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# IN SEARCH OF JAMES'S MIDDLE PATH

James A. Montmarquet

William James indicated a “middle path” according to which religious experience yields something like knowledge for the mystic, but not a kind that others, who do not share his experience, are compelled to accept. Such a middle way is initially appealing, but how is it to be developed? Here I suggest three leading ideas—the epistemic analogue of “agent-relative permissions,” the complementary relationship between the Jamesian virtues of bold exploration and sober caution, and the kind of special access the lover may claim with respect to knowledge of his beloved—with an eye to such development. Each is found helpful, but in ascending order of importance.

## *I. Introduction*

Part of the philosopher's fate, it seems, is to be forever threading one's way through some “twin peril,” and the present situation in the epistemology of religious experience could easily serve as a case in point. On one side there is the rocky shore of naturalism, safe and secure, but hardly fertile ground for those seeking higher knowledge. Out beyond the crashing surf beckons an alluring creature, inviting those who seek such higher knowledge to come to her, suggesting that God may be “perceived.” She is alluring because perception would be knowledge; but in the end, one senses, she will disappoint.

It is of some comfort, then, to remind ourselves that a great figure in the history of this subject has marked out, if incompletely, a “middle path” for us. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*,<sup>1</sup> James does this mainly by drawing a sharp distinction between the mystic's own experience and such claims as it may support (for the mystic herself), and the situation of those who do *not* share this experience. We take notice of each in turn.

Regarding the mystic's experiences, James writes:

As a matter of psychological fact mystical considerations of a well-pro-nounced and emphatic sort usually *are* authoritative over those who have them. They have been ‘there,’ and know. It is vain for rationalism to grumble about this. . . . Our senses . . . have assured us of certain states of fact; but mystical experiences are as direct perceptions of fact for those who have them as any sensations ever were for us.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2004).

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 366–367.



But then there is the third person perspective of one who is not having (and has no particular expectation of any time soon having) any such experiences, but must assess them coolly and objectively as knowledge claims. Here James's words are equally familiar (367):

Mystics have no right to claim that we ought to accept the deliverance of their peculiar experiences, if we are ourselves outsiders and feel no private call thereto. The utmost they can ever ask of us in this life is to admit that they establish a presumption. . . . But even this presumption . . . is far from being strong.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the familiar confines of what I understand as James's alternative to the twin perils identified just above. On one hand, this alternative would seem to offer something more than a naturalistic program in which any talk of religious experience must be cashed out in terms of secular life and its distinctive values.<sup>4</sup> The mystic's experience has beneficial consequences, but this is in great part because (she thinks that) she has "been there and knows."<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, James's approach will evidently settle for "less than perceptualism"—i.e., less than any unqualified claim that the mystic "perceives God."<sup>6</sup> This is not to say that, for James, it is flat-out "wrong" to make such a claim, but only this: Insofar as the mystic's perceptual claims fall on an audience unable to share those claims, the analogy with shareable perceptual knowledge of the natural world is not a very perspicuous one. We need something better.

However, *development* of such a Jamesian "middle course" will not be easy or straightforward (however congenial one might find its initial suggestion to be).<sup>7</sup> So, for instance, it hardly seems promising to begin by

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 367.

<sup>4</sup>A classic source for the naturalistic, as well as the pragmatic, approach to religious experience is John Dewey's *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934).

<sup>5</sup>Despite the pragmatic tone of much of *Varieties*, one of its unifying themes is the question of the ultimate "truth" of claims made on the basis of religious experiences—where this is not the same question as the secular utility of these. In *Varieties*, the pragmatist James can drive other pragmatists to the point of distraction. Thus Richard Rorty, "Some Inconsistencies in James's *Varieties*," in *William James and the Science of Religion: Re-experiencing Varieties of Religious Experience*, ed. Wayne Proudfoot (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 91: "The pragmatic reduction of experiences to their effect on practice is prominent in the first chapter of *Varieties*, but by the last chapter it has been displaced. . . . Had he stuck to this line of thought, he would have thought that it hardly matters whether the sense of a wider self from which saving experiences come is caused by a chance surplus of serotonin or . . . by an immaterial entity that is itself the remote efficient cause of a rearrangement of neural impulses."

