

The Verifiability of Daoist Somatic Mystical Experience

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Abstract: Mystical religious experiences typically purport to engage with the transcendent and often claim to involve encounters with spiritual entities or a detachment from the material world. Daoism diverges from this paradigm. This paper examines Daoist mystical experiences of bodily transformations and explores their epistemological implications. Specifically, we defend the justificatory power of Daoist somatic experiences against the disanalogy objection. The disanalogy objection posits that mystical experiences, in contrast to sense perceptions, are not socially verifiable and thereby lack *prima facie* epistemic value. We argue that some Daoist mystical bodily states, being essentially spatiotemporal, are exempt from this challenge. This leads to a broader understanding of mysticism and offers a partial resolution to the disanalogy objection.

Keywords: Daoism, mysticism, religious experience, disanalogy objection, Chinese philosophy

1. Introduction

Mystical experiences predominantly concern the transcendent realm. For Christians, these experiences are typified by purported interactions with spiritual entities such as angels and God (McGinn 2006; Mommaers 2009; Pike 1992; Swinburne 2004). Buddhists, eschewing theistic doctrines, value ‘pure consciousness’ that transcends the material world (Forman 1990; Gennaro 2008; Katz 1978; Wainwright 1981). For Confucians, the experience of ‘human-heaven unity’, *tianren heyi* (天人合一), can be regarded as a form of ‘cosmic consciousness’ (Ching 2000), which portrays the cosmos as meaningful and ‘entirely immaterial’ (Bucke 2010: 14).

However, not all mystical traditions prioritize transcendence. As recognised in Chinese philosophy and Asian studies, Daoists emphasise the material. They seek to unite with Dao (道), the Way, via somatic mystical self-cultivations (Ames 1993; Cheng 2007; Despeux 1994; Fava 2014; Granet 1975; Jia 2015; Kohn 2020; Komjathy 2011; Marinus Schipper 1993; Puett 2010; Robinet 1993; Roth 2021). Reaching for the divine via bodies, Daoists have developed a system of bodily practice and have recorded various bodily experiences. Of these experiences, some are embodied perceptions of spirits, some present the body as a site of sanctity, and a particular specimen – the sensation of *qi* (氣/炁) – is essentially physical, marking a significant divergence from transcendent experiences.

The aim of this paper is not to catalogue Daoist experiences, but to explore their epistemological implications. Specifically, we present a Daoist response to the so-called *disanalogy objection*. Religious experiences are often considered a source of *prima facie* justification for religious beliefs, e.g., feeling union with God *prima facie* justifies the belief that God exists (Brown 2015; Evans 2011; Ewing 1973; Griffioen 2021; Netland 2022; Swinburne 2018). The disanalogy objection

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alleges that, unlike sense perceptions, mystical experiences are not socially verifiable – e.g., the claim that God is present cannot be verified, unlike, say, the perceptual claim that a rose is in a garden. Consequently, mystical experiences are not ‘perceptual’ but are mere ‘subjective’ states with no *prima facie* cognitive value (Fales 2004; Gale 1994). Epistemologists have offered various responses, but they normally concede this disanalogy in verifiability between mystical and sense perceptions (Alston 1991; Kwan 2009: 535-536). Daoism, however, offers resources for defeating the disanalogy objection. After outlining Daoist mysticism in Section 2, we argue in Section 3 that the bodily states in Daoist mystical experiences are socially verifiable. Moreover, Daoist traditions not only posit verification as a social norm but also encourage the intersubjective exchange of *qi*. Instead of being individualistic, Daoist achievements often result from collective efforts, involving contributions from both disciples and their masters.

Expanding our discussion of Daoist epistemology, Section 4 considers four objections. The first alleges that Daoist somatic experiences lack justificatory power because they are subject to illusions and demonic deceptions. The second claims that even if Daoist bodily experiences are capable of justifying basic Daoist teachings, they cannot substantiate core Daoist tenets about the reality of Dao. The third contends that Daoist bodily experiences, compared to transcendent mystical experiences, are more vulnerable to naturalistic reductions due to the spatiotemporal nature of their contents. The fourth suggests that the plausibility of Daoism is threatened by other somatic mystical traditions that are equally plausible. By addressing these four objections, we argue that Daoist somatic mystical experiences are less subject to illusions and demonic deceptions than most transcendent experiences, that they can justify core Daoist tenets, that they are not an easier target for naturalistic attacks, and that the diversity among somatic mystical traditions raises less conflict than the diversity among religious doctrines about the ultimate.

2. Bodies in Daoist Mysticism

Daoism, or Taoism, holds that Dao is the ultimate, positing that humans can unite with Dao and become immortal deities in perfected bodily or spiritual form. The Daoist religion was institutionalized in 142 CE, but its philosophy can be traced back to the 4th-century BC texts of *Daode jing* (*The True Scripture of the Way and Its Virtue* 道德經 DZ 664) and *Zhuangzi* (*Book of Master Zhuang* 莊子 DZ 670). Over time, Daoism has become a system that incorporates philosophical ideas, rituals, mysticism, and various cultural aspects in China. Some philosophers prefer an intellectual reading of Daoism as a school of thought, dismissing its mysticism as a corruption of the institutionalized religion (Chou 1974; Creel 1970; Feng 1948). Others regard the classical texts as reflections of pre-existing mystical practices. Granet (1975: 121) argues that *Daode jing* ‘can be understood only by relating their ideas to the concrete religious practice to which they correspond’. Roth (1995: 155) similarly considers these texts ‘derived from the experience of practicing mystics’. Regardless of what the ‘core’ of Daoism is, mysticism is widely recognised as integral to the overall Daoist system.

2.1. A Sketch of Daoist Mysticism

Like many other religions, Daoism seeks spiritual elevation. A representative example is

Taishang laojun shuo chang qingjing miaojing (*Wonderful Scripture on Perpetual Purity and Tranquility, Spoken by the Most High Lord Lao* 太上老君說常清靜妙經 DZ 620):

Look into your mind and there is no mind. Look at appearances and appearances have no forms. Gaze at distant objects and objects do not exist. Understand these three modes of cognition and you will see emptiness. (內觀其心，心無其心。外觀其形，形無其形。遠觀其物，物無其物。三者即悟，唯見於空。 Translation by Wong (1992: 63))

Following this instruction is believed to free us from the limitations of external objects, phenomenality, and earthly mentalities. Aligned with Buddhism, this elevation of consciousness aspires to reach transcendent realms.

