

Mystic Analogizing and the “Peculiarly Mystical”

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I. Can non-mystics understand mystic claims and reports?

In this paper, the nature and limitations of non-mystics’ ability to understand mystic claims are explored. The exploration uncovers a certain “open-endedness” and consequent radical “open texture” of key concepts in our worldwide religious heritage, e.g. “God,” “Brahman,” and “Emptiness” (*śūnyatā*). The view of mystic language and communication that emerges reinforces the skepticism of those who would resist attempts to “read off” from mystical experiences detailed religious doctrines of individual traditions. But it also suggests that there is room for theoretic accommodations within a religious or “spiritual” domain, as have been attempted by such “universalists” as William James.^[1]

Let me begin by formulating a few rough but working general characterizations (or definitions). A *mystical experience* is a psychological event of indefinite duration that the mystic herself *takes* to be a direct awareness of such “spiritual objects” as God, Brahman, or Emptiness, or of a “spiritual realm” that is not a matter of people’s everyday acquaintance. (It is of course the crucial question whether the experience is indeed revelatory in the way she takes it to be, but this is not our immediate topic.) In other words, a mystical experience is an awareness that the mystic herself *takes* to be “spiritually cognitive,” that is, an awareness taken to provide direct information about a “spiritual” object or state of affairs, God’s present relatedness to the mystic, for instance. Then further, this experience taken to be spiritually informative is also an awareness that is either (a) not sense-mediated or if sense-mediated (b) not as sense perception normally occurs.^[2]

Roughly, the *spiritual*, what mystical experiences are taken to reveal, i.e. their “objects” broadly understood, is to be conceived on analogy to human subjectivity: things spiritual, if there are any, would have such attributes as the old metaphysical dualists believed differentiated minds and matter, e.g. thinking, having awareness and emotions, or, again to speak roughly, would have characteristics that are appropriate to persons and higher animals and not to *merely* physical things, capacities for self-concepts and agency, for instance. (God, Brahman, Emptiness, et cetera are considered of course to have such characteristics in vastly superior modalities or degrees.)

A *mystic claim* is a proposition put forth on the basis of mystical experience. Mystic claims, like other empirical claims, range from the extremely abstract to

the concrete and particular. Highly general and abstract beliefs standing at the center of entire religious world views may count as mystic claims so long as the body of theory is advanced at least in part on the basis of mystical evidence. An example of such a general or abstract claim might be, 'Enlightenment reveals the Vibrant Void underlying all worldly phenomena.' Other mystic claims are much more concrete. At the far extreme, we find putative "reports" of personal experience, reports that are roughly parallel to a (sense-mediated) "observation claim," e.g. 'I feel God embracing me now.'

I wish to focus on the issue of non-mystics' ability to understand mystic reports. These reports of personal experience are claims that are low in the tiers of theory putatively built upon mystical experiences. My contention is that the nature of and limitations on our ability (as non-mystics) to understand these reports carry important consequences for our ability to understand the more abstract claims and indeed much "religious" language in general. Oversimplifying and avoiding problems about memory, I offer the following rough characterization of a *mystic report*: a present psycho-spiritually perceptive judgment, i.e. a claim about a spiritual object taken to be in the present mystically related to the (first-person) mystic perceiver and claimant.^[3]

Why should it be thought that there is any special problem about the ability of a non-mystic to understand mystic reports? There is, after all, an extensive mystic literature that is not simply esoteric, meant only for initiates. Well, the problem arises when one reflects on the grounds of claims about meaning. Insofar as *ostension* is—as a long list of epistemologists and philosophers of language have held—required within the realm of descriptions to define certain basic terms that cannot be defined adequately through other terms, and insofar as similarly basic, mystically descriptive terms appear in mystic reports, the lack of mystical experience appears an insuperable block to non-mystics' understanding them.^[4] As, to quote the famous statement of David Hume's, "A blind man can form no notion of colours, a deaf man of sounds,"^[5] so a non-mystic could have no idea of the "spiritual." D. W. Hamlyn writes: "Even if terms like 'red' cannot be defined purely by reference to experience, they could not be understood fully without experience, for example, by someone who does not possess and never has possessed sight. . . . A posteriori terms and concepts may thus be defined as those that directly require our having experience in order for us to apply them or those that can only be fully understood by reference to terms that directly require our having experience to apply them."^[6] Though these statements are made in a different context, their relevance for our concern is plain. How can we understand depictions made on mystic grounds, i.e. through means that we, the blind, do not have? According to some theologies, buddhologies, etc., there are claimed, to be sure, non-mystical means whereby God etc. can be known to exist or to have a certain characteristic; yet nevertheless we non-mystics *ipso facto* are not *mystically acquainted* with whatever it is that is putatively designated in mystic reports by such key terms as 'God,' 'Brahman,' and 'Emptiness.' Nor does it appear that we could know the meaning of predicates used in mystic descriptions of such "objects." Not having the experience, we

are not in the right position to appreciate any potentially explanatory ostensions ('This is Nirvana,' for example).^[7] In the terms made popular by Russell, knowledge by description depends on knowledge by acquaintance; similarly, understanding descriptive terms depends on an ability to relate them to one's own experiences.

