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# RATIONALITY OF MYSTICISM
## A Methodological Proposal

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### 1. Introduction

Discussions on the cognitive worth or the truth-value of mysticism and religious experience have been with us for sometime now. The present article examines some of these attempts at exploring the rationality of mysticism. This leads me to conclude that although there have been some original and innovative studies in this field they are yet to make any decisive headway. The main reason for this lack of progress seems to be the absence of a method appropriate for studying the complex phenomena that go under the name of religion. Towards the end of the article, therefore, I propose a complex method that incorporates insights from various authors and methods. Let me begin, however, by acknowledging that neither 'rationality' nor 'mysticism' is a clear, unambiguous term. Therefore, it is only proper that a discussion about the rationality of mysticism begins by clarifying these terms.

### 1. 1. Mysticism

I shall take 'mysticism' or 'mystical experience' to be a subclass of the more generic 'religion' or 'religious experience'. What is its characteristic mark? Till recently, there has been an unwritten consensus in the literature on the matter that mystical experiences are one and the same everywhere, that it is a unitive state of consciousness. Our normal waking consciousness and experiences are bipolar: there is a subject who experiences and an object that is experienced. My seeing of a tree, for example, has a subject who does the seeing (myself) and an object seen (tree). If we go by the said consensus, this bipolar structure would not really apply to mystical states, at least not without significant modifications. William James put it thus: "In spite of their repudiation of articulate self-description, mystical states in general assert a pretty distinct theoretic drift. It is possible to give the outcome of the majority of them in

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terms that point in definite philosophical directions. One of these directions is optimism, and the other is monism."[1] The basic mystical claim, then, is that there is an underlying unity behind the multiplicity that is experienced in ordinarily waking state of consciousness. James becomes lyrical when he talks of it as having an "eternal unanimity," "the everlasting and triumphant mystical tradition, hardly altered by differences of clime or creed."[2]

It is not that there are no differences. James acknowledges that "the kinds of truth communicable in mystical ways ... are various. Some of them relate to this world – visions of the future, the reading of hearts, the sudden understanding of texts, the knowledge of distant events, for example..."[3] He recognizes that even to talk of unitve consciousness being typically mystical is an oversimplification because Sāṅkhya is dualistic, not even all Vedāntic traditions are monistic, variations are found within Christianity, and so on. He even goes on to say that the mystical feeling of enlargement and union "has no specific intellectual content whatever of its own. It is capable of forming matrimonial alliances with material furnished by the most diverse philosophies and theologies."[4] In spite of noticing such diversities, however, he would not repudiate the claim regarding the monistic drift of mysticism.

What it shows is that James, being true to the phenomena he explored, was rather ambivalent about the matter. At one moment he would emphatically affirm the unitive or monistic character of mystical experiences. But other times he seems not so sure. This point about the unitive character of mysticism has been discussed and debated ever since. The consensus remained in its favour till recently. This was understood to be the common truth that lies underneath all differences found in mystical literature. In the words of Wayne Proudfoot, "Though there are differences, it has seemed to many [including James] that Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, Jewish, and Christian mystics testify to a common experience."[5]

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[1]William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh 1901-1902), New York: Mentor, Penguin Books, 319.

[2]James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 321.

[3]James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 314.

[4]James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 326.

[5]Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985, 120.

At the core of this common experience lies its unitive nature. However, times have changed and this position has come under sustained attack. The most powerful criticism of that consensus comes from Steven Katz, which we shall examine in due course.[6] For the moment all that we want to do is to circumscribe the topic so as to get the discussion going. For this purpose, I shall take this claim about the unitive nature of reality as our starting point.

### 1.2. Rationality

What about the word 'rational'? What does it mean when we say that something, say an event *x*, is rational or not rational or even more strongly, irrational? There are at least three different uses of that word in the context of mysticism. I shall call them the commendatory, the explanatory, and the justificatory or the epistemological senses of rationality.

First, we shall deal with the commendatory sense. Sometimes, the word 'rational' is used to indicate a value judgment, a positive evaluation and approval of something or someone. This would be contrasted with the 'irrational', the 'weird', the 'unusual', the 'abnormal', the 'bizarre', and the like, all of which are terms of reproach. Science, in this sense, is often taken as the paradigm of rationality whereas magic, faith-healing, and superstitions would be irrational, or at least not rational. 'Rationality', in this commendatory use of the word, can also mean that the occurrence is 'normal' or something that is to be expected. Related terms are 'reasonable' and 'appropriate'. Applied to mysticism, this would mean that mystical occurrences are not weird or pathological but something normal and healthy.