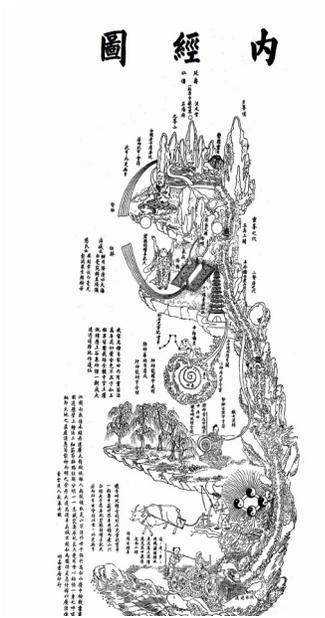


Figure 1. *Neijing tu* 內經圖

Instead of discussing the full scope of Daoism, we want to focus on Daoist somatic mysticism. Daoists regard human bodies as energetic systems that can achieve physical immortality, allowing one to join other deities of spiritual or bodily forms in Daoist heavens. *Neijing tu* (*Chart of the Inner Landscape* 內經圖 Figure 1, see Despeux (2008)) vividly portrays the body as an inner cosmos, replete with mountains, rivers, bridges, and beyond. Rather than a theoretical interpretation of bodies, *Neijing tu* is a description of bodily energies and a guide to realizing our potential. The language of *Neijing tu* is metaphorical, e.g., it regards the tongue as a ‘bridge’, not for its physical resemblance to one, but for its role in connecting two sections of the energy flow called *renmai* (任脈). Meanwhile, many Daoist texts offer literal descriptions. *Huangting jing* (*Book of the Interior Landscape of the Yellow Court* 黃庭經 DZ 331), which allocates an internal *body god* to each organ, records in detail how they should be visualised via ‘introspective meditation’, *neiguan* (內觀). The following refers to the heart deity:

The palace of the heart section is like a lotus bud, under which there is the house of the child Tan Yuan ... He regulates the cold and hot conditions so that the blood and the breath energy will be harmonized. He wears flowing red brocade clothes with a silk jade-colored shawl ... If one calls on him when one is about to die, one will be immediately revived. If one can practice that for long, one is able to soar to Tat Hsia, the Grand Glowing Clouds. (心部之宮蓮含華，下有童子丹元家，主適寒熱榮衛和，丹錦飛裳披玉羅，金鈴朱帶坐娑娑.....臨絕呼之亦登蘇，久久行之飛太霞。 Translation by Huang and Wurmbrand (1990: 236))

This translation notes that the palace is ‘like’ a lotus bud, but the Chinese text directly specifies it as one without any suggestion of metaphor. Body gods are not held to be mere inventions of the imagination. Daoists typically read *Huangting jing* in a realistic manner. As Robinet (1993: 53) argued, visualisations are ‘true imagination’ because the Daoist, when visualising, ‘does not create or invent, but discovers and unveils’.

Body gods raise a noteworthy ontological point. They are not fully physical, for it is untenable

to assert that a child in ‘red brocade’ physically dwells in one’s heart. However, regarding them as purely spiritual also seems amiss. Unlike Christian visions, which depict spiritual entities like God *as though* they have material attributes, Daoist body deities are supposed to be *veridically* visualised through their physical appearances. Fortunately, the categorisation of body gods as material or spiritual is not a significant issue. In Daoism, material and spiritual properties are not entirely distinct. Both are configurations of *qi*, the basic constituent of the world. Neither exclusively material nor spiritual, *qi* is an energy that can take either form. The ontology of *qi*, essential to Daoism, is also found in other Chinese schools of thought. To quote Kohn:

There is no fundamental difference in substance or function between body and mind in Chinese thought: they form part of the same continuum. Fundamentally monistic, this vision is yet neither physicalist nor idealist, but proposes an underlying energy (*qi*) that can manifest as either body or mind... (Kohn 2020: 62)

As configurations of *qi*, body gods can be construed both spiritually and materially. They are material inhabitants in human bodies and spiritual residents of a transcendent realm (see also Komjathy 2011: 83).

Moving beyond body deities, Daoist mysticism has been a bedrock for various facets of Chinese culture. Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), rooted in the ontology of *qi*, adopts the Daoist view of human bodies as having twelve ordinary and eight extraordinary meridians (十二正經-奇經八脈) – channels for the flow of *qi*. Acupuncture stemmed precisely from the observation that stimulating specific meridians regulates energy flows. While the existence of meridians has stirred debate in modern science (e.g. Singh and Ernst 2008), Daoism has its own epistemological account of these bodily features. According to *Qijing bamai kao* (*An Examination of the Eight Extra Meridians* 奇經八脈考 (see Chace and Shima 2010)), meridians are directly perceivable through introspective meditation: ‘meridians are discernible only by the introspective’ (內景隧道，唯返觀者能照察之). In addition to visualising meridians, Daoists also report tangible sensations of *qi*. For Chinese martial arts such as *Taiji quan* (太極拳), it is pivotal to direct *qi* to an energy centre in the abdomen called *dantian* (丹田). Practitioners discern such states more by sensation than by sight. They ‘actually feel it in the body’ (Olson 2005: 11).

Daoists believe that the path to immortality is long and arduous. Sensing *qi*, opening meridians, and visualising deities are preparatory steps. They must be followed by a series of body-spiritual transformations before attaining divine perfection. Although our exposition merely scratches the surface of Daoism, we have highlighted its basic bodily practices.

Before exploring the epistemology of Daoist somatic mysticism, a methodological note is needed: should we presume the reality of *qi* and body deities when discussing Daoist experiences? If such doctrines must be assumed or defended, we would be taking on hefty metaphysical commitments. Fortunately, epistemologists often hypothetically embrace religious doctrines to explore their implications. Alston adopted this approach:

I will be concerned only to argue that *if* God exists it is a real possibility that experiences like the ones under consideration constitute genuine perceptions of Him. (emphasis added 1991: 54)

This strategy, focusing on the *conditional* claim that God is perceivable *if* God exists, allows Alston to sidestep the need to affirm God's existence or counter challenges like the problem of evil. We adopt a similar tactic. Instead of endorsing Daoist tenets, we argue that *if* these tenets are true, then certain Daoist bodily states are perceivable. The perceptions of these states have cognitive value, in contrast to what the disanalogy objection states, because they are properly verifiable in Daoist communities *given* the relevant Daoist doctrines. Hence, we do not defend Daoist body cosmology or elaborate on how *qi* manifests as spiritual and material – these issues merit independent exploration (e.g. Choi and Kim 2018; Turner 2022). We proceed on the simple hypothesis that Daoist doctrines are coherent and true.

With this hypothesis, we do not expect Daoist experiences or their social verifications to 'verify' Daoist doctrines against other world-views. Mystical experiences and their social verifications can after all occur independently of the underlying religious truths. The verification of religious truths is a complex issue beyond the scope of the present work. Instead, we understand 'verification' of Daoist experiences to have perceptual states. That is, *if* Daoist tenets are accurate, then Daoist experiences can be verified via adequate *perceptual* methods, similar to the ordinary experience of a rose being verified by checking the light conditions, its aroma, etc. – all involving perceptual methods. The verification of Daoist experiences does not guarantee the truth of Daoism, just as verifying the experience of a rose does not prove the existence of external world. Rather, our point is that both Daoist experiences and their social verifications are adequately linked to their objects in the hypothetical Daoist world-view. Both can accordingly possess a 'perceptual' status with *prima facie* cognitive value that defeats the disanalogy objection.

2.2. The Role of Bodies in Daoism

Many mystical traditions involve somatic experiences. How is Daoism distinct in this regard? To start, the role of body in Daoism is not captured by the general proposal that all experiences, mystical or not, have embodied elements. Embodiment primarily concerns the form and the media of experience: it pertains to *how* we perceive a content. Body gods and meridians, in contrast, are *what* we perceive in Daoist experiences. Thus, in addition to forms of experiences, Daoism engages bodies in the *content* of experience.

