

Is Universal Consciousness Fit for Ground?

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The Perennial Philosophy centres around what is said to be a recurring mystical insight: that our inherent nature is actually pure, unconditioned consciousness, identical to the ground of all being. Perennial Idealism, the name I give to a metaphysical system I have been building, extrapolates from the Perennial Philosophy to explain how the world could be configured if it were in fact true. Among the most serious challenges faced is that of articulating and defending the very notion that our world is grounded in universal consciousness. This chapter further develops a line of reply to what I think are four major objections to the idea that universal consciousness grounds all being. I call these the Thales Objection, the Problem of the One and the Many, the Self-defeating Objection, and the Power Challenge.

1. Introducing Perennial Idealism

In 1946, Aldous Huxley wrote a book called *The Perennial Philosophy*. Coined by Leibniz, the phrase *Philosophia Perennis* speaks of an ultimate mode of being which is:

the metaphysic that recognises a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being—the thing is immemorial and universal. [Huxley, 1946, 9]

Huxley draws together sources from twenty-five centuries of different religious and mystical traditions that seem to present, in different idioms, this common theme. According to Huxley, the feature that is ‘the most important, the most emphatically insisted upon by all exponents of the Perennial Philosophy’ is expressed through the Sanskrit phrase *tat tvam asi*, or ‘that thou art’ (1946, 14). It signifies that our inherent nature is pure and boundless consciousness which is at one with the ground of all being. While we appear to be a personal self with physical and psychological boundaries — a thinker, owner and agent in the world which *has* consciousness — we are, in reality, the core of that consciousness which is not *had* by anything at all. The consciousness is universal and aperspectival. What we ordinarily take to be the world of

separate subjects and objects is all, somehow, grounded in this consciousness. Seeing things as fundamentally separate, as not grounded in this consciousness, locks us in the grip of a deep cognitive illusion. The illusion is sustained by perpetually attaching to the satisfaction of desire, which reinforces the sense of being a separate agent whose happiness depends on the ‘world out there’. Such self-identity lies at the root of all mental suffering. With suitable preparation, the mental tendencies can be undone, such that we come to directly experience the inherent nature of *our* being as the nature and ground of *all* being. Known by various terms including ‘enlightenment’ or ‘awakening’, this *summum bonum* of human existence is blissful and requires ‘annihilation of the self-regarding ego, which is the barrier separating ‘thou’ from ‘that’” (Huxley, 1946, 47). Waking up from the illusion of self to this unconditioned and hyper-real mode of being is often compared, quite literally, to waking up from a dream.

These central ideas of the Perennial Philosophy, which I also refer to as ‘Perennialism’, can be summarised through the following four tenets:¹

1. Everything that we take to be the world is somehow grounded in unitary, aperspectival consciousness. This consciousness is supremely real: in essence self-subsistent and unconditioned by parameters such as subject and object, space and time, and the sensory-mental qualities which usually mediate our experience.
2. This pure unitary consciousness is the underlying and abiding nature of our conscious minds.
3. What prevents us from directly recognising our abiding nature *as* the ultimate ground is the illusion of self, which takes the form of a thinker/owner/agent. The illusion manifests principally through the mistaken assumption that our consciousness is intrinsically confined to a private, localised perspective which confronts an external, mind-independent world. It is sustained by desire-driven mental tendencies that make us identify as a subject who attaches to objects.
4. Through various practices, it is psychologically possible to destroy the illusion of self together with its underpinning mental tendencies, thereby unveiling our real and abiding

¹ Readers should be aware that there are different definitions of the Perennial Philosophy floating around in the literature. Huxley himself didn’t emphasise pure consciousness, and he added further elements into the mix. It is sometimes expressed as the purely doctrinal thesis that ‘there is . . . one underlying esoteric set of beliefs embedded in all traditional religions that all mystics share’ (Jones, 2022), a definition echoed in Wikipedia. In being centred around ‘that thou art’ my definition of the Perennial Philosophy makes no universal or doctrinal claim about world religions, and it connects metaphysical insight with direct experience. For an interesting recent discussion that critiques a purely doctrinal and ‘universalist’ notion of the Perennial Philosophy see Sawyer (2021).

nature as being none other than that of unconditioned, grounding consciousness. The psychology of one who operates from this liberated standpoint, recognised to be that of the ground, is blissfully happy: freed from the capacity to mentally suffer, become attached, or act from a sense of individual agency.

Whether or not one agrees with this Perennial Philosophy, it is depicted as an exalted way of being that is directly discovered, woken up to and lived through experience. We cannot therefore treat tenets 1–4 as a philosophical system, such as that of Kant or Spinoza, which has been arrived at through the usual discursive philosophical methods. So how are we to approach it philosophically? I approach the Perennial Philosophy as an intriguing hypothesis that is based on reports made by mystics from different times and traditions.² My ongoing project has been to build a system that extrapolates from the Perennial Philosophy to explain how the world could be configured if the Perennial Philosophy were in fact true.³ As tenet 1 makes apparent, any such system must be a type of idealism, placing consciousness at the fundamental level. I have accordingly called the edifice ‘Perennial Idealism’. While its full elaboration will include dimensions that are epistemological, ethical, phenomenological, psychological, and axiological, my focus to date has been on developing its metaphysical foundation. How do we build our world from a ground of unconditioned and aperspectival consciousness which we could directly discover, through experience, to be our abiding nature? Does the system withstand philosophical scrutiny?

My approach to the construction and defence of Perennial Idealism has come from three main angles which I will call here ‘the motivational approach’, ‘the building approach’ and ‘the defensive approach’. (There’s overlap, but these names describe what is predominant in

² There is a major debate over whether various mystics from different traditions are in fact uniformly expressing statements that can be summarised around such claims as ‘that thou art’. Steven Katz, for instance, thinks that all mystical experience must be indelibly infused with cultural content, allowing for no cross-traditionally convergent experiences that could give rise to such core commonalities as tenets 1–4 (Katz, 1978, 26). My response to this has been to enlist textual evidence in arguing that mystics from different (but not necessarily all) traditions are making claims that are at least consistent with tenets 1–4. Making the case for their actual convergence, I maintain, will involve a multi-stranded argument. The arguments in the current chapter can be seen to contribute to this part of the project.

³ My most complete attempt to date at this system-building, which includes a survey of mystical literature, is in Albahari (2019). Has the Perennial Philosophy been defended before in the history of Western philosophy? Having extensively researched the matter (as part of an unpublished manuscript for work in progress) I would say that no philosophers in the West have explicitly defended all four tenets which I think define the Perennial Philosophy. The closest I have encountered is Plotinus whose *Enneads* (250 ACE) capture much of tenets 1–4 in an admirably complex neo-Platonic metaphysical system. But as he does not consider the self to be an illusion, his account falls short of exemplifying the Perennial Philosophy as I’ve spelt it out.

each.) This chapter will focus on the defensive approach, which is concerned with justifying the ground on which the edifice is built. However, I'll first briefly summarise my lines of thinking on the motivational and building approaches. This will provide some necessary background.

1.1 The Motivational Approach

What might draw a philosopher to hold such a position that sounds, to those schooled in standard Western analytical philosophy, a bit nuts? Here, I situate Perennial Idealism in the modern mind-body debate, with its major contenders of dualism, materialism and panpsychism. I have argued that when developed as a novel brand of panpsychism, Perennial Idealism is not only *not* outlandish but has theoretical advantages over its rivals. A typical version of panpsychism will hold that matter has a hidden inner nature of mind and that our mind, whose outer nature is the material brain, is made from the combined minds of various smaller material entities (such as neurons or atoms). These entities will in turn have an inner nature whose minds are comprised from those of yet smaller entities until we reach the fundamental level. Philosophers have in recent years been drawn to panpsychism because they see the endowment of matter with mind as closing the mind-matter gap that is well known to dog its mainstream competitors of materialism and dualism. But panpsychism has its own setbacks. For instance, how can a subject such as myself, as a conscious mind endowed with its own private perspective, be made from a combination of other subjects' minds with their own private perspectives? How can private perspectives breach their boundaries to form a larger perspective?⁴ I have argued that if panpsychism is taken in a more robustly idealist direction—as shortly outlined in the building approach section—this kind of 'combination problem' vanishes.⁵ Avoiding the problems of its rivals, I have thus argued, provides a strong theoretical motivation to adopt Perennial Idealism.

⁴ Some thinkers (e.g., Goff (2017, 2020), Shani (2015, 2022), Shani and Keppler (2018), Kastrup (2018)) have recently dealt with this 'combination problem' through proposing a version of panpsychism known as 'cosmopsychism'. Cosmopsychists typically regard the universe as a whole to be a conscious subject in virtue of which simpler subjects, such as ourselves, are conscious. This, however, generates a 'decombination' problem of how a wider conscious subject could coherently share parts of its perspective with simpler subjects (Albahari (2019, 2020, 2022), Shani (2022)). In developing panpsychism in an idealist direction, I allow that subjects may manifest at a micro or cosmic level, the main difference being that a subject's consciousness is owed to a ground of aperspectival consciousness rather than to individual consciousness(es) of other subject(s).

⁵ See note 7 for my outline of the solution.

1.2 The Building Approach

Such theoretical virtues are, however, of little use if Perennial Idealism cannot stand on its own feet as a coherent position. The building approach asks such questions as: How can we construct a lawlike, consciousness-based world with entities that behave in the way they do while cohering with science? How do we prevent the system from collapsing into a solipsistic dream without recourse to a Berkeleyan God-like figure? As I've just hinted, I develop Perennial Idealism as an idealist version of panpsychism.

Its rough outline is this. There is a ground of aperspectival, pure consciousness out of which subjects arise. Such consciousness is intrinsically unconditioned: not dependent upon perspective, space, time, causal laws or any discernible qualities that are known to us through the sensory or cognitive faculties. While comprising a subject's conscious field, the existence of pure consciousness does not rely on any subjects. A subject, at first blush, is what we take ourselves to be: a first-person, conscious perspective to which objects in the world, including our own bodies, appear. The objects include not only external items, such as people and chairs, stars and atoms, our bodies and brains, but also our own thoughts, sensations and emotions. But the objects, at least many of them, are not what we commonly think they are. They are not mind-independent entities in a mind-independent spatial world. Everything that we (as subjects) perceive as an object is also the outer appearance of another subject, or aggregate of subjects, or aspect of a subject, all of which arise from pure unconditioned consciousness. It is easy to infer that some of these objects are indeed also subjects: humans and animals most obviously. But plants, tables, stars, atoms, our thoughts, and the cosmos: these too, on Perennial Idealism, must be the outer appearances of other subjects—in part, whole, or many.