The word 'rational' used in the explanatory sense means that an occurrence of an event *x* is susceptible to explanation. Thus, for example, human ability to fly or to engage in space travel would have been considered irrational at one time. But once the mechanics of how this can happen has been explained, these become rational. 'Rational' here is contrasted with that which is mysterious (not susceptible to explanation) at the very least, or more strongly that such occurrences are not real, that they

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[6]Steven Katz has argued his case in a number of his writings, the most discussed one is: "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism" in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven T. Katz, 22-72, New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.

are products of fantasy or delusion. The main difference between the commendatory and explanatory senses is that the former includes and the latter does not include a value judgement. But the fact that explanatory sense of 'rational' is sometimes contrasted with the 'fantastic' and the 'imaginary' shows that it is easy to pass from the explanatory to the commendatory. When the explanatory sense of the word 'rational' is applied to mysticism, it means that mystical happenings or mystical experiences reported by different mystics are not really mysterious, that they can be explained. Explanations may vary from an appeal to divine intervention to reliance on psychological or physical and chemical factors.

The justificatory or epistemic sense of rationality concerns the truth of judgements or propositions. For example, as a result of seeing an object moving in the sky and hearing a particular kind of sound I might judge that an aeroplane is moving overhead. Is this judgement correct? Understood thus, justificatory or epistemic rationality applies to considerations that might be given in support of the truth or falsity of a given proposition. The demand here is to cite evidence for or against the truth of the proposition. The distinction between explanatory and epistemic senses of rationality is based on the object to which the term 'rationality' is applied. Explanatory rationality applies to an event or the occurrence of an experience whereas justificatory rationality applies not to the occurrence of an experience but to the content or proposition claimed as a result of the experience. In the above example explanatory rationality applies to the event of seeing and hearing, whereas epistemic rationality applies to the judgement, or rather to the available justification for taking that judgement as correct or incorrect. This distinction between explanation and justification, however, may not always hold. In some cases, explanation of an event may coincide with the evidence given for the proposition. The above example of seeing an aeroplane is such a case. The event of my seeing will have an explanation when it is found that there is an air corridor passing through my place and a certain flight is scheduled around the time I saw the movement in the sky. These findings also function as the evidence for the proposition that an aeroplane is overhead. It is clear, therefore, that there is an overlap between the explanatory and justificatory senses of rationality. This distinction, however, is important for examining the rationality of mysticism, as we shall see.

Having, thus, circumscribed the subject matter, we can move on to consider the rationality of mysticism. We shall begin with the first sense of rational, implying a sense of commendation or reproach.

## 2. Mysticism: Normal or Pathological?

Mysticism has had an ambivalent position in established religions like Christianity. On the one hand, it is highly esteemed and, on the other, it is looked upon with great suspicion. It is not surprising, therefore, to see that the term 'mysticism' entered the Anglo-American discourse as a term of reproach.[7] In the 18th century, mystics were considered irrational libertarians engaged in extravagant emotional practices. The women mystics and their devotional practices, in particular, were taken as cases of disappointed and displaced love. Mysticism, then, implied a sense of "misplaced sexuality, unintelligibility, pretension, and reason-to-be-damned extravagance."[8]

It is this idea that confronted William James when he started his classic study of mysticism. He tells us that the "words 'mysticism' and 'mystical' are often used as terms of mere reproach, to throw at any opinion which we regard as vague and vast and sentimental, and without a base in either facts or logic."[9] Against this idea of the 'mystical' as something abnormal and weird, he sets out to show that this phenomenon is "surely far from being uncommon."[10] Commenting on his own experiments, he says:

> 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, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, 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...[11]

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[7]Leigh Eric Schmidt, "The Making of Modern 'Mysticism'," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, 2 (2003), 273-302.

[8]Schmidt, "The Making of Modern 'Mysticism'."

[9]James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 292.

[10]James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 296.

[11]James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 298.

In other words, rather than consider abnormal and weird, mystical experiences must be considered as something universally present albeit different from ordinary waking consciousness. Towards the end of the study that takes him through Hinduism, Neo-Platonism, Sufism, Christian mysticism, and Whitmanism, he finds "the everlasting and triumphant mystical tradition" to be "hardly altered by differences of clime or creed," as we have already noted.[12] Moreover, he is convinced that "No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded... At any rate, they forbid a premature closing of our accounts with reality."[13] Mystical experiences, in other words, open up realms of reality that would otherwise remain hidden; any account of reality that neglects mystical experiences would be poorer for that. After James, there have been others who have followed this path. Thus, far from seeing mysticism as something odd and abnormal, there are even suggestions that mysticism is an innate capacity of every human being.[14] Like other human capacities, it may be more developed in some and less in others. What is more, there are even suggestions that developing this capacity is "inherently and inalienably healthy," a suggestion that finds increased acceptance in the contemporary world.[15]

### 3. De-automatization: An Attempted Explanation

Mysticism may not be irrational in the sense of being weird or abnormal, but is it rational in the sense of having an explanation? In raising this question, we run into the problem of the so-called reductionist explanations. Reductionism is an attempt to assimilate religious and mystical phenomena into something other than religion. Thus, religiously oriented writers tend to consider Freud's or Durkheim's accounts of religion as reductionist. Among the non-reductionist accounts, the most plausible explanation is perhaps Arthur Deikman's theory of de-automatization.

