

Mystical Experiences and Their Limiting Case

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The issue with which I shall be concerned in this discussion is one of perennial interest to philosophers of mysticism. And yet, it is more than that. In an age in which Eastern philosophies are making their presence felt in the West, when the ultimate validation of truth is the experience of the individual, the relationship between teachings which profess to assert the nature of that which is ultimately real and those praeternatural experiences which such teachings are putatively expressive of is of crucial importance.

It is difficult at the present time to assert, as William James did, that there is an "eternal unanimity" in mystical utterances. Our awareness of the variety and plurality of mystical utterances has grown apace with our awareness of the complexity of the religious traditions within which such utterances are enshrined. Moreover, it is just such an awareness of the multifarious nature of mystical utterance which creates that problem with which we shall try to deal viz., are there varieties of mystical experience which give rise to a variety of symbolic expressions, or, is there only one form of mystical experience and a variety of modes of interpretation of it? In short, what is the relationship between mystical experience and the interpretation of it, and further, how may we loosen the philosophical bonds which seemingly restrict this relationship from some elucidation?

In the current literature, three main positions may be discerned. Firstly, there is the view that there are as many different types of mystical experience as there are paradigmatic expressions. Secondly, there is the claim that all mystical experience is identical, the different expressions occurring because of different modes of interpretation. The third position is that there are as many types of mystical experience as there are paradigmatic beliefs entering into the structure and content of the experience. After a brief examination of the first of these models, I shall concentrate on the latter two. For convenience's sake, I shall refer to them subsequently as P1, P2 and P3 respectively.

P1 has not been offered as a thoroughgoing theory of the relationship between types of mystical experience and its various interpretations. Nevertheless, its presence may be implicitly detected in a number of analyses of mystical experience (See Larson: 1-16; Fakhry: 193-207; Zaehner; Dasgupta; Laski). For the purposes of our discussion, we may define 'paradigmatic expression' in the following way:

"A paradigmatic expression of mystical experience is an expression which refers to the central focus (e.g. God, Brahman, Nirvana), aim (e.g. union with God, attainment of *kaivalya*) or nature (e.g. that it is objectless, non-dual, an undifferentiated unity) of the mystical experience."

In other words, P1 is the view that there are as many types of mystical experience as there are various expressed foci, aims or descriptions of the nature of this experience.

Proponents of P1 are committed to the viewpoint, implicitly or otherwise, that mystical texts are "verbal images" of those experiences upon which they depend. The mystic is looked upon as a mirror, accurately reflecting the contents of the experience. This viewpoint is never argued for by proponents of P1 and, indeed, as is the case with the relationship between any first person report of an experience and the description of it, it is difficult to see what form such an argument might take. In fact, the 'pictorial' relation between paradigmatic expressions and the phenomenological character of mystical experience is *assumed* and, to this extent, P1 is involved in a case of *petitio principii*. P1 thereby ignores the possibility of non-experiential influences upon the experient's utterances and, in so doing, cannot take into account the mystic's own religious environment as a major factor in any expression of mystical experience. As Mircea Eliade (77) points out, the meaning of mystical experience, for the mystic, "can only come fully to his consciousness clothed in a pre-existent ideology". (See also Dodds: 80; Nicholson: 2; Underhill: 78f.)

A further consideration is worthy of mention. P1 is rendered more uncertain since mystics themselves assert that the experience is an in-

effable one. Although a definitive analysis of the notion of ineffability is still lacking, it may be said that 'ineffability' at least implies that there is a qualitative gap between the "Reality" apprehended and the description of it, a gap which reaches its limiting case in the refusal of the Madhyāmika school of Mahāyāna Buddhism to verbalise or conceptualise it at all. The words of T.R.V. Murti (146) are most apt:

"Paramārthasatya, or Absolute Truth, is the knowledge of the real as it is without any distortion . . . categories of thought and points of view distort the real. They unconsciously coerce the mind to view things in a cramped biased way: and are thus inherently incapable of giving us the truth . . . the absolute truth is beyond the scope of discursive thought, language and empirical activity."

