

The Metaphysics of Mystical Experience

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This is a rough, sketch-of-project manuscript. I wrote it in December 2024, presented it at the Ranch Metaphysics Workshop in January 2025, and have been circulating it for feedback since then. People have been asking me about it, so I'm making it publicly available here.

Feel free to cite this manuscript. For direct quotes, please note that I am currently developing some of the ideas here in other works. Specifically:

- *The model in section 4 is now developed much more thoroughly in “Immanent Monism”, a self-standing paper available on my website.*
- *The model in section 5 is developed in another self-standing paper, “Being and Emptiness”, available on my website soon.*

With these two central parts of the project now worked out in more depth, I am expanding the big-picture narrative in this manuscript into a book-length work.

1. Mystical experiences

Let us begin with some quotes. Here is Plotinus from 3rd Century Rome:

I awakened out of the body into myself and came to be external to all other things and contained within 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.¹

I had become one with the Divine. Elsewhere, Plotinus reports:

They see all not in process of becoming, but in being, and they see themselves in the other. Each being contains within itself the whole intelligible world. Therefore all is everywhere. Each is there all and all is each.²

Each being contains within itself the whole intelligible world. Meister Eckhart, 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.³

All things are One. Eckhart does not say if this “one” is God, but others are less reserved. Here is Mahmoud Shabestari in 14th Century Persia:

¹ Quoted in Dodds (1965), pp. 84-5.

² Quoted in Stace (1960), p. 77.

³ Quoted in Stace (1960), p. 63.

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.⁴

Far out. Here is Bayazid Bastami in 9th Century Persia reporting a similar encounter:

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.”⁵

Clothe me in Thy Selfhood, and... I shall not be there at all. This disappearance of self is also reported by Plotinus:

As my self unraveled, I became the river, the sky, and the earth. I felt the One moving through me as though it had always been my own.

Just kidding. That was a lightly edited internet post from someone describing their experience on ayahuasca, a psychedelic drug.⁶ Here is a similar description from someone on psilocybin, the active component of magic mushrooms:

The soul is no longer conscious of being a body, or of itself having an identity.

Wait, no. Sorry. That was Plotinus.⁷ *Here* is the psilocybin user:

The sovereign ego...was simply no more, and there was no one left to mourn its passing.

That’s Michael Pollen (2018, p. 264), who goes on to recount the sound of Bach:

I became first the strings... Then I passed down into the resonant black well of space inside the cello... I became the cello.

But it could almost be Malwida von Meysenbug from 19th Century Germany:

I felt that I prayed as I had never prayed before, and knew now what prayer really is: to return from the solitude of individuation into the consciousness of unity with all that is, to kneel down as one that passes away, and to rise up as one imperishable. Earth, heaven, and sea resounded as in one vast world-encircling harmony... I felt myself one with them.⁸

⁴ Quoted in James (1903), p. 318.

⁵ Quoted in Stace (1960), pp. 56-7.

⁶ I just replaced “universe” with “One”.

⁷ Quoted in Dodds (1965, p. 85).

⁸ Quoted in James (1903), p. 299.

There's a lot going on in here! These experiences apparently present themselves as revealing extraordinary truths about the nature of reality and the self. My question is: what are these truths? I would like to try to characterize, using the tools of analytic metaphysics, what it is that is revealed in mystical experiences such as these. Or more accurately, what is *presented* in these experiences, for I will not assume that they are veridical. Perhaps these experiences are just the confusions of a deluded or drug-addled mind—I won't try to settle that one way or the other. Instead, I want to understand what the world would have to be like for them to be veridical.⁹ What kind of picture of reality and the self do these experiences present? Is there even a *coherent* way the world could be that would answer to them? It's not obvious that there is! Still, I want to make sense of them as best I can.

2. Four aspects of mystical experience

To structure the discussion, let us start by identifying some common themes running through these reports. I will focus on four.

The first is what I will call *Oneness*. Mystics often report a deep sense of being interconnected with the rest of the world, perhaps even a sense that there is no real distinction between self and world in the first place. These reports vary in detail. While Bayazid Bastami and Plotinus said they became one with God and the Divine (respectively), von Meysenbug reported being one with things more generally (“earth, heaven, and sea”). William James (1903) collects numerous examples of the latter, for example:

I felt myself one with the grass, the trees, birds, insects, everything in Nature. I exulted in the mere fact of existence.¹⁰

The nature of the connection also varies. Sometimes it is reported as literal identity, as when Shabestari proclaimed “I AM GOD”. Other times it is less clear what the connection is, as when the ayahuasca user reported that the universe “moved through” them.

Moreover, while the connection is often metaphysical I think it can at other times be more epistemic. Metaphysically, the idea is that one's *being* or *identity* is somehow interconnected with the rest of the world. But another sense of being “one” with something is epistemic and involves one's *mind* coming into a kind of union or alignment with it—“knowing” it in a particularly intimate manner. These can be difficult to distinguish in mystical reports, for if a metaphysical connection is *revealed* to the mystic then they will of course say that they now *know* something they didn't before. But the point here is that the revelation itself might count as its own kind of “epistemic union” with reality. There may be a hint of this in the first quote from Plotinus, who says that it is when he “*saw* a marvelous beauty” that he became “one with the Divine”.¹¹ We will explore all these varieties of being “one” in what follows. For now, let's fold them under the general umbrella of Oneness.

⁹ Or rather, for the *reports* to be veridical. There is of course a question of how closely the reports match the experiences, and as we'll see issues of ineffability lurk just around the corner. For now, I'll just take the reports at face value.

¹⁰ James (1903, p. 298) reports this experience from Starbuck.

¹¹ Or consider the following passage from the Hermetic tradition, quoted in Dodds (1965, p. 82): “If you do not make yourself equal to God, you cannot apprehend God, for like is apprehended by like. Outleap all body and

A second aspect of mystical experience is *Monism*, the sense that reality is a unified whole. This is related to Oneness in its metaphysical guise. For when mystics report a deep sense of being inter-connected with reality, the picture is *not* that they are connected to *just one* bit of the world which is itself wholly disconnected from others. It's not that one is identical to the tree, which is itself wholly separate from everything else. No, the picture appears to be that *the world itself* is an inter-connected whole (Monism), encompassing the mystic along with it (metaphysical Oneness). Again, the strength of the connection may vary from mystic to mystic. When Eckhart said "all things are One", it is not obvious whether he meant that all things are *numerically identical* or just inter-connected in some other sense. Plotinus appears to mean something pretty striking when he said that "each being contains within itself *the whole intelligible world*". But perhaps the strongest variety is reported by 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, he explained himself thus:

The Divine Mother revealed to me that... it was she who had become everything.... I found everything in the room soaked as it were in bliss—the bliss of God... 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.¹²

He appears to be saying that the cat *is* the Divine Mother! And presumably there is nothing special about the cat.

There is another side of Monism worth noting. Sometimes, mystics report not just that reality is a *unified* whole but that it is a *living* whole. "Living" should of course be understood metaphorically here, as an umbrella term to be cashed out somehow. But the idea seems to be that reality is "vital" in some sense or another: perhaps it has a subjective "inside" much as we sense in our bodies, or perhaps it has a normative valence, or perhaps a purpose or telos. William James recounts a report of this kind from Dr Bucke, a Canadian psychiatrist (1903, p. 303):

I saw that the universe is not composed of dead matter, but is, on the contrary, a living Presence; I became conscious in myself of eternal life... I saw... that the foundation principle of the world, of all the worlds, is what we call love.

We also see this in Ramakrishna's report that everything was "soaked in bliss", and perhaps even in William James' previous account of the mystic who "exalted in the mere fact of existence". In any case, I fold this under the heading of Monism because the idea does not seem to be that *some* parts of reality are vital and others aren't, but that reality *as a whole* is in some sense vital.

A quick note on labels. As we'll see, the word "Monism" may be contentious. Rather than saying that reality *is* one, some mystics might prefer saying that it is *not* a plurality. So I will sometimes refer to this second aspect as Non-Pluralism rather than Monism. Likewise with

expand yourself to the unmeasured greatness; outstrip all time and become Eternity: so shall you apprehend God". Talk of *apprehension* here suggests something like the kind of epistemic union I have in mind.

¹² Quoted in Stace (1960), p. 77.

Oneness: instead of being “one” with reality, some mystics might prefer saying that they are *not* separate. So I will sometimes refer to the first aspect as Non-Separateness rather than Oneness.

The third aspect of mystical experience is the *Dissolution of Self*. This is again related to Oneness in its metaphysical guise, for both involve a merging of self and world. But while Oneness involves the self considered *as an object*, this aspect involves the self considered *as subject*—the “subjective self”. 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 the world. Thus, while Oneness involves a collapse of the distinction between one’s self *considered as object* and the rest of the world, here what collapses is the distinction between subject and object—between that which thinks and that which is thought, between perceiver and perceived, between the representer and the represented. The very 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 verify it. But it is there, I think, in Bayazid Bastami’s remarkable comment that in “clothing himself” in God’s selfhood he “shall not be there at all”. And it may 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.¹³

But it is particularly explicit in 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], the seeing self neither sees nor discerns, nor imagines two things, but has, in a way, become another, and not oneself.¹⁴

At the time of union, there is no distinction between the seer and the seen.

The fourth and final aspect is *ineffability*. A recurring theme in reports of mystical experience is that mystics find it impossible to put their revelation into words. They *try*, as we’ve seen. But their reports are almost invariably accompanied by a disclaimer that words cannot do it justice. As we’ll see, this could amount to many things. What’s ineffable could be *the experience itself*, or it could be *what reality is like* as revealed by the experience. And the ineffability could be due to the nature of what one is trying to eff—God, perhaps—or it could be due to limitations of the efferrer or their audience. I will distinguish numerous types of ineffability as we go on. Most interesting, to my mind, is a distinctive kind of ineffability that I develop in section 4 and which follows from the Dissolution of Self—an ineffability that stems from the fact that there is no *subject* to do the effing. But whatever the details, an account of mystical experience would be incomplete if it did not do justice to this recurring theme that in some way or another the mystic is unable to put their revelation into words. Or into thought, for that matter, for ineffability has

¹³ Quoted in Stace (1960), p. 115.

¹⁴ Enneads 6.9.10. Translation by Gerson (2018).

little to do with *language* per se. The ineffable is also *unthinkable*, and I will often slide between these two ways of talking.

These then are the four aspects of mystical experience I want to capture. Are they cherry-picked? Most certainly. While I don't want anything I say here to rest on my own inner life, it would feel disingenuous not to share that I have recently had a number of experiences that correspond in some degree or other to these four aspects. These experiences were for the most part precipitated by relatively large doses of LSD, though I've found it possible to replicate them to some extent through contemplative practices. My personal motivation for writing this paper was to try to understand these experiences with the tools I've been trained in, i.e. analytic metaphysics. And what better way to do so than to use these tools to describe what reality would be like if they were veridical—i.e., their veridicality-conditions. But happily, I don't think my experiences are particularly idiosyncratic. These four aspects do appear to be a recurring theme in reports of altered states of mind through the ages, as evidenced by the above quotes. So I hope the paper to be of value independently of my personal motivation for focusing on these aspects.

I should emphasize that these four aspects do not exhaust the character of mystical experience. But other notable aspects are not so relevant to my project here. For example, William James emphasizes the *noetic* quality of mystical experiences: the manner in which they present themselves as being more true, revealing something more real, than ordinary experience. This quality might bear on the question of *whether* these experiences are veridical, but I am bracketing that question here and focusing just on what their veridicality-conditions are in the first place. Their noetic quality does not obviously bear on this. For another example, mystics often report that their experiences are accompanied by deep feelings of peace, love, and compassion. This side of mystical experience is tremendously important, I think, but it belongs in a different paper on the *ethics* of mystical experiences—or more accurately, on their *practical* upshots, on what they might teach us about how to live. Here I focus just on their *cognitive* upshots, on what they might teach us about what reality is like.

I should also emphasize that in focusing on their veridicality-conditions I am bracketing all sorts of other questions about these experiences. A complete account would involve understanding the extent to which they are a natural kind, their neurological underpinnings, the psychological processes involved in them, the extent to which they are culturally situated or universal, their use in therapeutic settings, and so on.¹⁵ These are all great questions but not ones I am trained to discuss. Best to stick with what I have some training in: building metaphysical models that might verify the four aspects identified above.

It's clear that a monist (or at least, non-pluralist) metaphysics of some sort or another is called for. It's equally clear that not just any monism will do. Consider for example the kind of monism developed by Jonathan Schaffer (2010). I'll slur over the details of Schaffer's actual view and make some choices he didn't, so let's call it *Schafferian* monism. It's helpful to think of this picture in contrast with the *non-monist* picture associated with David Lewis. On both pictures, there are a plurality of numerically distinct material beings—trees, mountains, electrons, and let's throw in regions of spacetime too. And on both pictures, we have unrestricted

¹⁵ See Yaden and Newberg (2022) for a review of the literature on these topics. See also Lethby (2021) and Lyon (2023, chapter 10).

extensional mereology: for any plurality of things, there is something they compose. So on both pictures there is such a thing as The Cosmos, the mereological sum of all material beings. Where the pictures depart is over the question of what's fundamental, the parts or the wholes. On the Schafferian picture, The Cosmos is fundamental. Everything else depends on *it*. Whereas on the Lewisian picture, the parts are fundamental and The Cosmos is a "mere aggregate" that depends on *them*. (Lewis didn't himself speak of fundamentality or dependence; hence my calling this a Lewisian picture.)

