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Religious Experience in the First-Person Perspective: The Lived Body and Perception of Reality

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Abstract: The first-person perspective, developed by Husserl for the scientific study of consciousness, consists of formal categories which can be used both for the analyses of consciousness as such and its concrete forms. Evidence (*Evidenz*), the central category in this approach, characterizes consciousness as knowledge. This paper presents the phenomenology of changes in perception and embodiment which lead to evidence for religious/spiritual experience (RE). Such change develops over time via contemplative practice, but also can be a part of spontaneous RE. Because of the presence of evidence, RE containing the change of perception are presentational (as distinct from appresentative). This temporally extended evidence concerns reality's giving of itself, granted that the main distinction between religious and non-religious experience is in the kind of reality to which they refer: physical in the case of non-religious, and 'ultimate' in the case of religious experience. Involving flesh and the reversibility of the body, the change in such complex RE also entails the transmutation of emotion from negative to positive. I compare these findings with Husserl's analysis of religious experience in HUA XVII, and argue that grounding religious experience in the preconceived idea of God, as Husserl does, limits RE to regressive forms which do not constitute knowledge. Such experiences remain teleologically directed at the world-horizon. By contrast, REs grounded in change of perception have a different teleology and do constitute knowledge.



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1. Introduction

Inaugurated by Husserl in the introduction to *Logical Investigations*, the first-person perspective (FPP) is not just a reflection on subjectively experienced consciousness. FPP is a highly formalized, rigorous approach to research, relying on operative concepts which disclose the structures of consciousness to be the medium of knowledge. FPP was initially developed in reference to consciousness as such, but it also works for the concrete forms of consciousness in more complex, higher forms of analysis. However, in using the FPP for the analysis of religious experience (RE), even if the researcher can claim an abundant RE and thus carry through the analysis using her own experience, there emerges a number of interesting problems.¹ FPP was developed in reference to consciousness as a means of knowledge of physical reality, i.e., consciousness directed at the world. Many theorists consider such consciousness as the only possible consciousness and an emergent, complex adaptive property of evolving life. In reference to consciousness as such, RE either can be one of concrete forms of such consciousness, or can be different consciousness altogether. The reason for thinking the latter is that RE always puts forth its own reality, and this other reality (let's call it *R*) is not the same as any reality of non-religious experience. A reference to *R* comprises the most essential distinction between religious and non-religious experience. With regard to *R*, religious traditions widely attest RE to be knowledge, and even a form of knowledge in which all other forms are grounded.

As stipulated by Husserl's FPP, all knowledge flows from self-giving originary intuitions (*Evidenz*). However, if and what kind of *Evidenz* is at work in RE was asked but not answered by Husserl. In this paper, I summarize three pivotal points in his account of RE: (a) the focus on theistic RE associated with devotion, love, or ethics; (b) seeing the root of RE to be in the idea of God; and (c) seeing this idea of God as proceeding from the totality and unity of the world-horizon. I contrast grounding RE in the idea of God, whereby RE is faith and love, with grounding RE according to traditional accounts in which RE is knowledge. Referring to concrete forms of RE derived from several triangulated data streams, I show gradual change in the sense of reality; this change probabilistically predisposes one to RE. It follows that in common non-mystical forms of RE (dominant in Husserl's account), presentation of *R* is minimal. Intentionality in these experiences remains teleologically directed at the world, and such experiences are not knowledge. Many traditions place such experiences in the beginning of contemplative ascent. By contrast, a further development of contemplation brings about the changes in perception. I show that such changes have a different teleology. They rely on the auto-affective attention and cause transformation of the body-schema, of flesh, and of the sense of "internal-external" in the phenomenal field. Against these changes, the frequency of RE increases, and it appears in a series of predictable, developmentally connected events. Authentic, non-propositional *Evidenz* of *R* thus becomes available only after the extensive transformations of the lived body. Thereby, originary self-giving intuition of *R* is constituted not out of the world-directed idea of God (even though such idea contributes to constitution of RE), but out of the specific mental states which bring to awareness and transform the material aspects of constitution and the reversibility of the body. Finally, I argue that since the locus of transformation is subjectively lived flesh, negative affects in RE are unavoidable but also are subject to meaningful transformation.

2. Religious Experience According to *Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie* (HUA XVII)

In HUA XVII,² the notes on RE appear in conjunction with Husserl's reflections on birth, death, and instinctual drives, i.e., phenomena that exist yet are unavailable for perception by the subject and, consequently, for description.³ However, in contrast with birth, death, or instinctual drives, RE is a lived-through event with apodictic givenness. Yet, a clarified description of RE is hard to attain for several reasons. First, unless one is specially trained in contemplative practice, the details of such experience quickly fade out of memory. Second, the reality of this experience, i.e., God, is not only invisible perceptually but obscure both metaphysically and in Its ontological status. Thus, RE falls under the same category of limit-phenomena: it is an experience of something unavailable for objectification and grasp by consciousness. Treating RE not as direct intuition or perception (i.e., not as knowledge), but as apperception—a passive synthesis of the fragments from prior appearances and/or symbols that becomes coupled with the idea of God—HUA XVII indirectly suggests that the idea of God must precede RE. If so, RE cannot be a source of constructive theological metaphysics, because RE contains only a preconceived constituting idea of God and not God's originary self-giving.

