

THE UNANIMITY ARGUMENT AND THE MYSTICS *

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THE argument is widely used that there is a unanimity to be found in one or more of the aspects of the mystic's experience and that this unanimity is of such a nature as to warrant a claim that the mystic has knowledge of a Supreme Being. Bergson, for instance, writes :

We must note the fact that mystics generally agree amongst themselves. This is striking in the case of the Christian mystics . . . All we want to make clear is that, if external resemblances between Christian mystics may be due to a common tradition or a common training, their deep-seated agreement is a sign of an identity of intuition which would find its simplest explanation in the actual existence of the Being with whom they believe themselves to hold intercourse.¹

In a similar manner, Father Corbishley asserts that

. . . despite an immediate difference in detail, there is an almost monotonous sameness about their general attitude to the basic problems of moral conduct and religious belief. If mystic experience were no more than a self-induced trance, if the alleged intuition of a non-existent divine were hallucination, it is surely remarkable that these baseless and purely subjective phenomena should be under the control of a persisting framework of ideas and beliefs.²

This argument is not a simple one. Intuition as a way of knowing has been effectively coupled with agreement as a means of verification. Essentially the philosopher of mysticism argues that the defects of traditional intuitionism are remedied by the agreement amongst the mystics and that the agreement amongst the mystics has cognitive significance because of the fact of intuition. In other words, the direct apprehension of some reality, an intuition, when coupled with a common agreement as to the nature of that reality constitutes the mystic's claim to knowledge.

Three aspects of this argument will be considered. First of all, does mystic intuition provide knowledge, in a strict sense, of that which is apprehended? Secondly, does agreement or an appeal to numbers further substantiate a claim to knowledge? And finally, I will consider whether or not there is actually an agreement amongst mystics as to basic beliefs and attitudes. The first problem is part

¹ *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, pp. 235-36.

² "Do the Mystics Know?" *Hibbert Journal*, 1931, L., p. 5.

even "the brave side of what we call vice or crime."¹ This would seem to be part of what he means by charity.

But this is not the whole of Santayana's mature ethical thinking. The other direction in which his thought advanced was toward seeing the danger in "indiscriminate sympathy with every form of life," namely, that it leads to moral dissolution. While preserving our toleration and sympathy with other lives, we have at the same time to affirm our own: "so that integrity or self-definition is and remains fundamental in morals: and the right of alien natures to pursue their proper aims can never abolish our right to pursue ours."² Christianity is the victory-song of Spirit over the World, and as such is a suitable expression of the ripe naturalism of Santayana's later period. After a time of reproachfulness, based on moralistic and romantic illusions, the clear-eyed philosopher is reconciled, not merely to what he views as the good in nature, but to nature itself.

For Santayana is never anything but a naturalist. His language is Christian and orthodox; but he lacks one thing—faith. In an age when psychiatrists and social philosophers are calling upon men to recognize the importance of religious symbols even when they can not be taken literally, Santayana may yet find himself the prophet of some cult. One must doubt, however, whether such neo-Christianity would receive his endorsement. He wrote:

'It is not those who accept the deluge, the resurrection, and the sacraments only as symbols that are the vital party, but those who accept them literally, for only these have anything to say to the poor, or to the rich, that can refresh them. In a frank supernaturalism, in a tight clericalism, not in a pleasant secularisation, lies the sole hope of the church.'³

For an unbeliever such as himself to find its doctrines and practices meaningful and expressive, he must have been bred from childhood in an authentic tradition.

¹ See *Persons and Places*, p. 176.

² *Persons and Places*, p. 176.

³ *Winds of Doctrine*, p. 56. Readers may recall his strictures on Anglo-Catholicism in *The Last Puritan*. See also *My Host the World*, p. 90, and *Letters*, p. 63, where he discusses the efforts of the Cowley Fathers to "rediscover or to imitate a cultus."

of a very large and complicated subject into which I will not try to enter very deeply. The problem is relevant, however, in that when it is objected that intuition is inadequate as a way of knowledge, a form of the unanimity argument is often resorted to.

All true mystics agree, we are told, that there is a road which must be followed if we are to know the divine. "There is only one road from Appearance to Reality."¹ And this road is open for all of us to share if we only would have the courage and the passion for the Goodness, Truth, and Beauty which is there waiting for us. The mystic knows because he has actually travelled on this road and has returned to us with divine inspiration. A sceptic who would question the genuineness of this journey cannot be answered through the medium of language; language is inadequate for this purpose. The sceptic, however, can test the mystic's story. He can journey on the road to the divine reality and can verify the mystic's claim by his own personal experience.

