

Article

The Self as Source and Destination for Intuitive Interpretations of Religious or Spiritual Experiences

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Abstract: Religious or spiritual experiences (RSE) are often difficult to fully express even if one might be able to describe particular aspects of them. Yet the influences that such carry in a person's mode of being can be vast, and they are clearly a fundamental part of the human condition (whether accepted, denied, or dismissed, their occurrence appears universal). How then might these RSE—and the corresponding grounding implications—be better explained? This paper seeks to elucidate the problematic via an applied investigation of a self-theoretical framework which is composed of three interlaced “sets”: (1) Self-defining traits, (2) Self-directing traits, and (3) Self-evaluating traits. We will suggest that these elements (with consciousness and bodily presence) form a core self that is a separable facet from those of personal identity and whole person; and this finding will in turn require a brief look at consciousness and a two-tiered mental model. Taking the self-view into a phenomenological hermeneutical examination will illuminate the position at which RSE might reside within an individual's cognition, and thence to exploring the pre-thought (the functionally pre-aware) foundations involved. Finally, some considerations will be given for how an understanding of the foregoing structure (if it be found valid) might contribute towards the purposive shifting of that self-basis from out of and towards which RSE are situated in a lifeworld.

Keywords: experience; interpretation; mental model; phenomenology; religious or spiritual experiences; self-theory; self-transformation



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1. Splicing: The Self, Personal Identity, Whole Person

Any life event is necessarily intertwined with, and therefore filtered through, the self-view that one holds most of the time when functioning in one's daily experiential flow, but also further that self-identity which one takes of oneself in those (rarer) moments of reflection. A religious or spiritual occurrence, moreover, will far more often than not take place in those lived contexts wherein one's attention is directed externally, causing the interpretation of what is felt, thought, or done to be conducted by the brain automatically and largely without purposive analysis, leading to an assigned meaning which might be illusory, deceptive, or even harmful. These happenings (i.e., religious or spiritual experiences, hereafter RSE) can nevertheless be confronted actively rather than merely received passively, and I believe that an apposite theoretical positioning model for such would further allow an individual to undertake an engaged re-tooling and intentional re-structuring. Providing one potential model (which the reader may or may not agree with, in full or in part) is one goal of this article, and offering some suggestions for how said model could therefore be actively applied to RSE is another. Towards such let us begin with a grounding comment, followed by an outlining of the notions and framework we will employ; firstly our opening stance: Whatever the empirical issues about what God/"God" might be,¹ these RSE are real enough for those who undergo them (they are taken as internal evidence by the self, and this whether ultimately adjudicated to be mundane or to be transcendental; in either case the influences received certainly reach far), and thus in order to attempt a better understanding of what may be taking place in such instances we shall start our study by exploring what the (RSE-judging) self is, its relation to the

aspects of personal identity and whole person, and then in subsequent sections we will move to examine the contemporary mental structures involved in relevant automatic and self-directed brain processes (establishing relevant conceptual concerns and stating the model), thereafter meditate on the interpretative foundation(s) and meaning(s) involved in the place of the self as loop (or spiral) vis-à-vis RSE (applying the model narrowly), and lastly conclude with some comments on what one might therefore (wish to) do with such existentially (applying the model more broadly).

For the sake then of clarity, and to further describe our methodology, what we will attempt is the taking of psychological theory supported by cognitive science into a practical philosophical approach to how one might alter one's dealings with one's own RSE, should one so desire. Our hope is that through the attainment of a better picture of how the brain works via learning about it from those who study the organ (rather than those who study "mind"), combined with some phenomenological analyses that fit the felt (results of "conscious of" examinations) into the schemata, we shall be able to discover the whence and wherefore of RSE such that, again, one's hermeneutical responses may be made purposefully manageable *by* the self, instead of only (partially) managing *of* the self. Thus, we will split the discussion roughly in half: (A) Sections 1 and 2: the Psychological-Neurological, and (B) Sections 3 and 4: the Phenomenological-Applied Philosophical (and Section 4 will also include our conclusions, tentative as they may prove to be, consisting mostly of thinking on the possibilities).

Let us then begin by giving credit where credit is due. I first started to form the self-theory expounded here after a reading of the philosopher and pedagogical theorist Kristján Kristjánsson's *The Self and Its Emotions*, (Kristjánsson 2010) wherein a "soft realist" self is offered that is grounded on three emotional levels: (1) Self-constituting emotions (one's "core commitments, traits, aspirations, or ideals"), (2) Self-comparative emotions (those which take the self as an "indirect object" or "reference point" for "comparison with a baseline of expectations"), and (3) Self-conscious emotions (such as are in the self they are about, those that take said self as "their direct attentional and intentional object"). (Kristjánsson 2010, pp. 75–77) In my interacting with these sets I made a number of changes that I think better match the fuller neurological picture as cognitive science has given us at present (more on that in the next section), and that additionally enable a more robust theoretical framing. By way of building the necessary background, a few words on this before venturing further into RSE.

Initially, it might be noticed that Kristjánsson's first set, as he defined it, is not actually emotional in nature, although certainly particular emotions would be associated with the items listed. The other two sets, moreover, are composed of a mixture of rational analyses and the accompanying automatic intuitive and affective judgments and reactions which necessarily follow along with any course of reasoning conducted by the so-called "higher brain". These thoughts prompted my shifting of the areas into a more ideational grouping composed of trait-based aspects, which I also organized into three:

(1) *Self-defining traits*: These are one's preferences and outlooks, genetic inheritance, upbringing, choices previously made and the resulting influences (in pre-awareness and in awareness), historical, socioeconomic, epochal, geographic, climactic, et cetera, elements: in short, those formative "defaults" plus one's having lived through them.

