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## FICHTE AND PURE CONSCIOUS EVENTS

The mystic literature is full of alleged reports of the attainment of *pure* or *absolute* states of consciousness, states devoid of all forms of empirical content (e.g., sensations, feelings, thoughts, etc.).<sup>1</sup> Many investigators of mysticism have even gone so far as to make such experiences definitive of mysticism. Note, for example, Ninian Smart's definition, "[m]ysticism' describes a set of experiences or more precisely, conscious events, which are not described in terms of sensory experience or mental images."<sup>2</sup> A large number of philosophers, however, have been unwilling to accept the intelligibility of claims reporting such experiences. Steven Katz, due to his theory of *Constructivism* which espouses that *all* experiences are constructed by culturally relative conceptual structures, is perhaps the most famous of this group.<sup>3</sup> I shall here attempt to add to the plausibility of the possibility of these experiences, which have been labelled **Pure Conscious Events**, by showing that they are consistent with Johann Gottlieb Fichte's transcendental conditions for consciousness (i.e., preconditions for the possibility of our concept 'consciousness').<sup>4</sup>

Due to considerations of space, I shall not offer a detailed examination of the extensive primary and secondary mystical literature on *pure consciousness*. However, let me attempt to briefly elucidate the concept. Robert Forman, who along with Stephen Bernhardt introduced the phrase "*Pure Conscious(ness) Event*", stated,

A pure consciousness event may be defined as follows: the subject is awake, conscious, but without an object or content for consciousness – no thoughts, emotions, sensations, or awareness of external phenomena. There is an utter blank.<sup>5</sup>

Hence, pure conscious events, by definition, have *no positive phenomenological content*. Again, I do not have space to argue this point here, but the existence of such events does often seem to be the best exegetical analysis of much of the mystics' own descriptions of their experiences. For example, certain experiences are often described, both by mystics themselves and by investigators of mysticism, as completely *a-conceptual*. D.T. Suzuki wrote, "A tree is not a tree until it is subsumed under the concept 'tree'. Tathata [mystical consciousness] is what precedes this conceptualization."<sup>6</sup> Moreover, I believe that a phenomenological contentless conscious experience is the best explanation of the even more frequent claims by mystics that (some of) their experiences are *in-*

1. re., Walter T. Stace, *The Teachings of the Mystics*, Mentor, N.Y., 1960, pp. 17–23; *Mysticism and Philosophy*, St. Martin's Press, N.Y., 1960, pp. 85–123.

2. Smart's definition is paraphrased here by Robert K. C. Forman in his *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*, Oxford University Press, N.Y., 1990, p. 7.

3. Such definitions, although indicative of a common type of mystical experience, are far too narrow to cover the vast range of experiences described throughout the mystical literature.

4. re., "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism", in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, edited by Steven Katz, Oxford University Press, N.Y., 1978. For a criticism of Katz's view, see Robert Forman, "The Construction of Mystical Experience", *Faith and Philosophy*, v. 5, July 1988, pp. 254–267.

5. I shall *not* attempt to demonstrate that Fichte's transcendental conditions are *internally* consistent,

although I believe that they are. Fichte was following Kant in his transcendental method. One of the mistakes of these early transcendental philosophers was, I believe, assuming that the conditions they offered were necessary ones.

6. "Pure Consciousness Events and Mysticism", Robert Forman, *Sophia* v. 25, 1986, p. 49.

7. *Essays in Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D.T. Suzuki*, edited by William Barrett, Doubleday Anchor, Garden City, N.Y., 1956, p. 270. Also see *The Teachings of the Mystics*, pp. 17–18.

*intrinsically ineffable*.<sup>7</sup> This claim is so wide spread throughout the literature that 'ineffability' is generally included as one of the defining characteristics of (certain) mystical experience(s).<sup>8</sup>

Much of the insistence that the concept 'pure conscious event' is incoherent stems from a narrow (and false) interpretation of Immanuel Kant's dictum, "all experience does contain in addition to the intuitions of the senses through which something is given, a *concept* of an object as being thereby given, that is to say, as appearing."<sup>9</sup> The suggestion is that Kant is here asserting that *all experiences* are necessarily mediated by concepts. Hence, an *a-conceptual experience* (i.e., an experience which is not mediated by a concept), under this interpretation, is an impossibility. This reading neglects the fact that Kant is in the context of the quote con-

cerned only with empirical experience of objects ("Erfahrung") and not with experience in general ("Erkenntnis") or with lived experience ("Erlebnis").<sup>10</sup> However, I believe that this false interpretation is still worthy of consideration, since *Erfahrung* still covers a wide breadth of experience and this reading can be found, either explicitly or implicitly, throughout the philosophical literature on mysticism.

