The oceanic state: a conceptual elucidation in terms of modal contact

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Despite its lengthy history in psychoanalysis, the psychological origins, essential features and value of the oceanic state remain open to dispute. This ambiguity has come at a cost to the clarity of theoretical discussions on the topic. In working towards a conceptual elucidation, the author maintains that there are three primary accounts of the oceanic state: the metaphysical one of Romain Rolland, the developmental one of Sigmund Freud, and the cognitive-perceptual one of Anton Ehrenzweig. Based on the notion of modal contact, he argues that the accounts share a general theoretical structure that establishes as the necessary criterion for all oceanic states the loosening of ego boundaries and sufficient contact between differentiated and undifferentiated modalities of the mind. However, within this common structure, the accounts employ dissimilar metapsychologies to promulgate oceanic states of appreciably distinct kinds. To support this view, the author carries out a comparative examination of the modal contacts involved in the primary accounts' oceanic states. To conclude, he reviews the main implications of the notion of modal contact vis-à-vis recent discussion on oceanic phenomena, and puts forward for consideration a pluralist account of the mind that can accommodate the existence of several kinds of oceanic states.

Keywords: conceptual research, history of psychoanalysis, metapsychology, modal contact, oceanic state

Introduction

The concept of the oceanic state has had a lengthy and intriguing line of development within psychoanalysis. Since its emergence in the discussion of religio-mystical experience, it has become not only a nodal point of psychoanalytical inquiry into mysticism, but a salient feature of psychoanalytical aesthetics. This development has not, however, resulted in any definite agreement on its basic nature. In other words, the origins, essential features and value of the oceanic state remain open to dispute. Perhaps this is an unavoidable and even welcome state of affairs. All the same, it has come at a cost to the clarity of theoretical discussions on the topic. At face value, the oceanic state has often been depicted simply as a transient and regressive feeling of oneness with the universe. Upon closer examination, however, it has been portrayed as a multivalent phenomenon that incorporates diverse psychic mechanisms, cognitions and emotions, possibly extending over prolonged periods of time. We are thus faced with several accounts of the oceanic state – some of which appear to be mutually exclusive in key respects – and left with a pressing need for conceptual tools that make sense of their relations and relative import.
On the whole, discussions of oceanic states have appeared in a wide range of interrelated areas: from artistic creativity and aesthetics (Stokes, 1978; Milner, 1987; Fuller, 1980; Newton, 2001, 2008) to literary poetics (Rooney, 2007); from religious mysticism (Masson, 1980; Kakar, 1991; Merkur, 1999, 2010; Ostow, 2007) to meditation and altered states of consciousness (Werman, 1986; Epstein, 1990); and from the history of Freud and psychoanalysis (Fisher, 1976; Harrison, 1979; Parsons, 1999; Fried, 2003; Vermorel, 2009) to the philosophy of emotion (Goldie, 2008). These discussions are all – more or less, explicitly or implicitly – based on one or more of the accounts I call primary, namely those of Romain Rolland, Sigmund Freud and Anton Ehrenzweig. Given that Rolland first presented the oceanic state for psychoanalytic scrutiny, his account is self-evidently primary. Freud’s account, in turn, is primary as the original and paradigmatic psychoanalytic interpretation of the state. Finally, the primacy of Ehrenzweig’s account owes to its unprecedented argumentation for the state’s centrality in aesthetics. In short, these accounts have provided the grounds and framework for the majority of subsequent explorations into the issue, whether the latter seek to build on, revise or refute the former.

This gives rise to a weighty question regarding the objects of inquiry of the primary accounts. That is, do they identify and explain a single, self-same state of mind? Seeing as the accounts are founded on fairly discrepant metapsychologies, and pick out comparatively dissimilar mental properties as constitutive of the oceanic state, it would be ill-founded to claim out of hand that they merely describe three complementary aspects of an equivalent mental state. Indeed, I will argue that Rolland, Freud and Ehrenzweig did not delineate an identical oceanic state, which they then explained and evaluated differently. Instead, they ended up depicting rather different things based on their prior interests, theoretical commitments and overall aims. On that account, I will specify three distinct kinds of oceanic states: the metaphysical oceanic state suggested by Rolland, the developmental one put forward by Freud and the cognitive-perceptual one introduced by Ehrenzweig. I maintain that informed discussion on the topic should acknowledge that these different kinds of oceanic states have been suggested to exist – and that the diversity of oceanic phenomena is something that needs to be readdressed conceptually. Only then can we debate whether oceanic states do indeed occur as different kinds, or whether they should be theoretically subsumed under the description of a single uniform state.

In this article, the possibility of different kinds of oceanic states will be taken seriously. This poses two major challenges. First, we must establish a common criterion that classifies the specified mental states as ‘oceanic’ rather than something else; second, we must provide proper theoretical tools for distinguishing these oceanic states as appreciably distinct kinds. To meet these challenges, I will introduce the notion of modal contact. This conceptual tool will help us identify the general psychological mechanism that each primary account establishes as necessary for oceanic states. In other words, it will enable us to define what makes any mental state distinctly ‘oceanic’. Moreover, the notion of modal contact will allow us to systematically compare the oceanic states of each of the accounts. This will not only serve to
The oceanic state and its metaphysical, developmental and cognitive-perceptual accounts

The concept of the oceanic feeling emerged from the correspondence between Sigmund Freud and his respected friend Romain Rolland – a Nobel-winning novelist, social critic and professed mystic – that lasted effectively from 1923 to 1936. Having read Freud’s critical treatise on religion, *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), Rolland sent him a letter in which he requested an analysis of what he personally experienced to be the true source of religion: “the simple and direct fact of the feeling of the ‘eternal’ (which can very well not be eternal, but simply without perceptible limits, and like oceanic, as it were)” (Parsons, 1999, p. 173). Although Rolland’s choice of the term ‘oceanic’ seems almost like an afterthought, it was by no means an arbitrary whim. As William Starr (1972) has pointed out, aquatic metaphors are prevalent throughout Rolland’s literary oeuvre. It is also noteworthy that his favored tropes are more than aesthetic devices: they are systematically dispensed references to personally significant ideas and emotions. Moreover, at the time of writing the letter, Rolland was working on a biographical study of two Indian saints, Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, who came from a spiritual tradition similarly keen on oceanic imagery (cf. Masson, 1980, p. 36–44). It was thus no coincidence that Rolland decided upon the term ‘oceanic’ in his portrayal of primary religious experience.

In this article, I will demonstrate how the biographies of the Indian saints provide essential clues in deciphering the overall nature of Rolland’s oceanic state. To begin, however, let us return to the initial account laid out in his letter to Freud from 5 December 1927. Here Rolland describes his feeling as a subterranean and dynamic source of vital renewal that occurs spontaneously and independently from organized religion. Curiously, he pronounces that it is a constant state; a prolonged feeling that exists non-invasively alongside his critical faculties, uninformed by wishes for personal salvation or immortality. Finally, he claims the feeling is common to thousands of men actually existing, albeit with individual nuance, and should thus be subject to analysis with an approximate exactitude. Ironically, Rolland was not overly concerned with exactitude himself, offering Freud a vague ‘prolonged feeling’, ‘contact’, ‘sensation’, ‘sentiment’ and ‘constant state’ for analysis. Instead of pursuing descriptive precision, Rolland was evidently more intent on establishing the universal value of the oceanic feeling, and hoped perhaps that psychoanalysis would bolster this aspiration.

