

# Deconstructing Katzian Contextualism: The Uncanny and the Path to Pure Consciousness

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## Abstract

Does there exist a universal, cross-cultural mystical experience? Steven T. Katz's contextualist approach argues that there does not. For Katz, consciousness is necessarily content-based, and content is necessarily always acculturated and produces varied experiences. This article argues against Katz's conclusions about universal mystical experiences. I begin with Robert Forman's classic refutation of Katz, then update the refutations against Katz by utilising two neuro-cognitive models of consciousness, namely those of Zoran Josipovic and Thomas Metzinger. I argue not that these states of consciousness certainly exist, but rather, that because we have no privileged access to such phenomenological states of consciousness (a claim with which Katz concurs), the necessary position respective to pure consciousness is agnosticism. Pure consciousness offers the possibility that universal, or near-universal, mystical experiences exist; consciousness "of nothing" would necessarily be closer to a universal experience across subjects than consciousness "of something." This article therefore begins to construct a typology of intermediate, or "uncanny," experiences of consciousness. If the demolition of phenomenological structures can lead to a 'contentless' form of consciousness, what are the states between this endpoint, and ordinary consciousness? In this investigation, I refer to Jewish Kabbalism, Bonaventure's *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, the "Middle Way" in Madhyamika Buddhist philosophy, and Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* (1938).

## Keywords

Mysticism, Steven Katz, Pure Consciousness Events, methodological agnosticism, experience

## Introduction

Is it plausible for there to be a universal mystical experience? This is the question that has plagued the academic investigation of mysticism since its inception. Notwithstanding the truism that "mysticism" is itself difficult to define, philosopher Steven T. Katz claims that mystical experiences are necessarily the product of inter-differentiated religio-cultural milieux, and that therefore there are no universal mystical experiences. Katz introduced this framework, which he labelled "contextualism," in *Language*,

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*Epistemology and Mysticism* (1978, henceforth referred to as LEM). Torben Hammersholt calls the text a “classic” and a “strong candidate” for having “attracted the most scholarly attention within the last thirty years of research on mysticism.”<sup>1</sup> Katz’s framework was the most forceful rebuke to the hitherto dominant perennialist view, which asserted that all mystical traditions are constituted of the same “common core,” and that mystical experiences cross-culturally represent direct contact with a universally accessible, transcendent unity. Contextualism, in lieu of the dethroned perennialist paradigm, has, to some, become the “received view” in mysticism studies.<sup>2</sup>

In the following, I make the case that there exist hypothetical states of consciousness that could be rightly argued as universal. I first draw on Robert Forman’s proposals regarding “Pure Consciousness Events”; that is, hypothetically “contentless,” and thus unconditioned and universal, experiences.<sup>3</sup> The philosophical demands made by Forman’s hypothesised state are strong, namely the abandonment of Representationalism, or the idea that consciousness is necessarily always “of something.” I utilise two neuro-cognitive models of pure consciousness to investigate this problem. Zoran Josipovic’s neurological model fits the non-representational model, arguing for a non-dual awareness that underlies all experience.<sup>4</sup> That this fundamental awareness is non-dual means that typical oppositional distinctions such as subject and object dissolve, and consciousness, when directly experiencing this underlying state, is essentially “empty”. Thomas Metzinger counter-proposes the possibility of the Minimal Phenomenal Experience (MPE). The MPE is a hypothesised state that is phenomenally as reduced as possible, a kind of “minimum” for conscious experience. Metzinger maintains the intentionality of consciousness—that it is always “of something”—yet also argues that during the MPE, experience is stripped entirely of its regular, ordinary contents.<sup>5</sup> The stripping away of these appearances of consciousness represents an “appearance” in itself, albeit a singular kind. This alternative hypothesis maintains the contentful nature of consciousness, but still offers the possibility of a universal experience, because the remaining “appearance” in the MPE is a kind of meta-awareness that is theoretically unconditioned by culture.

Drawing on the idea of pure consciousness experiences, I develop the concept of “the uncanny”: a spectrum of “in-between” states between ordinary and these pure consciousness states. The question posed here is whether pure consciousness states are *sui generis*, or if they instead represent the endpoint of a continuum of consciousness, with “ordinary” consciousness at the other end. I propose that if pure consciousness is hypothetically universal, and there exist these consistent, in-between states, then these states must be quasi-universal. This conceptually challenges the binary framing of universal experience, upon which some of the debate in mysticism studies has hinged. Much of this debate has been fought over the possibility of universal, pure consciousness experiences being possible *at all*. Yet, at the very best, one can only really be agnostic to these claims. If we accept pure consciousness experiences to be earnest, lucid descriptions of human experience, can we say that they imply a spectral model of consciousness? Ken Wilber’s transpersonal psychological, spectral model of consciousness represents such a framework. Wilber proposes that consciousness is ultimately unitary and is subsequently

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<sup>1</sup> Torben Hammersholt, ‘Steven T. Katz’s philosophy of mysticism revisited’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81, issue 2 (2013), 467: “If one were to point to a text that has attracted the most scholarly attention within the last thirty years of research on mysticism, ‘Language, epistemology, and mysticism’ would be a strong candidate. It is now a classic.”

<sup>2</sup> Robert K. C. Forman, ‘Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting’, in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy*, ed. Robert K.C. Forman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Forman, ‘Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting’, 8-9.

<sup>4</sup> Zoran Josipovic, ‘Nondual awareness: consciousness-as-such as non-representational reflexivity,’ *Progress in Brain Research* 244 (2019), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Metzinger, ‘Minimal phenomenal experience: Meditation, tonic alertness, and the phenomenology of “pure” consciousness’, *Philosophy and the Mind Sciences* 1, issue 1 (2020), 9.

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partitioned into various strata that obscure the true unitary nature of the mind and reality itself.<sup>6</sup> One can ascend through these various “bands” of lower experience, reaching finally the “level of Mind,” which Wilber identifies with “Brahman, Tao, Dharmakaya, Allah, the Godhead.”<sup>7</sup> The strata below that of the Mind are the “Transpersonal Bands.” These, Wilber writes:

[R]epresent the area of the Spectrum that is supraindividual, where man is not conscious of his identity with the All and yet neither is his identity confined to the boundaries of the individual organism. It is on these bands that the archetypes, *bijas*, or *vasanas* occur. In Mahayana Buddhism (Suzuki, 1968) these bands are known collectively as the *alaya-vijnana*, or 'supra-individual repository consciousness'; while in Hinduism (Deutsch, 1969) they are referred to as the *karana-sarira* or 'causal body.' Also, if 'paranormal' phenomena do indeed exist, then many of them might be expected to occur on these bands, as, for instance, astral travel, out-of-the-body experiences, travelling clairaudience, and certain mystical states.<sup>8</sup>

Where Wilber's *psychologia perennis* makes fairly strong metaphysical claims, what I categorise as the uncanny is a more straightforward designation. In updating the refutation of Katzian contextualism's against a variety of theories of consciousness, I extend the logic of certain paradigms downwards from their theoretical extremities. Amongst other scholars urging a kind of “neo-perennialism” or “soft” perennialism, Steve Taylor writes:

It is important to note that all experiences are not equally conditioned. Some experiences may be less mediated and filtered than others. It is also possible to consciously decondition the mind in order to make our experience less mediated and filtered. In fact, this could be seen as another common theme across mystical traditions (related to the above-mentioned cross-traditional theme of cultivating inner stillness and emptiness): the use of techniques or practices to decondition the mind, or deconstruct ordinary conceptual processes.<sup>9</sup>

The mechanism by which these in-between states of half-constructed consciousness may occur is through the unwinding of automatistic cognition. Automatism in perception are those cognitive shorthands the mind develops to process everyday experience; yet some contemplative traditions claim that such automation may obscure their nuances. When one observes a table, rarely is all the granularity that constitutes the object actually witnessed. Instead, the table is immediately cognised as a gestalt, an entirety: 'table'. The word itself becomes a stand-in for the object. This perceptual pigeonholing makes the quotidian convenient—life as we know it would be nearly impossible in a constant state of pure, deconstructed perception—but of course the linguistic shorthands developed by the mind necessarily shape and constrain one's thoughts about the world. Deikman famously introduced the concept of deautomatisation, demonstrating that meditation or psychedelics could purposely reduce the role of automatism in experience.<sup>10</sup> Forman links this linguistic deconditioning to what he labels the

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<sup>6</sup> Ken Wilber, 'Psychologia perennis: The spectrum of consciousness', *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 7, issue 2 (1975), 105-106.

