

Chapter One

Mystics and Constructivists

Introduction

What, or who (or perhaps Who), causes mysticism? What does it signify? From whence does it come? Is it an authentic experience of something real, or a revered self-delusion? Some of each perhaps? Are mystics the fools of God, or merely fools?

Over the last quarter of a century, scholars—who are rarely mystics—have come to generally agree that it's not a Who but a what that plays the key formative role in mystical experiences. The “what” is the mystic's background: his or her beliefs, expectations, hopes, wishes, needs, questions, etc. In academic shorthand these are commonly referred to as the mystic's conceptual “framework” or background “set.” This approach to religious experience, along with a range of relatively minor variations and shadings with which it is taught, is called “constructivism.” Constructivism is the view that in significant ways the mystic's conceptual and linguistic scheme determines, shapes, and/or constructs his or her mystical experiences.

Constructivism has come to dominate an astonishing array of recent books and articles about not only mysticism, but about religious experience, spirituality, and indeed much of religion as well. It is the engine that drives most historical, theological, and contextual studies of religious individuals: scholars of particular religious people commonly trace how that person's experiences were influenced by his or her tradition or background. But this is to maintain—however unconsciously—that that individual's religious tradition shaped and/or constructed his or her religious experiences.

In the literature concerning Meister Eckhart's mysticism, for example, with which I am somewhat familiar, scholars have shown

how Eckhart's thought and experiences were influenced by Neo-Platonism,¹ Augustine,² Thomism,³ etc., etc. Hidden in all these accounts is the claim that the mystical experiences to which Eckhart avers must themselves have been influenced by his background. Typically, such articles do not argue for the purported connection between background set and mystical experience. They don't have to argue for it: given the general scholarly agreement on this approach, they can assume it. Those that are alert enough to recognize that they need to justify this connection, do so by merely referring the reader to the recent theoretical literature (purportedly) establishing this link. Among Eckhart scholars, for example, both Bernard McGinn and Kenneth Clark refer to Steven Katz's well-known article for an articulation of this connection.⁴

Hence, to understand the linkage between background and mystical experience the reader must turn to the philosophical literature that defends this claim, the so-called "constructivist" claim. William Wainwright,⁵ Ninian Smart,⁶ John Hick,⁷ Terence Penelhum,⁸ Jerry Gill,⁹ Wayne Proudfoot,¹⁰ Peter Moore,¹¹ and others have all offered excellent defenses of constructivism. Steven Katz, with his two articles, "Language, Epistemology and Mysticism" and "The 'Conservative' Character of Mystical Experience," is perhaps the most outspoken and renowned defender of the constructivist claim.¹² So frequently glossed are these articles, especially those of Katz, that this view became virtually the received view in the 1970s and '80s on mysticism.¹³ Because it has been so central to the recent discussions, I will focus much of my thought and attention on this viewpoint.

I will explore constructivism by both addressing the key articulating articles of this position, especially those of Katz, as well as the theories of the construction of experience in general. For mystical constructivist philosophers are writing squarely from within the great constructivist traditions of British and American analytical philosophy. Proudfoot, Katz, and Gill are the grandsons of philosophers like G. E. Moore, Gilbert Ryle, and Ludwig Wittgenstein; and the great-grandsons of Immanuel Kant. In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant maintained that we cannot experience reality in itself (which he called the "noumenon") directly. Rather, we can only encounter the world through a limited number of categories—space and time, the concept of unity, etc. We humans supply these categories, he said. We can see only in their terms. These concepts

and categories “mediate” any possible experience. If some experience came to us in other terms, we simply could not entertain it—we would have no category for it.

Wittgenstein, in his suggestive and evocative way, dispensed with the notion that our concepts mediate, for any human being, some unidentifiable *noumenon* “out there.” Rather, his dominant model is that we “construct” our world in and through our language, concepts, beliefs, and actions. The world does not come “at” us, he said, with our concepts passively filtering certain things out. Rather, we more actively “construct” our experience. The world is as we build it. And having built it, we live in what we have ourselves built. In living and understanding it in certain ways—which we learn from language, culture, behavior patterns, etc.—we *construct* our sense of the real.

This insight, that we construct our own reality, has had enormous impact on modern Western humanities and social sciences. I cannot begin to demonstrate the full ramifications of this constructivist model, but here are a few of its more obvious ones: the sociology of knowledge and anthropology have both detailed how a culture’s world view structures and controls perception and beliefs.¹⁴ Psychologists since Freud (and perhaps before) have argued that childhood concepts and experiences control, shape, and determine adult emotions and perceptions.¹⁵ Historians of culture and of ideas, and, of course, of religion all write explicitly out of this model. Even fields like Modern Art¹⁶ and Art Criticism¹⁷ may be viewed as grappling with the notion that we see only what we are conditioned to see. Writers work with it: Iris Murdoch, for example, said, “man is a creature who makes pictures of himself and then comes to resemble the picture.”¹⁸ Thus, when we explore the thesis that all experiences (including mystical ones) are constructed, we are in effect exploring a room whose corners are inhabited by the full panoply of humanists and social scientists.

