

# Mysticism, Metaphysics, Truth: Are Mystical Experiences Real?

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## **Abstract**

Under specific circumstances, or following specific practices, people can have the experience of losing their sense of being a subject opposed to an external world. This work aims at establishing the reality of these so-called “mystical experiences”. The project begins with a clarification of the assumptions and definitions at its basis. After this preliminary work, I will present a summary and a critical assessment of all the major arguments in the literature in favor and against the reality of mystical experiences. I will conclude that none of these arguments is ultimately convincing. I will then present my own argument in favor of the reality of mystical states, based on a pragmatic approach to truth taken (mostly) from Charles Peirce. Finally, I will clarify what mysticism-based metaphysical claims my premises allow me to make and I will explain how future metaphysicians might decide to further develop such claims.



If I speak in the spirit of this time, I must say: no one and nothing can justify what I must proclaim to you. Justification is superfluous to me, since I have no choice. [...] But the other spirit forces me nevertheless to speak, beyond justification, use, and meaning. – Carl G. Jung

Then I asked: «Does a firm persuasion that a thing is so, make it so?»

He replied: «All poets believe that it does, and in ages of imagination this firm persuasion removed mountains; but many are not capable of firm persuasion of anything». – William Blake

Jove determined therefore to make a perpetual example of the human race. He resolved to punish men unsparingly, and reduce them to a state of misery far surpassing their former condition. Towards the attainment of this end, he purposed sending Truth among men, not for a time only as they desired, but for eternity. – Giacomo Leopardi



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## I. Introduction

Since the dawn of civilization, humans have sought after what we now call a “mystical experience.” To introduce the phenomenon, let us look at a few reports written by different mystics from different historical periods and backgrounds. (In order of presentation: Terence McKenna, arguably the best known figure in the contemporary literature on psychedelic substances; Ibn Arabi, a 13<sup>th</sup> century Muslim mystic, specifically a Sufi; Giordano Bruno, a 16<sup>th</sup> century magician and philosopher; and a fragment from *The Upanishads*, a Hindu text and one of the oldest documents of mysticism).

"Ecstatic" is a word central to my argument and preeminently worthy of further attention. It is a notion that is forced on us whenever we wish to indicate an experience or a state of mind that is cosmic in scale. An ecstatic experience transcends duality; it is simultaneously terrifying, hilarious, awe-inspiring, familiar, and bizarre. It is an experience that one wishes to have over and over again.<sup>1</sup>

He who kills his selfhood, that is he who knows himself, sees that all his existence is Allah's existence. He sees no change in his inmost nature or in his attributes. He sees no necessity for his attributes becoming Allah's, for he has understood that he was not himself the existence of his own inmost nature and that he was ignorant of his selfhood and of his fundamental being. When you get to know what is your selfhood, you are freed from your dualism, and you will know that you are not other than Allah.<sup>2</sup>

Seek the truth of nature in all her specific natural forms in which they contemplate the eternal essence, the specific substantial perpetuator of the eternal generation and vicissitude of things which are called after their founder and fabricators, and above them all presides the form of forms, the fountain of light, the truth of truths, the God of gods, for all is full of divinity, truth, being, and goodness.<sup>3</sup>

As a lump of salt thrown into water melts away [...] even so, o Maitreyi, the individual soul, dissolved, is the Eternal – pure consciousness, infinite, transcendent. Individuality arises by the identification of the Self, through ignorance, with the elements; and with the disappearance of consciousness of the many, in divine illumination, it disappears.<sup>4</sup>

We will deal with the problem of finding an uncontroversial definition of “mystical experience” in section II.1. For now, not to avoid the elephant in the room, we can make use of Jerome Gellman's generous definition of mystical experience as “a (purportedly) [...] unitive experience granting



acquaintance of realities or states of affairs that are of a kind not accessible by way of sense-perception, [...] or standard introspection.”<sup>5</sup> A mystical experience can thus be understood, for now, as a “non-ordinary” state of mind, or state of affairs, that appears to grant *some sort of* union with a reality or state of affairs that is otherwise not accessible.<sup>6</sup>

It is commonly acknowledged that there exist different routes for reaching such extraordinary states. To begin with, some people appear to be naturally more prone than others towards mystical experiences. In fact, some seem to be so naturally predisposed that they are able to have one by simply looking at a landscape, enjoying a painting,<sup>7</sup> or for no apparent reason at all (an example of the latter are the spontaneous visions of the poet William Blake). For those who are less lucky, some discipline is usually required. A first example is meditation, a traditional and still extremely widespread approach. Meditation is an umbrella term covering a number of practices from different traditions, but what all these practices seem to have in common is “a conscious attempt to focus attention in a nonanalytical way and an attempt not to dwell on discursive, ruminating thought.”<sup>8</sup> Historically, asceticism (e.g., fasting and self-inflicted pain) and prayers have also been very common as practices among mystics, especially in the Judeo-Christian traditions. Less common methods, such as sensory deprivation (e.g., in caves, or more commonly nowadays in sensory deprivation tanks) and breathwork (e.g., Stanislav Grof’s “holotropic breathwork”) are also often acknowledged as valuable. Finally, a summary of mystical practices would not be complete without mentioning psychedelic substances.<sup>9</sup> Psychedelics are a quite heterogeneous class of drugs. Here I am mostly referring to the so-called “classic”, serotonergic (serotonin-acting) psychedelics, such as lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), psilocybin (found in “magic mushrooms”), mescaline (found in various cacti), and N,N-dimethyltryptamine (DMT, used, for example, in the ayahuasca brew).<sup>10</sup> At high enough doses and given the right “set and setting” (i.e., the user’s mindset and the setting in which the substance is taken),<sup>11</sup> psychedelics are known to induce extraordinary states of consciousness (let us call them “psychedelic-induced mystical experiences”) – states that have been sought after for different reasons throughout history, from healing to communicating with the dead. What makes these substances particularly fascinating in this context is the fact that they could be placed somewhere in between spontaneous mysticism and effort-requiring mystical practices. They could uncontroversially be described as a shortcut for mystical experiences.<sup>12</sup>

Why are we talking about mysticism? Why now? The first reason is that more and more people are abandoning religion in their search for meaning and are relying instead on “spirituality.” This new trend seems to be connected to an increasing demand for meditation-related and psychedelic-related retreats, events and content. Moreover, this group of “spiritual but not religious” people seems to be particularly open towards different practices that can induce powerful personal experiences, such as breathwork and various esoteric practices.<sup>13</sup> The second reason is the “psychedelic renaissance” the

western world is currently going through. This movement has been characterized as a reemerging academic, medical, and cultural interest in psychedelic substances, accompanied by efforts to decriminalize and legalize these substances. Specifically, this movement finds its starting point and main inspiration in the interest for drugs and their (societal, therapeutic, spiritual) potential that started in the '50s and that had to be largely dropped because of the war on drugs.

Looking at the bigger picture, in the past four-to-six centuries the West has been gradually secularizing and has seen a rise in popularity of science and materialism (the assumption that everything that exists, including mental properties, is reduceable to matter). Consequently, mysticism was often brushed aside as religious fanaticism, or as delusory. This trend seems to be changing. Studies and surveys are now showing not only how common mystical experiences are, but also how said experiences can radically and permanently alter a person's understanding of reality and themselves.<sup>14</sup> (Psychedelic-induced) mystical experiences have also now been confidently linked to significant and lasting improvements in well-being. Specifically, (psychedelic-induced) mystical experiences have been found to increase openness and sense of meaning,<sup>15</sup> to bring lasting psychological benefits to healthy volunteers,<sup>16</sup> to lead to improved drinking behavior,<sup>17</sup> to help with tobacco addiction,<sup>18</sup> with treatment-resistant depression<sup>19</sup> and finally, with psychological distress in terminally ill patients.<sup>20</sup> Needless to say, all of this evidence makes mystical experiences an extremely fascinating and relevant topic of research. Overall, it seems clear that as the interest for spirituality increases, and the more widespread and normalized psychedelic substances become, both inside and outside of academia, the more widespread and normalized mystical experiences seem to become. I ultimately believe that the Western world is about to witness (and is, in a certain sense, already witnessing) a renaissance of mysticism.<sup>21</sup>

It is in this context that the research question for this work assumes its relevance: are mystical experiences real? What I will be exploring in this project, then, is whether mystical experiences are nothing but delusions, or if they can be said to be "true," "real," if they can tell us something about the nature of reality. Debates on the reality of mystical experiences are probably as old as mystical experiences themselves, but the origin of contemporary debates on the matter is commonly attributed to the publication of William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Since then, various well-articulated arguments have been proposed both in favor and against a mystical-experiences-based metaphysics. However, with materialistic reductionism slowly becoming the dominant framework in both science and philosophy, especially in the last century, this problem fell in disregard. The psychedelic renaissance has certainly led some philosophers to deal with the problem of the metaphysical status of mystical experiences,<sup>22</sup> but, so far, there has been no thorough treatment of the issue. This is what I aim at presenting: a summary and critical assessment of the major arguments for and against the reality of mystical experiences (chapter III).

This, however, is only partially what this work is about. After presenting and analyzing different arguments, I will conclude that none of them is satisfactory. As I will show, the arguments in favor of the reality of mystical experiences stand on shaky grounds and the arguments against it are surprisingly naïve. I will thus present an argument myself in favor of the reality of mystical states. Specifically, my main twist will consist in adopting a pragmatic take on truth inspired by Charles Peirce and supported by considerations from William James and John Dewey. The argument could be summarized along these lines: there is an agreement among mystics on the reality of their mystical experiences (*cf.* section II.4); therefore, if we decide to pragmatically equate truth with agreement – in a specific way that will be explained in the dedicated chapter (chapter IV) – said agreement is sufficient to establish the reality of the experience. In this same chapter (specifically, in section IV.4 and IV.5) I will also discuss in great detail why I believe my approach to truth is not just one of the many theories of truth that are currently part of the academic debate. The obvious question that follows is: if mystical experiences have a metaphysical relevance, what *precisely* do they tell us about reality? This will be the topic of the final chapter of this project (chapter V). I will argue that the only thing that mystical experiences allow us to safely claim is that there exists a universal consciousness. Given the grandiose claims about the nature of reality that one can find in the literature on mysticism, this is, in fact, a very minimal claim. In short, what I will propose is not a full metaphysical system based on mystical experiences, but the basis for one. I will conclude my project with an exploration of some different directions in which this groundwork can be taken.

## Notes Chapter I

1. Terence McKenna, *Food of the Gods* (London: Rider, 1992), 59.
2. Ibn Arabi, "The Treatise on Singleness," *The Mountain Path* 18:3 (1981): 73.
3. Giordano Bruno, "Gli Eroici Furori," in *Dialoghi Italiani*, ed. Nuccio Ordine and Giovanni Aquilecchia, (Florence: Sansoni, 1957), 932.
4. *The Upanishads*. Transl. Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester. (New York: Mentor Book MD 194, New American Library of World Literature, 1957), 88.
5. Jerome Gellman, "Mysticism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, Summer 2019 ed., ed. Edward Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/mysticism/>.
6. "Union" is used technically by Gellman to include in the definition also those experiences in which one's subjectivity is not *completely* dissolved. For a complete account see section II.1.
7. A recent paper by Mäcklin describes what he calls "aesthetic self-forgetfulness," the experience of "losing oneself" in a painting. Mäcklin is very clearly describing what Walter Stace called an "extrovertive" mystical experience (see chapter II.1). More in general, the link between what we might call "aesthetic" phenomena (say, Kant's "sublime," or William James' "sentiment of rationality") and mystical experiences is very common in the literature on mysticism (Harri Mäcklin, "Aesthetic Self-Forgetfulness," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 61:4 (2021), doi: 10.1093/aesthj/ayab019).
8. Deane Shapiro and Roger Walsh, *Meditation: Classic and Contemporary Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 6.
9. A useful definition is offered by Grinspon and Bakalar. They describe a psychedelic as a powerful psychoactive substance "which without causing physical addiction, craving, major physiological disturbances, delirium, disorientation, or amnesia, more or less reliably produces thought, mood, and perceptual changes otherwise rarely experienced except in dreams, contemplative and religious exaltation, flashes of vivid involuntary memory and acute psychoses" (Lester Grinspoon and James Bakalar, *Psychedelic Drugs Reconsidered* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 9).
10. Here I am intentionally avoiding the word "hallucinogen," since this broader term is now usually taken to also include entactogens such as 3,4-Methylenedioxyamphetamine (MDMA), cannabinoids, dissociative agents (e.g., ketamine) and other drugs (David Nichols, "Psychedelics," *Pharmacological reviews* 68:2 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1124/pr.115.011478>).
11. The idea was introduced in this form by Alfred Hubbard and popularized so by Timothy Leary. It is now commonly acknowledged as a staple of psychedelic research and psychedelic-assisted therapy.
12. Dan Merkur, "Mysticism," in *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/mysticism>. Cf. Rupert Sheldrake, *Science and Spiritual Practices*. (London: Coronet, 2017); Rupert Sheldrake, *Ways to Go Beyond and Why They Work* (London: Coronet, 2020).
13. With "spirituality" I mean "privatized, experience-oriented religion" (Heinz Streib and Robert Hood, "Spirituality' as Privatized Experience-Oriented Religion: Empirical and Conceptual Perspectives," *Implicit Religion*, 14 (2011): 433–453, doi: 10.1558/imre.v14i4.433). Cf. Alberto Cavallarin, "Psychedelic Substances are Forcing Scientists to go Beyond Science," *Intercollegiate Psychedelic Network* (2022), <https://intercollegiatepsychedelics.net/blog/psychedelic-substances-are-forcing-scientists-to-go-beyond-science>; Wouter Hanegraaff, "Imagining the Future Study of Religion and Spirituality," *Religion* 50:1 (2020), <https://doi-org.proxy.library.uu.nl/10.1080/0048721X.2019.1681103>.
14. Timmerman et al.'s study, for example, shows how psychedelics seem to naturally lead a person to abandon strictly materialistic views and endorse positions closer to dualism, panpsychism, or idealism (Christopher Timmermann, et al., "Psychedelics alter metaphysical beliefs," *Scientific Reports* 11:1 (2021), doi: 10.1038/s41598-021-01209-2; David Bryce Yaden, et al., "The Noetic Quality: A Multimethod Exploratory Study," *Psychology of Consciousness Theory Research and Practice* 4:1 (2017), doi: 10.1037/cns0000098).
15. Roland Griffiths, et al., "Psilocybin can occasion mystical-type experiences having substantial and sustained personal meaning and spiritual significance," *Psychopharmacology* 187:3 (2006), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00213-006-0457-5>. Katherine MacLean, Matthew Johnson, and Roland Griffiths, "Mystical experiences occasioned by the hallucinogen psilocybin lead to increases in the personality domain of openness," *Journal of psychopharmacology* 25:11 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0269881111420188>.
16. Christopher Nicholas, et al., "High dose psilocybin is associated with positive subjective effects in healthy volunteers," *Journal of Psychopharmacology* 32:7 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0269881118780713>. Yasmin Schmid, and Matthias Liechti, "Long-lasting subjective effects of LSD in normal subjects," *Psychopharmacology* 235:2 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00213-017-4733-3>.
17. Michael Bogenschutz, et al., "Psilocybin-assisted treatment for alcohol dependence: a proof-of-concept study," *Journal of psychopharmacology* 29:3 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0269881114565144>.

