

# Mystical Experience and Divine Independence<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

In the following article, I argue that no possible experience can apodictically establish that the divine reality is, as classical theism asserts, independent of the subject, for it remains an epistemic possibility that the subject is simply mistaking an aspect of his or her own nature as an independent being. Nor can any possible experience show that the divine is, as Indian monism asserts, ontologically indistinct from the subject, for it is a perpetual epistemic possibility that the subject is merely intensely perceiving some aspect of the divine. I argue, however, that the divine's independence of us is not as religiously significant as it is often supposed to be. It makes no necessary *practical* difference to religious life.

## Introduction

I would like to explore a central religious belief, more a latent religious expectation, that though largely ignored in at least analytic contemporary philosophy of religion, has played an important role in the life of religion, both East and West. This is the supposition that, though we may live in separation now from the ultimate religious reality, there await (at least the soteriologically fortunate among us) special experiences - revelatory, interruptive, mystical, post-mortem, or otherwise - that would give us an absolute, justified certainty about the existence and nature of the ultimate divine reality; a certainty that would meet the demands of the most ardent sceptic. It is a recurring theme in many religious traditions that though we may live in separation from the ultimate religious reality at present, there will come a time when we are directly acquainted with it, at which time we shall possess absolute knowledge of the most important religious matters. In short, closely bound to many conceptions of salvation (if I

may use that term in a very general, inter-religiously applicable sense), is the ideal of a final epistemological state, the terminus of all possible religious doubt:

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face; now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. (1 Corinthians 13:12)

The contention is that we will acquire an almost Cartesian certainty about central religious matters:

When one sees him [Brahman] - both the high and the low;  
The knot of one's heart is cut, all doubts are dispelled; and his works come to an end. (Mundaka Upanisad, 2.1.8)

In our final form of existence, it is often supposed, we will have not simply sufficient reason to believe the things we will about the ultimate religious reality, but rather an absolute sort of knowledge of that reality, or true beliefs about it that we know cannot possibly be mistaken. While we can, I think, conceive of experiences that would lend a great deal of support for many important religious beliefs about the divine reality, in the following I will argue that no set of experiences could give us absolute knowledge about certain aspects of such an ultimate religious reality. Though it is often presumed that salvational experience *can* provide the absolute ground, that eludes us now, for certain central beliefs about the religious reality, I hope to show that we have very good reason, at present, to believe that even in the midst of salvation there could remain an ineliminable sceptical residue. I also hope to establish that no experience could make it unreasonable even to admit the possibility that we are mistaken in certain beliefs about the religious reality. In particular, I will argue that the independence or indistinction of the religious reality from our own fundamental nature, or what we might roughly call the religious reality's 'ontological location', can never be completely ascertained on the basis of any conceivable experience. Exactly how religiously important such an epistemological limitation would be, is debatable. At first glance it would seem, to many, to be very important indeed. For though the limit does not *explicitly* deny that the very existence of some religious reality can be known with certainty, one might suppose that, given certain traditional understandings of the divine reality, this limit does very directly entail that the existence of the divine cannot be so known. Specifically, a theist might suppose that part of God's essence is his ontological independence of us; therefore, the argument goes, our inability to ascertain the ontological independence from us of any putative religious reality entails our inability to determine that a putative religious reality is *God*.

Before we proceed into the main body of argument, a note of clarification

on my choice of the terms 'religious reality' and 'divine reality' is perhaps in order. As I use the two terms they are interchangeable, both functioning as general terms for the primary religious *intentum* of a given religious tradition. However, because I am primarily concerned here with the theistic and Advaitic Vedantic traditions, the terms more often simply denote the primary religious *intenta* of those very traditions: God and the Atman-Brahman unity. When a discussion is strictly confined to theism I usually use the term 'God', and when a discussion is confined to Indian monism I tend to use 'Atman', or 'Brahman', or both. But it is handy, during discussion that is meant to apply to both traditions, to have a general term that covers both theism and Indian monism. My terminological rationale is thus primarily the desire for concision, though there is of course a conceptual rationale underlying the use of such general terms: there is much in common, despite important differences that I will try to explicate, between the idea of God and the idea of Brahman. This is precisely why we will be able to draw general conclusions about the limits of religious knowledge that apply to both theism and Advaita Vedanta.

