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The Mystic and the Metaphysician

Clarifying the Role of Meditation in the Search for Ultimate Reality

Abstract: *To seek fundamental truths, analytic metaphysicians generally start with observed phenomena. From here they typically move outwards, using discursive thought to posit scientifically informed theories about the ultimate reality behind appearances. Mystics, too, seek to uncover the reality behind appearances. However, their meditative methods typically start with experience and go inwards to a fundamental reality sometimes described as a pure conscious unity. Analytic metaphysicians may be tempted to dismiss the mystical approach as unworthy of investigation. In this paper I will outline and address four challenges that sceptics are likely to advance, arguing that none is persuasive. I shall also attempt to clarify the role and scope of meditation in establishing the viability of mystical data in the construction of any potential metaphysic about fundamental reality.*

1. Introduction

A primary goal within modern analytic metaphysics and science is to understand the nature of fundamental reality. While philosophers may disagree about the details and scope of metaphysical enquiry, they usually agree that fundamental reality is to be sought and understood via rational and empirical methods that extrapolate to objective truths about the world behind them. Factors pertaining to experiences of the

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seeker do not enter into the content or understanding of these truths. But analytic metaphysicians and scientists are not the only seekers of fundamental reality. While not discounting the rich history of such attempts in the phenomenological tradition, my point of contrast will be the claims by various renowned mystics from Eastern and Western traditions. All hold the seeker's experience to enter into the methodology, content, and understanding of fundamental reality. Rather than being arrived at intellectually, via indirect abstract inference, fundamental reality is said to be accessed directly and non-discursively, through well-established methods such as meditation. Like the metaphysician, the mystic also moves beyond initial appearances with a view to becoming acquainted with a deeper reality behind them. But the mystic and the metaphysician arrive at their data through moving in opposite directions via very different methodologies. So which approach, if any, is right?

I do not aim to resolve this issue. The goal of this paper, rather, is twofold: to address various sceptical challenges to the very idea of investigation into the mystical data being taken seriously, and to clarify the role of meditation when evaluating mystical claims about fundamental reality. From the standpoint of a philosopher interested in fundamental reality, could meditative methods reveal anything of metaphysical significance, even if the proper mode of understanding escapes the scope of analytic methodology? Could enquiry into mysticism, in turn, influence the direction of research in contemplative studies? Addressing these kinds of questions is the aim of this paper.

2. The Different Approaches and the Sceptical Challenges

Understanding the foundations of reality is often proclaimed to be a primary objective within metaphysical enquiry. As Laurie Paul writes:

One of the more popular and enduring metaphysical projects in metaphysics concerns the search for fundamental and general truths about the world. The metaphysician engaging in such a search wants to determine the natures of the world, especially the fundamental natures of the world, as part of her enquiry into the nature of things. (Paul, 2012, p. 4)

Not all philosophers share Paul's outlook. As she notes, there is dispute as to the proper scope of metaphysics when investigating the fundamental nature of reality, if such there be. Some of Paul's interlocutors, for example, think that the exploration of fundamentals should

lie within the domain of physics. But the underlying assumption, usually shared between opponents within this debate, is that fundamental reality — whether discovered scientifically or philosophically — will be found within a world well beyond the reaches of human experience, in particular that of the person seeking to understand it. As Paul writes:

...[W]e can understand the methods employed by metaphysicians to be very similar, modulo the change in subject matter, to the methods employed by scientists. Both fields are interested in discovering truths about entities or features of the world that are sometimes observable, but are often unobservable, indirectly confirmable, and abstract. (Such entities include objects, properties, relations, or what-have-you.) Both fields rely on a priori reasoning in addition to a posteriori reasoning. (*ibid.*, p. 9)

Within standard analytic metaphysics, then, the approaches to discovering and understanding ultimate reality will involve the exercise of discursive rational thought through the analysis of concepts and scientifically informed data via *a posteriori* or *a priori* methods.

Yet such metaphysicians and scientists are not the only group to seek access to fundamental truths. Across different traditions, some going back more than 25 centuries, there have been reports from mystical figures who proclaim to have accessed fundamental reality. However, rather than go outward beyond the appearances in an attempt to transcend the limitations of experience, these mystics claim to go inward behind the appearances to perhaps the source of conscious experience itself. Such experience is often said to transcend the subject/object distinction and be accompanied by the revelation that our abiding nature is the unitive ground of all being. What were previously taken as hard and fast distinctions amongst worldly phenomena come to be apprehended as not essentially different from the unitive ground itself. Here are some quotations from renowned mystical sources across a sample of traditions, starting with Upaniṣads that were authored by anonymous forest dwellers who lived in India around 2,500 years ago. From the *Mandukya Upaniṣad* we have:

Beyond the senses, beyond the understanding, beyond all expression...
It is the pure unitary consciousness, wherein awareness of the world and of multiplicity is completely obliterated. It is ineffable peace. It is the

Supreme Good. It is One without a second. It is the Self.¹ (Stace, 1960, p. 20)

One of the most famous Christian mystics, Meister Eckhart (circa 1260–1329), speaks of a divine principle within us:

There is in the soul something which is above the soul, Divine, simple, a pure nothing; rather nameless than named, unknown than known... It is absolute and free from all names and all forms, just as God is free and absolute in Himself... It is higher than knowledge, higher than love, higher than grace. For in these there is still distinction. (Happold, 1970, pp. 49, 67)

The knower and the known are one. Simple people imagine they should see God, as if He stood there, and they here. God and I, we are one in knowledge... (*ibid.*, p. 67)

...The eye with which I see God is the same as that with which he sees me: my eye and God's eye are one eye, one seeing, one knowing, and one love. (Sermon 57, Walshe, 2009, p. 298)

Nothing hinders the soul's knowledge of God as much as time and space, for time and space are fragments, whereas God is one! And therefore, if the soul is to know God, it must know him above time and outside of space; for God is neither this nor that, as are these manifold things. God is One! (Stace, 1960, p. 153)

The following text has been traditionally ascribed to twelfth-century mystic Moyhiddin Ibn Arabi, one of the most well-known figures in the Sufi world:

Glory to Allah, before the oneness that knows no predecessor other than Allah who is that first. With Him there is no before nor after, no high nor low, no near no far, neither how, what, nor where, no state or succession of moments, no time, no space, no becoming. He is as He was, the One, the Subduer without Oneness...