Let's join Schaffer in defining fundamentality in terms of dependence: *x* is fundamental iff there is nothing on which *x* depends. And let's think of dependence as grounding; specifically, *generative* grounding as developed by Schaffer in independent work (2016, 2017).¹⁶ On this view, grounding is to be understood as the metaphysical correlate of causation. Just as a relation of causal dependence between events backs causal explanation, says Schaffer, so a relation of grounding between entities backs metaphysical explanation. Importantly, grounding (on this view) relates numerically distinct entities just as causation relates numerically distinct events. Thus if *x* grounds *y* it does not follow that *y* is "the same as" *x*, or that *y* "just is" *x*, or that *y* "consists in nothing over and above" *x*. Understood generatively, *y* *is* something over and above *x*! It is "metaphysically caused" by *x*. So understood, the difference between the Schafferian and Lewisian pictures lies in the direction of generative grounding: on whether it goes "top-down", from The Cosmos to its parts; or "bottom-up", from the parts to The Cosmos.

This monist picture may be a step in the right direction, but I think it leaves much in mystical experience unaccounted for. The main problem is that it is not *existence* monism, the view that all of reality *is* (numerically) one, but *priority* monism, the view that all of reality is *grounded in* one. And *generatively* grounded at that. So there remains a plurality of numerically distinct entities. Here I am, in front of a tree. We are distinct from one another, and both distinct from The Cosmos. We are both grounded in The Cosmos, sure, but insofar as grounding is generative we cannot say that we are both "nothing over and above" The Cosmos. I *am* something over and above it, and the tree is *something else* over and above it! It's just that we are both metaphysically caused by it—we are "ontological cousins", so to speak.¹⁷ This is a monism of sorts, and well worth distinguishing from the Lewisian picture. But it doesn't obviously verify Plotinus' remark that each being "contains within itself the whole intelligible world". And certainly not Ramakrishna's revelation that each and every being is numerically one with the Divine Mother!

Nor is it clear why someone would report being (or becoming) "one" with things, if this was the model revealed to them. Again, I am distinct from the tree! It is something else! We are ontological cousins, for sure, and that is a kind of connectedness. So let's count this as a Oneness of sorts, but note that it's a relatively weak variety. I have not "become" the tree in any obvious sense. The distinction between us has not broken down. There remain boundaries separating

¹⁶ Schaffer's work on generative grounding came after his work on monism, so this goes beyond what he said in the (2010) monism paper. I suspect this is what he had in mind, but if not let us simply build it in to what we are calling Schafferian monism. I apologize to Schaffer if this was not the intended model! Again, it is Schafferian.

¹⁷ My talk of the grounded being "something else over and above" its grounds is a bit sloppy. Schaffer might not agree with this characterization of his view; see his (2017), section 4.3, for relevant discussion. I *think* the gist of what I'm saying here stands, but as we'll see not a whole lot hangs on it.

us—my skin, its bark, and the air in between. Alan Watts said that “when you take psychedelics, you see that the boundaries between you and the world are illusions. There is no ‘you’ separate from the rest of existence”. This model does not appear to verify this aspect of psychedelic experience.

More importantly, nowhere in this model do we find the Dissolution of Self. Insofar as I had a point of view on things in the Lewisian picture, that remains in the Schafferian picture. Reversing the directions of ground does not seem to change that. Nor does anything appear to be ineffable. What is the world like, on this picture? Schaffer expressed it with admirable clarity! If this was the kind of picture revealed in mystical experience, why would mystics continually emphasize the ineffable nature of their revelation?

I hope it is clear that this is no criticism of Schafferian monism. Schaffer was not looking for metaphysics of mystical experience, after all. I’ve discussed his view just to indicate what it’s going to take to verify these experiences. It’ll take a lot more than priority monism.

I will now sketch three models that do better. The first model (section 3) is actually just a minor tweak on Schafferian monism: it remains a priority monism and so won’t capture the more mind-bending aspects we’re out to capture. It does do a bit better, and some might find it interesting to see what difference the minor tweak makes, but it’s just a warm-up exercise. We will only capture the more extreme aspects of mystical experience with the model I develop in section 4, on which reality is *numerically* one, and the model of section 5, on which reality is *empty*.

3. The Plotinic Model

The first model is inspired by Plotinus, who maintained that all of reality emanates from a single source which he variously called “The One” or “The Good”. But I won’t do any scholarship to show that this model corresponds to Plotinus’ actual views—in fact, it does a pretty *bad* job at capturing his own reports of mystical experience! It is a Plotinic model (just as the previous was Schafferian).

3.1. The Ineffable One

First, let us understand ‘emanation’ as *grounding*. To say that everything emanates from The One is to say that everything is grounded in The One. And let’s understand this, like before, as *generative* grounding in Schaffer’s sense.

Second, let us add that The One is simple. For now we can take this to mean *mereologically* simple, i.e. partless, though other respects of simplicity will emerge as we go on. It follows that The One is not the same as The Cosmos, for the latter has parts.

Third, let us further add that The One is not part of The Cosmos either. It is not, for example, a point of spacetime—that possibility was left open by the second claim; here we close that off.

Since The Cosmos is (by definition) the mereological sum of all material beings, it follows that The One is not material. Is it therefore mental? Or abstract? I think the Plotinic answer is: none of the above. We can think of this as another aspect of The One's simplicity: it does not possess attribute or form by which to classify it in any of these categories.¹⁸

Like the Schafferian model, this is priority monism, not existence monism. So it will not verify the sense that all of reality *is* one, just a weak monism on which everything stems from a common source. Likewise, it will verify metaphysical Oneness only in the weak sense above: the tree and I are ontological cousins, but beyond that there is no sense in which we are "one" or that the boundaries between us have broken down. All this is as it was in the Schafferian model. So far, the difference between the models is just this: that now the entity in which everything is grounded is not The Cosmos, a complex entity composed of matter, but rather The One, which is something else entirely and perfectly simple.

This difference makes a difference. Two, in fact. The first is that while The Cosmos was "dead matter", so to speak, there *may* be room in the Plotinic model to maintain that The One is "vital". Perhaps it carries with it a subjective "inside" much like we experience in ourselves. Or perhaps it carries normative valence (The Good), or a telic end of some kind. In that case the Plotinic model might be made to verify the "vitalistic" side of Monism: the sense that reality is not just unified but also in some sense living. It is not just that we are all ontological cousins, metaphysically caused by a common source; it is also that this source emits a "vitality" of some sort that saturates all beings and gives us all value or purpose or "presence" or something of that ilk. On this model, it might not be so out of place to say that we are all children of God. This possibility arises precisely because we are now grounding all beings in something other than the "dead matter" of The Cosmos we started with. But I mention this only tentatively, since it is unclear whether it fits with the The One's simplicity. So I'll set it aside now.¹⁹

The more important difference draws on The One's simplicity, which is the basis of a well-known argument that The One is ineffable. The idea is this. Suppose we try saying that The One is simple—this is the second part of our Plotinic model, after all, so we tried saying it above. Well, to say that The One is simple is to attribute a *property* to The One, i.e. the property of simplicity. But then we have *two* things—The One, and its property of simplicity—in contradiction to the initial idea that The One is, well, *one*! Thus even if The One *were* simple (so to speak), we cannot truly *say* that it is simple because for that to be true it would be simple no longer. The "simplicity" of The One is ineffable. Likewise for any predication: The One cannot be truly described in any way at all, for the truth of such a statement would require two things, The One and the property ascribed, which is contrary to its simplicity.

¹⁸ In a way, this follows from the claim that The One is not part of The Cosmos *if* we relax certain assumptions that went into defining The Cosmos. Lewis and Schaffer were both materialists, so it made sense for them to define The Cosmos as the totality of all *material* beings. But if one started off as a mind-matter dualist, it would make sense to define The Cosmos as the totality of all matter and mind, and then The One would not be material or mental. And if you started off as a mind-matter-abstracta dualist, it would make sense to define The Cosmos as the totality of all *that*... you get the picture.

¹⁹ It is also antithetical to Plotinus' own view, as far as I understand it, that the material world is very much "dead matter"! Regardless, I defended a "Plotinic" view of this kind in Dasgupta (2024). It was the view that all of reality—including matter and spacetime and so on—has a purely normative source. Normativity isn't just fundamental, a la "robust realists", but the source of all being.

You might object that to say “The One is F” is not to attribute it *the property* of being F. Why not interpret the statement nominalistically, as just describing it *as F*? Ontologically speaking, that just requires The One; there is no need for properties to complicate matters. But in that case we can try refocusing the argument around the nominalism. The idea, very roughly put, would be that predication involves drawing *distinctions*: to meaningfully predicate something as being F, there must be a distinction—at least in principle, at least in thought—between it being F and being not-F. That is the *point* of predication, the thought would be: it’s to recognize that there are *two* possibilities, F and not-F, and to indicate which possibility is actual. It is then *this* multiplicity (of possibilities) that contradicts The One’s simplicity.

Or so the argument goes. It has a long tradition in apophatic theology, where the argument more typically concerns the Abrahamic God rather than Plotinus’ One. There is an enormous amount to say about whether the argument goes through (and whether it is consistent with the idea that The One could be “vital”). But I won’t discuss it further here as I have nothing to add to the literature on this topic. I just want to point out that there is at least this *prospect* of an argument for ineffability on this Plotinic model that does not get off the ground on the Schafferian model, precisely because on the latter model the source of being is not simple.²⁰ For future reference I will call the (supposed) ineffability here ‘ontological’ because it stems from the nature of the The One itself, namely, its simplicity.

The Plotinic model might also yield a very different kind of ineffability. But to see what it is, we must pause to think about how a model such as this might be revealed to Plotinus in the first place.

3.2. *Alienation and witness*

Plotinus claimed to have had experiences in which The One was revealed to him. As we saw earlier,

I saw a marvelous beauty and was confident, then if ever, that... I had become one with the Divine.

But in what sense was The One “revealed”? What could this state of revelation consist in? By the apophatic argument, it cannot be *propositional knowledge* about The One. It cannot be that Plotinus came to know *that The One is simple*, for example, for what the apophatic argument shows (or purports to show) is that it cannot be *true* that The One is simple. How then are we to understand revelation?

²⁰ Or might it get off the ground? The Cosmos has parts, we said, but on the Schafferian model its parts are derivative entities. So perhaps it is simple *fundamentally speaking*? If so, one might try reconstructing this argument from apophatic theology around the Schafferian model. There is a lot to say about how this might go but I will leave it for another time and move on.

Let's try using color as a model.²¹ Some philosophers are attracted by the idea that perceiving a color reveals its "true nature". As Mark Johnston put it (1992, p. 233), "the intrinsic nature of canary yellow is fully revealed by a standard experience as of a canary yellow thing". The contrast here is with water. When you see water, its nature is hidden; chemical investigation is required to uncover what it really is. But when you see canary yellow, the idea is, you see it as it really is in itself. Its nature is not hidden behind an appearance, as it were, but is made manifest.

This phenomenon is clearly connected to knowledge. When the nature of canary yellow is revealed to you, you come to *know* its nature. You come to know what canary yellow really is in itself. Again, the contrast is with water. Just looking at water does not yield knowledge of what substance it really is; i.e., that it is H₂O. For that, chemical investigation is required. But revelation comes hand-in-hand with the idea that seeing canary yellow can yield knowledge of what it really is. Let us call this knowledge by acquaintance: a subject S is *acquainted* with x iff the nature of x is directly presented or revealed to S in experience (this is just a label, not an analysis).

So, let us try understanding Plotinus' revelation as an experience in which he became acquainted with The One (here I'm just playing around with the model, I've no idea what Plotinus' *actual* revelation consisted in). Just as Johnson's experience revealed to him the nature of canary yellow, let's suppose Plotinus' mystical experience revealed to him the nature of The One. He saw The One as it really is in itself. Its nature was made manifest.

Of course, we must take this talk of "natures" with a pinch of salt. On one view, canary yellow is one thing and *its nature* another. They are two distinct things. Clearly, we cannot import this view to the case of The One, on pain of violating its simplicity. But on another view, "natures" are not ontologically committing. Instead of talking about *the nature of* canary yellow, we can instead talk of canary yellow *as it is in itself*. And rather than saying that an experience of canary yellow reveals *its nature* to you, we can instead say that canary yellow is revealed to you *as it is in itself*. On this approach, talk of "the nature" of the thing indicates something more about the epistemic status of being *acquainted* with it than it does the thing itself. It indicates knowing it in some pure or unmediated or direct sense, with no distorting veil in the way. The idea is to model Plotinus' revelation as acquaintance with The One in this sense.

Understood like this, we verify a kind of *epistemic* Oneness; a sense of being "one" with something that involves one's mind coming into a kind of "alignment" with it and knowing it in a particularly intimate manner. Acquaintance with The One would count as being epistemically "one" with it in this sense.

In fact, I think the epistemic Oneness here goes deeper. To explain why, I will draw on a theory of 'knowing what something really is' that I presented in "Inexpressible Ignorance" (2015). The driving idea there was that one knows what *x* really is if one knows what *x* is via a mode of presentation that picks it out by way of its essence or nature. Consider Kit Fine's favorite set, {Socrates}. It is Fine's favorite set. That is true. It is also the singleton set containing

²¹ Much of the following two pages is copied verbatim from Dasgupta (2015). I have not yet had time to rewrite it and avoid the charge of self-plagiarism. Or maybe this footnote means it's not plagiarism after all. I don't know. Ask Christopher Rufo.

