

PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION AND MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

In spite of the recent trend toward proclaiming the end of philosophy in Western civilization, philosophy remains alive and well in the field of Religious Studies. Especially in discussions of mystical experience, philosophical analysis has been used to enhance and deepen our understanding. But rather than coast on the merit of present discourse, I suggest we push even further in our use of philosophy to clarify issues in the study of religion.

Many of the younger scholars in Religious Studies today have roots in the 60s, and for many the 60s was a time of focus on "experience." Many scholars today want to use a re-examination of experience in general--and the testimony of their own personal experience in particular--in discussions of mysticism, shamanism, conversion, the spiritual path, etc. And there seems to be evidence of tension between younger scholars and older scholars as to the legitimacy of personal experience in scholarship. To me this issue is not unresolvable.

To the "objective" scholars I would say all data, even unique personal experience, is necessary for our understanding of religion. As long as it is used according to "objective" (i.e., intersubjective) standards of scholarship--for example, not given *special* or particularly authoritative status, not made unanalyzable through claims of noetic self-justification--how could there be a problem with it? And to the subjectivist (postmodern or participant) scholar I would say that renewed attention to experience is welcome, but that this "experience" and its assumptions should not only *not* be made invulnerable to critique but in fact criticized as much as possible. I say this because I feel our whole approach to experience in general--and mystical experience in particular--should be overhauled completely.

As a philosopher of religion, I am trying to shift the focus of this discipline from phenomenology to critique. I feel for too long--perhaps it was necessary, coming out of theology--we have approached religious traditions as sources of phenomenological data to be accepted as meaningful but not as true or false. This essentially precludes any possibility of a *religionwissenschaft*, for truth-determination is the bedrock of all true science. If we begin again to hold *truth* (as an ideal, problem, issue) as our primary value, rather than *meaning*, we see that the necessary fallibility of truth requires critique as its main *modus operandi*. For me, critique in philosophy of religion should manifest in at least three ways: in analysis, synthesis, and heuristics.

Criticizing falsehoods (or unclarities, incoherencies) is the main avenue toward truth, so tools for critique take on central importance. Traditional philosophical analysis had discovered many such tools and its use should be reinvigorated in the new philosophy of religion. Analysis is not just the abstract division of concepts and theories into digestible parts--it is a breaking-down *in order to better scrutinize* the sense, and yes *truth*, of them.

The aspect of unity--a necessary dimension of the very idea of truth--dictates the need to rectify the various dualisms that maintain a constant intellectual schizophrenia in our civilization. As difficult as this synthetic task may seem (we've been trying for thousands of years to deal with mind-body, spirit-matter, science-religion, etc.), it is critical to a coherent worldview and absolutely necessary if our civilization is not to break up into thousands of conflicting fragments. More energy thus needs to be put into understanding the (supposedly contradictory) realities of science, common sense, and religion--and how we continue to live with many (at least partly) mutually exclusive worldviews.

Philosophy of religion should also take a heuristic stance. Because scholarly method is the very framework we use in processing our data, under a truth paradigm the truth or sense of religious methodologies is very important. We must not only use our

tools of analysis to critique religious traditions and the conflict between worldviews, but also to criticize and improve the ways we actually study religion.

In the rest of this paper, I want to critique aspects of the current debate on mystical experience from the standpoint of the philosophy of religion just suggested. To do this I will turn up the heat under this issue, carry the analysis of experience one step further. This can be done by re-examining certain assumptions and conflation that occur in the current debate. These will include the very existence of consciousness, the reality of intentionality, the nature of experience, the definition of experience, and the nature of interpretation. After this analysis I want to examine what I think is the real issue underlying the current debate on mysticism: the role of experience in determining the truth of a religious tradition.

