

Article

Secular Mysticism

Richard H. Jones

Independent Researcher, New York, NY 10014, USA; rhjones2488@gmail.com

Abstract: How a positive naturalist understanding of mystical experiences is possible and how these experiences and accompanying practices can be incorporated into a secular mysticism are discussed. Philosophical issues related to such a secular mysticism are also raised: is a truly secular mysticism possible? Are mystical experiences cognitive of transcendent non-natural realities? Can secular mysticism address the issue of the possible construction of mystical experiences? Can one find meaning or a purpose to life when non-natural realities and life after death are not parts of the picture?

Keywords: mysticism; naturalism; neuroscience; meditation; psychedelic drugs; spirituality; neo-existentialism

1. Introduction

Western society today is not so much secularized as pluralistic—i.e., a common religious legitimation to society has been lost, and so people now have a number of active options regarding religion to choose from (Berger 2014). One such option today is the rejection of any religious affiliation at all. Almost thirty percent of Americans today are not affiliated with any religious tradition (Pew Research Center 2021). But not all of the “none’s” are “unspiritual” or “antireligious”. Many still seek an all-encompassing meaning to life, and some seek it within a purely secular and naturalist framework. Thus, it is not surprising that in our culture’s new open atmosphere a new phenomenon has appeared in the last few decades: the total separation of mystical experiences from any theistic or other non-naturalist religious interest but still occurring within a framework espousing a spiritual interest—a “secular” or “naturalized” mysticism.¹ It is a spirituality that is mystical and grounded in a metaphysics that is naturalist—in short, both a specifically mystical type of naturalism and a specifically naturalist type of mysticism.

2. Naturalism

Ontological naturalism can best be defined by what it denies: no realities, either personal or nonpersonal in nature, that transcend the range of scientific examination exist. Hence, only the “natural” realm exists, not gods or non-natural selves, or life after death in another realm. As Carl Sagan famously said in opening his television program on the universe: “The Cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be”. To put the metaphysics another way, naturalists believe that if the natural realm were somehow completely destroyed, nothing would be left, but non-naturalists believe that something real would remain—non-natural realities “transcend” the natural realm in that sense. Prominent possible non-natural realities are a theistic god, the Neoplatonist One, Brahman/Atman in Hinduism, an eternal soul, and the transcendent self (*purusha*) of Samkhya-Yoga.² At best, the only realities transcending the natural cosmos that naturalists accept are mathematical entities needed in order to make science work.

Naturalists show little interest in the “Big Questions” of why the natural realm exists or where it came from, but they deny that a god or other supernatural reality is responsible for it (see Jones 2018b, chp. 5). “Methodological naturalists” remain agnostic about whether there are non-natural realities, but like “metaphysical naturalists”, they too accept that the



Citation: Jones, Richard H. 2022. Secular Mysticism. *Religions* 13: 650. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13070650>

Academic Editor: Sebastian Gäb

Received: 16 May 2022

Accepted: 12 July 2022

Published: 14 July 2022

Publisher’s Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2022 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

natural realm is closed: no transcendent non-natural realities, if they exist, are active in the natural realm, either through causation or some informational input or in any other way. So too, human beings are purely natural; persons are seen as having no transcendent non-natural dimension, and no part of us survives death in a non-natural realm. But naturalists need not be “physicalists” or “materialists” who reduce the mind to brain activity: some naturalists accept that consciousness is a purely natural phenomenon that is irreducible to matter, although how such a reality fits in the scientific picture is problematic. But in whatever form, naturalism appears to be the mainstream position within analytic philosophy today. It is based on the success of science, but naturalists go further and claim that their metaphysics is required for the practice of science to succeed (see [De Caro and Macarthur 2004](#)).

3. Mysticism

The term “mystical experience” is notoriously vague, and any proposed definition is in part stipulative. Here the term “mystical experiences” will denote short-term episodes in altered states of consciousness that allegedly involve a direct awareness of fundamental realities free of a sense of a discrete self and of the conceptual divisions that normally structure our mental life. Emotions such as joy and empathy often accompany the experiences. Mystical experiences give the feeling that everything is meaningful (even if no specific meaning is given). There are various extrovertive and introvertive types of mystical experiences.³ They are distinct from other altered state of consciousness experiences that involve a dualism of experiencer and what is experienced, as in visions and locutions. Here “mystical states” will denote more enduring states of such consciousness than transient experiences. “Mysticism” will refer to the cultural phenomena—teachings, texts, practices, social institutions, and so forth—surrounding someone who has had a mystical experience, or the phenomena centered around an interior quest to turn off the sense of self and to end our conceptualizing mind from controlling our experience in order to bring oneself into alignment with what one deems ultimately real. Thus, *mysticism* is more encompassing than simply having a *mystical experience*. For someone on a quest for such experiences, it involves, not merely a web of phenomena, but a comprehensive total *way of life* having practices, codes of conduct, rituals, and a specific goal, with doctrines about the nature of what is deemed real as its philosophical spine. Other non-ordinary phenomena such as paranormal powers and visions may or may not occur in such ways of life.⁴

How can mysticism fit into a naturalist picture? Naturalists first separate the experiences from the non-naturalist beliefs and practices surrounding traditional mysticism. They reject all non-natural realities or explanations since by definition these would be untestable by scientists in any fashion and hence are not natural, but they need not deny that genuine introvertive and extrovertive mystical experiences occur or that they occur to healthy persons with properly functioning brains—naturalists simply deny that these experiences are cognitive of non-natural realities or that non-natural realities initiate or participate in these experiences. The experiences and states themselves can be accepted as unusual but perfectly natural experiences and states of the brain.⁵ Naturalists can also accept any verified physiological or psychological benefits of meditative practices as more than merely a placebo effect. So too, simply because the same meditative manipulations of the mind or the same drugs produce the same experiences in people regardless of culture or era does not mean that these experiences must be cognitive of non-natural realities—it only means that we share a common neurology.

In fact, naturalists themselves, including a number of prominent atheists and agnostics, have had mystical experiences—undergoing a mystical experience is not tied to holding any specific metaphysical beliefs or to belonging to a religious tradition. The experiences for naturalists are usually of the nature-mystical variety—e.g., the experiencer’s sense of self dissolves while contemplating the night sky and the vastness of things. Friedrich Nietzsche wrote of experiences of ecstasy in which the reality of everything is affirmed in their “eternal return”—everything is of value, and the eternal return of everything counters

their deterioration in value through time. The experiences may lead naturalists to give up their metaphysics and embrace theism or deism or another non-naturalist option, but these experiences may have only the effect that a near-death experience had on the atheist A. J. Ayer (1990): it “slightly weakened” his conviction that his death would be his end but did not cause him to give up that belief. The experiences’ impact may also be great but still seen as only a matter of emotion and not upset the naturalist’s basic metaphysical beliefs. Bertrand Russell had a mystical experience in 1901 induced by seeing the suffering of cancer patients that transformed him into a more loving person and an opponent of war—it affected his values and emotions but not his agnosticism concerning possible non-natural realities. The physicist Alan Lightman’s experience in which he dissolved into the infinity of the universe did not cause him to give his naturalism, but he saw the structures of nature as sacred. Naturalists can refer to the existence of the natural realm in toto as “the All” or “being itself” without transcending the natural realm even if science has nothing to say about the sheer being or “that-ness” of the universe.

However, mystical experiences may have a negative effect on religious beliefs. Mystical experiences in the past were typically associated with religion: anything powerful was assumed to have religious significance, and this included mystical experiences. But mystical experiences need not be connected to non-natural realities or a quest for meaning. In fact, while mystical experiences normally have a positive effect on one’s religiosity, these experiences can lead to becoming convinced that there is no god or life after death and to abandoning religion entirely (Newberg and Waldman 2016, pp. 60, 67–81). The French philosopher Pierre Hadot had mystical experiences in which he felt his self melt into the vastness of the universe but also revealed that there is no god; this led him to abandon Christianity. Moreover, any emphasis on gaining mystical experiences alone can lead away from religion as a means to foster these experiences or as providing a framework for understanding them. Additionally, some experiencers today do understand their mystical experiences in nonreligious and sometimes explicitly atheistic ways (e.g., *ibid.*, pp. 69–75).