### The Advaita-Vedantist Denial of Divine Independence

Advaita Vedantists, or Vedantic 'non-dualists', allege that the ultimate reality (*Brahman*) is an infinite and unified consciousness, which is also the human subject's essential nature (*Atman*); there is in fact no ontological distinction between *Brahman* and *Atman*. The famous proclamation of the *Chandogya Upanishad* - "That art thou" - succinctly expresses the Advaitic identification of our own nature with the ultimate reality. Since reality is a self-identical unity, sensory experience of an external, spatio-temporal world is supposed to involve misapprehension of that reality. Phenomenal experience is not unreal in the radical sense of being a product of pure fancy as, to give a common Advaitic example, the horns on a hare are said to be; rather, it is the experience of what is real, but under the limiting conditions of ignorance. Hence the famous Advaitic analogy of a coiled rope that is mistaken for a snake: the world, like the snake, is our misidentification of, or 'superimposition' (*adhyasa*) upon a real substratum. Theistic experience of God is supposed to involve a similar misidentification, for there is nothing ontologically distinct from the self:

From the true point of view, there is no God who created the world....In reality all creation is illusory, and so the creator is also illusory. Brahman itself is at once the material cause as well as the efficient cause of the world. There is no difference between the cause and the effect; the effect is but an illusory imposition on the cause and is thus a mere illusion of name and form. (Dasgupta 1933: 165)

Thus putative experiences of God, according to Advaita Vedanta, are misapprehensions of our own unified essence, involving an ascription of independence to that which is ultimately indistinct from our ultimate nature. But what the Advaitin gains in consistency, one might object, she forfeits in plausibility. Is it not ludicrous to deny that the external world is real, to assert that multiplicity of any sort is a product of ignorance? Even if there is a super-phenomenal realm in which all distinctions disappear, one might argue, the very fact that the Advaitic aspirant enters such a realm *from* a realm of multiplicity is proof that at least two things exist: the world of diversity, and the super-phenomenal realm of unity. To this the Advaitic typically responds by emphasizing a distinction between epistemological and ontological separation. Phenomenal experience is a product of only epistemological alienation from the Atman-Brahman unity, and not the veridical representation of something that truly exists apart from that unity. The world is separate from Brahman only in the sense that it is a function of our ignorance of Brahman. The transition from the phenomenal realm of diversity to the super-phenomenal is thus only a transition from a lower state of awareness to a higher, not a transition between two separate realms of reality. Thus:

When once Brahman is completely realized, as the rope is in the case of the rope-snake, like the snake, the world will have vanished. Then comes the realization that Brahman alone was, is, and will be true and real. (Warrier 1961: 270)

But even such an epistemological transition is problematic, given Advaitic assumptions, for if the undifferentiated Brahman is truly the only reality it is hard to explain how a state of ignorance could arise in the first place. As one commentator) argues: "The nature of the Advaitin's problem is evident: he has to explain how diversity can even *apparently* arise from undifferentiated unity" (Potter 1981: 81). The Advaitin perhaps has an answer to the problem of *why* diversity should arise, a problem analogous to the theistic one of explaining why a perfect God would bother to create a seemingly less than perfect world. When it arises, Sankara and other Advaitins sometimes employ the metaphor of *lila* or 'play' to explain why Brahman allows for even apparent diversity; the phenomenal world is the creative expression of Brahman's inexhaustible plenitude. But the problem of *how* Brahman could express diversity, given that it is supposed to be an absolute unity, seems somewhat intractable.

We have seen that the Advaitin has, in the theory of 'superimposition' described above, a sort of preliminary, mechanical explanation of apparent diversity. But it seems undeniable that even illusory change constitutes a real change of some sort. In the production of an illusion, the illusion itself may be unreal in the sense of 'non-veridical'. For instance, there is no independently existing snake corresponding to the perceptual datum of the snake but there surely must

be a real act of production for the illusion to take place. Thus difference is difficult to deny *absolutely*, as many Advaitins seem to hope to do for they must at least allow, as a fact, that illusion occurs, though the things represented in the illusion are not as they seem. Nonetheless, the central Advaitic contention that mundane phenomenal experience, like theistic experience, does not represent a reality that is fundamentally distinct from the subject's own nature might be true (it is at *least* in the realm of logical possibility). The external world and God might indeed be like figures in a dream that, once we awaken, are seen by us to have no existence independent of us. But the Advaitin must admit that in this case there is at least one very real distinction to be made: *we* have at least undergone a real transformation in moving between the state of dreaming and waking. The questions of whether one could directly experience the Brahman-Atman unity, and if so, what the cognitive value of that experience would be, are important and interesting ones.

