

The Blue Mosque: An Experience of Otherness

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Introduction

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James claimed that the mystical consciousness possesses a noetic quality. He 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... and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority.” All this, despite these experiences being both transient (unable to “be sustained for long”) and ineffable (defying expression). But here a problem might be said to arise: If the mystical consciousness is “discontinuous with ordinary consciousness,” and the experience that corresponds to it is ineffable in its meaning, then how ought we regard the veracity of the mystical beliefs *after* the experience has come to its inevitable end (James 2012, 267)?

As a pragmatist, James believed that the truth of any belief, mystical or otherwise, is not to be judged by its origins, but only by the quality of its results, its practical benefits. A mystical belief could thus be considered justified insofar as it enriches one’s life (James 1979). While this might be endorsed as a sensible component of a criteria for justification, one might nevertheless worry that, on its own, it remains a little too *laissez-faire*. Doesn’t it water down our conception of truth? Is it not also important that our beliefs be subjected to a constant process of critique and revision? Should not at least *some* evidence be marshaled forward before we deem a belief to be justified? Caution might be especially warranted when it comes to beliefs that arise in response to a mystical experience. Consider the ways mystical beliefs differ from ordinary ones. First, they have as their object not a discrete and perceptible object, but an ‘unseen order’ that permeates everything (making them harder to verify through consensus). Second, they presuppose a higher degree of subjective conditioning than do beliefs that are of a more ‘objective’ character (making them more prone to error). Mystical beliefs present us with epistemic difficulties because they are simultaneously the most private of experiences, as well the most far-reaching (they refer to a ‘totality’).

It is here, I think, that we can begin to situate “The Blue Mosque”—Luis Villoro’s celebrated essay on the epistemology of mystical experiences. Like James, Villoro’s inquiry begins and ends with direct experience: formulating questions in light of it, then turning back to it for an answer. Unlike James, who conducts a sweeping survey of religious life in America, Villoro confines himself only to an experience which he personally lived through, a perception of ‘otherness’ that occurred during a service at a

mosque in Istanbul. But the main difference, ultimately, is one of priority. Whereas James tried to capture the diversity of religious consciousness through a methodical taxonomy, Villoro's prerogative is to subject the core mystical experience (and the beliefs that correspond to it) to a rigorous process of rational analysis, critique, and justification. And this is what makes "The Blue Mosque" different from James' treatise in a very unique and exciting way: it painstakingly traces out the progression from direct experience, to rational scrutiny, to justified belief—all the while remaining sensitive to the special difficulties that arise when dealing with experiences of a mystical nature.

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This piece consists of three parts, separated according to their purpose and the style in which I wrote them. The first describes a lived experience. The second rationally scrutinizes it with the aim of answering the question: Can we grant it any degree of credibility? The final part is a reflection on the relation between the first two: What is rationality to do with an experience of this kind?

Description

The streets, dirty and congested, pour into a wide and open expanse. At the base lies the blue mosque, erected by the great sultan Ahmed. Its stones, which are of a whitish-grey color, reach out into the sky. Above high walls, a profusion of domes of distinct sizes. In regular rhythms they ascend progressively until reaching the wide semicircles framing and appearing to sustain the central dome. These circular, wave-like patterns continue, each one responding to the next, joining together, finally culminating in the highest form: perfect and all-encompassing. This great central sphere resides over diversity, it gathers the many harmonious circles into a complete unity. Everything is held in balance. The plenitude of the sphere, singular as well as diverse: it would rest in a finished state were it not for the swift lines of four minarets that point up at the sky. Adjacent to the finished form of the sphere, they signal change, the continuous movement towards a higher plane. But these spires are not in contest with the sphere, they complement it by creating a new equilibrium. Plenitude integrates movement.

I walk through a small door: a new space opens. The rectangular patio, white, with a colonnade in a repeating pattern, stripped of any adornment, pure, undifferentiated. The little fountain at the center allows one to take note of the solitude of that contained space. It is a circumscribed totality, naked, empty—nothing is wanting, it is complete in itself. I am reminded of the white sand gardens found in Zen monasteries. All-encompassing emptiness. Plenitude is emptiness. The shouts of the card salesmen trail off, become faint; what is now present is only the silence of that great open space.

The patio is a passageway. Behind the heavy curtain lies the mosque. The first view is resplendent, expansive, fleeing from us until finding its perfect limit in the dome's curvature. The circular space rests above the four immense [pg. 60] pillars. The curvature's successive rhythms converge up high. Images of objects have disappeared. All that is left are colors and forms: blues, greens, reds, golds. Without exception, every surface has been coated in filaments: crossed, interlaced, joined-together, split apart, finding themselves anew—in this way woven and unwoven in an unending movement of lines and colors. One finds an unsurpassable complexity in an ordered state in the perfect geometry of the domes. Signs now take the place of images. All is in cipher, signaling at something, speaking in silence. This empty space is itself a sign. I have the impression of a steady and undulating movement, a spiraling canticle that directs itself towards what is higher, becoming concentrated there. I recall a similar sensation when I was in the presence of gothic cathedrals; though, I admit, it was so different in kind. Here and there is the ascending rhythm that reaches towards a higher plenitude; here and there is diversity coming together in a unity divested from space. Every circular motion congregates in the highest center. From it emerge a few rays that direct one's gaze towards Arabic characters that say: "God is the light of the heavens and the earth." I think of the resplendent energy plowing through the universe, I think of the bundles of stars overhead and of the primordial forces erupting through the galaxies. The origin, the source, life itself. I am reminded of Saint Bonaventure: "Light is the substance of the Deity."

Before the marble wall, a few men pray, motionless, looking inward. The impertinent babble of the tourists quiets down into a whisper. A crude wooden fence separates the area reserved for the devout Muslims from that occupied by visitors. It is mid-day. Little by little the space dedicated to oration is filled by the devout. Barefooted, their steps cannot be heard; they incline forward several times in reverence, they take in the silence. The tourists have dissipated. Now, before the fenced area that I dare not trespass, I perceive only a white woman seated in the lotus position who appears to meditate; she is motionless. Everything is still. I recall a few words: "The Lord is in his holy temple, let all the earth keep silence before him." I kneel.

The silence is softly broken by the hoarse voice of the Mullah. His canticle rises and flows forth in waves; it rises along the columns until reaching the blue dome. The voice is sustained, full of restrained emotion. It is a supplication, perhaps—or, better put, it is a kind of praise. Bit by bit a single note begins to stand out from the rest, held for several seconds; everything appears to hold still in suspense. I am reminded of a sharp note from a cantata by Bach. There is transparent beauty; it is absolute. No one has moved. The devout only tilt or raise their heads, attentive to the prayer. Despite the small fence that separates us, I feel that we are one—including the white woman in lotus position. I am Muslim, Buddhist, Christian, and I am not of any religion. Now we are one single voice, rising like the spires of the minarets. I am one of many, small and insignificant in the sea of humanity (always worshipping) which, throughout all of history, has [pg. 61] elevated itself to the sacred. My voice becomes tangled with all the voices of all men—all of humanity that time and again transcends into separate space and towards a plenitude that is other. But my vanity is still present. I attend to myself and

register my own words. I notice that I think over what I might later write about this moment. Then I plead: "Allow this pride to leave me, this immense vanity to crumble, this egoism to finally be erased." And only in that moment I feel, only then I see in truth. Everything becomes once again transparent, everything is purified, held still in suspense, serene and pacified, everything is safe. The 'I' has been lost—small, trivial, forgotten. How magnificent that it be so! That everything be one! How splendid the eternal light of the universe!

The voice of the mullah has settled into silence. The devout, carrying themselves with the same tranquility with which they prayed, begin to retire. The woman who was meditating has disappeared. I get up. I think to myself: "I know that my egoism is returning; I know that I begin to doubt again what I had lived through with certainty. My God! How can I avoid turning my back on you again? How can I attest to your glory? I have so little to give. I am not a poet, nor do I possess the clear vision and the evocative words of a good narrator. Neither is my soul pure, and I am so far from sainthood. I am not able to make a testimony out of my own life. All that is left is something clumsier, coarser: I can think. That can be my small homage. Because I have received the gift of thought.

Like a blundering camel in the desert, I will trace out paths in the plenitude of the sand; I will cut this space into strips, fill the vacuum with edges and planes; like a ridiculous ape, I will convert into disassociated gestures what was once a graceful dance; I will slice up the fluidity of sacred hymns by breaking into concepts the ineffable. In so doing, I will bask once again in the vanity of hearing myself speak, the embarrassment of being seen. I will again feel false, and that will be the price that I must pay. In this way, I will beget a caricature, I will fashion a mask. But that too will be a sign. I do not know how to do more. But this, at least, I ought to do.

