

# The Subject-Object Dichotomy

by: Douglas Lockhart

*Knowledge is absolute when there is no gap between knowledge and its object, or knowledge is its own object, hence subject and object at once.*

George Hegel  
Closing paragraph of *Phenomenology*

## Transparency Versus Nothingness

The above quote casts an interesting light on the question of subjectivity and objectivity in that it allows for a closing of the cognitive gap between the two when knowledge and its object are identical, a notion Arthur Danto rejects as fatally flawed in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*. Danto does however admit that art is now so "irritated by theory that the division between object and subject is all but overcome."<sup>1</sup> I agree. However, a philosophical closing of the subject/object gap is a little too tricky by far. That accepted, the language Hegel uses to set up his argument is nevertheless intriguing in that it characterises this subject/object closure as "consist[ing] in [knowledge] perfectly knowing itself, in knowing what it is."<sup>2</sup> That seems to make sense, but it is a sense of something that immediately teeters out of focus due to knowledge being presented as a subjective state of mind and also as objective mental content. It's an interesting notion, but

does it have any validity given that the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer's vertiginous notion of all history and the universe being grasped in terms of an intellectual epiphany is also questionable?

Danto perceives in this passage the idea of there being nothing but knowledge for us to deal with, nothing outside of knowledge that can be cognitively known; and that in spite of art, as he concedes, seeming to prove Hegel's point. Art has been all but disabled by means of ideas about art, he suggests, but does that apply to everything perceived? Is "perception" just "conception" by another name? Which is perhaps another way of asking if we are back in the philosopher Martin Heidegger's territory where we only "know" reality through the names we have bequeathed to our world of objects. Art, for Hegel, had lost its "genuine truth and life" and joined with the world of ideas; it was now something to "contemplate reflectively" in the hope of uncovering its nature, not something to be delighted in for its own sake.<sup>3</sup>

An interesting series of observations follow. Danto laments the turning of art history into an anemic discipline where one can be "an abstractionist in the morning, a photorealist in the afternoon, [or] a minimal minimalist in the evening."<sup>4</sup> He adds: "[Y]ou can cut out paper dolls or do anything you damned please. The age of pluralism is upon us. It does not matter any longer what you do, which is what pluralism means. When one direction is as good as another, concepts of direction no longer apply."<sup>5</sup> Pluralism is of course just another term for postmodernism, that which lies after modernism without ever being given a name. And we are, alas, in the midst of that *after*, that namelessness, indeed, firmly ensconced in pluralism's all-pervasive,

fatalistic presence where the end of history, never mind the end of art, lies cheek to jowl with our technological ability to make the end of history an actuality. We have even come to the end of ourselves conceptually in that we have defined ourselves as no more than the concepts we stand up in. Our understanding is that we do not have to understand Being beyond the bare fact of our "being here", a being here within which there is no trace of *here-Being* as penetrative insight. For pluralists, penetrative insight is just refined conceptual understanding misinterpreted by artists, and such like, as somehow belonging to some other category of comprehension. There is no such thing. There is, as Hegel suggests, only knowledge examining itself. In postmodern terms, subjectivity is processes processing, consciousness a Sartrean nothingness registering as biological white noise, "art" the metaphysics of that nothingness become a window through which knowledge as "subject" stares mindlessly through the lens of consciousness into knowledge as "object". Hence Hegel's illusion of subject merging with object; it is like merging with like, a mirage of opposites reflectively collapsing into one another because they are one and the same thing. But does that constitute Absolute Knowledge?

There is, however, something worthwhile in Hegel's notion of a subject/object mergence. His description of this merging as "consist[ing] in [knowledge] perfectly knowing itself, in knowing what it is" may well be flawed, but it nevertheless causes important questions to surface concerning what knowledge is in itself, and how knowledge can perfectly know itself? Is knowledge then mind? Is mind no more than self-generating knowledge ceaselessly scanning self, other and world in terms of ideas? That seems to be Hegel's position, and it ties in roughly

with Sartre's view of art and consciousness as "nothings" in themselves, that is, as windows through which mind interprets self, other and world into existence. Quoting Sartre, Danto dubs this the "Transparency Theory" of art and consciousness, and that well sums up the situation. We have come to the end of art, the end of history, the end of self and may as well close up shop and go home. Home? Where might "home" be under such circumstances? If art and history are ended as postmodernism suggests, where else is there to go but round in neo-type artistic circles.

In the complex transition from modernism to postmodernism symbols have been used for nefarious purposes. We have been shocked to a standstill and cannot determine what we have gained from the exercise. Or what we have lost, for that matter. Modernism has ended, a possible end to postmodernism itself impossible for us to imagine in that it is, by definition, a condition of knowledge rather than knowledge as content. In this sense postmodernism cannot be superseded; it is an elite conceptual position which only a postmodern intellectual elite can fully appreciate.