This Kantian claim of conceptual mediation of experience, together with the claim that pure conscious events are *a-conceptual*, brings a new theoretical difficulty to light. If conceptual mediation is a necessary feature of *intentionality* (i.e., the characteristic of being *of* or *about* something), a claim which seems responsible, then pure conscious events must be *non-intentional* (i.e., not *of* or *about* anything).<sup>11</sup> There are, in fact, some direct claims of non-intentional experiences in the literature.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, this fits well with the description of these events as *contentless*. However, if this is cor-

7. For examples of such claims, see: *The Tao of Chuang Tzu*, Thomas Merton, New Directions, N.Y., 1965, p. 152; *The Way of Zen*, Alan Watts, Random House, N.Y., 1957, p. 141; *The Tao Te Ching*, chapter 1; the "hsin hsin ming", by Seng-tsan, translated by Richard B. Clarke, Universal Publishing, Virginia Beach, Virginia; the Manduka Upanishad, translated by Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester, Mentor, N.Y., 1975, p. 51; *The Cloud of Unknowing*, edited and translated by William Johnston, Image Books, Garden City, N.Y., 1973, p. 95; *The Gnostic Gospels*, Elaine Pagels, Random House, N.Y., 1979, pp. 136-137; John Tauler's "First Sermon for the Second Sunday of the Epiphany", in *Johannes Tauler, sermons*, translated by Maria Shradly, Paulist Press, N.Y., 1985; & *Mysticism and Philosophy*, p. 277.

8. re., William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Longmans, Green & Co., N.Y., 1902, p. 380; *Mysticism and Philosophy*, pp. 89 & 277; F.C. Happold, *Mysticism: A Study & An Anthology*, Penguin Books, Baltimore, 1963, p. 45.

9. *Critique of Pure Reason* (A93, B126), translation by Norman Kemp Smith, St Martin's Press, N.Y., 1965, p. 126. I shall use the word "intuition" as co-extensive with "immediate conscious experience", and I shall assume that 'objectless intuition' is not an incoherent notion, although it is a notion which would have been foreign to Kant (re., *Critique of Pure Reason*, A19, B33, p. 65). I intend 'immediate experience' here to contrast with 'processual experience' (e.g., hearing a composition or performing a logical derivation).

10. re., Steven Katz, *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, and Stephen Bernhardt, "Are Pure Conscious Events Unmediated?", in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*. For a recent argument that this interpretation is a mistaken reading even of Kant's views regarding mystical experience, see Anthony Perovich, "Does The Philosophy Of Mysticism Rest On A Mistake?", in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*.

11. Martin Schwab has informed me of reports that new borns are able to distinguish human faces. Such experiences would clearly appear to be intentional (i.e., *of* a face), but if concepts are necessarily connected with language use, then these experiences would appear to be *a-conceptual*. Hence, it appears that some one who wishes to maintain that 'intentionality' implies 'conceptuality' must claim that there are some inherent or *a priori* (non-linguistic?) concepts.

12. For example, the Zen monk Shen-hui wrote, "though it is seeing it is not to be called seeing something" [quoted in Suzuki, p. 164]; note the following experience described in the Yoga Sutra, according to a commentary by Christopher Chapple, "the consciousness-of or 'I versus that' consciousness has retreated; pure witnessing takes place." ["The Unseen Seer and the Field: Consciousness in Samkhya and Yoga", in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*].

rect, pure conscious events would directly conflict with theories of consciousness which name intentionality as a defining characteristic of consciousness (e.g., Brentano, Husserl, and Sartre).<sup>13</sup> Hence, we may find ourselves at a loss to explain what consciousness could be, since a standard defining feature of consciousness would thereby be shown not to be universal.<sup>14</sup> Although Fichte agreed that all *empirical*

conscious states involve an awareness of an object (i.e., are intentional), I believe that his transcendental conditions for consciousness, based on his notion of *intellectual intuition*, can be seen as offering an account of consciousness which is consistent with the possibility of pure conscious events.

Before I attempt to demonstrate this consistency, let me try to offer a clearer picture of the alleged incompatibility between pure conscious events and this “Kantian” view of consciousness as it was understood in Fichte’s time. One of the first attempts to place Kant’s dictum at the cornerstone of a systematic philosophy was made by Karl L. Reinhold, who was the major Kantian between Fichte and Kant himself. Reinhold believed that he (following Kant) had elucidated the fundamental feature of all experience (i.e., the *first principle* of philosophy), which he denoted as the *Principle of Consciousness*: “[i]n consciousness the subject distinguishes the representation from both the subject and the object and relates it to them both.”<sup>15</sup> Clearly, pure conscious events are states of consciousness where this principle is not operating on the empirical level, since *during pure conscious events there is no phenomenologically noticeable distinguishing and relating of representations (or concepts)*. There are several characterizations of pure conscious events which, if correct, support this, including:

1. Pure Conscious Events are **non-intentional** (i.e., they are not consciously ‘of’ or ‘about’ anything, they have no objects).

