

# Mystical Experience and Radical Deconstruction Through the Ontological Looking Glass

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Knowing is that moment to moment reflexive, retrospective activity of awareness that we engage as we navigate the waters of consciousness. It is both the act of immediate experiencing as well as the experience of that experiencing. In its immediacy it appears to be our way of “touching” reality—of directly accessing the who, what, where, and when of our existential worlds. For most of us, most of the time, knowing has a consistency and constancy that allows us to feel and believe that there is an ontologically solid and unchanging world “out there” that we access through our senses. However, on some occasions the regularity and certainty of this daily style of knowing undergoes a radical transformation—such as when one has a mystical experience. To those of us who have had such encounters, mystical experiences appear to be a radically altered way of knowing, where reality is experienced afresh, illusions are penetrated, and self and other seem to lose their rigid boundedness. The world appears to become both imminent and transparent. Thus, mystical knowing appears to be both broader and deeper—encompassing a more complete contact with reality.

So, it is often claimed by those mystics and spiritual seekers, who are willing to speak of such things, that once one has encountered the “ultimate ground of being” (a direct encounter with God, Goddess, the “*Mysterium Tremendum*,” the Void, or whatever name is given to the ultimate source of our being), then one has gained a profound spiritual knowledge that subsumes all other knowing thereby bestowing on the knower a unique epistemic position and certainty.<sup>1</sup> This position is one in which it is claimed that the “truth” behind all appearances is revealed and the ultimate ontological source of our knowing, indeed of who we are, is now directly accessed. Those who make these sorts of claims argue with great sincerity and force that this new knowledge is *sui generis* and final—it cannot be questioned because it is not a matter of intellectual debate, but rather the result of a unique and direct awareness. It arises from a unique *spiritual knowing*. The argument usually given is that, if one fails to accept these assertions, then it is because one has not yet had such an experience and without the shared experiential base all attempts at explanation are futile (viz., to know color, one must not be color-blind).

In 1971, while a graduate student at the Psychological Institute of the University of Copenhagen, I had what I believe was a mystical experience—a radical transformation of knowing

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<sup>1</sup>Upanishadic wisdom has it that “He who knows does not speak, and he who speaks does not know.” However, the not-speaking of many sages is often louder than words in proclaiming their supposed direct access to “higher” knowing. Yet many do speak and make claims about reality and truth. Examples of the latter can be seen in the various accounts given in Happold’s (1963) well-known anthology.

where time and space collapsed, self and other disappeared, but the totality of my consciousness was permeated by an awareness of a supernal light filling an infinite voidness. At the time, my immediate reaction and understanding after the event was not unlike the claim-making described earlier. I felt and believed with every fiber of my being that my mystical experience had given rise to a unique kind of knowing that had carried me through the looking glass of phenomenal appearances and that I had encountered the ultimate, core “emptiness” of being—the ontological source. At the time I believed that I understood the very nature of the ontological bottom line and my entire world was reinterpreted from this view that I then believed was given as a result of my new and apparently elevated epistemic position. Although I accepted, absolutely, the truth of my new vision at the time, I have come to understand this episode somewhat differently with the passage of time. I accept that the experience was a move into a new epistemic frame—a uniquely different way of knowing—but I no longer accept that way of knowing as above all others—nor do I see it as leading to the attainment of the ultimate and final position at which one can arrive in order to make sense of the phenomenal world. In fact, I now doubt that there is such a final position at all.

My claim is that it is but one of many possible epistemic frames deriving from different ways of knowing. It is not that I believe that there is no truth revealed through such encounters—I certainly do. However, I no longer believe that there is one *final* position from which all truth is knowable in any ultimate sense. Although this encounter at first set me in the philosophical and religious mold of an ontological absolutist—there is one and only one final reality and truth—that position, itself, eventually opened my eyes to other possibilities. Once one other possibility was admitted, I then had to entertain the likelihood of still others. As I followed this process of intellectual and spiritual exploration I was inexorably led to a clearing in the forest, which I now identify as part of that collocation of intellectual perspectives known as Postmodernism. I later realized that the primary compass guiding me was a post-analytic critical method that has emerged in recent years as the primary technique of the postmodern school and usually goes under the rubric of Deconstructionism.<sup>2</sup>

Some would immediately accuse me of having lost my spiritual direction—a loss of faith and belief in what I had directly encountered. Rudolph Otto (1958), the nineteenth-century Christian

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<sup>2</sup>The Western notion of deconstructionism has its origins in the work of the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida (1978). Derrida’s deconstructions of Western thought from Plato to Heidegger attack what he identified as “logocentrism,” or the human habit of assigning ultimate truth to language and the voice of reason-in essence, making them the word of God. Taylor (1983) explicates Derrida’s overall position by making us aware that there is a broad context that saturates all texts, including the internal maps of knowing. This is summarized by Taylor in his assertion that “the reading of the text is the writing of the text.” In the East one finds prototypical forms of deconstructionism given as spiritual practice. In the Tamil-speaking world of India, a classic method of attaining the enlightened state was known as the practice of “*neti, neti*” (“not this, not this”), which was expounded by the nineteenth-century Yogi and mystic, Sri Ramana Maharshi (1982). In Tibetan literature, the classic work of the Lama Mi-Pham (1970) attempts to explicate the same process through a detached examination of the body.

theologian, might have charged me with having lost contact with the “creature feeling” experienced at the time of my encounter with the “tremendum” (p. 8) and, similarly, some of my Buddhist friends certainly believe that I had re-descended back into the samsaric depths from which I had temporarily emerged. This remains to be seen.

However, while I await final judgment regarding my spiritual health, I will give, first, a brief description of my encounter with mystical knowing and, second, using perspectives drawn from consciousness studies and postmodernism, make an attempt to demonstrate that, as I have come to understand it, mystical knowing is part of a progression into spiritual knowing—a progression that has no definite terminus or final structure. This “path,” if I can use this term, led me to a recognition that epistemic frameworks are operationally (functionally) created, and I now call this viewpoint Ontological Neutralism—an attempt to maintain no privileged ontological position while simultaneously understanding that any such attempt, *ipso facto*, creates such a position (Nelson & Howell, 1993-94). Thus, I will finally argue that spiritual knowing is to live consciously, with as full an awareness as possible in an unresolvable paradox, while still acting and taking responsibility for one’s life in a manner that assumes that there is no paradox. This process of maintaining ontological neutrality is the development of a dialectical and witnessing consciousness for which the relativity of epistemic frames is liberating rather than threatening. It is, metaphorically speaking, like surfing the existential waves as we move in and out of different ways of knowing.<sup>3</sup>

### **A Personal Encounter**

My mystical experience began as a rather ordinary evening of listening to music at a friend’s apartment in the Christianhavn’s district of Copenhagen, Denmark. The apartment in which he lived was condemned, but, as was common in Europe of the early 1970s, squatters, mainly students, often reclaimed these buildings because of the severe housing shortage existent at the time.

His dwelling was on the top story of a five-floor walk-up, and I arrived at about 8 p.m. one weekday evening, somewhat out of breath from lugging my guitar up all those flights of stairs. I was a graduate student in psychology and he in biology, and every Friday night we played music together in a local club to supplement our meager student grants. This evening was supposed to be our rehearsal night, but as I entered, I found him preparing to leave. An emergency meeting of the squatters committee had been called and he had to attend. Jorgen explained how to use his tape recorder and gave me a tape of blues music to listen to as he rushed out the door. His idea for our rehearsal evening was to take some tunes from the tape to add to our usual repertoire.