Arthur Danto also touches on the problem of what might lie beyond postmodernism when he describe it as a "celebration of openness",<sup>6</sup> an openness capable of explaining - via pluralism and relativism - the phenomenon of itself back to itself. In this sense openness is infinite; it has no conceptual boundary. One can cut out paper dolls or do anything you damned please. A piano concerto is of no greater worth than a strategically placed pile of bricks. Art does not do anything in itself; it is informed intelligence that determines what is, and what is not, art. Art is

in itself transparent, as is consciousness; they are each windows through which informed intelligence perceptually imbues self, other and world with meaning. Which sounds a bit like Hegel closing the cognitive gap between knowledge and its object through the arising of a new cognitively defined state, a state within which, in terms of focused, knowledge-filled attention, knowledge merges with itself into a perfect state of knowing. So is postmodernism a perfect state of knowing? Does art, and our being irritated with art theory cancel out as knowledge merging with knowledge in a Hegelian sense? Does knowledge constitute what we are as well as what our minds contain?

This is for me an almost comical non-argument in that it equates "knowledge" with "knowing" and leaves us with the problem of how knowledge can possibly know itself perfectly outside of a subjectively-based correlation of one thing with another. What we're dealing with isn't really knowledge at all; it is *meaning*. Knowledge is "meaning" before it is anything else; it is knowing that one knows something in the deepest sense of being subjectively alive. Deep subjectivity is not biological white noise, nor is it only our capacity for internalised dialogue or orientation; it is "meaning" supporting and confirming the experiential, non-temporal self's inherent meaning to itself in every given moment of time. The existence of meaning is in itself meaningful because knowledge cannot exist except in terms of meanings, and meanings cannot exist except in terms of meanings affectively plumbed and experienced. Meaning, in the first instance, is not objective in relation to knowledge; it is fundamentally subjective, affective and experiential. We did not dream up meaning; we were, in a sense, dreamt into existence by meaning because meaning is, as Thomas Nagel and

others have come to realise, an integral human capacity that progressively examines its own existence in relation to cosmos. Or, to put that another way, it is the problematic, inbuilt oppositional tension between internality and externality made conscious via the experience of self-presence.

There is however a certain truth in consciousness being a transparent medium as Sartre contends, but not therefore "nothingness" as he too quickly concluded. Transparency is not automatically nothingness because it is transparent; that is an ideologically-driven notion. "Self" in terms of its capacity for constant differentiation - which is "shallow subjectivity" by definition - is without doubt a force to be reckoned with, but it is by nature often a potentially dangerous force due to ideological propensity. Hence the Zen monk Sekida's distrust of Edmund Husserl's claim to have experienced "pure cognition" beyond ego influence. It was another way of saying that he, Husserl the philosopher, had managed to experientially cancel the subject/object divide inherent to ego-centred perception, and that was the equivalent of experiencing, in Kantian and Zen terms, reality as it is in itself. Simply not possible outside of a spiritual discipline such as Zen, was Sekida's response, and a direct challenge to Kant's refusal to accept such a feat on any level. Kant allowed for a "transcendental realm", but the only way into it was through a transcendent form of conscious reasoning. So what exactly was Husserl claiming, and why was he so confident in his claim? Sekida's understanding of the difficulties involved suggested intellectual hubris on Husserl's part; he seemed to be claiming access to a transcendent realm that only decades of mental training, Zen training in particular, could afford but not guarantee. Which is not unlike Arthur

Danto's conclusion that Hegel's intellectual merging of subject and object was fatally flawed, or present-day philosophical confusion over what the Christian pastor turned philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher meant by "consummate" self-consciousness.

Something interesting is going on here, and I think it has to do with consciousness being, as Sartre suggested, a transparent medium, but not "nothingness" in the sense of our being no more than processes mindlessly conjuring an illusion of individuality into awareness via the body. Sartre's definition of conscious transparency as nothingness, or emptiness, sounds alarmingly like the meaning-empty registrations of the psychologist Stephen Pinker's robots being classed as possibly sentient. So we should perhaps be reminded that robots do not "know" anything for themselves; they just "do" because they have no option. They have no personal volition, no affective sensibility. They are affectively insensible to how meaning *feels* as an experience. Meaning is more than a correlation of factors either making, or not making, sense; it is a state of mind allied to everything that we are brought to bear on whatever arises beyond a Gadamarian collapsing of history into itself. This raises the parallel question of what "knowing" is in itself. I would argue that knowing is an exercise in meaning prior to being laced with meanings.

