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# Mystical Experience and Epistemic Injustice

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Claremont McKenna College

# Mystical Experience and Epistemic Injustice

submitted to

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by

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## Introduction

With great consistency across times and places, individuals have reported experiences—often, though not necessarily, explained in religious or spiritual terms—in which the usual perceptions and sensations which mark our everyday life and constitute the world as we know it break down temporarily. In these moments, one’s awareness is reported to expand beyond the typical limitations of the self and the normal distinctions between self and other or subject and object are absent. One might also lose the perceptions of time, space, and/or bodily sensations. These moments of altered awareness have been called *mystical experiences*. Those who have had these experiences often emerge from them claiming to have learned a great deal from them. In this paper, we will specifically focus on the experiences of temporary union with the surrounding world, which we will call *unitive mystical experiences*, and the knowledge that is claimed to have been gained from them. Assuming these knowledge claims are true, these unitive mystical experiences present an interesting case study for thinking about how attempts at knowledge-sharing are received and understood or misunderstood by others. Because of the spiritual and unusual nature of the knowledge gained from these experiences, attempts to share this knowledge may often prove unfruitful.

Using the framework of *epistemic injustice* developed in Miranda Fricker’s seminal book *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, we will investigate how the various types of epistemic injustice she lays out might be applied to the misunderstandings or failures in knowledge-sharing surrounding these experiences. Although not examples of the far-reaching and deeply embedded systems of oppression which usually concern discussions of epistemic injustice (race, gender, class, etc.), there is reason to think that the mystic (understood as anyone

who has had a mystical experience and tries to share the knowledge gained from it with another) today is confronted with certain biases against her when she attempts to engage in testimonial exchange. These biases may result in a failure of epistemic uptake on the part of the hearer when the mystic tries to share her knowledge, a failure that can be traced to Fricker's concepts of *testimonial* and *hermeneutical injustice*. In this way, the mystic and her knowledge present an interesting and, in some ways, new domain for the application of Fricker's epistemic injustice framework.

In Section I of this paper, we will examine the nature of a *unitive mystical experience*, providing examples and a definition based on characteristic features compiled from the existing scholarship on mysticism. In Section II, we will turn to a discussion of knowledge in relation to mystical experiences, differentiating between two kinds of knowledge that appear in the accounts of these experiences: *propositional* and *experiential knowledge*. In Section III, we will connect the knowledge of the mystic to the challenges she might face in trying to share that knowledge and show when these challenges might merely constitute *epistemic wrongs* and when they might be better understood *testimonial* and *hermeneutical injustices*. Finally, in the conclusion, we will address the potential value of the epistemically just sharing and receiving of mystical knowledge.

## Section I: What is a Mystical Experience?

Although mystical experiences and the mysticisms informed by them are not unknown to academic inquiry, no single accepted definition of such an experience exists. At best, scholars use a set of characteristics that predict which experiences are mystical. There are many experiences that can be considered mystical—to present an accessible example, William James in his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* identifies what we could call a “low-grade” mystical experience: the "deepened sense of the significance of a maxim or formula which occasionally sweeps over one. 'I've heard that said all my life,' we exclaim, 'but I never realized its full meaning until now'" (James 382). James also notes the common experience of *deja vu* as another low-grade mystical experience. Although these will not count as mystical experiences under the definition we will put forth in this paper, they are experiences that most people have had that brings with them hints of the sudden alterations in consciousness and profoundly meaningful and memorable qualities that full-fledged mystical experiences share. For the reader who finds this subject material inaccessibly foreign, these introductory experiences may prove to be useful imaginative starting-points.

For the purpose of this paper, we will be focusing on a certain subset of mystical experience that lends itself well to the intersecting paths of inquiry we are pursuing. This project, however, will still pertain very relevantly to many mystical experiences that fall outside of this subset. What we will address here is the subset of mystical experiences which are comprised of an experience of what William A. Richards has called “*unitive awareness*” in his book *Sacred Knowledge: Psychedelics and Religious Experience*. Richards uses this term to describe an experience in which, "in the language of Hinduism, the Atman of the individual self recognizes

that it is an integral fragment of the universal Brahman, as a single drop of water may fall into the vast ocean and merge with it" (Richards 43). This is an experience marked by the perception and understanding of the interconnectedness of all things, by the loss of certain everyday perceptions—most notably the sense of self or ego—and by the partial or total breakdown of dichotomy—particularly that of self/other or subject/object. It is this—the actual experiencing of the loss of subject-object differentiation—that most basically comprises unitive awareness. This will be the primary focus of this paper and as such when we discuss mystical experiences we will be referring to this subset. There are bountiful examples of fascinating and meaningful mystical experiences that endow the individual with certain kinds of knowledge but that do not contain this unitive content. We will leave these experiences aside for now, acknowledging that the claims this paper makes may nonetheless be equally of value for them.

#### ACCOUNTS

Having narrowed down mystical experiences to those that include unitive awareness, we can turn to some actual accounts of individuals' unitive mystical experiences. These accounts convey the beauty and profundity of these experiences in a way a definition cannot. They also provide concrete examples of the types of experiences we are concerned with, useful for those readers unfamiliar with these states of consciousness. First, a report from Richards' *Sacred Knowledge* about the experience of a middle-aged cancer patient during a psilocybin session:

Early on the visuals came and dissolved so quickly I could not verbalize them in time . . . There were countless variations in what reminded me of the ceiling of Westminster Abby: gothic, vaulted, with great intricacy. These images changed lighting, color, and texture. . . . I had no doubt I was in the presence of the Infinite



because I felt an overriding peacefulness that carried me through everything, even the very few seconds of "Yikes!" that showed up. I had a sense of losing my observer. I no longer witnessed the images. I was becoming them. This was not exactly creepy, but I did hesitate a minute, feeling my way slowly. There was a sense of being engulfed. "Am I about to be possessed, is this okay?" . . . I said, "If we do this I want my body returned to me in at least as good a shape as it is in now." The reply came, "Do you think I would disrespect my own handiwork?" I got the point and went with it. . . . My body lit up, all parts in succession. It was the brightest thing I have ever seen. I glowed brilliantly from within. My whole being fluttered. I felt I was being breathed through or played like an instrument. Stunningly beautiful. I got that every part of all of us is sacred. There is no speck in the cosmos which is apart from this breath. The point of it all is sheer pleasure. The world is a misery out of love, presenting us with constant opportunities to find our way home. . . . I am seeing myself in everybody, and everybody in myself. (Richards 62)

From this report, we see the clear focus on unitive awareness. First, the identification with images—not just seeing them, but *becoming them*—represents the breakdown of a tension between subject and object. Then, the experience of this breakdown as a connection to all of the cosmos, as the feeling of a unifying breath passing through all things. Next, the felt understanding of the sanctity of all beings for their inseparability from this unity, and finally the further decalcification of the interpersonal self-other dichotomy. The subject also reports visionary experiences, a feeling of peace identified with “the presence of the Infinite,” a dialogue

between the subject and a reassuring voice, and the experience of bright light radiating from within the subject's body.

