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MYSTICISM OR MEDIATION: A RESPONSE TO GILL

Anthony N. Perovich, Jr.

Jerry H. Gill seeks¹ to clarify, reinforce, and extend some of the epistemological claims of Steven Katz regarding mysticism;² his most notable success, however, consists in revealing the limitations of the position both he and Katz defend, limitations that lead at times to incoherence. The following discussion begins with a preliminary statement of this incoherence, explaining how the use of the concept of mediation pulls in two incompatible directions. I then treat Gill's argument in detail to show more clearly why the "mediational" approach is at odds with the respect for diversity that the approach is intended to encourage and display. Weakening the notion of mediation, on the other hand, only succeeds in frustrating the plan to undercut philosophically the idea of a *philosophia perennis*, a goal which Katz's approach was primarily introduced to achieve. Mediation, whether considered in the version of Katz and Gill or in a weakened form, is simply too confining to produce the philosophical results alleged for it. Finally, I show how Gill's insistence on the epistemological significance of the non-conceptual (affective, behavioral, in short "bodily") aspects of human existence provides illuminating confirmation of the confined scope of his views.

Central to the position of both Katz and Gill is the claim that there are no unmediated experiences; all experiences become available to us only as the result of constitution through complex epistemological processes.³ Katz employs this thesis to argue for irreducible differences among mystical experiences arising in different religious traditions.

A proper evaluation [writes Katz] of this fact [*viz.* that there are no unmediated experiences] leads to the recognition that in order to understand mysticism it is *not* just a question of studying the reports of the mystic after the experiential event but of acknowledging that the experience itself as well as the form in which it is reported is shaped by concepts which the mystic brings to, and which shape his experience.⁴

Because all experiences are of necessity contaminated with the conceptual scheme brought to them by the subjects, and because the religions of the world equip those subjects with a multitude of dissimilar schemes, we must (logically must, as Gill has pointed out⁵) acknowledge variety rather than identity among the mystical experiences of different traditions. Thus Katz characterizes his paper



as a “plea for the recognition of differences.”⁶

Gill, on the other hand, appeals to the mediated nature of experience in order to limit rather than preserve diversity. The move occurs in the context of his discussion of the properly Christian understanding of the idea of union with God. Katz has attributed the absence of talk about union with God among Jewish mystics and the presence of such language among Christian mystics in part to the influence of Neoplatonism on Christian thought.⁷ Gill, anxious to ensure that Christianity maintain a close relation with Hebrew rather than with Greek views, exorcises the demon of Neoplatonic absorption through the invocation of mediation:

I am in agreement [he writes] that the Hebrew way of thinking is vastly superior to that of Greek dualism, because it fits better with the general character of religious experience and because it makes better Biblical theology. A mediational view of religious experience—and thus a relational understanding of encounter with the divine—does negate the sort of absorption or unity motif that is properly associated with the influence of Neoplatonism.⁸

Here Gill claims that the Neoplatonic doctrine of union with the One is incompatible with a mediational view of religious experience. Because all experience must be mediated, it follows that Neoplatonic descriptions of unmediated union are necessarily inaccurate, a fact Gill characterizes as a failure of “fit.” This development, however, plainly leads the standpoint to inconsistency: the principle that maintains the mediated character of all experiences is used on the one hand to justify the existence of a variety of types of mystical experience (including, of course, the Neoplatonic sort⁹) and on the other to dismiss some of those types from the realm of experiential possibility.

The source of the problem lies, of course, in the fact that Katz commits himself not only to a “mediational” approach but also to a respect for the diversity of types of mystical experience; in fact, he believes that mediation explains diversity, as we have seen. The effect of Gill’s remarks is to point out that Katz’s method of explaining variety limits that variety as well.

