entity (so is compatible with Russellian monism). The prevailing versions, like most of their predecessors, also take their fundament to be a *conscious subject of experience* that grounds our own conscious perspectives and their contents.

Two such recent proponents of cosmopsychism, Philip Goff (2017) and Itay Shani (2015), see a natural ally in Jonathan Schaffer’s (2010) priority monism. For Schaffer, the cosmos exists as the sole fundamental concrete entity that grounds all other less basic entities, which can be considered parts of, or abstractions from, the unified whole. While grounding is a topic unto itself, it can for these purposes be thought of as a relation of metaphysical dependence between facts, whereby the grounded facts hold in virtue of the more fundamental grounding fact(s). According to Goff, when the inner nature of the cosmos is considered to be a conscious perspectival subject, it yields a grounding relation that solves the combination problem, or its reverse, which I think is best termed the ‘decombination problem’: how a whole conscious unity can coherently decombine into, or necessitate, smaller conscious unities.⁸ Goff proposes that the fundamental cosmic subject contains within its unified conscious field each of our perspectives and their conscious experiences as its abstractable parts, just as our own conscious field contains various sensory experiences as parts. To take a toy example, if subject A experiences pain, and B experiences redness, and C has an experience of buzzing, then each of these subjects has their experience in virtue of fact that the fundamental cosmic subject S has a unified experience to its overarching perspective, involving pain-to-perspective-A, red-to-perspective-B and buzzing-to-perspective-C. This way of grounding each subject and all their experiences in the cosmic consciousness appears to satisfy what Goff, adapting Armstrong, calls the ‘free lunch constraint’ for a theory of fundamental reality, on which the less fundamental facts (in this case, those of the smaller subjects) are satisfactorily explained by the fundamental fact (the cosmic subject) – in this instance, by being intuitively nothing over and above it. Through each of us inheriting our subjecthood directly from the conscious field of the cosmic subject that contains them, the decombination problem is averted.

Central to this argument, as Goff notes, is the fact that even if we cannot actively imagine one conscious mind set up to subsume the perspectives of smaller conscious minds, the scenario reveals no contradiction or *a priori* incoherence. But I contend that further probing *does* reveal the scenario to be incoherent. The critique originates in two objections made by William James (1909) in *The Pluralistic Universe* towards the prevalent 19th-century idealism. While his objections target an

absolute subject that is omniscient and eternal, I will suggest that they can be redirected, with devastating effect, towards Goff's position. The decombination problem that each objection exemplifies re-appears.

James's first objection, which I'll call the 'epistemic problem', is as follows:

we experience ourselves ignorantly and in division. We indeed differ from the absolute not only by defect, but by excess. Our ignorances, for example, bring curiosities and doubts by which it cannot be troubled, for it owns eternally the solution of every problem. Our impotence entails pains, our imperfection sins, which its perfection keeps at a distance.

(1909: Lecture V)

The epistemic problem arises from furnishing the 'absolute's' epistemically all-encompassing perspective with content that also belongs to its smaller relatively ignorant perspectives. The ignorance owed to a subject's finite nature generates mental content, such as fear of mortality, that cannot be coherently ascribed to an absolute in the know. In reply, Goff is likely to point out that far from being omniscient, the conscious cosmos may well be a 'blobby mess' to which predicates like 'intelligent' or 'rational' don't apply. But the core of the epistemic problem does not disappear. Consider Fiona's intense and pervasive fear that she will be annihilated upon death, a fear whose first-personal character is partly owed to its mind-dominating nature. Goff's cosmic subject must directly experience not only Fiona's intense fear of dying but also Fred's overwhelming excitement at his impending reincarnation. Yet qualifying just a fraction of the cosmic mind, it's hard to envisage how each emotion could, from the personal cosmic perspective, retain their defining first-personal characters *as* intense and dominating, and hence as those particular emotions. It is also difficult to conceive of how the cosmic subject could first-personally harbour what would, to its singular conscious perspective, be the mass of everyone's contradicting beliefs and identities, e.g. 'there is only one life', 'there is more than one life', 'I am Fiona', 'I am Fred'.⁹ These epistemic considerations make Goff's subject-grounding scenario not only unimaginable, but I suggest, incoherent.

