

THE PSYCHICAL AND THE MYSTICAL: BOUNDARIES, CONNECTIONS, COMMON ORIGINS¹

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ABSTRACT

Notable exceptions aside, researchers in the fields of mysticism and parapsychology have not taken an active interest in each other's domain of study. Mysticism scholars have tended to regard psychical phenomena as unworthy of academic study, as lesser phenomena that mystics themselves view with suspicion. For their part, parapsychologists have been inattentive to mystical experience despite their interest in a variety of extraordinary experiences. However, one type of mystical experience—the unitive apprehension of the natural world—does appear to have connections with psychical cognition, and other links are evident too, including shared triggers and predisposing factors. It follows that the psychical and the mystical require interdisciplinary study and a theory capable of explaining both. To this end, filter theory and *kundalini* yoga are invoked to suggest that psychical and mystical cognitions derive from a common source.

INTRODUCTION

The distinguished Hungarian parapsychologist and psychoanalyst Nandor Fodor (1963) once declared that parapsychology needed to be taken in new directions if it was to avoid the insularity and stagnation that had befallen spiritualism and affected psychical research. One direction he had in mind was mysticism, more particularly 'at-oneness', in which the subject becomes united with its object. Fodor conjectured that at-oneness, especially at-oneness with ideas, might power the bizarre phenomena associated with saints and fakirs, and he wondered too if psychical perceptions and mediumistic contacts might be forms of 'mystic participation'. His alertness to the mystical was encouraged by personal experience, for he had known at-oneness himself, having been propelled into cosmic rapture by doses of mescaline, experiences so wonderful that he decided never to repeat them lest he be tempted to take his own life to secure "permanent entrance into that state of bliss" (1963, p. 63).

Fodor's call for attention to be paid to the mystical has largely gone unheeded by parapsychologists, who for the most part have shown little interest in the subject, and scholars of mysticism have reciprocated by neglecting the psychical. In the following, I enquire into the reasons for the segregation of the psychical and the mystical, and explore connections between the two. I devote more attention to the neglect of the psychical in mystical studies, partly because I

¹ This is a special issue of the *Journal*, featuring two papers that were first presented at the second annual "Exploring the Extraordinary" conference in September 2010, and one from the first one, held in 2009. Exploring the Extraordinary was established in 2007 by members of the Anomalous Experiences Research Unit (AERU) at the University of York as a network for researchers of and those interested in extraordinary experiences commonly labelled as paranormal, anomalous, supernatural, transcendent, religious or spiritual. A third conference is planned for September 2011 and further information about the initiative can be found at <http://etenetwork.weebly.com/>. Two members of the AERU group, Drs Hannah Gilbert and Madeleine Castro, served with me as co-Editors of the articles that appear in this issue — *Editor*

am better qualified to do so, but also because it will help to bring out what 'mystical experience' has been taken to mean by mysticism scholars and why in general they have not applied the term to the psychical accompaniments of the mystical life. But the central issue at stake is whether there are significant connections between the two classes of phenomena. The evidence suggests there are, implying that the two should be explained together and that they may even derive from a common source. To this end, I turn to the filter theory proposed by such thinkers as F. W. H. Myers and William James at the close of the nineteenth century and to one of its ancient precursors, *kundalini* yoga.

DISCIPLINARY BOUNDARIES

Parapsychology has not customarily included mystical experience within its remit, focusing its attention primarily on the psychical abilities (telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, psychokinesis) and evidence for life after death, including phenomena that have a bearing on survival, such as mediumship, apparitions, and out-of-body and near-death experiences. Only when parapsychology becomes allied with the study of spirituality and religion (e.g. Clark, 1977), transpersonal psychology (e.g. Daniels, 2005) and 'exceptional' or 'anomalous' experiences (e.g. White, 1990; Wulff, 2000) is mystical experience likely to receive more than a passing mention. Some researchers interested in the psychical have also devoted themselves to the study of the mystical (e.g. Johnson, 1953, 1959), but combined study has been a minority interest often associated with a spiritual outlook. One researcher who deserves special mention is Robert Crookall, who responded at length to Fodor's call. Fodor had stated that "at-oneness is unknown in Spiritualism and in today's Parapsychology" (1963, p.60), a remark that prompted Crookall (1969) to assemble evidence to the contrary. He gathered together material about at-oneness from a variety of sources, including mystics, astral projectors and channelled entities, and identified several "analogies" between psychical and mystical experiences.

