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**Master of Hallucination**  
**A Pragmatist Epistemology and Exploration of**  
**Mystical Experience**

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements of the degree  
of  
**Master of Arts in Philosophy**  
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by  
**D.J. Barron**

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## Abstract

Mystical experience appears to have always been a feature of human consciousness, and occurs with an enormous variety of content, character, and context. A modern awareness of the variegated nature of mystical experience has led to particular types being almost automatically considered false, usually on somewhat dubious grounds. How might a sound epistemology of mystical experience be developed? Most philosophers who tackle this question attempt to shoehorn mystical experience into a relatively traditional epistemology, with unconvincing results. God or whatever supernatural realm or entity a mystic might claim to perceive is a special kind of object, and requires a special epistemic approach. A common theme of mystical experience is the special knowledge or power that its subject claims to have gained. Perhaps such potentially tangible benefits should be made the focus of an epistemology of mysticism. In this thesis, my first act is to define mystical experience in a broader, more inclusive sense than most other treatments of the topic have done. I then examine the problems of formulating a viable epistemology of mystical experience around the traditional notions of objectivity and subjectivity, explore the question of whether current evolutionary theory can aid us in understanding the epistemic worth of mystical experience, and develop a pragmatist epistemology of mystical experience that draws on the work of William James and John Dewey. I conclude the thesis by arguing for an understanding of mystical experience as a supremely valuable force regardless of the reality of the supernatural, and as a potential cornerstone in a twenty-first century humanism.

*I shall now unveil all mysteries: religious or natural mysteries, death, birth, the future, the past, cosmogony, void.*

*I am a master of hallucinations.*

*Listen!...*

*I possess every talent! - There is no one here, and there is someone.*

*Arthur Rimbaud, A Season in Hell*

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Thank you to all of my amazing friends, particularly those I've engaged in discussion and research on this topic. I know some of you want me to do a Ph.D now, that's easy for you to say.

Thank you to my extended family in America. Maybe now that I've finished this, I can find a nice job and come for a visit. I wouldn't hold my breath though.

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# Introduction

It appears that as long as there have been humans, they have displayed an innate tendency towards belief in the supernatural, an unseen fabric of reality underlying and to potentially determining what we normally perceive. Furthermore, certain humans have had invariably astounding mystical experiences of this realm and its inhabitants: gods, demons, spirits, ghosts, pure unified emptiness. Even in modern society, where science has eaten away the territory that was once the domain of religious explanation, religious beliefs and mystical experiences are remarkably prevalent. We are future primitives, biologically almost identical to our ancestors sketching anthropomorphic spirits on cave walls, but who have obtained knowledge of the complex physics and chemistry that create consciousness, of how experiences of the supernatural are activated in the mind, of why we began to believe in the supernatural in the first instance. Yet there is no escaping the experiences and belief, and this seems a mystical paradox in itself.

Despite all the knowledge in our possession, nothing can discount the fact that there may be a supernatural realm from whence these experiences come. How might we investigate the perception of these worlds and entities that can only be perceived by certain people or under certain conditions? Why is there a strong tendency for some mystical experiences to be considered “more real” than others? Can anyone demonstrate truth or falsity of them without appealing to religious belief itself? Why does mystical experience exist? Does it have a use? Did it have a use? Is it always a pure malfunction of the brain? Does it matter if it is?

These are some of the questions I will be attempting to answer. Over the course of this thesis I will be developing a pragmatist theory of mystical experience, whereby a mystical experience can be deemed either “valuable” or “non-valuable” according to its effects on the subject. Notions of truth are not viable in the face of the radically subjective nature of mystical experiences, but the experiences may contain multiple layers of beneficial meaning nonetheless.

Chapter One outlines my definition of a mystical experience. It contains a general overview of the literature that attempts to form such a definition, and an extended discussion of what exactly constitutes an altered state of consciousness.

Chapter Two examines a variety of epistemic approaches to mystical experience. Of particular focus here are treatments given to the concepts of objectivity and subjectivity, particularly in the work of Jerome Gellman and W.T. Stace.

Chapter Three is a short chapter that formally introduces the pragmatist theory of mystical experience devised by William James. It also gives an overview of the thought of John Dewey, another pragmatist, with regard to religion. Although I agree with the general thrust of James’ theory, his argument contains a major fallacy.

Chapter Four outlines what I believe is a sound pragmatist treatment of mystical experience, based upon the work of Mike Jackson and K.W.M. Fulford. Some examples are surveyed to present my theory in greater relief.

Chapter Five contains an extended examination of the roles religion and mystical experience may play in the context of evolutionary adaptation. At first, this section may seem somewhat tangential to my main focus; however, I believed it was necessary to give a relatively comprehensive account of what is a complex topic, and one that is relevant to any non-moral pragmatism.

Chapter Six is the concluding chapter. In it, I discuss and demonstrate the kind of value that mystical experience can hold despite being an evolutionary byproduct and supposedly marginalised by advances in neuroscience. My argument is that mystical experience should be embraced as a powerful force in the aid of happiness and flourishing, and a personal interface for revealing what it means to be human.

## Chapter One

*And as he journeyed, it came to pass that he drew nigh unto Damascus: and suddenly there shone round about him a light out of heaven: and he fell upon the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: but rise, and enter into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do. And the men that journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing the voice, but beholding no man. And Saul arose from the earth; and when his eyes were opened, he saw nothing; and they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and did neither eat nor drink.*

Acts 9:3-9

*Within a flash, my state was utterly transformed. From hellish torment, I was plunged into ecstasy – an ecstasy infinitely exceeding anything describable or anything I had imagined from what the world's accomplished mystics have struggled to describe. Suddenly there dawned full awareness of three great truths which I had long accepted intellectually but never, until that moment, experienced as being fully self-evident. Now they burst upon me, not just as intellectual convictions, but as experiences no less vivid and tangible*

*than are heat and light to a man closely surrounded by a forest fire.*

John Blofeld, “A high yogic experience achieved with  
mescaline”<sup>1</sup>

*In the middle of the night, Siddhartha began to observe his own  
former lives, the lives of others, and the entire space-time continuum  
concentrated in an extensionless, eternal point. He saw the  
universality of suffering (dukkha), the pain of cyclic existence, in  
which beings trap themselves in ignorance and desire, like an animal  
walking around in a circle in a cage. Cutting the circle at the right  
point would bring liberation: he relinquished desire (attachment),  
desirelessness (aversion), and indifference (mixed  
attachment/aversion), and, as dawn broke upon him, cried, “Now is  
birth-and-death finished! The ridge-pole of that house built over many  
lives is broken!*

*Buddhacarita*<sup>2</sup>

*When I ate eboka I found myself taken by it up a long road in a deep  
forest until I came to a barrier of black iron. At that barrier, unable to  
pass, I saw a crowd of black persons also unable to pass...Suddenly  
my father descended from above in the form of a bird. He gave to me  
then my eboka name, Onwan Misengue, and enabled me to fly up after  
him over the barrier of iron. As we proceeded the bird who was my  
father changed from black to white...We came then to a river the color*

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<sup>1</sup> John Blofeld, “A high yogic experience achieved with mescaline”, *Psychedelic Review* 7 (1966), pp. 27-32 (p. 29).

<sup>2</sup> Roger J. Corless, *The Vision of Buddhism: The Space Under the Tree* (New York, NY: Paragon House, 1989), p. 11.

*of blood in the midst of which there was a great snake...It closed its gaping mouth so that we were able to pass over it. On the other side there were people all in white. We passed through them...until we arrived at another river – all white. This we crossed by means of a giant chain of gold...I saw a man, the hair on his head piled up in the form of a Bishop's hat. He had a star on his breast but on coming closer I saw it was his heart in his chest beating...Just then I looked up and saw a woman in the moon – a bayonet was piercing her heart from which a bright light was pouring forth...My father told me to return to earth. I had gone far enough. If I went further I would not return.*

“The vision of Ndong Asseko”<sup>3</sup>

*In the year 1411 of the incarnation of Jesus Christ the Son of God, when I was forty two years and seven months of age, a fiery light, flashing intensely, came from the open vault of heaven and poured through my whole brain. Like a flame that is hot without burning it kindled all my heart and all my breast, just as the sun warms anything on which its rays fall. And suddenly I could understand what such books as the Psalter, the Gospel and the other catholic volumes both of the Old and New Testament actually set forth; but I could not interpret the words of the text; nor could I divide up the syllables; nor did I have any notion of the cases or the tenses...The visions which I saw I did not perceive in dreams nor when asleep nor in a delirium*

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<sup>3</sup> James W. Fernandez, “*Tabernanthe Iboga*: narcotic ecstasis and the work of the ancestors”, in *Flesh of the Gods: The Ritual Use of Hallucinogens*, edited by Peter T. Furst (London, UK: Allen and Unwin, 1972) pp. 237-260 (pp. 251-252).

*nor with the eyes and ears of the body. I received them when I was awake and looking around with a clear mind, with the inner eyes and ears, in open places according to the will of God. But how this could be, it is difficult for us mortals to seek to know.*

Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*<sup>4</sup>

The above examples demonstrate the wide range of permutations possible across the landscape of human mystical experience. I take mystical experience to be a subset of what can be generally characterised as personal religious experience. In the context of this thesis, I follow William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* in focusing on personal religion as opposed to institutional or organised religion.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, for my purposes this concept of personal religion can be understood as the individual experiences, beliefs, and practices directed toward and inspired by what the individual views as the fundamental or normally unseen reality and/or entities of the world. Personal religion ranges from trivial, routine acts of worship to the full-scale mystical experiences of the kind cited above.

However, in the light of the rich and astounding variety of such accounts, how should mystical experience be defined? A review of mystical literature provides little in the way of consensus. This is not only due to the highly varied nature of individual mystical experiences, but also because of disagreement regarding the methods used to construct a definition. In his book *Mysticism and Religion*, Robert Ellwood differentiates between philosophical and psychological

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<sup>4</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, *Mystical Writings*, edited by Fiona Bowie and Oliver Davies, translated by Robert Carver (New York, NY: Crossroads, 1990), p. 68.

<sup>5</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York, NY: Modern Library, 1936 (1902)) pp. 29-32.

definitions of mysticism.<sup>6</sup> Philosophical definitions specify mystical experience as a broad type of experience not necessarily defined by content. They supply a generalised set of normative perceptual, experiential or intentional attributes that should be instantiated during a mystical experience. Psychological definitions argue for what W.T. Stace labelled a “universal core”<sup>7</sup> of content common to all mystical experiences. The search for these common features is descriptivist in method; the origins of this descriptivist tendency can be found in William James’ seminal work *The Varieties Of Religious Experience*. To demonstrate the difference between philosophical and psychological definitions, an example of a philosophical definition is that of W.R. Inge, “the attempt to realise, in thought or feeling, the immanence of the temporal in the eternal, and of the eternal in the temporal”,<sup>8</sup> whereas a psychological definition is more content-specific, requiring attributes such as “a feeling of peace” or “perceived contact with God or divinity”.

Although most modern studies of mystical experience have utilised the psychological method in constructing a definition, most have done so without examining the applicability and underlying validity of it as an approach. Is it correct to assume that all mystical experiences share some basic content? Can historical descriptivism provide the means to identify such content, or will novel forms of mysticism present exceptions to the “universal core”? Does it inevitably lead to a chauvinistic reductionism that requires the radical reinterpretation of some mystical experiences in order to allow their inclusion under the definition? These concerns, together with the fact that a broad definition will suffice in the context of my work, lead me to reject a psychological definition of mystical experience.

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<sup>6</sup> Robert S. Ellwood, Jr, *Mysticism and Religion*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980) p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> W. T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, (London, UK: MacMillan Press, 1960) p. 41.

<sup>8</sup> W. R. Inge, *Christian Mysticism*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (London, UK: Methuen and Co., 1933) p. 5. (Quoted in Ellwood, p. 13).

Given that William James occupies pride of place as the progenitor of the psychological approach to mystical experience, it is fitting that my first objection to the method relates to an error contained in *The Varieties Of Religious Experience*. Although I will be addressing this flaw in James' work in more detail at later point, it is indicative of a common problem of psychological definitions as a whole. In essence, James creates a question-begging argument which assumes that improved moral conduct is the sole benefit accruing to individuals subject to religious experiences. This is a result of James' descriptivism, which focuses almost solely on Christian and other western instances of mystical experience. Although twentieth century followers of James realised that such a narrow view provides an misleading picture, their commitment to a universal core generated a tendency to "hold one mystical tradition to be superior or 'normative'".<sup>9</sup> This method is useful because it allows the disparate content of various mystical experiences to be reconciled in a reductionist definition described in the terms given by the normative tradition. It also provides the means by which to classify irreconcilable content as outliers, the product of an "borderline and atypical case".<sup>10</sup> Stace, for example, differentiates between "extrovertive" and "introvertive" mystical experiences, and deems the latter superior in form, content, and legitimacy. Extrovertive experiences are sensory and perceptual in nature, whereas the introvertive mystic reports "a state of *pure* consciousness - 'pure' in the sense that it is not the consciousness of any empirical content...It has no content except itself".<sup>11</sup> He argues that the "visions and voices" exhibited in extrovertive mystical experiences "are not mystical phenomena".<sup>12</sup> The support for this argument is weak, consisting of quotations indicating that such

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<sup>9</sup> Steven T. Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism" in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, edited by Steven T. Katz (London, UK: Sheldon Press, 1978) pp. 22-74 (p. 65).

<sup>10</sup> Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, p. 132.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 86. His italics.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 47.

phenomena are signs that one is on the path to achieving a superior introvertive experience, but carry with them a risk of false idol worship, and may be heretical hallucinations. Part of his motivation here could be that it is easier to reduce pure consciousness with “no content except itself”<sup>13</sup> to a definition, rather than attempting to reconcile the diverse content contained in mystical visions. However, Stace offers little in the way of explanation how such “hallucinations” are substantively distinct from introvertive experiences, which could also be purely hallucinatory. Identifying what he believes to be the “universal core” common to both extrovertive and introvertive experiences, Stace defines mystical experience as featuring (1) “a sense of objectivity or reality”, (2) “blessedness” and “peace”, (3) a “feeling of the holy, sacred, or divine”, (4) “paradoxicality”, and (5) an “alleged” quality of ineffability.<sup>14</sup> Taking the experiences of St. Theresa of Avila and Meister Eckhart as archetypal, his dismissal of their “sensuous”<sup>15</sup> modes of mysticism enables an easier comparison with non-Christian mystical experience. This reveals an approach contradictory to pure descriptivism; rather than forming a conclusion on the nature of mystical experience after surveying reports of mystical experience, Stace appears to have a preconceived notion of what constitutes the true marks of mysticism. As Donald Bishop notes, such “a priori assumptions” and “selectivity in gathering evidence for one’s preconceived views”<sup>16</sup> are common amongst those arguing for common content across mystical experiences. Katz makes a similar criticism, stating that “these lists of supposedly common elements...always reduce the actual variety of disparate experiences to fit a specific theory”.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 86.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 131-132.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 49.

<sup>16</sup> Donald H. Bishop, ‘Introduction’ in *Mysticism and the Mystical Experience*, edited by Donald H. Bishop (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1995) pp.11-37 (p. 31).

<sup>17</sup> Katz, p. 47.

As it appears to me, achieving a purely descriptivist psychological definition is extremely difficult, if not impossible. Many of those attempting to formulate one already have a philosophical definition that they are working from, explicitly or otherwise. Evelyn Underhill is described by Ellwood as defining mysticism “as a quest for truth and reality that goes beyond merely sensory or intellectual spheres”,<sup>18</sup> but she goes on to develop a very specific psychological definition that is almost exclusively focused upon the western tradition of mysticism.

A definition such as Underhill’s, which contains concepts such as “an overwhelming consciousness of God and of his own soul”<sup>19</sup> and “the vision or experience of a Unity which reconciles all opposites, and fulfils all man’s highest intuitions of reality”,<sup>20</sup> will inevitably exclude some experiences commonly considered mystical in nature. For instance, how could such a definition account for Buddha’s vision of “his own former lives, the lives of others, and the entire space-time continuum concentrated in an extensionless, eternal point”,<sup>21</sup> an experience with no theistic content, or Carlos Castaneda’s bizarre, mescaline-induced encounter with a dog that is later revealed to him as Mescalito, the Yaqui Indian deity.<sup>22</sup> The range of mystical experiences documented throughout human history vary so greatly in form and content that exceptions and outliers will always defy attempts to create a psychological definition based upon a universal core. Although Stace, as stated above, builds his definition around excluding certain types of mystical experience, more contemporary exponents of the psychological method have recognised this difficulty as salient. Jess Byron

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<sup>18</sup> Ellwood, p. 14.

<sup>19</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism and Other Essays*, (London, UK: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1920) p. 2.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p. 21.

<sup>21</sup> Corless, p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> Carlos Castaneda, *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1968) pp. 25-27.

Hollenback, in his 1996 book entitled *Mysticism: Experience, Response and Empowerment*, decries the “essentialist” theories of Stace and Underhill, but develops a set of “distinctive features”<sup>23</sup> in the form of a psychological definition. According to Hollenback, a mystical experience is (1) “a radical, trans-sensory metamorphosis of the subject’s mode of consciousness” that (2) “gives the subject privileged access to and knowledge of those things that his or her particular culture and religious tradition regard as ultimately real”, (3) gives “knowledge about matters that are of ultimate soteriological concern to their communities”, (4) “is heavily laden with affect”, (5) “an illumination that is both literal and metaphorical”, (6) “fundamentally amorphous and its content historically conditioned”, and (7) “usually has its genesis in the recollective act”.<sup>24</sup> Although I find some of the features of this definition quite attractive, note the presence of the soft quantifier in (7). Hollenback does not subscribe to a universal core, adding the caveat that “some mystical experiences will not exhibit all of these attributes”.<sup>25</sup> However, he does not provide any other definition of what a mystical experience might be, aside from a description of mysticism as a “dramatic metamorphosis of the waking consciousness caused by simultaneously focusing the attention and quieting the mind”.<sup>26</sup> Stace also admits that there are “borderline and atypical cases”<sup>27</sup> which are mystical yet fall outside the terms of his definition. Two questions spring to mind here. Firstly, how many features of a psychological definition can be absent from or violated by a particular experience for it to be considered clearly non-mystical? Secondly, what is the point in creating such a specific definition if some mystical experiences do not fall under

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<sup>23</sup> Jess Byron Hollenback, *Mysticism: Experience, Response, and Empowerment* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996) pp. 40-55.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 40-41.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p. 41.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, p. 132.

its auspices, and yet are still admitted as being mystical? Here it becomes apparent that authors such as Stace and Hollenback have broader philosophical definitions in mind that in some sense take primacy over their psychological definitions. Hollenback is clearly doing so, but provides no explicit alternative to his psychological distinctive features, and gives little in the way of guidance regarding cases which do not display all these features. Stace asserts that borderline cases which do not instantiate all the attributes required by his definition can be considered mystical by utilising a family resemblance concept. However, he makes the somewhat bizarre admission that this is “out of respect to the family resemblance school of philosophers”,<sup>28</sup> and does not offer much in the way of further explanation. He does not address how closely, or in what attributes, a borderline experience has to resemble the archetype for it to be considered mystical. In a later discussion of such borderline cases, he adds to the confusion by mentioning that “in regard to commonly used words common usage is the rule, but...it is doubtful whether there is any established popular usage”.<sup>29</sup> I believe that this vagueness is disingenuous; Stace has a philosophical definition of mystical experience in mind, and is attempting to use concepts such as family resemblance to reconcile it with his psychological definition.

My aim in this thesis is to provide a working epistemology of mystical experience. With this in mind, it actually appears to me that many proponents of the psychological approach are allowing their definitions to perform epistemic undertakings. Returning to Stace again, his rejection of visions and voices together with “raptures, trances, and hyperemotionalism”<sup>30</sup> is due to his assertion

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<sup>28</sup> Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, p. 47.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, p. 81.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p. 51.

that they are “a source of weakness”,<sup>31</sup> and absent from the experiences of the superior introvertive mystic. In this sense, such states are more likely to be false, the product of disease or outright fraud. Although, as I outlined above, Stace has other reasons for marginalising these features of many mystical experiences, it appears that he may be excluding them from his definition in part because they are reputedly less epistemically robust. However, given my aim here, I will be delineating a different method of distinguishing between genuine and false mystical experiences; it would be a mistake to reject some forms of mysticism on epistemic grounds at this early stage. For me, a psychological definition seems too exclusivist. If the (non-psychological) definition I settle upon is overly inclusivist for some sensibilities, the epistemic criteria I present should deem offending examples as false or not genuine.

