

Article

High on God: Religious Experience and Counter-Experience in Light of the Study of Religion

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Abstract: Taking as its foundation a religious experience of my own, this paper explores the impact of the study of religion on the interpretation and significance of experience. My experience will be analyzed in relation to the work of William James, followed by a movement into neuroscientific research on null experiences, before turning to philosophic and theological treatments of experience in Nishida Kitaro and Meister Eckhart especially. These accounts of religious experience are then explored in terms of the potential connection they suggest with drug use in and out of religious settings. Finally, I will turn to a fundamental questioning of experience as seen in the work of Martin Heidegger and Jean-Luc Marion, all of which sets up a tentative conclusion regarding our approach to religious experience, whether as an object of study or our own.

Keywords: religious experience; William James; Jean-Luc Marion; counter-experience; Martin Heidegger; drug use

Preface

Before we begin, at the risk of giving everything away, please allow me to state plainly and directly what I am doing in this paper. This special issue of *Religions* asks us to question objectivity as a method in religious studies, but also to question subjectivity, and to do so through a phenomenological approach. This is what I will do, and I will accomplish this within this piece by switching perspectives and writing styles: I will include personal narrative, and describe the development of my thought, even including half-thoughts or false-perspectives which I have discarded along the way, but which lead me to where I am. I will also provide “objective,” conventionally academic descriptions of thinkers and concepts, striving for a rigorous engagement with seminal figures from religious studies, philosophy, and theology. Finally, I will question both subjectivity and objectivity through the discussion of a non-objective, non-subjective approach offered in the work of Jean-Luc Marion and Martin Heidegger.

To explain how this works: first, the inclusion of the subjective leads to a questioning of the objective; to write this paper in a traditional academic format would have resulted in a much shorter paper, where I would include, perhaps, only four thinkers: Nishida Kitaro, William James, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Luc Marion. I would argue in that version that the work of William James offers an overly narrow interest in certain forms of experience, one which can be expanded and considered outside of the paradigm of subjectivity/objectivity through guidance from the above figures. That paper would have possessed a conventional academic format and offered an easily digestible takeaway for scholars of religion considering experience. I did not write that paper, however. Instead, in providing a subjective account, I have made an easy conclusion far more difficult. I have accomplished this by showing the origins and development of my thought: I trace the origins of my interest in experience, my questioning of that approach through experience with drug use, and my recent discovery of the work of Heidegger and Marion, which allows me to express my disillusion in academic terms. This lineage is not clean and crisp; it includes mistakes I have made, misreadings or half-readings of the figures who inspired me, youthful idealisms and personal religious commitments, all of which lead to a (perhaps) academically compelling and seemingly objective conclusion. Again, I could have

written only the objective form of this paper, excluding all of the sloppiness which brought me to the conclusion expressed here, and presenting all of this in a nice, neat, formal and rigorous manner; but this would not be to ask a serious question of academic method.

On the other hand, this subjective approach is not the true approach, either. The figures I include in this paper do not allow for such a simplistic overturning. The story I tell of myself, the narrative of how I arrived at this conclusion, is just that, a narrative. The section on Heidegger is specifically dedicated to exploring this problematization of subjectivity; I suggest, in particular, that Heidegger's work provides grounds for questioning the accuracy and meaningfulness of a "lived experience" interview—the subjective recounting of a particular experience. But a subjective recounting of experience(s) is precisely what this paper offers as a way of destabilizing objectivity. My subjective critique is thus destabilized, as well, because I do not know whether my account of my experience and my intellectual development is actually a true account of the development of these ideas, or was merely created after the fact.

This is where Nishida, Heidegger, and Marion's work come in: all three provide philosophical accounts of experience which fundamentally question and dismiss the subject/object distinction. And this is where the paper will leave you, the reader—after reading a subjective account, an objective account, and finally a path toward a non-subjective/objective account through the notion of counter-experience, where do you think we should go from here? How should we study religious experience?

1. Introduction

"My attorney has never been able to accept the notion—often espoused by reformed drug abusers and especially popular among those on probation—that you can get a lot higher without drugs than with them." (Thompson [1971] 1998, p. 73) Raoul Duke (Hunter S. Thompson)

I write in agreement with the above quotation, as, in my own experience, I was able to get higher through meditation than through drugs. This may be more a factor of the drugs I chose—perhaps I missed out on the best ones. Still, the similarities of the two experiences led me to question what it is that I wanted to achieve through the pursuit of each respective thing. Did I pursue contemplation because I wanted to be close to God? Did I get high because, as I told myself, I just wanted to shut off my brain for a while? Or did I just like being high, as most people do? If that's the case, then wasn't my contemplation just a means of getting high?

I have always been broadly comfortable with the intersection of drug use and religion. For whatever reason, it did not strike me as unethical or contradictory to be a pot smoking teenager who regularly attended church and had an active life of faith. My drug use was not explicitly religious for the most part, though perhaps it should have been. But it would not have been easy for me to find anyone who would encourage this understanding of religion; the closest thing I found was Hunter S. Thompson, who offered nothing of the conventionally religious, but did offer an outlook on life I found spiritually invigorating as a sixteen year old. Considering myself "one of God's own prototypes" (Thompson 1977), I was comfortable forging my own way, ignoring cautions from conventional religious voices and finding sufficient inspiration from a few trailblazing exemplars.

My unconventional faith continued into college, where I first encountered the study of religion. I became a comparative religion major because of my ongoing interest in the subject, and also started the ordination process for the priesthood in the Episcopal Church. But what I found in the course of my study of religion was, of course, not always productive for my faith—my grandfather, a Lutheran minister and professor, had cautioned me to "take care and not lose my faith" when I told him I would be starting divinity school, as he had seen it happen to many who took on the academic study of religion.

I did not lose my faith—though it is perhaps more accurate to say that I did lose it and arrived at a new one, given how dramatically it has changed over the years. How did this happen? It occurred, in no small part, due to my study of religion, as my grandfather warned. I do not think this is a bad

thing, and what I plan to do in this paper is to explore, via one core example of my religious experience, the ways in which my study of religion from BA to MDiv to PhD and beyond complicated the way I exist religiously.

To restate this introduction in a conventional academic manner: what is the point of religious experience? How should we study it? How are our religious experiences altered by our study of religious experience? How are our interpretations of them altered? In particular, I write in response to the work of William James, whose interpretive framework has, to my mind, led to the exclusion of certain forms of religious experience while also moving a certain form of interpretation of experience to a problematic place of prominence.

The influence of James is extensive; and rightly so, as his work pioneered new forms of understanding the way religions operate and new ways of understanding the experiences of religious persons. Still, his approach to religion, though offered in a seemingly descriptive mode, often functions in the modern world in a prescriptive way. Religion, as he describes it, is about “meaning-making”, about offering purpose to our lives based off of certain sorts of experiences. The experiences James is most interested in are typically affective, producing certain positive emotions which help produce meaning and inspire further devotion, or simply new perspectives and practices. This description of religion is now prescriptive, and the average definition of religion focuses on this idea of providing positive meaning based off of positive experiences.

