

## Explanation, Evidence, And Mystical Experience

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### Abstract

This article argues that the testimony of mystics provides an interesting potential source of evidence for theism. The model of inference to the best explanation is utilized to analyze and assess mystics' testimony. It is argued that the evidential value of the reports from mystics, both within the theistic tradition and from without, ultimately proves weak.

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### I

If there is a God, one might well expect him not merely to concern himself with the progress of the human race by bringing about the occurrence of things prayed for, providing opportunity for men to do worthwhile things, or providing a revelation at a particular moment in history, or a society to continue that revelation; but also perhaps to show himself to and speak to at any rate some of the men whom he has made and who are capable of talking about God and worshipping him. . . . The argument from religious experience claims that this has often occurred; many have experienced God (or some supernatural thing connected with God) *and hence know and can tell us of his existence* (Swinburne 1991, 244).

Direct observations, for most of us, carry the ultimate epistemological weight. The reports of eyewitnesses, to cite just one example, often determine criminal proceedings. It is not surprising, therefore, that the subjects of mysticism and religious experiences have received so much careful attention by contemporary theologians and philosophers of religion. Mystics claim to have directly "observed" the existence of God. We have countless examples of this kind of "eyewitness" testimony to the truth of theism. The status of this testimony as religious evidence provides rich religious and epistemological territory.

I will bypass the important business of analyzing and distinguishing the various forms of religious and mystical experiences that have been documented in the literature. I offer instead the following as a particularly vivid example of the kind of psychological occurrence with which we shall be concerned in the remainder of this discussion.

I was at prayer on a festival of the glorious Saint Peter when I saw Christ at my side--or, to put it better, I was conscious of Him, for neither with the eyes of the body nor with those of the soul did I see anything. I thought He was quite close to me and I saw that it was He Who, as I thought, was speaking to me. Being completely ignorant that visions of this kind could occur, I was at first very much afraid, and did nothing but weep, though as soon as He addressed a single word to me to reassure me, I became quiet again, as I had been before, and was quite happy and free from fear. All the time Jesus Christ seemed to be beside me, but, as this was not an imaginary vision, I could not discern in what form: what I felt very clearly was that all the time He was at my right hand, and a witness of everything I was doing, and that whenever I became slightly recollected or was not greatly distracted, I could not but be aware of his nearness to me (St. Teresa 1960, 249).

The questions before us are the evidential status of such an experience for the mystic herself, in this case St. Teresa of Avila, and the evidential value of her testimony for the rest of us.

William James concludes his exhaustive study of religious and mystical experience with the following three epistemological principles:

- (1) Mystical states, when well developed, usually are, and have a right to be, absolutely authoritative over the individuals to whom they come.
- (2) No authority emanates from them which should make it a duty for those who stand outside them to accept their revelations uncritically.

(3) They break down the authority of the non-mystical or rational consciousness, based upon the understanding and the sense alone (James, 1902, 414).

James seems, in (3), to proclaim that wholly different epistemological rules and principles should govern our understanding of the evidential value of mystical experience. James, because of his thorough-going pragmatism, may mean something quite different when he speaks of epistemological authority but to the degree that the concept of good evidence applies, this entire paper should be read as a sustained argument against principle (3).

My interest is the evidential value of mystical testimony. Let me propose, therefore, the following reformulation of the first two of James' principles in a specifically theistic context:

- (1<sup>\*</sup>) Having a mystical experience involving God automatically provides good evidence for the mystic for the existence of God.
- (2<sup>\*</sup>) Reading or hearing the testimony of mystics about experiences involving God provides no (good) evidence for the existence of God.

I see every reason to reject both of these epistemic principles.

## II

Consider the following situation. You are grading a stack of bluebook examinations. You come across two essays that are identical--word-for-word; even the same words are

underlined. Most of us would say that you have very strong evidence that at least one of your students has cheated. What is the structure of this evidence? What do we mean by the evaluative notions of *good* evidence, or *strong* support? Your assessment of the evidence might be reconstructed as follows. You have a fair amount of data:

- e<sub>1</sub>. The examination had four questions on it. The students could answer any three.
- e<sub>2</sub>. Seventy-eight students took the examination.
- e<sub>3</sub>. There was a proctor in the room during the exam, but she merely sat at the front of the room; there were no special attempts at security.
- e<sub>4</sub>. The two examinations were practically on top of one another in the stack as they were graded.
- e<sub>5</sub>. The two essays were word-for-word identical.
- e<sub>6</sub>. One of the students had done very well on the previous exam; the other had done poorly.

With minimal time, attention and just a little imagination, it proves surprisingly easy to generate a list of hypotheses, any of which would explain what we know about the exam.