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13. I will not attempt an extensive exegetical defense of the claim that this is the “correct” interpretation of Brentano, Husserl, or Sartre; I offer merely one passage from each author:

– Brentano, “intentional inexistence, the reference to something as an object, is the distinguishing characterization of all mental phenomena.” [*Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, edited by Oskar Kraus, English edition edited by Linda McAlister, translated by Antos Rancurello, D.B. Terrell, and Linda McAlister, Humanities Press, N.Y., p. 97].

– Husserl, “intentionality signifies nothing else than the universal fundamental property of consciousness: to be conscious of something.” [*Cartesian Meditations*, translated by Dorion Cairnes, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Boston, 1988, p. 33].

– Sartre, “All consciousness, as Husserl has shown, is consciousness of something.” [*Being and Nothingness*, translated by Hazel Barnes, Washington Square Press, N.Y., 1966, p. 11].

Also see: Forman’s “Pure Consciousness Events and Mysticism”, pp. 49–50; Bernhardt’s “Are Pure Conscious Events Unmediated?”, in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*, pp. 232–233; and John A. Taber, *Transformative Philosophy: A Study of Sankara, Fichte, and Heidegger*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1983, pp. 40–41.

14. There are alternatives to the response to this dilemma which I am sketching here:

– Mark Woodhouse has speculated that we must ultimately “rely, in part, on each person’s intuitive understanding of what it means to be conscious.” [“On the Possibility of Pure Consciousness”, in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*, p. 256].

– Stephen Bernhardt suggests, “there is no single, nontrivial definition of consciousness; instead the term ‘consciousness’ has a range of uses with family resemblances, not all of which necessarily carry an intentional implication.” [“Are Pure Conscious Events Unmediated?”, p. 233].

– I believe that this problem can be solved by adopting David Smith’s suggestion that ‘consciousness’ be identified with ‘reflexive self-awareness’ which has been characterized by Bren-

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tano as ‘secondary awareness’ and by Sartre as ‘non-positional, pre-reflective awareness’. [re., David Smith, *The Circle of Acquaintance*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Boston, 1989, chp. II]. Alas, time does not allow me to explicate this suggestion here.

15. Quoted in Fichte’s “Review of *Aenesidemus*”, in *Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings*, translated and edited by Daniel Breazeale, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1988, (I:5), pp. 60–61; also see (I:6), p. 62.

2. In pure conscious events there is an absence in consciousness of any phenomenological distinction between subject and object. – In fact, pure conscious events are characterized *both* as involving a **lack of any object for consciousness** and a **lack of self-awareness**.<sup>16</sup>
3. Pure conscious events are **intrinsically ineffable** (i.e., they are **a-conceptual**, in the sense that they do not involve any mediation or construction via concepts).

I note again that I shall not attempt a detailed textual justification of (1) – (3) here. Let me merely note Walter Stace's comment on a famous passage in the Mandukya Upanishad,

[o]f introvertive mystical consciousness the Mandukya says that it is 'beyond the sense, beyond the understanding, beyond all expression. ... It is the pure unitary consciousness, wherein the awareness of the world and of multiplicity is completely obliterated. It is ineffable peace. It is the supreme Good. It is One without a second. It is the Self.' ... The core of the experience is thus described as an undifferentiated unity – a oneness or unity in which there is *no internal division, no multiplicity*.<sup>17</sup>

Although I believe that (1) – (3) necessitate that Reinhold's principle is not operating *on an empirical level* during pure conscious events, Fichte's three transcendental principles of consciousness (from which, Fichte maintained,

16. The Indian philosopher Sankara (who has been compared with Fichte by Rudolf Otto in his *Mysticism East and West*, Macmillian, N.Y., 1932 and more recently by John A. Taber in his *Transformative Philosophy: A Study of Sankara, Fichte, and Heidegger*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1983) spoke repeatedly of an experience which did not involve a subject-object structure. [re., Taber, p. 48]. Also note the following line, in the Yoga sutra, from a description of a mystical experience, "[i]n this state of pure consciousness... awareness is both subject-free (anahamvadi) and object-free (nirvastuka)". ["The Unseen Seer and the Field: Consciousness in Samkhya and Yoga", op.cit.]

17. *The Teachings of the Mystics*, p. 20; my emphasis.

Reinhold's *first principle* could be derived) are *pre-empirical* and therefore not obviously (i.e., directly) incompatible with (1) – (3). I will briefly elucidate Fichte's transcendental principles, before attempting to show how they can be seen as compatible with (1) – (3).