James's second objection, which I'll call the 'perspective problem' is as follows:

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)

The perspective problem trades on the idea that the specific perspectival character and content of thoughts and experiences is determined by and available only to their thinker as they are thought up. But Goff's scenario requires that our seemingly unique perspectives also exist as mental objects for the conscious cosmos. The lurking incoherence is made more explicit in a version of the perspective objection by Sam Coleman (2014), discussed at length by Shani. Like James's version, it doubles as a variant of both the decombination and combination problem through insisting that perspectives cannot, as a matter of logical fact, survive being subsumed by a larger perspective. In summarising Coleman's objection, Shani writes:

He asks us to imagine two micro-subjects, Red and Blue, such that Red sees only red, while Blue sees only blue. Red and Blue combine, in turn, to form a macro-subject, call it Mac, which integrates the phenomenal worlds into a single perspective. The problem,

says Coleman, is that Red's and Blue's perspective do not survive as *points of view* within Mac's unified perspective. For example, Red's take on the world is that of seeing red, to the exclusion of all else, but Mac's perspective defies this condition: it may contain seeing blue, in addition to seeing red, or it may simply consist of seeing purple . . . the original perspectives have disappeared from sight.

(2015: 401)

While Goff's subject-grounding scenario seems clearly impaled on this objection, reinforcing its incoherence, Shani, whose cosmopsychism is also theoretically committed to Schaffer's priority monism, believes that he has a way out. He responds to the perspective problem by evoking a notion of partial grounding. If A only partially grounds B, A does not fully ground and thereby entail B, as it does on Goff's position; rather, B's features are intelligibly traceable, in part, to A (2015: 403–6). To see how this is employed to solve the problem, I need to say more about the outline of Shani's rich and nuanced position. The cosmic absolute is a vast conscious plenum that operates by what he calls the 'lateral duality principle', whereupon the absolute has a concealed as well as revealed nature. Concealed to our perspective is the absolute's subjective interiority – its first-person perspective – a dynamic and sentient sea of consciousness (or as he calls it, 'endo-phenomenological expanse') whose constant creative activity is revealed to us as its outer expressions in our familiar physical environment. Embedded in this environment are quasi-independent patterns that emerge and co-evolve like vortices on an oceanic plenum, some of which are subjects of experience (2015: 410–14).

Each such concrete perspective, although anchored in the absolute, has, as localised interference patterns, its own interiority (with perspectival thoughts, perceptions etc.) whose specific character is concealed from all other perspectives, including that of the absolute. Yet the global sentient and perspectival nature of the absolute's conscious field – its unifying 'light', as it were – imparts sentience (generalised what-it-is-likeness) and perspectivity (a first-personal perspective to whom the contents are presented) to the smaller subjects. So while these generic structural features of our conscious lives are, as on Goff's view, directly inherited from the shared medium of the absolute's conscious field, the specific hidden interiority to our conscious life is intelligibly explained, via partial grounding, as localised patterns in this sentient medium, avoiding the perspective (and epistemic) problem (2015: 425–7). The free lunch constraint appears to be met, and the decombination problem averted.