Analysis

The preceding pages relate an experience. What are its characteristic marks, standing out against the rest? It is not the existence of some extrasensory content, given that no mention is made of data that is unresponsive to physical or psychic stimulus, nor is any mention made of an intuitive or extraordinary faculty. Neither can it be the occurrence of some incomprehensible event: no report has been given of a phenomenon or object which is not subject to the regularities of the perceived world. It concerns, rather, a change that affects both events and objects taken together.

It presents itself as a series of successive transitions. Each one is a rupture. The [pg. 62] transition simultaneously takes place internally as well as externally. The mosque's presence on the other side of the plaza appears a harmonious unity against the dispersal and disorder that surrounds it. The threshold of the door that leads into the patio negates, for a second time, the hubbub coming in from the outside. It opens into a different space, purified and soundless. The entrance to the mosque provides access to a circumscribed environment within which the integration and proportion of forms

prevail. Finally, the fence marks the ultimate step that can be taken—it can only be traversed spiritually, upon turning the attention inward and participating in a shared moment of contemplation. This is experienced as the abandonment of the everyday world, consisting of things, dispersed, existing singly as well as multiply; then, an order (foreign to that world) introduces itself.

The transition also involves a change in one's internal states and processes. One moves from an interest in external objects and events to an interest in certain values. It is, first of all, an inward retreat. One abandons an attitude of diversion (in which one is absorbed by sounds, images, and events) in order to better concentrate on the contemplation of what is perceived as valuable. As a result, one's conduct begins to achieve consonance with that of the community of the devout. All those present are united, through meditation and prayer, by a collective purpose. From movement to stillness, from loquacity to silence.

An inward retreat gives way to an attitude of reverence. This has two facets: on the one hand, losing the attachment to the self; on the other, affirming the superior value of that which exceeds it.

The deliberate change in conduct coincides with the entrance into a distinct physical space. These are two dimensions of the same transition and they have a reciprocal influence on each other. Contemplation of the empty patio prompts one to reject all external stimuli; at the same time, this internal purification prepares us for the most intense experience of unity, which occurs upon entering the mosque. In this way, the transition simultaneously affects our experience of the surrounding world as well as our internal states.

Once the experience is over, the path of return takes us through the same two dimensions. Attention is once again dispersed among the multiplicity of objects; the attachment to the self reappears.

The transition—both as it manifests itself internally as well as externally—is experienced as the acquisition of facts; facts which possess characteristics that are contrary to those typically found in the everyday world. One can best describe them in terms of oppositions: noise-silence, multiplicity-emptiness, dispersion-unity, movement-stillness, etc. The second term functions here only as the negation of a feature of ordinary experience. Though they purport to predicate something of this second experience, it is important to keep in mind that they cannot, fully nor with clarity, *describe* that “otherness.” They are thus only approximations. This is because the terms that were applied, in their ordinary usage, describe experiences which do not actually possess that quality of strangeness. In the final paragraph of my personal account, I express this difficulty: that is, the inadequacy between the fluidity and homogeneity of the lived experience, and the fragmentation and heterogeneity that I must [pg. 63] subject it to in order to analyze it with concepts.

In attempting to describe this character of “otherness” that was present in the experience, reference was made not only to sensible and physical qualities but also to

predicates of values. Statements about value communicate an aspect of an object insofar as there is an affective attitude that is *directed* at that object. Because of this, they cannot be reduced to mere sensory data. Given that the experience presupposes a double alteration (both in the external world as well as in one's internal states), the descriptors that one appeals to must therefore engage in this double reference as well. That is, they must refer not only to qualities of objects, but also to subjective states of mind. Even though any attempt at enumeration will prove contrived, let us attempt to summarize them under four headings: integration/unity, plenitude, reality, totality.

1) Fundamentally, there are multiple sensations: of color, of forms, of sounds, and above all, of space. In every case, there are three constants: *a*) perceiving the integration of multiplicity into a unity (in the play of circular forms, in the empty patio, the ornamental motifs, in the interior space of the mosque); *b*) perceiving what appeared as an upward movement (the minarets, the half domes joining together up high, the hymn of the mullah). Both perceptions (of unity and elevation) become integrated in a specific moment: in the contemplation of the convergence of multiplicity in the heterogeneous form of the central dome.

Something similar happens with the auditory sensations. From the multiplicity of the commotion outside, one passes into the silence of the patio and, later, the temple. The heterogeneity of sounds then converge in the single, elevated note of the mullah's canticle.

These perceptions are pregnant with feeling. They do not organize themselves into patterns without being accompanied by a particular emotional disposition. The emotions are various. In this first level, two predominate: *a*) an aesthetic feeling (the beauty of the various spaces, of the hymn; the sensation of harmony, equilibrium, elevation); *b*) a note of strangeness, mystery. There is the impression that one has abandoned the everyday world and entered into an environment in which contrary qualities predominate.

2) This same movement is simultaneously perceived as a transition from what is frail and lacking, towards the complete and finished. The mosque, the patio, the world that surrounds us all manifest themselves as pregnant with purity and plenitude. It is not possible here to dissociate the way these objects are perceived from the subjective disposition of those doing the perceiving. For instance, expressions of ascent—some of energies, others of serenity and peace—all were accompanied by a feeling of completion; it is impossible to distinguish this feeling of completeness from the feeling of beauty and strangeness that we had been speaking of earlier.

The experience culminates in a persistent feeling of plenitude in which no fault is detected. One has the sensation that time has stopped at the perfect moment ("Everything is peaceful", "serene and pacified").

3) The experience is accompanied by a feeling of security, a sensation that "everything is [pg. 64] safe", "everything is good", "in its place". This can perhaps only be described as an impression of *reality*. Not "reality" in a metaphysical sense—as

opposed to “appearances” or “illusion”—but rather in an evaluative and an affective sense, as that over which we hold a firm grip, affording us security and confidence, as that upon which anything could sustain itself. Faced with this kind of reality, everything else loses importance, ceases to have “consistency.” The affirmation of the reality of what is other is inevitably accompanied by the awareness of the insignificance and inconsistency of one’s own ego.

4) The perception and the feeling of a limited whole[1] recurs several times (the building seen from the outside, the patio, the interior of the mosque). One has the progressive sensation that particularities are being annulled by a looming totality; feelings of unity, plenitude, and reality refer to such a totality. In the final part of the experience, we witness the breaking of the ultimate duality: between the ‘I’ and the external world.

These feelings culminate in a state of elation. Upon abandoning the attachment to the self and affirming a plenitude (symbolized by the “light”), one has the sensation of being in communion with everything. At the same time, the surrounding world appears to us transfigured: it expresses reality in its fullest sense. Unity, plenitude, reality are not found either outside or inside of the subject; instead, they are found in a totality, emptied of any kind of diversity.

In sum: The transition has been shown to have consisted not in the appearance of new facts, but in a new means of experiencing them. There are two aspects to this. On the one hand, the totality of facts is perceived as being differently organized, and as “impregnated” by a kind of value which it did not exhibit before. On the other hand, there is a change that occurs internally, in one’s attitude. The change thus concerns the content of the experience understood in a global sense: it includes external phenomena as well as internal states. The same facts, taken in their totality, have undergone a transformation.

Both before and after these successive transitions, the sensory data remains the same. The difference only concerns how they are organized and the value that inheres in them. At any moment, these aspects could disappear (and ordinary experience return) without there being a corresponding reduction in the sum of perceived facts. Indeed, ordinary experience survives for a time alongside the new experience. We saw—first in the patio, then in the mosque—how scattered sensations continued to resist the attempt to pull one’s attention inward.[2] Later, when the moment of elation finally comes to an end, ordinary experience gradually returns. The perception of unity, plenitude, and reality all begin to fade without a single phenomenon disappearing along with it. The transition cannot therefore be said to consist in the increase of objects or facts that populate the world. More appropriately, it could be compared to reading between the lines in order to get at the overtones of a plot, or to the perception of the relief in an engraving. The same collection of phenomena can reveal to us, at one moment, a dimension of reality and value that was not evident before, only to again conceal itself at another time. The lived world is not just the one of everyday experience; it is also, at the same time, a reality that is stamped by otherness. [pg. 65]

Up until this point, we have summarized the characteristics of the experience without making any mention of the role that prior beliefs play in their spontaneous *interpretation*. But it is obvious that no experience is given in a vacuum. Perception itself is already oriented by an existing conceptual framework; additionally, our perceptions are interpreted according to other similar experiences from our past as well as each person's system of beliefs. In the situation just described, there is not yet a reflection over what is being experienced, but associations to prior situations are already being made and philosophical and religious concepts are being called to mind. Certain judgements are formulated that do not limit themselves to outlining that which is given in the experience; instead, they interpret and suggest certain images of perceptible objects, and some even generate new emotions that serve to reinforce those that came before.

