

WILLIAM JAMES AND THE ROLE OF MYSTICISM IN RELIGION

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Abstract:

In *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1902) William James examines the role of mysticism in the development of religion. James argues that the root of all religions is precisely the experience of mystical states of consciousness. As we shall see, although James himself admits that his own psychological constitution shuts him out from these experiences, the acknowledgement of practical developments of mysticism within institutionalized religions illustrates the reality of these states of consciousness, a stance supported by James' pragmatism. Thus, the paper not only examines the nature of mysticism but presents James' pragmatist view of religion.

Introduction

In the *Gifford Lectures* that compose *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) William James offers a view of religion that one can describe with the German concept of *Weltanschauung* (usually present in the hermeneutic continental tradition)¹. In other words, for James religion is a *world-view* that encompasses our tacit existential posture. In this sense, religion is basically our primordial existential stance towards the cosmos or, as Max Scheler would say, an eternal and unavoidable fact of being a human.² As James puts it, “a man’s religion might thus be identified with his attitude, whatever it might be, towards what he felt to be the primal truth.” (James, 2002, p. 32). Being one of the founding fathers of pragmatism³ James highlights this practical aspect of religion in order to describe it. Theological issues are and forever will be crucial aspects for the understanding of religiosity, nonetheless James is focused on the task of presenting religion through the analysis of individuals and their psychological experiences: “the immediate personal experiences will amply fill our time, and we shall hardly consider theology or ecclesiasticism at all.” (Ibid., p. 30). The most crucial aspect of these individual experiences deals with what James calls mystical states of consciousness: “One may say truly, I think, that personal religious experience has its root and centre in mystical states of consciousness” (Ibid., p. 294). As we shall see, those individual examples will serve to illustrate James’ position about mystical personal experiences

¹ See Dilthey, Wilhelm. *Selected Works Vol. VI: Ethical and World-View Philosophy* (2019).

² See Scheler, Max. *On the Eternal in Man* (2009).

³ See Brandom, Robert B. *Perspectives on Pragmatism: Classical, Recent and Contemporary* (2011).

being the root of further institutional religious developments.

Since mystical states of consciousness are the true core of religion, one must understand what mysticism is in order to offer a proper account of religion. Therefore, the paper shows the overall position of James in regards to mysticism and the pragmatist reading of religion by examining the main features of mystical experiences and its concrete manifestations through the use of chemical substances for inducing altered states of consciousness and the adoption of ritual practices such as praying, fasting and meditation.

I.

William James is concerned with religious phenomena as a path to elucidate the general existential stance that each and every one of us invariably enact on a day-to-day basis. This *worldview* or *Weltanschauung* for many of us is largely based on institutionalized religious doctrines. The origins of those doctrines, in turn, are always difficult to pinpoint. However, for James one thing is certain: they are rooted in individual mystical states of consciousness. In this sense, James is particularly focused on the role of individuals and their specific psychological configurations as the foundational sources of religion in general. For the American philosopher, we must dwell into the minds of such individuals in order to understand the overall phenomena of religious thinking and institutionalized religions as such. That is precisely the reason why throughout his *Gifford Lectures* James is constantly quoting personal and autobiographical writings of figures such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Goethe, Martin Luther, Saint Augustine, Walt Whitman, Baruch Spinoza, George Fox, Tolstoy, Voltaire, among others. Besides those well known and acclaimed figures of philosophical, religious and

aesthetic realms, James is also constantly quoting anonymous people to show the universality of mystical states of consciousness and their similar unfoldings. Nonetheless, before we give a detailed account of James' position, one must be at least familiar with different takes on the origins of religion and we shall begin by pointing out only two possible perspectives that offer a different description of the rise of religious thinking.

First of all, there is a possible explanation of religion as being nothing but the by-product of a particular mechanism of evolutionary adaptation, namely the folk psychology aspect of projecting volition and agency to events or noises that happen in our immediate surroundings.⁴ This cognitive feature of *homo sapiens*, of course, is what lies behind the birth of what we call *animism*, the first religious outlook of mankind by most accounts. Thus, from this perspective we must recognize that “religion evolved as a cognitive by-product of pre-existing capacities that evolved for non-religious functions.” (Hauser & Pyysiäinen, 2010, p. 104). In other words, in this view religion is simply an offshoot of something else that was naturally selected for different purposes but eventually became an integral part of human organization and an object that went through historical or cultural selection due to its societal role: “although religion did not originally emerge as a biological adaptation, it can play a role in both facilitating and stabilizing cooperation within groups, and as such, could be the target of cultural selection. Religious groups seem to last longer than non-religious groups, for example.” (Ibid., p. 108). The study of

⁴ See Hauser, Marc & Pyysiäinen, Ilkka. *The origins of religion: evolved adaptation or by-product?* (2010).

Peoples, Duda & Marlowe (2016)⁵ corroborates Hauser & Pyysiäinen (2010) by arguing that “the oldest trait of religion, shared by the most recent common ancestor of present-day hunter-gatherers, was animism.” (Peoples, Duda & Marlowe, 2010, p. 277). Animism, however, is not exactly a religion, but a particular cognitive apprehension of nature that enables religious beliefs to eventually be constructed: “Animism is not a religion or philosophy, but a feature of human mentality, a byproduct of cognitive processes that enable social intelligence, among other capabilities. It is a widespread way of thinking among hunter-gatherers.” (Ibid., 274). But what if the outburst of religion is not exactly a by-product but precisely what natural selection was ‘aiming’ for?

