

Establishing Foundations: Ladders and Laughing Gas, Phantoms and Fathers

The series of coincidences that could not be explained, the meetings with these strange people who seemed to be pieces of a jigsaw puzzle; all these things served to show my doubting mind a truth that could not be denied—there are laws governing our existence about which we have no understanding at all. Our lives are ruled by forces which, although invisible and intangible, have power greater than anything that can be seen or experienced in the physical world.

—Reshad Feild, *The Last Barrier*

You must not rest satisfied with the repeated oft-broken echo of that original sound. You must transport yourselves into the interior of a pious soul and seek to understand its inspiration. In the very act, you must understand the production of light and heat in a soul surrendered to the Universe. Otherwise you learn nothing of religion.

—Frederick Schleiermacher, *On Religion*

Expanding the Boundaries of the Mystical

Given the importance of William James to the fields of psychology, philosophy, and religious studies, it is astonishing that there has never been any focused, indepth examination of his decades-long fascination with mysticism. By far the best place to begin this investigation is with *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.¹ The centrality of mysticism in the *Varieties* is evident: several times in the course of this work, James postpones answering important theoretical questions until the chapter on mysticism, which according to James is “the vital chapter from which the other chapters get their light.”² But James’s discussion of mysticism in the *Varieties* is not just limited to this “vital” chapter. Instead, James’s fascination with mysticism pervades the entire book. This fascination is, however, easy to miss because it seems, on the face of it, that James’s focus is on religious experiences, not

mystical experiences per se. However, a closer look at the text reveals that the *religious* experiences that James spends so much time examining in the *Varieties* are also, at least from his perspective, *mystical* experiences.

It is easy to miss this interconnection between “religious experience” and “mystical experience” in James’s thought. James himself never overtly comments on the intimate connection between mystical experiences and religious experiences in the *Varieties*, and so it is easy to assume that, for James, mystical experiences are a subset of the broader category of religious experiences in general (which is how mysticism is typically understood today). If mystical experiences were understood in this way by James, then most of the *Varieties* would not, in fact, directly apply to his understanding of mysticism, because James’s explicit focus in the *Varieties* is on religious experiences. However, James had a unique conception of what should or should not be designated as “mystical.” Unlike the contemporary tendency to limit the term “mystical” to a rather narrow band of unitive states of consciousness, James saw “mystical experiences” as encompassing a broad and fluid spectrum of mental states, ranging from deep poetic insight, déjà vu, ghostly visitations, and psychedelic experiences to the more overtly religious ecstasies and unitive experiences. From James’s perspective, while certain mystical experiences are “religious,” other mystical experiences are not (at least overtly). Therefore (and here the plot thickens), the category of “mystical experience” for James is actually in some ways *wider* and *more* inclusive than the category of “religious experience”—not the reverse. For instance, James might say that an uprush of creative insight is “mystical,” and that sensing a “presence” in a room is “mystical,” and that a state of altered consciousness brought on by drugs is also “mystical,” but none of these experiences would be seen by James as overtly “religious.” Conversely, he would say that very mild and diffuse religious experiences, such as feelings of consolation, protection, or an increased understanding of scripture, are religious *if the person attributes these experiences to the influence of a transnatural source*, but they would not necessarily be termed “mystical” by James.

However, these two basically separate categories (“mystical experience” and “religious experience”) at times can and do intersect; they do so in the category of “religious mysticism,” a highly potent subset of religious experiences in general—the mystical experiences that James claims are at the “root and centre”³ of religious experience. Therefore, while not all mystical experiences can accurately be called religious, and not all religious experiences can be considered mystical,

all *powerful* religious experiences are mystical for James, and these are the types of experiences that fill the pages of the *Varieties*. The “varieties” of religious experiences that James is interested in exploring in the *Varieties* are typically not prosaic, “nonmystical” religious experiences. James, for specific methodological reasons, is primarily interested in investigating those experiences that are vivid, powerful, and extreme—experiences that are clearly “mystical” in James’s expanded sense of the term. It is crucially important to recognize this congruence between religious experiences and mystical experiences in the *Varieties*. If this connection is not kept in mind, it is easy to overlook the fact that while James’s theories may appear to deal only with *religious* experience, they almost always *also* are applicable to his discussion of *mystical* experience.

But what exactly is it that makes an experience “mystical” for James?⁴ In the *Varieties*, James gives us some clues. In the chapter that is specifically focused on mysticism, James states that he limits the term “mystical experiences” to those experiences that have four particular qualities.

The first mark of what characterizes a mystical experience for James is *ineffability*. According to James, people who have mystical experiences find, after returning to an ordinary state of awareness, that it is impossible to express adequately what occurred to them during their mystical experience. They discover that words do not accurately reflect the richness and depth of that experience. Their descriptions are simply not adequate; these descriptions neither correctly represent what was experienced, nor do they allow others to share in any meaningful way what the experiencer personally and directly perceived. James points out that in this way, mystical experiences are more closely aligned to “feelings” than they are to concepts, in that feelings are directly experienced.

