

The problem of The One and The World¹

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1. Can The World stand outside of The One?

This question won't make any sense if you think it's all just atoms spinning in a void. Or vibrating strings, abstract numbers, or immaterial souls. More generally, it won't make sense if you think that reality consists in a *multitude of independent beings*.

No, the question only arises if you think there is a very special being: something that either *is*, or *is the source of*, everything there is. On the first disjunct we have *existence monism*, the view that there is literally *just one being*. This is a very strong view indeed, as it entails that there is no numerical diversity at all! The second disjunct, by contrast, allows for numerical diversity but maintains that everything *is produced by* a single being. Here I use 'produced' liberally to include a number of relationships. On the one hand, it might be something like metaphysical grounding or ontological dependence, resulting in what is known as *priority monism*. On this view there is just one *metaphysically fundamental* being and everything else stands to it as, say, a set stands to its members or a smile to the face that smiles. Alternatively, the relationship might be more akin to creation or causal production, resulting in a view that I'll call here *creationism* (for want of a better word). This view might be something short of priority monism proper, insofar as it is no longer true that the produced entities are *metaphysically grounded* in the distinguished being. Nonetheless, they all 'owe their existence' to the distinguished being in an important sense, so the view resembles priority monism insofar as it postulates this intimate relationship between the produced entities and the producer. Either way, all these views posit a distinguished being: something that either is, or is the source of, everything there is. I will call this distinguished being The One.²

What exactly is The One? Some say it's the entire material cosmos. Jonathan Schaffer has recently developed this idea as priority monism, arguing that any proper part of the cosmos, such as a tree or a flower, is grounded in the whole cosmos; while Terence Horgan and Matjaž Potrč have developed it as existence monism, arguing that (strictly speaking) there are no such things

¹ I owe a deep debt of gratitude to Miri Albahari for showing me that there is a problem here in the first place—this paper would not exist but for conversations with her. She calls it the problem of the One and the *Many* (Albahari 2019, 2024), but I came to think that 'The World' might be a more fitting descriptor. I suspect the difference here is largely verbal, though this might need further discussion to clarify. As readers may be aware, something like the problem has recurred in numerous guises throughout the ages, often in different forms but with a similar underlying structure (the problem itself is both *one* and *many*). I believe that Albahari has isolated a particularly striking form of the problem, and it is this on which the problem I set out in section 1 is based. I then distinguish three versions of the problem in sections 2-4, and I am not entirely sure which (if any) Albahari had in mind. On this and other matters I look forward to further conversations.

² It is standard practice in the metaphysics literature to classify existence and priority monism together under a general category, *monism*, that excludes views like creationism. This is not wrong *per se* (categorization schemes are our tools not our masters), but for our purposes it makes more sense to focus on a category of views that posit such a thing as The One in the broad sense explained in the text, which includes creationism along with the two monisms. The reason for this will become apparent as we proceed.

as trees or flowers, there is just the entire material cosmos.³ Others have maintained that The One is an immaterial being such as the Abrahamic God or the ‘first principle’ of Neoplatonists like Plotinus. This idea is normally developed as a kind of priority monism or creationism, on which trees and flowers and everything around us are grounded in, or created by, a single immaterial source.

I said that our question arises only if there is such a thing as The One. Moreover, it arises only if you think that The One is *unlimited*. I will examine what this could mean, exactly, but the rough idea is that The One is all-encompassing, unbounded, unconstrained. It leaves nothing out. It is maximal, complete, all-inclusive. ‘That than which no greater can be conceived’—that kind of thing.

For in that case, what are we to make of *all this*? The trees and flowers in my garden, the planets and stars seen in the night sky, and indeed the people who see them: *what are they*? They all seem real enough, and indeed distinct from The One. But if so, isn’t The One *limited* after all? Wouldn’t there be a *boundary* encompassing The One, a *separation* between it and the trees and flowers and planets and stars?⁴ As a shorthand, I will use ‘The World’ as an umbrella term for *all this* (gesturing around me). Then our question concerns the relationship between The World and The One: if The World is real and distinct from The One, doesn’t it follow that The One is *limited*? Wouldn’t The One + The World be *greater than* The One on its own? In a nutshell: if The One is unlimited, *how is it possible for The World to stand outside of The One*?

The puzzle here can be put in the form of an inconsistent triad:

- (1) The One is unlimited.
- (2) The World is real and distinct from The One.
- (3) If The World is real and distinct from The One, then The One is limited.

Claim (1) is just a place-holder for now, for there is much to say about what it could mean to be ‘unlimited’. I will soon distinguish three senses of the term, and therefore three versions of the puzzle. But in each case, I will simply assume claim (1). I want to understand what the relationship between The One and The World could be *if* The One is unlimited in each sense.

Claim (2) is easier to clarify. By calling something ‘real’, I just mean to say that it exists. So, anyone who thinks *that there are trees* (or planets, or electrons...) is immediately committed to saying that The World is real. And by ‘distinct’, I just mean *numerical* distinctness. So, anyone who thinks that the tree in my garden is numerically distinct from The One is immediately committed to saying that The World is distinct from The One. So understood, priority monists

³ The canonical statement of Schaffer’s priority monism is (Schaffer 2010a); see also (Schaffer 2007, 2009, 2010b, 2010c, and 2013). I have slurred over many aspects of his view, not least the fact that his monism is restricted to concreta, but the gist is good enough for now. For Horgan and Potrč’s existence monism, see (Horgan and Potrč 2000, 2006, and 2012). Spinoza is often interpreted as offering a monism on which The One is something akin to the cosmos (see e.g. Bennett (1984)), though others have interpreted him as offering an ‘acosmism’ monism that denies the reality of the cosmos altogether (see Melamed (2010) for discussion). I will not attempt to engage in Spinoza interpretation here.

⁴ As Albahari (2024) puts it, ‘the very distinction between the ground and the grounded... imposes a boundary between them, thereby placing a limitation on what is supposed to be unlimited’.

and creationists are both committed to (2) by definition. For they both maintain that Worldly items like trees and flowers are *produced* by The One, and production is (by definition) not numerical identity. On both these views, therefore, (2) is non-negotiable and the *only* wiggle room is to reject claim (3).

It's only *existence* monists who can reject claim (2). On their view, there is no numerical diversity in the first place: there is nothing other than The One, and hence no World that is distinct from The One. And then there's no puzzle about the relationship between The One and The World; there is just The One. But the cost is that this appears to fly right in the face of *Moorean truths*: i.e., obvious platitudes that any reasonable person must accept. For isn't it an obvious platitude that the tree in my garden is numerically distinct from the flower beneath it? If so, then at least one of them is distinct from The One and we are back to (2). So, while existence monists can avoid this puzzle by rejecting (2), the cost, it seems, is denying Moorean truths that cannot be reasonably denied. Those who believe in an unlimited One will presumably want to avoid this cost if possible!

But can they? It depends. As we'll see in sections 2-3, there are two well-known versions of the puzzle on which we can perfectly well reject claim (3)—versions of the puzzle, that is, which are based on notions of limitation on which one can maintain that The One is unlimited *even if* The World is real and distinct from it. These versions of the puzzle are therefore not so puzzling: they do not *force* us to reject the reality of The World or its distinctness from The One.

But in section 4, I will develop a third and lesser-known version of the puzzle on which we simply *cannot* reject (3). It is based on a particular notion of unlimitedness, *perspectival* unlimitedness, that I believe can be found in reports of mystical experiences and on which an unlimited One rules out the reality and distinctness of The World from the get-go. On this version of the puzzle, (3) is non-negotiable and the *only* wiggle-room is to reject (2). This requires *existence* monism, of course, but not any old existence monism will do. For I'll argue in section 5 that it is in fact not clear how existence monists can make sense of a perspectivally unlimited One. So in sections 6-9, I will sketch a distinctive kind of existence monism that promises to make sense of a perspectivally unlimited One and which also, quite surprisingly, preserves the Moorean truths we cannot deny! I don't claim that the specific monism I'll develop is the only view that does the trick, but I do hope to show that the puzzle of perspectival limitation is a significant and under-explored challenge for those who believe in unlimited beings, and that meeting the challenge involves re-thinking what existence monism might amount to.

