

Extraordinary Experiences and Religious Beliefs

Deconstructing Some Contemporary Philosophical Axioms

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Abstract

Many contemporary scholars believe that all experience is dependent upon language and culture, meaning that it is unintelligible to speak of some cross-cultural event which can be called “mystical” or “religious”; and that the notion of the origins of religious beliefs lying in such experiences is thus methodologically and theoretically unsound. Challenges to these perspectives leave one open to charges of naivety, or of having crossed a boundary from the (ostensibly) objective Study of Religions into a kind of universalist crypto-theology. In defense of the study of such experiences, this article attempts to demonstrate the weaknesses in these arguments by showing that they are based upon a number of mutually-reliant but unproven culturally-situated philosophical axioms. With particular reference to near-death and out-of-body experiences, a reflexive, theoretically eclectic approach to this area of study is suggested.

Keywords

religious experience – mysticism – postmodernism – experiential source hypothesis – near-death experience – out-of-body experience – comparison

1 Introduction

Critics of the study of so-called “religious” or “mystical” experience regard religions as purely cultural-linguistic constructs. While certain extraordinary experiences are regularly characterized by experiencers and some scholars as “religious,” “mystical” etc., critics argue that because an experience cannot be independent of its cultural-linguistic context, there can be no such thing as

unmediated experience, and there is no sensible way we can speak of some unique pan-human category of event identifiable as “religious” or “mystical” experience at all. On these grounds, it is supposedly unintelligible to look to religious experience for the origins of religious beliefs (the “experiential source hypothesis” in David Hufford’s terminology). Indeed, for many critics it is not so much a chicken-or-egg question (which comes first: religious experience or religious belief)—it is more of a claim that there is never any egg to begin with.

The rhetoric of such arguments has grown increasingly dogmatic over time, from scholars such as Katz in the 1970s, to Proudfoot in the 80s, to Sharf in the 90s. More recently, Day (2010: 295) wrote that the “very idea” of religious experience “now looks like a curio from the past rather than something to be taken seriously. It is a magic feather in which we once believed.”

While such critics often make valuable points, there are theoretical and methodological problems with both the construction of their theories, and the ways in which these theories are applied to the study of experience *per se*—as if the subject itself is at fault. These critics are not all saying precisely the same things, nor do they always share the same goals, motivations, or conclusions. They do, however, share a general acceptance of certain mutually-reliant but unproven culturally-situated philosophical axioms largely derived from post-modernist thought. The aim of the present article is to gather together various logical challenges to such assumptions which, through their wide acceptance, have become detrimental to the study of the relationship between experience and belief. The article is thus structured thematically, rather than as a close engagement with a single particular author or work.

As Katz (1978: 22-3) emphasized, there is undoubtedly a need for clarity of meaning when it comes to terminology, and he successfully problematized the academic misuse of terms such as “mysticism” as catch-all categories for various experience types. Unlike some of his successors, Katz does not overextend his argument to claim that “mystical experiences do not happen,” nor that they are “mumbo-jumbo,” nor even that they are entirely explicable in reductionist terms. His concern is mainly with scholars who make universalist claims about *diverse* types of experiences:

... forcing multifarious and extremely variegated forms of mystical experience into improper interpretive categories which lose sight of the fundamentally important differences between the data studied ...

... and then use such claims as “evidence” that mystical experiences *per se* are “true.” “Religious experience” is often used synonymously with terms like “spiritual,” “ecstatic,” or “mystical” to categorize various kinds of non-quotidian

experiences: visions, healings, feelings of unity, transcendence, and so on. McClenon (1994) uses the term “wondrous events”; Brainard (1996: 371f) points to “nonordinariness” as a defining feature of “mystical” experiences; and Taves (2009) uses “special” to describe the types of experiences people might “deem religious,” emphasizing that their classification is cultural. “Extraordinary experience” (EE) is used here when not referring to a specific experience type or a particular author’s term, and (elaborating on Taves) “extraordinary experiences deemed religious” (EEDR) to more precisely signify *experiences interpreted by the experiencer as non-ordinary and having religious or spiritual meaning, import, or value*. This reflects one of my basic arguments: that there are certain identifiable types of EEs which are regularly interpreted in ways which give rise to what are commonly called “religious” or “spiritual” beliefs.

I concur with Taves (2009: 8) that:

Rather than abandon the study of experience, we should disaggregate the concept of “religious experience” and study the wide range of experiences to which religious significance has been attributed.

I will thus illustrate and underpin my arguments with specific EE types, especially near-death experiences (NDEs) and out-of-body experiences (OBES).

2 Narratives of Experience as Non-Referential

An idea most forcefully articulated by Sharf (1998: 286) is that we cannot separate a narrative of an experience from the experience itself:

... it is a mistake to approach literary, artistic, or ritual representations as if they referred back to something other than themselves, to some numinous inner realm.

While Sharf’s aim is to “draw attention to the way the concept [of experience] functions in religious discourse,” the rules of his “language game” are not explicit. He states, for example, that he does not “deny subjective experience,” while arguing that a *description* or *representation* of an experience cannot actually *refer* to it. This seems to imply that *describing and representing* an experience *is* possible, but that in so doing *referring to* it is somehow not. If one can have a subjective experience as Sharf allows, it can surely be described, and in order to *describe* an experience once must surely be able to *refer* to it. While the nuanced distinction is presumably intended as a Wittgensteinian

reminder that the description is not “the same” as the actual experience, the ultimate significance of the distinction in any “real” terms is obscure: can a person have an experience and allude to, relate, write and speak about it or not? If not, this begs the question: to what precisely is the person ostensibly referring? A representation represents and a description describes, implying that there is *something* to be represented and described. Sharf (1998: 280) acknowledges that his readers must be thinking that:

The vigorous and often exuberant language used by mystics the world over to describe their visions, trances, and states of cosmic union must refer to *something*. . . .

though an alternative theory as to what does give rise to the descriptions is not provided. This becomes particularly problematic when we later consider specific experience types (e.g., NDES and OBES) which not only have cross-culturally stable phenomenologies, but also *cross-culturally consistent locally ascribed meanings*.

To illustrate his contention that narratives of experiences do not refer to actual experiences, Sharf (1998: 280-82) draws a comparison with alien abduction. He argues that because the scholarly consensus is that alien abductions do not actually occur, there can be no originating experience—no “determinative phenomenal events at all”—behind alleged memories of them. Apart from the fact that there is no such scholarly consensus regarding all experience types which people deem religious, there are conceptual problems with this example. Sharf states that while alien abduction is not fully understood, its roots lie in “complex historical, sociological, and psychological processes.” Such “processes,” however, must themselves be considered types of “determinative phenomenal event,” i.e., experience; and given the overall similarity of accounts of alien abductions, it would be logical to argue that similar “processes” result in a consistent type of experience among the alleged abductees—as actually appears to be the case (see below).

Sharf (1998: 282) extends his analogy to encompass various types of EEs, asking:

. . . is there any reason to assume that the reports of experiences by mystics, shamans, or meditation masters are any more credible as “phenomenological descriptions” than those of the abductees?

If such reports are not “credible as phenomenological descriptions” of particular types of experiences, how is it that similar types of narratives of experiences

can be identified and generically categorized in consistent ways by numerous and diverse scholars, literally enabling their study? Categories are arrived at through phenomenological observation and comparison. Because Sharf himself cannot avoid using these categories, to what is he referring if they have no referent? As Brainard (1996: 370) pointed out in relation to Katz:

... there is an irony in his use of the term “mystical” to isolate a certain category of experiences in order to point up differences among that category’s members while neglecting exactly those characteristics of the experiences that gave him and others reason to call them “mystical.”

It is difficult to imagine what kind of proof there could ever be that the masses of descriptions of EEDR found cross-culturally do not actually refer to any experiences. Reprinted in a volume entitled *Cognitive Models and Spiritual Maps: Interdisciplinary Explorations of Religious Experience*,¹ Sharf’s article sits uneasily amongst explorations of cognitive approaches to religious experience which are predicated on them being both existent and cross-culturally stable.