It is tempting to maintain that Gill has simply misunderstood Katz here. After all, Gill’s claim above that the Hebrew conceptual framework is more adequate to “the general character of religious experience” than the Greek is wholly at odds with Katz’s respectful and even-handed approach to religious traditions, above all because it falls into what Katz would consider the trap of supposing that mystical experience has a general character which different traditions can more or less adequately describe, instead of realizing that mystical experiences have distinctive characters imposed by, and hence accurately describable in terms of, the traditions themselves. In the light of this observation we may hesitate to find the idea of mediation being properly employed in a limiting fashion and

rather suppose, then, that when Katz claims that all experience is mediated, he does not mean that only experiences of a relational nature are possible (as Gill suggests); else how could he insist so strongly that unitive mystics do not mis-describe their experiences?¹⁰

In the case at hand, however, Gill has perhaps a better insight into the consequences of a mediational approach than does Katz. The overall argument in Gill proceeds from his understanding of the intentionality thesis through the claim that all experience (including mystical) is mediated to the rejection of Neoplatonic absorptive "experience" as not in keeping with the "general character of religious experience," and the conceptual connections among these elements are, granting the necessary assumptions, persuasively established. But what the argument succeeds in demonstrating is merely how effective an approach based on the mediated nature of all experience is in frustrating the unprejudiced study of a central type of mystical experience.

Gill takes intentionality to be a necessary feature of human consciousness¹¹ and bases on it the mediated character of all human experience. (Already there is some bad question-begging at work in the argument, for the advocate of unmediated mystical experience is precisely the one who also denies the intentionality of mystical consciousness: in such an experience the distinction between subject and object breaks down.) The connection between intentionality and mediation is the constructivism that he believes the former involves: "Our consciousness is always consciousness *of* some concrete aspect of the world, of some particular aspect whose reality for us is constituted by our intentional activity in relation to it. This intentionality is clearly a mediational factor which undercuts the possibility of unmediated experience."¹² That there *is* an object of experience at all is due to the fact that we do not passively perceive but actively constitute it, and this activity introduces relational terms, such as the constructed object and the constructing agent, and mediational elements, in so far as the experienced object is known only via the constructive framework. To be related involves distinction, as Gill makes clear in contrasting an absorptive union with "a *relational* one in which individual persons remain distinct from one another and interact with one another."¹³ To be mediated by a framework is, on the Katzian assumptions accepted by Gill, to embody in a phenomenologically accessible manner the conceptual structure involved in that scheme: "the 'given' is appropriated through acts which shape it into forms which we can make intelligible to ourselves given our conceptual constitution."¹⁴

The rejection of unitive, absorptive mysticism follows directly from the relational, mediational character introduced by this intentionality, for the features distinctive of that putative variety of mystical experience are precisely the absence of (e.g. subject/object or interactive) relation and (e.g. conceptual) mediation. Gill's view, in other words, holds that reality-as-we-are-conscious-of-it is constituted for us by our intentional activity, with the consequences that such reality is necessarily mediated by (among other things) the conceptual structure involved

in our intentional activity and necessarily stands in relation to us, hence never absorbing us into itself.

While one may accept (as, in fact, I do) the interconnections among intentionality, mediation, and the rejection of unitive mysticism that Gill outlines, the effect is merely to make explicit the limitations of the approach to mystical experience advocated by Katz and him. For in his rejection of Neoplatonism as not fitting the general character of religious experience, Gill (doubtless unwittingly) explodes the illusion that an especially advantageous feature of this approach is its ability to handle the evidence.¹⁵ Katz himself urges us to bear in mind that,

Whatever the truth of the nature of the co-mingling of theory, experience and interpretation that goes into the mystics' "report", the *only* evidence one has to call upon to support one's analyses of this material, and hence one's description of this relationship, is the given recording of the mystic—the already "experienced" and "interpreted" first person recording.¹⁶

The unreconstructed testimony of the mystics, then, is the criterion against which the adequacy of any interpretive approach is to be measured.

When we turn to the Neoplatonic sources, and to the Christian mystics most deeply influenced by them, what does the evidence reveal? It reveals that the experience (so far as we can tell from our *only* source, "the already 'experienced' and 'interpreted' first person recording") is *not* intentional, *not* constituted through and mediated by the imposition of a conceptual structure, *not* relational. Plotinus makes these points clearly:

No longer can we wonder that the principle evoking such longing should be utterly free from shape, even shape Intellectual. The very soul, once it has conceived the straining love towards this, lays aside all the shape it has taken, even to the Intellectual shape that has informed it. There is no vision, no union, for those handling or acting by any thing other; the soul must see before it neither evil nor good nor anything else, that alone it may receive the Alone.¹⁷