No doubt, seers in the Indian tradition have, as William M. Indich notes, often *claimed* to have had "a realization which was so authentic, satisfying, certain and immutable that all other experience was immediately known to be illusory, or mere appearance, in contrast" (1980: 11). But even if we should find that a realization, so characterized, is not in fact attainable, the enduring possibility that something like the Advaitic account of reality is true provides us with some basis to question the attainability of theistic certainty. Though such an engagement with theism has never, as a matter of historical fact, been a primary concern of Advaita Vedanta, we may here use the possibility of the Advaitic account to advance a form of scepticism against theistic religious experience. God may seem to be thoroughly independent of me, yet so long as I can at least *conceive* that there may be a deeper unity behind such apparent independence, I have *some* reason to doubt the veridicality of my experience. No doubt I might have *better* reason to believe in the veridicality of my theistic experience and thus to embrace a theistic ontology if, all other things being equal,<sup>2</sup> the Advaitic synthesis of my theistic experience forever remains within the shadowy realm of mere possibility, while powerful theistic experiences of a divine Other continue unabated. Yet no matter how powerful and pervasive my theistic experience may become, I could not eliminate the very possibility of the truth of the Advaitic ontology and thus could not eliminate entirely all grounds for scepticism about theism. One might wonder, even in the face of powerful theistic experiences, if in fact God and oneself were one despite appearances to the contrary.

### Denying Advaita Vedanta: Rudolph Otto's 'Numinous Other'

A theist might insist here that a theistic experience *could* be of such a nature that it would indicate -with an apodictic certainty that decisively disconfirms Advaitism - that God is indeed independent of the subject. But given that the

Advaitist doubts the veridicality of even mundane perceptual experience, if a theistic experience has any chance of establishing that the divine reality is not ultimately a function or expression of the subject's own nature, it would have to do so on the basis of features of the experience fundamentally discontinuous with mundane perceptual experience. In other words, there must be something unique in theistic experience, not found in mundane perceptual experience, which decisively establishes God's otherness. But here the theist might insist on asking: Is such an appropriately unique experience possible? What is it supposed to be like? Rudolph Otto, in his seminal early twentieth century work *The Idea of the Holy*, claims that such apodictic apprehension of the divine reality's otherness is not only possible, but is indeed an essential element of genuine religious experience. The common source of all religion proper is experience of what Otto calls the 'numinous', which though occasioned or awakened by empirical phenomena, and though analogous to natural experience in certain respects, involves immediate apprehension of a reality thoroughly transcendent of both man and nature. In his famous analysis of the experience, Otto characterizes the religious object as a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, as a mystery that is awful and overpowering yet attractive and compelling nonetheless. It is the mysterious "moment" of the numinous that is supposed by Otto to reveal the absolute otherness of the numinous reality. On the one hand, 'mysterious' is a negative attribution, indicative of "that which is hidden or esoteric, that which is beyond conception or understanding, extraordinary and unfamiliar" (Otto 1950: 13). Yet in the *mysterium* we also encounter "something absolutely and intensely positive" which "we can experience in feelings" (Otto 1950: 13). Mystery is not simply an absence; it is a positive revelation of something radically beyond the experiencer:

The truly mysterious object is beyond our apprehension and comprehension, not only because our knowledge has certain irremovable limits, but because in it we come upon something inherently 'wholly other', whose kind and character are incommensurable with our own, and before which we therefore recoil in a wonder that strikes us chill and numb. (Otto 1950: 28)