Proudfoot (1985: 123) similarly argues that “the interpretations are themselves constitutive of the experiences”; though later (1993: 796) writes that religious experiences are “often private, personal, interior, and direct” (cf. Barnard 1993: 807). Cupitt (1998: *passim*, 132) states unequivocally that all experience is entirely linguistically constructed (see below), though also describes meditative states in exceedingly mystical terms,² and in doing so is referring to an experience as something that actually occurs outside writing about it.³ Also bewildering is his statement that because early humans likely engaged in consciousness-altering ritual activity, “in a certain sense” we can speak of mystical experience as going back “to the very beginnings of humanity” (Cupitt 1998: 20-21). If mystical experience is entirely dependent upon language, it should not have occurred *prior to the invention of language*. Likewise, Zaleski’s (1987: 190) statement that the NDE is “through and through a work of the socially conditioned religious imagination” is contradicted by her claim that it is shaped

1 A special issue of the *Journal of Consciousness Studies* (2000).

2 E.g., “The “I” melts down into the continuum, and so too does God. So God and the self are united at last, in their mutual dissolution” (Cupitt 1998: 132).

3 Cupitt does also describe a “Unitive State” achieved *during* “mystical writing,” in which “Everything, including the self, disappears into a shimmering oceanic bliss...” though this only serves to demonstrate that there are different ways of accessing similar types of experiences: Cupitt apparently achieves them through both mediation and writing.

by “universal laws of symbolic experience” (Zaleski 1987: 7).⁴ Fox (2002: 114) notes a similar confusion in Lindbeck’s *The Nature of Doctrine* (1984), finding that he “appears unclear as to whether or not language is *solely* constitutive of experience.”

Even from its earliest manifestations, internal logical inconsistency seems endemic to this mode of thought. In 1909, Rufus M. Jones wrote:

There are no experiences of any sort which are independent of preformed expectations or unaffected by the prevailing beliefs of the time. . . . Mystical experiences will be, perforce, saturated with the dominant ideas of the group to which the mystic belongs, and they will reflect the expectations of that group and that period (quoted in Almond 1990: 212).

However, Jones (1915: 165) also wrote:

. . . the mystical experience itself as it bursts upon the soul is a unifying, fusing, intensifying inward event. . . . It is not dependent upon any peculiar stock of ideas and is not confined to what is usually called the purview of religion; it is the sudden transcendence of our usual fragmentary island of reality and the momentary discovery of the whole to which we belong.

This pattern of apparent self-contradiction raises the suspicion that even the originators of these arguments have not quite been able to work them through comprehensively or fully coherently. While it may be that we are not intended to read them as modes of actually understanding the problem, but as hermeneutic, “playful” philosophical exercises in keeping with such postmodernist tropes as hyper-relativism, anti-realism, and the impossibility of “knowing,” though this is not made clear.⁵

4 Zaleski (1990: 208) later appears to contradict her book’s main thesis by stating: “. . . no where do I claim that near-death visions are merely ‘useful imaginings’ . . . To say that this experience is mediated by the religious imagination and is shaped by cultural forces is by no means to deny that it is an encounter with God.”

5 With the possible exception of Cupitt (1998: 144) who does engage with ideas of “playfulness,” our perpetual state of unknowing, and “deliberate use of paradox . . . intended to teach non-realism.” Whether this exempts him from being held to his zealous insistence on linguistic constructivism and his apparently “paradoxical” truth-claims about mysticism (see below) is a matter of philosophical preference.

Finally, implicit in such arguments is the worrying suggestion that critics are in a superior position to experiencers, who are characterizing as uncritical products of their belief systems at best (cf. Barnard 1992), or liars at worst. For example, Sharf (1998: 282) refers to narratives of “shamanic trance journeys” with the evaluative term “tales,” questions the credibility of representations of religious experience and states that “we are not obliged to accept” them as “phenomenological description” (Sharf 1998: 283). Cupitt (1998: 33) writes: “how can someone pretend to remember and to describe a state of being so lost in immanence that he can be in no condition to remember anything?” In addition to disbelieving experiencer testimony, Cupitt is also dismissing the possibility of memory function in an experience he seems to deny even occurs outside its description. Cupitt also attempts to discredit narratives of EEs by reference to local political conditions, characterizing mystics as “deconstructors” of local orthodoxy who threaten the stability of religious hierarchies, and thus face “suspicion of heresy and threat of persecution” (Cupitt 1998: 4). While he is obviously correct that people are not “persecuted for having heretical experiences” but for their writings about them (Cupitt 1998: 62, 80-92), a socio-political context of a narrative does not itself imply that the experience was fabricated by its author out of some self-endangering heretical agenda.

Rennie (2000: 108) writes, “*observation* assures us that there is a distinction between claim and experience.” To anyone who has any kind of experience, having it and relating it are not the same thing. For Davis (1989: 19-22), one of the criteria of “experience” is that it is “datable” (the others are that it is “undergone,” that the subject is “aware” of it, and that it is “private”). Any experience is temporal and finite—it has a beginning and an end, existing in a particular range of time. This indicates that it is *something*—an occurrence,⁶ and one that can be referred to and described like any other.⁷

3 Unmediated and Precultural Experience

Language and culture undoubtedly play a role in mediating EEs, and narratives of experiences are culturally-embedded artefacts. With reservations about the adjective “wholly,” I concur with Sharf (1998: 271) that:

6 Cf. Bagger’s (1999: 91) distinction between an *event* and an *experience*, emphasizing that what we generally refer to as an “experience” (noun) is essentially the way in which an “event” is “experienced” (verb).

7 Thanks to Gavin Flood for this observation.

... mystical experience is wholly shaped by a mystic's cultural environment, personal history, doctrinal commitments, religious training, expectations, aspirations, and so on.

However, accepting that experience is culturally *mediated* is not the same as accepting that it is entirely culturally *fabricated*. Mediation and mystical experience are often seen as dichotomous, with mediation being considered a barrier to mystical experiences, and thus enlisted as 'proof' that such experiences cannot occur. Short, however, argues (1995: 664) that mediation actually enables experience: "mediation is not an obstacle to experience, but its *sine qua non*, and not a barrier to understanding, but the process of understanding."

Short further contends that the role of specifically socio-cultural and linguistic mediation has been over-emphasized, and he reminds us of universal mediators. As ontologically human beings, "we come with given physical, perceptual, and neurological equipment," as well as common experiences of "time, space, and causality." This set of pre-linguistic mediators filters all experience, whether socio-cultural, linguistic, or extraordinary; and indicates a degree of commonality of all human perception, and thus of the ways in which we experience. We need not conceive of EEs as being any less mediated than any other kind of experience, *or any more mediated*. We can accept Katz's (1978: 25-26) arguments that no experience is unmediated, acknowledging difference and diversity; though reject the more extreme claims of the total "narrative construction" of experience as espoused by scholars such as Sharf and Cupitt.

Notwithstanding, the existence of cross-cultural similarities of discrete experience types indicates that they must *originate* in phenomena which are independent of culture. For example, all attempts to explain NDEs in materialist terms involve *physical* events, such as REM intrusion, anoxia, hypercarbia, and other epiphenomena of a compromised brain. These events cause experiences with identifiable, predictable, consistent phenomenologies, enabling critics of the veridicality of NDEs to formulate theories predicated on their universality. NDEs share a similar phenomenology with the effects of the drug ketamine, according to individuals who have had experiences of both (Jansen 2001). This demonstrates an objective phenomenology of two experience types. To accept one on the grounds that it has medically identifiable origins (ketamine) and not the other on the grounds that some claim it does not (NDE), would be an example either of cognitive dissonance or an anti-scientific privileging of philosophical commitments over evidence.

