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Qualia of God: Phenomenological Materiality in Introspection, with a Reference to Advaita Vedanta

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Abstract: Applying Michel Henry’s philosophical framework to the phenomenological analysis of religious experience, the author introduces a concept of material introspection and a new theory of the constitution of religious experience in phenomenologically material interiority. As opposed to ordinary mental self-scrutiny, material introspection happens when the usual outgoing attention is reverted onto embodied self-awareness in search of mystical self-knowledge or union with God. Such reversal posits the internal field of consciousness with the self-disclosure of phenomenological materiality. As shown by the example of Vedantic self-inquiry, material introspection is conditioned on the attitude ‘I “see” myself’ and employs reductions which relieve phenomenological materiality from the structuring influence of intentionality; the telos of material introspection is expressed by the inward self-transcendence of intentional consciousness into purified phenomenological materiality. Experience in material introspection is constituted by the self-affection and self-luminosity of phenomenological materiality; experience is recognized as religious due to such essential properties as the capacity of being self-fulfilled, and specific qualitative “what it’s like”(s). Drawing on more than 5000 live accounts of internal religious experience, it is shown that introspective attention can have different trajectories, producing, within a temporal extension of material introspection, different spatial modifications of embodied self-awareness and a variety of corresponding religious experiences.

Keywords: phenomenology, comparative philosophy of religion, religious experience, introspection, subjectivity, embodiment, self-awareness, intentionality, Michel Henry, self-inquiry, Vedanta, Christian mysticism

“We are invited ... to give a new meaning to the concept of ‘interior life’ ”.

M. Henry¹

In *The Essence of Manifestation*, Henry argues that appearances are a self-manifestation of Life. Insofar as Life is the metaphysical Absolute, all experience can be regarded as religious experience. However, most people distinguish religious experience from ordinary experience. Many have stated that religious experience is internal experience or even experience happening in introspection². Consequently, in order

¹ Henry, *The Essence*, 45.

² For connections between introspection and religious experience, see Crowe, *Theology*, 124-143. For more on religious experience and inwardness, see Flood, *The Truth*. Flood uses the term “inwardness” whereas Crowe uses “introspection”; neither of them explains their choice of the term. In this paper, the author chooses to use the term “introspection” as is more commonly used in philosophical investigations. For more on interiority and the formation of religious sense, see Ales Bello, “The Divine”, 65.

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to clarify the intuitions which constitute religious experience, one should study the phenomenology of interiority³. But what kind of interiority should be sought here, and what kind of introspection posits such interiority?

A note on my argument

First, I will argue that religious experience is situated in the material interiority of the embodied subject. Exactly this kind of interiority hasn't yet been posited in phenomenology, and also it hasn't been described with regard to it being a genetic region of religious experiencing. I will use the philosophical framework developed by Michel Henry to demonstrate the givenness of this region. After introducing the idea of material interiority in Section 1, I will describe the field of consciousness in the region of material interiority, and outline its essential structures in Section 2. I will also outline how material interiority can be accessed in religious practice, and outline the specifics of consciousness which are uncovered in material interiority. For this, I will use an example of introspection in Advaita Vedanta in Section 3.

I will analyze Vedantic introspection to show, by concrete example, how material interiority is used to evoke the particular experiences and insights *emic* to the tradition. These are descriptive phenomenological research findings, and not a rendition of the theory or metaphysics of Vedanta; further, the formal logic of Vedanta (including its participation in the generation of Vedantic metaphysics), and the temporal givenness of introspective experience, even though seemingly parallel, are not the same, and it is yet unclear whether they are even predicated on one another⁴. My report simply describes the emergence of material interiority in Vedantic introspection as a ground for experience; this description will help refine the notion of material interiority by showing how intentional consciousness in the region of individual being transcends itself and resolves into a purified form of phenomenological materiality, with a corresponding rise of religious experience. I do not execute comparative analysis between Michel Henry's Philosophy of Life, and Asian religious systems. I believe that Henry created an analytic method and a conceptual frame for the genetic analysis of a religious system (i.e., as Canullo suggests, he created a new philosophy of religion⁵), and this is how I apply his philosophy; a question of whether Henry's metaphysics can or should be treated as a religious system in its own right, and thereby whether it is commensurable with other religious systems, is not treated in this paper⁶.

1 Consciousness, interiority, and religious experience

Introspection has been an exegetical category for a number of very different processes including ordinary self-reflection, philosophical reasoning, Plotinian philosophical-mystical return (*epistrophē*), religious experiences such as those of St. Augustine, revelation, gnostic self-examinations in Sufism, et cetera⁷.

³ For the phenomenal field, see Gurwitsch, *The Field*.

⁴ For more on the relationship between empirical findings and logic (with regard to the existence of subjectivity), see Zahavi, "Consciousness"; for more on the relationship between logical and empirical investigations, see Hanna, "Husserl's Arguments".

⁵ Canullo, "Michel Henry".

⁶ For Asian influences on Henry, see Hatem, *Critique*. For comparisons between Henry's philosophy and Kashmir Shaivism, see Leclercq, "Sur 'l'éveil'"; between Henry's philosophy and Zen Buddhism, see Vaschalde, *A L'Orient*.

⁷ Overgaard and Sørensens in "Introspection" identify introspection as a condition in which "...the subject directs attention not towards the object as such but towards the very state of being conscious of the object...", 77. Close (in this definition) to ordinary reflective awareness in the first order of reflection, introspection is clearly treated differently in analytic philosophy, and in religious contexts, in which it implies turning away from the world onto oneself, i.e. a reversal of outgoing consciousness onto and into the subjectivity. For mental processes identified as introspection, see Stern-Gillet, "Consciousness", 145; Schwitzgebel, "Introspection"; for an example of introspective religious experience, see Harrison, "Augustine". For revelation in introspection, in Christianity, see Crowe, *Theology*; Špidlík, "Amore". For introspective perception of Union with God in Vedanta, see Osborne, *Ramana Maharshi*; Ramana Maharshi, *Words*; in Sufism, see Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure*; in Buddhism, see Wangyal, *Wonders*. For more on introspection as a means of intuitional knowledge, see Lyons, *The Disappearance*; for introspective reasoning, see Allo, "The Many Faces".

