

Article

The Philosophy of Mysticism: Perennialism and Constructivism

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ABSTRACT

The encountering of the experiencer or observer—transcendental subjectivity itself—at the foundation of the world leads inevitably to the recognition of pure objectivity as ultimate reality (which can be taken as its ultimate deconstruction, analogous to the apophatic or *via negativa*), from which objects derive their value, weight, significance, meaning or objectivity. In this way, pure objectivity can be seen as the supra-self-evident Axiological Axiom, so to speak, even Unconditional Love, in romantic terms. This axiology (value theory) has a structure inverse to the relationship between transcendental subjectivity as the radical unity of pure self-reference and on the other hand, the world of forms, as mere traces (representations, indications) of the unique, original “first distinction” Spencer-Brown speaks of at the foundation of his calculus. That is, all forms (i.e., distinctions, differences) would reduce to being the first distinction, also known as the marked state, which I call penultimate reality (pure self-reference or transcendental subjectivity: the Spirit which animates us), except that forms are complimentary to their content, which is their objectivity or value, which would reduce to the unmarked state or ultimate reality. It is the incongruity of form (thoughts; Whitehead’s “negative prehensions”) and value (feelings; Whitehead’s “positive prehensions,” or my notion of objectivity, meaning and qualia; in short, the non-formal aspects of experience) that holds forms open and keeps them from absolute reduction. This accounts for the brute, concrete persistence of the “functional illusion”—to use a term from Dzogchen Buddhism—of the world. Thus this system has an axiology of metaphysical objectivity grounded on the ideal of pure objectivity as the source of all value, meaning and significance, itself the very fecundity of profundity, which is the motive of drawing the distinction in the first place.

Key Words: mysticism, perennialism, constructivism, observer, subjectivity, Spencer-Brown, first distinction, axiology, Whitehead, feeling, qualia.

1. Introduction

Recent academic research on mysticism is entrenched in an ideological clash between two schools of interpretation of mysticism: perennialism (essentialism, or decontextualism), on the one hand, and anti-perennialism (constructivism, intentionalism, or contextualism), on the other. The former upholds the universality of the mystical experience, while the latter takes it to be—like any other human experience, they say—completely conditional. I will begin by explaining what ‘mysticism’ means. I will then proceed to define and illustrate the two schools of interpretation—perennialism and anti-perennialism—by the arguments of their representative pupils. My point is that the two schools of interpretation commit the disjunctive fallacy, or the fallacy of exclusive alternatives. Then, assessing the relation between mystical experience in practice, and systematic metaphysical theory, I will propose process philosophy (i.e., from Heraclitus to Peirce and Whitehead) as a framework for the debate, and my theoretical solution. In the end, upon reviewing two strong alternatives called, respectively, a “Middle Way” (Jackson, 1989), and a “middle ground” (Forman, 1993), I will suggest my own metaphysical understanding which is akin to the proposed alternatives to perennialist and anti-perennialist interpretations of the purity of mystical experience.

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2. Mysticism

Anthony Flew defines mysticism as “direct or unmediated experience of the divine, in which the soul momentarily approaches union with God.” (Flew, 1979.) The 2005 *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* states that mysticism is the “Belief in union with the divine nature by means of... the power of spiritual access to ultimate reality, or to the domains of knowledge closed off to ordinary thought.” Religious scholar Ninian Smart proposes that mysticism is “those inner visions and practices which are contemplative.” (Smart, 1978.) The problem with this is that although contemplation may characterize mystical *practice and tradition*, the essentially mystical experience is itself characterized by a quietude or peace contrary to contemplation, of the essence Robert Forman refer to (with minimal stipulation) as the “pure consciousness experience.” In Smart’s characterization we find the constructivist bias.

The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article “Mysticism” by Jerome Gellman is taken from his chapter in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, “Mysticism and Religious Experience”. Here is Gellman’s definition:

“A (purportedly) super sense-perceptual or sub sense-perceptual unitive experience granting acquaintance of realities or states of affairs that are of a kind not accessible by way of sense-perception, somatosensory modalities, or standard introspection.” (Wainwright, 2005.)