Deikman's understanding of mysticism is in keeping with what we have identified it to be: a state of consciousness where the multiplicity or

[12]James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 321.

[13]James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 298.

[14]Robert K. C. Forman ed., *The Innate Capacity: Mysticism, Psychology, and Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. See also, Dan Merkur, *Mystical Moments and Unitive Thinking*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999.

[15]Merkur, *Mystical Moments and Unitive Thinking*, ix.

subject-object dichotomy of our everyday consciousness disappears and the subject has a non-analytic or unitive apprehension of reality. It is a conviction "that reality is in some way connected so as to be a unified whole rather than a collection of independently existing parts."[16] He thinks that "it might be possible to understand mysticism by employing reason, experiment, and knowledge of development and cognitive psychology."[17] The result is his theory of de-automatization.

De-automatization is understood as an undoing of automatization. It is seen that when an action is done repeatedly it requires less attention. The intermediary steps of the action that initially required a lot of attention eventually drop out of consciousness. Such actions, in other words, become automatized. The contention is that "not only motor behaviour but perception and thinking, too, show automatization."[18] Experimental evidence from developmental psychology suggests that as children grow in age and their cognitive abilities become developed, they pay less and less attention to the sensual and concrete aspects of what they perceive, and tend to focus more on the conceptual and abstract aspects. This can be seen as providing support for the contention that perception in adults is an automatized process. The implication is that in the normal process of cognitive development there occurs a loss of attention to details. De-automatization is the reversal of this process, "an undoing of automatization, presumably by *re-investing actions and percepts with attention.*"[19]

### 3.1 The Process

Deikman theorizes that the mystical practices of contemplation and renunciation are meant to aid this reversal. "Since automatization normally accomplishes the transfer of attention from a percept or action to abstract thought activity, the meditation procedure exerts a force in the reverse direction. Cognition is inhibited in favour of perception; the active

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[16]Arthur J. Deikman, "A Functional Approach to Mysticism," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 7, 11-12 (November-December 2000) http://www.deikman.com (April 21, 2002).

[17]Deikman, "A Functional Approach to Mysticism."

[18]Arthur J. Deikman, "Deautomatization and the Mystical Experience" in *Understanding Mysticism*, ed. Richard Woods, New York: Image Books, 1980, 247.

[19]Deikman, "Deautomatization and the Mystical Experience," 248; italics original.

intellectual style is replaced by a receptive perceptual mode."[20] This accords with the practices of the mystics. Buddhist practices like Vipassana and Zen can be considered as ways of getting rid of concepts or getting away from the head that so constantly occupies the life of an adult. Even Christian mystics, with all their practice of *lectio divina* and conceptual meditation, recommend these more to the beginners than for the adepts; those more advanced in prayer life are advised to go beyond concepts. This process is aided by the practice of renunciation adopted as a life-style since it carries the attitudes of the meditative periods to all the segments of the mystics' life. Our analytic, intellectual life finds its "nutrition" in the objects of our everyday world. Renunciation, by banishing such thoughts, helps to "weaken and even disrupt" the supply of this nutrition and thereby aids de-automatizaiton.

Having explained mystical experiences in terms of de-automatization of consciousness, Deikman goes on to consider if this explanation can account for some of the common characteristics associated with mysticism. He picks out five such features for scrutiny. Of these, we shall restrict ourselves to the third feature (unity), which we have taken as the defining feature of mysticism.

### 3.2. Cognitive Possibilities

Traditionally, psycho-analysts have considered mystical experience and its unitive thinking to be a regression into an infantile, or a primitive style of thinking – a style of thinking that is more at home with the sensuous and the vivid than the conceptual and the abstract. Deikman acknowledges that de-automatization and the perception of unity can be considered this way.[21] Having granted regression as a possibility, he goes on to consider two other possibilities: that the perceived unity may be of one's own psychic structure or that it may be a structure of the actual world.

He explains the second possibility this way: we do not perceive the world directly. Rather, we have sensations and associated memories; from these we infer the nature of the stimulating object. The actual substance of

[20]Deikman, "Deautomatization and the Mystical Experience," 248.

[21]More recent researches, however, seem to discredit this view. According to Dan Merkur, the "current consensus among developmentalists ... [is] that people are born with innate abilities to communicate with their care-givers. There is no neo-natal developmental phase of ... subject-object non-differentiation." Merkur, *Mystical Moments and Unitive Thinking*, ix.

perception might as well be the electrochemical activity, which would then be homogeneous. The actual contents of awareness would, then, be variations of the same substance. Now if awareness were turned back upon itself, with the help of contemplative techniques,

> this fundamental homogeneity (unity) of perceived reality – the electrochemical activity – might itself be experienced as a truth about the outer world, rather than the inner one. Unity, the idea and the experience that we are one with the world and with God, would thus constitute a valid perception insofar as it pertained to the nature of the thought process, but need not in itself be a correct perception of the external world.[22]

Logically, however, there is also the possibility that the unity perceived by the mystic is actually a feature of the real world. Since de-automatization is an undoing of a psychic organization that limits the availability of attentional resources, it is possible that by reversing or temporarily suspending that organization, "aspects of reality that were formerly unavailable might then enter awareness." Thus, "de-automatization may permit the awareness of new dimensions of the total stimulus array – a process of 'perceptual expansion'."[23]

It is one thing to say that it is logically possible for mystical experiences to be revealing an aspect or dimension of reality that is closed to our ordinary everyday waking consciousness, and it is quite another to claim that it actually does so. Deikman, in other words, provides us with an explanation for the occurrence of mystical states without providing us a justification for the proposition about the unitary nature of reality. This takes us to the third, perhaps the most important, sense of rationality: epistemic rationality.

