



## **Mystical experience, hallucination, and belief in God**

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### ***The Argument from Mystical Experience***

The Argument from Mystical Experience expresses the view that as, in mystical ASCs (altered states of consciousness), a person finds himself to be at one with Ultimate or Supreme Being—the universal "I"—which according to his cultural upbringing might be interpreted in terms of God, Brahman, Allah, Christ, the Tao, etc. or all or some of these perspectives combined together as one), then that person is justified henceforth in believing in the existence of the same. This is the "seeing is believing" argument which has been used since ancient times, as in the Mandukya Upanishad which states that "In the union with Him is the supreme proof of His reality. He is peace and love." It is noteworthy that we also

use an identical form of argument to justify our belief in the mundane world's existence: we perceive and experience the mundane world and for most this serves as proof of its reality.

As well as asserting that mystical experiences have the right to be authoritative with respect to their revelations for the ASC percipient, some proponents of the Argument from Mystical Experience will go further and claim that the occurrence of such ASCs should at the very least make non-mystics more favourably disposed towards accepting that God exists, if indeed it does not absolutely convince them. This extension of the argument is based upon consensual validation: the point being made that mystics all seem to be relating to one universal metaphysical reality, hence just as those of us who have never been to San Francisco mostly believe in the city's existence on account of travellers' tales and related documentation, so those who have never been to God in a mystical experience still have good reason to believe in his existence on account of other people's stories which mutually corroborate.

Before proceeding further to discuss criticisms of the Argument, I should perhaps say a little about the study and nature of mystical experiences, since the argument ensuing from them enjoys the strength of having an empirical basis. Having a mystical experience is a bit like waking up out of a dream. In a dream my "greater mind" as it might be called projects a dream "me" into a dream world where I may interact with

other dream people, feeling that all is perfectly real until that horrible moment when the alarm clock goes of bringing me back into the NSC (normal state of consciousness) and showing me that the dream's only reality had been as a mental fantasy entertained by my now alert "greater mind". Likewise, as a person goes deeper into a mystical ASC she sees that her ordinary self and the mundane world are no more "real" than the dream world and dream self are seen to be by the dreamer who has just woken up. It becomes evident that at heart she is not a separate entity struggling against all the others in the world, but that she is bound up in the whole of creation which comprises a mighty cosmic dream being entertained in the mind of her greatest Self, which at this level is synonymous and at one with universal Self or God. It is this which gives rise to the incredible feeling of unity and oneness with all things which has been spoken of as the hallmark of mystical consciousness.

Now just as it would be *very* difficult if not impossible to try and explain to an indignant dream man what his relationship to the dreamer's mind really is, so mystics claim that it is impossible adequately to use language to explain our relationship to God's mind, and thus to tell what a mystical experience is like to have. It is in fact ineffable—beyond description using mere words. However, fortunately for the sake of empirical study, mystical ASCs do show certain common characteristics which can be classified and used to justify the claim that the experience relates to one universal metaphysical reality. A fine assembly of such characteristics

have been brought together by Pahnke and Richards in Tart 1969), the former having analysed both contemporary and historical cases of mystical experience to establish a set of criteria which could be used to establish whether or not subjects to whom a psychedelic drug had been administered had had what could be called a full mystical experience. Although I do not intend discussing this in depth here, it is worth noting, for when we come to consider consensual validation with respect to the Argument from Mystical Experience, we note that the nine categories of characteristics which Pahnke identified include such tangible features as having feelings of undifferentiated unity with all things, a dissolution of the space-time context of awareness, a sense of having found ultimate truth or reality, a sense of sacredness, the presence of deeply felt positive moods such as joy, love, peace, etc., alleged ineffability and paradoxicality in that the normal laws of logic and reason seem to be transcended and violated during the experience.

### *A Defence of the Argument*

We have seen that there are two aspects of the Argument from Mystical Experience: in the first place it is asserted that having such an ASC justifies the mystic's belief in God, and secondly it is claimed that by using consensual validation with respect to the nature of the experience, a non-mystic may use the occurrence of such experiences in others as at least a partial foundation for his belief in God's existence.

Various minor criticisms have been made of the argument, but the most

forceful and important one asserts that perception in mystical ASCs is "abnormal", and therefore cannot be considered to reveal truth so authoritatively as normal perception presumably does. Very commonly philosophers and psychologists who invoke this criticism compare the epistemological status of mystical perception to the perception of an alcoholic who is **having** hallucinations as a result of *delirium tremens* (the "DTs") and they follow through by adding that we should no more think of using consensual validation to support the validity of mystical perceptions than we should think of using it to proclaim alcoholics' hallucinations objectively real.

