

## Article

# The Epistemic Value of Non-Religious Mystical Experiences

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the epistemic value of non-religious mystical experiences. By taking a non-religious angle, it adds a complementary perspective to the context in which mystical experiences are generally discussed, i.e., the context of theological questions or perspectives informed by the philosophy of religion. While I am pessimistic about the possibilities of such experiences providing propositional knowledge about the external world, this discussion is largely bracketed. Instead, I focus on a different type of knowledge, arguing that what these experiences can provide is a certain type of subjective knowledge, namely experiential knowledge. I further argue that such experiences involve a feeling of concern about a very general object, something such as existence, the world, or reality as a whole. Consciously experiencing this type of feeling or emotion is rare, since it is a background emotion about a very general object relatively far removed from personal flourishing. Nevertheless, in this type of experiences, it is directly experienced. The experiential knowledge obtained through such experiences is what this general concern about existence as a whole feels like. I contend that both the insight on what this feels like as well as the feeling itself can be seen as valuable.

**Keywords:** mysticism; transformative experiences; experiential knowledge; epistemology of mystical experiences; philosophy of emotions



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## 1. Introduction

Extraordinary and significant experiences, in some contexts referred to as mystical experiences, have been reported by a considerable number of people, from very different walks of life, in many different time periods and cultural contexts (Stace 1961). While in its very intense form this type of experience is quite rare, less intense forms appear to occur more frequently. Described very generally, what characterizes such experiences is a sharp and mostly sudden shift of perception, in which a sense of ‘meaning’ is frequently perceived, often accompanied by intense emotions, either positive, such as elation, or negative, such as fear or alienation. It is also sometimes accompanied by changed sensory perceptions of the surroundings.

Importantly, such mystical experiences are further often reported to feel like insights. In fact, the feeling of having an immediate insight or gaining a new perspective is usually seen as an essential part of their definition. While some defend this perception as accurate, arguing that these types of experiences can lead to insights, others disagree, denying that such experiences can provide knowledge. I tend to agree to some extent with the latter position. I am doubtful about their ability to provide knowledge about the external world or propositional knowledge in general. However, I argue that such experiences can provide a different type of knowledge, namely experiential knowledge. Specifically, through these experiences the person experiencing them can learn what it is like to feel general concern for existence as a whole. Moreover, I argue that both this feeling, as well as the related experiential knowledge about this feeling, are valuable.<sup>1</sup>

To illustrate my argument it helps to compare it to a contrasting view. One perspective on mystical experiences is that what they are at their core is merely emotion or feeling (Russell [1917] 1976). I argue that the insight provided through such an experience is not *only* an emotion, in two ways. ‘Only’ here has a double meaning: it is not only an emotion

in the sense that there are more aspects to it. Specifically, I hold that there is something involved that can be usefully conceptualized as a type of knowledge: experiential knowledge. However, what is obtained through mystical experiences is also not only an emotion in a second sense, the potentially devaluing usage of only, that is in the sense that the central aspect that is an emotion or a feeling should not be accorded too little value because it is a feeling or emotion. For one thing, the main emotion involved is a special kind of broad, rarely felt emotion. More generally, neglecting the importance of emotions in experiencing life, risks undervaluing the subjective perspective.

I term the object under consideration in this paper non-religious mystical experiences. The experiences considered are quite similar, in terms of characteristics, to the Jamesian take on mystical experiences (James [1902] 1958). However, in terms of context and interpretation, the focus is on a somewhat different type of mystical experience. In the literature on mystical experiences, such experiences are mostly studied from the perspective of religious philosophy or theology, as a form of religious experience.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, in this paper I investigate how such experiences can be understood outside of the religious context, exploring their epistemic value, beyond considering their status or value with respect to theological questions.

Looking at mystical experiences in a non-religious context adds an important and neglected perspective. One reason why this perspective is important is simply that such experiences also occur in individuals who do not see themselves as belonging to religious traditions and in some cases not even see themselves as spiritual in a wider sense. Considering these experiences in a religious context risks neglecting aspects of these non-religious experiences, or not considering them enough at all. Moreover, cultural and ideational factors are believed to affect both the interpretation of mystical experiences as well as experiences themselves. This means that people who do not see themselves as belonging to any faith, or as being particularly spiritual, may simply have different mystical experiences and interpret these in different ways. This strengthens the case for looking at this as an own class of mystical experiences. Further, adding a secular perspective on the epistemic value of such experiences may be useful in providing a new angle for considering experiences that occur within a religious context or are interpreted in a religious way by those who experience them. In the course of laying out the main argument I will briefly consider its fit to religiously interpreted experiences.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. I start by attempting to define the phenomenon under consideration more closely, stating both what I take to be defining characteristics of the experiences themselves, as well as under what conditions they can arise and what effects they can have. I then go on to look at other characteristics that appear to often be part of such experiences. In Section 3 I consider different perspectives on extraordinary and significant experiences, which I subsume under the heading momentous experiences, and their relation to knowledge. My main conclusion from this discussion is that in each perspective experiential knowledge plays a role, sometimes a central one. In the subsequent section I come to my core arguments, first making the argument that through mystical experiences experiential knowledge, knowledge of what something feels like, is obtained. I go on to argue, that what is obtained more specifically is knowledge about what concern or general care feels like. In a next step I argue that this concern or care is directed at a very general or fundamental object, something that I describe as existence as a whole. In the following section I argue that both the feeling itself as well as the experiential knowledge about it can be considered valuable. I conclude with some final remarks.

## 2. Non-Religious Mystical Experiences

I term the phenomenon considered in this paper *non-religious mystical experiences*. This term is far from clear—all words involved are somewhat ambiguous and subject to multiple interpretations. In the following I define more closely the phenomenon under consideration. In the first part of this section I describe, first, what I mean by the *non-religious* perspective and then attempt to define mystical experiences as considered in this paper.

### 2.1. Attempt at a Definition

Mystical experiences are generally viewed as a subset of religious experiences.<sup>3</sup> This entails that mystical experiences are predominantly looked at in a religious context, with the focus on experiences by people belonging to religious traditions or, in the case of conversion experiences, at people who supposedly through the experience convert to a religious or spiritual tradition. This paper's focus is complementary. In the literature on mysticism it is widely argued that not only the accounts of mystical experiences, but also the experiences themselves are entangled with previously held beliefs and thus also with religious doctrines someone prescribes to. More generally, cultural and institutional factors affect mystical experiences, possibly not only affecting interpretation, but also the actual experience itself (Moore 1978). This underlines the importance of investigating mystical experiences by people outside of religious doctrines as a phenomenon in its own right. This is not because it promises to give a 'purer' picture, but because this is an additional valuable perspective, an additional type of interpretative or cultural background.

The qualifier 'non-religious' in the term describing the phenomenon considered in this paper accordingly captures two things: firstly, I consider predominantly experiences that are not (or not necessarily) understood or interpreted as religious by the person experiencing them; secondly, I adopt a largely non-religious perspective, meaning that I do not investigate how such experiences fit into specific creeds or how they interact with theological questions. While the latter perspective is included in the wide notion of mystical experiences considered by Stace (1961), my analysis differs from theirs by focusing in particular on experiences that are not primarily interpreted as religious. I will use the terms non-religious mystical experiences and mystical experiences interchangeably in what follows. If mystical experiences from a religious perspective or as described by definitions other than the one given in this paper are meant I will make this explicit.

In the following characterization of non-religious mystical experiences I partly draw on James' four criteria for mystical experiences (James [1902] 1958). Note that this is not meant to be an exhaustive definition of mystical experiences, neither of the non-religious type, nor more generally.<sup>4</sup> It merely serves to delimit the type of experience this paper focuses on. Before disentangling the various components of mystical experiences, it is helpful to give a first rough characterization. The term mystical experiences describes experiences, which occur to some degree out of the blue, generally involve multiple elements, such as emotions, somatic aspects, sense experiences, as well as cognitive aspects, which the experiencing subject in some way ascribes significance to. This significance can further lead to the perception of a changed outlook, changes in preferences or the way people understand themselves, or changed behaviour; a transformative element that is seen as part of or arising through the experience. The perceived significance and its consequences are lasting: they endure an extended period of time, i.e., more than a few hours attributable to a fleeting emotional episode.

In order to define the type of experience in more detail it is helpful to distinguish three interwoven but distinct questions that need to be considered. These three questions can be seen as belonging to different temporal stages related to the experience. What triggers the experience? What does the actual experience consist of? What consequences does it have? These different aspects are interwoven, there is no clear delimitation between these parts.

The first question, what triggers the experience, is not of major importance to the argumentation in this paper. The type of experience considered in this paper may emerge under various different conditions - I am agnostic as to what conditions the experience occurs under. Yet, since the conditions are closely related to the characterization of experiences, it is helpful to gain a brief overview. Most notable is the breadth of conditions, under which such experiences can occur, as has been argued for religious experiences as well. This breadth is also illustrated by the range of different examples listed in the Appendix A. Experiences may occur under very extreme conditions, such as near death experiences, or through special practices, such as various forms of meditation or breathing exercises. They may also occur under the influence of chemical or natural components (including such

common drugs as mescaline, LSD, or psilocybin, or even, as James ([1902] 1958, p. 257) argues, alcohol). Yet they may also occur in much more mundane circumstances, such as when viewing natural surroundings. These are cases that go beyond perceiving the splendour of, for example, the scenery of a mountainous landscape, but such instances can lead to this type of experience. They may also occur through predominantly cognitive activities. An example would be considering the position of the human world in the universe. Finally, they can also occur spontaneously, without any specific type of circumstance being present at all.