Some prominent founders of psychical research had been well aware of the mystical. Myers (1903) included "transcendental ecstasy" in his spectrum of consciousness, and James (1902) discussed mysticism at length, making an outstanding contribution to the subject, but without going into its psychical aspects (see below). Both Myers and James made the important speculation that the two classes of phenomena might be related by a common mechanism, the thinning of barriers that ordinarily screen subconscious contents. This perspective has recently come to the fore in Kelly, Kelly, Crabtree, Gauld, Grosso and Greyson (2007), which is also notable for its full engagement with the mysticism scholarship. Parapsychology, as it developed in the twentieth century, proved to be rather less interested in the mystical. It is open to speculation why mysticism failed to build on its foothold in the psychical sphere. In all likelihood, the increasingly science-based character of the discipline was a major factor, with parapsychology taking up residence in the laboratory. Whereas psi phenomena are open to experimental testing under controlled conditions, mystical cognitions are not easily studied for their veridicality. Another factor may have been the historical association of mysticism with religion, which could have made mystical experience unattractive to

researchers eager to forge a scientific discipline seen to be free of any religious agenda. It is also possible that parapsychologists were just not sufficiently aware of the features of mystical experience that would have been of interest to them, for the literature on mysticism has not generally given a very helpful account of the phenomenology. It has been all too easy to gain the impression that mystical experience is essentially a featureless unity about which little can be said.

Psychical phenomena had once been of great interest to students of mysticism. Continental Catholic writers on mystical theology such as Görres (1836–42) and Ribet (1879–83) had surveyed with great earnestness the divine gifts and diabolical imitations that manifest on the contemplative path. These ranged from such exotica as invisibility, stigmata, levitation and miraculous healing to the psi phenomena that would become the mainstays of psychical research and parapsychology. But in the English-speaking world at the beginning of the twentieth century, the scholars who laid the foundations of mystical studies largely avoided such phenomena. Although a common occurrence in the mystical life, they were not deemed to be genuine ‘mystical experience’, a term that came to be reserved in scholarly circles for exalted *noetic* and *unitive* experiences of reality. There was practical convenience to be had in passing over the secondary phenomena of contemplative practice and focusing on the lofty goal to which it is directed, a life grounded in experiential awareness of the supreme reality. James (1902, p.408) explained that he would omit mention of the secondary phenomena because they bring no “consciousness of illumination” and therefore have “no essential mystical significance”. Even those phenomena that do seem to bring knowledge—James mentions visions of the future, reading of hearts, sudden understanding of texts, and knowledge of distant events—could be set aside as inessential because they are not revelatory of fundamental truths, that is to say, theological and metaphysical ones.

Adopting definitions that made unity the hallmark of mystical experience, several other influential scholars felt justified in passing over the secondary phenomena. Stace (1960) excluded visions and voices because they are ‘sensuous’ in character, unlike pure consciousness, the ‘One’ or ‘Unity’ that he took to be the essence of mystical experience. Zaehner insisted that mystical experience is defined by unity, whether unity with God, the Absolute or the natural world, and he could therefore make the sweeping assertion that mysticism “has nothing to do with visions, auditions, locutions, telepathy, telekinesis, or any other praeternatural phenomenon” (1957, p.32). Like Zaehner, most commentators have assumed that psychical phenomena are not unitive. However, we have noted that Fodor (1963) speculated otherwise, and Crookall (1969) believed that at-oneness is present to some degree in clairvoyance, telepathy and hypnotism, and also in mediumistic phenomena, especially possession cases. Similarly, LeShan (1974) claimed that psychical and mediumistic consciousness shares the unitive quality with mystical consciousness. However, the evidence offered by Crookall and LeShan was rather thin, and the occurrence of unitive feelings in psychical and mediumistic experiences needs further study (see Wrightson, 2006).

