

## **Can Mystical Experience be a Source of Knowledge?**

The view that mystical experience can be a source of knowledge about the world outside of the mystic's brain and/or body has been held by both religious practitioners and philosophers. The thesis I shall be advancing in this paper is that such a view cannot be substantiated. In support of that thesis I shall argue that mystical experiences are essentially varieties of trance experience, which often facilitate vivid, seemingly veridical, though ultimately imaginative experiences. It is a thesis worth pursuing because various authors have commented on the relationship between these two types of experience and arrived at radically different conclusions.

**The majority of those who regard mystical and trance experiences as essentially similar** tend to be practitioners and researchers in the field of hypnosis or anthropologists. **Those who regard them as essentially dissimilar** tend to be religious writers or philosophers with a religious inclination.

The reasons for this disagreement are not difficult to determine.

**In religious circles** mystical experiences are generally understood in terms of making contact with or realizing one's unity with some kind of supernatural reality, the transcendent focus of a particular religious tradition, a being or dimension which gives meaning to the entire religious enterprise.

From this perspective mystical experiences may exhibit some features that give them the appearance of trance experiences or even share some elements with trance experiences but, at root, they are fundamentally different. Zaehner, for example, suggests that the techniques of mentally repeating some word or phrase and of chanting aloud as practised by Christian Hesychasts, the early sufis, some schools of yoga and mystical poets such as Tennyson are actually forms of self-hypnosis. Self-hypnosis, he contends, appears to be a milestone on the way to self-realization which, for him, is a lower variety of mystical experience.<sup>i</sup> In a similar vein, W.T. Stace rather confusingly suggests that hypnotic and mystical states have a certain kinship though they are not identical and that ‘... the mystical state is not in the least like the hypnotic state, although they both might share similar causal backgrounds.’<sup>ii</sup> These authors thus recognize a kind of affinity between some mystical practices and experiences and some hypnotic ones but they regard the latter as inferior and rudimentary when compared with the former.

**From the perspective of much hypnosis research** the contents of mystical experiences tend to be regarded as cultural or religious constructs that are experienced vividly because they are encountered whilst in a state of trance. Kroger, for example, argues that prayer and meditation are essentially autohypnotic techniques, citing the researches of Bowers and Glasner (1958), Das (1963), Gastaut (1969) and Walrath and Hamilton (1975) in support.<sup>iii</sup> Morse *et al* compared hypnosis and meditation and found no significant differences between them on a range of

physiological measures,<sup>iv</sup> whilst Sacerdote claims to be able to induce mystical experiences through the use of hypnosis.<sup>v</sup>

We have then, a range of phenomena which are commonly grouped together under the heading of mysticism or mystical experience and which are interpreted and explained by modern investigators in quite different ways. Which explanation is best? Is mystical experience to be understood as a distinctive, sui generis phenomenon, an experience of escaping from the conditioning of culture and offering access to some kind of transcendental reality, or is it better regarded as a variety of culturally constructed experience which acquires a profound veridical character for the experiencer because it occurs whilst he or she is in a state of trance?

**I shall argue** that the latter explanation is preferable, not just because it is the more parsimonious of the two but also because it is more explanatory: it can answer questions that are problematic for supernaturalist explanations and offer an account which makes sense of the fact that the contents of mystical experiences can be extremely different even though they are rooted in almost identical psychological processes.

**My strategy** for demonstrating the superiority of the second explanation will be to **first of all** establish what can and what cannot be legitimately included in the category of mystical experience. **Secondly**, I shall identify and criticize some interpretations of the mystical literature which seem to rank mystical experiences in some kind of hierarchical order and argue

that the constructivist approach advocated by Steven Katz and his colleagues offers a better method for addressing the issues raised by the differences in mystical experiences both within and across traditions. **I shall also seek** to demonstrate that critiques of Katz's approach based on the idea of a 'pure consciousness' do not achieve what the critics hope they will and that the constructivist approach still offers the best way to understand the nature of mystical experiences. **In the final section** this conclusion will be supported by a consideration of the parallels between mystical and trance experiences. Here, I shall argue that the same processes are occurring in both cases and that the differences in content are artifactual, that is they arise from the background and expectations of the person having the experience and the techniques of mental culture that they employ.