The Current Debate

I don't want to rehash all the details of the current "Stace-Katz-Forman" debate. The gist of it is as follows: the received tradition (in this century) up to Katz was that there existed certain mystical experiences that were universal, common to many (if not all) religious traditions. This theory was elaborated by W. T. Stace in his *Mysticism and Philosophy*. In 1978 Steven Katz wrote an essay (Katz) debunking this theory, saying that there are no "pure" experiences, all mystical experience is mediated by the tradition in which it occurs, and hence there are no universal or common mystical experiences. Robert Forman (1990, 1993) has attempted to disprove Katz's position by arguing that at least one kind of experience--a blank *samadhi*-like one, dubbed the "pure consciousness event" (PCE)--is not mediated (because it has no content whatsoever), occurs in many traditions, and could be seen as an almost universal mystical experience

Katz and Forman make assumptions and conflation we should question. They all involve the very nature of experience, admittedly a slippery area of investigation. Katz's argument depends on what Forman calls (I think justifiably) a "constructivist"

epistemology: that we construct experience by conceptualizing reality. This view assumes that prior to conceptualization--the mediation that Katz attaches to every traditional context--there is no knowable experience. Kant started this approach by denying the possibility of intelligible intuitions without concepts; James continued it by referring to conceptless intuition as a "blooming buzzing confusion." Rorty and Davidson bring this view on into contemporary philosophy by denying any nameable or neutral reality ("brute fact" or content-prior-to-scheme) behind our linguistic statements.

But this view of experience--exclusively conceptual and constructivist--is belied by the existence of a perceptual given that, far from being an ineffable sensory chaos, has in fact been quite elaborately described by genetic epistemologists (like Piaget), cognitive scientists (like Lakoff) and artists of all kinds. It consists of the full spectrum of sensory distinctions (color, sound, form, intensity, texture, movement, etc.) and perceptual gestalts (figure-ground, proximity to self, part-whole, aspect-thing, etc.) that constitutes the first layer of our experience. We actually live much of the time on this level. Conceptualization occurs when we *think* about these initial distinctions, and this involves making *comments* about them. We make comments to evoke (communicate to others) the "feel" of aspects of experienced reality; we make comments (as logical judgments) to guide our behavior around the face of reality.

The constructivist theories of Katz, Rorty, and Davidson assume a "copy" theory of epistemology rather than a "comment" theory as just described. For them, because language (or knowledge) mirrors reality, reality must look like language, must consist of imposed linguistic distinctions, must "cut up" reality according to alternative conceptual systems. But surely this view is absurd. If it were true, then before a child learned to understand language, there would be no form, structure, distinctions, or thus values in its world. But psychologists have for a long time known that motor and perceptual schemas operate well before the advent of language. It is naive to think that an orderly language could just be superimposed on a sensuous chaos--supplying us with our normally

structured reality! The unavoidable fact that the distinctions of language somewhat coincide with the "hard" realities of the world, allowing us to survive in it, would indicate a greater connection between concepts and reality than simply arbitrary creation. Without a perceptual given, the origin of language, the communication between users of very different languages, and the success of science--would all be complete mysteries.

The perceptual distinctions in reality are actually the result of external stimuli being processed by human physiology. In this sense they are universal and provide a basis for a common, fundamental conceptual system. All experience participates in this framework and because at this level no conceptual or interpretive activity occurs, it could be called unmediated. But because humans are so quick to conceptualize, contextualize, and interpret this fundamental given, any description of this experience is likely to consist in a very mediated and ramified form. In undergoing a mystical experience, for example, one could feel various sensations such as warmth or bliss, and then interpret them as being loved by God or as being immersed in *sat-cit-ananda*. Similarly in extrovertive or nature mysticism, the oneness or unity in the environment could be immediately interpreted as the ground of all being or as the body of God. Thus interpretation does not just occur after the event when one reflects on the experience, but actually during the experience, quickly alternating with unmediated sensations and perceptions. Katz's assumption that direct experience and interpretation are identical is, thus, problematized. The existence of an unmediated (by tradition) sensory given creates a gap between the direct experience and its interfusing interpretive conceptualizations, and renders the term "pure experience" less intelligible.

The Pure Consciousness Event

Forman's focus on the PCE has brought renewed attention to the entire issue of *experience* in religion. The PCE is a phenomenologically contentless "experience," usually the result of concentrative meditation, and apparently common to many religious

traditions. Problematic to me are two assumptions Forman makes: (1) that the PCE is an experience (in the sense of being conscious, not in the sense of having content); and (2) that consciousness exists, period.