2. Axiological limitation

So, let us begin by distinguishing our three notions of limitation. The first is axiological. To say that The One is unlimited in this sense is to say that it is unlimited *in perfection*. It is maximally good. It has maximal value. It cannot be made better. On this reading, our inconsistent triad becomes this:

- (A1) The One is unlimited in perfection.
- (A2) The World is real and distinct from The One.

- (A3) If The World is real and distinct from The One, then The One is limited in perfection.

The first claim, (A1), has a rich history in Abrahamic theology and Neoplatonist metaphysics, where The One is said to exemplify, or perhaps even *be*, maximal goodness and perfection. Insofar as these views count as creationism or priority monism, on which trees and flowers are created by or grounded in The One (but are not The One itself), we have (A2).

The puzzle arises once we note that the tree in my garden has positive value. After all, isn't it *good* that it is there? Isn't my garden a *better place* thanks to the tree? But if the tree *adds value* to my garden and yet is distinct from The One, doesn't it follow that The One is limited in perfection after all? More generally, the rationale for (A3) is that The World has some positive value; hence the value of The One + The World must be greater than the value of The One alone; hence The One is *limited* in perfection after all. Thus we have (A3) and an inconsistent triad.

This axiological puzzle is not so puzzling, for there is plenty of room to deny (A3). For example, one might say, following Mark Johnston (2019), that the value of The One is *infinite* while the value of The World is *finite*. Since 'adding' a finite cardinal to an infinite cardinal is no greater than the infinite cardinal, it follows that the value of The One + The World is no greater than the value of The One. So, even if The World is real and distinct from The One, and even if The World has some finite positive value, it remains that The One is unlimited in perfection. (A3) is false.

Another option might be to say, following apophatic theologians such as Pseudo-Dionysius, that the *kind* of value exhibited by The One is categorically different from, and incomparable to, the kind of value exhibited by Worldly items such as the tree. The latter kind of value is but a cheap imitation of the former, and we Worldly creatures are perhaps unable to even conceive of the former. The fact that my tree has positive value in the cheap, Worldly sense then has no bearing on the unlimited perfection of The One.

To be clear, I'm not saying that either solution is clearly correct or unproblematic. I'm just saying that those who maintain that The One is unlimited *in perfection* will find plenty of slack in *this* notion of limitation to coherently reject (A3). We are not yet forced to deny the reality of The World or its distinctness from The One.

3. Ontological limitation

A second notion of limitation is ontological. To say that The One is unlimited in this sense is to say that it is unlimited *in being*. It accounts for everything that there is. It leaves nothing out. It leaves no room for any more being. On this reading, our inconsistent triad becomes this:

- (O1) The One is unlimited in being.
- (O2) The World is real and distinct from The One.
- (O3) If The World is real and distinct from The One, then The One is limited in being.

The first claim, (O1), also has a rich history in Abrahamic theology, particularly on views like Avicenna's on which God *is* existence or being itself. It is also baked into priority monism, on which The One is the metaphysical ground of all being.

But if the tree in my garden is *numerically distinct* from The One, *per* (O2), doesn't The One 'leave something out' after all? Doesn't it follow that The One 'left room' for *something else*, namely the tree? If so, isn't The One limited in being after all? Thus we have (O3) and an inconsistent triad.

This puzzle is also not so puzzling, for there is (as before) plenty of room to reject the third claim (O3). At least, there is on the *priority monist* view that The World is grounded in The One. For one can reasonably say, following Jonathan Schaffer (2015), that grounded entities are 'no addition to being' over their grounds. Once the ground is in place, the idea is, grounded entities are a 'free ontological lunch'. To see the point, consider the smile on my daughter's face. And let's take that seriously: there really is an entity, *the smile*, that is numerically distinct from her face (just think of their different persistence conditions). Nonetheless, the smile is presumably grounded in (or depends on) her face: it's a *modification of* her face. In this case, there is I think a clear sense in which the smile is 'no addition to being' over and above the face.⁵ Likewise, even if worldly entities like the tree in my garden are numerically distinct from The One, priority monists can reasonably maintain that they are 'no addition to being' over The One insofar as they stand to The One as a smile does to the face. In that sense, The One is unlimited in being *even if* The World is real and distinct from it. (O3) is false.

As before, I don't mean to suggest that this solution is entirely unproblematic. For one thing, more must be said about the *conception* of ground that is needed to validate this idea that grounded entities are 'no addition to being' over their grounds.⁶ And even if grounded *entities* are no addition over their grounds, there is a further question whether the grounds' *properties* count as an addition to it; I'll come to this in section 5. For now, I just mean to say that priority monists will find plenty of slack in *this* notion of unlimitedness to coherently reject (O3), at least as it pertains to the relation between grounded *entities* and their grounds.

What about *creationists*, who maintain that The World is created by, but not grounded in, The One? This solution may not be available to them, for it is not obvious that *created* entities are 'no addition to being' over and above their creator. If The One is unlimited in being, therefore, perhaps this motivates priority monism over creationism. Still, there does not appear to be much of a puzzle here for priority monists.

In sum, the axiological and ontological puzzles are not so puzzling. Even if The World is real and distinct from The One, there is room to maintain that The World 'adds nothing' in terms of

⁵ Schaffer (2015) argues for this claim in depth; here I am just articulating its intuitive plausibility.

⁶ In particular, it is not clear to me that Schaffer's own conception of grounding, developed in Schaffer (2016) and (2017), is compatible with the claim that grounded entities are 'no addition to being' over their grounds. On Schaffer's view, grounding required a host of 'grounding laws' that generate the grounded from their grounds, and aren't those grounding laws themselves something additional over the grounds? But I won't try to settle this here.

perfection or being over The One and therefore that The One is unlimited in perfection and being. Neither puzzle forces us to deny that The World is real and distinct from The One.

4. Perspectival limitation

But I believe there is another puzzle that does. It is based on a third notion of limitation which is not axiological or ontological but *perspectival*. Very roughly, to say that The One is unlimited in this perspectival sense is to say that it is so all-encompassing that it leaves no room for a standpoint ‘outside itself’, so to speak, from which one can perceive it, represent it, or in any other way have a *point of view on* it, relating to it as subject to object. And more than that: it’s to say that The One is so all-encompassing that it leaves no room for a standpoint from which a subject can have a point of view on *anything!* It is so all-consuming, that is, that it swallows up any distinction between subject and object, leaving no room for the possibility of having a point of view on things in the first place.

This notion of perspectival unlimitedness is less familiar than the axiological and ontological notions just discussed. But it can be found, I think, in reports of mystical experiences. These experiences have been documented across a wide range of times and cultures, and typically exhibit a number of common features.⁷ One core feature involves an obliteration of distinctions, including the distinction between self and world. Thus, mystics often report experiences in which it was revealed to them (i) that ‘all things are one’; or (ii) that they are ‘one’ with reality (or God); and sometimes even (iii) that their sense of being a ‘separate self’, something that peers out at the world from some perspective inside their skin, had dissolved. It is this third aspect of these experiences, the dissolution of a ‘separate self’, that corresponds to the idea that The One is unlimited in perspective. But it’s a subtle idea, so I’ll build up to it slowly by distinguishing it from the first two aspects.

The first aspect—the revelation that ‘all things are one’—is, in effect, just an expression of *monism* of some kind or another. We find it in Plotinus, who claimed to have had a number of mystical-type experiences which led to him writing

Each being contains within itself the whole intelligible world. Therefore all is everywhere. Each is there all and all is each.⁸

Meister Eckhart, writing almost a millennium later in 13th Century Germany, apparently saw things similarly:

All that a man has here externally in multiplicity is intrinsically One. Here all blades of grass, wood, and stone, all things are One. This is the deepest depth.⁹

⁷ James (1903) contains a compendious collection of such reports; see also Stace (1960) and Yaden and Newberg (2022).

⁸ Quoted in Stace (1960), p. 77.

⁹ Quoted in Stace (1960), p. 63.

But it perhaps most striking in the writings of Sri Ramakrishna, the 19th Century Bengali mystic. Apparently, he once took food left as an offering to a deity and fed it to a stray cat. When confronted, explained himself thus:

The Divine Mother revealed to me that... it was she who had become everything... That was why I fed a cat with the food that was to be offered to the Divine Mother. I clearly perceived that all this *was* the Divine Mother—even the cat.¹⁰

He appears to be saying that the cat *is* the Divine Mother! And presumably there is nothing special about the cat: if we take him seriously then *you*, dear reader, are the Divine Mother too! We will return to this point later; for now, it suffices to note that what we find in these reports is just an expression of a *monist* metaphysics of some kind. It's not (yet) the dissolution of self we're after.