- t<sub>1</sub>. It was merely a coincidence that the two essays were word-for-word identical.
- t<sub>2</sub>. The students had studied together so thoroughly that their thinking on the topic was bound to be very similar.
- t<sub>3</sub>. At least one of the students cheated on the examination.

t<sub>4</sub>. One of the students had an unusually high degree of ESP; she was unconsciously reading the mind of the other student.

On what grounds do we justify our judgment that the evidence supports t<sub>3</sub>?

The model of inference to the best explanation seeks to characterize the notion of (good) evidence. Although the jargon is relatively new, the model has been around at least since Peirce's discussion of abduction. Basically what is sought is a non-deductive, non-statistical model of human reasoning. Data count, within this framework, as good evidence for some hypothesis, just in case the hypothesis provides the best explanation of the data. Hanson presented an early version as follows:

1. Some surprising, astonishing phenomena p<sub>1</sub>, p<sub>2</sub>, p<sub>3</sub>, . . . are encountered.
2. But p<sub>1</sub>, p<sub>2</sub>, p<sub>3</sub>, . . . would not be surprising or astonishing if H were true -- they would follow as a matter of course from H; H would explain p<sub>1</sub>, p<sub>2</sub>, p<sub>3</sub>, . . .
3. Therefore there is good reason for elaborating H -- for proposing it as a possible hypothesis from whose assumption p<sub>1</sub>, p<sub>2</sub>, p<sub>3</sub>, . . . might be explained (Hanson 1958, 60).

The identical essays are surprising (though sadly not as surprising as they should be). They are not surprising given t<sub>3</sub>; they follow as a matter of course. But, of course, they follow as a matter of course from the ESP hypothesis, as well. We have the ability to form explanatory theories, but our example shows that we also have the ability to sort out

rival theories in terms of explanatory plausibility. Inference to the best explanation can be productively applied to the assessment of evidence because we are often intersubjective in our evaluation of competing explanatory candidates. It would be nice to have clear, mechanical criteria for explanatory plausibility, but the most candid characterizations are vague and abstract.

There is, of course, a problem about how one is to judge that one hypothesis is sufficiently better than another hypothesis. Presumably such a judgment will be based on considerations such as which hypothesis is simpler, which is more plausible, which explains more, which is less *ad hoc*, and so forth (Harman 1965, 89).

The cheating hypothesis is the best explanation of the data because it is simpler, it explains more, it is less *ad hoc*, and ultimately, we agree that it is the most plausible. All of these criteria, however, probably reduce to a single judgment about plausibility, which is just to say what is the best. I agree with Larry Wright's characterization of the process of ranking hypotheses and evaluating evidence.

[T]he only very general thing we can say about what we do when we evaluate evidence is rather coarse-grained. When we *do* prefer one member of the list of rivals to the others, we do so simply because it comports best with the data we have, against the background of our relevant knowledge. Some rivals score better in some ways, others in others. We weigh the tugs in all directions and judge one rival to 'fit' better than the others, all things considered. . . . So at bottom it is always a complex judgment of fit: which one fits most easily with everything we know about the matter (Wright 1982, 6).

Several recent analyses have characterized many of the traditional arguments in natural theology as putting forward evidence for the existence of the God of theism, and used the

model of inference to the best explanation to assess the strength or weakness of this alleged evidence.<sup>1</sup> Swinburne nicely summarizes this inferential structure:

A cosmological argument argues that the fact that there is a universe needs explaining and that God's having made it and kept it in existence explains its existence. An argument from design argues that the fact that there is design in the world needs explaining, and that God's action provides that explanation. . . . The argument from the existence of consciousness argues that the fact that there are conscious beings is mysterious and inexplicable but for the action of God. Arguments from miracle and revelation cite various public phenomena in the course of human history as evidence of God's existence and activity. The argument from religious experience claims that various of men's private experiences are experiences of God and thus show his existence (Swinburne 1991, 10-1).

As Swinburne is well aware, pain, suffering and misery are also factors of this world that cry out for explanation. He remains confident that even when the problem of evil is incorporated into the data that must be explained, the theistic account remains the better explanation (Swinburne 1998). I am not so sanguine, and have argued that the better explanation of evil is the negative hypothesis that there simply is no omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect being who is in any position to do anything about the tremendous amount of pain, suffering and misery that is manifest in this world (Johnson 1984).