Narratives of NDEs are culturally idiosyncratic but are nevertheless characterized by similar structural features cross-culturally. The existence of differences does not negate the existence of similarities, or "disprove" that they

can exist (Shushan 2013). Just as we can accept difference without denying similarity, we can acknowledge cultural-linguistic and environmental factors without rejecting the possibility of common non-cultural factors (whether neurophysiological, psychological, or supernatural is irrelevant here). The fact that experiences are culturally-situated does not invalidate cross-cultural phenomenological consistency.

Drawing an analogy between emotions and religious experience, Proudfoot (1985: 90-1) wrote that emotions “are not inner states or events, nor are they somatic sensations or even experiences of any kind.” His position was essentially that there is no physiological difference between emotional states, and it is therefore context and interpretation that make us have diverse emotions at all. Proudfoot enlisted this theory to support his claims about the cultural-linguistic construction of religious experience. However, as Barnard (1992: 234) pointed out, within the scientific community “the more general consensus is that there are different physiological sensations associated with different emotions,” and cognition and emotion are now seen as different classes of phenomena (cf. McClenon 2002: 187, n.30). Of most importance here, it is now generally held that emotions can actually precede and affect cognition, as well as vice versa (Panksepp 2004; McClenon 2002: 161). One could therefore extrapolate (in reverse of Proudfoot) that EEs may also precede cognition. McClenon (2002: 162) summarized that recent scientific research suggests that “explanations of religious experiences are influenced by environmental and cultural factors but not fully produced by them.”

There are, in fact, two good indicators that EEs can originate in pre-cultural phenomena. The first is that they often conflict with the expectations and cultural-religious milieus of experiencers, as pointed out with numerous examples by Forman (1990: 19-20), Stoeber (1991: 112), King (1988: 267), and Fox (2002: 115-16), among others. The second is that they can be spontaneous, with no associated “practice,” no expectation, and indeed, often total ignorance of the phenomenon. Davis (1989: 162-3) gives examples of individuals whose EEs left them wholly bewildered, and who were able to make sense of them only upon later exposure to philosophical or religious ideas which allowed them to culturally “encode” what had happened to them. She cites cases of children who had “religious” experiences despite having had no religious training, and of children who found their experiences to be inconsistent with the religious ideas they had been taught. Some formed a belief in “two ‘Gods,’ one for church, the other the object of their numinous and mystical experiences,” indicating that the experience was of something outside their religious enculturation. Just as a prophecy cannot be self-fulfilled (as Katz [1978: 59] analogizes) if it is never made to begin with, an experience cannot conform to expectation

if one does not expect it. An early twentieth-century Zuni Native American NDE narrative includes encounters with deceased relatives and bright light—motifs that are inconsistent with Zuni afterlife conceptions (Wade 2003: 94-5). Medieval Chinese, Japanese and European NDE narratives often conflict with the theological conventions of their time and place (McClenon 1994: ch. 9); and atheists have NDEs consistent with those of theists (see below). Conversely, certain themes that we might expect to find in the NDEs of individuals of specific religions are rarely reported. For example, salvation, physical resurrection, and reincarnation do not commonly feature in reports from either Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews, or Muslims. Significantly, while NDEs report a number of sub-experiences from a recognized repertoire,⁸ variability between accounts is due to clear cultural and individual factors⁹ (Shushan 2009: 39-50). This means that NDEs can conflict with the expectations even of those *with* prior knowledge of the phenomenon, who may wonder, for example, why they did not go through a tunnel or have a life review.

NDE-type narratives are known from Ancient Greece, the Biblical Near East, Medieval-modern Europe, Ancient-modern India, China, and Japan, Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica and modern Mexico, 18th century-modern United States, 12th century-modern Tibet, modern Thailand and the Philippines (Shushan 2009: ch. 3, 164-8; Belanti et. al. 2008), and in 16th-20th century missionary, explorer, and ethnographer accounts of indigenous societies in the Pacific, Asia, the Americas, and Africa (Shushan *forthcoming*). Because any theory of diffusion or intertextuality on this scale is insupportable (Shushan 2009: ch. 2), the existence of structurally similar narratives describing contextually stable experiences from such different times, places, and cultural-linguistic backgrounds points to pre-cultural origins of this experience type.

The possibility of EEs having a pre-cultural origin is not necessarily predicated on their being wholly unmediated. Rather, such experiences are perhaps best understood as having interconnected universal, cultural, and individual layers: a universal “event” is experienced by, filtered through, and processed

8 According to the “Greyson Scale” (Greyson 1983), these are: time speeding up, time slowing down, replays of scenes from the past, universal understanding, peace and pleasant feelings, joy, sense of universal unity, bright light, exceptionally vivid senses, ESP, visions of the future, OBE, being in another realm, encounters with mystical beings, encounters with deceased individuals, reaching a border or limit. Other commonly reported elements include entering darkness, existence in quasi-physical form, evaluation of one’s earthly life, impressions of having returned “home,” and being instructed or choosing to return to the body. See Fox (2003: 100f) for a discussion on varying systems to determine NDEs.

9 And perhaps to the duration of the experience—see Stevenson and Greyson (1996: 203-4).

“live” by a biological, enculturated individual, who subsequently attempts to make sense of it according to his/her socio-cultural-religious situation (or indeed by innovating away from it) (cf. King 1988). As universally human beings we have universal experience types; and as enculturated human beings we process and express those experiences according to our specific cultural-linguistic modes. As a self-conscious, analytical species, we have the ability to discern one experience type from another, and to analyze and interpret our experiences in a diversity of ways.

While from this perspective the issue of unmediated experience has been given undue importance, the problem nevertheless remains. Fox (2002: 125-26) emphasizes that mystical experiences are typically described as “a state which bypasses normal modes of sense and apprehension.” Such exceptional experiences (e.g., preternatural light phenomena, OBE) are commonly regarded by those who have them as occurring beyond the physical senses and therefore not subject to physical laws; and thus beyond our ability to understand through our usual constraining modes of materialist analysis and interpretation. In other words, while direct, unmediated experience is not normally possible, it is at least philosophically conceivable that in certain exceptional states it is. As Evans (1988: 54-5) points out, while we cannot assume that mystical experiences are everywhere and for everyone “the same,” nor can we assume that there is simply no possibility of an unmediated “pure consciousness” experience.

Though widely accepted in the Study of Religions, without empirical validation,¹⁰ claims of the total narrative construction of experience are more properly seen as philosophical speculation than as axiomatic; and the justification for giving default ontological primacy to language/culture over experience is obscure.

4 Linguistic Constructivism and Ineffability

Critics (e.g., Katz, Proudfoot, Sharf) also object to the notion that a given term will necessarily have a counterpart in other languages, meaning that “religious

10 For “illustrative and dramatic purposes” Proudfoot (1993: 793) employed S. Schachter & J.E. Singer “Cognitive, social, and physiological determinants of emotional state” (*Psychological Review*, 1962, 69 379-3), a study which has been highly criticized and effectively refuted by half a century of further research (Barnard 1992: 234-35; McClenon 2002: 161-63). While Proudfoot (1993: 793) later clarified that his argument is not dependent upon the article’s conclusions, we are still left with a lack of empirical evidence to support his claims.

experience,” “mystical experience” etc. may be unknown in a given society. The lack of a truly analogous term for an experience type in a given language, however, does not indicate that the experience itself is unknown to speakers of that language. Put simply, linguistic differences do not negate the possibility of common experiences (cf. Forman 1990: 18). The fact that experiences sometimes *are* described and interpreted in similar ways across cultures suggests that it is more a question of how people linguistically negotiate these experiences rather than whether or not they actually have them. As McClenon (1994: 1) pointed out, Tibetans do not have a term for “supernatural” because they consider everything to be “part of the natural order.” Nevertheless, along with “all societies,” they “consider certain phenomena as beyond normal consciousness, outside the realm of ordinary experience.” Similarly, a recent survey has shown that although there is no regular Chinese term for “religious experience,” individuals in China report types of EEs phenomenologically consistent with those known elsewhere, and commonly associate them with religious ideas and beliefs (Yao and Badham 2007: 28ff).