But if he avoids this problem, he falls into the trap of another. As with Goff's view, the absolute is stipulated by Shani to be a subject of experience who is aware of various contents as its objects. He correctly notes that part of what it means to *be* a conscious subject is for any contents within its field of consciousness to be disclosed to its first-personal perspective (2015: 426) – what Dan Zahavi (2005) calls their first-person givenness or for-me-ness. At the same time Shani wants to insist that the contents of our conscious fields, while embedded within the absolute's field of consciousness, are hidden to the absolute's perspective. But he cannot have it both ways. If our conscious perspectives and their contents are to be embedded within – and illuminated by the sentience of – the absolute's conscious field, then, given that the absolute is a subject, **our contents (and perhaps perspectives)** must also, by definition, be first-personally revealed to the absolute's perspective. This then either contradicts his claim about hidden contents, forcing his position back to what we can collectively call the 'incoherent contents objection' (with its epistemic and perspective problems) or it forces him to abandon the claim that the absolute is actually a subject of experience (that must be aware of what is in its field of consciousness).

A possible way out, following Freya Mathews (2011), might be to deploy a psychoanalytic analogy, insisting that those aspects of the cosmic subject that ground smaller conscious subjects are *as part of it* entirely unconscious and thus closed off to its perspective. But now it is not clear how Mathews meets the free lunch constraint, by which the generic *conscious* features of the smaller subjects are supposed to be adequately explained by their *unconscious* cosmic ground. Goff's and Shani's scenarios,

assuming coherence of initial set-ups, did better in satisfying this constraint, our conscious subjecthood straight-forwardly inheriting its generic features, sentience and perspectivalty, from the conscious cosmic field. By renouncing what might be called ‘grounding by inheritance’, cosmopsychists such as Mathews have to rely on what so far look to be far less obvious solutions to the decombination problem.¹⁰

The cosmopsychists (along with many of their idealist predecessors) are thus left in a fix. They can, as Goff and Shani do, initially avoid the decombination problem by proposing a variant of grounding by inheritance. But then they are forced to either give up on the cosmos being a subject of experience or have the decombination problem resurface in the form of incoherent contents, with its epistemic and perspective problems. Or, they can, as Mathews does, give up grounding by inheritance, thereby preserving the cosmos as a subject of coherent experiential content. But then lacking the free lunch delivered through grounding by inheritance (and short of plausible alternatives) they are back to the decombination problem. Could the cosmopsychist renounce the prevailing assumption that cosmic consciousness must qualify a subject – as Nagasawa and Wager (2016) do? They might, but without coherent exposition of what such consciousness could amount to, the position borders on vacuous.

It is here that Advaita Vedanta and other mystical traditions, rich in accounts of people having allegedly *experienced* subjectless consciousness, can offer a way forward. In its absolute form, this universal consciousness does not belong to any subject or the cosmos; it is beyond subject/object duality, and grounds all manifestation. As any contents that might arise within it are not presented as objects to a grand subjective perspective, incoherence of content (with its epistemic and perspective problems) is avoided. Indeed, insofar as it is not framed as a puzzle about how a universal *subject* could entail smaller subjects, the decombination problem does not arise. But the Perennialist is left with the formidable task of explaining just how such non-dual consciousness could coherently ground our individual conscious perspectives and their contents – as well as the objects that we take to be our mind-independent environment.

The goal of the remaining sections is thus twofold: first, to offer a conception of universal consciousness that could be an experienceable non-dual grounding-base, and then to schematically show how such consciousness could conceivably ground what appears to us as spatio-temporal objects – a task that may, in the end, stretch the notion of grounding beyond its normal range of application. Rather than a full-blown defence, the following should be seen as the preliminary but critical exercise of clarifying just what would, or could, be argued for, if one *were* to philosophically defend a Perennialist metaphysics.

3. Preparing the Ground With Non-Dual Consciousness

To be a non-dual grounding-base, universal consciousness must at the very least be (i) intrinsically unconfined to subject/object structuring and (ii) spatio-temporally unbound, while being (iii) humanly *experienceable* as such. What follows is the first step towards an exercise in its conceivability, with an account of how our experience could come to *seem* to partake in such consciousness.

