

Mysticism as accommodation of transcendence

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Introduction

Mysticism, in its broadest sense, is best understood as a generic term that variously describes experiences which are felt to be extraordinary and profound to the extent that they cannot be intellectually defined nor rendered in language. At this early stage, the problem is evident: Transrational and ineffable qualities are normative in experiences of mystical transcendence; yet it is precisely these obfuscations that contravene linguistic and methodological protocols in academia. This problem can be wittily illustrated for the purpose of this debate from a linguistic vantage point: The mystical experience can only be said to *exist* when it can be *said* to exist, but since transcendence is ineffable, it cannot be *said* to exist and therefore cannot *exist*. How, in view of such paradoxical absurdities, can mysticism qualify as a field of analytical or critical research in academic discourse? What questions can reasonably be posed in a debate where the languages of reason and science are fundamental? Clearly, some foundations have to be set to provide contexts wherein such an examination can take place.

In an attempt to establish a degree of scholarly coherence, given the equivocation around meanings that are ascribed to mysticism and transcendence, this paper will firstly give some general definitions of mysticism to facilitate an understanding of its phenomenology and ontology.² Secondly, in a forum where the dialects of science and religion are afforded equal hearings, distinctions have to be drawn between the linguistic and epistemological peculiarities of these dialects. It is therefore realised that mysticism embodies a highly abstracted idiom that is composed mainly of metaphorical and allegorical instruments. The result of this exploration reveals the necessity for a uniquely crafted epistemology if mysticism and transcendence hope to qualify as fields of legitimate research in interdisciplinary contexts.

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² Kourie (1992:84) rightly notes that "... any attempt to find a definition of [mysticism] is fraught with difficulties, given the equivocal meanings attributed to the word 'mysticism', both in ordinary speech and in scholarly analysis".

Towards an understanding of mysticism

Cousins (1984:11) believes that the history of the term 'mysticism' is rooted in the Greek *mus* which is contained in the verb *muein*. The word was allegedly used in ancient rites that were practised in Greece, particularly in Eliusis, and refers to closing the lips or eyes. The recession of these ordinary sensory mechanisms imply alterations in conscious processes as a precondition for mystical experience.³ Pennington, Keating, Thomas and Clarke (2007:70) explain that to "... speak of the experiential knowledge of God, the Greek Bible used the word '*gnosis*' to translate the Hebrew word '*Da'ath*,' a much stronger term which implies *possession* of the thing known, an extremely intimate kind of knowledge involving the *whole person*, not just the mind". Cousins (1984:13) suggests that the Latin derivative *mysticus* was used in the Middle Ages to refer to the arcane or heightened acuity of this deep spirituality. Its manifestation in Christianity finds theological and spiritual expression in various modalities of union with God. Mystical theology (*theologia mystica*) goes beyond natural theology (*theologia naturalis*) in that it is, in the words of Thomas Aquinas, an "experiential knowledge of God" (*cognitio dei experimentalis*) (Scholem 1974:4). Whereas natural theology is generally concerned with the nature and activity of God in history, the mystical dimension aspires to experientially apprehend spiritual truths that are ordinarily inaccessible through mere intellection.

Evelyn Underhill (1875–1941), in *Mysticism: the nature and development of spiritual consciousness* ([1911]/1993) and *Practical mysticism* (2000), was one of the first twentieth-century writers to recognise and include modern advances in mystical understandings. Consequently, she considered the attainment of union with God as the answer to the science of ultimates; it is attained as a matter of *being* rather than mere believing and thinking (Happold 1970:38).⁴ Underhill maintains this version of mysticism as the expression of the innate yearning of the human spirit towards non-dual harmony with the Absolute as an antecedent to the theological formulae that seek to describe it. This union transcends subject–object dualities in consciousness, but nonetheless recognises the significance of sound informational agencies whereby transinformational awareness is realised. Underhill therefore maintains that most mystics employ philosophies or theologies that animate and motivate the intellect on the proceedings of spiritual intuition: "... running side by side with true or empirical mysticism: classifying its

³ Cousins (1984:19) explains that in such mystical states "... we leave behind all sense impressions, all intellectual activities, and pass over into the furnace of divine love".

⁴ Ilwood (1980:34 & 35) similarly claims that a mystical experience has occurred when "... the *experiencer* [has had an] encounter with ultimate divine reality in a direct non-rational way that engenders a deep sense of unity and of living during the experience on a level of being other than the ordinary".

data, criticising it, explaining it, and translating its vision of the super-sensible into symbols which are amenable to dialectic” (Underhill 1990:72 & 73).⁵ In this sense, Underhill’s encouragement is closer to Aquinas’ cognitive approach, but incorporates a broader experiential spectrum of possibility through the long heritage of mystical traditions in Christianity. In other words, she recognises that unique ontologies require unique epistemologies but that its accreditation in mystagogy does not necessarily satisfy the rigours of scientific epistemologies.