...By this the prophet means, he who kills his selfhood, that is he who knows himself, sees that all his existence is Allah's existence. He sees no change in his inmost nature or in his attributes. He sees no necessity for his attributes becoming Allah's, for he has understood that he was not himself the existence of his own inmost nature and that he was ignorant of his selfhood and of his fundamental being. When you get to know what is your selfhood, you are freed from your dualism, and you will know that you are not other than Allah. (Arabi, circa 1200/1981, pp. 70, 73)

¹ The Self in the Upaniṣadic tradition is a translation of *Atman*, which denotes the core essence of our being, not different from *Brahman*, the ultimate ground of all reality.

Nisargadatta Maharaj (1897–1981) is considered by many to be a prominent recent figure from the Upaniṣadic-influenced Advaita Vedanta tradition:

Understand that it is not the individual which has consciousness, it is the consciousness which assumes innumerable forms. (Maharaj, 1997, p. 26)

Because of mistaken identity we think of personalised consciousness but it is actually vast and limitless... The source of [personalised] consciousness is prior to time and space... Manifestation needs time and space, but the source of [personalised] consciousness was there before manifestation took place... There are millions of varieties of forms in the total manifestation, but the source of all is the [impersonal] consciousness. (*ibid.*, p. 86)

Putting aside (for now) the issue of whether these and other renowned mystics really do converge over the central realization, it is evident that the content of their purported insights differs starkly from anything that would be revealed via standard metaphysical or scientific enquiry. They appear to speak of a unity of our abiding conscious nature with that of a wider, undivided, non-spatio-temporal reality, be this ‘Allah’, ‘God’, ‘Self’, ‘consciousness’, or ‘Brahman’. Such unity is depicted both as fundamentally real and as devoid, in itself, of any sensory or mental phenomena that characterize changing appearances whether these pertain to our thoughts or the wider world. It is accessible not via the exercise of *a posteriori* observation or discursive *a priori* reasoning, but through contemplative, meditative methods.

Given that the term ‘mystical’ can cover a wide range of phenomena, what motivates my selection of the above type of accounts as ‘mystical’? For reasons that will become apparent, I believe that they bear the hallmarks of convergent insights with a common core. Their accounts also accord well with the definition of ‘narrow mystical experience’ offered in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on Mysticism (Gellman, 2018) and in writings of pioneers on the topic such as Walter Stace (1960, p. 15) and F.C. Happold (1970, pp. 119–22). All define (narrow) mysticism as, minimally, the purported acquaintance with an underlying unity or ‘Oneness’ whose nature and mode of access is (or appears) neither sensory nor intellectual.² Such apprehension is closely connected to the idea of an ‘awakening’, upon

² This central insight has been referred to also by Aldous Huxley (1946) and others as the ‘Perennial Philosophy’.

which the purported insight into Oneness is said to not fade even as the mystics engage with the world. In the words of Meister Eckhart: 'Here [i.e. in this experience] all blades of grass, wood, and stone, all things are One' (Stace, 1960, p. 16). The relation between a pure unitive experience and one where there is seeming engagement with the world will be returned to later.

While both the mystic and the standard metaphysician thus proclaim to seek truths about fundamental reality, the content and modes of access to their respective realities diverge widely. Many analytic metaphysicians will accordingly balk at the prospect of mystical data being taken as evidence for a metaphysical position unto itself. But aside from an 'incredulous stare', what reasons might metaphysicians have for being sceptical? I can think of at least four.

First, it may be pointed out that it is hardly surprising that meditative methods should 'reveal' fundamental reality to pertain to and be best understood through the medium of conscious experience. For, given that meditation is a method whose *modus operandi* is that of manipulating aspects of our conscious experience, it is unsurprising that something pertaining to our conscious experience should be unearthed in any so-called data of fundamentality. But the whole process, it could be charged, is blatantly circular. Even if meditation is the best method through which one could come to understand the nature of conscious experience, that is all that it can tell us about — conscious experience. Should fundamental reality lie outside of the scope of human experience, as metaphysicians and scientists standardly claim, then meditation will not be the right route to understanding the fundaments.

Second, sceptics may contend that a naturalistic explanation of mystical-sounding phenomena is far more parsimonious than any that appeals to supernatural-sounding phenomena, such as that of our abiding nature as identical with the non-spatio-temporal ground of all being. As science has already explained much of what we know about the underlying nature of our world in terms that pertain to a structured, spatio-temporal universe there are good inductive reasons to suppose that *any* conscious phenomena will be explained in scientific terms that make no appeal to a non-reducible conscious realm. There is hence good reason to suppose that scientific explanation will correctly account for any mystical-sounding data in terms of an unusual brain-state that is generated by the meditators.

