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Anthony N. Perovich  
Hope College, perovich@hope.edu

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TAKING NATURE MYSTICISM SERIOUSLY:

MARSHALL AND THE METAPHYSICS OF THE SELF

Anthony N. Perovich

*Department of Philosophy, Hope College, 126 East Tenth Street, Holland, MI 49422-9000, U.S.A., perovich@hope.edu*

ABSTRACT: Paul Marshall takes extrovertive mystical experience seriously by providing a metaphysical framework inspired by Plotinus and Leibniz that aims to interpret it nonreductively and to explain it persuasively. However praiseworthy Marshall's intentions, his account fails for a variety of reasons, among them an inability to establish convincingly why natural objects appear as transfigured and alive, characteristics frequently encountered in the reports of nature mystics. An alternative approach, rooted in contemporary pan-experientialist philosophy of mind, is able to take extrovertive mysticism equally seriously while accounting more successfully for its preeminent features at a less extravagant metaphysical cost.

*If the phenomena are to be taken seriously, then any metaphysics that tries to make sense of them will almost certainly appear strange.*

Paul Marshall, *Mystical Encounters with the Natural World*

Taking nature mysticism seriously

Paul Marshall's *Mystical Encounters with the Natural World*<sup>1</sup> is doubly noteworthy: his study brings welcome and sustained attention to the neglected phenomenon of nature mysticism, and his attempt to explain the phenomenon he documents treats the reports he collects (and their reporters) in a strikingly serious fashion. This is to say, first, that he offers us far and away the most thorough look at the topic of extrovertive mysticism that we possess. If his book's very comprehensive survey of its subject and detailed engagement with the entire range of scholarly discussion over the last century reflects its origin as a dissertation, it is none the worse for that. Writers on mysticism have tended to give a disproportionate share of their attention to introvertive mysticism, whose typical embedding in the context of institutional religion complicates its analysis, and it is good to have the imbalance redressed. Second, to say that he takes mysticism seriously is to say that he goes beyond the typical concerns of philosophers of mysticism: he limits himself neither to phenomenological description (although his phenomenology is careful and valuable) nor to epistemological concerns about the truth value of mystics' claims. Rather he is concerned to speculate about the metaphysics in relation to which the experiences he has documented would make sense. Taking those experiences and the reports of them seriously, as I am using the expression, involves finding a middle path between a literalist understanding, as is common among religious adherents, who, in assessing the metaphysical import of testimony arising within their own tradition, tend to take it at face value, and a reductionist understanding, which typically tries to explain the experiences in terms of the naturalist commitments of the investigator. (For example, Proudfoot, while rejecting 'descriptive reduction', embraces 'explanatory reduction', which 'consists in offering an explanation of an

experience in terms that are not those of the subject and that might not meet with his approval', and so can easily fail to take mysticism seriously in the sense intended here.<sup>2)</sup> Rather, taking a report seriously—while it does not preclude reevaluating or reinterpreting claims after critically considering them either alone or in relation to other religious, philosophical, or scientific ideas—nevertheless involves, roughly, an unwillingness to forego a realistic interpretation of the reporters' descriptions, an unwillingness to betray their metaphysical 'drift', so to speak.<sup>3</sup> Literalist readings tend to be more consequential and problematic in the frequently highly ramified accounts of introvertive religious mystics, but reductionist readings are common for all sorts of religious experience and seemingly *de rigueur* in some portions of the academic community. Obviously, those with naturalist leanings are not going to be sympathetic to treating mysticism seriously, in the sense intended here. This paper is not intended to challenge their approach directly, however, for Marshall does not belong to their number. By bringing a scheme inspired by Plotinus and Leibniz to bear on the interpretation of the phenomenon he has described, he explains his subjects' experiences in a way that likely goes beyond their metaphysical commitments without being dismissive of their ideas about the general direction in which their experiences pointed. Those who share Marshall's conviction that problems encountered by physicalism in contemporary philosophy of mind give good reason for not rushing to embrace the explanatory reduction of the mystical to the physiological will be grateful for the general tendency of his thought. Yet to be grateful for that tendency, as I am, is not necessarily to find it persuasive in its details. In this paper I risk the charge of ingratitude by arguing that Marshall's account does not in fact succeed very well in explaining the phenomenon that

forms the topic of his study. The failure of this account, however, does nothing to impugn the project of taking nature mysticism seriously, as the alternative advanced here aims to show; while it incorporates the key features of the experience that Marshall documents, the account developed below nevertheless avoids the problems exposed in his own.

The phenomenology of mystical experiences of the natural world is complex, and no two authorities who conduct independent investigations come up with identical lists of central characteristics. I will focus on four features that regularly appear in mystical experiences involving the objects of the natural world, examples of which will appear later in the discussion: (i) *unity*, both among the objects of experience and between those objects and the subject (this includes the frequently encountered notion of the expansion of the self insofar as the self is enlarged by somehow incorporating what had hitherto been outside of itself); (ii) the sense that those objects are in some sense *alive*, or that a *living presence* permeates nature; (iii) the *transfiguration* of natural objects; and (iv) a sense of *timelessness*, an eternal present, or at least some sort of *altered time-consciousness*. (In regard to the topic of ‘unity’, Bernard McGinn has urged that mysticism be understood more broadly than mystical union.<sup>4</sup> This is certainly a persuasive claim in the area of nature mysticism, where awareness of a ‘spiritual presence’ is not always accompanied by an experience of union with that presence. However, expressions of union are common enough in the mystical reports to regard it as a frequent, if not a universal, characteristic of such experiences.) While these are not the only features that are claimed by various writers to characterize extrovertive mystical experience, they seem to encompass all those that Wainwright finds to occur in the most

common types, they are prominent in Marshall's own account (ME, 60ff., 73f., 68ff., and 72f.), and they all figure in Stace's discussion of the phenomenon, even if all are not explicitly on his list.<sup>5</sup> Although I believe there is good reason for interpreting (iii) in terms of (ii), others evidently disagree—Wainwright treats them independently, and Marshall bases transfiguration on the revelation of a phenomenon's noumenal source—and so I list them separately. These are the characteristics, then, that any scheme will have to explain if it is to be taken seriously, and to explain nonreductively if it is to take mysticism seriously.

