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Article

Mystical Experience

Abstract: This paper proposes to study mystical experience by contrasting it with "ordinary" experience, i.e., with standard consciousness. It emphasises the construed nature of standard consciousness and the role that the mutual connectedness of mental contents plays in its construction. It then shows that removal of the factors that are responsible for the "making" of standard consciousness accounts for the principal features of mystical experience; these features are therefore mainly negative. The understanding of mystical experience as the suppression of factors that contribute to the construction of standard consciousness, along with a discussion of the mechanism that makes this possible, permits answers to some frequently asked questions, such as: why is mystical experience ineffable? what is its epistemic status? does it have implications for our understanding of mind, consciousness, and self?

Keywords: mysticism; experience; absorption

1. Introduction

What is mysticism? Humpty Dumpty might have no difficulty answering this question given the way he treats words: "When **I** use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less."[1] It seems that many of those interested in mysticism sympathize with Humpty Dumpty. Some define mysticism as a belief of some sort; others as a practice connected with ecstatic experiences; others again combine the two and emphasize the knowledge supposedly granted by those experiences.[2]

There is nothing wrong with this free use of the word *mysticism*, at least not in principle. However, in practice it results all too often in confusion between different domains, links between which are then taken for granted. One might think that the study of mystical *experience* should deal with experience. In reality, much of the literature mined for information about mystical experience has no demonstrable link with anybody's experience whatsoever. Hindu and Buddhist literature is often cited in this context. It is somehow assumed that the authors of the Upanishads, or Shankara the main representative of Advaita Vedanta, or so many others, derived their ideas from mystical experiences. No attempts are made to justify this assumption. And yet, none of the authors of these early texts ever mention anything like a personal mystical experience.

Buddhism fares worse. Many Buddhists are apparently thought of by modern investigators as inveterate meditators, and it is all too often taken for granted that meditation gives rise to mystical experiences. And yet, no classical Buddhist authors ever refer to any kind of personal mystical experience. In fact, scholars have pointed out that meditation is not all that popular in many Buddhist circles and probably never was.[3] And even those who do meditate do not necessarily have deep mystical experiences (more on this below). Worst of all, the philosophical developments within Buddhism can well be accounted for

[1] Carroll 1872: 124.

[2] Wulff (2014: 369-370) sketches the way *mysticism* and *mystical experience* have been used from the 18th century onward. See also Zarrabi-Zadeh 2008.

[3] See especially Sharf 2000.

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without assuming any extraordinary kind of experience whatsoever.[4] The idea that some of these developments are indebted to the mystical experiences of their authors has been criticized in recent discussions.[5] In short, there is no evidence that Buddhist literature gives expression to the mystical experience of its authors.

We do not have to go all the way to Asia to find examples of the misattribution of mystical experience. Consider Meister Eckhart, often considered the founder and foremost representative of Rhineland mysticism. Nowhere does he claim that his teachings are based on personal experiences. Some authors are not bothered by this and claim that Meister Eckhart *must* have had mystical experiences. W. T. Stace (1960: 64), for example, wrote: "[Eckhart] does not say in so many words that the oneness of all things of which he speaks is anyone's actual *experience*. … But no one who is familiar with his style of writing can doubt that the 'depth' of which he speaks is the depth of his own experience." And again (p. 58): "Anyone who reads these writers [i.e., Eckhart, Ruysbroeck, Sri Aurobindo] with insight soon sees that they must be writing of their own experiences. But this has to be gathered from the 'feel' of their writings. They do not themselves tell us in so many words."[6]

Bruce Milem's (2016: 116) following remarks are probably more insightful:

some of the writers who are usually acclaimed as mystics, such as Eckhart, Eriugena, and Cusanus, do not emphasize experiences or visions. Their mysticism consists in a particular way of thinking about God that tries to articulate how God is present in ordinary things and everyday experience. All three use a dialectical or paradoxical mode of speech that balances contrary descriptions of God against each other. Although God is identical with ordinary things, God is also absolutely transcendent and unlike them. Following their path of thinking may not lead to any special, peak mystical experiences, but it can infuse all things with a new significance as expressions or images of God.

