

IV. MYSTICISM

Concepts that are offered as descriptions or even as contributions to the theory of religious experience sometimes function in an evocative manner. They serve to establish conditions for the identification of an experience as religious in such a way as to insure that it be of a certain character. Schleiermacher's instructions to the reader for identifying the moment that precedes the differentiation of consciousness, and Otto's incorporation into his instructions for the identification of a religious experience the condition that it not be amenable to naturalistic explanation, both serve to illustrate this phenomenon. Both restrict the conditions under which an experience can be properly identified as religious so as to guarantee that the experience picked out will not be subject to classification under our ordinary descriptive or explanatory categories. The anomalous character of the experience is guaranteed by the rules that govern the employment of the terms by which a religious experience is identified. Language purportedly descriptive and neutral with respect to evaluations or explanations of the experience actually conditions that experience and places constraints on what kinds of explanation are deemed appropriate. In this chapter the formative influence of religious language and the shaping of an experience by the rules that govern its identification will be illustrated by examining two marks that

are widely acknowledged to be characteristic of the experiences reported by mystics: ineffability and noetic quality.

The Search for a Mystical Core

Reports of mystical experiences have been of special interest to those studying religious experience and, more recently, to students of comparative religion. These reports seem to point to an experience, or to a family of related experiences, that can be differentiated from the interpretations placed on it in various religious traditions. Though there are differences, it has seemed to many that Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, Jewish, and Christian mystics testify to a common experience. Many attempts have been made to describe this experience, and to distinguish it from the parochial interpretations associated with the various religious traditions (Otto, 1932; Smart, 1958, 1965; Staal, 1975; Stace, 1960; Underhill, 1911; Zaehner, 1957). There has been debate over how this core experience ought to be described and whether it consists of one or several fundamental types of experience (Smart, 1965; Zaehner, 1957). Some have thought that the ubiquity of the experience in different cultural settings provides support for the claims made by mystics for the revelatory character of their experiences.

f3083 In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James construes mysticism rather broadly. He says that personal religious experience has its root and center in mystical states of consciousness and that a consideration of these states is a consideration of the general claim that religious experience can yield knowledge. He proposes four marks of a mystical experience, two primary and two secondary (James, 1902: 380–381). The primary marks are its ineffability and a noetic quality. The experience defies verbal expression, and it seems to the mystic to be a state of knowledge or insight, revelation or illumination. These two characteristics taken together, James says, will entitle any state to be called mystical in the sense in which he is using the term. The secondary marks, which are usually found to be characteristic of such states, are transience and passivity.

This characterization is, of course, not unique to James. Classical studies of mysticism, including his, have been broadly phenomenological. Their aim has been to distinguish a single core or several fundamental types from the interpretations placed on the experience by the mystic in the light of his or her attitudes and beliefs. A difficulty arises, however, from the fact that these attitudes and beliefs are typically adopted prior to the experience rather than subsequent to it. The experience is shaped by a complex pattern of concepts, commitments, and expectations which the mystic brings to it. These beliefs and attitudes are formative of, rather than consequent upon, the experience. They define in advance what experiences are possible.

Attempts to differentiate a core from its interpretations may cause the theorist to lose the very experience he is trying to analyze. The terms in which the subject understands what is happening to him are constitutive of the experience; consequently those in different traditions have different experiences. Jewish and Buddhist mystics bring entirely different doctrinal commitments, expectations, and rules for identifying their mental and bodily states to their experiences, and thus *devekuth* and *nirvana* cannot be the same. It might indeed be possible to produce cross-cultural documentation of some common physiological states or mental images in the experiences of mystics. But to focus on these, as some theorists have done, is not to delineate a core but to attend to something other than the experience. A decelerated heart rate may be common to some mystics and to all athletes at the height of training, and it may be a natural endowment of some individuals in contrast to others. Deautomatization (Deikman, 1966) may occur as a consequence of a psychotic break, of finding oneself in a completely unfamiliar and possibly threatening environment, or of preparation through spiritual exercises. But to attend to such phenomena while disregarding the content of the mystic's beliefs and the expectations he or she brings to the experience is to err in one's priorities. What others have dismissed as

interpretative overlay may be the distinguishing mark of the experience.

Steven Katz (1978) recognizes that the mystic's experience is conditioned by the complex preexperiential pattern of beliefs, attitudes, and expectations which he brings to it. He illustrates this by contrasting the Jewish mystic's nonabsorptive encounter with God, on the one hand, with the unitive experience of some Christian mystics, on the other, and both of these with the insight into the impermanence of all things which constitutes the state of nirvana for the Buddhist. The fact that Jewish mystics do not experience union with God is best explained by reference to parameters set by the tradition that has formed their beliefs about persons and God and their expectations for such experiences.

That is to say, the entire life of the Jewish mystic is permeated from childhood up by images, concepts, symbols, ideological values, and ritual behavior which there is no reason to believe he leaves behind in his experience. Rather, these images, beliefs, symbols, and ritual define, *in advance*, what the experience *he wants to have*, and which he then does have, will be like. (Katz, 1978: 33; original emphasis)

In a similar fashion the experience of the Buddhist is shaped by his tradition.

Often, the structuring of an experience according to the particular tradition is done quite explicitly and self-consciously. Most mystical traditions place great emphasis on the importance of a qualified teacher or spiritual adviser for the novice. In Judaism, for instance, autodidacticism is suspect. Guides, gurus, and spiritual advisers in the several traditions do not teach mysticism in general but specific ways to specific goals. Detailed regimens are prescribed to prepare a disciple. Such regimens are employed warily by Buddhist meditators in order to create occasions for the application of Buddhist doctrine and to arrive at discernment (Gimello, 1978).

Those who have tried to distinguish a core experience from the diverse interpretations that can be placed on it would not,

of course, deny that these interpretative schemes are pre-experiential. The Kabbalistic doctrines employed by a Jewish mystic to interpret his experience form part of the set he brings to that experience. Some theorists (e.g., Stace, 1960), recognize the presence of such preexperiential patterns and their influence on the experience but still claim that a core can be differentiated from its interpretations. Katz points to what he regards as "a clear causal connection" between the antecedent beliefs and commitments one brings to an experience and the resultant experience. He seems to think he can show causal influence by demonstrating temporal priority. In fact, the connection between the mystic's antecedent beliefs and his experience is not a causal one but a conceptual one. As we shall see, the relevant conceptual connection includes a judgment about causes.

The logic that governs the concepts by which people interpret their experiences in different traditions shapes those experiences. Any attempt to differentiate a core from its interpretations, then, results in the loss of the very experience one is trying to analyze. The interpretations are themselves constitutive of the experiences. Devekuth could not be imagined in isolation from the tradition of beliefs and practices in which it is sought and attained. To isolate some bodily or mental state and refer to it as *devekuth* apart from any reference to a formative tradition would be to lose the experience. One cannot attain nirvana by accident. This is a logical matter, not just a contingent fact (Smart, 1958: 64). Nirvana is identified by reference to the rules that govern the behavior required to achieve it, and to the doctrines assumed by those rules. The rules that govern the practice and goals of mystics in particular religious traditions condition the experiences that are available to them.