18. Albert Garcia-Romeu, Roland Griffiths, and Matthew Johnson, “Psilocybin-occasioned mystical experiences in the treatment of tobacco addiction,” *Current drug abuse reviews* 7:3 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.2174/1874473708666150107121331>.
19. Leor Roseman, David Nutt, and Robin Carhart-Harris, “Quality of Acute Psychedelic Experience Predicts Therapeutic Efficacy of Psilocybin for Treatment-Resistant Depression,” *Frontiers in pharmacology* 8 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fphar.2017.00974>. Robin Carhart-Harris, et al., “Psilocybin with psychological support for treatment-resistant depression: six-month follow-up,” *Psychopharmacology* 235:2 (2018b), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00213-017-4771-x>.
20. Roland Griffiths, “Psilocybin produces substantial and sustained decreases in depression and anxiety in patients with life-threatening cancer: A randomized double-blind trial,” *Journal of psychopharmacology* 30:12 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0269881116675513>. Stephen Ross, “Rapid and sustained symptom reduction following psilocybin treatment for anxiety and depression in patients with life-threatening cancer: a randomized controlled trial,” *Journal of psychopharmacology* 30:12 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0269881116675512>.
21. Ben Sessa, “The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Psychedelic Renaissance: Heroic Steps Forward on the Back of an Elephant,” *Psychopharmacology* 235:2 (2018).
22. Two recent examples are Chris Letheby and Miri Albahari. Letheby’s project is aimed at making mystical experiences fit in a naturalistic framework, while Albahari is pushing for science to open towards a different metaphysics of the mind, namely cosmopsychism. (Chris Letheby, *Philosophy of Psychedelic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Miri Albahari, “The Mystic and the Metaphysician: Clarifying the Role of Meditation in the Search for Ultimate Reality,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 26:7–8 (2019)).

## II. Preliminary Work: Terminology and Assumptions

### II.1. Mystical Experience

Mystical experiences are, obviously, a class of experiences. Yet, what said experiences are actually about – what makes an experience “mystical” – is more complicated to assess. Let us begin with a methodological matter. Some believe that one can extract a set of features that identify a mystical experience as such, while others think that, given how different reports from different mystics are, we should treat mystical experiences case by case, or at least tradition by tradition.<sup>1</sup> Thus understood, the debate is largely historical: can we extract from the reports of mystics throughout history a set of features that qualify an experience as mystical? Unfortunately, we do not have the space for a full historical survey. Even if we did, a *complete* survey would simply be impossible: one would always have to choose *some* representative reports from *some* mystics. This means that *any* attempt at this task could ultimately be charged of misinterpreting the history of mysticism, or of cherry-picking. To this we can add that, in the field of mysticism, one can only work with personal reports, hence one can never be sure that what is reported is a reliable description of the experience itself (e.g., a mystic might impose their existing beliefs on the experience). Given these circumstances, I suggest to follow the first (so-to-say, “essentialist”) methodology simply because it is theoretically more interesting and useful than treating the matter case-by-case. I believe it is worth *trying* to circumscribe these extraordinary experiences, i.e., trying to give a proper definition of mysticism, unless we have good reasons not to attempt it.

The question then is: what features make an experience mystical? A lot of minor debates enrage among scholars.<sup>2</sup> A first distinction that is commonly made is between *introvertive* and *extrovertive* experiences. A mystical experience is *extrovertive* when it has contents. For example, when one has a sudden experience of unity when looking at a landscape. It is *introvertive*, on the other hand, when it is an experience of “emptiness,” “nothingness,” or “pure consciousness.” These are commonly referred to in the literature as Pure Consciousness Events. A second distinction that is commonly made is between *theurgic* and *non-theurgic* experiences, where the former are experienced, or interpreted, as to involve the divine (however one defines it), while the latter do not. The distinctions will come in handy later in our discussion. However, they are not relevant to my main argument, in the sense that our treatment of the topic cuts across them. For this reason, I will not enter these minor debates.

A distinction that is more interesting for our project is that between “apophatic” and “kataphatic” experiences, where the former refers to the idea that nothing positive can be said about mystical experiences. Negative theology is probably the most famous expression of the apophatic position. This tradition believes that the only way one can talk about the divine is either indirectly,

through metaphors and analogies, or through negations (e.g. “God is absence of evil”). This discussion is also connected to the sometimes-reported paradoxicality and ineffability of mystical experiences, i.e., the fact that mystical experiences are sometimes understood to be beyond the law on non-contradiction, or beyond language. Now, the simple fact that I am writing these words distances my project from any radical apophatic stance. However, my full position on what one can and cannot say on mystical experiences will be presented in chapter V, where I will be discussing what metaphysical claims mysticism allows us to put forward.

Finally, the one debate that creates the biggest schism among scholars is the one between monists and dualists. A mystical experience can be said to be monistic when it (purportedly) involves a dissolution of one’s sense of subjectivity (a so-called “ego-death”), and consequently has no subject-object structure, no experiencer and no experienced. Dualists, on the contrary, believe that there exist mystical experiences that are not states of complete identity, and specifically, that in some mystical states some sort of boundary between experiencer and experienced persists. This position is common, for example, in those traditions in which the identity of the subject and the Divine is sometimes considered heretical, such as Christianity.<sup>3</sup> Walter Stace was the first contemporary scholar to explicitly claim that the only experiences that are truly mystical are monistic experiences.<sup>4</sup> However, he was accused (mostly by Christian scholars) of misrepresenting some reports of mystical experiences<sup>5</sup>. In this project I will follow Stace in believing that only non-dualistic experiences are truly mystical. I have three reasons for taking this stance. None of these reasons is conclusive, but, if taken together, I think they make the monists’ position more solid than its rival.

First, the claim that monistic experiences are mystical is fairly uncontroversial and widely accepted. The debate mostly revolves around whether dualistic experiences can *also* be said to be mystical – and so far, there is no agreement on that. Second, monistic experiences are conceptually more solid, or better demarcated. As we will see in the following section (II.2), the experience of ego-dissolution can be fairly easily delineated and distinguished from any other phenomenon or state of affairs. Contrarily, if one accepts that mystical experiences can also have a subject-object structure, it becomes a lot harder to clarify what precisely distinguishes a mystical experience from our day-to-day experience of an external world, or from other types of mental phenomena (as we will see in section III.1, some scholars believe that there is, in fact, not much distinguishing mystical experiences from sensorial experiences). Third, and finally, some mystical experiences are described as happening suddenly, but they more commonly seem to involve some kind of progressive loosening of one’s sense of individuality.<sup>6</sup> It thus seems quite natural to think of mystical experiences as comprising a spectrum from a mild loosening of one’s sense of subjectivity, to complete ego-death. If this is correct, I believe it is possible to argue that dualistic mystical experiences are simply precursors to a real mystical state, or

at least that they are not “as mystical” as a state of complete subjectlessness. With all of this in mind, in the following I will endorse monism, so that “mystical experience” will always refer to the experience of losing one’s sense of being an individual.

## II.2. Subjectivity and Consciousness

This stance on the nature of mystical experiences opens further questions: “what is a ‘subject?’” and “what is ‘ego-death,’ the loss of one’s sense of subjectivity?” Let us begin with subjectivity (or “individuality,” or “selfhood” – I will use the terms as synonyms). With it I will refer to what Galen Strawson calls the “traditional inner conception” of subjectivity, i.e. the feeling of being a stable thing, or presence, of some sort, a “self” that experiences.<sup>7</sup> Notice that this definition of subjectivity tells us nothing about the nature of consciousness itself. For example, it tells us nothing about whether consciousness coincides with its contents or not; or whether it is individual or universal. However, it is clear that when there is a subject, there is also consciousness. As a definition of consciousness that is neutral in this regard, I propose the following: consciousness is the space in which everything appears – where “appears” is to be understood phenomenologically, and not, e.g., existentially.<sup>8</sup> The starting point for this definition is Thomas Nagel’s famous claim that consciousness is the “what it is like to be something”. However, Nagel assumes that consciousness and subjectivity coincide, i.e. that consciousness always has spatial coordinates; that it is necessarily owned.<sup>9</sup> My definition of consciousness can therefore be taken to be the same as Nagel’s, but without this conceptual and metaphysical overlap with subjectivity.

I will then take “contents” in consciousness to refer to *anything* that appears in consciousness. Among contents one finds both subjects and what I will refer to as “objects,” with which I mean anything that is experienced as *external* by a subject. But let us be more specific. I will take what we might call a semi-Hegelian stance on the relation between subjectivity and objectivity. Simply put, I will take the two to be codefined and phenomenologically codependent: subjectivity is simply the feeling of being a *something* opposed to *something* that is experienced (by the subject themselves) as external – i.e. the object. In this sense, subjectivity is defined as what objectivity is not, and vice versa; the two terms negatively define each other. Ultimately, this means that there are no objects without subjects and no subjects without objects.<sup>10</sup> To be clear, I am not claiming that consciousness necessarily has contents. That is a problem that I will not discuss in this work. I am making the less radical, perhaps even trivial claim that there can be no external things if there is no subject (in the traditional inner conception of the term) that experiences them as external. Then, to summarize with an example, a chair can be said to be both a content in consciousness and an object, but an emotion, or the sense of subjectivity itself, while certainly being contents, are not objects.



### II.3. Ego-Death

“Ego-death,” or “ego-dissolution,” is the loss of one’s sense of being a subject, where “subject” is to be understood as defined above. In other words, ego-dissolution consists in the loss of one’s feeling of being a stable entity opposed to an external world. Two notes on this definition are necessary. First, given our description of subjectivity and objectivity as codefined, the loss of one’s sense of subjectivity implies, by definition, the destruction of the subject-object dichotomy that characterizes our day-to-day state of consciousness. Second, here I am intentionally using “sense of subjectivity,” rather than just “subjectivity,” because the metaphysical status of subjectivity is yet to be determined at this point of our analysis. For now, my claim about ego death is just a phenomenological and not a metaphysical claim. It is precisely the purpose of this thesis to turn these phenomenological and conceptual claims into metaphysical ones.<sup>11</sup>

Some have suggested that ego-death, thus understood, is pragmatically incoherent: if mystical states are states of subjectlessness, how can *subjects* report them?<sup>12</sup> Certainly not from their own autobiographical memory, because there was allegedly no subject experiencing it in the first place.<sup>13</sup> With the words of Charles Foster: “If [the mystic] really disappears, who is left to tell the story? And if he doesn’t, why should we take the story seriously?”<sup>14</sup> One faces this pragmatic contradiction, however, only if with ego-death we mean a *complete* dissolution of *everything* that can be associated with subjectivity. But this is rarely how people describe their experience. A common way people describe their ego-dissolution is that there is awareness, but said awareness is not owned by them. There is just awareness itself. If this is correct, then not everything that we associate with subjectivity is gone with ego-death: consciousness is still there, it is simply momentarily not owned anymore. But the challenge could now be rephrased as follows: consciousness itself might remain, but that is not you as you, it is just consciousness, *you* have nothing to do with it. This however, largely depends on one’s metaphysics of subjectivity and consciousness. In the Hinduist Advaita Vedanta tradition, for example, the individual Self (Atman) is a manifestation of the universal Self (Brahman), but the two are fundamentally identical in nature. This metaphysical framework would, I believe, allow one to report their ego-death without falling into a performative contradiction: the subject would dissolve into the universal Self, but the former would be able to report the latter since the subject did not really go anywhere – the Self is both universal and individual.<sup>15</sup> The same challenge could be avoided through some contemporary forms of idealism<sup>16</sup> and cosmopsychism.<sup>17</sup> Here I am however not taking a specific stance on the metaphysics of ego-death. I was simply interested in showing that the reports about these experiences are completely reasonable as long as one allows that *something* associated with the subject remains during one’s mystical experience – and the one thing that certainly remains is consciousness itself. At which point, one can save ego-death from a performative contradiction by linking

consciousness and subjectivity in a way that can allow the subject to remember their experience of ego-dissolution once they come back.<sup>18</sup>

This discussion on the pragmatic dimension of reports on ego-death also allows me to make a minor clarificatory note. Any discussion on the nature of mystical experiences must be had after the experience itself, for the simple reason that during the experience there is no subject who can make any claim. In this sense, it should be clear that any statement such as “a mystical experience reveals x about reality” is to be taken as implying a subject that has come back from a mystical state and can now make claims about such a state. To be fair, a mystical experience almost never follows a linear development of subject, ego-death, return to subject. More often, these kinds of experiences involve a continuous shifting of one’s sense of subjectivity. However, for the sake of simplicity, we can take it to be a linear process.

Many questions remain about what ego-death *precisely* is. However, taking a specific stance on the metaphysics at the basis of ego-dissolution would presume too much at this point of our analysis. I will come back to this issue at the end of this project (chapter V).

#### **II.4. Noetic Quality**

Some words on the so-called “noetic quality” of mystical states are also necessary. Almost anyone who has had a mystical experience would argue that it was not just some sort of hallucination. Most of them would argue that the experience was indubitable, certain, or real (depending on one’s preferred terminology). In *The Varieties of Mystical Experiences*, William James famously referred to this “sense of authority” as “noetic quality”; a feeling so unanimously reported by mystics throughout history that it led James and others to consider it a fundamental feature of mystical experiences in general.<sup>19</sup> Now, the fact that a sense of certainty often accompanies mystical experiences is clear from any historical survey of mysticism. However, this is different for claiming that noetic qualities are a *fundamental feature* of mystical experiences. This would be an essentialist claim many would object to. For the purpose of this project I suggest the following. The noetic quality of mystical states are nothing but a direct consequence of the loss of one’s sense of subjectivity. The reasoning is simple and mirrors some of the claims that we have already made: the truthfulness of an experience can only be doubted if there is *someone* to doubt it. We could thus say that with the disruption of the subject-object antithesis, the necessary condition for doubting seems to fall away: if there is no subject there is no doubter, and if there is no external world there is no doubted.<sup>20</sup>

Two notes are needed to round this argument off. First, the argument assumes that the truthfulness of a state of affairs depends on the subject making the statement and not on the state of affairs itself. This latter position depends on metaphysical realism, which we can, for the present

purpose, describe as the idea that there is, in fact, a state of affairs independent of human judgement. As we will see later, the understanding of truth I endorse springs out of a rejection of metaphysical realism. So this epistemological assumption will only be fully justified once the understanding of truth I endorse will be fully laid out (chapter IV.4). Second, I define “certainty” negatively, as the absence of doubt. The reason why this remark is important is the following. If certainty was, just like doubting, a positive act, then it would require a subject performing it. This would imply that if in mystical states there is no subject who can doubt the experience, there is also no subject who can judge the experience as certain during the experience itself. The conclusion would have to be that mystical states are beyond both certainty and doubt. On the contrary, by defining certainty as the absence of doubt, we can claim that a mystical experience is certain for the person who comes back from it, simply because during the experience there was no subject who could doubt it. No subject is needed during the experience itself for the experience to be considered real – the only thing that is necessary is that the experience could not be doubted.

