

## The Mystical Debate: Constructivism and the Resurgence of Perennialism

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### Recommended Citation

Tyson, Adam "The Mystical Debate: Constructivism and the Resurgence of Perennialism."  
*Intermountain West Journal of Religious Studies* 4, no. 1 (2012). <http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/imwjournal/vol4/iss1/5>

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## THE MYSTICAL DEBATE: CONSTRUCTIVISM AND THE RESURGENCE OF PERENNIALISM

Mysticism is at the heart of a pivotal and ongoing academic debate, yet it can be an uncomfortable subject to explore, mainly due to the myriad definitions for the term *mysticism* that one encounters. Etymologically, the “myst” prefix has led to the colloquial use of mysticism as denoting practices, traditions, and beliefs that are simply shrouded in mystery. As Walter Stace puts it, “[it] is absurd that ‘mysticism’ should be associated with what is ‘misty’ . . . there is nothing misty, foggy, vague or sloppy about mysticism,”<sup>1</sup> rather, it is characterized by vivid experience. Academically, “mysticism” has been narrowed to describe “mystical experience” in no small part due to William James’ landmark exposition of mysticism in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Mysticism is anchored in experience, namely, mystical experience, and as a result, it is not one particular tradition, but a theme that can be found in any religious tradition correctly deemed mystical.

Yet, to this day, what is termed “mystical experience” is still a hotly debated subject. On the modern landscape of this debate, there are at least two notable ideological camps which stand in opposition to one another: the perennialists

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1. Walter Stace, “The Nature of Mysticism,” in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, ed. William L. Rowe and William J. Wainwright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 363.

and the constructivists. Two experiential events which may be considered mystical, in the perennialist sense, are at the heart of the debate between these two ideological stances: Absolute Unitary Being (AUB) and the Pure Consciousness Event (PCE). Perennialists tend to claim that these events represent universal traits of mystical experience, while constructivists argue that there are no such universal traits. This paper seeks to conduct an exploration of Perennialism, and Constructivism as a response, after which the PCE and AUB events are analyzed in the context of that debate. Further evidence will then be drawn from mystical traditions to support the prevalence of PCE and AUB experiences. As a result, these two events will serve as a perennialist counterargument to constructivism and its mystical relativism, demonstrating the persevering utility of a perennialist approach to mystical experience.

## I. PERENNIALISM AND THE CONSTRUCTIVIST RESPONSE

*Perennialism* can accurately be described as the dominant treatment of mysticism from William James' exploration of mysticism in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, up through the constructivist response in the 1970s and 1980s. The name is primarily derived from Aldous Huxley's work which labeled mysticism as "the perennial philosophy." Perennialists saw mystical experience as representing "a direct contact with a (variously defined) absolute principle."<sup>2</sup> Since this "contact" can be found existing within several traditions, "Religious traditions, they argued, all teach a cross-culturally similar philosophy that does not change over the centuries, i.e., a perennial philosophy."<sup>3</sup> Evelyn Underhill posits a definition of mysticism that depicts this perennialist understanding of mysticism's role in religion as a whole. Her definition describes mysticism as "the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with the transcendent order; whatever be the theological formula

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2. Robert K. C. Forman, "Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting," in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy*, ed. Robert K. C. Forman (New York: Oxford UP, 1997), 31.

3. *Ibid.*

under which that order is understood.”<sup>4</sup> The concept that mysticism is unitive survives through modern definitions, but what is problematic with Underhill’s definition is the use of the term “innate.” It is the innateness of the experience, as well as the assumption that a transcendent order actually exists, that has inspired the constructivists to vehemently reject such a definition of mysticism.

Constructivists, such as Steven Katz, Hans Penner, and Robert Gimello, put forth their pluralist theories in response to perennialism, each of which will be briefly discussed below. Each one has perceived perennialism as an academically accepted view. *Constructivism* is by no means exclusive to the discussion of mystical experience. It is an academic point of view that is closely related to pluralism, relativism, and subjectivism. Put simply, constructivism asserts that the individual constructs the surrounding world through his or her understanding, explaining experience and perception with mental constructs. What this view means, in terms of how mystical experience is to be interpreted, is that 1) there is no objective, numinous reality with which the mystic can interact or identify, and 2) there is no innate experience independent of mental and cultural constructs.