Another typical account of a mystical experience comes to us from a biography of J. A. Symonds, a 19th century English poet and literary critic, reproduced in James' *Varieties*:

“Suddenly,” writes Symonds, “at church, or in company, or when I was reading, and always, I think, when my muscles were at rest, I felt the approach of the mood. Irresistibly it took possession of my mind and will, lasted what seemed an eternity, and disappeared in a series of rapid sensations which resembled the awakening from anæsthetic influence. One reason why I disliked this kind of trance was that I could not describe it to myself. I cannot even now find words to render it intelligible. It consisted in a gradual but swiftly progressive obliteration of space, time, sensation, and the multitudinous factors of experience which seem to qualify what we are pleased to call our Self. In proportion as these conditions of ordinary consciousness were subtracted, the sense of an underlying or essential consciousness acquired intensity. At last nothing remained but a pure, absolute, abstract Self. The universe became without form and void of content. But Self persisted, formidable in its vivid keenness, feeling the most poignant doubt about reality, ready, as it seemed, to find existence break as breaks a bubble round about it. And what then? The apprehension of a coming dissolution, the grim conviction that this state was the last state of the conscious Self, the sense that I had followed the last thread of being to the verge of the abyss, and had arrived at demonstration of eternal Maya or illusion, stirred or seemed to stir me up again. The return to ordinary conditions of sentient existence began by my first recovering the power

of touch, and then by the gradual though rapid influx of familiar impressions and diurnal interests. At last I felt myself once more a human being; and though the riddle of what is meant by life remained unsolved, I was thankful for this return from the abyss—this deliverance from so awful an initiation into the mysteries of skepticism.” (James 385-386, quoting from H. F. Brown: *J. A. Symonds, a Biography*, London, 1895, pp. 29-31, abridged.)

In this account, we see the approach of unitive awareness as it sweeps over Symonds, obliterating the distinctions that make up our everyday world. We see the loss of the self-as-ego into the "pure, absolute, abstract Self," or self-as-all. We see also the focus on the inadequacy of words to make sense of the sensation, as well as the feeling of spatial and temporal transcendence.

Another account of a unitive mystical experience, again reproduced by James, comes from the memoirs of Malwida von Meysenbug :

“I was alone upon the seashore as all these thoughts flowed over me, liberating and reconciling; and now again, as once before in distant days in the Alps of Dauphiné, I was impelled to kneel down, this time before the illimitable ocean, symbol of the Infinite. I felt that I prayed as I had never prayed before, and knew now what prayer really is: to return from the solitude of individuation into the consciousness of unity with all that is, to kneel down as one that passes away, and to rise up as one imperishable. Earth, heaven, and sea resounded as in one vast world-encircling harmony. It was as if the chorus of all the great who had ever lived were about me. I felt myself one with them, and it appeared as if I heard

their greeting: 'Thou too belongest to the company of those who overcome.'" (James 395)

The theme of unity and oneness is strong in this experience and von Meysenbug learns from the experience "what prayer really is," namely, the exercise of bringing one's self closer to unitive awareness. Von Meysenbug experiences the world as one, as harmonious. The experience and reverence of the Infinite is also shown here.

One last example should suffice to complete the rough sketch of the nature of these unitive mystical experiences. The account of this mystical experience was submitted to a website called The Mystical Experience Registry. It was self-reported by a contributor identified only as a twenty-year-old woman:

I would go for walks in the evening with my dog. I would climb up on some rocks and sit down, looking at the mountains and the sky. After sitting there for a short time, I would feel my body become very light. Sometimes, I had to fight my fear that I would float away. If I stayed relaxed, though, I would have the feeling that my body was suspended in time and space. Then would come the glorious feelings. There were so many of them that it's frustrating to have to describe them through words. One of the feelings—or rather, one of the awarenesses—was of the immensity of space. The sky would resemble (to me) a huge porcelain teacup turned upside down, protecting me and our earth while the luminance of the universe beyond shone through its delicate skin. Sometimes, I would have a rushing feeling, as though I was being transported out to the limits of the teacup, then penetrating it and moving ever faster and higher, into the oneness of the universe. Another sensation that would be occurring at the same time would be

that everything around me was flowing through me and I was flowing through everything. I would reach out and touch a rock and the rock was me and I was the rock. I could hear its secrets and see the things that it had seen. Physically, I could sense that it was solid, but a deeper wisdom told me that the rock and I were connected and one.

This account ties together the themes we have seen throughout the three previous accounts: the imparting of wisdom, a reduction of bodily sensations, a transcendence of time and space, the ineffability of much of what was experienced, an appreciation of the vastness of the universe, an experience of things seemingly external to the self (feeling something flowing through one's self, feeling one's self as flowing through other objects), and an overcoming of self-other/subject-object dichotomy (the subject identifying with a rock, feeling one with it).

#### **DEFINITION**

Having surveyed some typical accounts of unitive mystical experiences, what can we say to further describe and define these experiences? As we have said earlier, most scholars relegate their definitional work regarding mystical experiences to sets of characteristics by which a mystical experience can be recognized. In order to situate these unitive mystical experiences within the broader realm of mysticism, we will survey the most compelling sets of characteristics from various scholars.

William James demarcates four different characteristics that signify an experience as mystical: it is (i) ineffable and thus “must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others” (James 380), (ii) noetic—it seems to be a state of knowledge, not just of feeling, (iii) transient, and (iv) passive—the experience itself is or seems to be out of the control

of the one experiencing it. Though he does not label it as such, James' discussion of the effects of such experiences on the lives of those who have them reveals a fifth essential characteristic: (v) it is transformative—mystical experiences “modify the inner life of the subject between the time of their recurrences” (James 381-2).

Evelyn Underhill, in her book *Mysticism: A Study in Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* proposes yet four different characteristics by which to identify a mystical experience. These experiences are (i) practical—as opposed to theoretical—and involve “the whole self” (Underhill 78), not just the intellect; (ii) concerned with the “wholly transcendental and spiritual” and with concepts of infinity and oneness—with “the changeless One” (Underhill 78); (iii) suffused with sensations of love and truth; and (iv) culminate in or provide access to what Underhill calls “the Unitive State”—a state of “living union” (Underhill 78) with the absolute reality of the universe that “entail[s] the complete remaking of character and the liberation of a new . . . form of consciousness” (Underhill 79). Caroline Franks Davis, in her book *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, defines an experience as mystical if it has the following characteristics: “(i) the sense of having apprehended an ultimate reality; (ii) the sense of freedom from the limitations of time, space, and the individual ego; (iii) a sense of ‘oneness’; and (iv) bliss or serenity” (Davis 54).