Cupitt (1998: 11, 74) argues for complete linguistic constructivism,¹¹ stating “there is no meaningfulness and no cognition . . .” and “no such thing as experience outside and prior to language . . . Language doesn’t copy or convey experience; language determines or forms experience as such.” Cupitt (1998: 114) emphasizes writing in particular:

You can’t first *experience* religious happiness and *then* transcribe it into words, because writing precedes experience, writing forms and produces experience, writing makes experience possible.

As Cupitt (1998: 9) acknowledges, both language and writing are culturally-situated constructs. Why they should be given such absolute priority over—and indeed set apart from—experience is therefore unclear. Equating “pre-linguistic” and “pre-literate” with “pre-experiential” is also highly problematic. First, it implies absurdly that only people with language and literacy have experiences, excluding infants, those with developmental disabilities, the profoundly deaf who are raised without sign language, the rare cases of feral children, all non-human animals, and the illiterate 26% of the world’s adults. Second, the lengths to which we should take this mode of thought, and on what basis, is unclear. Taken to its illogical extreme, it would imply that speakers of Malayalam or Russian, for example, do not experience having hands on the grounds that they

11 Adopting Forman’s (1990: 13) distinction between “incomplete constructivism” (something like the “middle way” outlined here) and “complete constructivism.”

have no separate word for “hand” (it being a part of the “arm”). Or as Brown (1991: 132) put it, “people who lack a word for ‘chin’ and thus call it the ‘end of the jaw’ still make sense.” Third, there is no psychological, neurophysiological, or anthropological evidence supporting such claims. On the contrary, there *is* evidence that cognition (a kind of experience) precedes language (Downey 2010). With empirical evidence for two experience types (emotions and cognition) preceding language, it seems that linguistic constructivism has been greatly over-stated. Citing various experimental studies, Davis (1989: 159-60) concluded that only the “weakest version” of the language-experience hypothesis is tenable and “has survived psychological investigation.” This hypothesis states that “language mainly affects the memory and expression of experiences”; it is not crucial to their formation (the strongest version), nor even significantly influential upon it (the middle version). Possessing language to describe a particular experience is clearly not a prerequisite for having the experience, though “the conceptual frameworks underlying language certainly do exert some influence.”

Linguistic constructivism becomes even more problematic when we consider that these experiences are often characterized as *ineffable*. Goldstein (1983: 106) argues that language is designed to refer to our physical reality and “to the abstract world of cognition,” whereas religious experiences ostensibly have no “referential likenesses to the physical or abstract aspects of this world.” We lack a common “conceptual category” to easily facilitate communication about them. It is true that “ineffability” can be used to characterize a wide range of dissimilar experiences, such as being in love or the creative process; and (contra William James) it is thus problematic to consider it a defining phenomenological indicator of “religious experience” (Katz 1978: 48). It does not follow, however, that those who describe an experience as ineffable are not having similar experiences, any more than it follows that they are. It would be an inversion of logic to enlist claims of ineffability and of non-linguistic experience against the very individuals who make them, as “proof” that such experiences do not occur.

Perhaps the most significant point about ineffability is made by Fox (2002: 134-35): if language is the primary factor in the creation of EEs, why is it that experiencers often do not have the “language” to describe them? The inadequacy of language to express the experience suggests that the experience originated prior to the attempt to put it into language. Fox concludes: “Far from being a product of language and/or cultural-linguistic expectation,” the core elements of NDEs “stand prior to and independently of their culturally acquired expectations of what death might be like.” Forman (1990: 41) makes a similar point in claiming that during a “Pure Consciousness Event” one

forgets language entirely. There is a “disjunction” between the event and the later attempt to describe it, and this disjunction itself is what the experiencer refers to as “ineffable,” i.e., non-linguistic. Indeed, one of the common descriptors of mystical experiences is an “emptiness” in which language and culture are “forgotten.” Short (1995: 665-7) stresses how mystical practices are essentially designed to “interfere with language use” and “disassociate sound from meaning, signifier from signified” resulting in a “non-linguistic” state. This does not mean that the experience is unmediated—only that the mediator is not language. Language does play a role, however, for “our understanding of the non-linguistic experience is a product of the interaction between what is there (the non-linguistic experience) and what we bring to it (the conventions of our language).”

5 Negative Exceptionalization

Language raises the issue of negative exceptionalization: if EEDR are cross-linguistically inexpressible (insofar as they are supposedly culture/language-specific), how can *any* sort of experience, or indeed idea or thought of any kind, be made intelligible from one culture or language into another? Wiredu (1996: 53) argues that any idea in any “language or conceptual framework . . . can be represented in, if not necessarily translated into, any other.” This “intercultural communication” and “transcultural intelligibility” show that humans “share a conceptual scheme, however minimal its dimensions” (Wiredu 1996: 21, 33). Our common human experiences are what actually enable cross-linguistic communication. If critics mean that *only* EEDR are cross-linguistically inexpressible, the justification for such an argument is obscure.

Sharf (1998: 268, *passim*) singles out such experiences to the extent that their occurrence seems to be denied, implicitly justifying his claim that they are “inaccessible to strictly objective modes of inquiry.” However, there are, in fact, objective ways of studying such experiences: Taves (2009: 68ff) points out that we can obtain “real time” neurological data from experiences in progress, and monitor experiencer actions and reactions. Laboratory-based empirical studies are conducted on meditative states (e.g., Josipovic 2010), autoscopy and OBES (e.g., Blanke et. al. 2003; and Metzinger [2005: 76] who writes of a current “renaissance of rigorous research on the OBE”). There are experiential studies of shamanic imagery (e.g., Rock et. al. 2005/2006), survey- and fieldwork-based studies on the relationship between experiences and beliefs (e.g., McClenon 1994; 2002; Hufford 2005; Yao & Badham 2007), and various NDE researchers are conducting experiments to test veridical observations during OBES in

hospital settings (e.g., Parnia 2006). There are at least as many approaches to the objective study of EEs as there are to any other kind of experience.¹²

To recognize and intellectually engage with the cross-cultural occurrence of EEs is little different from doing so with any other type of human experience. Grief at the loss of loved ones, for example, is universal though culturally expressed (Stroebe and Stroebe 1987: 53-4). If the concept of “extraordinary experience deemed religious” is untenable, why is not the concept of “loss experience deemed mournful”? The fact that people commonly ascribe to certain experiences religious, spiritual, mystical or otherwise supernatural meanings does not make them beyond our ability to research, or show that they are meaningless as cross-cultural categories.

Notwithstanding, by definition, EEs *are* exceptional within the contexts in which they occur: special, elevated status is given to certain kinds of non-quotidian experiences cross-culturally. While there may be rare exceptions, people generally perceive a difference between sensations of awareness being in the body or out of it; between feeling distinct from the rest of reality or at one with it; between encountering a physical living person or an apparition of a dead one; and between staying “dead” or coming back to life. Regardless of whether or not these things veridically occur, people around the world have been reporting them throughout recorded history, and regarding them as being in a separate category to everyday occurrences. This pattern of cultural ascription is an important indicator of their cross-cultural stability.

6 Postcolonialist Historiography and Cross-Cultural Comparison

Postmodernism has been valuable in articulating and emphasizing the importance of reflexivity: examining the problem of our own cultural situatedness as Western academics in relation to the religions we study, the terms we use, and the theories we formulate about them. However, this can be taken to unproductive extremes.

