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## WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE THE UNIVERSE?

### ABSTRACT

Cosmopsychism attributes subjectivity to the universe as a whole. What might that subjectivity be like? There are differing opinions in the philosophical literature, ranging from "simply a mess" to highly advanced. Mystical experience, if it genuinely brings unity or identity with the universe, could provide some insight. The evidence points to conscious mind of extraordinary quality and perhaps a universe with many cosmic subjects, an intersubjectivity that can be interpreted through the lens of a modified Leibnizian monadology.

### KEYWORDS

cosmopsychism,  
panpsychism, mystical  
experience, cosmic  
consciousness,  
Plotinus, Leibniz,  
monadology

*It was all so natural and simple. It was divine. The Universe was conscious. I was not separate from it at any point. . . . More, I was conscious with it.*

Algernon Blackwood, *Julius LeVallon*

## Introduction

The idea that the universe is conscious has attracted attention in recent years under the name "cosmopsychism," an extension of the panpsychist view that consciousness is distributed widely through nature, perhaps even intrinsic to small-scale building blocks such as biological cells, molecules, and atoms. Cosmopsychism elevates panpsychism to the largest of scales, attributing consciousness to the universe as a whole: the universe is a conscious being, an experiencing subject. One question that can be asked of cosmopsychism concerns the phenomenology of the universe's experience. While it will be significantly different from human experience, it cannot be completely dissimilar, for the cosmopsychist supposes that the universe's experience grounds human experience. If the two were radically different, there would be a discontinuity problem comparable to the mind–body problem, although not between mind and matter but between two types of experience, cosmic and human. There

is, then, reason to think that the universe's experience will possess, at the very least, some basic qualitative properties, such as colour, although not necessarily quite as they are found in sense-mediated human experience.

In view of the uncertainties, it is not surprising that cosmopsychists have had differing opinions on the character of the universe's experience, some regarding it as very basic, even proto-conscious, while others attribute it characteristics of conscious mind, perceptual, cognitive, affective, and volitional, and suppose that it is self-conscious and perhaps far superior to human mentality. The universe so understood can be an object of religious and spiritual interest. For one thing, the conscious universe can be construed as *divine*, worthy of reverence and even worship, and identical to God (*pantheism*) or at least contained in some sense within God (*panentheism*).<sup>1</sup> Clearly, the character of the universe's experience has a bearing on whether the universe will be considered worthy of devotion, although even a basic consciousness could draw reverence as the matrix in which conscious beings emerge and evolve. Second—and of particular significance for the present study—there are *spiritual* experiences in which the universe is intuited as conscious and alive.<sup>2</sup> These experiences become somewhat comprehensible if, as cosmopsychism asserts, the universe is indeed conscious, and we are able to intuit its consciousness, perhaps by virtue of being grounded in it. The most intense and revelatory of these spiritual experiences fall into the *mystical* category: they give mystics a strong impression that the universe's own consciousness is fundamentally theirs.

Given the diversity of views on the character of the universe's experience, how can the matter be investigated? In “Transforming the World into Experience” (Marshall 2001), I suggested three ways to explore the character of cosmic experience. One is to extrapolate tentatively from everyday human experience, which as noted will share some characteristics with it. Another is to look into the “behaviour” of the universe, that is, into the possibility that physics reveals something relevant. This could be the case if mathematical descriptions of the natural world afforded by physics, notably those of relativistic and quantum physics, reflect the structural organization and transformation of experience at large. A third approach, the one to be considered here, is to draw on the afore-mentioned mystical type of spiritual experience, which ostensibly reveals the deeper nature of things, including the natural world and even, it would seem, the universe in its totality. The question “What is it like to be the universe?”, a philosophical way of expressing cosmic subjectivity, takes on a whole new meaning, becoming an empirical question that can be directed at mystics (Marshall 2022: 9). If claims of mystical identity with the universe are well-founded, then mystics will know what it is like to be the universe.

The introduction of mystical experience into the discussion calls for some terminological nuance. Let's refer to experience of the universe enjoyed by

1 See for instance Brüntrup, Göcke, and Jaskolla (2020).

2 On the categories of religious, spiritual, numinous, and mystical experience, see Hood (2005).

mystics as *cosmic mystical experience* and the universe's own experience as *cosmopsychic experience*. Since the late nineteenth century, the term *cosmic consciousness* has very often been used in the former sense, to refer to cosmic mystical experience, but it is best avoided in the present context because contemporary philosophers who discuss cosmopsychism have also used it in the second sense, to refer to the universe's own consciousness (and even to an undifferentiated consciousness).<sup>3</sup> This is understandable, but it blurs a real distinction. Cosmic mystical experience and cosmopsychic experience will, however, intersect if the former partakes of the latter, if a mystical shift of consciousness makes cosmopsychic experience available to the mystic. There has, however, been much debate over whether mystical experience reflects anything other than the mystic's neurophysiology or religious conditioning, and so the reality-disclosing capabilities of the experiences cannot be taken for granted, and caution is required.

After introducing cosmopsychism and some of the ways in which philosophers have depicted cosmopsychic experience, I take a look at cosmic mystical experience and what it might imply about the character of cosmopsychic experience. Finally, I draw attention to a perplexing but potentially important feature that cosmic mystical experience sometimes exhibits: a mirror-like multiplication of cosmic subjectivity.