A general aspect related to the conditions under which non-religious mystical experiences arise is *passivity*. This is one of the four features characteristic of (religious) mystical experiences determined by James, while one can try to create conditions that increase the likelihood of having a mystical experience, such as practising meditation or taking substances, whether or not the person actually has a mystical experience is not in their immediate control; it either ‘happens to them’—or it does not. Concerning the shape of the experience, how it is experienced, and in particular how it is interpreted is a different matter. Here the subject consciously or unconsciously plays a considerable, active part. Yet with regard to occurrence itself there is the element of passivity.

The second question is what those experiences, which are seen as belonging to the type of experiences under consideration in this paper, actually consist of. In characterizing the experiences themselves, the other three characteristics given by James are helpful. Firstly, they are *transient*: the experience itself does not endure for long. James claims that it endures at most a few hours (James [1902] 1958, p. 253). This applies to the type of experiences I consider. Secondly, they are *ineffable*. I do not think this necessarily applies to the experience as a whole. One can certainly describe certain aspects of it, such as some emotions felt during the experiences, as well as the consequences. Yet that what makes them momentous, that what is new and feels special cannot be fully captured in words. Thirdly, they are *noetic*. In describing this characteristic, James writes that they “seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge” and that they “are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain” (James [1902] 1958, p. 253). This is characteristic for the type of experience under consideration. Yet, the form of knowledge that I will argue is gained through these experiences is of a specific kind. I therefore understand noetic as capturing a wide notion of knowledge and understanding.

A further aspect concerning the experience itself is intensity. The main focus of this paper is on experiences that exceed a certain level of intensity. This is the perspective generally taken when religious and mystical experiences are considered and is a useful starting point, since the characteristics as well as the consequences of such experiences are likely to be clearer in strong cases. Yet, as I will briefly discuss in the conclusion, I think that there are also weaker variants of non-religious mystical experiences. I do not think there is a necessary degree of intensity or strength of such experiences, though they have to be considered at least somewhat significant by the person experiencing them. Such experiences can still be differentiated from other experiences, which may seem similar to less pronounced versions of mystical experiences, such as feeling emotionally stirred through natural splendour, or a fleeting emotional state triggered by watching a movie or the news. The difference manifests itself in that mystical experiences are accorded greater significance and this perceived significance is lasting. The experiences to which the arguments advanced in this paper apply should fulfil the characteristics stated above, such as a certain duration and strength of the consequences. However, I think that for such characteristics to be fulfilled the experience itself does not have to be very extreme; I think there is a range of intensity of such experiences and I believe that my arguments hold for ‘weaker’ (in the sense of less drastic) experiences as well. In fact, weaker versions of such experiences are likely to be much more widespread—making the importance of the subject of this paper as well as the argument for the value of such experiences stronger.

The third question, related to the transformative aspect of mystical experiences, asks what consequences such experiences have. As described above, the transformative element also means that the experience has certain perceived changes as a consequence. These do not necessarily have to have the form of complete changes of a subject's life and they also need not be permanent or of extremely long duration. However, they do have the form of at the very least a significance attached to the experience and a somewhat changed outlook, which endures for at least a period of time.

## 2.2. Observed Components of Non-Religious Mystical Experiences

In order to identify more specific characteristics that appear to regularly feature in mystical experiences, components identified in the study of descriptions of mystical experiences are briefly described and sorted into 'types of experiences' in the following. All the examples these characteristics stem from fit the definition of non-religious mystical experiences in the previous section.

A first type is the sudden perception of significance and meaning in specific things, such as words, statements, poems, visual elements, such as reflections of light on water, smells, or musical sounds. In this type of experience these things are suddenly perceived as emotionally moving and as filled with meaning, without it being clear what suddenly triggers this perception (for an example see Appendix A.1.1 in the Appendix A). A second, closely related type is less clearly induced by anything and goes beyond perceiving meaning in certain things, instead consisting of more abstract perceptions of significance. James describes experiences falling under this type as "sudden invasions of vaguely reminiscent consciousness" (James [1902] 1958, p. 255), which give rise to perceptions such as a sense of mystery of things, of metaphysical duality, and "the feeling of an enlargement of perception which seems imminent but which never completes itself" (ibid.). Such experiences are sometimes accompanied by a perceived loss of normal consciousness (for an example see Appendix A.1.2 in the Appendix A). Such experiences are not necessarily perceived as positive. They can be experienced as unsettling, frightening or alienating. James notes that in some cases descriptions are, in fact, quite reminiscent of psychotic states (James [1902] 1958).<sup>5</sup> A type of mystical experiences with a negative slant may also arise in the sense of insignificance or powerlessness when considering, for example, the vastness of the universe or contemplating the impossibility of answering existential questions (James [1902] 1958, p. 57; Gutschmidt 2021). A typical aspect in mystical experiences is the prominence of nature: many such experiences appear to occur in natural surroundings, especially (but by no means exclusively) in observing vast spaces, such as the ocean, mountain ranges, landscapes, or the night sky (James [1902] 1958, p. 260).<sup>6</sup>

There is another type of experience that takes a more cognitive form, or at least arises in a more cognitive 'setting'. This type of experience appears to arise from contemplation, in 'going down particular paths of thought' (for an example see Appendix A.1.6 in the Appendix A). One such path of thought may be the contemplation of fundamental questions, such as Leibniz' question regarding the reason for existence: 'Why is there anything at all and not rather nothing?'. Experiencing what it is like to think about such questions, in particular experiencing their unanswerable nature and paradoxical structure, can also lead to transformative experiences, which may have the form of mystical experiences.<sup>7</sup>

A further type of experience consists of experiences made under the influence of various drugs. Strictly speaking, this is less of a type of experience, than a type of circumstance under which they arise, and it is, of course related to the other types, in that perceiving music, natural settings etc., can also feature in drug induced experiences. Yet it is nevertheless illustrative of the wide array of shapes that mystical experiences can take and thus the following examples are grouped under this type. James also considers mystical experiences occurring under the influence of substances, including alcohol, but discussing in particular nitrous oxide, ether, and chloroform. Again, what people experience is a sense of 'profound meaning', of a revelation of 'depth beyond depth of truth'. "This truth fades out, however, or escapes, at the moment of coming to; and if any words remain over in which it seemed



to clothe itself, they prove to be the veriest nonsense. Nevertheless, the sense of a profound meaning having been there persists;" (James [1902] 1958, p. 258). Beyond meaning, unity is also something that appears often in descriptions of drug induced experiences, such as the description of "a monistic insight, in which the other in its various forms appears absorbed into the One"(ibid.). There is also a wide range of experiences that fulfil the criteria for mystical experiences given above after the taking of newer or today more widely known drugs, including mescaline, DMT, LSD, and psilocybin (for an example see Appendix A.1.7 in the Appendix A). The proximity of some types of drug induced experiences and religious experiences has been considered conceptually<sup>8</sup> and, to some extent, empirically (Griffiths et al. 2006). A further set of conditions under which mystical experiences can arise are intense physiological or bodily episodes, such as, for example, pain. Such physical practices are also actively employed in spiritual and religious practices, likely in part at least with the goal of engendering such experiences.<sup>9</sup>

To summarize, the following components appear to occur frequently in mystical experiences. Different senses seem to be important. A component of feeling or emotion is present in almost all descriptions: for example, elation, euphoria, bliss. However, the related emotions are not necessarily positive. Less positively perceived intensities of feeling are also recounted. There is, further, the description of a perception of loss of self or of unity. There also is something that appears to be a cognitive element. This is the case in those types of experience that originate in thought, but is also the case in several of the other descriptions. This is manifested for example in the experienced perception of truths (which however remain unrecognized in terms of content) or the posing of the question of what life means (for examples exhibiting these aspects see A1 and A2 in the Appendix A). This is, of course, closely related to their noetic quality. What this means for their epistemic status is a core question of this paper and will be discussed in the following section. What further clearly emerges in several accounts is the significance accorded to these experiences, even many years later.

### 3. Momentous Experiences, Emotions, and Knowledge

In this section, I consider perspectives from three literatures on the epistemic value of experiences—all three provide insights for the epistemic value of the particular type of experiences that mystical experiences constitute. The first two perspectives look at phenomena that can be described as momentous experiences: this is the philosophy of religion perspective on mystical experiences and the decision theoretic perspective on transformational experiences. The third perspective looks at emotions. These are an important part of mystical experiences and thus may be one vehicle through which some form of knowledge can be attained. The debate on whether and what kind of knowledge can be gained through emotions is therefore also relevant to this paper. Rather than describing the debates in a comprehensive way, I will outline them very briefly, focusing instead on pointing out that all these perspectives accord some importance to experiential knowledge. In some perspectives this is the central aspect. In other strands of literature arguments are made that are meant to demonstrate that propositional knowledge can be gained through such experiences. Some of these arguments, can however be interpreted as, in fact, being about experiential knowledge.

#### 3.1. Perspectives from the Philosophy of Religion

What is examined from the perspective of the philosophy of religion under the heading of mystical experiences varies by authors. As mentioned above, mystical experiences are often, though not always (Stace 1961), considered as a type of religious experience, distinguishing it from other types of religious experiences, such as prophetic visions, psychic ascents to heaven, ecstasies, auditions, intoxications. Smart defines mystical experiences as a form of contemplation that yields "what is taken to be a fundamental insight into the nature of reality" (Smart 1978, p. 13). In the work on religious and mystical experiences in the philosophy of religion one main line of investigation is considering

the epistemic status of these experiences. As Moore puts it, this work poses the question whether “mystical experiences are purely subjective phenomena or whether they have the kind of objective validity and metaphysical significance that mystics and others claim for them” (Moore 1978, p. 101). However, what mystics claim concerning the epistemological status of their experiences varies substantially. As Moore himself as well as others point out (Moore 1978); (Pike 1978), there do not appear to be many who claim that such experiences in themselves provide evidence for a proposition such as ‘god exists’<sup>10</sup>. Different types of claims need to be distinguished: on the one hand there are subjective claims. Here the question concerns understanding in an individual sense, what meaning is assigned to the experience on a subjective level and what consequences are said to follow from experiences (changes in beliefs, behaviours, personality, etc.) (Moore 1978). Further, there are claims about inter-subjective or objective insights provided through such experiences, including causal claims and claims about the existence of some metaphysical entity (ibid.). Here the question that is examined is whether such experiences can indeed have a role in gaining such propositional knowledge. One can further disaggregate this enquiry into asking whether such experiences can in themselves provide such knowledge or whether they can provide some evidence which needs to be evaluated together with other, non-mystical references and presuppositions (Moore 1978; Pike 1978).