## **Mysticism**

Any survey of books with the word 'mysticism' in their titles quickly reveals that, according to many authors, this phenomenon - if it be unitary - is found in all the major religions of the world. Some even go so far as to claim that mysticism represents a common core of all religions. What then is mysticism?

**According to Ninian Smart** mysticism refers '... to the contemplative life and experience, as distinguished from prophetism, devotionism and sacramentalism.'<sup>vi</sup> In other words, mysticism, as a concept, embraces both the process of interiorization or turning attention inwards (contemplation) and the

experiences a person has as a result of such interiorization. The implication here is that mystical experience is, at least in part, dependent on a person engaging in contemplative practices. A further implication would seem to be that mystical experience is sought after by the mystic. These two features of mysticism: an actively pursued inner quest, provide the basis for **Smart's division of religious experiences into mystical and numinous types**. Numinous experiences are those of a being or reality which is perceived as outside of or 'wholly other' than the experiencer; a reality that is, in the words of Rudolf Otto, a fascinating and tremendous mystery (*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*). This reality 'reveals' itself to the experiencer (as Jesus did to Saul on the Damascus road) rather than being 'discovered' by him or her. However, this distinction cannot be pushed too far for, as we shall see, there are some mystical experiences that have a distinctly numinous quality and, after all, even though Yahweh revealed himself to Moses in a burning bush Moses had to climb up the mountain to find him.

## PROBLEM

If we follow Smart and give primacy to the processes for obtaining a mystical experience rather than the nature of the experience itself we find that experiences regarded as mystical by some scholars are excluded from the category, perhaps wrongly.

The prime example of such excluded experiences is what William James called 'sporadic' mystical experiences and W.T. Stace 'spontaneous' mystical experiences. Both writers provide a number of examples from the literature to illustrate the distinctive

nature of such experiences. Stace, however, goes further than James. He links the spontaneous experiences with what he calls extravertive mysticism and acquired or cultivated ones with what he calls introvertive mysticism. About these two types he writes,

‘The essential difference between them is that the extravertive experience looks outward through the senses, while the introvertive looks inward into the mind. Both culminate in the perception of an ultimate unity ... But the extravertive mystic, using his physical senses, perceives the multiplicity of external material objects - the sea, the sky, the houses, the trees - mystically transfigured so that the One, or the Unity shines through them. The introvertive mystic, on the contrary, seeks by deliberately shutting off the senses, by obliterating from consciousness the entire multiplicity of sensations, images and thoughts, to plunge into the depths of his own ego. There, in that darkness and silence, he alleges that he perceives the One - and is united with it - not as a Unity seen through a multiplicity (as in the extravertive experience), but as the wholly naked One devoid of any plurality whatever.’<sup>vii</sup>

## PROBLEM

Stace suggests that spontaneous experiences tend to be extravertive and cultivated ones introvertive, though he does recognize that the connection is not absolute.<sup>viii</sup> Indeed, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that introvertive experiences can be spontaneous. For example, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* by William James contains a number of accounts of sporadic or

spontaneous mystical experiences by a man called J.A. Symonds. Towards the end of one of these accounts Symonds writes, 'At last nothing remained but a pure, absolute, abstract self. The universe became without form and void of content.'<sup>ix</sup> This is what Stace would call an introvertive mystical experience but it is clearly a spontaneous one. Likewise, even though the opposite combination: cultivated extravertive experience seems to be rare there are some contenders for this description. The sahaja samādhi state mentioned by Forman and attributed to the Hindu mystic Ramana Maharshi appears to have the characteristics of extravertive mystical experience and it follows on from the practice of introvertive mysticism.<sup>x</sup>

It would seem then, that Smart's process-based definition is inadequate as it cannot accommodate spontaneous experiences. For Stace, it is not the means employed to gain an experience that makes it mystical but the content of the experience: the experience of unity or universal oneness. This definition certainly allows for the inclusion of spontaneous experiences but it also seems to exclude others that have a decidedly mystical character. The Jain, Sāmkhya and Yoga systems of India employ contemplative practices very similar to those found in the monistic Advaita Vedānta tradition (which is undoubtedly mystical according to Stace's criteria) yet the aim of such practice is not the realization of unity, as in Advaita, but the radical separation of spirit from matter - a state called Kaivalya (aloneness). Many writers would also claim that Christian Jewish and Muslim mysticism is also non-monistic. It seems to be the case, therefore, that experiences of

different and, one might add, mutually exclusive ontological realities can be appropriately described or categorized as mystical.