It is this criticism and its ramifications which I wish to counter herein, since it has become particularly pressing over the last fifteen years or so in view of the sudden surge of people who have experienced mystical states as a result of such things as psychedelic drug use, meditation and other ASC induction procedures like the "Christos" procedure with which I myself have carried out a considerable amount of work (McIntosh 1978 a and b). As a succinct expression of most of the criticism and its premises I shall use Bertrand Russell's statement in which he trenchantly claims that:

From a scientific point of view, we can make no distinction between the man who eats little and sees heaven and the man who drinks much and sees snakes. Each is in an abnormal physical condition, and therefore has abnormal perceptions. Normal perceptions, since

they have to be useful in the struggle for life, must have some correspondence with fact; but in abnormal perceptions there is no reason to expect such correspondence, and their testimony, therefore, cannot outweigh that of normal perception.

("Religion and Science", in Alston 1963)

I do not wish to argue that the testimony of mystical perception goes as far as to outweigh that of ordinary perception: it will be sufficient to show that there are grounds for considering each to be of equal epistemological status. Russell's statement although superficially persuasive is actually based on two implicit but naive premises. These premises commonly arise and go unchallenged when criticising mystical experience, and they cause the arguments to appear far more formidable than they actually are. The first is an opinion that mystical perception is "abnormal" in the same derogatory way in which the perception of someone suffering from *delirium tremens* is considered to be abnormal, and the second premise is the view that there is no difference from an analytical perspective between the set of elements common to mystical experience, and those found in the perception of an alcoholic with the "DTs".

On the question of abnormality, Russell considers that "normal perceptions must have some correspondence with fact". This sounds reasonable, but there is a snare hidden within the statement; namely the

implicit premise that fact relates to reality as we know it *from the NSC perspective*. Obviously this is by no means necessarily true, for while it is correct to think of ASC perceptions as being "abnormal" in the sense that they differ from our NSC modes of perception, it is quite unjustified to suggest that they might not have the same degree of correspondence with fact. We have no way of knowing how closely even our ordinary perceptions relate to ultimate reality or truth whatsoever that might be, and just because "normal" perceptions, in Russell's sense of the word, must, as he says, "be useful in the struggle for (physical) life", it does not follow that other modes of perception may not be equally valid or even superior to ordinary perception. Indeed, ASCs which incorporate a strong ESP component provide cases in point where the scope of normal perceptual means is clearly exceeded.

Having now established that AC perceptions cannot be dismissed out of hand as being inferior to ordinary ones, let us see how "DT" and mystical experiences differ in the corroborative value of the elements specific to each. As Broad points out ("The Argument from Religious Experience", in Alston 1963), the alcoholic's visions are mostly of everyday things like rats and snakes, even if they are often of unusual colours and sizes. He generally feels he is perceiving at an ordinary level of reality, so to him the rats are as real as the bed over which they run, and so far as he can understand, other people too, using their normal sensory modalities, should be able to see the horrors surrounding him. Such is not the case, of course. A discrepancy exists between the alcoholic's

view of what he thinks to be NSC reality, and the majority or consensus view of NSC reality as beheld by others.

In so far as he cannot get others to confirm the existence of things which he feels are there to be observed by all in a normal way, the alcoholic has good reason to conclude not only that he is suffering from a perceptual abnormality, but also that this particular type of abnormality is in fact inferior to his ordinary way of perceiving—a way, which, no doubt, he wishes he could resume. Furthermore, even if the alcoholic were accompanied by a few of his boozy friends who were also suffering from the "DTs", and having similar hallucinations of rats and snakes crawling over them, it would still be unwise for them to conclude as a result of consensual validation amongst themselves that they were right, and others wrong. There are two reasons for this. In the first place, it is highly unlikely that they would all see the same objects of fear—the same species of snake etc., in the same part of the room, acting in the same way—unless mutual suggestion was being invoked. Secondly, we can easily account for the kind of hallucinations under discussion, in terms of intrusions from the lower unconscious, consisting of the kind of things which most people deeply fear. In this condition the alcoholic is effectively in a world where nightmare fantasy co-exists with ordinary reality so that the two are intermingled. Even we, as presumably healthy individuals, can envisage such a state simply by using our imagination: the poor alcoholic however, having hit "rock bottom" and suffering from the "DTs", has brain damage, drunkenness,



and social and moral dilapidation to help make real any ghastly visions which his unconscious should be able to thrust above his less resilient threshold of consciousness.

