Reflections on Nothingness and Oneness: The Phenomenology of Religious and Mystical Experience

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Following a profound psychological event in his early adolescence, Carl Jung held with lifelong conviction that the experience of God is the most evident of all experiences (Jung, 1965, p. 92). William James made a similar, albeit milder, statement on human religiosity, to which he attributed a 'sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception of what we may call "something there," more deep and more general than any of the special and particular "senses"' (James, 1929, p. 58). These men were the great psychologist-philosopher-theists of the early twentieth century, and from Jung's published letters, we know of their deeply motivated discussions about the psychology of religious experience in the summer of 1909 (Adler & Jaffé, 2015, p. 531). Whatever was shared in this fortuitous meeting of minds might well have included James's transformative experiences under nitrous oxide. It is clear in later accounts of his drug-induced 'observations' that James could not help but ascribe metaphysical and religious significance to the effects of anaesthetics. The 'artificial mystic state of mind' was the only one that could bring about in James (1929, 389) a 'living sense' of genuine revelation; not so for Jung, whose autobiography showcases the exceptional frequency of his dreams, visions, and fantasies, out of which he developed his theory of archetypes and derived his most personal religious beliefs (Jung, 1965, p. 173).

Despite their cognitive differences, Jung and James shared an intuition that religiosity and mysticism are deeply related. Walter Pahnke's renowned Good Friday Experiment of 1962 gave scientific credibility to this view, by demonstrating that in religiously inclined, 'psychedelically naïve' volunteers, psilocybin—the main psychoactive compound in magic mushrooms—can facilitate 'experiences of varying degrees of depth that either are identical with, or indistinguishable from, those reported in the cross-cultural mystical literature' (Doblin, 1991, p. 13; Pahnke, 1963). More recent clinical studies of psychedelic experience also encounter these sentiments in no ambiguous terms. In one report of a study conducted at Johns Hopkins University, the researchers present a description of an experience written by a volunteer who received 20mg/70kg bodyweight of psilocybin:

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> In my mind's eye, I felt myself instinctively taking on the posture of prayer in my head. I was on my knees, hands clasped in front of me and I bowed to this force […] I only felt it, but it felt **more real than any reality I have experienced** (Barrett and Griffiths, 2017, p. 4, emphasis in original).

The volunteer's experience of a feeling 'more real than any reality' is a familiar expression to the British philosopher Walter Stace (1960b, p. 10), who found inspiration for a perennial philosophy of religion in his comparative reading of mystical texts. Stace (1967, p. 44) attributed several characteristics to mystical experience, including a sense of true revelation, corresponding neatly to James's criterion of 'noetic quality' and Pahnke's category of 'objectivity and reality' (James, 1929, p. 380; Pahnke, 1963, p. 6).

This brief and eclectic survey of ideas was for me a preliminary hint at the following thesis: that religious and mystical experience, indeed any experience, is in the first place *affective* and only derivatively cognitive or linguistic. On this view, religiosity and mysticism make salient the intrinsic and determinate *aesthetic* value of experience, which must be carefully distinguished from the indeterminate *truth* values of adjunct theologies (or atheologies) and speculative metaphysics. To be sure, agreement between reality and appearance is tacitly assumed in most ordinary events, but this approach is suspect in the extraordinary case of divine revelation (spiritual enlightenment if you prefer), for which no consensus may ever be reached. In this essay I examine what appear to be the chief counterexamples to our thesis in the philosophical literature: phenomenological *nothingness* and *nonduality*. My critical analyses of these concepts will, I hope, constitute an adequate defence.

