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The Epistemology of Religious Experience

Edited by
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Cover image courtesy of Mark Owen Webb
A photograph taken by Mark Owen Webb at the Sanctuary of Truth, Amphoe Bang Lamung, Chonburi, Thailand, on May 24 of 2016.

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About the Editor

Mark Webb

Professor Mark Webb is the chairman of the Philosophy Department at Texas Tech University. He received his B.A. in Philosophy and his two M.A. degrees, one in Philosophy and the other in Classical Humanities, from Texas Tech, and his Ph.D. in Philosophy from Syracuse University in 1991. In 2006, he earned a postgraduate certificate in Buddhist Studies from Sunderland University. He specializes in epistemology and the philosophy of religion.

Editorial

Introduction to the Special Issue *The Epistemology of Religious Experience*

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In this Special Issue of *Religions*, we have tried to bring together new research that can shed light on epistemological problems faced by accounts of religious experiences together with empirical research about its nature and qualities. We are happy to present the resulting collection of new and original papers.

The 'Cognitive Science of Religion' is a relatively new movement that aims to use recent work in neuroscience and related fields to elaborate a naturalistic explanation for religious experience, belief, and practice. The resulting scientific model is often invoked as an argument against religion; if a completely naturalistic explanation is available, then we need not appeal to any supernatural things to account for religions. Walter Scott Stepanenko's "The Epistemic Parity of Religious Apologetic and Religion-Debunking Responses to the Cognitive Science of Religion" takes on the Cognitive Science of Religion as a challenge to religious belief, arguing that the explanations posited by CSR, even if they do explain the phenomena, rely on a presupposition of naturalism. He argues that a similar scientific project, with theistic presuppositions, would be epistemically on a par with it.

Religious diversity provides fodder for another set of arguments against religious belief. Stated in a broad outline, the argument is that since different religions make claims that are inconsistent with one another, they cannot all be true. But they are also all epistemically on comparable footing, so there is no good reason to believe one of them over the others. It is therefore epistemically bad to accept the claims of one religion over the others. Answers to this argument must either play down the diversity or show that there is good epistemic reason to accept one religion over the others. One way to take the sting out of religious diversity is to deny the inconsistency of the different views. Miguel Rincon's "Diversity and Interpretation: Toward a Pluralist Realist Description of Religious Experience" argues that there is room for a pluralism about religious experience, while maintaining realism about the object of religious experience. He argues that the way to do this is to move from 'religion', which is about beliefs, to 'spirituality, which is about lived experience. The fact of one person's spiritual experience thereby does not conflict with other people's spiritual experience.

Juan Morales's "The Ecology of Religious Knowledge" offers another account of the epistemology of religious experience which respects the plurality of accounts of religious experiences, while maintaining their epistemic value. This approach, invoking the ecology of knowledges, involves as integral to the experiences the particularities and environments of the experiencers, which allows for diverse accounts of a multifaceted and inexhaustible ultimate reality. While Rincon focuses on what is the same among religious experiences from different traditions, Morales focuses on the multifaceted nature of the ultimate reality, such that the different experiences can all be of the same thing, even in all their diversity.

Perhaps the most exciting take on the diversity problem in this collection is Haeyoung Seong's "The Unique Concept of God in Donghak: an Emanation of the Religious Experiences of Suun Choe Jeu." Some religions present the ultimate reality as a being separate from the world, which we could call 'dualistic' because they divide the world into two categories: the ultimate reality and everything else. Other religions think of reality as consisting ultimately of only one thing, so experiences of the ultimate reality are

experiences of something monistic. The dualistic and monistic pictures are often thought to be irreconcilable. Seong presents the mystical experiences of Suun Choe Jeu, the founder of Donghak, as an example of how experiences may be both dualistic and monistic, and the resulting conception of God may actually be both monistic and dualistic.

A more modest approach to the diversity argument is to admit that the different religious views really are mutually inconsistent, and it is impossible for any single reality to answer to the multifarious descriptions of the objects of religious experience, but that reports of religious experiences should be extended the same presumptive trust that we extend to other kinds of testimony. Kirk Lougheed's "Religious Disagreement, Mystical Experience, and Doxastic Minimalism: A Critical Notice of John Pittard's *Disagreement, Deference, and Religious Commitment*" gives a detailed review of Pittard's recent book, in which he argues against giving religious experiences 'presumptive trust' (which is akin to *prima facie* justification). Lougheed, in defense of presumptive trust, argues that Pittard has not shown we should not extend presumptive trust to religious beliefs.

On the empirical side, Ron Cole-Turner's "Psychedelic Epistemology: William James and the 'Noetic Quality' of Mystical Experience" defends the therapeutic value of psychedelic drugs, in light of the fact that they frequently produce mystical experiences, and those experiences have what William James called a 'noetic quality', that is, a sense that what you are experiencing is objectively real. He starts from William James's analysis of mystical experience, and then shows that psychedelic drug experiences share many of those features. He then argues that it is precisely the 'noetic quality', the quality of seeming to be of objective reality, is what give psychedelic drugs their therapeutic value.

Near-death experiences are practically universally dismissed as illusory, precisely because naturalistic explanations seem to be available, and more than adequate to explain the experiences. Jonathan Kopel and I, in our "Near-Death Experiences and Religious Experience: and Exploration of Spirituality in Medicine" argue that near-death experiences, while usually treated separately from religious experience generally, should be handled in the same way as other religious experiences, and that, in spite of naturalistic explanations offered by medicine, they should be extended the same epistemic status as other religious experiences. The result will be of benefit to philosophy and medicine alike.

Article

The Epistemic Parity of Religious-Apologetic and Religion-Debunking Responses to the Cognitive Science of Religion

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Abstract: Recent work in the cognitive science of religion has challenged some of the explanatory assumptions of previous research in the field. Nonetheless, some of the practitioners of the new cognitive science of religion theorize in the same skeptical spirit as their predecessors and either imply or explicitly claim that their projects undermine the warrant of religious beliefs. In this article, I argue that these theories do no additional argumentative work when compared to previous attempts to debunk religious belief and that these recent debunking efforts are very much motivated by methodological commitments that are shared with canonical research. I contend that these argumentative strategies put debunkers very much on an epistemic par with religious apologists: both advocate responses to the cognitive science of religion that are primarily motivated by methodological commitments.

Keywords: epistemology; religious experience; cognitive science of religion

1. Introduction

The discourse around the cognitive science of religion (CSR) creates the impression that religion debunkers are in an epistemically superior position relative to religious apologists. A great deal of philosophical and theological work in the literature is dedicated to the construction of debunking arguments motivated by CSR evidence and apologetic responses to these arguments. In this article, I argue that the reality of the epistemic situation is quite different, and that religious apologists and religion debunkers are in very similar epistemic positions. To make this case, I first explicate some features of traditional research projects developed in CSR. I then contrast these projects with more recent developments in the field. I argue that both projects motivate debunking arguments in which methodological commitments rather than first-order scientific evidence are doing much of the argumentative work. I explain that these are commitments that most religious apologists reject and that the debate over the implications of CSR comes down to the viability of various methodological commitments. Insofar as CSR itself cannot settle these issues and debates over these commitments are philosophically live, I conclude that religious apologists and religion debunkers are on an epistemic par with respect to CSR.[1]

2. Canonical Cognitive Science of Religion

The canonical cognitive science of religion (CCSR) can best be described as a research program that is committed to the scientific investigation of religion.[2] Defined in this way, CCSR need not involve a commitment to debunk, undermine, or otherwise defeat religious beliefs.[3] In fact, defined in this way CCSR does not necessarily require practitioners to develop projects that fix their explanatory scope on religious belief(s). For example, this definition of CCSR covers explanatory projects that involve a coarse-grained explanatory scope that is concerned with offering accounts of the ubiquity and/or persistence of religious behavior.[4] However, many practitioners in CCSR take their work to have implications for the warrant of religious belief. For example, Bloom (2009) suggests that CCSR cannot

refute theism, but that CCSR can "still tell us something about the rationality, or lack thereof, of religious believers" (p. 126). Nonetheless, different practitioners pursue different explanatory strategies. Some theorists advocate adaptationist accounts of religion.[5] For these theorists, the ubiquity and persistence of religious belief and behavior are explained by appealing to the ways that they contribute to evolutionary fitness. Other theorists advocate by-product accounts of religion.[6] For these theorists, the ubiquity and persistence of religious belief and behavior are explained by appeal to the accidental outcomes produced by the normal functioning of otherwise adaptive cognitive processes. Despite these differences, there is quite a bit more common theoretical ground than the distinction between these two approaches implies. Many adaptationists fix their explanatory scope on extant monotheistic traditions, while many by-product theorists are most concerned with explaining the ubiquity of beliefs in supernatural persons. In this way, adaptationists often subsume by-product theories and imply that cognitive by-products are later co-opted by organized traditions where they play the role of exaptations.

To see this, consider a CCSR account following along lines suggested by Boyer (2002) and Norenzayan (2013): Human beings are animals just like any other animal, and just like every animal constrained by evolutionary processes of natural selection, human beings must survive long enough to reproduce and pass down their genes to the next generation. However, survival is no easy matter. Threats abound in most environments and every animal needs to be prepared to fend them off or evade them. Therefore, an animal will be well-suited for its environment if it is prone to identify threats. This makes agency detection very important. If an animal fails to detect a threat, it will be eaten and therefore unable to reproduce and pass down its genes to the next generation. However, if an animal is very sensitive to possible threats, it might flee more times than it needs to, but the only cost would be calories. Therefore, natural selection would favor trigger-happy animals over agency-insensitive animals, but the trigger-happy animals would be likely to overattribute agency. They would possess minds tailored to identify agents where there are none. If these animals are social animals, they would also possess minds tailored to attribute mental states wherever they detect agency. These animals would be prone to identify agents where there are none and to attribute various goals or desires to these agents. Therefore, these animals would be predisposed for belief in invisible, but imaginary, persons. The existence of such persons is surprising, given that they are like other persons these animals know in most respects except for the fact they are invisible, but the concept of an invisible agent is not so extravagant that it is difficult to remember. Therefore, the recognition of surprising invisible agents would be easy to transmit because the concept is captivating and easy to remember. Thus, belief in such agents could spread across a population. As it does, this belief could ratchet up the solidarity amongst the members. Belief in these invisible agents could then become a sign of one's group affiliation, but it could also become a way of keeping people in line. Group members cannot always monitor one another's behavior, but an invisible agent can stand in for them. The more that agent knows and sees, the more it can police, but it can only police that behavior if it has the intention and power to do so. Therefore, a group that believed in one invisible agent with as much power, knowledge, and goodness as possible might be able to coerce cooperation in a way that another group without that belief could not. Groups with such beliefs might therefore outcompete groups without such beliefs, and as a result, they could more successfully reproduce and spread across various regions such that over time and space, an entire race of progeny would exist with the genetic predisposition for their belief system.

Such a story captures the most crucial theoretical elements in various theories in CCSR. That it is a coherent story is one reason for its popularity amongst theorists, but what is most important for present purposes is the identification of various theoretical postulates therein. First, we have various cognitive processes producing the "raw materials" for religious belief. Chief among these is the hyperactive agency detection device, or HADD. HADD is the cognitive process that is responsible for producing belief in agents, but it is unreliable. It detects agents in more cases than those in which an agent is actually

present, but that is not all. HADD is expanded by theory of mind (ToM). ToM involves various cognitive processes that are responsible for attributing mental states to agents. Together HADD and ToM dispose individuals to believe in persons who are not there. These beliefs could be transient, but they are minimally counterintuitive (MCI): they violate categorical expectations but in only a few respects. They are surprising, but because they only minimally violate categorical expectations, they are easy to remember. They can therefore be easily transmitted. Once transmitted, they can serve as signals of group affiliation. Signals can promote group solidarity, but the beliefs underpinning the signals can also promote cooperation. The bigger and more powerful the agents believed in are, the more cooperation the beliefs facilitate.

In this way, the CCSR story subsumes by-product theories in more expansive adaptationist accounts of religion. HADD and ToM facilitate the emergence of religious beliefs, but these beliefs are by-products. They do not contribute to the fitness of the individuals who are committed to them, but the processes that produce these by-products are adaptive. These processes contribute to the fitness of the individuals who accept the by-products, but the by-products are not themselves adaptive. However, as these by-product beliefs are disseminated through a population, they facilitate the emergence of commitments that contribute to a group's fitness. They can serve as social signals of group affiliation and they can promote cooperation. Therefore, what started out as a cognitive by-product can be co-opted by a later evolutionary process that contributes to group cooperation and thus contributes to group members' fitness. In this way, a theory like supernatural punishment theory (SPT) can suggest that sufficiently developed religious beliefs, such as a commitment to monotheism, are adaptive even if underdeveloped religious beliefs, such as beliefs in ghosts or spirits, are merely by-products. Thus, the CCSR story supports both by-product and adaptationist theorizing. Whether a theorist committed to CCSR identifies as one or the other thus depends on whether that theorist takes their explanatory scope to cover supernatural beliefs in general or monotheistic beliefs in particular.

Of course, any one theorist could accept a by-product theory and resist the claims of adaptationists, but what is interesting is that both theorists are committed to at least part of the CCSR story. This reveals a significant overlap of theoretical commitments. This (partial) theoretical consensus reveals a similarity in their respective debunking strategies. To see this, it will help to first identify the theoretical commitments underpinning CCSR. As I see it, two of these major commitments include:

1. A commitment to Darwinian evolutionary synthesis, and
2. A commitment to modular theories of mind.

(1) is revealed in the CCSR story's focus on the gene as the unit of evolution and the primary locus of natural selection. A commitment to (1) is best seen in the error management theory that supports the HADD postulate. HADD is supposed to contribute to fitness because it predisposes an organism for agency detection, and while the false positives it generates are costly in terms of calories, false negatives are much more costly. False negatives can lead to death, which from an evolutionary perspective is not an evil in itself but is nonetheless disastrous insofar as it represents the end of a genetic line. (2) is revealed in the CCSR focus on the primacy of unconscious inferences. Modular theories of mind are defined by different theorists in different ways and are expanded to mean many different things in more recent cognitive science research,[7] but the classical conception of modularity involves a commitment to the idea that many or most sensorial processes encapsulate information.[8] This idea can be operationalized in different ways, but the basic idea is that senses passively receive information, encode that information, and pass that information along to online or conscious deliberative processes that take that information as their input. Thus, (2) can be read in CCSR's focus on HADD and ToM as "behind the back" cognitive processes producing beliefs that individuals are conscious of only once formed.

Now, what is interesting about these commitments is that they alone are not very damaging to religious believers. (1) may put pressure on young-Earth creationists, but that

is not where CCSR gets its bite. CCSR is not addressed to creationists. It is addressed to religious believers who accept evolutionary theory and think their religious beliefs are warranted. Similarly, (2) is hardly damaging either. (2) might put pressure on neuroscientific skeptics, but again, that is not where CCSR gets its bite. It is not addressed to such skeptics. It is addressed to religious believers who accept the claims of neuroscience and yet maintain that their religious beliefs are warranted. What is damaging to the religious believers is CCSR's suggestion that every instance of agency detection involving an invisible agent is a false positive. Therefore, what is potentially damaging to the religious believer is:

3.   A commitment to naturalism and/or physicalism.

Obviously, (3) could be better formulated. A physicalist need not necessarily deny the existence of all invisible forces and a form of naturalistic theism is theoretically possible.[9] Nonetheless, the CCSR story suggests that there are no invisible agents. Both naturalism and physicalism are often taken to involve the denial of these; therefore, I think (3) will do for now. What is interesting to note here is that (3) is doing all of the debunking work. (1) and (2) just provide the theoretical apparatus to tell the debunking story. The debunking work really rests on (3), but (3) looks like a metaphysical commitment. However, if the problem with religious beliefs ultimately reduces to the implausibility of metaphysical commitments, why all the cognitive scientific handwringing? One potential reason is that the CCSR theorist is probably not committed to (3) on metaphysical grounds but on methodological grounds. The CCSR theorist might believe that a methodological commitment to parsimony or scientifically tractable hypothesis forces (3) on them. Although I disagree with that contention, even if we grant it, the problem just resurfaces. In that case, (1) and (2) are still not doing much work. The debunking work is being done by the methodological commitments that underpin (3). However, once again, one can ask, why all the cognitive scientific handwringing? One reason for appealing to cognitive science is that cognitive science helps complete the debunker's account of religion and to systematize the debunker's perspective. This is not an altogether illegitimate move, but it has interesting consequences for how to frame debunking efforts, as I will explain later.

3. Challenges to CCSR and Non-Canonical Cognitive Science of Religion

The religious believer can respond to CCSR in several ways. One strategy is to subsume CCSR in a larger theistic worldview.[10] Another strategy is to argue that the scope of CCSR is too coarse-grained to have any definitive implications for specific religious believers.[11] A third strategy is to argue that CCSR only threatens specific epistemic strategies for defending religious belief.[12] A fourth strategy is to argue that CCSR has negative epistemic implications for the debunker and is potentially self-defeating.[13] A fifth strategy is to argue that CCSR has positive epistemic implications for religious belief.[14] I believe all of these strategies are interesting and that some are even promising. However, in this section, I want to focus on another strategic challenge to CSSR: challenges to the first two theoretical commitments. These are challenges to the validity of the science that motivates CCSR.

If I am right that CCSR involves two primary scientific commitments, then it follows that there are two primary ways to challenge the science of CCSR. If we look at religious responses to debunking work motivated by CCSR, I think this is exactly what we find. Consider, for example, Oviedo's (2018) concern that CCSR is "inscribed in a clear anthropological framework that builds on a quite simple and reductionist program" (p. 25). Here, the target of Oviedo's criticism appears to be (1). Recall that (1) involves a commitment to Darwinian evolutionary synthesis. In this view, evolution by natural selection primarily operates on genes and therefore genetic material is the primary locus of natural selection. Oviedo's concern here is that this conception of evolution is too simple and reductive. To improve their theoretical commitments, Oviedo calls for CCSR theorists "to make place for neglected instances, like epigenetic factors, symbolic processes, meaning systems, and in general, the role played by culture" (p. 25).

Consider also van Eyghen's (2020) concern that CCSR overlooks the extent to which "religious beliefs are mainly learned" (p. 187). In his view, religious beliefs are better understood as the products of predictive processing. According to this model of cognition, sensory input is interpreted in light of expectations of how the world works and is framed in terms of predictions about where the input came from. For example, van Eyghen discusses the case of a bird watcher whose expectation that she will see a bird leads her to conclude that a moving black dot in the sky is a bird. Therefore, on the predictive processing model, "all perception is heavily shaped by top-down processes" (p. 193). Here, van Eyghen's concern seems to be with (2). Recall that (2) involves a commitment to modular theories of mind. Classical modular theories of mind suggested that sensations are informationally encapsulated: they are encoded by receptive mechanisms that pass the encoded information downstream to online or conscious deliberative processes. Van Eyghen's endorsement of the predictive processing model in which all perception is shaped by higher-order cognition therefore involves a rejection of (2).[15]

Now, my intention here is not to adjudicate these scientific disputes. What I want to point out is that these disputes give rise to analogous reforms in CSR. To see this, let us work backward from (2) to (1). The charge against (2) is that theoretical postulates of CCSR involve a commitment to a classical conception of modularity. Therefore, one available response on behalf of the CSR practitioner is to deny this. Robert Nola (2018) does just this. Nola argues that it is wrong to call all agency detection devices, let alone hyperactive ones, "a module of any sort" (p. 80). Here, the idea seems to be that agency detection is a complex, distributed process. It not only involves perceptual triggers, but categorical triggers that classify the agent as one kind of thing or another, and inferential processes that make guesses about an agent's origins, intentions, or some other feature of the situation. Of course, this description may run together CCSR's typical distinction between HADD and ToM, but so long as Nola believes that some of these inferences and triggers are conscious, then Nola is denying the extent to which these postulated cognitive mechanisms are informationally encapsulated and therefore rejecting at least classical modularity.

A second way to reorient CSR is to reject (1). This involves a move from constructing theories under the assumption of Darwinian evolutionary synthesis and toward the construction of theories under a different conception of evolution, such as the one offered by the extended evolutionary synthesis.[16] One theorist who has developed such an account is Kim Sterelny. In Sterelny's (2018) view, the development of religious institutions should be explained in terms of the development of embodied religious practices into articulated religious beliefs. These early forms of religious activity involved "rituals, ceremony, collective activity, and material symbolism" (p. 419). As social and economic life became more complex and groups of humans had to interact across filial, tribal, and band units, Sterelny surmises an evolutionary pressure to codify the ontological suppositions of these activities into consistent narratives that could be transmitted across both groups and generations and therefore serve as signals of shared identity. In this way, Sterelny develops something quite like a big gods theory situated in a multi-dimensional evolutionary framework that emphasizes developmental processes that govern socio-cognitive niches and not just genetic inheritance. In his view, "[r]eligion is a dynamic mosaic of coevolving individual and social factors" (p. 410). Thus, Sterelny moves the Norenzayan (2013) big gods theory out of a Darwinian evolutionary framework and into extended evolutionary synthesis.

Of course, much more could be said about these theories. The important point for present purposes is that these brief descriptions reveal the structure of an alternative to CCSR. We can call this alternative non-canonical cognitive science of religion (NCSR). What distinguishes NCSR from CCSR is the rejection of (1) and (2). Therefore, we can say that NCSR involves:

4.   A commitment to extended evolutionary synthesis, and/or
5.   A commitment to non-modular models of cognition.

However, just as with CCSR, these commitments alone do not do much to undermine the warrant of religious beliefs. van Eyghen (2020) explicitly advocates (5) as a means

of walking back the CCSR claim that HADD is unreliable. In his view, the predictive processing model of cognition suggests that the cognitive mistakes CCSR attributes to HADD are better understood as cases of overfitting. However, in that case, van Eyghen suggests that the predictive processes are mostly reliable and therefore religious beliefs are "more sensitive to truth" (p. 202). Sterelny is not so sympathetic to the religious outlook. He suggests that religious beliefs are "[o]bviously not veridical" (p. 409). While this statement is terminologically confused (epistemologists typically describe beliefs as warranted or unwarranted and experiences as veridical or not veridical), it is nonetheless telling. Sterelny makes this claim before he develops his account of the origins and development and religion. Thus, Sterelny seems to take the epistemic vacuity of religious belief systems as part of a puzzle calling for an evolutionary and cognitive scientific explanation for their origin.[17] This suggests that neither (4) nor (5) are doing much debunking work. What is? It must be something like: (3) A commitment to physicalism and/or naturalism.

However, if that is the case, then the debunking work being done in NCSR is the exact kind of work being done in CCSR. The science has changed but the argument is largely the same. However, what exactly is that argument? Is it convincing? These are the issues to which I now turn.

4. Methodological Debunking Strategies

Some CSR practitioners accuse religious apologists of resorting to methodological appeals in the face of scientifically motivated debunking efforts. For example, Wilson (2009) argues that religious beliefs were once regarded as scientifically tractable hypotheses that only became "superempirical when they [were] driven from empirical inquiry by the scientific method" (p. 335). Here, Wilson seems to be implying that religious apologists only salvage their beliefs by methodologically bracketing them from the reach of empirical inquiry when confronted with confounding evidence. One thing to say in response to this charge is just that it is false. Medieval thinkers, such as St. Thomas Aquinas, long ago defended a conception of God as a transcendental, ontologically simple being for complex theological and philosophical reasons. It is not the case that these thinkers advocated supernatural conceptions of the divine only in response to the success of Baconian science. These thinkers advocated these concepts long before Boyle ever developed his air pump. A second thing to say in response is what I hope to demonstrate in this section: that the epistemic situation religious apologists find themselves in is exactly parallel to the situation religion debunkers find themselves in. Both are motivated by distinct methodological commitments. To reinforce this suggestion, I want to buttress the case developed in the preceding section that debunking efforts motivated by both CCSR and NCSR ultimately hinge on the same methodological appeals by examining some debunking arguments.

The first argument comes from Robert Nola (2018). In his argument, Nola pits religious explanations against naturalist explanations in attempts to account for a shared explanandum: many human beings have religious beliefs. He then advocates a method of comparative confirmation governed by "a Law of Likelihood," which stipulates that "data D favors hypothesis H1 over H2 if and only if p(D, H1) > p(D, H2)" (p. 88). In Nola's view, the naturalist explanation (H1) better accounts for D (the shared explanandum) than the religious explanation (H2). Why is that? In support of this contention, Nola invokes several criteria: ontological parsimony, explanatory breadth, explanatory and predictive novelty, progressive explanatoriness, absence of untestable assumptions, and fewer ad hoc assumptions (pp. 88–91). These criteria are probably familiar to many readers, but we can briefly summarize Nola's case as resting on the supposition that, compared to religious explanations, naturalistic explanations involve fewer and syntactically simpler theoretical entities, that they explain a wider variety of facts, generate new research programs, uncover new facts, presuppose no empirically intractable assumptions, and revert to no auxiliary hypotheses to salvage their theory.

I suspect much more can be said in defense of religious explanations on these counts than Nola surmises, but I want to direct attention to an altogether different issue. The issue

here concerns the fact that Nola's argument involves an inappropriate use of the method of comparative confirmation. A method of comparative confirmation making use of the law of likelihood is better situated in Bayesian forms of reasoning where the probability of a bit of data is not just assessed with respect to two rival hypotheses, but with respect to two rival hypotheses against a shared background. However, this is not how Nola appeals to the law of likelihood. He appeals to the law in the context of a categorical argument, but the law is superfluous in that form of argumentation. The notion of probability does no work in these contexts. In categorical contexts, one argues that one hypothesis coheres with more of the categorical desiderata than its rival, and this is exactly what Nola does. However, in that case, the notion of probability drops out. Methodological appeals remain and are doing the argumentative work.

To see this, compare Nola's argumentative strategy to the kind of reasoning we employ when we play a game like Clue. Suppose that we are playing an iteration of the game and we know that Mr. Green was murdered in the library of a mansion with a golf club on Saturday evening and that only Colonel Mustard and Professor Plum were recorded entering the mansion that night. Call this set of information D. Given D, we have two rival hypotheses: Colonel Mustard killed Mr. Green (H1) and Professor Plum killed Mr. Green (H2). Suppose, in addition, that we already know that Colonel Mustard and Professor Plum both had some animosity for Mr. Green. Call this information k. With this information, it seems that $p(D/k, H1)$ is roughly equivalent to $p(D/k, H2)$. However, suppose that we then learn that Colonel Mustard had recently purchased a set of golf clubs consistent with the murder weapon. In that case, $p(D/k, H1) > p(D/k, H2)$. Suppose that we subsequently learn that Colonel Mustard had loaned this set of clubs to Professor Plum the night before. Now, it appears that $p(D/k, H2) > p(D/k, H1)$. However, suppose we then check the surveillance footage from the mansion, and we discover that Professor Plum returned that set of golf clubs to Colonel Mustard before the two entered the mansion that evening. In that case, it seems that the evidence reverts the inequality back to $p(D/k, H1) > p(D/k, H2)$.

Nola's argument for the superiority of naturalistic explanations over religious explanations is irresponsive to first-order evidence of this kind.[18] In fact, Nola says nothing at all about concrete religious experiences and the features of the experiences that tilt the inequality one way or the other. One reason why not is that Nola is concerned with developing a general argument for the explanatory superiority of one research program over another. That is fine enough, but the problem is that he frames his argument as a comparative confirmation argument testing rival hypotheses. However, the argument that he constructs is not such an argument. It rests entirely on methodological appeals. The contrast with the game of Clue brings this clearly into view.

To be fair, Nola does develop another argument from the unreliability of HADD. This argument goes as follows:

P1. x's HADD causes x's belief that D exists.
P2. HADD is not reliable.
C. x's belief that D exists is debunked (p. 85).

This argument is responsive to first-order evidence. To make good on this argument, we would need first-order evidence that P1 is true. Nola does not offer evidence for thinking that any particular religious believer has a belief caused by HADD nor is it clear how he could. However, even if we bracket this concern, Nola's formulation of P1 is consistent with cases in which x's belief that D exists is overdetermined and cases in which HADD is only one cause of x's belief that D exists. For example, HADD can cause x's belief that D exists, but perhaps God co-opts HADD for this purpose. Or perhaps HADD causes x's belief that D exists, but later x has an experience of God speaking to them. In the former case, x's belief is overdetermined, and in the latter case, there are other causal routes to that belief. Presumably, Nola rejects the possibility of theistic overdetermination because it involves an explanation that is not as parsimonious as that naturalistic explanation and he rejects the explanation that an individual has verbal communication with God because that explanation contains untestable assumptions about the existence of God. That is fine

enough but notice that even if we grant Nola these claims for now, it is these methodological commitments that are doing the argumentative work.

Therefore, Nola does not actually develop the kind of argument he claims to be developing. However, this is not to say that arguments of this sort cannot be developed. Consider an argument developed by Goodnick (2016). Like atheistic arguments from divine hiddenness, Goodnick develops an argument that leverages evidential ambiguity into a consideration in favor of naturalism. She starts from the position of someone who is unsure whether God exists. She then suggests that the truth of theism would imply the possibility of several alternative routes God could have used to produce theistic belief. By contrast, the truth of naturalism would lead us to expect only unreliable routes relevant to the production of theistic belief. On the naturalistic view, the faculties that are responsible for producing supernatural beliefs (HADD, ToM, MCI, etc.) are unreliable. From these considerations, Goodnick concludes that naturalism should be favored over theism (p. 31). This argument has the appearance of a Bayesian argument. It starts from a condition of evidential ambiguity, presents some first-order evidence, and arrives at a conclusion about the relative likelihood of one hypothesis compared to another. However, this appearance is misleading. Goodnick's argument rests on the view that the first-order evidence clearly posits only one belief-forming faculty for theistic belief: the faculty constituted by the assemblage of CSR postulates. She outright dismisses the possibility that "God could have given us the belief through revelation" (p. 31). Of course, this is exactly what a Christian theist would suggest. Presumably, Goodnick believes that there is something methodologically incorrect with appealing to revelation. That is fine enough, but in that case, methodological commitments are playing a much more decisive role in Goodnick's argument than appearances suggest.

Finally, consider an argument motivated by a theory like the one developed by Sterelny. To see how such an argument could be developed, note that Sterelny's theory involves no appeal to the existence of supernatural agents whatsoever. Therefore, one could argue that the success of the account renders alternative religious accounts superfluous. However, notice that here considerations like the ones Nola appeals to are very much operative. If Sterelny's account succeeds, then it only obviates the possibility of supplementing it with religious accounts on the grounds that these accounts are less parsimonious and involve empirically intractable assumptions. Here, again, methodological considerations are doing much of the argumentative work. In response, a debunker might double down on Nola's concern for ad hoc assumptions. Here, the idea might be that religious accounts would not expect various evolutionary processes to facilitate the development of religious beliefs and behaviors and that for this reason, naturalistic accounts are explanatorily preferable. The problem with this suggestion is that it is not clear how much weight such considerations should receive. A physicist studying the origins of the universe might not predict the emergence of various biological processes at a later stage of the universe, but the emergence of such processes does nothing to shed any doubt on the warrant of that physics. We should not expect a theory of cosmic everything to fall out of theology, and if one does not, that is hardly a count against theology or religious explanations.

In addition to these considerations, one other point is worth discussing. Earlier I suggested that these debunking cases are motivated by (3), namely, a commitment to naturalism and/or physicalism, but I have not said much about physicalism. I suspect that most CSR debunkers take the success of naturalism to motivate a commitment to physicalism, but even this much can be questioned. For example, Visala (2018) argues that interventionist accounts in philosophy of science are ontologically neutral. These accounts simply identify difference-makers in causal relationships and support counterfactual statements.[19] However, Visala argues that this account "does not require an account of a physical chain of events that would link the cause to the effect...[all that] is necessary for the existence of a causal relationship is that we can produce change in the effect by producing change in the cause factor" (p. 64). If this is right, the truth of physicalism does not follow from the success of interventionist science and therefore empirical methodology

is in principle consistent with methodologies other than methodological naturalism. In fact, as Gant and Melling (2009) observe, various psychologists, including some representatives of the American Psychological Association, have begun, or signaled a need for, renewed efforts to study relationships between religion and health.[20]

Given these considerations, it very much appears that debunking cases are motivated more by methodological commitments than first-order evidence. A debunker might object that I have only examined three arguments and that this conclusion is just a hasty generalization. Of course, I admit that I have not examined every debunking argument ever developed in the history of the CSR literature, but I have not suggested that all religious experiences are veridical. I am sure that some experiences can be debunked by applying CSR theories to the case.[21] What I am suggesting is that CSR-motivated arguments concluding that all religious experiences are not veridical and that all religious beliefs grounded in religious experience are therefore unwarranted depend on methodological commitments and that these are methodological commitments religious apologists will reject. Religious apologists who recognize a transcendent God will believe that some things cannot be known scientifically and therefore reject methodological naturalism. They will also believe that some natural processes can be co-opted by a transcendent being and therefore balk at appeals to parsimony in some contexts. Therefore, religious and anti-religious responses to CSR in general exhibit epistemic parity. Whether one takes CSR theories to generally and/or universally undermine religious beliefs depends on one's methodological commitments. The actual science is not doing very much argumentative work in either direction. This is an important observation to make because many religious debunkers working in CSR often write as if religious apologists illegitimately resort to methodological considerations to salvage their view in response to scientific evidence. The preceding reveals that debunkers are in a very similar epistemic position.