Early in his career, Fichte gave the following explication of all three conditions,

The absolute subject, the I, is not given by empirical intuition; it is instead, posited by intellectual intuition. And the absolute object, the not-I, is that which is posited in opposition to the I.<sup>18</sup>

For a more detailed account of these principles we must turn elsewhere. In his *Foundations of the Entire Science of Knowledge*, Fichte offered the following formulations of the principles:

- (i) "The self begins by an absolute positing of its own existence."<sup>19</sup>
- (ii) The self posits "a *not-self* [which is] opposed absolutely to the self."<sup>20</sup>
- (iii) "Both self and not-self are posited, in and through the self, as capable of *mutually limiting* one another, in such a fashion, that is, that the reality of the one destroys that of the other, and vice versa."<sup>21</sup>

"Posit" ("Setzen") is Fichte's primary primitive term. It can perhaps best be thought of as "the act of establishing or *grounding* existence and determinacy claims."<sup>22</sup> Hence, *self-positing* is the act of grounding existence and determinacy claims of oneself; "*I am*" is the purest of such claims. The term "absolute" is meant to affirm that the *act* of positing is *itself* the only relevant ground. Thus **absolute self-positing** is

18. "Review of *Aenesidemus*" (I:10), p. 65.

19. *Science of Knowledge*, edited and translated by Peter Heath and John Lachs, Cambridge University Press, N.Y., 1982, (I:98), p. 99.

20. *ibid.*, (I:104), p. 104.

21. *ibid.* (I:125), p. 122.

22. *re.*, the editor's introduction to *S.K.*, p. xiv.

(roughly) *the act of asserting the validity of claims of one's own existence and determinacy by the very act itself*. Fichte called this self-positing of the self a *reversion* of the self into itself out of which all reality stems.<sup>23</sup> The self's absolute self-positing logically involves the positing of the not-I whose sole reality consists in its opposition to the originally posited I. But if the self and not-self were strictly opposed (such that the reality of either destroys the other) with nothing to unify them together then the positing of one would disallow the positing of the other. Thus, Fichte argued that the two must be posited under the unifying transcendental concept '*determinability / divisibility*', which enables the absolute self to partition itself into them.<sup>24</sup> In other words, Fichte held that the concepts '*determinability*' and '*divisibility*' were logically presupposed by his transcendental principles, which were pre-conditions for the possibility of our concept '*consciousness*'.

Clearly, *distinguishing* and *relating* are involved in these principles. There are even a subject (the absolute positing self), objects (the posited self and not-self), and concepts inherent within them. Should we not then assume that (i) – (iii) are incompatible with the assertion of the existence of pure conscious events? I believe not, for *four reasons* which I shall consider one at a time.

**First**, although they are operating within *intellectual intuition*, Fichte maintained that these principles were merely transcendental conditions of (i.e., logical preconditions for) consciousness and not present in the empirical content of ordinary consciousness.<sup>25</sup> Although Fichte held that intellectual intuition was a necessary component of every consciousness, he clearly differentiated it from all empirical con-

tent.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the distinction between the *absolute self* (i.e., the positing / posited self of (i)) and the *absolute not-self* (i.e., the posited not-self of (ii)), was not intended by Fichte to be an *empirical* one. As long as the experience is *phenomenologically* one of undifferentiated unity or emptiness, these principles can be viewed as operating during pure conscious events. In other words, as long as there is no empirical subject who, during the pure conscious event, is consciously aware of positing or distinguishing and relating, these activities can be seen as occurring during these states of *pure consciousness*.

**Second**, Fichte maintained that transcendental concepts derivable as necessarily present in intellectual intuition (e.g., '*determinability*') were not present in empirical consciousness.<sup>27</sup> As long as concepts neither are themselves *phenomenologically present* nor directly construct any phenomenological feature of consciousness, I believe that we can adopt a Fichte-type theory of consciousness and still attribute a strong sense to the mystics' claim that their experience is a-conceptual (i.e., (3)).

Certainly, '*determinability*' is instrumental in shaping or constructing the *phenomenological content* of most experience. I understand '*phenomenological content*' to involve (among other elements) the *phenomenological mode* (e.g., thinking, dreaming, seeing, wishing, etc.), the *phenomenological* (intentional) *object*, and the *phenomenological attributes* of the phenomenological object (e.g., '*soft, beautiful, white rose*'). One example of the role of '*determinability*' in shaping experience is distinguishing between these different elements and connecting them appropriately. For example, when I am in the appropriate type of relation to a particular type of object, I always have an experience with the appropriate phenomenological mode(s) (e.g., one always *sees* a movie, and one never *tastes* an idea, ordinarily at

23. re., *S.K.* (I:459), p. 34. A positive account of this *generation* of reality is difficult to give (at best). However, Fichte did not intend this to be taken in any (physical) causal sense.

24. *ibid.* (I:110–111), p. 110; and (I:129–130), pp. 125–126.

