

THE PRIORITY OF THE OTHER

MYSTICISM'S CHALLENGE TO THE LEGACY OF THE SELF

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The Priority of the Other

Mystical phenomena, by most accounts, entail an encounter with an “Other” of some sort. That is to say, they entail the apprehension, on the part of the experiencing subject, that there exists some “object” – whether person, thing, or unnamable power – that serves to draw forward the movement of subjectivity. According to some, this movement embodies the dissolution, or even annihilation, of the self; the self becomes annulled through the power of the object in question. For others, this movement is better construed as a kind of dispersion or expansion, wherein the self loses its quality of encapsulation and spreads out into the world. For present purposes, it is unnecessary to choose between these alternatives. What is most important to emphasize is the magnetic presence of some forceful object, some *Other*, which in some way *dis-places* the self: someone or something has taken hold of the person, such that he or she has been *moved*.

Taking this set of ideas one step further, I also want to suggest that mystical experience entails not only an encounter with the Other but a sense of what I am here calling the *priority* of the Other – that is, a sense that this encountered Other is larger than me, or comes “before” me, that it embodies a dimension of reality that is *prior* to the more mundane sphere ordinarily inhabited. James (1902/1982) puts the matter well: “It is as if there were in the human consciousness *a sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception* of what we may call ‘*something there*,’ more deep and more general than any of the special and particular ‘senses’ by which the current psychology supposes existent realities to be originally revealed” (p. 58).

As James immediately goes on to note, “The most curious proofs of the existence of such an undifferentiated sense of reality as this are found in experiences of hallucination” (p. 58) – that is, in situations in which psychical realities are projected outward with such force and clarity that they assume the illusory guise of what is wholly Other: “the person affected will feel a ‘presence’ in the room, definitely localized, facing in one particular way, real in the most emphatic sense of the word, often coming suddenly, and as

suddenly gone; and yet neither seen, heard, touched, nor cognized in any of the usual 'sensible' ways" (p. 59). From the very start, therefore, James acknowledges that what may *feel* like the priority of the Other may in fact refer to nothing more than the hallucinatory imagination. In this respect, James's perspective on the power of psychical reality is not unlike Freud's: whether assuming the form of hallucinations or fantasies, psychical reality is such that it can acquire an experiential presence that rivals and indeed mimics material reality. But none of this detracts from the distinct possibility that the "something there" of which James speaks is not a *product* of the psyche at all.

For the time being, in any case, two points warrant emphasis. First, James is referring explicitly not to something "here" but "there"; it is "a sense of reality, a feeling of objective" – rather than subjective – "presence." Hence my use of the term "Other," which will be clarified further as we proceed. Second, this "something there" of which James speaks, by virtue of its appearing "more deep and general than any of the special and particular 'senses' by which the current psychology supposes existent realities to be originally revealed," is to be considered primary, at least phenomenologically. Hence my use of the term "priority."

Another way of speaking about these phenomena is to invoke the idea of *transcendence*. And here I refer not simply to a feeling (akin, for instance, to the oceanic feeling about which Freud speaks) but to an experience of that which is assumed to exist in a realm beyond the earthly, material one that houses most of everyday life. I emphasize the word "assumed" in this context. Whether in fact there *is* such a realm cannot, of course, be decided. But mystical experience as such is unthinkable outside of the experiential conviction that some such realm exists and that it has been constitutive of the experience in question. Accordingly, the Other may be framed as a psychical reality that, for the experiencing person, carries within it the magnetic force of a realm that is felt and assumed to be transcendent.

In much of what follows, I shall try to articulate the meaning and significance of what I am here calling the priority of the Other. In doing so, I shall, by and large, abide by the customary aims of inquiry in the psychological study of mysticism and limit my analysis to purely phenomenological considerations. That is to say, I shall deal mainly with the psychical reality of the Other, leaving aside those sorts of ultimate questions that are more appropriately considered in theology. But there are two significant challenges to be faced along the way: one from "below," as it were, and one from "above."

The first challenge has to do with the fact that, however powerful the objects of mystical experience may be and however much their power may be localized wholly outside the confines of the self, these same objects are

frequently *local* in nature; they embody meanings that are thoroughly circumscribed by prevailing beliefs, values, and ideals (e.g., Hollenback, 1996; Katz, 1978; Proudfoot, 1986). Hence, many of the objects that incite mystical experiences in one person or group of people would not, and could not, do so in another. Whatever mystical power these objects may possess, therefore, has somehow been acquired in and through culture and history: they are part of *this* world, not some other, and their power resides in this very belongingness. How might we make sense of this situation? Does it not imply that, finally, mystical experience is a learned phenomenon, tied to the projection of meaning onto the objects in question? How else could these objects have acquired their magnetic power?

The second challenge is not only different but, in important respects, seems to run entirely counter to the first. As Louis Dupré has argued in his book *Religious Mystery and Rational Reflection* (1998), “All living religion centers around a nucleus that its believers consider to be transcendently *given*. To exclude that nucleus from phenomenological reflection means to abandon what determines the religious attitude” (p. 6). As Dupré realizes, there is no way of knowing, for sure, whether what believers consider to be transcendently given really *is* so given. This is a matter of *faith*. “But,” he quickly adds, “whatever the final conclusion may be, the religious act certainly displays a distinct quality in the passive attitude that the subject of this act adopts with respect to its object. That object,” Dupré tells us, “appears as providing its own meaning rather than receiving it from the meaning-giving subject” and thus “resists all attempts to define its meaning exclusively as actively projected” (p. 7). The religious as such, therefore – and, by extension, the mystical – is by its very nature bound up with the positing of the transcendent, and this positing of the transcendent precludes the notion that meaning is merely projected onto the world.