(2) *Self-directing traits*: Also one's ideas on oneself, but including with the ratio-conceptual the kind of intuitive and affective neural responses just mentioned, which contribute towards a maintaining, adjusting, or more forcefully shifting of the first set's traits.

(3) *Self-evaluating traits*: Those reflections done with an acknowledgment and a purpose towards ascertaining the nature of oneself vis-à-vis where one considers oneself to be as against where one would like oneself to be; and this aspect too includes the intuitive and emotional co-judgments as the second set does.

Thus far, however, this trio of traits we have outlined is a rather bare psychological positing—it is a moving-towards of neuronal functioning and little more, a mapping of how a notion is contained in the brain—and therefore to obtain an actual living self

as (/within; see the following comments on personal identity and whole person) an individual we must add consciousness and the presence of a physical body (that is, the mere presence and without the bodily details which occur at the next stage of personal identity, as below). Consciousness, let the reader note, is being used here broadly in order to indicate both the many automatic functions of the networked brain in its data analyses and internal communications—that to which we have no access through the medium of rational thought—as well as the more familiar aspects of “thinking through” and our (rather constant) “internal monologues”. I will use the items “pre-aware” and “pre-awareness” (listed in our self-defining traits) to signal the former, and contrast that mode of cognitive functioning with the latter which is accessible and open to manipulation through the practices of reasoning; terming such “aware” and “awareness”. All this will perhaps make more sense in light of the following details on a two-tiered mental model (Section 2); I believe that when approached from what we have come to know about the brain’s functioning there is a solid basis for concluding that “consciousness” is always maintained at some level while one is alive—with or without awareness—even finding “consciousness” in states of deep sleep for instance, as certain neurological data have indicated.² For the moment, however, let it suffice for us to summarize this core self as an operative psychological unit composed of: Set 1 + Sets 2 & 3 (grouped together due to the way these sets act on and about the more formative Set 1) + C (for “consciousness”) + B_p (for “bodily presence”: the simple having of a body; this is important to highlight in order to remove the Cartesian temptations to which we have become overly familiar (and I add that there is no possibility of a “brain in a vat” on this account)) = The Self.

This core self is the basis from which all practical and reflective thought flows in both inward and outward directions, including the brain’s management systems that use body internal signals and data (information on organs, tissue, muscles, et cetera) and its external environmental signals and data (information from sense organs), all of which feed into the three outlined trait-based sets in a constant (pre-aware) practice of maintaining and adjusting self-definition and self-image. This core self is known intuitively, although perhaps “sensed” is a better phrasing than “known” given that only upon purposive reflection would this self tend to be actively noticed. As the reader will have realized, however, what has been given thus far is not sufficient for the full-blooded creaturehood we know; you and I as such: human animals living within a society. Therefore the next movement takes us to the facet of personal identity, and this is defined as the aforementioned core self plus contingent facts about the body (those details beyond its sheer presence; and again keeping bodily elements distinct due to the centrality of physicality: we do not “have” a body, rather we “are” a body and it is only long acquaintance with Cartesian ideas that have led to such misleading (and mystifying) statements like “my spiritual self” (rather than the more accurate “spiritual aspect of my-self”, which would be about a mode of comprehending or perhaps relating to one’s preferences), “my true being/nature” (again, this points towards an essentialism that exists without the physical), or even simply “my body” (as if there were a separate and aethereal owner holding said meat-sack)); then other contingent facts (non-bodily); and finally feedback from the social realm (influential especially on how Sets 2 and 3 work on Set 1). To give a formula for this we would have: The Self + CF_B (contingent facts: bodily) + CF_O (contingent facts: other) + FB_S (feedback from others, interacting in a society) = Personal Identity.

From here it is a short step to the final facet of the whole person, which is simply personal identity (including the core self) along with its embedded contextualizations (“world” in the Heideggerian manner³). This is distinguishable from the social feedback just referred to in that a person’s embeddedness necessarily includes far greater detail than the back-and-forth of you and I: here too are the myriad facts and nuances of the time, place, and exceedingly rich background of the situatedness one discovers oneself to be living within (and in thinking on this it is clear how this level circles back into that of the self—how context helps form core—and how the entirety is cyclical in its being made and in its making). Symbolically: Personal Identity (necessarily including the Self) + Embeddedness

= Whole Person. A full presentation of this self-theory is laid out in *Blurred: Selves Made and Selves Making* (Oberg 2020). It is important to recognize the intertwining and looping nature involved: this is not so much a tripartite conceptualization as it is an abstracted stretching of what must always be a singularity, and then a looking at three sections thereupon. While it is possible (and, I would contend, useful) for us to segregate the facets of the self in this way for theoretical purposes which can later be applied phenomenologically to RSE, for a living individual the core self, personal identity, and whole person will always be concurrent, and any specific aspects “graspable” merely to certain degrees (one would think training and practice would be required to improve upon the reflective and analytical skills needed; probably also much humility!). In daily life one “feels” only the unity of these facets, and one (likely) experiences oneself primarily through whole person relations, or perhaps—if more self-directed thoughts become triggered—personal identity. To work towards investigating one’s core self would call for deeper meditation. Nevertheless, most apropos for us at this stage of our investigation is that religious and spiritual experiences are found within—and thence such are analyzed and interpreted at—the three trait-based sets of the fundamental core self. Having now presented the self-theory side of our (to be proffered) model, let us consider some applicable points from cognitive science in order to complete the psychological-neurological portion of our study.

