

Everthing, Ultimately, Is All There Is

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PDF compiled from a two-part essay originally written for my blog [Symmatica](#), where it also contains some nice pictures. If you prefer to read it there, click [here for part 1](#) and [here for part 2](#).

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1 Part 1: Why Seek a Secular Defense of ‘The Sacred’

*To her fair works did Nature link,
The human soul that through me ran*

— William Wordsworth,
Lines Written In Early Spring (1798)

1.1 A Prologue to the Mystery

Consider the following scenario that I experience regularly now, albeit only after many years of strange and diverse meditative practices, and reading ancient and contemporary texts on the philosophy of mind. Others with a spirit more vivid may stumble into such experiences without any deliberate groundwork. And there may be others who do not experience such moments regularly but who, on reflection, might recognize something in their past, perhaps an echo of a distant memory, that resembles, however crudely, what I so describe.

Consider: I rub a blade of grass between my fingers and feel its texture. My thumb slides slowly along the darker, coarser side, while my index finger slips down the smoother, lighter green. I hear the brown noise of the wind rising and falling, rustling leaves in its trail. Their sounds layer over the wind, adding to its grain and making it richer to my ear. To this music are choreographed glimmering columns of light that strike off the edges of the leaves, leaving behind ten thousand silver lines in the silhouette of this tree’s canopy.

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I inhale deeply and feel a cool, fresh breath rushing inside me, my diaphragm rising, a thin pressure along my face. Then a warm sustained exhale resonates on my upper palate, driven by a gentle falling of my chest. In this rhythm, the sounds of my surroundings find their subtle accompaniment. Through these breaths, on my skin, I feel, *really feel*, the warmth of sunlight. On every inch where the sun falls, as if my skin were photosynthesizing, as if sprinkled with some fine electric glitter, I feel life. Grass between my fingers, wind brushing, leaves rustling, breath in tempo and sunlight warm—I close my eyes. Behind the lids, from periphery to periphery, ever-evolving sheets of orange and black and yellow swirl in graceful motions, sailing on my breath. Hypnotized by this motion on my mind's eye, and in the serenity of fresh, cool breaths reaching my fingers and toes, and through the vitality of the buzzing static of sun on my skin, a fuzzy sensation grows in my heart. A seed of light, a feeble flame flickering, but growing steady. An amorphous feeling, with notes of joy and compassion, bubbling like the crescendo of a string orchestra swelling in chords.

Goosebumps, a rapid current pulsating through my face and arms and torso and legs. And then, a sudden quiet of expansiveness. The scene persists but my awareness of it disappears. There is no sun, no grass, no wind or leaves, no face or torso. Only a widening of my sense of bounds, an inarticulable expansion and a diluting of my 'self' into an unending vastness of nothing. Not a nothing that is the absence of the beauty of sun and clouds and trees and grass, but a nothing that is beyond beauty and on which, rather, beauty seems to distill. A stillness that is not the mere absence of the harmony and music of my breath in step with the winds; but a feeling of stillness atop which all harmony and music appears to subsist. In this moment, my self disentangles and thins into this limitless ocean of unperturbed tranquility, not through a calm of apathy or dispassion, but into an equanimous mind which is exalted with the immeasurable abundance in every moment of experience.

If the word *sacred* has any use in my vocabulary, it is to name precisely this mode of experience, this combination of feeling expansiveness, abundant awe and a deep harmony with the world.

After a few moments, maybe even a few minutes, of this expansive serenity, through a faint twitch of a muscle or a barely noticeable chill on my neck, suddenly a whole world and a whole self reappear. This world, with this river and this sunset, on this autumn of this year; and this self, with this name and this age, and these memories and these fears, these hopes and these disappointments, all return.