Socrates as its sole member. That is also true. But only the second describes it via its essential nature. It states what it is *essentially*, or (put otherwise) what it *really* is. So, only knowledge of the second would count as knowing what it really is. Or consider Putnam's favorite substance, water. It is Putnam's favorite substance. That is true. It is also composed of H₂O. That is also true. But only the second states its essential nature; so, the thought is, only knowledge of the second would count as knowing what it really is.

Let's understand 'essence' here in the way popularized by Fine (1994, 1995). On his view, the logical form of a statement of essence is (roughly)

It is essential to x that $\phi(x)$.

And let's follow him as reading this as a kind of real definition. So, to say that it is essential to $\{Socrates\}$ that it is the singleton set containing Socrates is to say that $\{Socrates\}$ is defined out of these other materials, i.e. Socrates and set-membership. Finally, to line this up with the tools we already have, let's assume that essential truths, i.e. real definitions, track relations of generative ground. So, this essential truth implies (or reflects) that $\{Socrates\}$ is grounded in Socrates.²²

If you know this essential truth about $\{Socrates\}$, does it follow that you know what $\{Socrates\}$ really is? Not quite, for you may have no idea who Socrates really is. Perhaps all you know is that he was some Greek chap. In that case, your knowledge would be "hollow", as I'll call it: you know the proposition

It is essential to $\{Socrates\}$ that it is the singleton set containing Socrates,

we are supposing, but you don't know what "fills in" the right-hand-side (so to speak). You don't know what Socrates is—or more accurately, what Socrates *really* is—and so you don't know what $\{Socrates\}$ really is either.

The natural fix is to require that one knows what all the items mentioned in the essential truth really are too. To know what $\{Socrates\}$ really is, you must know the above essential truth *and* know what Socrates really is. Left like this, the account leads to a regress: to know what x really is you must know what various other things really are; to know what those other things really are you must know what yet other things really are; and so on. The regress is not necessarily vicious, but I proposed that we halt it by appealing to acquaintance and defining 'knowing what something really is' inductively. At the base level, there are things with which we are acquainted—we know what they really are directly. If something x has an essence given in terms of those things, then we can know what x is by knowing that essential truth. And if something y has an essence given in terms of x , we can know what y is by knowing that essential truth in turn. And so on up the hierarchy. More precisely:

²² If you like, you could try defining generative ground out of essence, or vice-versa. Or you can treat them as independent notions, in which case the assumption that they track one another is substantive. Either way, things are a bit inelegant here, unfortunately, but it's just a way of bringing the framework of generative grounding we started with in alignment with the theory of 'knowing what something really is' that I presented in the lingo of essence.

1. If S is acquainted with x , then S knows what x really is.
2. If:
 - a. It is essential to x that $\phi(x)$
 - b. S knows that $\phi(x)$
 - c. S knows what all the items mentioned in ‘ ϕ ’ really are, then S knows what x really is.
3. That’s all, folks! All real knowledge stems from 1 and 2.²³

Let us say that you are *alienated* from x when you do not know what x really is, and that you bear *witness* to x when you do know what x really is. Alienation and witness are epistemic notions. 3rd Century peasants who didn’t know that water is essentially H₂O could of course bathe in water, drink water, and christen their children in water. It surrounded them and was inside them. But they were alienated from water insofar as they didn’t know what it really is. They were surrounded by and made up of... *something they knew not what*. In that sense they were alienated from their surroundings. Then they do science, let’s imagine, and discover that it is H₂O. Now they know its real nature and are alienated no longer.

That is, if they also know what H₂O really is. Which perhaps they never will. Some philosophers believe that science delivers only structural knowledge, not knowledge of intrinsic natures. Thus they might come to know that H₂O is essentially a molecule composed of one Oxygen atom and two Hydrogens; that Hydrogen is essentially an atom composed of a single proton;... and so on. But according to these philosophers, it’s just words all the way down (as it were). *All scientific knowledge is hollow*, for at no point does it bottom out in knowledge of anything’s nature. If these philosophers are right then we are all, always, alienated from reality. We know an enormous number of truths about the universe and how it works—sophisticated truths, scientific truths, profound truths—but *none of it reveals what anything really is*. Like the 3rd Century peasant, we remain alienated from our surroundings.

Now, imagine Plotinus before his mystical experience, working away with his student Porphyry. They are busy discovering truths about the world they live in. They know that water is wet, that water is drinkable, and so on. Let us further imagine that they learn that water is composed of H₂O and other scientific truths of the modern era. Throwing caution to the wind, let us go to the limit and imagine that they know every true proposition²⁴, including propositions of the form

It is essential to x that $\phi(x)$.

²³ One might require in 2.b. that S knows that it is essential to x that $\phi(x)$; that choice will not matter for our purposes. Note that this definition is an application and extension of the standard view of knowing-wh locutions. As Schaffer describes it, the standard view is that “to know-wh is to know that p , where p happens to be the answer to the question Q denoted by the wh-clause” (2007, p. 385). Consider the question ‘What is the time?’ In a given context, this denotes a set of propositions, e.g. that it is 1pm, that it is 2 pm, and so on. The answer is the member of that set that is true. So, in that context, to know what time it is is to know *that it is 2pm* (if it is 2pm). The definition of ‘knowing what x really is’ described in the text is an application of this insofar as the relevant answer-propositions are essential truths; and an extension insofar as it includes non-propositional acquaintance with x as one way of knowing what x really is.

²⁴ Paradoxes may lurk here, but I’ll just ignore them. We can restrict things if necessary.

Thus they know that water is wet and drinkable; that water is essentially composed of H₂O; that H₂O is essentially a molecule composed of one O and two Hs; that H is essentially an atom with one proton... and so on through a chain of definitions that bottoms out in The One. Imagine they know an analogous chain of definitions for each and every aspect of reality, with every chain bottoming out in The One. Imagine they know all that about reality. Still, *they do not know what any of it really is*. Their propositional knowledge, complete though it is, is *hollow*. They remain alienated from reality.

All that changes for Plotinus when, in the ecstasy of mystical experience, he becomes acquainted with The One. His experience reveals to him The One *as it is in itself*. Now he knows what The One really is. And so, through the chain of definitions that (we are supposing) he knows, he comes to know what H really is, what H₂O really is, and what water really is in turn. Now he is alienated from reality no longer. Now he bears *witness* to it. He witnessed The One, and, in turn, he is now witness to water and to everything else around him.

So the epistemic Oneness we find in the Plotinic model extends much further than mere acquaintance with The One. It's not just that Plotinus' mind is now "attuned" to *The One* in a way that it was not before. It's that his mind is now "attuned" to *all of reality* in a way that it was not before. I say "attuned" because this is not propositional knowledge—Plotinus has not gained any of that! It's that his propositional knowledge used to be hollow and is now "filled in". That's why I think it's fair to describe this as a kind of epistemic connectedness, or Oneness, with reality. Plotinus now knows what reality is like in a particularly intimate manner that goes beyond mere propositional knowledge.²⁵

3.3. *Experiential ineffability*

Note that Plotinus cannot communicate his newfound knowledge to someone unacquainted with The One. Consider his student Porphyry, watching enviously as Plotinus undergoes his revelatory experience. He asks his teacher to impart what he has learned. What can Plotinus say? Porphyry already knows every true proposition, including the full hierarchy of definitions that bottom out in The One. But his knowledge is hollow. How is Plotinus to "fill in" those definitions for Porphyry? He can't. It's ineffable. At most, he can help Porphyry undergo the same revelatory experience of The One. He might help him cultivate a contemplative practice. Or he might brew some kykeon. Whatever works. But there is nothing he can *say* to communicate his newfound knowledge.

The ineffability here is akin to Frank Jackson's case of Mary in the black and white room. Mary knows all physical truths about color. She even knows, let's suppose, that tomatoes are red. But prior to seeing red, Jackson says, she does not know what it's like to see red. According to

²⁵ Can this epistemic Oneness be replicated in the Schafferian model? It's not clear. The problem is that in that model everything is grounded in The Cosmos, i.e. the entire physical universe. Witness would therefore require acquaintance with *that*, and it is hard to see how that is possible. This is not to say that acquaintance with The One is unmysterious—it is anything but! The problem is rather that The Cosmos is a physical entity and is therefore constrained by physical laws. Being "acquainted" with The Cosmos would have to be, or be underwritten by, some kind of causal relation, and it is not clear that the laws of physics leave any room for that sort of thing. By placing The One outside The Cosmos and maintaining that witness is achieved through acquaintance with *it*, the Plotinic model renders the relation of acquaintance mysterious, no doubt, but it at least leaves room for its possibility.

Johnston's thesis of revelation about color, we can add this: she does not know *what red really is*. She knows that red things have such-and-such reflectancy properties, but according to revelation that is not the real nature of red. She knows *that* tomatoes are red, then, but her knowledge is hollow. The real nature of red is revealed only in an experience of red. This is not something that can be communicated to Mary prior to her seeing red. Its nature is ineffable to her, and by her.

This is not to say that it is ineffable *period*. We who have seen red can eff it to each other, drawing on our experiential history with red. What is red, you ask? It is *that color* you see when you see a ripe tomato. Assuming you *have* seen a ripe tomato, you know what I'm talking about. But *Mary* doesn't know what I'm talking about because she lacks that experiential acquaintance with red. Let's call this *experiential* ineffability: something is experientially ineffable to, or by, a subject S when it is effable only via an experiential content that S has not enjoyed. In these cases, two things are ineffable. First, *the experience* is ineffable: we cannot tell Mary what it is like to see red. And second, *the thing itself* is also ineffable: we cannot tell Mary what red really is.

Likewise, Plotinus' experience—as we are modelling it—was experientially ineffable to Porphyry. He could not tell Porphyry what it was like to *experience* The One. And *The One* itself is also ineffable: he cannot tell Porphyry what The One really is. And so he cannot tell Porphyry what *anything* in reality really is either. This is different from the ontological ineffability of the traditional apophatic argument. In that case the source of ineffability was The One's *simplicity*, which (according to the argument) means there are no true propositions about The One to eff. In this case, by contrast, the source of ineffability is the absence, in Porphyry at least, of the experiential content required to grasp what anything really is.

3.4. *The persistence of self*

In sum, if we understand mystical revelation of The One in terms of acquaintance, the Plotinic model manages to verify two further aspects of mystical experience. It verifies a kind of *epistemic Oneness* with reality, of coming to know reality in a particularly intimate manner. And it verifies a kind of *Ineffability*, experiential ineffability, in addition to the ontological ineffability of section 3.1.

And of course, there is the same kind of Monism and metaphysical Oneness that we had in the Schafferian model. But that was disappointingly weak, remember. It doesn't verify the more striking reports of oneness we saw earlier, e.g. of the mystic "merging" with reality, or of the boundaries between things evaporating.

More importantly, still we find no semblance of the Dissolution of Self. Here I am, looking at a tree. Even if we are ontological siblings that share a common ground, and even if I am now its witness, nothing in this model threatens the distinction between me *as subject* of experience and the tree *as its object*. I still have a *point of view* on the world, a *perspective* on what it is like and how I'd like to be. The same goes even for acquaintance with The One. As "direct" and "unmediated" as it is, acquaintance remains a connection *between* two distinct things, the subject of experience and its object. When Mark Johnston looks at an Australian cricket shirt and "the

intrinsic nature of canary yellow is fully revealed” to him, he remains distinct from the color so revealed.

For these reasons, I regard the Plotinic model as a somewhat tame model of mystical experience, incapable of verifying its more interesting aspects. Let me now turn to two models that do much better.

4. The Vedantic Model

This model is based on the metaphysics of the Vedanta school of Indian philosophy; specifically, the school of Advaita (or “nondual”) Vedanta associated with Shankara. Again, this is “based” in a loose sense as I will not do any scholarship to show that it is an accurate interpretation of the texts. This is a Vedantic model.²⁶

4.1. *That art thou*

Where the Schafferian and Plotinic models were examples of priority monism, the Vedantic model is existence monism. There is one and only one being, Brahman. All else is illusion.

The concept of illusion, or “maya”, is central to Advaita Vedanta. It is sometimes explained by analogy to dreams. Last night I dreamt I was talking with Henry Shukman about silence. Our conversation seemed real. But then I woke up and realized it was just a dream. Advaita Vedanta, it is said, maintains that the world we experience while awake is also a dream of sorts. The idea is that everything we ordinarily take to be real—trees, mountains, planets—is actually an illusion projected by Brahman. It stands to Brahman in something like the way that my dream stands to me.

In *something* like that way, but the analogy is I think misleading in various respects. For one thing, my dream was produced by complex neural activity, but Brahman does not have neural activity. Brahman is perfectly simple, just like The One.

More importantly, the analogy suggests a picture on which there are three distinct “levels” of reality. At the top is the world of (what we ordinarily call) dream and illusion: e.g. my dream about Shukman, containing dream-Shukman and our dream-conversation. In the middle is the world we ordinarily take to be real, containing me and my brain that “simulated” dream-Shukman; and also Shukman himself, a man who has never heard of me. And at the bottom is Brahman, which “simulates” (or “projects”) the middle level containing me and Shukman.²⁷

But this is *not* the picture I intend by the Vedantic model—nor, I am told by Jonardon Ganeri, is it the right interpretation of Advaita Vedanta either. For on this picture each level is in some sense a distinct world, with entities within each level distinct from entities in other levels.

