Towards a Rogerian theory of mysticism

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The Nature of Mysticism

Mysticism is a term used with reference to certain out-of-the-ordinary human experiences, experiences of a powerful nature belonging to that category of human experience that we label 'spiritual'. Mystical experiences, that is to say, are powerful versions of experiences in which the individual knows that they, the world and those around them are seamlessly embedded in, and manifestations of, a unitary and ultimate, transcendent cosmic reality, a reality that F. C. Happold describes as 'a beyond,…something which, though it is interwoven with it, is not of the external world of material phenomena,…an unseen order over and above the seen' (1970: 18-19)—'an actuality', as Evelyn Underhill further elucidates, that is 'beyond the reach of the senses'(1915/2000: 5).

Such a spiritual actuality is deemed, too, to be beyond the logic of discursive language and the categories that such language mediates in our everyday consciousness (James, 1902/1982: 380; White, 1972: x; Zaehner, 1957/1961: 198), an actuality, in other words, that is beyond such categories as 'personal' and 'impersonal', 'subject' and 'object'; 'me', 'you', and 'it'; 'sameness' and 'difference'…. In mystical experience this 'beyond in the midst' (Bonhoeffer, 1959) is said to be apprehended in a direct and unmediated manner; in a modality of experiencing that itself transcends the discursive categories of 'thought' and 'emotion'. Operative in mystical experience, that is, is a form of intuition or insight of a feeling/knowing kind, a manner of apprehending in which a sense of certitude regarding the truth-value of one's apprehensions is infused with the aura of profound and blissful meaning, awe-full and wonder-full love.

Mystical literature gives various names to the transcendent actuality so apprehended, names that usually begin with capital letters: viz., Reality, Absolute Reality, Divine Reality, Transcendent Reality, Ultimate Reality, the Ultimately Real, the Absolute, the Good, the One; not to mention Brahman and God. Here the use, in particular, of Divine Reality, Brahman, and God calls attention to the intimate relationship of mystical experience with religious and spiritual traditions. As Nona Coxhead notes:

> the 'mystic element' can be traced in records of all primitive religions. It is present in most of the Eastern spiritual philosophies such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism; in the Hellenic 'Mystery Religions'; in the Hebrew and Jewish Old Testament and Christian New Testament of the Bible; in Eastern Christianity and Western Catholicism and Protestantism; in Islamic Sufism. (1985:5)

For Margaret Smith, though, ‘Mysticism…is not to be regarded as religion in itself, but rather as the vital element in all true religions, rising up in revolt against cold formality and religious torpor’ (1980: 20). Smith’s view echoes that of William Inge, who declares that ‘mysticism…that dim consciousness of the beyond is...the raw material of all religion’ and as such ‘the fresh springs of inner life’ that foster ‘a revival of spirituality in the midst of formalism or unbelief’ (1899/1956: 5).

When we use the term ‘mysticism’, it is usually this close connection between religion and mystical experience that is uppermost in our minds. But, as Inge himself points out, mystical experience is not limited to the domain of religion and spiritual traditions; it also serves as the wellspring ‘perhaps of all philosophy and art’ (5)—an opinion other authorities definitively endorse (Coxhead, 1985; Gilbert, 1991; Happold, 1970).

Neither is science to be left out of this bigger mystical picture. Michael Polanyi, especially, strongly argues ‘that the discovery of objective truth in science consists in the apprehension of a rationality which commands our respect and arouses contemplative admiration; that such discovery, while using the experience of our senses as clues, transcends this experience by embracing a vision of a reality beyond the impression of our senses, a vision which speaks for itself in guiding us to an ever deeper understanding of reality’ (1964: 5-6).

So we see that mystical experience has not just been considered the fount of established religions and spiritual traditions, but of the other cultural enterprises of philosophy, art and science.

Another cultural domain with which mysticism is said to have a similar relationship is the domain of ethics and morality, that domain concerned with the art of living and rightful conduct. Mystically apprehending oneself to be part and parcel of a transcendent order in which one is one with the world and the other exercises a galvanizing and transformative effect upon individuals. They experience understanding who they truly are and how best to conduct themselves in their relationships with the world and with others.

Established religions and spiritual traditions greatly concern themselves, of course, with the nature of human identity and with what is or what is not proper conduct. However, mystical experiences that so transform a person’s ‘way of being’ need not occur within any formal religious or spiritual context. Such experiences frequently occur outside these formal contexts, seeming to come from out of the blue in a powerful manner—a number of adults relate enjoying ‘spontaneous’ mystical experiences of this kind in childhood (Robinson, 1977a). Various phenomena ‘trigger’ them, e.g., having sex, being depressed, appreciating art. When such experiences occur in relation to nature, though, they are referred to as ‘nature mysticism’; although a more general term, ‘cosmic consciousness’, is also used, a term used to connote that ‘without and within are one’ (Zaehner, 1957: 41). Irish novelist Forrest Reid gives us a flavour of such an experience when he writes, ‘It was within me that the trees waved their green branches, it was within me that the skylark was singing, it was within me that the hot sun shone, and that the shade was cool’ (in Zaehner, 1957: 41)

Contrasting with ‘spontaneous’ mystical experiences are those described as ‘induced’, experiences that arise in formal religious or spiritual contexts. In these contexts, past knowledge of what has facilitated the occurrence of mystical experience has led to the development of a discipline of specific beliefs and practices geared to such an end. Individuals who have committed themselves to these disciplines and enjoyed mystical experience record undergoing a roller coaster emotional journey; of travelling a developmental highway wherein, according to Evelyn Underhill, ‘the stages of its slow transcendence of the sense-world [are] marked by episodes of splendour and of terror’ (1912/1955: 445). ‘It is,’ says Underhill, ‘an organic life-process’ (1915/2000: 81-2).