The second perspective on the origins of religion can be exemplified by the work of David Elkind.⁶ For Elkind religion must be “regarded as an externalized adaptation which serves both the individual and society.” (Elkind, 1970, p. 35). Nevertheless, Elkind does not hold a reductionist position that would argue for the pure biological root of religion. He sees the adaptation as a sort of dialectic process that includes the historical and cultural aspects. Thus, religion is to be understood as a cultural manifestation of biological necessities and dispositions: “Every adaptation is thus a construction which bears the stamp of both nature and nurture, yet is reducible to neither one. The same holds true for religious adaptations.” (Ibid., p. 40).

That being said, if we take James’ approach now our starting point must be the conception that every chain of events that lead to the establishment of a particular religion is intertwined with individuals that go through mystical

⁵ See Peoples, H.C., Duda, P. & Marlowe, F.W. *Hunter-Gatherers and the Origins of Religion* (2016).

⁶ See Elkind, David. *The Origins of Religion in the Child* (1970).

experiences that validate or, specially, sometimes give birth to a particular doctrine. For instance, “In the Christian church there have always been mystics. Although many of them have been viewed with suspicion, some have gained favor in the eyes of the authorities.” (James, 2002, p. 314). Even today christian mysticism is a decisive aspect of being a follower of Christ, whether oneself experiences it or simply believes it to be true or at least possible.⁷ Along the way, as we know, those mystics tend to establish practices and teachings that eventually become orthodoxy: “The experiences of these [mystics] have been treated [by the church] as precedents, and a codified system of mystical theology has been based upon them, in which everything legitimate finds its place.” (Idem). Thus, religion - properly speaking - is something embedded in prior mystical states of consciousness. All the subsequent theological and philosophical aspects are but byproducts of these primordial individual experiences. As James puts it, “I do believe that feeling is the deeper source of religion, and that philosophic and theological formulas are secondary products, like translations of a text into another tongue.” (Ibid., pp. 333-334). Interestingly enough, this position is somewhat shared by Martin Heidegger in his lectures that compose *The Phenomenology of Religious Life* (2014). In this work, Heidegger (who happens to show familiarity with James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience*) says that “Psychopathology and Ethnology demonstrate that the primordial phenomena of all religions is the mystique, the experience of unity with God.” (Heidegger, 2014, p. 27). But what exactly is a mystical state of mind? How can we describe this trance-like quality of mystical awareness? We can start by saying that mystical states of consciousness “bring a sense of mystery and of the metaphysical duality of things, and the feeling of an

⁷ See McGinn, B. *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism* (2006).

enlargement of perception which seems imminent but which never completes itself.” (James, 2002, p. 298), but that wouldn't be enough. First of all, a mystical consciousness is not merely an expansion of our common consciousness. It is not a state of mind that leads us to a higher degree of what we already have in our daily perception. If we try to think of it simply as a sharper way of grasping reality one will inevitably arrive at a distorted picture. The mystical experience, or the ‘cosmic consciousness’ (a notion that James borrows from Richard M. Bucke⁸) is a kind of passive intellectual illumination or a sudden alien awareness of a deeper truth that lingers on after the event, generally in a lower intensity. Moreover, a mystical experience is the feeling or the realization of a truth that is incorporated as something that is undoubtedly reached in a real experience, an unquestionable occurrence that takes place in real life and it is not grasped by reasoning but comes as an unforeseen flow. A dream, on the other hand, can undoubtedly make us feel or realize something, but it is interpreted as a symbolic experience apart from life, and even though it may teach us about an important issue it is radically distinct from the mystical phenomenological standpoint. Furthermore, the lesson gained during a mystical state is never something that can be truly latched on by other means such as reading or listening. One thing is to listen, let's say, about the unicity or oneness of nature, men and God, a whole different thing is to feel it. That is the reason why James argues that “Consciousness of illumination is for us the essential mark of ‘mystical’ states.” (Ibid., p. 316). To be enlightened by a truth or a feeling that does not come in a propositional form

⁸ See Bucke, R. M. *Cosmic Consciousness: a study in the evolution of the human Mind* (2005).

is the core of the mystical experience.⁹ Nonetheless, although ‘consciousness of illumination’ is regarded as the crucial property of mysticism, James also proposes a systematization composed of *four marks* for the enlightened consciousness. The traits of this mystical phenomenology are as follows: 1) *Ineffability*; 2) *Noetic Quality*; 3) *Transiency*; 4) *Passivity*.

James affirms that ineffability is “The handiest of the marks [...] no adequate report of its [mystical experiences] contents can be given in words. It follows from this that its quality must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others.” (Ibid., p. 295). The character of ineffability confirms the mystique as the ground of religion if we also notice what Heidegger says about “the absence of names for God [in mystical experiences]” (Heidegger, 2014, p. 301).¹⁰ The experience of a nameless entity or a higher unknown power is precisely the crucial mark of mysticism and only a mystic can truly know what it is like to have these sorts of experiences. Given that, do we really have to take these reports seriously? For pragmatism religion is to be understood from its empirical outcome and although James himself is an outsider regarding the transcendental, the reality of mysticism in human culture is simply undeniable.

⁹ To illuminate even further the discussion on mysticism as the ground cause of religion and its non-propositional aspects see James, William. *A Suggestion About Mysticism* (1910).