Earlier that morning, a year-long thesis due in two weeks had stressed me, the pile of undone dishes at the periphery of my right eye had annoyed me, a general heaviness weighed on my shoulders and a cold tension gripped my spine. But while I am where I was, and I am who I was, the lightness of having experienced this strange expansive serenity, this equanimity, lingers in an afterglow and fills me with a familiar peace. The birds, the clouds, the children playing in the distance, the old couple taking a walk, the small dog teetering away; my place in life, my idiosyncrasies adored by my friends, my values and discipline my parents take pride in, the curiosities and obsessions that make me who I am; and this flawed world that holds, though much pain and suffering, also great many pockets of joy and hope, enveloping my life in a fragrant, lively ether of the good and of love — all of this, though precisely as it was a morning ago, now somehow seems ever so brighter, more harmonious, more at rest, and more wonderful.

If you do not share my particular peculiar background in meditation, the feelings and sensations might appear loosely familiar to you but not the mechanism. Maybe you felt this way when you finally embraced your loved one after months apart, hugging tightly and feeling a seed of warmth grow unbounded into an explosive, colorful, swirling bliss between your hearts, followed by a deep sense of safety and comfort. Perhaps you felt this while dancing at a live concert of virtuosic musicians, or on summiting a terrific trail and taking the views in. Perhaps, it was an ordinary walk home but on a day when the weather was especially pleasant, or a raging storm with thunderous lightning setting the sky ablaze. The details do not matter, nor do the mechanisms that triggered the experience. What matters, for the purposes of this essay, is that you hold in your mind a thumbnail of such a moment — for it is *that* quality of experience that I aim to discuss.

How are we to understand this spiritual elation, these fleeting moments of surreal connectedness, which feel increasingly sparse in our modern lives? What sophistry of my cognition, what trick of my parasympathetic nervous system, could conjure this strange illusion of my self, or the lack thereof, being inexorably soldered, seamlessly stitched, with some larger, perennially harmonious, order of existence?

In what follows, I present my retrospective attempts to integrate such experiences into my broader ways of understanding the world, as someone who lives, professionally, in the technical hairs of physics and philosophy. In defense of my use of the word *sacred* for moments like these, I sketch a secular

account that refuses to deny the immediate reality of such moments by brushing them off as incoherent illusions, and instead treats them with a certain primacy.

1.2 Throwing the baby out of the bathwater

The decline of organized religion’s political authority, the erosion of dogma as an explanatory principle, and the emancipation of moral life from obsolete clerical enforcements rank, in my opinion, among the genuine achievements of human history. Few instruments have been so effectively weaponized in megalomaniacal pursuits of domination as religio-political institutions; from the child-sacrificing cults, through the colonizers legitimized by the Vatican, to the bombings, lynchings and incarcerations in contemporary global politics. The net merits of religion to society only exist, if at all, besides their utter atrocities, not in their absence. Few would wish to undo their slow obsolescence, and I certainly do not.

Yet modernity’s justified recoil from theological authority has not been surgically precise. In rejection of bad answers, we have ignored the legitimacy of important, if not good, questions. Alongside the collapse of dogma, we also abandoned regular access to communal practices and tools that reliably induced awe, calm and elation, either through collective music, ritualized movement, or contemplative stillness. These so-called psycho-technologies persist only in fragments; in concerts (kirtans, qawwalis, moshpits, techno raves) or curated “wellness” retreats (Ayurveda, yoga, zen, Shaolin).

But one thing has been pushed to the margins of a modern, scientifically trained mind (excluding a few academic enclaves): metaphysical inquiries i.e. considerations about how things ‘hang together’ in the ultimate sense, unbounded by our particular structures of knowledge. Are our sacred experiences, our most vibrant reminders of being alive, to be taken as momentary glitches that deviate from our more “real” mundane existence? Or, is the dilution of boundaries accompanying the quietened self a glimpse of a more fundamental mode of being, usually obscured by the mind’s relentless ordering of sense data to navigate the world? Or, do we seek some other organizing principle to relate the mysteries of our inner lives to those of the universe? Whatever one pursues, the contemporary status quo or some ancient esoteric doctrine, the act of making this choice is invariably a practice in metaphysical positioning. Discourse over such considerations once supplied our shared vocabulary for talking about sacred experiences, like the one I described by the river. When we exile metaphysics from respectable thought, we do not stop holding metaphysical opinions. However, we do make it exceedingly difficult to speak intelligibly, in public, about these experiences and, more importantly, to design communal practices for accessing them with greater ease.