The second aspect—the revelation that *the mystic* is 'one' with reality—is closer, for it involves a merging of self and world. We find this again in a report from Plotinus:

I awakened out of the body into myself... when I saw a marvelous beauty and was confident, then if ever, that I belonged to a higher order, when I actively enjoyed the noblest form of life, when I had become one with the Divine and stabilized myself in the Divine.¹¹

He became *one with the Divine*. It is not clear whether this 'oneness' is to be understood as numerical identity, but Mahmoud Shabestari, writing in 14th Century Persia, is more explicit:

Every man whose heart is no longer shaken by any doubt, knows with certainty that there is no being save only One... In his divine majesty the ME, and WE, the THOU, are not found, for in the One there can be no distinction. Every being who is annulled and entirely separated from himself, hears resound outside him this voice and this echo: I AM GOD.¹²

The One is so all-encompassing, says Shabestari, that there 'can be no distinction' between him and *it*.

As striking as this is, the third aspect of mystical experience—the dissolution of self—is more striking still. It is related to the second aspect insofar as both involve a merging of self and world (or God). But while the second aspect involves the self considered *as an object*, this third aspect involves the self considered *as subject*—the 'subjective self', as I'll call it. By this I mean the subject of thought, perception, desire, and so on. It is that which thinks, that which perceives, that which desires; and more generally, that which takes a *point of view* on things, relating to them as subject to object. Thus, while the second aspect involved collapsing the distinction between one's self *considered as object* and the rest of reality, here what collapses is the distinction between subject and object itself—between that which thinks and that which is thought, between perceiver and perceived, between the representer and the represented. The very

¹⁰ Quoted in Stace (1960), p. 77.

¹¹ Quoted in Dodds (1965), pp. 84-5.

¹² Quoted in James (1903), p. 318.

idea of having a ‘point of view’ on things, of peering out at the world from some perspective inside one’s skin, dissolves.

This is to my mind the more interesting aspect of mystical experience, and it will take some doing to understand it. But we find a hint of it, I think, in this remarkable report of an encounter with God from Bayazid Bastami in 9th Century Persia:

Once He raised me up and stationed me before Him, and said to me “O Abu Yazid, truly my creation desire to see thee.” I said “Adorn me in Thy Unity and clothe me in Thy Selfhood, and raise me up to Thy Oneness so that when Thy creation see me they will say, We have seen Thee: and Thou wilt be That, and I shall not be there at all.”¹³

Clothe me in Thy Selfhood, says Bastami, *and I shall not be there at all*. Note that it’s God’s *selfhood* that clothes him, suggesting that it’s not just Bastami *the object* that won’t be there but that his *subjective self* won’t be there either. On this reading, it’s his subjective self that gets swallowed up in this unity with God.

This may also be what Al-Junayd, of 9th Century Baghdad, meant when he wrote

The saint... is submerged in the ocean by unity, by passing away from himself... He leaves behind him his own feelings and actions as he passes into the life with God.¹⁴

The saint passes away *from himself*, leaving behind *his own feelings and actions*. Again, this suggests that it’s not just the saint *considered as another object in the world* that merges with God, but that the saint’s *point of view on things*—including the feelings that shape his practical stance on the world and out of which he acts—dissolves as he ‘passes into the life with God’.

But this dissolution of self is particularly explicit in yet another report from Plotinus:

Perhaps one can argue that... there are two things, the seer and the seen, and that both are not one. This argument is indeed rash. For at the time [of union with The One], the seeing self neither sees nor discerns, nor imagines two things, but has, in a way, become another, and not oneself.¹⁵

At the time of union, there is no distinction between the seer and the seen—indeed, the ‘seeing self’ does not *see* and is no longer *oneself*! The subjective self has dissolved.¹⁶

This is heady stuff, to put it mildly! But there’s no need to *understand* what’s going on just yet. We are just at the stage of *characterizing the phenomena* here, not yet offering a theory of what it amounts to (I’ll come to that later). And this is all we need to set out the *perspectival*

¹³ Quoted in Stace (1960), pp. 56-7.

¹⁴ Quoted in Stace (1960), p. 115.

¹⁵ Enneads 6.9.10. Translation by Gerson (2018).

¹⁶ To be clear, I am using these reports from Bastami, Al Junayd, and Plotinus to draw out this third aspect of mystical experience, but I make no claim that my interpretations are correct. My aim here is not exegetical accuracy. Rather, I am using their reports to illustrate the sense of ‘dissolution of self’ that *I* have in mind, regardless of *their* intended meanings.

puzzle of limitation. To say that The One is unlimited *in perspective* is just to say that it dissolves the subjective self. It is so all-encompassing that it swallows up the very distinction between subject and object, leaving no room (so to speak) to relate to anything *as* subject to object. Thus the possibility of having a particular *point of view* on a world outside of oneself, with opinions on what it is like and how one would like it to be, is obliterated by The One. Indeed, the possibility of having a point of view *on oneself* is also obliterated, for that would require a distinction between the self *qua subject* and the self *qua object* and a perspectively unlimited One leaves no room even for *that*! As I interpret this third aspect of mystical experience, what is revealed is that The One is unlimited in *this* sense.¹⁷

So understood, our inconsistent triad becomes this:

- (P1) The One is unlimited in perspective.
- (P2) The World is real and distinct from The One.
- (P3) If The World is real and distinct from The One, then The One is limited in perspective.

(P1) says that The One dissolves the subjective self, but—to be clear—this does not necessarily entail that there is no subject whatsoever. What it entails is that if there is a subject, it is so unlimited that it consumes all possible objects of thought within itself and leaves no room to relate them *as subject to object*. It would be a *universal subject* with no object, so to speak—an all-consuming awareness, perhaps, leaving no room for awareness *of* anything. I will call this kind of thing a ‘cosmic self’, and (P1) as I intend it is consistent with the idea that The One is a self of this kind. Bastami talked of being consumed by God’s *selfhood*, after all. (P1) is also consistent, of course, with the idea that The One obliterates any kind of subject or self whatsoever. Either way, what (P1) says is that The One leaves no room for what I called a *subjective self*, i.e. a subject with a perspective *on* things.

This then is the *perspectival* puzzle of limitation. And this time, it is difficult to see how one could possibly reject the third claim, (P3). For suppose The World is real and distinct from The One. The World includes things like trees and flowers, remember; but it also includes people like you and me who *perceive* trees and flowers, *think about* them, *desire* them, and more generally take a *point of view* on them, relating to them as subject to object. Which is to say that The World includes *subjective selves*. But if subjective selves are real and distinct from The One, this immediately implies that The One is *not* unlimited in perspective after all. It does *not* obliterate the distinction between subject and object and hence does *not* dissolve the subjective self. The subjective self is still there! Thus, there does not appear to be any wiggle room in *this* notion of unlimitedness to coherently reject (P3).

¹⁷ I should emphasize that the dissolution of self characterized here is much stronger than the kind of ‘no self’ view one finds in Derek Parfit (1984) and related Buddhist schools of thought described in Garfield (2022). For those views allow that mental *time-slices* can take a point of view on the world, relating to it as subject to object; what they deny is that there is a further ‘self’ lying behind all that with which to unify a collection mental time-slices as time-slices *of* the same self. Those views therefore leave the subjective self (as I use the term) in place—or more accurately, they maintain that each person is an enormous collection of distinct subjective selves.

The problem here is particularly vivid for creationists, who maintain that The World is created or causally produced by The One. They will of course say that perceiving subjects and perceived objects share a common cause or creator. But so what? According to creationism, *they are still there!* It doesn't matter what caused or created them: so long as they are still there, The One has *not* swallowed up all perspective after all. For all creationism says, there remains room (so to speak) for one to have a *point of view* on things, relating to them as subject to object.

But the problem is no less pressing for priority monists. They will of course insist that perceiving subjects and perceived objects share a common *ground*. But again, so what? According to priority monists, *they are still there!* It doesn't matter what grounds them: so long as they are still there, The One has *not* swallowed up all perspective after all. Just like creationism, there remains room (on this view) for one to have a point of view on things, relating to them as subject to object.

