

Mystical Encounters with
the Natural World

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Experiences and Explanations

PAUL MARSHALL

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How can the whole world become visible to a single man?
Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*

Preface and Acknowledgements

The present study is devoted to mystical experiences of the natural world and the disparate ways in which they have been explained. Typically, these so-called *extrovertive mystical experiences* are characterized by some combination of unity, deepened knowledge, sense of reality, altered time-experience, light, bliss, and love. The experiences are well represented in modern collections of spiritual testimonies, but unlike some other extraordinary experiences, they have received little sustained attention in recent years. As a step towards redressing the neglect, I look at the experiences again—at their circumstances, characteristics, and consequences—and scrutinize a variety of explanations put forward over the last hundred years.

Why is renewed study of extrovertive mystical experiences desirable? Apart from their significance as life-transforming events, the experiences are of considerable theoretical interest. They have been important in the modern study of mysticism, constituting one of the major types of mystical experience recognized by scholars since the early days of study, and they promise to be important in the future development of the field. Any theory of mystical experience with pretensions to generality must be able to account for extrovertive experiences. The experiences provide an important test case for evaluating explanations, including the currently fashionable approaches that trace mystical experience to neuropsychology or to the conditioning influence of religious belief and practice. Extrovertive experience is also of interest for the stimulus it could give to the study of mind: the immense expansions of perception and cognition reported in some accounts raise questions about the nature of the perceptual process and the relation between mind and world. Are there non-sensory forms of contact with the world? Does mind exist beyond the brain?

Extrovertive mystical experience is also important in ways that are tangential to the present study but which are worth noting to underscore the potential benefits of a more sophisticated understanding of

the experiences. By bringing together spirituality and the natural world, the experiences have a bearing on several topics, such as nature religions, spiritual ecologies, nature aesthetics, science–religion relations, and writings in which nature and spirituality inter-fuse, including Romantic literature. It is perhaps surprising that extrovertive experience has received little attention in recent years, given the return of nature as an object of interest in religious and environmental movements that call for the veneration or ‘resacralization’ of the natural world.

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P.M.

Contents

Introduction	I
Part I The Experiences	21
1. Extrovertive Mystical Experience: Definition and Incidence	23
2. ‘Being All, Knowing All, Loving All’: Phenomenology	49
3. Sex, Drugs, and Beethoven? Circumstances and Consequences	82
Part II The Explanations	109
4. Divine Cosmos: Encountering Spirit in Nature	111
5. Empty your Mind: Uncovering Pure Consciousness	145
6. Scholars Lock Horns: Construction or Deconstruction?	176
7. On the Couch, in the Lab: Pathology, Psychoanalysis, Neuroscience	204
8. Mind Beyond the Brain: Reducing Valves and Metaphysics	233
9. Fashions, Failures, Prospects	269
References	280
Index	309

Introduction

I was sitting in the dentist's chair waiting for the dentist to examine my teeth. I was alone and looking out of the window. It was a dull, overcast day, but suddenly the sun came out—golden and glorious. This was not the physical sun, but a wonderful golden light. With it came a feeling of great joy, peace and well-being. I was so full of love for all things that I felt my heart would burst, and such a feeling of Unity. (RERC 4384, in Maxwell and Tschudin 1996: 113–14)

It sometimes happens that the world appears very different from usual. Things that were separate are now unified. Knowledge and love, ordinarily feeble and partial, become deep and all-encompassing. Self melts away in peace, bliss, light. The present embraces past and future. These experiences, which can vary considerably in details, often occur under the stimulus of beautiful scenery or come at times of great mental tension, but they also arise in the most prosaic of circumstances. Experiences of the transfigured world, sometimes called 'extrovertive mystical experiences' or 'nature mystical experiences', are more common than may be supposed, at least in their milder forms, and for over a century they have been recognized by scholars of mysticism.

There has, however, been little in-depth work on the topic since the 1950s and 1960s, when the comparative religionist R. C. Zaehner and the philosopher W. T. Stace discussed the experiences in their influential books on mysticism. Renewed scrutiny is long overdue, not least because the experiences and their interpretation were poorly served by the classic studies, which, in any case, have become rather dated. Important developments have taken place since the 1960s. Through the data-gathering efforts of Alister Hardy and other investigators of spiritual experiences, there are now many more accounts of extrovertive mystical experience available for study, and there can no longer be any excuse for the neglect of empirical data that has blighted many studies of mystical experience. Additionally, important theoretical perspectives have gained

prominence in recent decades. In particular, it has become popular to maintain that mystical experiences are thoroughly conditioned by the religious traditions in which they occur. Mystical experiences, it is asserted, are products of religious indoctrination and training. At first sight, the claim seems inappropriate for extrovertive mystical experiences: in modern times, the experiences often occur spontaneously, outside any tradition of religious doctrine and practice, and it is therefore not immediately apparent that they are products of religious conditioning. Clearly, the matter needs attention. Likewise, speculations about the neuropsychological basis of mystical experience have been growing in recent years, and the relevance of these speculations to extrovertive experience needs to be gauged. The time is ripe for a fresh look at the various ways in which extrovertive mystical experience has been explained.

The Experiences

When appraising explanations, it is important to have a sense of the phenomenon that is to be explained. The first part of the book is therefore given over to the experiences themselves. What are extrovertive mystical experiences like? How common are they? In what circumstances do they occur? What effects do they have? In what sense are they ‘mystical’, and what makes them ‘extrovertive’? It is all too easy to become bogged down in the intricacies of nomenclature and definition, but the matter needs some attention, and in Chapter 1 I attempt to mark out the territory without becoming embroiled in the debates that swirl round those slippery, contested terms ‘mysticism’ and ‘mystical’. In brief, extrovertive experiences can be called ‘mystical’ because they tend to be characterized by one or more of the following: profound sense of *unity*, profound sense of *knowledge*, profound sense of *contact with reality*. Modern scholars have commonly taken these features to be defining characteristics of mystical experience, and so there is some excuse for calling extrovertive experiences ‘mystical’. As for the ‘extrovertive’ label, the experiences are distinguished from other mystical experiences by their *orientation towards the natural world*. In extrovertive experiences, the mystical features—unity, knowledge, reality, love, luminosity, and so forth—characterize experience of the natural world, not experience of something completely beyond the natural world, such as a transcendent god, self, soul, or realm. Hence, the

experience recounted in the following passage can be called ‘mystical’ because there was a profound sense of unity, and it can be called ‘extrovertive’ because the unity involved the natural world:

It was a beautiful sunny day, and I began looking at the hills which I could see from my window. What followed is almost impossible to express in words, but my whole mode of perception and my whole being suddenly altered. For what I think was a brief instant, though it seemed to last for a long time, I seemed to be ‘at one’ with the hills, to be identified with them, to belong to them. My whole being was absorbed in this feeling, which was of great intensity . . . Then the ‘focus’ altered, and I was looking at the hills normally again, but feeling very startled at what had happened. I puzzled over it for weeks. (RERC 357, in Beardsworth 1977: 51–2)

For the purpose of defining extrovertive mystical experience, the term ‘natural world’ is not without complications because there is room for debate over what the natural world includes and excludes. Still, it is probably more important to give a living sense of the experiences at this stage than to aim at a cast-iron definition. Thus, in Chapter 1, steps are taken to give the reader a sense of the experiences through some extrovertive accounts and an overview of common or notable features. The discussion of characteristics is taken further in Chapter 2: scholarly attempts to identify extrovertive characteristics are considered, and the results of my own work in the area are presented. In Chapter 3, the focus switches to circumstances and consequences. Again, examples are given, and, by the end of Part I, the reader should have gained a fair sense of the experiences.

A study that dwells so much on mystical experience is liable to be accused of giving disproportionate attention to special, intense experiences. William James has long been criticized for privileging exceptional experiences over the commonplace aspects of religious life, and scholars have continued to take issue with the prominence given to intense, private experience in the study of religion and mysticism.¹ The emphasis on experience is said to be anachronistic: it is claimed that in pre-modern times, intense experiences were not highly esteemed, neither for their spiritual contributions to the religious life nor for their evidential value in support of religious faith. Typically, the modern preoccupation with experience is traced

¹ Wulff (1997: 499–503) summarizes the critical responses to James. For recent criticisms of the experiential emphasis, see Proudfoot (1985), Lash (1988), Jantzen (1995), Turner (1995), Sharf (1998), and Ferrer (2000).

to Friedrich Schleiermacher and his intellectual heirs, including James, who are said to have retreated to private religious experience as a defence against Enlightenment threats to religion. The thesis strikes me as an oversimplification, but whatever its merits or defects, it is not of direct relevance to the present study because I make no dogmatic claims about the significance of extrovertive experience in earlier periods. In Chapter 1, I do note some historical cases and raise some traditional religious philosophies that may have been inspired by extrovertive experiences, but my conclusions are tentative. For the most part, the cases raised in the study are drawn from modern times, and my focus on intense experiences and their explanation mirrors the importance often given to the experiences by those who have them and their urge to understand them. In the modern world, intense spiritual experiences do take place, do have a powerful impact, and do attract explanations, from subjects and ‘experts’ alike. It would certainly be a mistake to regard mystical experience as the essence or goal of religion, for religions are complex, multi-faceted phenomena, and the spiritual life consists of far more than access to special states of consciousness, but it would also be a mistake to neglect moments of intense experience that transform lives and raise profound questions.

The Explanations

Like other extraordinary experiences, extrovertive mystical experiences raise pressing questions for those who have them: ‘What happened? Why did it happen? Will it happen again? Should I tell anybody?’ It is not every day that one feels united with the world, knowing all, loving all, liberated from self-concern, transcending time, illumined, blissful, and, it seems, face to face with reality. Confronted with tales of extraordinary experiences, and in some cases inspired by their own unusual experiences, specialists also look for understanding, drawing upon their fields of expertise—psychology, psychiatry, biology, sociology, philosophy, theology—to explain what lies behind the experiences.

At the least, the present study will highlight the often divergent ways in which extrovertive mystical experiences have been explained. In Part II, explanations that have enjoyed some critical attention are re-examined, and those that have been neglected receive an airing. There is much to be gained by assembling a variety of

explanations. It provides a corrective to the usual tendency of specialists to fix on one explanatory approach to the exclusion of others. It also brings the advantages of comparative work: when explanations rub together, similarities and differences are placed in strong relief, and strengths and limitations become more obvious. It also encourages historical insights: we shall see how explanatory approaches shifted as the twentieth century unfolded. The present work is not a historical study, but it does draw attention to some major episodes in the intellectual history of extrovertive explanation.

In Chapters 4 to 8, these developments will be considered in detail. For the moment, it will suffice to give an overview of what is to come ('A Hundred Years of Explanation' below). Some theorists, particularly in the early years, gave credence to *transpersonal* factors by allowing persons to reach beyond themselves in ways that are not covered by the perceptual, biological, psychological, and social processes admitted by naturalistic science. For example, it has been claimed that in extrovertive experience the mystic intuits the presence of a spiritual being in nature or discovers mind in the world at large. Additionally or alternatively, theorists have called upon factors that do feature in mainstream natural and social sciences. Some are *contextual* contributions from the religious and cultural backgrounds of mystics, the acquired beliefs and practices that could exert an influence on the occurrence, characteristics, description, and interpretation of mystical experiences. Other factors are the intrinsic biological and psychological processes that structure ordinary experience and which possibly contribute to mystical experience too. Intrinsic biological and psychological factors recognized by naturalistic science can be termed *intrapersonal* to distinguish them from intrinsic factors of a transpersonal character, such as an indwelling soul or spiritual essence.

Explanations differ not only in their transpersonal, contextual, or intrapersonal orientations but also in the kinds of issues they address. For example, some explanations focus on the mechanisms that give rise to mystical experiences, whilst others have more to say about the functional value of the experiences. In 'Explanation and Reduction', I introduce these differences. Another topic highlighted below is the importance of metaphysics in the study of mystical experience ('The Relevance of Metaphysics'). Too often, contemporary scholars of mysticism have passed over some of the more interesting questions. Do mystical experiences really put

mystics in touch with reality? What do the experiences tell us about the world and human nature?

