

# 1000-Word PHILOSOPHY

AN INTRODUCTORY ANTHOLOGY

[1000wordphilosophy.com/2024/11/21/james-mystical-experience/](https://1000wordphilosophy.com/2024/11/21/james-mystical-experience/)

## William James on Mystical Experience

Author: Matthew Sanderson

Category: Philosophy of Religion

Word Count: 1000

Some Christians claim to sense Jesus' presence; some Hindus feel "one" with what they view as the permanent core of reality (i.e., Brahman); some "spiritual but not religious" people experience ecstatically losing themselves in the vast expanse of the universe.<sup>[1]</sup>

These are all examples of *mystical experiences*. But what defines a mystical experience?

In his landmark study *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) William James (1842-1910) attempts to define the common features shared by all mystical experiences, and address whether such experiences justify beliefs based on them.<sup>[2]</sup>

James is considered the first philosopher of mysticism. This essay introduces James' views on mystical experience.

### 1. Defining Mystical Experience

For James, mystical experience is one type of religious experience.<sup>[3]</sup> He argues that it is important to define mystical experience because, in his view, elements of it—such as the awareness of an unseen reality—form the core of all religious experiences.<sup>[4]</sup> James highlights four major defining traits of mystical experience, in addition to mentioning other common characteristics.<sup>[5]</sup>

#### 1.1. Ineffable

First, mystical experiences are partly *ineffable* or inexpressible in language.<sup>[6]</sup> People who have mystical experiences find it challenging, after returning to ordinary awareness, to adequately convey what happened to them during a mystical experience. James' view is that no *adequate* report can be given of a mystical experience, unlike how relatively easy it is to describe physical objects, for instance.<sup>[7]</sup>

This doesn't mean mystical experiences can't be described at all: metaphors and poetic language can sometimes be used to express what a mystical experience is like.<sup>[8]</sup> In this way, mystical experiences are like emotions: people must directly undergo the experience first-hand for themselves to fully understand them.<sup>[9]</sup>

#### 1.2. Noetic Quality

While mystical experience is perhaps ineffable like emotion, it nonetheless *seems* to experiencers to be a state of knowledge, understood as a perception of objective reality, whether it really is or not.<sup>[10]</sup> James refers to this characteristic as the "noetic quality" of mystical experience, i.e., it seems to provide genuine knowledge (i.e., noesis) of "ultimate" realities (e.g., God, Brahman, etc.) which are perhaps unavailable to ordinary consciousness.<sup>[11]</sup>

According to James, these first two characteristics alone make for a mystical experience.<sup>[12]</sup> However, James highlights two other important traits which, while less universally present than the first two characteristics, are nonetheless commonly found in mystical experiences.<sup>[13]</sup>

#### 1.3. Transiency

The third trait James considers is transiency.<sup>[14]</sup> This describes the fact that mystical experiences typically last only a few hours, minutes, or even seconds.<sup>[15]</sup> James notes, however, that mystical experiences tend to deepen and become richer, including persisting for greater lengths of time, with each subsequent experience a person undergoes.<sup>[16]</sup>

#### 1.4. Passivity

A fourth characteristic James discusses is passivity.<sup>[17]</sup> This refers to the idea that mystical experiences seem to happen to people rather than people making them happen. Experiencers may undertake forms of spiritual preparation (e.g., meditation, etc.) to become more open and receptive to mystical experiences.<sup>[18]</sup> But people usually can't force a mystical experience to occur simply by willing it.<sup>[19]</sup> Instead, mystical experiences seem initiated and caused by whatever "ultimate" reality people think they encounter during the experience.<sup>[20]</sup>

#### 1.5. Additional Characteristics

In addition to the four traits James highlights, he also briefly mentions additional characteristics. These include that the boundaries separating oneself and the "ultimate" reality seem to dissolve in a profound sense of "oneness" or unity.<sup>[21]</sup> As a result, mystical

experiences are typically “monistic” (i.e., all appears to be interconnected from within the experience) and “pantheistic” (i.e., everything appears to be one with the divine).<sup>[22]</sup>

Also, mystical experiences are arguably most compatible with a supernatural worldview insofar as experiencers seem to encounter a non-sensory, non-physical “ultimate” reality.<sup>[23]</sup> Finally, mystical experiences are usually “optimistic” in the sense that they are emotionally positive and uplifting, characterized by a sense of bliss.<sup>[24]</sup>

