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Mysticism and Its Cultural Expression: An Inquiry into the Description of Mystical Experience and Its Ontological and Epistemological Nature

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The purpose of this paper is to critically explore the nature and ontological and epistemological significance of differences observed in how various cultural traditions describe and explain such experiences. After an initial consideration of definitional issues, the article focuses on the arguments supporting and challenging the idea of mystical experience being a universal phenomenon and a vehicle for true knowledge. The article also examines the problem of the unity of the mystical experience as a definite state of consciousness and the multiplicity of its sociocultural and civilizational expressions and descriptions conditioned by different cultural and historical factors.

This paper is dedicated to the examination of the problem of the forms of cultural expressions of mystical experience. That is, the purpose of this paper is to critically explore the nature and ontological and epistemological significance of differences observed in how various cultural traditions describe and explain such experiences. Prior to initiating this undertaking, however, it is important to first address definitional issues.

The word "mysticism" and all its variants and derivatives (e.g., mystical, mystic) holds several largely unique meanings. For example, the term is used to designate (a) the experience or feeling of unity of the person with the ontological ground of the Universe and/or of all beings, (b) different esoteric rites and practices, and (c) various forms of occultism. Further, the word "mysticism" is laden with pejorative connotations, the most problematic of which concerns it as being diametrically opposed to rationality as the basis for epistemology.[1] Consequently, there is a need to exercise care in delineating what is meant by mysticism, since any discourse regarding the epistemological and ontological features of it will likely be met with skepticism and mistrust by the majority of Western scholars, scientists, and philosophers.

For the sake of this paper, mystical experience will be defined in a very specific way. In particular, it will be used to designate a type of experience described as involving the expansion of consciousness and the feeling of unity of the experient's heart-and-mind with the hidden (or concealed) ontological ground of all existence or with the original principle of all things and beings. This kind of experience, which often involves the transcendence of normal and sundry modes of consciousness, has direct and immediate relevance to epistemology and metaphysics.

Mystical Experience as Universal versus Culture Bound

Many of us use an expression such as "mystical experience" and yet there is little in the way of elucidation as to how such an experience arises within consciousness and how, if at all, it conveys knowledge of reality. In what sense can the feelings and intuitions observed to arise in a mystical experience be considered the product of consciousness and reflective of true knowledge? Before answering this question, we are confronted with another query. If mystical experience contains even an element of true knowledge, then why are there such a great number of descriptions and interpretations of the experience across different traditions (e.g., Judeo-Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, etc.)? Should there not be some form of convergence of expression and meaning? Here rests one of the major challenges of studying mystical expe-

rience; making sense of the vast array of seemingly divergent perspectives on the experience.

A number of scholars (e.g., Forman, 1998), including most notably Stace (1960), who completed a broad yet critical analysis of its phenomenology, have argued quite convincingly that the mystical experience is a universal phenomenon that is found in every culture and tradition. This position is most clearly supported by the essential descriptive features of the experience. Stace himself identified nine characteristics generally common to all mystical experience (e.g., ineffability, noetic quality, religious quality, paradoxicality, time-space quality). Franklin (1998), as a second illustration, has asserted that all forms of mystical experience share one fundamental quality involving strong feelings of unity which he calls "the flavor of nonseparateness." Indeed, it may be argued that the acceptance of the inherent universality of the mystical experience is one of the defining assumptions of transpersonal studies.

With this said, the problem of the varied expressions of the experience may be traced to two interrelated factors, namely, (a) its inherent nonconceptual and ineffable nature, and (b) the sociocultural and linguistic influences on the identification/detection and interpretation of the experience. Stated another way, the varieties of mystical experience appear to have arisen first and foremost as a function of the inadequacies of language in accurately capturing the flavor and immediacy of the experience and second because of differences in language and culture, which themselves bring structure and meaning to experience. How do we make sense of mystical experience in light of these obfuscating elements?

One way that we may address the problem is by dividing mystical experience into two aspects. The first concerns the actual experience itself (i.e., the immediate apprehension or intuition) and the second relates to its level of expression and description. The former aspect will likely be similar across individuals and traditions while the latter will differ from person to person and culture to culture. In a related vein, the former will be nonconceptual and nonlinguistic while the latter will involve the transference of the nonconceptual experience to the categories and terms of the experient's doctrine and/or thought system which, in turn, is a product of the cultural context in which the individual is operating.