Forman admits the PCE is not a usual kind of experience and perhaps should not be *called* one at all--this is why he labels it the pure consciousness *event*. But I think it is important how we define and conceptualize this phenomenon. For the concept of "experience" has connotations of *knowledge*, and thus a contentless experience would offer us none--and would be ineligible to be called an "experience." I don't think Forman or any of the experiencers of PCEs would want to consider the PCE empty of knowledge content. On the contrary, in several traditions (Vedanta, Christianity) this phenomenon is said to consist of the *highest knowledge*, intuitive knowledge of God or the Absolute. To keep the way open for the justification of these claims, Forman tries to attach some knowledge content to the PCE. He does this in two ways: by attributing some form of awareness to it and by including certain affective qualities in it.

In looking closely at the PCE, it seems that its "aware" quality is more a matter of a process of elimination than of actual knowledge or intuition. The PCE is conscious *because it is not* deep sleep or unconsciousness. Remember, there is no content to it, so we cannot know from the "inside" anything about it. Forman says we *experience* its difference from unconsciousness, but I claim that we only experience the states immediately before and after the PCE. For example, one does not get drowsy right before the PCE (thus it seems different from sleep in this respect), and one comes out of a PCE suddenly with all one's normal faculties (this being different from our arousal from unconscious states). One does not feel like one has been asleep or unconscious--for the transition states into and out of this *are* different. But these are intimations, inferences, from states other than the PCE. At most they suggest the PCE is a different physiological state from deep sleep and unconsciousness.

Likewise the experiences of bliss, tranquillity, wholeness, etc., attached to *samadhi* and other "introvertive" states, come from the periods of conscious awareness immediately preceding, and especially following, the PCE. These affective experiences have content (though we tend to notice only visual form, so our ability to articulate auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, proprioceptive, or sensate forms is slight) so cannot be had in the PCE itself. This applies to any qualities of experience that carry a feeling of lovingness or personality as well. And the attempt to interpret the PCE with the use of these extra-PCE contents will obviously be illicit.

To theoretically prove that the characteristic of awareness belongs to the PCE, Forman assumes the reality of *intentionality* for ordinary experience and creates the following argument [my interpretation]: (1) according to the concept of intentionality, consciousness exists and is normally directed toward objects (is aware of its contents); (2) experience shows that the PCE is a state of awareness (for one can either be conscious or unconscious, and the PCE feels different from unconsciousness--see above); (3) since the PCE is contentless, it can't be a normal intentional awareness; (4) therefore, the PCE must be a state of non-intentional awareness, i.e., an awareness of pure consciousness itself. We can question each of these premises.

The second premise, that the PCE is a state of awareness because experience shows it to be different from unconsciousness, assumes a two-narrow continuum of consciousness and, as we objected to earlier, that the PCE can be felt experientially as an awake state. We in fact don't know if it is an awake state. There is no discernible content to indicate so--our only evidence comes from neighboring transition states. (For all we know the PCE could be a momentary and abrupt complete loss of consciousness.) Forman's class of conscious states consists of two polar ends: conscious awareness and complete unconsciousness; but in reality there is an entire continuum of in-between states: the hypnagogic, comatose, hypnotic, various sleep states, variations of

unconsciousness. Thus, the PCE may or may not be an unconscious state, but it *could* be one of these in-between ones. There are several dimensions to brainwave measurement so perhaps the PCE is like unconsciousness or deep sleep (i.e., no content) on one dimension but more like awake awareness on another.

Intentionality and Consciousness Questioned

The first premise above, that intentionality and consciousness exist, is, I think, worth questioning. Let's start with intentionality. What is the evidence for the existence of intentionality? As far as I can tell, it comes from three sources: our ability to think, our particular physical-physiological view of experience, and our belief in a *self*. Though Husserl thought intentionality was an experiential or phenomenological characteristic of consciousness, I question its experiential existence. If we look closely at experience, say at the perception of some object, we notice only that object. That is the complete content of our direct experience. If we *think* about it, reflect, we may also realize that we are indeed looking at some object, that our mind or our attention is focused on it. But this is a *thought*--not a direct perception--and it is a thought constructed from our ability to abstract (make a perception into a thought) and from our modern knowledge of physics and physiology.