A Hundred Years of Explanation

The explanations explored in Part II are modern ones, with the earliest dating from the late nineteenth century, although some draw inspiration from ideas that go back well over two thousand years. The explanations were devised by theorists in the English-speaking world (e.g. Bucke, Carpenter, Inge, Underhill, Zaehner, Stace) or by those who achieved recognition there (e.g. Freud, Otto, Neumann). Undoubtedly, there are others whose ideas deserve attention, such as the French author and pacifist Romain Rolland (1866–1944), and several German writers, including Rolland’s friend and mentor Malwida von Meysenbug (1816–1903), the philosopher Karl Joël (1864–1934), and the literary and theatre critic Julius Hart (1859–1930) (see Riedel 1996). Despite these limitations, my rummaging in the humanities scholarship on mysticism have brought to light some varied explanations, and a glance at psychoanalytic theories and contemporary neuropsychological ideas has added to the wealth of offerings.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the vogue for reductionistic medical and psychiatric explanations of religious and mystical experiences, famously criticized by William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), was counterbalanced by unashamedly transpersonal understandings that included mystical experiences of nature within their explanatory remit. As we shall see in Chapter 4, these transpersonal approaches had both secular and Christian representatives. From the early 1890s, R. M. Bucke and Edward Carpenter described a ‘cosmic’ form of consciousness with a transpersonal reach. For these thinkers, mystical experience was pre-eminently this-worldly, a glimpse of the world that would one day be realized through a radical transformation of consciousness, religion, and society. Their theorizing was socially oriented and secular, yet transpersonal too:

- emergence of a special faculty that intuits cosmic wholeness (Bucke)
- an integrative recovery of pre-existing universal consciousness (Carpenter)

Historically and conceptually, Bucke and Carpenter sit alongside their Christian counterparts W. R. Inge and Evelyn Underhill. Both sets of theorists were transpersonal in orientation, both expressed the world-affirming spirituality of the pre-war period, and both trusted in the long-term spiritual progress of humankind. Inge and Underhill translated the liberal Christian affirmation of immanence and transcendence into a typology that esteemed two genuine mystical paths, the immanent way of nature mysticism and the transcendent way of inward mysticism. For Inge, Underhill, and other theorists who took up the twofold typology, notably Rudolf Otto, mystical experiences of the world really do put mystics in touch with spiritual reality:

- apprehension of the mind of God in nature (Inge)
- apprehension of God in nature (Underhill)
- a priori knowledge of the One in and behind phenomena (Otto)

Inge, Underhill, and Otto are more important for their typological contributions than for their explanations of extrovertive experience, which were fairly nebulous and inattentive to the experiential data. The twofold typology was important because it established extrovertive mystical experience as a distinct and significant type of mystical experience.

Esteemed by such influential figures as Bucke, Carpenter, Inge, and Underhill, extrovertive mysticism was well positioned for future recognition and study, but its prestige was soon to decline. The great disillusionment of the First World War extended to theology, tipping the immanence–transcendence balance towards a God beyond the world, a separation of spirit and nature. The intimate presence of a loving God in the fabric of a world racked by suffering and meaningless slaughter seemed implausible. In philosophy, the optimistic kinds of speculative metaphysics that could marry well with extrovertive mysticism, notably idealist and vitalist metaphysics, went out of fashion, and in psychology, behaviourism and psychoanalysis displaced the rich conceptions of the unconscious that had informed some approaches to mystical experience.

The Second World War also had transcendentalizing repercussions. R. C. Zaehner, a convert from his own mystical ‘pantheism’ to Catholicism in the 1940s, looked upon the material world with some disgust, and he separated it sharply from the spiritual reality he put beyond the world. For Zaehner, there was no room for truly spiritual experience of the natural world because the world is without

spirit. A shift towards transcendence is evident too in W. T. Stace's influential discussion. Stace, like Zaehner, had come to subscribe to a spirit–nature dualism in which the natural world is essentially non-spiritual. In Chapter 5, we shall see that Stace's theistic disillusionment and thoroughgoing naturalism at the time of the Second World War were relieved by the discovery of the transcendent One of the mystical philosophers, a conversion that dictated his subsequent understanding and comparatively low estimation of extrovertive experience. Stace judged the experience unimportant for he located the essence of mysticism in pure, undifferentiated consciousness. Nevertheless, his chief explanation of extrovertive experience does call upon a transpersonal reality, a 'pure consciousness' that has recently made a comeback in Robert Forman's thought, which is also discussed in Chapter 5:

- identity with the pure consciousness or 'self' beyond nature (Stace)
- a paradoxical identity-in-difference of sensory phenomena (Stace)
- extension of pure consciousness into nature (Forman)

As a contentless state of consciousness, pure consciousness does not seem to have much to do with extrovertive experiences, which are often very rich in contents. Stace's approach is therefore not at all promising. In Forman's treatment, however, Stace's spirit–nature separationism is overcome because Forman recognizes deeper kinds of extrovertive experience in which pure consciousness and the natural world come together. And Forman, unlike Stace, raises the possibility of a permanent extrovertive state, a suggestion that invites us to consider whether profound, enduring extrovertive experiences are really possible.

Although relegated to an inferior status by Stace and Zaehner, extrovertive experience received attention in their works, and subsequent discussion has generally looked back to these authorities, adopting, adapting, or rejecting their typologies. Their works marked a more critical phase in the study of mysticism in which the role of interpretation received some attention, although the phase was to give way to yet more sophisticated developments in the 1970s and 1980s.² It had often been assumed that mystical experiences are essentially the same across religions, cultures, and

² On phases in the study of mysticism, see Moore (1990), Kourie (1992: 83–4), and McGinn (1992: 263–343).

historical periods, or occur in just a limited number of cross-cultural types, as Stace and Zaehner had supposed. However, Bruce Garside, Steven Katz, and others initiated a debate that has continued to the present day by insisting that mystical experience is variable across religious traditions because it is fundamentally conditioned by its doctrinal and cultural contexts. This *contextual* argument, which is the subject of Chapter 6, cast doubt on cross-tradition typologies and directed attention to the study of mysticism embedded within religious traditions. Epistemological and methodological concerns came to dominate, including the ‘radical contextualist’ position that made interpretation central to mystical experience itself. Mystical experience came to be viewed as socially conditioned to its very core, a view that stood in opposition to the venerable belief, taken up by some psychologists at the time (e.g. Arthur Deikman, Robert Ornstein), that mystical experience results from a deconditioning of ordinary experience:

- religious and cultural conditioning (‘radical contextualism’)
- deconditioning of ordinary experience (‘mystical deconstructivism’)

With the rise of contextual epistemology, interest in extrovertive experience waned, even though the experience could have been used to challenge the contextual argument. It is notable that extrovertive experiences in the modern world often occur *outside any clear tradition of teaching and practice*, in non-religious contexts, and to persons who had no idea that there were such experiences. It is therefore by no means obvious that the experiences are a product of indoctrination and enculturation. Critics of radical contextualism, such as Robert Forman, took up pure consciousness as a counter-example. Empty of contents, pure consciousness seems to exhibit no signs of conditioning. Forman hoped that discussion would eventually be extended to ‘the more advanced and interesting extrovertive states’ (1990a: 8), and he has followed up his suggestion to some extent. The present study is, in part, an attempt to advance Forman’s programme by taking up the case of extrovertive experience. Cultural factors undoubtedly have an influence on the experiences, especially on peripheral issues and sometimes on core visionary and noetic contents, but I shall show that there is much about extrovertive experience that cannot be put down to religious and cultural context. I shall also suggest that extrovertive experience is often too complex and sophisticated to result from a simple deconstruction of ordinary experience. Extrovertive experiences must

draw in significant ways on other sources, intrapersonal, transpersonal, or both, and it is these other sources that are the subject matter of Chapters 7 and 8.

The explanations discussed in Chapter 7 are mainly intrapersonal and reductionistic. For the most part, Zaehner reduced extrovertive experiences to psychiatric and psychological phenomena, and in this respect, he was close to Freud, who traced extrovertive feelings of unity to infantile cognition. Their explanations cast extrovertive experience in an unflattering light, although some psychological explanations have affirmed the experiences by regarding them as oriented towards health or growth:

- mania brought on by mental illness or other causes (Zaehner)
- nostalgia for intra-uterine absorption (Zaehner's 'early Jung')
- unity with an inner, mental model of the world (Zaehner)
- persistence of inclusive, infantile ideation in the adult mind (Freud)
- individuation through a return to the unconscious (Neumann)
- a reparative psychological response to childhood loss (object relations)

In recent years, psychological theories have been joined by neuropsychological speculations, some of which include extrovertive experience within their remit:

- emotional investment following temporal-lobe seizure (Ramachandran)
- microseizures in the temporal lobes (Persinger)
- changes to the neurophysiological substrates of the self (Austin)
- input changes to the parietal lobes (d'Aquili and Newberg)

Neuropsychological explanations of religious experience have tended to be overambitious, driven by new technology at the expense of typological sensitivity, philosophical depth, and awareness of religious and cultural dimensions. Nevertheless, it is very likely that the brain plays some role, even if it may turn out to be a supporting role.

The intrapersonal explanations discussed in Chapter 7 prove to be either too weak or too underdeveloped to give a satisfactory naturalistic account of extrovertive experience. There is still room for approaches that are not entirely naturalistic, and so, in Chapter 8, I turn once again to the possibility of a transpersonal basis by looking at two overlapping sets of ideas:

- consciousness expansion through influx of the subliminal ('filtration theory')

- contact with mind intrinsic to the world at large (mind–body metaphysics)

In the first approach, it is supposed that mystical experiences and other unusual states arise when biological and psychological ‘valves’ allow ordinarily excluded contents of the subconscious to enter consciousness. Aldous Huxley famously contended that mystical and paranormal experiences occur when a ‘reducing valve’ lets in ‘Mind at Large’. This biological and psychological type of approach can blend into philosophical speculation if mind–body metaphysics is raised to support the idea of consciousness beyond the brain. The mind–body problem has once again become a matter of interest in mainstream thought, and renewed attempts to explain extrovertive experience could turn again to filtration theories and mind–body metaphysics. Indeed, a few modern thinkers have raised mind–body philosophy in connection with extrovertive mystical experience and nondual perception of the world. After considering various mind–body approaches, I conclude with a speculative venture into the area, outlining a panpsychic type of idealism that could form the basis of an extrovertive explanation.

Explanation and Reduction

Explanations answer the ‘hows’, ‘whys’, and ‘whats’, questions about characteristics, structure, nature, causes, function, purpose, meaning, origins, development, and ends. What kinds of questions can be asked about extrovertive experience? These are the questions that will be addressed in the first three chapters, questions about definition, nomenclature, typology, incidence, phenomenology, circumstances, and consequences. These questions can be addressed by descriptive efforts up to a point, but explanation cannot be left aside for long. Without explanation, uncertainties over definition, characterization, and typology are inevitable. For instance, it is possible that some experiences have superficially similar characteristics but are very different in nature and should not be classed together. Until we understand how the experiences come about and what they are, there will be uncertainties over their definition and classification.

Several kinds of explanations can be distinguished. *Causal* explanations aim to uncover the chains of cause and effect behind phenomena. What gives rise to the characteristics of extrovertive experience, such as unitive feelings, luminosity, expanded knowledge, and

altered time-experience? Are the characteristics related to one another through a common cause? Why are some experiences considerably different from others? Why do certain settings, states of mind, practices, and drugs tend to promote the experiences? Causal explanations can be natural and social-scientific, tracing physical, psychological, or social pathways of cause and effect, but they can also be transpersonal, with supernatural or spiritual agencies attributed a causal role. Causal explanations are sometimes *genetic*, tracing the steps through which something has come to be, but explanations of origin (and explanations in general) can also be *purposive*, offering motives, *teleological*, ascribing ends, or *evolutionary*, explaining origins and characteristics by means of natural selection and environmental adaptation, or some other evolutionary process. All these forms of explanations have featured in the study of mystical experience. There are also *functional* explanations, according to which things take place in order 'to do' something. For instance, an explanation may look at the social function of spiritual experiences in the lives of subjects and their communities, as in I. M. Lewis's celebrated study of spirit possession (1971). Or spiritual experiences may be ascribed a therapeutic and transformative function, bringing health and growth (e.g. Grof 1988). There are also *correlative* explanations, which point out recurrent associations without asserting causal relations. Unusually cautious physiologists may describe correlations between brain physiology and mystical experiences without proceeding to the stronger causal-genetic assertion that the brain produces the experiences. Finally, there is explanation that attempts to say what a thing really is, which I shall call *ontological* explanation. In essence, extrovertive experience *is* contact with a spiritual presence in nature; it *is* infantile cognition; it *is* disordered brain physiology; it *is* a social construct.