I sense meaning to be a condition rather than a content of mind, a condition related to the ungraspable self because of the self's experiential immediacy. Meaning is my overall state as a human being prior to it being stepped down into units of individual knowing. To see this through Sartre's eyes is to overlook Gadamer's placing of all objectivity in a subjective context. It is to conveniently overlook the

psychologists Bresnick and Levin noticing that what lies between and within definable cognitions imbues such cognitions with meaning. It is to push away Henri Bergson's suggestion that we can sense nature independent of thought as well as perceive nature by means of thought. And it is to ignore Edmund Husserl's own observation that "The naiveté of talk about 'objectivity' which completely ignores experiencing, knowing subjectivity, subjectivity which performs real, concrete achievements, the naivety of the scientist concerned with nature, with the world in general, who is blind to the fact that all the truths that he acquires as objective, and the objective world itself that is the substratum in his formulas is his own life construct that has grown within him, is, of course, no longer possible, when life comes on the scene." For this to happen, however, we have to be *alive when something happens*, and that carries its own set of demands.

### **The Theoretical Base of Personal Knowledge**

In 1969 the philosopher Michael Polanyi delivered a series of lectures at the University of Texas and at the University of Chicago entitled "Meaning", lectures developed and co-authored by Professor Harry Prosch. Published in 1975, Polanyi's book tackled, in part, the problem of intellectually romanticised nihilism, and in doing so anticipated the novelist-philosopher Iris Murdoch's gripe against "fatalistic determinism" by some twenty-seven years. Murdoch had detected intellectual fatalism on a wide academic front, and Polanyi, dubbing this tendency "utilitarian calculus" - a philosophically oblique epithet - held science and the humanities responsible for the debacle, the debacle being that we were

out of existential kilter with "a meaning[fully order[ed] world"<sup>7</sup> Meaning in the life of contemporary man had been destroyed, he contended, and only a reformation of epistemology and the philosophy of science would restore meaning to its rightful place. Such a restoration, if undertaken, would entail the development of "personal knowledge", a knowledge "structured on the distinction between subsidiary and focal awareness."<sup>8</sup> A synthesis of meanings was required, and this synthesis consisted of self-meaning and a fundamentally meaningful world being brought back into meaningful coincidence.

The hinge of Polanyi's argument was simple and straightforward: the vision of the Enlightenment had been abandoned after the First World War, the advent of Positivism, Behaviourism, Cybernetics and Psychoanalysis allowed to dictate the notion that "human thought was the working of a machine."<sup>9</sup> Mechanistic methods of inquiry had bedeviled us into accepting terrifyingly literal and far-reaching assumption about human nature. By this fiat moral principles had been reduced to rationalisations of desire, good and evil explained by way of sociological programs, counterintuitive convictions about self, other and world treated as quaint nineteenth-century fantasies.<sup>10</sup> We were on our way to a new world, a new vision of the future, a new and more exact assessment of what it meant to be a human being - but only in terms of physics, chemistry, and "the forces acting between atomic particles."<sup>11</sup> This had left us gaping inanely at a universe emptied of meaning, at meaning emptied of meaning, at existence itself emptied of meaning. Rational, evidential thinking had been a necessary response to the

excesses of religious authority and metaphysical extravagance, but it had come at the cost of denying personal conviction a theoretical base.<sup>12</sup> Mechanical reductionism was underway on all levels of inquiry, the insatiable appetite of science and science-driven disciplines for "facts", or the illusion of facts, now the tenor of everyday living.

What interests me about Polanyi's argument is his settling on "personal knowledge" as the key issue when discussing what has happened to us since the Enlightenment ceased to be enlightening. That flew in the face of everything going on around him where science dealt in facts and the humanities in values. As values were utterly different from facts, the humanities had to be dealing in, well, fancies.<sup>13</sup> In this quite logical scheme values were the result of fancy and therefore not "factual" by definition.<sup>14</sup> Only meanings in relation to science's dealings with hard reality were factual; all other meanings were works of imagination, "brilliant in some cases, often sparkling in interesting, intriguing, and enjoyable, but nevertheless inescapably only ephemeral flashes of lights".<sup>15</sup> Marshalling his intelligence in the midst of this science-driven certainty about the nature of the world, the nature of the universe and the nature of human nature, Polanyi dared question the trajectory of such thinking and concluded that something was radically amiss with the way in which we were now beginning to view reasoning. This "something" was that we had come to function on two different levels of awareness without realising it. Awareness was much more complicated than it first appeared. Awareness wasn't just awareness; it was not a single thing. Awareness had differing levels of registration,

some conscious, some unconscious. Alongside focal awareness lay subsidiary awareness, a somatic level that fed subtle bands of information into the focal stream. On driving a nail into a piece of wood, for instance, we concentrated on hitting the nail squarely, not on the feel of the shaft in our hand, yet simultaneously depended on the shaft's feel in that it was the dynamic of those sensations that helped guide us to our target. Which is to say that subsidiary awareness merges seamlessly into focal awareness, and that without it focal awareness would not arise with the necessary precision.<sup>16</sup>