Admittedly, the relation of ground is metaphysically more 'intimate' than causation or creation: there is less metaphysical 'distance', so to speak, between the ground and the grounded than there is between cause and effect. This is what allowed priority monists to say that The World is 'no addition to being' over The One and hence that The One is unlimited in *being*, as we saw in section 3. But what of it? Even if we grant that perceiving subjects and perceived objects are 'no addition to being' over The One, the fact remains that *they are still there!* There remain subjects with points of view *on* the world around them, that is, so it follows (by definition) that The One has *not* swallowed up all perspective.

For these reasons, I see no room in *this* notion of limitation to coherently reject the third claim (P3). The World includes perceiving (thinking, desiring...) *subjects* with a point of view *on objects* around them (and perhaps themselves). So *if* that is real and distinct from The One, *then* The One has not swallowed up all perspective after all. The distinction between subject and object is still there. It is therefore difficult to see how creationists and priority monists—who (by definition) maintain that The World *is* real and distinct from The One—can coherently reject (P3).

Could they not just deny that The World includes subjects with perspectives on objects? For example, could they not just be eliminativists about representational states with subject-object structure?¹⁸ They could, of course, but that would be to misunderstand the puzzle of perspectival limitation. If The One is unlimited in perspective, it's not just that there *happens* to be no subjects with perspectives on things; it's that The One *by its nature* rules out any distinction between subject and object for that to be possible. And it is hard to see how The One could do that without ruling out all distinctions whatsoever. For as soon as there is numerical diversity in The World, as creationists and priority monists allow, there appears to be nothing that rules out arranging that numerical diversity in ways that would constitute subjects with perspectives on objects. Brains and eye-balls, neurons and photons, immaterial souls interacting with matter—whatever it is that you think could possibly constitute a *subjective self* must be ruled out by The One. The problem, it seems, is *numerical diversity* itself. Thus, for The One to be unlimited in perspective, it must be a One that swallows up all numerical diversity from the get-go. It must be a One, that is, that rules out a World that is real and distinct from it.

¹⁸ See Churchland (1981) and Stich (1983) for views in this vicinity.

Here then we have a problem of limitation that *forces* us to reject the second claim, (P2). To maintain that the One is unlimited in perspective, we must deny that The World is real and distinct from The One. We must therefore give up on creationism and priority monism and look to *existence* monism instead.

5. Existence monism to the rescue?

But not just any old existence monism will do.

To see this, consider the existence monism of Horgan and Potrč. On their view, there is one and only one being: the entire material cosmos. Since that is the *only* being, it must have no proper parts. So on their view there are (strictly speaking) no trees, no flowers, no perceivers—nothing but the entire material cosmos. On first glance, this looks like a view on which there is no World distinct from The One.

But things aren't so simple, for they also claim that the cosmos possesses a complex distributional property P. This is important for them, for they want the cosmos to have enough structure to make Moorean claims like 'there are trees' *correctly assertible*, even if they're not strictly speaking *true*, and this structure is given by P. We can think of P as a property that might be expressed thus:

the property of treeing-here-and-flowering-there-and...

Strictly speaking, the possession of this property does imply *that there are trees*. It's just a complex distributional property with 'tree-ish' structure, as it were, so as to render Moorean claims correctly assertible in ordinary conversational contexts. They are correct in virtue of "indirectly corresponding" to P, to use their terminology.

Now, one question is whether this amounts to giving up on existence monism. For don't we now have *two* things, the cosmos *and* its distributional property P? This is not just the verbal issue of whether their view deserves the title 'existence monism'. Rather, the substantial issue is that if there now two 'things' then we appear to land straight back in the *ontological* puzzle of limitation. For if P is real and distinct from the cosmos, doesn't it follow that the cosmos itself is *limited* in being? The question is pressing because the Schafferian resolution of the puzzle from section 3 is not obviously available here. After all, the relation of *being instantiated by*, that P bears to the cosmos, is not the relation of *being grounded in*. So, even if grounded entities are 'no addition to being' over their grounds, as Schaffer maintains, it is not at all clear that P is 'no addition to being' over the cosmos. To the contrary, P is something that Horgan and Potrč *added* to the cosmos in order to vindicate the Moorean claims!¹⁹

A second (and related) question concerns the puzzle of *perspectival* limitation. If P is a complex property with 'tree-ish' structure, so as to make Moorean claims like 'there are trees'

¹⁹ This question arises for *priority* monists just as much as it does for existence monists. For if priority monists say that The One has some property that accounts for its apparent structure and perhaps even the entities it grounds, would this property not be an 'addition to being' over The One?

assertible, wouldn't it also be a property with 'perceiving-ish' structure, so as to make Moorean claims like "I perceive a tree" assertible too? That is, a property we might express thus:

the property of treeing-here-and-flowering-there-*and-perceiving-a-tree-here-and-being-perceived-there*...

Put otherwise, if P contains structure that "indirectly corresponds" to our ordinary talk of trees, I see no reason why it wouldn't also contain structure that "indirectly corresponds" to our ordinary talk of *subjective selves*. If so, the view does not dissolve subjective selves; it just re-locates them into the complex distributional property P! Even on this so-called existence monism, therefore, The One does not seem to swallow up all perspective at all. To the contrary, there appears to be plenty of room for a distinction between subject and object—or at least, something corresponding to this distinction within the structure of the complex distributional property P.

Of course, we could avoid both problems by denying that the cosmos has this complex distributional property P in the first place. The view would then be that there is *just one being*, The One, devoid of any kind of form or attribute or structure whatsoever. But it is hard to see how a formless being could possibly vindicate Moorean claims like 'there are trees', so we would be left having to deny the undeniable. The view would be too unMoorean to take seriously.

To be clear, this is no objection to Horgan and Potrč, for they never claimed that the cosmos is unlimited in being or perspective. Rather, the point is that we have here a general challenge for *any* existence monist who wants to maintain that The One is unlimited in these respects. The challenge can be put in the form of a dilemma. On the one hand, if we say that there is just The One *and that's it*, we appear to have no resources with which to vindicate Moorean claims which (let's be honest) we cannot reasonably deny. But on the other hand, if we attribute to The One some property or structure in order to vindicate these Moorean claims, we appear to lose the idea that The One is unlimited in being and perspective in the first place.

This is not to say that we must give up on existence monism altogether. Indeed, we saw in the last section that to make sense of a One that is unlimited *in perspective*, priority monism and creationism won't do: we need an *existence* monism on which The World is not real and distinct from The One. What we've now seen that not just any old existence monism will do either—certainly not anything like what we find in Horgan and Potrč. Those who believe in unlimited beings therefore need a different kind of existence monism altogether, one that steers between the horns of the dilemma just identified.

6. Immanent monism

I believe there is an existence monism that does the trick. But to see what it is, we have to rethink our approach to monism afresh.²⁰

²⁰ This section and the next three are drawn from, and overlap substantially with, a manuscript titled "Immanent Monism" (available on my website) where I develop the view that follows in much more detail.

To this end, note that all the monist views discussed so far have something in common: they all agree that The One is *not something around here*. It is not the tree in front of me or the flower beneath it. It is not something I can hug, or hold. According to Schaffer’s priority monism, for example, The One is the entire cosmos, something that grounds the tree but is not the tree itself. When I hug the tree, I do not hug the source of all reality. Likewise for Neoplatonists like Plotinus, for whom The One is an immaterial ‘first principle’. On his view the flower is grounded in The One, but when I hold the flower I am not holding The One itself. The source of all reality is not *right here* in my hands. And of course for Horgan and Potrč there is strictly speaking nothing in my hands in the first place (nor any hands, for that matter). I therefore classify all these monisms as “transcendent” insofar as The One is not something around here.

According to what I call “immanent” monism, by contrast, The One is *right here amongst us*. It is the tree, it is the flower, it is ground we walk on and the air we breathe. Thus in hugging the tree I embrace *all being!* When I hold the flower, I hold all of reality *right here in my hands!* By this I do not just mean that The One is “within” the flower in some metaphysical sense—that way lies priority monism, on which the flower is numerically distinct from The One “within” it, and it is then not so clear that in holding the flower I hold all of reality. No, I have in mind an existence monism on which there is just one being; and this being *is* the tree and *is* the flower and indeed *is* me and *is* you! All these are numerically one, and each one is all of reality, and any appearance to the contrary is a massive illusion.