Ontological explanations sometimes coincide with the 'insider' understandings of mystics, but very often they follow a different tack, performing *ontological reductions* that depict the phenomenon as something other than it appeared to be.³ Ontological reductionism

³ On types of reductionism, see for instance Peacocke (1985) and Jones (2000). Peacocke distinguishes 'methodological reductionism' (analysis of the subject into parts to aid study), 'epistemological reductionism' (translation of one theory into the terms of another), and 'ontological reductionism' (the claim that something is really something else).

is ontological because it asserts what truly is; it is reductive because it finds reality in something other than the thing itself. According to Zaehner, nature mystics believe that they have experienced unity with the world when in fact they have experienced unity with their inner mental models of the world. Reductionism is not limited to ontological explanation. For instance, a *functional reduction* replaces the insider's functional understanding with an outsider's functional explanation: 'You say that the experience was granted to you to strengthen your faith, but the experience actually served to reinforce your standing in the community.' A *genetic reduction* reappraises origins: 'You believe that your mystical training helped you towards an encounter with reality, but the training was really a conditioning process that manufactured the experience.'

Clearly, reductionistic explanations are often unflattering, and they are liable to draw hostile reactions from those who value the experiences. Hostile reactions are understandable, but rejection of social and natural scientific explanation is unhelpful. Religious and mystical experiences do take place in the contexts of bodies, minds, and societies, and so they are open, at least in some respects, to biological, psychological, and sociological study. Untested convictions about the falsity or truth of reductions lead nowhere: the truth of reductionistic approaches is 'an open rather than closed question, an empirical rather than *a priori* one', as Robert Segal has put it (1983: 114). Reductionistic explanations should not be faulted because they are reductionistic, but they should be faulted if they are unable to account for the data or are deficient in other ways. Likewise, non-reductionistic approaches should not be faulted because they have a place for transpersonal realities or processes in their explanations, but they should be criticized if they ignore the data or exhibit other faults.

When evaluating explanations of extrovertive experience, we can ask several questions. Does the explanation account for more than one or two characteristics? Does it explain why certain circumstances are facilitative? Is the explanation 'good'? Criteria for 'good' theories have been discussed in the sciences: subsumptive power, economy, clarity, testability, empirical support, fertility, predictive value, internal consistency, responsiveness to new evidence, and so forth. Some criteria are closely tied to the demands of scientific empiricism, notably predictive value and testability, and may not be so relevant to the more philosophical explanations, which do not often lend themselves to simple hypothesis testing, although they

should nevertheless respect and address the empirical data. Other criteria are more generally applicable, such as subsumptive power, economy, clarity, fertility, and internal consistency. For instance, a philosophy of mind that sheds light on a range of experiences, ordinary and extraordinary, has greater subsumptive power than one that makes sense of only ordinary experience. An economical explanation of extrovertive characteristics is preferable to one that raises a multiplicity of ad hoc hypotheses to furnish disconnected explanations of individual features.

The Relevance of Metaphysics

In the contemporary study of mysticism, there has been a reluctance to engage with metaphysical issues. Do mystical experiences really put mystics in touch with reality? Does the oft-reported sense of 'timelessness' tell us something about the nature of time in the world at large? What does mystical experience tell us about human nature? Scientific investigators tend to dismiss or pass over metaphysical questions, placing them beyond the reach of scientific study; humanities scholars have concerned themselves with philosophical issues, but largely with epistemology, logic, and ethics. The reluctance to engage with metaphysics partly reflects a widespread distrust of speculative metaphysics: some philosophers advocated the circumscription of traditional metaphysical ambitions and methods (e.g. C. S. Peirce, William James, Bertrand Russell) or rejected metaphysics altogether (Ludwig Wittgenstein, logical positivism), for a variety of reasons, philosophical and ideological.⁴ Traditional metaphysical questions have been viewed as unanswerable or meaningless. In the study of mystical experience, the distrust of metaphysics translates into the opinion that questions about transpersonal contributions are unanswerable or misconceived. Interest in metaphysics may also be frowned upon because it raises suspicions that a confessional agenda is being pursued, at odds with the academy's ideal of objective study. Metaphysics, if it is to be considered at all, should be left to theologians.

⁴ See DeAngelis (1997) and Linsky (1997) for a survey of twentieth-century metaphysical developments in the English-speaking world, including a limited return to metaphysics in the second half of the century.

However, metaphysics cannot be safely ignored in the study of mysticism because mystical experiences often carry metaphysical import. Subjects believe that they have gained insights into reality, self, time, and ultimate meaning, if only for the duration of their experiences. There is a clear link between mysticism and metaphysics: both are directed towards reality, the former seemingly through a direct intuition, the latter through discursive reasoning. The shared concern with reality suggests that there is a valid place for *metaphysical enquiry* in the study of mysticism, as a complement of epistemological, phenomenological, psychological, biological, sociological, textual, and historical approaches. At its least controversial, metaphysical enquiry would consist in *analysis*, the description and evaluation of the metaphysical claims of mystics and the explicit or hidden metaphysical contents of scholarly explanations. What assumptions do the explanations carry about reality, self, time, human nature, and the mind–body relation? Do they, for instance, take for granted a materialist conception of the natural world (e.g. Zaehner), a naturalistic account of human nature (e.g. Freud), a materialist or epiphenomenalist theory of the mind–brain relation (e.g. many physiologists)?

More controversially, metaphysical enquiry would engage in *theorizing*, in the formulation of explanations with an explicit metaphysical component, whether naturalistic or spiritual, secular or religious. To be acceptable as a scholarly activity, the theorizing would have to avoid dogmatism, pursued in a critical fashion with attention to evidence and argument. In advocating a place for metaphysical enquiry in the academic study of mysticism, I follow G. William Barnard (1994; 1997; 2002), who has explored William James's approach to mysticism to show how scholars may break free from the 'rather restrictive methodology' of contemporary philosophy of mysticism (1997: 89–90). Barnard points out that if metaphysics is ignored or dismissed it will nonetheless exert an influence through 'internalized metaphysical assumptions'. It is better to bring assumptions into the open for critical scrutiny than to allow them to operate unexamined in the background. In the spirit of Barnard's observations, I attempt to bring out the metaphysical aspects of existing extrovertive explanations, giving particular attention to the metaphysics behind Stace's understanding of mystical experience. Stace was a philosopher of the analytic school who retained an interest in metaphysics. His understanding of mystical experience was closely tied to his metaphysical presuppositions, yet

he failed to make these clear in his major study of mysticism. Thus, despite Stace's prominence in the modern study of mysticism, the rich metaphysical background to his work is largely unappreciated, and it therefore receives in-depth analysis here.

In Chapter 8, I indulge in a little metaphysical theorizing myself. I discuss some mind-body philosophies that could be utilized in extrovertive mystical explanation, and I come out in favour of idealism. Of all the metaphysical systems that could be used to explain extrovertive experience, I favour as a starting point a realist form of idealism that acknowledges the existence of the external world but which takes it to be mental in nature. I find the approach attractive not least because it seems to offer the best hope for understanding experience in general, ordinary as well as mystical. As we shall see, J. E. Mercer and Edward Carpenter raised this kind of idealist philosophy in their discussions of extrovertive experience. It will also become apparent that I take the idealism in a panpsychic direction, developing it along Leibnizian lines. Although seemingly outlandish, the metaphysics has some attractions.

'Mystic Scholars'

Theorists are likely to benefit from personal familiarity with the experiences they try to explain, although familiarity can create problems too. Frits Staal has gone so far as to claim that 'If mysticism is to be studied seriously, it should not merely be studied indirectly and from without, but also directly and from within' (1975: 123). Staal recommended experimentation with drugs and training in meditative disciplines under the guidance of competent teachers. On the face of it, Staal's point seems reasonable. It is usually beneficial to have 'hands-on' experience, and a lack of it can be disadvantageous. Freud boasted that he could not discover the 'oceanic feeling' in himself, and his appreciation of extrovertive phenomenology was limited, dependent on the meagre information provided by his correspondent Romain Rolland. Inevitably, limited appreciation of phenomenology leads to poor explanation.

However, the extent to which Staal's recommendation can or should be realized in the study of extrovertive experience is debatable. Investigators could try to gain firsthand acquaintance through various means. Aesthetic experiences of nature are readily

facilitated, for it is simple enough to immerse oneself in beautiful surroundings. On occasions, aesthetic experiences develop into extrovertive mystical experiences. However, deliberate attempts to use natural surroundings as triggers may prove unsuccessful if anticipation inhibits the mental sets that seem to be conducive to the experiences, such as a relaxed, empty state of mind. Other means available to investigators include meditative practices and psychedelic substances, as recommended by Staal. In the first case, the procedure (say, Zen meditation) may be prohibitively arduous and protracted for research purposes, and competent, non-exploitative teachers can be hard to find. The second method, although expeditious, may be unacceptable on moral or legal grounds, and carry serious risks to body and mind. In both cases, investigators would have to be alert to artefacts introduced by the facilitation method. The more complex meditative practices, such as those employing visualization, could introduce extraneous elements to the experiences. Psychedelic drugs commonly bring gross perceptual distortions and trains of images that are not typical of spontaneous extrovertive cases.

Still, recourse to firsthand experience may be an option for some investigators, and several scholars of mysticism have enjoyed at least passing acquaintance with mystical states, spontaneously, or through spiritual practices or drugs. The topic has been discussed in some depth by Jeffrey Kripal (2001), who has looked at the ways in which the mystical experiences of scholars have influenced their readings and writings. Contemporary examples include Kripal himself, Robert Forman (1990a; 1999), Robert May (1993), Michael Stoeber (1994), William Barnard (1997), James Austin (1998), Robert Ellwood (1999), and Arthur Deikman (2000), who have all disclosed firsthand experiences in connection with their studies of mysticism and altered states of consciousness. Earlier examples include W. R. Inge, William James, Evelyn Underhill, and Rufus Jones, who were reticent about their experiences, and R. M. Bucke, Edward Carpenter, P. D. Ouspensky, Francis Younghusband, Henry Nelson Wieman, Aldous Huxley, R. C. Zaehner, F. C. Happold, and Agehananda Bharati, who were more forthcoming.

Barnard raises a mystical episode in his early teens partly to cast doubt on the viewpoint that all mystical experiences are completely constructed from previous beliefs (1997: 127–9), and Forman, as we shall see, has drawn on his own meditative experiences to illustrate some of the mystical states he describes. Both have felt the need to

justify their autobiographical inclusions, believing that the introduction of personal material would be frowned upon in contemporary academia. Barnard argues that it is important to bring one's experiences into the open, not only for the positive contribution they may bring to the discussion, but also to make clear any personal perspectives that may colour the treatment. A look at the scholarship on extrovertive mystical experience corroborates Barnard's point, for in some instances it is apparent that personal experiences contributed to unsatisfactory characterizations and poor explanations. Reliance on one's own experiences can be double-edged: the experiences provide an invaluable foothold in an elusive domain, but they can also lead to distortions if used uncritically. In particular, there is the danger that experiences will be taken to be fully representative. As we shall see, Bucke's understanding of the characteristics and predisposing circumstances of cosmic consciousness was overly dependent on his own case, and Zaehner, who berated Bucke for his obtuseness, was equally guilty of generalization from personal experience. It is ironic that Zaehner took Bucke to task for incautious extrapolation from firsthand experience: 'Now, it is the custom of the nature mystics to assume that their own experience, even though it last only for a few moments, must be normative of all such experiences' (1970: 46). Zaehner was no exception, for he treated his own experience as normative. The lesson is not that investigators should suppress their experiences or avoid firsthand exploration. Rather, investigators should not assume that their experiences are fully representative, and they should study the accounts of others in a more than superficial way, alert to differences as well as to similarities.

In light of the above, it is only proper that I acknowledge two personal experiences that could pass as 'extrovertive mystical experience', depending on how it is defined. They have undoubtedly influenced my understanding of the subject. The first developed out of aesthetic appreciation of nature. Amid falling cherry blossoms and the yellowing light of late afternoon, I became unusually affected by the beauty of the scene: 'I was not an "I"—my energy was uncontained, my thoughts quiet' is how I described the event shortly afterwards. The mood lasted for two or three hours, with a slight interruption, and persisted even when I joined the company of others. The experience was mild and could be judged a particularly well-developed aesthetic experience or a rather underdeveloped mystical experience. A somewhat different and far more intense

experience took place a few months later whilst I was asleep. On waking, I felt a very strong, almost indescribable afterglow of ‘wholeness’, but I could not recall its origin, although it seemed to be connected with a dream. Some details eventually came back to me, and I was able to recall in fragmentary fashion an experience of expansive knowledge, vision, unity, and love. Both experiences brought a diminution of the usual self-focus, but they were also significantly different in character and circumstance. The second, taking place during sleep, has alerted me to the fact that extrovertive experiences may not always take place with the ‘eyes open’, through the senses, as some scholars have assumed. In Chapter 1, I have defined extrovertive experience accordingly, acknowledging that it can sometimes follow from an interior movement, when sensory input no longer dominates, as in sleep, near-death crises, and some meditative states.