But what do the words "seamlessly merge" mean? How can we be aware yet unaware at the same time? How can mutually exclusive forms of awareness merge into one another without our noticing? And what does "not notice" mean in this context? We can of course shift focal awareness to the hammer shaft in our hand, but only at the expense of our previous target, the nail. Focal awareness continues, but it is now concentrated on ourselves as a sensation-bearing entity, and that can easily turn into self-consciousness with a complete breakdown in focal awareness. Self-consciousness generally heralds focal disunity, and if allowed to take hold can play havoc with how we think and behave in the presence of others. No one is ultimately safe from this hazard; it is ubiquitous. Driving a car is very much an automatic procedure, but if one becomes conscious of that procedure driving skills can quickly evaporate. Even the most practiced communicator can find themselves battling with self-consciousness if they happen to register the sound of their own voice. It does not take much to send us off track, and it is this curious failing that has come to represent our so-vulnerable humanity,

our sameness in the midst of even radical intellectual difference. We are judged by our fluency, or lack of it, by our ability to keep track of what's going on around us, but seldom with what is going on within us. The key to success lies in "objective detachment", a culturally embedded myth that ignores the meaningful integration of subsidiary, focal and personal factors in all acts of awareness.<sup>17</sup>

What use then is Schleiermacher's "consummate self-consciousness" if ordinary self-consciousness is such a problem? Would that not constitute a kind of ultimate subjectivity, an overpowering of the objective mind to the point of behavioural lunacy? As if in a reply to this question, Polanyi talks of a reflex "indwelling" of the personal in relation to meaning, knowing and understanding. He tells us to "dwell in our subjects of knowledge more deeply"<sup>18</sup> if we want the coherence and meaning of what exists to fully register on us. Reducing everything to a jumble of atoms gets us no where; we have to commit to the commitments that we share rather than to a compulsory reduction of everything known to some ultimately unknowable level of expression.<sup>19</sup> Atoms exist and we ourselves are composed of atoms, but the atoms of which we are composed constitute a person and that is of greater significance. Which tells us that "impersonal" knowledge is conceptually self-contradictory. All expressions of the self are personal by definition. Words have no meaning in themselves; only speakers have meaning.<sup>20</sup> Words may have an open texture, but it is the speaker's fitness in uttering and appreciating them that gives them their credibility.<sup>21</sup> The ideal of completely detached thought is then a myth applicable only to

automatic pilots and guided missiles, there being in all completely formal operations of logic an inbuilt unformalised tacit coefficient.<sup>22</sup> Passion exists in mathematics, and between mathematicians just as much as it does in the humanities. Psychological elements exist even in written proofs and formulae in spite of the attempt to eliminate them.<sup>23</sup> Our "being here" amounts to more than merely existing; it amounts to our being a matrix of biological and psychological forces within which meaning equals deep sensibility.

### **The Immediate Apprehension of Objects**

Reflex "indwelling", for Polanyi, is a mixture of subsidiary, focal and personal awareness, a triadic structure "bridging the gulf that supposedly separates scientific from humanistic knowledge, attitudes and methods."<sup>24</sup> That is of course to define this indwelling as a subjective dimension present in all objective behaviours, a definition Polanyi broadens to include the notion of this indwelling being made more substantial through the attempt to "dwell in our subjects of knowledge more deeply." From being an unconscious phenomenon "indwelling" takes on what appears to be a conscious aspect, but perhaps only to the extent of objectively recognising the role of this subjective element in objective procedures. By doing so we will have engaged in the setting up of a theoretical structure for "thinking" that includes, rather than excludes, the mind's subjective dimension, and that, he hopes, will temper, if not actually change, our more extravagant objective hopes and ambitions.

Fair enough, that is a legitimate hope. But is it sufficient to offset the mind's obsessive engagement with objectivity? I think not. An additional factor is required to complete this formula, and I think that factor is the realisation that meaning is, as suggested earlier, more than a correlation of elements either making, or not making, sense, but rather a state of mind allied to everything that we are brought to bear on whatever arises. In this sense meaning is not something extracted from self, other and world, it is something metaphorically injected into self, other and world by way of the self becoming a living presence to itself. Meaning is a *presence*, not some vague backgrounding effect in relation to body, to our "being here", but to our "*here-Being*" as a perceptually registered phenomenon rich in self-meaning. Presence as an intimation of meaning at depth is what we are beyond name and personal history: it constitutes the only proof self has of self in relation to its underlying immediacy and non-temporality. In this sense it constitutes a way into understanding what Schleiermacher meant by consummate self-consciousness, his use of "consummate" signifying, not some outrageous circularity of self-involvement in relation to the universe's limitlessness, but rather self and world become, in relationship, a perceptually transcendent form of awareness. Husserl, too, has a transcendent form of awareness in his philosophical armory, a form of awareness belonging to a "transcendent" ego which, under certain circumstances, takes over from what he terms the "psychological" ego. This, I think, is what he means by *cognition without ego*, and it heralds the possibility of a new, pure (empty or transparent) form of perception, that is, a form of perception unhooked from the usual features of cognitive engagement.