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1In the French original: “le fait simple et direct de la sensation de l’Éternel (qui peut très bien n’être pas éternel, mais simplement sans bornes perceptibles, et comme océanique)” (Cornubert, 1966, p. 25).
Given its ambiguity and mystical leanings, it is not altogether surprising that Rolland’s request made Freud uneasy. When he finally replied in the first chapter of *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), the interpretation proffered was tentative, somewhat dismissive and, from Rolland’s point of view, at least partially misconstrued. Freud begins his analysis by proclaiming he has never experienced the oceanic feeling himself, and continues by pointing out the general difficulty of dealing with feelings scientifically, including their classification. Having said that, he opts to examine the “ideational contents” of this peculiar feeling, and rephrases them as those of “limitlessness and of a bond with the universe”, and of “an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole” (Freud, 1930, p. 65, 68). He then proceeds to explain its possible occurrence in ontogenetic terms as the psychic preservation and restoration of a pre-Oedipal state of infant–mother unity. This early “all-embracing feeling” could, Freud granted, exist “side by side with the narrower and more sharply demarcated ego-feeling of maturity” (p. 68). As such, Freud’s response explicitly denied the oceanic feeling the innate religious nature suggested by Rolland. To make his stance on its significance unequivocal, Freud states: “Thus the part played by the oceanic feeling, which might seek something like the restoration of limitless narcissism, is ousted from a place in the foreground” (p. 72).

Needless to say, Freud was not privy to the wealth of retrospective information we now possess on the overall course of Rolland’s mysticism. Essentially, all he had for his initial analysis was that one sketchy letter. It was, after all, only after the publication of *Civilization and its Discontents* that Rolland gifted Freud with his biographical studies of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. As mentioned earlier, these works are key to deciphering Rolland’s oceanic state. In fact, Rolland had already alluded to them in his pivotal letter of 1927, citing the two saints as exemplars of the sensation he valued so dearly. In a later letter to Freud, he again refers to the biographies – this time as his “‘Oceanic’ works” – and states: “What I feel, I have told you, and I have explained it in the introduction to the *Ramakrishna*: it is the Oceanic”. True to previous form, Rolland foregoes descriptive concision and reiterates his oceanic feeling in relatively abstruse terms: “my feeling – or intuition – (or whatever one calls it) – “Oceanic” – is absolutely disinterested! I state it, but I am not particular about it. It (the feeling) is a psychological fact, a vital trait of my character” (see Parsons, 1999, p. 177–8, for the letter from 3 May 1931).

What, then, can the biographies of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda offer in bringing much-needed clarity to Rolland’s account? In light of oceanic semantics, their significance lies in Rolland’s explicit commitment to a pantheistic monism informed by Spinoza and Advaita Vedanta philosophy. This is encapsulated in the introduction to *The Life of Ramakrishna*:

Now of all rivers the most sacred is that which gushes out eternally from the depths of the soul … From the source to the sea, from the sea to the source, everything consists of the same Energy, of the Being without beginning and without end … Unity, living and not abstract, is the essence of it all.

(Rolland, 1929, p. xvii)
Rolland identifies this vital metaphysical substance as the “Ocean of Satchidananda” (p. 144, 158), and goes on to give several examples of descents that reveal to the ‘diver’ the absolute, universal self underlying all particularity. Reading the biographies in conjunction with Rolland’s letters thus provide grounds to believe that his use of the term ‘oceanic’ does not refer primarily to affective quality. Instead, it is a consciously chosen reference to the object of his experience, namely the ‘Ocean of Satchidananda’. Case in point: when Rolland writes of “the simple and direct fact of the feeling of the ‘eternal’ (which can very well not be eternal, but simply without perceptible limits, and like oceanic, as it were)” (Parsons, 1999, p. 173), he confirms as an experiential fact that he has a feeling about something whose properties include ‘eternal’, ‘without perceptible limits’ and ‘oceanic’.

In this sense, Rolland’s oceanic feeling is more akin to, say, the concept of arachnophobia than the garden-variety of emotional concepts such as anger, happiness or sadness. Simply put, it reveals its object by definition. At the same time, it differs decisively from concepts such as arachnophobia in that it does not explicitly designate only one type of feeling, e.g. fear of spiders. Thus, if we were to maintain that Rolland’s use of the term ‘oceanic’ denotes feeling primarily, we would be left with the task of delineating what this feeling is. While it has axiomatically come to signify a feeling of oneness – and even more specifically, a feeling of oneness with the universe – the literature suggests a host of other feelings involved as well, including mania, timelessness, boundlessness and terror. We need only return to the earlier excerpt from Rolland’s letter, in which he refers to limitlessness and eternity, but not oneness, in relation to the ‘oceanic’. Indeed, references to oneness or unity are conspicuously absent from the seminal letter of 1927 as a whole. As I will argue, unity refers primarily to a property of the unconscious modality, i.e. the ‘ocean’, involved in oceanic states, and only secondarily – and contingently – to affective quality.

Peculiarly, Rolland also proclaimed that his feeling was a “constant state”, like “a sheet of water ... flushing under the bark” (Parsons, 1999, p. 174). This remark calls for clarification. To begin, Rolland’s analogy is unlikely to indicate constancy in the sense of an ongoing, consciously felt emotional episode. On the contrary, it suggests a permanent disposition that may induce temporally limited oceanic episodes or influence behavior in other ways (cf. Goldie, 2008 and Parsons, 1999 for similar arguments). The attainment of this enduring state was nothing less than the culmination of Rolland’s mature mysticism, involving a lifetime of experiencing, introspection and psychological structuration. In point of fact, Rolland reveals in his autobiography how he had always lived two lives simultaneously: one of the material, finite person confined to inheritance, space and time; the other of the spiritual, infinite self of “formless Being, nameless, homeless, timeless, the very substance and breath of all life” (Rolland, 1947, p. 10). He describes how the former concealed the latter for much of his life, but through a series of “sudden explosions” and “spiritual outbursts”, i.e. transient mystical episodes, his subconscious was gradually led to “open up a

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2Sat, being; Cit, consciousness; Ananda, bliss.
river-bed leading toward the unrevealed Being” (p. 10). Rolland pronounced
the mature state he had come to enjoy as an “immediate communion with
universal Life” (p. 10). It is thus no wonder he presented the oceanic state
to Freud as a vital trait of his character – surely to convey a sense of disposi-
tional permanence and dynamism.

Secondly, Starr (1972, p. 151–2) has noted that in Rolland’s symbolism
the ‘bark’ (boat) frequently denotes a finite habitation: one that not only
encloses and offers protection, but also confines and hampers free move-
ment. Moreover, boat and water together suggest the possibility of a voyage
into uncharted regions. My interpretation of the analogy in Rolland’s letter
is that the boat signifies the restrictive confines of the differentiated ego,
whereas the water symbolizes the freedom of the limitless metaphysical
‘ocean’. The ego may thus either impede or be used as a vehicle for the dis-
covery of one’s innate contact with the ‘oceanic’ substance within. In Roll-
land’s oceanic feeling the contact had become a constant state; once
discovered, the ‘ocean’ was a boundless source of vital renewal that did not
disturb the critical faculties of the ego. From this point of view, the phrase
“water flushing under the bark” (Parsons, 1999, p. 174) evokes neither a
sense of complete ego dissolution nor concurrent feelings of oneness, fusion
and the like. Rather, it portrays a reasonably intact ego, one that is aware
of, and ‘sailing’ in continuous contact with, a vast and vital force.

This overview reveals how the terms ‘ocean’ and ‘oceanic’ function as
expressive watchwords for Rolland’s monist worldview, rooted inseparably
in the grand principles of substance, space and time. Simply put, his
account cannot be grasped properly without acknowledging its metaphysi-
cal commitments. It is also noteworthy that Rolland did not pin the attrib-
utive ‘oceanic’ to any discrete psychological category. Instead, his oceanic
state may be seen as encompassing early transient mystical episodes, a
mature metaphysical conviction founded on experience and intellect, and
finally a permanent disposition to feel and embody this worldview. Thus,
the oceanic state of Rolland’s youth was arguably of a different kind than
that of his mature years – to such an extent do they differ in relevant
respects.

