Mystical Encounters with the Natural World

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Experiences and Explanations

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How can the whole world become visible to a single man?

Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*

Preface and Acknowledgements

The present study is devoted to mystical experiences of the natural world and the disparate ways in which they have been explained. Typically, these so-called *extrovertive mystical experiences* are characterized by some combination of unity, deepened knowledge, sense of reality, altered time-experience, light, bliss, and love. The experiences are well represented in modern collections of spiritual testimonies, but unlike some other extraordinary experiences, they have received little sustained attention in recent years. As a step towards redressing the neglect, I look at the experiences again—at their circumstances, characteristics, and consequences—and scrutinize a variety of explanations put forward over the last hundred years.

Why is renewed study of extrovertive mystical experiences desirable? Apart from their significance as life-transforming events, the experiences are of considerable theoretical interest. They have been important in the modern study of mysticism, constituting one of the major types of mystical experience recognized by scholars since the early days of study, and they promise to be important in the future development of the field. Any theory of mystical experience with pretensions to generality must be able to account for extrovertive experiences. The experiences provide an important test case for evaluating explanations, including the currently fashionable approaches that trace mystical experience to neuropsychology or to the conditioning influence of religious belief and practice. Extrovertive experience is also of interest for the stimulus it could give to the study of mind: the immense expansions of perception and cognition reported in some accounts raise questions about the nature of the perceptual process and the relation between mind and world. Are there non-sensory forms of contact with the world? Does mind exist beyond the brain?

Extrovertive mystical experience is also important in ways that are tangential to the present study but which are worth noting to underscore the potential benefits of a more sophisticated understanding of

the experiences. By bringing together spirituality and the natural world, the experiences have a bearing on several topics, such as nature religions, spiritual ecologies, nature aesthetics, science–religion relations, and writings in which nature and spirituality interfuse, including Romantic literature. It is perhaps surprising that extrovertive experience has received little attention in recent years, given the return of nature as an object of interest in religious and environmental movements that call for the veneration or 'resacralization' of the natural world.

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P.M.

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Introduction

I was sitting in the dentist's chair waiting for the dentist to examine my teeth. I was alone and looking out of the window. It was a dull, overcast day, but suddenly the sun came out—golden and glorious. This was not the physical sun, but a wonderful golden light. With it came a feeling of great joy, peace and well-being. I was so full of love for all things that I felt my heart would burst, and such a feeling of Unity. (RERC 4384, in Maxwell and Tschudin 1996: 113–14)

It sometimes happens that the world appears very different from usual. Things that were separate are now unified. Knowledge and love, ordinarily feeble and partial, become deep and all-encompassing. Self melts away in peace, bliss, light. The present embraces past and future. These experiences, which can vary considerably in details, often occur under the stimulus of beautiful scenery or come at times of great mental tension, but they also arise in the most prosaic of circumstances. Experiences of the transfigured world, sometimes called 'extrovertive mystical experiences' or 'nature mystical experiences', are more common than may be supposed, at least in their milder forms, and for over a century they have been recognized by scholars of mysticism.

There has, however, been little in-depth work on the topic since the 1950s and 1960s, when the comparative religionist R. C. Zaehner and the philosopher W. T. Stace discussed the experiences in their influential books on mysticism. Renewed scrutiny is long overdue, not least because the experiences and their interpretation were poorly served by the classic studies, which, in any case, have become rather dated. Important developments have taken place since the 1960s. Through the data-gathering efforts of Alister Hardy and other investigators of spiritual experiences, there are now many more accounts of extrovertive mystical experience available for study, and there can no longer be any excuse for the neglect of empirical data that has blighted many studies of mystical experience. Additionally, important theoretical perspectives have gained

prominence in recent decades. In particular, it has become popular to maintain that mystical experiences are thoroughly conditioned by the religious traditions in which they occur. Mystical experiences, it is asserted, are products of religious indoctrination and training. At first sight, the claim seems inappropriate for extrovertive mystical experiences: in modern times, the experiences often occur spontaneously, outside any tradition of religious doctrine and practice, and it is therefore not immediately apparent that they are products of religious conditioning. Clearly, the matter needs attention. Likewise, speculations about the neuropsychological basis of mystical experience have been growing in recent years, and the relevance of these speculations to extrovertive experience needs to be gauged. The time is ripe for a fresh look at the various ways in which extrovertive mystical experience has been explained.