According to phenomenological theory, the ultimate ground for all knowledge is in the ecstatic, self-constituting, intersubjectively determined transcendental subjectivity. Transcendental subjectivity opens into the ultimate world-horizon, which is filled up by sedimented accomplishments of the ego: the life-world. Husserl derives the idea of God from this horizon. First, the idea of God proceeds from the totality of the world. Second, the origins of this idea are both monadic and extending into infinity, and in the latter, implicitly dependent on the human community in positing the ideal of highest good:

Schließlich hat jeder seinen höheren Rang über sich. Jeder Mensch ist nach seinem Typus Glied einer unendlichen Stufenfolge. Jeder hat über sich als im Unendlichenliegend die Idee Gottes. (HUA XVII, p. 9)

Everyone has their highest standard. According to its type, every human being participates in an infinite series of stages [of ascent towards such a standard]. Everyone has the idea of God lying in the infinity above them.⁴

Thus, the idea of God proceeds from the world, and RE contains only such an idea of God and has no access to God per se or his essence: “Glauben und nicht sehen (auch nicht einsehen), das gehört zusammen” (“Believing and not seeing [also not realizing] belong together”), says Husserl (*HUA XVII*, p. 186). However, experience-oriented theologies, such as, e.g., Christian mystical theology (Lossky 2005) or theology of Sufism (Ibn al-‘Arabi 1997) posit God as having an essence which is not in the world yet is available through experience. Likewise, Eastern religions suggest that the metaphysical Absolute gives an access to its being in a variety of ways, and consequently, REs can grasp its being but differ in cognitive validity and epistemic gain.⁵ In the former USSR, where the idea of God for three generations was systematically eliminated from all discourses, including the “underground” ones, God arguably survived through REs which were spontaneous and emergent (Kungurtsev and Luchakova 1994) and had no connection with a preexisting idea of God in any noticeable manner.

Husserl connects God to the observable harmony in the totality of manifestations, the harmony available through consciousness teleologically vectored at the world:

Alles seine besonderen Zweckfunktionen hat, und in der Unendlichkeit dieses Werdensstroms liegt eine Synthese aller relativen Werte, in der sich ein unendlicher absoluter Wert verwirklicht, etwa in der Weise einer unendlichen Entwicklung. Transzendental wäre es die unendliche Entwicklung eines Ich-All. Aber wie ist dies anders zu verstehen als unter der Idee Gottes? (*HUA XVII*, p. 203)

Everything has its special purpose and function, and in the infinity of this stream of becoming there lies a synthesis of all relative values, in which an infinite absolute value is realized, somewhat in the manner of an infinite development. Transcendentally it would be an infinite development of I-All. How is this to be understood other than under the idea of God?

Thus, the emergence of the idea of God in one’s mind is warranted by the teleology of the human monad since this monad is developing its capability of knowledge from instinctual drives towards mature world-directed intentionalities. Based on such an idea of God, RE becomes a trigger of a radical inner change which yet remains under “sustained essential grammars in the constitution of the world.” (Sowa and Vongehr 2014, p. liv, fn. 4; Husserl 2014) For the self which is undergoing such a change, there emerges a “new life” or new world. A pregiven cultural world acquires an entirely new ideal meaning, a “divine” meaning: the constituted world, while essentially preserved, is claimed to change in its uppermost and at the same time all-pervading layer of being (Sowa and Vongehr 2014, p. xxvii). Since the harmony of the world is maintained via everyone’s “free activity” (*HUA XVII*, p. 378), the monadology is appropriate; ethics and belief are intertwined and inseparable, and RE is an experience of love and ethical choice. On one occasion only, Husserl mentions the fact that at the highest stages, faith becomes knowledge. As it appears from Husserl’s references to his own faith all through the text of *HUA XVII*, he had abundant experiences of this kind of certainty. However, the reference to personal experience and the stages of faith remains theoretically undeveloped—unfortunately so.

3. How Should Phenomenology Approach Religious Experience? Regression versus Knowledge

According to *HUA XVII*, the idea of God has its own genesis. There are several steps. First, there is a gradual development of intentionality out of invisible instinctual drives in the monadic consciousness. This is a teleologically world-directed, world-engaging process in which the self-constituting transcendental subjectivity engages with evidence which has the levels of relative apodicticity. In the being of transcendental subjectivity, all worldliness

of intentionality, all accomplishments of the constituting ego become elevated to the level of the logos (*HUA XVII*, p. 447). Thus, faith becomes knowledge of God in its most elevated stages, but only as certainty that there is God who makes himself available through the world—which is a well-known theological thesis. RE is a product of this knowledge, not a source of it.