As it stands, Rolland’s overall account set the precedent for ambiguous
oceanic terminology, and thus enabled a number of possible readings and
categorizations. It was only after Freud had analyzed the oceanic state in
terms of primary narcissism that a tendency to emphasize its regressive epi-
sodic aspects over its mature dispositional nature took hold. Parsons
describes the ensuing ‘received’ view as follows:

As many would have it, the oceanic feeling is but the psychoanalytic version of the
perennialist claim that mysticism is “one and the same everywhere”, and the occa-
sional regression to the preverbal, pre-Oedipal “memory” of unity, motivated by the
need to withdraw from a harsh and unforgiving reality, is the explanation behind
the transient, ineffable experience of oneness with the universe.

(Parsons, 1999, p. 35–6)

Parsons argues that this view not only distorts the nature of Rolland’s
oceanic state, it fails to do justice to the sensitivity of Freud’s account as
well – an account that, Parsons claims, recognizes its possible constancy, for instance. Either way, Freud’s account is uniformly developmental, and as such leaves little room for metaphysical/mystical speculation.

Despite the traditional prevalence of the received view, alternative views have also been voiced. As early as 1914, Herbert Silberer claimed that mystical experience contained integrative therapeutic potential. Paul Federn, in turn, rejected the notion that the oceanic feeling was a regression to a primitive state of ego feeling; rather, it was a developmentally advanced extension of the ego’s limits to cover the whole universe (Federn, 1932, p. 134–5). In the 1950s/60s, a move toward Rolland’s commendatory approach came by way of psychoanalytic aesthetics, when theoreticians such as Adrian Stokes, Marion Milner and Anton Ehrenzweig imbued the concept with new vitality. Although Stokes and Milner made relevant contributions to the topic, I will focus on Ehrenzweig’s views for one main reason: his examination of the oceanic state in aesthetics was incomparably comprehensive and influential. As such, it can indisputably be deemed a primary theoretical account of the state – one that lends itself readily to comparison with those of Freud and Rolland.

As an art educator, Ehrenzweig was intimately acquainted with the intricacies of artistic work. Besides teaching, he made considerable efforts to analyze the psychodynamics of artistic creativity theoretically. This led to an increasingly momentous and complex depiction of the oceanic state in the creative process. Although he referred to the oceanic feeling relatively sparsely in his first major book, *The Psycho-analysis of Artistic Vision and Hearing* (1953), the volume foreshadowed its gradual advancement in his work (see Ehrenzweig, 1957, 1962). Indeed, in his posthumously published book, *The Hidden Order of Art* (1967), we find Ehrenzweig arguing for the necessity of the oceanic state for novel symbol formation, and for its place at the heart of a tripartite phasic model of the creative process.

What sets Ehrenzweig’s account of the oceanic state apart from the other primary accounts is its emphasis on cognition and perception. In *The Hidden Order of Art*, Ehrenzweig argues that the perceptual processes of “low-level vision” and “unconscious scanning” are unique to the oceanic state, and furthermore, superiorly efficient tools in gathering information (Ehrenzweig, 1967, p. 32–46). This superiority is due to their ability to hold on to consciously incompatible entities in a single comprehensive view, which is useful in handling the open-ended structure of creative work. In short, Ehrenzweig depicted “dedifferentiated” oceanic perception as a kind of unlimited interpenetration between images and concepts wherein opposites are undone, inner and outer worlds merge, and the restrictions of space and time are dissolved (p. 103, 120, 192). On these grounds Ehrenzweig maintained that a separate “manic-oceanic” creative phase of undifferentiated vision was necessary to produce new symbolic formations (p. 95–109). It was during this phase that the so-called hidden order of art – its unconscious substructure – was formed, and the most crucial creative work carried through.

On the whole, Ehrenzweig’s use of the attributive ‘oceanic’ was rather profligate. For purposes of simplicity, we may summarize his oceanic
terminology as follows: he attached the term ‘oceanic’ to feelings and sensations, including oneness, mania and limitlessness (oceanic feelings); to a phase in the creative process (the manic-oceanic phase); to an unconscious level of the ego (the oceanic depth mind); to the type of perception characteristic of that level (oceanic dedifferentiation); and finally to the imagery produced by dedifferentiated perception (oceanic imagery). Furthermore, he used the term in a general sense to refer to any such state that incorporated depth-level perception, involved feelings of oneness, mania, etc. or, most likely, both (the oceanic state). Ehrenzweig believed these oceanic states of perceptual dedifferentiation and frequently intense emotions could be found in creativity across various domains of life, including religio-mystical practices.

Interestingly, the primary accounts introduced earlier are grounded not only in theoretically disparate terrain, but in different experiential worlds as well. Rolland possessed a phenomenal conception of the state, having known first-hand what it was like. Freud, on the contrary, had a theoretical conception, claiming never to have felt it personally. With regard to Ehrenzweig, we do not know of his experience, but clearly he was familiar with the state through his students’ work and the various art forms he engaged in. Again, analyzing the accounts straightforwardly as either competing or complementary explanations of an identical oceanic state would be neglectful of their individual nuance. Bearing this in mind, I will next introduce the notion of modal contact to reveal the common psychological mechanism implied in each of the accounts, and to examine the ways in which the oceanic states they suggest stand in relation to each other.

A comparative assessment of the primary accounts’ oceanic states in terms of modal contact

The term ‘modality’ is used here to refer to the particular manner in which something exists or is processed, experienced or expressed. On the whole, mental functioning and subjective experiencing consist of a variety of interconnected modalities that operate on an unconscious–conscious continuum. Primary process and secondary process functioning can, for instance, be viewed as distinct modalities of psychic energy flow, the first of which is unconscious and the second preconscious. The term ‘contact’, in turn, refers to a state of connection and interaction between modalities. For example, flexible contact between primary and secondary processing has often been deemed essential to creativity (Kris, 1952; Loewald, 2000). ‘Modal contact’, then, refers to a state of connection between two or more modalities in a manner in which they feed into and influence each other’s characteristic ways of experiencing, processing or expression. Continuing with the example of primary and secondary processing, the ways in which the two make contact and feed into each other are evidently quite different in cases of dreaming, artistic creativity and ordinary consciousness.

The main premise of my argument is that each primary account implies the joint involvement of two co-existent psychic modalities. One of these modalities is taken to inform ordinary conscious experience, while the other
is seen as habitually repressed into unconscious depths. More precisely, the ‘ocean’ inherent in each of the accounts designates a repressed unconscious modality characterized by unbounded and undifferentiated experiencing/processing. As a kind of opposite counterpart, each also posits a conscious modality – the ‘diver’ – that is characterized by limitation and differentiation. Under conditions wherein the boundaries of the ego are loosened, these two modalities are seen as coming into the type of contact that produces what is referred to as an oceanic state. On these grounds, sufficient modal contact between the ‘diver’ and the ‘ocean’ can be defined as the essential criterion for all oceanic states. Apart from this common core feature, each account suggests a distinct type of ocean–diver pairing, and highlights differing factors in the contacts between them. In sum, the primary accounts share a general theoretical/argumentative structure that is ‘filled in’ varyingly according to the specific aims and commitments of their individual authors. A closer look at the interactions between the presumed modal counterparts, i.e. the ocean–diver pairings, will therefore allow us to delineate the given oceanic states as sufficiently distinct kinds.