On the one hand, therefore, the cultural specificity of many of those objects that incite mystical experience points us toward a theoretical perspective that remains grounded in the meaning-giving human subject, largely as a function of what he or she “brings” to experience. On the other hand, the “passive attitude that the subject [...] adopts with respect to its object” and the felt conviction that this object is “transcendently given” points us toward a quite different perspective, one that at least entertains the possibility that mystical experiences are not a product of the subject at all but are instead bona fide *revelations* of what is truly Other. In one sense, James (1902/1982) notes in the chapter on conversion, psychology and religion are “in perfect harmony [...], since both admit that there are forces seemingly outside of the conscious individual that bring redemption to his life.” But psychology, “defining these forces as ‘subconscious,’ and speaking of their effects as due to ‘incubation,’ or ‘cerebration,’ implies that they do not

transcend the individual's personality." At this point, "she diverges from Christian theology," – among other theologies – "which insists that they are direct supernatural operations of the Deity." James then goes on to propose "that we do not yet consider the divergence final, but leave the question for a while in abeyance" (p. 211). By book's end, this question is still in abeyance, though there are of course some clues about how he would be inclined to address it.

Are there any alternatives to the positions James has laid out? Can there be a psychological approach to mysticism *not* grounded in the human subject? Framed another way, can there be a psychological approach to mysticism that preserves its ostensibly transcendent core by locating the power of the object outside the confines of the self? And if so, does this entail the further supposition that this power has a (truly) transcendent source?

To the first set of questions, I am prepared to answer in the affirmative. Drawing on some basic principles of hermeneutics (e.g., Gadamer, 1976, 1982), I shall try to show that it is perfectly possible to adopt a psychological approach to mysticism that is not grounded in the human subject and that indeed preserves its ostensibly transcendent core by locating the power of the object outside the self. As for the second question, the answer is "No, not necessarily." Emphasizing the priority of the Other does not *rely* on the idea of transcendence qua supernatural realm; it simply recognizes that the meaning that inheres in objects, including those that incite mystical experiences, often does in fact "transcend the individual's personality." While my own prejudices undoubtedly condition the meaning I derive from a given object, this in no way entails the further supposition that I merely foist meaning onto it, that it is ultimately a blank screen onto which I project my various designs and desires. We can therefore speak of the priority of the Other qua *Other*, as a reality whose meaning transcends me, without necessarily going the route of a supernatural account.

Having said this, let me be quick to add that I would not be one to exclude such an account. As many psychologists of religion and mysticism have emphasized, the familiar "Principle of the Exclusion of Transcendence" (Flournoy, 1903) is not to be construed in terms of an *ontological* atheism but a *methodological* one (see Belzen, 1997b). The reason seems straightforward: insofar as psychology is understood in essentially naturalistic terms, it can only address the phenomena of interest anthropologically, in reference to the "purely human." But the question that needs to be posed in this context is precisely whether psychology must be understood in this way. In one sense, the Principle of Exclusion is innocuous enough. Surely, the task of determining whether True Transcendence exists (not to mention God) ought not to be left to psychologists! What is more, there is, arguably, a certain danger in bypassing the rule of Exclusion; more than likely, there will

be those who will wish to smuggle the Divine in through the back door, as it were, justifying their own faith commitments along the way (see Proudfoot, 1986).

But there are at least two reasons, to be considered in greater detail later on, for adopting a skeptical attitude toward that form of skepticism embodied in the Principle of the Exclusion of Transcendence. The first is that the Exclusion reflects a faith commitment in its own right; it is a methodological stance that is itself inseparable from certain ontological and metaphysical convictions regarding the nature of the human being. By adopting a certain skepticism toward the principle at hand, therefore, there emerges a valuable tool for prying open not only the foundational assumptions of the discipline but, on some level, of modernity itself. The second reason has to do with the potential value of entertaining the possibility that transcendence is something other than a purely natural phenomenon.

In positing the priority of the Other in my own attempt to think about these matters, I want ultimately to suggest that mysticism, along with other areas of (ostensibly) transcendent experience, represents a profound challenge to the legacy of the self. This is so whether or not one abides by the Principle of the Exclusion of Transcendence: the simple phenomenological fact that mystical experience is contingent on the *felt* priority of the Other itself entails a certain decentering of the self, a certain shift in the direction of psychical energy. At the same time, entertaining the possibility that transcendence is something other than a purely natural phenomenon deepens mysticism's challenge to the legacy of the self. For if the power of the Other bears within it *supernatural* forces, the self we have come to know through scientific psychology needs radically to be rethought. Indeed, so too does the very project of scientific psychology.

Beyond Selfhood

As James goes on to suggest in his exploration of the "something there" referred to earlier, "We may now lay it down as certain that in the distinctively religious sphere of experience, many persons (how many we cannot tell) possess the objects of their belief, not in the form of mere conceptions which their intellect accepts as true, but rather in the form of quasi-sensible realities directly apprehended" (p. 64). It is interesting and curious that James insists here on the language of "possessing objects of belief." On some level, it seems, he remains caught in a framework that subjectivizes the objects of religious belief and experience, that renders them "possessions" of the person. Following his own line of thinking about these matters, it would perhaps be more phenomenologically accurate to say that it is the *objects* that possess

the person. Indeed, when he moves on to the lecture on mysticism, James makes exactly this move via his notion of “passivity”: the story of mystical experience, rather than being one of possession or ownership by the self, turns out to be one of *dispossession*, of the self, by the Other. Or so it seems, at least, to the persons involved:

Although the oncoming of mystical states may be facilitated by preliminary voluntary operations, as by fixing the attention, or going through certain bodily performances, or in other ways which manuals of mysticism prescribe; yet when the characteristic sort of consciousness once has set in, the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power. (1902/1982, p. 381)

Whether this “feeling” on the part of the mystic bears within it any reference to an *objective* superior power, James acknowledges, remains to be considered. For the time being, he simply wishes to note the subjective dimension involved.