Any object(-like appearance), be it star, atom, table, or thought must be automatically registered by an internal first-person perspective of a subject. The object-like appearances are made from what I call 'cognisensory imagery': ordered constellations of multimodal sensory and cognitive experiences.⁶ This constantly shifting imagery, as it presents to a given subject, both frames and maintains that subject's perspective. The conscious awareness that seems enclosed within each subject's perspective is, in essence, the ground itself. Like a honeycomb, what seems to enclose each subject's perspective into a private sphere are literally the outer imagistic appearances, to its viewpoint, of other subjects. Each other subject is in turn a

⁶ As I hold cognisensory imagery to carry representational content, the view is committed to a form of phenomenal intentionality. For a clear outline of this kind of view, see Kriegel (2013).

perspectival locus ringed by a set of outer appearances, to its perspective, of yet other subjects.⁷ The imagery comprising each set of appearances will usually differ markedly from our own: much simpler if the subject to whom it appears is a neuron or atom, or more complex if the subject is our cosmos. The system will entail a vast, interconnected network of co-dependent subjects, ruling out the possibility of solipsism.

What of the lawlike regularities in the appearances of subjects to one another (as objects), such that each appears to sustain a predictable and causally connected pattern of imagery? I explain this by making subjects dispositional.⁸ A subject, as a localised viewpoint, is disposed to have its imagery appear to it in a particular stable way and is in turn disposed to appear to other subjects in a specific stable way (depending on their dispositions). The edifice is being worked out in its details, facing plenty of logistical challenges. But I think it is fair to say that from the perspective of the building approach, Perennial Idealism is in no worse shape than rival panpsychist positions. If we agree that it avoids the combination problem, then, all other things being equal, it may actually be in better shape.

2. Four Holes in the Ground? The Defensive Approach

I suspect the main sticking points, which could render all things *not* equal, to lurk in the ground. The subjects are stipulated to arise, on Perennial Idealism, from a bedrock of unconditioned and aperspectival consciousness. For brevity I'll sometimes refer to this as 'universal consciousness'. Such bedrock, many will think, is of dubious substance. There are several

⁷ This, by the way, is how I propose to sidestep the (subject) combination problem for panpsychism. I have argued that most contemporary versions of panpsychism, despite overtly renouncing materialism, are still stuck in a materialist paradigm. Such a paradigm envisages mind-independent spatial objects containing inside themselves a spark of inner conscious life. The combination problem then arises because we envisage our inner conscious life, with an outer spatial aspect of a mind-independent brain, being comprised from the combined inner conscious lives of smaller material spatial entities (e.g., neurons) that are encased inside the spatial brain. The idea of their spatial containment railroads us into thinking that the internal contents of these physical vessels have to mix together in a way that breaches their boundaries. On the idealist version of panpsychism, the problem doesn't occur because we reconceive our cognisensory experience to come not from a merging together of other (spatially contained) subject's inner lives, but simply from the combined outer appearances of other subjects that arise in consciousness and frame our perspective. Our thoughts (also objects, under Perennial idealism) are for instance speculated to be the collective outer appearances of other subjects (arising from consciousness) that are disposed to visually appear to us, in different conditions, as neural networks. As no perspectival boundaries are breached there is no subject combination problem. For further details on this, see Albahari (2022).

⁸ In my work to date I have adapted Martin's (2008) view of dispositional/quality identity (also defended by Strawson (2008)) to that of a dispositional/subject identity. I have since become more sympathetic to those views that ground dispositions or powers in qualitative subjects. For modern exemplars of such a view see Builes (forthcoming) and Mørch (2019).

ground-trembling objections to it. As arguing for the ground turns out to be mainly an exercise of defence, I call this angle the ‘defensive approach’. The guiding question here is essentially: Is universal consciousness fit for ground?⁹ Is it solid enough to withstand the earthquakes? Or does it perhaps liquify into a quicksand of incoherence that can support no structure? If the ground liquifies, then the other two approaches to its defence will be nullified. It is therefore important, if Perennial Idealism is to be taken seriously, to meet these objections as frankly as possible. I have already, in other work, endeavoured to meet most of them (Albahari, 2019). But never all in one place and not always as clearly as I would like. The purpose of this chapter is to corral the objections together into an ordered sequence, before addressing each in turn. These challenges, I have discovered, can be divided into a set of four telescoped objections, such that if the first is met, the second arises, and if the second is met, the third arises, and so on. I will refer to these challenges as (1) the Thales Objection, (2) The Problem of the One and the Many, (3) the Self-defeating Objection and (4) the Power Challenge. The rest of this section sets them out, with the remaining sections of the chapter devoted to a response.

2.1 The Thales Objection

I owe this objection to Daniel Stoljar, who presented it to me at a conference Q&A, summarised in recent correspondence from which I will be quoting. The Greek philosopher Thales was famous for claiming that everything in nature is grounded in water. An initial objection to Thales, says Stoljar, would be that from the standpoint of the universe, water is a local phenomenon. It is present in our bodies, baths and oceans but is hardly ubiquitous. ‘Suppose that Thales responds by saying that by ‘water’ he means not ordinary water but *universal* water, understood as the ground of all being. Now, his thesis is that everything is grounded in the ground of all being.’ In such universal application the notion of ‘water’ has been effectively redefined to fit the desired role, thereby ‘ceasing to be the interesting thesis he started out with’. Stoljar says that an analogous charge to Thales can be made to the claim that everything is grounded in (unconditioned, aperspectival) consciousness: from a universal standpoint, consciousness is not observed to be ubiquitous, but a localised phenomenon that is had by individuals such as humans and animals. The defender of Perennial Idealism may then respond by insisting that by ‘consciousness’ he means not individual consciousness but *universal*

⁹ I use the term ‘ground’ in a way that is supposed to capture the general spirit of ‘x grounds y iff y obtains in virtue of x’ where ‘x’ is universal consciousness and ‘y’ are the items we take to be the world. It will transpire, however, that the nature of the grounding relation will be unlike what is usually espoused in Western philosophy.

consciousness, understood as the ground of all being. But then, just as with Thales, the thesis now becomes the uninteresting claim that everything is grounded in the ground of all being. So, when recast as the ground of all being, ‘consciousness’ effectively becomes the label for a role whose occupant, if it exists, bears no more connection to real consciousness than universal water does to real water.

2.2 The Problem of the One and the Many

I’ll endeavour to meet the Thales Objection by arguing that when the term ‘consciousness’ is applied universally it bears a meaningful relation to individual consciousness that (say) universal water does not bear to local water. But even if this objection is met, a new and more pernicious problem arises, to do with the relation between the ground and what is grounded. I refer to this as the ‘Problem of the One and the Many’. The problem is not confined to Perennial Idealism but has been faced throughout the history of philosophy by such monist thinkers as Parmenides (5 BCE), Plotinus (250 ACE), Spinoza (1677, and as discussed in Wolfson, 1965) and Schelling (as discussed in Beiser, 2002). Targeting any philosophical system that proposes an unconditioned substratum, the objection goes: how can a ground, as a principle of unity that is completely self-subsistent and unconditioned, indivisible and undifferentiated, coherently interface with the many and finitely specified items that it is supposed to ground or yield? The very distinction between the ground and the grounded—the one and the many—imposes a boundary between them, thereby placing a limitation on what is supposed to be unlimited. The problem is present whether the finite items are placed within the ground or outside of it. Commenting for instance on Schelling’s numerous attempts to overcome the problem and secure his ‘Parmenidean vision’ of ‘the absolute’, Frederick Beiser writes:

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

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

There is an alternative—to deny that the finite things or their divisions exist, and embrace instead an austere form of monism on which only the ground exists and nothing else. While in

earlier works I've referred to this position as a kind of existence monism, it is actually much stronger than standard existence monism which only states that there is exactly one concrete token. Existence monism still permits a plurality of properties, divisions and abstract objects. *Absolute monism*, as I'll refer to it (following Kriegel's suggestion), permits no plurality along any ontological axes whatsoever. While absolute monism entails existence monism, existence monism does not entail absolute monism.¹⁰ Absolute monism faces a serious objection. Not only does it seem to render otiose all the effort that is put into building a system of how the finite world or its manifold appearance comes about—because there's no such thing as finite, manifold entities—but it denies some of most obviously true-seeming statements that even a resolute sceptic would be hard-pressed to deny, such as 'thinking exists' or 'there is pain occurring in me right now' or even 'there *appears* to be a pain occurring in me right now'. Appearances cannot exist if there is only the ground.

Perennial Idealism is thus faced with what would appear to be a vicious dilemma: accept the many (imagery-bound subjects), and face negating the One (unconditioned consciousness), or accept only the One and face the absurdities that come with negating the many.

2.3 *The Self-defeating Objection*

My proposed resolution to the Problem of the One and the Many will recruit a tactic espoused by mystics associated with Advaita Vedānta, a Hindu tradition whose tenets are most explicitly Perennialist.¹¹ The advaitin tactic originates not as a heuristic that is meant to resolve a philosophical problem, but as the upshot of what they describe as an abidance in unconditioned consciousness. This leads these mystics to reject the authority of the very standpoint—that of subject versus object—from which *any* divisions are made. The subject-object framework and its ensuing divisions are likened to the inhabitants and happenings of a dream that is woken up

¹⁰ On existence monism there is exactly one concrete token, while on its close cousin of *priority monism*, a view often adopted by cosmopsychists, there is exactly one *fundamental* concrete token (Schaffer, 2014). Some recent defenders of existence monism include Horgan and Potrč (2008), Della Rocca (2020) and Builes (2021). None of their versions are as austere as that implied by Perennial Idealism, although Builes' version comes closest. Allowing no profusion of objects or properties that could exist as individual entities, his view nevertheless permits divisions in the form of *modes* or *aspects* of the one 'World Quality'. These aspects can be thought of as viable abstractions (second-order properties) that are deduced from the whole in the same way that a particular hue, saturation and brightness can be deduced from a determinate colour such as scarlet (Builes, 2021, 20). Perennial Idealism does not permit these sorts of divisions to be deduced from the ground, so is more austere than Builes' position.

