

**Similar Differences:
A Compatibilist View of the Common Core
Debate in the Study of Mystical Experience**

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Abstract: The study of mystical experiences is an endeavor that has been approached in many ways. One unresolved issue in this area of study is whether or not there is a particular type of experience underlying the traditionally religious interpretations, which can be termed “mystical.” In this paper, the author posits that some of the foundational claims of the common core view and the social constructivist view of the nature of such experiences, respectively, are not completely incompatible. Rather, the two approaches may converge with regard to the cognitive foundations of cross-culturally accessible anomalous experiences.

The study of mystical experiences is an endeavor that has been approached in many ways. Philosophy, psychology (cognitive, social, and evolutionary), anthropology and sociology all offer different insights into the phenomenon of reported mystical experiences.¹ Anomalous subjective experiences are reported in almost all of the world’s religious traditions as well as outside of religious frameworks. Often, paradoxical and ethereal language is used in conjunction with typical doctrinal or tradition-specific language to describe such experiences. The widespread use of such seemingly extra-traditional, sometimes poetic, and cross-culturally similar language can lead to difficulty in attempting to analyze and interpret claims of such experiences.

¹ Within this work, the term “mystical” will refer to anomalous subjective experiences. The term will, then, be used in reference to both “experiences of unity with or without a sense of multiplicity” and “experiences of a felt presence whether loving or fearsome” (Taves, p. 20).

One unresolved issue in the study of mystical experiences is whether or not there is a particular type, or spectrum, of experience(s) underlying the often traditionally religious accounts of such experiences. Some, including philosophers Wayne Proudfoot and Steven Katz, operate under the social constructivist paradigm, claiming that there is no primary mystical experience that is pre-linguistic or pre-conceptual. In other words, the content of all mystical experiences (and experiences in general) is fundamentally determined by one's conceptual, linguistic, or cultural framework or tradition. Alternatively, psychologist Ralph Hood has built upon the work of psychologist Walter Stace, making the claim that there is a "common core" of mystical experiences that is not wholly determined by one's specific religious or cultural tradition. As I will explore, this distinction partially rests on a differentiation regarding the term "experience." The debate between common core theorists and social constructivists incorporates both philosophical and psychological work in an attempt to understand the nature, if there is one, of mystical experiences.

However, the claim of common core theorists that mystical experiences can occur independently of cultural or religious context is not necessarily in conflict with the social constructivist claim that all experiences are conceptually shaped. While doctrine-specific claims about such experiences are obviously socially constructed, certain experiences may rely on more fundamental, and thus universally accessible,² conceptual structures and tendencies of thought that underlie many claims of anomalous experiences. In other words, similar physiological occurrences along with similar cognitive tendencies allow for universally accessible, but still conceptually mediated, experiences.

² The term "universal" is used in this work to mean psychologically rooted and non-culturally-specific. It is not meant to refer to experiences undergone or potentially undergone by *every* human being, but rather, to refer to experiences that are available to *most* humans, given their cognitive tendencies, independent of cultural contexts.

The Social Constructivist Approach

In his prominent work, *Religious Experience*, philosopher of religion Wayne Proudfoot articulates a social constructivist position with regard to mystical experiences. In this work, he makes a philosophical argument against the claim put forth by Friedrich Schleiermacher³ and Rudolf Otto⁴ that there is an experience underlying all the varying descriptions of mystical experiences that is, itself, pre-conceptual and pre-linguistic. Pre-linguistic experience, in this view, would be outside or beyond the realm of reason and therefore immune to rationalist critique. This claim seems to be used (by Otto and Schleiermacher at least) as an attempt to adapt theism in order to protect it from reductionist accounts of religion as the by-product of either social or psychological phenomena.⁵ The view of Otto/Schleiermacher is that speaking about religion in terms of psychology or sociology alone misses the fundamental feature of religion, namely the religious experience.⁶ This experience is said to be immediate and outside of, or preceding, rational categorization. It is therefore not primarily social or psychological because it is not the result of solely social or psychological forces. The experience is *primarily* traditionally religious, these theorists claim.⁷

³ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (T&T Clark LTD 1999).

⁴ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford University Press 1958).

⁵ Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (University of California Press 1985), 211.

⁶ “Religious experience” may refer, in some cases, to a broader range of experiences associated with certain communities, beliefs, and behavior. Within this work, however, I use “religious experience” and “mystical experience” synonymously, as terms for anomalous subjective experiences. For a thorough discussion of the distinction between such anomalous experiences and the potential evaluation of those experiences as “religious,” see Taves, p. 21-26. For the purposes of this work, the “deeming” of experiences as “religious” by practitioners is understood as further, culturally dependent, interpretation. Therefore, in these terms, there may exist experiences that fall into this taxonomic category of “religious experiences” that are not deemed “religious” by the practitioner. “Religious experience” and “mystical experience” are here used as explanatory classifications, rather than as practitioner-endorsed descriptors.

⁷ Ann Taves, in her recent work *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, calls this the *sui generis* approach to religious experience. In this framework, experiences are believed to be *inherently* religious, rather than being “deemed religious” by the experiencer (Taves, p. 17).

