Chapter 1

Experience and Conceptualization in Mystical Knowledge

The comparative study of mysticism is, on its surface, a very different enterprise from philosophy of science. But what post-logical empiricist philosophers of science advance concerning the ways theories change and the role of concepts in observation parallels philosophical problems arising in the comparative examination of mystical knowledge. First, let us consider how mystical experiences differ from other experiences normally taken to be cognitive (knowledge-giving).

Mystical Experiences

Mystical ways of life are various systems of values, action-guides, and beliefs oriented around, in Ninian Smart's words, "an interior or introvertive quest, culminating in certain interior experiences which are not described in terms of sense-experience or mental images, etc."[1] Two types of mystical experiences result from concentrative techniques (which focus attention) and receptive techniques (which de-structure our normal conceptual frameworks that structure sensory stimuli).[2] The distinction between them is brought out more clearly not by possible distinctions between extrovertive and introvertive experiences (Walter Stace) or between monistic, theistic, and nature-mystical experiences (R. C. Zaehner),[3] but by a more fundamental distinction: experiences totally free of all conceptual and sensory content ("depth-mystical experiences") and others having some conceptual differentiation regardless of whether thought content or sensory stimuli are involved ("nature-mystical experiences").

The depth-mystical experiences result, to use medieval Christian depictions, from a radical "recollecting" of the senses and a "purging" of the mind of all dispositional and cognitive content—especially any sense of "I." The resulting one-pointedness produces a stillness of mind where all sensory-conceptual apparatuses are in total abeyance. But this state of imagelessness is not unconsciousness in the sense of a total lack of awareness. Instead this emptiness permits the pouring in of a positive experience. Although this experience is often characterized negatively, it is taken to be an implosion of what is normally judged by mystics to be the ultimate reality (a permanent, unchanging "power of being"), accompanied by a sense of objectivity, certainty, and usually finality. "Objectivity" here does not denote an object or the totality of objects since nothing open to sense experience is involved; rather it means that reality, not anything subjective (dependent upon the individual experiencer alone), is present. This reality will be referred to as "the mystical." Unlike the theoretical entities of science, the mystical can be directly experienced (i.e., brought into awareness). The experiencer does not *see* the mystical but *becomes* the reality behind surface appearances. Even to say "becomes" may mislead since, according to Advaita Vedānta's construal, we always *are* the reality. There is no apprehension *of* unity, no object of awareness as in sense experience and thought, but only the objectless awareness which itself is real.

Nature-mystical experiences involve a subject-object differentiation present in ordinary sense experience or thought. They need not be sensory; an experiential sense of the presence of, or union with, God involves a differentiation, as do experiences of love or joy. If we are conscious of being in a certain situation, a dualism is set up between ourselves and something else. Within the realm of sense experience, these mystical experiences involve a lessening of the grip concepts normally have in directing our attention to aspects of the flux of experiences. The extreme instance on the continuum of possible sensory nature-mystical experiences is a pure receptive mindfulness, that is, totally de-conceptualized sensory stimuli unmediated by any sense of independent entities. In all instances of nature-mystical experiences, there is a breakdown of differentiation (as with a sense of a subject merging with an object); however, even with a sense of union, of being one with the whole of reality, there is also a sense of different nexuses within the flow of becoming. The surface appearance of the world as composed of distinct, self-contained units is seen (at least for the duration of the experience) not to be ultimate reality but a misreading of the nature

of sensory data. Mystical freedom can be understood at least partially as a release from our conceptual cocoons to know things "as they really are."

The change involved in nature-mysticism is experiential, not just a change in understanding. The issue arises as to whether every concept within a theory affects or shapes every experience. In philosophy of science, it is debated whether Copernicus *saw* the same thing, with his switch from a geocentric to a heliocentric theory, that Ptolemy *saw* in watching the sun seemingly cross the sky.[4] But the emphasis upon experience in mysticism makes the claim reasonable that mystical knowledge involves an experiential change. Some mystical traditions make a distinction between two types of nature-mystical experiences: "sudden" enlightenment (in which a final and complete change in perspective occurs in one moment), and "gradual" enlightenment (in which a clarification of awareness occurs over time). However, an emphasis on experience is always there. The sensory stimuli remain the same but are structured to a lesser degree or in a new manner. Different facts then appear to the knower. One example of such a repatterning of knowledge is that one who knows reality (*tattvavit*) sees all work as being done by material constituents (*guṇas*) rather than by an additional "actor."[5] The switch in perspective while viewing a Gestalt figure also produces a new fact, and sometimes a new scientific point of view or mystical enlightenment is likened to this; but scientists and mystics do not concede that all perspectives are equally valid. The analogy, though, does help to explain the experiential nature of such knowledge, that is, that experiences change, not just our understanding of them, while the stimuli remain the same.