I have already mentioned that a conscious subject is by definition the locus for a first-personal perspective on the world, such that its contents are disclosed to its viewpoint within a structured field of awareness. I will now draw upon my earlier work to say more about how the phenomenological structure of a subject can, arguably, be construed (Albahari 2006: 7–10, Albahari 2009). The conscious subject, I suggest, has two discernible components: (a) ‘witness-consciousness’ and (b) a focal perspective. Witness-consciousness denotes that aspect of consciousness which exemplifies a sense of present-moment being, and is sentiently luminous, knowing, intransitive and reflexive.¹¹ When directed at objects, witness-consciousness does not take a view from nowhere but appears from a focal, localised perspective whose circumscribed field, whether waking or dreaming, presents

for humans as structured by psycho-physical and spatio-temporal parameters. Objects are witnessed attentively or inattentively, as they come and go from the field. An 'object', for these purposes, is broadly anything discrete that such a subject could pointedly attend to: physical objects, people, perceptions, thoughts, etc. While a subject's witness-consciousness can be intransitively aware of its own presence, it can never pointedly attend to itself as something discrete; it is not an object.

My strategy will be to suggest that perspectivalness (component b) depends upon witness-consciousness (component a) being aware of objects, such that without the apprehension of objects there could be no subject (a+b): no perspectival lens through which witness-consciousness could form a focal point with a structured field of awareness. If we can conceive of a scenario where witness-consciousness, or something like it, is nevertheless present, perhaps as a sense of pure unstructured being, then this would give us a way in which to conceive of consciousness intransitively experiencing itself in its primal 'non-dual' mode, if it is indeed primal. I say 'something like it' as witness-consciousness normally presents as directional and object-oriented; without objects it would lack directedness. Yet while unfamiliar to most in this capacity, it would still exemplify pure intransitive awareness, and I'll refer to this mode as 'conscious awareness'.

To get a handle on how this may work, we need to first be clearer on how the presence of objects could *phenomenologically* furnish witness-consciousness with the psycho-physically, spatio-temporally structured field of a human perspectival subject. If we look to our current experience, we can begin to break it down in this way. Consider what directly cues us into the sense of being an embodied creature occupying a specific region in an external spatio-temporal world. It will involve awareness of an array of multi-modal perceptual cues – or perceptual-like cues if dreaming – visual, auditory, tactile, etc., setting external parameters on the boundaries of our experience. Without such cues could we have any inkling of such a world? Now consider what phenomenologically cues us into a thicker sense of ourselves as being in – and making sense of – this world. While harder to introspectively discern, cognitive objects are likely to play a central role. Thoughts, memories, emotions, intentions etc. conceivably help impart a sense of bounded coherence and identity around the embodied internal viewpoint *from which* all the various cues are experienced. (Note that it is not being claimed that these objectual cues tell the whole story about how we come to perceive the world; the idea is rather to make sense of what may be their immediate role in the phenomenological fabric of our experiencing the world right now).

Now imagine entering what I will call the 'Cognisensory Deprivation Tank'. Each conscious perceptual input – sight, sound, proprioception etc. – snuffs out one by one. Next, all conscious cognitive input, attentive or inattentive, goes too, eventually leaving no perceptions, thoughts, memories, imaginings, or emotions. But with the exit of each perceptual and cognitive input, it is conceivable that witness-consciousness, although increasingly less populated with objects, remains no less sharp or present. Extrapolating to the point whereupon all objects that cue us into a spatio-temporal, psycho-physical perspective vanish, it is conceivable that 'we' are left *not* in a coma-like vacuum, but rather with pure and unstructured conscious awareness. Beyond the scope of (structured) imagination, such awareness may amount to pure subjectivity: an undiluted sense of luminous being or presence – normally diluted and refracted through the structured filters of cognisensory experience. In the absence of any cues to create inner (self) or outer (world) boundaries, or to mark the passage of time, such objectless awareness, if actively present, could well be experienced as *boundless*, that is to say: non-dual, unbound by spatial or psychological parameters, and temporally unbounded – not coming or going. If, as Maharaj says in the opening passage, its default nature is in fact the unmanifest ground of all being, metaphysically prior to space, time and manifestation, then it might well *by default* apprehend its nature as such – intransitively, intuitively and non-discursively.