The Experiences

When appraising explanations, it is important to have a sense of the phenomenon that is to be explained. The first part of the book is therefore given over to the experiences themselves. What are extrovertive mystical experiences like? How common are they? In what circumstances do they occur? What effects do they have? In what sense are they 'mystical', and what makes them 'extrovertive'? It is all too easy to become bogged down in the intricacies of nomenclature and definition, but the matter needs some attention, and in Chapter 1 I attempt to mark out the territory without becoming embroiled in the debates that swirl round those slippery, contested terms 'mysticism' and 'mystical'. In brief, extrovertive experiences can be called 'mystical' because they tend to be characterized by one or more of the following: profound sense of *unity*, profound sense of *knowledge*, profound sense of *contact with reality*. Modern scholars have commonly taken these features to be defining characteristics of mystical experience, and so there is some excuse for calling extrovertive experiences 'mystical'. As for the 'extrovertive' label, the experiences are distinguished from other mystical experiences by their *orientation towards the natural world*. In extrovertive experiences, the mystical features—unity, knowledge, reality, love, luminosity, and so forth—characterize experience of the natural world, not experience of something completely beyond the natural world, such as a transcendent god, self, soul, or realm. Hence, the

experience recounted in the following passage can be called 'mystical' because there was a profound sense of unity, and it can be called 'extrovertive' because the unity involved the natural world:

> It was a beautiful sunny day, and I began looking at the hills which I could see from my window. What followed is almost impossible to express in words, but my whole mode of perception and my whole being suddenly altered. For what I think was a brief instant, though it seemed to last for a long time, I seemed to be 'at one' with the hills, to be identified with them, to belong to them. My whole being was absorbed in this feeling, which was of great intensity . . . Then the 'focus' altered, and I was looking at the hills normally again, but feeling very startled at what had happened. I puzzled over it for weeks. (RERC 357, in Beardsworth 1977: 51–2)

For the purpose of defining extrovertive mystical experience, the term 'natural world' is not without complications because there is room for debate over what the natural world includes and excludes. Still, it is probably more important to give a living sense of the experiences at this stage than to aim at a cast-iron definition. Thus, in Chapter 1, steps are taken to give the reader a sense of the experiences through some extrovertive accounts and an overview of common or notable features. The discussion of characteristics is taken further in Chapter 2: scholarly attempts to identify extrovertive characteristics are considered, and the results of my own work in the area are presented. In Chapter 3, the focus switches to circumstances and consequences. Again, examples are given, and, by the end of Part I, the reader should have gained a fair sense of the experiences.

A study that dwells so much on mystical experience is liable to be accused of giving disproportionate attention to special, intense experiences. William James has long been criticized for privileging exceptional experiences over the commonplace aspects of religious life, and scholars have continued to take issue with the prominence given to intense, private experience in the study of religion and mysticism.[1] The emphasis on experience is said to be anachronistic: it is claimed that in pre-modern times, intense experiences were not highly esteemed, neither for their spiritual contributions to the religious life nor for their evidential value in support of religious faith. Typically, the modern preoccupation with experience is traced

[1] Wulff (1997: 499–503) summarizes the critical responses to James. For recent criticisms of the experiential emphasis, see Proudfoot (1985), Lash (1988), Jantzen (1995), Turner (1995), Sharf (1998), and Ferrer (2000).

to Friedrich Schleiermacher and his intellectual heirs, including James, who are said to have retreated to private religious experience as a defence against Enlightenment threats to religion. The thesis strikes me as an oversimplification, but whatever its merits or defects, it is not of direct relevance to the present study because I make no dogmatic claims about the significance of extrovertive experience in earlier periods. In Chapter 1, I do note some historical cases and raise some traditional religious philosophies that may have been inspired by extrovertive experiences, but my conclusions are tentative. For the most part, the cases raised in the study are drawn from modern times, and my focus on intense experiences and their explanation mirrors the importance often given to the experiences by those who have them and their urge to understand them. In the modern world, intense spiritual experiences do take place, do have a powerful impact, and do attract explanations, from subjects and 'experts' alike. It would certainly be a mistake to regard mystical experience as the essence or goal of religion, for religions are complex, multi-faceted phenomena, and the spiritual life consists of far more than access to special states of consciousness, but it would also be a mistake to neglect moments of intense experience that transform lives and raise profound questions.

The Explanations

Like other extraordinary experiences, extrovertive mystical experiences raise pressing questions for those who have them: 'What happened? Why did it happen? Will it happen again? Should I tell anybody?' It is not every day that one feels united with the world, knowing all, loving all, liberated from self-concern, transcending time, illumined, blissful, and, it seems, face to face with reality. Confronted with tales of extraordinary experiences, and in some cases inspired by their own unusual experiences, specialists also look for understanding, drawing upon their fields of expertise—psychology, psychiatry, biology, sociology, philosophy, theology—to explain what lies behind the experiences.

