

COSMIC ECSTASY AND PROCESS THEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT: The notion that God and the world are mutually interdependent is generally taken to be unique to twentieth-century process theology. Largely, process thinkers have focused on classical theists, rather than the mystics. My thesis, however, is that, centuries before process came along, there were Western mystical concepts stressing that God needed the universe in order to become conscious and complete. In support of my thesis, I will provide a synopsis of the doctrines of God as found in mystics such as Boehme, Dionysius, Eckhart, and then show how Whitehead's aesthetic provides a coherent philosophical psychology of ecstasy.

KEYWORDS: Aesthetic Experience; Causal Efficacy; Consequent Nature of God; Creativity; ecstasy; Feeling; German Romanticism; Nicht; Primordial Nature of God; Reformed Subjectivist Principle; Unconscious Experience

INTRODUCTION

The philosophy of organism, proposed by the noted British mathematician, Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947), in recent years, has evolved into a major movement among Christian thinkers called process theology. In this paper, I wish to examine some of the crucial ways in which this theology may contribute to our understanding of mystical phenomena. Why process theology in particular? I believe that process, to be truly processive, is inherently and implicitly mystical, as I shall illustrate in the course of this essay.

First to note, then, is that Christendom, historically, yielded two competing models of God's relationship, or lack thereof, to the world. There is the majority report, the high God of Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Calvin, Luther, and other major church fathers, the God who is totally separate from and wholly other than the world, the God said to be void of body, parts, passions, immutable, as we find in the creeds and confessions, for example, *The Westminster*. As much of the process literature has been devoted to giving this God a major facelift, I shall say no more about this area of process study.

Often overlooked, is the minority report, small but influential, the mystical tradition. And looking at it from a process perspective opens a new area of investigation. This is not to say that mysticism has gone completely unnoticed in process circles. Hartshorne, for example, speaks very favorably of Boehme, credits him with going a long way toward a dipolar model of God. However, Boehme is quickly dismissed

because his language seems too vague, esoteric, etc.¹

From my readings of Boehme, I would certainly agree, saying yes, we do need to reformulate such concepts into a language more precise and more familiar to ourselves. However, I must also admit that Whitehead's prose has proven very difficult to decipher, by both laity and serious students alike, who find his language too esoteric. And I think what this maybe goes to prove is that the super-technical is the super-mystical.

Getting back to Hartshorne: On the other hand, he, in his numerous other writings, seems to avoid anything smacking of the paranormal, like the seven-year plague. Strange! Hartshorne was a student of Whitehead, and you would think that the latter's concept of essential relatedness would point to a kind of telepathy among every item of the universe.

Whitehead defines any and all experience as aesthetic. Each momentary unity of experience culminates in a "satisfaction." I call this an ecstasy of the moment. And then there is a parallel to Heidegger, who speaks of ecstasies of being. However, Whitehead, I think, has the advantage because he is a lot kinder to science, math, and philosophy. If you want to, he says, you can define philosophy as mystical, because mysticism is an immediate insight into "depths yet unspoken."² Also, I think Whitehead better highlights the fundamentally dynamic nature of our existence. Heidegger seems to see the self as a self-identical entity from birth to death. Whitehead pictures the self as a society of perishing occasions or selves.³

Whitehead defines the task of his Speculative Philosophy as the development of a coherent system of ideas by which every item of our experience can be interpreted.⁴ Accordingly, he claims religion is among the experiential data that philosophy must work into its own scheme;⁵ a powerful mandate, from the master himself, for a process study of mysticism.

Put another way, in the faith-revelatory situation, we can become easily confused. Mystics speak of having had experiences so overwhelming that they can't even begin to describe them. So, yes, we do need a time-out, to sit back and reflect on matters. Brute experience always demands an explanation.⁶

Elsewhere in his writings, however, Whitehead quickly dismisses Indian mysticism as too impersonal. And he writes off Christian mysticism as just a big escape trip. The mystics simply abandon this world to the Evil Prince and go off to some other-worldly, esoteric plane of existence.⁷

Ford seems to share Whitehead's view; and then, in personal communication with

1. Charles Hartshorne and William Reese, *Philosophers Speak of God*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1953, p. 164.

2. Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, New York, Macmillan, 1938, p. 174.

3. John Cobb and David Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition*, Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1976, p. 82.

4. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, New York, Macmillan, 1969.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, New York, The Free Press, 1967, pp. 32-3.

me, insisted that while the mystics may have sought a way out of classical theism, they all capitulated to it in the end. So it is just another form of classical theism, needing no further investigation in process circles.