Little wonder then that "DT" perceptions contain common elements or features. They mostly comprise familiar objects which arouse fear when in close physical proximity, or ghoulish freaks such as horror-comic artists create. The mystic, however, is in a very different position. As a necessary prerequisite according with our criteria for mystical experience, his perception and cognition relate to things which in essence are ineffable, pertaining to the nature of existence, and not merely to the familiar objects which have their place within that existence. Here lies the chief distinction between ASC revelations and alcoholic or other forms of hallucination. There is no contradiction between the mystic's experience and the sensory knowledge which others can claim about things in the world. Of course, the mystic might think that the NSC picture of reality is a very blinkered one, but unlike the hallucinator, he would not consider this view to be incomplete from within the limits to which ordinary perceptual and cognitive systems constrain it. This is because he knows himself to be functioning at a different and more complete (i.e. "higher") level of reality from which he can gain understanding of things which could be neither known nor understood in the NSC. He would not expect those in the NSC to be able to understand what he is experiencing in the higher state of consciousness, in just the same way as a mineralogist would not expect the untrained layman to recognise and understand the appearance

of a sliver of granite seen through the lens of a polarising petrological microscope which can reveal more about the specimen's composition and nature than can the naked eye.

The difference between the hallucinating alcoholic and the mystic is very distinct: the former is operating at a lower level of consciousness, in which his perceptual and cognitive functioning is impaired; while the latter is at a higher level of consciousness, in that he not only feels he is employing "supernormal" modes of perception and cognition, but he also knows that his normal modalities are all accessible if he wishes to direct attention back on to them and resume the NSC. Seen in this light, Russell's statement that "From a scientific point of view, we can make *no distinction* between the man who eats little (1) and sees heaven and the man who drinks much and sees snakes" is evidently based on an incomplete knowledge of the phenomenon in question, as are similar pronouncements made by others. To be fair to Russell though, this was written back in 1935 when very few empirical studies had been made of ASC characteristics, and so it might have seemed misleadingly self-evident then. It is not so now, however, as is apparent with our increasing knowledge of the subject, and in consequence I think it would be wrong for philosophers and psychologists to continue using the type of argument which has just been examined as a chief one to counter the contention that mystical experience indicates the presence of a Supreme Being and corresponding level of reality.

## *Implications*

What now, may we conclude, are the implications of the occurrence of mystical states of consciousness? In the first place, we should not consider the mystic to be deluded simply because his ASC percepts are different to NSC ones. His mode of perception might well be "super-normal", and if the percepts convince him of the existence of a higher level of reality, who are we to contradict that without first having experienced the ASC for ourselves? And, secondly, it must be admitted that although mystical experiences corroborate to suggest objectively that there is in fact a Supreme Being and a related level of being within our own psyches, we lack the indisputable premises which would provide the basis for a logical proof of this using the data available, or any other potentially available data for that matter. This is because although "logical proofs" are much sought after by rigorous thinkers, logic has limited application since it can only tell whether a given argument is valid, granted certain premises which might or might not be true. In most metaphysical arguments such as the one we are presently considering, acceptance of one or more of the premises is an act of faith, and so it boils down to saying that nothing to do with the nature of truth and reality—not even the existence of the mundane world—can be indisputably proven by means of formal logic.

The question of the existence of Supreme Being must be left purely for the individual to decide for him or herself. If a person has had a mystical experience his grounds for belief are very much stronger than those of a person who is basing his belief on the corroborated experiences of others. But

it cannot justifiably be held that the latter person is in a weak position, for he is trusting to the testimony of others in much the same way as he might trust to the testimony of a large number of travellers to a foreign country who claim that that country exists. True, where foreign countries are concerned, doubters can put a lot of effort into earning sufficient money for an airline ticket to fly there and see for themselves, yet in an age where meditative techniques, ASC induction procedures, and as a last resort psychedelic drugs, are available, there is no reason why, where God too is concerned, determined seekers should not make a journey to find out.

(1) A reference to the practice of fasting prior to meditation or prayer in some traditions to increase the likelihood of having a rewarding experience.

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