

What Does Mysticism Have To Teach Us About Consciousness?*

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A key strategy for understanding a complex phenomenon is to look at its simplest manifestations. The gene structure of *E. coli*, for example, has contributed significantly to our understanding of gene functioning in more complex organisms. Mystical experiences may represent the simplest form of human consciousness and thus, by the same token, may provide valuable insights into the nature of human consciousness.

Introduction: Why Mysticism?

In this article I would like to bring the findings of my somewhat unusual but increasingly accepted field — mysticism — to the discussion, for I think they may offer some helpful insights about consciousness. Why? When a biologist seeks to understand a complex phenomenon, one key strategy is to look to at it in its simplest form. Probably the most famous is the humble bacterium *E. coli*. Its simple gene structure has allowed us to understand much of the gene functioning of complex species. Similarly many biologists have turned to the “memory” of the simple sea slug to understand our own more kaleidoscopic memory. Freud and Durkheim both used totemism, which they construed as the simplest form of religion, to understand the complexities of religious life.¹ The methodological principle is: to understand something complex turn to its simple forms.

Mystical experiences may represent just such a simple form of human consciousness. Usually our minds are an enormously complex stew of thoughts, feelings, sensations, wants, snatches of song, pains, drives, daydreams and, of course, consciousness itself more or less aware of it all. To understand consciousness *in itself*, the obvious thing would be to clear away as much of this internal detritus and noise as possible. It turns out that mystics seem to be doing precisely that. The technique that most mystics use is some form of meditation or contemplation. These are procedures that, often by recycling a mental subroutine,² systematically reduce mental activity. During meditation, one begins to slow down the thinking process, and have fewer or less intense thoughts.

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1 I am indebted to the psychologist of religion William Parsons, in a private communication, for this observation.

2 See Ornstein (1976).

One's thoughts become as if more distant, vague, or less preoccupying; one stops paying as much attention to bodily sensations; one has fewer or less intense fantasies and day-dreams. Thus by reducing the intensity or compelling quality of outward perception and inward thoughts, one may come to a time of greater stillness. Ultimately one may become utterly silent inside, as though in a gap between thoughts, where one becomes completely perception- and thought-free. One neither thinks nor perceives any mental or sensory content. Yet, despite this suspension of content, one emerges from such events confident that one had remained awake inside, fully conscious. This experience, which has been called the pure consciousness event, or PCE, has been identified in virtually every tradition. Though PCEs typically happen to any single individual only occasionally, they are quite regular for some practitioners.³ The pure consciousness event may be defined as a wakeful but contentless (non-intentional) consciousness.

These PCEs, encounters with consciousness devoid of intentional content, may be just the least complex encounter with awareness *per se* that we students of consciousness seek. The PCE may serve, in short, as the *E. coli* of consciousness studies.⁴

But the story does not stop here. Regular and long-term meditation, according to many traditions, leads to advanced experiences, known in general as "enlightenment." Their discriminating feature is a deep shift in epistemological structure: the experienced relationship between the self and one's perceptual objects changes profoundly. In many people this new structure becomes permanent.⁵

These long-term shifts in epistemological structure often take the form of two quantum leaps in experience; typically they develop sequentially.⁶ The first is an experience of a permanent interior stillness, even while engaged in thought and activity — one remains aware of one's own awareness while simultaneously remaining conscious of thoughts, sensations and actions. Because of its phenomenological dualism — a heightened cognizance of awareness itself plus a consciousness of thoughts and objects — I call it the dualistic mystical state (DMS). The second shift is described as a perceived unity of one's own awareness *per se* with the objects around one, an immediate sense of a quasi-physical unity between self, objects and other people. States akin to this have been called "extrovertive-" or sometimes "nature-" mysticism; but I prefer to call it the unitive mystical state, UMS.⁷

3 See the articles in Forman (1990) and Section I of Forman (1998).

4 Bruce Mangan (1994) suggests this when he says that "mystic[al] encounters. . . would seem to manifest an extreme state of consciousness" (p. 251).

5 James' famous characterization of mysticism in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* states that a defining feature of mysticism is "transiency" (James, 1902/1983, p. 381). My evidence says this is simply wrong.

6 I say typically because sometimes one may skip or not attain a particular stage. Ken Wilber (1980) claims sequence. William Barnard (1995), however, disputes this claim of sequence.

7 One key element of the UMS is that it is a *permanent* shift in the structure of awareness. "Extrovertive" mysticism, a term coined by W.P. Stace, implies that one has mystical experiences out in the world, while we are "extrovertively" aware. Zaehner coined the term "nature mys-

Like the PCE, these latter two may serve as fertile fields for students of consciousness to plough. To understand them, I want to introduce the idea of the *relative intensity* of a thought or desire. Some desires have a high relative intensity. Let's say I am walking across the street when I see a huge truck hurtling at me. Virtually 100% of my attention is taken up with the truck, the fear, and getting out of the way. It is virtually impossible for me to think about anything else at that time. I don't even consider keeping my suit clean, how my hair might look, the discomfort in my tummy, or the classes I will teach tomorrow. The fear and running are utterly intense, we might say, consuming nearly 100% of my attention.

That evening, I come home starved, and rush to the fridge. I may be civil to my kids and wife, but I have very little patience. My desire for food is very intense, for it preoccupies most of my consciousness, but it consumes less of my attention than did jumping away from the truck.

Some thoughts consume very little of my attention. Driving to work the next day, for example, I might ruminate about my classes, remember the near miss with the truck, half hear the news on the radio, and think about getting that noise in the car fixed — nearly all at once. None of these thoughts or desires is very intense, for none has a strong emotional cathexis that draws me fully into it. My attention can flow in and out of any of them, or the traffic ahead, effortlessly. In short the intensity of a thought or desire tends to increase with the amount of my consciousness that is taken up with that thought or feeling. Conversely, the thought's intensity tends to lessen when I am able to retain more attention for other issues, and for my wider perspective.