However, to suggest that religious apologists and religion debunkers are on an epistemic par implies more than this; it implies that the epistemic weight of their methodological commitments is roughly equivalent. Rea (2002) suggests that methodological commitments are basic and that one can only judge one set of dispositions to be superior to another with respect to their epistemic consequences. I believe that much can be said in favor of this view, but if evaluative criteria are derived from methodological commitments, it is not clear how this evaluative process should go. This problem of evaluative incommensurability goes to the heart of what Taylor (1987) has called one of "the most important spiritual issues of our time," the struggle between "neo-Nietzscheans" and "the defenders of critical reason" (pp. 483–85). Fortunately, the present issue does not require the solution of these fraught epistemological problems. These problems in conjunction with the parallel appeal to methodology reveal that religious apologists and religion debunkers are on an epistemic par in response to CSR.

5. Conclusions

What else might one say about this epistemic situation? As I see it, the preceding supports the conclusion that the discourse around the cognitive science of religion very much depends on the social prestige of science compared to religion, but this much is not surprising to theologians and philosophers of religion. Nonetheless, a word of caution is in order here. In the preceding, I have only focused on the epistemic position of religious apologists and religion debunkers with respect to CSR. I have not discussed the epistemic positions of these two groups of thinkers relative to one another when all things are considered. I am also not suggesting that scientific research cannot undermine specific religious beliefs. For example, I do believe that evolutionary science puts significant pressure on and perhaps even refutes some religious beliefs.[22] However, I also believe that religious believers have options with respect to these challenges and that no field of scientific research and no body of scientific evidence has successfully undermined belief in a transcendent God.[23] In fact, if I had to make the case one way or the other, I would probably argue that when all things are considered, religious apologists are in

an epistemically superior position compared to religion debunkers. Nonetheless, I am perfectly willing to say that the situation is much more epistemically ambiguous than many partisans admit, but I doubt that this situation can be used to motivate any substantive conclusions. In my view, this situation says more about the epistemic limitations of human beings than it does about the existence of God.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

[1] In this article, I use the terms religious apologist and religion debunker to refer primarily to individuals concerned with the viability of Western forms of monotheism, most especially Christianity. This is due to the author's own religious identity and the context most of the CSR literature presupposes.

[2] Rea (2002) defines a research program as "a set of methodological dispositions" (p. 3).

[3] For example, Visala (2018) distinguishes between attempts to "pursue explanatory theories from the cognitive and biological sciences" and "a thoroughgoing 'naturalization' program of the humanities" (p. 52).

[4] For example, White (2018) suggests that CSR aims to account for "the *presence*, *prevalence*, and *persistence* of religion" (p. 40).

[5] See Wilson (2002).

[6] Bloom (2009) is an example of such a theorist.

[7] See McCauley's (2011) discussion of contemporary research on modularity (pp. 50–52).

[8] See Fodor (1983).

[9] See, for example, Draper (2019).

[10] See, for example, van Inwagen (2009).

[11] McBrayer (2018) might be described as advocating a strategy of this sort.

[12] For example, Jong and Visala (2014) argue that CSR is more threatening to reliabilists than internalists (p. 256).

[13] See Barrett and Church (2013).

[14] See Braddock (2018).

[15] However, as I mentioned above, more recent proponents of modularity modify the classical Fodorian conception of informational encapsulation (e.g., Barrett and Kurzban 2006). In their sense, a predictive processing model of cognition does not necessarily involve a rejection of modularity. Predictive processing is consistent with the view that automatic intuitive judging processes shape or constrain sensorial processes. I interpret van Eyghen's bird watcher example to suggest a view of cognition wherein willful, conscious intentions constrain and/or shape sensory input. Therefore, I interpret van Eyghen to advocate a model of predictive processing that is not modular in even this non-Fodorian sense, However, if that is wrong, we can simply interpret some challenges to CCSR as challenges to Fodorian modularity rather than to modularity in general. I thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to the need to belabor this point.

[16] See Laland et al. (2015) for an account of the extended evolutionary synthesis

[17] See the collection of essays in Deane-Drummond and Fuentes (2017) for theologically minded anthropologists working in the framework of the extended evolutionary synthesis.

[18] By first-order evidence, I mean evidence described in terms both hypotheses accept, a shared explanandum, etc.

[19] See Woodward (2005).

[20] Of course, it is also worth returning to a point made earlier regarding the theoretical possibility of naturalistic and physicalist accounts of the divine and/or ultimate. A pantheist could embrace physicalism, for example. I thank an anonymous reviewer for emphasizing this point as well.

[21] See Stepanenko (2020).

[22] See de Smedt and de Cruz (2020) for an excellent treatment of some of the ways evolutionary science challenges specific religious beliefs.

[23] Much more might also be said in the way of challenging the scientific objectivity of debunkers operating in CSR. Many critics point out that the accumulated empirical evidence does not support many of the theoretical postulates of CCSR (for some discussion, see Szocik and van Eyghen 2021). This is an important criticism to address, but I am wary of apologetic attempts to simply dismiss debunking arguments on these grounds. It seems to me that many partisans in these debates often overlook the ineluctable role of idealizations in scientific practice (e.g., Potochnik 2020). Idealized scientific "just so" stories still have some epistemic bite because they contribute to our understanding of how religious belief and behavior might have emerged, and religious apologists may still rightly feel inclined to respond to these stories. The strength of debunking arguments might be mitigated in these circumstances,

but it is not obviated, and in my opinion, much of what I have to say about epistemic parity holds therein. I thank an anonymous reviewer for stressing the need to address these issues.

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Abstract: This paper attempts to offer a pluralist realist account of the diversity of religious experience. In the first part, I show that an influential trend in contemporary philosophy of religious experience and religious pluralism is based on the mediational image of knowledge and a problematic notion of interpretation, which generates irresoluble problems. I then attempt a redescription based on an extension of Heidegger's theory of understanding as pre-theorical engagement with the world, which allows for the conciliation of the diversity of religious experience with its claimed epistemic force. To develop this argument, finally, I present the experience of diversity proper of the contemporary world as a type of spiritual experience in which the traits of a pre-theoretical religious understanding can be found. As a result, the paper suggests a move from epistemology to spirituality for a better understanding of religious experience.

Keywords: realism and anti-realism; religious pluralism; transcendence; hermeneutics; spirituality

1. Introduction

The possibility of experientially encountering the divine, supreme reality is integral to many religious traditions. This form of experience is regarded not only as the highest source of knowledge but also as one of the most valued goals of human life. A religious lifestyle strives to be in contact with the divine, to cultivate its presence and ground every other aspect of life in this source. This implies the claim that religious experience has cognitive value, that is, that it provides legitimate knowledge about that which the mystics experience as the supreme reality. It does not matter whether this knowledge can only be communicated indirectly, pointed out by means of symbols, and never fully encapsulated in propositions. Religious traditions nonetheless claim that there is knowledge of the divine which is revealed in religious experience. This experience is then appealed to as a source of support and justification for religious beliefs, doctrines, and practices.

However, the diversity of descriptions of what is discovered in mystical experience seems to challenge this claim. The apparent incompatibility among the mystics' reports generates what has become a classic problem in the philosophy of religion. How to account for the diversity of religious experience in a way that still permits it to maintain its cognitive value? In which cases should conflicting descriptions be taken as an indicator of the falseness of religious belief? Is it possible to evaluate diverse beliefs by assessing the power of religious experience to justify or ground them? There have been many important attempts to answer these kinds of questions (e.g., Alston 1991; Griffiths 2001; Hick 2004). However, the questions themselves are grounded in a series of presuppositions that require careful exploration, for they condition the way in which religious experience is understood.

Clearly, they presuppose that it is possible to determine in which cases diverse accounts are contradictory, incompatible, or mutually exclusive. (See Alston 1991, 256ff). Likewise, the questions assume that the kind of unity and universality that we commonly demand from knowledge in other domains, such as science, must also be valid regarding religious truth-claims. Finally, they take for granted that the apparent incompatibility of descriptions of the divine is somehow scandalous, either raising a challenge to its existence or

diminishing the validity or trustworthiness of religious beliefs (cf. Griffiths 2001, 66ff). All these presuppositions, in turn, are based on a deeper, more fundamental assumption—that which has shaped western epistemology and which, even though combated by different thinkers since the twentieth century, still haunts us. It is the mediational image of knowledge, based on the subject-object dichotomy, as the basic framework for understanding perception, knowledge, and our place in the world (Dreyfus and Taylor 2015).

In this paper, I want to show how an account of religious experience based on this image leads to irresoluble dilemmas regarding the way in which diversity challenges the epistemic validity of religious experience. I will focus primarily on those accounts that explain diversity as a result of interpretation. Given that they typically assume a theory of interpretation based on the mediational image, I will then explore an alternative view, based on Heidegger's phenomenological hermeneutics in *Being and Time*. My guiding idea will be that a description of religious experience, built on the notion of understanding as pre-theoretical coping with reality, helps to overcome the mediational image and to conciliate its plurality and its noetic quality. This will require finding a type of experience of the transcendent, whose pre-theoretical traits can be described. The experience of religious diversity itself will be explored in this direction.

2. Experience and Interpretation

The very idea that it is possible to have an *experience of* the divine seems to imply a problematic tension. This is so because, since Kant, a very extended philosophical position affirms that all experience is mediated or constituted by the concepts of the experiencer, and thus an immediate experience of the transcendent, that is, of the divine reality that surpasses all concepts and words, would seem impossible. On the contrary, the concepts proper to the mystic's culture would structure her experience generating its particular content. The plurality of experiences would be the result. All experiences, including mystical experiences, would be already forms of interpretation. This line of argument is the heart of influential theories of religious experience. In this section, I want to explore two of them, showing how they rest on a problematic view of interpretation.

In his 1978 extensively discussed paper, "Language, Epistemology and Mysticism," Steven Katz claims that "There are NO pure (i.e., unmediated) experiences. [. . .] all experience is processed through, organized by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological ways" (Katz 1978, p. 26). Thus, contesting those theories that affirm that there is a common, universal core in all religious experiences that would then be interpreted through the different conceptual and linguistic resources of the mystics, Katz claims that "the experience itself as well as the form in which it is reported is shaped by concepts which the mystic brings to, and which shape, his experience" (p. 26). Diversity would then lie on the experience itself and not only on its descriptions. It would be the product of what he calls "pre-experiential configurative elements" (p. 34), such as the previous beliefs, images, symbols, forms of practice, language, and other cultural conditions of the mystic. Therefore, there is no way to equate the mystical experiences of different traditions for they would be *caused* by preconditioning factors.

Since this sort of position immediately raises the question of the epistemic validity of religious experience, Katz advances an additional thesis, which he calls ontological but does not fully develop. A noted characteristic of most mystical states is what William James called their "noetic quality": "they are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect" (James [1902] 2002, p. 380). Mystics claim to have been in contact with the supreme reality, the source and ground of all other forms of reality, and even if it defies full expression in words, it is experienced in a certain way, having certain characteristics symbolically expressed in terms such as infinite love, compassion, vacuity, blissful consciousness, etc. Thus, Katz must account for the relationship between the conceptual scheme of the mystic and the "object" of her experience. Indeed, either there is nothing divine and concepts simply make up the referent of the experience, or there must be a way in which that which is organized by concepts also determines the content of

the experience (p. 64). Without fully committing to an answer, he seems to be inclined to affirm that different experiences are not only the product of diverse culturally determined conceptual and belief systems but also are experiences of "different phenomena" (p. 52).

However, this polytheistic alternative remains obscured, for he does not offer a way to relate the conceptual system of the mystic with that which is experienced in a way that the content of the experience may be at least partially defined by a transcendent reality which reveals itself in experience. In the end, for Katz, "[t]here seems no other way to get at the issue that would be philosophically satisfactory":

> There is no evidence that there is any 'given' which can be disclosed without the imposition of the mediating conditions of the knower. All 'givens' are also the product of the processes of 'choosing,' 'shaping,' and 'receiving.' That is, the 'given' is appropriated through acts which shape it into forms which we can make intelligible to ourselves given our conceptual constitution, and which structure it in order to respond to the specific contextual needs and mechanisms of consciousness of the receiver. (p. 59)

All the weight of this process lies on the side of the "receiver," making the "given" irrelevant. This, of course, generates an irresoluble dilemma: if religious experience is the product of the previous concepts of the mystic, then it lacks real epistemic value. It cannot disclose any real knowledge of the divine but only reproduce cultural preconceptions that go to configure experience. Where do these preconceptions spring from? They cannot be universal a priori categories because there happen to be different experiences. Neither, however, can they be originated in experience. As a result, all religious experiences would be fiction, and the conceptual schemes of the mystics vacuous. If this is so, then it is not even necessary to look for a way to reconcile the diversity of religious experiences with the claim that they are states of knowledge. Rather than a pluralistic theory or religious experience, Katz's would betray a secret naturalistic stance.

In any case, Katz's way of understanding religious experience is an example of what Terry Godlove calls the framework model in religious studies (Godlove 1997), which extends from Kant through Durkheim to other contemporary thinkers. According to this model, religious concepts would organize certain neutral data or raw material somehow "given" in sensation. This implies a dichotomy between a conceptual scheme (the belief system, culture, language, etc.) of the mystic and that which is given and cannot be directly apprehended. How can we understand that there is something there which does not impinge on, affect, or interpellate us in any sense and then is interpreted? For Godlove, this dichotomy is superfluous because, if there were some uninterpreted content, and it were non-conceptual and non-discursive, then nothing could be said about it ,and it would thus lack any explanatory power. Conversely, if there were something discursive in the "given," it would already be part of the reality that is supposed to be the product of the interpretative process (86ff).

Beyond these sorts of logical difficulties, the scheme/content dichotomy reveals a more fundamental problem. Transcendence is always lost either because it is not possible to establish a significant relationship with "it", or because whatever can be grasped or "received" is always organized, structured, or constituted by the activities of the subject of experience. Indeed, the scheme/content model is only an expression of the subject/object dichotomy proper of modern western philosophy, which from the beginning hinders an appropriate understanding of experience and religious diversity. According to this image of knowledge, the most basic and original human way of being in the world is that of a "disengaged agent," who

> In perceiving the world takes 'bits' of information from his or her surroundings, and then 'processes' them in some fashion, in order to emerge with the 'picture' of the world he or she has; the individual then acts on the basis of this picture to fulfill his or her goals, through a 'calculus' of means and ends. (Dreyfus and Taylor 2015, p. 92)

Thus, according to this picture, there would be an inner space (the conscious mind) confronted by the "outer" space of the world with which we always relate through representations. The disengaged agent has no world, is not part of reality, but stands before it as a separate, independent subject. Her task is either to check and secure her belief formation process, making each representation accurately *correspond* to the world, or to turn her attention towards her inner processes to discover that they *constitute* what counts as the world—it being impossible for her to move outside her conceptual apparatus to check whether her beliefs coincide with an independent reality. Both realist and anti-realist positions presuppose the picture (Dreyfus and Taylor 2015, p. 58).

In the case of Katz's theory of religious experience, the image holds even if the "object" of experience is not an external element of the world but what the mystics claim to be the supreme reality. The experiencer and that which is experienced are placed apart in a sort of confrontation from which an interpretation emerges. Only thus can it be claimed that something is conceptually structured as the content of experience. Indeed, to use Heidegger's terminology, the divine thus construed as an object of experience becomes a being among others, which in Western thought is then identified as the being who grounds all other beings, the first principle, causa sui, etc. (Heidegger [1957] 1969, 59ff). In non-theistic traditions, even pure consciousness would be the result of the interpretative construction of the mystic rather than its overcoming. Certainly, Katz's typically modern emphasis on the spontaneity and activity of the subject's conceptual apparatus directly contradicts an extended aim of spiritual practice in many traditions, described with the images of forgetting, emptying, quietening, and dissolving oneself in order to let the divine manifest in its transcendence (Forman 1990, 30ff).

The mediational picture of knowledge, as Taylor and Dreyfus called it (2015), implies a distance between subject and object somehow facilitated by representations. They either grasp or constitute the way things are, depending on the realist or anti-realist orientation of the epistemological view in question, but regardless of that orientation, that which is represented becomes available, fixed, and dominated. It is turned into an object. Domesticated and purged from its irreducibility, it can be made present to the mind again and again (re-presented) and used for the different purposes and needs that knowledge serves. If religious experience is thought up based on the mediational model, awareness of the divine presupposes the priority of an acting consciousness in which the divine is apprehended as an intentional object, and interpreted according to certain concepts, thus losing its transcendence (cf. Levinas 1996, p. 135).

How can we move beyond the mediational picture to understand the diversity of religious experience? Clearly, we need to find a way to include and account for the historical, cultural, and situational character of human experience while doing justice to the revelatory, meaning-giving, interpellating character of the divine, in a way that safeguards transcendence. This would imply elaborating on a notion of interpretation able to overcome the subject/object dichotomy and the representational model of thinking.

Let us explore another very influential theory of religious experience, which aims to account for religious diversity while maintaining the fundamental claim of religions of providing knowledge and forms of contact with divine reality. According to John Hick, human experience is the result of a process of interpretation that discovers the "significance" or "meaning" of reality at different levels. "Significance" means to Hick the feature of human consciousness that makes possible the experience of a "world," that is, of an ordered, stable, and intelligible place in which we can purposefully act. It can be defined as "the perceived character of an aspect of our environment which renders a particular type of response appropriate" (Hick 2004, p. 132). Thus, significance is a pragmatic notion that involves judgments about the appropriateness of actions in relation to the environment.

Here we find an interesting alternative both to a radical constructivist and a direct-realist understanding of significance. Finding or attributing the significance of a particular object or situation entails neither arbitrarily projecting or conferring order and meaning on a structureless, raw material, nor copying reality or getting to the way things are in

themselves. Rather, it implies determining the kind of reactions that allow us to deal with them in a way appropriate for our needs and interests. Thus, in the pragmatist fashion, "the significance of a given object or situation for a given individual consists in the practical difference which the existence of that object makes to that individual" (Hick 1988, p. 100). Accordingly, significance is a relational concept. It always implies a consciousness for which something is significant and thus cannot be separated from the particular cognitive constitution, as well as from the interest and situation of the interpreter. Correspondingly, interpretations are modes of action that are verified in our environment. Right interpretations are those that allow us to successfully act in the world, which necessarily has an existence and form independent of our beliefs (cf. James [1907] 2000, 87ff).

In this way, Hick tries to reconcile a basic realist stance with the recognition of conceptual pluralism. Our relationship with reality is mediated by fundamental cognitive freedom derived from its ambiguity (2004, p. 12): it does not impose on us a unique image but can be experienced and represented in different ways. The possibility of producing alternative interpretations, however, varies according to the level at which it occurs. At the level of physical significance, we deal with natural laws to which we must respond in an appropriate manner if we are to survive, and consequently, cognitive freedom is very limited. However, all our perceptions are interpretations and have a tentative, hypothetical character, even if they are constantly, and most of the time unconsciously, tested against experience. All perception, and more broadly all conscious experience, is a form of what Hick calls, following Wittgenstein, "experiencing-as."

"We see it as we interpret it," affirms Wittgenstein in the second part of *Philosophical Investigations*, referring to puzzle pictures, such as those in which a spectator can either see a duck or a rabbit (Wittgenstein 1953, p. 193). Hick enlarges the notion of seeing-as to cover all conscious experience. For him "identifying" or "recognizing" something as a particular kind of object does not mean having a pure act of perception but involves using concepts provided by our culture to determine what kind of thing the perceived object is (Hick 2004, pp. 140–42).

The second level of significance identified by Hick is the moral aesthetic. Here cognitive freedom is larger, to the point that we can refuse to accept a moral obligation to other persons or understand it in very different terms. Finally, there is the religious level of significance where cognitive freedom reaches its maximum degree. Reality is "religiously ambiguous in that it is possible to interpret it, intellectually and experientially, both religiously and naturalistically" (2004, p. 12). The first case implies, for theistic religions, the recognition of the presence of God in the universe:

> The primary religious perception, or basic act of religious interpretation, is not to be described as either a reasoned conclusion or an unreasoned hunch that there is a God. It is, putatively, an apprehension of the divine presence within the believer's human experience. It is not an inference to a general truth, but a "divine-human encounter," a mediated meeting with the living God. (Hick 1988, p. 115)

Now, in what sense can we talk about a "primary perception" or a "basic act" of interpretation at any of the three levels? If having an experience is always finding the significance or meaning of an object or situation, and this, in turn, is a process of identifying that object with a concept, in which sense could an interpretation be more basic than others?

At this point, we find that Hick's theory of experience is unable to lead us beyond the dilemmas typical of the mediational model of knowledge. On one hand, there is a "basic act of interpretation" which "discloses to us the existence of the sphere [of significance] in question, thus providing the ground for our multifarious detailed interpretations within that sphere" (Hick 1988, p. 108), On the other hand, the existence of each realm can only be perceived through concepts, which are previous to experience insofar as they make it possible. Thus, this theory is subject to the same irresolvable conundrum as Katz's: What

is the origin of concepts, and how do they relate to that which they interpret? (Gómez 2020, pp. 131, 170).

At the religious level, from the theistic point of view, it is the existence of God that makes the recognition of the religious realm possible. This realm is not a mere projection of purely human concepts, derived, for example, from the physical or moral spheres, but an ontologically different level of significance. However, the concepts by means of which a theist performs this basic act of interpretation have been made available to her through a particular religious and cultural tradition. If the concept of God were not available in this way, she could not have this experience. For that reason, in *An Interpretation of Religion*, Hick introduces the term "the Real" to refer to the transcendental noumenal reality, which is interpreted through different culturally determined concepts to produce the great variety of religious experiences of humankind, both in the theistic and non-theistic traditions (236ff).

Once again, we find the tension between our conceptual schemes, which inform the recognition of significance, and *that* (the Real) which is being experienced through them. How can our concepts be simultaneously inadequate to their object and allow for a pragmatically appropriate organization of experience?

I share the spirit of Katz and Hick's pluralism. However, it seems to me that the way in which it has been here accounted for is unable to escape the dilemmas of the mediational picture of knowledge. Interpretation is understood as a process by means of which something is identified (or constituted, seeing-as, grasped as a certain entity) by means of concepts. Thus, concepts, taken as mental representations, are given the primordial role in the picture and, as "mediators" between two separate realms, generate irresolvable problems. We need a different view of interpretation to move beyond this picture.

3. Understanding as Coping and Religious Experience

As it is well known, in *Being and Time* Heidegger develops a decisive critique of the mediational image and offers an alternative based on our being-in-the-world. Rather than as a mental process by means of which we discover or confer meaning to reality, he views understanding (*Verstehen*) as a way of coping with the world, that is, as being able to do something, to dwell in a pre-theoretical manner (Heidegger [1927] 2001, p. 183). Before any conceptual operation by means of which we make an aspect of reality an object of knowledge, we inhabit a world already meaningful, in which we purposively act and live, a world to which we are committed in our daily practices. Being-in-the-world, as the basic mode of human existence, means to be concerned (according to Macquarrie & Robinson's translation of *Besorgen*), involved, or practically engaged in different activities by means of which we understand ourselves and the world (Heidegger [1927] 2001, p. 83). This form of understanding is that of the knowing-how to interact with particular contexts, situations, and scenarios embodied in our practices and forms of dwelling (Dreyfus 1995, pp. 46, 86, 111, 184).

We find here an interesting similitude with William James's pragmatist theory of truth that we can only point out here. For him, even if the basic definition of truth continues to be the agreement of an idea with reality, this agreement cannot be understood as a metaphysical "inert static relation" (James [1907] 2000, p. 88). On the contrary,

> To 'agree' in the widest sense with a reality can only mean to be guided either straight up to it or its surroundings, or to be put into such working touch with it as to handle either it or something connected with it better than if we disagreed. (93)

True ideas help us to *deal* with and successfully adapt to reality. This capability is not reflected in a sort of external, purely theoretical verification process but in the fact that they work in our activities. That is, they "pay us," helping us to avoid "endless inconsistency and frustration" (93) in our experience. For Heidegger, however, it is not ideas that represent the primordial place of truth and understanding. Before explicit

thematization and formulation of concepts, we already move in a meaningful world. Our understanding of reality is implicit, embodied in our practices and forms of dealing. Only based on this primordial form of understanding, and as a derived mode, are theories and conceptual systems formulated (Heidegger [1927] 2001, p. 88).

Now, for Heidegger, in this primordial understanding proper of our being concerned, involved in-the-world, "the world" cannot be taken as a neutral, "external" collection of objects or states of affairs. The world is already a network of pragmatic significations established in *Dasein's* practices and forms of life. Instead of objects that are there either to be neutrally represented or that, immanent to consciousness, are discovered to have been intentionally constituted, *Dasein* lives by constellations of "equipment" (*Zeuge*), thas is, of the "things" that we use in-order-to something (97). In this sense, what configures the meaning of the world is the pragmatic character of the "entities" with which we deal in our activities, and which are integrated into totalities. Thus is

> Equipment [. . .] always is *in terms of* its belonging to other equipment: ink-stand, pen, ink, paper, blotting pad, table, lamp, furniture, windows, doors, rooms. These 'things' never show themselves proximally as they are from themselves, so as to add up to a sum of *realia* and fill up a room. What we encounter as closest to us (though not as something taken as a theme) is the room; and we encounter it not as something 'between four walls' in a geometrical spatial sense, but as equipment for residing. (98)

We inhabit totalities of meaning from which particular elements emerge as something-for-something. This is the primordial form of understanding: knowing-how to skillful use equipment within the significative network to which it belongs. Representations and concepts, aimed at thematically grasping what an object is, what its properties are, and so forth, come only in a second place and as a modification of this basic involvement with things. The pragmatic character of understanding, however, is not merely utilitarian, for in dealing with the world, we understand ourselves in a certain manner, e.g., as being someone, caring for certain things, belonging to a certain culture or group, etc. Moreover, we *project* possibilities of what we can be and do. In this sense, this primordial form of understanding, whose core is skillful coping with reality, is relational. This means that reality is discovered from a certain perspective, generated by our interests, needs, and forms of life. Thus, in our practical involvement

> The environing Nature [*die Umweltnatur*] is discovered and is accessible to everyone. In roads, streets, bridges, buildings, our concern discovers Nature as having some definite direction. A covered railway platform takes account of bad weather; an installation for public lighting takes account of the darkness . . . (100)

The key point is that "nature is discovered in some definite direction" *before* thematization and conceptualization. The meaning of the world already lies embodied in our ways of coping, in our concrete manners of interaction and forms of life. This meaning includes both the way in which we use things (equipment) and the constraints and possibilities of "nature," which allow for something to be successfully used *for something*. Interpretation, then, does not produce understanding but presupposes it (188). Unlike Hick's theory, it is not a process by means of which we identify concepts with objects, but rather is a way of clarifying, disclosing, and developing what already has been implicitly and pre-thematically understood in our dealings:

> In interpreting, we do not, so to speak, throw a 'signification' over some naked thing which is present-at-hand, we do not stick a value on it; but when something within-the-world is encountered as such, the thing in question already has an involvement which is disclosed in our understanding of the world, and this involvement is one which gets laid out by the interpretation. (191)

We move from what has been already understood through interpretation to new, and sometimes better and richer, forms of understanding. This is the circular nature of the hermeneutic process. What is important for our discussion is that in this hermeneutic image

of interpretation, both diversity of perspectives and the "way things are" are included because even if we are always situated in a particular horizon of fore-understanding, constituted by elements such as the fore-conceptions and forms of dealing with things proper to the traditions we live in, the "first, last, and constant task" of interpretation is to work out these fore-structures "in terms of the things themselves," not allowing them to be simply "presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions" (195). Thus, interpretation does not only make explicit what we already understand but also serves to revise and, when necessary, correct it. Given the circular nature of interpretation, the hermeneutic process implies permanent change and transformation.

The historical and situated character of all our dealings with the world is therefore not incompatible with discovering it from the perspectives that our interested practices open. A plurality of forms of understanding is compatible with basic realism. The fact that the world is always interpreted does not mean that our interpretations are barriers that keep us apart from the way, forever lost and inaccessible, that things really are. On the contrary, our historically situated practices of understanding and interpretation are forms of being in contact and inhabit a reality to which we belong. In the words of Taylor and Dreyfus, "At the most basic, preconceptual level, the understanding I have of the world is not simply constructed or determined by me. It is a 'coproduction' of me and the world" (2015, p. 93).

Could this alternative image of understanding offer a mode to better account for religious experience in a way that allows both for its phenomenological diversity and its epistemic potentiality?

One may argue that Heidegger's hermeneutic theory would be unable to include the experience of the transcendent, given its emphasis on the finitude and historicity of *Dasein* and its world. The pragmatically oriented network of significations that conforms "the world" is for-the-sake-of *Dasein*, and there is neither world, nor reality, nor truth but *for the Dasein*. Thus, all meaning is immanent to *Dasein's* being-in-the-world. This line of argument can be found in important Christian critics of Heidegger's project. (See Wolfe 2014, 174ff). We cannot explore all of them here, but for our aims, it is important to recall Edith Stein's fundamental insight according to which the priority given to *Dasein* as the only possible way of accessing the question of the meaning of being implies a limitation of meaning to human understanding (Stein 2007, p. 82). As we have pointed out, one of the typically reported characteristics of mystical experience is that it breaks into immanence to challenge and shake all taken-for-granted understanding not only to generate a revision and correction of what we believe but mainly to reveal forms of meaning that do not let themselves be reduced and encapsulated in words and concepts. The transcendence of the divine, which is experienced as ineffable (cf. James [1902] 2002, p. 380), seems to break into the world, bringing a meaning which cannot be accounted for as emerging from *Dasein's* concernment and skillful coping. For this reason, allowing for transcendence implies an effort to open the space for forms of meaning and intelligibility that question and break the priority of immanence, finitude, and *Dasein's* involvement (cf. e.g., Levinas 1996, p. 168; Marion 2012, 41ff).

In this direction, however, it may be possible to use and expand Heidegger's image to account for religious experience. This would imply, first, showing that there are ways of "coping" with the divine which correspond to the pre-theoretical forms of understanding proper of our engaged dealings with the world and, second, that either we can have meaningful experience *beyond* our being-in-the-world (cf. Stein 2007, 76ff), or that we can encounter a transcendent meaning also *there*, in our concernment and involvement with the world.

4. Diversity as a Daily Experience of Transcendence

Religious forms of life and practice may present clear examples of modes of preconceptual "dealing" with the divine. Many spiritual traditions offer testimonies and paths to such direct, unmediated understanding. They, however, will not be the focus of my exploration here. We are trying to find a way to account for the diversity of religious expe-

rience that overcomes the framework model, showing that there is an embodied form of spiritual understanding that takes place before conceptual thematization. Religious forms of life and practice normally belong to traditions in which the meaning of experience and life are already conceptually thematized (including trans-conceptual forms of experience). Assuming that there should be a movement between pure, non-interpreted experience and its conceptual interpretation would be to fall into the framework model. Accordingly, we must look for another kind or dimension of human experience that could also be a place of contact with the divine. There may be many candidates, but here I would like to test a somehow unexpected path proper to the secular, pluralist, and diffuse intellectual and spiritual situation of our epoch.