The contemplation of certain spaces elicits memories of perceptions with similar qualities (the Zen gardens, gothic cathedrals), and the mullah's canticle elicits the memory of other melodies. In this way, a reality that has already been contemplated can be recognized as being always a part of our actual experience. The world we perceive is interpreted as a "sign" of something that could similarly manifest itself in other particular instances ("Everything is a cipher..."). Feeling and imagination no longer have as their intentional object the same objects that are being perceived but something more, something which they are signaling toward. In order to designate these, they appeal to philosophical and religious concepts (*light, cosmic force, origin, God, the sacred*). These concepts then serve to judge one's lived experience.

In this way, we find ourselves with a few statements that do not limit themselves to describing one's experience as it is lived; rather, they interpret that experience as a sign of a conceptualized and imagined reality that reveals itself in it. Statements of this kind designate an entity that is not given as such, but which can be revealed to us through various kinds of experiences. We could say that they are referring to a "transcendent" reality (so long as we do not use that word in its arcane or obscure sense). "Transcendence" refers to an intentional object not identifiable with any objects of perception (circumscribed within a determined space and time), nor with the totality of these objects; however, it can be grasped via the qualities of the objects we perceive. The prayers of the devout are directed to the transcendent.

Previously we had described the experience of otherness as a distinct manner of capturing the totality of the surrounding world. The move towards conceiving of it as a sign of something transcendent is not the product of theoretical reflection, separated from experience; but it is a spontaneous interpretation of that which is perceived, arrived at by "reading" the experience with concepts of the understanding. It could be that statements which describe the characteristics of lived experience require different kinds of justifications than statements which interpret that experience as a manifestation of something transcendent. This is a question that we will examine in the final section of the essay.

Critique [pg. 66]

Now we will ask: What degree of credibility can we concede to this experience? Is the belief which results from it justified? Both questions are connected. In effect, we could say of an experience that it is “credible” or “trustworthy” to the extent that it provides justification for the truth of the beliefs which they bring about.

No question is asked in a vacuum. A question is only pertinent in certain circumstances. To better understand the scope of a question, it would benefit us to first investigate the situation in which it might be formulated. These questions could not have been raised during the experience. In those moments, we were witness to a reality that we had no reason to doubt. To determine whether the corresponding belief is actually justified, we would have had to examine our lived experience and put it to the test; however, in that instant, we would no longer be living it. The question only becomes pertinent when we cease to be involved in the experience. It refers, therefore, to an experience that has passed.

Only those distrustful of their past conviction feel the need to ask whether it was really justified. But what is it then that is being asked? The question is not whether one is convinced of the reality of their experience, because the response could not be anything other than the affirmative. The doubt does not concern the fact of having lived through certain events, nor is it over the conviction that might still accompany them; rather, it concerns the rational justifications for their belief. Thus, the question is this: Can one justify the belief in the reality revealed to them in their experience with reasons that are valid (not only for oneself but also for others) even after that experience has ended? In other words, can this personal conviction also be thought of as a rational possibility, a certainty? That is, does it draw its justification from a solid foundation of understanding or is it only responsive to a passing state of mind?

Belief in the reality of “otherness,” which the experience described gave rise to, is grounded in two kinds of reasons. First, it is grounded in the experience itself. The question ought to lead to its critique; that is, we ought to determine the degree of justifiability we ultimately concede to the testimony of the past experience in light of this question. Second, the same belief could also justify itself by drawing on reasons different from the experience which gave rise to them (other beliefs, other experiences, for example). The question ought to direct the investigation into this process by which we seek justification for what is affirmed on the basis of the experience. This might require working within a far-reaching belief system.

Let us first examine the validity of the experience as described. Only experience can supply us with a direct and unmediated apprehension of reality; however, a single, isolated experience does not yet provide us with sufficient guarantee of having reached this reality. It is possible, for instance, that subjective factors have effected a distortion

on our experience, thereby replacing reality with an illusion. The following two conditions must therefore be met if we are to accept an experience as providing a foundation for true belief: first, the possibility of subjective distortion (that could potentially falsify an experience) must be ruled out; second, it must be shown that the content of this experience can be corroborated by other experiences. [pg. 67]

If an isolated experience in some way alters or breaks with the rules that govern ordinary life, we would have our first reason to waver in our confidence. This cannot be said, however, of the experience that now concerns us. It contains no element that would give us reason to suspect an alteration of our normal faculties; neither does it contain any extrasensory perception; nor does it relate any apparition of facts and objects distinct from those that we normally perceive. Nothing in the experience breaks with the regularities that govern ordinary perception. Present in it are the same sensory contents (ordered in space and time), the same objects that we perceive in other circumstances (with normal relations of permanence, causality, reciprocal action). And of the feeling of strangeness: it is made in reference to certain qualities that affect the totality of the facts—but even here, each of these facts do not cease to be subject to the regular order present in normal perception.

If there were any indication of pathological factors at play, of either a physical or chemical nature, this too would be sufficient reason to doubt the veracity of an experience. Whenever an isolated experience fails to follow the general rules of ordinary experience, we tend to suppose the existence of causal factors that could have altered the faculties of the subject. Inversely, the detection of physiochemical or physical factors capable of altering normal perception is sufficient reason for casting doubt on a person's testimony. This is the case with pathological hallucinations or 'visions' produced by the ingestion of drugs, prolonged fasting, or strong sensorimotor stimulation. In the experience described, nothing was said that would give us reason to suppose that a distortion of normal perception had taken place. Therefore, we do not have any reason to deny this experience the same degree of certainty that we would any other normal experience. The same criteria according to which we find it reasonable to accept the validity of any ordinary experience of the external world applies to the one described as well.

However, one could claim that the experience narrated is necessarily conditioned by certain subjective changes that could, in turn, have altered the way reality is perceived. We have seen, in effect, that the experience involves an internal change in attitude. Nevertheless, the fact that an experience has been conditioned by subjective factors is not in itself a sufficient reason for denying its veracity. In fact, every experience depends on subjective conditions. What varies is only their breadth and character.

Even the propositions that make up what we call objective knowledge—in theory accessible by all subjects who form part of the rational community—must be verified by experiences which require that multiple subjective conditions be shared by those subjects.

Not only does it presuppose a sensory-perceptive apparatus and shared dispositions of retention and imagination; additionally, it requires a classificatory apparatus on the one hand (which is what brings order to our sensory data), and conceptual schemes on the other (which allows us to interpret [pg. 68] that which is given). These conceptual schemes, in turn, are conditioned by the society to which the subjects belong; and so, they can vary from one historical community to another. No experience can overcome the bounds of its subjective or historical conditioning. But this of course does not affect their truth; after all, the verification of knowledge can only ever occur within these parameters.

What makes the experience described in the preceding pages different from one that can be given the status of objective knowledge isn't that the first is conditioned by subjective elements whereas the others are not; the difference, rather, has to do with the breadth of those conditions and their characteristics. The experience we are examining now is subject to a range of conditions that go beyond those which apply to ordinary experience. We could call this a "global" experience in that all faculties belonging to a subject are engaged, not simply their perceptive and intellectual ones. It consists in a specific affective and evaluative attitude that gives free reign to intense acts and emotions. In this way, the experience engages all the internal dispositions of a person—the affective and volitional just as much as the intellectual. In this way, they are not like the experiences that go towards verifying the propositions that make up 'objective knowledge.' Instead, they serve as the foundation to other forms of knowing that are non-scientific in nature.

For instance, think of the process by which one acquaints oneself with another's personality. We come to understand the unique characteristics of an individual only through repeated observations of their behavior. This requires in the observer a special sensibility for capturing the singular qualities of this foreign "soul." There must also be an affective attitude of openness towards one's neighbor, which in turn requires that one feel a certain degree of "identification," "comradery," or "sympathy" with them. Anyone who takes an interest in discovering what is most peculiar to a foreign individual knows that these secrets are revealed only to those who are capable of emotionally responding to them. There are certain realities whose acquaintance requires subjective capacities broader than those of a purely intellectual nature.

Another example: acquaintance with aesthetic objects. An 'art critic' is only a person who, in addition to understanding the cultural elements that are expressed in the work, understanding something of the technique, etc., is also endowed with the sensibility and the taste that is necessary for appreciating its value and taking pleasure in it. A certain affective and evaluative disposition towards the object is a necessary condition for it to manifest itself as beautiful.

So too could we say of an acquaintance with moral values: that it requires, in addition to the capacity for judgment, a certain sensibility and emotional disposition in the subject. This, in turn, is what would allow them to perceive qualities such as "benevolence," "dignity," "humility," "compassion" in another's conduct. The moral

dimension of reality only reveals itself to those who approach it oriented by certain attitudes.

