

Article

Does Mystical Experience Give Access to Reality?

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Abstract: Mystical experiences can bring an overwhelming sense that deeper realities have been contacted or that the everyday world has been apprehended as it truly is. Philosophical study of the experiences has not given much attention to their metaphysical significance, especially to the insights they may offer on fundamental issues such as the nature of reality, self, consciousness, and time. There are reasons for the neglect, and in the present article I consider two major theoretical obstacles to finding metaphysical significance in the experiences: a radical form of contextualism and a reductionist approach to neuroscience. With these obstacles addressed, there is room to consider how mystical experience and metaphysics can be brought into dialogue, a task facilitated by the contemporary resurgence of interest in alternatives to materialist metaphysics and a renewed interest in mystical experience encouraged by psychedelic research.

Keywords: mystical experience; mysticism; metaphysics; reality; neuroscience; filter theory; psychedelics; consciousness; panpsychism; cosmopsychism



Citation: Marshall, Paul. 2022. Does Mystical Experience Give Access to Reality? *Religions* 13: 983. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13100983>

Academic Editor: Sebastian Gäb

Received: 28 September 2022

Accepted: 13 October 2022

Published: 18 October 2022

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1. Introduction

Behind the outwardly simple question posed in the title of the present article, there lurk complexities that have no quick and easy resolution. “Mystical” and “mysticism” are difficult to pin down and continue to be contested (Hammer 2020). “Reality” has been challenged too: in the postmodern climate of contemporary humanities, realities, absolutes, essences, and universals have given way to a relativism of socially constructed subjectivities. Even the seemingly innocuous term “experience” has been disputed in the study of religion (Sharf 1998), especially the emphasis that has been placed on experience in the study of mysticism (e.g., Proudfoot 1985; Lash 1988).

Nevertheless, there is a genuine question to be addressed here. It is undeniable that persons do describe experiences in which they felt intimate contact with profundities of some kind or other. Whether it is helpful to label these experiences “mystical” and interpret the profundities as “reality” is open to debate, but the fact remains that the experiences do occur, and relatively frequently too in the US and UK populations, at least in a mild form, if survey studies are indicative (Greeley 1975; Hay and Heald 1987; Castro et al. 2014). Religious traditions have told of such special moments, whether transfigurations of the everyday world or revelations of hidden realms, beings, and ultimates. In traditional religious literature, records of the experiences can be difficult to identify and interpret with any certainty, often obscured by “ramified” language—terms and ideas drawn from the traditions in which the experiences took place (Smart 1962). In the modern world, the experiences occur too, in secular as well as religious contexts, and the reports tend to be less doctrinally loaded and more straightforwardly descriptive. Many such accounts have accumulated since the late nineteenth century, through autobiographical disclosures and the testimony-gathering efforts of researchers.

It is clear from many of these accounts that the experiences bring new perspectives on reality, self, consciousness, time, space, the cosmos, and so on, topics that philosophers have traditionally addressed under the rubric of metaphysics and its sub-discipline ontology, the latter having to do with things (*res*) as they fundamentally are—things in their “thingness,” in their *reality*. For those familiar with philosophy, the experiences are recognizable as

having “metaphysical significance,” as William James (1902, p. 388) put it and could himself attest. It should be added that those new perspectives have epistemic and ethical aspects too, since the experiences can bring knowing, understanding, profound meaning, love, and compassion, and they have considerable transformative potential. Epistemic and ethical aspects are not really separable from metaphysical ones, as everything tends to blend together in the experiences, knowing with being, light with love, and so on.

Despite the resonances between mystical experience and metaphysics, contemporary philosophy of mysticism, from the 1970s onward, has not concerned itself very much with the metaphysical dimensions of mystical experience, other than in the elucidation and comparison of traditional mystical philosophies or in the study of modern philosophers whose ideas are particularly germane, such as James and Henri Bergson (Barnard 1997, 2011). Much attention has been paid to epistemology, language, logic, and ethics, but not so much to metaphysics, although there has been some work, and increasingly so in recent years.¹ Psychologist of religion Ralph W. Hood has repeatedly argued for the ontological relevance of mystical experience, its openness to empirical investigation, and potential evidential value: “To refuse to confront mystical claims as descriptive of reality is to miss an important aspect of the empirical psychological investigation of mysticism” (Hood 2001, p. 160). Hood supposes that the inductive method of generalizing from evidence to conclusions, and revising those conclusions in the light of new evidence, can be applied to mystical data, just as it is to empirical data in the sciences, leading not to certainties but to likely conclusions. Similarly, Cardeña and Lindström (2021, p. 107) observe that “the notion that ME [mystical experiences] (or some aspects of them) may provide a valid view of aspects of reality is an empirically defensible hypothesis.”

A major reason for the neglect has been an influential turn in the academic study of mysticism, still felt strongly today in the study of religion and beyond, that reduces mystical experience to psychosocial construction and thereby pushes metaphysics out of the picture. Another is the pervasive influence of neuroscientific reductionism, often grounded in materialist assumptions, according to which the brain produces consciousness, mystical as well as ordinary.² In the present article, I introduce and comment upon these two obstacles to taking the reality claims of mystical experience seriously. With these addressed, there is room to consider how the experiences can be brought into fruitful relation with metaphysics, a task facilitated by recent developments in mind–body metaphysics and psychedelic research. But first, let us consider mystical experience as revelatory of reality.