## 4. Epistemic Rationality of Mysticism

Till now I have overlooked the real difficulties and complexities and proceeded as if examining the rationality of mysticism is a straightforward affair. But once we begin to ask the question whether mystical experiences provide any epistemic warrant for asserting or denying the content of any proposition, we realize the almost total disarray we are in. In this section

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[22]Deikman, "Deautomatization and the Mystical Experience," 256.

[23]Deikman, "Deautomatization and the Mystical Experience."

we shall examine some well-known thinkers and their positions in this realm.

### 4.1 The Issues

In examining various positions we shall pay special attention to three issues: (1) method of studying mysticism and religion, (2) whether there is a common core to mystical experiences, and (3) the object of epistemic justification. Not only is there a lack of scholarly agreement on the epistemic warrant of religious and mystical claims, but it is not even clear as to how one should go about examining this matter. This is the problem of method. When there is no clarity of procedure, it is only to be expected that there would be disagreement about the epistemic warrant of religious and mystical claims. Therefore, not having an appropriate method is an important impediment in examining the epistemic rationality of mysticism. In making this statement I assume, of course, that there are certain cognitive claims for which warrant is sought. Of these, we have taken one claim – the unitive nature of reality – as a defining characteristic of mysticism. But questions have been raised as to whether there are any mystical claims as such (as opposed to claims of individual mystics or claims of mystics of particular religious persuasions) whose rationality may be examined. Are any core assertions – such as unity – common to mystical experiences? A third issue is this: is epistemic or justificatory rationality properly applied to persons who believe something or other, or to beliefs or propositions? The significance of this distinction may not be obvious at the outset, but will become clear soon.

### 4.2. William James

I have suggested that the moment we raise the issue of justification of mystical claim, we enter an epistemological *cul-de-sac*. This can be seen from the conclusion that James arrived at the end of his painstaking study. Raising the question about the warrant furnished by mystical experiences, he seeks to answer it in three sentences.

> (1) Mystical states, when well developed, usually are, and have the right to be, absolutely authoritative over the individuals to whom they come.
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> (2) No authority emanates from them which should make it a duty for those who stand outside of them to accept their revelations uncritically.

> (3) They break down the authority of the non-mystical or rationalistic consciousness, based upon the understanding and the senses alone. They show it to be only one kind of consciousness. They open out the possibility of other orders of truth, in which, so far as anything in us vitally responds to them, we may freely continue to have faith.[24]

It amounts to saying that the person who has the experience may believe in any proposition which he or she thinks is revealed by experience. The subject of experience has a privileged access to some information and on the basis of that privilege possesses the epistemic warrant for believing the concerned proposition. But an observer, a third party, who does not have any privileged access, is not warranted in holding the same belief. With some variations, this is the dominant position found in the epistemology of religious experience today.[25]

The issue here is the third one we have raised: Does epistemic rationality apply to persons or propositions? Although I suggested in the introduction that epistemic justification is a matter of examining the warrantedness of propositions or cognitive claims, it does not accord with what James says here; nor does it accord with the practice of a good many, one might even say the majority, of practising epistemologists. They seem to think that justificatory rationality applies not to propositions but to the persons who believe propositions. Let me explain it by reverting to our perceptual example given earlier. When I hear a certain kind of sound and look up the sky I see certain object moving in the sky and I come to believe that there is an aeroplane in the sky. If epistemic rationality applies primarily to persons, then the proper question to ask is: am I justified in believing that an aeroplane is flying in the sky, on the basis of what I have seen and heard or any other evidence I might have? The other way of posing the question, the way I have been posing it, is to ask: Is the proposition "There is an aeroplane flying in the sky" true or warranted? In this case it does not matter whether I or anybody has the experience of

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[24]James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 323-4.

[25]Most notable among these authors is William Alston who has made this contention in a detailed manner in his book, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991). For more authors who take this approach, see, George Karuvelil, "Some Problems in the Epistemology of Religion" in *Interrelations and Interpretations*, Job Kozhamthadom ed., New Delhi: Intercultural Publications, 1997, 109-140.

seeing and hearing; not even whether anybody has asserted or believed that proposition.