Third, sceptics may argue that the mystical reports, despite initial appearances, do not actually converge with one another in their

accounts of the fundament. For example, in the above passages Western mystics speak of the fundament in theistic terms such as ‘God’ or ‘Allah’ whilst Upaniṣadic mystics talk of a ground of pure unstructured consciousness which they call ‘Atman’ or ‘Brahman’. And amongst the Eastern traditions, many scholars maintain that there is, in particular, diametrical opposition between the foundational ‘revelations’ from Upaniṣadic mystics and those from Buddhist sources. The famous sceptic Steven Katz (1978) would argue that such inconsistent findings are to be expected because there can be no ‘pure’ unmediated experiential data: cultural presuppositions enter not only into the interpreting but the very having of the mystical experiences. Being culturally embedded creatures, none of our experiences can hope to reveal a culture-transcendent fundament. While Katz and the naturalists might still be challenged, substantive disputes in the purported foundational insights of great mystics do little to help the prospects of them being taken seriously.

Fourth, behind the charge of non-convergent reports may lurk a scepticism about the non-discursive methods of meditation itself. What reason have we to suppose that meditation can reveal the sort of data that mystics proclaim it to reveal, even about the mind? As a subjective method whose data are only directly accessible to the meditator, why should we suppose that any reports based upon it will be immune to corruption from cultural and subjective biases? Similar reasons were behind the failed introspective programmes at the turn of the 1900s.

In the remainder of the paper, I will offer a definition of meditation, before addressing each sceptical challenge with a view to clarifying the potential role of meditation in the validation of mystical reports.

3. Defining Meditation and Addressing Sceptical Challenges One and Two

We need a definition of meditation that is broad enough to encompass practices across the different traditions, while narrow enough to make potential sense of how it could culminate in the above mystical claims. In some respects this is tricky, as meditative practices can have different methods, different objects of focus, different aims. But within contemplative literature, meditation is generally defined with reference to

attentional training.³ To gain a clearer idea of this, it helps to begin by noting that our usual mindset is one whose attention is unwittingly pulled around by the content of various mental and sensory objects such as thoughts, emotions, and perceptions. For most of us it presents a real challenge to become deliberately aware, over a prolonged stretch of time, of these unfolding phenomena as present-moment events. With our attention usually hijacked by the content of various objects, there is only a dim cognizance of their present-moment unfolding as phenomena within awareness.

Meditation is thus the systematic training of attention to go against that current of mind which keeps it unwittingly lost in the content of various objects to enable, eventually, a keen percipience of the objects' status as unfolding, present-moment events. The attention can for instance be trained to (1) focus on one object (such as the breath, mantra, or an idea of God), perhaps eliciting states of absorption, or (2) become aware of different objects as they arise and pass away, or (3) go beyond objects to the field of conscious awareness in which they arise and pass away.⁴ As meditation involves a systematic drawing of attention away from its usual unwitting immersion in objectual content, we can broadly conceive of how it could eventually enable a mode of experience that is not dominated by such content. Through such practices, mystics will proclaim that innate aspects of our conscious nature, usually concealed, become revealed in a way that is not generally available to an untrained mind. Such revelations might conceivably culminate in the mystical insight that our abiding conscious nature is identical with a wider fundamental reality.

We now arrive at the first sceptical challenge: that any 'fundamental' reality that seems 'revealed' through methods of meditation will of course pertain to and be best understood through the medium of conscious experience. That is because the whole *modus operandi* of meditation comprises manipulating elements of conscious experience. In response, a symmetrical charge can be made against the standard metaphysician or scientist. For it could be claimed that *their* methodological approach of *a posteriori* discovery and *a priori* analysis equally presupposes the ultimate foundation of reality (however

³ See for example Davis and Thompson (2015), Millière *et al.* (2018).

⁴ 1–3 correspond to methods that have been alluded to in contemplative literature as Focused Awareness, Open Monitoring, and Non-dual Awareness meditation. See for example the survey article by Millière *et al.* (2018).

construed) to be best understood discursively, through methods that abstract away from, rather than become immersed in, factors pertaining to the experiencer. The metaphysicians who press this charge may thus also reason in a circular fashion. In this respect, the two camps are at a stalemate and in need of independent arbitration.

Here, the sceptic is likely to press the second charge against the mystic. The scientists and like-minded metaphysicians win the stalemate because they employ methods congruent with a naturalistic worldview that has had an impressive track record. Scientific methods and *a priori* reasoning have after all revealed so much already about the underlying structure of our world. Is it not both parsimonious and a matter of sound inductive reasoning to suppose that if any bedrock is to be uncovered and understood, then it will be done so via the same sort of methods and assumptions that have already told us so much about the world? Such methods will regard conscious phenomena to be as much a part of the material spatio-temporal world as any other physically explainable phenomena. Any so-called mystical data, in claiming to reveal fundamentals that lie beyond the physical and spatio-temporal realm, will be explained naturalistically as delusions that are produced by human brains under unusual circumstances, and mediated, quite possibly, by cultural influences.

As little as a decade ago, the standard naturalistic approach would, within the analytic tradition, have been widely considered the obvious winner in such a standoff. Nowadays, however, there is increasing doubt as to whether a materialistic explanation of conscious minds offers a truly satisfactory resolution to what David Chalmers (1996) termed the 'hard problem of consciousness'. When it comes to explaining conscious phenomena such as someone enjoying the taste of chocolate, there seems to be an unbridgeable explanatory gap between the experience and the brain states that are supposed to explain it. The general idea is that we can imagine the underlying neurological states occurring without the experience, which makes it hard to see how those brain states could explain it. Materialism's standard alternative, dualism, appears to fare no better. For it just inserts an explanatory gap in another place — between non-physical mind and physical matter. The dialectical pressure on materialism and dualism has led to the introduction of new metaphysical systems, such

as novel developments of panpsychism and idealism.⁵ Such positions take consciousness increasingly seriously by regarding it to partake in the metaphysical foundations, be this at the micro (e.g. quantum), cosmic, or any other level. While there exist a variety of such positions, many of which would still regard mystical phenomena to be illusory, there are now some that aim to take seriously the sort of claims made by mystics (e.g. Shani and Keppler, 2018; Albahari, forthcoming a,b).