Any reality experienced nature-mystically is not the mystical of the depth-mystical experience. Plotinus's distinction between the One and Being (the totality of phenomena) makes this distinction.[6] The depth-mystical experience involves no sensory or mental content and is temporary. Nature-mystical experiences may be temporary, but it is possible for an inner transformation of the total person to occur which affects cognitive and dispositional structures and which thus implements nature-mystical experiences into one's life constantly. Various states of enlightenment seem to involve internalizing a nature-mystical experience in this way. Depth-mystical experiences may have such a transformation as an aftereffect.

Within each mystically enlightened way of life room must be made for both types of mystical experiences; yet, mystics value each type according to their goals and beliefs, and usually one type is val-

ued more than the other. For instance, the medieval Christian Richard Rolle valued the "ravishment without abstention from the senses" over the "rapture involving abstention from the bodily senses"; the later even sinners have, but the former is a rapture of love that goes to God.[7] A rapture without the senses may reach the ground of the individual self or of creation, but a sense of union is necessary to experience God. Thus a nature-mystical experience is valued by him over the depth-mystical experience. This contrasts with the release (*mokṣa*) of Advaita Vedānta. Here concentration (*samādhi*), leading to the stilling of all mental activity, is central, not any nature-mystical experience.

Concepts and Mystical Experiences

These evaluations of the status of the two types of mystical experiences lead to the issue of the role of concepts and beliefs in experiences and knowledge. A methodological assumption to be made here is that the depth-mystical experiences are of one type regardless of the understanding employed by individual mystics in different cultures and ages. It is an assumption since all that mystics can ever tell us is the interpretation of experience—we cannot in principle describe any experience bare of all understanding. And we cannot tell if all the symbols and other conceptualizations point to the same reality. It may be that any unusual experience will be taken to be "union with God," for example; thus little of the experiential content may be revealed by a descriptive concept alone. Although all experiences are private, still the assumption is suggested by the recurrence of certain terms in the descriptions of the depth-mystical and the fact that mystical teachers assume some experiences are of the same general type as their own enlightenment experience. This may be physiologically based, that is, whatever in our anatomy permits the occurrence of mystical experiences is the same in each individual regardless of other possible differences. Thus, when we are conditioned in the same way and all sensory-conceptual content is emptied from the mind, all people experience in the same manner.

In the case of nature-mystical experiences, concepts are absent only in the extreme sensory instance; in the other instances there is no reason not to assume that concepts play an active role in the experiences themselves, thereby producing a variety of such experiences as with ordinary experiences. The concepts inform the

experiences themselves, thereby producing a variety of nature-mystical experiences; the concepts are not applied in an event occurring after the experience. Ordinary sense experiences are part of the sensory-experiential continuum. Nature-mystical experiences may involve only less structuring, a loosening of the grip of concepts upon sensory stimuli permitting more "raw sensory data" to come through the mental and physical processing mechanisms.[8] Or new structuring elements may be applied as in the case of Theravāda Buddhist insight-meditation (*vipassanā*): here the conceptual component analyzing reality in terms of the list of components comprising the experienced world (the *dhammā*) would restructure our perceptions. The great variety of nature-mystical experiences extends even to theistic concept-guided experiences, assuming love and union with God are genuinely experienced rather than added after the event as interpretations of experiences.

Conceptual frameworks do not affect the depth-mystical experience itself (since the mind is emptied of anything conceptual), but would return to the mystic's mind only after the experience is over. The position that there are any genuinely concept-free experiences is controversial. In contemporary philosophy of science the logical empiricists' assumption that there are conceptually neutral sense data, which are only interpreted differently after an experience, has been replaced, if there is any concensus at all, with a Gestalt view of observation.[9] Likewise, concerning mystical experiences, Steven Katz believes there is no "pure" experience: the experience itself as well as its expression is shaped by the concepts which the mystic brings to the experience.[10] This seems to be true of nature-mystical experiences, since they are sensory or sensory-like experiences (although it is not obvious that there is no unmediated or unconditioned element to these experiences). But if the depth-mystical experience is truly void of all sensory and conceptual content (as mystics say), what is present in the experience which could structure it? Only if the epistemological position replacing the empiricist dogma itself becomes a dogma is the possibility of concept-free experience beyond consideration. All that is available are the reports of the mystics themselves which suggest (as the quotation from Saint Teresa of Avila presented below indicates) that the depth-mystical experience itself is devoid of all dualistic content. No experiments in this regard involving the depth-mystical experience are possible, and it is not clear why the currently fashionable assumption about dualistic experiences should be used to rule out any other type of allegedly cognitive experience. Certainly Katz has ad-

vanced no reasons to believe all purportedly cognitive experiences must be of one type.