Although the terms 'justification' and 'rationality' are often held to be applying primarily to persons, I have argued elsewhere that this is a mistake.[26] The most basic reason for this contention is that the purpose of epistemic justification is to establish the truth of propositions and not the culpability or otherwise, of persons who believe. When justificatory rationality is seen in these terms, it is obvious that a person can honestly and truly believe a false proposition. A person may be totally convinced of the truth of a proposition and the concerned proposition may be false. Epistemic rationality, therefore, is better considered as applying more to propositions than to persons. As far as the truth of propositions arising from mystical experiences is concerned, then, we can agree with Wayne Proudfoot that mystical "experiences have [only] the epistemic status of hypotheses."[27] Their truth, if any, needs to be established independently.

Once this stand is adopted, it immediately affects our method. It closes the phenomenological route that goes by the conviction of persons having mystical experiences, as a viable means of establishing the epistemic rationality of mysticism.[28] It is seen that those who undergo mystical experiences invariably come to consider what they experience in those moments as more real than what is experienced in their everyday lives. It is to designate such intense sense of reality, terms like "ultimately real," "*pāramārthika sat*," etc., are used; such reality is contrasted with what is "only relatively real" or "*vyāvahārika sat*." This contrast is most dramatically expressed in the Indian traditions that draw a parallel between waking and dreaming states of consciousness. Just as we recognize dreams for what they are when we awake from sleep, so is the reality we experience in our ordinary waking state of consciousness, when seen in the light of mystical states. It is obvious that, phenomenologically, mystical experiences bring with them an intense sense of reality. James calls it the noetic quality of mystical experiences and considers it one of the primary marks by which mystical states can be identified.[29] But no matter how

[26]George Karuvelil, "Epistemic Justification and the Possibility of Empirical Evidence," *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research* 12, 1 (1994), 29-48.

[27]Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 163.

[28]For more details of this phenomenological approach as applied to religious experience, see Karuvelil, "Some Problems in the Epistemology of Religion."

[29]James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 293.

intensely this noetic quality is felt by the subject, it remains only a psychic fact. Although the subject might feel intensely about the noetic quality of his experience, it provides only a phenomenological report and not any independent evidence of truth. It is this phenomenological route to epistemology that is denied once we realize that epistemic justification applies primarily to propositions and not to persons. Epistemologically, the noetic quality experienced in mystical moments must remain only a hypothesis. This is the implication of accepting that epistemic rationality applies to propositions and not to persons.

Deikman gives us some additional empirical factors for not taking phenomenological reports as epistemological evidence. They include psychological disorders such as depersonalization where an individual feels his own self and the outside world as unreal or a feeling of the mind being dissociated from the body, feeling that one is a machine, etc., and the fact that similar effects can be produced by LSD.[30] Deikman, therefore, sees the need to distinguish between feeling of reality and reality itself. The latter calls for some sort of epistemic evidence other than the subject's own claim.

### 4.3. Arthur Deikman

A commonly used alternative to the phenomenological path is to take the support of quantum mechanics. Once the mystical core is identified with unity and inter-connectedness as we have done, it is an easy enough temptation, because some experiments in quantum theory indicate reality to be an interconnected whole. Deikman, though aware of this kind of 'evidence' from science, is not enamoured of it because he knows that science keeps changing and to rely on today's science to provide evidence for mystical claims is to risk its repudiation tomorrow. Rather than rely on science he prefers to look for cross-cultural evidence. He finds such support in two factors: one is the "compelling consensus of the mystics" and the other service-mindedness.[31] He acknowledges the possible objection that the "consensus is due to social contagion, ideas spreading through direct contact from one mystic to another, across cultural and geographic boundaries." But he does not find this objection serious because it is found in different cultures and about the same time. Also, the

[30]Deikman, "Deautomatization and the Mystical Experience," 252.
[31]Deikman, "A Functional Approach to Mysticism."

fact that many theistic mystics uphold the unitive view of reality against severe opposition from their official Church or religious establishment goes against the social contagion view. He also cites occasional experiences of non-mystics. Although occurring for brief moments, such experiences agree with the contention of the mystics.

The second factor that Deikman considers as 'evidence' for the mystical claim of the connectedness of reality is selfless service, or what he calls "serving-the-task."[32] Since I consider such 'evidence' to be of questionable value, I shall not go into it. But I do think that Deikman's argument from the "compelling consensus of the mystics" provides the best evidence for the mystical claim to unity. Dan Merkur does even a better job than Deikman to show that there is such a consensus. After citing evidence from various sources, including the testimony of Martin Bueber of "I-Thou" fame, he concludes: "The very fact that Catholic, Sufi, and Jewish mystics have apologized for experiences that they did not wish to experience, indicates that the experiences were real... The experience commences as an interpersonal encounter, but God ceases to be felt as a distinct 'Thou' when, at climax, one's normal or realistic sense of oneself is replaced by an ideal self who is seemingly God."[33]

On the other hand, Deikman's method of identifying mystical experience seems to be problematic from a critical and methodological perspective. While emphasizing the unitive element of mysticism, he neglects the Jamesian finding that mystical consciousness is "capable of forming matrimonial alliances with material furnished by the most diverse philosophies and theologies."[34] This lacuna is exploited by Steven Katz to arrive at the opposite conclusion.