The subjective conditioning of experience is not reason to deny it status as knowledge. In effect, the direct apprehension of any real quality presupposes the [pg. 69] existence of conditions that are suited to it. Without subjective dispositions we would be incapable of capturing the various dimensions of reality. When the subjective conditions are limited to what is generally assumed within a conceptual framework, the same experience can be verified by any normal, rational subject that shares the same categories and conceptual schemes. Experience can, in this case, be taken to justify an *objective knowledge*, verifiable by a broad community of rational subjects. Here we can think of science and many other technical, prescientific forms of knowledge. On the other hand, when the subjective requirements of experience extend to affective and evaluative conditions then, of the corresponding experience, we can only say that is verifiable by subjects who have similar attitudes. In this case, experience can justify only a *personal acquaintance*. Without a doubt, we are dealing with two different types of knowledge, each following its own route in securing a basis for its corresponding beliefs. Objective knowledge is based on reasons that can be verified by any normal subject that shares certain conceptual assumptions. Personal knowledge is based on direct experiences, verifiable by subjects that (in addition) share the same affective dispositions. But both kinds of knowledge presuppose subjective conditions.

Nevertheless, the objection still stands. One could accept that our knowledge of reality is conditioned by structures of perception and conceptual schemes (which can be intersubjective), but reject the claim that they are conditioned by affective states (because these vary from one person to another). It could be supposed that when one perceives in an object a quality that is conditioned by emotional states, it is merely a matter of “projecting” these states onto them. This could perhaps apply to the case of “personal knowledge” mentioned earlier. Specifically, consider the attempt to apprehend the psychological traits of another’s personality: Because this depends on our feeling “sympathy” towards them, is there not a risk that we project our own feelings onto their behavior, thereby distorting what their true intentions are? We can similarly ask of “acquaintance” with aesthetic objects: Is it actually a kind of knowledge, or is it merely that we attribute to these objects the mental accents that they awake in us? And what of moral properties: Are they *inherent* in the observed conduct of another, or are they merely *attributed* upon being judged according to a criterion that belongs to the observer? All these cases (which we have taken as examples of “personal knowledge”) could be interpreted as a “projection” of internal states onto the world. In this way, properties usually taken as *belonging* to these objects are in fact introduced by the subject. All of this can be said, with greater reason, of the experience that now concerns us—especially given that the emotional conditioning here is even more evident. In the end, could it be similar to other trivial and commonplace experiences? Haven’t we all experienced bouts of melancholy which, in turn, makes the world itself appear sad and insignificant? Haven’t we all had moments of intense joy in which all things appear delightful and exultant? And, in respect to these moments, who would deny that it is our mental states that cover the external world with a sentimental veil? [pg. 70]

In order to respond, we must first attend to the manner in which things are given within the experience itself. In doing this, it will not be difficult to distinguish between those cases in which evaluative qualities reveal themselves in the world as properties belonging to things themselves, and those in which their objective character is not evident.

Without a doubt, on many occasions we can confirm that the world appears to us “colored” after the likeness of our current state of mind. But if we really are just dealing with an appearance, an emotive aura that coats the object without belonging to it, it would be unusual if we were not able to notice this. In those cases, we do not in fact perceive the appearance as a quality that reveals itself in things. Only a schizophrenic—or their theoretical counterpart, a solipsist—would maintain that things really are “sad” when they feel melancholy creeping in, or “exultant” in their moments of joy. In cases such as these, we can only attribute meaning to that which we predicate of our emotions—and this we do only to signify a causal or analogous relation. We might want to indicate that things are the cause of certain subjective states of mind (the somber evening might result in state of melancholy, for instance), or to establish an analogy between a property of the world and an emotive quality that we only recognize through introspection (the darkness of the evening, for instance, as an analogy for our sadness). But in any of these uses, the emotive adjectives lack any meaningful reference to real properties of physical objects.

In contrast, when it comes to the kind of personal acquaintances that we have just mentioned, the situation that presents itself is entirely different. The perception of internal states in the subject does not exclude the experienced qualities that are revealed in the things themselves (as properties inherent to them). It is not only colors, textures, and spatial relations that are perceptible in external objects, but also aesthetic and moral qualities. “Grace” pertains to *that* musical phrase, “proportion” to *that* architectonic form, “compassion” to *that* conduct. It is clear that these properties do not reveal themselves in things in the same manner as sensory qualities: they are not singular properties, located in space and time alongside color, volume, and sound; rather, they appear in the form and arrangement of these properties as they are displayed alongside others. “Grace” isn’t a reference to yet another auditory quality, it is something that reveals itself in a completed series of sounds; “proportion” isn’t a property of a wall or an opening, it is something that reveals itself in the finished stone structure; “compassion” isn’t a feature of a gesture, it expresses itself in the sum total of a series of behaviors. There are properties of things which can be perceived in their constitutive parts; there are others that only show themselves in the arrangement that stands in for a limited whole. Both, however, are perceived as qualities *belonging to objects*, rather than to the subject (“grace” is an attribute of the melody, not of the person who hears it, etc.).

Something similar can be said of the experience of otherness. Even though the experience of “transition” involves an internal change that parallels those which take place in the world around us, when narrating it we made a distinction [pg. 71] between mental states and qualities displayed in things. The principal features that we

emphasized in the experience made reference to qualities perceived in the aggregate of facts. The integration of a multiplicity into a unity, the full and finished character of what is shown, the consistency and reality with which they appear, their relation to a totality—these are features that we believe we see and feel in the things themselves. Moreover, we do not confuse them with the analogous states of “inwardness,” “reverence,” or “disinterestedness in oneself.” Only in the final state of elation is there a sensation of unity between the person and external things: the properties that were previously predicated of things are now predicated of a totality that engulfs the subject. In this case, it is not an experience of “subjective projection” onto objects, but just the contrary: the “I” is immersed in reality, and purely subjective qualities are canceled out. Moreover, the entire experience affirms the maximum reality of what is foreign to oneself and the ordinary world (an experience that is given only to an attention that is directed at a totality). The narration gives testimony to an experience that is exactly contrary to a “projection” of the subject onto the world. It describes the experience of a reality that is foreign to the subject, captured in a moment in which the self is “desubjectivized.”

However, one may continue to insist that it is possible that the perception of evaluative qualities in objects is only an illusion and that, in reality, it is product of the unconscious projection of subjective feelings onto the world. It is true, this is possible. The problem is that we cannot, in principle, verify whether or not it is the case. When one perceives a quality in an object, and these qualities are conditioned by attitudes belonging to the subject, what can be verified is that the apprehension of these qualities is simultaneous with the existence of certain states of mind. However, what is not possible is to imagine a situation in which we can determine, with certainty, which of the following two is the case: first, that the perceived qualities are real; second, that they are illusory “projections” of subjective states. In the first case, one’s experience must meet certain subjective conditions in order to verify the objective reality of what is perceived. Therefore, it is not possible to determine whether the perceived qualities really belong to the objects, independent of the subject. In the second case, though we “project” subjective qualities onto the world, we nevertheless perceive these qualities as existing in the objects themselves. It is therefore impossible to determine whether a quality really pertains exclusively to the subject. And so, it is impossible, *a priori*, to have an experience which establishes the truth of one of these possibilities over the other.

We are faced with one of those cases in which the same data admits of two distinct “readings,” and where it is not possible to appeal to a decisive experience to determine which is correct. In such cases, what is the adequate criteria for deciding between these? It could only be the one most adequate to the situation. Given that we cannot point to a situation that could verify one of the two “readings,” the reasonable course would be to accept the one [pg. 72] which best approximates a description, without prejudice, of what is given (in the limits of what is given).

That the qualities perceived have an objective character is a conclusion which arises from considering the manner in which the world directly offers itself to an experience. On the other hand, to interpret this as merely a subjective “projection” runs counter to the spontaneous testimony of the observer. This interpretation does not have

the character of a description of what is given, but of a hypothesis (causal in kind) that tries to explain it. It is only if we deny the veracity of the data that we would then need to postulate a causal process (whatever that may be) that explains how these deceptive appearances are produced by a mechanism of "projection." Of the two possibilities mentioned, a selection of the first is based on the spontaneous confidence in the data of experience; the second, in an explanatory hypothesis that cannot be verified. But the burden of proof falls on the hypothesis. As long as it cannot be demonstrated, what is reasonable is to simply accept the way it appears to us.

Thus far, it seems that we lack sufficient grounds on which to deny credibility to the testimony of personal experience. But neither have we found enough reason for rejecting the possibility that this consists of an illusion. The only reasonable way to prove that a personal experience is not deceptive is to put it to the test. This can only be achieved by comparing the testimony given of that experience with others that are similar. We can assure ourselves that an experience is not deceptive if what it reveals can be corroborated by other experiences that concern the same subject (at a different time, or by different observers). But the form that the verification takes will be different depending on the kind of knowledge that the experience contributes to: whether it is taken to justify objective knowledge or whether it is the foundation for personal acquaintance.

If what is given in an experience is real, then it exists independently of subjects (even though perceiving it requires that certain subjective conditions be met). At a later time, it could in principle be verified by anyone who had access to the same objects or situations and who possessed the same conditions necessary for the experience. However, it could be the case that no one could verify it (for the simple reason that no one else has had the experience). If another subject (or the same one at another moment) has access to the same objects and does not perceive in them the same qualities, it could be assumed that they lack some condition necessary to experience them. But if a subject, despite being in possession of all the required conditions, cannot attest to the same data, then this would be sufficient reason to doubt its reality. In this way, the contents of a trustworthy experience ought to be verifiable, in principle, by those who have the conditions that are required for that experience (and, as we have seen, what these conditions *are* vary depending on the *type* of experience).