After he left I spooled the tape onto the machine and sat down to listen, but for some reason I was unable to focus my full attention on the music. Each time I attempted to “get into” the song and

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<sup>3</sup> Thanks to my colleagues Kaisa Puhakka and Tobin Hart for their very helpful suggestions here.

“map out” the guitar lines I found myself staring, in my mind’s eye, at a very vivid and stylized eidetic image of myself. This image was an exaggerated caricature of a role that had long been part of my self-image—Peter, “the brilliant graduate student.” In my mind’s eye I could see me talking and gesturing with the exaggerated self-importance and conceit that I usually managed to disguise from myself in those days. However, seen in such direct bold-relief and painful clarity, this internal “picture” made me mentally flinch. In my mind I scrambled to find something else on which to focus my attention and thus to rid myself of this unwanted, absurd specter. Yet, each time I tried to focus my attention back to the task at hand, I seemed unable to sustain any real concentration with my focus continually drawn back, as if by a magnetic force, to my inner caricature.

I cycled through this round of confrontation and avoidance several times, and as I struggled with it for the third or fourth time I was startled by a “voice” talking to me—apparently from my left side. It seemed to come from “outside” like any other aural veridical perception, but no one was there and the quality of the voice was definitely unlike my own internal discursive commentator. It was, in a sense, both “inside” and “outside” of my head at the same time. I paused, looked around and thought, “an hallucinatory projection.” Again I attempted to return to “normal” thoughts and to the music, but as I did, I heard the voice again, very clearly this time, and it said, “you are what you are and no matter what you think you are, you will remain what you are. It’s all you’ve got, so you might as well look at it.” I was startled by the suddenness and clarity of this second intrusion and my heart began to pound, but, like a man whistling in the dark, I nervously attempted once again to return to what I believed should have been my “normal” world. However, as I endeavored to reconnect to the music, which now seemed to be playing somewhere on the distant periphery of my awareness, the caricatured “self-picture” again returned. This time, for no apparent reason other than a feeling of “why not,” I decided to heed the advice of the “voice” and look more closely at this image I was struggling to reject.

I now turned my full attention to that inner picture. My examination of my persona’s behavior and qualities proved to be an exceedingly uncomfortable task, and my continuous impulse was to drop the whole process and escape into some other, less confronting activity. However, as I persisted the fear abated and my interest grew in who this person actually was. A sense of detached curiosity now took over. I found that as I persisted in staying with the image, my fear and revulsion lessened and, as that happened, the demand that I look at it diminished. This led to an abatement of my avoidance behavior, which eventually was followed by the caricatured self-representation fading from consciousness. In other words, the less I fought it, the less insistent it became. As it finally disappeared, I thought that I had been released and at last was done with the whole business—not for long, however.

After this first image finally vanished, it quickly was replaced by another—Peter, “the world traveler.” Yet again I was confronted by the same feelings of discomfort and an impulse to reject,

but this time I decided not to resist from the start, so instead of struggling against it, I continued the process of inner observation I had started with the first appearance. If not very pleasant, it was at least edifying in that it seemed to be a view of myself through a mirror not usually available to me.

During this process I made an important discovery—the negative power of these self-representations seemed to be directly proportional to the harshness of my judgment of them. The more I suspended the judgmental process and became an impartial observer, the more I could see and accept them with the subsequent diminishment of their power to offend. Again, as in the first instance, the new image eventually faded but soon was replaced by yet another—Peter, “the lover.” This “self” representation was more fraught with difficulty for me, and I found myself back in the previous, nervous struggle as I harshly judged what I “saw.” However, as I gradually relinquished my stance as judge and reentered my newly discovered attitude of impartial witness, the voice spoke again. It asked, “Who is doing all this judging?” My mind raced as I attempted to find the “person” who had been evaluating all these personae.

I can only describe my next response in metaphorical terms. In an attempt to discover the “knower” who was observing the scenes I had been witnessing, it was as if I somehow rotated my eyes 180 degrees around to look inward to the “place” “he” was felt to reside inside of my head. However, this total redeployment of my attention inward had an immediate and dramatic effect of its own. First, the room disappeared from my view; next, I heard a very loud rushing sound like a waterfall that was accompanied by intense waves, somewhat like convulsing shivers, that ascended repeatedly upward through my body. It was like being cold, but yet I was not chilled.

Second, as the experience rapidly increased in intensity it culminated with the sound roaring in my ears and the discovery that I was now apparently standing in a great cathedral-like marble hall—much like a Byzantine mosque or church but without any evident religious symbolism or icons observable. Many years later I found a painting by Salvador Dali (in one of those very large coffee table collections of his work), which contained a reproduction that has many key aspects of the scene in which I found myself at that moment. When I say found myself, I mean that there was some kind of discontinuity in my awareness such that one moment I was sitting on a makeshift couch in a semiderelict apartment and the next I was in a great stone hall without having instigated any physical change of which I was aware. The experience was fully veridical in the sense that, to my awareness at the time, it had all the apparent properties of my actually being physically in that place. It certainly was nothing like any locale I had ever been in or seen previously, which added to its strangeness and the overpowering awe I was experiencing.

As I stood staring in amazement at this utterly strange and impossible scene around me, I noticed that the ceiling above me was comprised of an enormous translucent glass dome with a large hole at its apex through which a luminous blue-white light was streaming. The light was almost like a spotlight, which shone down on me where I stood. There I stood, bathed in this

supernal luminosity, mystified, dumbstruck. Looking down, I was shocked to discover that I was fastened to the floor in my upright position by a series of leather straps circumscribing where I stood-like spokes-that were connected to a heavy leather belt around my waist by brass fittings at one end and to the floor by similar brass hooks at the other end. As I looked at my bonds they had a “presence” that seemed to “speak” to me as a symbol in a painting might convey meaning beyond form.

In this state of knowing I understood that these straps were the images or “ego-trips” that I had been inspecting in the theater of my mind only minutes before. At the very moment that I understood their symbolic import, the straps spontaneously unhooked from my belt one after another in rapid succession—the action circumscribing my waist like a wave of activity. As I watched them unhook I had another thought: “It’s me who always holds me down by living in my false selves.” Now, no longer fastened to the floor, as it were, I seemed to become weightless and I began to float upward. My ascent was rapid and I was soon passing through the hole at the top of the dome and into the supernal light.

As I advanced through the opening in the dome, the sound of rushing water, which had continued throughout the episode, abruptly stopped and, “looking” down (more as an act of attention than physical movement), I discovered that my body also had vanished. All that remained of “me” was an undifferentiated awareness and a total conscious absorption of that awareness into the light that seemed to bath me in total peace. I felt free—freer and lighter of being than I had ever felt in my life before or could have ever imagined feeling. My overall state was one of total and unqualified bliss and peace. There was no longer a “me,” but somehow total awareness was still there, but it was not really clear exactly who was having this awareness. I was conscious but did not exist in the usual sense that I had always understood as being in the world. I and everything were one.