Husserl's reiteration of transcendental phenomenological theory in the context of the idea of God defines—helpfully so—the regions of analysis. First, one should analytically isolate the field of constituting subjectivity. Monadic rather than formal, this field should give us access to concrete forms of RE. The transcendental capabilities of the ego give us the second analytic locus, which is evidence (*Evidenz*). *Evidenz* has a unique mode of being on the cusp of extra-mental reality and the transcendental subjectivity. In *Evidenz*, self-transcending reality and self-transcending consciousness come together and become amalgamated in a miraculous spectacle of knowledge. Third, in *Evidenz*, there is an infinite approximation of the adequacy of self-giving in the transcendencies: levels of relative apodicticity. Finally, there is an “upgrade” of the being of the ego and of the capture of the transcendental reality to the level of logos. This elevation of being takes place by the means made available by the constituting transcendental ego.

But interestingly, in the case of RE, Husserl's thinking seems to digress from the order of his analytic program. The program suggests that knowledge builds up progressively from *Evidenz* up to logos:

Habe ich es mir zur Lebensaufgabe gemacht eine Philosophie ‚von unten‘ . . .
so strebe ich doch unablässig von dem ‚Unten‘ hinauf in die Höhen. (Sowa and
Vongehr 2014, p. lxiv)

My life's work is to make philosophy 'from below' . . . that's what I strive for
incessantly, from 'below' up to the heights.

But the idea of God does not proceed from intuitional evidence. It appears to be derived by regressive analysis from the fact of existence of the world—nearly as an *a priori*. Indeed God is thought of as being in its totality, not a particular reality within the world, so *Evidenz* becomes problematic. (See later Husserl's own questioning of this). One other option is according to:

In einem letzten Sinn, Sein konstituierende, Sein aller Seinsrelativitäten, ist gewissermaßen über allem Sein und ist doch selbst eine Stufe des Seins, als durch schon seiende Vernunft ‚erkannt.‘ (*HUA XVII*, p. 446)

Sense [Sinn] is a form of being, constituting being, being of all relativities of being, which is, so to speak, above all being and itself a level of being 'recognized' through already existing reason.⁶

If an idea is in itself being, it thus can be considered founding evidence for the layers of progressive eidetic intuition. However, the difficulty here is not evidence per se, but the teleology of intentionality in such evidence. Proceeding from the world, intentionality in the idea of God must be a part of intentionalities teleologically directed towards the world. Thus, the world retains its status of evidence-giving reality. But then, the idea of God needs to be free from teleology brought up by objects-directed realism. If we detach the genetics of the idea of God from the primal object-intentionalities, the only option remaining would be to ground this idea in the world-horizon (for the latter, see *HUA XVII*, p. 480). However, a horizon in itself exists, at best, as a conceptual space. Husserl does not provide the details on how a horizon can serve as a ground; thus the question of whether or not a conceptual space can serve as an ontological (not logical) ground for higher eidetics,⁷ or whether it is but a logical ground remains open.

Taking into consideration post-Husserlian research on reduction-interruption (Dahl 2010) and on the appresentative mind set (Barber 2017, 2019, 2020). RE must be constituted in the following fashion. In an event of spontaneous reduction-interruption, all world-positing intentionalities become suspended or radically altered, and passivity

becomes denuded and directly available for coupling with the idea of God. The idea of God becomes intertwined (enters a synthesis) with affective passivity, animates presentations, and turns them into RE. A symbol may be involved. But if this is the only possible case scenario, all of RE acquires a very Freudian, psychoanalytic sense, as a developmentally regressive, archaic, child-like state. (Cf. Washburn 1994). Such experiences undoubtedly exist; however, they are likely to decrease, not increase, faith. (Cf. Gillham 2020). Phenomenologically, a repeated uncovering of the same mode of passivity decouples presentations from the idea of God (Louchakova-Schwartz 2020): previously religious, experience may stop feeling as such. By the same token (i.e., by the passivity-disclosing interruption), RE can become connected to a trauma which also causes interruptions, as well as to archaic, negative affective states—hence hostility, violence, revenge, etc., associated with the aftermath of religious experiences. Such states were indeed reported in traditions, such as, for example, consciousness of fruition in Buddhism, components of the spiritual bypass in transpersonal psychological literature, the “dark night of the soul” in mysticism of St. John of the Cross, etc. They were also shown in contemporary psychology of spiritual awakening (Greenwell 2002).

Traditions provide more evidence in support of Husserl’s other claim, the one he makes only once and which remains undeveloped: that the highest stage of faith is knowledge (*HUA* XVII, p. 447). However, the essential axis of change in reaching that stage is not axiology but perception. It is not exalted open-endedness of faith that mediates this advanced stage of RE but immediate, direct intuition of what becomes known in it—i.e., fulfillment. (Cf., e.g., Al-Attas 1990; Louchakova-Schwartz 2017). Buddhism or Vedanta allocates ethical changes to the beginning of spiritual ascent and claims the whole of RE to be knowledge—not open-ended objectless faith as knowledge, but knowledge which has specific contents. Vedanta, Buddhism, or Tantra (for a few examples) would link spiritual completion to a certain type of experience which is definitely religious, but this would not be a regular kind of experiences one qualifies as religious in the practice of ritual piety, of ethical reflection, or naïve worship. (Cf. Louchakova-Schwartz 2017). These systems would seek experiences associated with the discrimination of real and unreal, i.e., the advanced experiences of knowledge. In the concrete, where experience is complex and multimodal, all aspects of it will be subordinated to attaining knowledge: for example, Sufism would value changes in the psychological structure of the self precisely because they will allow for the changes in perception; and Hesychasm would treat the experiences of faith as foundation for higher-order experience which also entails a change in perception.⁸ Thus, RE that counts soteriologically in these systems is knowledge, not a regressive experience.