There is more variety to our religious experiences than James describes: I am hardly the first to argue this, so I will not belabor the point (see, for example, [Wright 2012](#); [Weller 2010](#); [Capps 1997](#); [Ruetenik 2006](#)). But it is essential to state that not all religions are about providing meaning and purpose; not all religious experiences clarify, inspire, or build up. Instead, experiences of abandonment, confusion, depression, and purposelessness are equally important religious experiences—at least in certain contexts—and their exclusion is to the detriment of our understanding of religion and to our religious lives. More significant, perhaps, is the fact that not all religions are about religious experiences. James’ argument forwards a certain intellectual stance toward experience and its subjective recounting, one which is potentially problematic. Our entire framework of approaching religion and religious experience is caught up in the intellectual framework of the central figures of the development of religious studies; Christian men with specific views of God, and thus with narrow categories for what is and what is not religious.

To this end, I offer two critiques of the work of William James, though these arguments must be carefully qualified. First, James does not show sufficient attention or respect for negative experiences; he does include them, and his chapter on the “Sick Soul” is praiseworthy, but he is also somewhat dismissive. At the end of this chapter he writes, “Fortunately from now onward we shall have to deal with more cheerful subjects than those which we have recently been dwelling on” ([James \[1902\] 2002](#), p. 184), and then no longer discusses these matters. Further, even the identification of this soul as necessarily sick is a value judgment, and one which fits into the overarching framework of *Varieties*, a movement of redemption and conversion to a fully formed and thus ideal point of view. Again, this issue has been addressed previously in depth, so it will not be the focus of this paper.

Instead, second, in what will be the ultimate concern of this paper, I argue that the influence of James pushes the academic study of religion into a focus on peak experience, and, with this, to the subjective recounting of peak experience, along with the interpretation and analysis of these accounts from an “objective” perspective. Heidegger’s critique of the subject and object paradigm, and in particular his critique of the notion of “lived experience” (*Erlebnis*) is essential here, as it provides a cutting argument against James’ method. Religion and religious experiences are reduced to mere experience: they are sapped of their power by objective analysis and cultural skepticism, but also by subjective recounting and private interpretation, where everything is merely personal—“that’s just my experience”—and shared concerns are no longer possible.

Heidegger’s work admittedly leaves us in a somewhat ambiguous place in relation to religious experience; for this reason, I turn to the work of Jean-Luc Marion, a philosopher and theologian deeply

influenced by Heidegger and the phenomenological tradition. Marion's account of the saturated phenomenon and his understanding of "counter-experience" provide a new approach, one which does not reduce religious experience to an object of study, nor prioritize a subjective account of the experience of that object. The idea of counter-experience, in particular, is significant, as it considers the fruit of the experience of the person as it manifests in their life, a process described not as a matter of subjective interpretation of the experience, but through the person's receptivity to what is given in the encounter.

In order to complete this discussion, I will first share one particular religious or "mystical" experience from my life. I will analyze it in relation to descriptions found in William James, choosing one in particular which holds many similarities. I will then proceed to a discussion of my religious experience in light of modern scientific understandings. After this description, I will move to a discussion of both theological and philosophical challenges to religious experience, these offered by Meister Eckhart and Nishida Kitaro. I then offer an explanation of the connection between religious experience and drug use, explaining why it again led me to question the significance of experience. Finally, I will turn to a fundamental questioning of experience as seen in the work of Martin Heidegger and Jean-Luc Marion.

2. A Religious Experience

When I was in college, I intensely pursued religious experience. As a comparative religion major and a religious person, I focused my study on meditative techniques from around the world and across time. My goal, unequivocally, was to be able to achieve union with God as was described in those texts. This was, perhaps, more than a little naïve, but I had loads of youthful optimism and an energetic faith, more than enough to keep me going.

The type of experience I was most interested in was that described in Plotinus and the Christian mystical tradition as influenced by him; this is the experience which is an absence of experience, a flight beyond sense, beyond reason, beyond feeling, beyond any sort of knowing. I found in pseudo-Dionysius, in particular, descriptions of this mystical ascent, and I combined this pursuit with what I had learned of breathing techniques described in Buddhism. I was able after careful prayer and practice to have a few of these experiences, and there is one in particular that bears further mention.

On this occasion, I was in a new location for my practice, on a mission trip to Philadelphia, staying at a house affiliated with the Franciscans and working at a soup kitchen for the week. Still, I proceeded as was typical: I settled myself in a chair, closed my eyes, and began to focus on my breathing. I sat in the kitchen in the dark, after the rest of the group had gone to bed, and, stilling my inner monologue, I cleared my mind of thought and eventually lost any sense of things. I returned after a while, coming down, awaking (so to speak) to the sense that I had forgotten to keep breathing. I have no real sense of how long I was "away" for, but I can't imagine it was for more than a moment. The experience itself was nothing; the feeling after it was the high better than a drug; a joyful, soothed elation, an abiding sense of satisfaction and wholeness, before this, too, was gone.

This experience was different than others, however. At this time in my life, despite my religious conviction and my recent decision to pursue ordination in the Episcopal Church, I was constantly questioning the existence of God. I remained firmly enough on the side of God existing, and I wouldn't say I was plagued by the question, but it was something which I was constantly thinking about and constantly attempting to come up with good arguments for. I wanted to find conclusive proof that God existed, something that could quell my doubts, and that I could share with others. After this experience, however, the question went away. It was not answered; I just no longer asked the question. It took me a week or so to realize what had happened, but I noticed that the question which had been guiding me intellectually for years no longer interested me. I can say more about why or what possible reasons there might be for this, but anything more is interpretation after the fact. The most important thing is this: I wondered about the existence of God all the time before this experience, and after it, I did not. I still do not.

That was the end of the experience. I recentered myself and steadied my breathing once more, opened my eyes, and again saw the dark kitchen as before. I stood up and went upstairs to brush my teeth and fell asleep, contented.

2.1. *A variety of Religious Experience*

I am well aware now that my experience was hardly exceptional. I don't believe I had yet read William James at that point in my life, but I would soon, certainly in the upcoming year or two upon beginning graduate school. Rereading *The Varieties of Religious Experience* for another recent project, I came across a passage which reminded me of my own experience. The experience itself is not so similar to mine, but the description of the resulting changes holds some interesting parallels

First, the experience: James describes this as the experience of a "clergyman," and represents it as a "longer and more developed experience." The clergyman describes it as follows:

I remember the night, and almost the very spot on hilltop, where my soul opened out, as it were, into the Infinite, and there was a rushing together of the two worlds, the inner and the outer. It was deep calling unto deep—the deep that my own struggle had opened up within being answered by the unfathomable deep without, reaching beyond the stars. I stood alone with Him who had made me, and all the beauty of the world, and love, and sorrow, and even temptation. I did not seek him but felt the perfect unison of my spirit with His. The ordinary sense of things around me faded. For the moment nothing but an ineffable joy and exultation remained. It is impossible fully to describe the experience . . . The darkness held a presence that was all the more felt because it was not seen. I could not any more have doubted that *He* was there than that I was. (James [1902] 2002, p. 76)

The primary distinction between my experience and this one is the sense of presence. I experienced no sense of presence; in fact, the main part of my experience was not experienced at all, I would say. Still, many of the emotions surrounding the experience, including "ineffable joy" and a sense of things being beyond description, are consistent.