II. The language of mystic analogizing

But this reading of the issue is not quite correct, as I intend to show. To do better, let us consider the role of experience, of personal acquaintance, with respect to certain people trying to understand the following four claims, the last two of which are mystic:

- (A) The rains came to Delhi a month late this year.
- (B) A mango tastes like pineapple, pineapple blended with whipped cream.
- (C) In the innermost Mansion, the soul knows Heaven and salvation: free from disturbance as is a king in his private chambers, we receive from God the kiss for which the Bride besought Him. (Teresa)
- (D) This ["'Emptiness'"] is not fire, therefore it is fire. (Keiji Nishitani echoing the *Diamond Sūtra*)

It is imaginable that an English-speaker Sam who has never visited India nor, let us say, witnessed a monsoon anywhere would nevertheless have little difficulty understanding *A*. Having experienced rain and knowing some geography and the conventional measurements of time, it is imaginable that *A* would convey to him some information about the rains in India this year, although he has no personal acquaintance with such a season.

Imagine now two persons Vic and Walt told that *B*. Vic, let us say, has enjoyed many a ripe mango, and although he might quibble that the description is inexact, he surely would be able to understand *B*, that is, so long as he were an English-speaker and had tasted pineapple and whipped cream. In fact, it would seem to be the analogue idea "pineapple blended with whipped cream" that would stretch most people's imagination—except dessert connoisseurs'. So to eliminate this complication, let us imagine Vic a fine chef who has himself prepared a pineapple blend which he has shared with Walt the previous evening. Now Walt, we have said, unlike Vic has never eaten a mango, but has, we are imagining, tasted Vic's pineapple and whipped cream blend. Though it does not appear that he would understand *B* as well as Vic would—he has had less of the relevant type of experience to which to relate the claim—Walt is able to understand something about what a mango tastes like because he has tasted things whose flavor—he is being told—is similar to that of a mango. Therefore, so long as Walt were an English-speaker there would be no special reason to suppose that

even he could not understand *B*.

B is an explicit statement of similarity; in it an analogy is drawn. Thereby the attention of the person Walt who has not tasted a mango would be directed to a basis in his experience for understanding the taste of mangoes (and the meaning of *B*). Since the explicit analogizing present in *B* is the key to Walt's understanding of the taste of mangoes, let us call *B* a *pedagogical* statement.

With *A*, implicit analogies are key. It is in virtue of having experience of things similar to the particular rains referred to in *A* that Sam would be able to comprehend the statement. The similarity involved is actually of two types. The truth of *A* depends on a similarity in nature: it implies that the monsoon this year is similar to those of previous years (despite the explicit denial of similarity in one respect).^[8] But further, we must presume that a person's *experience* of rain at one time is similar to his experience of rain at other times, and that through memory he is able to recognize such similarities; otherwise, he would not be able to use tokens of 'rain' appropriately on different occasions. Such implicit analogies, both between things and between experiences, are basic to communication in general.

Mystics' communication to non-mystics involves both these kinds of analogy, the implicit and the explicit. Yet comparisons of "things" that are largely unlike, and not groupings into common classes or abstractions of a single property, are distinctive in mysticism because of the importance of what I should like to call the "peculiarly mystical." As reported in the literature worldwide, mystical experiences are not just extraordinary in the sense that many people do not have them; the objects these experiences are thought to reveal are not just not widely known or less so than physical things. To the contrary, the "spiritual objects" are claimed to be encountered in a peculiar way. (Mystics could imaginably be in the majority.) As was mentioned earlier, it is sometimes said that God, Brahman, or Emptiness, a "supreme spiritual being" can be known in other, non-mystical ways, through "cosmological" inferences, or *a priori*. But it is typical of mystic testimony to claim a special means of encounter with whatever it is that such terms as 'God' are commonly, within specific traditions, taken to mean.