Naturalists give these experiences an explanation in terms of only the workings of the brain, although some may become less certain of their metaphysical assumptions. Their explanations keep all introvertive and extrovertive mystical experiences within the natural universe. Naturalists may deny that introvertive mystical experiences empty of all differentiated content can occur, arguing that all experiences are intentional and thus the conscious mind is never truly empty of all diverse content.⁶ Or if they admit such an experience, they will insist that it is either the result of the brain malfunctioning, or only a feedback effect of the monitoring activity of the natural mind that continues even in the absence of any content to process, or at most an awareness of a purely natural consciousness in its bare state. That is, consciousness arose and evolved through natural forces, and an “empty” introvertive mystical experience at best is the experience of that natural consciousness. Thus, they conclude these experiences at most show that the purely natural mind has a greater depth and complexity than normally accepted—there is no non-natural consciousness or any consciousness underlying the natural universe. So too, the experienced sense of bliss results only from the purposeless spinning of mental gears when there is no mental content to work on—that mystics take the bliss as indicating an experience of love or something transcending the natural realm only shows that they misinterpret the experience. Theists erroneously attach more significance to any experiences of light or warmth as “experiences of God” only because of the strangeness of the states of consciousness, their prior belief in a supreme non-natural reality, and their belief that others had experiences of God and so these experiences must be that. That is, the religious are expecting to experience God, and so they naturally interpret mystical experiences that way, even though the experiences are nothing more than brain events with no non-natural input. Even if there were an encompassing non-natural reality that is immanent in the natural world and thus in the brain, naturalists contend that none of our experiences contact that reality nor does that reality play any part in mystical experiences that it does not play in all our experiences.⁷

To naturalists, introvertive mystical experiences with content are merely cases of some subconscious content of our mind welling up into consciousness. Mindfulness is only paying extraordinarily close attention to the beings of things in the world. In a mindful state, one's awareness is broadened as conceptual constrictions applied by the mind in our sensing are loosened or totally eliminated, and one may become totally absorbed in the present and lose any sense of time or of a discrete sensing entity, the "self". But mindfulness merely switches our mental focus from differentiations to "that-ness" of things and thus reveals nothing new about what is or is not real. Experiences of beingness are treated as not more cognitive than our ordinary structured perceptions of the differentiated parts—the pieces remain real and distinct even if when we focus on beingness conceptual boundaries disappear. All that happens during a mystical experience is that the area of the brain responsible for a sense of a boundary between the sense of a "self" and the rest of the universe receives less input and the area attaching importance to events is more active, and so mystics naturally feel more connected to the universe, which in naturalistic metaphysics we in fact are. Moreover, living in the "now" without concerns for the future certainly would bring a sense of calm and peacefulness, but it does not negate anything about the complexity of reality or life—such an escape eases stress, but our life will be short if we ignore the difficulties that await us in life. But the self-transcendence valued in spirituality can thereby be achieved without transcending the natural realm—the loss of a sense of self can lead to only feeling connected to the rest of the natural realm. It is a "horizontal" transcendence within the natural realm rather than a "vertical" one reaching a non-natural realm (Goodenough 1998).

Naturalists treat nature mysticism (with its glow to the world) and cosmic consciousness (with the sense of something more than the natural world) only to be distortions caused by the brain. To naturalists, such experiences can be no more insightful than the interesting but cognitively-empty effects of psychedelic drugs such as LSD that distort our perceptions and consciousness. The sense of selflessness can be explained away as merely our being momentarily unaware of the self in an overwhelming experience or treated as empirical support for naturalistic theories such as Daniel Dennett's that the sense of "I" is ultimately an illusion (Dennett 1991, pp. 412–31): there are only various brain monitoring activities without any one unified center, let alone a distinct reality called the "self". Rather, the "self" is only a useful construct that the brain spins out of these monitoring activities. So too, everything that makes us human is tied to a sense of the reality of a phenomenal self even if we deny the existence of a discrete metaphysical entity called the "self".

4. Spirituality

The term "spirituality" is often used interchangeably with "mysticism" today, but the terms should be distinguished. Spirituality concerns a search for the meaning of life, our connections to each other and to nature, personal values, what is fundamentally real and important, and the Big Questions of philosophy and science (see Sheldrake 2014). Scholars who speak of "spirituality" rather than "religion" typically focus on an individual's personal development, the sense of well-being, connectedness to the rest of reality, and a practical sense of purpose or meaning that makes life seem worth living rather than the institutions of religions or traditional religious doctrines. One who is "spiritual" may be interested in the "sacred" in the sense of something of overriding significance (Stone 2012, p. 493), regardless of whether he or she is affiliated with a religious tradition, but the term "God" becomes used less often since it has non-naturalist connotations. One becomes interested in personal growth and experiences of the sacred, but a sense of transcendence may remain in the natural realm.

Mysticism is typically one form of spirituality, but spirituality encompasses more than mysticism, and so spirituality is not necessarily connected to mysticism. Spirituality has slowly severed its early ties to mysticism in the 1950s, and today spirituality is replacing mysticism and its ties to ancient cultures and otherworldliness in the cultural marketplace (Carrette and King 2005). Indeed, some in the field believe that the past focus on interiority

in spirituality was a mistake (e.g., [Thomas 2000](#)). Any “privatization” of spirituality leaves it without a doctrinal content or social focus ([Carrette and King 2005](#), pp. 68–69). In such circumstances, any sense of self-transcendence may well remain a matter of ordinary consciousness. Enlarging one’s perspective to encompass more than oneself may well impact our lives in how we deal with others and think of ourselves. It may lead to a sense that there is no entity—a “self”—separate from other things. But unless this sense alters our baseline state of consciousness it is not properly seen as mystical.

Today there now are also “religious naturalists” who reinterpret monotheistic language into naturalist terms—e.g., “God” becomes merely the laws of nature. Such naturalists highlight awe and wonder at the majesty of nature but may be atheists or agnostics (see [Goodenough 1998](#); [Solomon 2002](#); [Crosby 2008](#); [Stone 2012](#); [Crosby and Stone 2018](#); [Swimme 2019](#)). However, mystical and psychedelic experiences do not appear to play a major role in this religiosity. Religious naturalists tend to avoid the very word “mysticism”. The Routledge handbook on religious naturalism mentions mysticism only once. This reflects postmodern academic religious studies in which mystical experiences—indeed, all religious experiences—have fallen out of favor (see [McDaniel 2018](#); [Jones 2021](#), pp. 210–13).

5. The Scientific Study of Mystical Experiences

Studying yogins, meditators, and people who have undergone mystical experiences has been a prominent part of the resurgence in the interest in consciousness and the workings of the brain since the 1990s. Theories have been advanced on the neurology underlying mystical experiences. For example, neuroscanning of brain activity shows how meditation and drugs disrupt the neural mechanisms underpinning our sense of a “self” distinct from the rest of reality, permitting a different level or type of consciousness to emerge (see, e.g., [Lutz et al. 2007](#); [Barrett and Griffiths 2018](#); [Schmidt and Walach 2014](#); [Tang et al. 2015](#)). Triggers of mystical experiences besides meditation and psychedelics are also being studied.

Naturalists may not be particularly interested in these studies since they already assume that the experiences and states are purely natural, so discovering the actual mechanics of it all need not concern them. Even if none are found, this would not upset their assumption but only show the limits of science.⁸ But whether mystical experiences involve real insights into the nature of reality or are delusional, today it is increasingly becoming apparent that the experiences themselves are real and their occurrence can be observed and measured through the accompanying neural activity (e.g., [Yaden et al. 2017](#), p. 60). There may be no one area of the brain devoted to mystical experiences, but there is evidence of distinctive configurations of brain activity uniquely associated with mystical experiences—scans indicate that certain areas light up more, indicating that an experience is occurring even if it is not enabled by only those areas. So too, scientists have found different neurophysiological effects from extrovertive and introvertive meditation ([Hood 2001](#), pp. 32–47; [Dunn et al. 1999](#)) and can distinguish the neurological effects of concentrative and mindfulness meditation ([Valentine and Sweet 1999](#)). So too, neuroscience suggests that “cosmic consciousness” is a different state of consciousness from LSD-enabled visions ([Smith and Tart 1998](#)).