#### Problems with Marshall on nature mysticism

Marshall's position is an idealist response generated by the difficulties of attempts at dualist and materialist solutions to the mind-body problem and by hopes of integrating mystical and idealist notions with contemporary physics. The scheme is indebted to Plotinus in its vision of an intelligible (or at least nonphenomenal) cosmos and to Leibniz in its plurality of cosmic minds differentiated by their perspectives. Marshall is perfectly clear that the revival of not only old but old-fashioned idealist notions is at odds with reigning naturalisms and will consequently appear fanciful to many within the contemporary philosophical mainstream, but he recognizes that taking mystical encounters with the natural world seriously demands a willingness to challenge conventional viewpoints (see, for example, ME, 267-268). Granting this point hardly guarantees the success of his approach, of course, and the challenges to follow will not be based on charges of implausibility, strangeness, or the like, but on the adequacy with which his scheme is able to do justice to the phenomena in question. As a consequence of this, the highly developed presentation of the details of Marshall's own position in his

various writings will not be recapitulated here. The baldness of my delineation of his views is not intended to make them look less defensible than they are, but only to allow the focus of the discussion to remain on their explanatory success in handling the mystical phenomena in question.

The salient features of Marshall's metaphysics are as follows. His system is idealist, with two sorts of minds: 'little minds' and 'great minds' (ME, 264) or, alternatively, the 'personal self' and the 'universal self', or 'ordinary minds' and the 'greater mind'.<sup>6</sup> (It should be noted that the personal self includes both the experiential self and the personal unconscious; it is the experiential self, which Marshall also refers to as the phenomenological self, that is of primary interest here. In these passages 'universal self' and 'greater mind' appear in the singular, for a plurality of such minds is only introduced later on in his discussions.) The contents of a great mind, of which there are many, include (but are not exhausted by) the totality of noumena. Because all great minds are manifestations of a single underlying principle, their contents do not represent different universes: 'Each great mind has the universe as its noumenal contents, but the minds differ by expressing the universe from their individual vantage points' (ME, 265). It is not the Leibnizian dimension of each great mind representing a particular perspective on the universe, however, but the Plotinian dimension of each soul having access to a level of Intellect whose object of knowledge is true being (or true beings) that is central to Marshall's application of his metaphysical scheme to the interpretation of nature mysticism. According to this idealism the noumenal contents of a great mind interact causally with one another, and in this experiential realm, noumenal 'physical' objects (such as trees) may affect noumenal brains, with the result that phenomenal experience

(such as the awareness of a tree) arises as those contents of a great mind that bear phenomenal characteristics: ‘The noumenal tree, radiation, eyes, retinas, nerve signals, and brain structures, and the phenomenal representations of the tree that develop in the noumenal brain are all parts of the experiential universe, a universe that exists as the contents of the great mind’ (ME, 264). I am afraid this spare outline of Marshall’s views so far does nothing to motivate acceptance of his ideas. Those seeking such motivation in the fit between his account and modern physics are directed to those others of his writings where this case is made. However, one directly relevant way of motivating this scheme consists in showing its effectiveness in providing a framework within which reports of extrovertive mystical experience, taken seriously, make sense.

That explanation is presented in terms of a sort of Neoplatonic ascent: (i) ‘In the simplest extrovertive cases, the noumenal background is not strongly felt: the stream of phenomenal experience becomes nondual through a relaxation of sharp self-other distinctions, so that the everyday self and body are felt to be an integral part of the stream’; (ii) ‘In the more developed cases, the phenomenal stream begins to reveal its noumenal bedrock, bringing luminous transfigurations of phenomenal contents, more advanced feelings of unity, a growing sense of meaning and knowledge, significantly altered time-experience, and so forth’; and (iii) ‘In the profoundest cases, the noumenal background comes to the fore, blotting out phenomenal experience, resting alongside it, or containing it’ (ME, 267). In these last cases the mystics have fully raised themselves to the level of the cosmic vision of the Plotinian Intellect and to a fully adequate Leibnizian consciousness: ‘they have accessed the pellucid depths of their own monadic minds’ (ME, 267). (Marshall would seem at this point to have a natural transition to

introvertive mystical experience by completing this ascent to his ‘ultimate ground’—of which each great mind is only a single manifestation—but for the fact that it is unclear to him whether to regard the One as experiential.<sup>7)</sup>

There are several problems with this account. To begin with, in the first level of extrovertive experience the noumenal background plays no real explanatory role: the unity characteristic of mystical experience is encountered even though ‘the noumenal background is not strongly felt’. Only at the second level, where ‘the phenomenal stream begins to reveal its noumenal bedrock’, does the scheme really come into play, as the phenomenal contents undergo ‘luminous transfigurations’. Yet, it is with those phenomenal objects to which this first level limits its attention that extrovertive mystical experiences are typically concerned, and, as Marshall admits, the sense of unity so central to mystical experience is already present at his most elementary ‘stage’. Thus, when Bede Griffiths tries to explain the experiences he had as a student, he makes it clear that it was the world of natural phenomena—birds, trees, sunsets—that was their subject: ‘But it was not only that my senses were awakened. I experienced an overwhelming emotion in the presence of nature, especially at evening. It began to wear a kind of sacramental character for me. . . . The songs of the birds, the shapes of the tree, the colors of the sunset were so many signs of this presence, which seemed to be drawing me to itself’. Moreover, if the phenomenal world disguised anything, it was not Marshall’s noumenal objects but Divinity: ‘I hardly dared to look on the face of the sky, because it seemed as though it was but a veil before the face of God’.<sup>8</sup> When an unnamed undergraduate tries to explain his experience of union, it is clear that the subject-object identity stands between him and the phenomenal, not some noumenal object: ‘It’s like losing your

