HOLLIS PHELPS

Mercer University

CONSTRUCTING MYSTICAL EXPERIENCES: A CRITIQUE OF THE MYSTICAL PARADIGM IN PSYCHEDELIC RESEARCH

Introduction

Contemporary studies into the therapeutic potential of psychedelics have pointed to numerous desirable outcomes, including enhanced personal meaning and spiritual significance resulting in persisting positive affective states and behaviors;[1] beneficial, and sometimes sudden and dramatic, increases in personality domains, especially related to openness;[2] healthy psychological functioning and prosocial attitudes and behaviors;[3] and reductions in symptoms related to anxiety and depression.[4] This list of outcomes is certainly not meant to be exhaustive, and several authors have provided book-length, narrative overviews touting the myriad benefits of the therapeutic use of psychedelics.[5] The putative outcomes mentioned are simply intended to indicate that current studies tentatively show that psychedelics may have positive impacts on overall mental well-being, even if the studies remain limited in scope. Although to

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[1] Roland R. Griffiths et al., "Mystical-Type Experiences Occasioned by Psilocybin Mediate the Attribution of Personal Meaning and Spiritual Significance 14 Months Later," *Journal of Psychopharmacology* 22, no. 6 (2008): 621–632, https://doi.org/10.1177/0269881108094300; Roland R. Griffiths et al., "Psilocybin Occasioned Mystical-Type Experiences: Immediate and Persisting Dose-Related Effects," *Psychopharmacology* 218, no. 4 (2011): 649–665, https://doi.org/10.1007/s00213-011-2358-5.

[2] Katherine A. MacLean et al., "Factor Analysis of the Mystical Experience Questionnaire: A Study of Experiences Occasioned by the Hallucinogen Psilocybin," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 51, no. 4 (2012): 721–737, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2012.01685.x.

[3] Roland R. Griffiths et al., "Psilocybin-Occasioned Mystical-Type Experience in Combination with Meditation and Other Spiritual Practices Produces Enduring Positive Changes in Psychological Functioning and in Trait Measures of Prosocial Attitudes and Behaviors," *Journal of Psychopharmacology* 32, no. 1 (2018): 49–69, https://doi.org/10.1177/0269881117731279.

[4] Sharmin Nikolaidis et al., "Subtypes of the Psychedelic Experience Have Reproducible and Predictable Effects on Depression and Anxiety Symptoms," *Journal of Affective Disorders* 324 (2023): 239–249, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2022.12.042.

[5] For example, see Richard Miller Louis et al. *Psychedelic Medicine: The Healing Powers of LSD, MDMA, Psilocybin, and Ayahuasca* (Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 2017); Michael Pollan, *How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence* (New York: Penguin Books, 2018); William A. Richards, *Sacred Knowledge: Psychedelics and Religious Experiences* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); and Ben Sessa, *The Psychedelic Renaissance: Reassessing the Role of Psychedelic Drugs in 21st Century Psychiatry and Society* (London: Muswell Hill Press, 2017).

date the mechanisms of action are not known with certainty,[6] numerous lines of research converge on the notion that it is the subjective, psychedelic experience itself that is responsible for such favorable results.[7]

That is, whatever the neurological correlates involved, "qualities of subjective experience are indeed important determinants of therapeutic benefit."[8] Psychological phenomena related to the psychedelic experience thus seem crucial to the therapeutic potential that these substances may hold.

Indeed, a substantial and influential line of research into the relationship between the subjective aspects of psychedelic experiences and therapeutic efficacy focus on mystical or mystical-type experiences. Psychedelics, in this body of research, can and often do instigate mystical or mystical-type experiences that are phenomenologically indistinct from "spontaneously occurring mystical experiences" in religious and other traditions.[9] These experiences, in turn, are interpreted as the causal force behind efficacious therapeutic outcomes. As a seminal study for the current "psychedelic renaissance" (Sessa 2019) has shown, "psilocybin, when administered under comfortable, structured, interpersonally supported conditions to volunteers who reported regular participation in religious or spiritual activities, occasioned experiences which had marked similarities to classic mystical experiences, and which were rated by volunteers as having substantial personal meaning and

[6] Michiel van Elk and David B. Yaden, "Pharmacological, Neural, and Psychological Mechanisms Underlying Psychedelics: A Critical Review," *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews* 140 (2022): 104793, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2022.104793.

[7] David B. Yaden and Roland R. Griffiths, "The Subjective Effects of Psychedelics Are Necessary for Their Enduring Therapeutic Effects," *ACS Pharmacology & Translational Science* 4, no. 2 (2020): 568–572, https://doi.org/10.1021/acsptsci.0c00194; Krishna M. Nautiyal and David B. Yaden, "Does the Trip Matter? Investigating the Role of the Subjective Effects of Psychedelics in Persisting Therapeutic Effects," *Neuropsychopharmacology* 48, no. 1 (January 2023): 215–16, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41386-022-01424-z; Umar Khan, "Psychedelic Experiences in Psychedelic-Assisted Therapy for Depression," *Philosophical Psychology* (2024), advance online publication, https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2024.2378845.

[8] Nikolaidis et al., "Subtypes of the Psychedelic Experience," 247; see also Leor Roseman, David J. Nutt, and Robin L. Carhart-Harris, "Qualities of Acute Psychedelic Experiences Predict Therapeutic Efficacy of Psilocybin for Treatment-Resistant Depression," *Frontiers in Pharmacology* 8 (2018): 974, https://doi.org/10.3389/fphar.2017.00974.

[9] Roland R. Griffiths, William A. Richards, Una McCann, and Robert Jesse, "Psilocybin Can Occasion Mystical-Type Experiences Having Substantial and Sustained Personal Meaning and Spiritual Significance," *Psychopharmacology* 187, no. 3 (August 2006): 279, https://doi.org/10.1007/s00213-006-0457-5.

spiritual significance."[10]

I argue in this paper, however, that the use of "mysticism" or "mystical experiences" as a framing apparatus or paradigm relies on a perennialist understanding of mystical experiences to evaluate the efficacy of psychedelic-induced mystical experiences (PIMEs). Such framing imports theological notions into ostensibly empirical studies and, as a result, assumes the veridicality of PIMEs. The use of mysticism in this sense clashes with more naturalistic views of psychedelic experiences and standard scientific practices in general, which others have argued. But, more seriously, the reliance on mysticism lacks explanatory value regarding how and why psychedelic experiences lend themselves to a mystical interpretation in the first place. That is, such studies fail to account for the conditions of possibility for the construction of psychedelic experiences as mystical.