It is crucial to point out at this juncture that James is not equating mystical experience and emotion. As we will investigate more fully in chapter 2, “feeling” is a highly nuanced technical term for James, and encompasses much more within its boundaries than just “emotion.” Admittedly, however, mystical experiences are at least homologous to emotional states for James, in that there is an immediacy and depth to both types of experiences that has to be personally experienced and which cannot be adequately reflected in words. As James points out, people really only know what love feels like when they have been in love themselves, and in the same way, the depth of mystical experiences are also only truly known to people who themselves have had mystical experiences.

The second mark of a mystical experience for James is its *noetic quality*. Even though James has just noted the similarity of mystical experiences to “states of feeling,” he points out that they are *also* often described as “states of knowledge.”⁵ For James, mystical experiences “are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance . . . and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time.”⁶ James is not being careless when he affirms that mystical experiences can simultaneously be both states of “feeling” and states of “knowledge.” This integration of “feeling” and “knowledge” is based on an epistemological distinction that James articulates in his earlier work, *The Principles of Psychology*. In the *Principles*, James discusses the differences between two types of knowing: “knowledge about” and “knowledge by acquaintance.” “Knowledge about” is discursive knowledge; it is the publicly accessible, rationally articulated, conceptually mediated knowledge of something. On the other hand, “knowledge by acquaintance” is nondiscursive knowledge; it is the immediately received, intuitively understood, perceptually based “is-ness” of something. Although post facto these two types of knowledge can be reflectively separated from each other, in actuality, they interact in every concrete moment of knowing. “Knowledge by acquaintance” provides the “raw data” that “knowledge about” then refines and elaborates upon with its conceptual, linguistic and cultural categories. “Feelings,” for James, are particularly good examples of this synthesis of “knowledge by acquaintance” and “knowledge about”; they are not just emotive, but also are cognitive—they are “states of knowledge.” To the extent that mystical experiences are also combinations of these two types of knowledge (a claim that will need to be carefully investigated in chapter 2), they can be understood, without contradiction, as being both “states of feeling” (emotive) and “states of knowledge” (cognitive), since feelings themselves are also simultaneously emotive and cognitive.

The final two marks of what characterizes a mystical experience for James are *transiency* and *passivity*. James claims that these two characteristics are less crucial to a proper understanding of the phenomenology of mystical experience than the previous two marks (ineffability and noetic quality). This reluctance to make transiency and passivity universal characteristics of mystical experience was, in retrospect, a wise decision. James’s information on non-Christian mystical traditions was extremely limited, and this lacuna negatively affects his discussion of these two characteristics.⁷ For instance, in the section which deals with the apparent transiency of mystical experiences, James

points out that mystical experiences cannot be sustained for long, an hour or two at best. While this observation might accurately reflect the information James had available at the time (information drawn primarily from Protestant conversion narratives), it certainly does not take into account the numerous narratives by mystics in (for instance) Zen, Sufism, and Hinduism, who claim to have achieved a permanent alteration of consciousness, a plateau of superconscious awareness that the mystic rests in while going about his or her life in the everyday world. Therefore, James's emphasis on the transient nature of mystical experience is, at best, only partially accurate, and at worst (as will become apparent in chapter 5), undermines his understanding of the crucial interrelationship that exists between mysticism and saintliness.

James's discussion on the transiency of mystical experience does, however, contain some helpful (if relatively terse) insights. For instance, after he points out that the vividness of a mystical experience tends to fade in the memory of the mystic after he or she comes back to everyday awareness, James goes on to mention, almost as an aside, that if the mystic has more than one experience, then it is possible that he or she might begin to notice a continuity in the various experiences, and that in some cases the experiences might even seem to develop and become richer and more significant to the mystic.

This very brief mention of mystical experiences as part of an ongoing process is in vivid contrast to James's primary emphasis on those mystical experiences that come unexpectedly, that seem to explode in the person's awareness with little or no warning or preparation. These spontaneous and sporadic mystical experiences, which were a hallmark of the Protestant conversion process in James's time, form the bulk of the narratives of vivid religious experiences in the *Varieties*. There are a few exceptions: James somewhat wistfully mentions that compared to Catholicism with its disciplined practice of meditations designed to unite the soul with God, Protestantism has perhaps left behind something of value. James comments that "it is odd that Protestantism, especially evangelical Protestantism, should seemingly have abandoned everything methodical in this line. Apart from what prayer may lead to, Protestant mystical experience appears to have been almost exclusively sporadic."⁸ James also notes that "Hindus, Buddhists, Mohammedans, and Christians all have cultivated [mystical experiences] methodically," and goes on to describe, very briefly, the Hindu "training in mystical insight" or yoga, where the disciple by "diet, posture, breathing, intellectual concentration, and moral discipline" can gain an "experiential union . . . with the divine" by entering into "*samādhi*," a "superconscious state."⁹ He even includes a

short, if rather obscure, description of different stages of Buddhist *dhyāna* and a surprisingly long passage from the autobiography of Al-Ghazzali, a Persian Islamic mystic and philosopher. But on the whole, James's attention in the *Varieties* is focused primarily on those mystical experiences which appear spontaneously, rather than on those that occur as part of a disciplined spiritual life.

