

# THE RELATIONSHIP OF PERSONAL COGNITIVE SCHEMAS TO THE LABELLING OF A PROFOUND EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE AS MYSTICAL OR AESTHETIC

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## Abstract

Two of the more intriguing and ambiguous of subjective experiences are the profound mystical and the profound aesthetic experiences. These two experiences seem to share common characteristics, suggesting the hypothesis that the apparent differences between the two may be the result of a person's individual schema and cognitive framework. To test this hypothesis six major, recurring characteristics in the descriptions of both mystical and aesthetic experiences were distinguished. A questionnaire of 40 questions was prepared which included six demographic questions, 10 distracter questions, and 24 dichotomous questions intended to determine whether: 1) a person was religiously oriented, was especially engaged with art, or both; 2) had experienced events with six characteristics common to descriptions of profound aesthetic and mystical experiences; 3) felt he or she had had a mystical or aesthetic experience. The questionnaire was filled out by 487 individuals; approximately half of which were university psychology students and the other half respondents to an Internet on-line questionnaire. Of the respondents, 391 met the criteria set for a valid profound mystical/aesthetic experience. Preliminary examination of the data supported the hypothesis that there is a significant relationship between an individual's personal religious schema, and the belief that the experience was mystical; and, conversely, that an artistically oriented person tends to label a similarly described experience as a profound aesthetic experience, rather than as a mystical one.

## Introduction

William James famously pointed out the importance of consciousness as a legitimate domain for psychological investigation, but research in this area decreased during that period when behaviourism dominated the field, and James' book *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1902) was relegated by the behaviourist community to the domain of speculative philosophy. The pendulum has swung back, and there is now renewed interest in experiences that are in our consciousness. Two of the most intriguing and ambiguous of these experiences are the religious-mystical and the profound aesthetic experiences. It is remarkable that these two experiences share many common characteristics, suggesting the hypothesis that the differences between the two experiences are not in the experience itself so much as in the

individual's interpretation of the experience: i.e., the result of the person's individual schema and the framework in which these experiences occur.

Coincident with psychology's renewed interest in consciousness was a resurgence of interest in spiritual experiences. In a 1989 survey, Gallup and Jones found that 94 percent of all Americans believed in a divine power (Paloutzian, 1996). In another survey, Gallup and Newport asked "Have you ever been aware of, or influenced by, a presence or a power – whether you call it God or not – which is different from your every day self?" 60 percent of those who claimed to have felt this presence considered themselves very religious, whereas 39 percent who claimed not to be religious also had this experience. According to Paloutzian, there are two reasons for the differences in the percentage between the two groups: 1) Religious people may truly experience a higher percentage of these experiences than non-religious people; or 2) both groups have similar rates, but that religious people tend to report higher amounts due to their interpretation of the experience in religious terms. This suggests that non-religious people may be having these experiences as frequently as religious people but are labelling them differently.

W. T. Stace (1960) felt that there was a common set of seven characteristics associated with mystical experiences: 1) a sense of unity with the universe or with nature; 2) a feeling that there is life in all things; 3) a feeling that the mystical experience is more 'real' than reality, and that quotidian time is frozen; 4) a feeling of joy, happiness, or intense satisfaction; 5) a sense that one is experiencing something sacred or divine; 6) paradoxical feelings such as the feeling of ceasing to exist, yet continuing to exist; and 7) that the experience is "ineffable".

The descriptions of a profound aesthetic experience are congruent with many of these characteristics—with the exception of the experience being felt to be sacred—as are other descriptions of both mystical and aesthetic experiences. For example, Laski (1961) lists five defining characteristics of what he terms an "ecstasy experience": a difference in time and place, the loss of worldliness, loss of sense of self, a feeling of unity, and a sense of release from mundane reality. John Dewey viewed the aesthetic experience as involving a feeling of pronounced unity, integration, and wholeness (Carroll, 2002). Edmonston (1998) suggests that one of the characteristics of a person having a profound emotional experience is that the person is solitary, "whether he or she is actually or physically alone" and having a "sense of being both detached and yet involved", as well as a sense of timelessness. And Donald Mayo (1995) writes, "like mystical experience, the aesthetic experience ... was often ineffable, mysterious, sometimes numinous, and always noetic".

On the basis of the above mentioned research, as well as other research in the area, six descriptors were selected as common to—and indicative of—a profound emotional experience labelled as mystical or aesthetic: 1) a feeling of highly abnormal intensity to the experience; 2) a deep sense of the profundity of the experience; 3) an inability to adequately express the experience in words; 4) a feeling of unity with all; 5) a feeling that all is as it should be; and 6) an altered perception of time.