If the experience alone is given central importance, the structuring elements for the depth-mystical experience (unlike for the nature-mystical variety) become no more than, in William James's phrase, "over-beliefs."[11] Even if this experiential element is identical in every instance of depth-mysticism, still the total mystical ways of life are not identical from culture to culture and era to era. Understanding the experience is necessary—an uninterpreted experience would be unintelligible—and the understanding will reflect in varying degrees the values and beliefs of the culture in which the individual mystic lives. Concepts, doctrines, and entailed knowledge-claims are the epistemological elements involved. Concepts are any human constructs for handling experiential or mental data. Concepts and beliefs are not experiences; but, as in the case of Gestalt figures, they can enter into the experiences themselves. To speak of "beliefs" may be misleading since persons in religious or mystical ways of life speak of what they know or what is true (from their point of view), not what they believe. Doctrines are explicit statements of the knowledge contained in a way of life; but many unstated beliefs about reality also are involved which, if made explicit, a believer would accept. Thus, maintaining that the Buddha escaped the cycle of rebirths upon his enlightenment commits the holder of that doctrine to the two following knowledge-claims: there is a cycle of rebirths and one can break out of the cycle. Such claims are abstractions not conveying the total way of life; yet, they are not distortive or reductive as such.

For depth-mystical experiences, conceptualizations are *interpretations,* that is, structures of understanding consciously formulated or unconsciously imposed upon experiences *after* their occurrence. During the depth-mystical experience, all differentiations are inoperative. Once the mystic returns to a normal subject-object state of mind, reflections upon alternative systems of understanding may occur; or, as is more often the case, the superimposition of the understanding of the tradition to which the mystic belongs may take place. Mystics see their experiences through concepts: the mystical becomes a conceptual object in ordinary awareness. But the mystical is deemed ineffable: concepts necessarily differentiate and so cannot mirror a reality that cannot be experienced in a subject-object differentiation. Mystics thus become more aware than most people that the concept is not the referent. Meister Eckhart makes the distinction between God and the idea of God,

and more generally he feels the soul, in coming into contact with "creatures," makes images (*Bilde*) and only gets back to things by means of these images which the soul itself has created.[12] For the depth-mystical, although giving descriptions is incompatible with having the experience, the descriptions do not necessarily distort or falsify: the mystical is not ineffable in the strongest sense of permitting no concepts to be more appropriately applied than any others, if the recurrence of some descriptive concepts (e.g., "nonduality" and "reality") is an indication. The sense of the importance of the mystical compels mystics to speak, and the claim to ineffability reduces to a stress upon the fact that the mystical's ontological status is not that of an object or the totality of objects.[13]

In nature-mystical states, the enlightened do still use concepts—only the idea of self-existent, permanent objects as referents is removed. Sense experiences and concepts are not abolished in the enlightened state but are transformed in that no distinct entities are seen; concepts are still utilized but are not taken as mirroring a world of independent entities.

Within this framework, usually mystics discuss their way of life, its values, its goal, and the reality involved. Construals of the mystical are in terms of the *reality* involved: mystics usually talk about God, ultimate realities, the self, and so on, rather than their own firsthand *experiences* of them, just as we normally talk about tables and chairs rather than our experiences of them. Mystical statements are no more about experiences than scientific statements are about sense experiences instead of planets and gravity. So too, mystical experiences, like scientific ones, are not seen as personal in the sense of being grounded subjectively rather than in reality. Mystical claims differ from ordinary empirical claims by degree because of the fundamental nature of the reality involved in mystical interpretations: mystical ontological claims are on a level of metaphysics (with the resulting difficulty in arriving at a consensus) rather than ordinary empirical claims. The discussions of the mystical are typically embedded in philosophies which are not explicit reflections upon mystical experiences or sets of scientific-like, tentative hypotheses advanced to explain the mystical. In addition, mystical systems do not involve theoretical entities, as does science; the mystical reality that is interpreted is alleged to be open directly to our experience. Mystical thinkers such as Śaṁkara and Plotinus do develop elaborate philosophies, albeit not absolutely systematic ones: such works as the *Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya* are a series of arguments, counterarguments, and replies. But the goal of mystical

ways of life is radically to end suffering or some other fundamental matter related to how we lead our lives and to our expectations upon death, not to fulfill a speculative philosophical interest. The mystics' concern is to see things as they really are and to live in accordance with that perception.

Mystical Knowledge

The general lack of discussion by mystics of their experiences has led to a problem with regard to the issue of the role of mystical experiences in mystical knowledge, that is, knowledge about the fundamental nature of reality following from mystical experiences. It is hard to distinguish those thinkers who have mystical experiences as part of their experiential background from those philosophers who advocate, for reasons other than those connected to mystical experiences, beliefs which also are defended by mystics. In fact, probably every claim asserted by a mystic has been advocated by nonmystics for other reasons. For instance, David Hume speaks of the unreality of a permanent individual self; Parmenides argues "all is one" for totally nonmystical reasons; Alfred North Whitehead's and G. W. F. Hegel's systems have been likened to those of mystics. Conversely, even the *Upaniṣads* arose out of Vedic speculation and it is difficult to identify at what point mystical experiences begin to inform the total conceptual system. Such mystical thinkers as Eckhart, Plotinus, and Śaṁkara have been portrayed as philosophers who rigorously followed their premises through to the conclusions: if God, the One, or Brahman is the ultimate reality, then nothing else is real, and so forth. No appeal to special experiences would be necessary.