As we saw before, overcoming the framework model does not require abandoning historical consciousness, that is, the awareness of the situated character of understanding. We live and move in horizons of meaning that do not separate us from an inaccessible, noumenal reality but are forms of relationship with reality (cf. Gadamer [1975] 2004, 269ff, 285). While there is no complete, absolute understanding since it starts from and includes the perspectives allowed by our interests, needs, and historical forms of practice, we could not skillfully cope with reality and successfully do whatever we do if reality were not "discovered as having some definite direction." Our horizons of meaning move, change, and may be bound to dissolve in the future, and yet they are grounded.

Thus, in our historicity already lies a form of contact with transcendence which has not been thematized with religious concepts: *that* which allows and grounds all our ways of skillful coping cannot be exhausted; fully encapsulated; or dominated by any practice, form of coping, or conceptual scheme. *It* both makes possible our diverse interested ways of being in the world and challenges them, motivating their historical transformations. Might this tacit experience of transcendence, proper to our contemporary self-understanding, include a way of encountering the divine?

A particular kind of angst and sense of disorientation usually accompanies our contemporary awareness of historicity. We live and move in culturally configured worlds of meaning among a plurality of alternatives in which we could either have been born or to which we can "convert." Even those who try to recover a strong sense of authority and soteriological exclusivity for their traditions face the challenge of encountering the analogous claims of others who cannot be unthoughtfully dismissed. No belief system or horizon of meaning can take its superiority for granted or unproblematically claim the pre-eminence of its truth claims. However, no spiritual tradition can renounce the idea that there is the truth, the Real, the Supreme good, and so forth and that it manifests itself to or is attainable by human beings.

May it be that these tensions, challenges, and anguish that encountering diversity invite constitute themselves, prior to any conceptual interpretation, religious or philosophical, a place to meet the divine appropriate for our contemporary predicament? What would the traits of the primordial understanding implicit in that experience be? How could we access and explore them? Poetic exploration offers a unique starting point. Let us hear the voice of North American poet Christian (Wiman 2020, p. 18):

> All my friends are finding new beliefs.
> This one converts to Catholicism and this one to trees.
> In a highly literary and hitherto religiously-indifferent Jew
> God whomps on like a genetic generator.
> Paleo, Keto, Zone, South Beach, Bourbon.
> Exercise regimens so extreme she merges with machine.
> One man marries a woman twenty years younger
> and twice in one brunch uses the word *verdant*;
> another's brick-fisted belligerence gentles
> into dementia, and one, after a decade of finical feints and teases
> like a sandpiper at the edge of the sea,
> decides to die.

> Priesthoods and beasthoods, sombers and glees,
> high-styled renunciations and avocations of dirt,
> sobrieties, satieties, pilgrimages to the very bowels of being . . .
> All my friends are finding new beliefs
> and I am finding it harder and harder to keep track
> of the new gods and the new loves,
> and the old gods and the old loves,
> and the days have daggers, and the mirrors motives,
> and the planet's turning faster and faster in the blackness,
> and my nights, and my doubts, and my friends,
> my beautiful, credible friends.

The poem's two main sections, each starting with the reiterated verse ("All my friends . . . "), present two sides of the experience of diversity in our contemporary world: the fluidity and leveling homogeneity with which the most dissimilar quests for meaning occur and the perplexity that arises. They are all *finding* and not only looking for so that these quests are lived as leading somewhere. It is not the nihilistic state of decades ago, where the prominent and dramatic experience was that of there being nothing to find, because God is dead and everything is "Emptier and deeper than you are, O Heaves!" (Baudelaire). Here everyone's thirst and drive move them to some outcome that, rather than fuzzy uncertainty, may be presented with the solidity of "new beliefs." However, these outcomes, which involve decided and extreme commitments, are not only as assorted and publicly available as commercial products but also cannot be placed in any hierarchical order or appraised with any sort of evaluative criteria. Types of diet, exercise regimes, dementia, traditional religion, love, voluntary death—all are leveled as equally valid alternatives in a common space.

However, the radical seriousness of the most fundamental and definitive commitments and expectations does not let them be trivialized by the leveling power of the common space. They keep their personal, authentic character as "pilgrimages to the very bowels of being," even though are broadcasted, commercial alternatives. This generates a particular contrast that constantly emerges throughout the poem. Our deepest longing for deep meaning can be satisfied, but what there is to be found cannot claim to be universally compelling or satisfying, as would seem to be expected from our ultimate concerns. Maximum commitment is not concomitant with ultimacy. Some church or nature, ascetic diets or bourbon, sobrieties and satieties, "Priesthoods and beasthoods" all are pursued by some honest, highly committed friend.

How do we cope with this contemporary shape of pluralism? The flow from one option to the next is so vertiginous and the choices so disparate that it is harder and harder to grasp them and organize them into a coherent, unifying system or narrative. Velocity and impermanence cannot be inscribed in a bigger picture. From above, taking distance to see the planet turning, trying to escape the particularities of each path or choice, there is only blackness. Doubt about how everything fits together, however, neither disturbs the significance of the choices and paths nor calls into question what we can find through them. It is not that the diversity of testimonies counts as an argument against the reality of the divine, like in Hume's famous disjunctive, according to which "in matters of religion, whatever is different is contrary" so that every miracle or appeal to experience that is brought in support of the claims of one religious tradition has "the same force, though more indirectly, to overthrow every other system" (Hume [1748] 2007, p. 106). Diversity here, on the contrary, implies that even if there is no way to unify distinct spiritual quests into a single picture, they are honest and legitimate, requiring no further justification than the force of personal commitment and the extent to which they lead to *finding something*.

Thus, the contrast and perplexities generated by the experience of diversity do not end up in total confusion or despair. The final line remits again to friendship and the beauty and trustworthiness of the seekers. In our contemporary situation, the others, the different, are not any longer those belonging to alien cultures or religions but the closest

friends. Since their alternatives are also ours, alterity becomes internalized in the life path of everyone. The reliability of the loved ones, who are also the different, testifies in favor of their "beliefs." However, this testimony cannot work for the interests of an epistemologist or apologist, who wants to secure the rationality or truth of their traditions. It is personal testimony in the sense of existential commitment with the adventure of looking for the divine, which cannot any longer be assessed in traditional epistemic terms but for its beauty and trustworthiness. Only these two stand out and endure as the nearest, secure pole around which all things transient revolve.

Just like in the case of Heidegger's primordial understanding, alternative practices and paths are forms of contact with a reality that makes them possible and confers trustworthiness to those who, through their commitments, are finding new beliefs. As none of these beliefs can encapsulate and explain diversity by means of a synthetic unity, their legitimacy becomes their authenticity. It is not simply that everything goes uncritically or that all practices or beliefs are equally valid. Rather, no belief or practice will be definitive. For that reason, it is not they that stand out or can be somehow assessed but the seekers, their beauty and trustworthiness. This allows for a maximum degree of plurality while recognizing that spiritual experiences are grounded in reality. The focus moves from the systems to the searches.

In this description, transcendence remains as a challenge to any attempt to totalization, as the ground that allows something to be found and as the mobilizing force that animates the incessant search. This experience of diversity represents a sui generis form of religious experience. What this basic, primordial understanding tells us about ourselves and the divine remains to be conceptually developed in further interpretations.

5. From Epistemology to Spirituality

The experience of diversity in the contemporary world offers an example of pre-theoretical understanding in which what is experienced is not the content of a particular belief but transcendence itself. This motivates an important move from the consideration of conflicting belief systems to alternative practices and quests for meaning as the appropriate locus for understanding the plurality of religious experience. This move corresponds to what can be regarded as a key transformation taking place in contemporary philosophy of religion, which gives priority to spirituality over the classic issues related to the rationality of belief (e.g., Cottingham 2003, 2005). Can spirituality integrate our extension of Heidegger's hermeneutic theory of understanding into a coherent redescription of the diversity of religious experience? To finish this exploratory paper, I would like to delineate some basic elements of a notion of spirituality that could affirmatively answer that question.

Even if the term spirituality nowadays seems vague and diffuse, it has an important advantage: "it does not seem to provoke, straight off, the kind of immediately polarized reaction one finds in the case of religion" (Cottingham 2005, p. 3). Indeed, it allows us to move beyond the elements commonly associated with religion, such as belief and doctrine, with their concomitant emphasis on justification and rationality, toward what can be regarded as the core of "religious" commitment from the perspective of lived experience, that is, a form of life committed to the search for the meaning of life, a deeper self-understanding, personal and communitarian growth and transformation, and similar concerns and involvements. All of these may be embraced without requiring an explicitly endorsed metaphysical doctrine or alliance to a particular tradition or institution.

Some authors highlight inner transformation as the central element of spirituality. In its religious articulation, it is expressed as the central aim of many traditions: *metanoia*, liberation, enlightenment, etc. (cf. Cottingham 2003, 79ff; Hadot 1999, pp. 21, 132; Hick 2004, pp. 32, 300). In the contemporary scenario of pluralism, this inner transformation is linked to exercises and practices coming from a variety of sources and traditions. These practices are aimed at leading towards a kind of experience characterized by its power to illuminate life, conduce flourishing, and, in important cases, motivate communitarian and social welfare.

Now, even if the term "spirituality" is open enough as to include a wide variety of attitudes, lifestyles, and views regarding what constitutes human flourishing, many of which may be regarded as "non-religious" (cf. Taylor 2007, pp. 508, 539), in the sense that is relevant for us, it does not simply merge with all sorts of stances regarding what constitutes a flourishing life. Its core experience implies the awareness of a transcendent, divine reality irreducible both to other dimensions of life, such as psychological processes, and to the doctrinaire interpretations proper to religious traditions. It is this experience of the divine that has the power to enlighten other forms of experience and mobilize inner transformation.

How can we access and describe this experience? The pragmatic efficacy of primary, pre-theoretical understanding works here as a criterion. The experience of the divine in daily life establishes a center to discern other forms of experience, allowing us to make decisions and to orient action in a way that, as William James would say, "pays." However, unlike James's pragmatist theory of truth, it is not primarily ideas or well-established beliefs that help us to deal with or guide us into reality (James [1907] 2000, 93ff) but pre-theoretical feelings and forms of awareness. These include concrete phenomenological contents such as "awe, mercy, sense of connection with the transcendent and compassionate love" (Underwood 2011, p. 31), as well as other typically reported illuminating experiences such as inner peace, joy, motivation to serve, courage to face difficulties, trust, and clarity to make decisions.

Of course, this implies that spiritual experience does not oppose or exclude the formation of or adherence to religious beliefs, insofar as these beliefs attempt to express what the experience discovers. However, it does not require belief as a precondition. Moreover, the aim of spiritual exercises and practices is not the formation of "right beliefs" but rather the discovery of a deep understanding that helps to live.

How does this deep meaning provided by spiritual experience relate to the meaning immanent to the "world" proper to *Dasein's* practical involvement? We saw before that some critics of Heidegger pointed out that his fundamental thesis, according to which the constellations of pragmatically oriented pre-theoretical meanings that constitute the world are for the sake of *Dasein*, would close the possibility of divine transcendence. This may correspond to Heidegger's stance in *Being and Time*, but in our extension of hermeneutic theory to the experience of diversity, we saw that the fluidity of spiritual quests and the impossibility of offering a unifying narrative appear as signs and irruptions of transcendence. All immanence of meaning is permanently questioned, valued, and mobilized by means of the deep understanding gained in spiritual experience. In other words, the immanent meaning of the world is not self-explicatory or self-sufficient but needs to be enlightened by the deeper meaning coming from the experience of the divine.

6. Conclusions

In looking for a way out of the mediational image for the description of religious experience, we arrived at the experience of diversity in the contemporary milieu. The interpretation of Wiman's poem found that the locus of this experience is not a conflict between doctrines or systems but the fluidity of alternative spiritual quests for meaning in a leveling space and the resistance to totalization in larger unities. This movement from conflicting belief systems to alternative non-synthesizable quests is central to our pluralist realist description of religious experience. The mediational picture of knowledge forces us to focus on representations (beliefs, propositions, concepts, images) as the sole vehicle of interpretation and the core problem of religion. Can conflicting beliefs both be true? How do experience and belief relate? What does grant warrant to beliefs? Has religious experience sufficient evidential force to ground beliefs? These kinds of questions are the direct consequence of the mediational image.

If there is a primordial, pre-theoretical form of understanding implicit in the spiritual search, that is, a way in which we are already in a meaningful relationship with the divine before explicit conceptual interpretation, then, on the one hand, the situational, concrete

character of all forms of relationship allows for diversity; and on the other, the necessarily pragmatically oriented nature of our dealings makes them ways to "discover" or encounter the divine "in a definite direction." It is therefore *in* spiritual quests that the challenges of diversity may be appropriately addressed.

Rather than rationality of belief, the issue has to do with the ability of spiritual practices (which include but cannot be reduced to beliefs) to illuminate life, provide meaning to concrete situations, give orientation for action, and lead towards flourishing. The commitment of the seekers to such practices and the extent to which they show this ability in their lives makes them credible. The impossibility of a definitive practice or a total belief system, given the irreducible transcendence of the divine, makes their efforts beautiful. There is here a territory for philosophical exploration which, intertwined with spirituality, may lead to fruitful results away from epistemology.

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The Ecology of Religious Knowledges

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Abstract: Different religious traditions, beliefs, and experiences claim to have epistemic contact with the ultimate source of reality. However, this epistemic claim has encountered one of its most significant obstacles in the initial incompatibility of its multiple accounts. I argue that from the ecology of knowledges, the idea that intentions, body, and physical and social environments are constitutive elements of our experience and knowledge, we can understand both the veridical, as embodied and extended, and pluralistic, as essentially limited, nature of religious experiences and knowledges. I characterize the mystical religious experience as a state of consciousness that (allegedly) allows direct epistemic contact with the supreme reality, articulating its essentially *non-ordinary* nature on the basis of the radical otherness of the sacred realm, namely, its character of being eternal, infinite, and with supreme ontological, ethical, and aesthetic value. According to this proposal, the different religious perspectives are understood as different epistemic approaches dealing with these numinous features in *a gradual continuum* from their most impersonal to their most personal specifications. I conclude that the cognitive relevance of any religious knowledge implies explanations and interventions that, although compatible with, go beyond those of both other religious knowledges and the knowledges of the non-sacred domains.

Keywords: religious plurality; religious objectivity; ecological and embodied knowledges; mystical religious experience

1. Introduction

Different religious traditions, beliefs, and experiences claim to have epistemic contact with the ultimate and supreme source of reality, on which everything else depends. However, this epistemic claim has encountered, among other important obstacles, a main problem in the multiplicity and, at first sight, incompatibility of its different accounts. Most religious mystics and practitioners refer to the (allegedly existent) ultimate nature of reality from apparently contradictory perspectives: among others, as the ultimate emptiness of *Nirvana*, as the vast impersonal consciousness in which everyone participates, or as the infinitely perfect creator. Even personal or theistic religions, although affirming the omnipresence, omnipotency, omniscience, and all goodness of this supreme being, explain him/her through diverse and potentially conflicting accounts: as a great immaterial mind, a merciful mother/father, an immutable and impassible agent, a king or master who should be worshipped with awe and reverence, the love of his associates by whom he is controlled, and even the paramour of many girls and married women. Furthermore, sometimes this being is considered as three divine persons or as a divine couple.

Most of the philosophical proposals that have tried to resolve the problem coincide in favoring either the veridical contact with the supreme reality or the diversity of the accounts. Some authors argue about the former insofar as they affirm that the diversity only concerns the different linguistic forms which try to describe the same reality that is experienced beyond our concepts (Smart 1999; Smith 1987). In such a case, there can be a mystic experiential contact with that reality, but we cannot validly say whether it is an emptiness, a perfect father, or the highest cupid of the beings. From a Kantian perspective, other authors articulate the phenomenon in terms of a unique reality that is multiply

experienced and conceptualized, but that ends up being a noumenon that is beyond our knowledge (Hick 1989, 2004). Others go beyond this and argue that the diversity not only applies to our concepts and experiences but to their objects (Katz 1978), which implies that different religious traditions do not speak about the same reality or that, if they suppose to do so, they end up being mostly false (Alston 1991; Plantinga 2000).

The purpose of this paper is to propose an integrationist framework that can overcome the dilemma by giving validity to both the *veridical contact* and the *plurality* of approaches to divinity. A picture under which the supreme reality can be experienced and understood, following the mystics' own words, in infinite and inexhaustible ways (Gellman 1997): as a merciful mother/father, as a majestic king, as a supreme cupid, and even as an entity with sacred, transcendental, or numinous impersonal features. Borrowing Santos' (2016, 2018) term of the ecology of knowledges, I call this integrationist framework the ecology of religious knowledges, which is based on the idea of an enactive, embodied, extended (Ryle [1949] 2009; Wittgenstein [1953] 1997; Wittgenstein 1969; Taylor 1985; Varela et al. 1991; Clark and Chalmers 1998; Carter et al. 2018; Gallagher 2020), multiple, and essentially limited (Santos 2016, 2018) account of mind, experience, and knowledge, a perspective that understands the diverse religious traditions as sets of embodied and practical knowledges that try to grasp different features and dimensions of the same ultimate reality, constituting an epistemological ecology of multiple, interactive, and potentially complementary accounts.

It is important to note that the existence of a supreme reality is an ontological assumption of the different religious perspectives that delineates the *conditional* character of the arguments that follow, in the sense that *if* the religious nature of the world is really existent, *then* under the following proposal it must be experienced, known, and understood as articulated bellow.

The paper is divided into three main sections. In Section 2, I articulate the ecology of knowledges and its idea of our mind, knowledge, and experience as constitutively enactive, embodied, and extended. In Section 3, I characterize the nature of the mystical religious experience and its epistemological niche. In Section 4, I explain the consequent religious objectivity and plurality that follows from the ecological approach—an epistemic diversity that implies a range of religious explanations and interventions that, although compatible with, go beyond the scientific and common sense knowledges. The paper concludes with some synthesizing remarks.

2. The Ecology of Knowledges

In his many interesting works, the sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos has developed a counter-hegemonic vision of knowledge that has called the "Epistemologies of the South". One of Santos' primary aims is to fight against epistemicide, that is, the process of extermination that the non-hegemonic, non-European, and non-scientific knowledges have suffered and continue suffering since at least the scientific revolution at the beginning of Modernity. The author starts from the idea that social justice depends on cognitive justice, and that "the struggle for cognitive justice will never succeed if it is based only on the idea of a more equitable distribution of scientific knowledge". (Santos 2016, p. 189) The reason is that, on the one hand, this distribution is impossible under the global political and economic conditions of the world and, on the other, scientific knowledge has intrinsic limits that border on other types of rigorous, valuable, and necessary knowledges.

In this sense, one of the central theses of Santos is that the cognitive justice on which social justice depends is only possible within the framework of the ecology of knowledges, that is, the epistemological perspective that considers an ecology of multiple knowledges with different methodologies, contributions, verifiable results, and specifiable consequences within particular contexts and for specific needs.

The idea of the ecology of knowledges is that *scientific knowledge*, which has been considered by Western tradition—what Santos calls the "Epistemologies of the North"—as the only kind of real knowledge, only constitutes an epistemic approach that coexists

alongside many other materially, ethically, and politically valuable knowledges which have been established and developed within different cultures and places in the world, but which has been made invisible and even eradicated by the narrow vision of a colonialist approach. In consequence, Santos' proposal is that social justice will only be possible to the extent that the different non-scientific knowledges come to be recognized as equally valid and as epistemologically legitimate tools that *complement* the scientific Western methodology. Now, this seemingly simple turn changes the epistemological picture radically, as the criteria for the recognition of truth, correctness, and usefulness are significantly transformed.

The two fundamental principles of the ecology of knowledges is the idea that all kind of knowledge is (*i*) incomplete by principle, and (*ii*) enactive, situated, and embodied. In the first place, Santos affirms that the "principle of incompleteness of all knowledges is the precondition for epistemological dialogues and debates among different knowledges" (Santos 2016, p. 189). According to Santos, all knowledges have internal and external limits:

The internal limits concern restrictions regarding the kinds of intervention in the world they render possible. Such restrictions result from what is not yet known, but may eventually be known, by a given kind of knowledge. The external limits concern what is not and cannot be known by a given kind of knowledge. From the point of view of the ecology of knowledges, the external limits imply acknowledging alternative interventions only rendered possible by other kinds of knowledge. One of the specific features of hegemonic knowledge is that they only recognize internal limits (Santos 2016, p. 189).

Santos' idea is that both types of incompleteness and limitation are essential to all kinds of knowledges, but that the recognition of the external limits makes the difference between a traditional epistemology and one centered on the concept of ecology and diversity.

We can point out that there are reasons indicating the historical, current, and plausibly future existence of a variety of empirical knowledges because we find, on the one hand, a multiplicity of physical sciences that, although deploying a common methodology of intervention and prediction with essential mathematical support, do not seem to be mutually reducible (see, for instance, Leggett 1987; Van Gulick 1993; Cartwright 1997; Hoffmann 2007; Wimsatt 2007; Morales 2018; Dupré 2021); and, on the other hand, a multiplicity of traditional, local, and fundamentally pragmatic knowledges traditionally taught within most ancestral cultures of the world, solving specific problems in satisfactory and rigorous ways in relation, for example, to the preservation of biodiversity, the social and political balance of communities, and the moral, psychological, and spiritual development of individuals.

One of Santos' most interesting arguments about the necessary external limitations of all type of knowledges is based on the second characteristic of the ecology of knowledges already mentioned, that is, an enactive, embodied, situated, and extended conception of knowledge: the idea that there is neither incorporeal nor passive knowledge, a knowledge that does not presuppose particular needs, intentions, practices, and context, the elements that assign its position, nature, function, and objectivity. Inasmuch as all knowledges irreducibly presuppose an intentional, bodily, and social point of view, there cannot be a knowledge that can account for the totality of the world, as for this account the knowledge of the world itself would have to become an object and, thus, would be examined from another point of view that starts from different purposes, interests, bodily and/or cultural contexts and practices that, in turn, should be examined from a further perspective, and so on, leading us to an infinite regress with an impossible completeness.

We can put it in other words and say that all knowledges presuppose a world-picture (Wittgenstein 1969), a situated pre-comprehension (Heidegger 1962), and a practical background (Taylor 1985) that constitute a subjectivity. Under this idea it follows that any knowledge, either scientific, ancestral, artisanal, spiritual, etc., can only constitute a partial approximation of reality. Therefore, there must be a multiplicity of epistemic niches throughout which we grasp different regions and levels of reality.

We can see that the ecology of knowledges agrees with the enactive, embodied, and extended approaches of the last decades in philosophy which argue that the mind (in its

different cognitive, epistemic, emotional, and experiential aspects) deeply depends on elements that go beyond the agent's brain, such as her body and her interactions with the physical, social, and cultural world, insofar as these factors are *partially constitutive*, that is, *necessary and essential components* for its existence and function. Under this perspective, our mind, knowledge, and experience are located, not only in our head, but beyond it, in the interactions of our brain with processes that occur throughout our body and the environment that surrounds us (Varela et al. 1991; Clark and Chalmers 1998; Carter et al. 2018; Gallagher 2020).

One of the reiterated criticisms of the enactive, embodied, and extended approaches are their seeming confusion regarding the difference between the causal and constitutive connections among mind, body, and world. Authors such as Block (2005) and Adams and Aizawa (2009) argue that the multiplicity of empirical evidence about the dependence between mind, body, and world that these perspectives indicate as the basis of their arguments does not really show more than a causal and, so, contingent connection.

Let us remember that the standard vision—that we can call neurocentrism, the theory that scientists and philosophers assume by default (Vidal and Ortega 2017)—considers the brain as the sufficient physical basis for the appearance (supervenience) of the mental phenomena and capacities supposedly based on empirical evidence. For example, we find cases of people who have pain experiences from the direct stimulation of certain brain areas without having any corresponding bodily damage. We also know that sensations in the so-called phantom limbs are common in people who have been recently amputated. Neurologists are able to produce visual sensations such as the illusion of light flashes through direct neuronal stimulation. We also know the famous case of Phineas Gage, who in an accident suffered severe brain damage that led to noticeable changes in his personality, temperament, and moral behavior. The standard view takes this kind of cases as evidence to affirm that the functional brain is the physical-biological sufficient basis for our mind's existence and dynamics.

However, the neurocentric assertion of the standard theory is not implied by the adduced empirical facts just as we cannot affirm, let us say, that the engine (or any other part) of a car is sufficient for the existence and operation of the car, even when systematic modifications in the former entail systematic modifications in the second. However, beyond this point and in every case, we can show how the body and environment are playing preponderant roles for the mental phenomena in question. I agree with some authors who argue that the standard vision has not in fact depended on cerebral scientific knowledge, as it has originated in the changes of the notions of *person*, *subject*, and *identity* since the beginning of Modernity, when in fact there was no relevant empirical evidence for its claims (Vidal and Ortega 2017). More than an empirical theory, the neurocentric vision can be seen as a research program and a general world-picture with certain dualistic, analytic, and atomistic methodologies and presuppositions deeply incorporated by our culture and identity since that time about ourselves and our relations with our bodies and the world in which we live.

So, my particular proposal and articulation, as a working and empirical hypothesis, is that our mind, knowledge, and experience emerge from the interactions between our brain, body, and physical and social environments and that, therefore, these elements are the constitutive elements from which the former *emerge as their irreducible dynamical organization and structure*. In a nutshell, emergence refers to the idea that some entities of our world (properties, events, substances, and so on) are fundamental, in the sense of being non-reducible to, not completely grounded in, and still ontologically dependent on (because partially constituted by) other things (see, for instance, Morgan 1923; Broad 1925; Papineau 2008; Barnes 2013; Morales 2018, chp. 3). My proposal of the ecological emergence of mind is grounded in the almost universally accepted (at least partially) holistic character of our mind and subjectivity, which necessarily connects every of our mental states with other mental states and with our bodily conditions and reactions, behaviors, intentional actions, and meaningful interactions with our physical and social environments. Among different

sources of the holistic character of mind we find the well accepted Ramsey-Lewis method for the—whether a priori and/or a posteriori—functional inter-definition of our mental events, physical conditions, and interaction with the world (see, for example, Block 1980; Lewis 1980; Levine 1993; Kim 2011, chp. 6). Another related source is the idea of the holistic character of our mental ascriptions (see, for instance, Davidson 1967; Dennett 1987). And still another is the already mentioned claim that our mental states necessarily presuppose a world-picture (Wittgenstein 1969), a situated pre-comprehension (Heidegger 1962), and a practical background (Taylor 1985) that enable their specific senses and roles (for a detailed elaboration of the thesis that our minds emerge from brain, body, and physical and social environments according to a non-reducible physicalist perspective, (see Morales 2021, chps. 4 and 6).

Given that our mind, knowledge, and experience emerge from the dynamical interactions between our brain, body, and physical and social environments, one of the fundamental tenets of the ecological perspective is that our practical and experiential knowledges (above all, our bodily sense and bodily experience of the word—see Merleau-Ponty ([1975] 2012) precede and ground our conceptual, theoretical, and linguistically articulated knowledges. Practical and experiential knowledges precede theory in the sense that the goal of all theory is to improve practices and experiences which are given beforehand, and they ground it in the sense that theory itself is a sophisticated practice and experience that makes sense only as an element within a larger structure of intentions, presuppositions, purposes, and established practices.

For the ecological epistemic approach, all linguistically articulated knowledges, whether theoretical (such as the scientific), or mythological, analogical, or poetic (such as those found in the sacred writings of most religions and mystical traditions), imply constitutively knowing how to move in particular contexts or niches, knowing how to derive certain things, how to make them consistent with other things, and how to "put them into practice," that is, connect them *correctly* with other intentional attitudes, thoughts, emotions, and activities in our interaction with the physical and social environments (Ryle [1949] 2009; Wittgenstein [1953] 1997; Hetherington 2011; Stalnaker 2012; Wiggins 2012).

Another crucial principle of the ecological perspective of knowledge is that our experiences, beliefs, and general mind are *fundamentally objective*. As our activity and interaction with the world are constitutive elements of our (both implicit and explicit) experiences and knowledges, but also of our intentions, desires and, in short, of our subjectivity, we reach the phenomenological discovery that we have always been interacting with the world and the objects that we know, desire, and experience.

On this account we can understand how our beliefs and experiences are veridical by their very nature, and why error only makes sense within a set of massively true beliefs, thoughts, and experiences (Davidson 1986). As our activities and interactions with the physical and social (and purportedly spiritual) world are constitutive of our experience, knowledge, and subjectivity, the correctness and incorrectness of these interactions constitute the criteria for the correctness and incorrectness, truth and falsehood, veracity and illusion of our experiences, beliefs, and knowledge. It is in this way that we can say that the veracity of our perceptions and beliefs that, for example, we are facing a tree with certain characteristics, is determined by the correctness and incorrectness of the interactions (for example, the interventions) that we have and can have with the tree that derive from the possession of such perceptions and beliefs.

3. The Religious Mystical Experience and Its Epistemic Niche

One of the defining characteristics of the mystical or ecstatic experience of religious nature is its noetic character: its pretension to refer to the objective reality in a direct, non-mediated way and, even more, to come into direct contact and know the *ultimate* and *supreme* nature of reality, on which all other things depend. As we have seen, this epistemic claim has encountered significant obstacles. One of the most outstanding problems is the multiplicity of these experiences and their various religious and cultural articulations

which seem to be mutually incompatible, since a large part of them refer to the ultimate ontological nature of reality from apparently contradictory perspectives.

We have seen that the philosophical articulations that attempt to solve this situation end up without a satisfactory account of the epistemic contact that different religious perspectives assert about a single ontologically supreme reality. My proposal is that the ecology of knowledges can account for this phenomenon insofar as it allows us to understand the different religious approaches as different epistemic niches that come into contact with the multiple features and ontological levels of a single supreme and sacred reality.

There are different characterizations about the mystical, ecstatic experience, and its relationship with the religious experience, belief, and practices. Mark Webb (2017), for example, argues that the religious experience defines a broader category than that of the mystical experience, because the latter refers to a type of state of consciousness that is achieved through a practice specifically carried out for that purpose. However, following the common usage of the concept of mystical experience in the religious context, we can consider that the experiences of Saint Paul, Arjuna, Moses, and Muhammad, among others, constitute paradigmatic cases of mystical and ecstatic religious experiences that have not been achieved through specific practices. Instead, we can distinguish mystical experiences from the broader category of religious experiences, noting that the latter can refer to any type of experience that is developed within a context of religious and spiritual purposes. For example, the experience of a believer confessing her sins to a priest, of a family baptizing their first child, of a novice Buddhist practicing meditation, or even of an atheist, agnostic, or non-dogmatic impersonalist who reads Baruch Spinoza's *Ethics* in a transcendental way, as in fact has commonly happened.

In general terms, we can understand mystical experience as a state of consciousness that (allegedly) *allows direct and privileged epistemic contact and connection with the supreme ontological reality*, on which the other entities depend. And we can say that it is because this access that the different mystical and religious traditions consider the mystical experience as the ultimate goal to be achieved, whether through rigorous practice, pure gift, divine mercy, "luck," or "accident."

But in addition to (purportedly) having a direct epistemic contact with the supreme reality, the mystical experience is characterized by being an essentially *non-ordinary* state of consciousness, which is not reached through the sensory and perceptual capacities that *we use in our daily lives*. A type of access to reality that in this sense, as some authors have put it, can be termed as trans-empirical, trans-cognitive, or trans-phenomenal (see, for instance, Tripurari 2011; Satyanarayana 2015). Following the same idea, Jerome Gellman characterizes it as "A (purportedly) super sense-perceptual or sub sense-perceptual experience granting acquaintance of realities or states of affairs that are of a kind not accessible by way of sense perception, somatosensory modalities, or standard introspection". (Gellman 2019, p. 3)

This characterization is directly related to that which anthropologists and theorists of shamanism have given to the experiences underwent by shamans. In his classic treatment, Eliade ([1951] 1974) defines shamanism itself throughout the interconnection between some practices and a particular kind of experience, that is, as the archaic techniques of ecstasy. The shaman is that individual who, through very diverse techniques (ranging from the consumption of entheogenic plants, fasting, vigil, dancing, singing, reciting mantras, exercising physical postures, and more) achieves an *altered, modified, non-ordinary state of consciousness or experience* that allows her to come into contact with a non-ordinary reality, a reality of "the beyond," the dead, the spirits, the gods, the Absolute.