Christian literature terms this organic sequence of peaks and troughs the Mystic Way, whereas Buddhists speak of the Path to Enlightenment. With some form of meditation a key rite of passage (and sometimes the taking of drugs), progress along this developmental pathway is proportional to a person’s fitness as a traveller, fitness involving the purging of those aspects of her or his way of being that prevent them attuning themselves to the transcendental spiritual order.

Those who successfully travel the Mystic Way encounter experiences of oneness with others and the cosmos in general. But they are likely to encounter, too, strange and unusual experiences, including heightening of the five senses, extra-sensory perceptions, and inner visions and auditions. When the term ‘mysticism’ is broadened to characterize disciplined pursuit of the mystic pathway, such bizarre experiences also tend to be dubbed ‘mystical’. Most scholars, though, prefer to stick to deploying the term ‘mysticism’ where there is a more direct relationship to the final goal of the mystic path. This final goal or stage is that in which the being of the mystic pilgrim is so purified as to constitute oneness with the Ultimate, existential union apprehended in a direct and unmediated fashion devoid of any image or specific perceptual content.

Differences exist between spiritual traditions in describing and conceiving a condition wherein ‘The knower and the known are one’ (Meister Eckhart, in Huxley, 1916/1958: 25). So, for instance, ‘in Christian terminology’, informs R. C. Zaehner, ‘mysticism means union with God; in non-theistical contexts it also means union with some principle or other’ (1957: 32). It is a matter of academic debate whether such differences are (a) simply different interpretations of the same experiential condition—i.e., whether in experiencing a condition that does not fit the discursive categories of everyday consciousness, of ‘personal’ or ‘impersonal’, one tradition interprets things in terms of the category of the personal and the other in terms of the impersonal; or (b) indicative of a more fundamental difference.

However, whether the descriptions refer to a theistic, ‘I-Thou’ encounter (to a communion of one person with another), or to a monistic oneness with an infinite principle, the admonitions of William Blake and Evelyn Underhill still apply: that reaching the final goal of the mystic path involves some kind of cleansing or purification process, of eliminating the negative to become more whole and wholesome. ‘If the doors of perception were cleansed’, Blake famously recounts, ‘everything could be seen as it is, infinite’ (Huxley, 1946/1958: 197). For, describes Underhill, ‘the pure soul is like a lens from which all the irrelevancies and

excrescences, all the beams and motes of egotism and prejudice have been removed; so that it may reflect a clear image of the one Transcendent Fact within which all other facts are held' (1915/2000: 8). In other words, as Jesus divined: 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God'.

Terms that mystics employ to portray the character of that which they apprehend in the final Unitive state include the Void, the Divine Nothing, and the Dazzling Darkness. Buddhism with its emphasis on monistic oneness uses the term 'Emptiness', the nature of which is described by Daisetz Suzuki. 'In Buddhist Emptiness', declares Suzuki,

> there is no time, no space, no becoming, no thing-ness, it is what makes all these things possible; it is a zero full of infinite possibilities, it is a void of inexhaustible contents. Pure experience is the mind seeing itself as reflected in itself, it is an act of self-identification, a state of suchness. This is possible only…when the mind is devoid of all its possible contents except itself. (1957: 19)

By contrast, Christians speak of the blissful experiencing of the living and loving presence of the imageless Other, of two becoming one in a 'spiritual marriage'.

To denote the contentless experience of Union, modern students of mysticism employ the term 'the pure consciousness experience', PCE for short (Foreman, 1990). The claim is that the PCE is an apprehension of reality as it truly is, one unconditioned and free from the categories of sense making that constitute our cultural heritage.

As the lives of great mystics such as Buddha and St. Teresa of Avila bear witness, attainment of the peak mystical experience serves not for detachment from the everyday world—even if the mystic has transcended the 'attachments' of everyday consciousness—, but for energetic, fruitful and creative activity in the world, often performed with childlike spontaneity and gaiety. Robert Foreman (1990: 8) thus posits that such individuals enjoy a form of the PCE of an enduring, not transient, nature, one that is maintained in everyday activities. Conceivably this is what Martin Buber means when he declares that 'we can stand in the I-Thou relationship not merely with other men [sic.] but with beings and things which come to meet us in nature' (1958: 124-5). Certainly it is a relationship with the world wherein individuals feel they are personally attuned to a transcendent order and acting in harmony with a power greater than themselves—a state of affairs that prompts Evelyn Underhill to aver that 'broadly speaking' she understands mysticism 'to be the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with the transcendent order' (1912/1955: xiv). Harmony with the transcendent it may be, but there are times when such harmony leads to disharmony and even conflict with the existing world order. For the reliance by mystics upon private inspiration and personal creativity 'often puts them on a course that defies traditional practices, and they may find themselves at war with established authority' (Committee on Psychiatry & Religion, 1976: 719).

Such a brief overview of mysticism's main features fails to adequately portray the extent of academic disagreement over its precise definition and nature. What, for

instance, is the meaning of the differences between Eastern and Western spiritual traditions in characterizing mystical experience? Is it fair to speak of a common experience across such traditions? What of the relationship between mysticism and madness? Like mystics, 'psychotic' individuals are convinced that their visions and auditions provide true knowledge. Are we to say that mysticism is a form of madness, or that madness is a form of mysticism?