Occasionally mystical experiences are mentioned. For example, Plotinus mentions in a letter that three times he had attained a state of selflessness.[14] But since these experiences are not given an explicit place in his philosophical writings it is not self-evident that they form an integral part of the total framework. The work of another Neoplatonist, Dionysius the Areopagite, also lacks specific mention of mystical experiences.[15] But it contains many elements suggesting such experiences: "ecstacy" is stepping outside oneself; the "unknowing" (*agnosia*) of mental content permitting a new positive knowledge and the "dazzling obscurity" in which one comes to know God certainly are in contrast with the "clear and distinct" Cartesian ideas of the rationalist epitemological ideal. Some mys-

tics are philosophers also, but their total systems form fairly integrated wholes, not a series of isolated claims to be judged individually, even if the degree of this integration is not as great as the assertions in scientific theories; and the parts interact to suggest at least indirectly (as in Dionysius's case) if mystical experiences are of importance.

Mystical knowledge is not knowing that something is the case (i.e., understanding a claim and having reason to acknowledge its truth) but is experiencing the reality involved. Some mystics do not even call this "knowledge" since it may be confused with dualistic knowledge (knowledge by a subject of a distinct object).[16] It is not that intellectual propositions are necessarily wrong but just that such dualistic understanding is not the required experience. Medieval Christian contemplatives drew the distinction between knowledge of divine things coming through consideration (*scientia*) and true wisdom (*sapientia*).[17] Or according to Eckhart, to know *about* God is not to know God. In Theravāda Buddhism, Narada is said to have the same knowledge as the enlightened Musila but not to have achieved enlightenment himself: he understood and accepted the requisite truths but had not experienced them (i.e., had not internalized the beliefs so that they became his dispositional and cognitive framework).[18] The analogy is then given of a thirsty traveler who looks at water but does not drink: he understands but is not saved. Only with the internalization of mystical knowledge do we see reality rightly and live accordingly (as defined by each tradition).

The Role of Beliefs and Experiences in the Development of Mystical Knowledge

Mystical experiences give knowledge only in the context of mystical systems. What is taken to be the *insight* combines elements from the experience and from the conceptual scheme. Any *post facto* interpretation may present itself with the same immediacy and certainty as the experience itself. For example, Saint Teresa of Avila says that during the "orison of union," the soul is "utterly dead to the things of the world and lives solely in God":

> If you, nevertheless, ask how it is possible that the soul can see and understand that she has been in God, since during the union she has neither sight nor understanding, I reply that she does not see it then, but that she sees it clearly later, after she has returned

> to herself, not by any vision, but by a certitude which abides with her and which God alone can give her.[19]

Understanding applied after the experience may seem as inseparable as any occurring within the experience itself—only a great effort could convince ourselves that we are wrong. We do not normally see experiences as concept-structured events or as experiences perceived through interpretative frameworks.

In this situation two errors may result concerning the role of both experiences and beliefs. One is to conclude that the experiences provide the interpretation in a simple, straightforward manner; the other is to conclude that the experiences add nothing to the belief-framework. With regard to the former, mysticism is sometimes taken as fulfilling the logical empiricist ideal: claims about the world are confirmed by experiences alone.[20] Focusing on only the depth-mystical experiences (and again assuming they are identical in experiential character), the fact that these experiences are open to widely different interpretations should convince us that the meaning of the mystics' claim does not come from (nor is confirmed simply by) the experiences alone. Some elements of a world-view are given in a mystical experience—a sense of fundamental reality involving nonduality—but no complete interpretation is given. Śaṁkara construes the nonduality in terms of the fundamental nature of all reality while in Śāṁkhya-Yoga the nonduality is related only to the isolation (*kaivalya*) of each of many individual subjects (*puruṣas*) from all matter (*prakṛti*). Even within Christian theistic interpretations variations exist: Eckhart sees it in terms of the isness common to creature and God; Saint John of the Cross speaks of a union with a difference, using the analogy of sunlight penetrating air; Saint Teresa of Avila accepts a union of wills only, not of substance. Thus, it would appear that all interpretations are our various efforts at understanding and are not dictated by these experiences.

The problem is not only the Kantian issue of how we can go from bare experiences to concepts, nor is it that experiential claims cannot entail claims about existence apart from the experience. More than these, the problem here is that experiences related to how we fundamentally construe reality are open to widely different interpretations. For instance, even if one argues that self-awareness (the awareness of one's own immediate state of awareness) is the one certain cornerstone of knowledge which we all have, still it is open to different interpretations. René Descartes takes

this awareness as evidence of a distinct, abiding, individual mental entity; the Buddha takes each act of consciousness to be separate and takes the notion of an enduring underlying self to be an unverified posit; for Śaṁkara self-awareness is the awareness constituting the ultimate reality underlying all subjects and objects. Nothing about mystical experiences, no matter how strong the sense of finality and certainty, places them in a privileged epistemological position distinct from this problem. No such experience carries with it its own interpretation. The conceptual element necessary for understanding comes from outside any one type of experience.