The mystical experience is that state of non-ordinary experience that allows direct epistemic contact with the supreme reality, with the reality or the world of "the beyond." But as it should be clear from this characterization, the world of "the beyond" clearly refers to the beyond of what people in general and throughout their common states of consciousness and experience can come to grasp; not to an ontological or metaphysical beyond

disconnected from our common reality because, then, it would have no consequences on our world and would be both useless and impossible to evaluate.

Since the alleged reality, or features and levels of reality, that the religious mystical experience epistemically grasps cannot be known through ordinary perceptual and cognitive means, it follows that they cannot be known either through *standard* scientific experimentation, so science, as we know it, cannot be an effective means of accounting for this aspect of reality. If this supreme reality exists, there must be special epistemic niches for its unveiling, precisely the niches that religious traditions claim to constitute.

However, the mystical experience cannot be said to be non-ordinary simply because it is difficult to produce, or because most people cannot experience it (at least systematically and persistently), nor simply because it seeks to grasp the ultimate reality. These are only partial reasons for its non-ordinary quality. The main cause for its peculiarity is the nature of the reality that seeks to perceive and know, a nature so special that it causes the person who experiences it to be radically transformed. This purported reality, or these features and aspects of reality, have a different nature and, in a certain way, are opposed (maybe complementary) to those that we find in both everyday and scientific life and experience. Some of the non-ordinary features that different traditions and scholars claim to find in this reality are:

1. It is eternal, and its time takes an almost paradoxical character (James 1897; Gómez 2020).
2. It can be or seem contradictory in itself (even within the same religious tradition and the same mystical experience) (Stace 1961; Staal 1975).
3. Therefore, it is often considered as ineffable and/or inconceivable and/or unknowable (see, for example, *Tao Te King* I (Laozi 1972); *Kena Upanishad* III (Sharvananda 1920); James (1958); Teresa of Ávila (1961); Rahner (1966); Ricoeur (1978); Bodhi (2005); Rocca (2004)).
4. It is infinite, unlimited, open, progressive.
5. It is beyond the physical, the material, the corporeal.
6. So it is sometimes considered as an internal reality, as when it is affirmed that infinity, the universe, or God are found in our heart or in our consciousness.
7. Sometimes it is considered to be everywhere, internally and externally.
8. Yet, it is considered as the wholly other (e.g., Otto 1958).
9. As we have mentioned, it has an ontological supremacy: everything else derives from and depends on it.
10. Furthermore, (having knowledge and contact with) it is the ultimate goal of human and any other existence which has meaning, intentionality, and teleology.
11. So, it is the meaning of life, reality, and the world as a whole.
12. Thus, it is from where all things derive their meaning and ethical value.
13. Therefore, it has a supreme existential relevance (James 1897; Tillich 1957).
14. Additionally, at the same time, it has a supreme aesthetic relevance and value. As the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* says, "*raso vai saḥ*," the Absolute is aesthetic rapture, the ultimate aesthetic experience in transcendence (Tripurari 2011, p. 79).

We might summarize the main characteristics of this reality in the claim that it is eternal, infinite, and with supreme ontological, ethical, and aesthetic value. This is why the mystical experience that allows its epistemic contact is seen as a state of enlightenment that places the experimenter in a radical process of vital and human transformation, which carries not only ontological and epistemological, but also existential, ethical, social, and political consequences. Likewise, it is for this very reason that this experience is very difficult and unusually underwent.

Now we can better understand why neither everyday nor scientific experience and knowledge (under the usual senses of the terms) can, by definition, account for a reality with these aspects, since they are devoted to interact with objects and situations which are spatiotemporal finite, with derivative ontological relevance (since they are causal results of other objects and situations), and with secondary ethical and aesthetic value (if they come to have it). As we have said, in case the supreme reality comes to exist, there must be

special epistemic niches to grasp it, special intentions, beliefs, practices, and interactions that in spite of being non-ordinary, as we will explain later, must maintain a necessary connection with both scientific and ordinary epistemic domains and niches.

While religious mystical experience is not ordinary in the articulated senses, it is important to understand its own diversity and multiplicity. Depending on the circumstances, motivations, techniques, practices, and its physical, social, and cultural contexts (to which we will return in the next section), religious mystical experiences have a multiplicity of possibilities: they can be relatively superficial (as when someone has an ephemeral experience of the infinity of the world), unique or repeated, progressive and intermittent (for example, as results of the different practices and techniques that we find in most religious traditions), radical (such as those of Saint Paul and Moses, or of those people who have had near-death experiences and who transform their lives afterwards) and, at best and probably as a result of an intentional process, steady, permanent, and progressively profound.

Mutati mutandis, something similar can be said about the epistemic niches that mystical experiences partially (but necessarily, due to the thesis of the ecology of knowledges and its essentially embodied, emergent, and holistic conception of mind) constitute. In this sense, sacred emotions, beliefs, intentions, and the like, in the same way as mystical experiences, can also be unique, repetitive, gradual, steady, permanent, and progressively profound. Likewise, these sacred intentional states, insofar as are really referring to the numinous or sacred reality, must be intentional states *partially but necessarily constituted* by (because emerge from) the *real physical, bodily, and social interactions* that the subject has with the numinous features of reality and their practical implications through the different domains.

4. Religious Objectivity and Plurality

From the beginning we have wondered about the concept of religious experience and knowledge as a type of epistemic contact with a unique and objective ultimate reality, but a reality that is constituted by multiple features that can be experienced and known from perspectives that have been traditionally understood as being in tension: aspects such as the ultimate emptiness of *Nirvana*, the vast impersonal consciousness in which we all participate, and the infinitely perfect creator.

According to the ecology of knowledges we have proposed that the world is unique and multiple at the same time, that is, a reality that is made up of multiple features at different levels and dimensions; a reality that the different locally and contextually constructed knowledges can reveal in their different practical and experiential approaches. This epistemic conception is based on the fundamentally embodied and agencial character of human knowledge and mind, which leads us to an essential incompleteness for all epistemic approaches that enables their dialogue, potential complementarity, and mutual enrichment.

As we have explained, according to this perspective there must be a necessary interaction between the subjects and the knowable reality, insofar as such interaction is constitutive part of their epistemic states. Under this proposal, if religious aspects and levels of reality are really existent and having their defining unlimited character, then there must be a multiplicity of epistemic niches from which they can be known in an essentially practical and experiential way. These different niches will be constituted by the techniques, capacities, interests, purposes, beliefs, presuppositions, world-pictures, and the contexts and cultures of the different subjects. And these elements will dispose the subjects (although they will not determine them, due to their emergent—non-reductive—nature) to have certain types of interactions and, therefore, certain types of experiences and knowledges in which certain features of the ultimate reality are disclosed instead of others.

Bearing in mind the diversity and multiplicity of the mystical experiences, both throughout and within each religious tradition (and even for the same individual, as we have indicated), we can analyze the role that the social and cultural context may be playing in every case. For example, on some occasions the social and cultural context encourages and seeks the development of mystical techniques and capacities from an early age of many

or some of the individuals. This is the case of notably religious and mystical communities (from Buddhist and Christian to shamanic ones). In these cases, the communities predispose and equip individuals with certain techniques, through certain physical, intellectual, and spiritual practices, under the guidance of those more advanced in this knowledge, and with the help of sacred scriptures and/or inherited mythologies that outline and nurture the kind of experiential and practical knowledge that the supposed interaction with the divine implies.

In special cases such as those of Saint Paul, Moses, and Siddhartha, the social contexts play an important but different role: they establish a background that is criticized and overcame, but only on which the type of experience and knowledge that these individuals reach can make sense and where a (purported) direct interaction with the divine is shown as a more salient factor. From the ecology of knowledges and assuming the existence of the sacred world, we can say that in mostly secular, agnostic, or atheistic cultural contexts, as is the case in contemporary Europe, mystical experiences and knowledges will tend to be more diffuse and less common, although not null, as there will always be personal or contextual interests and incentives that may motivate their search and development.

On the basis of the different niches and the various possibilities for the appearance and development of mystical religious knowledges, the senses of eternity, infinity, and maximal ontological, ethical, and aesthetic value take on very particular specifications. We can speak about a *continuous* movement in the specification of these aspects that *gradually* flows from an *impersonal* border towards a *theistic* or *personal* pole and that can return in a back and forth motion. Impersonal experiences of the sacred, such as the absolute union with God in Christian mysticism, the melting of consciousness in the Hindu Brahman, and the annihilation of identity in the Buddhist void or *Nirvana* are experiences of a type of absolute "eradication" of the multiplicity and difference of the world (or, in an opposite but complementary way, experiences of "eradication" of the unity and permanence of any entity, where multiplicity and becoming are understood as the only thing "permanent" and real); experiences arising within epistemic niches that emphasize the common characteristics of the finite elements of the world and their interconnection with the infinite whole, rather than the features that differentiate these elements within (and with) the whole, giving an ontological, ethical, and aesthetic priority to the former over the latter.

Meanwhile, at the other pole (of the gradual transition from impersonalism) we find the personal or theistic experiences of the divine, characterized by different types of interactions with the different personal forms and traits of the absolute or God, as in the cases of Judaism, Islam, Christianity, and Vishnavism or devotional Vedanta. In these cases, throughout an interaction with its intentional object, the (purported) religious experiences and knowledges discover in the supreme person(s) the ultimate source of existence, ethics, and aesthetics and, accordingly, configure their ultimate goal in the progressive development of *divine love* as a type of deeper mystical experience and as their ultimate stage of wisdom, goodness, and beauty.

We can see that under the ecological approach we can understand both the veridical, cognitive, and objective (as embodied and extended) character, as well as the pluralistic and diverse (as necessarily limited) nature of the religious experience and knowledge. Under his proposal, Gellman argues about a similar picture that resorts to the key concept of divine infinitude or God's "inexhaustible fullness" in order to harmonize the different and apparently contradictory, incompatible, or conflicting religious traditions and experiences. He affirms:

In at least some mystical experiences of God, a subject experiences what is presented as proceeding from an intimation of infinite plenitude. Given this feature, a claim to experience a personal ultimate, for example, can be squared with an experience of an impersonal ultimate: one "object," identified as God or Nirguna Brahman, can be experienced in its personal attributes or in its impersonal attributes, from out of its inexhaustible plenitude. (Gellman 2019, pp. 22–23, see also Gellman 1997, chp. 4)

Although agreeing with Gellman, we have argued that this infinity or inexhaustible plenitude of God allowing the compatibility of apparently contradictory approaches must be complemented with a certain conception of the subject, since compatibility and integration of *perspectives* can only have a place under an account of knowledge and experience that articulates their necessary embodiment and partiality.

So the ecology of knowledges is a pluralistic and integrationist account of the different religious experiences, knowledges, and traditions. However, it also has to give an account of the connections of religious knowledges with other types of knowledges, in particular, with scientific and common sense experience and knowledge.

The ecological approach is based on a non-reductive, emergentist, embodied, and extended conception of mind and agency that has a conception of reality as constituted by multiple features, levels, and domains, wherein the function and scope of the different physical and special (among them, social and human) sciences must be understood as limited, collaborative, and complementary (see, for instance, Leggett 1987; Van Gulick 1993; Cartwright 1997; Hoffmann 2007; Wimsatt 2007; Morales 2018; Dupré 2021). I think that this emergentist and layered picture of reality and its epistemological consequences should be extended to the different religious perspectives as different approaches that deal with the upward and downward structure of the multiple (and inexhaustible) levels of the numinous reality, from its/her/his most impersonal aspects (throughout the described gradual continuum) to its/her/his most personal traits (for the interaction and integration of impersonal and personal traits of divinity in Asian religions see, for instance, Tripurari 2011; Satyanarayana 2015; Holdrege 2015; Holdrege and Pechilis 2017).

According to this picture, the function and scope of the different religious traditions should be also understood as essentially limited, collaborative, and integrative in their attempt to know the different numinous layers that naturally extend the ontologically structural organization going from microphysics to the human and social reality. Now, since it is precisely in the realm of human agency and psychology that the convergence of physical, animal, and human, as well as spiritual and (plausibly) divine spheres is most clearly and directly shown, it is natural to think that an empirical evaluation of any religious claim should begin with their psychological, ethical, and social (and, therefore, behavioral, and neurophysiological) implications.

In this sense, and following the non-reductive, pluralistic and integrationist character of the different epistemic approaches to reality that follows from the ecological perspective, the empirical evaluation of any religious claim should conform with at least the following requirements, in such way that: (*i*) it should propose human dynamics and consequences necessarily consistent with what the different (as other religious, common sense, and scientific) knowledges know about them; (*ii*) it should sustain their own "predictions" and interventions, which cannot be reducible to those given by other (as other religious, common sense, and scientific) knowledges; and (*iii*) it can be used by the other different knowledges to expand their range of action, explanation, and intervention.

A more detailed articulation of the evaluation and the necessary interaction between religious and other types of knowledges are outside the scope of this paper. Nonetheless, here we have pointed out some directions in which we can work on, discuss, and improve, in order to deepen our understanding of religious experiences, knowledges, and traditions.

5. Conclusions

We have seen that the different religious traditions, beliefs, and experiences claim to have epistemic contact with the ultimate and supreme source of reality. However, this epistemic claim has encountered one of its most significant obstacles in the initial incompatibility of its multiple accounts. The ecology of knowledges is the epistemic approach that argues about an essentially enactive, embodied, and extended conception of the subject, taking intentions, body, and physical and social environments as constitutive elements of our knowledge and experience. So, we have seen that under this conception we can understand both the veridical, cognitive, and objective (as embodied and extended)

character, as well as the pluralistic and diverse (as essentially limited) nature of the religious experiences and knowledges. However, what kind of knowledge is a religious knowledge? Furthermore, how is it connected with other kinds of knowledges?

Different traditions and authors characterize the religious mystical experience as a state of consciousness that (allegedly) allows direct epistemic contact with the supreme reality. We have found that it is a kind of conscious state or experience that is essentially *non-ordinary,* as the features of the reality that it seeks to grasp are essentially non-ordinary, and so special that they require a radical subjective transformation in order to contact them—features such as eternity, infinitude, and supreme ontological, ethical, and aesthetic value. According to this conception of the numinous realm, we concluded that neither everyday nor scientific experience and knowledge are appropriate to explain it, since they are devoted to interact with objects and situations which are spatiotemporal finite, with derivative ontological relevance, and secondary ethical and aesthetic value.

Finally, we talked about *impersonal and personal poles* on a *gradual continuum* of the specification of the sacred traits, in such a way that religious perspectives can be seen as different epistemic approaches dealing with the (inexhaustible) features of the numinous reality, from its/her/his most impersonal to its/her/his most personal aspects; a reality that can be seen as naturally connecting and extending the ontological structure that goes from microphysics to the human and social reality. On the basis of this picture, the ecological approach argued that central part of the empirical evaluation of religious experiences and knowledges must imply a range of explanation, action, and intervention on human agency and psychology that, although compatible with, goes beyond that proposed by the knowledges of the non-sacred domains, from which our human experiences, knowledges, and interactions with the divinity emerge.

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The Unique Concept of God in Donghak (東學, Eastern Learning): An Emanation of the Religious Experiences of Suun Choe Jeu

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Abstract: The religious experience of Suun Choe Jeu (水雲 崔濟愚, 1824–1864) was a decisive starting point for the Donghak (東學, Eastern Learning) religion. This paper illustrates how Suun's religious experiences—which are both dualistic and monistic—are foundational to the Donghak conception of God and are integral to Donghak's unique religious and ethical framework. Whereas the dualistic experiences are manifested both in Suun's first encounter with *Sangje* in 1860 and in *Cheonsa mundap* (天師問答, "conversation with the Heavenly Master"), the monistic experiences are demonstrated in Suun's *Osim jeuk yeoshim* (吾心汝心, "my mind is your mind"). Suun's monistic and dualistic experiences emerge as the monistic and dualistic aspects of Donghak's conception of God. In Donghak, God is both the object of a dualistic relationship with a human being and the object of a monistic or mystical union that confirms the ontological identity between God and humankind. Acknowledging the relationship between Suun's religious experiences and Donghak's concept of God reveals the weakness of the view that Donghak is merely a syncretism of Eastern and Western religions. Rather, Suun's religious experiences are formative to Donghak's unique conception of God; therefore, they are crucial to appreciating its religious and ethical creativity.

Keywords: Suun Choe Jeu; religious experience; William James; Donghak; concept of God; mysticism

1. Introduction: Religion and Religious Experience

The extraordinary and religious experiences of the individual play a significant role in the founding of a religion. The example of Buddha is a case in point. The religious experiences of believers that help to maintain and develop the religion are also significant (Smart 1983).[1] The early scriptures of Donghak (東學, Eastern Learning), which mark the religious experiences of Suun Choe Jeu (水雲 崔濟愚, 1824–1864), illustrate this fact. Suun's religious experiences in 1860 provided the starting point of the Donghak Movement.

Previous studies on Donghak have largely focused on its political and social aspects rather than on its religious aspects (Oh 2005). Suun's religious experiences are overlooked; instead, a sociopolitical approach that analyzes his person and impact predominates (Im 2015). To be sure, the Donghak Peasant Revolution of 1894 demonstrates the sociopolitical impact of Donghak. However, in seeking to fully understand the multidimensionality and uniqueness of the Donghak movement, Suun's religious experiences must be considered (Han 2004 and Kim 2007). The religious dimensions of Donghak are best encapsulated in its concept of God. Donghak's concept of God is distinct from that of the dominant religions of the time, in many aspects. It encompasses a personified God, dualism, and monism, extensively. This paper underscores the fact that the God presented in Donghak was directly influenced by Suun's religious experiences.

By focusing on the connection between Suun's religious experiences and Donghak's conception of God, we will see how Suun profoundly impacted the religious ideas of Donghak. Indeed, an understanding of Suun's religious experiences, based upon Donghak, both explains and highlights the unique aspects of Donghak. Donghak is neither a mere

syncretism of existing religions of the time nor is it a blending of *Yubulseon* (儒佛仙, Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism). Rather, Donghak offers a distinct conception of God that emerges from Suun's unique experiences, weaving together both dualism and monism.

The paper proceeds as follows: after reviewing some of the literature focused on the religious aspects of Donghak, the religious experiences of Suun are examined in detail. William James' (1994) *Varieties of Religious Experience* provides a framework for this analysis. After examining Suun's various religious experiences, I then turn to a discussion of Donghak's concept of God. As I will show, the fact that Suun's experiences have both dualistic and monistic aspects is integral to Donghak's unique conception of God, and therewith to its authentic normative framework. A fundamental conclusion of this paper is that Donghak is an authentic religion precisely because it arose from the personal religious experiences of Suun.

2. Studies on the Concept of God in Donghak

The existing relevant studies can be organized into three categories. The first group includes studies that address the correlation between Donghak and existing Eastern religions, such as Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. These studies primarily focus on the impact that these pre-existing religions had on Donghak. Among these research papers are numerous studies that investigate Confucianism's influence upon Donghak (Cha 2003; Cho 1990; Im 2003; Kim 2002; Park 2000). This is a reasonable approach, considering that Confucianism was the dominant religion in Joseon[2] when Donghak emerged. The primary conclusion of this research is that Confucianism had a significant influence on Donghak. Notably, some papers argue that Donghak is a creative revaluation of Confucianism, with a focus on social revolution (Cho 1990).

A second group of studies focuses on the relationship between Donghak and *Seohak* (西學, Christianity). The majority of these studies are undertaken by theologians with Christian backgrounds and are concerned with comparing the concepts of God presented in the two religions. Scholars working within this group arrive at a variety of conclusions. While some conclude that Donghak was significantly influenced by Christianity, others conclude that Suun's personal religious experience is responsible for the similarities between the Donghak and *Seohak* conceptions of God (Kim 1974b, 2003; Kwon 2004; Lee 1996).

The last group of studies deals directly with Suun's religious experiences. These studies presume that Suun's experiences in 1860 played a decisive role in his founding of Donghak. In interpreting Suun's religious experiences, these studies utilize a diverse set of concepts, such as shamanic trances and mystical unions (Mun 1996; Chang 1987; Han 2004). Notably, there have been attempts in the psychiatric field to interpret Suun's religious experiences from a psychological viewpoint (Kim 1974a, 1998; Lee 1974, 2008, 2011).

However, this research fails to adequately reflect the impact of Suun's religious experiences upon the development of Donghak's religious dimensions; specifically, on its concept of God (Kim 2002, 2005).[3] Furthermore, few studies have made detailed comparisons between Suun's various religious experiences or have attempted to analyze their meaning, with the exception of his encounter with *Sangje*[4] (上帝, Supreme Being or God) in 1860, which is often the only experience reviewed by research papers. This is surprising, given the widely accepted fact that Suun's religious experiences served as the starting point of Donghak.

I argue that Suun's religious experiences had a profound impact on his conception of God, as presented in Donghak. That is to say, there is a direct cause-and-effect relationship between the two. In particular, the diversity of religious experiences that Suun experienced led to the uniqueness of his idea of God. Therefore, it is necessary to pay more attention to the different types of religious experiences and their meanings. Moreover, Suun's religious experiences played a significant role in formulating the ethical codes and the overall content of Donghak.

3. The Religious Experiences of Suun

3.1. Religion and Religious Experience

Central to the academic study of religion are those human experiences that are classified as "religious" (James 1994).[5] But what counts as a religious experience? The very concept of "religious" seems difficult to define (Smith 1998). Indeed, the definition of "religion" differs significantly according to era and context, making it all the more difficult to determine a singular definition of a "religious experience."

The recitation of Buddhist scriptures would likely not be deemed a religious experience by most Christians. Even within the same religious tradition, opinions may differ on what counts as a religious experience. The act of worship, for example, seems to be a clear case of a religious experience. However, it is not easy to identify what makes worship religious. Is one's subjective experience essential to religious worship, or does a particular action count as one of "religious worship", irrespective of one's subjective state? Does an individual need to feel "inspired" in any and all acts of religious worship, or are an individual's emotions irrelevant?

To clarify such ambiguities, this paper uses the term "religious experience" as proposed by William James (1842–1910), who believed it to be "a relationship an individual develops with an unseen world" (James 1994, p. 36). James goes on to explain the importance of the "unseen" to religious experience, noting that "the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto" is essential to religious experience (James 1994, p. 53). James expounds upon his definition:

> Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine. (James 1994, p. 31)

Thus, a religious experience is an event in which an unseen metaphysical reality or immaterial reality is revealed in the consciousness of an individual. Therefore, rituals, acts of worship, recitations of religious doctrines, and the reading aloud of religious scriptures are not necessarily defined as religious experiences by default. Instead, the defining characteristic of a religious experience is that it results in an alteration to the ordinary state of an individual's consciousness.

In this context, the concept of "altered states of consciousness" (ASCs) can be applied to the definition of a religious experience (Tart 1990). This is a phenomenon in which an individual's ordinary consciousness is altered, so as to bring forth intense emotional changes and epistemological insight (Wach 1958).[6] In short, religious experiences serve as opportunities to experience an unseen reality, during a conscious state that is altered from the ordinary state. In his work, James goes on to assert that religious experiences are the source of diverse religious expressions, such as religious doctrines, rituals and myths (James 1994, pp. 34–37).

3.2. Dualistic Religious Experience of Suun

Let us now connect these ideas of James to the religious experiences of Suun Choe Jeu. Suun was born in 1824 to a ruined but aristocratic family. Rather than pursuing social advancement, he roamed the country focusing on religious practices until he was 31. Donghak-related literature testifies to the fact that Suun dedicated himself to conducting religious practices, prior to his encounter with *Sangje* (Pyo 2004; Yun 2004). For example, in 1858, he prayed for 49 days in 'Tranquility (*Jeongmyeol*, 寂滅) Cave'.

However, his religious practice did not result in any of the achievements for which he had hoped. In 1859, when he was 36, Suun returned to his hometown of *Yongdam* (龍潭) in *Kyeongju* where he continued to carry out ascetic practices. It was in the following year of 1860 that Suun encountered *Sangje (Cheonju* or *Hanullim)*. The details of this encounter are described in *Donggyeong Daejeon* (東經大全, *Great Scripture of Donghak*):

Suddenly, in the fourth lunar month, my heart quaked with cold and my body trembled, and I was unable to figure out what sort of illness this was. While I was in very difficult circumstances that I could not describe, words from the immortal (*shinseon*, 神仙,) spoke suddenly into my ears. Surprised, I jumped up to figure out what was going on, whereupon a voice said, "Do not be frightened or afraid. The people in the world call me *Sangje* (上帝, Supreme Being or God); do you not recognize *Sangje*?" I asked, "Why is it so?" The voice replied, "I have not achieved much, except that I have brought you into this world to teach people the correct practices. Have no doubts. Have no doubts." I asked, "If so, then do I instruct the people by means of the Western Way (*Seodo*, 西道)?" The voice replied, "No. I have a talisman (*yeongbu*, 靈符), and it is called the elixir of immortality (*seonyak*, 仙藥). Its shape is that of the grand ultimate (*taegeuk*, 太極) and the characters *gunggung* (弓弓, shape). Receive from me this talisman and save the people from illness. Receive from me this ritual incantation (*jumun*, 呪文) and instruct the people on my behalf. Then you, too, shall have a long life and shall spread virtue under heaven." (Kallander 2013, p. 158)[7]

This encounter with a being who disclosed himself as *Sangje* was a decisive event in the formation of Donghak. The passage expressly states that *Sangje* or *Hanullim* was an agent, separate from and unfamiliar to Suun, appearing before him unexpectedly. According to records, for several months, *Hanullim* delivered new teaching to Suun, as well as a *talisman* and other charms through *Cheonsa mundap* (天師問答, conversation with the Heavenly Master) (Brown 1997).[8]

Applying James' notion of religious experience to Suun Choe Jeu, it is clear that Suun's meeting with *Hanullim* in April 1860 was a typical one. It must be emphasized that this encounter was triggered by the unilateral will of *Hanullim* without warning and that the abrupt nature of this meeting evoked strong negative emotions on the part of Suun, including surprise, perplexity and fear. In their first encounter, *Hanullim* advised Suun, who was seized by these negative emotions, several times not to fear or doubt him. The fact that this experience was unexpected indicates that the advent of *Hanullim* did not coincide with Suun's preexisting worldview.

Prior to meeting *Hanullim*, Suun sought to resolve the social and political crises of his time by the application of religious practice. Then why did Suun feel fear and doubt of *Hanullim*, who imparted to Suun a means of salvation? However, at the time, Suun expected to achieve the enlightenment (*Jeungdeuk*, 證得) of non-personal principles by attaining *Dao* (道) or attaining Buddhahood (*gyeonseong*, 見性) on his own, in accordance with the teachings of Eastern religious traditions such as *Yubulseon* (儒佛仙). Thus, in this context, the sudden appearance of personified *Hanullim* was an event that Suun had not anticipated and that, in fact, ran counter to how he understood religion (Yun 1991).[9] Interestingly, just as Yahweh teaches his name to Moses, *Hanullim* also lets Suun know his name only after Suun, awestruck, "pressed for" his name.

Though *Hanullim* urged Suun not to doubt him, *Hanullim*'s appearance and words did not immediately dispel confusion and fear in Suun (Lee 1970).[10] According to Suun's worldview at that time, it seemed impossible for *Hanullim*, the Supreme Being, to appear in person and to converse with an individual. Suun's confusion arose due to his understanding of *Hanullim* as the God of *Seohak* (西學), or Western Christianity. In Suun's view, a Supreme Being who proactively asserts his will could only exist in *Seohak*. That is why, when *Hanullim* told him to disseminate the Truth to the people of the world, Suun asked if he "should teach them based on *Seodo* (西道)."

3.3. Mystical Union of Suun

The fear and doubt that Suun harbored in this first encounter transformed into Suun's teaching of *sichonju* (侍天主, to serve God), which calls on people to serve *Hanullim* devotedly. The concept of *sichonju* is a complete reversal of the negativity that Suun initially felt toward *Hanullim*. Suun's later teachings of *Osim jeuk yeoshim* (吾心汝心, "my mind is your

mind") and *Innaechon* (人乃天, "all humans are divine") further reflect the change in Suun's beliefs. These statements can be interpreted as a mystical declaration that *Hanullim* and humans are ontologically identical. In order to understand the way that Suun's doubts about *Hanullim* transformed into declarations of *sichonju* and *Osim jeuk yeoshim*, it is necessary to trace the trajectory of Suun's religious experiences, beginning from that initial day in 1860.

The "Discussion on Learning" *(Nonghangmun*, 論學文) text reveals that Suun attempted to "practice and understand the teachings of *Hanullim* for a year", starting in 1860 (Kallander 2013, p. 160).[11] The record also says that, after internalizing *Hanullim*'s teachings meticulously, Suun began to preach the teachings in full swing, beginning in 1861. As such, the process of eradicating the fear and confusion that Suun initially felt during the first encounter was gradual rather than immediate (Kim 2007).[12] The monistic declarations of Donghak, such as the concepts of *Osim jeuk yeoshim*, *Innaechon* and *Cheonsimjeukinsim* (天心則人心, "the mind of God is in fact the mind of a human"), emerged at the end of his journey of internalizing *Hanullim*'s words. In other words, Suun came to accept the authority of *Hanullim* gradually, through a long dialog of *Cheonsa mundap*. Lee Donhwa summarizes the process, as follows:

> *Cheonsa mundap* took place from April 5th, 1860, to September 20th of the same year. During this period of uncovering and understanding the many questions and answers, *Hanullim* (another name for *Sangje*) on one occasion tested Suun, the Great Divine Teacher *(Daesinsa*, 大神師). *Hanullim* said, " . . . therefore, I will give you the highest position of minister to save the world," to which Suun retorted, "Even *Hanullim* teaches me with wrongful *Dao* (道), so from now on I will never listen to his order or teaching *(myeonggyo*, 命)." After making this vow, he did not listen when *Hanullim* gave lessons. Even after fasting for eleven days, Suun did not change his mind. At last, *Hanullim* said, "Your will is good to behold, and your integrity is commendable. Your study is already exemplary and your practice has already reached the highest level, and your behavior is already perfected. I hereby grant you the perpetual harmony *(mukungchohwa*, 無窮調和)."

Hanullim gave "perpetual harmony" to Suun after he passed his test. This is the very *Osim jeuk yeoshim* event and mystical religious experience that allowed Suun to acquire the Great Cosmic Truth *(Mugeuk Daedo*, 無極大道). Lee Donhwa depicts this event in detail:

> The moment *Daesinsa* heard this, a new energy circulated in his consciousness, and new thoughts arose in his mind. The words of *Hanullim* that were heard from out of the air now resounded within *Daesinsa*'s mind—this became *kanghwa* (降話, the teaching) that had descended from above, and from it he wrote a lengthy manuscript *(manjijangseo*, 滿紙長書). He asked himself and then answered himself, recited the eternal, then sung the eternal; the Heaven and Earth, Sun and Moon, the stars, grass and trees, animals and beasts, humans and things all answered to the song; millions and billions of miles of space spread before the eyes; millions and billions of years spread before the eyes so there was no space far or close and no time past or coming, so millions and billions of innumerable hours and space drifted inside the single piece of mind . . . At this point, *Cheonsa mundap* stopped, and the principles of the Great Cosmic Truth and the great virtue *(Daedeok*, 大) were announced and answered based on simple *kanghwa*. He thereafter practiced on his own and unmistakably experienced *Daedo* (大道, the Way) of relieving people's suffering everywhere *(gwangjechangsaeng*, 廣濟蒼生). (Lee 1970)

Once Suun finally embraced the authority of *Hanullim*, after many questions and answers that continued for several months following their first encounter, *Hanullim* delivered to Suun the final teaching of *Osim jeuk yeoshim*, which confirmed the underlying identity of the ontological relationship between humankind and *Hanullim*. *Hanullim*'s words that came "from out of the air" now resounded "from Suun's mind." Suun chanted "eternity" *(mugung*, 無窮) and eventually reached the ultimate state wherein the concept of time and

space disappeared completely. It is also logical that Suun no longer needed to engage in *Cheonsa mundap* with *Hanullim* after acquiring ontological identity with *Hanullim*.

Let us summarize the itinerary of Suun's religious experience. It began abruptly, with the encounter in 1860, and continued through several months of *Cheonsa mundap*, culminating with the mystical union of *Osim jeuk yeoshim* (Yun 2000).[13] In this context, we can understand the process through which unfamiliarity during the first encounter transformed into a positive acceptance of *sichonju*.