As observed by Richard Crouter in a footnote to Schleiermacher's *On Religion* (1993), Schleiermacher uses the term "sensible intuition" (*sinnliche Anschauung*) for "immediate apprehension of objects in the world in which concepts play no mediating role", and that, in relation to his Kantian-based descriptions of the "starry heavens" is an attempt to "evoke this feeling for sensible objects in the reader."<sup>25</sup> In being "immediate" this form of apprehension constitutes "consummate self-consciousness", and as such it informs us that there is a mode of seeing at our disposal unsullied by ideas about self, other or world. This, I would contend, is what to be a "living presence" to oneself signifies in terms of experience (hence the notion of consummate self-consciousness); it is a perceptual, experiential merging of self and other (subject and object) that brings conceptual, associative thinking to an abrupt halt, so allowing another form of cognition to arise. It is consciousness functioning as a "transparent" medium within which no conceptual hook arises because mind has been unhooked from language. It is pure, unadulterated cognition, and there is not a trace of Husserl's "psychological" ego in it.

This of course goes well beyond Polanyi's deep "reflex indwelling"; we are faced with the same problem Schleiermacher faced when attempting to explain how such a state of pure cognition can arise given that it registers in memory as an experience. If what we're dealing with is by definition a "primordial" state of cognition, then how can it be known and remembered? Schleiermacher replies thus: "[There are]ways of looking at the world that are the result of grace, others that are the result of sin." In spite of how that may sound, this is not Schleiermacher trying to explain anomalies of perceptions in terms of right and wrong; it

is a Christian pastor, of sorts, attempting to explain a transcendent form of perception that he knows defies logical explanation. But he's not wholly at a loss. He terms this form of seeing "consummate" in relation to self and its encounter with reality, a "sacred" encounter within which self-awareness functions operationally in an entirely new way, that is, as a state of perception backed by a form of awareness that does not interfere in the process - hence the notion of it being pure. A new type of consciousness has arisen, a prototype form of awareness available to everyone when they come to understand the perceptual mechanisms involved.

This has of course nothing to do with religion as it is generally understood; it has to do with human beings as they are yet to be understood. In this sense it reflects Professor Harry Hunt's contention in 'The Truth Value of Mystical Experience' that mystical experience is "the maximal expression of consciousness" because "not inconsistent with the system principles of the universe that generates it."<sup>26</sup> Or, similarly, the Eastern Tantric tradition's description of consciousness as capable of unitive mystical states within which there is a direct intuition of the universe". Whichever way one turns the universe, in one form or another, is there to trip over, it seems. It is, as Heidegger rightly concluded, "world" that brings us into being as beings. But more than that. It is also what we essentially are in ourselves, not just what we psychologically become due to the presence of world.

What has to be understood here is that a theoretical base for "personal knowledge" cannot be founded, as Polanyi correctly states, on subatomic structures alone. Such structures do not constitute a final

conceptual frontier in terms of what human beings are in their depths. Yes, we are composed of subatomic particles like everything else, but such structures are in themselves not "things"; they are *forces* functioning on an unimaginable space-time scale, and in the minutia of the human body. The physicist and philosopher Bernard d'Espagnat compares particles to Pascal's "infinitely great, infinitely small" conception of universal scales, to Newton's "idealised specks and grains", and to Descartes' "figures and motions" conceived as "pipes and springs".<sup>27</sup> In this sense they are old-fashioned in their newness and conducive, as they have always been, to a "mechanistic world-view ... stamped with commonsense", but viewed as fundamentally naive in philosophical circles<sup>28</sup> to the extent that it is a generalised view useful to layman and scientist alike when dealing with the almost magical world of quantum physics, but not actually materially actual in real terms.

Bernard d'Espagnat describes the situation thus: "[T]he existence of a particle is a state of a certain 'Something', [the] existence of two particles ... another state of this same 'Something', [the] absence of a particle also a state of this same 'Something'." The creation of a particle is then "nothing else than the transition from one state of this 'Something' to another."<sup>29</sup> Get it? No? Luckily there is a more accessible piece of text. This "Something" is actually the underlying wholeness of all things, a wholeness constituting basic Reality in terms of it being "fundamentally the only one of its species."<sup>30</sup> This boils down to Reality not being made up of separate particle bits, but in itself all-of-a-piece with this "Something". Hence the concept of nonlocality and

nonseparability in physics.<sup>31</sup> But there's still a problem. Even the notion of this "Something" being fundamentally One is a misnomer, a misconception of first principles that Plotinus (205-270 A.D.) corrected by saying, "the One, if it is, is not even one."<sup>32</sup> Why so? Because to conceive of the One as "one" is quantitative, and that annuls the proposition's proposition that this "Something" is beyond being anything in particular. Which sounds curiously like consciousness being described as a transparent "something" that isn't actually anything, yet not nothing as Sartre too quickly determined. Or it may in exactly this sense be God before He became God, the great SOMETHING that cannot be accommodated within the universe yet in some integral sense constitutes the universe it transcends.