This “protective strategy”⁸ creates a conceptual gap at the point of the pre-cognitive religious experience, which can be filled by claims to theism (or at least supernaturalism) of one sort or another. The claim that Proudfoot is addressing in his work, then, is not *merely* whether there exist universally accessible mystical experiences, but also whether those experiences are free of cognitive or interpretive components *and* can be used as evidence to argue for some ontologically independent reality (e.g., a supernatural God), which causes the experiences. It is the latter claim that Proudfoot primarily focuses on and it is that claim that his argument effectively dismantles.

In discussing the label of “ineffability,” which William James⁹ claimed is one of the primary characteristics of religious/mystical experience, Proudfoot critiques the very invocation of the term. He claims that ineffability is never a *characteristic* of an object or experience. It is, rather, a placeholder that precludes any descriptions of the “thing” that is said to be ineffable. It is never descriptive to say that something is ineffable, or unsayable. To make such a claim is merely to misuse language, or to use it in an evocative way, rather than as description.¹⁰ Proudfoot rightly claims that this linguistic tactic is used in order to create mystery, rather than to articulate it. “Mystery and awe result when no appropriate label or explanation is available.”¹¹ If an experience cannot be spoken about, that inability is the inability of *some particular person, people, or language system*. It is not an inherent characteristic of the experience. Proudfoot would even say such things couldn’t be experienced, as the very term “experience” denotes cognitive content. This definition of

⁸ Proudfoot, 221.

⁹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Barnes & Noble Books 2004), 329.

¹⁰ Similarly, it is philosophically problematic to claim that something is inherently *mysterious*. Such a term may inform us about the speaker’s lack of knowledge, but it does not inform us about a quality of the thing discussed (Yudkowsky).

¹¹ Proudfoot, 211.

experience (specifically mystical experience) as necessarily conceptual, while perfectly reasonable, may somewhat confuse Proudfoot's argument, as will be discussed later.

The other primary characteristic of mystical experience, according to William James, is the "noetic quality" of the experience.¹² Proudfoot also addresses this "noetic quality," which is the feeling that an experience involves some gained knowledge or understanding. The mystic believes that her experience was, in some sense, revelatory or epistemologically valid. In other words, the mystic believes that she experienced something *true*. This feeling of the truth of the experience is often extended to validate truth claims about particular doctrinal propositions that align with the mystic's own religious tradition. As Proudfoot says, "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."¹³ While the experiencer does *feel* that the experience revealed something true, Proudfoot offers a reminder that the mystic's *feeling* about the truth of the experience is not *evidence* of the truth of the experience. He writes, "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."¹⁴

William James likely gave credibility to the claim of the noetic quality of the experience as another kind of protection strategy for religion against reductionism. If the mystic has experienced something true, the anti-reductionist might say, then perhaps

¹² James, 329.

¹³ Proudfoot, 153, emphasis mine.

¹⁴ Proudfoot, 152.

credibility could be extended from the phenomenological language used by the experiencer to the doctrinal description of the experience. However, an explanation of the experience need not assume the objective truth of the content of the experience, even in the case of sincere descriptions.¹⁵ This philosophical confusion of the distinction between the way something feels and the way something actually *is* is still seen in more recent literature.¹⁶ Therefore, while claiming a noetic quality for the experience may be a description of what it *feels like* to have the experience, this should not be seen as evidence that the experience reveals truth to the experiencer.

Proudfoot draws on the work of the philosopher Steven Katz when making his argument against the anti-reductionism of James, Otto, and Schleiermacher. Katz's work is also of a social constructivist nature. Katz believes that language necessarily mediates mystical experiences (i.e., they are never pre-linguistic) and that, therefore, varied descriptions and interpretations indicate different experiences across cultures. For Katz, this is not only a feature of mystical experiences, but also a fact about all human experiences. He believes that all human experiences are filtered through our cognitive, and therefore linguistic, frameworks. He writes, "Neither mystical experience nor more ordinary forms of experience gives any indication, or any grounds for believing, that they are unmediated. That is to say, all experience is processed through, organized by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological ways. The notion of unmediated experience seems, if not self-contradictory, empty at best."¹⁷

¹⁵ Proudfoot, 188-189.

¹⁶ Ralph W. Hood et al., "Dimensions of the Mysticism Scale: Confirming the Three-Factor Structure in the United States and Iran," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 40, no. 4 (2001): 691-705.

¹⁷ Steven T. Katz, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (Oxford University Press 1983), 4.

Katz repurposes the label “reductionist” to describe the view that Proudfoot would call the anti-reductionist position, saying that this view (i.e., the Schleiermachian approach) attempts to reduce the diversity in mystical experiences by not respecting the vastly different descriptions offered by religious practitioners. In regard to the proposed commonalities among mystical experiences, Katz writes, “The fact is that these lists of supposedly common elements not only always *reduce* the actual variety of disparate experiences to fit a specific theory... but they also turn out to be of little help in understanding mystical experience because they are so broad as to fit any one of several mutually exclusive experiences.”¹⁸ Here, Katz claims that broader phenomenological language, such as describing an experience as “non-spatial, non-temporal, beyond language...sublime, and joyful,”¹⁹ is too ambiguous to ensure that the same experience is being discussed across traditions. Even if the Buddhist’s experience of Nirvana and the Jew’s experience of God are both hard to describe or describable by words such as “non-spatial,” Katz says, it doesn’t follow that the experiences are the same. This critique is reasonable but places expectation on the articulation of mystical experiences that would not be placed on more day-to-day experience, as we will see.