### III

Gilbert Harman provides a succinct characterization of how inference to the best explanation can be used to unpack the reasoning involved in accepting the word of others:

In the testimony case a person comes to know something when he is told about it by an eyewitness or when he reads it in the newspaper. . . . No obvious deductive inference leads to a probabilistic conclusion in this case; the acceptance of testimony can be based on two consecutive inferences to the best explanation. . . . First, we would infer that the speaker so testifies because he believes what he says (and not because he has something to gain by so testifying, or because he has gotten confused and has said the opposite of what he means, etc.). Second we would infer that he believes as he does because in fact he witnessed what he described (and not because he has suffered an hallucination, or because his memory deceived him, etc.) (Harman 1968, 167).

In most cases where we assess testimony we have more data to explain than simply what has been said. Minimally we will know something about the speaker and something about the context in which the statement was made. The abstract model looks something like the following.<sup>2</sup>

e<sub>1</sub>. Linguistic statement.

e<sub>2</sub>. Context.

e<sub>3</sub>. Relevant biography.

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t<sub>0</sub>. The speaker said it because he believed it to be true.

The conventions of ordinary communication ask us to accept t<sub>0</sub> as the best explanation of these data, but we are always aware that rival explanations must also be considered.

t<sub>1</sub>. Said it because he has something to gain.

t<sub>2</sub>. Said it because he has become confused and said the opposite of what he meant.



In those cases where we infer that the speaker is sincere, this provides additional data for a second inference:

- e<sub>1</sub>. Linguistic statement.
- e<sub>2</sub>. Context.
- e<sub>3</sub>. Relevant biography.
- e<sub>4</sub>. The speaker said it because he believed it to be true.

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T\*<sub>0</sub>. The speaker believes this because he knows what he is talking about -- he believes it because it is in fact true.

We are asked to accept T\*<sub>0</sub> as a better account of the speaker's belief than either of the following rivals:

- T\*<sub>1</sub>. The speaker believes it because of he has suffered an hallucination.
- T\*<sub>2</sub>. The speaker believes it because his memory has deceived him.

Linguistic communication is dependent on the fact that in the overwhelming majority of cases  $t_0$ , and ultimately T\*<sub>0</sub>, are the uncontroversial best explanations of what has been said. Testimony is generally reliable. But, unfortunately, there are contexts where skepticism is demanded. The question before us is whether the testimony of mystics is one of these special circumstances where we should favor rival accounts of what has been said.

#### IV

St. Teresa's testimony fits perfectly into the schematic form described above.

e<sub>1</sub>. Statement: "I was at prayer . . ."

e<sub>2</sub>. Context: Written in her *Autobiography*.

e<sub>3</sub>. Relevant biography: Catholic nun.

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t<sub>0</sub>. She wrote it because she believed it to be true.

e<sub>3</sub> summarizes an incredibly rich amount of biographical detail. Much of it is relevant to the second stage assessment of her testimony. On the prior question of sincerity, however, I am confident that any conscientious reader will agree with me that the best explanation of what she wrote is that she was absolutely convinced that Christ was at her side. She writes with such grace, modesty, and insight, that her sincerity as an author is never seriously in question. Thus, we can move quickly to our second stage of explanatory inferences by supplying this inferred piece of new data:

e<sub>4</sub>. She sincerely believed that Christ was at her side.

Thus, we are led to the second, and most interesting, explanatory question -- why does she believe this? The answer she endorses, and the one that civil communication asks us to endorse as well, is the following:

T\*<sub>0</sub>. She believed that Christ was at her side because Christ really was at her side.

There are at least three important competing explanations of mystical experiences. The data that need to be explained may be experienced directly by the mystic, herself. Or, they may be learned of indirectly through the testimony of mystics. In either case, they cry out for explanation. Inference to the best explanation tells us that if we judge that the theist's explanation is superior to any serious rivals, this will provide important evidence for the truth of theism. If, on the other hand, we judge that any of the rival explanations are better accounts of the data, then, regardless of their intrinsic interest, mystical experiences will be of no evidential value to the theist.

## V

We should pause here to notice one important difference between first person and third person mystical reports. In order to take St. Teresa's testimony seriously, we were forced to infer her sincerity. Presumably St. Teresa does not have to assess the relevant evidence to discover that she is telling the truth; she simply knows it. Thus, she possesses a kind of epistemological authority to which those who simply hear of her experiences are never privileged.

Recall James' first epistemological principle:

- (1) Mystical states, when well developed, usually are, and have a right to be, absolutely authoritative over the individuals to whom they come.

The epistemological authority referred to here has nothing to do with honesty. It is assumed in the very statement of the principle that the experience has really happened.

James seems to be saying that St. Teresa is in a different explanatory position than we are with respect to—what all parties agree was—a genuine psychological occurrence.

Such a principle when extended to non-mystical experiences has disagreeable consequences. In the testimony case above our speaker could have sincerely believed whatever he reported. If he possessed *absolute epistemological authority*  $T^*_0$  would be self-authenticating.

