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# A Post-Kantian Perspective on Recent Debates about Mystical Experience

Martin T. Adam

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Academic discussion of mystical experience has tended to presuppose a model of experience that is broadly Kantian in character, and this is so in two regards. First of all it has adopted Kant's division between intuition and understanding—in the form of a distinction drawn between “experience” and “interpretation.” Through the former of each of these pairs, an object is said to be given; through the latter, it is said to be conceptualized. Second, many thinkers have presupposed the Kantian distinction of “noumenon” and “phenomenon.”

This article questions the appropriateness of both these presuppositions. Situating my arguments in the context of the recent constructivist-essentialist debate, I suggest that thinkers on both sides have not been sufficiently critical in their employment of Kantian terminology. I argue that there exists an important subcategory of mystical experience that does not fit comfortably into the Kantian conceptual framework.

**W**HAT RELEVANCE DO mystical experiences and the knowledge claims based on them have to the enterprise of philosophy? How seriously should the philosopher take the mystic? Such questions can be legitimately rephrased to place the onus on the philosopher who chooses to ignore the phenomena of mysticism. With what right can the philosopher simply dismiss mystical experiences as irrelevant to his or her concerns? That this may be a more appropriate way of stating the query becomes clear when

Martin T. Adam is a Ph.D. candidate and lecturer at the Faculty of Religious Studies, McGill University, Montreal, PQ H3A 2A7, Canada.

Following the usual convention in Kant studies, in this article “A” will refer to the first edition of *Critique of Pure Reason*, and “B,” to the second edition. For both editions I have relied exclusively on the Norman Kemp Smith translation.

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one considers the kinds of statements mystics have sometimes uttered. A brief glance at the literature documenting mystical knowledge claims yields a startling array of philosophical problems into which various mystics have professed insight, for example, the true natures of God, freedom and immortality, space and time, the human self (and the purpose of that self's existence), good and evil, love, and, indeed, the very nature of Reality itself.

The first line of inquiry a careful philosopher must pursue in assessing such a wide range of mystical knowledge claims pertains not to their truth but to their epistemological basis. The statements of mystics are said to be "based on" experiences—but in what sense is this the case? Are they inferences believed by the mystic to follow from the fact of an experience's occurrence? Or are they, rather, descriptions of truths that are considered "directly known" within that experience itself? Upon examination this turns out to be a very sticky issue.

Mystical knowledge claims are usually held to have more than a merely subjective validity; they are thought to pertain to the nature of reality in general. Insofar as mystics make such claims they are purporting to have insight into the nature of something other than their own psychological states and, hence, about "objects" that are in some sense distinct from their own subjectivity. Among philosophers the possibility that there exists a specifically mystical mode of knowing such objects has usually been held to depend on the idea that the structure of mystical experience is parallel to that of sense experience. It is commonly thought that in sense experience the subject has a direct nonpropositional knowledge of particular phenomenological features of the object of consciousness the existence of which, at the time of their occurrence, it is impossible to doubt. Carefully formulated propositions expressing these features are also thought to possess a special epistemological status such that it does not make sense for the subject of the experience to doubt their truth (e.g., Russell's "Red patch now"). In addition, under normal circumstances, there is little reason for a third person to cast doubt on them. Hence, the question to ask with regard to mystical claims is whether certain among them might be plausibly thought to stand on a similar epistemological footing (e.g., "God now").

In examining the possibility of such indubitable elements of mystical experience, the path that usually has been trod has been that of attempting to disentangle the elements of the experience that might be considered "directly intuited" or "given" from those that are the product of the mystic's own subjective understanding. This distinction, between intuition and understanding, is, of course, a Kantian distinction. It is one that has been uncritically presupposed by almost all thinkers working in this area of the philosophy of religion, taking the particular form of a division

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drawn between “experience” and its “interpretation.” The two sides of this

the time of the experience itself and interpretations that are applied post-experientially. I shall refer to the former as “concurrent.” It is this kind of interpretation that pertains most directly to any discussion of the appropriateness of the application of Kantian terminology in the mystical context. For Kant held that conscious reference to an object presupposes that certain fundamental concepts of the human understanding be applied to the appearances of intuition. These are the categories. Without the application of the categories, experience of an object is held to be impossible. The categories serve to unite the manifold appearances of intuition into coherent experiences of objects. Without their application, experience

all conscious experience is experience of phenomena and, hence, is necessarily conceptual in nature.