2. Mystical Experience as Ontically Revelatory

A prominent, arguably defining characteristic of mystical experience is its *ontic quality*,³ an overwhelming impression that ordinarily hidden aspects or depths of reality are revealed, in comparison to which everyday life can seem insubstantial. Consider the following description furnished by B.E.B., a woman who was thirty-five at the time of the occurrence in 1905:

I was standing among pine trees, looking out at the sky when, suddenly, ‘the heavens opened’ as it were, and caught me up. I was swept up and out of myself altogether, into a flood of white Glory. I had no sense of time or place. The ecstasy was terrific while it lasted. It could have lasted only a minute or two. It went as suddenly as it came. I found myself bathed with tears, but they were tears of joy. I felt ONE with everything and everybody; and somehow I knew that what I had experienced was Reality, and that Reality is Perfection. (Hall 1937, p. 81)

Several common features of mystical experience are mentioned: sudden onset, brief duration by clock time, transformation of the sense of self (“swept up and out of myself altogether”), special luminosity (“flood of white Glory”), altered time-experience (“no sense of time or place”), unity (“ONE with everything and everybody”), ecstasy/joy, and conviction that reality has been encountered—“somehow I *knew* that what I had experienced was Reality.” Ineffability figures too: although the experience was clearly describable to

some extent, language could barely capture its sheer ontic quality. B.E.B. writes, “no words seem to me able to convey a thousandth part of the *depth* and the *reality* of that Experience.”

It is not obvious how B.E.B. recognized that she was experiencing reality—“somehow” she knew. Why do mystics feel they are in touch with reality? Maybe it is the “realness” of the experiences—the tremendous clarity, wakefulness, intensity, aliveness—that creates the impression, realness rightly or wrongly being taken as indicative of reality. However, there may be another, more definitive factor at work. A commonly reported feature of mystical experience is a profound, direct kind of knowing, a *gnosis* or intellectual intuition, the *noetic quality* as James (1902, p. 308) called it, “insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect.” Mystics can feel that they know and understand everything, even if few details are recalled afterwards, and they report insights into, for example, the order, harmony, perfection, and ultimate rightness of the world, as well as more specific realizations (Marshall 2005, pp. 65–67). It is therefore conceivable that if mystical experiences actually do give access to reality then it is a special, intuitive kind of knowing that recognizes the real for what it is. *Unitive quality* could be implicated too, if noetic quality depends on the knower’s unity with the known. This has been called “knowledge by identity” (Forman 1999, pp. 109–27; Kelly and Whicher 2015, pp. 337–39). The mystic is able to know reality, and know it for what it is, if it exists as an indissoluble unity of the knower and the known.

Consider another example. A young man was recuperating from a car accident caused by alcohol intoxication. Concussion was diagnosed, and a sedative may have been administered (Robinson 1978, pp. 123–26). While asleep the next day, he felt lifted out of his body into a world where time was no longer important. There was heightened awareness of the surroundings, unprecedented vitality, and a realization that the ego is “insubstantial,” just a tiny part of a great process of creation distinguished by love, strength, humility, wisdom, gentleness, and peace. He thought it appropriate to describe his part in the creative process as being “part of God,” and felt “one” with a peaceful, pulsing light that was also love. It was “safety” too, for unity with the eternal process meant there could no longer be fear of death. The ontic quality was very pronounced and, as it was for B.E.B., impossible to convey adequately:

I seemed to be part of some mighty essence, some ultimate, unknowable reality, to describe which I knew would be impossible because no earthly analogy could be applied to it. This was the ultimate truth of which all other realities were poor reflections. This was the essence of beauty, the essence of knowledge, the essence of wisdom, the deepest essence of understanding. There was nothing further I need know or try to know; this experience was all sufficient for all time, and all waking life, in comparison with it, was mere illusion: a drop of water in a mighty ocean, a second in an ageless cycle of centuries. (Robinson 1978, p. 125)

On waking, the young man felt that ordinary existence was dreamlike in comparison: “the experience was one of such infinitely enriched and awakened consciousness that earthly existence seemed a mere dream in comparison with it,” a common feeling in the aftermath of the more intense experiences, which can leave feelings of alienation and depression, if only temporarily (Marshall 2005, p. 104).⁴ However, the thrust of the young man’s account is not so much to dismiss ordinary consciousness and its associated ego-states as “mere illusion” but to recognize that they are just a tiny part of a much greater whole, “a drop of water in a mighty ocean.” The illusion is to take everyday existence as all there is.

These examples give some sense of the ontic quality of spontaneous mystical experiences as reported in modern times, if not a clear and rounded picture of the reality or realities to which the experiences seem to give access. Yet they suffice to indicate why some definitions of mystical experience give pride of place to contact with reality. Other definitions have singled out unity as the defining characteristic,⁵ but even here an ontic component is present or implied, since the unity in question is likely to be given as unity with a reality of some kind, whether union with a personal God, identity with an

impersonal absolute, or unity with the natural world. Not too much can be expected of simple definitions of mystical experience, given the complexity of the subject, but they do at least provide orientation and a springboard for debate and refinement. For example, the common resort to unity in attempts to define mystical experience has drawn the criticism that the unitive focus is inappropriate for traditions, such as Christian mysticism, that typically emphasize “presence” or some form of contact that is not as close as identity or union (McGinn 1992, p. xvi).

According to the working definition provided by Carmody and Carmody (1996, p. 10), mystical experience is “direct experience of ultimate reality,” where ultimate reality refers to that which is “unconditioned, independent of anything else, most existent, dependable, valuable,” called God, the Tao, nirvana, the sacred, and so forth, in religious traditions. Robert Ellwood’s definition also makes contact with reality central and highlights again the seeming directness, but also has a place for unity:

Mystical experience is experience in a religious context that is immediately or subsequently interpreted by the experiencer as a direct, unmediated encounter with ultimate divine reality. This experience engenders a deep sense of unity and suggests that during the experience the experiencer was living on a level of being other than the ordinary. (Ellwood 1999, pp. xi, 39)

Here it is made clear that it is the experiencer who feels that the occurrence is ontically revelatory and direct. As we shall see, it has been very much open to debate whether the experiences do in fact give special access to reality and in unmediated fashion.