2. Structuring: Consciousness and a Two-Tiered Mental Model

Just as we found it necessary to make adjustments to Kristjánsson’s original three “emotional” sets, so too we recognize that his mental model is not reflective of what contemporary neuroscientific accounts have revealed about the processing mechanisms of the brain, especially with regards to its ordering. Before being able to make the philosophical applications regarding RSE that we seek to, therefore, such will need to be sorted. Kristjánsson uses a single-tiered model that is composed of “rationally grounded emotion” (Kristjánsson 2010, p. 94), wherein one makes (Aristotelean and Virtue Ethics) efforts to train one’s “moral-self” (i.e., one’s emotional dispositions) that in turn give rise to moral emotions which motivate moral actions (Kristjánsson 2010, p. 97). In other words, to Kristjánsson actions stem from emotional settings which rest upon (are founded within) a rational system, and thus if a person undertakes the applicable reason-based training—beginning with the rational choice to do so and then the adjacent analytical determination of its components—that individual can shape her/his emotions to be appropriately situated (/controlled) so as to generate the behaviors and responses she/he wishes to demonstrate in the world. That is, I think myself into feeling X and therefore do Y. Kristjánsson is critical of two-tiered models because he finds such to make emotion “distinct from—if complementary to—reason” (Kristjánsson 2010, p. 98); his view is that instead of this the pairing of reason-emotion ought to be placed one within the other, one as the other.

The problem here is that however advantageous a system like this might be for forming responsible and contributing adults within a society (e.g., Virtue Ethics; which I do applaud but think the human condition requires a more complex arrangement of this format), it does not match with what cognitive science and psychological research have been revealing about our innate conditions. If we follow these other avenues we discover that nearly the opposite appears to be the case: rationality is rather “based in”—coming out of—emotional (automatic and uncontrolled/uncontrollable) reactions, and the timing and placement of these processes aligns far better with a two-tiered (first and then separately second) ordering than with a uniformly leveled model. The brain, after all, works as a manager, and in that it is one *par excellence*, efficiently handling vast amounts of input (internal and external) and determining responses in its duty to maximize organism benefits, survival, and biological thriving (or as near to that ideal as possible). To help it do this the automatic and pre-aware processes quickly sort, interpret, and assign stimuli with organizationally advantageous intuitive responses (e.g., if A is encountered then promptly do B) that are also aided by an affective “coloring” (or perhaps “labeling” if one prefers) of the same. All of this happens very rapidly and well before any rational steps could be taken or reasoned-out decisions

made, and even if the latter should occur (purposive thought) such almost always takes place *ex post facto* the reaction (judgment/behavior) generated, and even then whatever assessments one might make will necessarily include as influencing factors the results of the earlier pre-aware adjudication(s). The picture being sketched here is a widely supported one. (To name but a few of the studies explaining and/or supporting the above (differing in the details and at times theoretical framework, but on the whole following this two-tiered arrangement), we may list: [Damásio 1994, 1999, 2012](#); [Dijksterhuis 2004](#); [Gazzaniga 2011](#); [Greene 2013](#); [Haidt 2001, 2012](#); [Kahneman 2003, 2011](#); [Klein 1993, 1998](#); [Sadler-Smith and Shefy 2004](#); [Tversky and Kahneman 1974](#)). The brain, moreover, is incredibly more attuned to handle information through its pre-aware manner (automatic, intuitive, pre-thought, efficient in both time and energy cost) than it is through the laborious and energy-draining method of analyses done with directed awareness (i.e., active thought); one researcher puts the figures at a processing capability of 11.2 million simultaneous bits of data for the pre-aware mode versus a mere seven for the aware. ([Dijksterhuis 2004](#), p. 587) Structurally this is happening within an organ that is segregated into differing specialist areas, and although each remains in a constant intercourse and information exchange with the others, such might nevertheless selectively be described as a “consciousness” (node, center, et cetera), meaning that the brain as a whole is a network of “consciousnesses” ([Gazzaniga 2011](#); [Ramachandran 2011](#)) out of which—as alluded to in the note above (this is the modal depiction)—there somehow arises a sense of unified experiential selfhood.

There is—and will probably remain—some disagreement over what precisely may be involved in the emergence alluded to here, but one recent and interesting suggestion has been made by Michel Bitbol, who remarks that “mind” (my quotation marks/double inverted commas) could be thought of as a kind of conversation between one’s bodily processing mechanisms and the sense that comes from their working: we might put this as the brain-as-manager leading to the brain-as-mind (i.e., unified perception of conscious self) while at the same time each part is also interacting; brain births mind, mind guides brain. ([Bitbol 2021](#)) The give-and-take here hints at the centrality of one’s lived experience: that from which we must start and to which all must return, ([Varela 1999](#)) and external to which—for us as subjects—there is nothing but what we remember, perceive, or imagine. ([Bitbol 2021](#)) I might add that the final trio there—memory, perception, imagination—is also reflective of brain-mind confluence, of the organ (seemingly) working at different levels but which are indeed singly physical. Let us very slightly draw out how this might be with some brief comments on another recent topic in the area: the notion of an artificial intelligence self. When I first started thinking about this I determined such entirely impossible due to the complications of consciousness, but upon further reflection some years later on the brain as a representation-producing device for data analysis (during which time of course the technology has progressed) I have come to lean towards this being a valid potentiality, ([Oberg 2017, forthcoming](#)) and especially so by means of a better appreciation for the significance of the neural maps that the brain produces to aid the organism in navigating its world. (This is certainly so for humans, probably most/all mammals, but maybe also other creatures. On neurons and representative maps see in particular [Damásio 2012](#)). Thus I was intrigued—but once the connections were realized not overly surprised—to find just such a schematic being offered for how we might go about engineering artificial consciousness. ([Graziano 2017](#)) Michael Graziano writes that were a robot to be equipped with software able to provide it with constantly updated information on the size, shape, condition, et cetera of its limbs, frame, head (or other part), and which also had cognitive and linguistic processors with access to that set of data, then it would not report on its actual bodily state if queried but rather on the make-up of the model from which it worked (the information set; e.g., “my left arm” instead of “currently north-facing upper appendage”: “left arm” would be part of the model, as indeed would “my”). If that internal patterning were in error the robot’s statements would be too, something we of course sometimes note in ourselves, and which is a condition well-known to be inducible from laboratory experiments such as the rubber hand illusion (wherein a subject witnesses an artificial but realistic looking hand

being stroked at the same rate and manner their own hand is; after a brief amount of time the rubber hand is felt by the subject to be their actual hand: there is a transference of the sense of ownership from real flesh hand to fake rubber hand). The maps our own brains have seem to operate very much like this.