25. re., "Review of *Aenesidemus*" (I:10), p. 65; *S.K.* (I:459), pp. 34–35, and (I:473), p. 47.

26. *S.K.* (I:435), p. 17, (I:459), p. 35, (I:463), p. 38, and (I:465), p. 40.

27. *ibid.* (I:124), p. 121.

least).<sup>28</sup> However, in a state of consciousness which is devoid of all phenomenological attributes (except for *pure* or essential phenomenological attributes, if any exist), this shaping or constructing role of 'determinability', along with all other transcendental concepts, would be inoperative.<sup>29</sup>

This is not to suggest that all transcendental concepts are *completely* inoperative during pure conscious events. There are clearly strict transcendental roles that these concepts can (and must) be involved in during every conscious state, including pure conscious events. For example, for memory to be possible every conscious state must be able to fit into an ordered manifold of conscious states and thus differentiated from all the other states in the manifold as well as all concurrent unconscious states. In addition, transcendental concepts are involved in the transition between conscious (and unconscious) experiences. However, all of these *transcendental activities*, activities depicted by transcendental concepts, occur outside the range of phenomena present before the experiencing subject during any specific conscious state; they are going on 'behind the scene.' For example, when I look at a computer screen, I am directly aware of seeing the screen and whatever may be displayed on it. During that experience, I am not aware of the activity of distinguishing my experience from my past experiences or from experiences which I expect to have in the future, although the fact that such distinguishing is occurring during my experience is evident from the fact that upon reflection I find my experience to be so distin-

28. For a complete account of 'phenomenological content', see David Woodruff Smith & Ronald McIntyre, *Husserl and Intentionality*, Kluwer Academic Publishing, Hingham, Ma., 1984.

29. I intend 'phenomenological attribute' to cover all features of conscious experience which the *experiencing subject* is aware of during the experience. This includes all the elements of the phenomenological content. I also intend to distinguish here between the *experiencing subject* and the *empirical ego*; the latter may itself be a phenomenological attribute, while the former may not.

guished.<sup>30</sup> Thus it seems coherent to maintain that these transcendental activities can occur during conscious states in which there is no conscious awareness of any thing at all (i.e., during pure conscious events).

**Third**, the absolute, positing / posited self of (i) was clearly distinguished by Fichte from the personal ego of empirical consciousness. Fichte maintained that this absolute subject could have no predicate attached to it, although it was a pre-condition for the existence of any subject of predication.<sup>31</sup> Fichte stated, "[t]hat whose being or essence consists simply in the fact that it posits itself as existing, is the self as absolute subject."<sup>32</sup> The absolute self, Fichte insisted, is *selfhood in general*, and he compared it to Kant's *transcendental unity of apperception*.<sup>33</sup> The central role of both Fichte's *absolute self* and Kant's *transcendental unity of apperception* is one of unifying and synthesizing a manifold (multiplicity) of presentations. Hence, Fichte's absolute self is, in fact, a (transcendental) *activity*. In contrast, the self which the mystics claim to be absent during pure conscious events, the individual empirical ego, is closer in ontological status to a *substance* than an activity. The empirical self is co-foundational with primary intentional objects of consciousness. For example, when I recall looking at the computer screen, I remember that *I saw it*. This 'I' (the I of the remembered experience, not the remembering experience) is

30. Husserl's theory of consciousness involves the claim that awarenesses of immediate past and possible immediate future experiences are *indirectly* present within conscious experience, but because these *horizontal* elements are only indirectly present I believe that they too can be seen as compatible with pure conscious events. [re., *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*, edited by Martin Heidegger, translated by James S. Churchill, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, 1964].

31. S.K. (I:110), pp. 109–110.

32. *ibid.* (I:97), p. 98.

33. *ibid.* (I:503–504), pp. 73–74. Also see T. P. Hohler's *Imagination and Reflection: Intersubjectivity – Fichte's Grundlage of 1794*, Martinus Nijhoff, Boston, 1982, p. 21 & pp. 97–99.

identified through the other experiences which I have had of looking at that same screen, possible experiences which I could have with the screen, and the unified chain of my experiences in which the experience is inserted. Thus, the presence of Fichte's absolute self can be seen as compatible with mystics' claims of *experiencing* a loss of self or no self, if the mystics are interpreted as referring to a loss of the phenomenological presence of an awareness of their individual empirical ego and if this awareness is dependent upon the presence of a primary phenomenological object which is absent during pure conscious events.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, Fichte's three transcendental conditions are actually *helpful* for dealing with three difficulties regarding the internal coherence of pure conscious events.<sup>35</sup>

- A. How can pure conscious events be remembered by the individuals who experience them?
- B. How are pure conscious events exited (i.e., how do mystics return to ordinary states of consciousness after pure conscious events)?
- C. How do pure conscious events differ from unconsciousness or deep sleep?