Given these facts, one might well wonder how it is that contemporary thinkers relying on the Kantian model of experience have spoken of experience as though it stands in contrast to the conceptual interpretation that it is given. The answer lies in the fact that the conceptual interpretation of the intuitional data of experience may be legitimately divided into two kinds. There are, first of all, those concepts that Kant attempted to identify under the title of "categories." Such concepts are considered, as we have seen, necessary conditions of the possibility of the conscious experience of phenomenal objects. As such, they are part of the human cognitive hardware; they are unlearned, transcultural, and common to all human minds.<sup>2</sup> Second, there are concepts that are culture specific; these are learned and are by no means necessary conditions of the possibility of experience. When philosophers examining mysticism have spoken of experience as distinct from its interpretation, they have, I believe, been thinking of interpretation in terms of the latter sort of concept.

Perhaps the best place to begin in attempting to gain an understanding of how this distinction between learned and unlearned concepts has been presupposed is with the classic account of the experience/interpretation distinction drawn by W. T. Stace in *Mysticism and Philosophy*. It is possible, says Stace, to make a legitimate distinction between two kinds of element present in any given report of a mystical experience. First, there are those elements that are truly descriptive of the phenomenal traits of the experience. It is clear that Stace would mean to include here those phenomena that are generated by the application of the basic Kantian categories to the appearances of intuition. Second, there are those elements

ferent level—between the basic phenomena (created by the categories in application to appearances) and a third component: the *learned* conceptualizations given to phenomena.<sup>3</sup> According to the Kantian model appearances are “given,” whereas their conceptualization is the mind’s unconscious activity in organizing them into coherent experience. That this division is merely a logical one, which is to say that experience of a phenomenal object must always contain the combination of these two elements, is, in Kant’s philosophy, a matter of definition. But whether the same holds true with regard to the application of learned concepts is another issue. It does not appear to be a *logical* impossibility that an individual could have an experience of a phenomenal object without the concurrent application of learned concepts. This appears to be a question of *empirical* possibility. A great deal turns on this; for if it is empirically possible to ex-

phers) who merely have the subject's verbal testimony on which to base their interpretation. Wishing to emphasize the universal character of mystical experiences, Stace tends to underplay the importance of concurrent interpretation while playing up the fact of diverse postexperiential interpretation. In recent years this tendency has been thoroughly critiqued by Steven Katz.

## II

It is Katz's contention that the phenomenology of mystical experiences varies across the different religious and cultural traditions in which they are found. Stace's attempt to find an underlying core experience common to all mysticism is viewed as misguided and untrue to the phenomenological facts. Katz's argument is based on the idea that the beliefs of mystics from different traditions vary to such an extent that it becomes implausible to suggest that they are of the same essential nature. For the concepts through which mystics actually experience the world, that is, those that their conceptual intellects contribute to their experiences, are determined by their respective traditions. The phenomenological features of experience are partly constituted by these concepts under which raw data are organized and understood. For Katz, it is not the case that in searching for the raw phenomena of mystical experience we are attempting to find only those features that are parallel to sensational appearances. Such are never presented to consciousness in an uninterpreted manner; they are always organized under concepts. And for Katz this means that mystical experience, like sensory experience, is always contextual, its phenomenology determined by the learned concepts of the mystic's tradition. It is not merely the case that the postexperiential interpretations given to mystical experiences vary across traditions; the experiences themselves, *at the time they are occurring*, are phenomenologically distinct because of this concurrent conceptualizing activity of the mind. Katz notes: "The experience itself as well as the form in which it is reported is shaped by concepts which the mystic brings to, and which shape, his experience" (1978: 26). Katz's position is most forcefully illustrated when he contrasts the Jewish mystical experience with that of the Buddhist:

There is no intelligible way that anyone can legitimately argue that a "no-self" experience of "empty" calm is the same experience of intense, loving, intimate relationship between two substantial selves, one of whom is conceived of as the personal God of western religion and all that this entails. The losing of self is not equivalent to the finding of another, especially when this other is conceived of as the God of Jewish tradition. (1978: 39–40)

Katz's argument hinges on the implausibility of suggesting that differences among the reports of different mystics are the product of post-experiential interpretations. On the contrary, he suggests, it is far more reasonable to think that the experiences of the mystic prior to a mystical experience determine the nature of the mystical experience. In speaking of the Jewish mystical experience, Katz makes this point explicit: "The entire life of the Jewish mystic is permeated from childhood up by images, concepts, symbols, ideological values, and ritual behavior which there is no reason to believe he leaves behind in his experience. Rather, these images, beliefs, symbols and rituals define, *in advance*, what the experience *he wants to have*, and which he then does have, will be like" (1978: 33).

Similar considerations obtain with regard to the mystical experiences of Buddhists and, indeed, to mystical experiences of any tradition. The beliefs and expectations of the mystic determine the kind of experience that he or she will have. And it seems to follow from this notion that because the beliefs of the different traditions are not identical, the experiences of their mystics will also be different.

Katz's empirically based argument is highly persuasive and certainly goes a long way toward undermining any attempt to find a central phenomenological core common to *all* experiences that have been labeled mystical. Yet, when carefully examined in terms of the Kantian framework it presupposes, his argument begins to look peculiar. It is Katz's position that it is because the conceptual frameworks of different mystics differ so dramatically that they cannot be deemed to have the same kind of experience. This position may be correct; but note that it can only be so if we accept the idea that a mystic's experience is *entirely* determined by the learned concepts of a tradition.<sup>4</sup> If Katz wants to maintain the position that the phenomenology of different mystical experiences must be different if the expectations and beliefs of the mystics differ, he must hold either that (a) there are no "given" mystical data as such, the entire content of the experience being conceptual, or that (b) whatever mystical data there exist are entirely determined by the beliefs and expectations of the mystic. Because he speaks of mystical experience as including such items as symbols and images, and because these objects seem to have at least a quasi-sensorially based content as well as form, it would initially seem that Katz did not intend the former of these two possibilities. But what is involved in the latter?

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<sup>4</sup> This point has also been noticed by Robert Forman (41). Forman's work constitutes a rare attempt to challenge the sense experience model's application to a certain subclass of mystical experiences that he terms Pure Consciousness Events. As such, both his method and its results are consistent with my own. However, Forman (57–63) argues for an understanding of Kant's thought that I cannot agree with, namely, that it allows for the possibility of objectless consciousness.



Because he wishes to deny the possibility that certain phenomenological features of mystical experiences could be present in the experiences of mystics of different traditions, that is, as the mystical data of the experience, Katz is logically required to maintain that the data that mystics interpret are also the product of their contextual consciousness. Katz's point that their experiences would necessarily be different owing to their culturally dependent conceptualizations is well taken; but this does not rule out the possibility that what they conceptualize could be the same. Certain phenomenological features of mystical experiences might be common across cultural divides. Hence, if Katz wishes to rule out this possibility, then he must maintain the position that the content and the cultural form of mystical experience are a product of the mystic's beliefs and expectations.

Hence, for Katz's position to be consistently maintained it actually must be held that there is no "given" element in mystical experiences parallel to the sensory content of perceptual experiences. The phenomena experienced by the mystic must be entirely the product of his or her own mind; they cannot have objective reference to a reality beyond the individual's own subjectivity. There can be no mystical data *per se*, or, more accurately, any such "data" that do exist are not perceived but *projected* by the mystic's mind. Not only are the learned classificatory concepts through which mystical data are understood the product of the mystic's tradition, but so are the very data themselves. Thus, for Katz the line drawn between raw data and their interpretation begins to blur. The logical distinction between these two elements partly rests on their respective origins; if both originate in the mind of the mystic, then it becomes unclear as to which elements of a mystical experience are to be thought of as interpretation and which are not.