Index

- Aberbach, David 225 n.
Abhidhamma psychology 216
Abhinavagupta 46
Abrams, M. H. 37, 38, 121
absolute unitary being (AUB) 230, 231
Active Intellect 133
'Adelaide M. B.' 81
advaita 199
Advaita Vedānta 199, 200, 246
aesthetic experience 16–17, 18, 194
A.G.F. 69, 77, 104
A.H.M. 91
Ahṃung 143
Alexander, C. N. 170 n. 6, 173
All-Einheit 38
'all is/shall be well' insight 25, 66–7, 106
All-Sinn 38
Allen, Warner 29, 64, 66, 70, 92, 95, 96
Almond, Philip 40, 141 n. 18, 141 n. 19,
142 n., 149 n., 179
A.M. 89–90
anaesthetics 69, 93, 94; *see also* drugs
Ancilla 64, 66, 76 n., 103, 106 n. 17, 107
Andresen, Jensine 227 n., 228
Angela of Foligno 41, 75–6
Anker-Larsen, Johannes 87
antecedent circumstances 84–102
apophatic mysticism, *see* negative
theology; Stace, W. T.
Argyle, Michael 83 n. 1, 84 n., 102
Arjuna 45, 76
Armour, Leslie 114 n., 124
Armstrong, A. H. 45 n.
art (circumstance) 85 n.
Arunachalam, Ponnambalam 119,
120 n.
ASCID 63
Assagioli, Roberto 103 n., 126 n. 10, 236
ātman 170, 199
AUB, *see* absolute unitary being
Auden, W. H. 30
auditory phenomena 26, 27, 71–2; *see*
also music
Augenblick 37
Aurobindo Ghose 94, 163
Austin, James:
on drug experiences 99
neuropsychology 10, 226, 228, 229,
230, 231
own mystical experience 17, 68, 87, 91
Austin, Mary 62, 74, 76 n.
autobiographical principle 40
Avatamsaka Sūtra 46, 245, 259, 260
A.W.O.N.I. 92
Baal Shem Tov 225 n.
Baker, D. N. 67
Bakshi, Parminder Kaur 120 n.
Bancroft, Anne 77, 86–7, 92, 104
baqā' 45
Barnard, G. William 15, 17–18, 234–5,
237, 254
Barth, Karl 139
Bastow, David 142 n.
Beatific Vision 207, 209, 212
beauty:
characteristic 25, 27, 28, 34, 40, 42, 49,
58, 63, 69, 71, 72, 73, 79, 85, 92,
95, 99, 138
circumstance 1, 3, 17, 18, 30, 82,
85 n., 86, 87, 89, 90, 92, 111, 136,
197, 211, 251
inherited Idea 125, 126 n. 9
overwhelming 81, 172
Neoplatonic 44, 134, 135, 142, 172,
175
Platonic Form of 132
B.E.B. 75, 107
Becker, Carl B. 242 n.
Beethoven, Ludwig van 29, 37, 92, 95
Beit-Hallahmi, Benjamin 83 n. 1, 84 n.,
217 n.
Bell, David N. 42 n. 10, 132
Bell, Ian F. N. 126 n. 9
Benedict, Mellen-Thomas 196
Benedict, Saint 42, 45

- 'Bengt' 61 n.
 Benson, Herbert 227 n.
 bereavement 74, 90, 92, 93, 225
 Bergson, Henri:
 direct realism 70
 filtration theory 138, 228, 237–8, 276
 neutral monism 242, 253, 256
 time as *durée* 139, 140
 vitalism 112, 138, 234
 Berkeley, George 118, 242
 idealism 152, 156, 235 n., 243, 244,
 246, 249, 250, 258, 261–2, 267
 mind of God 258, 261–2
 Berman, David 246 n. 9
Bhagavad Gītā 45, 76, 94, 117, 119, 190;
 see also Carpenter, Edward
 Bharati, Agehananda 17, 68 n., 94, 96,
 97
 Binet, Alfred 235
 Bingham, Bill 52 n., 66, 106 n. 17
 Blackmore, Susan 96
 Blake, William 37, 40, 121, 138
 Blakeslee, Sandra 227, 229
 body 123, 124
 cosmic 76–7
 microcosmic 125
 see also neuropsychological
 explanation; somatic phenomena
 Boethius 42
 Böhme, Jakob 38, 40, 121 n., 134, 138,
 162, 165, 171, 246
 Bon religion 46–7
 Boniface, Saint 42 n. 10
 Bower, Jacob 40
 Braden, William 65, 68, 81
 Bradley, F. H. 258
 Bragdon, Emma 103 n.
brahman 141, 148, 170, 180, 199, 246
 Brämsswig, A. 247 n. 11
 Brink, Andrew 218, 225–6
 Broad, C.D. 237, 238, 258
 Brown, Tony 117 n.
 Buber, Martin 199
 Buchbinder, Jacob T. 205
 Bucke, R. M. 6, 30, 112, 126 n. 10, 131,
 225 n.
 background 114
 Cosmic Consciousness:
 characterization 49, 50–2
 evolutionary theory of 83, 114–15,
 123
 as human mental faculty 114–16
 predisposing circumstances 83
 intellectual illumination 50, 51, 52, 56,
 66, 116
 moral nature 123–4
 neuropsychological speculation
 123–4, 228
 own mystical experience 17, 18, 52,
 92, 113
 pantheism 115–16
 Self Consciousness 115
 Simple Consciousness 115, 123
 and Whitman 91–2, 113, 114
 see also Carpenter, Edward;
 Zaehner, R. C.
 Buckton, Oliver S. 118 n.
 Buddha 45, 46, 154, 169, 175
 Buddhism, *see* Abhidhamma psychology;
 Avatamsaka Sūtra; Buddha; Ch'an
 Buddhism; Dzogchen; emptiness;
 Hua-yen Buddhism; nirvana;
 omniscience; *prabhāsvara citta*;
 Stace, W. T.; Tibetan Buddhism;
 Yogācāra; Zen Buddhism
 Bunyon, Brenda 92
 Bush, Nancy Evans 80
 Bussanich, John 44 n. 13, 45 n.
 Butler, Cuthbert 30
 Caldecott, Moyra 91
 C.A.M. 88
 Cambridge Platonists 133, 134
 Campbell, Anthony 170 n. 6, 171
 Capra, Fritjof 260 n.
 Carington, Whately 242 n.
 Carmody, Denise Lardner 31
 Carmody, John Tully 31
 Carpenter, Edward 6, 30, 92, 116–29,
 131
 and Assagioli 126 n. 10
 background 117
 and the *Bhagavad Gītā* 92, 128
 and Bucke 52, 112, 113, 123
 on conflict between conscious and
 subconscious 124–5
 cosmic body 77
 Cosmic Consciousness:
 explanation of characteristics 122,
 257–8
 and non-differentiation 48, 119,
 123, 197–8, 223, 257–8
 spiral path towards 117, 120–3,
 124, 223
 debt to Saiva teacher 48, 119–20
 on desire 119–20
 homosexuality 117, 118, 127
 idealism 16, 112, 116, 117–18, 234,
 248–9, 273–4
 identity of indiscernibles 129
 inherited Ideas 125, 126, 240
 and Jung 112–13, 118, 126–7

- on love 120, 122, 258
 neglect of 112, 117
 neuropsychological speculation 118,
 124–5, 228
 own mystical experience 17, 92, 105,
 118
 race-consciousness theory 112–13,
 118, 125–7
 and Romanticism 112, 113, 121
 Self Consciousness 121, 122, 124
 Simple Consciousness 121, 123
 sin as separation 120
 on spiritual psychopathology 103–4
 spiritualized neo-Lamarckianism
 125–6
 stage theory of religion 122–3, 183
 on synaesthesia 80
 universal Self 118, 125, 128–9, 145,
 178, 249
 and Whitman 91, 103–4, 113, 117,
 118, 128
 Carpenter, W. B. 235
 Cartesian dualism, *see* dualism
catuṣpād 170–1
 causal explanation 11–12
 cellular consciousness 77, 118
 C.E.N. 65, 89, 93 n. 8
 Chadwick, Peter K. 205
 Ch'an Buddhism 43, 47, 199, 200; *see*
also Zen Buddhism
 childbirth (circumstance) 82, 94
 Chimes, Julie 79
 Christian mysticism 32, 40–2, 45;
see also under individual Christian
mystics and theorists
 Christian Platonism 131–2, 133, 134,
 136, 225, 234
 Christian Socialism 117, 247 n. 10
 Christina of Markyate 42 n. 9
Chuang-tzu 42–3, 48, 199, 200
 Churchland, Paul 187
 Cicero 42
 circumstances 82–102; *see also under*
individual circumstances
 clairvoyance 41, 42, 78–9, 191, 239, 241,
 276, 277
 Clarke, Isabel 206
 Clarke, J. J. 43 n., 236 n. 2
 Clear Light 46
 Clifford, W. K. 241, 244
 cluster analysis 34
 C.M.C. 34–5, 61, 70, 73, 79
 cognitive labelling 205 n.
 cognitive psychology 187, 215–16, 236,
 272
 Coleridge, S. T. 73
 collective unconscious, *see* Jung, C. G.
 combination problem 245, 266
 'coming home', sense of 66, 122, 135
 communal unity 61–2, 63, 64, 203, 248,
 259
 compassion:
 characteristic 24, 91
 circumstance 68, 87–8
 Comtean positivism 114
 confinement (circumstance) 93
 Connolly, Peter 169
 consequences, *see* extrovertive mystical
 experience
 constructivism, *see* psychological
 constructivism
 contextual contributions 194–7; *see also*
 radical contextualism
 contextual factors, definition of 5
 contextual thesis, *see* radical
 contextualism
 Conze, Edward 191
 Cook, Ramsay 114 n.
 correlative explanation 12
 Cortright, Brant 99 n. 13, 101,
 103 n.
 cosmic consciousness 6, 30, 99–101, 113;
see also Bucke, R. M.; Carpenter,
 Edward; Transcendental
 Meditation
 cosmic mystical experience 76, 101, 259,
 270
 cosmic vision, *see* visual phenomena
 'cosmological mysticism' 195
 Coudert, Allison P. 246 n. 9
 Council on Spiritual Practices 98 n.
 Courcelle, Pierre 42 n. 10
 Courtois, Flora 72, 87
 Coxhead, Nona 84 n.
 creativity 224–5
 Crombie, R. Ogilvie 74
 Crook, Paul 131 n.
 Crouter, Richard 39 n.
 Crowley, Vivianne 91
 C.R.P. 90
 Cunningham, Andrew 41–2
 Dann, K. T. 80
 Dante Alighieri 42
 d'Aquili, Eugene 10, 228, 230, 231–2
 Darwin, Charles 115
 Davis, Richard P. 247 n. 10
 Davy, Humphry 73–4, 259
 DeAngelis, William James 14 n.
 deautomatization 198
 deconstructivism, *see* mystical
 deconstructivism