## 2. Are Mystical Experiences Authoritative?

Now that we understand how James defines mystical experience, let’s consider his views on whether mystical experiences are “authoritative,” that is, whether they justify the beliefs that result from them.<sup>[25]</sup> For instance, if a mystical experience leads you to believe that everything is one with God, are you justified in holding that belief based solely on the authority of your experience?<sup>[26]</sup>

James argues that mystical experiences are authoritative for the person who had the experience; they are not authoritative for people who didn’t have the experience and only learned about it from someone who did.<sup>[27]</sup> Mystical experiences are authoritative for the experiencer because they seem to be perceptions of objective reality just as much as sense perceptions; thus, since we consider sense perceptions authoritative for beliefs based on them, then mystical experiences should be considered authoritative as well.<sup>[28]</sup>

However, mystical experiences are not authoritative for others because experiencers greatly disagree about what “ultimate” reality (e.g., Jesus, Nirvana, the Dao, etc.) they allegedly encountered in their experiences. As a result, others can never figure out whose testimony to trust without having the experiences for themselves.<sup>[29]</sup>

A common objection to James’ position here is that mystical experience is not a perception of objective reality comparable to sense perception. If it were, critics argue, then other people would be able to check mystical experiences for accuracy like they can with sense perceptions. For instance, others could “take a look” and see if they perceive the same thing you did during your mystical experience. But that is not possible, critics say, and so James is mistaken to think mystical experience is just as authoritative as sense perception.<sup>[30]</sup>

## 3. Conclusion

Most philosophers of mysticism after James argue that his list of defining characteristics for mystical experience is incomplete or inaccurate in some way.<sup>[31]</sup> However, despite its alleged flaws and limitations, James’ theory of mystical experience was the first of its kind and continues to influence the philosophy of mysticism to this day. His theory is thus an excellent starting point for anyone seeking to understand how to define mystical experience and its relationship to beliefs based on it.

## Notes

[1] See Jones (2024) to learn more about these and many other examples of mystical experiences.

[2] For insightful discussions of James’ philosophy of mysticism, see Proudfoot (1985), Putnam (2006), and Roy (2001). Barnard (1997) argues that mysticism is a central concern of all of James’ philosophy.

Schleiermacher’s theories of religious experience in *On Religion* (1799) and *The Christian Faith* (1821) can be considered precursors to James’ views, but Schleiermacher did not seek to define mystical experience specifically.

To learn more about the philosophy of mysticism and mystical experience in general, see *Philosophy of Mysticism: Do Mystical Experiences Justify Religious Beliefs?* by Matthew Sanderson.

[3] This essay focuses on summarizing the essay entitled “Lectures XVI and XVII: Mysticism” in James’ *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

[4] James (1902/2004: p. 328) writes that “personal religious experience has its root and centre in mystical states of consciousness.” Many philosophers after James disagree with this assessment; they argue that mystical experience is simply one specific kind of religious experience, instead of the basis of all religious experiences, and that there are many types of religious experience which are not mystical in nature. See Franks Davis (1989) for an example of this argument.

[5] See James (1902/2004: pp. 329-330) for his discussion of these four traits.

[6] See James (1902/2004: p. 329) for his discussion of the ineffability of mystical experience.

[7] James (1902/2004: p. 329) writes, “The subject of it [i.e., mystical experience] immediately says it defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words.”

[8] For instance, it's common for people to describe the experiential union with an "ultimate" reality as feeling like a drop of water merging with the ocean or air pervaded by the warmth of sunlight.

[9] James (1902/2004: p. 329) writes that it follows from the ineffability of mystical experience "that its quality must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others. In this peculiarity mystical states are more like states of feeling than like states of intellect. No one can make clear to another who has never had a certain feeling, in what the quality or worth of it consists. One must have musical ears to know the value of a symphony; one must have been in love one's self to understand a lover's state of mind. Lacking the heart or ear, we cannot interpret the musician or the lover justly, and are even likely to consider him weak-minded or absurd. The mystic finds that most of us accord to his experiences an equally incompetent treatment."

James (1902/2004: p. 351) also writes, "This incommunicableness of the transport is the keynote of all mysticism. Mystical truth exists for the individual who has the transport, but for no one else. In this, as I have said, it resembles the knowledge given to us in sensations more than that given by conceptual thought....It is a commonplace of metaphysics that God's knowledge cannot be discursive but must be intuitive, that is, must be constructed more after the pattern of what in ourselves is called immediate feeling, than after that of proposition and judgment."