Turning to the concrete and thus being able to see the different kinds of RE, as we just did, helps to distinguish between RE which may or may not be founded on this idea. However, the problems with deriving RE out of the idea of God are not only due to the act that REs differ in their relationships to such an idea. The difficulties are also ontological, and they concern the hole type (species) of RE. If the idea of God serves as ontological ground for RE, and if in itself this idea is grounded in the world-horizon, which has its ground in the transcendental ego, which is in turn grounded on a number of *a priori*-s, RE itself turns into a purely mind-dependent entity, i.e., a psychic product.⁹ Similarly, the ground of the absolute subjectivity appears to be in the same infinity and harmony that are associated with the idea of God. The onto-genetics of subjectivity bothered Husserl all along (cf. his concern for the absence of substrate in subjectivity, in Beyler 2021), and with the idea of God claiming to be ground, his concern is even more acute:

Aber kann die absolute Subjektivität einen Anfang haben und es sein Bewenden haben in der Entwicklung zu einer Idee hin, die doch in unendlicher Ferne bleiben soll?

But can absolute subjectivity have a beginning and end in the development towards an idea that is supposed to remain in the infinite distance? (*HUA* XVII, p. 424, pointed out to me by George Hefernan)

In the same paragraph in *HUA XVII*, Husserl asks:

Oder auch: Ist und wie ist religiöse Erfahrung beschaffen? Gibt es wirklich religiöse Erfahrung (Selbstgebung)? Und wie sieht sie in reiner Selbstgebung aus? Was ist ihr Inhalt? Das wäre reine Religion als Gehalt einer universalen religiösen Erfahrung und eines religiösen, sich aus Erfahrung bewährenden Glaubens.

Is and how is religious experience constituted? Does religious experience (self-giving) really exist? And how does it look in pure self-giving? What is its content? That would be pure religion as the content of a universal religious experience and of a religious faith that proves itself through experience.

As already mentioned, Husserl affirms a possibility of a constructive phenomenological metaphysics, which can begin from the phenomenological analysis of the data of experience and extend into scientific and lawful metaphysical eidetics (*HUA XXXIX*, p. 492; Sowa and Vongehr 2014, pp. lix, xli). Elucidation of this metaphysics would have to begin with the “return to the first absolute, that of phenomenology and the phenomenologically reduced sciences” (*HUA XVII*, p. 164). However, he does not follow the steps of his own first-person approach with regard to RE: instead of beginning with the concrete complexity of RE and zooming into its evidence as ground for metaphysical eidetics, he takes the idea of God, which in itself is already metaphysical, and works regressively towards its possible origins, thus duplicating the approach of theology and ending up with the picture of God-in-the-world. According to Husserl, any form of RE will “reach into the totality” (*HUA XVII*, pp. 447–48); but isn’t this totality the all-too-human, all-too-familiar lifeworld, even so infinite in its realities? The “God-in-the-world” idea does not exhaust all options for a metaphysical absolute. It does not correspond with visions of God in the Merkhaba tradition of Judaism, or Christian Hesychasm, in which God is known through direct intuition, or with Vedanta, in which world is an illusion and the highest principle is Brahman, not God; or with Buddhism, which is not concerned with the world, etc. These traditions turn to RE specifically because it provides sure knowledge of incomprehensible God (St. Hesychios the Priest 1979), direct intuition of Existence (Al-Attas 1990), the understanding of God’s self-disclosure (Chittick 1998), God-Realization (in Vedanta and Kundalini Yoga), knowledge of Reality (in Buddhism), which intentionality grasping at the horizon of the world (Sowa and Vongehr 2014, p. xc) cannot deliver. Thus, the problem boils down to what is given in RE, or even what specifically is responsible for the certainty of knowledge in it—i.e., the nature of its *Evidenz*.

4. Talking about the Obvious: Reality in Religious Experience

“Belief in a reality quite different from what appears to the senses arises with irresistible force in certain moods, which are the source of most mysticism, and of most metaphysics.” —(Russell 2012, p. 22)

Especially in the advanced stages of RE, the sense of *R* has overwhelming, unquestionable, undeniable obviousness. Margarite Porete, the Beguine mystic of the thirteenth century, gives the following description of an advanced stage of RE:

But this Soul, thus pure and clarified, sees neither God nor herself, but God sees Himself of Himself in her, for her, without her. God shows to her that there is nothing except Him. And thus this Soul understands nothing except Him, and so loves nothing except Him, praises nothing except Him, for there is nothing except Him. For whatever is, exists by His goodness, and God loves His Goodness whatever part He has given through goodness. And His goodness given is God Himself, and God cannot separate Himself from His goodness so that it would not remain in Him. (Porete 1993, pp. 192–93)

According to Husserl’s principle of all principles, cognition is legitimized by presentation. Perceptual faith leads us to accept what is presented, in its current limits, as being, as in the famous quote: “every ordinary presentive intuition is a legitimizing source of cognition, that everything originally (so to speak, in its ‘personal’ actuality) offered to us

in ‘intuition’ is to be accepted simply as what it is presented as being, but also only within the limits in which it is presented there” (Husserl 1982, p. 44; also Berghofer 2020). Thus, consciousness is fit to grasp reality, specifically “designed” for this (Hopp 2021, p. 210). There is no reason to assume that in RE, consciousness would suddenly betray its character of giving evidence to reality just because it turned away from the world and objects and is looking somewhere else. The nature of evidence will change, but it would be a stretch to assume that despite the obviousness, what is presented in such experiences is not more than presentification.