Others have made similar claims, but I extend these arguments by focusing on the relationship between set and setting as a material instantiation of theological notions and the way that these material conditions incorporate unexamined metaphysical assumptions. I argue that the explanation of psychedelic experiences, including their interpretation as mystical experiences, should also examine the metaphysical assumptions that unwittingly guide current research and that participants may bring to the table. In the five sections that follow, I establish this via a critical analysis of W. T Stace's categorization of mystical experiences and Walter Pahnke's empirical application of them, which psychedelic research incorporates into the measures used to evaluate PIMEs, the common set and setting used, and the overall, theological conceptualization involved.

A "Good Friday" Miracle

On April 20, 1962, Good Friday, Walter Pahnke, a graduate student at Harvard Divinity School, gathered twenty theological students in a small, private prayer chapel in the basement of Boston University's Marsh Chapel to test whether and to what extent psilocybin could occasion experiences congruent with the mystical experiences reported in various religious texts and traditions. Under the strictures of a double-blind experiment, half of the students received psilocybin, while the other half received niacin, an active placebo. Pahnke found that, given the right conditions, psilocybin could function as a catalyst for mystical

[10] Griffiths et al., "Psilocybin Can Occasion Mystical-Type Experiences," 279.

experiences in religiously inclined individuals. In his words, "Under the conditions of this experiment, those subjects who received psilocybin experienced phenomena which were indistinguishable from, if not identical with, certain categories defined by our typology of mysticism."[11]

The "conditions" of the experiment matter considerably. Pahnke's experiment, it must be emphasized, does not show an unmediated, causal link between psilocybin-catalyzed experiences and mystical experiences. Rather, as Pahnke notes, every attempt was made "to maximize the possibility that mystical experiences would occur."[12] Prior to the actual experiment, the subjects were informed about the nature of the experiment and, in addition, given suggestions to prepare for a "meaningful experience," including "self-examination in depth, meditation, private devotional life, or reading of literature deeply meaningful to the person."[13] Given that the subjects of the experiment were all theological students, Pahnke also hoped the two-and-a-half-hour service, which included typical accoutrements ("organ music, four solos, prayers, and personal meditation"), would provide an ideal atmosphere to instigate experiences of a mystical nature. Although no mention of the typology of mystical experience was made to the subjects ahead of time, the subjects went into the experiment with intention and expectation, and the experiment itself occurred in a "meaningful religious atmosphere."[14] In short, the subjects in Pahnke's experiment were thoroughly primed to have experiences deemed mystical. Set and setting, that is, the psychological, social, and cultural factors that shape the psychedelic experience, matter, as researchers and users of psychedelics have long known.[15] Another way to state the matter is to say that what one brings to and puts into a psychedelic experience determines considerably, if not totally, the shape of the latter and its outcome. Psychedelics, in this sense, act as "non-specific amplifiers" of the conditions in and under which they are taken.[16]

Set and setting is likewise important to contemporary research into PIMEs. Existing studies do not show that psychedelics in

[11] Walter N. Pahnke, "Drugs and Mysticism" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1963), 243.
[12] Pahnke, "Drugs and Mysticism," 87.
[13] Pahnke, "Drugs and Mysticism," 87.
[14] Pahnke, "Drugs and Mysticism," 87.
[15] Ido Hartogsohn, "Constructing Drug Effects: A History of Set and Setting," *Drug Science, Policy and Law* 3 (2017), https://doi.org/10.1177/2050324516683325.
[16] Brian A. Pace and Neşe Devenot, "Right-Wing Psychedelia: Case Studies in Cultural Plasticity and Political Pluripotency," *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (2021): 733185, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.733185.

and of themselves occasion mystical or mystical-type experiences, even if they may, at times, be "weighted this way."[17] Rather, they show that psychedelics may occasion mystical or mystical-type experiences in and under conditions conducive to produce such experiences.[18] Again, set and setting matter, but the interpretive weight is usually put on the side of the subject undergoing the experience; set and setting themselves, although deemed important in both theory and practice, are remain considerably understudied.[19] The emphasis has been more on the relationship among the experiencer, the experience itself, and the way that these combine to produce mystical or mystical-type experiences, as determined by specific measures. However, it is important to emphasize what seems obvious: in research environments, the set and setting are external to the subject, that is, imposed from without. Set and setting, in such cases, are the designs of the researchers, not the subjects. Researchers construct set and setting in advance to produce experiences that they have deemed valuable or, at the very least, worthy of investigation. Worked into these constructions are certain frameworks and presuppositions, which shape set and setting, the individual's experience, and the recording and interpretation of the data gathered. Such is especially the case with much of the studies into psychedelics and mystical experiences, which presuppose the value and, ultimately, veridicality of the latter.

Establishing and Valuing Mystical Perennialism

Pahnke, as mentioned above, was the first to provide an empirical investigation of the relationship between psychedelics and mystical or mystical-type experiences. Subsequent and contemporary studies into PIMEs, in this sense, extend Pahnke's research. But they also import the interpretative framework that

[17] Andy Letcher, "Mad Thoughts on Mushrooms: Discourse and Power in the Study of Psychedelic Consciousness," *Anthropology of Consciousness* 18, no. 2 (2007): 89.
[18] Griffiths et al., "Psilocybin Can Occasion Mystical-Type Experiences"; Michael P. Bogenschutz et al., "Psilocybin-Assisted Treatment for Alcohol Dependence: A Proof-of-Concept Study," *Journal of Psychopharmacology* 29, no. 3 (2015): 289–299, https://doi.org/10.1177/0269881114565144; Alan K. Davis et al., "Effects of Psilocybin-Assisted Therapy on Major Depressive Disorder," *JAMA Psychiatry* 78, no. 5 (2021): 481–489, https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2020.3285; Katherine A. MacLean, Matthew W. Johnson, and Roland R. Griffiths, "Mystical Experiences Occasioned by the Hallucinogen Psilocybin Lead to Increases in the Personality Domain of Openness," *Journal of Psychopharmacology* 25, no. 11 (2011): 1453–1461, https://doi.org/10.1177/0269881111420188.
[19] Tammy L. Golden et al., "Effects of Setting on Psychedelic Experiences, Therapies, and Outcomes: A Rapid Scoping Review of the Literature," in *Disruptive Psychopharmacology*, ed. Frederick S. Barrett and Katrin H. Preller, *Current Topics in Behavioral Neurosciences* 56 (Cham: Springer, 2022), https://doi.org/10.1007/7854_2021_298.

he uses, specifically his understanding of mysticism which he derives mainly from the work of W. T. Stace.