The Jewish mystic’s description of the experience of God is an example that Katz uses to highlight distinctions that he believes the opposing view overlooks. Proudfoot recounts and affirms this point. He claims that the fact that the Jewish mystical tradition seems to lack reports of “unity with God” supports a social constructivist position, and therefore is evidence against a common core. Proudfoot, as was mentioned before, is primarily responding to the veiled theistic implications of the Schleiermachian view in

¹⁸ Steven T. Katz, *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (Oxford University Press 1978), 47.

¹⁹ Katz, *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, 46.

arguing against a common core. Proudfoot writes, “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.”²⁰ No doubt, the Jewish mystic’s socially determined concepts about God and people do set “parameters” on what she or he will say when interpreting an experience. However, as we will discuss later, some research has suggested that Jewish practitioners report the same type and amount of mystical-type experiences as practitioners of other traditions. This empirical research may bring anecdotal evidence from within Jewish mystical literature into question.

Katz, much like Proudfoot, addresses the distinction between the *feeling* and the *actuality* of an experience. In one article, he responds to the claim of a mystic who describes his experience as “an undifferentiable unity of myself without form or content.”²¹ Katz responds that the mystic’s description “of a sense of unity is not equivalent to contentlessness... the sense of unity is a content.”²² Here, Katz rightly points out that the mystic’s description is necessarily informed by cognitive content, no doubt some of it socially constructed. It is also, as are all descriptions of experience, linguistically communicated and therefore, as Proudfoot pointed out, a claim to ineffability, or even “contentlessness,” would be philosophically problematic. As I will discuss, however, this line of critique does not fully negate the possibility of cross-culturally accessible anomalous human experiences that are often couched in mystical language.

²⁰ Proudfoot, 122.

²¹ Steven T. Katz, “Recent Work on Mysticism,” *History of Religions* 25, no. 1 (1985): 78.

²² Katz, “Recent Work on Mysticism,” 78.

The Common Core Theory

In the time since social constructivists have responded to earlier, implicitly theological and “anti-reductionist” claims about religious experience such as those put forth by Otto, Schleiermacher, and James, more theoretically sophisticated approaches have attempted to argue in favor of the existence of universally accessible mystical experiences. The proponents of this view have come to call it “Common Core” or “Unity” Theory. The philosopher Walter Stace did early work from this perspective in the 1960’s. Stace argued that, “one could easily distinguish between minimally interpreted experiences and elaborations of experiences that were possible only within particular ideological traditions.”²³ In attempting to find evidence of a distinction between more and less tradition-specific experiences, psychologist of religion Ralph Hood formulated the Mysticism Scale or M-Scale, for use in empirical research on mystical experiences. The scale operationalized the categories of mystical experiences first suggested by Stace.

The scale measures reported experiences that utilize tradition-specific concepts independently of experiences that are explained in what the common core proponents would say is strictly phenomenologically descriptive language. The phenomenological²⁴ measurements are divided into “introvertive” and “extrovertive” categories. Introvertive experiences are “composed of ego loss and timeless/spaceless, denoting an inward unitary consciousness beyond time and space.”²⁵ Extrovertive mystical experiences, on the other

²³ Hood et al., 692.

²⁴ This term is here used to mean “subjective” or “first-personal.”

²⁵ Zhuo Chen et al., “Mystical Experience Among Tibetan Buddhists: The Common Core Thesis Revisited,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 50, no. 2 (2011): 329.

hand, include “an outward merging with the wholeness of all existence.”²⁶ The category of interpretation (i.e., experiences reliant on tradition-specific cognition) is measured in terms of “positive affect, sacredness, noetic quality, and ineffability.”²⁷ Positive affect, sacredness, and noetic quality all serve to represent more thoroughly interpreted experiences.

Experiencing “an outward merging of the wholeness of all existence” (i.e., extrovertive experience) is operationally value neutral. The further interpretation of this experience can be seen in claims that the experience is sacred, emotionally positive, or noetic.²⁸ Such an experience could potentially be interpreted as profane, emotionally negative, or confusing.

The interpretive factor, then, serves to measure more elaborate and tradition-specific interpretations of and ascriptions about such anomalous phenomenological experiences.

Stace’s conceptualization of the categories of mystical experience places ineffability in the interpretive, whereas Hood’s original Mysticism Scale viewed ineffability as an aspect of introvertive experience, due to the fact that introvertive mystical experience precludes a subject and is, therefore, unintelligible.²⁹ The ability of the scale to operationalize and show the independence of these two variables (i.e., less interpreted phenomenological description and ideologically dependent description), Hood believes, provides evidence for a common mystical experience that is not necessarily mediated by culturally dependent concepts.

²⁶ Chen et al., 329.

²⁷ Chen et al., 329.