¹¹ For an account of Advaita Vedānta from the lived perspective of Sri Ramana Maharshi, who was widely believed to be fully awakened, see Muruganar (2004, 2008). For a philosophical reconstruction of Advaita Vedānta, see Eliot Deutsch (1973). I will be drawing extensively upon Ramana's teachings in this chapter.

from and recognised to lack reality. The Problem of the One and the Many, posed from inside this spurious framework, will have no traction from an awakened standpoint that is the ultimate arbiter of truth.¹² The unsavoury implications of absolute monism will nevertheless be averted by allowing objects and their truths to exist in relation to subjects (just as dream-events exist in relation to a dream-subject).

But accepting this resolution yields a further problem that I refer to as the ‘Self-defeating Objection’. For if it is granted that subjects, objects and their divisions lack reality, then so too must the conceptual distinctions that are drawn upon in arguing for Perennial Idealism. A bit like Wittgenstein’s analogy of climbing the ladder to be kicked away, philosophical method will be harnessed to reach a point where it is argued that while Perennial Idealism has merit, its very supporting arguments rest on a framework that, by its own lights, must ultimately fail.

2.4 *The Power Challenge*

I will argue that the Self-defeating Objection is less pernicious than it initially sounds. The line I’ll take will be that although any truths pertaining to distinctions must be relativised to the standpoint of an object-viewing subject—a standpoint invalidated by awakening—such invalidation doesn’t so much contradict the truths of the subject-world as render them inapplicable. I’ll offer reasons to suppose that reality may extend well beyond what can be captured in logical, discursive thought. Accepting this much, a new challenge (as relativised to a subject’s standpoint) arises, which I’ll call the Power Challenge. How can unconditioned consciousness, which lacks any structure, impart order and structure to what we might call the ‘great dream network’ — an edifice whose items cannot be said to objectively *exist* in relation to the ground? The challenge has two parts. First, how can we understand such a grounding relation which will be, to say the least, unconventional? And second, supposing a feasible model can be found for such grounding, is there anything we can point to about universal structureless consciousness that could help generate the subject-relative appearance of our world as spatial, temporal and lawlike?¹³ Is universal consciousness, in this active sense, fit for ground?

¹² I’ll also argue that the problem doesn’t apply to the ‘unawakened’ standpoint either. The metaphysics of Perennial Idealism doesn’t permit any standpoint from which the Problem of the One and the Many could legitimately take hold.

¹³ The Power Challenge has been pressed upon me many times by David Chalmers in conversation.

3. Filling in the Holes

I'll now attempt to defend Perennial Idealism against these four objections.

3.1 Response to the Thales Objection

Addressing the Thales Objection will involve an exercise of conceivability that meaningfully connects consciousness as we know it with the notion of consciousness as a universal ground that is aperspectival and unconditioned. Is there anything about our consciousness that could allow its essence to conceivably be such a ground of all being—while still remaining *consciousness*? In other words, what could make consciousness, as opposed to (say) water, a meaningful rather than vacuous filler for the role 'ground of all being'?

Immediately setting claims about universal consciousness apart from those about universal water (or suchlike) is that their content is proposed not as a hypothetical philosophical entity, but as the datum of direct experience. Mystics have long reported being established in a standpoint of pure consciousness that is not limited by individual perspective, space, time or cognisensory quality. Regardless of whether such claims are true, a concrete example of such testimony will bring to life the idea that such a mode of consciousness might well be experienceable and thus conceivable. I will outline such a case in 3.1.1. In 3.1.2 I present a thought experiment which goes into more detail about how universal consciousness could conceivably be experienced. While this can be seen to complement and further elucidate the example, accepting this argument is not dependent on conceding that such testimony is or could be true. It stands as a separate argument for the idea that universal consciousness, unlike that of universal water, can be made sense of.

3.1.1 The Case of Sri Ramana Maharshi

One of the most well-known and widely documented mystical figures of recent times is Sri Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950), a South Indian sage in the Advaita Vedānta tradition. At the age of sixteen Ramana (known then as Venkataraman) had an experience that was irrevocably alter his perception of reality. Gripped with a sudden and inexplicable fear that he was about to die, he enquired if anything in his nature could survive death. In this spontaneous act of what he called 'self-enquiry' his attention entirely withdrew from objects and became absorbed in the source of the 'I-ness' from which all thought and perceptions seemed to arise. This, he said, catalysed an irreversible psychological transformation that destroyed his sense of individual 'I'. In his words:

[T]he question arose in me, ‘What was this “I”? Is it the body? Who called himself the “I”?’ So I held my mouth shut, determined not to allow it to pronounce ‘I’ or any other syllable. Still I felt within myself, the ‘I’ was there, and the thing calling or feeling itself to be ‘I’ was there. What was that? [Godman, 2019, 1]

In another record of this event he wrote:

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

Commenting on this, leading Ramana scholar David Godman writes:

This is a sutra-like summary of the experience in which Ramana boiled down the whole [awakening] narrative into its essence. He asked himself ‘Who is the one who sees objects?’ He focused on that entity, saw it disappear into its source, and from that moment on the individual perceiving ‘I’ never rose or functioned in him again. [Godman, 2019, 3]

As Ramana described it, what used to be his frame of reference—that of a separate locus of consciousness belonging to an individual self who perceives a mind-independent spatio-temporal world—permanently vanished. Shattered was the usual, unquestioning mode of perceiving the world through the framework of a duality between subject and object (Tamil: *suttarivu*), with the trinity of seer/seeing/seen or knower/knowing/known (Sanskrit: *tripuṭī*). What remained as his abiding frame of reference, as he tells it, was an experience as undecaying Self-awareness (*aham-sphurana*) not dependent on the body or any other conditions:

. . . In the vision of death, though all the senses were benumbed, the *aham-sphurana* (Self-awareness) was clearly evident, and so I realised that it was that awareness that we call ‘I’, and not the body. This Self-awareness never decays. It is unrelated to anything. It is Self-luminous. Even if this body is burnt, it will not be affected. Hence, I realised on that very day so clearly that that was ‘I’. [*Letters from Sri Ramanasramam*, 22 November 1945]

This pure consciousness, which Ramana often referred to as the Self (with an upper-case ‘S’), was from that point taken to be his real nature (*svarūpa*). The following excerpts, conveyed through his close disciple Muruganar (whose writings Ramana personally signed off on), provide further evidence that this was indeed Ramana’s ongoing experience:

This world phenomenon, consisting of dualities and trinities, shines because of thoughts. Like the unreal circle traced in the air by a whirling firebrand, it [the world phenomenon] is created by the spinning of the illusory mind. However, from the point of view of *svarūpa*, the fullness of intense consciousness, the illusory mind is non-existent. [Muruganar, 2008, 20]

What exists is the plenitude of object-free *jñāna* [knowingness] which shines as unconditioned reality. The world appears as an object that is grasped by your *suṭṭarivu* [object-directed consciousness]. Like the erroneous perception of a person who sees everything as yellow, this entire world is a deluded view consisting wholly of a mind that has defects such as ego, deceit, desire, and so on. [Muruganar, 2008, 21]

Consciousness will become replete when the knower enquires within and knows himself. [Muruganar, 2004, 87]

Knowing consciousness is not different from knowing reality. They are one and the same because reality is not different from consciousness. [Muruganar, 2004, 86]

To a *mūni* [a sage], all the multifarious scenes that appear before him will shine merely as the ever-present pure consciousness. [Muruganar, 2004, 94]

While space and time constrain the world of objects perceived through the localised and limited perspective of an embodied subject, Ramana frequently said that these dimensions were not applicable to pure consciousness:

The idea of time is only in your mind. It is not in the Self. There is no time for the Self. Time arises as an idea after the ego arises. But you are the Self beyond time and space; you exist even in the absence of time and space. [Muruganar, 2008, 325]

Ramana's testimony provides evidence that universal consciousness can be the datum of direct experience and, as such, be conceivable. But more is needed to dispel the Thales Objection. It can well be replied: With all due respect to Ramana, why trust the veracity of such reports? Might Ramana have been mistaken about the content of his experience—not only in terms of there really *being* a pure consciousness as ground of all being, but also in terms of the experience genuinely *conveying* an ongoing establishment in such consciousness? Is the undergoing of such experience *really* conceivable? This brings us then to the second approach which can help us make better sense of what Ramana is saying, while serving as an independent line of argument as to the conceivability of such a state.

3.1.2 The Cognisensory Deprivation Tank

Can we actively conceive of a scenario that will allow sense to be made of the idea that one could ongoingly experience their life from the standpoint of aperspectival and unconditioned consciousness? If so, then regardless of its actual psychological possibility, it will be enough to demonstrate a meaningful connection between consciousness as we know it and consciousness in its capacity as unconditioned. It will be enough to meet the Thales objection.

To this end I have in other work proposed a thought experiment that seeks to meaningfully connect the notion of consciousness in everyday experience with that of consciousness as universal ground (Albahari, 2019). Before running through this, it helps to clarify some central terms, starting with what I mean by 'consciousness in everyday experience'. Here, consciousness is defined with reference to subject and object.¹⁴ A subject, as I define it, is a localised perspective that is aware of objects via various sensory and cognitive modalities, however complex or simple. Objects are broadly anything discernible that could conceivably appear to a subject as separate from itself: trees, birds, rocks, atoms, sensations, thoughts, ideas, mathematical entities. We are immediately aware of objects through the medium of what I've been calling 'cognisensory imagery'. The notion of 'imagery', in this multimodal capacity, has a wider scope than that typically employed by psychologists or introspectionists. Cognisensory imagery includes not only the visual or the imagined dimensions to lived experience, but all of its cognitive and multi-sensory aspects as well, including their content. Perennial Idealism proposes that all objects are in fact made of cognisensory imagery.

¹⁴ Significantly, this usage aligns with how Ramana used the terms.

We will often not be explicitly aware of objects currently impinging on experience: think of a ringing in the ear, or subtle thoughts and feelings subtending the sense of agency. But insofar as objects are experienced, they will appear within the conscious purview of a subject: attentively or inattentively, focally or peripherally, externally or internally. The subject's perspective is the localised and centred point of view *to which* objects are presented; the subject's consciousness is the field of awareness *in which* objects are presented. A perspective, to which objects appear, divides one subject from another insofar as objects experientially apparent to one subject (e.g., a headache or look of a tree) are not directly accessible to another. What unites various contents within a given subject's perspective, such that the objects seem given to the *same* perspective, is the field of consciousness itself.