In *Drugs and Mysticism*, his dissertation on said research, Pahnke understands psychedelic experiences in terms of mystical experiences via "a phenomenological typology of the mystical state of consciousness."[20] Although Pahnke references others who have attempted to categorize "the mystical state of consciousness," including William James, Rudolf Otto, Evelyn Underhill, Joachim Wach, and D. T. Suzuki, the typology he uses to categorize and interpret the presumed mystical aspects of the bespoke psychedelic experiences come mainly from W. T. Stace.[21]

In *Mysticism and Philosophy*, Stace seeks to establish "a set of characteristics which is common to all mystical experiences" and condense these characteristics to a "universal core."[22] Stace does not come up with his own typology of mystical experiences out of thin air, so to speak. He draws on the work of the figures mentioned in the previous paragraphs and others, which influences Pahnke's own source material. Nevertheless, to arrive at a "universal core of mysticism," Stace insists on separating out "the mystical experience itself" from "the conceptual interpretations which may be put upon it."[23] This method allows Stace to extract supposedly universal features of mystical experiences from their religious and cultural expressions.

Applying this method and drawing on those whom he considers mystics, Stace outlines what he takes to be the universal features of two different types of mysticism, extrovertive and introvertive. Extrovertive mystical experiences, according to Stace, primarily take place through perception, or sense experience. In extrovertive mysticism, both the impetus for and expression of the experience is external, located in various degrees in the physical world. Introvertive mystical experiences, in contrast and as the name implies, do not take place through sense experience but, rather, internally, through undifferentiated consciousness. As Stace puts it, "In the introvertive mystical experience there is no multiplicity and no distinction . . . just as there are in it no distinctions between one object and another there can likewise be no distinction between subject and object. And if that which is here experienced is perceived on interpreted to be the One, the Universal Self, the Absolute, or God, then it should follow that the individual self which has the experience

[20] Pahnke, "Drugs and Mysticism," ix.
[21] Pahnke, "Drugs and Mysticism," 24-84.
[22] Walter T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1961), 43.
[23] Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 31.

must lose its individuality, cease to be a separate individual, and lose its identity because lost or merged in the One, or Absolute, or God."[24]

Stace outlines seven features characteristic of extrovertive mystical:

1. The unifying vision, expressed abstractly by the formula "All is One." The One is, in extrovertive mysticism, perceived through the physical senses, in or through the multiplicity of objects.
2. The more concrete apprehension of the One as being an inner subjectivity in all things, described variously as life, or consciousness, or a living Presence. The discovery that nothing is "really" dead.
3. Sense of objectivity or reality.
4. Feeling of blessedness, joy, happiness, satisfaction, etc.
5. Feeling that what is apprehended is holy, or sacred, or divine. This is the quality which gives rise to the interpretation of the experience as being an experience of "God." It is the specifically religious element in the experience. It is closely intertwined with, but not identical with, the previously listed characteristic of blessedness and joy.
6. Paradoxicality.
7. Alleged by mystics to be ineffable, incapable of being described in words, etc.[25]

Introvertive mystical experiences are similar and share features 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 of extrovertive mysticism. However, introvertive mysticism differs with respect to features 1 and 2:

1. The Unitary Consciousness, from which all the multiplicity of sensuous or conceptual or other empirical content has been excluded, so that there remains only a void and empty unity. This is the one basic, essential, nuclear characteristic, from which most of the others inevitably follow.

2. Being nonspatial and nontemporal. This of course follows from the nuclear characteristic just listed.[26]

The differences between the two, as already stated, occur among characteristics 1 and 2. According to Stace, nonspatiality and nontemporality are specific to the introvertive experience, as they are not found in extrovertive experiences, at least clearly and

[24] Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 111.
[25] Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 79.
[26] Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 111.

consistently. Both types of experience share a palpable sense of unity or oneness but, on Stace's reading, that sense is void of multiplicity and more pronounced or full in introvertive experiences. That is, extrovertive mystical experiences show "a partly realized tendency to unity," whereas introvertive experiences "completely" realize said unity.[27] It is important to emphasize, however, the these are not merely two different types of experience that can be set aside each other, so to speak. Stace, rather, puts them in a hierarchical relationship, the introvertive experience being the completely realized form of mystical experience in general. According to Stace, the "facts seem to suggest that that the extrovertive experience, although we recognize it as a distinct type, is actually on the lower level than the introvertive type; that is to say, it is an incomplete kind of experience which finds its completion and fulfillment in the introvertive kind of experience."[28] Extrovertive and introvertive mystical experiences, however, do have in common characteristics 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7, meaning that, according to Stace, these are "universal common characteristics of mysticism in all cultures, ages, religions, and civilizations of the world."[29]

For the purposes of this paper, I am not so much interested in the substance of Stace's typology as such, that is, the accuracy of its various components with respect to the religious traditions from which he draws, the validity of his construction of a universal core to mystical experiences, and the a-temporal, cross-cultural category of mysticism itself. Stace of course is, as I have mentioned, not the first to attempt on similar grounds such a typology. His typology is, however, the most influential when it comes to contemporary psychedelic studies.[30] The sort of perennialism that Stace's position articulates, which presupposes that mysticism is a *sui generis*, universal experiential reality that only needs to be phenomenologically drawn out of relevant sources and then interpreted, has long come under attack from religious studies scholars of numerous stripes.[31] Generally speaking, for such critics, religious experience is always culturally situated, meaning that it is difficult if not impossible to

[27] Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 132.
[28] Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 132.
[29] Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 132.
[30] Jeanne A. Breau and Peter Gillis-Smith, "Psychometric Brahman, Psychedelic Science: Walter Stace, Transnational Vedanta, and the Mystical Experience Questionnaire," *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* 48, no. 5 (2023): 788–806, https://doi.org/10.1080/03080188.2023.2266322.
[31] See, for instance, the influential essay in Steven T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); Steven T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); Steven T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

establish any ostensible "universal core." Indeed, it is often in culturally and religiously specific symbols and expressions that the truth of the experience lies for those whom we deem mystics.

Such critics generally argue that the construction of a universal core usually relies on a piecemeal homogenization of vastly different sources, the accuracy of which, moreover, perennialist for granted, including Stace.[32] To be sure, Stace does acknowledge the importance of taking cultural and religious specificities seriously as the vehicle for interpreting mystical experiences, but in the end the form is more important than the content. That is, it is in the form of the experience, which is expressed in the categories that constitute its universal core, that its truth ultimately resides.