Such considerations do not show, of course, that any mystic-based metaphysic will be viable. But they do suggest that, when it comes to opposing directions in the metaphysics of mind, the naturalist no longer has automatic right of way. If consciousness cannot be accommodated by the naturalistic worldview, then it is not obviously more parsimonious to suppose that mystical data, in so far as they pertain to consciousness, must be deflated to delusional brain states. And if it turns out that a metaphysical system extrapolating from the mystical foundations has sound independent arguments in its favour, the opposite conclusion may be pressed upon us. Data about the appearance of our material world may instead be best explained with reference to its grounding in a wider cosmic consciousness, with a proper understanding of the ground to be had non-discursively, such as via practices of meditation. Such a philosophical system, relying as it does upon discursive thought, would thus be likely to include an acknowledgment of its own methodological and epistemic limitations. While it is too early to properly judge the relative merits of such a position, the dialectical pressure to take consciousness more seriously reveals it as an option that can no longer be casually dismissed.

What is the role of meditation in this debate? Returning to the first sceptical challenge, we saw that neither scientific nor meditative methodology can be presupposed as the correct road to discovering and best understanding of any foundations. Each must be considered on its own merits. It won't be lost on the reader that the exercise of arbitrating between the two approaches will itself involve standard analytical methods that are *a priori* or *a posteriori*. Have we thus sided with the standard metaphysician against the mystic? Yes and no.

⁵ For a summary of the dialectic from materialist and dualist to panpsychist positions along with their main proponents, see Chalmers (2016), and for an alternative summary and list of cosmopsychist proponents, see Albahari (forthcoming a). See Chalmers (forthcoming) for a survey of recent idealist positions and its advocates.

In so far as the debate takes place within the arena of philosophy, the arguments for mystical data to be taken seriously (or not) will involve an appeal to analytic methodology. But we have already intimated that analytic methodology could itself yield arguments in favour of a mystic-based metaphysic. Such arguments might, for example, provide compelling reasons to suppose that an idealist metaphysical system, whose foundations are based on mystical consciousness, incurs fewer problems than those based on materialist, dualist, or standard panpsychist foundations.⁶ And there may be sound epistemic reasons for supposing that discovering and understanding the nature of the foundations, should they be that of pure unitive consciousness, is best attained not through analytic thought, but through meditative methods that help instantiate the relevant mode of consciousness within oneself.⁷

At this juncture, the role of meditation becomes highly relevant in evaluating the potential merits of a mystic-based metaphysic. For example, should we have reason to suppose that the methods of meditation could never reveal what might at least *appear* to be a unitive consciousness that coheres with the core mystical claims, the project would be a non-starter. However, should we have reason to suppose that meditation could reveal what would appear to be a unitive consciousness that coheres with core mystical claims, then there would be support for such a metaphysic, even if not conclusive. We return to this topic in the final section.

4. The Third Sceptical Challenge

The third sceptical challenge attempts to undermine the potential for a mystic-based metaphysic by questioning whether there is significantly converging content to various mystical claims across traditions. I use the term ‘content’ very broadly here, to convey a wider *purport* to the experience, such as its being ultimately real and unstructured by such parameters as subject/object, space, time, sensory quality, etc. The more inconsistencies there are between the reports of renowned

⁶ I argue along these lines in Albahari (forthcoming a).

⁷ This discussion bears upon a useful distinction made by Terje Sparby (2015, p. 216) who notes that ‘meditation research’ is ambiguous between research *on* meditation (which I contend in this context requires analytic methodology), and meditation *as* a method of research (which allows for non-discursive insight).

mystics,⁸ the less likely they are to be correct, and the more likely they are to reflect a brain-induced and/or culturally moderated fabrication. The inconsistent reports could also cast doubt on the efficacy of meditation as an acclaimed method for revealing ultimate reality.

Returning to our selection of mystical quotations, Katz (1978) would insist that they are alluding to *different* fundamental realities. Meister Eckhart, for instance, speaks of being at one with God, Ibn Arabi speaks of unification with Allah, the Upaniṣads talk of realizing one's nature as the Self or Brahman, while Maharaj speaks of the ultimate as consciousness. The heart of the matter lies with whether the different terms are reflective of merely a terminological difference or a substantive metaphysical difference.

The above mystics notably appear to speak of consciously realizing the underlying identity of their — and indeed, our — abiding nature with that of an ultimate ground that is beyond time and space, whether this ground is called 'Allah', 'God', or 'Brahman'. In here are several clues that only a terminological difference is at play. The fact that such experience is said to manifest itself directly *as* our abiding nature would suggest, first of all, that the foundation purports to involve consciousness itself. Second, it would suggest that such consciousness presents itself as unconditioned by the strictures of space and time. Third, the purported unity between our abiding conscious nature and the foundation presents as a *revelation*. This would suggest that our usual mode of conscious existence, in not revealing such unitive identity, must present itself as implicitly segregated from it. Can we point to a segregation within the structure of human experience that is basic enough to cut across cultural and individual variation such that its dissolution could conceivably reveal a foundation of unitive consciousness?

I believe we can. The most basic psychological structure to carve up our conscious experience is that of observing subject and observed objects. We approach what we take to be the world of internal and external objects through the localized and embodied perspective of a subject which we identify as our *self*. Much can and has been said about the cognitive structures that feed into our sense of being a self in its capacity as thinker, owner, agent, etc. But at its most basic level,

⁸ We should be reminded that I am only concerned with examples of 'narrow' mystical experience that would seem, at least on an initial reading, to transcend any sensory and mental, and hence religious, imagery.

our sense of self-identity manifests itself through the assumption that the field of conscious awareness, in which objects appear to us, is intrinsically localized and uniquely our own. These numerically distinct centres of consciousness are in turn assumed to confront a world of mind-independent objects. This assumption of being a separate localized consciousness is basic enough not to depend upon subjective or cultural variation. While some of those who doubt the existence of the self would regard this assumption to be correct, I would suggest that the mystical passages make the most sense if this deep-seated supposition is construed by them as incorrect.

