

Are There Pure Conscious Events?

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1. General Introduction

There has been much discussion about the nature and even existence of so-called “pure conscious events” (PCEs). PCEs are often described as mental events which are non-conceptual and lacking all experiential content (Forman 1990). For a variety of reasons, a number of authors have questioned both the accuracy of such a characterization and even the very existence of PCEs (Katz 1978, Bagger 1999). In this chapter, I will take a somewhat different, but also critical, approach to the nature and possibility of PCEs. I will focus on several overlapping views found in recent analytic philosophy of mind and examine PCEs in light of them. After introducing terminology and some preliminary matters (in this and the next section), I then examine in section three whether or not the so-called “higher-order thought (HOT) theory of consciousness” rules out the possibility of PCEs, and conversely, whether or not PCEs show that the HOT theory cannot apply to *all* conscious states. The HOT theory, which I have defended in numerous previous publications (e.g. Gennaro 1996, 2005), says that what makes a mental state conscious is that it is accompanied by a higher-order thought to the effect that “I am in mental state M now.” A related theme will be to assess PCEs in light of the recent debate between so-called “conceptualists” and those who believe that there are “non-conceptual contents of experience.” Conceptualism, to which I am very sympathetic, is basically the view that all conscious experience is structured by concepts

possessed by the subject. Opponents argue that one can experience objects or properties without having concepts of those objects or properties. I argue in section four that PCEs are indeed conceptual and so no threat to conceptualism. For example, standard criticisms of conceptualism do not apply to PCEs. In section five, I briefly discuss the so-called “transparency of experience” and show how it can shed light on the nature of PCEs. Finally, in section six, I examine the possibility that PCEs are not conscious at all. In the end, my overall conclusion is that we should hold that PCEs are indeed compatible with both HOT theory and conceptualism or seriously question the idea that PCEs are conscious at all.

1.1. Some Terminological Matters

The term ‘consciousness’ is notoriously ambiguous. One key distinction is between *state* and *creature* consciousness (Rosenthal 1993). We sometimes speak of an individual mental state, such as a pain or perception, as conscious. On the other hand, we also often speak of organisms or creatures as conscious, such as when we say that dogs are conscious. Creature consciousness is also simply meant to refer to the fact that an organism is awake, as opposed to sleeping or in a coma. Most contemporary theories of consciousness are aimed at explaining state consciousness; that is, explaining what makes a mental state a conscious mental state.

Perhaps the most fundamental and commonly used notion of ‘conscious’ among philosophers is captured by Thomas Nagel’s famous “what it is like” sense (Nagel 1974). When I am in a conscious mental state, there is “something it is like” for me to be in that state from the first-person point of view. When I am, for example, smelling a rose or

having a conscious visual experience, there is something it “seems” or “feels” like from my perspective. There is also something it is like to be a conscious creature whereas there is nothing it is like to be a table or tree. This is the sense of “conscious state” that will be used throughout this chapter. There are also a cluster of other expressions and terms related to Nagel’s sense; for example, philosophers sometimes refer to conscious states as “*phenomenal* states” having qualitative properties called “qualia,” which are perhaps best understood as the felt properties or qualities of conscious states.

2. Mysticism and Pure Conscious Events (PCEs)

In order to clarify and restrict the discussion, it will suffice for our purposes to use Robert Forman’s definition of “mysticism” (adopted from Ninian Smart) which says that “mysticism describes a set of experiences or more precisely, conscious events, which are not described in terms of sensory experience or mental images” (Forman 1999, pp. 5-6; see Gellman 2005 for other senses and categories of mystical experiences). We should of course not confuse mystical experience with “religious experience.” The latter refers to any experience having significance appropriate to a religious context or open to a more apparent religious interpretation. This could include some mystical experiences, but also religious visions, non-mystical Zen experiences, and various religious feelings, such as religious awe.

A PCE is typically construed as but one kind of mystical consciousness which allegedly consists of an “emptying out by a subject of all experiential content and phenomenological qualities, including concepts, thoughts, sense perception, and sensuous images” (Gellman 2005). The subject then allegedly remains with a “pure” wakeful

consciousness. Various philosophers, sometimes called “perennialists,” have attempted to identify common mystical experiences across cultures and traditions (Stace 1960, 1961). Whether or not one agrees with perennialism, Stace makes the very influential distinction between *extrovertive* and *introvertive* mysticism. The former

...looks outward through the senses to apprehend the One or the Oneness of all in or through the multiplicity of the world... The Oneness is experienced as a sacred objective reality, in a feeling of ‘bliss’ and ‘joy’... *introvertive* experience [is one] that ‘looks inward into the mind,’ to achieve ‘pure consciousness,’ that is, an experience phenomenologically not of anything.... Some have called this a ‘Pure Conscious Event’ or ‘PCE’ (Gellman 2005; but also see Wainwright 1981, pp. 33-41, for a somewhat critical discussion of the introvertive-extrovertive distinction and for a more elaborate taxonomy.).