Rather than focusing on the typology itself, I am more interested in the apologetic bent that goes hand in hand with Stace's perennialism, since it plays into research concerning PIMEs. Stace's formulation of the categories and isolation of the core of mysticism portrays itself as descriptive or empirical, in the sense that his goal is to abstract commonalities among ostensibly real experiences as recounted in prototypical texts. Stace's stated goal in doing so is to investigate the influence of mysticism on philosophical thought, but his analysis ultimately rests on his commitment to the veridicality and efficacious value of mystical experiences. Stace does not consider himself a "preacher," as he puts it, but insists that mysticism is "the way of salvation."[33] The "universal testimony" of mysticism is that it brings "blessedness, joy, and peace."[34] Although Stace insists that his inquiry is philosophical,[35] such statements are not philosophical but normative and apologetic, which constitutes a defense of mystical experience and its efficacious value for individuals and the "world."[36] Such statements ultimately operate theologically for Stace and even, in places, eschatologically. He suggests that the "direction of human evolution" may "be towards the spread of mystical experience to most men and not merely its possession by a few rare individuals as now. It is possible, in short, that the superhuman of the future is to the mystic man"[37] Stace, that is, is committed to the incontestable value of mysticism, meaning that it has a clear moral import and, in addition, grasps truths,

[32] J. Moussaieff Masson and T. C. Masson, "The Study of Mysticism: A Criticism of W. T. Stace," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 4, no. 1–2 (1976): 121.
[33] Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 204.
[34] Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 205.
[35] Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 5 & *passim*.
[36] Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 205.
[37] Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 205.

however vaguely defined. Mysticism is an epistemological phenomenon that exceeds "science and logical intellect."[38] Indeed, Stace develops his typology in light of the guiding question, "What *truths*, if any, about the universe does mysticism yield which the mind could not obtain from science and the logical intellect?"[39]

Ultimately, Stace's understanding of mysticism emerges from and, in turn, reaffirms a religious impulse, a religious commitment and longing, which drives his philosophical analyses from beginning to end. Such sentiment is present in Stace's earlier work as well. Consider, for instance, Stace's words from *Time and Eternity*, published in 1952:

"Here and there amid the arid hills of human experience are well-springs and fountain-heads of religious intuition. They are the original sources of all religion. They need not always be of great grandeur. They may be humble rivulets of feeling. Or they may give rise to great rivers of refreshment flowing through the centuries. But always, great or small, they bear upon themselves the stamp of their own authenticity. They need no external proof or justification. Indeed, they are incapable of any. We know them because the God in us cries out, hearing the voice of the God in the other, answering back. The deep calls to the deep. . . [R]eligion is the hunger of the soul for the impossible, the unattainable, the inconceivable."[40]

It is possible that the poetic and theological language Stace uses here functions to merely describe what religion is taken by many to be. But the language is meant to "stir the depths in us," the "hunger" that the "God in us" has for God—the language, and its underlying impulse, is not merely descriptive but directed as a call to *us*. Stace ends *Mysticism & Philosophy* on a similar note. Commenting in the book's last sentence on the relationship between mysticism and "organized religion," he notes that both "are linked together because both look beyond earthly horizons to the Infinite and Eternal, and because both share the emotions appropriate to the sacred and the holy."[41]

Returning to Pahnke, he uses Stace's categories as a model for his own, delineating mystical experience into nine categories: Unity; Transcendence of Time and Space; Deeply Felt Positive Mood;

[38] Masson and Masson, "The Study of Mysticism," 10.
[39] Masson and Masson, "The Study of Mysticism," 109; Stace, Mysticism and Philosophy, 14, emphasis in original.
[40] W. T. Stace, *Time and Eternity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), 3-4.
[41] Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 343.

Sense of Sacredness; Objectivity and Reality; Paradoxicality; Alleged Ineffability; Transiency; and Persisting Positive Changes in Attitude and/or Behavior. With the exception of the last category and setting aside differences in wording and organization, Pahnke's mysticism recapitulates the main features of Stace's mysticism. Although we could discuss the differences between the two, when applied to PIMEs via the instruments used to evaluate the latter, which I discuss in the next section, such differences are essentially moot.

We can, however, note significant difference in Pahnke's *approach* to Stace's characterization of mysticism, which is important to the argument presented in this paper. As Richard Saville-Smith has pointed out, "Stace starts with the presupposition of an essence and describes the phenomena, which he named as the characteristics, of mystical experiences."[42] Pahnke, however, reverses the relationship between essence and phenomena "by making the assumption that if Stace's phenomenal characteristics are present, then so is the essence—the 'complete' mystical experience."[43] Otherwise put, "Stace, drawing on textual accounts, constructed a characterization described in language. Starting with this language, Pahnke's plan is to induce drug experiences (in a manufactured setting) and then invite his participants to express themselves in relation to phrasings which he formulates and controls . . . Pahnke scientifically facilitates the translation of the immediate pre-linguistic drug experience into the vocabulary of mystical experience—as a reality, not an analogy."[44]

Saville-Smith criticizes this move, but we can still highlight his point that Pahnke reverses Stace, though to make a different point. Behind Stace's categorization of mysticism and Pahnke's deployment of it with respect to establishing the mystical aspects of certain psychedelic experiences lies a commitment to the veridicality of mysticism's object. Sure, they approach it from different directions, but they still approach it and, in doing so, ultimately affirm what they take to be its truth. I have already discussed this in relation to Stace, but it is important to stress that Pahnke, behind the empirical façade of his study, is keen to stress the latter's potential "theological implications." As he puts it in the conclusion of *Drugs and Mysticism*, "This study was an empirical investigation, but we are aware that there are theological implications. The analogy to the efficacy of the

[42] Robert Saville-Smith, *Acute Religious Experiences: Madness, Psychosis, and Religious Studies* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 80.
[43] Saville-Smith, *Acute Religious Experiences*, 80.
[44] Saville-Smith, *Acute Religious Experiences*, 80-82.

sacraments would have to be considered. Furthermore, theologians must evaluate the light that such research could shed on the doctrine of Incarnation, the Holy Spirit, the presence of Christ, and of *gratia active*."[45] Indeed, he emphasizes that his research may have implications for understanding the "validity of religious experience of the mystical type in terms of religious truth."[46]

An Empirical Approach to the Study of Mystical Experiences

Contemporary research into the relationship between psychedelics and mystical experiences import Stace's categories and Pahnke's empirical application of them. But whether intentionally or not, such research transposes theological notions and religious sensibilities into the concomitant experiments, and not just in terms of the conceptual frameworks used. The studies also rely on and introduce theological notions into the designed settings of the studies and the apparatuses used to measure PIMEs, which I discuss in this and the next section.

Studies into PIMEs are ostensibly empirical in nature, based on the observation of mystical experiences qua biochemical and psychological phenomenon.[47] Mystical experiences, in this context, do not necessarily refer to or substantiate any external referent but are, rather, related to the value they have for neuroscientific research and therapeutic efficacy. That is, PIMEs, it is claimed, are not understood in terms of their substantive truth value; instead, the interest lies in their functionality, in their operationalization. Another way to put it is to say that the experiences are understood phenomenologically, according to the criteria discussed above, rather than to a transcendent reality as such.