On this analysis, it is our supposition that consciousness is intrinsically (rather than just apparently) segregated which keeps us from realizing our abiding conscious nature as identical to the ultimate ground, whether this be called ‘God’, ‘Self’, ‘Brahman’, or ‘Allah’. The ultimate mystical awakening, if veridical, would invoke the insight that one’s conscious awareness, while nominally appearing from a private perspective, is not confined in essence to the parameters of our perspective any more than space is confined, in essence, to the shape of its enclosing vessel. Its true nature is aperspectival, beyond space and time, and universal, somehow grounding all that we take to be the world.

Of course, we need further explanation of what exactly this could mean, and I say more about it in the final section. But in support of this analysis is the fact that mystics and traditional scriptures invariably speak of unitive identity with the absolute as being *precipitated* by a dismantling of the dualistic subject/object, self/other, knower/known framework. For instance, in the quoted passages Ibn Arabi speaks explicitly of the prophet as ‘killing his selfhood’ to realize that his existence is none other than Allah’s. Meister Eckhart, in other passages, speaks of becoming ‘poor in spirit’ which he explains as having no desires or independent sense of agency — even that of ‘God’ acting within one, which he says is to ‘preserve distinction’ (Walshe, 2009, pp. 421–4). Another widely acclaimed mystic from the Advaitic tradition, Adi Shankara (circa 800 AD), is attributed with the following passage:

Though he possesses a finite body he remains united with the Infinite. His heart knows no anxiety... Though he lives in the body, it seems merely like a shadow following him. He is no longer troubled by the thought ‘I’ and ‘mine’... Through his transcendental vision he has realised that there is no difference between man and Brahman, or between Brahman and the universe — for he sees that Brahman is all...

Sense objects flow into his mind but he feels no reaction, for he lives in the consciousness of the one Reality. (Shankara, 900 AD/1968, pp. 122–3)

Summarizing this section so far: the enlisted mystical reports all appear to suggest that transcending the sense of being a separate subject or self would enable the revelation of our abiding conscious nature as identical with a wider unitive consciousness that is unstructured by any spatio-temporal or subject/object parameters. While in need of further elaboration, we have an initial way to understand the different mystical claims as having converging rather than diverging content.

But even if overcoming the sense of a self–other boundary were possible in a way that *appeared* to reveal unitary consciousness, why then should we suppose any so-called unitive revelation to convey the same content in all cases? Couldn't the experience still be 'revealing' different flavours of unitary consciousness? Here is where another salient factor common to the mystical reports becomes relevant. The reported experiences of the above exemplars depict not only a unification of their abiding conscious nature with the ultimate ground, but also a non-sensory/non-mental character to this ground. The five senses and the mental faculties (with their cognitive imagery) are modes through which we differentiate elements within both the internal and external world. They are the media through which any cultural differences would insert themselves. From all this, we can surmise that *if* there were truly no sensory or mental differentiation within a given mode of experience, nor any sense of a subject/object division, nor any sense of space and time, *then* there would likely be no discernible parameters along which various mystical experiences of the purported foundation could reasonably differ in their content.

The sceptical question, however, now shifts to the antecedent. Is it the case that experience could really occur with no sensory or mental differentiation? Or is it rather, as Katz claims, that all experience must be inevitably mediated by culture and prior conditioning despite mystical claims to the contrary? Could conscious experience transcend the subject/object boundary, and the sense of occupying space and time? Or must it be that all conscious experience, as some philosophers claim, manifests as inextricably subject-bound or time-bound? And granting a dissolution of the basic subject/object boundary, is there reason to suppose that this could precipitate the revelation that our abiding nature is at one with an ultimate unitive consciousness? At this stage, appeal to data from the reservoir of contemplative literature

becomes relevant. Have we reason to suppose that its meditative methods could both undo the sense of subject/object duality and transcend ordinary sensory and cognitive media to reveal what would *appear* to be timeless, non-spatial, and ultimate consciousness? Have we good reason to *trust* what such reports may purport to reveal, at least in so far as they apply to the domain of conscious experience? This will be addressed in Section 5.

Before addressing this issue, however, we must deal with another variant of the third sceptical challenge that issues primarily from scholars of the well-known tradition of Buddhism, especially the early Theravadin branch. Readers may have noticed an absence of Buddhist passages from the selection of mystical quotations. The Buddha never explicitly proclaimed our abiding nature to be identical with a unitary, unconditioned, and fundamental consciousness. The prevalent interpretation maintains that passages ascribed to the Buddha are at complete odds with the teachings of other well-known Eastern mystics, particularly those from Upaniṣadic traditions. Rather than the nature of ultimate reality being that of unitary, timeless and unconditioned consciousness, as explicitly suggested by mystics within the Upaniṣadic and Advaitic traditions, the Theravadin scholars claim ultimate reality as depicted by the Buddha to be exhaustively and fundamentally conditioned and impermanent. This includes, most perspicuously, our own conscious nature. In support of this interpretation, it is correctly noted that the Buddha often stated consciousness to be dependently arisen (*paṭiccasamuppannaṃ*) such that without an object, such as a perception or thought, that particular moment of object-directed consciousness would not have arisen. So, while the illusion of self extends to our identification as a localized conscious perspective, its dissolution is not to be had through the insight that our consciousness is unitive and universal, but the insight that it is disunified and discrete.