In its capacity of presenting as the field of an object-witnessing subject, I refer to consciousness as 'witness-consciousness' (Albahari, 2009). Witness-consciousness is mode-neutral knowing with intrinsic phenomenal character. It is that percipient aspect of the mind by which we seem to be aware, attentively or inattentively, of the babble of voices at the same time as the taste of lemonmint ice-juice and the thought 'that's nice'. It is mode-neutral in that it does not depend upon which cognitive or sensory modality is operative but occurs in tandem with them all. Witness-consciousness arguably comes with a basic and elusive sense of its own presence. There is something it is like to experience this presence; yet such phenomenal character pertains not, in and of itself, to any object that consciousness may target but to the percipient medium of the consciousness itself. In philosophical parlance, we can say that witness-consciousness is *intransitive* and *reflexive*. For consciousness to be intransitive is for it to pertain not (merely) to an object but to subjectivity itself. For consciousness to be reflexive is for it to take itself as its own (non-objectual) content such that it is self-revealing, like the sun. Combining all these aspects, we can say that witness-consciousness shines by its own 'light', knowing itself implicitly as it does so. It knows itself by being itself while illuminating objects within its purview.¹⁵

It can be hard to pinpoint the intrinsic phenomenal character of witness-consciousness, which is why I say that it *arguably* has such a character. But if it does have it, which I'm supposing it does for current purposes of conceivability, then there's a good explanation for its elusive presentation. So long as one is conscious, be it waking or dreaming, the attention is almost always being pulled away from it and out towards objects, whether via thoughts, perceptions or sensations. Objects are also perpetual residents of one's peripheral, inattentive

¹⁵ For a detailed description of witness-consciousness that alludes to its knowing, reflexive, luminous and intransitive nature, see Thompson (2015, 13–18).

awareness. I've proposed elsewhere that when the intrinsic phenomenal character of witness-consciousness gets superimposed with the flow of peripheral imagery (such as that pertaining to feelings of agency and ideas about who one is) the witnessing becomes reified into a background, personalised sense of self we call 'me' (Albahari, 2006). Regardless of whether we agree with this theory, it gives us a way of envisaging how, if witness-consciousness *were* to carry its own intrinsic sense of presence, a deep assumption of limitation could impose itself on its nature and scope. If consciousness is always being directed towards objects that simultaneously reinforce the background sense of being a limited, bounded self, then it will be natural to assume, very deeply, that the consciousness is intrinsically confined to the format of *suttarivu*: the perspective of a subject or self who confronts objects in the world. This suggests an intriguing question. What if the registration of all objects were to cease? How might witness-consciousness be experienced then?

Before going further, it helps to reflect upon what is it that immediately lends our everyday experience of the world its spatio-temporal, perspectival character. Regardless of any wider theory of origin, we can note that our sense of spatiality, whether waking or dreaming, is directly borne out through multimodal imagery with elements that are visual, tactile, auditory and cognitive, including our implicitly felt perception of depth and so forth. Without such imagery, what would give us our spatial cues? Similarly, our impression of passing time, regardless of wider theory, is immediately borne out through the perpetual flux of imagery in all modalities, enhanced by that which we associate with memory and imagination. Our sense of occupying the centralised perspective of a subject or self also depends plausibly on cognisensory imagery, be it a subtle peripheral flow of thoughts and desires, or the feelings of embodiment that locate us in a wider spatio-temporal setting. The suggestion, then, is that multimodal cognisensory imagery is what immediately cues witness-consciousness into the sense of belonging to an embodied and perspectival subject in a spatio-temporal world.

The engine for the thought-experiment now primed, I introduce the Cognisensory Deprivation Tank. This is the name I give to a fictional machine that aims to simulate the end-result of what Ramana Maharshi and other mystics reportedly experienced. Ramana's method of self-enquiry, *ātma-vicāra*, instructs the seeker to practice what he, in his death experience, spontaneously underwent. The idea of *ātma-vicāra* is to repeatedly turn the attention away from objects and towards the thread of subjectivity or 'I-am'-ness, following it back to its source as pure consciousness. With enough practice the sense of individual self, which relies on an object-bound sense of identity, is supposed to dissolve. In his words:

. . . take up the ‘thread’ or the clue of ‘I’-ness or ‘I-am’-ness and follow it up to its source. . . . whatever be the *sādhana* [meditation practice] adopted, the final goal is the realisation of the source of ‘I-am’-ness which is the primary datum of your experience. If you, therefore, practise *ātma-vicāra* [self-enquiry] you will reach the Heart which is the Self. [Anon, 2002, 85]

The Cognisensory Deprivation Tank (CDT) will be an exercise of conceivability rather than practice, and one that imaginatively removes objects rather than withdraws attention from them. While such an exercise won’t actually get us into an object-free mode, the CDT is otherwise meant to be somewhat analogous to *ātma-vicāra*. It invites us to extrapolatively imagine what could happen with the systematic removal of all objects from our consciousness (and hence attention to them) until *only* consciousness remains.¹⁶

So, let us now imagine stepping into a device that sequentially zaps each category of cognisensory imagery from purview: sights, sounds, tastes, smells, tactile and proprioceptive sensations, thoughts, feelings, emotions, desires. At each zap, our witness-consciousness remains. Upon removal of all the perceptual and bodily sensations, consciousness will be alight with thought. But being no ordinary tank, each set of cognitive imagery, including every thought, is now also zapped. Opinion will diverge here as to whether our consciousness disappears with the final zap of imagery. The idea is not to arbitrate on this matter, but to note that the scenario of consciousness remaining present is *minimally conceivable* insofar as there is no obvious contradiction in the idea.¹⁷

In the complete absence of objects, what might reflexive and intransitive consciousness, if it does remain, be like? It will conceivably present itself, by sheer default, as a luminous and uninterrupted percipience: a boundless, undifferentiated and unified presence that is unimpeded by limitations of space, passing time, cognisensory imagery, and localised perspective. For if we agree that our spatio-temporal experience is cued in by object-imagery, then without any such imagery there would be nothing to curtail consciousness into a sense of spatio-temporal limitation. Nor would there be anything to hem consciousness into the distinct viewpoint of a subject or self whose defining characteristic is to occupy a centre *to which*

¹⁶ With *ātma-vicāra*, emphasis is on the attention being removed from all objects (such that consciousness comes to be known as it is in itself) rather than all objects being removed from consciousness. However, the removal of all objects from consciousness would guarantee the removal of attention from all objects, so it is in this way the thought experiment parallels *ātma-vicāra*.

¹⁷ As Chalmers (2002) puts it, a scenario is *minimally* or *prima facie* negatively conceivable if no obvious contradictions within it are revealed on first appearances prior to rational reflection.

objects appear. In the absence of imagery there is nothing to mark centre from periphery, subject from object. Consciousness could thus very well appear as if it were really unconditioned and aperspectival in these central respects.

It is important to be clear on what the CDT thought experiment is and isn't showing. The aim of the CDT is not to demonstrate that consciousness really is unconditioned or aperspectival, or that an experience of pure objectless consciousness is psychologically possible. It isn't even to show that the experience of pure objectless consciousness is required in order to allow the apprehension of consciousness as unconditioned. After all, *ātma-vicāra* doesn't aim to expunge consciousness of all cognisensory imagery but simply seeks to render consciousness salient enough for the alleged insight to occur. The aim of the CDT is rather to make concrete sense of mystical experience such as Ramana's by connecting ordinary with unconditioned consciousness. It is a declaration of this sort: 'Here is what we can arguably say about witness-consciousness, as we reflect on it in ordinary experience. And here is how, with the removal all imagery—upon which plausibly depends our immediate sense of space, passing time, objectual qualities and perspective—this intransitive and reflexive sense of presence, were it to remain, could conceivably and by default make itself known.' A similar thought experiment would not work with water or any other object whose nature is limited by spatio-temporal and qualitative parameters. Any *object* would be a non-starter. In this central respect, consciousness rendered as pure subjectivity is profoundly disanalogous to water or suchlike—thereby making consciousness eminently more fit, on this dimension, for ground. We have met the first stage of the Thales Objection.

What of Ramana's claims about ongoing abidance in a ground of pure consciousness? This can be made sense of by imagining the reappearance of objects after immersion in the Tank. The Tank is entered with a primal assumption that one's consciousness is intrinsically limited to an embodied perspective in a spatio-temporal world. The Tank dissolves away the fabric of this assumption. Having reflexively experienced consciousness in the absence of a limiting framework, it is quite conceivable that the standpoint of a person who emerges from the Tank will be one in which the dissolved assumption does not return, even if their consciousness, once again, appears as perspectival.

To press this point I give a further analogy (Albahari, 2019, 17). Suppose Lucy is confined from birth to a square windowless room. It will be natural for her to assume that space is intrinsically limited to the shape of the room. That is, until the day that Lucy leaves the room and experiences a vast expanse of sky. The space in the room still looks square-shaped upon her return but her perception of it will have greatly altered. She will no longer experience space

as being *intrinsically* square-shaped. An analogous story could be told of someone emerging from the CDT. Until immersion in the Tank, a person's consciousness as their central point of reference will seem intrinsically 'perspective-shaped'—the only format ever known up until that point. While emersion from the Tank ushers a nominal return to the subject-object format, their central point of conscious reference will no longer assume the intrinsic confinement that the format suggests. This makes sense of what Ramana and other mystics say when they speak of being 'established in the ground' even while appearing to interact in the world. Having experienced consciousness as wholly independent of worldly parameters, they no longer behave as if consciousness—as their abiding point of reference—were confined to the parameters.

The notion of universal consciousness is not doomed to be an empty role-occupier. The idea of it meaningfully connects with that of ordinary consciousness in such a way that the idea of abidance in universal consciousness, unlike that of universal water, makes initial sense. The Thales Objection has been met.

