

# Introduction

The term “mysticism” can mean at least two different things. The term can refer to “immediate” or “direct” experience of God (these terms will be analyzed in due course) or it can refer to the thesis that reality is ineffable and can be characterized only in paradoxical ways. These two meanings are quite different because there is nothing in the concepts themselves of “immediate” or “direct” experience that entails paradox or ineffability. In fact, if God is omnipresent or ubiquitous, then we should expect for there to be mystics. If God’s existence is pervasive, then what would be paradoxical is claiming that no one can experience God; or at least the claim not to experience God could be seen as just as paradoxical as the claim to having done so. In this regard, the idea that there are mystics about is compatible with some versions of realism in that reality (including divine reality) is experienced because it exists, in contrast to the antirealist view that reality exists because it is experienced. Alfred North Whitehead’s concept of reality being “pre-hended” or “grasped” supports this realist view (MRM 463–69; *RSP* 69).

The purpose of the present book is to explore both senses of what it means to be a mystic from the perspectives of the process philosophies of Alfred North Whitehead, Henri Bergson, and Charles Hartshorne, although admittedly the perspective I will defend is definitely more Hartshornian than Whiteheadian or Bergsonian. I should also admit at the outset that the first sense of what it means to be a mystic (the claim to have “immediate” or “direct” experience of God) is primary, and the second sense (the claim that reality, or at least ultimate reality, is ineffable), although important, is not as crucial as the first. I will nonetheless attempt to find the proper place for the *via negativa* or apophatic religious discourse, which is often either mischaracterized or overemphasized in contemporary philosophy and

theology, in my estimation, as Donald Viney also insightfully argues in an article titled “Hartshorne’s Dipolar Theism and the Mystery of God.”

My aim is not so much to demonstrate that mystical experience is true or veridical as to *understand* in William Jamesian fashion how mystical experience could be possible and how claims to having had mystical experiences can avoid contradiction vis-à-vis the concept of God, specifically a process concept of God with which James was only dimly aware. This effort to understand mystical experience is not meant to compete with other efforts to achieve understanding, as in the recently popular tendency to see mysticism largely in terms of “negative theology” (or the *via negativa* or as “apophatic” discourse). Rather, my hope is to contribute something significant to scholarship on mysticism in terms of process philosophy and theology, which covers the territory in a distinctive and provocative way that is not traversed in other approaches. This novel process approach is meant to supplement and enrich other stances (*DL* 147–49, 152; *HB* 23, 28–29).

Whereas the most common way of preserving divine mystery in classical theism is through the *via negativa* or apophatic discourse, in the neoclassical or process theistic view that will be operative in the present book, divine mystery will be preserved largely through a crucial Hartshornian distinction between divine essence (*what* God is) and divine existence (*that* God is), on the one hand, and divine actuality (*how* God exists), on the other. Whereas the divine essence, as that than which no greater can be conceived, and God’s necessary existence can be discussed in rational terms, it is in divine actuality that mystery primarily resides (*CA* 182–83; *PCH* 594).

The obvious data that are readily detected are those that are sometimes present and sometimes absent, as in the sensation of an object that is bright yellow in color or an intense pain or the sudden appearance of a camel. But what is always present tends to escape notice, as in spatiality. It is true that there are different aspects of spatiality and different degrees of distinctness of spatiality, but spatiality is given in all experience. Hence, we have an analogy for the difference between the mystic and the rest of us, the latter of which tend to notice only the obvious data found in bright colors, intense pains, or the appearance of odd objects. Or again, most of us detect spatiality in our experiences of color, but only some of us do so with respect to spatial extension in experiences of sound, even though sound always involves spatiality. I will return to this analogy for mystical experience later in the book, the point of which is to illustrate the idea that the mystic is someone who is explicitly aware of what remains implicit for the rest of us, as in spatiality or God (*DL* 110, 120–21; *EA* xiii–xiv).

One of the key contributions of process thought to our understanding of mystical experience is a critique of the idea that experience is simultaneous with the data of experience. That is, there is a temporal structure to experience such that there is a finite amount of time that it takes for the data to be experienced by the subject, due to, say, the speeds of light or sound. This fact becomes obvious to us only in the case of really distant objects, such as when there is epistemically present experience of a star that burned out light years ago. But the temporal structure of experience applies even in experience of reality rather close to us.

The (implicit) presence of deity in all experience is not unconnected to matters of ethical concern. For example, the greatest happiness of the greatest number is not itself the actual happiness of any individual human being or collection of human beings. We are all naively aware of the fact that other people exist and that our importance is to a large extent constituted by what we contribute to the lives of others and that their importance in part consists in what they contribute to us. As is well known, value is relational. But the true measure of value or importance is something that transcends you or I or all of humanity. Only a theist can identify this additional factor who is the subject of the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Solipsism of the individual *and* the collective solipsism of all of humanity fail to account for the greatest good.