Interestingly, however, for James there ultimately is little difference between mystical experiences that arrive unexpectedly and those that are methodically cultivated. In his discussion of *passivity*, the fourth mark of what constitutes a mystical experience, James points out that:

Although the oncoming of mystical states may be facilitated by preliminary voluntary operations, as by fixing the attention, or going through certain bodily performances . . . 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.¹⁰

In the age-old discussion about the relative merits of "grace" or "self-effort" (a discussion that has certainly not been limited to Christianity), James, in the final analysis, stresses the priority of grace. For James, the various spiritual disciplines such as meditation, breathing exercises, visualizations, and so forth, simply prepare the way for the onset of a mystical experience that may or may not happen; he emphasizes that a mystical experience cannot be "forced" into consciousness by these various spiritual techniques. According to James, the purpose of these "voluntary operations" is, ironically, to short-circuit the ability of aspiring mystics to perform voluntary actions. Spiritual techniques strip the would-be mystics of their sense of self, and this dissolution of the boundaries that define that self opens up the possibility of an influx of heightened awareness from a transnatural source.

James recognizes that, in many ways, mystical experiences, at least on the surface, seem quite similar to several "psychical" phenomena, such as "alternative personality, . . . prophetic speech, automatic writing, or the mediumistic trance,"¹¹ in that individuals undergoing both mystical and psychical experiences believe that a "higher" or "deeper" power is initiating and ultimately controlling the process. But he also emphasizes that, unlike psychical phenomena, which often are not remembered once the subject returns to ordinary consciousness and which may not have any lasting impact on the psychic's everyday life, mystical states of awareness "are never merely interruptive. Some memory of their content always remains, and a profound

sense of their importance. They modify the inner life of the subject between the times of their recurrence."¹²

However, it is important not to be deceived by James's apparent theoretical separation between mystical and psychical phenomena. James also repeatedly emphasizes that the differences between mystical and psychical phenomena are often difficult to detect in the actual narratives of the lives of mystics. These two categories ("mystical" and "psychical") are simply not rigidly demarcated for James; for instance, there are many times in his writings that James will use the label "mystical" to refer to phenomena that he more typically would put under the category of "psychical," for example, the sense of a ghostly presence or a medium's clairvoyant knowledge. While this blurring of the boundaries between what is "mystical" and what is "psychical" may, at times, be based on a careless use of terminology by James, it is just as likely that his liberty with the terms "mystical" and "psychical" is rooted in his awareness of how many spiritual experiences are typically a complex fusion of both psychical and mystical components.

An Unseen Definition of Mystical Experience

Even though it may appear that James's detailed discussion of the most common characteristics of mystical experiences (i.e., the four "marks" of ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity) is a definition of mystical experience, in actuality, this discussion is not so much a definition as it is a phenomenological description of the most widely found qualities in most mystical experiences. However, a close investigation of James's work on mysticism as a whole does reveal an *implicit* definition of mystical experience. Mystical experiences for James (I will claim) are *experiences of powerful, transformative, personally interpreted, contacts with transnatural realities*.

First, every mystical experience, in James's sense of the term, must be *experiential*. That is, mystical experiences are first hand events; they are "seen," "felt," and "intuited" far more than they are "read about," "thought through," or "believed."

Second, mystical experiences, according to James, are also *powerful*. An experience is "mystical" if it is intensely felt, highly charged, and profoundly significant. As was pointed out above, religious experiences are "mystical" only if they have a particular level of potency. Having a nice warm feeling of thankfulness to God or to Amida Buddha does not qualify as a mystical experience. Further, nonreligious

experiences must also live up to this specification. For example, being mildly high on drugs or alcohol would not be a mystical experience, according to this definition.

Third, not only are genuine mystical experiences experiential and powerful, they must also, from James's perspective, be *transformative*—they can and should revolutionize a person's (and ideally a community's) life. For instance, James notes that religious conversion experiences are almost always mystical because of their ability to radically transform the way people understand their world and themselves. By the same token, non-religious experiences are "mystical" only if they succeed in significantly altering a person's worldview. For instance, simply noticing a new detail in Picasso's *Guernica* would not qualify as a mystical experience, but having a revelatory insight into the hidden meaning of *Guernica* that catalyzes a radically new way of perceiving the world *would* qualify as a mystical experience.

Finally, mystical experiences for James involve *personally interpreted contacts with transnatural realities*. James is not a reductionist. Even though he does recognize the complex ways in which our bodies, minds, and cultural backgrounds influence the final makeup of every mystical experience, he also insists that mystical experiences are more than simply an amalgam of physiological, psychological, or sociological factors. For James, mystical experiences are important sources of data on the existence of realms of reality or dimensions of consciousness that exceed (even while interpenetrating) our everyday "natural" reality or our typical waking consciousness. The existence of these "unseen worlds" is not dogmatically affirmed by James, and he is certainly no ardent defender of any particular description of the contours of the "landscape" and "scenery" of these worlds or levels of awareness; but he does feel that these experiences are best understood as a dynamic interaction of two factors: a transnatural source (or sources) and a person's interpretative framework (which is structured and generated by his or her subjective interests, as well as various physiological and sociological factors). James claims that the phenomenology of these experiences always indicates an "otherness" within the experience, even if that "otherness" is understood as a deeper level of one's own being.

