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What Has History to Do with Philosophy? Insights from the Medieval Contemplative Tradition

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THE FIELD OF THE HISTORY of philosophy is rife with disagreements about its own nature. While some scholars work actively to bring historical figures and ideas into conversation with contemporary debates, other scholars cry ‘Violence!’ and dismiss their work as anachronistic. At the same time, detailed textual reconstruction and analysis are discounted by others as philology rather than philosophy, and demand is made for ‘Arguments!’ These disagreements have, in turn, shaped the ways in which historians of philosophy have interacted (or not interacted) with contemporary philosophers. Too often, the contribution of historically oriented philosophers to modern discussions has been reduced to volunteering ideological nuggets mined from ancient sources, or to explicating theories whose value stems in part from their very lack of connection to current interests.¹

This chapter highlights a different *corrective* and *complementary* role that historically informed philosophy can play in contemporary discussions. Analysis of the development of key definitions, concepts, principles, and so on, often illuminates problematic prejudices that call for a re-examination of the philosophical considerations in their favour—a re-examination that should involve looking at the relevant historical context in which the idea developed. In what follows, I demonstrate, via the case study of medieval and modern conceptions of mystical experience, that turning to the relevant historical context can also provide viable philosophical resources with which to complement existing discussions. What it takes for an experience to count as genuinely mystical has been the source of significant controversy; most current philosophical definitions of ‘mystical experience’ exclude embodied, non-unitive states, but, in so doing, they exclude the majority of reported mystical experiences. I use a re-examination of the full range of reported medieval mystical experiences—both

¹ See Chapter 9, this volume, for a detailed discussion of these two extremes, as well as an alternative different from the one I lay out here.

in the apophatic tradition, which excludes or denigrates embodied states, and in the affective tradition, which treats such states as fully mystical—to demonstrate how a better understanding of the historical medieval mystic tradition can serve as a valuable complement to ongoing philosophical discussions of religious and mystical experience. I conclude by suggesting that this approach can also help philosophers engage in meaningful interaction with scholars working on similar topics in other disciplines.

10.1. Implicit Assumptions and the Case of ‘Mystical Experience’

The stories behind the development and adoption of any number of philosophical definitions, principles, and concepts are complex—and, often, problematic—in ways that should impact our use of them today. I focus on the concept of ‘mystical experience’ in this chapter because it provides an excellent case study not only of this point but also of the ways in which historically informed philosophy can respond. There is a rich tradition within medieval mysticism, for instance, of treating embodied experiences as genuinely mystical, on which contemporary scholars can—and should—draw in order to complement the existing focus on non-sensory, selfless mystic union.

In the remainder of this section, I explicate the current philosophical conception of mystical experience in the context of its 20th-century influences, showing how prejudices against women, emotions, and the body have played a significant role in determining which sort of reported mystical experiences fall under the contemporary definition and which do not. The role of these non-philosophical factors thus motivates enquiry, in Sections 10.2 and 10.3, into the philosophical considerations for and against that narrow focus.

Let us begin our enquiry, then, where everyone begins their philosophical enquiries these days: with the corresponding *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article.² The definition of ‘mystical experience’ in the entry on ‘Mysticism’ does an excellent job capturing general philosophical assumptions about mysticism and is, in fact, specifically described as ‘suited more specialized treatments of mysticism in philosophy’:

Mystical experience: A (purportedly) super sense-perceptual or sub sense-perceptual unitive experience granting acquaintance of realities or states of affairs that are of a kind not accessible by way of sense-perception, somatosensory modalities, or standard introspection.³

² In this case, a very good place to start. It possesses, among other virtues, an excellent bibliography of previous philosophical treatments of mysticism.

³ Jerome Gellman offers this definition in his *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on mysticism. The more general definition he offers does not include the word ‘unitive’ but is otherwise the same. See <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mysticism> (accessed 11 October 2017).

For our purposes, the first thing of note about this definition is its insistence that a mystical experience must be either ‘super’ or ‘sub’ perceptual.⁴ To count as ‘*super sense-perceptual*’, an experience must have ‘perception-like content of a kind not appropriate to sense perception, somatosensory modalities ... or standard introspection’.⁵ That is, although a mystical experience may accompany or even be occasioned by sense perception, as when one has a mystical experience while watching the sun set, the experience itself must transcend the senses in a distinctive way. This definition explicitly rules out visions, auditions, and other sense-based experiences from the category of mystical experience: ‘[p]ara-sensual experiences such as religious visions and auditions fail to make an experience mystical’.⁶ To count as ‘*sub sense-perceptual*’, in turn, an experience must go beyond the senses in the other direction, so that the experience contains little to no phenomenological content. (As I discuss in Section 10.2, such experiences are usually seen as the end achievement of a lengthy process of self-loss or self-annihilation en route to union with the divine.)