As Frits Staal points up in his book Exploring Mysticism (1975), 'A rational explanation of a phenomenon requires the formulation of a theory which purports to explain that phenomenon' (1975: 17). Academic disagreement over the nature of mysticism indicates that we do not possess such a theory. Thus, Staal elucidates, 'since we do not have a theory of mysticism, we do not know precisely what mysticism is and we are not in a position to provide a definition' (p. 18). The way to remedy such a state of affairs, according to Staal, is first to recognize that 'whatever it may turn out to be in addition, the study of mysticism is at least in part the study of certain aspects of the mind' (p. 186). 'Mysticism and mystical experience', he asserts,

> cannot be understood in isolation from the more general problem of the nature of mind. Conversely, no theory of mind which cannot account for mystical experience can be adequate. (p. 186)

On such a premise the kind of individual Staal considers best positioned to provide a rational, theoretical explanation of the nature of mysticism is a psychologist, an individual who seeks scientific understanding of the mind. But not any kind of psychologist; rather someone who has an open-minded attitude towards mysticism; someone who has engaged in spiritual practices and undergone mystical experiences first hand.

Such a someone, to my mind, is humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers, founder of person-centred therapy. Rogers, I contend, not only was open-minded towards mystical experience, not only enjoyed mystical experiences through engaging in spiritual practices, but provides us with the conceptual foundation for the development of a rational/scientific understanding of mysticism. Below I examine Rogers' ideas vis-à-vis mysticism and go on to suggest how they might be augmented to furnish the kind of explanation that Staal envisions.

Carl Rogers and the mystical, spiritual dimension

At the end of his life, having spent over a quarter century engaged in scientific research into the nature of psychotherapy, Carl Rogers published an article entitled 'The Foundations of a Person-Centered Approach' (1980), an article singularly significant apropos developing a rational/scientific understanding of mysticism.

In this article, reflecting upon his work as an individual therapist and as a group facilitator, particularly on those moments when he was at his best, Rogers remarks that:

> Our experiences in therapy and in groups, it is clear, involve the transcendent, the indescribable, the spiritual. I am compelled to believe that I, like many others, have underestimated the importance of this mystical, spiritual dimension. (1980:131)

This pronouncement is specially meaningful due to the fact that in his twenties Rogers had decisively turned his back on religion. After initially setting out to train as a Christian minister, Rogers forsook his Christian faith to qualify instead as a clinical psychologist. Thereafter he never again devoted himself to formal religious practices; and even after his re-estimation of 'the mystical, spiritual dimension' still confessed to only employing 'the word "spiritual"….reluctantly' and not to 'like using religious terminology' (1984: 417). Thus, despite his own and others' experiences of a mystical, spiritual nature, and despite being prepared to accept others' judgement that he himself was 'very spiritual', Rogers still maintained that 'to talk about spirituality and God is not what gives life its religious or spiritual quality' (p. 418).

If, then, Rogers came to enjoy mystical/spiritual experiences and was himself recognized as 'very spiritual'; if he achieved such experiences and such a way of being without indulging in formal religious/spiritual activities; and if he did not explain such matters in traditional religious or spiritual terms; it seems reasonable (a) to appraise those practices through which he came to experience and exemplify the 'mystical, spiritual dimension', and (b) to examine his theoretical explanation of such matters in a-religious and would-be scientific terms.

Rogers' 'Foundations' paper serves as a rich resource when it comes to furthering such investigation. For in this paper Rogers not only presents his key hypothesis apropos explaining mystical experience, but he makes reference to the two disciplinary practices that facilitated his personal development of 'mystical' abilities: the practice of psychotherapy and the practice of science.

In the succeeding discussion I consider in turn the 'mystical/spiritual' element in Rogers' characterization of the disciplines of psychotherapy and of science. Following which, I elaborate upon Rogers' concept of the formative tendency as key hypothesis for the development of a rational/scientific explanation of mysticism.

The practice of psychotherapy

Regarding the practice of psychotherapy, as early as 1955 we find Rogers referring to the 'almost mystical subjectivity of myself as therapist …when I am at my best in this function' (1967: 200). Familiarity with the ideas of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber leads Rogers at this time to propose that in these 'deepest parts of therapy….there is, to borrow Buber's phrase, a real "I-Thou" relationship, a timeless living in the experience which is between the client and me' (1967: 202). 'When', he expands, 'there is this complete unity, singleness, fullness of experiencing in the relationship, then it acquires the "out-of-this-world" quality which many therapists have remarked upon, a sort of trance-like feeling'.

Buber, for his part, goes beyond portraying the 'I-Thou' relationship as the most loving, open and intimate of relationships between human beings. He also construes it as the relationship that obtains between the person and God. Rogers, to an extent, mirrors Buber in this respect; since, in tracing Rogers' thinking after 1955 we discover that, like Buber, he places the 'I-Thou' moments of therapy within a transcendental context. In 1955 Rogers describes the 'the deepest parts of therapy' as those in which 'I do not know, cognitively, where...[the] relationship is leading' since 'it is as though both I and the client...let ourselves slip into the stream of becoming [or life], a stream or process which carries us along (1967:202). Whereas in his 1980 Foundations article, he associates his best moments as group facilitator or therapist with being in touch with a transcendent, spiritual order. 'When', he says,

> I am closest to my intuitive self, when I am somehow in touch with the unknown in me, when perhaps I am in a slightly altered state of consciousness….when I can relax and be close to the transcendental core of me, then I may behave in strange and impulsive ways in the relationship, ways that I cannot possibly justify rationally, which have nothing to do with my thought processes. But these strange behaviours turn out to be right in some odd way: it seems that my inner spirit has reached out and touched the inner spirit of the other. Our relationship transcends itself and becomes a part of something larger. (1980: 129)

That it is attunement to a transcendental order that sways his behaviour in such moments is underscored by Rogers through his witness to the 'peculiar satisfaction' and enrichment he experiences in 'really hearing someone', in 'resonating' to them 'at all levels' (Rogers, 1980: 8-9). Beyond his previous assertion that 'what is most personal is most general' (1967: 26), Rogers now boldly proclaims that such in-depth listening involves 'feeling one's self in touch with what is universally true' (1980:8). 'It is', he avers,

> like listening to the music of the spheres because beyond the immediate message of the person, no matter what that might be, there is the universal. Hidden in all of the personal communication which I really hear there seem to be orderly psychological laws, aspects of the same order we find in the universe as a whole. (1980: 8)

In terms of spiritual traditions, what Rogers is describing here is 'mystical enlightenment'. For, states John White, 'Enlightenment reveals that what is most

deeply personal is also most universal. In the mystical state, reality and ideality become one' (1972: xiv).