Suun's religious experiences encompass both the dualism depicted in the first encounter in 1860 and the resulting *Cheonsa mundap*, as well as the monism shown in the *Osim jeuk yeoshim* experience (Seong 2009 and Lee 2012). The God that Suun encountered was an object of dualistic relationship, while at the same time being an object of monistic or mystical unity, which ultimately confirms his ontological identity. Suun confirmed this fact through his own religious experiences in 1860 and 1861.

Put differently, Suun's religious experiences were ambidirectional; the revelation and encounters were given by *Hanullim* or were other-driven (James 1994, pp. 414–17).[14] At the same time, Suun reached a state of union with the Supreme Being by means of his own, self-driven efforts. However, previous research has focused only on the first meeting between Suun and *Hanullim* and did not pay proper attention to the subsequent experiences that were clearly distinguished from it and from the process itself. These aspects of Suun's religious experiences lead to the dualism and monism that are innate in the concept of God in Donghak.

4. The Unique Concept of God in Donghak

4.1. God as the Object of a Dualistic Relationship

As seen in his interactions with Suun, *Hanullim* is a personified being with free will and intention. It was *Hanullim*'s feelings of distress about the state of the world that led him to seek out Suun and to task Suun to save the world (Kallander 2013, p. 158).[15] The God presented in Donghak is a volitional agent that can develop a relationship with humankind.

The dualistic feature of the relationship between *Hanullim* and humankind is confirmed by his intimate relationship with Suun. Donghak scriptures depict the intimate interactions between Suun and *Hanullim* at several points. *Hanullim* assuages Suun's doubts and also consoles him affectionately. Occasions where *Hanullim* consoles the dispirited Suun appear often in *Yongdam yusa* (龍潭遺詞, Songs of *Yongdam*), as seen in the excerpt below:

> How could you know you were not as worthy as others? How could you know whether your talents were as worthy as others? Stop such words. You are the first after being born into this world. You are surrounded by good fortune. I decided to bring forth a propitious pregnancy. (Kallander 2013, p. 179)[16]

Upon hearing *Hanullim*'s mission for him, Suun questioned if he was qualified to accomplish such a mission. However, the words above demonstrate *Hanullim*'s consolation to Suun. *Hanullim* assures Suun that his life experiences have unfolded in accordance with *Hanullim*'s providence.

The fact that Suun experienced *Hanullim* as a volitional agent and an object of intimate relationship invariably had a significant impact not only on the formation of Donghak's concept of God but also on the ethical code of Donghak. In particular, *Hanullim*'s hope of making this world a better place was developed by Suun into a powerful code of ethics, as presented in Donghak, seen in concepts such as *gyeongcheon* (敬天, respect for Heaven), *gyeongin* (敬人, respect for humans) and *gyeongmul* (敬物, respect for all things). Reflecting this spirit, Donghak was distinguished from other religions of the time in its consideration of socially vulnerable groups of people, such as women and children.

The intimate interactions between Suun and *Hanullim* demonstrate that Donghak's God does not exist merely as a philosophical principle or transcendental being, existing beyond reality. True, the Donghak teaching of *sichonju* (侍天主) indicates that the Supreme Being of *Cheonju* (天主, Heavenly Lord) is an object of veneration and service. At the same

time, *Cheonsa mundap* confirms that *Hanullim*, as the lord of providence, is a being that engages in dialog and can give human beings detailed advice about the proper path for humanity, as he did with Suun. Thus, the God in Donghak is a personified Supreme Being that is immanent within creation but that can manifest itself as a distinct entity, in order to have a dialog with humans. Such a manifestation of God cannot easily be found in traditional Eastern religions, such as Buddhism.

Due to this characteristic of God in Donghak, the Joseon dynasty and Confucian scholars considered Donghak to be a copy of Christianity, something that could not coexist alongside Confucianism. As a result, Suun was executed. The Daily Records of the Royal Secretariat of the *Joseon* Dynasty (*Seungjeongwonilgi* n.d., 承政院日記) describe the misfortune and misunderstandings that Donghak's concept of God faced: "This title Donghak is just another name for the tricks they use in the West, to confuse the foolish."[17] In short, its personification of God is one of the defining characteristics confirmed in a string of Suun's religious experiences, spanning from the first encounter in 1860 to the *Cheonsa mundap*.

4.2. God and an Ontological Identity for all Human Beings

Dualistic religious experiences, such as the 1860 encounter and *Cheonsa mundap*, eventually developed into a mystical union with the ultimate reality. That is, Donghak's God was not merely the object of a dualistic relationship. The *Osim jeuk yeoshim* event confirms that Donghak's *Hanullim* is the single and ultimate being that encompasses all beings, including humans. This event breaches the ontological dualism between *Hanullim* and the human self. God is no longer an entity that is separate from human beings but is instead an entity that is identical to human beings.

Put differently, the God in Donghak was a being that could interact with human beings and was, at the same time, an entity that was identical to all beings at the fundamental level. Suun's religious experience served as an opportunity to confirm the personification of the Supreme Being, as well as the internal presence of the Being within all people, and, more precisely, the existence of all beings within the ultimate reality. It is in this context that, as Kim Gyeongjae aptly points out, the God of Donghak strongly takes on panentheistic characteristics that encompass both transcendence and immanence (Kim 2005).

In addition, Donghak teaches that people can internalize this understanding by practicing incantation sincerely as a mystical practice. Differences in time and space or in religions do not act as stumbling blocks to this process. Suun was a religious universalist who asserted that all civilizations had *Cheondo* (天道, Heavenly Way), transcending time and space.[18] However, Suun also emphasized that whether they actually practiced *Cheondo* was more important than whether they had *Cheondo* or not. Meanwhile, from the perspective of universalism, the name of God itself was not important to Suun (Park 1921).[19] That is why Suun and early-stage Donghak traditions employed a wide range of names for the Supreme Being encountered by Suun (i.e., *Sangje*, *Hanullim* and *Cheonju*).

4.3. Dynamic Concept of God in Donghak

Donghak's God is neither simply an aggregate of existing matters, nor a transcending principle that exists only behind or beyond matter. It not only interacts with human beings with intention but is also ultimately the entirety of beings. This unique concept of God in Donghak exerts immense influence on the religious thoughts of Donghak from many aspects, including the ethics of Donghak.

First, the God in Donghak created a powerful code of ethics through Suun; this code was the embodiment of teachings that Suun had received from *Hanullim* in person. The revelation from *Hanullim*, who commanded Suun to make this world a better place, served as the foundation for the ethical codes of Donghak. At the same time, the identity with *Hanullim*, as confirmed by the *Osim jeuk yeoshim* experience, developed into a mystical recognition that *Hanullim* existed inside all human beings. It is for this reason that all beings are precious. People must respect all others as a personification of another *Hanullim*.

Hanullim's revelation and mystical identification with *Hanullim* act as two crucial pillars of Donghak's code of ethics (Seong 2020).

Second, Donghak's unique conception of God also informs a distinct practice methodology that encompasses the relationship between God and human beings in its concept of *sichonju* ("to serve *Cheonju* or *Hanullim*)." The word "serve" is ostensibly premised on a dualistic distinction between the one who serves and the one who is served. However, the concept of *sichonju* that is presented in Donghak does not stay at the dualistic level because *Cheonju* exists inside all people in Donghak. As such, rather than simply serving another being dualistically, the practice of serving also refers to serving *oneself*.

The suffix "*ju* (主)" or "*nim*" is added to the concepts *Cheonju* or *Hanullim* to indicate immense respect for *Hanullim*, a volitional being. However, the practice of *sichonju* can be completed only when a person meets *Hanullim* residing within him- or herself and extends the identity of the self to include *Hanullim* (Yun 2009).[20] Therefore, *sichonju* is a religious practice that helps people to recognize that God exists inside themselves; only by doing so can they achieve their true state of being.

Third, the unique concept of God in Donghak generates *creative tension*. It is difficult to integrate the dualism and monism that are inherent in Donghak's concept of God. However, this difficulty enriches both Donghak and the relationship between God and humankind. God and human beings are not strictly separate, nor are they simply identical. As the 1860 experiences and the *Cheonsa mundap* of Suun show, God has an aspect of alterity, insofar as God is an intimate object with whom humans develop a relationship. However, as confirmed by *Osim jeuk yeoshim*, God is ontologically identical to us.

In other words, this aspect of God generates a *creative tension* that forces humans to interpret Donghak *dynamically*. *Hanullim*'s dualist and monistic qualities demand that humans recognize their genuine identity through their dynamic relationship with God. *Hanullim* acts with free will outside of humanity, and yet *Hanullim* is also identical to all humankind.

> Letters are also eternal and words are eternal as well. I search infinitely and know infinitely, so within this infinite boundary of God, isn't this the infinite me? (Yun 2009)

In other words, each individual is one among an infinitude of beings that live and move around inside the cosmic God. As such, *Hanullim*, all humankind and all material entities should be respected as eternal beings residing inside the eternal God. From this perspective, all of our behaviors of eating (*sik*, 食), revering (*sa*, 事) and serving (*si*, 侍) are transformed into internal activities that are undertaken within the infinite *Hanullim* himself. For instance, Donghak describes the act of eating food as *icheonsikcheon* (以天食天), which means that "the heaven eats the heaven". In this context, the reason Suun emphasized the truth of "It is not so, yet it is so" (*bulyeonkiyeon*, 不然其然) in his later years becomes clear.

To be sure, this concept of God may easily give rise to misunderstanding. Donghak is often considered a synthesis of the merits of Eastern and Western religions or a copy of a particular religion. This attitude was present not only during the Joseon dynasty but also remains true today. When the dualist nature of God is emphasized, Donghak appears to be a form of Western theism. When the monistic nature of God is emphasized, Donghak seems to be a copy of Eastern religions. As seen in the tension arising from the concepts of "mystical unity" and "mystical identity" that are found in Western religions, integration is no easy task, and yet, doing so unveils dynamic layers of meaning.[21]

5. Conclusions: Epistemological Validity of Religious Experience

How did Suun present such a unique concept of God, one not easily found in religious history? Was it the product of the multiple lines of religious thought of his time? Rather than deriving from theoretical syncretism, Donghak's religious thoughts, including its concept of God, originated from Suun's personal, religious experiences (Kim 1999, 2009).[22] The dualism and monism incorporated in Suun's religious experiences led him to de-

velop this conception in Donghak, encompassing the characteristics of both Eastern and Western religions.

Suun confirmed through his own religious experiences that Eastern mystical ideas could be integrated with Western theistic ideas. Suun harmonized the Eastern notion that human beings could acquire an identity with the ultimate reality with a Western notion that emphasized the given nature of divine grace. Furthermore, by including *Hanullim*'s revelation, which commanded respect for all humankind and all material entities with *Osim jeuk yeoshim* or the mystical union, Suun created an ethical code of conduct and a unique presentation of God. This integrated God resonated with many people at the time and yet also resulted in brutal oppression.

Put simply, the concept of God in Donghak reflects the creativity and the uniqueness of Suun's religious experiences. Analyzing Donghak's concept of God in Suun's religious experience inevitably gives rise to a few questions. Was the being that Suun encountered in 1860 actually the Supreme God? If so, why did *Hanullim* appear in front of Suun in 1860? Does *Cheonju* reside inside all of us, as Suun asserted?

Final answers cannot be given to these questions. However, just as merely the advent of *Hanullim* was surprising and marvelous to Suun, so the concept of God in Donghak still generates much wonder and many questions. Noting the impact of the unseen upon the seen, material world, William James writes:

> [T]he unseen region in question is not merely ideal, for it produces effects in this world. When we commune with it, work is actually done upon our finite personality, for we are turned into new men, and consequences in the way of conduct follow in the natural world upon our regenerative change. (James 1994, p. 516)

As a consideration of Suun's personal experiences demonstrates, the "new man" that he became after his encounter and communion with the "unseen" *Hanullim* deeply affected Suun and the world around him. Although not everyone acknowledged and welcomed it, Suun's religious experience had strong epistemological validity. A new conception of God was brought forth, guiding the Donghak movement and leading to events crucial to both the Korean and the international community, the effects of which still reverberate today.

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Notes

[1] Ninian Smart emphasizes the importance of "religious experience" in the formation and maintenance of a religion.

[2] Joseon is the name of the ruling dynasty in Korea from 1390 to 1910.

[3] Kim Gyeongjae and Kim Yonghwi are representative scholars who stressed the impact of Suun's religious experience on the formation of Donghak. (Kim 2002, 2005).

[4] Suun and Donghak adopt various names for the Supreme Being such as *Sangje*, *Cheonju* (天主, Heavenly Lord) or *Hanullim* (Korean equivalent of *Cheonju*). Among them, *Sangje* is the least used name.

[5] William James (1842–1910) is a representative thinker who emphasized the importance of "religious experience".

[6] Joachim Wach (1898–1955) regards human experience of the ultimate reality as religious experience, and explains religious experience from three aspects of thought, action and fellowship. (Wach 1958, pp. 27–58).

[7] "Podeokmun (布文, Spreading Virtue)" in *Donggyeong Daejeon* (東經大全, *Great Scripture of Donghak)*: "不意四月, 心寒身戰, 疾不得執症, 言不得難之際, 有何仙語忽入耳中, 驚起探問, 則曰 "勿懼勿恐, 世人謂我上帝, 汝不知上帝耶?" 問其所然, 曰," 余亦無功, 故生汝世間, 人此法,勿疑勿疑." 曰, "然則西道以人乎?" 曰, "不然, 吾有靈符, 其名仙藥, 其形太極, 又形弓弓, 受我此符, 濟人疾病, 受我呪文, 人爲我, 則汝亦長生, 布天下矣." The English quotation is based on a translation of the scriptures included in the book of

George Kallander. *Salvation through Dissent: Donghak Heterodoxy and Early Modern Korea* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii, 2013), p. 158.

[8] *Cheonsa mundap (*天師問答*)* is a channeling. Channeling is a phenomenon of a human being communicating with non-material beings in an altered state of consciousness. For types of channeling and their meaning, see (Brown 1997).

[9] Meanwhile, it is claimed that Suun changed practice methodology to praying practices after receiving a book titled *Eulmyo Cheonseo* (乙卯天書). *Dowon giseo* (道源記書), Trans. Yun Seoksan. (Seoul: Mundeoksa, 2000), pp. 8–21. The *Eulmyo Cheonseo* incidence indicates that Suun had already anticipated an encounter with personified *Hanullim*, but it is still difficult to explain Suun's confusion and fear manifested in *Podeokmun* (布文, Spreading Virtue)" and "*Nonghangmun* (論學文, Discussion on Learning)" in *Donggyeong Daejeon(*東經大全, *Great Scripture of Donghak).*

[10] Lee Donhwa records that Bakssi buin, wife of Suun, "upon seeing Suun ask and answer to himself by way of *kanghwa* (降話, teaching descended from above), thought he was deranged" and she attempted to commit suicide several times at *Yongdam* pond. In other words, the encounter and dialogues with *Hanullim* were very bizarre not only to Suun but also to his family. Donhwa Lee, *Cheondogyo Changgeonsa* (天道創建史, *History of the Foundation of Cheondogyo)*, 19.

[11] "*Nonghangmun* (論學文, Discussion On Learning)" in *Donggyeong Daejeon(*東經大全, *Great Scripture of Donghak):* "吾亦幾至一 修 而度之則 亦不無自然之理 故 一以作呪文 一以作降靈之法 一以作不忘之詞 次第道法 猶爲二十一字而已", "For almost one year, I cultivated and pondered upon the Way and realized it was nothing else but the principle of nature. Therefore, I wrote one written incantation [*jumun*], one technique for receiving the divine spirirt [*gangryeong*], and one poem, "Constant Awareness." The order and the principle were nothing more that the twenty-one-character expression." (Kallander, p. 160).

[12] In restructuring Suun's religious experience, Kim Yonghwi also puts time intervals between the first encounter with *Hanullim* and the *Osim jeuk yeoshim* experience. (Kim 2007, pp. 57–65).

[13] The same claim is found in *Dowonseogi. Dowonseogi* also describes that *Hanullim* was satisfied with Suun after testing him and awarded Suun with perpetual harmony. (Yun 2000, pp. 36–39).

[14] James conceptualizes this as "passivity". To James, passivity takes on a neutral meaning that focuses on the "givenness of experience" rather than on the lack of initiative. (James 1994, pp. 414–17).

[15] "*Podeokmun* (布文, Spreading Virtue)" in *Donggyeong Daejeon(*東經大全, *Great Scripture of Donghak):* "I have not achieved much, except that I have brought you into this world to teach people the correct practices. Have no doubts. Have no doubts." (余亦無功, 故生汝世間, 人此法, 勿疑勿疑)." (Kallander, p. 158).

[16] "Kyohun'ga (訓歌, Song of Instruction)" in *Yongdam yusa*. (Kallander, p. 179).

[17] *Seungjeongwonilgi (*承政院日記): 今此東學之稱, 全襲西洋之術, 而特移易名目, 眩亂蚩蚩耳.

[18] To Suun, the God of *Seohak* (西學) and the *Hanullim* of Donghak were each different expressions for the same ultimate *Dao* (道). "*Nonghangmun* (論學文)" in *Donggyeong Daejeon(*東經大全, *Great Scripture of Donghak):* "日: 與洋道無異者乎? 日: 洋學如斯而有異, 如呪而無實, 然而運則一也, 道則同也, 理則非也." "Yanghak (洋學, Western religion) appears to be the same as our to (道) but is different. It has the appearance of worshipping (呪) but has no substance (貫). However, they both have the same destiny (運) and the same to (道), but their doctrines are different."

[19] "My *Dao* (道) is a unification of *Yubulseon* (儒佛仙). *Cheondo* (天道) itself is not originally *Yubulseon*, but *Yubulseon* is a partial truth of *Cheondo* and is the ethical codes of the past." Inho Park 1921, *Cheondogyoseo (*天道書, *Heavenly Way Message)* (Seoul: *Cheondogyo jungang chongbu*), p. 87.

[20] "Do not have faith in me. Are you acting out of faith in me? He resides in you; should you leave something close and take from afar? The only thing I hope is that you would only have faith in *Hanullim*, that those of you who have not yet escaped from ignorance should discard books and pour your efforts in ascetic practice-that is also ethics." "Kyohun'ga" in *Yongdam yusa*; Seoksan Yun, *Juhae Donghak Gyeongjeon: Donggyeong Daejeon·Yongdam yusa (Annotated Donghak scriptures: Donggyeong Daejeon, Yongdam yusa)*, p. 358.

[21] Claiming the ontological identity of human beings and God was dangerous in traditional theistic mysticism. Examples of persecution include Meister Eckhart (1260–1328), Marguerite Porete (?–1310), and Mansur al-Hallaj (858–922).

[22] Kim Gyeongjae contends that Donghak originates from Suun's experience of *Osim jeuk yeoshim*, and that this experience is at the core of Donghak. (Kim 1999, pp. 22–43); Kim Yonghwi also asserts that Donghak is not a mere amalgam or a blending of *Yubulseon* (Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism) and *Seohak* (西學, Christianity) but is a unique religious text formed by Suun in the active process of interpreting his own religious experiences (Kim 2009, pp. 36–67).

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Review

Religious Disagreement, Mystical Experience, and Doxastic Minimalism: Critical Notice of John Pittard's *Disagreement, Deference, and Religious Commitment*

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Abstract: In his recent book, Disagreement, Deference, and Religious Commitment, John Pittard challenges J.L. Schellenberg's rejection of mystical experience as worthy of enjoying presumptive doxastic trust for two main reasons. First, Pittard holds that Schellenberg wrongly focuses only on avoiding error while placing no emphasis on gaining truth. I argue that, contra Pittard, Schellenberg's account nicely balances the competing epistemic goals of gaining truth and avoiding error. Second, Pittard thinks that Schellenberg's criteria for presumptive trust in that of universality and unavoidability are arbitrary. I counter that Schellenberg's criteria are not arbitrary since they are the best way of achieving these goals. I conclude that despite not enjoying presumptive doxastic trust, this in itself does not entail that mystical experiences are never trustworthy.

Keywords: Pittard; Schellenberg; doxastic minimalism; mystical experiences

1. Introduction

For some years now, philosophers of religion have discussed the problem of religious diversity; see (King 2008). The world is a global village, and any reflective religious believer knows that her particular set of religious beliefs are just one among many others. If different religions make contradictory claims (as it appears they do), then not all of them can be true. Why think that your religious beliefs are any more epistemically trustworthy than someone else's religious beliefs (including ones that are incompatible with yours)? These observations are meant to put pressure on the rationality of religious belief, particularly those who make exclusivist claims about their religion.[1]

A fairly recent debate in epistemology nicely highlights challenges to religious belief from diversity by focusing on disagreements between epistemic peers. The *epistemology of disagreement* literature focuses on questions surrounding the appropriate response an agent should have upon discovering that an epistemic peer disagrees with her. Two main positions have been defended in the literature. Non-conciliationism is the view that two peers can continue to rationally disagree with one another after the disagreement has been disclosed, e.g., (Bergmann 2009; Kelly 2005; Lougheed 2020; Oppy 2010). Conciliationism, on the other hand, holds that each party is required to revise their respective beliefs in the face of peer disagreement, e.g., (Christensen 2007; Feldman 2007; Matheson 2015). Strong versions of conciliationism say that an agent must lower their confidence in their original belief below the threshold for rationality.[2]

Of course, if strong conciliationism is true, then a serious challenge has been levelled against the rationality of religious belief. Religious believers are no longer rational in maintaining their religious beliefs in the face of widespread (apparent) peer disagreement about them. If strong conciliationism is true, then a very serious skeptical challenge to the rationality of religious belief is on offer. One way to avoid the conciliationist challenge is to say that it does not apply to doxastic practices that should be given presumptive

trust. If certain mystical experiences are one such type of practice, and agents sometimes based their religious beliefs on such experiences, then at least those religious believers can avoid this challenge. J.L. Schellenberg, however, argues that *only* those doxastic practices which are universal and unavoidable should be given presumptive doxastic trust and hence treated as basic. As such, a doxastic practice such as mystical experiences is not to be given presumptive trust because it is basic.

In his recent book, *Disagreement, Deference, and Religious Commitment*, John Pittard argues that Schellenberg's reasons for refraining from giving presumptive trust to mystical experiences are mistaken. If right, this could potentially serve to (at least partially) resolve the threat from strong conciliationism. In arguing that Schellenberg's scope for presumptive trust is too narrow, Pittard first says that Schellenberg wrongly focuses only on avoiding error while placing no emphasis on gaining truth. Second, he holds that the criteria of universality and unavoidability are arbitrary. I argue that Pittard's rejection of Schellenberg is mistaken, and we would be wrong to give mystical experiences presumptive trust. Schellenberg's account nicely balances the competing epistemic goals of gaining truth and avoiding error. It is for this very reason that the criteria are not arbitrary. However, my rejection of Pittard does not imply that mystical experiences should never be trusted; they just should not enjoy presumptive trust. The evidential import of mystical experiences needs to be examined on a case-by-case basis unless one already has a defeater for the doxastic practice in general.

Finally, while I will not attempt the impossible task of providing necessary and sufficient conditions for what constitutes a mystical experience, it may be helpful for the reader to see some examples before proceeding to the debate between Schellenberg and Pittard:

Amelia: "It all began one spring morning when, as a little girl, I ran out of the house before breakfast and to the end of the garden which led to the orchard. In the night a miracle had been wrought, and the grass was carpeted with golden celandines. I stood still and looked, and clasped my hands and in wonder at the beauty I said 'God'. I knew from that moment that everything that existed was just part of 'that sustaining life which burns bright or dim as each are mirrors of the fire for which all things thirst'. Of course, I didn't put it in those words, but I did know that I and everything were one in the life. When I grew older and read philosophy I thought of all creation as the Shadow of Beauty unbeheld, and felt that Beauty was God". Amelia remarks that even in the inevitable changes that life brings, she has felt certain that "God is there, and in it all, and part of it all. So I could rest in Him" (Wiebe 2015, p. 47).

Carol: "I looked up at the snows, but immediately lost all normal consciousness and became engulfed as it were in a great cloud of light and ecstasy of knowing and understanding all the secrets of the universe, and sense of goodness of the Being in whom it seemed all were finally enclosed, and yet in that enclosure utterly liberated. I 'saw' nothing in the physical sense... it was as if I were blinded by an internal light. And yet I was 'looking outward'. It was not a 'dream', but utterly different, in that the content was of the utmost significance to me and in universal terms. Gradually this sense of ecstasy faded and slowly I came to my ordinary sense and perceived I was sitting as usual and the mountains were as usual in daily beauty". Carol says that the aftermath of the experience was in the form of a wonderful mental and spiritual glow, and then adds: "I became convinced later that a spiritual Reality underlay all earthy reality, and the ultimate ground of the universe was benevolent in a positive way, surpassing our temporal understanding. This conviction has remained with me, but in an intellectual form; it has not, however, prevented me from feeling acute personal depression and disappointment time and again, throughout my life". She also relates that, later in life, she developed a strong interest in Buddhism, but felt that it was founded on a negative premise, whereas the universe seemed to her to be positive (Wiebe 2015, p. 71).

2. Presumptive Doxastic Innocence

Much of Schellenberg's focus is on ideal epistemic inquiry. Namely, it asks how should an inquirer proceed when it comes to investigating religion? This is the general context of his discussion about which doxastic practices should enjoy presumptive doxastic innocence. A doxastic practice enjoys presumptive innocence if its outputs (i.e., the beliefs one forms based on it) should be taken as 'innocent until proven guilty.' It is true that sense perception sometimes does not function properly and deceives us (indeed it can deceive us even when it is functioning properly). However, for a variety of reasons, many agree that sense perception should be given presumptive trust. One such reason is that we simply need to assume sense perception is reliable to function at even the most basic level. Whether mystical experiences are a doxastic practice that should be granted doxastic minimalism is an important question. For, it impacts where the burden of proof lies when examining the evidential import of mystical experiences. If they are not granted presumptive trust, then it is an uphill battle for the religious believer to show why they are veridical. Schellenberg and Pittard have an interesting disagreement on this point, with Schellenberg denying that mystical experiences should enjoy presumptive trust and Pittard rejecting Schellenberg's reasoning. It is this disagreement that is the focus of this critical notice. In what follows, I explain Schellenberg's argument against the claim that mystical experiences should enjoy presumptive trust. I then argue that they cannot be saved by Pittard's rejection of Schellenberg. However, I conclude that mystical experiences should not be granted presumptive trust does not mean that they can never be trusted.

3. Schellenberg's Rejection of Mystical Experience

Pittard explains that Schellenberg's "argument occurs in a context where he is arguing against the rationality of appealing to religious experience as a way of supporting religious belief in the face of religious disagreement" (Pittard 2020, p. 68).[3] It also occurs in the context of interacting with William Alston's *Perceiving God* (Alston 2014). Pittard says that "a key claim of Alston is that reliability of many broad doxastic practices cannot be *independently* confirmed—that is, confirmed in a manner that utilizes other doxastic practices but *not* the practice whose reliability is under consideration" (Pittard 2020, p. 70). For example, Alston does not believe that sense perception can be defended in a way that is non-circular (Pittard 2020, pp. 70–71).[4] For instance, I cannot demonstrate that my eyes are working properly and that I am looking at the screen of my laptop right now while seated in a local café without implicitly assuming that my eyes are working properly. Alston leverages this idea to defend Christian doxastic practices, but his point generalizes. While it is impossible to defend the reliability of various religious doxastic practices in a way that is non-circular, they are no worse off than any of our other doxastic practices. While this does not entail that religious doxastic practices are rational, it rules out rejecting them on the basis that non-circular defenses of them cannot be offered (Pittard 2020, p. 71). If Alston is right, then in a religious dispute, the believer might be entitled to appeal to mystical experience as evidence because it is no different than appealing to some piece of evidence gathered from sense perception. This is the dialectical context in which Schellenberg rejects mystical experience as a doxastic practice that should enjoy presumptive innocence.

Neither Schellenberg nor Pittard offer a standardized formulation of the argument against mystical experience enjoying presumptive innocence. However, standardizing the argument is a good way to get clear on precisely what is being claimed by Schellenberg. I am thus going to offer a standardized version of what I think is the most charitable interpretation of Schellenberg's argument. Even if Schellenberg himself would not endorse this argument, I think it is close to what someone sympathetic to his ideas might embrace. Here is the argument:

The Schellenbergian Argument for Doxastic Minimalism in Inquiry
Assumption: Widespread skepticism is false.

(1)   Inquirers (who are epistemic peers) in a dispute should aim at beliefs *grounded in inquiry.*

(2)   The best way for inquirers to gain the beliefs grounded in inquiry is to avoid placing presumptive trust in as many doxastic practices as possible. [Doxastic Minimalism]

(3)   In order to avoid skepticism and gain beliefs grounded in inquiry, presumptive trust should only be placed in those doxastic practices that are universal and unavoidable. [Basic]

(4)   Religious doxastic practices are neither universal nor unavoidable. Therefore,

(5)   Inquirers should not place presumptive trust in religious doxastic practices. Therefore,

(6)   Inquirers should not place presumptive trust in mystical experiences (which are a religious doxastic practice). Therefore,

(7)   Strong conciliationism threatens the rationality of religious belief.

Before explaining each of the premises, it is important to note that a fundamental assumption for Schellenberg is that widespread skepticism is false (indeed, an assumption that his dialogue partners in Pittard and Alston affirm too). This is why Schellenberg writes that "[a]n investigator will be moved by whatever is needed to get past the most general skepticism" (Schellenberg 2007, p. 171).

Premise (1) is needed because Schellenberg's argument focuses on inquirers. Premise (2) is likely where the controversy begins to arise for Schellenberg. This is a claim about limiting the number of doxastic practices that we endow with presumptive trust. Schellenberg therefore advocates for a kind of *doxastic minimalism*. What are his reasons for endorsing (2)? According to Pittard, part of Schellenberg's problem with Alston's defense of mystical experience is that Alston's account is overly permissive. In order for mystical experiences to be presumed trustworthy they would have to be ultimately grounded in 'epistemically unassailable practices'. Since they are not, they are not trustworthy. Pittard explains that for "Schellenberg, the only practices that should be treated as 'innocent until proven guilty' are those that are both *universal* among human beings (or at least nearly so) and *unavoidable*. Any other doxastic practice must be shown to be reliable before it is rational to rely on it" (Pittard 2020, p. 72). Inquirers should only assume a doxastic practice is innocent if it is absolutely necessary to get inquiry off the ground in the first place (Pittard 2020, p. 76). Schellenberg thus wants to minimize default trust (i.e., presumptive trust) one has in cognitive faculties.[5]

Pittard's interpretation of Schellenberg on (2) seems accurate thus far, though I will later note some important differences. For Schellenberg, if we really want the truth, we simply need to proceed with presumptive trust in at least some practices (though as few as possible):

One might want to say [. . .] that universality and unavoidability are required because only where they are present is one forced by the human cognitive condition to go along: we would like to substantiate more fully even such belief-forming practices if we could, but because we cannot, and because to do so is a necessary condition for arriving at any truth and understanding that might be possible for us, we concede defeat and settle for what is basically a naked assumption instead (Schellenberg 2007, p. 172).

Premise (3) says the way to avoid (widespread) skepticism is to trust only those practices that are universal and avoidable. However, why these criteria? Well, "it is reasonable to extend default trust when failing to do so would result in general skepticism and severe epistemic impoverishment" (Pittard 2020, p. 81). According to Pittard, Schellenberg is more concerned with what is unavoidable to human inquirers:

Because we find ourselves unable to form and revise beliefs that are not on the basis of sense perception, introspection, memory, and rational intuition, a certain basic picture of the world has been generated involving birth and conscious experience and physical objects and relations with other conscious beings and the reality of things past and death and also the appropriateness of valuation (presupposed by the humblest desires, and sanctioned by intuition) Schellenberg quoted in (Pittard 2020, p. 78).

Thus, Pittard suggests that Schellenberg's claim is better understood as implying "rationally ought implies humanly possible" (Pittard 2020, p. 79). For, "[i]f doubting some doxastic practice is not humanly possible, then one is not required to doubt it. But if

my inability to doubt some doxastic practice is particular to me or my particular group, then this does not exempt me from the skeptical prescriptions of doxastic minimalism" (Pittard 2020, p. 79). Therefore, the criterion of unavoidability entails the criterion of universality.