Our use of "sunrise" and "sunset" fools no reasonably educated person. We are fully cognisant of what is going on out there. Terms such as "table" or "chair" are different, however; they are not the equivalent of an astronomical illusion perceived as a literalism. Tables and chairs are self-evident literalisms; they are not an illusion in spite of being other at the subatomic level. This is because "purpose" defines their nature, not their structure. And so with human beings, I would argue. Composed of particles we may be, but that does not define what we are: consciousness in relation to "purpose" does that. Purpose defines what we are in relation to our engagement with world, and world, in that it has generated our psychology, defines our creative capacities in relation to itself. World is dizzyingly creative in its own right, cosmos the probable cause of our having intuited mathematics into existence beyond rudimentary forms of arithmetic. Mathematics at its cutting edge

constitutes everything we know we don't know about d'Espagnat's mysterious "Something"; it is, as Professor of Astronomy John Barrow puts it in *Pi in the Sky*, "[A] secret with two sides. It is at once both the key which unlocks for us the unknown structure of the universe, and the hidden kernel of reality that the Universe guards most impenetrably."<sup>33</sup>

This tells us that mathematics, powerful as it is, unimaginably powerful as it will undoubtedly become, will still not be able to crack the cosmic egg. For how can we hope to break into the One when the "Something" that the One is is not anything at all? There again, as Barrow's points out, mathematics is "larger than the scope of formal rules and symbols",<sup>34</sup> so it may still embody the actual nature of the One beyond any hope of comprehension. Yet carry, because of its nature, the possibility of mathematically expressing that nature in spite of that. Logic is thought by many to be the foundation of mathematics, whereas it may, as Wittgenstein suspected, be simply a part of mathematics itself.

### **Natural Mysticism Versus Religious Mysticism**

In 'What Does Mysticism Have to Teach us About Consciousness', Robert Forman refers to "Pure Consciousness Events" and defines them as a dualistic mystical state within which an awareness of one's own awareness<sup>35</sup> functions alongside thoughts, sensations and actions. That is an interesting statement; it tells us that "dualistic" mystical experience gives way to unitive mystical experience. Dualistic? Not in the sense of the mind's natural dualism, its need to differentiate between one thing

and another, but in the sense of attempting to hold awareness of one's own awareness in place while dealing with an external or internal object of attention, or of the world in general. In terms of "sensation" and "action" this seems to be what Forman is advocating, but in terms of "thoughts" there's a problem. I can see this aspect of his claim working in relation to switching from objective mode to subjective mode for creative purposes, that's something we all do without realising it, but the suggestion that awareness of awareness can function alongside thinking, and result in a unitive mystical state, strikes me as odd. By its very nature thinking is the antithesis of mystical experience; it is by nature a differentiating mode that disallows unitive experience except in the limited intellectual sense suggested by Hegel.

There again, it may only have been a slip of the pen in that Forman says elsewhere: "[B]y reducing the intensity or compelling quality of outward perception and inward thoughts, one may come to a time of greater stillness ... as though in a gap between thoughts, where one is completely perception and thought-free.<sup>36</sup> That realigns him with the unitive experiences we've been considering, his pure cognitive event splicing neatly into each of the mystical categories under investigation. Husserl seems to make the same point as Forman when speaking of a "knowing subjectivity, [a] subjectivity which performs real, concrete achievements", but that would be to misconstrue "real, concrete achievements" for thoughts, when what he's actually referring to is waking up to one's own Being alive in a wholly new way.

It seems to be the case that subjective self-awareness alongside experience of self, other or world is a prerequisite in relation to the

arising of mystical states - or at least what are generally construed to be mystical states. In Christian terms mystical states are not conceived in this fashion; they are directly associated with Christianity's theological canon where mystical states are defined in relation to the Christian conception of God. Conformity of mystical experience to doctrinal expectations are then assumed to constitute proof of the experience's spiritual integrity, and that tells us that a cognitive loop is in play, a closed circuit with Christian doctrine as its conceptual, visionary, and auditory template. Such visions or auditions belong exclusively to the Catholic and Anglican conservative contemplative traditions. Groups such as Baptists or Pentecostals have little interest in such matters due to being text-driven, fact-based religious structures with history as their central focus. Quakers are the exception to this rule, their "quietist", silence-based forms of contemplation are viewed as threatening because deficient in language as an initial meditative impulse. The conservative Christian hierarchy considers this kind of silence a form of insolence due to it being empty of prayer-filled, rote liturgical exhortations designed to elicit God's benevolence. Silence carries no identifiable confessional element; it silently denies doctrinal efficacy in relation to the contemplative structure as laid down by S. Augustine.

