EXPERIENCE AND CONCEPTUALIZATION IN MYSTICAL KNOWLEDGE

by Richard H. Jones

Abstract. The purpose of this article is to explore certain parallels and divergencies between contemporary philosophy of science and the comparative study of mysticism. Two types of mystical experiences, "depth-mystical" and "nature-mystical," are first differentiated. Next, the role of both experience and doctrine in the development and justification of mystical knowledge is defended. Finally, the issue of whether one mystical system can be established as superior to others is discussed.

The comparative study of mysticism is, on its surface, a very different enterprise from philosophy of science. But what postlogical empiricist philosophers of science advance concerning the ways theories change and the role of concepts in observation parallels philosophical problems arising in the comparative examination of mystical knowledge. First, let us consider how mystical experiences differ from other experiences normally taken to be cognitive (knowledge-giving).

Mystical Experiences

Mystical ways of life are various systems of values, action-guides, and beliefs oriented around, in Ninian Smart's words, "an interior or introvertive quest, culminating in certain interior experiences which are not described in terms of sense-experience or mental images, etc."[1] Two types of mystical experiences result from concentrative techniques, which focus attention, and receptive techniques, which de-structure our normal conceptual frameworks that structure sensory stimuli.[2] The distinction between them is brought out more clearly not by possible distinctions between extrovertive and introvertive experiences (Stace) or between monistic, theistic, and nature-mystical experiences

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(Zaehner),[3] but by a more fundamental distinction: experiences totally free of all conceptual and sensory content ("depth-mystical experiences") and others having some conceptual differentiation regardless of whether thought content or sensory stimuli are involved ("nature-mystical experiences").

The depth-mystical experiences result, to use Medieval Christian depictions, from a radical "recollecting" of the senses and a "purging" of the mind of all dispositional and cognitive content—especially any sense of "I." The resulting one-pointedness produces a stillness of mind where all sensory-conceptual apparatuses are in total abeyance. But this state of imagelessness is not unconsciousness in the sense of a total lack of awareness. Instead this emptiness permits the pouring in of a positive experience. Although this experience is often characterized negatively, it is taken to be an implosion of what is normally judged by mystics to be the ultimate reality (a permanent, unchanging "power of being"), accompanied by a sense of objectivity, certainty, and usually finality. "Objectivity" here does not denote an object or the totality of objects since nothing open to sense experience is involved; rather it means that reality, not anything subjective (dependent upon the individual experiencer alone), is present. This reality will be referred to as "the mystical." Unlike the theoretical entities of science, the mystical can be directly experienced (i.e., brought into awareness). The experiencer does not see the mystical but becomes the reality behind surface appearances. Even to say "becomes" may mislead since, according to Advaita Vedānta's construal, we always *are* the reality. There is no apprehension *of* unity, no object of awareness as in sense experience and thought, but only the objectless awareness which itself is real.

Nature-mystical experiences involve a subject-object differentiation present in ordinary sense experience or thought. They need not be sensory; an experiential sense of the presence of, or union with, God involves a differentiation, as do experiences of love or joy. If we are conscious of being in a certain situation, a dualism is set up between ourselves and something else. Within the realm of sense experience, these mystical experiences involve a lessening of the grip concepts normally have in directing our attention to aspects of the flux of experiences. The extreme instance on the continuum of possible sensory nature-mystical experiences is a pure receptive mindfulness, that is, totally de-conceptualized sensory stimuli unmediated by any sense of independent entities. In all instances of nature-mystical experiences, there is a breakdown of differentiation (as with a sense of a subject merging with an object); however, even with a sense of union, of being one with the whole of reality, there is also a sense of different nexuses within the flow of becoming. The surface appearance of the world as

composed of distinct, self-contained units is seen (at least for the duration of the experience) not to be ultimate reality but a misreading of the nature of sensory data. Mystical freedom can be understood at least partially as a release from our conceptual cocoons to know things "as they really are."

The change involved in nature-mysticism is experiential, not just a change in understanding. In philosophy of science, it is debated whether Copernicus saw the same thing, with his switch from a geocentric to a heliocentric theory, that Ptolemy saw in watching the sun seemingly cross the sky.[4] But the emphasis upon experience in mysticism makes the claim reasonable that mystical knowledge involves an experiential change. The sensory stimuli remain the same but are structured to a lesser degree or in a new manner. Different facts then appear to the knower. One example of such a repatterning of knowledge is that one who knows reality (*tattvavit*) sees all work as being done by material constituents (*guṇas*) rather than by an additional "actor."[5] The switch in perspective while viewing a Gestalt figure also produces a new fact, and sometimes a new scientific point of view or mystical enlightenment is likened to this; but scientists and mystics do not concede that all perspectives are equally valid. The analogy, though, does help to explain the experiential nature of such knowledge, that is, that experiences change, not just our understanding of them, while the stimuli remain the same.

Any reality experienced nature-mystically is not the mystical of the depth-mystical experience. Plotinus's distinction between the One and Being (the totality of phenomena) makes this distinction.[6] The depth-mystical experience involves no sensory or mental content and is temporary. Nature-mystical experiences may be temporary, but it is possible for an inner transformation of the total person to occur, which affects cognitive and dispositional structures and which thus implements nature-mystical experiences into one's life constantly. Various states of enlightenment seem to involve internalizing a nature-mystical experience in this way. Depth-mystical experiences may have such a transformation as an aftereffect.

Within each mystically enlightened way of life room must be made for both types of mystical experiences; yet, mystics value each type according to their goals and beliefs, and usually one type is valued more than the other. For instance, the medieval Christian Richard Rolle valued the "ravishment without abstention from the senses" over the "rapture involving abstention from the bodily senses"; the latter even sinners have, but the former is a rapture of love that goes to God.[7] A rapture without the senses may reach the ground of the individual self or of creation, but a sense of union is necessary to experience God.

Thus a nature-mystical experience is valued over the depth-mystical experience. This contrasts with the release (*mokṣa*) of Advaita Vedānta. Here concentration (*samādhi*) leading to the stilling of mental activity is central, not any nature-mystical experience.

Concepts and Mystical Experiences

These evaluations of the status of the two types of mystical experiences lead to the issue of the role of concepts and beliefs in experiences and knowledge. A methodological assumption to be made here is that the depth-mystical experiences are of one type regardless of the understanding employed by individual mystics in different cultures and ages. It is an assumption since all that mystics can ever tell us is the interpretation of experience—we cannot in principle describe any experience bare of all understanding. And we cannot tell if all the symbols and other conceptualizations point to the same reality. It may be that any unusual experience will be taken to be "union with God," for example; thus little of the experiential content may be revealed by a descriptive concept alone. Although all experiences are private, still the assumption is suggested by the recurrence of certain terms in the descriptions of the depth mystical and the fact that mystical teachers assume some experiences are of the same general type as their own enlightenment experience. This may be physiologically based, that is, whatever in our anatomy permits the occurrence of mystical experiences is the same in each individual regardless of other possible differences. Thus, when we are conditioned in the same way and all sensory-conceptual content is emptied from the mind, all people experience in the same manner.