<sup>7</sup> Wilber, 'Psychologia perennis: The spectrum of consciousness', 106.

<sup>8</sup> Wilber, 'Psychologia perennis: The spectrum of consciousness', 108.

<sup>9</sup> Steve Taylor, 'A New Day for Perennialism: The Case for a Perennial Phenomenology, or 'Soft' Perennialism', *Sophia* (2023), 14.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur J. Deikman, 'Bimodal consciousness', *Archives of General Psychiatry* 25, issue 6 (1971), 481-489.

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“forgetting way,” identifying this deconstructive method with various contemplative traditions and “negative” mystical theologies.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, the structure of this article is as follows. I begin by outlining the position of the early perennial school, which argued for an unchanging, universal and transcendent referent to all mystical experiences. Secondly, I will describe Katz’ refutation of the perennial position, and the contextualist position that he therein develops, refuting universal mystical experiences. Thirdly, I synthesise some criticisms of Katz’ contextualism before more directly introducing prominent theorists of pure consciousness experiences, describing how their work in turn refutes the Katzian position. I then develop the category of the “uncanny” against these models of consciousness. Finally, I investigate a variety of phenomenological phenomena against both this hypothesised endpoint of pure consciousness experiences, as well as the hypothesised midpoint of the uncanny. This investigation integrates a variety of mystical contemplative traditions, as well as some reports less typically associated with “mysticism.” In the mystical traditions I examine Jewish Kabbalism, Bonaventure’s *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, and the “Middle Way” in Madhyamika philosophy. I identify descriptions of what I call the uncanny in these reports, and then similarly identify them in other, non-mystical domains. Particularly, I look at Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Nausea*. I conclude by analysing what this category of the uncanny implies for mystical studies, and what fruits its utilisation may bear in the future.

### **The Perennialists**

In his book *The Perennial Philosophy*, Aldous Huxley defines the *philosophia perennis* as:

The metaphysic that recognises a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man’s final end in the knowledge of the immanent and the transcendent Ground of all being—the thing is immemorial and universal. Rudiments of the Perennial Philosophy may be found among the traditionary lore of primitive peoples [sic] in every region of the world, and in its fully developed forms it has a place in every one of the higher religions [sic].<sup>12</sup>

Besides Huxley, the perennial school of philosophy is made up by members such as William James, Evelyn Underhill, Joseph Marechal, William Johnston, James Pratt, Mircea Eliade, and W. T. Stace.<sup>13</sup> The school asserted that mystical experiences cross-culturally occurred as a consequence of “direct contact with a (variously defined) absolute principle.” The “essentialist” position of the perennialists holds that mystical experiences are all fundamentally the same, and that such experiences constitute actual contact with a transcendent reality.<sup>14</sup> Although Katz does concede that later perennialists at least had the sophistication to categorise different *types* of mystical experience, they still asserted that these

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<sup>11</sup> Robert K. C. Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), 96-102.

<sup>12</sup> Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945), vii.

<sup>13</sup> Forman, ‘Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting’, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Richard H. Jones, ‘On Constructivism in philosophy of mysticism’, *The Journal of Religion* 100, issue 1 (2020), 24: “perennial philosophy permits us to understand all the apparent differences in mystical doctrines as being generated by a common underlying metaphysical structure.” See also Forman, ‘Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting’, 4; “Indeed, this view supported an argument for the existence of a (variously defined) divinity on the basis of experience.”

various types have the same, unchanging referent, which he ultimately disagrees with.<sup>15</sup> As for why descriptions of mystical experiences ultimately diverge, the perennialists contend that this occurs as a consequence of cultural conditioning and linguistic constraints, but only *after the fact* of the experience itself.<sup>16</sup> That is, mystical experiences are fundamentally “unmediated,” with “interpretation” only creeping in after. William James offers four characteristic descriptors of the unmediated mystical experience: “(1) ineffability; (2) noetic quality; (3) transiency; and (4) passivity.”<sup>17</sup> Elaborating on James’ framework, Walter Stace differentiates “introvertive” from “extrovertive” mystical experiences, with the former representing an internal experience of “unitary consciousness” and the latter being an external experience of “unifying vision.”<sup>18</sup> Central to perennialist philosophy is the notion that mysticism constitutes the “common core” of all religious experience. By way of mediating between the realm of the profane and a universal, transcendent reality, mystical experiences are the fountainhead from which all religious traditions arise. Accordingly, different perennialists assumed varying positions respective to the commensurability of “authentic” mystical experiences, as well as other anomalous phenomena, such as drug-induced experiences and pathological psychological conditions.<sup>19</sup> Evidently, there are various problems present in the perennial paradigm; I now turn to Katz to offer a different approach.

### **Katz’s Contextualism**

Katz begins *Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism* by both denying the possibility of independently verifying the phenomenological content of reported mystical experiences,<sup>20</sup> as well as the possibility of generating “veridical propositions” about reality on the “basis of mystical experience.”<sup>21</sup> This represents an immediate departure from the perennialist position. If, as Katz claims, it is impossible to independently verify mystical claims, then the perennialist is incapable of asserting that all mystical experiences are the same. Likewise, if mystical experiences have no necessary implication respective to the metaphysical, then the perennialist contention that mystical experiences constitute evidence of contact with a transcendent unity is also unfounded. At the same time, Katz does not assert whether mystical experiences do or do not occur; only that our access to them, and our capacity to adjudicate their respective metaphysical claims, is epistemologically constrained.<sup>22</sup> This reveals his fundamentally

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<sup>15</sup> Steven Katz, ‘Language, epistemology, and mysticism’, in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven T. Katz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 25.

<sup>16</sup> Katz, ‘Language, epistemology, and mysticism’, 24.

<sup>17</sup> Katz, ‘Language, epistemology, and mysticism’, 47-48.

<sup>18</sup> Katz, ‘Language, epistemology, and mysticism’, 49-50. The full explication of Stace’s introvertive and extrovertive framework Katz gives is as follows: “Common characteristics of extrovertive mystical experiences: 1. The Unifying Vision - all things are one 2. The more concrete apprehension of the One as an inner subjectivity, or life, in all things 3. Sense of objectivity or reality 4. Blessedness, peace, etc. 5. Feeling of the holy, sacred, or divine 6. Paradoxicality 7. Alleged by mystics to be ineffable... Common characteristics of introvertive mystical experiences 1. The Unitary Consciousness; the One, the Void; pure consciousness 2. Nonspatial, nontemporal 3. Sense of objectivity or reality 4. Blessedness, peace, etc. 5. Feeling of the holy, sacred, or divine 6. Paradoxicality 7. Alleged by mystics to be ineffable.”

<sup>19</sup> Ann Taves, ‘Mystical and other alterations in sense of self: An expanded framework for studying nonordinary experiences’, *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 15, issue 3 (2020), 8-10.

<sup>20</sup> Katz, ‘Language, epistemology, and mysticism’, 22: “There are major, perhaps insuperable, problems involved in the issue of trying to verify mystical claims, if by verification we mean the strong thesis that independent grounds for the claimed event/experience can be publicly demonstrated. Indeed, it seems to me, though I will not try to justify this position here, that it is not possible to provide ‘verification’ of this sort.”

<sup>21</sup> Katz, ‘Language, epistemology, and mysticism’, 22.

<sup>22</sup> Katz, ‘Language, epistemology, and mysticism’, 22: “Despite the strict limitation being placed on the justificatory value of mystical experience, it is not being argued either that mystical experiences do not happen,

Neo-Kantian position; the phenomenal and the noumenal are separated by an unbridgeable chasm.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, he does not undermine the relevance of post-experiential interpretations *vis a vis* mystical states, and argues that these can be socially consequential.<sup>24</sup> For Katz, the problem emerges when mystical states themselves are exempted from our inescapable, interpretative faculties. He gives his “single epistemological assumption” as being that “[t]here are no pure (i.e., unmediated) experiences.” From this we can surmise that Katz’s position is fundamentally a constructivist one, defined by Richard Jones as the claim “that there is always an object present in any state of consciousness that is open to construction by cultural phenomena.”<sup>25</sup> Refining this further, Katz is also identifiably a proponent of Husserlian linguistic intentionality; that is, consciousness is always “of something,” and the “something” that it is “of” is always mediated by language.<sup>26</sup> From this basis, Katz argues that investigating mysticism requires not only “studying the reports of the mystic after the experiential event,” but also “acknowledging that the experience itself as well as the form in which it is reported is shaped by concepts which the mystic brings to, and which shape, his [sic] experience.”<sup>27</sup> Hence, when examining the data, the fact that one’s given culture’s mystical accounts differ from another’s is not because the experience is interpreted differently after the fact, but rather because *it was a different experience entirely*. In summary, the dichotomy between experience and interpretation is a false one; experience is *simultaneous* to, and the essentially the same as, interpretation.