Mystic literature shows a certain kind of figurative speech to be typical of mystic reports, and it is my view that this reflects not just the rarity of the experiences but a "taking" of the experience to make something known in a *peculiar* and indeed superior fashion, somewhat as vision is better suited to reveal colors than audition.^[9]

Let us now consider figurative analogizing in general, apart from mystic uses. And let us begin with metaphor as paradigmatic, though there are other tropes, namely, simile and (what is called by rhetoricians) "analogy," that are also important for our concern.^[10] Metaphor invariably involves implicit analogizing. But the analogizing is implicit only in the suppression of certain comparison terms, 'like,' 'is similar to,' 'as,' etc. In this way, metaphor is distinct from simile, its most closely related species of trope. In sharp contrast, while general and abstract terms also set up implicit analogies, these are usually of such

a “deep” sort—reflecting often it seems real joints of nature, or at least highly pragmatic conceptual slicings—that they are usefully distinguished from analogies that are comparisons across common categories. Sylvester is a cat *just* as Ferdinand is, and the general term ‘cat’ is used appropriately for what appears to be a “natural kind.” But to say that a certain poem has the texture of sandpaper is to imply a resemblance of a much less fundamental order. Mystics do use general terms that transcend the mystical/non-mystical and spiritual/physical distinctions, also abstract terms that would similarly reflect what we may call a natural bridge. But figurative utterances occur very frequently. Metaphor and figurative analogizing are found in the texts of mysticism—in discourses, sermons, and autobiographies as well as in the massive poetry—with the same high frequency that one would expect supposing the experiences to be “peculiar” in the sense I have outlined.

But let us also note that though mystic language is highly figurative, this is no absolute block to non-mystics understanding mystic reports. Analogies (reflecting perceived similarities), whether set up by metaphors and similes or by general and abstract terms, are basic to all communication. We have the ability to comprehend analogies, even ones that are for us “open-ended” because, like Walt with *B*, we are personally acquainted with only one of the two things compared. A personal acquaintance with *x* does carry certain epistemic and practical advantages concerning *x*, and I still have much to make of this point. But our ability to learn through analogies allows us from others’ testimony to acquire information about things with which we are personally unacquainted. Thus we should not believe that a non-mystic is in general precluded from understanding a mystic’s “spiritual” claims.

Let me analyze now the mystic statements *C* and *D* above, and show the role of metaphor and analogy in a more concrete way.

Unpacking particular mystic figures is often tricky business because of their context dependence. By “context dependence,” I mean all of several types and dimensions of context and situatedness, some textual, some cultural, and some simply semantic (simply?). But there are theories of metaphor that are helpful. Among these, I find “pragmatic” analyses, such as those contributed by H. P. Grice and A. P. Martinich, the most acute.^[11] According to the pragmatic approach, use of metaphor flouts a “conversational maxim” or common presupposition, and demands the listener or reader to appreciate a similarity beyond the usual senses of one or more of the terms employed.^[12] Indeed, all figures of meaning appear to flout what Grice calls a “maxim of quality,” namely, that one should try to say what is true.^[13] Thus ‘The ship plows the sea’ is a trope because a ship cannot really plow the sea, and in this case we are forced to appreciate an uncommon similarity by the flouting.

However, this (“The ship plows the sea”) and other figures are “simple” in the sense that they are interpretable without a thorough knowledge of the immediate linguistic and larger cultural context of the utterance.^[14] And while there are some rather “simple” metaphors in mystic literature, such as certain sexual ones,^[15] many of the figures found, in mysticism and in literature in

general as well, are quite complex, intended to suggest an association that is largely in the mind of the reader or hearer, whatever the ultimate basis in a person's experience for *its* meaning might be. So here a "semantic" approach, with an emphasis on a certain type of "context"—paradigmatically, internal relations of meaning within a single text—would appear to have merit. The difficulty of interpreting the more complex mystic tropes—those that trade on associations that are largely subjective—is that with these figures the entire belief system of the mystic, and his or her larger cultural context as well, is often relevant to their interpretation. Consider then *C* above.

This complex statement, which is a paraphrase and combination of several of Teresa's utterances,^[16] exemplifies many of the points made thus far. Teresa's use here of the term 'salvation,' among several others, is obviously figurative. Literally, the term means for her a state of grace that is actually known only after death. And she is not implying that she has died. She is saying that in her experience she felt an extreme peace, bliss, and "gentle rapture,"^[17] *like* that which could be imagined to accompany an awakening to an actual state of salvation. This flouting of Grice's maxim of quality marks the usage as figurative, and in a straightforward way. No one is likely to take it literally. But a moment's reflection reveals how complex are the implicit analogies and layered the associations raised with just this single term. 'Salvation' is an abstract noun derived from the verb 'to save': etymologically, "the state of being saved." Pressed for an ostensive definition, we might think of a person's being saved from drowning, though 'salvation' would unlikely be used now—after all the centuries of Christian thought—for such a mundane situation.

In one of the atomic propositions comprising *C*, a simile appears, introduced by the term 'as.' Here we have an explicit comparison—'[We are] free from disturbance as is a king in his private chambers.' The statement as addressed to a non-mystic would be thus much like *B* above as comprehended by Walt, the person who has not tasted mangoes. In this way *C* would be, like *B*, a *pedagogical* statement.