Now, as I understand them, advanced mystical experiences result from the combination of regular PCEs plus a minimization of the relative intensity of emotions and thoughts. That is, over time one decreases the compulsive or intense cathexis value of *all* of one's desires. The de-intensifying of emotional attachments means that, over the years, one's attention is progressively available to sense its own quiet interior character more and more fully, until eventually one is able to effortlessly maintain a subtle cognizance of one's own awareness simultaneously with thinking about and responding to the world: a reduction in the relative intensity of *all* of one's thoughts and desires.

This state of being cognizant of one's own inner awareness while simultaneously maintaining the ability to think and talk about that consciousness offers students of consciousness a unique situation. For these subjects may be both unusually cognizant of features or patterns of their own awareness and also able to describe them to us: a kind of ongoing microscope on human consciousness. In short, while not as phenomenolo-

ticism" to describe such paths as Zen or Taoism, which describe mystical experiences in nature. This he distinguishes from the theistic traditions, among others. But in the UMS, as I understand this form of life, the sense of being in contact with the expansive emptiness that extends beyond the self, never fades away, whether one is in nature or in the city, whether the eyes are open or closed, and whether one is a Zen Buddhist, a Jew or a Christian. Thus each of these accepted terms define this experience too narrowly, and thus I coin my own broader term.

gically simple as PCEs, these experiences may provide us with highly useful reports about the character of human awareness.

Several additional preliminary matters: First, perforce we will be drawing conclusions based on the experiences of a very few people. Most of us haven't had any experiences like the ones I will describe, and some may sound pretty strange. Yet we often do generalize from the unusual to the general. Just think how much we have concluded about consciousness from a very few: epileptics, people with unusual skull accidents or brain injuries, the man who mistook his wife for a hat, etc. From the *pathology* of a very few we have learned a great deal about the relationship of one side of the brain to the other, of two kinds of knowing, of information storage and retrieval, of impulse control, etc. Indeed it is common practice to take data about a few unusual individuals and generalize it to the many. Here again we are studying the data of a few. But rather than the pathological, we will be studying people — Teresa of Avila, Vasubandu, Ramana Maharshi, etc. — who are not “pathological” but unusually self-actualized.

Should we not be as willing to learn from the experiences of the unusually healthy as we are to learn from the unusually diseased?

The second matter is definitional: What do we mean by mysticism? What is generally known as mysticism is often said to have two strands, which are traditionally distinguished as *apophatic* and *kataphatic* mysticism, oriented respectively towards emptying or imagistically filling. These two are generally described in terms that are *without* or *with* sensory language. The psychologist Roland Fischer has distinguished a similar pairing as *trophotropic* and *ergotropic*, experiences that phenomenologically involve inactivity or activity. *Kataphatic* or imagistic mysticism involves hallucinations, visions, auditions or even a sensory-like smell or taste; it thus involves activity and is *ergotropic*. *Apophatic* mystical experiences are devoid of such sensory-like content, and are thus *trophotropic*. When they use non-sensory, non-imagistic language (cf. Smart, 1982), authors like Eckhart, Dogen, al-Hallaj, Bernadette Roberts and Shankara are all thus *apophatic* mystics. Because visions and other *ergotropic* experiences are not the simple experiences of consciousness that we require, I will focus my attentions exclusively on the quieter *apophatic* forms.

Finally, I want to emphasize that phenomenology is not science. When we describe these experiences, we do not gain hard scientific proof thereby. There can be many ways to explain an unusual experience: one might say it was the result of what one ate for dinner, a faulty memory, psycho-somatic processes, a quantum microtubule collapse, or an encounter with Ultimate Truth.⁸ Without further argumentation, phenomenology cannot serve as the sole basis for any theory of reality. It may be taken only as a finger, *pointing* in some direction, rather than *conclusive evidence* for or against a particular thesis. This is how I see my role in this paper. I will simply describe mystical experiences as accurately as I can, and say where I see their fingers pointing. That is, I

8 These may not be mutually exclusive. See, for example, neurologist Oliver Sacks' comments on migraines and mysticism in the case of Hildegard of Bingen (Sacks, 1994, pp. 238–9).

will attempt to coax metaphysical hypotheses out of these phenomenological descriptions.

First-person reports, especially those that are about unusual experiences are, of course, notoriously unreliable. When an epileptic says that “the table seemed wavy,” or when a man asserts that his wife is a “hat,” these reports are not taken as data about the world, but about their condition.⁹ One may want to assert that a mystic’s report should be regarded similarly.

But we must be careful here, for first-person reports can also be veridical or even sources of wisdom. For example, in the kingdom of the blind, the “first-person” report of a sighted fellow that “the mountain peak near the village is in the shape of five fingers” may be regarded as the rantings of a lunatic or as information about the mountains. Similarly, when Woodward and Bernstein spoke with the Watergate informant “Deep Throat,” they could have taken his utterances as paranoid ramblings, data about his developing psychosis, or as information about the Nixon administration.

How can we determine which way to regard the unusual first-person reports of the mystics? If we were Woodward and Bernstein, how would we decide? Common sense seems a good place to begin. We might ask, does Deep Throat, or the mystics in our case, *seem* unconnected or delusional? I believe most of us would say no. In fact many regard Meister Eckhart, Teresa of Avila, the authors of the Upanishads, and others who tell us of such experiences as unusually wise. Certainly they do not seem utterly unhinged, physically ill, etc. Secondly, we might ask, do others in a situation similar to Deep Throat’s describe things similarly? In our case, assuming reasonable cultural differences in language and detail, do mystics from around the world describe things largely similarly? Here again the answer is yes. We shall find a reasonable amount of similarity among their descriptions, a family resemblance. They tend to confirm each others reports. Finally, is there other confirming evidence for our Deep Throats’ claims? Here the information is not in: just how consciousness works, relates to the world or the brain, is anything but established.