I will illuminate the modal contacts of the primary accounts’ oceanic states through a comparative examination of the following factors. To begin, the relations involved will serve to identify which specific modalities are understood as coming into contact with each other. In figurative terms, they reveal what the diver and ocean are presumed to be. Second, degree indicates the extent to which contact is made, revealing how deep the diver descends. Third, duration places the contact on a continuum ranging from transient episode to permanent state. Fourth, mechanism refers to the ways in which the contact is instigated and sustained, either by conscious method or by chance. Next, function delineates what the contact is for, highlighting the roles the descent is intended or expected to play in addition to the ones it may play unintentionally. Finally, the outcomes include what the contact engenders in terms of feelings, sensations, perceptions, imagery, knowledge, psycho-structural change and behavior.

To reiterate, the purpose of this analysis is to demonstrate that the accounts share a common structure, yet within that structure promulgate oceanic states of different kinds, owing to their metapsychologically dissimilar ocean–diver pairings and interactions. It should also clarify further my terminological choices, i.e. how the attributives ‘metaphysical’, ‘developmental’ and ‘cognitive-perceptual’ function as descriptive labels for the very essences of the differently hypothesized modalities involved.

**Modal relations: what comes into contact with what in the oceanic state?**

For Rolland, the two modalities inherent in oceanic contact are derivatives of the metaphysical structure of the universe, and hence fundamental modes of being. The ocean is no less than the infinite self of undifferentiated, absolute reality, whereas the diver is the finite, differentiated ego implied in the world of relativity, persistently oblivious to its fundamental union with the ocean within. However, in strictly monist terms there is nothing that can
make contact with anything else, since the distinction between the ego and
the ocean is but an illusion. Thus Rolland asks, “But how has this absolute
Being become mingled with the will, the mind, the relative?” He answers in
Vivekananda’s Vedantic terms: “It has never been mingled. You are this
absolute Being, you have never changed. All that changes is Maya, the
Screen held between the real Me and you. And the very object of Life … is
the gradual elimination of the Screen” (Rolland, 1930, p. 209–10).

The screen analogy conveys a dualism, if not of substance, of personal expe-
rience. In Rolland’s account we find a metaphysical repression of sorts, in
which the screen prevents making a contact that would provide experiential
knowledge of both self and universe. Why such a screen/repression should
exist at all is, of course, a matter of extreme speculation. Furthermore, in
terms of intrapsychic dynamics, we may ask where in the mind do the finite
ego and infinite self make contact and demolish the screen? Even though Rol-
land was ambiguous about this, he was strongly drawn to the introspection
of the unconscious mind – enough so to request Freud’s assistance in its explora-
tion. Clearly the ocean was something unconscious that had to be discovered,
or rather recovered, and its existence and value made permanently conscious.

Freud also based his account of the oceanic state on two co-existent psy-
chic modalities: the mature ego feeling of autonomous separateness, and the
earlier ego feeling of limitless narcissism. However, in stark contrast to Rol-
land’s metaphysical setup, Freud’s diver and ocean are no more than devel-
opmental concomitants of the individual psyche. The repression of early
affective memory is accounted for by the mounting demands of the reality
principle. Thus the ocean is but an infantile, all-embracing mode of experi-
ence, preserved in varying degrees through ontogenetic fortuity. Seeing that
the boundaries of the mature ego are more or less susceptible to distur-
bance, it may occasionally come into contact with the preserved feeling, or,
in poetic terms, descend into the ocean of original limitlessness.

For Rolland, psychoanalysis turned out to be frustratingly imperceptive of
what he considered the true essence of the oceanic realm. He chides:

You, doctors of the Unconscious, instead of making yourselves citizens of this
boundless empire and possessing yourselves of it, do you ever enter it except as for-
eigners, imbued with the preconceived idea of the superiority of your own country
and incapable of ridding yourselves of the need, which itself deforms your vision, of
reducing whatever you catch a glimpse of in this unknown world to the measure of
the one already familiar to you?

(Rolland, 1930, p. 282–3)

Rolland thus rebuked the “prejudiced and puritanical” (p. 286) psychoana-
lytical position towards mystical experience for excluding as infantile that
which was of utmost value: the unconscious ocean within. That said, he
agreed that psychoanalysts were perceptive in pointing out the possible dan-
gers of oceanic contact, and argued accordingly that an attitude of rational
scepticism should function as a “strong, bitter, but health-giving tonic” to
one’s mystical inclinations (p. 287). Rolland maintained that rational reason-
ing also needed supervising, so his ideal was a state of equilibrium between
the diverse forces of the mind.
Ehrenzweig was also critical of the traditional psychoanalytic approach to the unconscious. More specifically, he disapproved of the excessive focus on the contents of the unconscious, especially when this came at the expense of its formal qualities. Ehrenzweig’s revisionary premise was that surface and depth levels of the ego incorporate distinct modalities of attention and perception. Differentiated surface-level attention produces consciously controlled, narrowly focused and articulate perception, whereas dedifferentiated depth-level attention produces unconscious, fluid, diffuse and holistic perception. At any given moment, attention oscillates between these two modalities, and thus incorporates various levels of perception simultaneously. However, unconscious imagery is regularly denied from conscious perception, not merely because of its offensive content but because of its undifferentiated form. Ehrenzweig called this “purely formal ‘structural’ repression” (Ehrenzweig, 1967, p. 32). In the oceanic state, the differentiated perception of the surface ego descends into the depth ego, and is suffused by dedifferentiated perception. Ehrenzweig’s ocean can thus be understood as the deepest substructure of the unconscious ego, operating even deeper than “the more superficial primary-process forms of condensation, displacement, representation by the opposite and the like” (Ehrenzweig, 1962, p. 115). In short, the ocean is structurally repressed unconscious form in its most unfathomable state.

A notable similarity between Rolland’s and Ehrenzweig’s accounts emerges here. In *The Life of Ramakrishna*, Rolland recounts how Ramakrishna specified two planes of vision. The first pertains to the normal perception of relativity, and functions within the “envelope of the differentiated ego”, whereas the second applies to the “supervision of perfect contemplation ... wherein one instant’s contact with the Infinite is sufficient to make the Illusion of all ‘differentiated’ egos, our own and other men’s, disappear immediately” (Rolland, 1929, p. 40). Ehrenzweig employed the notion of differentiation in relation to the ego and its depth perception in remarkably similar terms. Contrary to Rolland’s approach, and more in line with Freud’s, Ehrenzweig’s account does not transcend the individual psychic apparatus. For Ehrenzweig, undifferentiation is a property of unconscious form, not of any primal metaphysical substance itself. So, even if the two modalities in Rolland’s and Ehrenzweig’s accounts are qualitatively alike in the aforementioned respect, their presumed origins are worlds apart.

In sum, we find in the accounts of Rolland, Freud and Ehrenzweig three different oceans (the absolute/infinite self; primary ego feeling; and undifferentiated form perception) and three different divers (the relative/finite self; mature ego feeling; and differentiated form perception), each involving a different type of repression (metaphysical; affective-developmental; and cognitive-structural). These differences notwithstanding, all of the accounts imply that oceanic contact requires the dissolution of some aspect of the individuated ego and sufficient interaction between the conscious and unconscious modalities specified. Furthermore, each can subscribe to Rolland’s description of the ocean itself: “Unity, living and not abstract, is the essence of it all” (Rolland, 1929, p. xvii). That is, the unconscious modality in each account is, at its very core, characterized by undifferentiated oneness.
**Degree: to what extent can and should oceanic contact be made?**

In his analysis of the oceanic state, Freud refers to degree only in relation to the extent in which the early ego feeling of limitlessness may be preserved in the individual mind. Because he did not recommend any kind of descent into the ocean of primary narcissism, he had nothing much to say about its degree, either.