In the case of nature-mystical experiences, concepts are absent only in the extreme sensory instance; in the other instances there is no reason not to assume that concepts play an active role in the experiences themselves, thereby producing a variety of such experiences as with ordinary experiences. The concepts inform the experiences themselves, thereby producing a variety of nature-mystical experiences; the concepts are not applied in an event occurring after the experience. Ordinary sense experiences are part of the sensory-experiential continuum. Nature-mystical experiences may involve only less structuring, a loosening of the grip of concepts upon sensory stimuli permitting more "raw sensory data" to come through the mental and physical processing mechanisms.[8] Or new structuring elements may be applied as in the case of Theravāda Buddhist insight-meditation (*vipassanā*): here the conceptual component analyzing reality in terms of the list of components comprising the experienced world (the *dhammā*) would restructure our perceptions. The great variety of nature-mystical experiences extends even to theistic concept-guided ex-

periences, assuming love and union with God are genuinely experienced rather than added as interpretations of experiences.

Conceptual frameworks do not affect the depth-mystical experience itself (since the mind is emptied of anything conceptual), but would return to the mystic's mind only after the experience is over. The position that there are any genuinely concept-free experiences is controversial. In contemporary philosophy of science the logical empiricists' assumption that there are conceptually neutral sense data, which are only interpreted differently after an experience, has been replaced, if there is any concensus at all, with a Gestalt view of observation.[9] Likewise, concerning mystical experiences, Steven Katz believes there is no "pure" experience: the experience itself as well as its expression is shaped by the concepts which the mystic brings to the experience.[10] This seems to be true of nature-mystical experiences, but if the depth-mystical experience is truly void of all sensory and conceptual content (as mystics say), what is present in the experience which could structure it? Only if the epistemological position replacing the empiricist dogma itself becomes a dogma is the possibility of concept-free experience beyond consideration.

If the experience alone is given central importance, the structuring elements for the depth-mystical experience (unlike for the nature-mystical variety) become no more than, in William James's phrase, "over-beliefs."[11] Even if this experiential element is identical in every instance of depth-mysticism, still the total mystical ways of life are not identical from culture to culture and era to era. Understanding the experience is necessary—an uninterpreted experience would be unintelligible—and the understanding will reflect in varying degrees the values and beliefs of the culture in which the individual mystic lives. Concepts, doctrines, and entailed knowledge-claims are the epistemological elements involved. Concepts are any human constructs for handling experiential or mental data. Concepts and beliefs are not experiences, but, as in the case of Gestalt figures, they can enter into the experiences themselves. To speak of "beliefs" may be misleading since persons in religious or mystical ways of life speak of what they know or what is true (from their point of view), not what they believe. Doctrines are explicit statements of the knowledge contained in a way of life; but many unstated beliefs about reality also are involved which, if made explicit, a believer would accept. Thus maintaining that the Buddha escaped the cycle of rebirths upon his enlightenment commits the holder of that doctrine to the two following knowledge-claims: there is a cycle of rebirths and one can break out of the cycle. Such claims are abstractions not conveying the total way of life; yet, they are not distortive or reductive as such.

For depth-mystical experiences, conceptualizations are *interpretations*, that is, structures of understanding consciously formulated or unconsciously imposed upon experiences after their occurrence. During the depth-mystical experience, all differentiations are inoperative. Once the mystic returns to a normal subject-object state of mind, reflections upon alternative systems of understanding may occur; or, as is more often the case, the superimposition of the understanding of the tradition to which the mystic belongs may take place. Mystics see their experiences through concepts: the mystical becomes a conceptual object in ordinary awareness. But the mystical is deemed ineffable: concepts necessarily differentiate and so cannot mirror a reality that cannot be experienced in a subject-object differentiation. Mystics thus become more aware than most people that the concept is not the referent. Meister Eckhart makes the distinction between God and the idea of God, and more generally he feels the soul, in coming into contact with "creatures," makes images (*Bilde*) and only gets back to things by means of these images which the soul itself has created.[12] For the depth-mystical, although giving descriptions is incompatible with having the experience, the descriptions do not necessarily distort or falsify: the mystical is not ineffable in the strongest sense of permitting no concepts to be more appropriately applied than any others, if the recurrence of some descriptive concepts (e.g., "nonduality" and "reality") is an indication. The sense of the importance of the mystical compels mystics to speak, and the claim to ineffability reduces to a stress upon the fact that the mystical's ontological status is not that of an object or the totality of objects.[13]

In nature-mystical states, the enlightened do still use concepts—only the idea of self-existent, permanent objects as referents is removed. Sense experiences and concepts are not abolished in the enlightened state but are transformed in that no distinct entities are seen; concepts are still utilized but are not taken as mirroring a world of independent entities.

Within this framework, usually mystics discuss their way of life, its values, its goal, and the reality involved. Construals of the mystical are in terms of the *reality* involved: mystics usually talk about God, ultimate realities, the self, and so on, rather than their own firsthand *experiences* of them, just as we normally talk about tables and chairs rather than our experiences of them. Mystical statements are no more about experiences than scientific statements are about sense experiences instead of planets and gravity. So too, mystical experiences, like scientific ones, are not seen as personal in the sense of being grounded subjectively rather than in reality. The discussions of the mystical are typically embedded in philosophies which are not explicit reflections upon

mystical experiences or sets of scientific-like, tentative hypotheses advanced to explain the mystical. Mystical thinkers such as Śaṁkara and Plotinus do develop elaborate philosophies, albeit not absolutely systematic ones: such works as the *Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya* are a series of arguments, counterarguments, and replies. But the goal of mystical ways of life is radically to end suffering or some other fundamental matter related to how we lead our lives and to our expectations upon death, not to fulfill a speculative philosophical interest. The mystics' concern is to see things as they really are and to live in accordance with that perception.

Mystical Knowledge

The general lack of discussion of their experiences has led to a problem with regard to the issue of the role of mystical experiences in mystical knowledge, that is, knowledge about the fundamental nature of reality following from mystical experiences. It is hard to distinguish those thinkers who have mystical experiences as part of their experiential background from those philosophers who advocate for reasons other than those connected to mystical experiences beliefs which also are defended by mystics. In fact, probably every claim asserted by a mystic has been advocated by nonmystics for other reasons. For instance, David Hume speaks of the unreality of a permanent individual self; Parmenides argues "all is one" for totally nonmystical reasons; Alfred North Whitehead's and G. W. F. Hegel's systems have been likened to those of mystics. Conversely, even the *Upaniṣads* arose out of Vedic speculation and it is difficult to identify at what point mystical experiences begin to inform the total conceptual system. Such mystical thinkers as Eckhart, Plotinus, and Śaṁkara have been portrayed as philosophers who rigorously followed their premises through to the conclusions: if God, the One, or Brahman is the ultimate reality, then nothing else is real, and so forth. No appeal to special experiences would be necessary.

Occasionally mystical experiences are mentioned. For example, Plotinus mentions in a letter that three times he had attained a state of selflessness.[14] But since these experiences are not given an explicit place in his philosophical writings it is not self-evident that they form an integral part of the total framework. The work of another Neoplatonist, Dionysius the Areopagite, also lacks specific mention of mystical experiences.[15] But it contains many elements suggesting such experiences: "ecstacy" is stepping outside oneself; the "unknowing" (*agnosia*) of mental content permitting a new positive knowledge and the "dazling obscurity" in which one comes to know God certainly are in contrast

with the "clear and distinct" Cartesian ideas of the rationalist epistemological ideal. Some mystics are philosophers also, but their total systems form fairly integrated wholes, not a series of isolated claims to be judged individually, although the degree of this integration is not as great as in scientific theories; and the parts interact to suggest at least indirectly (as in Dionysius's case) if mystical experiences are of importance.