²⁶ I am deeply indebted to Shubhra Jyoti Das of the department of philosophy and comparative religion at Visva-Bharati University, Santiniketan, for long discussions of Advaita Vedanta in December 2024. It is largely on the basis of those discussions that I feel confident that this model bears enough likeness to Advaita Vedanta to call it Vedantic.

²⁷ In Vedantic texts these “levels” are called pratibhasika, vyavaharika, and paramarthika, respectively.

Dream-Shukman, on this picture, may be “simulated” or “constituted” by my brain processes, but is not identical to me or my brain (or to Shukman himself, for that matter). According to David Chalmers (2022), this is the right way to think about virtual worlds simulated by computer systems: they contain entities that are constituted by computer processes. It may also be the right way to think about dreams. But if so, the Vedantic model I have in mind is *not* like dream or computer simulation in this respect—if it were, it would be existence monism no longer. On the Vedantic model, it’s not that trees and mountains are “simulated” or “projected” or “constituted” by Brahman. No: they *are* Brahman.

It is worth noting in this regard that ‘maya’ is sometimes translated as ‘play’, or ‘game’, or ‘art’, rather than illusion. These may be a more accurate way to think about the model I have in mind. Rather than talking of Brahman “projecting an illusion”, which suggests the above picture I want to set aside, it might be better to talk of Brahman “engaged in play”. On this way of talking, the ordinary world around us *is* Brahman—Brahman as it presents in play. It’s not that there are two things, Brahman and *the illusion* it simulates. Rather, there is just one thing, Brahman, differently presented. There is Brahman as it really is, one and perfectly simple. And there is Brahman as it presents in play (maya), as a plurality of distinct things. But regardless of whether we talk of illusion or play, it remains that maya ‘hides’ or ‘conceals’ the true nature of things. Maya involves a kind of ‘deceit’. An actor on stage presents in character, not as who they really are, and so it is with Brahman as it presents in maya. So we can continue to talk of illusion, so long as we do not interpret this as a second level of reality distinct from Brahman.²⁸

I said that only Brahman exists; all else is illusion. Does this mean I am an illusion? Yes and no. 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*.²⁹ On this model, I am one with the tree in the most literal possible sense: we 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, shapeless, etc., *all that* is illusion too.

Note that I am not just *part of* Brahman. It’s not that part of Brahman is me and a different part is the tree. That would not yield the identity just mentioned, and Brahman does not have parts anyway (it is perfectly simple). It is rather that I am identical to Brahman *in its entirety*, the whole thing (insofar as “whole” can be meaningfully applied to Brahman). *That art thou*, says the Upanishads; and according to William James it goes on: “not a part, not a mode of That, but identically That”.³⁰ It might then be tempting to say that Brahman is wholly present here, where I am, and also there, where the tree is. The idea would be that Brahman is multiply located in space in much the way that endurantists think a material object is multiply located in time. But this is not quite right either, for space is part of the illusion. To say that Brahman is located in space would be akin to saying that Brahman has hands, which it doesn’t.

²⁸ I should say that ‘maya’ strictly speaking refers to Brahman’s *power* to produce illusion (or play). This leads to thorny debates in the Vedantic tradition about whether this power is distinct from Brahman, e.g. a form or attribute, compromising the monism of Advaita Vedanta. But this will not concern us here. In any case, the term is also used colloquially to refer to the illusion or play itself.

²⁹ This is one of the four “great sayings”, or Mahavakyas, of the Upanishads.

³⁰ James 1902, p. 310.

If we can make sense of this, we'll have a Monism of a very strong kind indeed. All of reality is numerically one. Not just "grounded in" one as in the Schafferian and Plotinic models, but numerically identical to one and the same thing. *Everything is nothing but Brahman*. By feeding the stray cat, Ramakrishna was indeed feeding Brahman.

We'll also have metaphysical Oneness of an equally strong kind. Me and the tree are not just ontological cousins but are *literally* one and the same being. The tree *is* me! I *am* you! Insofar as mystical experiences involve a sense of being "one" with things, the Vedantic model promises to verify this in a strikingly literally manner.

But *can* we make sense of this? Let me pause to develop the Vedantic model a bit more carefully.

4.2. Reality and illusion

"There is one and only one being, Brahman. All else is an illusion." How are we to understand this?

What's illusory is naturally contrasted with what's real. In the illusion I have hands; in the illusion I am distinct from the tree;... but none of that is *real*. So let's try modelling this with Kit Fine's notion of Reality.³¹

Fine wants to distinguish between what's true and what's true *in reality*. Equivalently, between what's the case and what's *really* the case. Suppose reality is just atoms spinning in a void. Some of these atoms come to be configured table-wise. Then there are tables, but in a certain sense tables aren't real. All that's real are the atoms configured table-wise. As Fine would say: it's true that there are tables, but it's not true *in reality*. Fine regiments this with a sentential operator $R(p)$, which is to be read 'in reality, it is the case that p' (2005, p. 268); or equivalently 'in reality, p', or 'it is true in reality that p'. Thus, interpreting p as "there are tables", the above view of tables is: p but not $R(p)$. Following Fine, let us assume that reality is factive:

Factive Reality: $R(p) \rightarrow p$.

How might we use this to express the Vedantic model? Well, what's illusory isn't real. In the illusion I have hands, the tree is green, and we are distinct; but none of that is true in reality. What is real? Only Brahman. But is anything *true* of Brahman? It's not clear, for the apophatic reasons of section 3.1. Brahman is supposed to be perfectly simply, with no form or attribute or property. So (says the apophatic argument) it can't be literally *true* that Brahman is perfectly simple else there'd be two: Brahman and its simplicity. For this reason it might be more perspicuous to regiment the notion of reality with a *subsential* operator that we could apply to Brahman alone and say that Brahman is real, i.e. $R(\text{Brahman})$.³² But for simplicity I'm just going

³¹ See Fine (2001, 2005). This notion of reality is similar to Ted Sider's (2011) notion of 'fundamentality' (aka 'structure', 'joints') and, as we'll see, Sider's notion may have certain advantages. But I think the differences between the two approaches, important though they may be for some purposes, do not matter much here.

³² Here is where Sider's way of talking may have advantages.

sidestep these worries and pretend that it's true that Brahman *exists*, apophatic theology notwithstanding (I don't think much hangs on this). Then we have

(1) R(Brahman exists).

Now, the central tenet of Vedanta is that everything is one and the same as Brahman. But this is no part of the illusion: in the illusion there are numerous distinct things! It is, rather, true in reality:

(2) R(I = Brahman)

(3) R(the tree = Brahman)

I'll assume that we can substitute identicals within the scope of the reality operator, and more generally that we can reason classically within that scope. That is,

Classical Reality: $[R(p) \ \& \ R(q) \ \& \ (p, q \text{ classically imply } r)] \rightarrow R(r)$.

Then it follows from (1) and (2) that I exist in reality too,

(4) R(I exist)

I am real. So is the tree, for the same reason. Indeed, it follows from (2) and (3) that I *am* the tree—in reality, at least:

(5) R(I = the tree)

And not just in reality: by Factive Reality, (5) implies

(6) I = the tree.

I am the tree, *period*—not just “in reality” but in the unqualified sense! Likewise, from (2) it follows that I am Brahman, *period*. Here is where the model verifies metaphysical Oneness in a very strong form indeed. Mystics report a deep sense of becoming one with the world, and on the Vedantic model this is *literally true* in the fullest possible sense. Though ‘becoming’ one does not quite capture the full impact of the situation. There is no “becoming”, for there were never two in the first place. No, the mystic is discovering *what she truly is and always has been*. She is (and always has been) *all of reality*. The boundary between self and world is obliterated.

So much for reality; what about illusion? It's an illusion that I have hands, that the tree is green, and that we are distinct. To model this, let us go ahead and introduce another operator, M (for ‘maya’), which is to be read ‘in the illusion, p’ or ‘it is true in the illusion that p’. So we have:

(7) M(I have hands)

(8) M(the tree is green)

(9) M(I \neq the tree)

And just as we could reason classically within the scope of reality, let us assume that the same goes within the scope of illusion:

Classical Illusion: $[M(p) \ \& \ M(q) \ \& \ (p, q \text{ classically imply } r)] \rightarrow M(r)$.

Thus from (7) we can infer that in the illusion *something* has hands. Importantly, though, none of this allows us to reason across operators. So from (2) and (7) we *cannot* infer that Brahman has hands, either in reality or in the illusion. Which is just as we want.

Now, how are we to understand maya? What does ‘in the illusion, p’ mean? Well, we know that the above things that are true in the illusion are not true in reality:

Not R(I have hands)
Not R(the tree is green)
Not R(I \neq the tree)

But is that all that (7)-(9) consist in? I think not. Fine’s category of the unreal—i.e., what’s not true in reality—is meant to encompass a wide variety of phenomena not all of which are properly thought of as illusory in the Vedantic sense. If it’s all just atoms in a void then it’s not true in reality that there are tables, but it doesn’t follow that tables are an *illusion*. There are tables! Just not in reality. Remember, whether we interpret ‘maya’ as illusion or play, the common theme is that maya involves a *deceit* of some kind, and we don’t get deceit just by saying that something isn’t true in reality. So, I think being unreal is not sufficient for being an illusion.

Should we instead think of the illusion as being *grounded* in Brahman? More specifically, the idea would be that $M(p)$ iff p is grounded in what’s true in reality. But this isn’t right either. For one thing, if reality is just atoms in a void then (truths about) tables might be grounded in (truths about) the atoms; but again, this does not mean that tables are an illusion. And in any case, ground is the wrong tool with which to understand the Vedantic model for reasons alluded to earlier when distinguishing the illusion from simulation. It’s not that there are different “levels” of reality related by constitution or simulation or projection, but that’s exactly the kind of picture we’d get if we modelled the relation between illusion and Brahman in terms of ground. This is not to say that we must reject talk of ground. Perhaps tables *are* grounded in atoms. But if so, that is just true in the illusion. What we can’t do, I think, is use ground to understand what illusion amounts to in the first place.

Much the same goes for the suggestion the illusion is “just a manner of talking” about Brahman. One might implement this approach with Sider’s metaphysical semantics: $M(p)$ iff p is verified by a metaphysical semantics in terms of Brahman. But this isn’t right either. For one thing, Brahman has no structure in terms of which to give a metaphysical semantics. For another thing, truths with a metaphysical semantics in terms of the fundamental were never supposed to be *illusory*, in Sider’s system. But most importantly, what’s true in the illusion *had better not be true!* At least, not in general. In the illusion I am distinct from the tree, so if that was *true* we would contradict (6).

So instead, I suggest we think of M as akin to a fictional operator. It is true in the fiction of Sherlock Holmes that he lives in Baker Street; but it's not *true* that he lives there, it's just a fiction. It is true in the play that Romeo loves Juliet; but it's not *true* that he loves her, it's just a play. It was true in a game I used to play with my daughters that I was Zeus; but it was never *true* that I was Zeus, it was just a game. Insofar as *maya* can be translated as play, or game, or art, this seems a fitting approach.

The key feature of this approach is that M is not factive:

Non-factive Illusion: $M(p) \not\rightarrow p$

What's true in the illusion need not be true. Thus we can say that it is true in the illusion that I have hands, but I don't have hands. And sometimes we *must* say this, as we saw. For we established earlier that

(6) $I = \text{the tree}$

But in the illusion I am not the tree, *per* (9). Therefore,

$M(I \neq \text{the tree}) \ \& \ I = \text{the tree}$.

Should we therefore go further and say that illusion is *anti-factive*, as in

Anti-factive Illusion: $M(p) \rightarrow \text{not } p$?

Not quite. Remember, we established earlier that I exist in reality,

(4) $R(I \text{ exist})$

Hence by Factive Reality, I exist. And I exist in the illusion too. So in this case we have

$M(I \text{ exist}) \ \& \ I \text{ exist}$.

So illusion is not anti-factive. However, I think there should be a presumption that what's true in the illusion is not true unless also true in reality. Now, it's a little tricky how to say this. The obvious suggestion is:

Restricted Anti-Factive Illusion: $[M(p) \ \& \ \text{not } R(p)] \rightarrow \text{not } p$.

But that's not *quite* right. Consider the proposition that I am not a lawyer. This is true in the illusion, but it's not true in reality. Reality "knows nothing" of lawyers, as Fine would say. So, as stated this principle implies that I *am* a lawyer, which is obviously not the intended result. One fix is to further restrict the principle to "positive" propositions, where here we must include propositions about distinctness. This feels inelegant, and I'd rather not rest on a distinction between positive and negative propositions. But the intuitive gist is I think clear enough for the time being. "I have hands", "I am a philosopher", "I am distinct from the tree"—on this model

all these are true in the illusion, but none of them are true. So let us live with the intuitive gist for now, push on, and talk about how to nail it down more precisely later.

A consequence of this approach is that we cannot think of truth in the illusion and truth in reality as species of the same genus, *truth*. This is in contrast to, say, fundamental vs derivative truth, where the former are truths with no ground and the latter are truths with a ground. Or contingent vs necessary truths, where the former are truths that are false in some worlds and the latter are truths that are true in all worlds. Real and illusory truth are, rather, entirely different beasts (this will be important later).