Instead of arguing for a universal core of content across all mystical experiences, I will define mystical experience as a general form of experience, characterised by its phenomenological attributes. On this view, mystical experience resembles an affective state or method of belief; rather than having any universally specifiable belief content, it is a belief generating mechanism. To exemplify what is meant here, let us hypothesise that there is a singular neurological “god module”. If manipulated in conscious subjects, we could expect phenomenologically similar experiences across the board, but the content of each experience would be culturally conditioned. Thus the experience, and at the physical level the god module, generate beliefs, but do not specify the particular content. Another, slightly weaker, analogy would be sense data. A single sense datum, such as my perception of the colour blue, does not contain any content other than the fact that I am perceiving blue. It requires contextual sense data and

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, p. 55.

background knowledge to generate beliefs such as “the sky is blue” or “that dress is blue”. This distinction between content and the experience generating it bears an affinity to John Dewey’s distinction between religion (beliefs and practices regarding the supernatural) and religious (“a quality of experience”<sup>32</sup> regarding matters of fundamental human importance) which I will explore in more detail at a later point.<sup>33</sup>

Descriptivism stills has a role to play in my philosophical definition, but it informs rather than shapes. Embracing a more normative method will also allow my definition to better accommodate instances of mysticism that are either not well documented in the historical body of mystical literature, or a new forms produced by today’s increasingly secular, possibly “post-religious” society.

Although I intend to formulate a philosophical definition of mystical experience, a review of the literature reveals a wide variation in form. Many are exceedingly simple, and possibly too much so: for example, Aquinas defines mysticism as “the knowledge of God through experience”<sup>34</sup>, and for Denise Lardner Carmody and John Tully Carmody it is “direct experience of ultimate reality”.<sup>35</sup> Others are much more comprehensive: Ellwood states that “mystical experience is experience in a religious context that is immediately or subsequently interpreted by the experiencer as encounter with ultimate divine reality in a direct nonrational way that engenders a deep sense of unity and of living during the experience on a level of being other than the ordinary.”<sup>36</sup> My definition falls somewhere between these two poles.

My general definition of mystical experience is as follows: a mystical

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<sup>32</sup> John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1934), p. 10.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 9-14.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Ellwood, p. 13.

<sup>35</sup> Denise Lardner Carmody and John Tully Carmody, *Mysticism: Holiness East and West* (New York: OUP, 1996) p. 10.

<sup>36</sup> Ellwood, p. 29.

experience is a state of nonordinary consciousness that is epiphanic in content. ‘Epiphanic’ here is relatively broad in scope; it does not necessarily entail “a manifestation or appearance of some divine or superhuman being” (the Oxford English Dictionary definition of “epiphany”). I intend it to include instances of sudden insight or revelation that are not necessarily perceived as descending from a deity or higher power. Thus, as I am defining it, “epiphanic” content is sudden, significant, profound, and of some fundamental relevance to the subject. Geoffrey Parrinder describes mystical knowledge as normally “inaccessible to intellectual apprehension”,<sup>37</sup> and this is in the same spirit, although slightly too narrow in scope and suggestive of ineffability for my liking. However, some epiphanies under this definition are not mystical in nature: for instance, my sudden realisation how the equation  $y=mx+c$  represents a straight line on a graph may be epiphanic but is not mystical. My definition of mystical experience excludes such “mundane” epiphanies by requiring “nonordinary consciousness” as a feature. This concept derives from the work of anthropologist Carlos Castaneda, who defines “nonordinary reality” as “peculiar states of distorted perception, or altered consciousness”.<sup>38</sup> (I have substituted ‘consciousness’ for ‘reality’; the use of the latter term was specific to the context of Castaneda’s work.) However, terms such as “nonordinary” or “altered” mean little when applied to consciousness. Any student of philosophy knows all too well that the subjective nature of conscious experience tends to evade such concrete descriptions. What I understand as my ordinary perception might seem alien to another if they could experience it. Can consciousness be defined in such a way externally, or are the operations of perceptual function subjective? Perhaps altered states are relative to what an individual considers normal states; but can this kind of subjectivism provide any

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<sup>37</sup> Geoffrey Parrinder, *Mysticism in the World’s Religions* (Oxford, UK: Oneworld, 1995) p. 11.

<sup>38</sup> Carlos Castaneda, *A Separate Reality*, (London, UK: The Bodley Head, 1971) p. 14.

meaning at all?<sup>39</sup>

Although the concept of an altered state of consciousness seems on face value simple to define, actually delineating its meaning in a way that is useful and free from vague denotations is a difficult task. While it is a relatively common idiom, it is just that: an idiom. It lacks definitive meaning aside from its everyday usage, which furthermore is usually suggestive of explicitly hallucinatory states. To begin with, one could follow Charles Tart's definition of an altered state of consciousness as a "qualitative alteration in the overall patterning of mental functioning, such that the experiencer feels his consciousness is radically different from the way it functions ordinarily".<sup>40</sup> However, this appears somewhat tautologous, essentially stating that an altered state of consciousness is an alteration of mental functioning. Synonyms do not offer much in the way of insight or analysis. Tart goes on to state that an altered state of consciousness involves a paradigm shift of perception and understanding, a radical change in "complex, interlocking sets of rules and theories that enable a person to interact with and interpret experiences within an environment."<sup>41</sup> This is a useful means of illustrating the nature of altered consciousness, and yet such a definition remains problematic. It seems possibly too inclusive for my purposes, as it can easily be interpreted to encompass heightened emotional states. For instance, an individual who has recently fallen deeply in love might view the entire world in a significantly more positive and beneficent way due to a change in overall mental functioning. However, to my mind it seems somewhat implausible that this and similar cases should be classified as actual altered states of consciousness. Altered

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<sup>39</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein's private language argument comes to mind here. If the contrast between ordinary and altered states of consciousness is purely a matter subjective relativity, no criterion of correctness exists, and thus any such claims are meaningless. This argument will also be utilised in later discussions of mystical experience.

<sup>40</sup> Charles T. Tart, 'States of consciousness and state-specific sciences', *Science* 176:4040 (1972) pp. 1203-1210 (p. 1203).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, p. 1204.

states of consciousness should not form a regular part of normal waking life; in the context of my argument, if this were the case then we could consider all kinds of mundane epiphanies mystical. In this respect, Tart's definition fails to fully capture the "peculiar distorted perception" described by Castaneda. An altered state of consciousness needs to be defined as one that breaks with the usual function and logic of perception. Yet the problem of how to define "usual" remains. Can it be objectified, or is it relative to the normal conscious states of the individual? What of individuals with severe mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia? In such cases, do anti-psychotic drugs treat their symptoms by preventing or ameliorating altered states of consciousness, or do they actually induce what is a kind of altered state of consciousness for the schizophrenic, a state different from their ordinary psychotic consciousness? An interesting example of such a case is that of John Wren-Lewis, who experienced "a permanent change of consciousness"<sup>42</sup> after awaking from a coma. He describes his post-coma consciousness as "a state of quintessential equanimity and stability" that "yet also carries the sense of being completely ordinary and obvious...as if it were now my baseline".<sup>43</sup> A purely objective definition of ordinary and nonordinary states of consciousness, with no consideration for individual differences of normal consciousness, will face difficulties accounting for anomalous cases such as that of Wren-Lewis.

Imants Baruss outlines three methods of understanding and comparing conscious states.<sup>44</sup> The first is physiological: consciousness is understood in terms of the neurological states underlying it. The second is cognitive: consciousness is understood in terms of cognitive operators and pathways. Under this view, an

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<sup>42</sup> John Wren-Lewis, "Aftereffects of near-death experiences: a survival mechanism hypothesis", *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 26:2 (1994), pp. 107-115 (p. 110).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Imants Baruss, *Alterations of Consciousness* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2003), p. 5.

altered state of consciousness would be one in which behavioural outputs varied from those that would be expected given an ordinary state of consciousness. The third method is experiential or phenomenological. This is the subjective approach, under which consciousness is assessed according to the introspective accounts of the individual. Obviously, any fully fledged theory of consciousness will involve aspects of all three accounts, as they are not really competing approaches so much as differing perspectives. For my purposes however, the physiological method will not be of practical use, as access to brain states on the neurophysical level is not available. The cognitive method shows some promise, and yet without a phenomenological component would strike difficulties distinguishing between truly altered states and states like the heightened emotions example cited above.<sup>45</sup> Wren-Lewis' cases would also prove problematic for a purely cognitive account, as he reports that he continues "to function in all the usual ways, from dealing with practical matters like talking with the doctors or eating supper, to thinking, 'This can't be happening to me – I don't believe in mystical experiences!'"<sup>46</sup> Without a phenomenological component, Wren-Lewis' permanently altered state may appear as no different from his pre-coma consciousness. To me, the way forward appears to be a phenomenological approach that utilises the type of structured guidelines suggested by the cognitive account to avoid being purely subjective. Without a structured approach, a phenomenological account will fall victim to the kind of pitfalls found in Adolf Dittrich's APZ scale, which measures

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<sup>45</sup> An example of a primarily cognitive account can be found in Michael Winkelman, *Shamanism: A Neural Ecology of Consciousness and Healing* (Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, 2000). Winkelman argues that consciousness is a collection of "knowing systems" that can be conceived of as "linking biology and experience" (p. 1). According to this model, "[v]ariation in processes and interrelated structures that produce consciousness provide the basis for differences among the many different forms of consciousness." (p. 11). However, Winkelman's focus on shamanistic and meditative practices entails that his theory is directed towards deliberately induced altered states of consciousness, and particularly those that are goal-oriented, such as "knowledge quest" and healing rituals. Under this view, many mystical experiences appear as unintended malfunctions of cognitive systems, despite being neurologically indistinguishable from induced mystical experiences.

<sup>46</sup> Wren-Lewis, p. 109.

altered states of consciousness according to three heuristics: “oceanic boundlessness”, “ego dissolution” and “visionary restructuralization”.<sup>47</sup> Although these terms may comprise an excellent guide for judging a subject’s feelings in a psychiatric context, they are of little use in forming a definition of what an altered state of consciousness is. Tart’s later work, in addition to that of other authors,<sup>48</sup> commits a similar error: although such theories are a useful attempt at combining the experiential with the cognitive, they largely consist of lists of phenomena that an individual subject to an altered state of consciousness may experience.

Theories of consciousness such as those of Dittrich and Tart’s later work may be effective as individual diagnostic tools, but are of little use in providing a concise definition of altered states of consciousness.

However, what Dittrich’s scale does suggest is consciousness as a continuum between ordinary and nonordinary states. This is the approach taken by David Lewis-Williams, who asserts that many theorists “wrongly imagine that consciousness is a single, consolidated state”<sup>49</sup> with ordinary and nonordinary states as specifically discrete units. Instead he argues that consciousness “should be thought of as a spectrum”.<sup>50</sup> Default ordinary consciousness is defined as “waking, problem-oriented thought”. Note that this fixes ordinary, unaltered consciousness in a standardised way without compromising possible differences between individual conscious phenomenologies. While ordinary waking consciousness is “outward-directed” there also exist waking states further along the spectrum which comprise “introverted states in which we solve problems by

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<sup>47</sup> Adolf Dittrich, “The standardized psychometric assessment of altered states of consciousness (ASCs) in humans”, *Pharmacopsychiatry* 31(1998) pp. 80-84.

<sup>48</sup> See, for example: Charles T. Tart, *States of Consciousness* (New York, NY: E.P. Dutton, 1975); Roger Walsh, “Phenomenological mapping: a method for describing and comparing states of consciousness”, *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 27:1 (1995), pp. 25-56.

<sup>49</sup> David Lewis-Williams, *Conceiving God: The Cognitive Origin and Evolution of Religion* (London, UK: Thames and Hudson, 2010), pp. 140-149.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, p. 140.

inward thought”, modes of consciousness that reach their apogee when “we are day-dreaming: mental images come and go at will, unfettered by the material world around us.”<sup>51</sup> Such experiences are the product of a very weak kind of altered consciousness: cognitive operators process information supplied by the internal pathways of the brain, and not external stimuli.

From introspection and day-dreaming, we move to what are more traditionally considered altered states. Here Lewis-Williams presents two trajectories: a “normal trajectory” which terminates in unconsciousness, and an “intensified trajectory” which terminates in full-scale hallucination.<sup>52</sup> The normal trajectory begins with hypnagogic and hypnapompic states that lie “on the threshold between sleep and waking”,<sup>53</sup> and are characterised by vivid visual hallucinations, sometimes accompanied by auditory and kinaesthetic hallucinations, the content of which is distinctively different from those experienced during REM dreams.<sup>54</sup> Hypnagogic and hypnapompic states generally feature singular hallucinations, such as facial images, hearing one’s name being called, or a feeling of falling,<sup>55</sup> as opposed to the bizarre narratives of “changing forms and impossible circumstances”<sup>56</sup> of REM dreams. Thus, the normal trajectory of consciousness follows this course: Waking, problem-oriented thought > Day-dreaming > Hypnagogic / hypnapompic states > Dreaming > Unconsciousness.

The intensified trajectory also features three stages. The first stage contains “entoptic phenomena”.<sup>57</sup> These are visual hallucinations of a geometric nature that occur in a variety of forms that include: an expanding hexagonal lattice grid;

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, p. 142.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>54</sup> Baruss, pp. 71-72, 88-90.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, p 89.

<sup>56</sup> Lewis-Williams, p. 142.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, p. 141.

parallel lines; bright dots and flecks; zigzag lines; “nested catenary curves” or “scotoma” (catenary curves surrounding a blind spot in vision); meandering lines.<sup>58</sup> Lewis-Williams notes that such phenomena are commonly perceived in rather unremarkable contexts such as migraines or concussion. Stage two involves the interpretation of the entoptic phenomena, “construing them as objects with emotional or religious significance”.<sup>59</sup> Here the state of consciousness goes beyond viewing entoptic phenomena as a trivial hallucination or malfunction of the brain, and attributes meaning to them; “the brain attempts to recognize, or decode, these forms as it does impressions supplied by the nervous system in a normal state of consciousness.”<sup>60</sup> Stage three involves full-scale hallucination of potentially all these senses. One may perceive auditory, olfactory and gustatory hallucinations, changes in body shape, size, or type, out of body experiences, and massive distortions of time and space. Lewis-Williams notes that although stage three visual hallucinations feature non-geometric imagery, “the entoptic forms of stage one persist, peripherally or integrated with iconic hallucinations.”<sup>61</sup> Another point that Lewis-Williams makes clear is that the intensified trajectory is not a sequence of conscious states that is always followed (for example, a state of stage three hallucinations will not necessarily be preceded by stages one and two), rather, they merely illustrate the continuum of altered consciousness, which may exist in some individuals as a progression and in others as discrete states.

What are the benefits and implications of Lewis-Williams’ model of consciousness? The concept of consciousness as a spectrum is an extremely useful heuristic, as it clearly recognises a variety of altered states while relating them to each other in a viable way. The spectrum model also recognises that some states

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 144-145.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, p. 146.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, p. 147.

may fall into a grey area between altered and ordinary, unlike, for instance, Roger Walsh's approach which supplies twelve parameters that an altered state of consciousness may be measured against, but without giving an indication of how many or to what degree the parameters need to be satisfied in order for an altered state of consciousness to be reached.<sup>62</sup> Another benefit is a practical combination of experiential and cognitive accounts. Lewis-Williams gives quite comprehensive descriptions of the separate phenomena experienced in different states, particular with regard to the intensified trajectory. His model is particularly strong in terms of cognitive function and cohesion, particularly in the way that the outward-directed / introspection distinction of waking states is mirrored in stage one and stage two of the intensified trajectory. This demonstrates how altered states of consciousness are, in part, a result of regular cognitive functions operating on radically different stimuli. Finally, it appears that Lewis-Williams' model could provide an account of the problematic Wren-Lewis case. Although Wren-Lewis' altered consciousness is effectively his baseline, normal, waking consciousness in the sense that it is outward-directed and presents no practical obstacle to him, it remains an altered state as he exhibits some of the characteristics ascribed by Lewis-Williams to stage two of the intensified trajectory, such as a tendency to interpret ordinary stimuli in an emotionally and religiously transcendent way.

With Lewis-Williams model of consciousness in mind, how exactly does it shape my definition of a nonordinary state of consciousness, and therefore my definition of mystical experience? Firstly, it does prove that "nonordinary" is preferable to "altered" with regards to terminology. This is because epiphanies could occur in dreams (an ordinary altered state of consciousness occurring on the normal trajectory) that will not be mystical in nature. For example, one morning I

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<sup>62</sup> Walsh, pp. 33-34.

might fall back asleep after my alarm has gone off and begin dreaming, only to be confronted in my dream world by the realisation that I need to wake up. This is certainly a mundane epiphany. Thus a nonordinary experience should typically be one that occurs on the intensified trajectory of the consciousness spectrum.

However, there do appear to be epiphanies that sometimes occur during the normal trajectory of altered consciousness that I would not describe as mundane. Dreams perceived or understood as being precognitive are one.<sup>63</sup> Another such phenomenon is sleep paralysis, a special type of hypnagogic or hypnapompic state which features “a transient, conscious state of involuntary immobility...[a]lthough individuals are unable to make gross bodily movements...they are able to open their eyes and subsequently report accurately on events in their surroundings during the episode”.<sup>64</sup> Those who experience sleep paralysis report a wide range of perceptions, including visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic hallucinations, a sense of other beings or entities being present, intense fear or bliss, pain, and out of body sensations.<sup>65</sup> Although sleep paralysis rarely seems epiphanic in the way traditional mystical experiences often are, those who do not dismiss it as a hallucination or kind of waking nightmare often perceive their experience as a visitation by ghost or spirit, or in some cases, alien abduction.<sup>66</sup> Although sleep paralysis is an anomalous experience (although certainly not completely uncommon<sup>67</sup>), it does fall on the normal trajectory as a subset of hypnagogic and hypnapompic states. How might we go about including states such as precognitive dreams and sleep paralysis under the nonordinary aegis?

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<sup>63</sup> Baruss, pp. 102-106.

<sup>64</sup> J. Allan Cheyne, Steve D. Ruffer, and Ian R. Newby-Clark, “Hypnagogic and hypnapompic hallucinations during sleep paralysis: neurological and cultural construction of the night-mare”, *Consciousness and Cognition* 8:3 (1999), pp. 319-337 (p. 319).

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, p. 324.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, p. 320.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, p. 323. Approximately 28% of their sample reported experiencing some form of sleep paralysis at least once in their lifetime.

What makes these particular experiences appear epiphanic in a non-mundane way, and thus mystical, is the significance attributed to them by the subject. As in stage two of Lewis-Williams' intensified trajectory, the perceptions are construed "as objects with emotional or religious significance". Although this is useful, it seems a little too vague for my liking: what is meant, exactly, by "emotional significance"? A dream could be emotionally significant just because it is extremely pleasant or traumatic, whereas the actual content of the dream holds no such significance for the individual. The solution is to link the emotional or religious significance to the epiphanic content; the latter must play some part in the perception of the former.

Now I have reached the point where my final definition of mystical experience can be stated. It is as follows: *A mystical experience is a state of nonordinary consciousness that is epiphanic in content, and such that the epiphanic content has emotional or religious significance for the individual.* From the discussion above, nonordinary consciousness can be generally characterised as an intensified altered state of consciousness according to the Lewis-Williams model, although normal altered states containing emotionally or religiously significant epiphanies can also be considered nonordinary. On a final note, I will state that time, with its fading feelings and wavering minds, is not a factor. If an experience fulfils these conditions at the time of its experience or immediately afterwards, it should be deemed a mystical experience, and not retroactively altered if changes in emotional or intellectual understanding occur. The value of the experience may change or diminish, but its fact as a mystical episode does not.

## Chapter Two

Forming a definition of mystical experience is difficult because such a wide variety of radically different instances exist. Many mystical experiences occur during prayer, meditation, or in a place of worship. Others occur outside of formally religious contexts, caused by neurological conditions, psychoactive drug ingestion, or for no apparent reason at all. The context in which they occur forms a strong intuition pump. For instance, we can imagine two individuals who report the same phenomena: a feeling of being possessed by a supernatural being and glossolalia (“speaking in tongues”). However, one has the experience after being blessed by the minister during a service at a Pentecostal church; the other has the experience while under the effects of a hallucinogenic drug such as atropine.<sup>68</sup> We might be tempted to consider the former experience as genuine, possibly a perception of God’s presence, whereas with the latter our tendency will be to deem it pure hallucination, the product of a malfunctioning brain. Are these differing judgements legitimately based in reason? To further illustrate my point, imagine a third individual who too reports the same experience, this time deliberately induced through starvation or sleep deprivation as an ascetic or shamanic ritual. This seems to fall between the initial two scenarios, as it appears in the context of a religious ritual and yet is the product of a compromised brain.

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<sup>68</sup> Atropine is an alkaloid found in plants such as deadly nightshade and mandrake, which produces an effect of delirium that may include feelings of being possessed and an inability to form sentences. Micheal Harner cites evidence that these plants were used for recreational effect by women accused of witchcraft in medieval Europe. See Michael J. Harner, “The role of hallucinogenic plants in European witchcraft”, in *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*, edited by Michael J. Harner (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1973) pp. 125-150.

Is there any rational reason to discriminate between these three experiences, and if there is, where exactly is the line drawn?