### 4.4. Katz and Proudfoot: Any *Religious* Claims?

So far we have seen that in as much as the object of justification is the proposition and not the person, the approaches of Deikman and Merkur are more appropriate. However, such a treatment of the rationality of mysticism is based on the assumption that the proposition (at least, one of them) needing justification is the unitive nature of reality. I have already noted in passing that, although this contention was generally accepted as a

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[32]Deikman, "A Functional Approach to Mysticism."
[33]Merkur, *Mystical Moments and Unitive Thinking*, 16.
[34]James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 326.

common feature of mystical experiences, this has been questioned in recent years. Steven Katz is in the forefront of those who question this. Therefore, we need to move to the second issue raised in the context of epistemic rationality: what is/are the claim/s whose rationality may be examined? Are there *any mystical claims as such* whose rationality may be examined? Or, are there only claims of individual mystics or claims of mystics of particular socially identifiable religious persuasions?

Examining the accounts provided by mystics of different religious traditions, Steven Katz comes to the conclusion that mystical experiences are shaped by the conceptual structures or doctrinal presuppositions of different mystics. Since these presuppositions are irreducibly plural, mystical experiences too are irreducibly plural. Unitive kind of mysticism is seen to be more typical of those religious traditions that are influenced by Neo-Platonic and Indic traditions than of strict mono-theistic traditions like Judaism or Islam. Upon this view, then, there is no common core to mystical experiences. They are all different. It is not that Katz is unaware of the similarity found in the descriptions of mystics, a similarity that so impressed James, Deikman, and others. He is very much aware of them. But he considers such similarity only superficial and not genuine. The basic reasoning is that since the empirical background of the mystics is varied, even apparently similar descriptions have different meanings. Talk of a common core (even attempts to classify mystical experiences into different kinds) is the result of "forcing multifarious and extremely variegated forms of mystical experience into improper interpretative categories which lose sight of the fundamentally important differences between the data studied."[35]

Wayne Proudfoot follows Katz in this regard. Like Katz, he denies that there are any common characteristics on the basis of which experiences may be classified as mystical or religious. He examines the alleged marks of mysticism like ineffability and noetic quality, only to rule them out as having any descriptive value. Finally, when he makes an explicit attempt to define religious experience, he is only able to come up with an empty formula which says, "A religious experience is an experience that is identified by its subject as religious..."[36] or that "the distinguishing mark of religious experience is the subject's belief that the

[35]Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 25.
[36]Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 183.

experience can only be accounted for in religious terms."[37] In other words, Proudfoot, the philosopher of religion, can only report what the subject of experience says; he himself, having looked at the experiences of various subjects, finds nothing that could be characterized as religious. It would be no exaggeration to say that for Katz and Proudfoot, there is no such thing as mysticism or religion, except in a psychological or sociological sense. There are only particular experiences or particular social formations which have been characterized as religious or mystical. But when we examine them we find they are all different. It seems to me that there must be something really wrong with a method of investigation that leads to this kind of conclusion.

## 5. The Problem of Method

We have seen that the phenomenological method is not satisfactory for justification of epistemic claims. The method of textual comparison adopted by Deikman and others invite the criticism of ignoring important differences. The strength of Katz's method lies in the close attention he gives to the different historical, cultural, and linguistic background of the mystics. For this reason, this approach is sometimes characterized as "empirical."[38] But his excessive preoccupation with the Kantian doctrine that there are no pure experiences unmediated by prior concepts prevents him from taking the commonalities seriously and to look for a comprehensive understanding of mysticism with their commonalities and differences. This is a sort of blindness towards theory.

In spite of some good insights, a similar blindness is also found in Proudfoot. He makes an excellent distinction between description and explanation. According to him, faithful *description* of religious experience requires that the description be done from the participant's perspective and not of a neutral observer. Not to do so would amount to reductionism at the level of descriptions and this will transform religious phenomena into something else. For example, to "describe the experience of the mystic by reference only to alpha waves, altered heart rate, and changes in bodily temperature is to misdescribe it"[39] because this is not how the mystic

[37]Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 223.

[38]Denise L. Carmody and John T. Carmody, *Mysticism: Holiness East and West*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, 6.