One side of the debate argues that, at least in the latter way, it is plausible that mystical experiences add evidence on the truth or falsehood of propositions. Copleston, for example, argues that while religious experiences do not prove the existence of god, they do provide some evidence, since the best explanation for them is that god exists (Coplestone as quoted in Russell 1957, p. 156).<sup>11</sup> On the other side, doubt is raised concerning the ability of mystical experiences to provide knowledge: MacIntyre claims that most arguments advanced for the reliability of mystical experiences as evidence for propositions are flawed (MacIntyre as cited by Pike 1978). Similarly, Russell argues that while we cannot know whether what mystical experiences appear to reveal is true, nor that the insight is not genuine, but that such insights are “insufficient guarantees of truth” and should not be considered as evidence (Russell [1917] 1976, p. 30). As mentioned in the introduction, I tend to agree with the latter position. Yet these arguments against the capacity of mystical experiences to provide knowledge are about propositional knowledge. There are, however, other forms of knowledge to be considered.

In exploring the epistemological status of mystical experiences in the philosophy of religion another type of knowledge also plays a role. Smart (1978) distinguishes between two types of understanding involved in religious experiences: theoretical and existential understanding. He describes the former as understanding the explanation of something. Since explanations can be understood to be about causal mechanisms, and since arguments about the evidence that such experiences can provide are generally related to ideas about what their causes are, this notion of understanding is where such evidentialist claims are situated. The other type of understanding, existential understanding, is defined as understanding what an experience is like—it thus seems closely related to experiential knowledge. According to Smart (1978), both types of knowledge are important for considering religious and mystical experiences.

Bambrough (1978) similarly identifies a type of experiential knowledge as important. He gives the example of visiting the parthenon: even if every architectural feature is known it can still add something to visit it oneself. A further example is the example of losing one’s child. Even if you have observed this happening in someone close to you, experiencing it yourself is different. According to him, these are examples of “cases where we have to learn the meaning of an experience we thought we already understood” (Bambrough 1978, p. 205). In a similar vein, one important role that James ([1902] 1958) accords to religious experiences is the feelings they engender and the feelings they have as consequences. This subjective perspective and subjective meaning is a central aspect, he argues (James [1902] 1958, p. 387ff.). A related aspect is also captured by other authors identifying, alongside claims of theoretical validity or practical import, an existential claim, referring to

the subjective importance that religion and religious experience can play in people's lives (Gasser and Viertbauer 2019).

Undoubtedly, an important set of questions concerning the epistemic value of mystical experiences from the perspective of the philosophy of religion is what evidence they can provide for the existence and nature of a divine being or other metaphysical realities. This is the case either for an individual and their beliefs, or as points of evidence taken together, as inter-subjective evidence. However, the examples mentioned show that within this literature a component of experiential knowledge also plays a role, at times somewhat implicitly, yet sometimes also quite explicitly.

### 3.2. Transformative Experiences

A further strand of literature that provides important insights for considering the epistemic value of momentous experiences takes a quite different angle: recently brought into prominence and much discussed is the concept transformative experiences, as introduced by Paul (2014, 2015).<sup>12</sup> Paul (2014) approaches the topic from the perspective of life decisions. Decisions about what course to take in life should be, according to most decision theoretic approaches, based on the valuation of the different potential outcomes. However, if there are experiences that have consequences (in terms of how I value things, for example) that I cannot know without having the experience, this makes valuing these outcomes in a satisfying way impossible. I will set aside the implications for decision theory, since they are not relevant to the concerns of this paper. What is important for this paper is the notion of experiential knowledge that is central to Paul's account.

Paul's main argument that is important here is that transformative experiences exist and that they provide epistemically relevant information. She defines transformative experiences as experiences that engender two types of transformation. Firstly, through such an experience something is learned, which would not have been learned without having this experience—this is epistemic transformation. Secondly, according to Paul, knowledge of what something is like leads to a change in the experiencing person's subjective point of view. If it changes the point of view in a sufficiently fundamental sense, leading to the transformation of a person's self-defining preferences, or the revision of 'how you experience being yourself', it is also personally transformative. These two characteristics do not necessarily occur together; in particular, many experiences can be epistemically transformative without being personally transformative, such as learning the taste of a specific fruit. If the two characteristics occur jointly, the experience is a transformative experience.

Transformative experiences share several important features with mystical experiences—notably the centrality of experiential knowledge as I will argue in later sections—but there are also ways in which they differ. Examples of transformative experiences as she defines them are, among others: having a traumatic accident, participating in a revolution, having a child, the death of a parent, or the fictional possibility of gaining a new sensory ability. Paul also mentions religious experiences as a type of transformative experience, but does not consider it further. The reason she gives is that for reasons of clarity she focuses on "a few special cases where the transformative nature of the experience is easily identifiable" (Paul 2014, p. 104). A further, related difference I see in the type of experience considered by Paul and the type considered in this paper, is the clarity of causes of the experiences and the conditions under which these arise. Given that Paul approaches the topic from a decision theoretic approach this makes sense: the problem of making a decision as to whether to undergo a certain transformative experience arises in those cases where I know *ex ante* that a certain experience will be transformative. In the case of non-religious mystical experiences (and similarly for most religious experiences as defined by James) this is generally not the case. Even if someone attempts to induce such an experience through meditative practices or the ingestion of substances they know that the chances that they will have some type of transformative experience are there, but they do not have control over inducing the experience—this is what is captured by the characteristic of passivity.



Transformative experiences as discussed by Paul are apparently not seen as being passive in this way.<sup>13</sup>

As stated above, transformational experiences are said to be epistemically transformative. This property is related to the discussions on physicalism and whether there are qualities to experiences that are non-physical. Put more generally, the relevant part of the debate for this paper is whether a first person, subjective perspective on experiences exists, which cannot be reduced to objective statements. While the examples of experiences considered in this debate are often less complex, such as what it is like to see a color, the core question, whether something new is learned through having the experience—whether the experience is epistemically transformative, in Paul's words—is similar.

However, using the thought experiment of Mary's room (Jackson 1982), Paul (2014) claims that her argumentation does not actually depend on taking a position with respect to physicalism, since it does not depend on experiences being the *only* way to know what an experience, for example seeing red, is like. The thought experiment centers on the question whether there is anything gained through experience itself, in particular the experience of seeing red for the first time, given that the individual has complete scientific or physical information. The assumption here is that the person having the experience has complete physical knowledge. From the perspective of individuals this is not necessarily that relevant, since this is a condition that is unlikely to be achieved very frequently. Even if what is gained through experience could be obtained exhaustively through knowing all knowable information on the physical level, if this is not a condition regularly achieved and if there is another way of gaining these insights, namely through experience, this makes the latter case relevant in itself. This underlines the importance of considering what can be gained, for individuals, through having experiences—even if this ultimately turns out not to be the only way in which this (for now) subjective knowledge can be gained.

I adopt a similar stance: I look at what it is that can be gained through having an experience, not at whether there is something that can be *exclusively* gained through experience. Even if what is gained through experiences could be gained through other ways, without having an experience, the question of what it is that is gained in the first place is important and that it can be gained through experience is in itself interesting. The same reasoning applies with regard to the role that epistemic subjectivity plays in discussions of consciousness: my argument does not rely on a notion of consciousness that accords a central role to a non-reducible subjective perspective (Nagel 1974).<sup>14</sup>

Turning back to Paul's discussion of the epistemic value of transformative experiences, part of her definition of these experiences is that they are epistemically transformative. Epistemic transformation means you learn what an experience is like (Paul 2014, p. 11ff.). As she describes it further, "by having the experience, we gain the ability to assess the subjective use of the experience by gaining the ability to grasp it using our first-personal, imaginative perspective" (Paul 2014, p. 12). Having such an experience for the first time is a sort of revelation: through undergoing the experience, what this experience is like (for the particular person) is revealed. For Paul's account the notion of experiential knowledge is clearly central.

To summarize, there is a type of knowledge distinct from propositional knowledge that appears to be important in momentous experiences. From the brief discussion of (mystical) religious experiences in the previous section and the discussion of Paul's concept of transformative experiences it emerges that both—otherwise relatively different—perspectives contain notions of experiential knowledge. Similarly, in the case of non-religious mystical experiences I believe this is a central type of knowledge to be considered.

### 3.3. Emotions and Knowledge

In the previous two sections I discussed perspectives on mystical and transformative experiences, which, among other questions, considered the epistemic status of these experiences. As I argue above, both also contain a notion of experiential knowledge. A somewhat different angle of looking at the question what epistemic value momentous experiences

have may be taken through looking at emotions. As discussed in Section 2, emotions are one important aspect of these experiences, while some may point to the importance of emotions in mystical experiences as showing that they do not provide knowledge, others argue that emotions themselves can provide knowledge. If this is the case, then the emotional component of such experiences may be the vehicle through which these experiences can be said to provide knowledge.