Mystical knowledge is not knowing that something is the case (i.e., understanding a claim and having reason to acknowledge its truth) but is experiencing the reality involved. Some mystics do not even call this "knowledge" since it may be confused with dualistic knowledge (knowledge by a subject of a distinct object).[16] It is not that intellectual propositions are necessarily wrong but just that such dualistic understanding is not the required experience. Medieval Christian contemplatives drew the distinction between knowledge of divine things coming through consideration (*scientia*) and true wisdom (*sapientia*).[17] Or according to Eckhart, to know *about* God is not to know God. In Theravāda Buddhism, Narada is said to have the same knowledge as the enlightened Musila but not to have achieved enlightenment himself: he understood and accepted the requisite truths but had not experienced them (i.e., had not internalized the beliefs so that they became his dispositional and cognitive framework).[18] The analogy is then given of a thirsty traveler who looks at water but does not drink: he understands but is not saved. Only with the internalization of mystical knowledge do we see reality rightly and live accordingly (as defined by each tradition).

The Role of Beliefs and Experiences in the Development of Mystical Knowledge

Mystical experiences give knowledge only in the context of mystical systems. What is taken to be the *insight* combines elements from the experience and from the conceptual scheme. Any *post facto* interpretation may present itself with the same immediacy and certainty as the experience itself. For example, Saint Teresa of Avila says that during the "orison of union," the soul is "utterly dead to the things of the world and lives solely in God:"

> If you, nevertheless, ask how it is possible that the soul can see and understand that she has been in God, since during the union she has neither sight nor understanding, I reply that she does not see it then, but that she sees it clearly later, after she has returned to herself, not by any vision, but by a certitude which abides with her and which God alone can give her.[19]

Understanding applied after the experience may seem as inseparable as any occurring within the experience itself—only a great effort could convince ourselves that we are wrong. We do not normally see experi-

ences as concept-structured events or as experiences perceived through interpretative frameworks.

In this situation two errors may result concerning the role of both experiences and beliefs. One is to conclude that the experiences provide the interpretation in a simple, straightforward manner; the other is to conclude that the experiences add nothing to the belief-framework. With regard to the former, mysticism is sometimes taken as fulfilling the logical empiricist ideal: claims about the world are confirmed by experiences alone.[20] Focusing on only the depth-mystical experiences (and again assuming they are identical in experiential character), the fact that these experiences are open to widely different interpretations should convince us that the meaning of the mystics' claim does not come from (nor is confirmed simply by) the experiences alone. Some elements of a world view are given in a mystical experience—a sense of fundamental reality involving nonduality—but no complete interpretation is given: Śaṁkara construes the nonduality in terms of the fundamental nature of all reality while in Sāṁkhya-Yoga the nonduality is related only to the isolation (*kaivalya*) of each of many individual subjects (*puruṣas*) from all matter (*prakṛti*). Even within Christian theistic interpretations variations exist: Eckhart sees it in terms of the isness common to creature and God; Saint John of the Cross speaks of a union with a difference, using the analogy of sunlight penetrating air; Saint Teresa of Avila accepts a union of wills only, not of substance. Thus it would appear that all interpretations are our various efforts at understanding and are not dictated by these experiences.

The problem is not only the Kantian issue of how we can go from bare experiences to concepts, nor is it that experiential claims cannot entail claims about existence apart from the experience. More than these, the problem here is that experiences related to how we fundamentally construe reality are open to widely different interpretations. For instance, even if one argues that self-awareness (the awareness of one's own immediate state of awareness) is the one certain cornerstone of knowledge which we all have, still it is open to different interpretations: René Descartes takes it as evidence of a distinct, abiding, individual mental entity; the Buddha takes each act of consciousness to be separate and takes the notion of an enduring underlying self to be an unverified posit; for Śaṁkara self-awareness is the awareness constituting the ultimate reality underlying all subjects and objects. Nothing about mystical experiences, no matter how strong the sense of finality and certainty, places them in a privileged epistemological position distinct from this problem. No such experience carries with it its own interpretation. The conceptual element necessary for understanding comes from outside any one type of experience.

Thus Smart is correct when he says that *nirvāṇa* involves the end of the cycle of rebirths and so cannot be defended simply by reference to meditative experiences.[21] Other mystics mention an end to desire, but mystics not raised with a belief in rebirth do not mention this more specialized feature. So too we must agree with Smart that the identification of the self (*ātman*) with the ground of "objective" reality (Brahman) in Advaita Vedānta comes not from inspecting the inner state of the mind or the mystical experience itself.[22] Similarly, branding ordinary experiences "illusions" also reflects nonexperiential judgments and reasons even if the claim appears to be given in the enlightenment experience itself. J. F. Staal notes that, although knowledge of Brahman is incompatible with ordinary awareness, preferring the nondual experience is itself an act of ordinary awareness since all knowledge and interpreting occurs in the ordinary state. Experiences are only decisive for becoming convinced of a doctrine's truth.[23]

Śaṁkara realized that the mystical experience could not establish its own interpretation: the Vedas are the final court of appeal with regard to the mystical—no experience is a means to correct knowledge (*pramāṇa*) in this area. The existence of Brahman is known on the ground that it is the self of everyone; Śaṁkara would go so far as to say it is impossible to deny that the self is apprehended because who would the denier be?[24] But the inquiry into the self is necessary because of the conflicting views of its specific nature.[25] Reason alone is incapable of demonstrating the nature of reality, as the contradictory theories based on reason reveal.[26] Nor would closer examination of the world validate any interpretation—the Vedas alone provide the right authority.

Śaṁkara's reliance on the Vedas and other mystics' denial of gaining knowledge in the mystical experience may lead some people to the other error mentioned above—giving full weight to the conceptual scheme. All experiences are understood in light of beliefs previously developed in a culture, and so it can be argued that mystical experiences add nothing to the experiencer's knowledge of ultimate reality—the ideas are always derived from other sources. Thus the experiences add nothing new but at best merely confirm in a circular manner whatever beliefs the mystic previously held. In utilizing the conceptual scheme of a culture and a religious tradition of the period, mystics have a ready-made framework to give intelligibility and meaning to the experience. These conceptual systems provide the correct understanding of the construction of reality as it has evolved for that tradition, and mystics normally evaluate and place their experiences as insights in accordance with them. Seldom do mystics deny the doctrines or authority of their religious faith; even visions and nature-mystical experiences reflect only what the experiencer is prepared to discover by cultural conditioning.

There are major problems with this position, however. Although no mystic withdraws totally from the cultural setting, there are degrees of independence—for example, Jacob Böhme versus Saint John of the Cross. So too some mystics such as Plotinus do attempt, albeit rarely, to devise a basically original system. In addition, if the mystics sense they have come to know what they only understood before, they will not accept their tradition uncritically: their attitude to the nonmystical elements of their tradition will be reoriented. They take over the conceptual system available to them but modify it to their needs. Thus Śaṁkara, while accepting the Vedas as authoritative in matters related to Brahman, freely interprets them to fit his system: if a passage concurs with his system, he takes its literal sense; if it conflicts, the literal meaning is dismissed.[27] There is a circularity here with his own thought, not the Vedas, gaining central importance. A basically nonmystical text such as the Bible is handled by Christian mystics in a similar manner. Eckhart, for example, sees the story of Jesus cleansing the temple as a symbolic depiction of the mystical experience (Jesus entering) cleansing the soul (the temple) of sensory concerns (the money changers).[28] Jesus' significance is also reshaped: more is said of Jesus as the bridegroom of the soul than as a sacrificial lamb on the cross.