particular sense of identity and it's just like, say, looking at a tree. You see certain things happening to the tree and you have words to describe it. There's nothing between us, the tree and me'.<sup>9</sup> Among nature mystics, identity and transfiguration are typically experienced in relation to phenomenal objects, and while Marshall acknowledges that such experiences occur, it is important to note that his metaphysical scheme does nothing to explain them. Having no place in his explanatory framework, he tends to downplay how central this 'level' is to the phenomenon of nature mysticism and tries to locate it as a 'simple' and merely introductory stage. Yet even when he does attempt to draw on his metaphysics for the explanation of the experience of the transfiguration of phenomenal objects, his scheme seems poorly equipped to accomplish that end, as we shall now see.

Second, then, Marshall's framework offers an unconvincing account of the transfiguration of phenomenal objects characteristic of extrovertive mystical experience. Because Marshall bases his account on an intermingled experience of noumena and their phenomenal representatives, it is important to recognize how different and externally related Marshall considers the two to be. In some ways his scheme, despite disclaimers,<sup>10</sup> looks very much like the oft-maligned 'two-world' version of Kant's distinction between appearances and things-in-themselves. There are only two levels of mind here. The phenomenal mind encounters only phenomenal objects, and as already seen Marshall's scheme offers no explanatory help in dealing with experiences that seem limited to this level. The 'great mind' on the other hand contains a vast, indeed, cosmic multitude of contents that it directly perceives, including, as we have seen, both noumenal objects and also their phenomenal counterparts. But the phenomenal contents of ordinary minds and

the noumenal contents of a great mind seem to diverge considerably, as Marshall himself insists:

Not only is there the contrast between perceptual partialness [in regard to the phenomenal object] and external comprehensiveness [in regard to the noumenon] . . . but also the contrast between the sense-mediated organization of perceptual experience and the sense-independent organization of external experience. Clearly, we must proceed with caution when extrapolating from familiar [that is, phenomenal] experience to external [that is, noumenal] experience and should certainly not expect an exact or even a close match.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly he observes, ‘We should be wary of making the external [noumenal] world too much in the image of human perceptual [i.e., phenomenal] experience’.<sup>12</sup> The two are connected for the great mind as cause and effect—to be sure, a state in which the effect is recognized as also a representation of the cause. In other words, what ‘the phenomenal stream begins to reveal its noumenal bedrock, bringing luminous transfigurations of phenomenal contents’ means is that consciousness has expanded to the level of its ‘great mind’, allowing thereby phenomena and their corresponding but perhaps quite different noumena to be perceived directly and together, and the latter to be perceived as the cause of the former. So cashed out, this hardly seems like a convincing account of a well developed mystical experience of the transfiguration of natural objects. Marshall rightly criticizes Stace’s account of nature mysticism, according to which an experience of the One is encountered merely alongside ordinary perceptual contents, pointing out that extrovertive accounts more typically ‘describe unities *with* or *of* diversified nature’ (ME, 149), but here he offers something disappointingly similar. He presents an account of

nature mysticism according to which an experience of the noumenon is encountered merely alongside its corresponding phenomenon and recognized as its cause. Just as Stace was mistaken in thinking that a sense of mystical identification could be explained simply by positing a unity alongside natural objects—rather, the natural objects are themselves unified with one another or with the subject—so Marshall is mistaken in thinking that the transfiguration of the natural world is explained simply by positing a distinct noumenon alongside natural objects—rather, the natural objects are themselves transfigured. Perhaps the hope is that in a single consciousness the noumenon will somehow provide an ‘aura’ for the phenomenon (rather as Stace suggested that Oneness ‘is experienced as shining through from beyond or behind’ the objects of the senses<sup>13</sup>), but the noumenon is not present to the phenomenal consciousness, and for the great mind the noumenon is perceived as distinct from, qualitatively different from, and the cause of the phenomenon, hardly the set of relationships that would plausibly constitute the transfiguration of the phenomenal object. In the ‘great mind’ this object is not transfigured because it remains unchanged; its perception is merely supplemented with a related but independent and nonsensory experience of the causally connected noumenon. Transfiguration will need to be sought elsewhere.

Third, Marshall seems to recognize only two selves: the phenomenal, personal, ordinary self and the great, universal self. Extrovertive mystical experience arises in the transition from the first to the second. There are multiple problems here. While this approach can account for what Marshall calls ‘cosmic’ or ‘universal’ mystical experience—experiences ‘of very broad scope, suggestive of contact with the universe as a whole’<sup>14</sup>—extrovertive experiences are certainly not always of this sort. Rather, the

contact is often more limited. ‘Suddenly I became aware of myself as being a leaf hanging on that tree’. ‘Then, as though a light were switched off, everything becomes still and I actually feel as though I were part of the scene around me. I can identify with the trees or the rocks or the earth . . . .’ Sometimes single reports combine what may be universal mystical experiences (‘it was as though my whole self was able to expand to and encompass the furthestmost star’) with more restricted ones: ‘This time the “expansion” was, geographically speaking, more limited, but none the less vivid’.<sup>15</sup> Richard Jefferies’s experiences can sometimes tend toward the cosmic, but are at others more specific: ‘The earth and sun were to me like my flesh and blood, and the air of the sea life’. They were also felt as progressive: ‘I felt down deep into the earth under, and high above into the sky, and farther still to the sun and stars. Still farther beyond the stars into the hollow of space, and losing thus my separateness of being came to seem like part of the whole’, and ‘I felt out into the depths of the ether’.<sup>16</sup> Marshall’s scheme cannot readily account for such features. The problem is not that extrovertive experiences are never felt as universal; the problem is that Marshall’s limitation to only the phenomenal self and the universal self seems to make his account of extrovertive experiences adequate only to the cosmic ones. It is true that descriptions of extrovertive experiences are often couched in terms of an expansion of the self, but Marshall’s account offers only a quantum expansion from the phenomenal self to the self whose awareness comprehends the entire universe, when in fact extrovertive expansion knows many stopping points in between as it widens its scope in a continuous process.