William Richards understands a mystical experience to be the event and experience of accessing what he calls *mystical consciousness*. Accessing this state is deeply impactful and memorable and Richards identifies a set of characteristics common to mystical experiences as “reported in the historic literature of mysticism and by volunteers in projects of psychedelic research” (Richards 43). These characteristics are: (a) unity, (b) transcendence of time and space, (c) intuitive knowledge, (d) sacredness, (e) deeply-felt positive mood, and (f) ineffability.

Richards names this mystical consciousness in various religions: “*samadhi* in Hinduism, *nirvana* in Buddhism, *sekhel mufla* in Judaism, *the beatific vision* in Christianity, *baqá wa faná* in Islam, and *wu wei* in Taoism” (Richards 10). For those familiar with any of these traditional concepts, the parallel may be helpful in understanding the type of experience we are talking about. This is not to claim that unitive mystical experiences are equivalent to these states; there are likely many salient differences. Unitive mystical experiences, however, are not confined to any particular religion and are very compatible with these concepts. Further scholarship is needed to endorse or reject the conflation of unitive mystical experiences with these religious states.

*The Oxford English Dictionary* defines *mystical theology* as “belief in the possibility of union with or absorption into God by means of contemplation and self-surrender; belief in or devotion to the spiritual apprehension of truths inaccessible to the intellect.” From this, we can derive two definitional characteristics of mystical experience: (i) the experience of union and (ii) the reception of intellectually-inaccessible truths.

In addition to our initial narrowing-down of the subject to *unitive* mystical experiences—experiences that provide access to Underhill’s “Unitive State”—some other characteristic criteria are needed to rightly categorize experiences as *mystical*. Taking selectively from the proposed criteria above, mystical experiences:

- (1) have content and/or personal impact or meaning that prove difficult to adequately describe using words,
- (2) impart knowledge onto the experiencer, especially of an experiential, *what-it’s-like* nature,
- (3) involve a feeling of transcendence of everyday sensations such as those of space, time, and selfhood,

(4) are transformative, in that the individual undergoes significant change of an epistemic (a change in what she knows), ontological (a change in who she is or her self-concept), or moral (a change in what she holds as good/right and how she acts) character as a result of the experience.

We will leave out the word *ineffability* as, although useful, it oversimplifies the issues of communicating what one has experienced and learned. The accounts we have surveyed show the challenge, but not necessarily the impossibility, of putting into words the nature of the experience. We will also leave out any criteria of *happiness, bliss, peace, love, or positive mood*, as these are not necessary for our purposes, nor essential to the nature of a mystical experience. Unitive experiences that meet the four criteria above might nonetheless engender feelings of fear, loneliness, or something equally uncomfortable, and they are not less mystical for this. Thus, to abbreviate, the mystical experiences we will consider here: (1) are unitive, (2) prove difficult to put into words, (3) impart knowledge, (4) transcend everyday sensations, and (5) are transformative.



## Section II: Mystical Knowledge

Having clarified in the previous section what sort of experience we are talking about, we are now concerned with what sort of things the mystic can accurately be said to have *learned* from such an experience. We will not concern ourselves with those who say that there is no possibility at all of knowledge being gained through a mystical experience. We start from the assumption that mystical experiences can be knowledge-producers to the person who has them. In this paper, we seek only to characterize this knowledge, determine what forms it may take, and discover what implications it might have for how we understand and communicate about mystical experience.

For now, to begin considering mystical experiences as producers of knowledge, we can revisit the “low-grade” mystical experience that we borrowed from James and introduced in Section I.<sup>1</sup> Recall that in this example, in a spontaneous visceral flash, the meaning of a phrase or saying is suddenly understood by the subject, despite her having heard the saying many times before. It seems that, although she knew the content of the saying already, the experience of some deepened understanding of the saying brought her a different kind of knowledge about the content than she had before. To understand this potentially different kind of knowledge, let us first try to describe the knowledge that the subject has before the experience.

Before the potentially knowledge-deepening experience, the subject knows the saying well. She has heard it many times before and is familiar with and understands its content. As a placeholder for this saying, we might use the example: “the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.” Before the experience, the subject knows that the grass is always greener on

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<sup>1</sup> To be clear, this sort of experience is not a mystical one under the conception we have been working with. We have called it a “low-grade” mystical experience only to point out certain phenomenal parallels between it and a full-fledged mystical experience.

the other side, and knows that this is a metaphor that means one always desires what one does not have, always thinks someone else's life is better than one's own, simply in virtue of its being someone else's. This seems to be a complete knowledge and understanding of this saying. If asked to, we can imagine that the subject would be perfectly capable of relating the saying to another person, explaining its meaning, and describing a real-life situation that would exemplify the maxim. Yet, in this hypothetical experience, the subject suddenly has an "Aha!" moment in which some deeper knowledge or understanding of the saying dawns upon her.

What would account for this deepening of knowledge? We can imagine two possibilities. First, the subject has never before had an experience that exemplifies the maxim herself. She understands the saying and understands how it is commonly used, and thus is perfectly able to come up with a scenario in which someone would be likely to say it. She has not, however, ever been in such a situation herself. The second possibility is that the subject has had a saying-exemplifying experience, but has never before realized it for what it was—exemplary of the saying in question.

In the first possibility, the "low-grade" mystical experience would occur when the subject first finds herself in a "grass-is-always-greener" situation. Mowing her lawn one day, she looks over to her neighbor's yard and feels irritated, thinking to herself, "I've never noticed this, but the neighbor's yard just looks so much nicer than mine." In a sudden, "Aha!" moment, she realizes that this is precisely the meaning of the grass-is-always-greener maxim. She thinks to herself, "Oh, I get it now!" She has had the experience—felt the desire or jealousy for her neighbor's yard—to which the saying refers. It is specifically this experience, the feeling of the desire or jealousy (or whatever the particular sensations might be), that is crucial to the deepening of her understanding of the saying. (For the purpose of the hypothetical, we will set

aside the question of how likely it is that someone knows this saying but has not experienced the sort of situation or type of desire or jealousy it describes.) When she knew the saying before, she had not experienced these characteristics of its meaning. She now knows how it feels to have the experience from which the saying derives. In the second possibility, the “low-grade” mystical experience would occur when the subject finds herself in a “grass-is-always-greener” situation and connects the experience to the saying for the first time. This is practically not much different from the first possibility, but allows for the subject to have previously had the experience relevant to the saying without recognizing it as such. Thus, the subject may have looked enviously at her neighbor’s yard many times before one day having the “Aha!” moment in which she connected this envious experience to the saying she knew well. (Again, the likelihood of the particulars of this hypothetical need not concern us.)