An even more important problem is that giving all weight to doctrines conflicts with a more likely explanation of the history of thought—that experiences and doctrines develop influencing each other constantly. Even if some one of the conflicting revelations of the world religions is correct and unaffected by previous beliefs or by any experiences, still it must be understood in each era and culture—and this understanding will be shaped by experiences and beliefs (as with Śaṁkara). The authoritative beliefs accepted at any point are shaped by previous experiences and vice versa. The issue of which came first, beliefs or experiences, can be aptly likened to the situation of the chicken and the egg.[29] Mystical traditions evolve through interaction with religious and other ideas—mystics have some influence on nonmystical cultural phenomena and the latter influences different elements of mystical ways of life. Mystical traditions may evolve more slowly than scientific theories, but they are not static.

Revolutions in mysticism such as Plotinus's do occur, but they are much rarer than in science. If the assumption that all depth-mystical experiences are identical is correct, this relative lack of revolutions is because the experiential contribution is constant. Mystics cannot run experiments which could pose problems for old views. Beliefs therefore exercise more control in the production of knowledge here than in science. Yet the lack of new experiential data does not rule out a radical

change in the conceptual understanding. Depth-mystical experiences may appear as anomalies to believers who did not expect them; an adjustment in their understanding of the faith's doctrines and concepts would then be necessary. No new knowledge-claims need be revealed, but the understanding of the beliefs change. The beliefs may have previously appeared readily intelligible (e.g., "all is impermanent" or "everything is interconnected"), but they take on a new significance in mystical enlightenment, that is, with *seeing* that they are actually true of everything. Thus mystics may fill some terms and expressions from their environment with different meanings—mystical concepts of "God," the "self," or whatever may not be commensurable with their nonmystical counterparts on the level of understanding in a way similar to how "mass," "space," and "time" for Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein may have identical referents but still differ in the understanding of the referred to reality. Or, "being" as a philosophical abstraction obtained by thinking of what is common to all entities may differ from the mystical concept "being" (the concrete content of mystical experiences).

A total break with the past is difficult, if not impossible. For example, Christian mystics—even Eckhart—were never very hostile to Christian doctrine but found it adaptable to their needs.[30] Seldom do they introduce new terms as Eckhart did; more usually, the concepts behind old terms are altered. In science there are strands of continuity with the past in radical instances of originality, since new theories arise from reflection on the current state of knowledge and its anomalies. If the history of ideas can be likened to evolution, as is often done for science,[31] still it is a form of Lamarckian, not Mendelian, evolution, since the development is not random but involves the inheritance of evolutionally valuable traits each generation acquires in adapting to its cultural environment. Thus the history of Buddhism can be seen as a series of reactions and counterreactions to earlier developments.[32] This bears upon the issue of commensurability: concepts such as "God" evolve and, although the understanding two thinkers have of the concepts may conflict, any tradition as a whole evolves through mystical and nonmystical contributions. Therefore general agreement on many concepts may result in a tradition.

Mystics' Interest in Doctrines

Before turning to the issue of the role of beliefs and experiences in justifying mystical claims, two preliminary points must be made. First, Staal's claim that mystics "are not interested in doctrines" must be refuted.[33] For Staal, the experience is all that is of importance; the added religious and philosophical conceptual superstructure is worth-

less if not meaningless.[34] Others make the joy and excitement of the experience everything; the different, conflicting "over-beliefs" at best aid in leading people to the experiences. Debates over doctrines or the nature of mystical experiences are pointless; inducing these experiences is all that matters, and whatever leads to being free of desire and a sense of self is correct. The experiences are ends in themselves.

Some mystics may be interested only in the enjoyment of experiences, but this position does not reflect the interest of most classical mystics as it appears in their writings: total ways of life most often are central. Nor should we confuse the difficulties which arise in expressing mystical insights, because of the sense of otherness, with a lack of interest in them. Nor should the fact that an experience is required, rather than an intellectual acceptance of a knowledge-claim, be construed as a necessary denial of the claim itself. Mystics discuss seeing things as they really are. Even in discussing any experience, the reality that is supposedly involved (along with nature) is a component. For example, in the case of the sun, the important scientific issues arise on a level above whatever common stimulus Copernicus and Ptolemy might receive; their understanding of the nature of the sun is what is important. The sun "as it really is" is not a set of subjective sensations free of all understanding; it really is the center of our solar system, a celestial orb circling an unmoving earth, or whatever, not just a bundle of our experiences (assuming some form of realism is correct). No one would say the experience here is all that is of importance. So too with mystics: their interest is in knowing how reality is actually constructed with regard to the mystical in order to fulfill their goals in life.

Doctrines go to the core of a mystical tradition, even to shaping nature-mystical experiences. Getting an accurate view of the relationship of the mystical to the rest of reality is important too for the other components of the way of life. How we act depends in part on how we see the world. The Brahmanical priests and Western scientists not only view the sun differently but differ significantly in how they act regarding it: the Vedic ritual necessary to maintain the course of the universe was an essential element in the way of life in classical India but would be absurd in the context of modern society. How we value mystical experiences and place them within our way of living also differ. Usually other concerns are placed more centrally. For all Medieval Christian mystics, mystical experiences may be a foretaste of what will occur upon death, but these experiences do not achieve that future state nor are they the basis of belief; instead mystical cultivation is only a way of loving God and of improving charity. For Theravāda Buddhists, a radical end to the suffering inherent in the cycle of rebirths is the only concern; for this, having an insight into the unsatisfying and substanceless nature of

experienced reality and subsequently undergoing a permanent transformation of character is required, not enjoying any temporary experience and returning to the old condition. Different mystics appear not only to hold different beliefs but to lead different lives.[35] Even if all mystics concurred upon knowledge-claims, expectations upon death, how to deal with others, and goals, this doctrinal component still could not be ignored. Living in accordance with how things really are, not feelings derived from isolated experiences, is what mystics deem important.[36]

"All Mysticism is One"

The other preliminary point is to refute the idea that all mystics really say the same thing regardless of different cultural expressions, that is, all mystics ultimately have one doctrine. Frithjon Schuon, standing in the tradition of perennial philosophy, contrasts the colorless essence of pure luminosity of the esoteric core with the distinct colors of the various exoteric traditions and symbols which manifest the esoteric.[37] Once we distinguish the symbol from the symbolized, the "container" from the "content," we shall see that truth is ultimately one and is only expressed differently. For instance, all spatial metaphors used for the mystical—the mystical stands "behind," "above," "below," or "through" phenomena—mean the same thing. Or the mystical is "being" while phenomena are "nonbeing" means the same as the mystical is "nonbeing" (or "nothing") while phenomena are "something": that the mystical is wholly other than phenomena is the common point. The difference in terminology can be predicted once the total cultural trappings are seen. A variation of this position is that different exoteric configurations of practices and beliefs do not say the same thing but are complementary paths, all leading to the same esoteric truth. Each tradition is a different approach emphasizing different features; each is equally legitimate and each is equally incomplete. Ultimately, the mystical is either indescribable (with different conceptualizations dealing with different manifestations) or, if describable as it is in itself, the correct interpretation of the mystical as literally as possible is this: one reality immanent in all phenomena, having personal and nonpersonal aspects, with something in each soul joined to or identical with it; our final goal is to recognize this immanent and transcendent reality.[38]

However, if we compare this with what mystics actually say, we see that such a position is normative in two ways. One is that the interpretation of the mystical is only one scheme among many alternatives: it cannot be deduced from various theistic and nontheistic mystical claims. Second, to assert that all religions say the same thing cannot be deduced from the mystics' claims. That the relation between mystical

traditions is that of clear light to colored light is an analogy that cannot simply be assumed as self-evident but must be positively argued. The dogmatic nature of Schuon's position becomes obvious when he must dismiss rebirth—a belief resulting, he says, in "some Hindu sects" through a "literalist interpretation of the Scripture"—because it would disprove all monotheism.[39] There also are methodological problems here: some diverse symbols may be symbolizing one reality, but can all mystical concepts that seem to contradict each other (e.g., Sāṁkhya-Yoga and Advaita Vedānta on the nature of the self) be treated so? We would be inclined to think of the differences as merely superficial only if we assumed in advance that there is an esoteric unity. We would need to read all the texts in a certain normative perspective.