Both the immensity of space and the immensity of value presuppose a subject cosmic in scope. We can think of the extended cosmos as a society of sentient creatures who influence one another via empathic prehensions in patterns treated by the sciences, including physics. Our knowledge of such patterns is always partial and fallible, but because we can falsify certain hypotheses with assurance (in Popperian fashion), our fallible knowledge presupposes a higher kind of knowledge that provides us with a measure or standard. The well-known Quaker mystic who heavily influenced Hartshorne as his first philosophy teacher and to whom he dedicated his intellectual autobiography, Rufus Jones, is instructive in the way he held that the difference between mystics and the rest of us is one of degree and not of kind. The mystic is one who is explicitly aware of what most of us are aware of implicitly: that we are meaningful parts of an immense whole; that our fallible value judgments presuppose a standard of Value that avoids our own defects in judgment, although our confidence that some actions are evil *simpliciter* means that we are not totally in the dark in this regard; and that our slow yet progressive effort to know the world presupposes an omniscient standard that secures for

us our strongest intuitions and knowledge claims (*DL* dedication; *ZF* 29, 36; *MVG* xviii; *OO* 107; *PCH* 14).

We will see in Hartshornian fashion that the existence of God is either necessary or impossible in that the contingent existence of God is ruled out by Saint Anselm's great discovery that contingent existence is at odds with the very definition of God as that than which no greater can be conceived. The implication of this view for mystical experience is that either everyone is aware of God at least implicitly or no one is aware of God. If the first option is true, then nontheists are deceiving themselves; and if the second option is true, then it is theists who are mistaken. Either way there is value to be found in the explication of mystical experience, if only due to the fact that some people at least claim to have had an awareness or intuition of God's actuality. Hartshorne himself may have been a mystic, even if he does not spend much time telling us about his own religious experiences. At the very least he tells us that he came "close to" a mystical experience of the finite aspect of God (to be explained in due course) while crossing the Atlantic at the time of the First World War. And he tells us of his fascination with James's descriptions of those who have had religious experiences, which conform to the general tendency of human beings to feel or have experiences first and then think about or interpret them later. The world is given as emotional, although Jones appealed to Hartshorne precisely because he was a *philosophical* interpreter of mysticism who was persuasive regarding the conceptual importance of the existence of love in the world (*DL* 126, also 84–86; *PSG* 499–500, 503–06).

The prominence of aesthetic categories in process thought dovetails with the tendency of mystics to see beauty everywhere in the world, although at times the beauty in question is tragic. To experience something is not necessarily the same thing as knowing exactly *what* one has experienced. After all, *aesthesis* is the Greek word for feeling, in general. Further, there is much in experience concerning which we are not consciously aware and concerning which we can never be fully aware. In the present context it is important to note that it is philosophy's task to see if it is even possible to have the sorts of experiences claimed by the mystics in their feeling of the divine. Although there should be nothing mystical about philosophy's method, the exercise of dialectic might point us toward the (at least partial) intelligibility of the sorts of experiences claimed by mystics. Throughout the present book we will notice that at every turn orthodox theological systems actually contradict what mystics say about God. This is a conceptual problem that deserves attention in that what is given and what is inferred are

both of philosophical significance. It is also significant that we intuitively understand the difference between the terms “perfect” and “imperfect,” even if such understanding is in need of conceptual fine-tuning.

Granted, there is historical evidence of the biases in metaphysical traditions that limit our understanding of mystical experience. The hope of the present book is that at least some of these biases can be corrected. The examples of mystical experience that will be considered in the book come primarily from the Abrahamic religions. This is due not to any assumption on my part that only these traditions are worthy of consideration but rather to my own limited competency, which is confined to the Abrahamic religions, in general, especially to Saint John of the Cross, in particular. I suspect that comparisons with Vedantism or Buddhism, for example, would be very fruitful indeed. If my focus is somewhat limited, this is due to a hope that it can bore through misconceptions of mystical experience that get in the way of a wider-angle view of the mystical terrain. In this regard it should be mentioned that differences *within* a particular religious tradition are often as great as differences *between* such traditions. Hartshorne, for example, finds one strand of Vedantism in Sri Jiva Goswami more congenial than classical theistic strands in the Abrahamic religions. Or again, Jewish or Christian process thinkers might find the process thought of Mohammed Iqbal more congenial than the thought of classical theistic thinkers in their own respective religious traditions. Further, it seems to me that there is a certain unity in the reports of mystical experiences once adventitious elements from different traditions are removed from them, as Hartshorne (who was once invited to speak at a Trappist monastery) attests (*PSG* 373; *ZF* 39).