## **Method**

A questionnaire of 40 questions was prepared. There were six demographic questions. The remaining questions were dichotomous. Ten questions were distracter questions to mask the intent of the survey. 10 questions were used to determine whether a person was religiously oriented and/or was especially engaged by art. 12 questions were devoted to the characteristics common in descriptions of profound aesthetic and mystical experiences as described above (two

to each of the characteristics). Two questions simply asked whether the person felt he or she had had a mystical or aesthetic experience. The significant questions were intended to determine four things: 1) whether a person was religious, was involved in or especially engaged by art, or both; 2) whether they really had met the criteria for a profound aesthetic or mystical experience, which was operationally defined as agreement to 10 of the 12 questions about the six characteristics; 3) how much of a correlation there was between the experiences described as mystical and those described as aesthetic; and 4) whether a person's religiosity or aesthetic interests seem to be linked to the description of experiences effectively identical when described.

The questionnaire was administered to 246 university students and posted as an interactive questionnaire on the Internet, where 241 individuals responded. 391 respondents met the criterion set for a valid profound mystical/aesthetic experience, which was a positive response to 10 of 12 profound experience descriptor questions. It is the data from these individuals that were analyzed.

## Results

In order to determine if a person's personal schema predicted whether he or she described a profound mystical experience or a profound aesthetic experience a number of different statistical tests were applied. First, it had to be determined if a person's level of religiosity and artistic nature are orthogonal. In order to determine this, a paired-samples t-test was run. The two groups were found to be significantly different at  $p < 0.001$ . For religiosity, the mean score was 7.45, (SD=1.85), whereas the mean score for artistic engagement was 7.85 (SD=1.71)

Then two bivariate correlations were run to determine if there was a relationship between how a person labelled his or her experience and whether or not they considered themselves religiously inclined or artistically inclined. A correlation was calculated to determine if individuals that labelled their experience as religious were also religiously inclined. It was found that the higher an individual scored on religiosity the more apt they were to label their experience as religious. ( $r = +0.49$ ;  $p < 0.001$ .) The second correlation was to determine if individuals who labelled their experience as aesthetic were also artistically engaged. It was found that the higher an individual scored on artistic inclination, the more apt they were to label their experience as aesthetic. ( $r = +0.50$ ;  $p < 0.001$ .)

The final question was whether the person's religiosity or artistic engagement was related to the strength of his or her profound experience (as measured by the score of the twelve qualifying profound experience characteristics). There was a weak positive correlation between the religiosity of the individual and the extent of identifying profound experience characteristics ( $r = +.14$ ;  $p < 0.008$ ), and with the more artistically inclined individual, the greater their artistic engagement, the more intense they found their profound experiences ( $r = +.36$ ;  $p < .001$ ).

## Discussion and Initial Conclusions

The data seem to indicate that there is indeed a relationship between an individual's personal religiosity and his or her belief that a profound emotional experience is a mystical experience, while an artistically oriented person would most likely describe his or her similar unusual emotional experience as a profound aesthetic experience, rather than a mystical one. The wealth of data collected suggests many more specific analyses, such as which characteristics are most commonly shared by those who reported aesthetic and mystical experiences, and

whether any differences could separate the two experiences, independent of individual personal predilections. Such analyses are planned.

Since this is a pilot study, there are many limitations to its methodology. The problems with using samples of university students and internet users are well known. There is also the inherent limitations to a dichotomous survey, and the inherent weakness of hind-sight, self-report questionnaires. The researchers are well aware of these flaws and would not presume to generalize too far from their data.

Nevertheless these initial findings do support the hypothesis that personal schema and cognitive labelling may be important factors in the interpretation of profound emotional experiences. Of course it is not entirely surprising that such cognitive labelling of experience applies in this domain just as it has been shown to apply in so many others. An experience that to one person is perceived as a threat is seen by another as a challenge.

The feudal peasant travelling from his humble abode to attend Mass at the majestic Köln Cathedral was surely moved profoundly by the grand architecture, the gorgeous stained glass windows, and the magnificent music played on a giant pipe organ; and he surely felt this to be a religious experience; while the contemporary unreligious, but aesthetically engaged, tourist is likely to have a very similar experience when first visiting this grand cathedral – but interpret it as a profound aesthetic, rather than religious, experience.

It is important that the preliminary findings of this study are not taken to indicate that mystical experiences are merely biased mis-labelling of an aesthetic experience, for the opposite could just as easily be argued from the data. Rather, these findings can be more reasonably interpreted as indicating that both the profound mystical/religious experience and the profound aesthetic experience are similar, if not identical, experiences of a deeper level of consciousness, a deeper understanding and experience of the world, that we are inclined to label according to our worldview. As Shakespeare has Juliet say in *Romeo and Juliet*: “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet.”

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