On what grounds could we decide, rather than assume a priori, if there really is commonality between traditions? It cannot be upon the assumption alone that there is one common depth-mystical experience since, as argued above, mystics take doctrines as central. D. T. Suzuki says, because of this common ground, "terminology is all that divides us [Buddhists and Christians] and stirs us up to a wasteful dissipation of energy."[40] But his religious interpretation becomes apparent when he adds that Christianity is laden with all sorts of "myths and paraphernalia" and ought to be denuded of this "unnecessary historical appendix."[41] To dismiss differences in understanding because of the common experiential component would be as unwarranted here as maintaining that the common sensory element in Copernicus's and Ptolemy's perceptions of the sun is sufficient to discredit any divergences between their points of view. The variety of nature-mystical experiences would also have to be taken into account.

Arguing that all mystical ways of life are ultimately the same because the same ultimate reality is involved will not succeed either. This is based upon an assumption with regard to the mystical. But even if it is correct, still this would be equivalent to arguing that Copernicus and Ptolemy are actually saying the same thing (i.e., their surface differences are only symbols of an esoteric truth) because a common reality is involved. Even if there were some such esoteric truth, we have no reason to believe that Copernicus and Ptolemy had it in mind: Copernicus's conceptual divergence from Ptolemy was intended. Also, we have no reason outside the normative position of perennial philosophy to think the diversity of mystical claims is not also intended.

Another avenue might be to find an abstract doctrine to which all mystics would adhere. The problem here is twofold. First, finding a common core of doctrine is very difficult. Consider Sāṁkhya-Yoga and Advaita Vedānta again on the self: for the former there is a plurality of selves distinct from matter; for the latter the one self is the ultimate

reality of every phenomena. Theists and nontheists disagree over the nature of mystical experiences in a fundamental way—whether the experiencer is identical with the mystical or is united in either substance or will while our "creaturehood" remains intact, whether the mystical experience involves God, and so forth. Whether there is a neutral criterion for selecting one doctrine is highly unlikely. For example, Evelyn Underhill's seemingly innocent definition of mysticism as the "art of union with Reality" has two built-in assumptions: the mystical is ultimate reality and the process is one of uniting.[42] With regard to the latter, Advaitins would disagree: nothing is brought about— only our ignorance of the fact we have always been Brahman is overcome. Sāṁkhya-Yogins also would disagree: the isolation of selves from matter is effected, not any union.

Furthermore, it is one matter to use general terms for classes of concepts ("the mystical," "mystical experience"); it is another matter to say any general term conveys the total interpretation of specific mystics. There is no abstract mysticism but only concrete mystics and traditions. Mystics could adopt a concept of a watered-down "absolute" as an adequate interpretation, but historically none has done so. Even Zen has more specific Mahāyāna concepts inextricably interwoven within it. All mystics' conceptions of the mystical cover more than simply describing an experience and, through connections to other aspects of their ways of life, the conceptions entail more knowledge-claims than a commitment to a vague "absolute." Thus, Śaṁkara's Brahman is ultimately nonpersonal and the only reality. A more abstract mystical that encompasses more but is more vague would not satisfy his total set of commitments.

In philosophy of science, a debated issue is whether we can totally isolate theory from neutral descriptions. It may be possible here to determine a description of the depth-mystical experience which is neutral to all more doctrinal interpretations. That is, it will still be theory-laden[43] but laden with a theory neutral to all doctrinal interpretations in the way "celestial orb" would be neutral to Copernicus's and Ptolemy's use of "sun." This may be difficult to accomplish. For example, Agehananda Bharati claims that Advaita gives the uninterpreted content of the mystical experience.[44] Assuming the Advaita account is in fact the description of some experience, nevertheless the identification of the self with the ground of reality is more than a simple description of an experience: it is an interpretation which would not seem obvious to followers of other traditions not committed to an ontology of absolute nonduality. A sense of having come into contact with a fundamental, undeniable reality (James's "noetic quality") is usually given in the experience, but these differences reveal that no

complete interpretation of the mystical is dictated by the experience itself. No complete interpretation is a minimal description of what occurs, impervious to error. None is anything other than theory-laden in the stronger sense of being integrated into more elaborate conceptual systems which give meaning to the concepts. A scientific concept has been likened to a "knot in a web," the strands of which are the propositions that make up a theory; the meaning of each concept is determined by the strands coming into that knot and by the other knots to which it is directly or indirectly connected.[45] This is true of mystical ways of life too: concepts gain meaning in the context of the doctrinal system which gives meaning to each utterance; some concepts may be more closely related to experiences than others, but it is the complete system that gives meaning to the parts—even to the experiences themselves. For example, rebirth is not a concept that can be simply tacked on to a world view: it changes our view of the nature of a person, replaces the uniqueness of one life and the idea of eternal post mortem existence, and may affect how we treat other people. Thus, a switch to this view would have wider repercussions within a totally integrated way of life and for how we believe things really are constructed.

Eckhart's "God," the Theravādins' "*nibbāna*," and Śaṁkara's "Brahman" are all concepts which gain their significance within the context of elaborate religious systems. Correlating them would be no more successful than was the quickly abandoned Chinese Buddhist *ko-i* method of translating Buddhist terms by means of Taoist ones. Even if the same term is used (e.g., terms translated "self"), they may have no common concept behind them; assuming the referent of each is the same, the referential and theoretical aspects of concepts cannot be conflated. Common features—overcoming a sense of duality and of self—may appear similar in isolation but not in their total contexts. Many of Eckhart's remarks sound like translations of Śaṁkara's: such phrases as "the essence of ignorance is to superimpose finiteness upon God and divinity upon the finite," "the all-inclusive One without a second, without distinction, not this, not that," and "isness-in-itself is identically unrestricted knowledge" have very similar counterparts in Śaṁkara's commentaries.[46] However, there are significant differences in their total conceptual systems and ways of life; for example, for Eckhart, there is a point in the soul that remains a creature—the soul's isness is God's isness but there is no final complete identity as with Śaṁkara. From each mystic's point of view, there may be something valuable in other systems, but it is vitiated by its placement within a faulty conceptual framework. To use an Indian saying, the milk in itself is pure, but it becomes useless when poured into a bag of dogskin.[47]

The variant position that each conceptual system is an equally legitimate complement can be seen to be a normative stance at variance with the position of most classical mystics. *Prima facie* conflicting claims could be treated as complements only if the claims are viewed by their holders as incomplete, tentative, and inadequate. But classical mystics usually do not do so; they see their tradition's account as absolutely certain, if not exhaustive. The lack of any tentativeness is a central feature. Despite their disclaimers about the applicability of language to the mystical, their writings indicate overwhelmingly that they feel something can be said accurately concerning the mystical and that they have done so while other mystics have not. Even if the mystical depth is not completely fathomable by the intellect, they are the enlightened in this matter. Their word is the end of the matter, and the claims are not open to rejection in the future. They claim that, if we test the situation for ourselves, we shall come to the same conclusions they reached. In addition, the knowledge-claims are about the same subject (such as the self), and each is taken as fundamental and as complete as possible. To that extent, the situation is like the conflict between the classical Copernican and Ptolemaic theories, not like the wave and particle models of contemporary quantum physics. This is not a case of taking inexact language overly seriously: there are genuine fundamental conflicts on the issues. As with Śaṁkara arguing against the Sāṁkhya-Yogins and the Buddhists in the *Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya*, in general mystics in one tradition think those in other traditions are mistaken in some fundamental account of a subject.