However, by “real”, neuroscientists mean only that mystical experiences relate to *distinct neurological events*—i.e., they are not products of imagination or simply interpretations of ordinary experiences in the baseline state of consciousness or necessarily the product of a damaged brain but involve unique configurations of neural activity of healthy brains functioning properly. This is as far as neuroscience can go toward establishing that mystical experiences are distinct from other experiences and are not merely a religious or other reading of a more typical experience, and that different types of meditation and psychedelic drugs enable different types of mystical experiences. Scientists may remain neutral on whether some mystical experiences are authentic encounters with a non-natural reality or are delusions. That is, “[p]eople may or may not actually be connecting to God or the supernatural, but ultimately there is something very powerful going on *inside* the

brain” (Newberg and Waldman 2016, p. 25). So too with mindfulness: scientists may confirm that, say, Buddhist meditative techniques calm the mind, but this does not confirm Buddhism’s theories of rebirth and liberation. Learning more about the necessary neural or physiological bases to these experiences may help in reproducing them, but that does not relate to the doctrines that mystics espouse.⁹

In addition to aiding in establishing the uniqueness of mystical experiences, the beneficial effects of meditation and psychedelics such as psilocybin and LSD in aiding such psychological problems as depression and addiction are now being demonstrated (e.g., Aday et al. 2020). Neuroscience appears to validate the positive effects of meditation and psychedelic therapy on our well-being. All of this leads many people to the belief that science is now giving credence to mystical experiences. But again, it is now a secular understanding of the nature of mystical experiences and natural effects that is now gaining attention.

To naturalists, the studies to date are taken only as reinforcing the view that the only value in mystical experiences is in their effect on the body. The experiences are “real” neurologically, and to naturalists, the significance and value of the experiences are exhaustively explained by scientific accounts. The possibility that the brain states that scientists observe are merely the base conditions that permit non-natural input into our mind may not even be seen as an issue. If mystical experiences are considered cognitive, they are given naturalist understandings; otherwise, the alleged insights are dismissed entirely on naturalistic grounds. Only the effect on the brain matters—if drugs could be devised that had beneficial psycho-physiological effects without any mystical experiences produced, secularists would be content since this would show that the experiences are only epiphenomenal side-effects. The reported benefits from meditation to date have been moderate but measurable. So too, if these results can be shown to be achievable by means other than hours of meditation, interest in meditation may fade quickly. In short, to naturalists, mystical experiences are merely events produced by the brain even if they have positive effects on our health and well-being.

6. Secular Mysticism

From the above, we can understand “secular mysticism” as the integration into one’s life of mystical experiences seen in a naturalist framework. Mystical experiences through psychedelics or meditation disrupt the mechanisms in brain activity underling a sense of a self-contained “self” separate from the rest of the natural realm and make one feel connected to others and the rest of the world, and secularists see this in terms of the natural world alone. The effect on beliefs may last for years and can lead to lasting increases in altruistic and pro-social behavior (Griffiths et al. 2006, 2008, 2011). This natural spirituality appears more tied to mystical experiences than other types of psychedelic experiences (Letheby 2021, p. 200). It is not a matter of “nature mysticism” or “cosmic consciousness” or anything leading to a belief in non-natural realities, or of aesthetic experiences as possible triggers of mystical experiences. If one participates in meditation or psychedelic therapy only for the psycho-physiological effects of meditation and psychedelics, it is hard to consider this “mysticism”.¹⁰ But if the resulting mystical experiences affect one’s life more generally, then this is mysticism.

Naturalists may be hesitant to use the term “mystical” or even the more general “spiritual”. Mystical experiences involve altered states of consciousness, but the post-experiential state of consciousness may not be altered. However, when a mystical experience has a transformative effect on one’s inner life and how one lives and acts toward others, one’s life involves a form of mysticism. Mystical experiences engage spirituality if they are attached to seeking a meaning or purpose to one’s life. The sense of “self” may persist in the consciousness, but it may now be seen to be merely a useful fiction that our brain devised for its evolutionary value and that in fact there is no “self” in reality. The nonexistence of a self-enclosed “self” is realized directly in an experience. Emotions may change, with increases in joy at just being alive, awe and wonder at the vastness, intricacy, and beauty of

the world, and empathy with others, even though naturalists do not take the experiences as “seeing the face of God”.

This mysticism may affect naturalists’ beliefs and attitudes. It may be that the experience does not introduce new beliefs but only alters a person’s existing beliefs and their impact (McGovern et al. 2021). Under the recently proposed REBUS (“RElaxed Beliefs under pSychedelics”) model (Carhart-Harris and Friston 2019), psychedelics weaken the control of one’s beliefs, thereby permitting more influence from experiential input and making experiencers more flexible in their resulting beliefs. Psychedelics do not necessarily make an atheist into a theist (Glausser 2021), but there may be a “significant decreases in identification as atheist and agnostic and significant increases in belief in ultimate reality, higher power, God, or universal divinity” (Davis et al. 2020, p. 1018).¹¹ It does appear that psychedelic experiences tend to cause a shift in the experiencers’ metaphysics away from “hard” materialism to panpsychism or to accepting non-natural realities (Timmermann et al. 2021; Letheby 2021, p. 206).¹² A single psychedelic experience may have an effect that lasts for years on how the person views consciousness (Nayak and Griffiths 2022). Meditation too may have an “implicit spiritual nature” even if not all participants in an experiment have spiritual experiences or see the spiritual effects in non-naturalist terms (Wachholtz and Pargament 2005, p. 382).¹³ (strong but short-term and reversible disruptions of self-consciousness can be occasioned by psychedelics, but long-lasting effects of meditation on well-being do not appear to be necessarily mediated by intense experiences but by training of different cognitive mechanisms (Millière et al. 2018, pp. 20–21)). Such effects on beliefs correlate with positive mental health changes and a sense of well-being, and these changes may be long-lasting (Timmermann et al. 2021).

Such a secularized understanding of mystical experiences has been adopted by many today, even among those who endorse mystical experiences for our well-being (e.g., Kornfield 2001; Forman 2011; Harris 2014). The value of mystical experiences thus is cut off from traditional mysticism. Nevertheless, transcending our baseline state of consciousness in experiences still attracts many, even when the resulting experiences are not deemed cognitive of a non-natural reality. There is a loss of a sense of a “self” even though it is not taken to be exposure to a non-natural reality but an expanded consciousness only within the natural realm—self-transcendence remains naturalized. A sense of selflessness may lessen desires and fears (including fear of death) and self-centered concerns and increase a sense of being connected to others and nature, but it is not taken as indicating a reality transcending the natural world or having any further ontic significance. Moreover, the negative mystical experiences—the proverbial “bad trips” (see Schlag et al. 2022)—are readily explained as cases of subconscious traits entering consciousness or the destabilization of the baseline state of consciousness permitting negative psychological conditions to manifest themselves.¹⁴

Nature plays a major role in secular mysticism, as it also does in nonmystical religious naturalists. The metaphysical oneness of the common being of the natural realm, the interconnection of things, and the unifying lawful order of things become important. In extrovertive mystical experiences, nature may seem to be alive or to have a consciousness. But nature is not “re-enchanted” as the creation or body of a god—nature remains “profane” in not having a relation to a non-natural reality, but the world can be treated, along with human beings, as “sacred” since it is all that actually exists. Scientific research into order takes a spiritual significance.¹⁵ But why there is anything rather than nothing and why the universe has the structures that it has are accepted as simply mysteries that we are incapable of answering with our evolved cognitive skills. Natural suffering is accepted as what it is: there is no need for a theodicy to explain it since it is simply a natural result of what is real—the works of nature are, in the words of Charles Darwin, “clumsy, wasteful, blundering low and horribly cruel”. So too, life and consciousness are naturally evolved, but for naturalists such evolution is unguided.¹⁶ No all-powerful non-natural reality creates or controls nature, but we are to trust nature and its laws in a way that theists are to trust the will of God. This can also lead to a moral concern for the environment, not only to

preserve human life but because the natural realm is all that is real. Ursula Goodenough (1998) suggests that life should be greeted with gratitude and reverence and that the natural order and the epic of evolution may be reworked into a naturalist analog to the biblical creation story.

Books on how to lead a mindful secular life are becoming popular (e.g., Tart 1994). The means for facilitating mystical experiences have also been secularized (see Heller 2015)—in particular, psychedelics, mindfulness, and some concentrative meditation for focusing attention upon one object. Susan Blackmore and Sam Harris advocate jettisoning traditional Buddhist beliefs in an afterlife, rebirth, and non-natural realities while still retaining Buddhist meditative practices (also see Batchelor 2015). Yoga becomes a matter of enhancing only physical well-being. Secular forms of meditation for limited psychological and physiological benefits rather than transforming one's character, such as Herbert Benson's concentrative "relaxation response" (Benson and Klipper 2000) are growing. Particularly popular is Jon Kabat-Zinn's (2005) mindfulness-based stress reduction program (MBSR). Meditation helps with psychological and physiological problems whether one's understanding of it is secular or religious. Today the government, corporations, hospitals, and schools are experimenting with secular forms of mindfulness meditation to see if attentiveness and positive psycho-physiological effects accrue (see Csikszentmihalyi 1990). Compassion meditation is also beginning to be practiced in schools. But meditation also is being "weaponized" as part of a program to produce "super soldiers" (Komjathy 2018, p. 194), without the spiritual dimension of classical samurai training.