More specifically, the English philosopher Walter Stace (1886 – 1967) distinguished two universal mystical states found “in all cultures, religions, periods, and social conditions.” These two are the extrovertive and introvertive paths to “the unitative experience of the One.” While the former achieves unity by going out through multiplicity looking “outward through the senses”, the introvertive, ‘monistic’ experience “looks inward into the mind,” to achieve “pure consciousness” devoid of phenomenal content. Both achieve ‘Oneness’ as “sacred objectivity.”¹

3. Perennialism

The term *philosophia perennis* was first popularized by Leibniz, who took it from the sixteenth century theologian Augustinus Steuchius’ 1540 work. Steuchius used it to describe the “originally revealed absolute truth made available to man before his fall, completely forgotten in that lapse, and only gradually regained in fragmentary form in the subsequent history of human thought.” (ibid.) Leibniz used it to describe what was needed to complete his own system. He called it “an analysis of the truth and falsehood of all philosophies, ancient and modern” by which one would “draw the gold from the dross, the diamond from its mine, the light from the shadows; and this would be in effect a kind of perennial philosophy”. (Thackara, 1984.)

As an *ideal aim*, the ‘perennial philosophy’ has a more universal history. For instance, in speaking of the existence of the soul after death, the Roman statesman Cicero stated that he had the authority of all antiquity on his side when he said “these things are of old date, and have, besides, the sanction of universal religion”². Alexandrian inspirer of Plotinus and the Neoplatonic movement, Ammonius Saccas (third century CE), had a similar goal of reconciling different religious philosophies.³ Renaud Fabbri’s article “Introduction to the Perennialist School” says “the ideal of such a philosophy is much older, and one can easily recognize it in the Golden Chain (seira) of Neoplatonism, in the Patristic *Lex primordialis*, in the Islamic *Din al-Fitra* or even in the Hindu

¹ Ibid. ‘Objectivity’ here means not merely the objectivity that the ordinary sensorial-phenomenal objective world objects have, but in contrast, more like the objects of universal truth of mathematics and logic, verities eternally true in all possible universes. This notion is perhaps best phrased “pure objectivity,” what one would expect the transcendental ultimate reality to consist of. It is formless objectivity. It is an ideal state, which is not to say it isn’t also real, even immanent in material reality. Later, I will show how such a notion completes my proposed solution in a metaphysics similar to the ‘Objective Idealism’ of Peirce and ‘Organic Realism’ of Whitehead.

² Thackara, 1984: quoting from *Tusculan Disputations* I.12-14.

³ Thackara 1984.

Sanathana Dharma"⁴, although this last connection has been the subject of debate between Swami Vivekananda (an Advaita Vedantin) religious scholars, like Fritjof Schuon and Georg Feuerstein.

Also as an ideal aim, the great logician and father of Pragmatism Charles Sanders Peirce, in the Introduction to his *Principles of Philosophy*⁵ expressed his outline of "a theory so comprehensive that, for a long time to come, the entire work of human reason, in philosophy of every school and kind, in mathematics, in psychology, in physical science, in history, in sociology, and in whatever other department there may be, shall appear as the filling up of details. The first step toward this is to find simple concepts applicable to every subject"⁶. As an *ideal* rather than a product, "a perennial philosophy has never been formulated in complete detail and with final perfection"⁷. The ordinary usage of the term 'philosophia perennis' or 'perennial philosophy' does not necessarily indicate an ideal aim, although that may be implied, but instead it tends to indicate an end product, a school of thought unifying the disparate religions, seeing their differences as mere surface feature, most pronounced in mysticism.

Constructivists will dispute the actuality of ideal states, wisely suggesting that claims of actually experiencing pure or transcendental states of experience, consciousness or being are not empirically verifiable, in the ordinary sense, certainly not in the sense naturalism or empirical science (and metaphysically, materialism) seeks. But mystics recognize that there is a higher validation which cannot be represented, for if merely represented, articulated or expressed, loses its meaning. This validation is that of being it, rather than merely seeing it. It is called "Knowledge Through Identity," but what it is knowledge *of* is not anything that can be called an object, but rather, the very objectivity that is manifested in all objects. It can be called a certainty, perhaps, but in any case it is a circumstance that needs to re-enter academic discussion for a better appreciation of the purity of mystical experience, and to be explicit of its place in the hierarchy of knowledge. This later need is sought by metaphysics in its ideal aim beyond the material.

In recent times, Aldous Huxley's 1945 book *The Perennial Philosophy* popularized this pole of interpretation called "perennialism" for the public, in the name of that title. Huxley called this the 'Highest Common Factor' "which is not only of divine inspiration and origin, but shares the same metaphysical principles". (Fabbri, 2009.) Before Huxley's popularization of the term, French author Rene Guenon (1886 – 1951) wrote at length about the Sophia Perennis (Eternal Wisdom,) or Primordial Tradition. Guenon has inspired Fritjof Schuon (1907 – 1998) as well as the Ceylonese scholar Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877 – 1947), who are also considered founding members of the esoteric Traditionalist school of perennialism of the interwar period.