Steven T. Katz’s *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* is a compilation of articles with primarily constructivist views on mystical experience, and contains an attack on the idea of an objective reality. His own article in this compilation, “The Conservative Character of Mystical Experience,” expresses the constructivist distaste for claims to a transcendent reality:

The metaphysical naivety that seeks for, or worse, asserts, the truth of some meta-ontological schema in which either the mystic or the student of mysticism is said to have reached some phenomenological ‘pure land’ in which he grasps transcendent reality in its pristine pre-predicative state is to be avoided.<sup>5</sup>

There is good reason, from the constructivist’s point of view, why such

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4. Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1999), xiv.

5. Steven T. Katz, “The Conservative Character of Mystical Experience,” in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, ed. Steven T. Katz (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983) 41.

assertions of essential truth are so undesirable: reality itself is relative. Hans Penner elaborates on this point in terms of mystical experience, declaring that “[t]he basic assumption of the mystical relativist can be described as follows: what is meaningful, what is in accord with reality and not in accord with reality, shows itself in the *context* that a mystical system has.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, it is the particular religious or cultural system that determines what “reality” is as well as how to achieve mystical union with it. This is opposed to one universal reality which is experienced through multiple mystical paths as many perennialists would argue. Nailing down this point, Gimello bluntly asserts that “what various mysticisms have most in common is their fidelity to their respective traditions.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, the constructivist approach to mysticism, or mystical relativism, denies an objective reality, and as a result, any interaction with it by the mystic. This goes hand in hand with the second assertion of mystical relativism, that there is no innate experience independent of mental and cultural constructs.

## II. THE PCE AND AUB

Both the Pure Consciousness Event (PCE) and Absolute Unitary Being (AUB) are well worth a thorough exposition in order to evaluate their respective places amongst the Perennialist and Constructivist debate. Together they cover a range of experiences that are commonly considered mystical.

### A. ABSOLUTE UNITARY BEING

The neuroscientists Eugene d’Aquili and Andrew Newberg are responsible for the creation of the term *Absolute Unitary Being*.<sup>8</sup> Roughly speaking, AUB may be described as “theistic mysticism,” a mysticism that is deity-based. AUB is achieved after a journey from dualism to monism; it typically entails the soul, or the self, arriving at union with a divine entity or transcendent reality. Newberg

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6. Hans H. Penner, “The Mystical Illusion,” in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (see note 5), 93.

7. Robert Gimello, “Mysticism in Its Contexts” in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (see note 5), 84.

8. Eugene G. D’Aquili, and Andrew B. Newberg, *The Mystical Mind: Probing the Biology of Religious Experience* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1999), 95–96.

and d'Aquili describe this ascent in emotional and aesthetic terms in that its achievement is coincidental with ecstatic emotions and an overwhelming sense of wholeness, or unity. The concept of AUB is problematic from a constructivist standpoint because of its consideration of a numinous reality, or supernal being to whom the mystic ascends.

### **B. PURE CONSCIOUSNESS EVENT**

Robert K.C. Foreman is responsible for the term *Pure Consciousness Event*,<sup>9</sup> and has written extensively about it in addition to having experienced mystical states himself. Like AUB, the PCE is the result of a journey from dualism to monism, however, if AUB can be described as the ascension of the soul towards unity with the divine, the PCE is an inward journey of the soul into itself, achieving what is often termed the “void,” or pure awareness. The PCE is problematic from a constructivist standpoint, since there can be no unmediated experiences such as the supposed cognitive blankness of a PCE. The cognitive status of mystical experience is a subject of much debate and aside from individual claims, there is no way of knowing whether the mind ever is truly rid of conceptions as the PCE is purported to be. C. PCE and AUB within the Perennialist/Constructivist Debate

Yet for all this debate, a major fallacy is being committed on the part of both perennialists and constructivists; it is the importance that is placed on assessing the “reality” of mystical experiences. An ethnographer does not need to assert his own belief in the religious system of the culture under study in order to appreciate the importance of religious belief and its impactful role in society; likewise, one need not accept that the mystic is uniting with a numinous reality, but simply that the mystic claims to unite with such a reality. With this in mind, a perennialism that asserts the essentiality of a particular trend in mystical experience would appear misguided. Similarly, a constructivism that seeks to do away with the categorization of similarities between traditions would also ap-

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9. Forman, “Introduction,” in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*, 8.

pear misguided, ignoring the many accounts of mystical experiences saturating religious texts throughout history. Both the PCE and AUB can be validated in a pragmatic fashion. First, time tested definitions of mystical experience can be applied to both, and second, mystical traditions provide striking evidence for the categorization into either Pure Consciousness Event or Absolute Unitary Being.