Observing that the unitive criterion had become entrenched in mystical studies, Wainwright (1981) contended that the inclusion of other experiences,

such as visionary and psi phenomena, would now only lead to confusion. Additionally, he argued that there is good reason for philosophers to focus on unitive states: they lack “*specific empirical content*” (1981, p.1) and therefore cannot carry empirically falsifiable beliefs. As a result, mystical claims cannot be dismissed as easily as psi ones, “many, and perhaps most” of which can be discounted (1981, pp.6–7). However, it is possible that some mystical claims are not immune to empirical scrutiny: I shall suggest that a certain type of mystical experience may carry empirically falsifiable beliefs because it confers insights into the natural world that may be open to scrutiny.

Mysticism scholars have also felt justified in disregarding psychical phenomena because religious traditions have warned of their superfluous and dangerous character. While it is true that the acquisition of special powers has not been an object of mainstream practice in the major religions, the secondary status of the phenomena should not exclude them from study, for they are liable to manifest in the lives of those who engage in certain mental and physical practices, and they have been important in esoteric currents and in primal religions, including shamanism. They even have a place in the foundation stories of historical religions and have been valued there in certain contexts, including healing, spiritual guidance and evangelical work. For example, the Buddha’s awakening is said to have drawn on superknowledges, including the clairvoyant ‘divine eye’, and the Buddha, although critical of the flaunting of supernormal powers, used them in his ministry (Shaw, 2009). What may be hazardous distractions for the novice may be of value to the self-restrained adept and of considerable interest to the academic researcher.

But mysticism scholars were not just setting manageable limits on their discipline or reflecting the cautious attitudes of religious authorities: some expressed distaste for the secondary phenomena or a concern that they would reflect badly on mysticism. Pioneering scholars not only had to contend with their own scepticism but also had to address an increasingly sophisticated audience, and so it was expedient to skirt around those phenomena, such as bodily elongation and demoniacal assault, that to the modern mind look like superstition, hagiography, symbolism, physical illness or psychopathology. Thus Inge (1899, p.viii) decried the “debased supernaturalism which usurps the name of Mysticism in Roman Catholic countries”, singling out the works of Görres and Ribet. Other scholars were similarly dismissive if not so blunt, but there were more sympathetic treatments too. While Underhill (1911) censured the supernaturalism that she thought played into the hands of the pathologizers and rationalists, she acknowledged that visions and voices have been common features of the contemplative life and devoted a chapter to them. Furthermore, readers in the English-speaking world had access to studies of the more exotic phenomena in translations of Poulain (1921) and Farges (1926), and there were home-grown efforts too. Herbert Thurston, a Jesuit deeply interested in spiritualism and the paranormal, wrote a series of articles between 1919 and 1938 that formed the basis of *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism* (1952). The colourful literary scholar and self-styled Catholic priest Montague Summers produced a book of the same title (1950). In this he expressed dissatisfaction with the neglect of the subject by recent English writers, commenting that “a Mysticism without supernatural phenomena is a starveling” (1950, p.11).

Criticism of the neglect has occasionally surfaced within the academic study of mysticism, with Parrinder (1976) and Moore (1978) making pertinent observations. Hollenback (1996) has explored the relation between the psychical and the mystical, conjecturing that they both stem from an intensification of focus that empowers the imagination. Geels (2003) has attempted to broaden the definition of mystical experience to include visions, and Kripal (e.g. 2010) has been especially receptive to the potential significance of extraordinary phenomena for the study of religion. Hood (1989, 2008) has reviewed survey studies that show a positive correlation between psychical and mystical experiences: persons who report one often report the other (see also Hood, Hill & Spilka, 2009). He has recently proposed a link between the two in the activation of Jungian archetypes (2008), but of particular interest to us here is his earlier observation that a certain kind of mystical experience is itself paranormal.

SIGNIFICANT CONNECTIONS

There is one kind of experience widely recognized as 'mystical' that is particularly germane to our topic. This is mystical experience of the natural world, often called *extrovertive mystical experience*, following Stace (1960), who distinguished it from *introvertive mystical experience*, a pure consciousness allegedly empty of sensory, intellectual and affective contents. Extrovertive mystical experience, in which the natural world is transfigured by permutations of unity, knowledge, sense of contact with reality, self-transcendence, altered temporality, luminosity, love, peace and joy, can be highly cognitive and perceptual, bringing not only a sense of comprehensive knowing, understanding and meaning but also specific insights and perceptual extensions. Consider, for example, an experience described by the poet and scholar Kathleen Raine (1975, p. 119), which took place when she was gazing at a hyacinth:—

I found that I was no longer looking at it, but *was* it; a distinct, indescribable, but in no way vague, still less emotional, shift of consciousness into the plant itself. Or rather I and the plant were one and indistinguishable; as if the plant were a part of my consciousness. I dared scarcely to breathe, held in a kind of fine attention in which I could sense the very flow of life in the cells. I was not perceiving the flower but living it. I was aware of the life of the plant as a slow flow or circulation of a vital current of liquid light of the utmost purity.