James's Mystical Germ

James believed in the reality of unseen worlds and was convinced that mystical experiences served a vitally important personal

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and social function, yet his sympathetic and receptive investigation of mysticism was honed by a keen critical awareness. He did not take the claims of the mystics at face value, and he was a virulent opponent of any sort of dogmatic certainty—whether “mystical” or “scientific.” But James did take the accounts of mystical experiences seriously, and he believed that the metaphysical and theological claims made by different mystics provided vivid and suggestive hypotheses about the nature of reality.

Although James was fascinated by mysticism, James himself was not a mystic, that is, he was not someone who had frequent and profound mystical experiences. As he stated in a letter written in 1904 to Prof. James H. Leuba:

My personal position is simple. I have no living sense of commerce with a God. I envy those who have, for I know that the addition of such a sense would help me greatly. The Divine, for my active life, is limited to impersonal and abstract concepts which, as ideal, interest and determine me, but do so but faintly in comparison with what a feeling of God might effect, if I had one. This, to be sure, is largely a matter of intensity, but a shade of intensity may make one's whole centre of moral energy shift. Now, although I am so devoid of *Gottesbewusstsein* in the directer and stronger sense, yet there is *something in me* which *makes response* when I hear utterances from that quarter made by others. I recognize the deeper voice. Something tells me:—‘thither lies truth’—and I am sure it is not old theistic prejudices of infancy. Those in my case were Christian, but I have grown so out of Christianity that entanglement therewith on the part of a mystical utterance has to be abstracted from and overcome, before I can listen. Call this, if you like, my mystical germ. It is a very common germ. It creates the rank and file of believers.¹³

James's “mystical germ” appears to have been nurtured by a few personal experiences that could certainly, in James's sense of the word, be called mystical. One of these experiences occurred in 1898. James was in the Adirondack Mountains, one of his favorite spots in which to escape from the pressures and demands of both domestic and academic life. He had climbed for five hours up New York's highest peak, the 5,344 foot Mt. Marcy; after hearing the sounds of axes in the valley below, he hiked for another hour to Panther Lodge Camp, where he met a group of young female college students. That night on the slopes of Mt. Marcy, sleep eluded him. Writing afterwards in a letter to his wife Alice, he describes the powerful “state of spiritual alertness” that gripped him that night. He goes on to write:

Exploring Unseen Worlds

The influences of Nature, the wholesomeness of the people round me . . . the thought of you and the children, . . . the problem of the Edinburgh lectures [the basis for the *Varieties*], all fermented within me until it became a regular Walpurgis Nacht. I spent a good deal of it in the woods, where the streaming moonlight lit up things in a magical checkered play, and it seemed as if the Gods of all the nature-mythologies were holding an indescribable meeting in my breast with the moral Gods of the inner life. The two kinds of Gods have nothing in common—the Edinburgh lectures made quite a hitch ahead. The intense significance of some sort, of the whole scene, if one could only *tell* the significance; the intense inhuman remoteness of its inner life, and yet the intense *appeal* of it; its everlasting freshness and its immemorial antiquity and decay; its utter Americanism, and every sort of patriotic suggestiveness, and you, and my relation to you part and parcel of it all, and beaten up with it, so that memory and sensation all whirled inexplicably together; it was indeed worth coming for, and worth repeating year by year, if repetition could only procure what in its nature I suppose must be all unplanned for and unexpected. It was one of the happiest lonesome nights of my existence, and I understand now what a poet is. He is a person who can feel the immense complexity of influences that I felt, and make some partial tracks in them for verbal statement. In point of fact, I can't find a single word for all that significance, and don't know what it was significant of, so there it remains, a mere boulder of *impression*. Doubtless in more ways than one, though, things in the Edinburgh lectures will be traceable to it.¹⁴

James's assessment seems correct; much of his discussion of mysticism in the *Varieties* is indeed implicit in this letter describing his "Walpurgis Nacht" experience. For instance, James insists that the experience could not be adequately described, yet he also maintains that it contained complex, if impossible to articulate, strands of knowledge (i.e., it was ineffable and noetic). The experience also arrived spontaneously, disappeared after a fairly short period of time, and could probably not be reproduced by an act of will (that is, the experience was transient and had within it elements of passivity). In a very real, albeit muted way, the experience held within itself all the four qualities that James considered the most important marks of a genuine mystical experience.

This account of James's "Walpurgis Nacht" experience also aligns with my formulation of the implicit Jamesian definition of mystical experiences—that is, *experiences of powerful, transformative, personally interpreted, contacts with transnatural realities*. For instance, the experience appears to be the result of an inextricably interwoven

fusion of subjective and objective components: it was neither the product of just James's own psyche, nor the consequence of an unadulterated revelation of divinity. It also made an intensely vivid impression on James and provided him with plenty of material for further productive philosophical work on issues that had long haunted him.