But even isolating the expressly analogical portion of *C*, we would have a figurative statement, unlike what Walt has with *B*, namely a statement that is quite literal. The reason that this is so is, I hold, the very reason that figurative analogizing must be said to be typical of mystic language: mystical experiences, and the spiritual "objects" taken to be their indications, are considered sufficiently distinct from everyday experiences and objects to *require* mystics to use a special language, to employ common terms uncommonly, i.e. figuratively.^[18] The "spiritual" is to some degree irreducibly "peculiar." Nevertheless, there is no reason to suppose that a non-mystic could not understand *C* at all, since we do have the ability to understand analogies, whether figurative or not, so long as we have had experience of the analogue, or (as with 'knows Heaven and salvation' in *C*) of its analogue, down through possibly many layers of association, abstraction, or generalization.^[19]

Consider now *D*, which stands, I believe, among intelligible mystic utterances at a far extreme of difficulty. I may be unwise to take it up, since I shall be

unable to make its meaning all that clear in a brief space. (Zen Buddhists are notorious for making apparently impenetrable statements.) But I believe that it is a good example of a mystic statement for our purposes because it is an extreme case of use of figurative speech to reflect experience that is “peculiar.”

D puts to use a special kind of trope, which I call “apparent paradox.” The statement concerns the Buddhist concept, and “realization,” of *śūnyatā*, “Emptiness.” The contemporary Japanese mystic philosopher, Keiji Nishitani, resorts to such apparent paradox in trying to explain *śūnyatā*, as have numerous Buddhists before him.^[20] We are told that a “Nirvana” type of mystical experience involves becoming personally acquainted—in the direct way in which one is aware of one’s own existence—with something, a “nothing,” that though according to some brims with compassion and bliss has few other discernible characteristics: it seems hardly any particular thing. My view is that the frequent use of paradoxical language by Nishitani and others results from their sense that the experience, and what it indicates, is so extraordinary, so “peculiar,” and specifically so devoid of definitive marks—so unlike anything finite and physical—that language has to be used that does violence to common and firmly held suppositions. In other words, seemingly paradoxical language such as this represents within mysticism an extreme case of the point I made earlier about the prominence of figurative speech as reflecting the peculiarity of mystical experience and a corresponding peculiarity of the spiritual object(s).^[21]

Now use of apparent paradox, whether by mystics or by you and me, need not be understood as true paradox or nonsense and contradiction. For example, a principal of an “excluded middle” is commonly presupposed in conversation; we normally think that something *x* has to be either *F* or not-*F*. Thus by flouting this rule, one can introduce a trope. Imagine two baseball fans, Jack and Karl, who are both supporters of a team that is tied for first place near the end of a season. Jack reports to Karl, who is ignorant of the prior day’s scores, “Last night’s games? Not a celebration, and not not one either.” Karl can be imagined to take this to mean that their team lost and that the other first-place team did, too. (If Jack had said, “Last night’s games were both a celebration and a postponement,” Karl would more likely take him to mean that both teams had won.) Taking a mystic’s claims seriously typically requires that one look beyond certain conversational presuppositions. “Apparent paradox,” like all tropes, signals that one is supposed to.

Note that not just any paradox will do; Nishitani, for example, uses particular paradoxical language with a particular intent. When he asserts *D* (echoing, as he points out, the *Diamond Sūtra*),^[22] he is trying to convey a particular idea: the transcendence of *śūnyatā*—the fact that it is not fire—permits its immanence—therefore it is fire. Let me say just a few words about this.

Emptiness, as I read Nishitani, is thought to have a “logic” that while unlike that of any physical or finite thing may yet be compared to that of an infinite set. Only an infinite set can be mapped onto a proper subset of itself, as Robert Nozick has remarked.^[23] Like Hegel’s “genuine Infinite,” Nishitani conceives Emptiness as including everything, and as able to do so because it is

nothing in particular, no finite thing. It is “no-thing” because it transcends all finite limitations. Nishitani believes that it is because Emptiness transcends fire, i.e. because it is not fire, that it is capable of being fire (and everything else). As I have argued elsewhere,^[24] Nishitani does not show why Emptiness should come to be fire (or anything else). But he does intend with *D* to convey a particular proposition. ‘This is not fire, therefore it is fire’ is not nonsense or contradiction. The statement employs a trope.