In sum, it makes sense to regard the mystics’ unusual reports about the world as more like those of a Deep Throat than those of an epileptic. But also, again as with Deep Throat, the information we can glean from them is not, by itself, reliable enough to base a theory of consciousness solely on it. It will take the hard-working Woodwards and Bernsteins in the scientific and philosophical trenches to verify or deny the suggestions of our Deep Throats.

Three Mystical Phenomena and their Implications

Pure consciousness events

Let me begin by offering several reports of the first of the mystical phenomena I men-

⁹ I am grateful for Joseph Goguen, private communication, for articulating this question so clearly.

tioned above, the pure consciousness event (PCE). First, from Christian mystical literature,¹⁰ St. Teresa of Avila writes of what she calls the “orison of union”:

During the short time the union lasts, she is deprived of every feeling, and even if she would, she could not think of any single thing. . . . She is utterly dead to the things of the world. . . . I do not even know whether in this state she has enough life left to breathe. It seems to me she has not; or at least that if she does breathe, she is unaware of it. . . . The natural action of all her faculties [are suspended]. She neither sees, hears, nor understands (James, 1902/1983, p. 409).¹¹

Several key features of this experience jump out. First, Teresa tells us that one reaches this “orison of unity” by gradually reducing thought and understanding, eventually becoming “utterly dead” to things, encountering neither sensation, thought nor perceptions. One becomes as simple as possible. Eventually one stops thinking altogether, not able to “think of any single thing . . . arresting the use of her understanding . . . utterly dead to the things of the world.” And yet, she clearly implies, one remains awake.¹²

Meister Eckhart describes something similar as the *gezucken*, rapture, of St. Paul, his archetype of a transient mystical experience:

. . . the more completely you are able to draw in your powers to a unity and forget all those things and their images which you have absorbed, and the further you can get from creatures and their images, the nearer you are to this and the readier to receive it. If only you could suddenly be unaware of all things, then you could pass into an oblivion of your own body as St Paul did. . . . In this case . . . memory no longer functioned, nor understanding, nor the senses, nor the powers that should function so as to govern and grace the body. . . . In this way a man should flee his senses, turn his powers inward and sink into an oblivion of all things and himself (Walshe, 1982, p. 7).

Like St. Teresa, Eckhart specifically asserts the absence of sensory content (“nor the senses”), as well as mental objects (“devoid of” memory, understanding, senses, etc.). One becomes oblivious of one’s “own body” and “all things.” In short one becomes “unaware of all things,” i.e. devoid of all mental and sensory content.

The absence of thought and sensation is repeated in the following passage from the Upanishads when describing the state these early Hindu texts call *turiya*, the “fourth.”

Verily when a knower has restrained his mind from the external, and the breathing spirit (*prana*) has put to rest objects of sense, thereupon let him continue void of conceptions. Since the living individual (*jiva*) who is named “breathing spirit” has arisen here from what is not breathing spirit, therefore, verily, let the breathing spirit restrain his breath-

10 Forman (1990) offers a rich compendium of reports of the PCE. I have intentionally offered here several reports of this experience that are not included there.

11 James is quoting from St. Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, in *Oeuvres*, trans. Bouix, vol. 3, pp. 421–4.

12 The mystic apparently remains conscious throughout. Although Teresa does not explicitly say the mystic is not asleep, I cannot imagine anyone spilling so much ink on merely sleeping or blacking out, or on something like a coma. See below for more explicit statements to this effect.

ing spirit in what is called the fourth condition (*turiya*) — Maitri Upanishad 6:19 (Hume, 1931, p. 436).

Here again one has “put to rest objects of sense,” i.e. gradually laid aside all sensations, and continued “void of conceptions,” i.e. not thinking. And yet the Upanishads are insistent that one remains conscious, indeed becomes nothing but consciousness itself. The consciousness that one reaches in *turiya* comes to be known in Samkhya philosophy as “*purusha*,” often translated as awareness or consciousness itself, that which “illuminates” or “witnesses” thoughts, feelings, and actions.¹³ The *purusha* or awareness that one reaches during this experience is described as “sheer contentless presence (*saskitva*) . . . that is nonintentional” (Larson, 1979, p. 77).

Here is a report from the present author’s own twenty-eight year practice of neo-Advaitan (Hindu-derived) Transcendental Meditation, which suggests the persistence of consciousness throughout such events.

Sometimes during meditation my thoughts drift away entirely, and I gain a state I would describe as simply being awake. I’m not thinking about anything. I’m not particularly aware of any sensations, I’m not aware of being absorbed in anything in particular, and yet I am quite certain (after the fact) that I haven’t been asleep. During it I am simply awake or simply present.

It is odd to describe such an event as being awake or being present, for those terms generally connote an awareness of something or other. But in this experience there is no particular or identifiable object of which I am aware. Yet I am driven to say I am awake for two reasons. First, I emerge with a quiet, intuited certainty that I was continually present, that there was an unbroken continuity of experience or of consciousness throughout the meditation period, even if there seemed to have been periods from which I had no particular memories. I just know that there was some sort of continuity of myself (however we can define that) throughout.¹⁴

In Buddhism such pure consciousness events are called by several names: *nirodhasamapatti*, or cessation meditation; *samjnavedayitanirodha*, the cessation of sensation and conceptualization; *sunyata*, emptiness; or most famously, *samadhi*, meditation without content (cf. Griffiths, 1990). What is most fascinating about traditional Buddhist explorations of this state is that despite the fact that one is said to be utterly devoid of content, according to Yogacara Buddhist theorists one’s consciousness is said to *persist* as “some form of contentless and attributeless consciousness” (Griffiths, 1990, p. 83). That is, despite the fact that one is not aware of any specific content or thought, “something persists” in this contentlessness, and that is consciousness itself: “I, though abiding in emptiness, am now abiding *in the fullness thereof*” (Nagao, 1978, p. 67). When discussing this possibility that one may abide in the “fullness” of “emptiness,” Vasub-

13 These two are not quite equivalent. *Atman*, when seen in its fullest, according to the Upanishads and to Advaita Vedanta, merges with *Brahman*, and thus is experienced as including the object or content of perception. *Purusha*, according to Samkhya, is more an independent monad. It thus remains forever separate from its content. But the two both represent the human awareness, however differently understood.