Including bodies within the experiential content still falls short of encapsulating Daoism. This is because encounters with spiritual beings can also feature bodily contents. In his classic study, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James (2002: 200) reported that a Christian felt the Holy Spirit coursing through his body 'like a wave of electricity'. In this case, we suggest, bodies are involved but play only a limited role. Epistemologists often distinguish sensory and perceptual levels of experience. The well-known rabbit-duck illusion shows how the same sensory data can be perceived differently, as presenting a rabbit or a duck, depending on the observer's perspective. The same percept of a rose's being red can also rest on different sensations when the

rose is viewed from different angles. Roughly, sensations set the stage for perception, whereas percepts carry propositional contents (e.g. Bengson et al. 2011). In James's report, the electric wave constitutes Christian's sensation, and the Holy Spirit is what he *perceives*. Bodily factors appear only at the sensory level. They are only enabling conditions for perceiving a transcendent reality. Daoism, however, engages bodies on both the sensory and perceptual levels. Through bodily sensations of the energy, bodily *qi* is perceived. Body deities are also intentional objects of perception.

In contrast to James's case, Daoist bodily experiences present a stronger epistemic connection between sensory and perceptual factors. Perceptions are not independent of sensations. We can perceive that 'an apple is red' under diverse lighting conditions but not in total darkness (but see Lyons 2009). Notably, sensations of electric waves are not reliably associated with the Holy Spirit. Often, they merely reflect neurochemical processes. In contrast, sensations of energy flows are properly indicative of *qi*: they *reliably* result from one's *qi* states and serve as a solid *evidential* basis for these states. Admittedly, mystical experiences might be culturally mediated (Katz 1978). What we perceive through a sensation could be a matter of interpretation. Even so, within their respective Daoist and Christian world-views, the indication of *qi* by sensations of energy is more reliable than that of the Holy Spirit by sensations of electric waves. Although both are based on bodily sensations, the perception of *qi* is less arbitrarily interpreted than that of the Holy Spirit.

According to Komjathy (2007: 250), for Daoist somatic mysticism, the 'sacred' is experienced 'in/as/through' the body. He asserts that 'the human body experienced as an ever-shifting flow of vital substances *is* the Dao', because 'it is the Dao that pervades every aspect of existence' (2007: 250). It is important to underscore that transcendence or sacredness is not a cornerstone of Daoist mysticism. The flow of *qi* is primarily a natural process. Body deities, despite their spirituality, are also configurations of *qi* awaiting further transformations. They are *tools* for self-cultivation, not sacred objects for worship.

This separability from the sacred and the transcendent distinguishes Daoism from many mystical traditions that hold sensations in equally high regard. In particular, according to Van Dyke (2022: 15), some medieval Christians regarded sensations as 'important ways of experiencing a direct connection' with God. In Marguerite d'Oingt's vision, she perceived herself as an inverted, withered tree. After drawing upon the 'living water' of Christ, she witnessed the names of the five senses inscribed on her rejuvenated leaves (Van Dyke 2022: 18-19). Similar bodily changes are also found in the writings of Margaret Ebner: 'I...began to wonder about what was happening to me... It came from my heart and I feared for my senses now and then whenever it was so intense. But I was answered by the presence of God with sweet delight, "I am no robber of the senses, I am the enlightener of the senses"' (Van Dyke 2022: 89). These experiences involve enhanced bodily sensations. For Christians, however, such experiences are *incomplete* without invoking divine entities. Ebner's fear arose precisely from her doubts about the nature of her experience, and it was only after receiving God's assurance that her experience became whole. Daoist experiences of *qi*, in contrast, are complete in themselves. They are self-sufficient and do not need validation from divine powers.

To summarise, bodies can be the sensory condition and the intentional object of Daoist

mystical experiences. The purported bodily states do not have to represent transcendent realities or be worshiped as sacred. This role of the body may have parallels in other somatic mystical traditions, which we consider in Section 4.4. Nevertheless, our observations effectively distinguish Daoism from many well-known forms of mystical experience.

2.3. Are Daoist Somatic Experiences Mystical?

The concept of ‘mysticism’ has broadened with the progress of religious studies, yet certain attributes appear to endure. Body deities can surely be considered mystical given their quasi-spiritual nature. However, sensing *qi* neither invokes spiritual beings, transforms consciousness, nor inherently represents the sacred. How can it be classified as mystical? Absent a universally accepted theory of mysticism, we offer two reasons for regarding the sensation of *qi* as mystical.

First, sensing *qi* grants epistemic access to an otherwise elusive ontology. *Qi* is central to Chinese philosophy, but its essence is hidden from the general populace. People in Asian cultures might be familiar with the term ‘*qi*’. They have heard that *qi* is the ‘most basic constituent of the world’. Nevertheless, this abstract idea does not elucidate the experiential basis on which the notion of *qi* is first established. When being asked, most people in Asian cultures cannot fully articulate ‘what *qi* truly is’, much less defend *qi*-based medical theories in the context of modern science. In this respect, sensing *qi* is crucial to properly comprehending ancient Chinese world-views. This experience acquaints us with ‘what *qi* is’ and sheds light into this arcane dimension of Chinese philosophy. The sensed vital energy might not yet be the ‘most basic constituent’, but it offers a pertinent model for theorising about *qi* in general.

Second, sensing *qi* is linked to higher achievements via Daoist *social* norms. Properly sensing *qi* signals to masters that a disciple is ‘on the right track’, paving the way to advanced practice. The masters, in turn, are guided by superior immortal guardians of Dao (e.g. Wong 1992: 19). From the Daoist perspective, sensing *qi* is the initial phase of a process towards immortalisation – a process sustained by a network of guidance stretching from Earth to celestial realms. Moore (1978: 120) highlighted this ‘developing character’ of mysticism: mystical states should be contextualised within the larger trajectories specific to their traditions. Preliminary Daoist bodily experiences can thus receive mystical attributes based on the spiritual achievements they facilitate. Granted, immortality is held to be rare, and sensing *qi* does not assure ultimate success. Also, since Daoism lacks rigid social structures, *qi* practitioners could focus on longevity without embarking on further spiritual quests (see Miura 1989: 357-358). Nevertheless, our topic is the verification of Daoist experiences *within the Daoist perspective*. In this context, the sensation of *qi* can properly be deemed mystical insofar as it marks the debut of one’s ascension towards Dao.

3. A Partial Solution to the Disanalogy Objection

How do Daoist bodily experiences avoid the disanalogy objection? In Section 3.1, we diagnose engagement with the transcendent as a source of the verification problem. Section 3.2 shows how Daoist experiences circumvent this issue.

3.1. Transcendence As a Source of the Verification Problem

According to a prevailing view, mystical experiences can offer some form of *prima facie* epistemic justification. For example, an experience wherein God seems present *prima facie* justifies the belief that God exists (Brown 2015; Evans 2011; Griffioen 2021; Kwan 2009; Netland 2022). Yet, the disanalogy objection alleges that mystical experiences are not socially verifiable. Perceptions can normally be checked via socially accessible procedures. The claim that a rose is in a garden can be verified by checking the lighting conditions, the state of the rose, the observer's faculties, etc. This possibility of social verification, it is claimed, is a necessary condition for sense experiences to be 'perceptual' and capable of offering *prima facie* justification. No such procedure seems available for mystical experiences. When a Christian feels the presence of God, how can we tell whether it is a divine encounter, an illusion, or a devil's trick? Religious traditions have certain criteria, e.g., a mystic genuinely encountering God will be humble and peaceful rather than arrogant and disturbed (de Guibert 1953; Iqbal 2013; James 2002). But even when these criteria are met, it is not guaranteed that God is genuinely perceived. As Martin (1959: 67) states:

There are no tests agreed upon to establish genuine experience of God and distinguish it decisively from the nongenuine.