So, if you look at the overall situation of mysticism in process, it appears similar to what is found in William James, who simply suggested a number of conflicting interpretations, leaving it go at that. Bad process form! For the goal of process should to arrive at a coherent explanation of these experiences, no matter how bizarre they may seem.

Now, at first glance, Ford's interpretation would appear to be correct. Mysticism does seem to be just another static, world-negating form of Christendom. The first-hand literature does picture ecstasy as a state of mind characterized by emotional withdrawal and deadening; for, throughout the first-hand accounts, numerous arid, ascetic passages abound, stressing that harmony or unity with God necessitates the annihilation of the self, as God is said to be an Impersonal Absolute, the complete and total negation of our humanity and our world.

In sharp contrast, I wish to present a radical re-evaluation of ecstasy as essentially world-affirming. Asceticism, mortification of the flesh, and stoical resignation were in fact major aspects of the mystical journey to God; but, I emphasize, only in the initial stages of the quest, largely due to the fact that mystics began their journey deeply imbued in classical theism and its fundamental concept of God as immutable. However, the mystical quest for God underwent a major transition in that the unitive experiences of the ecstasies brought them to an experiential appreciation of the emotional inter-responsiveness that exists between the self, world, and God, which is the true ground of all life, both human and Divine. Ultimately then, the mystical message is that we are saved, redeemed, transformed, by our aesthetic quest from emotional stimulation and gratification.

Perhaps one of the best examples of what I mean is to be found in the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite, who was a major source of inspiration for Medieval mysticism. Throughout his writings, he pursues with a vengeance what he terms his Negative Theology, according to which absolutely anything at all ascribable to creatures must be denied of God.⁸ However, the one thing this absentee, other-worldly image of God enthroned On High, far above and beyond the world, could not explain to his satisfaction is how and why bodies attract one another. So it was that his own experiences of intense passion and fulfillment brought him to a vision of God's radical immanence and all-inclusiveness. Consequently, his writings evidence a major transition to what he terms His Affirmative Theology, in which God and the universe are seen as ontologically one, the latter being an immense aesthetic stream pouring out of God and than back in, and in which God is said to be Eros, the suressential power of connection and unification that pervades throughout all beings, from the lowest to the highest, enabling them to mutually attract one another.⁹ Dionysius, then, strongly anticipates Whitehead's contention that God's massive presence throughout each minuscule seg-

8. Maurice Gandillac, *Oeuvres complete de Pseudo-Denys*, Paris, Editions Montaigne, 1943, p. 189.

9. Ibid., p. 109.

ment of time enables each and every creature to empathically identify with or resonate to God's own unitive feelings, thereby maintaining the aesthetic order of the universe, guaranteeing that total chaos is intrinsically impossible.¹⁰

ECSTASY AS WORLD-AFFIRMING

One of the main reasons why mystics are accused of fostering a world-negating state of mind is that they generally describe ecstasy as a blank, empty state of mind in which they are conscious of nothing, absorbed in nothing at all. However, these accounts have a positive meaning if placed in their proper context: It was the mystics, not Freud, who discovered the subconscious mind; for the fundamental mystical claim is that the discovery of God is the never-ending process of becoming opened to vast inner depths of experience that ordinarily remain beneath the threshold of normal waking consciousness and so are unreachable by either thought or sensation; hence, the truly mystical quest is the yearning for a richer, more radical unitive experience of God, self, and world than that provided by thought, sense, or the more specialized forms of conscious knowing. So we read in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a major 14th century English work, that in ecstasy "thou findest but a darkness and as it were a kind of unknowing. Thou knowest not what, saving that thou feelest in thy will a naked intent unto God."¹¹ The *Epistle of Discretion*, another outstanding English work from that period, states that "God may not be known by reason, may not be gotten by thought nor concluded by understanding. But He may be loved and chosen by the true lovely will of thine heart."¹²

Although ecstasy, then, has neither thought nor sense, and so is blank in that regard, it is not a truly vacuous state of mind; rather, it is filled with vivid, intense emotion. The imageless nature of ecstasy, achieved through the banishment of all thought and sensation, is not a renunciation of the world, but a process whereby the ecstatic becomes free of major distractions that would seriously interfere with the perception of the deepest and most sublime aspects of worldly existence. In Hilton's *Ladder of Perfection*, we read, "Therefore if you desire to discover your soul, withdraw your thought from outward and material things, forgetting if possible your own body and its five senses."¹³

According to Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), mysticism is a complex process of personal growth achieved through an ever-deepening self-awareness. It is true that much of her writing depicts this process as a complete and total withdrawal from experience, as if like a turtle she curls up in her shell and goes to sleep. Often she describes ecstasy in very somnolent terms—the soul is said to be fast asleep, the body is described as being dead.¹⁴ However, the main theme of her book *The Interior Castle* is the introspective journey through the so-called "interior mansions" or subconscious depths of experi-

10. Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, p. 131.