[39]Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 196.

identifies his experience. However, having given a description that is acceptable to the mystic or the believer, it is perfectly legitimate to provide its *explanation* in terms that are not familiar or acceptable to subject/insider/mystic/believer. Explanation is done from the perspective of a scientist or an observer and not that of the participant. Proudfoot gives the example of historians who "offer explanations of past events by employing such concepts as socialization, ideology, means of production, feudal economy" and so on which may not be "properly ascribed to the people whose behaviour the historian studies."[40]

On the face of it, the distinction between descriptive and explanatory reduction makes eminent sense. It enables one to combine the insider perspective of the phenomenological approach in descriptions with the objective, outsider perspective in explanations. What, then, leads to his blindness towards theory? It comes from the fact that the non-reductive descriptions play no role in his understanding of religious experience and mysticism. In order to see this, we should begin by asking what is it that calls for an explanation, a particular religious experience or the whole class or classes of experience qualified as religious? It is clear that, for Proudfoot, it is the particular event of an experience that needs explanation. We saw that his advocacy of explanatory reduction is based on the analogy between religious experience and historical events. Religious experiences are seen as particular historical events to be explained. After describing Steven Bradley's religious experience, for example, its explanation is to be done in terms of the "Methodist revivalism in the early nineteenth-century New England, about the particular meeting he attended in the evening and about the events in his life up to that moment."[41] It is clear, therefore, that the proper object of explanation for Proudfoot is particular religious experiences, and they are to be explained in terms of social and other empirical factors. Upon this assumption, the work of a scholar of religion is simplified. He (the scholar) need not look for a theory of religious experience, or a considered understanding of what makes a religious experience *religious*. This is theoretical blindness.

Theoretical blindness, in turn, lends itself to reductionism of a problematic kind. Since there is nothing that makes a religious experience

[40]Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 197.
[41]Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 223.

religious, other than the subject's own claim, and the subject's claim is accommodated at the level of descriptions, there is no reason why a scholar should not explain the increased heart rate of Bradley purely in physiological, sociological, or other empirical terms alone. This is reducing religious phenomena into something else. Such a reductionism would be unacceptable, not only to Bradley, the subject of experience, but to any believer because they do not consider their experiences to be fully explicable in natural terms. Given such reductions, one might ask: why to make the distinction between description and explanation at all, if the descriptions play no role in the explanation? One would have thought that non-reductive descriptions would provide a better understanding of religion or religious experience. In the absence of such guidance from non-reductive descriptions towards a non-reductive understanding of religion and mysticism, Proudfoot's injunction against descriptive reduction turns out to be nothing more than a psychological sop to the believer. Such descriptions, therefore, really play no role in his method. It is not surprising, therefore, that he should find the works of practically all religiously sensitive and enormously gifted intellectuals from Schleiermacher to William James, from Wittgenstein to Wittgensteinians like D. Z. Phillips merely as protective, apologetic strategy to immunize religion from outside criticism.

## 6. Epistemic Rationality of Mysticism: A Proposal

It seems to me that if we are to make any further progress in examining the epistemic rationality of mysticism we need to adopt a more complex methodology that incorporates religious sensibility of Schleiermacher, the descriptive fidelity of James, the philosophical insight of the Wittgensteinians, and the analytic acumen of Proudfoot. The following three stages must be considered indispensable in such a methodology.

### 6.1. Description

We must begin with non-reductive descriptions, not descriptions as a psychological sop to the believer, but as the preliminary data from which to build a theory of religious and mystical experience. The theoretical blindness of the empiricists stems from their inability to see the distinction between individual religious experience and theory of what counts as religious experience. The importance of making such distinction is perhaps one of the finest contributions of Wittgenstein and the Wittgensteinians

like Phillips and Norman Malcolm. They point out that any explanation and justification is done within a system of beliefs. Wittgenstein is explicit: "All testing, all confirmation and disconfirmation of a hypothesis takes place already within a system."[42] Malcolm says: "*Within* a language-game there is justification and lack of justification, evidence and proof, mistakes and groundless opinions, good and bad reasoning, correct measurements and incorrect ones."[43]

He goes on to say that one "cannot properly apply these terms to a language-game itself."[44] This is a further point. Not only is justification done within a system but the system itself is beyond justification. There are some passages in Wittgenstein that suggest this.[45] Their contentions on whether the system itself is beyond justification or whether religion makes an autonomous system of beliefs are debatable points. It is these debatable claims that make them vulnerable to accusations of practising a protective strategy. But there is hardly anything debatable about the claim that any explanation is done within a system or that the system itself stands on a different logical footing than a belief within the system.

If all justification is done within a system, it is important to grasp nature of the system. In other words, before attempting to justify particular religious beliefs it is important to have an adequate theory of religious experience. Such theory-construction should be guided by non-reductive descriptions. But there lurks a problem. A particular event, a phenomena or an experience can be described. A particular historical event like the American attack on Iraq can be described (which may be described as it was experienced by a soldier involved in the war, or as experienced by a pro-Saddam Iraqi, etc.), but can one describe history? My experience of the rising sun can be described, but can one describe perception as such?

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[42]See, for example, L. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe, New York/Evanston: J. & J. Harper Editions, 1969, 105.

[43]N. Malcolm, "The Groundless Belief," in Stuart C. Brown ed., *Reason and Religion*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977, 151. For more on Wittegenstein and the Wittgensteinian approach to religion, see Karuvelil, "Some Problems in the Epistemology of Religion" and P. Sherry, *Religion, Truth and Language-Games*, London: The MacMillan Press Ltd., 1977.

[44]N. Malcolm, "The Groundless Belief," 151.

[45]See, for example, L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958 and 1988, IIxi, 200, 217, 654.

