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Mystical Experience and Metaphysics

Paul Marshall

He who will pay attention to facts of the sort dear to mystics,
while reflecting upon them in academic-scientific ways,
will be in the best possible position to help philosophy.

—William James, “The Hidden Self”¹

In Chapter 2 of *Beyond Physicalism*, I suggest that mystical experience, if a source of genuine metaphysical insight, can shed light on a variety of extraordinary phenomena, including psi and near-death experience, as well as the mystery that is ordinary consciousness. It is striking that mystics are often left with the conviction that they came into contact with deeper realities during their experiences, and if their convictions are warranted, then the study of mystical experience could be highly informative, providing insights that will enrich metaphysical theorizing. Admittedly, the kind of inquiry I undertake in the chapter faces difficulties, some of which are noted there. Here I merely wish to draw attention to two areas of concern, a mistrust of metaphysics that impedes such inquiry and a challenge posed by the lack of metaphysical consensus among mystical traditions. Although supposedly informed by mystical insights, these traditions can have significantly different teachings about the nature of reality, which may suggest that mystical disclosures do not inevitably lead to similar understandings. In addressing the matter, I run through a variety of positions on mystical experience, mystical doctrine, and their relation. It will become clear that only a few of the positions are compatible with the idea that mystical experience can provide genuine insights into the nature of reality.

Mistrust of Metaphysics

The metaphysical significance of mystical experience has not been high on the agenda in the modern academic study of mysticism.² Humanities scholars have devoted themselves to the more acceptable or seemingly tractable philosophical issues that mysticism raises, in the fields of epistemology, logic, language, and ethics, and to textual and historical issues. Social scientists, in their psychological, sociological, and anthropological investigations, have been adept at “bracketing” or setting aside questions about the reality of the mystical object. Investigators from within the hard sciences have often dismissed or ignored the reality claims of mystics. With some exceptions,³ the metaphysical significance of mystical experiences has not received the academic attention warranted by the overwhelming sense of contact with reality that the experiences often bring.

One reason for the neglect may be the academy’s avowed devotion to objectivity and distance: pursuit of the metaphysical implications of mystical experience may seem more like “doing mysticism” than studying it, more like insider involvement than outsider observation. To do what mystical thinkers do – put together philosophies that draw upon mystical insights – may appear somewhat improper in an academic context, even though developments in philosophy of science and sociology of knowledge since the 1960s have cast doubt on the old ideal of the detached observer, and even more so its relevance to the human sciences, in which there has been a growing acceptance of insider or “participatory” contributions. Barnard (1994) has pointed out that mystical studies along with academic research in general has probably never been “neutral or disinterested,” an observation reinforced by Kripal’s (2001) reflections on the part played by scholars’ own mystical experiences in their research efforts and by his suggestion that the academic study of mysticism can itself be a form of mystical engagement. Barnard notes that a personal stake in a research topic is likely to provide valuable impetus and need not be detrimental if self-reflection is practiced. Insight derived from one’s own experiences, rather than exclusive dependence on texts, is another obvious advantage of an insider perspective. As Staal (1975) put it, “If mysticism is to be studied seriously, it should not merely be studied indirectly and from without, but also directly and from within” (p. 123). Even if such involvement brings distortions, as it sometimes has,⁴ it can still serve a valuable purpose by stimulating debate and research. It would, in any case, be naive to suppose that metaphysical inquiry is any more vulnerable to bias than other forms of philosophical study of mysticism. It is just as easy to be opinionated about, say, the ethics or epistemology of mysticism as it is about the metaphysics, as the scholarship has demonstrated on occasion. Indeed, metaphysical inquiry has the potential advantage of transparency if conducted honestly, for it brings into the open foundational assumptions that might otherwise go unacknowledged and therefore operate surreptitiously.

