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The phenomenon of consciousness in the perspective of comparative study of mysticism:

A challenge for interreligious and interspiritual understanding

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Abstract

*This article examines the phenomenon of consciousness in the perspective of comparative study of mysticism in the *The Cloud of Unknowing* and *Advaita Vedānta* of Ramana Maharshi. The author's approach is methodologically based on data extracted from reports, testimonies, and teachings of mystics taken into account through the method of content analysis of primary sources that is complemented by phenomenological description and hermeneutical enquiry. Mystical contemplation is subsequently interpreted in relation to the current epistemological debate concerning the role of interpretation in experience. Thus, the article brings into consideration the problem of "pure consciousness", its evidence, universality, and some other epistemological connotations. The author argues in favor of essentialist thesis based on conviction about transcultural occurrence of non-intentional and unmediated "experience" of "pure consciousness" interpreted as the very "essence" of transcendentality.*

The challenge of interreligious and interspiritual understanding

We have entered a new era in the history of humankind where a vision is being shaped of a global community that is more extensive than whenever before, and includes all races, cultures, religions and world views of the world. Over the last decades a process of awareness of ethnic, cultural, religious and spiritual plurality has taken place worldwide. In our age, sometimes called the "global village" or "global theatre" (Marshall McLuhan), and characterized by rapidly growing interconnectivity, religious

and spiritual plurality became our everyday reality. At the same time an urgent need appeared for promoting interreligious and interspiritual understanding that might cut through various religious barriers. Nowadays we are well aware that mutual understanding opens the door for mutual coexistence. Thus, understanding might be considered a key to authentic human coexistence, in particular global coexistence.

In my personal as well as professional search for interreligious and interspiritual understanding I focus my attention particularly to comparative mysticism. I presuppose that comparative study of mysticism might significantly contribute not only to understanding of respective religious facts situated in different cultural and religious contexts, but it also may deepen our understanding of human reality as such. A few glimpses of my consideration on human reality in the above-mentioned perspective I develop in the current article.

Mysticism in focus

Post-war development of Euro-American civilization had resulted into crisis that brought definitive breakup of Modern Era sometime around the 1960s. In response to the crisis of Modernism pre-modern values enjoyed its revival. At the same time attempts at totally new solutions appeared. *"In dramatic search for alternatives,"* finally, as a Czech sociologist of religion Dusan Luzny points out, *"two ways prevailed – one towards socialism, another one towards mysticism."*¹

Nowadays mysticism faces its revaluation as a relevant source of academic study. A wide range of academic disciplines deals with the research of mystical phenomena. Philosophy is not an exception.

Philosophical reflection of mysticism concerns mostly with epistemology, more precisely with the role of interpretation in experience. Thematization of mystical phenomena within philosophy might bring fresh ideas for rethinking, eventually reevaluating of basic epistemological categories, especially of the concept of consciousness. Not unimportant is prospective overlap of philosophical reflection of mysticism to the field of ontology that might possibly lead to construction or reconstruction of contemporary metaphysics.

¹ Luzny, *New Religious Movements*, 32.

Unmediated experience under consideration

There are two main positions concerning the issue of the role of interpretation in experience – the so-called *constructivism*, and *perennialism* or *essentialism*, in its contemporary version known as *neo-essentialism*.

The fundamental claim of constructivists, such as Steven T. Katz, with regard to mysticism is that there is no mysticism or mystical experience of a common type. According to constructivist paradigm all kinds of experience are “constructed” and mediated by terms, concepts, beliefs, and linguistic backgrounds that a subject brings to them. Interpretation is considered an intrinsic part of experience.