First of all, this is no arbitrary division of mystical experience; mysticism is often divided into categories of “external” and “internal.” Walter Stace, a noted scholar of mysticism, divides the experience into “extrovertive” and “introvertive” mystical experience:

One may be called extrovertive mystical experience, the other introvertive mystical experience. Both are apprehensions of the One, but they reach it in different ways. The extrovertive way looks outward and through the physical senses into the external world and finds the One there. The introvertive way turns inward, introspectively, and finds the One at the bottom of the self, at the bottom of the human personality.<sup>10</sup>

Accordingly, AUB can be described as extrovertive and PCE as introvertive. As stated above, both are monistic, or in Stace’s Neoplatonic words, “apprehensions of the One,” but the respective paths indicate an external journey in AUB, and an internal journey in PCE. While these are different varieties of mystical experience, they share three significant traits that help define them as such: ineffability, a noetic quality, and a unitive perspective on reality.

William James labeled “ineffability” as the first characteristic of mystical experience and it still holds today, although it requires some further elaboration. First and foremost, if mystical experiences were truly ineffable, there would be no accounts to speak of. Although the experience is ineffable, descriptions of what it is not—negative descriptions—are commonly used to explain a mystical experience. James describes this by stating:

The handiest of the marks by which I classify a state of mind as mystical is negative. The subject of it immediately says that it

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10. Stace, “Nature of Mysticism,” in *Philosophy of Religion*, 367.

defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words.<sup>11</sup>

Yet—and not necessarily to the contrary—Ninian Smart provides valuable insight as to how negative descriptions are not strictly ineffable. He writes that “such terms as ‘indescribable’, ‘ineffable’ and so on are themselves performatives also, and help to *express* an off-scale sublimity beyond the usual rungs of the ladder of value and joy.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, ineffability, in the case of mysticism is not to be considered *strict* ineffability, but rather, it simply necessitates the use of “performatives” such as negative descriptions and metaphors.

The motivating force behind an attempt to describe mystical experience, however, often results from another one of James’ “marks” of a mystical experience, which he calls its “noetic quality.” By this, he means that certain knowledge is imparted through the mystical experience. In other words, a transcendent experience provides knowledge to the participant. James describes this quality as follows:

Although so similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time.<sup>13</sup>

To highlight two aspects of this noetic quality, James first describes the experience as one that communicates knowledge in a way that goes beyond the “discursive intellect.” He then describes this knowledge as carrying weight even after the event of transcendence.

Often the knowledge that is imparted through mystical consciousness is a

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11. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902; Wikisource, 2011), lectures XVI and XVII, [http://en.wikisource.org/w/index.php?title=The\\_Varieties\\_of\\_Religious\\_Experience/Lectures\\_XVI\\_and\\_XVII&oldid=912487](http://en.wikisource.org/w/index.php?title=The_Varieties_of_Religious_Experience/Lectures_XVI_and_XVII&oldid=912487).

12. Ninian Smart, “The Purification of Consciousness,” in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (see note 5), 123–124.

13. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, lectures XVI and XVII.

monistic representation of reality, bringing one to a third characteristic of mystical experience: a unitive perspective of reality. William J. Wainwright declares that “[m]ystical consciousness . . . is ‘unitive’” and that in this consciousness “[d]istinctions are transcended or overcome (although the *way* in which they are overcome varies from one type of mystical experience to another).”<sup>14</sup> As Wainwright notes, and this paper has stated above, the path differs from tradition to tradition, but the goal in each is monistic. AUB is unitive in an extrovertive fashion, blending the self with a supernal presence, while PCE is unitive through the utter lack of distinction achieved in the state of Pure Consciousness.

D’Aquili and Newberg place religious experiences and aesthetic states of unity at parallel spots on an ascending scale in their article titled, “The Neuropsychology of Aesthetic, Spiritual, and Mystical States.”<sup>15</sup> William James, like d’Aquili and Newberg, was interested in the emotional sensation of a totally unitive mystical experience, declaring that it is “[i]n this peculiarity” that “mystical states are more like states of feeling than like states of intellect.”<sup>16</sup> Within this spectrum, as the felt sense of unity increases, the emotional content of a corresponding religious state does as well. This spectrum consists of levels of classical aesthetics ranging from disunity to unity, or “*Integritas*.”<sup>17</sup> Each rung on this aesthetic ladder has a corresponding emotional state, and type of religious experience associated with it. To exemplify this, Newberg describes “[a] transitional phase between aesthetic and religious experience,” that is, “romantic love, which might be characterized by the phrase, ‘It is bigger than both of us.’”<sup>18</sup> In this situation, aesthetic appreciation can be seen to coincide with the awe and corresponding emotional content in the religious sense. Newberg describes the ascent up the spectrum: “As one moves up this continuum, one moves through

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14. Stace, “Nature of Mysticism,” in *Philosophy of Religion*, 356.