The second significant feature in this definition is its emphasis on the inherently unitive nature of a mystical experience. Beginning at the outset of the 20th century with William James’ discussion of the ‘four marks’ of a mystical experience in *Varieties of Religious Experience*,⁷ and continuing with Evelyn Underhill’s influential ‘five stages of the mystic path’ in her *Mysticism: A Study of the Nature and Development of Man’s Spiritual Consciousness*,⁸ modern scholars of mysticism have generally upheld a conception of selfless mystic union as the ultimate end of religious experience.⁹ Thus, Underhill talks about a ‘death of selfhood’ in her depiction of the unitive life, which she describes as the highest and final stage of the mystic life,¹⁰ while Jerome Gellman characterises a unitive mystical

⁴ For those curious as to what Gellman means by ‘experience’ in this context, the following comment seems of note: ‘Mystical writings do not support William James’ claim (James 1958), that mystical experience must be a transient event, lasting only a short time and then disappearing. Rather, the experience might be an abiding consciousness, accompanying a person throughout the day, or parts of it. *For that reason, it might be better to speak of mystical consciousness, which can be either fleeting or abiding. Hereafter, the reader should understand “experience” in this sense*’ (emphasis added).

⁵ Text elided: ‘including the means for sensing pain and body temperature, and internally sensing body, limb, organ, and visceral positions and states’. See <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mysticism> (accessed 11 October 2017).

⁶ See <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mysticism> (accessed 11 October 2017).

⁷ James (1902).

⁸ Underhill, for instance, describes the final stage of the mystic path (which she bases on John of the Cross’ writings) as the ‘unitive life’. See Underhill (1911) as well as Underhill (1920). The previous four stages are, respectively, ‘awakening of self’, ‘purgation of self’, ‘illumination’, and ‘the dark night of the soul’.

⁹ Whether this loss of self should be understood metaphorically, ontologically, or phenomenologically is subject to debate. For our purposes, what is significant is merely that such union is understood to erase any distinction between the consciousness of the individual having the mystic experience and the divine.

¹⁰ In her words: ‘In that most dear relation all feeling, will, and thought attain their end. Here all the teasing complications of our separated selfhood are transcended. Hence the eager striving, the sharp vision, are not wanted any more. In that mysterious death of selfhood on the summits which is the

experience as involving ‘phenomenological de-emphasis, blurring, or eradication of multiplicity’.¹¹ Achieving this form of mystical union is generally taken to be both necessary for an experience being properly mystical and a (retroactive) sign that such an experience has been achieved.

On this widely accepted understanding, then, affective and/or sensory states in which the subject and the divine remain distinct (such as visions or auditions) do not qualify as properly mystical. The term ‘mystical’ is reserved for these super- or sub-sensory unitive states that grant access to ‘realities or states of affairs that are of a kind not accessible by way of sense-perception, somatosensory modalities, or standard introspection’.¹² Because my focus in this chapter is on the accepted mode of mystic experiences rather than their epistemic import, I will not discuss the ‘realities’ mystical experiences purport to impart. It is, however, worth noting that they are meant to be such that access to them requires utterly transcending our bodies and our senses.

In ruling out embodied states such as visions, auditions, and physical closure (surviving for long periods of time without taking nourishment or excreting), the modern definition of mystical experience carves a narrow swath in the full range of reported mystic experiences. One might think this tight focus is appropriate: after all, the question of how to ascertain whether someone’s claim to mystical experiences is valid has been a topic of fierce debate since at least the Middle Ages. In the 14th and 15th centuries in the Latin West, for instance, church authorities were understandably alarmed by what looked like the claim that—via the insight gained through mystic union—people could transcend need of the church altogether. Their alarm was not entirely unjustified. In her *Mirror and Annihilation of Simple Souls*, for instance, Marguerite Porete (burnt at the stake as a heretic in 1310) argues that the soul can be joined to God in such a way that its will becomes God’s will, and that a person in this state need not pray or attend Mass or participate in any of the regular activities of the Christian life.¹³ Especially in light of the enormous surge of reported mystic experiences in the late 13th and 14th centuries throughout Europe, church leaders became wary of people and communities who claimed to have direct contact with God; after the Reformation, such communities were often actively suppressed.¹⁴

In the 20th century, debates over the nature of mystical experience heated up again.¹⁵ In the first half, influential scholars such as William James and Evelyn

medium of Eternal Life, heights meet the deeps: supreme achievement and complete humility are one’ (Underhill 1911: 444).