Mistrust of metaphysics, especially of the bolder, system-building variety, is not of course unique to the study of mysticism. It has been a feature of Western philosophy for a long time, more severe and pervasive in some periods than others, long associated with skepticism, and, in the modern period, intensified by the general decline of religious certainty. It was exacerbated by Kant's influential rejection of so-called dogmatic, constructive, or speculative metaphysics, the activity he attributed to "Rationalist" philosophers such as Descartes and Leibniz, who allegedly sought to deduce truths about reality from basic principles alone, without regard to the limits of reason. For Kant, reason has no grasp of the things-in-themselves, and neither does sensory representation, being thoroughly conditioned by the ordering and synthesizing activities of the human mind. Kant was also critical of those who claimed supersensible knowledge, pouring scorn at least in his published writings (1766/1992) on Emmanuel Swedenborg's clairvoyance, and on the mystical pretensions of *philosophus per inspirationem*, the kind of philosopher who, following the lead of Plato, finds an intellectual intuition within that grasps its objects directly (1796/2002).⁵ In the terminology of Plato's disputed Seventh Letter, to which Kant refers in his polemic, these philosophers do not confine themselves to the three preconditions of discursive knowledge ("name," "definition," "image") and the knowledge itself ("the Fourth"), but give pride of place to an unmediated apprehension of the thing itself, the truly real object ("the Fifth"). Kant has no truck with the possibility of intellectual intuition for human beings and has great fun dismissing its exponents as lazy mystagogues and enthusiasts who cannot be troubled to put in the effort that discursive understanding requires. Kant ignores the Platonic insistence that the attainment of intellectual intuition is hard won, conditional on the difficult-to-achieve redirection of *eros* from baser to worthier things, and not at all independent of discursive effort. Plato had presented intuition of the Fifth, tantamount to liberation from the mythic shadow-cave of *The Republic*, as an intellectually demanding achievement, attained through mastery of the Four by means of searching dialectical exchange among truth-seeking friends.

Dismissal of metaphysics became especially pronounced in the middle of the twentieth century, when the meaningfulness of traditional metaphysical questions was challenged by logical positivists and language philosophers.⁶ Since the mid-century nadir, interest in metaphysics has recovered, with attention reapplied to such traditional problems as ontological categories, self, mind and body, free will and necessity, cause and effect, space and time, but the grander, more adventurous approaches continue to have little representation compared with earlier times. The rehabilitation of metaphysics has been incomplete, conservative, and technical, and the "pursuit of the real" remains out of step with influential perspectives within sections of the academy, notably a scientific materialism that assumes the question of reality has been settled in its favor and a postmodernism that rejects talk of the real, the true, the essential, the universal. But metaphysics cannot be discarded

with impunity, for if ignored it is likely to work away in the background, influencing choice of research topic, methodology, and conclusion, through unquestioned and even unrecognized presuppositions about the nature of reality. This is as true of philosophy and the natural and social sciences as it is of the specialized field of mystical studies. Indeed, it has sometimes been observed that the very rejection of metaphysics by philosophers can rest on hidden metaphysical assumptions.

The Challenge of Metaphysical Diversity

Inquiry into the metaphysical implications of mystical experiences will be unrewarding if, as some claim, the experiences provide no access at all to reality or only a highly mediated and uninformative kind of access. The evidential value of mystical experiences has come under suspicion for several reasons, not least because mystically informed metaphysical teachings across the world's religious traditions can display significant differences. Does the variety mean, then, that mystical insights are unable to provide a basis for a consistent picture of reality? One response is to assert that the differences between mystically inspired religious teachings are superficial and that a common core of teachings can be discerned:

Mystical perennialism – mystics in different traditions have *similar* experiences because they apprehend a common reality, and these experiences give rise to a common core of mystical teachings in the world's religions.

Here I label a viewpoint “mystical” if it maintains that contact with a “mystical object” – deeper reality itself, or some content, facet, or level of the reality – contributes to mystical experience and therefore to teachings that are informed by mystical experience. Mystical perennialism is one such viewpoint, but perennialism need not be mystical. Perennialists in general maintain that religious traditions share a common core of teachings beneath the surface differences; *mystical* perennialists go further by asserting that the consensus derives from shared mystical insights into a common reality. But for some perennialists, the consensus derives not from shared mystical experience but from shared metaphysical “intuitions” or “discernments,” whatever these may be (see Shear, 1994; Smith, 1987).

