

THESIS

WHERE MYSTICISM MEETS METAPHYSICS: SITUATING UNITIVE MYSTICAL
EXPERIENCES IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF MIND

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ABSTRACT

WHERE MYSTICISM MEETS METAPHYSICS: SITUATING UNITIVE MYSTICAL EXPERIENCES IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF MIND

There has been a recent resurgence of both cultural and scientific interest in altered states of consciousness. Among the most puzzling and widely reported are mystical experiences—anomalous events where one’s ordinary sense of self is replaced by an overwhelming and transcendent feeling of connectedness or unity. These ‘unitive’ mystical experiences challenge many of our common intuitions about the nature of consciousness. At the same time, the intractability of the so-called ‘hard problem of consciousness’ has renewed philosophical interest in non-physicalist theories of mind. In particular, panpsychism—the view that consciousness is a fundamental and ubiquitous feature of reality—has re-emerged as a legitimate theory of mind, often presented as better equipped than physicalism to account for subjective experience.

This thesis explores how these independent trends—cultural and scientific curiosity in mystical experiences and increased philosophical engagement with non-physicalist theories—may converge and inform one another. In Chapter 2, I examine and critique Miri Albahari’s “Perennial Idealism,” a contemporary successor to panpsychism that draws on unitive mystical experiences to motivate a monistic idealism which posits that there is a single, undifferentiated, asubjective, and aperspectival cosmic consciousness. I argue that unitive mystical experiences entail minimal

subjectivity and thus cannot be understood as instances of subject-less consciousness or be used to support a subject-illusionist ontology. In Chapter 3, I address potential objections, defend the importance of maintaining world-affirming ontologies, and advocate for a William James-inspired spirit of open-mindedness in our philosophical approaches to unitive mystical experiences. I hope to demonstrate that by applying careful philosophical analysis to unitive mystical experiences and teasing apart their ontological implications, we can gain real mileage in the philosophy of mind and metaphysics of consciousness.

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DEDICATION

To Francis Christopher Oakley

Papa, thank you for always encouraging me to ask big and bizarre questions.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

There has been a recent resurgence of both public and academic interest in altered states of consciousness. Intentionally exploring the plasticity of one's own consciousness, whether it be through meditation or the use of psychedelics, is no longer regarded solely as a practice saved for Eastern traditions, indigenous groups, or counter-culture hippies. In fact, there is now mainstream recognition of the benefits of meditation and mindfulness practices in the West, with more acceptance of psychedelic based medicine coming into the fold.

As of 2020, it is estimated that roughly 18.3% of the adult population in the US, or 60.53 million people, practiced a form of meditation— representing a more than 10% increase in popularity since 2002.¹ Thousands of meditation apps have been launched since 2012, with the top 10 most popular apps being downloaded over 300 million times.² While the popularizations of meditation and mindfulness practices in the West often display a clear departure from their Eastern origins, the widespread desire to explore consciousness-shifting practices is unquestionable. Many use meditation as a tool for attention regulation and enhanced mental well-being. But a growing number of others engage in more extreme forms of meditation that are geared towards inducing altered states of consciousness. Johns Hopkins University has an entire center dedicated to psychedelic and consciousness research— backed by over 55 million dollars, with the aim of developing new

¹ J. N. Davies et al., “Prevalence and 20-year trends in meditation, yoga, guided imagery and progressive relaxation use among US adults from 2002 to 2022,” *Scientific Reports* 14, no. 1 (2024): 14987, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-024-64562-y>.

² J. David Creswell and Sara B. Goldberg, “The meditation app revolution,” *American Psychologist* (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0001576>.

therapeutic techniques for treating a variety of psychiatric conditions.³ In 2018, Michael Pollan's, *How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence*, became a #1 New York Times bestseller— due to its popularity, it was adapted into a Netflix documentary in 2022.⁴ The 2022 National Survey on Drug Use and Health estimates that use of hallucinogenic drugs in the US nearly doubled between 2015-2022 — going from 4.7 million people in 2015, to 8.5 million people in 2022.⁵ Suffice it to say, there is growing curiosity in the purported value of intentionally altering one's states of consciousness— with experimentation ranging from simple mindfulness practices to partaking in shamanistic rituals that aim to induce temporary ego-dissolution.

While mainstream interest in meditation and psychedelics is on the rise, purposefully inducing altered states of consciousness is ancient. Indeed, consuming hallucinogenic substances and engaging in meditative practices, including prayer and chanting, can be observed across many religious and spiritual traditions. While there are numerous reasons why different traditions and individuals may seek altered states of consciousness, there is a general sense that they are associated with spiritual connectedness and transcendence. Prayer is typically thought of as a way to communicate with god(s), traditional meditation practices are aimed at spiritual enlightenment, and ceremonies that involve

³ Johns Hopkins Center for Psychedelic and Consciousness Research. *Johns Hopkins Center for Psychedelic and Consciousness Research*. Accessed May 1, 2026. <https://www.hopkinspsychedelic.org/>

⁴ Michael Pollan, *How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence*, Michael Pollan, accessed May 1, 2026, <https://michaelpollan.com/books/how-to-change-your-mind/>

⁵ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. “National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) Releases,” accessed on May 1, 2026, <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/data-we-collect/nsduh-national-survey-drug-use-and-health/national-releases/2022>

ingesting hallucinogens are considered ways to absorb higher teachings. One of the most confounding, albeit widespread and well-studied, altered states of consciousness that people report having are so-called ‘mystical experiences.’ Broadly, we can understand mystical experiences as events that are characterized by an overwhelming feeling of connectedness, where one’s typical sense of self fades away and one feels as if they are absorbed by a unified whole. These ‘unified’ mystical experiences (UME) will be the focus of this thesis, as they challenge many of our common beliefs about the nature of consciousness— such as it being contained in one body, generated by brain activity, and necessarily involving a sense of self.

Academic philosophy of mind has also seen a renaissance in curiosity concerning the nature of consciousness. Philosophical investigations, however, are not fueled by off-the-clock drug experimentation or the interests of popular culture. Rather, consciousness being back on the academic agenda seems primarily driven by the perceived failure of physicalism to answer the so-called ‘hard problem of consciousness’. That is, physical science cannot seem to adequately explain how or why brain activity could give rise to subjective experience. Coined by David Chalmers, the hard problem of consciousness argues that we have no explanation for how or why “physical processing give rise to a rich inner life,” such as our experience of seeing the color blue and hearing the sound of middle C.⁶

Despite physicalism being the predominant theory of mind among academic philosophers and neuroscientists for the past century, it remains unable to yield an adequate explanation for the phenomenological character of consciousness. Why is it that conscious experience is associated with

⁶ David Chalmers, “Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness.” *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 2, no. 3 (1995): 202. <https://consc.net/papers/facing.pdf>

certain observable physical states? Or as Chalmers explains, “Why is it that when electromagnetic waveforms impinge on a retina and are discriminated and categorized by a visual system, this discrimination and categorization is experienced as a sensation of vivid red?”⁷ He goes on to point out that inner feeling and experience don’t seem necessary for an organism to function, as it is conceivable that physical systems could operate without them.⁸ Notably, the hard problem is regarded as structural, rather than empirical, as it seems to require a different *kind* of explanation. A better understanding of brain functions and the neural correlates of consciousness still cannot yield an explanation as to *why* a physical state is conscious rather than nonconscious. Hence, physicalist accounts of consciousness leave us with an explanatory gap.

The hard problem of consciousness has reinvigorated the debate among philosophers about the nature of minds and subjective experience. Some philosophers of mind, Chalmers included, have proposed alternative theories of consciousness they argue can better account for its subjective nature. Panpsychism, or the view that consciousness is a fundamental and widespread feature of reality, has reemerged as a legitimate theory of mind.¹ Rather than consciousness arising out of physical processes, it is understood as a ubiquitous feature of the physical universe. There are several variants of panpsychism that I will explore later in this chapter, such as micropsychism and cosmopsychism — all are committed to the view that consciousness is a fundamental and omnipresent feature of reality.

⁷ Chalmers, “The Hard Problem of Consciousness,” 226.

⁸ Chalmers proposes a thought experiment with what he calls philosophical zombies (p-zombies) to illustrate the hard problem. P-zombies are identical to human beings, but do not have any inner subjective experience. It’s worth noting that there is a live debate about the actual conceivability of p-zombies, and some criticized the thought experiment— including Dennett 1996, Thomas 1998, Braddon-Mitchell 2003, Kirk 2007. <https://philpapers.org/browse/zombies-and-the-conceivability-argument>

Consciousness being a fundamental property of the universe, rather than an emergent one, represents a radical departure from the materialist views that have dominated philosophy of mind for the better part of the past century.

Consciousness is back on the agenda in academic philosophy, but the literature is just now beginning to home in on mystical experiences and their implications for theories of mind and consciousness. My aim in this thesis is to consider how these independent trends — cultural and scientific curiosity in mystical experiences and philosophical examination of non-physicalist theories of consciousness— may converge and inform one another. I will argue that by applying careful philosophical analysis to UME and teasing apart their ontological implications, we can gain real mileage in the philosophy of mind and metaphysics of consciousness.

Chapter 1 is primarily focused on introducing the phenomena of UME and the current landscape of academic philosophy of mind. I draw on William James' conception of mystical experiences, as well as offer some first-person accounts to help illustrate how they are felt first-personally. I then discuss Chalmers' hard problem and outline how some of the leading theories of consciousness attempt to address it. Lastly, I motivate the rise of panpsychist theories and consider their coherence with the reality that people report during UME.

Chapter 2 engages in more technical analysis, homing in on Miri Albahari's Perennial Idealism, a radical successor to cosmopsychism that unites UME and non-physicalist theories of mind and proposes what she calls 'a mystical solution to the mind-body problem'. Here, I demonstrate the careful philosophical analysis that I am advocating for; ultimately rejecting Albahari's account on the grounds that it rests on an asubjective view of consciousness. Through this engagement, I arrive at the

preliminary conclusion that UME, at least as both Albahari and I conceive of them, entail minimal subjectivity. Thus, they cannot coherently be used to support an ontology that maintains subject illusionism.

Chapter 3 addresses various objections that Albahari might raise to defend Perennial Idealism. Furthermore, it raises larger worries with ontologies that advocate, either tacitly or enthusiastically, for broad subject anti-realism. The latter half of Chapter 3 considers some of the upshots from the philosophical engagement with UME that this thesis demonstrates; I argue that the preliminary conclusion of UME entailing minimal subjectivity has important ontological implications for panpsychist theories of consciousness. Lastly, I discuss some of the broader, more practical and applied upshots of this project. Drawing on the warrants for truth that William James ascribes to mystical states in *The Varieties of Religious Experiences*, I argue that the coherence UME have with monistic, consciousness-first ontologies may give us more reason to take both the experiences themselves, as well as theories like cosmopsychism seriously. While we cannot presently deem them as mutually entailing, their consonance with one another may function to raise their plausibility. Lastly, academic philosophy of mind is uniquely well positioned to contribute to the study of UME; by taking these experiences and their ontological implications seriously, we can help individuals who have had UME make better sense of them.

1.1 Unitive Mystical Experiences

Despite being ancient and not uncommon, mystical experiences are inherently difficult to represent. Describing the what-it-is-likeness of first-person experience is challenging enough as is, but

attempting to systematically convey the phenomenal character of unusual experiences — for which most of us have no direct reference — is an enigmatic undertaking in its own league. Fortunately, philosophers, theologians, and street-wandering gadflies alike have chipped away at this descriptive project for thousands of years. As we shall soon see, unitive mystical experiences (UME) have long captured our interest and informed our ontologies. Before outlining the more systematic descriptions of UME and their qualities, it's worth getting a sense of how individuals describe and make sense of their own mystical experiences.

William James was one of the first scholars to systematically study and document UME, and his *The Varieties of Religious Experience* includes a number of first-person accounts. Here James shares J.A. Symonds' UME, labeling Symonds' experience as 'an extreme state of mystical consciousness':

I cannot even now find words to render it intelligible. It consisted in a gradual but swiftly progressive obliteration of space, time, sensation, and the multitudinous factors of experience which seem to qualify what we are pleased to call our Self. In proportion as these conditions of ordinary consciousness were subtracted, the sense of an underlying or essential consciousness acquired intensity.⁹

In his 1960 *Mysticism and Philosophy*, Walter Terence Stace chronicled UME, drawing attention to the parallels between secular and religious accounts. While religious and spiritual language is omitted from the secular accounts, descriptions of UME are relatively consistent across traditions. Here, Stace shares an account from Arthur Koestler, describing the UME he experienced while imprisoned during the Spanish Civil War:

Then I was floating on my back in a river of peace under bridges of silence. It came from nowhere and flowed nowhere. Then there was no river and no I. The I had ceased to

⁹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, ed. Matthew Bradley, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 294-295.

exist...When I say “the I had ceased to exist” I refer to a concrete experience...The I ceases to exist because it has, by a kind of mental osmosis, established communication with, and been dissolved in, the universal pool. It is this process of dissolution and limitless expansion which is sensed as the “oceanic” feeling, as the draining of all tension, the absolute catharsis, the peace that passeth all understanding.¹⁰

1.2 Unitive Mystical Experiences and their constituent parts

Following the lead of David Yaden and Andrew Newberg, I will understand *self-transcendence* to be the paramount feature of UME. During UME, the boundaries between “self” and “other” that characterize our ordinary conscious experiences, give way to a sense of fundamental oneness.¹¹ All things, including our *selves*, are experienced as constituting a unified whole.

Self-transcendence typically takes one of two forms: connectedness or ego-dissolution. While both forms of UME entail a loss of the typical sense of self as a distinct and individual locus of subjectivity, the way in which the loss of self is experienced differs. Those who have a UME that confers a sense of connectedness typically describe experiencing “a sense of oneness with all things” or feeling “completely connected to everything.”¹² Whereas those whose UME are characterized by ego-dissolution tend to report feeling like their sense of self, or self-boundaries, temporarily fade away. While both forms of UME confer a sense of monism that diverges from typical self-and-other experience of reality, we can think of connectedness as expansive and ego-dissolution as contractive.

Contractive UME where one's ego dissolves are often referred to as instances of “pure consciousness.” Jonathan Shear explains that through the practice of transcendental meditation, one

¹⁰ W. T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (London: Macmillan and Company, 1960), 120-121.

¹¹ David B. Yaden and Andrew Newberg, *The Varieties of Spiritual Experience: 21st Century Research and Perspectives*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

¹² Yaden and Newberg, *The Varieties of Spiritual Experience*, 226

can elicit states of pure consciousness where “the intensity and specificity of the ‘its’ gradually and spontaneously diminish until the subject finds himself alone by himself, simply self-conscious...

without any object of awareness, yet clearly awake. Consciousness alone remains the experience.”¹³

While episodes of pure consciousness are distinct from expansive experiences, both are types of UME as they paradigmatically involve experiencing a sense of oneness and self-transcendence.