The result of the experience is what I mark in this passage for further scrutiny. In particular, the clergyman describes a connection with the proofs of God's existence. He writes: "Since that time no discussion that I have heard of the proofs of God's existence has been able to shake my faith. Having once felt the presence of God's spirit, I have never lost it again for long" (James [1902] 2002, p. 77). The clergyman understands his experience to serve for him as a proof of God's existence, in that he felt a true or authentic presence. This is, of course, distinctive from what I have described above, as I did not understand my experience to prove the existence of God, but rather to remove my own questioning of God's existence. Still, the manner in which this unfolds is similar. The clergyman does not experience this new mental proof of God as something which unfolded in the form of an argument. Instead, he writes: "There was, as I recall it, no sudden change of thought or of belief, except that my early crude conception had, as it were, burst into flower. There was no destruction of the old, but a rapid wonderful unfolding" (James [1902] 2002, p. 77). There is a mental change here, but it is not a correction nor does it seem to provide new information, *per se*. Instead, the language of flowering is used, suggesting an expanded conception of God, but one that is ineffable—it is not possible to say expressly what he has learned, only that his understanding of God is different now.

James recounts several other examples, many of which align closer with my experience, but not necessarily with what followed. These are experiences of "nothing," especially those found in the chapters on "Mystics." Speaking of Buddhists, he writes:

Higher states still of contemplation are mentioned—a region where there exists nothing, and where the mediator says: "There exists absolutely nothing," and stops. Then he reaches another region where he says: "There are neither ideas nor the absence of ideas," and stops again. Then another region where, "having reached the end of both idea and perception, he

stops finally.” This would seem to be not yet Nirvana, but as close an approach to it as this life affords. (James [1902] 2002, p. 438)¹

A selection taken from Teresa of Avila offers a similar idea.

In the orison of union, the soul is fully awake as regards God, but wholly asleep as regards things of this world and in respect of herself. During the short time the union lasts, she is as it were deprived of every feeling, and even if she would, she could not think of any single thing . . . I do not even know whether in this state she has enough life left to breathe. It seems to me that she has not; or at least that if she does breathe, she is unaware of it. (James [1902] 2002, p. 445)

These descriptions are, of course, selected because they reflected James’ perennialist approach to religious experience, this core found in non-experience. The example from Teresa is interesting for the connection with breathing in comparison with mine—I had a sense of forgetting to breathe, and Teresa describes a similar questioning of whether breathing occurs at all.

The similarities are intriguing, but they also can give us pause—how do people across religions experience something similar? Either they are experiencing God, and many (if not all) of the religions are teaching the wrong thing, or they are not experiencing God, and the experience is just something human biology allows for through certain practices—which leads to the question of neuroscience.

I have not had any other experiences of this meditative sort which led to a substantive change in my understanding or way of life, at least that I know of. But I also have not sought any sort of “mystical” experience of this sort in many years. There are at least three reasons for this; I’ll discuss these three in the next sections: neuroscience, philosophy/theology, and drugs.

2.2. Neuroscientific Findings

The question of what I was experiencing has mostly been answered neuroscientifically, even if this field is still developing. I came across this research in divinity school in a course on neuroscience and religion. According to a more recent article—which I believe cites the one I read in graduate school—my experience would be classified as coming from a meditation technique focused on entrance into what they call “The Null Domain,” defined as follows:

The Null Domain represents those methods which purport to create an enhanced empty state that is devoid of phenomenological content—a non-cognitive/non-affective state (NC/NA EMS). Such methods would be classified as null-directed methods (NDM), typified by such techniques as TM, Zen satori methods, and Yoga methods aimed at the dissolution of the sense of self. (Nash et al. 2013, p. 6)

The association with mostly “Eastern” religions is well understood, even as I am not a direct practitioner of any of the methods mentioned; still, I had studied Buddhist and Taoist methods, and though the Null-Domain-directed meditation practice is largely absent from present day Christian spirituality, there is suitable evidence for it within the historical tradition. Of particular significance in the above description is the identification of the “non-cognitive/non-affective state,” which is described as “the resultant state of consciousness due to the successful employment of an NDM. This enhanced state is much more challenging to define, as it infers the absence of affect and cognition—an empty state with no phenomenological content” (Nash et al. 2013, p. 7). This is, of course, related to my description of these experiences. The absence of any sort of experience for a moment or moments—a sense, once you return, that for a moment there was no distinction between anything anywhere.

¹ In providing these examples, I am not attempting to place myself on an equivalent level with saints and spiritual masters, or saying that I have approached Nirvana, or anything like that.

What happens in the brain during this experience has been documented in repeated functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) studies, even if it is not entirely understood. The key term appears to be “deafferentation,” describing a sort of “disconnecting” of certain parts of the brain. In the case of the null experience, the parts of the brain responsible for the sense of self, the processing of visual stimuli, and the construction of the experience of experience as a whole reveal some interesting changes in these neuroscientific studies. As this article summarizes:

Regardless, deafferentation of these areas [PSPL (posterior superior parietal lobule) in particular, temporal and parietal lobe in general] orienting areas of the brain has been suggested as an important mediator in the physiology of meditation (Newberg and Iversen 2003). We have postulated that the mechanism by which deafferentation might occur is through the action of GABA, released by the reticular nucleus. Thus, GABA, acting as the primary inhibitory neurotransmitter [originally hypothesized by (Austin 1999)], might inhibit incoming neuronal information into the PSPL. One can speculate that there is something about certain meditation techniques (NDM) that can trigger this deafferentation effect. If this occurs to a substantial degree it could result in the dampening of cognitive and affective processes creating a state devoid of phenomenological content in which the person may begin to temporarily lose their usual ability to spatially define their notion of self or differentiate the self from the rest of the world—an experience which one could interpret as non-self, or emptiness. (Nash et al. 2013, p. 8)

Therefore, my meditation practice at that time resulted, I think, in this deafferentation process leading to this experience of the “Null Domain”, the experience without experience. This is not, of course, how my Christian forebears would describe the mechanism of this sort of process, attributing it instead to a special experience offered through the grace of God. The fact that we have a physiological description of the mechanism, or at least a hypothesis for one, does not rule anything about the ultimate cause, I suppose.

Still, I found the idea that there was a simple mechanism for this process to be disillusioning. I was capable of rationalizing the event—if God gave us a material with which to hear (ears), why would there not be an equivalent material process for contemplation? But even if there remained a sense that what I was pursuing or potentially achieving in meditation was a unitive experience with God, there was also a sense in which all I was achieving was sufficient GABA production to result in deafferentation of certain parts of my brain. It led me to question what the special nature of this event was—what special access does meditation give you? What sort of additional information does it provide which is not accessible to believers? Just because I could have this experience did not mean that it was good that I had this experience, or that I should be pursuing it.