$T^*_0$ . The speaker believes this because he knows what he is talking about -- he believes it because it is in fact true.

Suppose that I am the speaker and that I am aware of the dangers of the lack of relevant information or perceptual bias. Thus, I casually consider the following rival explanations:

$T^*_1$ . I believe it because I have suffered an hallucination.

$T^*_2$ . I believe it because my memory has deceived me.

The extension of James' principle would allow me to automatically rank order  $T^*_0$  significantly ahead of  $T^*_1$  or  $T^*_2$ . You, however, may well come to a significantly different judgment of explanatory plausibility, deciding that either one or both of the rivals is better than the original explanation of my sincerely held belief. We now seem faced with a problem of anything-goes relativism. My explanation of my belief is authoritative (the best) for me, but your explanation of my belief is controlling for you. And even if all of the qualified philosophical and psychological communities agree with your explanatory judgment, this in no way undermines my epistemological authority.

In fairness, James never suggested that absolute epistemological authority be extended to non-mystical contexts. But something like the same problem reappears for the mystic. St. Teresa sincerely believes that Christ was at her side. Thus, for her,  $T^*_0$  is automatically in first place.

$T^*_0$ . She believed that Christ was at her side because Christ really was at her side.

From what we know of her life it is indisputably clear that she did indeed take  $T^*_0$  to be the best explanation of her mystical experience. It is also true, however, that she seriously considered at least two rival explanations of what had happened to her.

$T^*_1$ . She believed that Christ was at her side because she was suffering from some physical pathology.

$T^*_2$ . She believed that Christ was at her side because the devil was deceiving her.

Both she and her confessors were very concerned with quasi-empirical tests to confirm or disconfirm these rival accounts. Her confident explanatory ranking was only possible after very seriously considering these rivals. Thus, one very undesirable consequence of James' principle is that it may suggest to the mystic that there is no need to consider rival explanations of the mystical experience. Even worse than this, however, is the problem of relativism. We, including all of the religious and scientific communities, may rank the rival hypothesis of insanity as the best explanation of David Koresh's apparently sincere

belief that God had spoken to him. Koresh, himself, is granted absolute epistemological authority to discount our explanation and substitute his own. This is epistemologically—and not just morally—perverse.

James seems to have made a rather elementary error. He has confused strength and unshakability of conviction with epistemological authority.

As a matter of psychological fact, mystical states of a well-pronounced and emphatic sort *are* usually authoritative over those who have them. They have been "there," and know. It is vain for rationalism to grumble about this. If the mystical truth that comes to a man proves to be a force that he can live by, what mandate have we to order him to live another way? We can throw him into a prison or a madhouse, but we cannot change his mind (James 1902, 414).

I concede that there are lots of circumstances, philosophical and practical, where we cannot change a person's mind about something he or she firmly believes. In many of these circumstances it would be inappropriate "to order him to live another way," and immoral to "throw him into a prison or a madhouse" if we fail to reason with him. Rationalism does not grumble about this, but it does give us a mandate to rationally criticize his reasoning.

James is surely mistaken. Disinterested third-parties are more reliable explainers than the mystic herself. Because the strength of her personal commitment is so strong, she will be less likely to fully consider the explanatory virtues of rival accounts. But, ultimately, the mystic is in precisely the same epistemological situation as those of us who only hear mystical testimony and are convinced that the mystic is honest.

## VI

St. Teresa explains her experience with implicit appeal to Swinburne's "principle of credulity"—Christ was at her side.

[I]f it seems (epistemically) to a subject that  $x$  is present, then probably  $x$  is present; what one seems to perceive is probably so. . . . [I]n the absence of special considerations, all religious experiences ought to be taken by their subjects as genuine, and hence as substantial grounds for belief in the existence of their apparent object (Swinburne 1991, 254).

Although it is stated in very different terms, Alston's "doxastic practice" principle gets at a similar point.

[I]t is rational to engage in any such practice that is socially established, that yields outputs that are free from massive internal and external contradiction, and that demonstrates a significant degree of self-support. This implies that it is rational to take any such practice to be reliable and hence a source of justification for the beliefs that it . . . engenders. . . . [T]he "mystical experience belief forming practice" satisfies the above conditions for rational acceptance (Alston 1991, 184-5).

Both principles have their basis in the epistemology of sense perception. How else do we avoid the skeptic's arguments other than by simply insisting at some point in the discussion that perception is reliable? What you see is what you get. None of this means, however, that every half-baked perceptual claim is automatically self-certifying. Both Swinburne and Alston included additional features—"the absence of special considerations" or being "free of massive internal and external contradiction"—which also must be satisfied.