Secularists may accept religious texts as useful today for outlining practices and delineating states of consciousness, but eventually these texts will be discarded as no more helpful here than in astronomy. Traditional religious metaphysics and postmortem goals will become ignored as anachronisms even as the experiences have a profound personal impact. A total inner transformation is no longer the goal in secular mysticism. Thus, meditation guides are still necessary, but teachers of metaphysical doctrines are no longer needed, nor is adherence to difficult monastic codes. Meditating for overall well-being means well-being within a naturalist framework—improved moods, higher self-esteem, and overall satisfaction with one's life. Naturalists may see mysticism, not in terms of cognition, but in terms of emotion, as Bertrand Russell did, and still conclude it is valuable. Russell believed that mysticism can be "commended as an attitude towards life" but not as a "creed about the world" because "this emotion, as coloring and informing all other thoughts and feelings, is the inspirer of whatever is best in Man" and even science "may be fostered and nourished by that very spirit of reverence in which mysticism lives and moves" (Russell 1918, pp. 11–12).

Naturalism can also lead to distorting one's understanding of mystics' teachings. Consider the nature-mystical experience that best-selling author Mark Waldman had in which the trees, a fence, and weeds outside his office window all seemed "perfect" and in which he felt a "pure bliss". The first thing he remembered thinking was "Oh! This is what those Buddhists and Hindus were writing about when they described enlightenment" (Newberg and Waldman 2016, p. 190). Actually, that is not what the Buddhists and Hindus claim: the Buddhist enlightenment experience is about seeing the impermanence of all phenomena, not their "perfection", and the Hindu ideas of enlightenment involve something both interior to our being and transcending the natural world, not something observed in the natural realm. In addition, his beliefs suddenly and radically changed at the moment of the experience: he *knew* that there was no heaven or hell or god and that when he died that would be his end. This, of course, is not what Buddhists and Hindus traditionally conclude in their mysticisms. After several months, Waldman's feeling subsided, and feelings of doubt arose. Then one day a small voice whispered to him: "Mark, you don't know a damned thing about religion" (ibid., pp. 190–91). He then started to study the works of mystics.

However, mystical experiences and their cultivation have been absorbed into modern culture without any interest in understanding what has been experienced. With the loss

of interest in classical mystical ways of life, any claim that mystical experiences provide possible cognitive insights into a non-natural reality is not so much denied as simply not of interest. Any cognitive component to mystical experiences is reduced to an awareness of aspects of the natural realm. Naturalists may deny non-naturalist claims in favor of a naturalistic metaphysics and epistemology or remain agnostic on such issues due to a lack of interest. All that matters is the physiological or psychological well-being that mystical experiences or meditation may foster. One need not adopt a non-naturalist worldview to provide an explanation: neurological theories of the brain explain all that is of value. That is, the only interest is a pragmatic one of whether meditation works for better psycho-physiological conditions, not doctrines on the relation between the states of consciousness attained and reality or whether one gains an insight into reality or participates in a non-natural reality. Only such practical worldly effects of a mystical experience are of interest. William Richards tells of a successful business leader who had a spontaneous experience that met all the criteria of mystical consciousness—the man’s reaction was “That was nice. What is it good for?” (Richards 2016, p. 124). But one study of a decade and a half of research reported that increased well-being “is one of the most reliable psychological changes following a psychedelic experience” (Peill 2022, p. 12).

But since for naturalists only the natural world is deemed real, mystical experiences in a naturalist framework can still be seen as aligning experiencers with how things really are if they enable experiencers to have greater personal well-being and to function better in the world. Consciousness can be seen as a purely evolved natural phenomenon. Losing a sense of a “self” is consistent with naturalism (e.g., Austin 1998). It can be argued that the evolved sense of a “self” had advantages for survival but can be overcome through meditation in the “pure consciousness” type of mystical experience and that this is consistent with the causal closure of the natural realm and the completeness of physical causes if consciousness is treated as a powerless epiphenomenon (Angel 2002, 2004). Thus, mystical experiences can be taken as making us more at home here: with no non-natural realities to worry about, such experiences make us feel more connected to reality (as defined by naturalists) and thus help us overcome any emotional alienation from the natural world and other people that our false sense of a separate “self” has generated. Secularists are not deluded by the material world—it is the traditional mystics with ideas of two realms who are deluded and need their beliefs corrected.

7. Is Secular Mysticism Legitimate?

Secular mysticism raises four important questions for the philosophy of mysticism. The first is raised by the possibility of there being mystical experiences and yet no non-natural realities such as a god, a nonpersonal reality such as Brahman, or a personal non-natural soul. Can mystical experiences actually involve no non-natural realities? Are naturalists simply deluding themselves that the experiences are purely natural? That is, is something that transcends the natural realm really present in these experiences despite the fact that secularists do not believe so? In short, is a truly secular mysticism actually possible?

However, what realities are actually involved in introverted mystical experiences is impossible to determine by a scientific experiment. There is no test to determine if the experiences are purely natural or involve some non-natural realities: all we have are the reports of brain activity during these events. It is like the problem of detecting consciousness: if we look at neuroscientific reports, there is no evidence of consciousness at all—all there is the activity of the material brain. From neuroscience alone, there is no reason to believe that there is consciousness. Moreover, the same problem arises for non-natural realities that might be involved in mystical experiences enabled by either meditation or psychedelic drugs (see Jones 2018a, 2019a). Naturalists may be right that the experiences do not involve non-natural realities. Mystical experiences do not prove that consciousness is independent of the body—the experiences are possible even if consciousness is an emergent property, a reducible property, or a panpsychic property. The experiences may have the

same base in the brain whether there are non-natural realities involved or not. Theists and other non-naturalists cannot show that the experiences must be neurologically different if non-natural realities are involved.¹⁷ Non-naturalists cannot demonstrate that experiences cannot be purely natural, nor can naturalists demonstrate that they are. Both parties are rational in accepting their position, at least as far as what science can demonstrate. And scientific results are all that naturalists will recognize as legitimate reasons.

Thus, we are in a position where naturalists may rationally accept that mystical experiences are purely natural events generated by the brain. From the science alone, non-naturalists cannot demonstrate that naturalists are necessarily wrong or showing bad faith. Non-naturalist metaphysics is not required to understand the nature and significance of these experiences, and non-naturalists cannot demonstrate that mystical experiences are impossible without non-natural realities. Thus, naturalists are within their epistemic rights (at least as far as science goes) to accept a secular mysticism. So too, they can treat mysticism spiritually within that framework since for them the natural realm is the only fundamental reality that we are aware of.

8. Are Mystical Experiences Cognitive of Non-Natural Realities?

The second impact secular mysticism has is on the epistemological question of whether mystical experiences give any insight into reality (either natural or non-natural) or other knowledge. Since William James, the claim that mystical experiences have a “noetic” quality (James [1902] 1958, p. 293) has been a central issue in the philosophy of mysticism—i.e., the experiences allegedly give us direct insights into some aspect of reality. Both extrovertive and introvertive experiences are traditionally deemed to be cognitive, offering direct and unmediated insights into the natural world in extrovertive experiences or non-natural realities in introvertive experiences. But if naturalists can have mystical experiences that do not even appear to give them any insights into non-natural realities but have only affective effects or at best give them nothing more than mundane insights into something only natural—either the being of the natural universe or the nature of the natural mind—we have to ask whether mystics’ non-naturalist knowledge-claims only come from their tradition and to ask what role, if any, these experiences actually play in the beliefs that mystics hold.

For naturalists, mystical knowledge-claims can involve only the natural realm. Loosening a sense of self and the conceptual framework in our perceptions may lead to extrovertive mystical experiences that lead to awe, wonder, and a sense of connection to others, but this does not mean that they offer insights we cannot attain through other means. At best, the experiences show us nature more intensely or highlight the natural connection of all things in the universe as products of the Big Bang. Introvertive experiences at best only show us aspects of our mind or new functions of naturally-evolved consciousness. We cannot simply assume that introvertive experiences must be of a non-natural god, soul, or other reality even though theists routinely do. Claiming God was experienced is the automatic go-to position in Western cultures for any overwhelming experience, but naturalists have now offered a reasonable alternative of what the experiences involve. Theists have not demonstrated that the phenomenology of the experiences themselves (rather than the differences in post-experiential reports) differs in nature for naturalists and non-naturalists.