Admittedly, I have provided only the briefest of glosses and explanations of *D*. This is not the place to elaborate at length the “Emptiness” idea. The point is that we should have some good reason—which could emerge only after patient study of a particular mystic world view, typically a true conceptual tension—for supposing that the paradoxical language cannot be meaningful. Most mystic “paradoxes,” I dare say, are really just tropes and special devices for communication—required by the peculiarity of the experiences and of their putative indications.^[25]

III. The “peculiarly mystical”

To this point, I have defended the ability of a non-mystic to understand mystic testimony. I conclude that it is wrong to suppose that a non-mystic cannot in principle understand a mystic report. This I firmly believe, but I also believe that the severity of the mystic analogizing that is required for non-mystics to understand what the extraordinary *experiences* are like means that we should recognize that mystic usages of such spiritual terms as ‘God,’ ‘Brahman,’ and ‘Emptiness,’ must remain for us non-mystics open-ended, that the “spiritual” is understood by us to a significant extent *only* analogically. My point here about the need for figurative speech to talk about things putatively mystically revealed is the truth behind much of the confusion of Western “negative theology” and of “anti-intellectualist” Eastern religious philosophy as well. But beyond its hermeneutic value, this recognition I am urging would also, I believe, promote accommodation among present and future “spiritual metaphysicians,” enabling them to present views that are truly global (as globally informed) and less tradition-bound.

Let me put the matter another way. In the arena of competing world views, a traditional spiritual metaphysics (Buddhist, Christian, and so on) loses the advantage of its claims to mystically experiential foundations because of its squabbling with other views also claiming such foundations. Should not the non-mystic take all mystical experiences to be illusions, simply because mystic claims, indeed mystic reports, are in conflict with one another when viewed worldwide? Yet on the assumptions (1) that the mystics themselves are often not expert in high-tier interpretations of their experiences and (2) that precisely at issue are certain high-tier claims, what is “peculiarly mystical” needs to be put into words. To take seriously the possibility that mystical experiences may provide significant support for spiritual beliefs, one needs to know what the experiences are like. This means that the “peculiarly mystical” has to be put into

words. And these words, we have seen, must be for non-mystics irreducibly figurative, involving invariably open-ended analogies. Thus there would appear much room for theoretical accommodations. Open-ended analogies, unlike credos, are not set in stone.

To look again at our examples, though Sam could understand *A* and Walt *B* along with something about the taste of mangoes, neither of these people is in any position to elaborate on the topics. Sam does not understand the Indian monsoon, nor Walt the taste of mangoes, very well. In a phenomenological dispute, these are not the people we would consult, and they would be at a severe disadvantage in many imaginable *practical* pursuits.^[26] Insofar as non-mystics need to know something about the “peculiarly mystical,” that is to say, insofar as a belief about God, Brahman, Emptiness, or some comparably spiritual “object” would be a belief about something that, perhaps, is not altogether physical, and at least is not the sort of thing that is directly indicated by sense experiences, something for which the “peculiarly mystical” would be the best sort of evidence, or at least a significant dimension of whatever the “object” is, a non-mystic cannot hope to be confident about his understanding, just because he lacks the relevant experience.^[27]

In a well-known paper, Friedrich Waismann terms “open texture” the feature of empirical concepts that they are subject to change and revision as we learn more about the way things are.^[28] Experience—sense experience or mystical experience or whatever—comes with no guarantee that the evidence it provides is the complete and final story. All concepts derived from experience are subject to revision as we learn more. Waismann takes this “open texture,” this essential revisability of empirical concepts, to follow from two ineradicable possibilities, “(a) that I should get acquainted with some totally new experience such as at present I cannot even imagine; [and] (b) that some new discovery [could be] made which would affect our whole interpretation of certain facts.”^[29] Now although these possibilities remain, it seems highly *unlikely* that what we call cats turn out to be anything other than animals. Common-sense and elementary groupings, such as whales as fish, have been discovered to be wrong. But on an assumption of the uniformity of nature, we may also assume that science has matured beyond the stage of salient classification of the “kinds” recognizable in everyday experience: such concepts as “cat” seem unlikely to be revised. The question is: is there a similar maturity concerning things “mystically revealed” (if indeed anything is)? I contend that the essential open-endedness of mystic analogizing suggests a *radical* open texture for such traditional religious concepts as “God,” “Brahman,” and “Emptiness” (*śūnyatā*). There is no reason to suppose that a non-mystic cannot at all understand mystic testimony, including, to some degree, what the special experiences are like. But the nature of the communication makes it *likely* that much in traditional understandings of spiritual “things” needs revising. Further, the essential open-endedness of mystic communication helps explain why mystic language tends to be especially “theory-laden,” a point that is now well established.^[30] Mystic metaphors appear to have become fixed and reified in individual traditions, without what

may have inspired their original forgings being at all well understood.

Let me test my positions now against a crucial case, a comparison of non-mystics' lack of mystical experience with the lack of sight on the part of the blind. To what extent can a person blind from birth understand statements employing color terms? My previous examples might be considered to fail to bring out the key role of ostension, or possible ostension, for understanding lower, "observation" statements and mystic reports, and I am afraid that all the talk of figurative speech may suggest I am sweeping difficulties under a metaphorical rug.