If there is no core experience, and if mystical experiences vary substantively from one tradition to another, what justification is there for continuing to employ the phrase *mystical experience* at all? Katz calls for a pluralistic account of these

experiences and a halt to any search for common characteristics. If there is nothing common to the experiences of nirvana and devekuth, and nothing that these share with others that have been classified under the rubric mystical experience, why continue to use the concept? No doubt a history of the phrase *mystical experience* could be written which would parallel Smith's (1964, 1979) research on *religion* with many of the same findings. The concept is very likely an artifact of the past two centuries of European scholarship on the subject.¹ But the results of such a history would be as inconclusive as those of Smith. The fact that the concept is of recent vintage means only that we cannot accurately ascribe it to people in other cultures and other periods. It does not mean that we cannot employ it to refer to a particular pattern of phenomena.

Although the search for an unmediated core that can be distinguished from the interpretations placed upon it may be futile, there do seem to be expressions, experiential reports, and practices that are sufficiently similar across different traditions to warrant use of the term *mysticism* and attention to some common characteristics. One can employ the results of phenomenological analyses without subscribing to the conviction that these represent some fundamental uninterpreted experience. The two primary marks suggested by James are themes that recur regularly in such reports and analyses. Stace (1960: 131–132), for example, gives a central place in his list of common characteristics to ineffability and the related notion of paradoxicality, and to a sense of objectivity or reality. Accordingly, let us focus on the two characteristics of ineffability and noetic quality, considering how each might best be construed.

Ineffability

James regards ineffability as “the handiest of the marks by which I classify a state of mind as mystical.”

The subject of it [a mystical state] immediately says that it defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can

be given in words. It follows from this that its quality must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others. In this peculiarity mystical states are more like states of feeling than like states of the intellect. No one can make clear to another who has never had a certain feeling, in what the quality or worth of it consists. (James, 1902: 380)

James treats ineffability as if it were a simple property of the experience, or a phenomenological characteristic that could not be further analyzed. He takes the fact that the experience defies expression to mean that it can be known only by acquaintance and thus is closer to feelings than to states of the intellect.

By contrast, Katz is critical of those mystics or theorists who invoke such pseudoqualities as ineffability, paradoxicality, and a sense of objectivity. He regards the first two as functioning only to inhibit careful analysis and the third as a hopelessly vague concept that has different meanings in different contexts. According to him, the terms *paradox* and *ineffable* are mystifying ploys, serving only to cloak experiences from investigators and to render their comparative study impossible (Katz, 1978: 54). If, however, the characterization of their experience as ineffable or paradoxical is widespread among mystics themselves, as indeed it seems to be, we would do well not to dismiss these concepts too quickly but to attend to the role such characterizations play. I shall argue that ineffability is not a simple unanalyzable characteristic of the experience, as James implies, but that it is an artifact of the peculiar grammatical rules that govern the use of certain terms in particular religious contexts. I shall also argue that terms like *ineffable* and *paradoxical* are not imprecise and vague. On the contrary, they are quite precise. They often serve, however, to constitute an experience rather than to describe, express, or analyze it. They are conditions for the identification of an experience as mystical.

Ineffable is properly a relative term. Nothing can be either effable or ineffable *tout court*. Something is ineffable with respect

to a particular language or symbol system, as a sound is ineffable with respect to talk about colors, or the square root of minus one cannot be represented in the system of real numbers (Danto, 1973). But what would it mean to say that something was absolutely ineffable, or ineffable with respect to all linguistic schemes? Paul Henle (1948) has argued that this would be impossible because, as in the example of the sound or the square root of minus one, we would need some way to identify or to represent that which we assert to be ineffable. Furthermore, to take seriously the mystic's claim that his experience is absolutely ineffable would be to credit him with a knowledge of all possible grammatical and symbolic devices. The experience might be ineffable with respect to some, but not to all. Richard Gale (1960) has suggested that to call an experience ineffable is just to ascribe value to the experience; it is an honorific title. Ninian Smart (1958: 69) also regards the term as a sort of intensifier that is expressive rather than descriptive. Danto suggests that absolute ineffability might be understood by reference to the space between language and the world which Wittgenstein attempts to display in the final pages of the *Tractatus*. Stace says only that the ineffability of the mystical experience differs from ordinary kinds of ineffability. But these suggestions are not very helpful.

Since something can be ineffable only with respect to a particular symbol system, the ineffability of an experience must result from its logical or grammatical component. If it is to be an identifying characteristic of mystical experiences that they are ineffable, then the rules that govern the use of the concepts that inform those experiences must be such as to preclude the experience being captured in words. The answer to Henle's query about how an experience could be said to be ineffable with respect to all possible symbolic systems without assuming a knowledge of all such systems is that the experience is constituted, in part, by an implicit rule or operator prescribing that for any symbolic system the experience is

ineffable with respect to it. The component of the experience which insures ineffability is a grammatical rule; it is prescriptive rather than descriptive. It is a criterion for the identification of an experience as mystical.

In many religious traditions, grammatical rules embedded in doctrine and ritual preclude the attribution of any name, label, interpretation, or description to a particular experience or religious object. The rules that govern these terms render them systematically anomalous, enabling them to function as placeholders that repel any determinate description or label. A particularly striking example can be found in the opening sentence of the *Tao te Ching*, in which it is said that the *tao* that can be put into words is not the *Tao*. This sentence is not descriptive but prescriptive. It is a rule that governs the use of the term *Tao*. The term then acts as a formal operator, or placeholder, systematically excluding any differentiating description or predicates that might be proposed. The term functions in this way regardless of its meaning or connotations. *Tao* means "path" or "way," but the term *god*, with its connotations of personal agency, serves as a placeholder in the work of Dionysius the Areopagite and the tradition of the *via negativa*. The meaning and connotations of these terms are very important for the traditions out of which they come; they shape the ways people understand themselves and their experience. But the placeholder function is common to these terms, despite the substantial variation in their meanings. The tetragrammaton YHWH, with associated prohibitions against images and the utterance of the holy name, may serve the same function in the context of the early religion of Israel and in later traditions of Jewish mysticism.

Meister Eckhart wrote of the Godhead: "If I have spoken of it, I have not spoken, for it is ineffable" (Clark, 1957: 83). A famous passage in the Upanishads says there is no better description of Brahman than *neti-neti* (not-this, not-this).² Nagarjuna says of *śūnyātā* (emptiness or voidness) that it is

empty even of itself.³ In each of these cases, the role of placeholder preempts any ordinary connotations a term might have and gives it a special logical function. It serves to maintain, and perhaps even to create, a sense of mystery. The effect is as if Schachter had designed his experiment in such a way as to discredit any possible labels the subjects might employ to explain their arousal, rather than providing labels for them to adopt. All determinate predicates are precluded. Thus the term is prescriptive and evocative rather than descriptive.