Bergson maintains that the mystic's journey is a type of verification in the same manner as that of a scientist carrying out an experiment or an explorer discovering new terrain. Thus he writes:

In the days when Central Africa was a *terra incognita*, geography trusted to the account of one single explorer, if his honesty and competence seemed to be above suspicion. The route of Livingstone's journeys appeared for a long time on the maps and atlases. You may object that verification was potentially, if not actually, feasible, that other travellers could go and see if they liked, and that the map based on the indications of one traveller was a provisional one, waiting for subsequent exploration to make it definitive. I grant this: but the mystic too has gone on a journey that others can potentially, if not actually, undertake; and those who are actually capable of doing so are at least as many as those who possess the daring and energy of a Stanley setting out to find Livingstone.²

There are several objections to Bergson's analogy and the implicit argument it contains. First of all, it is intimated that geographers accepted Livingstone's discoveries because his "honesty and competence seemed to be above suspicion," and that Stanley's subsequent exploration verified Livingstone's findings. Bergson, I fear, has here succumbed to the myth connected with the life of Livingstone and has neglected the facts of the case. It may be only of incidental interest, but Livingstone's fame as an explorer was established with the publication of his first book. At this time Stanley was a boy of seventeen and only starting his career. Thus the original success of Livingstone was quite independent of the explorations of Stanley.³

Furthermore, the cartographers did not as Bergson suggests trust the account of one single explorer just because his honesty and competence seemed to be above suspicion. Livingstone did not fill in the map from Kuruman to Timbuktu and then let the matter

¹ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism*, p. 446.

² *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, p. 234.

³ In 1857 Livingstone published his *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa*. It was his observations in this book that necessitated a reconstruction of the map of Central Africa. Livingstone's famous meeting with Stanley occurred years later, in 1871.

rest upon his integrity. Rather his description, enhanced by thousands of details, made possible an indirect means of verification by naturalists, botanists, geographers and other men who were familiar with the surrounding area. He furnished such an abundance of information to geography and natural science that the picture of Central Africa, like a missing piece of a puzzle, neatly fitted in with all the available knowledge of Africa. Then, of course, there were the officials, the missionaries, the natives, Arab slavers, and his family who were on hand to verify terminal points in his exploration. Thus it was not necessary for other travellers to take the journey in order to substantiate Livingstone's findings; he offered a wealth of evidence which could be successfully corroborated without going into the jungles of Africa. The mystic, on the other hand, offers nothing but his testimony. He does not bring back evidence of his visit to a divine reality. He offers nothing which might be corroborated from the available fund of knowledge; nor does anyone see him in his journey.

The apparent plausibility of Bergson's argument lies in his emphasis upon the journey taken by both parties and his neglect in comparing their destinations. Both men make a journey, but what of their destinations? Is Central Africa a proper analogy with divine reality? Having never been so fortunate as to experience the latter I hesitate to answer. And yet it seems clear, if we can talk at all of clarity in such matters, that there is an enormous difference between the two "lands" visited. No person, in the time of Livingstone, seriously doubted the *existence* of Central Africa, while the "land" the mystic journeys to has always been in great doubt. Describing Central Africa was Livingstone's problem: he did not have to prove its existence. But the existence of the mystic's divine reality is the problem Bergson is concerned with, and one which cannot be resolved by clever analogy.

If we wish to compare the mystic's journey with that of an explorer, the journey would then be analogous to an explorer having claimed to have been to Atlantis. Is it at all surprising that we are somewhat reluctant to believe such a claim? For without evidence that can be tested the description of Atlantis remains a pleasant myth which intrigues the imagination. And why is the story the mystic tells anything more? Why should we be so credulous in the case of the mystic when we are so sceptical with others? The answer is a simple one although it is not often stated outright. The mystic and the divinity he experiences is a source of morality and religion. The mystic inspires the masses.¹ But what of it?