Thus, secular mysticism offers another front against the alleged cross-cultural “common core” argument for the validity of mystical claims.¹⁸ As noted above, to naturalists it is our common neurology that explains the apparent similarity of mystical experiences across cultures and eras, not a common cognition of alleged non-natural realities. That mystical experiences *feel* insightful does not mean that they are—the sense of profundity only results from the stimulation by drugs or meditation on areas of the brain connected to a sense of importance. Alternatively, naturalists can offer arguments that the experiences are indeed insights that may transform a person, but they are only insights into the natural realm and natural mind (see Letheby 2017, 2021).

In this way, secular mysticism points to the issue of mystical experiences themselves versus the understanding provided by the experiencer after the experience. No doubt most experiencers today see a religious significance in these experiences, but a naturalist explanation has become a viable cultural option for understanding these experiences, and this amplifies the philosophical issue of how much one really learns in a mystical experience. As things stand based on the experiences alone, we cannot tell if theists experience God or have the same mystical experiences as nontheists but only interpret them post facto to be experiences of God. This in turn leads to the matter of the limitation of what can actually constitute mystical experiential *knowledge* in the grounding of mystical doctrines (see Jones 2016, pp. 71–120). Even if the experiencers today do not explicitly endorse the metaphysics of naturalism, many implicitly assume that there is no awareness or knowledge of non-natural realities involved in these experiences since for them only the secular effects are of importance. If secularists can easily come away from these experiences without a sense of insight into non-natural realities, non-naturalists will have to come up with arguments not based on the experiences themselves for why naturalists are mistaken.

9. The Question of the Role of Beliefs in Mystical Experiences

The last issue also highlights the constructivist issue: do cultural influences penetrate some or all types of mystical experiences or only the post-experiential reports? Naturalists can readily agree that beliefs or other cultural influences penetrate the experiences: that religious beliefs affect the experiences themselves does not mean that non-natural realities are involved but only that experiencers themselves affect the content of these natural experiences. Naturalists need not assert a cultural influence on mystical experiences—such experiences could still be only a matter of the natural mind. But naturalists may typically accept that our experiences of ourselves and the world are profoundly contingent and constructed (e.g., Letheby 2021, p. 219). But does secular mysticism offer any new light on the constructivist issue?

Constructivists assert the conceptual construction of mystical experiences themselves by cultural influences—i.e., religious and other cultural beliefs, expectations, and so forth penetrating mystical experiences and not merely the post-experiential understanding given by the mystics.¹⁹ Thus, there is no way to separate mystical experiences completely from their interpretations since our conceptual apparatus shapes our very experience. Constructivism's epistemic premise is that all human experience is necessarily structured by elements of culture, in particular, by language. The mind never transcends language in any cognition. Thus, mystical experiences "are inescapably shaped by prior linguistic influences such that the lived experience conforms to a preexistent pattern that has been learned, then intended, and then actualized in the experiential reality of the mystic" (Katz 1992, p. 5). There is no direct (i.e., unmediated) mystical experience of any reality. Soft constructivism is the view that there are no mystical experiences without at least some concepts provided by one's culture that structure the experiences. Hard constructivism is the view that a mystic's specific cultural background completely determines the nature and alleged cognitive content of all mystical experiences, not merely shapes, or influences an independent experiential element. In fact, according to Stephen Katz (1978, p. 46), mystics' socioreligious milieu *over determines* the cognitive content of mystical experiences. Both soft and hard constructivist arguments have been mobilized against the possibility of pure consciousness events. Nonconstructivists assert that some or all mystical experiences are in fact free of cultural influences.

One's beliefs can later alter one's opinion of what happened in a mystical experience. Martin Buber gives an account of a felt sense of "undivided unity" that he initially interpreted to be unity with the Godhead, but his later "responsible understanding" was that he actually experienced only the unity of his soul (Buber 1947, p. 24). The latter understanding was dictated by his theistic background in which the gulf between God and creature is unbridgeable. But this later change in understanding did not affect his sense of the character of the experience itself in which he felt an "undivided unity". The same can occur with

secularists. John Horgan gives the account of a psychedelic experience he had in which he was convinced he was approaching “absolute reality, the source of all things, God” and that he “*knew* that there is no death”. But when the “ground of being was yanked” from under him, he “*knew* that life is ephemeral; death and nothingness are the only abiding certainties” and that “there is no ground of being, no omnipotent God to catch us” (Horgan 2003, pp. 12–13).

These later changes in interpretation complicate the constructivist issue: it is not clear how the prior cultural understanding affected the experiences themselves. Mystical experiences among the secular will be different to the extent that cultural concepts are components of the experiences, but it is not easy to see how to determine whether concepts are components. The principal difficulty in resolving the issue of constructivism is that all we ever have are only mystics’ *post-experiential accounts*, which all parties agree are shaped by a mystic’s culture—we can never get to the experiences themselves to see if they are constructed or not.²⁰ Nor can we demonstrate through neuroscanning that the phenomenology of the experiences differs for mystics with different beliefs undergoing the same meditative practices or psychedelic treatment. Secularists can feel overwhelmed and bathed in love without concluding that a non-natural god is its source. In such circumstances, theists cannot demonstrate that mystical experiences taken to be theistic necessarily differ in content from “natural mystical experiences”. The effects of similar meditations after the experience may differ for the spiritual and the nonspiritual (see, e.g., Wachholtz and Pargament 2005), but the issue here is whether the content of the experiences themselves differ.²¹

Secular mysticism may appear to offer a new opportunity of examining the constructivist claim: we can examine experiencers with competing understandings of the significance (non-naturalist and naturalist) who are present in the same contemporary culture. Experiencers today are also aware of competing interpretations of the nature and significance of mystical experiences. But the basic roadblock remains of not having direct access to the phenomenology of these experiences by third persons.

10. Secular Mysticism and the Meaning of Life

A fourth philosophical issue raised by secular mysticism is this: can the effect of mystical experiences lead to a meaningful life or sense of purpose without some reference to realities that transcend the natural realm? When it comes to consciousness, the “hard problem” is why subjectivity is attached to apparently nonconscious physical events in the brain, but according to Owen Flanagan (Flanagan 2007; Flanagan and Caruso 2018), the “really hard problem” for naturalists is how to find meaning in a universe void of non-natural foundations or life after death. How can naturalists overcome a sense of existential anxiety and find meaning in their lives in a disenchanted world? Can there be a meaning when all there is only the material universe? Was not the physicist Steven Weinberg correct when he said, “The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless” (Weinberg 1977, p. 154)? We appear to be a short-lived animal that loses any significance in the vastness of the universe. Individually, we live for a brief blip of time in only one life and then are gone—no aspect of us survives. Collectively, after our planet or galaxy dies, we do not leave even a dent in the universe. It is as if we were never here. Moreover, the standard naturalist view is that we have no meaningful libertarian free will—our actions are determined by material events—and our consciousness is a powerless epiphenomenon of matter. Morality or any concern for others at all has no ultimate foundation. During an introvertive mystical experience or a state of pure mindfulness, the issue of meaningfulness does not arise—one is totally absorbed in the moment and so one is not interested in a point of things or the meaning of life—but can such experiences contribute to a later understanding of meaning and purpose or otherwise aid in overcoming the naturalists’ existential crisis?

First, it should be realized that the picture need not be so bleak from a naturalist’s point of view. By removing the possibility of otherworldly non-natural realities from the

picture, our consciousness is not split between two realms. Indeed, the natural realm can seem *more real* than it does within a non-naturalist frame of reference where it is dependent upon a more real non-natural reality. This allows for a more authentic existence in this life. We can focus totally on the world and other people and not have our minds distracted by attention to nonexistent non-natural realities and otherworldly aspirations. Nor need we puzzle over questions related to non-natural realities such as why and how God exists, what his purpose for creation and humanity is, or how he could affect events in the world. Realizing that we are dependent upon other people and the world for our existence gives them a greater significance than they would have if we were creations of some other reality. Science is not designed to find purpose or meaning any more than neuroscience is currently designed to find consciousness, and so Freeman Dyson's reply to Weinberg—that no universe with conscious life is pointless (Horgan 2003, p. 222)—is an option for naturalists. Morality has the only grounding it can have: like us, other sentient parts of the web of existence suffer, and so we should adopt moral values out of concern for them. Attaching greater significance to our own personal node in the web is selfishness that does not reflect reality—we are all equal parts of that web. The universe provides conditions for our flourishing (along with causing us suffering). That we are here at all is amazing—small outcroppings of consciousness in a vast material expanse. Life is an unmerited gift. It is a cause for celebration. Even the inevitability of dying and returning to the universe can be accepted calmly with reverence. Naturalists can react with joy, awe, and gratitude for being alive (e.g., Kurtz 2005). Learning, helping others, and contributing to the overall welfare of the universe can provide a meaningful life in light of what is truly real.