In the case we have been examining we could infer, from the behavior of the devout in the mosque, the presence of a shared attitude. In fact, all participate in an intentional conduct of collective reverence. We can deduce, then, that the experience is not private, belonging to only one [pg. 73] person, but communal. We have reason to assume that, insofar as others can partake in the same attitude, so too can they perceive similar qualities in reality.

On the other hand, an experience of the other has as its object a totality whose components could vary. In fact, in the narration, similar events taking place in distinct circumstances were remembered, and all these consisted in the same kind of experience (in Zen gardens, cathedrals). Though the individual objects encountered were themselves different, in each case there was nevertheless the perception of a

dimension of “otherness” found in the totality. It is this common content that could be corroborated by appealing to different experiences. Finally, similar experiences and attitudes are expressed in religious literature of every epoch all around the world, in the Orient just as much as in the Occident.

We thus have reasons for accepting that the content of the experience narrated can be corroborated, in principle, by other subjects in possession of the adequate conditions, and by the same subject at different times. However, we are not in the position to specify with exactness what conditions are needed for this corroboration. In effect, we must admit the possibility that other subjects, despite having access to the same objects and facts, might nevertheless give different testimonies of what reveals itself in their experience. If that were to be the case, we could suppose that they do not have the subjective conditions necessary for perceiving the same data: they are not capable of assuming the appropriate attitude, they lack the required disposition, etc. But we do not have any means of demonstrating this supposition. If someone claims to have the attitudes described, harbors the same affective and evaluative dispositions, and yet they do not perceive the same data—in that case we could not refute them... although our cherished conviction could persuade us that they deceive themselves. Inversely, if someone were to claim to have verified that the content our experience matches with theirs, we would have no way of truly knowing whether their internal states, affective and evaluative, in fact do coincide with ours. In sum, the difficulty in this kind of experience is not a matter of the testimony being unverifiable, but rather that it is not possible to specify the conditions for their verification or for their falsification.

We can arrive at a few conclusions:

1) We have not found sufficient reason for denying credibility to the described experience—even less so to sustain that it consists of a trick or a deception. In the end, all our personal acquaintances are based on direct experiences: they presuppose a spontaneous certainty in the manner in which things reveal themselves. The conviction that accompanies the experience of otherness is based in a revelation of the world, without intermediaries. Nothing permits us to confidently assert that this conviction is false. On the contrary, it is reasonable to abide by what an experience offers us, so long as there aren't sufficient reasons to reject it. [pg. 74]

2) We have reasons for believing that it is not an individual experience, but one shared by those who participate in the same act (and do so with a common attitude). We can say the same of other similar experiences (ours, or foreign to us) in which the same kinds of data make themselves apparent. Thus, what reveals itself in this experience can, in principle, be corroborated.

3) However, it is not possible to specify the conditions of its verifiability. Then, it does not meet the requirements for justification that would make it objective knowledge. Because it is not able to establish the conditions that would allow its testimony to either be verified or falsified, this experience cannot give way to a knowledge that is beyond doubt: it can only be the source of reasonable belief, justified by reasons shared by

subjects that meet certain subjective conditions. The possibility of denying it credibility always remains open.

4) The difference between reasonable belief and knowledge is not categorical but gradual in nature. One cannot establish precise boundaries between one and the other. Knowledge is only the term used to designate justified beliefs. A belief becomes more reasonable the better the justifications for its truth that can be put forward. Beliefs that are based on experience will never possess the characteristics of an objective knowledge. But, to the extent that we corroborate this testimony with similar experiences (our own or of others), it can thereby approximate a personal knowledge (acquaintance).

Given that an isolated experience cannot, on its own, either provide the foundation for a stable knowledge or eliminate the possibility of doubt, the belief to which it gives rise must therefore seek additional justification in reasons that go beyond the experience itself. To decide whether we should grant it credibility, we appeal to other rational beliefs, to other kinds of knowledge, or even, perhaps, to the testimony provided by forms of life. The degree of probability that ought to be conceded to what was shown in a past experience is a question that can only be decided in light of a global system of beliefs. In fact, this holds true of any belief: the process of justification puts them in relation with a wider grouping of which it forms part. This is what we will look at in the following section.

Justification

In the previous section, we considered an experience in isolation. However, in reality it comes along with other beliefs and experiences joined in a complex arrangement. The justification we provide for the beliefs that ensue from the original experience cannot be separated from this wider context. The process of justifying beliefs requires that we draw support from other beliefs (more or less justified) as well as from our own personal knowledge and diverse experiences. A singular experience, upon insertion into this complex system, may give way to a belief whose justification depends as much on the experience itself [pg. 75] as on its coherence with the other beliefs which form part of the system. Whether or not we accept the belief is therefore a function of the degree of justification belonging to this assemblage of beliefs and experiences.

Let us now look at our experience in this wider context. While it is actual, the experience is itself sufficient to justify the belief in the existence of the other. All that is required is a confident acceptance of what is being shown. Reflection does not accompany it and, consequently, no doubt is present. The belief does not require any more justification than that of the lived experience. But the experience ultimately disappears, and this gives way to distrust. The reason that had once been put forward (the experience itself) is no longer sufficient to justify the belief. The belief must now submit itself to criticism and be contrasted with the rest of our beliefs so as to determine the extent to which it is consistent with them.

On the one hand, other extraneous reasons can now be brought in to justify the belief in the reality of otherness. Some of these were present even before the experience had occurred—whereas before they had served to interpret it, now they serve to justify it. The prior beliefs are philosophical and religious in nature. They are based, in turn, on other personal experiences (our own or belonging to others), on rational arguments (more or less convincing), and on opinions that have been transmitted through education or social pressure. Taken together, they constitute an assemblage of opinions that serve as the background to the singular experience, and they encompass the belief that is then derived from it.

On the other hand, we have all these other beliefs about the world (rational, scientific, moral, etc.). A belief in otherness cannot remain isolated. If it happens to be inconsistent with a person's system of beliefs, it would result in an unbearable "dissonance." It can only be justified if it demonstrates its reasonable character, capable of being integrated into the subject's entire conception of the world. A belief that is derived from a prior experience must always seek support from this conception of the world which it now happens to form a part of; it is more or less justified depending on how well it coheres with this conception.

Upon analyzing our experience, we saw how it is immediately interpreted within a conceptual framework corresponding to a determined culture. When the reality of "otherness" presents itself to our experience, we already see it as characterized in a specific way: it is "light," "origin," "God," "sacred"—concepts that form part of a philosophical and religious tradition. Because of this, we distinguished in our analysis between what is strictly present and an interpretation that presupposes beliefs of a more general nature. In the sum total of facts, something is present that is other than any fact taken on its own; it reveals itself as a plenitude of reality and value, it integrates the world and the subject. But once we begin to describe it in words, interpreting it becomes inevitable. Even so, we can distinguish between a level of minimum interpretation, in which we employ primarily descriptive statements, and another level in which we judge what is given with concepts that exceed it, that are derived from a determined conception of the world.

We refer to otherness as "sacred." This term proceeds from the interpretation of religious experience provided by some authors (Otto van der Leeuw, Eliade). However, it can also have a descriptive use: by "sacred" we might mean that which is perceived [pg. 76] as being of the highest reality and value and thus as foreign to the ordinary world, the "profane." In the following pages, we will be using the term in this purely descriptive sense; it will be synonymous with "otherness," an expressly negative term that limits itself to designating that which presents features contrary to those of ordinary experience.

But "otherness" can also be taken as characteristic of "origin" and of "God." The sacred is then interpreted as transcendent, capable of revealing itself in the world, but not be confused with it. What is given is seen as a "sign" of this transcendence. Now concepts do not limit themselves to describing an experience; instead, they correspond to a monotheistic conception of the world. In effect, the aspects of unity, integration,

plenitude of reality, etc., could be thought of as inhering in the totality of the experienced world and not as a manifestation of something transcendent. The experience does not resolve the question as to whether the otherness of the world of the profane is either something “otherworldly” or else a distinct dimension of that same world. A religious conception is implicit in the first interpretation.

Nobody could cease to interpret their lived experiences within the framework of prior beliefs; there is no other way of understanding them. In our case, the interpretation is consistent. The highest reality and value reveals itself as something other than any individual entity, and it cannot be identified with any fact: this corresponds with the manner of conceiving of divinity in a cultural tradition. The characteristics according to which a transfigured reality is perceived are similar to those that many religious conceptions attribute to the divine; it is legitimate, therefore, to interpret it as its manifestation. The religious interpretation allows us to better understand that which reveals itself by associating it with prior conceptions; at the same time, it enriches and reinforces, with the emotions it awakens, the affective attitude that conditions the experience.