Different types of emotion form part of mystical experiences, acute emotional feeling, as well as latent background emotions.<sup>15</sup> While I will give more detail on the different types of emotion below and argue that it is background emotions which are central to mystical experiences, considering the relation of emotions and knowledge is important with respect to emotions as a whole. The core question to be considered is whether emotions can contain insights, or more broadly, knowledge. This question can be disaggregated further: if there is knowledge that is contained in and provided through emotions this knowledge can be of different kinds. Most relevantly for this paper, it can either be propositional knowledge about the external world or experiential knowledge, i.e., knowledge about oneself. In the following I present different takes on emotions and knowledge. I will focus in particular on one line of argumentation, claiming that emotions can indeed provide knowledge, including knowledge about the external world. I argue, however, that the type of knowledge provided in the cases given is more plausibly understood as being of an experiential rather than of a propositional kind. This example serves to show that when conceptualizing knowledge provided through emotions experiential knowledge appears important.

One common line of reasoning concerning the possibility of gaining knowledge through emotions argues that emotions direct attention (Furtak 2018); (Brady 2013); (De Sousa 1987). Out of a profusion of input and information, emotions make some objects more salient to us. They direct what we focus our attention on. They further influence what questions we ask and can motivate us to seek out information (Brady 2013). That this occurs, I think, can hardly be disputed. However, while emotions in this way create conditions for knowledge, this does not imply that they themselves directly provide knowledge—a condition for knowledge does not constitute knowledge. Applying this to mystical experiences, I believe that mystical experiences and its emotional aspects do impact knowledge in this way, by changing the attention directed to things and influencing the questions asked. This is likely to be one of the consequences of mystical experiences. Accordingly, it has an indirect bearing on the epistemic value of such experiences. Yet this paper focuses on the direct epistemic value of mystical experiences. The argument of emotions as contributing to knowledge through directing attention is mute on this point.

A further perspective on emotions and knowledge is found in recent work by Furtak (2018). Furtak appears to argue that through emotions both knowledge about the external world as well as experiential knowledge can be gained. Concerning experiential knowledge, he appears to argue that we learn something about ourselves through emotion, in parts what this something seems to be is learning what it is like to care about something, to be concerned with and to value something. Yet he goes on to claim that what we learn through emotion is part of knowing something about the external world. This is illustrated by the following example: we learn that a good friend has died, but we do not, initially, react to this news with grief, we fail to feel any deep emotion. According to Furtak, we do not (yet) fully *know* that a good friend has died if we know the fact but do not react with feeling grief (Furtak 2018, p. 79). In this argumentation the understanding of knowledge appears to include an aspect of valuation. This seems acceptable to me, if this part of knowledge is not about facts in the external world, but about what something feels like for me.

Other examples given by Furtak (2018) further indicate that the type of knowledge involved here is in fact experiential knowledge. Imagine driving on a frozen road and suddenly sliding, narrowly avoiding an accident. This experience scares us. According to Furtak, through this scare we *truly know* (again) that driving on a road is dangerous. I disagree, I do not think it is the emotion, the moment of fear, that leads to the knowledge

that the road is dangerous, or that makes this knowledge more present. Instead, what is happening here is one of two things: either our knowledge of the danger of the road is indeed changed, but in this case what is at the root of this knowledge change is not the moment of fear, but the incident of sliding, the fact that something almost happened, independent of whether this scares us or not. The best way to conceptualize this case is in terms of probability: knowing that driving on an icy road is dangerous can be understood as knowing that accidents occur more frequently (compared to driving on a non-icy road for example). Something almost happening can remind us that this is the case, or can increase our perceived likelihood of such an event occurring. It is not the related emotion, the scare that reminds us of this probability. Yet there is something that the fear, the scare can tell us, and this is the second thing that may be happening (it is independent of the other process, either or both may be occurring): what we learn (potentially) again is what it feels like to care. This means we feel the value we attach to, in this case, something not happening; we thus learn about our valuation. Since what is learned is what something feels like, it is an instance of experiential knowledge.<sup>16</sup>

A final example indicating that experiential knowledge is central to Furtak's understanding is the following: take the knowledge that one will die some day. According to Furtak (2018), if I dispassionately affirm this without any existential dread, either I do not fully believe that I will die someday or I am not entirely aware of what it means that I am a mortal being. I think, however, that there are other possibilities. To me it seems more likely that I simply do not pass judgement at that point in time. While caring about one's life is likely to be there as a background emotion, it is not in the foreground. I do not acutely attach valuation to not dying in the long run. I do not have present, at this moment in time, what it feels like to care about continuing to live.

Furtak (2018) appears to claim that what emotions provide is both propositional knowledge as well as experiential knowledge. However, I argue that the examples he gives to show that emotions provide propositional knowledge can be more plausibly interpreted as being about experiential knowledge. Looking at emotions as one aspect of non-religious mystical experiences through which knowledge is obtained thus also underlines the importance of experiential knowledge in mystical experiences.

In the preceding sections I discussed perspectives on momentous experiences, i.e., phenomena related to mystical experiences, as well as a perspective focusing on emotions. Both in the case of the perspective from the philosophy of religion, as well as in the case of the decision theoretic perspective on transformative experience, the notion of experiential knowledge plays a role. In the latter perspective it is the dominant notion of knowledge. I further argued that when conceptualizing the types of knowledge that emotions provide, what is dominant is again experiential knowledge. Given that experiential knowledge features prominently in conceptual perspectives on similar and related phenomena, it appears to be a plausible candidate for the type of knowledge that non-religious mystical experiences can provide.

#### 4. What Mystical Experiences Can Teach Us

##### 4.1. *Knowing What General Concern Feels Like*

The arguments I advance in this section are not meant to claim that experiential knowledge is necessarily the only type of knowledge that is gained. Yet I do argue that it is a central kind of knowledge involved in mystical experiences. I think it is central, firstly because this type of knowledge is indeed gained through mystical experiences and the object of this experiential knowledge, feeling concern with being as a whole, is an important one. I secondly think it is central because the other main candidate in terms of knowledge types, propositional knowledge, is a less plausible candidate. From the characterization of mystical experiences considered here, it becomes relatively clear that no new factual evidence perceived in ways that are generally considered to be reliable sources of propositional knowledge is provided through them. The experiences consist of sensory perceptions, sudden emotions, or cognitive processes, but without new content in

terms of external input. While I am therefore pessimistic concerning the possibility that propositional knowledge or knowledge about the world can be gained through mystical experiences, my argument does not rely on demonstrating the impossibility.

Before proceeding to discuss what experiential knowledge is provided through non-religious mystical experiences, I will first consider how experiential knowledge can be understood generally.<sup>17</sup> It seems clear that, compared to propositional knowledge, experiential knowledge has a strongly subjective component. If it relies on someone having to undergo the actual experience, i.e., to use Paul's terminology if an experience is epistemically transformative, then there is something about it that is tied to the person. Experiential knowledge, as I understand it, means knowing what something is like. I agree with Lewis that this means the same as referring to 'the raw feel' of something, or 'knowing the feeling' of something (Lewis 1988, p. 7). In order to explicitly capture the subjective component I additionally add that through having an experience we learn what something is like *for us*, i.e., for the particular person having the experience.

Can anything else be said about what we obtain through experiential knowledge? Lewis argues that the knowledge gained through experience is not knowing-that, i.e., knowledge about, it is knowing-how. What is obtained is in fact an ability, specifically the ability to remember, imagine, and recognize. Lewis gives the example of tasting a new taste for the first time. Consider the taste of cardamom. Before you have actually experienced the taste, no matter how closely it has been described to you beforehand, you cannot imagine what the taste will be like. You can imagine something, especially if you have been given analogies, but you cannot be sure that what you imagine is indeed close to what you will actually experience. Analogously, you cannot remember the taste, for you are unfamiliar with it, nor can you recognize it. Once you experience the taste of cardamom you *can* imagine, remember, and recognize this taste. Consider the example of being able to recognize the taste: if you taste it again you feel confident that this is, in fact, cardamom. Factual knowledge about the external world seems to be involved here: there is a sense of having information that you only have because you have first undergone the experience. What the experience provides, i.e., experiential knowledge, is not identical with this information, however. As Lewis puts it: "Here, the ability you gain is an ability to gain information if given other information. Nevertheless, the information gained is not phenomenal, and the ability to gain information is not the same thing as information itself" (Lewis 1988, p. 17). Ability as an important part of experiential knowledge is in line with the subjective nature of experiential knowledge: an ability is tied to an individual who has this ability.

To summarize the points made so far: through mystical experiences experiential knowledge is gained, meaning knowledge about what something is like for the particular person having the experience; this knowledge also includes the ability to remember, imagine, and recognize. However, what type of experiential knowledge is it, what is the knowledge about? The examples given in discussing experiential knowledge were experiences of a relatively simple structure. What is learned when tasting cardamom is what cardamom tastes like; what is learned when seeing red for the first time is what it is like to see red. In the case of mystical experiences the type of experiential knowledge gained is less clear; mystical experiences are likely to be more multifaceted and complex than tasting cardamom or seeing red for the first time. This is one reason why a sentence analogous to those of the other examples: 'experiential knowledge gained through having a mystical experience is what it feels like to have a mystical experience', seems less informative than in the other cases. The type of transformative experiences considered, for example, by Paul is more similar in this respect, such experiences are also 'cognitively richer'. What transformative experiences teach, according to Paul, is "the revelation of discovering what it is like to live a certain kind of life" (Paul 2014, p. 92). Though this captures a more complex aspect, it also does not fit mystical experiences well. Stating that what is learned is what it is like to live a life after having had a mystical experience does not appear informative and captures what happens after the experience, rather than what is learned through the experience itself. What type of experiential knowledge, i.e., experiential knowledge about what, is

provided through mystical experiences accordingly needs more analysis. Further, in order to argue that the experiential knowledge gained through such experiences is valuable, as will be done in later sections, it is important to look more closely at what aspect of mystical experiences it is, of which we learn what it feels like.