Another consequence of this approach is that there is no question of how what's true in the illusion relates to reality. In the illusion, I have hands:

(7) M(I have hands).

But there is no question of how it is that I come to have hands; of how Brahman makes it so that I have hands. We need not ask whether the relation between my having hands and Brahman is one of ground, or reduction, or identity, or what have you. This is because *I don't have hands!* It is *not true* that I have hands, so there is nothing here to explain! (The only exception is when $M(p)$ and $R(p)$, and hence p is true; but then the question of how p relates to reality is plain.)

There is of course the question of how (7) relates to reality. Is *that* true in reality, or just in the illusion? I don't think we should say that (7) is true in the illusion, for the illusion does not typically present *as* illusion. Brahman enacts a play in which I have hands, but in the play it is not a play that I have hands. Brahman is not Charlie Kaufmann. (I mean, Brahman *is* Charlie Kaufmann, but you get the point.) But nor should we say that (7) is true in reality. For one thing, the driving idea behind the Vedantic model is that *only Brahman is real*, and (in reality) Brahman is perfectly simple. To say that (7) is true in reality would therefore impart a degree of complexity to reality that is not supposed to be there. For another thing, if (7) was true in reality then reality would contain illusion, which is not the intended view. Reality is Brahman presented *as it really is*, not as it presents in the illusion; and Brahman *as it really is* contains no illusion. Reality contains *just Brahman*, not my illusory hands. This will be important later, so let us label it:

Unreal Illusion: $M(p) \rightarrow \text{not } R[M(p)]$.³³

You might complain that this builds an objectionable “explanatory gap” into the model. Why it is true in the illusion that I have hands? What makes that so? Nothing, it appears. It *just is* that Brahman enacts a play (illusion, game) in which I have hands. But this is no more objectionable than the brute truths one finds in ordinary metaphysical views like the Lewisian picture we started off with. There too one accepts a vast number of brute truths about what things are like. Here we have the same, except that they are truths about Brahman as it presents in the illusion.

4.3. *The self as an illusion*

³³ Note that since (7) is not itself true in the illusion, we cannot infer by Restricted Anti-Factive Illusion that it is false.

Here then is the model as we have it:

In reality, the tree exists. In reality, it is Brahman. The illusion is that it has leaves and is distinct from me, but none of that is true in reality. In fact, it has no leaves and is not distinct from me.³⁴

In reality, the leaves exist. In reality, each one is Brahman. The illusion is that they are green and distinct from each other (and the tree), but none of that is true in reality. In fact, they are not green and are not distinct from each other (or the tree).

The same goes for *me*, of course. But let's take care absorb what this amounts to. Start with my body. In reality, my body exists. In reality, it is Brahman. The illusion is that it has hands and is distinct from the tree, but none of that is true in reality. In fact, it has no hands and is not distinct from the tree.

Now take my mind *considered as an object*. By this I mean the sum total of mental events and states that pass through my brain, as it were—an array of sensations, thoughts, images, perceptions, emotions, urges, and so on. Their status is no different from my body or the tree. In reality, they exist. In reality, each one is Brahman. The illusion is that they have any content, that they are distinct from one another and the tree, and so on. But none of that is true in reality. In fact, they have no content and are not distinct from one another, or from the tree.

And the same goes for what I called earlier the “subjective self”, the subject of the mental states just mentioned. That which thinks, that which perceives, that which desires; and more generally that which takes a *point of view* on things, relating to the world as subject to object. In reality, it exists. In reality, it too is Brahman. The illusion is that it thinks and is distinct from what it thinks about, but none of that is true in reality. In fact, there is nothing that thinks, nothing that perceives or desires. In fact, *nothing has a point of view on anything*.

Here then we have the Dissolution of Self. The very idea of having (or being?) a point of view on things, of peering out at the world from some perspective inside one's skin, has collapsed. It is just part of the illusion. In fact, there is no distinction between subject and object, between thinker and world, between representer and represented, between perceiver and perceived—or as Plotinus put it, between the seer and the seen.

To be clear, you can of course think and believe and desire and perceive *in the illusion*. But *only* in the illusion. In fact, there is no thought, no belief, no desire, no perception, and no representation. Thus the very *enterprise* of being a thinking subject, something that believes and desires and represents and so on, rests on a false presupposition!³⁵

³⁴ I say “in fact...” just to make the contrast with the illusion; you can delete it with no loss of content. You might be tempted to say “in reality, the tree has no leaves”, but I think that's not quite right. The situation is not that “the tree has no leaves” is true in reality; it's rather that “the tree has leaves” is *not* true in reality, and so is not true at all.

³⁵ The point here is structurally alike a key component of Shankara's Advaita Vedanta. Like most schools of Indian philosophy, the *raison d'être* is to provide a route to liberation from bondage. According to Shankara, the metaphysics of Advaita Vedanta provides exactly that. In reality, one cannot be in a state of bondage because to be bonded is to be bonded *by another*. There must be something else to bond you—an oppressor, perhaps, or your

4.4. Subjectical ineffability

This leads to a distinctive kind of ineffability. To see why, suppose that you are a metaphysician attempting to limn the structure of reality. One day you have a mystical experience which reveals that only Brahman is real, all else is illusion. What then are you to think? You might continue to think that you have hands, that you are not a tree, etc. But that would be false. It is only true in the illusion, and as a metaphysician you are not interested in illusion. You are interested in reality. So instead, you might think that you are Brahman, that the tree is Brahman, that everything is Brahman. That is true, and indeed true in reality. The trouble is, your *thinking* this presupposes something that is not true in reality, and hence not true at all—it presupposes a subject that thinks and an object that is thought. In that sense *the very activity of thinking rests on a mistake*. And as a metaphysician, your aim was to avoid mistake. You wanted to limn reality *accurately*, not mistakenly; yet now it appears that *thinking anything at all* involves inaccuracy! In short, once you see that reality is Vedantic you see that very enterprise of trying to *represent* reality is a colossal mistake, an inherently confused enterprise. To avoid confusion and mistake, you must *stop representing*. You must stop *thinking*. You must stop *talking*. In this way the true nature of reality is unthinkable, ineffable.

This is different from the ontological ineffability we found in the Plotinic model. There, we could of course *say* “The One is simple”, it’s just that that failed to limn reality because the proposition asserted was not true (or so maintained the apophatic argument). Here, the relevant proposition—that you are Brahman—is true, and indeed true in reality; the trouble is, the act of *asserting* or *thinking* it is itself a failure to limn reality. I’ll call this *subjectical* ineffability, for want of a better term: reality is ineffable due to its inherent lack of an effing subject.

That’s the basic idea. But the obvious worry is that it doesn’t matter if the activity of assertion (or thought) rests on a mistake. So long as the proposition asserted is true—and true in reality—the Vedant has succeeded in her aim of limning reality. So let me now try to make the argument more precise. I don’t know if this is best way to do this, but here’s one attempt.

Start with the observation that belief (thought, assertion) is an illusion. It is only in the illusion that you believe anything at all. When you believe that you are Brahman, what we have is

M(You believe that you are Brahman),

not

R(You believe that you are Brahman).

In fact,

desires. But in reality, there is no other to bond you, nothing else to do the bonding. So in reality, you are free from bondage. My point here is that the same goes for belief, representation, and thought in general. In reality there can be no such thing, if for no other reason than that presupposes a distinction between subject and object and in reality there is no such distinction.

It is not the case that R(You believe that you are Brahman).

Hence it is not *true* that you believe that you are Brahman (by Restricted Anti-Factive Illusion). However hard you try, however loudly you yell “I am Brahman! I *am* Brahman!”, you do not believe that you are Brahman. As a first pass, then, we might put the argument like this: You can’t believe what’s true in reality because you can’t believe anything at all.

But this is not quite the right way to put the argument. The objection will be that illusory belief is good enough. “In the illusion”, the objector will say, “I *do* believe that I am Brahman. And it is *true* that I am Brahman—indeed, it is *true in reality*. So what’s the problem? My illusory belief is true! All the argument shows is that I did not *in fact* believe that I am Brahman, but why does that matter? What’s *wrong* with illusory belief? Why think it deficient? Belief is that by which I navigate the world—the *world of illusion*, that is. Belief is *made* for the illusory world, so to speak. Illusory belief is all that belief was ever *supposed* to be.”

The objector is right, of course, but she has sown the seed of the reply. Belief is made for the world of illusion. Good. Then a *true* belief is one that corresponds to *truth in the illusion!* And in the illusion, *she is not Brahman!* So her illusory belief is false. More precisely, let b be the proposition that she is Brahman. Then my point is that illusory beliefs have illusory truth-conditions:

(I) M(Her belief that b is true iff b)

In the illusion, she is not Brahman. So in the illusion, her belief that b is not true. Thus she cannot *truly believe* (assert, think) that she is Brahman, not even in the illusion.

The objector will complain that I misinterpreted her. She did not intend to form a belief with truth-conditions in the illusion. She intended to form a belief with truth-conditions in reality. That is,

(IR) M(Her belief that b is true) iff b

Since b is true in reality, we can write the right-hand-side R(b); it makes no difference. Now, in reality, she *is* Brahman (b is true). So in the illusion, her belief that b is true! Thus, the objector will claim that her illusory belief corresponds to what’s true in reality.

But I think this is confused. With (IR), the objector draws a connection between illusion and reality. Now, is the connection real or illusory? It can’t be real. For that would mean

(RIR) R[M(Her belief that b is true) iff b]

And this is obviously not so. Intuitively, the reason is that reality would then contain a connection between *two* things, something illusory and something real (remember, we can re-write b on the right-hand-side as R(b)). And that would violate the core tenet of the Vedantic model: that *only Brahman is real*. It would violate Brahman’s oneness. Right here is the crux of

the argument. The driving idea, remember, was that since reality is *one* it is incoherent for a thinking subject to represent it—in reality, at least. In fact, there can be no distinction between subject and object. In fact, there can be no such thing as *true representation* of an object by a subject. Here is where that driving idea shows up, for (RIR) is smuggling this relation of representation back in. Intuitively, it seems flat-out contradictory with the Vedantan model to think the connection (IR) is real.

Indeed, we can prove the connection isn't real from prior principles. Since *b* is true in reality, (RIR) implies

(*) R[M(Her belief that *b* is true)]

by Classical Reality. But remember the principle Unreal Illusion: if M(*p*) then not R[M(*p*)]. By contraposition, (*) then implies

Not M(Her belief that *b* is true)

That is: it is *not the case* that in the illusion, her belief is true! So if the connection (IR) is real, the objector's entire case falls apart.

So the connection (IR) must be illusory:

(IIR) M[M(Her belief that *b* is true) iff *b*]

And since it's not real, it's not even true (by Restricted Anti-Factive Illusion). That is, (IR) is *not true!* The biconditional *does not hold!* So the objector's case falls apart again. Even though *b* is true, it does not follow that in the illusion her belief that *b* is true.

Now, I am fudging things a little here. Restricted Anti-Factive Illusion had to be restricted to certain kinds of propositions, remember, e.g. "positive" ones or something like that. Is the biconditional (IR) "positive"? I don't know, but intuitively it's the kind of proposition to which we would want Restricted Anti-Factive Illusion to apply. Indeed, we should say that (IR) isn't true for the same reasons we said it isn't true in reality. Again, the core tenet of the Vedantic model is that there is just Brahman *and that's it*. Brahman presents in two ways, for sure, as it really is and as it is in *maya*. But (IR) draws a relation between those two manners of presentation, saying that *one* can truly represent *the other*, and the core tenet of the model is that there is no "room" (so to speak) for the representation of an object by a subject. The very idea of true representation, remember, is internal to *maya*. So I think there is no escaping the fact that the connection (IR) is not true. At most, it is true in the illusion *per* (IIR).

Here the objector may repeat her gambit. "An illusory connection is good enough. Who cares if it's not real, or not true? Here I am in the illusion. As long as *in the illusion* my illusory belief has truth conditions in reality, that is good enough for me." But here the buck must stop. I maintained that since belief is an illusion, a true belief corresponds to truth in the illusion—this was (I). The objector's first gambit was to say a true belief in the illusion can correspond to truth in reality—that was (IR). But she is now saying that *correspondence* itself is an illusion! And

with that she has pulled the rug out of her own feet. At stake, remember, is the project of “limning reality”. The objector first claimed to do this with an illusory belief—one that, she insisted, “corresponds” to reality nonetheless. This claim obviously collapses if ‘correspondence’ itself turns out to be an illusion. But that is what the objector is now saying.

We can I think diagnose what’s going on here. In appealing to (IR) the objector is too caught up in *maya*; so steeped in illusion that she gives belief more credit than it deserves. She neglects that the entire *enterprise* of belief and assertion is make-believe. There is no such thing as belief. Hence there is no such thing as *true* belief either. The very *notion* of “true belief” is just *maya*! The entire practice of forming beliefs and evaluating them as true or false is *all just an illusion*, a fictional game with no basis in reality. A true belief is like a winning move in a fictional game. We must therefore give up the idea that a true belief “corresponds to” or “represents” reality. Imagine a game in which I pretend to be Peter Pan, you pretend to be a pirate, and I win if I get your pretend gold. A true belief is like *that*. It “represents reality” no more than my getting the imaginary gold. Grant then that *b* is true in reality; and grant that the objector believes it (in the illusion); grant even that her (illusory) belief is true. So what? *True belief, it turns out, is not the kind of thing that corresponds to reality!*

Here it might help to distinguish “real” from “illusory” belief. Illusory belief is everyday belief, the attitude we’re familiar with. On the Vedantic model, it is part of the illusion. An illusory belief that is true is not something that “corresponds to” or “represents” reality, as we’ve seen. Compare the attitude of *denying* (setting aside the Vedantic model for a moment). If you *deny* that *p*, then even if *p* is true in reality, *your denial* does not correspond with reality. *You* have not limned reality by denying *p*. Denial is the wrong kind of attitude with which to do that. Or consider the attitude of *pretense*. If you *pretend* that *p*, then even if *p* turns out to be true in reality, *you* have not limned reality by your pretense. Pretense is the wrong kind of attitude with which to do that. Illusory belief is a bit like *that*.