11. Anonymous, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, London, J.M. Watkins, 1950, p. 77.

12. Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism*, New York, Dutton, 1961, p. 58.

13. Walter Hilton, *The Ladder of Perfection*, Baltimore, Penguin Books, 1857, p. 205.

14. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, New York, Image Books, 1961, p. 97.

ence, until God is encountered at the center of the soul. Teresa, then, faults those who live only by the senses, for living solely on “the outer wall of the soul” and warns that they will be turned to pillars of salt for having allowed themselves to become distracted by the senses, from turning inward to appreciate the great beauty of the interior structures of the soul.¹⁵ Her writings, therefore, make it quite clear that although she is not describing normal, waking consciousness, neither is she describing a perceptual blank. Rather, she is absorbed in almost violently dynamic emotive experiences. She likens the emotional impetus of ecstasy to that of a bullet leaving a gun;¹⁶ she stresses that although sensory images are totally absent, the higher levels of ecstasy manifest such depth and fullness of feeling that “the soul here resembles a fire which suddenly breaks forth, spreading flames in all directions and rising up into the air.”¹⁷

Consequently, in the context of this aesthetic-affective framework, God is no longer defined as the Passionless Absolute of classical theism, but instead is said to have deep personal feelings, which are sharable with creatures, and so is experienced as an all-encompassing matrix of sensitivity. Thus, the likening of God to an affectionate, gentle, supra-personal spouse is quite common throughout the mystical literature, as for instance in St. Teresa, St. John of the Cross, Bernard, Blossius, Hugh of St. Victor. This parallels the major contention of process theology, that God is a loving and unlimited companion, “the fellow-sufferer who understands,” as Whitehead puts it.¹⁸ Furthermore, the mystical literature tends to allegorize God in the feminine form. This calls attention to the empathic, receptive, preservative aspects of God, as these traits have been traditionally identified with femininity. One major example here is Henry Suso, another is Dame Julian of Norwich (1324-1415), who speaks of Christ as “Our Kind Mother, our Gracious Mother.”¹⁹ A corresponding theme is to be found in the mysticism of the Eastern Orthodox. For centuries, the Sophia has represented God’s wisdom. She is pictorially represented as a young woman, not a mother; she is the passionate, erotic side of God.²⁰

I believe this tendency to picture God in the feminine serves the purpose of providing a libidinal springboard to an emotionally rich prayer life by assuring that one will come to actually feel, hence resonate to, God’s own emotive states. Again and again the mystics assure us that rather than the dissolution of the self, ecstatic unity means to become a deeply emotionally enriched self by identifying with God’s own feelings. A favorite metaphor used by the mystics to illustrate this point is that of a piece of iron thrown into a fire; this image of ecstasy can be found in the writings of Blossius, John of the Cross, David of Augsburg, St. Bernard, St. Bonaventure, Eckhart, and Tersteegen. Jacob Boehme (1575-1624), one of the founding fathers of the Protestant

15. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 149-50.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 160.

18. Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, p. 413.

19. Paul Jaeger (ed.), *An Anthology of Mysticism*, Westminster, Newman Press, 1950, pp. 94-7.

20. Margaret Mallory, *Christian Mysticism: Transcending Techniques*, Netherlands, Van Gorcum, 1977, p. 73.

mystical tradition, writes of ecstatic unity with God, that we should “behold a bright flaming piece of iron, which of itself is dark and black, and the fire so penetrateth and shineth through the iron, that it gives light. Now, the iron does not cease to be, it is the iron still.”²¹ Five hundred years before Boehme, Richard of St. Victor wrote, “As the difference between iron that is cold and iron that is hot, so is the difference between the soul and soul: between the tepid soul and the soul made incandescent by divine love.”²² In other words, as the coldness and rigidity of a hunk of iron is melted away in a fire, so the icy, stony heart is bought to feel more deeply by coming to resonate God’s own love. Thus, ecstatic unity is a supreme instance of self-affirmation, attained by the gentle perfecting and fulfillment of our potentials from sensitive, appreciatory awareness.