Franks Davis (1989) disagrees with James that ineffability is unique to mystical experience. She argues that most, if not all, religious experiences are ineffable to some degree.

[10] To learn more about what philosophers call "seemings," including whether seemings can justify beliefs based on them, see *Seemings: Justifying Beliefs Based on How Things Seem* by Kaj André Zeller

[11] See James (1902/2004: p. 329) for his discussion of the noetic quality of mystical experiences. James (1902/2004: p. 329) writes, "Although so similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time."

Experiencers come away from mystical experiences feeling like they have acquired revelations into the true nature of "ultimate" reality. In fact, says James, mystical experiences seem so real and genuinely knowledge-granting that they make ordinary awareness feel like just one type of consciousness, and perhaps not the most revelatory kind.

James (1902/2004: p. 335) writes that mystical states of consciousness cause the experiencer to realize "that our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation. No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded. How to regard them is the question, for they are so discontinuous with ordinary consciousness. Yet they may determine attitudes though they cannot furnish formulas, and open a region though they fail to give a map. At any rate, they forbid a premature closing of our accounts with reality."

James (1902/2004: p. 366) writes that mystical experiences "break down the authority of the non-mystical or rationalistic consciousness, based upon the understanding of the senses alone. They show it to be only one kind of consciousness. They open out the possibility of other orders of truth, in which, so far as anything in us vitally responds to them, we may freely continue to have faith."

James (1902/2004: p. 369) writes that "the existence of mystical states absolutely overthrows the pretension of non-mystical states to be the sole and ultimate dictators of what we may believe...[T]here never can be a state of facts to which new meaning may not truthfully be added, provided the mind ascend to a more enveloping point of view. It must always remain an open question whether mystical states may not possibly be such superior points of view, windows through which the mind looks out upon a more extensive and inclusive world."

[12] James (1902/2004: p. 329) writes, "These two characters [i.e., ineffability and noetic quality] will entitle any state to be called mystical, in the sense in which I use the word."

Netland (2022: p. 193) points out that these first two characteristics are in tension with one another in the sense that, if mystical experiences are ineffable, it's hard to understand how they can also be knowledge-granting (i.e., noetic) since knowledge arguably always involves the ability to express what is known: if you can't express it, then you must not really know it.

[13] James (1902/2004: p. 329) writes, "Two other qualities [i.e., transiency and passivity] are less sharply marked [i.e., less than ineffability and noetic quality], but are usually found." James (1902/2004: p. 330) summarizes his analysis of the four characteristics as follows: "These four characteristics are sufficient to mark out a group of states of consciousness peculiar enough to deserve a special name and to call for careful study. Let it then be called the mystical group."

[14] See James (1902/2004: p. 329) for his discussion of the transiency characteristic of mystical experiences.

[15] James (1902/2004: p. 329) writes, "Mystical states cannot be sustained for long. Except in rare instances, half an hour, or at most an hour or two, seems to be the limit beyond which they fade into the light of common day."

[16] James (1902/2004: p. 329) writes of mystical experiences, "Often, when faded, their quality can but imperfectly be reproduced in memory; but when they recur it is recognized; and from one recurrence to another it is susceptible of continuous development in what is felt as inner richness and importance."

[17] See James (1902/2004: pp. 329-330) for his discussion of the passivity characteristic of mystical experiences.

[18] James (1902/2004: pp. 329-330) writes, "Although the oncoming of mystical states may be facilitated by preliminary voluntary operations [i.e., spiritual preparations], as by fixing the attention, or going through certain bodily performances, or in other ways which manuals of mysticism prescribe; yet when the characteristic sort of consciousness once has set in, the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power."

[19] James (1902/2004: p. 330) comments that, far from being caused by an assertion of will, once a mystical experience begins, the experiencer feels "as if his own will were in abeyance."

[20] James (1902/2004: p. 330) writes that, in a mystical experience, the experiencer feels "as if he were grasped and held by a superior power."

[21] James (1902/2004: p. 335) writes, "Looking back on my own experiences, they all converge towards a kind of insight to which I cannot help ascribing some metaphysical significance. The keynote of it is invariably a reconciliation. It is as if the opposites of the world, whose contradictoriness and conflict make all our difficulties and troubles, were melted into unity."