I do not know how long I remained in this state—it might only have been minutes, but it could have been hours. There was no reference point for time, so, effectively, it did not exist. However long I remained in that blissful light does not matter. Having arrived there and being there was all that mattered, but that was not a thought at the time. Later, when first attempting a *post hoc* interpretation of this episode, I came to identify my experience as a direct merger with the void—the “ultimate ground of being.” No matter how one interprets this encounter of my merger into the light, what remains with me to this day is a wordless and core knowing of who I am beyond role or form—a transcendent *sense* of “identity.”

There were no thoughts while there, so it came as a shock when the voice abruptly returned and asked, “What are you going to hold onto now?” The impact of hearing this question intruding into my bliss caused me to become abruptly self-conscious. With that question came the thought that, indeed, I had given up everything I usually held onto and suddenly I felt very vulnerable, like a

cripple without his crutches, and I started to feel that I might go into a free-fall or possibly even die if I did not grab hold of something solid and stable immediately. In retrospect, it was at that moment that I existentially understood Otto's (1958) "creature feeling" when confronted with the *Mysterium Tremendum*. At the core of my fear was an intense dread of not being able to return to my life as I had known it. This entire thought process generated a powerful anxiety, and with the emergence of all this emotional agitation the sound of rushing water returned with an increasing intensity that was rapidly followed by a feeling that I was plunging physically downward and out of the light. I was like Icarus falling away from the sun. The descent was short, very intense, and felt like free-falling in space accompanied by a "whooshing" sound that grew in volume with the accelerating speed of my fall and ended with a very loud, jarring but muffled thud as I reentered my previous reality frame. Once again, I found myself sitting on the couch in my friend's Christianhavn apartment.

The sound of rushing water was still quite loud and the waves of convulsive-like shivers continued as before my "exit" from the couch. I felt confused and torn. I desperately wanted to go back to that blissful place/state, but the requirement to let go of everything and feel like I was in a free-fall with nothing to hold onto for safety kept me back. I sat and struggled between the two impulses for over an hour and gradually the sound subsided, and I knew that the window of opportunity for reentry had passed. I tried to speak to an American friend who had come there with me that night, but for once in my life words failed me.

### **Spiritual Emergence?**

At the time I had no way of clearly labeling what had happened to me. All I knew at that moment was intense awe, ecstasy, fear, and excitement as I made an entry into a vastly different experiential world. Immediately after this encounter I found myself trying to label, categorize, and explain the experience, but without any success. Many months were spent engaging this process that included intensively reading, researching, and talking to people who seemed to be "in the know." However, this left me no wiser or conceptually better off. Of my first twenty-eight years on earth this had certainly been the most intense, all-encompassing experience I had ever had. My understanding, or what I thought I understood at the time, of myself and the world around me had been radically altered in a matter of minutes. I would spend the next five years obsessed with my attempts to understand how and why this happened to me while at the same time employing various techniques I believed would help me to find my way back to that dazzling state of blissful knowing.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>I attended yoga classes, learned various meditation techniques, fasted and ingested psychotropic substances. I finally settled on Vajrayana Buddhist practice under the tutelage of Tarthang Tulku Rinpoche. This, however, eventually proved not to be very useful in terms of my original purpose.

During this period I read a great deal about apparently similar experiences of others, but all these reported encounters came with an attached worldview. These explanations and justifications of why some of us have these encounters, and others not, all seemed to rest on arbitrary moral judgments and a supposedly externally bestowed grace. Having already rejected Western religious traditions, I turned to practitioners of Eastern disciplines who offered explanations ranging from their guru's "mystic power" having been focused on Copenhagen at that moment to, simply, it was my Karma.<sup>5</sup> In the conceptual hands of these Hindu/Buddhist-flavored Westerners, Karma meant nemesis and gurus were quasi-supernatural beings who made or broke you in the spiritual marketplace. In my current understanding much of this kind of westernized Eastern thought can be traced back to two primary sources—the teachings and practices of Blavatsky, Besant, Leadbeater as part of the Theosophical movement in the second half of the nineteenth century<sup>6</sup> and to Vivakananda's introduction of Hindu thought and practices into the West at the beginning of the twentieth century (Bharati, 1976; Gupta, 1973).<sup>7</sup>

Having been well indoctrinated in the empiricist/reductionist philosophical perspective of the West, I felt ill at ease with most of the wide variety of religious and spiritualist theories that were offered by way of explanation for my encounter. Most of these explanations seemed to be justifications for a closely held faith now collectively referred to as New Age thought. For example, a typical explanation of the good or bad events of our lives is that we are being carried along by a "spiritual evolution," which is taking all of us eventually to Cosmic Consciousness. Although I instinctually felt and believed that I had experienced the bottom line of what was real, I made the decision to put the experience on the shelf for awhile, as it were, thus delaying any final epistemological interpretations or ontological ascriptions until such a time that I could piece together the puzzle of what had happened to me and what, if anything, it meant.

From the start of this new chapter in my life I began to understand James (1936) listing ineffability as a primary characteristic of mystical experience. However, from my own encounter I

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<sup>5</sup>I remember asking a fellow American living in Copenhagen at that time who followed an Indian guru called Muktananda. He explained that his guru had recently been focusing his attention on Copenhagen, which had "raised" the "spiritual consciousness" of everyone in the city and this is what had affected me.

<sup>6</sup>The history of the Theosophical movement is well observed in the critical analysis offered by Peter Washington (1995). Many of the concepts currently used to define and explain spiritual life were first introduced to the West through the teachings of Theosophy, and these ideas were themselves distortions of Hindu and Buddhist thought or *ex nihilo* creations from the fertile imagination of Helena Blavatsky.

<sup>7</sup>Although Vivakananda was an Indian Hindu, his Anglicized education in India, his participation in the Brahmo Samaj, and his less than clear interpretation of the teachings of his guru, Ramakrishna, taken in the context of his Indian middle-class upbringing in a British-dominated culture, generated a system of beliefs that was far removed from the traditional Hindu worldview existent before the British Raj. Thus, in this cultural crossover world many then current Indian beliefs were in fact an admixture of traditional Eastern thought coated with a thinly disguised Calvinist Protestantism. Although Ramakrishna was supposedly an authentic master of ecstatic states, which he experienced frequently and with great drama while a priest of Kali at the temple dedicated to the Goddess at Dakshineswar near Calcutta, Vivakananda never was able to enter into this experiential side of his Master's life. So, according to scholars like Bharati (1976), Vivakananda is to be considered as being a very westernized revisionist who only partially understood and incorporated his master's teaching.

felt that it was not so much that one could not express what had happened, but that the use of language, when trying to describe the experience, so often led to self-contradiction or involved a signifier pointing at the signified that was not available to the knowing we usually depend on (trans-subjectivity) hence, it is nonconsensual. Also, there was no way to convey the true quality and impact of affect, atmosphere, and cognition I experienced through mere phenomenological descriptions of mental content and emotional state. I was often left groping for words while the eyes of my listener signaled non-comprehension.

This confusion led to endless frustration for me with each attempt at communication with my fellow, but uninitiated, beings. Although I knew that my rational description was well understood, I was aware that it was not conveying the quintessential quality that marked the mystical state as phenomenologically unique.<sup>8</sup> There seems to be a quality to the reality of these experiences that is *sui generis* and to which we cannot find any clearly related linguistic sign. Instead, we are left with an indirect and metaphorical use of words because our language does not deal well with concepts and experiences that are not spatial-metaphoric and objective-like (Carroll, 1956). At the time, for me, it was like the qualitative difference between the experiential reality of dreams as opposed to waking states, where entering the mystical state appears to be like waking from a dream and it is difficult, if not impossible, to relate the difference to any person who has not yet “awakened.”