### The cosmic view from within

Cosmopsychism is the idea that the universe as a whole is conscious. "There is a cosmic subject" is how Justin Gaudry (2008) put it when he introduced the term. Subjectivity is commonly expressed in the philosophical literature by invoking the "what it is like to be" locution. X, whether a human being, Martian, or bat, is conscious if there is something it is like to be X (Farrell 1950; Sprigge 1971; Nagel 1974).<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the universe is conscious if there is something it is like to be the universe.

Only a bat really knows what it is like for a bat to be a bat, and the same will be true of the universe if it is indeed conscious (for the sake of discussion, I henceforth assume that it is). In the case of bat experience, the felt reality is inaccessible to non-bats, but there are general experiential characteristics that can reasonably be inferred from bat neuroanatomy and behaviours (Nagel 1974: 439). For example, bats have a visual sensory system not too different from the human equivalent, and it is therefore reasonable to conjecture that bats enjoy

3 "Cosmic consciousness" is also used in the Transcendental Meditation movement, where it refers to the fifth of seven states of consciousness, a dualistic state in which awareness of the pure self is experienced alongside waking, dreaming, or deep sleep consciousness (Marshall 2005: 171). The term "universal consciousness" is also problematic, having been used in several ways and not necessarily applied to the universe.

4 Farrell and Nagel bring up both Martians and bats, and Sprigge neither. Not everyone likes the "what it is like to be" construction: for criticism, see for instance Hacker (2002).

visual experiences, if not quite like those of humans. It is not, however, the visual experience of bats that has caught the attention of philosophers, but the animal's use of echolocation, which seems unfamiliar and therefore unrelatable to human experience. Whether it is unrelatable can be disputed, for humans, notably the visually impaired, have developed echolocatory skills (Allen-Hermanson 2018). Whatever the case, it can be granted that some features of non-human experience, such as the bat's visual experience, are relatable in general terms to human experience.

When it comes to the universe, the character of its experience seems at first glance impenetrable, so different is the universe structurally and behaviourally from a human being. Analogies have been made between the cosmic web of galaxies and neuronal networks in the brain (Vazza and Felletti 2020), but these concern the distribution of matter, with no serious suggestion that the functioning of biological neural networks is paralleled at the cosmic scale. Despite the obscurities surrounding the phenomenology of cosmopsychic experience, philosophers have expressed opinions, attributing low-grade experience to the universe at one extreme and high-grade conscious mind at the other. In Western philosophy, a classic example of the latter is Plato's concept of the world soul (Gk. *psyche tou pantos*, L. *anima mundi*), further developed by Platonists and Stoics, and continuing to have representation well into the modern era (Vassányi 2011; Helmig 2020; Wilberding 2021). In a "likely story" told in the *Timaeus*, Plato portrays the universe as a living being, a creature fashioned by an intelligent craftsman or demiurge—by a divine intellect. The created, transforming universe, made by the demiurge in the image of an eternal, ideal model, consists of a cosmic body suffused and animated by an intelligent, thinking soul—by the world soul.

The arrangement has a dualist feel, although not of the kind that emerges in the seventeenth century, when mind and matter came to be viewed as radically dissimilar substances. Plato does not of course employ "consciousness" terminology, which again emerges in the early modern period, so it would be anachronistic to say that he attributes consciousness to the universe. Rather his discussion centres on *psyche* or soul, understood as a thinking agent responsible for motion. Plato infers the advanced intelligence of the world soul in Pythagorean fashion from the harmonious motions of the heavens—a deduction from the "behavioural" characteristics of the cosmic organism. Because the human soul is made in a way similar to the world soul, it too is rational, although subject to disturbances owing to embodiment. In the hands of the Stoics, the Platonic ontology is flattened, the transcendent demiurge and eternal model being replaced by a fully immanent divine maker or "god" that is both the intelligent world soul active in the universe and the universe itself—hence a kind of pantheism (Baltzly 2003). According to Zeno of Citium, only if the world is a living intelligence can it give birth to creatures that are living and intelligent, as Cicero reports in *De Natura Deorum* (II. viii).

Contemporary cosmopsychism also has a top-down approach, but it is not committed to following in Plato's or Zeno's footsteps by attributing high-grade,

divine mentality to the universe. Under its current name, cosmopsychism arose out of renewed interest in panpsychism as a possible solution to the hard problem of consciousness, the challenge of bringing brain states construed as purely physical into relation with the experiences they support. One form of panpsychism, *constitutive micropsychism*, attributes a basic level of experience to the microconstituents of the world and supposes that their combination in the brain yields the higher-grade experiences that human beings and similar organisms enjoy. There have been long-standing doubts about bottom-up combination (Seager 1995; Chalmers 2016),<sup>5</sup> which has motivated the top-down approach offered by cosmopsychism. Subjectivity is attributed to the cosmic whole, with limited, individuated subjectivities derived from it. This so-called *constitutive cosmopsychism* (Goff 2017) or *priority cosmopsychism* (Nagasawa and Wager 2017) faces a well-known challenge, which is to explain how the derivation takes place, dubbed the differentiation problem by Gaudry, and also known as the derivation, individuation, decombination, decomposition, and limitation problem.