Considering the descriptive aspect, a question that now emerges relates to the extent to which the higher states of consciousness found in mystical experience can be accurately expressed. Is it truly possible to describe and express the experience or are such expressions always doomed to being inexact and, ultimately, irrelevant in capturing the real stuff of mystical experiences? There are a variety of positions on this matter and, unfortunately, I cannot give a final solution that would be satisfactory to all parties. However, if it could be acknowledged that the experience is beyond expression as it is occurring but that its subsequent description holds some veridicality, then it becomes possible to gain a real sense of the experience through an analysis of its expressions and the associated culture-bound doctrines that have arisen to explain the experience. This possibility has been argued by some prominent figures including Stace (1960), who has stated that the mystical experience is wholly unconceptualizable and wholly unspeakable when the very experience lasts, but afterwards, when experience is kept in memory the situation must be changed. Now mystics have words and concepts and they can speak about their experience in the terms natural to their tradition or culture. Further support for the possibility of gaining knowledge of the experience from a doctrinally-based description arises from the fact that the act of labeling an experience as "nonconceptualizable" is itself a conceptualization. Therefore, the nonconceptual character of mystical experience cannot and should not be seen as absolute (Burton, 1999). Interestingly, the relation of the doctrinal/conceptual and the experiential modes of knowledge is acknowledged in some extant religious systems (e.g., Tibetan Buddhism recognizes and struggles with the implications of knowledge gained through critical conceptually driven investigation as compared to knowledge acquired through the highest states of experiential knowing [Williams, 1992].). Finally, the association of doctrine to practice and, in particular, the ubiquitous tendency of mystical traditions not only to advocate a "theory" of the experience but also to put forth a structured technique or method of cultivating consciousness to facilitate the arising of the experience may be seen as reflecting a universal process that is culturally variant only in terms of its content. This process may be depicted as starting with doctrine that leads to engagement in a psychospiritual practice. This, in turn, gives rise to the mystical experience. Lastly, following the conclusion of the experience, the individual utilizes the doctrine to articulate

the nature and meaning of the experience. In this process, neither the doctrine nor doctrinally driven interpretation is synonymous with the experience itself, though both hold some potential to give some knowledge of the experience.

Notwithstanding the argumentation about the tenability of analyzing language as a means of garnering an understanding of mystical experience, there is widespread recognition in the spiritual, religious, and philosophical literature that language itself, regardless of its particular cultural manifestation, serves as a hindrance to the direct comprehension of the experience.

As stated above, while doctrine plays a role both preceding and following the experience, neither doctrine nor language is the experience per se. Consequently, while language may be seen as a vehicle to introduce the possibility and quality of mystical experience, it must also be recognized as imperfect and prone to distortion. Stated another way, while doctrine may be useful in drawing our attention to the highest levels of spirituality, it does not and cannot serve as a substitute for the direct experience of such levels of spirituality.[2]

In response to the limitations of language, virtually all mystical traditions attempt to utilize methods of expression that are aimed at simultaneously minimizing distortion while also granting unhindered access to the experience itself. One of the most salient examples of this, found most clearly in Indian spiritual traditions (e.g., Hinduism, Buddhism), concerns the use of negative descriptions of the experience (i.e., describing the highest mystical states in terms of what they are not). This method of description has been referred to as "the semantic destruction of language" (Zilberman, 1972), where the destruction of language occurs when a description, previously based upon a symbolic form of expression adopted by a certain tradition, is changed into its negative form (or even paradoxical form as is the case in the Zen koan and mondo). Extending from this, mystical texts may be viewed in many instances as containing statements about the conditional or provisional character of mystical experience which, given the manner that they are described, are intended to communicate the nature of the experience beyond the words used. The use of poetry, metaphor, parable, and myth may also be seen as ways in which mystics from various traditions have used language to articulate the indescribable.

It may be inferred from this discussion that, given the apparent commonality across mystical traditions to address the challenges of language, there is an implied agreement about the reality and concurrent ineffability of the highest spiritual experiences. That is, all traditions appear to agree that the experience is real and inherently beyond language. Similarly, all traditions appear to (a) use language to provide an initial sense of what mystical experience is about, (b) manipulate language to enable the person to have the experience without being limited to the words describing the experience, and (c) advocate the use of practices that take the person beyond language and into direct experiential contact with higher states of consciousness and knowledge.