Thus, we will primarily be concerned with mystical states where the subject is looking into the mind. Defenders of PCEs often make references to pure consciousness in the mysticism literature. For example, the Buddhist philosopher Paramārtha (499-569) said that all of our cognitions were “conditioned” by our concepts except for the non-sensory “unconditioned” Buddhist experience of emptiness. Another example would be the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart who describes a “forgetting” that abandons concepts and sense experience to sink into a mystical “oblivion.”

A few other preliminaries: First, I will not focus on those, such as Katz, whose criticisms of PCEs are mainly directed at showing how one’s language, religion or culture can shape one’s mystical experiences, including PCEs (Katz 1978, 1983). Katz, unlike myself, is concerned with events which first need accurate descriptions and thus are essentially tied to language use. Second, it is obviously impossible to discuss all possible first-person reports from both Eastern and Western traditions. I will try to pick representative examples from major mystical traditions, but no doubt many more

questions will arise. Third, there is always the problem of interpreting later subjective reports of PCEs for both defenders and critics. For one thing, how seriously can we take such first-person reports, especially since they occur well after the fact? Either way there are potential pitfalls: If one is a believer in PCEs, then there is a tendency to use accounts which support that position, and then downplay conflicting reports, for example, by arguing that the concepts referred to in later first-person reports are imposed upon the PCE after the fact and not actually present during the PCE. On the other hand, if one is a critic of PCEs, there is the tendency to take these reports at face value whereas conflicting reports are discounted as exaggerations for various reasons. In some ways, of course, all of this is rather puzzling since many (following James 1958) describe such experiences as “ineffable.” For my own part, I do have some personal experience in meditation but certainly not to the extent of advanced practitioners. I will not rely on my own experiences at all for the purposes of this essay. I will also assume for now that Nagel’s sense of ‘conscious state’ does indeed apply to PCEs, as seems to be the standard view.

3. The HOT Theory and PCEs

Representationalism is the thesis that phenomenal properties are identical to certain representational properties, but there are many kinds of representationalism (Chalmers 2004, Lycan 2005). One question that should be answered by any theory of consciousness is: What makes a mental state a conscious mental state? There is a long tradition, going back at least to John Locke, which has attempted to understand consciousness in terms of some kind of higher-order awareness. This view has been

revived by a number of philosophers over the past few decades (Armstrong 1981, Rosenthal 1986, 1997, 2005, Gennaro 1996, 2005, Lycan 1996). In general, the idea is that what makes a mental state conscious is that it is the object of some kind of higher-order representation (HOR). A mental state M becomes conscious when there is a HOR of M. A HOR is a “meta-psychological” state, i.e. a mental state directed at another mental state. So, for example, my desire to write a good paper becomes conscious when I am (non-inferentially) “aware” of the desire. Intuitively, it seems that conscious states, as opposed to unconscious ones, are mental states that one is “aware of” in some sense. Indeed, this seems to be true by definition and I take it to be a conceptual truth (see Gennaro 2005, especially pp. 13-17, for more on my view here). Conscious mental states arise when two *unconscious* mental states are related in a certain specific way; namely, that one of them (the HOR) is directed at the other (M). Thus, HOR theory is a reductionistic theory in mentalistic terms.

Following on the above theme, Lycan (2001) motivates HOR theory by relying heavily on the premise that “A conscious state is a mental state whose subject is aware of being in it” (p. 3), which he takes to be true by definition. Nonetheless, I take it that a conceptual or necessary truth might also be empirical in the sense that it can sometimes also be supported by empirical or scientific evidence. We might also *claim* to know that some proposition is true *a priori* but then come across empirical evidence that *falsifies* it. Indeed, this seems to happen often in philosophy of mind when facts about abnormal psychological phenomena call into question what seem to be “obvious” conceptual truths, such as when the existence of Anton’s syndrome (blindness denial) forces us to doubt the view that we cannot be mistaken about our ability to see. Another case would be

falsifying what Descartes surely took to be conceptually true; namely, a kind of “self-intimation” thesis which denies the very possibility of unconscious mental states and says that if one has a mental state, then one knows that one is in it. In such cases, of course, we later conclude that these propositions were not known in the first place. It is in this spirit, then, that I will examine whether or not PCEs falsify HOR theory. I will attempt to show how these empirically identifiable conscious events do not force us to give up HOR theory.