- degeneration 80, 114
 Deikman, Arthur 9, 17, 198, 200, 202, 238 n., 271
 Delacroix, Henri 179 n.
 Delavenay, Emile 126, 127
 depression:
 circumstance 92, 93
 consequence 104–5
devekut
 Dewick, E. C. 130 n. 12
dharmatā 46–7
 Diederichs, Eugen 127
 disparity 191, 192, 193, 197, 271, 272, 274
 distress:
 circumstance 92–4
 consequence 103–5, 205
 DMS (dualistic mystical state), *see* Forman, Robert
 Dodds, E. R. 44 n. 12
 Donovan, Steven 227 n.
 doors of perception 138, 178, 203; *see also* veil
 Douglas, Claire 236 n. 2
 drug-induced mystical experience:
 compared with spontaneous experience 99–101, 226
 and contextual contributions 177, 195, 240, 272
 problematic use in characterization 59–60, 228
 drugs:
 as an aid to mystical research 16, 17, 228
 ‘bad trips’ 65, 80–1, 99
 and brain chemistry 226, 238, 239
 dangers 98–9
 disrupt filters 85, 211, 238, 239, 274–5
 and synaesthesia 79–80
 as trigger 12, 82, 98–101, 102, 111, 226
 dual-aspect monism 115, 234, 242, 244, 249, 250, 251–2, 253, 255, 257, 258–9, 277, 278
 dual personality 235
 dualism 241, 244, 261, 263, 264, 277–8
 Cartesian 242, 246, 251
 epiphenomenalist 15, 231, 232, 241, 243, 255, 274
 interactionist 235, 242, 243, 255
 occasionalistic 255
 parallelist 255
 dualistic mystical state (DMS), *see* Forman, Robert
 Dummett, Michael 208 n.
 Durham, T. W. 83
 Dyczkowski, Mark S. G. 46, 246
 Dzogchen 200
 Eagleton, Terence 126 n. 9
 Eckhart, Meister:
 and Romanticism 38, 246
 on the totality of the forms 132–3, 215 n.
 see also Otto, Rudolf; Stace, W. T.
 ‘Edward’ 26
 Edwards, Jonathan 40
 E.G.S. 76 n.
 Eigen, Michael 221
 Eisler, Rudolf 247 n. 11
 Eliade, Mircea 191
 Eliot, T. S. 67
 Ellenberger, Henri F. 38, 235, 236 n. 2
 Ellis, Havelock 127
 Ellis, Mrs Havelock 127
 Ellison, Arthur J. 242 n.
 Ellwood, Robert 17, 31, 260 n.
 embodied liberation 174–5
 EME, *see* extrovertive mystical experience
 Emerson, Ralph Waldo 37
 empirical data:
 comparative study of 47
 need for non-Western 39, 59
 neglect of 1, 54, 166, 189–90, 222, 269–70, 273–4
 scientific demand for 39
 selection of 34, 59–60
 empiricism, *see* metaphysics; Stace, W. T.
 emptiness, Buddhist concept of 33
 empty unity 55–6, 63, 149, 165, 171
 Engels, Friedrich 120
 Epicurean philosophy 43
 epilepsy 101, 226–7
 epiphenomenalism, *see* dualism
 epistemology, types of mystical 177–80, 185, 196, 201–2, 240
 Estany, Anna 187
 Eternal Now 53, 56, 135, 140, 245, 265; *see also* time
 Eucken, Rudolf 138
 evolution 12, 113, 130, 228, 229, 269
 biological 124, 130, 242, 244
 of consciousness 53, 80, 83, 112–24
 of monads 246, 248
 mystical insights into 35, 66, 93
 neo-Lamarckian 125–6
 evolutionary explanation 12, 229; *see also* Bucke, R. M.; Carpenter, Edward
 explanation:
 evaluation of 13–14, 136

- subsumptive power 13, 14, 79, 275
 types of 11–12
see also reductionism *and under specific types of explanation*
 Explanation-A, *see* Stace, W. T.
 Explanation-B, *see* Stace, W. T.
 extracerebral consciousness 234, 241, 243, 254, 258, 273, 275, 276, 277
 extrovertive 26
 two meanings distinguished 29–30
 extrovertive mystical experience (EME):
 as advanced state 9, 45, 146, 168–9;
 see also cosmic consciousness
 alleged inferior status 8, 10, 39–40, 150, 169, 207
 alternative names 30
 characteristics 1, 2, 24–9, 49–81;
 see also under individual characteristics
 ‘churched’ or ‘unchurched’ 48, 131, 190
 circumstances 82–102; *see also under individual circumstances*
 communication 106–7
 consequences 82, 102–7, 205, 270
 cross-cultural occurrence 39
 cultivation 16–17, 31, 39, 44, 90–1, 169, 172, 174, 190
 definition 2–3, 19, 23–32
 disturbing after-effects 103–5, 170
 disturbing contents 80–1
 duration 8, 24, 72, 146, 173–5
 explanation 6–11, 111–279; *see also under individual theories/theorists*
 feature list 26–7, 32
 incidence 23, 35–7
 ineffability 108
 and non-dual awareness 174
 not necessarily sense-based 19, 29, 53, 70
 and the paranormal 78–9
 permanent experience 150, 173–5, 217, 218–19; *see also* Forman, Robert
 and religious traditions 39–48
 similar to everyday experience 49, 107
 stages 23, 34–5, 53–4, 59, 142–3, 144, 239–40, 270
 terminology 1, 26, 29–32
 types 23, 33–4, 59, 270
 variation 23, 33
- Fairbairn, Ronald 225
fanā 45
 Farquhar, Ron 94
- Fechner, Gustav 242
 dual-aspect theory 234, 251–2, 254, 255, 258
 own nature experience 252, 253
 Fenwick, Peter 276
 Ferrando, Guido 126 n. 10
 Ferrer, Jorge N. 3 n.
 Ferrier, J. F. 118
 Ferrucci, Piero 103 n.
 Feyerabend, Paul 184 n. 2, 187
 filtration theory 10–11, 228, 232, 233–4, 237–40, 274–5, 276; *see also* Bergson, Henri; Huxley, Aldous; James, William; Underhill, Evelyn
 first-order writings 60, 73, 166, 189–90
 First World War, impact of 7, 117, 130, 131, 139
 Fischer, Roland 228
 Fisher, David James 217
 Fodor, Jerry 187
 Fontinell, Eugene 254
 Forgie, J. William 186 n.
 form constant 96
 Forman, Robert:
 consciousness as field-like 168, 235 n.
 criticism of radical contextualism 9, 146, 167, 184, 190, 192
 dualistic mystical state (DMS) 63, 146, 167–8, 169, 171, 172, 219
 ‘forgetting’ model 199–200
 knowledge by identity 178
 own mystical experiences 17, 167, 168
 permanent extrovertive experience 146, 167, 168–70, 172, 173
 pure consciousness as ‘self’ 168, 170
 pure consciousness event (PCE) 8, 9, 146, 167, 199, 230
 and Transcendental Meditation 167, 170–2
 unitive mystical state (UMS) 30, 168, 169–70, 172, 173
 Forster, E. M. 117
 Fort, Andrew O. 171 n., 175
 Foster, Genevieve 74, 96 n., 107
 Foster, John 247, 261
 Fox, Adam 131 n.
 Fox, George 40, 138
 Fox, Mark 96
 Francis of Assisi 41–2
 Franklin, John 24, 26, 66 n. 9, 69, 76 n., 84, 86
 Franks Davis, Caroline 50 n. 1, 184 n. 2, 192
 Fremantle, Anne 40 n., 104 n.

- Freud, Sigmund 6, 15, 127
 infantile ideation 10, 188, 220, 222, 223, 272
 oceanic feeling 16, 30, 206, 211, 218–24, 270
 origin of religion 218, 219, 220–1
 reductionism 180
see also psychoanalysis; psychoanalytic explanation; regression
- Fries, Jakob 142–3
- functional explanation 5, 12–13, 225, 228–9, 237, 238, 273
- functional reduction 13
- Furse, Margaret Lewis 130 n. 13
- fusion of characteristics 27, 79–80; *see also* synaesthesia
- F.W. 62, 69, 93
- Gall, Edward 32
- Garside, Bruce 9, 181, 183–90, 200; *see also* radical contextualism
- generation problem 266
- genetic explanation 12, 222, 225
- genetic reduction 13, 205
- Geoghegan, Vincent 120, 127
- Geraci, Joe 95
- Gershenowitz, Harry 126 n. 9
- Gibson, Derek 71, 78, 190
- Gibson, Vivien 66 n. 8, 76 n.
- Gimello, Robert M. 185, 204
- Glasier, Katharine Bruce 118 n.
- God:
 all things in 41, 44, 45, 46, 56, 138, 246
 body of 76–7
 cautiousness over ‘God’ terminology 76
 in definitions of mysticism 32, 84, 133
 divine experience of the world 42, 73, 266, 274
 fearful or limited 81
 grace of 31, 91
 immanence–transcendence 7, 28, 111, 113, 130, 134, 137, 209
 as an interpretative imposition 148, 151, 209–10
 known through the senses 198–9
 mentioned in accounts 25, 74–6, 77, 88, 89, 96
 as mind–data cell 157
 mind of 7, 44, 63, 132, 136, 144, 150, 248, 258, 261–2, 265, 274
 presence of God 32, 40, 62, 72, 74–6, 133, 135–6, 144, 210
 transcendent 2, 139
 union with 29, 32, 56, 59, 73, 89, 98, 151, 221, 253
see also omniscience; pantheism
- God consciousness 171, 173
- Godhead 41, 45, 54, 56, 135, 141, 162
- Golden Age 120, 217
- Gombrich, E. H. 184 n. 3
- Goodman, Lenn Evan 133 n.
- Greeley, Andrew 35–6, 37, 83 n. 1, 85 n., 97
- Greenberg, David 205
- Greene, Dana 130 n. 13, 137, 139
- Gregory I, Pope 42, 45
- Greyson, Bruce 80
- Griffin, David Ray 242 n., 245
- Griffiths, Paul J. 45, 199, 201
- Grof, Christina 94 n., 103 n., 206
- Grof, Stanislav 12, 94 n., 103 n., 206
- Ground, metaphysical 38, 63, 141, 169, 172, 175, 265; *see also* One, the; source unity
- Gurdjieff, G. I. 200
- Gurney, Edmund 235, 241
- Hadot, Pierre 43
- Haeckel, Ernst 83
- Hall, W. Winslow 32, 83–4, 85 n., 90 n., 92, 93 n. 7, 97, 104 n., 126 n. 10
- hallucination 70, 71, 194, 211, 231, 235, 263, 270
- Hannaford, Colin 94
- Hansen, Chad 43
- Hanson, N. R. 184, 187, 188–9, 271
- Happold, F. C. 17, 32, 94
- Hardy, Alister 1, 36, 80, 84 n.
- Hardy, Jean 236 n. 2
- Hardy, Thomas 126
- ‘Harold’ 61 n.
- Harrison, Jonathan 263, 264
- Hart, Julius 7
- Harvey, Peter 77 n., 170, 191
- Hay, David 36, 83, 84 n., 194
- Hayes, Charles 99 n. 14
- H.B. 79
- Heald, Gordon 36, 194
- Hearn, Lafcadio 126
- Hegel, G. W. F. 246; *see also* Stace, W. T.
- ‘Helga’ 80
- Helm, Robert M. 131 n.
- hen kai pan* 38
- Henderson, Linda Dalrymple 117 n., 118
- Hermetica 43, 44
- Heywood, Rosalind 68
- Hick, John 179–80
- Hildegard of Bingen 41, 191