<sup>6</sup>Views in this tradition include Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); William Wainwright, *Mysticism: A Study of its Nature, Cognitive Value, and Moral Implications* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981); William Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); and Keith Yandell, *The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>7</sup>William Rowe, for one, after characterizing James's position as a "middle path" says, by way of a kind of endorsement of this position, that "it is unlikely that studies of mysticism over the intervening years have invalidated these conclusions"; see his *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction*, third edition (Belmont, Ca.: Wadsworth, 2001), 71.

saying that the mystic "knows" many things that others do not, but in a special sense of this term, according to which we are entirely free to believe or not believe these things. For this seems but to take away with one hand what the other has given. Yet a weaker attribution, according to which the mystic "may" possess knowledge, but is in no position to demonstrate this possession to others—this leaves difficulties and challenges of its own. Must this state of affairs be permanent; and, if so, why? How can this seemingly rather static, even frustrating, state of affairs be made epistemologically interesting? Does it admit of interesting forms of development, within these prescribed limits?

## II. Agent-Relative Permissions

In any case, we begin by noticing the relevant modalities of James's asymmetry: the mystic is "permitted" to seek truth in her own way; but we are "not obligated" to regard her findings as possessing objective truth. In this regard, James's middle path may be likened to what in moral theory are called "agent relative permissions," for these too are permissions to undertake a certain activity, which others are not duty-bound to do anything more than allow to take place. Thomas Nagel has distinguished such permissions in a particularly vivid way:

If I have a bad headache anyone has a reason to want it to stop. But if I badly want to become a first-rate concert pianist, not everyone has a reason to want me to practice. I have a reason for wanting to practice, and it may be just as strong as my reason for wanting the headache to go away. But other people have very little reason, if any, to care whether I become a first-rate pianist or not.<sup>8</sup>

The question arises, then, whether it may not be helpful to understand the liberty James accords the mystic as a kind of "agent-relative permission," but to pursue *epistemic* rather than moral values.

First, let us recognize that agent-relative permissions (moral or epistemic) will properly be constrained by agent-neutral values and by well-established means by which they may be produced. If "social equality" is thought to have agent-neutral value, well-established means of its attainment will constrain (in some measure) my choice of personal projects. The point, however, is that this subjection is only *partial*; it falls well short of a constraint on all choice. Others may evaluate my personal projects as useful or foolish, but I am (at most) only partly constrained by their

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<sup>8</sup>"The Limits of Objectivity," *Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, vol. I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 120–121. More fully stated, the relevant distinction here involves, on one side, actions justified by their production of agent-neutral values; and, on the other, both agent-relative permissions and—what are not relevant to the current discussion—"agent-relative constraints," i.e., cases in which one is forbidden from maximizing agent-neutral value. Other seminal discussions of these issues include Bernard Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," in *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973) and Derek Parfit, "Prudence, Morality and the Prisoner's Dilemma," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 65 (1979), 539–564.

evaluations. It may be wrong to devote all of one's energies to something that, so far as concerns its agent-neutral value, is marginal at best. But it is not wrong to devote oneself occasionally to such matters; and there is no requirement that even one's most serious projects maximize agent-neutral value.

Next, by way of linking these notions to the epistemic domain, let us allow that here the relevant agent-neutral value is *truth*. Again, this value is not dependent on particular choices or pursuits of particular epistemic subjects. Insofar as my pursuit of a particular project is justified by its promise of yielding truth, others have a reason, however compromised it may be by a host of other considerations, to be supportive.

If, then, suitably constrained agent-relative permissions are acceptable from a moral standpoint, the same, it may be suggested, ought to be allowed for such permissions within the epistemic domain. But immediately there is a problem: insofar as truth is a kind of "constitutive value" for the entire epistemic domain, these cannot be intelligibly conceived as permissions to pursue *other* values. What, then, will be left? What will be the analogue of such agent-relative value as resides in Nagel's becoming a concert pianist?

One initial answer is that truth admits of a plurality of *kinds*, including "religious truth" (itself admitting of many sub-kinds). To this, however, it will rightly be objected that sub-kinds of what has objective value (like the elimination of different forms of suffering) continue to have objective value. Still, a defender of the mystic and her prerogatives may reply in these terms: I will say that religious truth *does* have objective value. It is just that it is sufficiently hard to come by that any method for its attainment that is not antecedently established as a way of pursuing other truths is at most "permitted"—like some novel and highly speculative way of eliminating suffering.