Now any theory which attempts to explain consciousness in terms of higher-order states is known as a “higher-order representational (HOR) theory of consciousness.” I have used the more neutral term ‘representation’ thus far because there are different kinds of higher-order theory with the most common division between higher-order *thought* (HOT) theories and higher-order *perception* (HOP) theories. HOT theorists, such as David Rosenthal, think it is better to understand the HOR as a thought of some kind. HOTs are treated as *cognitive* states involving some kind of conceptual component. HOP theorists urge that the HOR is a *perceptual* or *experiential* state of some kind (Lycan 1996) which does not require the kind of conceptual content invoked by HOT theorists.

I shall focus on HOT theory because I am more partial to it and it is the version of HO theory which is most at odds with PCEs. Given our understanding of PCEs in section 2, it certainly appears that having a PCE is inconsistent with the HOT theory, which says that having a higher-order thought (and its constituent concepts) is essential to any conscious state. Now one might hold that HOT theory only applies to conscious *experiences* (which are admittedly conceptual) as opposed to conscious *events*, but it is not clear to me that such a distinction can really be made or is very useful here. After all,

PCEs are still presumably conscious states *of some kind*, which are therefore mental events. In any case, I don't wish to let the HOT theorist off the hook so easily by defining our way out of the problem. On the other hand, I also do not wish to define "conscious events" so narrowly as to preclude the application of concepts in an *ad hoc* way. (For a related point, see Bernhardt 1990, pp. 232-4. Also see Bagger 1999, chapter 4, for a critical discussion of the way that Forman uses the event-experience distinction.)

It is important to note upfront that a common initial objection to HOR theories is that they are circular and lead to an infinite regress. It might seem that the HOT theory results in circularity by defining consciousness in terms of HOTs. It also might seem that an infinite regress results because a conscious mental state must be accompanied by a HOT, which, in turn, must be accompanied by another HOT *ad infinitum*. However, the standard reply is that when a conscious mental state is a first-order world-directed state the higher-order thought (HOT) is *not* itself conscious; otherwise, circularity and an infinite regress would follow. When the HOT is itself conscious, there is a yet higher-order (or third-order) thought directed at the second-order state. In this case, we have *introspection* which involves a conscious HOT directed at an inner mental state. When one introspects, one's attention is directed back into one's mind. For example, what makes my desire to write a good essay a conscious *first-order* desire is that there is a (nonconscious) HOT directed at the desire. In this case, my conscious focus is directed at the entry and my computer screen, so I am not consciously aware of having the HOT from the first-person point of view. When I introspect that desire, however, I then have a *conscious* HOT (accompanied by a yet higher, third-order, HOT) directed at the desire

itself. (See Gennaro 2004a for a much more detailed introduction to higher-order theories including several additional objections and lines of reply.)

In any case, the general problem might be phrased as a valid *modus tollens* argument as follows:

(1) If the HOT theory is true, then there are no entirely non-conceptual conscious mental states.

(2) PCEs are entirely non-conceptual conscious mental states.

Therefore, (3) The HOT theory is false.

I wish to challenge premise 2; that is, I will argue, at minimum, that what *seem* to be PCEs, really do have conceptual content or, similarly, that what are typically *called* PCEs really do have conceptual content.¹ Recall that conscious states, on the HOT theory, requires at least the presence of a HOT “I am in mental state M now.” Thus, there are at least three key concepts involved: ‘I,’ ‘mental state M,’ and ‘now.’ Let us examine these in turn in light of PCEs.

3.1. The ‘I’ concept

Much is made about the way that some mystics sometimes refer to there being “no self” or “no I” especially while undergoing various kinds of mystical experiences and PCEs. This would seem to be a problem for HOT theory’s ability to account for PCEs. However, from my examination of the literature, these kinds of cases are not really PCEs after all but instead *extrovertive* mystical experiences. More specifically, much of the literature is concerned with one’s “union with God or nature” or “Oneness” in a way that

dissolves one's sense of self as some *thing* clearly distinct from the outer world. This is seen for example in eighteenth century Hasidism and the notion of *ayin* or "nothingness" (Matt 1990, pp. 139ff.). Matt (1997) also argues that even for Meister Eckhart "emptying out" is having one's mind on no object other than God, rather than an absolute emptiness of content (see also e.g. Bishop 1995, pp. 70-87). These seem really to be cases of *extrovertive* mysticism designed to get the practitioner not to think consciously about oneself, often for the purpose of achieving humility, compassion, and selflessness (in the moral sense). If I am right about this, then the mere fact that one is not *consciously* thinking about oneself or *consciously* employing an I-concept is not a problem at all for HOT theory. Recall that when one has an outer-directed conscious state (as in the case of an extrovertive experience), the HOT is *not* itself conscious at all. Thus, these kinds of cases are no more problematic for HOT theory than instances of intense concentration on outer objects. We might indeed say that the "I" or our "sense of self" is lost, but this just means that I am not consciously thinking about myself or my current mental state. As we have seen, HOT theory can accommodate this fact by explaining how the HOT is not itself conscious during outer-directed consciousness.