Responding to what he sees as a poor assessment on the part of the perennialists of the available empirical data, Katz conducts his own examination. Through a comparison of the Buddhist mystical state *nirvana*, and the Jewish mystical state *devekuth*, Katz argues that it is impossible to “describe, let alone equate, the experience of *nirvana* and *devekuth* on the basis of the evidence.”<sup>28</sup> Further, he demonstrates that although *nirvana* is defined by its non-relational content, and *devekuth* by its unitive aspect, similar categorical distinctions of mystical experience within other traditions such as Christianity do not map onto the Jewish or Buddhist descriptions. That is, even though Christianity contains both “absorptive” and “non-absorptive” mystical traditions—where “absorptive” refers to experiences in which the self is entirely subsumed or dissolved in the divine, and “non-absorptive” involves a relational union that maintains some distinction between the self and the divine—these are not equivalent to respectively similar typologies in other traditions.<sup>29</sup> In fact, despite presenting apparently commensurate phenomenologies of mystical experience, the presence of apparently absorptive experiences in otherwise non-absorptive traditions such as Christianity actually confirm

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or that what they claim may not be true, only that there can be no grounds for deciding this question, i.e. of showing that they are true even if they are, in fact, true.” Additional clarification: The “phenomenal” pertains to the world as we experience it, while the “noumenal” represents reality as it exists beyond human perception, these two, Neo-Kantian’s claim, cannot be bridged.

<sup>23</sup> Hammersholt, ‘Steven T. Katz’s philosophy of mysticism revisited’, 471: “It is often argued that Katz’s philosophy of mysticism is ‘neo-Kantian’ or ‘hyper-Kantian.’ Like Immanuel Kant, Katz accentuates that experience is always mediated by the structure of the human mind. The prefix ‘neo’ or ‘hyper’ signals that while Kant spoke of universal categories, Katz speaks of mediation shaped by the given particular context. Even though mediation is, according to Katz, a universal fact, the character of the mediation is not universal because conceptual contexts differ.”

<sup>24</sup> Katz, ‘Language, epistemology, and mysticism’, 23.

<sup>25</sup> Jones, ‘On Constructivism in philosophy of mysticism’, 4.

<sup>26</sup> Katz, ‘Language, epistemology, and mysticism’, 63: “By way of only introducing the significance of this topic for our concerns, I will merely suggest that, if one looks closely at the language of mystics, as well as at mystical devotion, practices, and literature, one will find that much of it is ‘intentional’ in the sense suggested by Husserl and Brentano.”

<sup>27</sup> Katz, ‘Language, epistemology, and mysticism’, 26.

<sup>28</sup> Katz, ‘Language, epistemology, and mysticism’, 39.

<sup>29</sup> Katz, ‘Language, epistemology, and mysticism’, 41-42.

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Katz's contextualist thesis, in that we can locate these anomalies in fairly obvious, empirically verifiable, historical antecedents such as the Neo-Platonist schools.<sup>30</sup> This argument leads into the contextualist claim that "mystical experience is 'over-determined' by its socio-logical religious milieu." In other words, it is impossible to experience something in the mystical state that does not already exist within the cultural vocabulary of a given mystical practitioner.<sup>31</sup>

### **Preliminary Criticisms of Katz**

Philip Almond ironically applies a kind of contextualist approach to Katz's methodology, arguing that its "persuasive power" is due to its adoption of a culturally dominant "episteme"; namely, the constructivism reflected in the broader "shift in epistemology toward the view that there are no human experiences except through the sociolinguistic relations which mediate them."<sup>32</sup> Perhaps for this reason, Katz has at times avoided scrutiny for his unfounded epistemological assumption, which Forman frames as "*petitio principii*, assuming what is to be proved."<sup>33</sup>

Where Katz does deal with non-dualistic mystical experiences, he erroneously ties it to the referent of ordinary, dualistic styles of experience. His misapprehension of the term "ineffable" reveals this fallacy. Katz writes, "[t]hrough two or more experiences are said to be 'ineffable', the term 'ineffable' can logically fit many disjunctive and incomparable experiences. That is to say, an atheist can feel a sense of dread at the absurdity of the cosmos which he labels ineffable, while the theist can experience God in a way that he also insists is ineffable."<sup>34</sup> This is fundamentally a misunderstanding of what the word "ineffability" refers to in the context of empty experience. In as much as it is a substitution for non-dual, undifferentiated experience, then by its very definition, there are not different kinds of ineffability. I will utilise an analogy to explain. Firstly, let us say that light can manifest as many different colours and shades. Secondly, that darkness is the absence of light. Darkness, we can then conclude, does not refer to a particular condition of light, or a particular colour, or a variety of different shades: *true* darkness is the total absence of any of these descriptors. The fallacy that Katz is analogously making here, is to say that there are many kinds of true darkness, and that they are, in turn, entirely incommensurable. This is equivalent to arguing that there are many kinds of truly "empty" experience, when, if such an experience did really exist, it by definition precludes variety.

To accept Katz's framing of the problem requires taking on board his central epistemological assumption, namely that there are "no unmediated experiences." Yet to accept this *a priori*, in the context of querying "various kinds of ineffability," is to grapple with the broader problem Forman associates with Katz's epistemological assumption. Is Katz definitely wrong to say that such experiences are impossible? No: he may in fact be correct, but the necessarily resultant position is then

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<sup>30</sup> Katz, 'Language, epistemology, and mysticism', 42: "The unitive Christian mystics are invariably those such as Eckhart, Tauler, and Suso, who have been schooled on Plotinus, Dionysius the Areopagite, and Augustine, i.e. the strong Neoplatonic current in Christian intellectual history." See also, 41; Katz likewise argues that the possibility of unitive mystical experience in Christianity is permitted by its "incarnational theology... which is predicated upon an admixing of human and divine elements." This element is "absent from its Jewish counterpart."

<sup>31</sup> Katz, 'Language, epistemology, and mysticism', 46.

<sup>32</sup> Philip Almond, 'Mysticism and its contexts', in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy*, ed. Robert K. C. Forman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 212.

<sup>33</sup> Forman, 'Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting', p. 15; "It is ironic that Katz claims that this is an improvement on other approaches because, unlike these other approaches, his makes no 'a priori assumption' and proves its case by 'convincing logical argument.' For just the opposite is true of his article: once he has assumed that language enters and, in part, shapes and constructs all experiences, the remaining thirty-nine pages of the article provides virtually no further argumentation but only instances of this assumption."

<sup>34</sup> Katz, 'Language, epistemology, and mysticism', 48.

better described as agnosticism, because as of yet, and as Katz himself argues, we have no privileged access to mystical states, undifferentiated or otherwise. Even supposing we did, they are by definition ungraspable by our dualistic, everyday forms of language. As far as the ineffable being variously interpreted after the fact, that is still possible, even if the experience is singular and universal.

Others have bolstered Katz's epistemology by employing a burden of proof argument. Jerry Gill, for instance, in agreeing with Katz's methodology, claims that "the burden of proof lies with the one who affirms the negative position, in this case the position that some experience can be and is unmediated."<sup>35</sup> This presents a strong argument in favour of Katz. Ordinary experience is, by most accounts, dualistic and differentiated. However, this is again to accept a particular ontological framing before the fact; in this instance, one specifically rooted in typically Western modes of thought. Shigenori Nagatomo offers a relevant critique of Katz that draws on Eastern ontologies of non-dualism.<sup>36</sup> He contends that Katz defaults to subject-predicate, and either-or propositions, in analysing Eastern ontologies, which by definition do not accord with these Western-centric logics.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, considering the challenge of substantiating phenomenological claims, with which Katz himself agrees, a "burden of proof argument" is a remarkably facile tool to deploy in religious studies, especially when one considers that a vast number of religious claims are easily discounted by such arguments, including Gill's own belief in a Christian God. However, entertaining the possibility of the PCE need not involve a total capitulation to Eastern ontologies. It is possible that both dual and non-dual phenomenologies are possible; the experience of either does not necessarily indicate or reflect some deeper ontological truth, although it may do so contingently. While Eastern traditions take ordinary, dual consciousness to reflect a lesser form of reality, and non-dual consciousness to essentially reflect a *truer* version,<sup>38</sup> this is a value judgement to which religious scholars can remain impartial.