## Notes Chapter II

1. These stances are sometimes respectively referred to as “perennialism” and “constructivism,” however, perennialism and constructivism are a lot more complex as positions than they are often taken to be. In fact, methodological concerns are quite marginal in the debate between perennialists and constructivists. A full account of these two positions will be given in section III.4.4.
2. Gellman, “Mysticism.”
3. There are some major examples of heretical non-dualistic mysticism in the Christian tradition, such as Meister Eckhart and (arguably) Renaissance mystics such as Pico della Mirandola and Marsilio Ficino.
4. Walter Terence Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (London: Macmillan & Co, 1961), 131-3.
5. Cf. Peter Moore, “Recent Studies of Mysticism: A Critical Survey,” *Religion* 3 (1973).
6. There is a fair amount of debate on the matter. In Zen Buddhism, for example, there exist “subitist” schools that believe that awakening is sudden. Similarly, a type of mystical experience that is valued in traditional Christian mysticism involves a sudden rupture. However, if we look at the history of mysticism these seem to be exceptions.
7. Galen Strawson, “What Is the Relation between an Experience, the Subject of the Experience, and the Content of the Experience?” *Philosophical Issues, Philosophy of Mind*, 13 (2003), <https://doi.org/10.1111/1533-6077.00015>.
8. Understanding “appears” in phenomenological terms obviously makes this definition of consciousness somewhat circular, but it seems to me this is the best we can achieve if we are looking for a minimal definition.
9. Thomas Nagel, “What is it like to be a bat?” *Philosophical Review* 83 (1974): 436. Cristopher Peacocke, “Subjects and Consciousness,” in *The Self and Self-Knowledge*, ed. Annalisa Coliva (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 89, doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199590650.001.0001.
10. In Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, the subject recognizes themselves as a subject only through the external world. It is through this interaction that self-consciousness is born and with it the distinction between internal and external in the individual themselves. Subjectivity and objectivity only exist in their interaction.
11. Ego death is therefore “vague.” Vague terms are those words, such as “tall” and “bald,” that possess borderline cases: it is clear when one is tall, as it is clear when one is not, but in certain cases the distinction is far less obvious (say, if one is 1.80 meters tall). Similarly, some experiences clearly involve an ego-dissolution (when one’s sense of subjectivity is *completely* gone) and some clearly don’t, but there exist borderline cases. I do not find this observation particularly problematic for my argument, but as to avoid the discussion altogether, in what follows I will always use the term “mystical” to refer to those experiences that involve a *clear* loss of one’s sense of subjectivity.
12. Here we are introducing language, therefore we are moving from a “traditional inner conception” of subjectivity, to a “thick” conception. With “thick” subjectivity we refer to the individual as a whole, rather than just the feeling of being a stable experiencer. However, it is obvious that thick subjectivity depends on the traditional inner conception. Therefore, mysticism, by undermining the latter, also undermines the former. Hence the paradox (Strawson, “What is the Relation”).
13. Thomas Metzinger, *Being no one* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 566. Cf. Rocco Gennaro, “Are there pure conscious events?” In *Revisiting mysticism*, ed. Chandan Chakrabarti and Gordon Haist (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2008).
14. Charles Foster, *Being a beast* (London: Profile Books, 2016), 6.
15. For a contemporary defense of this view, see: Miri Albahari, “Beyond Cosmopsychism and the Great I Am: How the World might be Grounded in Universal ‘Advaitic’ Consciousness” in *The Routledge Handbook of Panpsychism*, ed. Bill Seager (Routledge, forthcoming).
16. E.g., Bernard Kastrup, “The Universe in Consciousness,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 25:5–6 (2018).
17. E.g., Joachim Keppeler and Itay Shani, “Cosmopsychism and Consciousness Research: A Fresh View on the Causal Mechanisms Underlying Phenomenal States,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (2020), doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00371.
18. For a complete diagnosis of the challenge and description of the possible ways out of it see: Sascha Benjamin Fink, “Look Who’s Talking! Varieties of Ego-Dissolution Without Paradox,” *Philosophy and the Mind Sciences* 1:3 (2020), doi: <https://doi.org/10.33735/phimisci.2020.I.40>.
19. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1902), 380-1.
20. Stace, “Mysticism and Philosophy,” 153-4. Michael Pollan, *How to Change Your Mind: The New Science of Psychedelics* (London: Penguin Books, 2018), 42.

### III. The Debate

The purpose of this chapter is to outline and discuss the main positions and arguments on the reality of mystical experiences. I will begin with two “honorable mentions,” i.e., two groups of arguments that are certainly worth mentioning for their popularity, but that will turn out to be less relevant for my project. I will then move on to discussing in detail two major arguments in favor of the reality of mystical states: the Doxastic Practice Approach and the argument from unanimity. Finally, I will thoroughly explore two famous arguments against it: naturalistic explanations and constructivism.

#### III.1. Honorable Mentions: The Argument from Experience

The so-called “argument from experience” is a theistic argument with a long history<sup>1</sup> and which is still surrounded by quite a big debate. It is worth exploring in some detail in the context of this project, since we will repeatedly refer back to it later in this work. The first step of the argument consists in arguing that (some) mystical experiences are dualistic, i.e., have a subject-object structure, where God is the object. The second step, then, consists in arguing that these dualistic experiences of God are not so different from our day-to-day, perceptual experience of reality. This can be done in different ways, but as William Alston argued, the presence of any external input, independently of its phenomenological structure, seems to be sufficient for the purpose of the argument.<sup>2</sup> Finally, the defenders of the argument from experience claim that this similarity between perceptual and mystical experience gives us a *prima facie* reason to believe that mystical experiences are veridical and their content (i.e., God) real; or at least that there must be *something* that is experienced. The two most famous defenses of this last point are Swinburne’s “principle of credulity” (“If it seems (epistemically) to a subject S that x is present, probably x is present”)<sup>3</sup> and Alston’s “Doxastic Practice Approach” (for a full analysis of Alston’s argument, see section III.3.1).

Many have argued that the argument from experience ultimately fails, namely because of the evident disanalogies between sense experience and mystical experience.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, some would argue that there are no dualistic mystical experience: all mystical experiences are monistic, but some interpret them as dualistic because of their religious background; e.g., because admitting a full identity with God would be heretical.<sup>5</sup> As noted above, we will not get into this debate. The reason is that the whole argument, as it is standardly presented in the literature, only works for those mystical experiences with a subject-object structure. As I explained in section II.1, in this work I am only interested in mystical states that can be said to be experiences of non-duality, i.e. experiences in which there is no experiencer and no experienced. Nonetheless, as we will see with Walter Stace’s argument from unanimity (section III.3.3), it is possible to reformulate the argument in such a way that it does not need dualistic mystical experiences.

### **III.2. Honorable Mentions: Historical and Ethical Arguments**

In the literature one can also find historical, or ethical arguments concerning (directly or indirectly) the metaphysical status of mystical experiences. Here I will only mention them for the sake of completeness, but I will not properly assess them because doing so would force me into ethical, critical, or historical debates that are beyond the purpose of this project.

Some have argued that the “saintly” behavior of mystics can be considered a *prima facie* reason to believe in the truthfulness of mystical states (or at least a further point of support).<sup>6</sup> The reasoning is roughly that no false, or unreal experience could induce the sort of moral improvements that are reported in (and by) mystics throughout history. However, first, it is not clear that there exists a straightforward relationship between mystical experiences and moral behavior. Some have even argued that morality and mysticism are incompatible because in (monistic) mystical experiences there can be no recognition of the other as other.<sup>7</sup> Second, Kripal’s famous historical survey on the matter seems to prove the claim to be factually wrong.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the psychedelic renaissance has brought about a new wave of interest for the potential for moral enhancement that psychedelic substances (and psychedelic-induced mystical experiences) are often reported to carry.<sup>9</sup> The (potential) connection between mysticism and moral behavior is therefore currently being reevaluated.

Finally, some philosophers have been skeptical towards the truth-value of mystical experiences because of the potential ideological nature of such claims. Some have argued, for example, that the whole discussion around the meaning, value and consequences of mystical states is androcentric and fundamentally patriarchal.<sup>10</sup> In a similar critical vein, it could be argued that the contemporary debate around mysticism was born in the West with William James and has developed in the West, thus keeping a fundamentally western tone.<sup>11</sup> These sorts of critiques are extremely valuable and interesting in themselves, however, once again, discussing them would prove too much of a digression.

### **III.3. The Arguments in Favor of the Reality of Mystical Experiences**

Let us now look at some major arguments in favor of grounding metaphysics in mystical experiences. Starting with the Doxastic Practice Approach.

#### **III.3.1. Alston’s Doxastic Practice Approach**

The leading name for what concerns the so-called “Doxastic Practice Approach” is William Alston.<sup>12</sup> In what follows I will first summarize Alston’s argument and then give an overview of the major replies.

A “doxastic practice” is a socially established “way of forming beliefs and epistemically evaluating them”<sup>13</sup>; some examples of which are the practice of forming physical-object beliefs on the

basis of sense perception and the practice of deducing conclusions from premises. According to Alston, a doxastic practice is always bound to a “background system” of beliefs, against which a specific belief can be checked for counter beliefs, or overriders – an “overrider system.” For example, one could logically deduce the existence of God (say, by accepting the ontological argument), but before said belief is endorsed or rejected – Alston argues – a subject puts it into relation with their existing beliefs (their overrider system) to see if it fits or if any of those beliefs needs reconsidering. Now, Alston believes that no epistemic practice can be fully justified and that no epistemic conclusion can be established in a definitive way. The reason is that all epistemic justifications are ultimately circular, i.e., they defend the reliability of a source of belief by relying on premises that are themselves based on that source. An example of this is sense perception: one cannot justify the reliability of sense perception without ultimately referring to sense perception itself.<sup>14</sup> Despite this problem in justifying doxastic practices, one cannot avoid engaging in them. Therefore, Alston argues that unless we have good reasons to believe that our doxastic practice is unreliable (and he extensively argues we do not, in the case of mystical experiences), it is *practically rational* to engage in it.

Let us assume that the belief output of a person’s mystical experience is the reality of said experience (or of God, in Alston’s Christian framing). Given Alston’s metaepistemology, if the mystic’s background beliefs give them no reasons to believe that said belief is inaccurate, then it is practically rational for them to believe in the reality of their experience. This is the case, Alston argues, for Christians with a background knowledge of the scriptures, of the dogmas, or of the history of Christian mysticism. The same can however be said for anyone with an over-rider system that accommodates the reality of mystical states (e.g., an over-rider system consisting in the history of mysticism, or the history of psychedelic substances, or in occult practices).

It should be clear that Alston’s Doxastic Practice Approach only allows the mystics themselves to consider their experience real. A person with a different over-rider system (say, a traditional neuroscientist) might have no reasons to believe in the reality of mystical states, whether they have had mystical experiences themselves or not. In Alston’s work it is the argument from experience that allows the step from this situation, to universally acceptable metaphysical claims about God. We said that mystics themselves might have no reasons to reject the reality of their experience (this is the Doxastic Practice Approach). But if we add that perceptual experience and mystical experience are similar in nature, then also non-mystics (who are perceptual experiencers) have reasons to believe in the reality of mystical states. However, we explained in section III.1 why the argument from experience is not useful to us. We are therefore just left with the Doxastic Practice Approach. It is clear from what we said above that, even if we were to accept the argument, it would prove quite dissatisfactory for the purpose of this project since no non-tradition-relative metaphysics could be based on it.

### III.3.2. Counterarguments to the Doxastic Practice Approach

A great number of complaints with Alston's approach can be extracted from the relevant general epistemological literature, and some of these complaints can be rectified within the doxastic practice approach itself.<sup>15</sup> Here I will only focus on two objections that specifically cut to the heart of Alston's argument, coming respectively from Kvanvig and Steup. Kvanvig finds Alston's concept of "practical rationality" problematic. Alston only tells us that practical rationality is not "epistemic" rationality, i.e. the kind of rationality we would "attach to a belief if solid grounds for its truth were adduced."<sup>16</sup> However, he does not offer a positive definition. Given Alston's own rejection of certain accounts of rationality (e.g., coherentism), Kvanvig believes that we are left with two options: practical rationality is either "true practical rationality," "the kind that accrues to a practice given our practical goals of survival and well-being," or "subjective" rationality, "the kind of rationality that accrues to a belief when persons are following those practices that seem, from a particular point of view, the best to follow in the pursuit of truth and avoidance of error."<sup>17</sup> However, it seems like neither of them can do all the work that Alston's practical rationality does. This leads Kvanvig to conclude that this central concept of Alston's work is too vague to be useful.<sup>18</sup> Kvanvig also shows some concern with Alston's discussion of reliability, but it is Steup who really dissects the text on this point. Alston believes that "when I judge [sense perception] to be [practically] rational, I am *committing* myself to the [practical] rationality of judging [sense perception] to be reliable."<sup>19</sup> The same goes for mystical experiences: judging mystical experiences to be practically rational commits one, according to Alston, to judging them as reliable. However, Steup notes, this implication from rationality to reliability is questionable: one can consider themselves practically rational in engaging in a doxastic practice, but still suspend their judgement on the practice's reliability. For example, one could engage in sense perception because there is not really an option (this is what Alston's practical rationality comes down to), but still believe that sense perception is ultimately unreliable. Similarly, then, one could be justified (in the sense of practical rationality) to engage in mystical practices, but that would not make them justified in finding the practice reliable.<sup>20</sup>

In recent years, the debate around Alston's project seems to have shifted from strictly epistemological concerns, to the so-called "problem of religious diversity." The objection was already identified in Alston's *Perceiving God* by Alston himself as particularly challenging for his argument. The problem is the following: "Since there is a plurality of mystical, perceptual doxastic practices, with mutually contradictory output and/or background belief systems, how can it be rational to accept one of these rather than any of the others (or none at all)?"<sup>21</sup> Note that religious diversity could be extended as a challenge to religious truth-claims in general. Different religions make mutually excluding claims about all sorts of things, from morality to the nature of the divine: why should I accept one claim rather



than another? However, let us keep our focus on Alston's argument. His attempt at replying consists in claiming a certain level of incommensurability between traditions. Different mystical traditions have different doxastic practices, with their own way of going from experiential input to belief and their own overrider system. There seems to be no common procedure to settle a dispute between different doxastic practices, especially since, as we noted above, every attempt at establishing that a doxastic practice is better than another would ultimately turn out to be a circular argument. If this is correct, then the practical rationality of a certain belief does not really impinge on the practical rationality of another, rival belief. We are left with a plurality of mutually incompatible practices.<sup>22</sup> This information, Alston believes, takes the sting out of the diversity objection. However, as he notes, it is far from defeating it: "the knowledgeable and reflective Christian should be concerned about the situation [and] should do whatever seems feasible to search for common ground on which to adjudicate the crucial differences between the world religions [...]. What success will attend these efforts I do not presume to predict. Perhaps it is only in God's good time that a more thorough insight into the truth behind these divergent perspectives will be revealed to us."<sup>23</sup>

Other solutions to the problem of religious diversity have been proposed. For example, Swinburne suggested that while different mystical practices might disagree on the details, they all agree on the general claim of having experienced a supernatural being.<sup>24</sup> Somewhat similarly, Hick suggested that different religions actually have different conceptions and experiences of one and the same reality ("the Real") – a reality that never presents itself as it is, but only through "masks."<sup>25</sup> However, these kinds of "all religions actually agree" approaches have often been criticized for being unfaithful to the actual claims made by different religions.<sup>26</sup> It ultimately seems like, as far as the problem of religious diversity is concerned, we are left with a dilemma: we either accept said diversity and live with the incompatibility of different religious claims; or we try to make different religions converge towards one common truth, running the risk of being unfaithful to the claims that these religions endorse.

We may safely conclude, then, that Alston's argument runs into quite some problems. Some of these problems spring from epistemological concerns, others from the mere fact of diversity: we cannot all be justified in our respective claims if said claims are incompatible. It has to be noted that the definition of mystical experience I am using in this paper would not run into the problem of diversity (see section I). However, all the other problems with Alston's approach remain. Moreover, as we noted above, even if the doxastic practice approach was reliable, it would only make it justified for the person who had the mystical experience themselves to believe in the reality of said experience. We would therefore need a further argument to make these metaphysical claims universally acceptable. The debate is ongoing, but given this current state of affairs, we can conclude that Alston's doxastic practice

approach does not offer a solid ground for a metaphysics based on mystical experiences. Let us now move on to the argument from unanimity.