That does help, but not for very long; for we are brought up short by what will prove a characteristic difficulty for James. Yes, the method is speculative; but why is that an argument for anything more than a plea that others adopt a "wait and see" attitude? Perhaps in time this novel method will prove itself a success or a failure—in which case perceptualism or naturalism is the winner, and James's asymmetrical position falls over on one side or the other. Perhaps the jury will remain deadlocked forever; but that result, in itself, is hardly very encouraging or enlightening. Nor does the notion of agent-relativity have any more of interest to add at this point.

### III. Complementary Epistemic Virtues

Still, to be fair, we should allow that the appeal to agent-relative permissions has accomplished something. At the very least, it provides a *parallel* for James's middle course, a broader, intellectually respectable classification under which it can be placed. More boldly put, it puts the mystic in fairly good, and certainly not unreasonable, company (with would-be

concert pianists and the like). At worst, it has drawn our middle path up rather short.

Seeking guidance for a longer journey, we turn to an even more pervasive feature of the contemporary philosophical scene, and that is the idea of inquiry as guided by "epistemic virtues"—i.e., qualities of intellectual character thought to be conducive to the discovery of truth (and perhaps other intellectually worthwhile goals).<sup>9</sup> The application of such a scheme to James's asymmetrical approach to religious experience could proceed, I suggest, along these lines:

Enthusiasm for the discovery of new truth is an intellectually desirable quality, but, as with the moral virtues, there is a need for *balance*. There is a time and a place for strict justice and likewise for mercy; and, closer to our concerns here, there is a time for moral enthusiasm, and a time for caution, lest one go overboard. In the case of religious experience, such balance is best achieved by recognizing that contrary qualities will fall disproportionately on different populations. To those gifted with religious experience, an excess of caution is particularly to be avoided, for caution can only have a dampening effect on such experiences—especially if applied when one is going on. The danger in the case of those not so gifted, however, is that they would too readily go along with excesses engendered by "true believers." These others, too, have a role to play and that role is to be bulwarks of caution—not only at the level of action but belief as well.

The idea, then, is of an intellectual division of labor, matching James's asymmetry, but at the level of predominant qualities of intellectual character. As one might instructively put this: the mystic should err on the side of enthusiasm; and others, caution.

One signal *advantage* of this proposal is easily explained. It allows us to hold that the mystic and the non-mystic are, or may certainly qualify as being, "equally virtuous" in their pursuit of truth and knowledge—though without attributing knowledge to either side (mystical knowledge or knowledge, say, that the mystic is misguided). The possession or exhibition of such virtues as intellectual enthusiasm and caution, that is to say, is no guarantee of truth or knowledge.<sup>10</sup>

This kind of "virtuous division of intellectual labor," notice as well, is of help in beating back the following dilemma posed against James's position by Phillip Kitcher:

Suppose one could garner evidence for claiming that mystical states are veridical. Then, of course, there'd be no difficulty in understanding how

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<sup>9</sup>See, for instance, Ernest Sosa, *Knowledge in Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) and Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>10</sup>Whether the "epistemic virtues" can be used to explicate knowledge is of course a point of some controversy—e.g., between such leading contemporary epistemologists as John Greco and Linda Zagzebski. See their lively exchange on this: Greco's "Two Kinds of Intellectual Virtues" and her "Response to Greco," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 60 (2000), 170–184 and 207–210.

the subjects of such states have the right to take them to be authoritative, but, by the same token, others, less fortunate in their more limited experiences ought to defer to those with broader capacities. . . . On the other hand, if there is genuine doubt about the veridicality of mystical states, it would seem that the clear-headed mystic, aware of the situation, ought to suspend judgment.<sup>11</sup>

Part of the difficulty here is simply that the evidence “garnered” by the mystic is rather equivocal: having experienced these things, she cannot discount them merely because others have not experienced them; nor can we who have not had such experiences credit these as evidence (on the strength merely of her claims to have done so). More to the present point, it will inhibit her very capacity to receive future “evidence” if she takes the kind of guarded attitude that we should take. As noted, different characteristic virtues apply—with no apparent likelihood of the kind of convergence that Kitcher sees as rightly taking place.