This is the kind of picture one finds in Advaita (or ‘nondual’) Vedānta, a school of Hindu philosophy generally traced back to the 8th Century Keralan scholar Adi Shankara. According to this school, there is one and only one being, Brahman, and everything in The World is nothing other than Brahman cloaked in illusion. This kind of monism has been largely overlooked in Anglophone philosophy, but I believe it’s just what we’re looking for: a view which entails that The One is unlimited in both being and perspective, while also vindicating our beloved Moorean truths. In what follows, I will develop an immanent monism along Vedāntic lines—which I call ‘Vedāntic monism’—and show how it delivers these goods. I won’t argue that this is the only (or best) variety of immanent monism that does the trick, but I offer it here as one example and invite readers to explore others. I also won’t argue that the view is *true*, just that it promises to satisfy those who believe in unlimited beings.²¹

I should stress that while the view I’ll develop is inspired by Advaita Vedānta, I will not do any serious scholarship to show that it is an accurate rendition of Vedāntic texts such as the Upanishads or Shankara’s commentaries. This is a Vedāntic monism, not necessarily a representation of Advaita Vedānta proper. I will as an acknowledgement (and with due apologies) use “Brahman” to name The One, but I will not assume that it has any theistic attributes sometimes associated with it in Hindu contexts. I will not, for example, assume that it has (or is)

²¹ For those losing track of labels: immanent monism is a sub-category of existence monism, defined to include any existence monism which maintains that The One is right here amongst us (it is the tree, it is the flower, etc.). And Vedāntic monism is the particular version of immanent monism I develop here. The monism of Segal (2014) *may* count as another immanent view, though that hangs on subtle issues I have no space to discuss here; see my manuscript “Immanent Monism” for more on this. Immanent monism might remind you of pantheism, but the connection between the two depends on details about how pantheism is to be understood and (again) there is no space to discuss these issues here; see Buckareff and Nagasawa (2016), and Buckareff (2022), for more on pantheism.

a mind or will or consciousness, nor that it has valenced attributes like benevolence or bliss.²² It will function simply as a blank ontological posit, much like the null set in set theory or regions of spacetime in physics. What follows is an exercise in pure analytic metaphysics, not theology.

7. Reality and illusion

Let me sketch Vedāntic monism in broad brush strokes before regimenting it more precisely. As I said, it maintains that there is one and only one being, Brahman—this is existence monism, not priority monism. Let us now add that Brahman is perfectly simple, devoid of form or attribute or distinction. It has no properties, no shape, no extension, no parts, no nothing. There is just Brahman *and that's it*. Any appearance to the contrary is just an illusion.

Does this mean that I am an illusion? Yes and no. According to Vedāntic monism, I exist—*therefore I am Brahman*. The tree in front of me also exists—*therefore it is Brahman too*. It follows that we are numerically identical; hence the Sanskrit aphorism “tat tvam asi”, typically translated as *that art thou*. This is one of the great sayings, or Mahāvākyas, of the Upanishads, and Vedāntic monism will verify it quite literally: the tree and I are *numerically* one and the same thing! The illusion is that we are distinct. And also that I have hands, that the tree is green, and so on: since Brahman is formless, colorless, etc., all that is illusion too.

This concept of illusion, or ‘māyā’, is central to Advaita Vedānta and will play a key role in the monism I’ll develop. But we must take care how to understand it in light of our commitment to existence monism. In Vedāntic literature it is sometimes explained by analogy to dreams. When we dream at night, a ‘dream-world’ is simulated by our brains and we are under the illusion that it is real. Advaita Vedānta, it is often said, maintains that the world we ordinarily take to be real is also a dream of sorts—an ‘illusory world’ simulated by Brahman. It stands to Brahman in something like the way my nightly dream-worlds stand to me.

But this analogy is misleading in two respects. First, my dreams are produced by complex neural activity in my brain, but Brahman lacks any complexity that might correspond to this. Brahman is perfectly simple, remember, devoid of form and attribute and distinction. And second, the denizens of my dream-worlds are not *identical* to me or my brain (just think of their different persistence conditions); rather, it’s more natural to say that they’re ‘simulated’ or ‘constituted’ by me and my brain.²³ But if that’s the model, we don’t get the *immanent* monism we want. We don’t want to say that trees and flowers are ‘simulated’ or ‘constituted’ by Brahman, for that way lies priority monism. No, we want to say that trees and flowers *are* Brahman: we need a model on which there is *just one thing* there, not one thing simulated by another.²⁴

Thankfully, Vedantic literature also explains the notion of ‘māyā’ by analogy with *pretense* or *performance*, and this I think is a better model for our purposes. When an actor walks on stage

²² Albahari (2019, 2024) develops a monist metaphysics, inspired by Vedāntic texts, on which all of reality is grounded in a single cosmic consciousness. Albahari’s view may be more attractive to those who think that consciousness is a key component of Vedāntic metaphysics; I will return to this in section 11. The Vedāntic metaphysics I present here, in which consciousness is not built into Brahman, may be closer to Eliot Deutsch’s (1969) interpretation of Advaita Vedānta; see my manuscript “Immanent Monism” for more on this.

²³ See Chalmers (2022) for a view of computer simulation along these lines.

²⁴ Ganeri (2024) offers an interpretation of Vedāntic texts along these lines.

they present in character, not as who they really are. Nonetheless, there is just one thing on stage, *the actor*, presenting in a fictional manner. For example, consider Stanley Kubrick's 1964 film *Dr. Strangelove*, in which Peter Sellers plays Lionel Mandrake, an officer from the Royal Air Force stationed with US General Jack D. Ripper. After Ripper orders a nuclear strike on the Soviet Union, Mandrake realizes that Ripper has gone insane and tries to find the recall codes. Now, when Sellers is on set playing the role of Mandrake, there aren't *two* things there, Sellers and Mandrake. There's just one thing, Sellers, *pretending to be Mandrake*.

This is how I propose to model Vedāntic monism. When we said it's an illusion that the tree is green, what's going on is that Brahman is *pretending to be* a green tree. But it's not that there are *two* things here, Brahman and the tree. There's just one thing, Brahman, *pretending to be a green tree*. Of course, Brahman is not *really* a green tree, for Brahman is devoid of form and attribute. But that's just like acting: when Sellers is on set he presents *in character*, not as who he *really is*, and so it is with Brahman as it presents in māyā.

Moreover, Sellers plays *three* roles in Kubrick's film: Mandrake, Dr. Strangelove, and US President Muffley. But there aren't three distinct things on set; there is just one thing, Sellers, *pretending to be three different people*. Likewise, Brahman pretends to be (at least) three things: the tree, myself, and my hands. But there aren't three distinct things here; there is just one thing, Brahman, *pretending to be three different things*.

So this is the core picture. There is Brahman *as it really is*, one and perfectly simple; and there is Brahman *as it presents in māyā*, as a tree that's green and me with hands.

Before I regiment this picture more precisely, let me make two clarifications. First, I'm thinking of māyā on the model of fictional *performance*, not fiction in the abstract. To see the difference, imagine being on the set of *Dr. Strangelove* watching Kubrick film Peter Sellers in the role of Mandrake, searching for recall codes. There are two things you could say about what's going on. One is a claim about the fiction as expressed in the script, such as

In the fiction of *Dr. Strangelove*, Mandrake searches for recall codes.

This is a claim about the fiction in the abstract, independent of the performance you're watching. But you could also say,

Sellers is pretending to be Mandrake, searching for recall codes.

This is a claim about the *performance* in front of you. It describes what it is in reality (Peter Sellers) that performs the fiction (of searching for recall codes). I am proposing to model Brahman's illusion (māyā) with the second kind of claim. Instead of saying

In the illusion, the tree is green.

we will say something more like

Brahman is pretending to be the tree, which is green.

But—and this is the second clarification—we must take care how to understand this talk of “pretense”. When Peter Sellers pretends to be Mandrake searching for recall codes, he does so by *really* doing certain things. He leafs through real notebooks on set, he shouts “Where is it?!”, and so on. Thus, the claim

Sellers is pretending to be Mandrake, searching for recall codes.

is true in virtue of truths such as

Sellers leafs through notebooks.