3.2 Response to the Problem of the One and the Many

In attempting to meaningfully connect the idea of individual with universal consciousness, the Cognisensory Deprivation Tank thought experiment invited us to imagine vanquishing all world-suggesting imagery, leaving only the underlay of pure consciousness. Perennial Idealism further proposes that this world-suggesting imagery is the outward appearance of subjects to one another, arising from the ground of universal consciousness. But does such a relation between subject, imagery and unconditioned consciousness withstand closer scrutiny? The Problem of the One and Many would suggest it does not. Admitting a profusion of interconnected subjects, with their kaleidoscopic flux of co-dependent imagery, would seem to impose a boundary between the limited subjects and their supposedly boundless ground. In a show of consistency, Ramana and other mystics sometimes eschewed talk of boundaries by declaring the ground of consciousness to be all that there is. But then this suggests the second horn of the dilemma: absolute monism and its problematic drawbacks. Can Perennial Idealism escape this objection which threatens to impale any metaphysical system that admits of an unconditioned ground?

I believe that the first step towards its resolution lies in challenging the framework from which the problem is usually posed. The Problem of the One and the Many arises through trying to reconcile the relation between multiplicitous, limited entities on the one hand and a single limitless ground on the other. This usually presupposes a neutral, observer-independent

standpoint—even if idealised—from which the two can be compared. Often associated with a scientific quest to discover the basic structure of physical reality, the implicit endorsement of an objective point of reference is found in many strands of Western philosophical thought.¹⁸ The division between primary and secondary qualities, for instance, arose from philosophers seeking to capture the fundamental and essential properties of matter in a way that abstracted from the sensibilities of human observers. Locke’s famous list of primary qualities—shape, size, solidity, number, motion and rest—was intended to describe the intrinsic observer-independent nature of Newtonian atomic fundamentals. The secondary qualities—colour, taste, smell, sound, tactile properties—were thought to depend on observers, and so not be true denizens of physical reality. In modern times, the catalogue of primary qualities has altered but the metaphysical quest to discover the world’s basic structures remains the same. It is in this intellectual context, which assumes an observer-independent reality, that questions about ultimate metaphysical grounding are usually framed. Facts about the world, sometimes including minds, are thought to depend upon facts that stand clear of how observers perceive things.

One might think that the recent panpsychist turn within the mind-body debate will have altered the trajectory. But this is mostly not so. The positing of a wider-than-usual range of intrinsically minded material entities, such as sub-atomic particles or the cosmos, comes with the pervasive assumption that our scientific measurements are still picking up on their external, observer-independent structures rather than on features that depend for their reality upon the observing scientist. In a recent paper David Chalmers describes this mainstream brand of panpsychism as ‘realist’:

. . . what it is for physical facts *p* to obtain is for certain structural roles to obtain [with] . . . no commitment to ‘esse est percipi’. . . [V]iews like this are naturally understood as versions of realism about the physical world, rather than versions of anti-realism. The physical world really exists out there, independently of our observations; it just has a surprising nature. Indeed, views of this sort are highly congenial to epistemological structural realism, which says roughly that science reveals the structure of the physical world but not its intrinsic nature. [Chalmers, 2020, 354]

He contrasts this with ‘anti-realist’ approaches upon which:

¹⁸ This tacit philosophical endorsement of an objective standpoint when it comes to understanding physical reality has been discussed at length by Thomas Nagel (1974, 1989).

for any nonmental fact *p* about concrete reality, what it is for *p* to obtain is for appearances that *p* (or closely related appearances) to obtain. [Chalmers, 2020, 354]¹⁹

Perennial Idealism tilts towards the anti-realist side of the pitch. The system does not permit an outside point of objective comparison from which a relation between the ground (the One) and the structured subjects (the many) could legitimately take hold *sub specie aeternitatis*. The only admissible standpoints, on Perennial Idealism, are those of the *jñāni*—the advaitic term for someone said to be established in the ground—and the *ajñāni* (which is most of us) who assumes the individual perspective of a subject.²⁰ With respect to neither of these standpoints is there an objective, outside point of reference. And the position allows no other point of reference from which the Problem of the One and the Many could take hold.

Take, first, the *jñāni*. His is a standpoint that denies the reality of a subject's individual perspective on which depends, in turn, the impression of individual objects and their divisions. The Problem of the One and the Many presupposes a framework in which there is a division between the ground and what is grounded. But a division between the ground and what is grounded can have no reality from the *jñāni*'s standpoint that rejects the very framework on which such divisions depend. Admitting of only the ground, the *jñāni*'s standpoint allows for no point of comparison, outside or otherwise, between the ground and subjects. I will return to this later in the section.

What about the standpoint of a subject? This also prohibits an outside, observer-independent point of reference from which the relation between the ground and the grounded could be analysed. As any distinction or division only exists from *inside* a given subject's perspective, we cannot permit any abstract, outside, objective point of reference from which any distinctions, including the enumeration of subjects in relation to the ground, could take hold. The unfolding world that I experience—trees, apples, thoughts, ideas, atoms, chairs, people, colours, shapes—exists because other subjects are appearing to me as such from inside my perspective. What we call 'the world', in Perennial Idealism, is always an outer appearance of other subjects *to* a given subject's perspective. Distinctions and qualities, space and time,

¹⁹ Chalmers (2020) describes both these views as types of *idealism* in virtue of being mind-based. In the current context, I am using the term 'idealism' in a stronger way, to convey a consciousness-based metaphysic whereupon objects and their structures depend on being viewed as such by an observer.

²⁰ In Sanskrit, placing an 'a' in front of a word can signify its negation. So, the opposite of *jñāni* is *ajñāni*. The related word meaning 'ultimate knowledge' is *jñāna*. *Jñāna* is pronounced 'nyana', (or 'gynana' with a soft 'g') and not, as a Spelling Bee once supposed, 'ja-nana'. Similarly, *jñāni* is pronounced 'nyani'.

events, objects and multiple subjects, including those recruited to explain Perennial Idealism—including what I’m saying here—must manifest inside a given subject’s perspective and must always be tacitly indexed to it. There exists no subject-independent point of reference from which we could even say that there are facts about how the world appears to a subject.²¹ There is no fact of the matter about any subject without a perspective to take it in; no observer-independent point of reference from which we could say that there exists, objectively, a web of numbered and structured, inter-perceiving subjects who could interface problematically with the ground. To talk in such a way is to make a category mistake.

Could a legitimate point of comparison between the ground and the grounded not be made from *within* a given subject’s perspective? We have described Perennial Idealism as a position upon which pure consciousness is a subject’s abiding nature, out of which arises imagery—the outward appearance of other subjects—to that subject’s perspective. This may then seem to involve a problematic interface, as perceived from within the perspective of a single subject, between pure unconditioned consciousness on the one hand and multiplicitous imagery on the other.

Despite appearances, the interface between imagery and unconditioned consciousness is not problematic for the simple reason that such an interface does not exist. Imagery, which is the outer appearance of other subjects, never manifests by itself in pure consciousness, but always to the localised perspective of what we have been calling a subject. It is subjects (perspective to which imagery appears), not simply imagery (the outer appearances of other subjects), that form the basic units of manifestation within Perennial Idealism. If the Problem of the One and the Many is to take hold, then the correct relata will be subjects (or a subject network) and pure consciousness, not imagery and pure consciousness.²² And we have just seen that subjects cannot be objectively enumerated in relation to the ground.

Whether one considers the standpoint of the *ajñāni* or the *jñāni*, there is therefore no legitimate point of reference from which Problem of the One and the Many can take hold. This is not yet enough, however, to fully dissolve the problem. It is one thing to argue that the system does not permit a standpoint from which the Problem of the One and the Many has traction, and quite another to show how it explains away the very appearance of the problem. (Compare: it is one thing to imply that one’s deterministic system prohibits libertarian freewill and quite

²¹ This doesn’t entail that the subject must be an epistemic authority on what appears within her perspective. I say more about this soon.

²² In the discussion ahead, about the *jñāni*’s standpoint, another avenue is offered via a dream analogy that independently argues that the boundary between pure consciousness and the many objects is spurious.

another to show how it explains away the subjective appearance of freewill). Imagery, objects and their distinctions, along with the subject's perspectives to which they appear, ordinarily present to us as being real—as real, indeed, as anything could be. It seems hard to deny the reality of someone having the experience of a headache. And science, mathematics and philosophy propose all kinds of distinctions that are presumed to be real. These distinctions will all be rendered spurious if consciousness is to maintain its ultimacy in a way that allows no boundary between it and the many. Can this lack of boundary be shown to hold without incurring the unwelcome implications outlined in connection with absolute monism? Addressing the challenge will require further consideration of the *jñāni*'s standpoint, but before going there, it will be instructive to compare Perennial Idealism with the system of another philosopher whose metaphysic bears a striking affinity with it: Immanuel Kant.

When it comes to the world's divisions and structures, Kant's philosophy, just as with Perennial Idealism, does not endorse an observer-independent standpoint. Although still positing a mind-independent world, Kant insists that we can know nothing about its nature. All knowable principles of division—such as space, time, mathematical principles, qualitative variation, causation, quantity, relational dependency—are imposed on experience by the mind. While data from the world enter our senses as a 'manifold of raw intuition', as he calls it, our minds stamp onto it all the distinctions. The mind's grounding terminus is in unified consciousness:

There can be in us no modes of knowledge, no connection or unity of one mode of knowledge with another, without that unity of consciousness which precedes all data of intuitions, and by relation to which representation of objects is alone possible. [Kant, 1929, A107]

A unified consciousness is required for us to be able to behold and recognise multiple objects all together in a single awareness, both at a time and over time. Kant sometimes calls this consciousness the 'transcendental I' as it is a condition for the possibility of our having structured experiences of the kind that we have. This I-consciousness, says Kant, is in itself unconditioned by the parameters and structures imposed by the mind onto experience, including space, time, qualitative variation and relational dependency (1929, A404).

Insofar as the unified consciousness is the unconditioned portal through which conditions are imposed on experience, Kant's philosophy aligns with Perennial Idealism. Both agree that conditioned structures and parameters cannot be imposed onto the consciousness, which is a

precondition for the presentation of such parameters. But there is a major difference. Kant insists that all knowledge and experience is object-directed and thereby thoroughly transitive, mediated by structures of the mind. Because of this, he holds that any attempt to know or experience the ‘I’ as it is in itself, aside from rationally figuring out its purely functional role, will be doomed to failure, illegitimately imposing onto consciousness the very structures that consciousness is meant to impose onto experience (1929, B422). Perennial Idealism, by contrast, rejects the assumption that all experience and knowledge must be object-directed. The possibility of unified and unstructured consciousness intransitively knowing itself fully as it is in itself is a foundational tenet.