Attempts at a more precise articulation and explication yield a variety of complex and potentially confusing answers. In an attempt to clarify the matter in different terms, Hollenbeck (1996:1 & 2) identifies the subtle internal dialogue that occupies most of our waking consciousness and suggests that mystics are individuals who have developed the skill to silence these interior deliberations through focused and disciplined meditative practise. She goes on to distinguish two important elements in mysticism: “... a distinctive mode of experience or consciousness, and the individual’s responses to that unusual modality of experience.” Both ingredients are fundamental in Christian mysticism, but their articulation in the academy remains disparate. For example, Peder Voetmann Christiansen (1988:35), referring to Peirce’s notion of *haecceity*, describes mystical experiences as “... a direct, shocking experience of an object which causes language to evaporate like a drop of water on a glowing sheet of metal. All we can do is point our index finger and say ‘that’”. The implication is that the nature of transcendence is not a sense, a thought nor a word; and neither is it not a sense, not a thought nor a word. It just is – and is not. Thus qualified, transcendence remains the preserve of that ineluctable paradox which is the definition of mysticism. Armstrong (2008:176) notes that “... it is not possible to measure nothing”.

The phenomenology of mystical consciousness

Whilst descriptions of transcendence are naturalised in mystagogy, the actual phenomena (isolated as it were from their cultural and theological pretexts) are more complex to articulate. Attempts at intellectual syntheses of phenomenological definitions of mystical transcendence have typically failed (particularly in Western philosophy) and whether a division of the phenomena from their theoretical contexts is possible without conceptual dis-

⁵ The utility of a disynchronous, intellectual and experiential, approach to mysticism is reiterated in Happold’s (1970:37) suggestion: “It will be useful ... to set out a number of definitions taken from medieval and modern sources. Medieval theologians described what they termed ‘mystical theology’ as ‘experimental wisdom’, or as ‘stretching out of the soul into God through the urge of love’, or as ‘an experimental knowledge of God through unifying love’. These definitions all approach mysticism from the theological standpoint.”

intergration is arguable.⁶ The problem is compounded further because the phenomenology of transcendence has no consistent definitions.

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) distinguished phenomena as the appearance of objects in consciousness from the intrinsic independence of *noumena* – the things as they are in themselves (Kant 1960:Section 33). Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) challenged Kant’s doctrine of the unknowable *thing-in-itself* (*Ding an sich*) by arguing that consciousness can apprehend the spiritual truth of divinity through its phenomenological manifestations. He explains that the dialectic of phenomenology articulates manifestations in conscious experience that can enable human beings to apprehend the nature of an absolute which precedes the appearance of phenomena (Hegel 1967; Kainz 1994). Whilst Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) initially used psychological descriptors, he later employed an eidetic approach whereby he distinguished between an act of consciousness and the independent or trans-conscious objects at which consciousness is directed (Ricoeur 1967).⁷ In this way, Husserl’s phenomenology assumes that since consciousness is always consciousness *of* something, it retains implicit dualities. Husserl therefore maintains that internal conscious knowledge of the nature of things, which are ostensibly beyond consciousness, is only possible by ‘bracketing’ all the assumptions about the existence of an external world (Husserl 1931).

This raises the question whether it is ever possible to know if we know things as they truly are or whether all phenomena are mediations – the products of conscious interpretations. Alternatively, even if phenomena are by definition experiential interpretations, are they necessarily artificial or untrue?

Answers to these difficult questions will largely be determined by the epistemologies that are applied to the ontology of consciousness, and phenomena necessarily succumb to these interpretive vagaries. This explanatory problem aside, Husserl’s phenomenology contends that an “... intentional phenomenology has for the first time made *spirit as spirit* the field of systematic scientific experience (*Geisteswissenschaft*), thus effecting a total transformation of the task of knowledge” (Husserl [1936]1970:Pt. II). Theoretical approaches to phenomenology are therefore inextricable from their epistemological agencies and subjective variability is therefore inherent in phenomenology. Martin Heidegger’s (1889–1976) thinking illustrates the

⁶ The distinction between Western and Eastern perceptions of mysticism is significant because the non-dual phenomenon in Eastern spirituality is more purposively central to the religious psyche of the people. The possibility of a more cohesive phenomenology of non-duality in Hinduism and Buddhism will probably be less constrained by the rationalist bifurcations that are typical of the classical and analytical philosophies of the West.