¹¹ See Gellmann (2014).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Porete is linked with the antinomianists or Free Spirit heresy for this reason, although the actual connection is quite unclear. See, e.g., Lerner (1972).

¹⁴ Communities of nuns who were frequently having mystic experiences during the Eucharist were sometimes forbidden the host until such experiences ceased. See Walker Bynum (1991).

¹⁵ For a detailed discussion of the history of the term ‘mysticism’ that also includes helpful references to further discussions, see Hollywood (2012). For an overview of the complex politics involved in the struggle to define mysticism in the 20th century, see the first chapter of Beckwith (1993).

Underhill focused on the psychological and philosophical as well as religious aspects of mysticism, and there was a general post-Freudian and Jungian interest in psychologising such experiences in order to uncover their true significance. This combined with the rise of medicine as a science and increased interest in identifying physical causes for altered mental states to produce working definitions of ‘mysticism’ and ‘mystical experiences’ from which physical and affective states were carefully ruled out—in part due to epistemological worries about how to distinguish genuine religious experiences from hallucinations or medical conditions such as epilepsy. In the post-Auschwitz world of the second half of the 20th century, the search for a universal divine that undergirds outwardly conflicting world religions gained ground, popularised by works such as Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (originally published in 1949). This push towards religious pluralism, epitomised by John Hick’s work in influential volumes such as *The Myth of God Incarnate* (1977) and *God Has Many Names* (1980), stressed the similarities in descriptions of selfless mystic union among different religious traditions in order to argue for a common basis for them all.

One common denominator in these modern discussions has been their dismissal of embodied experiences as inferior states, and sometimes even as misleading or counterfeit versions of true mystical experiences. As a number of scholars have noted recently, however, in ruling out these sorts of experiences, treatments of mysticism have discounted precisely those mystical states most common to women, for the majority of people reporting such embodied mystical experiences have been female.¹⁶

This dismissal of female experience has a long history. According to the widely accepted Aristotelian biology of the Middle Ages, women’s mental acuity is compromised by their bodies, which are more sensitive to sensory perception and thus more susceptible to bodily passions and emotions.¹⁷ Although this sensitivity makes women seem better candidates for certain sorts of religious experiences (such as visions and physical states such as stigmata and closure), the idea that their bodies consistently overpowered their intellectual capacities simultaneously calls into question their reports and judgements about such experiences.¹⁸ Thus, after the surge in reported mystic experiences in the 13th and 14th centuries, the people whose reports church authorities were most likely to scrutinise closely and then condemn were predominantly female—a result, no doubt, buoyed by further persistent cultural and religious beliefs that women are less trustworthy than men and prone to exaggerate their emotional and physical states.¹⁹

¹⁶ See Jantzen (1995) and Furlong (2013) for book-length treatments of this topic. Mooney (1999) provides an explicit discussion of how gender came into play in the way specific mystics’ reported experiences were recorded, altered, and/or understood.

¹⁷ In Caciola (2003), Nancy Caciola addresses why women were seen as more likely to be possessed by demons as well as to experience divine visions, auditions, etc.

¹⁸ This was one of the reasons the testimony of women was not accepted in court.

¹⁹ For detailed discussion of the sorts of experiences being reported, the general increase in embodied mystical experiences in this time period, and their perceived relation to women and women’s bodies,

The close negative association of bodies and emotions in women continues through to the present day.²⁰ This association also played an unacknowledged role in the exclusion of embodied states from the contemporary philosophical definition of mystical experience.

In some cases, the negative associations between bodies and women is left implicit, as when Evelyn Underhill dismisses reports of ecstatic union and other sensory and physical mystic states as a result of ‘the infantile craving for a sheltering and protecting love’ that is ‘frequently pathological’. We should be seeking to transcend our bodies and ourselves, she claims, not to wallow in pleasures and pains that speak to our personal desires; such visions and ecstatic experiences frequently accompany ‘other abnormal conditions in emotional visionaries whose revelations have no ultimate characteristics’.²¹ Although Underhill’s disdain for the role of emotions and physical aberrations in the mystic life is clear, what is left unsaid is that the vast majority of such ‘emotional visionaries’ were women, and that the sort of mystics whose experiences typify the superior unitive life are almost exclusively male.²² (It is also worth noting that the ‘ultimate characteristics’ which these revelations lack are those identified by Underhill herself as essential to true mystic union, and that they include self-abnegation and physical transcendence.)