I believe that a Fichte-type theory of consciousness can answer each of these difficulties. I will

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34. In fact, in a passage which could have been pulled directly from the mystical literature in question, Fichte himself asserted, "[t]he more a determinate individual can think away of himself, the closer does his empirical consciousness approximate to a pure self-consciousness [i.e., intellectual intuition]" [S.K. (I:244), p. 216]. The main difference between this claim of Fichte's and those of the mystics is that Fichte emphasized that this loss of self is obtainable through conscious abstract, conceptual *thinking* while the mystics claim that pure conscious events necessarily involve a complete phenomenological absence of concepts.

35. Once again, I am indebted to Martin Schwab here who first brought these difficulties to my attention.

address (A) and (B) together and then address (C).

- A. How can pure conscious events be remembered by the individuals who experience them?

That pure conscious events are claimed to be remembered is a helpful indicator of what mystics could mean when they claim that such experiences are, in fact, *conscious* events. Hence, we should clearly expect a theory of consciousness, which could allow for the existence of such experiences, to be able to account for the (alleged) fact that pure conscious events are remembered by those who experience them. Yet, the mystics' alleged dissolution of self during pure conscious events poses a problem for how these experiences are remembered. When an ordinary state of consciousness is remembered the remembering ego is identified with the empirical ego of the remembered experience. In my example above, I remember that I saw that screen. However, there can be no such identification in the case of the memory of a pure conscious event. A mystic may state, "I remember that I experienced a loss of myself." This statement would bare a structural similarity to my example above. However, the second "I" in the mystic's statement cannot have the same referent as the second "I" in the ordinary case (i.e., the empirical ego of the remembered experience), because according to the mystic there is no such referent in her experience. Fortunately, mystics who claim to experience pure conscious events are generally more careful in their descriptions. Often the mystics refrain from using this double "I" structure when describing their experience. For example, a mystic might claim, "I remember an absolute emptiness into which I had completely dissolved." Thus, we need an account of memory which does not necessitate the existence of an empirical ego in the remembered experience.

B. How can pure conscious events be exited?

The ability to exit a state in response to a perceived need to do so is also a definitive mark of consciousness. After a careful investigation of the famous medieval German mystic and theologian Meister Eckhart (about whom there has been some dispute as to his position regarding the possibility of pure conscious events), Robert Forman stated,

[i]n sum, I characterize the pattern of mental functioning denoted by Eckhart's term "gezucket" ["rapture"] as a pure conscious event, a mind which is simultaneously wakeful and devoid of content for consciousness. ... In one discussion of Saint Paul's rapture, Eckhart comes close to [directly] saying that one is wakeful during *gezucket*. Had anyone touched Saint Paul with a needle, "[W]ould he have felt it? I say, 'Yes.'... [I]f anyone had then touched him with the point of a needle, he would have been aware of it... he would have known it." In *gezucket* Paul could have responded had a need arose, only he had no such need. Had he been utterly blacked out he could not have felt anything. This capacity to respond to sensory input implies that the mind was not unconscious.<sup>36</sup>

'Determinability' seems to be at work here in allowing for the possibility of the next experience; some *determination* must be made as to what unconscious sensory constitutes a need to respond by exiting the pure conscious event. Forman goes on to admit that a contentless but alert mind may sound "paradoxical and strange", but concludes, "such an experience may be common in many traditions."<sup>37</sup> Forman himself testified to the ability to respond while in a pure conscious event, in a description of his own experience,

I had been meditating alone in my room all morning when someone knocked on my door. I heard the knock perfectly clearly, and upon hearing it I knew that, although there was no 'waking up' before hearing the knock, for some indeterminate length of time prior to the knocking I had not been aware of anything in particular. I had been awake but with no content for my consciousness... the experience was... utterly without content.<sup>38</sup>

Again (as with (A)), if we wish to accept the mystics' claims that they are alert and able to respond in pure conscious events then we must endorse a theory of consciousness which allows for this possibility. Furthermore the capacity to respond is generally attributed to an agent or self, and yet we have seen that the mystics claim that the empirical ego is absent during pure conscious events. To whom then shall we attribute this capacity? I believe that Fichte's transcendental conditions will enable us to postulate the existence of a **dispositional, non-empirical self** which is active during pure conscious events. This self can be viewed as constituted by dispositions to respond to various *subconscious inputs* by leaving the current conscious state (e.g., a pure conscious event) and entering a new one (e.g., an ordinary conscious state), as well as the capacity to imprint a memory of the event in the chain of memories which reflect the life of the individual mystic.<sup>39</sup>

Fichte's transcendental conditions can help a defender of pure conscious events respond to both (A) and (B). In the second part of the *Foundations of the Entire Science of Knowledge*, Fichte describes an *unfolding process* of intellectual intuition which results in empirical consciousness. I believe that in pure conscious events this unfolding can be seen as stopping

36. "Eckhart, Gezucken, and the Ground of the Soul", in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*, p. 106.