Sartre and Nothingness

Distinctions between reality and appearance abound in modern philosophy. In *Being and Nothingness* (*L'Être et le Néant*), Jean-Paul Sartre distinguishes between knowledge and consciousness, the 'most concrete of experiences' (Sartre, 2012, p. 17). This accounts for the fallibility of judgment, such as when we mistake a stranger for a friend on the street, or when Sartre imagines a tree trunk to appear as a man watching him in the half-light. Following Heidegger, he defines consciousness in its most basic form as 'pre-ontological,' i.e., it is taken for granted before being held as an object of contemplation. Similarly, he finds that while consciousness is always consciousness *of* something, it can never become another object among what is given to it. Thus far we agree. But the ontological status Sartre grants to consciousness in light of these premises is striking—he

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defines consciousness as being 'its own nothingness'; this is the import of the 'for-itself.' Furthermore, the for-itself is a self-consciousness and *'the only mode of existence which is possible for a consciousness of something.'* Consciousness thus defined 'transcends itself in order to reach an object, and it exhausts itself in this same positing' (Sartre, 2012, pp. 11-14). What Sartre intends to show in the first chapter of his magnum opus is that experience is not simply positive in character. We also experience a real nothingness, or non-being, latent in human experience and endowed with 'objective existence.'

Nothingness is not an uncommon philosophical idea. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Georg Hegel declared in *Faith and Knowledge* (*Glauben und Wissen*) that 'the first task of philosophy is to conceive of *absolute* nothingness.' His plain-English interpreters variably define this nothingness as 'the assertion of the absence of all determination' and 'the *immediate* absence of being as such' (McTaggart, 1910, p. 10; Houlgate, 2006, p. 278). Hegel regarded nothingness as a religious phenomenon contiguous with being, which signifies the 'infinite grief' or 'harsh consciousness of loss' in the felt absence of God (Hegel, 1977, pp. 190-191). On the other hand, Sartre situated nothingness *within* being, inferring from it the *nonexistence* of God, or at least the medieval scholastic notion of an omnipotent creator (Sartre, 2012, p. xxxiv). Heidegger also asserted the possibility of experiencing 'the nothing itself,' although rarely and fleetingly 'in the fundamental mood of *Angst*' (Heidegger, 1998, p. 88). Elsewhere still, absolute nothingness became the defining intellectual theme of the twentieth century Kyoto School philosophers, whose members were critically engaged with German idealism and Mahāyāna Buddhism (Heisig *et al.,* 2011, p. 643). Keiji Nishitani, a major representative of the school, perceived a dialectical relationship between Nietzschean nihilism and the Buddhist doctrine of *śūnyatā* or emptiness. His masterwork *Religion and Nothingness* (*Shūkyō to wa nanika*, 1961) conveys a deeply existential perspective on the present topic: 'Absolute nothingness […] is not possible as a nothingness that is thought but only as a nothingness that is lived' (Nishitani, 1982, p. 70). The founder of the Kyoto School, Kitarō Nishida, held that nothingness is neither complimentary nor internal to being, but transcendent and inclusive of it (Waldenfels, 1966, p. 365). These disparate views illustrate how the phenomenology of nothingness has been inconsistently interpreted across atheistic, theological, and existential or soteriological systems of thought.

Although Sartre is chiefly concerned with the *experience* of nothingness, in passing he speculates about its ontology: 'Nothingness beyond the world accounts for absolute negation' (Sartre, 2012, p. 56). Phenomenologically, Sartre says that non-being is brought into the world by the for-itself, occasioned by experiences of unfulfilled expectation. I might arrive late for an appointment at a café, expecting to see the person with whom I

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arranged to meet. Should I realise 'he is not here,' says Sartre, I intuit non-being, not a mere quality of judgment. This intuition is indeed a sheer *nothing*, he insists, and we attest to this fact in ordinary language and experience. 'Do we not say, for example, "I suddenly saw that he was not there" […]?' (Sartre, 2012, p. 41). Witnessing destruction is also thought to reveal nothingness in its 'pre-judicative comprehension.' But the most profound instantiation of nothingness for Sartre arises out of the Kierkegaardian-Heideggerian experience of *Angst* (anxiety or anguish). This emotion is said to conjoin, without contradiction, the 'concrete apprehension' of nothingness and the realisation of human freedom.