Premise (4) should be an uncontroversial claim: Doxastic practices that produce religious belief are not universal or unavoidable (Pittard 2020, p. 73). For Schellenberg, one reason to think this is so is based on the diversity of such practices that often lead to those of different religious stripes holding incompatible beliefs. They are also clearly not unavoidable since there are cases where people abandon their religious faith upon reflection. On the other hand, "practices of relying on memory, sense perception, introspection, and certain sorts of inductive and deductive inference are nearly universal and are practically unavoidable" (Pittard 2020, p. 73). A commitment to the truth implies that we should not give presumptive trust to any doxastic practice that is not absolutely unavoidable to all humans.[6]

The truth of (5) follows from (1) to (4). (6) just says that mystical experience is a religious experience which is a truism. If (1) to (6) are true, then (7) is true and the problem of religious disagreement remains. Since mystical experiences are not universal and unavoidable doxastic practices, they should not be given presumptive trust. This leaves the burden of proof entirely with the party in a religious dispute who wishes to claim that mystical experiences are evidence. This concludes what I hope is a charitable interpretation of Schellenberg's (and Pittard's understanding of Schellenberg's) advocacy for doxastic minimalism. In the next two sections, I describe Pittard's reasons for rejecting Schellenberg's minimalism along with my replies.

4. Problems for Pittard's Critique of Schellenberg: *Seeking Truth versus Avoiding Error*

I now turn to Pittard's first objection to the Schellenbergian Argument for Doxastic Minimalism and Strong Conciliationism and then show why it fails. Pittard begins his first criticism by explaining that:

"A more adequate account of the aims of inquiry does not lead one to conclude that committed inquirers are doxastic minimalists. In addition, I will argue that the restrictions Schellenberg imposes on doxastic minimalism are epistemically arbitrary. There is no good reason for thinking that all and only those practices that are part of humans' natural inheritance should be exempt from the otherwise unsparing axe of the doxastic minimalist" (Pittard 2020, p. 81)

While Pittard grants that one should trust doxastic practices that are humanly unavoidable, he holds that it should not *only* be granted to those practices. His objections, then, are primarily aimed at (2) and (3) of the argument. With respect to (2), Pittard denies that Schellenberg's doxastic minimalism can "supply answers to all of the questions that may be of interest. In order to arrive at views on questions that are controversial (and that would remain so even after evidence sharing), it would be necessary to employ additional doxastic practices that are not humanly unavoidable" (Pittard 2020, p. 82). In other words, Pittard holds that additional doxastic practices are needed to answer many of our questions about the world. However, according to Schellenberg, we are not allowed to use those additional practices.

William James serves as the main inspiration for Pittard's critique of Schellenberg. It is well known that according to James, inquirers often have two conflicting goals; that of avoiding error and believing the truth (Pittard 2020, p. 82).[7] Pittard contends that Schellenberg's account is too one sided with respect to these goals; it only cares about avoiding error. However, Pittard says that "it should not be assumed that the investigator who is concerned for the truth will remain agnostic on some question anytime the evidence is less than fully conclusive" (Pittard 2020, p. 83). Thus, if an investigator values truth, it is perfectly reasonable for her to use non-basic doxastic processes even if doing so increases the possibility of error. Pittard explains that "[i]n holding that the committed investigator will (as far as possible) be a doxastic minimalist, Schellenberg presupposes

without argument that the aim of error avoidance always trumps the aim of believing the truth" (Pittard 2020, p. 83). Pittard is thinking of a Schellenbergian argument in terms that focus more on veritism than on beliefs grounded in inquiry. To see why there is an important difference here, consider Pittard's version of the argument:

A Schellenbergian Argument for Doxastic Minimalism and Strong Conciliationism

(*1) Peers in a dispute should aim at the truth. [Veritism]
(*2) The best way for peers to gain the truth is to avoid placing presumptive trust in as many doxastic practices as possible. [Doxastic Minimalism]
(*3) In order to avoid skepticism and gain true beliefs, agents should place presumptive trust in only those doxastic practices that are universal and unavoidable.
(4) Religious doxastic practices are neither universal nor unavoidable. Therefore,
(*5) Peers should not place presumptive trust in religious doxastic practice. Therefore,
(*6) Peers should not place presumptive trust in mystical experiences (which are a religious doxastic practice). Therefore,
(7) Strong conciliationism threatens the rationality of religious belief.

Notice that this interpretation of the Schellenbergian argument is importantly different from the initial interpretation of it that I outlined above. Interpreting Schellenberg in this way makes his claims less plausible, though I will still show they can be defended. Furthermore, even though Pittard clearly thinks that veritism is essential to Schellenberg's argument, he appears to interpret (*1) along the following lines:

(**1) Peers in a dispute should aim at *avoiding error*.

When understood in these terms, it is easy to see why Pittard rejects the Schellenbergian argument. He holds that if forced to choose between avoiding error and gaining true beliefs, we should pick the later because that is more central to inquiry. Thus, for Pittard, (**1) is false because if forced to choose, the focus of inquiry should be gaining the truth. However, on this new interpretation, (2) and (3) do not have the appropriate connection to (**1) since those premises are about gaining the truth. They should thus be modified to something closer to:

(**2) The best way for peers to avoid error is to avoid placing presumptive trust in doxastic practices inasmuch as possible. [Doxastic Minimalism]
(**3) In order to avoid skepticism and avoid error, peers should place presumptive trust in only those doxastic practices that are universal and unavoidable.

Even if Schellenberg says he means something like (2) and (3), Pittard holds he is really committed to something closer to (**2) and (**3). However, since according to Pittard, the focus should be on gaining true beliefs, (4) does not follow from (**1), (**2), and (**3). He holds that inquiry makes little sense if gaining true beliefs is not at least part of the motivation in question. According to Pittard, "[o]nce it is allowed that committed inquirers may value believing the truth alongside error avoidance, there is no straightforward way of arguing from the aims of inquiry to the conclusion that extending default trust to an avoidable doxastic practice is always bad (or always good)" (Pittard 2020, p. 83). Hence, the Schellenbergian argument fails.

Reply:

Even if Schellenberg would not endorse Pittard's veritistic interpretation of his argument, I still believe it is possible to defend it. Contra Pittard, advocating for doxastic minimalism does not entail a sole commitment to avoiding error and nor does it entail only pursuing the truth. I do not see anything that commits Schellenberg to only avoiding error. In *The Will to Imagine: A Justification of Skeptical Religion*, Schellenberg actually draws on James and places more emphases on the epistemic goal of gaining truth than on false beliefs (2009). The context in which Schellenberg is writing is one where he is defending the rationality of non-doxastic faith in ultimism given human immaturity. Ultimism involves the claim that there is something more in terms of what exists and also in terms of value. By immaturity, Schellenberg means that humans are quite young in evolutionary terms

and hence really only at the beginning of religious inquiry (notice how different this view is from how we normally approach things). Indeed, Schellenberg says that:

At this early stage of the game [i.e., of inquiry into religion], some lightness of heart and willingness to act beyond the evidence must therefore be intellectually preferable to the heaviness and severe caution of those who order us always to wait for stronger evidence (evidence that may just for that reason never come) before committing ourselves in faith (Schellenberg 2009, p. 222).

I will not belabor the point, as it is in a slightly different context. I am simply emphasizing that Schellenberg is indeed well aware of these competing duties.[8] Additionally, if anything, he considers our duty to the truth more important than our duty to avoid error. With this discussion in view, consider how easily we can modify the Schellenbergian argument to include both epistemic goals:

(**1)   Peers in a dispute should aim at the truth *and at avoiding error.*

(***2) The best way for peers to gain the truth *and avoid error* is to avoid placing presumptive trust in doxastic practices inasmuch as possible. [Doxastic Minimalism]

(***3) In order to avoid skepticism, discover the truth, and *avoid error,* peers should place presumptive trust in only those doxastic practices that are universal and unavoidable.

Pittard, however, claims that on this interpretation, both (***2) and (***3) are false. Or, more carefully, he does not seem to ever consider Schellenberg's remarks in *The Will to Imagine: A Justification of Skeptical Religion.*

Perhaps there is another sense in which this critique of Pittard is too strong. With James, part of what Pittard might be claiming is that there is actually no appropriate criteria for telling us how to weigh the competing goals of avoiding error and gaining true beliefs. This is why they are rightly labelled as 'competing'. Therefore, Pittard may well respond that he does not really owe us the criteria I criticize him for not offering. However, later in the book, Pittard offers a defense of a rationalist view of 'partisan justification', which implies that mystical experiences may sometimes be justified (though not necessarily) if they yield an appropriate type of rational insight. This view is worthy of serious consideration in its own right, though space constraints prevent me from taking it up here. My point is that Schellenberg has offered an account of how to balance these competing aims, and if Pittard's critique holds, then it paves the way to an unpalatable permissiveness. What we do not want is a method of inquiry that maximizes the number of an inquirer's true beliefs, while simultaneously maximizing the number of her false beliefs.

Maybe part of the disagreement here is one about burden of proof. Who owes who a set of criteria about which practices we ought to presumptively trust? After all, in the parts of the book I focus on, Pittard is criticizing Schellenberg's endorsement of doxastic minimalism, not offering his own account as to which practices we should trust. The problem, however, is that Schellenberg has offered criteria and Pittard is wrong that it only prioritizes avoiding error. We thus do not have a reason to reject Schellenberg's criteria on the grounds that it focuses on one epistemic goal to the exclusion of another important one.

5. Problems for Pittard's Critique of Schellenberg: *Unavoidability and Universality Are Arbitrary*

I now move to Pittard's second main objection to Schellenberg and show why it is also misguided. Pittard says that even if he is wrong and we should not extend presumptive trust to other doxastic practices, Schellenberg's account remains incorrect because "there is no principled basis for singling out universal and unavoidable practices other than the fact of their unavoidability" (Pittard 2020, p. 84).[9] According to Pittard, Schellenberg does not treat basic doxastic practices as basic because they help our inquiry. Rather, he does so merely because we cannot help but use them. Schellenberg does not offer principled reasons for not wanting to include other avoidable practices, especially those that could possibly benefit our inquiry. We might standardize this objection as follows:

Pittard's Arbitrary Objection

(8) "If one's reason for giving special treatment to universal and humanly unavoidable practices is the fact of their unavoidability, then one must admit that radical skepticism would be rationally required if it were possible and that one's nonskeptical outlook is in a certain sense lamentable" (Pittard 2020, p. 84).

(9) "And this [i.e., admitting that radical skepticism would be rationally required if it were possible and that one's nonskeptical outlook is in a certain sense lamentable] concedes too much to the skeptic" (Pittard 2020, p. 84).

(10) "There is no principled basis for singling out universal and unavoidable practices other than the fact of their unavoidability" (Pittard 2020, p. 84). Therefore,

(11) Giving special treatment to universal and unavoidable practices either concedes too much to the sceptic or lacks a principled reason for giving such practices special treatment.

Pittard bolsters this argument by suggesting that if one were offered the chance to make an unavoidable belief-forming practice avoidable, that in Schellenberg's view, we ought to take it. Imagine being able to take a pill that causes one to no longer automatically believe in other minds or the external world. We should take the pill because for Schellenberg, our current non-skeptical outlook is in some sense lamentable.

Reply:

For Schellenberg, the universality and unavoidability criteria reflect an important fact about humans, especially with respect to the nature of ambition. We want to fill out the picture of our world as accurately as possible and as such other practices are required while others are denied presumptive trust (which is just what one would expect of good inquirers). Furthermore, Schellenberg seems concerned with offering advice for human inquiry given our current and actual epistemic situation, i.e., given the way humans actually evolved. The principled reason right now is that the practices Schellenberg defends are unavoidable. It is the best we can do given our actual epistemic circumstances. Pittard is likely correct that were it to become possible to change unavoidable doxastic practices into avoidable practices that Schellenberg would probably have to revise what he says about which practices deserve presumptive trust. However, this does not seem to conflict with the point that Schellenberg is just offering us advice for how to inquire *right now*.[10]

Finally, an easy amendment to avoid this worry is simply to modify Schellenberg's position to say that we should grant presumptive doxastic trust to doxastic practices that are unavoidable and universal without human intervention. This would, it seems, still bracket practices such as mystical experiences since they are not universal. It would also still exclude religious beliefs more generally since they almost always formed with the help of other humans (and when they are not, those experiences are not universal). Of course, more work would have to be done in order to develop this suggestion since right now Pittard could fairly accuse of it being ad hoc.

6. Conclusions

In light of the above criticisms of Pittard, the Schellenbergian Argument for Doxastic Minimalism and Strong Conciliationism remains intact. One item that appears sometimes lost in Pittard's analysis of Schellenberg is that what is under dispute is whether mystical experience should be granted *presumptive trust*. However, this does not mean that the outputs of doxastic practices not granted presumptive trust should *never* be trusted. This is important. For even supposing that my defense of Schellenberg against Pittard is correct, the Schellenbergian argument does not entail that mystical experiences can never be appeal to as grounds for rejecting strong conciliationism. Unless one possesses a defeater for the reliability of the entire doxastic practice, then the evidential merits of mystical experiences must be assessed on a *case-by-case basis*.[11] While I agree with Schellenberg that mystical experiences should not be granted presumptive trust, it does not follow that mystical experiences cannot be used as an evidential tiebreaker to defend against strong versions of conciliationism.

Notes

1 Exclusivists claim that their religion is the one unique true religion (and must be explicitly endorsed by an individual in order to rightly consider them a member). For example, (Plantinga 1999).

2 A minority of epistemologists advocate for hybrid views which call for conciliating or remaining steadfast depending on the specific details of the disagreement in questions. For example, (Lackey 2010).

3 Since I am most concerned with analyzing and ultimately rejecting Pittard's criticisms of Schellenberg, I will primarily stick to Pittard's interpretation of Schellenberg.

4 See also (Alston 2014).

5 Before arriving at his official critique of Schellenberg, Pittard raises the following worry: "If one finds oneself with some basic doxastic practice that is unavoidable (for oneself) but not universal, why is not one rationally entitled to trust this practice? As an example, consider someone in colonial America who was raised to believe that chattel slavery is morally abhorrent and who simply cannot get ride of this belief even after discovering that belief is not universally shared. Is this person's unavoidable belief in the wrongness of slavery irrational because it is the product of a nonuniversal doxastic practice?" (2020, 77). See also (Plantinga 2000, p. 450). I do not want to wade too far into this objection since it is not central to my focus in this paper. However, it is odd Pittard does not address the fact that this is a sword that cuts in both directions. Consider another unavoidable but nonuniversal doxastic practices such as *forming beliefs on the basis of childhood authority figures*. What if the belief formed in question is less pleasant than the one Pittard suggests? What if the person in colonial America was raised to think chattel slavery was part of God's natural order? Surely these doxastic practices should not be given presumptive innocence. We often rightly reject things we were taught as children from authority figures.

6 Pittard notes that Sandford Goldberg makes a similar argument to that offered by Schellenberg. We should only trust those doxastic practices which failure to do so would lead to 'epistemic impoverishment'. Sense perception is one such practice while religious doxastic practices are not (Pittard 2020, pp. 80–81). For more, see (Goldberg 2013).

7 See also (James 2012).

8 For more, see (Schellenberg 2009, pp. 220–26).

9 Pittard also criticizes Schellenberg with respect to how he approaches avoiding skepticism. According to Pittard, Schellenberg should lament the fact that we cannot but avoid our nonskeptical outlook (i.e., we need it to get inquiry off the ground). He also says that Schellenberg might be able to appeal to practical reasons to ground our use of perception, but not our belief in other minds. There is much to say here but doing so would take us too far afield. I am simply going to assume that we want to avoid skepticism and that Schellenberg's account is not somehow fundamentally incompatible with this fact. For more, see (Pittard 2020, pp. 84–91).

10 A further interesting issue worth exploring here is whether Schellenberg's defense of doxastic minimalism amounts to an instance of pragmatic encroachment (and whether such encroachment is legitimate).

11 As I mention above, Schellenberg concludes his chapter on mystical experience by suggesting two such candidates in that of religious diversity and alternative explanations. Given space constraints and that my focus is on Pittard, I will not discuss these here.

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Psychedelic Epistemology: William James and the "Noetic Quality" of Mystical Experience

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Abstract: William James proposed in 1902 that states of mystical experience, central to his idea of religious experience, can be identified based on their ineffability and their noetic quality. The epistemological category of the noetic quality, modified by W. T. Stace in 1960, plays a central but somewhat confounding role in today's biomedical research involving psychedelic drugs such as psilocybin and LSD. Using scales based on James, it can be shown that psychedelics "reliably occasion" intense subjective states of experience or mystical states. It is debated whether these states are necessary for the wide range of possible mental health therapeutic benefits that appear to follow. This paper reviews what James said about the noetic quality and its relationship to religious experience, epistemology, and states of mystical experience. It explores how the noetic quality is measured in today's research, addressing a growing list of concerns that psychedelic science can be epistemologically biased, that it is hostile to atheistic or physicalist views, that it injects religion unduly into science, or that it needs to find ways to eliminate the mystical element, if not the entire intense subjective experience altogether.

Keywords: William James; noetic quality; religious experience; mystical experience; mystical states; psychedelics; psychedelic experience; psilocybin; mystical experience questionnaire

1. Introduction

Few books have had such a wide-ranging and enduring impact as *The Varieties of Religious Experience* by William James. The book, published in 1902, is based on the lectures James gave in Edinburgh in the famed Gifford series (James 2004). The discussion of this book by scholars of religion is not surprising, given the originality of the book and its importance for religion, but interest by psychedelic researchers in university laboratories? Surprising though it may be, there are references in abundance in the latest technical literature, not always to James by name but to the concept that he put forward in his groundbreaking discussion of mystical states of experience. James called it the *noetic quality*, and this term appears almost like a standard fixture in the most recent technical articles on the possible therapeutic value of psychedelic drugs.

The "psychedelic drugs" included here are psilocybin, LSD, DMT, and mescaline. Psilocybin is found naturally in a group of fungi sometimes called "magic" or "sacred" mushrooms. In the human body, psilocybin (technically a "prodrug") is metabolized to become the psychoactive drug *psilocin*. LSD, the popular name for lysergic acid diethylamide, was first synthesized by Albert Hoffmann in 1938. DMT (N,N-dimethyltryptamine) is found in many plants and animals and is associated with what is known as the "*ayahuasca* brew". Mescaline is the common name for the active substance found in peyote. These drugs act in different ways and are associated with different cultural traditions and forms of use. The most widely studied drug in today's psychedelic research is psilocybin.

With only a few exceptions, these drugs are still largely illegal around the world. To study their effects, researchers need official approval, which is now becoming somewhat routine. In the early 2000s, at the beginning of what is now called the "psychedelic renaissance", the approval process was lengthy and demanding. What motivated researchers

was the possibility that these drugs may have broad, untapped therapeutic potential. Research is underway looking for possible psychedelic treatments for an astonishingly wide range of mental and neurological disorders. These include depression and anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, excessive end-of-life anxiety among the terminally ill, eating disorders, substance abuse disorders, and more. In addition, psychedelic states are seen by many researchers as a tool for exploring the experience of consciousness, both "ordinary" and altered. This includes, of course, what is widely called "mystical experience" or the experience of "mystical states".

To measure mystical states, researchers draw upon ideas that go back to William James, including his idea of the noetic quality. In a best-selling book exploring his first-hand encounter with the "psychedelic renaissance", Michael Pollan says about the noetic quality: "the conviction that some profound objective truth has been disclosed to you is a hallmark of the mystical experience, regardless of whether it has been occasioned by a drug, meditation, fasting, flagellation, or sensory deprivation. William James gave a name to this conviction: the noetic quality. People feel they have been let in on a deep secret of the universe, and they cannot be shaken from that conviction" (Pollan 2019, p. 41).

The title of Pollan's book (*How to Change Your Mind*) goes right to the heart of the epistemological or noetic quality. These drugs appear to change the way people think. We see the noetic quality making an even more dramatic appearance in the title of William Richard's book, *Sacred Knowledge* (Richards 2015). Popular media presentations of research have even implied that atheism and agnosticism could well be added to the list of disorders treatable with psychedelics! Might a drug-occasioned mystical experience convince atheists to become believers? These journalistic reports may in fact be "substantially misleading" (Glausser 2021, p. 1). The underlying concern, however, is real. These drugs "occasion" mystical experience which, as James pointed out a century ago, has an epistemologically authoritative noetic quality that can change the way people think.

One research team is clear that as a group, they "are keen not to endorse any associations between it and supernatural or metaphysical ideas". Then, they issued this challenge: Anyone "interested in the phenomenology of mystical type/peak experiences may wish to explore these classic texts", starting specifically with William James (Roseman et al. 2018, p. 2). This essay is an attempt to respond to the challenge.

2. What James Says about the "Noetic Quality"

The Varieties of Religious Experience by William James is based on lectures given in Edinburgh in 1902 as part of the distinguished series, the Gifford Lectures. It contains twenty chapters, only two of which are on "mysticism". Anyone looking at the book for the first time is likely to think that, for James, the idea of religious experience is the broad category or topic, and that mysticism is a special subset. In fact, there is good reason to think that, in James, mystical experience is the broader category, with religious experience being just one type.

How does James identify a mystical experience or distinguish it from an intense but non-mystical one? He lists four marks by which to "classify a state of mind as mystical". The first mark is "*ineffability*". He calls this the "handiest of the marks", pointing out that it is inherently "negative" in the sense that the content of the experience "defies expression". A mystical experience may be spoken of, but "no adequate report of its contents can be given in words" (James 2004, p. 209). As a result, a mystical experience cannot be shared. "Its quality must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others". For this reason, James says, experiences of mystical states "are more like states of feeling than like states of intellect". He calls *ineffability* "the keynote of all mysticism" (James 2004, p. 221).

The second mark of mystical states, which is the focus of this paper, is their "*noetic quality*". While *ineffability* is more like a state of feeling than of knowing, the opposite is true when we consider the *noetic quality*. In his key passage, James defines the noetic quality of mystical experiences in this way:

"Although so similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after—time." (James 2004, p. 210)

With this simple statement, James describes the noetic quality. He makes the claim that these two marks, ineffability and the noetic quality, are sufficient in themselves to "entitle any state to be called mystical, in the sense in which I use the word". However, he adds two additional qualities that "are usually found". These are *transiency* and *passivity*.

With the "noetic quality" briefly defined, James turns to the broader epistemological question of the truth status of what is known in the mystical state. "Do mystical states establish the truth" arising from their noetic quality? He begins his answer by pointing out that mystical states do not generally lead to the replacement of one set of beliefs with another. Beliefs formerly held are transcended in the sense that their narrowness or exclusivity is negated. In one sense, what is "known" is that there is much more to know; that former beliefs were too restrictive and that the truth is more expansive than previously imagined. He claims that "we pass into mystical states from out of ordinary consciousness as from a less into a more, as from a smallness into a vastness, and at the same time as from an unrest to a rest. We feel them as reconciling, unifying states. In them the unlimited absorbs the limits and peacefully closes the account" (James 2004, p. 227). The experience of the noetic quality of mystical states means that one now knows that there are more ways to know.

Furthermore, James is clear that the noetic quality does not necessarily lead to new concepts or insights. He makes the somewhat surprising point that the mystic learns what is already known, but perhaps now in a deeper and more confident way. He writes: "The simplest rudiment of mystical experience would seem to be that deepened sense of the significance of a maxim or formula which occasionally sweeps over one. 'I've heard that said all my life,' we exclaim, 'but I never realized its full meaning until now'" (James 2004, p. 211). He calls this "an extremely frequent phenomenon, that sudden feeling, namely, which sometimes sweeps over us, of having 'been here before'" (James 2004, p. 211). In different words, Michael Pollan describes this same sense of a new experience of old ideas: "The mystical journey seems to offer a graduate education in the obvious. Yet people come out of the experience understanding these platitudes in a new way; what was merely known is now felt, takes on the authority of a deeply rooted conviction" (Pollan 2019, p. 71).

Foreshadowing later debates, James insists that the authenticity of the noetic quality of the mystical experience does not depend on its cause. Does the experience come from years of spiritual practice in meditation or suddenly from some inhaled substance? This is not decisive for James when it comes to calling the experience mystical. He is very explicit on this question, which was so much debated fifty years later by (Huxley 1954; Stace 1960; Zaehner 1972). Referring to ether and nitrous oxide, James insists that they "stimulate the mystical consciousness in an extraordinary degree. Depth beyond depth of truth seems revealed to the inhaler" (James 2004, p. 212). The "cause" of the experience does not compromise the quality of the experience, including its noetic quality. W. T. Stace refers to this claim as the "principle of causal indifference" (Stace 1960, pp. 29–30). Writing at about the same time as Stace, religion scholar Huston Smith affirms the principle of causal indifference in the strongest terms possible: "Descriptively, drug experiences cannot be distinguished from their natural religious counterpart. When the current philosophical authority on mysticism, W. T. Stace, was asked whether the drug experience is similar to the mystical experience, he answered, 'It's not a matter of its being *similar* to mystical experience; it *is* mystical experience'" (Smith 1964, pp. 523–24; emphasis in the original).

To be sure, James expresses some doubt about whether a nitrous oxide experience rises to the same level as the more traditional mystical states. In his lectures, he narrates his

own experience in experimenting with nitrous oxide, something which he had previously discussed in print. Despite the experiment, James does not claim to be a mystic or to have experienced a mystical state. Nevertheless, he seems to suggest that, while the content of what he "knows" when the drug is acting in his brain may be questionable in terms of its enduring authority, the experience of entering a new horizon of consciousness led him permanently to question the sufficiency of "normal waking consciousness". He writes:

> "One conclusion was forced upon my mind at that time, and my impression of its truth has ever since remained unshaken. It is that our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation." (James 2004, p. 213)

Here, we encounter once again the idea that the noetic quality includes the experience of knowing that there is more than one way to know. When it comes to a nitrous oxide experiment, James does not seem to have much confidence in the content of what he came to "know" while under the gas. However, he does claim to know with great certainty what we might see as a formal principle of his epistemology, that what we ordinarily believe we see and know is not all that there is.

What, then, is the truth status of the content of what is "known" to the one experiencing a mystical state? In a fascinating passage, James asks about the relationship between the noetic quality and epistemic authority that attaches to the mystical experience. A mystical state is *noetic*, but is the knowledge authoritative? "Does it furnish any warrant for the truth of . . . supernaturality and pantheism which it favors?" His answer is both yes and no. Yes, he asserts, "mystical states, when well developed, usually are, and have the right to be, absolutely authoritative over the individuals to whom they come". However, at the same time, "no authority emanates from them which should make it a duty for those who stand outside of them to accept their revelations uncritically". When seen as a claim of authoritative knowledge, the *noetic quality* applies only to the one who experiences the mystical state. For James, the assertion of the *noetic quality* is not based on general knowledge of philosophy or religion, as if it were a rational argument leading to conclusions valid for all rational subjects. It is based not on publicly accessible evidence but solely on the experience of the individual, and, as such, its authority for the individual is taken by James to be a straightforward empirical fact of psychology. "As a matter of psychological fact, mystical states of a well-pronounced and emphatic sort are usually authoritative over those who have them" (James 2004, p. 230). And again: "Mystical truth exists for the individual who has the transport, but for no one else" (James 2004, p. 221). Anyone can know that mystical states include a noetic quality, but only the mystic experiences the authority of noetic dimension of the experience.

Whatever truth an individual encounters is not contained in a specific doctrine or metaphysical belief, much less one that is the same for all who experience mystical states. Nevertheless, according to James, "mystical states in general assert a pretty distinct theoretic drift". They tend to "point in definite philosophical directions. One of these directions is optimism, and the other is monism" (James 2004, p. 227). Even his own limited mystical experience under the influence of nitrous oxide had a kind of "drift" toward one view rather than another in reference to classical metaphysics. "Looking back on my own experiences, they all converge towards a kind of insight to which I cannot help ascribing some metaphysical significance . . . . It is as if the opposites of the world, whose contradictoriness and conflict make all our difficulties and troubles, were melted into unity" (James 2004, p. 214).

If mystical experiences lead to the discovery of truth that is authoritative to the one who experiences the mystical state but not to others, it is also true for James that the sheer fact that mystical states happen often to people commonly thought to be sane leads him to

a further observation about the *negative dimension* of the noetic quality. He writes that, for everyone who is open to taking the evidence seriously, the fact that *others* have mystical experiences is enough to "break down the authority of the non-mystical or rationalistic consciousness, based upon the understanding and the senses alone. They show it to be only one kind of consciousness. They open out the possibility of other orders of truth" (James 2004, p. 230). James refers to this as "negating the negation" (James 2004, p. 227). It is obvious that he wishes to emphasize what he is saying about this, making it clear now that he is speaking not just about what is authoritative for the mystic, but about what is binding on everyone. He writes: "Yet, I repeat once more, the existence of mystical states absolutely overthrows the pretension of non-mystical states to be the sole and ultimate dictators of what we may believe" (James 2004, p. 232).

James is not denying the validity of ordinary empirical and rational thought. What he is rejecting is the denial of the possibility of other ways of knowing. He refers to these other ways of knowing as "gifts to our spirit by means of which facts already objectively before us fall into a new expressiveness and make a new connection with our active life. They do not contradict these facts as such, or deny anything that our senses have immediately seized". Then he accuses his critics of a kind of epistemic narrow-mindedness. The critic, not the mystic, is the denier. "It is the rationalistic critic rather who plays the part of denier in the controversy, and his denials have no strength, for there never can be a state of facts to which new meaning may not truthfully be added" (James 2004, p. 232).

What, then, is the noetic quality of mystical states of experience according to William James? It is a complex idea, philosophically subtle and epistemological multi-dimensional. Its "curious sense of authority" applies only to the one who experiences the mystical state. The fact that such states are experienced widely by seemingly sane and intelligent people, however, leads James to see mystical states as the negation of ideas that limit the scope of human experience, beginning with the idea that "ordinary experience" is all there is.

3. From James to Stace to the MEQ30

The noetic quality of mystical experience identified by William James is very much alive in today's research laboratories. How a book published in 1902 continues to shape research methodology today is an interesting story by itself, especially when we consider that James is not writing about neuroscience or pharmacological research but about religious epistemology. In the decades after James, various authors revisited his discussion of mysticism. Foremost among them was W. T. Stace, whose *Mysticism and Philosophy* is the most important direct link between William James and psychedelic research (Stace 1960). This book, published in 1960, coincided with widening attention given to LSD and with the earliest modern Western accounts of psilocybin.

Stace is clear that the idea of the noetic quality originates with James, but Stace himself tends to call it the "sense of objective reality", speaking of it as "a second universal characteristic" of the mystical experience (Stace 1960, p. 67; cf. 79, 110, 131). In his key discussion of the noetic quality, Stace writes that "the experience is immediately interpreted by the mystic as having objective reference and not being a mere inner or subjective state of the soul. This is what James called 'noetic quality.' His word 'quality,' since it implies a characteristic of the experience itself and not a mere interpretation, draws attention to the fact that this is how the mystic himself regards it. Objectivity is not for him an opinion but an experienced certainty" (Stace 1960, pp. 67–68).

Elaborating more fully on the meaning of "the feeling of objectivity", Stace makes several interesting observations. First, although the noetic quality has authority only for the mystic, the non-mystic must contend with the force of the mystic's feeling of certainty. The mystic is not merely being obstinate about what is claimed as known, Stace argues. "Hence the mystic's certainty has at least to be explained as a psychological phenomenon" (Stace 1960, p. 153). As later discussed, today's psychedelic researchers seem to be taking up this challenge of trying to explain this phenomenon, aided now as they are by drugs to reliably "occasion" such experiences (Griffiths et al. 2006). Second, Stace nicely reiterates

and expands on a point already made in James. The noetic quality or "feeling of objectivity" is not an interpretation of the experience. Stace writes that "this feeling of reality is a part of the mystical experience itself and not an intellectual interpretation of it. The self-transcendence of the experience is itself experienced, not thought . . . . *Now the fact that self-transcendence is part of the experience itself is the reason why the mystic is absolutely certain of its truth beyond all possibility of arguing him out of it*" (Stace 1960, pp. 153–54; italics in original).

Another modification in Stace is that the noetic quality is one item in a longer list of characteristics of the mystical experience, no longer standing alone with *ineffability* as it did in the original text by William James. Complicating matters even more, Stace (unlike James) distinguishes between what he calls two types of mystical experience, the extrovertive and the introvertive, which differ mainly in the kind of unity that is experienced. Where the extrovertive experience is centered on the feeling that "all things are one", the introvertive mystic loses a sense of the self in a kind of spaceless, timeless experience. Building on that distinction, Stace identifies two lists of seven characteristics of mystical experience, each slightly different for the extrovertive and the introvertive, but largely similar. The Jamesian "noetic quality", now relabeled the "sense of objectivity or reality", appears on both lists.

