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Contemplative Experience - Pointing to the same Reality?

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Working Notes For Presentation

Abstract: *This presentation will be about contemplative experience in various traditions. Based on research in phenomenology and religious studies, we know that people have “anomalous experience.” Of course, various religious traditions interpret this in relation to their own culture and faith. What should we think about these experiences? Are they hallucinations produced by a stressed brain? Are they pointing to the same reality? Can we ourselves have similar experience and should we try to experience these states?*

Pt I. Introduction to Contemplative Experience

Thank you all for being here; hopefully we'll all walk away from this session a bit more enlightened.

So we're all taking part in the great mystery of Life. What's it all about? What does any of this mean? And while it might be fun to joke about it sometimes, we all have moments (or if you haven't, trust me someday you will) where this question strikes us very deeply. Obviously, these are questions that human beings have tried to answer for thousands of years, and no doubt many of us have our own views, and are here trying to live the best possible life we can live, and it's my hope that we all are able to find meaning and fulfillment as we all cope with the rigors of daily “practical” living with others. Maybe we've all had moments of what psychologists would call peak experiences - these are the kind of moments where the meaning of life hardly even becomes a question for us, and we can find this in athletic performance, exercise, in meaningful cultural performances- theater, music, art, and dance, times when a new child is born, religious worship, in intimate relationships, or even just when we enter into intense concentration on an everyday task.

While these types of experiences might be the very things that we live for, I do think that it's safe to say that there exists a type of experience that, can bring about a completely other sort of responses- awe, terror, profound gratitude, or joy, or despair and they can even cause a person to completely alter his or her lifestyle. Writers in almost every recognized worldview have written about these experiences, there also exist a number of generally secular or even atheistic persons who've had similar experiences. In general popular and often academic language, we often call these experiences “mystical,” insofar as they don't come about in everyday society and its form of life. Some people within the field of religious studies prefer the term contemplative experience- they hold that this terminology more accurately reflects the idea that these often emerge in light of intentional effort to cultivate the self for reception of these types of experience.

In this presentation, we'll read a few examples of “Varieties of Religious Experience” as the American Philosopher William James titled one of his books, and then offer several reflections on the nature of these types of experiences. Due to time constraints, we'll only be able to cover just a little bit of this immense topic.

We'll start with the Judeo-Christian writers, for no other reason than that is what most of us are likely to be at least somewhat acquainted with.

Christianity

Dostoyevsky

We'll start with a literary excerpt that describes this type of contemplative or *mystical* experience of reality. This excerpt comes from the character Father Zosima in Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, here he is describing a disposition or attitude towards life

“...If you learn to love each thing, you will learn to perceive the Mystery of God in things... This is no empty sentimentalism...Once you've perceived it, you will begin tirelessly to perceive more and more of it every day, and you will come at last to see the world with an entire, universal love... All is like an ocean, I say to you tormented by universal love, you too would start praying to the birds, as if in a sort of ecstasy and entreat them to forgive your sin. Cherish this ecstasy however senseless it may seem to people.. Do not be ashamed of this ecstasy,, even if it seems senseless to people...Love all men, and love all things. Seek this rapture and ecstasy.” (1991, 319)

Teresa of Avila - Interior Castle

One additional well-known examples of contemplative or “mystical experience” in the Christian tradition come from Teresa of Avila, a 15th century nun

Here's Teresa's description of what she interprets as the experience of the soul:

“The soul rests in peace...all [her] powers are at rest. The soul understands, with an understanding quite different from that given by external senses, that she is now quite close to God and that, if she drew just a little nearer, she would become one thing with him by union. She does not see him with eyes of the body or the soul....The soul understands he is there, though not so clearly. She doesn't know herself how she understands; she sees only that she is in the Kingdom....

She Goes on to Say...

...It is a caressing of love so sweet that now takes place between the soul and God that I pray God of his goodness to make him experience it who may think that I am lying or merely being foolish. McGinn (2006).