The absolute nothingness of Hegel and the objective non-being of Sartre contradict our thesis that experience is principally emotional and aesthetic. Both concepts imply the possibility of an experience devoid of all determinate qualities, save for sheer non-being. While nothingness had a distinctly existential influence on these authors, reminiscent of Nishitani's (1900) 'self-overcoming of nihilism through nihilism,' our main concern relates to its phenomenology. What is an experience of sheer nothingness like? In all attempts this author fails to conceive such a thing. Ordinarily the meaning of nothing is defined in contexts of absence. This came to my attention last weekend with a joke. While preparing for a trip to our local bakery, my flatmate Ruben invited our household to place orders with him:

Ruben: OK place your orders!
I'm off [to the bakery]

10 minutes elapses

Cool! Nothing it is!
Let me know how nothing tastes when you eat your piece of nothing.

For our purposes, Ruben achieves more than a frivolous play on words. The absurdity of his statement illustrates how nothingness, or negation, signifies relative absence but never absolute, unqualified privation. Let us suppose I had asked Ruben for a croissant, but he returned from the bakery without one. The Sartrean procedure asks what influence the idea of *zero* croissants has on my immediate experience. I confess that I cannot discern a meaningful effect. In no way does the perception of absence or lack deprive my experience of the world of its intrinsic aesthetic value—I continue to feel regardless, including in this case disappointment. More generally, the realisation of unfulfilled

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expectation does not, I hold, reveal a 'pure negativity' in the being of the for-itself. A givenness of purely negative being is not given at all, but a mere statement with no conceivable referent.

Another case in point: Sartre (2012, p. 50) identified 'numerous attitudes of "human reality" which imply a "comprehension" of nothingness: hate, prohibitions, regret […].' But the association of these affective terms with nothingness compromises the basic coherence of the concept. Would Sartre have characterised negative affect differently had he reconsidered the significance of human suffering? What about this familiar reality is accurately described as non-being or nihilation? On the contrary, pain as well as pleasure is an intensely definite given. To construe an unpleasant feeling as a manifestation of non-being (ergo non-feeling) is an extreme category error. Hegel's 'infinite grief' is analogous to the *Angst* that subsumes the above attitudes in Sartre's phenomenology. In either case, a logical relation between negative affect and negative being is presupposed but not explained.

Between (a) its conflicting meanings across a diverse range of philosophical treatises, (b) its explicit connections to negative emotion and judgment, and (c) the absence of a broadly intersubjective perceptual justification, nothingness appears to this author not to be a concrete apprehension of non-being. Rather it appears as an intellectual chimera, which takes the idea of absence and abstracts it beyond actual experience. In the act of description, one cannot help but implicate some positive information or other. I am inclined to think this explains a great deal about the paradoxical character of Hegelian dialectics, Sartre's 'phenomenological ontology,' Nishitani's existentialism, and Nishida's 'logic of contradictory identity,' insofar as absolute nothingness is granted a minimum of coherence at the level of direct experience. The lattermost principle of Nishida, applied to his master concept of 'absolute nothingness' (*zettai mu* 絶対無), furnishes the possibility of a more analytic critique. This will be our final investigation on nothingness and an opening for an inquiry into nonduality.

Nishida and Nonduality

Kitarō Nishida began his earliest philosophical work from the starting point of 'pure experience,' openly acknowledging the influence of James's radical empiricism in his own method. Both authors spoke to human 'intuition' as the foundation of religious belief, as opposed to reason or intellection (James, 1929, p. 436; Nishida, 1992, p. 32). They also recognised a paradoxical quality in mystical experience. James was thoroughly unconvinced by his predecessors' attempts to solve and dismiss the problem of

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nothingness,[1] 'for from nothing to being there is no logical bridge' (James, 1987, pp. 1002-1006). But Nishida would claim that there is such a bridge, not least one that establishes the 'clear existential fact' of God and the 'concrete' logical basis of religion (Nishida, 1987, p. 75; Masakatsu, 2020, p. 403). Some context is in order.