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⁴ Fabbri, Renaud, <http://www.religioperennis.org/documents/Fabbri/Perennialism.pdf>.

⁵ Peirce, C. S., *Collected Papers*, 1931-1935. In this quote Peirce is advocating a metaphysical system more than mysticism per se, but it shows Peirce's perennial ideal aim.

⁶ *Ibid.*, I, vii, Section 1

⁷ Leomker, Leroy, 2003

⁸ Fabbri, Renaud, <http://www.religioperennis.org/documents/Fabbri/Perennialism.pdf>.

⁹ StateMaster Encyclopedia entry on the 'Traditionalist school,' <http://www.statemaster.com/encyclopedia/Traditionalist-School>.

an initiatory spiritual path found in a traditional religion. The necessity of participating in a religious tradition was emphasized in Schuon's adaption called 'Religio Perennis'.

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4. Constructivism

In the context of the contemporary scholarly studies of mysticism, 'constructivism' denotes the conceptual and cultural (and religious and cognitive-linguistic) context (or construction) of the mystical experience. It could also be called pluralism or contextualism. The tendency of constructivists, or anti-perennialists, is to avoid the perceived problems with perennialism's conflation of religious views, which is good, but by claiming that mystical experiences differ from context to context, which misses the essence of the mystical experience as *an ideally unconditioned experience of pure consciousness or subjectivity itself*. More precisely, anti-perennialism, going by the name of "constructivism," profits from "a contemporary paradigm shift in epistemology toward the view that there are no human experiences except through the sociolinguistic relations which mediate them". (Forman, 1990.) Representatives of mystical constructivism are Steven Katz, Robert Gimello, Hans Penner, and Wayne Proudfoot (Forman, 1993.) Katz's basic and repeated claim is that "there are NO pure (unmediated) experiences". (Katz, 1978, 1983.) In the words of secular-religious-studies pioneer Ninian Smart, "experiences are always in some degree interpreted: they as it were contain interpretations within them. No perception can be quite neutral." (Smart, 1978.)

The general argument for mystical constructivism is that all experience is constructed, involving at least some concepts, which are themselves determined by the sociolinguistic and cultural context, among a myriad other factors, and so mystical experiences must differ from context to context, and mystic to mystic. Stephen Katz has focused on "the pre-experiential conditions of the mystic's circumstance and how this experiential pattern informs the resultant experience." (Katz, 1978.) These are noble causes, assuming there is no access to the transcendental, or that mystics don't generally have that access. The essential problem with this view is that it appears true, and for the descriptive or interpretive or even just the expressive level (for all practical purposes) it is true, but it implies that there cannot be that sort of purity ever achieved in the world, by a meditator or whatever. Furthermore, that assumption is found to be true when analyzing it with the gross tools of thought stationed in the world, to which we are accustomed. The meditator's goal is to refine the understanding of the world and its constituent thoughts (the mind) enough to come into contact with, or to realize what was already there: the transcendently unique 'empty set' of "experiences," sometimes identified with the true Self, pure subjectivity.

Of course, interpretation is contextual, but mystical experience is supposed to be an attempt at decontextualization in direct, unmediated experience, with the goal of a state of 'pure' content-less (and so context-less) experience. Robert Forman has developed this idea and calls it a "pure-consciousness event" or experience (Forman, 1990.) The "pure-consciousness event" is an alleged emptying out of all experiential content and phenomenological qualities. (Gelman, 2005.) Constructivists have argued that 'pure-consciousness events' are impossible because of "the kinds of beings that we are" (Katz, 1975). One should certainly suspect the possibility of *idealization* of the purity of the experience, in the sense that it may mislead us. Certainly, defenders of the 'pure-

consciousness event' may be exaggerating their claims, although this does not discount the possibility of PCEs. Furthermore, the meaning of "pure consciousness events" may depend on one's definition of consciousness. The founder of the phenomenological movement Husserl, for instance, denies the possibility of consciousness not of anything—unintentional consciousness is impossible, he says—all consciousness is intentional.¹⁰