Rolland, on the other hand, conveyed his recognition of various degrees of contact by identifying two forms of “mystical introversion” (Rolland, 1930, p. 281). At one end of the continuum he posited the mitigated introversion of everyday imaginative thinking and reverie – similar in extent, perhaps, to the wishful ‘daydreaming’ and ‘phantasying’ that Freud had discussed elsewhere in relation to creativity (1908). At the other end he saw the absolute, unmitigated introversion of the highest mystics. Following Ramakrishna, Rolland sounded a solemn warning against full-blown unmitigated contact:

> But it is not for ordinary mortals. They run the risk of being maddened or petrified by terror. Their weakness is not fitted to achieve the synthesis of the Absolute and the ego. In order that their vital spark may not be extinguished, ‘the wand of the ego imposed upon the Ocean of Satchidananda (Being, Knowledge, Happiness) must be preserved’.  
> (Rolland 1929, p. 158)

Thus, for the masses, Rolland advocated a more careful, mitigated descent, safeguarded by an ego tethered to outer reality.

Ehrenzweig was similarly aware of differing degrees of contact, enabled by the stratified structure of the ego. He made no sharp division between conscious, preconscious and unconscious perception, noting instead the smooth transitions between them. Based on this, he repeatedly described the gradual descent of the surface ego into extreme oceanic depths, and identified a crucial “near-oceanic” limit to the deepest levels of dedifferentiation (Ehrenzweig, 1967, p. 184, 193). He also argued that the descent manifests itself formally in the poemagogic imagery characteristic of each level (p. 176, 184). Ehrenzweig’s oceanic contact is therefore a progressive phenomenon: “[T]he transition first produces experiences of ‘vagueness’, then a gradual dissolution of precise space and time, and in the end, when the last critical limit has been overstepped, complete blankness occurs, still replete with intense emotional experience, the much vaunted ‘full’ emptiness of low-level vision” (p. 270).

Ehrenzweig did not, however, specify consistently how deep the artist must plunge in order to achieve novel symbol formation. On one hand, he noted that the bulk of creative work was carried out in a “near-oceanic state” (Ehrenzweig, 1967, p. 104), which is presumably akin to Rolland’s mitigated introversion. On the other, he rhapsodized about the deepest oceanic experience that incorporates “manic feelings of oneness, envelopment and mystic union”, and provides the work of art with its “minimum content” (p. 119–21). This implies a full-blown unmitigated state that seems more like an exception than the rule in an everyday artistic creativity that nonetheless produces novel imagery. Either way, it is clear that Ehrenzweig viewed the
cyclical oscillation between the various levels as essential, and the stronger and deeper the links to the ocean, the more powerful the work of art.

The idea that contact admits of degree raises a difficult question regarding the threshold level of oceanic states, i.e. whether there is a minimum degree of contact that must be made for the state to be deemed oceanic. Intuitively it seems there must be, for it is quite possible that the two modalities depicted by each of the accounts could be found in a contact so negligible that referring to such states as oceanic would stretch the term beyond its breaking point. Perhaps the extent to which the undifferentiated modality feeds into the differentiated modality is crucial. For the present purposes, we may simply recognize that degree plays a key role in the emergence of oceanic states, and agree with Rolland and Ehrenzweig that states of oceanic contact, like most mental states, come in a variety of degrees ranging from the moderate to the extreme.

**Duration: for how long can and should oceanic contact be made?**

In his analysis of the oceanic state, Freud recognized that the boundaries of the mature ego could be disrupted under various conditions, reasoning that “what can be temporarily done away with by a physiological [i.e. normal] function must also, of course, be liable to be disturbed by pathological processes” (Freud, 1930, p. 66, my italics). This indicates that for Freud boundary disturbances are typically temporary, whether they appear at the height of being in love, in pathology, or in mystical practices such as yoga, trances and ecstasies (p. 66, 72–3). Freud did not, however, identify his examples of being in love and pathology as oceanic states as such; instead, he used them to illustrate that the boundaries of the ego are inconstant and thus exposed to disruption. On that account, all instances of oceanic contact require a temporary disturbance of ego boundaries, but not all disturbances of ego boundaries entail oceanic contact between mature ego feeling and primary narcissism.

Interestingly, Freud also alluded to permanence in describing the ideational content of Rolland’s oceanic state as that of “an indissoluble bond”, and as the belief that “We cannot fall out of this world” (Freud, 1930, p. 65). Freud identified these ideas as the “intellectual perceptions” associated with temporary regression into primary narcissism. Therefore, even if the ideational contents convey the notion of permanence, the feeling itself is likely to pass. This is in line with Rolland’s view only insofar as the oceanic contact is viewed as an episodic state. In general, the contacts made in episodic states may be brief, as in Rolland’s early mystical “explosions” (Rolland, 1947, p. 10), or in extreme cases quite prolonged, as in Ramakrishna’s alleged six-month cataleptic “union with the ‘Formless’” (Rolland, 1929, p. 46).

Seeing as Rolland valued social and political action, he was wary of any sustained mystical withdrawal from worldly affairs (cf. Starr, 1971; Fisher, 1988). In his depiction of the Indian saints, he stressed that the permanent “supreme realisation, the absolute Identity” was reserved for those “who had achieved their mission in life; it was the ultimate and forbidden joy” (Rolland, 1929, p. 167–8). Even the temporary absorption that revealed for
an instant “the Ocean of Being in the full and Biblical sense” should be reserved for exceptional moments only (Rolland, 1930, p. 227). Instead of pursuing episodic states, Rolland was more concerned with a permanent oceanic state. As has been outlined earlier, his mature oceanic state was the pinnacle of a lifelong mystical journey: the embodiment of a monist worldview that suffused his whole character. In the biography of Ramakrishna, Rolland recounts that when Vivekananda wished to remain in the “infinite joy of nirvana”, Ramakrishna counseled him: “This realisation will become so natural to you ... that in your normal state you will realise the One Divinity in all beings; you will do great things in the world; you will bring spiritual consciousness to men, and assuage the misery of the humble and the poor” (Rolland, 1929, p. 192, my italics). Rolland arguably cast himself in a role comparable to that of Vivekananda, insofar as his early episodic oceanic states consolidated into a permanent disposition that guided his later actions. He had achieved a normalized, constant state of contact, which, he told Freud, did not affect his critical faculties or diminish his active involvement in the world.

In a similar vein, Ehrenzweig’s oceanic state can be viewed as an integral part of two processes differing in length and magnitude: as a transient phase in singular creative episodes, and as the permanent outcome of a longer journey of dispositional artistic maturation. In his teaching, Ehrenzweig encouraged his students to rely on the manic-oceanic phase to produce vivid imagery. Naturally, the duration of this phase may vary, depending on the artist, the demands of the work at hand, and so on. Ehrenzweig recognized that keeping differentiated conscious gestalt at bay for prolonged periods of time posed an insurmountable challenge to habitual perception (Ehrenzweig, 1967, p. 177). Nor would this be desirable: it would impede the cyclical oscillation between surface and depth perception that is crucial to novel symbol formation. He nonetheless believed it was possible, through deliberate intellectual effort, to train one’s powers of syncretistic introspection to hold on to less articulated states of consciousness (p. 88, 144). The ultimate aim of Ehrenzweig’s pedagogy could thus be summarized as the achievement of an enduring contact with the ocean, which could henceforth be called willingly into creative service. This endeavor is analogous to Rolland’s considered cultivation of a constant, dispositional oceanic state.

**Mechanisms: how is oceanic contact brought about and sustained?**

According to Freud, oceanic contact required the disturbance of ego boundaries. However, because he was unconvinced of the value of the contact, he was relatively unconcerned with the details of its willed implementation. Despite this, he was aware of such efforts, mentioning a friend who regarded the methods and practices of yoga as instigating “regressions to primordial states of mind which have long ago been overlaid” (Freud, 1930, p. 72).³ Freud believed that similar “obscure modifications of mental life” could be

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³Apparently this friend was not Rolland, as Parsons (1999) presumes, but Frederick Eckstein, who was once a Buddhist monk (Vermorel, 2009, p. 1245).
found easily in trances and ecstasies as well. Be that as it may, he summed up his cautious attitude towards the oceanic state with a pithy quote from Schiller’s diver: “Let him rejoice who breathes up here in the roseate light!” (p. 73).