Despite several developments in his thought, Nishida continually upheld the key precept of his first book, *An Inquiry into the Good* (*Zen no kenkyū*, 1911), that 'there is no distinction between subject and object in any state of direct experience.' The subject-object relation arises only after losing the original 'unity of experience' (Nishida, 1992, pp. 31-32). This is not a static unity but a highly dynamic world of feeling and volition, without which reality can only be held abstractly. These ideas reappear in the middle and later periods of Nishida's career, as he continued to engage with the history of Western thought. His extensive reading of continental philosophy exposed him to the ruthless emphasis on logic that characterised neo-Kantianism in the late nineteenth century. And, after being accused of subjectivism, Nishida undertook the 'logicisation' (*ronrika* 論理化) of his ideas (Masakatsu, 2020, p. 398). However, the task of logicising was difficult, as direct experience would have to establish some relation to conceptual knowledge without inferring either (a) an extreme dualism of mutually independent realities, or (b) a subjectivism that denies the existence of an actual world.

In his final year, Nishida set out to clarify a solution that, to his mind, lay half-expressed in the *Prajñāpāramitā Sutras* of Mahāyāna Buddhism. More importantly, it was his 'concrete' response to the decidedly abstract logics of Western philosophy. The principle of this logic is 'affirmation through absolute negation' (Nishida, 1987, p. 83). Perceptive readers may recall the self-negating action of the for-itself, which thereby transcends itself to affirm the objective world as in-itself (Sartre, 2012, p. 295). But the similarities on closer inspection are few. To be sure, Nishida and Sartre both agreed with the German phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, against Immanuel Kant, that much of reality is given in the analysis of experience. However, Nishida's method was neither a phenomenology nor an apriorism. Rather it was a 'paradoxical' and existential logic of 'absolutely contradictory self-identity' (*zettai mujunteki jiko dōitsu* 絶対矛盾的自己同一):

[1] The question of why there is anything at all rather than nothing has been raised and debated for millennia. The Presocratic philosopher Parmenides flatly denied the proposition that 'there could have been nothing,' arguing that being is necessary *qua* eternal and indestructible. See John Burnet, 'Parmenides of Elea' in *Early Greek Philosophy* (3rd ed., 1920). More recently, the question was answered theologically by Gottfried Leibniz in the seventeenth century—God created the best possible world, i.e., one in which there is being rather than non-being. In the medieval period, the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* provoked controversies over the divine power of God. See Roy Sorensen, 'Nothingness' in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring ed., 2020). Available at: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nothingness/.

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> The conscious act is creative without an underlying substance or ground, as the absolutely contradictory identity of space and time, of the one and the many, of object and subject (Nishida, 1987, p. 57).

Here, Nishida categorically denies the objective world external to the conscious act (e.g., Sartre's in-itself). The for-itself is also rejected, given the identity of subject and object. In short, this understanding of consciousness entails a metaphysic of extreme monism, which Nishida defined as the 'place of nothingness' (*mu no basho* 無の場所). His reference to place, or *topos*, was a complex reaction against the Aristotelian theory of substance, Kant's transcendental idealism, and the Hegelian dialectic of sublation (for Nishida, there is no 'higher synthesis' between affirmation and negation, as the tension is maintained in contradictory identity). The place of nothingness is 'the true absolute,' which 'by negating its own nothingness […] is infinitely self-affirming, infinitely creative, and is historical reality itself' (Nishida, 1987, p. 71).

What is my analytic response to Nishida? There are two primary contentions. First, he argued that experience forms a cohesive whole, therefore subject and object cannot be distinct. This does not follow. The subtle ambiguity in Nishida's reasoning can be removed by asking what precisely the cohesion relates to. Kant (1999, B130) explained the unity of experience as the way manifold sensations are 'combined' in the subject's consciousness by the power of representation. In this case, we preserve the common-sense notion that any experience is an experience *of* something. I believe Kant and Sartre correctly held—in conclusion, but not in method—this essential duality. Nishida's denial of subjectivism was mainly motivated by his certainty of an actual world. But he was also dissatisfied by the 'object logics' of Aristotle and Leibniz, whose respective theories of substance and identity appeared to ignore, or misconceive, the 'active, thinking self.' In response, he supposed a 'biconditional structure of co-origination and co-reflection' between subject and object. Strictly speaking, Nishidan monism (and Mahāyāna Buddhism generally), articulates a logic of mutual dependence or *interdependence:*

> From A, A expresses B in itself, as something expressed by A. That is, […] taking B as object, A predicates of B. But the converse is also true. It can equally be said that A is expressed in B, becomes a perspective of B's own expression (Nishida, 1987, p. 55).