¹⁰ The ineffability of God is a crucial part of the christian mystical tradition as one can notice in the so-called *Negative Theology* writings of figures such as John of the Cross and Meister Eckhart (whom Heidegger deeply admired). Concerning the former, James says that “Saint John of the Cross, for instance, one of the best of them, thus describes the condition called the ‘union of love’, which, he says, is reached by ‘dark contemplation’.” (James, 2002, p. 315).

my own constitution shuts me out from their enjoyment almost entirely, and I can speak of them only at second hand. But though forced to look upon the subject so externally, I will be as objective and receptive as I can; and I think I shall at least succeed in convincing you of the reality of the states in question, and of the paramount importance of their function. (James, 2002, p. 294)

We must remind the reader once again that for James the individual is in the foreground of this investigation: “The plain truth is that to interpret religion one must in the end look at the immediate content of the religious consciousness.” (Ibid., p. 15). And that is precisely the reason why James thinks mystical experiences are the basis of all religions. The immediate content of religious consciousness is not a social or collective object, but an individual experience. A given human group or society can only develop a major and mature religious outlook only after particular individuals can manage to offer beliefs from out of their mystical trance states. The pragmatist view of religion then is concerned about the cultural or social selection that filters those original experiences that eventually become part of a particular collective organization or institution. And that’s the reason why James puts forward the following request for his reader: “Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.” (Ibid., pp. 29-30). This focus on the individual is what makes James’ analysis an assessment of what he calls *personal religion*. If we truly want to grasp the foundational experience that serves

as the basis for religions we must take a deep look at personal mystical experiences.

I propose to ignore the institutional branch entirely, to say nothing of the ecclesiastical organization, to consider as little as possible the systematic theology and the ideas about the gods themselves, and to confine myself as far as I can to personal religion pure and simple. [...] so personal religion should still seem the primordial thing, even to those who continue to esteem it incomplete. (JAMES, 2002, pp. 28-29)

To give such a crucial role for *personal religion* and the individual aspect of religious thought does not mean that James defends the old (and wrong) reading of pragmatism as a sort of *perspectivism*. Pragmatism is not a philosophical stance that does away with the communal and intersubjective aspect of truth establishment procedures. James' pragmatism in regards to religion indeed sees the individual as the core object (something, among others, that clearly shows the proximity between pragmatism and german existentialism as noted by scholars such as Richard Rorty¹¹) but this doesn't imply a relativistic reading of the practical coping of reality. If pragmatism adopted such epistemological reading then 'truth' would simply be equivalent to pleasurable outcomes of given actions and states of mind, which would be absurd and totally backwards of what Peirce, James and Dewey intended.

What immediately feels most 'good' is not always most 'true', when measured by the

¹¹ See Rorty, R. *Essays on Heidegger and others* (1991).

verdict of the rest of experience. The difference between Philip drunk and Philip sober is the classic instance in corroboration. If merely ‘feeling good’ could decide, drunkenness would be the supremely valid human experience. (JAMES, 2002, p. 18).

The pragmatist reading of religion then is nothing more than the process of validating of a set of ethical and mystical beliefs (individually rooted) that unquestionably were selected by a substantial group of people through different generations and places due to its positive role in the enactment of better existential practices: “In other words, not its origin, but the way in which it works on the whole [...] In the end it had to come to our empiricist criterion: By their fruits ye shall know them, not by their roots.” (Ibid., p. 21). Theological and mystical assumptions are basically out of the empirical scope of the scientific method; that’s where philosophy enters as a rational and systematic assessment of beliefs, and in the case of pragmatism it gives us the ultimate criteria: “At any rate you must all be ready now to judge the religious life by its results exclusively” (Ibid., p. 22).¹²

Since James’ pragmatism is concerned with religious phenomena in terms of empirical outcomes of beliefs underlying primordial mystical states of consciousness one can now grasp why he even reaches the point of advocating for “different types of religion to different types of need” (Ibid., p. 109). From this perspective, James says that “the founders of every church owed their power originally to the fact of their direct personal communion with the divine. Not only the superhuman founders, the Christ, the Buddha,

¹² For an in depth analysis of James’ pragmatism on religion see Putnam, H. & R. A. Putnam. *Pragmatism as a Way of Life: The Lasting Legacy of William James and John Dewey* (2017).

Mahomet, but all the originators of Christian sects have been in this case” (Ibid., p. 29). This personal communion is not a system of intellectual or theological propositions. As Heidegger puts it, “the religious experience is not theoretical” (Heidegger, 2014, p. 296). With that, the very existence of God is something dispensable in James’ analysis. What really counts is the empirical or existential aftermath of holding those beliefs.

Immanuel Kant held a curious doctrine about such objects of belief as God, the design of creation, the soul, its freedom, and the life hereafter. These things, he said, are properly not objects of knowledge at all. Our conceptions always require a sense-content to work with, and as the words “soul,” “God,” “immortality,” cover no distinctive sense-content whatsoever, it follows that theoretically speaking they are words devoid of any significance. Yet strangely enough they have a definite meaning for our practice. We can act as if there were a God; feel as if we were free; consider Nature as if she were full of special designs; lay plans as if we were to be immortal; and we find then that these words do make a genuine difference in our moral life. (James, 2002, p. 47)

In addition to the mark of *Ineffability* which gives to the one who experiences it a deep feeling of connection with the transcendental, James also points to the *Noetic Quality* as a distinct characteristic. Thus, mystical experiences not only provide ineffable feelings but also metaphysical knowledge: “Although so similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge.