The problem has its counterparts in spiritual philosophies that dwell on the mysterious concealment of divine consciousness that ultimately leads to circumscribed subjects and their partial experiences. These systems often set out an elaborate sequence of stages, the first few of which typically occur out of time as ordinarily understood. Moreover, the universe itself is commonly taken to be derivative (as it is in Plato's story), manifested by a deeper reality, perhaps by way of a higher form of the cosmos (such as Plato's ideal model or the later Platonic intelligible universe). Limited subjectivities such as ours are ultimately grounded in those deeper ontological strata. Sophisticated and influential examples include the Neoplatonic philosophy of Plotinus in the West and nondual Kashmir Shaivism in the Hindu sphere (Marshall 2019: 249–265; Shani 2023). Although such schemes devote much attention to metaphysics and cosmogony, their purpose is soteriological and their practical application contemplative, offering a road map to spiritual aspirants who seek to overcome limitation by reversing the process of manifestation. The cosmogonic way down becomes a mystical way up. Contemporary cosmopsychisms tend to be “Stoic” rather than “Platonic,” in the sense that they do not typically have a role for consciousness transcendent to the universe, although some thinkers who engage with cosmopsychism do bring up the matter in their own different ways. These include Miri Albahari (e.g., 2020) in her perennial idealism, Max

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5 It is well known that William James cast doubt on the compounding of consciousness as early as 1890, but the point had already been made by Leibniz in 1676 when, rejecting the idea of the world soul, he raised an “aggregation” problem: “There can be no soul of the world, because a continuum cannot be composed of minds, as it can be composed of spaces ... a soul cannot be an entity by aggregation” (Leibniz, quoted in Vassányi 2011: 15). As Vassányi observes, Leibniz's criticism is not applicable to Plato's world soul, which is not compounded from individual souls. The contention that soul cannot be an aggregate becomes central to Leibniz's later concept of the mind-like monads, which are uncompounded wholes (see below).

Velmans (2021) in his reflexive monism, Itay Shani (2023) in his generative monism, and myself (e.g., 2019) in my neo-Leibnizian idealism, all of whom have a more than passing interest in mystical philosophy and experience.

### Cosmopsychic experience: low or high grade?

If the universe's experience is primitive, what might it involve? Perhaps vague perceptions, feelings, inclinations, with no reflective awareness, no self-consciousness—in Leibnizian terms, primitive perception and appetite.<sup>6</sup> If the universe has advanced consciousness, then we might expect it to have distinct perception, reflective awareness, intellection, high-level feeling, conscious volition, imagination, sense of self, and even personality. It is not possible to speculate with any assurance, for the universe is very different from human beings and to attribute some of these characteristics may be fanciful and anthropomorphic. At the very least, though, the contents of cosmopsychic experience can be expected to exhibit some of the familiar “qualitative” and “quantitative” properties, although not in exactly the same way as in sense-based experience.<sup>7</sup> Without those properties, cosmopsychic experience would be unable to ground our everyday perceptions. It can therefore be conjectured that cosmopsychic perception involves extended bodies with colour properties, as well as sound and perhaps other familiar properties, and unfamiliar ones too, although it is difficult to imagine what form they would take. It is easy enough to envisage a cosmic field of experience filled with luminous, extended contents, since colour and shape go together naturally in our familiar experiences (Marshall 2021: 443–444). By contrast, sound—and even more so taste, smell, and touch—are more difficult to situate on the cosmic stage. One possibility is that all the properties are “fused” into one in cosmopsychic experience, colour, sound, taste, and so forth not differentiated into distinct sense modalities there (see below).

Cosmopsychic experience presumably does have a perceptual character, an intentionality, an experience *of* something—of some or all the contents of the universe. Would cosmopsychic perception be organized from a point of view, as it is for sense perception, or can there be perspective-free perception? We strain to imagine what perspective-free perception would be like, and it is tempting to suppose that perception of objects is always organized from a

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6 Leibniz's appetite is the active component of experience, driving transformation of perception from state to state. In primitive form, it is unconscious but in more developed form it is evident as conscious appetite, desire, will, and emotion that urges action. Feeling can be given pre-eminence in perception, as Whitehead does in his theory of *prehension*, by which an entity, whether primitive or advanced, feels another and is “affected” by it. For feeling as basic to all experience, see Shani (2022).

7 Qualitative properties include colour, sound, touch, and taste, while quantitative ones are those readily open to numerical measurement, notably length and time characteristics, the subject matter of the quantitative sciences. On the distinction, see Marshall (2021: 409–411).

particular subjective stance (Marshall 2001: 70). The universe would then have its own point of view—a series of points of view if it transforms from state to state. What, indeed, are the temporal characteristics of cosmopsychic experience—moment-to-moment transience or all times contained within? Does the experience evolve, developing more sophisticated states?