I now believe that, mistakenly, this initiation is often taken by those “in the know” as indicating a profound spiritual emergence because of the way it upsets the ontological applecart. But in time I came to realize that the mystical state does not necessarily imply greater spiritual attainment or know-how for experiencers, but more accurately underscores the difference between existential and conceptual knowledge. I also now believe that these experiences are more about the reality perceived and known in various states of consciousness and the making and remaking of experiential reality frames with their particular styles of knowing. I eventually came to conclude that spirituality seems to be more a style of how one is in the world rather than the result of a massive shift in consciousness. Certainly the shift may be the beginning of a spiritual emergence, but great self-discipline and ethical remaking are required over some considerable time. As Bharati (1976) has asserted, one who was a “stinker” before having a mystical experience will remain so unless a great deal of moral effort and ethical transformation occur.

So, if mystical experience is not an automatic spiritualizing of the experient what is it? I believe that question only can be answered if we radically revise our notions of awareness, consciousness, and reality and understand mystical encounters as the remaking of one’s epistemic frame of reference and, hence, style of knowing.

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<sup>8</sup>For example, Charles Tart (1972) would argue that knowledge is state specific and it is difficult, if not impossible, to understand state-specific phenomena across states of consciousness.

## Reality and Existence

Science, and our derivative commonsensical understanding of the universe, with their absolute Democritian ontologies are, in the words of the philosopher C. D. Broad (1914), “naively real.” However, if science is naively real in its epistemological processes, then religio-mystical systems such as Buddhism and Vedantism are naively phenomenological—particularly in the conceptual hands of most Westerners.

What we must recognize is that we are human beings living in a uniquely human existence and awareness—a human epistemic frame. This may seem to be a trivial assertion, but I believe that it is the key to understanding the difficulty we get into when attempting to unpack the world of mystical and hence spiritual knowing. Spiritual knowing attempts to address ultimacy not only in values and meaning, but in terms of the very ontological ground from which everything springs. We must ask the question: “What is ultimately real?” but simultaneously remain cautious in order to avoid naive assumptions about the existence or not of things (or essences)-in-themselves.

Ninian Smart (1973), one of the founders of modern religious studies, clearly makes this distinction when discussing the objects of belief of the religious mind. He states that nonexistent objects can be phenomenologically indistinguishable from existent ones.

I shall distinguish between objects which are real and objects which exist. In this usage, God is real for Christians whether or not he exists. The methodological agnosticism here being used is, then, agnosticism about the existence or otherwise of the main foci of the belief system in question. It is worth noting a complication. I am not denying that existent things can be treated as unreal, just as real things can be non-existent. (p. 54)

He is suggesting that the “reading” of the “real” for any given sociocultural group is in fact the direct “writing” of a consensually experiential “text” (or world) whose meaning derives from the acceptance of the cultural projection as an absolutely existent entity. As Taylor (1983), expounding on Deconstructionism, argues, the reading of the text is the writing of the text. In a sense the construal of the world is a constant interactive process in which the map and the territory are interactively involved in an act of mutual cross-creation. True, the map is not the territory, but the map and the territory are inextricably bound to each other in an act of continual and mutual becoming.

Semiotics, or the study of “signs,” suggests that the signs of our world continually add up and *point*—as powerful and compelling inference generators—to Reality. Umberto Eco (1984), a semiotician, brings this idea out with power and clarity when the protagonist of his novel, *The Name of the Rose*, attempts to solve a mystery without remembering the power of the relationship of signs. Here, the protagonist, William of Baskerville, confides in his assistant, Adso of Melk, at the end of their long investigation into a series of deaths at a monastery.

I have never doubted the truth of signs, Adso; they are the only things man has with which to orient himself in the world. What I did not understand was the relation among signs. I arrived at Jorge [as the perpetrator] through an apocalyptic pattern that seemed to underlie all the crimes, and yet it was accidental. I arrived at Jorge seeking one criminal for all the crimes and we discovered that each

crime was committed by a different person, or by no one. I arrived at Jorge pursuing the plan of a perverse and rational mind, and there was no plan, or, rather, Jorge himself was overcome by his own initial design and there began a sequence of causes, and concauses, and of causes contradicting one another, which proceeded on their own, creating relations that did not stem from any plan. Where is all my wisdom, then? I behaved stubbornly, pursuing a semblance of order, when I should have known well that there is no order in the universe. (p. 492)

The deconstructive act is thus the separation of signs from one another and their context, which allows for a reconstruction into a new or revised reality—an endless process which Sartre (1972) has labeled sorcery.

We are thus surrounded by magical objects which retain, as it were, a memory of the spontaneity of consciousness, yet continue to be objects of the world. This is why man is always a sorcerer for man. Indeed, this poetic connection of two passivities in which one creates the other spontaneously is the very foundation of sorcery, the profound meaning of “participation.” This is why we are sorcerers for ourselves each time we view our me. (p. 82)

What I am suggesting is, that for mystics and scientists alike, reality is experiential—the difference between their conceptions appears to arise more as the result of the assignment of ontological value than through the existence of absolute differences. It should be noted that within both the scientific and mystical worldviews there is no clear-cut agreement as to how ontological status should be assigned. In general, however, the scientific position is that the ultimate ground is an objective, existent material reality with an ontological status separate from that of the observer, and for the mystic it is an inner, revealed truth or ontological principle grounded in a transcendental entity and/or consciousness. In the case of the former, consciousness is merely the place where the real world is reflected in order to be known by the observer, but for the latter it is often taken as the ground of being or ultimate reality itself.

### **Radical Consciousness**

Perhaps James’ (1936, 1967) most important contribution to this discussion of mystical experience is not his very general definition of the mystical state, but rather his later attempt to move us away from object or subject as ontological ground and into a radical empiricism. In his final published thinking on consciousness before his death, James explicitly denied the existence or “thingness” of consciousness as container or place but not its reality as a functional property intrinsically connected to our here-now experience. This notion of consciousness can be understood as being like the “backward cast shadow” as posited by Sartre (1972) in his critique of the transcendental “I” implied in Husserl’s (1962) phenomenology.

This “shadow” we call consciousness, which stalks our every waking moment, is a collective emergent property arising from our awareness of the contiguity of previous present moments as they become the ever-receding past while yet remaining connected to the immediate “now” through our present awareness. Thus, the experience of the immediate present, together with the knowledge of the chain of past presents, implies for most of us the existence of an ongoing experiential entity or being we identify as the “place” or “container” we usually identify as consciousness. In contrast,

in his functional approach to this chain of awarenesses, James wishes us to take “pure experience” as the singular *operational* “stuff” of which the human world is made. From this stance he argues for a radical empiricism that places subjective events on an equal ontological footing with objective ones, which, in his system, appear to vary more in degree than in any absolute kind from each other.

Here is how James (1967) describes this primal “stuff”—the human universe.