The experience was not only unitive, bringing oneness with the hyacinth, but also cognitive, seeming to confer insight into structure and process. In the more expansive cases, the perceptual extensions and intellectual illuminations seem to encompass the universe, as in Bucke's (1901) oft-quoted episode of 'cosmic consciousness'.

As such, extrovertive experiences have affinities with the psi cognitions of parapsychology and their analogues detailed in the handbooks of mystical theology and in the Asian literature on meditation and yoga. In fact, a case can be made for describing the extrovertive kind of mystical experience as paranormal. For if 'paranormal' in the parapsychological sense denotes phenomena informed by ways of knowing, communicating and acting unrecognized by conventional, present-day science (e.g. Irwin & Watt, 2007), then some mystical experiences are ostensibly paranormal. Considerations of this kind induced Hood (1989, pp. 126–127) to comment on the "paranormal nature of extrovertive

mysticism”:-

Surely this ‘sensing’ beyond the normal, this perception of unity within a differentiated visual field, is indeed a paranormal experience indicating a linkage between mysticism and the paranormal.

Here the first significant connection between the psychical and the mystical can be found: (1) *both psychical and extrovertive mystical experiences bring perceptions and cognitions that appear to reach beyond the normal range, spatially and temporally.* This statement needs qualification because certainly there are differences between typical psychical and extrovertive extensions of perception and cognition. There is considerable difference between the telepathic hunch that one’s beloved on the *Titanic* is in peril and the mystical realization that one knows everything, understands the meaning of suffering, and intuits the fundamental ‘all-rightness’ of the universe. Psi cognitions tend to convey specific information, sometimes mediated in symbols, and they are often open to assessment. Extrovertive cognitions tend to be general in character, give the impression of being unmediated and are not readily investigated.

But this is not to say that extrovertive perceptions and cognitions never deal with particulars and cannot be measured against knowledge from conventional sources. In extrovertive experience, it sometimes appears as though objects have become transparent, with their interiors open to inspection, a penetrative vision that is reminiscent of X-ray clairvoyance, although supercharged with vibrancy and profundity. Such experiences can seem both mystical and psychical. For instance, the following account gains its mystical character from an initial reverence towards the beauties of nature and the subsequent engulfing luminosity, expansion of consciousness, wholeness, and sense of contact with God, but also has a clairvoyant feel, with its perception of particles:-

Then while immersed in this emotion of reverence, he looked at a piece of quartz which he held in his hand, and as he looked at it and its glistening gold-like speckles, suddenly an intense illumination engulfed him. He saw millions of little stars with rainbow rings streaming from them in place of the piece of quartz, and he felt his consciousness enter into every particle belonging to an infinite whole, while his being was buoyant with intense delight for he knew at that moment that he had looked into God.

[Laubscher, 1972, p.229]

It is, of course, quite possible that no genuine insights into the structures and processes of nature are forthcoming in such experiences, and the popular literature that announced a convergence of physics and mysticism, such as Capra’s *The Tao of Physics* (1975), has been roundly criticized for its superficial parallels and careless scholarship. Some critics, notably Wilber (e.g. 1982), have even claimed that genuine mystical insight into the workings of nature is not *in principle* possible because mystics have access only to a distinct realm of spirit or to the everyday, macroscopic world, not to the microscopic and cosmic scales explored by physicists. Mystics explore spirit, physicists investigate matter, and never the twain shall meet. But such *a priori* claims, neglectful of the extrovertive mystical data, need not detain us here. For present purposes, it has been sufficient to indicate that extrovertive experiences, like psychical phenomena, can be *ostensibly* paranormal, seeming to bring extensions of knowledge and perception that should not be possible

according to conventional understanding. Whether they *really* do bring such extensions has yet to be settled beyond dispute.²