My conclusion regarding mystical constructivism (or pluralism) is that it is certainly relevant at the descriptive and interpretive level, when discussing mysticism in general. Its historical appearance was necessitated by the rampant epistemological naiveté and academic irresponsibility of the overwhelmingly perennialist mystical literature. The worst problem with certain influential pieces of perennialist literature was their uncritical (to say the least) representation of original sources. They distorted the translations to make them seem identical. "For example, in *Mysticism East and West*, Rudolf Otto misrepresented Shankara and transformed Meister Eckhart into a sort of Shankaran Neo-Plotinus. Huxley quoted little bits and pieces from one mystic after another, making them all something like Advaitins.... Perennialists lost what differentiates these great traditions." (Forman, 1993.) But constructivism has its own problems. That mysticism is essentially conditioned by sociolinguistic concepts is an assumption. In Katz's words, "There are NO pure (i.e., unmediated) experiences." It is essential to the *meaning and import of* mysticism that there are indeed pure, unmediated, unconditioned experiences, and furthermore it is as verifiable in direct experience as possible. Meditation is the compliment of mediation, and the attenuation of mediation by concentration is the essential characteristic of meditation. The clash between the Perennialists and Anti-perennialists is a clash between apriori worldviews: the ageless debacle in understanding, the communication breakdown between the Absolutists and relativists.

5. *Ko-i*, "Marching Concepts"

Roger R. Jackson's article "Matching Concepts: Deconstructive and Foundationalist Tendencies in Buddhist Thought" (Jackson, 1989) deals primarily with a polarity within Buddhism between the technique of deconstructive analysis, and foundationalism. But it begins with the Chinese concept called *ko-i* which came from 1st and 2nd century C.E. translations of Indian religious and philosophical ideas into Chinese. When the cultures first met, there were many foreign religious concepts, so terminological equivalents were sought, and some seemed intuitive. Of course, there were major problems with these first series of translations, such as the translation of *dharma* as *Bodhi* ("enlightenment") and even *yoga* into Chinese as *tao*, and *nirvana* was translated as *wu-wei*, "non-action." (Ibid., 561.) This style of translation was called *ko-i*, "matching concepts." This is a common phenomenon, says Jackson, when cultures meet. It can be extended to the assimilation of Eastern philosophy into Western, for instance, Jackson points out the existent interpretations of the Buddha through David Hume and William James, Nagarjuna through Ludwig Wittgenstein, Dharmakirti through Immanuel Kant and Williard Quine, Tantrism through Heidegger, and Zen through Eckhart. (Ibid., 562.) Of course, this is relevant to the perennialist position, from a critical standpoint of pluralism.

Deconstruction is a technique more than an ideology, a technique "to expose the ideological underpinnings, the limitations, the illogic of all thought and interpretation." (Ibid., 564.) Its critical purpose is to "deflate the certainties to which human thought... is prone." Jackson acknowledges that foundationalism is not necessarily a target of deconstruction, but he says that it does "seem to form a natural polarity with deconstruction, to which its assumptions are diametrically opposed." (Ibid.) It assumes that it is both necessary and possible to ground the construction of human

¹⁰ There are other terminological issues—with regards to philosophical stipulations on *consciousness*, *experience*, *existence* etc.—which seem moot points, and often the stipulation of transcendental or pure experience is simply that it is to be taken as the limit case or boundary conception of the term. It may also be that the term *consciousness* is too loaded for faithfully meaning what the mystic intends. Pure consciousness may be criticized as pure unconsciousness, proponents advocating awareness, but either way, a purification of one's own being is implied.

knowledge on firm epistemological or ontological foundations. A foundation itself needs no support, though it supports all other beliefs. It presumes that certain beliefs are either self-justified or irrefutable. (Ibid.) Examples of foundations in the Western philosophical tradition are given as Platonic *forms*, Cartesian “clear and distinct ideas” and the Thomistic *God*. Without these foundations, knowledge lacks certainty, but deconstruction has the advantage, says Jackson, of not requiring dubious certainty. “...foundationalism... in the West [has] generally been grounded in some ontological or epistemological absolute, such as Being, or the Cogito, or some transcendental subject.” (Ibid., 566.) Buddhism, however, says Jackson, has “a non-absolutist foundationalism” based on perception and inference which doesn’t grant *absolute* certainty, but *objective* certainty. This distinction in Jackson’s understanding of Buddhism is relevant to the foundationalist tendencies within perennialism generally. Perennialism tends to be of the “absolutist foundationalism.” There is a sense in which deconstruction is to foundationalism as mystical constructivism is to perennialism, but we have to keep in mind the stipulations of these terms—i.e., our use of *constructivism* and Jackson’s use of *deconstruction* are not opposed, but are both representative of anti-perennialism.

