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# THE NATURE OF MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

### I

In the philosophy of mysticism, an important and foundational problem concerns the nature of mystical experience. The problem is both significant and basic because an understanding of the nature of mystical experience is a necessary precondition for the evaluation of its epistemological, ontological, and ethical significance, and will in fact influence that evaluation. In other words, our ideas about the nature of mystical experience are premises for our conclusions about the role of mystical experience in human knowledge, about the ‘object(s)’, if any, of mystical experience, and about the value and moral implications of mystical experience.

The traditional theory of the nature of mystical experience is that which is put forward by W. T. Stace.<sup>1</sup> According to his model, mystical experiences are ‘given’ to the mystic; they are indubitable and incorrigible; they share very basic characteristics, such as unity and timelessness; and they are the objects of idiosyncratic interpretations by the mystic.

This model has been subjected to intensive criticism,<sup>2</sup> chiefly on the grounds that the social and psychological context in which the experience occurs influences the experience itself, and not just the interpretation which is put upon it. The mystic’s education, culture, and religion produce an experience rather different from that of another individual with a different background. Hence, the mystical experience is not and cannot be ‘pure’, in the sense of free of interpretation; it is the product of the cultural milieu in which it occurs.

The mystical experience, then, like other forms of experience, turns out to be something which the experient produces, not something which merely happens or is given to him. A mystical experience is not an independent entity inflicted upon the experient, who then interprets it. It is, rather, an activity, or the result of an activity, which is rule-governed, which may be learned or taught, and which may be more or less successfully engaged in. In fact,

<sup>1</sup> In *Mysticism and Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1961); *The Teachings of the Mystics* (New York: New American Library, 1960); and ‘The Philosophy of Mysticism’, in Stace’s *Man Against Darkness* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 1967).

<sup>2</sup> For example, by Steven T. Katz, ‘Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism’, in Steven T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (London: Sheldon Press, 1978).

the having of a mystical experience is, I want to suggest, like the exercise of a *skill*. It is this alternative model of mystical experience which I shall briefly set forth in this paper.

## II

The concept of an experiential skill is used both by Gilbert Ryle and David Hamlyn. Ryle writes, 'Perceiving... is exercising an acquired skill'. Indeed, Ryle argues that

...some questions about perceiving, and particularly those which are of interest in epistemology, are not causal questions – though there are such questions, and many of them have been answered – but questions about, so to speak, the *crafts* or *arts* of finding things out by seeing and hearing – including questions about the nature of mistakes and failures in perception and their relations with mistakes and failures in thinking, spelling, counting, and the like.<sup>1</sup>

Hamlyn explicitly offers the concept of an experiential skill as an alternative to the traditional given/interpretation dichotomy:

...instead of attempting to construe our perception of the world in terms of the ideas of data and inference or judgment, one might better invoke the notion of skill. Thus our perceiving things correctly might be thought of as the exercise or perhaps the results of the exercise of skills on our part, skills which may of course sometimes break down or be mis-applied.<sup>2</sup>

and further:

The analysis of a skill is not to be carried out in terms of inferences from data. Some one who is good at estimating, say, the weight of things by looking at them need not be making any inferences from clues that he can observe, even if those clues exist. The notorious case of the chicken-sexer is crucial here; there may be clues which would tell the sexer what the sex of a chicken was if he knew about them. But there is no obvious sense in which the chicken-sexer does know them, since he has not been taught to observe such clues and go by them, and he makes no obvious inferences.<sup>3</sup>

From the preceding quotations can be garnered the following ideas about the concept of an experiential skill: some sorts, at least, of experience are the exercise of a capacity to do something. That capacity is like an art, craft, or skill, which is learned, and may not always be exercised correctly. The exercise of the skill does not necessarily involve the making of interpretations of passively-received experiences.

In his book *Religion, Philosophy and Psychical Research*, C. D. Broad comes close to proposing a skill analogy for religious experience. In an effort to assess

<sup>1</sup> 'Sensation', *Perceiving, Sensing, and Knowing*, ed. Robert J. Swartz (Garden City, New York: Doubleday [Anchor Books], 1965), pp. 201–2, Ryle's emphasis.