My thesis is that if we start with the supposition that there is only one primal stuff or material in the world, a stuff of which everything is composed, and if we call that stuff “pure experience,” then knowing can easily be explained as a particular sort of relation towards one another into which portions of pure experience may enter. (p. 4)

James accounts for the apparent dichotomy that we all intuitively sense between inner and outer, subject and object, as being the result of the relationship between these qualities becoming part of this pure experience in which one of its “terms” becomes the subject or knower, and the other the object or the known. He describes the paradox of how, in his system, an experiential event can be both internal and external by reference to an analogy of two lines sharing the same point at an intersection. It is the intersection of two processes of pure experience that have two different sets of associations and can be counted as belonging to different groups—the inner or the outer. One such group is the context of our inner biography and the other is the context of an experience we take to be the outer perceptual world. James adds that the central feature of the experiential reference in the creation of the “me” of our biographies is the ongoing experience of our own breathing. This apparent duality of contexts, biography and perceptual world, gives the impression of both subjective and objective worlds simultaneously and separately existing but operating interactively in parallel.

However strange his mechanism for explaining the creation of the subject-object dichotomy might appear on first inspection, by placing James’s (1967) “pure experience” at center stage, ontologically speaking, he is, in effect, hinting at a functionally useful way of conceptualizing human reality. Starting with James’s “pure experience” we can imagine reality as being operationally defined by the type and style of the attentional and awareness processes used in the act of knowing. Thus, scientific observation and method, which is a cognitive and behavioral approach employing a particular set of experiential operations, is the *style* of scientific knowing that generates scientific knowledge. Likewise, religio-mystical practices (experiences) are styles of knowing that lead to spiritual knowledge.

Thus, without having to make any decisions concerning ontological primacy or requiring a demarcation between knower and known, James’s approach suggests that the disjunctions across subject and object as well as different frames of knowing are a product of the operations of awareness and not perceptions of some ultimate thing-in-itself. In other words, James’ radical empiricism is ontologically neutral, in that it does not require us to decide what ultimately *exists* (as understood in Smart, 1973) outside of our awareness. Also, it is non-epistemic in that epistemology

arises only when there are two distinct ontologic categories—subject and object or knower and known. At its core it is simply the knowing occurring before “maps” are constructed. In this book Kaisa Puhakka’s notion of the experiential contact before the thought or object is grasped comes closest to what is being suggested here and the grasping she refers to is the “particular sort of relation towards one another into which portions of pure experience may enter” (James, 1967, p. 4).

How can this be the case in any realistic sense you might ask? If we accept the objective world as a given Kantian thing-in-itself, then crossing the boundary of the inner person to reach the object in order to create an inner knowing is impossible. Between the two lies an infinite epistemic chasm separating two completely different ontic categories. However, if, as James suggests, we look to the “stuff” of the world (for humans) as being pure experience, then we can imagine a field of experience in which knowing across the borders of what are only objectified inferences is not at all illogical or impossible.

In effect, this solves the problem posed by Jorge Ferrer in this volume. He suggests that we must move away from defining transpersonal events as experiences but, instead, frame them as the imposition of “multilocal participatory events”—given as knowledge—into the experiential worlds of individuals. He, like Sartre, seems to want to place our engagement with “the real” on the side of the object in the epistemological equation. What is being suggested here, in contrast, is that we do away with the equation entirely by recognizing that no objective event, no knowledge supposedly borne of such an event—hence no knower and nothing known—can be understood to have ontological or symbolic status apart from the experience through which it is reflexively given to awareness (see Nelson, 1997-98).<sup>9</sup>

### **Ontic Shift**

Much of what is being suggested about the malleable quality of the real (again, in the sense indicated by Smart, 1973) has been reflected partially in the social constructionist movement in psychology and sociology. Gergen (1985), a leading exponent of this view, summarizes the position.

Social constructionism. . . begins with radical doubt in the taken-for-granted world—whether in the sciences or daily life—and in a specialized way acts as a form of social criticism. Constructionism asks one to suspend belief that commonly accepted categories or understandings receive their warrant through observation. Thus, it invites one to challenge the objective basis of conventional knowledge. (p. 267)

This leads to a notion that

the terms in which the world is understood are social artifacts, products of historically situated interchanges among people. From the constructionist position the process of understanding is not automatically driven by the forces of nature, but is the result of an active, cooperative enterprise of

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<sup>9</sup>However, I agree with Ferrer’s analysis regarding the pitfalls that often accompany the overvaluation of spiritual experiences “collected” as symbols of personal power and accomplishment. In my mind there seems to be very little difference between spiritual experience collecting and body-building when viewed as narcissistic pursuits.

persons in relationship. In this light, inquiry is invited into the historical and cultural bases of various forms of world construction. (p. 267)

Of course, the “person” and his/her subjective world at the knowing center of this picture is no more absolute than any other construction of any final description regarding what actually exists.

According to Berger and Luckmann (1971), the experiential world of everyday life is taken for granted as being *the* reality (the natural attitude), and it is a world that originates in thought and action and that is maintained by these same processes. It is more likely that we live in a world of multiple realities not unlike what has been suggested by the physicist Wheeler when he posited the notion of multiple universes as a way of understanding the diversity of outcomes that can arise from a single set of causes in the quantum world (Davies, 1990). From this we might conclude that the world is constituted from multiple realities and as one moves from one reality to another one experiences a kind of “shock.” Berger and Luckmann attribute this shock to the shift in attentiveness caused by the transition across a kind of consciousness boundary—an example being awakening from a dream. In a sense, when knowing hits a pothole in the existential road, it experiences a jolt in the vehicle of consciousness.

They argue, that of the multiple realities possible, the one that presents itself most convincingly is the reality of everyday life. It is impossible to ignore, it imposes itself with the greatest force, thereby dominating consciousness to the greatest degree. Although human experiential reality tends toward the everyday stratum, it is most often induced into transition by aesthetic and religious experience. For Berger and Luckmann (1971) “leaping” to new provinces of meaning is a metaphor for entering the sacred domain and that all these non-ordinary “finite provinces of meaning” (p. 39) are characterized by a turning away of attention from the reality of everyday life.

While there are, of course, shifts of attention *within* the frame of everyday life, the shift to a new finite province of meaning is of a much more radical kind. A fundamental change takes place in the tension of conscious awareness. However, it is important to stress that the reality of everyday life retains its paramount status even as such leaps take place. If nothing else, we return to the interaction and discourse of the everyday and in this frame of reference language keeps the everyday process on track. Although the reality of everyday life may remain paramount, this does not necessarily give it a sense of ultimacy. It is, rather, our “writing” of the life text in a repetitive and continuous way that declares the events of normal, everyday consciousness to be paramount. It is, in effect, an existential (living) *operational definition of reality*.

It thus seems to me, looking at the issue as both mystical experient and scholar, that the conviction held by mystics, vis-à-vis the ultimateness of mystical reality, is due primarily to the complete suddenness, newness, and the radical experiential differences engendered in a “leap” across a worldview boundary—especially when the new (mystical) state appears to subsume the

old. It is here that the old now emerges as a mere fragment of the new, larger experiential domain arising from the reshuffling of signs. Thus, this entire process of deconstruction and reconstruction engendered in the mystical encounter would be experienced as a sense of *ontic shift*, which is unconsciously molded and then, in retrospect, consciously given a revised ontological ascription with both processes still being linguistically and culturally contextualized.<sup>10</sup>

This leap into the sacred can be thought of as a quantum-like event. In fact it also may be that the leap itself is a retrospective inference arising as a linguistic filler that is used to conceptualize the “empty” moment during the shift from one experiential world to another. The quantum-like cloud of uncertainty, *vis-à-vis* knowledge, is “collapsed” into a determined knowing by linguistic filtering and categorical assignment through the act of observation (perception) in a manner similar to that proposed in some interpretations of quantum physics.<sup>11</sup>

Ultimately, I do not differentiate between mystical and other kinds of knowing other than that they are different apparent epistemic frames that tend to highlight different aspects or perspectives of reality as well as providing a different view of the relationship of signs one to the other. The mystical epistemic frame carries with it an inclusiveness regarding the self-other dichotomy whereas our ordinary frame gives rise to a knowing in which self and other are exclusive. The subsumption of “self” into “other” in the mystical form of knowing is certainly a release from a sense of separateness and alienation and thus tends to add to our feeling of having arrived at the “bottom line” as a result of a mystical encounter.