Accepting, then, that Rogers was privy to mystical experience vis-à-vis his person-centred practice of psychotherapy, what of the spiritual discipline he pursued that facilitated his development of this capacity? In other words, if 'the practice of person-centred therapy is a profound spiritual discipline' (Thorne, 2002: ix), what specifically is it that makes it so?

Thus far we have seen that for Rogers the discipline of practising person-centred therapy involves him relaxing and 'tuning in to his transcendental core'. That Rogers became capable of this depth of attunement seems to have been the reward for many years of determinedly refining a mode of interpersonal knowing that transcends the discursive knowing of everyday consciousness. Describing his method, Rogers says,

> I let myself go into the immediacy of the relationship where it is my total organism which takes over and is sensitive to the relationship, not simply my consciousness. I am not consciously responding in a planful or analytic way, but simply react in an unreflective way, my reaction being based (but not consciously) on the total organismic sensitivity to this other person. (1967: 202)

This description by Rogers appears to match what Freud terms 'evenly suspended attention', the successful exercise of which, according to Rogers, requires a person to be 'without any cognitive or emotional barriers to a complete "letting go" in understanding' (1967: 202).

Such a notion of cognitive and emotional barriers getting in the way of true and full knowing of the other obviously parallels the views expressed in spiritual literature referred to earlier: that spiritual purification is a necessary prerequisite for true spiritual perception to be achieved, especially Underhill's pronouncement that 'the pure soul' is one 'from which…all the beams and motes of egotism and prejudice have been removed'.

Freud used the term 'fixations' for the kind of barriers that Rogers refers to; and it is exactly this Freudian term that Michael Whiteman employs in declaring that 'we are all a mass of fixations, and essentially the mystical way is to release these fixations one by one until there comes a time when they are released without effort, because our response has become open and unified' (in Robinson, 1977b: 154). Janet Malcolm (1982: 26) makes a similar linkage in testifying to a kinship between Freud's 'evenly suspended attention' and Zen meditation, a discipline that Zen abbot Daishin Morgan (2004) emphasizes is specifically concerned with 'letting go'.

When it comes to explaining how an individual comes to develop psychological barriers to fulsome understanding and knowing, Rogers (like Freud and his account of fixations) focuses his attention primarily upon the experience of the child.

As an infant, says Rogers, a person starts life relying totally on the inner wisdom of her organism as the means by which to make sense of what she encounters. She deals with the world in a flexible and fluid manner, in process terms; she knows nonverbally 'what is good for her and what is not'; 'she is the center of the valuing process' (1983: 258). Unfortunately, cautions Rogers, this open and unsullied apprehending of self, world and other can become dimmed and distorted under circumstances in which 'love from a parent or significant other is made conditional' on the child introjecting 'certain constructs and values' belonging to that parental figure (1963: 19). 'These values', Rogers explains, 'are rigid and static since they are not part of the child's normal valuing process of his experience'. As alien introjects, they stand in the way of our appreciating reality for what it is and of our becoming integrated human beings. They thus reinforce the impact of the development, particularly in the West, 'of static concepts—in the formation of our language, in our thought, in our philosophy'. Here, in his focus upon culture, Rogers acknowledges that he is serving as the mouthpiece for Lancelot Whyte and Whyte's hypothesis that 'though nature is clearly process, man [sic] has been caught in his own fixed forms of thought' and thereby come 'to lose his proper organic integration' (p. 19).

Viewed from a 'spiritual' perspective, the pattern Rogers posits—of initial integration and undistorted apprehension of reality subsequently becoming sullied by the influence of society—obviously reprises the familiar religious theme of paradise lost. Likewise, when Rogers portrays the attributes of the individual who has wrestled free from such alien conditioning, his account closely resembles spiritual narratives of 'paradise regained'. Paralleling the description in spiritual literature of the mystic as one who enjoys re-found bliss and a re-found original vision, Rogers provides us with an account of the 'psychologically mature adult', or 'fully functioning person' (1967; 1983), where what is noteworthy about such a person is that in 'functioning fully there are no barriers, no inhibitions, which prevent the full experiencing of whatever is organismically present' (1980: 128). In consequence, just as the high functioning mystic is said to be child-like, so, 'like the infant', asserts Rogers,

> the psychologically mature adult trusts and uses the wisdom of her organism, with the difference that she is able to do so knowingly. She realizes that if she can trust all of herself, her feelings and her intuitions may be wiser than her mind, that as a total person she can be more sensitive and accurate than her thoughts alone. (Rogers, 1983: 264)

Clear comparisons can therefore be drawn between Rogers' characterization of the fully functioning person as one who is 'free from introjects' and thereby 'a unity of flow, of motion', 'an integrated process of changingness' (1980: 127; 1967: 158), and descriptions in spiritual literature of the way of being of the mystic: with, for example, Underhill's portrayal of the unitive mystic as one in whom 'the self is remade, transformed, [and] has at last unified itself' (1912/1955: 416); or Roger Westcott's (1972: 30) account that such an individual enjoys 'a state of consciousness' called 'moksha, "released"'. 'In the released state', elaborates Westcott,