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan gave a classic statement of perennialism: “In my writings my main contention has been to make out that there is one perennial and universal philosophy which is found in all lands and cultures, in the seers of the *Upaniṣads* and the Buddha, Plato and Plotinus, in Hillel and Philo, Jesus and Paul and the medieval mystics of Islam” (Schilpp, 1952, p. 820). Aldous Huxley (1945) took a similar position in *The Perennial Philosophy*, his anthological exploration of the “highest common factor” of teachings, metaphysical, psychological, and ethical,

that he found present in all “theologies,” and which he supposed is grounded in the intuitions of spiritual virtuosi. The kernel of the perennial philosophy, as expressed by Huxley and abridged by Huston Smith (1987), goes as follows:

First: the phenomenal world is the manifestation of a Divine Ground. Second: human beings are capable of attaining immediate knowledge of that ground. Third: in addition to their phenomenal egos, human beings possess an eternal Self which is of the same or like nature with the divine Ground. Fourth: this identification is life’s chief end or purpose. (p. 554)

Like R. C. Zaehner, a formidable critic of both Radhakrishnan and Huxley, modern-day scholars of religion are more attuned to differences than similarities and are likely to find an unconvincing suppression of differences in the perennialist declaration of a common core of teachings, and a theory of the unity behind diversity that is indebted to universalizing neo-Vedāntic Hindu teachings. Indeed, the hope that genuine insights into reality can be extracted from mystical teachings may seem optimistic in view of the metaphysical diversity to be found there. Belief in a universal core of teachings across mystical traditions is difficult to maintain in the face of deep-rooted differences, at least in respect of metaphysics and the soteriological goals that metaphysics has been used to justify. The metaphysics can be monist or dualist in regard to the number of basic substances that go to make up reality; it can be monist or pluralist in regard to the number of fully distinct spiritual selves who are said to exist, or it can deny them all together; it can be nontheistic or theistic in ways too varied to mention.

Take for instance Jainism and nondual Kashmir Śaivism, two traditions in the Indian sphere that accord high value to insights gained through meditative practice. The former, unlike the latter, is incompatible with Huxley’s four doctrines of perennial philosophy in so far as it has no place for a world-manifesting Divine Ground. Jaina metaphysics, which is said to rest on the special knowledge and perception of its realized teachers, the Jinas, is a metaphysical dualism (but not Cartesian) in its understanding of mind and matter, maintaining a distinction between that which is soul (*jīva*) and that which is not (*ajīva*), the latter consisting of matter (with sensible qualities), space, time, motion, and rest, and it is pluralist in regard to the number of distinct souls that exist. With the reality of matter affirmed, the idea of an immaterial creator God is rejected, for it is not admitted that such a God could create anything so different from itself as matter. The conclusion has implications for Jaina soteriology: liberation cannot be union or identity with an immaterial creator God, for there is no such God; rather, liberation consists in the soul’s isolation from material contaminants that obstruct its naturally unlimited knowledge, perception, bliss, and energy. By contrast, nondual Kashmir Śaivism, which also has claims to gnostic inspiration, can be interpreted as an idealist monism, for it makes consciousness primary and matter derivative, an obscuration of consciousness, and therefore

has no qualms about locating a creative divine consciousness at its metaphysical, cosmogonic, and soteriological apex. Liberation involves recognition that the divine consciousness is one's own essential self. Because all souls have this self in common they are not fundamentally distinct, unlike, say, the *jīvas* of Jainism, the *puruṣas* of Sāṃkhya, and Śaiva Siddhānta's multiplicity of souls distinct from Lord Śiva.

The above is just one example of differing metaphysical and soteriological positions to be found among traditions supposedly informed by a special mode of knowing, by a higher intuition sometimes indicated by the Greek terms *gnosis* and *nous*, and the Sanskrit *jñāna*. However, pronounced similarities can be observed too. For example, the "primordial ground" ontology, emanative cosmogony, and accompanying soteriology of mystical return found in nondual Kashmir Śaivism, although absent in Jainism, is represented in several other traditions with mystical currents, Neoplatonic (and thence Jewish, Christian, and Islamic), Daoist, and perhaps even Buddhist,⁷ albeit elaborated in their own distinctive ways. When significant parallels are observed between the metaphysical teachings of mystical traditions, there can be a temptation to attribute them to common experiential insights, as mystical perennialists do, and it is indeed possible that some shared features of metaphysical systems do have a basis in common experience. For example, the language of light that is a common feature of emanative metaphysics, expressive of the outflow of creation from its source and of mystical return to that source, is probably more than symbolism based on universal familiarity with the life-giving sun, for special experiences of luminosity are a very common, cross-cultural feature of mystical experience. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to overlook other possibilities, such as the emergence of comparable ideas in different cultures through discursive reflection alone or through the diffusion of ideas by missionary activity, trade, military expeditions, and migration. Significant transmission of mystical ideas has certainly taken place on occasions, as for instance in the well-recognized influence of Neoplatonism on forms of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic mysticism. In the extreme, transmission may be offered as the only mechanism responsible for cross-tradition commonality:

Radical diffusionism – similarities between mystical teachings across traditions are attributable to transmission of ideas through conventional channels.

However, diffusionism does not preclude contributions from mystical experience and contact with a mystical object. The ideas that are transmitted may have been inspired in the first place by mystical experiences in the originating tradition, and they may then prove acceptable to the receiving tradition because they are found to agree there with local experience. But transmission can be difficult to establish if records of cultural contact are scanty, as they often are, and the possibility remains that metaphysical commonalities derive not from transmission but from parallel philosophical development or from common experiential inspiration. When exploring similarities between systems of metaphysics, there can be a temptation

to attribute them entirely to transmission, without recognition that traditions may draw independently on common mystical experiences.⁸

Even if similar mystical experiences do occur across traditions, it does not follow that they will inspire the same kinds of teachings. The experiences may be so elusive, so ungraspable by the everyday intellect, that they do not lead inevitably to the same understandings. Furthermore, traditions may have developed strongly ingrained metaphysical stances through non-mystical routes, and these may influence the ways in which experiences are interpreted. Thus, mystical essentialists, unlike mystical perennialists (the two are often confused, but it is important to make the distinction), do *not* insist on a common core of teachings across traditions:

Mystical essentialism – mystics in different traditions can have *similar* experiences because they apprehend a common reality, but they may describe and interpret their experiences differently, in conformity to their religious backgrounds.

An essentialist might simply claim that mystical experience, as the intuition of deeper reality, is one and the same everywhere, but more nuanced statements of the position maintain that there are several types of mystical experiences with a cross-cultural presence, and recognize that traditions value and emphasize some types more than others. Several scholars have set out cross-tradition typologies of mystical experience, such as Zaehner (1957) with his classification of natural, monistic, and theistic unitive experiences. On the surface, W. T. Stace's (1960) influential introvertive-extrovertive typology follows this route, but Stace often took the two types to be the same in essence, the introvertive experience consisting of unsullied pure consciousness and the extrovertive consisting of pure consciousness alongside sense perceptions of the natural world (Marshall, 2005, pp. 145–167). It follows that there is really just one genuine mystical experience across all traditions – pure consciousness, on its own or with superadditions. According to Stace, mystics in theistic traditions misinterpret pure consciousness theistically, in conformity to their religious backgrounds. But essentialists need not take such a narrow view of mystical experience, which reduces all genuine cases to pure consciousness, and they therefore need not be as provocative as Stace, who imputed gross misinterpretation to mystics who report experiences other than those of pure consciousness, unsullied or adulterated.

As well as bringing typological refinement to their positions, essentialists can acknowledge that some experiences, particularly the less profound ones, are conditioned by the personal, religious, and cultural backgrounds of mystics and so will not be exactly the same across traditions. The experiences may be similar in general character but different in specific contents.⁹ Gershom Scholem (1960/1969) supposed that the essential mystical experience is “amorphous,” a formlessness that allows it to take on numerous forms and to be described and interpreted in diverse ways across

traditions (pp. 7–9). Initially, mystical experiences incorporate and reflect back to mystics their own traditions, but as the path unfolds, tradition-specific forms and cross-tradition “symbolic representations” of ultimate reality drop away to reveal a formlessness that defies adequate expression because it is beyond subject–object distinctions. Kelly and Grosso (2007) take this kind of approach when they suppose that although earlier stages of mystical experience are likely to be conditioned by tradition the conditioning drops away as experience deepens (pp. 512–515).