Unfortunately, that night had other less positive consequences. The next morning at six o'clock James and his companions hiked back up to the top of Mt. Marcy, and then trudged ten and a half grueling hours back to his shanty in Keene Valley. The return hike was especially strenuous, and ultimately disastrous, because James had chivalrously insisted on carrying a double load, the guide's pack as well as his own, so that the guide could in turn carry the young women's packs. The overexertion of this journey strained his heart, producing the damage that would ultimately lead to James's death twelve years later.

James's "Walpurgis Nacht" on the slopes of Mt. Marcy was not the only moment that he experienced states of consciousness that could be described as "mystical." Experimenting with the effects of nitrous oxide, undergoing a variation of a "dark night of the soul," and going through several other unusual experiences towards the end of his life (all of which will be described in detail later in this chapter) produced an extraordinary openness in James to mysticism. It seems then that James's claim at the beginning of his discussion on mysticism in the *Varieties*, that "my own constitution shuts me out from . . . enjoyment [of mystical states] almost entirely and I can speak of them only at second hand,"¹⁵ must be understood to mean that since these experiences were quite infrequent and did not produce in James that certainty that is common in most mystical experiences, James did not consider himself to be, as he put it, a "professional mystic."¹⁶ However, it also seems indisputable that the memory of their occurrence, combined with what he calls his "mystical germ," were sufficient to create in James a lively interest in mystical states; they also solidified within him the personal certainty that our typical awareness in this day-to-day world is only one of the many levels of consciousness that the universe truly contains.

However, James was not always so open to mysticism. Although in the *Varieties* James chastises those who use the words *mysticism* and *mystical* "as terms of mere reproach, to throw at any opinion which we regard as vague and vast and sentimental, and without a base in either facts or logic,"¹⁷ he was often himself guilty of doing just this in his early writings. As will soon become apparent, James remained profoundly ambivalent about mysticism; on the one hand, his

religious intuitions and metaphysical speculations were nourished by the information he gleaned from reading various accounts of mystical experiences; but, on the other hand, the ethicist in James was profoundly disturbed by the moral implications of mystical experiences, especially since James typically linked mysticism with his philosophical *bête noire*, monism.

Climbing the Mystical Ladder

One of James's primary criticisms of the monistic philosophers of his time was that their methodology was overly deductive, that is, they began their philosophical task with certain monistic assumptions about the structure of the universe as a whole and then imposed this assumption of oneness onto their subsequent investigations of the distinctly pluralistic universe of our everyday experience. James as an empiricist wanted to reverse this order. He thought that the first priority of a philosopher should be to gather concrete data on the workings of the universe as we actually experience it. Only after this first step of gathering data is accomplished should the philosopher be willing to make generalizations or to formulate hypotheses on the nature of the universe.

This inductive strategy is stunningly apparent in James's philosophical assessment of mystical experience in the *Varieties*. Example after example of specific mystical experiences crowd the pages of the *Varieties*, and these accounts are given top billing. It is only after these concrete narratives of mystical experiences have had their turn on the stage that James himself goes on to provide a few highly compressed, yet often remarkably insightful observations. This is not to say that the accounts of mystical experiences are presented in a hodgepodge, chaotic fashion. James is certainly willing and able to organize his data, and in this organizational process, James makes no pretense at complete objectivity; he continually emphasizes the creative and vitally important role played by the philosopher's subjective interests, and he recognizes the way in which these interests structure scientific conclusions. But, on the whole, it is apparent that James attempts to be faithful, as far as possible, to the qualities inherent in the mystical experiences themselves and he makes every effort not to impose arbitrarily a set of dogmatically rigid philosophical assumptions on the experiences themselves.

This inductive methodology is particularly evident in James's depiction of the "mystical ladder" in the *Varieties*. James wants to acquaint the reader with a very wide variety of mystical experiences,

which, in his opinion, "are best understood when placed within their series, studied in their germ and in their over-ripe decay and compared with their exaggerated and degenerated kindred";¹⁸ he attempts to aid us in this comparative process by creating a "ladder" of mystical experiences.

The lower rungs of this ladder are populated with descriptions of mystical experiences that have no evident religious meaning, while the upper rungs of the ladder contain accounts of mystical experiences that are profoundly and unmistakably religious. Evidently then (although he does not say so explicitly), James determined the position of a particular experience on the mystical ladder by using the criteria of "more religious" or "less religious."¹⁹ It appears, therefore, that even though James did not consider every mystical experience to be inherently religious, he apparently did believe that they were *more* mystical to the degree that they were *more* religious.