Interestingly, both mystical and psi cognitions are not limited to present events. Psi cognitions are sometimes precognitive, apparently bringing knowledge of the future. Very occasionally they are retrocognitive, seeming to access the past. Now it is a characteristic feature of mystical experiences that they bring an altered sense of time. This can be the feeling that time has stopped or is no longer important, and sometimes it is an expanded apprehension of the world that takes in past, present and future. For example, a girl found “everything that had ever happened or would happen was within myself”, including events she was later to learn about (Johnson, 1959, p. 71). The experience seems to have brought knowledge of particular events and so provides a counterexample to the blanket assertion that mystical experience lacks *specific* empirical content.

As noted before, survey studies reveal a positive correlation between psychical and mystical experiences, indicating that persons who have one tend to have the other. This is no great surprise, as the lives of the saints and yogis attest to the connection. Even Stace had to admit that “there is a certain correlation between the types of persons who have mystical experiences and those who see visions and hear voices” (1960, p. 50). This may follow in part if (2) *psychical and mystical phenomena share predisposing factors*, influences of an innate or deeply ingrained character such as personality traits that make one susceptible to both kinds of experiences. Thalbourne (2006) has suggested that a single factor, ‘transliminality’, lies behind correlations between mystical experiences, paranormal experiences, mania and schizotypy. This is not to say that the psychical and mystical are themselves pathological, just that they share an underlying factor with some psychiatric or pre-psychiatric conditions. Persons with high transliminality are said to be more open to influxes from the unconscious and the external environment, whereas persons with low transliminality are relatively closed to such intrusions. Hartmann’s (1991) related concept of a ‘thin/thick boundary’ dimension of personality has been applied to paranormal experients (e.g. Rabeyron & Watt, 2010) and to mediaeval mystics and ascetics (Kroll & Bachrach, 2005), with both groups attributed a thinness of boundaries — empathetic, unstructured, prone to daydreaming, diffuse in personal identity, and so forth. Another shared personality trait of possible relevance is ‘absorption’, which involves the ability to focus attention. For instance, Nelson (1991–92) found that religio-mystical experients and paranormal experients had higher levels of absorptive capacity than non-experients.

A positive correlation will also follow if (3) *psychical and mystical phenomena*

² Inspired by the ‘perennial philosophy’, Wilber divided reality into ‘levels’, ascending from matter through mind to spirit. This ontological partitionism lay behind his claim that physics and mysticism are unrelated disciplines (see Marshall, 1997). In later writings (e.g. 1995), Wilber showed greater awareness of nature mysticism, including cosmic consciousness, but classified it along with psi phenomena in the *lowest* of his four categories of transpersonal experience on the basis that both embrace what he considers to be the gross, material level of reality (see Daniels, 2005).

Wilber’s lowly estimation of extrovertive mystical experience, similar in rationale to Zaehner’s (1957), does not do justice to its often profound character and misses a point that mystics sometimes make: if the doors of perception are cleansed, the material world is discovered to be a spiritual reality.

share triggers, with various activities and mental states being conducive towards both kinds of experiences. Persons exposed to any one such facilitating circumstance stand a chance of having both kinds of experiences. Mystical experiences are associated with a variety of triggers, including withdrawal from sensory stimuli, a quiet state of mind, spiritual practices, scenic nature, feelings of love, concern for others, psychological distress, physical and mental illness, childbirth, inspirational literature, music, art, dance, sleep, dreams and drugs (Marshall, 2005; Taylor, 2010). It is surely significant that psychical phenomena share some of these facilitating circumstances, including reduced sensory input, meditation, psychological distress, illnesses, dreams and drugs. Take, for example, the case of drugs. There is good evidence that the potent psychedelics and dissociative anaesthetics can on occasion induce genuine mystical states (e.g. Kelly et al., 2007), although there has been resistance to the idea (e.g. Zaehner, 1957), and differences have been observed by those familiar with both spontaneous and drug-induced mystical experiences, the latter tending to be deemed inferior (e.g. Smith & Tart, 1998; Taylor, 2010). Nevertheless, the similarities are sufficiently pronounced to suggest that the two are not fundamentally different. Likewise, there is evidence that the same chemicals can induce psi experiences (Luke, 2008; Luke & Kittenis, 2005). That mystical and psychical experiences share several triggers clearly links the two and calls for explanation.