Inference to the best explanation is consistent with both of these principles, both in their straightforwardly perceptual applications, and in the context of mystical experiences. What we must do to assure ourselves that either principle can be safely utilized in a particular context is to consider, and ultimately reject, rival explanations. Application of the principle of credulity, or the doxastic practice principle, might lead St. Teresa, or those of us who listen to her testimony, to the conclusion that Christ was at her side. But to confidently apply these principles is to have considered, and found less satisfactory, a couple of serious rival accounts.

William Alston describes his approach to the epistemology of Christian mystical practice as one of direct realism. If the testimony of mystics themselves is to be our guide, they were almost all metaphysical realists. When St. Teresa tells us, "I was at prayer . . . when Christ appeared at my side," it is extremely artificial to read her as saying anything other than that Christ *really* was at her side. Metaphysical realism seems demanded by epistemological considerations. For mystics themselves, as well as for a majority of scholars who have studied mystical experiences, these special states of consciousness have been taken as relevant and important theological evidence. Not that she needed any, but St. Teresa's experience constitutes for her definitive evidence for the existence of God. Epistemology, as well as any substantive area of philosophical investigation like natural theology, or mysticism, is more straightforward from the metaphysical realist's point of view.



There also appear to be some specifically theological considerations that point in the direction of metaphysical realism. William Alston articulates a reason that many theists would give for demurring from some of the rival explanations to be considered below:

Theistic religions hold that the basic truths of the religion were revealed to us by God. If so, why should God fail to give us propositions that are strictly true of Himself? Would it not be misleading at best, and deceptive at worst, if He were to provide us with accounts that are couched in terms of one of the many ways in which He could appear to us, rather than in terms of what He is and does? (Alston 1991, 256-7).

Regardless of the advantages—both epistemological and theological—metaphysical realism can survive as the most plausible account of St. Teresa's experience only by proving to be a better explanation than the following two alternative accounts.

## VII

There is something artificial about the single-minded focus so far on this one bit of mystical testimony. St. Teresa's authority is greatly enhanced by the fact that the experience she describes is far from unique. She reported many similar mystical experiences during her life, and the literature shows that these psychological occurrences are "corroborated" by the accounts of many other Christian mystics. These are very important additional data.

e<sub>5</sub>. Many other Christian mystics have reported similar kinds of experiences.

I think that there is little doubt that all of us—theists and skeptics alike—would explain St. Teresa's experience of Christ at her side as a delusion if such experiences were absolutely unheard of in the Christian tradition.

The mystical literature is a mixed blessing, however, for the metaphysical realist. In one sense the written record corroborates St. Teresa's experience, but in another it falsifies, or at least complicates, it. The problem is that non-Christian mystics report occurrences that bear a strong psychological similarity to her experience, but seem to have a very different religious content. Thus, if we are to consider all of the relevant data we must also include the following:

- e<sub>6</sub>. Many non-Christian, and non-theistic, mystics report experiences that are psychologically similar, but theologically quite different.

Indeed, e<sub>6</sub> provides the context for the most important interpretive disagreement between contemporary scholars of mysticism.

Consider the following explanatory hypothesis which is stated very clearly in Stace's *Mysticism and Philosophy*:

[T]here is a clear unanimity of evidence from Christian, Islamic, Jewish, Mahayana Buddhist, and Hindu sources, also supported by the witness of the pagan mystic Plotinus, and the modern Englishman . . . , that there is a definite type of mystical experience, the same in all cultures (Stace 1987, 89).

That mystical experiences form a phenomenological, and perhaps metaphysical, natural kind has seemed obvious to many of the analysts who have approached their studies from a comparative, cultural, or religious perspective. Following Stace, we can refer to this

position as the theory of the "universal core." The following hypothesis has come under sustained recent attack, but also continues to find able defenders:

T\*<sub>3</sub>. There is a universal core to many cross-cultural mystical experiences. They are conceived, experienced, and responded to from within the particular cultural and religious heritage of the individual mystic.

Clearly such a hypothesis is threatening to the Christian realist.

## VIII

The realist might attack this rival head-on. The theory of the universal core says that "there is a definite type of mystical experience, the same in all cultures." Serious doubts might be raised about this by simply comparing St. Teresa's experience of Christ at her side to the following:

The Ego has disappeared. I have realized my identity with Brahman and so all of my desires have melted away. I have arisen above my ignorance and my knowledge of this seeming universe. What is this joy I feel? Who shall measure it? . . . Now, finally and clearly, I know that I am the Atman [the soul identified with Brahman], whose nature is eternal joy. I see nothing, I hear nothing, I know that nothing is separate from me (Prabhavandana, 1970, 103).