James's construction of his mystical ladder is not without its weak points. One of the major difficulties is that he never clearly states the criteria by which he determines the degree of "religiosity" of specific experiences, making it seem at times almost arbitrary whether a certain type of experience is "higher" or "lower" on the mystical ladder. Another area of confusion centers around his determination to rank mystical experiences as "higher" or "lower" on the mystical ladder in the first place. The high/low imagery leads us to think that James is making a normative determination. By using a hierarchical metaphor, it is easy to assume that James is claiming that one particular experience is *better* than another, when in fact, he is only using the degree of religiosity of a mystical experience as a convenient way of giving a tentative order to the mass of mystical narratives that he has collected.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate these various difficulties is by examining the "ladder" itself, starting with its lowest rung.

On this lowest rung, James includes a relatively broad cluster of experiences. It is here that he situates such experiences as new insights into a deeper meaning of a phrase or saying, as well as moments such as when particular words, sights, smells, sounds, poetry, or works of art trigger an elusive, powerfully evocative emotional response within us. As James says, "we are alive or dead to the eternal inner message of the arts according as we have kept or lost this mystical sensibility."²⁰

The next step up the ladder is reserved for those experiences commonly known today as "déjà-vu"—those times when a person has the disturbing and puzzling sense that he or she has previously experienced exactly what is occurring at the present moment. Possibly James considers these moments of awareness as "mystical," since they

"bring a sense of mystery" and a "feeling of an enlargement of perception"; but even James had to recognize that these moments of déjà-vu are "intrinsically insignificant."²¹ However, (interestingly enough) this very lack of importance also means that these "dreamy states" are not particularly alarming either, and therefore James rather curtly dismisses the "rather absurdly alarmist view" taken by one researcher who connects these "'dreamy states'" with epilepsy and insanity.²² This dismissal does not mean that James sees no connection between mysticism and insanity. As will become apparent later in this chapter, James was convinced that there were many possible correlations between mystical states and different types of mental illness; but James's common sense and ever-present tolerance simply would not allow him to authorize the more hard-nosed view of certain psychologists of his time that déjà vu was an indication of mental illness simply because it altered a person's prosaic level of awareness.

James's next step up the mystical ladder supposedly illustrates "deeper" mystical states of awareness, but unfortunately, there is very little indication as to why these states are deeper than what was previously described. For instance, James relates the account of one man who expresses that, "'I am oppressed now and then with an innate feeling that everything I see has a meaning, if I could but understand it. And this feeling of being surrounded with truths which I cannot grasp, amounts to indescribable awe sometimes'."²³ Although it could easily be argued that this narration *does* describe a more profound experience than déjà vu (why déjà vu is on the ladder at all is a mystery in itself), it is *not* so clear why James decided that this experience was more mystical than receiving insights from works of art or being powerfully affected by the beauty of nature.

James's next example, however, certainly *does* deserve to be called "more extreme."²⁴ Here James offers J. A. Symonds's description of an invasive trance state. Symonds comments that this trance state "took possession of my mind and will, lasted what seemed an eternity, and disappeared in a series of rapid sensations, which resembled the awakening from anaesthetic influence."²⁵ Symonds indicates that it is difficult to describe this state of consciousness, but suggests that as it progressed he gradually lost touch with his sense of space and time, which produced, frighteningly, a disappearance of his usual sense of self as well. Symonds then goes on to note that his ordinary consciousness was progressively replaced by an awareness of "a pure, absolute, abstract self."²⁶ The universe for Symonds became formless, and Symonds felt that he "had followed the last thread of being to the verge of the abyss."²⁷ He then gradually returned to his normal aware-

ness, not with the sense of loss so common to many mystics, but instead, with a deep sense of gratitude that he had been able to revert back to his more customary state of awareness. Symonds was also haunted afterwards with an agonizing question: which state of consciousness was real and which was illusory—the trance state revealing that “formless state of denuded, keenly sentient being,” or the “surrounding phenomena and habits which veil that inner self and build a self of flesh-and-blood conventionality”?²⁸ Even more frightening for Symonds was the question, “What would happen if the final stage of the trance were reached?”²⁹

This narrative (which could be seen as extremely religious if viewed through the lens of several Eastern traditions) is dismissed by James’s comment that it is “suggestive of pathology.”³⁰ However, once more it is not clear why James makes this rather negative assessment, unless it is a rhetorical device used to link this trance experience with the states of consciousness which occupy his next rung up the mystical ladder, states of consciousness that are also often labeled as pathological: the experiences of intoxication brought on by alcohol and anaesthetics.

Laughing Gas Revelations

James was acutely aware during much of his life of the dangers of the abuse of alcohol (one of his younger brothers, Robertson, was a severely troubled alcoholic), but in his discussion of the potential mystical aspects of alcohol and anaesthetics in the *Varieties*, he theorizes that underneath the more obvious, and often unattractive, reasons for getting intoxicated, lies the power of alcohol “to stimulate the mystical faculties of human nature, usually crushed to earth by the cold facts and dry criticisms of the sober hour.”³¹ For James, people use intoxicants not just to relax or to loosen their inhibitions, but also because these different drugs have the possibility of opening us up to levels of consciousness to which we are normally closed.