It is fashionable in the contemporary Study of Religions to trace the lineage of a basic academic signifier (e.g., “religion,” “Hinduism,” “experience”) with the intention of demonstrating how it ultimately lies in some modern Western colonialist and/or theologizing construct, and is therefore invalid as a category beyond that context. For example, in a chapter entitled “The Modern Construction of Mysticism and Religious Experience,” Cupitt (1998: 11-29, cf. 30-45) argues that in pre-Modern times, “experience” was conceived

¹² Cf. note 15, below.

of as being essentially *active*, while Modern definitions see it as *passive*. This allegedly led to the notion of “external” religious experience—something that “happens to” an individual—which served to justify and promote an emphasis on the *self*. While this may be the case for certain Western European Christian mystical traditions, it is problematic to use the argument to support any general theory of religious experience. Though Cupitt’s claims are presented in highly generalizing terms, they ignore attitudes to these experiences cross-culturally and in individuals (as opposed to elite doctrinal or philosophical statements). A historiographical analysis of a term within a particular context says nothing about the nature or existence of the term’s referent outside that context. It is a genetic fallacy to attempt to discredit a belief or theory through an understanding of its origin rather than on its own merits. Cupitt’s analysis thus has no bearing on the objectivity or otherwise of religious experiences; and the suggestion that the invention of terms is somehow equivalent to that to which they refer is insupportable.

Taking a similar approach, Sharf (1998: 273) argues that “there is simply no evidence of an indigenous Indian counterpart to the [Western] *rhetoric*¹³ of experience prior to the colonial period.” While Sharf (1998: 273-75, 277-80) may be correct about the particular Hindu and Buddhist examples he cites, he goes a step further in agreeing with Proudfoot that “religious experience is a relatively late and distinctively Western invention” (Sharf 1998: 271). Rather than confining his arguments contextually to the *use of rhetoric* in the Western academic Study of Religions in comparison to certain strands of Indian thought, Sharf (a) makes blanket statements about “Asian” and premodern religions *per se*, and about “religious” experience *per se*—including truth-claims about its ontological status—based upon a few culture-specific examples; and (b) presents his arguments about certain Western misunderstandings of the role of religious experience in Indian religions as inherent to the study of religious experience as such. Isolating particular examples to *illustrate* an argument is one thing; but without more extensive contextually relevant cross-cultural validation, treating the isolated examples as support of generalizations is methodologically problematic (cf. Evans 1988: 55 in relation to Katz). Brainard (1996: 364f) notes the important distinction between “nominal” and “real” definitions of terms. The “nominal” definition of “experience” reflexively seeks “to explain how the phrase is used in its community of discourse and what collective interest or intention lies behind the phrase’s continued existence and use.” The “real” definition, however, is concerned with actual “traits that exist in the experiences themselves.” Sharf seems to conflate the two

13 Emphasis mine.

definitions, allowing him to argue for the meaninglessness of the second (real) by reference to the first (nominal), as if the “reality” of a phenomenon is dependent on how we use or misuse words to describe it. A contextual analysis of the role of religious experience in particular traditions can say nothing about the “reality” or occurrence of religious experience *per se*.

A nearly exclusive focus on cross-cultural difference has become *de rigueur* in the Study of Religions, largely through politically-motivated attempts to discount observations of similarity made by comparativist scholars of Perennial Philosophy or other universalist orientations (see Shushan 2013). However, drawing specific examples of difference from an almost inexhaustible supply of narratives of wide ranging experience types in which any number of differences (or similarities) might be found ironically replicates some of the methodological errors common in cross-cultural comparison: (a) biased sampling techniques (selecting on the basis of difference) to advance a particular theory; (b) conflating diverse experiences under a single rubric, then constructing general theories about it (precisely as Katz rightly criticized); and (c) overgeneralizing based on inadequate sample size.

Proudfoot (1985: xii-xiv; *passim*) also adopts a historiographical approach, arguing that the concept of “religious experience,” and the idea of seeing religions in terms of such experience, can be traced only as far back as Schleiermacher. As Sharf (1998: 271) summarizes, such a “perennialist hypothesis” should not be applied earlier because “it anachronistically imposes the recent and ideologically laden notion of ‘religious experience’ on our interpretations of premodern phenomena.” However, precisely the same criticism can be made of Proudfoot’s or Sharf’s favoured paradigms. What might 16th century Native American *NDERS* (Harriot 1588: 37-8) have thought of anti-realist, constructivist, and/or postcolonialist truth-claims being made about their experiences and their perceptions of them? Indeed, most contemporary models of religious phenomena—whether anthropological, sociological, biological, or psychological—were unknown before Schleiermacher, though we nevertheless routinely “impose” them upon pre-modern and non-Western religions. None can be exempt from this kind of criticism, and singling out experiential models is a further example of negative exceptionalization. Furthermore, *EES* are clearly described in pre-Schleiermacher *religious contexts* around the world, confirming that they are neither late nor exclusively Western, and that they are regularly interpreted in “religious” terms cross-culturally. In India for example, the 10th century BCE *Atharva Veda* (VIII.1-2, VII.53.3) contains instructional texts for retrieving a soul from the underworld. Earlier still, Soma-induced transcendental and visionary experiences are described in the *Rig Veda* (IX.94.2, X.119). *OBES* are explicit in the *Jaiminya Brahmana* (c. 900-

700 BCE; I.46) and *Chandogya Upanishad* (VIII.12.1-2). Numerous narratives from ancient China are overtly rooted in shamanic experiences, and contain descriptions of OBES to other realms (e.g., “Ai shi ming,” “Yuan You,” “Zhao hun” in *Chu ci*, 4th-2nd centuries BCE; *Li ji* I.II.1.32; II.I.1.20, 5th century BCE; and throughout the *Zuangzhi*, c. 319 BCE).¹⁴

Finally, historiographical lineages of criticisms of experiential theories might also be traced in order to argue that *they* derive from colonialist thinking. Hufford (2005: 21) explores the historiography of the psychopathologization of spiritual experiences, pointing to “Enlightenment skeptics such as David Hume who saw supernatural belief as inherently not rational.” A similar dynamic is evident in the writings of certain Christian missionaries when faced with indigenous claims that local afterlife beliefs stemmed directly from EES. Le Clercq (1691: 207), for example, wrote that Mi’kmaq Native American statements to this effect were due to “error and imposture”; and Brébeuf (1636: 141) was “astounded” that anyone could believe the experiential narratives he heard from the Wyandot. Hufford (2005: 24-5) further argues that developments in Protestant and Calvinist theologies after the Middle Ages encouraged negative views of spiritual experiences; and (contra Cupitt 1998: 16ff) that observation and experience were downplayed in favour of “non-cognitive,” “non-rational” faith. Dominant contemporary perspectives of religious experience may thus bear traces of Humean skepticism, Catholic missionary ethnocentric justifications of colonialism, and Protestant/Calvinist theologies, in (a) their climate of disbelief and mistrust of experiencer testimony, and negatively evaluative assertions about narratives of experience; (b) in their portrayal of the “other” as non-rational and ignorant (unable to understand or distinguish between experience types, uncritical products of belief systems); and (c) in their privileging of preconceived philosophical, faith-based paradigms (i.e., beliefs) over evidence.

While the impulse behind post-colonialist discourse may be admirable, it does not follow that its methods are always sound or its conclusions correct (politically or otherwise). Focusing on any area of study by nature excludes others: there is nothing inherently ethnocentric (or androcentric, or any other—centric) about the study of EEDR—which indeed *are* studied from indigenous, feminist, and various other perspectives. Other descriptive terms we use in studying religions also situate certain areas of society apart from others: “art,” “ethics,” “gender,” “ritual” are no more neutral than “experience”; nor certainly are any of our theories about them.

14 See Shushan (2009: Ch. 6 for India; Ch. 7 for China; cf. 168) for numerous further examples, with summaries, references and discussions.

7 The Experiential Dimension of Beliefs

Bocking (2006) writes: “Sharf’s argument is, or should be, unsettling for anyone who naively thinks that religious beliefs are grounded in religious experiences.”

Among the range of experiences humans have are ones which, *within their cultural contexts*, are commonly considered “religious,” “mystical” or otherwise extraordinary and inexplicable without reference to a supernatural, metaphysical, or otherwise non-quotidian cause or agency. For example, McClenon’s fieldwork (1994; 2002, esp. ch. 5: 106–31) provides a mass of cross-cultural evidence that demonstrates that beliefs in the paranormal often originate in EES. Individuals state explicitly that their experiences of poltergeists, apparitions, precognitions, NDEs, OBES, mediumistic séances, shamanic experiences, etc. led to their beliefs—not vice versa. There are clearly certain types of human experience most relevant to certain types of beliefs, and as such they are logical candidates to help us explain the origins of such beliefs. The notion is no more controversial than attempts to explain religions in terms of how we experience and negotiate our societies or environments; or explaining mourning in terms of loss.