Ordinary experiential reality is not experienced as a leap or as coming with a shock because it is the base “text” or operational definition of reality in which we normally live and our awareness process tends toward that frame. However, for the mystic, the return to the “normal” state after leaving it is also experienced as a shock, and it is the result of this exit and reentry that impels the mystical experient to engage in a subsequent ontological realignment. Thus, it would appear that religious experience is, in some sense, ordinary experience (text), but one in which the shock of transition is great enough to cause a linguistic-ontological reconceptualizing and reordering. Hence, in James’ (1967) view, the experiential connectivities are being reordered such that the meaning and

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<sup>10</sup>Peter Moore (1978) argues that mystical experience is subject to three levels of interpretation by the experient. Part of that interpretive process results from a top-down instantaneous cognitive filtering, which he refers to as “reflexive interpretation.” Another, *post hoc*, aspect of the interpretive process he calls “retrospective interpretation.” The third forms he refers to as “incorporated interpretation,” which includes the cultural belief systems the experient uses as a bottom-line perspective and is therefore also partly reflexive and largely unconscious.

<sup>11</sup>In the quantum physical world subatomic “particles,” such as electrons, appear to have both wave-like and particle-like characteristics. What determines whether such an “object” is known as either a particle or a wave is, according to standard interpretations, the act of observation. This problem was framed by Heisenberg (1958) as the Uncertainty Principle. The indeterminate nature of subatomic particles is terminated only by the act of observation. One way that this cloud of uncertainty is described uses the mathematics of wave mechanics as developed by Erwin Schrodinger (1959). In this wave description the determination of the position of a subatomic particle, or the termination of its uncertainty, occurs with the collapse of the Schrodinger Wave, which always results from observation (measurement) of the event (Jeans, 1958).

linkages of the chaining of “percepts” and “concepts” are redefined—giving rise to a new sense of what is real.

In the operational notion of mystical experience being posited here, reality is conscious experience, which is the “doing” involved with knowing, which then is taken in a retrospective sense to be an overarching structure we label consciousness, which in turn appears to be reality itself (Nelson, 1997-98). I further would argue that the ontological certainty generated in these shifts to mystical consciousness happens only when there is a total subsumption of our usual experiential “self” into the experiential operations that define the new reality. Or, to put it another way, the reading of the “text” of the mystical reality becomes the rewriting of epistemological “text” of self and everyday life in the sense that James’s intersecting lines of object and subject appear to become one in conscious awareness.

As I already have suggested, in the mystical frame of reference conscious experience often appears to be reality itself. So, experience known across states—such that the experiential world of one state seems ephemeral or less impactfully real when compared to that of another state—will not be taken as having ontological status and therefore not be considered as ultimately real. However, when an experiential state engenders a sense of absolute onticity, because it is able to subsume self and world at its onset with a sudden, all-pervasiveness, it then will be regarded as the position representing ontological bedrock, or ultimate reality. Thus, this state will be taken as the pointer to the absolute ground and everything that is known through it will automatically be taken as arising from that ontological bottom line. We can now revision mystical knowing as being that way of experientially engaging the existential horizon such that self and not-self, perceptions and constructs appear as unified in a new window on reality as given through a revised epistemic frame that is clearly differentiated (experientially) from the frame of daily life. One cannot know otherness without simultaneously knowing one’s self and vice versa. There is no subject and no object, but only aware knowingness, which is given as a flashing of awareness into the vast phenomenal void. But is this the totality of spiritual knowing? I will return to this issue later on.

In my own research into mystical and paranormal experiences I have been able to map a general “technology” of the preternatural, which accounts for both the attentional resource issues raised by James (1967) as well as social constructionist notions as they participate in the maintaining or refraining of ontology (Nelson, 1990). In my investigations I found that state of consciousness and hence one’s epistemic frame are defined by the “set” and “setting” of the experiential process—including sociocultural context, place, personality style, content of experience at the outset and deployment of attentional resources immediately prior to the shift. The redeployment of attention is an energetic shift in which the hold of perceptual top-down systems is relinquished allowing for a moment of “free” running before a new perceptual “molding” is constituted. As understood here, one’s attentional resources are the “direction” of focus and the

quality of the “filter” that allows a “picture” to be generated and thus brought into the realm of knowledge.

It also was revealed in a later study that, phenomenologically, many mystical experiences are quite similar to paranormal ones (Nelson, 1991-92). The crucial differences that lead to different interpretations for experiencers are to be found in personality style, culture, and whether the leap of the transition is intense enough to engender a sense of ontic shift. The most important personality attribute associated with those who can make these state shifts appears to be Trait Absorption (Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974). In addition, some of my recent preliminary experimental work indicates that an individual’s ability to consciously redeploy attentional resources in unique ways represents the key operational basis for these state shifts. Thus, an unusual redeployment of attention taken in the context of an absorptive personality sets the stage, so to speak, for the restructuring of frames of meaning and possibly the entire ontological horizon as well.

While in this altered attentional state, it is also possible to actively deconstruct meaning structures that are taken as “givens” in our more usual states. As it happens there already are a number of traditional self-dialectic techniques for accomplishing this sort of shift that come to us from the East. These are practices such as “neti, neti,” as advocated by Sri Ramana Maharshi in a yogic tradition of southern India, and the method described in *The Wheel of Analytic Meditation* from the Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhist tradition (Maharshi, 1982; Mi-Pham, 1970). Next, I have reproduced a few illustrative examples taken from a modern translation of the latter nineteenth-century Tibetan text by Lama Mi-Pham where this process can be seen in action quite clearly.

It should be remembered, however, that when reading these excerpts, it most likely will not automatically engender the kind of shift I have been describing. What is required is the personality “set” and the functional “setting” as described previously. However, done against the necessary operational background (such as intensive meditation practice) the dialectical process can produce the epistemic deconstruction and ontic shift I have been outlining.

The text, like most of Buddhist writing, starts with a description of the nature of suffering, which is believed to arise from the transient quality of reality. In effect, it defines the meaning frame from which the deconstruction will take place by stating the cause of the problem as well as its possible solution.

The cause of confusion and frustration in life  
Is the virulent passion of the mind.  
Distortion and dispersion, the causes of passion,  
Must be replaced by incisive attentiveness. (Mi-Pham, 1970, p. 43)

This is followed by an explanatory commentary.

The cause of our frustrations, failings, misfortunes and anxieties is not external. It is to be found within. The confusion of emotional conflict dependent upon distorting vagaries of the mind is the primary obstacle to an understanding of Samsara as Nirvana. Discipline of the mind, concentrating it upon each moment of perception, leads to insight into its nature and its function. Thus, emotional confusion is eliminated. (p. 55)

Notice the emphasis on the “moment of perception” in the previous segment. This should be understood as the moment of knowing. The text now describes the first dialectical procedure to be followed.

