Superior Points of View

William James and Aldous Huxley's Reflections on Mystical and Religious Experiences

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Abstract

The question of the nature, truthfulness and value of mystical and spiritual experiences is thought-provoking and puzzling. Even today, it is not possible to provide a clear and univocal answer. There are multiple unsolved questions: What is a mystical or religious experience? Does a mystical experience supply knowledge about the transcendental? Are psychological, theological, and metaphysical speculations forever relegated to the limbo-land of mere possibility, or do they, on any level, reflect anything real? This article is an attempt to analyze these questions and to elaborate upon them; if not to find a definite answer to these questions, then to propose possible answers. I start by analyzing the account of the pragmatist American philosopher and psychologist William James, mostly focusing on two chapters of his work *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. Secondly, I discuss how James' account supports and expands upon that of Aldous Huxley as set out in his work *The Doors of Perception*. Then, I show how both James and Huxley's ideas find empirical support in a scientific study. Finally, I bring in the phenomenon of shamanism as a practical explanatory example of the views of these two thinkers. In this way, I propose a different and new outlook on the shamanic practice, less common in academic discourse.

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Introduction

The question of the nature, truthfulness and value of mystical and spiritual experiences is thought-provoking and puzzling. Even today, it is not possible to provide a clear and univocal answer. There are multiple unsolved questions: What is a mystical or religious experience? Does a mystical experience supply knowledge about the transcendental? Are psychological, theological, and metaphysical speculations forever relegated to the limbo-land of mere possibility, or do they, on any level, reflect anything real? Are these speculations true? If so, how do we go about determining their truth value? Furthermore, what exactly do we mean when we use terms such as "real" and "true", especially when these terms are applied to mystical religious experiences? What is the value of those experiences? Should we consider whatever is at the origin of those experiences as a fundamental aspect of their evaluation? Is it possible for different layers of reality, only open to a "mystical" brain, to exist? Are there other types of consciousness beyond our waking one? May mystical states be superior points of view, windows through which the mind looks out upon a more extensive and inclusive world? This article is an attempt to analyze these questions and to elaborate upon them; if not to find a definite answer to these questions, then to propose possible answers. I start by analyzing the account of the pragmatist American philosopher and psychologist William James, mostly focusing on two chapters of his work *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. Secondly, I discuss how James' account supports and expands upon that of Aldous Huxley as set out in his work *The Doors of Perception*. Then, I show how both James and Huxley's ideas find empirical support in a scientific study. Finally, I bring in the phenomenon of shamanism as a practical explanatory example of the views of these two thinkers. In this way, I propose a different and new outlook on the shamanic practice, less common in academic discourse.

William James and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

The Varieties of Religious Experience is a book written by the American pragmatist philosopher and psychologist William James. It comprises his edited lectures on natural theology, which were delivered at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland between 1901 and 1902. The lectures focus on the question of the nature of religious experience and the neglect by science of the academic study of religion. In addition to these issues, the book analyzes and discusses the origins and value of religious and mystical phenomena. This discussion constitutes one of the central topics of the book.

In his discussion and evaluation of religious experiences, James was, on the one hand, unwilling to accept the dogmatic claims made on behalf of religious and mystical experiences; but, on the other hand, he was equally unwilling to dismiss such experiences as merely interesting psychic phenomena with no objective import. To James, the claim that during a mystical experience a person experiences a wider reality than the ordinarily known one, must be taken seriously and cannot be dismissed.[1]

[1] Robert Burgt, *The Religious Philosophy of William James* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1981), 56.

Even more so, since James strongly believed in the existence and goodness of a hidden spiritual world – he considered religious experiences as evidence of the existence of a transcendental reality.[2] Furthermore, he was convinced that mystical experiences serve a vitally important personal and social function.[3] However, James was determined to establish clear boundaries of what the mystics could and could not legitimately tell us about the nature of reality, especially the reality of the unseen spiritual world and "his sympathetic and receptive investigation of mysticism was honed by a keen critical awareness."[4] Thus, he was open to learning about unknown and different realities from the mystical experiences of others; while, at the same time, he stressed the importance of being aware that these descriptions may still be faulty and incapable of truly describing the complexity of the unseen world.[5]

Although James was fascinated by mysticism, he was not a mystic. That is, he did not himself have frequent and profound mystical experiences. As he states in a letter written in 1904 to James H. Leuba:

> My personal position is simple. I have no living sense of commerce with a God. I envy those who have, for I know that the addition of such a sense would help me greatly. The Divine, for my active life, is limited to personal and abstract concepts which, as ideal, interest and determine me, but do so but faintly in comparison with what a feeling of God might effect, if I had one.[6]

Not being able to rely on his own mystical experience, in *The Varieties*, James gathers a wide-ranging mass of data on religious life and experience. He discusses religious conversion experiences, the mind-cure movement, prayer, and saintliness. His aim is not simply to examine these phenomena for their own sake; rather, he wishes to utilize these descriptions as evidence that belief in an unseen, transcendental, and spiritual world can have a positive impact on people and their lives, especially if this belief is the result of a profound religious experience.