Another objection that is raised against Katz, specifically his claim that mystical experiences are "over-determined," is that this cannot account for heretical mystical experiences, nor for experiences that occur *outside* of a given tradition while still sufficiently resembling the descriptions of mystical experience within that culture. As Michael Stoeber writes, "[c]ertain mystics not only flirt dangerously with heresy, their experience descriptions imply heretical beliefs. This forces us seriously to question the constructivist hypothesis because in the constructivist view the experiences of mystics should corroborate or correspond to the religious doctrine in which mystics participate."<sup>39</sup> Stoeber lists Islamic Sufis, Vedantins such as Ramanuja and Aurobindo, a Lutheran such as Jacob Boehme, or a Dominican such as Meister Eckhart, as examples of mystics whose experiences produced phenomenologies antithetical to their contextual preconditioning.<sup>40</sup> Notwithstanding these criticisms, even those who have offered them are largely on board with Katz's premise that mystical experiences are in fact culturally

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<sup>35</sup> Jerry H. Gill, 'Mysticism and mediation', *Faith and Philosophy* 1, issue 1 (1984), 112.

<sup>36</sup> Shigenori Nagatomo, 'A critique of Steven Katz's "contextualism": An Asian perspective', *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 1, issue 2 (2002): p. 207: "Katz's contextualism, as an explanatory model for mystical experiences, suffers from inconsistency and incoherence, when it is examined from the point of view of non-dualism, as advocated in the Asian philosophico-religious traditions."

<sup>37</sup> Nagatomo, 'A critique of Steven Katz's "contextualism"', 201.

<sup>38</sup> Donald Rothberg, 'Contemporary Epistemology and the Study of Mysticism', in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy*, ed. Robert K. C. Forman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 172: "The Upanishadic traditions counsel meditation on Brahman, bringing 'cessation from every illusion' and 'a falling off of all fetters.' The dramatic message of the Buddha is that it is possible to 'wake up' and no longer cognize reality inaccurately as if in a dream, but rather come to see things 'as they really are' (*yathabhutam*)."

<sup>39</sup> Michael Stoeber, 'Constructivist epistemologies of mysticism: a critique and a revision', *Religious Studies* 28, issue 1 (1992), 112.

<sup>40</sup> Stoeber, 'Constructivist epistemologies of mysticism', 112.



conditioned *in the majority of cases*.<sup>41</sup> This points towards what Richard Jones has identified as a “framing problem” within mysticism studies. He writes, “[t]hus, they [constructivists] saddled all who reject constructivism concerning mystical experiences with the full weight of perennialist metaphysics rather than with only rejecting the idea that all mystical experiences are constructed by cultural conceptions.”<sup>42</sup> Jones suggests that further research in mysticism would be greatly aided by an abandonment of these false methodological dichotomies.<sup>43</sup>

### **PCEs and MPEs as a Refutation of Contextualism**

If we take on board Katz’s suggestion of “over-determination” in mystical experiences, along with his *a priori* assumption that there are no unmediated experiences, then not much is left in the way of confirming the plausibility of a universal mystical experience. If experience is always of something, and both the thing it is of and the way that “of” is mediated is always different, then no mystical experience (let alone ordinary experience) is ever the same. With this in mind, one must ask what if it were true that there were experiences that are “of” nothing? To claim that an experience could be of nothing—that is, ontologically empty—is on first impression paradoxical. In large part this is because our language around consciousness is dualistic, which presupposes a subject and object, and the empty experience that is described in certain mystical traditions is generally described as non-dualistic. There is a poverty of language to refer to empty, non-dual experience, because language itself developed in a dualistic context. The verb to experience, presupposes an object or content. The non-dualistic synthesis of subject and object, experience and non-experience, logically trespass against the common sense of our everyday dualistic language that is constituted by mutually exclusive opposites. This very possibility of empty experience is not only described in various mystical traditions, but forms the basis of an increasing body of scholarship which refutes the Katzian contextualist position.

One of the most important attempted refutations of Katz’s methodology in this vein appears in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy* edited by Robert Forman and published in 1997. Forman hinges a criticism of Katz’s totalising constructivist claims on the possibility of a “Pure Consciousness Event” (PCE); that is, a hypothesised, “contentless” mystical experience that conceptually accords with many phenomenological descriptions of certain kinds of mystical states in Eastern religious traditions, as well as (albeit less frequently) similarly described states in other religious traditions.<sup>44</sup> The PCE, if taken as a serious possibility, undermines Katz’s anti-universalist stance because it suggests a kind of experience that is “unfiltered” by culture, and is therefore, at least theoretically, universally accessible.

A possible model for how this “event” might be accomplished is outlined by Forman in his 1999 book *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*. Forman alleges the PCE is brought about by a kind of neuro-linguistic *via negativa* that he labels the “forgetting way.” Originating in Neo-Platonist doctrines, and

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<sup>41</sup> Almond, ‘Mysticism and its contexts.’, 46: “It is important to recognise that the decision not to accept Katz’s claim that there cannot be pure consciousness events in the absence of any argument to that effect does not imply rejecting the notion that mystical experiences are intimately related to the contexts in which they occur.”

<sup>42</sup> Jones, ‘On Constructivism in philosophy of mysticism’, 3.

<sup>43</sup> Jones, ‘On Constructivism in philosophy of mysticism’, 3: “With such a clarification, the different positions on the nature of mystical experiences (constructivism vs. nonconstructivism), on methodology for understanding mystical doctrines and other cultural phenomena (contextualism vs. perennialism), and on whether there are common mystical experiences in all cultures or common features to all mystical experiences (essentialism) are easier to handle.”

<sup>44</sup> Forman, ‘Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting’, 7; Note the cross-cultural examples Forman gives: “Such authors as Eckhart, Dogen, al-Hallaj, Shankara, and Saint Teresa of Avila (when she describes nonsensory union) exemplify ‘mysticism’ as I intend it.”

famously espoused by mystic Meister Eckhart, the borrowed phrase *via negativa* refers to a theological doctrine wherein God is apprehended exclusively through negative statements.<sup>45</sup> That is, “God is not \_\_\_\_\_,” instead of “God is \_\_\_\_\_.” For Forman, negative statements serve categorically different functions to the positive kind. To analogise performative language to a knot: positive performative language ties it, negative performative language unwinds.<sup>46</sup> Although the movements may be identical, their directionality has a completely different consequence. Negative performative language has the capacity to undermine one’s linguistically constructed epistemology itself. The contemplative practices have discovered these self-undermining linguistic formulations, and employing them leads to a neuro-linguistic cascade that at its limit leaves only the PCE. These formulations are those such as “*cease* looking,” “lay your expectations *down*,” or “*stop* thinking you know what this will look like.”<sup>47</sup> The *via negativa* accomplishes the PCE through an unwinding of “automatisms.” Automatisms are essentially the cognitive shortcuts the mind develops in relation to everyday objects. When one observes a table, rarely is all the granularity that constitutes the object actually witnessed. Instead, the table is immediately cognised as a gestalt, an entirety: ‘table.’ The word itself becomes a stand-in for the object. This perceptual pigeonholing makes the quotidian convenient—life as we know it would be nearly impossible in a constant state of pure, deconstructed perception—but of course the linguistic shorthands developed by the mind necessarily shape and constrain one’s thoughts about the world. The demolition of these unconscious superimpositions therefore results in a kind of unfiltered and infinitely granular perceptual experience: everything is seen in absolute and borderless detail. Deikman was the first to categorise this process as “deautomatisation,” proposing that it occurs within meditation practice and psychedelic experience. A self-report of his own experiences of mescaline consumption, *The Doors of Perception* by perennialist Huxley takes its title from a William Blake stanza, which fittingly maps onto the concept of deautomatisation: “[i]f the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern.” This process of automatistic unwinding, when taken to its limit, results in the PCE.

A neurological paradigm such as Josipovic’s mostly maps onto Forman’s hypothesised PCE. Josipovic proposes that consciousness-as-such is a “non-conceptual nondual awareness, in itself empty of all other phenomenal content, yet reflexively self-aware.”<sup>48</sup> He separates conscious experience into two aspects: “the modified consciousness consisting of contents, functions, states and the indeterminate substrate, and the unmodified consciousness or consciousness as such.”<sup>49</sup> This non-dual consciousness is characterised as pure “awareness,” but is disambiguated from the ordinary sense of the word, such as awareness “of a specific stimulus or awareness as general alertness.”<sup>50</sup> Likewise, the “reflexively self-aware” does not refer to awareness of self in the typical sense, but rather the “inherent non-conceptual reflexivity of consciousness, awareness knowing itself to be aware non-transitively.”<sup>51</sup> All reportable phenomenal contents are a projection *on top of* this baseline of non-dual awareness. The locus for this baseline, non-dual awareness, is the central precuneus network.<sup>52</sup> Deconstructing ordinary perception leads directly to non-dual awareness, which underlies consciousness irrespective of arousal levels. This

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<sup>45</sup> Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*, 96-102.