> the waking intellect no longer attempts to stay the cosmic process by chopping it into segments or rigidifying it into an entity. Instead it flows—like the world movement of which it is part. (pp. 30-1)

Such 'released' freedom, Rogers makes plain, involves the freedom to care, the freedom to love, which again—if David Brazier (1994) is right in his revision of Rogers' thought—is also the re-finding on a higher level of the loving way of being of the infant. It is significant, therefore, that Rogers employs the Christian term for love, agape, in describing the way of being of the effective therapist in relation to her client (Rogers & Stevens, 1967: 94). Involving as it does a fully functioning awareness and child-like letting go, Rogers hypothesizes that intrinsic to such a therapeutic modus operandi is the communication to the other of the 'core' attitudinal conditions of empathic understanding, prizing or unconditional positive regard, and congruence or authenticity.

Whether for 'therapeutic' we should here read 'spiritual' is a moot point in the light of The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola that aim at the development of empathy towards others; not to mention Alfred Adler's assertion that empathy is a form of 'a social feeling' originating in 'a cosmic feeling and a reflection of the connectedness of the whole cosmos which lives in us' (in May, 1967: 79).

Confirming this cosmic-cum-spiritual connection vis-à-vis the fully functioning person, Rogers posits that through becoming 'more free from introjects', and thereby more aware of 'whatever is organismically present', this person is more likely to make conscious choices that are 'in tune with the evolutionary flow', (1980: 127-8). 'Moving in the direction of wholeness, integration, a unified life', he or she, says Rogers, 'more surely…will float in a direction consonant with the directional evolutionary flow', and so serve 'as a fit vanguard of evolution' (1980: 127-8; 1983: 292).

According to Rogers, therefore, this 'more complete development of awareness' represents the level at which 'new forms are invented' and 'perhaps even new directions for the human species' (p. 127). With the farthest advance of consciousness involving 'a transcendent awareness of the harmony and unity of the cosmic system, including humankind', it is perhaps here, he suggests, that 'we are touching the cutting edge of our ability to transcend ourselves, to create new and more spiritual directions in human evolution' (pp. 133 & 134).

So we see that Rogers' revering of the 'mystical, spiritual dimension' relates to his explicitly connecting mystical/spiritual experiencing with the further evolution of the cosmos; to him, the form of consciousness possessed by the fully functioning person represents the spearhead of evolutionary advance.

In drawing such a connection, Rogers' account closely accords once again with that found in spiritual literature. 'In the great mystics', declares Evelyn Underhill, 'we see the highest and widest development of that [spiritual] consciousness to which the human race has yet attained', (1912/1955: 444-5). Whereas F. C. Happold hypothesizes that if the advance of evolution is to be identified with 'the growth of an ever wider form of consciousness…which will result in an ability to see aspects of the universe as yet only faintly glimpsed…., may we not see in the mystics the forerunners of a type of consciousness, which will become more and more common as mankind [sic.] ascends higher and higher up the ladder of evolution?' (1963: 34).

Happold acknowledges that his hypothesis is essentially that of Teilhard de Chardin. Rogers was familiar with Teilhard's work and when interviewed late in life confessed to being open to the notion that Jesus, Buddha and Krishna, and other 'Spiritual Masters' were 'Adepts' involved in evolving 'new forms of spiritual existence', an evolution he associates with Teilhard's notion of 'the noösphere' as a new form of consciousness (Rogers, 1984).

The practice of science

Another area of Rogers' life pertaining to the mystical, spiritual dimension is his engagement with science, both as a scientific researcher into the nature of psychotherapy and as a writer on the nature of science. 'Like most people who are consumed by a scientific passion', posits Maureen O'Hara, 'Rogers could also be seen as a mystic', for 'like the mystic, the scientist is fired by a desire to come ever closer to a direct experience of this [the universe's] lawfulness or harmony' (1995: 41). 'I don't believe that this is a chance universe', declares Rogers (1984), thereby confirming O'Hara's affirmation that 'at the heart of the scientific vocation is a basic metaphysical belief that must be taken on faith if science is to continue: the fundamental faith that the universe is not random, capricious, or arbitrary but is in fact lawful, orderly, and understandable' (1995: 41).

In theorizing upon the nature of science, Rogers was much influenced by the ideas of Michael Polanyi. In tune with Polanyi, Rogers emphasizes the notion that 'science exists only in people' (1967: 216); that at root it is based upon the sense-making capabilities of individual persons. 'All science, and each individual scientific project, has its origin', Rogers proclaims, 'in the matrix of immediate, personal, subjective experience' (p. 217). At the outset, he says, 'a good scientist…immerses himself [sic] in the relevant experience, whether that be the physics laboratory, the world of plant or animal life, the hospital, the psychological laboratory or clinic, or whatever' (p. 216). 'It means', Rogers elaborates, 'soaking up experience like a sponge, so that it is taken in in all its complexity, with my total organism freely participating in the experiencing of the phenomena; not simply my conscious mind' (1968/1990: 269).

For Rogers, then, not only is 'this immersion…similar to the immersion of the therapist in therapy' (1967: 216), but like the effective therapist, like the fully functioning person, 'the discoverer of knowledge [e.g. 'Kepler, Einstein'] feels a trust in all his avenues of knowing: unconscious, intuitive, and conscious' (p. 270). That is to say, 'the more nearly the individual [scientist] comes to being a fully functioning person…, the more trustworthy he is as a discoverer of truth' (1968/1990: 274).