### III.3.3. The Argument from Unanimity and its Problems

The “argument from unanimity” is likely as old as mysticism itself, but appears to have found its first proper philosophical discussion in modern times in Walter Stace’s *Mysticism and Philosophy*. In this text we find both a positive case for it and the main challenges that the argument faces. To be precise, Stace begins with the argument from unanimity, but ultimately concludes that it is not sufficient. To support it, he believes one needs an element of commonality between day-to-day experience and mystical experience (i.e., an argument from experience, see section III.1). However, he concludes – and we will agree with him – that also this attempt at a “reinforced” argument from unanimity fails. What now follows is a summary of Stace’s whole argument and a critical assessment of his conclusion.

Two background notes are necessary before getting into the details of Stace’s argument. First, the argument is explored in chapter three of his book, where he is discussing whether mystical experiences have an “objective reference.” At the beginning of the chapter he mentions that he will be considering the possibility that the mystic is coming “in contact with some reality or some aspect of reality with which men do not come in contact in any other way.”<sup>27</sup> Therefore, given my definition of “objective” as “external” (see section II.2), I will always use the word “real,” rather than “objective” (unless stated otherwise). This should shield us from the potential claim that Stace is assuming a specific metaphysics. Second, Stace is a “perennialist,” which, for the present purpose, means that he believes there is a “common core” to mystical experiences throughout history (see section III.4.4 for a full account of perennialism). What he means by “argument from unanimity,” then, is the following: the similarity, or even identity, of the reports of mystical experiences throughout history makes the content of said experiences real. As explained in section II.1, the only experiences that we consider to be truly mystical are those in which there is loss of one’s sense of subjectivity. On this point, I am in agreement with Stace. Stace’s argument from unanimity could therefore be rephrased, for the purpose of this project, as follows: the fact that all those who have had a mystical experience agree that their sense of subjectivity was gone, makes the content of said experiences (i.e., subjectlessness itself) real.<sup>28</sup>

Stace begins by noting that the only two things we can know with certainty from the mystics’ unanimity are: “that the witnesses are telling the truth as to what they experience” and “that in their reports of their experiences they have not unintentionally misdescribed the nature of these experiences.”<sup>29</sup> But when one makes the extra step and claims that the unanimity makes the experience (or gives us reasons to believe that the experience was) real, a series of obvious objections arise. First of

all, collective hallucinations are possible. The fact that, say, a group of people walking in the desert see water, does not necessarily mean that the water is real. Similarly, if we all took a similar dose of lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) we would (most likely) all see the floor bending, or the walls melting, but that does not mean that the floor is *actually* bending, or that the walls are *actually* melting. “In short, an experience may be universal and yet illusory.” Moreover, one could also argue that the mystics’ unanimity only has a physiological, or biological relevance: it only means that similar techniques for reaching a mystical state affect all human bodies in similar ways; it tells us nothing about a reality said experience might correspond to.<sup>30</sup>

One way of avoiding these objections is looking for similarities between sensory experience and mystical experiences. The former is generally considered reliable and its contents objective, or real; so, if the latter is similar enough to sensory experience, we also have good reasons to believe that the content of mystical states is real. This approach is the same in spirit as the argument from experience. However, contrary to the traditional treatment of this argument that we discussed in section III.1, the kind of mystical states we are now working with is non-dual, which makes the case for the similarity between sense experience and mystical experience start from what seems like a point of disadvantage.

A first route that Stace explores is pragmatic in nature. The strategy consists in claiming that all experiences, whether sensory or mystical, are necessarily private, and therefore, that “reality” is ultimately a matter of agreement (or potential agreement). If this reasoning is correct, then, the agreement among those who have had a mystical experience (or their potential agreement) proves the content of said experience to be real; just like our agreement on the reality of day-to-day experience makes it real. Stace, however, seems to reject this point without much of a thought. He believes that the previous point still holds: agreement is a necessary condition, but not sufficient to establish the reality of an experience. In other words, he believes one can always ask “how do you know your experience is *actually* real?” What we are looking for, then, is an extra element that, *together with agreement*, makes an experience real, and whether this element is shared by both day-to-day experience and mystical experience.<sup>31</sup> As I will explain in section IV.1, I believe the pragmatic version of the argument from unanimity is a lot more interesting than Stace believes, but let us follow his reasoning for now.

Different philosophers throughout history have proposed different reasons, apart from agreement, to believe that the content of sensory experience is real.<sup>32</sup> Stace, following a hint from William James,<sup>33</sup> argues that the extra element we are looking for is *order*, by which he means “law, that is to say, regularity of succession, repetition of pattern, ‘constant conjunction’ of specifiable items.” We call the external world the order of nature – he says – because it strictly follows certain specific laws, i.e., the laws of nature.<sup>34</sup> Contrary to said world, Stace claims, dreams and hallucinations are not real because they are disorderly. The obvious counterargument to this claim is that sometimes they are not.

What about, for example, a dream in which one is simply walking down a street? Stace's reply is that in these cases what breaches the laws of nature is the shift from dreaming (or hallucinating) to sensory experience and vice versa. For example, in my dream I might be walking in the woods in Norway, but when I wake up I find myself in my bed in the Netherlands. As far as we know, teleportation is nomologically impossible, so the breach of the laws of nature happened in the shift from one state of consciousness to the other.<sup>35</sup>

What he concludes from this stance is that mystical experiences can be said to be neither real, nor unreal – a rather unsatisfactory conclusion. Stace is a proponent of Pure Consciousness Events (see section II.1), he believes, in other words, that truly mystical experiences have no content. He consequently believes that mystical states can be said to be neither in order (real), nor in disorder (unreal), since there are no identifiable “things” in them that can be either in order or disorder. At this point Stace takes the argument in a completely different direction,<sup>36</sup> but for the purpose of this work we can stop here.

Stace is evidently struggling in this part of his work. He first tries to consider whether agreement on its own is sufficient for his purpose, but rapidly concludes that something else, apart from agreement, is needed. However, his best attempt – order – ends up being fundamentally useless to round off the argument from unanimity. We are thus left with two options if we want to claim mystical experiences are real. The first option is to look for another element of commonality between mystical and day-to-day experience. However, all the proposals seem to either end up working only for dualistic mysticism (as in the case of the traditional argument from experience), or simply end up not working given the radical difference between these two states of consciousness (as in the case of Stace's proposal). The second option is to find a way to make agreement on its own suffice. I believe this second route is the more valuable. Specifically, I believe it becomes a live option if we employ a pragmatic definition of truth. This is the route I will explore in chapter IV of this project.

### **III.4. The Arguments Against the Reality of Mystical Experiences**

Let us now look at the two major arguments *against* the reality of mystical experiences. The first – naturalism – seems to be particularly popular in the scientific community and in the general public; the second – constructivism – is the current mainstream position in the field of religious experiences, even though it seems to be slowly falling in disregard.

#### **III.4.1. Naturalistic Explanations**

Anyone who has heard of mysticism is also familiar with naturalistic explanations. The naturalistic approach (which is none other than the mainstream scientific approach) simply consists in

explaining mystical experiences away by explaining what happens in the brain, or in the body, of the person having the experience. A variety of different theories have been proposed, such as extreme bodily states (especially for those experiences reached through fasting, self-inflicted pain, chastity and other forms of asceticism) and malfunctioning of brain areas (some candidates are the prefrontal area, the amygdala, the Default Mode Network, the temporal lobe – i.e., the locus of epilepsy).<sup>37</sup> Here I am not interested in the individual theories, rather in what they share.

“Naturalism” is a famously difficult term to grapple with. In the context of this work, I use it to signify a conjunction of two doctrines (technically three, but only two are worth discussing here; see note 38). Firstly, naturalists are physicalists, or materialists. Broadly speaking, physicalists believe that everything that exists can be reduced to matter and physical interactions (whether that means particles, waves, or something else). Physicalists believe, for example, that all mental phenomena such as perception, thoughts and consciousness are nothing above and beyond activity in the physical brain (or are ontologically reduceable to it). Secondly, I believe naturalistic explanations of mysticism (usually share a certain understanding of truth as *correspondence*. Correspondence theories of truth tend to see truth as a static relation between a truth-maker and a truth-bearer: a statement is true if it corresponds to the actual state of the world, to a fact. For example, the statement “a chair is black” is true if and only if there is a chair in the actual world that has the property of being black.<sup>38</sup> Summarizing, I believe this is the basis of the naturalistic strategy to explaining mystical experiences: (1) mystical states must be reduceable to neurobiological phenomena (or other physical phenomena), since everything that exists is reduceable to matter (materialism); and (2) since all mental phenomena are reducible to brain activity, mystical experiences cannot be true because there is no fact in the actual world corresponding to them (correspondence). Conclusion: mystical experiences are nothing but the product of a bodily alteration. It should be noted that this approach isn’t necessarily that of science as a whole. Other theories of truth (e.g., coherentism) and other ontologies (e.g., panpsychism) are arguably just as compatible with current scientific practices, albeit perhaps less popular. What I am suggesting is that the naturalistic “explaining away” of mysticism usually has these characteristics, in both academic and non-academic circles. Let us now look in turn at some major objections to materialism and to the correspondence theory of truth.

#### **III.4.2. Counterarguments to Materialism: The Hard Problem of Consciousness**

A big problem with these kinds of naturalistic explanations was already discussed early on by William James. All mental phenomena have a physical correlate. Just like there is something happening in the body of a person who is watching a bottle of water, there is something happening in the body of a person seeing a dead relative and in the body of a person having a mystical experience. Explaining the bodily activity associated to sensory experience, or simply pointing out that something is happening in the body, will not explain the value, or the metaphysical status of the sensory experience itself. The

same is true for mystical experiences.<sup>39</sup> I see this argument as a rudimentary version of the famous “hard problem of consciousness.” The idea is that there is an unbridgeable explanatory gap between the physical and the mental – there seems to be no obvious reason why consciousness and brain activity should be associated at all. For every explanation of a neural correlate of consciousness, one can always ask “why is there an experience associated to this activity?” Ultimately, what this means is that explaining quantities will not explain qualities (i.e. the redness of a rose) and explaining the objective – the external world – will not explain the subjective – the fact of consciousness, the presence of an opening onto the world.<sup>40</sup> Whatever one thinks of this famous argument, a major point remains: for the past century or so, one could often assume that all mental phenomena are reducible to bodily activity and find no major objectors; now, and specifically after Chalmers’ argument, this is not the case anymore. Materialism must be justified and even then, a great number of philosophers and scientists will object to it.<sup>41</sup>

What has just been said also covers the common claim, among naturalists, that their understanding of the matter should be preferred (1) because it has been proven reliable so far; and (2) because it is the more parsimonious, since it does not rely on the existence of scientifically unverifiable phenomena and entities. The answer to (1) is that science has been successful so far, precisely because it has not dealt with consciousness itself.<sup>42</sup> And the answer to (2) is that naturalism is not the least parsimonious stance precisely because – many would argue – it is not able to account for the existence of consciousness. Some have claimed, for example, that panpsychism (the idea that some form of consciousness is associated to the fundamentals of reality, whatever they may be) is the most parsimonious view that is available in contemporary metaphysics, since it retains the advantages of materialism, but also gives us a basis to start explaining consciousness.<sup>43</sup>

### **III.4.3 Counterarguments to the Correspondence theory of Truth**

Various complaints have been raised about the correspondence theory of truth itself, concerning its narrowness, triviality and obscurity.<sup>44</sup> However, some would argue that (some, or most of) these complaints are met by more recent and refined versions of the theory. Let us assume this is correct for the sake of the argument. In the following I choose to focus on two wider complaints.

The first objection begins as an epistemological complaint, but quickly turns into a metaphysical problem. Correspondence seems to lead into skepticism about the existence of an external world, since the correspondence between thoughts and world can never be ascertained. Berkeley, for example, famously argued that we have no reasons to assume that, say, my cup of coffee exists outside of my experience of said cup. We simply have no way to confirm, or disconfirm its mind-independent existence. In a similar vein, some constructivists argue that one’s culturally-acquired concepts radically

shape one's experience, thus making it impossible to have a "pure" experience of reality (*cf.* section III.4.4). Similar claims have been advanced by scientists. Donald Hoffman recently argued through evolutionary game theory that the human brain adapted to create a "reality" that is solely meant to allow us to survive.<sup>45</sup> Finally, recent research on the neural correlates of psychedelic experiences also seems to point to a similar conclusion. For example, Carhart-Harris' "Entropic Brain Theory" – based on neuroimaging research with psilocybin – argues that the human brain works like a sort of valve, or filter, reducing and radically shaping the information that the brain itself receives (an idea that finds its main advocates in modern times in Bergson and Huxley<sup>46</sup>).<sup>47</sup> Overall, this no-independent-access objection seems to lead one either towards skepticism about an external reality, or towards monistic positions. It is clear that, if one wants correspondence to work as a theory of truth, they have to assume that an external reality exists.

The second objection to correspondence theories of truth is precisely that they assume some form of metaphysical realism. Realism is the idea that (1) there exists a mind-independent world and (2) our claims and thoughts are about said world. It could be said to be the most natural metaphysical interpretation of the subject-object antithesis that characterizes day-to-day experience.<sup>48</sup> However, mystical experiences have no subject-object, internal-external structure. To be clear, this does turn correspondence into an *objection* to the reality of mystical experiences. By assuming that truth necessitates a subject-object structure, correspondence makes any discussion on the truthfulness of mystical states *impossible in principle*. One could bite the bullet and simply accept that mystical experiences are beyond truth and falsehood. But we would be conceding an unwarranted assumption that, as we will see, most other theories of truth do not share. Why should we endorse the one theory with the one assumption that makes the whole discussion that we are trying to have impossible?

The first objection is dependent on the second, so, we could simplify the matter by saying that correspondence is problematic because it assumes realism.<sup>49</sup> Note that this is not to be taken as an endorsement of anti-realism. My position on the matter will be developed in section IV.3. What I was mainly interested in showing is that, overall, naturalistic explanations of mysticism are quite more strongly objectionable than they are sometimes taken to be in the scientific community and among contemporary philosophers; but also among the general public. Precisely like materialism, correspondence cannot be assumed acritically and there are multiple reasons (we only saw the two major ones) why one might not want to endorse it. Ultimately, naturalistic explanations of mystical experiences are far from standing on solid ground.

Let us now move from naturalism, the most common objection to mysticism generally speaking, to the major objection to the reality of mystical states in the field of religious studies: constructivism.

### III.4.4. Constructivism and Perennialism

Constructivism (or “contextualism”)<sup>50</sup> was introduced in the field of religious experiences in 1978 by Steven Katz and almost immediately became the mainstream position in the research field – especially because it fit particularly well with the postmodern spirit of that time. Constructivism is usually understood as *the* alternative to perennialism, but this seems to be the case only because this is how Katz and other constructivists framed the matter. To this day, those in the field who reject one position feel obliged to endorse the other and vice versa.<sup>51</sup> However, the two stances are hardly antithetical, as we will now see.