In 1962, just two years after Stace published his work, Walter Pahnke drew upon it as part of his Harvard Ph.D. project. Pahnke develops the famous "Marsh Chapel" experiment, in which he administered psilocybin to divinity student volunteers to investigate the potential of the drug to bring about a mystical experience. He drew upon Evelyn Underhill (Underhill 1911), along with James and especially on Stace, to create a questionnaire to quantify the mystical marks of the experience. According to Rick Doblin, Pahnke's scale was based on eight categories. "The categories include (1) sense of unity, (2) transcendence of time and space, (3) sense of sacredness, (4) sense of objective reality, (5) deeply felt positive mood, (6) ineffability, (7) paradoxicality and (8) transiency" (Doblin 1991, p. 7). Doblin adds that "Pahnke arbitrarily determined that for a mystical experience to be considered complete for the purposes of the experiment", the total score and the score in each of the eight categories needed to be at least 60% of the maximum possible (Doblin 1991, p. 10).

About 25 years after Pahnke's experiment, Doblin located and surveyed most of the participants in the original experiment, finding that they rated their experience even more highly mystical than they had at the time of the experiment. This included their rating of the noetic factor, which came in at 82% of the maximum possible, the highest of any category (Doblin 1991, pp. 7, 11).

After many revisions, criticisms, and new editions, compounded by the world-wide halt in psychedelic research due to the "war on drugs", Pahnke's original questionnaire has evolved and has been supplemented by other survey instruments. Through this process, William Richards has played a key role (Richards 2015). In the late 1960s, Richards collaborated with Pahnke. More recently, he has worked with Roland Griffiths and the team at Johns Hopkins University. The result is consistency over time in the development of what is called the "Mystical Experience Questionnaire" or MEQ, subsequently shortened to become the MEQ43 and now in a form called the MEQ30. At the same time, it must be noted that, in the transition from James to Huxley and Stace and finally to the MEQ, the idea of mystical experience became associated with "perennial philosophy", the view that mystical states are common across cultures and underlie all religious traditions. This view is widely rejected by religion scholars today.

According to the Hopkins team, "the mystical items have remained largely consistent since the inception of the MEQ" in the work of Walter Pahnke in 1969 (MacLean et al. 2012, p. 4). This questionnaire is also sometimes known as the Pahnke–Richards Mystical Experience Questionnaire, and it is often administered as a part of the larger, 100-item "States of Consciousness Questionnaire" (SOCQ).

Remarkably, the *noetic quality* first put forward by William James in 1902 remains a key item in the current MEQ30. "The four factors of the MEQ30 are: mystical (including items from the internal unity, external unity, noetic quality, and sacredness scales of the

MEQ43), positive mood, transcendence of time and space, and ineffability (all three of which include items from their respective MEQ43 scales)" (Barrett et al. 2015, p. 2). When the MEQ30 is administered within the larger State of Consciousness Questionnaire, research volunteers are given this instruction: "Looking back on the extended session you have just experienced, please rate the degree to which at any time during that session, you experienced the following phenomena. In making each of your ratings, use the following scale: 0—none; not at all. 1—so slight cannot decide 2—slight 3—moderate 4 -strong (equivalent in degree to any previous strong experience or expectation of this description) 5—extreme (more than ever before in my life and stronger than 4)" (States of Consciousness Questionnaire and Pahnke-Richards Mystical Experience Questionnaire n.d.).

Four of the thirty items in the MEQ30 relate directly to the noetic quality. The four items are worded as follows, each preceded here by its number in the 100-item State of Consciousness Questionnaire:

"3. Feeling that the consciousness experienced during part of the session was more real than your normal awareness of everyday reality.

9. Gain of insightful knowledge experienced at an intuitive level.

22. Certainty of encounter with ultimate reality (in the sense of being able to "know" and "see" what is really real) at some time during your session.

69. You are convinced now, as you look back on your experience, that in it you encountered ultimate reality (i.e., that you "knew" and "saw" what was really real) (States of Consciousness Questionnaire and Pahnke-Richards Mystical Experience Questionnaire n.d.). https://www.ocf.berkeley.edu/~jfkihlstrom/ConsciousnesWeb/Psychedelics/States-of-Consciousness-Questionnaire-and-Pahnke.pdf (accessed on 28 November 2021)".

Using the MEQ and other questionnaires, researchers working with psychedelics such as psilocybin have consistently found that research volunteers typically report undergoing an intense subjective experience, often characterized as "mystical". The noetic quality, together with other marks or characteristics of mystical experience, are reported at levels researchers themselves find to be surprisingly high. As later discussed, not everyone is completely happy with this finding.

4. For Psychedelics to Work, Are Subjective Effects Necessary?

Within the global community of researchers studying the possible therapeutic benefits of psychedelics, there is optimism bordering on exuberance when they consider the sheer range of mental health problems for which substances like psilocybin seem to offer help. The current list of possible applications includes some of the most persistent and widely diagnosed challenges in mental health. Depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), drug and alcohol disorders, and eating disorders are just a few items on the list. With opportunities for all these possible new therapies, it is not at all surprising to see a growing number of private companies and investors engaging in their own research, all looking for ways to secure a share of future profits.

Throughout the ranks of the wide and diverse network of researchers and venture capitalists, however, a debate has arisen over the "subjective effects" of psychedelic drugs, especially the key role seemingly played by mystical experience as a part of the therapy. The nub of the question is whether these subjective effects are necessary if therapy is to follow. No one disputes the view that psychedelics substances reliably occasion what have been called "mystical states of experience", and no one seriously rejects the idea that they show amazing promise as a path to therapy for a surprisingly broad spectrum of mental health problems. The debate is whether therapy requires mystical experience. So far, the supporting evidence is correlational.

"A critical question for the field to address is whether or not the acute subjective effects of these drugs are necessary to produce long-lasting therapeutic response" (Olson 2021, p. 563). One reason why the question is important is purely practical. Helping research

subjects and future patients prepare for and work through the subjective experience is a challenge that complicates the therapy process. Some worry that dealing with the subjective experience will mean that "this treatment strategy is limited by the significant healthcare costs associated with it. Due to the powerful subjective effects of the drug, healthcare professionals must provide support before, during, and after treatment to prepare patients for the subjective effects of the drug, ensure that no harm comes to them during the altered state of consciousness, and help them integrate their experience" (Olson 2021, p. 563). So far, however, the evidence suggests that, by whatever name we call it, an intense subjective experience plays a key role in bringing about the full benefits of psychedelic therapies.

In keeping with our focus here on the noetic quality, our question is whether something like the Jamesian noetic quality or Stace's "sense of objective reality" is a necessary component of the subjective experience. In a recent book entitled *Philosophy of Psychedelics*, Chris Letheby suggests that there is reason to think that the answer is yes. "We have already seen evidence that the mystical experience is a key part of psychedelics' transformative mechanism, and a defining element of the mystical experience is the noetic quality: the powerful sense of direct, undeniable knowledge—the compelling feeling that the transcendent Reality encountered is 'more real than real'" (Letheby 2021, p. 28). Writing more than a decade earlier, William Richards predicted that more research would confirm that intense mystical experience is necessary for effective therapies. "As William James observed, although mystical consciousness may entail profound emotions, it also includes intuitive knowledge—James called it 'the noetic quality' (1902). This aspect could well prove to be the nexus of its therapeutic potential in the treatment of addictions, depression and anxiety" (Richards 2008, p. 193). The multi-billion-dollar question, it seems, is whether mystical experience, including the noetic factor, is truly the *nexus of therapy*.

Drug companies looking forward to psychedelic therapies certainly hope the answer is no. They would like to avoid the complications that are associated with a weird kind of therapy that occasions mystical experience. Such an intense experience is too big for the fine print about side effects. Just what would the warning label say? What should the informed consent process look like if it is true "that patients might experience significant shifts in their ethical outlook and worldview, which they cannot fully foresee from the perspective of their pre-therapeutic self (52)" (Langlitz et al. 2021, p. 4)? What if taking the drug changes their mind about consent? David Olson goes so far as to say that, unless the mystical element can be tamed, therapy might never become practical or scalable. "Despite the promising therapeutic responses produced by psychedelic-assisted therapy, the intense subjective effects of these drugs make it unlikely that they will ever become widespread treatments for disorders such as depression" (Olson 2021, p. 566).

So far, however, the debate has taken place among researchers rather than drug companies or clinical psychiatrists. The researchers themselves are divided on the matter, all supporting the idea that psychedelics have strong and wide-ranging therapeutic possibilities but with some investigators obviously unhappy with the idea that the path to therapy passes through something that can be called "mysticism".

There are, in fact, at least two issues at the heart of the conflict. First, do themes such as "mystical experience" have any use in scientific research in the first place? Does the very idea of mystical experience carry with it an undeniable religious connotation that is completely out of place in science, including medical research? Does it sound as though scientists are looking for evidence of divine healing or for other archaic manifestations of the occult? Second, assuming that "mystical experience" can be studied scientifically, is it true that the therapeutic potential of psychedelics hinges significantly on intense subjective experiences that should be called mystical? In other words, is the correlation pointing to a causal relation, even if the causal pathway is not (and may never be) fully understood?

Beginning with the first question, we recognize that many scientists are uncomfortable with religion, at least if it bears on their intellectual work. For some, the problem here is that religious or spiritual notions such as mystical experience are methodologically out of place in scientific research. Sanders and Zijlmans speak of the "risks and difficulties stemming

from the scientific use of a framework associated with supernatural or nonempirical belief systems". What is needed, they say, is "a demystified model of the psychedelic state" (Sanders and Zijlmans 2021, p. 1253). They continue by warning of "the encroachment of supernatural and nonempirical beliefs on psychedelic science". They encourage their collaborators to "imagine the ways in which new frameworks may bring greater benefit for science and society alike" (Sanders and Zijlmans 2021, p. 1253). What is needed, they say, is a new interpretation by which the "psychological phenomena previously explained as mystical might come to be understood in terms that are not encumbered by theological, supernatural, or fantastical baggage" (Sanders and Zijlmans 2021, p. 1255). Terms associated with mysticism, they believe, must be kept out of psychedelic research. "The purported 'sacredness', 'ineffability', and 'noetic quality' of these states may take on characteristics congruent with scientific understanding if an accessible scientific explanation exists, and if questionnaires reflecting this explanation are administered" (Sanders and Zijlmans 2021, p. 1254). Others share the concern, at least in part. "The so-called 'mystical' experience has been a classic problem area for mainstream psychology—if not science more generally. The term 'mystical' is particularly problematic, as it suggests associations with the supernatural that may be obstructive or even antithetical to scientific method and progress" (Roseman et al. 2018, p. 2).

Even those less concerned about keeping religion-related themes out of science will agree at least with this concern: "When we administer a mystical experience questionnaire, we invite participants to interpret their experience through the framework of mysticism. Thus, we risk creating biased data and may fail to learn from participants' own articulation and interpretation .... We are concerned that if science states that psychedelics induce mystical experiences that are key to their therapeutic action, this is too easily misinterpreted as research advocating a role for the supernatural or divine" (Sanders and Zijlmans 2021, p. 1254).

A solution put forward by some is to reconceive the whole idea of mystical states or mystical experiences, to secularize them, so to speak, so that the religious or transcendent features disappear while leaving subjective intensity and meaning fully intact. Researchers need to learn to use the category of "mystical experience" without being guilty of attempts to "'smuggle in' a supernatural interpretation of the experiences that people have under the influence of psychedelics". This category can be used in a way that "remains agnostic regarding the metaphysical claims about the truth or falsehood of these experiences" (Breeksema and van Elk 2021, p. 1471).

Can the language of mystical experience be used in an "agnostic" way? If we go back to William James with this question, the answer is yes. In fact, we can find the Jamesian view expressed in some of the latest arguments put forward in the current debate. For example, Jussi Jylkkä writes: "From the subjective perspective, the psychedelic experience can indeed be ineffable and mystical and include metaphysical insights, but the truth of the insights is an independent philosophical question" (Jylkkä 2021, p. 1468). Jylkkä is clear about his indebtedness to James. "The psychedelic insights have what William James called 'noetic quality' and are felt as true. It would not do justice to them to completely psychologize them or to treat them as merely neural processes. They are not just any kind of neural−psychological processes, but instead they form the subject's worldview" (Jylkkä 2021, p. 1469). Here, he makes the entirely Jamesian point that respect for the other requires respect for (but not necessarily agreement with) their sense of the noetic quality of their experience.

We return now to the second question, whether the therapeutic possibilities of psychedelic substances can be realized when the requisite subjective experience is not defined as mystical or inclusive of the noetic quality. Must the research volunteer of today or the patient of the future undergo a mystical experience as defined and scored for example by the MEQ30 to receive the full therapeutic benefit of the psychedelic therapy?

Today's leading researchers are sharply divided in their answer. Perhaps any experience of sufficient intensity and personal meaning, mystical or not, is sufficient to "cause"

the benefit. In an early pilot study on nicotine addiction, Garcia-Romeu and colleagues dismiss the idea that intensity per se explains the finding. They write that the "intensity of psilocybin session experiences was not significantly associated with smoking cessation treatment outcomes, suggesting that mystical-type effects specifically, rather than general intensity of subjective drug effects, are associated with long-term abstinence . . . . Furthermore, the magnitude of the mystical qualities of the psilocybin experiences as measured with the SOCQ seem to be predictive of subsequent decrease in tobacco craving and use, as observed from reductions in QSU scores and urinary cotinine levels" (Garcia-Romeu et al. 2015, p. 8). Here, a clear "association" of an undefined causal nature is affirmed between the MEQ-defined mystical experience and the benefit. Without the "mystical-type" effects, the therapeutic benefit is not fully realized.

If that is true, it puts psychedelics in a special class among possible therapeutic drugs. Most drugs work regardless of subjective effects. "The position that subjective effects are irrelevant to therapeutic effects is probably true of many pharmacological treatments" (Yaden and Griffiths 2021, p. 568). The report of the nicotine addiction pilot study includes this observation: "The idea that a single discrete experience can result in lasting beneficial effects in an individual's attitudes or behavior is highly unusual if not unprecedented within the modern biomedical paradigm, wherein curative or therapeutic processes are often conceptualized as occurring gradually" (Garcia-Romeu et al. 2015, pp. 9–10).

There seems, in fact, to be a four-fold or four-dimensional claim of "psychedelic exceptionalism". First, they are exceptional in the breadth of their possible applications. Second, they are exceptional in that they seem to work in a kind of burst of action, with one administration occasioning one intense experience, all in one afternoon. Third, these drugs are highly unusual if not unique in that they seem to require intense subjective experience as part of the pathway to their effectiveness. Fourth, and most controversially, psychedelic drugs provide therapy through the pathway of mystical experience. Whether these four claims are all true and how they might relate to each other is an open question. Here, we find ourselves coming back once more to William James. When we call to mind his mention of *transience* as one of the marks of mystical experience, we see that his view includes all four claims made above. For James, (1) wide-ranging health benefits come (2) in a flash through (3) intense personal experience that (4) can be called mystical and that includes the noetic quality.

Some researchers remain unconvinced that subjective effects of a mystical nature are truly necessary for therapy. Several alternative theories have been suggested. Perhaps intensive experiences occur but are not causally significant. The real cause, in other words, lies in the interactions between these drugs and the human brain. Or perhaps an intense subjective experience really is necessary as a part of the causal pathway, but must it be understood as "mystical" with the usual religious connotations?

The first theory is that subjective experience is not necessary. The true story of the causal pathway from drug to therapy lies at the usual and familiar level of pharmacology. It is fully accounted for in terms of the biochemical interactions between such things as molecules and cells. When it comes to psychedelics, of course, the complete and exact pathway has not yet been fully understood. That is no reason, however, to think that the pharmacological effectiveness of these drugs is exceptional in its pathway. More research will discover the full details of the molecular/cellular pathways by which these drugs act on the brain. When future advances fill in the gaps in knowledge, the outdated concept of "mystical experience" will be dismissed as one more example of a gap-holding explanation, retired whenever science advances and religious or philosophical explanations retreat. "From this perspective, the subjective experiences elicited by psychedelic substances are merely epiphenomena of the underlying neurobiological mechanisms which convey the beneficial effects" (Yaden and Griffiths 2021, p. 568). Does the causal pathway lie along the lines of drug interaction with serotonin receptors or with neural plasticity? There is little doubt that science will learn more about these pathways. Perhaps it will be able to

describe the causal pathway entirely at the molecular/cellular level, without recourse to subjective experience of any sort.

The second option, of course, is to agree that subjective experience is necessary but that it can be experienced and described in a way that either eliminates or limits the explicit religious or spiritual connotations. In other words, start with this affirmation: "A guiding principle of psychedelic psychotherapy is that the occurrence of a profound, potentially transformative psychological experience is critical to the treatment's efficacy" (Roseman et al. 2018, p. 2). Then, however, define this "profound, potentially transformative psychological experience" so that it can be expressed in strictly psychological and secular terms.

Mindful though they are that they continue to use the "Mystical Experience Questionnaire", and knowing very well that it measures key components of classically defined mystical experiences such as the noetic quality, some researchers propose nevertheless that the MEQ can be understood in a way that sets aside the religious connotations of the mystical dimension. "The mystical experience is not conceptually limited to religious experience or practice, and the measurement of mystical experience by the MEQ does not require any direct religious or mystical endorsement. The MEQ serves as a psychometrically sound self-report instrument that assesses philosophically and theoretically identified facets of mystical experiences and, by virtue of scores on these dimensions, can characterize the degree to which a given experience fits the schema of 'mystical'" (Barrett et al. 2015, pp. 12–13).

Letheby also tries to draw the same fine line between the necessary subjective psychedelic experience and the optional mystical experience. "The ultimate conclusion of this chapter is twofold: psychedelics' lasting psychological benefits (a) do not depend on their capacity to induce such metaphysical visions, but (b) do depend on some aspect of the psychedelic experience—some aspect, moreover, that correlates fairly reliably with psychometric ratings of mystical-type experience" (Letheby 2021, p. 61). His argument is based on the claim that the category, "mystical experiences", is not limited to states that include metaphysical or religious features. He writes that "not all 'mystical experiences', in the relevant, operational sense, are experiences as of non-naturalistic metaphysical realities. There are states of consciousness that (a) satisfy standard psychometric criteria for a 'complete' mystical-type experience, but (b) are not experiences" of a transcendent reality (Letheby 2021, p. 72).

Is it possible to have richly intense or "complete" mystical experiences without religious components such as "non-naturalistic metaphysical realities"? Or, to put it another way, can we have mysticism without religion? The obvious problem here is that, in the popular view, the idea of the "mystical" is entangled in religion, particularly with the religious beliefs of Western theistic traditions such as Christianity, the context, of course, in which James did his work. It may come as a surprise, then, to learn that, for James, the "mystical" is bigger than the "religious". In other words, not everything that is mystical is religious. It is true, of course, that his book is entitled *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. In it, mysticism occupies a relatively small part of the overall argument. Thus, it is easy to think that James sees mysticism as a subset of religion. In other words, mystical experience is shot through and through with religion. If so, then there is no legitimate way to separate the mystical from the religious. James, however, himself appears to have done just that, at least according to several of today's leading scholars of his work. The idea is put forward by (Barnard 1997) and affirmed by Richard King, who writes that "the mystical is in many respects a broader and more significant category than the religious, referring to a wider range of mental states with significantly more transformation potential than what James considered to be more mundane and everyday 'religious' experiences" (King 2004, p. 108). Scholars of religion debate whether James is right about this. Many today disagree with the Jamesian view that mystical experience, as a private moment of individual consciousness, is at the core of what defines religion. In James, the diverse practices of religion and its communal dimensions are largely ignored.

Here in this study, however, our focus is on how we get from James to contemporary biomedical research. His view of the marks of mystical experience, together with his largely negative view of "religion" as institutional and doctrinal, are key to that story. Why is this important? Because it helps us recognize the Jamesian nature of today's biomedical research. Our claim is that there is broad support in the writings of William James for the view advanced recently about the meaning of the noetic quality of mystical experience. Noting that the very word "mystical" sounds out of place in science, some biomedical research suggests that we can keep it nonetheless, if it can be understood to include non-religious, non-theistic, and non-supernatural manifestations and meanings.

For instance, Matthew Johnson writes that "'spiritual' can mean different things". It can apply to supernatural belief systems, but it can also refer to a humane and compassionate attitude toward others. Johnson continues: "'Spiritual' can also refer to caring for one's family and friends, a sense of belonging to a community and humanity, and having a sense of meaning in one's life. This latter category includes qualities that we know lead to psychological health and that any secular clinician should want for her or his patients. These qualities can and should be encourage by clinicians conducting psychedelic therapy. The concern surrounds the former category of supernatural or religious beliefs" (Johnson 2021, pp. 579–80). Would James go that far? No one can say for sure, but James seems to see mystical experience as something bigger than, and not always or altogether friendly to, traditional religious ideas.

When we return once again to the earlier question of whether mystical experience (by any definition) is necessary for the therapeutic benefit of psychedelics, we find that, on this point, James is uncharacteristically silent. According to Barnard, James skirts the question about whether the noetic quality of mystical experience is the *cause* of transformation. "James never clearly discusses the specifics of how we can determine, with any degree of certainty, that the positive transformations observed in the lives of mystics or saints actually *are* the result of their mystical inspirations". According to Barnard, there is an "unexamined assumption" at play here in James, who seems to believe "that a certain belief is the cause of a corresponding observable effect . . . . But is there ever really such a clear-cut, one-to-one correspondence between a distinct belief and an equally distinct outcome of that belief?" (Barnard 2004, pp. 139–40). Here again, we see that it is possible to stand in the tradition of William James and remain agnostic about the question of the causal role of mystical experience. Everything seems to suggest that it is necessary for the therapy and for personal transformation, but proving it?

5. James, Noetic Negation, and REBUS

One promising way to study these subjective experiences is to look for their correlates in the higher levels of the brain. As we already saw, the actions of these drugs on the cellular level of neurons and serotonin receptors have been described. Using brain imaging, however, researchers are also gaining a higher-level view of the action of these drugs on the brain as a functional whole, concentrating of course on key networks. Based on this work, one group of researchers has put forward a proposal for thinking about how these drugs affect what the brain is doing when the research volunteer lets go of prior beliefs. "A recent predictive coding inspired model of the brain action of psychedelics, known as 'REBUS' (RElaxed Beliefs Under pSychedelics), may provide some useful inspiration for aiding investigations of the neurobiology of belief change processes". The core idea here is that brain imaging offers a kind of window into the neurological processes that correspond to the subjective experience of relaxing the mind's hold on key beliefs. This "relaxation" is key to the therapeutic outcome. Although the picture is far from complete, the idea is being put forward as an attempt to get at a description of the causal pathway of psychedelic therapy. "The REBUS model proposes that rendering high-level beliefs and assumptions more plastic under psychedelics is a key mechanism underlying their acute phenomenological and potential therapeutic effects" (Timmermann et al. 2021, pp. 16–17).

For some mental disorders, it is thought that certain beliefs can be pathological. The idea suggested in the REBUS theory is that psychedelics can release patients from the beliefs that stand in the way of their healing. These beliefs, which the researchers call "priors", are "relaxed" during the drug experience. "Functionally, the effect of relaxing the precision weighting of high-level priors is to create a state in which these priors are imbued with less confidence . . . .In brief, our proposal is that psychedelics disrupt functioning at a level of the system (sensitivity of deep-layer pyramidal neurons, power of low-frequency rhythms, and integrity of large-scale networks) that encodes the precision of priors, beliefs, or assumptions" (Carhart-Harris and Friston 2019, pp. 319–20).

Whether psychedelic therapy might offer therapy for conditions that do not involve pathological ideas, or whether the course of therapy might also relax healthy ideas equally with unhealthy ones, are matter for further debate. The more basic question is whether REBUS is a significant and promising step toward understanding what the brain is doing in correlation with the subjective psychedelic experience. No attempt is made here to answer that question. Our focus, rather, is on the noetic significance of the REBUS proposal.

The relaxation of our confidence in our beliefs is an experience with a noetic quality, as is the process by which new beliefs come to define our views of ourselves and our world. It is clear that Carhart-Harris and colleagues see REBUS as a process of relaxing and regaining beliefs and therefore as a noetic experience. "We propose that psychedelics dose-dependently relax the precision weighting of high-level priors (instantiated by high-level cortex), and in so doing, open them up to an upsurge of previously suppressed bottom-up signaling (e.g., stemming from limbic circuitry). We further propose that this sensitization of high-level priors means that more information can impress on them, potentially inspiring shifts in perspective, felt as insight" (Carhart-Harris and Friston 2019, p. 334).

For this team of researchers, this raises the question of whether it is correct to think that psychedelics alter metaphysical beliefs, and, if so, do the alterations tend to run in one direction more than in other directions? The answer to both questions appears to be yes. They write: "The present study found a positive association between changes in metaphysical beliefs away from physicalism and increased psychological well-being" (Timmermann et al. 2021, p. 18). In other words, there is a "drift" (to use the language William James used to describe pretty much the same phenomenon) away from materialism or monistic physicalism towards what might be called "panpsychism". Continuing their summary, the team writes:

> Converging cross-sectional, prospective observational and controlled research data suggest a relationship between psychedelic experiences and shifts away from positions of hard physicalism and towards panpsychism, dualistic, and fatalistic beliefs. The observed changes were enduring, persisting for up to 6 months in most domains. Moreover, the large-sample prospective/observational and smaller-sample but well-controlled research findings converged, implying that psychedelic-use may indeed be a casual determinant of the relevant shifts in metaphysical beliefs. Furthermore, the belief-shifts were correlated with positive mental health changes; namely, improvements in well-being in the observational data and depression scores in the controlled research data. (Timmermann et al. 2021, pp. 14–15)

One concern raised by this finding is that we might come to think of psychedelic therapy as effective because it leads us to embrace delusional ideas. Letheby refers to this as the "Comforting Delusion Objection". The worry here is that psychedelics may help people "mainly by inducing metaphysical beliefs that are comforting but probably false, and we should therefore hesitate to use these substances for therapeutic or transformative purposes" (Letheby 2021, p. 28). He reassures us that this therapy "involves less epistemic risk than one might suppose" because it is "epistemically innocent", meaning that it "has significant epistemic benefits that are often unavailable by any alternative means". He grants that "the induction or strengthening of such beliefs sometimes accompanies the process, but not always" (Letheby 2021, p. 31).

Another problem here is that psychedelics might be seen as an effective therapy for a wide array of disorders, including atheism! Does the "drift" away from physicalism suggest a way to "cure" agnosticism or atheism? Some research reports offer hints in this direction. "An interesting finding of the present study was that, in the Non-Drug Group and each of the psychedelic groups, most of those who identified their religious affiliation as atheist before the experience no longer identified as atheist after the encounter, with this difference being significant in all groups" (Griffiths et al. 2019, pp. 21–22). Some worry especially about the way in which these findings are interpreted in the popular media. The idea of curing atheism is "substantially misleading", according to Wayne Glausser. The beliefs newly acquired by atheists do "not seem fundamentally incompatible with atheism" (Glausser 2021, p. 614).

Even though these findings can be sensationalized and distorted, there does in fact seem to be evidence of a real "drift" from physicalism to something "spiritual". According to the Johns Hopkins team, "our findings revealed significant decreases in identification as atheist and agnostic and significant increases in belief in ultimate reality, higher power, God, or universal divinity, which may be viewed as positive outcomes by some, but as negative outcomes by others". They grant that some might find this "belief in the veracity of messages" to be "alarming" (Davis et al. 2020, p. 2018).

In one respect, it really does not matter whether one favors a physicalist or a spiritual outlook. Any drug that can change the beliefs of other human beings *in any direction* is not socially benign or morally trivial. Obviously, it is true (if slightly understated) that "greater research is therefore clearly needed on the societal implications of putative psychedelic-induced belief-shifts" (Timmermann et al. 2021, p. 20).

6. Conclusions

William James describes "the noetic quality" as one of the two essential marks of mystical experience. The noetic quality means that the experience itself includes a feeling of objective reality. It includes noetic or epistemic implications that are authoritative, but only for the one undergoing the experience. With slight modifications, the Jamesian noetic quality is embedded in various questionnaires used today in scientific experiments with psychedelics to measure the intensity of mystical experiences. Reflecting on the meaning of the noetic quality in today's research, Letheby writes: "Noetic quality refers to a strong sense of gaining a genuine and unmediated insight, or of encountering ultimate reality; the mystical experience, by definition, is felt to be 'more real than real'" (Letheby 2021, p. 25). It is widely believed that the intensity of the mystical experience, including the noetic quality, correlates with the likelihood and the strength of the therapeutic benefit.

The idea of the noetic quality put forward by James has survived over the past century and appears as a factor in today's research. The reason for its endurance is that it continues to do actual work in the research setting, playing a pivotal role in the quest for new approaches to a range of mental health concerns, despite its tendency to complicate the field and to trigger debates about the place of religious motifs in science research. Turning our attention back to what James himself said about the noetic quality provides help in addressing some of these issues.

For example, we can follow the lead of William James in broadening our idea of the mystical to include naturalistic forms. According to James, mysticism is found in many forms. "How different again, apart from the happiness common to all, is the mysticism of Walt Whitman...and other naturalistic pantheists, from the more distinctively Christian sort. The fact is that the mystical feeling of enlargement, union, and emancipation *has no specific intellectual content whatever of its own*" (James 2004, p. 231; emphasis added). The suggestion by some researchers that "mysticism" remain though its meaning be broadened to avoid religious or philosophical beliefs is consistent with the Jamesian notion of the noetic quality.

However, even if "mystical" is seen as a broad category that includes nonreligious forms, we still must ask to what extent the subjective experiences include a noetically-

valent "shift" in beliefs away from physicalism towards a view that can be called vaguely "spiritual"? If these drugs shift beliefs, when is it ethical to use them? How does the noetic quality or the "epistemic risk" appear in the informed consent process? How exactly can it be stated in plain language?

No one will imagine that William James can help us with specific questions such as these, but perhaps it will be worth the effort to recall that, for James, the first part of the meaning of the noetic quality applies only to the person undergoing the experience. What is known in the experience, and with what authority? Only the person with the experience knows. The second part of the noetic quality, however, applies to others, including especially those who may in the future be involved in prescribing psychedelic drugs for therapeutic reasons. As James insists, only the person with the experience feels noetic and epistemic authority attaching itself to what is known, but the rest of us experience the fact that some have come to a new insight or now have a new take on reality. We may disagree with what we consider to be the content of their insight, but we must accept that they have it and that having it seems to help them.

What seems most important here to James is the intellectual virtue of epistemic humility—the awareness that what we know is limited and fragmented. It is not just that we have not read everything or learned everything our discipline has to teach us; it is that we are simply unaware of the value of other ways of knowing the full richness of reality. One psychedelic team, in a distinctly Jamesian way, makes this observation: "Where psychedelic research is concerned, its multi-facetedness, complexities, contextuality, and plurality should remind us that 'not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts'" (Breeksema and van Elk 2021, p. 1473). Not only does this sound like William James, but it is also the most epistemologically authentic form of agnosticism, not defined mainly by doubting the beliefs of others, but by questioning the adequacy and comprehensiveness of one's own knowledge. The noetic quality leads directly to epistemic humility.

Perhaps the enduring voice of William James is heard most clearly in today's biomedical research journals, in these words of Jussi Jylkkä, who reminds us that, even when they happen to others, "mystical experiences may emphasize our ignorance of reality. It does not conflict with natural science to acknowledge that science is limited to modeling reality or that it cannot tell anything of the reality beyond observations and models . . . . This opens room for positive claims about the reality that transcends the scientific observations and models" (Jylkkä 2021, p. 1469).

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Near-Death Experiences and Religious Experience: An Exploration of Spirituality in Medicine

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Abstract: There has been a continuous discussion of religious experience since William James, culminating in a rich and varied literature on the epistemology of religious experience in the late twentieth century. There has also been a burgeoning literature on near-death experiences (NDEs), largely on neurology and physiology and sometimes as possible counterevidence to naturalism. One important subject is largely missing, and that is a discussion of NDEs as religious experiences, and what light that might shed on their epistemic status. This paper is an attempt to fill that gap. In part one, we will delineate the topic of NDEs and what medical science has to say about them. In part two, we will lay out a general view of the epistemology of religious experience. In part three, we will apply that understanding of religious experience to NDEs and draw what lessons we may.

