

Mysticism, Wonder, and Cognition

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> Abstract • Gash leverages earlier discussions about the relationship between mysticism and its world, to argue that it is useful in thinking about the unexpected. I argue for a more nuanced understanding of surprise, which leads to asking about the place of questions and of events in cognition.

« 1 » In his target article, Hugh Gash usefully works through some of the issues at the border of the epistemology of the known and/or knowable and the epistemology of the not-yet-known, or unknowable. He moves beyond von Ernst von Glasersfeld's distinction between constructivist and mystical knowing – in effect, he opens the door to the possibility that mystical knowing might be something more than simply impressionistic or metaphorical thinking. It might, instead, be a way of investigating the unexpected.

« 2 » Gash raises a question about mysticism in the context of cognition that I raised in the context of hermeneutics (Janz 1995). That paper prompted a rejoinder from one of the major advocates of perennialism in mysticism, Robert Forman (1996), to which I responded (Janz 1996). Steven Katz and others (Katz 1978, 1983) argued that the discussion about the nature of mysticism should be understood as a debate between

- perennialists – those who thought that mystical experience burst through the boundaries of our normal epistemological and cognitive structures to give a direct access to “ultimate reality,” and
- contextualists – those who thought that even if there were an apprehension of an ultimate reality, we could never shed our epistemological and cognitive structures, and so mysticism would always come in a context, however we might define that.

« 3 » This is a difficult debate to settle, mostly because the nature of mystical experience is that it changes the experiencer. It is not, in other words, simply additional conceptual content (which might also happen

within religious or quasi-religious experience, but we would want to give it a different name). The nature of that change, though, is difficult to describe. And, it is fairly easy to see how the perennialist could reject any evidence that suggests that context matters, since the one suggesting would not have had the genuine mystical experience that would convince them otherwise (in other words, an *ad hominem* rejection of the arguer's lack of experience).

« 4 » My argument at the time was that the debate was driven by the assumption that an epistemological issue was at stake. I argued that this undermined the lived experience of mysticism (that is, it made it into something reflected upon after the fact or prepared for in advance), and that we needed to instead think of this as hermeneutical, in particular, like reading. The vast majority of experiences of reading are not, of course, mystical, but the point was that mystical experience was not just about the acquisition of new knowledge but rather a way of putting existing knowledge into a coherent picture. The novel exists in a context, but it can also be an event, that is, the opening to a new world.

« 5 » Although Gash does not use hermeneutics but constructivist cognition, in some ways his argument is similar to mine from 1995. He too is interested in the ways that we come to a coherent understanding. Gash claims that his interest is not in analyzing mystical experience as such but in thinking about the role of cognition in mysticism (§§22f). This approach, even more than my hermeneutical one, leads him away from the perennialist position. If perennialism is correct, after all, cognition is irrelevant, at least in the sense of the context or mechanisms of coming to know. One simply knows – “ultimate reality” manifests itself directly, rendering classical aspects of cognition moot. In perennialism, we are effectively passive recipients of the experience. We see this in historical accounts of mysticism – even when a mystic has undertaken some version of the *via negativa*, the moment of the experience is usually described as overwhelming them.

« 6 » Gash, then, asks exactly the right question, given that he retains a place for cognition, which is about surprise (and related ideas like wonder and gaps). This is not a question for perennialists – if there is no

context for a mystical experience, then surprise seems to be an obvious consequence. However, if we think of mystical experiences as being tied to some cognitive mechanism, scaffolding, history, or other contextualizing feature, then mystical experience is a kind of rupture that needs explaining.

« 7 » Surprises might be commonplace (§18), but not all surprises are the same. To the extent that we can connect some kinds of surprise with wonder, we might see at least two accounts, one linked to the Greek *thau-mazein* (θαυμάζω) tradition and the other to the Latin miracle tradition (Gallagher et. al. 2015: 115ff). The former emphasizes the wonder that comes from uncovering transcendence within the chaotic world, whereas the latter (best seen in Spinoza's account of wonder, *admiratio*, experienced in miracles) is the surprise that comes when a concept does not fit with an existing set of concepts. Gash discusses a “gap” between what we expect and what we experience (§17) which comes closer to the surprise we see in the Latin miracle tradition (and, we see this again in identifying surprise and wonder with the novel, §26). It is a surprise that can be put to rest, once the experience is put into place with other experiences. If, for instance, a magic trick is explained, it will no longer evoke wonder. One can, on the other hand, understand a great deal about the processes of birth, and yet still experience wonder in the presence of a birth. This is the wonder that the Greeks had in mind in *thau-mazein*.