According to many mystical traditions, such a mode of non-dual (objectless and subjectless) consciousness, known in Advaita Vedanta as *nirvikalpa samadhi*, is not merely speculative, but attainable in highly advanced stages of meditation. Determining its psychological possibility is not the mission of

this chapter, but it is encouraging to encounter what might turn out to be ‘empirical’ evidence. This is not to say that the thought (free) experiment, which sequentially and passively removes objects from the purview of witness-consciousness, is at all accurate in conveying the meditative methods that would elicit non-dual awareness, nor is it to say that there could in reality be such non-dual conscious experience (perhaps consciousness requires objects), or that if there were to be such experience it would be veridical. The thought experiment is rather meant to help us make sense of how non-dual consciousness, if indeed the ground of all being, might conceivably be experienced *as such* by humans, in its pure and native form.

Suppose that there *was* the genuinely direct apprehension of non-dual awareness, in say, a meditative mode. A return to bifurcated experience, I surmise, would elicit a profound alteration. The experient could never again harbour the sense – or, as the traditions say, the *illusion* – of consciousness being fundamentally restricted to the ‘shape’ of a subject, with each person’s consciousness assumed numerically distinct. Having experienced pure consciousness as the ultimate ground of all being, they will have come to lose all identity as a solid, separate self, such that they now cognise the world very differently. It is as if a person were from birth to be confined to a square room, and having not experienced any different, assumed space to be fundamentally constricted to the dimensions of that room. Upon release into open air, they could never again view space in that confined way, even after a return to the room prompts its old appearance as square shaped.

A conception of universal non-dual consciousness as timeless ground of all manifestation can be reinforced via a further reflection. This locates within our experience what appear to be opposing intuitions about the present moment, suggesting that their full reconciliation requires those intuitions to be sourced in non-dual awareness. The first intuition invites us to consider those elements within experience that signal ‘right now’. While it is common to think of *now* as dynamic and flowing (eliciting a moving spotlight analogy in the philosophy of time literature) there is also, I suggest, an element to our experience of *now* that seems unmoving, not arising or passing away, and in this sense conceivably *timeless* (incapable of coming or going) backing the intuition ‘it’s *always* now’.¹² To which aspect within experience does this element of unmoving nowness seem most naturally owed – subject or object? Clearly not the objects that come and go. It seems owed, rather, to *that which observes* the flow of objects – the subject – and in particular, its *modus operandi* of witness-consciousness. The conceivably timeless aspect within our experience of the present is *subjective*.

Turning to the second, opposing intuition: it is commonly supposed that the now or present moment we experience is not confined to our individual perspectives but is fundamentally *objective*. Were we – and indeed all organisms – to vanish, the present would continue to be. While we can think of this objective present as involving a flow of objects, is there a way to render objective that unmoving, subjective and conceivably timeless aspect of *now* that seems sourced in witness-consciousness? There is, but only if we allow that such consciousness is not intrinsically confined to subjects’ perspectives but is essentially *non-dual*. Carried in our minds as an unmoving sense of presence, conscious awareness will be both subjective *and* objectively universal, grounding the arising of all objects as well as subjects. While not conclusive, such reflections help pave the way to conceiving of a universal non-dual consciousness as the timeless ground for all manifestation.