However, as James suggests, to say that strong religious beliefs and intense mystical experiences frequently initiate positive changes in the lives of men and women is not the same as saying that those beliefs and experiences are true. Therefore, in *The Varieties*, James also seeks to formulate criteria to assess the truth value of religious beliefs, which I will analyze below. These criteria, together with numerous examples of the positive effects that a dynamic spiritual life has on the individual, form an attempt at justifying the belief in the reality, power, and goodness of a hidden, transcendental world based solely on pragmatic grounds.[7]

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[2] Bernard G. William, "The Varieties of Religious Experience, Reflections on its Enduring Value," in *The Varieties of Religious Experience: Centenary Essays*, ed. Michel Ferrari (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2002), 65.
[3] Bernard G. William, *Exploring Unseen Worlds: William James and the Philosophy of Mysticism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 18.
[4] Ibid., 19
[5] Ibid., 65
[6] Quoted in William, *Exploring Unseen Worlds*, 19.
[7] Ibid., 273-274.

Chapter 1: Religion and Neurology

In the first pages of *The Varieties*, before beginning to describe their differences in kind, James distinguished between two kinds of judgments usually applied by academics to religious experiences: the 'existential judgment' and the 'spiritual judgment'.

By the 'existential judgment', James means a type of judgement resulting from an investigation into the question of the origin of a certain phenomenon. It analyses the different historical, economic, psychological and cultural factors that have contributed to the development of a specific fact or experience.[8] It is therefore merely descriptive. The 'spiritual judgment', on the other hand, is normative. This kind of judgment is interested in evaluating a certain phenomenon in either a positive or negative manner: it seeks to establish the philosophical, ethical, or practical "importance, meaning, or significance" of what is being studied.[9]

James emphasizes that it is fundamental to distinguish between these two kinds of judgment: often, especially in the analyses of religious experiences, scholars inappropriately confuse and merge these two kinds of judgment. As a consequence of this confusion, many scholars, based on a description of the origin of a certain religious phenomenon (existential judgment) evaluate it negatively (spiritual judgment). That is, by showing that certain religious experiences have psychological origins, they conclude that these experiences are also unworthy and unevaluable, since the "the spiritual authority" of those undergoing them "is successfully undermined."[10] According to James, this is a conceptual error, as the descriptive teaches us nothing about the normative. For example, James calls the reduction of all religious expressions to a medical disorder "medical materialism":

> Medical materialism seems indeed a good appellation for the too simple-minded system of thought which we are considering. Medical materialism finishes up Saint Paul by calling his vision on the road to Damascus a discharging lesion of the occipital cortex, he being an epileptic. It snuffs out Saint Teresa as a hysteric, Saint Francis of Assisi as a hereditary degenerate. George Fox's discontent with the shams of his age, and his pining for spiritual veracity, it treats as a symptom of a disordered colon. Carlyle's organ-tones of misery it accounts for by a gastro-duodenal catarrh. All such mental over-tensions, it says, are, when you come to the bottom of the matter, mere affairs of diathesis (auto-intoxications most probably), due to the perverted action of various glands which physiology will yet discover.[11]

James readily concedes that it may well be true that all religious phenomena have organic underpinnings, but he also points out that, if we accept the theory that all states of mind are ultimately organic, then we equally have to acknowledge that atheistic conclusions and scientific insights also result from different physiological states. Or, in the words of James:

[8] Ibid., 275.
[9] Ibid.
[10] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experiences* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1902), 23.
[11] Ibid., 22-23.