It may be thought that cosmopsychic perception must be primitive, if it is assumed that distinct perception depends on the differentiating, organizing, and augmenting activities of sensory systems. There is no compelling evidence that the universe has such systems of its own—no cosmic receptors, organs, brain. Would the lack of cosmic sensory processes mean that cosmopsychic perception is rudimentary? Not necessarily so, for if cosmic perception is not mediated by sense organs, it will be *direct* and therefore possibly very clear and all-encompassing. According to one line of thought, sensory systems have limited data collection capacity and resolution, and therefore work to limit and obscure perception, selecting only relevant data, a limitation that confers survival and utilitarian advantages at the expense of detail and comprehensiveness. If cosmopsychic perceptions are direct, they would be very different from our sense-mediated ones. For instance, there would be none of the opaque colour patches that we have in our visual perceptions, which follow from the reliance of visual sense organs on light collected largely from the surfaces of objects, not from their interiors (Marshall 2001: 71–72). Instead of opaque surfaces, cosmopsychic visual experience would involve transparent films and volumes.

The evaluation of cosmopsychic experience as primitive or advanced will depend in part on the type of metaphysics that cosmopsychists use to flesh out their positions. Constitutive cosmopsychism requires elaboration because it does not provide a complete solution to the hard problem of consciousness if it is simply the claim that the universe, by virtue of being conscious, grounds the subjectivities of limited beings. To give an account of *how* the universe is conscious, cosmopsychists can call upon various types of mind–body metaphysics, such as idealist, dual-aspect, and neutral monisms. The choice of metaphysics has a bearing on the quality of consciousness that will be attributed to the universe. Take, for instance, idealist monism, which views all things, including material structures, as fundamentally mind. What exists is perception, feeling, thought, imagination, will, and so on, as types of experience. For cosmopsychism in idealist mode, the universe not only *has* experience but *is* experience.

An example is Timothy Sprigge’s panpsychic idealism, which attributes high-grade consciousness to the universe. Sprigge’s universe is a “single absolute all-embracing experience or consciousness,” containing all streams of experience but not itself subject to the “restless urges” that drive those streams onwards temporally, for it is an eternal whole and as such has contentment, even joy (2006: 486, 522). Cosmopsychic experience has, according to Sprigge, a temporally all-inclusive character that distinguishes it from the transient feel of ordinary human experience. This eternalistic character is sometimes reported by mystics (the “Eternal Now”) and chimes with the interpretation of special relativity that locates events in a spacetime whole (Marshall 2006,

2015a). Although Sprigge's Absolute is not God as commonly understood, it merits the label "divine" and qualifies as a proper object of personal religion.

Dual-aspect monism, another approach to the mind–body problem, is also able to ascribe high-grade consciousness to the universe as a whole. The dual-aspect theorist agrees with the cosmopsychist idealist that the universe has experience but does not go so far as to claim that the universe is experience. Rather the universe, like all systems, has two sides to it, two concomitant, mutually irreducible mental and physical aspects, an approach exemplified by the thought of Gustav Fechner and George Romanes in the nineteenth century, and sometimes traced to Baruch Spinoza in the seventeenth century. Fechner and Romanes were more than willing to view the cosmic mental aspect as very high-grade, as is the contemporary proponent of dual-aspect monism Max Velmans (2021).

Idealist and dual-aspect monisms are not tied to an understanding of cosmopsychic experience as high-grade. Sprigge took some inspiration from the idealisms of F. H. Bradley and Josiah Royce, and also from Spinoza, and his estimation of the absolute experience is accordingly positive. By contrast, if Arthur Schopenhauer's idealism, with its nonrational will as the thing-in-itself, is inspirational, then the quality of cosmopsychic consciousness will be assessed as low-grade, lacking self-consciousness and instinctive in nature (Kastrup 2021). The low estimation of cosmopsychic experience can be taken further by proponents of neutral monism, a mind–body metaphysics that regards the stuff of the world as neither mind nor matter but the basis of both. In classic neutral monisms, notably those of Ernst Mach, William James, and Bertrand Russell, this neutral stuff is not really neutral, being primitive experience, although with some qualification in the case of Russell, who came to refer to "events," a more neutral term than experience or sensation (Marshall 2021). If cosmopsychism absorbs this form of neutral monism, then cosmopsychic experience as a whole will be portrayed as rudimentary, as a field of primitive experience. Moreover, if neutral monism maintains that experience does not require a subject to experience it (e.g., Lockwood 1989; Coleman 2014), then there will be no cosmic subject and nothing that it is like to be the universe.

Philip Goff (2017: 243) seems to take on board the classic neutral monist view that experience is essentially rudimentary. He stated categorically that the universe is not "a highly evolved conscious creature" and that its consciousness is plausibly "simply a mess." Goff supposed that advanced mind is the outcome of long-term evolution driven by natural selection, an evolutionary pressure to which the universe is not subject. It follows that cosmopsychic experience remains in a primitive state. Goff (2023) has since modified his stance somewhat, entertaining the idea that the universe is purposeful, fine-tuning itself at the beginning to bring about the emergence of life and rational beings, and having a sense of the possible consequences of the fine-tuning decisions it could make.

The above examples illustrate a range of views on the character and quality of cosmopsychic experience. What light can mystical experience shed on the matter?