A few pages earlier Milem (2016: 107-108) had observed:

"Mysticism" is a modern designation that became widespread in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The first scholars of mysticism, such as William James, Evelyn Underhill, and Rudolf Otto, focused on what they called mystical or religious experience, which they thought was the root of all religion. This emphasis on experience is characteristically modern, in harmony with doubts about tradition, authority, and institutions, and congruent with modernity's confidence in the experiential basis of science.[7]

He then continued:

Because of the modern origins and character of the concept of "mysticism", we have to be careful when looking for mysticism in medieval Christianity. It is not that medieval people did not have, or were not interested in, extraordinary experiences of union with God. Rather, medieval people did not put the same weight on experience as an authority different from tradition, Scripture, and church that modern people do. They expected these authorities to agree. Moreover, medieval thinkers typically put experiences of God within the context of the Christian's gradual transformation into a perfected human being who enjoyed some sort of union or identity with God. This transformation, enacted in central Christian rituals such as baptism and communion, is what mattered, not the experiences. Still, some writers in the Middle Ages explored or emphasized the possibility that union with God is available in this life rather than exclusively in heaven ... While some of these writers saw union as the basis for extraordinary experiences, others understood union as a permanent state of being that Christians would attain.

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[4] See, e.g., Bronkhorst 2011.

[5] See, e.g., Franco 2018. For a different point of view, see Osto 2019.

[6] Ninian Smart (1967), too, does not hesitate to speak of the "timeless experience" of Eckhart, Teresa of Avila, Śankara, and the Buddha that, he claims, "involves an apprehension of the transcendent"; see also Smart 1965: 75.

[7] See also Taves 2009: Introduction.

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It should be clear by now that the reliability of many of the sources habitually invoked for the study of mystical experience is doubtful. Many of the claims these sources make have no demonstrable connection with mystical experience.

This puts scholars of mystical experience in a tricky position. If they are serious about wishing to study mystical *experience*, they *have* to find out which of their sources have or had "authentic" mystical experiences and limit their studies to the testimonies of those "approved" mystics. But how do we determine whether an experience is authentically mystical? Reports of "mystical" experiences have been collected.[8] Are they all equally authentic? Are some more "sacred" than others, which are "profane"?[9] Alternatively, are some of these experiences "deeper", and for this reason more "authentic", than others? In the absence of any objective measure of "depth" of mystical trance,[10] how does one distinguish one from the other?

It seems clear that numerous obstacles stand in the way of the scientific study of mystical experience. We could try to make lists of features that supposedly characterize "real" mystical experience, or worse: we could try to define the problem away. Either way we impose personal preferences. But what are those preferences based on? What could be their justification?

To avoid these problems, I propose to apply an established scientific principle: no enumeration of features will in and by itself lead to deeper understanding. We need theory even to make useful observations. Since we are studying experience, that theory should probably be a psychological theory. In what follows I will briefly present such a theory. It will become clear that it accounts for certain (but not just any) extraordinary experiences. It will further allow us to propose an answer to the question why people who have never had such experiences will yet be inclined to make statements that share features with those made by "real mystics".

2. The theory

Point of departure has to be the observation that mystical experience is extraordinary in comparison with "ordinary" or standard consciousness. However, standard consciousness is not "ordinary" in any absolute sense. It is now well known that standard consciousness is construed. Our perception of the world, including ourselves and our emotions, is made. As Anil Seth put it in his recent book *Being You* (Seth 2021: 220): "*All* of our perceptions and experiences, whether of the self or of the world, *all* are inside-out controlled and controlling hallucinations that are rooted in the flesh-and-blood predictive machinery that evolved, develops, and operates from moment to moment always in light of a fundamental biological drive to stay alive."

The construction of "normal", standard consciousness takes place with the help of other mental contents. Memory images play a particularly important role in this. Standard consciousness presents us with a picture of reality many of whose elements we recognize. Recognition is *re-cognition*, which is to say that associated memory images play a role in our perceptions. If the connection with those memory images were to be interrupted, we would then experience a world that we do not recognize and might interpret as being a different reality.

Similar reasoning can be applied to other aspects of standard consciousness. Our experience of temporal duration, of the flow of time, is a construction. Conscious percepts occur only at discrete moments in time. These "snapshots" represent integrated,

[8] See, e.g., the "Mystical Experience Registry" (http://www.bodysoulandspirit.net/mystical_experiences/).