Ordinarily, presentive intuition is vectored towards the fulfilling object, i.e., a thing. However, in RE, ordinary presentation must not be of things, and its adequacy is not relative to a thing, whether the latter is mental or extra-mental in its presentation. According to Henry (2008), knowledge of things appears in virtue of self-affective and reversible phenomenological materiality. In theory, if one imagines proto-intentionalities rising out of this substratum, there can be material phenomenality which can be, potentially, self-fulfilling. (Cf. Louchakova-Schwartz 2017, 2020). Unfortunately, Henry in his analysis does not go beyond the limits of invisibility—and, despite its limit-conceptual (Lomuscio 2017), limit-phenomenal contents, RE empirically is anything but invisible. In Husserl, materiality (hyletics) is fractured into protention-primal impression-retention the moment intentionality appears. The problem already stated by many but not solved is, What is primal impression? Hence, in either line of thought one runs out of options for analysis: materiality is either invisible or fragmented. If we seek evidence in RE within subjectivity, we cannot avoid this problem. If RE gives us God, the evidence must be both visible and not follow the usual logic of mereology: as one contemporary spiritual teacher, Sri Ranjit Maharaj, informally remarked, reality is indivisible like a crystal of salt. Suhrawardi, an Iranian philosopher whose main focus was intuition in RE, suggested that evidence is always two-sided: “to see and be seen” (Suhrawardi 1999, p. 140)—resonant with Henry’s and Merleau-Ponty’s versions of the thesis of the reversibility of the body.

RE redirects the grasp of consciousness away from appearances toward the region of reality which normally escapes attention. Here is a lengthy quote from Saul Bellow (1976) showing the empirical reversibility of religious and non-religious sense:

The essence of our real condition, the complexity, the confusion, the pain of it is shown to us in glimpses, in what Proust and Tolstoy thought of as ‘true impressions’. This essence reveals, and then conceals itself. When it goes away it leaves us again in doubt. But we never seem to lose our connection with the depths from which these glimpses come. The sense of our real powers, powers we seem to derive from the universe itself, also comes and goes. We are reluctant to talk about this because there is nothing we can prove, because our language is inadequate and because few people are willing to risk talking about it. They would have to say, ‘There is a spirit’, and that is taboo. So almost everyone keeps quiet about it, although almost everyone is aware of it.

In Kugelmann (2017), the “underbelly” of ordinary shows as “the sound of a small whisper”. In RE—e.g., in the Prayer of the Heart (Louchakova 2005)—reversibility shows by non-propositional demonstration through immediate direct intuition/perception in the Merleau-Pontian sense. In the tradition, this effect becomes instantiated as a center of consciousness known as the Spiritual Heart (Louchakova 2005, 2007b). Thus, following traditions, we have to examine the embodied, not just ideal, aspect of subjectivity, and then examine how this aspect contributes to the perception of *R*.

The relationships between the two sides of evidence, i.e., of the reality of the everyday and of *R*, are such that one masks the other: “What is a day for a knower is night for the ignorant, and vice versa,” says Vedanta. Vedanta, in particular, stresses differentiation between the ordinary sense of reality and *R*: the real (*R*) shines through the gaps in the unreal (ordinary reality). There also exists a transitional zone consisting in a gradual transformation of the sense of reality. In the two following sections, I will first show RE not as a single event but as a continuous string of events and, after this, describe the perceptual

changes that gradually co-constitute its *Evidenz*. Then, I juxtapose this gradual change with the religious reduction-interruption and show how the two are related.

5. The Temporal Extension of Religious Experience

RE is believed to be a rare empirical occurrence, non-reproducible, non-predictable, non-normative, uniquely individual, and thereby, its first-person accounts cannot be corroborated. However, psychologies of religious traditions ascertain RE to be not just an isolated event but part and parcel of a developing, spiritually advancing consciousness. Advancement takes time: spiritual psychologies refer to a sequence of REs connected by increase of the same parameter: the apodicticity of RE becomes more and more convincing, and the presence of *R* more and more visible. Traditions also offer experiential trainings that stimulate the progress from preceding less-advanced to posterior more-advanced forms of RE (e.g., [Guenther 2005](#); [Wilber et al. 1986](#)). In these maps, REs are connected by the temporally extended unity of motivation, and thereby are probabilistically predictable and in this sense normative. There are “marker” mental states (i.e., REs) which signify the advancement from one stage of spiritual advancement to another. There are also rituals dedicated to delivering the empirical proofs of *R*—for example, a *burhan* moment in the Rifai Sufi dhikr (personal observation, Istanbul, June 2011). In addition, there are historical and contemporary testimonies of cross-traditional dialogs in which resemblance of these developmental “maps” ([Wilber et al. 1986](#)) and individual experiences in different traditions ([Burdge 2006](#)) are discussed. Above all, from the practice of guiding meditation there comes a testimony that RE can be incited by certain attentional moves. ([Sparby and Lumma 2022](#)) Examples of developmentally connected mental states of RE can be found, practically, in all the traditions mentioned.