So far, then, relatively smooth sailing, I say. We have been able to attribute positive intellectual attributes to each side, without the kind of knowledge that the “middle path” rejects. But if we press harder on this idea of an “epistemic virtue,” familiar difficulties begin to filter back in. In the abstract, it may be said that “enthusiasm” and “caution” (regarding truth) are epistemic virtues; but that is like saying that, in the abstract, kindness is a moral virtue. Whether one’s actual kindness is praiseworthy must surely depend on the person to whom it is directed and various facts concerning one’s situation—and likewise for intellectual enthusiasm. The mystic’s enthusiasm, a critic may point out, is only a virtue if it is directed at some reasonably promising hypothesis. If a hypothesis shows no particular promise of yielding truth, it should, at least after a while, be rejected—or certainly be pursued with reduced enthusiasm. However, that is just the problem for James’s mystic (as long as she is conceived according to the “middle path” scheme). Insofar as her hypotheses command some credence, her enthusiasm is vindicated; but, by the same token, so will be a *perceptualist* account of her experiences. Insofar as they do not command this, *naturalism* will be the beneficiary. And likewise for our caution: insofar as the mystic’s hypotheses are gaining credibility, the value of caution is lessening. Insofar as the opposite is occurring, the opposite will be true. Either way, though, what had seemed a nice division of intellectual labor (and virtue) is threatened: in the end, it seems that either openness or caution must achieve a dominant position *for all* (and something like Kitcher’s dilemma will be proven right in the end).

Even so, it must be allowed that the appeal to different characteristic virtues does constitute an advance, relative to the appeal to “agent-relative permissions.” The latter, we observed, succeeded mainly in locating James’s mystic within a suitable, already recognized category; it did not,

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<sup>11</sup>Philip Kitcher, “A Pragmatist’s Progress: The Variety of James’s Strategies for Defending Religion,” in *William James and the Science of Religion*, 101.



however, advance our understanding or appreciation of the respective positions of the mystic and those not sharing her experiences. The appeal to the epistemic virtues, it must be conceded, at least partly addresses this shortfall. For we are able to associate suitably diverse intellectual virtues with the asymmetrical positions of the mystic and the non-mystic, and to that extent accord positive epistemic credentials to each party.

#### IV. *Love's Knowledge*

Can we do better, however? In effect, our division of intellectual labor has left us with two attitudes in the face of the unknown: openness and caution. Each is suitable, relative to the different experiences of the two parties. What we still need, however, is a more definite model, which is encouraging with respect to the mystic and her aspirations to knowledge, and at the same time possessed of enough built-in limitations—so far as the transmissibility of any knowledge-claims to others—to mark this quite indelibly as a Jamesian and not a perceptualist model.

In search of such a model, let us begin by recognizing that the asymmetry James posits is by no means unique to religious experience. Taken in its most general sense, it is reflective of the different epistemic positions of those having and those not able to have *any* given type of experience. In particular, I want to suggest (in part, following James), that this asymmetry is characteristic of such experiences as *romantic love*, and the first-person cognitive claims to which it is liable to give rise.

Thus, consider the lover's claim to "know" that his beloved has some special qualities, in virtue of which he terms her, say, "magical." Asked why others do not generally perceive these same qualities, the short version of his answer will be that because they do not love her, they lack his special *sensitivity* to these traits. But this claimed perception, or cognitive sensitivity of his, let us also notice, admits of two quite different understandings. It may actually be a special cognition he has of these qualities of hers; or it may be, in whole or part, a mere subjective reaction, which, if it discloses anything at all, shows something about *him*.<sup>12</sup>

Let us notice that elsewhere<sup>13</sup> James is concerned with much this same contrast:

Every Jack sees in his own particular Jill charms and perfections to the enchantment of which we onlookers are stone-cold. And which has the superior view of the absolute truth, he or we? Which has the more insight into the nature of Jill's existence, as a fact? Is he in excess, being in the manner of

<sup>12</sup>In which case his attribution of these qualities to her is rather like an instance of what Stendhal, in his treatise *On Love* (trans. P. S. and C. N. Woolf [Mount Vernon, NY: Peter Pauper Press, 1950], 13), calls "crystallization." This he defines as an "operation of the mind which, from everything which is presented to it draws the conclusion that there are new perfections in the object of love."

<sup>13</sup>William James, *Talks to Teachers of Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* (New York: Holt, 1899).



a maniac? Or are we in defect, being victims of a pathological anesthesia as regards Jill's magical importance?