Certainly, there have always existed people who tried to express their mystical experience in proper and precise terms notwithstanding traditional cultural conventions. In historical perspective, usually these individuals abandoned their native traditions and either were labeled "heretics" by the established cultural system and/or went on to found a new tradition. One of the most famous examples is the historical Buddha, who from the beginning of his religious career was a heterodox hermit (shramana) who rejected the Brahmanist interpretation of his experience of Enlightenment (or Awakening). However, even in this case, the descriptions of Buddha's own experience and the conclusions made from them by his followers were provided in terms consistent with the Indian cultural paradigm and its traditional language. Consequently, it is impossible for me to agree with arguments which maintain that all mystical experience is an intensified psychosomatic expression of extant religious beliefs and values (see, e.g., Gimello, 1983). The situation is much more complicated and dialectical. Mystical experience is by no means only the result of the influence of beliefs of the established religious doctrines. Instead, the opposite appears to be more accurate—mystical experience itself appears to serve as the basis for the creation of religious and philosophical teaching and systems (see, e.g., Forman, 1994, p. 38–49). More particularly, the mystical experience taken separately by and in itself is not religion per se if, by the term "religion" we mean a system of doctrines, beliefs, cults, and institutions.

However, the experience, when interpreted and understood within its cultural context, provides the experiential foundation on which such doctrines, beliefs, and institutions are based. Of course, the

extent to which established doctrinal traditions have been able to adapt and assimilate such experiences varies across the traditions (e.g., Eastern religions have tended to be more accommodating of mystical experiences while religions in the West, especially Roman Catholicism, have viewed such experiences as highly suspect and threatening to the supremacy of church doctrine). Nevertheless, it appears reasonable to maintain that both the mystical experience and the cultural context in which an individual has the experience are interacting and mutually structuring elements that lead toward the development and evolution of spiritual systems. Ostensibly, much more critical research is needed before we have an accurate understanding of the interplay of culture and experience.

Mystical Experience and Knowledge

Having established, at least superficially, the universality of mystical experience, we can now turn our attention to the first question posed in this paper: In what sense can the feelings and intuitions observed to arise in a mystical experience be considered the product of consciousness and reflective of true knowledge?

Perhaps the best place to start looking for an answer to this question is in the work of William James, a pioneer in the study of religious and mystical experience. James was one of the first researchers to create a theory of the universal or pure experience as a kind of "materia prima" (metaphorically speaking), which is the material of which everything in the world is "made." Within such a conceptualization, knowledge can be understood as the relation between two aspects of the pure experience. This is a very important statement because it eliminates the fundamental ontological necessity of a relation between subject and object in acquiring knowledge. It is especially important for an examination of the nature of mystical experience since, in virtually all mystical traditions, the assertion is made that such experience transcends the subject-object distinction (e.g., in a number of branches of Indo-Buddhist thought, the highest state of mind or consciousness is described as *advaita* or *advaya,* meaning non-dual). Interestingly, in one of the earliest of the Hindu religious texts, the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad, the highest form of mystical experience, which involves the state of unity of Atman (self) and Brahman (Absolute), is not described in terms of consciousness. As the author of the Upanishad maintains, consciousness is impossible without duality of cognizer and cognized, perceiver and perceived. Instead, in the state of religious liberation (i.e., *moksha*), consciousness ceases to exist and all that remains is the one and only Atman (absolute Self) which is non-dual and yet, simultaneously, is also an unmediated communion with knowledge *(jnana, gnosis)*. Following from this, it may be argued that the "highest" mystical experience of non-duality is not really a state of consciousness at all since consciousness does not participate in it.[3] Rather, it may be best conceived as a pure non-dual *gnosis* as such.

Notwithstanding the view of ancient Hindu spirituality, if the so-called mystical experience is a special state wherein the subject-object relation is eliminated, from the perspective of rational Western science and philosophy—which has tended to assume the relation is ontologically real—how can any knowledge be derived of it or from it? Putatively, it is not the kind of experience of which questions like "what did you learn?" can be meaningfully asked. Instead, we tend to speak about the mystical experience as a state of "no mind" or about consciousness without intention wherein knowledge is simply given. Of course, from the standpoint of Husserl's and Brentano's schools of phenomenology, such consciousness and knowledge are impossible. The substance of the phenomenological arguments, however, have been rendered suspect by more recent writers in the area of mystical experience (Forman, 1998; Pike, 1992). Thus, in the end, it may be contended that the highest experience of the mystics may be understood as consciousness directed upon itself or consciousness that experiences itself as pure awareness itself (Forman, 1998).