A position of conflict is the only one that describes the classical mystics' position. That is, it is the only one deducible from their sense of certitude and from the differing claims even if the various traditions have had no historical contact. To treat matters of whether ultimate reality is one or dual, personal or nonpersonal, and so on as complements is a religious or philosophical position external to the descriptions of the mystics themselves. To overcome conflicts by appeal to the elephant/blind men analogy employed by some Near Eastern and Indian mystics is a theological position not acceptable even to most mystics in those regions; they do not feel they are blind or that all mystical systems are of equal value. In the continuing evolution of religious thought traditional mystical conceptual options may die out and a new fusion of ideas may occur or a sense of complementarity may develop; but this will be a new development. The more usual response to the presence of traditions other than one's own is to establish a hierarchy of teachings with one's own at the top as the final truth. The Japanese Zen master Dōgen illustrates the classical mystics' position on the alleged identity of traditions: only those from whom Buddhism has

gone and who are lax in their thinking say that "the essence of Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism is identical, that the difference is only that of the entrance into the Way, and also that the three are comparable to the three legs of a tripod."[48] It is worth noting that Dōgen was not overly exclusivistic: he did not like the designation of a separate Meditation (Zen) sect within the Buddhist tradition.

The Role of Beliefs and Experiences in the Justification of Mystical Systems

This leads to the final topic: can any one mystical system be established as superior to others to the satisfaction of all mystics and nonmystics? This issue is important to mystics because knowing the correct status of the mystical experiences and of the mystical is necessary toward seeing things as they really are and living accordingly. Are there grounds for those who value mystical experiences to establish one conceptual interpretation as correct (most useful, least inadequate)? How can we rationally choose between traditions when each says it has the correct account of the mystical? If one way of life is even God-given, how can we tell?

Experiential certainty—the sense that the experience is self-confirming or self-evident—is not enough. If the experience has a powerful effect upon a person, this does not exempt the experiencer from the possibility of error concerning the status and nature of the mystical. First, the immediate awareness may cause an overemphasis upon its importance. It could be comparable to the prisoner from Plato's cave who, in encountering the dazzling splendor upon leaving the cave, mistakes the sun (here, the mystical) as the author of all things in the universe. Second, even if no other experience can shake the sense of absolute importance attached to the mystical experience, still this certainty cannot be transferred to the accompanying interpretative system. As discussed earlier, mystics normally equate the conceptualization with the experiential component—that is, with what seems to be given directly in the experience. Mystics are usually naive realists in this regard even if they are aware of alternative systems: from inside a belief system it always seems as if they are merely describing, not interpreting.[49] To give an example from Islam, al-Ghazālī speaks of getting away from secondhand belief (*taqlīd*) based upon mere authority, reaching the peak of "direct vision," and comprehending "things as they really are." But the theistic creedal principles which become "rooted in [his] being" not by argument and proof but by experience (*dhawq*) contrast greatly with those of, say, the Buddhist tradition.[50] He and the Buddha each feels that he and not the other sees things as they really are free of any theories. But it appears al-Ghazālī

would be on as sound a ground in this regard for dismissing the Buddha's claims as vice versa.

Śaṁkara's appeal to the Vedas shows that not every mystic takes mystical experiences to be self-validating. While mystics do not usually take their knowledge to be conjectural rather than unchanging and given *in toto* in experience, there are instances of mystics questioning their own interpretations. Martin Buber reinterpreted an experience which he thought at the time of its occurrence was "a union with the primal being or Godhead." Later he concluded that in "the honest and sober account of the responsible understanding this unity is nothing but the unity of this soul of mine, whose 'ground' I have reached."[51] This "responsible understanding" would be dictated by his Jewish background (for which the gulf between God and creature is absolutely unbridgeable), not in the form of conscious pressure but as tacitly guiding him to what is obviously the case. To him, it would seem more like a logical conclusion than a judgment. Ordinary experiences are never accepted uncritically; for example, a stick appearing bent in water is not taken to be actually broken. Our conception of how things really are directly affects this. And the same is true of mystical experiences: the moment of ecstasy, originally taken as an insight, may even be dismissed entirely by later reflection based upon a tradition's doctrine.

If a neutral description of a mystical experience were possible, it would not support any complete interpretation. This neutralizes experiences as the sole determining factor in deciding which mystical system is best. Nor are mystical systems testable by predictions involving mystical experiences. In the process of theory change in science, experiences occurring in new areas, as well as older anomalies, are involved. As mentioned earlier, more depth-mystical experiences will not enlarge the experiential base for the choice between mystical systems. For a conceptual system as encompassing and fundamental in nature as mystical ones, nonmystical experiences have little falsifying power in themselves (unless religious or philosophical consideration dictates otherwise): any nonmystical occurrences seems to be accommodatable to each system. There are no crucial experiments in this area.[52]

In science where new experiences figure into the acceptance of a theory, experiences alone do not determine theory selection (if post-empiricist philosophies of science are correct). In the case of mysticism, can the neutral mystical experiences be interpreted any way we want within the limitation of adequately accounting for all the elements (as we see them)? Are all interpretations on the same epistemological footing? Mystics do argue for their interpretation. Ernest Nagel says

that a "consistent mystic cannot hope to establish his claims by argument" since "argument involves the use of analytic reason, and on the mystic's own view reason is incapable of penetrating to the substance of reality."[53] However, while mystics would insist an argument is no substitute for the necessary enlightenment, still the proper understanding of the mystical and accepting the proper way of life are necessary—and these may legitimately involve arguments. Argument is an unmystical activity but is not completely negative for being so.

Are there any useful criteria for comparing and selecting mystical systems? Within science such criteria for the acceptability of a theory are, in addition to empirical accuracy, simplicity (ontological and mathematical), internal consistency and systematic organization, coherence with other accepted theories, scope, fruitfulness in leading to new empirical findings and new theories, familiarity, and the intuitive plausibility of the most basic elements of the theoretical framework. Whether even these can determine rationally one unique solution is debatable.[54] Mystical systems, though, have broader concerns than understanding the world through sense experience; within this broader context, while many of the same considerations apply, agreement is harder to establish. For example, all mystical systems claim to be of the same scope: each comprehends all aspects of reality that are fundamental from its point of view. Or consider simplicity: Advaita Vedānta is committed to the fewest number of ontologically irreducible elements—one—but this does not satisfy theists and others; such simplicity is rejected in favor of other values and considerations. Coherence with other beliefs (religious and nonreligious) is important, as Buber's reinterpretation indicates; but this shifts the problem to justifying the other beliefs.