Consider a person Lila, who has been blind from birth, trying to understand a statement employing the color term 'red.' My contention is that Lila could understand *E*, and through a knowledge of this and similarly theoretic and scientific statements would have an *intellectual* understanding of colors.

(*E*) Red is the color . . . of the long-wave extreme of the visible spectrum. (*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*)

This definition shows that much about colors is not so strictly "phenomenological"; an understanding of 'red' based on direct ostensions to, say, red apples, blood, and so forth, is not all that is conveyed by some uses of the term. It is not true that Lila could understand no statement employing a color term. Not only do the blind understand such useful commonplaces as that a red traffic light requires vehicles to stop and that a red apple is a ripe one, a blind person *who learned the theories of optics* would understand *well* colors (or color) intellectually. We can imagine our Lila, blind from birth, to be a scientist mastering theories in optics and making contributions to the field. With a suitable genius, why could she not? It might be argued that to understand *E* and other statements in optics Lila would have to be able to discern the difference in her experience that its truth would make. But this could be mediated through instruments with dials in braille. (Perhaps only the sighted could design the instruments, but that does not alter the basic point.) Not only would Lila be able then to relate *E* to her experience, *E* would mean for her *tangible* effects therein. And if she had mastered *E* and current theories in optics, she would have to be said to understand more about colors intellectually than most who can see, although having no direct acquaintance. Lila's understanding of such expressions as 'visible spectrum' in *E* would indeed have to be fundamentally mediated by analogy. Her understanding of such expressions, expressions whose meaning involves directly the sense medium she lacks, would have to rely on *pedagogical* statements, like *B* for Walt, made by the sighted. These of course could be provided.

Someone might ask, "But how is it in the case of a blind person and colors that there is any relevant experience that could stand as the ultimate analogue?" The answer has already been implied. The blind do have other sorts of sense experience, mediated by other organs. Similarly, mystics communicate to the rest of us on the basis of the experiences that we have in common. Note that our blind Lila could understand even more exclusively phenomenological visual terms on the basis of actual phenomenological similarities among the deliverances of the separate sense mediums. These her sighted teachers could appeal to.

For example, colors “blend” phenomenologically in somewhat the same way that sounds do; thus one speaks of a “harmony” among the colors in a painting.

But in considering the blind and colors, it may seem that my principal thesis (a non-mystic is not precluded from understanding a mystic report) stands in opposition to my conclusion about the “open-endedness” of key spiritual terms: if a blind scientist can understand colors intellectually, then it seems that non-mystics would not have the reason that I have pointed to for considering descriptions of “objects” putatively mystically revealed to be irreducibly figurative. But such is not the case. The crucial difference between Lila’s and a non-mystic “Norma’s” cognitive situations, as I imagine that they might be with regard to, respectively, color terms employed in optics and mystic descriptions employed in spiritual (“religious”) metaphysics, is that light is physical and there can be imagined a one-to-one correspondence between visual readings on spectrometers and ones in braille, while Norma, in my judgment, would typically need to understand something about the “peculiarly mystical.” As has already been pointed out, Lila’s understanding of terms such as ‘visible spectrum’ in *E* would have to rely on analogies made by the sighted. Note that this scientist, however much genius she might demonstrate concerning the physical nature of light, would not be able directly to pick out things by their color. Speaking roughly, I would say that an understanding of the “peculiarly mystical” is more important for the meaning of such key spiritual terms as ‘God,’ ‘Brahman,’ and ‘Emptiness,’ than an understanding of the “peculiarly visual” would be for color terms, that is, (even) supposing the larger context in each case to be highly theoretic: in optics, there could be spectrometers, etc. with dials in braille, it seems, while it is difficult to imagine a similar correspondence between mystical and sensuous apprehensions. There are after all common indications of the separate senses, a fact that is best explained by the existence of physical objects that are sensed through different mediums.^[31] Thus a blind person can know what Jim “looks like” from touching his face.

Now some “mystic claims” may appear to be similarly founded in an objective reality—God, Brahman, or Emptiness—that can be cognized through different mediums, namely through mystical experiences on the one hand and sense experiences on the other. I cannot enter now into the theological (and buddhological, etc.) considerations called for here. But note that if sense experiences are restricted in their objective indications to things that are physical and if God, etc.—the “spiritual” (“religious”) objects that mystics claim to encounter by peculiar and direct means—are in any way intrinsically “spiritual,” then understanding the peculiarly mystical would be far more important for Norma than understanding the peculiarly visual would be for Lila, (even) given a theoretic context. The peculiarly mystical must needs be expressed through irreducibly figurative speech that—unless Norma were to become herself a mystic—could not be reduced to literal statements, could not be for her precise and “close-ended.”