Finally, the important extrovertive awareness of nature as a ‘living presence’ is neither highlighted nor adequately explained, with results particularly damaging to

Marshall's account: not only does he neglect the feature of extrovertive mystical experience that provides the best explanation of the experience of phenomenal objects as transfigured, but focus on the frequent claim of nature mystics that the world was seen to be 'alive' provides the key to a more adequate account of these experiences generally. It would be untrue to state that he totally ignores this feature, for as noted his 'great mind' is an intellectual descendent of Plotinus' Intellect, and Marshall clearly believes that his own metaphysical scheme shares in 'Plotinus' intellectual vision' of 'a luminous, transparent cosmos boiling with life' (ME, 259). The fact is, however, that this life is never much analysed nor put to explanatory service. This is unfortunate, for the awareness of a 'living presence' by nature mystics is frequent and significant.

#### A panpsychist interpretation of nature mysticism

The Romantics of course made familiar the notion of nature alive, of a sense 'of something far more deeply interfused', as Wordsworth put it, of a spirit that 'rolls through all things', an awareness that led him to remain 'a lover of the meadows and the woods / And mountains'. But this experience is frequent among extrovertive mystics generally. Referring to himself in the third person, R. M. Bucke writes, '... he saw and knew that the Cosmos is not dead matter but a living Presence . . .'.<sup>17</sup> John Edward Mercer, the Anglican Bishop of Tasmania in the early twentieth century, insists, 'The nature-mystic, then, is bound to reject the "brute" matter doctrine . . . . Nature for him is living . . .'.<sup>18</sup> A response solicited by the Alister Hardy Research Centre is refreshingly concrete: 'I felt real life surging in the tree trunks'.<sup>19</sup> Now of course not every natural object is alive in a biological sense, so it is reasonable to seek a reading of such claims that embodies an alternative interpretation of 'living'. In this regard the testimony of 'N.

M.', 'a living American' (living, that is, in 1960) who was 'philosophically trained' and an acquaintance of W. T. Stace, is helpful. N. M. describes how his view of the tenements outside the room in which he stood was transformed: 'Suddenly every object in my field of vision took on a curious and intense kind of existence of its own; that is, everything appeared to have an "inside"—to exist as I existed, having inwardness, a kind of individual life, and every object, seen under this aspect, appeared exceedingly beautiful'.<sup>20</sup> (It deserves to be mentioned that a 'dose of mescaline' preceded the experience; Stace is sympathetic to N. M.'s claim that the drug did not produce the experience but only counteracted the inhibitory functions at work in ordinary consciousness.) In this case, being 'alive' is understood in terms of having an 'inside', that is, to use Stace's alternative formulation, possessing 'its own subjectivity': for each thing, there is something that it is like to be that thing, in the language Thomas Nagel made famous. This is a reasonable gloss on the statements of other nature mystics: the attribution of life is the attribution of inwardness, subjectivity, consciousness. As Marshall himself observes about many of his cases, 'Life means consciousness' (ME, 74), but the fact that the noumenal cosmos of Plotinus' intellectual vision is 'boiling with life' does nothing to establish that the phenomenal world is experienced as alive, as shot through with consciousness, and it is the phenomenal world, not its 'noumenal bedrock', that is experienced as alive.

This immediately suggests an alternative account for the 'transfiguration' experienced by nature mystics: rather than being transfigured because the 'noumenal bedrock' begins to shine through the 'phenomenal stream', phenomenal objects are transfigured because while to ordinary consciousness they appear 'dead', the mystical

vision shows them to be ‘alive’. On the translation scheme advocated above, this is equivalent to saying that things that appeared merely objective are seen to be subjective, and their subjective character is what accounts for the sense that they have been transfigured. N.M. says as much: ‘everything appeared to have an “inside”—to exist as I existed, having inwardness, a kind of individual life, and *every object, seen under this aspect, appeared exceedingly beautiful*’.<sup>21</sup>

If the transfigured character can be explained without appealing to the incursion of Marshall’s noumenal realm, perhaps that framework is in general unnecessary for making sense of extrovertive mystical experience, even if we remain committed to taking that experience seriously. Marshall’s own account begins from the difficulties encountered in recent philosophy of mind as it has attempted to do justice to the phenomenon of consciousness while remaining faithful to its physicalist agenda. In responding to these problems, some writers have been willing to engage in what is, by the standards of analytic philosophy, rather free-wheeling speculations. Certainly no one will get far in taking mystical experience seriously by trying to hew closely to the materialist mainstream of contemporary philosophy, but it may be worthwhile to turn to some of the ideas in the philosophy of mind that have emerged in the attempts to circumvent the dead ends to which an adherence to physicalism has repeatedly led philosophers trying to do justice to mental phenomena.