Contrary to Freud, both Rolland and Ehrenzweig viewed oceanic contact as a worthy pursuit, and were accordingly interested in methods for its attainment. In the biographies of the Indian saints, Rolland outlined a number of different paths to the ‘Ocean of Being’, including art, compassion, meditation, methodical mysticism, labor and science. More specifically, he advocated the methods of yoga in its various forms, including Karma (work), Jnana (knowledge) and Bhakti (devotion). However, Rolland was anything but doctrinaire, proclaiming that in “all countries and at all times learned men, or artists, great men of action or of intense meditation, have known and practised it instinctively each in his own way, either consciously or subconsciously, as experience dictated” (Rolland, 1930, p. 184). His fundamental principle was that regardless of method, personal conviction should always be founded on inward experience; only then could it be complemented with knowledge from outward scientific observation. For Rolland, mystical introversion was thus a demanding yet adaptive search for the truth, not an immature flight from reality. Moreover, he asserted that the oceanic state was no “replunging of conscious thought into the distant abysses of prenatal life” (p. 282). That said, he admitted that the frequent maternal-aquatic symbolism of unmitigated oceanic states added weight to the psychoanalytic assumption that these were but regressions to an early stage of unity. Even so, Rolland defended his view by distinguishing the rich and luminous simplicity of the mystic from the confused pre-intuition of the child, and denied that the former was due to any simple return to the latter (p. 282).

Like Freud and Rolland, Ehrenzweig recognized that oceanic contact was not limited to a particular life domain. “It is now widely realized,” he noted, “that any – not only religious – creative experience can produce an oceanic state” (Ehrenzweig, 1967, p. 294). For Ehrenzweig, the crux of the matter was the promotion of creativity in all its forms. In the context of artistic creativity, the pursuit of oceanic contact is viewed as something of an heroic act, as it calls for a deliberate decomposition of the mind: the ego has to attenuate the demands of a strict superego and allow itself to sink to undifferentiated levels of perception while utilizing the energy of the superego to deepen its normally shallow oscillation (p. 212). Initially this requires considerable toleration of anxiety, since undifferentiated perception is commonly experienced as threateningly chaotic. Through time and practice, however, the artist can learn to initiate and hold onto unconscious scanning, and utilize it effectively for creative ends.

Here Ehrenzweig echoes Ernst Kris’ (1952) depiction of adaptive structural shifts in the ego, and, in particular, its controlled relaxation as a means of interacting with primary process functioning. However, in reference to Kris, Ehrenzweig denied that creativity was merely a controlled regression toward primary process content; instead, it entailed the management of the constructive capacities of the primary process itself (Ehrenzweig, 1967,
p. 261–2). Ehrenzweig was also aware that adulthood behaviors could not – in terms of their function – be simply traced back to childhood experience (cf. “the genetic fallacy”; Hartmann, 1955, p. 221). It was therefore “useless” to explain the creative oceanic state of dedifferentiation as a “regression” to pre-existing infantile or primitive percepts and concepts” (p. 261). Rather, it was best understood as the “creation of an entirely new matrix, the undifferentiated structure of which is made to fit precisely a particular task” (p. 261). Thus, like Rolland, Ehrenzweig departed from Freud’s account by sidetracking regressive-developmental factors, and by highlighting the willed, presently contextualized and beneficent activity of the mature ego. This does not mean that Ehrenzweig neglected the role of developmental factors in the overall structuration and functioning of the mind. In fact, he placed his phasic model of artistic creativity firmly within the Kleinian framework of paranoid-schizoid and depressive developmental positions (p. 95–109). Be that as it may, his emphasis regarding the oceanic state was on a cognitive-perceptual capability that does not merely revive earlier experience.

Functions and outcomes: what is the oceanic contact for, and what does it engender?

Freud expressly denied that the oceanic state was a reliable source of objective knowledge, the origin of religion or suitable for adaptation to the world at large. He confirmed this position in a letter to Rolland in 1930:

> We seem to diverge rather far in the role we assign to intuition. Your mystics rely on it to teach them how to solve the riddle of the universe; we believe that it cannot reveal to us anything but primitive, instinctual impulses and attitudes – highly valuable for an embriology [sic] of the soul when correctly interpreted, but worthless for orientation in the alien, external world.

(E. Freud, 1960, p. 392–3)

Freud did, however, recognize how the restoration of primary narcissism could play a defensive function by denying outside threats to the ego (Freud, 1930, p. 72). As such, it could provide consolation and spur the individual towards religious explanations later on.

Counter to Freud, Rolland believed that “all virile souls should plunge into it [the ocean] and renew their strength from time to time” (Rolland, 1929, p. 157–8). Employed carefully, oceanic contact could induce the disintegration of illusory mental structure, and thus provide means for mastering the mind (p. 19). In addition to its vitalizing psycho-structural effects, Rolland maintained that the contact could deliver knowledge of immutable metaphysical laws. He quoted the American transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson in pertinent fashion:

> For all beings proceed out of this same spirit, which is differently named ... just as the ocean receives different names on the several shores which it washes ... The perception of this law of laws awakens in the mind a sentiment which we call the religious sentiment, and which makes our highest happiness.

(Rolland, 1930, p. 38)
Here, at the very base of Rolland’s oceanic sentiment, we encounter a metaphysical dictum, the unity between self and the absolute. This led him to remonstrate against the incredulity of psychoanalysts towards the epistemological rewards of mystical introversion, and to ask rather sardonically: “Is it a slight thing by means of direct inner perception to be able to realize the great cosmic laws and the forces that govern the universe controlled by our senses?” (Rolland, 1930, p. 283).

Rolland depicted the behavioral outcomes of oceanic contact as manifold. Extreme states could reportedly induce catatonia, delirium, identification with deities and fits of unconsciousness (Rolland, 1929, p. 17). However, as has been noted, Rolland favored a mysticism with practical social effects. To this end, he derived an ethical law from the experientially discovered metaphysical one. The great motto retrieved from the ocean – the foundation and highest code of his ethics – was “Not me, my brother, but thou!” (Rolland, 1930, p. 228). Each time this was uttered, one step forward was taken on the inverse journey towards original infinitude and freedom. In short, for Rolland the most desirable behavioral outcome of oceanic contact was ethical: the humble and wholehearted service of humanity.

As I have argued, Rolland seemed wary of accompanying oceanic contact with any particular feeling, relating instead a broad spectrum that included, for instance, compassion, ecstasy and terror. Similarly, he depicted a host of sensations such as engulfment, suffocation, flooding, dizziness, timelessness and boundlessness. In terms of perception, Rolland related visions of dazzling light and waves, the disappearance of the material world and various mental images. He viewed these images as individually and culturally conditioned projections:

My own view [of Ramakrishna’s visions of Mother Kali] ... is that he saw nothing, but that he was aware of Her all-permeating presence. He called the Ocean by Her name ... [The mind attaches the name of the being filling its thoughts to quite a different form; the object of our love is in everything; all forms are but its cloak. (Rolland, 1929, p. 15–6).