On the basis of the discoverer's trustworthy sensing or 'indwelling', recounts Rogers, there can come to the individual 'a recognition—usually prelogical, intuitive, involving all the capacities of the organism—of a dimly sensed gestalt: a hidden reality' (p. 271). 'This gestalt or pattern', he says,

> appears to give meaning to disconnected phenomena. The more that this total apprehension is free from cultural values and is free from past scientific values, the more adequate it is likely to be. (pp. 271-2).

That such a sensing of a pattern is a form of mystical apprehension is implicit in Rogers' affirmation 'that when a pattern is sensed, it must be perceived in its own terms; whether those terms are internal, ineffable, subjective, and invisible; or whether they are external, tangible, and visible' (p. 271). This implicit mystical connection is made explicit, though, when Rogers endorses the claim of Polanyi mentioned earlier: that the discovery of objective truth in science involves 'embracing the vision of a reality beyond the impression of our senses' (p. 273). For Rogers, Polanyi's 'vision of a reality' is no different from his own 'sensing of a pattern', with both phrases in his view referring to the same thing as the term 'hypothesis'.

Rogers' cosmic hypothesis

Having overviewed Rogers' 'person centred' conception of science, I move on now to elaborate upon the personal hypothesis/sensed pattern/vision of reality that Rogers sets forth—allied to acknowledging the importance of the mystical, spiritual dimension—in his article The foundations of a person-centred approach.

Rogers' vision is a vision of cosmic unity couched in terms of 'a formative tendency at work in the universe, which can be observed at every level' (1980: 124). Rogers identifies this formative tendency with Smuts' 'whole-making, holistic tendency' and dubs it a 'holistic force' (p. 113), thereby revealing a close concordance with views found in spiritual literature—with for instance, Underhill's assertion that the mystic experiences 'inundations' of the 'transcendent life-force' (1915/2000: 134); that it is, in White's words, illumination of a 'unifying principle at work', (1972: x).

Elsewhere (Ellingham, 2002) I have elaborated at length upon the character of the workings of the formative tendency as conceived by Rogers, an elaboration that buttresses Rogers' exposition with ideas drawn from thinkers sharing the same fundamental worldview—Michael Polanyi and Lancelot Whyte, especially, both of whom directly influenced Rogers' thinking. Here, having little space, I concentrate on reprising key aspects of my earlier discussion in order to highlight how the formative tendency may serve as conceptual cornerstone for a scientific explanation of mysticism.

To understand how this is possible, consider the nature of scientific concepts, Newton's concept of gravity in particular.

Scientists employ symbols and symbolic devices (words, mathematical formulae, pictorial images) to characterize a pattern present in a wide range of phenomena. The abstract formulation of such a pattern is termed a concept and the more precisely it is formulated, the wider the range of phenomena to which it applies, the more powerful such a concept will be. So, for instance, Newton's mathematically formulated concept of gravity identifies an abstract pattern common to events in the heavens and events on earth. Having apprehended, 'mystically' intuited, a single order/unitary pattern to earthly and heavenly events, Newton symbolized the oneness that he had sensed in terms of his mathematically expressed concept of gravity.

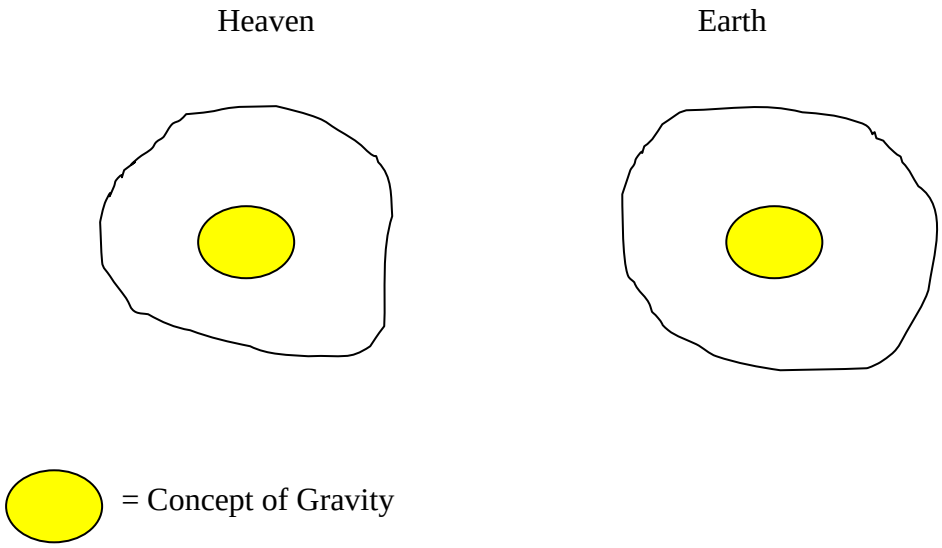


Figure 1: Newton's concept of gravity

By comparison with Newton's interrelating the events of earth and heaven, Rogers

> (a) speaks of 'aspects of the same order we find in the universe as a whole' being manifested in the in-depth psychological order within the person (1980: 8).
>
> (b) identifies a hypothetical concept, the formative tendency, as a 'directional tendency in the universe, which can be traced and observed in stellar space, in crystals, in micro-organisms, in more complex organic life, and in human beings' (1980: 133).
>
> (c) characterizes this order, the activity or 'workings' of this universal formative tendency, in terms of verbal description rather than mathematical formula.

Which is to say that Rogers' notion of the formative tendency is first, more all-encompassing than Newton's concept of gravity, embracing all 'levels' in the universe, including the subjective experiencing of the person; second, less precisely formulated insofar as it is characterized verbally rather than mathematically.

Note, then, how Rogers' characterization of the formative tendency can be given greater specificity and so help develop greater conceptual understanding of mysticism.