The notion of entering the presence of God in some raw psychic state minus doctrine as a guide is perceived by conservative Catholic/Anglican thinkers as an ego-driven affront to God's salvatory work in history, the precise role of tradition and doctrine in history being discarded in favour of contemplative techniques borrowed from the East. There are, in Christian tradition, no such "techniques" for entering the presence of God; that is to reduce the spiritual domain to the level of a

controllable mechanism and make a nonsense of Christian piety. Piety is a life-process, it is not a technique; it is a condition of psyche conducive to mystical experience when practiced as a way of life minus that very aim. And so the question of whether natural mysticism is actually mysticism at all arises, a question that has to be dealt with in that it is the question conservative Christianity feels compelled to pose. Arguing that a Christian context is the basis on which mysticism is defined as mysticism, there can be no mystic atheists for that very reason. Talk of "natural" mysticism is therefore a contradiction in terms, the experiences had having no recognisable Christian content.

And so the battle lines are drawn, secular mysticism edging its way into the fray as an intellectual alternative to both natural and religious mysticism. Mystical Christianity has then two enemies, not one, natural mysticism being the lesser in that it continues to recognise psyche as a domain of discovery and revelation parallel to, but not subservient to, the claims of religion. In contrast to this, secular, postmodernism's mysticism of language is a self-contained kingdom where existential nothingness reigns as God alongside Hegel's mysticism of knowledge. As such it is a force to be reckoned with, and that in spite of its poetic opaqueness, its not really saying what it means, or its not really meaning what it says.

With regards to the problem of natural mysticism not being mysticism proper, however, it is Marghanita Laski who puts paid to this popular myth among Christian scholars. In *Ecstasy in Secular and Religious Experience* (1961), she uses the term "secular" to signify not postmodern secularism, but rather the secular-based findings of natural mysticism, studies such as those conducted by Robert Forman and Harry

Hunt now confirming her suspicions. Laski's attack is thorough, her conclusion dismissive of the notion that non-Christian mysticism can be differentiated from Christian mysticism because of the terminology used. This is R.C. Zaehner's conclusion, and as professor of Eastern religions he can't be ignored. Problem is, experiences claimed by Zaehner as non-Christian are often identical to those made by traditional Christian mystics, so why differentiate? Zaehner's attempts to explain this anomaly is to say that although all mystical experience is unitive, it is what one unites with that determines the nature of the experience. It is, he writes, one thing to encounter Reality, say, in the Quietist or Eastern meditative sense; it is quite another to prayerfully encounter God in the Christian sense. Laski's reply is that Christian mystics do not always "use such terms as must lead us necessarily to assume that their contact was with God."<sup>37</sup> For Zaehner, the Christian mystic's use of terms such as "The Absolute", "Absolute Being" or "Absolute Reality" automatically refer to the Christian God, whereas the use of identical terminology by an atheist or Eastern/Asiatic meditator is assumed to mean something quite different.

Laski provides amply proof for her rejection of Christian superiority in these matters, her most pointed observation being directed against Catholic theologians in that it is through their carefully honed, doctrinally-driven sensibilities that the words of the Christian mystics have been filtered. She puts it like this: "Catholic theologians may explain any seemingly pantheistic statement by an accepted Catholic mystic as not really meaning what it seems to mean."<sup>38</sup> Which is a convenient way of avoiding questions that ought to be asked. One such question

concerns the fact that there is "plenty of evidence that even the most respectable Christian mystics do describe experiences that are not doctrinally acceptable." And so Meister Eckhart was attacked, St Teresa tailored into theological conformity and Marguerite Porete forced to face the flames. God was a good Catholic, and on that basis mystical experience, whatever its demands, had to fall into line with Catholic doctrine.