Moreover, and additionally similar to human beings, Graziano proposes that the robot's schema would not need the sort of detailed information that would be associated with inner workings, just as we do not have for many of the elements of our internals (muscular connections, bone shapes, electro-chemical functions, et cetera: all these must be purposively researched to be known), but that "What is crucial here is the presence of a rich, descriptive model that is constructed beneath the level of cognition and language, and yet still is accessible to cognition." (Graziano 2017, p. 4) Again, this matches the two-tiered picture given above. As corollary to this Graziano also adds an attention construct (naturally too found in ourselves) for the environment outside the body but for which the robot (/organic brain) still needs to account (processing internal conditions and external conditions), an awareness that is then attributed in relations and becomes the foundation for inter-creaturely commerce: "Arguably, all of social cognition depends on attributing awareness" and "What is important is the overlap in function between modeling oneself and modeling others." (Graziano 2017, p. 6) The robot (/us) is able to interact by extending the map-based mental states it knows from within onto another, albeit the root data source (the representative map or information set) remains hidden. This appears to be how the automatic and pre-aware functions of the human brain work too.

We need not continue to burden the discussion with much more as our main purposes are elsewhere (investigating the place and associated interpretations of RSE phenomenologically), but perhaps a short example may be illustrative of the overall sequence: I am walking down the sidewalk and notice something in the distance, I am curious and want to go see (this feeling of curiosity results from an intuitive pre-aware judgment and its corresponding affective motivation: What is it? Approach), I get nearer and realize it is dog faeces which have not been picked up (assuming here a pet dog whose human companion—I dislike the term "owner"—would/should have done) and I immediately veer away in disgust (another intuitive judgment with its emotion: Possible harm, Avoid); I then continue on my way. The preceding took place entirely in the absence of secondary rational apparatuses and completely without any need to pause and reason about what to do or how to feel at any point in the operation. It is a very simple example, but if the above (and other) neuroscientists and related researchers are correct in the framework we are finding, this same series extends always and for everything (input → pre-aware processing → automatic intuitive determination, usually adjoined by some affective marker → generated reaction → occasional noticing of one's act in one's awareness (*ex post facto*) → even less frequent purposive rational analysis conducted in one's active awareness): it is a physico-chemical unfolding (neuronally-based), and it has been honed over the millennia of our evolutionary journey to be maximally effective with minimal wastage. Some of these intuitive-emotional conclusions appear to be species inherent (e.g., the instinctive fear of snakes), but most are products of one's upbringing, formative years, and socio-environmental factors, and thus these latter might be changed either by working to equip oneself with desired automatic judgments (personalized re-training; this is where the Kristjánsson type of Aristotelean/Virtue Ethics picture contains a grain of the biological results the research have demonstrated), or from pressure/feedback received from others within one's milieu; however it must be stressed that due to the timing of noticing one's intuitive and emotional reactions in the world as (almost always) happening after the fact of the act's manifestation, the efforts thus caused tend to be directed towards "next time". (See especially Haidt 2012, 2001 and his "social intuitionist approach") The day-to-day benefits (but also dangers) rendered by this generalized and default set-up are obvious enough not to require explication; with the psychological and cognitive bases for our self model in place we are therefore freed to delve more deeply into examining its phenomenological role in relating to/with RSE, which will form our final two sections.

3. “See”-ing: RSE as Self-Bound

Having set our background, let us next consider a religious/spiritual experience to try and fill out phenomenologically the theoretical dimensions we have thus far explored. What will be involved in this investigation? As Maurice Merleau-Ponty expresses it, “Phenomenology is the study of essences, and it holds that all problems amount to defining essences, such as the essence of perception or the essence of consciousness”, that as a methodology “Phenomenology involves describing, and not explaining or analyzing” (which can nevertheless be done with the description), and moreover that its “first rule [is] to be a ‘descriptive psychology’ or to return ‘to the things themselves’”. (Merleau-Ponty 2012, pp. lxx and lxxi; there is a note included indicating that Franz Brentano—Husserl’s teacher—made “descriptive psychology” the subject of a series of lectures he gave between 1887 and 1891; see Endnote 11 on p. 491) To think in practical terms, phenomenology is “an approach to research that seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it” (Neubauer et al. 2019, p. 91). The recurring words here of “essence” and “describe” aimed at a “defining” will have been noticed, as too the fact that such necessarily occurs from within the bounded perspective of the individual thusly engaged. Hence, another important element of this procedure is its focus on the “lived experience of a phenomenon that highlights the universal essences of that phenomenon”, taking what is “given directly” without respect to any background knowledge, theory, logic, empirical evidence, et cetera. (Neubauer et al. 2019, pp. 93 and 92) This is the handling of the subject of enquiry in one’s awareness and the tracking of the contours it traces and effects: following the “given” *exactly as it is* “given”. It is also important to recognize that this is occurring deeply contextually, and that what becomes revealed through the attention of awareness is “an interplay between a focal actuality and a ring of potentiality”, (Caputo 1984, p. 160) that in some ways, at least, phenomenology is bringing to light that which is already there but buried; the reader will no doubt immediately understand the connections here with the preceding schematic on brain function and aspects of self.