Fundamental questions about what grounds or transcends representation have been increasingly dismissed as vestiges of a pre-scientific worldview, fashionably abandoned alongside angels. Schrödinger articulated this tension rather dramatically¹:

Rising to their feet after centuries of shameful servitude imposed by the Church, conscious of their sacred rights and their divine mission, the natural sciences turned against their ancient tormentress with blows of rage and hatred.

Schrödinger’s concern was neither a defense of religion nor a critique of science. It was a warning about the imbalance of scientific over-corrections. In his view, metaphysics does not form a part of the house of knowledge but, rather, its scaffolding without which (he presciently warns) further construction becomes difficult. I take the epistemic smugness of abandoning the sacred and the commodification of spiritual integration by consumer markets to be a genuine cultural pathology (in ways I would not indulge in describing but anticipate many of my readers experience as lived truths). For this reason, I believe Schrödinger’s warning demands attention.

1.3 Something, something, map, territory

In an [earlier essay on beauty](#), I corrected myself for having described an otherworldly sunset as looking *like a painting*. I said, instead, ‘it is the painting that aspires, only asymptotically, toward the richness embodied by the phenomenon of the setting sun’.

This is a familiar mistake. However refined our descriptions, images, models, or simulations become, they remain representations that are but partial, perspectival and mediated. They may

¹Schrödinger, E., [My View of the World](#) (1964)

capture some structure with extraordinary fidelity, but they never coincide with the thing they hope to describe. Even my perception of the sunset is itself a representation: a stereoscopic reconstruction from flat images on the retina, filtered through a narrow band of trichromatic vision, and stabilized by a brain that learned, months after birth, how to see the world upright at all. In this sense, my experience of the sunset may well be closer in kind to a painting of it than to the *Ding an sich* (Immanuel Kant’s German phrase of ‘thing as it is’).

Crucially, this non-identity is not a defect destined to be eliminated by better instruments, more immersive simulations, or futuristic neural implants. Representations are, categorically, not the thing that they are representing. Our maps can improve indefinitely without ever becoming *The Territory*. Whatever ultimately grounds reality—whatever it is that our theories and artworks orbit—remains prior to, and irreducible by, the representations we construct.

One may excise all utterances of metaphysics from their systems of thought, either by accepting a world constituted of physical fields or, with greater sophistication, by adopting principled silence over such questions. Yet no such move achieves meaningful closure. It is this persistent mismatch between description and what is described, between phenomena and our experience of the phenomena, that renders metaphysical questions ineliminable.

2 Part 2: What coheres as my secular account of ‘The Sacred’

Language serves not only to express thought but to make possible thoughts which could not exist without it.

— Bertrand Russell,
Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits (1948)

The Dao that can be named is not the Eternal Dao

— Lǎozǐ,
Dào Dé Jīng (4th century BCE)

Let us begin where we left off in Part-1. To motivate a secular account of the sacred, I described the experience of it as a combination of feeling expansiveness, abundant awe and a deep harmony with the world. I argued that such moments of dissolved self-hood and heightened connectedness (whether on a riverbank in autumn, in the arms of a loved one, in a concert hall or under a storm-lit sky) have a perceptibly distinct existence, cultural importance and phenomenological value, and that they remain ill-served by a vocabulary that oscillates between the dogma of institutional religion and the epistemic arrogance of scientific dismissal. Now, I ask a sharper question: how do *I* accommodate such experiences within *my* broader understanding of the world? In this second, slightly more technical essay, I sketch one candidate, drawing on a small constellation of well-established traditions, and ask how well it coheres with what I take contemporary sciences to suggest.