Another move James makes in the chapter on mysticism comes in the pages that immediately follow. Having sketched out his four characteristics of mystical experience, the next step is to explore some typical examples. In line with the method of serial study, he begins with “phenomena which claim no special religious significance,” after which time he will move on to “those of which the religious pretensions are extreme” (p. 382). Right away, then, we see two important features to James’s approach to mysticism. Phenomena with “no special religious significance” are continuous with those that have it in the extreme. Furthermore, these phenomena are not a function of discrete practices and the like (fixing the attention, etc.) but are instead woven into the fabric of everyday life, as lived by mystics and non-mystics alike.

“The simplest rudiment of mystical experience,” James continues, “would seem to be that deepened sense of the significance of a maxim or formula which occasionally sweeps over one. ‘I’ve heard that said all my life,’ we exclaim, ‘but I never realized its full meaning until now’” (p. 382). The paragraph to follow develops this line of thinking most eloquently:

This sense of deeper significance is not confined to rational propositions. Single words, and conjunctions of words, effects of light on land and sea, odors and musical sounds, all bring it when the mind is tuned aright. Most of us can remember the strangely moving power of passages in certain poems read when we were young, irrational doorways as they were through which the mystery of fact, the wildness and the pang of life, stole into our hearts and thrilled them. The words have now perhaps become mere polished surfaces for us; but lyric poetry and music are alive and significant only in proportion as they fetch these

vague vistas of a life continuous with our own, beckoning and inviting, yet ever eluding our pursuit. We are alive or dead to the eternal inner message of the arts according as we have lost this mystical susceptibility. (pp. 382–383)

Mystical susceptibility, James suggests, is there for all of us, from childhood on up; the mystery of existence steals into our hearts and thrills us, for reasons that remain utterly obscure. This mystery, he tells us, is part and parcel not only of mystical or religious experience but of *human* experience. And it is precisely when we “lose” this susceptibility, when we succumb to forgetfulness about the mystery of being, that we set apart the religious realm and come to regard it as a separate province, outside the scope of everyday life. But what exactly are we to make of those “vague vistas of a life continuous with our own” to which James refers? And where are they to be located?

“Humility,” Simone Weil (1952/1997) has written, “consists in knowing that in what we call ‘I’ there is no source of energy by which we can rise. Everything without exception which is of value in me comes from something other than myself (p. 27). [...] With all things, it is always what comes to us from outside, freely and by surprise as a gift from heaven, without our having sought it, that brings us pure joy. In the same way real good can only come from outside ourselves, never from our own effort. We cannot under any circumstances manufacture something which is better than ourselves” (p. 41). The culture of narcissism notwithstanding, “No one loves himself. Man would like to be an egoist and cannot” (p. 54). For Weil, therefore (acknowledging that she no doubt had her own unique reasons for emphasizing the valueless, unlovable nature of the self), the kind of “inspiration” that emerges in people like herself ought not to be seen as internally generated. The direction of influence, she insists, is from outside in.

Marcel (1973) is even more pointed in his consideration of the idea of wisdom by referring to that which derives “from spiritual powers which are not at all situated within the orbit of the human world as it appears even to the most careful observer” (p. 198). Rather than the distinction between being and beings, à la Heidegger, he calls attention to the distinction between light and that which is illuminated. By “light,” he explains, he does not mean a material agent. Rather, he is speaking of the process of seeing, understanding, a process wherein light “floods our minds” in the course of an encounter with that which was initially obscure. The question of whether this light has an immortal source of some sort (“or even whether there is any precise meaning in asking such a question”) can be set aside – if only for the time being. But “there would obviously be no sense in saying that man produces this light, and trying to define or describe the production” (p. 209).

For Weil and Marcel, the notion that human beings might “manufacture” good or “produce” light simply doesn’t work, psychologically or

philosophically. There is thus the need to combat what Marcel refers to as the “aggressive anthropocentrism” that characterizes thinking about these matters and to move still farther in the direction of that which lies outside the orbit of the self. This move does not entail the further supposition that the “outside” being considered exists in a metaphysically separate world. Indeed, Marcel offers, the process of illumination reveals the “primordial, secret, and [...] inviolable integrity” (p. 210) that rests in the heart of everyday life. So it is that “each of us is invited, [...] apart from any appeal to faith, which does not concern us here, to restore the traces of a world which is not superimposed from without ours, but is rather this very world grasped in a richness of dimensions which ordinarily we are simply unaware of” (p. 212).

How might the phenomena of which Weil and Marcel speak be understood psychologically? A first option might be to frame the notion of the priority of the Other in relational terms (e.g., Benson, 1993; Bollas, 1992; Jones, 1997). Benson (1993), for instance, whose primary interest is the process of “absorption” in aesthetic experience – “in which selves are described as merging, fusing, uniting with, or simply becoming other than themselves” (p. 2) – has argued that this understanding of absorption requires an interactive theory of self in order to deal adequately with the transformation of the autonomous “I” into “a subject intimately engaged with and centred in ‘the world’ of the art work” (p. 3). More specifically, this perspective on absorption “requires a conception of experience as constituted by the interactive relationship of self and object” (p. 12). Even though one can plausibly speak of the “non-deployment of I” (p. 83), wherein one’s “location” becomes centered in the object, there still remains a relational dimension to the process. The task, therefore, is to fashion an adequate rendition not of the Other but of the self, framed in relational terms.