The point of this disanalogy objection is not that mystics are unable to eliminate *remote* possibilities of error. Rather, it contends that mystical experiences, without social verifiability, are not even 'perceptual' in the first place. They are mere 'subjective' states devoid of any cognitive value with respect to objective religious truths (Fales 2004; Gale 1994).

Epistemologists have attempted to restore the analogy to some extent, but they mostly concede that mystical experiences are not socially verifiable in the way expected by champions of the disanalogy objection. Therefore, the prevailing response is to downplay the disanalogy. Alston argues that 'there is no reason to suppose it appropriate to require the same checks and tests' for mystical and ordinary sense experiences – insisting otherwise would be committing 'epistemic imperialism' (1991: 216). We shall not assess these dominant approaches (cf. Byrne 2000). The question of how far a process can deviate from ordinary perceptions while still preserving epistemic value can be answered only with a principled theory of justification. Without furnishing such a theory, we merely show that Daoism is exempt from the objection.

Although the disanalogy objection is open to multiple diagnoses, a salient source of the trouble is engagement with the transcendent. Typically, material objects are identifiable by various observers. According to Gale (1991: 328), objective realities must be 'able to exist when not actually perceived and be the common object of different sense perceptions'. For this to occur, the subject and the object need a 'common space-time'. There might be non-spatiotemporal realities, such as platonic ideas, but Gale insists that *perception* necessitates a context where we 'causally interact' with the object (1991: 328). Generalizing from the reference to space and time, this requires that objects of perception 'occupy some non-empirical dimension', where they are 'individuated' and 'causally hooked up with different perceivers' (Gale 1994: 872). Only then are they the 'common object of different perceptions' (Gale 1991: 326-328, 340-341). Being the common object is essential to social verification. The claim about a rose being in a garden is verifiable

only if it can be confirmed by different observers. God, beyond space and time, does not meet this identification criterion. If God were the sole spiritual entity, identifying God in spiritual encounters could be feasible. Yet, given the myriad of spirits and our inability to distinguish them as we do physical objects, identifying spiritual beings is challenging:

... how...to decide when two religious experiences of a very powerful and loving nonhuman person had by two people at one time or by one person at two different times are of numerically one and the same being or only qualitatively similar ones? (Gale 1991: 342)

Non-theistic transcendent experiences, such as Buddhist ‘pure consciousness’, face similar difficulties. Buddhist experiences are not generally used for referential purposes (Streng 1978: 165). They often highlight the notion that ‘no views capture the nature of reality’ (Gimello 1978: 193). Nevertheless, when construed as implying a world-view – e.g., ‘the world is void’ – these experiences are subject to epistemic evaluation. How can we authenticate an experience about voidness? Asserting its mere truth in Buddhism is insufficient. Genuine experiences of the world’s voidness necessitate a causal link to the voidness itself, just as experiences of God must be causally linked to God. Yet, voidness is attributed to the entire world. Verifying one’s link with such universal properties is difficult, especially within the boundaries of the very world they describe.

To clarify, we do not regard transcendent experiences as impossible to verify. Spiritual beings may occupy space differently (Aquinas 2006: 45), and God could be perceivable even if we cannot reliably identify spiritual agents (Plantinga 2000: 337-345). *Qi*-based ontologies may also posit quasi-spiritual entities like body gods that are easily identifiable. Still, our topic is not the verification of transcendent experiences. We argue only that this problem does not arise for mystical experiences with specific spatiotemporal contents.

3.2. Verifying Bodily States in Daoist Societies

Daoist bodily states are spatiotemporal. Meridians and *dantians* are bodily energy flows. When a Daoist feels that ‘my *qi* is accumulating in my *dantian*’, this experience points to a bodily location with a tangible truth-maker for its propositional content. Similarly, body deities, albeit partly spiritual, are conceived to inhabit specific organs and thereby meet Gale’s criteria of being properly ‘individuated’ and ‘causally hooked up with different perceivers’. In this respect, Daoist bodily experiences promise a partial solution to the verification problem.

It is important to note that Daoist experiences are not for everyone to verify. Verification can be performed only by those equipped with the required cognitive skills. The claim that a rose is in the garden is verifiable only by those who can see, smell, or touch. Accordingly, we focus on Daoist communities whose members are most likely to have the expertise. This approach does not imply that verification is a matter of social convention. We emphasise only that having the proper cognitive skills is a prerequisite for participating in the verification process.

Our discussion will not venture into developing a comprehensive theory of how Daoist bodily experiences can be verified. Crafting such a theory involves extensive assumptions about Daoist ontology, for which textual support is scant. Rather, we examine how Daoism internally implements social checking. If verification is a norm for Daoists and faces no major barrier, we have

a solid argument for the verifiability thesis.

Fortunately, although Daoist scriptures seldom discuss the checking of mystical states, a pertinent example emerges in the biography of Wang Liping (王力平), the 18th-generation transmitter of the Dragon Gate Daoist school. Throughout his meditative journey, Wang receives guidance from three masters. When he channelled *qi* to *niwan* (泥丸) – an energy centre in the head – the masters perceived a light in his head:

After going through a certain period of training, Wang Liping's inner gaze could see a spot of brightness in the nirvana chamber at the crown of his head (泥丸). The wizards also saw this bright spot and knew that the aperture at the top of his head had opened, meaning that the foundation work was done. (Cleary et al. 1998: chap. 7)

Wang's bodily transformation is directly perceived by the masters. His experience that 'my *niwan* is opened' is properly verified in this small group. The masters might not have a panoramic comprehension of all his energetic state – some *qi* states may be elusive – but the opening of *niwan* is a significant phase in Daoist practice, of which the masters must be aware.

Objectors might question the credibility of such reports. If we endorse Wang's narrative, does it follow that mystical experiences are trivially verifiable if mystics report so?

This criticism, however, is mistaken for three reasons.

First, epistemologists have standardly relied on mystics' testimonies to conceptualise mystical experiences. Although this does not mean regarding every mystical claim as truthful, or every mystic as capable of accurately describing her experience, it minimally takes testimony to be a generally viable source of information for construing the essential characteristics of mystical experience. Given this methodological convention, Wang's report is *prima facie* trustworthy.

Second, endorsing Wang's report does not trivially solve the verifiability issue. As argued, verifying mystical experiences is complicated by engagement with transcendent realities. This challenge is not magically unravelled just by asserting one's prowess in discerning transcendent nuances. Because Daoist bodily experiences avoid this issue through the spatiotemporal nature of their contents, Wang's report is only an additional support for our argument.