<sup>46</sup> Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*, 97.

<sup>47</sup> Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*, 100.

<sup>48</sup> Josipovic, ‘Nondual awareness’, 3.

<sup>49</sup> Zoran Josipovic, ‘Implicit–explicit gradient of nondual awareness or consciousness as such’, *Neuroscience of Consciousness* 2021, issue 2 (2021): 2.

<sup>50</sup> Josipovic, ‘Implicit–explicit gradient of nondual awareness or consciousness as such’, 2.

<sup>51</sup> Josipovic, ‘Implicit–explicit gradient of nondual awareness or consciousness as such’, 2.

<sup>52</sup> Josipovic, ‘Nondual awareness’, 28.

framework, along with Forman's, is anti-representationalist. That is, consciousness need not be necessarily contentful.

Conversely, Thomas Metzinger argues for a representationalist version of consciousness. Metzinger introduces the idea of Minimal Phenomenal Experience (MPE). According to Metzinger and Alex Gamma, the MPE,

...lacks time representation, spatial self-location, agency, autobiographical self-awareness, and a phenomenally experienced first-person perspective. This can be understood as an unstructured form of global content that is also devoid of perceptual, motor, affective, conceptual and propositional content.<sup>53</sup>

It is likewise defined by six “phenomenological constraints”: “Wakefulness, Low Complexity, Self-Luminosity, Introspective Availability, Epistemicity, Transparency/Opacity.”<sup>54</sup> In the contemporary search for the neural correlates of consciousness, Metzinger sees in MPEs the potential to identify a baseline neural correlate of global consciousness. Metzinger writes that “in order to really solve the problem of consciousness we will ultimately need a theory of MPE – because only a minimal model can give us a deep scientific understanding of the essence of phenomenal experience.”<sup>55</sup> In other words, when trying to identify which parts of the brain are responsible for what kinds of conscious states, it makes sense to try and find the *simplest* or most *minimal* state of consciousness possible, and work upwards from whatever that state neurologically corresponds to. While not beholden to its validity, the assumption Metzinger makes is that—as the contemplative traditions tell us—“a minimal form of phenomenal experience is present in *all* forms of phenomenal content and functionally underlies *all* types of conscious experience.”<sup>56</sup> Metzinger identifies his version of pure consciousness experiences, as Forman and Josipovic do with theirs, with the phenomenological reports found in the contemplative traditions. Yet where Metzinger departs from them is on the presence or absence of content in MPEs. The MPE project, according to Metzinger and Gamma, “allows for the possibility that the non-conceptual experience of consciousness *as such* can co-occur with conscious contents.”<sup>57</sup> In this understanding, the PCE becomes a “plausibly homogeneous subclass of MPE states,”<sup>58</sup> while the MPE, in its still-intentional nature, serves to defend philosophical Representationalism.<sup>59</sup>

Metzinger traces the concept of pure consciousness in the work of perennialist Walter Stace, through to PCEs in Forman. He identifies two consistent phenomenological constraints from their respective descriptions of pure consciousness phenomena, namely:

Wakefulness (PC1): the phenomenal character of tonic alertness. Low Complexity (PC2): often described as the complete absence of intentional content, in particular of high-level symbolic mental content (i.e., discursive, conceptual, or propositional thought), but also of sensorimotor or affective content.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Alex Gamma and Thomas Metzinger, ‘The Minimal Phenomenal Experience questionnaire (MPE-92M): Towards a phenomenological profile of “pure awareness” experiences in meditators’, *Plos One* 16, issue 7 (2021), 3.

<sup>54</sup> Metzinger, ‘Minimal phenomenal experience’, 7.

<sup>55</sup> Metzinger, ‘Minimal phenomenal experience’, 5.

<sup>56</sup> Metzinger, ‘Minimal phenomenal experience’, 2.

<sup>57</sup> Gamma and Metzinger, ‘The Minimal Phenomenal Experience questionnaire’, 3.

<sup>58</sup> Gamma and Metzinger, ‘The Minimal Phenomenal Experience questionnaire’, 3.

<sup>59</sup> Metzinger, ‘Minimal phenomenal experience’, 9.

<sup>60</sup> Metzinger, ‘Minimal phenomenal experience’, 9.

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Accepting Wakefulness as a constraint, Metzinger conversely questions the necessity of Low Complexity. Where Stace conceives of a “empty whole or unity” in the experience of pure consciousness, Metzinger questions whether these two distinct descriptors are really all that commensurate. Furthermore, Forman’s reliance on the unclarified idea of “non-intentional consciousness” leaves room for ambiguities, in that it is possible that “[t]he absence of all empirical content could itself be an appearance, and what subjects (falsely) describe as a ‘contentless’ phenomenal state could actually carry an abstract form of intentional content.”<sup>61</sup>

In searching for the “content that can account for the reported experience of contentlessness,” Metzinger hypothesises that this remaining content is the representation of a Bayesian predictive model that controls and regulates the “global signal of the *Ascending Reticular Arousal System* (ARAS).”<sup>62</sup> The function of the ARAS is to respond to immediate stimuli and adjust arousal levels based on sensory input, a bottom-up process. Metzinger suggests that higher order brain areas create a predictive model that proactively modifies the ARAS signal based on more complex data than simple present stimuli (e.g. past experiences, anticipated demands or internal states), a top-down process.<sup>63</sup> Arousal is thus more accurately regulated according to this more complex prediction model. Metzinger argues that global consciousness itself is underpinned by this prediction model; when content is stripped away from consciousness, what remains in the MPE is an abstract representation of the prediction model itself.<sup>64</sup>

While Metzinger alleges that pure consciousness may still be contentful, I would suggest that even Metzinger’s hypothesis leaves no room for the Katzian, contextualist refutation of universalism. Representationalism need not imply contextualism. Contextualism itself is representationalist, but the important constraint is that for a contextualist, the content that the brain represents is necessarily socially conditioned. The MPE, in its meta-aware and self-referential quality, contains no content subject to cultural conditioning. In both the PCE and the MPE, the narrowing of intentional contents is so severe—to either 0 in the former, or 1 in the latter—that the states are theoretically phenomenologically universal. Even Josipovic with his non-representational view concedes that “[w]hether consciousness as such is entirely non-representational or only less representational remains an open question.”<sup>65</sup> He further acquiesces that some degree of conceptuality that frames ordinary thought may be present in the non-dual awareness state, but considering “the absence of key properties of ordinary conceptual cognition and metacognition such as categorizing, memory associations, semantic tagging and especially the pervasive dualistic subject-object structuring makes it unlikely that nondual awareness is, in itself, a similar conceptual process as ordinary dualistic cognition.”<sup>66</sup>

The absent properties are notably those subject to cultural conditioning. One cannot say whether the conceptual elements in the non-dual state are also those subject to cultural conditioning, but it could at the least be stated that there are *less* of these elements. Hence, even with the question of representationalism open in Josipovic’s model, this non-dual state at the least *approaches* universality.

In addition to their shared categorical universality, the paths to these states need not be different either. Although Forman may hold it leads to a different place, his “forgetting model” is not mutually exclusive to Metzinger’s descriptions of MPE. While Metzinger claims that the abstraction of the ARAS predictive model still qualifies as intentional, content-based consciousness, it is still an experience that is self-referential to the brain’s representative capacities *in themselves*, and not referential to any worldly content, or anything resembling automatistic cognition. While there is not a *complete* rejection of

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<sup>61</sup> Metzinger, ‘Minimal phenomenal experience’, 9.

<sup>62</sup> Metzinger, ‘Minimal phenomenal experience’, 3.

<sup>63</sup> Metzinger, ‘Minimal phenomenal experience’, 36-48.

<sup>64</sup> Metzinger, ‘Minimal phenomenal experience’, 36-48.

<sup>65</sup> Josipovic, ‘Implicit–explicit gradient of nondual awareness or consciousness as such’, 2.