## Mystical encounters with the universe

In the interdisciplinary field of consciousness studies, mystical experience has had a presence, with particular attention paid to so-called pure consciousness, often said to lack any content. Mystical experience and other “rogue phenomena” can be drawn upon to help address some classic metaphysical issues, including the mind–body problem and the nature of time (e.g., Marshall 2006, 2021, 2022; Kelly 2007, 2015), an idea given further impetus by the recent explosion of interest in psychedelics and ensuing debates about the status of the mystical experiences they trigger and the role the experiences play in therapeutic outcomes (Ritchie 2021; Hauskeller and Sjöstedt-Hughes 2022). Mystical experience typically brings a profound sense of contact with reality and so offers a potential resource for metaphysical enquiry. Indeed, mystical experiences may have provided stimulus in the early days of philosophy, for instance in the thought of Parmenides and Plato, and the authors of the Upanishads, although in the modern era it has been underutilized and largely spurned. Sprigge (2006: 540–541) wondered why the absolute idealists had paid little or no attention to mystical experience, given that their philosophies resonate well with it, a resonance that Anthony Perovich (2021) has brought out in the case of Bradley’s absolute idealism and Glenn Magee (2021) in connection with Hegel’s thought.

These two authors specifically bring extrovertive mystical experience into their discussions, a type of experience that has the natural world and its contents as its mystical focus.<sup>8</sup> It is this type of experience that is most immediately relevant to the cosmopsychist’s claim that the universe is conscious, which is not to say that other types of mystical experience are irrelevant. If it is supposed that the universe and its consciousness are derivative of a more fundamental level of reality, then mystical experience that takes that deeper level of reality as its focus will be relevant too.

At its most expansive, extrovertive mystical experience is cosmic mystical experience. In lieu of a full-scale survey of these experiences, which is not possible here, I shall give just three examples. These are not the most extensive and descriptively rich available, but they will serve to give some sense of the experiences in question. The following demonstrates the dramatic changes to self-identity that the experiences can bring. There is, however, little qualitative detail, although luminosity is mentioned. The report was, it seems, set down in 1890 by a young man prone to “cataleptic” trances:

I felt a kind of soothing slumber stealing over me. I became aware that I was floating in a vast ocean of light and joy. I was here, there, and everywhere. I was everybody and everybody was I. I knew I was I, and yet I knew that I was much more than myself. Indeed, it seemed to me that there was no division. That all

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8 For what counts as the “natural world” understood broadly, see Marshall (2005: 28–29; 2019: 23–24).

the universe was in me and I in it, and yet nothing was lost or swallowed up. Everything was alive with a joy that would never diminish. (Nomad 1913: 115)<sup>9</sup>

The ordinary sense of self seems to be retained (“I knew I was I”) but is supplemented with a cosmic sense of self (“all the universe was in me”) and a recognition of mutual identity with others (“I was everybody and everybody was I”). Joy is emphasized, in connection with the ocean of light and the aliveness of everything.

Transformation of self-experience is also described in the following account by David Spangler, who provides a little more qualitative detail. The experience took place in 1952 when Spangler was only seven years old. It unfolded through several stages, and at one point Spangler felt “embraced by a great presence” in which “all things seemed to exist in profound oneness, filled with an indescribable love and serenity and with an irresistible power as well” (1984: 63). Once again joy and light feature. This stage of the experience proceeded as follows:

As if a curtain were drawn aside, I had a visual impression of the universe, a great wheel of stars and galaxies, suffused with the golden glow of billions of suns, floating in a sea of spirit. It was as if I were seeing as this presence saw, and for one instant we were as one. In that instant, it was as if I were one with everything that existed, every atom, every stone, every world, every star, seeing creation not from some great distance but from the inside out as if it were my very body and being. Even more powerful than this perception was the awareness of the flow of creativity throughout everything I saw and the joyous embrace of life and unfoldment in response; the rhythm was that of a ballroom. (Spangler 1984: 63)

It seems that Spangler first experienced the universe as somewhat separate, as “a great presence” that embraced him, a presence filled with love, serenity, and power, but he then became fully one with it and seemed to perceive as the universe perceives. There is a suggestion of cosmopsychism here, of the universe as an experiencing being.

A strikingly similar description, even down to the cosmic dance, is provided by Jean Houston.<sup>10</sup> The experience brought no unusual lights or sounds, but she now apprehended everything as a unity:

My mind dropped all its shutters. I was no longer just the little local “I,” Jean Houston, age six, sitting on a windowsill in Brooklyn in the 1940s. I had awakened to a consciousness that spanned centuries and was on intimate terms with the universe. Everything mattered. Nothing was alien or irrelevant or distant. The farthest star was right next door and the deepest mystery was clearly seen. It seemed to me as if I knew everything. It seemed to me as if I was everything.

<sup>9</sup> The case is given in *Cosmic Consciousness* by Ali Nomad, a pseudonym of the flamboyant hypnotist, mind-reader, and New Thought exponent Alexander J. McIvor-Tyndall, who apparently was himself prone to cataleptic attacks.

<sup>10</sup> The full accounts given by Spangler (1984) and Houston (1982) can also be found in May (1993).