I believe that the possibility of consciousness intransitively knowing itself as it is in itself will be needed to adequately resolve the Problem of the One and the Many. To see how this is so, consider first where Kant’s system leaves us. As with Perennial Idealism, the Problem of the One and the Many should in principle have trouble taking hold. For Kant does not permit an outside observer-independent point of reference from which unconditioned consciousness could be said to exist in a problematic relation to the numerous individual subjects and the world that appears to them. All structures and divisions, including the category of quantity, are only supposed to have application from *inside* the perspective of any given conscious subject, rather than *between* subjects, considered from an outside standpoint. Subjects and their structures cannot therefore be objectively numerous, such that they stand in a problematic relation of ‘many’ to the one unconditioned consciousness, imposing a boundary on it. Yet Kant does not consistently follow through on these strictures, leaving us with questions and loose ends. He still talks as if subjects or persons were objectively real and numerous entities, each backed by a transcendental ‘I’. It is left a mystery as to how the transcendental I, purportedly unconditioned by quantity and relation, could manifest, or appear to manifest, as one per person or if not this, then how a single unconditioned consciousness could interface with multiple persons, as well as provide diverse structure to their fields of perception.²³ And

²³ Schopenhauer, who saw himself as improving on elements of Kant’s philosophy, argued that plurality (what Kant called ‘quantity’) was closely linked to spatio-temporal division such that if the thing in itself were to lack spatio-temporal division then plurality would also be lacking: ‘But if *time* and *space* is foreign to the thing in itself, i.e. to the true essence of the world, then necessarily plurality is foreign to it also: consequently in the countless appearances of this world of the senses it can really be only one, and only the one and identical essence can manifest itself in all of these. And conversely, that which presents itself as a *many*, and hence in time and space, cannot be thing in itself, but only *appearance*’ (Schopenhauer, 2009, 251). Despite initial similarities, along with a professed admiration for the *Upaniṣads*, the thing in itself that Schopenhauer called the ‘will’ does not map onto universal consciousness (*Brahman*) as it is alluded to in Upaniṣadic and Advaitic teaching, and which informs Perennialism. The will is characterised as a ‘blind striving’ (2009, xix), which universal consciousness is most definitely not.

what of the relation between the transcendental I and the mysterious noumenal world? Is there a boundary here too? This is also left unspecified.

The shortfall demonstrates how it is one thing to imply that a system prohibits the Problem of the One and the Many from arising, and quite another to positively show how it explains away the appearance of the problem. Despite proposing a system that should allow no objective profusion of subjects or divisions, Kant still writes as if subjects and divisions are objectively profuse, which fortifies, rather than explains away, the problem at hand. And it is hard for him to not talk in this way. His system lacks the resources from which to positively account for the status of multiple subjects and divisions as actually spurious—as they need to be—while appearing to be real.

Does Perennial Idealism have the resources to meet this demand? Return to the *jñāni*'s standpoint. It was mentioned that with the *jñāni*'s establishment in the ground, the individual subject, on which the impression of objects depends, is perceived to lack reality. The *jñāni* will commonly declare the only reality to be that of unlimited consciousness. Known as the *ajāta* doctrine, meaning 'not created, not caused', it is a notion that was expounded by a distinguished early proponent of Advaita Vedānta: Gauḍapāda (Nikhilānanda, 1949). The doctrine originated not as a theory but as a putative insight based on direct experience. Gauḍapāda's summary was approvingly paraphrased by Ramana Maharshi:

The *ajāta* doctrine says, 'Nothing exists except the one reality. There is no birth or death, no projection [of the world] or drawing in [of it] . . . no *mumuksú* [seeker of liberation], no *mukta* [liberated one], no bondage, no liberation. The one unity alone exists ever.' [Muruganar, 2008, 50]

In another account of this interchange, Ramana adds:

One who is established in the Self [the ground] sees this by his knowledge of reality. [Godman, 2005, 240]

Is this absolute monism? It could be argued that if no objects or distinctions have validity, then the very condition under which absolute monism is meaningfully asserted, as a position in contrast to other positions, is not met. Be that as it may, we still seem to be left with the same troubles. If there is only the one reality, then how is the system to explain the appearance of division, not only from the limited perspective of the *ajñāni*, but from the standpoint of the

jñāni himself? Did not Ramana Maharshi, in the fifty years since his awakening experience, engage in the world and attend to its divisions? And is not the very appearance of division still *itself* really divided and multiplicitous in nature, and so, in that capacity, real? More is needed. It is this further expansion of the *ajāta* doctrine by Ramana that offers the crucial clue to a resolution:

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

The dream analogy provides a handle on how to conceive of subjects, objects and their divisions as lacking in reality while appearing, from a limited standpoint, as if they were as real as anything could be. To explore the idea further, imagine that Lucy, after her initial escape from the square room, starts dreaming of open spaces: a beach with sand, waves and an expansive blue sky. She dreams of other people with whom she goes swimming and of a crab who nips her toe causing pain, before apologising (this is a dream!). We can agree that this dream phenomenon is somehow in a general way dependent on Lucy’s consciousness. But it would be incorrect to say that an inventory of the dream’s items, events and qualities—*the beach, the people, the blue of the sky, Lucy’s swimming, the pain in the toe and the crab’s apology*—are grounded in Lucy’s consciousness. These items don’t exist, and so can neither be grounded nor not grounded in her consciousness. There cannot then be a *boundary* between the dream objects and Lucy’s consciousness. It is only in relation to Lucy’s dream-perspective that there are dream-objects on which depend facts about what she does or does not dream. The unreality of herself as occupant of the dream-perspective, upon which the dream-objects depend, is something she recognises as soon as she wakes up.

In Perennial Idealism, the situation of the *jñāni* ‘waking up’ from ordinary life is directly analogous to that of the *ajñāni* waking up from a dream. Realising their abiding nature to be that of pure, non-dual consciousness, the *jñāni* wakes up from the false idea that their consciousness is confined to a limited, psycho-physical perspective. With disidentification from the embodied perspective comes the reciprocal recognition that all the objects and imagery, dependent on this spurious perspective, are also unreal. What we, the *ajñāni*, take to be a self-standing, spatio-temporal world of objects and imagery to a real perspective all appears as non-existent to the *jñāni*, just as the dream-objects and imagery, once we wake up

and recognise the dream-perspective to be spurious, appear as non-existent to us. And since the perspective and its items do not exist, they cannot be said to be grounded in universal consciousness such that there would be a problematic boundary between these items and the pure consciousness.

Insofar as the *jñāni* still appears to engage with the world and its objects, they might be described as retaining something of a *notional* perspective, akin to that of someone who fully knows they are in a dream and is keenly aware that its items don't exist beyond the purview of that spurious dream-perspective. That this was Ramana's direct experience finds support in the following passage by Narayana Iyer who frequently visited 'Bhagavan', as he was often known:

One day I felt puzzled by the teaching that everything in the world is *māyā* or illusion. I asked Bhagavan how with the physical existence before our eyes we can all be unreal and non-existent? Bhagavan laughed and asked me whether I had any dream the previous night. I replied that I saw several people lying asleep. He said 'Suppose now I ask you to go and wake up all those people in the dream and tell them they are not real, how absurd would it be! That is how it is to me. There is nothing but the dreamer, so where does the question of dream people, real or unreal, arise; still more of waking them up and telling them that they are not real. We are all unreal, why do you doubt it? **That** [the ground] alone is real.' [Narain, 2009, 261–262, emphasis his own]

By all accounts these were not merely words. In the fifty years that followed his awakening experience, Ramana's comportment was invariably described as consistent with one who would regard the world as a dream, neither identifying with his body nor emotionally investing in worldly matters.

The dream analogy allows us to avoid the unwelcome implications of absolute monism. For it can account for the appearances of the many without reifying these appearances into objectively real and multiplicitous items. Objects do exist, but only to the perspective of the subject to whom they appear. Our unquestioning identification with our perspective, as an embodied being in space and time, bestows a reciprocally solid sense of reality to the objects that appear to us. This is so whether we are waking or dreaming.²⁴

²⁴ Some may point out that even so, there's still a marked difference between dreaming and waking states, insofar as items in the dream states depend only on the dreamer. For an account of this difference under Perennial Idealism, see Albahari (2019), 23.

Relativising the existence of objects to a subject's standpoint grants Perennial Idealism the enormous advantage of being able to preserve the subject matter of such domains as science, mathematics and philosophy. Working out the semantics (based on appropriate epistemic standards) is the province of the building approach, but it bears noting that the subject-relativity of truths about the world does not entail a mushy anything-goes status such as 'If subject S judges that Q occurs within her perspectival field then Q is the case'. While facts about our world will always be derived from how cognisensory imagery appears to a given subject, that given subject is not the infallible authority on what appears within its perspectival field. With no observer-independent point of reference from which to index statements of fact about the contents of a subject's conscious field, the semantics for Perennial Idealism will develop an intersubjective approach by which standards of relative objectivity can be secured.²⁵

In allowing for the possibility of an awakened standpoint, Perennial Idealism thus has the resources to explain both how the Problem of the One and the Many fails to take hold, and how it could nevertheless *appear* to take hold. For it provides an explanation of how apparently real phenomena, such as that of someone having the experience of a headache, could turn out to depend on a perspective that is itself spurious. And by relativising world-based truths to a subject's perspective it avoids the unwelcome implications of absolute monism. Given the long history of the Problem of the One and the Many for any philosophical system positing an unconditioned ground, this solution, if it succeeds, is not a trivial outcome. Not only Kant, but (as mentioned previously) Parmenides, Plotinus, Spinoza and Schelling were among those who did not have similar resources, so the problem always remained a thorn in the side of their metaphysical systems.

But Perennial Idealism is not yet out of the woods. If all distinction-based truths lack ultimate authority, including those within philosophical thought, then is not the philosophical system of Perennial Idealism itself rendered ultimately untrue by its own lights, and hence self-defeating?