I submit that social intercourse openly contradicts this point of view. Nishida presumed that A's experience of B co-originates in B's experience of A. But suppose that B is not

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yet aware of A. Then the relation is not mutual, for B is independent of A's experiencing, whereas A depends on B for the experience of B. Additionally, when two subjects do perceive one another, the foregoing theory declares that only *one* experience relates the co-reflecting subjects. In other words, A's experience of B is one and the same thing as B's experience of A. These ideas do not seem logically tenable. I propose a different view, owed largely to the doctrine of nominalism. It is trivial to say of a subject's experience that it assumes the form of *her* experience, in contrast to *this* experience, which is mine, and to that experience which is yours. The view that experience is concretely individual may explain more about its integrated character than the concept of co-reflection. Evidently, my readers do not share directly in my conscious experiences. At best, one observes and infers, somewhat imperfectly, what other subjects are feeling and thinking.

Lastly, on Nishida's nondualism: the contest he adjudicated between mutual independence and interdependence, whose outcome would decide the true logic of relations, was a false dichotomy. For this insight, philosophy is indebted to Charles Hartshorne, one of the foremost metaphysicians of the twentieth century. Hartshorne (1989, p. 104) labelled this pervasive assumption as 'the fallacy of misplaced symmetry,' and the ubiquity of 'symmetrical' thinking in world religion and early modern philosophy can hardly be overstated (see Scherbatsky, 1962, p. 7f.; Hartshorne, 1983, p. 155ff.; 1989, p. 98ff.; Nakamura, 1992, p. 436ff). On the one hand, mutual independence found expression in Cartesian dualism (mind and matter occupy different realities); Hume's 'separability principle' (whatever differs is distinguishable, and whatever is distinguishable is separable); and, according to Scherbatsky (1962, p. 14), the early Sarvāstivāda Buddhists' pluralist doctrine of *sarvam asti* ('everything exists'). On the other hand, interdependence has among its variants: Spinoza's necessitarianism[2]; Leibniz's theory of the individual as 'once and for all everything that will ever happen to him' (Leibniz, 1991, p. 12); and the *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination) doctrine of the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition to which Nishida belonged. The missing alternative in this conflict of extremisms is, Hartshorne submits, the moderate 'one-way,' or asymmetrical, case:

> […] interaction is a two-way relation, but it is explained as a complex of one-way actions. For example, I-now influences you a moment later, you-now influences me a moment later. Neither of these actions is strictly symmetrical (Hartshorne, 2011, p. 52)

[2] Spinoza held that, by way of natural reason, we 'perceive things […] not as contingent, but as necessary.' Corollary to this: 'Hence it follows that it is due only to imagination that we regard things, whether with respect to the past or to the future, as contingent' (*Ethics Part 2*, Prop. 44; Fullerton, 1894, p. 117ff).

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Applied to Nishida's principle of contradictory identity, space may be defined as a dimension of symmetrical relatedness, in the sense that perceptual phenomena exist as 'contemporaries' in space. However, time is a dimension of one-way relations. The subject always perceives her objects a moment later, since we do not observe any phenomenon—whether the light of a distant star, or the scourging impact of a whip—instantaneously with its occurrence.

My second and final contention bears on the double negation in the place of nothingness. Taken at face value, and on closer inspection, Nishida is arguing for the principle of explosion ('from contradiction, anything follows'). This would render his conceptual scheme into a religious dialetheism; an interpretation that appears conclusive based on the following passage in *Last Writings* (1945):

> For any religion, any true religion, when a person gains religious faith, or deliverance, there always appears a principle of the absurd, which expresses the absolutely contradictory identity of God and mankind. This principle is neither sensory nor rational. It must be the Word of God, the self-expression of the absolute. It is the creative Word itself (Nishida, 1987, p. 106).