For Bollas (1992), who seeks to move beyond aesthetic experience alone, the situation is similar, though he tends to focus more on the object pole of the relational process. Certain objects, he has suggested, are like “psychic ‘keys’” that “open doors to unconsciously intense – and rich – experience in which we articulate the self that we are through the elaborating character of our response” (p. 17). These are objects of “intermediate space,” and they exist neither in the subject nor in the object alone but between them (see also Buber, 1965, 1970). As Bollas goes on to explain, such objects “release us into intense inner experiencings which somehow emphasize us.” He speaks of this process as a form of “lifting,” wherein the encounter with the objects in question lifts one “into some utterance of self available for deep knowing. [...] As each encounter solicits us, lifts us up from our unconscious nuclearity, it shows an aspect of our self to the I and thus reveals some feature of our sensibility.” It does so in a way that is only partly thinkable, Bollas emphasizes: “the experience is more a dense condensation

of instinctual urges, somatic states, body positions, proprioceptive organizations, images, part sentences, abstract thoughts, sensed memories, recollections, and felt affinities, all of a piece" (p. 28). Hence, perhaps, the condition of ineffability that is often seen to characterize this sort of experience.

While many of the objects being considered are sought for their "evocative integrity" – at least by those open enough to be transformed – others happen our way by chance, at which point we are "played upon by the inspiring arrival of the unselected," our delight now coupled both with surprise and with a sense of our having been the lucky recipients of a gift, issuing from without. These gratuitously given objects open us up, liberating a dimension of self that had heretofore been closed, unavailable. "In such moments," Bollas suggests, "we can say that objects use us, in respect of that inevitable two-way interplay between self and object world and between desire and surprise" (p. 37). Scarry (1999) employs a similar metaphor in her own reflections on the nature of beauty. "At the moment one comes into the presence of something beautiful," she writes, "it greets you. It lifts away from the neutral background as though coming forward to welcome you – as though the object were designed to 'fit' your perception" (p. 25).

There are, however, some important differences in Scarry's rendition of these matters. For her, it is not actually the *self* that is being "lifted" in these encounters but the *object*, coming forth out of its "neutral background." And this object, Scarry tells us, not only "fills the mind" but "invites the search for something beyond itself, something larger or something of the same scale with which it needs to be brought into relation" (p. 29). As she goes on to acknowledge, whether or not this "something" truly exists in some immemorial sphere is, in a certain sense, irrelevant: "Even when the claim on behalf of immortality is gone, many of the same qualities – plenitude, inclusion – are the outcome. [...] What happens when there is no immortal realm behind the beautiful person or thing is just what happens when there *is* an immortal realm behind the beautiful person or thing: the perceiver is led to a more capacious regard for the world" (pp. 47–48).

There are at least two ways of understanding this process. According to Jones (1991), for instance, the experience of the sacred has a transcendental quality "not because the sacred is a wholly other object but because such experiences resonate with the primal originating depths of selfhood" (p. 125). Not unlike Marcel, therefore, Jones is reluctant to consider the sacred as a "wholly other object," existing in some separate realm. Where they part company is in their understanding of what happens during the course of such encounters. It could be, Jones suggests, that these encounters are as powerful as they are because they somehow tap into "the primal originating depths of selfhood." As he explains in a later (1998) work, those defenses

that function as barriers to connection to ourselves and to others can also prevent access to the sacred. "When these barriers are broken through and the real self emerges," Jones writes, "a sense of connection with or concern about the transcendent often surfaces" (pp. 183–184). This is a variant of the same idea: "transcendence," such as it is, is a function of release, of defenses being broken down, revealing the "real self" in its primal givenness; it is the "sense" one may get upon realizing the full depth and measure of one's inner life.

Marcel's understanding of this process, along with Weil's and Scarry's, takes us in a quite different direction. Simply put, is not the *self* that emerges – or, to put the matter more appropriately, it is not the self that is felt to have priority; it is the *Other*. Otto's (1917/1958) critique of Schleiermacher addresses exactly this shift in location. Schleiermacher's emphasis on the idea of "dependence," Otto argues, "is merely a category of *self*-valuation, in the sense of self-depreciation." As such, "the religious emotion would be directly and primarily a sort of *self*-consciousness, a feeling concerning oneself in a special, determined relation, viz. one's dependence" (p. 10). According to Otto, however, this way of conceptualizing things "is entirely opposed to the psychological facts of the case," which entail an "immediate and primary reference to an object outside the self" (p. 10). Whatever the ontological status of such an object may be, Otto continues (in a footnote directed to James), the feeling of its presence must be considered "a primary datum of consciousness" (p. 11). Its effects on the self must, in turn, be considered secondary. "The latter presupposes the former" (p. 11). That the self may in fact come to realize some of its own inner depths during the course of mystical experience is surely true. But it is the revelation, and priority, of the Other that makes this possible. How else can the "release" about which Bollas speaks or the "resonance" about which Jones speaks be explained?

Along the lines being drawn here, mysticism's challenge to the legacy of the self is perhaps to be tied not so much to that sort of self-dissolution that is often said to accompany mystical experience but rather to the existential displacement the Other's priority provokes. The priority of the Other entails the *de*-prioritization – or what might be called the *secondarity* – of the self. It is a movement wherein via the operation of the Other the self is rendered "ex-centric," drawn beyond its own borders. The priority of the Other thus leads beyond self qua bounded, encapsulated being. At the same time, it opens up the possibility of conceiving of a kind of "self-beyond," one that acquires its very nature by its relation to those objects that draw it outward. From this perspective, one may still speak of the revelation and realization of the "real self," à la Jones and others. But this real self is being revealed and realized precisely in its secondarity and ex-centricity.