In analytic philosophy, introspection has been mainly regarded as mental self-scrutiny. Insofar as one's introspection is experienced as "my mind", introspection is a form of self-awareness. Recent research shows that self-awareness is constitutively embodied⁸. Therefore, introspection must be considered not only as a spatial phenomenon⁹, but as a constitutively embodied phenomenon. Interiority attained as a result of such introspection must also be constitutively embodied. However, religious inwardness has not yet been treated in the context of its possible embodiment, but referred to as an idea within a culturally-determined construct of the self¹⁰. In such a view, religious experience consists of ideas or symbolic forms, and if the body is referenced in the description of experience, this would be nothing other than the idea of the body projected onto the idea of the self¹¹.

1.1 Two models of consciousness in regard for interiority

Religious introspection begins in the natural attitude, with an idea that one's self has an interiority in which the contents of the self can be directly perceived. This presupposes a presence of some kind of internal "space" for such a spectacle, which would be different from external or physical space. The naturalistic distinction between the inner and the outer, for example in the work of Brentano, was rejected by both Husserl and Heidegger as rooted in Cartesian metaphysics and thereby not applicable to the phenomenological analysis of consciousness¹². Thereby, phenomenology famously distanced itself from introspectionism. Different from introspective experience, "internal experience" (*innere Erfahrung*) in phenomenological investigations refers to non-objectifying self-awareness¹³. The term "internal" further refers to the analysis of the consciousness of time which is constitutive for self-awareness, and which also contains the "necessary material of temporal self-awareness of experiences", i.e., "primary impression" or sensation¹⁴. Husserl understood the "lived-bodily-interiority" (*Innenlieblichkeit*) in terms of kinesthetic-hyletic self-affection; there is no other kind of interiority in self-awareness. By the same token, intentionality of consciousness doesn't consist of anything other than itself; after experience has been purified by the phenomenological reduction, the idea that there can be something which would inform experience and make it into what it is, i.e., an idea of some specific internal material of experience, would be obsolete. Since self-awareness is interconnected with intentional consciousness and the world, indeed, the state of affairs must be that "...there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself"¹⁵. Thereby, experiences such as "an awakened heart" in Moravian Pietism, "the Hidden Man" of Orthodox Christianity, the Kierkegaardian "spirit-self", et cetera, must be reduced to a set of ideas and thereby disappear from regard¹⁶.

In this view, intentionality's top-down structuring of the hyletic stratum of experience can be metaphorically likened to patterns on the surface of the ocean, while the interiority of the ocean is filled by water (i.e., hyletics) which remains out of view¹⁷. Henry, who believed that the essence of experience must be sought in phenomenological materiality, and not in intentionality, stated:

⁸ For more on the constitutive embodiment of self-awareness, see Taipale, *Phenomenology*.

⁹ For more on the spatiality of introspection, see Mehta, "Beyond Transparency", 2.

¹⁰ For example, the metaphor of the internal Ladder of Spiritual Ascent would not be *not* connected to any ladder-like internal perception which may be isomorphic to a ladder. For more on the analysis of distinctions between cognitive and perceptual aspects of this religious idea, see Louchakova-Schwartz, "Theophanis".

¹¹ For more on interiority as an idea of interiority, see Flood, *The Truth*.

¹² For more on inner and outer perception according to Brentano, see Mohanty, "Husserl's Total Theory"; for Husserl's criticism of Brentano's ideas, see Moran, *Introduction*, 52-53; Hopkins, *Intentionality*, 21-22.

¹³ Husserl, as quoted by Taipale, *Phenomenology*, 22.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 24-29.

¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, xi.

¹⁶ For more on Moravian Pietism, see Peucker, "The Ideal". For more on interiority in Orthodox Christianity, see Zacharias, *The Hidden Man*. For introspective spirit-self, see Kierkegaard, *The Sickness*.

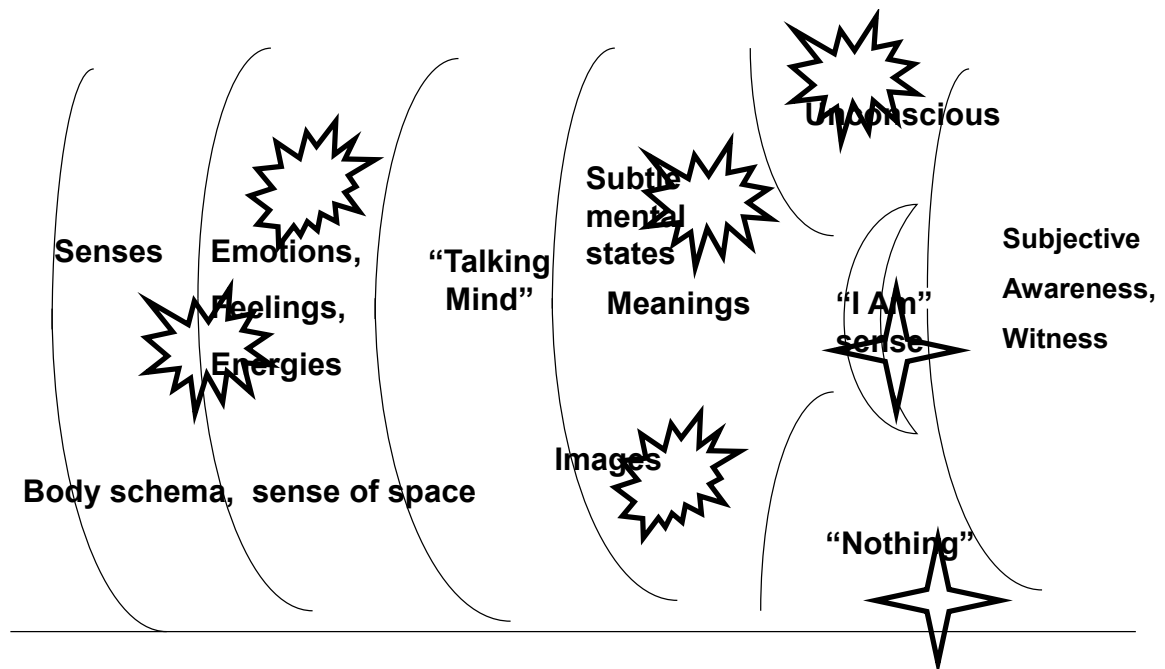
¹⁷ This Husserlian model of consciousness has been extensively criticized by Henry in *Material Phenomenology*.