Third, and most importantly, rather than being an isolated anecdote, Wang's case exemplifies the typical transmission of Daoist mystical knowledge. Daoist schools are not established on mere sporadic divine encounters or the hope of receiving grace. Rather, Daoists positively seek self-perfection towards divinisation. Daoist masters should thereby possess the expertise to deliver accurate instructions. While masters might only have a slight glimpse of the ultimate, they are well-versed in the preliminary stages of practice. Like a piano teacher gauging a student's performance, they must judiciously assess a disciple's physical-spiritual level. This mentorship is crucial for transmitting Daoist mystical knowledge. Daoist scriptures often cloak practical specifics in ambiguity, relying on successive generations of masters to relay the concealed technique. In *Zhong-Lü chuandao ji* (*Transmission of Dao by Zhong Liquan and Lü Dongbi* 鍾呂傳道集 DZ 263 chap. 18), the legendary immortal Zhong Liquan (鍾離權) emphasised:

If one practices seriously with earnest will but in the end sees no success, this is not the fault

of Dao but happens because Daoist adepts do not follow an enlightened teacher and receive the wrong methods. (苦誌行持，終不見功者，非道負人。蓋奉道之人，不從明師，而所受非法。 Translation by Kohn (2020: 188))

While mentorship is also significant for many other mystical traditions (Staal 1975: chap. 11), Daoist masters must further *intervene* at key stages of the disciple's practice, as Wang reported:

When [the energy] reached the “gate of heaven” at the top of his head, however, [Wang] needed a mentor to attend him. Around the aperture on top of the head there are always four flashing points of brightness; the ancients called these the “four great spirits of the gate.” Their adamant guardianship makes it hard for the pure energy inside the body to burst through here. It is necessary for a teacher to move these “four great spirits of the gate” before the “gate of heaven” can be opened. (Cleary et al. 1998: chap. 5)

Thus, instead of being exclusively individualistic, Daoist bodily transformations can be a collective endeavour. Masters must possess the discernment to gauge disciples' levels as well as the ability to catalyse their advancement. Outside the context of self-cultivation, such intersubjective exchange of *qi* is performed by Daoists renowned for their non-contact energy-field healing techniques. This exercise of *qi* therapy, documented world-wide (Cohen 1999; Friedman 2009), is particularly recorded in *Songshan taiwu xiansheng qijing* (*Mr. Grand-Nothingness of Song Mountain's Scripture on Breath* 嵩山太無先生氣經 DZ 824):

If you use the breath to cure people's diseases, first examine the patient (to find out) which one of the five viscera is sick. The healer has to attempt to disperse the proper, corresponding breath inside the patient's body. (夫用氣與人療疾，先須依前人五臟所患之疾，取方向之氣布入前人身中。 Translation by Huang and Wurmbrand (1987: 23))

The checking of Wang's *niwan* by his masters' heightened senses is an example of verifying Daoist bodily experiences *via mystical perception*. Meanwhile, Daoist bodily states are also socially verifiable by non-mystical methods. *Qi* cultivation is intertwined with health conditions, for which TCM has a complex system of interpretation. *Qie* (切), a TCM technique, diagnoses the patient's *qi* through her pulse. Many *qi* states, per TCM, can manifest as different pulse patterns, allowing TCM experts to infer a patient's bodily condition. This method is less mystical than the sensing of *qi* because it requires only familiarisation with pulses through ordinary sensations. Still, *qie* is a tool for checking *qi* states. When a Daoist adept opens her *daimai* (帶脈) – the ‘belt meridian’ – a TCM expert should detect this state via pulse diagnosis.

Acknowledging TCM as a viable checking method might seem to yield improbable outcomes. Would it mean that simply observing a Daoist's improved health affirms her activation of *daimai*? To address this issue, note that checking Daoist experiences with TCM is not crucial for our view. For our purposes, it suffices that Daoist bodily states are checkable via mystical perceptions, as in Wang's report. There is no need to expand the verification toolbox. Nevertheless, verification is often multifaceted. If what visually appears to be a rose lacks its characteristic aroma, the claim about the rose is probably false. Likewise, health improvement is supposed to follow from successful Daoist practice. *Qi* is a vital energy. The appropriate accumulation and

bodily circulation of *qi* are expected to improve one's health conditions (e.g., Kohn 2008). If Wang's masters saw the light but found him severely ill, they should reconsider whether his *niwan* is properly opened. Certain Daoist states are directly observable via mystical perceptions, but TCM expands the verification toolkit. Once again, we shall not defend TCM itself, just as we do not defend Daoist tenets in general. Rather, because Daoism and TCM not only 'have the same origin' (醫道同源) but also share the same concepts, fundamental principles, overlapping goals, and blended practice (Stanley-Baker 2022), we can regard TCM, or at least a major part of it, as intrinsic to the overall Daoist system. Therefore, *if* we presume the Daoist world-view, TCM will be a legitimate tool for verifying Daoist mystical states.

4. Objections and Replies

To further defend the justificatory power of Daoist somatic experiences, we consider four objections. The first claims that Daoist mystical perceptions are affected by the possibility of illusions and demonic deceptions. The second regards somatic Daoist experiences as incapable of justifying core Daoist doctrines about the transcendent Dao. The third alleges that Daoist mystical bodily states are particularly vulnerable to naturalistic reduction. The fourth contends that the plausibility of Daoist teachings is compromised by the availability of other somatic mystical traditions.

4.1. Christian Demons, Cartesian Demons, and Daoist Demons

For Christians, verifying mystical experiences is difficult partly because we cannot detect 'illusions through the machinations of the devil' (Alston 1991: 201). When a Daoist senses *qi* and her master perceives it in her body, might they too be victims of illusions or demonic tricks?

Let us first consider mere illusions. In Christianity, distinguishing genuine spiritual encounters from illusions is especially challenging. Unable to reliably discern spiritual entities, we may always wonder if an experience of God is merely a mental construct. Daoist bodily experiences are more insulated from this worry because, as argued, they are supposed to have spatiotemporal contents with observable manifestations. When a Daoist feels her *daimai* opened, if TCM experts observe her pulse changes and her masters perceive related signs, the experience can be deemed non-illusory. Given their bodily nature, such Daoist experiences are easier to authenticate against illusions than Christian spiritual encounters.

What about demonic interference? Daoists acknowledge demonic influences, particularly at advanced spiritual levels. *Lingbao wuliang duren shangjing dafa* (*Great Rites of the Book of Universal Salvation* 靈寶無量度人上經大法 DZ 219 chap. 45) recorded that the celestial demons, *tianmo* (天魔), deceive Daoists with heavenly scenes: 'The hermit, when cultivating the elixir in contemplative tranquillity, might perceive various joyous forms with waves of flowers and scented clouds... This is the trial by celestial demons, not the proper path to follow. (修煉居山之士.....正煉火丹, 修真養浩, 行持入靖, 或目見顯現形影, 幢蓋旛花, 百種天香異雲覆室.....此乃天魔之所試, 即非正道之所履行也。)' According to this text, celestial demons typically target advanced practitioners in their contemplations. Basic achievements, such as sensing *qi*, are seldom affected. Novices might also face demons during early practices, but these entities usually stir up distorted desires

and emotions rather than delusions. In Daoism, disciples are not the prime targets of demonic deceptions.

Two immediate concerns arise. First, are disciples nonetheless subject to demonic deceptions? If so, will this pose epistemic threats? Second, could Daoist masters be deceived by demons when evaluating a disciple's state?