They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect.” (James, 2002, p. 295). Of course, mystical knowledge is not equivalent to scientific knowledge. It is not methodical and not replicable. Ultimately, every truth or hint of knowledge that comes from a mystical state is connected to the first person perspective and, in this sense, demands a leap of faith: “Faith, says Tolstoy, is that by which men live. And faith-state and mystic state are practically convertible terms.” (Ibid., p. 328). Nonetheless, from the pragmatist perspective it is still something worth investigating in view of the concreteness of their effects. In short, we must take mystical states seriously because “Their fruits appear to have been various.” (Ibid., p. 320). That being said, the ecstasy that accompanies the mystical state is not something to regard either as proof or indication to dismiss them. On the contrary, it only shows, according to James, another level of consciousness that we should investigate and account for. A purely reductionist and materialist stance would fail to realize the ‘pragmatic reality’ of these experiences and such a position is what James calls *medical mind*.

To the medical mind these ecstasies signify nothing but suggested and imitated hypnoid states, on an intellectual basis of superstition, and a corporeal one of degeneration and hysteria. Undoubtedly these pathological conditions have existed in many and possibly in all the cases, but that fact tells us nothing about the value for knowledge of the consciousness which they induce. To pass a spiritual judgment upon these states, we must not content ourselves with superficial medical talk, but inquire into their fruits for life. (James, 2002, p. 320)

The fruits for practical life are what matters when we deal with the corollary of mystical states. This type of materialist reductionism that tries to remove religion from the scientific or philosophical discussion does not realize that truthfulness has an inherent *cash-value*¹³ in the sense that maybe God turns out to be unreal but the consequences of mysticism and its later developments in the form of institutional religions are as real as economic inflation or ecological disasters. This improper position is also called by James *medical materialism*: “Medical materialism finishes up Saint Paul by calling his vision on the road to Damascus a discharging lesion of the occipital cortex, he being an epileptic. It snuffs out Saint Teresa as an hysteric, Saint Francis of Assisi as an hereditary degenerate.” (Ibid., p. 16). If we were to follow this point of view, all the mystic figures were to be classified purely on pathological terms. But even if it were the case it wouldn’t matter, and it goes only to show how committed to pragmatism James is. In short, we must ask ourselves: “If the mystical truth that comes to a man proves to be a force that he can live by, what mandate have we of the majority to order him to live in another way? [...] Its value must be ascertained by empirical methods, so long as we are not mystics ourselves.” (Ibid., pp. 328-330).

James argues that those two first mentioned marks (*Ineffability* and *Noetic Quality*) are sufficient enough to describe the mystical consciousness. *Transiency* and *Passivity*, in turn, “are less sharply marked, but are usually found” (Ibid., p. 295). *Transiency*, as the term encapsulates, simply indicates that “Mystical states cannot be sustained for long. Except in rare instances, half an hour, or at most an hour or two, seems to be the limit beyond which they fade into the light of common day.” (Idem). We’ll see further ahead that

¹³ See James, W. *The Meaning of Truth* (1997).

if the mystical state is induced by chemical substances or religious and ascetical rituals the time frame can be enlarged. Finally, the *Passivity* quality tells us that once the mystical state sets in “the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power.” (Idem).

With the four marks in mind James seeks to unfold “the general traits of the mystic range of consciousness.” (Ibid., p. 327). For the American philosopher, the mystical phenomenological perspective truly opens “the possibility of other orders of truth” (Idem). An important sign of this realm of reality disclosed by mystics is the fact of recurring similar reports from different traditions. The most relevant of them is undoubtedly the experience of *oneness*.

This overcoming of all the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute is the great mystic achievement. In mystic states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness. This is the everlasting and triumphant mystical tradition, hardly altered by differences of clime or creed. In Hinduism, in Neoplatonism, in Sufism, in Christian mysticism, in Whitmanism, we find the same recurring note, so that there is about mystical utterances an eternal unanimity which ought to make a critic stop and think, and which brings it about that the mystical classics have, as has been said, neither birthday nor native land. Perpetually telling of the unity of man with God, their speech antedates languages, and they do not grow old. (James, 2002, pp. 324-325)

Again, the mere existence of similar or harmonious accounts is not enough to declare the unquestionable existence of oneness or the transcendent. Taking mysticism seriously does not mean to espouse it: “mystics have no right to claim that we ought to accept the deliverance of their peculiar experiences, if we are ourselves outsiders and feel no private call thereto. The utmost they can ever ask of us in this life is to admit that they establish a presumption.” (Ibid., p. 328). Besides, a true philosophical stance is one of openness to all sorts of topics and the truth is that “No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded.” (Ibid., p. 301). However,

even this presumption from the unanimity of mystics is far from being strong. [...] To begin with, even religious mysticism itself, the kind that accumulates traditions and makes schools, is much less unanimous than I have allowed. It has been both ascetic and antinomianly self-indulgent within the Christian church. It is dualistic in Sankhya, and monistic in Vedanta philosophy. [...] How different again, apart from the happiness common to all, is the mysticism of Walt Whitman, Edward Carpenter, Richard Jefferies, and other naturalistic pantheists, from the more distinctively Christian sort. The fact is that the mystical feeling of enlargement, union, and emancipation has no specific intellectual content whatsoever of its own. [...] We have no right, therefore, to invoke its prestige as distinctively in favor of any special belief, such as that in absolute idealism, or in the absolute

monistic identity, or in the absolute goodness, of the world. (James, 2002, p. 329)