In other cases, however, the negative associations between emotion, bodies, and women is made explicit. David Knowles, for example, describes the ‘pure spirituality’ of the early Middle Ages as ‘contaminated by another current, that of a more emotional and idiosyncratic form of devotion ... deriving partly from the influence of some of the women saints of the fourteenth century, women such as Angela of Foligno, Dorothea of Prussia, and Bridget of Sweden’.²³ As with Underhill, Knowles associates purity of spirituality with an emphasis on transcendence of the particularities of the body and its affective states; unlike his predecessor, Knowles makes the connection between undue emotionality and women clear. Although some male mystics also report embodied experiences, women are particularly likely to be linked with the sort of emotional and

see the chapter ‘The Female Body and Religious Practice’ in Walker Bynum (1991), and Grundmann’s classic (1936).

²⁰ See the introduction to Bordo (1993) for a succinct history of this association and its manifestations in modern culture.

²¹ Underhill (1920: 20, 23).

²² The exception to this general rule is Teresa of Avila. Simone de Beauvoir (1989) speaks approvingly of Teresa in her largely critical chapter in *The Second Sex* on ‘The Mystic’, for instance, and Gellman’s lengthy (2014) *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article from which the definition at the beginning of the chapter (see also fn. 3) is taken mentions exactly one female mystic: Teresa of Avila. Teresa is of obvious philosophical and theological significance—see Christia Mercer (2017) on the relation between her *Interior Castle* and Descartes’ *Mediations*—but she comes a full century later than the explosion of affective mysticism that paper focuses on, and she is not embedded in either the same sort of cultural movement or religious communities. Perhaps this is why she is consistently upheld as the acceptable sort of female mystic.

²³ Knowles (1948–9: 222–3).

other forms of religious expression which are portrayed as ‘tainting’ the appropriately dispassionate, universal modes of true mysticism and connection with the divine.

The same negative connection between women, bodies, and emotional religious experiences is drawn by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*. In this groundbreaking work of feminist philosophy, de Beauvoir is sharply critical of the majority of female medieval mystics, arguing in her chapter on ‘The Mystic’ that women are more likely than men to report physical mystic experiences because of their disadvantaged status as Other, which has led them to become more susceptible to religious fervour and extreme emotional states. ‘Not clearly distinguishing reality from make-believe, action from magic, the objective from the imaginary,’ she writes, ‘Woman is peculiarly prone to materialize the absent in her own body.’²⁴ In other words, women are more likely to passively embody their religious beliefs in physical and emotional suffering or ecstasy than they are to attempt concrete action in the world of men from which they have been excluded.²⁵

Prejudices against emotions, bodies, and women thus factored into the development of the contemporary understanding of mystical experiences as necessarily involving non-sensory, selfless union. Even Jerome Gellman, author of the working definition quoted at the beginning of this chapter, admits that ‘[t]he thinking that there is a common, unconstructed, essence to mystical experience has worked against the recognition of women’s experiences as properly mystical’.²⁶

Here we can see in action the first sort of corrective role that historically oriented philosophy offers: an examination of the development of conceptions of mysticism in the 20th century demonstrates how it is undergirded by problematic assumptions, and thus provokes a re-examination of its philosophical merits. In Section 10.2, I demonstrate another aspect of this corrective role, turning to medieval discussions about the nature and range of mystic experiences in order to examine the philosophical motivations in favour of excluding physical and affective experiences from the properly mystical; as we will see, these motivations rest on controversial claims about the nature of God and human persons. Furthermore, as I show in Section 10.3, the broader historical context was where standard views about mystical experiences embraced embodied and affective expression.

10.2. Correction in Context: Apophatic Self-Abnegation

Prejudices against emotions, bodies, and women have influenced the development of current philosophical conceptions of what counts as a mystical experience. One might well think that these prejudices (which have been around at least as long as philosophy) have always worked against the inclusion of embodied,

²⁴ De Beauvoir (1989: 672).

²⁵ See also her discussion of religion in her chapter ‘Situation’ in de Beauvoir (1989: 621ff.).

²⁶ See <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mysticism> (accessed 11 October 2017).

affective experiences in the mystical canon—after all, attitudes towards the body and towards women were not *better* in ages past, correct? One would, however, be wrong in so thinking. This is where historically informed philosophy has a second important corrective role to play: although there is a strain of mysticism that excludes embodied experiences from the properly mystic life—namely apophaticism, which generally focuses on the ineffability of the divine and the inability of language and thought to express any direct experience of that divine—such mysticism represents only one part of a much larger tradition. Its cautions against physical and affective states thus need to be understood in the larger context in which such embodied states were seen as the mystic norm, and the reasons those states were accepted as the norm need to be taken seriously. This approach, like the corrective approach described and illustrated in Section 10.1, is also easily generalisable to any number of other contemporary philosophical discussions: it can (and should) be used to counter mistaken claims of ‘But this is the way things have always been!’ by presenting historical examples of real alternatives.