Katz recognizes the possibility that such predicates as *ineffable* might function in this way, but he views the consequences for the researcher as entirely adverse and regards this possibility as sufficient evidence to discredit those predicates and to warrant our disregard for them.

A fortiori it would appear that to take the mystic's claim seriously, i.e. that his proposition "x is PI" ["x is paradoxical and ineffable"] is a true description, turns out to have the damaging implication that one cannot make any reasonable or even intelligible claim for any mystical proposition. The proposition "x is PI" has the curious logical result that a serious interpretation of the proposition neither makes the experience x intelligible nor informs us in any way about x, but rather tends to cancel x out of our language—which, of course, is what most mystics claim they want. (Katz, 1978: 56)

He concludes that this is no foundation on which to build an analysis of mysticism. But perhaps it is a beginning. The opening sentence of the *Tao te Ching* does serve to cancel the term *Tao* out of the language, at the very moment of introducing it. It strips it of all possible characterization. The result, however, is quite unlike it would have been had that sentence been omitted entirely. It is not actually dropped from the language; rather it stands there as a placeholder, repelling all attributions. That initial sentence plays a very important role. It formulates the rule by which the term *tao* will be governed in this context.⁴

Some philosophers have argued that to say "God is ineffable" is self-contradictory, because one is simultaneously denying that anything can be predicated of God and predicating something of him, namely, ineffability. We can now see, however, that this is no ordinary predicate. It is an operator designed to achieve the result it is supposed to describe. It is prescriptive and evocative rather than descriptive or analytical. Words are required in order to formulate the rules that guarantee ineffability. The examples cited above should be regarded not as regrettably imprecise descriptions of some state that defies description but rather as precise formulae that rule out in advance the appropriateness or adequacy of any description that might be proposed. William Alston (1956: 319) suggests that those who say that God is ineffable are not actually saying anything about God but expressing their determination not to count as a predicate anything that is said of God. He is correct to note that such a determination is implied by the use of the predicate, but the matter is a logical one rather than a psychological one. The meaning of the term ought to be attributed, not to the determination of individuals, but to the grammatical rules that govern the proper use of *ineffable* in such contexts.

The term *God*, in conjunction with prohibitions against idolatry, may function in monotheistic contexts in a manner similar to that of *Tao*. If it is taken to be a proper name that is used to refer to one being among others, or as a noun that refers to a particular kind of being or an aspect of the cosmos, it no longer serves its function as a placeholder. Placeholders do not represent. Their function is served precisely by the rules that deny them any representational role. Their opacity maintains a sense of ineffability. To the extent that such words are not completely opaque—that *tao* connotes "way" or "path," and that *god* connotes personal agency—they allow determinate attributions, and predicates can be ascribed to the religious object. They then lose some of their anomalous or transcendent status, while gaining plausibility by becoming more fully

integrated into the interpretative or theoretical schemes of which they are a part. God becomes an entity in a metaphysical system, and claims about his existence and nature are supported by that system. When the religious object becomes too domesticated in this manner and threatens to lose its anomalous or transcendent status, an Amos, a Luther, or a Kierkegaard arises to proclaim that God's ways are not our ways and that God is "wholly other."

In contexts other than the mystical, the religious object is often designated by terms or phrases that function as placeholders, or as operators that preclude all determinate predicates. Schleiermacher's use of the term *whence* to designate that toward which the feeling of absolute dependence is directed is a case in point. Any determinate specification of the source upon which we are dependent is precluded. Anselm's famous formula *aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit* (something than which nothing greater can be conceived) is carefully constructed so that no matter what is conceived, that is not God. Karl Barth's (1960: 73–89) idiosyncratic construal of Anselm's phrase as a proper name is designed in part to expunge from it even the ordinary meanings we associate with the words that constitute the phrase. David Burrell has recently argued that Thomas Aquinas has no doctrine of God and that he refuses to provide one. According to Burrell's reading, *esse* functions as a placeholder, and the ascription to God of such predicates as *simple*, *good*, *limitless*, *unchangeable*, and *one* serve as systematic reminders that nothing can be said of him.

In fact, all we can do is acknowledge that the statements which purport to describe God truly will fail to do so if the God they would describe is the true one. For the true God cannot be circumscribed by any set of statements. (Burrell, 1979: 68)

Any statement that purports to describe God must necessarily fail. The transcendental predicates and what has been misconstrued as Thomas's doctrine of analogy function to insure

that the religious object eludes all concepts and predicates. Burrell argues that Thomas's refusal to permit any description or conception of God was motivated in part by considerations arising from the mystical strain in his spiritual life.⁵

The common feature of each of these examples is the employment of a term or phrase to identify God as a religious object in such a way as systematically to preclude all determinate attributions and thus to guarantee, in advance, ineffability. These terms, and the rules that govern their use, play an active role in establishing the conditions under which one can think of God or identify a moment of one's experience as religious. They direct one's attention to a point that is systematically emptied of all content. Schleiermacher's instructions for the identification of the religious moment in consciousness function in a similar way.

Your thought can only embrace what is sundered. Wherefore as soon as you have made any given definite activity of your soul an object of communication or of contemplation, you have already begun to separate. It is impossible, therefore, to adduce any definite example, for, as soon as anything is an example, what I wish to indicate is already past. (Schleiermacher, 1958: 41–42)

For the identification of a moment of one's experience, these instructions are analogous to Anselm's formula and Thomas's employment of *esse* and the divine attributes. They guarantee ineffability.

Many of the terms employed in the literature of the history of religions to capture a universal feature of religious experience or practice also appear to function as placeholders. Though purportedly descriptive, they are lifted out of their original contexts and employed in ways that empty them of their original meanings and suggest that they are indefinable. Otto's *numinous* is the most obvious example, but such terms as *mana*, *tabu*, *baraka*, and *wakanda*, each of which has been used to designate the essence of religious belief or practice, function in

similar ways.⁶ Each has a meaning in the linguistic context from which it is derived, but each is employed as a technical term for the characterization of religion in a treatise written in a modern European language. Each is left untranslated, as an exotic word that contributes to a sense of mystery. Though *numen* fits Otto's purposes, he is not primarily interested in its meaning within the context of Roman religion. He employs it as a surd, heightening its mystery by the rules he formulates for its use. Owing in part to Otto's influence, the words *holy* and *sacred* have come to function in the same way.