2.1 A Numinous Ground

An intellectual export of 20th century German theology, which I consider a useful bit of terminology, is Rudolf Otto’s idea of the *numinous*. Otto coined the word to talk of an awe-inspiring, spiritually arresting aspect of religious experiences that is outside the sphere of ethical considerations, thus isolating an irreducible attribute that does not attempt to smuggle moral perfection or anthropomorphised authority and agency. He describes experiencing the numinous as a ‘*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*’ (Latin for ‘a mystery that is terrifying and fascinating’, what one could today refer to as ‘the sublime’). Notably, however, the numinous has no beard, no thunderbolt, no clipboard of sins or mailbox for prayers. Numinous does not point to The Watchmaker (of a clockwork universe), nor The Legislator (of divine justice), nor any super-agent sitting in the skies. This separation subtracts what I consider fluff from most models of Gods (i.e. the commandments, cosmogenies or super-agential psychology). Sometimes, in more permissive intellectual company and other times in artistic contexts, especially while writing charged prose, I reach for words like *sacred*, *divine*, and *holy* but what I usually want to is to *isolate the experience from the doctrine* as is done by the term *numinous* (with, of course, no intention of importing Otto’s Lutheran theology wholesale either).

As I argued earlier, if representations (which include, amongst other things, explanations as well as experiences) are finite and perspectival, then they cannot exhaust what they represent; there is an epistemic remainder *prima facie* inaccessible to our knowledge-making endeavors. In an admitted abuse of notation, I will treat this remainder as pointing toward an ontological prior (‘ontology’ being the study of what exists and ‘prior’ suggesting a priority over other existents)². Since antiquity, people have speculated about a transcendent mode of being (not *a* being, but a structure-less placeholder for that which embeds and facilitates all of existence) and have often associated the numinous affects of this hypothesized ground, in part, with a sense of the sacred. Spinoza’s god was famously not outside the world, but identical with its *absolute* totality, whose attributes and modes generate the vibrancy we perceive. In more ancient texts of Advaita Vedānta, *Brahman*³ is evoked (at the risk of sounding pompous) as the ultimate unchanging reality, that is uncreated, infinite, transcendent, the cause and the goal of all existence. These are not identical ideas, and each carries its own flavor, but they resonate with a shared archetype, not of a character in the story we tell about our world, but its irreducible backdrop *and* the drama within.

Here lies a familiar objection. One might ask: what is gained in constructing expansive definitions that denote the remainder of our representations, if nothing follows from them? The transcendent, as the name suggests, is beyond the reach of our knowledge-making endeavors. If the ‘divine’ cannot be dissected or brought under explanatory control, let alone operationalized, then why speak of it at all? There is a force to this worry.

Decisive clarity on metaphysical questions may well be unattainable but, fortunately, it has never been the point either. Many of my views (and, I suspect, many of yours) on the character of scientific theories, the architecture of culture and the future of governance are implicitly shaped by such commitments, regardless of whether they are acknowledged or not. I therefore take this opportunity to make my personal, perhaps embarrassingly esoteric, web of metaphysical beliefs explicit and visible. It is through these threads, open to relentless future revision, that the rest of my life’s work—my science and art, and aspirations and affections—ultimately hang together.

2.2 One Thing about Monism

2.2.1 What I mean by monism

I would like to call myself a ‘measured monist’⁴. Sometimes I forget about it, often I talk as if I am not. But in my heart, I feel it is the most appealing position to hold on the question of what *ultimately* exists. The answer that monism provides is that, ultimately, the foundation of reality is a single unified whole, rather than a multiplicity of independent constituents. ‘Everything’, in this sense, is *all* there is and the many things (in plural) are abstractions carved out of the whole (rather than the ‘whole’ being a mere aggregation of its parts).

2.2.2 The Problem of Plurality

A small voice within me, at every invocation of monism, raises an eyebrow and asks:

Whence cometh the apparent pluralities, the undeniable varieties of form, as colossal as the difference between primordial torrents tessellating the poles of Jupiter and the last breaths of a washed up whale, and the variations as elusive as the palettes of Tawny Ports aged a decade apart.

To settle a complete account that does justice to this diversity is, of course, a daunting task and, possibly, one that is bound to remain incomplete. But the general defense that monism offers rests in the claim that the boundaries by which we carve the world into distinct things are projections of our

²In this short (non-academic) essay, I do not fill in the reasoning steps required to move from the epistemic remainder to the ontic remainder (but [here](#) I flesh out the reverse relationship in slightly more detail). The move that is trickier to elaborate is the ‘priority’ claim (i.e. the world as it is, beyond our experiences, is the more fundamental form of existence). I address this *partly* in the later sections and expect the charitable reader to suspend disbelief momentarily. For modern expositions of metaphysical priority, I would recommend ‘A Guide to Ground’ by K. Fine and ‘The Priority of the Whole’ by J. Schaffer.