On the other hand essentialism treats different mystical experiences, or at least some of them, as variations of a common type of experience to which interpretation is considered extrinsic. Neo-essentialists, such as Robert K. C. Forman, proclaim: “*mystical experience represents an immediate, direct contact with a variously defined absolute principle. (...) Only after that immediate contact with the something more is such a direct contact interpreted according to the tradition’s language and beliefs. Since interpretative categories (e.g., concepts, beliefs, the background set) do not enter the transcendental experience, mysticism is by and large transculturally homogeneous*”.²

Moreover, if we can demonstrate the evidence of experiences that are not “constructed” by our language, mind and belief, we have a strong argument in favor of perennialism, otherwise constructivism seems to be correct. The core of exploration of neo-essentialists is therefore focused on proving the evidence of direct, unmediated “experience” known as *Pure Consciousness Event* (PCE)³ and defined as “*a wakeful though contentless (non-intentional) consciousness*”⁴. Neo-essentialists base their criticism of constructivism on the possibility of “pure” that is “unmediated” experience. In this sense Donald Evans claims that there is a possibility to give up all conceptual and linguistic constructions and enter the *State of Pure Consciousness* (SPC).⁵

Neo-essentialists also argue in favor of transcultural occurrence of the SPC. SPC is considered a core feature common to variety of mystical traditions. The conviction of

² Robert K. C. Forman, “Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting,” in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*, ed. Robert K. C. Forman (New York – Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 3.

³ See *Ibid.*, 25–28.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵ See Donald Evans, „Can Philosophers Limit What Mystics Can Do? A Critique of Steven Katz,“ in *Religious Studies* 25, no. 1 (1989): 53–60.

universal occurrence of unmediated experience forms a basis for the *essentialist thesis of universalism* as opposed to the *constructivist thesis of (radical) pluralism*. By universal Stephen Bernhardt means “*the lesser claim that this phenomenon occurs in a variety of different religious and mystical traditions, traditions which in other respect (and even in respect of how they interpret the pure consciousness event itself) diverge radically*”.⁶ On the contrary, Steven Katz, one of the most distinguished opponents of neo-essentialism argues that “*there are no pure (i.e., unmediated) experiences*”,⁷ and thus all of our experiences are somehow conceptually or cognitively mediated and culturally conditioned.

According to neo-essentialist epistemology the SPC is to be described as *non-intentional* and *phenomenally identical*. Because of its non-intentional nature, that is because of the fact that “*the subject is awake, conscious, but without an object or content of consciousness*”,⁸ PCE differs from “common” experience that is, by its focus on an object, always an experience of “something” (*intentionality*). Documented cases of occurrence of PCE are, according to neo-essentialists, *phenomenally identical* in case “*if any two texts describe contentless events*”.⁹

Mystical contemplation in comparative perspective

In my philosophical study of mystical contemplation in the mysticism of *The Cloud of Unknowing* and *Advaita Vedānta (non-dualism)* of Ramana Maharshi I put under consideration two historically, culturally, and religiously different forms of contemplation (however, at the same time formally related as indicates their apophatic character) to examine their structure and meaning.¹⁰ My exploration is based on data extracted from reports, testimonies, and teachings of mystics taken into account through content analysis of primary sources. The method of textual analysis is complemented by phenomenological description and hermeneutical enquiry. While the phenomenological description is primarily concerned with identification of the structure of mystical

⁶ Steven Bernhardt, “Are Pure Consciousness Events unmediated?,” in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*, ed. Robert K. C. Forman (New York – Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 228.

⁷ Steven T. Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 25.

⁸ Bernhardt, “Are Pure Consciousness Events unmediated?,” 220.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 224.

¹⁰ See Martin Dojcar, *Mystical Contemplation: The Cloud of Unknowing & Ramana Maharshi* (Bratislava: Iris, 2008).

contemplation, hermeneutical enquiry is aiming to provide us with its interpretation in the sense of *Verständnis*, not only *Erklärung*, in accordance with distinction made by Johann Gustav Droysen. For the purpose of my research I understand phenomenological description in its broader sense, distinct from its strict philosophical meaning as developed in the classical Husserlian or post-Husserlian phenomenology, that is a description of phenomena given to consciousness which is primarily concerned with identification of attributes characterizing phenomena under investigation. In this way I identify invariant structure or essence of mystical contemplation as expressed in four common features that have been tagged by using such traditional and contemporary terms as *synergeia*, *praxis*, *concentration*, and a “*transcendent state of being (mode)*”¹¹. On the basis of the above-mentioned analytical and phenomenological exploration further philosophical investigation may subsequently deal with the issue of “pure consciousness”, its evidence, universality, and epistemological connotations concerning relation between mystical experience and its interpretation.