> Modern psychology, finding definite psycho-physical connections to hold good, assumes as a convenient hypothesis that the dependence of mental states upon bodily conditions must be thorough-going and complete. If we adopt the assumption, then of course what medical materialism insists on must be true in a general way, if not in every detail: Saint Paul certainly had once an epileptoid, if not an epileptic seizure; George Fox was an hereditary degenerate; Carlyle was undoubtedly auto-intoxicated by some organ or other, no matter which—and the rest. But now, I ask you, how can such an existential account of facts of mental history decide in one way or another upon their spiritual significance? According to the general postulate of psychology just referred to, there is not a single one of our states of mind, high or low, healthy or morbid, that has not some organic process as its condition.[12]

Therefore, we cannot measure the relative worth of different "states of mind" based on their physiological origin. After all, one would never argue that a certain scientific discovery were invalid simply because the scientist had a fever the day he made the inspired breakthrough. Therefore, James concludes:

> To plead the organic causation of a religious state of mind, then, in refutation of its claim to possess superior spiritual value, is quite illogical and arbitrary, unless one has already worked out in advance some psycho-physical theory connecting spiritual values in general with determinate sorts of physiological change. Otherwise, none of our thoughts and feelings, not even our scientific doctrines, not even our disbeliefs, could retain any value as revelations of the truth, for every one of them without exception flows from the state of their possessor's body at the time.[13]

This argument, albeit written down at the beginning of the 20th century, is still relevant today: many scholars still make these same assumptions. Moreover, as James explains, the fact that a religious experience happens by way of a psychopathic state does not mean that it has less value. He takes his argument even further, affirming that a psychopathic personality is sometimes even more likely to perceive those aspects of reality that healthy people do not have access to. James claims:

> In the psychopathic temperament, we have the emotionality which is the sine qua non of moral perception; we have the intensity and tendency to emphasis which are the essence of practical moral vigor; and we have the love of metaphysics and mysticism which carry one's interests beyond the surface of the sensible world. What, then, is more natural than that this temperament should introduce one to regions of religious truth, to corners of the universe, which your robust Philistine type of nervous system, forever offering its biceps to be felt, thumping its breast, and thanking Heaven that it hasn't a single morbid fiber in its composition, would be sure to hide forever from its self-satisfied possessors? [...] If there were such a thing as inspiration from a higher realm, it might well be that the neurotic temperament would furnish the chief condition of the requisite receptivity.[14]

Thus, not only must we not discredit a religious and mystical experience simply because it was experienced by a psychopathic temperament, but we could even hypothesize that only a person of that kind – because of their special perceptive abilities – possesses the necessary characteristics to get in touch

[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid., 32-33.

with the 'corner of the universe' that the healthy nervous system hides from us. This view is not at all esoteric, and I will show later own that it very much present in contemporary science as well.

In the last part of the first chapter, James outlines his own method for determining the relative worth of the 'states of mind of the religious experience' independently of their physiological origin by developing three different criteria. It seems that James does not separate truth from value. Therefore, if religious experience is defined, according to these three criteria, as valuable, the experience is equally true.[15] The three criteria developed by James to assess religious experiences are: 1) 'immediate luminousness', 2) 'philosophical reasonableness', and 3) 'moral helpfulness'. 'Immediate luminousness' is a criterion based on the intensity, the force of the mystical experience or their degree of immediacy. The criterion of 'philosophical reasonableness' assesses whether a religious state of mind fits logically into the broader religious system of belief of that person and evaluates it according to that fitness. Finally, 'moral helpfulness' is the pragmatic criterion which assesses whether the insights gained from the religious experience will have, in the long run, a positive effect on the individual and the community. If these three criteria are met, the mystical or religious experience must be considered, according to James, both valuable and true.

Chapter 16: The Mystics

In chapter sixteen of *The Varieties*, probably the most central and important chapter of the book, James focuses on the topic of mysticism. According to James, personal religious experience has its roots in mystical states of consciousness.[16] He understands religious experience as having two necessary recurrent factors. The first factor is the fact that subjects who undergo a mystical experience hold that the experience cannot be adequately expressed. According to James, when going back to their regular state of consciousness, these people cannot express properly what they experienced during their mystical state since human language is unable to express it properly. To understand a religious experience, one must have experienced it for oneself, much like having a particular feeling.[17] This is what James calls a "mystical experience's ineffability". He explains:

> In this peculiarity mystical states are more like states of feeling than like states of intellect. No one can make clear to another who has never had a certain feeling, in what the quality or worth of it consists. One must have musical ears to know the value of a symphony; one must have been in love one's self to understand a lover's state of mind. Lacking the heart or ear, we cannot interpret the musician or the lover justly, and are even likely to consider him weak-minded or absurd. The mystic finds that most of us accord to his experiences an equally incompetent treatment.[18]

The second factor is the mystical experience's "noetic quality," i.e. its cognitive or intellectual quality. According to James, mystical experiences, as much as they may be hard to explain to others, are still

[15] Niek Brunsveld, "The Varieties and the Cognitive Value of Religious Experiences", in *William James on Religion*, eds. H. Rydenfelt and S. Pihlström (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 58.
[16] James, *The Varieties*, 365.
[17] Bernard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds*, 13.
[18] James, *The Varieties*, 366.

intellectual experiences: "States of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance […] as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time."[19] For James, a state of consciousness can only be defined as mystical if these two factors are present.