No doubt we should not speak of seeing; but we cannot help talking in dualities, seen and seer, instead of, boldly, the achievement of unity. In this seeing, we neither hold an object nor trace distinction; there is no two.¹⁸

Moreover, whatever interpretive virtues there may be in Gill's attempt to separate such views from the New Testament and "historical Christianity," such doctrines certainly recur in prominent Christian mystics. No stronger statement rejecting Gill's intentionality thesis could be desired than that in which Meister Eckhart

criticizes misconceptions of union with God: "Some simple people think that they will see God as if he were standing there and they here. It is not so. God and I, we are one."¹⁹ Gill's "mediational" approach is inadequate to the sources in an area where, as Katz himself points out, to be so inadequate is to fail as an interpretive scheme.

Because Katz commits his position to a strong stand regarding the reliability with which mystical texts indicate the character of their authors' experience, his mediational approach suffers the same incoherence whether it faces the difficulty of accommodating itself to certain mystical experiences, which was the situation considered at the outset, or the problem of accommodating itself to certain mystical reports, the situation just looked at. The incoherence results from trying to remain faithful to the idea of mediation as well as to the full diversity of mysticism, a diversity equally manifest on this view in the experiences proper and in the reports that serve as our only evidence for their character. There are only two ways to restore intelligibility to the account: either the claims regarding diversity or the claims regarding mediation must be modified.

Gill adopts the former course by limiting the admissible types of mystical experience, but we have seen that this course leads to failure. Katz's "plea for the recognition of differences" claims to overlook no evidence²⁰ and thus to be preferable to alternative accounts insofar as it puts one "in a position to respect the richness of the experiential and conceptual data involved in this area of concern."²¹ An approach which sets itself such goals can only be severely embarrassed by its own inability to accommodate Neoplatonic absorptive experience. Moreover, the modification of the claims regarding diversity in Gill is effected by the insistence that all human experience (including mystical) is intentional, relational, and mediated, and this view of experience is implausible in the extreme: reports of mystical experience quite simply do not always manifest these characteristics. Such general claims about the nature of human experience seem quite false when confronted with some of the best known and best documented sorts of mystical experience.

The claims regarding mediation consequently must be modified, either by the exemption of certain types of experience (notably the absorptive variety) from subjection to mediation or by weakening the notion of mediation itself. The latter approach might suggest that absorptive experience is due to the conceptual background the mystic brings to it, although (and this is where the weakening occurs) a phenomenologically accurate description of the experience itself does not reveal this background (thus permitting the appearance of unmediated experience). In other words the experience would be mediated by the conceptual scheme not in the sense that that scheme has shaped the experience itself (for if "shaping" is to mean anything in these contexts then an accurate description should divulge the scheme's workings) but rather in the sense that the scheme has provided a

background by the possession of which the mystic is enabled to enjoy an experience of an absorptive variety.²²

Either of these modifications, however, will be accepted with equanimity by the critic of Katz's and Gill's "mediational" approach. That such an approach as a matter of fact is opposed to both suggestions is quite clear: excluding certain types of experience from mediation violates the fundamental assumption that there are no unmediated experiences, and admitting experiences which do not reveal their conceptual background violates the claim, already noted,²³ that all experiences are shaped by the epistemological process in such a way that an adequate phenomenological description will reveal the formative conceptual framework.

There is a very good reason why the "mediational" approach manifests this opposition to the suggested modifications, a reason that becomes clear when we investigate the strategic role the approach is expected to play. An impartial reader is struck by two shortcomings in the use of mediation by Gill and Katz: too little diversity of mystical experience is generated as well as too much. Too little, because, as we have seen in our discussion of Gill, certain central varieties of mysticism seem to be excluded. Too much, because divergence of experience among different traditions, a controversial result to say the least, is guaranteed merely on the basis of unsubstantiated epistemological assumptions made at the outset.²⁴