²⁵ My suggestion would be to modify Daniel Dennett's (1991) heterophenomenological approach. When seeking to understand a given subject's conscious happenings, the reports which that subject gives about her experiences are included in the data, along with a host of behavioural observations, neurological scans, and so forth. The interpretation of the collated data will retain a degree of objectivity insofar as it does not rely solely upon the judgements of the subject from which it is harvested. Nevertheless, the data will itself be embedded in the cognisensory imagery of whoever is trying to discern the relevant patterns. Its existence and interpretation will in this way remain fallible and subject-dependent.

3.3 Reply to the Self-defeating Objection

When it comes to its expression of ultimate truth, it is hard to deny that Perennial Idealism has a self-defeating air to it. Arguments and assertions in its favour are expressed through discursive thought that relies on divisions rendered inapplicable from the ultimate standpoint. This includes declarations about the nature of ultimate reality by the *jñāni* himself. After expounding on the *ajāta* doctrine, Ramana Maharshi said:

This [explanation] is all from the point of view of the current conversation. In reality, there is only the *Ātman* [one's real nature as pure consciousness]. Because this is so, there is nothing to know and nothing to be known. [Godman, 2005, 262]

But why even accept as true such a statement as 'in reality there is only the Atman' when the discursive claim has no application from the standpoint of ultimate reality? And why accept the *jñāni*'s standpoint as ultimate if its very declaration of ultimacy cannot be known or declared? Why indeed argue for a system whose philosophy, enmeshed in distinctions, lacks ultimate legitimacy by its own lights?

It pays first to disentangle, from within Perennial Idealism, the levels on which a logical tension might arise. The standpoint of a *jñāni*, not perceiving distinctions, will admit no contradictions. Any logical tensions must take hold from the perspective of a perceiving subject—including when talking *about* the *jñāni*'s standpoint. This granted, there is a notable difference between logical tensions that occur from within the world of objects and concepts, including a philosophical system as understood from a subject's standpoint, and those that occur between the subject's and the *jñāni*'s standpoints. The former sort of tension involves straight-out contradictions and paradoxes, such as when a proposition is deemed both true and false. These are the more pernicious cases that can infect the plausibility of a philosophical system. The latter sort of tension—between the articulation of a philosophical system from the subject's standpoint and its declaration as inapplicable from the *jñāni*'s standpoint—is not of this sort. For the *jñāni* is not saying that the statements made from the subject's standpoint are false by the same standards of truth and falsity that would apply from within the subject's perspective. There is no straight-out contradiction. He is, rather, saying that the very framework, from which ordinary and distinction-based notions of truth and falsity have purported ultimacy, lacks validity from the standpoint of the *jñāni*. This takes some of the sting out of the logical tension. The self-defeating air around Perennial Idealism stems more from a tension of the second than the first kind.

When it comes to defending Perennial Idealism, it is impossible to avoid using concepts, logic, and discursive thought. But insofar as such language is a medium through which to express the system's claims about ultimate reality, we must be candid about its limitations. Language and logic should be understood to have either a pragmatic use, such as helping orient the mind to its conscious underlay, or an attenuated epistemic use, such as employing the tools of philosophical method to climb as far up the logical ladder as one reasonably can. But by the system's own admission it can never get us to the top. Descriptions of ultimacy can never be taken to convey absolute truths about pure consciousness that could be understood perfectly through logic and concepts. To use a simile from Zen Buddhism, words are like fingers pointing to the moon. An experience as pure consciousness will always outrank any argument for its existence.

This may not be as radical a departure from ordinary life as might initially be thought. For when it comes to explaining and understanding our world of concrete entities, confidence in discursive thought can be overestimated. Just as with maps, the use of concepts and logic is crucial for navigating the world, but they are not always a substitute for what is being mapped. There is still much that escapes the net. Thomas Nagel's seminal paper 'What is it like to be a bat?' (1974) and Frank Jackson's parable of Mary in the black-and-white room (1986) are both famous modern exemplars of this point. The idea is also behind the push for panpsychism, its advocates drawing upon Russell's (1927) and Eddington's (1928) contention that the language of physics tells us what matter *does* but not what matter *is*. But it is William James, inspired by Bergson, who puts it in a way most pertinent to the current theme:

When you have broken the reality into concepts you never can reconstruct it in its wholeness. Out of no amount of discreteness can you manufacture the concrete. But place yourself at a bound, or *d'emblée*, as M. Bergson says, inside of the living, moving, active thickness of the real, and all the abstractions and distinctions are given into your hand: you can now make the intellectualist substitutions to your heart's content. Install yourself in phenomenal movement, for example, and velocity, succession, dates, positions, and innumerable other things are given you in the bargain. But with only an abstract succession of dates and positions you can never patch up movement itself. It slips through their intervals and is lost. [James, 1909, 261–262]

This propensity to wholeness over discreteness is what we might expect with an underlay of pure, unified consciousness. Even when distinctions are made, they are often fluid and

entangled and hard to pin down. James believes that puzzles such as Zeno's paradox arise from the 'intellectualist' assumption that the essence of all things can be captured and understood in static abstract terms. Having described himself as caught in its net for many years, he writes:

Well, what must we do in this tragic predicament? For my own part, I have finally found myself compelled to *give up the logic*, fairly, squarely, and irrevocably. It has an imperishable use in human life, but that use is not to make us theoretically acquainted with the essential nature of reality Reality, life, experience, concreteness, immediacy, use what word you will, exceeds our logic, overflows and surrounds it. [James, 1909, 212]

Logic being the lesser thing, the static incomplete abstraction, must succumb to reality, not reality to logic. Our intelligence cannot wall itself up alive, like a pupa in its chrysalis. It must at any cost keep on speaking terms with the universe that engendered it. [James, 1909, 207]

To 'keep on speaking terms with the universe' is to 'fall back on raw unverbilized life as more of a revealer', allowing reality to disclose itself through direct experience, as opposed to merely what we think it is (James, 1909, 272). The reality of which James speaks is that of our ordinary empirical world, as viewed from the perspective of a subject. If the necessity of raw non-discursive experience for understanding our world is already apparent within the subject/object framework, then it is less of a leap to suppose that an acquaintance with what could be its ultimate underlay, that of pure aperspectival consciousness, will be entirely immersive and beyond all logic and concepts.

3.4 Reply to the Power Challenge

Even if James is right about nature's propensity to unity over division, the divisions must still be accounted for. How might pure undivided consciousness supply its ultimately non-existent and dream-like subjects with inner conscious lives that contain the spatio-temporal, perspectival and lawlike parameters of our structured and diverse world? And how are we to understand a grounding relation where the subjects to be grounded do not literally exist as objective entities in relation to the ground? This, in broad outline, is the Power Challenge.

The difficulty immediately faced is that universal consciousness is supposed to be unstructured by any parameters. Conceiving of it as such was the point of the Cognisensory

Deprivation Tank. The experienced dimensions space, time and perspective (with all their causal goings-on) were envisaged to depend proximally upon the presence of cognisensory imagery whose removal would hypothetically leave our experience structureless. How, then, could this unconditioned consciousness meaningfully contribute to these dimensions as they appear within our perspectives? To compound the trouble, mystics have been notoriously elusive on the broader question as to how or why pure consciousness would give rise to the illusion of world-viewing subjects as opposed to, say, nothing at all. To pose the question in metaphysical terms: what explains the fact that we are in a world in which consciousness generates the appearance of world-viewing subjects rather than a world in which it does not? Mystics sometimes account for the origin of manifestation with explanations such as that of divine play (*līlā*), a power to delude (*māyā*), or the universe seeing itself in a mirror, but these explanations are not usually considered to have ultimacy. While Ramana sometimes alluded to manifestation as a kind of desire-driven projection, this description, on closer examination, applied only to the relation between the ultimately non-existent subject (sometimes referred to as ‘mind’) and the world rather than to a relation between the ground and a world-perceiving subject:

There is in fact nothing but the *Atman* [Self, our inherent nature as pure consciousness]. The world is only a projection of the mind. The mind originates from the Atman. So Atman alone is the one being. [Muruganar, 2008, 390]

A modicum of reflection will show that the mystics are not simply copping out. If the metaphysics of Perennial Idealism are correct, the question as to how or why consciousness would generate the illusion of world-viewing subjects, as opposed to nothing at all, is an impossible one to answer. It is impossible for the same reason that the Problem of the One and the Many has no traction. From the standpoint of a *jñāni*, any answer would have to assume the validity of distinctions from within a subject/object framework that they reject as unreal. From the standpoint of an *ajñāni*, questions about the how and why of apparent manifestation could only have a proper answer if posed hypothetically from the *outside* of the subject network which would objectively relate subjects to the ground. For reasons recently discussed, this is a non-starter. Distinctions and divisions exist only from inside a given subject’s perspective with no ‘outside’ to any subject that could interface with the ground. It thus makes no sense to ask: why are we in a world where consciousness generates the appearance of world-viewing subjects rather than a world where it does not? That there *is*—from the standpoint of a putative

subject—the manifestation of itself as a subject to which a multifarious world of imagery appears must therefore, from its perspective as a subject, be taken as a *brute fact*.

But now there seems something troublingly uninformative about the grounding story that ensues. It would seem that no aspect of universal consciousness is being recruited to explain *either* the subject's own brute appearance to itself as a subject, *or* the distinctive characters of how other subjects appear to it—which is all being accounted for by the imagery. It puts one in mind of that cheaty-sounding tactic whereupon a novelist, unable to patch up the holes in his plot, finishes the story with 'and then she woke up and it was all a dream!' In grounding the existence and characters of subjects and their experienced world, universal consciousness seems to be doing no heavy lifting at all. While this does not show Perennial Idealism to be false, it is a serious strike against it. This is the heart of the Power Challenge.