<sup>2</sup> 'Unconscious Inference and Judgment in Perception', unpublished paper delivered at 'Images, Perception, and Knowledge' Conference (London, Ontario; May, 1974), p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 9. See also Galen K. Pletcher, 'Agreement Among Mystics', *Sophia* 11 (1972), p. 13.

the veridicality of religious experience, Broad suggests the following analogous case:

Most of the detailed facts which biologists tell us about the minute structure and changes in cells can be perceived only by persons who have had a long training in the use of the microscope. In this case we believe that the agreement among trained microscopists really does correspond to facts which untrained persons cannot perceive.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps microscopists, says Broad, are like those who have religious experiences, for members of each group have access to certain special experiences, and members of each group tend to agree about the nature of their observations.

However, having proposed this analogy, Broad subsequently rejects it, primarily because he is concerned with the issue of the veridicality of religious experience. He argues that we regard the microscopists' experiences as veridical because, first, our knowledge, based on ordinary visual perception, of the laws of optics assures us that the microscope does not cause 'optical delusions'; and second, 'we know of other cases in which trained persons can detect things which untrained persons will overlook, and . . . in many cases the existence of these things can be verified by indirect methods'.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, says Broad, we don't know much about the laws governing the occurrence of religious experiences and determining their variations. He concedes that there do exist 'standard methods of training and meditation which tend to produce mystical experiences', but says that there is no conclusive reason to suppose that these produce veridical rather than delusive experiences. For these reasons, Broad regards trained microscopists as insufficiently similar to subjects of religious experiences.

I believe, however, that his rejection of the analogy is too hasty. If we consider it, not at first from the point of view of assessing the veridicality of mysticism, but rather for the sake of getting a better understanding of the nature of mystical experiences, we find that the analogy is illuminating. Both trained microscopists and mystics are exercising skills.

This approach to mystical experience has some affinities with that of James R. Horne, who regards mysticism as a problem-solving activity, 'a process of creative transformation of the personality, characterized by an intellectual, emotional or visionary illumination experience at its critical stage'.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Charles H. Cox and Jean W. Cox use an analogy borrowed from art:

The difference between the mystic's way of seeing and our ordinary way of seeing is like the difference between one who sees unity and harmony in a work of art and one who sees only a jumble of lines or words.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> C. D. Broad, *Religion, Philosophy and Psychological Research* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), p. 194.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 196.

<sup>3</sup> *Beyond Mysticism* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1978), p. 37.

<sup>4</sup> 'The Mystical Experience: With an Emphasis on Wittgenstein and Zen', *Religious Studies* 12 (1976), p. 484.

Somewhat comparably, Herbert Fingarette gives a lengthy and detailed discussion of the similarities between 'the mystic's way of self-liberation' and 'the psychoanalytic way to insight'.<sup>1</sup> All four of these philosophers are, I suggest, implicitly regarding mystical experience as being like the exercise of a skill.

Let us consider the properties of skills in general which are relevant to understanding mystical experience. First, a skill is acquired through learning, and is mastered by continuous practice. Although there may be some 'innate programming' of visual and auditory capacities and preferences,<sup>2</sup> the infant is not born with the adult's fully developed perceptual abilities. He must learn to distinguish his mother's voice from other voices, to focus on the mobile above his crib, to discriminate the tastes of various foods. He practises the use of his senses over and over again, so that his abilities gradually approximate to those of an adult experient.

Similarly, neither the microscopist nor the mystic is able to have his particular sort of experience from infancy; instead, the capacity for it is acquired through learning and perfected by practice. The microscopist learns his skill within the context of a scientific community. The mystic acquires his skill, ordinarily, within the context of some sort of religious community. (In what follows I shall, for the sake of ease of expression, speak of 'the mystic's skill', rather than of 'the mystic's capacity for experience, which is like the exercise of a skill'. The former expression should, however, be thought of as a metaphor.) It is the attitudes, beliefs, values, language, and culture of the religious community which determine, at least in part, the mystical experience of an individual from that community. In following a mystical path, one is developing the capacity for experiencing in a rather specific way.

Mystical writings emphasize that the quest for enlightenment is arduous and discouraging; that it requires discipline and sacrifice for the sake of the goal which is sought. Such warnings indicate that the acquisition of the capacity for mystical experience is like the development of a very difficult skill. In that respect, the comparison between microscopists and mystics can be misleading: for presumably it is much easier to become a practising microscopist than to become a practising mystic. As Broad notes, there are standard methods of training and meditation for the production of mystical experiences, but these procedures are demanding, and even a good adherence to them does not guarantee the production of the desired consciousness.