But if reference to neither method nor ontological content can enable us to distinguish mystical experiences from non-mystical ones, how can we decide what is to count as mystical and what is not?

William James offers what might be called a 'characteristics' approach to the issue of definition. In his view, experiences possessing certain general characteristics are to be classed as mystical; experiences lacking these characteristics are not. James lists four characteristics of mystical experience. The first two he regards as primary, the second two as secondary. They are:

1. **ineffability** - they defy expression; no adequate report of their content can be given in words;
2. **noetic quality** - they are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain;
3. **transiency** - they cannot be sustained for long, their quality can be but imperfectly reproduced in memory; but when they recur it is recognized;
4. **passivity** - when the characteristic sort of consciousness once has set in the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance.

Close examination of these characteristics reveals that they too exclude experiences that seem to have a natural home in the category of the mystical. The Buddhist and Yoga traditions



describe a number of states variously called *jhāna*, *dhyāna* and *samādhi*. The accounts of these states describe a progression from content-ful, externally-oriented experience to content-less, internally-oriented experience. This process is common to many contemplative traditions and it clearly falls within the scope of Smart's definition and probably also of Stace's definition of introvertive mysticism, yet it has little or no noetic component. Such experiences provide a foundation for the contemplative's subsequent access to noetic states (truth-bearing insight (*rtambhara prajna*) and right knowledge (*samyak jñāna*) in Yoga and Buddhism respectively) but appear to lack the noetic quality themselves. It is clear, however, that they do form an integral part of at least some cultivated mystical experiences.

What seems to be the case then, is that mystical experiences can be spontaneous or cultivated; some have a noetic quality and some do not; some lead to an experience of unity and some do not.

James' passivity characteristic also has limited scope. Whilst it might well apply to all spontaneous mystical experience there are some cultivated ones to which it does not seem to apply. James himself recognizes that there are 'preliminary voluntary operations' that precede what he regards as mystical experience proper and it has been argued above that such 'voluntary operations' frequently give rise to non-noetic mystical states. But even those mystical experiences that we might call culminatory and which do have a noetic component are not all passive. Perhaps the best example of such an experience is the Buddha's enlightenment. Having

attained the fourth jhāna Siddhārtha decided to apply his concentrated mind to the acquisition of three knowledges, the third of which liberated him from the cycle of rebirth and made him a buddha, an awakened one. This can hardly be described as a passive experience. Indeed, the Buddha's primary criterion for deciding whether the 'knowledge' gained through meditation had the capacity to bring release from rebirth was the nature and focus of the attentional activity carried out in that state.

So far then, we have been unable to formulate a definition of mysticism that will do justice to the range of experiences that seem sufficiently closely related as to form a single category whilst at the same time distinguish mystical from non-mystical experiences. What we do have, however, is what we can think of as an outline map of the territory:

SPONTANEOUS	SPONTANEOUS OR CULTIVATED
<u>No stages</u>	<u>Preliminary stages:</u>
ineffable	ineffable
noetic	transient
transient	
passive	
	<u>Culminatory stages:</u>
	ineffable
	noetic
	transient
	sometimes passive
EXTRAVERTIVE	INTROVERTIVE

This diagram is, of course, just a provisional representation of the territory and will need to be modified if it is to be comprehensive. It is derived from what can be regarded as the more valid elements of the scholarly accounts to which I have referred. These same accounts, as has already been indicated, also contain elements that are invalid or inaccurate, and it is to these I now turn.

### **Hierarchical and constructivist interpretations of the mystical literature**

Both W.T. Stace and R.C. Zaehner seek to explain the differences between mystical experiences by creating some kind of rank order. Stace, for example, argues that,

‘... the extravertive experience, although we recognize it as a distinct type, is actually on a lower level than the introvertive type; that is to say, it is an incomplete kind of experience which finds its completion and fulfilment in the introvertive kind of experience.’<sup>xi</sup>

So far as I am aware, there are no grounds for this claim in the mystical literature. If it were accurate, we would expect to find evidence of a progression *from* the extravertive mystical experience *to* the introvertive one. The fact is that there is little or no evidence of such a progression. Moreover, we may recall that the cultivation of introvertive mystical experience usually begins with a restriction and introversion of attention. This progresses or deepens to a point or stage which then acts as a kind of foundation for culminatory experiences possessing a noetic quality that has to do with the nature of existence at a deep level. In other words, extravertive mystical experience seems to have more in common

with the culminatory stages of introvertive mystical experience than it does with the preparatory ones. The idea that the extravertive experience 'finds its completion and fulfilment in the introvertive kind of experience' thus appears to be phenomenologically inaccurate.