A useful parallel is the phenomenon of sleep paralysis (SP)—a hypnagogic state in which an individual feels immobilized by a malevolent presence. Hufford (1982, 2005: 13) has demonstrated conclusively that SP is a pan-human, codifiable, diagnosable, neurophysiologically-based experience, which is commonly interpreted in local supernatural terms cross-culturally. It has given rise to folk beliefs in various types of ghosts, demons, and spirits in Newfoundland, China, Japan, Southeast Asia, Sweden, and everywhere the phenomenon is testified (Hufford 2005: 16)—including the United States where it appears to be linked to alien abduction (Clancy 2005). Those who experience SP are often convinced “not only that the experience has ‘really happened,’ but that it really represents a perception of objective reality.” Hufford (2005: 33) concludes that such experiences “often produce spiritual beliefs rather than being produced *by* such beliefs, even among persons not previously inclined to such beliefs.” There are numerous cases of individuals who have never heard of SP nevertheless having the experience. Moreover, their recurrence serves to maintain belief, for beliefs are not simply faith in past “stories” but are rooting in the persistence of experiences.

Although Taves (2009: 162) allows that ascriptions of “specialness” to certain types of experiences can be “building blocks” of religion, and refers to SP as “a quintessential example of experiences that *seem sui generis*” (Taves 2009: 137), she also believes it is “premature” to extend the experiential source hypothesis to religious beliefs:

In time we may be able to identify a variety of types of experiences that—empirically speaking—people are more likely to consider special and to which, as a result, they are more likely to attach religious ascriptions across cultures than would be the case with other sorts of experience (Taves 2009: 139).

It is unclear why SP might be accepted as an apparently *sui generis* experience which can lead to certain folk beliefs, while much more caution is shown to other cross-culturally identifiable EE types (e.g., OBES and NDES) which people commonly “deem religious,” despite being the subjects of perhaps even more extensive research.¹⁵

There are numerous examples of modern religious traditions which trace their origins directly to EES of their founders: from the 19th century, the Bahá'í faith is emically understood to be grounded in Bahá'u'lláh's vision, Mormonism in Joseph Smith's angelic visitation, certain Sectarian Shintoisms in spiritual communications, and Spiritualism is inseparable from spiritual mediumship. From the early 20th century, Dao Yuan in China and Cao Dai in Vietnam emerged following mediumistic communications; and the EES of Indian gurus such as Jiddu Krishnamurti, Dada Lekhraj, Meher Baba, and Sathya Sai Baba are crucial to the spiritual movements associated with them. Alien abduction (SP?) is alleged to be the foundational experience behind Raelism in France, and telepathic communication with aliens is the alleged basis for the Aetherius Society in the UK and The Universe People in the Czech Republic. In the more distant past, the impact of Zoroaster, the Buddha, Jesus, or Muhammad might conceivably have been less profound had it not been for the various EES attributed to them, which served to greatly elevate their status: prophecies, healings, transubstantiations, unusual births, encounters and communications with divine, demonic, deceased, or otherwise spiritual beings, journeys to other realms, and returning from or otherwise transcending physical death. Indeed, rare would be the religion that does not have some kind of EE event, emically understood to be “miraculous” or supernatural, and ultimately “deemed religious,” held central to belief, and continuously accepted by adherents.

To be clear, the experiential source hypothesis does not in itself attempt to define the ontological status of an experience. Nor does it entail seeing all beliefs in diverse traditions as being rooted in “the same” experience. *Specific* religious beliefs can be grounded in *specific* experiences, regardless of their

15 A search of the term “sleep paralysis” on *Google Scholar* yields 4,970 results; a search for “near-death experience” yields 11,200, and “out-of-body experience” 6,820.

origin. In other words, EE can be the egg from which the chicken comes, but where the egg comes from is irrelevant here.

8 NDES, OBES, and Afterlife Beliefs

Much empirical and social scientific research has been devoted to NDES. For a number of reasons they present a major challenge to the types of criticisms discussed above:

- (1) NDES are widely accepted by researchers from the most reductionist to the most theological of orientations as pan-human experiences. NDE narratives are found throughout history and in all parts of the world. Their occurrence is not in general dispute, only their origins and meanings. This demonstrates that:
- (2) NDES are phenomenologically classifiable, and distinguishable as a particular type of EE.
- (3) NDES typically occur under similar, generally *physical* circumstances: an individual is close to death, apparently dies, subsequently revives, and reports having undergone unusual experiences. A particular originating event (being near death) is thus a common catalyst for generating the structural effects of the NDE. This means they have an objectively cross-culturally stable *originary context*.
- (4) The fundamental *interpretation* of NDES appears to be universal—not only in general “religious,” “mystical,” or otherwise “supernatural” terms, but specifically the belief that “*this is what happens when you die.*”

If there is no common experience underpinning narratives of experiences, cross-culturally consistent narratives of a specific EE type should not exist; and certainly should not have the same nearly *universally ascribed basic meanings*.

The NDE has been largely ignored by most critics of religious experience.¹⁶ A key exception is Zaleski (1987: 190), exemplifying some of the now familiar problems, including adherence to a preconceived conclusion even when it results in logical inconsistencies. For example, she carefully draws parallels between modern NDES and Medieval Christian “otherworld journey” narratives, though because similarity is inconsistent with her conclusion that the NDE is wholly imaginative, the parallels are left unexplained in order to focus on the differences. As noted above, while she makes very clear statements

16 Sharf (1998: 284f) raises them, but only to criticise inconsistencies in Zaleski (1987).

about the narrative construction of NDEs, Zaleski also makes statements to the opposite effect. Zaleski (1987: 127) also argues that imposing ostensibly neutral descriptive terms upon NDEs cross-culturally denies the testimonies of experiencers. Researchers use the term “being of light,” for example, for what experiencers may identify as a *particular* radiant entity (the Buddha, Jesus, etc.). However, Zaleski herself denies insider testimony comprehensively and deliberately by concluding that NDEs are imaginary, while also sidestepping the fact that NDEs describe these entities in phenomenologically similar ways (radiating light and benevolence) regardless of cultural ascription.

Bocking (2006) discusses an NDE narrative by mathematical physicist and psychologist John Wren-Lewis, writing that the author differentiates the experience he described from an NDE because it “had none of the classic NDE features of tunnel, light etc.” and because “it stayed with him permanently.” However, while Wren-Lewis (n.d.) was indeed puzzled by elements that he believed conflicted with so-called “classic” NDEs, he himself referred to his experience *as* an NDE.

Furthermore, his description actually does feature some typical elements of NDEs.¹⁷ The tunnel motif has been convincingly shown by Kellehear (1996: 36-7) to be a culturally-situated expression of the more general sensations of darkness and light, which may bear some relation to Wren-Lewis’ “almost palpable blackness that was yet somehow radiant.” More clearly, NDEs commonly do “stay with” the individual, remaining vivid and meaningful long after the experience and having lasting positive after-effects (cf. William James “fruits”), including loss of a fear of death and increased spiritual orientation—both of which Wren-Lewis described. Other common NDE elements found in Wren-Lewis’s narrative are time slowing down, indescribable bliss and joy, universal understanding and unity, “eternity consciousness,” returning to a “home” or origin state of being, ineffability, and being “*pure consciousness*” beyond space and time. Though Bocking writes that Wren-Lewis had “little or no idea what to make of his profound experience beyond describing it,” Wren-Lewis actually concluded:

My intensive investigations in this area over the past decade have left me in no doubt that proponents of the so-called Perennial Philosophy are correct in identifying a common “deep structure” of experience underlying the widely different cultural expressions of mystics in all traditions.