[9] As maintained, for example, by R. C. Zaehner (1957).

[10] Ralph W. Hood (1975) developed a measure of reported mystical experience, the Hood's M-scale (see further Streib et al. 2021). Hood's M-scale measures a personality trait, not the depth of a mystical state.

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meaningful outputs of unconscious brain processing that have taken place during the relevant time slice.[11]

A particularly important construction is our sense of self. Memory images play again a central role, but so do no doubt other mental contents, including hopes, fears, concepts, etc. If the links with those mental contents could be reduced or even suppressed, the result would be a modified (or even annihilated) sense of self. Since our sense of self separates us from others, a further consequence would be that we no longer feel separate from others, that there would be no felt boundaries between us and others, easily interpreted as a sense of unity.[12]

As a last example, I mention the influence that the acquisition of language (our first language) exerts on the way we perceive the world. This influence goes far deeper than the relatively minor effects of language suggested by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.[13] The acquisition of language (i.e., of our first language) has effects that can be best appreciated by reading how Helen Keller, a deaf and blind girl who did not learn language until the age of seven, remembered her non-linguistic past (Keller 1910: 113-114):

Before my teacher came to me, I did not know that I am. I lived in a world that was a no-world. I cannot hope to describe adequately that unconscious, yet conscious time of nothingness. I did not know that I knew aught, or that I lived or acted or desired. I had neither will nor intellect. I was carried along to objects and acts by a certain blind natural impetus. I had a mind which caused me to feel anger, satisfaction, desire. These two facts led those about me to suppose that I willed and thought. I can remember all this, not because I knew that it was so, but because I have tactual memory. It enables me to remember that I never contracted my forehead in the act of thinking. I never viewed anything beforehand or chose it. I also recall tactually the fact that never in a start of the body or a heart-beat did I feel that I loved or cared for anything. My inner life, then, was a blank without past, present, or future, without hope or anticipation, without wonder or joy or faith.

In an earlier book, her first, Helen Keller described how "the mystery of language was revealed" to her, in the following words:[14]

Some one was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word *water*, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten — a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that "w-a-t-e-r" meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free!

The acquisition of language consists of more than learning words along with their corresponding objects or situations (an indexical association). In order to become competent language users, we have to learn to use words as symbols, we have to cross the "symbolic threshold". Even our closest cousins in the animal kingdom, chimpanzees and bonobos, are barely capable of doing so, if at all. Crossing the symbolic threshold, it appears, involves more than being able to learn to use language. It opens up a world of representations which, by a *boot strapping effect*, extends well beyond the representations covered

11 Herzog et al. 2016; further Drissi-Daoudi et al. 2019. See also Manassi & Whitney 2022. On the experience of time passing more or less fast, see Wittmann 2013; 2018.

12 See Hood 2011. Kromer (2021) emphasises the role of the sense of self in distinguishing between the own body and the outside world.

13 On this, see, e.g., Evans 2014: 215 ff.

14 Keller 1903: 22-23. Merlin Donald (2001: 249) notes, no doubt correctly: "The notion of labeling events and objects *simply doesn't occur* to an isolated mind."

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by the words of one's language.[15] At the same time, the words of one's language cover far more than the objects of our experience (speakers of English know what an angel is without having seen one).[16]

Helen Keller did not call her pre-linguistic experiences *ineffable* but one cannot but feel that she might have considered this expression appropriate, given the contrast between her earlier language-void and her later language-imbued consciousness.[17]

3. Mental absorption

The above examples strongly suggest that, if only it were possible to reduce or suppress associations with other mental contents, the result might be a form of consciousness in which essential factors that contribute to standard consciousness are weakened or even absent. Sticking to the examples considered, the resulting consciousness might be unrecognizable (a different reality), timeless, selfless and without boundaries, and ineffable.

Are there mechanisms that reduce or suppress mental associations? One universally shared human faculty does just that. Humans and many other animals possess the faculty of concentration. Concentration reduces or suppresses mental associations, allowing the individual concerned to avoid being disturbed by irrelevant sense impressions and mental noise. There is a limit to the depth of concentration in most of us, but it is easy to imagine greater depths of concentration that reduce or suppress mental associations of which we are not ordinarily aware. Using the expression (mental) *absorption* in connection with the exceptional depths of concentration that are available to some (perhaps many in extreme circumstances), we are led to expect that the experience of people in the most extreme states of absorption will be unrecognizable, timeless, selfless and without boundaries, and ineffable.