³*Brahman*, the metaphysical ground, is not to be confused with *Brahmin*, the caste.

⁴If I was to use contemporary philosophy terminology, my beliefs would best align (though not fully) with ‘Priority Monism’. See the [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry by J. Schaffer](#) if you’re interested in the differences between the various strands of monism.

modes of representation, a scaffolding for intelligibility, rather than features that are fundamental to reality itself.

2.2.3 Resisting Deductive Resolutions

It may be tempting to demand a water-tight formal argument for the fundamentality of unity and an account of how multiplicity arises. But such demands may already misunderstand the nature of the problem. Later I describe some support for monism but, before that, here is Schrödinger articulating why the demand for proof is a tricky thing to navigate in this context.

I do not think this difficulty can be logically resolved, by consistent thought, within our intellects. But it is quite easy to express the solution in words, thus: the plurality we perceive is only an appearance; it is not real. Vedantic philosophy, in which this is a fundamental dogma, has sought to clarify it by a number of analogies, one of the most attractive being the many-faceted crystal which, while showing hundreds of little pictures of what is in reality a single existent object, does not really multiply that object. We intellectuals of today are not accustomed to admit a pictorial analogy as a philosophical insight; we insist on a logical deduction. But, as against this, it may perhaps be possible for logical thinking to disclose at least this much: that to grasp the basis of phenomena through logical thought may in all probability be impossible, since logical thought is itself a part of phenomena, and wholly involved in them and we may ask ourselves whether, in that case, we are obliged to deny ourselves the use of an allegoric picture of the situation, merely on the grounds that its fitness cannot be strictly proved.

In talking of things so arcane, one is bound to run up into esoteric paradoxes. Philosophical traditions that took the limits of conceptual articulation seriously tried to design formal systems of logic capable of such conversations. In parallel, Buddhists and Vedāntics alike prescribed protocols for first-person (phenomenological) experiments to reliably re-discover inarticulable insights about the nature of self. Regardless of individual sensibilities of these traditions, whether through pictorial analogies of Vedānta, many-valued/para-consistent logic of Catuskoṭi or Saptabhangivada, paradoxical poetry of Zen Koans or intense episodes of Vipassanā meditation, a shared goal⁵ has been to prevent the inadequacies of expression from being mistaken as truths about the world.

I do not wish to poorly recapitulate centuries, even millennia, of such developments. What I can say, however, is that such positions often originate from deeply personal background commitments and aesthetic inclinations that underwrite the pursuit-worthiness of ideas. The best we can do is to tame their coherence. In this sense, monism can be motivated as a sober metaphysical position with echoes across physics, philosophy and mysticism alike.

2.2.4 Coherence Across the Sciences

One can debate the interpretations of our mathematical theories *ad infinitum*. So, it is not entirely catastrophic to claim that the impressively reductive foundations of modern physics, in its most daring moments, *permit* a monistic reading and display a persistent drive towards a unification of otherwise apparently distinct entities. This methodological unification drive does not entail monism, but allows us to at least check for harmony with our current knowledge. Quantum fields already strain our naive intuitions about boundaries that we inherit from the particle based picture of the world. Philosophers of physics even [argue that the spacetime-matter dichotomy is deflated within general relativity](#) and might entirely vanish in certain quantum gravity paradigms. Theoretical physicists may rightly hesitate and point to the formal differences in fermions, bosons, spacetime metric, etc., each corresponding to different kinds of mathematical objects representing distinct structures within the theory. Yet even so, they would agree that a central ambition of the contemporary scientific zeitgeist (the same one at the heart of unified field theories, supersymmetry, quantum gravity, and others) is to acquire a maximally-reductive maximally-parsimonious theory of everything, ideally an

⁵This epistemic inclination is not a coincidence because knowledge traditions in the East developed without the influence of ‘Aristotelian *horror contradictionis*’, at least ‘until the influence of orthodox Nyāya philosophers and the [later] Buddhist epistemologists like Dignāga and Dharmakīrti’ (quotation from the excellent book by Deguchi et al. named ‘What Can’t be Said’). It is only recently that [para-consistent formal systems](#) have become a promising research interest for logicians to pursue in western academia.

amalgamation of all our experiences into a single unified paradigm. Oh how we wish to glance at the sole seed of the infinite variety in our universe and transcribe it into a unitary maxim to print on coffee-mugs and other merchandise.