Both definitions place mystical experience within the context of religion, Ellwood’s explicitly, and the Carmodys’ by couching the mystically apprehended reality in some traditional terms, such as God and the Tao. This is understandable because these two definitions were formulated in the context of the comparative study of mysticism in religious traditions. However, it is important to appreciate that many mystical experiences in the modern world are “unchurched” or “unattached,” taking place unexpectedly and unbidden, outside traditions of belief and practice and in a wide variety of secular circumstances. For instance, two very common circumstances are the beauty of nature and psychological distress, and in recent decades near-death crises and use of psychedelics have become familiar occasions for the experiences.

The two definitions also have in common a focus on ultimacy: in both cases, the experienced reality is said to be “ultimate.” In the first definition, this is glossed as “unconditioned” and “independent of anything else,” and in the second as “limitlessness,” in the sense that there is no further reality beyond it to be contacted, at least as far as the person having the experience is concerned. It is certainly true that ultimacy is sometimes raised by experiencers, as in the second example above (“This was the ultimate truth”), but it is by no means always the case. There are mystical experiences with pronounced ontic quality that are not understood as contact with an ultimate. For instance, a young man suddenly found himself “merged with all there is,” his “individual identity” no more but his “personal awareness” still in place (Johnson 1984, pp. 111–12). All times were found to coexist in an eternal now, all was known, and there was “perfect blending of all into an indescribable expression of joy, peace, beauty, and love.” This surely has a right to qualify as mystical experience, yet it was not understood to be contact with *ultimate* reality, for the young man sensed that there was something yet more profound beyond it, an “awesome mystery” that he was not ready to face despite his great curiosity. Mystical experiences can develop through progressively deeper stages, with the culmination having the aura of ultimacy. For example, R. H. Ward (1957), while under nitrous oxide at the dentist, was lifted into a “region of ideas” in which all was found to be within, interconnected, and known directly, and then into a light of “indescribable purity and lucency” that was a “final and perfect unity.” Both stages deserve to be considered mystical, even though only the second was considered ultimate.

Certainly, it would be rash to think that mystical experiences only have to do with an ultimate reality that is amorphous and ineffable, perhaps understood as a pure conscious-

ness or ultimate ground, source, creator, or Self. Mystical traditions often recognize several experienceable levels or domains of reality, such as the Soul, Intellect, and One of Plotinian mystical philosophy—only the last is said to be ultimate and completely beyond description. The diversity is borne out by contemporary accounts, which describe contact with a variety of “realities,” including pure consciousness, spiritual beings and realms, and the natural world. Many spontaneous modern experiences are of the last type, termed “nature mystical” or “extrovertive mystical,” taking the natural world and its varied contents as their focus, including inorganic things, plants, and animals, both human and nonhuman, experienced either “outwardly” through the senses or “inwardly” by withdrawal from the senses to reveal the universe in its full richness, no longer obscured by the veil of sensory appearances (Marshall 2019). The experiences have an ontic quality, for it seems that the world and its contents are experienced as they *really* are, without distortion, in greater depth, and in proper relation to oneself, not as radically separate. These “this-worldly” mystical experiences can be contrasted with “other-worldly” and “no-worldly” ones, the former seeming to reveal realms and beings distinct from the familiar universe, and the latter seeming to go beyond all worlds to, say, a divine creator or supreme consciousness (Marshall 2019, pp. 18–20).

The upshot is that if reality is multifaceted, with different domains and levels, and if mystical experiences do give access to them, then we should expect the experiences to reflect the ontic variety. James (1902, p. 428) made the observation long ago, likening mystical states to “windows through which the mind looks out upon a more extensive and inclusive world,” windows that will afford different views if that wider world has a “mixed constitution.” Accordingly, if we suspect that mystical experiences are indeed revelatory and hope to draw on them to help map out the constitution of reality, then it would be advisable to pay attention to the variety of experiences.

3. Mystical Experience as Ontically Irrelevant: Radical Contextualism

But *are* mystical experiences ontically revelatory? There are two major positions that reply in the negative: the first is *radical contextualism* or strong constructivism; the second is *neuroscientific reductionism*.

Radical contextualism arose in Anglo-American mystical studies in the 1970s, announced by Bruce Garside (1972) and brought to prominence by Steven Katz (1978b) and colleagues. Prior to the 70s, commentators on mystical experience, philosophical as well as theological, had often expressed confidence that some kind of ontic revelation takes place, although there was long-standing skepticism too, often in the form of pathologizing medical and psychoanalytic views (McGinn 1992, pp. 265–343; Parsons 1999). These two contrasting perspectives—validation and skepticism—came together in the work of comparative religionist R. C. Zaehner (1957, 1958). On the one hand, he supposed that mystical experiences of the religious type, which he subdivided into “monistic” and “theistic,” do bring unitive contact with realities, with the soul in isolation and with the loving, transcendent God respectively. On the other, he contended that mystical experience of the natural world is akin to the psychiatric disorder of mania (or, if it does have ontic reach, comprises unity with a mindless, irrational, animating force in nature). Analytic philosopher W. T. Stace (1960a), another major contributor to the study of mysticism in the period, claimed that all genuine mystical experiences, both the introvertive and extrovertive types, reveal an undifferentiated, pure consciousness that is one and the same for everyone (“transsubjective”) and entirely separate from the natural order. Although differing in very significant ways, these two thinkers held in common the view that there are some cross-cultural, trans-historical types of mystical experiences that are ontically revelatory.