In *The Varieties*, James deems *noetic quality* and *ineffability* to be the primary features of UME. He takes seriously the epistemic inaccessibility of UME to external observers, arguing that ineffability is one of their most salient features:

The subject of it immediately says that it defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words. It follows from this that the quality must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others. In this peculiarity mystical states are more like states of feeling than like states of intellect. No one can make clear to another who has never had a certain feeling, in what the quality or worth of it consists.¹⁴

The amazed bewilderment that this ineffability confers, for subjects and laypeople alike, is further heightened by the noetic qualities of UME; or the feeling that the experience offers epistemic access to more fundamental truths. James describes their noetic quality as:

Mystical states seem to those experiencing them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time.¹⁵

¹³ Johathan Shear, “The Experience of Pure Consciousness: A New Perspective for Theories of Self,” *Metaphilosophy* 14, no. 1 (1983): 58, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24435534>.

¹⁴ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 290-291

¹⁵ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 291

Lastly, James notes *transiency* and *passivity* as common features of UME. They tend to be short-lived and happen *to* a subject, not requiring active engagement on the part of the experiencer to manifest.

Since 1902 when *The Varieties* was first published, our understanding of the human brain and behavior has grown substantially, and James's methodology and observations remain highly relevant. Despite having advanced neuroimaging technology that allows us to observe live brain activity, questions about the nature of subjective experience that James was investigating remain largely unresolved. Yaden and Newberg chronicle several scholars who have worked on advancing and refining James's UME criteria. In 1975 Ralph Hood developed the Mysticism Scale, or M-Scale, that aimed to capture the phenomenological qualities of UME and their variations across cultures. 50 years later, researchers from the Center of Psychedelic and Consciousness Research at Johns Hopkins developed the Mystical Experience Questionnaire (MEQ), to systematically study the attributes of UME and the impact that they have on an individual's wellbeing.¹⁶ Despite being developed nearly 120 years later, the core features of UME that JHU researchers identified through their MEQ are remarkably consistent with ones James deployed in *The Varieties*. Used to measure the mystical experiences that patients have had during psychedelic therapies, the MEQ identifies four primary factors:

1. Mystical: "Experiences of unity with ultimate reality" (MEQ; Barrett et al., 2015. P. 1186)
2. Positive mood: "Experience of ecstasy" (MEQ; Barrett et al., 2015. P. 1186)

¹⁶ Yaden and Newberg, *The Varieties of Spiritual Experience*, 229-230

3. Space/Time: “Loss of your usual sense of time” (MEQ; Barrett et al., 2015. P. 1186)
4. Ineffability: “Sense that the experience cannot be described adequately in words” (MEQ; Barrett et al., 2015. P. 1186)¹⁷

Participants are asked to rate their experience by identifying the degree to which they felt each of these factors. Researchers have found that the higher a participant scores on the MEQ directly after a psychedelic therapy session, the more likely they are to report longer term benefits from the therapy. It's important to note that the MEQ is a measurement tool and should not be taken as the only arbiter of whether a UME took place. It facilitates standardization across individual experiences, allowing researchers to get a sense of the significance of each experience and help them predict outcomes. However, quantitative survey data is unable to capture the depth and nuance of each experience. Qualitative data, like written accounts from participants, often falls short of sufficiently capturing the experience, as ineffability is one of the primary features of UME. All to say, while mysticism, positive mood, space/time, and ineffability are the primary features we will use to understand and identify UME, they need not be regarded as an exhaustive list of necessary and sufficient conditions. Yaden and Newberg understand UME to be the most intense variety of spiritual experiences, as did James. But it is worth noting that other intense religious or spiritual experiences may share these properties. While my focus is specifically on UME as altered state of consciousness, there is a larger spectrum of philosophically interesting experiences that exhibit some of these same features. For our purposes, we can understand UME as consisting of the four features that Yaden, Newberg, and James identify—with overall feelings of self-transcendence and unity being preeminent.

¹⁷ Yaden and Newberg, *The Varieties of Spiritual Experience*, 230

Perhaps the noetic quality of UME has driven our prolonged captivation with them—and for good reason. UME leave an indelible mark on individuals, often shaping their understanding of themselves and reality. The purported ontological insights and increased grasp of reality that UME confer is part of what sets them apart from other atypical episodes of consciousness, such as dreaming or states of psychosis. Unlike dream states or episodes of psychosis where individuals can recognize their illusory qualities after the fact, UME often leave a lasting impression of reality. Individuals who have had UME maintain their significance and noetic quality long after the experience itself. In *The Varieties*, James includes the experience of his peer, Richard Maurice Bucke, who was a Canadian psychiatrist. Bucke described the lasting noetic quality of his UME in his 1901 book *Cosmic Consciousness: a study in the evolution of the human mind*:

The vision lasted a few seconds and was gone; but the memory of it and the sense of reality of what it taught has remained during the quarter of a century in which it has since elapsed. I knew that what the vision showed me was true. I had attained to a point of view from which I saw that it must be true. That view, that conviction, I may say that consciousness, has never, even during periods of the deepest depression, been lost.¹⁸

As touched on in the introduction, UME are multiply realizable. That is to say, there are a number of different mechanisms that are thought to be involved in UME. They are often associated with meditative practice and psychedelic use, but have also been linked to various health conditions, such as epilepsy, and have even been reported to occur spontaneously with no clear cause. The causes of UME remain largely unknown, although some neuroimaging research suggests that feelings of unity

¹⁸ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 305

may be linked to decreased activity in the posterior superior parietal lobe— a part of the brain associated with self-other boundaries.¹⁹ A 2001 study conducted by Andrew Newberg scanned the brains of experienced Tibetan meditators and Franciscan nuns while they were in a state of meditation or prayer. The participants pulled a string to indicate when they had reached a state of unity and then researchers were able to see how blood flow patterns in their brains were affected. Newberg and his team found that for both groups, the posterior superior parietal lobe was inhibited during the time that the participants reported a state of unity.²⁰ Although neuroscience can help us understand what brain states may be involved during UME, it may only be able to help explain the subjective aspect of the experience indirectly.

1.3 Non-dual/monistic traditions:

As both James and W.T. Stace point out, many religious, spiritual, and philosophical traditions are committed to non-dual or monistic ontologies that are consonant with the reality that individuals report witnessing during UME. Monism is the view that reality is made up of one kind of entity or substance. Physicalist monism might maintain that everything is reducible to one kind of physical substance, whereas an idealist monism may contend that everything is fundamentally mental. Non-dualism originates from the Advaita Vedānta tradition and is translated to “not-two.” It is similar to monism in that it regards reality as being fundamentally composed of one kind of thing, but it takes a step further to assert that

¹⁹ Yaden and Newberg, *The Varieties of Spiritual Experience*, 242

²⁰ Yaden and Newberg, *The Varieties of Spiritual Experience*, 72

everything is unified; there is no actual separation between things, despite what our manifest reality may indicate.

Whether the ontologies of monistic and non-dual traditions were informed by people having UME themselves is hard to know, but we can at the very least identify parallels between individual experiences and theoretical commitments. Indeed, this is at the core of Aldous Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy*, where he gathers shared insights held by numerous religious and spiritual traditions throughout history. Huxley claims that there is seemingly a shared "Highest Common Factor" across religious and spiritual traditions, speculating that even early peoples may have had rudimentary forms of this perennial philosophy. He explains perennial philosophy as,

The metaphysic that recognizes 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.²¹

We see terms like *unity* and *oneness* invoked to describe the nature of reality as early as 400-800 BCE in ancient India. The Advaita Vedānta tradition defends a nondualist ontology, where *brahman* is the ultimate reality. Advaitins understand *brahman*, or ultimate reality, as *sat-cit-ānanda*— meaning that it is being itself, pure consciousness, and supreme bliss or value. *Brahman* is not just the true-est element of reality; it is the *only* true feature of reality. Despite manifest reality appearing to be composed of discrete and independent things, such as individual persons and objects, everything is ultimately an instantiation of *brahman*. Hence, Advaitins' nondual ontology; rather than reality being

²¹ Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009), vii.

composed of both the physical and the mental, as is maintained by dualist ontologies, everything is ultimately just *brahman*.

Advaitins recognize that our seemingly innate desire to grasp fundamentality and ultimate truth requires investigating the most basic questions about the nature of our existence. Seeking answers to fundamental questions such as, “Who am I’, ‘What am I’, ‘Where am I’, ‘When am I’, ‘How am I’, ‘How is this world created’, and ‘Who is its creator?’” tends to reveal that much of the manifest reality that we take to be true— the objects that we perceive, causation, the emotions we experience— are only knowable through awareness itself.²² In *Drg-Drśya-Viveka: Wisdom of the Seer and the Seen*, Śaṅkara demonstrates the reasoning that leads to the conclusion that awareness is ultimate, beginning with the observation, “All objects are perceived by the senses. The senses are, in turn, perceived by the mind. The mind, in turn, is a movement that unfolds in Awareness. Awareness is not perceived by any other structure. It is its own perceiving.”²³ Śaṅkara is arguing that our ability to observe the constant changes that our senses and minds undergo, is made possible by the unchanging nature of awareness itself. He states, “Awareness is unchanging and ever-present, while all changing phenomena arise within unchanging awareness.”²⁴ In other words, awareness is that which allows *anything* to show up. *All* phenomena, whether we take them to be veridical or not, presuppose conscious awareness. Simply posing the claim that reality is a mere illusion, as some Buddhist schools

²² *Drg-Drśya-Viveka: Wisdom of the Seer and the Seen*. Translated by Richard D. Miller, 2015. *Sutra Journal*. Accessed May 1, 2026. <https://www.sutrajournal.com/drg-drysa-viveka-wisdom-of-the-seer-and-the-seen-by-richard-miller>

²³ *Drg-Drśya-Viveka*, 1.

²⁴ *Drg-Drśya-Viveka*, 4.

do, necessarily requires the presence of consciousness. Thus, the Advaitins want to argue that conscious awareness itself is fundamental.²⁵

We also see reference to unitive world views in the work of Plotinus (205-270 CE), the Egyptian-Roman philosopher who is often regarded as the founder of Neoplatonism. Not unlike the Advaitin conception of *brahman*, Plotinus also posited the existence of an ultimate reality or essence, which he referred to as the ‘One.’ Everything in the universe was thought to derive from the One— it is understood as the fundamental source and cause of all things. As is the case with apprehending *brahman*, people are not privileged with direct epistemic access to the One, rather it can only be known “by way of a presence of superior knowledge” that comes from rigorous study of natural forms. Plotinus doesn’t offer any systemic descriptions of how superior knowledge is *experienced* by an individual, but he does describe what appears to be a union with the One in Ennead 4.8,

Often, I awaken into myself out of my body and come to be outside of all other things. I come to be within myself and, seeing such a wondrous and great beauty, at that time I trust myself to be of the greater part. I accomplish the best life, I have come into an identity with God, and I am seated in Him. I come into actuality there and I seat myself above everything else noetic. After this standing in God I look away, coming down out of nous into reasoning. At that time, [I ask myself] how it is that I now come down, and [I ask] how has the soul within me ever come to be of a body, since it is the sort of thing it just revealed itself to be even while it is in a body.²⁶

We also see similar ontologies coming out of Europe’s early modern period. Baruch

Spinoza developed the most prominent substance-monist ontology of the time. Spinoza

believed that the universe was composed of an indivisible, self-caused, infinite, and eternal

²⁵ Importantly, the Advaitins also advance independent metaphysical arguments for non-dualism/ monism. For instance, they maintain that relations are illusory.

²⁶ Plotinus, Ennead IV.8, translated by Paul DiRado.

substance. *All* other things necessarily derive from this single substance, which he understands as God. However, Spinoza rejected the anthropomorphized view of God as an entity primarily concerned with human lives. The Spinozistic God is better understood as an all-encompassing universal order, not an individual figure with plans and desired ends. Similar to the Advaitins and Plotinus, Spinoza argued that liberation and transcendence involve developing adequate knowledge of God's nature, formal essence, and attributes. Notably, Spinoza's monism does not draw on first-person *experiences* of oneness; like many of the contemporary non-physicalist theories that I will discuss, Spinoza offers purely philosophical reasons to take his monist ontology seriously.

Suffice it to say that while consciousness-first monism has seen recent popularity in western academic philosophy, its tenets are ancient and enduring. The following section will take a detour to introduce contemporary debates in the philosophy of mind and consider how UME may further complicate our theories of consciousness.

1.4 Contemporary debates in philosophy of mind

Despite the advances in neuroscience and the predominance of physicalism in the last 100 years, the issue of consciousness is far from being resolved. As the introduction touches on, academic philosophy of mind has also experienced a resurgence of interest in consciousness in recent years partly in response to David Chalmers' hard problem of consciousness. What makes the hard problem so intractable is that there is a persistent explanatory gap between physical brain activity and the phenomenological characteristics of our subjective experience.

For instance, in Andrew Newberg's study on the brain activity of Tibetan meditators and Franciscan nuns during peak moments of unity, researchers were able to observe the brain and conjecture that there is a correlation between inactivity in the posterior superior parietal lobe and transcendent feelings of oneness. This, however, does not reveal anything about the causal mechanism of the first-person feeling of oneness, or what it is like for the meditators and nuns to experience oneness. Hence, there is a troublesome lacuna between experience and explanation.

In Thomas Nagel's 1974, "What It Is Like to Be a Bat?" he argues that "an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something it is like to *be* that organism—something it is like *for* the organism."²⁷ This is what Nagel understands as the subjective character of experience—something that cannot be understood through analysis of mental states, as mental states could persist without being accompanied by first-person experience—such as instances of unconsciousness where the brain is still active. Nor can the subjective character of experience be explained by neurological function, he argues, as it is conceivable for an artificial machine to have a system identical to an organic brain, while remaining phenomenally unconscious. As Nagel puts it, "[The] subjective character of experience... is not captured by any of the familiar, recently devised reductive analyses of the mental, for all of them are logically compatible with its absence."²⁸ William Seager notes that this is enigmatic

²⁷ Thomas Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" *The Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (1974): 436
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2183914>

²⁸ Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?", 436.

and stands in contrast to other cases of emergence, such as “the non-liquidity of water (at normal temperature and pressure) [being] logically incompatible with the properties of hydrogen and oxygen and the laws governing them.”²⁹ In this case, simply understanding the properties and functions of hydrogen and oxygen is sufficient for explaining why water is necessarily liquid in certain conditions. With consciousness, however, third-person facts about the brain and neurological functions do not entail facts about first-person experience. Hence, to solve the hard problem of consciousness, a theory must be able to give an account of what gives rise to the phenomenological qualities of consciousness, or the subjective character of experience, that doesn’t rely on an unprecedented radical emergence.