When characterizing mystical experiences in Section 2, one aspect that featured prominently in descriptions of such experiences was emotion. In descriptions of such experiences (see Appendix A), emotions such as elation are frequently mentioned. I argue that the object of experiential knowledge obtained through mystical experiences is related to the emotional aspects of these experiences. However, it is not the type of briefly experienced emotion such as elation that is central, it is a somewhat different type of emotion. This type of emotion can also be described as a ‘background feeling’;<sup>18</sup> The relevant emotion, I believe, is a general form of concern or care.

I understand emotions as being fundamentally connected to attribution of value and general concerns.<sup>19</sup>

Again the example of driving on a frozen road and narrowly avoiding an accident given by Furtak is illustrative. As described above, he argues that through the scare we receive, we learn that the driving on a road is dangerous. I disagree. Either it is the fact that something almost happened (independent of the scare) that tells us something or reminds us about the probability of accidents. Or, and this is where valuation comes in, through the scare we learn something (or have a latent emotion present in the background pushed to the forefront), namely what it feels like to care about not having an accident. Fear here is an emotion built on the background concern with one’s life, the valuation of being uninjured, avoiding pain, being alive. In similar ways, valuation seems central to all emotions (though not necessarily about one’s own well-being).

The type of emotion I think is most central to experiential knowledge provided through mystical experiences is a form of background emotion, not transitory brief emotional episodes. Furtak makes this distinction by contrasting ‘long-standing attitudes of love and concern’ to ‘emotional responses’ that are experienced at particular points or intervals of time. Martha Nussbaum makes a similar distinction between background and situational emotions, Richard Wollheim contrasts dispositional emotions towards and episodes of emotion (Wollheim 1999). In what is important for this paper, these distinctions are relatively similar. The first type is in some way prior to the other and is thus in a way more fundamental. The main type of background emotion is variously described as concern with, care about, love, or according import to things. These emotions “constitute the felt background to our experience of the world” (Furtak 2018, p. 107). We must care about something in order for us to experience other emotions, emotional episodes; this type of background emotions thus “grounds our whole emotional life” (Furtak 2018, p. 108). In feeling relief that someone arrived home safely it is the underlying care for this person that that provides the basis for other types of emotions occurring, such as fear and relief.

Both transitory emotional episodes as well as deeper underlying emotions are aspects of non-religious mystical experiences considered here, yet the relevant experiential knowledge provided is learning what experiencing the latter feels like for someone. I do not suggest that these underlying, background emotions are engendered through such experiences. Generally, they are likely to exist in a latent form and as the name suggests ‘in the background’. In this form they are not directly experienced, however. Through experiences they are pushed to the forefront and experienced directly.

In some accounts of religious (mystical) experiences it emerges quite clearly that feeling general concern or care for something general and abstract appears central. Descriptions of such experiences (see Appendix A) quite often mention elation or euphoria, related to or triggered by, for example, the beauty or intensity of a specific feature, perceived by the senses (or cognitive processes). In these descriptions those who have made the experiences often then go on to state that this emotion encompasses more than the things perceived, it seems to be detached from them and more encompassing. This, however, still appears to be an acute emotional response, an emotional episode. Yet, quite often,



subsequently love, awe, rapture or something similar are mentioned. These emotions are mostly mentioned without reference to specific objects, instead appearing to be general emotions. Simultaneously, perceptions of something universal, or of oneness, or unity are recounted. These general emotions in conjunction with the sense of universality, suggest that there is something more to the aspect of emotions than the brief emotional episodes.

Further, these experiences are often perceived to instil in the experiencing person a sense of ‘meaning’. I believe that this sense of meaning may be related to concern or care, which (being an emotion) may exert motivational force, thus instilling a sense of meaning. Part of the description of religious experiences in the novel ‘Life of Pi’ by Yann Martel reads as follows: “a quickening of the moral sense, which strikes me as more important than an intellectual understanding of things; an alignment of the universe along moral lines, not intellectual ones; a realization that the founding principle of existence is what we call love, which works itself out sometimes not clearly, not cleanly, not immediately, nonetheless ineluctably” (Martel 2002, p. 69f.). That what such an experience reveals, according to this description, has something to do with valuation and care or concern becomes quite apparent: while the reference to a moral sense and alignment along moral lines can be understood to mean some sort of moral truths, from the perspective of the individual it is compatible with realizing the valuation of certain things, feeling that something matters to the individual. Thus, if ‘moral’ is understood less as an objective should, more as a statement about what an individual cares about, about personal valuation, then this part of the quote fits the argument quite well that the experiential knowledge provided through mystical experiences is what experiencing an emotion, and specifically the valuation of something, feels like. Calling love the “founding principal of all existence” implies much more in terms of propositional knowledge or metaphysical statements than I wish to discuss. Nevertheless, it does reveal that a notion that may be similar to what I understand as care or concern is central to such experiences. From the perspective of the individual, which I argue is the central one in these experiences, since what they provide is experiential knowledge, the founding principle could also capture the nature of background concern as the basis for other emotions. In this interpretation the description comes quite close to what I argue happens in mystical experiences.

To summarize, what I argue in this section is that what mystical experiences provide is experiential knowledge, meaning learning what something is like for the experiencing person. Specifically, learning what it is like to experience a general form of concern. In these experiences a basic background emotion, concern, is pushed to the forefront and consciously experienced. In the next section I will explore what more I believe can be said about what this concern or care is about and will further discuss in what sense it is a very general type of concern.

#### 4.2. *Feeling Concern about Existence as a Whole*

Above I argued that through mystical experiences a person learns what concern towards something feels like. In this section I attempt to outline *what* this something is. In order to do so, it is helpful to draw on further distinctions among types of emotions made by Nussbaum (2001). Besides distinguishing between background and situational emotions, she further distinguishes between different levels of generality. In most emotions multiple aspects are at work simultaneously, both aspects valuing very concrete objects, as well as more general aspects. Yet different levels of generality may be more salient in different emotions.<sup>20</sup> In the conditions that give rise to mystical experiences specific objects may play a role, yet in the overall experience a high level of generality is salient. As mentioned in the previous section, while descriptions of experiences initially refer to, for example, beauty perceived in certain things and sensations, this quickly appears to develop into a much more encompassing, general perception, and the feelings this gives rise to, such as elation, also appear to frequently be all-encompassing. The relevant type of emotion is thus of a very general sort.

A further distinction is between eudaimonistic and non-eudaimonistic emotions. Emotions are eudaimonistic if they are concerned with a person's flourishing. Mystical experiences seem to be non-eudaimonistic, or at least not eudaimonistic in a narrow sense, in that they tend not to refer to an individual's personal flourishing directly.<sup>21</sup> I am not excluding the possibility that such aspects form part of a mystical experience, for example one that arises in a context of closely avoiding death. However, I do think that it is not the dominant aspect.

The object of concern most crucial in these experiences is something much more general and more non-eudaimonistic: the object of this concern is, I believe, existence, reality, or the world as a whole. One argument for this is that it fits well with the perceived absence or dissolution of self and the perceived oneness with the world. This is seen as a central characteristic of mystical experiences—Stace (1961, p. 131ff.) sees what he terms the dissolution of individuality, the perception of the one, or self-transcendence, as the feature of main importance. He emphasizes that this is not part of the interpretation, but part of the experience itself: “[T]hat self-transcendence is a part of the experience itself is the reason why the mystic is absolutely certain of its truth beyond all possibility of arguing them out of it. An interpretation of any experience can be doubted, but the experience itself is indubitable” (Stace 1961, p. 154). I believe that instead of being indicative of actual interrelatedness this perception may be, at least partly, explained by the object of concern: if concern is experienced with regard to an object much wider than usual, with existence, the world, or reality as a whole, and if this is something that is rarely acutely experienced, this may explain the perception of loss of boundaries between the self and the world. There is self-transcendence, but in the realm of concern, specifically with regard to the object of concern, of what someone accords value to.

That a non-eudaimonistic type of concern directed towards existence in general may be central is further suggested by Nussbaum's discussion of wonder. Given her broad definition of eudaimonistic it is not surprising that, according to Nussbaum, most emotions are eudaimonistic. Wonder, however, is an exception: “This emotion responds to the pull of the object, and one might say that in it the subject is maximally aware of the value of the object, and only minimally aware, if at all, of its relationship to her own plans” (Nussbaum 2001, p. 54). This similarly holds for the related emotions of reverence and awe.<sup>22</sup> In these emotions the *general* value of an object appears to be acknowledged, independently from how it serves an individual's goals. Import and concern are attached to the object towards which wonder is directed. These are emotions, which are often part of mystical experiences. If, in such experiences, wonder is felt not towards a specific object but in a general sense or explicitly directed at existence as a whole, then this is an indication that concern for the world in general is central in such experiences.

Further considering wonder, Nussbaum expresses doubt that wonder can exist as a background emotion. This, she says is related to it being relatively non-eudaimonistic. She claims that background emotions are more commonly eudaimonistic than non-eudaimonistic, because “what is especially likely to persist in the background is a structure of personal goals and plans” (Nussbaum 2001, p. 73). In contrast, I argue that the most important emotions involved in mystical experiences are, like wonder, at least to some degree non-eudaimonistic and are, nevertheless, underlying, i.e., background emotions. If Nussbaum is correct that background non-eudaimonistic emotions are rare, this may be part of an explanation of what it is that makes mystical experiences particular. Part of what makes them extraordinary may be that in such experiences very general emotions, the concern about something largely detached from one's own life goals, which are generally at the background, are directly experienced; the abstract and eudaimonistic emotion is combined with the very subjective perspective that is inherent in experiential knowledge, which is about what something feels like for an individual, i.e., from the subjective perspective.