The ostensibly empirical investigation of PIMEs and, we could add, mystical experiences in general, is discursively encapsulated in the questionnaires used to score said experiences. Current studies use several different, though overlapping instruments, including the Hallucinogen Rating Scale (HRS), the States of Consciousness Questionnaire (SCOQ), the 5 Dimensions of Altered States of Consciousness Questionnaire (5D-ASC), the 11 Dimensions of Altered States of Consciousness Questionnaire (11D-ASC), the Mystical Experience Questionnaire (MEQ), and

[45] Pahnke, *Drugs and Mysticism*, 242.
[46] Pahnke, *Drugs and Mysticism*, 243.
[47] Katrin Ko et al., "Psychedelics, Mystical Experiences, and Therapeutic Efficacy: A Systematic Review," *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 13 (2022): 917199, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2022.917199.

the Hood Mysticism Scale (HMS).[48] For this paper, it will suffice to focus on the latter two questionnaires, the MEQ and the HMS.

The MEQ and the HMS have gone through multiple iterations. Nevertheless, as used in contemporary psychedelic studies, the MEQ contains four factors: Mystical, Positive Mood, Transcendence of Time and Space, and Ineffability. The HMS contains five factors: Unity, Ineffability, Positive Affect, Sense of Sacredness, and Loss of Ego.[49] Although the two apparatuses use different, yet overlapping, factors, they both in their own way originate in and express Stace's categories to determine the sense and scope of PIMEs. Moreover, the instruments and the researchers who use them mostly take these categories as given, importing them without question into empirical descriptions of mystical experiences and specifically PIMEs. For instance, Ralph Hood, the originator the HMS, praises Stace's "excellent conceptual work" and the "cold, dispassionate logic" through which he "carefully demarcated the phenomenological characteristics of mystical experience."[50] Hood ultimately agrees with Stace that "the mystical experience is itself a universal experience that is essentially identical in phenomenological terms despite wide variations in ideological interpretation of the experience."[51] That is, following Stace, mystical experiences are "cross-cultural, ahistorical, and unbiased by religious ideology."[52] Contemporary studies into PIMEs likewise operate under the same assumptions. For example, Barrett, Griffiths, & Johnson base their validation of the MEQ on the "philosophically and theoretically identified facets of mystical experiences" as articulated by Stace.[53] Likewise, MacLean et al. follow Stace in their factor analysis of the MEQ, assuming that "[m]ystical experiences are a common component of religious traditions across human history."[54] They continue, "Historical descriptions

[48] Ko et al., "Psychedelics, Mystical Experiences, and Therapeutic Efficacy"; Alexandre A. D. Pontual et al., "Systematic Review of Psychometric Instruments Used in Research with Psychedelics," *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 55, no. 4 (2021): 359–368, https://doi.org/10.1080/02791072.2022.2079108.
[49] Ko et al., "Psychedelics, Mystical Experiences, and Therapeutic Efficacy."
[50] Ralph W. Hood Jr., "The Construction and Preliminary Validation of a Measure of Reported Mystical Experience," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 14, no. 1 (1975): 30.
[51] Hood, "Construction and Preliminary Validation," 30.
[52] Hood, "Construction and Preliminary Validation," 39.
[53] Frederick S. Barrett, Roland R. Griffiths, and Matthew W. Johnson, "Validation of the Revised Mystical Experience Questionnaire in Experimental Sessions with Psilocybin," *Journal of Psychopharmacology* 29, no. 11 (2015): 1190, https://doi.org/10.1177/0269881115609019.
[54] Katherine A. MacLean et al., "Factor Analysis of the Mystical Experience Questionnaire: A Study of Experiences Occasioned by the Hallucinogen Psilocybin," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 51, no. 4 (2012): 2, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2012.01685.x.

of mystical experiences from diverse sources reveal common themes, suggesting a core experience that cuts across religions and cultures."[55]

By uncritically incorporating Stace's categories, the use of the MEQ and HMS by contemporary researchers also transposes his perennialism, along with the latter's problems that I have already discussed. Such perennialism is evident in the quotations from the previous paragraph, where it is simply assumed and stated as such, without regard for more constructivist approaches to mysticism. The failure to take critical studies into mysticism into account may no doubt be the result of unfamiliarity with this literature, given that most psychedelic researchers do not have a background in critical religious studies. Lack of disciplinary knowledge may not excuse the failure to engage critical studies into mysticism, but it does at least provide some explanation. But some researchers certainly are familiar with criticism of the perennialist paradigm and simply choose to side-step it or ignore it altogether. Barrett & Griffiths, for example, affirm the "idea that there is a common core to such religious experiences."[56] In making this claim, they dismiss out of hand criticisms of a core, a-cultural component to mystical experience as "constructionist." The latter term they use as a pejorative to shoehorn approaches to religious experiences that emphasize the irreducibility of language and culture. Critical approaches to the general category "mysticism," and to religious experience in general, do not make for good science in their estimation. Barrett and Griffiths write, "Although debating the conceptual extreme interpretations of mystical experience has provided a platform for academic scholarship, it may not be a productive strategy for advancing a scientific basis for exploring the immediate causes and consequences of such experiences."[57]

But there is, I suggest, more going on here than the mere empirical investigation of mystical experiences, in and of themselves and in terms of their outcomes. Based on my discussion of Pahnke and Stace, the adoption of the perennialist paradigm is itself an implicit acknowledgement of its intrinsic, positive value and veridicality. But whether intentionally or not, this is to introduce into current studies and their interpretation theological notions and religious sensibilities.

[55] MacLean et al., "Factor Analysis," 2.
[56] Frederick S. Barrett and Roland R. Griffiths, "Classic Hallucinogens and Mystical Experiences: Phenomenology and Neural Correlates," *Current Topics in Behavioral Neuroscience* (2018): 397, https://doi.org/10.1007/7854_2018_71.
[57] Barrett and Griffiths, "Classic Hallucinogens," 397.

Religious Sets and Settings

I am not the first to make the claim that contemporary studies into the relationship between psychedelics and mystical experiences and the therapeutic effects that may attend the latter imports theological notions and religious sensibilities into current studies. Matthew Johnson points out that one of the dangers of psychedelic research is that "scientists and clinicians [may impose] their personal religious or spiritual beliefs on the practice of psychedelic medicine."[58] Although the studies present themselves as empirically grounded, Johnson notes that the loose use of terms such as "consciousness," "spiritual," "mystical," and the like may import into psychedelic research a slew of unexamined non-empirical presuppositions and beliefs. Such terms often correspond to a piecemeal perennialism, which, as I discussed above, understands the psychedelic experience in terms of an ostensible cross-cultural, universal reality. Johnson writes, for instance, that researchers and clinicians often import beliefs that "resemble a loosely held eclectic collection of various beliefs drawn piecemeal from mystical traditions, Eastern religions, and indigenous cultures, perhaps best described by the term 'new age,' although they could come from any religious or spiritual belief system."[59] Rick Strassman makes a similar claim, noting that studies into PIMEs often rely on a "mélange of New Age, Vendanta, and Christianity."[60] Sharday Mosurinjon et al. are more specific, detecting in such research an overall Christian bias in the way that PIMEs are conceptualized and interpreted.[61] Nevertheless, for Johnson, scientists and clinicians may discuss spiritual and religious beliefs and concepts for therapeutic reasons, so long as these cohere with the patient's own experience and their attempts to draw meaning from the latter, a claim that is echoed by Peter Sjöstedt-Hughes.[62] It is another thing altogether, however, to introduce non-empirical concepts into experimental designs and the interpretation of outcomes, as doing so may, indeed, sneak in theology through the backdoor, so to speak. Otherwise put, the reliance on non-empirical concepts risk conflating science with the "supernatural, fantastic,