A major source of the intuitions outlined above appears to derive from our knowledge of a mystical experience's causal origin. A mystical experience will generally not be considered legitimate unless it occurs under the correct circumstances. Even in pre-scientific cultures, mystical experiences occurring outside of religious ceremony and ritual might often be discounted as products of madness or disease. This focus on causality has been etched in greater relief, and become more controversial, with modern advances in neuroscience. Many atheists and sceptics see scientific hypotheses for the neurological basis of mystical experience as an opportunity to explain religion as a pure invention of the human brain. Although I find such willingness understandable, neurology alone will not prove to be some kind of panacea for the problem of religion. Just as I cannot "explain away" my perception of my notebook as a work of imagination by indicating its neurological basis, I cannot deny the reality of an experience of God. As neurotheologians Eugene d'Aquili and Andrew Newberg state, "neuropsychology can give no answer to the question of which state is more real, baseline reality or hyperlucid unitary consciousness often experienced as God."<sup>69</sup> Mystical brain states may just be the method by which God makes His presence felt. Even if we could find a singular "God" button in the brain which could be pressed to artificially induce a mystical experience, to do so as proof that all mystical experiences are false would be little different from artificially inducing an image of an apple in the brain as proof that all apple experiences are false. Another problem for neurological reductions of mystical experience is hinted at by d'Aquili and Newberg in their use of "hyperlucid" to describe mystical

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<sup>69</sup> Eugene G. d'Aquili and Andrew G. Newberg, "The neuropsychological basis of religions, or why God won't go away", *Zygon*, 33:2 (1998), pp. 187-201 (p. 200).

consciousness. A common thread amongst mystical experiences is how they can exhibit “hyperreal” perceptions that satisfy “all man’s highest intuitions of reality”,<sup>70</sup> and even produce a sense of existing “united with the reality being experienced”.<sup>71</sup> Although subjective, this conviction of the unparalleled reality and authority of mystical experience is difficult to overcome for most individuals who have felt it.

Another problem with causal explanations on the neurological level is that they may reduce every single mystical experience to the same level. Although part of my purpose in this work is to expand our perception of what may be included under the banner of valuable mystical experience, it remains very clear to me that some mystical experiences are more valuable than others, on both individual and societal levels. A pure focus on neurological causality could obscure this point.

Thus causality, at least in a scientifically examinable sense, does not provide a very satisfactory means of passing epistemic judgement on mystical experiences. If we assume that all mystical experiences share the same basic brain state (although this is by no means true, and in need of significant further study), then mystical experiences previously discounted as products of pathology may require reconsideration. Rejecting deliberately induced mystical experiences is also largely fruitless, as most mystical experiences are induced, occurring in the context of religious worship, ritual and reflection. Primarily focusing upon the causes of mystical experiences will not yield a satisfactory epistemology.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James distinguished between “existential judgement” and “spiritual judgement” of religion and religious experience.<sup>72</sup> “Existential judgement” analyses a religion’s

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<sup>70</sup> Underhill, p. 14.

<sup>71</sup> Ellwood, p. 31.

<sup>72</sup> James, *The Varieties of Mystical Experience*, p. 6.

“history and its derivation from natural antecedents”,<sup>73</sup> and in the case of religious experience, its physical, biological, and psychological basis. “Spiritual judgement”, however, is based upon value perceived in an experience’s content. With such value-based interpretation, we can avoid the dead-end street of causal judgement, and the unsympathetic reductionism which “finishes up Saint Paul by calling his vision on the road to Damascus a discharging lesion of the occipital cortex...snuffs out Saint Theresa as an hysteric, Saint Francis of Assisi as an hereditary degenerate.”<sup>74</sup> Moreover, this distinction assists in demonstrating why causal judgements prove unsatisfactory. Causality plays an important role in the traditional correspondence theory of truth, which holds that a true perception of an object needs to be in the correct causal relationship with that object. Thus, under the correspondence theory, value judgement is derived from existential judgement. However, mystical experience differs from regular experience in a fundamental aspect: the object perceived by the mystic is not a regular physical object. A perception of God is not the same as my perception of my notebook. No clear causal chain exists, and as I noted above, simply arguing that neuroscience as it stands gives us all the necessary causal information represents a heavy-handed and unsatisfactory reductionism. Additionally, if existential judgement is considered equivalent to spiritual judgement, then a future comprehensive neurological theory which proves that all mystical experiences are delusional will strip them of all value. Again, this seems heavy-handed. Perhaps some human values cannot be reduced to purely material terms.

The correspondence theory of truth is not only popular with materialists hoping to reduce mystical experience to a collection of brain states. Jerome Gellman believes that some mystical experience is veridical, and adopts a type of

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<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, p. 14.

correspondence theory, arguing that mystical experiences can and should be tested against the same criteria as regular experience. Although he recognises that there are significant differences between the two, these do not require abandonment of the correspondence theory. This is because “our ordinary physical-object beliefs are way overjustified by confirming evidence.”<sup>75</sup> Thus, it is not the case that the correspondence theory is too tough for mystical experience; just that we cannot expect it to live up to the same standards we set for regular experience. One of these standards that seems particularly problematic for mystical experience is that of intersubjectivity: if you question whether my perception of my notebook is accurate, you can check it using your own senses. This option is rarely, if at all, available in cases of mystical experience. Gellman, however, argues that an intersubjective “checking procedure”<sup>76</sup> is available. If I want to confirm the mystical experience of, for example, a Tibetan Buddhist, I have the option of training in Tibetan Buddhist meditation. This may recreate the experience I wish to confirm. This appears rather flimsy to me. Not only is it extremely impractical in most cases (and perhaps impossible in cases where the experience has not been clearly induced through meditation or similar), I have no way of knowing whether my experience is an accurate recreation of the Buddhist’s. “Ineffability” is a quality frequently ascribed to mystical experience, and therefore the Buddhist may not be able to give me a description of his perception, whereas I can easily describe my notebook or most physical objects. Although mystical experiences occur in “numbers, diversity and vividness”,<sup>77</sup> the diversity and ineffability counteract the argument from numbers. It is as if several people (but still a minority) can perceive my notebook, but none claim to be able to describe the

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<sup>75</sup> Jerome Gellman, *Mystical Experience of God: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2001) p. 27.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, p. 30.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, p. 28.

qualities of the notebook properly, and the ones we can describe differ significantly between us. Without a discernible causal chain or intersubjectivity the correspondence theory of truth fails. Although it works well with ordinary perception, the inability to provide satisfactory accounts of causality or intersubjectivity with regard to mystical experiences means it cannot be applied to them.

Coherence theories of truth have also featured in historical treatments of mysticism. Coherence theory states that a true idea is one that does not conflict with any other ideas that the subject holds. Christian mystics were sometimes tested using a type of coherence theory: they were questioned on the content of their experiences; inconsistencies with accepted doctrine or within the experience meant the experience was rejected as delusional or worse.<sup>78</sup> This kind of use of coherence theory seems particularly fraudulent, as it is merely comparing mystically revealed content to other mystically revealed content, or to theological systems devised without direct knowledge of the divine. Logical contradictions within an experience do not seem to be sufficient grounds alone for rejecting it, as contradictions and paradoxes are in fact a hallmark of mystical experiences.<sup>79</sup> However, sometimes a coherence approach may be useful: for example, in the context of experiences claiming precognitive knowledge. If such a prophecy is not fulfilled as promised, we have good reason to be sceptical of the experience in question. However, not all mystics make such verifiable statements, and there is of course the potential that they will be radically reinterpreted or explained away when contradicted or unfulfilled.

Gellman's focus upon intersubjectivity raises a salient issue. As I noted

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<sup>78</sup> The trial of Meister Eckhart during the Inquisition is an example.

<sup>79</sup> See, for example: Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, p. 131. A common paradox reported by mystics is a sense of the world being plural and yet singular.

above, it is common for mystics to claim that their experiences are somehow more objective than ordinary perceptual experience. In contrast, the sceptical view holds that such experiences are radically subjective, and have no referent outside of the mind. Gellman takes what might be considered a default position in the face of such uncertainty: recognising the subjectivity and potential for error inherent in individual cases of sense perception, but arguing that intersubjective checking procedures can confirm or deny the objectivity of an experience with a sufficient confidence interval. However, as demonstrated in my earlier discussion of Gellman, the nature of mystical experience is such that the checking procedures offer far less accessibility and guarantee of accuracy than those used in cases of ordinary experience. As appealing as it may be, mystical experience cannot simply be treated as a special instance of sense perception.

Acknowledging this obstacle, what is the epistemic status of mystical experience? From my remarks thus far, it is probably reasonably clear that I believe it is subjective. This is not necessarily because I believe that all mystical experience is false and without objective referent, but rather because it does not appear that mystical experience can be proven with a sufficient level of justification to be objective. As my discussion of Gellman's argument demonstrated, ordinary methods of distinguishing between subjective and objective experience are inadequate in the case of mystical experience. It seems we need to look beyond traditional epistemology for a satisfactory account.

Perhaps the problem here is that our subjective/objective dichotomy is not appropriate in the context of formulating an epistemic account of mystical experience, which is radically different from ordinary perceptual experience in form, content, and resulting truth claims. To explain the problem in the simplest of terms, mystical experience is a subjective experience of an objective reality. The

sceptic in me argues that the former prevents the latter from attaining true objectivity, at least in the usual sense. I will return to this idea shortly. For the time being, however, I wish to give an overview of how others have recognised and addressed this issue.

William James, in both *The Varieties Of Religious Experience* and *The Will To Believe*, argues that the subject of a mystical experience is entitled to believe in the objective reality of it, and ‘it is vain for rationalism to grumble about this’.<sup>80</sup> However, for anyone other than the subject, the existence and content of such an experience provide no necessary basis for belief other than that ordinary perception is ‘only one kind of consciousness’ and that ‘other orders of truth’<sup>81</sup> may exist. This foreshadows the pluralist philosophy James would develop in his later work *A Pluralistic Universe*, in the sense that there are multiple ways of correctly perceiving and understanding reality. This also reflects James’ antirealist general epistemology, tied to his particular brand of pragmatism. Practical utility becomes a proxy for truth, and because of the various shapes utility can take, the notion of fixed, objective truth falls away.<sup>82</sup> I will discuss James’ pragmatism and its relevance in more detail shortly.

Taking James as a reference point, William Alston also argues that the subject of a mystical experience is entitled to believe in the objective reality of it. However, he explicitly goes a step further, asserting that under the correct conditions, a non-mystic can be justified in holding such a belief. If I trust X, who is the subject of mystical experience which conveyed to him that p, and “have sufficient reasons for regarding X as sufficiently competent, reliable, or

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<sup>80</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 414.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> William James, “Pragmatism: a new name for some old ways of thinking”, in *Pragmatism and other writings*, edited by Giles Gunn (New York, NY: Penguin, 2000) pp. 1-132.

authoritative”,<sup>83</sup> then I am justified in believing *p*. Alston argues that such a case is comparable to more mundane incidents of justified belief, in that “if I had to rely on my own experience and reasoning alone, I would know little of history, geography, science, and the arts, to say nothing of what is going on in the world currently.”<sup>84</sup> In this regard Alston follows a similar path to Gellman, and faces the same problems of intersubjectivity, and the lack of readily available checking procedures. When it comes to the authoritative force of the direct experience itself, though, Alston develops a slightly more comprehensive theory than either James or Gellman, taking an atomist view of perception as his basis. For him, the basic elements of experience are phenomenal qualities such as ‘red, round, acrid, or bitter’.<sup>85</sup> The subjective reality of such qualities, when experienced, is undeniable. Complex entities that we experience such as trees, houses, and even more abstract concepts commonly ascribed to God such as “power, goodness, and love”<sup>86</sup> remain comprised of such basic sensory phenomena. According to this theory, just as we learn through practice how to accurately identify a house we have never seen before through our previous experiences of what a house looks like, we can identify the love God presents to us through our previous experiences of human love. However, such experiences remain subjective. I might identify the love of God that I perceived, but there remains the problem that nobody else perceived that same loving God in the same time and place that I did. Intersubjectivity is still sorely lacking. I might have correctly identified what I perceived, but that does not make it any more real than an apple I can imagine and define the attributes of.

The problem that mystical experiences appear quite radically subjective

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<sup>83</sup> William Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991) p. 280.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

remains. We are back to intersubjectivity and the diametrically opposed positions of the mystic and the sceptic again. I desire a more definitive, productive, or at least insightful epistemology than this bleak impasse.

W. T. Stace, like Alston, is a phenomenalist, arguing that “the given [basic sensory qualia] is what is *certain* in knowledge”.<sup>87</sup> But unlike Alston, Stace presents an interesting and creative argument that mystical experience should be considered neither objective or subjective. Rather, he claims that mystical experience is “transsubjective”: experience that is subjective in form but ‘self-transcending’<sup>88</sup> in content. This claim seems instantly suspicious. How can a perception bootstrap itself out of subjectivity? Moreover, what are the implications of this novel epistemic category? Should we accept transsubjective phenomena as veridical, like an objective perception? If not, then how are they different from merely subjective perceptions?

The argument for transsubjectivity is based upon two of Stace’s fundamental beliefs regarding mystical experience: firstly, that introverted mystical experience of a singular unitary consciousness is the paramount and most completely realised form of mysticism; secondly, as touched upon in my previous discussion of Stace, the “argument from unanimity”<sup>89</sup> suggests a universal core common to all mystical experience. Although I am highly sceptical of both these claims, I will suspend my disbelief to charitably reconstruct Stace’s argument.

To begin, Stace’s definitions of objectivity and subjectivity are required. He states that “an experience is objective when it is orderly both in its internal and its external relations...an experience is subjective when it is disorderly either in its

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<sup>87</sup> W. T. Stace, *The Theory of Knowledge and Existence* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1970), p. 20. His italics.

<sup>88</sup> Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, p. 147.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, p. 134.

internal or its external relations.”<sup>90</sup> Hence, an objective experience is not logically incoherent or contradictory, and is consistent with the known external world. Accordingly, a subjective experience fails to satisfy one or both of these requirements for objectivity. Again, I am sceptical of these definitions, if for no other reason than that the notion of transsubjectivity itself can be considered a subjective concept, given its contradictory nature. The argument is as follows: in ordinary experience, two individuals *A* and *B* maintain separate streams of consciousness, discrete personal identities distinguished through differing beliefs, memories, and perceptions, some objective, some subjective. However, if both *A* and *B* are subject to an introvertive mystical experience of unitary consciousness (also described by Stace as pure ego and the “One”<sup>91</sup>), there is no ‘principle of individuation’<sup>92</sup> that can distinguish between the content of either experience. Both are having the same experience of “undifferentiated unity...which is both something and nothing”.<sup>93</sup> These singular referents of both experiences are qualitatively identical, containing “nothing to distinguish them or make them two pure egos”,<sup>94</sup> as no thought or perception other than pure unity is present in either consciousness. At this point, the grounds for Stace’s claim of transsubjectivity should become clear. His ideal introvertive mystical experience cannot be considered either subjective or objective, because it contains no content that could be considered orderly or disorderly in its internal or external relations; in fact, the experience contains no content at all. Another way of viewing it is that the experience is not subjective because both *A* and *B* are having exactly the same experience, but not objective because the normal checking procedures for verifying the reality of an experience are not available. However, how do *A* and *B*

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<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, p. 140.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, p. 152.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, p. 148.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, p. 86.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, p. 151.

verify that they are having the same contentless experience? How can they be sure that “pure consciousness” is the same experience for each individual?

We seem to be back again at the same question we began with: are some mystics perceiving a common object? How can we find out? However, Stace does not see it as a problem, as the transsubjective nature of the experience precludes any questions regarding objectivity. This rejection of objectivity entails that he is only making what Richard Gale calls “a psychological claim”.<sup>95</sup> Stace asserts that although there is a universal consciousness that introvertive mystics encounter, “is” in this case “cannot be taken to mean ‘exist’, since this would make it objective.”<sup>96</sup> Thus we are left with the conclusion that the experience itself is real, and to the mystic undeniable, but that it may not be true in a traditional objective sense. Epistemically, I find this considerably unsatisfying. The category of transsubjectivity gets us nowhere, as it does not give an answer in the terms we were looking for. Transsubjective objects are, at best, a common mental object. Yet we cannot even be sure that this is the case.

It appears to me that the problem here is the radically subjective nature of mystical experience. (This may be stating the obvious, but bear with me for the moment). Attempting to devise a working epistemology applicable to mysticism based upon traditional concepts such as objectivity and intersubjectivity is a hopeless task. However, the reason why such epistemologies fail in cases of radical subjectivism was not fully explicated until the advent of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* in the middle of the last century. His anti-private language argument demonstrates why arguments such as the above fail. To give a summary of the argument, Wittgenstein states that an individual

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<sup>95</sup> Richard M. Gale, ‘Mysticism and philosophy’, *The Journal of Philosophy*, 57:14 (1960), pp. 471-481 (p. 480).

<sup>96</sup> Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, p. 152.

could not invent a word to describe a purely private sensation; the word would not have a “criterion of correctness”.<sup>97</sup> As meaning and therefore language are public constructs, the private linguist would have no test outside her subjective awareness to ensure the invented word was being used correctly.

Applied to mystical experience, Wittgenstein’s argument suggests that Stace cannot base his argument upon mystics’ phenomenological claims. The undifferentiated unity, a perception of both everything and nothing, seems a classic case of a private sensation, particularly when combined with the ineffability claimed by most mystics. Furthermore, Stace is making his argument for transsubjectivity using reports of such subjective, private experience as a fundamental premise. In the case of *A* and *B*, we have no way of knowing that their experiences, although described in the same or similar terms, are qualitatively identical; and they must be if Stace’s argument is to be considered valid. Stace asserts that the principle of unanimity proves that mystics “are not misdescribing what they experience”,<sup>98</sup> but without a criterion of correctness, what a mystic claims to be an accurate description of his experience is reduced to “whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here we can’t talk about ‘right’.”<sup>99</sup>

To my mind, it is not surprising that radically subjective mystical experience does not provide the fertile ground necessary to cultivate an epistemology. Given this impasse, what is the correct epistemic approach? Gale, in closing his discussion of Stace, points in what I believe is the correct direction. “The question, ‘Which is the *true* reality, the one revealed to us in mystical experiences or the one revealed to us in our non-mystical experiences?’, is really a

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<sup>97</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1958), §258.

<sup>98</sup> Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, p. 136.

<sup>99</sup> Wittgenstein, §258.

value question and cannot be settled by any logical means. What a man takes to be the *really* real is a value judgment expressive of what experiences have the greatest significance for him.”<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Gale, p. 481. His italics.

## Chapter Three

My previous discussion of William James suggests more fertile ground for cultivating a worthwhile epistemology. If we focus upon examining a mystical experience in terms of its value to the subject, we can put aside the subject/object concerns of the correspondence theory. James develops such a pragmatist theory, and summarises his approach as follows: “*Immediate luminousness*, in short, *philosophical reasonableness*, and *moral helpfulness* are the only available criteria”.<sup>101</sup> In other words, mystical experience should be judged upon the basic coherence of its content and its moral benefit to the subject. The latter criterion is James’ primary focus throughout *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. This appears compelling: if God is an entity of total benevolence, purity, and every other characteristic ascribed to Him, genuine contact with Him should result in a morally improved subject. James’ pragmatism also gives us a clearly testable hypothesis, albeit by somewhat subjective means. Another major benefit that I perceive in such pragmatism is that it renders speculation about the existence of God and the cause of mystical experience somewhat unnecessary. If a pragmatism such as James’ provides a satisfactory working account of mystical experience, difficult and most probably unanswerable questions regarding the veridicality of such experiences fall out of the picture. If a mystical experience assists the subject, we can declare that there is some form of value in it without further inquiry being necessary. Pragmatic value can become a proxy for objective truth in the absence of a clear proof defining the latter. However, it is of importance

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<sup>101</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 19.

here to note that I am not endorsing some variety of pragmatist antirealism regarding the ordinary physical world, as James is guilty of. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, mystical perceptions are something of a special class of experience. It appears to me that a means of circumventing the cat's cradle that is the debate over objectivity, subjectivity and intersubjectivity (not to mention transsubjectivity) is an epistemology worth developing.

Although James' pragmatism is an excellent starting point, and was a revolutionary approach to religion in its time, it has one major flaw. His sole focus upon morality as the benefit accruing to the mystic is reductionist, and begs the question. This narrow view derives, in my opinion, from his Judeo-Christian foundations and the descriptivism of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, which focuses almost exclusively on examples supplied by Christians of various denominations. Although the Christian God is often portrayed as a primarily moral entity, in other religions this is not the case. In what one might label "primitive" religions, deities are often malevolent, capricious entities, capable of bestowing great pain as well as great power. Gods of polytheistic religions often operate out of self-interest rather than concern for the well-being of humanity. In the context of such religions, a mystic would probably not be expected to gain greater moral fortitude so much as special power, knowledge, or luck. Therefore, James' argument begs the question:

P1) A true<sup>102</sup> experience is of practical assistance to the subject, by virtue of the qualities of the object(s) experienced.

P2) God is a moral entity.

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C) A true experience of God will be of moral assistance to the subject.

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<sup>102</sup> Here "true" is meant in James' pragmatic sense of the word. James' pragmatism is essentially antirealist in nature, arguing that truth is a concept derived from effect.