Thus, Ninian Smart is correct when he says that *nirvāṇa* allegedly involves the end of the cycle of rebirths and so cannot be defended simply by reference to meditative experiences.[21] Other mystics mention an end to desire, but mystics not raised with a belief in rebirth do not mention this more specialized feature. So, too, we must agree with Smart that the identification of the self (*ātman*) with the ground of "objective" reality (Brahman) in Advaita Vedānta comes not from inspecting the inner state of the mind or the mystical experience itself.[22] Similarly, branding ordinary experiences "illusions" also reflects nonexperiential judgments and reasons even if the claim appears to be given in the enlightenment experience itself. J. F. Staal notes that, although knowledge of Brahman is incompatible with ordinary awareness, preferring the nondual experience is itself an act of ordinary awareness since all knowledge and interpreting occurs in the ordinary state. Experiences are only decisive for becoming convinced of a doctrine's truth.[23]

Śaṁkara realized that the mystical experience could not establish its own interpretation: the Vedas are the final court of appeal with regard to the mystical—no experience is a means to correct knowledge (*pramāṇa*) in this area. The existence of Brahman is known on the ground that it is the self of everyone; Śaṁkara would go so far as to say it is impossible to deny that the self is apprehended because who would the denier be?[24] But the inquiry into the self is necessary because of the conflicting views of its specific nature.[25] Reason alone is incapable of demonstrating the nature of reality, as the contradictory theories based on reason reveal.[26] Nor would closer examination of the world validate any interpretation—the Vedas alone provide the right authority.

Śaṁkara's reliance on the Vedas and other mystics' denial of gaining knowledge in the mystical experience may lead some people to the other extreme mentioned above—giving full weight to the

conceptual scheme. All experiences are understood in light of beliefs previously developed in a culture, and so it can be argued that mystical experiences add nothing to the experiencer's knowledge of ultimate reality—the ideas are always derived from other sources. Thus, the experiences add nothing new but at best merely confirm in a circular manner whatever beliefs the mystic previously held. In utilizing the conceptual scheme of a culture and a religious tradition of the period, mystics have a ready-made framework to give intelligibility and meaning to the experience. These conceptual systems provide the correct understanding of the construction of reality as it has evolved for that tradition, and mystics normally evaluate and place their experiences as insights in accordance with them. Seldom do mystics deny the doctrines or authority of their religious faith; even visions and nature-mystical experiences reflect only what the experiencer is prepared to discover by cultural conditioning.

There are major problems with this position, however. Although no mystic withdraws totally from the cultural setting, there are degrees of independence—for example, Jacob Böhme versus Saint John of the Cross. So, too, some mystics such as Plotinus do attempt, albeit rarely, to devise a basically original system. In addition, if the mystics sense they have come to know what they only understood before, they will not accept their tradition uncritically: their attitude to the nonmystical elements of their tradition will be reoriented. They take over the conceptual system available to them but modify it to their needs. Thus, Śaṁkara, while accepting the Vedas as authoritative in matters related to Brahman, freely interprets them to fit his system: if a passage concurs with his system, he takes its literal sense; if it conflicts, the literal meaning is dismissed.[27] There is a circularity here with his own thought, not the Vedas, gaining central importance. A basically nonmystical text such as the Bible is handled by Christian mystics in a similar manner. Eckhart, for example, sees the story of Jesus cleansing the temple as a symbolic depiction of the mystical experience (Jesus entering) cleansing the soul (the temple) of sensory concerns (the money changers).[28] Jesus' significance is also reshaped: more is said of Jesus as the bridegroom of the soul than as a sacrificial lamb on the cross.

An even more important problem with this position is that giving all weight to doctrines conflicts with a more likely explanation of the history of thought—that experiences and doctrines develop influencing each other constantly. Even if one of the conflicting revelations of the world religions is correct and unaffected by previous

beliefs or by any experiences, still it must be understood in each era and culture—and this understanding will be shaped by experiences and beliefs (as with Śaṁkara). The authoritative beliefs accepted at any point are shaped by previous experiences and vice versa. The issue of which came first, beliefs or experiences, can be aptly likened to the situation of the chicken and the egg.[29] Mystical traditions evolve through interaction with religious and other ideas—mystics have some influence on nonmystical cultural phenomena and the latter influences different elements of mystical ways of life. Doctrines within mystical traditions also evolve. Mystical traditions may evolve more slowly than scientific theories, but they are not static.

Revolutions in mysticism such as Plotinus's do occur, but they are much rarer than in science. Mystics most often take their experiences as confirming the doctrines of their tradition. If the assumption that all depth-mystical experiences are identical is correct, this relative lack of revolutions is because the experiential contribution is constant. Mystics cannot run experiments which could pose problems for old views. Beliefs therefore exercise more control in the production of knowledge here than in science. Yet the lack of new experiential data does not rule out a radical change in the conceptual understanding. Depth-mystical experiences may appear as anomalies to believers who did not expect them; an adjustment in their understanding of the faith's doctrines and concepts would then be necessary. No new knowledge-claims need be revealed, but the understanding of the beliefs change. The beliefs may have previously appeared readily intelligible (e.g., "all is impermanent" or "everything is interconnected"), but they take on a new significance in mystical enlightenment, that is, with *seeing* that they are actually true of everything. Thus, mystics may fill some terms and expressions from their environment with different meanings—mystical concepts of "God," the "self," or whatever may not be commensurable with their nonmystical counterparts on the level of understanding in a way similar to how "mass," "space," and "time" for Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein may have identical referents but still differ in the understanding of the referred to reality. Or, "being" as a philosophical abstraction obtained by thinking of what is common to all entities may differ from the mystical concept "being" (the concrete content of mystical experiences).

