

Values of Mysticism

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Mysticism and Morality by Arthur C. Danto (Basic Books, New York, 1972, 127 pp., \$5.95); *Mystical Experience* by Ben-Ami Scharfstein (Bobbs-Merrill, Indianapolis, 1973, 195 pp., \$6.95).

Arthur Danto's book is a lucid exposition of the dominant systems of thought in India and China and, in part, a significant contribution to ethical theory.

Danto does not argue for the poverty of mysticism, but only for its general moral poverty. His contention is that the mystic wants a total solution to the problem of life as such, and that the mystic's ultimate goal (happiness or bliss) is more often than not only attainable by a radical and complete form of escapism. Danto carefully reminds us that morality cannot be a technique of salvation, that "ethics has to do with how we should treat one another, not merely with how we are to treat ourselves alone," and that "no man could be counted moral who did not have that minimal concern for others that permits his own felicitude to vary as theirs does." The fundamental point is that no one can save us but ourselves and that escapism is neither a moral nor an adequate answer.

Danto's argument is essentially correct. I say essentially correct, because the dominant systems of oriental mystical thought surely do reflect a certain moral poverty. But it is important to distinguish carefully between what this does prove and what it does not prove. First of all, it does not prove that all varieties of mysticism, or even all oriental varieties, are so impoverished. D. T. Suzuki has argued, for example, that criticisms similar to Danto's are not applicable to Zen Buddhism. Second, it does not prove that mysticism is merely an escape from life. One of its other functions, presumably a valuable one, is that it provides a perspective, a way of looking at things. For whatever else he may believe or do, the mystic senses an element of mystery in the universe (something that defies but also

intrigues understanding) that cannot be reached by the usual modes of sensory experience, and this belief, or experience, is of such significance that the individual structures an activity of his life in its expression or evaluation.

Finally, Danto's argument does not show that the escapism of mysticism is devoid of value. "Does not wisdom," as Morris Cohen once observed, "consist in apportioning time for work and for play, time to live with others and time to live with one's self?" And rather than turn to hard drugs or choose the ultimate escape, suicide, is it not better for those who are captured by the compulsion to escape and lack better alternatives to turn to, and explore, the mystic way?

Ben-Ami Scharfstein's book is a successful attempt to describe accurately, and yet preserve, the rich diversity of mystical experience. In addition to description and explanation, there are hypotheses, exciting and important ones. There is no reductionism. That is, there is a sense of fairness, an almost loving concern not to legislate out of existence any possibly relevant mystical phenomena.

Descriptions of mystical techniques and the superlative states of mysticism are provided. Everyday mysticism (itself an intriguing notion) is explained as the power of each human self to assimilate whatever lies outside it, that is, to abolish the otherness of other persons and things. It is admitted that mysticism takes abnormal or psychotic forms everywhere, and the hypothesis is advanced that unreality is an insight for the mystic, but an unavoidable torture for the psychotic. In the longest and most interesting chapter, "Creator's Mysticism," the claim is made that creation, "whether internal or external, mystical, scientific, or artistic, expresses the need for unity. The inner person needs to be united with himself and with his body, and the single person with others and with real and ideal communities." In Scharfstein's view, the creative effort contains three essential features: a certain intensity of suffering in a certain kind of sufferer; a constructive answer to that suffering; and a need "to atone for one's suffering and distance by a gift able to transform the suffering into a certain pleasure and the distance into a certain intimacy."

The validity of this view is, of course, of great practical importance. Imagine, if you like, how the lovers of suffering would argue. But surely it is quite plain that not all creative individuals go through this analogue of suffering and atoning. Moreover, it seems reasonable to suppose that the need for unity is merely an exaggerated way of expressing a common sociogenic need, the need to belong. And if this is admitted, then not only could questions of the nature and limits of this need be more successfully explored by the social scientist, but much of the mystery of mysticism vanishes. •