Granted that there is invariably a "looseness-of-fit" between mystical experience and its subsequent expression, then this means that there is a complex interplay between the attained "reality" and the language, enmeshed as it is within our everyday stream of consciousness, which expresses that "reality". Such complexity is certainly taken seriously by Ninian Smart, the foremost philosophical exponent of P2. Smart's position may be most clearly perceived in his critique of R.C. Zaehner, and it is to this critique we now turn.

Smart takes Zaehner to task for his categorisation of Theravāda Buddhism as an expression of monistic mystical experience, the latter meaning for Zaehner the isolation of the soul from all that is non-soul. He argues that the earliest parts of the Pali canon affirm the doctrine of no-soul (*anatta*). If an intimate connection between mystical experience and the doctrine of no-soul is admitted, then Smart's analysis places Zaehner on the horns of a dilemma. Either he must admit that there is a variety of mystical experience which is neither theistic nor monistic (for there is neither ultimate deity nor ultimate personal essence in Theravāda) or he must show that it is possible for Buddhism to have misinterpreted mystical experience and hence argue that it is feasible to re-interpret the Buddhist experience monistically. Smart points out that if Zaehner were to choose the latter alternative, then in admitting that Theravāda might be mistaken in its auto-interpretation, might it not be the case that Christian mystics are mistaken in their interpretation. He writes (1965: 83, my italics):

"If the monistic category includes heterogeneous high auto-interpretations, there is no guarantee that we should not place all mystics, including theists, in the same category; and explain their differences not in terms of radically different experiences, but in terms of varied auto-interpretations."

tations. The gaps within the monistic category are big enough for it not to seem implausible to count the gap between monism and theism as no wider.” (Cf. Smart, 1968: 71 f.)

Thus, utilising the principle of parsimony and a sharp distinction between experience and its interpretation, Smart maintains that all mystical experience is identical, its different expressions being due to the ramifying effect of various doctrinal schemes.

Yet, in spite of the Ockhamistic appeal of the Smartian proposal, a caveat must be entered. It is true that Zaehner has not carried through with vigour the implications of his implicit model, which is, of course, P1. For, if theistic mystical experience is to be classified as a separate category of mystical experience on the basis of its paradigmatic expression, then various other modes of paradigmatic expression (e.g. those of Sāṅkhya, Advaita Vedānta, Theravāda) ought to be classified. But, that Zaehner has not made further classification of varieties of mystical experience is not in itself an argument in favour of P2.

Smart’s analysis is certainly sufficient to cast doubt on Zaehner’s classification but I believe that the question as to whether there are, for example, phenomenologically theistic mystical experiences (and more crucially, the question as to the means of *demonstrating* that there are) remains an open one.

In an important reply to Ninian Smart, Nelson Pike sets out to show that it is possible to delineate mystical experiences which are phenomenologically theistic, experiences which may minimally be said to be “self in contact with other” and maximally “the union of the soul and God”. In support of his thesis, Pike (146 f.) writes of a person who has had a theistic mystical experience:

“Let us suppose that he was a committed Christian prior to his experience. One might hold that the fact that he experienced himself in contact with a good and mighty person was in some way determined by his prior theological beliefs. Had he not believed in the existence of God, he would not have experienced himself in contact with such a person. Let us grant this. The description of the experience as “Self in contact with God” would still be a purely phenomenological description. Prior to his dream my son believed that Paul Bunyan’s ox was blue. As a consequence, he dreamed of himself riding on a *blue* ox. But that the dream-ox was experienced as *blue* is part of the phenomenological description of that dream. It is not an item my son incorporated into the description of the dream after waking as a consequence of his belief that the ox was blue.”