2.3. Nishida on Religious Experience

In the article examined above, the non-affective/non-cognitive states can lead to “an experience which one could interpret as non-self, or emptiness” (Nash et al. 2013, p. 8). That is, the movement is made from a religious experience to a religious doctrine; the foundation of religion is experience, which is then reflected upon in theology. This perspective, perhaps the most significant of contributions from William James, is one that Nishida wishes to refute, at least by the end of his career (Nishida refers to the work of William James directly, which he had read at least some portion of). It implies that the core of religion is a certain sort of religious experience, namely a subjective, “mystical”, or affective experience. The way religion works, therefore, is that a person has some sort of event or sensation, and this event is so profound that one considers it religious, and both interprets it through the religious perspective one has available and builds one’s religion from that experience, denying what can be held objectively or scientifically in favor of this experience. For Nishida, this is an incorrect procedure, as it is from my own point of view. It is incorrect because the experience itself is not the foundation, nor can the experience be used as a foundation. Nishida was concerned that this conclusion could allow those who

only value rationality or objectivity to declare religion as something irredeemably subjective, down to its roots. His efforts in philosophy of religion seek therefore to prevent this movement by charting a middle course: on one side, criticizing “objective” forms of philosophy, especially those found in the West, for denying certain key features of reality through their subject- and object-based approach; and on the other side, he criticizes the movement toward a merely subjective, personal-experience-based “religious” approach as a response against the objective.

Andrea Leonardi’s article on mysticism in Nishida’s thought pinpoints the moment where, he argues, Nishida was impelled to distinguish himself from the subjective approach. It originated through a criticism offered by Tanabe Hajime, another Kyoto School philosopher, who suggested that Nishida’s work “tended to degenerate into mysticism” (Leonardi 2014, p. 462). That is, the only way to justify his arguments was by resorting to what Nishida’s earlier work refers to as “pure experience.” Nishida, conscious of the criticism of eastern thought by western thinkers who suggested that it was purely subjective or merely religious, and thus easily dismissed, found this criticism antithetical to his end goal. Leonardi describes this transition:

The most direct counterpoint can be made between the final statements of the two passages: in IG [*Inquiry into the Good*] Nishida praises the experience of great people—like the mystics he has just mentioned—as being superior to that of average people whereas in LLRW [*The Logic of Locus and the Religious Worldview*] he stresses that religious experience lies at the core of everybody’s soul, and is not a privilege of particular people. It seems very likely that when Nishida was writing his assessment of mysticism in LLRW, he had in mind the earlier characterization of mysticism he had given in IG, and was also aware of contradicting it. (Leonardi 2014, pp. 450–51)

Nishida’s thought on experience moves, therefore, from a special gift for certain persons to an experience which is at the very least accessible to everyone. As James Heisig writes, it still maintains a place for a sort of pure experience, but it is one arrived at not through transcendence of this world, but through intuition available to all. He writes:

Knowledge, for Nishida, could only be grounded on the intuition of universal principles, and the expansion of knowledge, on the observance of how these principles take concrete form in the world. The surest knowledge was philosophical knowledge, and the height of philosophical knowledge was self-awareness. Where self-awareness was lacking, understanding was incomplete. All other knowledge—scientific, technical, or artistic—was derivative and conventional. Despite the starting point in experience, abandoned once it has yielded its intuition of unity, the logic of Nishida’s approach is deductive in nature. (Heisig 2004, p. 68)

Nishida, therefore, is seeking to articulate a philosophically coherent approach to reality, one which refutes the subject/object distinction—and thus objectivity—at the core of Western philosophy, but does not do this simply by asserting a religious truth or mystical experience as its foundation. The experience is an intuition of the non-dual reality of self and object—it is, in particular, an experience of doubt, identified with the “Great Doubt” of Buddhism in the work of Nishida’s disciple Keiji Nishitani (See Nishitani 1982, p. 90). But this is not a special experience limited to the spiritually ascendant, nor does his philosophy as a whole depend on this experience. Instead, the realization of the philosophy, the bringing it into practice, requires this experience.

I read Nishida as an undergraduate, at the same time as I was pursuing these religious experiences. We did not read *An Inquiry into the Good*, where he articulates a viewpoint perhaps more accepting of religious experience, but his final work, with the conclusion Heisig mentions above. To encounter this approach, this alternative philosophy of religion at a time when I was pursuing essentially the opposite, was a stark challenge. Nishida writes: “And therefore, as a fundamental fact of human life, the religious form of life is not the exclusive possession of special individuals. The religious mind is

present in everyone. One who does not notice this cannot be a philosopher (Nishida 1987, p. 85).” I saw myself implicated in my attempt to become someone special through special experiences and therefore gain access to a special truth. Why was I worried about my own joy and knowledge instead of the lives of others?

There are always sufficient reasons for doubting or questioning the experience—or, better yet, for asking what insight is gained which might be special or privileged in comparison with another person’s experience. If there is nothing that can be known which is unavailable to others, then why would we worry about experience?

The answer commonly given is “inspiration.” That is, the affective dimension—a person needs to love God or whatever is significant to their life, and sometimes the only way to inspire love is to have a moment of inspiration. I do not interpret religion this way, knowing plenty of religious people who do not have affective understandings of their religion. Nor do I think the philosophical components of religion are reducible to previous religious experiences. My religious life has had mystical moments, but these moments of experience are not the reason why I continue to have faith. At the time, this led me to two conclusions about religious experience:

1. Religious experiences do not provide any content which cannot be otherwise arrived at.
2. Religious experiences of a peak sort (“mystical” experiences) are inherently selfish, and are more about entertaining oneself or comforting oneself than actually serving others or improving oneself.²

2.4. Relationship with Drug Use

This second point especially, for me, is revealed in the connection with drug use. It started first with a concern over the idea of personal ecstasy. I had also read Meister Eckhart around this time, and in particular his description of a person who at the height of spiritual ecstasy in prayer, notices a poor person in need of soup. Eckhart’s recommendation is that it is “far better” to abandon your own personal ecstasy and tend to the one in need (Eckhart 1981, p. 258; Counsels on Discernment 10). It is not difficult to understand where Eckhart is coming from—praying in the way he describes benefits no one beyond oneself, whereas handing out soup shows a clear benefit to the world. Why should a person seek their own beneficial experience? What do they receive from it? In Eckhart’s mind, as in Nishida’s, the answer appears to be that nothing is received from it. Nothing is imparted that one cannot otherwise receive or arrive at. This, for me, cemented the connection between drug use and the form of prayer I was seeking. Even if I received a spiritual insight from one such occurrence, for the most part my meditative practice did nothing but entertain me. And that spiritual insight was something I found in the texts I read, though I may not have internalized it with such surety otherwise. Granted, there are connections between contemplation, mental health, and happiness,³ and it is nice to bask in the love of God from time to time. But even as my religious experience was different, particularly in degree, it was not completely different from the comfort of having a few beers and snorting a few opiates. When I was high, I felt comfortable, elated, satisfied, contented, and complete. I viewed it as an enjoyable complement to a tiring week of school, and the business of studying and doing extracurriculars and so on. It was a way to unwind, and to do so completely, by shutting off my mind. One of my favorite quotes on the matter, and one I return to frequently, is from Omar Khayyam: “I drink not from mere joy in wine nor to scoff at faith—no, only to forget myself for a moment, that only do I want of intoxication, that alone” (quoted in Becker 1973, p. 9). I was always with friends, laughing, joking, having fun. It was a communal restoration to myself—much more of a shared experience than contemplation in my room alone.