We now know that perception is a result of physical stimuli (energy: as heat, light, repulsion, etc.) interacting with our sensory physiology--this is the scientific explanation of experience. Thus experience is a process that occurs between us and the external objects in the world. This theoretical view of experience surreptitiously informs our accounts of direct perception: we think we actually *perceive* this perceptual process. We have invented a term for the experiential (mental) equivalent of this theoretical (scientific) process: "intentionality." We have even invented a mental term corresponding to the physical object of perception: "content" of consciousness. Perhaps this failure to distinguish between direct experience and theoretical conceptualization

comes from the same traditional philosophical preference for concept over perceptual given that we discussed earlier. Certainly the common use of the word "awareness" for perception *and* reflection conflates matters. Whatever its cause, this conflation of experiential and theoretical manifests in the confusion of "content" with "object" in so many discussions of consciousness and experience. (The subject-object concept is another of these confusions: we don't directly perceive "objects" or "subjects"; these notions come from theoretical epistemological talk derived from the same scientific view of experience.)

But intentionality assumes more than a scientific view of experience. It also assumes the existence of self (whether called *Cogito* or consciousness). The sense (I think it is actually a thought) that we *have* experience is more than the knowledge that the organism perceives the world. It is an implicit belief in the philosophical dualism of mind and matter. The organism and the world are matter, but the self is mind, consciousness, even spirit (in some traditions). In our civilization this dualism is ontological: the two sides are absolutely distinct, irreparably separated. Philosophers have tried for millennia to show how such ontologically distinct worlds could interact; but the attempts are always futile (if indeed coherent) because the entire ontology is mistaken. Husserl's attempt at bridging this gap was his elaboration of the concept of intentionality: the way the self or consciousness relates to its objects is by "intending," or going out to, them.

But what could this mean? Attention has objects? Awareness of something is "of" something. The concept of intentionality seems to be completely superfluous, trivial. As a description of experience it *is*--but not as a covert way to posit the existence of consciousness as an entity. It was no accident that Husserl derived his *Cogito* (Absolute self) from the "fact" of intentionality. For the very notion of "consciousness of" (something) implies the existence of consciousness independent of its content. We have contents *of* consciousness, not contents *as* consciousness. This is why Forman

focuses on the idea of intentionality. Though he feels it cannot account for the PCE (no content implies no intentionality), he nevertheless embraces it as a model for normal consciousness (Forman 1993).

Psychologism Revisited

Intentionality as a backhanded way to promote the existence of consciousness as an entity (as opposed to a process) is actually part of the larger movement of "psychologizing" experience. We take this approach for granted for our own civilization is founded on it. Since at least Aristotle in the West and the time of the Buddha in the East, a psychologistic or mentalistic picture of experience has been dominant: experience is not felt as a body interacting with its environment but rather as a *self* having an *experience* of reality. It seems that only a handful of thinkers have questioned this model (I can think off-hand of the Buddha, William James, Gilbert Ryle, Wittgenstein, the behaviorists, and Krishnamurti, for example).

The psychologistic approach to mystical experience: (1) leaves the *body* out of its analysis; (2) reifies "conscious" (the adjective or quality) into "consciousness" (the noun or thing); and (3) distinguishes the *content* of consciousness from *consciousness* itself.

This approach assumes the Cartesian split of reality into bodies and minds and follows Descartes' preference for minds over bodies. We *could* talk of experience as a body/field or organism/ecology matter: of bodies seeing things, of thinking as subvocal speech, of feelings and sensations as material forms, of imagination and memory as stored physical icons (engrams). But we have chosen to make the psychological ("mental") *self* the center of our universe--and to make reality the creation and possession of this self. Thus objects in the world are contents of our experiences, states of our minds. The more extreme psychologistic views see pure mind as distorted by material body (Plato), true self deluded by worldly illusion (Vedanta), spiritual self held captive by nature (Samkhya, Gnosticism), the world as creation of mind (Berkeley). The most

insidious view is our own Western notion that behind both the body and the mind is our unique ego. The body is now only the accidental nexus of experience--the self is its real essence.

It is psychologism that reifies "conscious" into "consciousness." If we stick with "conscious" we simply have a world in which we are conscious (awake) and conscious of things (aware). But in a psychologized world, consciousness becomes a thing in itself; we have consciousness *and* its contents.

