

Richard H. Jones. *Philosophy of Mysticism: Raids on the Ineffable*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016. 438 pp. \$31.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4384-6118-2.

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In this lengthy but well-organized text, Richard H. Jones discusses the basic philosophical issues facing mysticism and the claims of mystics. For each issue, Jones cites numerous mystics and philosophers to build his case, provides an argument, and attempts a resolution.

The first chapter is concerned with a basic typology of mystical experiences. Jones defines “mysticism,” explains what its experiences consist of, and describes the role it plays in religion. For Jones, “the traditional objective of a mystical way of life ... is *to correct the way we live* by overcoming our basic misconception of what is in fact real and thereby experiencing reality as it really is” (p. 7). He notes that there are two kinds of mystical experiences: the “extrovertive,” where the mind is highly attuned so that normal reality takes on a new hue (for example, nature mysticism or cosmic consciousness); and “introvertive,” where the deep unity of all being within is sensed. These could more basically be described as sensory and non-sensory.

Chapter 2 addresses the question of whether there are in fact mystical experiences. Jones deftly navigates different arguments, citing poststructuralist and constructivist thought as well as neurophysiological studies to build a rounded case. His conclusion is that there are *some* experiences that can be correctly labeled as mystical, and, con-

tra strong constructivism, these are always read in terms of the mystic’s native tradition at some point.

In chapter 3, Jones assesses whether mystical experiences/claims can be considered cognitive; in other words, are they veridical with meaningful content claims (claims that are information bearing) about reality? If so, what do they generally claim? Herein Jones addresses the question of whether non-mystics can meaningfully participate in the discussion, arguing that mystics themselves have to assess their experiences once outside of them in order to form conclusions about them, and to decide what they imply for cognitive claims about reality. He concludes that they are no better placed than non-mystics to judge.

Chapter 4 assesses the possibility of the scientific study of mysticism based on the axiom that there must be some neurological method or basis to experience (to mediate) the mystical. He concludes that neurological activity correlating to mystical states seems to be established now. Finally, he asks whether mystical experiences require a new theory of mind.

In chapter 5, “Mysticism and Metaphysics,” Jones takes on the content of mystical experience, namely, that there is “an overwhelming sense of direct awareness of fundamental reality—a reality that is one, powerful, immutable, permanent,

and ultimate” (p. 171). This “realism,” that there is something real grounding mystical experiences, is common across introvertive and extrovertive mysticisms. Whether seeing all phenomenality as illusion or not, there is some reality behind it.

Jones looks into many mystical ideas from different traditions (both religious and philosophical), demonstrating how each approaches particular notions, often coming to quite similar metaphysical conclusions. It becomes clear in this section that Jones’s own preference is for Eastern thought. Much space is given to Buddhist and Hindu ideas, a little for various articulations of Christianity, but otherwise only vague mentions of “theism” and “Abrahamic theisms.” This to my mind effaces some strong characteristic differences; especially the unique metaphysical systematizing of the kabbalists should have been mentioned here beyond a single quote from Gershom Scholem. The question, however, of the impersonal, non-dual “depth-mystical” vision of a divine ultimate ground to the universe, versus the active, personal, and loving God is of prime importance to the kabbalists as with other traditions (pp. 186-187)—and whether these experiences may be the same in essence, merely filtered through some kind of personal preference, is a cornerstone of Jewish mystical thought. This section, to my mind, is one of the most potent for investigation, and deserved a more thorough treatment.

This chapter also creates an impression of parallelomania; different authorities are cited (Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Upanishads in one instance) as holding identical views, but without a detailed investigation it is difficult to accept this. Are their words, similar in English translation, *really* conveying the same sense? They may well be, but without the hard textual-analytical work it is impossible to say, and Jones’s assurances seem shallow.

Turning to the well-worn issue of mysticism’s relationship with language, chapter 6 discusses the cliché that mystics use a lot of ink explaining

that the subject of their writings cannot be put into words. Again, the large majority of source material here is on Indian mysticism and Anglophone philosophy. The metaphysical and experiential difference of mystical experience to the everyday creates a gulf between how we normally use language and how we would try to communicate the mystical. Yet “an ‘ineffable insight’ is not possible” (p. 206); the labeling of mystical experiences as ineffable itself means there is something that can be experienced and so is not ineffable in the strict sense. Mystics seem to be saying simply that the object of mystical experience is other than the everyday, and other than the way we normally use words. The chapter’s argument is well made: words in general are not onomatopoeic, so why should the finite quality of language be seen as especially inapplicable for the transcendent? The mirror theory of language is not necessarily part of the usage of language (as we should now know from Wittgenstein’s later work), and learning to see the implication beyond the everyday sense of the words is part of coming to understand the content of mystical experiences. There is no logical problem here. This chapter would also have benefited from the inclusion of Jewish mystical thought, which has tended to emphasize the role of language; as language in Jewish religion generally is the means of revelation, and of communication between God and human, its importance and even its quasi-divine nature could not be overstated. This has been especially true in the mysticism, whether of the Merkavah mystics, the Kabbalah, or Hasidism, and offers a third path between concepts of language as simply descriptive or performative.

However, while the transcendent may go beyond language, mystics do not typically seek to disable rationality. Chapter 7 looks at mysticism and rationality, noting initially that the common use of paradox may appear to refute rationality. However, Jones counters that we are wise to consider that much of twentieth-century thought has demonstrated that rationality sometimes does not

quite fit reality, and simply trying to break traditional modes of thinking in some cases does not mean an end to all logic. Much of what in mysticism has been perceived as irrational is in fact intended to simply make us think in different ways about the particular case; and so, the claims are not illogical themselves but only transcendent of common logic, as they are of common language.

Chapter 8 asks whether mysticism and science are compatible, assessing their different approaches to knowledge. In a basic sense they are compatible (they talk of different aspects of reality so cannot contradict each other); however, the religious grounding of a mysticism may hold claims that contradict scientific findings. The final chapter analyzes the impact of mysticism on morality, probing questions about the roots of morality in mysticism, and the effects of rejecting the existence of any selves.

Overall, this book presents an interesting overview of the philosophical issues concerning mysticism, and is an important contribution to the philosophy of mysticism. However, it falls down in its lack of breadth, demonstrating only a cursory knowledge of Jewish mysticism and its unique character. A deeper understanding of Jewish mystical thought would have provided further grounding for Jones's discussion of metaphysics and would have added an important counterpoint to the old trope that mysticism goes beyond everyday language. Jewish mysticism demonstrates a way of performing mysticism that encompasses much that is not covered here, and goes beyond what is normally considered mystical. However, given that Jones includes some references to all of the postbiblical stages of its development, it is clearly not beyond the purview of this text.

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