By contrast, let a *real* belief, by definition, be an attitude that, if true, corresponds with reality. If you really believe that *p*, and *p* is true in reality, then—by definition—*your belief* corresponds to reality. *You* have limned reality. That’s what real belief is by definition. But like all definitions, it’s a further question whether there is any such thing. On the Vedantic model, there is not. The very idea of an attitude “corresponding to” or “representing” reality is incoherent, as we’ve seen. That is why reality is ineffable, unthinkable.

4.5. *Alienation, witness, and union*

Let’s see where we are. As a metaphysician, you start off wanting to limn reality. To do this you try *thinking*. You reason, conjecture, argue, draw conclusions, form beliefs—that sort of thing. But on the Vedantic model, to form a belief, or any attitude for that matter, you step out of reality (so to speak) and into illusion; and it is then impossible for the attitude so formed to “correspond to” or “represent” the reality you left. Reality simply does not contain the resources for that to be possible. So in *thinking* you completely failed from get-go. You went wrong right out of the traps. Insofar as your aim is to limn reality, *thinking just gets in the way*.

What then are you to do? You must *stop thinking*. You must quieten the subjective self. You must let go of all belief, all desire, and any other state that involves relating as *subject to object*. According to the Vedantic model, *this is how to do metaphysics!* If your aim is to limn reality, you must let go of the subjective self. To be sure, it doesn't follow that reality *can* be limned like this. At most what we have here is akin to Reichenbach on induction: *if* reality can be limned at all, it is by quieting the subjective self.³⁶

This is the aim of certain meditative traditions, of course (though talk of “aim” might import too much of the subjective self). Here I don't just mean focusing on the breath and noting thoughts as they arise. True, this helps you relate to those thoughts *as objects*, not as their subject. You are no longer *thinking* them but *observing* them. But of course, to observe them is to be the subject of another mental state; your state of *observing* them. So you must stop all that too. You must let go of your focus on the breath, let go of your attention to thoughts, let go of attention to anything. The result (so it is said) is a field of awareness in which various mental events may unfold but none of which are the object of attention. But insofar as the field of awareness has a ‘center’, there is still a subject—an inactive subject, perhaps, but a subject nonetheless. So you must let that go too. This is notoriously elusive. You might try sitting in a cave for twenty years. Or you might drop 300 micrograms of acid. Whatever works. Either way, the result (so it is said) is a field of awareness with no center. Pure consciousness without a subject. Our Reichenbachian result is that if reality can be limned at all, it is with a state of mind like *that*.

Of course, by “limning” I do *not* mean “representing” or “copying”. The idea is not that pure consciousness would “represent Brahman” any more than would belief.³⁷ It is rather that “representation” and its cognates are the wrong way to approach the enterprise of metaphysics in the first place. The conclusion of metaphysical inquiry is not a set of *true claims* or *beliefs* about reality, not even ones that count as knowledge. It is not a ‘book of the world’, to use Ted Sider's phrase. On the Vedantic model, the conclusion of metaphysical inquiry (if there is one) is not *thesis* but *meditation*.³⁸

This might count as a kind of epistemic oneness with reality even tighter than the witness we saw in the Plotinic model. There, we saw that knowing true propositions can still leave you alienated from reality as Porphyry was. His knowledge was hollow. Plotinus did better at limning reality. He got epistemically “closer”, as it were, more “attuned” to reality, not with more propositional knowledge but with acquaintance. Through acquaintance he came to witness reality, as we put it. But we now see that to be acquainted with something is still to retain some distance from it, namely the distance of subject to object. By letting go of the subjective self one removes that distance. We might call this a state of *union*: an epistemic oneness with reality you achieve only by ceasing to relate to it as subject to object.

³⁶ Of course, there never was a subjective self in the first place. By “letting go” of it I mean: letting go of the illusion that you are a thinking subject.

³⁷ Sometimes, Advaita Vedanta is described as being a view on which reality (Brahman) is pure consciousness. But what I just said raises another possibility. Maybe it's not that *Brahman* is pure consciousness—that threatens Brahman's oneness, after all. Maybe it's that if only Brahman is real, the only way to limn reality is with a state of pure consciousness. TBD.

³⁸ Maybe those annoying people at parties who hear that you do metaphysics and start talking about their chakras were right after all.

This all feels a bit nuts, I know! But it seems to have been foreshadowed in the Upanishads:

The Fourth, say the wise... is not the knowledge of the senses, nor is it relative knowledge, nor yet inferential knowledge. Beyond the senses, beyond the understanding, beyond all expression, is the Fourth. It is pure unitary consciousness wherein awareness of the world and of multiplicity is completely obliterated. It is ineffable peace. It is the Supreme Good. It is One without a second.³⁹

And perhaps also by Plotinus, who even calls it union:

You ask how we can know the Infinite? I answer, not by reason. It is the office of reason to distinguish and define. The infinite therefore cannot be ranked among its objects. You can only apprehend the Infinite... by entering into *a state in which you are your finite self no longer*. This is... the liberation of your mind from finite consciousness. *When you thus cease to be finite you become one with the Infinite...* You realize this union, this identity.⁴⁰

Or as Margaret Smith (1994, p. 198) nicely puts it:

In that vision the mystic passes away from self into the One and attains to that state of union which is the end of the quest.

What I've tried to do is make sense of these remarkable passages by showing that they follow from the pretty straightforward model I set out in section 4.2.

4.6. Summary

Let me summarize what we found in the Vedantic model. We found Monism and metaphysical Oneness in a very strong sense. The mystic is literally numerically identical to all of reality. We also found the Dissolution of Self in a striking strong and literal manner: the very idea of the subjective-self, of having a point of view on the world, was revealed to be an illusion. It is simply not there. This led straight to the distinctive kind of ineffability, “subjectical” ineffability, that stems from the fact that there is no effing subject. Which, in turn, raised the possibility of a very strong kind of epistemic Oneness, i.e. union, that results from giving up the illusion of being a thinking subject. The Vedantic model therefore appears to verify our four aspects of mystical experience to an impressive degree.

But notice: I just summed up the results without saying the word “Brahman”. Which raises the question: what role exactly did Brahman play in the above? Well, we needed *something* in that role to get the numerical identity in Monism and metaphysical Oneness. But what happens if we remove Brahman? What happens if we say that *nothing* is real, not even Brahman?

5. The Madhyamakan model

³⁹ Quoted in Stace (1960), p. 88.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Stace (1960), p. 112. I told you the Plotinic model didn't do justice to Plotinus!

This brings us to our final model, on which nothing is real. Reality is empty.

I'm calling this the Madhyamakan model due to its resemblance to the philosophy of emptiness in Madhyamaka Buddhism, founded by Nagarjuna. But it may bear even less resemblance to that than did the Vedantic model to Vedanta and the Plotinic model to Plotinus. In truth, it's a bit of an unholy mishmash of the kind of pragmatism you find in people like Richard Rorty and Nelson Goodman seasoned with a sprinkling of realism from Kit Fine and Ted Sider, which, when mixed together in a certain way, starts to *sound* very much like the Madhyamakan doctrine of emptiness. It might be more accurate to call it the *Grordhyamakan* model, but one must balance accuracy with aesthetics.

5.1. Reality and emptiness

Nothing is real. Reality is empty. How are we to make sense of this?

Let's continue to use Fine's notion of reality. We distinguish between what's the case and what's *really* the case; between what's true and what's true *in reality*. And let's continue to write $R(p)$ for "in reality, p". Then the core of the Madhyamakan model is:

Emptiness: For all p, not $R(p)$.

Nothing is true in reality. Is *that* true in reality? In principle one could say yes, restricting the scope of Emptiness to propositions that do not involve the concept of reality. We will examine that restriction in due course. But for now let's go all in and say no. *Nothing* is true in reality, not even *that*.⁴¹

So, it's not true in reality that I have hands. Still, I have hands. That is true, for all Emptiness says. What kind of a truth is it? For now, let's label it a *conventional* truth, written $C(p)$. You can read this as "conventionally speaking, p" or "it is conventionally true that p". So far this is just a label; we'll examine what conventional truth amounts to soon. For now, the important point is that it is factive:

Conventional Factivity: $C(p) \rightarrow p$.

This distinguishes it from the Vedantan model. Conventional truth is not illusion. It is not an illusion that I have hands. On this model, I *do* have hands! The world is not an illusion.⁴²

⁴¹ The Emptiness thesis is a generalization of an idea from Jonathan Jacobs (2015), who claimed (roughly) that for any proposition p *about God's intrinsic nature*, it is not true in reality that p. (Jacobs expressed this in terms of Sider's notion of fundamentality, but as we'll see I don't draw a significant distinction between the notions and neither did Jacobs). Clearly, Emptiness is a generalization of Jacobs' thesis to all propositions whatsoever. Now, Jacobs developed his thesis in order to make sense of God's ineffability, and I will likewise argue that Emptiness leads to an ineffability thesis too (section 5.6). I suspect that the nature of the ineffability is somewhat different in each case, but unfortunately I won't have space to explore this here.

⁴² Madhyamakan Buddhism is known as the "middle path" because while it maintains that reality is empty, in contrast with Hindu schools like Vedanta and the Buddhist school of Abhidharma, it rejects the annihilationist doctrine that nothing exists. This middle path is reflected in the model by the factivity of conventional truth (though to foreshadow, the import of factivity will start to evaporate as we go on.)

Before examining what conventional truth amounts to, let me add something to the notion of reality in play. Or perhaps I should say “emphasize” instead of “add”, for I suspect it’s implicit Fine’s conception of reality already. Either way, I will assume that reality is *joint-carving* in Ted Sider’s sense (2011). The idea is that if p is true in reality, then p is a perspicuous representation of the world in terms of concepts that match the world’s own structure. Suppose I’m looking at a green emerald. It is green and it is grue. But grue is a “gerrymandered” category, not a natural kind. So while it is *true* that the emerald is grue, that is not a perspicuous representation of how things really are. As Sider puts it, it doesn’t carve at the joints—or as he says equivalently, it isn’t “structural”, or “fundamental”. So what I’ll assume is that p is true in reality iff p is structural (fundamental, joint-carving) in Sider’s sense.⁴³ Now, Sider applies his notion of structure freely to sentences, propositions, and truths; and also to their ‘subsential’ parts like words, concepts, properties, objects, quantifiers, operators, and so on. This extends the grammar of Fine’s reality operator $R(p)$ considerably, but I’ll allow myself to talk like Sider here. To some extent (though not perfectly), you can define these extended ways of talking out of Fine’s operator. Alternatively, we could take Sider’s notion as basic and treat Fine’s as a special case. The two approaches aren’t exactly the same (see Sider 2011, chapter 8, for discussion), but I think the differences won’t matter for our purposes.

What might be a genuine addition is a connection that Sider draws to accuracy. Just as truth is one species of accuracy, Sider thinks that joint carving is another. Suppose I believe that the emerald is green and also that it is grue. Both beliefs are true. But the first is more accurate insofar as it is more joint carving. The idea is that even if a representation of the world in terms of gerrymandered categories like grue were *true*, it would still fail to accurately represent the world’s structure. The cash value of this connection to accuracy is that it makes explicit the *normative* component of structure. Insofar as an aim of inquiry is accurate representation, structure is a standard by which to evaluate a representation for accuracy or correctness. All else equal, a joint-carving belief is *more correct* than one that isn’t. Given the aforementioned aim, joint-carving beliefs are *better*. Since I’m equating structure and reality, this is to say that a belief that is true in reality is *more correct* than one that is “merely” true. Given the aforementioned aim, beliefs that are true in reality are *better*.⁴⁴

Now, a key feature of the Madhyamakan model is that it does not reject this notion of reality. Madhyamakans (in my sense) find the notion perfectly intelligible—indeed, their core thesis of Emptiness is stated in its terms! They therefore agree that a belief that is true in reality *would* be more correct than one that isn’t; it’s just that they take themselves to have discovered that nothing *is* true in reality. In this regard the model is *unlike* the kind of anti-realism you find in people like Richard Rorty and Nelson Goodman, who reject all this talk of “reality” and “structure” as unintelligible nonsense. This is easy to miss. For Madhyamakans will of course reject any claim of the form “ $R(p)$ ”—in that regard they are just like Rorty. But Rorty rejects the

⁴³ This seems to be what Fine has in mind anyway. Or at least he leaves it open. For when introducing the notion of reality he says “One might think of the world and of the propositions by which the world is described as each having its own intrinsic structure; and a proposition will then describe how things are in themselves when its structure corresponds to the structure of the world” (2001, p. 25).