One model of thought in particular has facilitated, maintained, perhaps even created, our conception of consciousness: that is the "container" model. One of the fundamental gestalts of perception (Lakoff), this image was used by the ancient Greeks to illustrate the way the life force emptied out of a dying warrior. If it could leave the body (its container), it must have a separate essence of its own. In modern times, the image of the container is now applied to consciousness itself. A myriad of separate experiences must have some unifying element; consciousness as container fulfills this function. All experiences are contents of consciousness. Pushing consciousness into the background of immediate experience has made it a mysterious thing. Some of this mystery has rubbed off onto its contents. Mental events seem to have an ethereal quality that distinguishes them from the inert material character of bodily and physical events. This assumed essence has kept mental events from being analyzed into material categories--which I think they could be with some success.

The container model has also allowed us to think of consciousness as distinct from its contents. It has been said (Woodhouse 257) that without this distinction we would be unable to be reflectively aware of our experience--that we could have pains, for example, but not be able to be aware that we were having pain. This theory equates content with experience and consciousness with awareness of experience. In other words we need the distinction between consciousness and content to have awareness. But awareness of content is simply *another* content. It is not a privileged or distant or

second-order process. Not only is the distinction between consciousness and content unnecessary to account for awareness, but it perhaps has an actually negative function in our lives. According to J. Krishnamurti, the belief in a consciousness or self behind the contents of experience leads to the belief that this self is independent of these contents and can manipulate them. A self separate from its feelings, for example, can try to appropriate, ignore, change, or hide its feelings--thus setting up a tension in the person, a fragmentation of experience, leading to emotional suffering.

The Continuity of Experience

A long-standing argument for the existence of consciousness behind experience concerns the continuity of experience. Sankara, and more recently Ramana Maharishi, argued for an eternal witness that was the reason for the unity and intelligibility of experience. Kant, in his own way, argued for the transcendent unity of the mind (in terms of cognitive functions) to provide for continuity and coherence to experience. Forman (1993) says that the continuity of experience demands a continuous awareness (unbroken by changes in consciousness) to account for both memory and the numerical unity of the world. Buddhists have historically argued otherwise. Early Buddhism (especially the Abhidharma) tried to show just *how* we have an illusory sense of self (of continuity, of underlying consciousness). To Buddhists in particular, belief in (and acting upon) continuity of self is the paramount trap of worldly existence. Early Buddhism was just never afraid of any lack of continuity to experience or reality, so it never posited anything positive to account for its appearance. But today we know that the physical body can account for the continuity of experience and the unity of reality. First of all, the lifelong body *is* a continuous substratum to lifelong experience. Secondly, bodily memory and the familiarity of same-body processed reality can be seen as the mechanisms behind the sense of unity. Nothing more, or more mysterious, need be invoked to accomplish this.

The Deeper Issue: Experience and Truth

It is clear from this analysis that mystical experience must be examined as a subset of experience in general. This is why philosophy of religion exists: to apply the findings of general philosophical inquiry--and the tools of conceptual analysis--to specific content areas in the study of religion. When an issue, problem, or debate seems to be at a standstill, this usually means that there are ignored assumptions needing to be examined or accepted contents needing closer scrutiny. As we have seen, the "Stace-Katz-Forman" debate is more complex than it appears. But though we have applied a deeper analysis to the problems, I still have the feeling there is an unsaid issue lurking in the background. My guess is that it is the problem of the role of experience in determining the truth of a religious tradition--in other words, the *meaning* of mystical experience.

There is a lot of energy in the debate over the nature of mystical experience: this debate stands out in current philosophy of religion. I think this is because it is trying to get at truths that transcend a mere phenomenological description of the area. As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, I see philosophy of religion taking a much more critical position in Religious Studies--critical for the purpose of pursuing truth.

Since religion is fundamentally a *lived* phenomenon, *experience* plays an important part. As Ninian Smart has pointed out many times, experience must be placed in the total context of the other dimensions of religion--it is not the only determiner of religious truth. But because the noetic quality of religious experience can be so strong--and because abstract doctrine, and conflicting "truths" from other traditions, can be so confusing and less compelling--many look to the truth of experience to justify their faith (be it theistic *or* atheistic).

