

THE HEAD AND THE HEART: WILLIAM JAMES AND EVELYN UNDERHILL ON MYSTICISM

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ABSTRACT

*Two books, published in 1902 and 1911, continue to shape our understanding of mysticism today. William James's landmark study *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, published in 1902, elevated him to a leading authority on the study of religious experience. This detailed phenomenological study focused on conversion and the value of saintliness, but James also devoted 123 pages to his analysis of mysticism (including his oft-cited four marks of mystical experience) and mysticism's relationship to theology, psychology, symbolism and magic. While James's work was acclaimed, Evelyn Underhill dismissed it, feeling that James had misunderstood the nature of mysticism and the subsequent path, the mystic way. She responded by writing *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*. This paper undertakes an examination and comparison of these two towering figures' understandings of the nature of mysticism, framed through the lens of their methodology.*

Two volumes, published in 1902 and 1911, have significantly contributed to our understanding of mysticism over the last century. William James's (1842-1910) landmark study *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, published in 1902, elevated him to a position as a leading authority on the study of religious experience. This detailed phenomenological study focused on conversion and the value of saintliness, but James also devoted 123 pages to his

analysis of mysticism, including his oft-cited four marks of mystical experience, and mysticism's relationship to theology and psychology. While James's work was acclaimed, Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941) dismissed it, feeling that James had fundamentally misunderstood the nature of mysticism and the subsequent path, which she termed "the mystic way." She responded by writing what is arguably her own best known work, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*. Ironically, James did not live to see the critique of his methods implicit in Underhill's book. It was first published in 1911, a year after James's death. This paper undertakes an examination and comparison of these two towering figures' understanding of the nature of mysticism, framed through the lens of their methodology. With James's study informed by biological, phenomenological and philosophical perspectives, and Underhill's study informed by a heartfelt engagement with the mystic, and the centrality of love, their contrasting views on mysticism serve as a means to chart the distance between the head and the heart in the study of mysticism.

Fundamentally, William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* is a phenomenological study of religious experience. James himself would not identify as a phenomenologist, as in his day it was associated with the thought of Hegel, but from today's distant shore we can easily recognize him as one. James M. Edie explained James's phenomenology of religion after addressing the work of more widely recognized phenomenologists, such as: Mircea Eliade:

There is another phenomenological approach possible in this area....It would be a phenomenology not of *religion* – in some or all of its manifestations – but of *religious experience as such*. It would be not a study of historical and philosophical origins of religious meanings and symbols but of the foundations of such meanings in consciousness itself....less a hermeneutic of texts and institutions than a turn to naïve, unreflective experience, as we find it prior to any theory or doctrine about it. This is the orientation of William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*, and this is what radically distinguished him from other phenomenologists of religion.¹

This phenomenological method, grounded in James's understanding of the biological aspects of experience, is also employed in his treatment of mysticism. But James ascribes a central role to mysticism, writing, "One may truly say, I think that personal religious experience has its root and centre in mystical states of consciousness."²

James proposes a definition of mysticism based on four marks that, for him, characterize all mystical experience; ineffability, noetic quality, transiency and passivity.³ His next step is to provide some examples of such experience, including the effects of alcohol, nitrous oxide, and chloroform, before turning to first person accounts of mystical experience. James casts a wide net, looking not just at Christianity but other faith traditions, noting that in the study of mysticism, "We must next pass to its methodical cultivation as an element of the religious life. Hindus, Buddhists, Mohammedans, and Christian all have cultivated it methodically."⁴ After providing examples from these traditions for the reader he concludes that mystical experience "resembles the knowledge given to us in sensations more than that given by conceptual thought."⁵

What James does not address is anything resembling a progression in mystical states. In fact, he indicates he give little credence to such, writing, "I cannot pretend to detail to you the sundry states of the Christian mystical life....I confess that the subdivisions and names which we find in the Catholic books seem to me to represent nothing objectively distinct."⁶ He skips lightly through John of the Cross's *Dark Night of the Soul*, straight to Teresa of Avila's description of the prayer of union, and darts through Ignatius of Loyola's transcendent experience on the banks of the river Cardoner in Manresa. He reflects at some length on what his diverse accounts have in common and notes "This overcoming of all the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute is the great mystic achievement. In mystic states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness."⁷

As to the authority granted by mystical experience, James is reserved. He treats the question in three parts:

- (1) Mystical states, when well developed, usually are and have the right to be absolutely authoritative over the individual to whom they come.
- (2) No authority emanates from them which should make is a duty for those who stand outside of them to accept their revelations uncritically.