R.C. Zaehner adopts a similar approach. He distinguishes three general types of mystical experience:

1. the **panenhenic** - an experience of Nature in all things or of all things being one;
2. the **monistic** - the isolation of the soul from all that is other than itself;
3. **theistic** - where the soul is led out of its isolation and is slowly transmuted into the substance of the Deity like a log of wood which is gradually assimilated to the fire.

The first of these is virtually identical with Stace's extravertive type whilst the monistic and theistic varieties would be subsumed under Stace's introvertive type. Stace, writing some three years later than Zaehner, dismisses the latter's distinction between monistic and theistic mystical experience as reflecting nothing more than two different interpretations of what are essentially identical experiences.

He does not, however, explain how this process of interpretation works, though in 1975 Ninian Smart attempted to do just that.

The tool Smart employs for this purpose is the concept of *ramification* or what might be termed 'conceptual embeddedness'. Smart describes ramification as follows: '... where a concept

appears as part of a doctrinal scheme it gains its meaning in part from a range of doctrinal statements taken to be true.<sup>'xii</sup> In other words, many accounts of mystical experiences are not simply descriptive (e.g. I saw this, I heard this, I felt this - terminology to which all humans can relate), but are doctrinal in nature. That is, concepts which are particular to one or just a small number of religions are used alongside or even instead of more straightforwardly descriptive ones. The extent to which any account of mystical experience is ramified can be determined according to Smart, by employing a simple question: 'How many propositions are presupposed as true by the description?' The more propositions presupposed as true, the higher the degree of ramification. The higher the degree of ramification, '... the less is the description guaranteed by the experience itself.'<sup>xiii</sup>

Zaehner's typology is based on highly ramified descriptions of mystical experiences and this renders it suspect to say the least. It is also clearly propagandist. Zaehner was a Roman Catholic. It is, therefore, no surprise to find that when he comes to rank his three types against each other the theistic type (which his own tradition endorses) is deemed to be the best. Zaehner's ranking, like Stace's, is not based on any kind of progression through the types but on doctrinal preferences.

Smart's concept of ramification is clearly useful when assessing the validity of attempted rankings of mystical experiences. It has less value in the search for the essence of mystical experience. The reason for this is that few accounts of mystical experience are free of ramification. One way to deal with this problem would be to

remove the ramified elements from descriptions of mystical experiences. The drawback with this approach is that in most cases de-ramified accounts would contain very little information.

**Another approach has been taken by Steven Katz.** He takes the concept of ramification seriously, but he does not restrict its application to the post-experience situation. Rather, he argues that ramification occurs at all stages of mystical experience and description. The mystic's background prepares him or her for a certain kind of experience. The experience itself is structured and moulded by that background and, not surprisingly, the accounts of the experience are also permeated by concepts deriving from the mystic's background tradition. For Katz, it is not that mystics reflect on their raw experience and then filter it through doctrinal categories when seeking to describe it. Rather, the categories are constitutive of the experience, they are not separable from it. As he states, 'There are *no* pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences.'<sup>xiv</sup> If Katz is correct, then mystical experiences are better understood as experiential manifestations of doctrine than as insights into the fundamental nature of existence - despite the conviction of mystics that their experiences are veridical.