At the least, the present study will highlight the often divergent ways in which extrovertive mystical experiences have been explained. In Part II, explanations that have enjoyed some critical attention are re-examined, and those that have been neglected receive an airing. There is much to be gained by assembling a variety of

explanations. It provides a corrective to the usual tendency of specialists to fix on one explanatory approach to the exclusion of others. It also brings the advantages of comparative work: when explanations rub together, similarities and differences are placed in strong relief, and strengths and limitations become more obvious. It also encourages historical insights: we shall see how explanatory approaches shifted as the twentieth century unfolded. The present work is not a historical study, but it does draw attention to some major episodes in the intellectual history of extrovertive explanation.

In Chapters 4 to 8, these developments will be considered in detail. For the moment, it will suffice to give an overview of what is to come ('A Hundred Years of Explanation' below). Some theorists, particularly in the early years, gave credence to *transpersonal* factors by allowing persons to reach beyond themselves in ways that are not covered by the perceptual, biological, psychological, and social processes admitted by naturalistic science. For example, it has been claimed that in extrovertive experience the mystic intuits the presence of a spiritual being in nature or discovers mind in the world at large. Additionally or alternatively, theorists have called upon factors that do feature in mainstream natural and social sciences. Some are *contextual* contributions from the religious and cultural backgrounds of mystics, the acquired beliefs and practices that could exert an influence on the occurrence, characteristics, description, and interpretation of mystical experiences. Other factors are the intrinsic biological and psychological processes that structure ordinary experience and which possibly contribute to mystical experience too. Intrinsic biological and psychological factors recognized by naturalistic science can be termed *intrapersonal* to distinguish them from intrinsic factors of a transpersonal character, such as an indwelling soul or spiritual essence.

Explanations differ not only in their transpersonal, contextual, or intrapersonal orientations but also in the kinds of issues they address. For example, some explanations focus on the mechanisms that give rise to mystical experiences, whilst others have more to say about the functional value of the experiences. In 'Explanation and Reduction', I introduce these differences. Another topic highlighted below is the importance of metaphysics in the study of mystical experience ('The Relevance of Metaphysics'). Too often, contemporary scholars of mysticism have passed over some of the more interesting questions. Do mystical experiences really put

mystics in touch with reality? What do the experiences tell us about the world and human nature?

A Hundred Years of Explanation

The explanations explored in Part II are modern ones, with the earliest dating from the late nineteenth century, although some draw inspiration from ideas that go back well over two thousand years. The explanations were devised by theorists in the English-speaking world (e.g. Bucke, Carpenter, Inge, Underhill, Zaehner, Stace) or by those who achieved recognition there (e.g. Freud, Otto, Neumann). Undoubtedly, there are others whose ideas deserve attention, such as the French author and pacifist Romain Rolland (1866–1944), and several German writers, including Rolland's friend and mentor Malwida von Meysenbug (1816–1903), the philosopher Karl Joël (1864–1934), and the literary and theatre critic Julius Hart (1859–1930) (see Riedel 1996). Despite these limitations, my rummagings in the humanities scholarship on mysticism have brought to light some varied explanations, and a glance at psychoanalytic theories and contemporary neuropsychological ideas has added to the wealth of offerings.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the vogue for reductionistic medical and psychiatric explanations of religious and mystical experiences, famously criticized by William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), was counterbalanced by unashamedly transpersonal understandings that included mystical experiences of nature within their explanatory remit. As we shall see in Chapter 4, these transpersonal approaches had both secular and Christian representatives. From the early 1890s, R. M. Bucke and Edward Carpenter described a 'cosmic' form of consciousness with a transpersonal reach. For these thinkers, mystical experience was pre-eminently this-worldly, a glimpse of the world that would one day be realized through a radical transformation of consciousness, religion, and society. Their theorizing was socially oriented and secular, yet transpersonal too:

- emergence of a special faculty that intuits cosmic wholeness (Bucke)
- an integrative recovery of pre-existing universal consciousness (Carpenter)

Historically and conceptually, Bucke and Carpenter sit alongside their Christian counterparts W. R. Inge and Evelyn Underhill. Both sets of theorists were transpersonal in orientation, both expressed the world-affirming spirituality of the pre-war period, and both trusted in the long-term spiritual progress of humankind. Inge and Underhill translated the liberal Christian affirmation of immanence and transcendence into a typology that esteemed two genuine mystical paths, the immanent way of nature mysticism and the transcendent way of inward mysticism. For Inge, Underhill, and other theorists who took up the twofold typology, notably Rudolf Otto, mystical experiences of the world really do put mystics in touch with spiritual reality:

- apprehension of the mind of God in nature (Inge)
- apprehension of God in nature (Underhill)
- a priori knowledge of the One in and behind phenomena (Otto)

Inge, Underhill, and Otto are more important for their typological contributions than for their explanations of extrovertive experience, which were fairly nebulous and inattentive to the experiential data. The twofold typology was important because it established extrovertive mystical experience as a distinct and significant type of mystical experience.