In either possibility, it seems that a relevant experience brought the subject a certain kind of new knowledge about the grass-is-always greener saying. Namely, upon being in a situation to which the saying applies, the subject learns how it feels to have the experience described therein (either learns how it feels or learns how it feels *as the experience described by the saying*). Before the experience, the subject could describe the meaning of the saying and examples of its application and could even report the emotional or cognitive states that accompany the experience it describes, based on what others have told her. She could say, for example: “it is when you feel unsatisfied with your life and jealous of another person’s, even though if the situations were reversed you would still be unsatisfied.” But upon her actual experience of such a situation (or upon her first connection of the experience to the saying, as in the second possibility), she gains knowledge about what it is like to have those particular emotional or mental states in response to that particular type of situation as well as knowledge about the

connection of that maxim to said states and situation. Her knowledge of the content of the saying has not changed. As before, she can accurately convey the saying's meaning and provide an example of its application. What is different now is that she knows what the grass-being-greener experience is actually like.

This brings us to a bipartite conception of knowledge. The first is the kind of knowledge the subject can be said to have had before having the grass-being-greener experience. The second, she gains only by having the experience. The first kind is *propositional knowledge*; the second is *experiential knowledge*.

#### PROPOSITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Before the grass-being-greener experience, the subject has *propositional knowledge* of the maxim. She could make propositional knowledge claims that reflecting her knowledge of the saying and its meaning. When a person makes a propositional knowledge claim, she claims that she knows a certain proposition to be true. Propositional knowledge claims are claims about *knowledge-that*: she *knows that* the grass is always greener on the other side (she knows that proposition to be true); she *knows that* this saying refers to the dissatisfaction with what is one's own and jealousy for what is someone else's; she *knows that* such-and-such cognitive states usually arise in grass-being-greener situations; she *knows that* such-and-such situation is an example of this maxim.

In his 1982 paper "Epiphenomenal Qualia," Frank Jackson discusses this relationship between propositional and experiential knowledge. To elucidate the difference, he uses the example of *black-and-white Mary*:

Mary is a brilliant scientist who is, for whatever reason, forced to investigate the world from a black and white room *via* a black and white television monitor. She specializes in the neurophysiology of vision and acquires, let us suppose, all the physical information there is to obtain about what goes on when we see ripe tomatoes, or the sky, and use terms like ‘red’, ‘blue’, and so on. She discovers, for example, just which wavelength combinations from the sky stimulate the retina, and exactly how this produces *via* the central nervous system the contraction of the vocal chords and expulsion of air from the lungs that results in the uttering of the sentence ‘The sky is blue’. . . . What will happen when Mary is released from her black and white room or is given a color television monitor? Will she *learn* anything or not? It seems just obvious that she will learn something about the world and our visual experience of it. But then it is inescapable that her previous knowledge was incomplete. (Jackson 130)

Like our subject who has not herself experienced the grass-being-greener, Mary has not seen color. Like our subject who is perfectly knowledgeable about the meaning of the saying, the type of situation to which it applies, and the cognitive states likely to arise in such a situation, Mary is perfectly knowledgeable—in fact, an expert—about which things are what color (she knows that a ripe tomato is red) and the cognitive states that arise when people see color. But neither Mary nor our subject have experienced these cognitive states arise in response to such situations themselves. Both our subject and Mary have propositional knowledge: our subject *knows that* the saying refers to such-and-such situations and cognitive states and Mary *knows that* color has such-and-such properties and produces such-and-such cognitive states in those who see it. So

what is it that both our subject and Mary—until they have the grass-being-greener or seeing color experiences—lack?

#### EXPERIENTIAL KNOWLEDGE

In the absence of having had the relevant experiences, Mary and our subject lack *experiential knowledge*. This is the knowledge that can be gained only by having for oneself the experience in question. Experiential knowledge is knowledge about *what-it's-like*. When our subject has the grass-being-greener experience, the full meaning of the saying suddenly dawns on her as she is able to connect the propositions with the *what-it's-like-ness* of the experience. She gains knowledge about what it's like to feel the dissatisfaction with her own things and jealousy about others' things, or whatever the cognitive or emotional states that correlate to this saying may be. She now knows the saying and its propositions *experientially*. She is now in a position to make an experiential knowledge claim: she knows what it is like for the grass to always be greener on the other side, so to speak.

As for Mary, when she steps outside of her black-and-white cell and sees color for the first time, she gains knowledge about what it's like to see color. She has the “Aha!” moment, where her propositional knowledge of color is connected to the actual experience of what seeing color is like. Like our subject, who gains a deepened understanding of what a given saying means in virtue of her experience of such a situation, Mary, too, gains a deepened understanding of what it means to see color in virtue of her experience of seeing it. She is now in a position to make an experiential knowledge claim: that she knows what it's like to see color. Both our subject and Mary started with plenty of propositional knowledge about the topic at hand, but

were lacking key pieces of knowledge about these topics—the knowledge about what the experiences relevant to the propositions are like.

Our examples thus far suggest that there may be something distinct about this kind of knowledge, something that differentiates it from propositional knowledge. So how does experiential knowledge fit into the picture? There are a few possible conceptions of experiential knowledge. The first, articulated by Jackson, sees experiential knowledge as being distinct from propositional knowledge in that it carries with it *phenomenal information*. This phenomenal information is irreducible physical information and could not be transferred to another by any means except the having of the experience. For Jackson, to gain experiential knowledge is to gain this phenomenal information. Thus, on this account, gaining experiential knowledge is really gaining a sort of propositional knowledge, albeit a sort which cannot be fully transmitted to another through textbooks, conversation, demonstration, etc. Another possible conception is the one that has been put forth in various papers by Laurence Nemirow: that experiential knowledge is really *knowledge-how*—that one does not gain new phenomenal information but merely *abilities*. Nemirow calls this the *ability hypothesis*: that experiential knowledge consists, “not in the grasping of facts, but in the acquisition of abilities”—namely, the “ability to place oneself, at will, in a state representative of that experience” (Nemirow 475-6). Gaining experiential knowledge is really just, as David Lewis has written, gaining the “abilities to remember and to imagine”—by “remembering how it once was, you can afterward imagine such an experience” (Lewis 52).