Let us begin with perennialism. This was the mainstream position before Katz, especially given its popularity among some fathers of the field (William James, Aldous Huxley, Walter Stace). From the literature it seems possible to extract (at least) three different definitions. First, perennialism sometimes refers to the idea that all religions throughout history share a common truth.<sup>52</sup> Second, to the idea that all mystics throughout history share some beliefs on what their mystical experiences consist in. Third, to the idea that all mystical experiences reveal the same set of truths about reality. The first is an historical claim about religions. The second is an epistemological claim about mystics. The third is a metaphysical claim about mystical experiences and reality.<sup>53</sup> The step from the first two to the latter can be made, as we saw, through the argument from agreement: the agreement among religions, or among mystics, gives us (*prima facie*) reasons to believe in the truth of their common statements. Most perennialists seem to accept this step in one degree or another – indeed, the move from general agreement to reality is what motivates a lot of perennialists in the first place. Having said this, while a lot has been said by perennialists on what mystical experiences reveal about the nature of reality,<sup>54</sup> most of the contemporary discussion has been about what features characterize a mystical experience. Certain proposals (such as James’ and Stace’s) are far more popular and cited than others, but among scholars there seems to be no agreement.<sup>55</sup>

As we already know, constructivism was presented as the rival theory to this cluster of beliefs. Constructivists insist on how the society we live in, and especially societally-informed concepts, “construct” our experiences (whether mystical or not). Specifically, they believe that the contextual shaping of experience happens *during* the experience itself and not only after. One may distinguish between “soft” (or “moderate”) and “hard” (or “strong”) constructivism. Soft constructivism is the idea that the context we live in only partially shapes experience; or that, even if it massively shapes it, there remains a certain degree of commensurability between different experiences from different contexts. Thus understood, constructivism is a fairly moderate proposal and most would feel no need to disagree with it. Hard constructivists believe, on the other hand, that all experiences are *completely* and



*incommensurably* determined by societal influences and/or conceptual scheme. Fully spelled out, the hard constructivist's argument against perennialism is the following:

(A) The conceptual scheme a mystic possesses completely determines the nature of the mystical experience.

(B) Mystics of different mystical traditions possess pervasively different conceptual schemes.

(C) Therefore, mystical experiences are not universal and there can be no transcultural (or trans-contextual) understanding of mystical experiences.

If strong constructivists are correct, it might be true that different mystics have an experience of de-subjectification, but if said mystics come from different traditions, then their experiences are not *actually* the same.<sup>56</sup>

Now that the two positions have been laid out, it should be clear why it is not an *aut aut*. One can reject perennialism for reasons that have nothing to do with the conceptual construction of experience. And one can endorse perennialism, while also endorsing some form of soft constructivism. I therefore follow Jones in preferring the term “nonconstructivism” for the actual alternative to constructivism; or for the position constructivists are actually arguing against.<sup>57</sup>

Nonetheless, hard constructivism remains a problem for the idea of a metaphysics based on mysticism: if mystical experiences from different traditions are incommensurable, that is, if mystical experiences are not universally identical, there can be no universal metaphysics based on said experiences either. One would have to either restrict their metaphysical claims to the tradition they were raised in – perhaps endorsing some form of pluralism, or relativism – or simply drop the whole project. Let us then see why hard constructivism is a less solid position than it is often taken to be.

#### **III.4.5. Counterarguments to Hard Constructivism**

To begin with, it is hard to see how strong constructivism could be confirmed or dismissed. This radical form of constructivism is based on one major epistemological assumption: experience is always constructed. Where does this assumption stem from? Is it historical? Certainly not, because historical reports of mystical experiences, first of all, are not the experience itself and second, are always intermingled and contaminated by cultural elements – the constructivist would argue. Then, is the assumption perhaps based on empirical data? It might be possible to show that this is how the physical brain works: it could be empirically shown that all data must first pass through some form of conceptual shaping in the brain.<sup>58</sup> However, a hard constructivist would have to argue that also the empirical data used for this kind of research is culturally determined, thus making such a theory relative to a certain tradition. The starting assumption therefore seems to be baseless. Worsening the situation

is the fact that hard constructivism is not even falsifiable. Every piece of data that is brought forward by nonconstructivists (say, the fact that there are clearly *some* points of agreement among mystics) can be discarded by the constructivist as being culturally determined. Then the question becomes obvious: why should one endorse this assumption at all?<sup>59</sup>

Moreover, hard constructivism cannot really make sense of mystical experience having an unexpected content, since all experiences are taken to be determined by one's culture. However, Mystics throughout history have been challenging and modifying the doctrines they were raised in after their own experiences. For instance, one can find many heretical mystics in the history of religion (Eckhart and Boehme being two major examples for Christianity).<sup>60</sup> Indeed, there are many examples of mystics claiming that their work is conservative in nature, when they are in fact radically altering the tradition they are in (this is arguably the case for Plotinus).<sup>61</sup>

Finally, even if we were to grant the hard constructivists' premise, they would have to actively dismiss the self-understanding of certain mystical practices as being about deconditioning, about loosening the conceptual schema and cultural patterns one was raised in.<sup>62</sup> Most practitioners of vipassana meditation, for example, argue that this is, in part, what meditation is about. If this is correct, meditation might be a potential tool for practitioners to escape their conceptual schemes and thus have universal mystical experiences.<sup>63</sup> Deconditioning is, moreover, not only central to many mystical practices, but also to some contemporary therapy traditions, such as psychoanalysis. Once again, freeing oneself from one's past would not be possible if the hard constructivists were right.

Summarizing and concluding, we have seen that there exist two forms of constructivism, soft and hard. Soft constructivism is the more moderate position and does not pose a threat to the claim that mystical experiences are real. The more radical position – hard constructivism – presents a real challenge to grounding metaphysics in mysticism, but its popularity seems to be inversely related to how solid the argument actually is. Hard constructivism rests on an unjustifiable assumption – it is neither provable nor disprovable. Moreover, were it true, there would be no originality or heresy among mystics, something that is clearly false. Finally, were it true, it would make any form of deconditioning impossible – a claim many mystical and non-mystical traditions would object to.

### **III.5. Conclusion: A Blueprint**

In this chapter we have explored in detail two arguments in favor of the reality of mystical experiences and two arguments against it. The first argument in favor of the reality of mystical states was William Alston's Doxastic Practice Approach. From an analysis of the argument we concluded, first, that it would only allow the mystics themselves to believe in the reality of their experience; and second, that there are too many counterpoints to it to use it as a starting point for a metaphysical

system. This latter conclusion was also reached when we discussed the second argument in favor, the argument from unanimity. However, we also noted that this is the case only given how Stace framed the issue. A reframing of the argument from unanimity will be precisely the starting point of my own argument, which I will elaborate in the following chapter.

The first argument against the reality of mystical experiences was naturalism. We concluded that this approach to mysticism rests on two problematic assumptions. The first is materialism – a worldview put into question by the mere existence of consciousness. The second is metaphysical realism – a framework, that, as we explained, not only rests on further assumptions, but also makes the conversation we are trying to have impossible in principle. As we will see, this rejection of realism will be a constant point of reference for the discussion to follow. Finally, we analyzed constructivism and we rejected the only form of this doctrine that challenges the reality of mysticism (hard constructivism) because of the unjustifiable assumption at its core and its factually wrong implications.

Ultimately, none of the arguments presented in the traditional literature on mysticism seem particularly persuasive. The arguments in favor of the reality of mystical states turned out to be too problematic to be endorsed, and the arguments against it rest on a number of unjustified (and sometimes unjustifiable) assumptions. What will follow in the next chapter is my own attempt at establishing the reality of mystical states and an explanation of why I believe my argument, contrary to those just presented, stands a chance at succeeding.

## Notes Chapter III

1. The first formulation of the argument can be found in a 1939 book by Baillie. In 2011 Kwam proposed another attempt at defending it (John Baillie, *Our Knowledge of God* (London: Oxford University Press, 1993); Kai-man Kwam, *The Rainbow of Experiences, Critical Trust, and God* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011)).
2. William Payne Alston, "Reply to Commentators," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 54:4 (1994): 896.
3. Michael Martin, "The Principle of Credulity and Religious Experience," *Religious Studies* 22:1 (1986): 79. Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, Revised Edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).
4. Charles Bruton Martin, "A Religious Way of Knowing," in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (London: SCM Press, 1955). Richard Gale, "Why Alston's Mystical Doxastic Practice is Subjective," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 54 (1994). Peter Byrne, "Perceiving God and Realism," *Philo* 3 (2001). Evan Fales, "Do Mystics See God?" In *Contemporary Debates in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Michael Peterson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).
5. Ninian Smart, "Interpretation and Mystical Experience," *Religious Studies* 1 (1965). This position is a form of soft constructivism, cf. section III.4.4.
6. William Wainwright, *Mysticism, a Study of its Nature, Cognitive Value, and Moral Implications* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981), 83-8.
7. Wainwright, *Mysticism, a Study*, 211-12.
8. Jeffrey Kripal, "Debating the Mystical as the Ethical: An Ideological Map," in *Crossing Boundaries: Essays on the Ethical Status of Mysticism*, ed. William Barnard and Jeffrey Kripal (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2002).
9. Brian Earp, "Psychedelic Moral Enhancement," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 83 (2018), doi:10.1017/S1358246118000474.
10. Nancy Caciola, "Mystics, Demoniacs, and the Physiology of Spirit Possession in Medieval Europe," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42 (2000). Sarah Coakley, "Dark Contemplation and Epistemic Transformation: The Analytic Theologian Re-meets Teresa of Avila," in *Analytic Theology, New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology*, ed. Oliver Crisp and Michael Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Grace Marion Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Melissa Raphael, "Feminism, Constructivism, and Numinous Experience," *Religious Studies* 30 (1994).
11. It is sometimes argued that the concept of "philosophy," as it was developed in the West, cannot be applied to Eastern thought without misrepresenting said thought. One could similarly argue that the concept of "mysticism" cannot be used in, say, Buddhist or Hinduist thought, without misrepresenting said traditions.
12. William Payne Alston, *Perceiving God, The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 68-101, 146-83. William Payne Alston, *Beyond "Justification": Dimensions of Epistemic Evaluation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 207-29.
13. Alston, *Perceiving God*, 6.
14. William Payne Alston, *The Reliability of Sense Perception* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).
15. See for example: Alston, "Reply to Commentators," 897-99.
16. Jonathan Kvanvig, "William Alston, Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 11:2 (1994): 313, doi: 10.5840/faithphil19941122.
17. *Ivi*.
18. *Ibid*, 313-7.
19. Matthias Steup, "William Alston, Perceiving God. The Epistemology of Religious Experience," *Noûs* 31 (1997): 410.
20. *Ivi*.
21. Julian Willard, "Alston's epistemology of religious belief and the problem of religious diversity," *Religious Studies* 37 (2001): 62.
22. Steup, "William Alston," 411-12.
23. William Hasker, "William Alston, Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 35:3 (1994): 184.
24. Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 295.
25. John Hick, "On Conflicting Religious Truth-Claims," *Religious Studies* 19:4 (1983): 487.
26. Gavin d'Costa, "the Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religion," *Religious Studies* 32:2 (1996).
27. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 135.
28. Or gives us a *prima facie* reason to believe it, or makes it probable; depending on how strong one wants their claim to be.

29. *Ivi*.

30. *Ibid*, 136. An important line of research, headed by John McDowell, claims that experience *is* knowledge. Such an account would provide an interesting solution to Stace's problem. However, McDowell's position is a form of metaphysical realism. See section III.4.3 for why we cannot accept a realistic account of reality (John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1994)).

31. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 137-9.

32. Cf. Lorraine Daston and Peter Gallison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2010).

33. Michael Hodges, "The Claims for Mysticism in The Varieties of Religious Experience," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 25:4 (2011): 401.

34. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 140.

35. *Ibid*, 140-3.

36. Stace proceeds to argue that mystical experiences are "transsubjective," beyond subjectivity, and that the mystic's selfhood is dissolving in a cosmic self. However, he claims, we cannot say that this cosmic Self is "real," because that would lead us back to our original problem. Transsubjectivity must be beyond order and disorder, beyond real and unreal (*Ibid*, 149).

37. David Wulff, "Mystical Experiences," in *Varieties of Anomalous Experience: Examining the Scientific Evidence*, ed. Etzel Cardeña, Steven Jay Lynn and Stanley Krippner (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2014).

38. To this list we could add what has been called "methodological naturalism," according to which, broadly speaking, philosophy should be science's handmaiden, e.g., by clarifying concepts, untangling dilemmas, or creating a broader picture starting from the scientific data. However, I am leaving this feature of naturalism aside because it is not particularly relevant to my overall argument (David Papineau, "Naturalism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, Summer 2021 ed., ed. Edward Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/naturalism/>).

39. James, *The Varieties*, 13-4.

40. David Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

41. Miri Albahari, "The Mystic and the Metaphysician: Clarifying the Role of Meditation in the Search for Ultimate Reality," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 26:7-8 (2019): 20-1.

42. Philip Goff, *Galileo's Error* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2019a), 12-25.

43. Philip Goff, "Panpsychism is Crazy, but it's Also Most Probably True," in *Aeon*, 2019b, <https://aeon.co/ideas/panpsychism-is-crazy-but-its-also-most-probably-true>.

44. David Marian, "The Correspondence Theory of Truth," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, Winter 2020 ed., ed. Edward Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/truth-correspondence/>.

45. Donald Hoffman, *The Case Against Reality: How Evolution Hid the Truth from Our Eyes* (London: Allen Lane, 2019).

46. Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell* (HarperCollins Publishers: HarperCollins e-books, 2006).

47. Robin Carhart-Harris, "The entropic brain – revisited," *Neuropharmacology* 142 (2018a),

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuropharm.2018.03.010>. Some take these sorts of statements to be self-defeating. The reasoning is, roughly, that if empirical data shows that reality is an illusion, then that empirical data used to arrive at this conclusion must also be an illusion. This, however, does not have to be the case. Some, for example, have connected the work of Carhart-Harris with Kantian metaphysics. If the reality-shaping functions are taken to be a priori categories, rather than empirically discernible parts of the brain, then the above-mentioned objection does not apply. Similarly, Bergson used a priori methodologies to arrive to the valve hypothesis (Peter Sjöstedt-H, *Noumenautics* (London: Psychedelic Press, 2015), 23-32).

48. Crispin Wright, *Truth and Objectivity* (London: Harvard University Press, 1992), 1-2.

49. It seems possible to argue for some form of idealistic correspondence. The idea is that everything that exists is mental in nature – the world we experience as external is of the same nature of, for example, our thoughts. Nonetheless, truth is about a correspondence between propositions and this not-actually-external world. This would be a solution to the realism problem, but such an understanding of truth still implies a distinction between internal and external (even though this distinction is between mental contents themselves). This distinction is undermined by mystical experiences.

50. The two are sometimes taken to be slightly different doctrines. Contextualism stresses specifically the context in which one has an experience, while constructivism highlights the *conceptual* construction of an experience. However, for the sake of simplicity, I will treat them as one position.