It is like the suspension of all internal and external powers. The external man does not wish to make the slightest movement but rests, like one who has almost reached the end of his journey, that he may resume his journey with redoubled strength....The soul is so happy to find herself near the fountain (of life) that she is satisfied even without drinking. She seems to have no more desire. The faculties are at peace and do not wish to move...However, the faculties are not so lost that they cannot think of Him whom they are near. Two of them are free. The will alone is held captive....The understanding desires to know but one thing, and memory to remember only one. They both see that only one thing is necessary, and everything else disturbs it...I think therefore that since the soul is so completely happy in this prayer of quiet, the will must be united during most of the time, with Him who alone can satisfy it.

Sufism

If you've taken any courses that mention Islam here at Shawnee, you've probably heard a bit about Sufism

Religious Studies Scholar Arthur Buehler of Victoria University of Wellington has written an essay on the Sufi Contemplatives, in which he notes "In the academy, we are hardly aware of our egocentricism, and often assume that anything worthwhile lies within daily waking consciousness." However, the study of contemplative practice, cannot avoid the post-rational realms. The aim of Sufi practice is to cultivate the experience of *Fana*, or annihilation of the perception of subject-object and achieve union with reality."

One of the most famous writers in the Sufi Tradition is Jalal- Al-Din Rumi. In Buehler's essay, he quotes some excerpts from Rumi's poetry, we he views as expressive of this radical state of experiencing.....

*"Why should I seek (God)? I am the same as He. His essence speaks through me. I have been looking for myself!
"I'm caught in this curling energy!...
Whoever is calm and sensible is insane!*

These matters are as real as the infinite is real, but they seem religious fantasies to some to those who believe only in the reality of the organs and digestive tract

The mystery does not get clearer by repeating the question nor is it bought with going to amazing places

My friend, try to describe how near is the creator to your Intellect... Intellectual searching will not find the way to that king

Don't theorize about essence! All speculations are just more layers of covering. Human beings love covering...

Yesterday I was clever, I wanted to Change the World. Today I am wise- I know that I must change myself...

Judaism

The Jewish tradition also has a school of mysticism known as Kabbalah, where individuals recite prayers and performs meditational exercises to prepare themselves to receive the Divine.

And in the past century, Martin Buber a Jewish Philosopher, - 10 time Nobel Prize Nominee and author of the work *I and Thou* describes two fundamental attitudes of human beings.

There is the I-It and there is I-You attitude. I-It establishes a mode of existence as experience, as an experience of some particular thing, of an object. I-You establishes a mode of relation, one stands within a mode of relation and a relation is between an I and a You.

The It world, for Buber, is objectivity, use, and order. This Experience leads us to divide things into discrete quanta, and into categories of usefulness, of purpose... The It world combines past “experience, which constitutes this world ever again, and use, which leads it towards its multifarious purpose — the preservation, alleviation, and equipment of human life.” The ability to confront a world of discrete things is an indispensable aspect of human life and survival. The objectification of the world of experience is not evil, but, “when man lets it have its’ way, the relentlessly growing It-world grows over him like weeds, his own I loses its actuality, until the incubus over him and the phantom inside him exchange the whispered confession of their need for redemption.” We can neither do without the It world, but we cannot, if we wish to live without despair, spend all of our lives in the experience of objects.

He goes on to describe the I-You attitude. In this mode of encountering reality, we don’t find the You as a point in space and time, but, instead, the other person set of things we experience are given as if it were the entire universe, or rather, as if the entire universe somehow existed through the You... With man the phenomena of encounter is best described as love. We can also, however, enter into encounter with a being that cannot be the object of experience, and this is the experience of God.

Hopefully that was comprehensible.

Zen Buddhism

Moving on to “Eastern” worldviews, we’ll look at some of the short writings of Zen Buddhism. If you read any of the many works written on Zen, practitioners will claim that we can know reality as it is when we practice meditation in which we experience a complete silence of the mind and an absence of the sense of “Self” in the world. Further they would explicitly encourage us *not* to speculate or philosophize about the types of experiences that come about in meditation, but simply to accept them and continue on with our lives.

Shunryu Suzuki has written a collection of writings from masters in this tradition called *Zen Mind, Beginner’s mind*,

*“The activity of Big mind is to amplify itself through various experiences
(One who understands Zen) finds no fear of losing Big mind, nor fear of death...”*

“You experience immeasurable hundreds of eons in one day. (Chapter on Home-leaving)...”