Mystical experience has obviously been seen in this light. For all the talk and study about the Absolute (God, nirvana, etc.), there seem to be actual experiences that

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allow one to directly experience it. The possibility (or actuality, if one accepts the tradition) of this certainly buttresses any belief in the existence of the Absolute. So though mystical traditions have often been relegated (by religious authority) to the edges of the larger religious tradition, they have nevertheless constituted a valuable component.

Thus, for example, Stace's argument for the existence of a common core to worldwide mystical experience gives support to the truth of religious traditions in general and to the perennial philosophy in particular. There seems to be some kind of authority (toward truth) granted to universal experiences. I would argue that this is not warranted, however, because history shows us examples of ubiquitous beliefs that turned out to be mass delusion. The fallibility of individual humans surely is capable of spreading to large numbers of them. Katz's position denied universal sameness to mystical experiences and emphasizes their strictly contextual and constructed nature--this would imply that the truths of the various mystical and religious traditions are relative.

Forman argues, ostensibly, for recognizing the existence of the PCE as an unmediated mystical experience. While he seems to be disinterestedly exploring its phenomenological nature, he is in fact setting up a theological interpretation of it. Let me give some examples. Forman speaks of the PCE as occurring "within" (1993: 714)--as opposed to an intentional awareness of external objects--and as "the knowing agent of any knowledge" (1993: 716). But if the experience is blank, then we don't really know that it occurs within or without, and the identification of consciousness as a knowing agent is a theoretical construct based more on assumed theological tradition than on the actual scant data of the event itself. To say "I know, on coming out of the pure consciousness event, that I had been awake but was not thinking anything in particular" (1993: 714) is to posit, after the fact, an awakesness in the PCE that hadn't been felt *during* the event. By reading into the PCE the existence of awareness, he can argue for the Advaitin position that awareness (a conscious substratum) underlies all experience,

all of life. This theological position also assumes the reality of intentionality and the distinction of consciousness from its contents.

So, in effect, each of the main positions in the debate over the nature of mystical experience implies a stance on the relationship between mystical experience and the truth of religion(s). And I take these implied positions (which in the debate receive secondary consideration) as the more important issue here. By "truth" of religion, I'm referring to the reality (truth, existence) of the central transcendental phenomenon: God, Brahman, nirvana, etc. If the PCE or introvertive experience is the universal mystical experience, common to all traditions, and implying direct knowledgeable contact with this transcendent sphere--then the truth of (most) religion is vouchsafed by direct knowledge. The epistemic blindness of faith and the uncertain relativism of inherited tradition can be transcended. Noetic certainty is a possibility.

Truth and Knowledge

But truth also implies knowledge--the apprehension of truth *is* knowledge. So whether this apprehension is a direct experience of subtle states of reality or the articulation of right livelihood, it concerns noticing real distinctions and articulating true comments about them. As we know, experience can be delusional or even empty (the PCE), so it is not a foolproof source of knowledge and truth. And certainly the PCE (and perhaps most "introvertive" mystical experience) itself offers us no knowledge whatsoever. Form or content is a prerequisite of knowledge--in any meaningful sense of the word--and so a contentless state just cannot offer distinctions for comment. This is perhaps why some meditative traditions see *samadhi* as a tool for further states of content and insight. Here the PCE is said to constitute a certain level of concentration which is then used as a kind of magnifying glass to discover the subtle structure of reality.

Because the PCE itself offers us no knowledge, the significance of it must come from some other source. In Advaita Vedanta, this source is the Upanisadic tradition. It is

Hindu theology that places such meaning on *samadhi*. And we must then ask where Hindu theologians get this meaning. From some other mystical or transcendental experience? From information channeled from the gods? The ascetic tradition in India has always been directed at eliminating the suffering in life. Perhaps long ago someone figured out that a certain form of meditation helped one transcend all content (including the content of suffering). It may even be the case that a regime of constant such meditation dulls the organism to a degree that inhibits suffering. (This is not such an outrageous claim when you consider that physiological experiments on meditating Hindu yogis revealed the occurrence of a psychological process called "habituation" where normal bodily responses to stimuli gradually diminish, the stimuli becoming an unnoticed "habit.")