... No flesh can show itself in the world (in the world's appearing) while this mode of appearing is nevertheless the only one thought knows. Everything suggests that, since the mode of revelation proper to flesh is obscured in principle, its nature would be inevitably falsified, and confused with that of the body. Since the essence of flesh would be reduced in an illusory way to the essence of the body, and since the body will be invested with a flesh that in itself is foreign to it, this flesh/body or body/flesh would be put forward as a kind of mix, a dual being, without being able to give the ultimate reason for this duplicity¹⁸.

If phenomenological materiality is regarded not as hyletics constitutively subordinated to intentionality¹⁹, but in its own mode of being, and is not reduced to the essence of the body, but acknowledged in its self-revelation, a different kind of interiority can be posited. This would not be an interiority constituted by ideas, but an interiority within the bodily self-awareness, in the phenomenologically material subjectivity. In light of this possibility, one should reconsider religious introspection as a way of reaching this interiority, in order to attain direct apperception of phenomenological materiality.

1.2 The essential structures of religious experience are not in intentional consciousness

Having outlined the possibility that religious interiority is phenomenologically material interiority, I will now support this proposition by reports of internal religious experience in more than 5000+ subjects whose accounts were examined with regard to the situatedness of religious quality in their experiences (Figure 1)²⁰.



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Figure 1. Areas of religious experience in the introspective space within embodied subjectivity.

¹⁸ Henry, *Incarnation*, 31-32.

¹⁹ Here and throughout this paper, the terms “intentionality”, “intentional consciousness”, et cetera, are used to designate intentionality phenomenologically understood, as “aboutness” = noetic-noematic structure pertaining to consciousness.

²⁰ These accounts were collected and analyzed by the present author, herself a mandated teacher in traditional Advaita Vedanta, Kundalini Yoga, and Eastern Christian mysticism, from sources such as meditation groups, New Age and religious groups, spiritual teachers and exemplar practitioners, therapy and pastoral counseling clients, et cetera, for a period of 25+ years.

The schema in Figure 1 shows the introspective “space” onto which the subjects mapped their experiences. The “stars” are the areas of a situated religious quality which shows up most often in the domains other than that of sense. There are soteriological sentiments as opposed to ordinary emotions; there are mental states with a specific spiritual taste, *dhawq* (Arabic, ‘taste’); there are spiritual “subtleties”, such as densities and transparencies of phenomenological materiality (Arabic, *laṭā’if*, ‘subtleties’), et cetera²¹. Rather than attributing a religious quality to the properties of experience, the subjects acknowledged a religious quality in its immediate givenness.

These second-person studies of religious experience in live informants, who themselves can identify the situatedness of a religious quality, must be contrasted with textual studies. In traditional texts, the pre-reflective dimension of experience is masked by the very fact of the evidence being a recorded text, in which the first-person authority of the subject as *homo religiosus* is unavailable, thereby predisposing a reader to attribute religious quality to sense²². No doubt, some essences of experiences qualified as religious must be in the structures of meaning²³. However, these structures may just reflect a religious quality which is already complete in other strata of experience, for example phenomenological materiality. In support of this possibility is the fact that in our study, all experiences qualified as “religious” carried a possibility of fulfillment within themselves, and not in their possible intentional objects or directedness which may be characteristic of some type of intentionality *in absentia* of intentional objects (e.g., as in Steinbock’s notion of verticality). For example, one of the research participants enjoyed religious longing. Longing can be a frustrating experience of deprivation, as longing for somebody or something; the difference between his longing and such ordinary psychological longing was that his longing carried the conditions of satisfaction within itself. While in longing, he could also be experiencing union or presence, as an “I am here” response from the Divine. A similar condition is described by Ibn al-‘Arabī, who depicts an “outcast and distraught” seeker receiving an immediate internal response from the Divine: “Is it not enough for him that I am in his heart and that he beholds me at every moment? Is it not enough?”²⁴

When a mystic performs a silent Sufi *dhikr*, or seeks inside herself “the incomprehensible God” of Hesychasm, or engages in one of the hundred and twelve prescriptive internal *samādhī* practices of Kashmiri Shaivism, the inwardness is not “empty”, nor is it fulfilled by self-soothing imagination. Rather, it is filled by something²⁵, least of all by ideas or meaning-making which, on the contrary, have to be suspended for such fulfillment to arise.

1.3 The inward-going thrust of attention in religious introspection

The idea that the *eidos* of ordinary religious experiencing must be sought in the horizon of phenomenological materiality gains support from an unexpected source, which is neuroscientific research of meditation. Neuroscience uses its own reductions for bracketing out religious connotations of meditation; such bracketing helps to focus the research on the attentional strategies of the brain. However, in traditional

²¹ For more on soteriological sentiments, see Sovatsky, *Words*. For more on *Dhawq*, see Louchakova-Schwartz, “Seal”; Schimmel, “Sufism”. For more on subtleties (*tonkosti*, Russian), see Antonov and Vaver, *Compleksnaya Systema*; Ouspensky, *In Search*. For more on *Laṭā’if*, see Dahnhardt, *Change*. For more on the pluralism of spiritual materialities, see Poortman, *Ochêma*.

²² For more on the problem of the first person experience in textual evidence, see Louchakova-Schwartz, “Phenomenological Approach”; Louchakova-Schwartz, “Theophanis”.

²³ Cf. Steinbock finding the essences of Islamic and Judeo-Christian religious experience exclusively in the stratum of intentional consciousness, with just a minor engagement of the *imaginaire* of the phenomenology of life in the terms such “spiritual densities” or “vital-life” (*Phenomenology*, 201-203).

²⁴ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Tarjumān*, 58. Also, cf. Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Wisdom*, chapter on Seth, 21, Divine response to prayer as “I am here”.

²⁵ For more on the internal *dhikr*, see Özelsel, *Forty Days*. For internal practices of Kashmiri Shaivism, see Singh, *The Yoga*; for the phenomenology of internal prayer, see Louchakova, “Ontopoiesis”; Louchakova-Schwartz, “Theophanis”. For saturated phenomena, see Marion, *In Excess*.

piety, these very attentional strategies are a means to religious experiencing²⁶. Some practices, such as the Indian *Ātmavicāra* or the Christian Prayer of the Heart, use a focused inward-directed motion of the mind towards the internal center of the body-schema; when attention gets into this area, there arises an experience of God²⁷. Other areas, known in Hindu Tantra as *granthi*, ‘knots’, serve quite the opposite: they cause an obfuscation of religious experience²⁸. Figure 2 shows the trajectories of somatic attention which are associated with various kinds of internal religious experiencing (data collected from the abovementioned interviews, 5000+ subjects over the course of about twenty five years).