In order to evaluate the epistemological relevance and veracity of mystical experience, it is of central importance that we understand the states of mind of those individuals who lay claim to having had such an experience. Forman (1998, p. 16–17) states,

> It should be clear that on empirical matters, the statements of philosophers have no legislative force. No matter how many Humes, Moores, or Hamiltons observe that they cannot catch themselves devoid of perceptions, this tells us little about what a Hindu monk, Dominican friar, or Sufi adept might experience after years of yoga, Jesus prayer, or Sufi dancing. Indeed, many mystics do report that they have undergone something quite unique.

It might be imagined that the philosophers cited by Forman tried to "catch" themselves without perception on two or three quiet furtive attempts but to little avail. This outcome should come as no surprise since those attempts likely would have been delimited by their a priori commitment to their respective philosophical perspectives (much in the same way that the mystical experience is interpreted by the doctrine used by the experient). As a result, and likely without being aware of the experiential implications of their attitude of trying to seeing something about or within consciousness, these thinkers probably could not have allowed themselves and their stance toward the subject-object dichotomy to dissolve completely. Of course, to say this does not mean that non-dual experience was unavailable to these great thinkers. Who is to say whether one of them might have achieved such states of consciousness after some years of meditation, visualization, or similar practices. Who is to say what Professor Moore might have "seen" in his sensation of blue had he performed twenty years of Tantric visualizations of blue mandalas. However, what I am trying to get at here is that the mystical experience cannot be understood logically or through the application of a rational system of thought. Rather, it is an empirical matter, though not one readily digestible by modern science. As noted by Forman (1998), there are enormous differences between ordinary empirical attempts to introspect the sensations of consciousness and a transformative meditative path—the former does not impose logical limits on the latter.

If one agrees with the possibility of pure experience in which there does not exist an ontologically grounded distinction between subject and object, it then becomes possible to examine a "subject" (or interiorized world or "phaneron" in the terminology of Charles Pierce) as a kind of self-conscious focus of this experience and to explore the manner in which the subject-object distinction arises in consciousness. In such a case, we may begin the inquiry from the position that we do not merely live in the outer world; rather, we experience the world and it is experienced by us. The world becomes the objective side of the field of pure experience, while the human being embodies the subjective aspect. In this context, the field of pure experience as a whole may be seen as utterly transcendent to a subject-object dichotomy, with the reification of the dichotomy holding some pragmatic value but no ontological value.

This position is very similar to that maintained by Buddhism. Russian Buddhologist O. O. Rosenberg has written that in Buddhist thought there is no distinction made between living beings and the contents of their perceptions; they are one and the same entity. Buddhism does not reject the reality of the external, it is simply not analyzed as separate from the perception of the experient. Rosenberg (1991) comments, "it is only said that a human being experiencing any phenomena (e.g., a person looking at the sun), consists of such and such elements in such and such interrelations, and so on" (p. 90).

Nevertheless, it may be supposed that some events are not given in immediate experience but rather occur outside of experience (e.g., the events on the other side of the moon as maintained by B. Russell). As an argument against this point, Solovyev (1993) has contended that even in the natural science of astronomy, gains in knowledge of the cosmos are dependent upon empirical/experiential verification (e.g., the discovery of a new planet by Parisian astronomer Leverier based upon his mathematical analysis of known planetary orbits was viewed as suspect until it was confirmed through experience derived from use of the telescope and spectral analysis). Thus, it does not appear tenable, at least when exploring the nature of mystical experience, to maintain that reality occurs or can be known outside of experience.

Taking the position consistent with Solovyev and Buddhism most generally, it can be maintained that experience is composed of the experiencer and the thing to be experienced. However, it should appear obvious that every living being experiences the world of its (his/her) own and that the worlds (phanerons) of different living beings differ greatly from one another (e.g., the phanerons of humans ostensibly differ from those of other animals). Despite this, it may be argued that regardless of the experiencer, the ability to derive knowledge from any given experience is contingent on the ability to conceptually differentiate between subject and object. That is, the almost arbitrary and abstract separation of the subject from the object has epistemological implications—such a separation allows the subject to know the object. Nevertheless, such a distinction, while having a direct bearing on epistemology, does not uncover or adequately address the true ontological and metaphysical nature of pure experience.