²⁸ These ascriptions can be thought of as a way of investigating or measuring whether these experiences are, in Taves’ language, “deemed religious,” “special,” or “set apart” (Taves, p. 21, 45).

²⁹ In light of the discrepancy as to the proper view of the claim to ineffability, the scale can measure ineffability either as introvertive or interpretive. The scale has been used in both capacities, with different views of the ineffability measure varying in usefulness for different traditions. Proudfoot’s philosophical critique must logically be sustained, however. The claim to ineffability is necessarily interpretive due to the fact that the claim articulates the subject’s perceived inability to represent the experience conceptually, rather than the nonconceptualizability of the experience itself (Chen et al.).

The use of Hood's Mysticism Scale has been successful in the study of psychology of mysticism. It has shown repeated consistency across various cultural groups.³⁰ For this reason the Mysticism Scale has become "the most frequently used empirical measure of mystical experiences."³¹ However, while the common core proponents do not appear to be motivated by implicit theological (i.e., supernaturalist) perspectives, some problems do persist. For example, Stace and Hood both adhere to the "radical empiricism" of William James.³² This view undermines the naturalist reliance on intersubjective evidence by assigning equal epistemic value to first-person subjective experience, regardless of its agreement or disagreement with knowledge gained through intersubjective empirically based methods. Stace and Hood, then, fall into the trap of believing that the content of the mystical experience must, or should, have some influence on the explanation of the experience. In critiquing the social constructivist position Chen et al. write, "constructivists also cast off the authority of mystic experience in grounding doctrinal explanation, which essentially undermines the ontological and epistemological validity of any religious claim."³³ The social constructivists rightly "cast off" such "authority" due to the fact that there is no publicly accessible evidence that claims made on the basis of such experiences should carry any ontological or epistemological weight. In fact, there is evidence to the contrary. Experiences such as dreaming, drug-induced hallucinations, epileptic seizures³⁴

³⁰ Chen et al., 328-338; Hood et al., 691-705; Aryeh Lazar & Shlomo Kravetz, "Responses to the Mystical Scale by Religious Jewish Persons: A Comparison," *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 15, no. 1 (2005): 51-61.

³¹ Pehr Grandqvist & Marcus Larsson, "Contribution of Religiousness in the Prediction and Interpretation of Mystical Experiences in a Sensory Deprivation Context: Activation of Religious Schemas," *The Journal of Psychology*, 140, no. 4 (2006): 319-327.

³² Chen et al., 328-338.

³³ Chen et al., 329.

³⁴ Epileptic seizures may have a correlation with, if not a causal relationship to, experiences thought of as mystical (Livingston 2005). A correlation can also be found with drug-induced hallucinations (Griffiths et al. 2006). Both are discussed in further detail below, pg. 12.

and virtual reality all offer examples of experiences that can not be adequately explained in terms of the sensory content of the experience or how the experience ontologically and epistemologically *feels* from the first-person perspective. This is a theoretically damaging consequence of the appeal to “radical empiricism” by the common core theorists.

Another problem within the current common core proponents’ view, as was mentioned before, is the belief that ineffability may be considered in some cases to be a genuine characteristic of a particular experience. This problem overlaps with the aforementioned issue of overlooking the distinction between description and explanation. As Proudfoot correctly notes, “*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.”³⁵ This is only problematic when ineffability is used as part of the introvertive measure on the Mysticism Scale, as opposed to being used as a part of the interpretive measure. The fact that people who claim to have had mystical experiences sometimes *believe* those experiences to be ineffable is not in question. However, the social constructivist critique is correct in saying that mystics, in this case, are philosophically incorrect about the possible explanations of their experience. In other words, claims of ineffability do not *qualify* as explanations. This, again, is a derivative problem, the larger issue being the misunderstood relationship between first-person description and third-person explanation. The claim to “radical empiricism” breaks down in light of this fact. The common core theory could be said to privilege certain pseudo-empirical data (e.g., the first-personal quality of mystical experiences) over, or on equal footing with, empirical data (e.g., intersubjectively accessible explanations of why certain first-person experiences *feel* as they do).

³⁵ Proudfoot, 125-126.

Theoretical Compatibility: Universal Cognitions

In exploring how these two views (i.e., common core theory and social constructivism) may be at least theoretically compatible, it will be helpful to return to the foundational claims of each. Current common core theorists claim that there are universal experiences that are often discussed using paradoxical language, but do not go as far as the Schleiermachiian view that these experiences are *primarily* or *inherently* associated with religious traditions, as can be seen by their attempts to differentiate between tradition specific and non-specific experiences. The social constructivists claim simply that all human experiences (mystical experiences included) are filtered through and influenced by some cognitive content, which is socially constructed. Therefore, they claim, mystical experiences are not universal due to the variance in language, concepts, and expectations across different cultures, languages, and time periods. The question as to whether either or both of these views are *accurate* descriptions of the phenomenon of mystical experiences is an empirical question beyond the scope of this paper and, therefore, will not be directly discussed here.³⁶ However, certain aspects of these two viewpoints are not *theoretically* incompatible. Compatibility between the two is rendered intelligible by virtue of universally accessible cognitive tendencies.