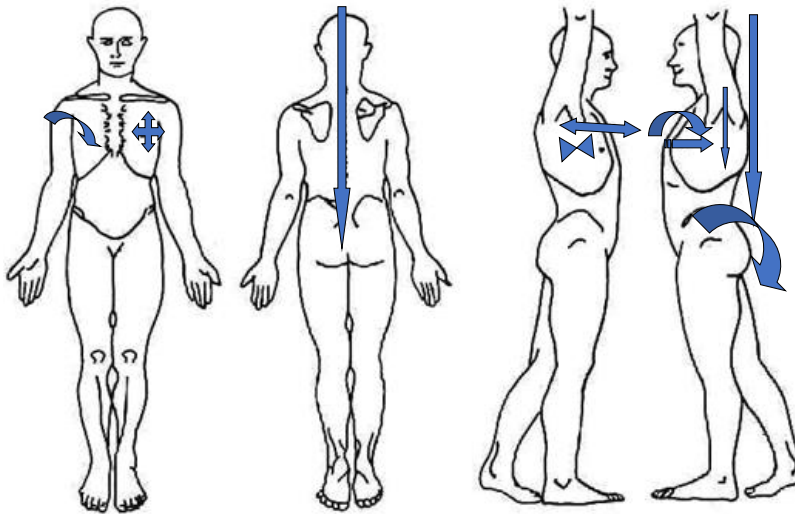


Figure 2. Inward motions of attention in religious experiencing.

What do these inward motions of attention reach for? They reveal

...bursting forth of... the reality of the soul, the unthinkable division of its essence into a hierarchy of more or less obscure degrees... including the feeling of freedom....²⁹

Religious introspection would be the means by which the mind reaches “the reality of the soul” in the constitution of the phenomenologically material interiority. Henceforth, my analysis will focus on a) how material interiority can be disclosed by introspection, and b) how the certainty of religious fulfillment can be attained in material interiority.

2 The phenomenological region of material interiority

Instructing monks in the method of internal prayer, the 10th century St. Simeon the New Theologian writes:

[W]ithdraw your intellect from everything worthless and transient...and search inside yourself with your intellect so as to find the place of the heart where all the powers of the soul reside.³⁰

²⁶ For religious experiences in meditation, see Eifring, *Meditation*. For examples of attentional and cognitive strategies in meditation, see Manna et al., “Correlates”; Slagter, Davidson, & Lutz, “Training”; Travis & Shear, “Attention”; for more on the internal spatial-temporal structures of experience, see Louchakova, “Kundalini”; Louchakova, “Ontopoiesis”; Louchakova & Warner, “Via Kundalini”; Louchakova-Schwartz, “Cognitive Phenomenology”; Louchakova-Schwartz, “Theophanis”; Louchakova-Schwartz, “Phenomenological Approach”.

²⁷ For more on *Ātmavicāra* and the Prayer of the Heart, see Louchakova “Ontopoiesis”, Louchakova-Schwartz, “Self”.

²⁸ For more on *granthi*, see Harrigan, *Kundalini Vidya*.

²⁹ Henry, *The Essence*, 536-537. For many examples of experiences resulting from the internal focusing of attention, see Antonov and Vaver, *Compleksnaya Systema*.

³⁰ St. Simeon the New Theologian, “The Three Methods”, 72.

In those who followed these instructions (more than 300 accounts from live practitioners in this research³¹), the outgoing thrust of intentionality is weakened, but self-awareness, on the contrary, becomes more prominent and intensified. The motions of attention in these practitioners are depicted in Figure 3, which shows that an initial movement of the somatic ego from the head into the body develops into an orthogonal absorption of self-awareness³².

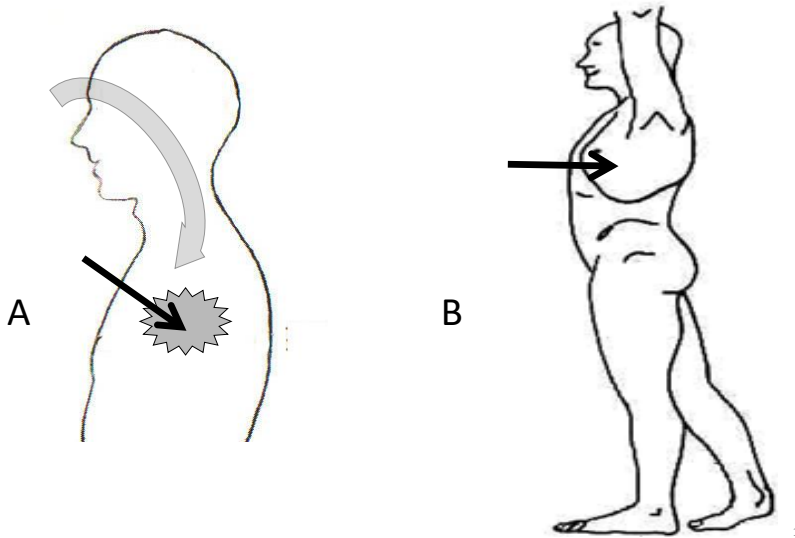


Figure 3. Refocusing (A) and absorption (B) of the somatic ego-sense in the Prayer of the Heart.

Between the initial reversal of intentional consciousness onto the self, and the full cessation of intentional consciousness when it becomes absorbed in the core of self-awareness, there emerges a whole field of phenomena “inside” embodied self-awareness. Phenomenological materiality is disclosed, in different ways, in every instance of this continuum. Manifestations of phenomenological materiality in introspection bear no structuring by intentional consciousness as would be the case with “external” sensory impressions, except for perhaps the positing of “internal space” which can be regarded as initially posited in intentional consciousness. Because materiality is obscured in appearances³³, there is no retention or interpretive patterns (in other words, no cognitive schemas) which can be readily applied to impressions of material introspection, and thereby, the process has the character of a revelation. In line with Henry’s thought, the region of material introspection discloses the constitutive participation of phenomenological materiality in all forms of intuition, including the categorical ones. The constitutive roles of intentional consciousness and phenomenological materiality in material introspection are reversed: introspective revelation of phenomenological materiality provides a structural organizing matrix for the clusters of emergent intentionalities³⁴. This presupposes a regional eidetics with its own ontology of truth, as a truly “material ontology”, to use Husserl’s term in the Henryan sense³⁵.