Esteemed by such influential figures as Bucke, Carpenter, Inge, and Underhill, extrovertive mysticism was well positioned for future recognition and study, but its prestige was soon to decline. The great disillusionment of the First World War extended to theology, tipping the immanence–transcendence balance towards a God beyond the world, a separation of spirit and nature. The intimate presence of a loving God in the fabric of a world racked by suffering and meaningless slaughter seemed implausible. In philosophy, the optimistic kinds of speculative metaphysics that could marry well with extrovertive mysticism, notably idealist and vitalist metaphysics, went out of fashion, and in psychology, behaviourism and psychoanalysis displaced the rich conceptions of the unconscious that had informed some approaches to mystical experience.

The Second World War also had transcendentalizing repercussions. R. C. Zaehner, a convert from his own mystical 'pantheism' to Catholicism in the 1940s, looked upon the material world with some disgust, and he separated it sharply from the spiritual reality he put beyond the world. For Zaehner, there was no room for truly spiritual experience of the natural world because the world is without

spirit. A shift towards transcendence is evident too in W. T. Stace's influential discussion. Stace, like Zaehner, had come to subscribe to a spirit–nature dualism in which the natural world is essentially non-spiritual. In Chapter 5, we shall see that Stace's theistic disillusionment and thoroughgoing naturalism at the time of the Second World War were relieved by the discovery of the transcendent One of the mystical philosophers, a conversion that dictated his subsequent understanding and comparatively low estimation of extrovertive experience. Stace judged the experience unimportant for he located the essence of mysticism in pure, undifferentiated consciousness. Nevertheless, his chief explanation of extrovertive experience does call upon a transpersonal reality, a 'pure consciousness' that has recently made a comeback in Robert Forman's thought, which is also discussed in Chapter 5:

- identity with the pure consciousness or 'self' beyond nature (Stace)
- a paradoxical identity-in-difference of sensory phenomena (Stace)
- extension of pure consciousness into nature (Forman)

As a contentless state of consciousness, pure consciousness does not seem to have much to do with extrovertive experiences, which are often very rich in contents. Stace's approach is therefore not at all promising. In Forman's treatment, however, Stace's spirit–nature separationism is overcome because Forman recognizes deeper kinds of extrovertive experience in which pure consciousness and the natural world come together. And Forman, unlike Stace, raises the possibility of a permanent extrovertive state, a suggestion that invites us to consider whether profound, enduring extrovertive experiences are really possible.

Although relegated to an inferior status by Stace and Zaehner, extrovertive experience received attention in their works, and subsequent discussion has generally looked back to these authorities, adopting, adapting, or rejecting their typologies. Their works marked a more critical phase in the study of mysticism in which the role of interpretation received some attention, although the phase was to give way to yet more sophisticated developments in the 1970s and 1980s.[2] It had often been assumed that mystical experiences are essentially the same across religions, cultures, and

[2] On phases in the study of mysticism, see Moore (1990), Kourie (1992: 83–4), and McGinn (1992: 263–343).

historical periods, or occur in just a limited number of cross-cultural types, as Stace and Zaehner had supposed. However, Bruce Garside, Steven Katz, and others initiated a debate that has continued to the present day by insisting that mystical experience is variable across religious traditions because it is fundamentally conditioned by its doctrinal and cultural contexts. This *contextual* argument, which is the subject of Chapter 6, cast doubt on cross-tradition typologies and directed attention to the study of mysticism embedded within religious traditions. Epistemological and methodological concerns came to dominate, including the 'radical contextualist' position that made interpretation central to mystical experience itself. Mystical experience came to be viewed as socially conditioned to its very core, a view that stood in opposition to the venerable belief, taken up by some psychologists at the time (e.g. Arthur Deikman, Robert Ornstein), that mystical experience results from a deconditioning of ordinary experience:

- religious and cultural conditioning ('radical contextualism')
- deconditioning of ordinary experience ('mystical deconstructivism')

With the rise of contextual epistemology, interest in extrovertive experience waned, even though the experience could have been used to challenge the contextual argument. It is notable that extrovertive experiences in the modern world often occur *outside any clear tradition of teaching and practice*, in non-religious contexts, and to persons who had no idea that there were such experiences. It is therefore by no means obvious that the experiences are a product of indoctrination and enculturation. Critics of radical contextualism, such as Robert Forman, took up pure consciousness as a counter-example. Empty of contents, pure consciousness seems to exhibit no signs of conditioning. Forman hoped that discussion would eventually be extended to 'the more advanced and interesting extrovertive states' (1990*a*: 8), and he has followed up his suggestion to some extent. The present study is, in part, an attempt to advance Forman's programme by taking up the case of extrovertive experience. Cultural factors undoubtedly have an influence on the experiences, especially on peripheral issues and sometimes on core visionary and noetic contents, but I shall show that there is much about extrovertive experience that cannot be put down to religious and cultural context. I shall also suggest that extrovertive experience is often too complex and sophisticated to result from a simple deconstruction of ordinary experience. Extrovertive experiences must

draw in significant ways on other sources, intrapersonal, transpersonal, or both, and it is these other sources that are the subject matter of Chapters 7 and 8.