Sellers shouts “Where is it?!”

These latter truths are (in and of themselves) nothing to do with the fiction, they’re just ordinary truths about what Peter Sellers is actually doing. Thus, the former claim about what Peter Sellers is *pretending to be* is true in virtue of truths about what Peter Sellers is *really doing*. By contrast, when we say that Brahman is pretending to be a tree, this cannot be understood as holding in virtue of truths about what Brahman is *really* doing. For Brahman *as it really is* is perfectly simple, devoid of form or attribute; hence there cannot be any truths about what Brahman is *really* doing in virtue of which it is pretending to be a tree. This means, I think, that we must understand the locution “...is pretending to be...”, when applied to Brahman, as a primitive mode of predication. To say that Brahman is pretending to be F is *not* to say that Brahman is F, nor that Brahman has some other attribute in virtue of which it pretends to be F. It is, rather, its own primitive mode of predication.

This fits with our core picture. We said that there is Brahman *as it really is*, and then there is Brahman *as it presents in māyā*. What we’ve now seen is that these must be understood as two independent modes of predication, neither of which holds in virtue of the other. Brahman is a coin with two sides, so to speak. Thus it would be more perspicuous to say that Brahman *is-in-reality* one way and *presents-in-māyā-as* another way, with the hyphens indicating that each is its own primitive mode of predication.

8. The logic of Vedāntic monism

To regiment this, let us introduce a copula for each primitive mode of predication: ‘is_R’ and ‘is_M’. Thus we can write

Brahman is_R...

and

Brahman is_M...

to describe Brahman as it *is-in-reality* and as it *presents-in-māyā*, respectively. Now, when saying how Brahman presents-in-māyā, we’ll want to predicate something broadly “sentential” of Brahman. After all, our claim about Sellers’ performance was not just that he is pretending to

be *Mandrake*, but that he is pretending to be *Mandrake searching for recall codes*. Likewise, we want to say not just that Brahman presents-in-māyā-as *a tree*, but that it presents-in-māyā-as a tree *which is green*. That is, we want to say

Brahman is_M the tree, which is green.

and, likewise,

Brahman is_M Shamik, who has hands.

It will therefore be convenient to turn what is predicated of Brahman into a sentential form and regiment these as follows:

Brahman is_M such that the tree is green.

Brahman is_M such that Shamik has hands.

where these are understood to say that Brahman presents-in-māyā-as something (the tree, Shamik) which is thus-and-so. So regimented, what we have is a locution

Brahman is_M such that p

which behaves, syntactically speaking, as a sentential operator that takes an ordinary English sentence p as input and outputs a statement expressing how Brahman presents-in-māyā. While not strictly necessary, it will be convenient to regiment is_R-predications likewise, i.e. as:

Brahman is_R such that p.

Thus, to say that Brahman is-in-reality the only thing that exists, I will write

Brahman is_R such that Brahman is the only thing that exists.

As a final shorthand, let us abbreviate these sentential operators as

M(p)

and

R(p)

respectively. I will often gloss the first informally as ‘in the illusion, p’ or ‘it is true in the illusion that p’; and the second as ‘in reality, p’ or ‘it is true in reality that p’. But keep in mind that these are just informal ways of expressing is_M- and is_R-predications of Brahman, as just explained.

According to Vedāntic monism, then, there are two kinds of truths. First, there are truths about Brahman as it is-in-reality, i.e. that it exists and is all:

- (1) R(Brahman exists)
- (2) R(Brahman is the only thing that exists)

And second, there are truths about Brahman as it presents-in-māyā, such as

- (3) M(the tree is green)
- (4) M(Shamik has hands)
- (5) M(Shamik perceives the tree)
- (6) M(Shamik $\neq$ the tree)

We can gloss (3) informally as “in the illusion, the tree is green”, or “it is true in the illusion that the tree is green”, so long as it is understood that the illusion is presented by Brahman, who plays the role of the tree. Likewise with (4)-(6).

Notice that in (5) and (6) Brahman plays *two* roles at once, presenting-in-māyā as Shamik and as the tree. How is this possible? Well, there is nothing mysterious about an actor playing multiple roles. Peter Sellers played *three* roles in Kubrick’s film—Mandrake, Dr. Strangelove, and US President Muffley—and there is nothing mysterious about this because Sellers shot different roles at different times. What *would* be mysterious is if he pretended to be all three characters *at once*—that is impossible because he *plays* each character in virtue of *actually doing* certain things, like leafing through notebooks or wrestling with his own arms, and what he needs to do to play Mandrake is incompatible with what he needs to do to play Dr Strangelove. But when Brahman presents-in-māyā-as a tree, remember, that is not in virtue of Brahman’s *actually doing* anything! We have already accepted that “presents-in-māyā-as” is a primitive form of predication. The fact that it is primitive may render it mysterious, for sure—I never said that Vedāntic monism was common-sensical! But once that is granted, there is no further mystery of how Brahman can at once present-in-māyā-as a tree *and* present-in-māyā-as a person (indeed, the phrase “at once” must be taken with a pinch of salt, insofar as time is part of the illusion).

With these two operators, then, we model the core idea that Brahman is a coin with two sides. There is Brahman as it is-in-reality, one and perfectly simple; and there is Brahman as it presents-in-māyā, as a plurality of distinct things with different forms.

What about the ordinary English sentences to which the R and M operators attach, such as

- (2-) Brahman is the only thing that exists.
- (3-) The tree is green.

Are they true or false? Neither: they are not complete, truth-evaluable claims. According to Vedāntic monism, the only genuine modes of predication are ‘is_M’ and ‘is_R’, and neither is identified with the ordinary English ‘is’ used in sentences (2-) and (3-). As a comparison, consider views about tense on which sentences like these only have a truth-value *at a time*: strictly speaking, they are incomplete locutions and are truth-evaluable only when “completed” (implicitly or explicitly) by a time. Likewise, according to Vedāntic monism these sentences are

incomplete locutions that are completed only by predicating them of Brahman in the is_M or is_R manner.²⁵

What about the status of claims like (3): is (3) itself true in the illusion, or true in reality? The issue is whether to accept

$M(M(\text{the tree is green}))$

or

$R(M(\text{the tree is green}))$.

I think we must reject both. We should not say that (3) is true in the illusion, for the illusion does not present *as* illusion. The illusion is *that the tree is green*, not that the green tree is an illusion. Put otherwise: Brahman performs a play in which the tree is green, but *in the play* it is not a play that the tree is green. But nor should we say that (3) is true in reality, for that would violate Brahman's simplicity. It would be to say that Brahman is-in-reality something *that presents-in-māyā-as a green tree*, which imparts a degree of complexity to Brahman as it is-in-reality that is not supposed to be there. Brahman is-in-reality perfectly simple, remember, devoid of attribute—it does not *in reality* partake of pretense or illusion at all!

Thus, truths of the form $M(p)$ are themselves neither true in reality nor true in the illusion. The same goes for truths of the form $R(p)$, such as

(2) $R(\text{Brahman is the only thing that exists})$.

This can't itself be true in reality, for that would again impart a degree of complexity to Brahman as it is-in-reality that is not supposed to be there. But nor is it true in the illusion, for the illusion obviously doesn't present as one in which Brahman is-in-reality the only existing thing! For these reasons, we must reject all claims of the form

$M(M(p))$

$R(M(p))$

$M(R(p))$

$R(R(p))$

Call this the No Overlap principle. This will be important later on.

9. Pointing through

²⁵ To be clear, the ordinary English 'is' does play a role in the system insofar as it is used to construct the (incomplete) locutions that are predicated of Brahman. But it is not a genuine mode of predication alongside is_M and is_R in the following sense: unlike is_M and is_R , it does not combine with a term and a predicate to form a truth-evaluable statement. I am indebted to Theodore Schimizzi for discussions that helped clarify my thinking about this point.

We must add one more component to Vedāntic monism. The Vedāntic revelation, remember, was that *everything is Brahman*:

The tree = Brahman,
Shamik = Brahman,

and therefore,

Shamik = the tree.