James is open to, and even perhaps overly appreciative of, the mystical effects of intoxicants (they are, after all, fairly high on his mystical ladder!) because of his own experiences with nitrous oxide. The mystical potential of this anaesthetic, which is perhaps better known today as the “laughing gas” used by some dentists (in a much more controlled and diluted fashion than in James’s day) attracted his attention when he read Benjamin Paul Blood’s pamphlet, “The Anaesthetic Revelation and the Gist of Philosophy.” According to

James, nitrous oxide has a remarkable ability to produce a mystical state of awareness. He writes:

Depth beyond depth of truth seems revealed to the inhaler. This truth fades out, however, or escapes, at the moment of coming to; and if any words remain over in which it seemed to clothe itself, they prove to be the veriest nonsense. Nevertheless, the sense of a profound meaning having been there persists; and I know more than one person who is persuaded that in the nitrous oxide trance we have a genuine metaphysical revelation.³²

James goes on to reveal that he had earlier experimented himself with the drug and from that experience he came to one unshakable conclusion:

It is that our normal waking consciousness . . . is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness. . . . No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded. How to regard them is the question,—for they are so discontinuous with ordinary consciousness. Yet they may determine attitudes though they cannot furnish formulas, and open a region though they fail to give a map. At any rate, they forbid a premature closing of our accounts with reality.³³

James had previously detailed his experience with nitrous oxide gas in a chapter of *The Will to Believe* entitled, "On Some Hegelisms." In this chapter, James begins his depiction of his experience with nitrous oxide by encouraging others to perform the same experiment. He is convinced that beneath the superficial differences of each individual's experience under nitrous oxide, a similar depth of revelatory truth will manifest itself. Commenting on his own experience with nitrous oxide, James notes that "as with every other person of whom I have heard, the keynote of the experience is the tremendously exciting sense of an intense metaphysical illumination. Truth lies open to the view in depth beneath depth of almost blinding evidence."³⁴

At its peak, James's own nitrous oxide mystical experience was characterized by an "immense emotional sense of *reconciliation*," a new perception in which "the centre and periphery of things seem to come together" and in which "the ego and its objects, the *meum* and the *tuum*, are one."³⁵ James's first response to this experience was to

be utterly convinced that his previous pluralistic philosophical beliefs were incorrect and that monism was, after all, the truer philosophical perspective. This conviction was fueled by the mystical insight he received while in the altered state of awareness catalyzed by nitrous oxide, an insight which led James afterwards to several startling conclusions. For instance, he notes:

“that every opposition . . . vanishes in a higher unity in which it is based; that all contradictions, so called, are but differences; that all differences are of degree; that all degrees are of a common kind; that unbroken continuity is of the essence of being; and that we are literally in the midst of an infinite, to perceive the existence of which is the utmost we can attain.”³⁶

James goes on to emphasize the ineffable nature of this experience. As he points out:

It is impossible to convey an idea of the torrential character of the identification of opposites as it streams through the mind in this experience. I have sheet after sheet of phrases dictated or written during the intoxication, which to the sober reader seem meaningless drivel, but which at the moment of transcribing were fused in the fire of infinite rationality. God and devil, good and evil, life and death, I and thou, sober and drunk, matter and form, black and white, quantity and quality, shiver of ecstasy and shudder of horror . . . and fifty other contrasts figure in these pages in the same monotonous way.³⁷

Depending upon one’s aesthetic sensibilities, it is possible to conclude that James was perhaps overly harsh in his judgment of what he wrote while intoxicated. The following are a few samples of what he wrote or dictated in his “perfect delirium of theoretic rapture”:

Agreement—disagreement!!

Emotion—motion!

Die away from, *from*, die away (without the *from*).

Reconciliation of opposites; sober, drunk, all the same!

Good and evil reconciled in a laugh!

It escapes, it escapes!

But —

What escapes, WHAT escapes?

Emphasis, EMphasis; there must be some emphasis in order for there to be a phasis.

No verbiage can give it, because the verbiage is *other*.

Exploring Unseen Worlds

Incoherent, coherent—same.

And it fades! And it's infinite! AND it's infinite!

If it wasn't going, why should you hold on to it?

Don't you see the difference, don't you see the identity?

Constantly opposites united!³⁸

James's enthusiasm for this monistic insight was, however, soon radically transformed. He mentions that as his experience progressed a startling change occurred:

the flood of ontological emotion . . . [changed from] the rapture of beholding a process that was infinite . . . into the sense of a dreadful and ineluctable fate, with whose magnitude every finite effort is incommensurable and in the light of which whatever happens is indifferent. This instantaneous revulsion of mood from rapture to horror is, perhaps, the strongest emotion I have ever experienced.³⁹

These violent mood swings happened repeatedly for James; he finally concludes that "a pessimistic fatalism, depth within depth of impotence and indifference" was the final outcome of this "revelation," and that "*indifferentism* is the true result of every view of the world which makes infinity and continuity to be its essence."⁴⁰