⁷ *Eidetic*, in this context, refers to the ability of consciousness to project images as foundations or fundamental types of knowledge. The concept is translated from the German *eidetisch* – a descriptive term that was coined by the psychologist Erich Jaensch (1883–1940) in 1924 (*Online Etymology Dictionary*).

extent of this variability. He criticised Husserl for not identifying Being as the foundation of structural facets of subjective and objective consciousness. For Heidegger, phenomenological techniques thereby become the methodology for ascertaining the ontology of being as Being (*Dasein*) which is non-dual and the true definition of what it means to be human (Heidegger 1962).⁸ Hegel's 'absolute', Husserl's 'science of spirit' and Heidegger's 'Being' describe the general, if ambiguous, terrain of the phenomenology of spiritual experience.

Given these arguments, the arch physicalist Daniel Dennett (1993:44) rightly maintains that “[p]henomenology has failed to find a single, settled method that everyone could agree upon”. Dennett attempts to give a simple categorisation of the basic characteristics of phenomenology in popular usage. He notes that phenomenology has come to “... refer to the merely descriptive study of any subject matter, neutrally or pre-theoretically ... [that] inhabit our conscious experience...” Can some general phenomenological features of mystical consciousness be discerned within such a broad category?

Waldron (1999:105 & 106) lists some of the common attributes of phenomenology. The first and most distinctive descriptor is *noesis* – a feeling of direct knowledge of the Absolute that is unmediated by the translatory faculties of interpretive consciousness.⁹ Further qualities of the experience of this intimate union are reflected not only in the sense of oneness with God, but also as oneness with the cosmos in the *timeless, spaceless* immediacy of the present moment. Helminiak (1998:271) makes the point that the phenomenon of *timelessness* does not mean that the experience actually *is* timeless – it clearly has a beginning and an end, which means that minds are not eternal. The sense of transcending space–time boundaries is therefore a fabrication of consciousness, albeit of a peculiar kind. The suspended awareness of diachronic location crystallises a sense of cosmic simultaneity that extends beyond the boundaries of self – seemingly indefinitely. This experience of unanimity frequently translates into a super-essential definition of the self, but such associations become a matter of belief that is ascribed to

⁸ Heidegger's use of *Dasein* in *Being and Time* (1962) loosely refers to the meaning of presence or existence, but his more specific intention is closer to the immanentist philosophy of Giovanni Gentile (1875–1944) which explains that being subsists in temporality only to illuminate and interpret the meaning of Being. In this way, the essential Being is neither object nor subject, but the coherence of meaning that is implicit in Being-in-the-world.

⁹ *Noesis*, explains Shanon (2001:91–96), has not received serious or sufficient philosophical consideration because it embraces too wide a spectrum of possibility in ontology, metaphysics, epistemology and theories of meaning. Its inclusion as a primary description of transcendence is therefore representative of the suspicion with which mystical states are treated in science and some categories of philosophy.

the experience rather than evidence that the experience or 'experiencer' is indeed somehow supernatural.

The sense of self as a unity with the *All* in God also leads to awareness of *paradoxicality* (a feeling of continuity and simultaneity in multiplicity). However, says Waldron (1999:105), the encounter is usually *transient* and animates non-dual awareness only for as long as an exercitant is in this particular state of consciousness. Despite scholarly vacillation around the subject, the phenomenon of *numinousity* is also frequently accompanied by *perceptual changes* wherein ordinary modes of awareness can be perforated by transcendental incidents of transport or divine presence. Furthermore, this sense of God's imminence can induce *affective* propensities of joy or peace and a general disposition of altruism towards all creation.¹⁰ The accumulation of these effects in Christianity only accrue spiritual value to the extent in which they actuate personal *transformation* into Christ-likeness, but the ambiguity of the phenomenon forestalls attempts at clear direction in this regard.

Another common aspect that should be added to Waldron's list is the centrality of meditative or contemplative quietude as the principle means of attaining the grace of mystical consciousness. Whilst there are exceptions to this standard, the practice of silence is the common medium in both Western and Eastern disciplines. Wilson (2000:18) asserts the centrality of silence by quoting Goethe (1749–1832): "Let us seek to fathom those things that are fathomable, and reserve those things which are unfathomable for reverence in quietude." This, says Wilson (2000:18), "... is the silence of God Himself" and it is not merely the absence of sensory disturbance, but a disposition of equanimity as the inner discourse between possibilities recedes into attentive receptivity. It is at this point, says contemporary American philosopher Ken Wilber (1993:71), that "... silence reigns ... for no human language or concept can express this experience". According to William James's explanation in *The varieties of religious experience* (1958), the profundity of this inner silence is the consequence of mysticism's most inviolable definition – *ineffability* – and this is so because it identifies the paucity of linguistic constructs.¹¹ It is this inscrutable trait, more than any other, that complicates

¹⁰ Wilber expands that such a sense of affection is often accompanied by "... profound compassion for literally all of the world" (1989:464& 465).