These scenarios of demonic tricks are admittedly possible in Daoism, but they are held to be rare. Daoist demonology is supposed to be a credible recording of Daoist interactions with demons. Thus, based on the hypothesis that its teachings are true, demonic deception is not a *nearby* possibility for Daoist students or their assessing masters. Epistemologists widely agree that possibilities of error undermine knowledge only when they are close or relevant (DeRose 2009; Grundmann 2018; Lewis 1996; Pritchard 2009; Vogel 1999). In this aspect, the Christian perception of God is vulnerable to demonic influences, not because demons possibly exist, but because the spiritual realm housing God is also rife with demonic entities, making deception a *high risk*. Objectors might ask: if mystics such as St. Teresa worried about demons during meditation, should they not be wary of them elsewhere (see Mavrodes 1978)? This reasoning, however, introduces Cartesian demons. Christian demons are not identical to Cartesian demons. The former are nearby entities affecting mystical perceptions; the latter are theoretical possibilities intended to undercut epistemic certainties. Our topic is the *prima facie* justification by mystical experiences, not their certainty, so remote possibilities of error are not a concern. To clarify, Daoist masters are expected to have the ability to discern demons. *Lingbao wuliang duren shangjing dafa*, after detailing indicators of demons, prescribes mudras that ward off these entities. If in doubt, masters can resort to superior guardians for assurance. That said, verification cannot proceed ad infinitum. The method of checking a first-order perceptual claim is typically fallible, but scrutinising this method itself is seldom included in the evaluation procedure for the original claim. Focusing on basic Daoist states, we shall not explore further mystical insights higher up the verification ladder.

Although an extensive comparison of Daoist and Christian demonologies is beyond our present scope, some of the different roles of demons in these religions are noteworthy. Whereas Christians regard demons as adversaries of God, Daoists see them as integral to self-cultivation. One example is the 'three corpses', *sanshi* (三尸), which are demonic agents in one's body. Unlike benevolent body deities, they are harmful parasites. A pivotal step in Daoist practice involves eliminating these demonic creatures, with methods detailed in *Taishang chu sanshi jiuchung baosheng jing* (*Scripture of the Most High for the Protection of Life through the Elimination of the Three Corpses and the Nine Worms* 太上除三屍九蟲保生經 DZ 871). In this sense, Daoists positively *use* demons as a *means* of self-transformation. Demons are not elixirs, of course, but their innate presence in humans renders their removal necessary for Daoist practice. Accordingly, Daoism recognises a broader spectrum of demons. More than sources of evil or enemies of the righteous, Daoist demons are also intrinsic building blocks of our existence and stepping stones to our elevation. One consequence is that Daoist masters should be as knowledgeable about demons as they are about deities. The three corpses are integral to self-transformation, so a Daoist teacher ignorant of these demons will not fully understand a disciple's body on the verge of a breakthrough. Consistent with this richer demonological notion, Daoists posit more sophisticated norms for demonic

interactions. Beyond simply ‘defeating’ demons, Daoists also ‘subjugate’ and ‘control’ them (Blofeld 2000: 28; Despeux 2019: 43). Ge Hong (葛洪), a 4th-century master, expected Daoists to ‘control all kinds of demons’ (使役万神) (Akahori 1989). Masters like Zhong Liquan even used demonic illusions to test disciples (Kohn 1993: 131). Therefore, although Daoism recognises a broader spectrum of demonic influences, it also empowers its masters to navigate such complexities. Daoist demons might raise the epistemological bar, but not beyond the level an ideal Daoist master is anticipated to meet.

4.2. Indirect Justifications for Core Daoist Tenets

Even if the perception of *qi* affirms that ‘*qi* is flowing in my body’, does it offer justification for the reality of Dao or immortality? No. An epistemic gap separates tangible sensations of *qi* from core Daoist doctrines. This gap exists despite the conditional nature of our project. Even if Dao is real, and immortality is achievable, the sensation of *qi* might still fall short of justifying beliefs in these truths. Unlike Christian encounters with God that directly justify central Christian doctrines about God, sensing *qi* merely provides epistemic support for preliminary Daoist teachings about meridians and *dantians*. It justifies only a limited range of basic Daoist tenets.

We concede that an epistemic gap exists between basic Daoist experiences and core Daoist doctrines. Nevertheless, our conclusions hold weight for two reasons.

I) Direct justification for basic Daoist teachings: The bodily experiences could directly justify Daoist teachings about bodily *qi* energies. Insofar as these perceptions are mystical, they present a firm case of socially verifiable mystical experience.

II) Indirect justification for core Daoist tenets: When a disciple experiences a bodily state that fits Daoist descriptions, it evidentially supports the Daoist world-view. The Daoist system, as a whole, is a compelling explanation of the experience. The reality of Dao and the prospect of immortality are then deducible as components of this plausible framework. Hence, basic bodily experiences can indirectly justify core Daoist tenets.

Admittedly, these justifications are defeasible. For instance, Daoism might not present a unified system where one aspect supports another. The disciple’s masters may privately reject core Daoist doctrines. Furthermore, her *qi* states could be explicated by future sciences in non-Daoist terms. Thus, Daoist doctrines might not be the best explanation of Daoist experiences.

Nevertheless, such scenarios are *defeaters* that challenge the *ultima facie* plausibility of Daoist tenets, not their *prima facie* plausibility. For an individual immersed in Daoism, the sensation of bodily energy following a master’s guidance offers *prima facie* justification for believing in *qi* and core Daoist tenets. Again, we do not assert that Daoist experiences and their verifications warrant the truth of Daoism over other world-views. Instead, we argue that *if* Daoist doctrines are true, these experiences can be perceptual and thereby possess justificatory power. Plausibly, with this ontological setting, Daoist bodily experiences do offer indirect *prima facie* justification for core Daoist tenets in the absence of defeaters.

To strengthen this verdict, compare Daoism with Christian mysticism in light of Alston’s (1991) ‘doxastic practice’ theory. A doxastic practice is a socially established mechanism of belief-formation that is open to overrides, is not proven unreliable, etc. According to Alston, it is *prima*

facie rational to engage in a doxastic practice. The outputs of a doxastic practice are *prima facie* justified even if the participants lack non-circular arguments for its reliability. Indeed, we do not have non-circular argument for the reliable connection of sense experiences with external objects, but we are rational in endorsing the outputs of sense experience because it is an established doxastic practice. By parity, Christian mystics are rational in holding religious beliefs based on experiences of God because doing so is a doxastic practice in Christian communities – even if Christian tenets might not be the best account of their experiences. The same holds true for Daoism. In Daoism, it is an established practice to believe in *qi* and thereby *in* the reality of Dao based on sensations of bodily energies. This doxastic practice is rational notwithstanding other competing explanations. Interestingly, whereas Alston omitted the social verification condition from his model of mystical doxastic practice due to the disanalogy objection, Daoist experiences are verifiable. Daoist bodily experiences might be less direct in justifying core tenets than Christian mystical experiences, but their justificatory status is more robust.

4.3. Against the Naturalistic Attack

Although Daoist experiences could offer *prima facie* justification despite the possibility of naturalistic attacks, naturalism deserves further examination. It might, after all, seem that bodily *qi* states are especially vulnerable to naturalistic reduction. Could the spatiotemporal *qi* energies be nothing more than subtle physical states?