Toward an understanding of consciousness on the background of mystical contemplation

Careful examination of mystical contemplation shows that there are certain initial conditions and assumptions to be fulfilled. Both forms of contemplation taken into account presuppose certain ability (*habitus*) concerning *moral* and *psycho-spiritual disposition*. The very method of contemplation consists, in both cases, in *concentration*. “One-pointed concentration” is declared to be able to “calm mental activity” and mediate realization of the SPC that is characterized by non-intentionality.

Mystics offer practical advices and instructions how to achieve direct *insight* into “one’s own ground of being”. Their suggestions vary from tradition to tradition; variety of approaches reflects variety of spiritualities. Even so they differ, they have one in common – psycho-mental activity has to be transcended, attention has to be focused. The unknown medieval Christian author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* teaches the method of loving concentration on God, the contemporary Indian *jnani* Ramana Maharshi prefers his own method of *self-enquiry* (*ātma-vicāra*).

¹¹ Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, 21.

The method of *The Cloud* lies in “the simple recognition and blind acceptance of your own existence, and no more that this, either intellectually or emotionally”.¹² *Unio mystica* is thus achieved through non-intentional awareness of the self.¹³ Contemplation culminates in self-transcending surrender when soul is “lovingly making itself nothing and exalting God as all in all”.¹⁴

Ramana Maharshi’s *ātma-vicāra* alike transcends individuality through constant attention to the awareness of the simple fact or perception “I” or “I am”. Since the individual “I-thought” cannot persist without an object, as Maharshi claims, it will disappear if attention is focused on the awareness of “I” or “I am” with such intensity that the thoughts “I am this” or “I am that” do not arise any more. In this way “I-thought” will be replaced by a direct “experience” of pure consciousness.¹⁵

Profound tension between experience and its expression is very typical for mysticism. Silence seems to be the only adequate expression of mystical experience. Language constantly fails to describe non-intentional “experience” in which subject-object structure of human cognition is transcended (*apophasis*). *Negative theology (via negativa)* is a testimony of an ascent of a mind over all concepts and images. No wonder it can be found alike in *The Cloud of Unknowing* and Ramana Maharshi’s doctrines.

The Cloud of Unknowing introduces into the state of mystical union with *God who is always greater (Deus semper major)*. Its goal is to be “united with God, in spirit, in love, and in harmony of will”.¹⁶ Description of *unio mystica* transcends the boundaries of human understanding and speaking. Even it is described as *perfection* and *eternal bliss*, the author of *The Cloud* is very aware of the limits of language; he knows that each statement about a state that is transcendent is finally inadequate.¹⁷

It is similar to Maharshi. The goal of *ātma-vicāra* is *samādhi* or “*enstasis*” (M. Eliade). Consistent self-enquiry finds its evaluation in contemplative insight, in discovery of *primordial subjectivity* that resembles sudden revelation by opening room for *liberating knowledge (jnana)*. An experiential knowledge of *sahaja-nirvikalpa-samādhi* is a state of

¹² “Epistle of Privy Counsel,” in *The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982), 161.

¹³ See *Ibid.*, 185.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 178.

¹⁵ See “*The I-thought is said to be the totality of all thoughts. The source of that I-thought must be searched for (investigated).*” in *Sri Ramana Gita*, 28; “*The I-thought is only a semblance of the Self. When that thought dissolves, there remains the undiluted primary Self, the reality, perfect and full, all around.*” in *Sri Ramana Gita*, 29.

¹⁶ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, 141.

¹⁷ See *Ibid.*, chapter 26.

wisdom (insight), not a trance.¹⁸ This “experience” alone is considered capable to overcome suffering that necessarily accompanies all human reality in its contingency (the point of departure of almost every traditional Indian thinking or religious philosophy);¹⁹ it alone ought to bring *liberation (moksha)* and *unconditioned bliss (ānanda)*.²⁰

Both methods of contemplation share non-objective or object content transcending character as they are not mediated by thinking or imagining or relating to some object of attention, but they are realized simply by *turning attention to attention itself* through the “I-feeling” or “I-thought” (*ego*) that is *primordial “experience” of subjectivity* – “I am and I know that I am”. In both cases transcending movement of contemplation ontologically culminates in ultimate surrender that *transcends the human condition* and establishes a *transcendent state of being* (M. Eliade).