P2 lacks proof, as we have no knowledge of God being a moral entity outside of experiences of Him, and hence P2 operates with the conclusion in a circular manner. As cited above, there is no *a priori* reason that God should be necessarily be considered a moral entity. If the only experiences of God considered true are those that provide moral assistance, then God will always be considered moral by nature of the qualities described and evinced by those who have the true experiences. In the Judeo-Christian tradition James is working from, mystical experiences of a morally neutral, amoral, or immoral God would have been rejected as fraudulent, thus creating a self-confirming hypothesis that God is a moral entity. This may be a result of James working backwards from the conclusion to some extent, with his psychological descriptivism taking primacy over philosophy.

James views ‘saintliness’, unsurpassed moral purity, as the apogee of practical value deriving from mystical experience. He contrasts this with the “worldly passions”<sup>103</sup> epitomised by the ubermensch championed in the anti-religious philosophy of Nietzsche. According to James, morality is the sole benefit of mysticism; it cannot directly engender other valuable traits and behaviours. It seems counterintuitive to me that even the God of Christianity would be solely concerned with morality. John Dewey, a pragmatist following the trail blazed by James, agrees. Dewey, in his work *A Common Faith*, distinguishes between “religion” and “religious”: the former denotes “a special body of beliefs and practices having some kind of institutional organization”;<sup>104</sup> the latter denotes “a quality of experience”<sup>105</sup> defined by “the *effect* produced, the better adjustment in

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<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 362-363.

<sup>104</sup> Dewey, p. 9.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*, p. 10.

life and its conditions, not the manner and cause of its production.”<sup>106</sup> Throughout *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James asserts that religious experiences of the supernatural are “gifts to us”<sup>107</sup> that act through human agents as “heralds and harbingers, and...leavens also, of a better order.”<sup>108</sup> In contrast, Dewey believes humanity would benefit greatly from a rejection of religion, particularly the accompanying beliefs in the supernatural, and directing religious emotion towards secular, humanist ends. For Dewey, religious experience is not purely moral, but encompasses the “aesthetic, scientific, moral, political”,<sup>109</sup> possibly all at the same time. The “religious” emotion Dewey speaks of comprises the most powerful motivations and passions, but is not defined by any content aside from an absence of supernatural content.

My pragmatist epistemology of mystical experience utilises this foundation laid by Dewey. The only satisfactory way to address mystical experience is through an assessment of its products, but the range of these products may be extremely broad. To begin, I need to reiterate my belief that my pragmatist epistemology does not primarily seek to address the question of whether a given mystical experience is veridical or otherwise. The existence of a deity, or deities, or a perceivable ultimate reality is not sufficiently testable, even by pragmatist methods. The goal of my epistemology is to classify mystical experiences as valuable or non-valuable; this is as far as we can go while remaining on stable ground.

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<sup>106</sup> *Ibid*, p. 14.

<sup>107</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 148.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid*, p. 368.

<sup>109</sup> Dewey, p. 10.

## Chapter Four

I want to argue for assessing mystical experience on the grounds of “helpfulness” in general, and not merely on the grounds of “moral helpfulness”. James appears to imply such an approach in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, but avoids it in his explicit description of the criteria for examining religious experience. He writes of assessing a “belief” on “the way it works on the whole”,<sup>110</sup> and notes that despite the often pathological character of human genius, the products of such minds “are invariably tested by logic and experiment”.<sup>111</sup> James wants the value of religious and mystical experiences to be considered in an equal fashion to more mundane varieties of experience, but he falls short of fully realising this goal because he regards religion as solely a source of moral belief and behaviour. To build upon his own analogy comparing the minds of the genius and the mystic, James’ approach is akin to presuming that a scientific genius could never make any valuable pronouncement on matters of morality. I do not believe that James held some prejudicial belief that all non-moral revelation was worthless, rather, he held that all revelation was moral in its focus or that its eventual benefit was ultimately a matter of morality. It appears distinctly possible to me that he believed the latter after realising that a more standard pragmatist approach to assessing religious experience is fraught with the problems I am about to navigate.

What of this more general concept of “helpfulness”? Such a concept obviously needs refining; at first glance, it seems that many mystical experiences

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<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

are *unhelpful* in the usual sense. Those periodically experiencing mystical episodes may feel with great fear that they are losing their sanity, or be ostracised by society after revealing their anomalous experiences, or distance themselves from ordinary life because of its perceived triviality in comparison with the mystical realm. “Helpfulness” in this sense is focused on an individual’s interactions with reality as observed from a third-person perspective; although mystical experiences are not purely moral in the benefits they provide and can often provide knowledge that assists in interactions with reality, their consequences are often too complex for us to expect that they can always be satisfactorily assessed in the same way that my knowledge that  $2 + 2 = 4$  can be understood as assisting me in my everyday life. A subject of mystical experience may, for instance, leave his comfortable home and occupation to live a life of squalor, asceticism and even moral depravity due to his revelatory experience, and yet still feel that experience has great value for him, value that easily supersedes all else. Rather than being “helpful” in some pragmatic sense, I argue that such experiences “empower” an individual, “empowerment” not merely being contingent on an individual’s pragmatic success.

To develop this concept, I take Mike Jackson and K.W.M. Fulford’s paper “Spiritual Experience and Psychopathology” as my starting point.<sup>112</sup> In this paper, Jackson and Fulford explore the relationship between psychotic phenomena and spiritual experience with specific regard to psychiatric diagnosis, with a focus on a central paradox: although mystical experience shares many of the qualities attributed to psychosis, and is often diagnosed as such by traditional psychiatry, “it would be quite wrong...to “treat” spiritual psychotic experiences with neuroleptic drugs, just as it is quite wrong to ‘treat’ political dissidents as though

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<sup>112</sup> Mike Jackson and K.W.M. Fulford, “Spiritual Experience and Psychopathology”, *Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology*, 4:1 (1997), pp. 41-65.

they were ill.”<sup>113</sup> They seek to distinguish “spiritual from pathological forms of psychotic experience”,<sup>114</sup> where treatment would be required in the latter but not the former. Rejecting models that decree all mysticism as mental illness as “defined by objective norms of bodily and mental functioning”,<sup>115</sup> and others that argue for mental illness as a concept invented for the purposes of social exclusion or political control, Jackson and Fulford propose a model based around the concept of “action failure” as a determinant for pathological psychotic experience. On this model, an individual’s experience is defined as spiritual if it empowers the individual in the sense that “action is radically enhanced”,<sup>116</sup> or as pathological if there is “radical failure of action”.<sup>117</sup> The spiritual psychotic will be motivated by his experience, whereas the pathological psychotic will be disturbed and disconcerted to such an extent by the content of his experience that he cannot act upon it. What constitutes the action that may be enhanced or otherwise will depend upon the intentions and values of the individual.

Jackson and Fulford recognise that their method of distinguishing between spiritual and pathological experiences is potentially vague and subjective. However, they argue that any accurate circumscription of the topic will necessarily face such problems, as “the distinction between health and ill-health...may sometimes not be finally decidable at all”<sup>118</sup> given the subjectivity and complex behaviour involved. They are correct that some borderline cases will prove highly problematic. For example, instances of extreme asceticism inspired by religious fervour are relatively common throughout history; are these mystical experiences failures of action? Or are they enhanced action, even in cases such as

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<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

that of the ascetic Vianney whose account James cites as one who would “never smell a flower, never drink when parched, never drive away a fly, never show disgust before a repugnant object, never complain of anything that had to with his personal comfort, never sit down, never lean upon his elbows when kneeling.”<sup>119</sup>

Is this the product of enlightenment, or pathology masquerading as fastidious self-abnegation? It seems that this approach may lead to some conclusions that will prove surprising and possibly unsavoury to our common sense. Nonetheless, I believe Jackson and Fulford’s method is worthwhile, and can be developed so as to become more robust and theoretically sound.

As a way of developing my own account differentiating between spiritual and pathological experience,<sup>120</sup> I will consider the critique of Jackson and Fulford offered by Marek Marzanski and Mark Bratton.<sup>121</sup> Jackson and Fulford are solely medical in their focus, basing their concept of pathological experience on a definition of illness as “failure of action”.<sup>122</sup> In contrast, Marzanski and Bratton write from what they assert is a more religiously informed perspective, and view Jackson and Fulford as overly reductionist in their approach. Marzanski and Bratton argue that viewing spiritual experience purely in terms of action “ignore[s] the importance of the relationship between experience and the broader pattern of the subject’s life usually emphasized in the religious traditions.”<sup>123</sup> In other words, simple “action” is often not the focus of religious experience and doctrine; rather, they are concerned with less tangible aspects of human life such

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<sup>119</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 297.

<sup>120</sup> Note that my aim is not to provide a distinction in these specific terms; rather than distinguish between spiritual and pathological experiences, I wish to distinguish between valuable and non-valuable mystical experiences. For the time being, however, I will consider both distinctions as the same in extension.

<sup>121</sup> Marek Marzanski and Mark Bratton, “Psychopathological symptoms and religious experience: a critique of Jackson and Fulford”, *Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology*, 9:4 (2002), pp. 359-371.

<sup>122</sup> Jackson and Fulford, “Spiritual experience and psychopathology”, p. 53. See also K.W.M. Fulford, *Moral Theory and Medical Practice* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), Chapter 10.

<sup>123</sup> Marzanski and Bratton, p. 364.

as long term well-being and happiness in the face of debilitating difficulty.

According to Marzanski and Bratton, a satisfactory method of distinguishing between spiritual and pathological experience must account for this, and recognise that “theology or doctrine is not simply a layer that can be pared away...rather it encompasses the language and tradition in which the religious self is formed.”<sup>124</sup>

Certain types of spiritual experience will not be action-enhancing by their very nature or because of the way they relate to a larger framework of both religious and non-religious belief, and yet be no less legitimate in terms of their religiosity.

According to Marzanski and Bratton’s interpretation, Jackson and Fulford will inevitably fail to provide an adequate account of such experiences which have no effect or negative effect in terms of outwardly observable action. The previous quote also links with Marzanski and Bratton’s belief that Jackson and Fulford “construe too narrowly the meaning of *spiritual experience*”,<sup>125</sup> creating an artificial division between religious experience and what could be called “the religious life”. This is a very salient issue, and a criticism directed at philosophers of religion dating back to James; I plan to return to it later.

Although I share Caroline Brett’s scepticism that Marzanski and Bratton are correct in their interpretation of Jackson and Fulford,<sup>126</sup> such misunderstandings are to be expected given the somewhat vague nature of the latter’s position. Regardless of such exegetic matters, I want to build upon Jackson and Fulford’s method for distinguishing between spiritual or pathological experiences. One of the strongest criticisms Marzanski and Bratton make is that “Jackson and Fulford do not attempt to define *experience* in terms of its intrinsic

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<sup>124</sup> *Ibid*, p. 369.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid*, p. 361. Their italics.

<sup>126</sup> Caroline Brett, “Spiritual experience and psychopathology: dichotomy or interaction?”, *Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology*, 9:4 (2002), pp. 373-380 (p. 373).

properties, for example, inner feelings and altered states of consciousness”.<sup>127</sup>

Instead, at least on this interpretation, Jackson and Fulford adopt an overly behaviourist view of religious experience, and define action enhancement purely in terms a “subject’s ability to do what he normally does even better.”<sup>128</sup> Although I agree with their focus upon action as a means of distinguishing between spiritual and pathological experiences, the narrow definition of “action” employed is very much a limiting factor in their theory. Rather than being problematic because Jackson and Fulford fail to recognise the importance of the wider framework of religious belief and tradition, the counterexamples presented by Marzanski and Bratton are effective because they are not clearly action enhancing for the subjects concerned, although this does not appear to be Marzanski and Bratton’s main focus.

Jackson and Fulford differentiate between “spiritual” and “pathological” experiences, whereas I want to distinguish between “valuable” and “non-valuable” experiences. Although I think these separate heuristics are largely interchangeable, I want to move away from the medical and psychiatric connotations of the spiritual/pathological distinction. Given my personal opinion that all mystical experience is “in the head”, I would say that it is all “pathological” in a certain sense. Brett appears to share this concern that “both aspects may co occur in an individual”.<sup>129</sup> If I kept Jackson and Fulford’s typology, I suspect it would obscure my point that the origin or cause of an experience is a different matter to whether that experience is valuable or useful to an individual. On my view, the “value” of a mystical experience is the only meaningful sense with which we can discuss such phenomena; any other labels

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<sup>127</sup> Marzanski and Bratton, p. 364. Their italics.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> Brett, p. 379.

are about as meaningful as the veridical / non-veridical distinction discussed previously. Jackson and Fulford encounter problems because they are using a broadly behaviourist criterion as a proxy for distinguishing between psychological properties that are inaccessible, or not as accessible.<sup>130</sup> Anthony Storr expresses a similar sentiment when he states his belief in “the inadequacy of psychiatric categorisation...the distinction ‘spiritual’ versus ‘pathological’ should be dropped. Everyone is liable to have deeply irrational experiences or hold deeply irrational beliefs which may be destructive or may be life-enhancing.”<sup>131</sup> As all mystical experience might be considered “irrational” in some sense (“psychotic” in Jackson and Fulford’s vocabulary), what really matters is the value or use of an experience and the beliefs resulting from it have to an individual. It may be that often there is no property intrinsic to a particular mystical experience that determines it as valuable or otherwise; it is purely up to the subject in terms of what influence the experience will exert upon them. I think this observation is particularly relevant in cases where the subject believes that the experience in question ultimately finds its cause in something other than a divine being or similar causal entity.

I wish to utilise Jackson and Fulford’s method for distinguishing between spiritual and pathological experience around the concept of action enhancement. However as discussed above it is not without problems. Their basic definition of a spiritual, as opposed to pathological, experience needs to be further refined and possibly expanded.

For the moment, let us return to issues of vocabulary. Under a pragmatist view, meaning is effect. A mystical experience that initiates action in a subject has

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<sup>130</sup> Jackson and Fulford would take issue with this, and point out that they essentially reduce the meanings of ‘spiritual’ and ‘pathological’ to their properties in terms of action enhancement. However, given the psychiatric focus of their paper, I would argue that their classification will inevitably be seen as correlating with internal states such as ‘benign’ and ‘malign’ psychoses.

<sup>131</sup> Anthony Storr, “Commentary on ‘Spiritual experience and psychopathology’”, *Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology*, 4:1 (1997), pp. 83-85 (p. 85).

an effect on that subject, and therefore has meaning for that subject. From this, we can see that “meaning” is interchangeable with “value”. A valuable experience is one that has actionable meaning. Given the fundamental significance of the content of mystical experiences, we should expect them to have some effect, some course of action derived from the content and its meaning to the subject. A mystical experience that exhibits no effect on its subject is an experience that has no meaning for the subject. In such a case, we can assume that the experience is not veridical, if we wish to fall back into those terms.

An action-enhancing mystical experience is one that has actionable meaning, and therefore value. But what is the meaning of “action-enhancing”? What kind of actions fall under this umbrella? And what actions or behaviours fall outside it? Previously I criticised Jackson and Fulford for the subjectivity I perceived in statements such as “whether they [mystical experiences] are spiritual (good) or pathological (bad) depends...on the way in which they are embedded in the structure of values and beliefs by which the actions of the subjects concerned are defined.”<sup>132</sup> Although I stand by these criticisms in the sense that Jackson and Fulford make little attempt to clarify what exactly is meant by “action-enhancing”, they are correct that a certain reliance on subjectivity is inescapable. However, this is not the kind of subjectivity that arises because I am exercising my personal judgement, the kind of subjectivity inherent in a statement such as “apples taste better than oranges”. Rather, it is subjective because the question of whether a subject experiences action-enhancement or otherwise is dependent, at least in part, upon his reaction to the experience. As noted above, meaning is a salient concept, and whether a subject is empowered or otherwise by a mystical experience will depend upon the meaning he draws from it. A similar assertion

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<sup>132</sup> Jackson and Fulford, p. 54.

can be made regarding value: if a subject dismisses a mystical experience as having no value (for instance, when the subject believes their experience is a symptom of psychosis), our assessment of that value will depend upon his subjective reaction. However, such assessments cannot be purely dependent upon the subjective experience of a subject. This will not yield a satisfactory epistemology. To build such a theory, the role of subjectivity must be seated within a more substantial framework.

The concepts of action and empowerment I will use are based upon the concept of flourishing. However, this is not necessarily the same as the “flourishing” that has been much discussed in the moral philosophy of the past fifty years and finds its origins in Aristotle; a concept which is loaded with implications regarding virtue and other problems of morality. With my above discussion of James in mind, it should be clear that considerations of ethics and morality are not a viable starting point for examining mystical experience. Thomas Hurka outlines a contrast between “substantive” and “formal” conceptions of flourishing. The former “equates flourishing with some determinate state *F* of people or their lives”, whereas the latter “does not equate flourishing with any independent good *F* but only with the general idea of human good, whatever its content”.<sup>133</sup> In the context of mystical experience, we cannot argue for a substantive state of morality that constitutes flourishing. We also cannot argue for a set of moral virtues that lead to an indeterminate general idea of flourishing. To do either would be to repeat James’ fallacy, as they comprise prejudicial judgements of what type of moral values or virtues might exist objectively, and could be revealed by mystical experience. What we must use is a formal concept that breaks apart the moral and intellectual virtues originally

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<sup>133</sup> Thomas Hurka, *Virtue, Vice, and Value* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 235.

prescribed by Aristotle.

Continuing in the vein of Jackson and Fulford, I would argue that a flourishing life is one lived in a coherently goal-directed, passionate manner. We should expect a valuable mystical experience to engender flourishing by aiding in and providing for the development of intellectual virtues specified by Aristotle: demonstrative knowledge, creativity, practical knowledge, intuition, and wisdom.<sup>134</sup> On this view, activity and productivity are essential features of human life. In this sense, “flourish” can be juxtaposed against “languish”, which shares its etymology with “languid”, a state of apathy, indifference, and inactivity. We can actually see how passionate activity is essential to flourishing through an argument constructed by Philippa Foot against the separation of flourishing from morality. Foot, in considering why some immoral individuals flourish and claim to be perfectly happy, cites the case of German citizens who were imprisoned and executed after protesting against Nazi treatment of the Jews and other minorities. If immoral individuals can flourish, she asks, should these men have chosen not to speak out and lead longer, happier lives as free men? “One may think that there was a sense in which the [prisoners] did, *but also in a sense did not*, sacrifice their happiness in refusing to go along with the Nazis.”<sup>135</sup> Foot’s argument is that by refusing to comply, they were flourishing in a moral sense, and because of the compunction they would have felt, could not have flourished or been happy if they had complied. However, we can also view their flourishing in the nonmoral way I define it. The men flourished (at least in a certain sense) because they saw it as their purpose to take action against Nazi injustice and inhumanity. Their reasons may have been moral, but we can also interpret their lives in a nonmoral,

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<sup>134</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by David Ross, revised by J.L. Ackrill and J.O. Urmson (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 140-144.

<sup>135</sup> Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 95. Her italics.

goal-oriented sense. Additionally, if they had complied with the Nazis to avoid execution, they could not have flourished as free men if they perceived a failure of action on their part. This could haunt their days just as Foot suggests the feeling of moral compromise could.

In this spirit, Corey Keyes places “flourishing” and “languishing” at opposite ends of a “mental health continuum”; like Jackson and Fulford, he argues that mental illnesses are not simple cases of identifiable symptoms such as delusions or hallucinations, but a matter of how an individual functions as a person and as a member of society. Arguing “for a definition of mental health as more than the absence of mental illness”,<sup>136</sup> Keyes quotes the U.S. Surgeon General’s definition of mental health as “a state of successful performance of mental function, resulting in productive activities, fulfilling relationships with people, and the ability to adapt to change and to cope with adversity”.<sup>137</sup> Keyes interprets “subjective well-being”<sup>138</sup> as comprising a major feature of mental health and flourishing, arguing for “mental health as a syndrome of symptoms of positive feelings and positive functioning in life”.<sup>139</sup> This emphasis of “positive feelings” draws out the type of subjectivity I wish to utilise. How a subject feels about her mystical experience is a critical factor in judging its value.

At this point, it is important to clarify that the link between harbouring positive feelings about a mystical experience and the experience having value does not necessitate that the content of the experience must be positive in the sense that “positive” is synonymous with “pleasant” or “comforting”. The content does not need to be of this nature, simply the subject’s feelings towards it; this is

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<sup>136</sup> Corey L. M. Keyes, “The mental health continuum: from languishing to flourishing in life”, *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour*, 43:2 (2002), pp. 207-222 (p. 208).