The apophatic tradition in Western Christian mysticism, for instance, has a long philosophical lineage—arguably beginning with Plato’s claims about the nature of the Good in the *Republic* and emerging in the Middle Ages via figures such as pseudo-Dionysius. Developed in the 13th century and onward also in relation to the Islamic and Jewish mystic traditions, medieval apophaticism is typified in the works of Marguerite Porete, Meister Eckhart, the anonymous English *Cloud of Unknowing*, and Nicholas of Cusa (continuing post-Reformation most prominently in the writings of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross). During the centuries in which mysticism flourished as a form of religious expression and in which it (arguably) found its fullest form, however, apophaticism was a non-dominant tradition that frequently flirted with heresy. This fact, of course, makes no difference for its philosophical plausibility; what does prove significant is that in advocating a selfless merging with an unknowable God as the ultimate end of human existence, apophatic mysticism assumes highly contentious premises about both God and human nature.

Apophatic mystics tend to describe the spiritual life as a series of stages that we move through in a journey towards unknowing union with the unknowable divine. In this journey, one of the most important tasks is self-abnegation, or radical self-loss. In the *Mirror of Simple Souls*, for instance, Marguerite Porete explains how we can gain desired union with God through complete elimination of the conscious self:

All things are one for her [the Soul], without an explanation (*propter quid*), and she is nothing in a One of this sort. Thus the Soul has nothing more to do for God than God does for her. Why? Because He is, and she is not. She retains nothing more of herself in nothingness, because He is sufficient of Himself, because He is and she is not. Thus she is stripped of all things because she is without existence, where she was before she was created.²⁷

²⁷ Porete (1993: 218), translation slightly modified. As Barbara Newman notes in her discussion of

This stress on self-abnegation runs throughout Porete's work: such annihilation is essential for the sort of complete union with God she advocates. Meister Eckhart also frequently exhorts his listeners to detach themselves from all individual affections and desires, so that they can prepare themselves for the final act of self-abnegation. In Counsel 23, he states baldly: 'There is still one work [after the soul has detached itself from worldly concerns] that remains proper and his own, and that is annihilation of self.'²⁸ It is often unclear in such texts precisely how to understand this sort of self-abnegation (is it meant to be understood literally or metaphorically, ontologically or phenomenologically?), but the stress on removing any sense of self that might impede complete union with God is consistent throughout the apophatic tradition.²⁹

Given this emphasis on self-abnegation, it is not surprising that apophatic texts frequently caution their readers against taking unusual physical and emotional states to be signs of mystic union. Such states might indicate a sort of spiritual progress, but they are not themselves the goal of the contemplative life. Thus, in his late 14th-century *The Scale of Perfection*, Walter Hilton warns against accepting physical sensations as signs of true mystic union, whether 'in sounding of the ear, or savoring in the mouth, or smelling at the nose, or else [the sensation of] any perceptible heat as if it were fire, glowing and warming the breast' (1.10).³⁰ This is a direct jab at Richard Rolle's earlier *Fire of Love*, which describes Rolle's mystical experiences as including physical warmth in his body (especially his chest), a sense of surpassing sweetness, and the sound of celestial music. The anonymous 14th-century *Cloud of Unknowing* takes aim at Rolle's 'fire of love' as well, cautioning that such experiences might even signal something sinister: 'For I tell thee truly that the devil has his contemplatives, as God has his' (ch. 45). Meister Eckhart, in turn, 'tartly condemn[s] those who want to see God with the same eyes with which they behold a cow'.³¹

Significantly, in all these cases, the God in whom we want to lose ourselves is characterised as utterly unknowable and (at least for Eckhart and Porete) beyond being itself. Experience of such a God necessarily transcends physical

Porete's theory of self-abnegation: 'In this dissolution of the ego no room remains for the body: even the physical humanity of Christ is no longer cherished by the free soul' (Newman 2003: 203). Porete explicitly addresses the need to move past consideration of Christ's humanity in chapter 79. See also Hollywood (1995).

²⁸ Counsel 23, *Meister Eckhart*, 280.