Moreover, when the Buddhist 'not-self' (*anattā* or *anātman*) doctrine is discussed in any great detail, it is typically done in a far more metaphysical and historical context, such as in critically examining the view that there really are enduring selves, perhaps analogous to Hume's view on persons (e.g. Collins 1982, Griffiths 1986). But, of course, that is an entirely separate issue which does not rule out having I-thoughts or applying the "I" concept to one's own everyday experiences in general. It may be that the word "I" doesn't really *refer* to what many people believe it refers to (e.g. an enduring substance

of some kind) given a sophisticated metaphysical view about the nature of persons. But that is not to say that we don't often think about ourselves or our mental states in a less rigorous sense and use such a concept from moment to moment. Indeed, one finds such linguistic expressions and concepts often in Buddhist writings (such as *ahamkāra* and *asmīti*).

So then a real problematic case would be one where there is a claim to have a PCE, and thus a truly *introvertive* mystical experience, but where there is no conscious I or self present. But it is very unclear that there are such cases. Again, many seem really to be extrovertive, invoking union with God or nature. In other instances, we do indeed find reference to an "awareness of self" and the conscious employment of the concept "I." Even Forman's own accounts of PCE reports are littered with self-reference and uses of the word "I," including the report of his own PCE (Forman 1999, 11-27). More theoretically, it seems to me that anyone having a truly introvertive experience must be consciously employing the I-concept. For one thing, the practitioner is clearly taking the mental state to be *her own* as opposed to someone else's. For another thing, it is difficult to understand how practitioners can later remember and describe these events without having employed conscious I-thoughts during the alleged PCE, that is, without having experienced the event as one's own (see also 3.3 below).

Finally, this may be one area where neurophysiological evidence can be very helpful. The fact that relatively higher-order areas of the brain like the prefrontal cortex, often associated with introspection and voluntary action, are very active during PCEs suggests that the subject is having conscious first-person thoughts. One current theory

proposes that the prefrontal area of the brain is the locus of special brain activity during mystical episodes (d'Aquili and Newberg 1999).

3.2. *The mental state (M) concept*

In normal cases, the HOT refers to a particular mental state or at least a type of mental state, e.g. “I am in pain now” or “I am having such-and-such a visual experience.” If we take many descriptions of PCEs at face value, it might seem that there is no mental concept at all employed during such events. However, I think that such a characterization is exaggerated and there is a kind (to be sure, a special kind) of mental concept employed in such instances. Even if we accept the notion that PCEs are devoid of content, it seems to me that we should take this to mean devoid of the “typical content.” Several concepts regarding one’s mental state remain, however, and are deployed in having PCEs. For example, a subject having a PCE is said to experience ‘nothing’ or sometimes ‘emptiness’ (*śūnyatā*). But it seems to me that ‘emptiness’ or ‘absence’ is a concept being applied to the conscious state in question. It is, if nothing else, a *comparative* concept which is employed in contrast to “something” or some content. Indeed, there seems to be a distinct phenomenology associated with the application of such a concept perhaps analogous to experiencing the “absence” of something or someone in one’s visual field. To be sure, these are very unusual or, maybe better, “limiting” cases of mental concepts, but they are mental concepts nonetheless. On the HOT theory, it is precisely because of the applications of these concepts that PCEs have the phenomenology they do. The HOT theorist can clearly grant that PCEs and their concepts are unusual; after all, that is the whole point of the inherent interest in such

states of mind. It also seems to reflect what is meant by ‘pure.’ But it doesn’t follow that *no* mental concepts are applied or that the HOT theory is really inconsistent with PCEs. It is of course notoriously difficult to give an adequate account of concept possession and concept application (see Margolis and Laurence 1999 for a sample of the literature), but surely it is widely acknowledged that concepts, at minimum, serve to distinguish one object or property from another as well as aiding in the recognition of objects. These capacities are clearly still at work when one is having a PCE.

We might say, then, that a PCE is a case where one has a conscious thought (= introspection) directed at an empty mental state; that is, a mental state that itself is directed at or representing nothing. It is not enough to say that having a PCE involves awareness *of* a mental state; there must be awareness of a mental state *as a mental state*. But this is precisely what is claimed to occur in PCEs; an experience of something mental with the understanding that there is something mental present (though devoid of content). Some reports of “emptying out” may refer only to an emptying of ordinary experiential content, making room for an extraordinary content. This also accords well with some conceptions of *ayin* (nothingness) in Jewish mysticism, which is saturated with divine reality (Matt 1997).