The consciousness of RE and non-religious consciousness are like a duet of voices interchangeably taking the lead. When the ordinary sense of reality is dominant, the sense of *R* turns into an undercurrent (as in the experience described by Saul Bellow, above). This undercurrent from time to time comes to the surface in separate REs which are developmentally connected, eventually becoming the dominant sense and taking over the flow of consciousness. These two currents in the sense of reality have distinctive teleologies: towards the world in ordinary experience, and towards the “omega point” with full recognition of *R*. The seemingly separate events of RE share the unity of motivation under this distinctive teleology. This logos has a perceptual grounding in *R*, and only a part of its eidetics is in the ideal principle of totality that in itself proceeds from the teleology of ordinary experience towards the world.

In the teleological flow towards *R*, perception is the main organizing axis. For example, in Malamatiyya Sufism, changes in perception form the main criterion of the seeker’s progress. Changes in personality, ethics, and behavior also take place, but they are auxiliary to changes in perception. REs of a purely ethical kind, such as the one referred to by Husserl ([Sowa and Vongehr 2014](#), pp. xxvii, cx) are widely attested by the traditions, but developmental approaches treat them only as the point of departure for transformations of perception. The axiological intentionality of such experiences is tied to the capacity of critical reflection, not perception. On the side of perception, there is always a response “I am present” ([Ibn al-‘Arabī 1975](#), p. 21) in reference to presence (an atmospheric feeling according to [Nörenberg \(2017\)](#))—a mild, spontaneous beginning of the embodied transformation. The idea of God remains as an idea, given as such, and an empty presentation with regard to *R*. In other words, in idea of God per se, a sought-after *Evidenz* of *R*, would remain inauthentic. As [Husserl \(2001a\)](#), pp. 113–14 puts it: “We can say without hesitation that non-intuitive presentations are only called presentations in an inauthentic sense; genuinely speaking they do not actually present anything to us, an objective sense is not constituted in them; nothing is built up in them as the being of this or that content through actual intentional structures such that we could continuously acquire knowledge of it”. The probability of fulfillment grows only in parallel with changes in

perception, what is to be understood as “givenness understood in a comprehensive enough way and not just limited to the being of individual real things” (Ortiz Hill 2008, p. xxv).

In what follows, I describe the changes in perception which lead to RE. To describe such changes, one needs to rely on some concrete data. These data were obtained by this author by triangulation of traditional texts, oral authority, and mostly, second-person accounts which she witnessed over a period of thirty years of teaching spirituality and guiding meditation. As a practitioner in several traditions, she also has access to the first-person account of RE. It is unfortunate that such a claim to RE carries a sense of authority or exclusivity, for she does not claim either. In order to neutralize both the cloaking influence of traditions and the impact of personal histories (for the value of the latter, see Westphal 1990), texts were juxtaposed with live accounts not only within traditions but also from people not belonging to any tradition, such as, e.g., New Age practitioners in different countries. Traditional accounts tend to either objectify and formalize perception (e.g., in Sufism), or mythologize it (e.g., in Tantra). Thus, in researching RE, the first-person standpoint is indispensable: one cannot get to an originary giving intuition through all the hermeneutic build-up without one’s own experience of religious perception.

6. Embodiment: The Zone of Transition

Contemplative religious practices (also known as spiritual practices)—e.g., the Christian Prayer of the Heart or the Indian *mantra-japa*—direct attention inward. In these practices, “inward” means into the body-self—i.e., into the lived body, not towards the anatomical body (Louchakova-Schwartz 2017). Such inwardness differs from introspection, in which attention is directed at one’s mind. Inwardness, by contrast, directs attention into the interiority of the body-schema. Usually, the practitioner first gains access into the region of the chest, with other areas of the body becoming available later. As a result of sustained inward attentiveness, there arises awareness of the inner space of the body, of different densities and partitions in this space, of lights, sounds, synesthesia, and motions in it. These impressions create an internal landscape, which is fluid yet structured. The practitioner learns to navigate the complex topology of these internal spaces through the concentration of attention, absorption, relaxation, letting go of mental habits, various meditation practices, etc.