Several notions in this passage may lead us to some fresh insights. Firstly, there is the question of the possible points at which "interpretation" may occur. There would appear to be three possibilities - after the experience (through reflection upon it), during the experience, and prior to the experience (by shaping the nature of the experience). These may be called "retrospective", "reflexive", and "incorporated" interpretation respectively - a distinction and terminology I owe to P.G. Moore (147 f). With reference to the dreaming Pike, his prior belief that the ox was blue is incorporated into the dream such that he sees the ox as a blue ox during the dream, and upon waking describes his dream as that of riding on a blue ox. A theistic mystical experience on this frame of reference is one in which a prior theistic belief-state is incorporated into the experience such that the self is aware of contact with another and subsequently describes that experience as one of union with God. We shall return to this anon. For the present, however, and arising from this, we may note the existence of an implicit third model of the relationship between mystical experience and its expression, namely, P3, the view that there are as many varieties of mystical experience as there are *incorporated interpretations* of it.

II

We have seen that the major problems in P1 lay in its assumption that the paradigmatic expressions "pictured" the nature of the experience. Now P3 avoids this problem since what we may now call "paradigmatic beliefs" enter into the structure and content of the experience itself. Thus, the "ineffability gap", the barrier between the experience and its subsequent expression, is to that extent closed, for in the majority of cases retrospective interpretation will reflect the prior religious and cultural framework of the mystic. An exponent of P3 would need to maintain that experience in general is a product of the interaction of the organism and the environment, and that the more we move away from perceptions of physical objects to moral, aesthetic and emotional "perceptions" and finally to mystical "perceptions", the more determinative become the salient features of specific cultural and conceptual frameworks. From this perspective, the phenomenology of the mystical experience is totally dependent upon the incorporated interpretation; indeed, the distinction between experience and interpretation becomes a nugatory one. As Bruce Garside (94) remarks:

"If experience is the product of stimuli and conceptual framework . . . then people of different cultures and religious traditions would necessarily have different religious experiences. It makes no sense to look for an 'authentic' des-

cription of a mystical experience undistorted by any interpretative framework.”

The position has now been reached whence, having littered the stage with characters, we must move towards a resolution of their conflicts. In order to do so, I shall invoke a notion, by now a familiar one, which was brought to philosophical clarity by Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*. Suffice it to say, therefore, that in his discussion of “seeing-as”, Wittgenstein pointed to ambiguous diagrams such as the Necker cube, Jastrow’s duck-rabbit and Köhler’s goblet-faces. In Köhler’s diagram, the configuration of lines can be seen as the outline of a goblet or as two faces looking at each other; the duck rabbit may be seen as a duck’s head facing to the right or as a rabbit’s head facing to the left, and so on. We may speak therefore of “seeing-as” when what is received by the senses can be consciously perceived in different ways as having different character, nature, significance etc. The received sensations are identical, the perceptions are varied.

Let us now suppose that mystical “sensations” are the same in all cases, and that the mystical “perceptions”, due to incorporated beliefs, may be varied. Let us further invoke the previously outlined notion of reflexive interpretation - that interpretation may take place during the mystical experience itself. Thus, seeing a configuration of lines as, on the one hand, a goblet, and on the other, as a pair of faces looking at each other is a case of reflexive interpretation. So also, ‘seeing’ a mystical experience as a union with God may also be a case of reflexive interpretation, the reflexivity being determined by the incorporated belief. So, just as in the diagrams mentioned above there is interpretation placed upon the basic datum of a certain configuration of lines, so also, in theistic mystical experience, there is interpretation of a more basic experiential datum.

But, how might this latter datum be identified? In the cases of the duck-rabbit etc., the core datum is easily identifiable. Indeed, in these cases there is *seeing-as* only because it is quite apparent that the seeing of the diagrams as configurations of lines is quite separable from seeing them as a duck, rabbit, goblet, faces etc. There is neither a conceptual nor an actual difficulty in seeing the configuration of lines *qua seeing*, as a configuration of lines, and seeing them *qua seeing-as* as alternatively a duck or rabbit.