So the idea is that with enough effort and practice, one can train the mind to turn within itself and empty itself of all ordinary content until one experiences “nothing.” Indeed, this seems to be the whole idea behind many meditation practices.

3.3. *The concept ‘now’*

Finally, it seems to me that there still must be a temporal component involved, particularly the concept ‘now,’ which is implied in a HOT. First, despite Forman’s rejection of the relevance to PCEs of Kant’s theory of time (Forman 1999, pp. 57-63), I still think that *some* notion of time is at work, at least in the minimal sense of the practitioner applying the concepts of the past, present, and future. During various stages of at least *many* mystical experiences, these concepts are clearly at work in the sense that there is an understanding of “before” and “after.” Numerous reports of such experiences, including Forman’s own (Forman 1999, p. 20), describe the experience as involving a sequence of events. Change occurs and thus the concept of time must be applied. It may sometimes be true that “time slows down” as seems evident from the fact that practitioners often express surprise as to how much (clock) time has passed during the event. But, of course, this is not to say that time has stopped entirely from the first-person point of view. Indeed, time slowing down would seem to be an interesting consequence of the fact that PCEs are states of heightened awareness or deep concentration. This is perhaps analogous to the way that world class athletes describe their experiences while performing at a high level, such as a professional quarterback in football or a top notch basketball player. However, even if this is so, it is one thing to say that time slows down during certain unusual mental feats, but quite another to say that there is no temporal component at all. Indeed, if the concept ‘now’ were not applied at all in a PCE, then it would seem impossible for the subject to be able to distinguish the PCE from a memory (of the past) or a clairvoyant vision (of the future). Why doesn’t the practitioner believe that she is having a memory or seeing a vision of the future? Answer: Because the temporal concept applied is “present” or “now” rather than “future”

or “past.” (See Novak 1996 for one discussion of Buddhist meditation and the consciousness of time.)

Secondly, even if there is somehow no change at all during a PCE and the subject were said to achieve the (unlikely, in my view) timeless state of Aristotle’s God, forever reflecting on Itself, the concept ‘now’ still applies. After all, even if we are so bold as to claim such an analogy, Western conceptions of God still include there being an “eternal now” experienced from the point of view of God. There may be no change and no time *in some sense*, but still a perpetual now. Wouldn’t Aristotle’s God at least have to apply the concept ‘now’ to all experience? I would think so.

Finally, to wrap up this entire section, Bagger makes an interesting and related point when he says that

if the Pure Consciousness Event contains absolutely no conscious content, I fail to see how the mystic could possibly remember anything about the experience....To remember an experience an individual must experience it *as* something (Bagger 1999, p. 102).

Griffith (1990, pp. 75-6) made a similar point when he wondered how a subject could later know that a PCE occurred (as opposed to, say, the unconsciousness of dreamless sleep) if there were no content or phenomenology at all associated with the PCE. It is indeed difficult to understand how any episodic memory (i.e. first-person autobiographical memory) of a PCE could remain unless the subject was concentrating on or paying attention to the experience, understood to be occurring in the present moment, and thus, at least applying the concept ‘now.’ Moreover, episodic memory is a form of declarative memory, described as a “remembering *that*” something happened. Surely such memory involves the application of the concepts contained in the “that-clause.” There are, to be sure, kinds of memory that can be retained without episodic

memory of the corresponding events. In abnormal psychology, for example, there are cases of severe amnesics who are taught a skill (e.g. typing, maze learning) over time and yet do not have any episodic memory of the previous learning episodes. However, these kinds of memory are so-called “procedural memory” (e.g. memory of *how* to do something) and thus a form of “implicit memory,” which is quite different than memories for episodes. The idea, however, of an episodic memory of event E without E’s involving at least some experiential content is indeed absurd. For my immediate purposes here in section 3.3, I am only claiming that part of the reason for the later episodic memory of a PCE is that the concept ‘now’ was applied during the occurrence of the PCE, but I think that this point applies equally to the other concepts described in sections 3.1 and 3.2. Of course, if someone like Forman insists that, despite the above argument, there is no phenomenological difference between a PCE and a dreamless sleep, then I fail to see how it can accurately be called a pure *conscious* event (and see section 6 below for more on this issue).²

4. PCEs and Conceptualism

Another related area to explore is in the dispute over whether or not there is “nonconceptual content” in experience (see e.g. Gunther 2003). A central issue is whether or not one can even have a conscious experience of objects or properties without having the corresponding concepts. Conceptualism is basically the view that all conscious experience is structured by concepts possessed by the subject (e.g. McDowell 1994). In a somewhat Kantian spirit, we might say that all conscious experience presupposes the application of concepts, or, even stronger, the way that one experiences

the world is determined by the concepts one possesses. One motivation for this view stems from the observation that concept acquisition colors the very experiences that we have. Another influential motivation is to explain how perceptual experience can provide reasons for empirical beliefs about objects in the world (Brewer 1999). I am indeed very sympathetic to conceptualism, but, again, this view appears to be strongly at odds with the nature of PCEs. After all, if PCEs are devoid of conceptual content, then they obviously cannot be conceptual through and through as the conceptualist claims. Now, I have already argued in the previous section against the view that PCEs falsify HOT theory, but conceptualism is arguably stronger than HOT theory in that it explicitly leaves no room at all for non-conceptual content.