Katz himself does not seem to explicitly recognize these implications. In arguing that the object of the mystic's experience cannot, logically, be experienced unless the mystic is possessed of a pre-experiential belief in

mystics from different traditions could experience the same phenomenal objects, albeit under their different cultural interpretations. This would imply the possibility that certain core phenomenological features could

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enal object of man's religious experience is a joint product of the divine noumenon itself and the various human concepts of the Transcendent

Positions like those of Hick and Stace have been dubbed “essentialist” in contrast to the “contextualist” or “constructivist” views championed by Katz.<sup>7</sup> Hick’s particular essentialism entails the acceptance of the belief that a divine reality, distinct and separate from the mystic’s own subjectivity, actually objectively exists. It also requires that one accept the idea that mystical forms of consciousness are in some sense noetic, that is, that they allow the subject to know this reality, albeit through the framework of one’s concurrent conceptualizations. Katz’s contextualism requires no such assumptions. Given these considerations, and the judicious employment of Ockham’s razor, it would seem that a careful philosopher should prefer Katz’s account over Hick’s on purely rational grounds. For it is by no means clear that either of the points assumed by Hick is in fact true. They *might* be true, but to argue for their truth on the basis of mystical experience itself is to beg the question at issue.<sup>8</sup>

In any case, if the model of sense experience is adopted, then no attempt to evaluate the epistemological significance of mystical experiences can ever be concluded with certainty. Because of the private nature of the experiences, it will always remain an open question as to which parts of a given mystical report, if any, are actually descriptive of an “intuited” element and which parts are the result of the application of learned concepts to the basic phenomena. Hence, the knowledge claims of the mystic will remain subject to the concern that the elements described as “perceived” or “directly known” could well be interpretations of still more basic phenomena. Of the various interpretations possible it must remain a moot point as to which is the best. The mystic’s own interpretation may in one sense be considered indubitable; for, as Katz has pointed out, the interpretations that are given to the basic phenomena of mystical experiences are often at least partially constitutive of the phenomenology of the experiences themselves. But note that this indubitability can only obtain insofar as a mystic’s interpretation includes no claims with regard to the ontological status of the object experienced.

#### IV

In assessing the nature and significance of mysticism there is another line of inquiry leading neither to the naive universalism of Hick and Stace nor necessarily to the subjectivism entailed by Katz’s views. This approach

<sup>7</sup> For recent summary statements of this debate, see King: 167–186 and Katz 2000.

<sup>8</sup> With regard to the first of these beliefs, this point was first noted by John Heintz (58) in his comments on Hick’s essay.

makes no ontological claims. It grants that certain mystical phenomena are present in many, but not all, the cultural forms of mystical experience. It acknowledges family resemblances among the diversity of experiences called “mystical” while at the same time picking out for examination subsets of experiences having similar descriptions. For example, one can fruitfully draw comparisons among reported experiences of divine love—say, those of a Christian, a Bhakti Vedantin, and a Sufi. Or one could draw together and compare diverse experiences of “tranquility”—say, of a Buddhist practitioner of *shamatha* meditation, a Taoist wayfarer, and a modern-day enjoyer of float tank technology. The possibilities are many. As noted above, such an approach could bear much fruit in the field of religious studies—if not philosophy.

But in closing this article I would like to throw a monkey wrench into the discussion by picking out one such set of descriptions, which does raise a number of very interesting philosophical issues. The shared feature of this subset casts considerable doubt on Katz’s key assumption that consciousness is necessarily contextual.<sup>9</sup> The set is philosophically controversial, for it seems to require that the very subject–object dichotomy, and therefore the entire sense experience model, be rejected as unsuited to the task of characterizing mystical experience. While mystical knowledge claims framed in terms of subject and object might remain subject to objection, one might equally object to the subjection of all mystical experiences to the subject–object dichotomy. The kind of experience that does

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<sup>9</sup> There are, in fact, two closely related possible sets that might lead to Katz’s position being undermined. The first can be described from within the model of the subject–object dichotomy that has been assumed throughout the course of this article. Here I will only touch on this possibility. It might be argued that an individual could train him- or herself to experience phenomena *as such*. It seems to me that this is the point of certain meditative practices common in Zen and other traditions wherein, for example, one centers one’s consciousness on a particular object such as a candle flame or the sensation of one’s breath at the tip of one’s nose. What is sought is a kind of “raw” experience of the object, without the application of the learned concepts through which it is normally understood. As has been noted, this question would appear to be *empirical* in nature. We have seen that it is a logical requirement of the Kantian conceptual schema that it be impossible to experience an object without the application of the basic categories of human thought; the same does not seem to be the case for those concepts that are inherited from one’s culture.