Another thing to add in the description of such states concerns the source or building blocks that substantiate it in the light of James' radical empiricism. The denial of pure and plain physicalism or medical materialism moves James towards neutral monism, and precisely for that reason he asserts that one's outwardness is, let's say, the pool of possible mystical experiences given that "As a rule, mystical states merely add a supersensuous meaning to the ordinary outward data of consciousness." (Ibid., p. 331). Yet, it doesn't mean that the whole picture that emerges during a mystical state belongs exclusively to the realm of what is reachable or accessible to consciousness: "It seems far more reasonable to ascribe them [intense mystical states of consciousness] to inroads from the subconscious life, of the cerebral activity correlative to which we as yet know nothing. (Ibid., p. 330). This subconscious aspect of mysticism makes James relate it to the aesthetic component of our perception of the world. The appreciation of art is somewhat analogous or kindred to the mystical phenomenology, which leads James to say that "We are alive or dead to the eternal inner message of the arts according as we have kept or lost this mystical susceptibility." (Ibid., p. 297). This mystical susceptibility that we come across during an aesthetic experience reveals a subconscious level of apprehension of reality which implies that even the least mystical person (such as James himself), with all their justifiable doubts, must agree on "the existence of mystical moments as states of consciousness of an entirely specific quality, and of the deep impression which they make on those who have them." (Ibid., p. 308). But not only art is connected with this tacit perception of reality that spark at least a seed of mysticism within us, the contact with unaltered nature also facilitates

reaching other realms of existence: “Certain aspects of nature seem to have a peculiar power of awakening such mystical moods. Most of the striking cases which I have collected have occurred out of doors.” (Ibid., p. 305). This new feature in James’ analysis forces us to wonder: if the subconscious plays an indispensable role in the genesis of mystical states, is it possible to ever come up with a rigorous description of mysticism?

The introduction and attestation by James of the subliminal or latent region of our mind helps us even further towards a full description of mysticism. Let’s then remember the first trait: ineffability. If now we take into account the reality and role of the subconscious in our perception, it becomes clear the necessity to state its non-conceptual and individualistic character: “This incommunicableness of the transport is the keynote of all mysticism. Mystical truth exists for the individual who has the transport, but for no one else. In this, as I have said, it resembles the knowledge given to us in sensations more than that given by conceptual thought.” (Ibid., p. 314). By ‘transport’ James means the first-person accessibility to the mystical phenomena (composed by a wide range of possible paths as we already touched upon). In the christian mystical tradition James is able to find an important example that corroborates his thesis of ineffability as the foremost trait of mysticism, which will lead us, next, to the general aspects of paradoxical attempts in describing it: every mystical undergoing is far and beyond any verbal description, as we said concerning Saint John of the Cross and his *Negative Theology of dark contemplation*.

The dialectical aspect of trying to report a mystical experience with descriptions such as Saint John’s ‘dark contemplation’ is a perfect sign of the difficulty in putting into words what one goes through in those states of mind. Paradoxical or dialectical expressions are definitely “abound in mystical writings.” (Ibid., p. 323). Still within christian

tradition James perceives the tendency of using dialectical speech to clarify what undergoes during these phenomenological events: “The fountainhead of Christian mysticism is Dionysius the Areopagite. He describes the absolute truth by negatives exclusively.” (Ibid., p. 322). To think on ‘dialectics’ and ‘negatives’ inevitably leads one to Hegel, and that is the case for James: “Like Hegel in his logic, mystics journey towards the positive pole of truth only by the ‘*Methode der Absoluten Negativität*.’” (Ibid., p. 323). It almost seems that for mystics it is required this dialectical use of speech as a way towards a higher or closer description of this inner and idiosyncratic episodes.

In mystical literature such self-contradictory phrases as “dazzling obscurity,” “whispering silence,” “teeming desert,” are continually met with. They prove that not conceptual speech, but music rather, is the element through which we are best spoken to by mystical truth. Many mystical scriptures are indeed little more than musical compositions. (James, 2002, p. 326)

Given that “Intellect and senses both swoon away in these highest states of ecstasy” (Ibid., p. 319), it is comprehensible that subsequent reports have to rely on patterns of speech that are closer to the aesthetic feeling than the procedural and propositional mindset of a philosopher or scientist. For that reason, it is common for mystics to be treated with dismissiveness for those that are not particularly open to the possibility of a true grasp of reality by alternative means. Let’s put it clearly so that there is no confusion: philosophy and science are indisputably the most reliable sources of knowledge in our view. But the fruits of mysticism and religion oblige any pragmatist to take seriously the fact that those experiences can show us the richness of particular

perspectives just as those found in the aesthetic realm, which demonstrates once again similarities between James and Heidegger, since the German philosopher is an avid and known defender of poetry and art in general as a way of *Dasein* to unveil Being.¹⁴

These words [mystical speeches or texts], if they do not awaken laughter as you receive them, probably stir chords within you which music and language touch in common. Music gives us ontological messages which nonmusical criticism is unable to contradict, though it may laugh at our foolishness in minding them. (James, 2002, p. 326)

Although this dialectic or paradoxical speech is a common trait of mystics and seems to overshadow a coherent or understandable thesis underneath all the word puzzle, it doesn't exclude the possibility of a clear philosophical or theoretical outcome: "mystical states in general assert a pretty distinct theoretic drift. It is possible to give the outcome of the majority of them in terms that point in definite philosophical directions. One of these directions is optimism, and the other is monism." (Ibid., p. 322). With regard to monism, who better than Hegel to illustrate, according to James, an undisputed mystical insight outlined in a system built upon a dialectic pattern of reasoning?