Otto, like Schleiermacher in *On Religion*, is trying to communicate what he takes to be the essence of religion by evoking it in the reader. He assumes it can be known only by acquaintance. The term *numinous* is not a descriptive one but a placeholder meant to convey a sense of the mystery that characterizes religious experience. The term is not as much about religious experience as it is a surrogate for that experience. By precluding all determinate labels, and thus all demystification, Otto gives the term a role that resembles that given to *Tao* in the opening sentence of the *Tao te Ching*. The latter, of course, in its context of tradition and ritual, has more force than the former, but both serve as placeholders. Their function is evocative rather than descriptive.²⁵

Such terms as *numinous*, *holy*, and *sacred* are sometimes employed as if they were descriptive. Reference is made to various manifestations of the sacred, and the term is treated as if it were a theoretical concept. The resultant "theories" of religion are, like the concept of the numinous, designed to evoke that which they are supposed to describe or explain. We have seen, however, that direct acquaintance is neither necessary nor sufficient for understanding religious experience. Such experience includes a cognitive component that can be analyzed and rendered intelligible even in the absence of direct acquaintance with the experience. Fear of reductionism leads some historians and phenomenologists of religion to believe that the

sense of mystery that characterizes the experience must itself be reproduced in the description of that experience.⁷ For that reason, many purportedly theoretical terms employed for the characterization of religion are actually surrogates for religious language. They are intended to evoke rather than to describe or analyze.

Another illustration of the refusal, in advance, to admit the adequacy of any determinate characterization of a religious experience can be found in the only public lecture that Wittgenstein delivered. In a lecture on ethics he tried to elucidate the notion of absolute value by reference to three experiences: wonder at the fact of the world's existence, the sense of being absolutely safe, and the feeling of guilt. None of these experiences, he says, can be represented sensibly in words. The verbal expressions we give of them are strictly nonsense. Moreover, he rejects the suggestion that a correct analysis of religious and ethical concepts could ever enable us to discover what we mean when we say that an experience has absolute value.

Now when this is urged against me I at once see clearly, as it were in a flash of light, not only that no description that I can think of would do to describe what I mean by absolute value, but that I would reject every significant description that anybody could possibly suggest, *ab initio*, on the ground of its significance. That is to say: I see now that these nonsensical experiences were not nonsensical because I had not yet found the correct expressions, but that their nonsensicality was their very essence. (Wittgenstein, 1965: 11)

The essence of such experiences is constituted by the fact that significant descriptions of them are precluded. The empty placeholder enters into the logic of the experience. Any description with a significant content is, by that very fact, judged to be inadequate. It is a misrepresentation of the experience.

Could a mysterious and ineffable experience be created by manipulating conditions in such a way that a subject would have no determinate label for what was happening to him, or so the object of his attention would be emptied of its ordinary meanings until it served as a placeholder? An experiment could be designed along Schachterian lines which would systematically discredit any label the subject considered. The preparatory regimens and disciplines developed in the various religious traditions for the pursuit, enhancement, and interpretation of mystical experience include manipulations of this sort. Meditation on a mantra, an icon, a doctrine, a name, or a still point, until the object of meditation loses all its ordinary connotations and serves only to empty the mind by excluding all distinctions, is an exercise that is common to many mystical traditions. Typically, the focal object of the meditation is not important in itself but is employed as a tool for excluding all extraneous thought, especially the ordinary inferences we make and explanations we adopt about ourselves and our world. The object of such meditation, whatever it might be, fulfills the function of an empty placeholder. Though its content may be significant for the specific religious tradition in which it is employed, that content is irrelevant for the sense of mystery that James regards as one of the two distinguishing characteristics of the mystical experience.

The description of mystical experiences as paradoxical can be analyzed exactly as we have analyzed the concept of ineffability. Stace (1960: 212) calls paradoxicality one of the universal characteristics of all mysticism. He criticizes both apologists and skeptics who try to explain away the paradox. Stace contends that mystical paradoxes are flat logical contradictions, and the difficulty of finding language adequate to the mystical experience is a logical one rather than a case of the incommunicability of a feeling or sensation. He says that the experience itself is paradoxical.

The paradox which he [the mystic] has uttered has correctly described his experience. The language is only paradoxical because the experience is paradoxical. Thus the language correctly mirrors the experience. (Stace, 1960: 305)

Stace is correct to see that the matter is a logical one. But his claim to have distinguished a core experience from the interpretations that can be placed on it detracts from his insight into the grammar of the experience. He often claims that the experience is extralogical; he writes that "Laws of logic do not apply to mystical experience" (Stace, 1960: 304). If the experience were extralogical, what would it mean to characterize it as paradoxical? Paradox, like contradiction, is a predicate applied to sentences or propositions. By definition, a paradox entails a logical or grammatical structure. Such a term could properly be applied to the mystic's experience only if that experience were constituted by certain thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes.

Paradox is essential to the mystical experience. Stace's insight is correct, but he reifies the concept of paradox and treats it as a quality inherent in the experience rather than as a feature of the rules governing the identification of an experience as mystical. The subject of the experience perceives ineffability or paradox as a quality of the object of the experience. Peirce (1934: 5.398) observes that the indeterminate character of our thought often leads us to claim that the object of that thought is essentially mysterious. The mystery, however, lies neither in the object nor in some moment of experience which transcends logic and language. James was correct to single out ineffability as a key characteristic of the mystical state, but he was wrong to construe it as a simple property of a feeling or a sensation that could not be put into words. Ineffability is a logical matter. Nagarjuna's tetralemma, the *via negativa*, the speculations of Eckhart or the Kabbalah, or the rules that govern the use of such terms as *Tao*, *Brahman*, *śūnyātā*, *esse*, or *God* can all produce and enhance a sense of mystery or ineffability. The terms

ineffability and *paradox* themselves shape the expectations of seekers. They enter into the criteria by which a person might identify his experience as mystical, and thus they determine the conditions under which a mystical experience can occur. Like the opening line of the *Tao te Ching*, they insure that no experience of which a determinate description can be given will count as a mystical experience. With such a rule in force, ineffability is guaranteed.

Noetic Quality

The second of James's two primary marks of the mystical experience is its noetic quality. The mystic regards his experience as a source of knowledge and insight. James also refers to a "consciousness of illumination" as an essential mark of mystical states. Stace reports that all mystical experiences include a sense of objectivity or reality. Katz judges such characterizations as "a sense of objectivity or reality" to be hopelessly vague. He says that every mystic makes claims to objectivity despite the fact that their views of reality contradict one another, and therefore it is not reasonable to assume that they experience the same reality (Katz, 1978: 50). Once again, Katz thinks such considerations justify and even require that the analyst disregard the mystic's claim. To disregard it, however, is to miss an important component of the experience. The proper question is not whether the "realities" posited by different mystics can be compared; it is whether their experiences can be compared, including the sense of objectivity which is a part of those experiences. Attention ought to be directed to the role the claim of noesis plays in shaping those experiences.