As mentioned earlier, Proudfoot's claim that all experience is conceptually influenced is perfectly reasonable, but may be misleading given his overall line of argument. Even supposing that one defines the term "experience" as denoting only conceptualized subjective sensations or events, it is certain that not all physiological happenings are

³⁶ The recent experimental success of common core measures, such as the M-Scale, are discussed in order to highlight the plausibility of *some version* of a naturalistic common core interpretation in the face of social constructivist philosophical critiques. This empirical research suggests the need for reconciliation between the two viewpoints more than common core philosophical counterarguments alone.

dependent on conceptualization. Or, at least, conceptual frameworks and the availability of certain cognitive content do not predetermine them. Eating, for example, is linguistically and symbolically represented in English by the symbol “eating.” However, the physiological occurrence represented by the symbol “eating” is obviously not *dependent* on or *determined* by the conception of the event.³⁷ This critique, then, does not exclude the possibility of universal human (or even universal mammalian) physiological happenings and therefore the question of whether the “experience” of eating is different cross-culturally seems to be a semantic distinction. At least, the conceptual differences about what it *is* or what it *means* to eat in different cultural frameworks is not enough to cause us to invoke separate words or ontological categories for the action of eating in Canada as opposed to eating in Japan. And surely, we would not say that ingesting edible material is only *experienced* insofar as it employs culturally variant beliefs, practices, or concepts. Also, by adhering to such an unconventional definition of the term “experience,” one is forced into the unconvincing and possibly morally dubious position of maintaining that non-human animals, and even humans without language, are incapable of experience.³⁸

This apparently unintended consequence aside, Proudfoot himself notes the possibility of underlying physiological similarities in mystical experiences when he writes, “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

³⁷ The appropriateness of classifying multiple instances of eating as fundamentally the same type of experience is not undermined by cultural differences surrounding what or how people eat. For example, while customs, cooking styles, and food vary from culture to culture, one would not say that the people of another culture do not “eat” simply because they are eating in a different way or consuming different food.

³⁸ In order to maintain the conventional use of the term “experience,” one must be able to differentiate between experience and conceptualization or linguistic description *of* an experience. This allows for the standard explanation of the evidence that non-human animals have subjective states (i.e., that they actually *do* have experiences), but one may still make the reasonable claim that the experiences of psychologically healthy humans are necessarily described in terms of their particular conceptual frameworks.

quality that James regards as the distinguishing marks of experience.”³⁹ While the phrase “enter into” is ambiguous in the above quote, Proudfoot is right to assert that similar physiological states are not cause for believing in the actual ineffability or noetic quality (i.e., socially-dependent ascriptions) of any mystical experience. Nevertheless, Proudfoot’s claim that it is the non-natural interpretation “and not the specific state that occasions it, which is critical for the mystical experience”⁴⁰ is simply a semantic argument about where the definitional lines of the term “experience” are drawn. This definition of “experience” is, in fact, not used for more mundane events, where similar psychological or physiological states or events are enough to qualify experiences as similar. In addition to this, by implying that cognition determines the “experience” of physiological events, Proudfoot overlooks the very real possibility that the causal relationship between cognition and physiology could be bidirectional, with certain physiological events giving rise to certain cognitive patterns, regardless of cultural context. This possibility is even more likely given the growing consensus that cognition itself *is* a type of physiological event occurring in various regions of the brain.

In line with the idea that physiology may influence cognition in particular and reliable ways, it must be noted that various recent research has found links between certain physiological states and reports of experiences that are described in mystical or paradoxical language. For example, studies in brain science have found positive correlations between certain frontal lobe activity, namely less intense versions of the same type of seizures that are common among those with epilepsy, and reports of mystical experiences. As one report put it, “There is now direct empirical evidence that there is a relationship between an

³⁹ Proudfoot, 147.

⁴⁰ Proudfoot, 147.

individual's propensity for producing [electroencephalogram or EEG] microseizures, and reports of direct experiences of mystical or divine encounters."⁴¹ And rather than being uncommon, 50-70% of humans are thought to have some level of susceptibility to such microseizures, with the other 30-50% either experiencing intense epileptic seizures or being immune to such EEG activity.⁴² Some theoretical work has even suggested that rituals that utilize rhythmic dancing, chanting, or visual accompaniment could unknowingly aid individuals in experiencing such microseizures, and therefore, increase the probability of individuals having anomalous experiences.⁴³ This theoretical idea is particularly interesting considering that it has been found that "the use of polyrhythms and a tempo that accelerates into the 8 to 12 Hz range over time maximizes the likelihood that the greatest number of people will experience just the right patterns to drive their own unique neurophysiological susceptibilities."⁴⁴

Another approach to understanding the psychological, and possibly universal, aspects of such experiences comes from research done utilizing the hallucinogen psilocybin. The effects of psilocybin "include significant alterations in perceptual, cognitive, affective, volitional, and somatesthetic functions, including visual and auditory sensory changes, difficulty in thinking, mood fluctuations, and dissociative phenomena."⁴⁵ In this particular study, the sample group consisted of people who reported moderate to high levels of

⁴¹ Kenneth R. Livingston, "Religious Practice, Brain, and Belief," *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 5, no. 1-2 (2005): 85.