According to James, there are two additional factors that, though not necessary, are usually present in religious and mystical experiences: namely, their 1) transiency, and their 2) passive nature. By their transiency, James means the way in which mystical experiences are usually circumscribed in time and cannot persist for long. By their passive nature, James means the way in which the subject experiencing a mystical state feels they no longer have a personal will, even when they themselves consciously provoked this experience in the first place.[20]

Following this outline of the four fundamental characteristics of the mystic experience, James offers a list of a whole range of experiences that he considers mystical, from the most trivial to the most significant. As we saw above, to James, there are many kinds of spiritual experiences that all differ in their degree of intensity and perception of different realities. The first and most rudimentary kind of mystical experience, according to James, "would seem to be that deepened sense of the significance of a maxim or formula which occasionally sweeps over one, 'I've heard that said all my life,' we exclaim, 'but I never realized its full meaning until now.'"[21] This experience is a sort of sudden understanding of a principle or an idea that was previously obscure to us. Even this brief experience, like a flash of inspiration, which is common to all of us, is considered by him to be a mystical one, the simplest mystical experience of all.

Next comes the experience that we nowadays call *déjà vu*: "that sudden feeling, [...] which sometimes sweeps over us, of having 'been here before.'"[22] James sees this as the kind of experience making us vaguely aware of the possibility of things beyond our ordinary perception.

A more radical kind of mystical experience is what James calls "dreamy states," those are states in which we feel surrounded by mystery and the metaphysical duality of things. James brings as an example, the experience reported by Charles Kingsle:

> When I walk the fields, I am oppressed now and then with an innate feeling that everything I see has a meaning, if I could but understand it. And this feeling of being surrounded by truths which I cannot grasp amounts to indescribable awe sometimes.[23]

A further class of mystical states that James takes into account and of which he claims to have some experience himself is what we today call drug-induced states, a state that is produced by intoxicants and anesthetics, especially by alcohol. The writer states that his own experience of nitrous oxide intoxication has led him to the conclusion that:

[19] Ibid., 367.
[20] Brunsveld, "The Varieties and the Cognitive Value of Religious Experiences", 60.
[21] James, *The Varieties*, 368.
[22] Ibid., 368.
[23] Ibid., 370.

> Our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness, as we call it, is but one especial type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation. No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded.[24]

This is one of the most important conclusions of *The Varieties*. James here underlines that our waking and rational consciousness is very specific and not exclusive. Indeed, other kinds of consciousness certainly exist, even though "we might go through life without suspecting their existence."[25] James points out that, with the right stimuli, such as the use of specific drugs, we can experience these different forms of consciousness whose existence we did not even suspect. These experiences, therefore, expose us to unknown and rich worlds.

Thus, James not only claims that spiritual experiences are not necessarily false, but he adds that we can all have a taste of them through the use of these drugs. He goes so far as to say that we do not get an account of the universe in its totality without having an experience like that. Therefore, the lack of mystical experiences is considered by James a lacuna in the complete understanding of reality and not the opposite. The person who undergoes a mystical experience has the chance to encounter aspects of reality that are unknown to individuals who don't. Those aspects of reality are extremely important and valuable.

Continuing his survey, James now reaches "religious mysticism pure and simple". This is the experience of being in the presence of God. A religious experience in which, as one of the writers quoted by James states: "I was aware that I was immersed in the infinite ocean of God."[26] Certain aspects of nature seem to have a peculiar power of awakening such mystical moods. Most of the striking cases that are collected by James about this kind of experience have in fact occurred outdoors.