Imagining an image before one  
of whatever is desired most  
And distinguishing the five groupings of elements  
Begin to analyze the imaginary body.  
Flesh, blood, bones, marrow, fat and limbs,  
Sense organs, internal organs and cavities,  
Faeces, urine, worms, hair and nails—  
Distinguish the foul parts of the body.  
Categorize and classify these parts  
By composition and sensory field.  
Then divide and analyze them  
To irreducible particles.  
Looking for arising desire for any part,  
See this “body” as nothing but foul fragments.  
Remember it as a dirty machine or frothing scum,  
Or a heap of sticks, stones and pus.  
(p. 43)

These directions are further explained in a commentary.

The search for the nature of reality begins with the visualization of the most fascinating object of sexual desire. Men should take a woman as the object of meditation, women should take a man, and homosexuals one of their own gender....The mental object is fixed by the faculty of mind which tends to lock into a perceptual situation while the discursive faculty of mind thoroughly examines it. The search is for both the external base of desire for the sex object and for something substantial or self-existent in the world of created things, the elements of which are collected together under one of the groups of body-mind constituents. (pp. 58-59)

Thus, the dialectic between the concept of the body as usually held in awareness and the body reconceived into unappealing reductions leads, in the context of the meditative redeployment of attention, to a refraining of meaning both cognitively and affectively.

The other variant of this analytic technique just mentioned is part of the Hindu tradition and is best illustrated by the teachings of Ramana Maharshi (1982) in his now classic text, *Who Am I?* The phrase, “neti, neti,” at the heart of this method simply means “not this, not this.” In this technique any aspect of our world of objects is examined and the surface appearance is denied as being the “real.” Continuing to dissect inward we will eventually find that nothing remains and that nothingness, too, is finally dissected away in an attempt to deconstruct the very ontological core of our perceived reality. Of course, this dialectical investigation also takes place in the context of a developed meditative practice, which is the “setting” requirement for a redeployed attention.

### **A Postmodern Interpretation**

When the deconstructive process, as described earlier, is fully engaged over a period of time, eventually there is an epistemic refraining that then, as in the mystical experience, may be followed by a revision of ontological ascription. Umberto Eco’s (1984) character, William of Baskerville, reflects on the process of knowledge building.

The order that our mind imagines is like a net, or like a ladder, built to attain something. But afterward you must throw the ladder away, because you discover that, even if it was useful, it was meaningless. (p. 492)

However, what William does not tell us is that there is an immediate rebuilding of a new net and/or ladder, whether consciously or unconsciously accomplished. In fact, the late philosopher of science, Sir Karl Popper (1982), describes scientific theories as being like nets as well. In our construction of the empirical picture of the world through science, we are actually only “catching” what the shape and character of our nets will allow. However, whether the deconstruction of the net is accomplished through the use of the scientific analytic method or through spiritual practices, there remains the belief for most that there is a final position or net that is capable of at least catching a glimpse of bottom-line existence. What I am suggesting is that the very belief in the ultimately real, however engendered, is also subject to possible deconstruction and, through the continual application of that process, we have the possibility of eventually arriving at the realization that there may be no final bottom line. In fact, that realization itself is not merely a new bottom line that there are no bottom lines, but is an entry into a profound unknowing that must be lived as an abiding existential ontological uncertainty—and this, in the sense of spiritual knowing, is what is meant by ontological neutralism.

Thus, one arrives at a postmodern revisioning in which one becomes conscious that every choice of word or each deed is an epistemic positioning implying an ontology, but at the same instant we know that this “truth” or “reality” is in some sense temporary. Every position is a reconstruction and we only stop when the new epistemic frame is successful in deafening us to the next knock at the door of our unknowing, which is asking us, yet again, to wake up and know anew. McCance (1986), in his review of physics, Buddhism, and postmodern thought, asserts that the crisis of understanding for the twentieth century has been precipitated by the collapse of naive realism, or our belief that we can have our ontological cake and eat it, too.

In the decentering of the Cartesian subject, then, we confront the de-realizing not only of the reified objects of mechanistic science but also of their counterparts, the abstract entities of atomistic individualism. The “I,” who created the illusion of objectivity “out there” simultaneously with the creation of itself, is now in crisis. (p. 289)

McCance asserts that the way out of the dilemma today is the same as that suggested by the Buddha in his time—to shatter the illusions of independent objects and the detached neutrality of the observer. But, of course, that includes the illusion of the illusion of objects and observers. And this will cause us to eternally reenter the crisis of unknowing with its panicked inner call to remake meaning. McCance’s solution is that we embrace the whole and he concludes by insisting that scholars (and I would argue everyone else as well) must pay closer attention to the “wholism” of the recent interpretations of postmodern physics as argued by a number of physicists such as David Bohm (1980). The attention we pay is not one of epistemic reframing, but rather a recognition of the interdependence of self and other, true and false, and so on. In other words, to keep our attention

on the moment of knowing before it is solidified into knowledge. This is the moment of unfettered knowing as described by Puhakka and the source of inspiration as suggested by Hart in this volume.

This is also the view of reality that was so eloquently expressed in the words of one of Christendom's greatest mystics, Meister Eckhart (Blakney, 1957): "The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me...one vision or seeing, and one knowing and loving" (p. 288).

This affirmation of spiritual connectedness does not condemn us to a reductive ontological ground and thus allows us to frame the position of the knower on either side of the subject/object or human/divine divide. We only make a bifurcation and take a side because to embrace the whole without a clear definition of where we stand within it can appear to make dealing in the realm of the day-to-day seemingly impossible. However, I would argue that the rejection of this wholism—the totality of experience, knowledge, and reality—as well as the plurality this whole implies, simplifies decision making for most of us in our day-to-day frame, but at a considerable cost to the quality of our spiritual lives.

This kind of postmodernist deconstruction of our absolutes suggests a need for a reinterpretation of the polarity of the sacred and the profane as well. Traditional scholars of religion, such as Mircea Eliade (1959), argue that the sacred and profane are two distinct modes of being in the world or "two existential situations assumed by man in the course of his history" (p. 15). They are in the final analysis, modes of being dependent on "the different positions that man has conquered in the cosmos" (p. 15). Eliade asks us to look back to some halcyon time when a person of a traditional society was the true, uncorrupted *homo religiosus* who occupied a "sacred space" characterized by a hierophany that ontologically founds the world, "an absolute fixed point, a center" (p. 21) existing in the homogeneity and infinite expanse of the totality of "profane space." According to Eliade, life's moment-to-moment experience, by being centered in this hierophany, is made sacred.

If the world is to be lived in, it must be founded—and no world can come to birth in the chaos of the homogeneity and relativity of profane space. The discovery or projection of a fixed point—the center—is equivalent to the creation of the world. (p. 22)

I believe that Eliade's description of the connection to the sacred is correct as far as it goes. It is an operational description of how we make the relationship between the sacred and profane, but he seems unaware that it is the *creation* of the sacred and profane as well. It is being argued here that the sacred appears to arise as a result of existentially "writing" the ultimate fixed point from which all meaning is suspended. For Eco (1989), that fixed point is death, as symbolized by the creation of a new point of suspension for Foucault's Pendulum, which is created by his character Belbo when he is executed by being hung in the pendulum's wire.