Not surprisingly, we find James answering his own question on the side of the lover:

Surely the latter; surely to Jack are the profounder truths revealed; surely poor Jill's palpitating little life-throbs *are* among the wonders of creation, *are* worthy of this sympathetic interest; and it is to our shame that the rest of us cannot feel like Jack. For Jack realizes Jill concretely, and we do not. He struggles toward a union with her inner life, divining her feelings, anticipating her desires, understanding her limits as manfully as he can, and yet inadequately, too; for he also is inflicted with some blindness, even here. Whilst we, dead clods that we are, do not even seek after these things, but are contented that that portion of eternal fact named Jill should be for us as if it were not.

Here we may agree with James that Jack's experience in relation to Jill is certainly much richer, purely as an experience, than ours. We may also agree that such intimacy is a good, even a great, thing. It is also unclear, however, whether what Jack can claim is *knowledge* of otherwise inaccessible qualities of Jill. Again, how is Jack able to tell whether, or the extent to which, what he experiences is a quality of hers, merely some very special reaction he has to her, or something of each?<sup>14</sup>

Even so, our analogy is not without its good issue. For even if we are not entirely able to disentangle what is subjective and objective in the lover's experience, it is surely plausible to suppose—we must, I think, concede James this much—that the intense involvement of the lover in his beloved yields *some* special cognitive access, however mixed with noise this signal might be. It is surely plausible that, at times, the lover would have some level of experiential access to qualities of the beloved, access to which “we dead clods” are denied.

This is good. It is exactly the kind of model we seek: some promise of “special access”—and of development in this regard—yet with the kind of built-in limitations able effectively to block any immediate, contemplated claim of demonstrable knowledge, perceptual or other. That is to say: one can expect, with emotional development and growing closeness in a romantic relationship, the plausibility of claims to special knowledge to grow stronger; at the same time, none of this need, or can, carry over to anything evident to others.

With these points in mind, we return to the case of the mystic, who may be understood, surely, as a lover, but of different things. Here many questions and concerns must be passed over. How exactly is mystical different from romantic love? How is the mystic's “love” related to other

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<sup>14</sup>Richard Gale, to whom I owe this fine passage, presses the Jamesian point that it takes a certain “sympathetic intuition” to enter into someone's inner life in this way. “You can only really know someone,” he points out, “if you love them”; see *The Divided Self of William James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 248. Gale, however, does not raise, as we do here, the question of whether such intuition yields reliable knowledge.

characteristically mystical forms of involvement and even absorption in the Godhead? Is the mystic's knowledge supposed to follow upon her love—or is it more the reverse? Important as answers to these might be, it seems unlikely that they would emerge from a tradition in which conceptual boundaries are not, and are not meant to be, sharp.

What mainly matters is this. If, in the purely human domain, love bids fair to overcome the cognitive barrier separating one person from another, it may also be said that the (somewhat) different love and different sensitivity of the mystic allows her to surmount, in some fashion, a different epistemic barrier separating the human and what James likes to call "the divine." Now this must be understood as a *very* modest claim. We will—in fact, must (as voyagers on this middle path)—continue to deny that either the earthly or the mystical lover is able to show us, who do not experience what she experiences, that these constitute knowledge of their object. Rather, we will submit only that in both cases (again we use what seems the best word) it is "plausible" to suppose that the unique sensitivities, motivations, and emotional involvement each possesses give her some epistemic advantage, some greater possibility of knowledge, relative to others. At the same time, we freely admit that in both cases there is no small likelihood of bias, of all sorts of "noise" on whatever channels the lover and the mystic utilize.

At this point, however, some may want to object that these cases are not alike. It may be said: "we know that in the case of human love, the object of this love can be interpersonally experienced and obviously known to exist; the case of the mystic's experience is entirely different." But there are two countervailing points also to be noted. The first is nothing more than a reminder: the claims in question are in both cases precisely those to which such interpersonal access is denied. In ordinary terms, the object of the lover's affection may be known to all, but not the special knowledge *he* claims to have. The second response attempts to turn the tables: it will point out that if the case of the lover seems more secure in its earth-bound characteristics, the case of the mystic is more secure in another. Many claim to have experienced this single divine object. In the case of romantic love, barring such dubious cases as Helen of Troy or Marilyn of Hollywood, its object is sought by only one or some very small number. To that extent, the claims of mystics can be compared and sorted through, while nothing like that is possible in the case of romantic love. At most, the lover can compare their experiences of, and cognitive claims respecting, *different* objects.