Katz's argument has been criticized by a number of writers, and most extensively by the contributors to a volume edited by Robert Forman entitled *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*. In his introductory essay Forman criticizes Katz's position with an argument that is reiterated in various ways by other contributors and which offers a different way of understanding mystical experience. Katz is deemed to be misguided because he grounds

his account on what his critics call an unwarranted assumption: that 'There are *no* pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences ... *all* experience is processed through, organized by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological ways.'<sup>xv</sup> The import of this claim is made clear in his subsequent comments, e.g. 'Properly understood, yoga ... is *not* an *unconditioning* or *deconditioning* of consciousness, but rather it is a *reconditioning* of consciousness, i.e. a substituting of one form of conditioned and/or contextual consciousness for another, albeit a new, unusual, and perhaps altogether more interesting form of conditioned-contextual consciousness.'<sup>xvi</sup> This assertion denies the fundamental claim of much mystical soteriology: that mystical experience can provide insight into the truth of things, access to the noumena behind phenomena or experience of a normally unperceived transcendent reality.

It is this assertion that the critics want to challenge most of all. They do it primarily by arguing that not only is Katz's assumption just that, an assumption, it is also unphenomenological because we find reports in the mystical literature of what the contributors to this volume call a 'pure consciousness event' (PCE for short). A PCE is defined by Forman as '... a wakeful though contentless (nonintentional) consciousness.'<sup>xvii</sup> An example of such a report can be found at the beginning of Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtra* where the state of yoga is described as 'the cessation of the mind's activities' (*citta vṛtti nirodha*). Pure Consciousness Events, claim the contributors, *are* unmediated. That is, during such events the mystic is *not* '... employing concepts; differentiating his awareness according to religious patterns and symbols; drawing upon

memory, apprehension, expectation, language or the accumulation of prior experience; or discriminating and integrating.<sup>'xviii</sup> In short, PCE's are not conditioned.

Within the context of mysticism, claims Forman, such events occur primarily in the course of what Stace called introvertive mysticism. Here it is to be understood as, to use Forman's words, a rudimentary form of mystical experience, a stage on the introvertive mystical path. The relation between the PCE experience and experience at the culmination of the mystical path can be understood, he suggests, by reference to the distinction between *samādhi* and *sahaja samādhi* described by the Hindu mystic Ramana Maharshi. *Samādhi* refers to a pure consciousness event akin to the state of yoga mentioned earlier; *sahaja samādhi* '... is a state in which a silent level within the subject is maintained along with (simultaneously with) the full use of the human faculties ... such a permanent mystical state is typically a more advanced stage in the mystical journey.'<sup>'xix</sup> So described, *samādhi* is an introverted mystical experience whilst *sahaja samādhi* is an extravertive mystical experience. Seemingly without realizing it, Forman has inverted Stace's progression. Stace regarded the extravertive experience as a precursor to the introvertive; Forman regards the introvertive as a precursor to the extravertive. This inversion also challenges Stace's claim that there are no techniques for cultivating extravertive mystical experiences. Forman, however, has the opposite problem to Stace: if *samādhi* (an introvertive experience) is a precursor to *sahaja samādhi* (an extravertive experience) how



do we account for the fact that many people claim to have had extravertive mystical experiences that have arisen spontaneously?

The solution to this phenomenological muddle is quite simple. If we refer back to the diagram and the accompanying argument we can see that Stace was wrong in thinking that the extravertive experience was a precursor to the introvertive. In this we can agree with Forman who, however, makes no mention of spontaneous mystical experiences nor of the culminatory stages of the introvertive path. Once these omissions are corrected we can simply modify the diagram by adding a column to accommodate sahaja samādhi and an arrow into it from the culminatory stages box in the introvertive column:

SPONTANEOUS	SPONTANEOUS OR CULTIVATED	CULTIVATED
<u>No stages</u> ineffable noetic transient passive	<u>Preliminary</u> <u>stages</u> ineffable transient	<u>No stages</u> ineffable noetic passive
	<u>Culminatory</u> <u>Stages</u> ineffable noetic transient sometimes passive	
EXTRAVERTIVE	INTROVERTIVE	EXTRAVERTIVE

These additions expand our map of the mystical territory but do not complete it, for there is another element in the generation of mystical experiences that all the authors mentioned so far have neglected. This is the fact that some mystical experiences are reported as being directly induced by other people. Two examples, one from Buddhism and one from Hinduism, will illustrate the point.