Otto is critical of the famous Schleiermacherian analysis of religious experience into a feeling of dependence because, alleges Otto, it characterizes religious experience as a function primarily of self-consciousness from which we arrive at "the fact of God via a kind of inference." But "this is entirely opposed to the psychological facts of the case," argues Otto, for the sense of dependence is actually the "subjective concomitant and effect of another feeling element, which casts it like a shadow, but which in itself indubitably has immediate and primary

reference to an object outside the self" (Otto 1950: 10). A sense of dependence, indeed a more extreme consciousness of one's relative nothingness is an important part of religious experience, Otto concedes. Yet such self-consciousness is not the central datum of the experience but only a residual effect from the overwhelming presence of something wholly beyond and incommensurable with the self. 'Other-consciousness' is primary and self-consciousness only secondary in genuine religious experience, Otto contends. His analysis amounts to a factual claim about religious experience: he alleges that experiences of the kind described have in fact occurred and are, moreover, the fountainhead of religious life. But implicit in such a historical claim, of course, is the weaker possibility claim that such experiences are at least possible. As for the historical claim, it is apparent that *elements* of Otto's analysis, such as the religious object's concomitant attractiveness and awfulness, are commensurable with well-known reports of religious experience, such as those in the Book of Job and the eleventh chapter of the Bhagavad Gita. Yet even the possibility of a revelation of 'intrinsic otherness' is not so apparent, and it is this aspect of Otto's analysis that primarily concerns us. If Otto is correct that such a revelation is possible (indeed that it occurs in fact) then it seems that a decisive sort of theistic experience - one that could at least defeat all Advaitic forms of scepticism - is possible. But though it is reasonable to suppose that the numinous divine reality could convincingly *seem*, to the subject, to be external to the subject, it does not seem reasonable to suppose that it could somehow convey apodictic certainty of its otherness. In other words, we could have some reason to doubt the otherness of a religious object, even in the midst of the *mysterium* moment.

### The "Bruteness" of the Mysterium

Precisely *what* in the *mysterium* moment, let us ask, is supposed to establish apodictically the otherness of the numinous object? Otto does not provide us with much explanation here but let us try to imagine what such an explanation could be. Perhaps it is the fact that the *mysterium* involves an immediate and overwhelming 'bruteness': the numinous seems to come to the passive subject uninstigated and inalterable, and this seems to preclude the possibility that it is in fact some sort of subjective construction. The *mysterium* may indeed involve such an element of 'bruteness', but this could not in itself establish the otherness of the religious object. The basic problem here is that it is impossible to distinguish with certainty between a brute datum that actually is indicative of an external reality, and a brute datum that is not so reflective. That a percept should simply appear to us uninstigated, without any conscious effort on our part, may or may not be a *necessary* condition of that percept being the veridical reflection of an external reality; but it certainly is not a *sufficient* condition. For hallucinations also have this uninstigated feature, a feature that is traditionally

thought phenomenologically to distinguish hallucinations from the more vivid efforts of the imagination. One might object to this traditional criterion of hallucination on the ground that even the imagination (think, for example, of a song that you cannot get out of your head) can have this uninstigated feature. Such an objection, if sound, further weakens Otto's case, for then the uninstigated aspect of the *mysterium*, alone, distinguishes the *mysterium* from neither hallucination nor the most insistent efforts of the imagination. That the numinous is relatively *inalterable* is similarly insufficient to establish its veridicality. Of course, if something appears to be some thing *x*, when we think of *x*, and then appears to be *y* when our thoughts wander to *y*, we probably have good grounds for believing that we are hallucinating or otherwise suffering from non-veridical experience. But the fact that the numinous does not so change according to the whim of our thoughts, does not establish its independence of us. Indeed, it is quite consistent with the Advaitic hypothesis that theistic experience be relatively stable, given that *avidya* or ignorance of the ultimate unity is supposed to be deeply entrenched in human cognitive patterns. Thus even if the world were such that the divine reality always appeared to all subjects with 'brute otherness', one could still find at least some basis for raising questions about its ontological independence. The Advaitic possibility remains, in the face of such constant experience, that the divine's apparent otherness reflects some persistent structure or condition of our own subjectivity. Theism might seem, to many, highly probable in such a world, but it would still lack the justified certainty that could completely, once and for all, defeat Advaitic scepticism.

One might further contend that in our own world, theism becomes much less certain. The *fact* of religiously diverse experience - the fact that some people have characteristically theistic experiences, while others have the unitive experiences which are often taken to support Advaita Vedanta - perhaps places the truth of theism more reasonably in doubt than it would be if there were only theistic experiences of 'brute otherness'. This is one facet of what is generally called the problem of religious diversity, a problem that has received increasing attention in recent decades. However we are not particularly interested in that problem here, for whether or not people in fact participate in non-theistic forms of life, we can at least *conceive* of interpretations of putative theistic experiences that would rival the properly theistic one. The mere *possibility* that the Advaitic picture of reality is the correct one, a possibility that remains even in a world in which all experience is powerfully theistic, leaves theism somewhere short of complete certainty. Yet it is perhaps worth acknowledging here that the Advaitic account does seem to carry *something* more than mere logical possibility. Doubtless, the fact that the Advaitic account is not only logically possible but also held by many to be true would (and probably should) not be sufficient alone to shake a theist from his or her own convictions, formed on the basis of personal experience. The mere fact that any number people believe something to be so