37. *ibid.* pp. 106–107. Forman is referring to Stace's investigation in *Mysticism and Philosophy*, especially chapter two; and *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*. Also see Forman's "The Construction of Mystical Experience."

38. "Pure Consciousness Events and Mysticism", p. 55; quoted in Paul Griffiths, "Pure Consciousness and Indian Buddhism", in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*, p. 75.

39. I believe that an account of this dispositional, nonempirical self based on the Husserl and Sartre inspired idea of *subject-horizon* can be illuminating. Again, however, time does not allow me to explicate this account here.



short of arriving at the level of differentiation of ordinary empirical consciousness.

Let me outline this process to show how this could be possible. Fichte felt it was the main task of idealism (and philosophy in general) to account for the existence of all *representations of necessity*. Thus, after Fichte grasped the transcendental principles of consciousness, he proceeded to attempt to deduce “the system of all necessary presentations or the entirety of experience” as necessary consequences of these principles.<sup>40</sup> Fichte maintained that all of reality derives from the positing activity of the absolute self.<sup>41</sup> Beyond the absolute partitioning itself into itself and the not-self, the absolute self further partitions the not-self to manifest empirical reality.<sup>42</sup> It further orders these partitions which become intuitions of objects and, for each of these partitions, it posits a *finite subject* (i.e., the empirical ego) related to the specific object. Fichte stated,

presentation consists in the fact that the self posits a subjective and counterposits another thing thereto as an objective, and so on; and thus we see the beginning to a series of presentations in empirical consciousness.<sup>43</sup>

However, defenders of pure conscious events here part company with Fichte and maintain that for some intuitions (i.e., pure conscious events) this further positing of an object and an empirical subject does not occur.

It is important to note that, although devoid of any relational, *empirical* subject, these pure or empty intuitions can still be seen as being posited by the absolute self as specific presentations among the ordered set of presentations which are unified by the absolute self and into

which the not-self differentiates. We have also added to the story the absolute self’s positing of a non-empirical, dispositional self, to account for the movement within this ordered set of presentations. Thus, there would not appear to be any more of a problem explaining the movement from a pure conscious event to an ordinary presentation then there would for explaining the movement between two ordinary presentations. The non-empirical, dispositional self is active (behind the scenes) in both ordinary conscious presentations and in pure conscious events. For example, if a fire broke out, anyone would (probably) respond to it whether they were reading or “lost” in a pure conscious event. However, if you knew that a water faucet was leaking in the other room, you would (probably) not respond to the sound of a drop of water, whether you were reading or “lost” in a pure conscious event. Furthermore, if we conceive of a remembering experience as an ordinary (i.e., dualistic, intentional) conscious presentation which has an earlier conscious presentation as its object, it would be no harder for a Fichte-type theory to explain how pure conscious events are remembered then it would be for such a theory to explain how ordinary conscious experiences are remembered, since the remembered presentation could either be another ordinary conscious presentation or the *empty* presentation of a pure conscious event.

C. How do pure conscious events differ from unconsciousness or deep sleep ?

Referring specifically to the above quoted personal account of a pure conscious event offered by Robert Forman, Paul Griffiths stated,

[i]f the pure consciousness event in question really has no content and no phenomenological attributes, it is hard to see how its subject can, at a later time, know that it was different from the unconsciousness of dreamless sleep.<sup>44</sup>

40. *S.K.* (I:445–446), pp. 25–26. I take ‘(transcendental) deduction’ here to refer to a line of reasoning from a given phenomenon to conditions for its possibility (i.e., *transcendental conditions*).

41. *ibid.* (I:95), p. 96; and (I:110–112), pp. 110–111.

42. *ibid.* (I:130), p. 126.

43. *ibid.* (I:209), p. 188.

44. “Pure Consciousness and Indian Buddhism”, p. 75.

Griffiths argued,

[p]resumably, a postulated pure consciousness event cannot be phenomenologically distinct from dreamless sleep, for, if it is, it has at least the phenomenological attribute of being differentiable from dreamless sleep and is, thus, not strictly a pure consciousness event.<sup>45</sup>

I believe that Griffiths is mistaken here. All conscious states (including pure conscious events) are distinguishable from unconscious states simply by virtue of their being conscious. Any given conscious state with a particular content surely is distinct from an unconscious state with the exact same content, not because they have different phenomenological attributes (unconscious states have no direct phenomenological attributes at all), but simply because one is **conscious** and the other is not. For example, a conscious wish is phenomenologically distinguishable from an unconscious wish simply because the former is conscious. The situation is exactly analogous for experiences with no particular content (i.e., pure conscious events). I once heard Maezumi Roshi, a modern Zen teacher, say of the meditation practice *shikan taza* (literally “just sitting”) that it is *not* just sitting, for “a rock just sits” and sitting in *shikan taza* does not mean becoming like a rock.<sup>46</sup> *Shikan taza* is often described as the cultivation of a mental state of intense alterness which, however, is not focused on anything (i.e., a pure conscious event).<sup>47</sup> Presumably, the difference between the sitting in *shikan taza*, and the rock’s sitting is that the former is accompanied by consciousness.