¹¹ Ferrari (2002:6) notes that William Barnard (in *Exploring Unseen Worlds: William James and the Philosophy of Mysticism*, 1997) accuses William James of employing a form of "incomplete constructivism" by "... explaining mysticism through a dialectic between two kinds of knowledge – knowledge of acquaintance and knowledge about ... This dialectic allows James to maintain both that mystics worldwide share certain aspects of their experience, but also to remain a pluralist about the specific experiences and interpretations of mystical experience of mystics from different traditions such as Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism". Ferrari therefore mentions that scientists today can question the credibility

the study of mysticism. How then should the phenomenon of transcendence in mysticism be approached as a subject of study? Clearly, the conceptual and linguistic elusions of mysticism frustrate rational articulation in academic discourse; but are there alternatives?

Ontology and epistemology

Does mysticism require a uniquely tailored epistemology that operates only within its own noetic and experiential domain? If so, is it sufficient for it to be self-legitimising (given the dangers inherent to self-referencing systems) or should mysticism's truth-claims be valid in other disciplines? Is it really possible, for example, for science to study mysticism?

The general terrain of ontology refers to inquiry into the nature of *being* in the capacity of *being*; however, since there are a number of possible assignments to notions of *being*, it follows that the capacity of *being* will be defined in various ways. There are, in other words, theoretical disparities in the modes and capacities that are ascribed to concepts of *being* which necessarily define and direct the process of ontology. For example, material, metaphysical, theological, linguistic and technological variants imbue *being* with different properties and require appropriately stylised epistemologies. Ordinarily, such variations cannot be synthesised without breaching their respective epistemological protocols and it is not only a matter of propriety, but sound academic process to test the integrity of such syntheses.

Clearly then, the character of *being* will also be translated differently by dualists and physicalists. The former, which I prefer to call essentialism, will be accommodating of an 'is-ness' that inheres or predefines phenomena (be they material or subjective); whereas the latter will be concerned only with *being* as a material phenomenon. Although essentialists and physicalists will render the ontology of mystical experience differently, need such variance necessarily dilute the transformative fecundity of the mystical experience as such? Does a physicalist explanation have to censure the non-dual phenomenon as it is described by mystics? The possibility that such questions can educe new understandings is promising, but care should be taken to observe sound academic technologies.

The relational problem between ontology and epistemology is at the forefront of this debate. The ontological domain of science (whatever its disciplinary type) is necessarily defined within closed systems of matter and our apprehension of its many manifestations. The ontology of mystical phenomena submits to no such limitations and this contravenes the appropriation of epistemologies that are designed for science when they are

of James' position since consciousness is deemed to be generated by the brain rather than transmitted by the brain from a deeper realm of transmaterial being.

imported into mysticism. In brief, science cannot measure transcendent phenomena directly. Thus acknowledged, science can however measure the physiological configurations that support it, cause it and mediate its various states. Furthermore, scientific method can quantitatively study the socio-cultural, religious, symbolic, aesthetic and theological narrations which undergird or contextualise mystical experiences and, depending on how criteria are selected, it can validate mystical phenomena on the basis of this inferred and corroborated evidence. The rapidly growing field of consciousness research has made significant strides in the study of the human brain and these findings can also inform and endorse, in principle, the real experience of spiritual transcendence.

Difficulties that are associated with inductive and deductive methodologies nevertheless come to the fore and conclusions will have legitimacy on the condition that epistemological coherence and consistency are maintained. Again, this means that objective manifestations of phenomena that pertain to the occurrence and contexts of mystical experience can be measured and assessed, but not the inner personal experience itself because the rule of phenomenological privacy prevents it. In other words, those who follow the scientific method should be willing to accommodate the “assumption” that mystics are reporting their experiences truthfully and accurately. Some background explanation is therefore necessary if we hope to proceed with a coherent proposal.