James (1902/2004: p. 360) writes, "We pass into mystical states from out of ordinary consciousness as from a less into a more, as from a smallness into a vastness, and at the same time as from an unrest to a rest. We feel them as reconciling, unifying states...In them the unlimited absorbs the limits and peacefully closes the account."

James (1902/2004: p. 362) writes that the "overcoming of all the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute is the great mystic achievement. In mystic states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness." James (1902/2004: p. 371) writes that mystical experiences involve a feeling of "inner union with the divine."

[22] James (1902/2004: p. 336) writes that mystical experience "is a monistic insight, in which the other in its various forms appears absorbed into the One." James (1902/2004: p. 360) writes that mystical experiences point in the philosophical direction of monism. James (1902/2004: p. 365) writes that the mystic state of consciousness is "on the whole pantheistic."

[23] James (1902/2004: p. 351) writes that "mystics may emphatically deny that the senses play any part in the very highest type of knowledge which their transports yield." James (1902/2004: p. 358) writes that "other-worldliness" is "encouraged by the mystical consciousness." James (1902/2004: p. 365) writes that the mystical state of consciousness is "anti-naturalistic, and harmonizes best with...so-called other-worldly states of mind." James (1902/2004: p. 365) writes that mystical experiences seem to speak of the truth of "supernaturality" and (p. 370) "supernaturalism."

[24] James (1902/2004: p. 360) writes that mystical experiences point in the philosophical direction of "optimism...They appeal to the yes-function more than to the no-function in us." James (1902/2004: p.

365) writes that the mystic state of consciousness is “on the whole...optimistic, or at least the opposite of pessimistic.” See Corrigan (2008) for a helpful discussion of feelings and emotions in James’ analysis of mystical experience.

[25] James (1902/2004: p. 365) says his “task is to inquire whether we can invoke it [i.e., mystical experience] as authoritative. Does it furnish any warrant for the truth of the...supernaturality and pantheism which it favors?”

[26] For what is meant by “justified” here—*epistemically* justified—see *Epistemic Justification: What is Rational Belief?* by Todd R. Long. An epistemically justified belief is, in some sense, likely to be true; this type of justification contrast with, among other types, “pragmatic” justification which concerns what is useful or helpful to believe.

[27] James (1902/2004: p. 366) writes, “Mystical states, when well developed, usually are, and have the right to be, absolutely authoritative over the individuals to whom they come.” However, “No authority emanates from them which should make it a duty for those who stand outside of them to accept their revelations uncritically.”

[28] James (1902/2004: pp. 366-367) writes, “As a matter of psychological fact, mystical states of a well-pronounced and emphatic sort are usually authoritative over those who have them. They have been ‘there,’ and know...Our own more ‘rational’ beliefs are based on evidence exactly similar in nature to that which mystics quote for theirs. Our senses, namely, have assured us of certain states of fact; but mystical experiences are as direct perceptions of fact for those who have them as any sensations ever were for us. The records show that even though the five senses be in abeyance in them, they are absolutely sensational in their epistemological quality, if I may be pardoned the barbarous expression – that is, they are face to face presentations of what seems immediately to exist...The mystic is, in short, invulnerable, and must be left, whether we relish it or not, in undisturbed enjoyment of his creed.”

[29] See James (1902/2004: pp. 367-369) for his discussion of why mystical experiences are not authoritative for those who haven’t had them. James (1902/2004: p. 367) writes that “mystics have no right to claim that we ought to accept the deliverance of their peculiar experiences, if we are ourselves outsiders and feel no private call thereto. The utmost

they can ever ask of us in this life is to admit that they establish a presumption.”

To learn more about how to respond to disagreements, in terms of deciding what—if anything—to believe about matters of profound disagreement, see *The Epistemology of Disagreement* by Jonathan Matheson.

One reason James says mystical experiences are not authoritative over “outsiders” is because the appearance of authenticity present in each mystical experience is weakened by the fact of religious diversity: different mystics hold varying beliefs based on their experiences, and mystical experience is compatible with a variety of metaphysical positions and religious beliefs.

For instance, James (1902/2004: p. 368) writes that mystical experience is “dualistic in Sankhya, and monistic in Vedanta philosophy. I called it pantheistic, but the great Spanish mystics are anything but pantheists...The fact is that the mystical feeling of enlargement, union, and emancipation has no specific intellectual content whatever of its own. It is capable of forming matrimonial alliances with material furnished by the most diverse philosophies and theologies, provided only they can find a place in their framework for its peculiar emotional mood. We have no right, therefore, to invoke its prestige as distinctively in favor of any special belief, such as that in absolute goodness, of the world. It is only relatively in favor of all these things – it passes out of common human consciousness in the direction in which they lie.”