What reader of Hegel can doubt that that sense of a perfected Being with all its otherness soaked up into itself, which dominates his whole philosophy, must have come from the prominence in his consciousness of mystical

¹⁴ See Heidegger, M. *Poetry, Language, Thought* (2013)

moods like this, in most persons kept subliminal? The notion is thoroughly characteristic of the mystical level, and the *Aufgabe* of making it articulate was surely set to Hegel's intellect by mystical feeling. (James, 2002, p. 301)

As in Hegel's case, that which is related to mystical feelings usually deals with the most primordial or metaphysical issues of existence. As James puts it, "the most important [mystical] revelations are theological or metaphysical." (Ibid., p. 317). However, as we shall see in the next section, there are different levels of mystical experiences, with some of them being unrelated to religious feelings overall. Moreover, the establishment of religious ritualistic practices and the use of chemical substances to help induce mystical states of consciousness are two topics which we must examine in order to fully cover the essence of mysticism.

II.

When one deals with mystical experiences it must be noted that "religious mysticism is only one half of mysticism." (Ibid., p. 330). This sudden feeling or emotion that pervades these trance-like states of mind is not necessarily religiously based. Actually, non-religious mystical experiences are quite regular as well which goes to show how shrewd is the concept of religion offered by James. Most of the time, non-religious mystical occurrences have positive or even sort of neutral upshots but they may also uncover negative perspectives or emotions to the experiencing subject, leading to a kind of inverted religious experience which leaves one with dread. Even though James admits a

common origin to both kinds, the latter is closer to pathological conditions than to a healthy construction of a *Weltanschauung*.

The other half [of mysticism] has no accumulated traditions except those which the text-books on insanity supply. Open any one of these, and you will find abundant cases in which “mystical ideas” are cited as characteristic symptoms of enfeebled or deluded states of mind. In delusional insanity, paranoia, as they sometimes call it, we may have a diabolical mysticism, a sort of religious mysticism turned upside down. The same sense of ineffable importance in the smallest events, the same texts and words coming with new meanings, the same voices and visions and leadings and missions, the same controlling by extraneous powers; only this time the emotion is pessimistic: instead of consolations we have desolations; the meanings are dreadful; and the powers are enemies to life. It is evident that from the point of view of their psychological mechanism, the classic mysticism and these lower mysticisms spring from the same mental level, from that great subliminal or transmarginal region of which science is beginning to admit the existence, but of which so little is really known. (James, 2002, p. 330)

Given that “The range of mystical experience is very wide, much too wide for us to cover in the time at our disposal” (Ibid., p. 296), James proposes what he calls *method of serial study* (James, 2002) which simply means the attempt to explain mysticism by starting “with phenomena which

claim no special religious significance, and end with those of which the religious pretensions are extreme.” (Ibid., p. 296). Thus, initially we must recognize that “The simplest rudiment of mystical experience would seem to be that deepened sense of the significance of a maxim or formula which occasionally sweeps over one.” (Idem). Maybe for some people this example as the starting point of mysticism does not count as a mystical experience in the strongest sense but if we take into account the marks of *Noetic Quality* and *Passivity* the experience of suddenly realizing a pivotal truth related to our daily existence while we are walking on the street or looking outside the window during an airplane flight is certainly a mystical experience in the framework of the *method of serial study* proposed by James. We must start from the simplest event that already counts as a way of reaching ‘orders of truth’ (existential and metaphysical ones) by non-propositional paths.

Next, James proposes that “A more pronounced step forward on the mystical ladder is found in an extremely frequent phenomenon, that sudden feeling, namely, which sometimes sweeps over us, of having ‘been here before’.” (Ibid., p. 297). The *Ineffability*, *Transiency* and *Passivity* pertaining to states of *Dèjà vu* also gives us a glimpse of the mystical consciousness. Every individual that has gone through *Dèjà vu* knows that no rational discourse can talk us out of the feeling of this particular insight of ‘having been here before’. The question of whether the *Dèjà vu* experience informs us of something factual is not crucial here, since religious mysticism remains real (in the pragmatist sense) even if God does not exist. The fact of the matter is to describe how gradual mysticism is and how it manifests in different contexts. Thus, *Dèjà vu* must be regarded as another step up in the ladder of mysticism.

In addition to such simpler manifestations of mysticism, James is also concerned with induced mystical experiences.

It is unquestionable the fact that beneath our normal and sober state of mind “there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness” (Ibid., p. 300). The coming out of the sober state can be provided by innumerable ways. First, James indicates that “Single words, and conjunctions of words, effects of light on land and sea, odors and musical sounds, all bring it when the mind is tuned aright.” (Ibid., pp. 296-297). The reading of a particular poem; a certain song heard in solitude or during a mass; the saying of a prayer and so on. A great deal of diverse stimuli can help open up the mind, making it more susceptible to these experiences. But above all, James is focused on the next degrees of the mystical ladder: the use of chemical substances and the adoption of ritualistic practices. First, we shall start with the former.

The next step into mystical states carries us into a realm that public opinion and ethical philosophy have long since branded as pathological, though private practice and certain lyric strains of poetry seem still to bear witness to its ideality. I refer to the consciousness produced by intoxicants and anæsthetics, especially by alcohol. The sway of alcohol over mankind is unquestionably due to its power to stimulate the mystical faculties of human nature, usually crushed to earth by the cold facts and dry criticisms of the sober hour. Sobriety diminishes, discriminates, and says no; drunkenness expands, unites, and says yes. It is in fact the great exciter of the Yes function in man. It brings its votary from the chill periphery of things to the radiant core. It makes

him for the moment one with truth. Not through mere perversity do men run after it. To the poor and the unlettered it stands in the place of symphony concerts and of literature; and it is part of the deeper mystery and tragedy of life that whiffs and gleams of something that we immediately recognize as excellent should be vouchsafed to so many of us only in the fleeting earlier phases of what in its totality is so degrading a poisoning. The drunken consciousness is one bit of the mystic consciousness, and our total opinion of it must find its place in our opinion of that larger whole. (James, 2002, pp. 299-300)