The theory thus far presented is incomplete and leaves open several questions. We will turn to them below. But we can now already draw some hypothetical conclusions. The theory proposes a link between certain forms of experience on the one hand and states of deep absorption on the other. The experiences concerned are all essentially *negative*: they are lacking in factors that are constitutive of standard consciousness. We have considered unrecognizability, timelessness, selflessness and the related absence of distinction between self and others, and ineffability. There are no doubt others. The theory suggests that those who have these experiences, or any one or several of them, find themselves in a state of deep absorption. It also predicts that those in whom a state of deep enough absorption can be induced will have such kinds of experiences.[18]

We have to face a crucial question. Is there anything left once one removes the factors that are constitutive of standard consciousness? Is the result still consciousness? Is the person who recognizes nothing, who is unaware of the passage of time and has no sense of self still conscious in any meaningful way?

This question takes us to an issue that is at the heart of consciousness studies: the distinction between what are sometimes called "phenomenal consciousness" and "access consciousness". A recent publication describes it as follows:[19] "Phenomenal consciousness, by definition, involves a hypothetical and idealized situation of pure subjective experience … without further associated information processing (and, therefore, no need for

[15] On the way in which the acquisition of language can give rise to representations, see Bronkhorst forthcoming a.

[16] For details, see Deacon 1997: 79-86.

[17] Without necessarily subscribing to his philosophy, Wittgenstein's famous statements — "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world" and "whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" — come to mind (Wittgenstein 1922: 5.6 & 7).

[18] Cf. Berkovich-Ohana et al. 2013; Wittmann 2018: ch. 2.

[19] Mashour et al. 2020: 776.

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verbal report). Access consciousness refers to the fact that conscious information, unlike unconscious information, is accessible to numerous cognitive processors, such as those mediating working memory, verbal report, or motor behavior." The preference of the authors of this publication seems clear from the way they continue: "The importance of this distinction remains hotly debated, but it has been suggested that 'global availability of information … *is* what we subjectively experience as a conscious state'."

Not everyone agrees. Three brain researchers in particular, whose most recent books came out in 2021, take a different position. They are Anil Seth (whose book *Being You* was already mentioned above), Mark Solms (*The Hidden Spring*) and Antonio Damasio (*Feeling & Knowing*). I will here follow the last of these three authors.

For Damasio, a precondition for consciousness is feeling. Feelings — he points out (p. 95) — "arise in the interior of organisms, in the depths of viscera and fluids where the chemistry responsible for life in all its aspects reigns supreme … They inform each mind — fortunate enough to be so equipped — of the state of life within the organism to which that mind belongs. Moreover, feelings give that mind an incentive to act according to the positive or negative signal of their messages." Feeling plays a role in making minds conscious, as the title of Damasio's book already indicates. It can do so because "consciousness" and "mind" are not synonyms. "Consciousness is a distinctive state of mind" but "not all mind states are necessarily conscious" (p. 135).

The following passage from Damasio's book is directly relevant to our reflections (p. 73):

The simplest variety of affect begins in the interior of a living organism. It springs up vague and diffuse, generating feelings that are not easily described or placed. The term "primordial feelings" captures the idea.

An endnote specifies (p. 204):

My use of the term "primordial" is conventional and meant to refer to the simple and direct nature of what I conceive of feelings as having been as they emerged in early human evolution and as they still are likely to be in many nonhuman species not to mention human infants.

Here, then, we meet a theory that describes standard adult consciousness as composite. Feeling is a "foundational component", but more elements are needed for standard consciousness to arise.[20] It will be clear that Damasio's theory does what we were looking for: it provides an analysis of standard consciousness and tells us what would remain if we could remove the added mental elements.