The really relevant point in “Matching Concepts” is Jackson’s negotiation of these two poles in his understanding of Buddhism. He identifies his method with the Buddhist “middle way” of avoiding extreme views. “Poles” is the metaphor he employs when speaking of Buddhism generally, but he has a notion of “frames” for the differing particular positions on the spectrum within Buddhism. These frames refer to “whether it is primarily a deconstructive enterprise that is framed by foundationalism, or a foundationalist enterprise framed by deconstruction.” (Ibid., 567.) Deconstruction however, is simply a technique, insists Jackson, not an ideology, so rather than being a position, it may employ a temporary perspective, but as a technique for “exposing the incongruities inherent in any position,” it is called a “meta-position,” although it must be admitted to be a “position” in some meaningful sense. (Ibid.)

Jackson’s conclusion is that in Buddhism, the two poles must be balanced via the “Middle Way.” “The innermost frame... tends to be the “strong foundationalist” assertion of worldly and religious conventionalities.... That frame is surrounded and sublated by a wider frame that involves... the ultimate deconstruction of those conventionalities.” (Ibid., 584.) That frame, in turn is surrounded by a still wider “weak foundationalist” frame, and its ultimate deconstruction involves conventional foundations themselves deconstructed, and so on. It would seem that this process leads to philosophical and spiritual frustration, but, argues Jackson, the philosophical and spiritual failure is in “the attitude that would seek finally to resolve the deconstruction-foundationalism polarity in favor of one or the other.” (Ibid., 585.) The metaphor he ends with is that of the Buddhist who must walk a difficult tightrope, “balancing two truths, holding a pole weighted deconstructively on one end, and foundationally on the other, knowing that if her equilibrium is lost, the fall will be a long one. As long as both are under her control, however, passage will be possible and the goal—which is no goal, but a goal nevertheless—will be attained.” Jackson adds that in many Mahayana traditions, a *Buddha* is defined by his or her ability to balance the two truths.

This is Jackson’s take on the Buddha’s middle way: “...one of Buddhism’s most basic metaphors is that of holding to a middle between extremes, whether of hedonism and asceticism, eternalism and annihilationism, or, simply, “is” and “is not.”” (Ibid.) Jackson’s view is a suggestion to balance deconstructionism and foundationalism in Buddhism, but his elaborate framework has a simpler analog in my brand of process metaphysics. The analogy only reaches so far, as Jackson calls his position “non-absolutist foundationalism,” and mine is more in the Whiteheadian vein of absolute idealism on a realistic basis (*Process and Reality*, pp. xiii), or Peirce’s objective idealism (*The Architecture of Theories*), wherein the real is no less ideal.

6. Mysticism and Metaphysical Systems

When viewing mysticism generally, one may be struck by a distinction between mystical traditions which involve meditation and practice an economy of just enough content in experience to achieve no content (content-less consciousness, Forman’s “pure consciousness event”),

characterized by religious and ascetic practices, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the more philosophical mysticism from the likes of Plotinus, Bradley and Schopenhauer, and even more broadly construed, idealist metaphysical systems from the likes of Parmenides, Plato, Spinoza, and Peirce. The explanation of the details of such mystical traditions and metaphysical systems is a project beyond the scope of this investigation, but I can argue that the distinction between these two categories is merely that of praxis and theory, stemming from a common motive: either the “pure consciousness event,” or something like it. Mysticism and idealist metaphysics, generally construed, are not different. The Buddha had his theories, and Descartes had his meditations.

Jackson’s metaphors of informed frames and the Buddha balancing on a tightrope may be a solution to the two schools of interpreting mystical experience, and Forman’s solution called “Tirtha”—which will be discussed in the next section— may be a “middle ground” perspective of both perennialism and constructivism. But perhaps the metaphysical formulation of these metaphors is best construed in the framework of process philosophy. I suggest this because *process*, based on events rather than entities, or actions rather than atoms, is an ontological category (that of becoming, which accounts for being) which already encompasses opposites, extremes, and has the power to understand contradictions.