4. Grounding the World in Non-Dual Consciousness

It now remains to make sense of how non-dual universal consciousness *could* ground what appears to us as the spatio-temporal, psycho-physical world of objects, mental and physical. Taking the setup for the previous thought experiment as our first clue, ‘mind-independent’ objects are fittingly construed as complex arrays of sensory and cognitive imagery. But rather than being sourced purely from within an individual’s private perspective, amounting to a form of solipsism, the cognisensory imagery that frames each subjective perspective will emanate from the non-dual conscious ground

that can be considered its material cause. How might this emanation be construed in a way that both accounts for the appearance of multiplicity, while not ‘conditioning’ the unconditioned ground, such as by casting the appearances as temporal events efficiently caused by it? A promising tactic will be to treat all distinguishing aspects of the emanation somewhat analogously to how we would the projective contents of a dream, allowing that there is no *subject* who is dreamer. The conditioning descriptors (spatial, temporal, qualitative, efficiently causal, etc.) will be properly applied to the multi-perspectival content *within* the ‘dreamscape’ rather than to any relation between the ground and content. Our imagery-filled perspectives are thus somehow the contents of a timeless projective emanation from the non-dual ground of pure consciousness (further implications of which are visited in the conclusion).

The content of the projective emanation will manifest as numerous, inter-connecting subject-object poles: each a finite and unified conscious perspective that is furnished with structured intentional imagistic content, however simple or complex (e.g. atom or human). Following F. H. Bradley, I refer to these subjects as ‘finite centres’.¹³ The subjective character and content of each finite centre, besides partaking in unifying conscious awareness from the timeless absolute, will be determined by the subject’s *own disposition* for other objects – themselves either subjects or aggregates of subjects – to appear to it in a particular way, along with the *dispositions of other objects* – subjects or aggregates – to appear to the subject in a particular way. In turn, that subject will be disposed to appear as a particular object (or aspect) to other finite centres.

I base my discussion of dispositionality upon the pioneering work of C. B. Martin (2008), on which I will present some bare bones before saying more about its adaptation to the Advaitic account. For Martin, objects are propertied regions of space-time, itself a substance. Each property is ontologically identical to both a disposition and a quality, which, like a duck-rabbit drawing, can be regarded with emphasis on one aspect or the other. A disposition can manifest in an infinite variety of ways, but how or whether it manifests will depend upon the co-presence of other ‘reciprocal disposition partners’ that it teams up with. For example, even if a sample of water were never to come into contact with salt, its properties have

the directedness of a dispositionality as solvent *for* salt and *not* gold . . . for the *mutual* manifestation of a coming into a solution of salinity. And salt has a directedness and dispositionality as soluble in water and not *aqua regia*, even without the existence of water, for that same *mutual* manifestation of a coming into a solution of salinity.

(2008: 88)

As well as being dispositional, a property such as wateriness is *qualitative*, itself the mutual manifestation of further reciprocal disposition partners such as the atomic properties of hydrogen and oxygen, which are, in turn, the manifestations of subatomic disposition partners. Qualities are either mental (e.g. sensory qualia) or non-mental (e.g. extensional), serving as the concrete side of a property that anchors the disposition to space-time. At any point, what manifests is “the tip of a disposition iceberg” (2008: 4), its deeply rooted lines of dispositionality or “power-net” always outrunning the manifestation. Causality occurs without time lag insofar as the co-presence of relevant disposition partners (e.g. match, striking, oxygen, etc.) involves an immediate manifestation (a bursting into flame).

For Martin, then, the double nature of a property is dispositional and qualitative, occurring in the mind-independent substratum of space-time. On the proposed Advaitic variant, the substratum, if we can call it that, is not space-time, but non-dual awareness, and each ‘arising’ is not a property, but a finite centre. Each centre, no matter how simple or complex, has a dispositional and *subjective* – as opposed to just *qualitative* – nature, the subjective nature being the appearance of objects to the perspective of a subject. The subject is not an empty perspective but must always co-arise with objects

that lend to it a structured spatio-temporal viewpoint. Conversely, objects can never arise without the perspective of a subject that is aware of them; there are no purely mind-independent objects.