Damasio sums up his understanding of consciousness in the following words (p. 123): "Consciousness … is a particular state of mind resulting from a biological process toward which multiple mental events make a contribution. The operations of the body's interior signaled via the interoceptive nervous system contribute the feeling component, while other operations within the central nervous system contribute imagery describing the world around the organism as well as its musculoskeletal frame." The "imagery describing the world around the organism as well as its musculoskeletal frame" corresponds to the mental contents that contribute to standard consciousness. Without the contribution of these multiple mental events, only the foundational biological process that contributes the feeling component would remain. In an earlier book Damasio (2019: 152) does not exclude access to this background feeling: "The ebb and flow of spontaneous homeostatic feelings provides for an ever-present background, a more or less pure sense of being of the sort that those who practice meditation aspire to experience."[21]

[20] "The non-feeling, 'precise' contents of the mind flow with distinction, silhouetted against the affect process, a bit like acting figurines against an animated backdrop." (Damasio 2021: 78-79)

[21] Seth (2021: 218) goes further: "At the very deepest layers of the self, beneath even emotions and moods, there lies a cognitively subterranean, inchoate, difficult-to-describe experience of simply being a living organism. Here,

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4. Mystical experience

This, then, is the theory here proposed. A reduction or suppression of associations with other mental contents, if it can be accomplished, will produce experiences that can be characterized as unrecognizable, timeless, selfless, and ineffable.[22] There is, moreover, reason to think that such a reduction or suppression can be attained by means of the particularly deep form of concentration we call absorption.

If we now return to mystical experience, the theory says the following about it. If and to the extent that mystical experience has one or more of the characteristics here discussed,[23] it is a result of the reduction or suppression of associations with other mental contents. The theory further predicts that such mystical experiences will normally be accompanied by (and are indeed the result of) deep mental absorption.

In what follows I'll use the expression "mystical experience" or "authentic mystical experience" only with respect to experiences that have one or more of the characteristics discussed. The theory will allow us to answer questions that have been raised about mystical experience (or at least about mystical experience thus defined). Before turning to them, we have to confront a difficulty hinted at at the beginning of this article: Some of the features of authentic mystical experiences are part of the teachings of individuals who, to the best of our knowledge, never had any such experience. How can we explain Meister Eckhart's insistence on union with God? How can Upanishads speak about a realm beyond words?[24] How can Nagarjuna deny the existence of temporal reality?[25] Presumably none of the authors concerned had had mystical experience.[26] I will in such cases speak about "inauthentic mystical teachings" (i.e., not based on authentic mystical experience), to be distinguished from "authentic mystical teachings"; similarly, I'll speak of "authentic" and "inauthentic" mystics.

At first sight one might be tempted to think that inauthentic mystical teachings merely show the influence of authentic mystical teachings on the individuals concerned. This answer is not satisfactory, because it begs the question. Why should someone who

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experiences of selfhood emerge in the unstructured feeling of just 'being'." On p. 220 he says: "the very deepest levels of experienced selfhood — the inchoate feeling of 'just being' — seem to lack … external referents altogether. This, for me, is the true ground-state of conscious selfhood: a formless, shapeless, control-oriented perceptual prediction about the present and future physiological condition of the body itself."

22 This suggests that brain injuries that affect such associations may result in mystical experiences; see on this Cristofori et al. 2016.

23 According to the "Mystical Experience Registry" (see above note 8), mystical experiences are marked by all or some of the following feelings/insights:

-A sense of unity or totality

-A sense of timelessness

-A sense of having encountered ultimate reality

-A sense of sacredness

-A sense that one can not adequately describe the richness of this experience.

All but one ("sacredness") correspond to the points discussed in this paper.

24 *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* 2.4; *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 5.14.

25 E.g., *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 7.17: "If there existed anywhere something unarisen, it could arise. Since no such thing exists, what is it that arises?"

26 As pointed out above, some (or even many) of these teachings can at least in part be explained in terms of the intellectual and cultural surroundings of their authors. However, the appeal of "mystical ideas" may have influenced the shape in which we find them in the relevant texts.

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never had a mystical experience follow the teachings of an authentic mystic and not someone else's? Do people have a proclivity to believe authentic mystical teachings? If so, why would they need the teachings of an "authentic mystic" to proclaim ideas that have a mystic flavour? We'll return to these questions below.