Mystics judge their experiences to be revelatory, productive of insight into the true nature of reality, and not artifacts or projections of their own subjective mental states. This is an important feature of the experience. In most traditions a

novice engages in elaborate preparations. Not only is he fully steeped in the attitudes and beliefs of his tradition but he subjects himself to manipulations that he knows will have a considerable effect on his physiological and mental state. For example, he might engage in prolonged fasting, chanting, orison, dancing, sensory deprivation, or various forms of yogic meditation. The seeker is not unaware that these exercises might contribute powerfully to the resultant experience, but it is a *conditio sine qua non* of that experience that he view these manipulations as catalysts, not as sufficient causes. The experience must be perceived by the subject as providing access to some reality beyond himself and his conscious preparations. He must attribute the experience not to the fasting, the exercises, or the chanting alone, but to some power that transcends these natural causes.

The mystic's identification of his experience requires a commitment to a certain kind of explanation or, what comes to the same thing, the exclusion of a particular kind of explanation. He must identify his experience under a certain description, and that description must preclude naturalistic explanation. The assumption that the experience cannot be exhaustively accounted for in naturalistic terms is included in the criteria for identifying an experience as mystical. Not surprisingly, then, it turns out that mystical experiences elude natural explanations.

This explanatory commitment can be illustrated by the logic of the term *miracle*. I could not identify an event as a miracle and then proceed to explain it in naturalistic terms. The question of whether or not a miracle can be explained is not an empirical one. That it cannot be explained follows from the grammar of the concept. Of course, any particular event that has been labeled a miracle might turn out on closer examination to be susceptible of naturalistic explanation, but then it is no longer to be regarded as a miracle. The term does not have

a simple descriptive use but is employed to identify events under a certain explanation. A miracle, by definition an exception, presupposes rules according to which such exceptions can be identified. The capacity to identify a miracle requires a distinction between natural and supernatural explanation and a judgment that the former is inadequate to account fully for the latter.

Astor and Bingham may travel together to Lourdes and witness a person's astonishing transformation from crippling disease to radiant health. Astor may experience that transformation as a miracle, while Bingham, equally astonished, views it as an event that is anomalous with respect to the present state of medical knowledge but will doubtless one day be explained. Only Astor has had an experience of a miracle. Their different experiences are constituted, in part, by different beliefs about the explanation of the event. It is their beliefs *about* the explanation which differ because, by hypothesis, neither *has* an explanation. Their different beliefs about the appropriate kind of explanation lead them to identify the event differently. Any event one could imagine, even a deep voice from heaven speaking biblical Hebrew, could only be experienced as a miracle by a person who judged that it eluded and even precluded all naturalistic explanation. It would not be experienced as such by one who viewed it as anomalous with respect to our present knowledge but amenable to explanation in terms of natural causes—as, for instance, we view cancer. This explanatory commitment enters into the identification of a miracle. "Nothing is esteemed a miracle if it ever happen in the common course of nature" (Hume, 1975: 115).

Mystical experience is more complex, but it can be illumined by the logic of miracle. The phrase *mystical experience* can be construed as either (1) a simple description of certain mental and/or physiological states, independent of any judgment about their explanation, or (2) not a simple description but, like *miracle*, a phrase that includes among the rules for its proper

application an explanatory commitment—namely, the judgment that whatever physiological or mental states are being identified as mystical could not be accounted for in naturalistic terms.

The literature on mysticism includes examples of both alternatives, but most recent treatments construe the experience as one that can be described without any explanatory commitment. Stace (1960: 29) even adopts at the outset of his study a "Principle of Causal Indifference": If the phenomenological characteristics ascertained from the descriptions given by two mystics exactly resemble one another, then it cannot be said that the experiences are different, or that one is "genuine" and the other is not, merely because they arise from dissimilar conditions. But the analogy with miracle would suggest that a judgment about these conditions is itself a part of the experience. As with Astor and Bingham at Lourdes, a judgment that what has taken place eludes naturalistic explanation is required for the experience to be identified as, and thus to be, a mystical one. To adopt Stace's principle would be to preclude consideration of such a judgment and thus to insure that one would not be studying a mystical experience. That would be like trying to study the perceptions of Astor and Bingham without reference to their judgments about how the event ought properly to be explained.⁸

I have translated James's phenomenological characterization of the mystical experience as having a noetic quality or a sense of objectivity into a description of a judgment made by the person who has the experience. The phrases James employs reify that judgment and suggest an added quality that can be called a sense of reality but cannot be analyzed further. In fact, nothing is added. But the person who undergoes the experience judges it to be revelatory, rather than an artifact of his own subjective states. Compare the following: you are skiing down an icy slope; you are having the experience of skiing down an icy slope; you are dreaming that you are skiing down

an icy slope; your brain is being stimulated by a neurosurgeon so as to simulate the experience of skiing down an icy slope. The picture might be the same in each case, but your judgment about the connection of that picture with the rest of your experience differs, and so your experience differs. The difference of felt quality between the several states is accounted for by a difference of judgment.

It might be argued that no judgment about the explanation of the experience is required in order to make it a mystical experience. An interpretation is sufficient. That is to say, it is sufficient for the subject to regard the experience from a perspective other than that of ordinary natural explanation but without rejecting such explanations. He might view the experience in religious terms. This would be one way among others of interpreting his experience. It need not be seen as a judgment about the validity of natural explanations. It need not require an explanatory commitment at all.

This same issue has been raised with regard to the identification of a miracle, and it might be helpful to return briefly to that example. Hume (1975: 115n) defines a miracle as "a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent." Attention to the phrase "violation of the laws of nature" has led to much irrelevant speculation about whether the laws of nature are statistical rather than mechanical, thus allowing for occasional anomalies, and about whether an event must be unique and the violation of natural law nonrepeatable in order for it to be described as miraculous (Smart, 1964: 26–56; Swinburne, 1970: 23–32). The distinction between mechanical and statistical laws is beside the point, however. A miracle must be judged anomalous with respect to natural explanations. The statistically deviant molecule or photon does not leave the realm of the natural, and its path is not to be regarded as miraculous. Neither is uniqueness crucial. Eyewitness testimonies to two resurrections from the dead would not lead to

the establishment of a new natural law, though they might inspire a more active search for explanations than a single report would warrant. Kant (1960: 81) describes miracles "as events in the world the operating laws of whose causes are, and must remain, absolutely unknown to us." The requirement that they must remain absolutely unknown distinguishes them from the many events for which we as yet have no explanation. Miracles are events that are deemed to elude our ordinary explanatory schemes.

Schleiermacher disagrees. He is among those who have argued that a miracle need not be a violation of or inconsistent with natural laws or explanations. It is enough that an event be interpreted in religious terms, and perhaps that it elicit wonder. The best statement of this position is to be found in his second speech in *On Religion*.