However, in the 1970s a sea change took place in academic mystical studies, inspired by currents of thought in the social sciences and philosophy, which for some time had asserted the psychological and social constructedness of perceptions. Imported belatedly into the academic study of mysticism, the idea gave prominence to the claim that mystical experiences are conditioned. This was not a novel realization: psychologically inclined

commentators on exceptional experiences, including hypnotic states, had long recognized the power of “suggestion.” For example, mysticism scholar Rufus Jones (1909, p. xxxiv) had said “There are no ‘pure experiences’, i.e., no experiences which come wholly from *beyond* the person who has them,” words eerily prefigurative of Katz’s (1978a, p. 26) own declaration seventy years later: “There are NO pure (i.e., unmediated) experiences.”

However, some of the new contextualists, as exemplified by Katz, were far more radical than their forebears, since they claimed that mystical experiences are near enough *entirely* a product of conditioning, having no ontic basis at all. If there is more to the experiences than context, it is “mere hedonic tone, a pattern of psychosomatic or neural impulse signifying nothing” (Gimello 1983, p. 62). It followed that the earlier “essentialist” view (held for instance by Zaehner and Stace) that there are cross-cultural commonalities of mystical experience was rejected in favor of the “relativist” or “pluralist” view that each tradition, through indoctrination and reinforcing practices, constructs its own tradition-specific mystical experiences.⁶ Christians have Christian mystical experiences, Buddhists have Buddhist mystical experiences. It follows that the experiences agree with reality only insofar as the conditioning tradition successfully manages to express reality in its teachings (Marshall 2014). This is not to deny that spiritual realities exist, but it is to deny that mystical experiences give access to them.

Radical contextualism has serious methodological and evidential weaknesses. There is no need to go into detail here, for the shortcomings have been explored at length elsewhere (e.g., Wainwright 1981; Forman 1990, 1998; Herman 2000; Marshall 2005; Studstill 2005; Jones 2016; Rose 2016; Taylor 2017). However, it is appropriate to mention one that has a bearing on the ontic relevance of mystical experience. As noted, it is a corollary of radical contextualism that mystical experiences are not ontically revelatory, since they are thought to consist of tradition-sourced material. However, even if an experience does exhibit significant conditioning, it does not follow that it is a complete construction. This is the case with ordinary sense perception: while it is highly dependent on and conditioned by biological and psychological processes, there is reason to think that it is grounded in and gives useful representation of an objective world. Sense perception allows us to navigate our way through the world, and, if it did not, our chances of survival would be minimal. Sense experiences, then, have ontic relevance, even though they are mediated and most likely do not closely resemble the world as it is (and certainly not as modern physics describes it).

Although by no means the same, something similar may be true of religious/mystical experiences that plainly incorporate tradition-derived imagery, such as contact with revered spiritual figures in familiar, traditional guise, as typically depicted in religious art. These tradition-specific images may constitute mediated, symbolic representations of underlying realities and, importantly, fulfill a similar role *across* traditions, say a guiding, admonitory, or comforting role. The forms vary, but the substance may be the same. Admittedly, the experiences would not be direct, being in the form of mediating images, but there would nonetheless be ontic contact, and the experiences may hint at characteristics of the underlying realities, such as luminosity, love, and profound knowing, the mediating presences having what could be called an “ontic sheen.” According to philosopher of religion John Hick (1989), all mystical experience is like this, no direct contact with the Real, but always mediated through tradition-specific forms. Like radical contextualism, Hick’s mediationism predicts tradition-specific mystical experiences, but unlike the former it affirms ontic relevance.

However, there are some mystical experiences that do have a claim to be direct. These are experiences that follow from a *deconstruction* of ordinary experience, whether the total exclusion of sensations, images, and concepts to yield a content-free pure consciousness (Stace 1960a; Forman 1990), or the relaxation of habitual patterns of attention and conceptual overlay to yield content-rich nondual experiences of the world (Marshall 2005). It is pertinent that many of the latter, as they occur in modern times, take place outside conditioning traditions, and even to minimally enculturated young children, further weak-

ening the radical contextualist case. It is unsurprising that radical contextualists had little or nothing to say about these unchurched nature experiences, since they do not fit their tradition-centered model.

4. Mystical Experience as Ontically Irrelevant: Neuroscientific Reductionism

While radical contextualism fails to undermine the possibility of ontic relevance, there is another perspective that, superficially at least, threatens to give a more formidable challenge, for it is able to address cross-cultural and trans-historical commonalities, as well as spontaneous, unchurched cases, by calling upon biology and psychology common to all humans. Neuroscientific reductionism attempts to explain the experiences in neurobiological and psychological terms alone, with no reference to ontic contributions, although in more sophisticated form it may admit some secondary contributions from social and cultural factors—a biopsychosocial model rather than a purely biomedical one.

As intimated above, the biomedical approach has been around for some time. [James \(1902, p. 13\)](#) referred to it as “medical materialism,” the kind of speculation that makes St. Paul’s Damascene vision of light a “discharging lesion of the occipital cortex.” The association of mystical experience (and more recently near-death experience) with epilepsy has continued unabated to the present day (e.g., [Persinger 1987](#); [Britton and Bootzin 2004](#)), even though the evidence is not compelling. The phenomenology of seizures does not closely match the phenomenology of mystical experiences ([Kelly and Grosso 2007](#); [Greyson et al. 2015](#); [Greyson 2021](#)). From the 1990s—“the decade of the brain”—neuroscientific theorization of mystical experiences, propelled along by newly available advanced brain-imaging technology, sometimes gave emphasis to a single localized brain area (such as the temporal lobe) or identified several areas to account for the broader mystical phenomenology ([Austin 1998](#)), a more realistic approach given the richness of the experiences and the complexity of the human brain. This kind of neuroscientific theorization of mystical experience is not necessarily reductionist, but it becomes so if the experiences are explained entirely in neuroscientific or biopsychosocial terms.