First we must dispose of the idea that the constituent elements of standard consciousness are experienced separately. They are not. It is true that deep absorption can reduce or suppress some of those constituent elements, but the foundational component of standard consciousness — i.e., feeling — cannot be separately experienced as a component of standard consciousness, and cannot be remembered as such either.[27]

Let us look somewhat more closely into the matter. The reports or teachings of authentic mystics are based on (more precisely: interpretations of) personal mystical experiences. During those experiences their consciousness was temporarily stripped of the factors responsible for standard consciousness. Authentic mystics remember those experiences and try to communicate their contents to others. Non-mystics do not have such experiences in their adult life.

But they *did* have such experience in earliest childhood! It is true that at that early period their consciousness could not be *stripped* of the factors responsible for standard consciousness, for the simple reason that those factors were not yet there. Apart from that, their experience resembled that of the authentic mystic.

This would mean that non-mystics, too, will remember the fundamental consciousness that was to become the foundational component of standard consciousness. Their memory will be different from that of authentic mystics, to be sure. The latter will have episodic, autobiographical memory of the mystical experience; they'll remember it as something that is *theirs* and has become part of their autobiographical self. Memories from earliest childhood, on the other hand, pertain to a time before there was a sense of self, that is, before the formation of an autobiographical self. As memories they do not belong to *me* or to anyone else, nor are they part of a continuing story, of the narrative self. Memories pertaining to consciousness in earliest childhood must occupy a place of their own and are by their nature vague and imprecise.[28] And yet, it makes sense to assume that they *are* there and that they are the reason why even non-mystics have a tendency to pronounce (or believe) statements that at first sight seem to give expression to authentic mystical experiences.

5. Experiences and statements

The theoretical notions developed in the preceding pages allow us to confront some frequently asked questions. A much-debated question is whether mystical experiences in different times, cultures, and religions share a common core. Often the debates concentrate on what mystics *say* about their presumed experiences and explore whether these *statements* share common features. The theory here presented suggests that this is the wrong question to ask. Yes, the experiences that we call "authentic mystical experiences" are essentially the same (leaving out of consideration potential differences in depth of absorption, to be discussed below). They all approximate the foundational component of standard consciousness. But there is not much that can be said about that foundational component apart from being without the factors that contribute to the making of standard consciousness. Our attempts led to a list of negative terms: unrecognizable, timeless, selfless and without boundaries, ineffable. Attempts by others don't add much: "more or less

[27] Is this what Damasio meant when he said: "In and of themselves, feelings are never memorized and thus cannot be recollected" (Damasio 2019: 141)?

[28] Some scholars — most notably Morrison and Conway (2010) — "consider a version of episodic memory ('sensory-perceptive-affective'), which appears very early in life, and another version ('conceptual episodic memory'), which appears later; … autobiographical is … considered by them to appear even later" (Staniloiu et al. 2020: 5).

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pure sense of being" (Damasio), "cognitively subterranean, inchoate, difficult-to-describe experience of simply being a living organism" (Seth). Perhaps the only positive thing one can say about it is that it is a state of feeling.

Add to this that "mystical statements", as we have seen, can be made by people who are not "authentic mystics". In fact, mystical statements can be made by authentic mystics, by non-mystics, and by those who may have had half-way mystical experiences. (Remember that there is still no objective way to measure depth of mystical experience, or depth of absorption for that matter.[29]) In practice this means that it will be extremely hard to show that a specific statement was made by someone who has had a full authentic mystical experience.

All this implies that all *statements* presumably expressive of mystical experiences are interpretations at best. As such, they are likely to differ across time, and between cultures and religions. If and to the extent that they emphasize the negative side of the experience (the *via negativa* comes to mind) they hit the mark as far as the experience is concerned. However, if they claim to speak about mind-independent reality, such statements are no more credible than any other claims about mind-independent reality. Other evidence will be required to support them. The mere fact that they are supposedly based on mystical experience cannot count as a justification.

6. Further implications

The theory here proposed has some further implications. Recall that mystical experience as here understood is accompanied by states of deep absorption. Since absorption, like concentration, can be of varying depths, it follows that mystical experience, too, can be of varying depths. That is to say that there is no simple yes/no or black/white relationship between what might be considered "real" and "unreal" mystical experiences. In other words, "mystical experiences" of varying depths cover the space that lies between deepest possible mystical experience and standard consciousness. Mystical experiences of varying depths presumably come about when the corresponding level of absorption is attained.