- (3) They break down the authority of the non-mystical or rationalistic consciousness, based on the understanding and the senses alone. They show it to be only one kind of consciousness. They open out the possibility of other orders of truth, in which, so far as anything in us vitally responds to them, we may freely continue to have faith.⁸

James concludes that mystical experiences offer a kind of hypotheses. “They offer us hypotheses, hypotheses which we may voluntarily ignore, but which as thinkers we cannot possibly upset. The supernaturalism and optimism to which they would persuade us may, interpreted in one way or another, be after all the truest of insights into the meaning of this life.”⁹

In *The Varieties* James provides a phenomenological study of religious experiences in themselves. Grounded in his own physiological understanding of psychology, he sees them as almost a form of sensation. But when it comes to the implications of these collective experiences, James takes a turn back to the cognitive, to the head. James sees them as foundational for developing a philosophy of religion. “Philosophy has always professed to prove religious truth by coercive argument; and the construction of philosophies of this kind has always been one favorite function of the religious life, if we use this term in the large historic sense.”¹⁰ He proceeds from his chapter on mysticism to one simply entitled “Philosophy.” There he clarifies but reasserts the importance of mystical consciousness, “I do believe that feeling is the deepest source of religion, and that philosophies and theological formulas are secondary products, like translations of a text into another tongue.”¹¹

James’s lecture on mysticism gives us a snapshot of the complexities of James thought as a whole. He uses a prescient phenomenological method, which will be developed more fully by and more often credited to Edmund Husserl and his students in continental philosophy. He retains a physiologically-based understanding of sensation and feeling that privileges feeling over the “secondary products” of theological and philosophical thought. And he recognizes that while any of these voices and visions may not hold authority for us as individuals, we ignore them at our peril, for they might provide “after all the truest of insights into the meaning of this life.”¹²

Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941) showed little patience for the nuances of James’s methodology. She strongly disagreed with his methods and conclusions. But if the greatest

compliment you can pay a thinker is to carefully and eloquently dispute with that person, then the production of her 1911 book *Mysticism* ranks as high praise indeed. In discussing the characteristics of true mysticism, she dismisses James's four marks of mysticism, writing "I think that we have already reached a point at which William James's celebrated 'four marks' of the mystic state, Ineffability, Noetic Quality, Transiency and Passivity, will fail to satisfy us. In their place I propose to set out, illustrate, and I hope, justify four other rules or notes which may be applied as tests to any give case which claims to take rank amongst the mystics."¹³ Underhill then proceeds to detail her own assumptive framework about the nature of true mystical experience.

The fist of these is that "True mysticism is active and practical, not passive and theoretical. It is an organic life-process, a something which the whole self does; not something as to which its intellect hold an opinion."¹⁴ Secondly, in true mysticism, "Its aims are wholly transcendental and spiritual. It is in no way concerned with adding to, exploring, rearranging or improving anything in the visible universe. The mystic brushes aside that universe....his heart is always set upon the changeless One."¹⁵ The heart will play a primary role in her approach, for as the third note clarifies, "This One is for the mystic, not merely the Reality of all that is, but also a living and personal Object of Love; never an object of exploration. It draws his whole being homeward, but always under the guidance of the heart."¹⁶ Finally, she proposes that process by which one achieves the higher states of mysticism is what she terms "The Mystic Way." Underhill writes:

Living union with this One – which is the term of his adventure – is a definite state or form of enhanced life. It is obtained neither from an intellectual realization of its delights, nor from the most acute emotional longings. Though these must be present, they are not enough. It is arrived at by an arduous psychological and spiritual process – the so-called Mystic Way – entailing the complete remaking of character and the liberation of a new, or rather latent form of consciousness; which imposes on the self the condition which is sometimes inaccurately called "ecstasy," but is better named the Unitive State.¹⁷

As to the relationship to philosophy, Underhill is clear. “Mysticism, then, is not an opinion: it is not a philosophy. It has nothing in common with the pursuit of occult knowledge.” Rather, “It is the name of that organic process which involves the perfect consummation of the Love of God: the achievement here and now of the immortal heritage of man. Or if you like it better – for this means exactly the same thing – it is the art of establishing his conscious relation with the Absolute.”¹⁸

To support her assertions, Underhill divides her text into two distinct parts, “Part One, The Mystic Fact,” and “Part Two, The Mystic Way.” In Part One, Underhill clarifies the relationship of mysticism to vitalism, psychology, theology, symbolism and magic, as well as outlining the four characteristics noted above. In Part Two she describes the stages of the Mystic Way, the organic process by which individual mystics proceed in the love relationship with the Divine. These include the awakening of the self, purification, illumination, recollection and quiet, contemplation, ecstasy and rapture, the dark night of the soul and the unitive life.

Underhill’s method is much more grounded in history. She had read history and botany in her student life at King’s College London. One of the most helpful aspects of the book is a 29-page bibliography of primary writings by mystics, detailing texts, translations, biographies and monographs.¹⁹ Additionally in an Appendix she provides what she terms “a historical sketch of European mysticism from the beginning of the Christian era to death of Blake.”²⁰

Part Two of Underhill’s book examines each of the stages she ascribes to the Mystic Way. In an introductory section she clearly states her purpose in doing so, writing:

Our business, then, is to trace from its beginning a gradual and complete change in the equilibrium of the self. It is a change whereby that self turns from the unreal world of sense in which it is normally immersed, first to apprehend, then to unite itself with Absolute Reality: finally possessed by and wholly surrendered to the Transcendent Life, becomes a medium whereby the spiritual world is seen in a unique degree operating directly in the world of sense.....The completed mystical life, then, is more than intuitional; it is theopathic. In the old frank language of the mystics, it is the *deified life*.²¹

Although traditional treatments of mysticism have limited those stages generally to three – the illuminative, the purgative and the unitive – Underhill expands her stages to five. She recognizes that this is a deviation from the classical stages of mysticism. She writes, “This method of grouping means, of course, the abandonment of the time-honoured threefold division of the Mystic Way and the apparent neglect of St. Teresa’s equally celebrated Seven Degrees of Contemplation; but I think that we shall gain more than we lose by adopting it.”²² To the threefold division of illumination, purgation and union, she adds two more stages, the Awakening of the Self and the Dark Night of the Soul.

Underhill sees the Awakening of the Self as the initial conversion experience that marks the beginning of the Mystic Way. “This awakening,” she explains, “from the psychological point of view, appears to be an intense form of the phenomenon of ‘conversion’ and closely akin to those deep and permanent conversions of the adult type which some religious psychologists call ‘sanctification.’”²³

Although not initially cited, the Dark Night of the Soul is offered in recognition of St. John of the Cross’s masterful work of the same name. She explains the Dark Night as:

The most intense period of that great swing back into darkness, which usually divides the “first mystic life” or Illuminative Way, from the “second mystic life” or Unitive Way, is generally a period of utter blankness and stagnation, so far as mystical activity is concerned. The “Dark Night of the Soul,” once fully established, is seldom lit by visions or made homely by voices. It is of the essence of its miseries that the once-possession power of orison or contemplation now seems wholly lost. The self is tossed back from its hard won point of vantage. Impotence, blankness, solitude are the epithets by which those immersed in this dark fire of purification describe their pains.²⁴