If “ineffable” means “not exhaustively describable,” then, in a sense, the description of *any* experience in its concreteness and in full detail is ineffable. If to have experience of God means an experience of the one who knows everything logically knowable, then in a sense to know God would mean to be omniscient ourselves, which is ludicrous. However, I will nonetheless argue that there is a sense in which, when we talk about God’s abstract qualities, in contrast to God’s concrete experiences of knowing and loving the world in its detail, we *can* offer an accurate description. That is, the *abstract* essence of God need not transcend language, or at least not in the same sense that description of God’s life in concrete detail understandably does present difficulties regarding accurate description (*RSP* 175–76; *WP* 9–11).

In chapter 1, I will deal with the famous critique made by defenders of mystical experience that “the God of the philosophers” is inadequate to understanding mystical experience. I will argue that it is a particular, yet

widely influential, concept of God (classical theism) that is inadequate, not philosophical concepts in general or a concept of God that offers a more nuanced understanding of the greatest conceivable being (neoclassical theism). *Both* metaphysical concepts and religious experience are necessary for a better understanding of ultimate reality, and inadequacy in one will affect negatively our understanding of the other (*PSG* 503–06).

In chapter 2, I will examine the concept of world-inclusiveness as it surfaces in neoclassical theism. Specifically, I will explicate the (Platonic) concept of the World Soul, defended by Hartshorne, so as to better appreciate the testimony of the great mystics that God is omnipresent and that it is possible to have *interaction* with God. The complete denial of divine embodiment in classical theism is criticized in the process effort to overcome the bifurcation of the world. In this chapter I try to overcome the gap that might appear in classical theism between “theistic mysticism” and “nature mysticism.” That is, in neoclassical theism the two mysticisms are alternative ways of designating the same sorts of experience (*RSP* 152–53).

Chapter 3 indicates the severe problems with the concept of omnipotence as found in classical theism and shows how these problems get in the way of an understanding of mystical experience and tragedy. Nonetheless, in neoclassical theism, God would, as that than which no greater can be conceived, exhibit ideal power, if not omnipotence. As long as the doctrine of omnipotence is in play, there is a tendency not to be drawn positively to omnibenevolent love but to question why particular sufferings exist.

It is the purpose of chapter 4 to explicate the relationship between very abstract thinking in philosophy about the concept of, and existence of, God, say as found in the ontological argument, on the one hand, and the concrete experience of God found in the mystics, on the other. Special attention is paid to two distinctions that are not often made when trying to understand mystical experience: the distinction between indirect and direct experience and the distinction between mediated and unmediated (or immediate) experience. A big mistake is made when these two distinctions are collapsed, a practice that negatively affects some of the most important philosophical analyses of mystical experience. In this regard the approach of John Smith is shown to be far superior to that of William Alston.

The purpose of chapter 5 is to supplement my largely Hartshornian treatment of mystical experience with the thought of Whitehead. The two are sufficiently different to warrant attention paid to Whitehead’s thought, too. The relationship between the two constitutes something of a unity-in-difference that will be productive in the effort to understand the contri-

contributions process thought in general can make to scholarship on mysticism (*WP* 111–12, 145, 153).

In chapter 6 there is an attempt to build on the previous chapter in the effort to rescue mysticism from the allegation that it is tied to a dangerous world-denying tendency that is fueled by both ascetical and apophatic negativities. Starting with asceticism, there is no doubt that the Abrahamic religions, heavily influenced by classical theism, have failed to genuinely synthesize “spiritual” and “physical” values, especially by denigrating the latter. It is precisely this failure that plays into the hands of religious skeptics such as Friedrich Nietzsche, who sees in asceticism something body-hating and world-denying. I will respond to this challenge by emphasizing the roots of *askesis* in athletic training in a positive way so as to perform well in big events. Also in this chapter can be found an examination of the ways in which apophatic or negative theology is both defensible and indefensible (*RSP* 163).

Chapter 7 examines the widely-held assumption that mystical experience is to be identified with, or finds its prime exemplification in, flashy claims to having received divine visions and voices. I take a deflationary view of visions and voices in this chapter, but I also try to locate their place in the traditional debate between “the God of the philosophers” and “the God of religious experience.” This debate changes dramatically in the transition from classical to neoclassical theism. Further, in this chapter I explore, with the help of John Gilroy, some of the strengths and weaknesses of neurotheology for the topic of divine visions and voices, in particular, and for mystical experience, in general.

Like chapter 5 regarding Whitehead, chapter 8 deals with the distinct contributions to an understanding of mystical experience and the concept of God that are made possible by considering the thought of Henri Bergson, another magisterial figure in the history of process metaphysics. Bergson helps us to realize that mysticism and the concept of God are rooted in social life, broadly conceived. But there are two sorts of social life: closed and open. Each of these is connected to a particular view of God. Very often mystics are those who open us up to a more dynamic and defensible concept of God, morality, and society.