- Hinduism 46, 48, 130; *see also* Advaita Vedānta; *ātman*; Aurobindo Ghose; *Bhagavad Gītā*; *brahman*; Carpenter, Edward; Rāmakrishna; Śaivism; Transcendental Meditation; *Upaniṣads*; Yogananda, Paramahansa
- Hocking, W. E. 247
- Hodgson, Shadworth 241
- Hölderlin, Friedrich 38, 121
- Hollenback, Jess Byron 50 n. 1, 78
- Holmes, Edmond 93 n. 8
- Hood, Ralph W. 55, 84 n.
- Hooker, C. A. 187
- Horgan, John 81, 101
- Horne, James R. 114 n., 139, 160 n.
- Houston, Jean 63, 99, 195
- Hruby, Paula Jo 98 n.
- Hsüeh-yen Tsu-ch'in 47
- Hua-yen Buddhism 46, 200, 245
- Hughes, Robert D. 208 n.
- Hume, David 161, 235 n., 256
- humour 27, 91
- Huxley, Aldous 11, 17, 131, 178, 181
 filtration theory 84–5, 211, 228, 234–5, 238–9, 276
 on language 238
 and mescaline 192, 206–7, 208–9, 210–11, 238–9
 Mind at Large 11, 234, 238–9, 240, 275
- Huxley, T. H. 241
- hypnagogic transition 96
- hypnopompic transition 96
- hypnosis 114, 235
- Ibn Tufayl 133
- idealism 7, 156, 178, 234, 242, 244–5, 269
 and extrovertive characteristics 251, 257–60, 273–4
 form of monism 244, 245–51, 256–7, 277, 278
 panpsychic 11, 16, 235, 244, 250–1, 261–7, 278
 realist 16, 246, 247–9, 254, 256, 261, 278
 and Romanticism 37, 38, 162, 197, 235, 246
 and science 256–7, 260, 261, 266
see also Berkeley, George; Carpenter, Edward
- identificatory unity 57, 61–2, 68, 80, 81, 149, 171, 214
- identity idealism 247
- identity of indiscernibles, *see* Carpenter, Edward; Stace, W. T.
- Iglulik shamanism 191
- Ignatius Loyola 41
- Ikin, Graham 90
- immanence, divine 13, 32, 54, 111, 130, 133, 137
 unbalanced notion of 131, 139
- immanent way 7, 113, 129–31, 137, 209
- immanentism 130–1, 140, 269
- immersive unity 58, 61, 64, 65, 81, 149, 202, 211 n., 212, 214
- incorporative unity 28, 58, 61–2, 64, 76, 81, 98, 149, 171, 211 n., 214, 221, 272
- ineffability 50 n. 1, 51, 55, 106, 134, 151, 193
- inflation, *see* self
- informal meditations
 (circumstance) 89–90
- Inge, W. R. 6, 7, 17, 30, 111, 209, 273
 Anglican Modernism 133
 Christian Platonism 112, 133–7
 definition of mysticism 133
 objective mysticism 30, 134–6
 on pantheism 130 n. 11
 and Plotinus 48, 133, 135, 136, 140
- integral unity 60–1, 64, 149, 164, 202, 214
- intellectual illumination, *see* Bucke, R. M.
- interconnective unity 62–3, 64, 149, 203, 214, 259
- intrapersonal explanation 5, 10, 204–32, 272–3, 275–9
- intrapersonal factors, definition of 5
- intrinsic values 250
- introvertive–extrovertive distinction, *see* twofold typology
- introvertive mystical experience 26, 54, 55, 199, 230
- introvertive path to extrovertive experience 30, 44, 95, 225
- Islamic mysticism 45, 133
- Israel, Martin 66, 89, 92
- I.W. 93 n. 8
- Jackson, Frank 264
- Jacyna, L. S. 130 n. 11
- Jaini, Padmanabh S. 45
- Jainism 45–6
- Jakobsen, Merete 80
- James–Lange theory of emotion 124
- James, William 6, 14, 15, 17, 21, 23, 37, 124, 131, 242
 emphasis on experience 3–4, 39

- James, William (*cont.*)
 filtration theory 228, 234, 237, 274, 275
 on mind-stuff theory 245
 mystical marks 50 n. 1
 neutral monism 235, 249, 252, 254, 256
 noetic quality 31, 50 n. 1
 panpsychism 247
 pathological mysticism 205
 psychical research 236 n. 3
 pure experience 158, 236, 256
 transmarginal consciousness 235, 236
- Janet, Pierre 235
- Jantzen, Grace M. 3 n.
- Jaspers, Karl 199, 204 n.
- Jay, Mike 99 n. 14
- Jefferies, Richard 210, 212, 213, 215
- Jephcott, E. F. N. 37
- Jevning, Ron 170 n. 6
- Jewish mysticism 32, 45, 133, 182, 189, 246 n. 9
- J.M.M. 93 n. 7
- Joël, Karl 6, 142, 212
- Johnson, Raynor 35, 99, 210
- Johnson, Todd E. 140 n.
- Jones, Richard H. 12 n., 198, 202, 267
- Jones, Rufus 17, 32, 179, 180
- Joseph, Hermann 42
- joy:
 experience of 1, 24, 25, 34, 61, 69, 78, 80, 89, 90, 192
 and non-dual awareness 202, 267
- J.P.W. 87
- 'Judith' 69–70
- Julian of Norwich 41, 67
- Jung, C. G. 10, 103 n., 196, 223, 240
 collective unconscious 113, 118, 126–7, 188, 213, 214–15
 mystical participation 214 n.
 and Romanticism 121 n., 236
see also Carpenter, Edward;
 Neumann, Erich; Zaehner, R. C.
- Kant, Immanuel 127
 epistemological 'revolution' 178–9
 idealism 245
 transcendental self 160–1, 253
see also Otto, Rudolf; radical contextualism; Stace, W. T.
- Katz, Steven 9, 167 n., 180, 181–90, 200;
see also radical contextualism
- Kellehear, Allan 106 n.
- Kelly, Emily Williams 241 n.
- kensho* 229, 231
- kevalajñāna* 45
- Kidner, David W. 30 n.
- King, Richard 31 n., 201 n. 8
- King, Sallie B. 201–2, 267
- Kirschner, Suzanne R. 121 n.
- Knight, David 130 n. 11
- knowledge, mystical 27, 65–7
 assessment of claims 276–7
 comprehensive 45, 65
 sense of meaning 28, 35, 56, 65–6, 69, 71, 79, 95, 107, 205, 210–11, 229, 267
 specific 24, 45, 66–7
 understanding 25, 36, 51, 56, 65–6, 68, 81, 104
see also omniscience
- Knysh, Alexander 45
- Koestler, Arthur 89, 93–4
- Kohut, Heinz 217
- Kourie, Celia 8 n.
- Kräupl Taylor, F. 204 n.
- Kripal, Jeffrey 17, 208 n.
- Krishna, Gopi 64, 65, 70–1, 81, 91
- Krishnamurti, Jiddu 90, 225 n.
- Kṛṣṇa 45, 76, 77 n., 94, 177
- Kuhn, Thomas 184, 187
- kundalīnī* 46, 77–8, 79, 81, 91, 94, 98, 169–70
- Lamarckianism 125–6
- Lancaster, Brian L. 216
- Lane, N. R. 187
- Lane, S. A. 187
- Lao-tzu 163
- Lash, Nicholas 3 n.
- Laski, Marghanita 69, 84 n., 85 n., 89, 94 n., 97, 179 n.
- Laubscher, B. J. F. 101–2
- Law, William 134
- Lawrence, D. H. 117
- Leary, Timothy 195
- Leibniz, G. W. 242, 247
 monadology 128–9, 152, 243, 245, 246, 253, 258, 259, 260, 265–6, 267
 and mysticism 246, 259
- Lévy-Bruhl, Lucien 214
- Lewis, Edward 118 n., 127
- Lewis, I. M. 12
- liberal Christian theorists 129–44, 247–8
 contribution to typology 7, 113
- life (characteristic) 27, 73–4, 79, 83, 90, 94, 259
- life-reviews 79, 237
- light, *see* luminosity, cause of mystical; visual phenomena

- limbic system 229
 Lindsay, T. M. 247 n. 11
 Linsky, Bernard 14 n.
 literature (circumstance) 37, 91–3, 190
 Lloyd, Peter B. 242 n.
 Lockwood, Michael 254
 logical positivism 14, 147
 loneliness 61, 68, 81, 105
 Lotze, R. H. 247
 love:
 characteristic 1, 2, 19, 24, 25, 27, 28,
 33, 40, 61, 67–8, 74, 75, 79, 93, 94,
 96, 104, 105, 106, 107, 111
 circumstance 87–8, 89–90, 197, 198
 contribution to self-transformation 65
 contribution to unity 60, 61, 94
 fusion with other characteristics 27,
 79, 87
 and God 25, 59, 74, 75, 89, 96, 253,
 265, 274
 insight into importance of 36, 51, 52,
 66, 106
 neglect of 49, 54, 56, 59, 68
 in object-relations theory 224–6
 as repressed hatred 217
 see also compassion
 Loy, David 199, 249–50
 Loyola, Ignatius, *see* Ignatius Loyola
 LSD 76, 97, 99–100, 239; *see also* drugs
 Lukoff, David 205–6
 luminosity, cause of mystical:
 contextual 193
 intrapersonal 204, 272
 transpersonal 132, 136, 267, 273, 274
Lux Mundi 130 n. 12

 McDermott, Robert A. 236 n. 3
 McGinn, Bernard 8 n., 32, 42 n. 10, 134
 Mach, Ernst 242, 252–3, 256, 259
 Macnaghten, Phil 30 n.
 McTaggart, J. M. E. 246
 Maharishi Mahesh Yogi 170, 171,
 227 n.
 Main, Roderick 223 n.
 mania, *see* Zaehner, R. C.
 Mansfield, Katherine 74, 93
 Marcus Aurelius 44
 Marshall, Paul 257, 260 n., 261
 Masefield, John 97 n.
 Masters, Robert 63, 99, 195
 Matchett, Freda 77 n.
 ‘materialism’, old usage of 241
 materialist monism 243, 244, 256, 261,
 277–8
 Maudsley, Henry 205
 Maurice, F. D. 117
 Mavromatis, Andreas 96
 Maxwell, Meg 106 n. 18
 May, Robert 17, 52 n., 88, 106 n. 17,
 124
 mechanical philosophers 246, 278
 medical materialism 6, 205, 206
 meditation:
 and enlightenment 174–5
 and extrovertive experience 16–17,
 42–4, 46, 87, 90–1, 227
 and non-dual awareness 200, 202, 271
 and pure consciousness 146, 167–75
 scientific study of 227–8, 230
 see also Transcendental Meditation;
 Zen Buddhism
 Melechi, Antonio 99 n. 13
 mentalistic realism 247
 Mercer, Calvin 83
 Mercer, John Edward:
 idealism 16, 234, 247–8, 256, 273–4
 liberal Christianity 131–2, 247
 monadology 248
 Merkur, Dan 99 n. 14, 224 n., 260
 Merlan, Philip 128, 133
 mescaline 68, 81, 100, 239; *see also*
 Huxley, Aldous
 metaphysical analysis 15–16, 146
 metaphysical enquiry 15
 metaphysical theorizing 15–16
 metaphysics:
 empirical input 147, 150–1, 261, 278
 relevance of 5–6, 14–16
 speculative 7, 14, 147, 261–6
 Meysenbug, Malwida von 6
 M.I.D. 80
 Miles, Sarah 77
 Mind at Large, *see* Huxley, Aldous
 mind–body metaphysics 11, 15, 231–2,
 234–5, 240–68; *see also*
 dual-aspect monism; dualism;
 idealism; materialist monism;
 mind-stuff theory; neutral
 monism; panpsychism
 mind–body problem 11, 241, 242, 244,
 274, 277–8
 mind of God, *see* Berkeley, George; God
 mind-stuff theory 241, 244–5, 247
 monadology:
 and modern physics 257, 261, 266,
 267, 278
 neo-Leibnizian 265–6
 theory of matter 261, 265
 see also evolution; Leibniz, G. W.;
 omniscience; Plotinus
 monism 243–4; *see also* mind–body
 metaphysics

- mononoism 128
 monopyschism 128
 Moore, F. C. T. 237
 Moore, G. E. 158
 Moore, J. M. 142 n.
 Moore, Peter 8 n., 60, 78, 210
 Montague, Margaret Prescott 35, 67, 93
 Morgan, Lewis 120
 Morisy, Ann 83
 Mortley, Alice 90 n.
 Mosse, George L. 127
 Mrs A. 64, 66
 Mrs L. 72, 104
 Muller-Ortega, Paul E. 46, 172
 Mumme, Patricia Y. 175
 Murphy, Michael 227 n.
 Murray, Muz 77, 87, 106, 191
 Murry, John Middleton 74, 93, 100–1
 music:
 characteristic 72, 88, 89
 circumstance 85 n., 89, 92, 95
 Myers, Frederic 118, 235–6, 237, 241, 275
 mystical deconstructivism 9, 176–7, 189
 agnostic 202
 background 197–200
 explanation of circumstances 197, 198, 203, 271
 limitations of simple theory 202–3, 204, 221, 270
 naturalistic 180, 202
 transpersonal 202
 mystical essentialism 8, 176, 181–2
 mystical experience:
 defining characteristics 2, 31–2
 metaphysical character of 15, 31
 as unitive experience 31, 57
 mystical participation 214
 mysticism:
 as mystical tradition 182–3
 scholarly study of 6–11, 14–15, 60, 130–1, 146, 246
 Mysticism Scale 55