Curiously, Rolland condemned “the mistrust shown by some masters of psychoanalysis for the free natural play of the mind”, and criticized “the stigma they imprint upon it of ‘narcissism’ and ‘autoerotism’” (Rolland, 1930, p. 286). Furthermore, he firmly denounced what he perceived as the “austere scorn” of the “great Freud” towards “the principle of pleasure” (p. 286). It seems that Rolland misguidedly conflated Freud’s notion of the pleasure principle with the valuable and pleasurable aspects of contact with the metaphysical ocean, and insisted that it was only natural that the “full perception ... of the logical ordering of the universe” be accompanied by feelings of wellbeing and joy (p. 286). Even though Freud attempted to rectify Rolland’s misconceptions by pointing out that psychoanalytic terms such as regression, narcissism and the pleasure principle were of a purely descriptive nature – and, as such, did not carry any valuation per se (E. Freud, 1960, p. 392) – the two failed to reach any final agreement on the nature and value of the oceanic state.

Ehrenzweig also described in detail the various feelings and sensations involved in oceanic contact. Initially, it could be felt as anxiety-provoking,
but once the deeper oceanic levels were reached, feelings of manic elation were likely to ensue, accompanied by sensations of envelopment, fusion, timelessness and boundlessness. Despite his rich depiction of affective experience, Ehrenzweig placed greater emphasis on the cognitive-perceptual outcomes of the contact, and suggested that feelings were but concomitants of the ego’s descent: “Dedifferentiation suspends many kinds of boundaries and distinctions; at an extreme limit it may remove the boundaries of individual existence and so produce a mystic oceanic feeling that is distinctively manic in quality” (Ehrenzweig, 1967, p. 294). He also speculated whether it was not the removal of boundaries per se that produced the oceanic feeling(s), but rather the rising into conscious awareness of the products of dedifferentiated perception (p. 295). Significantly, he noted how “a manic element belonging to deeper near-oceanic levels of dedifferentiation (where unconscious scanning is carried on) must persist to sustain the artist against the onslaught of depression at the sight of persisting surface fragmentation” (p. 193). On that account, the positive feelings produced by oceanic contact could sustain the flow of the creative process.

Whereas Rolland’s primary aims were epistemic and ethical, Ehrenzweig’s foremost interests lay in the formal results of the creative process. For him, the most significant outcome of oceanic contact could be apprehended in the actual materiality of artworks. However, Ehrenzweig also recognized the psycho-structural change of the more permanent oceanic state – evidenced by increased ego flexibility, stronger toleration of uncertainty, and openness to new experience. These changes could, in turn, lead to improved personal relations, insofar as the “frequent failure in human relationships is due to the same ego rigidity that impedes creativity” (p. 223). On the whole, then, Ehrenzweig’s account can also be understood as advocating behavioral and ethical outcomes that reach beyond the immediate (artistic) context.

I have now elucidated – in terms of modal contact – how the primary accounts promulgate three distinct kinds of oceanic states while sharing the core criterion of ego boundary disruption and contact between differentiated and undifferentiated modalities of the mind. My reading of the accounts indicates that oneness is primarily a property of the ocean involved in oceanic contact, and only contingently an affective feature of the state itself. This departs from the predominant view that takes the specific feeling of oneness as the key criterion for oceanic states. To conclude, I will examine my proposals in light of recent research and discussion on oceanic phenomena.

**In conclusion**

The idea that oceanic states appear in different forms and settings, and are put to different uses, is neither novel nor exceptional. In fact, one of Ehrenzweig’s closest collaborators, Marion Milner, was quick to discover that the artist’s creative state did not consist of “the oceanic feeling by itself, for that would be the mystic’s state”; rather, she believed creativity, unlike mysticism, required the intentional use of the oceanic state to “produce
something” (Milner, 1987, p. 197). More recently, Stephen Newton has discussed similar issues in his reassessment of Ehrenzweig’s and Rolland’s theorization. Although Newton posits a core oceanic experience as the fulcrum of both artistic and mystical states, he acknowledges it may come in varying degrees (Newton, 2008, p. 104). Moreover, oceanic states in the two may differ insofar as “mystical experience is the creative process without an art object” (p. 131). Indeed, it has become a near-given that oceanic states may emerge in different contexts, engender various ideational contents, and serve many functions ranging from the rigidly defensive to the profoundly transformative (cf. Werman, 1986; Parsons, 1999). It is also relatively uncontested that, despite sharing a set of distinctive features, oceanic states are varyingly conditioned by personal aims, expectations and developmental histories, and by the wider socio-cultural context in which they occur.

I also subscribe to these views. Moreover, I believe that recognizing oceanic states as variable in content, function, etc. in itself justifies talk of different kinds of oceanic states. Just as we delineate general categories for emotional states such as fear and love (based on sets of distinctive characteristics), yet identify specific kinds of fear and love within those categories (e.g. xenophobia and platonic love), we may likewise postulate a general category for psychological states that are oceanic (again based on a set of distinctive characteristics), while speaking of different kinds of oceanic states within that category (e.g. artistic, romantic or religious ones).

But what I have implied here is a bit different, and takes a venturesome step from semantics towards the ontology of mental states. In discussions on the topic, it has thus far been assumed that no matter how much oceanic states vary individually, they still involve one – and only one – ocean–diver pairing. Emphasis has accordingly been laid on the psychological nature of this singular ocean, and on the mechanisms and implications of immersion into it. Newton (2008), for example, hypothesizes one core oceanic dimension that binds together the developmental, cognitive-perceptual and mystical elements of all oceanic experiencing. This type of explication entails two major problems. First, it establishes the ‘oceanic dimension/core/level’ as a nebulous conceptual container for a motley assortment of psychological processes, developmental remnants and experiential qualia, and, as such, diminishes its descriptive and explanatory power. Second, it implies that Rolland, Freud and Ehrenzweig ultimately referred to one self-same ocean, when, quite consciously, they did not. In effect, what they achieved was a complementary mapping of different unitive modalities of the unconscious mind. Freud delineated an infantile mode of all-embracing feeling, Ehrenzweig a mature mode of undifferentiated perceiving and Rolland an existential mode of unitive being.

As of yet, then, there has been no serious examination of the possibility of different ocean–diver pairings co-existing within the mind. To some, such an alternative might seem like a gross violation of theoretical parsimony. However, I find no a priori reasons for its dismissal. Having said that, I believe any cogent argumentation for distinct oceanic modalities must rely on contemporary knowledge of the mind. From a developmental point of view, the criticism leveled against the notion of primary narcissism/symbiosis
is crucial (cf. Peterfreund, 1978; Stern, 1985). Instead of an early stage of undifferentiated fusion – out of which differentiation and separation proceed – it has been suggested that union and distinction emerge together, and co-constitute each other as the general parameters of experiencing, with one or the other mode more influential at any given moment (Eigen, 1983). Similarly, early experiencing has been described in terms of the infant’s occasional merger fantasies and moment-to-moment alternations between differentiation and undifferentiation (Pine, 2004; Silverman, 2004). In short, empirical studies of, for example, the nascent body ego and the emergence of self-awareness are indispensable to valid conceptualizations of the developmental oceanic modality (cf. Lehtonen et al., 2006; Rochat, 2003). Everything considered, the evidence suggests an ocean rooted in early somatosensory feelings and fantasies of unity. As a constitutive modality of the mind, this ocean may feed into the more usual mode of separateness and produce an oceanic state.

With regard to the cognitive-perceptual oceanic modality, the crucial question is whether it can be established as an integral part of the visual-perceptual system, and construed as functioning independently from the developmental ocean outlined earlier. Interestingly, Ehrenzweig drew from experiments of subliminal vision to support his ideas of unconscious scanning and formal structural repression (Ehrenzweig, 1967, p. 32–3, 270–2). Since then, research into unconscious vision/perception has proliferated (e.g. see Brogaard, 2011; Fisk & Haase, 2011). As things stand, I am wary of making the ontological claim that a distinct cognitive-perceptual oceanic modality definitely exists, especially in the superior sense that Ehrenzweig claimed. Nonetheless, pending further evidence, it is reasonable to investigate whether an oceanic way of perceiving is constitutive of overall visual perception, and if so, whether it can be accessed intentionally to dedifferentiate habitual conscious perception.