These considerations help differentiate mystical experiences and the experiential knowledge they provide from other weighty or intense experiences. Consider the experience of narrowly avoiding death. There may be an intense fear involved and the acute

experience of caring about one's life, while this may be very intense and may also give rise to lasting consequences, as such, without further elements, this is not what I understand as a mystical experience. Using Nussbaums terminology, in this example the concern felt is eudaimonistic in the narrow sense. In mystical experiences, in contrast, the concern experienced is somewhat detached from care about one's individual life.

To gain a clearer idea of what I mean by concern about the world or existence in general it is helpful to illustrate the commonalities as well as differences with related concepts: the concept of existential feelings as defined by Ratcliffe (2008) and the concept of peak experiences described by Maslow (1964). Turning first to existential feelings, put very briefly, these feelings capture "a sense of the reality of the world and of one's being situated within it" (Ratcliffe 2008, p. 6). The concept encompasses feelings such as feeling at home in the world, feeling detached or estranged, feeling at one with life, or the world feeling unreal. According to Ratcliffe (2008), they provide a background in everyday life and structure all other experiences within it. Ratcliffe explicitly discusses religious experiences as instances of shifts of existential feeling, while he states that different types of existential feelings may be involved in such religious experiences, he further argues that they tend to share a common element, namely that there is a "wider space of possibility, something *more*, something *greater*" (Ratcliffe 2008, p. 261).

I agree with Ratcliffe (2008) that the concept of existential feeling plays a role in mystical experiences. The central emotions forming part of such experiences are related to a background sense of the world and oneself. Yet I believe that the existential feeling involved in mystical experiences can be better construed as having to do with concern, than with a perceived space of possibility. In the case of mystical experiences the sense of the reality of the world, all of existence, is dominant; the sense of self as being in this world, on the other hand, is present, but does not carry as much weight or loses its distinctness, as exhibited in reports as a feeling of 'oneness'. This relates back to the non-eudaimonistic nature of the emotion involved. It may be a matter of terminology more than understanding, but possibility appears to me related to flourishing, to be eudaimonistic. Concern with or import attached to the world better expresses the nature of the related emotion.

In their discussion of peak experiences, Maslow (1964) identifies something that he terms Being-cognition and related Being-values. This is a way of thinking or perceiving<sup>23</sup> that is present in these experiences and which he describes as having a clearly non-eudaimonistic character: "Normally we perceive everything as relevant to human concerns and more particularly to our own private selfish concerns. In the peak-experiences, we become more detached, more objective, and are more able to perceive the world as if it were independent not only of the perceiver but even of human beings in general. [...] In a word, [we] can see it in its own Being (as an end in itself) rather than as something to be used or something to be afraid of or something to wish for or to be reacted to in some other personal, human, self-centered way" (Maslow 1964).

While Maslow's appears to understand what happens in such experiences as a new type of non-eudaimonistic thought or perception, I think it is more plausibly interpreted as an emotional attitude, namely concern. He describes such experiences as being non-evaluating and non-judging. In contrast, I think it is an expansion of one's concern, of one's valuing, which is in this sense an evaluation, because the world in general is perceived as having import. What their concept clearly shares with my understanding is the non-eudaimonistic nature and the generality of the object, which is existence as a whole, or in their terms Being.<sup>24</sup>

Throughout this paper I take a non-religious perspective and focus on accounts of mystical experiences that are not interpreted in a primarily religious way. Yet the importance of learning what concern with the existence as a whole feels like also fits to descriptions of religious mystical experiences. In the section on mystical experiences from the perspective of the philosophy of religion I cited a characterization of what mystical experiences yield: something that is "taken to be a fundamental insight into the nature of reality" (Smart 1978, p. 13). With what has been argued above in mind, this can be restated from

the perspective of this paper's theoretical arguments: what mystical experiences yield from a non-religious perspective is a fundamental personal insight into what concern with the nature of reality, the existence of the world, feels like. A further example for a statement about religious mysticism that lends itself to reinterpretation is the following: in the introduction to 'Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis', Katz argues that what was searched for in the renewed interest in mysticism in the 20th century was a "immediate, non-critical, largely non-cognitive, contact with the mystical depths of being itself (whatever that is!)" (Katz 1978, p. 1). Reinterpreting this from the perspective of this paper's arguments, what (non-religious) experiences yield is knowledge on what it is like to feel concern about the depths of being itself.

## 5. The Value of Mystical Experiences

I argue that both the background concern about existence as a whole that is felt in non-religious mystical experiences, as well as the experiential knowledge about this feeling, can be seen as valuable. Both the feeling itself, as well as knowing what it feels like is valuable, for related but also for separate reasons.

There are two ways in which I think the emotion itself can be valuable. As discussed above, the most relevant emotion I see as a part of mystical experiences is either non-eudaimonistic or only very weakly eudaimonistic. This unimportance of personal flourishing and the very general object with regard to which concern is experienced can push the person experiencing it beyond vested interests and self-interest. This does certainly not mean that having such an experience will necessarily result in non-self-interested behavior. It means that, in this experience, a very general perspective of concern is taken. This separation from one's own interests may potentially also push the person experiencing it towards intersubjectivity, towards realizing that the perspective taken in everyday life is informed by one's own interests—that most emotions felt in everyday life *are* eudaimonistic. This realization holds the potential of being aware of the multiplicity of perspectives, including a general, non-eudaimonistic perspective, and thus of the limits of one's own perspective.

The second way, in which feeling the background concern about existence as a whole can be valuable, emerges in some of the descriptions of experiences given above. Several of the descriptions contained elements of these experiences providing a sort of basis, of giving meaning, of profoundly and positively influencing people's lives. I would argue that this feeling has this influence, because care, concern, or valuation are elements that can serve as motivation. Furthermore, if the object of this concern is very general, then this may give a fundamental form of motivation. However, it is very important to state that whether mystical experiences are valuable in this way is contingent and relies to some degree on them being experienced as positive. As discussed above, this is not necessarily the case. A very tentative explanation for these experiences sometimes being perceived as negative may be related to the aspect mentioned above of intersubjectivity or of a multitude of perspectives. It seems possible that being pushed in this direction and that the experience of a general concern can also lead to being negatively overwhelmed, or feeling alienated. Feeling concern for existences as a whole may also lead to a feeling of helplessness or impotence. Applying this paper's arguments to negatively valenced experiences needs to be explored in much more detail, but is left to future work since it exceeds the scope of this paper.

Beyond the feeling itself, I think the experiential knowledge of it, knowing what experiencing this type of concern is like, is also valuable. The first reason for this is tied to the feeling itself being valuable. It has to do with what we gain through experiential knowledge, namely the ability to remember, imagine, recognize. In descriptions of mystical experiences, it is often notable, that these experiences are remembered quite clearly, even though they may have taken place many years before.<sup>25</sup> If the feeling, the background concern about existence as a whole, is rarely experienced and if it is valuable, the ability to remember it and imagine it is clearly important as well. Similarly, if mystical experiences are thought to have important consequences, clearly the ability to remember, and maybe to

imagine, the experience is valuable. The feeling itself may have consequences—but these are likely to fade over time.

The second reason for why I think experiential knowledge of what general concern feels like is valuable is tied to the importance of the subjective perspective. Paul assigns having experiences an intrinsic value. “Perhaps because we value gains in cognitive abilities, understanding, and information, what it’s like to have experiences matters to us. Our experiences, especially new ones, are valuable, that is, we value having them, and we especially care about having experiences of different sorts” (Paul 2014, p. 11). I agree that there is intrinsic value to having experiences, yet this value is strengthened depending on the object of experiential knowledge, while we may value knowing what it is like to taste cardamom, we will accord this less value than knowing what something we perceive as more momentous is like. One way to think about whether an experience is momentous is its newness, i.e., its differences from other experiences we have, and how much significance is generally accorded to this type of experiences. Taking these two characteristics as criteria, mystical experiences appear to be quite momentous. Knowing what it is like—for us—to feel concern with existence the world, reality as a whole tells us something about ourselves. It helps us understand what it is like for us to be in the world.<sup>26</sup>

## 6. Concluding Remarks

Before summarizing the main points made in this paper I will quote a view on mysticism which in its core is similar to the direction of my main argument, but which also highlights what I add. The quote is from someone who is not exactly well known for their defence of mysticism, namely Bertrand Russell.

While fully developed mysticism seems to me mistaken, I yet believe that, by sufficient restraint, there is an element of wisdom to be learned from the mystical way of feeling, which does not seem to be attainable in any other manner. If this is the truth, mysticism is to be commended as an attitude towards life, not as a creed about the world. The metaphysical creed, I shall maintain, is a mistaken outcome of the emotion, although this emotion, as colouring and informing all other thoughts and feelings, is the inspirer of whatever is best in Man. Even the cautious and patient investigation of truth by science, which seems the very antithesis of the mystic’s swift certainty, may be fostered and nourished by that very spirit of reverence in which mysticism lives and moves (Russell [1917] 1976, p. 29f.).

I agree with Russell that mysticism, or more specifically mystical experiences, are valuable because of something having to do with attitude, with emotion, while I take less of a strong stance on the possibility of gaining insights about the world through such experiences than Russell, I do argue in this paper that an emotion, namely concern is more central. I think, however, that what such experiences do to our attitude can be spelled out further and merits doing so—this is what I have attempted to do in this paper. The main type of emotion involved, I argue, is a special, rarely experienced one. I further think, and Russell may disagree with this, that there is a understanding, a type of subjective knowledge that lends this experience epistemic value, though not in a narrow sense of objective knowledge about the world. This is the experiential knowledge of what the concern with existence in general feels like.