Because this model is shared by so many, a challenge to such a widely accepted way of looking at things is likely to be either ignored, scoffed at, or seen as a threat.¹⁹ Be that as it may, challenge it I will. For I am, in effect, asking in this book, is there a *limit* to the constructivist model of human experience? Are there any experiences, types of experiences, or phenomena that a human being may consciously undergo, which may plausibly be said to be *not* determined or constructed by the subject’s set? Can anyone,

i.e., a mystic or anyone else, escape the self-constructed world, even for a moment?

If the answers to my questions are affirmative, as I believe they are, then we will be faced with another question: if the mystic does not construct her own experience, then what does cause and/or shape the experience(s)? This means we must offer our own theory of mysticism, one that is more adequate to the task. And, given the deep acceptance of the constructivist thesis in general, our answer may turn out to have ramifications that reach far beyond the narrow confines of mysticism studies.

A Definition of Mysticism

Before analyzing the constructivist model in detail, I want to define mysticism as I will use the term. The word *mysticism*, like *religion*, *truth*, and *modernity*, is pivotal but murky. It can denote the unintelligible statements of an illogical speaker, a schizophrenic's vision, someone's hallucinations, a drug-induced vision, the spiritual "showings" of a Julian of Norwich or a Mechthilde of Magdeburg, the unspoken, silent experience of God that Meister Eckhart called the "Divine Desert," or the Buddhist Nagarjuna's empty *shunyata*. Clearly, before we can progress we must be more precise about our field of inquiry.

Roland Fischer has put forward a "cartography" of states of conscious arousal which includes all of these so called "mystical" states.²⁰

Hallucinations, acute schizophrenic states, and the visions and auditions of a Julian of Norwich fall on the ergotropic side of the chart. These are states of hyperarousal: cognitive and physiological activity are at relatively high levels. On the trophotropic side are hypoaroused states, marked by low levels of cognitive and physiological activity: here we find Hindu *samādhi*, *mushinjo* in *zazen*, the restful states associated with *The Cloud of Unknowing's* "cloud of forgetting," or Eckhart's *gezucket*.

Levels of metabolic excitation, emotional arousal, mental activity, etc. indicated on the trophotropic and ergotropic scale move in opposite directions. Physiological parameters such as heart rate, skin temperature, spontaneous galvanic skin responses, etc. increase on one side of the chart, and decrease on the other. Electro-

encephalogram (EEG) patterns differ sharply. Given such different signatures, these two scales are unlikely to have identical psychological characteristics, mental features, and, most interesting, causes. One should not explain feelings of love as if they were just like the feelings we have in a foot race, at least not without further rationale.²¹ We must be careful, for models developed to explain phenomena on the ergotropic scale may very well not explain trophotropic phenomena.

I propose reserving the term *mysticism* for trophotropic states. I will call ergotropic phenomena such as hallucinations, visions, auditions, etc. “visionary experiences.” Thus, the following vision record of the thirteenth-century Christian, Mechthild of Hackeborn, however fascinating, is ergotropic:

The King of glory once appeared in indescribable splendor in the fullness of his joy, wearing a golden robe embroidered with doves and covered by a red mantle. This garment was open on two sides to indicate that the soul has free access to God.²²

The Beguines, St. Teresa when she speaks of her visions and auditions, Mohammed, Isaiah, Nichiren, etc. are all known for being visionaries.

I will reserve the term *mysticism* only for those people who write about experiences on the trophotropic side of our chart. Such authors as Eckhart, Dogen, al-Hallaj, Bernadette Roberts, and Shankara are all, in my usage, “mystics” rightly so called. A passage like the following, from the Hindu Bhagavad Gita, then is “mystical” as I will use the term:

But with desire-and-loathing-severed
Senses acting on the objects of sense,
with (senses) self-controlled, he, governing his self,
Goes unto tranquillity.