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.* Quoted from U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General* (Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1999), p.4.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

part of the “positive functioning” aspect of Keyes’ stipulation. One can actually loathe the experience but feel positive about it on a wider view that brings consequences and implications to the forefront. A mundane example might be cleaning a house or performing an unpleasant but financially lucrative job. Consider the experience of George Fox, the founder of Quakerism, which William James cites in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Fox claimed that he found himself compelled by God to walk shoeless through the city of Lichfeld decrying it as “bloody”, and experienced a vision of “a channel of blood running down the streets, and the market-place...like a pool of blood”<sup>140</sup> Such an experience does not seem qualitatively pleasant or enjoyable, but Fox obviously viewed it in a positive light, a necessary part of his role as a messenger of God. As Kenneth Kensinger concludes in his study of Peruvian shamanic ritual: “If they find it so unpleasant, so fearful, why do they persist in using the drug? The answer lies in the relevance of the hallucinations for personal action.”<sup>141</sup> In cases such as that of Fox, positive feelings stem from a sense of being enlightened or in a privileged relationship with the deity or ultimate reality; in those cited by Kensinger, positive feelings stem from awareness of the practical utility of the experience, the power it allows an individual to attain over others and the physical world. Returning to Jackson and Fulford’s psychiatric focus, a subject experiencing genuinely pathological psychoses will not view them as positive or desirable, and as useless states, even if he lacks the insight to recognise them as potential symptoms of a mental illness. Such a subject is languishing, and his experience holds no value for him.

A mystical experience’s effect on the subjective well-being of its subject is

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<sup>140</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 9.

<sup>141</sup> Kenneth M. Kensinger, “*Banisteriopsis* usage by the Cashinahua”, in *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*, edited by Michael J. Harner (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 9-14 (p. 12).

a vital component in determining its value. However, as I mention above, this is not enough for an intellectually robust epistemology. Although I can tolerate the kind of pluralism suggested by James, relativism is anathema. This examination needs to go deeper than asking “did you like it?”. If it was simply a case of feeling positive about the experience, then we would be forced to conclude that all manner of feigned, artificial and trivial mystical experiences are indeed valuable. Action-enhancement and empowerment are not purely subjective notions, or at least if they were they would have little meaning as concepts, but how do we go about framing them with objective criteria? Mystical experience may enable many types of action. Saint Theresa of Avila was inspired by her experiences to live a life of greater moral perfection. Gautama Buddha sought to eliminate human suffering. Jess Byron Hollenback, in his book *Mysticism: Experience, Response, and Empowerment*, focuses on mystics who exhibit parapsychological abilities such as clairvoyance and ex-stasis (out of body experience). Ecuadorian shamans undertake mystical quests in order to heal the sick.<sup>142</sup> From this tiny sample, it is clear that activity inspired or caused by mystical experience ranges from the abstractly spiritual to the conspicuously practical. What is the unifying factor linking such divergent phenomena? Quite simply, there is no one factor that can be identified. What all cases of empowerment should have in common, however, is that a subject feels the action was necessitated by the mystical experience, views this relationship in a positive light, and the action must provide or contribute to the attributes featured in the definition of mental health quoted by Keyes. Here I should emphasise that I do not desire a concept of empowerment that is solely medical or psychiatric in its focus; however, I do believe that such qualities constitute a type of heuristic in determining whether an individual is

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<sup>142</sup> Michael J. Harner, “The sound of rushing water”, in *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*, edited by Michael J. Harner (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 15-27.

flourishing or languishing, as Keyes suggests. In other words, although a valuable mystical experience should contribute to a subject's mental health, it should also be functioning on a much wider scale. In a similar fashion, although the subject's subjective well-being is a vital part of his being empowered, empowerment is about much more than "feeling good". We should expect true empowerment (and true subjective well-being too) to translate into tangible, objective results that assist in the goal of flourishing. Real meaning must yield such an effect.

At this point, I can state my definition of a valuable mystical experience, slightly modified from the one given by Jackson and Fulford:

*A mystical experience is valuable (spiritual) for a subject S if its content is action-enhancing for S, and S views the enhanced action as positive.*

Note that flourishing is not explicitly included in the definition as it should be considered as a wider state of affairs. Being empowered in a certain respect does not necessarily constitute *S*'s state of flourishing, rather, it contribute to *S*'s flourishing.

There is one type of action that requires discussion. The history of religion is littered with martyrs, flagellants, and ascetics: those who willingly harm or even kill themselves in the name of religion. How does such action contribute to their flourishing? I am willing to argue that if the self-destructive mystic feels positive about their course of action, and it assists in achieving some greater good, either for themselves, others, or both, then it is empowered action. Self-destruction with no such purpose, however, is a prime example of what Jackson and Fulford label "radical failure of action". There must be some tangible benefit to the action, in the sense that it can be perceived and understood in real-world terms, and is not purely supernatural. Self-destructive action of the empowered kind can be

considered as an extension of self-sacrifice. Self-sacrificial and altruistic behaviour is rarely deemed undesirable given the correct intentions and outcomes. According to my framework, a mystic who self-harms with the sole intention of gaining succour or forgiveness from God is not empowered; but one who does so for practical real-world benefit is. Examples of the latter might be a martyr who deliberately dies by the sword of an unjust government to draw attention to its iniquity and brutality, and thus motivates others in society to challenge or overthrow its authority, or an ascetic who engages in self-starvation or sleep deprivation in order to induce mystical experiences, and thus gain further knowledge and empowerment (assuming the knowledge gained is empowering).

As I noted in my discussion of flourishing, moral and ethical considerations cannot form part of our determination of value. There is no room for judgements such as “*S*’s mystical experience has no value because the action resulting from it is morally wrong”. In addition to my previous objections regarding the question-begging nature of moral realism in the context of religion, such an attitude would, to my mind, inevitably lead to a form of religious exclusivism that holds one religion’s system of morality as superior and more truthful than any other systems. Of course, there are moral systems without any religious basis, but using these to judge mystical experience returns us to question-begging: God or gods are not necessarily moral entities, and thus veridical experiences of them may not necessarily be morally correct. Although the content of a mystical experience and its meaning for the subject will often be of a moral character, the truth or falsity we perceive in such conclusions does not affect its value for the subject.

However, this should not be taken as asserting that our hands are completely tied when it comes to the ethically questionable mystic. All I am

suggesting is that moral considerations cannot affect the assessment of a mystical experience's value. We can still pass judgement on the actions enhanced or empowered by a mystical experience as we see fit. To analogise, a current event might initiate a passionate argument between a friend and I on some ethical matter. Our disagreement does not entail that I should dismiss his perception of or interpretation of the event as completely false or delusional; we simply differ on a point of ethics. Although current events and private mystical visions are very different things, my point is that I can disagree with someone without completely denying the personal meaning an experience has for them. The same applies to questions of truth value, and may help to further clarify my point. I may not agree with a mystic's claim that the apocalypse will occur on December 12 2012, but I can still assert that the experience which revealed the prognostication to him has value and meaning to him – it clearly does if he is passionately trying to convince myself and others of its truth, making the preparations he sees fit, and so forth. In this sense, it is no better or worse than any other mystical revelation. However, if the date passes without event, we might expect (in a fit of optimism, perhaps) that he would no longer value the experience himself. He prepared for a non-event and was made a fool of; it was all delusion. Barring an experience revealing a revised date, or a radical re-interpretation on his part, he can no longer take meaningful action, and his positive feelings regarding the experience will dissipate. To summarise my argument here, when a mystical experience is described as empowering and therefore valuable, that does not constitute endorsement of the experience's truth value or the behaviour it initiates. It is merely a judgement of the epistemic status of the experience using the only method that I believe is logically available.

Having given account of my definition of valuable mystical experience, I

will explore its operation by way of a selection of examples. The first case I will use for this purpose is that of Simon.

### **Simon**

This case is originally presented by Jackson and Fulford.<sup>143</sup> Simon, a 40 year old black American professional, was a practising Christian prior to his mystical experiences.

*Around four years before his first interview, his hitherto successful career was threatened by legal action from colleagues. Although he claimed to be innocent, mounting a defense would be expensive and hazardous. He responded to this crisis by praying at a small altar which he set up in his front room. After an emotional evening's "outpouring", he discovered that the candle wax had left a "seal" (or "sun") on several consecutive pages of his Bible, covering certain letters and words...Although the marked words and letters had no explicit meaning, Simon interpreted this event as a direct communication from God, which signified that he had a special purpose or mission.*

After this experience, Simon continued to receive such messages, and his interpretations of them formed into a complex set of beliefs. He came to believe that he was, among other things, "captain of the guard of Israel",<sup>144</sup> and that the ultimate purpose of his revelations was to unite Christianity and Islam. He appeared to view his entire life in the context of his mystical experiences, even regarding minor misfortunes as satanic in cause. Most people would view Simon as highly delusional, and he recognised that those privy to his beliefs and the

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<sup>143</sup> Jackson and Fulford, pp. 44-46.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid*, p. 45.

photographs he took of the wax revelations were generally unimpressed.

However, when his experiences are viewed in terms of action-enhancement they appear highly beneficial:

*He claimed that they gave him the conviction to contest and win the lawsuit against him, and more generally to succeed as a high-achieving black person in a predominantly white, racist, context. He had high self-esteem, firm moral convictions, and a strong sense of purpose in life.*

Jackson and Fulford view Simon's experiences as clearly action-enhancing, and I agree. The experiences endowed him with unusual fortitude, and he views their influence as positive. Although he admits being overwhelmed at times by the responsibility they place upon him, and being treated with scepticism by those whom he reveals his beliefs to, he certainly does not appear to wish that the experiences had never occurred. This is the sense in which I wish to use the term "positive" with regard to my definition, rather than in a sense synonymous with "pleasant" or "enjoyable".

### **Carol**

The following case was originally presented by Marzanski and Bratton, as a counterexample to Jackson and Fulford's typology.<sup>145</sup> Carol, now 67, married Bill when she was 27, and he was 40. In the second year of her marriage to him, Carol's husband Richard began an affair which escalated to the extent that Richard invited his lover Sophie and her children to live with Carol and himself. After seven years of this, Carol had a nervous breakdown.

*She claimed that God had visited her and had told her that some*

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<sup>145</sup> Marzanski and Bratton, pp. 361-362.

*“nice people” would take her away. She began wandering along the streets looking for these nice people, but never met them despite messages from cars, stars, shop windows, and church bells left for her in various places. Eventually she was admitted to the psychiatric hospital in a stupor. She was successfully treated with antipsychotic medication and discharged. She returned to a new house, purchased by her husband and stayed there alone for the next 8 years. In 1991, Sophie left Richard for another man and Richard returned to Carol. Soon afterwards, Carol had her second nervous breakdown.*

Carol is still living with Richard, who now has arthritis and is dependent upon Carol for care. She sees this provision of care as her duty as a spouse, and believes that Richard is genuinely sorry for his treatment of her, but is readmitted to the psychiatric hospital every year due to a relapse in her condition. However, despite her attempts to escape from Richard while experiencing psychosis, once treated she inevitably returns to him.

While they claim Jackson and Fulford would view Carol’s experiences as action-destructive and hence pathological, Marzanski and Bratton take a wider view of her spirituality that includes her faith and duty to her husband as manifestations of her spiritual character. They suggest such strength of character may be enhanced by her mystical experiences, “perhaps by giving her respite from the difficulties of domestic life.”<sup>146</sup> However, I would say that Carol’s experiences do not appear valuable, and that Marzanski and Bratton’s argument is extremely speculative given that they do not indicate what Carol’s feelings are regarding her mystical episodes and wider religious practices. Once treated, Carol’s behaviour returns to its regular pattern, and she resumes her relationship with Richard. If the

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<sup>146</sup> *Ibid*, p. 362.

content of the experiences was valuable to her, I would expect that she might act upon the suggestion contained in them that there is a better life waiting for her outside of her marriage to Richard, or she might at least recognise that they appear to be indicative of how much stress the marriage places on her. Instead of using the experiences as the basis for an improved, goal-oriented, potentially flourishing life, they are cast aside as symptoms of a periodic mental illness.

### **Mark**

This is a case of my own devising that demonstrates another type of non-valuable mystical experience. It also links with the problems of asceticism I considered previously.

Mark has a general interest in things spiritual. This leads him learn a set of meditation techniques. While meditating by himself one day, he has a mystical experience in which feels himself in contact with a force that underlies all reality, determining and causing all events in the universe. This force exerts a sensation of total inner peace upon Mark, and he perceives it as more real and meaningful than anything else he has ever experienced. Mark finds that by practising his meditation, he can connect with this force as he wishes. He values these experiences so much that he begins to devote his entire life to them, and begins to meditate for several hours every day. He loses interest in all else, to the extent that he neglects his job and spends little time in the company of others due to his preference for meditation. Although he is cognisant of the destructive influence his meditation has on his regular life, he views it as merely a dream in comparison with the hyperreality of his meditation experiences. When confronted by friends and family who go as far to suggest that meditation is ruining his life, he often examines his choices, but always concludes that he is overwhelmingly happy with

his life and certainly does not wish that he had never his mystical revelations.

Although Mark expresses positive feelings about his experience, it is not action-enhancing. Despite his claims that he is in contact with the fundamental reality underlying the physical world, it has no effect on his nonmystical life. To be considered valuable, it would have to satisfy this condition. Additionally, because of this dearth of tangible effect, Mark's meditative practices represent a form of self-destructive action that fails the test of value. He is certainly not on a path to flourishing, despite his claim of happiness. However, we can imagine a slightly different scenario, where the insights revealed by meditation inspire Mark to live more compassionately towards others, or educate others on the joys of meditation. If he acts on these inspirations, then his experience would be valuable.

At this stage we may ask a series of related questions. Why can mystical experience be action-enhancing? Why is it such a powerful force in human lives, in the brain, and across the breadth of history? Why is it such a force that an adamant secularist such as John Dewey recognised the extraordinary power and utility of religious motivation and emotion, while at the same time decrying any belief in the supernatural? Perhaps if we can understand the role and mechanism of mystical experience throughout human society, we can give a better account of just how and what a valuable mystical experience is.

## Chapter Five

In the search for an externalised, objective criterion by which to determine the value of mystical experiences, grounds of evolutionary adaptation appear to offer a possible solution. Certainly, given the link I have drawn between valuable mystical experience and a nonmoral concept of flourishing, perhaps mystical experience assists “to instantiate the life form of that species”,<sup>147</sup> much like other adaptations. If religious beliefs, practices and institutions comprise or facilitate fitness-enhancing traits, and mystical experience has a central role in the origin and perpetuation of religion, then mystical experiences that demonstrate certain characteristics will be valuable as adaptive tools.

This is an enticing prospect, and reveals a potentially robust account of mystical experience which would place it within a context of the established scientific corpus without dismissing it as mere neuropathic folly. However, my rather convoluted description of how mystical experience could be interpreted as fitness-enhancing reveals several questions that must be addressed before we can welcome mystical experience as an adaptive mechanism. To begin, how important is mystical experience and mystical tradition to human religion as a whole? Does religion find its roots in the mental journeys of Neolithic visionaries and shamans? Even if evidence confirms this in the affirmative, do modern-day mystical experiences have a viable relationship with institutionalized religion, or are they a relic from a world without systematised theology and religious inquiry? These questions aside, does religion in general confer evolutionary advantage? Is it

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<sup>147</sup> Foot, p. 92.

hardwired into our genetic heritage, is it a purely cultural adaptation, is it a by-product of adaptations? Perhaps it is in fact the opposite of an adaptation, particularly in the context of today's scientific and technological advances. Unfortunately, what appeared at first to be a simple and scientifically sound epistemic approach to mystical experience reveals itself as an ever-deepening wormhole. However, it is my belief that its exploration will provide a rich source of answers to the riddles of mystical experience, even if the solution beckoning me into the wormhole proves illusory.

Firstly, how might religion be considered an evolutionary adaptation, conferring an advantage on those who practise it? In his book *Breaking The Spell*, Daniel Dennett gives three basic adaptations religion has been interpreted as providing.<sup>148</sup> The first two are psychological, positing religious beliefs as an inevitable consequence of the vicissitudes of human nature. Maybe religion provides comfort in the face of anxiety regarding death or the difficulties of life. Life often appears as a series of struggles and tribulations, only to be ended by untimely death. Particularly for Neolithic humans in whom we might assume religion first developed, Hobbes' description of life as essentially "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" might be exceedingly accurate. In the context of such an existence, religion provides a sense of control, or assuages suffering "by the promise of a better life or of salvation".<sup>149</sup> In a similar fashion, the difficulties created by the human ability to consider his own mortality are said to be countered by religion. Religious beliefs may promise some form of immortality, or an afterlife superior to earthly existence. Death ceases to be, at best, an end to suffering. It becomes merely another step in life's journey, and possibly the

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<sup>148</sup> Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking The Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2006), p. 103. Pascal Boyer's *Religion Explained* gives a similar but more expanded list.

<sup>149</sup> Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Human Instincts that Fashion Gods, Spirits and Ancestors* (London, UK: William Heinemann, 2001), p. 22.

realisation of salvation.

Alternatively, or perhaps additionally, religion supplies explanations to account for phenomena that would otherwise prove incomprehensibly puzzling. I say additionally because it appears to me that providing explanation leads to the provision of comfort; for instance, religion might comfort the emotionally stricken survivors of a natural disaster by explaining why such suffering occurs. Lacking explanations, at least for certain kinds of phenomena, promotes fear and anxiety. Even when the questions demanding explanation are not directly related to death or suffering, not having answers can lead to existential anxiety. This anxiety could arise from a desire to understand one's purpose in life or solve ethical quandaries, or answer somewhat less grandiose questions. A need for a coherent world view is often seen as a common human urge, and a wide variety of matters, from love to dreams to the seasons need to be addressed to attain such a world view. At least for modern humans, doubt and the unknown seem a particularly potent source of fear and angst. Religion may provide certainty, a security blanket with which to smother a world of complex and puzzling perceptions. It is certainly comforting to possess assured beliefs regarding questions such as "why does life exist?" or "what is my purpose in life?". From a humanist, secular, and scientifically informed perspective such questions may appear as absurd riddles, either unanswerable (your life's purpose is whatever you make it) or largely nonsensical in their simplicity (life exists because, well, it does). However, the absurdity of such questions shows how and why explanations could be considered useful. If attaining answers is impossible or an exercise in futility, and yet as humans we cannot resist the urge to explore such issues, having any answer provides certainty, allays anxiety, and precludes waste of resources debating such issues. This certainty of conviction also binds a religious community together with a

common purpose and vision, a fact that actually ties into the third purpose of religion discussed by Dennett, and which I will address shortly.

Already a problem with this purpose of religion is plain to see; why wouldn't the answer provided by a religion (that such evil is necessary in order to allow good things to happen, or that the disaster was retaliation from God for immoral behaviour, or that the disaster was caused by an malignant deity) simply precipitate more anxiety or doubt, or at least raise a need for higher-level explanations? How could one be reassured by the idea that a drought was caused by a witch, as opposed to just viewing it as a lack of rainfall that unfortunately occurs from time to time? Although it does provide a clearly prescribed remedy to the disaster (the witch must be exorcised or punished), who is to say more witches will not cause future catastrophes? Or, in the case of Christianity, how is it soothing that a God of pure love and omnipotent power was forced into allowing evil and suffering? The anxiety that is supposedly rationalised away merely appears elsewhere, at a higher, supernatural level which evades truly rational thought. It seems that such explanations simply offer accounts that, under minimal scrutiny, seem to provide no actual solution at all. What they do provide have been described as "relevant mysteries"<sup>150</sup> or "just-so stories";<sup>151</sup> explanations that cannot be disproven by material evidence. Even if we disregard the inadequacy of such explanations, the premise that there is some innate human need for the explanation of certain or all phenomena is doubtful. As I hinted at above, this might be an example of a modern scientific or philosophical mentality being applied universally. Pascal Boyer demonstrates that not all phenomena encountered by humans necessitate explanation, and that in actual fact the mind is

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<sup>150</sup> Boyer, p. 17.

<sup>151</sup> Scott Atran, *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002).

made up of multiple modules, or inference systems, designed to identify events that require explaining and then provide those explanations.<sup>152</sup> Boyer (in addition to the majority of experts on the relationship between evolution and religion) argues that religious belief is in fact a by-product of these inference systems; they exist not because they hold some special explanatory power, but because they are an extension of the kind of concepts our minds are designed to formulate. David Lewis-Williams elaborates further on this theory, surmising that the explanatory order is the opposite of what is commonly supposed: “people harnessed the inexorable seasonal cycle to *confirm* the existence of supernatural beings and influences in which they already believed *for other reasons altogether*”.<sup>153</sup> This appears to be a novel and yet surprisingly intuitive interpretation; rather than religion being necessary to explain observed phenomena, the observed phenomena are necessary to explain religion.

The third possible adaptation that Dennett discusses is social in basis. It has long been suggested that what religion provides is intra-group cohesion, a method of ensuring that a community operates effectively as a unit, with common ideologies and set of goals. This seems particularly plausible when one considers the move from small hunter-gatherer groups to large societies not necessarily sharing a common ancestry or ethnicity. In recent years, a theory of this type has gained some currency through the works of David Sloan Wilson, and his argument that religion developed due to the advantages it provides in the context of inter-group competition. However, the basic idea is as old, if not older than, the psychological theories discussed above. Cynical freethinkers (Boyer cites Voltaire in his discussion) have often viewed religion as the foundation that guarantees a particular sociopolitical order or set of otherwise arbitrary morals. However, as

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<sup>152</sup> Boyer, pp. 19-21.