Among its many other purposes and functions, religion straddles the spaces that separate opposites. Beliefs about existence and the nature of life and death, sin and salvation, heaven and hell, and body and soul occupy much of spirituality’s energy in its attempt to heal these schisms. And yet it is precisely the dynamic and necessary tension between opposites that seem to animate human imagination and intellect – it almost appears as if we *need* the uncertainty to fuel the creative power of the human mind. Consciousness cultivates and exercises all the resources of faith, reason and imagination as it strains to answer the most fundamental and ubiquitous of questions: Why is there such an explanatory gap at all? At the heart of this dilemma is the so called mind–body problem. Since the advent of human consciousness, all kinds of theoreticians (from mystics to philosophers and from linguists to scientists) have considered why and how it is that an individuated self seems to occupy or indwell a physical body. There is a common experiential sense that personal consciousness (the sense of “self”) and the body are two different things. Gamez (2007:83) aptly summarises this dilemma: “The *real* problem of consciousness is ... how one part of phenomenal experience [inner personal subjectivity] can be reduced to another part of phenomenal experience [the physical brain].” Therefore, when we speak of transcendence, what is it that is transcended and into what do we transcend? To date, the answer remains anathema if the question is posed to reason, but perhaps the

apparent bifurcation between body and mind (or matter and spirit) can be defined more simply. To address this problem, it is necessary to first understand the ontological and epistemological differences between essentialism and physicalism

Essentialism and physicalism

Essentialists maintain that non-physical properties are inherent in all forms and functions of physicality. For example, all persons are *essentially* (that is, in *essence*) human; whereas aspects or expressions of humanness such as personality, ethnicity and language remain contingent and variable. The origins of this essentialist understanding is rooted in Aristotle's (384–322 BCE) *Principle of Non-contradiction*, where he argued that manifest forms have essential or necessary properties without which the form and function of objects cannot exist (Aristotle 2007). This notion is problematic because there appears to be no definitive way of establishing with sufficient certainty whether *essences* subsist as the real or ideal nature of things in the Platonic sense or whether they are merely descriptive instruments for philosophical constructs. The latter generally intimates nominalism – the view that only individual existents and their particular sensible properties can be real. The sagacity of Aristotle's theory of essentialism nevertheless transcends that of his master's. Plato (427–347 BCE) argued in his theory of forms or ideas that objects imply the real existence of abstract entities of which objective manifestations are imperfect reproductions.¹² Plato's thinking therefore involves *essences* with seemingly transcendental ontologies of the type that Judeo-Christian theologians subsequently adapted and imported through neo-Platonic nuances to explain the Divine 'image and likeness' in which humanity is believed to be created (Genesis 1:26). Despite philosophical equivocations, the central principles of essentialism indicate that a type of ultimate or transphysical *ontos* or *ousia* is elementally necessary in order for particularised manifestations of *being* to exist. If this is so, what (in the context of this argument) is the *essence* of transcendence? Is it a highly abstract, complex and integrated sophistication of the human brain within its sociocultural and religious milieus, or is there indeed an elemental *consciousness* that pervades and predefines the universe which can be realised as the apex of spiritual aspiration? How is it possible to tell the difference experientially? Are there perhaps other heuristic possibilities to establish consistent and coherent explanations of mystical consciousness?

¹² Taylor (2001) explains in detail that Plato's understanding of forms and ideas are recurrent themes, but that his dialogues in *Cratylus* (439–440: The Problem of Knowing Form); *Laws* (721: The Form of Immortal Man); *Meno* (71–80: The Impossibility of Knowing Forms); and particularly *Phaedo* (73–80: The Soul Before Birth in the Land of Forms) describe this aspect of his philosophy most precisely.

At this point, we look to physicalism for possible answers – spiritually offensive as the idea might seem to theists. In brief, physicalists claim that the extant universe, as a multiplicity of complex material processes, is the only reality there is. While physicalism as a concept (also known as materialism or materialistic monism) is as old as philosophy itself, the term “physicalism” was introduced more recently by Otto Neurath in *Physicalism. Analytic philosophy: beginnings to the present* (2001). The science of consciousness has come a long way since Neurath’s definition. Nevertheless, as a significant starting point of the exploration of physicalism in this paper, it should be noted that Neurath (who remained committed to logical positivism) includes statements about interior mental phenomena in the empirical domain of spatio-temporal objects on condition that they are sensible (that is, that they are not tautologous). Various versions of physicalism have roots in the Vienna Circle of logical positivists and later came to be associated with *identity theses* of mind, which explain conscious states exclusively in terms of brain states. Positivism normally connotes a world view that is in sympathy with the tenets of modernist empirical science.¹³ It implicitly rejects metaphysics and therefore eschews religious epistemologies since sense experience is deemed the only reliable source from which valid knowledge can be derived. Transrational allusions to non-dual or mystical consciousness are therefore anomalous to positivists since such intimations transcend the bounds of rationalism and empiricism.