It might be objected that the analogy is marred by the fact that there appear to be spontaneous mystical experiences, whereas we would not suppose that an individual could spontaneously acquire the ability to detect the minute structures of cells. But here the question arises whether there really

<sup>1</sup> *The Self in Transformation* (New York: Basic Books, 1963), pp. 294–341.

<sup>2</sup> Penelope Leach, *Babyhood* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 134.

are spontaneous mystical experiences, or whether all apparently spontaneous experiences have been prepared for in some ways. As Horne points out, so-called spontaneous mystical experiences often follow ‘a considerable amount of deep personal preparation . . . , although it may be disorganized and unsystematic, and the mystic may not realize just what he is doing’.<sup>1</sup> It is significant, too, that in Zen mysticism, spontaneity is something for which the novice paradoxically must strive. Each of the Zen arts – archery, karate, flower-arranging, and so on – must be practised as an ‘artless art’.<sup>2</sup> Thus, because the issue of spontaneity is unresolved, I cannot regard it as counting against the view that developing the capacity for mystical experience is like acquiring a skill.

A second general property of skills is that their development often requires the guidance of a teacher: skills are taught as well as learned. For example, the novice musician may need the help of a trained musician to assist him in learning to hear the differences between major, minor, and perfect intervals. Similarly, both microscopist and mystic ordinarily learn their skill under the tutelage of experienced teachers, who provide a model of successful exercise of the skill, and make assessments of the relative success of the aspirant in his acquisition of the skill. The microscopist practices under the supervision of a professor or tutor, who instructs him as to how to prepare the sample, the lighting, and the background; how to accurately correct the microscope’s magnification; what to look for; and how to recognize certain items.<sup>3</sup> Among mystics, the novice practitioner of Zen mysticism, for example, works under a ‘master’ who instructs him in appropriate techniques, exhorts him to greater efforts, and provides or withholds the ultimate validation for ostensible *kensho* (enlightenment) experiences.<sup>4</sup>

Third, the mastery of a skill is a matter of degree: one may be more or less successful in the implementation of a skill. For example, different individuals have varying capacities to detect the quality of different wines. A professional wine-taster has mastered the skill or art of distinguishing between wines on a number of criteria. Most other people, by contrast, do not develop the wine-taster’s expertise (whether through lack of native ability, lack of practice, or lack of instruction). Similarly, there are degrees of mastery of the microscopist’s and the mystic’s skills. An individual just starting to use a microscope is less adept at seeing and recognizing ‘minute structures’ than the expert with years of practice. The beginner needs

<sup>1</sup> Horne, p. 25. See also Peter Moore, ‘Mystical Experience, Mystical Doctrine, Mystical Technique’, *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, p. 114; and Terence Penelhum, ‘Unity and Diversity in the Interpretation of Mysticism’, *Mystics and Scholars: The Calgary Conference on Mysticism 1976*, ed. Harold Coward and Terence Penelhum (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1977), p. 71.

<sup>2</sup> Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, introduction by D. T. Suzuki (New York: Random House [Viking Books], 1971), p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> A. K. Overall, Philips Electronics Ltd., personal communication.

<sup>4</sup> See Philip Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen: Teaching, Practice, and Enlightenment* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965).

patience, dedication, and a knowledge of the appropriate techniques in order to develop his ability. The experienced mystic has a surer grasp of the unitive experience than has one who has taken only a few steps along the mystic path. Peter Moore reminds us that mystics often report a 'series of phenomenologically distinct stages of mystical experience'. Moore stresses that mystical experience has 'a dynamic and developing character, sometimes carrying the subject along with it...but often inviting his active response and co-operation.'<sup>1</sup> Fingarette suggests that the concept of stages of enlightenment expresses 'the ever-present potential in real life for still further deepening insight...*Perfect* enlightenment seems to be a mythic ideal in mysticism'.<sup>2</sup>

Variations in the degree of mastery of the mystic's skill may thus be due to variations in the amount of learning and practice. But they may also be due to the presence or absence of innate abilities. Broad comments on this:

...capacity for religious experience is in certain respects like an ear for music. There are a few people who are unable to recognize and distinguish the simplest tune. But they are in a minority, like the people who have absolutely no kind of religious experience. Most people have some slight appreciation of music. But the differences of degree in this respect are enormous, and those who have not much gift for music have to take the statements of accomplished musicians very largely on trust. Let us, then, compare tone-deaf persons to those who have no recognizable religious experience at all; the ordinary followers of a religion to men who have some taste for music but can neither appreciate the more difficult kinds nor compose; highly religious men and saints to persons with an exceptionally fine ear for music who may yet be unable to compose it; and the founders of religions to great musical composers such as Bach and Beethoven.<sup>3</sup>

It might be questioned whether people who have absolutely no religious experience are in fact a minority; perhaps it depends on how widely one construes 'religious experience'. Stace is as optimistic in this regard as Broad; he says that 'practically all men are capable of mystic experience in some degree'. He draws a comparison between mystics and poets:

The relation between the great mystic and the plain man seems to be like the relation between the great poet and the plain man. In both cases the one is creative, the other not. But the plain man responds to the vision of the poet, proving that he too is capable of poetic consciousness. And the plain man, if he is at all sensitive, responds to the utterances of the mystic. They stir within him at least an echo, proving in the same way that he is capable in some degree of mystic consciousness.<sup>4</sup>

The general outlines of Broad's and Stace's comparisons seem apt: different people have different capacities for artistic creation and for mystical

<sup>1</sup> 'Mystical Experience, Mystical Doctrine, Mystical Technique', p. 120. See also Moore's 'Recent Studies of Mysticism: A Critical Survey', *Religion* 3 (1973), pp. 153-4.

<sup>2</sup> Fingarette, p. 327, Fingarette's emphasis.

<sup>3</sup> Broad, p. 190.

<sup>4</sup> 'Naturalism and Religion', *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 23 (1949-50), p. 24. See also Stace's *Religion and the Modern Mind* (London: Macmillan, 1953), p. 239 and pp. 256-7.

experiences, so that regardless of factors such as motivation and instruction, works of art and mystical experiences will be more difficult to attain by some than by others.

To summarize: the microscopist and the mystic are both involved in something like the exercise of a skill. Each learns and is taught to have certain types of experience, in the having of which he may be more or less proficient.

### III

Clearly, the skill model does not automatically resolve all philosophical problems concerning mystical experience, and it needs further development. For example, if mystical experience is like the exercise of a skill, what does this suggest about the alleged ineffability of mystical experience? (In this connection some remarks by Renford Bambrough are instructive. He points out that one may possess a certain skill even if one cannot 'convey to others a theoretical articulation of [one's] practical understanding. . . . Tea-tasting and wine-tasting are modes of discrimination whose exponents may or may not be able to articulate some of the grounds of their powers of discernment.'<sup>1</sup>) Moreover, what does the skill model indicate about the apparent passivity of some aspects of mystical experience? (For instance, in Christian mysticism, although 'knowledge of God' is said to be attainable only after great physical and spiritual effort, such knowledge is 'the free gift of God's grace'. It is 'received in a mood of passivity' and 'the soul is then more passive than active'.<sup>2</sup>)

Finally, and most importantly, there is the question of veridicality. Viewing mystical experience as the exercise of a skill subtly changes that issue. For we do not ordinarily speak of the exercise of a skill as being veridical or unveridical; rather, we describe it as more or less successful or competent. If the issue of the veridicality of mystical experience has been for so long controversial and unresolved, perhaps that is because the issue is misunderstood: we have attempted to evaluate the experience using the wrong set of criteria. Rather than using epistemic criteria drawn from ordinary experience, perhaps we need to make use of the sort of evaluation we are accustomed to making in judging art, music, or poetry, or even in successful therapy. This clearly is an issue which needs further attention.

Nevertheless, in spite of these unresolved questions concerning the implications of the skill model, its advantage is that it enables us to avoid the traditional Stacean theory, according to which the mystic receives a pure experience which he subsequently interprets. Instead, we can say that the mystic is one who actively seeks and obtains, through learning and practice,

<sup>1</sup> 'Intuition and the Inexpressible', *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, p. 212.

<sup>2</sup> H. P. Owen, 'Christian Mysticism: A Study in Walter Hilton's *The Ladder of Perfection*', *Religious Studies* 7 (1971), p. 34.

a special unitive state of consciousness which is, at the same time, the product of his expectations, education, goals, and beliefs. Perhaps, then, the correct answer to the question, what is the nature of mystical experience? is this: mystical experience is, or is like, the exercising of a special skill, the skill of experiencing unitively.