Describing the pattern to its workings, Rogers speaks of the formative tendency as 'the evolutionary tendency toward greater order, greater complexity, greater interrelatedness' (1980: 133). It is, he amplifies, 'a creative and not a

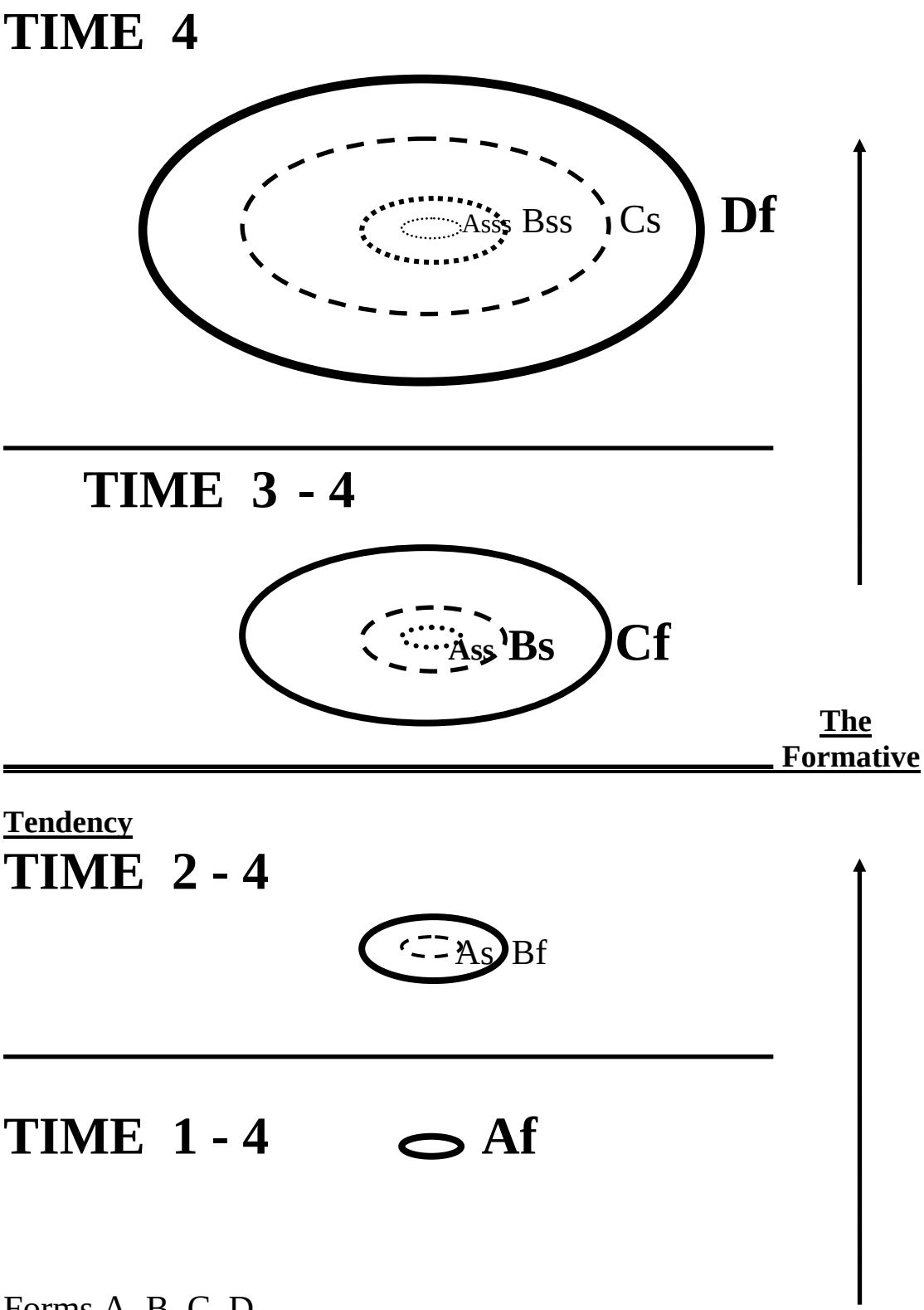
destructive process' whereby 'every form that we see or know emerged from a simpler less complex form' (1980:125).

Rogers acknowledges the strong influence of Lancelot Whyte's ideas in his developing the notion of the formative tendency, especially Whyte's equivalent concept, the morphic tendency. This influence is clearly evidenced when Whyte speaks of the morphic tendency being 'life-enhancing, not merely adaptive but formative and creative', of its constituting 'the principle that well-formed terminal states can arise from less-formed initial ones' (1974: 43, 83). Beyond Rogers, though, Whyte makes explicit the fact that the ongoing creative emergence of greater forms/wholes from simpler forebears gives rise to a hierarchical structure to the universe. So conceived, says Whyte,

> the universe is arranged in a series of discrete 'levels', which for precision we call a hierarchy of wholes and parts. The first fact about the universe is its organization as a system of systems, from larger to smaller, and so is every individual. (Whyte, 1974: 43)

Specifically, this means that 'the known universe as a whole, and every organism, including man [sic.] contains a graded sequence of units in each of which a formative tendency has been, or still is, present' (Whyte, 1974: 58).

Further explication of the hierarchical pattern that represents the ubiquitous working of the formative tendency is provided by Michael Polanyi. As depicted by figure 2, Polanyi posits that when a larger form creatively emerges from a simpler forebear, the simpler forebear continues to have a 'tacit' or 'subsidiary' presence within the structure of the later, more comprehensive form, even as 'focal' manifestations of the simpler form remain present. For example, having emerged from animal form, human form has animal form subsidiarily present within its structure even as animal form continues to be focally manifested by today's non-human animals.