Even if you think you've gained enlightenment, do not stop practicing- the Buddha Way is endless... That you carry yourself forward and experience the myriad things is delusion. That the myriad things come forward and experience themselves is awakening

Proper Zen practice yields a Heart like the ocean, and mind like the sky....

To study the self is to forget the self, to forget the self is to be enlightened by all things....

Daoists - If you take Dan Johnson's Asian Philosophy course, you'll get some good expose to Daoism.

Dr. Louis Komjathy is a Daoist priest and professor of Religious Studies and Philosophy at the University of San Diego. He's written several books about the Daoist tradition and contemplative experience, and includes his own field work in the studies. He notes in some of his writings "I've encountered Daoist Hermetic Practitioners who claim to have encounters with the "Immortals" of the religion, spirit beings, and disembodied appearances of master teachers."

After reading this, I have exchanged several emails with him about the nature of Daoist mystical experience, and he states that several aspects of this tradition experience includes not encouraging the things we like, nor avoiding what we dislike; so the unconditional accepting of Reality as it appears to us. He notes that, "Undoubtedly, there are some contemplative experiences that are very *disturbing*, but we view these as all part of the greater whole, or *the elixir of life*." He also conveyed to me that that for Daoist practitioners, there is a very strong emphasis cultivating or aiming at these experiences through meditation, and then becoming an embodiment of these experiences in everyday life.

To put it very roughly, Daoist contemplative experience emphasize the unity of life- I think we can see this in some of the writings of Zhuangzi-

"Once upon a time, I dreamt I was a butterfly, fluttering hither and thither, to all intents and purposes a butterfly. I was conscious only of my happiness as a butterfly, unaware that I was myself. Soon I awaked, and there I was, veritabily myself again. Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly, dreaming I am a man."

Secular Persons

So I've just read some writings of people situated within religious traditions, and the listed works are nowhere near exhaustive. Now we'll turn to some secular persons.

Jordan Peterson

Are any of you are familiar with Jordan Peterson? (He's a psychologist at the University of Toronto who's been quite newsworthy for the past few years.)

To paraphrase, he states in this video (which is linked to on the handout if you're interested in watching it),

“I was going through a period of intense nihilism (thinking that life has no meaning, and maybe isn’t even worth living), but was determined to find meaning in my life. I realized that almost everyone finds meaning in music, so I decided to create a sculpture to represent my own interpretation of the meaning of music. I’d been working on this sculpture for about three months by the time I was finishing it up, and I was playing Mozart’s 40th symphony on the loudspeaker in my living room, while entering into this intense state of concentration. During this moment I had a series of visual experiences in which it seemed as if the sky had opened up and a being of light was descending towards me. My eyes become dilated and this being seemed to be communicating that I could live in this state of ecstasy all the time. I tried to tell it that I don’t know how I would be able to even walk down the street in such a state of ecstasy and that I would have to refuse. With some sadness this being receded... I didn’t know what to tell my friends about this... I thought, “what the hell?” I consider myself a materialist scientist and an Atheist; if I tell my friends and colleagues this, what will they think of me? (YouTube, Jordan Peterson on Mystical Experience)

Interestingly, he’s also gone on to talk about the topic of mysticism in several of his lectures, affirming the reality of these experiences, but noting, “These types of experiences generally don’t come about when you’re sitting at home eating cheetos and playing video games”

Sam Harris-

Maybe some of you are familiar with Sam Harris; he runs a popular podcast, and is a philosopher and neuroscientist. When he was his early 20s, he went on meditation retreats in India and Nepal, and had an experience in which he claims to have felt an overwhelming sense of interconnectedness and love. Interestingly, although he is a very unapologetic Atheist, he is a big proponent of spirituality. In his article titled “Rational Mysticism” he writes

How this discussion proceeds will ultimately be decided by contemplative scientists. As I said in my book, if we ever develop a mature science of the mind, most of our religious texts will be no more useful to mystics than they now are to astronomers....