 Nash, Carroll B. 242 n.
 natural mystical experience, *see* Zaehner, R. C.
 natural selection 12, 124
 ‘natural world’, problem of defining 3, 23, 28
 naturalism 130, 152; *see also* naturalistic explanation; Stace, W. T.
 naturalistic explanation 5, 10, 111, 178, 180, 202, 204–5, 231, 272–3, 279
 nature as circumstance 85–6
 nature ecstasy 30

 nature mystical experience 1, 30, 54
 nature-mystical experience, *see* Jones, Richard H.
 nature mysticism 168, 194, 225, 250
 definitions 32
 and liberal Christians 7, 130–1, 137, 209, 247–8
 restricted meaning 30, 41, 86, 136
 and Romanticism 37–8, 52, 129
Naturphilosophie 38
 Naughton, Alex 45, 175
 NDE, *see* near-death experience
 near-death experience (NDE) 66 n. 9, 80, 106 n. 18, 276
 as circumstance 42 n. 9, 60, 81, 94–6
 contextual contents 196, 272
 and dying brain 96
 non-sensory input 19, 29, 70
 see also life-reviews
 negative theology 134–5, 147
 Nelson, John E. 206
 Neoaristotelian philosophy 128, 133
 neo-Lamarckianism 125–6, 217
 Neo-Orthodox theology 130, 139
 Neoplatonism 67, 128, 131–3, 142, 162; *see also* beauty; Plotinus
 neo-Thomism 139
 Neumann, Erich 6, 10, 121, 212, 214 n., 217, 223
 stages of mystical experience 217
 neuropsychological explanation 2, 10, 206, 226–32, 238–9, 273
 neutral monism 235, 242, 244, 249, 250, 252–4, 255–6, 257, 258–9, 278
 ‘New Look’ psychology 184
 New Testament 38
 Newberg, Andrew 10, 228, 230, 231–2
 Newell, W. L. 57 n. 5
 Nield, Keith 117 n., 126, 127
 nirvana 25, 148, 189
nirvikalpa jñāna 201
 N.M. 56, 165, 166
 no-self 173
noesis 135, 142
 noetic quality 50 n. 1, 55, 229; *see also* knowledge, mystical; omniscience
 Noll, Richard 127
 non-differentiation, *see* Carpenter, Edward; nondual awareness; subject–object unity
 nondual awareness 98, 174, 175, 197–8, 249–50, 267
 in Asian philosophies 42–3, 199–200, 201
 nondual Kashmir Śaivism, *see* Śaivism

- 'nonduality', different meanings
of 199–200
- noumenal experience 264–7, 268
- Novalis 121
- novelty 191–3, 196–7, 271, 272, 274
- numinous experience, *see* Otto, Rudolf
- object-relations theory 10, 217, 224–6, 273
- objective mysticism, *see* Inge, W. R.
- oceanic feeling, *see* Freud, Sigmund
- ocean-seal concentration 46, 260
- Odin, Steve 245
- omniscience 65
through assimilation to higher
intellect 44, 133
of the Buddha 45, 175
of God 45, 67, 157–8, 166, 253, 274
of monads 266
of the soul in Jainism 45
see also knowledge, mystical
- One, the 32, 138; *see also* Otto, Rudolf; Plotinus; Stace, W. T.
- ontological explanation 12, 222, 225
- ontological reductionism 12–13, 211
- Oppenheim, Janet 115 n.
- organic disorders (circumstance) 101–2, 226–7
- Ornstein, Robert E. 9, 200, 271
- Orofino, Giacomella 47
- Otis, Laura 127
- Otto, Rudolf 6, 7, 39, 111, 139
convergence of inward and outward
ways 142, 143
on Eckhart 53, 54, 56, 141, 142, 143, 145, 150
and Kant 112, 140–1, 142–3
numinous experience 141
the One 7, 53–4, 63, 143, 148, 162
on Plotinus 53, 56, 141–2, 143, 165
on Śāṅkara 54, 141, 142, 145, 150
typology 52–4, 141, 142, 182
unifying vision 30
a priori intuition of unity 53, 142–3
characterization of 49, 52–4
as inspiration of science 142
paradoxical identity 53, 56, 62–3, 148
and the senses 70 n.
stages of 53–4, 144
see also Stace, W. T.
- Ouspensky, P. D. 17, 118, 126 n. 10
- out-of-the-body experience 34 n., 78, 79, 97, 276, 277
- Overall, Christine 155, 158, 160 n.
- Overzee, Anne Hunt 77 n.
- Owens, Claire Myers 52 n., 68 n.
- Paffard, Michael 37 n., 92 n.
- Pahnke, Walter 55
- pamphysistic mystical experience 30
- Pan 74
- Pandey, K. C. 246 n. 8
- panenhenic mystical experience 30, 70 n.
- panpsychic idealism, *see* idealism
- panpsychism 244–5, 247
- pantheism 7, 115, 129–30, 144, 195, 269
- pantheistic error, *see* Zaehner, R. C.
- pantheistic paradox, *see* Stace, W. T.
- paradoxical identity, *see* Otto, Rudolf; Stace, W. T.
- paranormal phenomena 11, 26, 27, 78–9, 138, 234, 239–40, 241, 242, 243, 253, 254, 275, 276, 277
- parapsychology 241; *see also* psychical research
- parietal lobes 229, 230
- Parmenides 43
- Parnia, Sam 276
- Parrinder, Geoffrey 208 n.
- Parsons, William B. 131, 212, 216–17, 218 n.
- participation mystique* 214
- pathology, *see* organic disorders; psychopathology
- Pauli, Michelle 99 n. 13
- Pauli, Wolfgang 223
- Paulsen, Friedrich 247
- PCE (pure consciousness event), *see* Forman, Robert
- peace:
characteristic 1, 24, 25, 27, 34, 36, 41, 67, 78, 87, 89, 94, 95, 192, 211
circumstance 86–7
consequence 102, 105
and reduction of egocentricity 1, 202, 251, 267
- Peacocke, Arthur 12 n.
- Pearson, Jo 91
- Peirce, C. S. 14
- perennial philosophy 169, 181, 208
- perennial psychology 170
- Perovich, Anthony N. 184 n. 2, 186 n.
- Perry, John Weir 103 n.
- Persinger, Michael 10, 228, 231
- peyote 260
- phenomenal experience 264–7, 268
- phenomenalism 152, 231, 244; *see also* Stace, W. T.

- Plato 104, 127, 132
 cosmic sentiment 43–4
- Platonic dualism 44, 135
- Platonic Forms 44, 63, 125, 132, 156
- Plotinus 44, 169
 compenetration 63, 135, 165, 259, 260
 cosmic vision 44–5, 141, 169, 172–3, 175, 258, 259
 and monadology 259, 260
 the One 134, 135, 172, 175
 subject–object unity 44, 136
see also Inge, W. R.; Otto, Rudolf
- pluralistic thesis, *see* radical contextualism
- possession 12, 97, 194
- prabhāsvara citta* 170, 191
- pramāṭrs* 46
- prāna* 213
- prayer (circumstance) 69, 85 n., 90, 93
- predisposing circumstances 18, 52, 82–4, 118n.
- presence(s), experience of 24, 27, 54, 74–6, 93, 94
- presence of God, *see* God
- presence theorists 129–44
- Presocratics 43
- Price, C. G. 65
- Price, H. H. 237, 239–40
- Priest, Stephen 257
- Prince, Raymond 218
- process philosophy 242 n., 244, 245, 278; *see also* Whitehead, A. N.
- Proudfoot, Wayne 3 n., 180
- Proust, Marcel 210
- psychedelics, *see* drugs; LSD; mescaline
- psychical research 114, 115 n., 236 n. 3, 237, 241
- psychoanalysis 7, 121 n., 126 n., 269
- psychoanalytic explanation 6, 198, 206, 212, 216–26, 272
- psychokinesis 241
- psychological constructivism 184–5, 200, 269, 271
- psychopathology:
 experiences 81, 103–4, 205, 211
 explanations 194, 204–6, 209, 210–11, 217, 218, 222, 224–6
- psychophysical explanation 10–11, 234–5, 240–68, 274
- psychophysical problem 234; *see also* mind–body problem
- pure consciousness 145–6, 201
 experimental study of 170
see also Forman, Robert; Stace, W. T.
- pure consciousness event (PCE), *see* Forman, Robert
- purposive explanation 12
- quiet state of mind (circumstance) 86–7, 92, 98, 198, 226
- radical contextualism 2, 9, 177, 180
 background 176, 181
 contextual thesis 183–6
 criticisms of 187–90, 270–2
 difficulties with 190–4
 and Kantianism 183–4, 185–6, 188
 pluralistic thesis 181–3
 reductionism 180
 and Wittgenstein 184
see also psychological constructivism
- Rahman, Tariq 118 n.
- Ramachandran, V. S. 10, 226–7, 228–9, 231
- Rāmakrishna 165
- Rāmānuja 77 n.
- Ramaswamy, Gnani 119–20
- Randrup, Axel 235 n.
- Rappe, Sara 44
- reality, sense of contact with 24, 27, 31, 74–6
- realness 27, 58, 99, 202, 231
- rebirth 45, 46, 66, 126 n., 153
- reducing valve 11, 85, 237–40
- reductionism 6, 10, 12–13, 97, 180, 228
- Reed, Graham 205 n.
- regression 221, 270
 Freudian 198, 211–12, 217, 218–24
 Jungian 211–12, 217–18
see also Zaeher, R. C.
- Reid, Forrest 225 n.
- reincarnation, *see* rebirth
- Religious Experience Research Centre/Unit (RERC/RERU) viii, 85 n.
- representative realism, *see* representative theory of perception
- representative theory of perception 70, 261, 262–4, 278
- RERC, *see* Religious Experience Research Centre
- Richards, Robert J. 115 n.
- ‘right brain’ 228
- Rimbaud, Arthur 92, 211
- Ring, Kenneth 94 n.
- Roberts, Bernadette 169–70, 173
- Roberts, Jane 96–7
- Roberts, Thomas B. 98 n.
- Robinson, Edward 192

- Rolland, Romain 6, 16, 30, 131, 218–19, 220, 222
 Romanes, G. J. 115, 116, 124, 251, 258
 ‘Romantic spiral’ 117, 121, 223
 Romanticism 37–9, 52, 129, 162, 190, 194, 197, 235, 246, 269; *see also* Carpenter, Edward
 Rose-Neill, Wendy 73
 Roseman, Bernard 260
 Rothberg, Donald 201 n. 7
 Rousseau, Jean-Jacques 39
 Rowbotham, Sheila 117 n.
 Royce, Josiah 246, 247
 Russell, Bertrand 14, 252, 254, 256
 Rutherford, Donald 246 n. 9

śāgaramudrā samādhi 46
 Saivism:
 nondual Kashmir Śaivism 46, 172, 200, 246, 258
 Śaiva Siddhānta 80, 119
 Śāṃkhya 200, 246
 Śāṅkara, *see* Advaita Vedānta; Otto, Rudolf
sarvajña 45
 Saunders, Anja 99 n. 13
 Saunders, Nicholas 99 n. 13
 Savage, Charles 218
 Schelling, F. W. J. 162, 246
 schemata 215–16
 Schiller, F. C. S. 237
 Schiller, Friedrich 121
 Schlamm, Leon 141 n. 18, 210 n.
 Schleiermacher, Friedrich 4, 38–9, 143
 Schmidt, Leigh Eric 31 n.
 Scholem, Gershom 32
 amorphous mystical experience 183
 stage theory of religion 121, 182–3
 Schopenhauer, Arthur 127, 246
 Schuon, Frithjof 181
 Schürmann, Reiner 132–3
 Seager, William 245, 266
 second-order writings 60, 189
 Second World War, impact of 7–8, 159
 secondary selves 235
 ‘seeing as’ 179, 184, 188
 Segal, Robert 13
 Segal, Suzanne 72, 101, 173, 174
 self:
 alienated 38, 118, 121–2, 183, 217
 cosmic solipsism 62, 68, 81
 diminution 1, 19, 64–5, 88, 93, 94, 213, 216
 empirical 259
 expansion 28, 44, 58, 64–5, 193, 216; *see also* incorporative unity
 inflation 65, 81, 205, 210
 negative experiences 65, 68, 81, 205
 neurophysiological substrates of 10, 229
 relaxation of self as trigger 64, 98
 transformations 27, 66, 78, 91, 100, 191
 Self Consciousness, stage of, *see* Bucke, R. M.; Carpenter, Edward
 self–other distinction 197, 203, 219–20, 223, 229–30, 267, 271
 self–other unity 24, 38, 55, 60, 62, 169; *see also* nondual awareness
 Self, deeper:
 experience of 64, 66
 see also Carpenter, Edward; Forman, Robert; Stace, W. T.; Transcendental Meditation
 Seneca 43
 Seth communications 96–7
 sex:
 circumstance 85 n., 97–8, 197
 degradation of 120, 123
 gender differences 83–4
 homosexuality 118 n.
 reduction of mysticism to 97, 205, 221
 Shamdasani, Sonu 127, 236 n. 2
 Sharf, Robert H. 3 n.
 Shear, Jonathan 169, 170 n. 6
 Sherwood Taylor, Frank 32, 62
 Shortt, S. E. D. 67, 83, 114, 124
 Sidgwick, Henry 241
 Silburn, Lilian 46
 Simple Consciousness, stage of, *see* Bucke, R. M.; Carpenter, Edward
 Sims, Andrew 204 n.
 sin:
 world empty of 51, 67
 as separation 120
 necessity of 67
 Singh, Jaideva 46, 246 n. 8
 Śiva 46, 246
 Sjørup, Lene 83
 sleep (circumstance) 96–7
 Smart, Ninian 70 n., 141 n. 18, 149 n.
 Smith, Allan L. 68 n., 77, 99–101, 106 n. 17
 Smythies, John R. 264
 Snow, C. P. 89
 Society for Psychical Research 237
 Sogyal Rinpoche 47
 solipsism, *see* self
 somatic phenomena 26, 27, 76–8, 91, 168; *see also* *kuṇḍalīnī*