There may be objections from two different sides regarding this claim. Those who deny that such experiences have epistemic value may argue that the type of insight I identify, knowing what it is like to feel concern about something, is not epistemically relevant. I argue that these experiences are valuable for other than epistemic reasons (see Section 5), but I do also think that they have epistemic relevance. The nature of experiential knowledge is subjective. However, since each individual is part of the world, it does tell us something about this tiny part of the world, about its motivation and what experiences are like for this one particular individual. Further, and maybe more importantly, for living one’s life the subjective, individual perspective, the direct perception of the world, is of



great importance—alongside other perspectives. I think this provides sufficient reason to see knowledge about what concern feels like as being epistemically relevant.

On the other hand, the other side, those who have had such an experience (or have heard accounts) and perceived a strong sense of having had an insight, may not be satisfied with the type of insight gained through experiential knowledge. They may grant that this form of knowledge is gained, but do not think it sufficiently explains the feeling of having had an insight. Here my answer is that I think experiencing concern, especially if it is a rarely experienced background general concern, can be intense enough to strongly feel like an insight. Moreover, experiential knowledge, also involves being able to recognize, imagine, and remember what something feels like—which contributes to its nature of providing an insight. That it is fundamentally about what I as an individual feel concern for, i.e., about valuation, does not lessen either the importance of the experience nor the feeling of having had an insight.

What I attempt to do in this paper, which is contributing to the understanding of mystical experiences, is important for multiple reasons. As argued in the literature on religious experiences, how such experiences are framed, including whether they are seen as something to be encouraged or discouraged, may not only affect the content and interpretation of such experiences, but also their occurrence (Moore 1978). If, as I argue above, such experiences can be valuable, then it is important to acknowledge this and explore this type of experience further. On the other hand, one may doubt whether conceptualizing a form of knowledge that can only be gained through actual experience is useful. However, even though one cannot obtain the knowledge itself, trying to describe and understand the experiences as a whole is nevertheless informative. Brambrough underlines this by giving the analogy of a music piece: “The music is more than the description, but the description may help us to understand the music” (Brambrough 1978, p. 207). Further, while mystical experiences as defined in Section 2 seem to be comparatively rare, there are less drastic variants that are likely to be more common.<sup>27</sup> While such experiences are probably less clearly identifiable and maybe should not be termed mystical experiences, considering strong and relatively clearly identifiable mystical experiences can also help understand in such weaker but probably considerably more frequent variants.<sup>28</sup>

This paper’s core aim is not to argue against other forms of insight that may be obtainable through mystical experiences. Nevertheless, I think that the importance of experiential knowledge, in particular if it can capture the feeling of having had an insight, which is often described as a core feature of such experiences, can serve to delineate the limits of the insights mystical experiences can provide. In particular, if the insight that is perceived to be gained through mystical experiences feels so strong that “discursive analytic knowledge” (Russell [1917] 1976, p. 26) is contrasted unfavourably with it, as Russell seems to fear, then this feeling of having had an insight becomes problematic. As Russell puts it when discussing mystic insight: “but if it should appear, on examination, to be at least as fallible as intellect, its greater subjective certainty becomes a demerit, making it only the more irresistibly deceptive” (Russell [1917] 1976, p. 33).

Through having a clearer picture of how experiential knowledge is gained through mystical experiences it may be easier to distinguish this form of subjective knowledge from knowledge about the world. Confounding subjective knowledge with knowledge about the world holds obvious dangers. However, there is also the danger of according subjective knowledge too little value. This risks not taking seriously enough individual, subjective experiences, which is one main perspective we have on the world. Therefore, conceptualizing mystical experiences and the role experiential knowledge plays in them can, on the one hand, help to identify the limits of knowledge gained through mystical experiences. On the other hand, it also accords the subjective perspective the importance it is due.

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## Appendix A

### *Appendix A.1. Selected Accounts of Non-Religious Mystical Experiences*

#### Appendix A.1.1. Jane Goodall

The following is an excerpt from an account by Jane Goodall, who describes an experience she had while visiting the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, listening to Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor. Characteristics: auditory trigger; strong, positive emotions; a sense of vastness and eternity; long lasting impression.

I had always loved the opening theme; but in the cathedral, filling the entire vastness, it seemed to enter and possess my whole self. It was as though the music itself was alive. That moment, a suddenly captured moment of eternity, was perhaps the closest I have ever come to experiencing ecstasy, the ecstasy of the mystic. [...] It is hard now, after twenty years, to recapture that moment of ecstasy in the cathedral—although the experience has never left me. It became incorporated into the warp and woof of my very being. If I hear Bach's fugue, no matter where I am, the result is the same: [...] that music floods my whole being with love, joy, and a sort of spiritual exaltation. [...] The experience, whatever else it did, put me back on track; it forced me to rethink the meaning of my life on earth. (Goodall and Berman 2000, p. 266)

The second account by Jane Goodall is from an experience she had while working in the rain-forest. Characteristics: unclear trigger, includes visual and olfactory aspects; awe/perception of beauty; a sense of loss of self and of experiencing truth; clear reference to ineffability.

Lost in the awe at the beauty around me, I must have slipped into a state of heightened awareness. It is hard—impossible, really—to put into words the moment of truth that suddenly came upon me then. [...] It seemed to me, as I struggled afterward to recall the experience, that self was utterly absent [...]. Never had I been so intensely aware of the shape, the color of the individual leaves, the varied patterns of the veins that made each one unique. Scents were clear as well, easily identifiable: fermenting, overripe fruit; waterlogged earth; cold, wet bark; the damp odor of chimpanzee hair, and yes, my own too. Furthermore, the aromatic scent of young, crushed leaves was almost overpowering. (Goodall and Berman 2000, p. 173f.)

#### Appendix A.1.2. John A. Symonds

The following description is of an experience by John A. Symonds. Characteristics: unclear trigger; negative emotions; a sense of loss of self and of experiencing an underlying, essential consciousness; clear reference to ineffability.

I cannot even now find words to render it intelligible. It consisted in a gradual but swiftly progressive obliteration of space, time, sensation, and the multitudinous factors of experience which seem to qualify what we are pleased to call our Self. In proportion as these conditions of ordinary consciousness were subtracted, the sense of an underlying or essential consciousness acquired intensity. [...] At last I felt myself once more a human being; and though the riddle of what is meant by life remained unsolved, I was thankful for this return from the abyss—this deliverance from so awful an initiation into the mysteries of skepticism. (Brown, as cited by (James [1902] 1958, p. 256))

#### Appendix A.1.3. Albert Hofmann

The following descriptions are of experiences Albert Hofmann recounts from their childhood. Characteristics: visual and auditory triggers (natural surroundings); strong, positive emotions; a sense of oneness, security, and realness.

It happened on a May morning—I have forgotten the year—but I can still point to the exact spot where it occurred, on a forest path on Martinsberg above Baden,

Switzerland. As I strolled through the freshly greened woods filled with bird song and lit up by the morning sun, all at once everything appeared in an uncommonly clear light. Was this something I had simply failed to notice before? Was I suddenly discovering the spring forest as it actually looked? It shone with the most beautiful radiance, speaking to the heart, as though it wanted to encompass me in its majesty. I was filled with an indescribable sensation of joy, oneness, and blissful security. I have no idea how long I stood there spellbound. However, I recall the anxious concern I felt as the radiance slowly dissolved and I hiked on: how could a vision that was so real and convincing, so directly and deeply felt—how could it end so soon? [...] While still a child, I experienced several more of these deeply euphoric moments on my rambles through forest and meadow. It was these experiences that shaped the main outlines of my world view and convinced me of the existence of a miraculous, powerful, unfathomable reality that was hidden from everyday sight. (Hofmann [1979] 2009, p. 29f.)

#### Appendix A.1.4. Virginia Woolf

The following accounts are of experiences made by Woolf (1985). Characteristics: unclear trigger, includes visual, olfactory and auditory aspects; strong, positive emotions; a sense of retreat of self; clear reference to ineffability; long lasting impression.

If life has a base that it stands upon, if it is a bowl that one fills and fills and fills—then my bowl without a doubt stands upon this memory. It is of hearing the waves breaking, one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach; and then breaking, one, two, one, two, behind a yellow blind. It is of hearing the blind draw its little acorn across the floor as the wind blew the blind out. It is of lying and hearing this splash and seeing this light, and feeling, it is almost impossible that I should be here; of feeling the purest ecstasy I can conceive. [...]

The next memory—all these colour-and-sound memories [go] together at St. Ives—was much more robust; it was highly sensual. [...] The gardens gave off a murmur of bees; the apples were red and gold; there were also pink flowers; and grey and silver leaves. The buzz, the croon, the smell, all seemed to press voluptuously against some membrane; not to burst it; but to hum round one[,] such a complete rapture of pleasure that I stopped, smelt; looked. However, again I cannot describe that rapture. It was rapture rather than ecstasy.

The strength of these pictures—but sight was always then so much mixed with sound that picture is not the right word—the strength anyhow of these impressions makes me again digress. Those moments—in the nursery, on the road to the beach—can still be more real than the present moment... However, the peculiarity of these two strong memories is that each was very simple. I am hardly aware of myself, but only the sensation. I am only the container of the feeling of ecstasy, of the feeling of rapture. (Woolf 1985, p. 64f.)

#### Appendix A.1.5. Karl Joel

The following account is of an experience by Karl Joel. Characteristics: visual and auditory trigger (natural surroundings); positive emotions; a sense of oneness.