² This conclusion sounds harsh and perhaps overly strict, but I was young and it seemed like the right conclusion in this period of my life.

³ There is an incredible amount of research on this topic; for a summary and meta-analysis, see (Sampaio et al. 2017).

This idea of forgetting myself for a while connects, if loosely, with the recommendation and practice of Nishida. As he writes: “Dogen thus says that ‘to study the way of Buddha is to study the self, and to study the self is to forget the self.’ This is a point of view which is completely opposite to that of seeing things through object logic” (Nishida 1987, p. 80). While high, I did not need to be such a self, such a subject making objects of the world, such an agent directing those things around me to their ends. I did not worry about all of the frivolous things I was generally consumed with; I was alive and in the moment, instead of being stuck in my own head, where I usually am. The world happened to me—or with me—rather than my directing and willing a self to always behave, always perform for the people I was with. If I did not have the patience and commitment to become a Zen master exercising detachment toward all things in my daily life, I could achieve this poor imitation from time to time.

In the same way as Khayyam, I did not see this drug use as anything counter to my religious commitments. In the same way as the centerpiece of Christian worship is the act of communal drinking, I found apparent examples of drug use in my study of Taoist texts. Reading of the Langgan elixir in *The Upper Scriptures of the Purple Texts Inscribed by the Spirits*, I found further instances of persons potentially using intoxicants for spiritual awakening. The text speaks of one experience:

In a wavelike rush, I attained the paired mysteries, exhausting to its limits my spiritual perception. Merging with the utter stillness of the dragon void, I then buried my impulse to split hairs deep with the cinnabar chambers of my heart and opened the spirit-gates of my consciousness that I might give myself over to the transformation and release myself from entanglements following the progress of my changing form. (Bokenkamp 1997, p. 309)

A text which perhaps shares loose resonances with the work of consciousness-expansion in the 1960s Acid era, and my college partying mind found these Taoists deeply entertaining and inspiring. They were pursuing new ways of life through religious practices, and doing so with, at the very least, metaphors of drug use.⁴ Why would it have been wrong for me to do something similar, to alter my consciousness for the sake of being a better person? I was better adjusted, I told myself, when I had the suitable outlet of getting drunk and high at a fun party. Oddly enough, James hints at an agreement with me:

The sway of alcohol over mankind is unquestionably due to its power to stimulate the mystical faculties of human nature, usually crushed to earth by the cold facts and dry criticisms of the sober hour. Sobriety diminishes, discriminates, and says no; drunkenness expands, unites, and says yes. It is in fact the great exciter of the Yes function in man. It brings its votary from the chill periphery of things to the radiant core. It makes him for the moment one with truth. (James [1902] 2002, p. 421)⁵

“For the moment” is the important qualifier here; but it is important to highlight this connection. Phenomenologically speaking, it is not so simple to distinguish drug experiences from religious experiences, if it is even possible, or desirable, to do so.

But what about the bad parts of drug use? What about depression and addiction and mistreating one’s family and friends and loved ones? Of course these are valid concerns, and we are obliged to say that it is a risky thing to play with this approach. But it is also important to say that religion in itself is a risky thing; intolerance, bigotry, zealotry, violence in the name of faith, all of these things occur in the sober as well as the drunk. It is not as simple as saying that alcohol and drugs are risky, while prayer and sobriety are free of danger; they are both experiences which can be abused. And thus we

⁴ Given the contents of the recipes, including things like mercury and lead, the outcome of actually ingesting these things would likely be serious poisoning or death. For this reason, and others, readers of these texts like Bokenkamp conclude that they may be metaphorical recipes referring to meditation practices, rather than literal recipes. For more on drugs and religious practices, see (Masters and Houston 1966; Zaehner 1972; Partridge 2018; Richards 2016; Osto 2016).

⁵ For a discussion of alcohol, alcoholism and William James, see (Arjona 2015).

are too eager to dismiss the insights found in the negative moments associated with behaviors of this sort. There is much one can learn about oneself—and humanity in general—after waking up with a severe hangover following an epic night: an abiding sense of dread and regret, tinged with anxiety, concern about how you behaved and what you might have done, but can't quite remember. But what an insight! To realize how malleable humans are to the influence of chemicals and surroundings, how fundamentally weak we are. This is an opportunity to really understand the Apostle Paul: "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do" (Romans 7:15, NRSV). If you have not made bad choices against your own interest, do you really understand Paul?

Yes, these too are religious experiences. They are insights into the world and ourselves which are beneficial for coming to know the reality we live in, whether good or bad. They are even, for certain perspectives within certain religious traditions, necessary events to pass through. I am reminded of a story told by Shizuteru Ueda in an address memorializing his teacher, the Kyoto School philosopher Nishitani Keiji. He writes:

One time, I came to a point in my life when everything I was doing became empty and colorless. I went to see Nishitani Sensei and we were talking about something else, and the words just came out a like a heavy sigh: "Everything has turned gray. For the first time in my life I feel negative about everything."

"That's good," he replied. (Ueda 1992, p. 3)

Ueda, miserable and showing clear indications of depression and anhedonia, is encouraged and complimented by his teacher and mentor for this depression. His feelings of the world were a potential insight into Buddhist emptiness, the nothingness which Nishida, Nishitani, and Ueda all discussed as philosophers. Ueda realizes that this insight sat behind "locks" in his mind, an immediate inclination to view bad things as bad, and only good things as good (Ueda 1992, p. 3). If everything is colorless, then everything is the same, and to see all things as the same is perhaps the starting point to understand the non-dual nature of things, the insight at the beginning of philosophy that Nishida describes. This religious experience is not about meaning-making, or feeling full and contented, or feeling "presence;" it is an experience of depression and dread and self-loathing, and it is, potentially, an even greater gift to religious life than a "fulfilling" experience, provided it is explored within the right context.

3. The Philosophy of Religious Experience

We are not finished on this journey yet, however. There is a further wrinkle in the form of where I find myself in the present moment, my studies not having ended yet. These days I am working primarily on Martin Heidegger and Jean-Luc Marion on the matter of nihilism. In the course of pursuing an answer to nihilism, both Heidegger and Marion insist upon the importance of rethinking the modern subject and challenging Cartesian approaches to reality. As described in the introduction, this requires a rethinking of all that we take for granted in terms of our access to the world and to the things we encounter, and thus a rethinking of the matter of experience. Though it is unclear if Heidegger read James directly (or if Marion has, for that matter), James was a direct influence on Edmund Husserl, to whom both Heidegger and Marion respond, especially on the matter of experience (Leclercq and Galetic 2012; Spiegelberg and Schuhmann [1960] 1994; and also Alvis 2018). In questioning subject and object, as Heidegger and Marion do, this leads to a questioning of the subjective experiencing of the world, which is the foundation of James' approach to religion.