Mystical experiences may not give knowledge that is not attainable by other means, but they do make us more aware of the reality of the universe and our presence in it. For naturalists, traditional mysticism is not seen as a means to align ourselves with reality but only to evade it, nevertheless, mysticism understood within a naturalist framework helps us overcome a false sense of an isolated “self” and make us feel our connectedness to all that is real—we are all specks of stardust with no separate entity (a “self”) to enhance at the expense of others. We can transcend the false sense of “self” without a dimension transcending the natural world being needed. This also opens us up to what is truly real and thus helps to align with reality as it truly is. Mysticism helps us gain awe and wonder at what is truly real and makes for a more spiritual approach to ourselves and our world.

In fact, without a *religious interpretative framework*, some mystical experiences may not have positive effects but lead instead to less well-being (see Byrd et al. 2000). Thus, naturalists will have to work out a naturalistic framework in which mystical experiences (including different types of introvertive ones) are a source of meaning if mystical experiences are not to have a negative effect on their well-being. A first step is that the experiences can be treated positively as cognitive of natural realities (see Angel 2002, 2004). A meaning that would resonate with naturalists must be sought within this world, but it is possible for naturalists to work out a meaning of life within their framework (see Jones 2018b, pp. 167–70; also see Hearn 2021). Mysticism does not overcome the basic mystery of why anything exists—in fact, the shock of the unexpected in these experiences may accentuate this mystery—but it can help us greet there being anything at all with amazement and fascination and lessen any dread at being alive. None of this requires a non-naturalist framework.

11. Conclusions

All in all, secular mysticism appears to be a viable option in today's cultural marketplace. Mystical experiences in which a sense of a confined, narrow “self” vanishes, and we feel connected to reality can be incorporated into a naturalist worldview without great difficulty and can figure in a specifically naturalized spirituality. Both meditation and psychedelic drugs may be utilized. Nothing about mystical experiences is irrational by naturalist standards. Additionally, when mystical experiences are incorporated into a

naturalist's way of life, the resulting secular spirituality is indeed mystical. As noted above, naturalists may be uncomfortable with the label "mysticism" and reticent to employ it, but it is appropriate in a naturalized spiritual context incorporating these experiences and practices, and there are no better labels. They need not use the term "entheogen" to denote psychedelics. Nor need they see their mysticism as a new category of "religiosity".

Such naturalization of mystical experience will be a challenge to traditional religions by offering an alternative spirituality. Non-naturalists will object to any naturalization or this-worldly secularization of these experiences. They will claim that naturalists misunderstand what is occurring in mystical experiences. Naturalists will reverse the charge. Moreover, it does appear that introverted mystical experiences are not necessarily tied to non-natural realities but can be disentangled from non-naturalist metaphysics. Any cognition in those experiences may be limited to the nature of the natural world or the human mind. Of course, many in mainstream Abrahamic religion today may be as happy to jettison all talk of mysticism as most naturalists are.²² On the other hand, the most prominent Catholic theologian in the second half of the twentieth century, Karl Rahner, predicted that "the Christian of the future will be a mystic [i.e., one who has experienced God] or not be a Christian at all": in Western society today, institutional support for Christianity has lessened, and so Christianity will have to be grounded in individuals who have had immediate experiences of God (Rahner 1984, p. 22).²³

However, perhaps in an era of decline in participation in religious institutions the immediate future of mysticism lies in a secular form: the value of mystical experiences will be seen only in its demonstrable this-worldly benefits and sense of meaning, not in any alleged cognitions fostered by classical mystical ways of life. But naturalists can accept those benefits and that mystical experiences may help us overcome any sense of isolation from the rest of the natural world by helping us realize that we are thoroughly embedded in the world and connected to each other. It may also enhance a sense of mystery at the heart of reality, even if that reality is confined to the natural world.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

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

Notes

- ¹ In the history of Christianity, "secular" was often used for anything *worldly* in contrast to "*religious*". So today some Christians use "secular mysticism" as a way to *experience God through worldly means*—"nature mysticism" or "cosmic consciousness" leading to theistic mystical experiences. But here "secular mysticism" will refer to a mysticism that entails the denial of a god or other non-natural realities, life after death, or related traditional religious claims. Thus, mystical experiences in this context are seen as involving no non-natural realities and not leading to experiences of such alleged realities.
- ² A cosmic "Mind at Large" as discussed by William James, Henri Bergson, C. D. Broad, and Aldous Huxley is open to both naturalist or non-naturalist understandings.
- ³ For a typology of mystical experiences, see Jones (2021, chp. 2). In their aversion to "mysticism", many who value mindfulness do not want to consider it "mystical" (e.g., Varela et al. 2016, p. 23), but this can be done only if one limits "mystical experience" to introverted experiences.
- ⁴ See Jones (2021, chps 1–3) for an presentation of this characterization of "mystical experiences", "mystical states", and "mysticism".
- ⁵ Surveys show that mystical experiences (e.g., Hardy 1983; Hood 2005) are actually more common than generally believed.
- ⁶ Constructivism is discussed below.
- ⁷ This brings up the philosophical issue of the reduction of mystical claims (see Jones 2000, chp. 8).
- ⁸ In principle, neuroscience can give as complete an account of what is occurring in the brain during mystical experiences and states as it can for any conscious events. However, the place of consciousness as a phenomenon or as a possible cause still remains problematic. Merely identifying brain activity does not explain consciousness unless a reductionism or eliminationism is correct,

and even then why there should be a level of phenomena that arises from brain activity that is so unlike the material is not explained.