The attentive reader must have noticed how remarkable the quote above is. Not only James is capable of presenting the topic in an objective manner but his sensibility as a philosopher and psychologist allows him to connect the ordinary man's experience of drunkenness to the metaphysical and theological quest of mystical inclined individuals. But alcohol, as James puts it, is but one of these possibilities. Contemporary research in pharmacology demonstrates the validity of James' insight and confirms that the use of chemical substances can definitely provide an entrance to the mystical realm for the non-religious or non-mystical persons.¹⁵ By now we can assert as an empirical fact the positive advantages in the use of different substances such

¹⁵ See Griffiths, R. R., Richards, W. A., McCann, U. *et al.* *Psilocybin can occasion mystical-type experiences having substantial and sustained personal meaning and spiritual significance* (2006).

as psilocybin.¹⁶ Moreover, substance induced experiences have the benefit of prolonged mystical feelings¹⁷ that are known to be helpful in the overcoming of states of depression¹⁸ or drug addiction.¹⁹ Back to James, ether and nitrous oxide are also other cases of alternative paths to mysticism, which can genuinely - James believes - lead one to metaphysical thesis.

Nitrous oxide and ether, especially nitrous oxide, when sufficiently diluted with air, stimulate the mystical consciousness in an extraordinary degree. Depth beyond depth of truth seems revealed to the inhaler. This truth fades out, however, or escapes, at the moment of coming to [...] Nevertheless, the sense of a profound meaning having been there persists; and I know more than one person who is persuaded that in the nitrous oxide trance we have a genuine metaphysical revelation. (James, 2002, p. 300)

¹⁶ See MacLean KA, Johnson MW, Griffiths RR. *Mystical experiences occasioned by the hallucinogen psilocybin lead to increases in the personality domain of openness* (2011).

¹⁷ See Griffiths R, Richards W, Johnson M, McCann U, Jesse R. *Mystical-type experiences occasioned by psilocybin mediate the attribution of personal meaning and spiritual significance 14 months later* (2008).

¹⁸ See Cowen, P. *Altered states: psilocybin for treatment-resistant depression* (2016).

¹⁹ See Garcia-Romeu, A., Griffiths, R. R., and Johnson, M. W. *Psilocybin-occasioned mystical experiences in the treatment of tobacco addiction* (2014).

The relation between mystical feelings and the use of various substances is even more comprehensible when people like Saint John of the Cross describe, according to James, mystical states as “intoxicating consolations” (Ibid., p. 320). There is a clear link between these different accesses to the transcendental that cannot be disregarded. Additionally, studies have suggested that the mix usage of substances and religious practices are also a positive endeavour.²⁰

Curiously, nitrous oxide is precisely the substance that James himself admits to have used (James, 2002). And what is most striking is the fact that despite James’ admittance of being a non-mystical person his experience is nothing short of a mystical one. The ultimate insight of his own drug induced experience is remarkably similar to those of religious figures, which serves as another empirical data attesting the connection between non-religious altered states of mind and religious mysticism.

Some years ago I myself made some observations on this aspect of nitrous oxide intoxication, and reported them in print. One conclusion was forced upon my mind at that time, and my impression of its truth has ever since remained unshaken. It is that our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness [...] Looking back on my own experiences, they all converge towards a kind

²⁰ Griffiths, R. R., Johnson, M. W., Richards, W. A., Richards, B. D., Jesse, R., MacLean, K. A., et al. *Psilocybin-occasioned mystical-type experience in combination with meditation and other spiritual practices produces enduring positive changes in psychological functioning and in trait measures of prosocial attitudes and behaviors* (2018).

of insight to which I cannot help ascribing some metaphysical significance. The keynote of it is invariably a reconciliation. It is as if the opposites of the world, whose contradictoriness and conflict make all our difficulties and troubles, were melted into unity. (James, 2002, pp. 300-301)

Still on the use of nitrous oxide James references the work of Benjamin Paul Blood²¹; and in relation to the “mystical experience with chloroform” (Ibid., p. 302), the poet J. A. Symonds is recommended, which indicates that James is aware of the broad range of possibilities in drug use and mystical outcomes. But now we shall turn our attention to the final step of the mystical ladder: the establishment of religious methodical practices: “We have now seen enough of this cosmic or mystic consciousness, as it comes sporadically. We must next pass to its methodical cultivation as an element of the religious life. Hindus, Buddhists, Mohammedans, and Christians all have cultivated it methodically.” (Ibid., p. 310). A well known example that gained widespread popularity in the West during the last century and remains mainstream is Yoga practice.

In India, training in mystical insight has been known from time immemorial under the name of yoga. Yoga means the experimental union of the individual with the divine. It is based on persevering exercise; and the diet, posture, breathing, intellectual concentration, and moral discipline vary slightly in the different systems which teach it. (James, 2002, p. 310)

²¹ Blood, B. P. *The Anaesthetic Revelation and the Gist of Philosophy* (2018).