14 This account is taken from Forman (1998).

andu states:

It is perceived as it really is that, when anything does not exist in something, the latter is empty with regard to the former; and further it is understood as it really is that, when, in this place *something remains, it exists here as a real existent*.¹⁵

In sum, the PCE may be defined as a wakeful but contentless (non-intentional) experience. Though one remains awake and alert, emerging with the clear sense of having had “an unbroken continuity of experience,” one neither thinks, nor perceives nor acts. W.T. Stace (1960):

Suppose then that we obliterate from consciousness all objects physical or mental. When the self is not engaged in apprehending objects it becomes aware of itself. The self itself emerges. The self, however, when stripped of all psychological contents or objects, is not another thing, or substance, distinct from its contents. It is the bare unity of the manifold of consciousness from which the manifold itself has been obliterated (p. 86).

Now what implications can we draw from the pure consciousness event about the nature of human consciousness?

- 1 We have a pattern here that is seen across cultures and eras. This, in combination with the reports offered in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*, suggests that the phenomenon is not an artifact of any one culture but is something closer to an experience that is reasonably common and available in a variety of cultural contexts.¹⁶
- 2 Thomas Clark and other defenders of functionalism have suggested that consciousness is *identical to* certain of our information-bearing and behaviour-controlling functions, even going so far as to define it thus (Clark, 1995, p. 241). Others have suggested that consciousness is an artifact or an epiphenomenon of perception, action and thought, and that it arises *only* as a concomitant of these phenomena. Our accounts tend to *disconfirm* this view, which is generally argued on *a priori* grounds. Rather they suggest that consciousness *does* persist even when one has *no* perception, thought or evaluation. This suggests that consciousness should not be defined as merely an epiphenomenon of perception, an evaluative mechanism, or an arbiter of perceptual functions, but rather as something that exists *independently* of them.
- 3 Some have suggested that if we can understand how we can tie together perceptions and thoughts — the so called binding problem — we will *ipso facto* understand consciousness.¹⁷ Now, how we bind together perceptions is a very interesting question

15 Vasubandu commentary on Vs. 1.1 of the Madhyanta Vibhaga, quoted in Nagao (1978). Vasubandu is here wrestling with just the focus that made Yogacara so distinctive and clear. In its focus on the *alayavijnana*, it deals directly with the question of what remains in “cessation meditation.” Steven Collins (1982) believes this is a mistaken view of the nature of *samadhi*, though unfortunately he never directly confronts such Yogacara texts. For comparable analyses from a Zen perspective, with explicit comparisons with Yogacara, see e.g. Chang Chen Chi (1970), pp. 167–71.

16 See especially Forman (1990), Part I.

17 This debate goes back at least to Kant’s criticism of Hume’s “associationism” in the eighteenth century. For a discussion of contemporary parallels, see Hardcastle (1994).

for cognitive psychology, neurobiology and philosophy of mind. But even if we understand how we do tie together perceptions, we will not *necessarily* understand the phenomenon of consciousness *per se* thereby, for according to these mystical accounts, it is more fundamental than a mere binding function.¹⁸ These reports suggest that binding is something done *by* or *for* consciousness, not something that creates consciousness.¹⁹

- 4 Our evidence suggests that we should conceptually and linguistically differentiate *merely* being aware or awake from its functional activities. Accordingly, I propose to use the terms as follows: (i) “awareness” and “consciousness” for that facet of consciousness which is aware within itself and which may persist even without intentional content; (ii) “awareness of” and “consciousness of” to refer to that feature of experience which is cognizant when we are *intentionally* aware of something; and (iii) “pure awareness” and “pure consciousness” to refer to awareness without intentional content.²⁰
- 5 Reports of pure consciousness suggest that, despite the absence of mental content, the subjects were somehow aware *that* they remained aware throughout the period of the PCE. Apparently they sensed a continuity of awareness through past and present. If they did, even though there was no content, then they must have somehow *directly* recalled that they had been aware despite the absence of remembered content.²¹ This implies human awareness *has* the ability to tie itself together and to know intuitively that it has persisted.²²

We may want to say that being conscious seems to entail this sort of direct self-recollection, a presence to oneself that is distinct from the kind of presence we have to percep-

18 If we think in a socio-cultural way here, we might note that our long western worldview, with its roots in the Judaeo-Christian past, in the protestant capitalistic history, and in the history of science, would tend to favour a definition of consciousness in active, masculine, intentional, and “doing” terminology. Thus consciousness is, in this view, always vectorial, intentionally pointing towards this or that. Such a definition fits how people are expected to act in such a culture. Contemplative traditions and the east, on the other hand, tend to be more open to defining consciousness as *awareness per se*, or just being. In the west we may take these to be too passive, feminine, but they “fit” the more station-oriented caste and natal-status behavioural patterns. My thanks to Bill Parsons for this observation.

19 Logically: awareness is a necessary but not sufficient condition for binding; binding is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for awareness.