As expected, the matter of a mentally indwelling yet supra-individual metaphysical modality diverts us from the methods of experimental research, and leaves us standing on rather speculative ground. Even so, many psychoanalytical theorists have attempted to formulate a metapsychology that incorporates a genuinely mystical dimension of the mind. Parsons mentions Erikson’s “unborn core of creation”, Bion’s “O”, Lacan’s “Real”, Deikman’s “deautomatization” and Kohut’s “cosmic narcissism” as conceptualizations of this order (Parsons, 1999, p. 134; see also Merkur, 2010). Without elaborating on these any further, it is evident that many theorists have taken seriously the idea of an oceanic dimension that transcends the individual mind and its developmental history. If any such ocean does indeed exist, contact with it must be of a very unique kind.

Finally, if we accept the possibility of several different oceans, we need not favor one primary account (or its kind) as more definitive than the other; nor are we obliged to submit any one account to the explanatory framework of another. Instead, we may work towards a pluralist account of the mind that accommodates several oceanic modalities. This need not entail that oceanic states always, or even mostly, occur as purely metaphysical, developmental or cognitive-perceptual kinds – it only suggests their possibility.
Hence, despite being open to the idea of different oceans, I have not taken a definitive stand on their actual co-existence, nor offered any methods for recognizing them in any given instance. I have simply argued that the notion of a mind with more than one ocean enriches theoretical discussion and merits further examination.

Translations of summary

Der ozeanische Zustand: eine konzeptionelle Erläuterung unter dem Aspekt des modalen Kontakts. Trotz seiner langen Geschichte in der Psychoanalyse sind die psychologischen Ursprünge, die entscheidenden Merkmale und der Wert des ozeanischen Zustands weiterhin Gegenstand der Diskussion. Diese Mehrdeutigkeit geht auf Kosten der Klarheit der theoretischen Diskussionen über das Thema. Im Rahmen einer konzeptionellen Erläuterung behauptet der Autor, dass es drei grundlegende Darstellungen des ozeanischen Zustands gibt, nämlich die metaphysische von Romain Rolland, die entwicklungsorientierte von Sigmund Freud und die kognitiv-wahrnehmungsorientierte von Anton Ehrenzweig. Auf der Basis der Vorstellung des modalen Kontakts argumentiert er, dass die Darstellungen eine allgemeine theoretische Struktur teilen, die als das notwendige Kriterium für alle ozeanischen Zustände die Lockerung der Ich-Grenzen und einen ausreichenden Kontakt zwischen differenzierten und undifferenzierten psychischen Modalitäten festschreibt. Im Rahmen dieser gemeinsamen Struktur verwenden die Darstellungen jedoch unterschiedliche Metapsychologien, um ozeanische Zustände deutlich unterschiedlicher Art zu beschreiben. Um diese Sichtweise zu stützen, führt der Autor eine vergleichende Untersuchung der modalen Kontakte durch, die mit diesen grundlegenden Darstellungen von ozeanischen Zuständen verbunden sind. Zum Abschluss bespricht er die Hauptimplikationen der Vorstellung des modalen Kontakts gegenüber der neueren Diskussion über ozeanische Phänomene und unterbietet zur Betrachtung eine pluralistische Darstellung der Psyche, die sich an die Existenz verschiedener Arten ozeanischer Zustände anpassen kann.

El estado oceánico: una dilucidación conceptual en términos del contacto modal. A pesar de la larga historia del estado oceánico en psicoanálisis, sus orígenes psicológicos, características esenciales y valor siguen siendo objeto de disputa. Esta ambigüedad ha tenido un costo para la claridad de las discusiones teóricas sobre el tema. En su intento de lograr una dilucidación conceptual, el autor sostiene que existen tres descripciones fundamentales del estado oceánico: el metafísico de Romain Rolland, el evolutivo de Sigmund Freud y el cognitivo-perceptivo de Anton Ehrenzweig. A partir de la noción de contacto modal, el autor argumenta que estas descripciones comparten una estructura teórica general. Esta establece que todos los estados oceánicos tienen como condiciones necesarias el alejamiento de las fronteras del Yo y un contacto suficiente entre las modalidades diferenciada e indiferenciada de la mente. Sin embargo, dentro de esta estructura común, las descripciones utilizan metapsicologías diferentes para promulgar estados oceánicos de tipos claramente distintos. Para respaldar esta visión, el autor realiza un examen comparativo de los contactos modales involucrados en las descripciones fundamentales de los estados oceánicos. Para concluir, repasa las principales implicancias de la noción de contacto modal en relación con el debate reciente acerca de los fenómenos oceánicos, y presenta para su análisis una descripción pluralista de la mente que puede dar cabida a la existencia de varios tipos de estados oceánicos.

L’état océanique: une élucidation conceptuelle du contact modal. En dépit de l’occurrence ancienne du phénomène d’état océanique dans l’histoire de la psychanalyse, ses origines psychologiques de l’état océanique, ses caractéristiques essentielles et sa valeur demeurent un sujet controversé. Cette ambiguïté a causé du tort à la clarté des discussions théoriques autour de cette question. En travaillant à l’élucidation de ce concept, l’auteur du présent article soutient qu’il existe trois principales conceptions de la notion d’état océanique, la conception métaphysique de Romain Rolland, la conception développementale de Freud y la conception cognitive-perceptuelle d’Anton Ehrenzweig. Selon l’auteur, ces conceptions, basées sur la notion de contact modal, partagent une structure théorique générale qui établit le critère nécessaire constitutif des états océaniques, à savoir le relâchement des frontières du moi et un contact suffisant entre les modalités différenciées et indifférenciées du psychisme. Cependant, au sein de cette structure commune, ces trois conceptions font appel à des métapsychologies distinctes définissant des états océaniques de types résolument différents. Pour soutenir cette hypothèse, l’auteur fait une étude comparative des contacts modaux inhérents à ces trois conceptions. Pour conclure, il fait en revue les principales implications de la notion de contact modal vis-à-vis des discussions récentes sur les phénomènes océaniques et propose une conception pluraliste du psychisme permettant de rendre compte de l’existence de différents types d’états océaniques.
Lo stato oceanico: un chiarimento concettuale in termini di contatto modale. La nozione di stato oceanico esiste da lunga data nella storia della psicoanalisi; ciò nonostante, le idee circa le origini psicologiche, gli aspetti essenziali e il valore di questo stato sono a tutt’oggi ancora discordanti. Le ambiguità che ne risultano offuscano le argomentazioni teoriche su questo argomento. Nel tentativo di effettuare una delucidazione concettuale, l’autore sostiene che esistano tre concettualizzazioni essenziali della nozione di stato oceanico: quella di Romain Rolland, quella freudiana relativa alla teoria dello svi-luppo, e quella cognitiva –percettiva di Anton Ehrenzweig. Muovendo dalla nozione di contatto modale, l’autore propone che queste tre prospettive condividano l’assunto teorico di base per cui un rilassamento dei confini dell’Io e un sufficiente contatto fra le zone psichiche differenziate e quelle indifferenziate sar-ebbero i criteri indispensabili per l’emergenza dello stato oceanico. Tuttavia, all’interno di questa struttur-a comune, le tre prospettive ricorrono a metapsicologie diverse, proponendo nozioni di stato oceanico considerevolmente diverse fra loro. Per sostenere questa tesi, l’autore effettua una ricerca comparata di contatto modale nelle tre diverse prospettive. Conclude poi con una rassegna delle principali implicazioni della nozione di contatto modale nei confronti di recenti dibattiti sui fenomeni oceanici, e propone di considerare una prospettiva pluralistica della mente che possa concepire l’esistenza di diversi tipi di stato oceanico.

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