Even though mystical experiences are not authoritative over “outsiders,” James writes (p. 368) that they “tell of the supremacy of the ideal, of vastness, of union, of safety, and of rest. They offer us hypotheses, hypotheses which we may voluntarily ignore, but which as thinkers we cannot possibly upset. The supernaturalism and optimism to which they would persuade us may, interpreted in one way or another, be after all the truest of insights into the meaning of life.”

[30] See Alston (1991) for a thorough summary of the ways in which mystical experience and sense perception are not alike according to critics (including the example cited here), as well as possible responses to this criticism. Also see “Properly Basic” Belief in God: Believing in God without an Argument by Jamie B. Turner for similar discussion.

One response, for instance, is to point out that there are many ordinary, non-mystical experiences – e.g., experiences of emotion, imagination, rational intuition, etc. – which cannot be independently checked and verified by other people, and yet that doesn't lead us to conclude that such experiences are all illusory; therefore, we shouldn't draw that conclusion about mystical experiences either.

Another response is to argue that mystical experience *can* be checked and verified, just in a manner that is appropriate for this unique type of experience (because it's not appropriate to judge non-sensory mystical experiences by the same standards as sensory experiences) – for instance, by examining the “fruits” or positive benefits of the experience on the experiencer's moral and spiritual development; by checking the mystical experience against religious doctrines and texts as well as the past mystical experiences of others in the tradition; and so on.

[31] For example, Franks Davis (1989: p. 34) introduces her own list of four defining traits of mystical experience which differs significantly from James' list. She (p. 34) argues, for instance, that a sense of freedom from space and time should be considered an essential characteristic of mystical experience, which is a trait that James doesn't seem to mention at all in his analysis.

## References

- Alston, William. (1991). *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*. Cornell University Press.
- Barnard, G. William. (1997). *Exploring Unseen Worlds: William James and the Philosophy of Mysticism*. SUNY Press.
- Corrigan, John (editor). (2008). *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Emotion*. Oxford University Press.
- Franks Davis, Caroline. (1989). *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*. Oxford University Press.
- James, William. (1902/2004). *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Barnes & Noble Books.
- Jantzen, Grace. (1996). *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*. Cambridge University Press.
- Jones, Richard H. (2024). *A History of Mysticism*. SUNY Press.
- Netland, Harold A. (2022). *Religious Experience and the Knowledge of God: The Evidential Force of Divine Encounters*. Baker Academic.
- Proudfoot, Wayne. (1985). *Religious Experience*. University of California Press.
- Putnam, Ruth Anna (editor). (2006). *The Cambridge Companion to William James*. Cambridge University Press.
- Roy, Louis. (2001). *Transcendent Experiences: Phenomenology and Critique*. University of Toronto Press.
- Schleiermacher, Friedrich. (2011). *The Christian Faith*. Apocryphile Press.
- Schleiermacher, Friedrich. (1996). *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*. Cambridge University Press.

## Related Essays

[Philosophy of Mysticism: Do Mystical Experiences Justify Religious Beliefs?](#) by Matthew Sanderson

[Epistemic Justification: What is Rational Belief?](#) by Todd R. Long

[“Properly Basic” Belief in God: Believing in God without an Argument](#) by Jamie B. Turner

[Seemings: Justifying Beliefs Based on How Things Seem](#) by Kaj André Zeller

[The Epistemology of Disagreement](#) by Jonathan Matheson

[Cosmological Arguments for the Existence of God](#) by Thomas Metcalf

[The Ontological Argument for the Existence of God](#) by Andrew Chapman

## About the Author

Matthew Sanderson is Professor of Philosophy and Ethics at West Shore Community College in Scottville, Michigan. He specializes in philosophy of religion, aesthetics, and 19th and 20th-century continental philosophy. [westshore.edu/staff/sanderson-dr-matthew/](http://westshore.edu/staff/sanderson-dr-matthew/)

***Follow 1000-Word Philosophy on Facebook, Bluesky, Instagram, and Twitter / X, and subscribe to receive email notifications of new essays at [1000WordPhilosophy.com](http://1000WordPhilosophy.com).***