<sup>66</sup> Josipovic, ‘Implicit–explicit gradient of nondual awareness or consciousness as such’, 2.

intentionality, there is still an extreme narrowing of the intentional contents in the MPE. Hence, if we take the forgetting model as a means by which the mind can deconstruct intentionalism, in the PCE it accomplishes this absolutely, while in the MPE it only approaches this ideal by reducing intentional content to a minimal, self-referential form. Therefore, there is nothing prohibiting the “forgetting way” from being the path to the MPE.

### **Quasi-Universality: ‘The Uncanny’**

If the endpoint is a universal experience, and the “forgetting way” is gradualist, how does one then categorise the universality of the experiences which constitute movement towards this endpoint? In addition to refuting Katz’s anti-universalist position in the absolute, I am additionally arguing that the semi-deconstructed states between ordinary consciousness and pure consciousness, could logically be argued as being semi-universal, or approaching universal. The phenomenology of the MPE, for example, “lacks time representation, spatial self-location, agency, autobiographical self-awareness, and a phenomenally experienced first-person perspective.”<sup>67</sup> Each of these constraints are, in principle, isolable. To sequentially fulfill all these constraints, which represent mental constructions subject to acculturation and individuation, would signify a progressive movement towards the absolute universal. Likewise, the positive phenomenological constraints that Metzinger offers are also isolable,<sup>68</sup> and from their relative fulfillment Metzinger himself develops a typology of various psychological phenomena.<sup>69</sup>

These semi-deconstructed states are what I call the “uncanny.” Mysticism studies is plagued, as many domains are, with definitional ambiguity. It is almost impossible to define mysticism, let alone mystical experiences. The category of the uncanny does not help to narrow the definitional scope of mysticism itself; rather, it links broader phenomena to those traditionally associated with mystical experience. In this sense, such experiences are theoretically brought about by relative deconstruction of typically acculturated phenomenological contents.

To begin, Metzinger outlines a hypothetical state wherein it may be possible to “awaken” to the predictive model that underlies global consciousness without reducing the Complexity, or contents, of consciousness. He writes:

Unsatisfied Low Complexity plus maximal Wakefulness could serve to describe so-called “awakened” states. For example, following a global Gestalt switch in which MPE has turned from an unrecognized background into the dominant and spontaneously present foreground of all experience, an explicit experience of Wakefulness could appear as the medium or the centre- and timeless epistemic space in which rich, variable, and complex phenomenal contents unfold over time.<sup>70</sup>

The MPE, if it indeed underlies all conscious experience, can be experienced by eliminating all other conscious contents until only it is left; a state of Satisfied Low Complexity and maximal Wakefulness. However, what Metzinger proposes above is that the MPE can be brought to the fore simultaneous to ordinary, contentful consciousness. This poses immediate challenges to this category of the uncanny.

Is it the half-deconstruction of categories, selfhood, perceptual content, and mental content that constitutes uncanny states? Or, is it the superimposition of the MPE over fully constructed aspects of

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<sup>67</sup> Gamma and Metzinger, ‘The Minimal Phenomenal Experience questionnaire’, 3.

<sup>68</sup> Metzinger, ‘Minimal phenomenal experience’, 7.

<sup>69</sup> Metzinger, ‘Minimal Phenomenal Experience’, 32-33.

<sup>70</sup> Metzinger, ‘Minimal phenomenal experience’, 17.

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experience that constitutes the uncanny? Perhaps it is both. If so, can both states—if they are even different at all—be said to approach universality in the same way that I suggest occurs in the uncanny? To solve this problem, it is necessary to describe the function of the MPE when it co-occurs with ordinary experience. There are two possibilities here. One is that the appearance of the MPE, as a kind of unconditioned meta-awareness, “crowds out” conditioned content by necessity. This argument takes Metzinger’s “Gestalt shift” to mean that conditioned content in the phenomenal experience is actively reshaped by the appearance of the MPE, and not merely coexistent with it. The Gestalt shift towards an object that underlies global, universal consciousness, implies that experience itself has shifted towards something more akin to the universal. The second possibility is that the MPE merely does coexist with ordinary experience. It is not transformative; it is merely additive. Yet, even in this possibility, I would contend that the addition of the globalised background state, which is universal and unconditioned to foreground awareness, *still* constitutes movement towards the universal. If the MPE is a plus for universality, and ordinary contents are minuses, then the highest form of universality is the MPE alone. The lowest is ordinary contentful consciousness alone, and somewhere between is the two co-occurrent.

Josipovic similarly presents his hypothesised non-dual, baseline awareness as frequently co-occurrent with ordinary experience. He writes:

This is challenging because instances of completely isolated nondual awareness are relatively rare, and nondual awareness most often co-occurs with some amount of ordinary dualistic conceptual processes. Although this awareness is ordinarily only implicit in experience, it can under certain circumstances become explicit. When explicitly present, it knows itself inherently to be aware and as the aware space within which conscious states and contents occur.<sup>71</sup>

Josipovic develops an implicit-explicit spectrum of non-dual awareness; that is, a continuous gradient of subjective awareness *of* non-dual awareness. Since he argues that global state arousal and phenomenal contentfulness can be divorced from one another, and from the implicit-explicit gradient of non-dual awareness, it becomes possible to chart these three vectors on a 3D plane.<sup>72</sup> Within this 3D plane, the aspect of non-dual awareness is non-discretely split into implicit, transitional and explicit categories. A classically “empty” MPE, for example, could be categorised as low in both arousal and content, but high in non-dual awareness. Both the transitional and explicit categories of non-duality would account for the spectrum of uncanny experiences. Josipovic bifurcates the transitional zone into transitional unitary experiences and transitional self-recognition. For the former, Josipovic writes:

When the endogenous or exogenous conditions cause the dualistic subject-object self-world model to temporarily relax or cease, commonly reported as ego dissolution properties of nondual awareness can become more clearly reflected in experiences, giving them, among other properties, their unitary character.<sup>73</sup>

The reduction or “subtlety” of content in these experiences inversely correlates to the presence of non-dual awareness.<sup>74</sup> Transitional self-recognition involves the initial, direct “knowing” of the non-dual

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<sup>71</sup> Josipovic, ‘Implicit–explicit gradient of nondual awareness or consciousness as such’, 6-8.

<sup>72</sup> Josipovic, ‘Implicit–explicit gradient of nondual awareness or consciousness as such’, 8.

<sup>73</sup> Josipovic, ‘Implicit–explicit gradient of nondual awareness or consciousness as such’, 8.

<sup>74</sup> Josipovic, ‘Implicit–explicit gradient of nondual awareness or consciousness as such’, 8: “Interestingly, the more subtle the content, the more clearly it can reflect the properties of nondual awareness. For example, a more subtle experience of internal and external energy can reflect the unity property more strongly than the coarser

awareness itself. This awakening to the non-dual can “ignite even with the presence of dualistic subject–object conceptualizations.”<sup>75</sup> Hence, both states involve some mixture of constructed and unconstructed experience; they are uncanny. When non-dual awareness is entirely explicit, then it is uncanny only when some phenomenal contents are present; otherwise it is theoretically entirely universal.

It is worth noting at this point that when I refer to deconstruction, I am explicitly referring to an unwinding of conceptual and perceptual categories. This process is conceptually negative; it is *de*-construction. But the neurological processes underlying this deconstruction need not be negative as well. Antonio Raffone and Narayanan Srinivasan have developed the “Adaptive Workspace” model as their own hypothesis for the neural correlate of consciousness. While its full scope is not explorable within the confines of this paper, a particular element of the hypothesis is relevant here. In the Adaptive Workspace model of consciousness, ordinary perceptual processing represents “first-order” consciousness. Meta-cognitive awareness emerges in the “second-order,” wherein the medial BA10 is responsible for metacognition regarding external stimuli. For example, “I am aware that I am experiencing the sight of a red cherry.”<sup>76</sup> The lateral BA10 does the same for internal “thought contents”: “I am aware that I am recollecting an episode of my adolescence.”<sup>77</sup> Transcendent, or “third-order” experiences, are those wherein the self and typical conceptions dissolve. They are not caused by any reduction in activity in the medial or lateral BA10, but rather by an *integration* of the two.<sup>78</sup> Again, this returns us to a conception of deconstruction that is generated by additive *gestalt*, not by mere reduction. Regardless, I am not presenting any of these hypotheses to take a side. Perhaps Forman is correct, and the *via negativa* generates a deconstructive cascade until nothing is left. This does not actually preclude Raffone and Srinivasan being correct; “pure consciousness” is generated by increased integration, not disintegration. The neurological correlate to the phenomenology of deconstruction need not be deconstructive itself. Further, it is vital to acknowledge that the category of universality is not a neurological category *per se*, but a phenomenological one. Hence, however the ultimate endpoint of pure consciousness is brought about neurologically, whether positively or negatively, if the endpoint is phenomenologically universal, then the midpoints are phenomenologically quasi-universal, or uncanny.