Everything—the fig tree, the pups in the closet, the planets [...] and all the music that ever was—were in a state of resonance and of the most immense and ecstatic kinship. I was in a universe of friendship and fellow feeling, a companionable universe filled with interwoven Presence and the Dance of Life. (Houston 1982: 186–187)

Again sheer vitality comes across, and there is a tremendous reach of awareness and a sense of identity with the universe. Interestingly, music is mentioned too, as part of what Houston calls a single Unity, a “glorious symphonic resonance in which every part of the universe was a part and illuminated every other part” (Houston 1982: 186). This last statement hints at an interconnection of parts in the cosmic whole. There is no explicit suggestion that the universe is conscious, but if Houston’s new “I” is both the universe and conscious of the universe, it would follow that the universe is conscious of itself. It is a subject that has itself as its object. Houston’s account, like the other two, portrays a dynamism in the universe. Although not illustrated by the first two cases, this vitality can be a feature of mystical experiences that have a temporally inclusive character, dynamic and eternal qualities apparently not excluding each other (Marshall 2005: 72–73). In Houston’s case, temporal inclusiveness is suggested by her statement that the consciousness spanned centuries.

Cosmic mystical experiences have much in common with the less expansive extrovertive mystical experiences. They draw on a shared pool of characteristics, the most common of which can be listed as follows: sense of contact with reality, various kinds of unity, changes to the sense of self, heightened perception, all-inclusive knowledge, profound understanding and meaning, altered-time experience, special luminosities, all-embracing love, beauty, peace, bliss, and joy (Marshall 2005; 2019). Several of these characteristics, such as enhanced perception, knowing, understanding, meaning, and love, if taken as indicative of cosmopsychic experience, suggest that it is highly advanced perceptually, cognitively, and in feeling. Sprigge and thinkers like him seem to be on the right track. But is there cosmopsychic “contentment,” as Sprigge suggests, the universe satisfied with itself in its eternal completeness? For the mystic, cosmic mystical experience can certainly bring peace, joy, bliss, relief, freedom from fear, and a sense of coming home, but is this enough to suggest the universe’s own contentment? Plotinus thought not, reserving true contentment for unity with the ultimate ground, the One, the source of cosmic mind and the goal to which the whole creation aspires.

What do extrovertive/cosmic mystical experiences suggest about the qualitative properties of cosmopsychic experience? In many cases, there is a visual component to the experiences, a visual perception in which seer and seen are not separate. It is plausible that cosmopsychic experience will have this character, including a transparency or translucency appropriate to the unobstructed reach of the vision (Marshall 2006: 71–72). Auditory and other non-visual properties are not so clearly evident, sound being much less frequently reported than sight, and the other properties barely at all, at least if the accounts I have studied

are representative (Marshall 2005: 71–72). If cosmopsychic experience has an eternalistic “all times together” character, sound experience there will be very different from the temporally successive character that it ordinarily has for us.

One possibility is that all the various qualitative properties we distinguish in sensory experience are unitary in cosmopsychic experience. When Plotinus tried to give a sense of the intelligible world, he described “one quality” that contains all the qualitative properties associated with the senses:

They all flow, in a way, from a single spring [...] as if there was one quality which held and kept intact all the qualities in itself, of sweetness along with fragrance, and was at once the quality of wine and the character of all tastes, the sights of colours, and all the awareness of touch, and all that hearings hear, all tunes and every rhythm. (Plotinus, *Ennead* VI. 7. 12; Armstrong 1988: 127)

Mystical experience does sometimes have a “synaesthetic” feel, especially when induced by psychedelics, bringing a unification of qualitative properties, notably light and sound (Marshall 2005: 79–80). The English socialist Edward Carpenter raised this when he discussed cosmic consciousness: “all the senses unite into one sense” and “sight and touch and hearing are all fused in identity” (Bucke [1901] 1989: 198, 206).<sup>11</sup>

When cosmic mystical experience received attention from the late nineteenth century onwards under the name of cosmic consciousness, it pointed to a deeply spiritual universe. Systematic if somewhat eccentric investigation was undertaken by the Canadian psychiatrist Richard Maurice Bucke in conversation with Carpenter, both of whom had personal familiarity with the experience and knew its exalted character (Marshall 2005; Ganeri 2022). For Bucke, however, cosmic consciousness was *not* the universe’s consciousness but a psychological faculty recently emergent in humankind, a faculty of intuition that has evolved naturally from earlier stages of mental development. When the faculty suddenly crystallizes in an individual, it brings luminosity and “a consciousness of the cosmos, that is, of the life and order of the universe” ([1901] 1989: 2). The universe is found to be ordered in such a way that “all things work together for the good of each and all,” with love the foundational principle ([1901] 1989: 61). The universe is intuited to be entirely immaterial, spiritual, and alive, and also in some sense divine, for “the universe is God” and “God is the universe” ([1901] 1989: 14). Bucke does not explicitly state that the universe is conscious, but arguably his characterization of it, drawn from the intellectual illumination brought by cosmic consciousness, implies that it is.