So far discussion suggests that taking seriously the transfiguration of the physical world characteristic of nature mysticism will first of all involve taking the claim that nature is ‘alive’ seriously, a claim to be understood in terms of pan-subjectivity. Surveying the metaphysical scene for a supportive theoretical framework, contemporary

philosophy of mind turns out to be surprisingly obliging: difficulties in explaining consciousness on standard physicalist views have indeed led to the revival of panpsychism in certain quarters. Historically, panpsychism has been a fairly common philosophical position; it has, however, been one of many casualties of twentieth century scientism. Thomas Nagel provided important advocacy, however, and in more recent years it has received renewed attention at the hands of writers like William Seager, David Ray Griffin, and Galen Strawson; while hardly representing the philosophical mainstream, even the *New York Times* has taken note of the increased attention.<sup>22</sup>

To motivate the adoption of a position that is still suspect among many, a bit of history is helpful. The reason for the willingness to reconsider a view that many have regarded as outlandish (and that many still do) is the recalcitrance with which consciousness has resisted materialist attempts to domesticate it. Dualism of what is usually called the ‘Cartesian’ sort (‘substance dualism’) has, of course, long been in disrepute among most mainstream philosophers of mind. Problems of interaction between mental and physical substances loom large, but one may assume that the inexplicability of the appearance of mental *substances* on the evolutionary scene in a naturalistically viewed world plays some role as well. Nevertheless, dualism at least provides an immaterial locus for consciousness and is not saddled with the problems faced by those committed to physicalism. Finding a place for consciousness in a purely material world has proven highly challenging. A central problem facing many of the positions advanced in the philosophy of mind, whether behaviorist or functionalist, reductionist-materialist or eliminativist, is that they either deny (implicitly or explicitly) the existence of consciousness or are entirely compatible with it being the case that the

subjects whose mentality they purport to explain are utterly without it. For example, what has probably been the most popular of the standard options in the philosophy of mind, namely functionalism, understands mind in causal terms: roughly speaking, those states are 'mental' that mediate between sensory input and behavioral output. But, as has been effectively demonstrated, states can perfectly well fulfil this functional role without there being any need for them to be conscious, or indeed for consciousness to enter the picture at all.<sup>23</sup> Similarly at the scientific level, explanations of how physical organisms can perform certain functions, such as learning and remembering, in virtue of their neurophysiological structures cast no light of themselves on why (or indeed whether) those structures are accompanied by consciousness. The 'hard problem' in these areas is thus to explain why the satisfaction of functionalist requirements or the neural processing that goes on when we are engaged in 'mental activities' is accompanied by consciousness, by a subjective inner life. How, then, is consciousness to be explained, if these approaches say so little about it? There seem to be two options: either consciousness emerges upon the attainment of a certain level of (neural) complexity, or consciousness is already omnipresent, so that its incidence at any particular location in the universe calls for no special explanation. Unsurprisingly, advocates of the latter, panpsychist or panexperientialist, approach find problems with the idea of emergence, or at least with the idea of the emergence of consciousness. The arguments go like this: if the appearance of emergence is simply due to our epistemological condition, then emergence as a metaphysical matter does not occur, while if emergence is ontologically genuine, it is nevertheless the case that consciousness is not a plausible contender as an emergent entity. Advocates of the first approach include Nagel, those of the second Strawson.

Without rehearsing the arguments in detail, the first approach suggests that the novelty and unpredictability characteristic of emergent phenomena result only from our ignorance, the consequence of an incomplete knowledge of the constituents of the system from which the phenomena emerge or of the properties of those constituents. The second points out that textbook cases of emergent properties, such as liquidity, admittedly show how what is liquid may emerge from what is not itself liquid (say, individual water molecules), but such examples do no more than exhibit the emergence of phenomena fully describable in terms of the notions of physics from other phenomena similarly so describable, and the emergence is neither arbitrary nor ‘brute’. On the other hand, the supposed emergence of experience from non-experiential material constituents presents us with an emergent phenomenon that cannot be adequately described using only the notions of physics: here the emergence seems both arbitrary and ‘brute’. As Griffin writes, ‘All of the unproblematic forms of emergence refer to *externalistic features*, features of things *as perceived from without*, features of *objects for subjects*. But the alleged emergence of experience is not simply one more example of such emergence. It involves instead the alleged emergence of an “inside” from things that have only outsides’.<sup>24</sup>

If dualism is implausible, if the standard materialist options disqualify themselves by explaining ‘mind’ without explaining consciousness, and if the hopes pinned on emergence turn out to be vain, then panpsychism offers itself as an alternative worth considering. While the arguments in its support are of course controversial and not all will find them as compelling as I do, the main points to be insisted upon here are two: first, that panpsychism has come to be regarded by some in the philosophy of mind,

obviously for entirely independent reasons, as a position deserving advocacy; second, that panpsychism is precisely the sort of view that enables one to take nature mysticism seriously insofar as nature mystics view nature as ‘alive’, that is, possessed of subjectivity, and insofar as seeing nature as alive plausibly explains the mystics’ sense that nature has become transfigured in their experience. If panpsychism enables us to explain two of the features characteristic of nature mysticism, namely, the sense that nature is alive and that the experience reveals nature as transfigured, we may persist in investigating whether it can also provide a foundation for explaining the other two features mentioned, namely, unity and timelessness.

Let us turn, then, to the mystical experience of the unity of nature: nature seems to be unified both in itself and with the subject. Here the concern is primarily with the unity between subject and object, for the other sort of unity can be seen as derivative from this. (Marshall has a useful classification of the different types of unification found in experiences associated with nature mysticism (ME, 60-64). Here we are primarily concerned with what he calls ‘identificatory unity’, in which subjects experience themselves as identified with the world, and ‘incorporative unity’, in which subjects experience the world as contained within themselves. Objects incorporated in me have by that very fact achieved a certain sort of unity with one another.) We have already encountered experiences of this sort above,<sup>25</sup> but looking at a few others helps bring out further features of interest. For example, the following passage goes beyond a mere claim of the identity of subject and object by analysing this breakdown into an expansion of the self: ‘The first symptom was a sudden hush that seemed to envelop me—this was subjective, however, as my hearing and my other senses appeared actually to be keener