¹ Is mysticism, as Bergson suggests, inspirational? If so, in what religious currents does it carry us? These questions are perplexing and I wonder whether Bergson has not passed judgment on this matter before sufficient sociological evidence has been uncovered. Troeltsch, in his classic work *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, suggests that "mysticism has an affinity with the autonomy of science, and it forms a refuge for the religious life of the cultured classes; in sections

Anything can be a source of morality and religion so long as it induces the proper beliefs. It is one thing to assert that mystic intuition induces a set of beliefs which are responsible for moral action.¹ It is still another thing to assert that the set of beliefs induced by mystical intuition constitutes knowledge. The requirement for a source of morality and religion is success at the job of guiding belief and action into proper channels. The requirements for knowledge are far more stringent, although it is exceedingly difficult to determine exactly what they are. At the very least, knowledge consists of a set of beliefs which are capable of being expressed in the form of communicable statements and which have at one time passed certain reliable tests which have made their veracity seem highly probable. Religious beliefs induced by mystical intuition have so far failed to meet these requirements.² Suffice it to say that intuition may be a source for truth, but by itself is inadequate as a test for truth since it provides no safeguard by means of which we are to avoid error.³

Let us now turn our attention to the other aspects of this argument. Bergson and Father Corbishley, in passages cited, maintain that the unanimous type of experience the mystics undergo is evidence that they possess knowledge of a Supreme Being. Perhaps the warmest criticism of this argument comes from the writings of William James. I say that the criticism is a warm one as James was an early champion of religious mysticism. He rescued mysticism from the intellectual underworld, thinking it could survive and make a contribution not only to faith but also to science.⁴

In discussing the problem of unanimity, he writes :

The utmost they can ever ask of us in this life is to admit that they have established a presumption. They form a consensus and have an unequivocal outcome; and it would be odd, mystics might say, if such a unanimous type of experience should prove altogether wrong. At bottom, however, this would only be an

¹ See Ruth Gordon's paper "Has Mysticism a Moral Value?" for a stimulating criticism of the claim that mysticism is a source of morality. *International Journal of Ethics*, 1921, xxxi, pp. 66-83.

² This does not mean that the object of the mystic intuition does not exist, as many critics have falsely concluded. Such may or may not be true. If we do not possess a knowledge of divinity, all that this entails is that we have no knowledge of divinity and not that the mystic experiences nothing.

³ Cf. Bertrand Russell, *Mysticism and Logic*, pp. 12-18; W. P. Montague, *The Ways of Knowing*, pp. 54-68; Brand Blanshard, *The Nature of Thought*, Vol. II, pp. 221-25.

⁴ See *A Suggestion about Mysticism* for James's view as to the noetic value of mysticism. *Journal of Phil., Psych. & Sc. Method*, 1910, vii, pp. 85-22.

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of the population which are untouched by science it leads to extravagant and emotional forms of piety, but in spite of that it forms a welcome complement to the Church and the Sects' (Vol. II, p. 994). While Troeltsch and the Bergsonians feel that mysticism forms a complement to the church, others feel that it is in direct antagonism with, and is a potential destroyer of, all organized religious faith. Still others strive to show how mysticism is neither complementary nor antagonistic but how it is a law-abiding and essential component of religious faith. It would seem that mysticism is made to play all sorts of roles. But which of these is its actual role? This cannot be answered until we are able to determine exactly how and in what manner the phenomena of mysticism function in society. Until the sociologist provides such information we are left to entertain what may very well be idle speculation.

appeal to numbers, like the appeal of rationalism the other way; and the appeal to numbers has no logical force. If we acknowledge it, it is for 'suggestive', not for logical reasons: we follow the majority because it suits our life.¹

The strange thing about James's argument is that it takes a favourite defence of mysticism and turns it back on its users. We are repeatedly told that although the majority disagrees with the mystics, the appeal to numbers has no logical force when we are dealing with truth. Professor Stace goes so far as to compare the majority of mankind with the people in H. G. Wells's *The Country of the Blind*: the mystic being the only one with vision while the majority of us are really the blind ones.² Of what value, he asks, is the *a priori* logic of the blind when it comes to the experience of sight? Of what value is a majority decision on a matter which the majority is unable to experience? We would reply that all this is true; however, what is good for the goose is good for the gander. If the mystic is under no obligation to be restricted to the majority of mankind, then surely the rest of mankind is under no obligation to follow the mystic. If the appeal is solely to experience, then one cannot demand that people believe something which they do not or cannot experience.

James also challenges the alleged fact of unanimity. For he realizes that even the presumption from the unanimity of mystics is far from being strong.