What words should we use to acknowledge the fact that the happiest person on this earth at this moment might have spent the last twenty years living alone in a cave? Any experienced meditator knows that this is a serious possibility. (Indeed, I consider it not only possible, but likely.) What can we say about the fact that the conventional sources of human happiness—association with family and friends, positive engagement with society, diverse experiences of physical pleasure, etc.—might be neither necessary nor sufficient to produce happiness in its most profound forms? This is not New Age mumbo jumbo. What secularists like Flynn tend not to realize is that there are genuine, introspective insights that can be terribly difficult to acquire. The lack of general accessibility does not render such insights at all suspect. The average person could spend the rest of his life trying to determine whether string theory makes any sense (and still fail); this is not a measure of whether string theory is mumbo jumbo. As any serious practitioner of meditation knows, there is something to the claims that have been made by mystics over the ages. And yet, the fact that such claims have always been advanced in the language of one or another religious ideology continues to confound secularists.

Reflections/Questions

Hopefully in the course of these short readings, you've received a general impression of the type of radically different experiencing that these people are trying to convey, and the deep sense of meaning that they seem to reveal.

I don't think that this presentation will be able to give any final answers (sorry) about the nature of reality, but I hope to point out a few similarities and raise questions that might prove fruitful for further inquiry.

1. This might be obvious at this point, but we notice some similarities across almost all of these experiences: beauty, a feeling of boundlessness, no fear of death, reassurance that life is ultimately good, even if we can never get a complete grasp of its meaning or mystery
 - a. Do we have reason to trust these experiences?
2. Can we do anything of our own initiative to bring these states about?
 - a. Many people seem to think that we can. So we might consider, what roles to our own attitudes, theories, and thinking play in modifying our experience of reality?
 - i. Of course, the aim in many university studies is to learn to develop our cognitive abilities.
 1. Some religious studies scholars would argue that this is an inherent barrier to certain forms of religious experience
 2. Are there ways of embodied being-in-the-world that lead us closer to these states? What role do drug use, and dietary and sexual choices play in our experience? What about our interactions with technology and society that is highly dependent upon rapid communication and production?
 - b. Are these experiences more likely to emerge among groups of people or are they largely individual? Or both? How do withdraws from community/daily society affect our experience of reality?
 - c. If we can't do anything to bring these states about on our own, can states such as depression and despair be a precursor to such experiences? Do states of severe illness and near death experiences create these states?

- i. These are generally things that we try to avoid, but this may make us question to what extent accepting these experiences as they emerge could be part of living a fully human life. There is a term in Roman Catholic spirituality called *The Dark Night of the Soul*, that's supposed to be an extended feeling of desolation or withdrawing of a person's sense of aliveness that has to be passed through in an individual's spiritual journey and the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard states that "despair is the worst sickness NOT to have had."
- d. How should one study or interpret these experiences? Is there a way of studying these experiences? There are several approaches.
 - i. Neuro-scientific or biological reductionists might say something along the lines of "these are just physiological responses to abnormal environmental stressors; the brain is trying to cope with death anxiety."
 - 1. This carries with it, I think the assumption that the brain is entirely responsible for creating our experience
 - a. Obviously, much ink has been spilled on this issue
 - b. There might be some severe limitations in method with this approach. So for example, there have been attempts to study the Brain waves of Buddhist Meditation Practitioners using this framework.
 - ii. Contemplative studies has recently emerged as an interdisciplinary field of study that attempts to incorporate perspectives and methods from philosophy, neuroscience, religious studies, and psychology into their inquiry
 - 1. If you're interested in that, you might check out the Mind and Life Institute
 - iii. Phenomenologists (a school of philosophers) would respond to this first group and say that we need to suspend *all* of our theories and presuppositions to approach this phenomenon clearly and experientially and describe the appearances as they occur to our subjective first person perspective

1. So If you're interested in these approaches, I've included some further readings in the handout.

Conclusion

Lastly, Who knows what our innermost being might be like? We might call these anomalous experiences, but should we also consider that what we think of as a radical way of experiencing could be our natural state?

I don't know what everyone's engagement with these questions or personal experience has been, but hopefully this short presentation has raised some or questions that we can all continue to explore as life allows us to continue to participate in its mystery.

If there are any questions, or if anyone has experiences or views they'd feel comfortable sharing or would like to talk afterwards, I'm happy to hear what you have to say.

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