While it is beyond the scope of this article to fully explore this possibility, the following description of a Hindu meditative practice provides some conception of what is meant: “In this meditation, thought is freed from the presence of the ‘I,’ for the cognitive act (‘I know this object’ or ‘This object is mine’) is no longer produced; it is thought that *is* (becomes) the given object. The object is no longer known through associations—that is to say, included in the series of previous representations, localized by extrinsic relations (name, dimension, use, class), and, so to speak, impoverished by the habitual process of abstraction characteristic of secular thought—it is grasped directly, in its existential nakedness, as a concrete and irreducible datum” (Eliade: 82).

not seem to fit constitutes a subset of those described by Stace as “absolute undifferentiated unity.”<sup>10</sup> Even if it is not the case that an experience of undifferentiated unity is a core feature of *all* mystical experiences, there can be little question that it is central to the reports of *many*. And I would suggest here that the model of sense experience is not adequate to the task of fruitfully analyzing the nature and significance of this particular kind of mystical experience.<sup>11</sup>

The reason for this is that the sense experience model presupposes a division between subject and object that, if the reports of various mystics are to be believed, is entirely absent from the experience of undifferentiated unity. However one chooses to analyze an object of mystical experience, be it in terms of a noumenal interaction with the human mind or as entirely subjective, conceptually organized mystical data, the fact remains that a division between the experiencing subject and the object of the experience is required if the model is to work. Yet it is the presence of exactly this division within their experiences that these mystics deny.

As far as I can tell, there has been very little in the way of explicit rec-

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is by their application to an object of consciousness.<sup>14</sup> If an object is not present, concepts cannot be applied. Consciousness would, therefore, be noncontextual. Such a state would have to be devoid not only of learned concepts but also of the basic categories of thought that Kant held to be essential components of all conscious experience.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Or, it might be added, learned concepts may shape experience by their *effect on the subject*. I leave a detailed response to this possible rejoinder for another day. In brief, one would have to argue that it is the case that not only the object but also the subject is absent from such "experiences." No object, no subject. If one then wished to maintain that such experiences or "events" involved "consciousness," then one would be compelled to speak in terms of a transpersonal consciousness, a notion that is, in fact, quite at home in many of the traditions wherein such mystical experiences are attested.

<sup>15</sup> See A 252/B 307 for Kant's views on this. In A, Kant actually seems to hold open the logical possibility of a special mode of nonsensible intuition through which the noumenon might be given: "But in order that a noumenon may signify a true object, distinguishable from all phenomena, it is not enough that I *free* my thought from all conditions of sensible intuition; I must likewise have ground for *assuming* another kind of intuition, different from the sensible, in which such an object may be given. For otherwise my thought, while indeed without contradictions, is none the less empty. We have not, indeed, been able to prove that sensible intuition is the only possible intuition, but only that it is so for us. But neither have we been able to prove that another kind of intuition is possible" (A 252). In B, however, he forcefully rejects this very possibility: "if by 'noumenon' we mean a thing in so far as it is *not an object of our sensible intuition*, and so abstract from our mode of intuiting it, this is a noumenon in the *negative* sense of the term. But if we understand by it an *object of a non-sensible intuition*, we thereby presuppose a special mode of intuition, namely, the intellectual, which is not that which we possess, and of which we cannot comprehend even the possibility. This would be 'noumenon' in the *positive* sense of the term" (B 307). I must here acknowledge my debt to James Horne for pointing these passages out to me and in general for his very useful comments on an earlier version of this article.



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