It might seem easy to dismiss this worry by simply claiming that the Buddha's purported insights do not lie within the ambit of relevant mystical data. Why not leave it at that? The problem is that much of the Buddha's methods and soteriological aims bear striking parallels to those of Upaniṣadic-influenced traditions such as Advaita Vedanta. Each is directed towards the ultimate attainment of a direct non-discursive insight into no-self, with the meditative practices geared towards disidentifying with conditioned phenomena. If both have similar methods that advance a similar aim, then it is troubling to learn that their central insights are diametrically opposed. It casts aspersions

not only on the insights — and hence the prospect of a *common* insight — but on the methodology by which they are reached.

I have argued elsewhere and at length (e.g. in Albahari, 2011) that this interpretation of Theravada Buddhism is not correct. For now, it suffices to note that the Buddha's orientation of teaching is eminently practical. We can understand the passages on conditioned consciousness not as a statement about its deep metaphysical nature, but as a strategy to disidentify with sensory and mental objects that are its perpetual targets (such as ideas about who one is). In this object-oriented and relational capacity, consciousness *can* be viewed as dependently arisen, such that without x there cannot be consciousness-of-x, and without y, consciousness-of-y, etc. So long as the consciousness is not seen clearly *as* targeting a flux of objects, the objects are in danger of being appropriated to the subject's perspective and reified into the sense of a permanent self. Reminding his disciples to notice that their consciousness is perpetually targeting different objects can be understood as the Buddha's antidote to this self-reifying tendency. The methods involve becoming keenly aware of the objects' status as impermanent events as opposed to being lost in their content.

Moreover, despite the Buddha's predominant reference to consciousness in this practical, object-oriented capacity, there are striking discourses (e.g. *Dīgha Nikāya* 11 and *Majjhima Nikāya* 49)⁹ where he does allude to what would appear to be a non-object-directed consciousness as 'non-manifesting' or 'without feature' (*viññāṇaṃ anidassanaṃ*), 'boundless' or 'limitless' (*anantaṃ*), and 'all-luminous' (*sabbato pabhaṃ*). The Buddha also states clearly in the *Itivuttaka* 2.16 that an unconditioned reality is necessary for there to be liberation from (attachment to) what is conditioned (Ireland, 1997). In keeping with his practical orientation, such passages do not form the primary emphasis of his teaching. But they are, importantly, *compatible* with the passages of the above-cited mystics.

Should we take this approach to the Buddhist teachings, as I argue we should, then the scholars' objection is no serious threat to the idea of there being a common core to mystical experience.¹⁰ The third sceptical challenge can be successfully met in so far as the prospect of

⁹ A translation of this discourse in the *Majjhima Nikāya* can for instance be found in Bhikkhu Ñānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi (1995).

¹⁰ This doesn't mean there cannot be debates between mystics over how to construe the philosophical implications of their insights.

cross-traditional convergence between mystical claims is not obviously ruled out. This brings us to the final section, where we address the fourth sceptical challenge.

5. The Fourth Sceptical Challenge

Let us take stock. It has been argued that neither meditative nor standard *a posteriori* and *a priori* methods can be presumed without argument to be the best way of discovering and understanding any fundaments, if such there be. On arbitrating this matter, particularly as it pertains to the veracity of a common mystical core, each set of claims and methodology must be considered on its own merits and then compared. I will call the hypothesis that mystical data are both cross-culturally convergent and veridical the ‘mystical hypothesis’.

For the mystical hypothesis to be viable, the mystical data must minimally meet the convergence challenge, which, as we saw, depends on whether there can be such an experience as pure (non-sensory/mental) unmediated consciousness that appears unstructured by space, time, subject, and object. Some will contend that as meditation is a method whose ‘data’ are only directly available to the meditator, it is always going to be subject to corrupting biases, and hence a dubious basis for any convergent mystical hypothesis. This, then, is the fourth sceptical challenge. Can it be met? Is there reason to suppose that the practices of meditation could elicit an unmediated experience of pure non-mental/sensory consciousness, which at least appears to be unstructured by subject/object and spatio-temporal distinctions?

There is to date a vast body of research and literature on meditation, psychology and the brain, and, most recently, comparisons with reports of those who have been administered with psychedelics under controlled conditions. Several surveys have over the years summarized key themes in this research (e.g. Millière *et al.*, 2018; Davis and Thompson, 2015; Shear, 2014; Brewer, Garrison and Whitfield-Gabrieli, 2013; Davidson, 2010). Some of the themes to have emerged suggest a pluralistic tendency that at first glance does not obviously support the mystical hypothesis. For instance, with regard to the effect of meditation on the primary mystical aim of awakening to no-self, Millière *et al.* write, ‘few controlled studies have investigated the experience of self-loss in meditation or drug-induced states, and those that have done so have limited sample sizes’ (2018, p. 21). And to the extent that it has been studied, ‘ego

dissolution should not be conceived as a simple graded phenomenon along a single dimension' (*ibid.*). Aspects to the loss of self-sense, they say, might vary, such as through inhibition of self-related thoughts, less involvement of the narrative self, and a loss of sense of body ownership, self-location, etc. And while there have been limited studies on modes of consciousness that participants report as being either pure (lacking sensory-mental content) or non-dual (in so far as it lacks a subject/object structure), it is not clear how to understand these modes and the relation between them. Jonathan Shear, for instance, alludes to accounts of pure objectless conscious experiences that still involve a subtle subject/object phenomenological structure (2014, p. 213) and Robert Forman may also presuppose this when he describes the notion of a 'Pure Conscious Experience' as a 'relatively common' state that is neither ultimate nor salvific (1997, pp. 8–9). Millière *et al.* (2018) write that 'these conceptual distinctions are not straightforward and there is not yet enough data on the phenomenology and neurobiology of alleged states of "pure consciousness" and "non-dual awareness" to determine whether these are valid and distinct constructs' (p. 18).