⁴⁴ Again, this may be what Fine has in mind anyway: “realist metaphysics... has a single focus—the fundamentally real—and our interest in other categories of reality will derive from their connection with this more fundamental category” (2001, p. 28).

claim because he thinks it's gibberish. By contrast, Madhyamakans find the claim perfectly intelligible; they just think it's false. They are *error-theorists* about reality, not *quietists*. This will be important as we go on.

5.2. Conventional truth

Good. Now, how are we to understand conventional truth? All we know so far is that conventional truths are true but not true in reality. That is, $C(p)$ only if p & not $R(p)$. But that cannot be sufficient for conventional truth. Fine would agree that "I have hands" is true but not true in reality, but that doesn't make him a Madhyamakan Buddhist. It's not true in reality, he'll say, but it is *grounded* in reality. Here the Madhyamakan must disagree, for if nothing is real then nothing is grounded in reality either.

It will therefore help to bring in Fine's notion of ground too. This is not quite the same as *generative* grounding à la Schaffer—it's not a relation of that *backs* metaphysical explanation like causal dependence backs causal explanation. It *is* metaphysical explanation. To say that q grounds p just is to say " p because q " in a metaphysical (or constitutive) sense of "because".

So, I have hands because I have an appendage with five fingers; and I have an appendage with five fingers because... and so on. Let us all agree on that. On the view I'm attributing Fine, this chain of explanation bottoms out in things that are true in reality. Hence while my having hands isn't true in reality, it is part of reality in an extended sense: it's part of all that's grounded in the real. Let us write $R_e(p)$ for this extended sense of reality: $R_e(p)$ iff $R(p)$ or p is grounded in what's real (you can read this as "in extended reality, p " or "it is true in extended reality that p "). Then while Fine thinks that it's true in *extended* reality that I have hands, the Madhyamakan model disagrees. If nothing is true in reality, then nothing is true in extended reality either (and vice-versa). So we can re-write the core thesis of Emptiness thus:

Emptiness: for all p , not $R_e(p)$.

Thus, the Madhyamakan model can agree with common sense about what's *true*: it's true that I have hands. It can also agree with common sense about what grounds what. It can even allow that the chain of grounds always bottoms out in truths with no grounds—"basic" truths, as Fine calls them. It just denies that any of that is real. Extended reality is empty.

It follows that conventional truths are true but not true in extended reality. That is, $C(p)$ only if p & not $R_e(p)$. But now we must take care. Fine thinks that any truth that's not true in extended reality is nonfactual (2001, p. 28). That is,

Factuality: If p is factual then $R_e(p)$.

It would follow, then, that conventional truths are nonfactual. And this seems wrong. For Fine, the nonfactual is a category for views like ethical expressivism, on which ethical assertions and beliefs are really just expressions of conative attitudes. And what *makes* a view like that nonfactual, on his view, is that its account of ethical practice—e.g. of ethical belief and assertion—makes no appeal to ethical properties, facts, propositions, or what have you. Thus an

expressivist might say that one believes that murder is wrong in virtue of having a certain con-attitude to murder (this is a claim of grounds). This is in contrast to factualist views, as Fine understands them, on which ethical practice is explained in terms of ethical matters: one believes that murder is wrong in virtue of believing *the proposition that murder is wrong*, for example. This is just a sketch of Fine's system, but no matter the details. The point is that the factual vs nonfactual distinction concerns what *grounds* the practice of forming beliefs and making assertions. And yet we said that the Madhyamakan model is neutral about what grounds what. It can agree with the ethical factualist that to believe that murder is wrong is to believe *the proposition that murder is wrong*; and it might then add that that proposition is true in virtue of material truths about the natural world (a la Cornell Realism), which are in turn grounded in basic physical truths. She just maintains that *none of that is part of extended reality*. None of it is real. It's unreal all the way down.

So I think we must give up Factuality (though we'll see that it might make a reappearance down the road). If so, we can then characterize conventional truth thus:

$$C(p) \text{ iff } p \ \& \ \text{not } R_e(p)$$

leaving it open whether a given conventional truth is factual or nonfactual in Fine's sense. To keep things concrete, I'll assume that conventional truths are factual unless otherwise stated.

So here is the model as we currently have it. It has two components. The first is that reality is empty *per* Emptiness: for all p , not $R_e(p)$. And the second is that not everything is false. Many things are true. Indeed, whatever we previously thought was true can remain true, on this model. It's just conventionally true: true but not in extended reality.

5.3. Empty questions

This is fine as far as it goes. It's not wrong. But it is misleading. Look at our characterization of conventional truth. It suggests that conventional truth is a species of truth. First come the truths, so to speak, and then the conventional truths are just those that aren't true in extended reality (which, by Emptiness, are all of them). But the situation is in fact more delicate. After all, where do the truths come from? Out of all the candidates for truth (sentences, propositions, whatever), what distinguishes those that are true from those that aren't? It's true that I have hands, we think, but not that I am a tree. But why? What makes that the case?

In a sense there's no problem. Remember, the Madhyamakan model can replicate any claim of grounds we like. Why is it that I have hands? Because I have appendages with five fingers—*that's* why I have hands; *that's* why it's true. And why is it that I have appendages? You can continue the chain of grounds as far as you like. Maybe it bottoms out in physics. But the question is where that entire chain of ground comes from in the first place. To see the point, think of ground non-factively for a moment: to say that q grounds p makes no implication that p or q are true, it just says what *would* ground q were p and q true. Then in addition to the chain of grounds that results in my having hands, there is also a chain of grounds that results in my being a tree. I have hands because (non-factively) I have an appendage with five fingers, and so on down the chain. But equally: I am a tree because (non-factively) I have a trunk and leaves, and so

on down *that* chain. What is it that distinguishes the first chain over the second? Why does the first chain consist of *truths* while the second chain doesn't?

One thing we could say here is that there is no answer. The first chain is true and that is all there is to say. The world *just is* the way it is. But I think that's a misleading way to think of the Madhyamakan model.

The reason is that none of these truths are joint-carving. As in, *not at all*. In this regard they're *much* worse than grue, on Sider's view. As gerrymandered and non-joint-carving as grue is, on Sider's view it at least has *some* basis in reality. There is some "finite distance", so to speak, between grue and the joints. But on the Madhyamakan model my having hands is *maximally* non-joint-carving: it has no basis in reality at all! Now, one feature of non-joint-carving discourse is that it is not a mistake to start talking otherwise. Is an appletini a martini? You say yes, your friend says no. Who is right? It's a silly question. We can say what we like because there are no joints in the vicinity. We can speak this way or that way and neither is more 'correct' than the other because neither is more joint-carving than the other. The question is vacuous, or "non-substantive" as Sider puts it.⁴⁵ Now, do I have hands? On the Madhyamakan model, this question is *maximally* non-substantive! We can say what we like! There are no joints *anywhere*, let alone in the vicinity, so we can speak this way or that way and neither is any more 'correct' than the other. Just as it is no mistake to say that an appletini is no martini, nor is it a mistake to say that I have no hands! Arguing about whether I have hands is just as silly as arguing whether appletinis are martinis is on Sider's view. Indeed, it's *more* silly. It's *maximally* silly. It's *completely* vacuous. As Nagarjuna would say, the question is *empty*.

Now, it's tricky how exactly to put this. On one approach, deciding to speak one way is deciding what one *means* by a word. If we decide to call appletinis 'martinis', we are fixing the meaning of 'martini' so that it refers to a category of drinks that includes appletinis. Call that category martini₁. On this approach, it was always already true that appletinis are martinis₁. Of course, it was *also* always already true that appletinis are *not* martinis₂—where martini₂ is a category of drinks that does not include appletinis. So it was always already true that appletinis *are* martinis₁; and always already true that appletinis *are not* martinis₂; and on this approach the issue is non-substantive because both truths are equally non-joint-carving and so in that respect neither is more "correct" than the other. If it was previously indeterminate whether 'martini' referred to martini₁ or martini₂, then deciding to call appletinis 'martinis' amounts to precisifying its referent; the point then is that neither precisification yields a more "correct" representation of reality. If 'martini' *did* refer to martini₂, then by deciding to call appletinis 'martinis' we are changing its meaning; but still, the point remains is that neither meaning yields a more "correct" representation of reality.

That is one way of putting things. But it is not ideal for our purposes because it presupposes what was always already *true*, and the very notion of truth is under contention. So here is another way to put things. Suppose the sentence "appletinis are martinis" was always already true. OK, but the sentence "appletinis are *not* martinis" was always already *shmue*. Think of truth and shmuth here as properties of sentences, and assume an abundant conception of properties on

⁴⁵ See Sider (2011, chapter 4). I'm slurring over all sorts of details of his account of substantivity, but I don't *think* they matter here.

which there is a property for every set. Then there is one set of sentences that includes “appletinis are martinis”—that’s the set or property we’re calling truth. And there is another set of sentences just like it except we replace that sentence with “appletinis are not martinis”—that’s the set or property we’re calling shmuth. Or to avoid prejudging things, let’s call them truth₁ and truth₂. And what goes for sentences goes for propositions. It is true₁ that appletinis *are* martinis, and true₂ that appletinis *are not* martinis. OK. Then one way to describe the appletini case is that truth₁ and truth₂ are equally non-joint-carving. You can speak truths₁ or you can speak truths₂, and neither is a more “correct” way to represent reality. Both “correspond” to reality equally well (or badly).

To emphasize the point, suppose we defined truth₁ a la Tarski in terms of a reference, i.e. a relation between words and things. Call this relation reference₁. Thus it is true₁ that appletinis are martinis because ‘appletini’ refers₁ to a set A and ‘martini’ refers₁ to a set M and A is a subset of M. That sort of thing. Then truths₁ “correspond” to reality in the sense that they link up to reality by way of the relation of reference₁. They correspond₁ to reality. Now suppose we defined truth₂ in the same Tarskian manner except using a *slightly* different relation of reference, reference₂. Reference₂ is *very similar* to reference₁; the only difference is that it relates ‘martini’ to a set M’ that is just like M except we remove the elements of A. Then truths₂ *also* “correspond” to reality: they link up to reality by way of the relation of reference₂. They correspond₂ to reality. And the point then is that reference₁ and reference₂ are equally non-joint-carving. Neither yields a more “correct” or “accurate” representation of reality. If you want to correspond₁ with reality you should speak truths₁; if you want to correspond₂ with reality you should speak truths₂; but neither way of speaking does a better job of getting at *how things really are*. Neither way of corresponding with reality is more accurate than the other.

OK. Go back now to the two chains of (non-factive) ground we started with. There is the chain that results in my having hands. And there is the chain that results in my being a tree. I have hands because (non-factively) I have an appendage with five fingers, and so on down the chain. But equally: I am a tree because (non-factively) I have a trunk and leaves, and so on down *that* chain. Which chain is true? Do I have hands or am I a tree? We saw earlier that the question is *empty*. Both chains are *maximally non-joint-carving*. As with appletinis, we can say what we like because there are no joints in the vicinity—worse, there are no joints *anywhere!* We can speak how we like and neither is any more “correct” than the other. That’s what we saw earlier. And now we can put the point like this: the first chain is true₁, the second chain is true₂, and truth₁ and truth₂ are both *maximally non-joint-carving*. You can speak truths₁ or you can speak truths₂, but neither way of speaking is any more “correct” than the other. There is nothing metaphysically distinguished about truths₁ over truths₂ (or vice-versa). Neither way of speaking is any more accurate than the other.

What then determines which propositions are *conventionally* true? We said that

$$C(p) \text{ iff } p \ \& \ \text{not } R_c(p)$$

but can now see why this is biconditional is misleading. When read as a definition from right-to-left, it presupposes that it is already given which p’s are true, and then the conventional truths are those p’s that aren’t true in extended reality. And that’s not the situation *at all*. Rather,

convention truth is *just a manner of talking*. Is it conventionally true that I have hands or conventionally true that I am a tree? We now know that the question is empty. *We can say what we want*. Conventional truth is *whatever we take it to be*. Thus, $C(p)$ means something like: *by our lights, p*.⁴⁶

This is not to say that the biconditional is wrong. $C(p)$ implies p by factivity, and we get not $R_c(p)$ by Emptiness. And if p is true but not true in extended reality, it must be conventionally true since we introduced ‘conventional truth’ as a label for those truths that aren’t true in (extended) reality. So the biconditional isn’t wrong, it’s just completely unilluminating as to what conventional truth is.

It is worth comparing what we have here with the Vedantic model. At first, conventional truth may have appeared more “robust” than illusory truth thanks to being factive. What’s conventionally true is *true*, after all, while what’s true in the illusion is (typically) not. In this regard the Madhyamakan model can appear to give more solid ground to stand on, so to speak: everything we thought was true can still be true! But in another sense, conventional truth is less robust thanks to being *empty*. Is it conventionally true that I have hands? It’s an empty question. You can say what you want. It’s just like appletinis, only more so. By contrast, the illusion is *given*. It is what it is. Is it true in the illusion that I have hands? *Yes of course*. There is a fact of the matter what’s true in the illusion; it’s nothing like appletinis at all (unless its appletinis).

5.4. Restricted emptiness

One more point before we move on to verifying mystical experience. We just saw that the question of whether I have hands is empty. But so too are questions of *grounds*. I have an appendage with five fingers, let’s agree. Does that make it the case that I have a hand, or that I am a tree? Empty question! We can say what we like because there are no joints anywhere in the vicinity. We could say that *I have a hand* because I have an appendage with five fingers. But equally, we could say that *I am a tree* because I have an appendage with five fingers! Neither way of talking is any more accurate than the other!