In recent years, the neuroscientific study of mystical experience has received a considerable boost from the explosion in psychedelic research, driven in part by promising therapeutic applications of the drugs. Since psychedelics are known to trigger some experiences that can be very similar to naturally occurring mystical ones as evaluated by questionnaire studies ([Yaden et al. 2017](#); [Griffiths et al. 2019](#); [Corneille and Luke 2021](#)), it may be hoped that an understanding of drug action on the brain/mind will shed light on mystical experiences in general. However, it is important not to confuse triggering action with the phenomena triggered: insight into the former may give only limited insight into the latter, especially if mystical experiences have ontic contributions. Moreover, given the fact that mystical experiences occur under a variety of circumstances, it is advisable not to be too preoccupied with just one particular trigger, such as psychedelics, when formulating explanations. It is equally important to try to fathom why concern for someone in need should lead to the experience, or deep love for another, or admiration of a plant or a beautiful work of art, or thoughts about the extent of the universe, or a prayer for help during psychological distress, or extreme neurological shutdown during a near-death crisis, to mention just a few real-life circumstances ([Laski 1961](#); [Hardy 1979](#); [Marshall 2005](#); [Taylor and Egeto-Szabo 2017](#)).

While neuroscientific research into mystical experience holds promise if conducted with an open mind, a further cautionary note should be sounded. [Kelly and Grosso \(2007, p. 531\)](#) have highlighted some common failings in the existing literature. One significant problem is the tendency to “spin out elaborate neurophysiological just-so stories” based on potentially fallible neuroscience of the day. Circumspection is required as neuroscientific techniques and models are still works in progress. Another problem is a lack of attention to the full range of mystical phenomenology. This is certainly an apposite observation: neuroscientific explanations have sometimes fixated on unity to the exclusion of other important characteristics, and treated it without appreciation of the varieties of unity

reported in mystical testimonies (Marshall 2005), some of which may require different explanations. Similarly, there has often been a simplistic focus on “loss of self” and “ego dissolution,” without appreciation of the subtleties of self-transformation in mystical states (Lindström et al. 2022). These, for example, can involve not only challenges to the ordinary sense of self, but also the discovery of a higher center of self experienced concurrently with the familiar ego—the “human as two” as Jeffrey Kripal (e.g., Kripal 2014, 2022) has called it.⁷ The manifestation of a higher center of self alongside a relatively unimpaired ordinary self in a mystical state is not readily explicable in neuroscientific terms that appeal to a dissolution of the ego-concept and corresponding changes to its neurobiological underpinnings, such as the parietal lobe (d’Aquili and Newberg 1999) or the default mode network (DMN) that has attracted increasing attention in recent years (Carhart-Harris et al. 2012).

Furthermore, it is important to recognize that although the brain clearly has a role to play in mystical consciousness, just as it has in ordinary consciousness, it would be a mistake to assume that the brain necessarily generates consciousness, mystical, ordinary, or otherwise. There is some empirical evidence for mental activity independent of the brain, deriving from the study of near-death experiences and postmortem survival (e.g., Greyson 2021; Tucker 2021), and there is a model of brain action that can support such independence. Since the late nineteenth century, in the face of growing physiological reductionism, several philosophers and psychologists, including William James, Frederic Myers, and Henri Bergson, pointed out that the brain may not act as a generator of consciousness but as a “filter” or “transmitter” of consciousness, selecting contents from an extensive subliminal field or reservoir. Aldous Huxley (1954), reflecting on his own psychedelic experiences, called this reservoir Mind at Large (Poller 2019). Changes to the brain’s selection processes result in contractions or expansions of consciousness, including mystical expansions. The brain is given a key role here, but the approach is not biologically reductive because the brain is not the entire story—it works in conjunction with Mind at Large, with a subliminal consciousness of considerable, perhaps unlimited extent. These classic filter theories should not be confused with a contemporary version (Carhart-Harris and Friston 2019) that invokes filter ideas and a Freudian model of the mind but which has no place for an extensive subliminal consciousness in the style of James and Myers, as Sawyer (2022) explains.

Whether classic filter theory can be developed into a well-elaborated model, with neuropsychological details worked out, remains to be seen (Kelly and Presti 2015), but in the meantime it does serve to counter the assumption that the brain is entirely responsible for consciousness, and it also provides a nonreductive approach to understanding extraordinary experiences, including mystical ones.

5. Mystical Experience and Metaphysics as Mutually Enriching

Classic filter theory posits a subliminal consciousness of considerable, even universal extent, but the theory remains psychological unless attempts are made to give metaphysical substance to the idea of consciousness beyond the brain. What relation does subliminal consciousness have to the world in general, and how does the brain filter it? After all, consciousness is not a fluid to be channeled through cerebral pipes: hydraulic “reducing valve” metaphors can only go so far. When James (1898) originally presented his filter theory, he framed it in dualist terms, with a purely material brain filtering the subliminal sea of consciousness, but this was just a strategy to counter a common type of dualism that has a material brain generate consciousness. Rather, James opined that an “absolute phenomenism” might prove to be a superior metaphysical background for filter theory, and he later developed a monist metaphysics himself. Bergson had a monism of his own in which to set his filter theory: here both the brain and the world upon which it draws consist of “images” (Barnard 2011).

It just so happens that in our day too, over the past thirty years or so, philosophers have increasingly explored alternatives to materialism and dualism, types of mind–body metaphysics that were once actively pursued but which became marginalized as the twentieth century unfolded, with the rise of philosophical behaviorism and then physicalism.