In Nishida's mature philosophy, what is ordinarily meant by the self is transfigured into the 'action-intuition' (*kōiteki chokkan* 行為的直観) of the dynamic and creative world (*sōzō-teki sekai* 創造的世界) (Ōhashi & Akitomi, 2020, p. 381). Pushed to its ontological conclusion, reality is defined paradoxically as the 'concrete universal' (Masakatsu, 2020, p. 404). What intuitions could inspire this worldview? According to my understanding, Nishida posited the nondual place of nothingness to make sense of the conflicting sentiments and passions in human life. We feel joy but also sorrow, pleasure but also pain. Not only this, but our volitions are swayed by conflicting ethical principles, and in the final analysis religion directs us to 'the matter of [our] very life and death' (Nishida, 1987, p. 82). Nishida saw what Aristotle (*Metaphysics*, p. 1027b) had contemplated two thousand years earlier as 'the existence of things that are contrary in the same body' (McMahon, 2007, p. 132).

With the utmost respect to Nishida's final existential project, which he successfully completed only two days before his death, I maintain that from mixed emotions, cognitive dissonance, and paradox, it does not strictly follow that we inhabit a dialetheic world of true contradictions. In the language of Aristotelian logic, Nishida attempted to explain why the empirical subject can and often does possess contradictory predicates. The human organism feels, on a regular basis, complex mixtures of disparate emotions, not only across its lifetime but also simultaneously. Chief examples known to the English language

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include bittersweetness and frisson (excitement and fear). The Japanese have a word (*wabi-sabi* 侘寂), derived from Zen Buddhism, to convey the melancholic affinity for the transient beauty of nature. In German, there is the concept of *schadenfreude*—the unsavoury pleasure derived from other people's suffering. These phenomena are recognised in neuroscience as affective and cognitive states of 'ambivalence.'

What do we accomplish by interpreting ambivalence within a metaphysic of contradictory identity? For one, we deny the possibility of a genuine pluralism. Your experiences are not precisely yours, but the expressions of an all-encompassing Absolute. This monistic view is commonly ascribed to Mahāyāna Buddhism. But the paradoxical identity of all subjectivity is an original reading of dependent origination. This is Nishida's nondual place of nothingness, and it is based on the very reasonable premise that causal influence cannot obtain between mutually independent realities. Thus, there can be no sharp separation of subject and object. At this critical juncture, however, Nishida committed the fallacy of misplaced symmetry by assuming the opposite extreme of causal interdependence. He overlooked the essential asymmetry of time by defining concrete actuality as an 'absolute present,' which enfolds the infinite past and future within itself (Nishida, 1987, p. 88). Alternatively, why not take temporal process as a one-way influence of the determinate past over the partly indeterminate future? In this way, one is equipped to explain why I am influenced by, dependent on, Nishida's ideas, yet in no way is Nishida influenced by mine. I leave it to my reader whether the concept of an 'eternal now' is a greater or lesser abstraction than the linearity of time's arrow.

Plotinus and Mysticism

The furthest idea one could have from nothingness may have originated in ancient Greece. Parmenides, credited as the father of metaphysics, held 'it is not possible for what is nothing to be' (Fragments 6; Burnet, 1920, p. 174). Yet, like Nishida, he was a monist of an extreme kind. Anticipating the nondualism of Zen, he declared: 'the thing that can be thought and that for the sake of which the thought exists is the same' (Fragments 8; Burnet, 1920, p. 176). He took multiplicity for an illusion, and the subject-object distinction is a special case of this. However, far from validating nonduality as the ultimate principle, Nishida's logic of contradictory identity would have been an aberration to the Presocratics. Centuries later, Plotinus gathered from Parmenides that 'everything is contemplation' (*theōríā* θεωρία) and derives solely from the absolute (Emilsson, 1996, p. 32). Putting aside a thorough treatment of his metaphysics, Plotinus referred to this wellspring of all things as the One. However, experiences of divine union

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with the One are, he claimed, attainable only by grasping that of which 'nothing can be predicated' (§3.8.10; Gerson, 2020, p. 63). In a word, nonduality is indescribable.