<sup>153</sup> Lewis-Williams, p. 128.

with the psychological theories of adaptation, what seem at first to be a persuasive argument appears less plausible under examination. It is clear that religious power is inextricably linked with political power, and that religious belief is frequently co-opted as a tool for the suppression of political dissent. In fact, Lewis-Williams supplies a reasonably convincing argument that Upper Paleolithic cave paintings demonstrate a religious system that created or at least perpetuated some form of hierarchy amongst practitioners.<sup>154</sup> However, the presence of a religious hierarchy proves little about the relationship between it and any social hierarchy or order. Boyer argues that those asserting that religious systems are always linked to the maintenance of political control or oppression are guilty of an ethnocentric bias, and place too much emphasis on the role of Christianity in the past two millennia. Indeed, history inevitably focuses upon the larger and more prevailing societies in which a close relationship between political and religious power is necessary for social stability. For example, explorers returning from South America would be much more likely to give accounts of the Mayan or Incan cultures as opposed to smaller Amazonian communities, if for no other reason than the former were much more prevalent and thus more likely to be encountered. In smaller communities, religious and political power do not seem so closely seated. For example, amongst the Jivaro people of the Ecuadorian Amazon, approximately one in every four men is a shaman.<sup>155</sup> Thus religious power is hardly limited to a privileged elite, and the power in question is not some special anointing from the deity, rather a special set of supernatural skills; a Jivaro shaman is more like a doctor than a priest. This emphasis on healing is common across what we would call folk religions, and will be discussed further shortly.

In fact, as with the theory that religion was necessitated by a human need

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<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 227-229.

<sup>155</sup> Harner, , "The sound of rushing water", pp. 15-27.

to explain observed phenomena, perhaps the actual order is the opposite. Extant religious belief is co-opted to provide political and social stability, rather than being invented for the purpose. This is supported by Boyer's observation that common features are shared by all religions, regardless of differences in social structure, hierarchy and levels of oppression. A brief look at major historical episodes in the relationship between politics and religion supports such a conclusion. Constantine converted the Roman Empire to Christianity for reasons of political expediency, as did Henry VIII in the formation of the Protestant Church of England. Their attitudes to religion seem to be as something that is necessary, and in fact unavoidable, but also a source of difficulty, a beast that can turn on its master as easily as serve it. Religion is not some conspiratorial political invention.

With regards to morality, the same argument can be advanced. Boyer notes that "all societies have some prescriptive rules that underpin social organisation but their religious concepts are very diverse".<sup>156</sup> Despite this latter diversity, some basic moral laws appear to be shared across all cultures, perhaps revealing an underlying "universal grammar"<sup>157</sup> of morality intrinsic to the brain. Respect and kindness towards others, or at least those within one's society, seems the most obvious universal moral. Certain "sinful" behaviours also appear to be proscribed across all cultures: gluttony, greed, selfishness, and lack of humility.<sup>158</sup> Once again, perhaps it is safer to assume that morality, at least in the form of some basic ethical instincts, preceded religion, or existed prior to religious justification of its reality.

Traditionally, the above theories were interpreted as providing

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<sup>156</sup> Boyer, p. 27.

<sup>157</sup> Ilkka Pyysiainen and Marc Hauser, "The origins of religion: evolved adaptation or by-product?", *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 14:3 (2010), pp. 104-109 (p. 107).

<sup>158</sup> Richard T. Kinnier et al, "A Short List of Universal Moral Values", *Counselling and Values* 45 (2000), pp. 4-16 (p. 10).

evolutionary advantage on an individual level. On this view, religion underpins morality or social structure, and the co-operation and/or altruism provided allows longer, more productive lives. Yet this idea is problematic. What about the members of society that inevitably violate the rules laid down by political, moral, or religious authority? If they can do so without earning reproach or punishment, it will probably prove to their advantage. If the church requires me to tithe, but I lie about my income and yet still reap the full benefits that the church provides, I have an instant advantage over my honest fellow citizens. David Sloan Wilson, for whom this “freeloader” problem is a central concern, expresses it using an example of birds who call to alert other members of their flock that a predator is approaching:

*The most vigilant individuals will not necessarily survive and reproduce better than the least vigilant. If scanning the horizon detracts from feeding, the most vigilant birds will gather less food than their oblivious neighbours. If uttering a cry attracts the attention of the predator, then sentinels place themselves at risk by warning others. Birds that do not scan the horizon and that remain silent when they see a predator may well survive and reproduce better than their vigilant neighbours.*<sup>159</sup>

This example of Wilson’s is more problematic than the one supplied by me, as it is doubtful whether the freeloaders in the flock are punished by the birds who maintain vigilance. Contrast this with the denunciation and ostracism faced by one who is found to be tithing dishonestly. Nonetheless, given the threat of freeloading, how do social groupings retain their integrity and avoid failing in a

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<sup>159</sup> Wilson, *Darwin’s Cathedral*, p. 8.

maelstrom of self-interest?

Wilson believes he has the solution to this quandary. A group of individual beings, “once they become sufficiently dependent upon each other”,<sup>160</sup> actually function as a larger organism. This allows for a theory of natural selection that applies to such groups, or “multilevel selection”. According to Wilson’s theory, a trait such as religion exists because it enhances a group’s evolutionary fitness by promoting co-operation, solidarity, and sharing of resources. Freeloading is demonstrated as a negative behaviour because it decreases a group’s fitness and ability to compete effectively with other groups. Hence, it is bad for me to tithe dishonestly because it increases my individual fitness at the expense of the group’s fitness, and likewise with the bird that provides no predator alert. If adaptation and selection only applied at the individual level, such behaviours are not as common as they should be, and freeloading should spread throughout the group. However, this doesn’t appear to be the case, because groups in which this occur are quickly forced into extinction. Wilson is fond of imagining human societies as beehives; superorganisms working towards one shared goal. He believes that religion supplies this goal:

*A given religion adapts its members to their local environment, enabling them to achieve by collective action what they cannot achieve alone or even together in the absence of religion...when examined closely most of them will make sense as part of a “social psychology” that coordinates action and solves the all-important problem of cheating from within.*<sup>161</sup>

To extend Wilson’s beehive analogy, perhaps religion and belief in gods are like a queen bee: the reason for all societal structure and action, and essential for the

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<sup>160</sup> Wilson, *Evolution for Everyone*, p. 134.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 237.

preservation of a group's genetic heritage (even if though many workers never come face to face with her). Although Wilson's theory of multilevel selection seems plausible, and to my mind, attractive (as it would thus suggest how mystical experience is an evolutionary adaptation), does it stand up to scrutiny?

Both Wilson's arguments and use of evidence appear to be somewhat suspect. In *Darwin's Cathedral* he considers the obvious objection from traditional evolutionary theory that groups form because of the advantages they provide to individuals, and not because of group-level selection. However, on his interpretation of such an argument, it is contested that such groups are formed and persist because they provide special advantage to particular members who hold positions of power or influence. Here there appears to be some disconnect between his likening of human societies to superorganisms such as beehives; why don't they exist because belonging is the best choice for each individual member, and not because of some malignant, controlling influence? Animals such as wildebeest do not form into groups because the strong members know that the weaker individuals will be picked off first by predators, as forming a herd works to the advantage of even the weakest. Indeed, it becomes clear at this point that such analogies between human and animal social groups are not ideal: are human socio-political structures comparable to animal societies? Once religion becomes involved, they becomes even more strained. Religion is so much more complex than being merely a tool to guarantee social cohesion.

The objection above that religion provides special advantages for those in power creates a straw man for Wilson: clearly social groups do provide benefits to the group as a whole, and not just the leaders. But why not simply focus on individual advantages rather than those of the group? Wilson believes that such a

focus commits what he calls the “averaging fallacy”.<sup>162</sup> Returning to his bird example, we can compare two flocks of birds: one with nine callers and one non-calling freeloader, and the other with one caller and nine freeloaders. When the chances of survival for both groups are aggregated and averaged out, it is clear that the callers have a much better chance at survival than the non-callers. The freeloaders in the second group do not do nearly as well as the single freeloader in the first group, simply because not enough of them are able or willing to draw attention to danger. This seems to indicate that such altruistic behaviour is advantageous on the individual level. However, Wilson points out that if individual selection is the only factor at play, then the freeloaders will gradually proliferate. It follows that group selection must be the mechanism that allows groups to form and persist. Yet Wilson is wrong to be so dismissive of the “averaging fallacy” and the role of individual selection in a group context. What game theories such as the averaging model show us is that there *is* a tipping point at which freeloaders cease to be so significantly adaptive for individuals. If the freeloaders become too prevalent within the group, it no longer gives the same advantage, and it becomes clear that a greater frequency of co-operative and altruistic behaviour would be to the individual advantage of each member. Multilevel selection need not be the explanation for this: Scott Atran states that altruism and co-operation “may actually be a naturally selected response to distant rewards”.<sup>163</sup> Such distant rewards include the benefits reaped from the reciprocal behaviours of other members of the group; group behaviour does not necessitate group selection.

Atran also takes major issue with Wilson’s use of anthropological

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<sup>162</sup> David Sloan Wilson, *Darwin’s Cathedral* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 14.

<sup>163</sup> Atran, p. 217.

evidence. According to Atran, such studies “place informants on their best behaviour”,<sup>164</sup> producing an account of the society in question that may greatly overestimate the voluntary status of altruism and co-operation. Atran quotes Nicholas Peterson’s work on sharing within Australian Aboriginal communities, noting that “much giving and sharing is in response to direct verbal and/or nonverbal demands”.<sup>165</sup> Peterson construes such sharing as not altruism as is commonly conceived; rather, it is “tolerated theft”.<sup>166</sup> He also notes that this model of behaviour is widespread throughout hunter-gatherer societies, and that pure altruism and voluntary generosity are concepts often attributed to such communities as part of a “noble savage” narrative. Most interestingly, however, is the way in which Peterson characterises “demand sharing” as a secular activity. Nowhere is it mentioned as being necessitated by religious practice, ritual, or belief; demands are initiated due to family relationships or civil customs. On this view, social structure does not appear to be dependent upon religion, even in hunter-gatherer communities. According to Wilson’s theory, we should expect such societies to be dependent on religion to supply a rigid framework for adaptive behaviour. Again, it seems that religion may be in some way supervenient on social structure. Social cohesion would exist without religion, and religion may tie itself into that cohesion, after the fact, as a way of providing legitimacy for itself.

A major problem with the concept of social cohesion as the essential function of religion appears in Wilson’s book *Evolution for Everyone*. Wilson distinguishes between what he labels the “horizontal” and “vertical” dimensions of religion. The former is practical knowledge, a code for how to behave in

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<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>165</sup> Nicholas Peterson, “Demand sharing: reciprocity and the pressure for generosity among foragers”, *American Anthropologist* 95:4 (1993), pp. 860-874, p. 860.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 861.

everyday life and society. The latter is the supernatural aspect of religion, a code for understanding the mysteries of life. Wilson puzzles over this question: “What accounts for the linkage between the frequently crazy-appearing vertical dimension and the immensely practical horizontal dimension of religion?”<sup>167</sup> He doesn’t seem to find an solution above a simple answer that the two dimensions “are linked by our mental processes”.<sup>168</sup> In other words, the vertical dimension is a by-product of the adaptive horizontal dimension. This seems highly implausible to me, and where Wilson’s theory of religion begins to truly unravel. The supernatural features contained within every religion are a vital, definitive feature of it. They are not something that could be discarded in the way Wilson suggests they could, if only we could escape our meddling neurology. Wilson appears somewhat cognisant of this when he points out that “major religious traditions such as Buddhism and Confucianism come close to my ideal religion by providing strong horizontal dimensions with vertical dimensions that adhere closely to factual realism”.<sup>169</sup> In other words, some religions contain minimal emphasis on the supernatural. However, this is completely incorrect: what religions such as Buddhism lack is a concept of the supernatural as characterised by Judeo-Christian tradition. This differing concept of the supernatural is what causes Buddhism to be, or at least appear to be, closer to “factual realism” as Wilson puts it, as there are no spirits or mythologies that are irreconcilable with scientific belief. However, one only needs to study the rich and ongoing mystical traditions of such religions to realise that the supernatural remains a central force within them. This brings us back to my central theme: why do such mystical traditions exist? Although I clearly believe that they are central to religion, what is their

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<sup>167</sup> David Sloan Wilson, *Evolution for Everyone* (New York, NY: Delacorte Press, 2007), p. 258.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid*, p. 259.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid*, p. 262.

purpose?

My exploration of religion, and thus mysticism, as an evolutionary adaptation has born little fruit thus far. Nonetheless, given the larger context of my argument that mysticism is a pragmatic tool, necessity demanded its examination. As we have seen, many of the common accounts describing the existence and use of religion are, under scrutiny, implausible. Indeed, the inverse of such theories often appears to be true. Religion is a post hoc explanation for phenomena, and uses these explanatory abilities as a means of justifying itself.<sup>170</sup> Nonetheless, religion does exist for a reason, even if it is not a direct evolutionary adaptation.

Theorists such as Dennett, Atran and Boyer advance the most plausible arguments regarding the cause and origin of religion. According to them, religion is a by-product of various adaptive modules in the human brain that organise received perceptual data and create functional mental patterns and models. Crucially, such theories do not conceive religion as a monolithic entity, a singular species of human behaviour with one guiding principle. As Atran states, “cultures and religions are not ontologically distinct ‘superorganisms’ or ‘independent variables’ with precise contents or boundaries”.<sup>171</sup> (The divergence from Wilson’s approach could not be more apparent; perhaps herein lies the reason he struggled to reconcile the horizontal and vertical dimensions of religion) Instead, what we call religion is a family of beliefs and behaviours that are diverse in origin and character but which share a common attribute in being directed toward the supernatural, or, to use slightly different terminology, “ultimate reality” or “ground or power of being”.<sup>172</sup> However, even these broad attempts to define

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<sup>170</sup> Lewis-Williams, pp. 76-77.

<sup>171</sup> Atran, p. 10.

<sup>172</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. II (Digswell Place, UK: James Nisbet, 1957), p. 10.

religion appear stretched in the face of the “unfamiliar diversity”<sup>173</sup> noted by Boyer.

What are these mental modules that give rise to religious belief? Firstly, the human brain features a sophisticated ability to attribute agency and intentions to entities. This module evolved as an aid in identifying predators and prey, and being able to understand their goals and intentions. However, evolutionary pressures resulted in a “hyperactive agent detection device”,<sup>174</sup> because, in Boyer’s words, “it is far more advantageous to over-detect agency than it is to under-detect it.”<sup>175</sup> Humans are capable of observing complex phenomena and patterns, and awareness of such concepts often demands “action in response to those concepts”.<sup>176</sup> Here we can see the beginnings of systematic religious belief; what Dennett calls “practical animism...arguably not mistakes at all, but extremely useful ways of keeping track of the tendencies of designed things, living or artifactual”.<sup>177</sup> It also becomes apparent why the argument from design remains so intuitively forceful for many people, as agency detection is deeply hardwired into the brain. Atran observes that the hyperactive agent detection device accounts for the common belief that religion exists as an explanatory or comforting force, because humans “are cognitively susceptible to invoke supernatural agents whenever emotionally eruptive events arise that have superficial characteristics of telic event structures with no apparent controlling force”.<sup>178</sup> Monumental, life-altering, and yet mysterious and uncontrollable events such as natural disasters, disease and childbirth act as triggers for agency detection. Note, however, that this contrasts with the idea that the purpose of religion in is to provide such

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<sup>173</sup> Boyer, pp. 7-12.

<sup>174</sup> Justin L. Barrett, “Exploring the natural foundations of religion”, *Trends in Cognitive Science* 4:1 (2000), pp. 29-34 (pp. 31-32).

<sup>175</sup> Boyer, p. 165.

<sup>176</sup> Barrett, p. 32.

<sup>177</sup> Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 117.

<sup>178</sup> Atran, p. 66.

explanations; religion remains a by-product of the “hair trigger”<sup>179</sup> agency detection module that evolved to recognise the presence of predators and prey.

A second feature of the brain that reinforces the existence of supernatural agents and a supernatural realm is the ability to enter into altered states of consciousness. As was noted previously, David Lewis-Williams noted similarities shared amongst such states that demonstrate that they are not “culturally determined...[r]ather, they are wired into the neurology of the human brain.”<sup>180</sup> Whether it be through dreams or full-scale hallucinations, such states suggest a world of mysterious power and truth beyond that of our ordinary perceptions. Note that I am not arguing for some type of singular “God-module” within the brain (although few contemporary neurotheologians hold such a simplified view anyway).<sup>181</sup> Rather, my point is that human consciousness regularly encompasses realms that appear beyond nature. Particularly when formally incorporated into religious ritual and exegesis, altered states of consciousness comprise a highly effective feedback loop that confirms belief, an interface between the natural and the supernatural, “some sort of trafficking with supernatural forces or beings”.<sup>182</sup> Dreams appear to play an important role in the brain, probably in reinforcing new memories and consolidating such new facts with the extant neural network, although there are also alternative theories such as brain detoxification or tissue restoration.<sup>183</sup> Regardless of which of these theories are true, it appears that the experiential content of dreams is simply a by-product of the adaptive underlying

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<sup>179</sup> Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 110.

<sup>180</sup> Lewis-Williams, p. 145.

<sup>181</sup> See for example: Eugene d’Aquili and Andrew B. Newberg, *The Mystical Mind: Probing the Biology of Religious Experience* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1999).

<sup>182</sup> Lewis-Williams, p. 149.

<sup>183</sup> See, for example: Pierre Maquet, “The role of sleep in learning and memory”, *Science* 294:5544 (2001), pp. 1048-1052; Matthew P. Walker and Robert Stickgold, “Sleep, memory, and plasticity”, *Annual Review of Psychology* 57 (2006), pp. 139-166; Jerome M. Siegel, “Sleep viewed as a state of adaptive inactivity”, *Nature Reviews: Neuroscience* 10:10 (2009), pp. 747-753; Francis Crick and Graeme Mitchison, “The function of dream sleep”, *Nature* 304 (1983), pp. 111-114.

physical mechanism.<sup>184</sup> When it comes to altered states classified by Lewis-Williams as “intensified”, unanswered questions regarding the possible evolutionary role of such mystical altered states are what brought me to this point, and therefore it would be premature to state whether they are pure by-product; however, it should be clear by now in what direction I am tending.

Dennett argues for hypnotisability as a third adaptive module of which religion is a by-product. In early religion, the primary role of a priest and shaman was as a healer; such religions can still be found today in the Amazon, for instance. Such figures derive their healing power largely from taking advantage of the placebo effect that humans are so susceptible to. Those who are most prone to its influence (Dennett claims about fifteen percent of humans demonstrate “strong hypnotizability”)<sup>185</sup> reap full benefit from the shaman’s treatment, and thus possess an evolutionary advantage over those who are less suggestible. Shamanic healing, as a primitive yet somewhat effective form of health care, “could have created a strong ridge of selection pressure that would not otherwise have been there.”<sup>186</sup> The power of the psyche is well known in contemporary medicine, even in the face of serious illnesses such as cancer, and even more so with regard to childbirth, which is cited by Dennett as being a primary health concern in premodern times. Under this view, being susceptible to hypnotism and induced trances was accompanied by the by-product of religious belief. To put it another way, religious content supervened upon hypnotic healing rituals, and those susceptible to the hypnosis were more suggestible and willing to accept the truth of that content.

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<sup>184</sup> More recent work has challenged this view with mixed reception, for example: Antti Revonsuo, “The reinterpretation of dreams: an evolutionary hypothesis of the function of dreaming”, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 23:6 (2000), pp. 877-901; J. Allan Hobson, “REM sleep and dreaming: towards a theory of protoconsciousness”, *Nature Reviews: Neuroscience* 10:11 (2009), pp. 803-813.

<sup>185</sup> Dennett, *Breaking The Spell*, p. 137.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid*, p. 140.

The final evolutionary adaptation that religion is a by-product of relates to the transmission of messages and facts via oral culture. Atran and Ara Norenzayan demonstrate via empirical study that minimally counterintuitive statements, such as the disembodied beings and talking animals one finds in mythology, “may have a potent survival advantage over intuitive beliefs: once processed and recalled, they degrade less than intuitive ones.”<sup>187</sup> These counterintuitive statements, that initiate and/or reinforce belief in a supernatural world outside of ordinary intuition and perception, are what Dennett labels “memory-engineering devices”.<sup>188</sup> A mythology featuring the right amount of “combinations of explicit violation and tacit inference” reaches a “memory optimum”,<sup>189</sup> and will efficiently serve as a vector for transmitting and preserving extremely valuable cultural, ethical, and even scientific knowledge across the ages amongst oral cultures with no other method of retaining knowledge other than the art of storytelling. In addition to being memorable, the mysterious absurdity of counterintuitive beliefs means that “there is no recourse but memorization”<sup>190</sup> for the listener, and therefore discourages use of artistic license in their retelling, which would risk the gradual degradation of the message underlying the myth. Once again, religion is not essential to this mechanism – any counterfactuals could be utilised to create these mnemonics – but a feedback loop is created in which nascent supernatural forms and ideas are incorporated into a cultural narrative, and then confirmed as true by virtue of their vital role within that narrative.