²⁹ In extreme cases, apophatic mystics even saw self-abnegation as allowing for an identity of the mystic with God; when no egoistic self remains, one can be filled with God to the point where one *becomes* God. When the title character of the 14th-century 'Sister Catherine' treatise comes out of a mystic trance and says to her confessor: 'Sir, rejoice with me, I am become God!', she is not boasting of an ascendance to divinity but rather indicating that 'she' no longer exists, properly speaking. See 'The "Sister Catherine" Treatise', trans. Elvira Borgstädt, in McGinn (1986: 358). For further discussion of this treatise and also this general tradition, see McGinn (2005). For a book-length treatment of this topic (that focuses particularly on Meister Eckhart), see Morgan (2013).

³⁰ Manuscript: Cambridge University Library MS Add. 6686, p. 284.

³¹ McGinn (1981: 61). The sermon referenced is *Sermon* 16b in Meister Eckhart (1936– : 272).

and affective experience: for most apophatics, it entails the loss of consciousness itself. Human beings thus find their end not just in separating their souls permanently from the body (a claim in direct contradiction with both a holistic conception of the human being and the doctrine of the resurrection of the body), but in perfecting the act of self-annihilation. The highest form of mystical union for the apophatic tradition is one in which neither human beings nor God exist in standard ways.

In part because of this, apophaticism was never the leading mystical tradition in the medieval period. Instead, particularly during the 13th to 15th centuries, when the Western Christian contemplative movement was at its height, a more body-friendly and affective mysticism formed the dominant tradition, finding expression in a host of religious communities throughout Europe. In Section 10.3, I turn to this tradition. Contemporary discussions in analytic philosophy of religion ignore the reports of the vast number of people who claim to experience embodied states that connect them directly to the incarnate God. Whether this oversight results from ignorance of the relevant tradition or from adopting the problematically exclusionary conception of mystical experience discussed in Section 10.1, it represents precisely the sort of conceptual lacuna that historical philosophy is primed to correct. I thus offer this correction as the conclusion of my case study, turning in the final section (10.4) to a discussion of other benefits this historically based approach to philosophy yields—most notably, rich points of connection with disciplinary fields beyond our own.

10.3. Correcting via Complement: Embodied Mystical Experiences

As we saw in Section 10.1, affective mysticism is often dismissed because of its association with the body and with emotions. This is, however, to miss the primary significance of such forms of connection with the divine. Human beings are physical and affective as well as intellective and volitional beings: our primary interaction with reality—created and divine—is physical. Whereas the apophatic tradition urges us to transcend those modes of interaction, the affective tradition encourages us to delve more deeply into them. Once we recognise the problematic prejudices that shaped the contemporary conception of mystical experience and the controversial philosophical assumptions underlying the apophatic exclusion of embodied experiences, we are in a position to see the rich history of embodied mystical experiences reported in the Middle Ages as offering a vital complement to the narrow range of religious experiences currently studied by analytic philosophers. As with the corrective approaches mentioned in Sections 10.1 and 10.2, this method is perfectly generalisable for any number of similar situations: contemporary discussions of love, of happiness, of persons, and so on, would all be enhanced by pulling back from the idiosyncratic foci of modern philosophy and incorporating insights from the past.

In the case at hand, it is worth noting that the medieval emphasis on embodied contemplative experiences developed in part as a response to 12th-century gnostic movements that either denied or de-emphasised Christ's humanity and taught the need for purifying our immaterial souls from the inherently corrupt material realm. In other words, the push to transcend our bodies in apophatic mystical union was viewed as displaying an important misunderstanding of both God and human nature. In the mainstream contemplative tradition, figures as diverse in education, social status, and geographical location as Hadewijch of Brabant, Catherine of Siena, Richard Rolle, Marguerite of Oingt, Beatrice of Nazareth, Ida of Louvain, and Angela of Foligno viewed altered physical states (such as mystic death or bodily 'closure'), emotional states (such as uncontrollable weeping or laughter), and parasensory states (such as visions and auditions) not as *distracting* from true mystic union but as ways of *experiencing* a direct connection with the God who had become incarnate for us.