Defenders of physicalism, the view that consciousness is ultimately a physical process that emerges from brain activity, have mounted several responses to the hard problem. Owen Flanagan, who is a proponent of physicalism, maintains a “so what?” attitude about the hard problem of consciousness. He understands the hard problem to be a conceptual issue, not a metaphysical one; the explanatory gap that philosophers of mind puzzle over is commonplace and to be expected when there are significant conceptual or linguistic changes.³⁰ However, there is a relevant worry that if the hard problem is merely conceptual, yet no adequate account of entailment is found, physicalism may collapse into mysterianism, concluding that the human mind cannot solve the hard problem.

²⁹ William Seager, “From Panpsychism to Neutral Monism... and Back Again (?)” Manuscript. Accessed May 1, 2026. https://www.utoronto.ca/~seager/from_pan_to_nm_seager.pdf, 3.

³⁰ Gregg D. Caruso and Owen Flanagan, *Neuroexistentialism: Meaning, Morals, and Purpose in the Age of Neuroscience*, (New York: Oxford, 2018): 9.

Another famous physicalist who deflates the importance of the hard problem is Daniel Dennett. Dennett maintains that the subjective character of consciousness, or *qualia*, is an illusion created by our brain's processing of information. He effectively rejects that there is a hard problem in need of solving, because he denies the veridicality of the subjective aspect of experience all together. For Dennett, there is no problem of emergence because nothing real is emerging.

While illusionism is a legitimate way out of the hard problem, it implies a radical global antirealism that many philosophers find hard to get behind. Not only does illusionism require a drastic reworking of our ordinary metaphysics, but it also appears to undermine itself under scrutiny. Philip Goff argues that all of our knowledge about the world is nothing other than '*facts about experience.*'³¹ He explains that "we have no way of directly accessing the physical world; all knowledge of physical reality is mediated through experience."³² So, while illusionism about consciousness aims to be commensurate with the physical sciences, it ultimately renders science illusory as well—insofar as science itself it is only ascertained through subjective experience.

While physicalism has been the predominant theory of mind for the past century, dualistic approaches to consciousness have also had eras of popularity. Mind-body dualism attempts to solve the hard problem of consciousness by positing that the physical world and the mind, or our subjective conscious experience, are two distinct features of reality. Popularized by Descartes, the mind-body dualist understands humans as composite entities,

³¹ Philip Goff, *Galileo's Error: Foundations for a New Science of Consciousness* (New York: Vintage), 106.

³² Goff, *Galileo's Error*, 106.

consisting of a material body and an immaterial mind or soul. Unlike physicalists who think that the subjective character of consciousness arises from physical processes in the brain, the dualist understands the material brain as distinct from the immaterial mind. Indeed, much of the hard problem of consciousness is driven by the fact that emotions, thoughts, and feelings don't seem to have physical characteristics. While dualists of the modern period, such as Galileo, argued that immaterial matters of the mind were beyond the grasp of physical science, more contemporary naturalistic dualism doesn't necessarily embrace the same mysterianism. Rather, they argue that consciousness can still be part of the natural world, even if it is not corporeal. That is to say, the natural world has both physical and non-physical properties. Naturalistic dualism gets around the hard problem of consciousness by postulating that consciousness and its subjective character are immaterial— we don't have to account for how physical brain processes give rise to seemingly non-physical phenomenon, as they are two distinct features of reality.³³

Dualism is an intuitive explanation that shows up across different cultural and religious traditions, however, it too faces vexing problems. Dualism does not have to solve the puzzles of emergence that physicalism often faces, but by arguing that consciousness is explained by something outside of the physical world, dualists must develop an account of how the physical and the nonphysical interact. I will not spend time fleshing out the nuances of the interaction problem but suffice it to say that many philosophers are hesitant to embrace

³³ Goff, *Galileo's Error*, 30-32.

dualism because of it. While it does offer a way out of the hard problem, dualism requires positing consciousness as something outside of the physical world that has the ability to interact with corporeal beings. This may be a lesser issue for theistic ontologies, but for a theory to gain traction in analytic philosophy of mind it must remain secular.

Panpsychism, the view that consciousness is a fundamental and ubiquitous feature of reality, has now entered the scene as a live third option. Driven by the intractability of the hard problem, and physicalism and dualism's unsatisfactory accounts of what confers the subjective character of consciousness, panpsychism has become an increasingly viable alternative.

Panpsychism does not place consciousness outside of our physical world or chalk it up as an emergent property of nonconscious brain activity. Rather, the panpsychist conjectures that consciousness is a fundamental aspect of reality. Seagar offers a simple argument to illustrate the steps that lead us to panpsychism:

“P1. Consciousness is real, it exists.

P2. Consciousness cannot be physically reduced (or fully explicated in purely physical terms).

P3. Nature does not exhibit radical emergence.

C. So, Consciousness is a fundamental feature of the world, presumably ubiquitous in nature, which is panpsychism.”³⁴

There are two primary variants of panpsychism, micropsychism and cosmopsychism; both maintain the fundamentality of consciousness, but diverge on its source. Micropsychism maintains a bottom-up approach, understanding complex consciousness, such as seeing red or hearing middle C, to come from simpler forms of consciousness. On this view, simple forms of

³⁴ Seagar, “From Panpsychism to Neutral Monism... and Back Again (?)” 4-5.

consciousness exist as fundamental aspects of matter; just like individual cells combine and interact to form our physical bodies, individual units of consciousness do the same and give rise to the complex conscious experiences we are familiar with. It does not follow that all physical things have the capacity for complex consciousness like humans. Micropsychism contends that the complexity of consciousness may come in degrees: less complex organisms, like bacteria, and even inorganic matter, such as quarks and electrons, possess a rudimentary proto-consciousness. In essence, ubiquitous rudimentary proto-consciousness combines to give rise to our complex and phenomenologically rich human consciousness.

However, the micropsychist must give an account of how simple conscious entities combine to form more complex ones; this is known as the combination problem. As Chalmers puts it, “how do the experiences of fundamental physical entities such as quarks and photons combine to yield the familiar sort of human conscious experience that we know and love?”³⁵ While there are several proposed solutions to the combination problem that are consonant with the broader micropsychist commitments, some panpsychists have moved to endorse cosmopsychism. Cosmopsychism can be understood as a top-down approach to panpsychism. On this view, there is an absolute unified cosmic consciousness that individuates into conscious subjects, such that individual subjects are aspects of the cosmic consciousness. Itay Shani, a self-proclaimed card-carrying cosmopsychist, illustrates the view as follows:

On the present account, cosmic consciousness is on par with the Vedic notion of pure consciousness in that, like the latter, it serves as a deeper layer of consciousness

³⁵ David J. Chalmers, “The Combination Problem for Panpsychism,” in *Panpsychism: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Godehard Brüntrup and Ludwig Jaskolla (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 179.

grounding the particular streams of consciousness of individual creatures... Cosmic consciousness may be likened to the vacuum in quantum field theory. Just as the vacuum is really a plenum, constantly teeming with spontaneous activity, so we may think of cosmic consciousness as an inner expanse constantly teeming with a spontaneous buzz of qualitative feel. And just as the vacuum serves as a relatively homogenous background against which local field excitations, and patterns thereof, are discerned as events and entities (i.e., as the particles and systems of our world) so we may think of cosmic consciousness as a background against which local interference patterns are discerned as phenomenal states, viz., as the states characteristic of the consciousness of individual creatures.³⁶

While proposing cosmopsychism as a viable theory of mind is often initially met with incredulity, it may offer a more promising framework for addressing some of the intractable problems of consciousness. Unlike micropsychism and physicalism where subjects and their experiences are ultimately deflated, most cosmopsychist views understand consciousness as fundamentally entailing subjectivity— putting it in a better position to account for our experiences as unified conscious subjects. Philip Goff, who is also a proponent of cosmopsychism, sees this as its crucial advantage over other theories: the physicalist has to explain how non-conscious physical processes give rise to our rich and unified subjective experience. Meanwhile, if we avoid radical emergence by taking the micropsychist route and assume that all matter is conscious, we are left to explain how individual conscious entities combine into a unified conscious subject. Some worry that cosmopsychism faces the same problem but reversed. The decombination problem, or the individuation problem, asks how a single cosmic sized consciousness can decombine into individual conscious subjects.

Cosmopsychists, like Shani, have developed accounts that they argue don't suffer from

³⁶ Itay Shani, "Cosmopsychism, Coherence, and World-Affirming Monism," *The Monist* 105, no. 1 (2022): 24-25.

individuation problems. Moreover, he maintains that issues regarding subject decombination are not nearly as threatening as some of the issues that plague other views. Suffice to say, all theories of mind face a unique subset of issues; solving one problem almost invariably gives rise to another.

As the following chapters will investigate, the nature of subjects and subjectivity is at the heart of the consciousness debate. Whether or not human consciousness necessarily entails subjectivity will determine the viability of these proposed theories of mind. For instance, if it is possible for conscious experiences to be subject-less— i.e. instances of phenomenal consciousness can exist without the presence of a subject experiencing it— then our theories of consciousness need not understand it as localized phenomena. If consciousness doesn't require subjectivity, then perhaps it is better conceived of as a formless, free-floating universal energy of sorts. On the other hand, if it is inconceivable for phenomenal conscious experience to exist without the presence of a subject who is having the experience, then our theories become much more constrained. Hence, the way that theories of consciousness regard subjects will be crucial for their conceivability.

1.5 UME and ontology converging

I am not committed to cosmopsychism, nor am I attempting to critically evaluate its viability as a theory of consciousness. Rather, my aim is to examine how cultural and scientific curiosity in UME and the increasing philosophical investigations of non-physicalist theories of consciousness may inform one another. It is immediately striking how consonant first-person

descriptions of UME are with the cosmopsychist ontology. Individuals report feeling like they have been absorbed into a unified cosmic whole, which presents itself as the fundamental structure of reality.

Given these parallels, it's reasonable to consider whether UME might serve as evidence for a cosmopsychist reality. Is it possible that the unification with ultimate reality that people report experiencing during UME is the unified cosmic consciousness that cosmopsychists are advocating for? Many individuals who have had UME, such as Maurice Bucke, independently come to this conclusion and understand the ontology that their experiences reveal as veridical.

Indeed, the noetic quality of UME can be so profound that it permanently shifts an individual's ontological commitments and understanding of reality. James points out that “mystical experiences are as direct perceptions of fact for those who have them as any sensations ever were for us.... they are face to face presentations of what seems immediately to exist.”³⁷ Hence, he argues that it is perfectly reasonable for the reality revealed during mystical experiences to be authoritative to individuals who have them. However, he does not think that this authority extends to those who have not had UME; those of us who only learn about them third personally should not “accept their revelations uncritically.”³⁸ I will return to James's epistemic prescriptions in Chapter 3, but for now our primary question is that given their coherence with each other, how might the phenomenon of UME be used to raise the credence of monistic ontologies that posit consciousness as fundamental and primary? Is it possible that

³⁷ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 323.

³⁸ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 322.

independently plausible and substantial accounts like cosmopsychism could support the noetic quality of UME? And more broadly, what does approaching this question with careful philosophical analysis involve?

We need not look far to find rigorous metaphysical theories that have a conception of reality consistent with what individuals experience during UME. I will be exploring Miri Albahari's "Perennial Idealism" in Chapter 2, which is a contemporary non-dual theory of consciousness that attempts to solve the hard problem of consciousness, along with other puzzles that plague the philosophy of mind, by drawing on UME as first-person evidence of a non-dual cosmic consciousness.³⁹ While I raise several objections to Albahari's theory of mind and ultimately argue that it fails to paint a coherent and convincing picture of consciousness, careful philosophical engagement with it has positive upshots. Taking UME seriously and incorporating them into the philosophy of mind dialectic provides useful grist for understanding how other features of consciousness, such as subjectivity, may factor into broader ontologies like panpsychism. By zooming in on Albahari's work, my hope is to posit the preliminary conclusion that UME entail subjectivity, and in the process demonstrate what technical philosophical engagement with UME can look like.

³⁹ Miri Albahari, "Perennial Idealism: A Mystical Solution to the Mind-Body Problem," *Philosophers' Imprint* 19 no. 44 (2019): 1-37.

Chapter 2

2.1 *Miri Albahari's Perennial Idealism*

As the title of her 2019 paper indicates, Miri Albahari dubs Perennial Idealism a “mystical solution to the mind-body problem.” Drawing on perennial philosophy, which points out the recurring metaphysical insights that mystical experiences seemingly deliver, as well as the radical nondual ontology maintained by the Advaita Vedanta tradition, Albahari crafts a successor to cosmopsychism that posits unconditioned and aperspectival consciousness as the ultimate reality. Perennial Idealism ambitiously aims to get around some of the most formidable problems of consciousness, such as the hard problem, panpsychism's subject combination and decombination problems, and the problem of the one and the many. Albahari argues that PI sets itself apart from other theories of mind by grounding its ontology in observation and extrapolation, with the hope that it can be realized through subjective conscious experiences. Thus, before explaining how a unified and unconditioned consciousness could yield our seemingly plural manifest world, Albahari is tasked with proving that it is conceivable for consciousness to radically depart from its typical perspectival state and be experienced as non-dual and the ground of all being.

PI argues that while consciousness is *ultimately* aperspectival, we experience the sense of being a perspectival subject through our “cognisensory object-imagery,” which Albahari defines as “objects that form the dynamic array of multi-modal sensory and cognitive imagery.”⁴⁰ For instance, I currently have a sense of being a subject occupying an external spatial world through various cognisensory

⁴⁰ Albahari, “Perennial Idealism,” 14.

inputs— I can see text on my computer screen, feel my chair underneath me, and hear the sound of people driving past my apartment. In other words, the multi-modal sensory information that I receive creates my feeling of having a first-person point of view. In addition to these multi-modal cognisensory inputs, we also have an interior sense of awareness and receptivity, or something to which cognisensory information is presented. We can understand this feature as “witness-consciousness” — the intrinsic feature of consciousness that reveals, or illuminates, that which is in its field.⁴¹ If, as Albahari argues, external cognisensory information is what creates the sense of being a perspectival subject, then instances of *pure* witness-consciousness could conceivably be perspective-less and subject-less.