In tranquillity, of all griefs
Riddance is engendered for him;
For of the tranquil minded quickly
The mentality becomes stable.²³

I can thus concur with Ninian Smart’s definition of mysticism: “Mysticism describes a set of experiences or more precisely, conscious

events, which are not described in terms of sensory experience or mental images.”²⁴ In so restricting the term *mysticism* to experiences not described with sensory language, I believe I am in accord with the original meaning of “mystical,” i.e., “to close,” and to the overtones of the term as it was brought into the Christian lexicon by Pseudo-Dionysius, that is, separate from the sensory (“rapt out of himself”).²⁵

Let us focus the searchlight of our inquiries even narrower. W.T. Stace distinguishes between “introvertive mysticism” and “extrovertive mysticism.”²⁶ In extrovertive mysticism one perceives a new relationship—one of unity, blessedness, and reality—between the external world and oneself. This Stace distinguishes from introvertive mysticism, the nonspatial experience of a void awareness or “pure consciousness.” Although he does provide seven characteristics of each type, he overlooks what seems to me to be the central fact that distinguishes them. It can be seen most readily in a distinction made by twentieth-century Hindu mystic Ramana Maharshi between *samādhi* and *sahaja samādhi*.²⁷ *Samādhi* is a contemplative state, and is thus “introvertive” in Stace’s sense of the term. *Sahaja samādhi* is a state in which a silent level within the subject is maintained along with (simultaneously with) the full use of the human faculties. It is, in other words, a state that is *continuous*—either permanent or lasting a long time—through activity. The distinction between a state maintained only during meditation and one maintained along with activity seems to be key here.

Because it involves several aspects of life—that is, external activity and some sort of internal and quiet aspect—and the relationship(s) between them, *sahaja samādhi* seems inherently more complex than *samādhi*. And it seems to be a more advanced state in the sense of coming later in the developmental process.²⁸ It seems to me that much misunderstanding has arisen because people have looked at the more advanced, sophisticated, and perhaps more interesting form of experience—*sahaja samādhi*, extrovertive—prematurely, that is, without first understanding the simpler more rudimentary form(s) of mystical experience. In this book I will first look at this more rudimentary stage, and then, with our understanding of it firmly in hand, turn to a more advanced form. That is, I propose to begin at the beginning.

In so doing I want to emphasize one point: while I will start by looking at the pure consciousness event (PCE)—one quite interest-

ing and relatively common form of introvertive mysticism²⁹—I do *not* claim that this form of mysticism is the only important mystical phenomena. There are many other interesting mystical phenomena, *sahaja samādhi* being one, and we will turn to that one toward the end of this inquiry. I will first focus on the pure consciousness event because:

1. it is relatively common;
2. it is rudimentary and hence may indicate key features of more advanced mystical phenomena;
3. most important, it seems an excellent philosophical case study of one of the peculiarities of mysticism, one that stands as a *prima facie* counterexample to the constructivist model.

I want to emphasize that I do not claim, and I do not believe, that it is everywhere believed to be ultimate or salvific. Indeed, I do not regard it as salvific in and of itself, although it may play an important role in the more advanced forms of the mystical life.³⁰

Structure of the Book

In sum, my question is, how shall we best account for mysticism? By mysticism I mean “trophotrophic” mystical experiences. I will look at two common types of them, a transient experience called the pure consciousness event (PCE), and a permanent or semipermanent experience called the dualistic mystical state, (DMS). What is the best way to understand these experiences?

The book is divided into three parts. In Part I I will look primarily at the pure consciousness event, and ask whether constructivism adequately accounts for it. Here I will, of course, detail several reports of this sort of experience (chapter 2) and then explore constructivism and its philosophical underpinnings (chapters 3 and 4). The question here is, does constructivism adequately account for these events? I will argue that it does not.

In chapter 5, I will show how a well-respected ninth-century Eastern thinker, Paramārtha, tends to support my thesis that constructivism does not adequately account for these pure consciousness events. Paramārtha offers an account of ordinary experience

that is in profound accord with the current constructivist model, but goes on to say that it is not applicable to mysticism.

The hypothesis of Part I then is that constructivism is ill suited to explain these “introvertive” mystical experiences. But that leaves us with the problem of offering a more adequate account. This I will offer in Part II. Because constructivism so focuses on language, in chapter 6 I will explore in some detail the role of language in bringing on the pure consciousness events. In chapter 7 I will turn to the place of consciousness in them.

But this touches only on the pure consciousness event. In Part III I will turn to the dualistic mystical state. First, in chapter 8 I will present some data about its existence and precise phenomenological character. In chapter 9 I will explore this interesting experience by drawing a parallel between Sartre, Hui Neng, and the observations of several mystical thinkers. With that in hand I will offer what seems to me a more sensible account of human consciousness, which both makes sense of the insights of the mystics and also has a lot to say about the nature of ordinary human consciousness. And this may serve to call into question some of the academic orthodoxy about the constructed nature of all human awareness and experience.