Inasmuch as pure or ‘hard’ physicalism insists that all categories of existential being have to be reducible to material predicates, phenomenalism assumes basic predicates and propositions to be *about* sense data – which simply means that the two views differ in their choice of basic propositions. The latter leaves some leeway for subjectivity in its more considered inclusion of phenomenology, but any conscious processes nevertheless remain definitively physical. Some recent physicalist approaches to the study of mind emphasise that as long as the laws of science are consistently applied, science can legitimately reach into the ontology of personal conscious experiences.¹⁴ The allure of such hospitality can be misleading and disappointing. The main hurdle seems to be idiomatic: How can scientific language, with its epistemology governing and delimiting methodological

¹³ Among the best-known proponents of this form of physicalism is Francis Crick, who co-discovered the structure of the DNA molecule with James Watson and Maurice Wilkins in 1953. According to Horgan (2006:1 & 2), Crick (in *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul*, 1994) “... argued that the soul is an illusion perpetuated, like Tinkerbell, only by our belief in it. Crick opened his book with this manifesto: ‘You’, your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules”.

¹⁴ This new trend is well illustrated in the works of, among others, Edelman, Newberg and D’Aquili (see Works Consulted).

processes, be applied to the typically transrational and ineffable qualities of mysticism? Moreover, since the epistemology that is applied to brain physiology is different from the epistemology that is applied to subjective conscious phenomena, on what basis can it be assumed that they respectively apply to the same thing? Such notions can be philosophically capricious and fall into phenomenological fallacies. Despite these prevarications, it now appears that conscious experience as phenomenally 'other' to the brain can be integrated with physicalist explanations without reduction, but theories that are based on phenomenalism, property dualism, panpsychism, supervenience, emergence or constructivism are not necessarily the most viable solutions. How is this possible?

Ullin Place (1924–2000) explains phenomenological fallacies in *Is Consciousness a Brain Process?* (1956). In this book, he elucidates an aspect of the mind–body problem by pointing out the mistaken assumption that descriptions of manifest forms are simultaneously descriptions of their manifestation in inner subjective consciousness. This observation can be enticing initially, but it also reveals a problem because it implies that there are no phenomenal properties other than the phenomena themselves. This quandary indicates the importance of distinguishing the meaning of *is* in a definition from the meaning of *is* in its composition.¹⁵ For example: A sunset *is* composed merely of reflections and refractions of electromagnetic waves in visible light, but in consciousness its *is-ness* can be something quite different – a spectacular array of colours that inspires emotional or religious responses of wonder and awe. The appreciation of a beautiful sunset cannot be experientially defined as electromagnetic waves, even if it *is* composed of them. In summary, it does not follow that an identity of composition equals an identity of perception. Phenomenological fallacies are therefore revealed in the extent to which personal experience is ontologically confused with the physiology that mediates it. How can this distinction apply to an interpretation of transcendence? The relational problem between subjectivity and objectivity in physicalism is self-evident and it goes to the heart of the mind–body problem. It seems therefore that idiomatic variance can appear to imbue phenomena with different ontologies; however, if the ontology of a phenomenon is limited to only one kind, then any experiential variance can be accounted for merely idiomatically.

In support of this suggestion, recent advances in the science of consciousness might indicate the plausibility of including subjective phenomena in a unified scientific language without necessarily taking recourse to the ontological paradoxes that are implicit in mysticism. This does not suggest that the metaphorical utility of the mystical idiom should not have its place;

¹⁵ Deikman (1996:350) similarly explains that awareness “... cannot be made an object of observation because it is the very means whereby you can observe”.

indeed it must, but does it simultaneously have to submit to essentialist ontologies in order for it to establish its veracity? Moreover, are there possibly ways whereby the phenomenon of mystical consciousness and physiology can be simultaneously described without succumbing to phenomenological fallacies? The basic premise of this alternative physicalist view is that experiences that appear *in* consciousness as *other than* the mere physical properties of the brain can avoid phenomenological fallacies by reviewing traditional definitions of consciousness and mysticism. This is a bold and potentially inflammatory hypothesis, but many researchers who are now interested in the science of consciousness are innovating compelling challenges.