does not make it so<sup>3</sup>, or perhaps even more likely to be so. Yet neither, on the other hand, need the Advaitic account be a completely 'idle' hypothesis for the theist who is aware of it. The question of how to determine, in a given situation, whether or not a hypothesis is an epistemically relevant alternative to some other accepted explanation of the facts, is difficult to answer satisfactorily. However, the Advaitic hypothesis is certainly not the product of pure philosophical fancy, dreamt up *ad hoc* to place a sceptical thorn in the side of committed theists. It is rather the considered religious view of a significant and influential portion of Indian religionists, developed historically in the light of accumulating experience and reflection. The fact that the Advaitic thesis is a 'live' interpretive option for so many could endow it, for the committed theist, with a degree of psychological force (if not properly epistemic support) that it might otherwise lack.

### The Mystery of the Mysterium

We have found that the brute 'otherness' of Rudolph Otto's *mysterium* is not sufficient to ascertain fully the theistic belief in an independent religious reality. Perhaps then it is the mystery itself - the revelation *that* something lies unrevealed in the numinous - that establishes the religious object's otherness. As a mystery, the numinous object is supposed to convey a sense of its ontological depth to the subject, without, nonetheless, exhaustively disclosing its precise nature. The subject perceives that the reality of the religious object far exceeds the limits of her present experience and resists comprehension, that, in Otto's (1950: 200) wonderful phrase, it "bursts the bounds of interpretation". Yet though the religious object may be mysterious - indeed, in part *because* it is mysterious - its ontological source is uncertain. It is logically possible that the mysterious object is actually grounded in the consciousness of the subject, and that it is therefore not an "intrinsically other" reality totally incommensurable with the self. Consider the position of the Advaita Vedantist, who alleges that human consciousness is of infinite depth and furthermore, that we typically exist in a state of epistemological alienation from that depth. The Advaitist might explain the mystery of the numinous as the experiencing subject's indirect intuition of his own reality, as a misplaced attribution of his own inchoately perceived ontological depth to a supposed external reality. Though the *particular* claim of the Vedantist that our ultimate nature is an infinite consciousness may be false, it is possible that in *some* way the numinous mystery is actually a concealed dimension of our own being. Indeed what experience could ever establish with certainty that the numinous exists independently of our experience? To know that the numinous is *not* an aspect of our being it seems we would have to do what is clearly impossible to do: get outside of ourselves and see that *this* is where we end, so to speak, and that *this* is where the numinous mystery begins. Insofar as we

experience the religious object it is *within* our sphere of experience, but in order to know that it also has reality *apart* from our experience we seem to require some sort of perspective *from outside* of our experience. If we want to know that the religious object exists independently of our experience, we must experience it *as* independent of our experience; we must somehow get *outside* of our experience and see it *there*. But it is clearly absurd to experience outside of experience, to somehow be ourselves yet not be ourselves.

Thus neither the bruteness, nor the mystery, nor any conceivable aspect of the *mysterium* could establish with the certainty that a theist might hope for, that the divine reality exists independently of us. We can find reason for at least a nagging doubt, in the face of any conceivable theistic experience, that the religious object exists independently of us: that the divine reality and experiencing subject are actually one seems an ineliminable possibility. One might suppose that there is some aspect of the numinous that Otto has not specified, and which we have not yet explicitly considered here, that could succeed where the bruteness and mystery of the *mysterium* have failed. But our most recent consideration supports the suspicion that no such aspect is forthcoming. For it could not give us what we seem to require to determine an object's independence of our experience, which is a perspective from outside of our experience. Of course, this is not to say that *ecstatic* experiences, in which one transcends the *normal* limits of the self, are impossible, for such experiences still occur, tautologously, *within* one's experience. One goes not outside of experience *per se* during ecstasy but only outside of the mundane boundaries of the self. Neither does any of this rule out, I suppose, that one could somehow know *a priori* that an object exists independently of oneself. It is not easy to see how a fact about the boundaries of existing things could be known on a purely *a priori* basis, but in any case I am primarily concerned here with the cognitive value of religious *experience*.