15. Eugene d’Aquili and Andrew Newberg, “The Neuropsychology of Aesthetic, Spiritual and Mystical States,” *Zygon* 35, no. 1 (March 2000).

16. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, lectures XVI and XVII.

17. Eugene d’Aquili and Andrew Newberg, “The Neuropsychology of Aesthetic, Spiritual and Mystical States,” *Zygon* 35, no. 1 (March 2000): 43.

18. *Ibid.*

the experience of numinosity, or religious awe,”<sup>19</sup> until “the self becomes as a drop of water in the ocean of reality.”<sup>20</sup> This final stage is what he and d’Aquili term AUB. For example, one of the ascending states “involves an elated sense of well-being and joy, in which the universe is perceived to be fundamentally good and all its parts are sensed to be related in a unified whole.”<sup>21</sup> D’Aquili and Newberg place AUB at the very pinnacle of an emotional-aesthetic spectrum of consciousness:

There is a progressive blurring of the boundaries between entities until one finally moves into Absolute Unitary Being (AUB). AUB is characterized by absolute unity. There are no longer any discrete entities that relate to each other. The boundaries of entities within the world disappear, and even the self-other dichotomy is totally obliterated. In AUB there is no extension of space or duration of time.<sup>22</sup>

### III. NEWBERG AND D’AQUILI’S AUB IN MYSTICAL TRADITIONS

Newberg and d’Aquili’s model is worth being put to the test; whether mystics, their texts and traditions, reflect this state in all its emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual manifestations can determine if the model has pragmatic use or not. Neoplatonic thought appears to affirm all of these in the state of Absolute Unitary Being. Plotinus, a philosopher-mystic of 3rd century Alexandria, expounds the existence of a singular Unity, which he also terms the One, or even God, from which all existence both emanates from, and shares a part in. Speaking of the One he uses the highest Platonic Forms as points of reference, “while both The Good and The Beautiful participate in the common source, The One precedes both.”<sup>23</sup> The One, then, is beyond even the highest platonic forms, that

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19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., 47.

21. Ibid., 42.

22. Ibid., 43.

23. Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna and B.S. Page (Digireads.com Publishing, 2009), 317.

of “The Good” and “The Beautiful,” since form denotes difference, the highest Unity conceivable, the One, must necessarily be above even these forms. Here, Newberg and d’Aquili’s sense of wholeness accompanying AUB could not be more apparent. Since the Unity must remain perfect, the self is necessarily a part of this unity, and is capable of merging with the One through the very contemplation of it. Plotinus recognizes that the pinnacle of being, AUB, conveys a strong emotional content, characterized by an ecstatic love. He writes of the union of the soul with the One, “Suppose the soul to have attained: the highest has come to her, or rather has revealed its presence . . . here is no longer a duality but a two in one . . . it is as lover and beloved here . . . so huge the happiness she has won to.”<sup>24</sup> From this, one can see the aesthetic perfection in that the One is beyond even beauty itself, and the ecstatic emotional content of the soul’s merging from a spiritual belief in and contemplation of this concept.

From this analysis, Christian, Muslim, and Hindu mysticism can be evaluated similarly where the concept of a monistic God-concept, just like that of the One, exists. Meister Eckhart, a Dominican scholar, declares God to be “That being in comparison with which nothing better can be conceived”<sup>25</sup>— Plotinus’ very concept of the One having survived an entire millennium. Sufi belief revolves around the concept of uniting the soul with its infinitely divine origin, Allah. Of the same infinite scale as Plotinus’ “One,” is the Upanishadic conceptualization of Brahman who “though one, takes new forms in all things that live. He is within all, and is also outside.”<sup>26</sup>

Brahman is also Atman, or the divine self, in the Upanishads. Several Hindu traditions borrow this concept, though under different names. In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna declares, “Nothing is higher than I am; . . . all that exists is woven on me . . .”<sup>27</sup> Within various traditions, the self is capable of uniting

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24. *Ibid.*, 454

25. Meister Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. Oliver Davies (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1994), 258.