7. Tirtha

In Robert Forman’s 1993 *Sophia* article, “Of Deserts and Doors: Methodology of the Study of Mysticism”, he presents these two views—perennialism and constructivism—and critiques them both in a “plea for the recognition of differences, but only where there *are* differences”, and offers the possibility of a third alternative, a middle ground which he names Tirtha (from Sanskrit, ‘passageway’ or ‘crossing place’), after the Hindu temple doorways through which one gains access to the gods, but also leaves the temple for the desert outside. In Forman’s theory, “tirtha” means a passageway or crossing place at the entry or exit to a Buddhist temple, and this door-frame is akin to Jackson’s *frames*. But rather than a balance between biases in endlessly deconstructed foundations, Forman proposes a “middle ground” perspective on the mysticism debate. “Our Tirtha, threshold, stands between the closed room of constructivism and the borderless desert of perennialism.” (Forman, 1993, p. 40.) This alternative recognizes that mystical experience centered on the ‘pure consciousness event’ shows no signs of being constructed, but recognizes also that the processes leading up to it are completely inter-dependently originated in their contextuality.

Assuming the existence of what is meant by ‘pure consciousness event’, this seems to be the best view. Forman argues for the existence of the pure consciousness event on the grounds of its universality or uniqueness: “...this new approach allows for the possibility that cross-culturally parallel descriptions of pure consciousness may actually refer to cross-culturally parallel experiences. For without content, there is no particular feature or characteristic to distinguish two experiences...” (Ibid., 41.) This latter point is reminiscent of the unique and singular existence of the ‘empty set’ in mathematics. The assumption of the existence of pure experience is the key assumption, which cannot be demonstrated, but only proven as a super-self-evident axiom, that is, proven only after one has “had” or “become” the experience or event in question. This kind of higher knowledge, beyond sensually-mediated experience (and Forman suggests it is even beyond inference,) has been called “Knowledge through Identity”. (Forman, 1999, Merrell-Wolff, 1973.)¹¹ Its evidence is so pervasive we can’t help but overlook it, for it is us in our own being—we don’t see it to know it, we be it to know it. That direct, first-hand knowledge which cannot be transmitted second hand is not the exclusive knowledge of elite meditators, but is the ultimate reality, which is always already the case, just as the metaphysical intuition of the Infinite¹² is necessary to grant signification to the finite.

¹¹ Spencer-Brown also seems to suggest it as the difference between “being” and “seeing being,” in the AUM conference transcripts, 1973.

¹² Guenon distinguishes ‘the metaphysical Infinite’ from ‘the mathematical Infinite’ by simply referring to the former as the Absolute Infinite, because, he says, the mathematical Infinite is often the merely indefinite countability of otherwise finite beings (Guenon, 2003.) In recognizing the uniqueness of this Absolute Infinite, I

Of course, calling it 'Objectivity in Itself' presumes there being some form or formless sort of subjectivity, and certainly there *seems* no escape from the perspectivity of subjectivity, as Descartes found(ed.) But this alternative interpretation of mystical experience (Forman's Tirtha) can demonstrate, for philosophical inquiry, that there is indeed an exit, via the Tirtha or temple doorway between the constructed building or temple, and the desert outside, the unmarked state.

Next we will look at my "threshold." Rather than a metaphorical doorway, my metaphysical exodus from the perennialist-constructivist debate is a metaphysical structure—not a structure as in a building, but only a foundation, a corner-stone: more precisely Being is taken to be Spencer-Brown's "first distinction," which is the crossing to the *beyond of being* (*epekenia tes ousia*), and it is deconstructed, erased, or crossed, just like Jackson's *frames*, and Forman's Tirtha, but precisely, Spencer-Brown's *forms*.¹³ Every frame is formed and every form framed; this is the doctrine of the unmarked cross. Although the play of signifiers (percipience, perspection, or perspectivity), is endless, Pure Subjectivity is the exit and the entry, the end and the beginning.

8. Tarati

Independent of Forman's Tirtha, I have come to a foundational metaphysical position which has resisted my attempts at deconstruction over my years of philosophical study. This system is a process metaphysics which accounts for the genesis of multiple realities, orders, levels or dimensions, distinct from the unique ultimate reality, by analogy to the way Spencer-Brown's *Laws of Form* accounts for the genesis of forms and time from the "unmarked state."