The texts of the Buddhist Pali Canon provide us with a number of descriptions of stages in meditational practice and, perhaps more significantly, the stages through which the Buddha passed en route to his enlightenment experience. These stages are called *jhāna* in the Pali language and *dhyāna* in Sanskrit. Eight and sometimes nine *jhānas* are mentioned in the Pali literature but the

first four are the most important as it was whilst he was abiding in the fourth

jhāna that the Buddha-to-be obtained the three liberating knowledges: knowledge of his own former births; knowledge of the causes of the births and rebirths of others; and knowledge of the destruction of the defiling impulses (āśava).

In the first jhāna the mind has the characteristics of being ‘... accompanied by initial thought (vitarka) and discursive thought (vicāra), is born of aloofness and is rapturous and joyful.’ The second jhāna (... is devoid of initial and discursive thought, is born of concentration, and is rapturous and joyful.’ The third jhāna is characterized by ‘the fading out of rapture, equanimity, attention, joy and clear consciousness. The fourth jhāna ‘... has neither anguish nor joy and ... is entirely purified by equanimity and mindfulness.’<sup>xx</sup> These jhānas are clearly contenders for classification as pure consciousness events. Some of the later ones such as the state of no-thing-ness, the state of neither perception nor non-perception and the state of the cessation of perception and feeling might be stronger contenders, but the significance of the fourth stage within the context of mystical progress in the Buddhist tradition is that it is here that the mind becomes ready for the acquisition of mystical knowledge.

The interesting point from the perspective of the present argument is that a state having the characteristics of the fourth jhāna is also recorded as being attained by people to whom the Buddha gave a progressive talk on dhamma (teachings).<sup>xxi</sup> Peter Masefield claims to have identified more than eighty accounts of such progressive

talks in the Pali Buddhist scriptures.<sup>xxii</sup> Similar accounts are found throughout Hindu (and Buddhist) tantric literature. The *Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā*, for example, claims that 'It is very difficult to get the condition of samādhi without the favour of a true guru (teacher)' (4.9).<sup>xxiii</sup> The *Gheraṇḍa Samhita*(7.1) tells us that 'The samādhi is a great yoga; it is acquired by great good fortune. It is obtained through the grace and kindness of the guru and by intense devotion to him.'<sup>xxiv</sup> According to Swami Muktananda, a contemporary Hindu tantric, a guru can enter into a disciple through sound, touch or look and awaken the kuṇḍalinī energy, that is, establish a state of samādhi.<sup>xxv</sup>

Mystical experiences can then, arise through the practice of some form of mental culture such as meditation or prayer, or spontaneously, or through input from a third party; they can be internally or externally oriented (introvertive or extravertive); they can be content-less or content-ful and, when present, the content can display considerable variety. A map or diagram that accurately and comprehensively mapped the territory of mysticism would thus need to include the following:

SPONTANEOUS	SPONTANEOUS OR CULTIVATED	CULTIVATED	INITIATED
<u>No stages</u> ineffable noetic transient passive	<u>Preliminary</u> <u>stages</u> ineffable transient	<u>No stages</u> ineffable noetic passive	A number of stages leading to an experience that is: ineffable noetic transient passive
	↓ <u>Culminatory</u> <u>stages</u> ineffable noetic transient sometimes → passive		
EXTRAVERTIVE	INTROVERTIVE	EXTRAVERTIVE	INTROVERTIVE OR EXTRAVERTIVE

This diagram places pure consciousness events in the wider context of mystical experience though it does not refute the claim that PCE's are unmediated; nor does it have to for Katz's claim that mystical experiences are conditioned by the mystic's background prior to, during and after the experience is not as dependent on his 'single epistemological assumption' as his critics might think. Even if PCE's are unconditioned they have no noetic content and are therefore of little doctrinal or soteriological value to religious traditions. Furthermore, as Forman himself admits, such

experiences are staging posts on the way to noetic mystical experiences. Even if PCE's are unconditioned this does not establish that mystical insights derive from unconditioned experience and this is what anyone who wants to claim that mystical experiences offer some glimpse or contact with the true nature of things or a transcendent reality has to demonstrate. What the diagram does show is that there are close parallels between the structural phenomenology of mysticism and the structural phenomenology of trance.