The changes affect not only perception of space and time but the materiality (tangibility) of this inner space. The latter becomes posited exactly like the outer space, except that the materiality in this case is not a mental construct emerging out of the intermediary of the senses, as it is with the physical world, but is given as a lived-through, auto-affective impression. As the lived body reveals this constitutive depth, the ego can both observe this picture and become immersed in it, with concentration of attention not “on” but “in” the phenomenal field of the body. The body’s hyletics turns into a structured multiverse of densities and vibrations, in which the perception of time depends on the position of the embodied ego: in the head or in one of the newly discovered internal regions. A practitioner may choose her locations—which is especially interesting because particular forms of RE arise in conjunction with such rearrangements of the body-schema (Louchakova-Schwartz 2017). For example, an imaginal experience of the universe as a totality of manifestations arises in conjunction with the absorption on the left side of the chest (Louchakova 2007a, p. 276), while experiences of formless divine essence are more typical of the absorption in the center of the chest (Louchakova 2005; Laude 2019)—phenomena empirically well attested both in Sufi practices (Dahnhardt 2007, pp. 131–33, on *Lata’if*) and the somatics of Kundalini yoga (Louchakova and Warner 2003; Louchakova 2009) but not yet researched phenomenologically.

There appear to be at least five coordinates to the position of the ego within this new perceptual field of the body: three usual dimensions, plus the depth of the body, plus the quality of its materiality. The ego navigates this multiverse by either objectifying these worlds or immersing itself in them. The body-schema becomes fluidly available to deconstruction and reconstruction: a practitioner can dissociate from it, experience being bigger or smaller, identify with different shapes, etc. This all takes place within the natural

attitude with its empirical distinctions between the outside world and the interiority of the self. But as the transformation of perception deepens, the boundary between the external and the internal becomes permeable and, later, transparent, and this transparency adds the additional dimension of internal continuity between the inside and outside. Thus, the changes in the perception of the lived body are integrated with the perception of the world, and as a result, one undergoes perception-based change in the sense of reality. No longer is the world three-dimensional and crudely material, and thereby aporetic to human spirit, but the two are now intertwined. The physicality of the world acquires depth and is now perceived on the spectrum of densities and vibrations a known in common parlance as “energy”.

If before the contemplative or meditation practice, the world was clearly mind-independent, the mind and the world are now united under this new picture of reality: the materiality of the world acquires multidimensionality, fluidity, and depth, and the mind is visible on a continuum with the world. Many more aspects of change cannot be included in this brief description, but the tendency is clear: in mystical/contemplative/spiritual practice, experience grants a view into a new picture of reality, vaguely intuited from the beginning of the practice and now coming to more and more clarity. As one continues to practice, the phenomenal field continues to change well beyond what was described. Traditions themselves have limited descriptions of these advanced stages of practice, and oral explanations of this fact usually say that because of the mind’s capacity to imagine and imitate, a seeker may be deceived by one’s own imitation of descriptions, while what is needed is an experience of the actual change, i.e., authentic evidence. The relevant changes affect the boundary between visible and invisible, i.e., the phenomenality itself of the limit-phenomena. In the Henrian framework, this is the boundary between the invisible phenomenological materiality and intentionality, in the area of reversibility in which flesh is both sensed and sensing—i.e., on the limit of phenomenality. In some practices (e.g., the Prayer of the Heart or Tantric Yoga sadhanas), one can be present to “thought emerging out of a void,” to the deployment of the mental image, etc.—the very phenomenal origins of the constituted world. (See, for example, a phenomenalist account of consciousness in [Jñānadeva \(1991\)](#), [Balsekar and Jñānadeva \(1997\)](#)). or a seeker, such awareness becomes a new normal and contributes to the picture of reality. It is as if appearances become “thinned out,” to a layer one molecule thick, like oil spilled into the ocean and making rainbow circles on the surface, while the underlying continuum of spirit is available as the substance of everything. The reduction-interruption that leads to RE now happens with higher probability—that is, more easily and more often than in a thicket of sedimented perception and ego-habitualities of the everyday. With every new perceptual opening, there emerges a clear sense of the other reality, of *R*, which is more foundational, more true, and more Divine. Changes of perception are often corroborated by psychological changes, as well as by changes in relationships with people and interactions with the world. Reduction-interruption is usually active at each new level of perception (comes in quantum shifts in experience; see, e.g., [Louchakova-Schwartz 2016](#)), and each such instance signals more and more unclouded presence of the spirit.

Why, then, are these changes themselves rarely described in the description of RE? The situation is the same as with ordinary experience: unless we conduct a special epoché that reveals the participation of the body in experience, the body remains invisible, masked by the making of meaning. And yet, it is the body and its perception that grounds the making of reality. Likewise, in RE it is the transformations of the body that underlie the change in the sense of reality. While physical reality is given to us via the medium of the senses, no such medium operates in the imaginal inner space of the body: texts and accounts refer to sensory modalities in the “inner space”, but these modalities become synesthetic upon deeper absorption. The substance of inner space is auto-affective; its sensibility is reversible. This is the point now at which this analysis must stop: the links between the stages of inward perception, its transcendental aspects, and (meta)metaphysics of *R* remain to be worked out outside the scope of this paper.