Carpenter’s understanding of cosmic consciousness is rather different, although similarly located in an evolutionary framework. Drawing on Romanticism, idealist philosophy, and Hindu mysticism, Carpenter was attuned, unlike Bucke, to the significance of the sharp subject–object distinction that marks

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<sup>11</sup> Carpenter’s observations could reflect his own experience or draw on the spiritualization of synaesthesia in the late nineteenth century and even on Shaiva teachings about the reunification of the senses in a higher space (*akasha*) consciousness (Marshall 2005: 80).

ordinary human consciousness but which is overcome in cosmic consciousness. Carpenter's cosmic consciousness is a nondual mystical experience in which unity with other selves and the world is recognized. More than that, it is a metaphysical reality, a nondual consciousness in which the universe has its existence, for things exist only by being known (Carpenter's idealism). Does this mean that the universe is itself conscious? Perhaps so, since the universe is a unity of knowing self and known cosmic object. But the universe is also the manifestation of a deeper dimension of self that differentiates into the many selves in pursuit of self-knowledge (Carpenter 1904: 72–74; Marshall 2005: 128–129).

The situating of cosmic consciousness in evolutionary frameworks by Bucke and Carpenter points to another consideration. Although mystical experience gives the impression that consciousness at large is highly advanced, there is a possibility that some of its advanced characteristics are the result of the age-long evolution of the individual subjects it supports. It is only through the trials and joys of limited experience and the consequent maturation of limited beings that the whole gains some of its advanced characteristics, such as meaning, love, and compassion. While cosmic mind might be a vast, all-knowing intellect, able to support within itself limited forms of consciousness, its spiritual depth could be a developmental achievement (Marshall 2019: 97).

A word of caution amid all the speculation. There are difficulties in pursuing a mystically informed metaphysical line of enquiry, some practical, some theoretical. An example of the former is the selection of mystical accounts, for the researcher can introduce bias by selecting those that support preconceptions. I have quoted from just three accounts here, and these should not be taken as representative of all cosmic mystical experiences. In fact, a distinction can be made between experiences that clearly incorporate culturally sourced astronomical and cosmological imagery and symbolism, and those that present details well outside the range of familiarity and which are therefore less likely to be culturally mediated. This does not mean that imagery-mediated experience, drawing on the imagination, has no reality-disclosing value, only that it is indirect and therefore not to be taken at face value (Marshall 2019: 143). Another difficulty is the challenge that mystics may have in assimilating and accurately reporting their extraordinary experiences. On the theoretical side, the reality-disclosing credentials of mystical experience have been vigorously challenged by those who regard the experiences as simply pathological, biological, psychological, or cultural phenomena. I shall not comment on these views here, as I have addressed them elsewhere (Marshall 2005, 2022).

It could be objected that a human being cannot possibly be one with the universe and so access its cosmopsychic experience. "I am the whole universe," declare alike the modern extrovertive mystic and the ancient Upanishadic seer. Scholar of mysticism R. C. Zaehner had a low estimation of the natural world and thought it both inappropriate and *illogical* to seek unity with it. There is nothing to be gained from achieving oneness with a universe that, in Zaehner's estimation, is "mindless, devoid of consciousness, and amoral" (1972: 60). Even

more damning, it is irrational to think that a human being can be identical with it (1958: 76). Reason shows that “such an identification cannot be literally true on *any* plane of consciousness” (1958: 76). Zaehner, however, misrepresented the situation, for it is not a matter of the limited human organism, with its limited mind and body, being literally identical with the universe (Marshall 2005: 214). The “I” that was everything was not “Jean Houston, age six,” but an expansive consciousness that Houston more profoundly was.

## The intersubjective universe

Cosmic mystical experience can have a solipsistic feel, marked by a prominent cosmic “I,” but it also brings a strong sense of other beings, even of community. Houston writes, “I was in a universe of friendship and fellow feeling, a companionable universe.” Those other beings may be recognized as not different from oneself: as the first account above puts it, “I was everybody and everybody was I,” although the precise meaning of this statement is unclear. One way in which I can be you, and you can be me, is if we are both subjects who have the universe as our common object. I am the universe, you are the universe, and therefore you and I are one, although also different in some way that makes us distinguishable (Carpenter 1904: 68). As the cosmic whole, we share a core identity. It is a kind of holism: the whole gives us a common core of identity. As an adult, Houston (1982) found attractive the metaphor of the hologram, which had become popular in the late 1970s and early 80s, the hologram being expressive of a holism in which the whole is present in each of its parts (Wilber 1982).

If we are indeed cosmic subjects with experiences of the universe, there is an unexpected consequence—an unending multiplication of experiences. If my experience is truly inclusive, it contains your equally inclusive experience. Your experience will contain mine too, including my experience of yours, and so on, ad infinitum. Some excellent descriptions of this infinitely elaborated cosmic intersubjectivity can be found in the writings of the seventeenth-century Anglican churchman, poet, and mystic Thomas Traherne. For example, in the *Centuries* (II. 72), Traherne writes,

One soul which is the object of mine, can see all souls, and all the secret chambers, and endless perfections in every soul: yea, and all souls with all their objects in every soul: Yet mine can accompany all these in one soul: and without deficiency exceed that soul and accompany all these in every other soul. (Traherne 1908: 129–130)

Traherne employs mirror analogies to convey the multiplication of spatially and temporally all-inclusive souls within one another (Marshall 2019: 198–214), multiple mirrors being the analogy of choice before the hologram and fractal came on the scene. The universe is like a hall of mirrors in which subjects and their objects are infinitely multiplied.