So we have one account on which Mary, upon leaving her black and white room, gains new information—new facts about the world—that she could not have gained any other way. On the other account, Mary does not gain any new information (remember, she is an expert on all the

physical information that seems to be available about color), but gains the abilities to remember the experience of color and imagine experiencing it again—abilities which enable her to identify red when she sees it again and to remember the redness of things she has seen before. The accounts differ in their interpretation of the nature of that which is gained by Mary leaving the room (whether it is propositional knowledge, whether new facts about the world are gained), but both agree that there is something Mary gains upon leaving that she was unable to acquire inside the black and white room. If we accept Jackson's account, experiential knowledge is a specific sort of propositional knowledge, one that endows the experiencer with new phenomenal information about the world. If we accept Nemirow's, experiential knowledge is actually ability—knowledge-how.

When someone has a unitive mystical experience, they gain experiential knowledge. This experiential knowledge either consists of newly gained phenomenal information about the unitive experience or of newly gained abilities to remember the unitive experience and imaginatively place oneself in that situation again—to imagine oneself having a unitive mystical experience even when one is not. On either picture, the experiencer gains knowledge. Thus, if we are convinced by the ability hypothesis, we need only to think of experiential knowledge as knowledge-how. If we deny that the subject of the unitive mystical experience has gained knowledge-that about what the unification of subject and object is like on the basis that such phenomenal information is not really knowledge-that, then we need only to say that the subject has gained knowledge-how: how to remember and imagine the unitive mystical experience. We will continue to refer to experiential knowledge as knowledge about what-it's-like-ness, but the skeptic about what-it's-like-ness can substitute in knowledge-how without hindering the argument. We will return in the conclusion to the ability hypothesis and its usefulness for



thinking about mystical experiences, whether or not we accept the existence of the phenomenal information which Nemirow rejects.

#### MYSTICAL KNOWLEDGE

Having differentiated between propositional and experiential knowledge, we can return to the context we are concerned with—mystical experiences—and investigate how these types of knowledge function in such a context. We will focus on what we have taken to be the most important facet of the unitive mystical experience: the unification of subject and object. Let us briefly look back to some of the accounts of mystical experiences we have surveyed, highlighting the parts that exemplify the breakdown in the divisions between subject and object that usually make up the world as we know it.

From our first account, taken from Richards' *Sacred Knowledge*, the anonymous experiencer reports that they lost the sense of themselves as a subject viewing an external object: "I had a sense of losing my observer. I no longer witnessed the images. I was becoming them." Instead, they *became* the object—it was no longer external to their sense of self. They similarly report losing the usual differentiation between self and other, between who is "me" and "not-me": "I am seeing myself in everybody, and everybody in myself." They go on to report an even farther-reaching unification: "I felt I was being breathed through or played like an instrument. . . . I got that every part of all of us is sacred. There is no speck in the cosmos which is apart from this breath" (Richards 62). From our second account, taken from James' *Varieties*, Symonds reports the falling-away of his sense of himself as a subject separate from the rest of the world, experiencing the "obliteration of space, time, sensation, and the multitudinous factors of experience which seem to qualify what we are pleased to call our Self." Describing the loss of

this discernment between subject and object, and between objects themselves, he reports that “[t]he universe became without form and void of content” (James 385-6). The universe was undifferentiated—unified. In our third account, also taken from James, von Meysenbug explains the unification of subject and object as an experience of prayer, defining prayer as “return[ing] from the solitude of individuation into the consciousness of unity with all that is . . . .” She reports how distinctions between external objects broke down, with her surroundings melting together into a unified, harmonious whole: “Earth, heaven, and sea resounded as in one vast world-encircling harmony. It was as if the chorus of all the great who had ever lived were about me. I felt myself one with them . . . .” (James 395). In our fourth account, taken from the Mystical Experience Registry, the anonymous experiencer reports this breakdown of the differentiated world as “a rushing feeling, . . . being transported out to the limits of the [atmosphere] . . . into the oneness of the universe” and describes how “everything around me was flowing through me and I was flowing through everything.” On the the lack of separation between herself and external objects, she reports: “I would reach out and touch a rock and the rock was me and I was the rock. I could hear its secrets and see the things that it had seen.”

What sort of knowledge claims can be extracted from these accounts? The main propositional knowledge claim produced by these mystical experiences seems to be something like: “the division between subject and object is not inherently real or fixed, but mutable.” Each account displays how, during the mystical experience, the world ceased to exist as it typically does—ceased to exist as divided into “me” and “not-me” or “self” and “other.” rather, the things that were “other” became indistinguishable from “self,” and vice versa. the subjects claim to have gained knowledge that the world is not inherently differentiated, but perhaps only seems so contingent on a certain mutable awareness which divides the world into self and other.

We can see now why the differentiation between propositional and experiential knowledge was an important one, for the accounts of these mystical experiences do not only present us with propositional knowledge claims. When the subject says “I would reach out and touch a rock and the rock was me and I was the rock,” she is not merely making a propositional claim about the reality of the world—she is also making an experiential knowledge claim. She has not only gained *knowledge-that* about the world (*that* it is not inherently differentiated), but also knowledge about *what something is like* (what it’s like to experience the unification of subject and object). The subjects whose reports we have read have learned something over and above the fact that the usual divisions between subject and object are mutable and contingent. They have learned from their mystical experiences what it’s like to be undifferentiated from the world around them, what it’s like to lose their distinct, separate self-ness. Whereas anyone could have the propositional knowledge about the mutable divisions between self and other (whether one has had a unitive mystical experience or not), only the person who has had the experience herself can gain the experiential knowledge.

### Section III: Epistemic Wrongs and Injustices

Thus far, we have provided examples and constructed a loose definition of mystical experiences. We have also differentiated between two forms of knowledge—propositional and experiential—and examined the presence of both in our mystical experience reports. Why have we examined mystical experiences in this way? Of what use is our bipartite understanding of the knowledge gained from mystical experiences? Why are we focusing on mystical experiences, specifically, and not just experiential knowledge of any and all sorts?

Knowledge does not exist in isolation. We do not each live in sectioned-off epistemic worlds, each with our own solitary knowledge. Rather, we want to and do—with varying levels of success—share our knowledge with others and receive the knowledge they have. An account of a mystical experience is not simply an amalgamation of words in a vacuum. It is a testimony, an attempt to share knowledge with the reader or listener. And in these attempts to share, the knowledge gained in unitive mystical experiences faces particular challenges and roadblocks. It is these particular epistemic challenges which we will now turn to in our discussion of mystical experiences.