Can Perennial Idealism do better? Let us revisit the implications just drawn from the CDT. I had observed that multi-modal cognisensory imagery seems immediately to cue consciousness into assuming the standpoint of a localised perspective in a spatio-temporal world. The problem was raised as to how consciousness, intrinsically lacking such parameters as space, time or perspective, could play any meaningful role in their grounding. But maybe I gave up too quickly in supposing it to have no such role. This may now be seen through posing the question: if we accept that imagery is proximally necessary for the parameters to seem to take hold, is it also completely sufficient? In an obvious sense, the answer must be no: it is after all *consciousness* that is being cued into taking the form of a subject with its various parameters. But could pure consciousness, as it comes through in the subject's experience, also be contributing something more specific to the parameters? Consider perspectivalty. Imagery is never free-floating but will automatically appear to a perspective which we are calling a subject. And the *modus operandi* of a subject's perspective is to witness. In the absence of imagery, consciousness is not structured into the *tripuṭī* of witness/witnessing/witnessed, but presents itself, all the same, as a non-directional, intransitive percipience. Upon the arising of imagery, that percipience becomes directed towards the objects in the capacity of *witnessing*. This witnessing, importantly, is none other than directed percipience; it does not suddenly appear out of the blue as a novel feature of subjects. As such, we can see how pure consciousness *qua* percipience could well help to sustain a subject's distinct impression of its perspectival subjecthood.

This opens up the Scrabble board. If pure consciousness could discernibly feed into a subject's impression of perspectivalty, then might it not also, when overlaid with imagery, feed discernibly into its impression of other structural parameters such as space, time and causal

order? And might this line of thinking suggest a model through which to conceive of the grounding, at least in terms of how pure consciousness could contribute to the structural character of a subject's experience?

I'll start with the grounding story. Because the objects of a subject's experience have an ultimately non-existent, dream-like status, it will fittingly be a model that utilises the dream-mechanism. So let us return, once again, to Lucy's dream, but imagine this time that the pain she feels from the 'crab nipping her toe' is actually from a scorpion stinging her foot as she slumbers. The pain is genuine, but the dream-narrative she weaves around it is not. I suggest that this could be analogous to the way in which pure consciousness may pervade the experiential life of a putative subject, with the structural aspects discernibly traceable, at least in part, to its original form. Just as a genuine feeling of pain or an alarm-sound can puncture a dream-perspective and be woven into its narrative while still retaining, in the dream, its painful or ringing quality, so too—from the standpoint of a subject—might pure and unified consciousness pervade a putative subject's waking life while retaining, in the subject's experience, something of its original form.²⁶ I have elsewhere referred to this phenomenon as a 'two-tiered illusion' whereupon a tier of genuine, *unified* consciousness seems to become infused with cognisensory imagery to produce the composite illusion of a separate but *unified* self (Albahari, 2006).

We should be reminded that the very posing of such a model would have no validity from the *jñāni*'s standpoint. Conceiving of pure consciousness as a source to which different dimensions of experience (such as unity) can be traced, such that we describe its original form as this way or that way, is an exercise that invokes abstraction. Pure consciousness, in and of itself, is beyond all abstractions and divisions. Yet when it comes to conceiving of the connection between pure consciousness and the character of a subject's experience as it appears from inside their 'waking dream' (as I'll call it) the two-tiered model is as good as any we can hope for.²⁷ The scope of illusion, with its tier of real consciousness, will extend much further than to just that portion of the world we take to be our unified self. Since the boundaries of a subject's perspective are also built from the world-inducing appearances of other subjects that

²⁶ Kriegel (in conversation) has pointed out that there's a disanalogy in as far as the alarm clock exists independently of the dream and its contents, whereas consciousness is ultimately comprising the dream and all its contents! The crucial part of the analogy, however, rests on the idea that something's original form (alarm sound, pure consciousness) can pervade a subject's dream world such that it bestows to the dreamscape something of its original character while still getting warped by the imagery. The matter of how pure consciousness came to yield non-existent dream subjects with their dream objects is something that we've already established, from the standpoint of a subject, as unassailable brute fact.

²⁷ There is a masterful music video by Lady Gaga called '911' which aptly illustrates the two-tiered model.

fill its experiential field, the illusion will encompass the subject's entire perceived world. On the two-tiered model, addressing the Power Challenge—with the proviso that a subject's general appearance be taken as brute fact—amounts to addressing the following question. Posed from the standpoint of a subject, is there anything about how an underlay of pure consciousness could pervade the subject's waking dream such that, together with an overlay of imagery, it may traceably account for what appears to that subject as the world's most salient parameters of space, time and causal power?²⁸

Answering this question in detail would take us into the building approach. But having seen how an underlay of universal consciousness can feasibly percolate into a putative subject's experience of perspectivalty, it will help to close this section by *hinting* at ways through which pure consciousness could similarly play into a subject's experience of space, time and causal power. Even if a complete story cannot be given, discernibly tracing each of these parameters to a possible source in pure consciousness will give us optimism that the Power Challenge can be significantly ameliorated.

Take our experience of space. Be it physical or mental space, this dimension essentially conveys an empty, neutral, unified medium through which a diversity of objects can simultaneously be known to their subject. The CDT allowed us to conceive of consciousness in its original mode as an absolute unity, undifferentiated by any structural dimension. I postulate space to be the extroverted form that the pure unity of consciousness could take when appearing as bifurcated, in the waking dream, into subject and object. Space is the unified and empty medium through which a subject is able to view objects in opposition to itself. I conjecture that when the imagery is visual or auditory, the emptiness takes on the external character of physical space; when the imagery is cognitive, emptiness assumes the internal character of mental space. In either case, the character of unified emptiness that helps to mark our experience as spatial can be discernibly traced to the absolute unity of pure consciousness.

Now consider time. Devoid of objects to mark the passage of time, consciousness in the CDT was described as timelessly present. While an unmoving present doesn't add up to a sense

²⁸ We should be reminded that Kant (1929) sought to explain the organising parameters of our sensory input—space, time, qualitative variation and relational dependence—as originating in a transcendental principle of unified consciousness which could not itself be conditioned by the parameters. Kant's philosophy thereby sets a powerful precedent for a system upon which unconditioned consciousness can impose onto experience structures that explain mathematical and natural order. Some of his arguments can be recruited to strengthen Perennial Idealism, making him is an important ally. However, the reverse is less true. Since Kant allows consciousness no intrinsic phenomenology, it cannot permeate ordinary experience in a way that is analogous to the sound of an alarm permeating a dream. The two-tiered model will not apply to Kant's system as it stands. The reflections to be offered will all assume the two-tiered model.

of passage, it may feed into a central component of it. It has often been remarked upon that our experience of passing time is anchored in the present, and that this present moment appears real in a way that past and future do not. Ever-present universal consciousness, when refracted through a lens of subject and object, is naturally placed to serve as this anchor-point. I conjecture that our sense of passage comes from our attention being perpetually pulled out into objects of memory and imagination whose content is imbued with ideas of past and future. The present may then take on the more fleeting and ephemeral characteristic of being a mere moment that is sandwiched in between past and future. But our locus of experience, for all that, is always in the present—naturally traceable to ever-present consciousness.

How about causal laws? Perennial Idealism regards its putative subjects to be inherently dispositional and it is part of the building approach to explain the appearance of causal and lawlike structures in terms of these dispositional powers. Significantly, the powers are not independent of consciousness. They are all about how conscious subjects can be *known* as imagistic objects to one another: as particular modes of *being*. But could such powers be traceable to unconditioned consciousness? Return again to the Cognisensory Deprivation Tank. In stripping our consciousness of its objects, it is tempting to think of our remaining unconditioned awareness as a passive and powerless void. But if descriptions from mystical literature are anything to go by, this notion is utterly mistaken. While consciousness may be empty of objects, it is also frequently depicted as a fullness or plenum: a unity of knowing and being whose reality transcends the illusory *tripuṭī* of knower/known/known. Our ordinary capacity to know things, even if based in illusion, is described by Ramana Maharshi as depending on our real nature as the Self, which is the very fountainhead of knowingness:

Since Self shines without another to know or be known by, it is [true] knowledge. It is not a void. Know thus. . . .Self, which is clear knowledge, alone is real. Knowledge of multiplicity is ignorance. Even this ignorance, which is unreal, cannot exist apart from the Self, which is knowledge. [Muruganar, 2004, 58]

Knowing the Self is *being* the Self, and being means existence—one's own existence—which no one denies, any more than one denies one's eyes, although one cannot see them. The trouble lies in your desire to objectify the Self, in the same way that you objectify your eyes when you place a mirror before them. You have become so accustomed to objectivity that you have lost knowledge of yourself, simply because the Self cannot be objectified. [Muruganar, 2004, 60]

Just as the materialist framework of Big Bang theory posits a singularity of infinite density that explodes forth as the physical universe, so too the idealist framework of Perennial Idealism posits a ‘singularity’ of knowing-being that will seem to splinter forth, through a subject’s waking dream, as the duality of knower and known. I think it not implausible, on our idealist framework, that the subjects’ power to *know* and be *known* to one another—through modes of objectified *being* in the form of lawfully ordered imagery-to-a-perspective—could have their precursor in a primal nexus of knowing and being.

The Power Challenge posed a bleak prospect. The metaphysics of Perennial Idealism had rendered the general fact of a subject’s appearing to itself, with all its experiences, a brute fact. And it seemed that unconditioned consciousness, lacking structure, could not contribute anything discernible to that putative subject’s structured experience of the world, leaving all the heavy lifting to configurations of imagery. But while the *fact* of the world appearing to a subject remains (to its perspective) unavoidably brute, I hope to have shown how the *manner* of the world’s appearing may not be brute. The salient patterns and characters of manifestation could well be owed to more than just configurations of imagery happily coalescing in an orderly manner. As understood through the two-tiered model of grounding, there is reason to suppose that each major parameter within our experience—perspectivalty, space, time, causal power—bears the traceable imprint of pure consciousness as it pervades all aspects of our waking dream. Pursuing such lines of inquiry may well prove universal consciousness, on this front, to be fit for ground.

4. Conclusion

This chapter offered a novel defence of an ancient view. Four major challenges were launched at the idea that universal consciousness could ground all phenomena. Does Perennial Idealism survive the earthquake of the Thales Objection, the Problem of the One and the Many, the Self-defeating Objection and the Power Challenge? Is universal consciousness fit for ground?

The answer is an optimistic *probably*. I hope to have shown that when relativised to the standpoint of a subject, the system offers a stable enough ground on which to commence building. A fuller test of the ground’s stability has to come through the building approach itself, which is needed to properly address such objections as the Power Challenge. But having

defended the ground to the extent offered here, I would say that Perennial Idealism, inspired by the vision of mystics, is a serious contender in the mind-body debate.²⁹

²⁹ I am grateful to David Godman, David Builes and Uriah Kriegel for their insightful feedback on this chapter and to Andrew Milne for discussion in relation to the Kant section.

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