Filling in from before, the subjective character of each conscious projection will depend upon three factors, which are usefully emphasised rather than ontologically distinct. First, it will depend upon the native sense of conscious present-momentness bestowed by the common unifying ground. Second, upon its own disposition, as an arising subject, for other objects, whether themselves subjects or aggregates of subjects, to appear to it in a particular way. To the housecat, a book will appear very differently than to a literate human. If an atom is a subject, another atom will appear to it very differently, perhaps as primitive buzzing, than to a scientist peering at it through a microscope. Third, the internal subjective character will depend upon the manifesting dispositions of other objects – finite centres or their aggregates – that appear to it as various structured qualities. To the human perspective a housecat, a book and a magnified atom will be disposed to present very different appearances.

Each finite centre will in turn be disposed, in tandem with other finite centres, to appear as, or contribute to the appearance of, a variously qualified object to other subjects; they will be reciprocal disposition partners for a mutual manifestation. While a given mutual manifestation is likely to involve a great many finite centres, it can be individuated by the unified appearance of various objects to a specific subject. Each object within that subject's purview will of course *itself* be either a finite centre or aggregate of such centres; the manifestations will thus intersect. An aggregate is an arbitrary grouping of finite centres into an object which, for pragmatic reasons, a subject may treat as a disposition partner. I have been supposing that atoms and animals are finite centres, while tables and toasters are not, and it will be a challenge to arbitrate the principles that sort finite centres from mere aggregates. But mutual manifestations will always be the *direct* upshot of finite centres, at whichever level of complexity they naturally occur.

The conference is ending. Each philosopher's complex perspective, which takes in the sight of a green table, will anchor a mutual manifestation that envelopes a wide array of finite centres. Continuing to suppose that atoms rather than tables are among the direct partnerings, when conference-goers exit the room they will not leave behind an 'Edenic' veridical mind-independent green table, nor a Lockean or Cartesian primary-qualified substance, nor a watchful Berkeleian God (or Absolute) to keep the table existent in its mind, nor solipsistic nothingness, nor a Kantian noumenal something about which nothing can be said, nor a Martinian buzz of qualitative/dispositional properties arising from space-time, nor atomic particulars with inner conscious or qualitative natures. There will just be each of the inside perspectives of the dispositionally arising micro-subjects, appearing to one another as simple objects as they partake in the shared ground of non-dual awareness.

5. Conclusion

Much more needs saying on how the inter-connecting finite centres could help comprise the appearance of the spatio-temporal world with which we are familiar. But as indicated, care must be taken to not overstep boundaries of what can be said about the position. Readers may have noted that the absolute non-dual consciousness somewhat resembles Kant's noumenal 'subject' insofar as it is unconditioned by descriptors of space, time, quality and relation (see Kant 1787/1929: A404). A key difference is that the Perennialist/Advaitic noumenon is not just a transcendental ground for the possibility of experience, but can be humanly experienced in its pure unconditioned form as ground of all being. But just as with Kant's position, such descriptors can only be properly applied to the world as experienced or conceived of from *within* the inter-locking perspectives of each conscious centre, and from which those descriptors originate. A purely external 'objective' account of how the absolute consciousness grounds its projections, insofar as it would draw upon such descriptors, will never be possible. Aside from its most general statement as a bare transcendental fact, accounts of grounding will only be expressible as relative rather than ultimate truths, structured by perspectival

limitations of the system. Perhaps paradoxically, it must be with this proviso that any defence of the Perennialist metaphysics is to make sense.¹⁴