Cultural Mediation and the Autonomy of the Other

Thus far, I have sought to explore mysticism's challenge to the legacy of the self through emphasizing the priority of the Other. Whatever we decide James's "vague vistas" to be, whether we place them in some immortal realm or not, there still remains the fact of the sheer phenomenological force that is exerted by certain objects. Indeed, it is exactly this force that has led so many to posit a transcendent realm. Great art, for instance, Steiner (1989) claims, entails a "postulate" of transcendence and, ultimately, of divinity simply by virtue of its revelatory power. Music looms especially large in his formulation. "The energy that is music," he writes,

puts us into felt relation to the energy that is life; it puts us in a relation of experienced immediacy with the abstractly and verbally inexpressible but wholly palpable, primary fact of being. The translation of music into meaning [...] carries with it what somatic and spiritual cognizance we can have of the core-mystery that we are. And this energy of existence lies deeper than any biological or psychological determination. (p. 196)

Steiner also calls attention to the embarrassment we sometimes feel "in bearing witness to the poetic, to the entrance into our lives of the mystery of otherness in art and music." And this mystery, he holds – not unlike James, he speaks of "the reality of a presence, of a factual 'thereness' which defies either analytic or empirical circumscription" (1997, p. 84) – immediately calls forth the indubitable reality of transcendence.

As suggested earlier, there is, however, a challenge brought forth by Steiner's position on this set of issues. And that is that the very objects that Steiner cites in order to provide evidence for his claims – for instance, Western classical music – are *local* ones, that could not have possessed a comparable degree of power at other times or in other places. James, you will recall, spoke in a similar way about "the strangely moving power" of passages in certain poems and told us we are "alive or dead" to their "eternal message [...] as we have kept or lost this mystical susceptibility" (1902/1982, p. 383). But these very poems, of course, are comprised of words, language, the meaning and significance of which is largely a function of the concrete world in which one lives. The meaning of poems is neither forever nor for everyone. And the same may be said of the variety of other objects that might awaken mystical susceptibility: however *unmediated* the resultant experiences may feel, they may in fact be mediated by a vast range of values, expectations, and beliefs regarding the objects in question. Indeed, these values, expectations, and beliefs may be the requisite conditions through which such experiences emerge (e.g., Belzen, 1997a; Hollenback, 1996).

As Belzen (1997a) has suggested, "Human subjectivity in its totality is always subject to specific historico-cultural conditions. [...] Accordingly, psychology of religion, like history, anthropology and linguistics, is an interpretive science: it focuses attention on meanings and searches out the rules according to which meaning originates in a cultural situation" (p. 111). What is striking about Belzen's rendition of the psychology of religion is its insistence that religious phenomena be located within the context of "specific historico-cultural conditions." In order for conduct to be deemed "meaningful," he goes on to argue, it must be "culturally constituted." Even those arenas of experience that aspire to make contact with the transcendent, therefore, are, on some level, to be tied back to their local moorings. Language is central here. Following Ricoeur (1995), "whatever ultimately may be the nature of the so-called religious experience, it comes to language, it is articulated in a language, and the most appropriate place to interpret it on its own terms is to inquire into its linguistic expression" (p. 35). In short, then, whatever might exist *beyond* culture and personal history, must on this account be manifested *within* it, through language.

Hollenback (1996) conveys similar ideas in his own "contextualist" critique of the "essentialist" view of mystical experience. According to Hollenback, "(T)he contextualist thesis implies that mystical experience in its 'pure' state (free from all context-dependent influences) simply does not exist. [...] (T)here is never a moment, from the time that a mystical experience begins to form until the time that it is over, when it is not being shaped by context-dependent elements" (p. 10; see also Katz, 1978; Proudfoot, 1986). Hollenback goes on to speak of the capacity of mystical experience "to exhibit an almost infinite plasticity in reifying and rendering concretely present the beings, objects, and spiritual locales posited by the mythology of any given religious tradition" (1996, p. 77). He also speaks of "the amazing sensitivity of the mystical experience to the subject's religious and philosophical assumptions" (p. 79). For Hollenback, these experiences are therefore "anything but spontaneous" (p. 78). But this last assertion does not follow. The contextuality of mystical experience, Hollenback has told us, is necessarily correlative with its lack of spontaneity. But why can't there be true spontaneity *within* the discursive confines of culture and history? As has been suggested already, we are often moved by objects that are local in nature, objects whose very meanings are mediated by and enmeshed within culture. But this says nothing whatsoever about the spontaneity of our response.

Contra Hollenback, I maintain that there is ample room for true spontaneity within a theoretical perspective that recognizes the contextuality of mystical experience. People do not need to "leave" everyday life in order to experience the priority of the Other; oftentimes, the Other emerges in and through the fabric of everyday life itself. What this implies is that we are

somehow hermeneutically “prepared” for such experience, that its very condition of possibility is our own existence in tradition (e.g., Gadamer, 1982). This point is important for several reasons. First, it suggests that the category of the Other is not to be located wholly outside of history but rather within it. Second, it suggests that the existence of the Other, despite pointing straightaway to the “outer” rather than the “inner,” nevertheless retains a connection not necessarily to the “subconscious” or “psychical apparatus” but to a *particular way of life* – one, for instance, that finds in certain poems or pieces of music revelatory points of contact with existence as it is lived and known.

An important question to be posed in this context may therefore be framed as follows: How is it possible for local objects to acquire the power to incite mystical experience? Consider again what Marcel (1973) had said regarding that process by which we are able to behold a world “which is not superimposed from without ours, but is rather this very world grasped in a richness of dimensions which ordinarily we are simply unaware of” (p. 212). Ordinarily, Marcel implies, there is a kind of inertness to the objects encountered throughout the course of everyday life; they are merely “there,” to be observed, used, or ignored; they are part of the familiar furniture of things. In certain circumstances, however, this very familiarity becomes undone, revealing in turn what Edwards has referred to as “the continual possibility of the familiar’s sacramental transformation into the alien” (Edwards, 1997, p. 212). For Edwards, poetry is one prominent site of such transformation. “The power of poetry,” he writes, “is not only that it lets us see; it lets us see the seeing, thus lets us see the possibility of even more surprises as the unknown god yields to its alien element” (p. 212).