Of course, there are many philosophers who argue that conceptualism is false for other reasons; for example, that perceptual experience can outstrip the concepts that one possesses (see e.g. the essays by Michael Tye, Sean Kelly, and Jose Bermúdez in Gunther 2003). Part of the issue centers around just how “rich” the content of conscious perceptual experience is. It seems, for example, that we can experience a complex visual scene, such as a landscape, without having all of the concepts of the objects or properties experienced. Another related issue has to do with the so-called “fineness of grain” in our experience. Thus, it is often said that conscious perceptual experience is much more fine-grained than the concepts one possesses. In other words, it seems that one can experience many objects or properties without having the concept of that specific object or property. For example, it seems that a subject could experience a novel shade of red without having the corresponding concept and without being able to re-identify that shade on a future occasion. Conceptualists have replies to these arguments but there is significant question

as to their success. The conceptualist might reply that we can form “demonstrative concepts,” such as “this shade of red,” for a specific new color that is experienced (McDowell 1994). However, some doubt that such concepts really deserve the name ‘concept’ at all since the subject is unable to re-identify things which fall under it (see Kelly 2001 but then Chuard 2006 for a reply).

It is interesting, however, to examine why at least these two common objections to conceptualism do not apply to PCEs. (1) The argument from the richness of experience cannot apply to PCEs because there is nothing “rich” at all about such states. Indeed, the reasoning is quite the opposite; namely, that PCEs are non-conceptual *because* of the alleged *emptiness* of experiential content. As I have argued in the previous section, however, this makes it easier, not harder, to show that minimal conceptual content is really present in PCEs. PCEs in this sense are clearly very simple or conceptually “poor,” not complex or rich. (2) Regarding the fineness of grain objection and specifically the experience of “novel” properties of objects (such as a new shade of red), it seems to me that the conceptualist reply equally applies to PCEs. If we accept, with McDowell, that there are demonstrative concepts, then we can use this strategy here as well. When one has a PCE for the first time, one analogously applies the demonstrative concept “this very experience” or “this special conscious state.” Now even if we accept the notion that re-identification is essential to concept possession, it does indeed seem that the more experienced practitioner is capable of applying the demonstrative concept “this very experience *again*” while having subsequent PCEs. After all, there seems to be some memory of the nature of these special states of mind such that the person knows when she has achieved and duplicated that state of mind.

Indeed, part of the motivation for continuing to meditate along these lines is precisely to achieve such duplication or even to go beyond one's previous mystical experiences.

There must be some sense of comparing later and earlier PCEs for the sake of re-identification. It is interesting to note that "this experience" is of course an indexical notion and two of the concepts considered in section 3 are also "indexicals," namely, 'I' and 'now.'

More generally, however, it is striking to see just how difficult it can be to give an account of PCEs without bringing concepts into the experience. Griffith (1990, pp. 85-90) rightly points out the problems with what he calls an "unstructured awareness," which is presumably similar to a PCE. Griffith notes that "the awareness in question is not, strictly speaking, objectless...Neither is [it] contentless..." (p. 88). It is also surprising to see how often Forman slides from talk of there being "no senses or images involved" or "obliviousness to one's own body" to the conclusion that there are no concepts (or no cognitive content) at all involved in PCEs (see also Wainwright 1981, pp. 117-22 for a nice discussion on this point). Forman similarly comes dangerously close to mistakenly holding that if an experience is non-intentional then it is thereby non-conceptual. The reason for these slides may just be that if one allows for any cognitive content (or judgments) within a PCE, then the door is open for conceptual content (as Forman seems to acknowledge, 1999, p. 77). But when one reads his own "reports of PCEs" closely (Forman 1999, pp. 11-27), there is actually very little to suggest that PCEs are non-conceptual, let alone *entirely* non-conceptual. Forman seems more concerned to show that the subjects are "awake" in some sense.

Of course, I have not proven here that PCEs are *entirely* conceptual either, but, given how very simple or conceptually “poor” PCEs are, it seems like a reasonable view to take. In addition, the two most common arguments against conceptualism do not apply to PCEs. Thus, I find little reason to give up conceptualism due to the existence of PCEs.