That art thou, as the great saying goes. But are these identities true in reality, or in the illusion? They are obviously not true in the illusion, for the illusion is that I am *not* the tree! But they can't be true in reality either: it can't be that Brahman is-in-reality identical to *a tree*, for Brahman is-in-reality devoid of form or attribute. Trees have extension, shape, and color, yet Brahman as it is-in-reality has none of these. You might reply that there is no tree *in reality*, it's just an illusion that there is a tree. That's right, of course, but then what are we doing talking about *the tree* outside of the illusion?²⁶

To understand these identities, imagine again being on Kubrick's set as they film Sellers pretending to be Mandrake, searching for the recall codes. You might point at the man in the scene and say

That's Peter Sellers.

Here you are looking at a fictional performance and "pointing through" it, as it were, saying something about reality. Now, notice that you can pick out Sellers in various ways. Instead of the demonstrative "that", you could use a description such as:

The man leafing through notebooks is Peter Sellers.

This is actually true. Peter Sellers *really is* leafing through a notebook (it's not a pretend notebook), so this is a truth about reality, not the fiction. But you could also use a fictional description:

The guy searching for recall codes is Peter Sellers.

Understood descriptively, this is not true: Sellers is *not* searching for recall codes, he is just pretending! Yet there is a perfectly reasonable use of the description on which it is understood referentially, not descriptively. One can use 'the guy searching for recall codes' to refer directly to *the actor playing the role*, regardless of whether he satisfies the description in reality; and one is then saying that *he* is Peter Sellers. Here one uses a fictional description to "point through" to the actor and make a claim about reality—this time a true one. To indicate that an expression "e" is used in this pointing-through sense, I will write "[e]_{pt}". Hence the above claim is more perspicuously written

²⁶ I am very grateful to Miri Albahari for a discussion of this issue.

(PS) [The guy searching for recall codes]_{pt} is Peter Sellers,

where the content of this is, in effect: *that's Peter Sellers*.

I propose to understand the Vedāntic revelations likewise. “The tree is Brahman”—here we should understand “the tree” as pointing through the illusion and referring directly to *that which presents as a tree*, regardless of whether it *is* a tree in reality; and one is then saying that *it* is Brahman. So understood, the identities should be written

[the tree]_{pt} = Brahman,
[Shamik]_{pt} = Brahman

where the content of each is, in effect: *that's Brahman*. Just as (PS) uses a fictional description to “point through” to the actor performing the fiction, i.e. Sellers, here we use *illusory* vocabulary to “point through” to what performs the illusion, i.e. Brahman. And now we can say that these revelations are true in reality, as desired:

- (7) R([the tree]_{pt} = Brahman)
- (8) R([Shamik]_{pt} = Brahman)
- (9) R([Shamik]_{pt} = [the tree]_{pt})

For notice the effect of pointing through: the content of (7), for example, is not that Brahman is-in-reality identical to *a tree*—at least, not insofar as trees have extension and color and the like. It is true in the illusion that trees have extension and color, but by pointing through we leave all that behind and refer directly to *that which presents as the tree*, saying (in effect): *that's Brahman*. In this way, (7) does not imply that Brahman is-in-reality a tree with extension and color any more than (PS) implies that Sellers is searching for recall codes. Likewise, (9) “points through” the illusion and identifies *that* (which presents as the tree) as one and the same as *this* (which presents as Shamik). Or in other words: *that art thou*.

There is of course nothing special about me or the tree. *Everything* is nothing but Brahman, in the sense that whenever Brahman presents-in-māyā-as something, *a*, it follows that Brahman is-in-reality identical to [*a*]_{pt}. That is,

All Is Brahman: $M(\phi(a)) \rightarrow R([a]_{pt} = \text{Brahman})$.

[I]_{pt} am Brahman, [the tree]_{pt} is Brahman, [you]_{pt} are Brahman, and so on. I promised you a view on which

there is just one being; and this being *is* the tree and *is* the flower and indeed *is* me and *is* you. All these are numerically one, and each one is all of reality, and any appearance to the contrary is a massive illusion.

and this is exactly what we have!

This then is Vedāntic monism. It's a view on which The World we thought was real—a world of trees and flowers and persons—is in fact a grand illusion, a cosmic performance with

Brahman playing every role. It's a view on which *you yourself are just a fictional character in this cosmic play!* This is a striking revelation about the nature of the self, and is precisely what we need to make sense of the dissolution of self. So let us turn to this now.

10. The dissolution of self

The dissolution of self, remember, concerned the *subjective self*: that which thinks, that which perceives, that which desires, and more generally that which takes a particular *point of view* on the world, relating to it as subject to object. What does Vedāntic monism entail about the subjective self?

To take a concrete example, suppose I perceive a tree. What is this 'I' that perceives? Is it real or an illusion? Well, let's start simple and ask the same of the tree. What is it? Is it an illusion? Yes and no. In reality, it exists:

$R([the\ tree]_{pt}\ exists).$

For in reality, it is Brahman:

$R([the\ tree]_{pt} = Brahman).$

The illusion is that it is green and distinct from me:

$M(the\ tree\ is\ green),$
 $M(the\ tree\ \neq\ Shamik).$

But none of that is true in reality:

$\neg R(the\ tree\ is\ green),$
 $\neg R(the\ tree\ \neq\ Shamik),$

not even if we point through:

$\neg R([the\ tree]_{pt}\ is\ green),$
 $\neg R([the\ tree]_{pt} \neq [Shamik]_{pt}).$

For in reality $[the\ tree]_{pt}$ is nothing other than Brahman, devoid of form or attribute or distinction. In reality $[the\ tree]_{pt}$ exists, therefore, *but it is not a tree*.

Turn now to my subjective self, i.e. the 'I' that perceives the tree. What is it? Is it an illusion? Yes and no. In reality, I exist:

$R([I]_{pt}\ exist).$

For in reality, I too am Brahman:

$R([I]_{pt} = \text{Brahman})$.

The illusion is that I perceive and am distinct from the tree I perceive:

$M(I \text{ perceive the tree})$
 $M(I \neq \text{the tree})$

But none of this is true in reality:

$\neg R(I \text{ perceive the tree})$
 $\neg R(I \neq \text{the tree})$

Not even when we point through:

$\neg R([I]_{pt} \text{ perceive } [the \text{ tree}]_{pt})$
 $\neg R([I]_{pt} \neq [the \text{ tree}]_{pt})$

For in reality $[I]_{pt}$ am nothing but Brahman, something that does not perceive or think or desire (Brahman is devoid of form and attribute). Indeed, $[I]_{pt}$ am the very same thing that presents-in-māyā-as the tree I perceive:

$R([I]_{pt} = [the \text{ tree I perceive}]_{pt})$.

Thus the “perceiver” *is* the “perceived”, and, in reality, does not perceive at all.

11. Brahman, unlimited in perspective and being

Here then we have a view on which The One is unlimited *in perspective*. Remember, to say that The One is unlimited in this sense is to say that it dissolves the subjective self. It’s to say that The One is so all-encompassing that it swallows up any distinction between subject and object, leaving no room to relate to anything *as* subject to object. The very possibility of having a particular *point of view* on the world—of perceiving it, representing it, cognizing it, desiring it, or in any other way having a *perspective on* it—is consumed by The One.

And this is precisely what Vedāntic monism delivers! For in reality, we just saw, there is no distinction between subject and object, between self and world. In reality, there is just Brahman—something that presents-in-māyā *as* a perceiving subject but also *as* the perceived object; and again, *as* that which desires but also *as* that which is desired. The idea that there is any distinction between the subjective self and its objects is just an illusion, for reality is devoid of distinctions. Moreover, in reality the subjective self does not perceive or think or desire in the first place. The very idea of having a point of view on the world, with opinions on what it is like and how one would like it to be, is all just an illusion! Thus in reality, $[the \text{ subjective self}]_{pt}$ exists—it is Brahman—but *it is not a subjective self*. The subjective self has dissolved into Brahman.

In this way, Vedāntic monism vindicates those wild reports from mystics of their selves melting into The One—of being ‘clothed in God’ (Bastami); of ‘passing away from themselves into God’ (Al-Junayd); of ‘the seer and the seen’ becoming one (Plotinus). Those reports may have struck you as gibberish nonsense when we first saw them, but I’ve shown that they fall naturally out of the pretty straightforward monist metaphysics I sketched in sections 7-9. According to Vedāntic monism, The One is indeed unlimited in perspective.