20 This usage preserves Deikman’s (1996) separation of awareness from the other senses of “I,” and Chalmers’ (1995) similar distinction. My thanks to Jonathan Shear for pointing out that I have reversed Chalmers’ terms (he calls awareness in itself “consciousness” and connects its various functional phenomena with the term “awareness”). I believe that my usage is in better accord both with ordinary speech and the traditional scholarly use of “pure consciousness” and “pure consciousness event.”

21 See the extended discussion of this possibility in Forman (1998).

22 Here language fails us. The awareness is not in any sense conscious of the passage of time; rather I am suggesting that awareness ties itself together through what an external observer would note as the passage of time.

tions and other intentional content. In this sense, the pure consciousness event tends to affirm Bernard Lonergan's distinction between our conscious presence to intentional objects and our consciousness of consciousness itself:

There is the presence of the object to the subject, of the spectacle to the spectator; there is also the presence of the subject to himself, and this is not the presence of another object dividing his attention, of another spectacle distracting the spectator; it is presence in, as it were, another dimension, presence concomitant and correlative and opposite to the presence of the object. Objects are present by being attended to but subjects are present as subjects, not by being attended to, but by attending. As the parade of objects marches by, spectators do not have to slip into the parade to be present to themselves; they have to be present to themselves for anything to be present to them (Lonergan, 1967, p. 226, quoted in McCarthy, 1990, p. 234).

In sum, the PCE militates towards a distinction between consciousness or awareness *per se* and its usual binding, relational and culturally-trained processes. It suggests that consciousness is more than its embodied activities.

The dualistic mystical state, the peculiar "oceanic feeling"

The second mystical phenomenon bears a dualistic pattern. Let us look at a few reports. The first comes from the autobiography of a living American mystic, Bernadette Roberts, middle-aged ex-nun, mother, housewife, and author of *The Experience of No-Self*. She had been in the practice of meditating in a nearby monastery, she tells us, and had often had the experience of complete silence we described above. Previously such experiences had sparked fear in her, perhaps a fear of never returning. But on this particular afternoon, as her meditation was ending,

once again there was a pervasive silence and once again I waited for the onset of fear to break it up. But this time the fear never came. . . . Within, all was still, silent and motionless. In the stillness, I was not aware of the moment when the fear and tension of waiting had left. Still I continued to wait for a movement not of myself and when no movement came, I simply remained in a great stillness (Roberts, 1984, p. 20).

She became silent inside but, to her surprise, did not emerge from that silence. She stood up and walked out of her chapel, "like a feather floats in the wind," while her silence continued unabated. No temporary meditative experience, this was a permanent development of that quiet empty interior silence.²³

. . . Once outside, I fully expected to return to my ordinary energies and thinking mind, but this day I had a difficult time because I was continually falling back into the great silence (*ibid.*).

She "remained in a great stillness," driving down the road, talking on the phone, and cutting the carrots for dinner. In fact that inner stillness was never again to leave her.

She experienced her interior silence as her original "consciousness," by which I under-

²³ William James' thought that mysticism is "transient," i.e. short lived, clearly does not capture Bernadette Roberts' experience, nor many of the experiences documented in this section.

stand that she experienced it as devoid of the intellectual self-reflection that generally accompanies experiences. She describes this new state as a continuation of what she had encountered when she was in her meditative silence (PCE); only here she remains fully cognizant of her own silent awareness even while active.

My own previously published autobiographical report of such a state also associates a permanent interior silence with consciousness:

This began in 1972. I had been practicing meditation for about three years, and had been on a meditation retreat for three and a half months. Over several days something like a series of tubes (neuronal bundles?) running down the back of my neck became, one by one, utterly quiet. This transformation started on the left side and moved to the right. As each one became silent, all the noise and activity inside these little tubes just ceased. There was a kind of a click or a sort of “zipping” sensation, as the nerve cells or whatever it was became quiet.²⁴ It was as if there had always been this very faint and unnoticed activity, a background of static, so constant that I had never before noticed it. When each of these tubes became silent, all that noise just ceased entirely. I only recognized the interior noise or activity in these tubes in comparison to the silence that now descended. One by one these tubes became quiet, from left to right. It took a couple of weeks and finally the last one on the right went *zip*, and that was it. It was over.

After the last tube had shifted to this new state, I discovered that a major though subtle shift had occurred. From that moment forward, *I was silent inside*. I don’t mean I didn’t think, but rather that the feeling inside of me was as if I was entirely empty, a perfect vacuum.²⁵ Since that time all of my thinking, my sensations, my emotions, etc., have seemed not quite connected to me inside. It was and is as if what was *me*, my consciousness itself, was (and is) now this emptiness. The *silence* was now me, and the thoughts that have gone on inside have not felt quite in contact with what is really “me,” this empty awareness. “I” was now silent inside. My thinking has been as if on the outside of this silence without quite contacting it: When I saw, felt or heard something, that perception or thought has been seen by this silent consciousness, but it has not been quite connected to this interior silence.

In this experience the silence is explicitly associated with awareness. It is experienced as “the I,” “what was really “me,” “my consciousness itself.” Somehow this area in the back of the head seems to be associated with being aware; as it became silent, a sense of the self or consciousness itself within became more articulated, and was now experienced as silent.

Like Roberts’, this shift to an interior silence was permanent.²⁶ Thus we should call it a state, not a transient experience. I call it the dualistic mystical state (DMS).

Descriptions of a DMS are surprisingly common in the mystical literature. Teresa of

24 Here I am struck by the parallel with the rapid shifting of a physical system as it becomes coherent. Disorganized light just “shifts” or “zips” into laser light nearly instantaneously.

25 Writing this, I think of the parallel between this sense and Bernadette Roberts’ sense of having lost the usual “unlocalized sense of herself”

26 It is my impression that the awareness of the specific locations within the body is not essential to this transformation.