This pluralistic and ambiguous bent may initially seem to undercut the viability of the mystical hypothesis which, as we saw, appears to unequivocally agree on the aspirant overcoming *any* sense of identification as an individual self, bodily or narrative, to reveal consciousness in its natural mode as pure, non-dual, and unstructured. Yet if the mystical hypothesis were correct, there would be an obvious reason as to why the data could point this way. It is almost entirely derived from subjects who, on that hypothesis, may only be part-way there. The experiments are also usually set up to test not the mystical hypothesis but other parameters such as the therapeutic benefits of meditation or psychedelics. Their findings can nevertheless involve modulations to the sense of self that may double as signposts to awakening. We should not be surprised to discover the sense of self to be a multifaceted phenomenon whose diminution can happen in stages, and along different dimensions, and in contexts other than those that have awakening as a goal. But in ignoring the possibility of the mystical hypothesis, such plurality may be viewed as all that there is to the story. It would be like surveying the different relative latitudes and routes of various climbers up a mountain and on the basis of this declaring the journey to lack a common direction or destination. Taking the mystical hypothesis seriously is theoretically valuable because it can potentially provide a unified lens through which to

interpret the complexity of data, not by denying its plurality, but by understanding it in relation to a possible summit.

But how are we to get a sense of what the mystical summit is supposed to be if there aren't the data within modern contemplative research to directly back it up? In particular, how are we to properly understand, in relation to awakening, the key notions of no-self, pure conscious experience, and non-dual awareness? It is here that close attention to the mystical literature becomes crucial — a first major step in the research project. The following brief synopsis of some of my work on this topic proposes an answer to these questions in relation to research that can or has been implemented (Albahari, forthcoming a,b).

If the mystical reports are convergent and veridical then, to recap, they would suggest that our spurious identity as a self is manifested most basically through the assumption that the field of conscious awareness, in which objects appear to us, is intrinsically divided and confined to our localized perspectives. All other aspects to the sense of self — thinker, owner, agent, both bodily and narrative — build on the basic assumption that the field of consciousness is uniquely our own. Awakening to no-self will involve a dis-identification with this perspective, along with a direct revelation of our abiding conscious nature as fundamental non-dual awareness, unstructured by space and time. While meditative or mystical reports won't prove the veracity of this purported insight, we can get a clearer idea of what could be involved, experientially, in consciousness *presenting* as such. This will, in turn, clarify the key notions in question, enabling us to appraise meditative techniques for their efficacy in implementing the relevant experience.

We can thus first ask: what, in experiential terms, is it that most immediately cues our conscious awareness into the sense of occupying an embodied psychophysical and spatio-temporal perspective in the world? I have suggested it to be a complex flux of sensory and mental (or 'cognitive') objects which I've referred to as 'cognisensory imagery'. I suggest that such imagery serves to frame our conscious perspective, whether attentively or inattentively. For example, our perspectival sense of being in a spatial world seems to depend, most immediately, upon an array of visual, auditory, tactile as well as cognitive imagery. Our sense of passing time seems to immediately depend upon the coming and going of all cognisensory

imagery from the field of our awareness.¹¹ Without any such imagery it seems that there would be nothing to cue awareness into the sense of being a psychophysical perspective that occupies a spatio-temporal world, be this waking or dreaming. And without any spatio-temporal or mental cues, it seems there would be nothing to discernibly cue conscious awareness into the sense of being a perspectival *subject* in opposition to objects. Yet if all the sensory and cognitive objects (thoughts, memories, sights, sounds, proprioceptive sensations, etc.) were to sequentially vanish from our conscious field, via an imaginary device that I call the ‘cognisensory deprivation tank’ (CDT), it is conceivable that the dissolution of the subject’s perspectival boundaries would leave not a void, but a field of pure unstructured conscious awareness.

This remaining conscious field, in seeming unbounded by the presence of any spatio-temporal or perspectival parameters, could conceivably turn out to be the non-dual consciousness that is alluded to by mystics. Upon the reappearance of cognisensory objects that precipitate the nominal re-emergence of a spatio-temporal, psychophysical perspective, the underlying consciousness could well carry the reflexive impression that it is not, as formerly assumed, intrinsically confined to such a perspective. (The analogy I give is of someone, confined from birth to a square windowless room, seeing open space for the first time. Upon re-entering the room they can never view space again as *intrinsically* square-shaped.) It would be experientially compatible with signalling the profound unitive insight that mystics refer to as ‘awakening’. On this picture, awakening precipitates a transformative shift from consciousness reflexively and inaccurately viewing itself as intrinsically confined to a spatio-temporal, psychophysical perspective, to it reflexively and accurately viewing itself as unconfined. It is an insight that does not fade upon the reappearance of perspective-cuing objects. Such a picture would also naturally suggest that what were previously taken to be mind-independent objects in the world are, actually, clusters of cognisensory imagery that frame a subject’s perspective.

¹¹ One of the referees objected that several phenomenologists hold the temporal aspect to consciousness to be a fundamental feature of it that is metaphysically prior to the imposition of any cognisensory objects. As we’ll see, such theories are hard to square with mystical data that allude to pure conscious experience as being timeless as well as subjectless. This points to an interesting tension between them.

This scenario, extrapolated from the accounts of mystics, clarifies the relation between the central notions of no-self, non-dual awareness, and pure conscious experience. Pure conscious experience is a mode of awareness that lacks any sensory or mental objects, including those that cue consciousness, however subtly, into the sense of being a perspectival subject in opposition to objects. An experience of pure consciousness is, or can precipitate, a mode of non-dual awareness. Non-dual awareness is *awakened* consciousness after which there is no longer identification as a subject, hence no sense of self in its most basic capacity as a localized perspective. Non-dual awareness carries the wider purport of being ultimate and unconditioned, and it continues to present as such to one who undergoes sensory and mental experiences after awakening. It need not be confined to modes of pure objectless consciousness.