Ecstatics, then, enjoy a direct, immediate awareness of the passive, receptive dimensions of God, and therefore experience themselves to be contained within the very being of God. Meister Eckhart (1260-circa 1328), one of the giants of German Medieval mysticism, although initially quite dualistic in his view of God, eventually overcame his classical heritage and affirmed that the highest joy of the soul is to experience itself as a life literally within God.²³ Numerous other mystics, such as Gerson, Antione de Saint-Esprit, Ribet, St. Gertrude, and Denis le Chartreux, speak of experiencing the infinitely strong but sweet and gentle hug by which God envelopes and absorbs the totality of their being. In her work on Purgatory, one of the most famous on the subject, Catherine of Genoa (1447-1510) contended that even souls in Purgatory are subject to this divine embrace.²⁴

These ecstatic experiences of God’s all-inclusiveness mark a revolution in the Western understanding of God. The classical model of God as a self-sufficient, statically complete perfection was challenged by the mystics; their ecstatic experiences brought them to discover that they are fused to God and therefore contribute value to God. Here, then, is a striking parallel with the process concepts of the relative nature of God (Hartshorne) or the consequent nature of God (Whitehead), which denote God as supreme effect, continually receiving perfection from the world, and which Whitehead describes as a tender care that nothing be lost and includes within itself the sufferings, sorrow, joys, and failures of all actualities, woven into one harmonious unity of feeling.²⁵ And there is also strong parallel here with Whitehead’s concept of the primordial nature of God, which is the ground and source for the consequent, and which is God as unconscious.²⁶

Aside from Dionysius, cited earlier, Eckhart and later Boehme are telling examples of such a major revision taking place right within their own doctrines of God. Numerous dualistic themes are to be found throughout their writings. Eckhart, for example, states

21. Underhill, *Mysticism*, p. 307.

22. Ibid., p. 429.

23. Franz Pfeiffer, *Deutsche Mystiker: Meister Eckhart*, Gottigen, Vandenhoeck, 1914, pp. 618-9.

24. Jaegher (ed.), *An Anthology of Mysticism*, p. 125.

25. Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, pp. 407-8.

26. Ibid., p. 407.

that a cask cannot hold two liquors; so, where creatures go in, God goes out and vice versa; that "God is truth, but things in time are not truth."²⁷ Boehme stresses that flesh is the enemy, that to be saved we must renounce all worldly things.²⁸ But pervasive of an influence as classical theism may have been on them initially, their ecstatic visions of the ontological unity or oneness of God and the universe led them to reject this world-negating model of God. Consequently, each of them ultimately provides a doctrine of God which centers on the notion that creation is God's movement from unconsciousness into consciousness, so that creation is the medium of God's own self-actualization, indeed the body of God.

In Eckhart, such a revolutionary concept of God is to be found in his doctrine of the Trinity, where he says that God would have intuited Himself not as a self but as an empty void, had He not differentiated into Father and Son, through whom He created all things.²⁹ Likewise, in Boehme, God is not merely active, but also passive. Thus, he is quite specific that creation is the process whereby the Nicht or Ungrund, which is God alone in Himself and so knowing neither who not what He is, strives to project Himself into physical actuality in order to feel, find, and behold Himself.³⁰

Thus, the ecstasies' unitive experiences with God correlate with monumental changes in their perceptions of the external world. Just the mere fact alone that ecstasies perceive of God as diffuse in the cosmos provides them with the basis for a spirituality in which purity is not found in a separation from the world, but in and through an ever-deepening involvement with life. That is the central theme in the writings of Henry Suso (circa 1300-circa 1366), a disciple of Eckhart, who, on the basis of instructions received through divine revelation, abandoned a twenty-year obsession with gruesome ascetic practices and went forth from the monastery into the world he had sought so hard to renounce.³¹

Indeed, mystics did not and in fact could not compartmentalize their experiences of God and the world; for, to experience the ontological oneness of God and creation is also to experience the essential unity of all things, a point well illustrated by one of the most profound and purely affectively based illuminations found in the *Theologia Germanica*, where God is said to be "the One and must be the One; and God is All and must be All ... Now he who would hold to God loves all things in the One which is one and All."³² Thus, the mystical literature is replete with accounts of ecstasy centering upon that is sometimes called cosmic consciousness, that is, the transcendence of the subject-object dichotomy, which so dominates our ordinary conscious sensory awareness, such that all barriers, all lines of demarcation between the self and others as well