If religion is an evolutionary by-product and not itself adaptive, what of

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<sup>187</sup> Atran, p. 105. The full details of the study can be found in: Ara Norenzayan and Scott Atran, “Cognitive and emotional processes in the cultural transmission of natural and nonnatural beliefs, in *The Psychological Foundations of Culture*, edited by Mark Schaller and Christian Crandall (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 2002), pp. 149-170.

<sup>188</sup> Dennett, *Breaking The Spell*, p. 141.

<sup>189</sup> Pascal Boyer and Brian Bergstrom, “Evolutionary perspectives on religion”, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 37 (2008), pp. 111-130 (p. 119).

<sup>190</sup> Dennett, *Breaking The Spell*, p. 150.

mystical experience? The above accounts of dreams and some forms of ritualised hypnosis demonstrate how certain kinds of altered states of consciousness are adaptive, but do not include the significant majority of mystical experiences, and more importantly, assert that the religious content of these mechanisms is an unnecessary by-product. However, the question of whether a cultural trait is an evolutionary adaptation is not the be-all and end-all of its value, and religious belief, even as a by-product, does have strong links to adaptive behaviours. Furthermore, I believe that mystical experience has played a crucial role in the historical development of religion, and that it may also be important to human development in ways not directly linked to religion.

As noted above, Lewis-Williams argues for altered states of consciousness as essential to the genesis of religion. Without them, he claims, it would not be possible for “people everywhere to suspect the existence of an unseen realm”.<sup>191</sup> Similar assertions are made by several others.<sup>192</sup> According to such theories, religion is either directly sourced from altered states of consciousness, or a somewhat weaker claim is made that such states are necessary to provide experiential confirmation of the supernatural beliefs suggested by other conceptual modules. However, such arguments appear problematic, as it is far from clear that mystical experiences or even significant alterations of consciousness were common in early human societies. Boyer and Brian Bergstrom note that “[i]n all modern groups, such states are exceptional in one’s

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<sup>191</sup> Lewis-Williams, p. 139.

<sup>192</sup> See, for example: Weston La Barre, “Hallucinogens and the shamanic origins of religion”, in *Flesh of the Gods: The Ritual Use of Hallucinogens*, edited by Peter T. Furst (London, UK: Allen and Unwin, 1972) pp. 261-278; Jennifer L. Dornan, “Beyond belief: religious experience, ritual, and cultural neuro-phenomenology in the interpretation of past religious systems”, *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 14:1 (2004), pp. 25-36; Michael Winkelmann, “Shamanism as the original neurotheology”, *Zygon* 39:1 (2004), pp. 193-217; James McClenon, “Shamanic healing, human evolution, and the origin of religion”, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36:3 (1997), pp. 345-354.

lifetime and are typically the preserve of specialists or particular subgroups”.<sup>193</sup> If mystical experience is what justifies religious belief by supplying an experiential basis, then it needs to be something that is experienced by more than a privileged or exceptional few. This is true; the kinds of experiences described by Meister Eckhart, R.M. Bucke or Carlos Castaneda are not commonly experienced. Indeed, their scarcity combined with their universality is what makes them of such remarkable interest.

In the case of Lewis-Williams’ argument, however, this objection overlooks his particular theory of consciousness and what constitutes an altered state. As described previously, Lewis-Williams views consciousness as a spectrum or continuum, rather than a set of discrete values denoting “ordinary” and “altered”. Therefore the altered states of consciousness necessary for religious belief need not be the kind that are the almost exclusive focus of mystical literature; Lewis-Williams’ theory includes “other, milder, mental states that many people would not consider ‘altered’”.<sup>194</sup> He describes such “milder” states as “shifting consciousness”,<sup>195</sup> including dreams and waking reveries of imagination under its circumscription. Add to these “sensations of religious exaltation”<sup>196</sup> and the “numinous” experiences of “awefulness” and the sublime originally given serious consideration by Rudolf Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy*.<sup>197</sup> All such various altered states allow an awareness of a perceived supernatural realm or at least a world much larger and more complex than is revealed by ordinary experience. In fact, Lewis-Williams argues that interpreting dreams and other “aberrant

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<sup>193</sup> Boyer and Bergstrom, p. 117.

<sup>194</sup> Lewis-Williams, p. 152.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 154-155.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid*, p. 153.

<sup>197</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, translated by John W. Harvey (Oxford, UK: OUP, 1958).

experiences”<sup>198</sup> in such a way comprises an evolutionary adaptation of sorts, as it is a means of reconciling them with normal perceptual experience, “a ready-made framework for sorting out the different kinds of experiences that everyone has”.<sup>199</sup> It is certainly not uncommon for individuals to experience a sense of heightened religious awareness or exaltation during rituals or in places of worship; nor is it uncommon for individuals to place special, even prophetic, emphasis on particular dreams. Additionally, both Lewis-Williams and Otto observe that such feelings of religious or transcendent awareness, a shift in consciousness, can take place outside of religious contexts, and without being tied to any religious system. Howard Wettstein supplies multiple examples of this type of naturalistic awareness, whether it be awe of natural or human grandeur.<sup>200</sup>

Although massive, hallucinatory changes in consciousness are not necessary to gain a glimpse of the supernatural realm that is the domain of religion, the power of such experiences should not be denied. Little can equal them for belief and life-altering effect. This can be observed in the ways that, throughout history, the ability to induce major alterations of consciousness has been a remarkable tool in promulgating particular religions. If such experiences can be ritually induced on a consistent basis across a group, such rituals become a powerful tool in both conversion and in reinforcing faith and belief. For instance, the “Peyote Religion” of native Americans, a variant of which Carlos Castaneda reported being initiated in, spread from northwestern Mexico to as far north as Saskatchewan during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, arguably due to its inclusive and emotionally powerful shamanic rituals.<sup>201</sup> Another example is the

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<sup>198</sup> Lewis-Williams, p. 157.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>200</sup> Howard Wettstein, “Awe and the religious life: a naturalistic perspective”, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 21:1 (1997), pp. 257-280.

<sup>201</sup> Richard Evans Schultes, “An overview of hallucinogens in the western hemisphere”, in *Flesh of the Gods: The Ritual Use of Hallucinogens*, edited by Peter T. Furst (London, UK: Allen and

Pentecostal movement, a Christian denomination which places great emphasis on ritualised episodes of glossolalia (speaking in tongues), which are interpreted as a channelling of supernatural or ancient languages and evidence of an individual's blessing by God.<sup>202</sup> It has spread rapidly throughout the USA and the world over the past century, and when compared with other forms of Christianity, "can be counted as one of the great success stories of the current era of globalization".<sup>203</sup> If these cultivated mystical experiences are such a powerful force, however, why are they not more prevalent? Why did religions with such rituals not consistently outcompete those without them? The answer to this question may lie in the fact that the promulgation of radical mystical experiences, particularly amongst the general congregation, can be damaging to the structural and doctrinal stability of a religion. This is especially true in the case of large religions that also operate as socio-political institutions. Placing such an emphasis on individual experience and insight is thus a dangerous game, with equal risks and rewards. A more moderate approach is to retain a default attitude of scepticism, or even outward distrust of such radical alterations of consciousness and rely on lesser forms of "shifting consciousness" to supply a sense of the reality of the supernatural. These lesser forms still provide supernatural awareness, without having quite the same explicit "noetic quality" described by James.<sup>204</sup>

These altered states of consciousness, wherever they might fall on the spectrum devised by Lewis-Williams, serve as a method of reifying information provided by the other conceptual modules of the brain. Although thus far my emphasis has been on the first-hand experience, observing or hearing reports of others' altered state experiences also contributes to an acceptance of a

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Unwin, 1972), pp. 3-54 (pp.13-15).

<sup>202</sup> Joel Robbins, "The globalization of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity", *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004), pp. 117-143 (p. 120).

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid*, p. 117.

<sup>204</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp. 371-372.

supernatural reality, particularly in the context of group ritual. For instance, seeing others speaking in tongues confirms your glossolalia as not unfounded; it allows a sense of intersubjectivity. A prophet or shaman recalling his vision has a similar effect. Such experiences work to quieten sceptical thoughts and reinforce the belief that the religious truths in question are not just in the head.

As observed previously, altered states of consciousness form a feedback loop of being somewhat initiated by and yet also confirming beliefs in the supernatural. But although the hyperactive agent detection device preceded altered states of consciousness (even invertebrates with little consciousness to speak of display simple kinds of agency awareness), mystical experience probably preceded the other adaptations that religion is a by-product of. It definitely entered the scope of human behaviour before the hypnosis method of healing, if we make the assumption that the practice began as a shamanic healing ritual, thus creating the “strong ridge of selection pressure” that led to such rituals becoming widespread. Given that such rituals, at least as they are observed in contemporary societies,<sup>205</sup> are attempts to diagnose and/or cure ailments by supernatural and/or magical means, it seems implausible that they originally existed without such mystical content.

Similarly, although perhaps less certainly, it seems that altered states of consciousness were the original source of doctrine and prophecy, and in particular the counterintuitive elements of mythology that made such stories so readily transmissible. Altered states of consciousness, at least in the form of REM dream sleep, occur in most mammals,<sup>206</sup> and as such predate language and religion in the brain. Once humans began to become aware of simple religious concepts and a

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<sup>205</sup> See, for example: Michael J. Harner, “The sound of rushing water”; Douglas Sharon, “The San Pedro cactus in Peruvian folk healing”, in *Flesh of the Gods: The Ritual Use of Hallucinogens*, edited by Peter T. Furst (London, UK: Allen and Unwin, 1972), pp. 114-135.

<sup>206</sup> Siegel, p. 750.

differentiation of natural and supernatural, a “universe full of mystery”,<sup>207</sup> looking to mystical experience for the truths of that universe that lay beyond ordinary human knowledge was a natural solution. Also worth consideration here are Lewis-Williams’ descriptions of the “vortex” and “flight” as reoccurring themes in intensified altered states of consciousness,<sup>208</sup> experiences which suggest venturing beyond or above normal perception to a position where special knowledge or even absolute truth is revealed. The content of these experiences could then be combined or reconciled with existing folk knowledge to form doctrine, mythology, and cosmology. With the right combination of practical folk wisdom and counterintuitive statements, such a doctrine could prove its use and maintain integrity over many generations.

Perhaps, at this point, a schematic of how basic human consciousness developed systematised religious belief can begin to be formulated. It might be something like this: Base consciousness → Altered consciousness / Dreams / Imagination → Concept of the supernatural → Symbolic thought → Religious belief. Note that this is merely a tentative outline of how such a progression occurred, and is an obvious act of blatant simplification in some respects. Several steps are very probably the result of complex feedback loops, and suggestive of “chicken and egg” scenarios rather than simple antecedents and consequents. Nonetheless, bear with me while I offer an explanation of it.

The “base consciousness” that we begin with is a simple animal consciousness of sorts: non-reflective, non-reflexive, lacking the self-awareness that we refer to as part of “the human condition”. It could be compared to the consciousness enjoyed by Adam and Eve prior to their fall. From this stage, the human imagination develops as an adaptive tool. The ability to imagine is clearly

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<sup>207</sup> Le Barre, p. 262.

<sup>208</sup> Lewis-Williams, pp. 165-170.

adaptive, as by the use of “this sort of mental manipulation a person is able to solve problems in the present and to decide on future behaviour”.<sup>209</sup> Add to this an increasing awareness of dreams, the complexity of which may be augmented by a more activated and flexible imagination, and increasing awareness of potential altered states of consciousness, quite possibly through the discovery of hallucinogenic plants. Imagination and altered states of consciousness supply a cognisance of the supernatural, and combine with the hyperactive agent detection device to form a kind of proto-religion, perhaps a less systematised predecessor to the Upper Paleolithic animism and totemism documented by Lewis-Williams.<sup>210</sup>

Cognitive scientist Fred Previc demonstrates that the dopaminergic neurochemical activity observed in dreams and hallucinatory states is associated with increased activation of the brain’s extrapersonal space systems.<sup>211</sup> These systems comprise part of the brain’s mechanism for orienting the body and objects within three-dimensional space; the focal and ambient extrapersonal systems activated during altered states of consciousness relate to objects beyond one’s personal space (focal extrapersonal) and on or over the horizon (ambient extrapersonal).<sup>212</sup> Dopaminergic activity, and activation of extrapersonal systems are also associated with an increased emphasis on abstract thinking and diminished scepticism. Given this evidence, it appears that altered states of consciousness, not merely by content but rather by their neurochemical configuration, facilitate a greater awareness of and belief in the supernatural and abstract concepts of unseen agency. In addition to this, altered states of consciousness and in particular the growth of imagination familiarise the mind

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<sup>209</sup> *Ibid*, p. 156.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 207-231.

<sup>211</sup> Fred. H. Previc, “The role of the extrapersonal brain systems in religious activity”, *Consciousness and Cognition* 15 (2006), pp. 500-539.

<sup>212</sup> Fred H. Previc, “The neuropsychology of 3-D space”, *Psychological Bulletin* 124:2 (1998), pp. 123-164 (pp. 126-127).

with concepts of possible worlds and counterfactuals. These thought modules, combined with the dopaminergic cognition Previc emphasises, would be necessary for the simplest ritual behaviour, behaviour that presumes some relationship with or ability to manipulate supernatural beings who are present yet undetectable, or abstract supernatural realms beyond the horizon.

However, before humanity could be capable of the sophisticated worship and ritual that makes religion so distinctive and powerful, symbolic thought is required. Several theorists argue that altered states of consciousness were in fact integral in the development of symbolic thought. Matt Rossano notes evidence that symbolic reference, as opposed to iconic and indexical reference, did not appear until the Upper Paleolithic.<sup>213</sup> These different methods of reference originate in the semiotics of Charles Peirce.<sup>214</sup> Iconic reference connects a sign and an object through resemblance (such as red ochre referring to blood). Indexical reference connects a sign and an object through some causal relationship (such as smoke referring to fire). Symbolic reference connects a sign and an object through pure convention (such as the word “lake” referring to a large body of water). Rossano argues that meditative “campfire rituals of focused attention”<sup>215</sup> and trance-based shamanic healing rituals provided the foundation for and/or augmented symbolic reference capability. As evidence he cites research which shows that meditating subjects enjoy significantly activation in “areas of the frontal lobe of the brain associated with working memory and focused attention”,<sup>216</sup> and that consistent practice confers major long-term benefits.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Matt J. Rossano, “Did meditating make us human?”, *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 17:1 (2007), pp. 47-58.

<sup>214</sup> Charles S. Peirce, “What is a sign?”, in *The Essential Peirce*, Volume II (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), pp. 4-11.

<sup>215</sup> Rossano, p. 47.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid*, p. 51.

<sup>217</sup> Sara W. Lazar et al., “Meditation experience is associated with increased cortical thickness”, *Neuroreport* 16:17 (2005), pp. 1893-1897.

These benefits, together with the rituals involved, created a significant selection pressure in which individuals who excelled were admired by their peers. Michael Winkelman makes a similar argument for shamanic altered states of consciousness being instrumental in the cognitive evolution of the brain. He notes that the “evolution of the human brain and its modular structures produced a fragmentation of consciousness, reflecting both the increasing modularity of consciousness and the diversification of self”.<sup>218</sup> Altered states of consciousness reverse this fragmentation by producing “limbic system slow-wave discharges that synchronize the frontal cortex”<sup>219</sup> to achieve a psychointegrative state that features “a synthesis of behavior, emotion, and thought.”<sup>220</sup> This “cross-modal integration”,<sup>221</sup> together with the abstract thought enabled or emphasised by dopaminergic activity, facilitates the complex symbolism and metaphor characteristic of religion. Integrated brain function across the “evolutionary strata”<sup>222</sup> of separate conceptual modules is what allows otherwise ordinary objects, locations and animals to take on special social and mental significance as religious icons.

From this evidence, it appears that mystical experiences and altered states of consciousness were not only essential to the development of religion, but were also instrumental in human cognitive evolution. Therefore, even if it is conceded that religion is purely an evolutionary by-product, and confers no adaptive advantage at all aside from the conceptual modules it supervenes upon, mystical experience can still be viewed as adaptive in a separate sense. However, can it still

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<sup>218</sup>Michael Winkelman, “Shamanism and cognitive evolution”, *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 12:1 (2002), pp. 71-101 (p. 73).

<sup>219</sup>*Ibid*, p. 198. D’Aquili and Newberg’s *The Mystical Mind* provides a more detailed account of the theory that mystical experiences are the result of focused, synchronised stimulation of the limbic system, particularly the hypothalamus.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>221</sup> Winkelman, “Shamanism and cognitive evolution”, p. 73.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid*, p. 74.

be given such status in the context of the modern brain? Does its role in cognitive evolution continue? Or was it merely a stepping stone to the complex symbolic thought we enjoy today, like an infant crawling in order to walk, a necessary relic? Many theorists, including Lewis-Williams and Dennett, take this latter view, arguing that humanity can finally break free from the yoke of religion with its primitive and even barbaric rituals, oppressive moral laws, and the “consciousness fiddling”<sup>223</sup> of mystical experience. But is it really as simple as Lewis-Williams asserts? Can we keep the baby of religious history, art and literature while throwing out the bathwater, that ephemeral by-product of supernatural suspicion and yearning? In this age of science and secularism, can we really dismiss religious belief as the bastion of the gullible, the uneducated, the weak of heart and mind? Or is this the arrogance of the enlightenment all over again? Is it a quixotic endeavour, pitted against the enormous weight of phenomena that are “hardwired in the brain...always there ready to make an appearance when they are needed”<sup>224</sup> and accompanied by a subjective certainty that the mystical and supernatural are “fundamentally more real than baseline reality”.<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> Lewis-Williams, p. 180.

<sup>224</sup> Eugene d’Aquili and Andrew B. Newberg, “The neuropsychological basis of religions, or why God won’t go away”, *Zygon* 33:2 (1998), pp. 187-201 (p. 198).

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid*, p. 199.

## Chapter Six

Although I generally agree with the assertions of Lewis-Williams and Dennett that religion's influence upon modern society will inevitably diminish, I am much less sympathetic to the idea that its yoke can be completely cast off and relegated to the status of some museum exhibit. The fact remains that the capacity for religious and mystical experience resides deep within the brain, ready to be activated by a variety of factors and circumstances. No matter how much these experiences are marginalised or scorned, their importance to some individuals cannot be avoided. Even if all the world's religious institutions and systems of belief were dismantled, religious experiences would still occur and generate belief. However, even if the inevitability of these experiences is recognised, do we still write them off as a neurological artefact, a pure by-product? Or do they still have value?

Firstly, the practice of meditation derided by Lewis-Williams as “consciousness fiddling” is not deserving of such a pejorative description. Regular meditation is shown to “promote neural plasticity”<sup>226</sup> (which is actually one of the benefits thought to be provided by dream sleep<sup>227</sup>) and also “may slow age-related thinning of the frontal cortex”.<sup>228</sup> Meditation can certainly be sheared away from what Lewis-Williams dubs the “embarrassing doctrines”<sup>229</sup> of religious belief and cosmology, but the so-called fiddling that remains has a tendency towards religious and mystical insight. Even if a practitioner of meditation rejects the supernatural, his meditative exercises function by manipulating the same

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<sup>226</sup> Lazar et al., p. 1895.

<sup>227</sup> Walker and Stickgold.

<sup>228</sup> Lazar et al., p. 1895.

<sup>229</sup> Lewis-Williams, p. 182.

cognitive modules and operators activated during religious ritual; both involve “intermittent emotional discharges involving the subjective sensation of awe, peace, tranquillity, or ecstasy, and...varying degrees of unitary experience or feelings of oneness, correlating with the emotional discharges just described.”<sup>230</sup> Additionally, research indicates that spiritually based meditation is much more effective than secular meditation at alleviating and cultivating resistance to stress, anxiety, and physical pain.<sup>231</sup> Separating meditation, and other mystical experiences, techniques, and rituals from their religious origins may not be as easy as it seems, and may be largely counterproductive.

Aside from such tangible benefits, mystical experiences may have another kind of value. A small group of neurotheologians and anthropologists (including Eugene d’Aquili) argue that mystical experiences and mythologies, regardless of their objective, literal truth values, can constitute important signifiers of symbolic value. In other words, they can be an expression of human values hardwired into the brain, experiential signifiers of “biogenetic”<sup>232</sup> structure. Walter Burkert describes his book *Creation of the Sacred* as “an analysis of religious worlds in view of the underlying landscape”;<sup>233</sup> such a dyadic enterprise does not only examine religious tradition, but also the shared human condition found in the biological “landscape”. Burkert’s focus is primarily on mythology and ritual, and how their essential structures can be traced back to primitive behaviours. This is supported by d’Aquili and Newberg’s thesis that mystical experiences find their origin in manipulation of the hypothalamus, a part of the brain found in all

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<sup>230</sup> Eugene d’Aquili and Andrew B. Newberg, *The Mystical Mind: Probing the Biology of Mystical Experience* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), p. 95.

<sup>231</sup> Amy B. Wachholtz and Kenneth I. Pargament, “Is spirituality a critical ingredient of meditation? Comparing the effects of spiritual meditation, secular meditation, and relaxation on spiritual, psychological, cardiac, and pain outcomes”, *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* 28:4 (2005), pp. 369-384.