To clarify the naturalistic attack, we distinguish mystical *experience* from its *content*. Naturalism in the philosophy of mind views conscious experience as physical. In contrast, Daoists conceptualise mentality as a composition of souls and spirits (e.g. Kohn 1989: 203-205). For our discussion, we sidestep the debate on the nature of the mind. When applied to mysticism, naturalism more often concerns the *cause* of mystical experiences than their *essence*. Against Christian mysticism, this challenge asserts that ‘if the occurrence of mystical experience can be adequately explained solely in terms of this-worldly factors, God need never be mentioned in an adequate explanation’ (Alston 1991: 228). Naturalism might indeed be true: perhaps no spiritual being exists and everything is physical. We shall not address this general naturalistic position. Rather, we counter a specific naturalistic attack against Daoism. This attack does not concern body gods or immortals – for they are as elusive as angels and God – but focuses instead on basic bodily *qi* states of meridians and *dantians*. For naturalists, these spatiotemporal states seem fully amenable to naturalistic accounts. They appear to be an *easier target*.

It is important to note that emphasising the conditional nature of our project does not sufficiently counter this naturalistic attack. The conditional approach aims to show only that Daoist bodily experiences provide justifications *if* the relevant doctrines are *true*. It does not concern *what* these doctrines exactly are. The current naturalistic attack is precisely aimed at the *content* of the concepts of *qi* and meridians. Often, naturalism implies the falsity of the purported religious doctrines: e.g., it regards Christianity as false insofar as it denies the reality of a transcendent creator. Nevertheless, this is not the point of the naturalistic attack on Daoism. The naturalist might concede the existence of *qi* but argue that it can be more effectively explained in naturalistic terms. Therefore, according to the objection, even if Daoism is not entirely false, it should be abandoned

as an inferior explanatory system of the purported bodily states.

In response, we argue that this naturalistic attack faces a dilemma. On the one hand, if the naturalist takes a static view and exclusively focuses on basic bodily *qi* states without considering advanced Daoist practice, then a properly developed naturalistic account might fully cover the preliminary Daoist doctrines. In this case, the naturalistic theory is simply an improved account of Daoist teachings and ceases to be a hostile ‘attack’. On the other hand, if the naturalist takes a dynamic view by also considering advanced Daoist practices, then transcendent beings are necessarily involved. Daoism will be no less challenging a target than Christian mysticism.

To clarify the first horn, imagine that future science identifies a physical state, *d*, corresponding to *daimai*. This state is located where *daimai* is and varies with the strength or weakness of one’s *daimai*. Daoists might initially be hesitant to equate *d* with *daimai*. Nevertheless, when naturalists similarly explicate *all* basic Daoist bodily states – including all the meridians, *dantians*, and their interactions – Daoists can agree: ‘yes, *d* is *daimai*’. Nothing seems lost for the Daoist when the naturalist predicts the *entire* gamut of basic Daoist practices. Naturalism becomes a congruent explanation instead of an ‘attack’.

One might perhaps object that naturalism nonetheless contradicts Daoist ontology. State *d* is entirely physical. It involves no factor that is allegedly more basic than the mental/physical dichotomy. Is this divergence from Daoist ontology not an attack on Daoism? Does it not imply the ‘falsity’ of Daoist ontological doctrines? We concede that naturalism alters the Daoist metaphysics of *qi*. However, it is crucial to note that, in Daoism, the ontology of *qi* is primarily an explanatory framework for mystical practice rather than a dogma. The Daoist teachings that make truth claims primarily concern the questions of which practice has which bodily effects, or how to establish *dantians* and open *niwan*. The ontology of *qi*, as a tool for explaining these practical effects, need not by itself necessarily make truth claims. Admittedly, the Daoist doctrines of divine entities are at odds with natural sciences, but these doctrines are not the target of the naturalistic attack that focuses solely on basic *qi* states. Hence, as long as we consider merely these *qi* states that do not directly involve spiritual or transcendent realities, the cost of reducing *qi* to physical states is negligible.

The second horn of the dilemma emerges once we take a dynamic view that construes bodily *qi* states in light of subsequent spiritual transformations. In Daoism, the visualisation of body gods and immortalisation are not ontologically independent of basic *qi* states. They are instead results of the workings of bodily *qi* energies. To wit, *qi* is monistic, but not simple. The flux of *qi* follows the *yin-yang* (陰陽) principle, where *yang* embodies positivity, associated with the sun, warmth, mental activities, etc., and *yin* represents negativity, connected to the moon, cold, mental faculties, etc. *Yin* and *yang* are relational configurations of *qi*, and they are disposed to change into their counterparts. *The Diagram of Taiji* (太極圖 Figure 2) illustrates this by embedding a *yin* within *yang* and vice versa. Within this schema, the physical has the potential of becoming the mental, and the mental contributes to higher physical states. Hence, although basic bodily *qi* energies might not yet manifest spiritual qualities, they have the potentials – a form of ‘*yang* within *yin*’ – to fuel a transformative process that refines these energies into ascending spirits. This *qi*-spirit metamorphosis is known as *lianqi huashen* (煉氣化神), detailed in texts like *Xishan qunxian huiizhen ji* (*Record of*

the immortals of the huizhen on Xishan 西山群仙會真記 DZ 246 vol. 5). From a developmental per-



Figure 2. The Diagram of Taiji 太極圖

spective, therefore, the state d that corresponds to *daimai* must not only interact with other basic energy patterns but also have the potential of constituting spiritual entities. For naturalism, this is unacceptable. The definition of what is ‘natural’ or ‘physical’ might be debatable (e.g., Wilson 2006), but naturalistic theories should typically not acknowledge spiritual beings. Therefore, the naturalist would deny these Daoist potentials of *qi*-spirit transformation: ‘body gods are illusions, and immortals a myth’. With this move, however, one may similarly deny the existence of Christian angels and God. The naturalistic attack we currently consider would

simply become an instance of the denial of spiritual and transcendent realities in general. It no longer concerns Daoism as an *easier target* for naturalistic reduction.

4.4. Alleviating the Threat from Somatic Religious Diversity

Religious diversity has long generated epistemological concerns. For example, if the Christian concept of God as infinite substance is accurate, how can Buddhist teachings about the world’s voidness be true (see Alston 1988; Benton and Kvanvig 2022; Gellman 1993; Quinn 2005)? A similar question arises in the bodily domain: if Daoism and yoga construe bodies differently, which is correct? Given the spatiotemporal nature of somatic experiences, their conflict seems more obvious than disputes about the ultimate. Inspired by Kant’s distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal realms, John Hick (1989) has famously attempted to reconcile varied religious accounts of the ultimate as ‘different interpretations’ of the same noumenal reality. For somatic mysticism, however, this Kantian approach is unavailable because the bodily experiences, rich in spatiotemporal details, are clearly distinct and not equally reconcilable as reflections of the same ineffable reality.

To delineate the range of the diversity problem, notice that whereas religious diversity affects the *ultima facie* credibility of a doctrine, its impact on the *prima facie* credibility of a doctrine is less evident. Normally framed in terms of peer disagreement (Basinger 2020; Benton and Kvanvig 2022; Dastmalchian 2013), religious diversity might not negate the *prima facie* justification from mystical experience. But in this paper, we shall not rely on this easy solution. After all, it might be thought that religious diversity can negate the *prima facie* plausibility of each tradition. Additionally, the diversity challenge persists even under our conditional approach. The conditional project makes assumptions about the metaphysical background for theoretically evaluating the epistemic potential of mystical experience. The diversity problem, in contrast, pertains to a mystic’s concrete epistemic situations. *Even if* the Daoist world-view is in fact true, a Daoist might still be less justified to believe in Daoist doctrines when she meets a yogic master. She still faces the question of whether Daoism is less plausible, or plausible at all, in light of other somatic mystical traditions.