The explanations discussed in Chapter 7 are mainly intrapersonal and reductionistic. For the most part, Zaehner reduced extrovertive experiences to psychiatric and psychological phenomena, and in this respect, he was close to Freud, who traced extrovertive feelings of unity to infantile cognition. Their explanations cast extrovertive experience in an unflattering light, although some psychological explanations have affirmed the experiences by regarding them as oriented towards health or growth:

- mania brought on by mental illness or other causes (Zaehner)
- nostalgia for intra-uterine absorption (Zaehner's 'early Jung')
- unity with an inner, mental model of the world (Zaehner)
- persistence of inclusive, infantile ideation in the adult mind (Freud)
- individuation through a return to the unconscious (Neumann)
- a reparative psychological response to childhood loss (object relations)

In recent years, psychological theories have been joined by neuropsychological speculations, some of which include extrovertive experience within their remit:

- emotional investment following temporal-lobe seizure (Ramachandran)
- microseizures in the temporal lobes (Persinger)
- changes to the neurophysiological substrates of the self (Austin)
- input changes to the parietal lobes (d'Aquili and Newberg)

Neuropsychological explanations of religious experience have tended to be overambitious, driven by new technology at the expense of typological sensitivity, philosophical depth, and awareness of religious and cultural dimensions. Nevertheless, it is very likely that the brain plays some role, even if it may turn out to be a supporting role.

The intrapersonal explanations discussed in Chapter 7 prove to be either too weak or too underdeveloped to give a satisfactory naturalistic account of extrovertive experience. There is still room for approaches that are not entirely naturalistic, and so, in Chapter 8, I turn once again to the possibility of a transpersonal basis by looking at two overlapping sets of ideas:

- consciousness expansion through influx of the subliminal ('filtration theory')

- contact with mind intrinsic to the world at large (mind–body metaphysics)

In the first approach, it is supposed that mystical experiences and other unusual states arise when biological and psychological 'valves' allow ordinarily excluded contents of the subconscious to enter consciousness. Aldous Huxley famously contended that mystical and paranormal experiences occur when a 'reducing valve' lets in 'Mind at Large'. This biological and psychological type of approach can blend into philosophical speculation if mind–body metaphysics is raised to support the idea of consciousness beyond the brain. The mind–body problem has once again become a matter of interest in mainstream thought, and renewed attempts to explain extrovertive experience could turn again to filtration theories and mind–body metaphysics. Indeed, a few modern thinkers have raised mind–body philosophy in connection with extrovertive mystical experience and nondual perception of the world. After considering various mind–body approaches, I conclude with a speculative venture into the area, outlining a panpsychic type of idealism that could form the basis of an extrovertive explanation.

Explanation and Reduction

Explanations answer the 'hows', 'whys', and 'whats', questions about characteristics, structure, nature, causes, function, purpose, meaning, origins, development, and ends. What kinds of questions can be asked about extrovertive experience? These are the questions that will be addressed in the first three chapters, questions about definition, nomenclature, typology, incidence, phenomenology, circumstances, and consequences. These questions can be addressed by descriptive efforts up to a point, but explanation cannot be left aside for long. Without explanation, uncertainties over definition, characterization, and typology are inevitable. For instance, it is possible that some experiences have superficially similar characteristics but are very different in nature and should not be classed together. Until we understand how the experiences come about and what they are, there will be uncertainties over their definition and classification.

Several kinds of explanations can be distinguished. *Causal* explanations aim to uncover the chains of cause and effect behind phenomena. What gives rise to the characteristics of extrovertive experience, such as unitive feelings, luminosity, expanded knowledge, and