In characterizing mystic states as pantheistic, optimistic, etc., I am afraid I over-simplified the truth. I did so for expository reasons, and to keep the closer to the classic mystical tradition. The classic religious mysticism, it now must be confessed, is only a 'privileged case.' It is an *extract*, kept true to type by the selection of the fittest specimens and their preservation in 'schools'. It is carved out from a much larger mass; and *if we take the larger mass as seriously as religious mysticism has historically taken itself, we find that the supposed unanimity largely disappears.* To begin with, even religious mysticism itself, the kind that accumulates traditions and makes schools, is much less unanimous than I have allowed. It has been ascetic and antinomically self-indulgent within the Christian church. It is dualistic in Sankhya, and monistic in Vedanta philosophy. I called it pantheistic; but the great Spanish mystics are anything but pantheists. They are with few exceptions non-metaphysical minds, for whom "the category of personality" is absolute. The "union" of man with God is for them much more like an occasional miracle than like an original identity. How different again, apart from the happiness common to all, is the mysticism of Walt Whitman, Edward Carpenter, Richard Jefferies, and other naturalistic pantheists, from the more distinctively Christian sort. The fact is that the mystical feeling of enlargement, union, and emancipation has no specific intellectual content whatever of its own.³

James may have over-simplified the truth for expository reasons, but others do so for a very different purpose. Bergson, W. R. Inge, and Evelyn Underhill also create their own brand of mysticism. They carefully make a selection of the purest mystics. We are assured that the selected mystics are of the true, pure and angelic

¹ *Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 424.

² *Time and Eternity*, p. 239.

³ *Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp. 424-25. The latter emphasis is my own.

variety. If we pause for a moment and ask why these thinkers bother to make such a selection, we are told that this is the prerogative of any writer. If we push deeper, however, we soon see that each selection is made in order to promote a species of religion or morality.

Bergson, for example, having asserted in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* that mysticism functions as a source of pure inspiration, "that it is the mystic souls who draw and will continue to draw civilized societies in their wake,"¹ is later confronted with the problem of purifying historical mysticism in order that it may fulfil its proper function in society. He informs us that pure mysticism is a rare essence and that it is generally found in diluted form.² This is most convenient as it allows Bergson to proceed to construct his own brand of pure mysticism. Thus he rejects Jewish, Greek, and Eastern mysticism as either impure or underdeveloped forms. Complete or pure mysticism is action, creation, love,³ and is only exemplified by the great Christian mystics: theirs is the ultimate culmination of this type of experience.⁴

Inge frankly admits that his book is to be judged as "a contribution to apologetics, rather than as a historical sketch of Christian Mysticism."⁵ His polemic against Catholicism⁶ is not so much a defence of the Reformation as an attempt to establish an independent mysticism which can support the English Church. The problem for Inge, then Dean of St. Paul's, was that of providing the historical ground for a mysticism which would serve as a foundation for a modified form of Anglicanism.⁷

Evelyn Underhill, on the other hand, is an ardent defender of Catholicism. She has interpreted historical sources in such a manner as to extract a "dynamic mysticism" which necessitates Catholic dogma. Thus she writes⁸:

Without prejudice to individual beliefs, and without offering an opinion as to the exclusive truth of any one religious system or revelation—for here we are

¹ *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, p. 75.

² *ibid.*, p. 202.

³ *ibid.*, p. 216.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 214.

⁵ *Christian Mysticism*, p. vii.

⁶ His attitude towards the "theologizing of mysticism" by the Roman Church is one of polite contempt. He remarks that "objective Mysticism has often been pervaded by another kind of false spiritualism—that which finds edification in palpable supernatural manifestations. These so-called 'mystical phenomena' are much identified with 'Mysticism' in the Roman Catholic Church of today . . ." (p. 264).

⁷ There is a distinct flavour of English nationalism running throughout this book. For instance, he says that it is only when we come to Hilton, an English mystic, that we see "the psychical experience . . . entirely dissociated from the metaphysical ideal of absorption into the Infinite. The chains of Asiatic nihilism are now at last shaken off, easily and, it would seem, unconsciously. . . . It is, I think gratifying to observe how our countryman strikes off the fetters of the time-honoured Dionysian tradition, the paralysing creed which blurs all distinctions, and the 'negative road' which leads to darkness and not light; and how in consequence his mysticism is sounder and saner than even that of Eckhardt or Tauler" (p. 200). Once Hilton opened the door to English mysticism, Inge keeps it open by emphasizing those mystics who have sympathies in directions other than that of Rome, preferably those who support the English Church, such as William Law.