Chapter 9 explores the aesthetic dimensions of mysticism, both in its generic sense, wherein all of us at least implicitly experience ourselves as parts of a meaningful whole, and in its specific sense, wherein God is experienced *as* God. We will see that the Greek word *aesthesis* originally meant nothing other than feeling, or what we today might call “experience.” Only

later did the word refer to a disciplined feeling for beauty, in particular. I will make use of both senses of *aesthesis* in defense of a view of beauty as a dual mean between two sets of extremes. Both the beauty of abstract ideas and the beauty of concrete experiences, including mystical experiences, will be explored.

In chapter 10 can be found an examination of some of the practical ramifications of process mysticism. I will locate the mystical tradition within a kindred tradition in ethics: the virtue ethics approach, with the theological virtue of love occupying a prominent place in my exploration of the consequences of mystical experience for ethics. The virtue of love has controversial implications for the issue of death; in this regard I will be defending a view called “contributionism.” I will also consider a danger in the agent-centered character of virtue ethics. Further, the virtue or vice of anger will be treated, which seems in our especially irascible world to provide an impediment to the life of virtue that is a precondition of the contemplative life.

My focus on mysticism in the Abrahamic religions is *not* due to a commitment on my part to the thesis that different traditions or different historical epochs or even two different thinkers within the same tradition and in the same historical epoch are incomparable. Indeed, I lean in the opposite direction in claiming that well-read and open-minded thinkers *can* fruitfully engage in intellectual comparisons across various boundaries. I will be assuming that abstract disciplines like metaphysics (and mathematics) have extremely wide application across many cultures and that these disciplines are just as important (or almost as important) as those that rely on concrete observations. We do not scrutinize experience one drop at a time but tend to bring various experiences into a system of fallible explanation. In order to make sure we have surveyed all (or almost all) of the possibilities, one must arrange them in a formal way. Johannes Kepler did this when he discovered that the orbits of the planets were not circular, hence he found the need to use a theory of conic sections in astronomy. Likewise, when we find mystics in various traditions and in different historical epochs saying things about God that conflict with established doctrine, we find the need to contrast theory in what I will call classical theism with theory in neoclassical or process theism.

My aim in the present book is to work toward a higher synthesis of various conflicting ideas to be detailed in the book. It will become apparent that I defend a view that can be described as epistemological realism and ontological idealism, a view that has important implications for real



(mystical) knowledge of God as psyche. The hope is that progress can be made in metaphysics, particularly in its relationship with mystical experience. Just as there must have been some stage in the development of medicine before which it would have been safer to rely on common sense than on the advice of a physician, so also before the onset of neoclassical metaphysics it would have been better (or at least as fruitful) to listen to the mystics and not to classical theistic metaphysicians if one wanted to learn about God. Throughout the book the term “metaphysics” will refer to the rational (and secular) study of the universal traits of experience and existence. This discipline does not presuppose any special religious experiences, but it should at least be compatible with them. Classical theism is not compatible with such experiences due to its unsocial conception of reality wherein the lowest beings in inanimate nature are seen as inferior to social relations and God is seen as beyond them as unmoved and strictly impassible. What we need is a weighing of reasons in the effort to achieve reflective equilibrium between abstract metaphysics and concrete experiences found in various religious traditions (*RSP* 129–30).

The entire book can be seen as an effort to bring together what is special and very particular in religious experience and what can be said in the most abstract way about experience in general. Validation in metaphysics occurs not through the details of mystical experience but through what is left when we abstract away from all of the details. Nonetheless we will see that *the* metaphysical question can be put from the perspective of a particular standpoint, that of a revised version of the ontological argument. In this regard I will be trying to arrive at truth *through* Whitehead, Bergson, and especially Hartshorne, rather than to communicate the truth *about* these thinkers. The truth in question is compatible with both rationalist and empiricist tendencies in philosophy, neither of which should be denigrated. I want to do justice to *all* of experience so as to secure a place for mystical experience, in particular. It might be too ambitious to claim that I will *prove* something in the present book, an aim that would seem to confuse philosophy with geometry, but the goal of approximating reflective equilibrium might enable me to half-prove something very important (*AD* xii).

A key concept in the book is that of dipolarity wherein reality everywhere has aspects of particularity *and* generality, concreteness *and* abstractness, contingency *and* necessity. To assert that reality consists only in contingency or only in necessity leaves out of the picture something significant. God as supreme reality can be described as dual transcendence: ideally necessary in existence and ideally contingent in response to creaturely feelings (especially

suffering feelings). Although the method of philosophy is not mystical, its conclusions are, as we will see (*PSG* 513–14; *PCH* 626). Finally, as a result of the process theism that will be explored in the present book, it can be said that the classical theistic God that many claim is dead never was alive in that no living being can be simply unmoved by other life.