Yoga is a clear instance of the search and embrace of mystical experiences through strict rules and practices. All the discipline that pervades practices like Yoga demonstrates that the most advanced instance of mysticism for James is the incorporation of religious traditions that seeks to achieve this transcendental experience of mystical states. The comparison of different traditions points to common traits. The main one is asceticism, which leads the practitioners to a view of necessary correlation between grasping mystical truths and moral rigorous discipline: “Since denial of the finite self and its wants, since asceticism of some sort, is found in religious experience to be the only doorway to the larger and more blessed life, this moral mystery intertwines and combines with the intellectual mystery in all mystical writings.” (Ibid., p. 323). In a few words, the methodical cultivation of specific practices (mostly ascetic ones) means the fostering of “Mystical conditions” (Ibid., p. 322). Every tradition - from East to West - strives to facilitate and promote circumstances in which trance-like states are more likely to occur. To follow a particular mystical tradition is to enact a particular background of meaning. A certain relevant and common mystical lesson is the pursuit of a state of mind devoid of bodily sensations, something very well known and commented on in eastern texts: “The Buddhists use the word ‘samâdhi’ as well as the Hindus; but ‘dhyâna’ is their special word for higher states of contemplation.” (Ibid., p. 311). In western thinking the cartesian *cogito* is perhaps the most similar and well known meditation that can help us to understand the quest for a higher state of contemplation that surpasses the *res extensa* but this is also to be found in christian mysticism.

Such manuals as Saint Ignatius’s *Spiritual Exercises* recommend the disciple to expel

sensation by a graduated series of efforts to imagine holy scenes. The acme of this kind of discipline would be a semi-hallucinatory monodeism — an imaginary figure of Christ, for example, coming fully to occupy the mind. Sensorial images of this sort, whether literal or symbolic, play an enormous part in mysticism. (James, 2002, p. 315)

The possibility of a state of mind completely detached from bodily sensations is something one can easily question. How could thinking happen decoupled from being embodied, embedded and in relation to external content? Perhaps the phenomenological tradition of continental contemporary philosophy can be understood as the ultimate philosophical reasoning against positions that, in a way or another, embrace an ontological cartesian dualism. It goes without saying that Husserl's meditations²², Heidegger's *Dasein*²³ and Merleau-Ponty's concept of the *corps propre*²⁴ (that later influenced the development of enactivism²⁵) are serious contests to those kinds of reports. In anyways, at least the reality of such accounts concerning the detachment of the body must be taken seriously and they all come down to intuition and *ineffability* as the primary characteristic of those highest degrees of contemplation.

²² See Husserl, Edmund. *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology* (1977).

²³ See Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time* (2008).

²⁴ See Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception* (2013).

²⁵ See Varela, Thompson & Rosch. *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (2017).

It is a commonplace of metaphysics that God's knowledge cannot be discursive but must be intuitive, that is, must be constructed more after the pattern of what in ourselves is called immediate feeling, than after that of proposition and judgment. But our immediate feelings have no content but what the five senses supply; and we have seen and shall see again that mystics may emphatically deny that the senses play any part in the very highest type of knowledge which their transports yield. (James, 2002, p. 314)

With that, the mystical ladder is completed. From simple moments of basic insights and *Déjà vu* to the adoption of chemical substances and religious ritualistic traditions, we can see clearly the reality and gradation of the mystical phenomena: “We pass into mystical states from out of ordinary consciousness as from a less into a more, as from a smallness into a vastness, and at the same time as from an unrest to a rest. We feel them as reconciling, unifying states.” (Ibid., p. 322). Yet, the question remains: “Do mystical states establish the truth of those theological affections in which the saintly life has its root?” (Idem). For James, the answer is a resounding yes. Each and every individual invariably enact a *Weltanschauung* and, according to James, we basically have two psychological paths or worldview constitutions that were not part of the scope of our discussion: the *Healthy-Minded* and the *Sick Soul* (James, 2002). Regardless of which category you fall into, the millennial knowledge passed on by the religious and mystical traditions have already proved themselves to be useful. In this *cash-value* or existential sense, they are undeniably real.

Conclusion

James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* claims the reality of religion from its *cash-value*. The test of a religion's worth is always empirical: "its fruits must be good for life." (Ibid., p. 310). After all, James' ultimate concern is with what he calls *personal religion* (James, 2002), meaning the unavoidable enactment of a *Weltanschauung*. With that in mind, one must look - as Martin Heidegger did - in mysticism for the roots of religion. Not only that, but the whole series of lectures that compose *Varieties* must be read in the light of the chapter on mysticism: "so for us, who in these lectures are treating personal experience as the exclusive subject of our study, such states of consciousness [mystical states] ought to form the vital chapter from which the other chapters get their light." (Ibid., p. 294). Thus, the question is not if mystical states of consciousness are real or not, but how to describe these undeniable, visible and peculiar behaviors: "How to regard them [mystical states] is the question, for they are so discontinuous with ordinary consciousness." (Ibid., p. 301). Firstly, James offers the following traits: 1) *Ineffability*; 2) *Noetic Quality*; 3) *Transiency*; 4) *Passivity*. Secondly, from these features we can perceive a gradation in mysticism going from experiences such as *Dèjà vu* to the use of chemical substances and all the way up to institutionalized religious ritualistic practices. What all of these occurrences show is, once again, their existential *cash-value*. Undeniably they seem to provide in a powerful manner lessons that time and time again prove themselves to be useful for optimizing one's existence: "The cognitive aspects of them, their value in the way of revelation, is what we are directly concerned with, and it is easy to show by citation how strong an impression they leave of being revelations of new depths of truth." (Ibid., p. 316). Still, philosophical pragmatism does not mean the simple equivalence of truth to what is practical. The

usefulness of something surely adds to the possibility of its reality, but it will never be sufficient by itself: “It must always remain an open question whether mystical states may not possibly be such superior points of view” (Ibid., p. 331).

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