⁸ *Mysticism*, p. 104.

concerned neither with controversy nor apologetics—we are bound to allow as a historical fact that mysticism, so far, has found its best map in Christian philosophy, especially that Neo-platonic theology which, taking up and harmonizing all that was best in the spiritual intuitions of Greece, India, and Egypt, was developed by the great doctors of the early mediaeval Church, supports and elucidates the revelations of the individual mystic as no other system of thought has been able to do. . . . Whether the dogmas of Christianity be or be not accepted on the scientific and historical plane, then, those dogmas are necessary to an adequate description of mystical experience—at least, of fully developed dynamic mysticism of the west.¹

In other words, not only are the Church dogmas sustained by mystic revelation but mysticism, if it is to be adequately expressed, must be expressed through the medium of those dogmas. Mysticism necessitates Catholicism and Catholicism in turn explicates mysticism.

Each thinker is here primarily concerned with the perpetuation of a particular brand of religious beliefs and cares little for the fact that the historical picture of mysticism has been distorted. The mystics are being used and manipulated in such a way as to produce that incentive which is considered essential for morality and religion. The method employed is very similar to that of a huckster whose meretricious showmanship is not particularly false but whose selection of facts is entirely misleading.

The philosopher of mysticism, however, is not alarmed by such criticism. He would simply reply that it is his prerogative to write about whatever he pleases and that it is only the pure forms of angelic mysticism which interest him. To a certain extent this is true. One cannot criticize a choice of subject-matter if an *a priori* criterion has not been established. However, if this be the only defence that can be made to the above criticism, then the unanimity argument must fall by the wayside.

For what does it mean to say that the pure Christian mystics agree? It is like saying that all pure anti-vivisectionists agree that any cutting-of, or operation on, a living animal is criminal; or that all pure pacifists are opposed to the use of force for any purpose. In each of these propositions the subject is so constructed that the predicate necessarily follows; in Kantian language we would say that the predicate B belongs to the subject A as something contained (though covertly) in the concept A. Is it surprising then that all pure anti-vivisectionists agree as to the condemnation of animal experimentation if such agreement is the very criterion by which we judge one to be an anti-vivisectionist? If, in order to be considered a pure pacifist, one needs to be opposed to the use of force, then what does it mean if we are subsequently told that all pacifists agree as to the use of force? In a similar manner we are told that all pure mystics agree. But since the criterion for being a pure mystic presupposes agreement, then anyone stating that the pure mystics agree merely expresses an analytic proposition. If the philosopher

¹ *ibid.*, p. 107.

of Christian mysticism goes still further and claims that this enables him to assert things about the world of fact such as the existence of a Deity, then he is guilty of fallacious reasoning.

This latter technique is alarmingly simple. One simply states that "X" is a definition of true mysticism. "X" of course, specifies certain beliefs as to the nature of a Supreme Being. Those who do not conform to this criterion are not true mystics. Those who do conform are true mystics and are in almost unanimous agreement as to his nature. The philosopher then appears and proudly points to this unanimity as evidence of their knowledge of the Divine. It is obvious, I think, that such a technique is nothing more than a form of begging the question. The philosophers of Christian mysticism have assumed in their definitions of mysticism the conclusion they seek to prove.

If the unanimity argument does not prove or even support the contention that the mystic has knowledge of a Supreme Being, then why does a feeling still linger that we have here overlooked an element of truth? What is it about the unanimity argument that gives it its air of plausibility? It is this: the mystics all do agree about something. The agreement, however, is not one of belief but of attitude. All mystics have a common perspective, a way of looking, so to speak, at the universe. If I may suggest a description of mysticism which is far more accurate than those available in the literature, it would be that mysticism is a perspective, a way of looking at things, which if expressed would run as follows: There is an element of mystery in the universe (something which defies but also intrigues understanding) which cannot be reached by the usual modes of sensory experience; and this mystery is of the utmost significance for mankind. A mystic, therefore, is someone who either believes in, or experiences, an element of mystery in the universe which cannot be reached by the usual modes of sensory experience, and to whom the belief, or experience, is of such significance that the individual structures an activity of his life in its expression or evaluation.

This is a criterion which most mystics have and by which they are still being judged to be mystics. Their unanimity of perspective may be due to some type of aspiration or it may be due to some external stimulus: we just do not know. We only know that such a perspective is what seems to characterize best those we call mystics.