Notes

1. Ken Wilber is an exception, although his emphasis is on developing a meta-theoretical ‘neo-Perennialist’ framework into which different disciplines (including philosophy) can be integrated and understood, rather than on explaining or justifying the Perennial Philosophy within the field of philosophy itself. For an example of his schema, see his (2006).
2. German idealists such as Schelling and Hegel might seem to have come close in the notion of intellectual intuition – acts of non-discursive apprehension that grasp an absolute that is beyond the subject/object distinction. But according to Frederick Beiser, their concept of the absolute “excludes its description as either subjective or objective” (2002: 5), and must be interpreted as something neutral, even though the subjective could be exemplified in its “highest *manifestation, expression or embodiment*” (2002: 6). While also beyond subject/object duality, the Perennialist absolute is nevertheless the nature of pure subjectivity whose apprehension involves not (merely) an act of intellectual intuition but a radically transformed mode of cognition.
3. Itay Shani has however recently defended a version of cosmopsychism which he says bears some resemblance to Vedic views of universal consciousness, claiming that view “leaves room for the idea that there are non-ordinary conditions under which this epistemic barrier breaks down, opening a gate to the realisation that one’s own self is not as separate an entity as one would imagine” (2015: 427). Yet, as this paper will imply, in continuing to construe perspectivalty as fundamental to both our own minds and universal consciousness, his model lacks the essential non-dual underpinning that could enable the barrier to break down.
4. An exception is Nagasawa and Wager (2016) whose cosmopsychism “does not assume that the cosmos is a subject of experience exemplifying experiential content”. However, they provide little exposition of how they do construe the consciousness.
5. See for example Eliot Deutsch (1969), David Loy (1997), Bina Gupta (1998), and Wolfgang Fasching (2011). Advaita Vedanta sometimes alludes to the absolute as ‘Self’, but being aperspectival, it is not a subject of the sort described in this paper.
6. While Bernardo Kastrup presents an innovative metaphysics that goes beyond cosmopsychism, it still falls prey to subject/object dualism insofar as the fundamental universal consciousness (“That Which Experiences”) forms a subjective perspective harbouring a “stream of inner experiences” as objects (2016: 4).
7. There are other versions of the combination problem, many alluded to in this volume. For a good survey, see also Chalmers (2015, 2017).
8. While the term ‘combination problem’ is owed to William Seager, the term ‘decombination problem’ has been used informally by Itay Shani and Luke Roelofs. There have been other terms, but I find this the most apt.
9. David Chalmers has suggested in conversation that the demonstratives could be experienced by the cosmos in a global non-contradictory manner (‘this is Fred’, ‘this is Fiona’, etc), which would ground the local indexical facts (‘I am Fred’, ‘I am Fiona’, etc). However, this departs from Goff’s subject-grounding scenario, insofar as the cosmos no longer experiences the subsumed states in their original ‘felt’ format. It thus presents the mystery of how the cosmos would experience all the unfolding indexical facts embedded in its conscious field: would there be some mode of extrasensory perception?
10. Following Kastrup (2016), one might alternatively suggest that absolute consciousness, like a broken mirror, is fragmented into our separate conscious perspectives, a model of Dissociative Identity Disorder providing the story about ground. But then it is hard to retain any sense in which the Absolute *qua* conscious subject remains an all-encompassing conscious unity rather than plurality.
11. Evan Thompson (2015: 14, 17–18) has nicely expounded on most these aspects of consciousness, defining ‘luminosity’ as the “power to reveal, like a light”, allowing objects to appear to it; ‘knowing’ as “the ability to apprehend whatever appears” and ‘reflexiveness’ as self-revealing. ‘Intransitive’ depicts its luminous, self-revealing character as non-objectual. For a more explicitly Advaitic take on witness-consciousness, see Gupta (1998: 17–18) and Fasching (2011).
12. What about dreamless sleep and anaesthesia, when consciousness seems suspended? Again it is arguably quite conceivable – and indeed part of Advaitic lore – that while the higher cognitive functions of our conscious lives go into repose, the pure knowing/being aspect remains present, so is conceivably timeless. For an excellent discussion of consciousness during dreamless sleep, see Thompson (2015: 231–71).
13. Bradley’s ‘finite centre’ is the immediate and durationless locus for first-personal and bounded indexical experience – the raw data out of which we construct durational conceptions of ourselves and the world of

objects (Bradley 1914: 410–14; Mander 2011: 112–13). In this respect his notion comes close to what I wish to convey here.

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