³¹ The findings in the introspective Prayer of the Heart were previously published in Louchakova, “Ontopoiesis and Union”.

³² For more on somatic ego, as a dynamic condensation of the somatic sense of the self in some areas of the body, see Spiegelberg, “On the Motility”. For more on absorption, see Bronkhorst, *Absorption*.

³³ For more on the relationship between materiality and appearances, see Henry, *The Essence*.

³⁴ For examples of the organizing function of phenomenological materiality, see the reference to somatic vibrations which produce consciousness, in *Taittiriya-Upaniṣhad*, 56; or the findings on the hyletic matrix in Louchakova, “Spiritual Heart”, 92; or the description of the spectrum of hyletic densities in the steps of the Spiritual Ladder, Louchakova-Schwartz, “Theophanis”.

³⁵ For regions of being in Husserl’s phenomenology, see Landgrebe, “Regions”. For more on hyletics in regional ontologies, see *Ibid.*, 139.

2.1 Prolegomenon to the analysis of the field of consciousness in material introspection

Material introspection takes place in the attitude that one can see and act inside in the same way as externally, not physically but by intention and focus³⁶. Until posited, volitionally or non-volitionally, this region is totally absent from the ordinary “extrospective” consciousness; once posited, for example in meditation, it never fades away³⁷. “What do these people see [perceive] inside?”, the author of this paper was once asked³⁸. Material introspection creates a field of consciousness³⁹ of its own. The landscapes of this field have been reflected in traditional cosmologies, and served as generative ground for religious concepts, such as the Ladder of Spiritual Ascent⁴⁰. A comparative morphology of material introspection has yet to be developed.

The field of consciousness in material introspection includes compounds of impressions of the internal senses, images, thoughts, and feelings; vague representations of the internality of the anatomical body, and perhaps, even of the brain⁴¹; also, there are memories integrated into the body schema. Complicated composites of internal impressions and mythological ideas, as is for example *Mundi Imaginales* of Suhrawardī or Ibn al-‘Arabī, are multidimensional, asymmetrical, and in case of egological introspection, stratified⁴². Normally invisible, phenomenological materiality shows in the various degrees of introspective synesthesia, as a background of densities on the margins of non-actional intentionality. In some areas, one can observe constitutive processes as they take place, with intentional consciousness, as if emerging out of the material phenomenological matrix⁴³. St. Simeon describes it as following:

To start with you will find there darkness and impenetrable density. Later, when you persist and practice this task day and night, you will find, as though miraculously, an unceasing joy. For as soon as the intellect attains the place of the heart, at once it sees the things of which it previously knew nothing. It sees the open space inside the heart and it beholds itself entirely luminous and full of discrimination⁴⁴.

The temporal extension of the introspective phenomenal field reveals more and more different impressions, and reaches deeper and deeper into phenomenological materiality. As prescribed by different soteriologies, introspection resolves into “a sure knowledge of the incomprehensible God”⁴⁵, or the state of liberation⁴⁶, et cetera, as prescribed by a tradition. The introspective modes differ: one may cultivate intentional freedom from thoughts and mental objects, or focus in different areas of inner space, repeat a name of God or chant a mantra, perform localized embodied visualizations, practice absence of mental engagement with internal impressions, discriminate between intentionally generated and *sui generis* internal phenomena, et cetera. But despite these and many more variations, there are stable structures in this field which show

36 For traditional maps of the interiority of the self, in Indian Sufism, see Dahnhardt, *Change*; in Hindu Tantra, see Woodroffe, *The Serpent Power*; for Iranian Sufism, see Corbin, *The Man*; Suhrawardī, *Le Livre*.

37 For examples of contemplative practices opening the phenomenal field of material interiority, see Kadloubovsky and Palmer, *Early Fathers*; Antonov and Vaver, *Compleksnaya Systema*. For examples of spontaneous or non-volitional experiences of material interiority, see Greenwell, *Energies*.

38 Berkeley Social Ontology Group meeting, November 16, 2016.

39 “The field of consciousness” is a phrase introduced by Gurwitsch in *The Field*, 2, to designate a totality of co-present data.

40 For examples of the analysis of internal representations corresponding to the Qur’an’s twenty-fourth Sūrah An-Nūr, see Svirī, *The Taste*; of Spiritual Ladder, see Louchakova-Schwartz, “Theophanis”.

41 For an example of “seeing” one’s brain, see Torey, *The Crucible*.

42 For more on egological and non-egological introspection, see Louchakova, “Prayer of the Heart”, Louchakova, “Spiritual Heart”; Louchakova-Schwartz, “Theophanis”.

43 For more on the internal phenomenon of emergent cognition, see Louchakova, “Ontopoiesis”; Louchakova, “Ontopoiesis and Spiritual Emergence”.

44 St. Simeon the New Theologian, “The Three Methods”, 72.

45 St. Hesychios, “On Watchfulness”, 162.

46 Sri Jñānadeva, *Amritānubhava*, 116-127.

up in accordance with the telos which takes material introspection in the direction of transcendence of intentional consciousness and into the self-disclosure of phenomenological materiality⁴⁷.

2.2 More on the general structure of the region

Practicing mystics report that material introspection renders two kinds of states⁴⁸. In one of them, the attitude “I see my body” persists, and intentional consciousness in this attitude appears to shape hyletic impressions, as it should according to classical phenomenology. The spatial background, created by the body-schema, is filled by hyletic impressions of light and texture associated with the locations of the anatomical organs, like “the unstructured raw materials for our structuring and form-giving mental activities”⁴⁹. In this state, no religious experience happens.