At this point, James diverges slightly by introducing a variety of mystical experiences identified by an author, Dr. Bucke, as "cosmic consciousness". According to the latter:

> The prime characteristic of cosmic consciousness is a consciousness of the cosmos, that is, of the life and order of the universe. Bucke describing his experiences writes: 'I saw that the universe is not composed of dead matter, but is, on the contrary, a living Presence; I became conscious in myself of eternal life.'[27]

James completes his survey of the range of different mystical experiences by looking at "its methodical cultivation as an element of the religious life."[28] He focuses on mysticism as an element of the religious life, specifically on the different means and methods through which different religions achieve mystical experiences and different level of consciousness. He starts with yoga, used by the Hindus, which is a

[24] Ibid., 388.
[25] Ibid., 388.
[26] Ibid., 385.
[27] Ibid., 386.
[28] Ibid., 387.

means to achieve "the experimental union of the individual with the divine."[29] He subsequently turns to the description of the various levels of contemplation in Buddhism. He then continues by quoting an account that offers insight into the practices of Sufism. Finally, James comes to the mystical theology of Catholicism as exemplified in three Iberian mystics: St. John of the Cross, St. Ignatius Loyola and St. Teresa of Avila. According to James, the experiences of these Christians are characterized by two important stages: illumination and ecstasy. St. Teresa, for example, describes receiving privileged insights into the nature of the Holy Trinity (illumination), as well as experiencing a rapture of the mind and senses (ecstasy). The main benefit that James seems to find in all of these practices is an "overcoming of all the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute"[30] In mystical states, we become both one with the Absolute and aware of this oneness.

Finally, James concludes his chapter on mysticism by considering what truth it might hold for us. He makes three points. Firstly, the subjects of mystical experiences are themselves totally convinced by them. He explains:

> As a matter of psychological fact, mystical states of a well-pronounced and emphatic sort are usually authoritative over those who have them. They have been 'there,' and know. It is vain for rationalism to grumble about this. If the mystical truth that comes to a man proves to be a force that he can live by, what mandate have we of the majority to order him to live in another way?[31]

Secondly, there is no reason why other people should share that conviction, but we should at least open ourselves to the possibility of their reality:

> If we are ourselves outsiders and feel no private call thereto […] non-mystics are under no obligation to acknowledge in mystical states a superior authority conferred on them by their intrinsic nature […]. The utmost they can ever ask of us in this life is to admit that they establish 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 to be altogether wrong. At bottom, however, this would only be an 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.[32]

Moreover, different subjects' experiences generate different messages. James suggests that mystical experiences, viewed overall, are non-specific in doctrinal content; but even if this were the case, it is still not a reason to embrace them as true.

Thirdly, the existence of mystical experiences prevents us from rejecting the possibility of a world beyond our senses out of hand and overthrows the pretension of non-mystical states to be the sole and ultimate arbiters of what we may believe:

[29] Ibid., 388.
[30] Ibid., 406.
[31] Ibid., 408.
[32] Ibid., 411.

> It must always remain an open question whether mystical states may not possibly be such superior points of view, windows through which the mind looks out upon a more extensive and inclusive world […] the counting in of that wider world of meanings, and the serious dealing with it, might, in spite of all the perplexity, be indispensable stages in our approach to the final fullness of the truth.[33]

Therefore, James concludes the following: on the one hand, mystical experiences are extremely powerful and real for the people who partake them, and we cannot convince them of the opposite; on the other hand, for a person who has not experienced them for themselves, it is very hard to be convinced of the reality of mystical experiences. This is mostly because these states of consciousness, as explained earlier in the chapter at issue, are ineffable, impossible to explain. What we have to keep in mind, however, is that the existence of these experiences is still extremely important, since it opens us to the possibility of a level of consciousness and reality that is hidden to our ordinary understanding of reality.

Aldous Huxley and *The Doors of Perceptions*

As indicated at the begging of this paper, I argue that the ideas expressed by William James about religious and mystical experiences are strengthened and expanded upon by a theory formulated about 50 years later by Aldous Leonard Huxley.

Huxley was an English writer, novelist, and philosopher. He is famous for his philosophical essay, entitled *The Doors of Perception*, first published as a book in 1954. The title is derived from the following statement by William Blake: "If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite."[34] The idea that the possibilities of perception are greater than what we ordinarily believe is a recurrent argument in Huxley's essay, which is characterized by his memory of an ecstatic experience he underwent over the course of an afternoon in May 1953 as a consequence of the use of the drug mescaline. In the book, he recalls the insights he experienced and reflects on the meaning of those experiences.