We instead argue that the conflict arising from the diversity of somatic mystical experiences is milder than the standard problem of religious disagreement. Although Hick attempts to

reconcile different religious doctrines as interpretations of the same ultimate religious reality, conflicts emerge precisely because they assert different things about *a common referent* – the ultimate. In contrast, ‘some people are pianists’ and ‘some people are football players’, though diverse, are compatible as they address different subjects. The situation is complicated by the *exclusivist* nature of most religious doctrines. Whereas ‘some people are pianists’ is compatible with ‘some people are football players’, the exclusivist proposition ‘everyone is a pianist and only a pianist’ is not, for it exhaustively describes what people can be. Regarding the ultimate reality, religious doctrines are often exclusivist, e.g., if the ultimate is infinite substance, then it is not voidness, and vice versa.

Our response is that somatic mystical traditions, however, do not inherently exhibit these features. While concerned with human bodies in general, they can be interpreted as addressing different subjects; somatic teachings on bodily states are also not necessarily exclusivist. Hence, they are less problematic than religious teachings about the ultimate. To defend this view, we examine somatic religious diversity in *potentials* of bodies, bodily *facts*, and the *checking* of bodily states.

First, somatic mysticism often discusses human potentials. In Daoism, the openings of *daimai* and *niwan* are both bodily potentials. Plausibly, different potentials entail no inherent conflict. A person can have both the potential to visualise Daoist body deities and to open yogic chakras, just as she can have both the potentials to become a pianist and to become a football player. Unlike characterisations of the ultimate – as infinite substance or as emptiness – there is nothing wrong with recognising plural potentials of human bodies. Potentials are unrealised possibilities. They are individuated according to how they are conceptualised. Thus, we can regard somatic mystical doctrines as referring to distinct possibilia. Further, somatic teachings are not inherently exclusivist regarding bodily potentials. The assertion that ‘*niwan* opening is a potential in one’s head’ does not imply that it is the *only* potential. For most somatic traditions, bodily potentials are merely paths to transcendent realms. They are evaluable in terms of efficiency, and there is no need to assert that only one such path exists.

Second, regarding actual bodily facts, Daoism recognises twelve ordinary meridians, and yoga ascribes a different energy pattern. This diversity is innocuous, especially when viewed as anthropological data documented by local cultures, e.g., between Chinese and Indian people. Akin to some individuals being pianists and others being football players, different people can display different energy patterns. Generally, when somatic doctrines discuss varied bodily facts, they refer to different individuals who realise those facts. True, problems might arise with universal-exclusivist claims. If Daoism insisted that *everyone* has twelve meridians *without exception*, it would clash with yoga’s different patterns. However, Daoists recognise variations. They even consider animals capable of divine elevation despite their different meridians (e.g. Yu 1986: chap. 7). For Daoism, therefore, it is unnecessary to insist on a singular pattern for everyone.

Third, what about different results in *checking* mystical states? Consider a scenario where yogi masters perceive a light in the head of a yogi opening her crown chakra. If a Daoist master at the scene also perceives this light, no conflict arises. The two traditions will give different names to the light and prescribe varying follow-up practices, but neither is compromised by this shared

experience. Also, if advanced Daoist masters can mostly perceive crown chakras, while the Daoist at the scene misses it, her failure could result from a personal lack of the perceptual ability or an occasional impediment to using the ability. Again, no tension is created between yogic and Daoist teachings. Even if crown chakras are systematically imperceptible to Daoists, the plausibility of yoga still need not compromise Daoist teachings. Mystical practices are expected to cultivate advanced perceptual capacities, as in Wang's case. Because each tradition posits a different version of bodily potentials, their masters could be attuned to distinct aspects of the body – which is analogous to night vision goggles and thermal imagers capturing different facets of the same scene. This analogical explanation may seem speculative, but it is crucial to remember that somatic mystics are not inherently exclusivist. Daoists do not regard the twelve meridians as the only energy pattern or *niwan* as the only potential, so they may acknowledge mystical states beyond their perceptual range. Usually, Daoist masters need only the discernment necessary for guiding their disciples. They do not purport to be omniscient about bodily states, especially prior to achieving divine perfection. To further reduce the appearance of conflict, let us note that yoga, like Daoism, has therapeutic manifestations (e.g. Saraswati 2004). By reading the therapeutic results, Daoists may always indirectly perceive crown chakras. What they miss is only a fragment of a reality, not an independent entity.

To summarise, somatic mystical traditions could involve distinct potentials, facts, and aspects of bodily realities. They might not have the same referent. The non-exclusivist nature of somatic doctrines also reduces the potential conflict.

It is worth adding that even when somatic doctrines concern the same referent, their difference can be rationally explained. Daoism regards Earth as a microcosmos, so the different energy patterns between Daoism and yoga can be interpreted as reflecting regional variations in the *qi* of Earth. Supporting this view, Wang reported changes in *dantians* that correspond with the practitioner's geographical location: 'In Chinese people, it is between 1.2 and 1.5 inches below the navel; in people who live nearer to the equator, the lower elixir field is closer to the navel' (Cleary et al. 1998: chap. 7). This form of explanation is unavailable for mystical experiences about the ultimate. In contrast to the influential Kantian approach championed by Hick, which takes the ultimate as an inaccessible reality with varied contents perceived across different cultural backgrounds, Wang does not resort to cognitive inaccessibility or conceptual-doxastic influence. Rather, *qi*, a spatiotemporal energy, and the microcosmos of Earth, which explains the varied energy patterns, are both perceivable by Daoists. No cultural influence is invoked. Wang's bodily experiences might be conditioned and framed by his somatic training, of course, but his observation about the changed locations of *dantian* is not predicted by Daoist dogmas – it even deviates from orthodox Daoist teachings. In this respect, Wang's account of different somatic experiences is physical-physiological, not social-contextual. As previously argued, this explanation nicely fits the naturalistic perspective insofar as it focuses on basic bodily states. Clearly, this explanatory approach is inapplicable to mystical experiences about transcendent realities.

Further research is still needed to explore the compatibility among different somatic mystical traditions, particularly regarding how they might concern different aspects of bodily reality. Such inquiry requires enumerating possible ontological theories for each somatic mystical system,

pairing each theory with others across these systems, and measuring the level of mutual compatibility in each pair. This extensive project is beyond the scope of our paper. Nevertheless, we have sufficiently addressed the challenge from somatic religious diversity. A practitioner may suspect her practices when exposed to other traditions, but her primary concern should perhaps be the efficacy of her system and the competence of her mentor, rather than the truth of her doctrine. This concern is practical, similar to a pianist wondering about trying football, rather than doubting the existence of pianos. Of course, it is rationally permissible to question one's tradition, as students are often encouraged to critically evaluate their teachers before committing to a somatic mystical tradition (Staal 1975: 146). Still, we have shown that somatic mystics do not inherently make exclusivist claims about the same referent. Their conflicts, if any, are less stark than those among different views about the ultimate.

5. Conclusions

We have argued that certain Daoist somatic mystical experiences are socially verifiable and thereby exempt from the disanalogy objection. Our solution to the disanalogy objection is partial since it does not cover transcendent experiences. Nevertheless, it applies to any somatic mysticism with similar views about the body. The result is an enriched spectrum of mystical experiences and a principled account of why some of them could be more apt in offering justifications.

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