The Dark Night serves as the gateway to the final state, the Unitive State, and so, in a sense, marks the final abandonment of selfhood, or ego, before full union with the Divine can be achieved. In the Unitive Life, “Here all teasing complications of our separated selfhood are transcended. Hence the eager striving, the sharp vision are not wanted anymore. In that

mysterious death of selfhood on the summits which is the medium of Eternal Life, heights meet the deeps: supreme achievement and complete humility are one.”²⁵

Thus we can see a significant difference in the methods by which these two towering figures’ approach the study of mysticism itself. James is more interested in specific religious experiences or first person accounts as a part of his larger phenomenology and in the service of his philosophy of religion. Underhill, after clarifying her positions, undertakes what could be considered a developmental study of the parallels and stages the mystic experiences in a process of growth. In all fairness, one must remember that James cannot detail the study of mysticism is his 123 page treatment which is, after all, only part of a larger scope. Underhill has the luxury of devoting her attention solely to mysticism, and of having 519 pages to do so. Both default to their earlier training – James in philosophy, psychology and medicine (in terms of his physiological foundations) and Underhill in her historical and botanical studies. Her studies in botany may have influenced her in presenting the development of the mystic as an “organic process” or a process of ongoing growth in the “art” of “establishing conscious relation with the absolute.”²⁶

At the end of James’s *Varieties*, James reflects “The whole drift of my education goes to persuade me that the world of our present consciousness is only one out of many worlds of consciousness that exist, and that those other worlds must contain experiences which have a meaning for our life also; and that although in the main their experiences and those of this world keep discrete, yet the two become continuous at certain points, and higher energies filter in.”²⁷ In words that provide a small glimpse into the work he will undertake in *A Pluralistic Universe* he notes the importance of over belief, finishing with a question. “Who knows whether the faithfulness of individuals here below to their own poor over-beliefs may not actually help God in turn to be more effectively faithful to his own greater tasks?”²⁸ So it would seem that, despite their many differences, both James and Underhill both end up with a focus on the unique relationship that the believer, or the mystic, has with their chosen God. Underhill closes her work with the following reflection on what we learn from mysticism about our capacity for relationship with the Divine.

According to the measure of their strength and their passion, these, the true lovers of the Absolute, have conformed here and now to the utmost test of divine

sonship, the final demands of life. They have not shrunk from the sufferings of the cross. They have faced the darkness of the tomb. Beauty and agony alike have called them: alike have awakened a heroic response. For them the winter is over: the time of the singing of birds is come. From the deeps of the dew garden, Life – new, unquenchable, and ever lovely –comes to meet them with the dawn.”²⁹

While recognizing the differences in these two landmark works, one should not fail to realize that their ultimate conclusions also bear strong similarities. For both James and Underhill, the human capacity for relationship to the Divine, whether understood by the head or swept forward by the heart, lies at the core of mysticism, and subsequently at the core of religion.

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NOTES

¹ James M. Edie, “William James’s Phenomenology of Religion,” *William James and Phenomenology*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 51.

² William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1902) 379.

³ James, *Varieties*, 380-381.

⁴ James, *Varieties*, 400.

⁵ James, *Varieties*, 405.

⁶ James, *Varieties*, 408.

⁷ James, *Varieties*, 419.

⁸ James, *Varieties*, 422-423.

⁹ James, *Varieties*, 428.

¹⁰ James, *Varieties*, 429.

¹¹ James, *Varieties*, 431.

¹² James, *Varieties*, 428.

¹³ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism*, New York, New American Library, 1974, 81.

¹⁴ Underhill, 81.

¹⁵ Underhill, 81.

¹⁶ Underhill, 81.

¹⁷ Underhill, 81.

¹⁸ Underhill, 81.

¹⁹ Underhill, 475-504.

²⁰ Underhill, 453.

²¹ Underhill, 174.

²² Underhill, 168.

²³ Underhill, 176.

²⁴ Underhill, 381.

²⁵ Underhill, 443.

²⁶ Underhill, 81.

²⁷ James, *Varieties*, 519

²⁸ James, *Varieties*, 519.

²⁹ Underhill, 450-451.