At the begging of the book, Huxley argues that the human mind and brain – partly because it is unable to handle the infinite number of impressions and images coming in, and partly because this is the way it was thought to function – filters reality. He believes that psychoactive drugs or certain kinds of people and practices can remove this filter to some degree. Certain drugs, for instance, leave the user exposed to 'Mind at Large'. In Huxley's words:

> The function of the brain and nervous system is to protect us from being overwhelmed and confused by this mass of largely useless and irrelevant knowledge, by shutting out most of what we should otherwise perceive or remember at any moment and leaving only that very small and special selection which is likely to be practically useful. According to such a theory, each one of us is potentially Mind at Large. But in so far as we are animals, our business is at all costs to survive. To make biological survival possible, Mind at Large has to be funneled through the reducing valve of the brain and nervous system. What comes out at the other end is a measly trickle of the kind of consciousness which will help us to stay alive on the

[33] Ibid., 415.

[34] William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Miami: University of Miami Press, 1972), 14.

> surface of this particular planet. […] Most people, most of the time, know only what comes through the reducing valve and is consecrated as genuinely real by the local language. Certain persons, however, seem to be born with a kind of by-pass that circumvents the reducing valve. In others temporary by-passes may be acquired either spontaneously, or as the result of deliberate "spiritual exercises," or through hypnosis, or by means of drugs.[35]

Therefore, Huxley argues that the brain functions as a "reducing valve" that reduces conscious awareness to somethings that is bearable for us. The use of mescaline and other hallucinogens, which induce psychedelic effects, inhibit the filtering mechanism that acts on our brains. In this way, we have access to new worlds of consciousness that were previously foreclosed to us. According to Huxley, drugs are only one way to get access to these different worlds. The inhibition of the reducing valve can happen spontaneously in some people (for example, in the psychopath) or through the use of different techniques such as hypnosis or meditation.

Huxley argues that the things we perceive when we overcome the constraints of the filtering mechanism are real. The fact that our brains perceive the things surrounding us only partially, for the sake of survival, does not mean that the only reality is the one we perceive through the reducing valve of the brain. We are led to believe that this "reduced awareness" is the only awareness of reality possible since it is the only one we know. This is, according to Huxley, wrong. Different layers of awareness do exist, and it is our brain's mechanism of survival that prevents us from perceiving them. Huxley describes in detail the process of the deactivation of the reducing valve on the brain and its consequences on our perception of reality:

> These effects of mescaline are the sort of effects you could expect to follow the administration of a drug having the power to impair the efficiency of the cerebral reducing valve […] the brain runs out of sugar, the undernourished ego grows weak, can't be bothered to undertake the necessary chores, and loses all interest in those spatial and temporal relationships which mean so much to an organism bent on getting on in the world. As Mind at Large seeps past the no longer watertight valve, all kinds of biologically useless things start to happen […] Other persons discover a world of visionary beauty. To others again is revealed the glory, the infinite value and meaningfulness of naked existence, of the given, unconceptualized event.[36]

Therefore, according to Huxley, the inhibition of the reducing valve's function initiates one to a world of "visionary beauty" and "glory". This is a powerful experience of unknown and wonderful different worlds around us.

Relating his own experience under the influence of mescaline, Huxley describes the objects he sees. He talks about how everything becomes more brilliant and colorful during this experience, and how everything becomes more powerful and variegated. His perception of the world changes completely as it becomes richer and more detailed. Aspects of reality that were previously only perceived as secondary become extremely central and important:

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[35] Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell* (New York: Random House, 2010), 6-7.
[36] Ibid., 8.

> How significant is the enormous heightening, under mescaline, of the perception of color! […] Man's highly developed color sense is a biological luxury—inestimably precious to him as an intellectual and spiritual being, but unnecessary to his survival as an animal. […] Mescaline raises all colors to a higher power and makes the percipient aware of innumerable fine shades of difference, to which, at ordinary times, he is completely blind. It would seem that, for Mind at Large, the so-called secondary characters of things are primary.[37]

This experience is not only real, but also extremely valuable and important. Huxley claims:

> To be shaken out of the ruts of ordinary perception, to be shown for a few timeless hours the outer and inner world, not as they appear to an animal obsessed with survival or a human being obsessed with words and notions, but as they are apprehended, directly and unconditionally, by Mind at Large — this is an experience of inestimable value to everyone and especially to the intellectual.[38]

Furthermore, the man who trespasses the doors of perceptions, who is introduced to these different layers of reality, undergoes a permanent transformation, he is no longer the same. From now on, he will be aware of his ignorance and inability to perceive the world in its totality. He will be wiser and at the same time more doubtful about the things he believed beforehand. People who do not go through the doors of perception and do not have these experiences tend to dismiss them. But the person who undergoes the mystical experience cannot dismiss it anymore, and their entire understanding of reality changes:

> The man who comes back through the Door in the Wall will never be quite the same as the man who went out. He will be wiser but less sure, happier but less self-satisfied, humbler in acknowledging his ignorance yet better equipped to understand the relationship of words to things, of systematic reasoning to the unfathomable mystery which it tries, forever vainly, to comprehend.[39]

Huxley's theory strongly echoes James' account in *The Varieties*. James, as I explained above, suggests at the beginning of the 20th century that mystical experiences need to be taken into consideration as possible and true accounts of the real. According to James, when we undergo a mystical experience, our consciousness expands to include aspects of reality that we are not able to perceive in its normal state. The questionable psychological health of spiritual practitioners does not make the spiritual experience less valuable. Even more so, James suggests, a psychopathic personality may even have a higher chance of perceiving aspects of reality that healthy people do not have access to, though he does not specify how this happens.

Huxley, about 50 years later, expands on James' ideas, claiming that people under the effect of drugs and with specific personality traits are not sick or crazy, but rather have access to aspects of the world which are foreclosed to most of us in normal situations. He understands mystical experiences of reality as being the product of the inhibition of the "reducing valve" that acts in our brain as a filter of the stimuli that surround us. Since most of us know only what comes through the reducing valve, we believe that reduced

[37] Ibid., 7-8.
[38] Ibid., 23.
[39] Ibid., 24.

consciousness is the only consciousness. However, some people – such as mystics, visionaries, and psychics – seem to be born with a way of bypassing the reducing valve, whilst others acquire it temporalily one through meditation, yoga, hypnosis, or certain drugs. Huxley suggests that mescaline is one of these drugs, i.e. a drug that has the power to impair the efficiency of the cerebral reducing valve and thereby creating a temporary bypass. The reducing valve helps us adaptively survive in this world . When this reducing valve is impaired or does not properly work, we are suddenly introduced to a brand-new world.

Therefore, these two thinkers agree on the existence of a world and a level of awareness that is outside of our normal perception, as well as on the fact that we have access to these different levels of consciousness and reality through mystical and religious experience. Neither of them is willing to dismiss these experiences as untrue and invaluable; instead, they both invite us to take them seriously, and, even more so, to consider them as extremely important, since they give humanity access to a world otherwise unknown. James adds to Huxley's considerations the idea that those experiences are not only valuable in how they introduce us to unknown aspects of reality, but also in the way they have positive consequences on both the person who undergoes them as well as on society in general. Huxley is less certain about these positive consequences but nevertheless affirms that the opening of the doors of perception adds both to our knowledge of the world and to our doubts and insecurity about what we knew before.

Huxley and Modern Neuroscience

Even though Huxley proposed this theory in 1954, decades before the advent of modern neuroscience, it turns out that he may have been correct. Although the prevailing view has been that hallucinogens work by activating the brain, rather than by inhibiting it as Huxley proposed, the results of a recent imaging study challenge these conventional explanations. The study in question was conducted by Dr. Robin Carhart-Harris together with a group of other scientists.[40] The study in question used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), a technique for measuring activity in specific regions of the brain, to study the effects of the psychedelic compound psilocybin on brain activity in 30 regular consumers of this hallucinogen. In this study, 2 milligrams of psilocybin were administered intravenously to the study subjects. The psilocybin caused a moderately intense psychedelic state that was associated with a decrease in neuronal activity in brain regions such as the medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC) and the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC). These are both believed to be involved in functions like emotional regulation, cognitive processing and introspection, and as such highly connected to other regions of the brain. The researchers therefore concluded that hallucinogens *decrease*, rather than increase, activity in certain regions of the brain. This decreased activity lessens the ability of the brain as whole to coordinate other specific cognitive functions. More precisely, confirming Huxley's hypothesis, the psilocybin seems to be responsible for the inhibition of those brain regions that are responsible for restraining consciousness within the narrow limitations of the usual waking state.

Thus, Huxley, James, and neurology all propose a new direction for the interpretation of mystical and religious experiences. For the sake of this paper, I will give an illustration of James and Huxley's theory by way of a description of the phenomenon of shamanism. By defining and describing shamanism in light of Huxley and James, I will illustrate their views and show how their ideas stand in opposition to the

[40] Robin L. Carhart-Harris et al., "Neural Correlates of the Psychedelic State as Determined by fMRI Studies with Psilocybin", *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 109, no. 6 (2012): 2138-2143.

mainstream scholarly definition of the same phenomenon.

James and Huxley's Hypothetical Definition of Shamanism.