5. The Transparency of Experience

Aside from reductionistic motivations, many representationalists invoke the notion of the “transparency (or diaphanousness) of experience” in support of their view (Harman 1990; Tye 2002). This is an argument based on a phenomenological first-person observation which goes back to Moore (1903). The idea is that when one turns one’s attention away from, say, the blue sky and onto one’s experience itself, one is still only aware of the blueness of the sky. The experience itself is not blue; rather, one “sees right through” one’s experience to its representational properties, and there is nothing else to one’s experience over and above such properties.

The larger issue at hand is typically cast as the main dispute between representationalists and non-representationalists about the existence of qualia or, more specifically, non-representational properties of conscious experience (Block 1996). If there is more to an experience than its representational content (as Block thinks), then representationalism is false. If we can introspect non-representational properties of experience, then, *contra* the representationalist, the phenomenal character of experience is not *exhausted by* its representational content. The issue turns, as Block (1996, p. 29) puts it, on whether or not there are “mental properties of experience that don’t represent anything” which he calls “mental latex.” In contrast, “mental paint” is characterized as

the “mental properties of the experience that [for example] represent the redness of the tomato.” (p. 29)

My purpose here is not to engage directly into this dispute though my sympathies do lie more with the representationalist. However, we must be careful to distinguish between what is doing the representing (i.e. the state or vehicle) and that which is represented (the content). And my main point here is that something like the transparency of experience can help us to understand how to describe PCEs. Perhaps we can sometimes train our minds to achieve a unique state of “mental latex” such that we become aware of a “pure” conscious state (or vehicle) itself by emptying out all representational content. If this is plausible, then we should indeed be prepared to admit that PCEs are counter-examples to the transparency thesis. However, I am far more wedded to the HOT theory than to the transparency of experience so I am not as concerned to defend a strong transparency thesis at almost all costs. Indeed, those familiar with the literature know that there are other, more common, problematic cases such as pains, orgasms, and after-images. PCEs might then be a very special instance of having an introspective conscious mental state directed at another mental state (or vehicle) with no “mental paint.” In some ways, this way of phrasing the matter is reminiscent of the discussion in section 3.2 where, similarly, the idea was to be able to introspect an “empty” or “pure” mental state *as* a mental state.

6. Two Other Possibilities

In this final section, I will briefly explore two other intriguing possibilities with respect to PCEs. It is sometimes tempting to understand PCEs as a case of state

consciousness without creature consciousness, or vice versa (recall these terms from section 1.1). It is not clear that one must entail the other or that they always occur together. Gellman (2005), for example, reports that one criticism of PCEs is that “perennialists may be exaggerating the wakefulness of some emptying out. The Islamic Sufi *fana* experience (“passing away”) is sometimes described as an unconscious state, and the Sufi might become purely unconscious upon finding God, in *wajd* (Schimmel, 1975, 178-79). Therefore, an emptying out might sometimes simply be pure unconsciousness.” But these can’t both be quite right since there is reference *both* to a lack of state *and* creature consciousness in the above passage. Such a characterization sounds more like an instance of death. But there remain two other possibilities:

(a) Perhaps PCEs are unusual cases where there is creature consciousness without state consciousness. Indeed, some have flirted with the idea that PCEs are not really states of consciousness at all but are better described as unconscious states. As we saw in section 3, it is not always easy to distinguish between PCEs and, for example, being in a state of dreamless sleep. A similar idea can be found in discussion of the “attainment of cessation” (*nirodhasamāpatti* or *samjñāvedayitanirodha*) within various Buddhist traditions (Griffiths 1986, 1990, pp. 78-85). Such cases initially seem to lend support to having PCEs, but there is significant disagreement within and between various Buddhist traditions about just how to characterize such states. Some descriptions abandon state consciousness altogether, but leave something like creature consciousness intact. That is, the body is still functioning and “alive” with “heat” (so the person isn’t dead), but yet there is no mental activity at all: when one truly attains cessation one is literally “mindless” (*acittaka*). However, there are Buddhist thinkers “who attempt to show that

there must be some kind of [state] consciousness (*vijñāna*) present within the attainment of cessation (Griffiths 1990, p. 82).” And there does seem to be something behind the idea that a subject *S* having a PCE is (creature) conscious, based on later first-person reports definitively claiming that *S* is “awake” or “not asleep” (Forman, 1999, pp. 11-30). Indeed, it seems plausible enough to say that “*S* is conscious” in such cases, much like we might say with regard to someone in deep meditation.

Of course, the main problem with this option for our purposes is simply in denying that state consciousness is also present, as I have assumed thus far. After all, as we have seen, it seems perfectly reasonable to hold that there is “something it is like” to have a PCE; that is, something it is like to be in that state of mind. If there were nothing it is like to have a PCE, why would so many people wish to be in that state and be able afterwards to describe the experience? And why call it a pure *conscious* event? As we saw in section 3, it is difficult to explain how subjects can later remember PCEs without taking them to be genuine cases of state consciousness.