Another shared trigger of considerable relevance is near-death trauma. Parapsychology has taken near-death experience (NDE) under its wing to the extent that even introductory texts include chapters on the subject. Now it is interesting that (4) *the psychical and the mystical converge in near-death experience*, which can exhibit both sets of features, and is therefore one area in which parapsychology is confronted with the mystical. The paranormal features of NDE are said to include vivid sensations, extrasensory perceptions, precognitive visions and out-of-body experiences (Greyson, 1985). The mystical features, particularly evident in well-developed NDEs, have been described by several researchers (e.g. Kelly, Greyson, & Kelly, 2007; Pennachio, 1986). They include unity, self-transcendence, sense of presence, transcendence of space and time, heightened perception, luminosity, peace, joy, ineffability and transformative character. Even the tunnel phenomenon commonly associated with NDEs is sometimes present at the commencement of mystical experiences, particularly those that follow the exclusion of sensory input (Marshall, 2005). Indeed, it has been observed that it is possible to have experiences very much like NDEs when there is no threat of death or physical injury. This has led one investigator to use the term 'near-death-like experience' (NDLE) for experiences similar to NDEs but not triggered by life-threatening circumstances (Atwater, 1994). An impressive example is the NDLE occasionally induced by the dissociative anaesthetic ketamine (Corazza, 2008). The implication is that the NDE is not a fully distinct category but occurs in a variety of circumstances. However, it would be extreme to identify NDEs completely with mystical experiences or to claim that NDEs are just a sub-category of mystical experience, for it is possible to have NDEs with no mystical characteristics, and some features are particularly associated with the NDE, notably the encounter with deceased relatives.

Near-death experiences point to another connection: (5) *the mystical can develop out of the psychical*. In the NDE, a psychical stage of out-of-body experience and heightened perceptions can give way to experience with mystical qualities. This is also true of experiences not triggered by near-death trauma. For instance, Blackmore tells of her cannabis-induced out-of-body experience that turned into “a classic mystical experience of light and oneness” (2009, p.200). And X-ray clairvoyance has sometimes developed into full-blown mystical experience (Marshall, 2005). The observation that psychical experience can develop into mystical experience is expressed in yogic systems that describe a latent power (*kundalini*) coiled at the base of the spine. Practitioners attempt to raise this power through a sequence of centres (*chakras*) in the subtle anatomy of the body. As the centres are pierced, supernormal powers similar to those attributed to the Catholic saints may arise, climaxing in a mystical expansion of consciousness when *kundalini* reaches or goes beyond the crown of the head. The teachings are complex and exhibit differences across the texts (Flood, 2006), but they deserve in-depth attention for the light they may shed on the relation between psychical, near-death, psychedelic and mystical experiences, and the role of the body in such experiences. Some persons familiar with the experiences have described somatic feelings congruent with *kundalini* arousal, such as a flow of sensation up or down the body, and there may be systematic evidence that backs up the self-reports (Thalbourne, 2007).

COMMON ORIGINS

Given the conspicuous links between the psychical and the mystical highlighted above, it is not unreasonable to conclude that the two are indeed closely related. It follows that interdisciplinary research is likely to prove beneficial, as Rose (1980) pointed out some time ago, with mystical experience perhaps even offering metaphysical insights that could help elucidate the fundamental basis of psychical phenomena. It also follows that there is a need for an explanatory framework able to account for both. It is not sufficient to explain the phenomena individually; they need to be explained together. An explanation that might seem reasonable for one may come to grief over the other.