One criterion relates to the fruits of one's mystical experience—joy, paranormal powers, character changes, and actions toward others—but these are relative to the broader mystical positions. For example, many mystics de-emphasize the significance of paranormal powers. So too proper enlightened mystical action may be helping others with this worldly concerns in Christianity or it may mean taking no action at all, and consequently starving to death, as is the Jaina ideal upon enlightenment. As with differing doctrines, it is too facile to say that such differences merely complement each other—instead they compete.

A proposal of a more general religious criterion is the adequacy of the solution offered to the perennial religious needs of humanity.[55] Yet, there does not appear to be any one set of such needs: overcoming estrangement with other persons, realizing one's unchanging true nature, escaping a cycle of rebirths, and reaching heaven as primary goals are objectives which, if not all conflicting, are not identical.

Determining one set of social or psychological needs may be just as difficult. Taking history seriously is integral to Judeo-Christian traditions, but that whole area of concerns is screened out in most traditional Indian systems. Taking this criterion as the deciding factor is therefore inadequate.

More limited enterprises such as science may be able to find a common framework within which to resolve disputes, but the problems are greater at a level describing the fundamental structures of reality. Each such scheme determines by its very nature the criteria deemed relevant towards justifying a conceptual scheme. To anyone within a given mystical framework, any view advanced from outside that framework is an unintentional or intellectual misinterpretation of what is real. Once the prescribed enlightenment experience has occurred, one's internalized point of view no longer appears to be a view at all but the way things really are. This is not so much audacity as simply part of the logic of such belief: the mystical way of life provides the broadest court of appeal and thus, unlike more limited scientific theories, it is very difficult (if possible at all) to stand truly outside it in order genuinely to consider alternatives.

Any experience occurring in this situation tends to be taken as confirmation of belief, thereby leading to conviction. All experiences confirm the doctrines from inside the circle of faith somewhat as Ptolemaic astronomy was verified by every predicted eclipse before a plausible alternative interpretation was advanced. Clifford Geertz sees religious systems as defining a reality which believers use in turn to justify the systems themselves.[56] Paul Feyerabend says the same about science: empirical evidence is created by a procedure which quotes as its justification the very same evidence it has produced.[57] But science does progress in a way the world's mystical systems have not; this points to the greater control of doctrine in shaping world views in the case of mysticism. The self-fulfilling nature of this situation means that any mystic's vision of the nature of reality is verifiable in the way all are: the vision itself sets up a framework for facts which determines in advance what will be the objective facts and what will count as verification. In valuing experiential, social, and historical phenomena differently, each tradition will construct problems differently. Refuting one system in such a situation is only possible from the point of view of a rival set of commitments: mystical experiences are neutralized, and phenomena deemed negative from one point of view are handled differently by another system.

What is deemed rational in different ways of life will depend upon the total conception of reality. Thus for those Christian theologians who take the Christ as the central fact, any attempt at understanding

which ignores this fact as central is not being *objective*. Reasonable actions will depend also on what is deemed real; for example, if belief in rebirth is accepted, repercussions of action upon future lives becomes a concern. The very ground that permits comparisons (i.e., a common level of interpretation) rules out any adjudication between the systems. This may lead to skepticism (no means of determining which mystical system is best) or relativism (each viable system is no better than any other). Each system can consider criticism from other systems, but in the end grounds internal to the system will decide such issues as how much weight to give each desideratum. Justification in the sense of advancing reasons acceptable to all parties appears to be ruled out when there is no theory neutral way of determining fundamental ontology.

If there are no timeless, neutral standards, to whom do we have to justify our commitments? Certainly not to someone, whether mystic or nonmystic, who endorses another set of commitments. The most that can be done to make a particular mystical conceptual system acceptable to other people is complicated and ultimately inadequate. Smart feels the truth of a doctrine depends on evidence other than the mystical experience.[58] However, probably the justificatory process is similar to the discovery process: elements from experiences and the concern for understanding interact in devising a conceptual apparatus which adequately accounts for all experiences in light of the concerns. Having reason to believe an interpretation will depend on both considerations. The central principles within a mystical system need not be accepted uncritically any more than are those of science—alternatives and possible objections are discussed by mystics such as the Buddha and Śaṁkara. Mystical experiences alone are not evidence for one position since alternative interpretations are possible. But they are not irrelevant either: they make up part of the pool of allegedly cognitive experiences out of which world views arise; they are usually considered especially prominent and can adjust our understanding of doctrine. The religious experience argument for good grounds for belief in some absolute is damaged by the fact that mystical experiences are not a unique source of establishing doctrines. This does not, however, reduce religious thought to speculative metaphysics independent of experiences. Knowledge-claims are justified by clusters of factors from both experience and conception. An experience may be decisive for convincing one of a doctrine's truth, but neither the doctrine nor the experience is the basis of the other; rather, the understanding of the experience is consistent with the tenets of the system.[59] It may even be that evidence for a position will be the adequacy of the conceptual unit as a whole: the parts may not be totally isolatable, and so cumulative weight and basic decisions—not formal justification—will prevail.

One consequence of this is that, contra William James, the acceptability of a mystical position would not be greater for one who has undergone a mystical experience than for those who have not. Mystical experiences may be replicable by all other people, but no new experiential data will in principle be produced. Even if only those who have had such experiences have the psychological motivation to endorse a mystical position, the experience is not conclusive proof of a position—a web of arguments is necessary. Because of this, if it is reasonable for some people to make certain decisions, it is reasonable for all, although the problem returns concerning what is reasonable. The mystical experience does not place some people in a privileged epistemological position in this regard.

Vindication of a whole conceptual and value system may rely upon an appeal to a way of life to which we are committed. The most that can be done to justify any system is to invite others to adopt it, to ask whether these ideals reflect what they want to see realized in the world and how they want to live.[60] Are rational choices between alternative ways of life ideally possible? Probably not. If each way of life, its possible effects, and the means necessary to bring it about could be known, there would still remain disagreements over the value of each, over the ultimate construction of reality, and hence over which way of life ought to be pursued. Of course conversions do occur. Often psychological and social causes and persuasion are involved, or a mystical experience may occur while a person is under the influence of one system and the experience is taken as proof of that system. Rarely does one convert by means of rational consideration of doctrines and experiences alone.

In the last analysis, the different religious and mystical traditions of the world that have historically survived have earned the status of being legitimate options at present. Various theistic and nontheistic systems, nondualisms, and pluralisms have proven adequate to a significant number of people, whatever their philosophical problems or the survival value of mysticism for an individual or a culture. Not all mystical positions have survived; for example, Buddhist and Advaitin texts discuss mystical traditions that have since died. So too the popularity of options has varied from period to period; for example, in India, Advaita Vedānta has gained wide-spread support only in the last few centuries. Because of the role of group decisions, there has been a weeding out process, but there has been no convergence upon one point of view, or a "progressive problem shift" as in science.[61] The options that have survived account for the experiences and basic values: any one will appear invalid only from the viewpoint of other belief-commitments. No one can be singled out as compelling or strongest in some absolute sense, or even as more probable or plausible

since probability calculations simply cannot be applied in matters of basic choices. Judgments will be made and all positions will be ultimately groundless. Antimystical positions, whether nonreligious or religious,[62] will remain options too since even any unanimity among mystics does not guarantee validity (e.g., all people might suffer the same persuasive delusion under the same conditions) or determine the significance of the experience.[63] In the evolution of human thought, the present options may prove to be temporary and obsolete; other religious positions or conceptual systems may develop in light of other cultural factors. A consensus may form, although consensus does not guarantee truth—before the sixteenth century all European astronomers were Ptolemists. The alternative is that a pluralistic situation will continue: different human constructions will survive, each accounting for all the data in light of different fundamental beliefs, values, and concerns—and each providing a way of life for different people.