Emerging from this is the question: Is it possible to apprehend and know reality as prior to the world of pure experience? Stated in a different way, is it possible to recognize reality as it is by itself *(yathabhutam)*? Proponents of mystical experience as a mode of knowing assert that it is possible. From this point of view, the mystical experience in its highest expression may be seen as a form of cognizing penetration. Subject and object are embraced by a kind of unity which is transcendent to the immanent space of pure experience, and the phenomenal interrelations of subject and object can be perceived as a kind of reflection (or appearance) of a highest form of non-duality (or of *advaya* as mentioned in the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad cited earlier). Consequently, one can suppose that the phenomenological unity of pure experience needs a source beyond it. The contents of our experience are given to us and we are not able by our volition to change such contents. Human subjects are not gods of their own phanerons. Rather, the universe is given to the subject by something transcendent to phaneron itself (be it the transcendent "ens" matter of the materialists or the God of theists). In all likelihood, the phenomenological unity of experience is preceded by a ground unity of subject and object and simply due to this natural and original unity, the experiencing subject and the empirical object may be seen as two poles of the field of pure experience, which possess one and the same basic nature. Thus, subjects and objects experienced are aspects of the field of pure experience. All elements of the universe are phenomena or appearances of the fundamental unity that serves as the ground on which all qualities of experience are constructed.

Self-Cognizing As a Vehicle to True Knowledge

Schopenhauer noted that the only path to the knowledge of reality as it is (or as "thing-in-itself" according to the Kantian phraseology adopted by Schopenhauer) is the path of self-cognizing. All phenomena outside of the subject are given to our self-consciousness only vicariously, from the outside. However, insofar as we can examine ourselves, we find that we know ourselves from the inside. Extending from this, and assuming that the inner subject or self is of the same nature as the whole world, it may be maintained that the exploration of the nature of self more readily enables the individual to discover this underlying pervasive quality of sameness. Further, we may ex hypothesi conclude that the so-called mystical experience is a kind of cognizing *(gnosis)* that penetrates in a very special manner from inside into the nature of the innermost self, thus revealing the character and nature of this self. At the same time, because of the inherent unity of subject and object, this is also a cognizing of the nature of all objective appearances as much as they are immanent to the cognizing self and thus attainable as knowledge of the subject. We can describe such cognizing as movement from the conceptualized world of appearances to the nonconceptualized knowledge of nonconceptual reality as it is, or reality as such (*Tathata,* or Suchness of the Buddhist texts). In Mahayana Buddhism, this knowledge of reality is referred to as *"yatha bhutam."*

Kant stated in his *Critique of Pure Reason* that the knowledge of the "thing as it is" *(Ding an sich)* is possible only if we are able to eliminate our present forms of sensory intuitions and uncover a new kind of non sensory intuition. It can be said that mystical experience is such a non sensory mode of cognition.

In the end, and as stated earlier in this article, the ultimate value and significance of mystical experience cannot be ascertained by philosophical discourse alone. As such, the conclusions reached in the latter half of this paper should be interpreted as, at best, an effort at approximating the process of how knowledge arises in the context of subject-object duality. The epistemological and ontological issues of the researches into the mystical experience are too important to be neglected anymore. One can even suppose that such studies, along with the development of philosophical aspects of psychology (first of all, transpersonal psychology), may supply philosophy with new impetus to overcome the difficulties of its traditional approaches, thus opening new horizons and unknown dimensions of our undersanding of reality.

End Notes

1. This alignment of mysticism with irrationality may be, at least in part, traced to Judeo-Christian interpretations of such problems as faith and knowledge/intellect and, ostensibly, has resulted in a largely negative reaction on the part of scholars, scientists, and philosophers to the challenges presented by the mystical experience. It is important to note, however, that in many non-European cultures, the opposition of the mystical and the rational is less absolute and even absent all together. Mystics in the Indo-Buddhist cultural tradition, for instance, do not negate the significance of the intellect (or, more exactly, the significance of discursive thought). Instead, we see an effort at applying discriminating rationality to the analysis and comprehension of mystical experience. Moreover, even in Europe, there are philosophical systems that may be interpreted as arising from the critical and rational analysis of mystical experience (e.g., the work of Spinoza may be seen as the rationalization of the mystical experience ["illumination"]; Vladimir Solovyev's system of "all-unity" may be understood as closely connected to his own mystical experience). Nevertheless, and despite the few exceptions seen in Western thought, mysticism is generally perceived as an enemy of rationality and, combined with its numerous and ambiguous meanings, has become a term that has little value in meaningful philosophical discourse.

2. It may be argued that any description of any state of consciousness, even the most elementary of states, cannot be done in an absolutely adequate manner. Language, at least natural language, has not been explicitly developed to describe the inner world of personality or inner psychic processes. That is, language does not appear to have been designed, and is not particularly well suited, to serve as an intersubjective tool of communication.

3. In this vein, I agree with Pike's (1992) criticism of Stace's (1960) concept of introvertive mysticism.

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