The classification of mystical experience into types suggests a further refinement of essentialism. If reality is “multifaceted,” then contact with it will take several forms, depending on which “facet” is apprehended:

Mystical aspectism – mystics in different traditions have *similar* or *different* experiences depending on which aspects of a common reality they contact.

Reality has distinguishable “aspects” – facets, subdomains, dimensions, gradations, levels – with which mystics come into contact. William James (1902) adopted an aspectist position when, in the face of the metaphysical diversity of mystical teachings, he raised the possibility that mystical states are “windows” on “a more extensive and inclusive world,” and pointed out that this world may have a “mixed constitution,” with heights and depths (p. 428). The classic Indian parable of the elephant and the blind men, told in Jaina, Buddhist, and Hindu traditions, can be used to bring across the approach. The blind men, unable to see the elephant and therefore its varied totality, touch different parts of the animal, such as the tail, trunk, leg, and ear, and so have different experiences and give different accounts of the elephant, likening it to a rope, snake, pillar, and rug respectively. The aspectist supposes that mystics of all traditions “touch” reality, make contact with it, but may have different experiences of it, depending on which facets of reality they discover. Some mystics will make contact with a personal creative aspect, some with an impersonal aspect, some with cosmic reality, some with an archetypal realm, and so forth. Mystical traditions with complex ontologies have room for understanding a variety of experiences, and if the ontologies are constructed hierarchically, as they often have been, then the corresponding types of mystical experiences will be ordered hierarchically too, and taken to reflect stages of mystical development. Although the deepest level of reality may be simple, reality as a whole is stratified and complex.

Retreat from the Mystical Object

In the remaining approaches to be described here, the mystical object – whether the simple reality of an uncomplicated essentialism or the complex “ontological elephant” of aspectist essentialism – fades from view, is regarded as inaccessible, or may disappear altogether, discarded as irrelevant or even nonexistent. The first of these

approaches retains the mystical object but supposes that it is not accessed directly by the mystic, who instead has a mediated encounter with it:

Mystical mediationism – mystics in different traditions have *different* experiences because reality is experienced by them in mediated form, clothed in tradition-specific garb.

Whereas aspectist essentialism accounts for some differences in experience and doctrine across the traditions by having a mystical object with several domains or levels, mediationism has a mystical object that adapts to its subjects (*accommodationist*) or has subjects who bring their own backgrounds to their experiences of the mystical object (*subjectivist*). In both cases, contact with reality is mediated. The more traditional and theological of the two is accommodationism: the otherwise inaccessible and incomprehensible divine reality is said to present itself in guises to suit its audiences, so that it can be recognized and understood by them. The more modern and psychological is subjectivism: subjects apprehend reality through the “tinted glasses” of their own personalities, religious traditions, and cultures. A mediatory epistemology has been advocated by the philosopher of religion John Hick (1989), whose approach to religious diversity is termed “pluralism.” According to Hick, those religious traditions that are in the salvatory business of shifting persons from self-centeredness to reality-centeredness all look toward a common, truly existent reality, “the Real,” but they understand it in different ways, notably as either personal or impersonal. Mystics in the various traditions do make contact with the Real but only at an unconscious level, and their conscious experiences are always clothed in culturally conditioned forms woven by the mystic’s memory and imagination. Thus, mystical experiences of all kinds are “joint products of a transcendent reality and of the mystic’s own mind-set” (pp. 165, 294–295). Hick’s mystical mediationism is professedly Kantian and Wittgensteinian in its inspiration, with the thing-in-itself inaccessible, and interpretative “seeing as” rather than pure “seeing” taking place. Drawing on Hick, Studstill (2005) has advocated a position he calls “mystical pluralism,” but unlike Hick he admits direct contact with the thing-in-itself in exceptional cases, “an unconditioned, unmediated experience of the Real” (p. 26), and so introduces an element of essentialism that is absent from Hick’s approach. Studstill’s pluralism therefore resonates with Scholem’s brand of essentialism, which recognizes widespread tradition-specific conditioning but also has a place for an experience of the ultimate reality beyond forms and symbols.

In the next approach, the mystical object drops out of consideration and leaves only tradition-specific conditioning. There may be a spiritual reality, but mystical experience does not derive from contact with it:

Radical contextualism – mystics in different traditions have *different* experiences because their experiences are fully conditioned by the tradition-specific teachings they receive and practices they undertake.