Having clarified the central dimensions of mystical consciousness, the next step would be to investigate whether meditation could do the job of the cognisensory deprivation tank by genuinely dissolving the sense of self to enable what would *appear* to be awakened consciousness.

Initial support comes from the reports of meditation practitioners (and those in psychedelic experiments) claiming to experience pure consciousness, non-dual awareness, or 'ego dissolution'. The mere conviction of occupying such modes, however, is not good enough reason to suppose that they are being fully exemplified. First, their full exemplification would, on the mystical hypothesis, imply the consciousness to be genuinely unconditioned by space and time — something that contemplative data cannot tell us. Second, from a phenomenal standpoint the experience could, unbeknownst to the practitioner, be dualistic in so far as it involves a subtle identification with ideas about who one is. In keeping with our account so far, there would need to be an active practice in place to dismantle this sense of a bounded self that keeps consciousness locked into the implicit sense of identity as a subject. The application of meditative techniques will accordingly differ from that of the CDT which just passively removes the subject-framing objects. A future research project could thus investigate how meditation may break down such boundaries to enable a mode of consciousness that is phenomenally compatible with that of pure or non-dual consciousness. Alongside phenomenological reports, behavioural and neurophysiological correlates could serve as objective anchors by which to monitor the progress.

There is reason to be optimistic about the prospects. Both mystical and Western neurophenomenological literature (e.g. Damasio, 1999; Letheby and Gerrans, 2017) link the process of self-identity (as a core thinker, owner, and agent) to what manifests psychologically as powerful patterns of desire-driven thought and emotion. Our attention is repeatedly drawn to the content of objects, including our thoughts, that are of most interest to what we take to be our self. With such selective attention comes a failure to notice other objects within one's purview, and to fully cognize the self-related objects as impermanent. Many such thoughts, including ideas about who one is, are unwittingly appropriated to one's perspective such that the ideas present as a solid 'me-lens' through which the world is viewed. Through identifying with the content of perspective-framing objects, consciousness will seem as if it is inextricably tied to a bounded perspective that seeks the perpetual gratification of its desires.

The range of meditative practices, such as those outlined by the Buddha, can be seen to work by short-circuiting these self-perpetuating patterns of attention. For example, through repeatedly bringing one's attention to their status as unfolding impermanent objects, rather than being lost in their content, the patterns of attention that continually reinforce the idea of one's consciousness as intrinsically perspective-bound are eroded. Different types of meditation perform different parts of the process, but the overall goal is to wean attention from its enchantment with objects which keeps it locked into the central subject-bound assumption. There is evidence that this process has a neurological correlate. Brewer, Garrison and Whitfield-Gabrieli (2013) summarize a decade of studies that implicate activation in the posterior cingulate cortex (PCC) as a 'sentinel' marker for getting caught up in thought and experience, and conversely, its deactivation as a marker for 'the subjective experience of "undistracted awareness" and "effortless doing"' (p. 4). In a rich paper on the neurophenomenological dimensions of the self (which they regard as the illusory content of a representational model), Letheby and Gerrans point to studies indicating PCC deactivation in users of psychedelics, which 'correlates with psychometric ratings of ego dissolution' as well as an increase in 'mindfulness-related capacities' (2017, p. 7). Such studies are valuable in providing what may be measurable correlates for the process of disidentification that is so central to enabling awakened consciousness.

Finally, the contemplative literature indicates why we can give more credence to reports from accomplished meditators than to untrained

subjects such as those of the failed introspective programmes. Davis and Thompson draw upon a number of studies that reveal meditation and established mindfulness to increase cognitive understanding by ‘decreasing affective biases and increasing alertness’ (2015, p. 55). With increased alertness, more subtle objects are noticed attentively as present-moment occurrences, and with attenuated affective biases, pervasive distortion to the way we view objects is minimized. The more objects that are noticed, and the less distortedly, the more accurate our perception of (conditioned) reality. Increased alertness and reduced affective biases may also be key indicators that signal erosion to the sense of self. If the self is an illusion, then we can presume that its dissolution upon awakening, if possible, would lift the heaviest veil of cognitive distortion that exists (Albahari, 2014, pp. 25–7). It would be surprising if such insight did not reveal an epistemic platform from which to notice aspects about consciousness that may not be otherwise accessible, including what may present as the core mystical insight.

Of course, none of this will by itself win the argument for mysticism in so far as it shows consciousness to actually be the unconditioned fundament that it purports to be. The most that any appeal to contemplative data can show is that it is possible to have a culturally transcendent experience of aperspectival objectless consciousness that, in the genuine absence of sensory-mental cues, will *appear* fundamental and unstructured by space and time. This would help win the debate against those who regard all experience as mediated by cultural conditioning (or temporal structure) — a vital step towards proving the viability of the mystical hypothesis. However, it does not yet win the debate against those, such as the naturalist, who are metaphysically opposed to the mystic. It could still be the case that the experience of pure and non-dual consciousness, in so far as it purports to be a fundament that transcends space and time, is a brain-induced hallucination. As already mentioned, further arguments will need to be recruited for either side to make headway. But I hope to have clarified the role of meditation in the project of exploring the mystical hypothesis, such that its investigation is seen as a viable option with a rich potential for research. None of the sceptical challenges that we considered is a serious barrier. Aided by contemplative research, perhaps analytic metaphysics will one day point to the mystical hypothesis as being the correct one.

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