NOTES

1. Ninian Smart, "Interpretation and Mystical Experience," *Religious Studies* 1 (1965): 75.

2. Terminology from Claudio Naranjo and Robert E. Ornstein, *On the Psychology of Meditation* (New York: Viking Press, 1971).

3. See Smart, pp. 75-87; Walter T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1960), chap. 2; R. C. Zaehner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961); and William J. Wainwright, *Mysticism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981), chap. 1.

4. See, e.g., Carl R. Kordig, "The Theory-Ladenness of Observation," *Review of Metaphysics* 24 (1971): 448-84. For a discussion of some of the problems involved in comparing mystical and sense experiences, see Wainwright, chap. 3.

5. *Bhagavad-gītā* 3.27-28.

6. *Enneads* 3.8.9, 6.9.2

7. Ray C. Petry, ed., *Late Medieval Mysticism* (Philadelphia: Westminister, 1957), p. 210.

8. Charles T. Tart, *States of Consciousness* (New York: Dutton, 1975), pp. 84-85.

9. See, e.g., Norwood Russell Hanson, *Observation and Explanation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 1-8; Frederick Suppe, ed., *The Structure of Scientific Theories*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1977), pp. 192-99; and Thomas S. Kuhn, "Reflections on my Critics," in Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave, eds., *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 276-77.

10. Steven T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 26.

11. See J. F. Staal's account of this process, *Exploring Mysticism* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 170-73. He does not distinguish types of mystical experiences and so does not deal with whether this is true of only one type.

12. Raymond B. Blakney, ed. and trans., *Meister Eckhart* (New York: Harper & Row, 1941), p. 97.

13. For more on the problems of mystics' use of language, see Richard H. Jones, "A Philosophical Analysis of Mystical Utterances," *Philosophy East and West* 29 (1979): 255-74.

14. Cited in Stace (n. 3 above), p. 112. Porphyry mentions that Plotinus was "oned" with the One four times (*Life of Plotinus*, chap. 23).

15. Jan Vanneste, "Is the Mysticism of Pseudo-Dionysius Genuine?" *International Philosophical Quarterly* 3 (1963): 304.

16. For a depth-mystical experience to occur, all knowledge must be eliminated from the mind. Also, new knowledge-claims may not be revealed. See R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, "On the Mystical Rejection of Mystical Illuminations," *Religious Studies* 1 (1966): 177-84. But a new inward wisdom is usually felt to be obtained that is cognitive (an insight into the nature of reality).

17. Petry (n. 7 above), p. 47.

18. Cited in Mircea Eliade, *Patanjali and Yoga* (New York: Schocken, 1975), p. 171.

19. Cited in William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experiences* (New York: New American Library, 1958), pp. 313-14.

20. E.g., K. N. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1963), with the qualification that the Theravādins accept paranormal experiences as veridical.

21. Ninian Smart, *Doctrine and Argument in Indian Philosophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1964), p. 50.

22. Ibid., p. 78; cf. Stace (n. 3 above), p. 125.

23. J. F. Staal, *Advaita and Neo-Platonism: A Critical Study in Comparative Philosophy* (Madras: University of Madras, 1961), pp. 88-89, 158-60.

24. *Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya* 1.1.1, 1.1.4.

25. Ibid., 1.1.1.

26. Ibid., 2.1.1.

27. Ibid., 2.1.17; e.g., 2.3.1-3.

28. Blakney (n. 12 above), p. 156; Mark 11: 15-17 and parallels.

29. John Hick, ed., *Truth and Dialogue in World Religions: Conflicting Truth-Claims* (Philadelphia: Westminister, 1974), p. 149.

30. Matthew Fox, *Breakthrough: Meister Eckhart's Creation Spirituality in New Translation* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980), p. 23. Ecclesiastical authorities were hostile to some Christian and Muslim mystics. Some mystical utterances seem intentionally provocative, although the mystics usually said that if properly understood the claims were orthodox.

31. E.g., Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 205-7.

32. John Blofield, *The Tantric Mysticism of Tibet* (New York: Dutton, 1970), pp. 45-46.

33. Staal (n. 11 above), p. 25.

34. Ibid., p. 147.

35. See Richard H. Jones, "Theravāda Buddhism and Morality," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 47 (1980): 371-87.

36. Even the idea that mystical teachings are rafts to be jettisoned once we become enlightened is misleading since enlightenment involves the internalization of a conceptual system: we come to see reality by means of the raft even if we are not consciously trying to employ it (which would involve a dualistic stance toward the concepts present).

37. Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. xxviii. This position holds not only that all mysticism is ultimately one but also the questionable claim that mysticism is the essence of all religiosity and hence that all religions are one.

38. Gleaned from Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1944).

39. Schuon, p. 82.

40. D. T. Suzuki, *Mysticism, Christian and Buddhist* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), p. 44.

41. Ibid., p. 9.

42. Evelyn Underhill, *Practical Mysticism* (New York: Dutton, 1915), p. 3.

43. Gilbert Ryle, *Dilemmas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), p. 90. For a discussion in philosophy of science on this point, see Kordig (n. 3 above).

44. Agehananda Bharati, *The Light at the Center* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Ross-Erikson, 1976), pp. 69, 109.

45. Harold I. Brown, *Perception, Theory and Commitment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 120.

46. Cited in C. F. Kelley, *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977), pp. 49, 143, and 143 respectively.

47. Cited in Frederick H. Holck, ed., *Death and Eastern Thought* (New York: Abingdon, 1974), p. 111.

48. Cited in William A. Christian, *Oppositions of Religious Doctrines* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), pp. 115-16.

49. Mystics are never critical realists since ultimate reality is directly experienceable. The mystical is not known by inference or speculation, but understanding and interpreting its status are required.

50. W. M. Watt, *The Faith and Practice of al-Ghazālī* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1963), pp. 21, 19, 55-56.

51. Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1947), pp. 24-25.

52. E.g., can any post mortem experience—even those lasting a great length of time—decide between a cycle of rebirths and one eternal life? Would even impressions of past lives assure that these lives were ours? For a discussion of philosophical problems in this area, see John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).

53. Ernest Nagel, *Logic Without Metaphysics* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1956), p. 390.

54. See Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (London: NLB, 1975) and Imre Lakatos, "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes," in Lakatos and Musgrave (n. 9 above).

55. Joachim Wach, *Understanding and Believing* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 148.

56. Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 17, 97.

57. Feyerabend, p. 44.

58. Smart (n. 1 above), p. 86.

59. Staal (n. 23 above), pp. 88-89, 158-60.

60. Paul W. Taylor, *Normative Discourse* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1961), p. 132.

61. See Lakatos (n. 54 above), pp. 91-195.

62. According to Reinhold Niebuhr mysticism is at total variance with the Christian faith (*The Nature and Destiny of Man* [New York: Scribner, 1941], 1: 135-36). For certain Protestants (such as Karl Barth), mysticism is sinful because it is an attempt to become God.

63. Antimystical positions in this situation are just other positions of the same fundamental level of decision; they are no less metaphysical than the acceptance of a mystical alternative.

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