One sign of this tradition's understanding of the properly spiritual subject as a holistic union of body and soul (as opposed to a soul seeking to rise above the material) is its reliance on the imagination. In the 13th century and onward, the imagination was generally taken to be the faculty of the human soul that stores phantasms (mental 'pictures' formed via information collected by the external senses) and then is able to combine those phantasms in both familiar and unfamiliar ways.³² In a popular spiritual exercise of the time, contemplatives were encouraged to imagine themselves present at key moments of Christ's life, particularly his Passion, the explicit purpose of which was to generate certain sorts of affective responses that would deepen the subject's devotion.³³

This use of the imagination in spiritual exercises was also closely linked with the idea of 'spiritual vision' (*visio spiritualis*), a concept borrowed from the Augustinian Platonic tradition. In contrast both to the sort of material vision (via the eye) which is directed at physical objects and to the sort of intellectual vision (via reason) which is directed at divine truths, spiritual vision is directed at images held in the imagination. As such, it mediates between our physical sense capacities and our intellectual and volitional capacities; physical experiences and intellectual experiences come together and are combined in significant ways in spiritual vision (also associated in this tradition with the 'inner senses' and the 'inner body'). In the affective mystical tradition, meditative exercises such as imagining oneself present at the Crucifixion allow the inner senses to undergo spiritual experiences with transformative physical and intellectual/volitional effects. In the words of Niklaus Largier, such meditation 'helps construct an inner space that creates affectively embodied access to the divine'.³⁴

³² For a clear exposition of how phantasms function in human cognition for Aquinas, whose view on this issue was extremely influential in this period, see MacDonald (1993).

³³ For further discussion of this meditation and its use of the imagination, see Matter (2012).

³⁴ Largier (2003).

Because strong emotion was closely linked both to bodies and to our ability to imagine things vividly (driving us to deeper devotion and closer communion with God), it was welcomed in forms of religious expression that celebrated the Incarnation. The mystical visions, auditions, smellings, tastings, and so on associated with such affect were not understood as the result of overexcited sensory capacities but as important spiritual experiences, and valued as such. As Patricia Dailey notes:

The goal of affective mysticism is not to excite the outer body into a Bacchic frenzy, but to allow one's affective and thus embodied experience to stimulate the construction of the inner body and then to allow the heart, innards, or inner senses to speak and act through the outer body.³⁵

Embodied mystical experiences were seen as connecting the human subject to God in ways that enhanced rather than abnegated our distinctive humanity: 'All Christ's members—eyes, breasts, lips and so on—were seen as testimony to his humanation, and the devout soul responded to this enfleshing with all its bodily capabilities.'³⁶

Consider the following vision that Hadewijch of Brabant reports having during the celebration of the Eucharist (a particularly significant act in the affective tradition, since it involves a mystical physical connection between Christ and the person receiving the elements):³⁷

With that he came in the form and clothing of a Man, as he was on the day when he gave us his Body for the first time ... and he gave himself to me in the shape of the Sacrament, in its outward form, as the custom is; and then he gave me to drink from the chalice, in form and taste, as the custom is. After that he came himself to me, took me entirely in his arms, and pressed me to him; and all my members felt his in full felicity, in accordance with the desire of my heart and my humanity. So I was outwardly satisfied and fully transported ... [After a short time] I saw him completely come to naught and so fade and all at once dissolve that I could no longer recognize or perceive him outside me, and I could no longer distinguish him within me. Then it was to me as if we were one without difference. (Vision Seven)³⁸

This account begins with a very physical sort of mystic union with Christ (via the inner senses): note that it is described as fulfilling the desire of her *humanity*. Even when she reports the later experience of being 'as if we were one without difference' with God, the metaphor at play is one of digestion: Christ has become one with her (and she with him) in the way that food and drink become one with us—part of our very being.

³⁵ Dailey (2012: 269).

³⁶ Walker Bynum (1991: 91).

³⁷ Caroline Walker Bynum has written extensively on the significance the Eucharist takes on in the affective tradition; see the chapters 'The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages' and 'Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion in the Thirteenth Century' in Walker Bynum (1991).

³⁸ Hadewijch (1980: 281).

Although Hadewijch also frequently describes a loss of self in mystic union, she does so without downplaying the significance of affective and embodied experiences. This acknowledgment of the importance of physicality for human subjects is present in her metaphorical language as well. In one particularly striking depiction of union with the divine, for instance, she describes how complete union can also include eternal self-preservation:

Where the abyss of his wisdom is, God will teach you what he is, and with what wondrous sweetness the loved one and the Beloved dwell one in the other, and how they penetrate each other in a way that neither of the two distinguishes himself from the other. But they abide in one another in fruition, mouth in mouth, heart in heart, body in body, and soul in soul, while one sweet divine nature flows through both and they are both one thing through each other, but at the same time remain two different selves—yes, and remain so forever. (Letter 9)³⁹

A less developed but just as striking portrayal of this sort of physical and self-preserving union is Marguerite of Oingt's vision in which she sees herself as a withered tree that is then watered by a stream that is Christ.⁴⁰ Having drawn the 'living water' into herself, Marguerite then sees the names of the five senses written on her newly revived branches. In this way, she experiences both union with God, as the water fully penetrates the tree of her selfhood, and the preservation and flourishing of that self, in body as well as spirit.