Let us dwell a moment longer on this notion of the what-is-there-but-hidden arising to the fore: According to Husserl, what we experience is possible because of the latent elements that lie within us and our external environments—that are a part of the “architecture”, we might term it—and hence, as Husserl writes, “a belief, an actual belief ‘stirs’; we already believe ‘before we know it.’” (Husserl 2014, p. 226; Caputo 1984 refers to this passage (from Section 115) using a different translation; see Caputo 1984, p. 168) The concept was there prior to our realizing it; it is not created but discovered; it is uncovered, or revealed. This now of course brings us to Martin Heidegger’s contributions to the field, and so we must make some brief further remarks. We mentioned in the above Footnote 3 how for Heidegger the self is “thrown” (or “fallen”) into its embedded “world”—and it is important to remember too how this is a situation in progress: the self is born within an historical trajectory that is already underway—and that the public nature of this provides the self with a particular understanding which conceals it, and that this must be “violently” broken through by the self in its own interpretation:

“Entangled being together with those things of the ‘world’ that are taken care of guides the everyday interpretation of Dasein [again, Heidegger’s specialized self-term] and covers over ontically the authentic being of Dasein . . . Thus the existential analytic constantly has the character of *doing violence*, whether for the claims of the everyday interpretation or for its complacency and its tranquilized obviousness. Of course, the ontology of Dasein is particularly distinguished by this characteristic, but it belongs as well to any interpretation, because the understanding that unfolds in interpretation has the structure of a project.” (Heidegger 2010, pp. 297 and 298; emphasis in the original).

Interpretation is therefore central, especially in the conflict or contest of self-comprehension provided by one’s situational elements (“world”) versus that which is “won” for oneself through the struggles of seeking an authentic being-hood. As Caputo comments on this same section in Heidegger, “Dasein tends, by the natural momentum of

fallenness, to drift outside of a proper self-understanding, and to interpret itself in the light of the public understanding.” (Caputo 1984, p. 169) Putting these together, the beliefs of the self (available to the self) are already within it and/or its embedded contextuality; to focus a phenomenological investigation onto a belief or belief-bound (belief-dependent) act is therefore to seek a revelation in one’s awareness of these “buried” details. Such requires work: and difficult work as the “violence” implies. For both Heidegger and, after him, Hans-Georg Gadamer, these efforts must also be concentrated on one’s habitual and regular (that is, regularized, normalized) patterns of thought (McManus Holroyd 2007). Again, the affinities here with the core layer of the preceding two-tiered mental model will be apparent.

On this aspect we may also highlight Heidegger’s indispensable (at least, on my reading) departure from Husserl: while the latter attempted to make phenomenology a science based on a premise-free starting point (à la Descartes), Heidegger recognized that for a self in its “world”—for any of us in whatever situatedness we happen to be in (however “enworlded”)—this is not possible, that phenomenology *must be* hermeneutic, interpretative, “whereas the goal of a presuppositionlessness is a Cartesian import, a residue of the modern metaphysical tradition which from Descartes on is focussed on the debate over the idea of transcendental consciousness.” (Caputo 1984, p. 177)⁴ Returning to Gadamer, the objective of an examination then is an “interplay” between partners (and here we may include the self-tracing in one’s awareness of an experience just as we would the more transparent pairings of actors like those of conversationalists or reader and text) where meaning “remains unknown at the onset of the exchange, and emerges through interaction.” (Sammel 2003, p. 160) We seek an engagement amidst the details of an experience and reflection on that experience, and hence with our methodology outlined we now employ a very simple example of an RSE, trying to think its place in the self-theory we have suggested, intending to assign it a level and section, and therefrom to make some conjectures on practical applications. (I should note that while the specific self model with its RSE relatings under consideration here is novel, RSE have garnered a good amount of attention in the literature, including a recent psychology and mental health centered Special Issue in this very journal, (Muthert and Austad 2020) and in phenomenological circles going back at least to Heidegger’s 1920–1921 lectures on religion at the University of Freiburg. (Heidegger 2004) A recent book on the inherently political nature of all experience may also have some applications to our subject. (DeRoo 2022)).

For these purposes we will use the very ordinary and seemingly mundane gesture of a divine-human “communication”, and hereafter we bracket everything save the action itself and its correlate input from internal examination: “conscious of” data. We will assume the thought-world of a believer in God/“God” to better describe the ongoing experiential aspects (using “I feel”, “I think” et cetera type statements for illustrative purposes, such as an author writing a fictional character in a first-person novel might do), returning to our suspension only after the example (that is, firstly we have our character be a believer while we describe, and then we step back out of that character’s point of view to analyze the “received” data):

Say that I am praying, and in doing so I take note of an emotion arising of a sense of calm, and concurrent with this are further feelings of peace and reassurance; I do not attempt to explain this rationally in terms of physico-chemical reactions but rather interpret it as nearness of the numinous, and whatever beliefs I had regarding the divine which caused me to pray in the first place, such are strengthened by the experience. I finish my prayer and am aware of a lingering inner uplifting and empowerment carrying forwards, aspects that lend additional credence to the religious ideas (and perhaps too ideals) I hold. Inwardly I assure myself that “Everything will be all right”; my day continues. This snapshot of a lived moment would be described by me as enjoyable and personally comforting, and its experience deemed significant because it seemed as if the whole were presented to me, a string of information not too unlike those garnered from one’s sense organs.