## **Trance and Mysticism**

What then of trance? One of the problems with seeking to explain mysticism in terms of trance experience is that researchers in the field of hypnosis disagree about the nature of trance. In *Theories of Hypnosis* Lynn and Rhue classify the various theoretical perspectives on this issue under three heads:

- 1) single factor theories, the most significant of which is neodissociation theory;
- 2) socio-cognitive theories; and
- 3) interactive-phenomenological theories.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Crudely speaking, single factor theories emphasize the similarities in hypnotic experiences across a range of contexts, socio-cognitive theories emphasize the differences whilst interactive-phenomenological theories seek to give appropriate weight to both. My own understanding tends to align with the last of these groups, seeking to identify the core factors that remain when factors such as beliefs, expectations and demand characteristics have been identified yet also recognizing that *all* hypnotic experiences are influenced by such factors. The determination of

what are demand characteristics and what are not is itself a complex and often controversial process.

**A relatively simple example** will illustrate the point. One of the single factor theories listed by Lynn and Rhue is the Aniesis or Relaxation theory advocated by researchers such as William Edmonston. Relaxation is so fundamental to hypnosis, argues Edmonston, that it must be regarded as *the* primary factor or mechanism and all others regarded as secondary. In short, no relaxation, no hypnosis. An obvious question to ask in this context is 'how relaxed does a person have to be in order to be classed as hypnotized?' People who are hypnotized in the course of stage shows often engage in quite vigorous activity whilst in, or seemingly in, a state of trance. Indeed, all activities undertaken in response to post-hypnotic suggestions are deemed by some researchers to be activities performed in revived trance state.<sup>xxvii</sup> At the very least these observations are problematical for Edmonston's theory. Even more damaging for the relaxation theory is the research of Arnold Ludwig and William Lyle. They point out that 'in most instances, the trance states occurring outside of experimental and therapeutic settings have been produced by manoeuvres designed to increase tension, alertness, emotional excitement and physical activity rather than relaxation or sleeplike mental states.'<sup>xxviii</sup> Following on from this observation they developed an induction technique which they called 'tension induction'. This creates what they describe as a hyperalert trance state, in which '... all the phenomena commonly associated with hypnotic-trance induction and the trance state can be achieved under tension-producing manoeuvres ... (moreover) ... subjects

could be trained to pass easily from the hyperalert trance to the 'sleepy' hypnotic trance, and vice versa, indicating that there are some common features between these two forms of trance.<sup>'xxix</sup> Relaxation thus appears to be an artefact of the induction procedure rather than a primary component of the hypnotic state. Edmonston disputes this conclusion and argues that the term hypnosis should be reserved for states that are induced through suggestions of relaxation. As Robert Temple points out, however, this objection '... might be said to amount to little more than a quibble over words.'<sup>xxx</sup>

The question then arises, 'are there any components of hypnotic experience that are not artefacts? Socio-cognitive theorists are inclined to answer in the negative, interactive-phenomenological ones in the positive. Two of the strongest contenders for the status of non-artifactual components of the hypnotic state are what Ronald Shor describes as a fading of the generalized reality orientation and experiential absorption. The generalized reality orientation (Tart refers to it as consensus reality orientation)<sup>xxxi</sup> is '... a structured frame of reference in the background of attention which supports, interprets, and gives meaning to all experiences.'<sup>xxxii</sup> Many hypnotists use the rather vaguer phrase 'conscious mind' to refer to this orientation. Absorption is '... the sense of being caught up in the phenomena or content of the session or in the phenomena experienced.'<sup>xxxiii</sup> Fromm and Kahn found that the only structural and state-related common features of auto- and hetero-hypnosis were these two factors.<sup>xxxiv</sup> In different words they can be seen to form the core of Gilligan's definition of trance: '... a state of deep experiential absorption where a person



can operate independently of the constraints of regulatory, error-oriented conscious processes.<sup>'xxxv</sup>

Gilligan also offers a phenomenology of trance that is particularly helpful when investigating trance states outside clinical and experimental settings. He points out that in trance '... attentional focus may be internally or externally oriented'<sup>'xxxvi</sup> and that trance can be developed in many ways, such as inhibition of movement,<sup>xxxvii</sup> '... rhythmic and repetitive movement ... chanting, attentional absorption and balancing of muscle tonus.'<sup>'xxxviii</sup>

He also lists twelve 'phenomenological characteristics common in the experience of trance':

1. experiential absorption of attention;
2. effortless expression;
3. experiential, nonconceptual involvement;
4. willingness to experiment;
5. flexibility in time/space relations;
6. alteration of sensory experience;
7. fluctuation in involvement;
8. motoric/verbal inhibition;
9. trance logic;
10. metaphorical processing;
11. time distortion,
12. amnesia.<sup>xxxix</sup>

A number of these are particularly relevant when exploring mystical experiences from the perspective of trance processes.