Mystical experiences are purely contextual constructions, products of religious indoctrination and training (e.g., Garside, 1972; Katz, 1978). It follows that mystical experiences are not windows on reality but mirrors of religious traditions, reflecting back to mystics their doctrinal backgrounds and practices. A mystical experience will be revelatory of reality only to the extent that its conditioning tradition has accurately portrayed reality in its teachings. Even more so than mystical mediationism, radical contextualism goes against the mystic's strongly felt sense of having come into direct contact with reality.

Radical contextualism has been applied to various extraordinary experiences. For example, applied to the "Old Hag" attacks of sleep paralysis, Hufford has called it the "cultural source hypothesis" and found it wanting (1982, pp. 13–16; 1985, pp. 118–123). It also has serious weaknesses when applied to mystical experience. Like mystical mediationism, it is unable to explain "novel" experiences, those that deviate significantly from the expectations of the conditioning tradition. It also fails to address the many "spontaneous" experiences recorded in modern times that take place outside any conditioning tradition of teaching and practice. Moreover, it has been undermined by a serious methodological flaw. Radical contextualists asserted that mystical experiences are thoroughly conditioned by their religious contexts, but much of the evidence they raised to support the contention was not rich, firsthand reports that might have demonstrated the conditioning but abstract mystical ideas and metaphysics, for which experiential sources are often unclear or not at all visible.

Radical contextualists do not necessarily deny that a deeper reality exists and that it is revealed to some extent in religious teachings, but they do deny that mystical experiences derive from contact with it. They hold that the experiences are entirely constructed from the religious and cultural backgrounds of mystics. By contrast, in the final two approaches to be noted here, the mystical object has not merely receded from view or become redundant: now its existence, if not passed over in silence, may be dismissed outright. The first of these approaches, which could be called *post-modern relativism*, is similar to radical contextualism and is sometimes confused with it. Postmodern relativism stresses the religious, cultural, and linguistic situatedness of mystics and so expects a diversity of conditioned experiences across traditions. Similarly, texts and language, not experience and its supposedly direct intuitions, are made central. However, the postmodern relativist goes further than the radical contextualist and condemns all talk of "reality," whether in philosophical, scientific, or mystical discourse, as an absolutist hangover from earlier times that should be put aside in favor of postmodern nonabsolutism and relativism. Thus, Don Cupitt (1998) calls for a "mysticism *minus* metaphysics" and dismisses the "noetic" pretension of mystical experience, its claim to be a direct, prelinguistic way of knowing (p. 8). With metaphysics abandoned, Cupitt rejects Hick's "semi-realism" and his mediated mystical object, the Real (pp. 38–41).

The final approach also has no place for a mystical object, but like mystical essentialism it expects to find commonality of mystical experiences across traditions

and can also admit some degree of local conditioning that introduces differences. However, the commonality is not the result of contact with deeper realities but of shared human biology and psychology:

Neuroscientific reductionism – mystics in different traditions have *similar* experiences because their experiences are products of common neurobiological and psychological mechanisms, but mystics may describe and interpret the experiences differently, in accordance with their religious backgrounds.

Like radical contextualists, neuroscientific reductionists have not made much effort to grapple with the finer details of the experiential data. Typically, only a basic form of mystical unity will be addressed (say, a vaguely conceived “oneness”), and the phenomenology as a whole will be poorly represented, although some theorists have been better than others in this regard.¹⁰ Neuroscientific reductionists are especially challenged by the clarity of consciousness and noetic quality that can arise in very unlikely circumstances, including psychological distress and near-death trauma.

More fundamentally, neuroscientific reductionism is as limited in the study of mystical experience as it is in the study of consciousness in general, in which neurobiology must be just one component of an adequate approach to the mystery of consciousness. Nor has the credibility of existing neuroscientific explanations been helped by the formidable challenges faced by experimentalists. Laboratory studies of the “neural correlates” of mystical experience have to make do with altered states induced by meditation, which under lab conditions are unlikely to be well-developed mystical experiences and may not be mystical at all. Psychoactive drugs can be used, if permission is obtainable, but drugs bring complications of their own, for they are crude implements that may introduce potentially misleading artifacts. While there certainly is a link between neurobiology and spiritual experience that can be very usefully studied, it would be rash to conclude that neurobiology creates the experiences outright. It has long been pointed out by filter theorists that changes to brain physiology brought about by a wide range of triggers, including psychoactive drugs, may facilitate the experiences rather than create them. For example, it is possible that drugs may induce mystical expansions of consciousness by reducing brain activity that supports psychological habits, such as self-preoccupied thinking, that ordinarily work to narrow experience (e.g., Carhart-Harris et al., 2012).