Enter the Cognisensory Deprivation Tank (CDT) thought experiment. Albahari asks us to imagine that we are in a CDT where all our cognisensory inputs gradually disappear, including our memories, emotions, and desires. She contends that even when all objects of our consciousness disappear, including the mental features that commonly make up our sense of “self”, it is conceivable that witness-consciousness could remain. Presumably, if witness-consciousness remained even when there were no objects left in the field, there would be nothing to create the sense of differentiation, or point-of-view. As Albahari points out, it is not obvious if or how our witness-consciousness could be reliant on any specific cognisensory mode, such that it could no longer exist in the absence of it. Thus, she argues that “if consciousness can conceivably be experienced as aperspectival and unconditioned, then, being inherently experiential, it will conceivably *be* aperspectival and unconditioned.”⁴² Here, I

⁴¹ Witness consciousness (*citsākṣi*) comes from the Advaitin concept of *sākṣin*, which means ‘witness’.

⁴² Albahari, “Perennial Idealism,” 14.

take Albahari to be setting the stage for her larger idealist ontology— because consciousness is ultimately an experiential mental phenomenon, all ways that it presents itself are equally veridical.

Once Albahari establishes that it is conceivable for consciousness to seem, and thus be, aperspectival and unconditioned, she takes on the larger issue of accounting for how the manifest world that we experience could be grounded in aperspectival and unconditioned consciousness.⁴³ While her account of the ontological status of subjects and objects is at times meandering and convoluted, PI ultimately arrives at a version of subject-object illusionism. In line with the radical monism found in the Advaita Vedanta tradition, all that is ultimately real is the unconditioned ground of non-dual consciousness— or what the Advaitins call *brahman*. Subjects and objects appearing as individual and differentiated are just that— appearance. The manifest world of subjects and objects possesses no ultimate reality.

Albahari argues that we wrongly assume the existence of an “idealised neutral vantage-point” or “Objective Standpoint” despite recognizing that we can never truly step outside of our own conscious perspective.⁴⁴ Because the observations that we take to be facts about an objective mind-independent reality can only be made from within a subjective point of view, we are not able to justify tacit assumptions about the ontological status of anything outside of our own subjectivity, including other subjects and objects. Albahari maintains,

As all the distinguishing features of a subject and its world, with its disposition 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

⁴³ Albahari, “Perennial Idealism,” 19.

⁴⁴ Albahari, “Perennial Idealism,” 30.

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 relation of or by another subject(s). Subjects can thus not exist as objective *relata* that externally interface with the ground.⁴⁵

Albahari turns to the Advaita Vedanta doctrine of *ajata* to help explain how we have a first-person experience of the manifest world despite it, and us, not being ultimately real. The term *ajata* can be translated to 'unborn-ness' or 'unoriginatedness'. So, the *ajata* doctrine, advanced by two of the most prominent Advaitins, Gaudapada and Sankara, functions to deny the ultimate existence of subjects and objects, while offering a way to conceptualize the possibility of our seemingly direct experiences of the manifest world. Advaitan mystic Sri Ramana explains:

To such as find it difficult to grasp this truth and who asks, "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."⁴⁶

Albahari explains that the subjects and objects we take to be real share the same ontological status as dream items. That is, they are "real" within the cognisensory perspective of our dream, but they are not objectively or ultimately real. As is the case for hallucinations; while there is no objectively real item that is grounded in our consciousness during hallucination, our *experience* of seeing the item is real. She allocates the same dream-like status to the subjects and objects we perceive during waking experiences. In deploying the *ajata* doctrine, her hope is to help PI get around the problem of the one and the many by arguing that the many aren't strictly real. She explains that if we grant objective reality to any of the items appearing in our perspectival imagery, we would be "allowing into our ontology a

⁴⁵ Albahari, "Perennial Idealism," 30.

⁴⁶ Albahari, "Perennial Idealism," 28.

real event whose existence forms a boundary with the unconditioned ground.”⁴⁷ Thus, Albahari asserts that the manifest world, with all of its subjects and objects, does not exist *simpliciter*. Rather, “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 world and proclaim ourselves.”⁴⁸

Albahari stresses that unlike other speculative metaphysics, the ontology proposed by PI can be accessed during UME. While the CDT thought experiment is supposed to mimic what undifferentiated and aperspectival consciousness might be like, people frequently undergo UME that “awaken” them to reality. In accord with Perennial Philosophy, Albahari contends that UME reported across traditions over thousands of years seemingly point to a monistic ontology. The insights that UME confer are often so strong that they are reported to permanently shift the perspective and commitments held by the experiencer. For instance, Ramana Maharshi claimed that after his awakening his conscious experiences ceased to be characterized by a perspectival “I-ness.”⁴⁹ Thus, Albahari maintains that in addition to PI getting around the subject-combination/decombination problems that plague other panpsychist theories, there are extensive first-person reports of experiences that are consistent with an ultimate reality of undifferentiated and aperspectival consciousness.

2.2 Objections to Albahari

⁴⁷ Albahari, “Perennial Idealism,” 29.

⁴⁸ Albahari, “Perennial Idealism,” 31.

⁴⁹ Albahari, “Perennial Idealism,” 31.

For Albahari's Perennial Idealism to succeed, consciousness must be able to come apart from the subject, as the subject is not ultimately real, whereas consciousness is. Unlike views where subjectivity and consciousness are mutually entailing, PI maintains that because consciousness is aperspectival it is possible for an individual to experience subjectless consciousness. Albahari points to UME and the CDT thought experiment as instances of subjectless consciousness, arguing that so long as consciousness can be conceived of as subjectless and aperspectival, it can *be* subjectless and aperspectival. Importantly, this conceivability condition *must* be met for PI to get off the ground.⁵⁰ If the CDT thought experiment cannot illustrate the conceivability of subjectless consciousness, or if the reports of UME that Albahari draws on are deemed to entail subjectivity, then the foundational evidence for PI crumbles. This is exactly what my objections aim to illuminate.

My objections to Albahari's PI take on two distinct, but related horns. The first major objection that I raise regards the contradictory theoretical commitments that PI entails. I point out that Albahari's commitment to the possibility of a conscious state being both reflexively self-aware and asubjective is inconsistent with the Advaita Vedanta conception of reflexive awareness that she is drawing on. The second horn of my objection to Albahari raises concerns with the CDT thought experiment and first-person reports of UME. While they are meant to illustrate the conceivability of subjectless consciousness, both display the features of minimal subjectivity and thus cannot coherently be conceived of as asubjective. I will draw on Matthew MacKenzie's conditions of minimal

⁵⁰ I will return to conceivability conditions in Chapter 3. At times Albahari seems to appeal to positive conceivability, and then in other moments she argues that subjectless consciousness only needs to be negatively conceivable.

subjectivity to illuminate how the examples Albahari points to as instances of subjectless consciousness still seem to entail minimal subjectivity.⁵¹

2.3 Theoretical Objection

Despite much of Albahari's view being unorthodox, her understanding of human phenomenal consciousness as self-illuminating and having an automatic reflexive self-awareness is consonant with other well-established and commonly accepted theories of mind. Albahari, drawing from the Advaita Vedanta, tradition and maintains that consciousness necessarily has reflexive awareness (RA), meaning that a conscious state automatically reveals itself and is aware of its own awareness. As she puts it, "witness-consciousness automatically reveals and knows itself simply by being itself... It is reflexive insofar as it is self-revealing, including when revealing other objects."⁵² However, when we unpack what this commitment to RA really implies, it becomes hard to disentangle it from subjectivity. A conscious state being reflexively aware of itself looks a lot like what other scholars understand as a minimally subjective state.

It is first worth getting a sense of the intuitions that motivate commitments to self-awareness models of consciousness, as they are fairly well established and widely accepted. The intuitions are well captured by the so-called Transitivity Principle, which understands a conscious state as one that a subject is (suitably) aware of being in.⁵³ Greg Janzen's Symmetry Argument takes a phenomenological

⁵¹ Matthew MacKenzie, "Minimal Subjectivity and Reflexive Awareness," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 31, no. 5 (2024): 37-61.

⁵² Albahari, "Perennial Idealism," 16.

⁵³ David M. Rosenthal, "Consciousness and Metacognition," in *Metarepresentations: A Multidisciplinary Perspective*, ed. Dan Sperber, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 265-296.

approach to the Transitivity Principle, arguing that if “all conscious experiences are, indeed, like something to the subject of experience, it follows that the subject is, in some way and to some degree, aware of the experience.”⁵⁴ For instance, at this moment I am consciously aware of my computer— my experience of my computer is like something for me. However, experiencing my computer can only be like something for me so long as I’m aware of it. If I am unaware of my computer, there is nothing it is like for me to be experiencing it.

Janzen’s Symmetry Argument is contending that, “just like a physical object cannot be like something to a creature unless the creature is aware of that object, so a conscious experience cannot be like something to a creature unless the creature is aware of that experience. It follows that a conscious experience is always an experience of which the subject is, in some appropriate way, aware.”⁵⁵ The Symmetry Argument is taking the same principle that we see as uncontroversial about physical objects and applying it to the experiential state itself. Considering what we typically deem as unconscious states may help illustrate this intuition. Mental states are considered unconscious only if an individual has no occurrent awareness of those mental states. During general anesthesia, an individual is not only unaware of the physical procedure being done to their body, but they are also unaware of themselves as being the subject of an experience; in effect, there is no proper experience being had. When people describe the “experience” of surgery, they point to the moments of conscious awareness right before and right after general anesthesia; however, the surgery itself is experientially void. Hence, we understand one to be unconscious while under general anesthesia, because there is nothing it is like to

⁵⁴ Greg Janzen, *The Reflexive Nature of Consciousness*, (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2008), 77.

⁵⁵ Janzen, *The Reflexive Nature of Consciousness*, 77.

undergo it. Blindsight, a neurological phenomenon where an individual can visual stimuli in a perceptual blind spot without having a suitable conscious awareness of the object, is another example of an unconscious state. While the individual may be lucid and responsive to stimuli presented to the blind area, insofar as they are not appropriately aware of the object—there is nothing the perceptual state is like for them—we would deem the state unconscious.

However, it may be question-begging to suggest that Albahari is committed to the Transitivity Principle, seeing as it explicitly entails subjectivity. While she rejects that conscious states necessitate the presence of a subject, she does agree that conscious states are self-aware in the way that the Transitivity Principle claims them to be. Another way of cashing out the Transitivity Principle is through a model of reflexive awareness, which agrees that conscious states are states that we are aware of being in, but argues that awareness of the states is not separate from the very state itself, as this awareness of awareness is a built-in, structural feature of conscious event. On the RA account, consciousness is self-presenting and has an automatic, reflexive awareness of awareness. Indeed, consciousness having RA built into its structure is the primary posit of Indian “self-illuminationists.” Light and illumination are often used as metaphors for consciousness in classical Hindu and Buddhist Indian philosophical traditions, and self-illuminationists believe that it is the nature of consciousness to both illuminate other objects, as well as itself in the same process. A shining lamp does not need light from an additional lamp to be illuminated, as the process of shining reveals itself, as well as objects

around it. Conscious awareness, like a shining lamp, necessarily reveals itself by being itself. It is in this sense that consciousness has RA, as it presents itself and other.⁵⁶

Dignāga, an Indian Buddhist philosopher from the Mahāyāna school and ardent self-illuminationist, maintains the view that conscious mental events *necessarily* entail RA, or *Svasaṃvedana*.⁵⁷ He argues that consciousness’s reflexive structure necessarily has dual aspects—an object-aspect and a subject-aspect. Dignāga explains, “That cognition has two aspects is [known] from the difference between the cognition of the object and the cognition of that [cognition].⁵⁸ Consider, at this moment you are experiencing this text. The text itself is the object-aspect of your current conscious state, whereas the seeing or reading of the text is the subject-aspect. Importantly, the subject-aspect isn’t merely the sense that *I* see the text, as having a sense of “I” need not, and often is not, a feature of awareness. On Dignāga’s view, the object-aspect and subject-aspect necessarily co-occur and are embedded in every cognitive experience, together constituting RA, or awareness of the awareness itself. While the object-aspect and subject-aspect of an event may express different propositions, Dignāga argues that they cannot be disentangled. It is not as if you have one direct experience of the text, and then a separate subsequent awareness of your experience. Rather, proponents of the dual-aspect view argue that they are two features of the same conscious event and constitute consciousness’s reflexive nature. I will explore some of the relevant arguments for RA later in this chapter, such as Dignāga’s ‘memory argument’ for reflexive awareness.

⁵⁶ Matthew MacKenzie, *Consciousness in Indian Philosophy: Illuminating Mind, World, and Self*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2026), 22.

⁵⁷ *Svasaṃvedana* means awareness of awareness or reflexive awareness, (MacKenzie, *Consciousness in Indian Philosophy*, 24).

⁵⁸ MacKenzie, “Minimal Subjectivity and Reflexive Awareness,” 49.

Importantly, it is not just Buddhist traditions that advocate for a self-illuminationist theory of consciousness. The Advaitins, a Hindu tradition, are also staunch self-illuminationists. Returning to Albahari and the claims of PI, recall that she is committed to the Advaitins' reflexive, self-illuminationist view of consciousness. She models her view on the Advaitin conception of witness-consciousness, understanding it to "[carry] an intrinsic phenomenal character, which might be described as luminosity that is unborrowed from any particular sensory or cognitive modality In sum, witness-consciousness is percipient, object-revealing luminous presence that imbues all our conscious life, immediately knowing itself by being itself."⁵⁹ She is careful not to explicitly implicate the presence of a subject, as she maintains the witness-consciousness itself is subjectless. However, this is a curious move, seeing as in the Advaita tradition witness-consciousness is *ātman*, true self, or pure subjectivity. I will return to this worry in Chapter 3, but for now we should note how similar Albahari's account of RA is to Dignāga's and Janzen's. Insofar as a conscious state has a phenomenal character, there is also necessarily an awareness of that state of awareness. In Dignāga's dual-aspect model of RA, consciousness's awareness of awareness necessarily entails that there is a subject-aspect built into each moment of .⁶⁰

We need to carefully unpack what these commitments imply, seeing as the success of PI rests on the conceivability of consciousness being asubjective, which is a major departure from other RA views. I will return to some additional problematic upshots of these commitments in Chapter 3 when I

⁵⁹ Albahari, "Perennial Idealism," 15.

⁶⁰ This does not mean that all moments of consciousness are imbued with a sense of "I-ness"

discuss Albahari's attempt to deflate a potential objection by chalking it up to a terminological dispute. For now, it suffices to say that I take Albahari's commitments to asubjective consciousness to be inconsonant with her reflexive and self-illuminationist model. Specifically, I argue that consciousness having reflexive self-awareness also implies that it is minimally subjective, which goes against Albahari's own commitments to subjectless consciousness. I use Matthew MacKenzie's account of minimal subjectivity, showing that not only does mere reflexive awareness imply minimal subjectivity, but the first-person experiences Albahari draws on also display all the components of minimal subjectivity. Thus, Albahari's theoretical commitments imply the presence of subjectivity, as well as the experiences she points to as potential instances of subjectless consciousness.