How could anyone seriously suggest these experiences are the same? What does Stace mean when he talks about a *type* of mystical experience?

Consider the following examples of conscious experiences:

- (1) My experience of an idle daydream.
- (2) My experience of listening to Handel's *Messiah*.
- (3) My experience of enjoying a hot fudge sundae.
- (4) My experience of listening to the Beatles.
- (5) My experience of listening to my favorite piece of classical music.

(1) and (2) are the same—or relevantly similar—because they are both examples of *conscious experiences*. (2) and (3) are *sense experiences*; (2) and (4) are both *auditory experiences* (or perhaps, musical experiences). (2) and (5) are identical in a more interesting sense, however, since the *Messiah* happens to be my favorite piece of classical music. I take it to be obvious that the universal core hypothesis asserts a cross-cultural identity between mystical experiences that comes much closer to the relationship between (2) and (5), than the rather general relationship between (1) and (2).

The standard move for defenders of the universal core hypothesis has been to distinguish between the raw mystical *experiences*, themselves, and the *interpretations* that have been placed on them by various mystics.

[T]here is no necessary reason to suppose that [mystical accounts] involve different sorts of experience; the difference lies rather in the way the experience is interpreted. . . .

[There is a] contrast between experience and interpretation. . . . [M]ysticism is substantially the same in different cultures and religions (Smart 1965, 75).

If you find the *Messiah* to be repetitive and a two hour torture your description of the piece will no doubt be very different than mine. Nevertheless, it would make sense to say that you and I had been experiencing the same piece of orchestral music. To make such a case, however, we would need to conduct a more thorough phenomenological analysis.

All of this suggests a kind of "empirical" test. Mysticism is often characterized as a phenomenological concept. The emphasis we see in Stace and Smart on experiences, and interpretations of experiences, also suggests that we should consult some actual phenomenological analyses of mystical experience. Nelson Pike has recently completed just such a study of Christian mystical practice, with particular focus on "the several states of union." (Pike 1992, 14). He puts to the test the following claim by Stace:

"Union with God" is not an uninterpreted description of any human being's experience. It is a theistic interpretation of undifferentiated unity. St. Teresa's uninterpreted experience is the same as Eckhart's, but she is incapable of distinguishing between experience and interpretation so that when she experiences the divisionless oneness of the mystical consciousness she jumps at once to its conventional interpretation in terms of Christian beliefs (Stace 1987, 107).

On the basis of four chapters of careful phenomenological analysis of Christian mystics like St. Teresa, Pike is in a position to make embarrassing observations like the following:

Recall that in the Prayer of the Quiet, God and the soul of the mystic are said to be *close* while in Full Union and in the culmination stage of Rapture these same two objects are pictured as being in *mutual embrace*. . . . The same is true of the other descriptions

persistently offered of union phenomena. God *enwraps* and *penetrates* the soul; the soul is *submerged in* and *saturated by* God; God and the soul are *mingled*. Again the language is radically dualistic (Pike 1992, 108).

Grand metaphysical claims like Stace's are unlikely to be supported by the phenomenological method implicitly endorsed by most supporters of the ecumenical interpretation of mystical experiences.

## IX

In retrospect, the failure of the phenomenological method was only to be expected, at least by those of us who are at all sympathetic to the sociology of knowledge. Steven Katz presents the case in its starkest terms.

*There are no pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences.* Neither mystical experience nor more ordinary forms of experience give any indication, or any grounds for believing, that they are unmediated. That is to say, *all* experience is processed through, organized by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological ways. . . . This epistemological fact seems to me to be true, because of the sorts of beings we are, even with regard to the experiences of those ultimate objects of concern with which mystics have intercourse, e.g. God, Being, nirvana, etc (Katz 1978, 26).

If we accept that the given in experience is a myth, then the whole project of establishing cross-religion, or cross-cultural, identity for mystical experiences by phenomenology seems doomed from the start.

Phenomenological analysis will not provide evidence for the universal core hypothesis. Indeed, whatever direct evidence it does provide is likely to point in the opposite direction.

[T]he Hindu mystic does not have an experience of  $x$  which he then describes in the, to him, familiar language and symbols of Hinduism, but rather he has a Hindu experience, i.e. his experience is not an unmediated experience of  $x$ , but is itself the, at least partially, pre-formed anticipated Hindu experience of Brahman. Again, the Christian mystic does not experience some unidentified reality, which he then labels God, but rather has the at least partially prefigured Christian experiences of God, or Jesus, or the like (Katz 1978, 22).