One way of distinguishing between conscious and unconscious experiences involves the claim that consciousness is essentially comprised of a (set of) *pure* phenomenological at-

tribute(s) which does not count as part of the phenomenological content of the experience. Here I intend to distinguish between *pure* or *essential* phenomenological attributes and *relative* or *inessential* phenomenological attributes (e.g., the particular phenomenological mode: seeing, wishing, remembering, etc.; the particular phenomenological object; and the attributes of the phenomenological object). Note, pure conscious events can still be viewed as ‘contentless’, under this suggestion, if ‘phenomenological content’ is comprised solely of these *inessential* phenomenological attributes.

A *pure feeling element* or *phenomenal quality* has often been suggested as such a pure phenomenological attribute.<sup>48</sup> According to this suggestion, every conscious experience (*sensations, thoughts, desires, etc.*) has some general *feeling quality* to it.<sup>49</sup> David Smith stated, “[t]he phenomenal quality of an experience is a property that involves the overall structure of the experience *qua* consciousness.”<sup>50</sup> It is important to note that the presence of this pure phenomenological attribute does not imply that the empirical subject of a pure conscious event is, during the event, *consciously* distinguishing between her current experience and dreamless sleep. However, the presence of consciousness (with its phenomenal element), in addition to being a prerequisite for the state being remembered, allows for the two states to be distinguished, via the transcendental concept ‘determinability’, *at a later time*.

It may be objected that a defender of the possibility of pure conscious events could not accept this suggestion of ‘phenomenal quality’ as a pure phenomenological attribute since consciousness *by (/in) itself* cannot feel like anything. The objector may insist that every feeling

45. *ibid.*, p. 76.

46. Maezumi Roshi was the founder of the Zen Center of Los Angeles.

47. For vivid descriptions of this practice, see Philip Kapleau’s *The Three Pillars of Zen*, Anchor Doubleday, N.Y., 1965.

48. *re.*, David Smith, *The Circle of Acquaintance*, Kluwer Press, Boston, 1989, pp. 95–98.

49. “Feeling” is here to be taken in a wider sense than the (normal) use to depict physical sensations; *re.*, *The Circle of Acquaintance*, pp. 95–96.

50. *ibid.*, p. 96.

is only possible if a (set of) corresponding contrasting feeling(s) is also possible.<sup>51</sup> For example, happiness is (according to the objection) partially composed of and constituted by an awareness by the subject that she could be sad. If sadness was impossible then 'happiness' would be meaningless. The objector would insist that if this is correct then, since there is no contrasting feeling(s) for consciousness in itself, 'feeling conscious' is meaningless. However, even though nonconscious states (probably) cannot meaningfully be ascribed any feeling quality, such states (i.e., unconscious states, dreamless sleep, comas, death) clearly exist. All conscious states include an (indirect) awareness of the possibility and even inevitability of (some of) these states. We as conscious agents continually face the possibility of losing our consciousness. It seems plausible that the awareness of this possibility makes us continually (indirectly) aware of our own consciousness. Thus, I believe that this objection is inadequate, even if the (questionable) claim that all feeling involves the possibility of contrasting feeling(s) is granted.

In conclusion, I hope to have shown that Fichte's three principles of consciousness are compatible with pure conscious events, by showing that Fichte's transcendental conditions, based on an absolute self's positing via *transcendental concepts*, can be seen as compatible with the existence of *phenomenologically a-conceptual* conscious events. I hope it is now clear that pure conscious events must not be seen as *completely* a-conceptual, since some concepts still have transcendental roles in pure conscious events (i.e., synthesizing, unifying, and differentiating). However, during pure conscious events *no* concepts have any mediating or constructing role for any relative (inessential) phenomenological attributes. Furthermore, I hope to have demonstrated that Fichte's conditions are actually helpful in attempting to find a theory of consciousness which can account for the possibility of pure conscious events. Unfortunately, it seems that Fichte himself did not allow for the possibility of pure conscious events, even though it appears that he could have done so. Alas, we can assert, along with Goethe, "*Fichte too often forgets that [all] experience is not in the least what he has imagined it to be.*"<sup>52</sup>

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51. This objection was brought to my attention by Martin Schwab.

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52. Goethe quoted in Robert Adamson's *Fichte*, Books for Libraries Press, Freeport, N.Y., 1969, p. 13.