I have outlined an empiricist approach to mystic language. There are several further considerations both for and against this understanding that

perhaps should, but cannot, be taken up here. Let me close then by repeating just one advantage: by viewing spiritual terms and concepts as enjoying not only an “open texture” in the sense that we may want to make revisions when we learn more and to change traditional meanings, but as also enjoying an intrinsic “peculiarity” (i.e. for non-mystics), we could then find *much* room for theoretic accommodations among spiritual philosophies worldwide. There may be nothing at all promising in an idea of the “spiritual.” But if there is, it would seem that as dependent on mystic reports for our understanding of much that would be significant about it, we should recognize a *radical* open texture in particular instances, that is, in such concepts as “God,” “Brahman,” and “Emptiness,” key traditional concepts about what is taken to be mystically revealed.^[32]

NOTES

1. *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Chicago, 1958), Lecture XX.
2. This complication is necessary to include so-termed “nature mysticism” and “spiritually transformed sense perception.” I confess that I am prone to restrict the characterization to the non-sense-mediated. But current studies of mysticism and typologies of mystical experiences do often include nature mysticism, and there is a substantial primary literature as well.
3. Compare Roderick Firth’s characterization of a “present psycho-physical perceptual judgment,” in “Sense Experience,” which is Chapter One of *Handbook of Perception*, vol. I, ed. Edward C. Carterette and Morton P. Friedman (New York, 1974).
4. E. Allison Peers in his “translator’s preface” to Teresa’s works complains at length of the difficulty of rendering the great Spanish mystic’s talk of her experiences: *The Complete Works of St. Teresa of Jesus*, tr. and ed. by E. Allison Peers, vol. I (London, 1973), pp. xiv-xxii. This is not only a philosophical problem.
5. *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, Section 2. Cf. Hume’s *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Bk. I, Pt. I, Section 1.
6. *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. P. Edwards, vol. I (New York, 1967), p. 141.
7. The point can also be stated in verificationist terms. A non-mystic, not being able to appreciate mystic ostensions, would not be able to check a mystic claim in the most appropriate way. Unable to understand what the experiences that would be entailed by the truth of the claim would be like because he has nothing to which to tie or relate the claim, a non-mystic could not be said to understand it, so the argument would go. Neither verification nor “ability to verify” is, I believe, precisely what is key here, but *relevant* experience is required to understand descriptive propositions, as it is to verify them.
8. Can one assert anything at all without implying at least one similarity relation? It would seem not. Even the statements ‘X is identical with Y’ and ‘Z is unique’ imply similarities: the identity of X and Y would be like other identities, and Z would be similar to other unique things in its very uniqueness. Bertrand Russell, considering and rejecting an ontology in which universals were eliminated, concludes (for similar reasons) that there is at least one universal that could not be eliminated, similarity: *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* (Baltimore, 1962), pp. 323-27.
9. This “taking” might perhaps be more accurately termed an “*ostensible* compelling by the Object.”

10. There are two species of figures of speech: tropes, which concern meaning, and rhetorical devices, such as alliteration, which do not. Metaphor, analogy, and simile are closely related species of trope.
11. H. P. Grice, "Logic and Conversation," included in *Syntax and Semantics*, vol. 3, ed. Peter Cole and Jerry Morgan (New York, 1972), pp. 41-58; A. P. Martinich, "A Theory for Metaphor," *Journal of Literary Semantics* 13/1 (April 1984), pp. 35-56.
12. Grice, op. cit., p. 53. See also Martinich, op. cit., pp. 39-41.
13. A similar view is expressed in the Naiyāyika literature (Indian "Logic"). 'mañcāḥ krośanti,' "The stands are shouting." But the *stands* are not shouting; the *people* in the stands are shouting. Various Naiyāyikas develop a view of figurative speech, in discussing in particular *Nyāyasūtra* 1.2.14 (and a few other sūtras), and in focusing on this metonymy (given by an early commentator) and other tropes as well.
14. Is this metaphor so simple that it ceases to be a figure at all? Is the meaning of the term 'plows' here a general kind of action, a progressive splitting, not performed only by farmers or only on fields? Though I would say no, such cases as this suggest analogical origins for the meaning of many abstract terms. Cf. W. V. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, MA, 1960), pp. 9-12.
15. e.g. Yājñavalkya's statement, *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 4.3.21.
16. *The Complete Works of St. Teresa of Jesus*, op. cit., Vol. 1, p. 58, and Vol. 2, pp. 338 and 343 in particular; cf. Vol. 1, pp. 119-20.
17. Teresa, op. cit., Vol. 2, p. 340: "They are no more afraid of death than of a gentle rapture."
18. There could also be coinages, e.g. 'hrim.' Yet insofar as non-mystics are to have any understanding of these, analogies would have to be made.
19. Teresa's descriptions are much too long to examine without abbreviation. But it is easy to see that her writing excellently illustrates my theses: see for example the following quotation (op. cit., p. 180) and note how many analogies are explicitly drawn. (C, by the way, is a paraphrase of Teresa's descriptions of an experience that she takes to be more advanced than this one.)