A total break with the past is difficult, if not impossible. For example, Christian mystics—even Eckhart—were never very hostile to Christian doctrine but found it adaptable to their needs.[30] Sel-

dom do they introduce new terms as Eckhart did; more usually, the concepts behind old terms are altered. In science there are strands of continuity with the past in radical instances of originality, since new theories arise from reflection on the current state of knowledge and its anomalies. If the history of ideas can be likened to evolution, as is often done for science,[31] still it is a form of Lamarckian, not Mendelian, evolution, since the development is not random but involves the inheritance of evolutionally valuable traits each generation acquires in adapting to its cultural environment. Thus, the history of Buddhism can be seen as a series of reactions and counterreactions to earlier developments.[32] Indeed, there are no "pure" religious traditions—every religion and every religious person is influenced by at least some other religious and nonreligious traditions. This bears upon the issue of commensurability: concepts such as "God" evolve and, although the understanding two thinkers have of the concepts may conflict, any tradition as a whole evolves through mystical and nonmystical contributions. Therefore general agreement on many concepts may result in a tradition.

Mystics' Interest in Doctrines

Before turning to the issue of the role of beliefs and experiences in justifying mystical claims, two preliminary points must be made. First, J. F. Staal's claim that mystics "are not interested in doctrines" must be refuted.[33] For Staal, the experience is all that is of importance; the added religious and philosophical conceptual superstructure is worthless if not meaningless.[34] Others make the joy and excitement of the experience everything; the different, conflicting "over-beliefs" at best aid in leading people to the experiences. According to this position, debates over doctrines or the nature of mystical experiences are pointless; inducing these experiences is all that matters, and whatever leads to being free of desire and of a sense of self is correct. The experiences are ends in themselves and the only value.

Some mystics may be interested only in the enjoyment of experiences, but this position does not reflect the interest of most classical mystics as it appears in their writings: total ways of life most often are central. Nor should we confuse the difficulties which arise in expressing mystical insights, because of the sense of otherness, with a lack of interest in them. Nor should the fact that an experience is required, rather than an intellectual acceptance of a

knowledge-claim, be construed as a necessary denial of the claim itself. Mystics discuss seeing things as they really are. Even in discussing any experience, the reality that is supposedly involved (along with its nature) is a component. For example, in the case of the sun, the important scientific issues arise on a level above whatever common stimulus Copernicus and Ptolemy might receive; their understanding of the nature of the sun is what is important. The sun "as it really is" is not a set of subjective sensations free of all understanding; it really is the center of our solar system, a celestial orb circling an unmoving earth, or whatever, not just a bundle of our experiences (assuming some form of realism is correct). No one would say the experience, in that context, is all that is of importance. So, too, with mystics: their interest is in knowing how reality is actually constructed with regard to the mystical in order to fulfill their goals in life.

Doctrines go to the core of a mystical tradition, even to shaping nature-mystical experiences. Getting an accurate view of the relationship of the mystical to the rest of reality is important, too, for the other components of the way of life. How we act depends in part on how we see the world. The Brahmanical priests and Western scientists not only view the sun differently but also differ significantly in how they act regarding it: the Vedic ritual necessary to maintain the course of the universe was an essential element in the way of life in classical India but would be absurd in the context of modern society. How people value mystical experiences and place them within their way of living also differ. Usually concerns other than the experience itself are placed more centrally. For all medieval Christian mystics, mystical experiences may be a foretaste of what will occur upon death, but these experiences do not achieve that future state nor are they the basis of belief; instead mystical cultivation is only a way of loving God and of improving charity. For Theravāda Buddhists, a radical end to the suffering inherent in the cycle of rebirths is the only concern; for this, having an insight into the unsatisfying and substanceless nature of experienced reality and subsequently undergoing a permanent transformation of character is required, not enjoying any temporary experience and returning to the old condition. Different mystics not only hold different beliefs but also lead different lives.[35] Even if all mystics concurred upon knowledge-claims, expectations upon death, how to deal with others, and goals, this doctrinal component still could not be ignored. Living in accordance with how things really are, not feelings derived from isolated experiences, is what mystics deem important.[36]

"All Mysticism is One"