What is a miracle? What we shall call miracle is everywhere else called sign, indication, Our name, which means a wonder, refers purely to the mental condition of the observer. It is only in so far appropriate that a sign, especially when it is nothing besides, must be fitted to call attention to itself and to the power in it that gives significance. Every finite thing, however, is a sign of the Infinite, and so these various expressions declare the immediate relation of a phenomenon to the Infinite and the Whole. But does that involve that every event should not have quite as immediate a relation to the finite and to nature? Miracle is simply the religious name for event. Every event, even the most natural and usual, becomes a miracle, as soon as the religious view of it can be the dominant. To me all is miracle. In your sense the inexpressible and strange is miracle, in mine it is no miracle. The more religious you are, the more you see miracle everywhere. (Schleiermacher, 1958: 88)

Whereas I have argued that *miracle* is a term that cannot be employed for descriptive purposes alone but is properly used to identify an event under a certain causal explanation, Schleiermacher suggests that it refers to an event under a

certain interpretation, and that it remains neutral with respect to causal accounts or explanations. Tillich (1951: 130) appears to agree with Schleiermacher when he describes a miracle as "an event which is astonishing, unusual, shaking, without contradicting the rational structure of reality." Though it is not altogether clear what is meant by "the rational structure of reality," he seems to hold that an event need not elude naturalistic explanation in order to qualify as a miracle.⁹

Schleiermacher's position makes it impossible to distinguish the miraculous from the marvellous, or finally, from any other event. "Miracle is simply the religious name for event. . . . To me all is miracle." He recognizes and accepts the implications of his argument when he says that the term "refers purely to the mental condition of the observer." It is an interpretation under which the observer views an event, but it entails no judgment as to the proper explanation of that event. We do sometimes apply the term *miracle* to childbirth, marvellous feats of skill, or astonishing and welcome coincidences, where we would not deny that a sufficient explanation could be given in naturalistic terms. But these uses of the term are surely derivative.

A scenario constructed by R. F. Holland (1967) nicely illustrates the issue. Holland claims that contingencies and coincidences viewed religiously may be miracles.¹⁰ He imagines a case in which a distraught mother watches a train come miraculously to a halt only a few feet from where her child has been caught on the tracks with his toy car. She regards the incident as a miracle and continues to do so even after she learns that the stopping of the train was due to natural causes entirely unrelated to either the child's plight or her concern. A sudden stroke caused the engineer to faint, and the brakes were applied automatically.

The mother's continued identification of the event as a miracle can be understood in any of three ways. (1) She believes that the natural explanations are insufficient to account for exactly why the train stopped where it did rather than a

few feet farther down the track and attributes that apparent coincidence to divine governance. (2) She employs the term *miracle* honorifically to refer to the marvelous coincidence that saved her son, much as we might say that the halting of the train was providential. (3) The constellation of emotions of fear, relief, and gratitude elicited in her by the series of events is so powerful as to remain even after the implicit belief in divine action which initially informed the gratitude has been discarded. In the first instance, she would be invoking some power beyond the natural to explain the event; in the second, her use of the term *miracle* would be derivative and metaphorical; and in the third, her emotion would assume belief in some supernatural power, though she no longer consciously defends such a belief. The difference between these three alternatives has implications for the interpretation of the explanatory commitment that is assumed by a subject's identification of his experience as mystical.

Despite his denial that any explanatory commitment is entailed, we saw that Schleiermacher's description of the religious consciousness implicitly ascribes to the subject a belief in a power that transcends the nexus of natural causes. The object of the feeling of absolute dependence is a "whence," or source that is not a part of this world but on which the world and everything in it depends. All finite existence is grounded in the infinite, and everything is ultimately to be attributed to the divine causality (Schleiermacher, 1928: 4.4, 46.2; 1950: 39; Harvey, 1962). Schleiermacher is a proponent of what James (1902: 520–523) refers to as universalistic, as opposed to piecemeal, supernaturalism. The fabric of natural causes is not rent, but the entire natural order depends on divine causality. His statement that anything is a miracle as soon as the religious view of it is dominant can now be seen to include reference to a causal explanation. The "religious view" is a perception of the world as absolutely dependent upon a source that is not itself part of that world. The causal judgment is then disguised by its inclusion in an allegedly phenomenological description of the

pious consciousness or the feeling of absolute dependence. Both the perception of an event as miraculous and the distinctive moment in the religious consciousness assume this implicit judgment.

The third way of construing the mother's continued identification of the preservation of her son's life as a miracle may be relevant to Schleiermacher's account. He regards the distinctive moment of religious consciousness as a moment that is prior to thought and independent of belief, though we have seen that reference to concepts and to an implicit belief about causes is incorporated into his criteria for specifying the sense of the infinite or the feeling of absolute dependence. Schleiermacher might erroneously regard these feelings and emotions as primitive and independent of speculative thought because he is confusing psychological and logical priority. These emotions are now firmly entrenched in the lives of persons and communities even when explicit assent is no longer given to the beliefs they presuppose. Religious emotions and practices that were shaped in a culture in which belief in divine governance was assumed and supported may be preserved and transmitted even when many would no longer subscribe to those beliefs or to the arguments that once legitimated them. The concepts and beliefs might then appear to derive from the emotions and to give them expression, even though an adequate analysis of the emotions would require reference to the concepts and beliefs. In such a situation, the emotions would be psychologically prior to but logically dependent upon the concepts and beliefs. The relevance of this possibility for the identification and explanation of religious experience will be explored more fully in chapter six.

The subject's identification of his experience as mystical entails the belief that it cannot be exhaustively explained in naturalistic terms, just as the identification of an event as a miracle implies that it is anomalous with respect to the natural order. Two questions immediately arise: (1) What is meant by

the phrase "in naturalistic terms"? that is, What boundaries of the natural are presupposed? and (2) What is it in the mystic's experience that is to be explained? that is, What is it that cannot be accounted for in naturalistic terms? The form of the answers to the two questions is the same. In each case the point is a logical one, having to do with the conditions under which an experience might be identified as mystical, and is independent of the content of particular situations.

The term *miracle* implies that any event to which it refers exceeds explanation in terms of natural causes, and this holds irrespective of where the boundaries of the natural are drawn. As Hume saw, a miracle is, by definition, an anomaly. This holds regardless of what nomos it is anomalous with respect to. The concept of miracle is parasitic upon conceptions of the natural order. What people call a miracle may vary according to their familiarity with and explanations of the objects and events in the world around them, but it will always be something they judge to be anomalous with respect to the natural order. If comets and eclipses are judged to be exceptions to that order, they may be perceived as miracles and attributed to divine activity. When it is recognized that their motions can be subsumed under natural laws, they will no longer be considered miraculous. Considered in themselves, events identified as miracles are often trivial. Their significance lies in their anomalous status. Geertz (1973: 101) describes a toadstool in the Javanese village in which he was doing fieldwork which grew larger and more rapidly than the astonished inhabitants of the village thought that toadstools were wont to do. They were anxious and demanded a special explanation. Our expectations and norms for the growth of flora and fauna are probably less restrictive than those of Geertz's villagers, so the precocious fungus would not elicit in us the same reaction. The conditions under which people are astonished depend on their beliefs and expectations about what is normal. If the identification of an experience as mystical entails the judgment that it cannot be

exhaustively accounted for in naturalistic terms, this entailment will be invariant across different conceptions of the natural. What is required is that something be judged anomalous with respect to the natural order, regardless of what substantive conception of the natural order is assumed.