Now then, this conception of divinity can put forward other reasons distinct from the experience that it interprets: testimony, supposed revelations, philosophical and theological arguments, etc. These reasons may confer to the religious conception a higher or lesser degree of probability. In any case, the belief in otherness, grounded in personal experience, is now reinforced by its coherence with that conception. In this way, the relation between both kinds of beliefs is twofold: on the one hand, the religious conception interprets what is given in the experience and allows us to better understand it; on the other, it lends additional justification to our confidence in it by demonstrating that its testimony is consistent with other beliefs, grounded in other reasons.

However, it is possible to distinguish between what is shown through experience as such, and the attributes that we then assign to that experience as part of the process of evaluating it according to a certain religious conception. What appears before us is neutral in contrast to the distinct philosophical or religious doctrines that could help us conceptualize it. In the experience described, other concepts, derived from different cultural traditions, could have easily taken the place of those we relied on in our interpretation. If the observer had another general framework of beliefs, perhaps an altogether [pg. 77] different interpretive scheme would've come to mind (one no less comprehensive and illuminating). For example, the experience could have been understood in light of a more primitive conception that holds the sacred to be a kind of “mana”—an impersonal force immanent in everything. The experience then would not have consisted in the revelation of a transcendent divinity by means of signs, but in the manifestation of an occult force whose operations underly everything (not just in the subject, but in nature too). Alternatively, someone belonging to a more complex oriental culture could have interpreted a similar experience as the perception of “non-duality” (a greater truth lying beyond the illusion of multiplicity), and as the experience of identity between “that” and “I.” And still other conceptual interpretations could fit here. The experience on its own does not settle the question as to which of these is superior. All

exceed the scope of what is shown. Thus, to the extent that a positive religion implies a general conception of the world, the experience that we now consider cannot be taken as establishing the validity of any positive religion. But many of them could help us in understanding them (after all, the same reality could be interpreted according to distinct conceptual frameworks). It could be supposed that, at bottom of many of the religious conceptions of the world, we would find experiences of the sacred similar to the one described here. In turn, some metaphysical doctrines (bound up with religious systems) could have as their primary origin the attempt to interpret reality as it offers itself in direct experiences with otherness. We would therefore have to distinguish, in our case, between the sacred—as that reality and value that is revealed in our experience—and the distinct conceptions that are superimposed on it.

In this way, in every interpretation of the sacred, we can distinguish between contributions made by conceptions of the world (which vary from one culture to another), and a basic belief (common to them all, which can be justified by a personal experience). This belief, derived from the experience described, lying at bottom of all the possible interpretations—what would it be? If we recall our prior analysis, we could, perhaps, summarize it in three statements: 1) there exists a reality as plenitude of value (or, inversely, the highest value is this reality); 2) this reality is neither a fact nor an object, but manifests itself in every fact with a character contrary to that of ordinary experience (is it “other”); 3) this reality is experienced as the product of an attitude of detachment from the ‘I,’ along with an interest in otherness. These three features describe the nucleus of the basic belief in the sacred, founded on a personal experience like the one described here.

We have said that the belief in otherness can be justified not simply because it can be integrated into a prior conception of a religious nature, but also because of its compatibility with other beliefs that are *not* religious. Therefore, we must examine the place that it occupies in a broader grouping of reasonable beliefs.

The basic belief in the sacred has a special function in the context of a global system of beliefs. Given that it refers to the reality of everything, it can [pg. 78] support and inform our beliefs about an aspect, or a part of, reality: given that it deals with the aggregate of facts, it can serve as the background to other beliefs that refer to singular facts. The same facts or objects can be interpreted differently in light of a basic belief that concerns a totality.

Depending on whether or not we accept the existence of otherness, a fact or sequence of facts could appear in relation to an absolute value and meaning or it could, by contrast, appear without that reference. Each fragment of a personal life will vary depending on whether or not it stands out against the backdrop of this basic belief. This is not because the belief postulates the existence of other distinct facts, but because it sees all of them as colored by a determined dimension of value and meaning. Those who accept and those who reject the belief can have access to the same world (constituted by the same objects and facts) and, nevertheless, read them in a different way. This difference in reading can be explained as a variation of the characteristics exhibited by these objects and facts. A belief in the sacred (based on a personal

experience) can open up a peculiar dimension in things. Without referring to the appearance of any one thing in particular, it can orient the manner in which we “read” meaning, both in the world and in our relation to the world—and it does so without enforcing any specific reading. This process forms part of what John Hick has called “a total interpretation.” A total interpretation does not consist in a belief about an object or a set of objects, nor about a set of relations; rather, it constitutes a general supposition, according to which any object and any relation between objects can be interpreted. A total interpretation does not lead to an acquaintance with new facts; instead, it offers a new way of comprehending the same facts; it becomes possible to narrate another history of the same events.

Given that the personal experience of otherness does not give way to firm knowledge nor eliminate the possibility of doubt, the final acceptance of the belief that accompanies it will depend on the possibility of adapting it to an interpretation that is consistent with everything else, and which is capable of illuminating distinct events.

Statements over the existence of the sacred (in any of its religious conceptions: “mana,” “God,” “Oneness,” “origin,” etc.) can be seen as expressions of a total interpretation of reality. Because they do not refer to the existence of singular facts, none of them can be verified or falsified; because they do not state causal relations nor form part of explanatory theories, it is also not the case that their validation follows the structure of general, explanatory propositions. All this is because their cognitive function is different.

Its justification could be similar to that of other less general interpretive statements employed in other fields. Think, for instance, of some historical interpretations. In history, we often find a kind of general statement that is not reducible to explanatory propositions: these are the kind that [pg. 79] try and revive the “spirit” of an epoch, its sensibility, its way of understanding the world and our lives; in general, they refer to beliefs, evaluations, shared attitudes and ideals. Through them, the historian attempts to trace out a general framework for the epoch; this makes it possible to understand its specific products, make connections between its diverse manifestations. A single epoch can offer us various global interpretations and general frameworks of reference; between them, the most plausible will be the one which offers the greatest understanding. In this way, every concrete case, every singular product, every idea or attitude that we can better understand in view of the global interpretation—all these factors corroborate its validity (although none can verify it conclusively).

The same is the case with moral and aesthetic interpretations. A moral judgment is “confirmed” in a very distinct manner than a statement over physical properties. In articulating the meaning and the value of conduct, moral statements allow a variety of behaviors across different circumstances to be put in relation with their motives and their consequences. Thus, they establish general patterns of reference for human acts—and this allows us to perceive new qualities in them and understand them better. To the extent that a particular way of comporting oneself can be illuminated by a moral interpretation (in light of certain values), we can say that the conduct “confirms” the moral interpretation (in the broad sense, as lending it plausibility). In a similar manner, to

the extent that an artistic interpretation orients us to see a new quality in a work of art, allows us to better appreciate it, that interpretation becomes more illuminating and, consequently, more acceptable. In neither of these two cases are we dealing with the verification of a general proposition; after all, it would not make sense to say that the facts verify statements of value. Nor can we hold that the “verification” of the interpretation is convincing for those who do not share it. Nevertheless, in both cases, the probability of the interpretation increases, for those who accept it, if it happens to strengthen their capacity to make facts more comprehensible, to reveal new qualities in them.

Well then, the belief in the sacred will differ from those cases in their degree of generality (it refers to a totality), but it will be similar to them in its mode of justification. In effect, the belief does not explain any fact, but it can encompass them all due to its connection with a general supposition: the existence of an absolute reality and value. Every interpretation of a fact, or of a fragment of the world, illuminated by that belief has its probability increase for those who believe—although the same reading would be impossible for those who do not share the belief. An event that is taken as revelatory for a believer can be opaque for the non-believer. Its profile will be distinct from one case to another; the reason for this being an underlying difference in one’s assumptions about reality.

But there is another important characteristic of this type of belief (one which is perhaps also shared with moral and aesthetic beliefs). The belief in the sacred does not only [pg. 80] serve the function of orienting us in our understanding of the world, it also directs our behavior in it. We saw how the experience we examined is conditioned by an affective and evaluative attitude. But an experience of this kind is not foreign to the intentionally led life; assuming it only supposes an intervention by the will. In effect, the attitude not only conditions the mode by which the world reveals itself, it also gives way to dispositions for acting in it. We are, then, before a type of experience that cannot be untangled from intentional practice.

A change of attitude is implied in the description of the experience; it parallels the novel manner in which the world offers itself. The change of attitude is, in fact, what causes the world to reveal itself in a certain way; this change in how the world reveals itself reinforces, in turn, the new personal attitude. After the experience, we ask ourselves if something has changed in us—more specifically, we ask ourselves if the new attitude can be permanently maintained. In effect, the revelation of otherness and the basic belief that it arouses in us cannot only orient our way of seeing the world, it also incites us into assuming a certain demeanor towards it. This, in turn, can open the door to new experiences. Persisting in an attitude of reverence, sustaining a vital interest in what is other—both motivate the embrace of a certain form of life. This form of life can itself be perceived as valuable. And so, we could say that a belief that endorses a manner of conducting oneself is “validated” if it turns out that that conduct is itself valuable.