27. Rufus Jones, *Some Exponents of Mystical Religion*, London, Camelot Press, 1930, p. 101.

28. Jacob Boehme, *Weg zu Christo*, Stuttgart, Fr. Frommans Verlag, 1957b, p. 6.

29. Pfeiffer, *Deutsche Mystiker: Meister Eckhart*, p. 608.

30. Jacob Boehme, *Betrachtung göttlicher Offenbarung*, Stuttgart, Fr. Frommans Verlag, 1957a, p. 66.

31. Henry Suso, *Life of B. Henry Suso by Himself*, trans. Paul Thiriot, London, Everyman's Library, 1896, p. 422.

32. Anonymous, *Theologia Germanica*, trans. S. Winkworth, New York, Pantheon Books, 1949, p. 205.

as between the human and the nonhuman are swept away. The universe is experienced as being composed not of passive, inert, dead matter, but of centers of subjectivity flowing into one another in the giving and receiving which is the Kingdom of God. Mystics, then, often claim a noetic quality for their ecstasies; the level of empathic identification they attain with the universe is so intimate that great secrets are revealed to them, just as secrets are shared with a friend who has become one thing with his or her friend.

This revelation into the fundamental structure and function of all things, however, takes place on an exclusively emotional plane and so defies any form of intellectual analysis or precise cognitive description, as is stressed, for example, in the mysticism of Fox, Boehme, Benedictus of Nursia, Ignatius Loyola, and his co-worker, Franz Xavier.

GERMAN ROMANTICISM

If it was the mystics, not Freud, who discovered the unconscious, it was German Romanticism, not Freud, which made it a fundamental datum in philosophical circles. Essentially, this movement was a rediscovery of mysticism, especially that of Boehme and Eckhart, who were rescued from the closet and made the *cause celebre* in intellectual circles.

For example, Vischer, one of the best-known disciples of Hegel, asks his colleagues: "Have you forgotten that the new philosophy from the school of the old mystics, especially from Jacob Boehme?"³³ Von Baader, one of the first to rediscover Boehme, nicknamed him the "Teutonic Philosopher." He boasts of what great pleasure he gets from scandalizing foolish scholars, with this shoe-maker.³⁴ Another disciple of Hegel, Martensen, who published the first book on Eckhart's religious thought, insisted that "German mysticism is the first form in which German philosophy revealed itself in the history of thought."³⁵

Hegel, introduced to Meister Eckhart through his friend von Baader, finds in Eckhart confirmation for his own philosophy of mind.³⁶ The unconscious, then, is a fundamental dimension of Hegel's thought. He speaks of the *Schacht* (the shaft, pit, mine), or more directly of the "unconscious" (*Bewutlos*). He also refers to a "nightlike abyss," which underlies all imagination and higher thought.³⁷ Self-becoming is essentially the spirit arising from this somnolent state and awakening into consciousness as ego.³⁸

And there is no doubt that Hegel was also influenced by Schelling, deeply imbued

33. Ernst Benz, *The Mystical Sources of German Romantic Philosophy*, trans. B. Reynolds and E. Paul, Allison Park, Pickwick Publications, 1983, p. 2.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

37. G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Subjective Spirit: Being §§ 377-482 of Part Three of The Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences (1830) with Zusätze and Including Two Fragments; A Fragment on the Philosophy of Spirit (1822/5)' and 'The Phenomenology of Spirit (Summer Term, 1825)'*, trans. M. J. Petry, Vol. 2, 3 vols., Holland, D. Riedel, 1978, p. 135.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 119.

in Boehme, who offered into philosophy what no philosopher had dared before: the unconscious. For Schelling, the unconscious is the *sine qua non* of psychic life. He is, then, credited with being the first to undertake a systematic work on this subject. He views all reality, including God, as evolving from unconsciousness into consciousness. Even seemingly impersonal forces, such as light and gravity, have hope, as they eventually evolve into consciousness by becoming human psyches. "Nature," he writes, "begins as unconsciousness and ends up in consciousness."³⁹ And here is a striking parallel with Whitehead's panpsychism, which argues the fundamental building blocks of nature are not bits of passive, inert, dead matter, but momentary unities of experience (actual entities), which attain to consciousness only in higher organisms.

THE PLACE OF ECSTASY IN WHITEHEAD'S AESTHETIC

Although Whitehead never acknowledges any influence from the above-cited sources, key parallels do exist and he is not at all indifferent to the issues they raise. By his own philosophy, he would be compelled to say something like that of himself; for actual entities do not arise out of a vacuum, but out of the past, each representing a fresh synthesis of the past. His aesthetic, then, is of particular relevance to the study of mysticism, because he shares the mystical quest for inner wholeness, which he, like the mystics before him, believes can be achieved only by returning ourselves to the full measure of our experience.⁴⁰ His aesthetic, then, is a reaction against the reductionism of the long-standing traditions of empiricism and behaviorism, which deny the reality of the subconscious and view feelings as an insignificant by-product of sensations. According to his reformed subjectivist principle, the centerpiece in his theory of aesthetics, conscious sensory awareness is not the primary perceptual construct, but belongs to the superficialities of experience. At rock bottom, is unconscious feeling, just as the mystics and Romantics argued. Indeed, the plain facts of ordinary consciousness always point beyond themselves to the reality of subconscious experience; for normal waking consciousness is continually haunted by a vast periphery or penumbra of intense experience in dim apprehension.⁴¹