The case of dreams is somewhat more complex. To revert to the dream of the blue ox, can it be said that reflexive interpretation is taking place? If the answer is yes, then what remains as the basic datum of dream experience if the contents thereof are bracketed out as due to reflexive interpretation? The answer is a dream-state without content. But this is tantamount to dreamless sleep. Yet, while the abstraction of the content of dreams renders “dream” meaningless in these circumstances, for “a dream without content” has no application, never-

theless, this does not negate the fact that there is a state equivalent to a contentless dream state, *viz*, the state of dreamless sleep.

Turning now to the mystical case, we may note a number of consequences. Firstly, in the light of Pike's analysis, it is certainly feasible that there may be phenomenologically theistic mystical experiences. Nevertheless, this does not necessitate the adoption of P3 for the possibility of reflexive interpretation leads to the exercise of extrapolating a core mystical datum from the experience. Indeed, the validity of this exercise is reinforced by the fact that mystics of some traditions and here I am thinking particularly of Meister Eckhart and al-Hallaj, do react in retrospective interpretations against the conceptual framework putatively incorporated into their mystical experiences. Such mystics thereby indicate that the nature of the experience is not *solely* determined by incorporated belief.

III

Let me now attempt to clarify what I mean by "the core mystical datum" and outline how we might set about identifying it. Taking a theistic mystical experience *ās* our example, what remains if the content of the experience, the experience of the self in contact with a good and mighty person, is abstracted? The residue is a contentless experience, one in which there is neither awareness of the self (or perhaps rather, the empirical self, for the experience might indeed be one of the 'essential' self) nor of anything over against the self - a state in which, unlike the waking and dream states, there is no subject-object polarity. It is furthermore a state in which there is neither incorporated beliefs nor, therefore, reflexive interpretation, for there are no beliefs, thoughts, dual awareness within.

That our discussion of dreams and dreamless sleep is a fortuitous one is demonstrated by the Māndūkya Upanishad (4, trans.S. Radhakrishnan) for, beyond the waking, dreaming and dreamless states of the soul is the mystical state of *turiya* :

“ . . . not that which cognises the internal (objects), not that which cognises the external (objects), not what cognises both of them, not a mass of cognition, not cognitive, not non-cognitive. (It is) unseen, incapable of being spoken of, ungraspable, without any distinctive marks, unthinkable, unnameable, the essence of the knowledge of the one self, that into which the world is resolved, the peaceful, the benign, the non-dual, such they think is the fourth quarter. He is the self; He is to be known.”

In short, what I am suggesting is that this non-dual contentless mystical datum which we have been led to by our analysis is just that state which is referred to in the above text. Furthermore, it is that state which Smart (1968: 42 f) delineates as the paradigmatic contemplative or mystical state:

“In the contemplative state . . . discursive thought and mental images disappear . . . If the contemplative experience is void of images, etc. it is also void of that sense of distinction between subject and object which characterises everyday experiences.” (cf. Smart 1958: 71)

Contra Smart, however, we have recognised that it is necessary to take into account, not only those experiences from which all the multiplicity of sensuous or conceptual content has been excluded, but also those content filled experiences where the self is said to be in union with God.

Our analysis now leads to the presentation of two theses, the first arising from the above considerations, the second implicit within it, but standing in need of some further validation. The first thesis is that the pure datum of mystical experience will be attained by the mystic when the state attained has neither incorporated content, nor reflexive interpretation occurring. Evidence for the attainment of such a state may readily be gained from mystical texts. The second thesis is that the limiting case of mystical experience is just such a state. This means that although we may recognise contentful mystical experiences as mystical experiences, there is nevertheless a state ‘beyond’ these which is, in a sense, “pure”, for no prior beliefs are incorporated therein. It is towards the attainment of this state that the contemplative method, proceeding as it does through a variety of content-filled stages, is directed.

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