These include dual-aspect monism, neutral monism, idealism, and panpsychism. There is also a development out of panpsychism, called cosmopsychism, that has gained increasing attention in the past few years, and which takes the universe itself to have experience or even be a *conscious* subject. These exotic types of mind–body metaphysics, the details of which need not concern us here (see [Marshall 2021](#)), have made a comeback in the face of the seeming intractability of the mind–body problem. They are interesting for the present task because in their various ways they can give contemporary philosophical substance to the idea of Mind at Large and show how consciousness or experience can be considered fundamental (or at least co-fundamental in the case of dual-aspect monism and some dualisms). These types of metaphysics make genuine ontic contact in mystical experience all the more comprehensible and therefore more plausible than would otherwise be the case. It does increasingly seem that if the hard problem of consciousness is to be put to bed, then some such exotic type of mind–body metaphysics will be needed.

Two routes can be distinguished by which metaphysics and the study of mystical experience can come together for mutual enrichment, although in practice the distinction may be arbitrary, especially if philosophical activity draws some motivation from personal mystical experience. The first path takes *philosophy as the starting point*. Philosophers, grappling with the big questions, may turn to the evidence of mystical experience, psi phenomena, and other exceptional experiences to add a further dimension to their theorizing. For example, Leibniz, Hegel, Schelling, and Schopenhauer took an interest in extraordinary experiences. James and Bergson have already been mentioned, and several idealist philosophers in the same period took an interest in mysticism, including Josiah Royce and W. E. Hocking. A fascinating example from the period is the monadological idealist J. M. E. McTaggart, for his philosophizing ran parallel to his own mystical experiences, but he did not make explicit recourse to the evidential value of mystical experience ([Marshall 2019](#), pp. 44–45). Much more recently, Timothy Sprigge (e.g., [Sprigge 1991](#)), a rare proponent of absolute idealism in the latter years of the twentieth century, brought his metaphysics to bear on another interest, environmental ethics, finding in nature mystical experience a sign of intrinsic value in nature. [van Dongen et al. \(2014\)](#) bring together chapters on several philosophers who paid attention to exceptional experiences, including Kant, Schelling, Schopenhauer, James, Bergson, and Derrida.

Sprigge’s “super-consciousness” is echoed, if not adequately acknowledged, in the recent burst of interest in cosmopsychism. Some philosophers interested in cosmopsychism have explored connections with Indian philosophy (e.g., [Gasparri 2019](#); [Albahari 2020](#); [Ganeri and Shani 2022](#)), including traditions that have a pronounced mystical component. Such comparative work is valuable, promising to shed light on both cosmopsychism and the traditional philosophies, but it does not engage directly with the empirical data of mystical experience. Phillip Goff (2019), a leading exponent of panpsychism and cosmopsychism, has brought up “formless consciousness,” suggesting that it may constitute the intrinsic nature of spacetime—what spacetime is in and of itself. Elsewhere [Goff \(2017, p. 243\)](#) speculates that the universe’s consciousness is more likely to be “simply a mess” than a “supremely intelligent rational agent.” Here is a matter where consideration of mystical data could provide some guidance. We can ask mystics: *What is it like to be the universe?* Some mystics have opinions on the matter, their experiences of unity with the world revealing the very opposite of a “mess,” with intuitions of order, harmony, perfection, and rightness, as well as profound knowing and loving. These intuitions may better reflect the character of the universe’s consciousness, at least as it has come to be or is heading toward through an evolutionary process in which qualities of love and compassion emerge ([Marshall 2019](#)). It is possible that careful examination of features of mystical experience, drawing on firsthand reports, can generate tentative metaphysical conjectures. In my own speculative work in this regard, I have, for instance, conjectured that light experience and knowing are intrinsic to deeper reality and that the universe exists as a spatiotemporal whole ([Marshall 2015](#)). The “spatiotemporal whole” conjecture may be no surprise to physicists, but the attribution

of luminosity will be, for physical science since the time of Galileo has excluded color qualities from the external world (Marshall 2001, 2021; Goff 2019).

Sara Lane Ritchie (2021), finding inspiration in Goff's tentative remarks, does take the discussion of panpsychism rather closer to a consideration of the mystical data, by looking at contemporary psychedelic research, a venue in which, she rightly observes, mystical experience, metaphysics, and theology are currently coming together. Ritchie takes a broad view of panpsychism, explaining that it "entails the claim that, at the very least, human minds are ontologically connected to all of nature," which she finds consistent with psychedelic reports of "weakening or dissolution of the rigid boundaries between oneself and the rest of reality" (2021, p. 282). As she recognizes, some forms of panpsychism will strain to support unitive contact, such as those that merely distribute consciousness to fundamental particles and hope they can combine together to yield human consciousness. Cosmopsychic varieties, by contrast, are in a better position because they take as their premise an all-encompassing consciousness or experience. It follows that integral unity or wholeness is built into the system from the start, if not some of the other types of unity reported by mystics. Ritchie develops her discussion by noting Spinozan monism, Whiteheadian pluralism, as well as panentheism, and comes to the conclusion that "it is at least plausible to suggest that mystical psychedelic experiences are able to yield insights that *may* be rooted in fundamental reality, even Ultimate Reality" (2021, p. 285). Goff (2021, p. 326) responds sympathetically and explains that he has some personal feel for the experiences, but expresses caution. He agrees that "panpsychism removes some reasons *not to believe* that mystical experiences are veridical," but adds that having "no reason *not to believe*" does not give "reason *to believe*." Belief, however, is not what is at stake here. Rather, it is theories that can do most justice to the evidence—"inference to the best explanation" as philosophers of science put it, the best explanation given the available evidence. By carefully considering the mystical evidence, we may (or may not) come to conclude that ontic contact, at least in some regards, is the best explanation.