Sensory experience, despite its predominance in consciousness, is only one special form of experience, merely the end product of a complex integration of nonsensory events or feelings within the brain and body.⁴² The words "nonsensory" and "feeling" are used quite deliberately here. For example, the neurons firing in our nervous systems are responsive to one another, can excite each other, yet in themselves lack any form of sensory apparatus and so are void of all sensation, though their mutual sensitivity suggests they can certainly feel one another.

39. Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism (1800)*, trans. Peter Heath, Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1978, p. 217.

40. Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, New York, Mentor, 1948, p. 54.

41. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, p. 270.

42. Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, pp. 188-9.

So, when we see green, for example, what actually happens is that first we empathize, though subconsciously, with the datum at hand, thereby having greenly feelings or feeling greenly, and then, by projection, we see green out there. In other words, the visual impression of green is the result of the literal incorporation into ourselves of the datum at hand, followed by the synthesis of countless feelings in the brain, body, and nervous system, of which we ordinarily are not conscious, that finally culminates in the sensory impression of green. Sensations, then are in point of fact qualifications of empathic affective tone, although normally this relationship lacks vividness in consciousness.⁴³

This conception may provide an explanation for the fundamentally emotive character of mystical introspection. That is, if consciousness were fully turned back upon itself, then it would become exclusively preoccupied with a direct apprehension of those feelings from which sensory experience is later derived. In such a case, the perceiver might undergo an overwhelming experience of unity. The reason why we ordinarily perceive of the world in terms of a rigid subject-object dichotomy is that our level of conscious awareness, because it is the end product of countless intervening nonsensory events, is numerous steps away from the original absorption of the datum that gave rise to these feelings, in the first place. If, however, this process were reversed, if consciousness were turned far enough back on itself, then the subconscious empathic dimensions of our psyches, by which we absorb others into ourselves, might enter into consciousness awareness. The whole subject-object dichotomy would then disappear; the perceiver and the perceived would be experienced as one.

But can consciousness be turned back on itself, as the mystics claimed? Can we, according to Whitehead's aesthetic, even become conscious of those psychical operations which, by nature and definition, are beneath the threshold of conscious awareness?

We need be sensitive to the fact that the primacy of unconscious experience can lead some to assume that the conscious mind, preoccupied at it is with thought and sense, is somehow alienated, unimportant, inauthentic. A Heidegger would certainly agree with that. Whitehead, however, sees the mind as a unity, meaning consciousness is not at all alienated from the unconscious, each being mutually sensitive to the other. One example of this mutuality, of consciousness passing back into the unconscious, informing it, is that each self, each momentary unity of experience, begins with an unconscious absorption of the past, and yes, it would, then, include the conscious experiences of its predecessors. Another example, is that there is no dispassioned intellect in Whitehead's system, just "intellectual feelings." And that's because there is an affective dimension present and active in all intellectual activities. If you watch people doing math, science, etc., you will see all sorts of facial expressions, all kinds of emotion permeating the whole atmosphere.

In process, the unconscious is not a factor or dimension of our alienation, but what overcomes all such alienation. Cobb and Griffin, then, do, on one hand sympathize with Heidegger, at least with his concept of being "thrown" into the world.⁴⁴ The first phase

43. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, p. 246.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 350.

of self-creation, the dative or conformal phase, is the birthing subject overwhelmed with the chaos of the world pouring in, brute empathy. And let me emphasize that at this stage, there really is no self present, just feelings whirling around, like, say, cloths in a washer or dryer. And then, through empathizing with God's initial aim or goal for this occasion, the mess begins to settle down, become ordered. And then, a kind of crude subject begins to appear, which makes the final decision as to what it will become. So we do start out absolutely helpless and without a definite plan at work. However, ultimately, Heidegger is seen as too negative, because he seems to accept the lonely isolation of the human being as fully real, whereas process looks to the unconscious as the source of our internal relatedness.⁴⁵

So, getting back to my above question, my answer is, Yes! Let me go into more detail.