### Theistic Scepticism About Monism

Now I would like to conclude by turning the tables, and using certain theistic considerations as a basis for scepticism about Advaita Vedantic certainty. Practitioners within the Vedantic tradition often report experiences in which the subject feels himself or herself to be in union or "at-onement" with a fundamental divine reality beyond all distinctions. Brahman is supposed to be not just a theoretical postulate, but also the vivid experience of "the wise who perceive him within themselves" (Katha Upanisad 5, 14). In the Mundaka Upanisad we are told that:

The wise, their selves controlled, when they attain him altogether,  
he who is present in all, they enter into that very All.

One might wonder whether genuinely unitive experiences have *in fact* occurred; but such experiences seem at least possible, though they may inevitably present special descriptive difficulties. It seems that to report on thoroughly unitive experiences one would have to reflect on them *post facto*, using the distinctions characteristic of thought and language; but the fact that such distinctions inevitably creep into descriptions of the experiences does not entail that the experiences are not unitive in the first place. The subject of such experiences can protest that thought and language necessarily involve drawing distinctions, and are thus inadequate for the given descriptive task. Such unitive experiences leave their subject with the powerful impression that all objects of experience are actually contained within the subject's own nature, or are modes of that nature, and thus are thought to reveal a self-identity behind all apparent distinctions. The occurrence of such experiences might at least improve the case for Advaitic scepticism about theism, and might even provide one with sufficient reason to actively embrace Advaitic monism. But unitive experiences could not provide absolute support for an Advaitic ontology, any more than experience of a numinous Other could absolutely ground theism. Just as characteristically theistic experiences are open to an alternative Advaitic interpretation, experiences of absolute unity seem open to a distinctively theistic interpretation. It is an ineliminable possibility, even in the face of unitive mystical experience, that the ultimate religious reality in fact exists independently of us.

It is significant, for this question of how to interpret unitive experiences that they seem to occur even among mystics within the theistic tradition. For example, the late medieval mystic Gerlac Peterson describes an encounter in which "The soul seeth itself consummated in Him *who is One*, and perceiveth itself one or one spirit with the Selfsame, and that Selfsame which is God united with itself." (1921: 23) Meister Eckhart (1994) describes the goal of spiritual endeavour as a state in which "our whole being, life, understanding, knowledge and love will be from God and in God and will actually *be God*". He asserts that: "The divine nature is One, and each person is both One and the same One as God's nature". Such descriptions might seem incompatible with the postulates of classical theism, providing additional support for Advaitic monism; yet theists often carefully qualify descriptions of such experiences with an assertion of some sort of absolute distinction between the subject and God. Louis de Blois, the sixteenth century Benedictine, speaks of an experience in which the soul "is united to God, without any medium, and becomes one spirit with Him, and is transformed and changed into Him"; yet he is also careful to insist that the soul is "not so as to be of the same substance and nature as God" (1903: 185). According to Nicholas of Cusa, though fusion of God the Father and God the Son is perfect (an "absolute and essential identity") in the case of Christ,

[t]is not so when human nature is united unto the divine, for human nature cannot pass over into essential union with the divine, even as the finite cannot be infinitely united unto the infinite....Wherefore this union, whereby human nature is united unto the divine nature, is naught else than the attraction in the highest degree of the human nature unto the divine, in such wise that human nature, as such, could not be attracted to greater heights. This union then, of human nature, as such, with the divine is the greatest, in the sense of being the greatest possible, but it is not purely and simply the greatest, and infinite, as is the divine union. (1969: 97-98)

Nicholas' point seems to be that though we might experience a vivid and intimate identification with the divine reality, the ontological fact remains that there is an aspect of the divine that is outside of our experience altogether. In other words, an experience of apparent identification with the divine reality may merely be participation in an *aspect* of that reality, a reality that makes it possible but is ultimately independent of the experience.<sup>4</sup> Just as mental introspection alone does not establish the mind's causal independence of a material substratum, unitive mystical experiences do not establish that there is nothing that supports, yet transcends, the boundaries of the experience. It is a psychological fact that a person who is already committed to theism is more likely than an Advaitin to assume that indeed there *is* something in the divine nature that transcends their unitive experience. But this of course does not mean that the theist's assumption is false, empirically unfounded though it may be, and the Advaitin would be hard-pressed to point to any aspect of their own experience that could decisively disconfirm the theist's assumption. It is thus a perpetual epistemic possibility that the Advaitin overestimates the ontological import of their own unitive experience. We have found that an Advaitist can interpret numinous-theistic experiences of an independently existing God as 'pre-Advaitic' misapprehensions of the self-identical unity; but so can a theist interpret unitive experiences, whether reported by theists or Advaitists, as hyper-theistic aberrations, as temporary and intense 'sharings' of God's reality that are easily mistaken for revelations of a complete ontological unity.