The other preliminary point is to refute the idea that all mystics really say the same thing regardless of different cultural expressions, that is, all mystics ultimately have one doctrine. Frithjof Schuon, standing in the tradition of perennial philosophy, contrasts the colorless essence of pure luminosity of the esoteric core with the distinct colors of the various exoteric traditions and symbols which manifest the esoteric.[37] Once we distinguish the symbol from the symbolized, the "container" from the "content," we shall see that truth is ultimately one and is only expressed differently. For instance, all spatial metaphors used for the mystical—the mystical stands "behind," "above," "below," or "through" phenomena—mean the same thing. Or the mystical is "being" while phenomena are "nonbeing" means the same as the mystical is "nonbeing" (or "nothing") while phenomena are "something": that the mystical is wholly other than phenomena and more real are the common points. The difference in terminology can be predicted once the total cultural context is seen. A variation of this position is that different exoteric configurations of practices and beliefs do not say the same thing but are complementary paths, all leading to the same esoteric truth. Each tradition is a different approach emphasizing different features; each is equally legitimate and each is equally incomplete. Ultimately, the mystical is either indescribable (with different conceptualizations dealing with different manifestations) or, if describable as it is in itself, the correct interpretation of the mystical as literally as possible is this: one reality immanent in all phenomena, having personal and nonpersonal aspects, with something in each soul joined to or identical with it; our final goal is to recognize this immanent and transcendent reality.[38]

However, if we compare this with what mystics actually say, we see that such a position is normative in two ways. One is that this interpretation of the mystical is only one scheme among many alternatives: it cannot be deduced from various theistic and nontheistic mystical claims. Second, to assert that all religions say the same thing cannot be deduced from the mystics' claims. That the relation between mystical traditions is that of clear light to colored light is an analogy that cannot simply be assumed as self-evident but must be positively argued. The dogmatic nature of Schuon's position becomes obvious when he must dismiss rebirth—a belief resulting, he says, in "some Hindu sects" through a "literalist interpretation of the Scripture"—because it would disprove all

monotheism.[39] There also are methodological problems here: some diverse symbols may be symbolizing one reality, but can all mystical concepts that seem to contradict each other (e.g., Sāṁkhya-Yoga and Advaita Vedānta on the nature of the self) be treated so? We would be inclined to think of the differences as merely superficial only if we assumed in advance that there is an esoteric unity. We would need to read all the texts through a certain normative perspective.

On what grounds could we conclude, rather than assume *a priori,* that there really is commonality between traditions? It cannot be upon the assumption alone that there is one common depth-mystical experience since, as argued above, mystics take doctrines as central. D. T. Suzuki says, because of this common ground, "terminology is all that divides us [Buddhists and Christians] and stirs us up to a wasteful dissipation of energy."[40] But his religious interpretation becomes apparent when he adds that Christianity is laden with all sorts of "myths and paraphernalia" and ought to be denuded of this "unnecessary historical appendix."[41] To dismiss differences in understanding of the mystical because of the common experiential component would be as unwarranted here as maintaining that the common sensory element in Copernicus's and Ptolemy's perceptions of the sun is sufficient to discredit any divergences between their points of view. In terms familiar since Gottlob Frege, the reference of the terms may be the same but the sense provided by the conceptual background diverges substantially. The variety of nature-mystical experiences would also have to be taken into account.

Arguing that all mystical ways of life are ultimately the same because the same ultimate reality is involved will not succeed either. This is based upon an assumption with regard to the mystical. But even if it is correct, still this would be equivalent to arguing that Copernicus and Ptolemy are actually saying the same thing (i.e., their surface differences are only symbols of an esoteric truth) because a common reality is involved. Even if there were some such esoteric truth, we have no reason to believe that Copernicus and Ptolemy had it in mind: Copernicus's conceptual divergence from Ptolemy was intended. Also, we have no reason outside the normative position of perennial philosophy to think the diversity of mystical claims is not also intended. The mystical ways of life are still based on specific conceptions of the mystical and thus would diverge accordingly.

Another avenue might be to find an abstract doctrine to which all mystics would adhere. The problem here is twofold. First, find-

ing a common core of doctrine is very difficult. Consider Sāṁkhya-Yoga and Advaita Vedānta again on the self: for the former there is a plurality of selves distinct from matter; for the latter the one self is the ultimate reality of every phenomenon. Theists and nontheists disagree over the nature of mystical experiences in a fundamental way—whether the experiencer is identical with the mystical or is united in either substance or will while our "creaturehood" remains intact, whether the mystical experience involves God, and so forth. Whether there is a neutral criterion for selecting one doctrine is highly unlikely. For example, Evelyn Underhill's seemingly innocent definition of mysticism as the "art of union with Reality" has two built-in assumptions: the mystical is ultimate reality and the process is one of uniting.[42] With regard to the latter, Advaitins would disagree: nothing is brought about—only our ignorance of the fact we have always been Brahman is overcome. Sāṁkhya-Yogins also would disagree: the isolation of selves from matter is effected, not any union.

Furthermore, it is one matter to use general terms for classes of concepts ("the mystical," "mystical experience"); it is another matter to say any general term conveys the total interpretation of specific mystics. There is no abstract mysticism but only concrete mystics and traditions. Mystics could adopt a concept of a watered-down "absolute" as an adequate interpretation, but historically none has done so. Even Zen has more specific Mahāyāna concepts inextricably interwoven within it. All mystics' conceptions of the mystical cover more than simply describing an experience and, through connections to other aspects of their ways of life, the conceptions entail more knowledge-claims than a commitment to a vague "absolute." Thus, Śaṁkara's Brahman is ultimately nonpersonal and the only reality. A more abstract mystical that encompasses more but is more vague would not satisfy his total set of commitments.