51. Richard Jones, "On Constructivism in Philosophy of Mysticism," *Journal of Religion* (2020): 2-3.

52. The idea of perennialism originated with Italian Renaissance philosophy, namely with Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (who respectively called it *prisca theologia* and *philosophia perennis*). They used the term with this first meaning.
53. Some use the word “essentialism” to refer only to this third position.
54. Cf. Huston Smith, “Is There a Perennial Philosophy?” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55:3 (1987): 560-4.
55. Cf. Peter Moore, “Recent Studies of Mysticism: A Critical Survey,” *Religion* 3 (1973).
56. Jess Byron Hollenback, *Mysticism: Experience, Response and Empowerment* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 2000), 21-5. Gellman, “Mysticism.” Hard constructivism seems to lead to metaphysical anti-realism, even though Katz believes constructivism does not imply or assume any metaphysics (Katz, Steven Theodore Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven Theodore Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 66; Steven Theodore Katz, “On Mysticism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56 (1988): 752, doi:10.1093/ jaarel/LVI.4.75).
57. Jones, “Constructivism,” 24.
58. E.g., Nina Azari, et al., “Neural correlates of religious experience,” *The European journal of neuroscience* 13:8 (2001), <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.0953-816x.2001.01527.x>.
59. Jones, “Constructivism,” 17-8.
60. Michael Stoeber, “Constructivist Epistemologies of Mysticism: A Critique and a Revision,” *Religious Studies* 28 (1992): 112-3.
61. William Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds: William James and the Philosophy of Mysticism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 127-30.
62. Katz acknowledges this (Katz, “On Mysticism,” 756).
63. Henk Barendregt, “Mindfulness Meditation: Deconditioning and Changing Views,” in *Neuroscience, Consciousness and Spirituality*, ed. Harald Walach, Stefan Schmidt and Wayne Jonas (Frankfurt: Springer, 2011).

## IV. Pragmatic Truth and the Pragmatic Argument for the Reality of Mystical Experiences

### IV.1. Introduction

I believe that a pragmatic theory of truth is the solution to the debate on the reality of mysticism. As noted in section III.3.3, my starting point for reaching this conclusion is Walter Stace's discussion of the argument from unanimity. At a certain point of his analysis, Stace claims that the mystic and the naturalist have reached a deadlock: the mystic insists that agreement is sufficient to establish the reality of mystical experiences (to one degree or another), and the naturalist insists that this is not the case. As we anticipated in section III.3.3, there are two possible ways of dissolving the deadlock in favor of mysticism. One can either find an extra element that, together with agreement, makes an experience real (this is the option explored by Stace), or one can find a way to make agreement suffice on its own.<sup>1</sup> This second option is made available by a pragmatic definition of truth – i.e. a definition that equates truth and agreement (in a way to be determined later).

However, even with this adjustment, the argument is lacking. If we follow Stace's analysis, the agreement among mystics is only on the *phenomenology* of the experience (i.e., the fact that it involves an ego-death) and not on its *reality*. So, if we pragmatically decide to equate truth with agreement, what we get is not that mystical experiences are real, but only that there is one true mystical phenomenology. To make mystical experiences real, we need an agreement on their reality. It is at this point that the so-called “noetic quality” of mystical states, the sense of certainty that accompanies them, becomes relevant. To explain why, let us imagine an idealized version of a standard conversation between a mystic and a naturalist.

Such a standard dialogue between a mystic and a naturalist on the reality of mystical experiences goes roughly as follows. Everyone who has had a mystical experience would argue that it was not just some sort of hallucination, that it was real (*cf.* section II.4). To this the naturalist usually replies that we have no reasons to assume that mystical experiences are anything but, say, a neurochemical phenomenon. The fact that an experience *feels* real, and the fact that all mystics agree on this, does not *make it* real. Faced with this kind of naturalistic skepticism, a lot of mystics attempt a way out by pointing out that one cannot really have an opinion on mystical states without having experienced one for themselves.

This is more or less the same dialogue that Stace envisioned, but with the major difference that we are now introducing noetic qualities. This addition shapes the dialogue in two different manners. First, now the agreement among the mystics is not on the content of the experience, but on the fact that said experience is for them indubitable. Second, now the mystic can claim that the naturalist should

have the experience themselves before judging. In other words, what the mystic is saying is that, were the naturalist to have a mystical experience, they would also agree that it is real. With this in the background, I can now state my argument properly:

- (1) if mystical experiences have a noetic quality;
- (2) if we all had a mystical experience;
- (3) if we pragmatically equate truth with agreement;

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(4) then we would all agree that mystical experiences are real;

(5) which would make them real.

The fact that mystical experiences have a noetic quality (conditional (1)) was discussed in section II.4. To solidify the argument, then, what we have to do is clarify the connection between agreement and truth (conditional (3)), that is, we have to clarify what pragmatic theory of truth we endorse. This, in turn, will also explain the specific role of (2) in my argument. Once we will have established (1), (2), and (3), (4) and (5) will follow by implication.

This obviously still leaves open the question of why we are choosing to endorse a pragmatic theory of truth in the first place. Wouldn't, for example, an identity theory of truth work just fine? A full answer is not yet possible. As a foreshadowing, however, we can say that I have two main reasons to believe that my approach to truth is to be preferred to the major theories of truth. First, what distinguishes my position from regular theories of truth is that it is what I will call a “(non-)definition,” with which I mean that it finds itself in a grey area between a standard definition of truth and a very simple methodological guideline. My approach to truth could therefore be reframed as a methodology. Second, I believe that any attempt at rejecting my position on truth – and in general, any attempt at having a conversation on truth – must assume my approach to truth. Unfortunately, a better explanation is not possible at this point of the analysis, so these will have to be left here as hints to be developed, respectively, in sections IV.4 and IV.5.

## **IV.2. Pragmatic Theories of Truth**

Pragmatism is an extremely broad term, and some even argue that there is no unitary description of the movement. One thing that can be said uncontroversially is that pragmatic theories of truth focus on the connection between truth and practice.<sup>2</sup> The five big names that come to mind when discussing pragmatism are Charles Peirce, William James, John Dewey, Richard Rorty and Hilary



Putnam. The first three are the so-called classical pragmatists, while Rorty and Putnam are commonly referred to as neo-pragmatists.

In the following I will not discuss neo-pragmatic theories of truth. In the case of Rorty, the reason is that he is often taken to flirt with relativism by equating raw agreement and truth. For example, he claimed that truth is no more than “what our peers will, *ceteris paribus*, let us get away with saying”<sup>3</sup>; or just “an expression of commendation.”<sup>4</sup> I will not discuss Rorty so as to avoid getting into the debate on whether he was a relativist or not; or, in other words, to avoid any accusation of relativism myself. Moreover, it is not clear if Rorty was interested in proposing a theory of truth, or simply in elucidating how the word itself is used.<sup>5</sup> If this is the case, then Rorty’s work would simply not be particularly useful in a project such as mine.

In the case of Putnam’s conception of truth the problem is different. In the ‘80s he endorsed a form of what he called “internal realism,” the idea that “*what objects does the world consist of?*” is a question that it only makes sense to ask *within* a theory or description.<sup>6</sup> However, he eventually found this position too problematic and shifted towards “natural realism,” the view “that the objects of (normal ‘veridical’) perception are ‘external’ things, and, more generally, aspects of ‘external’ reality.”<sup>7</sup> This view aims at overcoming metaphysical realism by rejecting any form of mediation between reality itself and experience: the “external” reality we experience *is* reality. Now, it might be thought that this is a move from a coherence theory of truth to an identity theory (*cf.* section IV.4), however, first, Putnam’s natural realism has been famously criticized for being, implicitly or inadvertently, a form of correspondence.<sup>8</sup> Second, Putnam himself admits that – while he endorses some form of language-game-based pluralism – he is not sure what role truth plays in his latest position.<sup>9</sup>

The debate obviously continued among pragmatists after Rorty and Putnam. This new wave of pragmatic thinkers is sometimes referred to as “new pragmatism.” However, most of this contemporary pragmatism follows Rorty in his interest in explaining how “truth” is used, rather than in proposing an actual theory or definition. More specifically, new pragmatists seem to be mostly interested in showing how “truth” plays a fundamental role in establishing the norms of inquiry and assertion.<sup>10</sup> As we will see in section IV.4, my argument has something of a new-pragmatic spirit, but at the same time sticks to the more traditional attempt at finding a definition of truth.

With all of this in mind, in the following chapters I will only discuss the definitions of truth coming from Peirce, James and Dewey, the original pragmatists. As I will show, putting these three authors in communication with each other is sufficient for coming up with a pragmatic definition of truth that is sharp enough for our purpose.

#### **IV.2.1. William James on Truth**

William James, apart from being one of the fathers of the modern studies on mysticism, is also one of the fathers of pragmatism. It therefore makes sense to take him as our starting point.

James takes truth to be instrumental. His position on the matter is presented in books two and six of *Pragmatism*:

*'The true', to put it very briefly, is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as 'the right' is only the expedient in the way of our behaving. Expedient in almost any fashion; and expedient in the long run and on the whole, of course.*<sup>11</sup>

Ideas [...] become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relations with other parts of our experience. [...] Any idea that will carry us prosperously from any one part of our experience to any other part, linking things satisfactorily, working securely, saving labor; is true for just so much, true in so far forth, *true instrumentally*.<sup>12</sup>

These descriptions seem to suggest that “beliefs are made true by the fact that they enable us to make accurate predictions of the future run of experience,”<sup>13</sup> but this is only partially true. In some passages James adds that a statement is true if it has “value for concrete life,” in the sense that it can contribute to one’s happiness or fulfillment. As we will see, this latter take on truth is the one that is particularly interesting in the context of mysticism.

To clarify James’ position, he is not claiming that we can believe in anything that makes us happy, as Russell suggested.<sup>14</sup> His full position is that whether a statement brings us joy or calm is truth-relevant, but for something to be properly true it would have to not clash with other benefits. For example, the sense of fulfillment that astrology brings to many people is – according to James – relevant for its truthfulness; but if believing in astrology suddenly conflicts with other areas of our lives, thus making us less happy (for example, if we start thinking that our lives are fatalistically determined by planets’ positions), then James would argue such belief should be dropped.<sup>15</sup>

Ultimately, this take on truth makes of James a pluralist: anything that can be said to work satisfactorily (in the widest sense of the term) is true; but different things work satisfactorily, for different people in the same contexts; which ultimately means that there can be more than one truth in the same area of research, depending on an individual’s needs and temperament.

Specifically, what does this mean for the truthfulness of mystical experiences? It obviously means that one is justified in believing they are real, as long as that belief brings them joy (or calm, or fulfillment etc.) and it does not conflict with one’s overall happiness. In *Pragmatism*, James believed that one’s beliefs on the matter were just one of the many things that could bring satisfaction in a person’s

life.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, one's beliefs about God would be on the same level as any other belief that makes one's life better. However, in *A Pluralistic Universe* he finally takes his position to its logical conclusion and claims that the religious sphere offers a superior relation to the universe, which makes it – according to his standards – the most truthful part of human life.<sup>17</sup> If we keep in mind what we said in the introduction about the proved benefits of mystical experiences for a person's mental health (which is something that James himself concluded from his own survey on mysticism as well<sup>18</sup>), this final stance of James does not come as a surprise.

James' take on truth is perfect if one wants to argue for the reality of mystical experiences. In fact, it seems to me a little *too* perfect – one might even say *ad hoc*. The whole rationale behind wanting to achieve a mystical experience is that they make one's life fuller by giving one a deeper understanding of themselves, of what humans are, or what reality is. They are very commonly reported to be one of the most meaningful experiences a person can have in their life.<sup>19</sup> If we then decide to simply make truthfulness and fulfillment coincide, it is obvious that there is nothing, or very few things as real as mystical experiences. To this we can add that using the word “truth” as James does sounds quite counterintuitive. A common objection to James' definition of truth is precisely that it does not sound like a definition of truth at all. It is very likely, then, that few contemporary philosophers would use “truth” as James does.<sup>20</sup> Ultimately, what we need is a definition that has the same wide scope as James', but that is closer to how one would normally use the term. I believe Peirce's definition offers a first step in this direction.

#### **IV.2.2. Charles Peirce on Truth**

According to Peirce: “the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real.”<sup>21</sup> As to clarify what he means with “fated,” Peirce later rephrased his definition as follows: “truth is that concordance of an abstract statement with the ideal limit towards which endless investigation would tend to bring scientific belief.”<sup>22</sup> What all of this means is that, if we put every human (or a group of researchers, to simplify the matter) on an island and gave them infinite resources and time to do research on a topic, what they would end up agreeing on would be “true.” As Misak puts it, “if we were to reach a stage where we could no longer improve upon a belief, there is no point in withholding the title ‘true’ from it.”<sup>23</sup>

The problem with defining truth as “what people will agree on” is that, as anyone in any research field knows, there is almost never a full agreement on any belief or theory. Moreover, there exist no “ideal” researchers, in the sense that one's research is always limited by time, physical resources, funds and other things. In this sense, even if there was a final statement everyone could

agree on (which is in itself arguable, *cf.* section IV.3), such a statement would more often than not be unreachable. Ultimately, Peirce's "truth" is (at best) only theoretically possible, which, ironically, goes against what pragmatism is about in the first place.<sup>24</sup>

Mystical experiences, however, represent an exception to this. As we noted in section II.4, mystical experiences are indubitable, which means that if everyone was to reach a mystical state, everyone would agree that the experience was true. In other words, in the case of mysticism, agreement, in the terms specified by Peirce, is possible: if we understand truth as what everyone would ultimately agree on, mystical experiences might be one of the few things that one could confidently call true. Peirce's definition of truth therefore seems perfect for establishing the reality of mystical experiences.

However, here we run into a further problem. Peirce has a very specific understanding of what an "investigation" or "inquiry" is and such an understanding seems to not include personal, private experiences. Peirce was a strong advocate of the scientific method, by which he meant a process consisting in "abduction (making conjectures or creating hypotheses), deduction (inferring what should be the case if the hypotheses are the case), and induction (the testing of hypotheses)."<sup>25</sup> He was certainly not a "naturalist" in the sense described in section III.4.1, meaning that he did not endorse a correspondence theory of truth (as we saw in this chapter), or materialism, or metaphysical realism. In fact, later in his life he got closer and closer to endorsing a certain form of panpsychism, or even a form of idealism quite similar to what Hegel proposed in his *Phenomenology*.<sup>26</sup> This, however, does not change the fact that, at least on a superficial level, Peirce was a quite traditional scientist with an appreciation for the traditional way of empirically testing hypotheses that we also see in science nowadays. This ultimately means that having an experience yourself to establish the truthfulness of said experience would, most likely, not be understood by Peirce as part of the process of scientific inquiry.

Interestingly, in a letter to a priest that was never sent, Peirce reports of having had a mystical experience himself. Some traditional mystical themes are certainly present in Peirce's overall thought and some have even argued that Peirce's whole life-project could be understood as a very peculiar mix of mysticism and traditional scientific methodology. Nonetheless, if Peirce was a mystic, he thought of the scientific method as the privileged path towards divine insight.<sup>27</sup> In this sense, despite the mystical elements in his thought, we are still left with the problem we are currently facing.

We are thus stuck with a definition of truth that suits our purpose, but that does not consider personal experiences relevant. It is at this point that William James can come back to assist us. One of the reasons that made James' *Varieties* such a popular work is the fact that he gave the topic of mysticism the same respect that many of his fellow scientists would have only given to scientific matters. Arguably, *The Varieties* is as "scientific" (in the widest sense of the term) as a work on

mysticism could have been at that time. What we need now, then, is to integrate Peirce's position on truth-as-agreement with James' attitude towards mysticism. John Dewey's work might do the trick.