than normal. Then, almost at once, I had a strange feeling of expansion, which I find very difficult to describe. It seemed to me that, in some way, I was extending into my surroundings and was becoming one with them'.<sup>26</sup> This expansion, in turn, manifests itself in Richard Jefferies as the feeling of the life of the objects around him as his own: 'Dreamy in appearance, I was breathing full of existence; I was aware of the grass blades, the flowers, the leaves on hawthorn and tree. I seemed to live more largely through them, as if each were a pore through which I drank'.<sup>27</sup> Taken together, such experiences suggest that central to unitive nature mysticism is the union of the self with natural objects, a union that results from the expansion of the self so as in some way to incorporate those objects and to experience them from within. Now we have just seen that the supposition that natural objects have an 'inside' is not alien to some contemporary discussions within the philosophy of mind, but taking mysticism seriously demands further that the subject have access to that 'inside', and this evidently must result from an 'expansion of the self'. We may again receive assistance by turning to discussions in contemporary philosophy of mind, in this case to discussions of the unity of consciousness.

The unity of consciousness refers to the fact that the elements of our consciousness (typically) present themselves as parts of a single, unified experience: my simultaneous visual, auditory, and tactile perceptions are encountered not as unrelated to one another but as combined into a single experience representing a single world, with the copper colour, warmth, and whistle all integrated into my awareness of the teapot, that awareness sharing the single mental stage with that of the stove, sink, counter, and so on. Philosophical attention was first directed to the phenomenon by Kant, under the title

of the ‘transcendental unity of apperception’, among others. Kant argued that the condition for the awareness of a single, objective world, that is, for human awareness, is the unity of consciousness, for only if all my perceptions are referred back to a single self—only if all my representations are *my* representations, to use Kantian language—can they be related to one another so as to form the consciousness of a single world.

Contemporary discussions of the unity of consciousness are less likely to treat it as a precondition for any experience whatsoever, but they certainly regard it as a central, if not well understood, feature of our mental life. Current accounts vary, but useful for our purposes is the analysis of the unity of consciousness in terms of subsumption offered by Tim Bayne and David Chalmers. Making use of the familiar notion of ‘what it is to be like’, they offer the following account of ‘subsumption’ which, if they do not think it as fully adequate as the more formal definition they put forward, is at least useful as an aid to understanding and is sufficient for our purposes: ‘A phenomenal state A subsumes phenomenal state B when what it is like to have A and B simultaneously is the same as what it is like to have A’.<sup>28</sup> The standard case here would be one in which ‘A’ represents a complex phenomenal state and ‘B’ represents one of its components. Thus, the state of observing a male North American Cardinal subsumes the state of seeing the colour red, because what it is like to see such a bird and to see red simultaneously is the same as what it is like to see a cardinal. The ordinary case of unity of consciousness occurs when subjects have a phenomenal state that subsumes all their other phenomenal states at that time.

The phenomenal states that we possess at a given time are typically limited to those that we regard as ours and no one else’s. Philosophical issues have tended to focus

on questions of whether there might be more than one centre of consciousness associated with a particular person, or, better, with a particular body. Occasionally one may encounter discussions of ‘collective consciousness’, understood not in the sense of Durkheim but rather in the sense of someone’s actually undergoing the experiences of another (for example, in what is called ‘remote viewing’, subjects aim to undergo and describe the experiences of other individuals who have traveled to other, undisclosed locations) or of a single unified consciousness seemingly encompassing more than one individual. (One of the most interesting of the latter cases involved Greta and Freda Chaplin, identical twins the extent of whose joint life led some of the involved health professionals ‘to view what was presented to them as a her, not a them’.<sup>29</sup>) It is not clear what to make of such accounts, and it would not be possible to claim that such cases provide a reliable paradigm for what is required to take nature mysticism seriously. It seems clear, however, that taking it seriously requires something along these lines, in which the phenomenal states experienced by the subject lie outside the sphere typically accessed. That is to say, nature mysticism consists in the subsumption of experiences that in the first instance are the experiences associated with other bodies. The panpsychist thesis implies that ‘bodies’ not be understood merely in an organic sense, although panpsychists are quick to point out that the viewpoint does not require that they attribute experiential states to every ‘aggregational composite’ (like a rock or a table), but only to ‘true individuals’ (which are not, however, solely limited to biological organisms).<sup>30</sup> Subsumption accounts for both union and the expansion of the self: union, for experiential states that belonged to beings other than me are now incorporated into my

unified consciousness, and expansion of the self, for the experiential states that make up my consciousness now extend beyond what is usual.

Consider the following experience reported by an adolescent student:

The thing happened one summer afternoon, on the school cricket field, while I was sitting on the grass, waiting for my turn to bat. I was thinking about nothing in particular merely enjoying the pleasures of midsummer idleness. Suddenly and without warning, something invisible seemed to be drawn across the sky, transforming the world around me into a kind of tent of concentrated and enhanced significance. What had been merely outside became an inside. The objective was somehow transformed into a completely subjective fact, which was experienced as 'mine', but on a level where that word had no meaning; for 'I' was no longer the familiar ego.<sup>31</sup>

Here we have both union and expansion. The claims that the 'outside became an inside' and that the objective 'was transformed into a completely subjective fact' are interpreted, on the reading offered here, as expressing the union achieved by subsuming experiential states of entities normally regarded as outside oneself: by incorporating them into one's own unified consciousness what was external to oneself has become internal, and this has been achieved by gaining access to their inner states, thereby transforming their objectivity into subjectivity. Similarly, on the reading offered here the fact that the experience was 'mine' yet not that of 'the familiar ego' is interpreted as an expression of the expansion of the ego: because the experiential states of beings typically regarded as external to me are subsumed in my unified consciousness, the experience is attributable

to me, but the limits of the 'I' are a function of the limits of my awareness, and precisely because the experiential states of external beings are subsumed in this experience, its newfound extent breaks the boundaries of the ordinary self.