Keeping this in mind, it is noteworthy that many human activities — and "religious" activities[30] in particular — are conducive to states of absorption. A detailed discussion can be found elsewhere.[31] A short list of such activities must here suffice. Mental absorption is inseparable from prayer in some of its forms.[32] It also characterizes ritualized acts. Communal singing or dancing has the same effect. The practice of mental absorption itself is promoted in several religious currents, especially in India, where it is supposed to lead to altered states of consciousness.[33] None of these activities guarantee the attainment of very deep states of mystical experience.[34] However, they do suggest that the search for mystical experiences, even light ones, is part and parcel of human behaviour. Some of these activities are "religious", others take place outside "religious" contexts, as for instance at ceremonial events. It would be a mistake to look upon mystical experiences as exclusively "religious" or even "spiritual".

7. Trait and state

[29] Is it possible that the correlation between pupil dilution and (depth of?) attention may open up ways to measure depth of absorption? See Zhao et al. 2019.

[30] I.e., activities that are "deemed religious" (Taves 2009).

[31] Cf. Bronkhorst 2017; 2021.

[32] See, e.g., Luhrmann 2020; Lifshitz, van Elk & Luhrmann 2019.

[33] On different traditions of meditation in ancient India, see Bronkhorst 1993.

[34] Interestingly, there are reasons to think that psychedelics can help to attain far deeper states; see below.

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Deep mystical experience is not easily attained and perhaps totally unattainable for most of us. Since our theory postulates a close connection between mystical experience and mental absorption, the flip side of this observation is that deep absorption, too, is unattainable for most of us. That is to say, our faculty of concentration has a "ceiling" beyond which it cannot easily go.

At this point it is necessary to point out that *absorption* is a well-known term in psychology, where it is most often used to refer to a personality *trait*. A scale has been developed to measure this trait, which covers various features, including hypnotisability: the Tellegen Absorption Scale.[35] This particular trait is also known by the name *dissociative absorption*, and has been described in a recent publication in the following words:[36]

Dissociative absorption is a tendency to become absorbed in imagination or in an external stimulus (movie, book) to the point of obliviousness to one's surroundings and reduced self-awareness.

Dissociative absorption, we further learn, is "uniquely associated with [obsessive-compulsive] symptoms". "Indeed, high absorption is correlated with psychopathological symptoms and distress, depression, anxiety, and psychoticism … as well as post-traumatic stress …"[37]

The present article does *not* use the word absorption to refer to a *trait*, but rather to a *state*. Most unfortunately, *trait absorption* and *state absorption* are often confused in the literature.[38] It may yet be significant that those who have the *trait* can more easily attain the *state*. This may go some way toward explaining that so many "normal" or "average" people, who may not have the trait, are denied access to a deep state of absorption.[39]

This is not the place to ask why many people (presumably most of them) have a "ceiling" that prevents them from entering deep absorption. (It is no doubt pertinent to note that the evolutionary advantages of mystical experience may be limited, if there are any at all.) For our present purposes it is sufficient to understand that there *is* such a ceiling. However, this ceiling is not foolproof, it is "leaky". Because of this leakiness humans engage in various "religious" activities, as we have seen. We may legitimately ask if there would be religion without this leakiness, but this question cannot be dealt with at present.

More relevant to our present concerns is the observation that there appear to be ways to "break through" the ceiling. The methods that are used to attain (normally weak) mystical experiences — I mentioned prayer, meditation, communal dancing or singing[40] —

35 See also Jamieson 2005.

36 Soffer-Dudek 2019: 51.

37 Soffer-Dudek 2019: 52.

38 Cf. Bronkhorst forthcoming. Interestingly, Tellegen and Atkinson, the originators of the Tellegen Absorption Scale, distinguish between the two, already in the title of their relevant article (1974): "Openness to absorbing and self-altering experiences ('absorption'), a trait related to hypnotic susceptibility." Here the trait is openness, the state is the experience. The word absorption is here used to refer to the experiences, not to the trait. And yet, "[i]n discussing imaginative involvement and absorption, for instance, … Tellegen … sometimes blurred together comments on trait and state notions of absorption" (Roche & McConkey 1990: 92).