Ritchie's attention to psychedelic experience takes us to the second route by which mystical experience and metaphysics can come together for mutual enrichment, namely by taking *extraordinary phenomena as the starting point*. This path, again like filter theory, was pioneered by James, Myers, and others in the late nineteenth century, when a diverse range of rogue phenomena (James's "wild facts") were surveyed, such as psychical phenomena, mediumship, and mystical experience. The approach has been taken up by scholars who convened at the Center for Theory and Research at Esalen Institute over several years, first primarily to update and consider in depth the range of challenging phenomena (Kelly et al. 2007), and then to explore various metaphysical frameworks that can potentially accommodate them (Kelly et al. 2015; Kelly and Marshall 2021). Several of these frameworks were drawn from traditional systems, such as Neoplatonism, Yoga, and nondual Kashmir Shaivism, or inspired by later thinkers, such as Leibniz, Peirce, Whitehead, Jung, and Hegel.⁸ The theological approach to the God-world relation known as panentheism was a recurrent theme, and the potential relevance of modern physics, quantum and hyper-spatial, was also addressed. Also of interest here is Hauskeller and Sjöstedt-Hughes (2022), an edited volume on philosophy and psychedelics that brings together several relevant chapters, including discussions of Whiteheadian and Spinozan philosophies as frameworks for psychedelic experience.

With all these potentially applicable philosophical frameworks available (and no doubt many more too), identification of the most promising candidates might seem a hopeless task. However, the various approaches can be evaluated according to several criteria (Marshall 2021). Importantly, general types of mind-body metaphysics (such as neutral monism and idealism) and specific versions of them (such as Russellian monism and Whiteheadian process philosophy) can be evaluated in their own right, irrespective of their application to rogue phenomena. Most likely, all will be found to have theoretical difficulties, but some much more than others. Another criterion, again not directly related to the rogue phenomena, is whether the metaphysical approach provides a fruitful basis for

understanding challenging features of physics, relativistic and quantum. A metaphysics that is able to ground physics in a compelling fashion will be in a strong position.

Then, there is the matter of particular interest here: the applicability of the meta-physical approaches to mystical experiences. How well can they address the mystical phenomenology, which consists of rather more than simple unity or ego-dissolution? And do the approaches provide a framework solely for expansive experiences of the natural world or can they embrace other kinds of mystical experiences, such as the empirically empty pure consciousness or contact with divinity in nature or beyond? Applicability to mystical experience, however, is not the only criterion: applicability to a range of related phenomena is another. These related phenomena include near-death experiences and psi perceptions. Unlike mystical experience, the veridicality of psi (such as telepathy and clairvoyance) is open to experimental testing, and the results have been encouraging but disputed (e.g., [Cardena 2018](#)). If mystical experiences are indeed closely related to psi ([Marshall 2011](#)), then the veridicality of the latter may be suggestive of the veridicality of the former. Furthermore, an explanation that may initially seem to account well for mystical experience (say, a reductive neuroscientific approach) but sheds no light on psi phenomena will likely be on the wrong track, if there are deep connections between the two phenomena.

6. Conclusions

Interest in the reality claims of mystical experience will continue to grow as more and more individuals come to use psychedelics, in recreational and religious/healing settings, such as the ayahuasca sacrament, or in medically supervised therapeutic settings for treatment of clinical depression and other refractive mental health conditions. Many will be confronted by the powerful ontic quality of the experiences, and, while gaining benefit in many instances from those psychedelic interventions and attendant supportive counseling, they will be challenged to come to grips with their experiences and integrate them over the long term. Some neuroscientific researchers, with a reductionist outlook or constrained by institutional pressures (funding, time constraints, anticipated peer reaction), will be reticent to look deeply into the religious and metaphysical implications of psychedelic mystical experience, at least publicly, although there are exceptions (e.g., [Richards 2016](#)). Philosophers and scholars of religion in the academy may feel more able to engage with the metaphysical implications of mystical experience, but even here there is likely to be reticence, again through institutional pressures, including anticipated reaction of potentially hostile colleagues who have no time for “woo-woo.”⁹ Nevertheless, there is an issue of real consequence here.

Does mystical experience give access to reality? At the very least, [Ritchie \(2021, p. 285\)](#) is surely justified to say, as quoted above, that “it is at least plausible to suggest that mystical psychedelic experiences are able to yield insights that *may* be rooted in fundamental reality, even Ultimate Reality” (italics in original). This affirmation of possible ontic relevance is framed in a cautious manner. Yet the matter need not rest here. As Ritchie, Hood, and Cardena and Lindström suggest, there is opportunity for empirical research, for engagement with the mystical data. The aim would not be to reach some final word on the matter, but rather to follow an inductive process that leads to best explanations given the evidence available. Perhaps ontic contact would turn out to be the best explanation or at least one component among several in a more comprehensive explanation that embraces biopsychosocial components too. Taking the matter further, even before likely conclusions have been reached, it is possible to embark on metaphysical theorizing. “What if” questions can be asked: “what do mystical experiences tell us if they are indeed revelatory of reality?” ([Marshall 2015, p. 48](#)), and “what kind of world do we live in if these phenomena are what they seem to be?” ([Marshall 2021, p. 408](#)). Such questions open the door to the investigation of relevant metaphysical theories without requiring a high level of commitment to the ontic relevance of the experiences.