It is possible that Edwards has over-emphasized the notion of the “alien.” In many ecstatic experiences, it was noted earlier, there can also be a profound sense of recognition. We might recall in this context James’s consideration of the “simplest rudiment” of mystical experience, wherein we are able to realize the “full meaning” of that which we may have heard our whole life. Alongside the alienness to which Edwards refers, then, there is the dimension of familiarity and recognition of which James speaks (see also Gadamer, 1986). The experience of encountering the familiar-made-alien, I suggest, is another way of speaking about encountering the *Other*. The simultaneous experience of familiarity and recognition may in turn be understood in terms of the Other’s *priority*: this world that comes before me is infinitely larger than I am, the mystic might say, but it is also one to which I belong. Mystical experience thus understood becomes a kind of *homecoming*, wherein one’s very belongingness in and to the world is revealed in and through its otherness. Perhaps it is this experience of belongingness that can begin to explain the ecstatic quality that frequently characterizes

mystical experience: insofar as the world is revealed as home, as the place where I belong, I am “at one” with it, able, if only momentarily, to move beyond the condition of ordinary alienation against which the experience is juxtaposed.

Mystical experience may thus be understood to embody a kind of dialectical tension between the ordinary and the extra-ordinary. The notion of the extra-ordinary itself reflects this tension; there is reference to a world or a sphere of reality that is *other* than the one ordinarily inhabited. However other-worldly mystical experience may feel, therefore, the condition of this other-worldliness is its relation to, and difference from, the “this-worldly” experience that surrounds it. In this respect, there is a *metaphorical* dimension to mystical experience: the “old” world and the “new” one that supersedes it are somehow held together, resulting in the aforementioned co-presence of the familiar and the alien (see Ricoeur, 1981). The world is refigured and, through this refiguring, *remade*, such that it suddenly appears *realer* and *truer*. Following Heidegger (1971), we might speak here of the process by which the world becomes “unconcealed”: “The setting-into-work of truth thrusts up the unfamiliar and extraordinary and at the same time thrusts down the ordinary and what we believe to be such” (p. 75). The sudden irruption of mystical experience may thus be tied to the rapture of discovery, wherein the hidden potentiality of ordinary life is disclosed.

By all indications, James adhered to a similar point of view in his treatment of religious experience. By virtue of his avowed interest in the *varieties* of religious experience, James effectively rejects not only a monolithic conception of transcendence but one that leaps entirely out of the earthly world. Oftentimes this issue is posed in either/or terms: either there is some sort of projection involved in the genesis of mystical experience or there is something transhistorical and transcultural going on. To some extent, James himself succumbs to this mode of either/or thinking. But he also seems to want to give us another option in this context. “As a rule,” he notes, “mystical states merely add a supersensuous meaning to the ordinary outward data of consciousness. They are excitements like the emotions of love or ambition, gifts to our spirit by means of which facts already objectively before us fall into a new expressiveness and make a new connection with our active life” (1902/1982, p. 427). To speak about the possibility of transcendence, James implies, is not necessarily to step completely out of history and culture. Indeed, as Gadamer, Heidegger, and others have suggested, particularly via the aforementioned notion of tradition, it is exactly our immersion *in* history and culture that opens the possibility of our being as captivated as we often are by certain objects – lyric poetry and music, for instance, to take James’s examples – that may have no universal appeal whatsoever. We might therefore speak of *historically conditioned* or *historically prepared*

transcendence, the main idea being that it is perfectly possible to speak about transcendence, of a sort, within the fabric of society, history, and culture.

In localizing the transcendent realm as I have, I certainly do not wish to close off the possibility that “higher spiritual energies,” as James puts it, play a vitally important role in the process. Finally, then, let us consider whether in fact there is any justification, within psychology, for moving in this direction.

Mysticism and Transcendence

Iris Murdoch’s work, particularly her (1970) reflections upon the nature of goodness, may be valuable in thinking through the issues at hand. Following Simone Weil especially, Murdoch emphasizes the profound importance of attention, “the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality” (p. 34), in realizing goodness. The ideal is the extinction of choice, wherein one responds to the world not from the vantage point of one’s own willful desires and needs but through a kind of necessity. “This is something of which saints speak and which any artist will readily understand. The idea of a patient, loving regard, directed upon a person, a thing, a situation, presents the will not as unimpeded movement but as something very much more like ‘obedience’.” (p. 40)

As Murdoch goes on to suggest, “the chief enemy of excellence” in morality, art, and other realms that demand our attention is personal fantasy: “the tissue of self-aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one” (p. 59). Somehow, therefore – and it is at this juncture that Murdoch’s own interests extend into the mystical realm – there needs to be a process of emptying, silencing, “unselfing”; only then will it be possible to see the true depth of the real. As noted earlier, discrete practices that fix the attention represent one such way of unselfing. But certain objects and events can do much the same thing through their very power, their insistence on our full presence. In both cases, “We cease to be in order to attend to the existence of something else, a natural object, a person in need” (p. 59).

It is in virtue of such acts of undivided attention, Murdoch maintains, that we can apprehend goodness and experience transcendence. Why transcendence? In part, Murdoch’s answer is a Platonic one. As she explains, “A deep understanding of any field of human activity (painting, for instance) involves an increasing revelation of degrees of excellence and often a revelation of there being in fact little that is very good and nothing that is perfect. Increasing understanding of human conduct operates in a similar way. We come to perceive scales, distances, standards, and may incline to see as less

than excellent what previously we were prepared to 'let by'" (1970, p. 61). The artist, in particular, Murdoch notes, "is obedient to a conception of perfection to which his work is constantly related and re-related in what seems an external manner" (p. 62). The artist – the good artist at any rate – adheres to directives that issue *outside the self* and that require, as the condition of their apprehension, the divestiture of "the almost irresistible human tendency" to seek consolation in fantasy and thereby to retreat from the real. Success is rare and difficult: "To silence and expel self, to contemplate and delineate nature with a clear eye, is not easy and demands a moral discipline" (p. 64). But this "spiritual exercise" is absolutely necessary for apprehending the world in its full measure.