### **Phenomenological Reports**

Theologian Bonaventure’s 1259 *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* (‘The Journey of the Mind to God’) gives an account a manifold path to mystical union with God. He identifies seven stages in this pathway. The first stage involves contemplating God’s presence in the world, his “vestiges.”<sup>79</sup> This involves noticing

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experience of solidity of the body and objects in the environment. Further along in subtlety, an actual—not merely imaginary—formless experience, such as that of infinite light, can reflect the properties of nondual awareness to a great degree and with relatively little distortion.”

<sup>75</sup> Josipovic, ‘Implicit–explicit gradient of nondual awareness or consciousness as such’, 8.

<sup>76</sup> Antonino Raffone and Narayanan Srinivasan, ‘An adaptive workspace hypothesis about the neural correlates of consciousness: insights from neuroscience and meditation studies’, *Progress in brain research* 176 (2009), 173.

<sup>77</sup> Raffone and Srinivasan, ‘An adaptive workspace hypothesis about the neural correlates of consciousness’, 173.

<sup>78</sup> Raffone and Srinivasan, ‘An adaptive workspace hypothesis about the neural correlates of consciousness’, 173.

<sup>79</sup> Bonaventure, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* (1258), 1.11: “In the first manner the power of sight [aspectus] of the one contemplating, considering the things in themselves [res in se ipsis], sees in them the weight, number and measure; the weight in regard to the position [quoad situm], where they are inclining, the number, by which they are distinguished, and the measure, by which they are limited. And for this reason it sees in them measure [modum], species, and order, and also the substance, virtue, and activity [operationem]. From which it can rise together, as from a vestige, to understand the power, wisdom and immense goodness of the Creator.”

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the basic appearance of God in all simple perceptual data; the world is recognised as an echo of God's presence. The second stage involves the more direct recognition of God's immanence in his vestiges and specifically "in all other creatures."<sup>80</sup> In the third stage, the mystic turns away from the exterior and begins to gaze inwards.<sup>81</sup> While highlighting the practice as a kind of intellectual contemplation, gazing upon the soul internally reveals God as though "through a mirror." In the fourth stage, Bonaventure continues, "howevermuch one be illuminated by the light of nature and acquired knowledge, one cannot enter into himself, to delight in his very self in the Lord, unless by means [mediante] of Christ."<sup>82</sup> In advancing towards an ultimate union with God, Bonaventure begins to point out the insufficiency of intellectual understanding. Instead, one must now ascend towards God by "descend[ing] first into the heart by grace."<sup>83</sup> In the fifth stage, God's ultimate unity in all *being-itself* is recognised as foundational across *particular kinds* of being,<sup>84</sup> an almost Heideggerian distinction of *being* and *beings*. The intellect is here "blind" to the very foundation of the of itself, which is pure being.<sup>85</sup> This pure being that underlies all existence is analogises to light. When we perceive objects in the world, we observe their colours and forms, but do not see the light itself that makes this perception possible. When we then directly observe this divine light, it appears as "nothing." Bonaventure writes:

[b]ecause accustomed to the shadows of beings and to the phantasms of sensibles, when it surveys the light itself of Most High Being, it seems to it that it sees nothing; not understanding, that that darkness is the Most High Illumination of our mind, as, when the eye sees pure light, it seems to it that it sees nothing.<sup>86</sup>

In the sixth stage, particularly through contemplation of the Trinity and Christ, one reaches a "perfection of the illumination of the mind,"<sup>87</sup> after which "nor does anything more ample now follow except the day of rest, in which through an excess of the mind the perspicacity of the human mind rests from every work, which one accomplished."<sup>88</sup> In the seventh stage, the stage of rest, "it is proper that all intellectual activities be relinquished, and the whole apex of affection be transferred and transformed into God."<sup>89</sup> The mind is surrendered into an ineffable union with God. Concepts and intellect do not partake in, or have the capacity to explain, this ultimate, wordless union.

In the Jewish Kabbalah, we see many of the same themes. Named for Jewish mystic and rabbi Isaac Luria, the Lurianic Kabbalah describes a myth of creation wherein God's first act is *tsimtsum*, a "concentration" or "folding in."<sup>90</sup> This negative act creates a void within which creation takes place. The place from which this contraction takes place is *en sof*, James David Dunn writes, "[t]he upper light diffuses eternally. This light that radiates eternally is called *en sof*. It cannot be grasped in thought nor principal. It is abstracted window of the soul and separated from all thought and it existed before all

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<sup>80</sup> Bonaventure, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, 2.1.

<sup>81</sup> Bonaventure, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, 3.1.

<sup>82</sup> Bonaventure, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, 4.2.

<sup>83</sup> Bonaventure, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, 4.4.

<sup>84</sup> Bonaventure, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, 5.3: "But this is not particular being, which is analogous being, because it has the least from act, in this that it is the least. It follows [restat] therefore, that that being is the divine being."

<sup>85</sup> Bonaventure, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, 5.4.

<sup>86</sup> Bonaventure, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, 5.4.

<sup>87</sup> Bonaventure, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, 6.7.

<sup>88</sup> Bonaventure, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, 6.7.

<sup>89</sup> Bonaventure, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, 7.4.

<sup>90</sup> James David Dunn, *Window of the Soul: The Kabbalah of Rabbi Isaac Luria* (Cape Neddick: Weiser Books, 2008), 25.



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that was ever emanated or created.”<sup>91</sup> From this “absolute space,” the divine light penetrates into the “primal space” or void of creation.<sup>92</sup> These divine emanations in the material world manifest through any one of ten *sefirot*, which are vessels of divine light. Many of these *sefirot* shattered, and consequently only sparks of divine light are dispersed throughout the material world.<sup>93</sup> This prepares the stage for *tikkun*, the moral imperative of ‘repairing’ of the world through contemplative and ethical acts.<sup>94</sup> This tension between the unitive perfect transcendency and the material world begins in *tsimtsum*. As Sanford Drob writes, “in linguistic terms, as a contraction and concealment of divine light into the letters of language, one which brings about distinctions between ideas, values and, ultimately, all finite entities.”<sup>95</sup>

Between Bonaventure and the Lurianic Kabbalah, there emerges many themes relevant to pure consciousness and the uncanny. Namely, they both share a vision of transcendent unity, which is shrouded in the material world, and points to a fundamental insufficiency of language and concepts respective to this transcendent unity. Both characterise this metaphysical unity with a kind of primordial light, something which both Metzinger and Josipovic identify in their phenomenological constraints in pure consciousness experiences.

Regarding the uncanny, Bonaventure argues that we can, in the fifth stage, recognise existence as manifest in the objects of the world we perceive. What this represents is the deautomatisation of perception. Objects lose their essential definition and only boundaryless being is apparent. In the Kabbalah, this is less immediately clear. Drob writes, “[i]n contrast to other mystical views in which language is thought only to *obscure* reality, and in which the *real* is only understood when the mind is devoid of language and thought, the main kabbalistic view is that language is both constitutive and revelatory of the essential nature of the world.”<sup>96</sup> In the actual world, names themselves are closely tied to creation. The transcendent *ein-sof* is not subject to this same linguistic subdivision, but the here-and-now is, thus reality here is best apprehended by language. Yet at the same time, the power of language in scripture is complemented by an “infinite interpretability” of it.<sup>97</sup> This perspective of language is difficult to reconcile in the Kabbalist traditions. Drob argues that this is resolved by “the Jewish hermeneutic method [being] one that creates a dialectical balance between the subjective and objective.”<sup>98</sup> This concept of infinite linguistic variation is found in Abulafian Kabbalism. Mystic Abraham Abulafia preceded Luria; he claimed that he could accomplish ecstatic mystical experiences by the repeated permutations of divine names.<sup>99</sup> One of Abulafia’s disciples writes, “[w]hen an individual completely enters the mystery of prophecy, he... becomes totally unaware of his own essence, as it were concealed from him.”<sup>100</sup> Instead of clearing out constructs by deconstruction, this is again more akin to the “crowding out” of conceptions by relentless permutation. Whether or not these pathways would constitute the same phenomenal effect of reducing conceptual categories of experience, and approaching universality, is no certain matter. Regardless, the differences in the phenomenological reports of these intermediate pathways may perhaps be a moot point *vis a vis* the endpoint of pure consciousness. Putzu writes:

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<sup>91</sup> Dunn, *Window of the Soul*, 25-6.