7. Some Notes on Emotions and the “Dark Side” of RE

At the risk of over-extending an already long paper, a few words about the “dark side” of RE. The gradual transformations of embodiment affect the same horizon of auto-affective flesh that constitutes the feeling part of emotions. Thus, the transformation (a.k.a transmutation) of emotion is a vital part of changes leading to RE. While the general direction of transmutation is towards the wholesome affects (cf. positive emotions), the process includes uncovering and bringing to awareness emotional memories, including negative affects. Of interest here is not the “dark side” of RE (despite its obvious psychological significance), but the fact that transformation of the enfleshed body towards RE entails a deeply innate meaningful aspect which is associated with the transmutation of emotions (Louchakova-Schwartz 2019).

8. Conclusions: Evidence in Religious Experience

Our ordinary commitments to object-ontology do not exclude the possibility of ontological commitments of different kind, and “our intuitive grasp of the conception of reality is a sufficient guide in itself to their proper employment” (Fine 2009, p. 176). Coming from an analytic philosopher, this confirms Husserl’s views of correlation: the reality is given, and what is given is the reality. If so, the certainty of RE makes it into a true presentation of existing reality. RE is neither a phantasy, nor some reorganized memory, nor a symbolic representation, nor a presentification, nor an enfleshed abstraction, but *R*’s giving of itself. Different REs may be thus viewed as adumbrations of *R* (Louchakova-Schwartz and Crouch 2017). *R* in RE is not a concept, but *R* as it gives itself—which makes one rethink the concept of reality altogether, as, e.g., ancient Mandukya Upanishad suggests (Gambhirananda 1980; Gaudapada Acarya and Gambhirananda 1995).¹⁰

Since *Evidenz* includes inputs of both self-transcending reality and self-transcending consciousness, the intuition of *R* emerges in temporal transformations of embodiment opening into the transcendental horizon—i.e., the transcendental aspect of the body. But by the reversibility of flesh, RE turns into a spectacle of phenomenalization. Traditions are extremely laconic about such aspects of RE, but such accounts exist: e.g., in the descriptions of *savikapla samadhi* (Louchakova-Schwartz 2017) or *theosis* in the Prayer of the Heart (Louchakova-Schwartz 2016). By taking these accounts not as metaphors but as descriptions, we acquire a point of entry into *R*—not through an abstract idea but via reduction in the concrete of monadic consciousness: i.e., the entry one can trust perceptually. Insofar as the body concretizes the formal ontology, Husserl’s monadology is extremely important for the analysis of RE. Spiritual interiority of the body is indeed the field (paraphrasing *Bhagavad Gita* 13:1) in which *R* enters experience and acquires a presentational character. As Husserl says: “All thought and knowledge have as their aim objects or states of affairs, which they putatively “hit” in the sense that the “being in itself” of these objects and states is supposedly shown forth, and made an identifiable item, in a multitude of actual or possible meanings, or acts of thought” (Husserl 2001b, p. 169). Thus, RE is indeed knowledge—the cutting edge of cognition.

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Notes

- ¹ Ideas in this paper were first presented by the author during the presidential address to the annual conference of the Society for the Phenomenology of Religious Experience entitled “In the Shadows of Religious Experience: Hostility, Violence, Revenge”, which met Oct. 6–8, 2021, and was hosted by the Department of Philosophy of the University of Vienna.

- ² My gratitude to George Heffernan for directing me to this issue of *HUA* (and especially its pages 447–48, where Husserl discusses *Evidenz*) at “Essences and Ideas: Religion and Metaphysics in Early Phenomenology”, at the conference of the North American Society for Early Phenomenology held at Dominican University College, Ottawa, Ontario/online, April 29, 2022. *HUA* stands for the abbreviated Husserliana, a series publishing complete works of Husserl (edited by Rudolph Bernet and Ullrich Melle). *HUA* is usually cited by the number of the volume. Hereafter I use *HUA* in reference to volumes containing Husserl’s notes and unfinished fragments, while using the author-year when citing completed works.
- ³ For more on the limit-phenomena, see Steinbock (2017).
- ⁴ All translations from German are my own.
- ⁵ For introspective RE with various forms of direct intuition of God’s being or essence, see (Al-Attas 1990; Louchakova 2005; Louchakova-Schwartz 2017; Porete 1993; Vidyāranya 2009). Louchakova and Louchakova-Schwartz are the same author.
- ⁶ For more on being of the ideal in Husserl, see Mensch (1981, p. 55).
- ⁷ For the kinds of grounding, see (Raven 2012, pp. 2–3).
- ⁸ For the progression of psychological changes in the ego (*nafs*) according to Sufism, see (Frager 2013). For the progression of RE in Sufi training, see (Al-Attas 2002). For correlation between RE and psychological changes, see (Louchakova and Warner 2003). For progression and fulfillment of RE in Catholic mysticism, see (Porete 1993). For RE in Vedanta, as distinct from ethical kinds of RE, see (Louchakova-Schwartz 2017); in Hesychasm, see (Louchakova 2005, 2007a, 2007b); in Buddhism, see (Guenther 2005).
- ⁹ For more on psychic products, including in late Husserl, see (Taieb 2018).
- ¹⁰ Husserl suggests “constructive phenomenology” as a new approach to metaphysics. For more on “constructive phenomenology” that should tackle the problems that cannot be solved in the “regressive phenomenology,” see (Fink 1988, pp. 61–74, especially pp. 67–70).

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