The term "goodness," Murdoch goes on to suggest, "refers us to a perfection which is perhaps never exemplified in the world we know [...] and which carries with it the ideas of hierarchy and transcendence." In the course of everyday life, "we see differences, we sense directions, and we know that the Good is still somewhere beyond." At one and the same time, it becomes clear that "(t)he self, the place where we live, is a place of illusion. Goodness," therefore, "is connected with the attempt to see the unself, to see and respond to the real world in the light of a virtuous consciousness" (p. 93). Murdoch's first way of answering the question posed above, therefore, has to do with those intimations of the "beyond" we often receive in the course of encountering differences and gradations, of meeting up with people and things, some of which draw us outward, magnetically, by virtue of what they simply are.

Murdoch's second way of dealing with the issue of transcendence is more explicitly phenomenological in nature. For Murdoch, the reality of the Other and the reality of the Good are one; and far from being encountered in art alone, they are encountered in virtually anything that incites *love*. "People speak of loving all sorts of things, their work, a book, a potted plant, a formation of clouds. [...] Reflecting in these ways we see 'salvation' or 'good' as connected with, or incarnate in, all sorts of particulars, and not just as 'an abstract idea'" (1993, pp. 496–497). This experience, she continues,

is not like an arbitrary and assertive resort to our own will; it is a discovery of something independent of us, where that independence is essential. If we read these images aright they are not only enlightening and profound but amount to a statement of a belief which most people unreflectively hold. Non-philosophical people do not think that they invent good. They may invent their own activities, but good is somewhere else as an independent judge of these. Good is also something clearly seen and indubitably discovered in our ordinary unmysterious experience of transcendence, the progressive illuminating and inspiring discovery of *other*, the positive *experience* of truth, which comes to us all the time in a

weak form and comes to most of us sometimes in a strong form (in art or love or work or looking at nature) and which remains with us as a standard or vision, an *orientation*, a *proof*, of what is possible and a vista of what might be. (p. 508)

According to Murdoch, there is “no need for a dramatic voluntarist ‘way’ to be pressed upon us by theologians. The ordinary way is the way. It is not in that sense theology, and the ‘mysticism’ involved is an accessible experience” (pp. 508–509).

For Murdoch, it should be noted, none of what she has to say bears on the question of the existence of God. Indeed, much of what she seeks to do in her work is figure out a way of talking about goodness and transcendence without bringing God into the picture. Finally, it is experience itself that is the primary concern, and it is fidelity to experience, following where it leads, that is the primary goal. This does not mean uncritical acceptance of what experience *seems* to reveal. As Murdoch – along with James – was well aware, some of what feels like a visitation from without may actually be a visitation from within, tied to wishes and fantasies and other such vehicles for obscuring the Other. So it is that Murdoch (1970) is forced to respond as honestly as she can to a hypothetical interrogator who asks: “(A)re you speaking of a transcendent authority or a psychological device?” (p. 57) Refining this question still further, Murdoch herself asks: “Is there any true transcendence, or is this idea always a consoling dream projected by human need on to an empty sky?” (p. 57) Her answer, finally, is a cautious one:

There is [...] something in the serious attempt to look compassionately at human things which automatically suggests that ‘there is more than this.’ The ‘there is more than this,’ if it is not to be corrupted by some sort of quasi-theological finality, must remain a very tiny spark of insight, something with, as it were, a metaphysical position but no metaphysical form. But it seems to me that the spark is real. (p. 73)

There is a link to be made here to mysticism, Murdoch notes – “if by this is meant a non-dogmatic essentially unformulated faith in the reality of the Good, occasionally connected with experience” (p. 74). As she goes on to admit, this point of view does not readily lend itself to philosophical proof and can surely be challenged on empirical grounds; because “Good is non-representable and indefinable” (p. 75), it doesn’t sit particularly well with those who like their evidence up straight. “All one can do,” therefore, “is appeal to certain areas of experience, pointing out certain features, and using suitable metaphors and inventing suitable concepts where necessary to make these features visible” (pp. 74–75). Doing so leads one beyond selfhood, toward the recognition of the priority of the Other.

Murdoch's "tiny spark of insight," her conviction regarding the "there is more than this" is of course reminiscent of James's (1902/1982) analysis of "wrongness" in the closing pages of the *Varieties*:

The individual, so far as he suffers from his wrongness and criticises it, is to that extent consciously beyond it, and in at least possible touch with something higher, if anything higher exist. Along with the wrong part there is thus a better part of him, even though it may be but a most helpless germ. With which part he should identify his real being is by no means obvious at this stage; but when stage 2 (the stage of solution or salvation) arrives, the man identifies his real being with the germinal higher part of himself; and does so in the following way. *He becomes conscious that this higher part is conterminous and continuous with a MORE of the same quality, which is operative in the universe outside him, and which he can keep in working touch with, and in a fashion get on board of and save himself when all his lower being has gone to pieces in the wreck.* (p. 508)

James goes on to speculate that religious experience may bring people "into an altogether other dimension of existence from the sensible and merely 'understandable' world" (p. 515). Indeed, he continues, "The whole drift of my education goes to persuade me that the world of our present consciousness is only one out of many worlds of consciousness that exist, and that those other worlds must contain experiences which have a meaning for our life also; and that although in the main their experiences and those of this world keep discrete, yet the two become continuous at certain points, and higher energies filter in" (p. 519).