This account of James's experiment with nitrous oxide gives us a glimpse of the strengths of James's character. We see here not only James's courageous receptivity to the unknown and the unconventional (as well as his openness to ideas that could reverse years of personal philosophical work), but also his willingness to share this unorthodox experience with his academic colleagues. Further, James's comments on his nitrous oxide experience are also an immensely fertile source of insights into the roots of James's later, more developed philosophical stance on mysticism. To begin with, this account is a clear demonstration of his methodology: phenomenological reporting first, followed by an intellectual and ethical assessment. We can also see evidence here of James's later stress on the emotional aspects of mystical experience, as well as the characteristics of ineffability, noetic quality, transience, and inner unity that James repeatedly associates with mystical experience in his later philosophy of mysticism. Finally, this account also illustrates the ways in which James's repeated emphasis on the theme of reconciliation in his philosophical work—both the reconciliation between the self and God that is stressed in the *Varieties* as well as the reconciliation between mind and matter that was attempted in his later radical

empiricism—is intimately connected with his understanding of mystical experience.

In the *Varieties*, James's fascination with the reconciling aspects of mysticism are emphasized, and his earlier (*The Will to Believe*) reluctance to embrace the monistic insights of his experience has been somewhat muted. He asserts in the *Varieties* that his own experiences "all converge towards a kind of insight to which I cannot help ascribing some metaphysical significance. The keynote of it is invariably a reconciliation. It is as if the opposites of the world, whose contradictoriness and conflict make all our difficulties and troubles, were melted into unity."⁴¹ James recognizes that a belief in the reconciliation of opposites is perhaps logically troubling to some (himself included), but he also maintains that this reconciliation is a reality that is insistent and self-evident, at least for those who have personally experienced this "anaesthetic revelation."⁴²

A Pluralistic Mystic

Few people in James's life were more insistent about the importance and self-authenticating quality of the mystical insights received while using anaesthetics than his long-time friend and confidant, Benjamin Paul Blood. Before continuing up the mystical ladder, it is important to spend some time reviewing James's relationship with Blood. As was mentioned above, Blood had first attracted James's notice in 1874 with the publication of his pamphlet, "The Anaesthetic Revelation and the Gist of Philosophy." Many years later, James wrote: "I forgot how it fell into my hands, but it fascinated me so 'weirdly' that I am conscious of its having been one of the stepping-stones of my thinking ever since."⁴³ Blood and James began an active correspondence with each other in 1887 and continued to exchange letters regularly with each other until James's death in 1910.

Blood lived in Amsterdam, New York, and was, as James put it, a "character"—a small-town landowner (apparently a town favorite) with the time and inclination to dabble in metaphysics, who was, nonetheless (to James's delight), also quite physically developed; in one of his first letters to James, Blood included a picture of himself from his early days when, as he put it in the letter: "I had lifted by a chain on my right shoulder and around my right arm, 1160 lbs."⁴⁴ Blood was a prolific writer, yet he rarely attempted to publish any of his ideas in the standard academic forums of that time, preferring, instead, to publish most of his ideas in letters in small local newspapers. This seemingly

self-imposed philosophical humility was perhaps not simply a demonstration of Blood's lack of desire for public acknowledgment, but rather may reflect Blood's unwillingness to engage in the stylistic requirements of most conventional philosophical journals. Blood was temperamentally far more suited to compose grandiloquent assertions on the nature of reality than he was to construct a logically supported, cohesive philosophical argument. As James himself told Blood: "For single far-flung and far-flashing words and sentences you're the biggest genius I know; but when it comes to constructing a whole argument or article it seems to be another kettle of fish."⁴⁵

Despite James's friendly criticism of Blood's purple prose, he continued to be intrigued with Blood's mystical insights. In "A Pluralistic Mystic," the last work James saw published before his death, he attempts both to make Blood's thought accessible to a larger philosophical audience and to utilize the authority of Blood's own mystical experiences to support his own philosophical pluralism. James admits that he is impressed by the monistic utterances of many mystics:

The practically unanimous tradition of 'regular' mysticism has been unquestionably monistic; and inasmuch as it is the characteristic of mystics to speak, not as the scribes, but as men who have 'been there' and seen with their own eyes, I think that this sovereign manner must have made some other pluralistic-minded students hesitate, as I confess that it has often given pause to me. One cannot criticize the vision of a mystic—one can but pass it by, or else accept it as having some amount of evidential weight.⁴⁶

James could not ignore mysticism, but he also would not accept its authority to determine the truth about the nature of reality. Even as late as "A Pluralistic Mystic" James continued to be ambivalent about mystical experience. Although he perceived it as having a number of appealing characteristics (for example, it was empirical; it often had quite valuable social and personal consequences; and it appeared, in one form or another, in almost every culture), he also perceived some less positive aspects of mystical experience (for example, its inaccessibility to public scrutiny, its resistance to philosophical assessment, and its tendency to undergird a dogmatic belief system). To make matters even worse, he realized that mystical experience usually affirmed a monistic understanding of reality, an affirmation that Blood's initial writings did nothing to disconfirm.

James was at first dismayed by the monistic tone of Blood's writing, but he later discovered, much to his pleasure, that Blood's