The religious experience of Steven Bradley can be described, but how does one describe religious experience as such? Unlike the Iraq war or the experience of Bradley, there is no one experience to be described. It is a whole class (if not classes!) of experiences that needs to be described. Describing particular experiences and explaining the same with no reference to the system in which the particular experience occurs, therefore, is not enough. Having described (non-reductively, in the manner advocated by Proudfoot) as many and as varied religious experiences as possible or required, we must attempt to provide a coherent account of those experiences. The aim here is to provide a *theory* of religious experience that maintains the religious nature of experience without reducing it into something else. That would give us the system within which the rationality of individual claims is examined.

### 6.2. Explanation and Interpretation

It is in trying to provide a coherent account of these varied experiences that the role of explanatory reduction comes into picture. Such reduction is merely an acknowledgement of the fact that religious experiences, and the background beliefs within which those experiences arise, are so varied that they cannot all be combined into one mega-system of religious beliefs. Therefore, in providing a theoretical explanation of religion, one may have to disregard some aspects of the particular belief system of the subject. On the other hand, such explanations should not be so far off the mark as to lose the religious character of the experience being explained. For example, the fact that no believer would hold his religious experience to be totally explicable in natural terms is part of the phenomena that cannot be neglected in any adequate explanation of religion. So is the widespread occurrence of unitive mystical experiences, irrespective of whether or not they are to be taken as the core of mysticism. Further, there is also the fact that most mystical experiences are heavily influenced by empirical factors such as background religious beliefs. The task of a theory of religious experience is precisely to explain these seemingly contradictory phenomena in a coherent fashion. In other words, the theorist should remain faithful to descriptions as much as possible; it is the descriptions that guide the explanation, even when all particular aspects of those descriptions cannot be taken into account. The result would be what John

Hick calls a "religious interpretation of religion."[46] Both interpretation and explanation will have had a role in constructing such a theory of religion. Such a theory would be an explication of the nature of what the Wittgensteinians call a religious language game. The debatable issue of whether religious language game is an autonomous one needs to be decided on the basis of the descriptions and will be part of a comprehensive theory of religion.

### 6.3. Justification

A theoretical work on religious experience is not something that is attempted either by the Wittgensteinians or the empiricists. Wittgenstenians remain at the general level of affirming the autonomy of religious language and experience without attempting a theory of religion. They acknowledge religion to be an autonomous language game, but the contours of such a language game are not explored. The empiricists, on the other hand, remain at the level of descriptions without being able to use those descriptions to build a religious theory. Accordingly, neither of them makes, nor need to make, a distinction between explanation and interpretation, on the one hand, and justification of beliefs, on the other. But once a religious theory of religious experience is in place we might also realize that explanation needs to be distinguished from justification, because a "religious interpretation of religion" still remains at the level of understanding. An explanation provided for a particular phenomenon at this level may be a genetic one, purely in terms of the natural factors. But the circumstances leading to the origin of beliefs says nothing about their truth. Therefore, we need to distinguish discovery from justification, understanding and interpretation from the truth of the matter. Deikman's theory of de-automatization provides a good explanation of how mystical experiences come about, but not the justification of what is revealed in mystical experiences. We must not confuse, then, matters of explanation and interpretation with justification and evidence. Interpretation is a matter of coherence, a matter of reflective equilibrium, as Proudfoot rightly recognizes, but justification is a matter of logic and evidence.[47]

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[46]John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989.

[47]Although Reflective Equilibrium is usually understood as a method of justification, I suggest that it is more properly understood as a method of discovery, a

## 7. Conclusion

This study, though very limited, has hopefully helped to clarify some of the issues involved discussing the rationality of mysticism. Of the different senses of 'rationality' we have considered the most intractable is the epistemic sense. If there is an obvious lesson to be learned from our discussion of epistemic rationality, it would be recognition of the complexity of the matter. Mysticism or, more broadly, religion is a complex phenomenon, as complex as human life itself. Therefore, discussing their rationality needs to reflect that complexity. But not all our problems are due to the complexity of the subject matter; some of the problems are also due to the Cartesian roots of modern epistemology. Further, the fact that for centuries discussions of mysticism remained within the confines of theology has not helped the matters either.

Learning from those who have attempted to deal with these matters, I have suggested a complex methodology for examining the rationality of mysticism. In keeping with the complexity of the subject matter, it is a route that makes room for description, interpretation and explanation and, finally, a logical procedure of justification that is not content with coherence of interpretations and reflective equilibrium. This route is definitely a long one, but one that seems more promising than any we have considered. Until we employ such a complex methodology, it is not likely that our discussion of the rationality of mysticism and religious experience would make much headway.

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matter of gaining insight. For more on the method of Reflective Equilibrium, see Karuvelil, "Reflective Equilibrium," in *Philosophical Methods*, ed. Johnson Puthenpurackal, Bangalore: ATC, 2004. I must confess that at the time of writing the above said article, I had not yet realized the need to critique the claim that Reflective Equilibrium is a method of justification.