39 Assuming that many scholars are "normal" or "average", this may throw light on the fact that some of them find it difficult to take mystical experience seriously. Indeed, "for a long time extraordinary consciousness experiences have either been ignored by the mainstream natural sciences or have been explicitly denigrated as nonexistent — as the fantasies of cranks." (Wittmann 2018: 2769)

40 More can no doubt be added. Lewis-Williams (2010: 143) adds auditory driving (e.g., chanting, clapping, drumming); electrical stimulation; flickering light; fatigue; hunger; sensory deprivation; stress and extreme pain to this list.

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become much more effective when carried out in combination with the ingestion of psychedelics. Research in the combined effectiveness of psychedelics along with other ways to reach altered states of consciousness is not yet very developed but appears to confirm this.[41]

8. Conclusion

The transition, in early modern Europe, from a geocentric model of the solar system (with a stationary earth at the centre) to a heliocentric model simplified the understanding of the movements of the planets. The present paper, similarly, proposes a change of perspective which simplifies the understanding of mystical experience. There is a tendency to try to understand mystical experience in terms of standard consciousness that is considered "normal". However, it may make a lot more sense to proceed in the opposite direction and try to understand standard consciousness in terms of the consciousness that reveals itself in mystical experience.

Consider the following. Mystics may not experience the flow of time. Do we need to explain *this*, or rather the fact that we *do* experience the flow of time in standard consciousness? Furthermore, is it possible that the sense of self in standard consciousness is more in need of explanation than its absence in mystical experience? And again, is it perhaps our *ability* to recognize things in standard consciousness that calls out for an explanation, rather than our *inability* to do so in mystical experience? Finally, the mystic finds it hard or even impossible to describe his experience in words. Does *this* need explanation or is it rather the fact that in standard consciousness we *can* describe our experience that needs to be explained?

These questions — and the last one in particular — make sense of our tendency to confuse experience and statements that give expression to it. We take it for granted that the ability in standard consciousness to express experiences in words also applies to mystical experience. It does not. This mistake would not have arisen if we had opted for the inverse direction of explanation: *from* the consciousness of mystical experience *to* standard consciousness.

With this in mind, look at some of the questions raised at the beginning of this volume. Recall that the theory here proposed supports the idea that there can be, and that there are, mystical *experiences*. It does *not* support the idea that *statements* that are supposedly expressive of those experiences can tell us anything about mind-independent reality.

What, then, *are* mystical experiences? They are, briefly put, states of consciousness in which the factors that contribute to standard consciousness (essentially associations with other mental contents) have been reduced or even suppressed. Seen from the perspective of standard, "normal", consciousness, they are distinguished by those absences. (Seen from the perspective of deep mystical experience, standard consciousness is distinguished by the *presence* of those factors.) In comparison with standard consciousness, mystical experience cannot but be described in negative terms.

Since the same mechanism is at work in the "production" of mystical experiences wherever they take place, they are in principle independent of where and when they occur. (There can of course be differences of depths, but that is a different matter.) Note however that even where mystical *experiences* are the same (or similar), this *cannot* be said about the *statements* that are supposedly expressive of those experiences. To the extent

[41] For recent research on meditation combined with psychedelics see, e.g., Griffiths et al. 2017; Smigielski et al. 2019; Heuschkel & Kuypers 2020; Eleftheriou & Thomas 2021. Mention should also be made of the Good Friday Experiment designed by Walter N. Pahnke and carried out in 1962. Psilocybin was administered to theology students in a prayer chapel. For details, see Wittmann 2018: 2226; Baier 2021. Psychedelics have also found their way into Buddhist meditation: https://www.lionsroar.com/the-new-wave-of-psychedelics-in-buddhist-practice/; Osto 2016.

that such statements concern mind-independent reality, they are not validated or justified by those experiences.

In and by themselves, mystical experiences do not clash with language, because language plays no role in their organisation as it does in standard consciousness. Trying to express these experiences in words is an attempt to impose aspects of linguistically organised standard consciousness on an experience that is without them. Such attempts are bound to fail, and mystics know this.

If, then, mystical experience is mainly negative, can mystics gain insights from it? I would say *yes*. By experiencing the weakening or disappearance of factors that play an essential role in the construction of standard consciousness, they can become aware of the constructed, conditioned, nature of "ordinary" reality. Such an insight may not tell us all that much about the mystical experience (and nothing whatsoever about mind-independent reality), but quite a lot about standard consciousness.

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