We will start with the epistemic hurdles that a person providing an account of her mystical experience faces. Let's turn away from the specifics of the accounts we have surveyed and start from a clear, hypothetical testimony. Mystical Mary has had a unitive mystical experience of the sort in which we are interested. She wants to tell her friend about her experience. She says to him: "I had this experience while I was deep in meditation—suddenly I had completely lost any usual sense of myself! I didn't know who I was and I couldn't differentiate between what was "me" and what was "not-me." It was like everything was

merging with and flowing into everything else and “I” was just part of that flow. I could identify with other objects and people in a way I have only ever identified with myself—I literally did not understand myself as anything separate from them. It made me realize that the division between subject and object is not fixed, not inherent, but is in fact contingent and mutable.”

This represents a testimony, Mary’s attempt to share her knowledge with her friend. She is sharing the propositional knowledge claim that the division between subject and object is not fixed and the experiential knowledge claim about what that is like. We can imagine a few possible responses to this testimony, each representing a different level of uptake on the part of the hearer.

#### **EPISTEMIC UPTAKE**

First—full uptake. We are not considering gaining the experiential knowledge to be a requirement for “full uptake,” as we have already established that such knowledge is gained only by the experience itself and cannot be fully transmitted to another through testimonial exchange. Thus, full uptake could occur in a hearer who has had a mystical experience himself or one who has not. Having had a unitive mystical experience himself, the hearer might understand and appreciate the account and relate it to his own experience. This hearer already had the propositional and experiential knowledge. For the hearer who has not had a mystical experience, but still achieves full uptake of Mary’s testimony, we can imagine that the hearer listens carefully to Mary, hears and takes seriously the two types of knowledge claims Mary makes, and accepts these knowledge claims, integrating them into his own knowledge about the world. This hearer did not have the propositional or experiential knowledge beforehand and did not realize that there was any other way to experience the world other than divided into self and other. Upon

receiving Mary's testimony, this hearer gains the propositional knowledge Mary puts forth and hears and thinks carefully about the experiential knowledge Mary has gained, though this hearer himself does not gain this knowledge (as he could not without having such an experience himself). He is moved to consider the possibility that the world divided into self and other is not an immutable reality.

Second—partial uptake. Here, we can imagine a hearer who, upon receiving Mary's testimony, understands her to be making a propositional knowledge claim about the ways of perceiving and experiencing the world. The hearer uptakes this knowledge, accepting that the world divided into self and other is not a fixed reality. But we can imagine, perhaps, that this hearer fails to understand that Mary is also making an experiential knowledge claim. He accepts her proposition, but does not imagine that there is any sort of additional knowledge that Mary has gained from her mystical experience. He does not realize that Mary has gained experiential knowledge: thus the hearer either (on Lewis' account of experiential knowledge) fails to appreciate the abilities Mary has gained and thus her status as a *knower-how* in this regard, or (on Jackson's account) fails to appreciate the new phenomenal information about what-it's-like to have such an experience that Mary has gained.

Third—little or no uptake. In this case, Mary is confronted with a hearer who fails to listen to her account and does not uptake any of the knowledge claims Mary makes. One way this might happen is if the hearer literally cannot hear (or read) what Mary says—a loud truck drives by just as she gives her testimony, for example, or they speak different languages, or the words on the page are illegible. We need not concern ourselves with cases like this—they are failures of uptake which are easily understood and solved. The more interesting way is that the hearer *hears* Mary's testimony, but does not really *listen* to it. In this case, there is nothing

physically preventing the hearer from receiving the testimony—the hearer can hear the individual words Mary is using, they are using the same language, etc. The hearer is physically capable of receiving the testimony, and is hearing the words Mary utters, but for some reason he fails to uptake any of the knowledge Mary provides.

What might account for the hearer's failure to uptake the information Mary provides in this second case, where all the necessary physical preconditions are in place? We can imagine at least two possible explanations, the second of which will be our focus. First, we can imagine a hearer who has perhaps had a bad day. His mind is on the day's events, maybe something that went particularly poorly that day. Mary is speaking to him and he nods—he is trying to listen, but his mind is elsewhere and he is not really paying attention. This is a common occurrence—one does not realize one is not listening to what another is saying, but after the person has spoken, one does not recall what has been said. So it is with the hearer, who after Mary's testimony realizes he does not know what she has just told him. This clearly is not an ideal epistemic scenario—it is usually better to listen to another person when she is telling you something. In this sense, it is an *epistemic wrong*—the hearer fails to respect Mary's capacity as a knower in that testimonial exchange by not actively listening to her account. Mary's testimony was not received and the hearer misses an opportunity to gain knowledge. In this way, both participants in the exchange are worse off or shortchanged in some way.

There is another scenario—another possible reason for the failure of uptake on the part of the hearer when the mystical account is shared. Like the hearer who has had a bad day, the recipient of the account fails to actively listen to Mary's testimony. In this second scenario, however, the failure in uptake does not stem from the distraction of the hearer. Instead, it stems from a prejudice that the hearer has against Mary which causes him to dismiss or devalue the

credibility of Mary's testimony. Specifically, it is a prejudice against Mary in her identity *as a mystic*. We will use this term going forward to describe anyone who has had one of these mystical experiences. There is good reason to believe that the having of such an experience is an identity-constituting characteristic: recall the "transformative" criterion in our definition in Section I. These experiences are often so transformative and life-changing that having had one of them is often enough to alter a person's behavior, values, life trajectory, and relatedly, identity or self-concept.<sup>2</sup> The prejudice against Mary as a mystic need not be an explicit one—if asked, the hearer might report harboring no negative ideas about mystics, about those who have had these types of experiences, or about these sorts of knowledge claims. Nonetheless, an implicit bias absorbed from a larger, cultural bias might be present. Especially within academia and the sciences (key epistemic sites), there has been a cultural and ideological move away from religious or spiritual knowledge based in personal experience and towards secular and scientific knowledge based in reason and objective evidence, which follows a documented decrease in religious practitioners and beliefs in the United States (Main, "Study").

Brad S. Gregory writes about this secularization and prejudice against the spiritual or religious, specifically within academia, in his paper "The Other Confessional History: On Secular Bias in the Study of Religion." He writes that the move in academia towards increasingly and exclusively secular and scientific analytic frameworks "has produced not unbiased accounts, but reductionist explanations of religious belief and practice with embedded secular biases that preclude the understanding of religious believer-practitioners" (Gregory 132). The secular assumptions and biases "are so widespread among scholars today, [that] they are not often

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<sup>2</sup> Karl Keliner, for example, writes that upon leaving one of these states of unitive mystical awareness, one is "a sage, a prophet, a saint, his whole character changed, his life changed, illumined" (qtd. in James 401). Wilfred Monod describes a mystical experience that created "a profound modification of [his] nature, a new manner of [his] being" (qtd. in James 419).



explicitly articulated” (Gregory 132). He points, however, to Emile Durkheim as an early pioneer of these now-normal biases against the spiritual. Durkheim, in his *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, discusses spiritual knowledge in terms of delusion, unintelligence, and psychopathology. About trying to study the spiritual knowledge people claim to have, he writes that “[t]o understand a delusion properly and to be able to apply the most appropriate treatment, the doctor needs to know what its point of departure was. That event is the more easily detected the nearer to its beginnings the delusion can be observed” (Durkheim 6).