#### IV.2.3. John Dewey on Truth

John Dewey's pragmatic conception of truth is sometimes understood as a combination of elements from Peirce's and James'. Like Peirce, Dewey considers truth to be connected to a rigorous inquiry. Unlike Peirce, however, he did not consider truth to be the end of an investigation, an abstract entity with – he thought – no meaning for human beings, with no actual practical use.<sup>28</sup> He rather followed James in equating truth and utility.<sup>29</sup> Let us focus on this last point. Dewey, especially later in his career, was particularly skeptical of concepts such as “truth” and “knowledge” – he considered them to be burdened with a huge philosophical baggage. He thus started talking in terms of “warranted assertibility,” by which he meant what “a proposition gains when it is warranted through the ongoing, self-correcting processes of enquiry.”<sup>30</sup> What this move from truth to warranted assertibility shows is Dewey's conviction that all forms of inquiry should not be understood as static (e.g., a sudden jump from ignorance to knowledge), but as forever-going processes. In fact, Dewey believed that “there is no belief so settled as not to be exposed to further inquiry”<sup>31</sup>; i.e., that intellectual investigation has no endpoint. This is precisely why he rejects Peirce's account of truth. Ultimately, what all of this amounts to is a “definition” of “truth” that simply makes it coincide with the process of inquiry itself: “truth, in final analysis, is the statement of things ‘as they are’, not as they are in the inane and desolate void of isolation from human concern, but as they are in a shared and progressive experience.”<sup>32</sup>

Two objections can be raised against this understanding of truth. First, one might argue that Dewey's conception of truth has precisely the same problem as James': it is not really a conception of truth at all. If we simply equate the process of inquiry with truth, are we even talking about truth anymore? Generally speaking, I believe Quine was correct when he claimed that Dewey was not providing any solution, but simply sidestepping the problem of truth to “limp along with warranted belief.”<sup>33</sup> This is a problem that Peirce's definition does not raise. Second, if what I have said about the noetic quality of mystical experiences is correct, then Dewey's belief (or assumption) that humans can never get to the end of an inquiry is simply incorrect in the case of mysticism. A final agreement among mystics *can* be reached.

Despite all of this, Dewey's understanding of truth as the scientific process of inquiry can still be useful to us. To see why, let us go back to the first element of Dewey's position mentioned above: the rigor of the intellectual inquiry. These are Dewey's words on the matter: “if a scientific man were asked to point to samples of what he meant by truth, he would pick [...] beliefs which were the outcome of *the best technique of inquiry available in some particular field*” (cursive added).<sup>34</sup> To be sure, Dewey here

mostly has in mind a traditional empirical testing a-la-Peirce.<sup>35</sup> However, what this quote points to is an expansive understanding of science: “for Dewey, science emerges from and is continuous with everyday processes of trial and error – cooking and small-engine repair count as ‘scientific’ on his account – which means he should not be taken too strictly when he equates truth with scientific verification.”<sup>36</sup>

All of this is connected to Dewey’s “instrumentalism,” roughly the belief that scientific ideas are instrumental to human benefit. Here we are not interested in the details of this account. What is relevant to us is the understanding of “inquiry” that instrumentalism implies. One of the explicit aims of Dewey’s instrumentalism is breaking down certain major distinctions between philosophical categories and areas of research, such as realism-idealism, empiricism-rationalism and (interestingly for us) religion-science. Instrumentalism does this by focusing on how ideas change and evolve, and on how research must change and evolve with them. Science is “instrumental” also in the sense that it is about survival and adaptation: if scientific methodology does not evolve with the general evolution of human society, then science stops being useful. What I believe all of this tells us is that an inquiry should be pursued with all the (best) instruments that are available to researchers. Such instruments might be unusual, or not taken seriously by mainstream researchers, but ideas and problems evolve, and so must the methodology that one uses to understand said ideas and problems.

How does this inform the study of the nature of mystical experiences? Nowhere Dewey says that one should have an experience before having an opinion on that experience’s reality. However, it certainly means that even in peculiar research areas such as mysticism, one should use all the best tools they have. Mystical techniques are often not available to the general researcher. For most researchers, for example, it is not really possible to meditate on a mountain for months, or years. But psychedelic substances might do the job. As we noted in the introduction (chapter I), they are fairly reliable in inducing a mystical experience, given the right circumstances and doses.<sup>37</sup>

To be sure, one could object, out of principle, that mystical experiences are not important “instruments,” in the sense that whether one does have a mystical experience or not is not really relevant. I do not have a rigorous argument to convince a person otherwise. However, the fact that everyone who has had such an experience reports that having it is important for understanding it, strongly suggests, I believe, that it is, in fact, important. Let us make a comparison to explain why. Imagine a different area of inquiry, in which a group of researchers and engineers works on a new instrument for the purpose of their research. From said instrument they get different results than another group of researchers with different instruments. Now, what would a good researcher do? Reject the new instrument out of principle? They might, but that would be bad science. What good scientists would do is see if the new instrument is reliable and reports interesting results, and if this is

the case, that new instrument with its new results would slowly be taken seriously by the scientific community.<sup>38</sup> This is exactly the case for mystical experiences: they are a new, reliable tool that can be used to obtain interesting results. As Dewey tells us, problems change, and so must the research that aims at solving those problems. Perhaps it is time to change our preferred methods of inquiry when it comes to the study of the metaphysical status of mystical experiences.

### **IV.3. The Pragmatic Argument for the Reality of Mystical Experiences**

The fact that mystical experiences are undoubtable was established in section II.4. We now also have a proper description of how to equate truth with agreement, which we got from Peirce, with the aid of James and Dewey: “the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, *using the best instruments available*, is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real.” The purpose of the sentence in cursive is to highlight that one’s research methods, if the problem at hand requires it, should be extended beyond currently accepted scientific practices to include any reliable and relevant instrument. I argued that, in the case of the study of the metaphysical status of mystical experiences, having a mystical experience is relevant. What makes it also reliable is its availability through the (controlled and regulated) use of psychedelic substances. To be certain, the first point about the relevance of mystical experiences is the weaker point of my argument, for the simple reason that, given my premises, there is no rigorous philosophical argument for defending the introduction of having a mystical experience in one’s methodology. However, in the previous section I have given some reasons why I believe this should be the case. With all of this in mind, we can now establish a full argument for the reality of mystical experiences by filling in the points 1-5 presented in section IV.1:

- (1) mystical experiences have a noetic quality;
- (2) a good researcher in this field is expected to have a mystical experience themselves;
- (3) truth is the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate;

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- (4) every researcher agrees that mystical experiences are real;
- (5) which makes them real.

To summarize, then, we argued for points 1-3, which imply points 4-5. Conclusion: mystical experiences are real.

Let us reply to two potential objections. The first one has already been hinted at but is worth replying to explicitly: if we were to understand truth in terms of agreement, we would eventually end up

endorsing relativism or pluralism – for example, because different (groups of) people would end up agreeing on different things, or not agreeing at all. Indeed, the danger of relativism is always present for pragmatists – or at least it is something all pragmatic theories of truth have to be put up against (unless they are explicitly relativistic). However, it should be clear from what we have said above that the position we endorse embraces realism about truth: there is but one truth at the end of the inquiry. Given this stance, a statement is either simply true, or more or less close to truth. The second option, as Dewey already remarked, seems too obscure to be useful: how do we know when we are getting closer to truth? This inclines me to argue that the concept of truth should simply be dropped when it comes to any research that is not on mysticism. Specifically, I am inclined to advocate for Larry Laudan’s pragmatic model of scientific progress – a model that stems precisely from a rejection of a classical understanding of truth.<sup>39</sup> However, this is only a suggestion that we need not further discuss or evaluate here. What matters for the purpose of this project is that agreement, and therefore truth, *can* be reached in the realm of mysticism.

The second objection is related to this first one. In section III.4.3 I rejected correspondence theories of truth because they assume metaphysical realism. However, pragmatic theories of truth are often accused of doing the opposite, that is, they are often accused of going hand-in-hand with anti-realism. By equating truth with agreement (or utility), pragmatic theories seem to imply the denial of a mind-independent world, in the sense that they seem to make truth and reality dependent on human judgement. This seems particularly right given how pragmatic theories tend to originate as counterproposals to correspondence and realism. Now, it is true that pragmatism has been endorsed for anti-realistic projects (e.g., Putnam’s “internal realism”). It might also be correct that pragmatic theories of truth tend to be more compatible with certain metaphysics rather than others. However, I believe that in the case of the specific position we are endorsing, no metaphysical stance is implied. In fact, one could argue for the exact opposite: given our position on truth, the metaphysical theory that is to be considered true is also what we find at the end of our inquiry, what we are fated to agree on. If we were all to end up agreeing that realism (in any form) is true, then realism would be true; and this is the case also for anti-realism. We could thus avoid the objection by arguing that, for a pragmatist, metaphysics is dependent on agreement and thus on truth, and not vice versa. This obviously opens up the question of whether there is one metaphysics everyone would agree on. This question will be the starting point of chapter V.

#### **IV.4. Why Pragmatism?**

Now that my argument is fully laid out, I can finally answer the question: why choose a pragmatic theory of truth in the first place?



A first reply was already hinted at. As mentioned above, the idea that one should have a mystical experience before having an opinion on its metaphysical status is already extremely common. What my argument does is give this position a proper theoretical background. What I am doing is substantiating this take, turning it from a passing remark, into a philosophically rigorous position.

But there is another reason. Pragmatic theories of truth are explicitly understood and elaborated by pragmatists themselves as alternatives to correspondence theories. The main problem that we found with correspondence theories is that they always assume some form of metaphysical realism (section III.4.3). However, if that is where the problem lies, there exist other theories of truth that do not share this assumption. For example, identity theories claim that a true proposition and a fact are identical. Therefore, for identity theorists there is no gap between a proposition and the actual world – the actual world is not something *beyond* statements. The same can be said for coherentists, who believe that truthfulness is about the coherence of a proposition in a set of propositions. Once again, if that is the case, there is no need to refer to a world beyond the propositions themselves. Then, why choose pragmatism and not one of these two alternative theories? The reason is that both coherence and identity theories, just like correspondence theories, have arguments in favor and against them.<sup>40</sup> What I mean with this is that, just like many other fields of philosophy with multiple candidates, all the different candidates have points in favor and against them, which tends to make a full endorsement of any one of them unconvincing. I see two reasons why one would choose one theory rather than another. A first possibility is for one to endorse a theory because they believe it is the better one; but for every philosopher claiming the superiority of a theory there are many more who disagree. The second option is that their preferred theory works particularly well with their argument; or perhaps, as James would put it, because that specific theory fits their temperament more than another. I find neither of these strategies particularly appealing.<sup>41</sup> What I believe makes pragmatic theories an exception is that they can often be reformulated as non-theories, or non-definitions of truth. This is not true for all forms of pragmatism, but it is certainly the case for the definition I am endorsing.

What we can do with our definition, specifically, is turn it into a methodology. Instead of defining truth as “the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed by all who investigate, using the best instruments available,” one could simply argue that, when it comes to research, one should use all the best instruments they can access. And if at the end of this thorough inquiry everyone agrees and there are no more questions or doubts, then let us call that opinion truth and its content reality. Arguably, this is one of the few methodological principles most people can agree on: let us do research and let us see if we all get to the same result. We thus have a “(non-)definition,” something that we could place between a classical definition of truth and something else – a methodological guideline, in this case. Perhaps more accurately, this (non-)definition is *both* a definition and a methodology,

depending on how one looks at it. I believe it is precisely this potential to be reformulated as a very uncontroversial methodology that makes my position on truth stand a chance, compared to all the other main theories of truth. Indeed, saying “just do the research” is a rather unspectacular solution. However, it seems to be all we need for the study of the nature of mystical experiences. Interestingly, a very trivial methodological guideline for any research field seems to be the solution to the problem of establishing the reality of mystical experiences.

Let us reply to one final objection. Some might argue that treating our definition of truth as a methodology is self-defeating. If all we have to do when it comes to truth in mysticism is do research and wait for an agreement, what if we end up agreeing that a different theory of truth is correct? What if we end up agreeing, for example, that correspondence is the correct theory of truth? I have three replies to this objection. First, as I noted above, I am extremely skeptical that an agreement on the matter can be found; that is, I am skeptical everyone could agree on one theory of truth. This is precisely why I am endorsing what I called a (non-)definition of truth. Second, in the specific case of correspondence, I believe an agreement based on mystical experiences is simply impossible. As I have explained multiple times, correspondence assumes realism, and if mysticism dissolves the subject-object structure of day-to-day experience, then correspondence will simply not be a valuable understanding of truth for our researchers.

The third and final counterargument requires a chapter of its own.

#### **IV.5. The Elenctic Argument for a Pragmatic Understanding of Truth**

A different way of conveying what I argued for in the previous section is saying that I am extremely skeptical of any theory that admits disagreement in any field, which is most theories in most fields. However, using this as an argument in favor of a theory of truth based on agreement would make my point circular. In this section I will therefore attempt to convey the same point through a non-circular argument. This argument will also represent my final reason for endorsing my approach to truth, rather than any other major theory of truth.

I believe that an *elenctic* defense of my position is possible. The idea at the basis of the argumentative technique called “*elenchos*” is that, instead of trying to positively prove a position (e.g., through a syllogism), one can show that any attempt at denying such a position necessarily *implies it*. What follows, then, is an attempt at showing that any attempt at rejecting my position on truth – and more in general, any serious (i.e., truth-oriented) inquiry on truth – must assume my (non-)definition of truth.

A first, intuitive way of building such an argument is the following. If, for example, our researchers decided that coherentism is the theory of truth to be preferred, that would be through agreement. By *agreeing* that the truth is to be found in coherentism, they are simply assuming that truth is to be found in agreement. Any attempt at going beyond truth-as-agreement thus seems to imply it. However, at this point one could argue that it is only because truth is truth, that one can agree on it. We thus have a the-chicken-or-the-egg kind of scenario: what comes first, the agreement on truth or truth itself?

The German philosopher Karl-Otto Apel developed Peirce's theory of truth into a full argument that provides an answer to this difficulty. Peirce argued that truth is that statement everyone would agree on at the end of a research, were the researchers "unlimited," i.e., not limited by resources, time, or cognitive capacities. Apel's twist consists in arguing that this ideal agreement among researchers is not only the ideal ending point of an inquiry. Every inquiry must *presuppose* this agreement. In other words, Apel argues that every truth-statement and every truth-oriented conversation must presuppose an "unlimited community of investigators," or "communicators" – i.e., a community that, not being restricted by space and time, *coincides* with the agreement among the investigators themselves. The reason is the following: one must presuppose a potential, final agreement if the research is to begin at all – we would not be doing research in the first place if we were not assuming that an agreement can ideally be found.<sup>42</sup> In different words, Apel believes that the reason why we think our opinion is true is because – knowingly or not – we believe that our opinion is the one that would prevail in an ideal, unlimited debate between all researchers.<sup>43</sup>

With Apel in the background, I can now state my full argument. Every attempt at rejecting my approach to truth would consist in an exchange between people who believe they are right, that is, between people who believe (knowingly or not) that their opinion is the one everyone would agree on, were the communicators not limited by time and space. In other words, any truth-oriented inquiry ever must assume that an agreement can ideally be found and that truth consists in this ideal agreement. Any attempt at claiming that truth is not to be found in agreement thus assumes that truth is to be found in agreement, otherwise (1) the truth-claim "truth is not to be found in agreement" would be empty and (2) the inquiry would not even begin.

Summarizing and concluding, I have attempted to show how my (non-)definition of truth is to be considered the precondition of any inquiry on truth, which I believe shows, once again, why understanding truth in terms of agreement should be preferred to endorsing any other major theory of truth in the current academic debate.