When introducing Vedāntic monism in section 6, I said I would not assume that Brahman has, or *is*, attributes like consciousness. But that was just for austerity and we can tweak the model in this respect without changing its perspectival unlimitedness. For suppose we say that Brahman *is* pure, universal consciousness.²⁷ Then it would still follow that there is, in reality, no distinction between subject and object. In that case, Brahman would be a ‘cosmic’ self in the sense of section 4: a universal subject with no object; an all-consuming consciousness that leaves no room (in reality) for consciousness *of* anything. Whether this is a better model of mystical experience is a question I won’t answer here; it suffices to say that both models dissolve the subjective self.

Moreover, Vedāntic monism also implies that The One is unlimited *in being*. For in reality there is *nothing but Brahman*, devoid of form and attribute and distinction.²⁸ No flowers, no trees, no perceivers, no color, no matter—*just Brahman*. In reality, Brahman is all the being there is.

To be sure, Brahman *presents-in-maya-as* green trees and yellow flowers. Nonetheless, *in reality* there are no green trees or yellow flowers! The World of trees and flowers (and *all this*, gesturing around me) is nothing but Brahman’s cosmic pretense.

But did we not just attribute a *property* to Brahman, namely the property of *presenting-in-maya-as a green tree*? Not really. I mean that literally. When we said that Brahman presents-in-maya-as a green tree, you can take this to imply that Brahman has *the property* of presenting-in-maya-as a green tree if you want. Still, Brahman does not have this property *in reality*!

This follows from the No Overlap principle, which, remember, rules out truths of the form $R(M(p))$. When we said that Brahman presents-in-maya-as a green tree, what we have is

$M(\text{the tree is green})$.

But by No Overlap, we also have

$\neg R(M(\text{the tree is green}))$.

²⁷ This might be close to what Albahari (2019, 2024) calls ‘Perennial Idealism’, though the logical structure of Vedāntic monism—even modified in this respect—is I think somewhat different to the specific view she develops. I hope to discuss the similarities and differences between these views in future work.

²⁸ Even if we say that Brahman *is* pure consciousness, the point is that this *pure consciousness itself* is devoid of form and attribute and distinction.

That is: it is *not the case* that Brahman *is-in-reality* something that presents-in-maya as a green tree! So it is *not the case* that Brahman *is-in-reality* something that has *the property* of presenting-in-maya-as a green tree! In reality, Brahman has no properties whatsoever.

This is not just semantic trickery. The point is that there are, on this view, two fundamentally independent modes of predication: *is-in-reality* and *presents-in-maya-as*. So, when we ask whether Brahman *has* a property, we have to ask: in what sense of ‘has’? In the reality sense or the illusory sense? And in the reality sense, we just saw, Brahman does *not* have the property of presenting-in-maya-as a green tree!

Does Brahman have this property in the illusory sense? No, for the same reason! Remember, the No Overlap principle also rules out truths of the form $M(M(p))$, so we have

$\neg M(M(\text{the tree is green}))$.

It is *not the case* that Brahman *presents-in-maya-as* something that presents-in-maya-as a green tree. So it is *not the case* that Brahman *presents-in-maya-as* something that has *the property* of presenting-in-maya-as a green tree. *In the illusion*, therefore, Brahman has no properties either. Thus, in neither sense of ‘has’ available in Vedāntic monism does Brahman *have* any properties at all!

This is a key point of difference between the existence monism we have here and the kind of existence monism we examined in section 5. The idea there was that there is just one being, and that it possesses a property P with enough structure to vindicate Moorean claims such as ‘there are trees’. This raised the question of whether it counts as *existence* monism, remember, insofar as there are now *two* things, The One and its property P. Or, more pertinently, whether The One is then *limited* in being insofar as the property P is real and distinct from it. What we’ve just seen is that Vedāntic monism sidesteps the question entirely. Yes, Brahman presents-in-maya-as green trees and yellow flowers and the like. But in no sense does Brahman have any properties! According to Vedāntic monism, there *really is* just Brahman *and that’s it*—no properties, no attribute, no form, no structure, no nothing. Brahman *really is* all the being there is. It is unlimited in being.

12. The vindication of Moore

To be sure, the kind of existence monism examined in section 5 could sidestep the question too if it denied that The One has this property P. But the cost, remember, was that it would then have no resources with which to vindicate Moorean truths such as that there are green trees and yellow flowers. If Brahman has no properties, do we therefore incur this cost too?

Not entirely, for two reasons. The first is that it remains true *in the illusion* that there are green trees and yellow flowers:

$M(\text{the tree is green})$
 $M(\text{the flower is yellow})$.

But this is cold comfort, you might think, insofar as the Moorean truth wasn't that *it's an illusion* that there are such things but *that there are such things*.

But the second (and more important) reason is that according to Vedāntic monism, we can *truly say* that there are such things! For suppose we say 'the tree is green'. The key is to remember that *speech is just an illusion*. And assertion, belief, thought, and so on: it's only *in the illusion* that one asserts or believes or thinks anything at all. Brahman is-in-reality perfectly simple, remember, devoid of form and attribute, so Brahman cannot in-reality assert or believe or think. So, if I assert 'the tree is green', what we have is

(i) M(I assert 'The tree is green').

And just as it's only *in the illusion* that assertions are made, it's only *in the illusion* that they have truth-conditions. According to Vedāntic monism, that is, there are no truth-conditions outside of the illusion, i.e. of the form

'S' is true iff S.

But there are truth-conditions *inside* the illusion, i.e. of the form

M('S' is true iff S).

In particular, we have

(ii) M('The tree is green' is true iff the tree is green).

But in the illusion, the tree *is* green:

(iii) M(The tree is green).

So, reasoning within the scope of the illusion, it follows from (ii) and (iii) that

(iv) M('The tree is green' is true).

So, when I asserted 'The tree is green', my (illusory) assertion was true! That is, (i) and (iv) imply

(v) M(My assertion was true).

In the illusion, I asserted *truly*. And what goes for assertion goes for belief in just the same way. Thus whenever we *assert* or *believe* a Moorean truth, such as that there are green trees and yellow flowers, our assertions and beliefs are *true*!

Here then we have an existence monism that steers between the two horns of the dilemma of section 5. On the one hand, Brahman really is unlimited in being: it has no properties or attributes that could possibly count as an 'addition to being'. At the same time, our Moorean

beliefs are all *true*! And not just true in a fictional sense: when you believe *that the tree is green*, your belief is not merely true according to a fiction you stand outside of, like your belief that Sherlock Holmes lives on Baker Street. Rather, *your belief itself* is inside the fiction (so to speak) and *in the fiction* it is as true as true can be!

13. The World as The One

I started with a puzzle about an unlimited One, which I put in the form of an inconsistent triad:

- (1) The One is unlimited.
- (2) The World is real and distinct from The One.
- (3) If The World is real and distinct from The One, then The One is limited.

That was just a template, for I distinguished three versions of the puzzle each based on a different notion of limitation. In each case, I assumed that The One is unlimited and asked: what then could be the relationship between The World and The One? If The One is unlimited, how can The World be real and distinct from it?

The Vedāntic answer is: *it isn't*. The World *is* The One. Thus (2) is false: The World is *not* real and distinct from The One.

But is it not real, or not distinct? That depends on whether we point through. Consider again the tree. In reality, $[it]_{pt}$ exists:

$R([the\ tree]_{pt}\ exists).$

For in reality, $[it]_{pt}$ is Brahman:

$R([the\ tree]_{pt} = Brahman).$

But in reality, Brahman is *not a tree*, for Brahman is devoid of form and attribute. So in reality (no pointing through here), *there are no trees*. That is,

$\neg R(the\ tree\ exists).$

So if we point through, $[the\ tree]_{pt}$ is real but not distinct from Brahman. But if we don't point through, the tree is not real; it's just an illusion. Either way, it is not real *and* distinct from Brahman.

Likewise for flowers, planets, stars, selves, and everything else in The World: while they are not real, $[they]_{pt}$ are real but are nothing but Brahman. Thus, whether we reject the *realness* of The World or its *distinctness* from The One depends on whether we point through. Either way, The World is not real *and* distinct from The One.

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