This structure can be articulated, beginning with the first principle, the One, the source, and cannot be so articulated beyond that, 'before the beginning' so to speak. The One or Being In-Itself, in this system, is the dimensionless point construed as pure self-reference, formless subjectivity, and the transcendental *signifier*. The ultimate is the transcendental *signified* in my system-- pure objectivity, or objectivity without an object-- and it is the beyond of being, *epekeina tes ousia*. It can be either pure and radical nothingness (which is impossible) or the Absolute Infinite, and it cannot be articulated or actualized without passing through the penultimate to get to the non-ultimate or conditional-conventional universe of discourse. This metaphysical system takes the ultimate reality of the Infinite-- to express one such articulation of it-- as an axiom. This is an axiom not in the sense of 'self-evident,' for there is no Self or One *ultimately* (this system takes the Self or One to be merely *penultimate*), only the reality beyond itself (beyond the qualifier 'In-Itself,') and is therefore called 'Supra Self-evident.' In fact, it can only be known to be the Infinite, rather than pure nothingness, by deciding on the "essence" of "the beyond of being."

For all purposes which may concern us (on *this side* of being, i.e., *within* the realm of finite being), the "beyond of being" can only "be" one of two "things" or satisfactions of our conceptual understanding: either 1. Pure and radical nothingness, for we can imagine nothing more possibly ultimate, or, since that cannot be, 2. A "beyond of being" which overflows our determination of it as "beyond being", and becomes Being in the first place, but immediately ensues as everything else. This latter notion is the Absolute Infinite, in a process metaphysics.

The starting point of this foundational system is this pen-ultimate reality, taken as the very Principle underlying other metaphysical notions of 'first principles', as well as the differentiations of the Peircian class of Firstness, and even Whiteheadian novelty, and it is known (insofar as it is said to be 'known') by 'Knowledge through Identity' (Merrell-Wolff) which is *unmediated*, but *meditated*, so to speak. This foundational core is likely what Descartes meant to know, but claimed to think; that 'I

strive to imagine the Infinite as the overwhelming or overflowing nature of the beyond of being—*epekeina tes ousia*—from which Being bootstraps itself into existence, in the first place. After all, it seems to me, ultimate reality must either be pure and radical nothingness (which is impossible) or the Absolute Infinite.

¹³ Spencer-Brown, George, 1969, *Laws of Form*. The work itself is far beyond the scope of this work, and densely mathematical, metaphysically similar to the system of Peirce, and idealist to the core. Often taken as the kernel or nucleus of systems theory, and as a calculus of mystical mathematics, *Laws of Form* has largely unexplored metaphysical implications, but adopted by this author nonetheless.

am'. It is what Kant couldn't quite come to accept, however close he came to Pure Subjectivity in his architectonic. It is from Kant that Schopenhauer came to his realization of what he calls "the subject of subjectivity," a phrase from Kant's writings, as the Vedantic *Paramatman*.

I could call this system, following the style of Forman, 'Tarati' which is Sanskrit for 'he crosses', a term taken from George Spencer-Brown's siblinghood for teaching the "consequences of there being nothing at all" (*Laws of Form*) implied in his calculus of indications (the very same structure as structure as "codependent origination,"¹⁴ *pratitya samutpada*) of 'the First Distinction' (which, I'll add, is metaphysically, Difference In-Itself as much as Being In-Itself). I identify it with Pure Self-Reference, or Pure Subjectivity, for the purpose of technically elucidating how multiplicity arises from Unity.

9. Conclusion

Ultimate Reality is the beyond of being, which overflows its own boundlessness to found all finity, starting with pure subjectivity— or pure self-reference which is Being in Itself, transcendental Unity, which I therefore call *penultimate reality*—the original and originary Difference In-Itself, from which all differences in the multiplicity of any construct have their meaning and significance as forms of indication or reference (traces of the first distinction), and to which they all ultimately simplify. I do not attempt to de-center Western ontology, but place the philosophy of Presence-as-Being within a philosophy of Becoming or *process*, which distinguishes that which is given in the present, from the very Presence of the present. This latter notion is what is meant by my use of Spencer-Brown's "first distinction," I suggest. The First Distinction is also called "the cross" as it is read, in an injunctive language (a *process*, like a recipe, or a machine language) rather than a descriptive language (a "natural language," a *product* of human communication,) as an instruction to cross itself (the *act* of *drawing* a distinction or *making* a difference) out, thereby *erasing* itself. By this ontological erasure, the notion of the "first distinction" can be read as a deconstructive tool and foundational event, likening it to Jackson's *frames*, but it is the basis of Spencer-Brown's *forms*.