Were precognition or extrasensory perception to be reliably established under stringent laboratory conditions, this would not provide evidence for the existence of forces outside the natural realm. It would merely require a revision of our understanding of the forces that exist in nature. Psychologists would be obliged to take account of the new evidence and to modify their theories accordingly, just as physicists took account of electromagnetic phenomena when they were first discovered and revised their conceptions of physical interaction. Such a change would not be a small matter. The integration of the theory of electromagnetic interactions and classical Newtonian physics is not yet complete. But no newly discovered phenomenon could provide evidence for belief in a supernatural order. Nor could a mystical experience, described without reference to its constituent beliefs, be evidence for the inadequacy of naturalistic explanation. If, however, the experience is in part constituted by the belief that natural explanations are insufficient to account for the event, then the identification of the experience as mystical entails, for the one who undergoes it, the inadequacy of such explanations.

If *miracle* is used of events that are deemed to be anomalous with respect to the natural order, what is it in the experience of the mystic that is judged to elude psychological explanation? It must be some physiological or mental state, but exactly what state it is may vary from one context to another. We constantly monitor our own states and behavior, as Stephen Bradley and Schachter's subjects did, making causal attributions and seeking explanations for what happens to us and for what we do. This ascription of causes determines, in part, the emotions we feel. People seek the best explanation for what is happening to

them, and the concepts and beliefs employed in that explanation are often drawn from the immediate context.¹¹

Preparation for mystical experience within a religious tradition typically includes two components: (1) a disciplined activity designed to produce a change from the physiological and mental equilibrium that constitutes normal consciousness, and (2) intensive study, usually under the tutelage of a guide, guru, or spiritual director, of the doctrines and beliefs of the tradition within which the mystic will interpret and understand what is happening to him. The altered state may be achieved by meditation on a mantra, koan, or icon, by fasting, engaging in yogic exercises, sensory deprivation, or by any of a variety of other means. The actual effect produced may vary from one situation to another. It might include decelerated or accelerated heart rate, a state of quiet pause or one of excitement, visions or the emptiness that results from extended meditation on a sound or a still point. These phenomena may all be functionally equivalent. Any of them might provide the occasion for the mystic's perception of what is happening to him as a breakthrough, an insight, or an experience of a reality that is fuller than that with which he has to do in normal states of consciousness. It is this perception, with its constituent beliefs, and not the specific state that occasions it, which is critical for the mystical experience. While further investigation may reveal some physiological characteristics that are common to the experiences of mystics, those do not enter into the sense of ineffability and the noetic quality that James regards as the distinguishing marks of the experience.

The two secondary marks by which James characterizes the mystical state, transience and passivity, are also related to the noetic quality of the experience. Passivity conveys the sense of being grasped and of being subject to some power beyond oneself. Both passivity and transience reflect the perception that the experience is not under the subject's voluntary control. It cannot be manipulated or guaranteed by the subject's decision

or by causes that he might set in motion. He can prepare himself for it, but the experience is finally not subject to his control. The rules for the identification of an experience as mystical include the condition that he judge it to be something other than an artifact of his own thought and actions.

Each of the distinguishing characteristics of mystical experiences is best construed, not as a simple unanalyzable quality of the experience, but as a conceptual constraint on what experiences may be identified as mystical. Ineffability and noetic quality, the two marks that James regards as jointly sufficient for the specification of a mystical experience, function to insure that any experience identified as mystical will be anomalous with respect to any determinate description and with respect to any natural explanation. Any experience whose object can be captured in a descriptive phrase or that can be explained in naturalistic terms is, *ipso facto*, not a mystical experience. These criteria are incorporated in the rules that govern the proper use of the phrase *mystical experience*. Far from being more primitive than words, concepts, and beliefs, or transcendent with respect to them, the experience cannot be specified without implicit reference to these criteria. Absolute ineffability can only be guaranteed by a logical placeholder that precludes determinate predication in any symbol system; and anomaly with respect to natural explanations can only be insured by an implicit rule to the effect that if an experience can be explained in such terms, it is not the experience reported by mystics.

Anomaly and Authority

Mystics describe their experiences as anomalous with respect to all symbolic systems and as anomalous with respect to all natural explanations. In our consideration of Peirce's account of the logic of inquiry, we saw that inquiry is elicited by doubt. Doubt arises when we are confronted with some phenomenon or event that is anomalous with respect to our current beliefs. Anomaly gives rise to inquiry, and the aim of inquiry is to fix

belief. Schachter discovered that receptivity to and the need for new labels or interpretations occurred under conditions in which subjects were faced with anomalies or surprises. When no appropriate cognition was available, people sought new interpretations to make sense out of what was happening to them and out of their own actions. The role of anomaly and doubt concerning the adequacy of available explanations is crucial for the adoption and discard of religious beliefs.

The anomaly reported by the mystic, or by Astor in describing the miracle he witnessed, is different, however. It is not a provisional anomaly that can be removed by inquiry. The mystic claims that his experience is ineffable, not just with respect to his native tongue or his own capacity to articulate, but with respect to all possible linguistic systems. Astor claims that the event he witnessed is anomalous not only with respect to the present state of medical knowledge but with respect to all natural explanations. Further inquiry might possibly result in an explanation of an alleged mystical experience or of the event at Lourdes. Were that explanation to convince him, however, the mystic would claim either that it was not a genuine mystical experience or that the real experience had not been captured by the explanation. The healing that Astor once took to be a miracle would now be considered a case of mistaken identification.

The anomaly represented by the mystic's claim of absolute ineffability and the anomaly of a miracle are incorporated into the rules for the proper identification of a mystical experience or a miracle. Absolute ineffability can only be guaranteed by an implicit rule to the effect that no symbol system can capture the experience. One cannot identify an event as a miracle and allow that it can be exhaustively explained in natural terms. The identification of an anomaly is determined in part by the conceptual system with which one is operating and by the rules that govern the proper application of concepts like miracle and mystical experience.