Conclusion

Although investigation of the metaphysical implications of mystical experience is not straightforward, the unfashionable status of speculative metaphysics is no good reason to avoid it. Moreover, it is far better to bring metaphysics out into the open than let it operate surreptitiously in the background. Nor is the diversity of metaphysical

teachings across mystically informed religious traditions any reason to assume that such investigation is futile. Of the various positions identified above, perennialism and essentialism are fully compatible with the proposal that mystical experiences can give genuine insights into the nature of reality beyond the biology of human brains and the psychology and religious contexts of human minds. Mediationism may be compatible too, up to a point, despite its insistence that contact with the mystical object is always mediated. The mediationist can suppose that some general characteristics of the object, such as luminosity, noetic character, and its role as a source of values and ethics, can be inferred from mystical experiences since the experiences are taken to be products not only of the mystic's "mind-set" but also of the "transcendent reality." Perennialism and essentialism go further than mediationism because they allow direct contact with the deeper realities, but perennialism is undermined by significant core differences in doctrine across religious traditions, at least in metaphysics and soteriology. Thus, essentialism is left as the approach to metaphysical diversity most congenial to the project undertaken in Chapter 2. But it should be an essentialism sensitive to typological differences and to the possibility that reality is multifaceted and stratified, for there do appear to be distinguishable types and stages of mystical experiences. The essentialism would also do well to acknowledge contributions to mystical *teachings* from cultural diffusion and non-mystical philosophical activity, and also contributions to mystical *experience* from the mystic's religious tradition, allowing space for some mediatory adaptations in the mystic's contact with reality. Contributions from biology also have to be recognized. The brain is certainly implicated in altered states of consciousness, at the very least in the neuropsychological changes that permit the experiences to occur, but more directly too in contributing to some aspects of the phenomenology.

Notes

- 1 James (1890, p. 362). Here James uses "mystical" in a very broad sense to cover a range of extraordinary phenomena, including psychical as well as strictly mystical, the "wild facts" that the "scientific-academic mind" is generally slow to acknowledge.
- 2 For an earlier discussion, see Marshall (2005, pp. 14–16).
- 3 Exceptions include Barnard (1997, 2011), Brainard (2000), and Perovich (2011). Hood (e.g., 1997) has often stated that the ontological claims of mystical experience should be taken seriously and are open to empirical study (p. 230).
- 4 For example, Zaehner's lively but notoriously partisan efforts. See Kripal (2001) and Marshall (2005, pp. 206–216).
- 5 Kant was responding to a mystical Platonism expressed in the mid-1790s by Goethe's brother-in-law Johann Georg Schlosser and his circle. See Rhodes (2003, pp. 175–180).
- 6 Some of the philosophers who continued to pursue metaphysics during the lean years had an active interest in psychical phenomena or mystical experience: C. D. Broad, H. H. Price, C. J. Ducasse, W. T. Stace.

- 7 Primordial-ground ontology is not a feature of early Buddhism, which is conspicuous for its pragmatic avoidance of metaphysical speculation, but emerges in later Buddhist doctrinal developments and becomes important in Tibet and East Asia. There has been heated debate over whether such developments constitute “true Buddhism” (e.g., Hubbard & Swanson, 1997).
- 8 See, for instance, Bussanich’s (2005) observations on McEvilley’s (2002) diffusionist study of Greek and Indian philosophical parallels.
- 9 The insight that experience of spiritual realities may be conditioned by tradition and person, and so have a subjective as well as objective character, is not a new one. See Shaw (2015) on the idea among the Neoplatonic theurgists, for whom the imaginal vision derives some features from the divine object and some from the human subject.
- 10 Austin (1998) does a better job than many of his fellow neuroscientists.

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