Keywords: near-death experiences (NDE); religious experience; framework; experience

1. Introduction

At the heart of religious belief are numerous claims of personal experiences with a divine or unseen reality (Badham 1997). Accounts of religious experiences are reported in all major world religions (e.g., Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism) and non-religious traditions from ancient to modern times. Although rational argumentation, revelation, and tradition have been at the foundation of religious belief, religious experiences have been the existential component for solidifying an individual's religious belief and relationship with the divine. Religious experiences are a common occurrence for many believers. A Pew Research Study found that approximately 65% of Americans surveyed also expressed a belief or reported having experienced some form of supernatural phenomena, such as a belief in reincarnation, belief in spiritual energy, having been in touch with the dead, or experiencing a ghostly encounter (Pew Research Center 2009). Furthermore, 49% of all Americans reported having some form of "a religious or mystical experience—that is, a moment of religious or spiritual awakening" (Pew Research Center 2009). Among non-religious participants, 30% described having a religious or mystical experience (Pew Research Center 2009). In 1962, only 22% of Americans surveyed reported having a mystical or religious experience, which increased to 31% in 1976 and 33% in 1994. Since then, the proportion of Americans reporting having a religious or mystical experience has continued to increase (Pew Research Center 2009).

In most instances, mystical or religious experiences are common among those who regularly attend religious services. More than 60% who attend weekly reported having a religious or mystical experience (Pew Research Center 2009). Among those who attended a religious service monthly or yearly, only 48% reported a religious or mystical experience (Pew Research Center 2009). Only 33% of those who seldom or never attended a religious service reported having any religious or mystical experience (Pew Research Center 2009). Based on these results, religious experience of a kind is far more widespread than often supposed. The high prevalence of religious experiences among religious and non-religious

participants is also surprising given the predominant scientific worldview adopted by much of Western culture and society. Of course, the correlation can be explained in many ways, including that having mystical experiences increases the likelihood of attending religious services, or that both are caused by some third factor (Greyson 2010). It may be that regular attendance at religious services increases the likelihood of having a mystical experience, or it may be that having mystical experiences increases the likelihood of attending religious services.

Along with the increase in reported religious or mystical experiences, there has been an upsurge in reports of near-death experiences (NDEs) (Badham 1997). Similar to religious experiences, NDEs produce profound and life-changing effects that share many characteristics of religious or mystical experiences found in many of the world's religions (Badham 1997; Facco et al. 2015; Greyson 2010, 2015). In general, individuals who have experienced an NDE report a variety of experiences, such as out-of-body experiences, looking down at themselves during their resuscitation, feeling a sense of life-review, meeting deceased relatives and friends, or enjoying a mystical experience with a figure identified in a person's own religious traditions (Badham 1997; Facco et al. 2015; Greyson 2010, 2015). As a result of modern resuscitation techniques, thousands of patients routinely report experiencing NDEs during traumatic injury or emotionally traumatic events. According to a random survey in the United States (US) and Germany, four percent of the total population in the Western world have reported experiencing an NDE (van Lommel 2014). Other clinical studies have estimated the prevalence of NDEs to occur in 10% to 20% of patients who have come close to death (Greyson 1998). More recent estimates estimate NDEs occur in 4–9% of general community members and up to 23% of critical illness patients (Cant et al. 2012). These experiences share many of the characteristics of the deepest religious experiences known to humanity (Badham 1997; Facco et al. 2015; Greyson 2010, 2015).

The descriptions of NDEs appear routinely across religious traditions, cultures, or worldviews (Badham 1997). As Daniel Van Egmond explained,

> "It is highly probable that some types of (religious) experience suggested to man that he is able to exist independently of his physical body. For instance, the so-called near-death experiences, out-of-the-body experiences, and shamanistic trances are easily interpreted this way. Indeed, the occurrence of altered states of consciousness is such a common feature in most cultures that it is very probable that such experiences were interpreted as perceptions of so-called "higher worlds"". (Egmond 1993)

The similarities and differences in NDEs across cultures highlight comparable and contrasting themes. Local themes appear to be the most important. While being 'dead' and so separated from the body is accepted, the transcendence of the Western European concept is not as evident in many texts describing NDEs in other cultures (Belanti et al. 2008). These NDEs had more practical themes including food offerings, being sent back due to mistakes, and a larger emphasis on good and evil. It was also more frequent to meet departed relatives. Although certain characteristics of NDEs are definitely impacted by culture, others, such as altered states of consciousness and generalized visions, are universal. The substance and significance of NDEs may have changed over time, depending on the extent of religious influence and engagement in society (Belanti et al. 2008). Although cultural variables must be considered when attempting to evaluate individual accounts, there may be a fundamental component to NDE. More research is needed to understand the influence of culture, religion, and society on NDEs. The study of published materials in their original languages, collaboration with multilingual professionals, and broadening the literature search to include religious/spiritual, ethnographic, and anthropological studies could result in a body of materials that can be used to investigate the interplay of cultural meaning systems and neurobiology in NDEs (Belanti et al. 2008).

There has been a continuous discussion of religious experience since William James, culminating in a rich and varied literature on the epistemology of religious experience in the late twentieth century. In many instances, NDEs are an important aspect of scholarly

discussions often overlooked despite their potential to shed light on the epistemic status of religious or mystical experiences. Therefore, examining NDEs may provide a framework through which to describe religious experiences in a well-defined and accessible manner to help physicians understand the elements of spirituality in themselves and their patients.

2. Near-Death Experiences

Although NDEs have been reported throughout history, the first account of NDEs reported in academic circles was by Albert von St. Gallen Heim in 1892 (Noyes and Kletti 1972). In general, NDEs are vivid, subjective experiences that occur during life-threatening emergencies, such as cardiac arrest, head injury, shock after loss of blood, or asphyxiation (Facco et al. 2015). Near-death experiences have also been reported in patients in non-life-threatening conditions during isolation, depression, or meditation, or without any obvious reason (van Lommel 2014). According to Bruce Greyson, the experiential elements of NDEs are classified into four main categories: cognitive features, including things such as time distortion; affective features, including feelings of love and cosmic unity; paranormal features; and transcendental features such as mystical encounters with spirits and an uncrossable border (Greyson 1983). In out-of-body experiences (OBEs), patients can experience veridical perceptions from a position outside and above their lifeless body (Greyson 2015; van Lommel 2013). A recent clinical report of an intensive care unit patient NDE illustrates the colorful and unique aspects of OBEs. In his interview, the patient described his NDE, stating that,

> "It seemed to be four to five seconds! It was unusual; I went up. . . . It was so painless; there was no pain . . . I was so happy . . . I was enjoying myself . . . I looked back and I could see my bed, my body in the bed. I could see everything that was happening on the floor. I saw doctors when I was up there; I was looking down and could see the doctors and even the sister, what she was actually doing in the ward. It was marvelous; I could see nurses around me and the doctors". (Sartori et al. 2006)

Similarly, NDE patients can experience consciously returning to their body after their OBEs. In many instances, trauma patients describe feeling "locked up" in their body, experiencing all the pain and restriction of their disease or injury, which they were free from during the NDE (van Lommel 2013). As one patient described,

> "And when I regained consciousness in my body, it was so terrible, so terrible . . . that experience was so beautiful, I never would have liked to come back, I wanted to stay there . . . and still I came back. And from that moment on it was a very difficult experience to live my life again in my body, with all the limitations I felt in that period". (van Lommel 2013)

These dramatic shifts in perspective often have profound influences on a person's understanding of their mortality.

Some NDE patients also experience previews, or flash-forwards, in which future images from personal life events and general experiences from the future come to the individual (van Lommel 2013). In other instances, NDEs may include personal interactions with a patient's deceased acquaintances or relatives. As one patient described,

> "During my cardiac arrest I had an extensive experience (. . .) and later I saw, apart from my deceased grandmother, a man who had looked at me lovingly, but whom I did not know. More than 10 years later, at my mother's deathbed, she confessed to me that I had been born out of an extramarital relationship, my father being a Jewish man who had been deported and killed during the second World War, and my mother showed me his picture. The unknown man that I had seen more than 10 years before during my NDE turned out to be my biological father". (van Lommel 2013)

Such experiences with deceased relatives can have a profound effect on the individual, allowing for both closure and peace with their loved one's passing (van Lommel 2013).

In other instances, NDE patients can experience a holographic life review and experience a sense of unity, peace, and interconnectedness knowing that their actions are connected and integral to the lives of their loved ones and the entire world. For religious individuals and cultures, this may be interpreted as a cosmic law in which everything one does to others will ultimately be returned to oneself (van Lommel 2013). An NDE patient reflected on their holographic life review, stating,

"All of my life up till the present seemed to be placed before me in a kind of panoramic, three-dimensional review, and each event seemed to be accompanied by a consciousness of good or evil or with an insight into cause or effect. Not only did I perceive everything from my own viewpoint, but I also knew the thoughts of everyone involved in the event, as if I had their thoughts within me. This meant that I perceived not only what I had done or thought, but even in what way it had influenced others, as if I saw things with all-seeing eyes. And so, even your thoughts are apparently not wiped out. And all the time during the review the importance of love was emphasized. Looking back, I cannot say how long this life review and life insight lasted, it may have been long, for every subject came up, but at the same time it seemed just a fraction of a second, because I perceived it all at the same moment. Time and distance seemed not to exist. I was in all places at the same time, and sometimes my attention was drawn to something, and then I would be present there". (van Lommel 2013)

Descriptions of near-death experiences can also be influenced by the culture, religion, or prior beliefs of the individual. For example, Christian and Buddhist cultures are more likely to describe NDEs as a tunnel sensation or life review, which is a rare description among native populations in North America, Australia, and the Pacific islands (Greyson 2015). However, there is a growing consensus that the interpretations of NDEs are largely based on the available images, concepts, and symbols available to the individual regardless of culture or religion. However, NDEs may not always be pleasant or a curious experience for a patient. In some instances, patients have reported NDEs as being particularly terrifying or "hellish" in some reports (Greyson 2015). In this manner, NDEs encompass a wide range of experiences that resemble several aspects of religious experiences.

In recent years, the literature on NDEs and the mind–body relationship has exponentially increased (Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin 2014; Rousseau 2011; Sleutjes et al. 2014; van Lommel 2006). The increased interest is related to the enormous challenge NDEs bring towards the predominate naturalistic paradigm of Western culture and science (Greyson 2015). Specifically, NDEs prove anomalous to present neuroscientific models of the brain and cognitive processes (Greyson 2010). As Bruce Greyson explained,

"In sum, the challenge of NDEs to materialist reductionism lies in asking how complex consciousness, including mentation, sensory perception, and memory, can occur under conditions in which current physiological models of mind deem it impossible. This conflict between a materialist model of brain–mind identity and the occurrence of NDEs under conditions of general anesthesia or cardiac arrest is profound and inescapable. Only when we expand models of mind to accommodate extraordinary experiences such as NDEs will we progress in our understanding of consciousness and its relation to brain". (Greyson 2010)

Beyond impacting our understanding of consciousness, NDEs have life-long impacts on those who experience them.

3. Spiritual Impact of NDEs

In many instances, NDEs have a profound impact on individuals as they seek to incorporate the sense of awe and wonder of their experience into their daily life (Khanna and Greyson 2014b). Patients often seek to re-experience and appreciate their experiences with respect to the sacred. During these explorations, patients who experienced NDEs show radical and permanent transformations of their attitudes, beliefs, and lifestyles (Khanna and

Greyson 2014b). Patients also show an increase in spirituality, empathy, and appreciation of life along with a decrease in the fear of death, material concerns, and competitiveness (Greyson and Khanna 2014). Specifically, many patients who experience NDEs report a stronger belief in life after death, renewed sense of purpose, increased self-esteem, greater compassion and love for others, and a deeper interest in religious faith and spirituality (Greyson and Khanna 2014; Greyson 2015). These results are observed among those who previously identified as atheist or non-religious. Given the significant changes following an NDE, it is possible that NDEs provide a framework towards understanding the impact of religious experiences on an individual's worldview and spiritual life.

4. Understanding Religious Experience through NDEs

The characteristic patterns for NDEs include: 1. feeling peaceful and tranquil; 2. experiencing a sense of detachment from one's physical body; 3. observing one's surroundings from a position above the self; 4. entering into a dark region or void; 5. perceiving a region of brilliant light and unusual beauty; and 6. occasionally encountering other beings such as God, Jesus, or deceased relatives (McLaughlin and Malony 1984). Since religion tackles fundamental human issues such as death and dying, one could hypothesize that religious inclination is linked to near-death experiences. Therefore, there is a link between religious experience and NDEs. Religious experiences may be described as experiences that seem to be of objective reality and religious importance to the person. This reality might be an individual, a situation, a truth, or even an absence (McLaughlin and Malony 1984).

The experiences depend partly on the religious traditions in which the subject is embedded. However, there are features they all tend to share. Williams James was the first to attempt an analysis of those common features, producing a framework that many have used since (Greyson 2014; James 1902; Pennachio 1986). In his book, William James outlines key distinctions with regards to religious experience. Specifically, James explored the difference between institutional and personal religions. Institutional religion refers to the religious group or institution and has a significant role in the culture of society. Personal religion in which the person has a mystical experience, independent of culture, can be experienced (James 1902). In either situation, James concluded that religious experiences are characterized by four features. These features can be summarized through the mnemonic PINT, which stands for:

- Passive—The individual's experience occurs mainly without conscious control. Although it can make religious experiences more probable, practices such as meditation are not something which can be turned on or off at will.
- Ineffable—The experience cannot be adequately put into words.
- Noetic—The person thinks he or she learns something precious from the encounter. Feels like information has been obtained which is usually concealed from human awareness.
- Transient—It is a brief experience: the person recovers quickly to a "normal" mental state. Feels outside of conventional space and temporal perspective.

In examining religious orientation, many people have favorable opinions on death, such as hoping for an afterlife of rewards, and have a strong religious orientation (McLaughlin and Malony 1984). On the other hand, an externally oriented religious person usually has negative attitudes towards death, such as concerns of solitude or agony, and uncertainty. In general, internal religious (intrinsic) individuals have more positive attitudes towards death and less dread of dying. Those seeking personal advantage or religious support (extrinsic and consensus) showed more unfavorable views of death and a greater fear of death (McLaughlin and Malony 1984).

If intrinsically religious people had a reduced fear of death, then one may infer that they could be more involved in the near-death experience than if the dread of death was a barrier for the full experience of the NDE. It is also possible to be more sensitive to the NDE, which may be regarded as a transition to another level, if you have a vital relationship with God—a spiritual, nonmaterial presence (McLaughlin and Malony 1984). Similar to other

religious experiences, NDEs are viewed as transitions in awareness from a regular mode of consciousness to a different mode of consciousness. The temporal constraints of human life are overcome in this dimension and the person experiences fresh and unique feelings such as communication with departed relatives or a luminous entity. In contrast, some people experience an NDE before they were ever converted to a specific religion (McLaughlin and Malony 1984). In some cases, these patients reported that the NDE was not an important religious conversion factor. Others considered NDE to be a religious experience that was not comprehensible. As part of their NDE, for example, they witnessed the medical staff operating on them outside of their body but did not experience any divine presence or any religious experiences. It is worth noting that these individuals have not even tried to integrate their experience of near death into their religion (McLaughlin and Malony 1984). In contrast, NDEs have led other people away from their former religious views. These people claimed that the NDE was inconsistent with their earlier religious knowledge so that they changed their religious beliefs and accepted a belief in a new religion or were less active in any organized religion. Thus, the NDE may have a variety of consequences on the religion of a person, from conversion or confirmation of faith, all the way to a renunciation of and a departure from mainstream religion. There is only proof that NDEs lead to increased importance of religion and to a growth in religious activity when the subject group is evaluated as a whole (McLaughlin and Malony 1984).

As demonstrated through NDEs, mystical experiences are often seen to comprise good values, attitudes, views, beliefs, and emotions, and they are regarded as human experiences that are, at least theoretically, attainable to everyone (Greyson 2014). They are generally defined by a conscious knowledge of ultimate truth or divinity, as well as an experienced unity with it, albeit this experience may not be present in every spiritual school. Mystical experiences, according to William James, are distinguished primarily by their noetic nature and ineffability, as well as the fact that they are frequently fleeting and passive experiences. People who describe mystical experiences show indicators of better adjustment than comparison groups, and mystical experiences can even help people who are depressed (Greyson 2014). Pahnke, using the work of James and Stace, developed a model incorporating nine common mystical consciousness characteristics: unity, transcendence of time and space, deeply felt positive mood, sense of sacredness, noetic quality, paradoxicality, alleged ineffability, transiency, and persistent positive changes in attitudes and behaviors (Pahnke 1969; Pahnke and Richards 1970). In contrast, people's altered states of consciousness generally move through three stages as they approach death, according to Noyes: resistance to dying, submission and life review, and eventually transcendence (Noyes and Kletti 1972; Noyes and Slymen 1979). Ineffability, transcendence of time and space, feeling of truth, loss of control, increased emotion, and distorted perception are all characteristics of mystical experience in this last phase (Greyson 2014). He later defined the mystical component as a sensation of tremendous insight, harmony or oneness, joy, revelation, heightened visual imagery, life review, and a sense of being directed by an outside force in response to acute life-threatening peril (Greyson 2014).

Some authors have seen parallels between near-death experiences and other mystical encounters. Cressy compared NDE phenomenology and aftereffects to the lifelong mystical experiences of medieval Roman Catholic mystics St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross, highlighting the similarities between ecstatic out-of-body travel, visions of God, clairvoyance, loss of fear of death, and healing transformations (Greyson 2014). Near-death experiences, according to Badham, have many of the features of deep mystical experience, and contemporary resuscitation procedures have made profound noetic experiences available to ordinary people, which were previously only attainable on rare occasions (Badham 1997). Pennachio discovered evidence of all nine elements of mystical experience described by Stace in NDE accounts (Greyson 2014; Pennachio 1986). According to Wulff, NDEs differ from traditional mystical experiences in their emphasis on individual identity, such as life reviews and interactions with departed relatives, the relative clarity of events, and the lesser frequency of a sense of unity (Greyson 2014). Hufford stated that the lower prevalence of

oceanic sensations in NDEs does not rule them out as authentic mystical experiences, and that NDEs typically meet the criterion of mystical experience (Greyson 2014). NDE and mystical experience, according to Marshall, are not mutually exclusive concepts due to their phenomenological overlap, since the former is defined by its conditions and the latter by its contents (Greyson 2014; Marshall 2005). These debates in the literature point to the necessity for a scientific examination of mystical components in NDEs.

As Bruce Greyson argues, the phenomenological parallels between near-death and mystical experiences imply that the allegedly comparable transforming nature of these events warrants additional exploration (Greyson 2014). NDEs are said to have a profound and long-lasting effect, causing people to lose their fear of death, strengthen their belief in postmortem survival, strengthen their relationship with the divine, gain a new sense of meaning and purpose, increase their self-esteem, increase their compassion and appreciation for nature, and have less interest in material gain or social status (Greyson 2014). For more than a century, mystic experiences have been recognized as causing sudden and lasting changes in character and values, including changes in a person's relationship with God, perception and appreciation of nature, attitude toward the self, and attitude toward others (Greyson 2014).

5. New Frontiers on NDEs and Spirituality

In reality, there has been a frenzy of work in the field of near-death study since the publication of Raymond Moody's *Life After Life* in 1975. Both believers and skeptics have raced to the forefront, trying to shed light on the mysterious phenomenon of NDE. Near-death experiencers' accounts frequently strain the boundaries of veracity, yet their allure is obvious. The possibility of NDEs providing indisputable proof of life beyond death further adds to their attraction. In other words, is an NDE a genuine visit to the hereafter, or are they simply the hallucinations of a dying brain? This basic issue is at the heart of much NDE study, and it is the answer to it that gives this incredible experience its enormous power. The explosion of interest in near-death studies over the last several decades has resulted in a plethora of hypotheses attempting to address this topic. Models based on psychological, cultural, physiological, and spiritual aspects, as well as hybrids, have all been offered. Currently, biological and spiritual theories are by far the most common.

However, the relevance of my question rests in the models' consequences for humanity and human existence, not in the models themselves (Newberg 2010). Biological hypotheses, for example, claim that NDEs are the outcome of a dying brain's activities. According to these and other researchers, the occipital cortex, frontal lobes, hippocampus, basal ganglia, amygdala, and, in many cases, the temporal/parietal junction are all implicated in NDEs. When the brain's oxygen supply is reduced, it might react in ways that lead to a patient's NDE. Other circumstances, such as general anesthesia and medications such as ketamine, LSD, and cannabis, can cause pleasure, visual hallucinations, tunnel vision, and transcendental sensations (Ammermann et al. 2007; Blanke and Dieguez 2009; French 2005). Patients with aberrant temporal lobe EEG patterns may experience an intensification of emotions as well as a sense of personal destiny. Patients who have their temporal lobes activated also describe memory flashbacks, life-in-review, and mystical experiences. The right posterior temporal lobe and the temporal/parietal area are the most common sites for out-of-body experiences. As a result, it appears that NDEs share characteristics with other scenarios and can be triggered by pharmaceutical drugs, epileptic discharges, or direct brain stimulation (Blanke and Thut 2007; Waxman 1975). Spiritual models stand in opposition to biological answers. These models frequently accept the NDE at face value, presuming that the bizarre interactions recorded by those who experienced an NDE occurred. One such concept, offered by Ring, asserts that out-of-body experiences by persons on the verge of death indicate a true separation of spirit, soul, and mind from the body. As a result, these models usually accept a continuous human existence after death and look for proof of human survival in NDEs (Newberg 2010).

Given the limitations of both models, Andrew Newberg and Eugene d'Aquili intro-
duced a theoretical neurophysiological model of the NDE based on our current scientific
understanding of brain experiences during NDE (Newberg and d'Aquili 1994). Specifically,
their model reconsiders some aspects of the Jungian archetypal hypothesis and how the
neural activation of certain archetypes may be involved in the NDE. In addition, Newberg
and d'Aquili proposed more specific neural pathways that might be responsible for such
archetypal activation, thus generating the NDE (Newberg and d'Aquili 1994). Newberg and
d'Aquili argue that the activation (or partial activation) of two archetypes—the archetype
of Dissolution and the archetype of Transcendent Integration—is believed to be the cause
of NDE. Assuming that these archetypes are basic components of neuropsychological
structures, Newberg and d'Aquili suggest that the various brain areas in the activation of
these archetypes make sense in the context of NDE (Newberg and d'Aquili 1994).

The NDE accounts examined over the last few decades appear to imply that NDE
is largely good (Newberg and d'Aquili 1994). The situation, on the other hand, is not
straightforward. There are a growing number of examples in which the NDE appears to
be a dreadful and frequently terrifying experience. These terrifying NDEs appear to be
downplayed and occasionally not reported in line with our culture's optimism in these
things. Furthermore, NDE experiences also appear to be influenced by an individual's
cultural and religious background (Newberg and d'Aquili 1994). To incorporate these
observations, Newberg and d'Aquili proposed an archetypal model. In this model, New-
berg and d'Aquili argue that NDEs trigger two archetypes sequentially throughout the
whole NDE.

The first is what Newberg and d'Aquili call the Dissolution archetype, which is made
up of pictures of torture, slicing apart, burning, and other gruesome situations that represent
the impending death, fragmentation, and destruction of the corporeal self. This is followed
by the activation of what Newberg and d'Aquili call the Transcendent Integration archetype.
It is this motif that brings the traditional otherworld travels to a close in both the East
and the West, as well as practically all current NDEs (Newberg and d'Aquili 1994). With
regard to the positive versus negative difference in NDE reports, Newberg and d'Aquili
emphasize the cultural influence on the tenor of NDEs, claiming that it is likely that our
society's general optimistic hopes for a possible otherworld, combined with the general
elimination of any vivid sense of personal sin and guilt of a transcendent nature, will abort
the full constellation of the archetype of Dissolution in contemporary NDEs. As a result,
the modern experiencer of an otherworld excursion may proceed fast from a short and
hazy discomfort, or at most, to totally transcending archetypal integration (Newberg and
d'Aquili 1994). By examining classic NDE accounts from both the East and the West, as
well as the more often reported frightening modern NDEs, it is clear that there are two
distinct constellations of components, both of which are very comparable across cultures.

Mechanistically, Newberg and d'Aquili believe that ergotropic activation of the amyg-
dala triggers an interaction with the neocortex of the inferior temporal lobe, resulting in
hyperlucid images with scary contents. According to Newberg and d'Aquili, the ergotropic
drive elicited by stress in the early phases of real physical disintegration has a feature that is
particular for activating fear centers in the amygdala and, ultimately, the archetype of Dis-
solution. Then, as the ergotropic system reaches its maximum stimulation, a trophotropic
breakthrough occurs. Newberg and d'Aquili argue that this very uncommon condition of
second-stage autonomic tuning activates the OBE as well as deeply quiet and calm senti-
ments, especially when the chain of events is triggered by extreme physiological discomfort.
The fact that most current near-death experiencers first have emotions of calm shows that
trophotropic stimulation is important for the formation of happy NDEs, especially those
that follow the awful features of the archetype of Dissolution. Furthermore, the fact that
most ND experiencers maintain these calm sentiments throughout the good NDE suggests
that trophotropic drive is likely to be responsible for the NDE beyond the ergotropic pe-
riod. The experiencer finally awakens the archetype of Transcendent Integration as the
trophotropic stimulation persists.

Taken together, Newberg and d'Aquili argue that our understanding of consciousness and, ultimately, NDEs should include the following four properties (Newberg and d'Aquili 1994):

1. A strong sense of the reality of what is experienced.
2. Endurance of that reality through very long periods of time, usually only interrupted by the sleep state.
3. The sense that when elements in it undergo formal dissolution they have in fact ceased to be.
4. High cross-subjective validation for the details of perception, but somewhat less cross-subjective validation for the core meaning of perceptions.

The NDE is one of the most unusual examples of a spontaneous spiritual experience. As previously stated, NDEs have been widely recorded and examined, with multiple scientific publications devoted to the subject. Phenomenological analysis and certain approaches to the neuropsychological correlates of these experiences have also been examined (Newberg et al. 2002; Newberg 2010). Knowledge about these experiences, on the other hand, has the potential to bring crucial insights into the research and analysis of spiritual experiences. NDEs have been experienced, written about, and debated since the Tibetan Book of the Dead, the Middle Ages, and up to the current day. There is no denying that many people believe they have experienced near-death experiences. However, the exact mechanism through which and why the NDE occurs is still unknown. In reality, there has been a great deal of debate about the true nature and genesis of NDEs (Newberg et al. 2002).

Whether these near-death experiences represent perceptions of what is outside our usual sensorium and concept of consciousness is a scientifically problematic question (Konopka 2015; Newberg 2010). To comprehend the prevalence of near-death experiences in patients who appear to lack a functional brain, we may need to abandon our present physiological paradigms and consider other explanations for the occurrence. Near-death experiences may provide a glimpse into the notion of a universal mind that exists beyond time and space (Konopka 2015; Newberg 2010). The validity, significance, relevance, and need for study into the neurology of religious and spiritual practices and experiences (e.g., NDEs) has expanded, raising fundamental questions about the validity, importance, relevance, and need for such research (Newberg 2010, 2014). While the neuroscientific study of religious and spiritual experiences has progressed significantly since some of the early studies over 30 years ago, this field of inquiry is still in its infancy. In addition to the normal financing and academic status constraints, this discipline faces a number of distinct methodological problems. Pursuing such undertakings, on the other hand, may pay off handsomely for both science and spiritual disciplines. Such research may aid in a better understanding of the human experience of spirituality and religion from a religious standpoint. From a scientific standpoint, such study may aid in the understanding of the human brain's intricate workings, as well as the general link between brain states and body physiology (Newberg 2010, 2014).

6. Conclusions

Near-death experiences expose the deep-seated spirituality inherent in human beings. This becomes more apparent for patients near the end of the life. Near-death experiences show how these experiences help patients to discontinue anxiously attempting to exert control over their external conditions. Rather, people develop attitudes and perspectives on death and dying that make such control less necessary. Rather than attempting to control everything, faith enables individuals to let go of their need for control and believe that God will take care of their problems based on God's love, wisdom, and unique understanding of their circumstances (Greyson and Khanna 2014; Khanna and Greyson 2014a, 2015; Koenig 2002). These people are not looking for a place to call home on this planet. Instead, they are looking forward to coming home, to their true home, where they will be reunited with loved ones who have already passed away, as well as loved ones who are still alive. Dying is primarily about bidding a final farewell to loved ones and providing solace in their grief. It is a journey back to a place where they will no longer be in agony or suffering,

but instead will have new bodies that will never become ill again. Death, for those who have experienced NDEs, is a period of profound healing and completeness, unlike any other (Greyson and Khanna 2014; Khanna and Greyson 2014a, 2015; Koenig 2002). Most individuals have little influence over the details of their death, such as when they die, where they die, how they die, how others treat them while they die, and so on. They have no way of knowing if they will die in "a refuge suffused with one's own order".

As NDEs show, it is much more necessary for us, the living, to provide a loving and caring atmosphere for the dying. It is critical that others' suffering elicits compassion and a desire to address the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of persons who are dying. Patients and their family need to have all of their medical, psychological, social, and spiritual needs met during their final days of life. In clinical treatment or scientific research, none of these topics should be overlooked. When they are handled in a compassionate, sensitive, and patient-centered manner, the patient, family, and health-care professionals are more likely to find the dying process to be both comfortable and meaningful. Patients need spiritual materials made available to them in a nonthreatening manner and at their own speed. Finding purpose and meaning, forgiving and accepting forgiveness, sustaining hope, saying goodbye, and coming to grips with whatever they believe will happen when they die are all spiritual demands of patients who are not religious. In this respect, NDEs are a reminder to healthcare professionals that addressing the spiritual needs of the patients remains an integral component of end-of-life care.

As NDEs demonstrate, religion, medicine, and healthcare have been linked in some form in all human groups (Koenig 2012; Pargament 2011; Rosmarin and Koenig 2020). Despite the unfavorable views and attitudes of many mental health experts, research on religion, spirituality, and health is quickly expanding—and the majority of it is taking place outside of the realm of psychiatry (Koenig 2012; Pargament 2011; Rosmarin and Koenig 2020). Both medical and psychiatric patients utilize religious and spiritual beliefs and practices to deal with disease and other stressful life events. People who are more religious and spiritual have better mental health and adjust to health difficulties more rapidly than those who are less religious and spiritual, according to a substantial body of research (Pargament 2011; Rosmarin and Koenig 2020). These potential mental health and well-being advantages have physiological ramifications that influence physical health, illness risk, and treatment response. In general, these studies show a strong relationship between religious experience and health outcomes (Koenig 2012; Pargament 2011; Rosmarin and Koenig 2020).

There seems to be a complicated connection between religion and NDEs. At a particular level, though, the NDEs have shown a wide range of outcomes, from spectacular conversion to disillusionment with organized religion without impact. However, these experiences touch upon the common religious experiences of human beings regardless of any previous religious or philosophical leaning. In general, viewing NDEs from a point of view informed by both science and religion may constitute a paradigm change in medical treatment combining scientific research and belief with patient disease experiences with a new understanding of spiritual and medical relationships. Since the Enlightenment, reductionism has been an important component of the development of science and Western civilization. The practice of abstracting and reducing parts of the universe to their essential components has greatly enhanced the knowledge of the physical and chemical laws in all realities. However, the medical paradigm of the 20th century underlined the human being's holistic character. In this regard, the human person is seen not as a mechanical process defined exclusively by physical rules but as an interconnected totality. With the new medical paradigm, the complex social and environmental connections that influence human health and illness were more understood. New facts or interpretations can, just like with any perspective of philosophy or science, challenge or expand the current ideas, yet old paradigms are inflexible to take these changes. As David Brooks wrote,

> "This new wave of research will not seep into the public realm in the form of militant atheism. Instead, it will lead to what you might call neural Buddhism . . . .

In unexpected ways, science and mysticism are joining hands and reinforcing each other . . . . We're in the middle of a scientific revolution. It's going to have big cultural effects". (Kopel and Habermas 2019)

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