[58] Matthew W. Johnson, "Consciousness, Religion, and Gurus: Pitfalls of Psychedelic Medicine," *ACS Pharmacology & Translational Science* 4, no. 2 (2020): 578–581, https://doi.org/10.1021/acsptsci.0c00198, 579.
[59] Johnson, "Consciousness, Religion, and Gurus," 580.
[60] Rick Strassman, "The Psychedelic Religion of Mystical Consciousness," *Journal of Psychedelic Studies* 2, no. 1 (2018): 1–4, https://doi.org/10.1556/2054.2018.001, 2.
[61] [1]Sharday Mosurinjohn, Leor Roseman, and Manesh Girn, "Psychedelic-Induced Mystical Experiences: An Interdisciplinary Discussion and Critique," *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 14 (2023): 1077311, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2023.1077311.
[62] Peter Sjöstedt-Hughes, "On the Need for Metaphysics in Psychedelic Therapy and Research," *Frontiers in Psychology* 14 (2023): 1, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1128589.

and divine," as James W. Sanders and Josjan Zijlmans worry.[63] Thus, as Ann Taves cautions, "If scientists fail to make a clear distinction between scientific claims based on empirical evidence, that is, in principle, accessible to all and theological claims based on revelation and tradition, they risk setting mystical experiences apart from other similar experiences on theological rather than scientific grounds."[64]

But this is just what many contemporary researchers do. I have already argued above that the use of Stace's categories and Pahnke's study as a baseline is, ultimately, theological in orientation, in that the baked in perennialism assumes and advocates for the positive valuation and veridicality of mystical experiences. Whether understood objectively or subjectively, the positing of a core assumes an essence, an essential thing to which the mystical experience points. That is, perennialism as a position is always already theological, at least in Stace, Pahnke, and psychedelic researchers' incorporation of it.. Moreover, as incorporated into psychedelic research into mystical experiences, the theological elements are not just descriptively present but fostered, which raises questions regarding the religious or, at the very least, quasi-religious nature of said research. As Taves points out, insisting on an essential core to mystical experiences "primes participants to anticipate the potentially transformative effects of such experiences and to view what they experience in relation to ultimate questions of meaning and significance."[65]

The theological bent of contemporary research into PIMEs is not just conceptual but, in addition, material, in the sense that it relies on specifically designed sets and settings to foster an intentionally religious sensibility which, researchers hope, results in a mystical experiences. We have already seen this in Pahnke's study in which he set intentions among his participants and relied on a religious setting to create conditions conducive for the production of mystical experiences. That is, within psychedelic research, mystical experiences do not just happen but are, rather, created.

Two examples of from contemporary research regarding set and setting illustrate this point. First, it is common in sessions to use artifacts, symbols, and icons from various religious traditions in

[63] James W. Sanders and Josjan Zijlmans, "Moving Past Mysticism in Psychedelic Science," *ACS Pharmacology & Translational Science* 4, no. 4 (2021): 1253–1255, https://doi.org/10.1021/acsptsci.1c00097.
[64] Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Special Things* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 670.
[65] Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 679.

psychedelic sessions, as a way to create an atmosphere conducive to mystical experiences.[i] For instance, one can find, among other things, indigenous artifacts, symbols and textiles, Buddhist prayer flags, statues of the Buddha, cups that resemble the Eucharistic chalice, texts from religious and spiritual traditions, and more generic calming images.[66] The amalgamation of these images creates a religious space but one that is, moreover, perennialist in orientation: the different images ultimately represent and work toward the same goal. Moreover, the selection of icons to use in sessions is just that, a selection: it is not empirically based but chosen by the researchers considering their own presuppositions and biases with regard to what they think counts as representative of the operative mystical paradigm.[67] Concerning the practice of setting the room with religious imagery, Johnson notes, "In addition to other concerns about conflating religious beliefs with empirically based clinical practice, the introduction of such religious icons into clinical practice unnecessarily alienates some people from psychedelic medicine."[68] Specifically, subjects who come from religious traditions that do not recognize icons from other traditions or icons as such, along with those who do not subscribe to any religious traditions or beliefs at all, may find the use of icons off-putting, even counterproductive. Indeed, research into PIMEs have largely side-stepped or even dismissed outright questions related to atheism, for example. As Wayne Glausser has argued, researchers have adopted an "inhospitable attitude toward atheists, adopting as they often do an implicit theistic bias."[69] Although some studies have shown that PIMEs may shift beliefs toward religious and non-naturalistic metaphysical views,[70] selection bias remains an issue.[71] Indeed, the consideration of

[66] The list of artifacts, symbols, and icons is my own, which I gathered from images available on line. Pictures of such settings can be found through a Google search of "psychedelics research lab settings," accessed on February 6, 2025.
[67] March Shapiro, "Inside the Johns Hopkins Psilocybin Playlist," *Dome*, November/December 2020, accessed January 4, 2024, https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/news/articles/2020/10/inside-the-johns-hopkins-psilocybin-playlist.
[68] Johnson, "Consciousness, Religion, and Gurus," 580.
[69] Wayne Glausser, "Psychedelic Drugs and Atheism: Debunking the Myths," *Religions* 12, no. 8 (2021): 614, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12080614, 6–7.
[70] Cristopher Timmermann et al., "Psychedelics Alter Metaphysical Beliefs," *Scientific Reports* 11, no. 1 (2021): 22166, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-01209-2; Sandeep M. Nayak and Roland R. Griffiths, "A Single Belief-Changing Psychedelic Experience Is Associated with Increased Attribution of Consciousness to Living and Non-Living Entities," *Frontiers in Psychology* 13 (2022): 852248, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.852248; Roland R. Griffiths et al., "Survey of Subjective 'God Encounter Experiences': Comparisons Among Naturally Occurring Experiences and Those Occasioned by the Classic Psychedelics Psilocybin, LSD, Ayahuasca, or DMT," *PLOS ONE* 14, no. 4 (2019): e0214377, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0214377.
[71] Glouser, "Psychedelic Drugs and Atheism."

questions related to these sorts of issues manifests bias toward said views.