Of course we are not bound to look at the PCE from only the Advaitin point of view. We could also explore it physiologically. We could look at the PCE as a kind of consciousness "screen-saver" device. After a certain time of concentration, the image (yantra, mantra, vision, etc.) concentrated upon suddenly disappears and the brain goes into sensory-form habituation--until the next stimulation (complaints of a tired body, external noise, indigestion) brings the "screen" back. And, of course, this would explain why the experience is so universal: because the physiological mechanism is common to all humans. There are other physiological, psychological, sociological, and religious perspectives from which to interpret the PCE. Physiologists might see it simply as another non-ordinary physiological state with no unique or special philosophical meaning; psychologists might see it as a state that results in dissociation (from ordinary reality) and passivity; sociologists might see it as an institution-maintaining apologetic or as a theology of detachment; Rinzai Zen masters might see it as a "dead-log" existence and a dangerous trap (of enticing bliss) to be avoided.

Our conclusion to this last issue--the role of mystical experience in determining the truth of religions--must thus be a skeptical one. Because of the fallible nature of truth

(i.e., we won't know something is not true until it is proven false) and the vulnerability of experience to distortion (error and delusion), there can be no strict connection of implication between experience and its interpretation. This means that the blank "experience" of *samadhi* cannot logically imply union with the Absolute, that the introvertive "experience of God" cannot imply or prove the *existence* of God. Experience cannot be self-justifying.

This does not mean, however, that there is *no* logical connection between experience and interpretation. Any interpretation, though not implied by data, must "fit" with the data. This means interpretation must not ignore or "violate" the distinctions of the given *or* of other accepted distinctions (truth). Thus, for example, one could not say that *samadhi* was the same as *sunyata* or nirvana. For *sunyata* is an experience of the dependent origination (interconnectedness and hence non-independence) of things--thus a content experience; and nirvana is a permanent state of being and not a temporary trance. Forman says, "There is no problem in using differing terms with different senses to refer to the same experience" (1993: 18), but this statement is unclear. For, true, there is no problem with using different *descriptive* terms from incommensurate (non-conflicting) perspectives; but there is a problem using different *interpretations* from conflicting traditions. For these separate traditions comment on the same distinctions in conflicting ways. While no one can argue with the basic physiological or psychological experience, everyone argues about the meaning of that experience. The *anatman* interpretation of experience by Theravada Buddhists conflicts with the *Atman* interpretation of the Advaita Vedantins: either there is a self or there is not.

Justification Beyond Experience

And so it will take extra-experiential evidence to judge the truth of an interpretation of an experience. Perhaps an Abhidharmic explanation of the *appearance* of continuity of self will seem more reasonable than the Advaitin plea for a universal

Self. Perhaps science will figure out the meaning of brainwave patterns and convince us that the PCE is more akin to hibernation or hypnosis than wakefulness or contact with the Ground of Being. Perhaps not. One thing we should consider, though, is how a material entity (our body) can experience, contact, unite with, a spiritual being. Or how the part in us that is spiritual (soul, Atman, etc.)--and can, sensibly, achieve union with a larger Spirit--"resides" in a physical body. How can consciousness that seems individual (as when intentional) coalesce with a universal, infinite consciousness. These are formal problems--partly scientific, partly logical, partly common sense. Understanding (exploring, questioning, resolving) the interface of all of our worldviews (Christian, Buddhist, spiritual, material, mental, etc.) is one of the tasks I envision philosophy of religion taking up.

Subjecting the interpretation of mystical experience to all of our analytic skills--thus employing philosophical analysis, science, logic, common sense, history, the insights or truths of other religious traditions--is also the task of philosophy of religion. As is the task of evaluating and honing these skills, methods, perspectives. Religion has always been important to humans--both to those of faith and to those who feel the effects of too much faith. But because of its importance it has attained a hands-off attitude in terms of questioning and criticism. But this is a historical quirk--for the importance of religion really should motivate an *extremely strong critique* of itself--for the essence of religion is truth, and critique is our best approach to truth.

I too would like to believe that my own non-ordinary experience pointed with certainty to the truth of a transcendent world. But I know this can't happen. These experiences do suggest directions in which to explore for truth, and perhaps combined with insights from other sources of knowledge may make the picture of reality clearer. This is why I suggest we make *truth*--rather than any one tradition or any particular experiences--our goal and our only security.

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