Plotinus describes something similar, although in connection with the intelligible universe, not the familiar sensible world. However, a case can be made for understanding the two worlds as just one world apprehended in two different ways, directly by the intellect and indirectly via the senses (see Marshall 2005: 44–45). There all things are seen in each thing, for the parts are wholes:

They see themselves in other things; for all things there are transparent, and there is nothing dark or opaque; everything and all things are clear to the inmost part to everything; for light is transparent to light. Each there has everything in itself and sees all things in every other, so that all are everywhere and each and every one is all and the glory is unbounded; for each of them is great, because even the small is great. (Plotinus, *Ennead* V. 8. 4; Armstrong 1984: 249)

Comparable descriptions of interpenetration are found in the Indian Buddhist *Avatamsaka Sutra*, which portrays the universe as the Buddha and advanced bodhisattvas experience it. Metaphors such as Indra’s Net and the Tower of Vairocana’s Adornments convey the interpenetrative character of the experience (Marshall 2006, 2019). Chinese Huayan Buddhism, drawing on the Sutra, employed interreflecting mirror demonstrations to give a sense of it.

All this interpenetration of experience is rather mysterious, and surely it makes no sense to suppose that the cosmic experience has more than one cosmic subject. Surely one experience has only one subject? Perhaps Leibniz’s monadology can shed some light on the matter, for it posits not one cosmic experience but a multiplicity of them, each with its own subject. According to an idealist reading of the metaphysics, there are numerous transforming perceptual agents (“monads”), each of which expresses the entire universe from its own perspective, from its own sequence of points of view. The universe is therefore multiply instantiated and inherently perspectival, existing concretely only as the all-inclusive perceptions of each monad. Each monad represents all the other monads within its perceptions, and the clarity of those perceptions differs considerably between monads, depending on the kind of body a monad represents itself as having, whether that of a micro-organism, plant, non-human animal, human being, or superhuman being (Leibniz includes extraterrestrials in this category). It follows that “what it is like to be the universe” depends on the individual monad. For very many, the cosmic experience will be highly confused, but for those with more advanced bodies, there will be relatively distinct sense perception and conscious mind, and for still more advanced monads there will be very clear intuitions of the universe. Thus, “What is it like to be the universe?” has no single answer in Leibniz’s monadology. It depends on the sophistication of the individual monad.

Monads have cosmic subjectivity, confused though it is in most cases, so it seems fair to regard the monadology as a kind of cosmopsychism (and panpsychism too, since monads represent all the other monads within themselves). It is untroubled by the combination problem of constitutive micropsychism, since monadic perceptions are wholes, not compounded from smaller perceptions. However, if it is a cosmopsychism, it is an atypical one, for there are many

instantiations of the universe and its cosmic subject. Monadology is a numerical pluralism, not a monism, and the question of derivation is pushed up the ontological ladder to the emanative source of the plurality, which for Leibniz is God. The challenge is to explain how the multiplicity of monads—mutually accommodated, inter-representational cosmic trains of perception—are generated. Leibniz has little to say on the matter, but we can look for hints in mystical philosophies that go into details, such as that of Plotinus (Marshall 2019).

Leibniz's version of monadology does not quite fit with the mystical evidence. As human beings, our monadic perceptions have some distinctness, but in Leibniz's system there is no way that they could achieve the expansive clarity and advanced mentality of cosmic mystical experience. I have therefore sought to revise certain aspects of the monadology (as many have before, for different reasons, including A. N. Whitehead) by supposing that all monads have perfectly distinct perceptions of the universe, like the intellections of Plotinian intellects, while confused perceptions pertain to partial representations within the monad, such as those afforded by the senses (Marshall 2015b, 2019). Cosmic mystical experience is made possible by those perfectly clear perceptions. Mystical experience of the divine source of the monads is possible too, if the source constitutes the ultimate core of each individual consciousness. Precisely how the source reality is to be understood is open to discussion, for there are alternatives to Leibniz's classical theism.

What is it like to be the universe? If cosmic mystical experience is indicative, cosmopsychic experience will be highly noetic, unitive/nondual, perceptually clear, luminous, blissful, joyful, temporally as well as spatially inclusive, and perhaps organized intersubjectively, to name a few noteworthy characteristics. Love and compassion will feature too, innately as a foundational principle, as Bucke put it, or fostered by the social development of limited subjectivities as they trace their personal and evolutionary paths together in the cosmic whole.

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Pol Maršal

### Kako je to biti svemir?

#### Apstrakt:

Kosmopsihizam pripisuje subjektivitet svemiru kao celini. Kakav bi taj subjektivitet mogao biti? U filozofskoj literaturi postoje različita mišljenja, u rasponu od „jednostavne zbrke“ do veoma naprednog mišljenja. Mističko iskustvo, ukoliko zaista donosi jedinstvo ili identitet sa svemirom, moglo bi pružiti određeni uvid. Evidencija ukazuje na svesni um posebnog kvaliteta i moguće, svemir sa mnogim kosmičkim subjektima, intersubjektivnost koja se može tumačiti kroz prizmu modifikovane lajbnicovske monadologije.

Ključne reči: kosmopsihizam, panpsihizam, mističko iskustvo, kosmička svest, Plotin, Lajbnic, monadologija