2.4.1 MacKenzie's minimal subjectivity

MacKenzie draws a clear distinction between being a subject and being a *self*. The debate over the possibility of subjectless consciousness does not rest on the presence or absence of a sense of self during the experiences in question, as there seems to be an inherent plasticity in self-experience. For instance, the sense of self that we have during dreaming states might feel weaker than the sense we have in intimate moments, or during intense physical exercise. As we saw in Chapter 1, one of the paradigmatic features of UME is that one's sense of identity and self-ownership dissolves, creating a conscious experience that doesn't involve a typical sense of self. However, the sense of selflessness, or absence of 'I-ness', reported during pure witness-consciousness or UME does not also entail the loss of subjectivity. Indeed, an experience occurred: there is something it was like to undergo it, it is accessible

by memory and may even have long-lasting existential import. Yet, the typical feeling of ownership, or *mine-ness*, that ordinarily shapes our sense of self was not the subject of this experience.

MacKenzie explains that being a subject involves having both creature subjectivity, or the ability to be aware of a self/other distinction, as well as sentience, understood as the capacity for conscious sensation, feeling, and action.⁶¹ For example, we can grant a great horned owl subjecthood insofar as it has the capacity for sensation and action and can distinguish itself from other objects and entities around it. The owl can identify a mouse as a being which is different from itself, perform the action of catching it, and presumably experience the positive sensation of consumption and satiation. However, MacKenzie maintains that being a self is a much more complex phenomenon, “[involving] the synchronic and diachronic integration of (at least) four paradigmatic capacities or features: (1) subjectivity, (2) ownership, (3) agency, and (4) valuation.”⁶² Thus, being a subject is necessary, but not sufficient for being a self or having a sense of self. Developing a complete view of selfhood is less pressing for our current purposes, as we are primarily concerned with the possibility of subjectless consciousness.

MacKenzie argues that despite occasions of non-dual awareness and pure consciousness events seeming like potential instances of subjectless consciousness, they still maintain minimal subjectivity. On his view, a conscious event is minimally subjective if it contains the following four features: (1) phenomenal consciousness, or the *what-it-is-like* of experience; (2) weak first person perspective (1PP), or that which allows things to come into presence, or mere self-presence in the absence of specific

⁶¹ MacKenzie, “Minimal Subjectivity and Reflexive Awareness,” 40.

⁶² MacKenzie, “Minimal Subjectivity and Reflexive Awareness,” 40.

content; (3) receptivity, or that the experience is presented *to* awareness and that it is undergone experientially; and (4) access, or the introspective ability to access our conscious states.⁶³ In the following sections, I will consider how each feature of minimal subjectivity remains present during instances of pure-witness consciousness, with the aim of demonstrating how Albahari fails to establish the conceivability of subjectless consciousness with reports of UME and the CDT thought experiment.

2.4.2 Phenomenal consciousness, or the what-it-is-like of experience

UME and the imagined experience of the CDT are undeniably instances of phenomenal consciousness, as there is *something it is like* to undergo them. The sense of oneness that individuals cite during UME is itself a phenomenal characteristic. There is even something it is like to experience the episodes of pure witness-consciousness that Albahari discusses. Despite moments of witness-consciousness *seeming* aperspectival, the fact that they *seem* some way at all is an indication that there is still an aspect of phenomenality present. Indeed, the primary function of Albahari's CDT thought experiment is to get the reader to consider what pure witness-consciousness might be like. Insofar as there is anything it is like to be in the CDT, then the experience entails this first feature of minimal subjectivity, as there must be a subject to which the experience is like something. This is what Janzen's Symmetry Argument aims to illustrate: in order for an experience to be like something at all, a creature must be suitably *aware* of that experience. A conscious experience cannot be like something for you unless you are suitably aware of the experience, just as physical objects cannot be like something for

⁶³ MacKenzie, "Minimal Subjectivity and Reflexive Awareness," 46.

you unless you are aware of them .⁶⁴ Moreover, merely being able to conceive of an experience at all implies minimal subjectivity, as conceiving of an experience is to conceive of what the experience is like.

As I will return to later, if there is not *something it is like* to undergo an experience, a subject would be unable to report on the experience itself after the fact, as is the case with occasions of unconsciousness. We may be able to report on the phenomenal qualities of the moments right before and after unconsciousness, but the event of unconsciousness itself is, by definition, void of phenomenal experience. Consider again the case of general anesthesia. Patients experience a definitive gap in phenomenal consciousness when put under general anesthesia. In fact, reckoning with the phenomenal blankness of the experience is often cited as being unsettling and disorienting. So, while experiences with general anesthesia lack subjectivity, they also lack consciousness. We cannot conceive of what it would be like to undergo general anesthesia, because there is nothing it is like to be in that state. We have no awareness during unconscious experiences; hence it is not like anything for us to undergo them. For PI to succeed, it needs to be conceivable for consciousness to exist without the presence of subjectivity. However, as I have argued, only experiences with phenomenological characteristics — a feature of minimal subjectivity— are conceivable at all. Thus, while UME and states of pure witness-consciousness are often ineffable, they still exhibit the first feature of minimal subjectivity, as there is something that it is like to experience them.

⁶⁴ Janzen, *The Reflexive Nature of Consciousness*, 77.

2.4.3 *Weak first-person perspective (1PP)*

We can think of a first-person perspective (1PP) as the sense of personal ownership that we have over ourselves. We move through the world with awareness of ourselves as an individual locus of experience and action. As Blanke and Metzinger understand it, humans typically possess a strong, cognitive 1PP that involves having “an abstract and active mental representation of [oneself] as a subject of experience, which includes a special form of cognitive self-reference.... that is, to mentally refer to oneself using a concept such as ‘I’, for example by consciously thinking I-thoughts such as ‘I am happy’ or ‘I myself am a thinking thing’ or ‘I myself am a subject of experience.’”⁶⁵

However, the presence of a 1PP is perhaps the most difficult feature of subjectivity to identify in instances of pure witness-consciousness that paradigmatically lack the concept of “I” and any cognisensory information that leads to the feeling of perspectival convergence. Indeed, what makes the experience so puzzling is that consciousness seems to remain despite the disappearance of a sense of self and sensory information that make up our typical 1PP. Be that as it may, we are only interested in determining whether we can find *minimal* subjectivity present during these events. MacKenzie’s view of minimal subjectivity requires that there only be a *weak* 1PP, where weak 1PP just involves the “basic conscious perspective or perspectival ownership at the basis of all phenomenal appearances.”⁶⁶ Here,

⁶⁵ Olaf Blanke and Thomas Metzinger, “Full-Body Illusions and Minimal Phenomenal Selfhood,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 13, no. 1 (2009): 7.

⁶⁶ MacKenzie, “Minimal Subjectivity and Reflexive Awareness,” 58.

MacKenzie account of weak 1PP is slightly different from Blanke and Metzinger, who define the weak 1PP as “a purely geometrical feature of an egocentric model of reality, most often referred to as a visuospatial model. A weak 1PP includes a spatial frame of reference, plus a global body representation, with a perspective originating within this body representation. A visual (or auditory) weak 1PP possesses a centre of projection, which functions as the geometrical origin of the ‘seeing’ (or ‘hearing’ etc.) organism’s embodied perspective,” (2009, 7).

perspectival ownership is simply the way in which the contents of an experience directly present themselves to the experiencer. It is not that one recognizes a present experience as *belonging* to them, rather one just needs to undergo a direct experience to have ownership of it. Consider MacKenzie's example: "When an individual feels a pain directly, she has perspectival ownership of the pain, even if she does not identify it as hers."⁶⁷ The difference between direct 1PP experience and simply witnessing someone else to have an experience is essential here. While the experiencer may not have a strong 1PP, or sense of "I", what it is like for her to feel pain directly is phenomenologically different from what it is like for someone to watch her endure pain, as our experiences are undergone from different weak 1PP.

Thus, 1PP is part of what accounts for why individuals have different experiences. There is a phenomenological domain and geometric point that constitutes the field of experience, or point of view, in which things are arising. We can think of this geometric structure as the point around which the field of awareness is organized. Additionally, our 1PP is part of what accounts for the synchronic unity of consciousness. One moment of experience involves the convergence of information arising from multiple different sensory channels within a field of awareness. For instance, several of my senses may be involved when I recognize my dog in a given moment. I can see and touch my dog in one instance, and despite my visual and tactile sensory modalities being incommensurably different in

⁶⁷ MacKenzie, "Minimal Subjectivity and Reflexive Awareness," 58.

nature, I am able to recognize that what I touch and what I see belong to the same entity because they arise within my 1PP.⁶⁸

When it comes to instances of pure witness-consciousness, MacKenzie diverges from Albahari. Albahari argues that cognisensory information is what *creates* this localized point of view, so a sense of subjectivity cannot be sustained during events of pure witness-consciousness where there are no mental or physical objects to shape it. While cognisensory information often converges to a single point of view, contributing to the sense of perspectival ownership, MacKenzie argues that a weak 1PP continues to be present even during pure witness-consciousness, as it is what grounds all phenomenal appearances. While there is no sensory input shaping phenomenal appearances during pure witness-consciousness, consciousness's mere self-presence maintains an inherent phenomenal appearance—there is still something it is like to experience pure witness-consciousness, which entails that there is a weak 1PP grounding it. The weak 1PP is simply the phenomenological domain, or field of experience in which things are arising, even if all that is arising is the mere self-presence of pure witness-consciousness. Again, Albahari agrees with much of this assessment, as she puts it witness-consciousness “[carries] an intrinsic phenomenal character, which might be described as luminosity that is unborrowed from any particular sensory or cognitive modality.”⁶⁹ So long as witness-consciousness is self-reflexive in nature, as Albahari claims, it will maintain a basic awareness of its own awareness, which is minimally grounded by a weak 1PP.

⁶⁸ By “incommensurably different in nature” I mean that the qualities of sensory experiences are restricted to a specific sensory modality. For instance, I cannot touch color or see loudness.

⁶⁹ Albahari, “Perennial Idealism,” 15.

2.4.4 Receptivity, or the phenomenal presentation of the experience

The third feature of minimal subjectivity that MacKenzie identifies is receptivity. Understood as “the dative of manifestation or sentient terminus of all phenomenal appearances.”⁷⁰ We can conceptualize this as the thing to *which* the phenomenality of the experience appears, or the recipient of the manifest experience. MacKenzie holds a thin notion of receptivity— it does not require that the subject has a minimal sense of self or conception of “mine-ness.” Rather, he sees receptivity as only involving the absorption of whatever is being phenomenally presented.⁷¹ Shani has a similar view, arguing that in addition to reaching out and appropriating objects outside of itself, consciousness also possesses a “native receptivity” insofar as conscious subjects serve as “veritable *addressees*, or datives of disclosure, to whom things are given by way of experience.”⁷²

In the case of pure witness-consciousness, the act of witnessing is what receives the phenomenal presentation of the experience— even if all that is being received is the presence of consciousness itself. As was the case for the first two features of minimal subjectivity — phenomenal consciousness and weak 1PP— receptivity can still be present in states of pure witness-consciousness that are void of specific sensory content. As I have argued consciousness’s awareness of awareness, or self-reflexive nature, has a phenomenal appearance— there is something it is like for consciousness to

⁷⁰ MacKenzie, “Minimal Subjectivity and Reflexive Awareness,” 58.

⁷¹ MacKenzie, “Minimal Subjectivity and Reflexive Awareness,” 46.

⁷² Itay Shani, “Pure Consciousness as the Ground of the Given: Or, Why There is No Perception Without Background Reception,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 31, no. 5 (2024): 180.

witness only itself, with no additional sensory content. Thus, there is a phenomenal experience being lived through and received by a sentient subject.

2.4.5 Access, or the introspective ability to access our conscious states

Finally, details of the UME and hypothetical episodes of pure witness-consciousness in question are all later accessible through memory and reflection. Any information that we have about these events is available only because individuals have been able to report on them after the fact. Recall that the noetic quality of UME is one of their defining features— conferring a lasting sense of having gained epistemic access to fundamental truths, often permanently shifting one's spiritual and ontological commitments. As James chronicled in *The Varieties*, Dr. Richard Bucke, a Canadian psychiatrist of the late 19th century, described his UME as, “[a vision that] lasted a few seconds and was gone; but the memory of it and the sense of the reality of what it taught has remained during the quarter of a century which has since elapsed.”⁷³ Albahari also describes this process of awakening, arguing that the first-person accounts of life pre- and post-awakening are consonant with a reality that is ultimately aperspectival and ungrounded consciousness. After Ramana Maharshi was awakened to the unbounded consciousness at age sixteen, he was able to recognize that his previous sense of being an individual “I” no longer functioned and instead lived without the sense of occupying a localized body and self.⁷⁴ And while Maharshi clearly underwent a significant transformation, he still had an awareness of his “old” self and how it differed from his post-awakening phenomenal consciousness.

⁷³ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 304.

⁷⁴ Albahari, “Perennial Idealism,” 33.

While his sense of self and “I-ness” changed, he maintained the capacity to access old memories and differentiate his awakened self from his prior ignorant self. These examples illustrate cognitive accessibility: both men could access memories of their UME, articulate how it altered their phenomenal consciousness, and incorporate the experience into their narrative personal identity, recognizing how it permanently altered their lives.

2.5 The implications of memory

I argue that the accessibility feature of minimal subjectivity is the most immediately problematic issue for PI and Albahari’s suggestion that UME might be instances of subjectless consciousness. Albahari takes first-person experiences of seeming aperspectival and non-dual consciousness to be potential evidence of its conceivability. Indeed, we only have knowledge of the phenomenon in the first place because people have long documented their UME. However, despite people reporting that their *sense* of self and typical perspectival point of view vanished, their ability to report on the event and integrate it into their episodic memory raises doubts about a complete absence of subjectivity. It would require someone to give a first-person account of an experience in which they were not the subject.