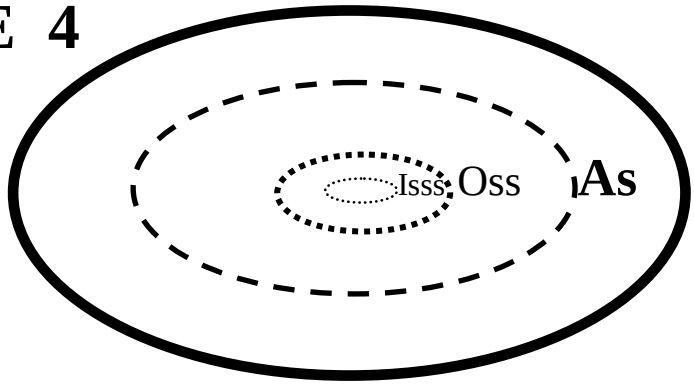
Forms A, B, C, D
f = focal
s = subsidiary, ss = sub-subsidiary, sss = sub-sub-subsidiary.

Figure 2: Abstract Representation of the Workings of the Formative Tendency

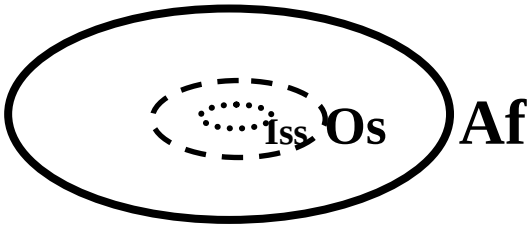
Rogers speaks of nature being ‘clearly process’ (1963: 19), i.e. patterned activity; but whether such process exhibits itself to us as phenomena that are animal, vegetable, mineral, psychological, or spiritual, etc., in every domain the same hierarchical pattern to the creation and continuing existence of those phenomena is discernible: the ubiquitous pattern represented by figure 2. If the mystical vision consists in the direct apprehension of a ‘transcendent life-force’ (Underhill, 1915/2000: 134), ‘a unifying principle at work’ (White, 1972: x), or as Rogers puts it, ‘the formative tendency’, then figure 2 provides us with a conceptual, or formal, representation of that force/principle/tendency.

On such a basis, a modified version of figure 2, figure 3, helps explicate the mystical experience of our being one with the world in the sense of what is outside us is the same as within. From an evolutionary perspective, figure 3 represents the creative emergence of the various forms of existence preceding and including human form.

TIME 4



TIME 3 - 4



The Formative Tendency

TIME 2 - 4

TIME 1 - 4

f = focal, s = subsidiary;

I = Inorganic Form
O = Organic Form
A = Animal Form
H = Human Form

Figure 3: The Evolutionary Workings of the Formative Tendency

Depicting the 'ladder' or 'chain' of evolution from inorganic to human form, figure 3 specifies how

(a) the major forms, or levels, of evolution have emerged from simpler forebears, forebears that continue to have an ongoing ('focal') existence in their own right.
(b) each more elaborate form possesses a structure in which its simpler forebears have a subsidiary/tacit presence.

Regarding the pattern of processes comprising the human being (i.e. human form, Hf), figure 3 depicts the tacit presence within the structure of human form of the major evolutionary forms from which human form emerged: namely, inorganic, organic and animal. Such a representation clarifies Polanyi's assertion that in 'the hierarchy of levels' making up each human being 'we can see all the levels of evolution at a glance' (1966: 36).

Viewing the structure of human form in this way highlights the 'sameness' between the patterns of process that comprise a person and those that make up the surrounding world. Apropos human experiencing of this sameness, Alfred North Whitehead posits that not only is 'the human mind…conscious of its body inheritance' (1929/1969: 129), but that all patterns of process have a qualitative 'feel' to them, the same patterns having the same 'feel'.

So understood, the mystic is a person who enjoys states of mind whereby he or she empathically senses that the qualitative feel to the patterns of process that comprise rocks, plants, animals, other humans, is the same as that arising from equivalent patterns comprising their own organism. The mystic, in other words, senses that the without of the world and the within of their own organism are one, in the same fashion as a person in a choir perceives that the musical note sung by others is the same that they themselves are singing.

Further, in the same way that with a choir we speak of a unified field of sound waves with centres on self and others, so, in general terms, we might think of a unified field of processes (patterns of activity) with specific nodes centred in ourselves and the surrounding world. Early in the 20th century Whitehead realised that such a 'process' or field worldview—one in which we view ourselves as 'process immersed in process beyond ourselves' (Whitehead, 1938/1968: 8)—is a general version of the worldview intrinsic to modern physics; which makes it significant that Fritjof Capra (1975) finds a close similarity between characterizations of the world by modern physicists and those of Eastern mystics. 'In modern physics', says Capra, 'the universe is thus experienced as a dynamic, inseparable whole which always includes the observer in an essential way.…Such an experience, however, is closely similar to that of Eastern mystics' (p. 81). It is significant, too, that Rogers adduces Capra's views to support his own concerning the formative tendency.

Although here it is not possible to go into detail, figure 2 can also be used to explicate the mode of feeling/knowing intrinsic to mystical experience. Insofar as simpler (e.g. infantile) patterns of sense-making are tacitly present in adult patterns,

one can conceive of such modes becoming focal to the adult through a relaxation, 'letting go', of the operation of more developed higher levels. Thereby, a more global, less differentiated sensing of that which lies beyond adult discursive awareness makes itself available for integration into that awareness. New patterns of process become formed as consciousness itself expands and advances. In such a fashion, the mystic, as Rogers expresses, is able 'to create new and more spiritual directions in human evolution' (1980: 134)—he or she being, in Underhill's words, 'a creative artist of the highest kind' (1980: 400).

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