Yet upon what are determinations like the preceding based? The reception in question could certainly be categorized as a perception, and leaving aside the question of an empirico-scientific “reality” to the spiritual dimension (the reality of the experience itself is not in doubt: “I” felt it, however much or little it changed “me”), what might be claimed of this experience and its sourcing? Commonplace explanations tend to either term this an external happening (e.g., a believer may claim it as “truly” from God/“God”), or as illusory (e.g., a skeptic may claim it as being purely “all in one’s head”); we will try to demonstrate how the latter orientation fits in certain ways with what we have outlined above but not in the dubious manner intended, and furthermore in a style that does not thereby discount the deposition of the former (yet neither does it verify the former: we are neutral (albeit our example character was not)).

In explicating our sample phenomenology of an act of prayer we set aside surrounding concerns to focus on the experience in its moment to moment flow, but we did not bracket the overall understanding which our “I” took from it since that interpretation too was a part of the experience. For this “me”, from “my” standing within “my” “world”, the experience was definitively a “touching by God/‘God’”. Such was taken; but why? How might the mental model presented above be applied to the self-view we have elucidated to try and “get around behind” the “conscious of” to arrive at (or at least to approach) the grounding position that (may) inhere? If we take the above framework and apply it to our subsequent analysis, we begin from the threefold self-sets—which, while placed cognitively in pre-awareness and “beneath the surface” (as it were) of “conscious of” examination, are now tools we may take up in rational direction—as the initial order for searching out the “why?” of the “I felt” in phenomenological description. It will be recalled that the core self’s first section of traits entail the notional grounding for the manner in which “I” (anyone) comprehend what the divine “is” (and/or “is not”), and this set is also composed of one’s goals, objectives, desires, wishes, hopes, et cetera, in respect to the divine as “I” understand it and thence “my” relating to it. Naturally this comprehending will moreover be filled in by the way in which “I” was raised by “my” parents, guardians, or others; whatever they might have thought and taught “me” will remain to some degree as past influence/input, even if “I” have now rejected all that “I” once heard, read, thought, felt, et cetera. These are shadows that do not lightly pass. In addition, the second set of self-directing traits will inform “my” reaction to the pleasant emotional experience “I” have just had, and likely also “my” taking its positivity as a signal of the reality of those concepts which “I” affirm (again, whatever such may be), an area that the third set of self-evaluating traits will also relate to: Where do “I” find myself to be in “my” “relationship” to/with God/“God” as “I” comprehend it? Do “I” deem changes in “my” behavior and/or form(s) of thinking to be called for? If so, then how and by how much: in what way or ways and to what extent? It is important to remember that on the two-tiered functional model presented all of these analyses engaged in would be occurring at the deepest self-definitional layer, and would be concurrent with those intuitive and emotive internal mechanisms which operate beyond the reach of awareness-rooted mental control. “I” recognize that this amalgam has been flowing through the networked modes of “my” brain (“my” interlaced consciousnesses) during and after “my” RSE, and its footprint will be left on “my” neuronal functioning forthwith, irrespective of whether or not “I” further take up the experience in active thought and thenceforth try to do something with it; should “I” attempt such, or should “I” simply leave it (or not even notice it) and turn “my” attention elsewhere, still its having passed as an experience—and therefore too its having been processed—would remain.⁵

In this post-experiential investigation we may note as well that these mental palpitations were happening at “my” deepest identitarian layer—core self—but that self is only one part of the personhood of this “I”, and thus in exploring the RSE as self-bound the social feedback element of the connected facet of personal identity must especially be remembered. “I” have had my experience, “I” have thought it such and such (given it this and that meaning: interpretation, evaluation, assignation), but “I” realize that even if “I” never discuss with another what happened to “me” and/or how “I” felt about it

and what “I” took from it, yet “I” live amidst other people and am entirely—completely without trying to be—exposed to their ideas about the divine and its place or its absence with us: what such may or may not entail, and what may or may not be made of that. “I” acknowledge that whether this input be strong (e.g., if “I” directly speak of “my” experience and am responded to about it), or if it be weak (e.g., if “I” keep things to “myself” but hear of what others have thought and/or felt, or come across the same through a media outlet or other public source of some kind), then either way this feedback will be present and it will exert its influences into the cycle of “my” self-formation, self-monitoring, and self-maintenance or self-adjusting. Towards all of this the facet of “my” whole person (inclusive of the full embedded characteristics thereby implied) will commit additive force and reach, helping to sustain, bend, or break whatever “I” originally understood “my” RSE as “being about”: that hermeneutic and the adjacent weight to it which “my” brain assigned. With respect to this, “I” particularly recognize those historical Zeitgeist factors which hang heavily over the determinations “I” am able to make—what any of us can and cannot think (one cannot, of course, think that which is beyond one, but we affirm that there must be said “beyond”—something incapable—although we do not know what)—from behind the kneejerk biases and prejudices “I” admit “I” have, erupting from the moulding “I” am aware that “I” previously received (and again, we are helped in comprehending this from applying the two-tiered mental model outlined above). The reach of “my” ensconced culture (people and place) is an inescapable for “me” (Haidt 2012, 2001; Greene 2013; see also Kahneman 2011; Tversky and Kahneman 1974): be it “my” birth culture or as the culture wherein “I” currently live; and nearly everything strikes as being cultural. All of these, then, denote the backwards rushing of the higher to the lower within the theoretical framework: Whole person down to the core self from whence the chain began; or rather so we thought, yet now we have come to understand that there is no beginning, only a looping, or perhaps better still a “spiraling”. Whatever the ontology of an RSE is or is not, its ontics are two-directional: such are “all in my head” but never *only* “all in my head”; there are aspects and portions which are external (ultimately of divine origin? → query bracketed; clearly self-influencing? → absolutely yes), but each will always be internally filtered and thus rendered anew. Moving now from a “me” to an “us”: given the preceding, if we accept this framework, or anyway are willing to engage with it, what are we to make of the overall situation? Or better still: What *can* we make? With the special application of our alternative model in mind, let us finally move to some more way-of-being apportioned thoughts pertaining to how an individual might (be enabled to) choose the nature of self engagement with RSE.