We can look at the so-called memory argument for reflexive awareness, developed by Dignāga, to get a better sense of why the reportability of seeming non-dual conscious events may actually prove their dual-aspect nature. Recall that for Dignāga, each conscious event has dual-aspects: the object-aspect, or the object of one’s awareness, and the subject-aspect, or the awareness of one’s awareness. Hence, on his view, reflexive self-awareness is a built-in feature of consciousness. Memory and

accessibility are central to Dignāga's case for reflexive awareness, as memories indicate that an individual not only had the previous experience that is the content of their memory, but also that their consciousness contained reflexive self-awareness at the time of the original event. For instance, when I recollect seeing a great horned owl perched outside of my window, I am recalling the object-aspect of the previous perception < *the owl itself* > and the subject-aspect of the event < *seeing the owl* >. There is no additional higher-order cognition required for one to recognize the subjective character of their memory, as the memory is of the *experience* of seeing the owl. It is not as if we have a mental event that bears the phenomenal characteristics of memory but are required to engage in further reflection before establishing that the experience the memory is recalling belongs to us. As Dignāga puts it, "Because it [i.e., recollection] is never of that which has not been [previously] experienced. It is unheard of to have a recollection of something without having experienced [it before]." ⁷⁵ For Dignāga, the immediate and non-inferential self-awareness present in memory indicates that reflexive self-awareness must have also been present during the original perception. If there is a memory of seeing a great horned owl perched outside of the window, then there must have been an awareness of the seeing of the owl at the time.

It is worth pointing out that while I am drawing on Dignāga's memory argument to support my case for minimal subjectivity during UME, I do not share his broader no-self commitments. Seeing as Dignāga is coming from a Buddhist school, he denies the existence a persisting self. Buddhist ontology assert that everything is ultimately reduced to momentary particulars. Entities that appear to persist across time, such as a singular subject or self, are just rapid casual chains of *dharmas*, or

⁷⁵ Paul Bernier, "Dignāga on Reflexive Awareness," *Philosophy East and West* 65, no. 1 (2015): 131.

momentarily existing discrete units of experience. Hence, Buddhists maintain that there are no enduring substances, only sequences of momentary particulars. So, for Dignāga, the subject who had the original perception is not numerically identical to the subject who is later recalling the perception.

However, there is a worry that Dignāga's memory argument for reflexive awareness is incompatible with his larger atomistic Buddhist ontology. Utpaladeva, an Indian philosopher from the *Pratyabhijñā* school, argued that Buddhist momentariness cannot allow for genuine memory, as each moment of knowledge is self-contained. As Bruno M. J. Nagel explains, Utpaladeva maintains that having memory of events that occurred at separate times seems to be impossible without an enduring subject to contain and connect each moment of knowledge.⁷⁶ In effect, Utpaladeva is using Dignāga's own argument against him; the memory argument for reflexive awareness seems to imply that there is a persisting subject of experience who is able to recall and connect the different subject-aspects of their experiences. Hence, although the memory argument is attributed to Dignāga— and I will refer to it as such— I understand it in the same way as Utpaladeva: the diachronic integration involved in memory implies that there is an enduring subject.

What does this mean for Albahari's claims that states of witness-consciousness can be subjectless? My argument is that if UME or states of pure witness-consciousness are reportable after the fact, and thus recallable through memory, then some degree of subjectivity must have been present throughout the entire experience. As per Dignāga's argument, having a memory of an experience necessarily implies that the subject had some reflexive awareness of their experience at the time; for our

⁷⁶ Bruno M. J. Nagel, "Utility and Contradiction: Some Arguments in Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta for the Evidence of the Self as Śiva," *Philosophy East and West* 45, no. 4 (1995): 507.

memories are a recalling of the subject-aspects of previous experiences. Otherwise, it is unclear how the experience would become encoded into memory such that one is able to vividly recall details of the event, let alone draw ontological insights from it. As Albahari points out, part of what makes mystical experiences so powerful, and worthy of study is that they have significant, long-lasting effects on one's life and world view. Despite pure witness-consciousness feeling subject-less, experiencers still recognize that *they* were the ones who had the experience, that the experience was within their diachronic conscious experience. Moreover, there is an important connection between the kind of continuity, reportability, and recallability that Dignāga is looking at in the memory argument. A UME was like something for the experiencer at the time; it was transformative for them; they can remember it afterwards and integrate it into their narrative level of subjectivity.

Albahari might invoke an inference objection of sorts, arguing that one is able to infer previous events and generate a subjective perception ad hoc. For instance, I see a cut on my leg and infer that I must have unknowingly scraped it on my hike yesterday, manufacturing a memory of the incident despite not being self-aware at the moment of the incident. However, as Evan Thompson points out, inference objections to the memory argument ignore that memories are distinct cognitive states insofar as they are experiences with a unique “phenomenal content of pastness.”⁷⁷ Thompson argues that “Memory is not thinking about the past on the basis of present marks (like tree rings or time stamps), it is re-presenting the past by, or through, re-presenting past experience.”⁷⁸ Seeing a cut on your skin and

⁷⁷ Evan Thompson, “Self-No-Self? Memory and Reflexive Awareness,” in *Self, No Self? Perspectives from Analytical, Phenomenological, and Indian Traditions*, ed. Mark Siderits, Evan Thompson, and Dan Zahavi (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 157-173.

⁷⁸ Thompson, “Self-No-Self? Memory and Reflexive Awareness,” 167.

inferring that you must have unknowingly gotten it while hiking contains totally different phenomenal qualities than having a memory of cutting your leg on a hike.

In addition to the memory itself presumably containing more intricate details of the occurrence, it also contains a phenomenal character of pastness. Drawing on Husserl's theory of inner time-consciousness, Thompson explains that present recollections can only contain the phenomenal character of pastness because the act of memory involves an act of intentionality— we're not just recalling the past object-aspect of a perception, we're also recalling the subject-aspect or our first-person experience of it. Memories often evoke emotion, creating similar feelings to the ones that were experienced during the original event. As Dignāga argues, we cannot recall something that we did not experience; or at the very least, we cannot coherently characterize recall of that sort as genuine memory. If memory does not necessarily involve the recalling of a previous subject-aspect of an experience, then it becomes unclear how it differs from a mere hallucination. So, if Albahari is going to maintain that states of pure-witness consciousness can be entirely aperspectival and subjectless because experiencers describe them as such, she must also posit a mode of integration other than memory that can account for how a subject is able to later recall the experience and non-inferentially claim it as their own. Recall MacKenzie's weak 1PP feature of subjectivity: 1pp is what makes my experience of reading this text different from the reader's experience. Moreover, it accounts for why I cannot remember another person's UME. The synchronic synthesis and diachronic integration of an event entail the weak 1PP. Experiencing a UME at t_1 and then having a memory of it at t_2 must be indexed by the *same* subjective point of view. Hence, it is unclear how the diachronic integration involved in

memory could function if there was not a continuous weak 1PP where the UME was had and then later recalled from.

Interestingly, Albahari aims to address this in a footnote, acknowledging that PI is silent on how a subject returning from the CDT could remember the subjectless and objectless mode of experience they just had. Because there is presumably nothing for the memory to latch onto, insofar as the experience was subjectless and objectless, it is unclear what would be remembered. However, as Albahari points out, non-dual experiences, such as UME, are paradigmatically transformative. Albahari adopts Jerome Gellman's response, arguing that "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."⁷⁹ Be that as it may, this requires Albahari to posit a cognitive mechanism other than memory to integrate previous experiences into one's current cognition. While she could conceivably make that move, the CDT and mystical accounts of seeming subjectless consciousness cannot be put forth as potential evidence for her non-dual ontology until there is a non-memory-based mode of integration she can point to.

2.6 Conclusion

To recapitulate, I have raised two major worries with Albahari's Perennial Idealism. First, I point out that Albahari's commitments to RA and self-illuminationist models of consciousness seem to be inconsonant with her subject anti-realism, as both typically understand subjectivity as an

⁷⁹ Albahari, "Perennial Idealism," 18 (footnote 37).

inherent feature of consciousness. Next, using MacKenzie's criteria, I argue that UME and the CDT thought experiment that Albahari points to as potential instances of subjectless consciousness display the features of minimal subjectivity. Chapter 3 will consider and reply to possible objections that Albahari could advance in response to my arguments. Then, I will zoom back out and revisit questions concerning how we ought to responsibly approach and situate UME in the philosophy of mind. Recall that part of my aim in engaging with Albahari is to demonstrate how philosophers can go about critically evaluating UME and work them into their theories of mind. Hence, this chapter and the forthcoming responses and replies aim to display how careful philosophical engagement with UME can lead to real progress on some of the questions contemporary theories of consciousness are concerned with.

Chapter 3

I argue in Chapter 2 that Miri Albahari's Perennial Idealism does not successfully develop a conceivable account of subjectless consciousness. Albahari's theoretical commitments to reflexive self-awareness, her CDT thought experiment meant to illustrate the conceivability of subjectless consciousness, and the first-person examples of UME that she points to as evidence for the conceivability of an undifferentiated cosmic consciousness all implicate subjectivity in some form or another. The first half of Chapter 3 is dedicated to entertaining and replying to potential objections that a Perennial Idealist could raise in response to my argument. I also consider some of the troubling upshots of subject illusionism and argue that consciousness-first theories, like cosmopsychism or forms of idealism, need not result in a world-disaffirming anti-realism. The latter half of Chapter 3 revisits the primary aims of this thesis: how should academic philosophy engage with UME and where, if anywhere, should they be situated within contemporary theories of consciousness? I conclude by returning to James' observations on mystical experiences and advocate that we take on his spirit of open-mindedness in our philosophical approaches to UME.

3.1.1 Entertaining objections: Do we mean the same thing by subject/ subjectivity?

It is worth addressing the immediate worry that Albahari and I are operating on different notions of subjects and subjectivity. Perhaps we are simply talking past each other, and this can be resolved on terminological grounds? As I illustrate below, Albahari and I share a sufficiently similar understanding of subjects and subjectivity, however we diverge on the ontological status of subjects.

Namely, whether subjects are an inherent feature of phenomenal consciousness, or whether they are an emergent property of consciousness that arises from contact with cognisensory information.

Recall that I adopt MacKenzie's notion of subjects and minimal subjectivity. In his view, any being that is sentient and has subjectivity is a subject. A conscious state has minimal subjectivity insofar as it displays the following four features: (1) phenomenal consciousness, or the *what-it-is-like* of experience; (2) weak first person perspective (1PP), or that which allows things to either come into presence, or mere self-presence in the absence of specific content; (3) receptivity, or that the experience is presented *to* awareness and that it is undergone experientially; and (4) access, or the ability to access our conscious states through mechanisms such as introspection, verbal report, belief formation, action, etc.⁸⁰ While the sense of *self* is fluid and may disappear during anomalous conscious experiences, such as UME, subjectivity remains. As MacKenzie concludes, and I concur, *all* human phenomenal consciousness displays minimal subjectivity; insofar as a state is conscious, it is necessarily minimally subjective.

Albahari regards subjects and subjectivity in a similar way, defining a subject as a “minimally localized 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 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.”⁸¹ Because Albahari understands subjects as localized and perspectival, non-dual UME that have no *specific* locus do not entail subjectivity on her view. She

⁸⁰ MacKenzie, “Minimal Subjectivity and Reflexive Awareness,” 46.

⁸¹ Albahari, “Perennial Idealism,” 14.

fleshes this out in footnote 35 where she responds to a worry raised by Galen Strawson's view, which argues, along the same lines of MacKenzie and me, that conscious experience necessarily implies a subject of that experience; including UME or pure conscious experiences that have no specific content. Albahari argues that it is the lack of a perspectival locus of experience that characterize UME, so if subjectivity entails a localized point-of-view and the experiences she is concerned with do not include a locus, then we can understand them as consciousness without a subject. However, she acknowledges that "[If] Strawson intends for the term 'subject' to include within its scope an aperseptival 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 *Atman* (Self)."⁸²

There are a couple of worries that I will raise regarding this position. First, recall that Albahari is also committed to a reflexive, self-illuminative view of consciousness. As I pointed out in Chapter 2, Albahari is committed to the view that "witness-consciousness automatically reveals and knows itself simply by being itself... It is reflexive insofar as it is self-revealing, including when revealing other objects."⁸³ Even during a pure conscious experience where there is no cognisensory content, the light of consciousness may continue to shine because it is fundamentally self-revealing. As MacKenzie puts it, "[reflexive awareness] is that which allows anything to come into presence and in the absence of such contents it is mere self-presence. In this sense, reflexive awareness or self-luminous consciousness

⁸² Albahari, "Perennial Idealism," 16 (footnote 35).

⁸³ Albahari, "Perennial Idealism," 16.

is not just minimal subjectivity, but *pure* subjectivity.”⁸⁴ While Albahari rejects that RA and self-luminosity entail subjectivity, she cannot draw on the Advaita Vedanta notion of non-dual consciousness to support a view of RA that is asubjective. For the Advaitins, reflexivity is the witness or the seer, and in that sense, it is pure and absolute subjectivity. There is a live debate about the role of subjectivity in RA, but she cannot use the Advaitins to motivate a view that eliminates subjects and subjectivity from witness consciousness.

In sum, Albahari’s understanding of “subject” and “subjectivity” is not entirely clear. Aside from her notable silence on the role that memory and access play in subjectivity, as well as her convoluted commitments to RA, our working definitions of subjects and subjectivity are largely consonant. Because Albahari is explicitly committed to the Advaita Vedanta tradition, it seems reasonable to defer to the Advaitin understanding of subjects and subjectivity in these instances where her own commitments seem unclear.

3.1.2 Negative conceivability response and reply

Since my objections to Albahari cannot be chalked up to a mere terminological dispute, how might she, or other proponents of an asubjective model of consciousness, respond to my argument about the inconceivability of subjectless consciousness? I suspect that Albahari’s immediate response to my objection would be to point out that she is only trying to prove the *prima facie* negative conceivability of pure objectless consciousness, which understands a scenario to be conceivable if “on

⁸⁴ MacKenzie, “Minimal Subjectivity and Reflexive Awareness,” 59.

first appearances, no obvious contradictions are revealed.”⁸⁵ She concedes the possibility that the thought experiment might not hold up to the scrutiny of positive conceivability, where “the scenario withstands rational reflection and can in some robust sense be positively envisaged.”⁸⁶ This, however, seems like an unacceptable bullet to bite. She is not asking us to imagine other possible worlds that are inhabited by phenomenological zombies; she is asking us to positively envisage and reason through what it would be like to occupy a sensory deprivation tank where all our conscious sensory-perceptual imagery disappears. For her thought experiment to illustrate the argument that she is trying to make — that subjectless consciousness is conceivable, and thus ontologically possible — we are forced to attempt to positively conceive of its possibility. Thus, we may be able to negatively conceive of subjectless consciousness, but not insofar as we are using the CDT thought experiment to do so. Moreover, using UME as potential real-world instances of subjectless consciousness acts as a claim much stronger than mere negative conceivability. Insofar as we take the experiences seriously, we ought to do more than merely ensure that they aren’t immediately imbued with obvious contradiction. Hence, it does not seem like Albahari can mount a convincing response to my objection by appealing to negative conceivability alone. Moreover, even if we grant for the sake of argument that the idea of subjectless consciousness is not obviously inconceivable in the same way that the idea of a square circle is, that alone seems like an insufficient foundation for expansive ontology like PI to be built on.