altered time-experience? Are the characteristics related to one another through a common cause? Why are some experiences considerably different from others? Why do certain settings, states of mind, practices, and drugs tend to promote the experiences? Causal explanations can be natural and social-scientific, tracing physical, psychological, or social pathways of cause and effect, but they can also be transpersonal, with supernatural or spiritual agencies attributed a causal role. Causal explanations are sometimes *genetic*, tracing the steps through which something has come to be, but explanations of origin (and explanations in general) can also be *purposive*, offering motives, *teleological*, ascribing ends, or *evolutionary*, explaining origins and characteristics by means of natural selection and environmental adaptation, or some other evolutionary process. All these forms of explanations have featured in the study of mystical experience. There are also *functional* explanations, according to which things take place in order 'to do' something. For instance, an explanation may look at the social function of spiritual experiences in the lives of subjects and their communities, as in I. M. Lewis's celebrated study of spirit possession (1971). Or spiritual experiences may be ascribed a therapeutic and transformative function, bringing health and growth (e.g. Grof 1988). There are also *correlative* explanations, which point out recurrent associations without asserting causal relations. Unusually cautious physiologists may describe correlations between brain physiology and mystical experiences without proceeding to the stronger causal-genetic assertion that the brain produces the experiences. Finally, there is explanation that attempts to say what a thing really is, which I shall call *ontological* explanation. In essence, extrovertive experience *is* contact with a spiritual presence in nature; it *is* infantile cognition; it *is* disordered brain physiology; it *is* a social construct.

Ontological explanations sometimes coincide with the 'insider' understandings of mystics, but very often they follow a different tack, performing *ontological reductions* that depict the phenomenon as something other than it appeared to be.[3] Ontological reductionism

[3] On types of reductionism, see for instance Peacocke (1985) and Jones (2000). Peacocke distinguishes 'methodological reductionism' (analysis of the subject into parts to aid study), 'epistemological reductionism' (translation of one theory into the terms of another), and 'ontological reductionism' (the claim that something is really something else).

is ontological because it asserts what truly is; it is reductive because it finds reality in something other than the thing itself. According to Zaehner, nature mystics believe that they have experienced unity with the world when in fact they have experienced unity with their inner mental models of the world. Reductionism is not limited to ontological explanation. For instance, a *functional reduction* replaces the insider's functional understanding with an outsider's functional explanation: 'You say that the experience was granted to you to strengthen your faith, but the experience actually served to reinforce your standing in the community.' A *genetic reduction* reappraises origins: 'You believe that your mystical training helped you towards an encounter with reality, but the training was really a conditioning process that manufactured the experience.'

Clearly, reductionistic explanations are often unflattering, and they are liable to draw hostile reactions from those who value the experiences. Hostile reactions are understandable, but rejection of social and natural scientific explanation is unhelpful. Religious and mystical experiences do take place in the contexts of bodies, minds, and societies, and so they are open, at least in some respects, to biological, psychological, and sociological study. Untested convictions about the falsity or truth of reductions lead nowhere: the truth of reductionistic approaches is 'an open rather than closed question, an empirical rather than *a priori* one', as Robert Segal has put it (1983: 114). Reductionistic explanations should not be faulted because they are reductionistic, but they should be faulted if they are unable to account for the data or are deficient in other ways. Likewise, non-reductionistic approaches should not be faulted because they have a place for transpersonal realities or processes in their explanations, but they should be criticized if they ignore the data or exhibit other faults.

When evaluating explanations of extrovertive experience, we can ask several questions. Does the explanation account for more than one or two characteristics? Does it explain why certain circumstances are facilitative? Is the explanation 'good'? Criteria for 'good' theories have been discussed in the sciences: subsumptive power, economy, clarity, testability, empirical support, fertility, predictive value, internal consistency, responsiveness to new evidence, and so forth. Some criteria are closely tied to the demands of scientific empiricism, notably predictive value and testability, and may not be so relevant to the more philosophical explanations, which do not often lend themselves to simple hypothesis testing, although they

should nevertheless respect and address the empirical data. Other criteria are more generally applicable, such as subsumptive power, economy, clarity, fertility, and internal consistency. For instance, a philosophy of mind that sheds light on a range of experiences, ordinary and extraordinary, has greater subsumptive power than one that makes sense of only ordinary experience. An economical explanation of extrovertive characteristics is preferable to one that raises a multiplicity of ad hoc hypotheses to furnish disconnected explanations of individual features.

The Relevance of Metaphysics

In the contemporary study of mysticism, there has been a reluctance to engage with metaphysical issues. Do mystical experiences really put mystics in touch with reality? Does the oft-reported sense of 'timelessness' tell us something about the nature of time in the world at large? What does mystical experience tell us about human nature? Scientific investigators tend to dismiss or pass over metaphysical questions, placing them beyond the reach of scientific study; humanities scholars have concerned themselves with philosophical issues, but largely with epistemology, logic, and ethics. The reluctance to engage with metaphysics partly reflects a widespread distrust of speculative metaphysics: some philosophers advocated the circumscription of traditional metaphysical ambitions and methods (e.g. C. S. Peirce, William James, Bertrand Russell) or rejected metaphysics altogether (Ludwig Wittgenstein, logical positivism), for a variety of reasons, philosophical and ideological.[4] Traditional metaphysical questions have been viewed as unanswerable or meaningless. In the study of mystical experience, the distrust of metaphysics translates into the opinion that questions about transpersonal contributions are unanswerable or misconceived. Interest in metaphysics may also be frowned upon because it raises suspicions that a confessional agenda is being pursued, at odds with the academy's ideal of objective study. Metaphysics, if it is to be considered at all, should be left to theologians.