There is much more to be said on this topic, of course, and an extensive literature reporting affective and/or embodied mystical experiences that involve unmediated union with God. Even this brief discussion should be sufficient, however, to demonstrate that inclusion of these states would enrich and complement current philosophical discussions. As we have seen, even an exclusive focus on reports of *unitive* mystical experiences (as the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* definition addressed in Section 10.1 does) need not rule out embodied and affective mystical states. Ongoing debates in analytic philosophy concerning the nature and role of religious and mystical experiences would benefit from considering embodied mystical experiences together with those of selfless union—particularly in light of the spurious motivation undergirding their exclusion in the first place.

10.4. Philosophical Morals and Historical Stories

So far in this chapter, I have focused on the corrective and complementary roles that a historically oriented approach can occupy in philosophical discussions. First, I have argued that analysis of the development of key definitions, concepts, principles, and so on, can often illuminate problematic prejudices that should motivate a re-examination of the philosophical considerations in their favour. Secondly, I have claimed that this re-examination should involve looking at the

³⁹ Hadewijch (1980: 66).

⁴⁰ Duraffour *et al.* (1965: 139).

relevant historical context in which the idea developed. Thirdly, I have demonstrated via the case study of medieval and modern conceptions of mystical experience that turning to the relevant historical context can sometimes provide viable philosophical resources with which to complement existing discussions. In this fourth and final section, I conclude by suggesting that this approach can also help philosophers engage in meaningful interaction with scholars working on similar topics in other disciplines.

Consider again the example of the contemporary philosophical conception of mystical experience, which picks out a narrow swath of the sum total of reported mystical experiences, and which correspondingly restricts philosophical investigations of mysticism in general. As I noted in Section 10.1, this conception is specifically characterised as ‘suited more specialized treatments of mysticism in philosophy’⁴¹ for its focus on particular sorts of unitive experiences. But what about the addition of ‘unitive’ in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* definition makes it suited to philosophical examination? Basically, the fact that it picks out the particular range of experiences that philosophers became interested in over the course of the 20th century. As we saw, though, predispositions against women, bodies, and emotions played an important role in developing that focus.⁴² Not only is this lamentable on purely philosophical grounds, but it has also interfered with philosophers having productive conversations outside their own field.

There is a vast literature on mysticism and mystical experiences by scholars in religious, medieval, and gender studies, for instance, as well as in history and in the various languages in which medieval mystic texts were written. Careful studies of particular contemplative figures, general movements, and the nature of mysticism itself abound in these fields. And yet philosophers have distanced themselves from these resources and stuck to increasingly specialised discussions of idiosyncratic experiences. The recent *Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism* contains essays by twenty-two scholars at various career stages who represent thirteen distinct disciplines—and there is not a philosopher among them. The reason for this is simple: the ‘philosophical’ conception of mystical experience corresponds so poorly to what everyone else is talking about that there is almost no point in trying to engage in a common conversation.

Philosophers excel at biting bullets, and this complete lack of engagement with other disciplines might be one that some would happily swallow. By this point in the chapter, however, I hope that it is clear what philosophy would lose out on as a result. As noted in Section 10.3, there exists a rich history of embodied and affective mystical experiences—and a correspondingly rich secondary

⁴¹ See <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mysticism> (accessed 11 October 2017).

⁴² There is also a contemporary focus on distinguishing true from false mystic experiences, which belies epistemological concerns that mystics themselves largely do not express. The idea that it would somehow be easier to determine whether a super- or sub-sensory unitive experience is veridical than whether an embodied mystical experience is veridical, however, seems to me to betray precisely the sort of distrust of the body, emotions, and the people most likely to report having these experiences that makes the contemporary definition problematic in the first place.

literature on these experiences in any number of other disciplines—that could be used to enhance current philosophical discussions of mystical and religious experience. Realising this, however, requires doing historically informed work.

The general applicability of this particular case study should be obvious: philosophy often paints itself into an ideological corner when it looks only to itself for insight. In any number of cases, it has arrived at a starved and impoverished version of the conversation current in broader cultural circles: about love, about happiness, about knowledge, about embodiment, and so on. Rather than congratulate ourselves for having figured out what ‘really matters’ and sticking to that, we would do well to interact with discussions happening in other fields—something we will only be in a position to do if we have first done the work of examining the historical underpinnings of our operating assumptions, correcting and complementing them as necessary.⁴³

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