Eliade is suggesting that the sacred, and hence the experience of the world from a spiritual epistemic, arises as an act of creation or, in the terms of my thesis, as an intentional "reading"

and/or “writing” of the life “text.” In this context the enactment of religious ritual and initiation appears to be an attempt to create sacred time and space and hence to sanctify experiential reality through a participation that takes us through the ontological looking glass. Eliade claims that this is not merely a reenacting of the sacred time, but it is a reconnecting to the sacred time and hence the foundations of reality itself. The ritual not only defines the occurrence of this rebirth, but its style and quality as well. It is, in essence, the “writing” of the “text” of reality through enactment.

However, from a postmodern perspective it appears that we are not so much contacting an absolute sacred center as we are sensing and coming to experience an ontic otherness through our rewriting of the possible and hence the real in ways that radically separate us from the epistemology of everyday life. The fixed center is not so much found as it is made and remade. This is also evidenced in a historical context. What constitutes a sacred act and/or experience in some past time can, and often does, become today’s ordinary and hence profane activity. This process, of course, also works in reverse. The text and signs of the sacred and profane are, therefore, continually in transition as they are read, written, reread, rewritten, read, and written yet again.<sup>12</sup>

Further, I would assert that our fragmented state, the profane life, leads to a relationship to the world in which we deny the sacred, even when it irrupts into awareness, because it does not fit the pictures given by the Newtonian and Judeo-Christian worlds that most of us inhabit. What I am suggesting is that our way of knowing prevents us from recognizing that we are taking every “text,” or life scenario, and unconsciously giving them all the same rewrite, thus always finding the sacred and profane to be what we expect.

There are, of course, dangers inherent in this deconstructive/reconstructive process. In a culture such as ours, which does not have any clearly defined roadmaps or guides for this process, there is the possibility that the deconstructive process will spin out of control into an infinite regress of self unmaking, fear, panic, and further unmaking. It has been an observation of mine that a significant percentage of those who have been diagnosed as paranoid schizophrenics are, in fact, *failed mystics*. They have entered the tunnel of transition and never fully reemerged in a stable epistemic frame. They are permanently in the transitional phase of multiple “readings” and “writings” against which they fight a losing struggle to return to the pre-deconstructed state. They want to forget, but every attempt at doing so reengages the deconstructive process leaving them as blissless, ghost mystics.

Of course, there are ways to fail the mystical encounter without becoming a paranoid schizophrenic. An equally serious but nonpsychotic negative outcome is a narcissistic collapse. In

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<sup>12</sup>For example, whales have changed status a number of times throughout history. First, as sea monsters and guardians of the depths, they had a direct connection to the sacred. Later, in the nineteenth century, they fell from those heights to be seen as a source of lamp oil and lady’s girdle stiffeners. Today, taken in the context of the environmental movement, they are again sacred in their symbolic role as the holy eco-other.

this case the special knowing of the mystical encounter's deconstruction is successfully exited, but the reconstruction is grandiose: "I am now a perfected being. I have transcended the human condition." The *narcissistically wounded mystic* now adopts a stance much like Nietzsche's grand romantic character Zarathustra just down from the mount with a message for all of us. This character may rapidly collect a group of followers whose narcissistic wounds are resonated by the charismatic outpourings of such a pseudo-spiritual leader and the followers will serve to reinforce the rigid outcome of this particular style of mystical failure.

Less damaging, but in some ways equally sad, is the *denied mystic*. This person is cast into radical doubt by his or her encounter with mystical knowing and can never trust that other forms of knowing are valid doors to different aspects of the totality of reality. They are stuck in an interpretive ambivalence. Each time the power and certainty of their encounter with mystical knowing confronts them, they rationalize it away. Perhaps they feel as though they are on an existential tightrope and if they look down they will fall into the deconstructive abyss of the failed mystic.

Finally, the successful mystic is one whose epistemic process deconstructs thereby launching him into mystical knowing but who successfully reconstruct a livable reality frame. Nevertheless, these mystics are able to walk the rope, look in different directions, and accept the two worlds of ordinary and non-ordinary reality that they integrate and use to facilitate a more fulfilling and creative life.

### Conclusion

I would assert that behind the activity of most of our lives there lies a profoundly spiritual impulse—a passion to know the ontological bottom line and align ourselves with it. This search appears to be, like Ricoeur's (1970) description of the discipline of religious studies, hermeneutics engaged in the restoration (or creation) of meaning. In summarizing the postmodern position of this chapter in its attempt to reframe both the mystical and sacred, I would alter that definition to read: hermeneutics in search of a hermeneutical position. Inevitably, this restorative action will require the breakdown of old structures and a reframing of the relationship of signs to each other in ways that can profoundly disturb our ontological certainty. However, if we persist in our spiritual inquiries we must each participate in a creative process where creator and created speak to one another in a dialogue of mutual construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction. It is from this process of *engaged knowing* that inspiration and new meanings arise that are valorized and eventually reified into spiritual knowledge.

Thus, spiritual knowledge—and hence the sacred as known through mystical experience or any other type experiential move through the ontological looking glass—seems to give rise to a sense of awe that we experience during the process of our participation in connecting to what we

sense as the ultimate. Whether or not this contact, such as Otto's *Mysterium Tremendum*, refers to an encounter with an actual existent ontological otherness is of no account. What is important from my point of view is the sense of ontic shift that arises as the result of the intensity of feeling engendered as we leap across an epistemic boundary. The *post hoc* ascriptions of source and cause, whether they be Karma, spirit guides, higher intelligence, divine grace, or ultimate emptiness, are of little consequence. From my perspective life, in its constructive and deconstructive cycling, becomes the sacred, which again becomes the profane as we ebb and flow between the various readings and writings of the existential life-text. In this scenario spiritual knowing is that immediacy of connected awareness that occurs at the border between that "reading" and "Writing."

So, the question still remains, how does this interpretation of spiritual knowing and the sacred connect to and illumine my mystical experience? My experience certainly subsumed what I understood at that time to be my self-structure and radically altered my relation to otherness—sacred or profane. At the time the revolutionary nature of the experience automatically called to me to reframe my knowledge of self and world. That I certainly attempted to do. However, as the years went by and I reflected back on the event, I thought more and more about the voice that had called my attention, first, to the guises I had used as personae and, second, to the guise of my supposed liberated state.

That first call made me aware that I was clothing myself in a series of constructed selves. As I entered into the experience I discovered that I could deconstruct these selves through an act of discriminating but dispassionate awareness—a kind of disidentification. The second call, however, provided the clue that eventually led to my postmodern reevaluation of mystical experience and spiritual knowing. At the moment that my bliss and sense of liberation were at their pinnacle, the voice returned to make me aware that my new existential position was being created by way of contrast—freedom and liberation versus ego and attachment versus freedom and liberation versus...The shock of crossing the boundary from the ordinary to the mystical was an ontological wake-up call, as was the shock of moving back across the boundary.

What I finally understood is that it is the discovery of the relativity of epistemic frames that liberates us from being stuck in spiritual unknowing, *not the reifications that are built from the remains of one crossing*. Thus, the subtle contact of spiritual knowing emerges only when we let go of whatever ontological anchor that secures us and realize that reality is but one face of one looking glass and spiritual freedom is to consciously leap through it as an act of intentional, creative play.

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