⁴² The critique may be noted that if some people are immune to this, then mystical experience cannot be said to be universal. However, even if certain portions of people are immune to such microseizures (as they may be) and if EEG microseizures are both necessary and sufficient in inducing anomalous experiences (which is unlikely), the distinguishing factor between potential-experiencers and those who are immune would be neurological and not cultural or conceptual.

⁴³ Livingston, 75-117.

⁴⁴ Livingston, 87.

⁴⁵ Roland R. Griffiths et al., "Psilocybin Can Occasion Mystical-Type Experiences Having Substantial and Sustained Personal Meaning and Spiritual Significance," *Psychopharmacology* 187 (2006): 269.

religious activity. The participants received either psilocybin or a placebo and were interviewed in the aftermath of ingesting the respective substances. The reports of the participants' experiences were measured using the Mysticism Scale composed by Hood. The study concluded that psilocybin "when administered under comfortable, structured, interpersonally supported conditions...occasioned experiences which had marked similarities to classic mystical experiences and which were rated by volunteers as having substantial personal meaning and spiritual significance."⁴⁶ This study could be critiqued from a traditional social constructivist viewpoint because the sample only consisted of people "who reported at least intermittent participation in religious or spiritual activities"⁴⁷ and who were therefore already influenced by certain culturally constructed religious conceptual frameworks. However, the study obviously does suggest some relationship between particular physiological events, in this case brought on by a change in the participants' neurochemistry due to the ingestion of a hallucinogen, and the likelihood of having a mystical (and in my explanatory classification, "religious") experience, whether or not one then deems that experience "religious."

In light of the empirical evidence suggesting some correlation between certain physiological events, which are certainly not culturally determined, and the likelihood to assent to a description of one's experience that employs traditionally mystical language, one may wonder how cognitions fit into any theoretical framework attempting to reconcile common core theory and social constructivism's claim that human experience necessarily contains cognitive elements.

⁴⁶ Griffiths et al., 279.

⁴⁷ Griffiths et al., 269.

With the rise of the discipline of evolutionary psychology, many features of human culture (religion included) have been explored via the mechanism of evolution by natural selection. This method is particularly relevant to the issue at hand in that cognition is not only culturally, but also evolutionarily, influenced. The human brain, like all other organic phenomena, developed as a result of particular selection pressures in its natural (and, in this case, social) environment. Therefore, human cognitive processes were “selected” due to their ability to assist the organism in negotiating obstacles and opportunities in prehistoric African savannas. The cognitive capacities and tendencies of modern humans are similar cross-culturally for this reason (i.e., their common environmental origin).

Pascal Boyer, an anthropologist, has attempted to explain certain features of religious behavior in terms of evolutionarily adaptive cognitive tendencies. The growing consensus that at least some influential factors of human psychology (cognitive, affective and behavioral) evolved as a series of systems under pressure from earlier human environments opens up the possibility for underlying universally human cognitive functions. Boyer claims that many concepts associated with religions are the by-product of evolutionarily adaptive systems, rather than being adaptations themselves. For example, Boyer attempts to explain the human tendency to believe in noncorporeal agents (i.e., gods, spirits, ghosts, demons, monsters, etc.) in terms of a hyperactive agency detection device, which is a function of human inference systems.⁴⁸ He describes the very common occurrence of hyperactive agency detection, writing that it consists of “interpreting some noise or movement as indicating the presence of an agent.”⁴⁹ This tendency is anecdotally obvious. If you awaken in your home at night to the sound of one of the windows of your house breaking, explaining

⁴⁸ Justin Barrett, psychologist of religion, originally developed the term “hyperactive agency detection device” (Barrett 2004).

⁴⁹ Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (Basic Books 2001), 147.

the noise as simply a tree limb falling through the window is not likely to be your first explanatory attempt. More likely will be the assumption that the sound was caused by some sort of agent who has intentions, purposes, desires, etc. In other words, you will assume the sound was caused by something with a *mind*. In the case of a window breaking late at night, a burglar might be a plausible explanation. Boyer claims that this tendency to sense “the presence of barely detectable agents”⁵⁰ is evolutionarily adaptive in that it equipped early humans to detect both predators and prey.⁵¹

While this tendency has obvious evolutionary advantages, Boyer claims that the belief in counterintuitive agents such as gods, spirits, etc. is a universal by-product of this more basic cognitive adaptation. This tendency exemplifies the utilization of concepts and assumptions, which can be seen in most psychologically healthy humans regardless of cultural setting. In the aftermath of ambiguous sensory input (e.g., a noise in the bushes behind you), the assumption that “someone/something is there” utilizes and is filtered through concepts, *some of which* are particular to one’s cultural environment. A Christian living in the United States in the early 21st century, for example, is unlikely to believe that the Greek god Pan caused a rustle in the bushes. However, the more general concepts of “someone” and “there” are utilized regardless of the additional beliefs about exactly who the *particular* “someone” is, and which location “there” refers to. In other words, the cognitive pattern will be similar enough across time/cultures/languages to be considered a similar

⁵⁰ Boyer, 146.