### Religio-pragmatic Implications of the Religious Reality's Location

The onto-location of the religious reality is often thought to be one of the great points of division between religious traditions, in particular between Western theism and the monistic traditions of India, but I would like to close this discussion with the suggestion that the onto-location of the religious reality is not so

significant a religious issue as it is often thought to be. 'On paper', we might say, there certainly is an important difference between asserting that the divine reality is grounded in a being external to human nature, and asserting that the divine reality is ultimately not distinguishable from our own ultimate nature. But it seems that the mere location of the divine reality, in itself, entails very little about the nature of that divine reality. For a divine reality non-independent of human consciousness could possess the central features (aside from, of course, independence of human consciousness) that are traditionally predicated of God. There also seems to be little reason to suppose that a human-independent God is necessarily significantly limited in comparison to a religious reality that is ontologically indistinct from human consciousness. Of course, our *conception* of our ultimate relation to the divine reality will be different if we conceive of it as independent of us rather than as indistinct from us. Yet much, if not all of the traditional theistic discourse regarding our relation to the divine could still be appropriate in reference to a self-identical divine reality. This is the case so long as we exist in a state of epistemological, if not ontological alienation from the self-identical divine reality, and that reality can therefore appropriately be conceived as 'Other', as a state of existence significantly distinct from our current one. We might worship it, call on it in times of need and thank it in times of plenty. Such discourse might be said to occur within an ultimate ontological framework different from the properly theistic framework, yet perhaps that is all that is different. The sense of separation from a potential state of oneself might phenomenologically be identical to the sense of separation from a being conceived to be ontologically distinct from oneself, and discourse expressive of that separation might be appropriately identical. Yet one might still think that the ultimate religious goal of theism is necessarily different from the ultimate religious goal of a monistic system such as Advaita Vedanta. The latter assumedly seeks a complete sort of *union* with the divine reality; it assumes that we already are ontologically one with the divine reality, and enjoins a further epistemological union with the divine reality, the full realization that we are already one with it. Theism, on the other hand, assumedly seeks at most some sort of intimate relation with the divine reality, stopping short of expectation of a full union, epistemological or ontological.

Yet though soteriological goals may be conceived of differently in theism and Advaita Vedanta, practical realization of those goals may be experientially indistinguishable. It is for this very reason, I have tried to show in this paper, that it is not possible to ascertain through experience whether one has genuinely merged with the divine reality or is merely sharing in its reality, perhaps eternally. The necessary differences between theism and Vedantic non-dualism turn out to be rather abstract, for they do not seem to entail any necessary experiential differences.<sup>5</sup>

## Notes

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- 2 For example, there are no decisive *a priori* arguments for one ontology or the other.
- 3 Except, perhaps trivially, certain incorrigible beliefs about one's own states of consciousness, such as "I believe that I am now in pain", or "I believe that I now believe something."
- 4 Robert Nozick expresses a similar point, I think, when he asks of the Advaitic experience of Brahman: "But how can one tell that it is featurelessly homogenous throughout, including at all (possible) levels beneath the one where it is experienced as such? A painted surface can look perfectly undifferentiated, until we look closer or theorize about its microstructure" (1981: 138-139).
- 5 Indeed the difference between epistemological and ontological separation seems somewhat to dissolve here. Barry Stroud makes the interesting argument that the distinction between ontology and epistemology is in general not as neat as one might suppose: "I think even questions about knowledge, when they are properly philosophical, turn out to be questions about what is so in reality: 'Do we really know the things we think we know?'" (2000: 5). In the case of ontological union but epistemological separation from the divine, one might suppose that the epistemological separation entails a sort of ontological separation: to be in a state of epistemological alienation is, after all, to be in a particular way.

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