## Notes Chapter IV

1. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 139.
2. John Capps, "The Pragmatic Theory of Truth," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, Summer 2019 ed., ed. Edward Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/truth-pragmatic/>.
3. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 176. More recently Rorty admitted this statement is provocative (Richard Rorty, "Reply to Cheryl Misak," in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, ed. Randall Auxier and Lewis Edwin Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 2010a.), 45.)
4. Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?" *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, Philosophical Papers, 1 (1991): 23.
5. Cf. Richard Rorty, "Reply to David Detmer," in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, ed. Randall Auxier and Lewis Edwin Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 2010b), 391. Capps, "The Pragmatic Theory of Truth".
6. Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 49.
7. Hilary Putnam, *The Threefold Cord* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 10.
8. Crispin Wright, "Truth as Sort of Epistemic: Putnam's Peregrinations," *Journal of Philosophy* 97:6 (2000), doi:10.5840/jphil200097617.
9. Maria Baghramian, "From Realism Back to Realism?: Putnam's Long Journey," *Philosophical Topics*, Pragmatism, 36:1 (2008): 32.
10. Cheryl Misak, "Pragmatism and Deflationism," in *New Pragmatists*, ed. Cheryl Misak (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 68.
11. William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co, 1907), 106.
12. *Ibid*, 34.
13. Catherine Legg and Christopher Hookway, "Pragmatism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, Summer 2021 ed., ed. Edward Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/pragmatism/>.
14. Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1946), 772.
15. Legg and Hookway, "Pragmatism".
16. James, *Pragmatism*, 143-4.
17. William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), 135.
18. James, *The Varieties*, 171-6
19. Roland Griffiths, et al., "Mystical-type experiences occasioned by psilocybin mediate the attribution of personal meaning and spiritual significance 14 months later," *Journal of psychopharmacology* 22:6 (2008), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0269881108094300>.
20. Capps, "The Pragmatic Theory of Truth".
21. Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, ed. the Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 139.
22. Charles Sanders Peirce, "Truth and Falsity and Error," in *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Volumes V and VI, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935), 5565.
23. Cheryl Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 101. What leads Peirce to this definition is his pragmatic theory of meaning. He believes a meaning of a word is exhausted by how we use said word: "consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object". The meaning of the word "truth" is therefore exhausted by how we use it and Peirce believes that it is used when one has no further questions on a matter (Charles Sanders Peirce, "The Probability of Induction", in *Writings of Charles S. Peirce: a Chronological Edition*, Volume III, ed. the Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 266).
24. Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality*, 57.
25. Robert Burch, "Charles Sanders Peirce," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, Summer 2022 ed., ed. Edward Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/peirce/>.
26. *Ivi*.
27. Søren Brier, "A Peircean Panentheist Scientific Mysticism," *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* 27 (2008): 37.
28. Larry Laudan argues that such a conception of truth is so obscure and useless to research that scientists might as well do without truth at all (Larry Laudan, *Progress and its Problems: Towards a Theory of Scientific Growth* (Los Angeles: California University Press, 1977), 125).

29. Capps, “The Pragmatic Theory of Truth.” “You can say of it then either that ‘it is useful because it is true’ or that ‘it is true because it is useful’. Both these phrases mean exactly the same thing” (James, *Pragmatism*, 98).
30. Simon Blackburn, “Warranted assertibility,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Simon Blackburn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), <https://www-oxfordreference-com.proxy.library.uu.nl/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803121109210>.
31. John Dewey, “Logic: The Theory of Inquiry,” in *The Collected Works of John Dewey, The Later Works*, Volume 12, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981a), 16.
32. John Dewey, “How We Think,” in *The Collected Works of John Dewey, The Middle Works*, Volume 6, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981b), 67.
33. Willard van Ormen Quine, *Quine in Dialogue* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 165.
34. John Dewey, “The Problem of Truth,” in *The Collected Works of John Dewey, The Middle Works*, Volume 6, ed. Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981c), 28.
35. Dewey, “How we Think”.
36. David Hildebrand, "John Dewey," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, Winter 2021 ed., ed. Edward Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/dewey/>.
37. This opens some ethical questions. Obviously some of these substances are not legal everywhere in the world, so here I am assuming that the research is being done in a country where they are. Second, it should be noted that these substances have been shown to be incredibly safe if done in controlled circumstances, i.e., taking into account set, setting and doses. Finally, the idea of taking drugs for research purposes is not big in hard sciences such as physics, or neuroscience – or in metaphysics, for that matter. However, it is not new to science in general. For millennia chemists and pharmacologists (before them alchemists, medics etc.) have been self-administering drugs (Letheby, *Philosophy of Psychedelics*, 13-6; Sandra Comer, et al., “The role of human drug self-administration procedures in the development of medications,” *Drug and alcohol dependence* 96:1-2 (2008), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2008.03.001>; Leigh Panlilio and Steven Goldberg, “Self-administration of drugs in animals and humans as a model and an investigative tool,” *Addiction* 102:12 (2007), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1360-0443.2007.02011.x>).
38. Here I am assuming a traditional, “positivistic” understanding of science as a free and critical enterprise. Some accounts of scientific progress (e.g., Kuhn’s or Lakatos’) claim that it is precisely the dogmatic rejection of different results that allows a specific theory (or paradigm, or program, or tradition) to advance. I am sympathetic towards these accounts. However, it should be noted that endorsing any of them would not be a counterargument to my claim, quite the contrary. Virtually all of these “historicist” models allow for any theory, with any methodology, to simply exist and attempt to thrive. In this sense, a metaphysics based on mysticism would have as much of a right to exist as scientific materialism; and a methodology based on personal experiences would have as much of a right to exist as any other research method.
39. “If rationality consists in believing only what we can reasonably presume to be true, and if we define “truth” in its classical, non-pragmatic sense, then science is (and will forever remain) irrational?” (Laudan, *Progress and its Problems*, 125)
40. The specific counterarguments to these theories are not particularly relevant (see sections IV.4 and IV.5 for an explanation), but let us mention some examples. Coherentism seems to face a dilemma. Either mental representations are representations of an actual external world, in which case coherentism turns into a (partial) form of correspondence; or they are not, in which case coherentism implies idealism. The first option is obviously not acceptable; and a full endorsement of idealism, first, is not particularly popular and second, opens further issues connected to this metaphysical stance (which I will not explore here). Identity theories, on the other hand, while not having an all-encompassing complaint, face a lot of minor counterpoints; see Richard Gaskin, “the Identity Theory of Truth,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, Winter 2021 ed., ed. Edward Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/truth-identity/>. (Paul Thagard, “Coherence, Truth and the Development of Scientific Knowledge,” *Philosophy of Science* 74 (2007): 29-30).
41. One could also be a deflationist about truth. Deflationary theories claim that we should not be looking for a definition of truth because truth has no nature that can be defined in the first place. My account is sympathetic to this attitude (see below), however, if deflationism is simply understood as another theory of truth, then I believe it should also be rejected (see sections IV.4 and IV.5).
42. Apel’s project is actually quite more revolutionary than what I have presented here. Apel’s aim is a marriage between American pragmatism and continental philosophy (specifically, Kant). His full position is that the unlimited community of investigators is *transcendental*, in the Kantian sense of the word: it is the a priori condition of knowledge. Reality itself is formed within this presupposition and it is this presupposition itself that makes any knowledge valid. Apel’s project is thus often referred to as “transcendental pragmatism.”

43. Karl-Otto Apel, *Comunità e Comunicazione*, transl. Gianni Carchia (Torino: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1977), 144. In summarizing Apel's thought I am following *Dal Soggetto al Linguaggio* by prof. Lucio Cortella of Ca' Foscari University. The book is not yet published and was given to us as a manual for one of his courses.

## V. Groundwork for a Metaphysics Based on Mystical Experiences

### V.1. Introduction

Let us summarize the work we have done up to this point. We reviewed and critically assessed all the major arguments in the literature in favor and against the reality of mystical experiences. What we concluded from our survey is that none of these arguments stands on solid ground. Nonetheless, we found in Stace's discussion of the argument from unanimity an interesting hint. Specifically, what we found to be promising was his attempt at overlapping agreement and truth towards establishing the reality of mystical experiences. With the help of the founding fathers of pragmatism (Peirce, James and Dewey) we fully developed this suggestion. What we ended up with is a pragmatic argument for the reality of mystical experiences: all mystics agree that their experience was real; therefore, were we to pragmatically equate truth and agreement, and were we all to have a mystical experience ourselves, mystical experiences would be considered – and would therefore be – real. A different way of phrasing this is that mystical experiences tell us something about the nature of reality. What I am interested in exploring now is what, specifically, these experiences reveal about reality.

The end point of the following discussion will be a metaphysics based on mystical experiences. Perhaps more accurately, it will be a *basis* for a metaphysics, since, as I will explain, I believe my premises only allow for very minimal metaphysical claims. Nonetheless, I will discuss what would be needed to develop a more detailed metaphysical system. Specifically, I will explore what the reality of mystical experiences might imply for the metaphysics of subjectivity and the metaphysics of what we commonly experience as the external world. I will not provide answers, but rather suggest different directions in which future metaphysicians might decide to develop my premises.

### V.2. From Mysticism to Metaphysics: A Minimal Claim

According to the definition of mysticism I have employed in this project, the main feature that makes an experience “mystical” is the dissolution of the subject-object distinction. Therefore, a first thing that mystical experiences reveal is the reality of these states of subjectlessness: the disappearance of the sense of being a stable, experiencing entity is not just an hallucination. However, we also noted that subjectivity and objectivity are codependent, where, as we explained in section II.2, an “object” is anything that is experienced as external. What is also real, then, is the absence of any distinction between internal and external that people experience in mystical states. Finally, we know that mystical experiences are states of non-duality, but are still *experiences*. What this means is that mystical experiences reveal the reality of a consciousness that is not dependent on subjects (or objects): mystical experiences reveal the reality of a non-subjective, universal consciousness.

These are, then, the core elements of a metaphysics that acknowledges the reality of mystical states: there exists a consciousness that involves no subjects and (consequently) no objects. The idea that consciousness is universal in nature is known in the literature as cosmopsychism. However, I believe that this claim can be developed in different directions. As we will see in the following chapter, the specifics of one's mysticism-based metaphysics largely depend on other metaphysical stances. Given the premises of my work, however, the only claim that one can confidently put forward is the minimal claim presented above. If one sticks to my premises, adding anything to the idea that there exists a subjectless consciousness will, without additional argumentation, be no more than metaphysical speculation.

With this in mind, let us try to push our claim a bit further and explore some potential developments of it.

### V.3. Subjectivity and the External World

A common conclusion that people reach from their mystical experience is that subjectivity is an illusion, i.e., that subjects are not real. I do not believe this follows directly from the experience itself. The only thing that the mystical experience teaches us is that states of subjectlessness are real. But that does not imply that one's sense of being a stable subject is not. For example, certain Buddhists might be right in believing that subjectivity is just a bundle of sensations loosely held together. However, the fact that meditation dissolves such a bundle does not make it *unreal*.<sup>1</sup> Then, can we really tell from the experience itself whether subjectlessness is *more real* than subjectivity? Moreover, is ego-death the experience of something *more fundamental*, or just the experience of something different?

As I noted in section IV.3, I take metaphysics to be dependent on truth, i.e., on agreement. We know that we can have an agreement on subjectlessness (section II.4). Can we have the same kind of universal agreement on the reality, or on the non-reality of subjectivity? The idea that the self is an illusion is extremely common among mystics. One could therefore argue that, were we all to have a mystical experience, we would all agree that subjects are not real. They might be, for example, an illusory manifestation of the universal consciousness. However, a different line of argumentation seems possible to me. One might argue, for example, that all researchers would, in ideal conditions, agree that subjectivity must be *in some sense* real, since most of a normal human life is dependent on it. I believe the most natural way of endorsing this latter position would consist in a form of non-eliminativist reductionism, i.e., the idea that subjectivity can be *reduced* to the universal consciousness, but that that does not make it *unreal*. It is simply a *different* state of consciousness. It should be noted that this precise debate can be found in the Hinduist Advaita Vedanta tradition, according to which the self (Atman) is a manifestation of the universal consciousness (Brahman). Hinduists have been debating for centuries



whether this should lead us to believe that the self is as real as the universal consciousness (since they have the same nature), or if this makes of Atman an illusory manifestation of Brahman.

The same problem that we have with subjectivity can be extended to the external world of day-to-day experience: do mystical experiences reveal day-to-day external “reality” to be an illusion? That depends, once again, on whether an agreement on the reality of these external things can be reached. The options are fundamentally the same as before. One could argue that, since this world disappears (or radically changes) during a mystical experience, were we all to have one, we would all agree that said world is an illusion. A person endorsing this claim could further develop it in two different directions. First, they could argue that the external world is an illusory manifestation of the universal consciousness (as it is sometimes claimed in the Advaita Vedanta tradition). Second, they could argue that the external world is metaphysically dependent on subjectivity, meaning that, when the illusion of being a stable subject is gone, the illusion of a subject-independent external world is also gone.<sup>2</sup> On the complete opposite hand, one might conclude that, since most of our life is based on the presence of this external world, the ideal community of researchers would ultimately agree that it must be real, in some sense of the word.

Summarizing, then, I think that a solution to these debates can be found if one can show that an agreement can be found; however, as I said before, I do not believe the premises of my work, on their own, suffice for a rigorous answer. In general, in fact, I am skeptical that a universal agreement on the reality or non-reality of either subjects or the external world could be found.

To conclude, I have argued that the only metaphysical claim that mystical experiences allow one to put forward is that there exists a universal consciousness, i.e. a consciousness that involves no subjects and (consequently) no objects. Mystical experiences might also inform us on the metaphysical status of subjectivity and of what we commonly perceive as the external world. This will depend on whether an agreement on these issues, based on mystical experiences themselves, can be found. I do not believe an agreement is likely, but these are certainly viable routes for metaphysicians who disagree with me on this point.

With the end of this metaphysical groundwork, we have now come to the end of this project.

## Notes Chapter V

1. Andrej Ule, "The Concept of Self in Buddhism and Brahmanism: Some Remarks," *Asian Studies* IV:1 (2016), doi: 10.4312/as.2016.4.1.81-95.
2. This idea can be found throughout the history of philosophy and saying that it is popular among mystics would be an understatement. As we quickly mentioned in chapter III.4.3, it is also now becoming more and more popular among scientists working on psychedelics and mysticism.

## VI. Conclusion

As I noted in the introduction to this work, mystical experiences are becoming more and more relevant as the 21<sup>st</sup> Century unravels. Scientific research on the societal, therapeutic and spiritual potential of psychedelic substances is only in its primordial phase and is very likely going to increase in speed as these substances get decriminalized and normalized worldwide. Moreover, as the general population moves away from religion and towards spirituality, the interest for existentially fulfilling and sometimes life-changing experiences (such as mystical experiences) will increase. Overall, if these trends keep progressing, it will become harder and harder to approach the question of the reality of mystical experiences naively, or to brush it aside. Indeed, understanding the metaphysical status of mystical experiences might become one of the most important challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. This work aimed at giving some analytical tools to start approaching this challenge rigorously.

In chapter II I discussed some fundamental terminology and presuppositions for any work on the metaphysics of mysticism. In chapter III I summarized and assessed the major arguments in the literature in favor and against the reality of mystical experiences. In chapter IV I discussed pragmatism, which I take to be, as I explained, the philosophical framework that would allow the debate on the metaphysics of mysticism to move forward. Finally, in chapter V I lay the foundations for a metaphysical system based on mystical experiences.

This is one of the increasing number of projects aimed at rebuilding and renovating the very, very old house of mysticism. My hope is that, in the following decades, more and more academics will join this construction site.

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