⁵¹ A cost-benefit analysis of such a cognitive tendency reveals its evolutionary advantage. A false-positive for agency detection (i.e., believing that predators or prey are present when they are not) only results in the loss of some cognitive effort to temporarily increase vigilance and possibly the loss of a few calories from unnecessary running. On the other hand a false-negative (i.e., believing that no agent is present when one is present, be it predator or prey) could result in the potential loss of a food source in the case of prey, or the loss of preparedness of the fight or flight mechanism in the case of a predator, which could ultimately compromise one’s life.

experience even though the experience contains a cognitive component (i.e., the experience of believing someone caused the noise that one heard).

The question still remains as to what cognitions could be universal *and* could condition anomalous or mystical experiences. Boyer claims that the concepts of gods, spirits, demons, etc. have longevity in human groups beyond the recognition of a false-positive for agency detection⁵² due to the fact that such concepts are counterintuitive. The term “counterintuitive,” in Boyer’s framework, does not simply refer to strange ideas, but to ideas that include “information contradicting some information provided by ontological categories.”⁵³ For example, the Christian God is very much like a person, but with characteristics that are not normally included in the ontological category of “person.” The Christian God is in multiple places at one time, can manipulate the physical order of the Universe and can hear the morally relevant thoughts of practitioners. Obviously, one usually assumes that a person does not have such characteristics and therefore, the concept of the Christian God is counterintuitive. Some mystical conceptions may also be counterintuitive, making them particularly memorable.

Paradoxical language, such as that used in describing mystical experiences, may be counterintuitive with respect to categories of relations of number or quantity. For example, Hood’s Mysticism Scale uses many propositions in measuring extrovertive experience that display paradoxical concepts in regard to number. Such measures include agreement or disagreement with statements such as, “I have never had an experience in which all things

⁵² Boyer discusses the evolutionary disadvantage to allowing false positives in agency detection to affect future behavior or beliefs. He writes, “It makes sense to ‘overdetect’ agents only if you can quickly discard false positives; otherwise you would spend all your time recoiling in fear, which is certainly not adaptive” (Boyer, p. 147). In light of this, concepts of gods, demons, spirits, ancestors, etc. seem enigmatic in that these concepts have longevity in human groups. Boyer resolves this problem by noting that such concepts are counterintuitive, making them particularly memorable.

⁵³ Boyer, 65.

seemed to be unified into a single whole,” “I have never had an experience in which I became aware of the unity of all things,” and “I have had an experience in which I felt everything in the world to be part of the same whole.” These statements are counterintuitive in regard to our concepts of unity and plurality. The concept of “unity” is useful day-to-day only if it precludes plurality. Also at the evolutionary level, one could imagine unity and plurality being at least as foundational to human cognition as agency. Even the concept of an agent implies the ability to conceptually distinguish between a singular agent and multiple agents in order to gauge the potential threat or opportunity.

In addition to Hood’s utilization of numerically counterintuitive statements, the introvertive measure on the Mysticism Scale utilizes counterintuitive statements dealing with subjectivity. As was previously mentioned, the introvertive category deals with “inward unitary consciousness.”⁵⁴ Statements such as, “I have had an experience in which all things seemed to be conscious” and “I have never had an experience in which all things seemed to be aware” measure the extent to which objects other than those typically associated with awareness or consciousness (i.e., subjectivity) are described as possessing these characteristics.⁵⁵

Such an effect could be a by-product of the human psychological tendency to form “theories of mind” or “intuitive psychologies” of others.⁵⁶ In negotiating social interaction it is necessary to have the ability to reliably predict the likely behavior of others. For example, if a known rival is walking speedily toward you with a furrowed brow, steady intense eye

⁵⁴ Chen, et al., 329.

⁵⁵ These ideas are slightly different from the counterintuitive ideas of gods, but many of the same cognitive tendencies seem to be involved (i.e., agency detection, theory of mind). Gods in many traditions can be thought of as minds without bodies. This is counterintuitive in that the ontological category of “minds” includes the inference that minds and bodies usually coexist in the same place and time. A mind usually has a body.

⁵⁶ Boyer, 123.

contact, aggressive posture, and clenched fists, it is very adaptive to understand such bodily cues as a signal of anger and a prelude to aggressive or violent behavior. In moving from seeing initial bodily cues or movements to beliefs about the person's subjective mental states and the expectation of certain corresponding behavior, you are forming a "theory of mind" regarding the person you are observing. However, again, while this function of such a tendency is clearly adaptive, there exists the possibility of attributing a mind, subjective states, and intentionality to something that is, in fact, mindless. Examples of such concepts are numerous in stories from religious traditions. While talking snakes, trees that can hear morally relevant conversations,⁵⁷ and burning bushes may be less counterintuitive than feeling that "all things seemed to be conscious," the difference is in degree, not in kind.