The second state is in a different attitude, such as “I see myself”. In this state, a more Henryan picture of consciousness prevails: hyletics, which in the first state appears under the structuring influence of intentionality, in this state comes upfront as phenomenological materiality and a primal constituter of conscious experience. In absorption, consciousness is not directed at any object. The phenomenal field contain “energies”, i.e. self-luminous, self-affective synesthetic impressions of density, tangibility, and light which transform, contract, and expand⁵⁰; an eight year-old respondent commented on this: “Wow, inside I am much larger than outside!” If intentional acts and objects appear, they clearly emerge out of and have no existence apart from this “alive” phenomenological materiality. If the external, two-fold visual field presents relations such as next-to-one-another, one-above the other, or one-inside-the-other, and lines delimiting the field⁵¹, in material introspection there are no borders, and things appear predominantly as one-inside-the-other with multidimensional depth, enclosed inside one another like Chinese ivory balls. If in the first state, with its predominant intentional mode of mental imagery, phenomenological materiality is more or less masked, in the second state there is no masking of materiality. On the contrary, the unveiling of phenomenological materiality takes place, in the inward deepening and degrees, as if awareness is digging into, folding onto, or being sucked into the phenomenologically material “stuff” of the meditating subject. This creates an inward-opening quantum organization of gradually “thinning-out” layers in phenomenological materiality, a hyletic spectrum which is crucial for the religious experiencing in Tantra, Hesychasm, or the esotericism of G. Gurdjieff, to give a few examples⁵².

As noted by Husserl, “the epistemological question about the possibility of experience is the question about the essence of experience”⁵³. The essence of experience in material introspection is in accessing a

⁴⁷ Gurwitsch (*The Field*, 48) emphasizes that structural organization is an immanent feature of experience. For more on the structures of introspective experience such as the spectrum of densities, internal luminosity and similar introspective phenomena, see Louchakova-Schwartz, “Phenomenological Approach”; Louchakova, “Prayer”. For egological and non-egological introspection, see Louchakova, “Spiritual Heart”.

⁴⁸ As of Landgrebe, “Regions”, 138, “...an order in the founding relationship that exist between the regions of being is ascertained by reflecting on the way in which the entities of the respective regions are given, and essentially, the only way they can be given”. The two modes conditions in region of material introspection are described in Antonov and Vaver, *Compleksnaya Systema*.

⁴⁹ Hintikka, “The Phenomenological Dimension”, 98.

⁵⁰ For examples of introspective synesthesia, see www.sos.org, *jyoti* and *shabd* meditations.

⁵¹ Husserl, *On the Phenomenology*, 5.

⁵² For more on the layering of internal experiences, cf. “The world of the Tantras...is ultimately all God, but it contain a vast range of things, from things as gross as stones, to things as subtle as God”. Sunjukta Gupta, “Mandala”, 35, as quoted in White, “*The Alchemical Body*”, 19. See also “*Bhuvanādhvādirupeṇa cintayet kramaśo'khilam sthūlasūksmaparasthityā yāvadante manolayaḥ* / One should step by step immerse the mind in the universe as being dissolved successively from the gross state into the subtle, and from the subtle state into the supreme state till finally one’s mind is dissolved in it”, Singh, *Vijñānabhairava*, verse 56, 51. See also the stages of internal light as reflected in an account of the Hesychastic internal Jesus Prayer: “He [Christ] at first appears to our intellect like a torch which, carried in the hand of the intellect, guides us along the tracks of the mind; then He appears like a full moon, circling the heart’s firmament.” (St. Hesychios, “Watchfulness”, 166, 191). For a detailed description of the hyletic spectrum in introspection, see Louchakova-Schwartz, “Theophanis”; Louchakova, “Spiritual Emergence”.

⁵³ Husserl, *On the Phenomenology*, 9.

fundamental mode of appearing that is precisely *non-* and even *pre-*intentional and that therefore essentially differs from intentionality⁵⁴. This mode, which in ordinary consciousness is invisible, is material and self-affective, and is inherent in the givenness itself and not in the eidetic representation of this givenness. The region of material introspection is the region in which phenomenological materiality can be available in direct intuition, can be purified rather than merely inferred, and can be examined for its constitutive role. This self-disclosure of phenomenological materiality differentiates this region from all other regions of consciousness⁵⁵. If, as Henry suggests, the essence of all experiencing abides in phenomenological materiality, and if, as we suggested, religious experience has its beginning in material introspection, the essence of religious experiencing must be sought in the introspective self-disclosure of phenomenological materiality. I will now demonstrate such constitution of internal religious experience in the example of Indian Advāita Vedānta.

3 Religious fulfillment in material introspection

Vedānta aims at a soteriological goal of liberation (*mokṣa*, Sanskrit)⁵⁶ attained through introspective examinations of self-awareness intent on recognition of one's immortal Self. Realization of this Self entails distinct religious experiences with connotations of certainty (of God) and happiness⁵⁷. To uncover the Self, Vedānta uses a reduction, *neti-neti*, also known as the "differentiation between the seer and the seen"⁵⁸. Reductions happen in the attitude that the true Self is accessible inside one's normal self-awareness. If one takes herself for granted as the finite body, in the natural attitude, this Self is masked. To find it, one needs to turn inward and practice reductions of *Ātmavicāra*, self-inquiry. Reductions uncover the irreducible, absolute subject, termed *Atman*; the following reflections (*manana*) reveal its identity with *Brahman*, the Absolute⁵⁹. Vedānta discriminates between a *śrotṛiya* who knows the theory of liberation, and a *Brahmavid* who has experience of her awareness (the Self) being God's awareness of Herself, being the essence of all appearances, timeless and thereby immortal. *Brahmavid* also experiences corresponding psychological changes such as extinguishment of the fear of death⁶⁰.

3.1 The Logos of Vedantic introspection

As mentioned above, in every experience, there is consciousness of two kinds, intentional consciousness of something, and non-objectifying self-awareness; these types of consciousness are co-constituted, interdependent, and appear together⁶¹. Associating religious experience exclusively with non-objectifying self-awareness, Vedānta upholds the foundational mode of consciousness as non-intentional⁶². Consequently, if phenomenological reduction purifies intentional relations and masks the constitutive

⁵⁴ For more on phenomenological materiality as the first appearing, see Seyler, "Michel Henry".

⁵⁵ For more on the phenomenological status of various regions, see Hopkins, *Intentionality*, 46-47; Husserl, *Ideas I*, 63/67, 147-155.

⁵⁶ Dayananda, *The Teaching Tradition*.

⁵⁷ For more on happiness and fulfillment in Vedantic realization, see Karapatra, *Advaita Bodha Deepika*, 6; also, watch *Call of the Search*.