Mary Douglas is one of a growing number of social scientists who have turned their attention to the cognitive components of cultural systems. She has been especially interested in the religious significance of cultural anomalies. In an illuminating analysis of the dietary laws of the Deuteronomic code, she demonstrates how each of the forbidden creatures is anomalous with respect to the classificatory structure for animals, birds, and fish which is assumed by that code (Douglas, 1966). She hypothesizes that these creatures were set apart and considered impure because they could not be incorporated adequately in that structure. In the experience of the Lele, an African people, the pangolin, or scaly anteater, is similarly anomalous. It cannot be classified as either an animal or a fish. Here the anomaly is also set apart, but it is worshipped as a sacred object. Douglas suggests that the concern to maintain boundaries and to protect the identity of a nation that had emerged out of a history of exile and conquest caused the Israelites to interpret anything that threatened to dissolve or obscure boundaries as dangerous. The essentially sustaining and peaceful relationships that the Lele enjoyed with their neighbors disposed them to interpret the crossing and eliding of boundaries in a positive fashion, not as a danger but as an unexpected opportunity (Douglas, 1975: 276–318). In both cases the anomalous instance is set apart and treated with respect. The interpretation or labeling of one as taboo and the other as an object of worship is a consequence of the experiences of the respective peoples and their assessments of their situations. The need for new labels and reassessment arises only in the presence of anomaly, however, and of the doubt such cases raise concerning the adequacy of a classificatory and explanatory scheme.

Douglas's work suggests that the sense of the sacred or mysterious is inextricably bound up with the anomalous. A mystery is something that defies classification or explanation. Mystery and awe result when no appropriate label or explanation is available to satisfy inquiry. Schachter manipulated the

cognitive context of his experiments so that different labels or interpretations were salient. If the context were arranged so that every candidate for a determinate interpretation was discredited and no labels were available by which to make sense of the experience, the sense of anomaly would be sustained and heightened. The more the need for interpretation is aroused and frustrated, the greater the sense of unease and mystery which is created. As Douglas reports, such situations often lead to respectful behavior and feelings of awe toward the "objects" of these experiences. Whether they are classified as objects of worship or taboo, they are set apart from the world of profane objects and actions.

Both the identification of an anomaly and the attitude that is taken toward it—whether that attitude be worship, avoidance, or a sustained sense of mystery—depend on the conceptual system available to a person for understanding himself and his world. Schachter manipulated labels, and Douglas compared cosmologies in different cultures. Both demonstrated that the sense of anomaly and one's response to it depend on the cognitive context. Otto claims that the experience of the numinous is anomalous with respect to all description and explanation, but we saw that the rules he formulated for the identification of that experience guarantee its anomalous status. The criteria for the identification of an experience as mystical perform a similar function.

In his study of the varieties of religious experience, James turns to mysticism in order to examine the claims of religious persons that they see truth in a special manner (James, 1902: 378). Can the experiences of mystics yield knowledge? We have seen that the subjects of such experiences regard them as having a noetic quality, but can they provide evidence for religious belief? Katz (1978: 22) contends that neither mystical experience nor religious experience more generally described can provide reasons or evidence relevant to the truth or falsity of any religious belief. James is more careful; he recognizes the

need to differentiate between the case of the subject and that of the observer or analyst. He summarizes his answer in three parts:

(1) Mystical states, when well developed, usually are, and have the right to be, absolutely authoritative over the individuals to whom they come.

(2) No authority emanates from them which should make it a duty for those who stand outside of them to accept their revelations uncritically.

(3) They break down the authority of the non-mystical or rationalistic consciousness, based upon the understanding and the sense alone. (James, 1902: 422–423)

The experience produces conviction in the subject and is regarded by him as evidence for his religious beliefs, but it carries no authority for the observer. At best it may offer a hypothesis and establish a presumption for those who have not undergone the experience, but it provides neither reasons nor evidence to support the claims of mystics.

Mystical states are and have the right to be authoritative for their subjects. One of these claims is descriptive, the other normative. The description is accurate, but the claim that the subjects are justified in regarding their experiences as evidence for their religious beliefs is not. It is based on an inaccurate theory about why the experience is authoritative for the subject. James assimilates the experience to that of sensation and thus regards it as a direct acquaintance that provides evidence analogous to that of sense perception. For this reason, he says, the mystic's claims are invulnerable.

Our own more "rational" beliefs are based on evidence exactly similar in nature to that which mystics quote for theirs. Our senses, namely, have assured us of certain states of fact; but mystical experiences are as direct perceptions of fact for those who have them as any sensations ever were for us. (James, 1902: 423–424)

These experiences are, he puns, "absolutely sensational in their epistemological quality."

This recognition of the authority of the experience for the subject is important. The experience has a noetic quality. But the explanation that James offers for this authority is based on his erroneous assimilation of the experience to that of sensation and feeling. James makes two errors here. Mystical experience is not a simple feeling that is independent of concepts and beliefs, and sense perception is not authoritative simply by virtue of direct acquaintance with an object.

In accord with his assumption that mystical states are similar to sensations, James attempts to arrange them alongside similar states as one might set the smell of a particular perfume between similar fragrances, or as Hume's missing shade of blue can be placed between two shades that are directly experienced. He treats the sense of profundity allegedly elicited by the sound of the word *Mesopotamia*, the experience of *déjà vu*, alcoholic intoxication, and mystical states as a spectrum. The problem is not that he associates mystical states with lower states of consciousness but that each of these states differs from the others with respect to how it is to be described. The specification of mystical states requires reference to sophisticated concepts and grammatical rules. The ineffability of the mystical experience does not arise from its kinship to sensations but from the logic of the terms by which the subject identifies it as a mystical experience.

The identification of an experience as mystical, as nirvana or devekuth or communion with God, assumes the belief that it is authoritative, revelatory, and that it provides support for the teachings of the tradition within which it is identified and interpreted. Buddhist meditational practices are designed to achieve certain states in order to exemplify Buddhist doctrines (Gimello, 1978). The aim of the meditation is not simply the achievement of the states but the discernment of the truth of Buddhist teachings. The authority of the experience for the

subject derives from his identification of the experience under a certain description. That identification assumes the belief that the experience yields knowledge and that it is not an artifact of his preparatory manipulations or subjective states. It follows that the experience will be authoritative for him. But this authority is to be explained not by its similarity to sense perception but by the logic of the description under which he identifies the experience.

Ordinary perceptual experiences also assume beliefs. They presuppose beliefs about the causes of the experiences. One would not identify an experience as a perception in the face of evidence that the appropriate causal relation between the object perceived and the experience itself was lacking.¹² As in the case of mysticism, the identification of a perception assumes certain beliefs about how that experience is to be explained. The experience has no authority for one who does not share those beliefs. The authority of the experience is based not on direct acquaintance but on what is regarded as the best explanation of the experience.

This analysis of the authority of the experience for the subject demonstrates why it carries no obligation for one who has not undergone the experience. It is the subject's identifying description, his belief that the mystical state is one of insight, and his view of the proper explanation of the experience which are constitutive of the experience. The observer must cite the subject's description in order to identify the experience adequately, but he need not endorse that description nor the beliefs it assumes. The experiences of mystics do offer hypotheses, but they do not establish a presumption. They are testimonies not to some direct perception but to the beliefs that enter into the identification of the experience. These issues will occupy us in the following two chapters.