« 8 » Françoise Dastur offers a phenomenology of surprise as a way of encountering the unprecedented event (see Janz 2017 for more on this). “Event” in this case is significant – she unpacks it as a moment of becoming, an excess within the current order that spurs something new (Dastur 2000: 182). The concept of the event has been heavily theorized since at least Martin Heidegger's *Ereignis* (2012), and on through Emmanuel Levinas, Gilles Deleuze, Alain Badiou, Jeff Malpas, Claude Romano and many others. Dastur uses it to recognize that phenomenology, an approach rooted in intersubjectivity, sometimes has to deal with occurrences that fall outside of the realm of possibilities of meaning. We are faced with the question of whether the surprise points to some deeper or transcendent truth (*thau-mazein*), or whether it is novelty (*ad-*

miratio). She leans towards the first (as do most philosophers, who chart their mission back to Aristotle's "it is owing to their wonder (*thaumazein*) that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize" (Aristotle 1984: 1554), but she recognizes that the moment of becoming is in some sense a challenge and a task for phenomenology.

« 9 » I have briefly surveyed the multiple roots of wonder, and Dastur's approach to surprise, to place Gash in conversation with it. If we see mysticism through a constructivist lens, we find ourselves thinking about the existing structures of knowledge and what happens at their limits. Gash mentions Kuhnian paradigm shifts as the space in which wonder might happen (§21). This seems less descriptive than Gaston Bachelard's concept of the problematic (Bachelard 1966; see also Maniglier 2012). For Bachelard, we are not simply faced with wonder when things do not cohere, but rather a lack of coherence is evidence that we have been asking the wrong question. We need to interrogate our questions, not simply stand in wonder. In other words, while there is clearly a rupture in the organization of knowledge, it is not the non-rational break that Thomas Kuhn imagines, solvable only by an older generation passing away and a new generation taking over, but instead by being thrown back on the inadequacy and hidden assumptions of our forms of questioning. On Gash's model, does mysticism enable a new form of questioning, or just surprise? **Q1**

« 10 » Gash suggests that mysticism is a step beyond surprise. I certainly agree with this. What I suspect about mysticism, though, is that there is another issue at stake than the question about the limits of epistemology or existing structures for accounting for knowledge. Gash sees it too – he offers a different conclusion from von Glasersfeld's, that constructivist and mystical knowing belong in different domains. Instead, he suggests a model of "different [...] geometries with different assumptions" (§39).

« 11 » There might be something else in mysticism that is even more useful to constructivism. If the mystical experience is just a different geometry with different assumptions, it simply becomes a matter of personal choice. However, mystics report something more profound than this. Jacob Boehme,

for instance, groped towards a new way of accounting for individuals in a universe that does not minimize God (Janz 2014). He used a host of analogies to imperfectly express this vision throughout his life – the Kabbalah, alchemy, gematria, other forms of esoteric thought, and yes, also theology – and one might say that he never entirely succeeded in expressing this vision. And yet, those who come later create the vocabulary and conceptual ecology in which that vision could become a reality.

« 12 » Boehme's mystical experience, in other words, was rooted in a set of inadequately answered questions (and as such were contextualist rather than perennialist). Language and theology at his time had not yet caught up with his vision, and so he had to rely on analogies and esoteric structures. He saw his breakthrough as a kind of *thaumazein*, although that might be because it had such strong theological content. It was, without question, a surprise, but one that remained with him for decades. And, in retrospect, one might see it as a paradigm shift *à la* Kuhn, but at the time it looks like a new problematic, *à la* Bachelard. It is an event, and seen as such in the moment, even if its articulation was lacking.

« 13 » The interesting outcome of Gash's article is that the question of the creative moment is raised, not as something to describe in retrospect or as something to prepare for beforehand, but as an event. That is where the mystic lives, the perpetual moment, always trying to grasp the answer to a different question than had previously been asked. There is no way to smooth that process out, because any way we could imagine draws on the resources of the systems we already think we know. This is epistemology, yes, but also hermeneutics (the changes in meaning), and more than that, it is the discontinuity of new questions. If constructivism is mostly about continuities, this stands as a challenge, a task, and an opportunity within constructivist models of cognition. Can constructivism use mysticism to account for events? **Q2**

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