Second, along with the use of religious icons, trip sessions use standardized musical playlists during sessions, to help guide the subject through the psychedelic experience. The music used, in other words, provides an ambient setting for the trip, "a nonverbal support system, sort of like the net for a trapeze artist. If all is going well, you're not even aware that the net is there — you don't even hear the music — but if you start getting anxious, or if you need it, it's immediately there to provide structure."[72] Like the selection of religious imagery in session rooms, the selection of songs used is not empirically based. William Richards, for example, notes that the development of these playlists was and remains a largely "intuitive" affair, in the sense that it correlates well with the experience itself.[73] But certain musical and religious traditions are privileged. For example, one popular playlist contains mostly instrumental and choral music pulled from classical, Christian, Indian, Buddhist and "new age" sources."[74] Playlists along these lines tend to manifest a "contestation of the secular."[75]

Implicitly or explicitly, the set and setting of research into PIMEs weight psychedelic experiences and their outcomes toward theological interpretations and religious sensibilities. Moreover, theological and religious interpretations are reinforced in the use of perennialist mysticism as an interpretative paradigm, such as we find in Stace and Pahnke, As we see with Stace and Pahnke and, arguably, perennialism in general, baked into this approach to mysticism is a positive valuation of mysticism which assumes the veridicality of the experience. Even if this is not the explicit intention of researchers—many would certainly claim that they are *just* taking an empirical, phenomenological approach to PIMEs—the conceptualization, interpretation, set and setting, and instruments used as measures transpose theological ideas and religious sensibilities into the experiments, even if these may be taken piecemeal and at times vaguely defined.

[72] Shapiro, "Inside the Johns Hopkins Psilocybin Playlist."
[73] Shapiro, "Inside the Johns Hopkins Psilocybin Playlist."
[74] Johns Hopkins University Playlist for Psilocybin Studies, Spotify, Accessed 22 July 2025, https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5KWf8H2pM0tlVd7niMtqeU?si=6ZrLpDB9TuCYT0rT20FXIQ&nd=1&dlsi=4ab94eddb91441db
[75] Simon Lett and Erika Dyck, "Tune In, Turn On: Religious Music and Spiritual Power in the History of Psychedelic Therapy," *Social History of Medicine* 36, no. 1 (2023): 62-79, https://doi.org/10.1093/shm/hkac057, 65.

Even if such studies introduce theological notions and religious sensibilities, many researchers would likely claim that their work is only descriptive in nature, done without regard to the veridicality of PIMEs. As discussed above, the studies take PIMEs as empirical phenomena and, thus, confined to a defined, closed loop, governed by scientific mandates. I have challenged this immanent understanding of said research above, but some interpretations of the data explicitly frame the latter in overtly religious ways.

Numerous examples could be given,[76] but here we can reference one prominent example. In *Sacred Knowledge,* William Richards provides a detailed overview of the state of past and contemporary research into the significance of PIMEs.[77] He views them, however, as "intrinsically sacred" and believes "in their promise to constructively contribute to the quality of life on our planet when people utilize them in intelligent ways."[78] Richards' claim regarding the importance of psychedelics corresponds with an appreciation of a universalized, perennialist mysticism, of which the psychedelic experience is an authentic expression. Noting "the spiritual awareness" that "[a]ll of the great world religions" value and recommend, Richards affirms "that there is indeed an eternal awareness deep in the core of the human mind, where creativity, love, and beauty reign supreme."[79] He in addition interprets PIMEs proleptically and eschatologically. In the final chapter of *Sacred Knowledge*, titled "Movement into the Future," Richards writes:

"What would our world be like if more of us were awakening spiritually, if more of us were increasingly aware of both the temporal and the eternal realms in consciousness? Such awareness appears to be dawning and intensifying in the minds of many people, as evidenced by the expanding interest in yoga and meditative disciplines, by curiosity about and tolerance for the perspectives of different world religions, as well as in expanding respect for the therapeutic, educational, and sacramental use of psychedelic substances."[80]

[76] Huston Smith, *Cleansing the Doors of Perception: The Religious Significance of Entheogenic Plants and Chemicals* (Boulder: Sentient Publications, 2000); Don Lattin, *God on Psychedelics: Tripping Across the Rubble of Old-Time Religion* (Berkeley: Apocryphile Press, 2023); Ron Cole-Turner, *Psychedelics and Christian Faith: Exploring and Unexpected Pathway to Healing and Spirituality* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2025); Dana Sawyer, *The Perennial Philosophy Reloaded: A Guide for the Mystically Inclined* (Rhinebeck: Monkfish Books, 2024).
[77] William A. Richards, *Sacred Knowledge: Psychedelics and Religious Experiences* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).
[78] Richards, *Sacred Knowledge*, 8.
[79] Richards, *Sacred Knowledge*, 10-11.
[80] Richards, *Sacred Knowledge*, 207.

Such claims, it is worth pointing out, are remarkably similar to Stace's claims, made from within the confines of his categories and in the isolation of a "core" of mystical experiences, as discussed above. Nevertheless, Richards' interpretation of PIMEs is more than a description of the latter and their therapeutic protentional: it is a theology of and for psychedelics. Richards thus brings us full circle, to an understanding of PIMEs as indicative of that which is ultimate, an ultimate sourced from various religious and spiritual traditions.

Conclusion: From Mysticism to Metaphysics

As I have already mentioned, the focus on PIMEs in psychedelic research has its critics. Johnson, as discussed above, has criticized such research for relying on unexamined non-empirical presuppositions and beliefs, drawn from an eclectic mix of religious and quasi-religious traditions and sources. Because of this, Johnson suggests avoiding scientific experiments that seek to induce PIMEs among participants. The use of mysticism as a framework "is concerning at a general level because patients may take such descriptions as scientific fact rather than opinion when coming from scientific or clinical authorities."[81] Instead, Johnson argues that researchers most adopt a "secular framework," which would allow "working with patients or participants of any religious/spiritual background.[82] Doing so would be more inclusive of those with no background at all, including those who consider themselves atheists or agnostics, as Glausser likewise argues.[83] Sanders and Zijlmans take a similar view, arguing that we should demystify psychedelic experiences; failing to do so "risks damaging the credibility and potential of psychedelic science,"[84] a sentiment that is echoed by Strassman.[85] Perhaps even more problematic from a clinical context is that PIMEs may, in fact, not correspond to reality at all,[86] and researchers who rely on mystical conceptualizations may be doing little more than offering subjects a "comforting delusion."[87]

[81] Johnson, "Consciousness, Religion, and Gurus," 580.
[82] Johnson, "Consciousness, Religion, and Gurus," 580.
[83] Glausser, "Psychedelic Drugs and Atheism."
[84] Sanders and Zijlmans, "Moving Past Mysticism in Psychedelic Science," 1255.
[85] Strassman, The Psychedelic Religion of Mystical Consciousness."
[86] Andrea Lavazza, "Ways of Being Well: Realistic and Unrealistic Wellbeing," in *New Perspectives on Realism*, ed. Luca Taddio (Sesto San Giovanni: Mimesis International, 2017), 237-52.
[87] Chris Letheby, *Philosophy of Psychedelics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); see also Pollan, *How to Change Your Mind*.