Let us remain for a moment on this point. One way of determining the truth or probability of a descriptive statement about reality is by testing it against practice. If a

belief is true it will conform to reality; a true belief is what allows our actions to become suited to reality—more likely to be successful. We are interested in having our beliefs correspond to reality because we want our actions to achieve their goal. A sure sign that we know is precisely to see that we have hit the mark. Objective knowledge is thus a reliable guide for practice.

In a related way, acquaintance with valuable things orients our conduct by giving it meaning. Statements that express value of this kind (known only through personal acquaintance) do not pretend to describe properties of reality that can be verified by anyone; instead, they point to features that only show themselves to those who open up to the world with certain attitudes. By analogy with descriptive statements, we could perhaps say that a guarantee of the validity of an evaluative statement is the success of the action guided by it. But in this case the success of the action is not measured by the achievement of a concrete end (getting somewhere specific, producing an object, etc.), but through the praiseworthy character of its results. It would not make sense to say that the fruits of a form of life are a criterion of *truth* for the beliefs that govern it; but it would make sense to say that they make these beliefs acceptable, testify to their capacity to give meaning, confirm their worth as a method by which to orient our lives. In effect, a belief that leads us to a form of conducting oneself is more convincing to the extent that it results in something of value. Through its fruits we also come to better understand the beliefs that correspond to it. The acceptance or rejection of a belief of [pg. 81] this kind will depend, among other factors, on its capacity to give way to praiseworthy forms of life. Just as the truth of our beliefs about reality are confirmed when our actions succeed in transforming it, so too do we determine the correctness of our conduct: achieving a praiseworthy life assures us of the validity of the value judgments that have guided it.

We could distinguish between two species of beliefs and ways of knowing according to the underlying motive (the interest that prompted them) and the function they serve in life. The first species corresponds to the interest in acquainting ourselves with reality so that we may mold our actions to better suit it; the goal here is to become more capable of dominating reality. Part of what we need for this is to really know how events unfold—i.e., according to their own rules, independently of our own desires. Only in this way will an intentional act have the guarantee of influencing reality and of being able to achieve the proposed ends. But there are other beliefs that respond to a very different interest: discovering value and meaning so that we may orient our existence by them. To achieve this we need to acquaint ourselves with the evaluative dimension of events and the manner in which they refer to a totality. In this case, it does not matter what reality is like, independent of our desires; what matters is how it reveals itself before our affective disposition and our will.

Corresponding to these two species of beliefs are two different kinds of experiences. The first species of belief grounds itself in the perception of properties resistant to the influence of our will. The second emerges from experiences in which evaluative qualities are discovered in a grouping of facts—facts which are considered in relation to our desire. In the first kind of experience, a hypothesis that we formulate to explain reality is put to the test: the function of the experience consists in the verification

or falsification of theoretical propositions. In the second type of experience, what is put to the test are the value judgments with which we try to understand the meaning of the world: its principle function consists in selecting a method with which to interpret reality, to either validate or invalidate a form of life. In this way, both types of experiences form part of a grouping of beliefs that have distinct functions and respond to different interests. The first kind provides the foundation to technology and science (dominators of the world); the other, to forms of practical wisdom (which governs our life). Between these two we find moral, aesthetic, and religious experiences. The experience that concerns us now can be found here too.

Confusion between the two species of belief drives towards opposing fallacies. In our case, the fallacy appears in the manner in which the experience we described is interpreted. The first fallacy is dogmatism. It manifests itself when we interpret as objective knowledge (verifiable by anyone) what are in truth personal beliefs or acquaintances, valid only for those subjects who share certain conditions. From there, the tendency of the dogmatic is to demand of others an adherence to one's own beliefs, as if these ought to be imposed on everyone. [pg. 82]

The experience analyzed within these pages cannot justify a dogmatic stance. We saw how it did not validate any particular doctrine nor any established religion. It forms part of a personal system of beliefs and cannot be confused with the experiences that corroborate an objective knowledge. When dealing with personal experience, indoctrination has no place; the most one can do is offer testimony to another and an invitation to assume the disposition which could then allow them to access a similar experience.

In addition to dogmatism there exists a contrary fallacy. It manifests itself in the rejection of all belief and personal acquaintances that cannot be reduced to an objective knowledge. It could be expressed in the refusal to concede any measure of credibility to an experience, such as the one we described, insofar as it consists in the perception of qualities non-reducible to physical properties, and insofar as it depends on and results in beliefs that are not universally verifiable. Nevertheless, the flipside also appears to be rational: to accept what is shown within the limits of what is shown, to concede some verisimilitude to beliefs that are not universally verifiable (even though it is not a position taken "in the name of reason"). Here we begin to catch a glimpse of a commonplace prejudice that is implicit in this view: scientism. We can define this as a form of skepticism which consists in circumscribing as valid only those forms of knowledge that are founded on a scientific mode of inquiry. Additionally, it considers as "irrational" any form of knowledge or modes of inquiry that differs from this ideal. But this prejudice forms part of an ideology that is no more "scientific" than the doctrines put forward by the dogmatics.

Religious dogmatism and scientific skepticism, though contrary in some aspects, nevertheless coincide on these points: first, both refuse to acknowledge the distinction between forms of experience and different methods of justification (each with its own set of specific characteristics); and second, both ground their denial, not in the

examination of reasons invoked by each form of belief, but in a doctrine that is sustained by prejudice.

Contrary to dogmatism and skepticism, reason walks another path: it accepts each experience within its limits of validity and each belief with the probability conferred on it by the appropriate kind of justification; this is done without rejecting any experience or belief in advance, and without judging all forms of professed knowledge against a single epistemic norm.

Conclusion

The belief in the existence of otherness is justified by a set of different reasons—above all, in a personal experience. Once this has transpired, it is also supported by its coherence with a system of beliefs. What is offered is a mode of interpreting the world which can, in turn, be partially validated by the particular events that thereby become illuminated. At the same time, a new manner of conducting oneself presents itself as an option, and its results can serve to validate it. [pg. 83]

Any circumstance can be interpreted in the light of this belief; every grouping of facts that is made comprehensible augments its verisimilitude (though none can serve to completely validate it). On the other hand, the acceptance of the belief is always subject to our ability to uphold a certain attitude (which is always liable to be missing in us). From there arises the constant possibility of subjecting it again to doubt.

An experience such as the one that we have examined cannot serve as the foundation to a secure knowledge, but neither can we dismiss it as an illusion. This was a particular way of perceiving something that was being revealed in the world. Such an experience allows us a glimpse into a dimension where a fullness of value and reality are united. Though it can orient our comprehension of a totality, invite us into a new way of life, the experience cannot be imposed on us. It can only challenge us into a global interpretation of existence, an interpretation which can be accepted or rejected, corroborated or eluded.

In the midst of insecurity, without it being explained to us, perhaps even without our wanting it, the otherness present in our ordinary world will gleam for a moment only to conceal itself again: everything can then return to its prior state, everything can also divest itself of value and meaning.

Final Reflection

I return to the last page of my notebook. Where am I? The blue mosque, with its perfect sphere, is present in the memory, though I feel it distant. Thought has come between it and I. Over time, reflection has created a division within me. I have examined my experiences in a detached manner, as if they were foreign to me. Now I become

reintegrated with myself. I ask: What have I done with my experience? The autobiographical aspect of the question is not of interest here; what matters is the problem it poses: What is reason to do with an experience of this kind?

First, let us look at what has happened with my belief. Do I still have the same conviction that I had then? No, it is now of another kind. I have turned an unreflective yet emotionally charged conviction into a reasonable belief. The procedure has been ambiguous. On the one hand, rational discourse has stripped reality of the richness of lived experience. Thought leaves no room for marvels or splendors. In doing this, I have lost the original emotion and, with it, the conviction. But only in this way could I assimilate the experience. The loss of certainty and richness are the price of its acceptance. Thought has shown that the belief in otherness is compatible with a rational system of beliefs; in this way, it has made it livable for me, acceptable for others. This is what reason can do with an extraordinary experience: take from it its disruptive character in order to assimilate it. Isn't this exactly what philosophy has always done with religious convictions? [pg. 84]

Another question remains: What kind of person requires this sort of procedure? Someone who experiences the sacred as a dimension of ordinary life, who participates in a social medium where the experience of otherness is not a sporadic and isolated phenomena—why should they not have this need? This need can only arise in them who belong to a society and an epoch in which the sacred is absent. Only a person divided between nostalgia for the sacred and a rationalist, scientific mentality would feel the urgency of justifying their belief in otherness. Rational justification is felt as necessary because it allows us to make the belief consistent with our conception of the world, present it in a way that others would find acceptable. In a society where the sacred has been expelled from our ordinary collective life, where it is able to manifest itself in unexpected moments of solitude—only in this kind of society can it even make sense to grapple with the problem of submitting a belief in otherness to rational scrutiny. And this is something that must be done if we are to hold on to its presence.