### **Deeper Still Indwelling**

An immediate apprehension of objects where concepts play no mediating role is only possible in relation to the arising of self-presence, but not to self-presence alone. This is not a "mono-directional" exercise in which personal subjectivity takes pride of place; it is a consciously directed exercise where self-presence as subject and presence of world as object come to occupy the same perceptual space. In conceptual terms this is a Kantian impossibility; in terms of Schleiermacher's and Husserl's philosophy it is perceptually possible in that there is, due to the counterintuitive nature of the engagement, an immediate cessation of thinking: you simply can't think while attempting to draw self and world into the same perceptual space! Hence Husserl's cute claim that ego vanishes and that this is due to experiencing "knowing subjectivity, subjectivity which performs real, concrete achievements". But only when "life comes on the scene". When life comes on the scene it is no longer possible to assume that "all the truths that [we] acquires as objective, and the objective world itself that is the substratum in [our] formulas is [our] own life construct that has grown within [us]." That, he tells us, is a

naive belief. When life comes on the scene everything changes. In this much deeper sense of indwelling, "life" does not pertain to the life-history of an individual, as in Gadamer, but to a state of perceptual unity in relation to world that can, as Rudolf Otto claimed, be evoked in the mind. By such means is the immediate apprehension of objects attained, the mediating role of concepts brought to a halt. But not in terms of objects reduced to the level of subatomic particles; that does not constitute an object in itself. Everything remains just the same, but isn't.

#### References and Notes

- 1) Danto, Arthur, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, Columbia University Press, 1986. p. 113.
- 2) Ibid.
- 3) Ibid, p. 114.
- 4) Ibid.
- 5) Ibid, pp. 114-5.
- 6) Ibid, p. 210.
- 7) Polanyi, Michael, *Meaning*, The University of Chicago Press, 1975. Intro. p. x.
- 8) Ibid.
- 9) Ibid, p. 22.
- 10) Ibid, p. 23.
- 11) Ibid, p. 25.
- 12) Ibid, p. 22.
- 13) Ibid, p. 64.
- 14) Ibid.
- 15) Ibid. The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy notes that with the publication of 'Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy' (1913), Husserl's philosophical position changed in relation to Kant's conception of reality. From claiming that we could only know the thing as it is given to us, he came to believe that the "thing-in-itself" could be intuitively given to us. But only after "deeper reflection on our experience of time, on memory, and on the nature of philosophical thinking." Many saw this as his having adopted traditional idealism, and on that basis they distanced themselves from Husserl. Technically, Husserl's new position favoured analysis as "experimentation" over the construction of "large-scale theories and defending ideologies." What we had to do was get to the essential structure of things through "free variation" or "imaginative variation", that is, attempt in our imaginations to remove various features from the target of our analysis. The removal of certain features would, he contended, leave the object intact. By such means would we hit on something essential to the thing and experience eidetic intuition. But only if the eidetic intuition "be directed not only toward objects but also towards the various forms of intentionality". In making this demand, Husserl was advocating a form of double-seeing, a seeing "out" and a seeing "in" where what he termed the psychological ego, the ego as [engaged?] part of the world, was swapped for a transcendental

[disengaged?]ego whose perception of "truth" (reality?) helped the psychological ego transcend its limited perception of the world.

- 16) Ibid, p. 55.
- 17) Ibid, p. 64.
- 18) Ibid, p. 63.
- 19) Ibid.
- 20) Polanyi, Michael, *Personal Knowledge*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983. p. 253.
- 21) Ibid, p. 257.
- 22) Ibid, p.258.
- 23) Ibid.
- 24) Polanyi, Michael, *Meaning*, (as above) p. 64.
- 25) Schleiermacher, Friedrich, *On Religion*, Cambridge University Press 1996. p.106.
- 26) Hunt, Harry, 'The Truth Value of Mystical Experience'. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 13. No.12, 2006.
- 27) d'Espagnat, Bernard, *On Physics and Philosophy*, Princeton University Press, 2006. p. 14.
- 28) Ibid.
- 29) Ibid, p. 16.
- 30) Ibid, p. 17.
- 31) Ibid, p. 394.
- 32) Ibid, pp. 17, 395. In this vein it's worth looking at Georg Cantor's mathematical investigation into the notion of "infinity", or the Absolute. The question Cantor raised is raised by the physicist Paul Davies thus: "If infinity can be grasped and manipulated using rational thought, does this open the way to an understanding of the ultimate explanation of things without a need for mysticism?" Davies thinks not. Such an attempt would run into Russell's paradox and into the Godelian limits to rational thought where an Absolute, "being a Unity and hence complete within itself, must include itself." Or, as Rudy Rucker has it in relation to Mindscapes, "If the Mindscape is One, then it is a member of itself, and thus can only be known through a flash of mystical vision." Why so? Because "No rational thought is a member of itself, so no rational thought could tie the Mindscape into a One." (The Mind of God, p. 230-231)
- 33) Barrow, John, *Pi in the Sky*, Oxford University Press, 1992. p. 294.
- 34) Ibid, p. 295.
- 35) Forman, Robert, 'What Does Mysticism Have to Teach us About Consciousness?', *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 1998.
- 36) Ibid.
- 37) Laski, Marghanita, *Ecstasy in Secular and Religious Experience*, Jeremy P. Tarcher, Inc., Los Angeles, 1961. p. 253.
- 38) Ibid.