The fact that evolutionarily focused theories in psychology suggest certain universal human tendencies of cognition helps to explain the significant success that Hood's Mysticism Scale has had in different types of cultures (both individualist and collectivist), as well as across religious traditions (all three Abrahamic traditions and Tibetan Buddhism). For example, in a 2001 study by Hood et al., a sample of American Christians and a sample of Iranian Muslims were asked to complete the Mysticism Scale. The results showed that

American Christians and Iranian Muslims displayed clear similarities in their self-reported mystical experiences. MI [multiple imputation] procedures, for instance, confirmed that the Mysticism Scale measured an equivalent introvertive factor across the two cultures. This finding conformed with recent descriptions of introvertive mysticism as a "pure conscious experience" that exists independent of any tradition-specific interpretation.⁵⁸

Also, the finding that the "interpretation factor in both countries was associated with greater religious interest" supports the idea that there is some sort of distinction between tradition-

⁵⁷ Boyer, 63.

⁵⁸ Hood et al., 704.

dependent experiences and more basic phenomenological descriptions.⁵⁹ Again, reports of introvertive experiences were similar across both cultures regardless of religiosity, while interpretive experiences were positively correlated with religiosity. This finding does not contradict the social constructivist view that all experience contains a conceptual component, but does suggest that even cross-cultural cognitive tendencies may allow for conceptually determined experiences that occur independent of cultural context.

Another study asked Israeli Jewish practitioners to respond to the Mysticism Scale.⁶⁰ This work is particularly relevant given the potent criticism by Proudfoot and Katz that Jewish mysticism is necessarily culturally predetermined because of the lack of “unity with God.” While Jewish mystics usually do not describe their mystical experiences in terms of experiencing “unity with God,” the aforementioned study produced findings, among Israeli Jewish participants “that were similar to [those] found by Hood et al. (2001) for a Protestant sample and for a Muslim sample.”⁶¹ Therefore, Jewish people appear to have the capacity for and a similar rate of occurrence of some type of “unity” experience as those in Protestant and Muslim populations, even though describing the experience as unity with God may be distasteful, or even blasphemous, as far as Jewish doctrine is concerned.

The Mysticism Scale has been used successfully in traditions other than the Abrahamic monotheisms as well. In a study conducted in 2011, Tibetan Buddhists filled out the Mysticism Scale. While there was some discrepancy as to the issue of whether such measurements as “ego loss” should be understood as interpretive or introvertive, the findings, like the studies done among Christian, Muslim and Jewish populations, supported

⁵⁹ Hood et al., 698.

⁶⁰ Lazar & Kravetz, 51-61.

⁶¹ Lazar & Kravetz, 59.

the common core idea that “pure experience can be distinguished explicitly from its context-specific hermeneutical construal.”⁶²

The term “pure experience” in the above quote may be overreaching or misleading, as these findings do not contradict the social constructivist view that all human experience contains a conceptual component. They do, however, suggest that even cognitively influenced anomalous experiences that are similar can occur regardless of particular cultural contexts. The cross-cultural anomalous experiences accounted for by the introvertive and extrovertive measures of the Mysticism scale are “religious” for the practitioner only insofar as they are interpreted as “religious,” and need not be religiously interpreted at all (e.g., secular meditation, epileptic seizures, hallucinations, etc.).⁶³ Anomalous phenomenological (i.e., mystical) experiences can apparently be distinguished from the specifically religious language with which they are so often intertwined, and in these cases, it is safe to say that the experiences are similar enough to taxonomically group together in spite of the various interpretations imposed on them.

Final Discussion

Through the previous discussion, it should be clear that there is potential compatibility between several of the foundational claims of both the common core and social constructivist theories of mystical experiences. Mounting empirical research from social psychology and neurophysiology, as well as theoretical work in anthropology and evolutionary psychology, all support the idea of cross-cultural tradition-independent physiological and cognitive patterns that are often correlated with what are traditionally

⁶² Chen et al., 328.

⁶³ Again, I am using the term “religious experience” as a classification tool within the bounds of this work, but I am not suggesting that all experiences that fall into this classification are deemed “religious” by the experiencer. Ann Taves discusses the role that “ascription” plays in understanding anomalous subjective experience, and especially in understanding how those experiences come to be “deemed religious” (Taves).

thought of as mystical experiences. The evidence that there are universal cognitive tendencies reveals the possibility of conceptually influenced experience that is accessible to humans among different social, cultural, and religious contexts regardless of the frameworks that the experiences are filtered through or how those experiences are interpreted or evaluated. However, those social constructivist philosophical critiques that are truly compelling, in some instances, have still not been fully acknowledged by common core theorists. For example, the understanding that ineffability is not an inherent characteristic of experience and the realization that the subjective description of an experience does not automatically hold epistemological or ontological weight in regard to the explanation of the experience must be embraced and incorporated into any version of the common core view that is to be fully naturalistic. On the other hand, the social constructivist critique that all experience is necessarily conceptual is best understood as a rebuttal to the veiled theistic and supernaturalistic claims of Schleiermacher, Otto, and James, and not as a serious challenge to any naturalistic account of universal human experiences. The foundational claims of both common core theory and social constructivism, however, are not theoretically incompatible. Given the possibility of a completely naturalistic theoretical account of potentially universal mystical experiences, the empirical question of whether there *are* such universally accessible anomalous human experiences has yet to be fully answered.

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