17 David Rousseau (pers. comm.) has calculated that it rates a 9 out of 32 points on the Greyson scale, and 7 is enough to qualify as an NDE.

Before his experience Wren-Lewis was highly skeptical, and regarded mysticism as a form of neurosis. Not only did his experience run contrary to his expectations, it also resulted directly in new spiritual beliefs. To be clear, NDEs are not central to Bocking's arguments;¹⁸ but nevertheless, like Cupitt and Sharf, he employs a biased "straw man" methodology by selecting an isolated example of an alleged inconsistency in order to imply that consistencies do not exist in general, while also ignoring consistencies found within that example.

In addition to Wren-Lewis, other staunch materialists have also had their convictions challenged by NDEs. While publicly admitting only that the experience had "slightly weakened" his conviction that death is the end of consciousness, shortly after his fairly typical NDE philosopher A.J. Ayer told his doctor, "I saw a Divine Being. I'm afraid I'm going to have to revise all my various books and opinions" (Foges 2010). Such cases are effectively microcosms of the experiential source hypothesis, showing that not all EEs are due to expectation, that there are common EE types that do not seem to be purely cultural, and that they can generate new beliefs.

Religious texts with afterlife-related narratives often involve an individual temporarily leaving the body and traveling to afterlife realms. Such texts typically have a didactic function in preparing the reader for what to expect after death, and instructing about behaviour-types which will ensure a positive fate. This is evidently the function of the continuous strand of such narratives spanning the range of Vedic literature (*Rig Veda* x.135, *Shatapatha Brahmana* XI.6, *Jaiminiya Brahmana* I.42-44, *Katha Upanishad* I-VI), and is overtly the case with the Tibetan *Bardo Thodol*. There is an important, perhaps foundational connection between NDEs and Pure Land Buddhism in China and Japan, with many prominent figures in the traditions reporting them (see McClenon 1994: 182). Hultkrantz (1957: 235-7) presented a great deal of evidence to support his conclusions that Native American afterlife beliefs are widely based on NDEs. When asked about their afterlife beliefs, informants from various tribes related ostensibly factual NDEs, both to give a phenomenological description and to lend their beliefs experiential authority. In the late 19th century, Ghost Dance revitalization movements began with the NDE of Paiute shaman Wovoka; and the Indian Shaker Church was founded by John Slocum following instructions given to him during an NDE (Wade 2003: 99-102; cf. Shushan *forthcoming*). Generalizing about small-scale societies, Kalweit (1984: 70) wrote:

18 He uses Wren-Lewis' example to illustrate his points about distinctions between mystical experience and mystical teaching (another point prefigured by Jones [1915: 162-65]).

...when asked about the origins of their knowledge of the Beyond, the members of the various cultures say they gained this knowledge from the experiences of those who have returned [i.e., NDErs] and from shamans.

As a single discrete experience (as opposed to the composite NDE), the OBE is perhaps even more challenging to critics of the concept of EEDR. Whatever its cultural-linguistic context, it is by definition always and unambiguously considered a dualistic state in which consciousness is separated from the body. While Sharf (1998: 277) may be correct that Western perceptions and assumptions about religious experience lie in Descartes' notion of mind as an "immaterial substance," what is being described in all OBE reports is a *kind* of dualism. Phenomenologically speaking, it is irrelevant whether OBE is understood in philosophically Cartesian, Upanishadic, or Salteaux terms. Cultural models of mind-body dualism need not be identical in order to be grounded in the same experience type.

Explicit descriptions of OBES are found in Eastern and Western narratives throughout history, including in the Vedic, Chinese, and Native American examples cited above; and mind-body dualism, often exemplified by descriptions of OBES, is a common element of nearly every branch of Ancient Egyptian, Ancient Near Eastern, Zoroastrian, Græco-Roman, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, and numerous other theologies. Shiels (1978: 699) found that of the 67 small-scale societies he reviewed, 95 per cent believed in OBES, consistently described in remarkably similar ways. He summarized:

When different cultures at different times and in different places arrive at the same or a very similar out-of-the-body belief we begin to wonder if this results from a common experience of this happening.

From a neuroscientific perspective, Metzinger (2005: 57) has theorized that dualistic beliefs cross-culturally originate

...in accurate and truthful first-person reports about the experiential content of a specific neurophenomenological state-class called "out-of-body experiences." They can be undergone by every human being and seem to possess a culturally invariant cluster of functional and phenomenal core properties.

Metzinger (2005: 78 n.8) cites other studies which support his experiential source hypothesis, including one (Osis 1979) in which 73% of survey

respondents claimed that their beliefs had changed as a result of their OBE; and another (Gabbard & Twemlow 1984) in which 66% claimed that their OBE caused them to adopt “a belief in life after death.” Metzinger’s conclusions here are worth quoting at length:

For anyone who actually had that type of experience it is almost impossible not to become an ontological dualist afterwards. In all their realism, cognitive clarity and general coherence, these phenomenal experiences almost inevitably lead the experiencing subject to conclude that conscious experience can, as a matter of fact, take place independently of the brain and the body: what is phenomenally possible in such a clear and vivid manner must also be metaphysically possible or actually the case. Although many OBE reports are certainly colored by the interpretational schemes ordered by the metaphysical ideologies available to experiencing subjects in their time and culture, the experiences as such must be taken seriously. Although their conceptual and ontological interpretations are often seriously misguided, the truthfulness of centuries of reports about ecstatic states, soul-travel and second bodies as such can hardly be doubted.

Accounts of NDEs and OBES clearly reflect established local beliefs, *as well as* sharing apparently universal structural similarities. Cross-cultural differences are due to experiences being mediated, interpreted, and elaborated upon within individual and cultural contexts. This is consistent with sociological perspectives:

... culture supplies broad values and attitudes to individuals and these provide individual orientation *during*¹⁹ an experience. In this way, cultural influences provide a basis for interpreting NDE content, and furthermore are crucial to shaping the retelling of the experience to others from one’s own culture. (Kellehear 2001: 34)

And:

Although wondrous events are part of a symbiotic process in which culture shapes narrative accounts and the accounts, in turn, affect experiential reports, the thematic elements in common within wondrous accounts have had an impact on religious ideologies, contributing to cross-cultural

19 Emphasis mine.

convergences. . . . These common features include the belief in spirits, souls, heavens, hells. . . . (McClenon 1994: 151)

Specific, stable pan-human EE types have been clearly identified, and their basic consistent interpretations cross-culturally have been attested, helping to explain certain structurally common themes found in religious beliefs in diverse societies around the world. Specifying and focusing on a particular experience type (e.g., NDE, OBE) controls for over-generalizations caused by treating different experience types as being somehow the same, while also ensuring that the experiences we are comparing and generalizing about are contextually relevant to the cultures from which they emerge: in this case experiences which are seen emically as being related to the survival of consciousness after physical death. We can thereby account for both general structural similarities and specific cultural differences, re-acknowledging the proper place of experience as one of the dimensions of religion (irrespective of any ideological commitments beyond those of scholarly justification).

9 Wider Implications and Conclusions

Whatever their differences, the critiques discussed above share one or more of the following fundamental conceptual or methodological problems.

First is the presentation of *philosophical arguments* as axiomatic. While these arguments tend to emphasize *what cannot be* according to their own philosophies rather than engaging with *what actually is*, truth claims are implicitly (and indeed sometimes explicitly) being made about the nature of EEs and their relationship to religions, without adequate empirical evidence. Despite common commitments to relativism, making anti-realist evaluations of EEs is essentially a claim to objective knowledge about basic human ontological problems. This is not only contradictory, but also allows science to be negated by particular culturally-situated strands of philosophy. Like theological arguments, the kinds of philosophical statements discussed here are ultimately matters of faith: neither are dependent upon empirical research or internal logical consistency; and both self-exempt from the inconvenient confines of the burden of proof, while simultaneously denying the possibility of competing theories or simply ignoring the evidence they present, leaving different modes of understanding unexplored.