Here is where Whitehead's distinction between Appearance and Reality comes to the fore. Sensory perception, Appearance, is defined as "blunt truth" or "clear and distinct appearance."⁴⁶ Aesthetic truths, Reality, however, are not sensory truths, are not clear and distinct; for they are the dim, massive truths from behind the frontier where the precision of consciousness fails.⁴⁷ Aesthetic experience, then, is the enrichment of our emotional lives, by the elicitation into radiant consciousness of this penumbral world of feelings surging through relevant realities in a context far less articulate than those factors ordinarily disclosed in sensory awareness. Because aesthetic experience unloosens feelings from deep beneath the threshold of conscious experience, it is loaded with heavy, shifting, indeterminate meanings; it is unbounded experience; that is, it is very brief, easily lost, totally unanalyzable, and therefore ineffable.

Thus, Whitehead's concept of aesthetic experience, although formulated in secular, philosophical categories rather than religious ones, is essentially the mystical cloud of darkness and unknowing, in which no clear images are perceived but instead a new dimension of inner reality is received. The kind of experience, then, that Whitehead labels as aesthetic can never be divorced from deep religious connotations; for, what he is pointing to is a revitalization of the sense of mystery, both within and around ourselves, and therefore the experience of living faith.

Turning to his doctrine of God may further deepen this connection between Whitehead and spirituality. Mystics claim to have experienced a direct revelation of God's secret passions; and, in Whitehead's aesthetic, this claim receives a precise philosophical rationale. According to his doctrine of creativity, each momentary occasion of experience, each actual entity must begin with an initial aim from God for what it is to become, since God alone is the sole source of all novelty, as only God can conjure up conceptual feelings (imagined ideas) that do not depend upon prior physical feelings (perceptions of concrete manners of fact).⁴⁸ The mystics, then, are not misleading us

45. Cobb and Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition*, p. 18.

46. Ibid., p. 82.

47. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, p. 350.

48. Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, p. 104 & 55.

when they claim to have seen God. Frankly, from the perspective of Whitehead, it is surprising that this does not happen more frequently; for each and every aspect of the universe, however trivial or ugly it may be is a least potentially revelatory of God since the initial aims from which they arose are always a finite reflection of the divine harmonization of God's own experience of the world. Also, God as chief exemplification of relativity is God present throughout the entire universe, in the fullest and most perfect way possible. Nevertheless, we may not be consciously aware of God through the initial aim, even though we may be conscious of some aim for novelty. There may be no need, no real reason to become conscious of the internal dimensions of God, since the aim is directed toward the world. But, because God is the lure for feeling, continually striving to broaden and deepen our level of conscious awareness, there may be special aesthetic aims of God whose content is to focus on the source of the aim. In these cases, the actualization of the initial aim would mean that we would become consciously aware of God as an omnipresent infinite harmony containing all lesser harmonies.

There is, however, a significant difference between how the mystics understand God to function in ecstasy as opposed to Whitehead's concept of God's role in aesthetic experience. In mysticism, the concept of a higher side or apex of the soul is generally introduced as something innately given, so that God, in luring the soul into ecstatic unity, functions as a liberator of repressed unconscious capacities. The initial aims for occasions are possibilities for relevant novelty and not merely the recovery of lost perfection. God's aim is not only for the maximum incorporation of unconscious feelings into consciousness, but also for us to continually change our unconscious wants, needs, desires in order to attain a larger, grander beauty which is depth, breadth, and intensity of feeling.

Consequently, Whitehead understands the conscious-unconscious dichotomy in sense radically different from that found among humanistic psychologists and psychoanalytically oriented thinkers, due to the fact there their concept of the unconscious is largely indebted to mysticism, although, of course they do not readily acknowledge this. Humanistic psychology assumes that the latent potentials of the subconscious are instinctoid. Maslow, for example, argues that his hierarchy of needs is constitutional or hereditary.⁴⁹ Jung assumes his archetypes are inherited. In Whitehead, however, potentials are not some innate property of the individual but arise in the context of the total situation, including God. They are, as I just emphasized, possibilities for relevant novelty rather than the mere satisfaction and fulfillment of our instinctoid heritage.

Really, on the grounds of Whitehead's aesthetic, there is no way into the subconscious, save through creativity. Consciousness is the extreme form of selective emphasis, the grasp of contrasts, and therefore requires figure-ground relationships.⁵⁰ That means there is always a very limited range of experience in clear, sharp focus that stands out over and against dimmer, more massive dimensions of experience. To transcend this dichotomy requires for more than the analyst merely lifting a repression; it requires

49. Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, New York, Harper and Row, 1954, p. 136.

50. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, pp. 270-1.

God, because, as the sole source of all creativity, only God can provide potentials that, by virtue of their relevant novelty, stand in sufficient tension with ongoing unconscious feeling so as to bring them into consciousness by virtue of this contrast.

Now I argue that there is absolutely no way we can conceive of these creative acts on God's part, by which our consciousness is expanded, without the possibility of cosmic consciousness; for Whitehead is quite specific that all of God's creative acts are intended to promote unitive experiences in order to perfect the harmony of the universe.⁵¹ Certainly it is true that Whitehead had provided a strong metaphysical basis for such mystical phenomena. According to his principle of relativity, all entities, including God, enjoy real internal relationships with all others. That is to say, the emotive lives of all entities are absorbed either directly or indirectly into the real internal constitutions of all others.⁵² In the context of Whitehead's aesthetic, then, there are no reservations about cosmic consciousness; it is neither a mere cultural epiphenomenon brought on by cruel and unusual sensory deprivation, nor a capricious act of grace on God's part; rather, it denotes a fundamental operation throughout the natural order; it represents the most ancient and primal, hence the purest, form of experience, by virtue of which the universe is a genuine harmony, rather than a chaotic heap of monads who lead separate, isolated lives, encapsulated within themselves.

Thus, Whitehead gives every indication that coming to consciously experience our essential relatedness, as did the mystics, realizes major aesthetic values. Aesthetic experience is rich, full experience; and in order for experience to be rich and full, it must include the significance of things; and in order for experience to include significance, it must be an apprehension of the relatedness or interconnectedness of things; and that means all genuine aesthetic experience entails perception in the mode of causal efficacy.⁵³

This perception, emphasizes Whitehead, is essentially nonsensory experience. One line of argument he advance here is that the purposive behavior of very primitive organisms, with no real sensory apparatus or cognition, shows evidence of causal feeling. Another concerns our identification with our bodies. We say that we see with our eyes, hear with our ears, etc. Now, our experience of connectedness with these organs, upon which our sensory experience depends, is not itself a sensory experience. We do not see the eye make us see; we feel the eye make us see. So the brute facts of sensory experience always point back down beneath themselves to a more aboriginal, purely affective experience of connectedness. A final argument is that the empiricists are incorrect in viewing causality as exclusively a sensory affair by identifying it with the learned associations of familiar sensa. If such were the case, then the omission of familiar sensa should lead to a decrease in causal awareness; but, in point of actual fact, when sense perceptions fade away, we are overwhelmed by vague feelings of influence from vague things around us. Every way of omitting sensa still leaves us prey to causal feeling and

51. Ibid., pp. 324-5.

52. Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, pp. 171-2.

53. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, p. 383.

actually heightens its dominance in conscious awareness.⁵⁴ And this again goes to prove that the source of our experience of connectedness is not sensation, but, as the mystics claimed, emotive tones normally only dimly grasped by consciousness.

It is incorrect, then, to interpret Whitehead's thought as purely a product of our secular age, although process writers are wont to do just that. In point of fact, his aesthetic is a contemporary defense of the conviction stated centuries earlier by his mystical predecessors that feelings make truth claims deeper than those possible by thought or sense, that emotions are not just things stirring around in our heads and no place else, as they are often falsely depicted in much Western theology, but rather are the very vehicles which bridge the gulf between subjectivity (the in-here) and all the rest of reality (the out-there). But, as I have just indicated, Whitehead's aesthetic does far more than merely validate the mystics' nonsensory experiences of unity as an accurate impression of reality. Because cosmic consciousness is a major dimension of any and all experience that is genuinely aesthetic, it represents the ultimate fulfillment of our capacities for spiritual growth.

In sum, the value of Whitehead's aesthetic is that it arises out of actual, ongoing conditions of human spirituality in this world. His aesthetic theory has a religious present and a deeply mystical past. It was not created out of nothing, but out of the need to find ways to meet the clamant call of humanity for a divine utterance. Thus, the value of his aesthetic is that it provides a coherent philosophical psychology of mysticism that would interpret ecstasy in continuity with ordinary experience. Consequently, his aesthetic would rescue ecstasy from the negative interpretations of authorities such as Tart and Underhill, who unduly confine mystical phenomena to an elite subset of individuals assumed to be either psychotic or high-minded spiritual geniuses. In contrast, the Whiteheadian has every reason to claim that ecstasy has meaning and relevance to all persons, because it represents a return to a more authentic level of existence, by reintegrating consciousness, with the deepest and most primal forms of experience that are to be found in each and every one of us.

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54. Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, p. 204.

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