Still, one may wish to pursue something of the above objection. Is there not at least *this* difference? Lovers are at least able to assure us that they share a common experience "of love." As with those who have shared any other intense experience (such as riding a roller coaster), they are able to say: "You know what I mean; you've been there" (even if, hopefully, not with her). Mystics may speak of a common experience "of God" but we must take their word for it on that score.

This, however, is an unfair comparison. In effect, it compares the familiarity of the lover's experience (qualitatively considered) to the unfamiliarity of the *object* of the mystic's experience. In other words, a fair comparison should either invoke the qualitative characteristics of the lover's *and* the mystic's experience, or it should compare such definite cognitions of an object each case may offer. The mistake, then, is to regard the lover's cognitive achievements as somehow more definite and secure, based on the accessibility of his experiences as experiences. Thus, if we ask the lover what exactly he has come to know of the beloved, he will be very hard pressed to describe this. If, more pointedly, we challenge the lover to specify some one *proposition*, knowledge of which his love has gained him, and to which others' access is blocked, he will be even more severely pressed to accomplish this. It seems that he will be forced to adopt either (or both) of the following, patently unsatisfactory responses:

He may supply a proposition, such as that "She is truly *good*" accompanied by an insistence that while others may also know that she is good, they are barred from "truly experiencing her goodness." The first problem with this, of course, is that it has failed to meet the challenge of providing a relevant proposition only known to him; the second is that mystics are able to make precisely this claim with respect to such propositions as that God is One.

Alternatively, he may admit that there is no such proposition, but still insist that he knows her (qua distinctive *object* of knowledge) even if without any accompanying propositional knowledge. Of course, this raises the fine, or not so fine, old distinction between knowledge by "acquaintance" and by "description."<sup>15</sup> For our part, however, we are content to make use of the same two points: that this is not responsive to the original challenge, which was to supply a relevant item of propositional knowledge; and, second, that the mystic, too, can make this kind of distinction. Of course, she, too, can say that her experience and knowledge of God is not "propositional," that it is of God qua "object."<sup>16</sup>

In short, the case for romantic love as a "model" for mysticism and its knowledge claims may be summed up in these terms. In both cases, there is an intense experience of emotional involvement in, and oneness with, what would otherwise be a distinct and in many ways unknowable being. In both cases, this absorption in the other carries to the point that the one becomes dead to other things (and alive only to this one). In both cases, there is the apparent transcendence of ordinary metaphysical and

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<sup>15</sup>On this see the classic discussion of Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), chapter five. It is notable that, for Russell and for empiricism generally, acquaintance provides a *basis* for description, not an alternative to it.

<sup>16</sup>This is likely, on the mystic's side (but also on the lover's), to be bound up with a claim of what James calls "ineffability." (How else could one claim both to have experienced an object which is distinctive in some way, but be unable to supply any kind of qualitative description of that object?) Even if this claim of ineffability is suspect, we must remind ourselves that the issue here is merely one of whether the mystic's and the lover's cognitive claims are fundamentally different, and not whether either constitutes knowledge.

epistemic boundaries (separateness of persons and such limits as this imposes on knowledge). And, alas, in both cases, the apparent fruits of this special relation are ascertained only by those enjoying it. Others are left out, metaphysically and epistemically.

To the foregoing presentation of "love's knowledge" as a model for mystical comprehension of the divine, let us now append a brief case for the distinct *inferiority* of ordinary perception as a model for the mystical. On this score, we note the following:<sup>17</sup>

First, perceptual reports are normally taken as telling us less about the perceiver than the perceived. The claim to see "a red Ford" is ordinarily more of automotive than biographical interest. In the case of love and mysticism, as we have emphasized, this is somewhat unclear. We take reports of their experiences, at least in the first instance, as enriching our knowledge of the subjects rather than the objects of their experiences. Romeo's extravagant proclamations, in general, tell us more about him than her.