Avila writes of such a dualistic state. Speaking of herself in the third person, I believe, she writes:

However numerous were her trials and business worries, the essential part of her soul seemed never to move from [its] dwelling place. So in a sense she felt that her soul was divided . . . Sometimes she would say that it was doing nothing but enjoy[ing] itself in that quietness, while she herself was left with all her trials and occupations so that she could not keep it company (Peers, 1961, p. 211).

She too describes an experience in which, even while working and living, one also maintains a clear sense of the interior awareness, a persisting sense of an unmoving silence at one's core.

Meister Eckhart describes something similar, calling it the Birth of the Word In the Soul. One of Eckhart's clearest descriptions is from the treatise "On Detachment." It analogizes the two aspects of man with a door and its hinge pin. Like the outward boards of a door, the outward man moves, changes, and acts. The inward man, like the hinge pin, does not move. He — or it — remains uninvolved with activity and does not change at all. This, Eckhart concludes, is the way one should really conduct a life: one should act yet remain inwardly uninvolved. Here is the passage:

And however much our Lady lamented and whatever other things she said, she was *always in her inmost heart in immovable detachment*. Let us take an analogy of this. A door opens and shuts on a hinge. Now if I compare the outer boards of the door with the outward man, I can compare the hinge with the inward man. When the door opens or closes the outer boards move to and fro, but the hinge *remains immovable* in one place and it is not changed at all as a result. So it is also here . . . (Clark and Skinner, 1958, p. 167; emphasis mine.)

A hinge pin moves on the outside and remains unmoving at its centre. To act and yet remain "in her inmost heart in immovable detachment" depicts precisely this dualistic life. One acts, yet at an unchanging level within retains a sense of something unmoving. One lives a dichotomous existence. Inside, she experiences an interior silence, outside she acts. Elsewhere Eckhart describes what this is like:

When the detached heart has the highest aim, it must be towards the Nothing, because in this there is the greatest receptivity. Take a parable from nature: if I want to write on a wax tablet, then no matter how noble the thing is that is [already] written on the tablet, I am none the less vexed because I cannot write on it. If I really want to write I must delete everything that is written on the tablet, and the tablet is never so suitable for writing as when absolutely nothing is written on it. (*ibid.*, p. 168.)

The emphasis in this passage is on the achievement of emptiness within. One has "deleted" everything inside; one comes to a "Nothing" inside; the tablet is "blank." When one is truly empty within, comes to "the Nothing," what goes on "outside" is of lesser significance, for it is unconnected to the inner "nothing." Only once this interior "Nothing" is established does one truly begin "acting rightly." This is highly reminiscent of the empty interior silence achieved by our other reporters.

In sum, in this DMS the subject has a sense, on a permanent or semi-permanent basis,

of being in touch with his or her own deepest awareness, experienced as a silence at one's core, even while remaining conscious of the external sensate world. Awareness itself is experienced as silent and as separate from its intentional content.

This dualistic mystical state seems to evolve gradually into another state. First this author's own experience:

Over the years, this interior silence has slowly changed. Gradually, imperceptibly, this sense of who I am, this silence inside, has grown as if quasi-physically larger. In the beginning it just seemed like I was silent inside. Then this sense of quietness has, as it were *expanded* to permeate my whole body. Some years later, it came to seem no longer even limited to my own body, but even wider, larger than my body. It's such a peculiar thing to describe! It's as if who I am, my very consciousness itself, has become bigger, wider, less localized. By now it's as if I extend some distance beyond my body, as if I'm many feet wide. What is *me* is now this expanse, this silence, that spreads out.

While retaining something of the dualistic character, the sense of the self or awareness itself here seems to have become as if quasi-physically expanded, extending beyond the felt borders of the usual physical frame. It is important to note that exterior perception has not changed here, only the sense of what consciousness itself is. That will change in the next state.

Freud called this a "peculiar oceanic feeling," which seems to communicate both the ineffability and the expanded quality of such a sense of consciousness.²⁷ Yet at this point this sense of an inner expanse does not yet seem to "touch" or affect the perception of objects.

Being in the middle of an expanse is reminiscent of the well known passage from Walt Whitman. As if having a conversation with his soul, he recalls,

I mind how once we lay, such a transparent summer morning,
Swiftly arose and *spread around me* the peace and knowledge that pass all the argument of
the earth.²⁸

Here the sense of inner silence, the peace, is experienced as part of the world. But note again that Whitman does not suggest that the peace is *within* the world.

The sense seems to be that what one is, one's awareness itself, is experienced as oceanic, unbounded, expanded beyond the limits of the body. Here, I believe, a theist might plausibly associate this silence, that seems to be both inside and yet quasi-physically expansive, with God. If this is true, then St. Teresa's "Spiritual Marriage" is very much like this one. In it, one is permanently "married" to the Lord,

. . . the Lord appears in the centre of the soul . . . He has been pleased to unite Himself with His creature in such a way that they have become like two who cannot be separated from one another: even so He will not separate Himself from her. [In other words, this

27 Freud was employing a phrase from his correspondence with Ramakrishna's disciple Romain Rolland. See Parsons (forthcoming).

28 Walt Whitman, quoted in James (1902/1983) p. 396, no reference.

sense of union is permanent.] The soul remains all the time in [its] centre with its God. . . . When we empty ourselves of all that is creature and rid ourselves of it for the love of God, that same Lord will fill our souls with Himself (Peers, 1961, pp. 213–16).

To be permanently filled within the soul with the Lord may be phenomenologically described as experiencing a sense of some silent but omnipresent, i.e. expansive, “something” at one’s core. If so, this becomes remarkably like the other experiences of expansiveness at one’s core that we have seen before. (Once again, the expanse is not described as permeating the world, as it might in the next “state.”)