James acknowledges at this point that his conviction remains an "over-belief," for we can never know for sure whether this "more" of which he speaks truly exists in the universe outside the self. But this very over-belief, like so many others – including "consciousness" as well as the "subconscious" – may nevertheless deserve a place in psychological inquiry. But what kind of place? Consciousness and the subconscious, intangible though they are, are (hypothetically) at least within the orbit of personal being. Once one begins speaking about the Other, the situation becomes rather more complicated. What is to be done about this situation? How might it be possible to affirm the priority of the Other under the auspices of a "psychological" approach to mysticism?

The challenge, in essence, is to fashion an approach to these matters that preserves the Other *as Other*. As I have suggested, one relatively uncontroversial way to do so is through hermeneutics, which allows for conceiving the magnetic power of the Other as localized within the object rather than the subject – or, perhaps more appropriately, within the dialogic space between subject and object which is the condition of possibility for meaning to emerge (see Bakhtin, 1981; Gadamer, 1982; Jauss, 1989; Taylor, 1989; see

also Buber, 1965, 1970). By conceptualizing mystical experience in this way, it is possible to avoid entirely any and all recourse to the notion of projection and, thereby, to place credence in the otherness of the Other.

As I have also suggested, however, it may be valuable to consider an approach that truly entertains the possibility that the “something more” that has been spoken of *really does* refer to something more. It is clear enough, however, that this cannot be done within the confines of an essentially naturalistic psychology, a psychology in which there exist firm boundaries between the human and the other-than-human. To put the matter in more positive terms, if indeed there is some validity to positing the *transcendental* priority of the Other, in the context of mysticism and beyond, then a different kind of psychology is called for. At this point, it is difficult to say what this psychology would look like. One alternative to explore might be the Levinasian transition from ontology to ethics (see, e.g., Levinas, 1996a, 1996b, 1999a, 1999b), wherein the Other is seen as the fundamental source of meaning and value. In light of Levinas’s exclusive focus on the human Other, however, perhaps it would be better to replace an ethics with an *erotics*, which would explore that life force which is drawn outward, to both the human and non-human Other (see Farley, 1996).

Whatever name is given to this psychological perspective, it will have to accommodate the possibility that the human person is rooted not only in nature but in what is *beyond* nature. Perhaps this is not the right way to put the matter; the idea remains rough. Perhaps it is better to say that the human person itself partakes of the other-than-human, that it is indeed boundaryless, an opening into the infinite space of the Other. One could, of course, talk about “spirit” as well. But why do so? What advantages might there be to rethinking the Principle of the Exclusion of Transcendence?

The first advantage, as suggested earlier, has to do with the possibility of exposing the operative assumptions that undergird contemporary scientific psychology, particularly in regard to its thoroughgoing naturalism and its tendency to privatize experience, to keep it within the confines of the subject. There is a curious situation to be acknowledged in this context. As Proudfoot (1986) has noted, many scholars of religion (e.g., Schleiermacher, Otto) have refused to allow “explanation” of religious and mystical experiences, essentially arguing that the subject’s own account must be privileged and dealt with on its own terms. According to Proudfoot, this refusal is problematic insofar as it seems to result in “a protective strategy that serves apologetic purposes” (p. 228). But along these same lines, is there not some sense in which the Principle of the Exclusion of Transcendence also serves a protective strategy, effectively ensuring that the doors to other possible frameworks of understanding remain closed? It might, of course, be argued in this context that scientific psychology is not simply “another framework,”

but a privileged one. This is perhaps why James, for instance, considers his own conviction in the reality of the “more” to be an over-belief but not his conviction in the reality of the subconscious. Is it possible that scientific psychology’s own faith commitments are preventing it from fully coming to terms with certain forms of experience?

The second advantage is more explicitly concerned with the way we understand human selfhood. Although the Principle of the Exclusion of Transcendence is generally understood to be methodological rather than ontological in nature, it is not clear that the two are wholly separable. By adhering to this methodological norm, it would seem, a certain form of ontology cannot help but be perpetuated: one that need not consider whether in fact human beings are anything more than interesting and complex organisms. Let me clear about this: it is quite possible that this is exactly what we are and that psychology is quite right to continue operating with this basic assumption. But it is also possible that mystical experience tells us something different. “(T)he ultimate message of the mystic about the nature of selfhood,” Dupré (1970) has written, “is that the self is *essentially* more than a mere self, that transcendence belongs to its nature as much as the act through which it is immanent to itself, and that a total failure on the mind’s part to realize this transcendence reduces the self to *less* than itself” (p. 104). There is no doubt but that Dupré is relying here on an over-belief. There are, however, some compelling reasons to entertain it that have nothing whatsoever to do with one’s religious commitments. As Dupré continues,

The general trend of our civilization during the last centuries has not been favorable to this message. Its tendency has been to reduce the self to its most immediate and lowest common experiences. But for this restriction we pay the price of an all-pervading feeling of unfulfillment and, indeed, dehumanization. Deprived of its transcendent dimension selfhood lacks the very space it needs for full self-realization. With its scope thus limited freedom itself becomes jeopardized. Within such a restricted vision any possibility of meaning beyond the directly experienced is excluded. (p. 104)

There is much in these passages to reflect upon. For present purposes, I simply wish to suggest that the “diagnosis” Dupré has offered may be worth examining. Remaining strictly within the scope of what is directly experienced may serve to privatize selfhood and to keep theoretical perspectives fundamentally ego-centric. It may also serve to perpetuate the kind of “aggressive anthropocentrism” of which Marcel had spoken. By conceptualizing experience and selfhood in more *ex*-centric terms, as I put it earlier, other perspectives, indeed other kinds of perspectives, may be opened up. If Dupré is correct in his view, this opening-up may be valuable not only for psychology but for the human beings it seeks to understand.

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