In short, the encountering of the experiencer or observer—transcendental subjectivity itself—at the foundation of the world leads inevitably to the recognition of pure objectivity as ultimate reality (which can be taken as its ultimate deconstruction, analogous to the apophatic or *via negativa*), from which objects derive their value, weight, significance, meaning or objectivity. In this way, pure objectivity can be seen as the supra-self-evident Axiological Axiom, so to speak, even Unconditional Love, in romantic terms. This axiology (value theory) has a structure inverse to the relationship between *transcendental subjectivity as the radical unity of pure self-reference*¹⁵ and on the other hand, *the world of forms*¹⁶, as mere *traces* (representations, indications) of the unique, original "first distinction" Spencer-Brown speaks of at the foundation of his calculus. That is, all forms (i.e., distinctions, differences) would reduce to being the first distinction, also known as *the marked state*, which I call penultimate reality (pure self-reference or transcendental subjectivity: the Spirit which animates us), except that forms are complimentary to their content, which is their objectivity or value, which would reduce to *the unmarked state* or ultimate reality. It is the incongruity of form (thoughts; Whitehead's "negative prehensions") and value (feelings; Whitehead's "positive prehensions," or my notion of objectivity, meaning and qualia; in short, the non-formal aspects of

¹⁴ This technicality is beyond the scope of this paper, unfortunately. I refer interested researchers to *Laws of Form*, and Spencer-Brown's other writings.

¹⁵ In this system, once again, the One or the Self is "penultimate reality", the center and source of the world, analogous to the Origin in an extensive continuum or Cartesian co-ordinate plane, from which any extensive *point of reference* (or any *form*, or *frame of reference*) receives its value, meaning and significance from the formless, dimensionless point of *pure self-reference*, the first difference of the system.

¹⁶ Form is here taken in the sense of George Spencer-Brown's *Laws of Form*: "We shall take... the form of distinction for the form"; that is, *form* precisely as that which is comprised of distinctions. The *Laws of Form* is a calculus of indications of the first distinction based on two simple axioms which govern the consequences of just having drawn a distinction in an otherwise unmarked state.

experience,) that holds forms open and keeps them from absolute reduction. This accounts for the brute, concrete persistence of the “functional illusion”—to use a term from Dzogchen Buddhism—of the world. Thus this system has an axiology of metaphysical objectivity grounded on the ideal of pure objectivity as the source of all value, meaning and significance, itself the very fecundity of profundity, which is *the motive*¹⁷ of drawing the distinction in the first place.

This is my foundational theory, inspired by the metaphysical implications of George Spencer-Brown’s *Laws of Form*, specifically his *calculus of indications* of the first distinction (the laws of form themselves, expressed as two elegant axioms) interpreted as the very precise mathematical formulation of the Buddha Sakyamuni’s doctrine of codependent origination or mutual co-arising of form. I also extend it to Whitehead’s metaphysical system from *Process and Reality* (Whitehead, 1929, 1978)—although Whitehead does not speak of *transcendental* subjectivity or *transcendental* superjectivity (the term for objectivity in his system) — and I take “form” to mean Whitehead’s notion of “subjective form”, for the Spencer-Brownian form of distinction is the *activity* of distinguishing, the injunction to cross the distinction,¹⁸ and the *process* Whitehead identifies with “the experiencing subject itself” (Ibid., p. 16.) The subject, or pure subjectivity, is also an ideal aim of meditation, the “pure consciousness” of Asamprajnata Samadhi. Hence, ‘pure subjectivity,’ in my formulation, is to be construed as the formless boundary case or limit-concept of the Whiteheadian “subjective form” or *process*, conforming with Whitehead: “Process is the becoming of experience.” (Ibid, 166.)

It is no mere coincidence that Forman uses the Sanskrit for “to cross beyond”, Tirtha, and Spencer-Brown uses the Sanskrit for “to cross”, Tarati, to designate a metaphysical system each feels to be complete, for the first distinction is identical with the act of drawing it up, and once enacted is erased (deconstructed). My formulation is original, but I adopt Spencer-Brown’s term in this context as a metaphysical analogue of Forman’s proposed middle ground, Jackson’s ‘frames,’ and in my indebtedness to the structure of Spencer-Brown’s calculus.

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¹⁷ “There can be no distinction without motive, and there can be no motive unless contents are seen to differ in value.” Spencer-Brown, 1969, p. 1, Ch. 1. This would be circular reasoning were *Laws of Form* not a process metaphysics. This interpretation, the metaphysical implication of it, inspired my axiological theory.

¹⁸ i.e., the distinction is nothing else than the crossing: all else is mere indication, mere traces, mirror reflections. For representational purposes, the crossing of a boundary is its erasure.

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