This critique of experience by Heidegger is intimately connected with his account of nihilism. And, interestingly enough, I see my younger self as an encapsulation of the nihilistic culture Heidegger describes in his later writings. Hubert Dreyfus writes of Heidegger's understanding of the matter:

When everything that is material and social has become completely flat and drab, people retreat into their private experiences as the only remaining place to find significance. Heidegger sees this move to private experience as characteristic of the modern age. Art, religion, sex, education—all become varieties of experience. When all our concerns have

been reduced to the common denominator of “experience,” we will have reached the last stage of nihilism. One then sees “the plunge into frenzy and the disintegration into sheer feeling as redemptive. The ‘lived experience’ as such becomes decisive.” (*Nietzsche* I 86) (Dreyfus 2006, p. 348)

“Lived experience” (*Erlebnis*) is one of Heidegger’s most consistent concerns regarding modern culture. To have a lived experience, he suggests, always requires a subject, and thus to think of experience in this way is to repeat metaphysics following the Cartesian subject—metaphysics being a form of philosophy that Heidegger wants to avoid. This emphasis on experience also explains my equivalence of drug use and religious experience, as Dreyfus also points out:

When there are no religious practices that call forth sacrifice, terror, and awe, people consume everything from drugs to meditation practices to give themselves some kind of peak experience. The peak experience takes the place of what was once a relation to something outside the self that defined the real and was therefore holy. As Heidegger puts it, “The loss of the gods is so far from excluding religiosity, that rather only through that loss is the relation to the gods changed into mere ‘religious experience’” (*Question Concerning Technology* 117; Gesamtausgabe 5 76). (Dreyfus 2006, p. 348)

I did this; I consumed every meditation practice and every drug I could find, seeking a fulfilled life through fulfilling experiences. And you can see this, further, in my immediate questioning of my experience: I did not know of a context where this experience could be shared, or whether it would be supported. I have never told anyone about it, and I even never considered it to be particularly important; it was just one experience of many I’ve had in my life. Here, then, is the connection between drugs and mystical experiences—they are experiences, so who really cares what we are experiencing so long as we have experiences? I wanted experiences in no small part to make myself significant—or, better, it was also about my standard metaphysical view of the world, myself as the subject to be entertained by, and to dominate and control, the world for the purposes of my life. If Heidegger views this as an indication of the continuation of metaphysics and thus an expression of nihilism, what would he recommend instead?

Heidegger recommended *Erfahrung* over *Erlebnis*, where *Erfahrung* has a non-subjective sense: “Very roughly, in the context of *Being And Time*, the German word for experience-as-observable-event is *Erfahrung*, while the German word for experience-as-subjective-stream is *Erlebnis*” (Paley 2014, p. 1522).⁶ That is, *Erlebnis* describes the idea of a subjective stream of consciousness present in our experience of an event: I felt this way so I thought about this thing in this way, and then I chose to respond in this way. This account of experience always maintains a subject existing apart from the event, choosing how to be engaged with the event by choosing how to interpret, and so constitute the object. *Erfahrung*, on the other hand, suggests that we as persons are always equally caught up in the event as the rest of the event—there is no subjective plane of existence *apart* from the experience—no subjective stream of experience—only the experience as a whole. To put this in different terms, a teacher of mine once gave the example of a car accident he had been in: he was driving along, nonchalantly, absentmindedly, and all of a sudden he hydroplaned off the road ending up in a ditch. The first thing he noticed was that the radio had stopped working, and so he tried to turn up the volume as his dead car sat hissing in the ditch. After a moment, he realized that the radio was not working, and this because the car was totaled and he had crashed. To interpret this experience through *Erlebnis*, one would say, “I chose to fiddle with the volume knob before I realized that I had crashed.” To interpret this through *Erfahrung*, we must acknowledge the “mindless” part of driving: he was driving, but not in a conscious way, not in a self-directed way. Similarly, he fiddled with the radio in an unconscious pattern, but later thought of himself as making the choice to do this. This is not the event itself, however, but an

⁶ Paley refers to (Inwood 1999) for this claim.

interpretation after the fact, one where we add the notion of consciousness and willing as separate items in relation to the event, rather than considering the occurrence as integrated. Though this is a dramatic example, the same is true for the way we generally encounter the world, where we are not subjects in command of every aspect of our actions, dictating our responses to a separated body; instead, we are bodily creatures who are parts of events in the same way as we think of the objects “out there.” This means, further, that the meaning of a given event is not something available as a separate subjective input stream—I saw *this* happen and it meant *this* to me, so *I chose* to do this—but only as an inseparable piece of the connected event as a whole, the meaning of which likewise manifests itself through a gradual learning process within this connected whole.

So Heidegger encourages us to think in a fundamentally different manner about how we exist in the world, questioning the idea that we have “experiences” available as subjects who examine an objective reality before us. Further, and perhaps most significantly, this has important implications for how we think of ourselves and our past experiences—and potentially for how we think of the work of religious studies on religious experience. In an article exploring a Heideggerian perspective’s implications for nursing, John Paley suggests that the idea of a “lived-experience” interview is anti-Heideggerian. This is because the interview relies on a re-presentation of “psychological states,” (Paley 2014, p. 1523) and Heidegger denies this realm any meaningful existence. This is, of course, a bold claim, and a difficult one to think through. But it is one supported by research on the nature of the interview and its relation to reality. Paley writes:

So how is it that an interview respondent can usually answer the questions she is asked? How is it that these answers are offered without hesitation? If there is no subjective experience accompanying the events and circumstances, where do the answers to such questions come from? Does the respondent just make them up? Surely not. This cannot be right. Except that it is. Research in social psychology during the last 50 years has demonstrated that Heidegger called this one correctly. The connection between Heidegger and social psychology is rarely noted; but experimental studies clearly indicate that people do make the answers to these questions up—although they do it unconsciously—and that the ‘experiences’ they describe are an artefact of being interviewed. Psychologists call this ‘confabulation.’ (Paley 2014, p. 1524)⁷

Though we might challenge Paley’s claim regarding the extent of confabulation, there is extensive and significant evidence for it being a regular part of our lives. Thus, it is an essential point to make: *The Varieties of Religious Experience* consists almost entirely of “lived experience” interviews or other re-presentations of past subjective experiences—how much of it is confabulation from a subjective metaphysical perspective, filled with later interpretive additions from figures who identified with specific religious traditions? We do, of course, have experiences. Things do happen to us and we do feel one way or another as they happen, but these experiences are always integrated within their contexts, and there is no separate stream of subjective consciousness which exists and is available for review after the fact. Instead, we make it up. Paley goes on to detail several studies showing, among other things, that people make up their reasons for taking a certain action or buying a certain product, change their account of their emotions in response to the interview setting, believe they are not susceptible to bias when they are, and are unable to identify why they end up liking another person.⁸

The implications of Heidegger’s account of experience should bring my efforts here to a halt, as everything I’ve done in this paper is called into question. I have been providing an autobiography of sorts, focused on my experiences, describing a religious experience I once had as a “mere” experience and equating it with my experiences of drug use. I have also provided an after the fact account of

⁷ Paley’s claim is contentious, but I find his reading of Heidegger compelling. See a defense of this article and his work in relation to nursing research in (Paley 2018).