This sense of an interiority that is also an expanse is reconfirmed by her disciple St. John of the Cross, who says, “the soul then feels as if placed in a vast and profound solitude, to which no created thing has access, in an *immense* and *boundless* desert.”

In sum, the interior silence at one’s core sometimes comes to be experienced as expanded, as if being quasi-physically larger or more spacious than one’s body. Now, what might this DMS suggest? It offers several tantalizing hints about consciousness.

- 1 Human capacity includes more epistemological modalities than is generally imagined. It is clear from these reports that one can be self-reflexively cognizant of one’s own awareness more immediately than usual. The contemplative life can lead one to the ability to be aware of one’s own awareness *per se* on a permanent or semi-permanent basis. This is not like taking on a *new awareness*. None of our sources describe this as a sense of becoming a different person, or as a *discontinuity* with what they had been. Rather the descriptions are that of becoming more *immediately* cognizant of the awareness they had always enjoyed.
- 2 We suggested above that consciousness should not be defined in terms of perceptions, content, or its other functions, for in the DMS awareness continues even when perceptions do not. Here awareness is not only not implicated with thoughts and perceptions, but is *experienced* as entirely different in quality or character — unchanging, without intrinsic form — than its content. It is also experienced as unconnected with its intentional content. Even thoughts do “not quite contact it.” Awareness itself is experienced as still or silent, perceptions as active and changing. Therefore instead of defining awareness in terms of its content, we should think about awareness and its mental and sensory *functions* as two independent phenomena or processes that somehow interact.
- 3 The sense of being expanded beyond the borders of one’s own body, what Freud called the “peculiar oceanic feeling,” is a very peculiar sense indeed. Yet if we take these wide-spread reports seriously, as I think every open-minded thinker should, what do they suggest?

The phenomenology, simply put, suggests that consciousness is not limited to the body. Consciousness is encountered as something more like a field than a localized point, a field that transcends the body and yet somehow interacts with it.²⁹

²⁹ Of course, that implies that one has some sort of non-sensory sense, the ability to sense one’s own expansive presence even though there are no visible mechanisms of sensation. But is

This mystical phenomenon tends to confirm William James' hypothesis in his monumental *Principles of Psychology* that awareness is field-like. This thought was picked up by Peter Fenwick and Chris Clarke in the Mind and Brain Symposium in 1994, that the mind may be non-localized, like a field, and that experience arises from some sort of interplay between non-localized awareness and the localized brain.³⁰ It is as if these mystical reporters had an *experience* of just the sort of field-like non-locality of awareness these theories hypothesize.

The heretical suggestion here is not that there is a ghost in the machine, but rather that there is a ghost in and *beyond* the machine! And it is not a ghost that thinks, but a ghost *for which* there is thinking and perception.

- 4 The experience of awareness as some sort of field points towards the theory that consciousness is more than just the product of the materialistic interactions of brain cells, since it can be understood in two ways. First it may mean that like a magnet, the brain "produces" a field which extends well beyond its own physical borders. The slow growth of the sense of an experience suggests this.

Or, conversely, the field-like experience may suggest that awareness somehow transcends individual brain cells and perhaps the entire brain. This suggests a new way to think about the role of the physical body. Brain cells may receive, guide, arbitrate, or canalize an awareness which is somehow transcendental to them. The brain may be more like a receiver or transformer for the field of awareness than its generator: less like a magnet than like a TV receiver.

The unitive mystical state

Our last commonly reported mystical experience is a sense of becoming unified with external objects. It is nicely described by the German idealist Malwida von Meysenburg:

I was alone upon the seashore . . . I felt that I . . . return[ed] from the solitude of individuation into the consciousness of *unity with all that is*, [that I knelt] down as one that passes away, and [rose] up as one imperishable. Earth, heaven, and sea *resounded as in one vast world encircling* harmony. . . . *I felt myself one* with them . . . (von Meysenburg, 1900; emphasis mine).

The keynote of Malwida's experience is that in some sort of immediate or intuitive manner she sensed that she was connected with the things of the world, as if she was a part of them and they part of her. It is as if the membranes of her experienced self became semi-permeable, and she flowed in, with or perhaps through her environment.

A similar experience is described in Starbuck's 19th century collection of experience reports. Here again we see a sense of unity with the things of the world.

. . . something in myself made me feel *myself a part of something bigger* than I . . . *I felt my-*

that so strange after all? If we can sense our own awareness directly in the pure consciousness event, why shouldn't we be able to sense something of its non-limited character on a more permanent basis?

30 See Freeman (1994) for a brief report and Clarke (1995) for the full text of Chris Clarke's talk.

self one with the grass, the trees, birds, insects, everything in nature. I exulted in the mere fact of existence, of being apart of it all, the drizzling rain, the shadows of the clouds, the tree-trunks and so on.

The author goes on to say that after this experience he constantly sought these experiences of the unity between self and object again, but they only came periodically. This implies that for him they were temporary phenomena, lasting only a few minutes or hours.

This sense of the unity between self and object, the absence of the usual lines between things, is clearly reminiscent of Plotinus's First Ennead (8:1).

He who has allowed the beauty of that world to penetrate his soul goes away no longer a mere observer. For the object perceived and the perceiving soul are *no longer two things* separated from one another, but the perceiving soul has [now] within itself the perceived object (quoted in Otto, 1930, p. 67).

Again we have a lack of boundaries between consciousness and object. It is not clear from this passage if Plotinus is describing a transient or a permanent experience. Yet some reporters clearly tell us that such an experience can be constant. Though it is often hard to distinguish biography from mythology, Buddhist descriptions of Sakyamuni Buddha's life clearly imply that his Nirvana was a *permanent* change in epistemological structure. Similarly the Hindu term for an enlightened one, *jivanmukti* (enlightened in active life), clearly suggests that this experience can be permanent.