⁸⁵ Albahari, “Perennial Idealism,” 16 (footnote 33).

⁸⁶ Albahari, “Perennial Idealism,” 16 (footnote 33).

3.1.3 Epistemic constraints on conceivability?

While my case against PI rests on its failure to meet the conceivability condition, could it be the case that conceivability is constrained by our own experiences? Perhaps we cannot conceive of subjectless consciousness unless we have experiences where our sense of subjectivity is lost, such as during UME? Albahari suggests that this could be the case, pointing out that because most people have only ever experienced consciousness as a subject, “it is natural to assume that its intrinsic nature is part of a subject-bound.”⁸⁷ She ultimately contends that we have to relativize our grasp of the truth and recognize that our perspective as subjects informs all our judgements and facts about the world.⁸⁸ The suggestion being that our ability to understand reality, and conceive of subjectless consciousness, is constrained by our status as subjects that are not ultimately real.

Be that as it may, this seems to change the conditions of conceivability. In her own words, the purpose of the CDT thought experiment is “to demonstrate [a] scenario by which one could conceivably undergo an experience in which consciousness appears, and hence could conceivably be, unconditioned.”⁸⁹ However, there is a fundamental incommensurability in what Albahari is arguing; at once she is suggesting that mere conceivability is sufficient for proving that something is ontologically possible, while at the same time maintaining that our cognitive capacities as subjects is constrained, as we effectively have the ontological status of objects within dream states. While it is beyond the scope of this project to fully flesh out the contradictory nature of her commitments, I

⁸⁷ Albahari, “Perennial Idealism,” 17.

⁸⁸ Albahari, “Perennial Idealism,” 31.

⁸⁹ Albahari, “Perennial Idealism,” 17 (footnote 36).

hope to have illustrated that subjectless consciousness, on Albahari's account, does not meet the requirements of negative conceivability.

3.2.1 Upshots of the ontological status of subjects

At this point in the dialectic, it is reasonable to ask why the issue of subjects matters at all—especially given that I am advocating for a thin notion of subjectivity, rather than a substantial self. Is this dispute merely an instance of pedantic hair-splitting? Quite the contrary; issues of subjects and subjectivity are central how we go about responsibly integrating first-person experiences, like UME, into our philosophies, as well as how we navigate some of the troublesome subject (de-) combination problems that plague theories of consciousness.

First, the status of subjects is central to the so-called combination and decombination problems that panpsychist theories grapple with. Recall that in micropsychism's bottom-up approach, where fundamental consciousness exists at a micro level and combines to give rise to complex consciousness, it must account for how discrete micro-subjects combine to form seemingly unified macro-subjects. Whereas cosmopsychism's top-down approach faces the opposite problem: it must explain how a unified cosmic subject can *decombine* into individual subjects that have their own independent thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

Whether or not human phenomenal consciousness necessarily entails minimal subjectivity influences how we can go about addressing subject combination problems. For instance, the micropsychist might advocate for macro-subject deflationism to defuse the worries of the combination problem. Similar to Albahari, as well as Buddhist approaches, they may argue that our sense of having

strong subject-unity is an illusion. By weakening the notion of macro-subject unity to mere illusion, accounting for how micro-subjects aggregate into a single macro-subject becomes a lesser worry. Whereas the cosmopsychist might apply the similar subject deflationism to the decombination problem— where the cosmic consciousness does not decombine into individual subjects in any strong way. Granted, Albahari's PI doesn't neatly fall into the panpsychist camp, rather she sees it as a successor to cosmopsychism that embraces idealist metaphysics. One of PI's purported selling points is that it doesn't suffer from the decombination problem, because individual human subjects aren't strictly real. As I explain in Chapter 2, Albahari sees terrestrial subjects and objects as having the ontological status of a dream. Our world of subjects and objects is only 'real' from within the dream state that we occupy, maintaining no objective reality because nothing other than the undifferentiated ground of pure consciousness can strictly exist. Thus, she attempts to avoid subject combination problems by rejecting the ontological reality of anything other than 'the one.' Moreover, Albahari maintains that PI isn't just an abstract metaphysical posit, as we can point to instances where it seems like people have tapped into and experienced the undifferentiated ground of consciousness and come to understand that our subject reality is ultimately illusory.

However, this leads me to an additional worry with PI. While Albahari is entertaining the idea of using first-person reports of UME as evidence for a universal aperspectival consciousness, she is simultaneously advancing an ontology where subjects and objects are illusory and not ultimately real. Following the Advaita conception of *brahman*, in Albahari's view the only thing that is strictly real is universal, nondual consciousness. While she may coherently maintain idealist metaphysics, and even posit near total illusionism, she cannot then use *subjective* first-person experiences of purported

aperspectival consciousness as evidence for a view that ultimately advocates for subject illusionism. If subjects are illusory, their experience must also be illusory. Hence, it is hard to see how subjects could possess any epistemic credibility, such that their experiences are ontologically significant. For instance, it would be odd to rely on your imaginary friend's account of reality, while also maintaining that they do not exist in reality. Following the logic of Albahari's own view, subjects should not have any purchase on reality, because they don't strictly exist in reality. Thus, all subjective experiences must be explanatorily void on her view.

I will address some of the troubling upshots of subject deflationism and illusionism in the following section, but my present aim is to illustrate just how central questions concerning the ontological status of subjects and subjectivity are in this debate. The mysteriousness of the subjective character of consciousness is at the heart of the hard problem, thus we cannot propose solutions that ignore the puzzle of human subjectivity.

3.2.2 The risk of global antirealism

Importantly, not all panpsychists attempt to solve subject combination problems with subject illusionism or deflationism. In fact, many worry that denying subjects all together runs the risk of leading to global skepticism. Arindam Chakrabarti argues that different types of realisms are interlinked; realism about the self and realism about the world are mutually entailing.⁹⁰ Hence, the worry is that if we embrace accounts that entail subject illusionism, like PI, observations made by

⁹⁰ Arindam Chakrabarti, "I Touch What I Saw", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 52, no. 1 (1992): 103-116.

subjects, such as perceptions of the external world, will lack epistemic authority. If the ontological reality of the observer is doubted, then the reality of their observations is likewise called into question, leading us towards radical global skepticism. As Anand Vaidya points out, illusionism about individual subjects and the world they inhabit radically departs from ordinary metaphysics and has potentially troubling moral upshots.⁹¹ While contemporary philosophy of mind has been open to rethinking ordinary physicalist understandings of the nature of reality, Vaidya acknowledges that a revision like the global anti-realism Albahari is suggesting requires extraordinary evidence that is currently lacking. Moreover, Vaidya worries that radical illusionism may lead to moral and existential nihilism. If all our experiences are mere illusion, what is the point of living and acting morally?

To her credit, Albahari recognizes the worry that PI may lead us down a road of global anti-realism. But she struggles to reconcile the risks of embracing a self-defeating global skepticism with the ontological upshots of subject-realism,

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.⁹²

Ultimately biting the bullet of subject illusionism, Albahari recognizes that PI's monistic metaphysics cannot launch if it allows for real and individual subjects to arise from the ground of unconditioned consciousness and thus deems everything other than the ground itself as ultimately illusory. I suspect that Albahari would respond to the moral and existential worries that Vaidya raises about illusionism

⁹¹ Anand Jayprakash Vaidya, "Analytic Panpsychism and the Metaphysics of Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta," *The Monist* 105, no. 1 (2022): 125.

⁹² Albahari, "Perennial Idealism," 28.

by effectively bracketing them. We can operate as if conscious subjects who have the capacity for joy and suffering are real, while also recognizing that they are ontologically illusory; our manifest world of conscious subjects who have the capacity to experience pain and suffering can maintain importance from within the illusory dream state that we occupy.

Be that as it may, it is not clear that subject-illusionist accounts, like Albahari's, get us any closer to an explanation of how our phenomenal conscious experiences of subjectivity, ontologically real or not, relate to an asubjective cosmic consciousness. Swami Medhananda raises an adjacent worry with Albahari's PI— arguing that it suffers from the same 'fatal aporia' as the classical Advaita Vedānta philosophy that it is based on.⁹³ Echoing the arguments made by Sri Aurobindo, Medhananda points out that if, as Albahari and Advaitins argue, everything other than non-dual *brahman* is an illusion, it still remains unclear what the relationship between reality and illusion could entail. Medhananda asks, "why should an illusory world appear to us at all? And how exactly does this world-illusion relate to *Brahman*?"⁹⁴

Insofar as we want to avoid global anti-realism, we are left to explain how our subjective experiences arise. And in Albahari's case, she is left to explain how the brute-fact appearance of subjects and objects could arise from and interact with an aperspectival and unconditioned ground of consciousness. Albahari recognizes this, stating that, "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

⁹³ Swami Medhananda, "Can Consciousness Have Blind Spots? A Renewed Defense of Sri Aurobindo" Opaque Cosmopsychism," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 31, no. 9 (2024): 122

⁹⁴ Medhananda, "Can Consciousness Have Blind Spots?" 122.

manifestation as a subject whose conscious field could conceivably turn out, in essence, to be aperspectival and unconditioned.”⁹⁵ Hence, she seems to trade subject combination problems with interaction and emergence problems that are just as troubling. Moreover, as I pointed out in the previous section, a theory of subject illusionism that relies on using subjective first-person experiences of purported aperspectival consciousness as evidence is philosophically unstable. Albahari cannot have it both ways— at once maintaining that subjects aren't real, while also using subjective experience as evidence for her metaphysics. Despite setting out to develop a metaphysic that isn't “utterly divorced from our everyday conscious states” as other theories of mind often are, Albahari arrives at a version of global anti-realism.⁹⁶

3.2.3 The case for world-affirming subject-realism

As explained throughout Chapter 2 and 3, global anti-realism is one of many reasons to reject PI's metaphysics. In fact, radical skepticism need not be the logical conclusion of a monistic ontology that regards consciousness as fundamental. Many advocates of panpsychism speak to the importance of maintaining a world-affirming ontology. Itay Shani proposes a ‘generative monism’ that shares the belief in a unified cosmic consciousness (CC), but simultaneously maintains the reality of individual subjects. Shani's generative monism holds that subjects and objects populating our manifest reality are not fundamental, but rather generated from a fundamental cosmic consciousness that is formless and void of plurality.⁹⁷ Unlike Albahari who maintains that it would too metaphysically disruptive for her

⁹⁵ Albahari, “Perennial Idealism,” 20.

⁹⁶ Albahari, “Perennial Idealism,” 2.

⁹⁷ Itay Shani, “Cosmopsychism, Coherence, and World-Affirming Monism,” 8.

view to concede the existence of anything other than the ground of undifferentiated consciousness, Shani does not see subject combination/decombination problems as a threat to the coherence of his theory. Individual subjects are not fundamental to reality, but rather are *generated* from CC's process of internal differentiation.⁹⁸ Lesser subjects are contained within CC, but do not constitute it. That is, CC's ontology is not altered or influenced by the lesser subjects that it generates and grounds within itself. Shani employs the metaphor that CC is like an oceanic expanse, and finite lesser subjects are like vortices that emerge within it. He explains that "each vortex, while being but a limited expression or manifestation of the ocean, maintains an autonomous internal regime with a substantive degree of impermeability and an exclusive, self-centered focus."⁹⁹

Crucially, like Albahari, Shani maintains that the CC is aperspectival. However, he does not conclude that this entails CC also be asubjective. Rather, Shani proposes that it can be understood as an aperspectival subject or pure subject. As he puts it,

a formless sea of awareness, a self which is not only bereft of object representations but also one to which the constriction of casting a partial view from a particular location does not apply. Although differing markedly from ordinary empirical subjects, we reasoned that such a pure subject is nevertheless an abode of sentience and the dative of experience, and, as such, that it possesses the necessary means to partially ground the subjective perspectives of ordinary empirical subjects.¹⁰⁰¹⁰¹

I am not arguing that Shani's variant of cosmopsychism is correct or that we should accept it.

Several other scholars, including Medhananda, have raised concerns that Shani's posits of partial

⁹⁸ Itay Shani, "Cosmopsychism, Coherence, and World-Affirming Monism," 14.

⁹⁹ Itay Shani, "Cosmopsychism, Coherence, and World-Affirming Monism," 15.

¹⁰⁰ Itay Shani, "Cosmopsychism, Coherence, and World-Affirming Monism," 18.

¹⁰¹ The 'dative of experience' that Shani argues the CC possesses is the same as the Advaitins 'witness,' and MacKenzie's receptivity and weak 1pp.

grounding are too vague to sufficiently answer subject combination problems.¹⁰² Rather, my present aim is to illustrate that monist and cosmopsychist ontologies need not embrace a world-disaffirming subject illusionism. Moreover, a world-affirming ontology that maintains subject realism appears to be better equipped to make sense of where UME and atypical conscious experiences fit into contemporary panpsychist theories. My careful philosophical analysis of UME and the CDT thought experiment meant to characterize them, lead me to the preliminary conclusion that they entail minimal subjectivity. Hence, if subject illusionist views, like Albahari's, want to explain away individual subjectivity, or argue positively that a cosmic consciousness cannot be a cosmic subject, they need stronger arguments that don't rely solely on UME as evidence, as they seem to entail a minimal subjectivity.

The concluding sections of this thesis will revisit UME and consider some of the upshots that come from giving them careful philosophical analysis. More specifically, I argue that incorporating UME and atypical conscious experiences into academic philosophy of mind may not solve the intractable problems of consciousness in the way that Albahari wants them to. However, carefully examining UME does allow us to better understand the nature of consciousness, as well as give us a better sense of how to help individuals regard and make sense of the experience itself.

3.3 Attitudinally informed theories?

¹⁰² Swami Medhananda, "The Playful Self-Involution of Divine Consciousness: Sri Aurobindo's Evolutionary Cosmopsychism and His Response to the Individuation Problem," *The Monist* 105, no. 1, (2022): 92-109.