Once again, does mystical experience give access to reality? The reader may wonder if I have been hedging the question with “ifs, buts, and maybes.” Maybe so. Am I able to give a plain opinion? Were I to take off my academic hat for a moment and reflect on the truly astonishing quality of mystical experiences, drawing on one that came to me years ago in non-psychedelic circumstances, then to be true to that experience I would say “yes,” it was ontically revelatory. That’s how it felt, and that’s the impression it left. In the cold light of day, I don’t know if it was genuinely revelatory, although some considerations make me think it was. Not just the quality of the experience, nor the shortcomings of currently available reductive explanations, nor the potential superiority of ones that have a place for ontological contributions. There is a philosophical reflection that gives me some assurance. If ordinary experience is a rough guide to the nature of reality (given that ordinary experience is part of reality), then reality will be experience too. Now if reality is indeed experience, then it should be no great surprise if mystics can have access to it. Genuinely revelatory mystical experience is not an insurmountable conceptual hurdle.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: My thanks to Edward F. Kelly and Dana W. Sawyer for ongoing discussions on mystical experience, and to the latter for impressing upon me the significance of contemporary psychedelic research for the study of mysticism.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ For my initial advocacy of metaphysical inquiry in the study of mysticism, see [Marshall \(2005\)](#), pp. 14–16). Richard H. [Jones \(2016\)](#) devotes a chapter to mysticism and metaphysics in his comprehensive textbook, and F. Samuel [Brainard \(2000, 2017\)](#) has addressed the concept of reality in relation to mystical experiences and more generally too. Jeffrey J. [Kripal \(2019\)](#) raises various kinds of mind–body metaphysics in connection with experiences that transform (“flip”) worldviews. Andrew C. [Papanicolaou \(2021\)](#) has made an ambitious attempt to identify authentic core features of mystical experience and assess their claims to ontological validity.
- ² Note that I do not use “reductionism” in a disapproving way. Ontological reduction of one thing to another (say, religious experience to sociological or biological factors) is perfectly acceptable as long as there is good reason to do so. As Robert [Segal \(1983\)](#), p. 114) observes, the truth of reductive approaches is “an open rather than a closed question, an empirical rather than a *priori* one.” The proof of the pudding is in the eating.
- ³ Ontic: “possessing the character of real rather than phenomenal existence” (*Random House Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary*).
- ⁴ It is this feeling of waking up to reality that has no doubt contributed to such increasingly popular terms as awakening experience ([Taylor 2012](#)) and spiritual awakening experience ([Newberg and Waldman 2018](#)) as alternatives to mystical experience. These and other labels, such as enlightenment experience, unitive experience, and nondual awareness, are not without issues of their own, if overly inclusive or exclusive, or carrying historical baggage of their own (e.g., Buddhist *bodhi*, awakening; Hindu *advaita*, nondual), or incorporating the term “spiritual,” which is just as tricky to pin down as “mystical” and has a similarly varied history ([Bouyer 1981](#); [Peng-Keller 2019](#); [Berrios and Marková 2021](#)).
- ⁵ For example, R. C. [Zaehner \(1957\)](#), pp. 198–99): mystical experiences are “praeternatural experiences in which sense perception and discursive thought are transcended in an immediate perception of a unity or union which is apprehended as lying beyond and transcending the multiplicity of the world as we know it.” W. T. [Stace \(1960b\)](#), pp. 14–15): “The most important, the central characteristic in which all *fully developed* mystical experiences agree, and which in the last analysis is definitive of them and serves to mark them off from other kinds of experiences, is that they involve the apprehension of *an ultimate nonsensuous unity in all things*, a oneness or a One to which neither the senses nor the reason can penetrate.”
- ⁶ It is with trepidation that I employ “essentialism,” so disgraced has the term become in the academy and liable to draw knee-jerk reactions. [Carmody and Carmody \(1996\)](#), pp. 6–10) use the term, contrasting it with “empiricism” (i.e., contextualism), although “relativism” and “pluralism” would be more apt for the claim that experiences are relative to the traditions in which they take place. Furthermore, radical contextualism paid little attention to the empirical data of mystical experience, focusing instead on comparative mystical doctrine. Carmody and Carmody explain that essentialism stresses sameness or similarity of experiences and human nature across cultures and historical periods, but they also recognize considerable variation among essentialists. Some—let’s call them radical essentialists—make the unsupportable claim that there is essentially just one mystical experience and it is common to all traditions and periods, whereas moderate essentialists give a more nuanced account, recognizing a variety of experiential types and a place for biopsychosocial contributions too. Furthermore, to avoid a very common confusion, a distinction is worth making between an essentialism that merely claims some cross-cultural, trans-historical commonalities

of experience, practice, and transformational outcome, and a certain type of “perennialism” that makes the far bolder and difficult to sustain claim that there is a common core of mystical teachings across the world’s religions (Marshall 2014). The term “perennialism” itself has been applied to a variety of positions, as Sawyer (2021) points out, so care should be taken not to tar all perennialists with the same brush. Some perennialisms, such as Huxley’s, are close to essentialism, giving much more emphasis to commonality of experience than to common doctrine. On essentialism, see also Rose (2016) and Taylor (2017). Rose makes a strong case for commonalities across traditions in the contemplative journey, and Taylor raises several empirical studies that have suggested cross-cultural experiential commonalities. An alternative to “essentialism” and “essentialist” would be advantageous, to avoid misleading associations and polemical reactions. One possibility would be to contrast “commonality thesis” and “commonality theorist” with “plurality thesis” and “plurality theorist.” The former emphasizes commonalities of experience (and other factors), while the latter emphasizes plurality/relativity of experience.

⁷ For examples of this kind of self-experience, see Marshall (2019, pp. 89–91).

⁸ Glenn Alexander Magee’s (2021) chapter on a neo-Hegelian approach to mystical and psychical phenomena is nicely complemented by Anthony Perovich’s (2021) article on F. H. Bradley’s absolute idealism and mystical experience.

⁹ For this term, I am indebted to Carhart-Harris and Friston (2019), who strive for a naturalistic, woo-free approach to psychedelic research.

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