⁸ Paley provides an extensive list of psychological studies in (Paley 2014, p. 1526).

my intentions and a description of my change as a subject. This is all a matter of re-presentation, in Heidegger's terms. Heidegger and social psychology would likely agree that I have made up some unknowable percentage of all of this information, especially any interpretation and any notion of what I willed and why I willed that specific thing. I have been interviewing myself, and giving an account of myself, but one tailored to a specific audience and thus in all likelihood adapted, even if I believe I have told the truth.

Moreover, I can assure you that it is incomplete and certainly misleading. I cannot predict all the ways it will mislead you, the reader, but it does not provide a full picture of who I am as a person or what I am really like, if either of these things is possible (they are not), and so you likely have an image of me in mind which is a fiction. It is, of course, true that to have an image of anyone in mind is always to have a fiction in mind, so it is certainly my error in providing you with one through this article.

4. Marion's Saturated Phenomenon and My Experience (Counter-Experience)

And yet, one thing Heidegger's account of experience does not do is exclude religious experience, so long as it is properly considered. Heidegger, however, is somewhat quiet on this topic, though his later works, especially his encounters with the poet Hölderlin, can be mined for what he calls "the Holy." One of the philosophers most influenced by Heidegger, Jean-Luc Marion, provides a robust account of the possibility of religious experience within a Heideggerian framework. Most relevant to this discussion is the fact that Marion preserves the distinction between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*, given in French as *vécu* and *l'expérience*, respectively.⁹ Marion follows this distinction because he shares several key points of agreement with Heidegger—in particular, he is working against the Cartesian subject, and the subject/object distinction in general, and to have a subjective experience is always to have an object, and thus to preserve this distinction. He also reflects conclusions from Heidegger which are perhaps more subtly suggested, especially the idea of a "surplus of meaning" rather than an absence of meaning. For example, in a passage summarizing Heidegger's description of the "experience" of Hölderlin's poetry, Tobias Keiling writes:

In this second reading, there is no doubt *that* Heidegger imagines Hölderlin's poetry to be a radical experience; but it is unclear *how* this experience is to be understood if it is indeed to transform our understanding of art and philosophy, and through the transformation of philosophy, transform a people. Where Nietzsche is giving an inherently double and paradox meaning to art, Heidegger's stance toward the radicality of aesthetic experience is paradoxical in a different way: He attributes to Hölderlin's poetry a meaning of utmost importance, and at the same time, denies the possibility of such attribution, calling for utter openness to its experience instead. (Keiling 2017, p. 90)

Heidegger calls for openness: one must be receptive to what is given in the experience of the poetry, and therefore one must avoid willful interaction with the piece under consideration. He argues that there is great meaning to Hölderlin's poetry, but for Heidegger to tell you what meaning has been given to him would be to 1. Falsify it through re-presentation; and 2. Close you, the new reader, off from your own necessary receptivity. We must be open to a surplus of meaning, and yet recognize that to have a preconceived notion of what will be found will cut us off from this surplus.

Marion calls for the same openness to phenomena; for him openness does not reveal the call of Being, but rather love manifests itself in the kenotic openness to these phenomena. By emptying oneself, by giving oneself in openness in the encounter, the person receives what is given by the object which is not an object, because not understood, controlled, or interpreted preemptively, and in fact receives themselves. These are experiences without objects where the phenomenon "gives" itself to us, rather

⁹ (Horner 2007) explains this development, but also suggests that Marion is variable in his use of these terms and changes their use depending on which other philosopher he is discussing at the time.

than a subject constructing the object. Marion calls these “saturated phenomena,” which are likewise, as for Heidegger, a surplus of meaning and an absence of meaning; as Marion writes, “the saturated phenomenon contradicts the subjective conditions of experience [l’expérience] precisely in that it does not admit constitution as an object” (Marion 2002, p. 214). Because the saturated phenomenon is not an object, it is not available to “subjective” experience in the subject/object distinction. Robyn Horner’s article describes where we go from here:

Why does experience not become impossible in the face of the saturated phenomenon? Because experience becomes counter-experience, which is a particular type of experience, determined by its content (non-object, superabundant in intuitive givenness, dazzling). Counter-experience is “experience to the second degree” because it is “founded,” that is, “it depends on the very thing that it passes beyond but nevertheless renders intelligible.” (Horner 2007, p. 14)¹⁰

A counter-experience is an event after the saturated phenomenon, one which reveals the meaning or content of the experience. This is not an immediate insight, nor is it simply a subjective “lived experience” (*Erlebnis*) coming after non-subjective *Erfahrung*. Instead, the saturated phenomenon provides a content which is not subjectively deduced or interpreted, not realized or understood by a subject, but given by the phenomenon itself gradually. As Marion writes: “The I can no longer provide its meaning to lived experiences [vécus] and intuition; rather, these give themselves and therefore give it their meaning (a meaning that is for that matter partial and no longer all encompassing)” (Marion 2002, p. 217).¹¹ In subjective experience, the I, the ego, gives meaning to experiences through interpretation and false attribution of mental states. In Marion’s account, meaning is not an act of willed deduction or rational conclusion, but a meaning which emerges from the phenomenon and is given to the person. This leads to Marion’s theory of givenness, where the phenomenon gives itself to us, rather than the subject seeing and “grasping” the object.

This is likely quite abstract at this point, so we can turn to the examples that Marion gives to help ground it. In particular, as mentioned above, Marion approaches love as a saturated phenomenon, and not only divine love, but also everyday love, as God loves with the same love that we do (Marion 2007, p. 222). Love, for Marion, does not consist in words or actions, but on the encounter with the bottomless other who is the beloved:

For the one that I love clearly imposes herself upon me as a saturated phenomenon, whose endless and measureless intuition does not cease to overflow all of the significations that I attempt to assign to her, the face of the other, or more precisely the face of *this* unsubstitutable other of who I claim to be the lover, requires that I give without end a new meaning to the intuitions that never cease coming to me, and thus that I say all the words and pronounce all the names I am able to mobilize, or even that I invent others, so as to accomplish the indefinite interpretation. The lover never finishes telling himself of the beloved, telling himself to the beloved, and telling the beloved to herself. (Marion 2007, p. 210)

The experience of love is “endless,” “measureless,” “overflowing;” it communicates something inexhaustible, because it does not communicate some “thing,” but a saturated phenomenon, a non-object. The non-object beloved gives endless “intuitions,” premonitions which are not produced by the lover but received. In this passage, Marion describes a process of interpretation, albeit an “indefinite interpretation.” In his more recent work, he has moved further away from any sort of hermeneutic toward a further emphasis on givenness. Horner writes:

We have, then, finally reached a point where we might summarise Marion’s understanding of experience. While in much of his work he maintains the phenomenological structure of

¹⁰ Horner with reference to (Smith 1977).