I lie on the seashore, the sparkling flood blue-shimmering in my dreamy eyes; light breezes flutter in the distance; the thud of the waves, charging and breaking over in foam, beats thrillingly and drowsily upon the shore—or upon the ear? I cannot tell. The far and the near become blurred into one; outside and inside merge into one another. Nearer and nearer, friendlier, like a homecoming, sounds the thud of the waves; now, like a thundering pulse, they beat in my head, now they beat over my soul, wrapping it round, consuming it, while at the same time my soul floats out of me as a blue waste of waters. Outside and inside are one. The whole symphony of sensations fades away into one tone, all senses become

one sense, which is one with feeling; the world expires in the soul and the soul dissolves in the world. (Jung 1976, p. 325f.)

#### Appendix A.1.6. Arthur Koestler

The following is an excerpt of an experience described by Koestler (1954). This experience occurred while he was in prison, considering Euclid's theorem on the infinite number of prime numbers. Characteristics: cognitive trigger; strong, positive emotions; a sense of the infinite and eternity, sense of oneness.

Then, for the first time, I suddenly understood the reason for this enchantment: the scribbled symbols on the wall represented one of the rare cases where a meaningful and comprehensive statement about the infinite is arrived at by precise and finite means. The infinite is a mystical mass shrouded in a haze; and yet it was possible to gain some knowledge of it without losing oneself in treacherous ambiguities. The significance of this swept over me like a wave. The wave had originated in an articulate verbal insight; but this evaporated at once, leaving in its wake only a wordless essence, a fragrance of eternity, a quiver of the arrow in the blue. [...] It is the process of dissolution and limitless expansion which is sensed as the 'oceanic feeling', as the draining of all tension, the absolute catharsis, the peace that passeth all understanding. [...] there remained a sustained and invigorating, serene and fear-dispelling after-effect that lasted for hours and days. (Stace 1961, p. 230)

#### Appendix A.1.7. Aldous Huxley

The following quote recounts part of Aldous Huxley's experience after taking mescaline. Characteristics: substance related trigger; a sense of significance, eternity, existence as a whole.

A bunch of flowers shining with their own inner light and all but quivering under the pressure of the significance with which they were charged; [...] what rose and iris and carnation so intensely signified was nothing more, and nothing less, than what they were—a transience that was yet eternal life, a perpetual perishing that was at the same time pure Being, a bundle of minute, unique particulars in which, by some unspeakable and yet self-evident paradox, was to be seen the divine source of all existence. (Huxley 1954, p. 8)

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> A more detailed definition of experiential knowledge will be given in the course of discussing my main theoretical arguments. It is contrasted to propositional knowledge, i.e., knowledge regarding the truth value of propositions, especially about propositions concerning the world beyond the subject's experience.
- <sup>2</sup> There are exceptions however, such as for example Stace (1961) and Maslow (1964).
- <sup>3</sup> Though not universally, as mentioned in a footnote above: Stace (1961), for example, has a wider notion of these experiences and notes that the term mystical is in fact unfortunate, because it ties these experiences so closely to the religious realm. Maslow (1964) also sees religious and mystical experiences as part of a wider notion of what he calls 'peak experiences'.
- <sup>4</sup> As has been noted by Jantzen (1994, 1995) and Griffioen (2021, p. 6f.), the importance accorded to the criteria for mystical experiences as formulated by James has led to a limited understanding of the class of phenomena and a neglect of other perspectives. For example, much of the literature is focused on private psychological episodes—considering the context in which these occur, as well as more shared types of experiences, is important as well. Relatedly, the traditional literature exhibits an androcentric bias with regard to the perspective on mystical experiences, both in terms of accounts of such experiences as well as conceptualization. Moreover, much of the discussion on religious experiences has been informed by a Western perspective—both with regard to what is defined as religious as well as how experiences are understood. Recent literature makes strong arguments for broadening this focus Griffioen (2021, p. 50ff.), and, somewhat less recently, Jantzen (1994). This includes considering experiences that do not conform to the Jamesian criteria, for example considering experiences in more active, ritualistic contexts. (Griffioen 2021, p. 51f.)
- <sup>5</sup> On the possible negative character of drug induced experiences see Huxley (1954, 1956).

- <sup>6</sup> Huxley (1954) mentions that in particular (images of) distant natural surrounding, such as far-off landscapes, and very closely examined natural objects, such as a leaf examined in detail, are likely to be potent in this type of experience. For several examples of experiences exhibiting these components see Appendices A.1.1, A.1.3, A.1.4 and A.1.5 in the Appendix A.
- <sup>7</sup> On such contemplation as transformative experience, in particular in the contexts of negative theology and scepticism see Gutschmidt (2019) and Gutschmidt (2021).
- <sup>8</sup> See, for example, Aldous Huxley's description and analysis of their mescaline trips Huxley (1954, 1956), Hofmann ([1979] 2009) on LSD, or, more recently, Pollan (2018).
- <sup>9</sup> For a wide if somewhat interpretative summary of such practices see Huxley (1956).
- <sup>10</sup> I refrain from capitalizing god, since I here use the term to refer to a general concept and not as a proper name with reference to any specific religion.
- <sup>11</sup> Full quote: "By religious experience I do not mean simply feeling good. I mean a loving, but unclear, awareness of some object which irresistibly seems to the experiencer as something transcending the self, something transcending all the normal objects of experience, something which cannot be pictured or conceptualized, but of the reality of which doubt is impossible—at least during the experience. I should claim that cannot be explained adequately and without residue, simply subjectively. The actual basic experience at any rate is most easily explained on the hypotheses that there is actually some objective cause of that experience" (Russell 1957, p. 156).
- <sup>12</sup> A further conception of experience that can be understood as transformative is Maslow's peak experiences (Maslow 1964). Yet considerations of the exact nature of peak experiences and especially of their epistemological status remain somewhat unsystematic, as far as I can see. I therefore do not introduce this conception here, though I do briefly consider it in Section 4.2.
- <sup>13</sup> This distinction is not a clear one, however: many experiences understood as choices by Paul may not be fully within control of an individual. Take the paradigmatic example of choosing to have a child: whether this is actually a choice, i.e., whether someone freely chooses this and whether they actually end up having a child, will not be fully in their control. They may either turn out to be infertile or they may be in a context in which becoming pregnant and carrying the child to term cannot be understood as a free choice (Carel and Kidd 2020). This is even clearer for other examples she gives, such as having a traumatic accident.
- <sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, the importance of subjective perspectives in this debate is likely to be related to the importance of experiential knowledge argued for later in this paper—this discussion exceeds this paper's scope and is left for future analysis.
- <sup>15</sup> Note that I use emotion as a broad concept, also encompassing things sometimes referred to as feeling or mood. Some more detail on my understanding of different types of emotions will be given in Section 4. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper and not of immediate importance to its core argument to attempt a clean definition of the terms feeling, emotion, and mood.
- <sup>16</sup> My understanding of experiential knowledge is discussed below, in Section 4.1.
- <sup>17</sup> I refrain from discussing in depth the relation of experiential knowledge to propositional knowledge and its relationship to truth and justification, while these are undoubtedly important aspects, they are not pertinent to the main concern of this paper and exceed its scope.
- <sup>18</sup> As will emerge below, I have a broad understanding of the term emotion, relatively close to the term 'feeling', as containing acute affective states, as well as more general dispositional feelings.
- <sup>19</sup> This is in line with conceptions found in the literature on emotions, such as Helm (2001) and Nussbaum (2001).
- <sup>20</sup> Note that this distinction is logically independent of the distinction between background and situational emotions.
- <sup>21</sup> Nussbaum has a quite wide understanding of eudaimonistic, as personal ends and purposes encompassing very broad concerns not directly related to oneself. Within this understanding it seems conceivable that even concern about very non-personal abstract things may be seen as eudaimonistic. Irrespective of how this question is decided, the important point is that the relevant type of concern is not eudaimonistic in the narrow sense (Nussbaum 2001, p. 31ff.).
- <sup>22</sup> The role of vastness and collective concerns in experiencing awe as discussed by Keltner and Haidt (2003) points in a similar direction.
- <sup>23</sup> As far as I can see Maslow is not very clear on to what extent elements in peak experiences are cognitive or non-cognitive, or how this differs across different elements involved.
- <sup>24</sup> A further important difference is that Maslow (1964) understands peak experiences as always being experienced as positive. This differs from my understanding of mystical experiences, which can also be negatively valenced.
- <sup>25</sup> Consider for example Jane Goodalls experience while visiting the cathedral of Notre Dame in the Appendix A. She explicitly states that the memory of the experience remains present, and even that the emotions felt during the experience can be reignited.
- <sup>26</sup> Following a broad notion of understanding, such as endorsed by Elgin (2017).
- <sup>27</sup> I think much of what I argue applies to such less intensive variants as well—in correspondingly weaker ways. Take the description of Hoffmann's experience listed in the Appendix A: such an experience in contemplating nature with a briefer duration and only a brief glimpse of euphoria seems clearly conceivable. Similarly, a deep absorption in art or music may also be understood as sharing aspects with mystical experiences, though in attenuated form. A further example, of a more negatively valenced experience, is the feelings experienced by Roquentin in Jean-Paul Sartre's novel 'La Nausée': the protagonist experiences feelings of alienation, initially tied to specific objects, situations, or sensations, but expanding and becoming more encompassing.



Moreover, even experiences with a relatively strong mystical components may not be that infrequent. Maslow (1964), for example, claims that peak experiences as he understands them (which seems somewhat similar to this paper's understanding of mystical experiences) are relatively common, though sometimes not recognized or suppressed.

- 28 Considering mystical experiences as a type of existential feeling in the sense defined by Ratcliffe (2008) may be helpful for looking at attenuated versions. He argues that there is a continuity between experiences understood as mystical and other types of changes in existential feeling. His framework can also help identify commonalities mystical experiences share with other types of experiences. A further important aspect that Ratcliffe discusses at length is the role of the body. I hold the somatic dimension, the role of bodily aspects to be of considerable importance in mystical experiences. Yet I have largely bracketed it here, because of the constraints of this project.

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