The defense of the universal core hypothesis is based on a mischaracterized insight. The similarities between mystical experiences are surely psychological, perhaps religious, but not phenomenological.

None of these latter considerations, however, point us back in the direction of theological realism. Indeed, once we have jettisoned the hope of phenomenological similarity or identity, a very plausible explanation of cross-cultural mystical experience immediately suggests itself. Hick is one contemporary spokesperson for this theory.

The hypothesis proposed at this point hinges upon the distinction (first given by Kant) between something as it is in itself and as it appears to a consciousness dependent upon a particular system of perceptual machinery and endowed with a particular system of interpretive concepts congealed into a linguistic system. . . . [This] suggests the hypothesis that the infinite Real, in itself beyond the scope of other than purely formal concepts, is differently conceived, experienced and responded to from within the different cultural ways of being human (Hick 1989, 13).

The universal core theory is irreparably false, but it gets at something interesting and important. We might christen this explanatory strategy as the "post-Kantian thesis," or the

"pluralist hypothesis." In any case, we need to seriously consider the possibility that there exists some cross-cultural religious reality that many mystics, including St. Teresa, have made psychological contact with, and consciously experienced, within the cultural and linguistic framework they were raised. I propose, therefore, the following restructuring of T\*<sub>3</sub>.

T\*<sub>4</sub>. Mystics are in some direct contact with the infinite Real, in itself beyond the scope of other than purely formal concepts. It is differently conceived, experienced and responded to from within the different cultural ways of being human.

## X

A good number of contemporary philosophers and psychologists would be highly suspicious of both the theistic realist's account and that of the pluralist. These scholars would favor some sort of secular-naturalistic account. As we saw, even St. Teresa operating in a sixteenth century context was forced to seriously consider a naturalistic rival explanation of her experience.

T\*<sub>1</sub>. She believed that Christ was at her side because she was suffering from some physical pathology.

Contemporary materialists would likely explain St. Teresa's experience, as well as those of most other mystics, in the following terms:



T\*<sub>5</sub> Mystical experiences are simply the conscious manifestation of complicated neurophysiological occurrences within the mystics' central nervous systems.

Such an explanatory strategy, though widely endorsed and apparently plausible, proves to be surprising complicated to articulate and defend.

Secular naturalists emphasize certain features of St. Teresa's central nervous system. This will not, however, provide a completely satisfactory rival. Theistic defenders of T\*<sub>0</sub>, like Adams (1987), Swinburne (1991) and Alston (1991), adopt a sophisticated position on the relationship between consciousness, in general, and neurophysiological occurrences. They can then argue that a neurophysiological account of St. Teresa's experience is not a *rival* explanation, but a complementary one, articulated at a different explanatory level. After all, a neurophysiological account of my visual experience of my word-processor does not automatically count as a rival; it in no way suggests that this visual experience is an hallucination or a dream. Sophisticated versions of substance dualism are perfectly compatible with our most up to date neuroscience.

The neurophysiological explanation does not really address the question of the etiology of mystical experiences. Why was St. Teresa's central nervous system in an experience-of-Christ mode at that particular moment? Theistic realists believe that the interesting causal story is religious—the actions of God are responsible. Secular naturalists seek an internal causal account in terms of brain chemistry, or patterns of neural firings. It is not clear that empirical research will settle this matter, though continued breakthroughs will

inevitably strengthen the secular naturalist's position as we learn more about the underlying physiology of consciousness in general.

One looks in vain to contemporary cognitive science for detailed neurophysiological accounts of mysticism. This is hardly surprising. We are just at the beginning of the cognitive revolution. There are still huge empirical and methodological debates about consciousness and sensory experience in general. Such an admission may strike some readers as hand waving and a desperate attempt to avoid explanatory responsibility. It is not offered in that spirit. When knowledge of the mechanism of consciousness was in its true infancy, it was much easier for secular naturalists to propose physiological accounts. Recall the following from Huxley that is not altogether out of date:

[There is a] close similarity, in chemical composition, between mescaline and adrenalin. . . . [L]ysergic acid, an extremely potent hallucinogen derived from ergot, has a structural relationship to the others. . . . [A]drenochrome, which is a product of the decomposition of adrenalin, can produce the symptoms observed in mescaline intoxication. But adrenochrome probably occurs spontaneously in the human body. In other words, each of us may be capable of manufacturing a chemical, minute doses of which are known to cause profound changes in consciousness (Huxley 1963, 11).

I am not in any way suggesting that such a view would find supporters in contemporary neuroscience, but I take it to be obvious how this kind of account could be fleshed out to provide a satisfactory, and genuinely rival, explanation of St. Teresa's experience. Presumably more up to date naturalistic accounts would stress neural networks, or perhaps the relationship between consciousness and memory (Dennett 1991, and Churchland 1995).