Second, such reliability tests as may be invoked in the case of love or mysticism amount to certain very broad plausibility considerations: if the lover or the mystic claims to experience something which contradicts what is known, or assumed to be true, concerning the objects of their claimed knowledge, we are rightly skeptical. By contrast, well established perceptual reports have the power to overturn what had been *thought* knowledge, which power the mystic's and the lover's experience are not granted. (It is interesting in this regard that mystics do not generally take their experiences to refute the experience-based claims of other mystics—even when there are apparent conflicts, e.g., concerning the unity or triune nature of God.)

Third, what happens in the case of the *absence* of any such contradiction between an experiential report and what is independently known, or believed on good grounds, to be true is also illuminating. In this case, perceptual reports are generally taken as true; the lover's and the mystic's experiences are not.

Finally, it is noteworthy that James's well-known four marks of mystical experience (329–330)—its "noetic," passive, transitory, and "ineffable" (see note 16) characteristics—would very arguably apply as well to the experience of the lover more than to ordinary sense perception. The latter may be passive and transitory as individual episodes, but not with respect to the larger experiences in which perceptions are embedded (say, perceptual *investigations*). The more interesting point, however, concerns ineffability. In the case of sense perception, while it is true that all sensory experience eludes direct verbal description, obviously we are able to make verbal reports, linking such experiences to what are assumed to be

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<sup>17</sup>For additional supporting discussion, critical of the "perceptualist" school cited in note 6, see especially Richard Gale, "The Cognitivity of Religious Experience," *Faith and Philosophy* 22 (2005), 426–441.

matter of common perception (thus: "sky blue" and so forth). Of course, the mystic and the lover can, and typically will *liken* their descriptions to matters of common perception; however, as with the previously cited cases of "She is good" or "God is One," they will resist too close an association, insisting that "you must experience this for yourself."

### V. Conclusion: On the Prospects of Development

Our initial challenge was to "develop" James's middle path. Have we done so? I think we have at least begun this fairly daunting task. We have located James's project in the context of contemporary value theory, and contemporary epistemology. But more importantly, since these "leading ideas" only lead us so far, we have linked mysticism to what does admit of considerable development, I think, which is its association with human love and "love's knowledge." As befits James's asymmetrical, bifurcated approach, however, this envisioned development must continue on two different fronts.

On the side of those having experiences of the right kind (i.e., on the side of the mystic), development is not a great issue or problem. For the model of "romantic love" has everything to do with development: both with the deepening of emotional ties and thereby deepening (apparent) cognition of the other, and the reverse: deepening cognition so as to enrich emotion.

On the side of us "dead clods" who lack these experiences, all *three* of the leading ideas we have considered—agent-relative permissions, epistemic virtue, and love's knowledge—are much less promising (of development). Our role is, respectively, one of "permitting without participating" (the case of Nagel's would-be concert pianist); cautiously guarding against excesses; and the lover's best friend and confidant, who hears much but is unsure exactly what to make of it. Whatever "development" goes on, it is strictly dependent on, and a reaction to, developments on the side of the lover or mystic!

So the "middle path," as we must have known, is not a very equal path for all parties; but this is what all three of our models imply. They entail a division of cognitive labor, of epistemic virtue, of experience, and of emotion. Like the aforementioned Jack (who knows Jill "concretely"), the mystic has this developing relationship, whose emotional aspects can hardly be gainsaid. If this model denies her a full attribution of "knowledge" (and development in respect of that), there is at least the hope that emotional development *may* mean increase on the side of cognition. We who are in the position of Jack's friends are both barred from this emotional development and insofar as Jack's deepest claims to know Jill are shot through with "ineffability," are hardly able to share in these. As good friends, we can only remain steadfast and ever cautious, making sure that Jack's enthusiasm does not get the better of him (taking advantage of the fact that it is very unlikely to get the better of *us*). But this is a matter more of constancy than development.

What of "development" for the competing programs of perceptualism and naturalism? For perceptualism, development becomes of relatively less consequence inasmuch as, from this standpoint, the mystic is already *there*: she already knows. Of course, her experiences admit of progressive development, of "enrichment." But the essence of perceptualism, unlike the middle path suggested by romantic love, lies in the cognitive *achievement* perception implies. For Deweyan naturalism, there will be development on the side of the moral benefits of mystical experience (as these may be enjoyed by the mystic and others). But what of development on the side of those formative experiences which must partly explain those benefits? The difficulty, or certainly the challenge, for the naturalist is to explain this development in non-cognitive terms.

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