<sup>232</sup> d’Aquili and Newberg, *The Mystical Mind*, p. 51.

<sup>233</sup> Walter Burkert, *Creation of the Sacred: Tracks of Biology in Early Religions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 23.

vertebrates.<sup>234</sup> For example, Burkert argues that myths and rituals of sacrifice, in which a body part or a member of the community is forfeited or surrendered for the sake of the whole, resemble common evolutionary adaptations, such as lizards with tails that detach in the grip of a predator; “[h]ere mutilation is encoded in a special biological program”.<sup>235</sup> Adaptive fact is transformed across the evolutionary divide into symbolic experiences and acts. Charles Laughlin and Johannes Loubser assert that such isomorphism is produced through “neurognosis”, the evolutionarily determined biogenetic structures of the brain.<sup>236</sup> Tying such mythological parables directly to mystical experience, Laughlin argues that myths finds their genesis in altered states of consciousness,<sup>237</sup> and “may operate as innate releasing mechanisms for structures in the depths of the human psyche”<sup>238</sup> ...“transmitting knowledge about the primal relations in the cosmos upon which the existence and well-being of the people depend.”<sup>239</sup>

Although I agree with the general idea that mythologies and mystical experiences contain (in certain cases<sup>240</sup>) symbolic knowledge, the overall tenure of arguments such as Laughlin’s go too far. Mythology is not purely a result of mystical experience “reworked by the conscious mind”.<sup>241</sup> Rather, mythology is formed by the syncretic process previously discussed: it is a combination of

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<sup>234</sup> d’Aquili and Newberg, *The Mystical Mind*, pp. 110-116.

<sup>235</sup> Burkert, p. 41.

<sup>236</sup> Charles D. Laughlin and Johannes H.N. Loubser, “Neurognosis, the development of neural models, and the study of the ancient mind”, *Time and Mind: The Journal of Archaeology, Consciousness and Culture* 3:2 (2010), pp. 135-158; Johannes H.N. Loubser, “Prefigured in the human mind and body: towards an ethnographically informed cognitive archaeology of metaphor and religion”, *Time and Mind: The Journal of Archaeology, Consciousness and Culture* 3:2 (2010), pp. 183-214.

<sup>237</sup> Charles D. Laughlin and C. Jason Throop, “Imagination and reality: on the relations between myth, consciousness, and the quantum sea”, *Zygon* 36:4 (2001), pp. 709-736 (p. 713).

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid*, p. 717.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid*, p. 715.

<sup>240</sup> Obviously not everything labelled as or claiming to be a religion, or every mystical experience, will contain such truths. For instance, some of the former are simply cults with no interest in truth or practical wisdom, while some of the latter are bizarre artefacts of mental illness which have no redeeming value.

<sup>241</sup> “Imagination and reality: on the relations between myth, consciousness, and the quantum sea”, p. 713.

minimally counterintuitive statements that most probably originate in dreams and mystical experiences, and pragmatic knowledge that persists through mechanisms of cultural and/or meme selection. What mystical experiences can supply are new ways of viewing ourselves, human life and the universe; perspectives of pragmatic value, some of which may be neurologically determined, but not necessarily the hard biogenetic truths suggested by cognitive archaeologists such as Laughlin.

What are these symbolic values revealed by certain mystical experiences? A common feature of most instances of mystical experience is an overwhelming perception of all objects or individuals as one. James provides an example of one such gestalt experience:

*I felt that I prayed as I had never prayed before, and knew now what prayer really is: to return from the solitude of individuation into the consciousness of unity with all that is, to kneel down as one that passes away, and to rise up as one imperishable. Earth, heaven, and sea resounded as in one vast world-encircling harmony. It was as if the chorus of all the great who had ever lived were about me. I felt myself one of them, and it appeared as if I heard their greeting:*

*"Thou too belongest to the company of those who overcome."*<sup>242</sup>

In this example, there is a unity not only across the universe of objects, but also across people and consciousnesses throughout history. Mystical experiences such as this unveil something that we, as humans, tend to overlook: that the universe can be perceived and understood as an interconnected and unified whole, that time and space may only be constructed concepts. Human perspective and perception tends strongly towards splitting the totality of experience into separate fragments and units; and with good reason, as this process is a pragmatic aid in successfully

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<sup>242</sup> Quoted in James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp. 386-387. The original source is Malwida von Meysenbug, *Memoirs of an Idealist*.

understanding and negotiating the world. However, other perspectives exist, and realising that our ordinary perceptions and knowledge are tethered to our niche in the universe and are able to be transcended, albeit on a very temporary basis, forms part of the human condition. This is what we could call that symbolic value of this type of mystical experience; it is not to say that the alternate perspective offered is true in an objective sense. Rather, what might be true is that different perspectives produce very different pictures of reality.

A similar kind of symbolic value is often revealed in what Stace classified as introvertive mystical experience, which authors such as d'Aquili and Newberg describe as being perception of "absolute unitary being". Stace takes the mysticism of Jan van Ruysbroeck as archetypal:

*There follows the union without distinction. Enlightened men have found within themselves an essential contemplation which is above reason and beyond reason, and a fruitive tendency which pierces through every condition and all being, and in which they immerse themselves in a wayless abyss of fathomless beatitude...Behold this beatitude is so onefold and so wayless that in it every...creatureless distinction ceases and passes away...There all light is turned to darkness; there the three persons give place to the essential unity and abide without distinction.*<sup>243</sup>

This type of experience can be described as "pure consciousness". Nothing exists except a sense of unity: mystic and God, subject and object are one. There is only consciousness. In addition to similar revelations to those regarding perspective, the primacy of consciousness could be the symbolic value of such an experience.

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<sup>243</sup> Quoted in Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, pp. 95-96. The original source is Jan van Ruysbroek, *The Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage: The Book of the Supreme Truth, the Sparkling Stone*.

Consciousness and perception is all we ultimately have in our relations with the universe; without consciousness we are not really human. There exists a world “above reason and beyond reason” which perhaps we cannot understand fully with or without consciousness and perceptual perspectives, but possibly there is nothing to be understood without such necessities. Without mediation through some kind of consciousness, what is the universe? Can it even be said to exist?<sup>244</sup>

A third kind of symbolic value is suggested by Burkert in his discussion of what he labels “the shaman’s tale”, a particular variant of mythological story that he surmises finds its source in primeval predator/prey narratives.<sup>245</sup> This type of narrative follows a common pattern: an individual must leave the safety of his home to undertake some kind of quest (at the animal level, this entails locating food). However, challenges and/or dangerous enemies are encountered on the journey. After these tribulations, success is attained, with a moment of triumph followed by a desperate pursuit back to the safety of home.<sup>246</sup> Shamanic and mystical experiences reflect this neurological imprint. For example, the Cashinahua of the Peruvian Amazon view their drug-induced mystical experiences “as the experiences of an individual’s dream spirit; they are portents of things to come or reminders of the past”.<sup>247</sup> In the mystic’s case the quest is for knowledge rather than food; but spiritual nourishment is no less dangerous or terrifying to attain. Even prior to the correct altered state of consciousness being reached, “supplication, laborious service”<sup>248</sup> or brutal asceticism may be necessary. Venturing away from the comfortable safety of ordinary consciousness, one encounters disconcerting truths, bewildering hallucinations, and the dissolution of the ego. It is certainly not uncommon for God to be described as

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<sup>244</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1986).

<sup>245</sup> Burkert, pp. 67-69.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid*, p. 63.

<sup>247</sup> Kensinger, p. 13.

<sup>248</sup> Burkert, p. 68.

inducing great fear as well as love. Then once the goal is reached, pitfalls still line the way. As in Plato's cave allegory of *The Republic*, danger comes to those who claim privileged knowledge of reality. In cases such as those of Casteneda and the Jivaro tribe, participating in shamanic ritual opens an individual up to a world of dangerous magic and potential for self-harm. Burkert also notes that "a strange characteristic of the quest tale is the asymmetry of going and returning. The way back often is different from the way taken before the decisive encounter. The normal geometry of space seems to disintegrate."<sup>249</sup> In the context of mystical experience, this signifies the sense in which once such special knowledge is attained, one cannot perceive the world in the way one used to. Quest tales in general symbolise a pattern that repeats throughout life: the necessity of danger, difficulty, and of leaving one's comfort zone in order to grow and live a truly successful life.

This focus upon symbolic value demonstrates the potential merit of mystical experiences. Religious structures and beliefs have always been a reflection of the society they are situated within: hunter-gatherer deities are usually capricious controllers of animals or weather, whereas larger societies with complex and authoritative political structures will often worship an omnipotent and omniscient God, a ruler to rule all.<sup>250</sup> Yet what does such an observation portend for today's society? How can secularism and the primacy of science be reflected in a religious system? Are reactionary fundamentalisms or fuzzy-minded new-age beliefs the fruits of our modern age? For all its power and innate presence in the human psyche, to me religion appears more and more as a rudderless ship, drifting in every direction. A major factor in the confusing multiplicity of religious forms that have arisen in the west over the past century is

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<sup>249</sup> *Ibid*, p. 66.

<sup>250</sup> La Barre, pp. 267-268.

the spreading rejection of the supernatural. Lewis-Williams observes that religion has always been a means of satisfying the “need to bridge, or mediate” between cosmological divisions, “tiers of the cosmos”.<sup>251</sup> Traditionally, a tiered cosmos has been divided, basically, between the natural and the supernatural. Observable and hidden; clear and mysterious; man and spirit; earth and heaven; religion serves as an interface by which the latter is translated into the terms of the former. Through religion, disparate elements of the human experience are able to be interpreted in mutually relevant ways.

In today’s society, the realm of the supernatural has shrunk to a size that often appears trivial. Scientific explanations, using theories of materialism and natural cause, can account for the existence and functions of the heavens and the earth, for the existence of humans and our complex thoughts, feelings, and ethical systems. Even the human proclivities for spirituality and religiosity do not escape the purview of science. Supernatural explanations are now limited to a few tiny spheres of the unknown: speculating that God is what existed before the big bang; or, in the case of d’Aquili and Newberg, rather wishful scepticism that their fully scientific research on the neurological causes of mystical experience disproves the notion that God causes such states.<sup>252</sup> As Lewis-Williams states, “scientific knowledge has indisputably again defeated what once was taken to be revealed religious knowledge”,<sup>253</sup> and there is no reason to believe this pattern will not continue as it has done over the course of human civilisation.

Religion is not the explanatory *tour de force* it once was. But religion and science, supernatural and natural, were not always the mutually exclusive, opposing forces we have come to think of them as since the Enlightenment.

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<sup>251</sup> Lewis-Williams, p. 17.

<sup>252</sup> See, for example: *The Mystical Mind*, pp. 205-211; “The neuropsychological basis of religions, or why God won’t go away”, pp. 199-201. This caveat that “our research does not disprove theism” is found in virtually all their work.

<sup>253</sup> Lewis-Williams, p. 85.

Dennett talks of “folk religion as practical know-how”<sup>254</sup> - religion was once a means of understanding and sharing pragmatic knowledge about the world. As was noted in my discussion of mythology, practical facts about the natural world and human behaviour were encoded in supernatural narratives. Thus, originally, there was no distinction between science and religion; they were both combined in human endeavours to understand the world around them. This fact is easily observed in the development of science during the medieval and renaissance periods. Scientific rationalism was utilised (Aquinas is the prime example) to justify belief in God. Prior to the birth of what we now call “the scientific method”, there was no conscious distinction between natural and supernatural, just between seen and unseen, and true and untrue. (As an aside, it becomes apparent here why attempts to classify religion as an evolutionarily adaptation fail; beliefs are by-products of adaptive systems, and thus beliefs in God or spirits are no more adaptive than beliefs in atoms or solar systems.) Today there is no role which the supernatural can fulfil. Materialist systems do not allow for supernatural intervention. This is where arguments like those of d’Aquili and Newberg fall flat: how can such adherents of the scientific method allow room in their map of the brain for a “mystical experience” button that God presses? They find no evidence for such a module, and it seems bizarre that scientists would allow that such a closed system could be manipulated by supernatural forces. Realistically, the only space left for God in a modern cosmology is as creator and “first mover”, and nothing else. Although even this seems to be a mere extension of the primitive humans’ attribution of the changing weather to the activities of gods given their ignorance of meteorological systems.

However, the human ability for religious feeling and mystical experience

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<sup>254</sup> Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 156.

is not going anywhere. It is an undeniable part of our neurological makeup, a beast lying dormant in the brain of even the most militant atheist. I hold that, even if one recognises the irrationality and falsity of the supernatural, such emotions and experiences are still extremely useful. It is just a matter of interpretation and reaction.

The evidence I surveyed previously shows that religion and mystical experience are evolutionary by-products, results of conceptual and neurological modules that evolved for other reasons. However, just because something is not directly fitness-enhancing does not render it a worthless accident. To illustrate my point, I will turn to Dennett's discussion of byproducts and "spandrels" in *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, his classic work on evolutionary theory. "Spandrel" has become a synonym for an evolutionary byproduct, and was first used in this context by Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Lewontin. The term originates in architecture, denoting "the tapering triangular spaces formed by the intersection of two rounded arches at right angles".<sup>255</sup> Spandrels were utilised with artistic effect by the painters of cathedrals, but this does not mitigate the fact that the space is a necessary by-product of the "adaptations" which are the towering arches of the structure. Religious experience and beliefs are spandrels too; their supervenience upon certain modules of the brain is necessitated by the properties of those modules and the physical facts of how the brain operates. This fact regarding their reason for existence need not belittle them, for they still exist nonetheless. Dennett labels the spandrel as "an obligatory design opportunity",<sup>256</sup> and notes that the spandrel Gould and Lewontin focus on could be replaced by various alternatives. Given this, he argues, spandrels are a kind of adaptation, still a by-product and yet

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<sup>255</sup> Stephen J. Gould and Richard C. Lewontin, "The spandrels of San Marco and the Panglossian paradigm: a critique of the adaptionist programme", *Proceedings of the Royal Society. Series B, Biological Sciences* 205:1161 (1979), pp. 581-598 (p. 581).

<sup>256</sup> Daniel C. Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (New York, NY:Simon and Schuster, 1995), p. 273.

“designed to have the shape they have precisely in order to provide suitable surfaces for the display of Christian iconography.”<sup>257</sup> Much in the same way that “you have to put something up there to hold up the dome – some shape or other, you decide which”,<sup>258</sup> we can decide how to manage mystical experience. The artist decides how the spandrel will be designed; the mystic decides how her experience is interpreted. Much like mythologies or religious texts, mystical experiences are usually open to a variety of interpretations and justifications of use. The spandrels of a great cathedral are decorated with art rich in symbolic value, and the modern mystic can do very much the same with the interpretation of her experience.

Returning to my remarks about religion as an interface between cosmological divisions, I believe mystical experience can still be interpreted in such a way. However, today the division is not between the natural and the supernatural. The latter has been left by the wayside, but (to continue the analogy) it is not the only image the spandrel could convey. Mystical experience does not necessarily need to be a meeting of man and God. Perhaps, in the contemporary context, mystical experience could bridge the divide between perception and reality, or the subjective and objective. These could be considered the types of tiers extant in our modern cosmos. A cosmos split between a determinate physical reality and the imagination, creativity, and free will of humanity; between a grey, perspectiveless universe and the human qualitative understanding of it; between a world without meaning or innate purpose and the human conviction of the opposite. Perhaps even simply between the known and the unknown. To put this idea in a more concise (although unfortunately no less vague) way, mystical experience could be the ultimate statement of the human condition. Revisiting an

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<sup>257</sup> *Ibid*, p. 274.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid*, p. 273.

example I gave in my discussion of symbolic value, introvertive mystical experience could be interpreted in such a way: the ultimate expression of humanity is pure consciousness, as that is all we have and all we are, the world as we perceive it does not exist without it – in reality there are no concepts of subject and object, true and untrue, one and many. Everything is a lie and yet more real and true than could ever previously be conceived. The limited human psyche crosses the divide and is confronted by this limitless reality. Another relevant example can be found in *The Teachings of Don Juan*. Castaneda experiences a hallucinatory journey in which he flies across the landscape; when the hallucination passes, he finds himself some distance from where he began. Following the experience, he asks his mentor Don Juan if he really flew, physically, “as birds do”.<sup>259</sup> Don Juan answers with a combination of scornful and cryptic statements: he did fly, and yet maybe his body did not. Consciousness is not necessarily the defined state present in ordinary perception. Perhaps the most revealing reply is “[t]he trouble with you is that you understand things in only one way.”<sup>260</sup> Multiple and seemingly contradictory facts can be true of one state of affairs, as all is dependent upon perspective. In this experience, we can see a mediation between what Castaneda views as normal consciousness and an indeterminate reality that breaks from the conventions created by the former.<sup>261</sup>

An objection here could be that these interpretations fall victim to the same pitfalls of supernatural interpretations. Much like a theistic mystic might point to the moment prior to the big bang and say “that’s where the God I saw resides!”, I point to the confusing world of perception and consciousness and say “that’s

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<sup>259</sup> Castaneda, *The Teachings of Don Juan*, p. 128.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>261</sup> For an interesting philosophical discussion using Castaneda’s experience as a heuristic, and a demonstration of the kind of complex interpretations that can be drawn from what is one level just an extremely vivid drug-induced hallucination, see Laurence Foss, “Does Don Juan really fly?”, *Philosophy of Science* 40:2 (1973) pp. 298-316.

where the meaning of what I saw resides!” According to this accusation, I am simply replacing one subject area that is beset by uncertainty, yet in principle completely comprehensible, with another. This is a salient criticism; but I believe that it overlooks the fact that, historically, supernatural claims have always been disproved by advances in scientific knowledge. Questions regarding the perception/reality and subject/object distinctions, however, have always existed, and are arguably no closer to being solved than when they were debated in antiquity. These are true philosophical puzzles, problems of the human condition. To my mind, seeking an understanding of these problems, and not whether a more powerful being controls us, might be the true calling of humanity.

Another issue is how such interpretations could be pragmatically useful. There is no singular answer to this; valuable action can take all forms, and often it might be partly determined by the goals for flourishing already present in a person’s mind. The use is dependent upon individual reaction. Possessing greater personal understanding could be action-enhancing. One could merely be inspired by the rich multiplicity and beauty of consciousness or reality. A demonstration of the power inherent in consciousness could motivate an individual that anything is possible if its power is harnessed. The gift of lateral thinking is another possibility. Above all, what I am arguing is that interpretation is the key. Any experience, great or small, can be a source for great deeds if the right interpretation is applied.

Note that I am not claiming that this is exactly how mystical experiences should be interpreted, or that there is any correct or definitive interpretation of any particular experience. Understanding these experiences in supernatural or theistic terms is unavoidable in certain cases or for certain individuals; the neurologically determined hyperactive agent detection device ensures that if nothing else. The argument above is more about demonstrating how mystical experiences can retain

powerful relevance in a secular, material world. The ultimate value of these experiences lies in the meaning and use the individual takes from them. To borrow John Dewey's words, all I wish to see is mystical and religious experiences introducing "genuine perspective"<sup>262</sup> into peoples' lives, perspective that facilitates practical understanding of and engagement with the world. After all, this is the gift that all experience provides. Experience is the fountain of knowledge, and knowledge gives the gift of action.

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<sup>262</sup> Dewey, p. 24.

## Conclusion

I have demonstrated how mystical experience can be understood, not necessarily as an individual's relationship with God or the supernatural, but as a source of human value. In fact, I have demonstrated that such human value is the only real means we have of understanding mystical experience. For some, the attribution of value to certain experiences will act as an aid in the confirmation of them as true, objective perceptions of God or whatever the purported object might be. Others, such as myself, will be eager to leave such approximations by the wayside, and focus solely on the extraordinary, overwhelming power wielded by mysticism in purely human terms.

This often incredible value derived from mystical experience is all we have in terms of apprehending it. In this context, where traditional epistemologies provide few (or perhaps too many) answers in the face of mysterious perceptions, the strength of pragmatism as an epistemology becomes readily apparent. With its focus upon effect and its meaning for the individual, abstract conceptualisations of reality are thrust aside in favour of the implications of perception for action.

Utilising my pragmatic definition of mystical experience, it can cease to be necessarily viewed as a window to the supernatural and instead as a tool. Mystical experience can become an interpretive device, revealing the multifarious structure of perceptual possibility and perhaps even reality, allowing insights into the deepest underlying elements of consciousness and the mind, and exploring what is to be human or even what it is to be a conscious being. These experiences can take on any kind of symbolism, and more than ever it is within our grasp to understand

it. Mystical experience should no longer be considered a one-way street down which the supernatural delivers images, icons and messages; instead a fundamental part of its character lies in the interpretive act. As with anything else presented to our consciousness, it is we who give it meaning.

The power of the mystical consciousness supersedes anything else ever conceived of by the human mind. No matter what our ontology, no matter what our theory of religion, it will not disappear so long as we have our humanity. It is our duty as members of modern civilisation to harness its power for tangible benefit and to maximise its utility in worldly ways. Although we cannot escape it, ultimately we are the masters of hallucination.

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