Steven Katz suggests an epistemological principle governing mystical experiences that is even more surprising than those of William James:

[M]ystical experience is not and logically cannot be grounds for *any* final assertions about the nature or truth of any religious or philosophical positions nor, more, particularly, for any specific dogmatic or theological belief. . . . [M]ystical or more generally religious experience is irrelevant in establishing the truth or falsity of religion in general or any specific religion in particular (Katz 1978, 38).

Within the context of inference to the best explanation this seems overly pessimistic. We have data that are relevant, and cry out for explanation. We have focused on a single report by a Christian mystic, but there are many such reports, and many that are equally sincere. Thus we have an entire interpretive community composed of mystics themselves, and those of us who judge their testimony to be sincere. All of us must account for the following data:

E<sub>1</sub>. Scores of mystics have had experiences that they believe were direct encounters with God.

We have concentrated our discussion on three general alternative theories. First the direct realist account that the mystics themselves almost universally prefer:

T<sub>C</sub>. Mystics believe that they have had direct encounters with God because they did in fact have such direct encounters.

Next there was the reductionist explanation:

T<sub>R</sub>. Mystics believe that they have had direct encounters with God because they have experienced complicated physiological and psychological occurrences.

And finally we have the pluralist account:

T<sub>P</sub>. These mystics believe that they have had direct encounters with God because they were in contact with the Real (the numinous, etc.) which they conceived, experienced, and responded to from within their Christian heritage.

The question, of course, remains as to the best explanation of mystical experiences. Inference to the best explanation is sometimes criticized on the grounds that it fails to provide a formula for discovering which theory is best. But that was never its purpose. It is intended as a descriptive account of the relationships between data and explanation that are perceived to hold when intelligent people acknowledge cases of good evidence. Ultimately, it asks us to make considered subjective judgments as to what we see as the best explanation, and then hope that within these subjective judgments we will discover intersubjective agreement. I have already confessed that natural theology may be one of the least likely areas in which to expect explanatory consensus.

I close, therefore, with a couple of brief considerations that are relevant to my own rank ordering of the three potential explanations of mystical experiences. T<sub>C</sub> has to rank as the

poorest explanation for two reasons. Pain, suffering, and misery are manifest features of this world. Evil provides relevant data that the theistic religions have a very difficult time explaining, and hence it provides additional evidence against  $T_C$  (Johnson 1984). Furthermore,  $T_C$  asks us to assume that one particular religious tradition is privileged to the metaphysically correct conceptual scheme and the theologically correct explanation of mystical experiences. All other traditions are not simply incorrect in their judgments about explanatory plausibility, they do not even possess the conceptual and linguistic tools to appreciate the nature of theological reality. This position is simply too self-serving and arrogant to be correct.

With respect to  $T_R$  and  $T_P$ , however, the explanatory race is much more interesting. My own secular and materialist biases lead me to prefer  $T_R$ , but I have to confess that I cannot really articulate any principled reason for treating this explanation of mystical experiences as superior. The context of the debate between the pluralist and the reductionist is easy enough to anticipate. Reductionists will appeal to the explanatory virtue of parsimony. Clearly the ontological commitment of secular-naturalists is simpler than that of religious pluralists. This certainly counts as one reason to prefer  $T_R$ . Pluralists, however, can easily respond that this account is *too* simple. Good explanations must also be complete—they must account for all of the relevant data. Secular naturalists have no convincing account of the internal etiology of the neurophysiological states that they claim constitute the entire story about mystical experiences. Pluralism, at least, provides some kind of genuinely causal account.

Intersubjectivity, here, is extremely unlikely. Hopefully, pluralists can see the ontological economy involved in the reductionist account. But reductionists need to acknowledge

how much is left unaccounted for in their hypothesis. Left out of the discussion, however, are the Christian realists. Their explanatory preferences are so out of line with this author that one has to suspect more than disagreement, but the beginnings of a breakdown in communication. Perhaps this is the source of Katz's pessimism. But, I prefer to conclude more optimistically. I strongly suspect that I have succeeded in communicating with Christian realists like Alston. The breakdown between us is not one of linguistic communication. We disagree, but hopefully better understand one another. Perhaps, even better respect the other's position on the evidence.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Swinburne (1991), Mackie (1982), and Johnson (1993).

<sup>2</sup> By far the most thorough examination of the evidential value of testimony from the perspective of inference to the best explanation is contained in the work of Larry Wright (Wright 1982, 1989, 2001). The characterization of testimony to follow is deeply indebted to Wright's treatment of this issue.