Second is the way these ostensible axioms are then combined as mutually-reliant components in the construction a paradigm which circumvents criticisms through internal cyclical argument. Thus, according to Axiom 1,

experience cannot precede language/culture; hence Axiom 2, *narratives of experience are non-referential*; hence Axiom 3, *religious experience is meaningless as a cross-cultural category*; and Axiom 4, *religious beliefs cannot be grounded in religious experiences*. “After all,” McClenon (2002: 187, n.30) remarks, “if there are no true religious experiences, the experiences cannot have led to religious beliefs.” This is an anti-scientific misapplication of deductive reasoning, in which conclusions are preordained and self-justified by reference to the ostensible axioms of which they are formed.

Third, in addition to a common failure to distinguish between experience types, there is also a general failure to distinguish between accounts of *spontaneous* EEs by individuals who are neither writers nor “mystics” *per se*, and accounts of experiences which are (or are sometimes erroneously assumed to be, as Bocking [2006] notes) part of a “mystical” tradition in which they are deliberately sought as goals. This misleadingly characterizes those who have such experiences as something like “professional” mystics – a status which does not apply to the majority of people who report such experiences.²⁰ It is problematic to make generalizing statements about one through reference to the other. Reiterating Katz once again, failing to make distinctions between experience types and their contexts is a methodological error equally for the essentialist, constructivist, or deconstructionist. Neurological studies of spontaneous OBES cannot be tarred with the same brush as scholarly misunderstandings of the place of meditation in Buddhist traditions.

Fourth, in addition to critical theory and/or philosophy, the critics discussed here largely specialize in narrowly contextualized research confined to particular religions or religious communities. Their claims, therefore, do not have the academic authority to override those of specialists in the cross-cultural comparison of EEs and their relationships to belief. Some (e.g., Hufford, McClenon) have spent decades researching these areas in great depth and formulating cogent, sophisticated theories grounded in sound empirical data. Their work is not invalidated by philosophical objections from particularist scholars who generally do not engage with the most relevant bodies of research and the evidence and conclusions they present.

Fifth, the focus on metaphysical/theological claims about religious experiences (by critics and supporters alike) has clouded other issues, to the extent that *recognizing* and *asking questions* about experiences is often conflated with making particular *claims* about them; though obviously *recognition* and *inquiry*

20 See, for example, the over 6,000 first-hand accounts of various EEs in the archives of the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre, based at University of Wales Trinity St. David, Lampeter, Wales.

are not the same as *interpretation*. We need not accept that EEs are genuinely supernatural in order to study them, any more than we need to be religious to study religions. Indeed, the experiential source hypothesis is enlisted to support both theological and reductionist conclusions. We can accept narratives of experiences as phenomenological descriptions of experiences without necessarily accepting experiencers' interpretations of their experiences (beyond accepting that they had something like the experience they describe)—or, in Proudfoot's (1985: ch. IV) terms, leaving room for "explanatory reduction" while rejecting "descriptive reduction."

Sixth, though presumably unintended coming from otherwise sensitive critics, there are troubling political implications to some of their stances. The most obvious is the disregarding of emic testimonies and self-understandings of EEs; and even outright denying them with charges of fabrication. It is objectionable to imply that "others" have insufficient critical faculties when it comes to distinguishing between types of experiences, and the ability to interpret them rationally. If we do not have direct knowledge of such experiences, conceding that we cannot fully comprehend them is preferable to accusing those who claim to have had them of "pretending," or inventing "tales" (Goldstein 1983: 111-12). In addition, postcolonialist reductions of entire concepts to mere Western constructs can be seen as perpetuating further academic colonialism. Whatever problems categories and terminologies present, "we" do not own "experience" (or "religion," or "Hinduism"), and staking a claim to such concepts as exclusively Western inventions is dubious. The repeated insistence on *difference* to the exclusion of even basic similarity is also divisive and potentially fosters ethnocentrism.

Seventh, some critics adopt an unfortunate condescending tone towards those who disagree with them, and even attempt to dictate which problems should and should not be studied (e.g., Day 2010). Cupitt (1998: 14) characterizes scholars of mysticism as relics who disappeared in the 1960s, whose ideas are subject to "ridicule";²¹ and refers to orientations he opposes in the past tense, as if they are akin to theories of geocentrism or the four humours, e.g., "mystical texts *were*²² understood to contain descriptions of mystical states..." (Cupitt 1998: 33). Not only do researchers of EEs risk being met with accusations that they are ridiculous, and assumptions that they are naïve

21 I.e., their focus on mysticism as something private and personally enriching, as opposed to Cupitt's (1998: 28) own personal and subjective model of ideal religion as an "extravertive" "postmodern spirituality." How this squares with his enthusiasm for such solitary experiences as meditation and "mystical writing" (Cupitt 1998: 132) is unclear.

22 Emphasis mine.

(Bocking 2006) and/or theologically motivated, there are also powerful political implications to disagreeing with the dominant contemporary paradigms. After all, no career-minded Study of Religions academic wishes to be seen as a politically incorrect colonialist crypto-theologian throwback.

Finally, critics of the study of religious experience are no more acultural or objective than those who defend experience via reference to theology, perennial philosophy, or social or cognitive sciences. Like any worldview, theirs are burdened by the uncertainty of their own claims,²³ and should not be exempt from their own emphasis on reflexivity. As Hufford (1995: 60) has articulated, reflexivity importantly “helps to control hidden bias,” though,

We must learn to tolerate uncertainty and ambiguity, while holding the reduction of uncertainty and ambiguity in our knowledge as primary goals (always sought, never completely achieved). That is not a contradiction or a paradox. It is a fact of life. Certainty is a direction, not a goal.

The natural methodological response to reflexivity, Hufford argues, is effectively interdisciplinary theoretical eclecticism:

Reflexivity and the strong light that it shines on the importance of viewpoint and perspective urges on us a multiplication of perspectives. We can never have a set of observations made from everywhere anymore than we can have a view from nowhere, but the more views we consider, the more reason we have to be hopeful about our conclusions.

As with any constructivist or experiential theory, language and culture are more productively seen as contributing factors in the formation, processing, and expression of experiences rather than comprehensive explanations in and of themselves. Part of the unique strength of the Study of Religions is that it is a *field* rather than a *discipline*, and as such it is wide enough to encompass a diversity of disciplines, methodologies, theories, and various combinations thereof.

The issues discussed here have wider implications for theoretical problems in the field. For example, the dominant perspective that religious *beliefs* are wholly culturally situated and cross-culturally meaningless conflicts with claims of the total cultural-linguistic construction of religious *experience*. If

23 Including, incidentally, claims of the impossibility of certainty.

afterlife beliefs, for example, cannot be objectively and meaningfully cross-culturally similar, how can *dissimilar* beliefs result in cross-culturally *similar* NDEs? If one were to claim that there are no cross-cultural similarities of either NDEs or afterlife beliefs, the mass of evidence to the contrary needs to somehow be proven false. Otherwise, if we acknowledge that there *is* a type of human experience which is regularly interpreted in “religious” terms cross-culturally, similarities can no longer be dismissed as theoretically unintelligible Western scholarly subjectivities; and we then have a category of phenomenon which can logically and generically be called “religious.” This could provide validation for the study of “religion” as a category distinct from other aspects of human culture. This example shows that it should not be taken for granted that *any of these issues have been resolved by currently fashionable paradigms.*

The dismantling of terms and concepts is counterproductive unless they are reconfigured and reassembled. While it is always wise to learn new lessons about old problems, it is unwise to do away with the questions themselves or pretend the problems no longer exist. Like comparison, “religious experience” as a category, subject, and problem is at risk of becoming a casualty of the attempt to purge the Study of Religions of any theological baggage. Neither the category nor the experience types commonly grouped under it need be erased from our academic lexicon, however—they just need some *reconstruction*, as opposed to *ad nauseam* deconstruction.

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