- sound, *see* auditory phenomena
 source unity 63, 64, 149, 171, 174, 203, 214
 Southey, Robert 73
 Spalding, Douglas 241
 Spangler, David 34 n., 66 n. 8
 Spencer, Herbert 126 n. 9, 241
 Spinney, Dorothea 68 n., 86, 191–2
 Spinoza, Baruch 242, 251
 spirit–nature integrationism 111–12, 234
 spirit–nature separationism 8, 111–12, 145, 146, 207, 234, 269
 spiritual emergence/emergency 103
 spiritual practices (circumstance) 90–1; *see also* meditation
 Sprigge, T. L. S. 234, 237, 250–1, 256, 257
 S.T. 68
 Staal, Frits 16–17
 Stace, W. T. 1, 6, 29
 and apophatic mysticism 150, 151, 154
 background 153
 and Buddhism 153, 154
 compared with Wieman 198
 concept–datum distinction 155–60
 on Eckhart 56, 163, 164–5
 emphasis on unity 31
 empirico-phenomenalism 150–1, 152, 155–7, 161
 explanations of extrovertive
 unity 55–6, 147–8, 270
 Explanation-A 147–63, 164, 165, 166, 168, 274
 Explanation-B 148, 155, 164–7
 extrovertive mystical experience:
 characterization of 54–6
 mixed state 150–1, 160
 neglect of characteristics 54, 56, 149, 166
 seen ‘through the eyes’ 29, 53, 55, 70 n.
 former Christian beliefs 153, 157
 God-cell explanation 157–8, 166–7, 244
 and Hegel 147, 152, 155, 164
 identity of indiscernibles 128, 149, 151
 ineffability 55, 151, 154
 interpretation and the mystical
 core 158–9, 185
 and Kant 147, 152, 155, 160–3
 metaphysics 15–16, 146–7, 152–64
 mind–data monads 156–8
 naturalism 8, 151, 152, 154–5, 160
 the One:
 nature of 150–2
 paradox and logic 55, 161–2, 165–6
 role as source de-emphasized 63, 162–3
 and Otto 53, 56, 148, 149, 154, 163, 164, 165
 pantheistic paradox 155, 162
 paradoxical identity 8, 55, 56, 62–3, 148, 152, 155, 162, 164–6
 permanent introvertive
 experience 150, 169
 pure consciousness 8, 145–63
 as self 161, 163, 170
 spirit–nature separationism 111–12, 145, 154, 160, 168
 transsubjectivity 152
 turn to atheism 113, 151, 153, 154
 vacuum–plenum paradox 162
 stage theories of religion, *see* Carpenter, Edward; Scholem, Gershom
 stages of extrovertive experience, *see* extrovertive mystical experience; Otto, Rudolf
 stages of mystical development, *see* Neumann, Erich; Transcendental Meditation; Underhill, Evelyn; Zaehner, R. C.
 Stapledon, Olaf 76 n.
 Starr, Irina 71, 72, 74, 79, 96 n., 104
 Staveley, Lilian 104 n.
 Stephen, Leslie 117
 Stoeber, Michael 17
 Stoicism 43–4
 sub specie aeternitatis 73
 subconscious, the 11, 112, 114, 124–5, 233–4, 235–7, 240, 275
 subject–object unity 38, 44, 53, 58, 136, 142, 169–70, 202; *see also* nondual awareness
 subliminal consciousness 10, 118, 123, 235–7
 Sufism 45, 48, 200
 Superconscious (Assagioli) 126 n. 10
 Superconscious (Romanes) 115, 116, 258
 super-consciousness (Sprigge) 251, 256
 survival of the soul 51, 52, 241
 Sutton, Florin Giripescu 246 n. 8
 Suzuki, D. T. 163, 182, 199
 synaesthesia 26, 27, 79–80, 88, 259, 260

 taboo 106–7
 Taliaferro, Charles 247
 tantric religion 48, 97, 199, 254
 Taoism 43 n., 195; *see also* Chuang-tzu
 Tart, Charles T. 99–100, 200

- tattvas* 46
 Taylor, Eugene 227 n., 236 n. 2, 237
 teleological explanation 12
 telepathy 78, 79, 236, 237, 239–40, 241, 276, 277
 temporal lobes 10, 227, 228–9, 231
 Tennyson, Alfred 210
 Teresa of Avila 41, 81, 165, 225 n.
 third-order writings 60, 189
 Thomas, L. E. 195
 thought inhibition 46, 87, 119, 197, 202;
see also nondual awareness; quiet state of mind
 Thouless, R. H. 243
 Tibetan Buddhism 46–7
 ‘Tilleināthan Swāmy’ 119
 time 27
 cessation 56, 72, 85, 91, 95, 193, 242
 harmonious flow 72, 73
 and music 72, 88
 phenomenal and noumenal 267
 temporal inclusivity 25, 28, 43, 63, 65, 72–3, 122
 transcendence of 58, 142
 TM, *see* Transcendental Meditation
 Traherne, Thomas:
 communal unity 62, 260
 cosmic body 77
 eternal Now 73
 expansive vision 41, 260, 266
 as ‘nature mystic’ 40–1
 object relations 206, 225–6
 sole heirloom 265
 transcendent sexual experience 97–8
 transcendental consciousness 170
 Transcendental Meditation (TM) 101, 170–3, 174, 227
 cosmic consciousness 171, 173
 mystical stages 170–2
 transpersonal explanation 5, 111–44, 145–67, 233–68, 273–9
 transpersonal factors, definition of 5
 trans-sensory contact 70–1, 259, 260, 270
 Traubel, Horace 50 n.
 triggers 84
 Trott, Elizabeth 114 n., 124
 Tschudin, Verena 106 n. 18
 Tsuzuki, Chushichi 117 n.
 tunnel, *see* visual phenomena
turiya 171
turiyātīta 171
 Turner, Denys 3 n.
 Turner, Frank Miller 115 n., 241 n.
 twofold typology:
 liberal Christian 52, 54–5, 133–4, 137
 Otto’s methodological take on 113, 141
 Stace’s atheistic transformation of 113, 145
 theological basis 7, 113, 130–1, 136, 140
 typology:
 cross-tradition 9, 182, 207
 tradition-specific 167, 182
 see also twofold typology
 UMS (unitive mystical state), *see* Forman, Robert
 unconscious, the 7
 cognitive 216, 236
 Freudian 219, 236
 Jungian 10, 211–12, 217–18
 physiological 235
 in Romantic thought 38, 236
 see also Jung, C. G.; subconscious, the; subliminal consciousness
 Underhill, Evelyn 6, 7, 17, 111, 209
 and Bergson 112, 131, 138–9, 140, 144, 234, 237, 253
 Catholic Modernism 137, 139
 filtration theory 138–9
 on love 138, 140
 mystical stages 137–8
 retreat from vitalism 139, 140
 typology 137–8, 182
 and von Hügel 139–40
 unifying vision, *see* Otto, Rudolf
 unitive mystical state (UMS), *see* Forman, Robert
 unity:
 as criterion for mysticism 2–3, 31–2
 not distinct from other characteristics 60
 types of 27, 60–4, 214; *see also under individual types*
 unity consciousness 171, 173
 unity-in-difference:
 unity-in-duality 64, 135
 unity-in-multiplicity 64
 unity in separateness 138
 see also paradoxical identity under Otto, Rudolf and Stace, W. T.
 universal Self, *see* Carpenter, Edward
 Universalism 67, 114
Upanisads 39, 45, 117, 129, 150, 153, 170, 192
 Urry, John 30 n.
 Utpaladeva 77
 vacuum–plenum paradox, *see* Stace, W. T.
 van Lommel, Pim 276

- veil 25, 35, 42 n. 9, 54, 259
 understood as karma 45
- vikalpa* 199
- visio mundi* 132, 137
- visio mundi archetypī* 132, 137, 215 n.
- vision of Dame Kind 30
- visual phenomena 27
 colours 69
 cosmic vision 34, 44–7, 70
 intense awareness 69–70
 interior/exterior light 24, 69
 luminous suffusion 26, 33, 69
 obliterating light 33, 68–9, 97, 100
 panoramic vision 70, 78
 penetrative ('X-ray') vision 70, 78–9, 190
 tunnel phenomenon 95–6
 two modes of visual perception 70–1
see also luminosity, cause of mystical
- vitalism 7, 112, 138–9, 140, 234
- Vivekānanda 211
- von Baader, Franz 246
- von Hügel, Friedrich 139–40
- Wach, Joachim 39
- Wade, Jenny 61 n., 97–8, 217
- Wainwright, William 33–4, 53, 56, 57 n.
 5, 70 n., 149 n., 276
- Wallis, Richard T. 44
- Ward, James 256
- Ward, R. H. 34 n., 65, 66 n. 8, 103
- Washburn, Michael 217, 224 n.
- Weber, Carl Maria von 92
- Weigel, Valentine 134
- Weir, Lorna 80, 123 n.
- Wenlock, monk of 42 n. 9
- Whitehead, A. N. 140 n., 235 n., 242, 245, 278
- Whitman, Walt 91–2, 104, 113, 114, 117, 128
- Whyte, L. L. 235
- Wiemann, H. N. 17, 198–9
- Wiesner, B. P. 243
- Wilber, Ken 260 n.
- Willis, Janice Dean 199
- Wilmshurst, W. H. 34 n., 78, 79
- Winnicott, D. W. 217
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig 14, 179, 184
- Witztum, Eliezer 205
- Wolf, Robert 193
- Wordsworth, William 37–8, 92, 121, 134, 225 n.
- Wozniak, Robert H. 242
- Wren-Lewis, John 63, 72, 101, 106 n. 17, 173, 174
- Wulff, David M. 3 n., 63, 83 n. 1, 198, 224 n., 226 n., 228
- 'X-ray' vision, *see* visual phenomena X.Y. 105–6
- yoga 39, 200, 211
- Yogācāra 48, 199, 200, 201, 246 n. 8
- Yogananda, Paramahansa 34 n., 70, 71, 91, 104, 191
- Younghusband, Francis 17, 104 n.
- Yuktēswar, Sri 91
- Zaehner, R. C. 1, 6
 and Aristotelian thought 210, 215, 216
 background 206–7
 criticism of Bucke 18, 115–16, 213, 215
 criticism of contextualism 191–2
 criticism of Huxley 84–5, 98, 192, 206–9, 211
 criticism of perennialism 181, 208
 defence of theistic mysticism 207, 209
 explanations:
 inner image 10, 213–16, 272
 mania 10, 85, 206, 210–11, 270
 mindless force 212–13, 214, 270
 regression 10, 211–12
 and Jungian thought 10, 57 n. 6, 113, 210, 211–12, 213, 214–15, 216
 misinterpretations by mystics 13, 209–10, 213, 215
 mystical stages 212
 natural mystical experience 30–1, 98
 characterization 56–9
 cultivation 31, 39, 211
 inferiority 207, 210
 higher form 57 n. 6
 historical instances 39
 lacks morality and love 49, 59, 209
 own mystical experience 17, 18, 92, 207, 208
 pantheistic error 209–10
 reductionism 10, 13, 180, 211
 spirit–nature separationism 7–8, 15, 207
- Zaleski, Carol 94 n.
- Zen Buddhism:
 enlightenment 39, 199
 meditation 17, 87, 91, 190, 195, 211, 229, 231
 nondualism 48, 199, 200