In a parallel spirit, scientific attempts to understand consciousness largely proceed without positing a separate mental substance. While the explanatory gap surrounding subjective experience remains real, consciousness need not be treated as an outlier from nature. One way of articulating this continuity is through *neutral monism*: the view that both physical and experiential descriptions arise from a more basic, neutral substrate. I emphasize again that none of this establishes a metaphysical conclusion (in fact, physics-inspired ontology is a philosophical program with well-known pitfalls), but it does suggest that a measured form of monism is not an alien imposition, rooted in indulgent speculation and incompatible with our best scientific theories. Rather, it is a disciplined way of reading what they arguably strain toward.

The claim is not that the world contains no plurality. On the contrary, the differentiated objects, structures, and domains described by our theories are indispensable to intelligibility of the world as it presents itself to us. Reality does not (maybe, cannot) present itself to us whole and it must be fragmented and articulated in order to be known at all. The claim is rather that such plurality is *derivative*: a consequence of how a seamless ontological ground becomes accessible under our finite attempts of representation.

2.3 Here comes the point

Let's take stock of where this winding discussion has brought us. Religion has been historically weaponized by various institutions as a political instrument for domination. But a modern recoil away from its harms mustn't take the form of an over-correction, throwing away that which is good (perhaps, necessary) for the holistic human well-being. Besides things like meditation, art and community, something else worth preserving is an engagement with metaphysical questions.

Our experiences and, more so, our understanding is an incomplete representation of reality as it is. What grounds such representations is, often in the history of philosophical thought, associated with some ultimate and transcendent truth, a sacred or divine form of being. Decisive clarity over the remainder of our representations may be unattainable but positions can be evaluated on the basis of supra-empirical merits like coherence. A metaphysical position that coheres well with physics and philosophy is monism; one formulation of which posits that what ultimately grounds reality is a single unified whole, and the fragmentation into table and chairs, poets and parrots and so on is an abstraction carved out by our finite perspectives.

Our ways of carving up experience serve our particular human purposes. But they are representations, not fundamental features inherent in the structure of the world. And the lines between the natural and the seemingly supernatural, between the sacred and the mundane, are ones that are drawn in sand, destined to reconfigure continually by the ever-evolving winds of perspective.

Whatever we call the ontological prior — The Territory, the numinous or a capital-T Truth — it is not, and cannot, be something our base existence is separated from. If it is the ground of being, then we are not perched upon it but, in our fundamental essence, we are woven into it. Ultimately, there is no “we” distinct from “it.” There is no not-we. There is only *the thing itself*.

And here our models, our art, our physics, our faith, our metaphors, the culmination of the Human Project of making sense of the world around and the world within, softly converge, asymptotically shedding superficial disagreements along the way and nodding in mild acknowledgement of the internal coherence, and the *a priori* appeal of an idea so natural that several traditions develop some version of it⁶ — *Brahman is Atman*, the Self is not separate from the Sacred⁷.

And this, not institutions, not dogma, not promises of salvation or calls to arms, but a reminder to situate ourselves inseparably from the rest of reality, to tune our modes of awareness and to calibrate our decision-making accordingly, I submit is the baby worth keeping.

⁶While I make this claim on the basis of the few illustrations mentioned in the main body of the text, this convergence onto similar themes in logico-phenomenological inquiries is often discussed under the umbrella term of ‘The Perennial Philosophy’ (a term popularized by Aldous Huxley in his book by the same name)

⁷Another way Vedāntic philosophers evoke this is by pointing at things like ants and moon and saying ‘*Tat Tvam Asi*’, which literally translates to ‘That thou art’ (or, more simply, ‘That is you’)