Jussi Jylkkä has argued that such critiques fail to take seriously or even ignore altogether the subjective element at work in research into PIMEs.[88] That is, the subjects involved do often, in fact, feel PIMEs as real and reap psychological benefits accordingly. Whether such experiences are metaphysically veridical is ultimately a separate issue; if the experiences have psychologically beneficial and meaningful outcomes for subjects then the benefits outweigh the risks, as both Flanagan and Graham and Letheby similarly affirm.[89] An emphasis on subjective experience over against metaphysical veridicality may allow taking PIMEs seriously from within a more naturalistic framework. We could, for example, adopt some form of "mystical fictionalism," as Brian Garb and Mitch Earlywine suggest, approaching PIMEs *as if* they were true, without any commitment to "belief in the existence of the mystical."[90]

These two general lines of thought, however, still lend credence to mysticism as a category in which to frame psychedelic experiences, although the former—the naturalistic critique of the category—does so negatively. That is, it argues for naturalism in light of mysticism, which is still taken as a self-explanatory category, though one that should be dropped. Rather than taking mysticism as a given, however, I suggest instead that we push psychedelic research to an examination of the conditions of possibility for labelling psychedelic experiences as mystical in the first place. Otherwise put, as Peter Sjöstedt-Hughes writes, "[M]ystical experience *per se*" is not "sufficient to provide a meaningful explanation of such an experience to a person, for the simple reason that mystical experience is the phenomenon to be explained—*mystical experience is the explanandum rather than the explanation*."[91]

We could go about this in numerous ways. Taves (2020 p. 685) for instance, has argued that a focus on mysticism privileges certain types of psychedelic experiences at the expense of other,

[88] Jussi Jyllkä, "Reconciling Mystical Experiences with Naturalistic Psychedelic Science: Reply to Sanders and Zijlmans," *ACS Pharmacology & Translational Science* 4, no. 4 (2021): 1468–1470, https://doi.org/10.1021/acsptsci.1c00144.
[89] Owen Flanagan and George Graham, "Truth and Sanity: Positive Illusions, Spiritual Delusions, and Metaphysical Hallucinations," in *Extraordinary Science and Psychiatry: Responses to the Crisis in Mental Health Research*, ed. Jeffrey Poland and Serife Tekin (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 123–146; Letheby, *Philosophy of Psychedelics*.
[90] Brian A. Garb and Mitch Earlywine, "Mystical Experiences Without Mysticism: An Argument for Mystical Fictionalism in Psychedelics," *Journal of Psychedelic Studies* 6, no. 1 (2022): 48–53, https://doi.org/10.1556/2054.2022.00215, 51.
[91] Sjöstedt-Hughes, Peter. "On the Need for Metaphysics in Psychedelic Therapy and Research." *Frontiers in Psychology* 14 (2023): 1128589. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1128589, 8.

differently valenced experiences that likewise involve alterations in the sense of self. She advocates for a more inclusive "framework that includes a wide range of alterations in sense of self instead of privileging experiences that researchers view as potentially more authentic."[92] Hence she prefers the term "special things" instead of terms related to mysticism as broader in scope.[93] The framework that she offers "would allow us to investigate the interaction between alterations in sense of self, population-level cultural differences, and underlying cognitive schemas."[94]

I am largely in agreement with Taves, but the framework she suggests should also include more abstract, philosophical schemas, as these too may play a role in interpreting psychedelic experiences. Sjöstedt-Hughes has argued, for example, that we should understanding psychedelic experiences in terms of metaphysics, that is, as metaphysical experiences. That is, rather than take mysticism as a given, explanatory category, he argues that we "outline a reasonably comprehensive 'menu' of metaphysical options, some of which may help experiencers to frame and thus make sense of, and give significance to, their experiences." Sjöstedt-Hughes.[95] outlines a comprehensive "matrix" for understanding PIMEs, whose main categories include physicalism, idealism, dualism, monism, and transcendence. Mysticism is only one, subordinate part of the puzzle here. Sjöstedt-Hughes (2023, p. 8) writes, "Metaphysics is more comprehensive than mysticism, and as such provides *in which* to understand to understand the significance of 'mystical experiences. But metaphysics also provides frameworks for other forms of exceptional experience that are often excluded from mystical criteria."[96] We might say that metaphysics drains the mystery from mysticism, on which research into PIMEs continues to rely.

But metaphysics works in the other direction as well. Metaphysics does not simply provide a framework *in which* to understand PIMEs; it also provides a framework *from which* to understand said experiences. Participants in psychedelic research come to the lab with certain metaphysical assumptions, although these may not be fully articulated, or even articulated at all. I

[92] Ann Taves, "Mystical and Other Alterations in Sense of Self: An Expanded Framework for Studying Nonordinary Experiences." *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 15, no. 3 (2020): 669–90. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691619895047, 685.
[93] Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*.
[94] Taves, "Mystical and Other Alterations in Sense of Self," 2.
[95] Sjöstedt-Hughes, "On the Need for Metaphysics," 8.
[96] Sjöstedt-Hughes, "On the Need for Metaphysics," 8.

would suggest that the designs of the experiments themselves also come loaded with metaphysical assumptions. I noted above the theological aspects of typical clinical sets and settings. In addition, the material construction of the experience itself appears to rely at least in part on a dualistic metaphysics. The psychedelic experiments discussed above are usually fostered by blocking out external, sensory distractions, via the use of eye mask and headphones. Translated into metaphysical terms, the experiments and the concomitant experiences take place within a framework that makes a sharp distinction between the internal and external, that is, mind and body.

I am not suggesting that a specific metaphysical framework necessarily corresponds to a specific type of experience. Studies have already shown that psychedelic experiments result in different metaphysical interpretations.[97] I am suggesting, rather, that the link between the two needs more investigation, not just on the back end, as Sjöstedt-Hughes advocates for, but on the front end as well, in the conceptual assumptions of participants and researchers and, importantly, the material designs of the experiments themselves. Insofar as mysticism, too, implies metaphysics, doing so might help us better understand how and why psychedelic experiences *become* mystical experiences—not, of course, to the exclusion of other factors but in concert with them.

[97] Timmerman et al., "Psychedelics Alter Metaphysical Beliefs"; Griffiths, R. R., Hurwitz, E. S., Davis, A. K., Johnson, M. W., & Jesse, R. (2019). Survey of subjective "God encounter experiences": Comparisons among naturally occurring experiences and those occasioned by the classic psychedelics psilocybin, LSD, ayahuasca, or DMT. *PLOS ONE*, *14*(4), e0214377. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0214377; Nayak and Griffiths, "A Single Belief-Changing Psychedelic Experience."