4. Shifting: Self as Source for Re-Comprehending

To interpret an RSE is automatically to make realism oriented claims of it, be such with regards to its veracity, meaning, purpose, place, or whatever. These are existential issues and go far past the oft-heard criticism of such experiences as being mere “projections” (which stance, lest it be misunderstood, our own study is not making: rather we have been seeking to locate the source-foundation (and return destination) for the phenomenology involved in RSE: for this we claimed our self explication). To state that “X is” assumes both X as substantive and thenceforth that the further proceeding attributes listed are necessary to X (and this whether such are definitionally sufficient or not; if the “sufficient” threshold fails to be reached, they would still adhere necessarily). That be-verb of the claim then (that “is”), it is absolute to the organism stating (/holding) it regardless of what might be asserted from empirico-scientific quarters with an eye either towards “objective proof” or “absolute refutation”: to the experiencer whose self grasps the RSE as valid and worthy the entirety of the self-shaping grounding will already be present. It will be real and meaningful: meaning-giving and meaning-receiving (the hermeneutic circle). We have suggested that the cognitive foundation of these experiences precede them for each self in question, and as must be: not only in a *linear* fashion, but also in a *formative* one: we have both chicken and egg in a box that would make Schrödinger’s cat blush with envy. To

understand the dynamics at play let us review the constituted facet of core self: The Self = Set 1 (separated due to its importance) + Sets 2 & 3 (put together to reflect the way these sets interact with and towards Set 1) + C (“consciousness”) + B_p (“bodily presence”); and for the reader’s convenience here again are the set listings taken from Section 1 above:

(1) *Self-defining traits*: These are one’s preferences and outlooks, genetic inheritance, upbringing, choices previously made and the resulting influences (in pre-awareness and in awareness), historical, socioeconomic, epochal, geographic, climactic, et cetera, elements: in short, those formative “defaults” plus one’s having lived through them.

(2) *Self-directing traits*: Also one’s ideas on oneself, but including with the ratio-conceptual the kind of intuitive and affective neural responses just mentioned, which contribute towards a maintaining, adjusting, or more forcefully shifting of the first set’s traits.

(3) *Self-evaluating traits*: Those reflections done with an acknowledgment and a purpose towards ascertaining the nature of oneself vis-à-vis where one considers oneself to be as against where one would like oneself to be; and this aspect too includes the intuitive and emotional co-judgments as the second set does.

Thus by our investigation what seems to be occurring in these instances is that the traits of the first self-defining set provide the material for its hermeneutic moment: the framing, ordering, and building, against which the second and third self-directing and self-evaluating sets process the appraisements of how experiential datum X comprehended as Y fits with the currently established self and the idealized self towards which one’s goals are directed/directing (the three self “sets” in their operational flow). This must perforce be emplaced in a creature with consciousness and a body (i.e., our full self definition), but will apply further to the aspects of personal identity (the self (with its sub-elements) + bodily contingent facts + other contingent facts + social feedback) and whole person (personal identity (with its sub-elements, inclusive of self) + embeddedness; see again our Section 1). “My” prayer and its attendant affective input therefore “means” Y to “me” (is experienced and comprehended as: core self) within the confines of “my” broader embedded lifeworld (whole person) and as ascertained with respect to this “me” at the current time (personal identity). The area at which change—should it be desired—might most efficaciously be exerted is clear, and in that again the centrality of the self-set traits is reinforced. Such are not mere beliefs which might be expounded or explained, they go deeper: recalling Husserl’s evocative phrasing, “we already believe ‘before we know it.’” (Husserl 2014, p. 226) If, then, by “my” post-experiential analysis of recorded phenomenological data “I” think that “I” would like to take something different from the act engaged in, “I” must do the extra work beyond a conceptual adjustment towards realigning those elements which “I” can control (at least to some degree) while trying to learn more about those which “I” cannot. “I” must know and re-train my intuitions and linked judgments/reactions: I strive to transform (a part of) my Set 1 so that it with Sets 2 and 3 together shift the core self along the decided and desired lines.

It must additionally be remembered that since by and large these procedures unfold beyond the reach of rational awareness (the automatic and pre-aware intuitive and emotive aspects of the second and third sets), whatever latterly reasoned considerations are brought upon the notional bearing will only be effective to a limited degree, but because this is not zero the repetitious element of undertakings like Kristjánsson’s building of a “moral-self” (Aristotelean, Virtue Ethics; see again Section 2 above and Kristjánsson 2010) can be important and contributory to equipping oneself with fresh or variant initial pre-thought ascertainties and responses. (Haidt 2012, 2001) On our example, the apprehensional stance that formed a part of “my” core self’s psychological unit and obtained prior to the prayer being enacted outfitted that self (“me”, in part) with the structural potential for the “calming” and “reassuring” nuances “I” realized “myself” undergoing (“conscious of”) to be actualized in awareness. Any “I” cannot feel (emotionally) what said “I” does not already think (notionally) because the “I” will not be fitted to call it so (interpretatively); but too “I” cannot think (rational adjudication) what “I” do not already feel (intuitive and affective