- 9 For discussions of the significance and limitations of neuroscience and psychedelic drugs for philosophy of mysticism, see (Jones 2016, chp. 4; 2018, 2019; Letheby 2021, chp. 5).
- 10 Whether having a mystical experience makes a person a “mystic” is a matter of choosing a definition. But if a person has one or more mystical experiences but they do not affect that person’s subsequent life, it is hard to consider that person a “mystic” in any meaningful sense. On the other hand, if an experience does profoundly affect all of one’s inner life (beliefs, attitudes, emotions) and actions, at least the word “spiritual” should apply, especially if the term “mystic” is reserved for a person practicing a mystical way of life or aspiring to a mystical goal. If a naturalist attains an enduring state of selflessness, that person should be classified as a “mystic” even though he or she understands the experience in naturalist terms. Secular mysticism need not be a full-blown secular “religion” with rituals and doctrines built around naturalism and mystical experiences to be rightfully called a “mysticism”. Nor need practices such as meditation and drug sessions approach the more extreme and arduous training of classical mystical traditions.
- 11 The researches in that study hypothesized that some naturalist subjects may find this a negative outcome: “profound changes in ontological worldview, including the belief in a previously unbelievably different dimensions of reality or a belief in the veracity of messages or predictions about the future, might be regarded as important insights by some but could be alarming to others because they may lead to overt physical or psychological harm or because they may be viewed as resulting in the epistemic harm of taking the individual further away from the truth about reality”, although their study “provided no evidence of such harmful outcomes” (Davis et al. 2020, p. 1018).
- 12 Naturalists could endorse a panpsychism in which consciousness is as fundamental a property of matter as physical properties like mass and electromagnetism (see Skrbina 2017). Panpsychism is a naturalist philosophy that attempts to overcome the problem of how something *subjective* in nature (consciousness) could arise from something *not conscious* in any sense (matter). Sarah Lane Ritchie (2021) connects panpsychism to psychedelic states and spiritual flourishing. It does not involve a non-natural “mind at large” that is also immanent in the natural realm or consciousness as an emergent property of matter but nevertheless treats consciousness as purely natural.
- 13 Meditation with a spiritual component may also produce different effects on the mind than a secular approach and may produce experiences with more mystical characteristics (Wachholtz and Pargament 2005). Whether meditation in secular contexts has no more than a placebo effect is also a matter of debate.
- 14 Such bad experiences are usually short-lived and even they can lead to positive effects (Schlag et al. 2022, p. 5).
- 15 New Age spirituality has both non-naturalist and naturalist forms. Since Fritjof Capra’s *The Tao of Physics* (Capra [1975] 2000), the alleged convergence of science and mysticism into a possible naturalist worldview has gained popularity. But the knowledge of mysticism and also science of the advocates of this position is open to question (see Jones 2014, 2019b, 2021, pp. 129–46).
- 16 Naturalists need not feel compelled to support Neo-Darwinism (in which the evolution of life is unguided). They could endorse evolutionary or emergent or biological principles that would guide the course of life and even nonorganic evolution. But for naturalists, such laws would be as natural as gravity and electromagnetism—no guidance by a non-natural reality would be necessary.
- 17 “Spontaneous” mystical experiences—i.e., those not sought or cultivated—do not prove that some non-natural reality initiated them: purely natural mechanisms may still be all that is at work, just as we cannot control all other aspects of our mental life.
- 18 For a discussion of the common core claims for alleged common experiential elements or alleged common belief elements, see Jones (2016, pp. 288–93).
- 19 See Katz (1978, 1983); for nonconstructivism, see Forman (1990, 1999). For evaluations, see Stoeber (1992) and Jones (2020).
- 20 Some neuroscientists are willing to accept the possibility of mystical experiences empty of any differentiated content (and thus of any possible cultural influences), and some data is interpreted as evidencing that, but constructivists may not accept such results (see Jones 2018a).
- 21 Post-experiential effects of meditation and psychedelic experiments will depend on such factors as prior beliefs, how seriously participants in an experiment take meditation, prior experiences, how experienced the participants are in meditation, and what a person wants from an experience.
- 22 In the modern era, mainstream Abrahamic theisms have exhibited hostility to mysticism and psychedelics, but this does not reflect the history of these religions. That the Abrahamic traditions each have rich mystical traditions does not need documenting. But there is a long history of the religious use of entheogens in prehistory (see, e.g., Winkelman 2019; Muraresku 2020). Controversial claims of their use in biblical and post-biblical Judaism (see, e.g., Shanon 2008) and Christianity (see, e.g., Merkur 2001) are also worth noting. In addition, today a few Christian churches make psychedelics part of their ceremonies (e.g., the Santo Daime churches in Brazil), and some advocates of psychedelics are trying to make them part of more mainstream religious ceremonies (e.g., Forte 1997; Roberts 2012).
- 23 Rahner also believed that mystics are the paradigms of being truly human. The rest of us are falling short by blocking the mystical potential latent in each of us.

References

- Aday, Jacob S., Cayla M. Mitzkovitz, Emily K. Bloesch, Christopher C. Davoli, and Alan K. Davis. 2020. Long-Term Effects of Psychedelic Drugs: A Systematic Review. *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Review* 113: 179–89.
- Angel, Leonard. 2002. Mystical Naturalism. *Religious Studies* 38: 317–38. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Angel, Leonard. 2004. Universal Self Consciousness Mysticism and the Physical Completeness Principle. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 55: 1–29. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Austin, James H. 1998. *Zen and the Brain: Toward an Understanding of Meditation and Consciousness*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Ayer, Alfred J. 1990. “The Undiscovered Country” and “Postscript to a Postmortem”. In *The Meaning of Life*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, pp. 197–208.
- Barrett, Frederick S., and Roland R. Griffiths. 2018. Classic Hallucinogens and Mystical Experiences: Phenomenology and Neural Correlates. In *Behavioral Neurobiology of Psychedelic Drugs*. Edited by Adam L. Halberstadt, Franz X. Vollenweider and David E. Nichols. New York: Springer, pp. 393–430.
- Batchelor, Stephen. 2015. *After Buddhism: Rethinking the Dharma for a Secular Age*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Benson, Herbert, and Miriam Z. Klipper. 2000. *The Relaxation Response*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Berger, Peter L. 2014. *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralistic Age*. Boston: De Gruyter.
- Buber, Martin. 1947. *Between Man and Man*. Translated by Maurice Friedman. New York: Routledge & Kegan.
- Byrd, Kevin R., Delbert Lear, and Stacy Schwenka. 2000. Mysticism as a Predictor of Subjective Well-Being. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 10: 259–69.
- Capra, Fritjof. 2000. *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels Between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism*, 4th ed. Boston: Shambhala Press. First published 1975.
- Carhart-Harris, Robin L., and Karl J. Friston. 2019. REBUS and the Anarchic Brain: Toward a Unified Model of the Brain Action of Psychedelics. *Pharmacological Reviews* 71: 316–44. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Carrette, Jeremy, and Richard King. 2005. *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*. New York: Routledge.
- Crosby, Donald A. 2008. *The Thou of Nature: Religious Naturalism and Reverence for Sentient Life*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Crosby, Donald A., and Jerome A. Stone, eds. 2018. *Routledge Handbook of Religious Naturalism*. New York: Routledge.
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. 1990. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Davis, Alan K., John M. Clifton, Eric G. Weaver, Ethan S. Hurwitz, Matthew W. Johnson, and Roland R. Griffiths. 2020. Survey of Entity Encounter Experiences Occasioned by Inhaled N,N-dimethyltryptamine: Phenomenology, Interpretation, and Enduring effects. *Journal of Psychopharmacology* 34: 1008–20. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- De Caro, Mario, and David Macarthur, eds. 2004. *Naturalism in Question*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Dennett, Daniel. 1991. *Consciousness Explained*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Co.
- Dunn, Bruce R., Judith A. Hartigan, and William L. Mikulas. 1999. Concentration and Mindfulness: Unique Forms of Consciousness. *Applied Psychophysiology and Biofeedback* 24: 147–65. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Flanagan, Owen. 2007. *The Really Hard Problem: Meaning in a Material World*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Flanagan, Owen, and Gregg D. Caruso. 2018. Neuroexistentialism: Third Wave Existentialism. In *Neuroexistentialism: Meaning, Morals, and Purpose in the Age of Neuroscience*. Edited by Gregg D. Caruso and Owen Flanagan. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 1–22.
- Forman, Robert K. C., ed. 1990. *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Forman, Robert K. C. 1999. *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Forman, Robert K. C. 2011. *Enlightenment Ain’t What It’s Cracked Up to Be*. Washington, DC: O-Books.
- Forte, Robert. 1997. *Entheogens and the Future of Religion*. San Francisco: Council on Spiritual Practices.
- Glausser, Wayne. 2021. Psychedelic Drugs and Atheism: Debunking the Myths. *Religions* 12: 614. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Goodenough, Ursula. 1998. *The Sacred Depths of Nature*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Griffiths, Roland R., Matthew W. Johnson, William A. Richards, Brian D. Richards, Una McCann, and Robert Jesse. 2011. Psilocybin Occasioned Mystical-Type Experiences: Immediate and Persisting Dose-related Effects. *Psychopharmacology* 218: 649–65.
- Griffiths, Roland R., William A. Richards, Matthew W. Johnson, Una D. McCann, and Robert Jesse. 2008. Mystical-Type Experiences Occasioned by Psilocybin Mediate the Attribution of Personal Meaning and Spiritual Significance 14 Months Later. *Journal of Psychopharmacology* 22: 621–32. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Griffiths, Roland R., William A. Richards, Una McCann, and Robert Jesse. 2006. Psilocybin Can Occasion Mystical-Type Experiences Having Substantial and Sustained Personal Meaning and Spiritual Significance. *Psychopharmacology* 187: 268–83, 284–92. [\[CrossRef\]](#) [\[PubMed\]](#)
- Hardy, Alister. 1983. *The Spiritual Nature of Man*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Harris, Sam. 2014. *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Hearn, Benjamin. 2021. Psychedelics, Mystical Experiences, and Meaning Making: A Renegotiation Process with the Challenges of Existence. *Journal of Humanistic Counseling* 60: 180–96. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Heller, Rick. 2015. *Secular Meditation: 32 Practices for Cultivating Inner Peace, Compassion, and Joy*. Novato: New World Library.
- Hood, Ralph W., Jr. 2001. *Dimensions of Mystical Experiences: Empirical Studies and Psychological Links*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