(b) On the other hand, maybe a PCE is a case of state consciousness without creature consciousness. Of course, one would first have to reject the rationale (stated above) that *S* is creature conscious mainly because *S* claims later to have been awake. And then one might reasonably take REM sleep (with vivid dreams) or being in certain hypnotic states to be cases of state consciousness without creature consciousness, and then argue that *S* is in a somewhat vague middle ground area between normal wakefulness and vivid dreaming, with respect to creature consciousness. *S* might be awake in some sense while having PCEs, but *S* is clearly not typically “alert” or

“responsive to the outer environment,” which one might hold is also essential to creature consciousness.

I must say that I find these options intriguing. I am not inclined to think that either is the *best* explanation of PCEs for the reasons already given, such as the ability later to recall and explain (often in detail) one’s mystical experience unlike, say, with the vast majority of dreams. It should be noted, however, that the argument in this paper is left untouched regardless of whether or not one accepts either (a) or (b). If one opts for (a), then neither HOT theory nor conceptualism can be refuted since they apply only to conscious states. If PCEs are not really conscious states at all, then they have no bearing on the truth or falsity of HOT theory or conceptualism. That is why I worked on the assumption that PCEs are (state) conscious from the beginning of the paper. And if PCEs are indeed state conscious (but without any accompanying creature consciousness) as in (b), then I believe that my arguments in this paper should still go through. I suspect that most who believe that PCEs are entirely non-conceptual would be more inclined to embrace option (a) than to accept the idea that PCEs are really both conscious and conceptual, unless of course I have convinced them otherwise.

My overall conclusion, then, is that we should either hold that PCEs, or what are commonly *called* PCEs, are indeed compatible with both HOT theory and conceptualism or we should seriously question the idea that PCEs are (state) conscious at all.

NOTES:

1. Of course, one might instead interpret my rejection of premise 2 as saying something more like “there are really no PCEs at all” since, by definition, PCEs are “pure” meaning

“without any concepts or content.” This is perfectly understandable, but, again, I’d prefer to stay away from purely stipulative definitions which can only inhibit any real progress to be made in examining to what extent HOT theory and PCEs are really inconsistent. It is enough to show that what many take to be PCEs are not really “pure” after all. As we’ll see later in section 6, a similar issue arises for those who question whether or not what are called PCEs are really *conscious* at all.

2. It is worth noting here that a related and increasingly popular version of representational theory holds that the meta-psychological state in question should be understood as *intrinsic* to (or part of) an overall complex conscious state. This stands in contrast to the standard view that the HO state is *extrinsic* to (i.e. entirely distinct from) its target mental state. Part of the reason for this trend is renewed interest in a view somewhat closer to the one held by Franz Brentano (1874/1973) and various other followers within the phenomenological tradition (Husserl 1913/1931, 1929/1960; Sartre 1956; see also Smith 1986, 2004). To varying degrees, all these views have in common the idea that conscious mental states represent *themselves*, which then still involves having a thought about a mental state, just not a distinct or separate state. For example, I have argued that, when one has a first-order conscious state, the unconscious HOT is better viewed as *intrinsic* to the target state, so that we have a complex conscious state with parts (Gennaro 1996, 2002, 2004, 2006). I call this the “wide intrinsicity view” (WIV). Robert Van Gulick (2004, 2006) has also explored the alternative that the HO state is part of an overall global conscious state. He calls such states “HOGS” (= higher-order global states) whereby a lower-order unconscious state is “recruited” into a larger state, which becomes conscious partly due to the implicit self-awareness that one is in the

lower-order state. This approach is most forcefully and directly advocated in a series of papers by Uriah Kriegel (beginning with Kriegel 2003) and is even the subject of an entire anthology debating its merits (Kriegel and Williford 2006). Despite their differences, there is agreement among these authors that conscious mental states are, in some important sense, reflexive or self-directed. Forman and many other commentators on PCEs often criticize the Brentanian/Husserlian view that all consciousness is intentional (Forman 1999, pp. 67-75). However, they still seem rather sympathetic to the related idea that PCEs are somehow self-reflexive or self-referential states, and cite Sartre's theory of consciousness in a more approving way (see e.g. Forman's 1999, pp. 116-123, discussion of "knowledge-by-identity" and pp. 153-157 on Sartre). I have serious reservations about what I call the "pure self-referentialism" of Brentano (Gennaro 2006) and have also attempted to show how Sartre's theory can be understood in terms of my own version of HOT theory (Gennaro 2002).

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