Ecstasy is defined by the *Random House Dictionary* as the ability "of being taken or moved out of one's self or one's normal state and entering a state of intensified or heightened feeling" and as "the ability to voluntarily enter altered states of consciousness". Roger Wash argues that this definition may be applicable and appropriate to the phenomenon of Shamanism as well.[41] He also adds that "shamans experience themselves leaving their bodies and journeying to other realms in a manner analogous to contemporary reports of some out-of-body experiences."[42] Michael Harner likewise suggests that a key element of shamanic practices may be "contact with an ordinarily hidden reality." He defines a shaman as "a man or woman who enters an altered state of consciousness at will to contact and utilize an ordinarily hidden reality in order to acquire knowledge, power, and to help other persons."[43]

Are these features of "contacting a hidden reality," and "communication with spirits," crucial aspects of a definition of shamanism? Mainstream scholars often dismiss this definition. The most widely shared definition of shamans in the scholarly literature is, in fact, one that states that shamans are "psychologically disturbed individuals who have managed to adapt their psychopathology to social needs."[44] Throughout the years, "Shamans have been diagnosed, labeled, and dismissed in many ways."[45] For instance, shamans have been described as charlatans and "healed madmen."[46] They have also been called neurotic, epileptic, impostors, "mentally deranged," and "outright psychotic."[47] Perhaps the most common diagnoses have been hysteria and schizophrenia.[48]

The possible authenticity of their experiences has not concerned the majority of the scholarly discourse. According to many scholars, there is no reason to suppose that shamans actually get in touch with a 'hidden reality,' or with 'spirits.' Certainly, this is what shamans experience and believe they are undergoing, but there is no value and no truth in this experience.

I believe that James and Huxley propose another option. They expose us to the possibility that shamans, because of their special abilities and qualities, can experience aspects of reality that regular people are unable to experience: we should not exclude the existence of these aspects a priori. Both Huxley and James open us to the possibility that shamans do get in touch with a 'hidden reality' unknown to us. James would strongly criticize those who focus on the origin of the phenomena, categorizing the shamans as mentally ill, instead of focusing on the phenomena themselves and determining their value. The fact

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[41] Quoted in Roger N. Walsh, *The World of Shamanism: New Views of an Ancient Tradition* (Portland: Llewellyn Worldwide, 2007), 14.

[42] Roger N. Walsh, "The Shamanic Journey: Experiences, Origins, and Analogues", *ReVision* 12 (1989): 25.

[43] Michael Harner, *The Way of the Shaman* (New York: Bantam, 1982), 25.

44 Roger N. Walsh, "The Psychological Health of Shamans: A Reevaluation," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65, no. 1 (1997): 101-124

45 Ibid.

46 Walsh, *The World of Shamanism*, 14.

47 Ibid.

48 Richard Noll, "Shamanism and Schizophrenia: A State-Specific Approach to the 'Schizophrenia Metaphor' of Shamanic States", *American Ethnologist* 10, no. 3 (1983): 443-459.

that ecstatic experiences happen in people that we today define as psychopathic does not necessarily falsify their value and truthfulness. Huxley and James push us to open our minds to the option of a different reality that we simply, for many reasons, are not able to perceive. They both stress the importance of giving attention as well as credit to the experiences that shamans undergo, for they could open our eyes to layers of reality that we are not able to grasp. Both authors would not stop at a simple medical definition of shamanism and would instead define them as the gatekeepers of different realities.

Shamanism is only one of many examples of spiritual and mystical states. I employed this example to illustrate what James and Huxley mean by taking a mystical experience seriously. But it is clear that, to them, all mystical experiences, no matter what they are or where they come from, can be the access doors to worlds unknown to our everyday perception.

Conclusion

It is nearly impossible to give definite answers to the multiple questions posed at the beginning of this paper. Many people, both within and beyond the academic circles, tend to dismiss mystical and spiritual experiences, defining them as valueless. This is simply because the individuals who undergo these experiences are often strange or different. James and Huxley invite us to stop and think, to ask ourselves if we have not judged too hastily and if there could be some truth to and value in those experiences that are so different from our own. Of course, this awareness will also change how we relate to mystics or shamans, and make us look at them with more respect and more interest. Those individuals, whom we often see and dismiss as "crazy," could, in fact, have access to realities and levels of understanding of the world that surrounds us that we cannot even dream of. It is important, therefore, not to dismiss them right away, but instead to be open to the alternative that the world is a much richer place than what we are used to thinking.

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