William Ralph Inge is helpful in warning against elitist readings of Plotinian mysticism.[3] There is no special 'faculty' involved. Instead, there is a spiritual frame of mind that 'all possess but few use,' which enables a continuity from sense perception up to the vision of the One (Inge, 1918, p. 148). Similarly, in the monastic training of Rinzai Zen, students aim for an experience (dōriki 道力, literally 'power of the way') of nonduality that is naturally obscured within ordinary conventional experience (Hori, 2000, p. 307). Plotinus and Zen Buddhism each appeal to the utter ineffability of their respective enlightenments, but the former was not entirely consistent in this regard. For example, in the 'way of return' to the indescribable One, Plotinus took himself to 'behold a beauty of wondrous quality' while becoming 'externalised' from his body (§4.8.1.1; Gerson, 1996, p. 83). By extension, his opinion of the body was exceedingly negative. Owing to the plurality of perceptual phenomena, he regarded the aesthetic qualities derived from sensation as a 'mere charade' (Emilsson, 1996, p. 180). Superlative beauty belongs to the One, he thought, and as cause of all things, it must therefore produce the inferior 'composites' (*súnthesis* σύνθεσις) of nature.

Most aesthetes will undoubtedly oppose such a flagrant disdain for the body. Even Zen Buddhism, demanding as it is for mastery of 'spirit over matter,' perceives true beauty in the evanescence of worldly existence. The Japanese scholar of art and aesthetics Kakuzō Okakura remarked that uniformity and symmetry are 'fatal' to a healthy imagination and the Zen pursuit of perfection (Okakura, 1956, p. 70f). He would not have seen in the Plotinian One the source of all beauty, but a monument to repetition and monotony. My affective-aesthetic interpretation of experience is consistent with this view. Plotinus inherited the monistic bias of his predecessors by venerating simplicity over complexity; cause over effect; independence over dependence. Yet the richness and depth of human emotion is afforded by its contrasts, and the profound benefits of social relationships are demonstrably formed in the reciprocal influencing of self and other.

[3] Etymologists identify the Greek μυστικός (*mustikós* 'secret') among the origins of the term *mysticism*, whose earliest meaning is associated with the secret rituals of ancient Eleusis. Christianity appropriated the term to specify, among other things, the 'supremely ineffable' doctrine of the Trinity (see Bouyer, 1980, p. 42ff). Similarly, in Hinduism, the ultimate spiritual goal of *moksha*, or liberation, is 'beyond the senses, beyond understanding, beyond all expression' (*Mandukya Upanishad, Verse 7*; Stace, 1960a, p. 88). Nishida (1987, p. 106) also defined the absolute as 'neither sensory nor rational.' Plotinus anticipated all three mysticisms. The One is 'ineffable' truth, transcending sense perception, the Soul, and finally 'the majesty of Intellect' (§5.3.13.62; Gerson, 2020, p. 127).

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Conclusion

In closing, those who are perplexed by the ideas of experiencing absolute nothingness and apprehending oneness have little recourse to judge the veracity of either. The mysticism of Plotinus depends largely on the coherence of his nondualism; Nishida, as a dialetheist, depends on even less. Effectively, the uninitiated are barred from inquiry unless they should vindicate for themselves the very issues of contention! Thus, we return to our working thesis. The language of religious experience points to a transmutation or intensification of feeling that may obscure—but never annihilate—the duality of subject and object. Furthermore, these experiences reliably generate interpretive and theoretical interest. In so doing, religiosity and mysticism exert a tremendous influence over personal belief, yet the variety of ideas we have considered are neither self-evident nor mutually supportive. These investigations have led me to stand against the empirical method of religious inquiry common to William James, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Kitarō Nishida. Questions of existential importance cannot be settled by declarations of truth in terms of correspondence to observable phenomena, or by sense-destroying affirmations of true contradiction. Sartre ought to have seen, having distinguished knowledge and consciousness, that the fallibility of judgment extends no less to metaphysical abstractions. When attempting to make sense of the most profound human experiences, one appears in the final analysis to rely solely on the consistent application of concepts. Hence, I hold with Aristotle that clarity is a virtue of style. I would only add that coherence is a prerequisite for meaning.

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