⁵⁸ For more on *neti-neti*, see Taydaravaya *Kaivalya Navaneeta*; Karapatra, *Advaita Bodha Deepika*; Śaṅkarācārya, *Dṛg-Dṛśya-Viveka*.

⁵⁹ Vedānta ascribes the term *Brahman* a colloquial meaning as derived from the root *br̥h*, 'be high' or in some oral interpretations, 'biggest'. In reality, the etymology of the word has nothing to do with 'be high'; for more on the complex etymology of *Brahman* with some connotations of 'form-maker', see Schwartz, "Hospitalities".

⁶⁰ For more on the cessation of fear, see Karapatra, *Advaita Bodha Deepika*, 5. For more on the psychological changes in the aftermath of so-called non-dual experience, see Louchakova, "Ontopoiesis and Spiritual Emergence".

⁶¹ Taipale, *Phenomenology*, 22.

⁶² Cf. "It is not intentionality that is a principle of our experience, it is not an intentional field that confers meaning and status on the impressions of our flesh; they, in their original self-revelation, precede, regulate and determine the process in which they are inserted and disposed in one's own body." Henry, *Incarnation*, 158.

role of materiality, in Vedanta the direction of reduction is reversed: *neti-neti* has to neutralize intentional consciousness in order to reveal the phenomenological materiality which comprises the Self as discovered in non-objectifying self-awareness. However, Vedantic verses do not indicate the direction of reduction. For example, verse 3 of *Advaita Makaranda*:

In me, in the space of awareness, rises this celestial city called the world. Therefore, how am I not *Brahman*, who is all knower and the cause of all⁶³,

may point to awareness understood as *ego cogito*, i.e. in abstraction, or as non-objectifying self-awareness, i.e. in embodiment.

Like the transcendental reduction in phenomenology, Vedanta analytically isolates the co-constitutive relationship between the ego and the world⁶⁴. Unlike the transcendental reduction, Vedantic reduction has an empirical component in which all reductions are performed as embodied (see below); but along with it, paradoxically, Vedanta also suggests negation of the body⁶⁵. I will now show how this contradiction is resolved in practice.

3.2 Necessity in material introspection

When he was eight years old, Harilal Sri Poonja “Papaji” experienced an exalted union with God. For the next twenty five years Harilal tried to recapture that early experience through devotion to the Hindu God Krishna. Harilal had many visions of Hindu deities and heroes, but the experience he craved so much did not come back. Then, Sri Ramana Maharshi, one of India’s most beloved gurus, advised him:

What appears and disappears [i.e., the visions], is not real... . The seer remained. You saw him [Krishna] – he disappeared – You remain. See the seer. Now find out who the seer is⁶⁶.

Following this instruction, Harilal not only recaptured his early experience, but made it a permanent one. Ramana’s suggestion had several components: to turn attention onto oneself, to negate all intentional consciousness, and to search for the apodictic intuition of the Real⁶⁷. The video shows Harilal pointing to the chest. In his discourses, Sri Ramana suggests to anchor introspection in *aham-sphurana*, (“the radiance of the ‘I’”), by which he means the somatic ego-sense on the right side of the chest⁶⁸. This creates a situation in which self-awareness will be absorbed towards the embodied “seer”. In such absorption, reduction will negate the body schema and kinesthetic consciousness, but the materiality of the body (density, tactility) cannot be negated; it will remain as thinning out yet irreducible bottom line of absorption. Thereby, hyletics is purified of intentional consciousness and revealed as pure phenomenological materiality⁶⁹. The initial recognition of self-awareness as embodied creates the necessary conditions of possibility for such purification.

The stages of teachings in Vedanta include *śravaṇa*, ‘listening’, *manana*, ‘reflection’, *nididhyāsana*, ‘stabilizing the contemplative posture’, and *manonāśa*, ‘dissolution of the mind’. *Śravaṇa* exposes the practitioner to verbal egological significations, such as:

⁶³ Lakshmidhara, *Advaita Makaranda*, 3, 13.

⁶⁴ As indicated by Taipale in *Phenomenology*, the intentional ego and the world are co-constituted and their givenness cannot be considered one without the other; thereby, their relationship is not a true relationship between two separate entities, but rather, an appearance of relationship as a constitutional structure of consciousness, 22.

⁶⁵ For an example of the Vedantic negation of the body, see Lakshmidhara, *Advaita Makaranda*, verse 8, 26.

⁶⁶ Poonja gives this account in Lemkin and Godman, *Call Off The Search*.

⁶⁷ According to oral tradition, the foundational qualification of a seeker of Self-Realization is *viveka*, a capacity to discriminate between the real and unreal; this quality must be given; it cannot be trained.

⁶⁸ For more an *aham-sphurana*, see Ramana Maharshi, *Sri Ramana’s Words*.

⁶⁹ For more on body-schema, see Preester and Knockaert, *Body Schema*; for the connections between abstract cognitions and spatiality, see Gattis, *Spatial Schemas*. For more on absorption, see Bronkhorst, *Absorption*; Goleman, *The Meditative Mind*.

Always I am, always I shine, never am I an object of dislike to myself. Therefore it is established that I am that Brahman, which is of the nature of existence, awareness and fullness⁷⁰.

By the time when the next stage of inquiry, *manana*, brings in the negation of the body, such as:

[I am] not the body, not the senses, I am not the breath, nor mind, nor intellect. They are seen as mine, a play of the mind. They are known as ‘this’⁷¹.

self-awareness is already experienced in the chest. Therefore, the body has to be negated within the body itself. What is negated is the *form* of the body *and* intentional consciousness of the body-as-an-object, but not phenomenological materiality. Since “a living body can never *fully become an object*”⁷², reductions are accompanied by absorption in the body-subject whereby phenomenological materiality is revealed.

Further, and because absorption of self-awareness aims at finding constancy that never goes away (cf. Ramana’s “what appears and disappears cannot be real” above), in the verses such as

I am the knower of the six-fold modifications [birth, transformation, etc.],
Since I know them,
I am free of them,
If I were not free of them,
I could not know them⁷³.

intentional consciousness is used to negate the kinesthetic component of self-awareness, i.e. to reduce it out of self-awareness, and to uncover the purified, sentient material subjectivity⁷⁴.