26. *Katha Upanishad*, part 5, in *The Upanishads*, trans. Juan Mascaró (London: Penguin Books, 1965), 64.

27. *Bhagavad Gita*, trans. Barbara Miller (London: Bantam, 1986), 74.

with a deity of the same infinite-beyond-conception scale.

Newberg and d'Aquili would need to confront the constructivist criticism that there is no one transcendent reality which is being encountered objectively from each tradition. Fortunately they would rather “maintain an attitude of humility, rather than presume that our understanding of neurophysiology can give us an intrinsic knowledge of the relationship between ‘reality’ and consciousness.”<sup>28</sup> Their model is just that, a mere model. Even though it is derived from brain imaging scans and is empirically grounded, there is hardly certainty regarding the correlation of the imaging to actual experience. Nonetheless, this model illuminates several useful, inter-causal links between aesthetics, emotion, and spiritual states, describing the progression towards AUB in terms familiar to the mystic.

#### IV. FOREMAN’S PCE IN MYSTICAL TRADITIONS

The Pure Consciousness Event can be defined as a mystical experience as determined by the criteria mentioned above: ineffability, the knowledge-imparting noetic quality, and the presentation of a unitive model of reality. Robert K.C. Foreman cites examples to illustrate just what the PCE is as its ineffable nature evades description. In fact pure consciousness can be described as a state which does not seek description while engaged. The yogic philosophy of Patanjali perhaps exemplifies this state best. It refers to an inward journey, beyond the layers of selfhood, towards what is seen as the true self, *purusa*, the eternal soul. Patanjali describes this goal as the “enlightenment of the distinction between the pure Purusa and Buddhi”<sup>29</sup> where Buddhi is the lesser self, the Ego. Patanjali’s path to one-ness is described in terms of going into one’s self, where “the mind rests in itself”<sup>30</sup> and “the awareness of one’s individual self gets lost.”<sup>31</sup>

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28. D'Aquili and Newberg, *The Mystical Mind*, 120.

29. Swami Hariharananda Aranya, *Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali*, trans. P.N. Mukerji (Albany: SUNY Press, 1984), 7.

30. *Ibid.*, 7.

31. *Ibid.*, 8.

This inward journey is seen elsewhere in Hindu philosophy and religious tradition. For example, in the *Baghavad Gita*, speaking of what essentially appears to be *purusa*, Krishna remarks, “[e]ternal and supreme is the infinite spirit; its inner self is called inherent being” and it “is the source of creatures’ existence.”<sup>32</sup> The Upanishads echo in declaring, “all things find their peace in their inmost Self . . . thus all things find their rest in Atman, the Supreme Spirit,”<sup>33</sup> thus indicating a parallel between Atman and *purusa* as the pure, true self. In essence, the PCE may be described as the consciousness resting in itself.

Yet, the PCE is by no means limited to Hindu tradition, it finds itself in many Buddhist manifestations, particularly in the concept of *sunyata*, or nothingness. Specifically, the no-thought of Dzogchen in Tibetan Buddhism, like the aforementioned Hindu traditions finds this state of consciousness to be the natural, primordial state. Foreman even asserts that Meister Eckhart “discusses what he calls *gezucken*, a state of being enraptured without sensory or intellectual content” which he “understands as a transient encounter with what he calls the innermost within the soul . . . wherein God exists in purity.”<sup>34</sup>

In his *Mathnawi*, Rumi presents a similarly inward approach to God, “O God, do Thou reveal to the soul that place where speech is growing without letters, That the pure soul may make of its head a foot (fly headlong) towards the far-stretching expanse of non-existence.”<sup>35</sup> This state of consciousness is not necessarily associated with relative emotions like AUB, yet it is still accurately described as mystical; since the PCE is characterized by a lack of thought or distinction, it is inherently ineffable – it imparts knowledge about the nature of the soul and of reality, and this knowledge is of a reality unified through lack of distinction. Constructivist critics, however, have much to say on the matter of the Pure Consciousness Event.

32. *Bhagavad Gita*, 79.

33. *Prasna Upanishad*, fourth question (see note 26), trans. Mascaró, 72.

34. Daniel C. Matt, “The Concept of Nothingness in Jewish Mysticism,” in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness* (see note 2), 146.

35. Jalal al-Din Rumi, Maulana, *The Mathnawí of Jalálu'ddín Rúmí*, ed. and trans. by Reynold A. Nicholson (London: Trustees of the E.J.W. Gibb Memorial, 1926), 168.