*Experiential absorption of attention* means that entranced people can become ‘fully immersed in one particular experiential context for a sustained period.’

*Effortless expression* refers to the absence of a need to try to do anything or to plan “ahead”. Experience “just seems to happen” and “flows quite effortlessly”.

*Experiential, conceptual involvement* refers to the fact that entranced individuals ‘usually are quite immersed in experiential, rather than conceptual domains. They are more able to directly experience “things as they are” and generally show little need to logically understand or conceptually analyze experience.’

*Flexibility in time/space relations* means that ‘the hypnotized person becomes unbound from fixation to a single time/space coordinate (the “present”) thereby making available an infinite number of potential realities.’ Hallucinations and perceptual distortions in all sense modalities are also common, as is ‘both-and’ or ‘trance’ logic and highly symbolic or metaphorical processing. All of these characteristics are frequently found in accounts of mystical experience.

Trance states can also be self-induced or induced by another, hence the familiar distinction between auto- and hetero-hypnosis. Although both are clearly forms of trance there is some evidence that the two are experienced as being slightly different. Fromm and Kahn point to heightened, vivid imagery in self hypnosis as the most prominent, though the hetero-hypnosis to which this

comment refers is experimental, laboratory-based hetero-hypnosis rather than therapeutic hetero-hypnosis.<sup>x1</sup>

Trance experiences can also be content-less or content-ful.

**With regard to content-less experiences,** Charles Tart comments that ‘Typically, if a deeply hypnotized subject is asked what he is thinking about or experiencing, the answer is “Nothing”.’<sup>x1i</sup> We should note, however, that Ludwig and Lyle did observe a number of differences between hypnotic and hyperalert trances: ‘In the hypnotic trance, subjects claimed that their mind was ‘blank’ whereas, in the hyperalert trance, they commonly stated that all sorts of thoughts and emotions were racing through their minds during periods of time when the experimenters chose to remain silent.’<sup>x1ii</sup> The implication of this is that this state of empty-mindedness, which sounds rather like a Pure Consciousness Event, is itself an artefact of the induction procedure.

**As regards content-ful experience** Tart points out that the hypnotic state is ‘... characterized by greatly enhanced suggestibility, a greater motility of attention/awareness energy, so when a particular experience is suggested to the subject he usually experiences it far more vividly than he could in his ordinary d-Soc [discrete state of consciousness], often to the point of experiential reality.’<sup>x1iii</sup> In a similar vein, Fromm and Kahn comment that when practitioners of auto-hypnosis gained some experience in the procedure ‘... internal events at times took on a quality of verisimilitude comparable to the way in which one experiences

external reality itself.<sup>xliv</sup> This also applied to self-suggestions that auto-hypnotists made to themselves, usually through actively planning the tasks they intended to undertake in trance.<sup>xiv</sup>

Trance states can thus exhibit the characteristics that James uses to describe mystical experiences: they often have a passive quality, experience 'just seems to happen' as Gilligan puts it; they are transient - if the hypnotized person does not bring him or herself out of trance or someone else does not do it for them, sleep will intervene at some point and they will return to normal consciousness on waking; they also have a noetic quality - the vivid images and feelings sometimes experienced in trance are often taken to be realities. With regard to William James' ineffability characteristic I am not aware of any claims that hypnotic experiences are ineffable. What is clear, however, is that since trance states, as characterised by Gilligan, often involve non-conceptual processing, alterations in sensory experience and the experience of time, trance logic (akin to the paradoxicality often reported in association with mystical experience?) and metaphorical processing we would expect people trying to describe their experiences of trance to struggle when trying to put them into words. In short, mystical states and trance states have many characteristics in common, are induced by similar methods and show similarities in the variations of experience that they produce. Indeed, the parallels are so marked that a reasonable conclusion would seem to be that there is more than a prima facie case for regarding mystical experiences as varieties of trance experience and any denial of that identity will need to be supported

by a detailed argument rather than a few dismissive assertions if it is to have any credibility.

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