Stephen G. Post writes about anti-spiritual prejudice within psychology and psychiatry in his paper “Psychiatry and Ethics: The Problematics of Respect for Religious Meanings.” He discusses how various psychological literature, specifically the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), has used the beliefs and practices of spiritual or religious people to exemplify various mental disorders associated with delusional or otherwise psychopathological thinking and behavior (Post 367). Camilla Curren, discussing anti-spiritual bias in medicine, writes about an interview with Dr. Mike Miller at Ohio State University: “[religious] belief system[s], according to Miller, . . . [have] fallen out of favor in modern society and now, according to the words of a medical student and patient at OSU, persons with a religious belief system feel they need to ‘explain to others or to justify how being a person of faith is compatible with being an intelligent individual’” (Curren).

Absent concrete statistical data on the scope and impact of such biases against spiritual people and their knowledge or on the conflation of spiritual knowledge with delusion or psychopathy, we cannot make any definitive claims about how detrimental these prejudices are or how often they occur. Thus, we will not attempt to portray as equivalent these prejudices and the well-documented racial and gender prejudices which affect people in big and small ways

every day. It is worth pointing out, however, that the lack of research on a prejudice does not mean it does not have detrimental effects on those who face it. We can see from the limited writing and examples above that a certain bias, whether implicit or explicit, may exist against people who claim spiritual knowledge, at least in some areas of modern life, especially academia and the sciences. Those who speak about their spiritual lives and beliefs or who try to share knowledge gained through spiritual experiences risk being written off as irrational, deluded, or crazy—all demarcations we have come to use as knowledge-invalidators. As was reported above, spiritual knowledge may be seen as not “compatible with being an intelligent individual.” If someone is characterized as irrational, unintelligent, or deluded because of the type of knowledge they are trying to share, they are excluded from the knowledge-generating and sharing processes on that basis.

The spiritual aspect of the prejudice is also combined with a skepticism about—and perhaps even fear of—what we might call non-normative experiences of reality: experiences that most people have not had or do not have. Experiencing reality in ways that are significantly different from the currently accepted and normalized one (in this case—experiencing reality as non-dual instead of dual) or in ways that are not easily explained or interpreted is likely to (in an increasingly secular and scientific culture) yield accusations of delusion or psychopathy. We saw this in Post’s discussion of anti-spiritual bias in psychology and psychiatry and the use of spiritual people and thinking as exemplars of mental disorders. Like irrationality, the accusation of psychopathy functions as an immediate delegitimization of knowledge. These two biases—against spiritual and non-normative experience—act in tandem to create a prejudice against the mystic, who sits precisely at the intersection of spiritual knowledge and non-normative experience of reality, which results in the dismissal or devaluation of her credibility and

knowledge. We can see how in this case, as with the first case of no uptake, an epistemic wrong is done to the mystic and the hearer misses an opportunity to gain knowledge. Are these two cases of lack of uptake, however, examples of the same sort of epistemic wrong? It seems not. This second case of failed uptake is less coincidental—it is directly related to the mystic’s identity and the sort of knowledge she is sharing and the hearer’s perception of this identity and knowledge.

#### EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE

Miranda Fricker, in her book *Epistemic Injustice: The Ethics and Power of Knowing*, introduces the concept of *epistemic injustice* to refer to a “wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower” (1), but one which results from the operation of power. She specifically discusses *identity power*, writing: “Whenever there is an operation of power that depends in some significant degree upon . . . shared imaginative conceptions of social identity, then *identity power* is at work” (14). It seems that this case of failed uptake does depend on these shared conceptions of identity—the mystic’s identity, for our purposes, is constituted exactly by her position at the intersection of the biases against spiritual knowledge and non-normative experience of reality. There seems to be reason to think, then, that the dismissal or devaluation of the mystic’s knowledge is an operation of this kind of identity power and thus constitutes not just an *epistemic wrong*, but an *epistemic injustice*. Accepting this, what further might we be able to say about such an injustice? Fricker focuses on two main forms of epistemic injustice: *testimonial* and *hermeneutical injustice*. How does the failed uptake of the mystic’s account fit into these forms of injustice?

In her book, the social groups and identities Fricker is concerned with are primarily based in gender and race (the epistemic injustices women face in testimonial exchanges, for example). We do not want to downplay the incredible importance of bringing these gendered and racial injustices to light by drawing exaggerated parallels between the social groups she is concerned with and the mystic. These social groups have long and brutal histories of systemic oppression and face dangers and injustices which the mystic, if she is not also a member of one of these groups, simply does not. Keeping this in mind, we can still explore the possible application of Fricker's framework to this new context, as we have shown that there does seem to be bias operating in relation to the knower's identity as a mystic, although we may not know the scope or severity of the prejudice.

Fricker argues that because one must use "social stereotypes as heuristics in [one's] spontaneous assessments of [one's] interlocutor's credibility," (16) testimonial exchanges are particularly susceptible to the effects of what Fricker calls a "negative identity prejudice" (27), which refers to a prejudice against someone in virtue of some component of their identity. If these prejudices seep into testimonial exchange, Fricker says, an epistemic injustice occurs: "the hearer makes an unduly deflated judgement of the speaker's credibility, perhaps missing out on knowledge as a result; and the hearer does something ethically bad—the speaker is wrongfully undermined in her capacity as a knower" (17). This deflated credibility based on a negative identity prejudice is a form of epistemic injustice Fricker calls *testimonial injustice*. We can see how this concept applies to the failed uptake of the mystic's testimony—a negative identity prejudice (biases against the mystic *qua* her mystical knowledge and non-normative experience) causes the hearer to undervalue the mystic's credibility and fail to uptake her testimony and its

knowledge claims. The hearer does not appreciate the mystic's testimony as knowledge, misses an opportunity for epistemic gains, and wrongs the mystic in her capacity as a knower.