In philosophy of science, a debated issue is whether we can totally isolate theory from neutral descriptions of experiences. It may be possible here to determine a description of the depth-mystical experience which is neutral to all more doctrinal interpretations. That is, it will still be theory-laden[43] but laden with a theory neutral to all doctrinal interpretations in the way "celestial orb" would be neutral to Copernicus's and Ptolemy's use of the term "sun." This may be difficult to accomplish. For example, Agehananda Bharati claims that Advaita gives the uninterpreted content of the mystical experience.[44] Assuming the Advaita account is in fact the descrip-

tion of some experience, nevertheless the identification of the self with the ground of reality is more than a simple description of an experience: it is an interpretation which would not seem obvious to followers of those traditions not committed to an ontology of absolute nonduality. A sense of having come into contact with a fundamental, undeniable reality (James's "noetic quality") is usually given in the experience, but these differences reveal that no complete interpretation of the mystical is dictated by the experience itself. No complete interpretation is a minimal description of what occurs, impervious to error. None is anything other than theory-laden in the stronger sense of being integrated into more elaborate conceptual systems which give meaning to the concepts. A scientific concept has been likened to a "knot in a web," the strands of which are the propositions that make up a theory; the meaning of each concept is determined by the strands coming into that knot and by the other knots to which it is directly or indirectly connected.[45] This is true of mystical ways of life, too: concepts gain meaning in the context of the doctrinal system which gives meaning to each utterance; some concepts may be more closely related to experiences than others, but it is the complete system that gives meaning to the parts—even to the experiences themselves. For example, rebirth is not a concept that can be simply tacked on to a world-view: it changes our view of the nature of a person, replaces the uniqueness of one life and the idea of eternal post mortem existence, and may affect how we treat other people. Thus, a switch to this view would have wider repercussions within a totally integrated way of life and for how we believe things really are constructed.

Eckhart's "God," the Theravādins' "*nibbāna,*" and Śaṁkara's "Brahman" are all concepts which gain their significance within the context of elaborate religious systems. Correlating them would be no more successful than was the quickly abandoned Chinese Buddhist *ko-i* method of translating Buddhist terms by means of Taoist ones. Even if the same term is used (e.g., terms translated "self"), they may have no common concept behind them; even if the referent of each is the same, the referential and theoretical aspects of concepts cannot be conflated. Common features—overcoming a sense of duality and of self—may appear similar in isolation but not in their total contexts. Many of Eckhart's remarks sound like translations of Śaṁkara's: such phrases as "the essence of ignorance is to superimpose finiteness upon God and divinity upon the finite," "the all-inclusive One without a second, without distinction, not this, not that," and "isness-in-itself is identically unrestricted knowledge"

have very similar counterparts in Śaṁkara's commentaries.[46] However, there are significant differences in their total conceptual systems and ways of life; for example, for Eckhart, there is a point in the soul that remains a creature—the soul's isness is God's isness but there is no final complete identity as with Śaṁkara's system. For Plotinus, too, there is no identity of the soul with the One even in the depth-mystical experience where the soul and the One are as indistinguishable as the centers of two coinciding circles. From each mystic's point of view, there may be something valuable in other systems, but it is vitiated by its placement within a faulty conceptual framework. To use an Indian saying, the milk in itself is pure, but it becomes useless when poured into a bag of dogskin.[47]

The variant position that each conceptual system is an equally legitimate complement can also be seen to be a normative stance at variance with the position of most classical mystics. *Prima facie* conflicting claims could be treated as complements only if the claims are viewed by their holders as incomplete, tentative, and inadequate. But classical mystics usually do not do so; they see their tradition's account as absolutely certain, if not exhaustive. The lack of any tentativeness is a central feature. Despite their disclaimers about the applicability of language to the mystical, their writings indicate overwhelmingly that they feel something can be said accurately concerning the mystical and that they have done so while other mystics have not. Even if the mystical depth is not completely fathomable by the intellect, they consider themselves the enlightened in this matter. Their word is the end of the matter, and the claims are not open to rejection in the future. They claim that, if we test the situation for ourselves, we shall come to the same conclusions they reached. In addition, the knowledge-claims are about the same subject (such as the self), and each is taken as fundamental and as complete as possible. To that extent, the situation is like the conflict between the classical Copernican and Ptolemaic theories, not like the wave and particle models of contemporary quantum physics. This is not a case of taking inexact language overly seriously: there are genuine fundamental conflicts on the issues. As with Śaṁkara arguing against the Sāṁkhya-Yogins and the Buddhists in the *Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya,* in general, mystics in one tradition think those in other traditions are mistaken in some fundamental account of a subject.

A position of conflict is the only one that describes the classical mystics' position. It is the only one deducible from their sense of cer-