It is not a radiance which dazzles, but a soft whiteness and an infused radiance which, without wearying the eyes, causes them the greatest delight; nor are they wearied by the brightness which they see in seeing this Divine beauty. So different from any earthly light is the brightness and light now revealed to the eyes that, by comparison with it, the brightness of our sun seems quite dim and we should never want to open our eyes again for the purpose of seeing it. It is as if we were to look at a very clear stream, in a bed of crystal, reflecting the sun's rays, and shadowed by clouds. Not that the sun, or any other such light, enters the

vision: on the contrary, it is like a natural light and all other kinds of light seem artificial. It is a light which never gives place to night, and, being always light, is disturbed by nothing. It is of such a kind, indeed, that no one, however powerful his intellect, could, in the whole course of his life, imagine it as it is. And so quickly does God reveal it to us that, even if we needed to open our eyes in order to see it, there would not be time for us to do so. But it is all the same whether they are open or closed: if the Lord is pleased for us to see it, we shall do so even against our will. There is nothing powerful enough to divert our attention from it, and we can neither resist it nor attain to it by any diligence or care of our own. This I have conclusively proved by experience

20. *Religion and Nothingness*, tr. Jan van Bragt (Berkeley, 1982). See also, for example, Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*.
21. Note that (apparent) paradox is a feature of many mystic reports in other traditions as well. This fact has been emphasized by William James and W. T. Stace, two of the more prominent philosophers who have written about mysticism: James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Lecture XVI; Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (Philadelphia, 1960), pp. 251ff. (Neither, however, recognizes "apparent paradox" as a trope.)
22. op. cit., p. 118.
23. *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA, 1981), p. 603.
24. "Nishitani's Buddhist Response to 'Nihilism,'" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55/1 (January 1987), pp. 75-104.
25. Another kind of extreme figure often employed in mystic writing is the symbol. The early twentieth-century Indian mystic Aurobindo, for example, thinks of light as not just an analogue of spiritual phenomena but as "embodying" in its very materiality certain spiritual qualities that he intends his use of the symbol to suggest: *The Life Divine* (Pondicherry, 1973), pp. 945-46. Light, in his use, would be a symbol, because the physical reality to which the term directly refers is thought to suggest (beyond itself) intrinsically spiritual qualities.
26. Let us suppose that Walt has been told that mangoes are a type of fruit as well as roughly what they look like, with the result that he would be able to pick out a mango when confronted with one in most situations. But is it imaginable that if asked to identify the *bona fide* mango among a lot of close fakes, he would be able to do so? As well as would Vic, the longtime mango-fancier? (*Ceteris paribus*, Vic would have the advantage.)
27. According to some theological views, God is never known directly, but is inferred from divine manifestations. Maybe then there is no mystical experience at all, but only a disposition of some to sense—i.e. really infer, probably in part on the basis of dubious suppositions, such as that nature exhibits

design—the handiwork of God, or even God’s presence. But to be frank, I would simply exclude from the class of *mystic* claims assertions that were not in any way *about* something “spiritual,” and “spiritual” in the strong sense that mystical cognition of it would be privileged as (likely) the most direct way of being personally familiar with it, like sight for objects with color, or at least, as I have said all along, as a particularly significant means to a personal knowledge.

28. “Verifiability,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Vol. 19 (1945), reprinted in *Meaning and Knowledge*, ed. Ernest Nagel and Richard B. Brandt (New York, 1965), pp. 38-46.
29. *ibid.* p. 43.
30. See in particular Steven T. Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” included in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York, 1978), pp. 22-74.
31. John Locke puts forth this argument, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Bk. IV, Ch. XI, Sect. 7.
32. Although hasty and imperfect—and perhaps downright wrong—on more than one count, an example of the kind of theoretic accommodation this approach would promote is William James’ most general conclusion of his wide-ranging study, *The Variety of Religious Experiences*, pp. 384-85:

He [the mystic of whatever tradition] becomes conscious that this higher part [of himself] is conterminous and continuous with a MORE of the same quality, which is operative in the universe outside of him, and which he can keep in working touch with, and in a fashion get on board of and save himself when all his lower being has gone to pieces in the wreck. . . . [But] what is the objective “truth” of their [the mystical experiences’] content? . . . Is such a “more” merely our own notion, or does it really exist? If so, in what shape does it exist? Does it act, as well as exist? . . . It is in answering these questions that the various theologies perform their theoretic work, and that their divergencies come to light. They all agree that the “more” really exists; . . . They all agree, moreover, that it acts as well as exists, and that something really is effected for the better when you throw your life into its hands. It is when they treat of the experience of “union” with it that their speculative differences appear most clearly. . . .