¹¹ Translation modified in (Horner 2007, p. 48).

the *vécu*, this becomes increasingly empty as his work progresses, to the point where the *expérience* that is given to the witness (*adonné/interloqué*) in the saturated phenomenon can have no ultimate theoretical determination and is evidenced only by the way it disturbs its recipient. (Horner 2007, p. 17)

The experience of the lover and the beloved, therefore, is not properly an experience, at least in the later Marion. Instead, love as a saturated phenomenon would only be apparent in the disturbances given to the person after the event, the involuntary intuitions mentioned above. The interpretation of this event is thus not available to subjective formulation. Working from Marion's account of the disciples' experience of Jesus at Emmaus, Horner concludes:

To the understanding of this type of experience as something that happens to me, and of which I cannot take full account, we would be adding the notion that the meaning ultimately ascribed to it (not in the sense that any concept would exhaust it, but in the general sense that one might say it was "of God") will emerge as part of a learning process. We will have moved, in other words, to an understanding of experience as *Erfahrung* in its fullest sense. The work of two commentators supports and amplifies this idea. (Horner 2007, p. 23)

This is a dramatic movement, as we turn away from a focus upon the religious experience at its highest height, the mystic in rapturous union with God, the annihilation of self in the bliss of God, and shift our concern to the counter-experience, the learning process which manifests an educating aspect, the ongoing disturbances in our intuition and activity that follow the inexpressible.

Marion's work is helpful, I would argue, for understanding my own religious experience. I had an experience which was not an experience, something one might consider a saturated phenomenon. There was no subject which experienced it and no experience at the level of a directing consciousness—not that Marion's sense of experience must always be of this null sort. I then had a counter-experience where my questioning of the existence of God was taken away. It was not something I deduced, not something developed through thinking or considering the experience, but something given to me by the experience, even as there was nothing experienced.

Further, these saturated phenomena are not limited to positive experiences of love or mystical ascent toward God. It would, to my mind, be equally possible to see the alternative religious experiences I described above as fitting in this mold of indecipherable experience and significant counter-experience. Are these likewise saturated? Does the indecipherability of a drunken party, one with ongoing counter-experiences in the forms of the gifts of pangs of anxiety or regret, similarly constitute a saturated phenomenon? There are certainly ongoing lessons from these experiences, even if they are not of the traditional "positive" form most frequently recounted.

James is, of course, familiar with the idea of counter-experience, even if it was not a primary point of emphasis. As an example, consider Teresa of Avila again:

If you ask nevertheless how it is possible that the soul can see and understand that she has been in God, since during the union she has neither sight nor understanding, I reply that she does not see it then, but that she sees it clearly later, after she has returned to herself, not by any vision, but by a certitude which abides with her and which God alone can give her. (James [1902] 2002, p. 446)

That is, something is given after the experience which is not the experience itself. Marion's philosophy, as one interprets it as truly being philosophy and not theology in these moments, gives a secular account of what is occurring—a non-object granting something through a counter-experience. In this experience and counter-experience of Teresa of Avila, we can ask, which is more important to her life? The experience of the high of God which typically occupies our interest, or the counter-experience which quietly follows and changes her life?

The hardest question which emerges from these accounts of experience and counter-experience is what is required for counter-experience to successfully manifest. Carol Zaleski, writing on James'

interest in fruits despite our focus on peak experience, describes the insight of the cofounder of Alcoholics Anonymous: “It was from the *Varieties* that Bill W., cofounder of Alcoholics Anonymous, learned not to put too much stock in his mystical ‘hot flash,’ but to emphasize instead the lifelong process of conversion within a fellowship” (Zaleski 2000, p. 60). This emphasis on context, on communal support, is a particularly significant question for our increasingly fragmented world. Heidegger’s solution to nihilism invariably requires some sort of cultural movement, as shared meaning derived from *Erfahrung* is only possible in a community; Marion, likewise, recognizes the need for a community to provide context for these experiences, with his being the Roman Catholic Church. Here, a tension emerges for James’ work. For while it is true that he speaks of fruits, he also emphasizes the subjective, individual, private experience, with a reduced concern for the communal context in which these experiences are found.

This leads us back to the primary argument of this paper: James’ interest in subjective experience has created a paradigm for the study of religious experience. First, his innovation is essential, as he challenges, in his own time, the rigid, rationalist study of religion which denied the significance of subjective accounts of experience. But in raising subjectivity to a place of prominence, he has repeated the subject/object paradigm. Heidegger’s critique of this subjective recounting is a heavy challenge; Paley’s recounting of the psychological research on lived-experience interviews offers even more reason to question this approach at its core. Further, my own subjective recounting of an experience and my subsequent efforts at interpretation using all of the resources of religious studies, all of which has made this paper more confusing and perhaps led you to question its validity, reveals the fundamental issue with the subjective approach: subjective meaning is only potentially meaningful for me, the one who experiences it; and, even worse, as I have yet to arrive at any settled meaning to this experience, all I can meaningfully share with you is my confusion in the form of this lengthy and meandering article. But I thank you for reading this far.

5. Conclusions

Where have I been and where am I going? This paper has highlighted a few of the many ways the study of religious experience can influence the way a religious experience is perceived. I had a religious experience based off of practices I read about in the course of religious studies. In subsequent study, I learned about the similarity of accounts written by others; I learned about the neurological explanation of the experience offered by science; I learned of philosophies which questioned the significance of experience, the wisdom of pursuing it, and the interpretation of it; I learned about the connections of drug use with religious experience; I learned about Heidegger’s critique of experience and Marion’s altered and renewed form. In all of this what have I learned?

I suppose the question is, fundamentally, what should I do with this experience? Should I take it seriously because I read of similar accounts in the work of William James? Should I discount it because I read of the mundane neurological processes described by fMRI studies? Should I discount it further because Nishida, Eckhart, and Heidegger suggest that my interest in this sort of experience is perhaps misguided, and I should be directing myself elsewhere—or that I should give up the idea of a subject who directs oneself anyway? Have I answered some of these complaints by turning to Marion’s account of the saturated phenomenon, and given myself a way of legitimating my experience for theological and philosophical consideration through an exploration of the counter-experience—and should I thus be taking it quite seriously?

What am I becoming? Because I do not want to leave you in a nihilistic position, I should offer some direction. Contained within this paper are (at least) two perspectives on experience: one indicates a subject who interprets an experience and another indicates a human who is given the meaning which emerges over time in the pattern of one’s life. My own conclusion about this, whether based off of my experience or a meaning which was given to me by the overall saturated phenomenon that is living, is that a willful striving for meaning does not lead to meaning. My quest through the resources of religious studies was not for nothing, and I am in no way dismissing their value; but stacking methods

and research and philosophical frameworks did not provide me with a meaning to that religious experience, only hesitations and complications. However, if I remain open to the experience, and learn of what it continues to give, in that gift I find a direction for living; in that gift I find a meaning for the event.

The competing points of view described here should inform religious studies, of course: we should place an equal emphasis on counter-experience as we do on experience. We should have an equivalent hesitation to accept accounts based off of “lived experience,” and an equal questioning of how our methodology of study can actually extend philosophical presumptions about the world, including subject and object. We should question research into religious experience which considers only the peak of meditative insight and ignores the “That’s good” said to the person in the midst of depression. There are many voices, many groups, and many understandings left out of the study of religious experience. Perhaps in a more balanced approach we can truly begin to appreciate the full variety of religious experience—and counter-experience.

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