My investigation shows that mystical contemplation in the mysticism of *The Cloud of Unknowing* and in *Advaita Vedānta* of Ramana Maharshi can be correctly described as non-intentional and unmediated from epistemological point of view. Despite all the differences in theological and psycho-spiritual articulation of concepts of grace, morality, ethics, spiritual practices as well as methods and techniques of “*non-objective concentration*”²¹, both historically, culturally, and religiously distant forms of contemplation seem to be the expression of PCE. According to their protagonists, in both cases final “experience” is characterized by non-intentionality – it is a state of wakeful, but content-less consciousness. On the basis of the above-mentioned methodological principle both concepts of mystical contemplation are thus *phenomenally identical*.

Non-intentional character and phenomenal identity of mystical contemplation in the cases taken into account support validity of the essentialist thesis based on conviction about transcultural occurrence of unmediated “experience”. At the same time both forms of contemplation support validity of distinction between “empirical consciousness” or “consciousness of something” (i.e., “awareness of something”) or *intentional consciousness*, i.e., ability to be aware of any object of attention, and “pure

¹⁸ See “*wisdom-insight (jnana-drsti)*”. in Ramana Maharshi, *Who am I?* (Tiruvannamalai: Sri Ramanasramam, 1966), verse 25; “*Telepathy, knowing past, present and future happenings and clairvoyance do not constitute wisdom-insight.*” in Maharshi, *Who am I?*, verse 25.

¹⁹ See “*The result that flows from self-enquiry is the end of all miseries and difficulties.*” in *Sri Ramana Gita*, 29.

²⁰ See “*realizing one’s true nature is release.*” in Maharshi, *Who am I?*, verse 28.

²¹ See Hugo M. Enomiya-Lassalle, *Living in the New Consciousness*, 92–94.

consciousness” or “pure awareness” or *non-intentional consciousness* without any content, i.e., awareness as such, that is distinction between *awareness per se* and processes of *observation* or *attention* related to it.²²

Reports on mystical contemplation taken into account similarly testify about *continuity of consciousness* (I am I). They show that consciousness endures even when mental objects absent (*autonomy of consciousness*). In other words, they suggest that consciousness somehow “*subsists*” independently from intentional objects as the condition of awareness. In this sense consciousness can be understood as the *a priori condition of possibility for cognition as such*, likewise as *transcendentality*.

I understand the concept of *transcendentality* in the Kantian sense as concerned with the conditions of possibility of knowledge itself, more particular, as a transcendental condition of experience. For Kant transcendental means knowledge about our cognitive faculty with regard to how objects are possible *a priori*: “*I entitle transcendental all knowledge which is occupied not so much with objects as with the mode our knowledge of objects in so far as this mode of knowledge is to be possible a priori.*”²³

All our experience of “inner” and “outer” kind is finally possible due to consciousness, in which and through which we are conscious of everything we perceive. Thus, the non-empirical origins of cognition are related to consciousness that transcends experience which is *aposteriori*. Although a transcendental condition of experience cannot be noumenal, for if it were noumenal, than it would have transcendent reality unknowable for humans,²⁴ we are somehow conscious of it, but we have no determinate knowledge of it.

Transcendental “nature” of consciousness subsequently contradicts the assumption of epiphenomenalism that considers consciousness as an epiphenomenon of perception. Transcendentality of consciousness indicates that consciousness is not the result of cognitive processes, it is not their construct, but it differs from them. Consequently, consciousness cannot be the product of neurophysiological processes of brain activity or nervous system, but *vice versa* it seems to be an *unconditioned condition of possibility for cognition as such*, the very “*essence*” of *transcendentality*.

²² See Robert Forman, „What Does Mysticism Have to Teach Us About Consciousness?,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 5, no. 2 (1998): 185–201.

²³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A12/B25.

²⁴ See *Ibid.*, A296/B352–353.

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