Notice how different these reports are from our DMS descriptions of an inner expanse. There we saw no change in the relationship between the subject and the perceived world. Here "the object perceived and the perceiving soul" are now united. "I felt myself one with the grass, the trees, birds, insects, everything in nature."

One of the clearer descriptions of this state comes from Krishnamurti, who wrote of his his first experience of this sort, in August, 1922:

On the first day while I was in that state and more conscious of the things around me, I had the first most extraordinary experience. There was a man mending the road; that man was myself; the pickax he held was myself; the very stone which he was breaking up was a part of me; the tender blade of grass was my very being, and the tree beside the man was myself. I also could feel and think like the roadmender and I could feel the wind passing through the tree, and the little ant on the blade of grass I could feel. The birds, the dust and the very noise were a part of me. Just then there was a car passing by at some distance; I was the driver, the engine, and the tires; as the car went further away from me, I was going away from myself. I was in everything, or rather everything was in me, inanimate and animate, the mountain, the worm and all breathing things. All day long I remained in this happy condition.

Perhaps the most unmistakable assertion that these shifts can be permanent comes from Bernadette Roberts. Sometime after her initial transformation, she had what is clearly a development on her earlier dualistic sense of an expanded consciousness. She writes:

I was standing on [a] windy hillside looking down over the ocean when a seagull came

into view, gliding, dipping, playing with the wind. I watched it as I'd never watched anything before in my life. I almost seemed to be mesmerized; it was as if I was watching myself flying, for there was not the usual division between us. Yet, something more was there than just a lack of separateness, "something" truly beautiful and unknowable. Finally I turned my eyes to the pine-covered hills behind the monastery and still, there was no division, only something "there" that was flowing with and through every vista and particular object of vision. . . . What I had [originally] taken as a trick of the mind was to become a permanent way of seeing and knowing (Roberts, 1984, p. 30; italics mine).

She describes this "something there" that flowed with and through everything, including her own self, as "that into which all separateness dissolves." She concludes with an emphatic assertion: "I was never to revert back to the usual relative way of seeing separateness or individuality." Again we have a state, not a transient episode.

We could multiply these examples endlessly. This unitive mystical state (UMS), either temporary or permanent, is a very common mystical phenomenon. It is clearly an evolution of the previous sense. First one continues to sense that one's awareness is expansive, field-like, and that the self is experienced as larger, expanded beyond the usual boundaries. One feels oneself to be "a part of something bigger," which is to say, senses a lack of borders or a commonality between oneself and this expanse. Indeed, in Bernadette Roberts' case, her sense of "something there" *followed* and was an evolution of her initial dualistic mystical state. But now this perceived expansion of the self is experienced as none other than, permeating with and through, the things of the world. One's boundaries become as if permeable, connected with the objects of the world. The expanded self seems to be experienced as of the same metaphysical level, or of the same "stuff," as the world. Despite the grammatical peculiarities, "what I am is the seagull, and what the seagull is, I am."

From this fascinating phenomenon we may note several implications for our understanding of consciousness.

- 1 The perceived "spaciousness" of awareness suggests, I said above, that consciousness is like a field. These unitive experiences reaffirm this implication and suggest that such a field may not only transcend our own bodily limits, but somehow may interpenetrate or connect both self and external objects. This is of course strikingly parallel to the physical energy fields and/or the quantum vacuum field said to reside at the basis of matter, for these too are both immanent within and also transcendent to any particular expression, a parallel that Fritjof Capra, Lawrence Domash and others have been quick to point out.
- 2 The perception of unity holds out the possibility that the field of awareness is common to all objects, and however implausibly, among all human beings as well. It indicates that my own consciousness may be somehow connected to a tree, the stars, a drizzle or a blade of grass and, paradoxically, to yours. Thus these unitive experiences point towards something like a primitive animism, Leibniz's panpsychism and Griffin's suggestion of a pan-experientialism, that experience or some sort of consciousness may be "an ingredient throughout the universe, permeating all levels of

being.” All this, however, opens up another Pandora’s box of peculiar questions: most obviously what might the consciousness be of a dog, flower, or even a stone? Does the claim of a perceived unity merely point to some ground of being, and not a consciousness that is in any sense self-reflective like our own consciousness? Or if you and I share consciousness, can I experience what you do? If not, why not?

- 3 Not everyone who meditates encounters these sorts of unitive experiences. This suggests that some may be genetically or temperamentally predisposed to mystical ability; borrowing from Weber, the “mystically musical.”

One might suggest that the mystic’s awareness is categorically different than other peoples’, i.e. that it is connected to the world in an ontologically deep way that the rest of ours is not. I find this unconvincing, since every mystic I have read says he or she began as an “ordinary,” i.e. non-mystical, person and only came to realize something of what he or she “had always been.” Whichever explanation we opt for, however, it is clear that there is some ability the mystics have been able to develop — through meditation or whatever — that most of us have not.

Conclusions

Our three modalities of mystical experiences point clearly towards a distinction between awareness *per se* and the ordinary functional processes of sensation, perception and thought. They suggest that awareness is not constructed out of the material processes of perception or perhaps the brain, but rather they suggest a distinction and/or interaction between consciousness and the brain. Furthermore, they suggest that awareness may have a non-localized, quasi-spatial character, much like a field. Finally they tend to suggest that this field may be transcendental to any one person or entity.

I want to end by restating my earlier caveat. Phenomenology is not science. There can be many ways to explain any experience, mystical or otherwise, and we should explore all of them. But in the absence of compelling reasons to deny the suggestions of their reports, we would be wise to seriously examine the direction towards which the finger of mysticism points. If the validity of knowledge in the universities is indeed governed, as we like to claim, by the tests of evidence, openness and clarity, then we should not be too quick to throw out the baby swimming in the bathwater of mysticism.

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