Part of what is so enticing about using UME as potential evidence for non-physicalist ontologies is that it paints a picture of unity, meaning, and order in the universe. Moreover, it may also suggest that phenomenal conscious experience, even just in the form of pure witness-consciousness, can exist after bodily death. I suspect that much of what drives recent fascination with mystical phenomena is that it challenges the oftentimes disenchanting nature of science and materialism that has shaped our understanding of reality for the last century— at least in the secular west. Max Weber discussed the spiritual disenchantment that accompanies scientific modernity in his famous 1918 lecture “Science as a Vocation.” Weber says,

The increasing intellectualization and rationalization do not, therefore, indicate an increased and general knowledge of the conditions under which one lives. It means something else, namely, the knowledge or belief that if one but wished one could learn it at any time. Hence, it means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculations perform the service. This above all is what intellectualization means.¹⁰³

Advances in science and technology don’t just disenchant because they remove mystery or challenge the validity of religious doctrine— humans are, after all, generally uncomfortable with ambiguity. Disenchantment also comes from what contemporary neuroscience and materialist metaphysics suggest about the human mind and experience, which cast doubt on humanistic assumptions as fundamental as metaphysical free will. In their 2018 book *Neuroexistentialism: meaning, morals, and purpose in the age of neuroscience*, Gregg Caruso and Owen Flanagan describe

¹⁰³ Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” from *Max Webber: Essays in Sociology*, translated and edited by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946): 139.

the scientific image of persons as denying many of the commitments that have long shaped our more humanistic perspectives, such as the belief in free will, the idea that humans are not merely animals, a belief in God and the soul, and just a general conviction that life possesses some larger transcendental meaning.¹⁰⁴ On their view, the scientific image asserts that there is no metaphysical free will, humans are animals and not made in God's image, and that there is no soul or afterlife.¹⁰⁵ They argue that while this scientific image does not necessarily need to be disenchanting or destabilizing for humans, they also recognize the need for a new existential framework to address what Flanagan calls "the really hard problem" of meaning. The really hard problem asks, "How—given that we are natural beings living in a material world and given that consciousness is a natural phenomenon— does human life mean anything? What significance, if any, does living our kind of conscious life have?"¹⁰⁶ The third-wave existentialism, or *neuroexistentialism*, that Caruso and Flanagan propose is meant to express the anxiety that comes from the really hard problem and the disenchantment that modern neuroscience confers.

Given the existential angst that modernity (including modern neuroscience) can introduce, it is no wonder that people have been turning to psychedelic therapy and ancient mindfulness and meditation practices to restabilize and search for meaning and purpose. Is it possible that non-physicalist accounts of consciousness, like cosmopsychism or PI, are somehow a response to this neuroexistential angst? Could panpsychism, and the urge to use it to explain UME, be an effort to

¹⁰⁴ Gregg D. Caruso and Owen Flanagan, *Neuroexistentialism: Meaning, Morals, and Purpose in the Age of Neuroscience*, (New York: Oxford, 2018): 6.

¹⁰⁵ Caruso and Flanagan, *Neuroexistentialism*, 139.

¹⁰⁶ Caruso and Flanagan, *Neuroexistentialism*, 10.

reinstate cosmic enchantment in academic philosophy? Philip Goff nods to this in the closing paragraph of his book, *Galileo's Error: Foundations for a New Science of Consciousness*. Goff writes,

Panpsychism offers a way of “re-enchanting” the universe. On the panpsychist view, the universe is *like us*; we *belong* in it. We need not live exclusively in the human realm, ever more diluted by globalization and consumerist capitalism. We can live in nature, in the universe. We can let go of nation and tribe, happy in the knowledge that there is a universe that welcomes us. My hope is that panpsychism can help humans once again to feel that they have a place in the universe. At home in the cosmos, we might begin to dream about— and perhaps make real— a better world.¹⁰⁷

We should not dismiss the possibility that the desire for enchantment and proof of cosmic unity could play a role in motivating panpsychism as an explanation for UME. Perhaps there is a relevant worry that a yearning for spiritual meaning and order beyond human life may cloud our ability to properly and responsibly evaluate UME. Indeed, this is Daniel Dennett’s interpretation of the recent popularity of panpsychism. In an interview, Dennett argued that the rise of panpsychism and rejection of physicalism is due to a yearning for magic and a desire for things to be “Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious.”¹⁰⁸ Be that as it may, most responsible academic philosophers entertaining panpsychism and mystical experiences, including Albahari, take this worry seriously and insist that we refrain from drawing any hasty conclusions. But cultural interest in UME and excitement over the possibility that panpsychism, or other non-physicalist theories like PI, could help solve some of the intractable problems of consciousness should not disqualify them from being taken seriously in academia. It simply requires that our studies proceed with care and caution.

¹⁰⁷ Goff, *Galileo's Error*, 217.

¹⁰⁸ Robert Lawrence Kuhn, “Daniel Dennett on Consciousness, Virtual Immortality, and Panpsychism | Closer to Truth Chats,” YouTube, August 6, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Djqk-RexNFs>

We should also not dismiss the possibility that similar personal biases and interests influence more orthodox physicalist theories as well. Sarah Lane Ritchie, another scholar interested in panpsychist explanations of psychedelic mystical experiences, expresses this worry. Ritchie argues that that the influence of totalizing physicalism “necessitates a dismissal of the epistemological potential of psychedelic states, on the assumption (perhaps unwittingly) that consciousness is *reducible* to neural activity in the brain.”¹⁰⁹ Influential philosophers, such as Dennett, asserting that panpsychism is “embarrassing” and can be chalked up to young philosophers trying to say something new and different to garner fame and notoriety, demonstrates a troubling hubris. Despite what diehard materialists like Flanagan and Dennett claim, we don’t seem to have good reason to accept that totalizing physicalism and neuroreductionism have sufficiently solved or dismissed the problems of consciousness. Hence, maintaining a sense of dogmatism is not only needlessly divisive, but it is also unfounded.

3.4 Embracing a Jamesian Spirit

As I discussed in Chapter 1, William James’ investigations and analyses of mysticism remain preeminent. I will turn to his conclusions on the epistemic authority of mystical experiences in this final section of my thesis and argue that we can use them as a guide for how to responsibly explore the convergence of UME and non-physicalist theories of consciousness. Despite substantial advances in neuroscience and widespread confidence in physicalist and neuroreductive views for the past century, consciousness remains largely mysterious. UME and other anomalous conscious experiences further

¹⁰⁹ Sarah Lane Ritchie Ritchie, “Panpsychism and Spiritual Flourishing: Constructive Engagement with the New Science of Psychedelics,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 28, no. 9-10 (2021): 277.

complicate an already unsettled landscape. James's insights prove to be invaluable to philosophical projects like this one, where I am trying to make sense of how we ought to go about studying UME and where they may fit into our metaphysics of mind.

The first conclusion that James proposes is that: "mystical states, when well developed, usually are, and have the right to be, absolutely authoritative over the individuals to whom they come."¹¹⁰ This indeed seems like a good first premise for philosophers to begin with. A person reporting to have had a UME is, *prima facie*, a good reason to suppose that the phenomenon occurs. Moreover, we have lots of qualitative data documenting UME over time and across various cultures. But as James points out, the epistemic authority that UME have for those who have experienced them, is no different from the epistemic authority that any other first-person experience confers. He explains:

Our own more 'rational' beliefs are based on evidence exactly similar in nature to that which mystics quote for theirs. Our senses, namely, have assured us of certain states of fact; but mystical experiences are as direct perceptions of fact for those who have them as any sensations ever were for us.... they are face to face presentations of what seems immediately to exist.¹¹¹

It could be the case that an evil Cartesian genius is interfering with one's perceptions and causes them to hallucinate a UME, but the same could be true for any experience, including ordinary ones that we assume to be veridical. The modality of perception during UME does not seem to be especially different from that of our ordinary experience. Hence, an individual who has had a UME has *prima facie* justification to grant the experience epistemic authority. While this conclusion isn't an especially

¹¹⁰ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 322.

¹¹¹ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 323.

radical one, it still may require those coming from staunch materialist traditions to exercise some epistemic humility and open-mindedness.

James also argues that this same epistemic authority should not necessarily extend third-personally. In his words, “no authority emanates from [UME] which should make it a duty for those who stand outside of them to accept their revelations uncritically.”¹¹² Even those who are the most apt to contend that UME may serve as ontological insights, such as Albahari, seem to advocate for a cautious approach. It is critical that philosophers approach UME with epistemic reasonability, as there are significant social upshots. As I discussed in the introduction, the recent psychedelic and mindfulness zeitgeist has zeroed in on anomalous experiences and psi phenomena, such as UME and near-death experiences. And while this is not inherently problematic, it is important that we maintain empirical rigor, especially in the present era of dangerous scientific skepticism. Thus, as James contends,

What comes from [from the mystical experience] must be sifted and tested, and run the gauntlet of confrontation with the total context of experience, just like what comes from the outer world of sense. Its value must be ascertained by empirical methods, so long as we are not mystics ourselves.¹¹³

That being said, it remains open whether UME and other mystical phenomena are the kinds of things that can be fully captured through our current methods of scientific research. As I have discussed throughout this thesis, part of why consciousness remains so mysterious is because it doesn’t seem to be the kind of phenomenon that materialist science has been able to adequately explain, at

¹¹² James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 322.

¹¹³ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 325.

least with our current methods and resources. Indeed, this is what Goff draws attention to in his book, *Galileo's Error*. Goff points out that Galileo purposefully narrowed the scope of scientific inquiry to focus only on material properties that can be captured by mathematics and physics. Effectively excluding qualitative phenomena like consciousness and sensory experience from physical scientific exploration, as they are in Galileo's view immaterial qualities of the human soul and cannot be captured by the observational methods that he was proposing. But as Goff explains, Galileo never intended for his new methods to give a *complete* account of reality, as he deemed sensory qualities to be outside of the purview of material science. Goff is careful to point out that this does not necessarily mean that our scientific methods can never explain consciousness or sensory experience, but instead it serves as a reminder that modern natural science came out of a movement that purposefully separated the quantitative and the qualitative, and thus may not have the proper mechanisms to study the qualitative features of consciousness.¹¹⁴

Given this background, it is essential to bear in mind that we are still in the very early days in consciousness research. While James' *Varieties* laid important groundwork in the early 1900's, consciousness didn't reenter the academic scene until the early 1990's. Hence, it behooves us to approach the study of consciousness with an open mind and to not dismiss anomalous experiences, like UME, simply because they don't fit neatly into neuroreductive theories of mind. James' third and final conclusion encourages this open-mindedness, arguing that the phenomenon of mystical

¹¹⁴ Goff, *Galileo's Error*, 14-22.

experiences should challenge the authority of purely rationalistic and non-mystical explanations of consciousness. He contends,

[Mystical experiences] break down the authority of the non-mystical or rationalistic consciousness, based upon the understanding and the senses alone. They show it to be only one kind of consciousness. They open out the possibility of other orders of truth, in which, so far as anything in us vitally responds to them, we may freely continue to have faith.¹¹⁵

James goes on to argue that it is the rationalistic critic, or skeptic of UME, who must take on the additional baggage that comes with the role of the denier. James diminishes the authority and strength of this denial, for, as he puts it, “there never can be a state of facts to which new meaning may not truthfully be added, provided that the mind ascend to a more enveloping point of view.”¹¹⁶ As I have illustrated throughout this thesis, we are in no position to be dismissive about UME and regard them as mere hallucinations that we need not take seriously. Furthermore, dogmatic dismissal of UME runs the risk of thwarting valuable progress in the philosophy of mind. Not only can we do valuable phenomenological work by carefully unpacking and modeling UME, but it may also serve as an independent line of evidence for non-physicalist theories of mind. While Albahari’s PI does not offer a convincing account of this convergence, it introduces important questions into the dialectic. As she, James, and many others have pointed out, we have experiential and ontological accounts that seem to be consonant with one another, and it may be the case that through a reflective equilibrium they become mutually supporting. It may turn out that UME are akin to hallucinations, but if non-physicalist theories of mind give us independent reason to think that consciousness is ultimately

¹¹⁵ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 322.

¹¹⁶ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 326.

unified, the oneness felt during UME gives us good reason to further investigate with epistemic caution. We are still in the early days of consciousness studies, so it behooves us to adopt this Jamesian spirit of open-mindedness about UME and their potential ontological implications.

Conclusion

Recall the stated aim of this thesis: to consider how the cultural and scientific curiosity in mystical experiences and philosophical examination of non-physicalist theories of consciousness may converge and inform one another. I hope to have demonstrated that by applying careful philosophical analysis to unitive mystical experiences and teasing apart their ontological implications, we can gain real mileage in the philosophy of mind and metaphysics of consciousness.

In Chapters 2 and 3, I evaluated Albahari's PI as an example of analytic philosophy of mind drawing on UME as a tool to help solve some of the intractable problems of consciousness. Indeed, the title of Albahari's 2019 paper "Perennial Idealism: A Mystical Solution to the Mind-Body Problem" perfectly captures her aim. I argued that Albahari's PI does not successfully solve the mind-body problem, nor does it get off the ground as a potentially plausible solution. Nonetheless, her project does serve as a positive example of how careful philosophical work on UME can confer a better understanding of the phenomenon. By engaging with Albahari's work on UME, I was able to reach the preliminary conclusion that UME entail minimal subjectivity. If that is correct, it has important implications on how we regard UME and conscious experiences in general. If phenomenal consciousness necessarily entails a subjectivity, even when the sense of self is absent, then we must continue to develop plausible solutions to subject (de-) combination problems, as Shani does with his Generative Monism. With this in mind, future research might continue to home in on the nature of subjectivity, how it differs from the self, and the degrees of its presence in human experience.

While rigorously studying UME can help inform and refine our theories of consciousness, philosophy of mind may also have a pressing and practical role to serve. There is a relevant worry that

if we do not take altered states of consciousness like UME seriously, they can be haphazardly used to defend inaccurate and potentially irresponsible philosophical conclusions. Dogmatically dismissing them as mere hallucinations, tricks of the brain, or ‘woo-woo’ nonsense not only discourages valuable philosophical research, but it also pushes human experience to the peripheries of academic philosophy of mind. It is critical that we do not forget about the real people whose lives have been altered, for better or worse, by UME. Despite the usually abstract nature of consciousness studies, philosophers of mind are in the position to help individuals make sense of an experience that may have permanently transformed the way that they understand themselves and reality. Thus, I argue that we ought approach UME and the individuals who have experienced them with a Jamesian open-mindedness.

Thankfully, there is a lot of interesting research being done at the intersection of altered states of consciousness and the metaphysics of mind. For instance, neurophenomenology is an area of research that is entirely dedicated to tackling the gap between first-person experience and third-person neuroscience. Evan Thompson, one of the founders of neurophenomenology, has written several books that engage with many of the same questions that I do in this thesis. Moreover, as public interest in consciousness grows, we are increasingly seeing philosophers speak about the nature of consciousness and the implications of mind-altering practices on more publicly accessible platforms, such as podcasts. Moving forward, it will be important for academic philosophers to be aware of how their abstract and theoretical work on consciousness interacts with public interest on the topic.

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