The next step in Vedantic transformations of consciousness, *nididhyasana*, stabilizes the gestalt of subjectivity as the phenomenologically material subjectivity, which is experienced as “pure tangibility”, i.e. sentience of “That Self, which is self-effulgent”⁷⁵. Sentience (self-affectivity) makes this condition fulfilled in itself (see next section for more discussion), as in the statements “I am all joy”⁷⁶, or

I am happiness, independent of anything
Anything other does not bring happiness
Love is not towards others;
Nor can I love myself,
For I am love⁷⁷.

If this were a subjectivity within abstracted *ego cogito*, it would not be able to offer any fulfillment, whether existential or phenomenological⁷⁸.

Since phenomenological materiality is found within the bodily subjectivity, the process of reduction takes one through the phenomenal field of material interiority. The effort at full cancellation of intentional consciousness in an attempt to reach the irreducible “felt” pure subjectivity which is experienced as reaching the ultimate interiority of everything (cf. the multiple references to the self in the Heart in Vedanta). After the reduction of temporal and spatial horizons, at the climax of material introspection, this is “a stateless state”⁷⁹, in which the self-revelation of phenomenological materiality manifests as awareness purified of objects. Associating the purified subjectivity with the ultimate interiority, the *Taittiriya* and *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣads* refer to the former as *antaryamin*, the indweller in all names and forms. Thereby, the shift of the

⁷⁰ Lakshmidhara, *Advaita Makaranda*, 2, 7.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 8, 26.

⁷² For more on ‘body qua mine’, as denoted by Marcel, see Zaner, *The Problem*, 21-22.

⁷³ Lakshmidhara, *Advaita Makaranda*, 13, 36.

⁷⁴ For more on kinesthetic and hyletic components of self-awareness, see Taipale, *Phenomenology*.

⁷⁵ Lakshmidhara, *Advaita Makaranda*, 16, 42.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 9, 28.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 24, 60.

⁷⁸ For an example of an error in reduction, see Tandaravaya, *Kaivalya Navaneeta*, 70-71, 15, 16.

⁷⁹ For more on the “stateless state”, see Siddharameshwar Maharaj, *Amrut Laya*.

attitude includes a recognition of purified phenomenological materiality as the essence of all appearances whereby the reality of intentional consciousness is necessarily annulled.

3.3 Sentience in the constitution of religious experience

Phenomenological materiality doesn't have a vector of directedness; even though revealed as a result of the inward motion of the mind, phenomenological materiality in itself is non-positional.

Thereby there is no place in the phenomenal field where the purified phenomenologically material essence of subjectivity is not, and because of this, phenomenological materiality cannot be in self-transcendence or in *ek-stasis*⁸⁰. This absence of self-transcendence doesn't make phenomenological materiality passive; on the contrary, as sentience, it gives rise to other kinds of consciousness⁸¹. *Aparokṣānubhūti* ascribes a special mode of givenness to this purified material of the mind, as knowledge of itself by itself, likened in other Vedantic sources to light being luminous by itself and not as a result of another light cast on it⁸².

After sentience has been phenomenologically relieved from intentional consciousness, the masking presence of intentionality is not as “dense” as before. Once obtained, awareness of purified materiality-sentience cannot be lost. Since sentience completely informs the field of consciousness, its constitutive presence becomes obvious in all cognitions⁸³. This is called in Vedanta *manonāśa*, the extinction of the mind. One of the participants in this research commented on the “what it's like” of such state by exclaiming: “It's crazy! Everything is alive!”⁸⁴. Because self-affection = sentience pertains to phenomenological materiality, such states are different not only in their constitution, but qualitatively: Vedanta calls this *mānosollāsa*, exhilaration of the mind⁸⁵.

As mentioned above, such states are self-fulfilled, not by intentional objects, but in themselves. For example, if this is a prayer, it appears granted; the worship appears fulfilled by divine benevolence; if it is decision-making, a decision appears easily available, et cetera. Mental states bask in the self-luminous presence of sentience-materiality, and that is what becomes signified by the term religious. Thereby, the essence of religious experience is not in its intentional structure, but rather, in the dissolution of such structure, as a result of the unveiling of phenomenological materiality through introspection. The many trajectories of material introspection (as shown in Figure 1, above) create a range of possibilities for religious experiences with their own specific “what it's like”⁸⁶.

In the present paper, I have outlined the conditions of possibility for religious experience, defining them as the region of material introspection. Just as I've been completing this paper in a Berkeley café, I have noticed a small colored poster: Saint Baljit Singh is inviting seekers to “awaken the soul with meditation on Inner Light and Sound”. The soul, in this case, will be the inner space of the embodied subject in material introspection, with light and sound as the manifestations of phenomenological materiality.

⁸⁰ Cf. Lakshmidhara, *Advaita Makaranda*, “I am that material of the mind which is all-pervasive” [translation O. L.-S.], 6, 22.

⁸¹ For more on sentience in the constitution of consciousness, see Louchakova-Schwartz, “Intuition of Life”; Louchakova-Schwartz, “Direct Intuition”.

⁸² For more on the mode of knowledge in purified awareness, see Śaṅkarācārya, *Aparokṣānubhūti*. For the metaphor of light, see Vidyananda, *Pañcadaśī*; also, Sivananda, *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 4.3.1-7; same in the Islamic philosophy of Illumination, see Louchakova-Schwartz, “Phenomenological Approach”.

⁸³ For more on the direct intuition of life, see Louchakova, “Direct Intuition”.

⁸⁴ For more on *manonāśa*, see Karapetra, *Advaita Bodha Deepika*. For more on Vedantic *samādhi*, which are the states of the dissolution of the mind, see Śaṅkarācārya, *Dṛg-Dṛśya-Viveka. Nirvikalpa samādhi*, mental absorption with cognitions, is constituted by pure phenomenological materiality, sentient, self-affective and self-luminous. The existential possibility of such a state is not clear, as it requires a high degree of stability in inhibiting intentional consciousness from rising. In the second state, *savikalpa*, intentional consciousness is present yet transparent to the presence of phenomenological materiality as its primal constitutor.

⁸⁵ For more on *mānosollāsa*, see Sureśvara, *Mānosollāsa*.

⁸⁶ For more on the problem of quality, and ontology of quality, see Giannotta, “Epistemology”.

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⁸⁷ Olga Louchakova and Olga Louchakova-Schwartz is the same author.

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