The labor of thought has served to “profane” the belief in the sacred in order to show that it does not infringe on the rational criteria demanded by our epoch and that it is capable of coexisting with the sum total of the existing beliefs about the world. It has done this in two respects: stripping it of its disruptive character and integrating it into a vision of the world that could reside and operate in life as it was prior to the experience. For those who do not habitually come into contact with the sacred, it is necessary to profane it in these two respects in order to make it suitable for acceptance. And this has always been the work of thought, in its philosophical exercise. Its paradoxical undertaking has been to convert the unsayable into the reasonable. But in what other way could reason give testimony to that which exceeds it? [pg. 85]

Critical Commentary

In many ways, “The Blue Mosque” represents a continuation of the themes that preoccupied Villoro throughout his life: epistemology, mysticism, the relationship between the self and the other, and the limits of language to name a few. However, it has been argued that this essay also marks a (perhaps unwelcome) departure from positions he had taken earlier in his life. For instance, the Mexican philosopher Guillermo Hurtado writes in “Portraits of Luis Villoro” (2015) that the perception of the oneness of reality we find in “The Blue Mosque” stands in tension with arguments made in his celebrated 1948 essay “Solitude and Communion” (Villoro 2017). What I wish to do now is explore this seeming tension. I show that it does not actually signal an inconsistency in his thought, but can, on the contrary, be thought of as a further elaboration of his earlier position.

In “Solitude and Communion” Villoro asks himself, How do we escape a state of solitude and solipsism, a state in which our relation to the ‘other’ (that which is not-I) is merely one of control and domination? His conclusion is that one must enter into communion with that other. This, in turn, entails cultivating an attitude of respect towards the other’s freedom—an acknowledgement of their independence from us, their fundamental irreducibility to our concepts and patterns of thinking. But now we face a problem: We seek communion to escape a state of solitude, and yet, “if we were to take communion to its limit, we would relapse [back] into solitude.” In other words, “if for a moment the other ceases to be irreducible, the loving relationship would disappear; there would not be two alterities facing each other, but one alterity in solitude.” Thus, communion can only be sustained “in the constant failure of total unification towards which [a loving] relation naturally tends” (Villoro 2017, 144).

In “The Blue Mosque,” Villoro describes an experience where communion *is* taken to its limit: that of total unification. He says of this experience that it feels simultaneously like an “abandonment of the everyday world, consisting of things, dispersed, existing singly as well as multiply; then, an order (foreign to that world) introduces itself.” This order which he was introduced to in his experience reveals a fundamental unity between what we ordinarily take to be disparate and isolated parts. It’s an experience in which one has “the feeling of being in communion with everything,” a feeling which comes only after “abandoning an attachment to the I.” In apprehending this reality, Villoro witnesses “the breaking of the ultimate duality: between the ‘I’ and the external world.”

And so, the seeming contradiction is this: Villoro now holds that an experience of total unification between the self and the other (and, indeed, with all of reality) is not only achievable, but it also results in an understanding of that reality which is desirable, illuminating, and truer than many of our ordinary belief about it. In Hurtado’s words, “On the one hand, [Villoro] complains about the I, of any I, his and that of others, but on the other hand, he believes that the vital encounter with other people, who are also I’s, is not only the source of morals, but also the source of our lives” (Hurtado 2015, 27).

While I grant that this points to an area in Villoro's thought that stand in need of clarification, I do not think that they constitute irreconcilable beliefs. This is because the reality which reveals itself to Villoro in his perception of unity is not one in which the other disappears, nor is it an experience undertaken in a state of solitude. The sensation of oneness Villoro experiences in the Mosque does not contradict the belief, expressed in "Solitude and Communion," that unification with the other extinguishes the possibility of love and leads us to solitude. To understand why, we must make a distinction between two kinds of unity: in "Solitude and Communion" the unity comes as a result of an expansion of the self; in "The Blue Mosque" the unity comes as a result of a dissolution of the self. The latter kind of unity is different in that it does not result in the expulsion of otherness from our experience; because otherness is preserved, it doesn't lead to the kind of solitude mentioned in "Solitude and Communion." In what follows I elaborate.

In "Solitude and Communion," Villoro attempts to trace the cosmological shifts that have, over time, resulted in the feeling of solitude we find in our era. The first step along this path is a rejection of an "affective unification with the cosmos, a sympathetic participation with it," which comes as a result of the spreading influence of Christianity (Villoro 2017, 142). God and the divine are no longer seen as being of the same substance as the material world, but rather exist in a plane of existence wholly foreign to it. Similarly, our own spirit – fashioned in God's image – is also seen as both removed from as well as superior to the natural world. Because of this spiritual superiority over Nature, we also possess the right of dominion.

Next, we see the rise of a mechanistic worldview, spawned by the technological advancements of the 17th century. Nature now "reveals itself to the eyes of the new physics as a combination of phenomena determined perfectly by precise laws" (Villoro 2017, 142). This development finishes what was started by Christianity, rupturing the unification once felt between humans and the natural world. Nature is now prohibited from speaking to us unless it is as a response to our scientific hypothesis, to the questions that our technologies pose to it. It has value only in its ability to furnish us with the resources needed to achieve human ends. Lastly, Nature is seen no longer as a source of meaning in its own right; rather, it is regarded as meaningful only in virtue of the universal laws that humankind has discovered, laws which determine as well as explain its motions (143). Thus, not only is Nature an object over which we have rightful dominion (as we saw with Christianity), it is now also ontologized as a resource waiting to be harnessed and commodified by our ever-advancing technologies.

In the final step, we see the development of what Villoro calls the Transcendental "I." In his words, this is "the subject of idealism, valid for all mankind, legislator of nature." In other words, here we see the individual self and their subjective experience of the world become eclipsed by an abstract, anonymous, and universal subject. In turn, "the whole world appears before me, objectified, regulated in accordance with my own laws" (Villoro 2017, 144). When looking at the world from the vantage point of the Transcendental I, the reality I perceive appears to me as the only reality that exists, and thus I begin to believe that the objects I encounter only have "as much significance as I

decide to give them. They depend on me; only from me do they receive an order, intelligibility, and meaning” (145).

The unity that one experiences through the lens of the Transcendental I arises from the belief that one is in full possession of all the relevant facts, as well as the tools with which those facts can be exploited for personal gain. Villoro associates this with a desire to possess the other, to see them as a source of information, value them only in their ability to aid in the furtherance of our own ends. It's the belief in this kind of unity that is ultimately to blame for our current state of solitude. When the self expands to the point of enveloping all of reality, there is no one to love or be in communion with.

In contrast, the unity which is described in “The Blue Mosque” comes as a result of a different process, and is structured in a different way than the unity we find in “Solitude and Communion.” These differences ultimately explain why one kind of unification is able sidestep the issue of relapsing back into a state of solitude and not the other. In “The Blue Mosque” we hear Villoro give testimony to an experience in which the multiplicity and heterogeneity of the world become integrated into a single whole. We could divide this experience into three parts. First, there is a perception of an order, an underlying reality, which is seen as uniting disparate phenomena. Second, the differences between I and ‘other’ break down to reveal a fundamental sameness. Third, there is an abandonment of an attachment to the I. The main difference between this kind of unity and the one that comes from an expansion of the self is its understanding of reality and what it can be said to encompass.

On the one hand, in the experience of unity-by-self-expansion, the totality of one's perceptions – that is, the phenomena that appears before one's consciousness – is taken to be all that is real. Conversely, in “The Blue Mosque,” reality is understood as being reflected in (or referred to in a limited way by) one's perceptions, and it is not thought of as equivalent to the totality of those perceptions. In Villoro's words, his words do not “limit themselves to describing one's experience as it is lived; rather, they interpret that experience as a sign of a conceptualized and imagined reality that reveals itself in it.” This reality is not, moreover, a “fact nor an object, but manifests itself in every fact with a character contrary to ordinary experience.” The reality we see ourselves as being in union with, in other words, is to be understood to include everything that escapes our subjective and limited perception, yet whose presence we can nevertheless guess at and gesture towards. In this way, a perception of individuals as inexhaustible and undeterminable sources of meaning does not preclude one from having the separate perception that we can be simultaneously united as part of a larger whole (that is, so long as we acknowledge that whole to also encompass the other).

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank Gregory Pappas for introducing me to Luis Villoro and his essay "La Mezquita Azul." Without his constant encouragement, I would not have embarked on or finished this project. I am also indebted to Vicente Medina for his wonderful feedback on an early version of this draft. Most of all, I want to extend my appreciation to Allyson Duarte for her patience and her brilliant editorial assistance. I attribute so much of this translation's coherence and readability to the many hours we spent reviewing it together, line by line.

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