[4] See DeAngelis (1997) and Linsky (1997) for a survey of twentieth-century metaphysical developments in the English-speaking world, including a limited return to metaphysics in the second half of the century.

However, metaphysics cannot be safely ignored in the study of mysticism because mystical experiences often carry metaphysical import. Subjects believe that they have gained insights into reality, self, time, and ultimate meaning, if only for the duration of their experiences. There is a clear link between mysticism and metaphysics: both are directed towards reality, the former seemingly through a direct intuition, the latter through discursive reasoning. The shared concern with reality suggests that there is a valid place for *metaphysical enquiry* in the study of mysticism, as a complement of epistemological, phenomenological, psychological, biological, sociological, textual, and historical approaches. At its least controversial, metaphysical enquiry would consist in *analysis*, the description and evaluation of the metaphysical claims of mystics and the explicit or hidden metaphysical contents of scholarly explanations. What assumptions do the explanations carry about reality, self, time, human nature, and the mind–body relation? Do they, for instance, take for granted a materialist conception of the natural world (e.g. Zaehner), a naturalistic account of human nature (e.g. Freud), a materialist or epiphenomenalist theory of the mind–brain relation (e.g. many physiologists)?

More controversially, metaphysical enquiry would engage in *theorizing*, in the formulation of explanations with an explicit metaphysical component, whether naturalistic or spiritual, secular or religious. To be acceptable as a scholarly activity, the theorizing would have to avoid dogmatism, pursued in a critical fashion with attention to evidence and argument. In advocating a place for metaphysical enquiry in the academic study of mysticism, I follow G. William Barnard (1994; 1997; 2002), who has explored William James's approach to mysticism to show how scholars may break free from the 'rather restrictive methodology' of contemporary philosophy of mysticism (1997: 89–90). Barnard points out that if metaphysics is ignored or dismissed it will nonetheless exert an influence through 'internalized metaphysical assumptions'. It is better to bring assumptions into the open for critical scrutiny than to allow them to operate unexamined in the background. In the spirit of Barnard's observations, I attempt to bring out the metaphysical aspects of existing extrovertive explanations, giving particular attention to the metaphysics behind Stace's understanding of mystical experience. Stace was a philosopher of the analytic school who retained an interest in metaphysics. His understanding of mystical experience was closely tied to his metaphysical presuppositions, yet

he failed to make these clear in his major study of mysticism. Thus, despite Stace's prominence in the modern study of mysticism, the rich metaphysical background to his work is largely unappreciated, and it therefore receives in-depth analysis here.

In Chapter 8, I indulge in a little metaphysical theorizing myself. I discuss some mind–body philosophies that could be utilized in extrovertive mystical explanation, and I come out in favour of idealism. Of all the metaphysical systems that could be used to explain extrovertive experience, I favour as a starting point a realist form of idealism that acknowledges the existence of the external world but which takes it to be mental in nature. I find the approach attractive not least because it seems to offer the best hope for understanding experience in general, ordinary as well as mystical. As we shall see, J. E. Mercer and Edward Carpenter raised this kind of idealist philosophy in their discussions of extrovertive experience. It will also become apparent that I take the idealism in a panpsychic direction, developing it along Leibnizian lines. Although seemingly outlandish, the metaphysics has some attractions.

'Mystic Scholars'

Theorists are likely to benefit from personal familiarity with the experiences they try to explain, although familiarity can create problems too. Frits Staal has gone so far as to claim that 'If mysticism is to be studied seriously, it should not merely be studied indirectly and from without, but also directly and from within' (1975: 123). Staal recommended experimentation with drugs and training in meditative disciplines under the guidance of competent teachers. On the face of it, Staal's point seems reasonable. It is usually beneficial to have 'hands-on' experience, and a lack of it can be disadvantageous. Freud boasted that he could not discover the 'oceanic feeling' in himself, and his appreciation of extrovertive phenomenology was limited, dependent on the meagre information provided by his correspondent Romain Rolland. Inevitably, limited appreciation of phenomenology leads to poor explanation.