Thus, while I started the last sub-section pretending the two chains of (non-factive) grounds were “given”, so to speak, we must now take that back. Whether p is true, *and what grounds p* , is all mere convention.

What about questions of *reality*? Well, we started with

Emptiness: For all p , not $R_c(p)$,

and we said that *that* was not true in reality either. It is therefore a conventional truth. This does not entail that it is false, but it does entail that we can say what we want! I have hands, and that is not true in reality. Or so we previously said. But it would be no mistake, we now see, to say that

⁴⁶ This is, in effect, the view of truth I defend in my manuscript “Undoing the Truth Fetish: The Normative Path to Pragmatism”. I have struggled for a long time to find the right way of articulating the view in that paper—the current version is very different from a version I circulated some years ago. So it came as something of a revelation to find that the view follows straight from the doctrine of Emptiness!

it *is* true in reality. This is what the Madhyamakan model as we currently have it entails: that reality is empty; but that *that* is itself a mere convention and hence it would be no mistake to start saying otherwise.

One might therefore wish to make the model more robust, so to speak. I have hands, and that is not true in reality. To give that bones, let's try saying that *that* is true in reality:

R [Not R(I have hands)]

On this revised model, then, the fact that it's not true in reality that I have hands is not mere convention, but is true in reality. So, *some* propositions are true in reality. It's just that they're all propositions of the form

Not R(p).

where p does not itself involve reality. This leaves us with:

Restricted Emptiness: (i) For all p that do not involve reality, R[not R_e(p)]; and
(ii) No other propositions are true in reality.

For many purposes the difference between these models won't matter. They both imply that for any true p that does not involve reality, not R_e(p) and hence C(p); and that implication will drive most of what follows.

5.5. *Emptiness and mystical experience*

It is now straightforward to see how this model verifies the sense of Oneness reported by mystics. Ordinarily, we think we are distinct from the rest of reality. Here am I, there is the tree. We are distinct things.

(1) I \neq the tree.

But then I have a revelatory experience and realize that reality is empty. It is not true in extended reality that I am distinct from the tree, it is only a conventional truth:

(2) C(I \neq the tree).

This does not negate (1), since convention is factive. But it does mean that the question of whether I am the tree is empty. It is no more substantive than the question of whether appletinis are martinis—in fact, it is *much less* substantive! It's completely empty. So it is no mistake to think that I *am* the tree. Nor is it a mistake to think that I am *not* the tree. In that sense there is no fact of the matter whether I am the tree. Here I don't mean that it's nonfactual in Fine's sense. It isn't (I'll suppose). I mean that the very *question* of whether I'm the same or different from the tree is completely confused—at least, insofar as it presupposes that there's an answer. If reality is

empty, there is no answer! *I am the tree. I am not the tree. I am neither tree nor not tree.* You can say what you want. It makes no difference either way. It's like appletinis, only more so.⁴⁷

In this way the idea that I am an independent being, something distinct and separate from the rest of the world, evaporates completely. But it's not that I am one with everything either—that was the Oneness we had in the Vedantic model, and that's not what we have here. Better to call this Non-Separateness: I thought I was something separate, but now I see that the very question of my separateness is completely empty. There is no fact of the matter one way or the other.

Likewise with Monism. Previously I thought that the world is a collection of distinct entities. Over there is the tree, up above are the stars. They are distinct things. But then I realize that reality is empty. It follows that the very question of their distinctness is even sillier than appletinis. There is no answer. It's an empty question. The tree is the star. The tree is not the star. The tree is neither star nor not star. It makes no difference. Again, it's not that the world *is* one—that's what we had on the Vedantic model, and that's not what we have here. Better to call this Non-Pluralism. We thought the world contained a vast plurality of distinct things, and now we see that the very question of their distinctness is empty. There is no fact of the matter one way or the other.

And likewise again with the Dissolution of Self. This is much like Non-Separateness, but whereas that concerned the self *as object* here it is the self *as subject*, the subjective self. That which thinks, that which perceives, that which desires; that which takes a point of view on things, relating to them as subject to object. I ordinarily take myself to be (or to have) such a thing. I have opinions on what things are like and how I would like them to be. Here I am, for example, looking at the tree. I see it as green. That's how it is from my point of view. And I, the perceiving subject, am distinct from the object perceived. *I perceive it*, not vice-versa. But on the Madhyamakan model, all that is empty! Do I perceive it or does it perceive me? Is there any distinction between the perceiver and the perceived? Empty questions! There is no fact of the matter. We can say what we want. It's like appletinis, only more so. In this way the distinction between subject and object collapses. The very idea of having a *point of view* on things evaporates.

Who am I? What am I? Where am I? What is it that thinks? What is it that perceives? What is it that desires? All empty questions! There is no fact of the matter what the subjective self is or where its boundaries lie. Is it enclosed within this sack of skin? Does it extend through the entire universe? There is no fact of the matter. The self is empty. The self has dissolved.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ I just said the issue isn't nonfactual in Fine's sense. But this is a little tricky. Discourse about trees is factual in his sense, remember, if the practice (i.e. assertion and belief and the like) is grounded in terms of trees. Now, *in the convention*, this will be so. *Conventionally speaking*, to believe that I am a tree is to believe the proposition *that I am a tree*. Remember, the Madhyamakan model can preserve any claim of ground we want. Still, there's a sense in which *the entire convention* is nonfactual. After all, C(p), we said, means something like: by our lights, p. Conventional truth is explained not in terms of any subject matter, but in terms of our practice. It's just that Madhyamakans need never *say* that! In the convention, they are free to distinguish discourse about trees from ethical discourse. Perhaps we should say that everything is "transcendentally" nonfactual on the Madhyamakan model. But I'll just leave this here.

⁴⁸ In Dasgupta (forthcoming) I argue for a similar conclusion and explore its consequences regarding objectivity.

5.6. *The metaphysics of emptiness*

In the Vedantic model, the dissolution of self led straight to subjectical ineffability. Do we get the same result here? Not obviously. In the Vedantic model, the argument stemmed from the fact that belief, and true belief, and correspondence, was all an illusion. *There is no such thing as belief, no such thing as correspondence.* And so it was impossible to limn reality—to limn the fact that only Brahman is real—with belief, or indeed with thought of any kind. Here the situation is not quite the same. It's not that belief, or true belief, or correspondence, are illusions. It's that they're conventions. By factivity, this means it *is* possible to believe all sorts of things, for these beliefs to be true, for them to correspond to the facts, and so on. Now, maybe the argument can be resuscitated on the grounds that *all that* is mere convention. Maybe *limning* reality requires not just correspondence as convention but “real” correspondence. But I'll leave that for another time, for there is on the face of it a more pressing problem: namely, that *there is nothing to limn.* The aim was to limn reality, but reality is empty!

What are we to make of this situation? Here we must be mindful of the distinction between restricted and unrestricted emptiness. Start with the unrestricted version. Suppose you are a metaphysician attempting to limn the structure of reality. Then you realize that reality is empty. What then are you to think? Well, you could think that you have hands, that you are not a tree, and so on. That would all be *true*, let's suppose, but none of it limns reality. It's all empty, it's all just convention. And as a metaphysician your aim was not to limn convention. Your aim was to limn reality. So instead, you could think that nothing is real, i.e.

Emptiness: For all p , not $R_c(p)$.

That is *also* true (we're supposing), but it *also* doesn't limn reality! It has no more substance, so to speak, than the claim that you have hands! It's empty. It's just convention. And again, you were not trying to limn convention. You were trying to limn reality!

So, what are you to do? Maybe the answer is that you should go home and stop doing metaphysics. Limning reality, you now see, is a defunct project, so give it up and do something else. Write poetry. Play with your kids. Do science and discover truths. Whatever. Just forget about the project of limning reality, of carving at the joints, because there aren't any joints to carve.

But I don't think that's quite right. That's what *quietists* like Rorty and Goodman should do. They think limning reality is *incoherent*. They think all this talk of “reality” and “joints” is gibberish. For them, trying to “limn reality” is like trying to have a colorless green idea that sleeps furiously. It's nonsense. It's bullshit. So the correct thing *for them* to do, no doubt, is go home and do science or whatever.

But as a Madhyamakan, you are not a quietist. You don't think this talk of “reality” and “joints” is gibberish. You find it just as intelligible as Ted Sider and Kit Fine. You just don't think there are any joints, or that anything is real. You are an *error-theorist*, not a quietist. And this makes all the difference. For it means you recognize that joint-carving is a species of accuracy (section 5.1). You agree that, all else equal, a belief that is joint-carving—i.e., that is

true in reality—is more accurate than one that isn't. Of course, you also think that all propositions are *maximally non-joint-carving* (section 5.3). And so you think all propositions are *maximally inaccurate* in that respect. By contrast, the quietist does not recognize this respect of inaccuracy. This notion of inaccuracy is, on her view, complete gibberish.

Think of it like this. For Ted Sider, thinking about the world in non-joint-carving terms involves a kind of “distortion”. Even if what you think isn't false, you're seeing the world through tinted spectacles (so to speak). As a Madhyamakan, you *also* think that thinking about the world in non-joint-carving terms involves a kind of “distortion”; it's just that you don't think there is a distortion-free way to think. While Ted Sider thinks you can take off the spectacles and see the world without tinted lenses, you think that's impossible. At most, you can swap out one tinted spectacle for another. For quietists, by contrast, there is no meaningful notion of distortion here in the first place.

So, when the quietist goes home and does science, she discovers things that are in her view true and accurate *in the fullest possible sense of the term*. Whereas when a Madhyamakan goes home and does science, she discovers things are on her view *maximally inaccurate* in the above respect! A complete and utter distortion. And yet her aim was to avoid inaccuracy. She did not want to limn distortion, she wanted to limn reality. She was asking the question, “what is reality like, free of distortion?” So in answer to that question she should not just walk away and do science, *for that would involve distortion!* Instead, she should answer the question like this: “In reality, ...”.

There is nothing to say, of course. There is nothing to think. All thought involves distortion. And so here again we have metaphysics not as thesis but as meditation. The correct conclusion to metaphysical inquiry is not to write *The Book of The World*, or to go home and do science, but to *stop thinking*. Or to put the point in its Reichenbachian form: *if* metaphysics can be done at all, it is not by *thinking*. As before, this is not limning in the sense of “copying” or “representation”. It's not that an empty mind copies an empty world. It's that anything else, any thought whatsoever, involves precisely the kind of distortion one was trying to avoid. Once again, *thinking just gets in the way*.

To be sure, letting go of thought is not always an effective pedagogical tool. If a student asks you what reality is like and you drop into meditation, they might well call the Dean. So instead, you could tell them that reality is empty. That is *true*, after all. It's just that you must *also* tell them not to take that too seriously. You must tell them that the claim that reality is empty is *also* empty. You must explain that the question of whether reality is empty is *utterly silly*, like appletinis only more so. And then you must tell them not to take *that* too seriously either... and so on. The difficulty here is that every time you *say* something you risk being taken too seriously. You are *saying* it, after all! Better, then, to stop teaching by saying. But how else to teach that every question is maximally silly? By enactment, perhaps. By asking questions that are *obviously* silly. What is the sound of one hand clapping? Metaphysics, taught by koan.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Those annoying people at parties will now feel *super* justified. It's infuriating.

So much for unrestricted emptiness. What about the restricted version? Suppose again that you are a metaphysician trying to limn reality. Then you realize that reality is empty in the restricted sense, i.e.

Restricted Emptiness: (i) For all p such that p does not involve reality, $R[\text{not } R_e(p)]$; and
(ii) No other propositions are true in reality.

What then is reality like? This time, there is much to say:

It's not true in reality that I have hands.
It's not true in reality that electrons have mass.
It's not true in reality that appletinis are martinis.

And so on. This time, *all those claims* are true in reality! In saying them, you are limning reality. The trouble is, they're all *negative* claims. They all say what reality is *not*. It's a situation made for Monty Python:

Student: What is real?
Metaphysics professor: Not this, not that, nor this other thing either.
Student: No no, you misunderstood. I asked what *is* real.
Professor: I just told you.
Student: No you didn't. You just told me what *isn't* real!
Professor: But that *is* real.
Student: What is?
Professor: Not this, not that, nor this other thing either.
Student: I want my money back.

Still, the student got what she paid for. On this view, limning reality is inherently a negative exercise. It's not this, not that—"neti neti", as the Sanskrit aphorism goes.

Interestingly, this aphorism has its roots in Hindu philosophy and is predominant in the Advaita Vedanta school on which the Vedantic model of section 4 was based. But there, the aphorism is more naturally interpreted as a reaction to the subjectical ineffability we found in the Vedantic model. Or perhaps the ontological ineffability we found both there and in the Plotinic model. If there is no saying what Brahman (or The One) *is*, perhaps all we can do is say what it *is not*. On that interpretation, notice, the aphorism does *nothing* to limn reality; it's a response to the fact that reality cannot be limned with speech. Here the situation is subtly different. Reality *can* be limned, but only by negation.

So on Restricted Emptiness, we don't quite get the result of metaphysics as meditation. There are truths in reality one can think, it's just that they're all truths about what reality *isn't*. Still, there is a related result around the corner, namely that any *positive* claim about the world is maximally inaccurate. A complete distortion. With the exception of "neti neti", thinking just gets in the way. This is why the student wants her money back. What *is* reality like? There is no answer. One can only say "neti neti", or else stop talking altogether.

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