If a physicalist approach is able to accommodate mystical narratives without reducing the transcendent experience, it has to also accommodate the linguistic limitations of describing mystical consciousness in natural language. Thus acknowledged, it might view the paradoxes in mystical narratives merely as typological idiosyncrasies. This description is not intended to be discourteous, but simply classifies ineffability as an identifying trait of mystical narratives. Notwithstanding the usefulness and even the transforming capacity of religious language, physicalist theories which permit the inclusion of mystical phenomena remain relatives of monism – which means that they cannot permit the inclusion of dualist ontologies, but perhaps they can permit the phenomena essentialists describe by reorienting or ‘deconstructing’ the linguistic contexts of such ontologies. Whilst monistic physicalism is the theory that the stuff that *is* the universe is the only stuff that there *is*, the emphasis is less on the actual ‘energy as matter stuff’ and more on the unity and consistency of the theories that define it. It therefore asserts the truth that there is only one kind of stuff that *is* the universe, but it need not thereby imply that this truth can only be described by one kind of language – the language of empirical science. Smith (2006:273) endorses this view:

The natural world is all there is... But to say that everything that exists is just part of the one world of nature is not the same as saying that there is just one theory of nature that will describe and explain everything that there is. Reality may be composed of just one kind of stuff and properties of that stuff, but we need many different kinds of theories, at different levels of description, to account for everything there is. Theories at these different levels may not be reduced one to another. What matters is that they be compatible with one another.

Smith might be right to a point, but to prescribe ‘compatibility’ can be easier said than done. At least in the recognition of theoretical variability,

physicalism accommodates more open approaches which find expression in two primary versions of monism: Neutral monism, as proposed by William James, claims that consciousness and physical phenomena are constructed from more ultimate constituents which are neither exclusively physical nor conscious (James 1904:477). Anomalous monism, as proposed by Donald Davidson (1917–2003), claims that there are no universal statements which are equally true of phenomenal states and physical states (Davidson 1980:214). Either way, monism cannot contain any notion that there are two types of stuff in the universe – the essential and the material. Spinoza (1632–1677) is among the best known exponents of this view, but the more qualified theories of anomalous monism and neutral monism (despite ontological and epistemological disjunctions) importantly include the possibility of degrees of subjective ambiguity in monistic philosophy. Experiences can therefore consist of entities that include the subjectivity of metaphorically interpreted states of consciousness, but they remain by nature one with the natural fabric of the universe. The 'real' existence of God as ontologically 'other' is therefore untenable, but the *experience* of God can be interpreted as real experience on condition that the ontology of the phenomenon is *physically* rather than *essentially* defined; however, this idea is epistemologically treacherous.

Is the actual 'ontology' of experience therefore affected by language? Strong arguments can be made for – and against – this supposition, but the matter is not that simple. Language, for example, can claim truths that cannot be experientially verified. The phenomenon of transcendence cannot therefore be shown by language to have any causal link with the existence or non-existence of God. Thus qualified, *belief* in God in the context of a faith system (which is necessarily linguistically conveyed) can be a determining criterion for the import of mystical experience. Can current versions of physicalism accommodate this possibility by recognising such variance as purely idiomatic rather than ontological?

Linguistic problems in the study and expression of mysticism

After having briefly surveyed the common phenomenological, ontological and epistemological difficulties that are associated with transcendence in mysticism, it becomes necessary to consider its linguistic contexts since language and theory exist in a recursive relationship. Linguistics lies at the very heart of the philosophy of meaning. Stated simply, the communication of meaning is the purpose and function of language. The formulae that describe the mechanisms of apprehension which communicate meaning in language comprise a vast and varied matrix of opinion. It is beyond the scope of this paper to survey the rarefied details of all these disciplines, but some issues in linguistics that are reflected against the language of transcendence will persuasively illustrate the difficulties of scholarly discourse in mysticism. For example, how do intentionality and structure in linguistic and symbolic systems transmit meaning in a language whose subject reference is ineffable? Answers to this question, and a range of similar questions, are crucial to theories of language. Moreover, such understandings are now stylistically crafted to convey specific meanings in different disciplines and the rising current of interdisciplinary research has evolved the frontiers of language into wholly new subspecies.

Early theories of language, based on the so-called *AAA Framework* (Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas), suggested that meaning emerges in the relationship between two categories of objects: signs and their significations. Such relationships are normally symbiotically causal, contextually adaptive and theoretically interdependent, but not necessarily substantially equal. This definition can apply to the present argument: the mystical phenomenon is symbiotically related to its expressions in mystagogy and mystography; contextually adaptive according to demographic, religious and cultural variables; and theoretically interdependent with mystical theology; however, the experience and its expression are not therefore necessarily the same.¹⁶ The implication is that the existence of conscious experience can only be verified once it can be linguistically expressed. The quirky nature of this dilemma was illustrated in the opening paragraph of this paper, but it does present a serious problem. The *signified* (the non-dual mystical phenomenon of transcendence) is excluded from linguistic investigation because it is ineffable, and this leaves only its *signifiers* in the allegories and metaphors of mystical narratives. Since no verifiable relationship in *signs* can be established, it begs the question whether meaning can be ascertained from