However, the extent to which Staal's recommendation can or should be realized in the study of extrovertive experience is debatable. Investigators could try to gain firsthand acquaintance through various means. Aesthetic experiences of nature are readily

facilitated, for it is simple enough to immerse oneself in beautiful surroundings. On occasions, aesthetic experiences develop into extrovertive mystical experiences. However, deliberate attempts to use natural surroundings as triggers may prove unsuccessful if anticipation inhibits the mental sets that seem to be conducive to the experiences, such as a relaxed, empty state of mind. Other means available to investigators include meditative practices and psychedelic substances, as recommended by Staal. In the first case, the procedure (say, Zen meditation) may be prohibitively arduous and protracted for research purposes, and competent, non-exploitative teachers can be hard to find. The second method, although expeditious, may be unacceptable on moral or legal grounds, and carry serious risks to body and mind. In both cases, investigators would have to be alert to artefacts introduced by the facilitation method. The more complex meditative practices, such as those employing visualization, could introduce extraneous elements to the experiences. Psychedelic drugs commonly bring gross perceptual distortions and trains of images that are not typical of spontaneous extrovertive cases.

Still, recourse to firsthand experience may be an option for some investigators, and several scholars of mysticism have enjoyed at least passing acquaintance with mystical states, spontaneously, or through spiritual practices or drugs. The topic has been discussed in some depth by Jeffrey Kripal (2001), who has looked at the ways in which the mystical experiences of scholars have influenced their readings and writings. Contemporary examples include Kripal himself, Robert Forman (1990*a*; 1999), Robert May (1993), Michael Stoeber (1994), William Barnard (1997), James Austin (1998), Robert Ellwood (1999), and Arthur Deikman (2000), who have all disclosed firsthand experiences in connection with their studies of mysticism and altered states of consciousness. Earlier examples include W. R. Inge, William James, Evelyn Underhill, and Rufus Jones, who were reticent about their experiences, and R. M. Bucke, Edward Carpenter, P. D. Ouspensky, Francis Younghusband, Henry Nelson Wieman, Aldous Huxley, R. C. Zaehner, F. C. Happold, and Agehananda Bharati, who were more forthcoming.

Barnard raises a mystical episode in his early teens partly to cast doubt on the viewpoint that all mystical experiences are completely constructed from previous beliefs (1997: 127–9), and Forman, as we shall see, has drawn on his own meditative experiences to illustrate some of the mystical states he describes. Both have felt the need to

justify their autobiographical inclusions, believing that the introduction of personal material would be frowned upon in contemporary academia. Barnard argues that it is important to bring one's experiences into the open, not only for the positive contribution they may bring to the discussion, but also to make clear any personal perspectives that may colour the treatment. A look at the scholarship on extrovertive mystical experience corroborates Barnard's point, for in some instances it is apparent that personal experiences contributed to unsatisfactory characterizations and poor explanations. Reliance on one's own experiences can be double-edged: the experiences provide an invaluable foothold in an elusive domain, but they can also lead to distortions if used uncritically. In particular, there is the danger that experiences will be taken to be fully representative. As we shall see, Bucke's understanding of the characteristics and predisposing circumstances of cosmic consciousness was overly dependent on his own case, and Zaehner, who berated Bucke for his obtuseness, was equally guilty of generalization from personal experience. It is ironic that Zaehner took Bucke to task for incautious extrapolation from firsthand experience: 'Now, it is the custom of the nature mystics to assume that their own experience, even though it last only for a few moments, must be normative of all such experiences' (1970: 46). Zaehner was no exception, for he treated his own experience as normative. The lesson is not that investigators should suppress their experiences or avoid firsthand exploration. Rather, investigators should not assume that their experiences are fully representative, and they should study the accounts of others in a more than superficial way, alert to differences as well as to similarities.

In light of the above, it is only proper that I acknowledge two personal experiences that could pass as 'extrovertive mystical experience', depending on how it is defined. They have undoubtedly influenced my understanding of the subject. The first developed out of aesthetic appreciation of nature. Amid falling cherry blossoms and the yellowing light of late afternoon, I became unusually affected by the beauty of the scene: 'I was not an "I"—my energy was uncontained, my thoughts quiet' is how I described the event shortly afterwards. The mood lasted for two or three hours, with a slight interruption, and persisted even when I joined the company of others. The experience was mild and could be judged a particularly well-developed aesthetic experience or a rather underdeveloped mystical experience. A somewhat different and far more intense

experience took place a few months later whilst I was asleep. On waking, I felt a very strong, almost indescribable afterglow of 'wholeness', but I could not recall its origin, although it seemed to be connected with a dream. Some details eventually came back to me, and I was able to recall in fragmentary fashion an experience of expansive knowledge, vision, unity, and love. Both experiences brought a diminution of the usual self-focus, but they were also significantly different in character and circumstance. The second, taking place during sleep, has alerted me to the fact that extrovertive experiences may not always take place with the 'eyes open', through the senses, as some scholars have assumed. In Chapter 1, I have defined extrovertive experience accordingly, acknowledging that it can sometimes follow from an interior movement, when sensory input no longer dominates, as in sleep, near-death crises, and some meditative states.

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