My comments about the last 'frequent' characteristic of nature mysticism, timelessness, are more tentative, in part because it is not clear how common a characteristic this is. Marshall sometimes refers to an 'altered time-experience' rather than an experience of timelessness, and there is good reason for this. Extrovertive mystical experiences often include an awareness of succession in a way that is hard to reconcile with strict claims of timelessness, claims that seem more at home and more common in the world of introvertive mysticism. For example, an older man recounts how, in middle age, he had an experience in which 'everything was transformed, transfigured, translated, transcended. All was fused into one. . . . The hands of the stall-keeper danced. The branches of the trees danced'.<sup>32</sup> Or consider one child's ecstatic experiences, recounted in later life, that brought 'an intensity of awe and wonder that seemed to take me right out of my body'; the items perceived with awe and wonder were various, such as 'the falling of snow, or the sound of the waves'.<sup>33</sup> Evidently, branches can be experienced as dancing and snow can be experienced as falling only insofar as the positions of the branches or the snowflakes change over time.

Such an awareness does not, however, preclude an 'altered time-experience', and such a phenomenon is suggested in the report of Stace's acquaintance N. M. He wrote, 'There was a cat out there, with its head lifted, effortlessly watching a wasp that moved without moving just above its head'. In further conversation with Stace, N. M. observed, 'Time and motion seemed to have disappeared so that there was a sense of the timeless

and eternal', and Stace relates this comment to the earlier written statement: 'There is the curious remark that the wasp to which he refers "moved without moving". The experience is timeless, and yet somehow there must be time in it, since movement is observed'.<sup>34</sup> Now we think of what occurs within the specious present as happening 'all at once' or as contained within a single moment, even though succession is found within that present. If the scope of the specious present expanded with the expansion of the self, it might be possible to account for this altered time consciousness of movement without motion.

It is helpful here to recall the theory of Royce regarding consciousness of the present,<sup>35</sup> for it represents an attempt to explain how to accommodate successiveness within the eternal, and in so doing it also suggests how even something short of consciousness of a timeless eternity can involve an altered awareness of time relevant to our current concerns. Royce notes that, in one sense of the term 'present', a succession (such as the notes of a melody) is experienced as a whole, as present all at once. While we can encompass only a brief succession as present in this manner, for Royce all time is present to the Absolute in just this way, and eternity is to be understood in terms of such a mental state: 'A consciousness related to the whole of the world's events, and to the whole of time, precisely as our human consciousness is related to a single melody or rhythm, and to the brief but still extended interval of time which this melody or rhythm occupies,— such a consciousness, I say, is an Eternal Consciousness'.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, Royce also supposes that what was experienced as present or all at once might vary in its time-span for different beings.<sup>37</sup> Applying these ideas to the present case, one might conclude that as consciousness expands in an extrovertive mystical experience so too

might the time-span of the subject's specious present expand, either because its consciousness more adequately comes to approximate that of the Absolute with its all-encompassing 'present', its eternal now, or because its consciousness subsumes another whose present involves a more extended time-span. Just as we are aware of the succession of one note after another in a brief melody even as the melody is also present to us all at once, so might we be aware of more extended successions occurring in a specious present whose time-span was greater than normal. In that case our altered perception of time might present us with a consciousness quite unlike our typical one, in which, for example, a wasp might 'move without moving' because a flight too lengthy to be ordinarily experienced as a whole was now able to be perceived all at once by our expanded consciousness. While admittedly speculative, these ideas are at least entirely compatible with the account of extrovertive mysticism advanced here. Unlike strict timelessness, the altered time-consciousness encountered among nature mystics lends itself to an explanation purely in terms of transformed subjective faculties and does not require an appeal to a nonphenomenal realm, neither to the silent desert of the introvertive mystic nor to the noumenal realm of Marshall.

Thus the preminent features of nature mysticism—a sense of an altered time-consciousness, of unity, and of the objects of nature as transfigured and alive—can be explained in a way that takes them seriously and yet avoids all the difficulties identified with Marshall's postulation of a noumenal realm behind the phenomenal but occasionally 'shining through'. For the phenomenal objects *are* alive, that is, conscious; we perceive them as conscious when our consciousness expands so as to subsume and unite with theirs; this appropriation of the consciousness of what had previously seemed 'dead'

reveals them as transfigured; and the expansion of our self brings with it an alteration of the temporal scope of what is perceived as occurring all at once. The metaphysics employed, while no less strange, perhaps, than that proposed by Marshall, has at least the small advantage of drawing on ideas that to a large extent have already been independently introduced to deal with the perplexities induced by pursuing a physicalist agenda within the philosophy of mind, problems that form one of the basic starting points of Marshall's own reflections.

It may perhaps seem that such an explanation drains nature mysticism of its religious significance. If that is so, it is no more true for this account than for Marshall's so far described, for a religious element enters into his metaphysics, at best, only in the obscurely delineated common, unifying ground of which the various great minds are manifestations. Be that as it may, it is not entirely clear that the account offered here need be bereft of a religious interpretation. Incorporated into a suitable metaphysical framework, the expanded consciousness of our nature mystic may well be straining toward the absolute consciousness of those idealists who saw the human mind as a fragment of a larger, divine whole. The religious significance of nature mysticism, however, should be determined by a reflection on our best efforts to ascertain the true character of the phenomenon; it should not be a normative force guiding those efforts. In any case, it may well be that extrovertive mysticism turns out to be a fundamentally different phenomenon from introvertive mysticism, and the similarities between the two in terms of unity, timelessness, and so forth, turn out to be merely verbal. But this would then be all the more reason to refuse to treat nature mysticism as the poor relative of introvertive experience; rather, it would provide an added incentive to explore it on its

own terms and for its own sake, as Marshall has so helpfully begun to do.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Marshall *Mystical Encounters with the Natural World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). Hereafter ME, with references in the body of the text.