<sup>92</sup> Dunn, *Window of the Soul*, 24.

<sup>93</sup> Dunn, *Window of the Soul*, 35.

<sup>94</sup> Dunn, *Window of the Soul*, 22.

<sup>95</sup> Sanford L. Drob, *Kabbalah and Postmodernism: A Dialogue*, Vol. 3 (Lausanne: Peter Lang Inc., 2009), 26.

<sup>96</sup> Sanford L. Drob, *Symbols of the Kabbalah: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives* (Lanham: Jason Aronson Inc., 1999), 252.

<sup>97</sup> Drob, *Symbols of the Kabbalah*, 278.

<sup>98</sup> Drob, *Symbols of the Kabbalah*, 279.

<sup>99</sup> John F. Nash, ‘Abraham Abulafia and the Ecstatic Kabbalah’, *The Esoteric Quarterly* (2008), 55.

<sup>100</sup> Nash, ‘Abraham Abulafia and the Ecstatic Kabbalah’, 57.

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The idea that the peak of mystical experience can be achieved both through increasing mental activity—as in Abulafian Kabbalah—and through decreasing arousal of consciousness—as in other religious traditions—seems most appropriate, insofar as it accounts for the existence of two opposite paths (overstimulation and overrelaxation) leading to what appears to be the same ultimate outcome—a mental state radically different from the ‘normal’ waking one and often labeled as ‘mystical’.<sup>101</sup>

One traditional concept that maps closely with the uncanny is the “Middle Way” popularised by Buddhist monk and philosopher Nagarjuna. Best elaborated in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (Root Verses on the Middle Way), the Middle Way represents a Mahayana innovation on the Buddha’s teaching. Here, phenomena are recognised as lacking inherent, independent existence. This tenet is *śūnyatā*, or “emptiness.” Prior conceptions of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* divide the concepts. *Samsāra* is ordinary, everyday existence, experienced in the first person with all of its entanglements and attachments to the material world. *Nirvāṇa* is liberation from, and transcendence above, this everyday experience; the self and all typical mental concepts are abolished. In the Middle Way, Nagarjuna writes that, “[*samsāra* is nothing essentially different from *nirvāṇa*. *Nirvāṇa* is nothing essentially different from *samsāra*.”<sup>102</sup> Nagarjuna essentially argues that true recognition of the emptiness of concepts should be extended to the states of *nirvāṇa* and *samsāra* themselves. In the introductory essay to his translation of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, Kenneth K. Inada writes:

The middle path... is realized by the avoidance of the two extremes. What extremes? The extremes of the realism of activities relative to luxury and asceticism. One side engenders the quest for affluent matters and things which are of the nature of permanency and eternity while the other the quest for total self-abnegation, self-effacement and of the nature of impermanence, nihilism and annihilationism. In both instances there arise the root evil forces of objectifying or entifying either the elements related to wealth or riches on the one hand or “elements,” related to non-entity, nihility or negativity on the other.<sup>103</sup>

Nagarjuna’s philosophy is very much a kind of *via negativa*, or a “philosophy of no-position.”<sup>104</sup> This elimination of “physical” and “conceptual tainting”<sup>105</sup> leads one to a state where “[e]verything is. . . in the sense of inclusive or immanent transcendence.”<sup>106</sup> In essence, the non-duality of *nirvāṇa* blends with *samsāra*; awakening is simultaneous to ordinary experience. The realisation of this contingency of perceptual objects does not lead one into a nihilistic chasm because of the principle of interdependency implied in *śūnyatā*. Interestingly, this leads me to another kind of uncanny experience, which is generally described as nihilistic.

In Jean-Paul Sartre’s 1938 novel *Nausea*, the protagonist Antoine de Roquentin is faced with a growing sense of estrangement from the world and its objects: a “*nausea*.” Where Nagarjuna resists

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<sup>101</sup> Vadim Putzu, ‘Mystical techniques, mental processes, and states of consciousness in Abraham Abulafia’s Kabbalah: A reassessment’, *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 41, issue 2 (2019), 18.

<sup>102</sup> Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, trans. Kenneth K. Inada (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1994), 19:24.

<sup>103</sup> Kenneth K. Inada, ‘Introduction’, in *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1994), 21.

<sup>104</sup> Inada, ‘Introduction’, 21.

<sup>105</sup> Inada, ‘Introduction’ 14.

<sup>106</sup> Inada, ‘Introduction’ 22.

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nihilistic estrangement in the face of ontological contingency by observing the interdependency of the material, Sartre's protagonist is nauseated by the world's contingency. Sartre writes, "[t]he essential thing is contingency. I mean that, by definition, existence is not necessity. To exist is simply *to be there*; what exists appears, lets itself be *encountered*, but you can never *deduce* it."<sup>107</sup> The names that Roquentin gives to perceptual objects increasingly fail to grasp any of their actual, material characteristics. "Things have broken free from their names. They are there, grotesque, stubborn, gigantic, and it seems ridiculous to call them seats or to say anything at all about them: I am in the midst of Things, which cannot be given names."<sup>108</sup> The extent of this meditation and awareness on contingency leads Roquentin to an experience where, observing a tree's root, he finds he "*was* the root of the chestnut tree... Still detached from it—since I was conscious of it—and yet lost in it, nothing but it."<sup>109</sup> Experiencing this state of undifferentiated being leads him an almost Bonaventurian vision wherein "[t]here was nothing left at all, my eyes were empty."<sup>110</sup>

In both Nagarjuna and Sartre, there is a direct cognisance of the "emptiness" or "non-essential" nature of materiality. This recognition is simultaneous to, and transformative of, everyday experience. In both cases, one can observe that there is a recognition that the limit of these uncanny experiences is at its end a demolition of typical self-hood and dualistic experience. In these examples then, where experience is increasingly unmodulated by preconceptions, it is arguable—since this conceptual unwinding represents a bypassing of acculturated concepts—that experience approaches universality.

### **Conclusion**

The various phenomena I have touched on above are consistent, to varying degrees, with the concept of the uncanny. Both Bonaventure and the Kabbalah highlight unitive experiences with God as a transcendent unity that exceeds language. In the former case, there is an explicit unwinding of language in a variety of intermediate states, while in the latter there is often an *overloading* of the language faculties to produce this state. It is an open question whether this constitutes a kind of deautomatism as well, or if this is an entirely different kind of process. In Nagarjuna and Sartre, there is a more direct recognition of the insufficiency or the progressive disappearance of linguistic concepts within the confines of ordinary experience, although the emotional quality this produces does vary. The endpoints for these intermediate experiences could be those states which map onto the neurological models of Metzinger or Josipovic. Perhaps the *unio mystica* of Bonaventure matches the neurological model of Raffone and Srinivasan even better; the integration of external and internal metacognition leading to "transcendence" could be what Bonaventure is describing in the progression from recognising God in his worldly "vestiges" to recognising God inside one's mind and ultimately synthesising to accomplish an absolute unity with God. Regardless of whether the neurological models accurately describe the aforementioned, I have for the most part employed them to update the refutation of Katzian contextualism against emerging models of consciousness. Of course, the implications of these models are a collapsing of the binary of universality, particularly in Josipovic's sliding scale of non-dual awareness. This cursory glance, then, has served the purpose to being comparing this conceptual category of the uncanny against various phenomenological reports.

To conclude, the ultimate assumption underpinning the investigation in this work is one that is shared with Katz; we do not have privileged access to phenomenological states. The resultant position

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<sup>107</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions, 1964 [1938]), 188.

<sup>108</sup> Sartre, *Nausea*, 180.

<sup>109</sup> Sartre, *Nausea*, 188.

<sup>110</sup> Sartre, *Nausea*, 189.

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should therefore be agnosticism and not a kind where *a priori* assumptions about the phenomenology of mystical experiences are made. Where Katz' assumptions prohibit the possibility of a universal mystical experience, once this assumption is discarded, several interesting possibilities emerge regarding pure consciousness experiences. The neuro-cognitive models I touch on are just some of the possible hypotheses that emerge. Their status as *hypotheses* rightly confirms the same aversion to *a priori* dismissal of certain phenomenological states; these are not absolute claims, just empirically testable frameworks. From these hypothesised endpoints of universal, pure consciousness, I have articulated the uncanny as a hypothetical, quasi-universal midpoint, offering a new framework for the investigation of various religious as well as psychological phenomena.

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