What I have characterized as the introduction of too great a diversity of mystical experience by the account is viewed by Katz not as a shortcoming but as a virtue of great strategic importance, for it is what permits him to eliminate the possibility of identical experiences by mystics of different religious traditions. "There is no *philosophia perennis*,"²⁵ says Katz, and even the relatively sophisticated views of Zaehner, Stace, and Smart, which recognize a variety of types of mystical experience, "are unsatisfactory because they try to provide various cross-cultural phenomenological accounts of mystical experience which are phenomenologically as well as philosophically suspect."²⁶ The philosophical suspicions are, of course, based on the mediated nature of all experience; this factor requires, as we have seen, that we recognize "a wide variety of mystical experiences which are, at least in respect of some determinative aspects, culturally and ideologically grounded."²⁷ Katz's "plea for the recognition of differences" is, in fact, a plea for the rejection of any version of a *philosophia perennis*, of any possibility of an identity of mystical experience among subjects of different religious and cultural backgrounds, and mediation is the philosophical tool for achieving the necessary distinctiveness.²⁸

It is clear that abandoning (in certain cases) or weakening the notion of mediation in the fashion suggested above will permit the revival of the idea, at least, of a *philosophia perennis*. For if the experience does not itself bear traces of

the conceptual background, there can be *no* epistemological argument based on mediation for the rejection of that idea. The framework in question may provide a route to that experience, as the weakened version would suggest, but there is no longer any reason to think it provides a *unique* route, any more than there is reason to think that, because a Fregean sense offers a route to a referent, two sense cannot offer different routes to one and the same referent. Only the conceptual traces in the experience itself permit Katz's one-to-one relations between scheme and experience. Moreover, admitting experiences phenomenologically free from conceptual taint would not only reintroduce the possibility of a *philosophia perennis* but also require entirely rethinking the approach's facile method of concluding a difference of experiential content from a difference of conceptual content in the descriptions of mystical experiences. This method, the primary basis for the claims of diversity and of the "conservatism" of mystical experience, is undermined if the claim that the experience bears the structure of the experiencer's conceptual framework is abandoned.

Katz and Gill are committed not only to the doctrine of mediation but also to the goals of recognizing (and in fact explaining) the full variety of mystical experience and of closing the door on any version of the perennial philosophy. Unfortunately, our earlier discussion of Gill makes clear that mediation as Katz and he understand it is incompatible with the first goal, and our present discussion makes equally clear that any abandonment or weakening of the notion of mediation so as to handle this difficulty makes achievement of the second goal impossible. Since this latter (along with its basis, the conceptual shaping of experience) is in every way central to the interest of the "mediational" approach, the proposed abandonment or weakening has the effect of gutting the approach of philosophical significance. This approach, far from being "extremely right-headed,"²⁹ as Gill would have it, is profoundly incoherent, and I see no way to make it both intelligible and interesting.

If the comparative studies detailing similarities among the mystical experiences occurring in diverse cultures and religious traditions deepen our suspicion that mediation generates too great a diversity of experience, it is worth noting that Gill's expressed desire to give "a more prominent place to the role of non-conceptual dimensions of human existence"³⁰ by emphasizing the importance of the body in religious epistemology reconfirms our view that the approach limits diversity as well, in this case by attempting to undercut the means thought valuable for achieving those experiences we have seen his approach unable to handle. Gill wants to overcome the need to view the encounter with the divine as direct or unmediated by stressing the epistemological importance of the body: once we recognize that the affective and behavioral dimensions of existence mediate our experience, we shall be unlikely to characterize any of our experiences as unmediated.³¹ He traces the characterization of the encounter with the divine

as direct or unmediated to a reaction to an overly intellectualized account of cognitivity.³² While his account as it stands is hardly clear (is the characterization due to the fact that cognitive encounters under a “narrow, intellectualist definition” are necessarily indirect and mediated? why?), it seems plain enough that the description of the encounter as unmediated is not to be traced to any such implausible quasi-historical thesis but rather to the connection Neoplatonic absorptive mysticism has established between forsaking the bodily and achieving direct experience of God. To be sure, part of the Platonic tradition’s neglect of the body is due to the contempt expressed in the *Phaedo*, exemplified in its claims that the body can only lead one astray in the search for truth, that the senses merely distract.³³ This attitude receives its most perfect expression in Porphyry’s well-known report that Plotinus seemed ashamed of being in the body.³⁴ The chief motive behind the attempt to escape the bodily, however, lies in the nature of the One (or of God, for those Christians writing in this Neoplatonic tradition) and in the means that are in consequence required to achieve union with It (or Him). The One transcends all multiplicity, and as the quotation above from Plotinus makes clear, the soul that would achieve union must shed all that is manifold in itself as well. Now both the senses and the intellect introduce such elements of multiplicity and consequently both need to be renounced by the Neoplatonic mystic; thus the Pseudo-Dionysius counsels Timothy to leave behind the senses and the activities of the intellect in order to achieve union, devoting separate chapters to the exposition of God’s transcendence of the senses and His transcendence of the intellect.³⁵ Given such a viewpoint, Gill’s attempt to connect embodiment with mediation appears as one more effort to rule out certain sorts of mystical experience, hereby limiting the means of access.