<sup>2</sup> See Wayne Proudfoot *Religious Experience* (Berkeley and Los Angeles CA: University of California Press, 1985), 196-197. See also Matthew Bagger *Religious Experience, Justification, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 13: ‘We could have no good reason for asserting that an event, in principle, resists naturalistic explanation.’ Bagger explicitly exempts his naturalism, however, from any commitment to physicalism or to a materialist reduction of the mind.

<sup>3</sup> If the person interpreted is being taken seriously, then the interpreter must satisfy the criteria for talking about ‘the same thing’ that the person being interpreted is talking about, where the criteria for talking about the same thing are determined by something like the ‘vector’ Putnam introduces in ‘The meaning of “meaning”’ (Hilary Putnam *Mind, Language and Reality: Philosophical Papers, Vol. 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 215-271, esp. 269).

<sup>4</sup> See Bernard McGinn *The Foundations of Mysticism* (vol. 1 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*) (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 1991), xvii.

<sup>5</sup> William Wainwright *Mysticism: A Study of Its Nature, Cognitive Value and Moral Implications* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1981), 33-34; W. T. Stace *Mysticism and Philosophy* (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Company, Ltd, 1960): ‘unity’ and the sense of a ‘living presence’ make it onto his list (79), while

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‘transfiguration’ (69) and ‘timelessness’ (73) figure in his discussion of extrovertive mysticism.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Marshall *The Living Mirror: Images of Reality in Science and Mysticism*, rev. ed. (London: Samphire Press, 2006), 75-76, and ‘Transforming the world into experience’, *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, **8** (2001), 68.

<sup>7</sup> See Marshall *Mirror*, 248.

<sup>8</sup> Bede Griffiths, O.S.B. *The Golden String* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1965 (first published 1955)), 10, 9.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in David Hay *Exploring Inner Space: Scientists and Religious Experience* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1982), 138.

<sup>10</sup> Marshall ‘Transforming the world’, 69.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 69-70.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>13</sup> Stace *Mysticism*, 286.

<sup>14</sup> Marshall *Mirror*, 63.

<sup>15</sup> Meg Maxwell and Verena Tschudin (eds) *Seeing the Invisible: Modern Religious and Other Transcendent Experiences* (Lampeter, Wales: Religious Experience Research Centre, 1990), 49, 151, and 136.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Jefferies *The Story of My Heart* (London: Macmillan/New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1968 (first published 1883)), 80, 7, 61.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Maurice Bucke *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind* (Philadelphia: Innes and Sons, 1905), 8.

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<sup>18</sup> John Edward Mercer *Nature Mysticism* (Charleston, SC: Bibliobazaar, 2007 (first published 1913)), 27.

<sup>19</sup> Maxwell and Tschudin *Seeing*, 177.

<sup>20</sup> Stace *Mysticism*, 71-72. (The reference to N. M.'s philosophical training is found on 74.)

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 72; my italics.

<sup>22</sup> Representative of the authors mentioned are Thomas Nagel 'Panpsychism', first published in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 181-195; William Seager 'Consciousness, information and panpsychism', *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, **2** (1995), 272-288; David Ray Griffin *Unsnarling the World-Knot: Consciousness, Freedom, and the Mind-Body Problem* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998); and Galen Strawson (and others) *Consciousness and Its Place in Nature: Does Physicalism Entail Panpsychism?* ed. Anthony Freeman (Exeter, UK, and Charlottesville, VA: Imprint Academic, 2006). For the newspaper notice mentioned, see Jim Holt, 'The mind of a rock', *The New York Times Magazine*, November 18, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/18/magazine/18wwln-lede-t.html>. These are merely some of the more prominent names; just how common panpsychism was in the past has recently been documented in David Skrbina *Panpsychism in the West* (Cambridge, MA/London: MIT Press, 2006), and he devotes considerable space to current discussions of the topic. It should be noted that Marshall describes his own position as 'a panpsychic idealism' (ME, 278; see also 'Transforming the world', 75), but it is the idealism rather than the panpsychism that plays the central role in his explanation of extrovertive mystical experience. This is unfortunate for reasons I try to explain below.

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- <sup>23</sup> See, for example, Ned Block ‘Troubles with functionalism’, in Ned Block (ed.) *Readings in Philosophy of Psychology*, vol.1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 268-305.
- <sup>24</sup> Griffin *World-Knot*, 64-65.
- <sup>25</sup> See, for example, the texts cited in notes 9 and 15.
- <sup>26</sup> Maxwell and Tschudin *Seeing*, 133.
- <sup>27</sup> Jefferies *Story*, 10.
- <sup>28</sup> T. Bayne and D. J. Chalmers, ‘What is the unity of consciousness?’ in Axel Cleeremans, ed. *The Unity of Consciousness: Binding, Integration, and Dissociation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 41.
- <sup>29</sup> Andrew Brook and Paul Raymont ‘The unity of consciousness’, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/consciousness-unity/>.
- <sup>30</sup> See Griffin *World-Knot*, 95-97.
- <sup>31</sup> Reported in Margaret Isherwood *The Root of the Matter: A Study in the Connections Between Religion, Psychology and Education* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1954), 97.
- <sup>32</sup> Maxwell and Tschudin *Seeing*, 48.
- <sup>33</sup> Isherwood *Root*, 99.
- <sup>34</sup> Stace *Mysticism*, 72-73.
- <sup>35</sup> Josiah Royce ‘The temporal and the eternal’ in *The World and the Individual. Second Series: Nature, Man and the Moral Order* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1901), 111-151.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 142.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* 227.