marking): hence the beginningless loop, the spiral. It is furthermore important to stress the situatedness of each lived experience, and that within the same cycle being portrayed; either prong of this relating (feel-think, think-feel) could be influenced from the social realm more narrowly and/or the environment more widely; such are major sources for the changes that the self undergoes, as we have seen. However, these shiftings are made to the facet of core self, and thereafter any following new or variant or alternate discernments will spring from that originary self-source. By whatever means of differentiation are employed—inner or outer, intentional or incidental—the comprehensional hermeneutics of an RSE (on this framework) will be self-bound, and hence it is from that core wherein the phenomenology of the experience arises and must arise (rather than, say, at either of the others: personal identity or whole person); purposeful or not, via the above we think that change starts and ends there. Thus, if there is merit in the model, “I” can and will have no “conscious of” with respect to an RSE in the absence of its antecedent (its presumed) intuitive interpretational grounding. Should there be any wish to make what one thinks(-feels) into a determinedly (through a directed rational analysis) existentially beneficial adjustment (reformatory or radical)—if “I” want to “see” God/“God” anew, afresh, or even not at all but anyway otherwise than “I” presently do—such could (we have surmised) most effectively be wrought from a resolute adjustment to one’s foundational core self traits.

It must be stressed once more that none of this has anything to do with assertions of “objective” realities: in any case we reject such—at least for human animals given our biological status and functioning at this evolutionary juncture—and the issue is moreover not one of pertinence for the phenomenology of being. In closing, therefore, let us also note how absolutely wonderfully the cosmos opens up when nothing whatsoever is “forced” upon us: if we can think(-feel) God/“God” in any form or manner, and if we can discover what we take to be worthy reasons (internal or external) for uniting our self-elements with those ideational items, then we are free to live and to experience from within measures that are unbounded. Others may find one’s thoughts deleterious, and if one is made aware of the reasons for such (and particularly if one is willing to entertain those in reflection), then one might find cause to adapt the elements of one’s self-sets to the measure one is able. Such could of course be for good or ill (all things considered), and we should hope that each “I” will have the mental wherewithal to be properly adjudging. The choice, however, is ours: to the extent that we realize it, to the extent that we move upon it, to the extent that we take it and make it within the being-in-the-world we have adopted. Whatever we conclude about God/“God” as “out there”, RSE are to be found “in here”: from and to the self.

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Notes

- ¹ In this paper, and in my writing generally, I use the shorthand “God/“God”” (with the impersonal pronoun “it” to avoid gendering) as a signal to indicate a Husserlean bracketing on the question of the numinous as being (existential) and/or as force/“call” et cetera (phenomenal-mental) when examining one’s lived moments judged to appertain to such, i.e., in this case focusing on the immediate “conscious of” one is having in light of one’s own full existence without adding the extra “angle” or “facet” of definition; whatever God/“God” “is” or “is not” it is felt by us (and maybe too by non-human animals in a manner we

do not appreciate), and on that human side is where I wish to focus this discussion. For some basic introductions to Edmund Husserl's methodology, see: (Husserl 1999) and (Smith 2013). Additional comments elucidating phenomenological approaches will be made below in Section 3.

- 2 E.g., in addition to maintenance and monitoring actions, the brain during deep sleep moves between varying levels of more or less "conscious" ("higher" functioning) tasks, consolidating memories and producing hormones (Edlund 2011); just how "conscious" such might be considered is an arguable point to be sure, but the pertinent contention here is that some part of the networked brain is always doing *something*, and thus that it is never fully at rest (the reader will recall we are including non-aware areas (the automatic) within consciousness as a system, and therefore such activity is (some version of) consciousness). In the context of the modal brain (linked subdivisions of consciousness centers which together somehow give rise to the sense of a unified whole), this aspect provides at least some degree of psychological continuity (continuous consciousness, if not perpetual awareness). By itself this perhaps does not provide sufficient "proof" of consciousness (particularly if one disagrees and thinks only in terms of "conscious equals aware"), but after exploring the model in more detail below I believe the contribution data such as these provide will become clearer.
- 3 For an overview of how Martin Heidegger uses this concept (essentially—crucially in many ways—expanding on Husserl's earlier "horizon") and on Heidegger's view of the self as "thrown" into one's (and *not* into "the") "world", see his Sections 13, 18–21, 38, and 43 in (Heidegger 2010). For a brief glossing on the self as "thrown" in Heidegger, the interested reader could also see (Sembera 2007, pp. 107–8), but note that Sembera uses "falling" in place of the more common translation of "thrown" in his explanation. What is most relevant to the present is that for Heidegger, Dasein (his particular explication of self) finds itself in a complex "already in motion" as it were, a situational setting that is an ongoing result of multitudinous historical pressures and flowing outlines, and that Dasein views such from within its position as subject and hence interprets its being and its experiencing necessarily "hemmed into" its "world", i.e., its "version" of the world as such. Quite a lot has been written on Heidegger's ontology, but for my part I would only comment that on my understanding (and I may be wrong) I do not think a fully "objective" view is attainable from our own human existential placing.
- 4 Caputo initiates his article by undertaking a study of Husserl's remarks on "explication" in his book *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology* (published 1931, late in his career).
- 5 I note in passing that none of this could take place without the other core self facets of consciousness and the presence of a physical body; there cannot be only the mentality of the self. (While "brain in a vat" type arguments have been made which might suggest otherwise, I find such false as without perception of some sort there does not seem to be a way for thought to be grounded and hence its additional effects: could a brain on its own, entirely without input, "pray" in some manner? On one hand we might imagine that somehow it could (perhaps via memories stored as neural mass), but on the other hand of what might such consist? How long before the input-less brain failed to be able to produce anything? Above all: The brain itself is physical! I cannot have a "mind" floating around without a brain unless I am the most fervent of Cartesians, and thus any thought will need a brain (=physicality), and that brain will need further body).

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