An indication of how an integrative explanation might proceed comes from the observation that the two classes of phenomena share predisposing factors and triggers. Predisposing personality traits such as ‘thin boundaries’ point to a *filter mechanism*, as do the wide variety of circumstances in which the experiences occur. According to filter theory, consciousness is normally constrained by biological and psychological processes that make only a small, immediately useful range of material available to it from a subconscious reservoir. It is said that in mystical and psychical experiences, some of the excluded material finds its way into consciousness. Persons with ‘thin boundaries’ have less severe filtering systems and so have greater access to subconscious contents and therefore to psychical and mystical extensions of consciousness. Filter theory is able to explain in general terms why diverse triggers spark off very similar experiences, for anything that can affect filter operation will let excluded material into consciousness. It would seem that meditation, drugs, illnesses, near-death trauma and many other triggers can

compromise the psychological–biological filter operation, allowing very similar experiences to occur, although each perhaps coloured by the triggering agent, which introduces some differences. This is perhaps especially true of the very disruptive triggers, such as drugs and near-death trauma.

Filter theory came to prominence in the late nineteenth century through the work of F. W. H. Myers, F. C. S. Schiller, William James, Henri Bergson and others. It surfaced now and again in the twentieth century, applied to psychical and mystical phenomena, and has received its most comprehensive historical and theoretical treatment to date in Kelly et al. (2007). Hints of filter theory can be found in the thought of earlier thinkers who maintained that the body in some way acts to restrict consciousness. Indeed, the idea is present to some extent in *kundalini* yoga, which has consciousness reduced at knots in the subtle anatomy, knots that can be pierced through yogic practice, allowing reconnection with a greater sphere of consciousness. The *kundalini* scheme is particularly significant for our present concern because it combines psychical and mystical phenomena sequentially in what could be called a ‘multi-stage’ model (Marshall, 2005), one that posits stages of reducing operations and so is better able to account for (1) differences between psychical and mystical experiences, (2) the development of the mystical out of the psychical, and (3) stages of mystical experience of increasing profundity.

Although I have emphasised similarities, there are differences to explain. For one thing, psi cognitions often seem mediated rather than direct. Although they can appear to have a modicum of truth, they may be erroneous in some details or have a symbolic character, like dream images, suggestive of the influence of intermediary processes that introduce errors and disguises. By contrast, a characteristic feature of mystical experience is its alleged immediacy. There is no need to assert that all mystical experiences are unmediated, and indeed some theorists claim that mystical experiences without exception are thoroughly conditioned by psychological processes, constructed out of the mystic’s belief system (e.g. Katz, 1978). However, mystical experiences often do feel as if they give direct access to reality, much more so than the average psychical cognition, and so it can be speculated that the mystical brings a more direct, less processed cognition. This can be considered advantageous and disadvantageous. Mystical experience may be deeper, more direct and more comprehensive, but it often seems less able to confer specific information. Mystics may emerge from their experiences with the sense that everything was known, but often they are unable to remember much detail. By contrast, psi cognitions can be very specific, retrievable and testable, and therefore useful for establishing the authenticity of extraordinary cognitions, although they tend to be rather humdrum and unmetaphysical. The upshot of this line of speculation is that psychical and mystical cognitions have a common source in a background reservoir of considerable reach and depth, although the former are more processed than the latter. Psychical cognitions are more heavily mediated cognates of mystical cognitions.

Filter theory as described above is incomplete in several respects. Not only is the filtering mechanism unspecified, but the nature of the background reservoir is unstated. For some Indian yogis who engaged in *kundalini* practices, it was a divine cosmic consciousness. For filter theorists in modern

times, it could be understood in naturalistic terms as a psychological unconscious, with personal contents and perhaps collective contents of an archetypal nature. For instance, Zaehner (1957) speculated that extrovertive mystics access a biologically inherited, inner image of the world. More often, filter theorists have been willing to grant the background reservoir a deeper transpersonal reach. There are several resources available to theorists who wish to flesh out the idea of a comprehensive substratum that supports ordinary, psychical and mystical experiences: these include metaphysical systems that make experience fundamental in some way (e.g. Leibniz, Berkeley, Fechner, Bergson, Whitehead) and the ideas of cutting-edge physics. For example, Carr (2008) has posited a comprehensive 'Universal Structure', utilizing the higher dimensions of bulk-brane theory. I have favoured idealist metaphysics in the style of Leibniz (e.g. Marshall, 2001, 2005), which I believe may shed light on psychical and mystical phenomena as well as the relativistic and holistic features of modern physics. Admittedly, such approaches are highly speculative, and it remains to be seen whether purely biological, psychological and sociological explanations can rise to the challenge presented by the close affinities of the psychical and the mystical.

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