- Hood, Ralph W., Jr. 2005. Mystical, Spiritual, and Religious Experiences. In *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*. Edited by Raymond F. Paloutzian and Crystal L. Park. New York: Guilford Press, pp. 348–64.
- Horgan, John. 2003. *Rational Mysticism: Dispatches from the Border Between Science and Spirituality*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- James, William. 1958. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study of Human Nature*. New York: New American Library. First published 1902.
- Jones, Richard H. 2000. *Reductionism: Analysis and the Fullness of Reality*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press.
- Jones, Richard H. 2014. *Piercing the Veil: Comparing Science and Mysticism as Ways of Knowing Reality*. New York: Jackson Square Books/Createspace.
- Jones, Richard H. 2016. *Philosophy of Mysticism: Raids on the Ineffable*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Jones, Richard H. 2018a. Limitations on the Neuroscientific Study of Mystical Experiences. *Zygon: Journal of Science and Religion* 53: 992–1017. [CrossRef]
- Jones, Richard H. 2018b. *Mystery 101: The Big Questions and the Limits of Human Knowledge*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Jones, Richard H. 2019a. Limitations on the Scientific Study of Drug-Enabled Mystical Experiences. *Zygon: Journal of Science and Religion* 54: 756–92.
- Jones, Richard H. 2019b. Mysticism in the New Age: Are Mysticism and Science Converging? In *Mysticism and Meaning: Multidisciplinary and Perspectives*. Edited by Alex S. Kohav. St. Petersburg: Tree Pines Press, pp. 247–77.
- Jones, Richard H. 2020. On Constructivism in the Philosophy of Mysticism. *Journal of Religion* 100: 1–41. [CrossRef]
- Jones, Richard H. 2021. *An Introduction to the Study of Mysticism*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Kabat-Zinn, Jon. 2005. *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*. New York: Hachette Books.
- Katz, Steven T., ed. 1978. *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Katz, Steven T., ed. 1983. *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Katz, Steven T., ed. 1992. *Mysticism and Language*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Komjathy, Louis. 2018. *Introducing Contemplative Studies*. New York: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Kornfield, Jack. 2001. *After the Ecstasy the Laundry: How the Heart Grows Wise on the Spiritual Path*. New York: Bantam.
- Kurtz, Paul. 2005. *Affirmations: Joyful and Creative Exuberance*, rev. ed. Buffalo: Prometheus Books.
- Letheby, Chris. 2017. Naturalizing Psychedelic Spirituality. *Zygon* 52: 623–40. [CrossRef]
- Letheby, Chris. 2021. Spirituality. In *His Philosophy of Psychedelics*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 196–204.
- Lutz, Antoine, John D. Dunne, and Richard J. Davidson. 2007. Meditation and the Neuroscience of Consciousness: An Introduction. In *The Cambridge Handbook of Consciousness*. Edited by Philip David Zelazo, Morris Moscovitch and Evan Thompson. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 499–552.
- McDaniel, June. 2018. *Lost Ecstasy: Its Decline and Transformation in Religion*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- McGovern, H. T., Pantelis Leptourgos, Brendan T. Hutchinson, and Philip R. Corlett. 2021. Do Psychedelics Change Beliefs? *Psychopharmacology* 239: 1809–21. [CrossRef]
- Merkur, Dan. 2001. *The Psychedelic Sacrament*. Rochester: Park Street Press.
- Millière, Raphaël, Robin L. Carhart-Harris, Leor Roseman, Fynn-Mathis Trautwein, and Aviva Berkovich-Ohana. 2018. Psychedelics, Meditation, and Self-Consciousness. *Frontiers in Psychology* 9: 1475. [CrossRef]
- Muraresku, Brian C. 2020. *The Immortality Key: The Secret History of the Religion with No Name*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Nayak, Sandeep M., and Roland R. Griffiths. 2022. A Single Belief-Changing Psychedelic Experience is Associated With Increased Attribution of Consciousness to Living and Non-living Entities. *Frontiers in Psychology* 13: 852248. [CrossRef]
- Newberg, Andrew B., and Mark R. Waldman. 2016. *How Enlightenment Changes Your Brain: The New Science of Transformation*. New York: Penguin Random House.
- Peill, Joseph M. 2022. Validation of the Psychological Insight Scale: A New Scale to Assess Psychological Insight Following a Psychedelic Experience. *Journal of Psychopharmacology* 36: 31–45. [CrossRef]
- Pew Research Center. 2021. About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated, by Gregory A. Smith. December 14. Available online: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated> (accessed on 3 July 2022).
- Rahner, Karl. 1984. *The Practice of Faith: A Handbook of Contemporary Spirituality*. New York: Crossroad.
- Richards, William A. 2016. *Sacred Knowledge: Psychedelics and Religious Experiences*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Ritchie, Sarah Lane. 2021. Panpsychism and Spiritual Flourishing: Constructive Engagement with the New Science of Psychedelics. *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 28: 268–88. [CrossRef]
- Roberts, Thomas, ed. 2012. *Spiritual Growth with Entheogens: Psychoactive Sacramentals and Human Transformation*. Rochester: Park Street.
- Russell, Bertrand. 1918. *Mysticism and Logic*. London: Longmans, Green, and Co.
- Schlag, Anne K., Jacob Aday, Iram Salam, Jo C. Neill, and David J. Nutt. 2022. Adverse Effects of Psychedelics: From Anecdotes and Misinformation to Systematic Science. *Journal of Psychopharmacology* 36: 258–72. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Schmidt, Stefan, and Harald Walach, eds. 2014. *Meditation: Neuroscientific Approaches and Philosophical Implications*. New York: Springer.
- Shanon, Benny. 2008. Biblical Entheogens: A Speculative Hypothesis. *Time and Mind: The Journal of Archeology, Consciousness, and Culture* 1: 51–74. [CrossRef]
- Sheldrake, Philip. 2014. *Spirituality: A Guide for the Perplexed*. New York: Bloomsbury.

- Skrbina, David. 2017. *Panpsychism in the West*, rev. ed. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Smith, Allan L., and Charles T. Tart. 1998. Cosmic Consciousness Experience and Psychedelic Experiences: A First-Person Comparison. *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 5: 97–107.
- Solomon, Robert C. 2002. *Spirituality for the Skeptic: The Thoughtful Love of Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Stoeber, Michael F. 1992. Constructivist Epistemologies of Mysticism: A Critique and a Revision. *Religious Studies* 28: 107–16. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Stone, Jerome A. 2012. Spirituality for Naturalists. *Zygon* 47: 481–500. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Swimme, Brian Thomas. 2019. *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos*, rev. ed. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Tang, Yi-Yuan, Britta K. Hölzel, and Michael I. Posner. 2015. The Neuroscience of Mindfulness Meditation. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 16: 213–25. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
- Tart, Charles T. 1994. *Living the Mindful Life: A Handbook for Living in the Present Moment*. Boston: Shambhala.
- Thomas, Owen C. 2000. Interiority and Christian Spirituality. *Journal of Religion* 80: 41–60. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Timmermann, Christopher, Hannes Kettner, Chris Letherby, Leor Roseman, Fernando E. Rosas, and Robin L. Carhart-Harris. 2021. Psychedelics Alter Metaphysical Beliefs. *Scientific Reports* 11: 1–13. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Valentine, Elizabeth R., and Philip G. Sweet. 1999. Meditation and Attention: A Comparison of the Effects of Concentrative and Mindfulness Meditation on Sustained Attention. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 2: 59–70.
- Varela, Francisco J., Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch. 2016. *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, rev. ed. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Wachholtz, Amy B., and Kenneth I. Pargament. 2005. Is Spirituality a Critical Ingredient of Meditation? Comparing the Effects of Spiritual Meditation, Secular Meditation, and Relaxation on Spiritual, Psychological, Cardiac, and Pain Outcomes. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* 28: 369–84. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
- Weinberg, Steven. 1977. *The First Three Minutes*. New York: Basic Books.
- Winkelman, Michael. 2019. Evidence for Entheogen Use in Prehistory and World Religions. *Journal of Psychedelic Studies* 3: 43–62. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Yaden, David B., Khoa D. Le Nguyen, Margaret L. Kern, Nancy A. Wintering, Johannes C. Eichstaedt, H. Andrew Schwartz, Anneke E. K. Buffone, Laura K. Smith, Mark R. Waldman, Ralph W. Hood Jr., and et al. 2017. The Noetic Quality: A Multimethod Exploratory Study. *Psychology of Consciousness: Theory, Research, and Practice* 4: 54–62. [[CrossRef](#)]