Gill’s discussion of intentionality developed along Kantian lines provides a further (though, I believe, related) means of understanding the connection in the Neoplatonic tradition of a scorn for the bodily with an emphasis on absorptive union. Gill has suggested that intentionality involves a constructivist view of experience. If developed in Kantian fashion such a view requires both a manifold and a conceptual scheme that effects a unification of that manifold. In rejecting the intentionality of mystical experience, the Neoplatonist rejects all those elements of ordinary experience which contribute to its intentional character, and this involves abandoning not only the conceptual components of our experience but the conceptualized ones as well. Even if we do not limit these latter to the sensory and bodily, they surely include them;³⁶ consequently we can understand, on the one hand, why disparagement of the body has figured prominently in the Neoplatonic search for union in non-intentional, non-relational, and unmediated experience, and on the other, why Gill possesses a sound instinct when he seeks to associate an emphasis on our embodied nature with an insistence on the intentional character of experience. That we find in the whole Neoplatonic trad-

ition a continual stress on the need to free oneself from the bodily element of human existence further corroborates the claim that centrally included among mystical experiences are those that are non-intentional and unmediated. And an understanding of such experiences, like an unprejudiced look at the possibility of a *philosophia perennis*, is necessarily closed to one who approaches mysticism equipped solely with the intellectual tools of mediation.

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NOTES

1. Jerry H. Gill, "Mysticism and Mediation," *Faith and Philosophy*, I, No. 1 (1984), pp. 111-21.
2. Steven T. Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 22-74.
3. See *ibid.*, p. 27, and Gill, "Mysticism and Mediation," p. 113.
4. Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," p. 26.
5. Gill, "Mysticism and Mediation," pp. 112-14.
6. Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," p. 25.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
8. Gill, "Mysticism and Mediation," pp. 118-19.
9. Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," p. 42.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Gill, "Mysticism and Mediation," p. 113. Cf. Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," p. 63.
12. Gill, "Mysticism and Mediation," p. 113.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
14. Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," p. 59.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
16. Steven T. Katz, "The 'Conservative' Character of Mystical Experience," in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 5.
17. Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1969), VI.7.34, p. 588.
18. *Ibid.*, VI.9.10, p. 624.
19. Meister Eckhart, *The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, trans. Edmund College, O.S.A., and Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), p. 188.
20. Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," p. 66.
21. *Ibid.*
22. I owe this suggestion to Professor William P. Alston.
23. See above, p. 181.

24. For a comparison of this situation with a similar one in another area of philosophy, see my "Mysticism and the Philosophy of Science," *The Journal of Religion*, forthcoming.
25. Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," p. 24.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
28. Katz is, therefore, rather disingenuous when he prides himself on the fact that his account does not "begin with *a priori* assumptions about the nature of ultimate reality" (*ibid.*), for his work certainly suggests gratuitous assumptions on his part, though regarding the nature of experience rather than the nature of ultimate reality.
29. Gill, "Mysticism and Mediation," p. 111.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 117-18.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 115.
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Phaedo*, 65b-c.
34. Porphyry, "On the Life of Plotinus and the Arrangement of His Work," in Plotinus, *The Enneads*, p. 1.
35. Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Mystical Theology*, chapters 4 and 5.
36. The connections between the preceding paragraph and this one are clear if we regard conceptual synthesis of a manifold as the source of intentionality; suppression of the body will simultaneously suppress multiplicity and the intentionality that arises with the synthesis of that multiplicity.