## V. CONSTRUCTIVIST CRITIQUE OF THE PCE AND FOREMAN'S RESPONSE

Constructivists claim that there are no un-mediated experiences. What is here meant by “mediation” is actually two-fold; mediation of experience occurs on the individual level and, more broadly, on the cultural level. First, the individual interprets every perception and experience, forming mental constructs in the process. Secondly, cultural constructs and religious systems provide the language and concepts that the individual uses to interpret his or her experiences. Steven Katz describes these mediators as “forms of consciousness which the mystic brings to an experience” which “set structured and limiting parameters on what the experience will be.”<sup>36</sup> He simplifies this, stating that “[p]re-mystical consciousness informs the mystical consciousness.”<sup>37</sup>

First, Foreman responds to the undecided issue that it is the language that comes before the experience, Katz may “be accused of committing the fallacy of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*,” and iterates that “[t]he relationship between experience and expectation may be contingent, not necessary.”<sup>38</sup> In other words, just because a mystic’s experience of a PCE comes after a lifetime of culture and language, does not necessarily mean that those factors informed the experience. Though it may seem as though Foreman is somewhat dismissing the obvious impact of culture and language on one’s experience, there is actually good reason to stand his ground on this point. The very nature of a PCE is defined by a lack of distinction or discursive reasoning. No matter what language brings one to a PCE, ideally, it is the same experience.

Hans Penner echoes Katz’s point writing that “[w]e must remember that all we have for understanding mysticism is language, not experience” and that it “is not mystical experience which explains mystical traditions or languages, rather

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36. Steven T. Katz, “The Conservative Character of Mystical Experience,” in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, 5.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Forman, “Introduction,” in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*, 19.

it is mystical language which explains mystical experience.”<sup>39</sup> Not only is Penner committing the same post hoc ergo propter hoc fallacy as Katz, and assuming the language precedes the experience, but as someone who has experienced mystical states, Foreman can actually attest to mystical experience preceding mystical language. By declaring that language, not experience describes mystical phenomena, Penner, as well as Katz, are insisting that all purportedly mystical forms of consciousness are lodged within discursive reasoning. This simply is not the case where many mystical experiences are concerned, especially given the role that ineffability plays in mystical experience.

Foreman congratulates the Katz and other constructivists saying, “[t]hey have successfully removed the mystics from the perennialists’ borderless desert.”<sup>40</sup> Yet, when Hans Penner declares “that mysticism does not refer to any particular kind of system or experience,”<sup>41</sup> declaring the word itself to be what Totemism was to religion a century ago, he seems to think they have taken it too far. Hard-line constructivists appear to almost completely deny any possibility for common mystical threads between cultures.

However, Foreman regards the PCE as one such common thread which is made all the more common by the fact that it is supposedly Pure Consciousness, and hence, something we all experience the same underneath language or conception. Newberg and d’Aquili likewise consider Absolute Unitary Being to be a potentially universal trait in mystical traditions, contrary to mystical relativists such as Katz, Gimello, and Penner. Andrew Newberg’s neuroscience and AUB, as well as Robert K.C. Foreman’s PCE are quite possibly the last vestiges of mystical perennialism to be found in the modern academic debate. They serve as a reminder that it is not such a mistake to conceive of human experience as being the same underneath those mental constructs that divide people into culture.

Perhaps suggestions of universality are not at all unreasonable. In his book

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39. Penner, “The Mystical Illusion,” in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, 91.

40. Robert K. C. Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 43.

41. Penner, “The Mystical Illusion,” in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, 95.

*In Gods We Trust*, Scott Atran artistically describes similarities in human evolution:

Think metaphorically of humankind's evolutionary history as a landscape formed by different mountain ridges. Human experience that lies anywhere along this evolutionary landscape converges on more or less the same life paths, just as rain that falls anywhere in a mountain landscape converges toward a limited set of lakes or river valleys. This notion of landscape is a conduit metaphor in the sense that it serves as a guide for a multisided approach to the evolutionary riddle of religion.<sup>42</sup>

Relativism, constructivism, and pluralism are more than necessary to constructing an accurate understanding of human phenomena, but they can cause one to forget the overwhelming array of human similarities. From a constructivist standpoint, it is easy, and many times necessary, to tear down the perennialist treatment of mysticism. Surely it is at least as admirable an endeavor to unite experiences, traditions, and beliefs into categories that encourage accuracy and precision, rather than a hiding behind the negating curtains of relativism.

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42. Scott Atran, *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2002), 11–12.