Fricker also gives us the concept of *hermeneutical injustice*, which can help us to see other aspects of the injustice the mystic faces that may not be strictly testimonial. Hermeneutical injustice, compared to testimonial, "occurs at a prior stage, when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences" (1). There are a few key ideas to pull from Fricker's discussion of this type of injustice: *collective hermeneutical resources*, *formal hermeneutical gaps*, and *hermeneutical marginalization*. The collective hermeneutical resources are the concepts, frameworks, etc. which can be drawn upon to interpret testimony and experience. They are collective insofar as they are widely available and socially accepted. In our case of Mary's friend and his failed uptake, we can see how the use of this concept could account for an unjust failure of uptake even when the hearer is not personally prejudiced against the mystic: we might think that it is not that the hearer's prejudice against the mystic bars him from listening to and uptaking the mystic's testimony, but rather that he simply lacks the proper hermeneutical resources to interpret what Mary tells him as knowledge. What, in our discussion of testimonial injustice, we attributed to the individual hearer—the privileging of the secular and scientific as well as the aversion to non-normative experiences—would here be attributed to the collective hermeneutical resources. It is not necessarily an individual prejudice which prevents the hearer's uptake, but a hermeneutical gap. The mystic's testimony falls into this gap and the hearer is barred from being able to recognize it as knowledge.

We might also think that the testimony falls into a *formal* hermeneutical gap. A hermeneutical gap, Fricker says, "might equally concern not (or not only) the content but rather

the form of what can be said” (160). In our case, we could imagine that the hearer is precluded from uptaking Mary’s testimony not (or not only) because of its spiritual or non-normative content but because of its experiential form—that the testimony primarily entails the recounting of an experience. It was the experience of the unification of subject and object that comprised the key epistemic gain for Mary. Fricker discusses formal hermeneutical gaps in the context of a woman’s testimony that might be expressed in intuitive or emotional ways: “if the mere fact of an intuitive or an emotional expressive style means that one cannot be heard as fully rational, then one is thereby unjustly afflicted by a hermeneutical gap” (161). It would seem that something similar could be said for the mystic: if the fact of an experience-centric testimony means that the mystic cannot be heard as fully objective and rational, then she might be faced with an unjust formal hermeneutical gap. In Fricker’s case, the knower is barred from knowledge-sharing practices by the intuitive method by which she came to her knowledge and thus the intuitive style or form in which that knowledge is expressed. In our case, the mystic is barred from knowledge-sharing by the experiential method by which she came to her knowledge and thus the experiential form in which it is expressed. Just as Fricker points out how intuitive knowledge may be discounted as irrational—and thus excluded from epistemic practices—based on a privileging of reason and objectivity<sup>3</sup>, mystical knowledge gained from and/or related to experience may be similarly discounted. When a certain form of knowledge and expression, namely rational and objective, is privileged, it is possible and even likely for knowledge that challenges this form, namely intuitive or experience-based, to fall into the hermeneutical shadows.

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<sup>3</sup> For one of many possible discussions of the privileging of reason and objectivity in Western thought since the Enlightenment, see Adorno, Theodor W., and Max Horkheimer. “The Concept of Enlightenment.” *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Stanford University Press, 2002, pp. 1–33.

This gap need not occur because there is any identity-based prejudice at work. We can imagine that the hearer has no prejudice against the mystic *qua* social type, as we had posited in our discussion of testimonial injustice. Still, Mystical Mary's knowledge and experience might fail to receive uptake because the content and/or form of the testimony falls into a hermeneutical gap and cannot be correctly interpreted by the hearer. The failure in communication and epistemic uptake, regardless of the cause, leads us to the useful concept of *hermeneutical marginalization*. Because of the failure of uptake, the mystic is denied hermeneutical participation and the collective hermeneutical resources miss an opportunity for expansion. When "there is unequal hermeneutical participation with respect to some significant area(s) of social experience," Fricker says, "members of the disadvantaged group are *hermeneutically marginalized*" (153). The mystic is unjustly prevented "from understanding a significant patch of her own experience" (Fricker 151) if her testimonies are dismissed and not given the chance to be incorporated into the collective resources, thus barring her from "those practices whereby social meanings are generated" (Fricker 160).

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored the nature of unitive mystical experiences—experiences in which the usual division between oneself and the surrounding world temporarily dissolves. We have examined the knowledge gained from these experiences in its multiple forms and discussed how the mystic, when attempting to share the knowledge she has gained, may face challenges to effective testimonial exchange which constitute *testimonial injustices*. Similarly, due to a cultural privileging of the rational and objective, the mystic's interlocutor in an exchange may lack the necessary epistemic resources to understand an account of the mystic's experience and its epistemic fruits as knowledge, thus subjecting the mystic to a *hermeneutical injustice*. We made these claims in a partially exploratory way, as the studies and research necessary to confirm or reject the hypothesis that the mystic does in fact face significant identity-based bias when she attempts to share knowledge does not exist as of yet. Though its scope remains unknown, the anti-mystical bias we have explored in this paper represents an interesting and new realm for the application of Miranda Fricker's framework of epistemic injustice.

Having imagined how the mystic's knowledge might fail to be heard or accepted by the hearer or reader of her testimony, we can now briefly turn to some other questions: what might happen when the exchange happens successfully? What's special about this mystical knowledge? Although it would require another paper to address in full, we can start by pointing out one motivating factor in our desire for an epistemically just reception of an account of a mystic's experience. The social and political world we live in today, in the U.S. and in the world, is fraught with tribalism, xenophobia, greed, and exploitation. And what are tribalism, xenophobia, greed, or exploitation but violent manifestations of the division between self and other? Do they



not all rest on the stable perception of what is “me” and “mine” versus “not-me” and “not-mine”? What is “like me” and “not like me”? If these seemingly-steadfast barriers that divide up the world could disappear, even if just temporarily, might we not see an expansive and liberating new horizon before us? Recall that in Section II we entertained two possible models of experiential knowledge, one of which was Laurence Nemirow’s *ability hypothesis*, which portrayed experiential knowledge as *knowledge-how*, in that it involves the acquisition of abilities to remember the experience in question and imagine oneself having such an experience again even when one is not. Considering such a hypothesis, we might wonder whether these abilities—in the context of the self-other unification of mystical experiences—might provide the mystic with liberatory tools for the overcoming of these divisive social forces. Might the mystic, in a time of conflict, be able to call to mind her past mystical experiences and, imagining how the conflict would appear without a self to root for or an other to root against, overcome any anger or self-interest on which she might have been acting?

The unitive mystical experience is a fascinating one, unlike the reality most of us are accustomed to experiencing. For the challenge it poses to the everyday divisions in our world, it is extremely valuable—not only to the one who has experienced it, but also to the one who has the chance to hear about it and try to imagine what it might be like. There are many ways to start thinking about how such an experience and the knowledge it begets might be used in service of a better, less fragmented world. Some of this knowledge may be impossible to gain without the having of the mystical experience itself. Even absent the unitive experience, however, everyone can learn from the testimonies of the mystics that an egocentric world divided into self and other is not the only reality available to us. From there, who knows what’s possible?

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