¹⁶ Ashley (1995:14) explains similar relationships in Christian contexts: "First, whatever else it is or does, ultimately a spirituality is instrumental to an encounter with God, an encounter which is consummated to the degree that it becomes incarnate as a life of discipleship. Second, a spirituality should incorporate one more deeply into the body of Christ. A spirituality is, or should be, a communal, indeed an ecclesial reality."

transcendence at all. Gottlob Frege (1848–1925) noted in *On sense and reference* ([1892] 1952) that the meaning that is attached to a descriptor cannot be shown with any certainty to represent its object of reference (Kenny 2000). Consequently, while meaning can be derived from the language of mystagogy and mystography, the actual experience of transcendence has to extract meaning through translanguistic agencies. Edelman and Tononi (2000:15) endorse the point by claiming that “[n]o description can take the place of the individual subjective experience of conscious qualia”.¹⁷

At best, the languages of both the essentialists and the physicalists can report only on phenomena as they appear in consciousness. For essentialists this ‘observation’ extends legitimacy to esoteric as well as exoteric or objective features; whereas physicalists are typically limited to impartially demonstrable, repeatable and corroborated evidence. If, however, essentialists and physicalists permit that human experience can submit to the languages of different epistemologies, the only remaining problem is ontological. Even here it is indicated that ontological understandings are significantly designed by language; however, since God and experience of God are ineffable in mystical transcendence, it follows that only the phenomenon in human consciousness is available for scholarly scrutiny. As such, the phenomenon remains distinctly human – embodying all the complex and seemingly paradoxical processes of consciousness from basic physiological senses to highly abstracted experiences in mystical transcendence. The full spectrum of these experiences is necessarily biological if mind and body are perceived as one reality. Therefore, if the mystical experience qualifies as real experience, there is no reason why a biological interpretation of transcendent experiences should be reductionistic. Such a qualification does not have to denude the experience itself. The difference, of course, is that only the experience of what is believed to *be* God can be examined and not God himself because an experience of God does not prove the existence of God. The result is that neither science nor religion can prove the existence of God, but both science and religion (albeit in alternate idioms and epistemologies) can examine and legitimise that which appears in consciousness as transcendent experience.

¹⁷ A *qualia* is a general term that is used to describe the ways things seem in experience. *Qualia* are therefore distinguished from phenomena (as the qualities of things) as aspects of phenomena rather than the effect they have on experience or behaviour.

Conclusion

It is clear that phenomenology, ontology and epistemology (with their various idioms) function as the intradynamic sides of a triangle and that the contents of this triangular set and its relational angles will be calculated by either essentialist or physicalist premises but never by both simultaneously. In whichever way they are configured, essentialist triangles will contain the basic premise that matter–energy processes are not all that there is; whereas physicalist triangles will insist that there is only one substance and that it *is* the universe itself – albeit variously manifest and variously described. If this rudimentary analogy is applied to experiences of mystical transcendence, and if such experiences are retained within physicalist ontologies that permit the reports of mystics as reliable evidence, the ‘problem’ of God as ontologically ‘other’ is rightly retained within the domain of faith. In this sense, the risk of ontological and epistemological confusion is allayed, but the problem of causality can still be a problem. If, on the one hand, the ‘giver’ of mystical transcendence is believed to be God (as it would be for theists), such “givenness” has to remain an ingredient of faith and not evidence (Hebrews 11:1).¹⁸ If, on the other hand, mystical transcendence is retained within the fabric and biology of consciousness (albeit of an extraordinary and profound type), faith becomes a disposition that narrates and animates the mystical phenomenon through the idiom of religion; however, it does not thereby fall into phenomenological fallacies that submit to truth claims about that which it cannot prove – God. Faith, in this sense, becomes an incarnational attitude that seeks to embody personal responsibility for living in Christ-likeness – not mere belief in historic-literal truth-claims *about* the God-man Jesus. This is a potentially inflammatory suggestion and it will be heavily criticised before it is objectively debated, but there is growing evidence in churches around the world (particularly in developed or so-called First World contexts) which indicates that a move in this direction is already underway. More to the point, renewed interest in spiritual and mystical traditions lies at the heart of this tenuous trend. For this reason, if not for my cautious provocations in this paper, this debate should be sustained.

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¹⁸ Hebrews 11:1” “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” (*New King James version*).

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