

by W. T. Stace

RELIGION AND THE MODERN MIND

A CRITICAL HISTORY OF GREEK PHILOSOPHY

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Mysticism

AND *Philosophy*

BY *W. T. Stace*

MACMILLAN & CO LTD

London 1961

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MACMILLAN AND COMPANY LIMITED
London Bombay Calcutta Madras Melbourne

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY OF CANADA LIMITED
Toronto

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PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

PREFACE

The aim of this book is to investigate the question, What bearing, if any, does what is called "mystical experience" have upon the more important problems of philosophy? We start with a psychological fact the denial of which could only proceed from ignorance. Some human beings do occasionally have unusual experiences which come to be distinguished as "mystical." These are recorded, or at least referred to, in the literatures of most advanced peoples in all ages. But since the term "mystical" is utterly vague, we must first examine the field empirically to determine what types and kinds of experience are called mystical, to specify and classify their main characteristics, to assign boundaries to the class, and to exclude irrelevant types. We then ask whether these experiences, or these states of mind, so selected and described, throw any light on such problems as the following: Whether there is in the universe any spiritual presence greater than man; and if so, how it is related to man and to the universe in general; whether we can find in mysticism any illumination on the questions of the nature of the self, the philosophy of logic, the functions of language, the truth or untruth of human claims to immortality, and finally the nature and sources of moral obligation and the problems of ethics generally.

In the last paragraph I used the phrase "spiritual presence," which I borrowed from Toynbee. Its virtue is its vagueness. A distinguished physicist, giving a popular lecture, was recently irrelevantly asked by

a member of his audience, "Do you believe in God?" He replied, "I do not use the word because it is too vague." I think this was the wrong answer. He should have said, "I do not use the word 'God' because it is too precise." This is why I speak of a "spiritual presence." Perhaps this also is too precise.

It is better to be vaguely right than to be precisely wrong.

This enquiry is in some respects parallel to the question, What bearing, if any, has our sense experience, e.g., our colour sensations, upon the problems of the nature and structure of the universe? I say, "*in some respects parallel.*" How far we can take the analogy seriously is itself one of our problems. But he who has perused nothing beyond the preface of this book is not entitled forthwith to reject the comparison—unless he wishes to convict himself of prejudice.

I write as a philosopher, and not as a mystic. I do not profess to be an expert in any of the cultural areas of mysticism which this book discusses. I have selected in each area a limited number of those whom I take to be the greatest mystics in that area and have based my conclusions mainly on an intensive study of these. Moreover my approach to philosophy is that of an empiricist and an analyst. But as an empiricist I do not hold that all experience must necessarily be reducible to sense experience. And as an analyst I do not hold that analysis is the sole business of philosophy. I attach the greatest value to what was once called "speculative philosophy," but consider that analysis is an essential instrument of it. Analysis can be made an end in itself. But I prefer to use it as a preparatory step toward discovery of truth.

Most of my predecessors in the field of mysticism either were not trained philosophers at all, or they thought in terms of philosophical methods and ideas and idioms which we can no longer accept—at any rate in Anglo-Saxon lands. In these lands, the methods of philosophy were revolutionized about fifty years ago by a small band of men among whom G. E. Moore was a main leader. I hold that whatever in that revolution is likely in future history to be adjudged of lasting value can be seized and appropriated now without attaching oneself to any of the one-sided rival schools of analysts who now divide

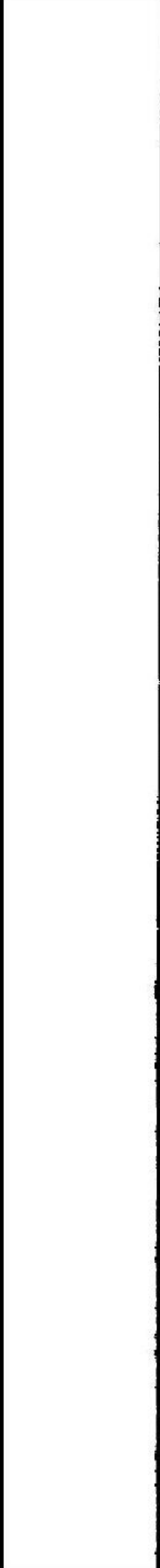
the field—the logical positivists, the Carnapian formalists, the Oxford “ordinary language” philosophers, the Wittgensteinian true believers.

Our predecessors in the field of mysticism have done nothing to help us in many of the problems which I have had to discuss. I have had to chart a lone course without guidance from the past. Hence there are a number of ideas in this book which may seem almost wholly novel, and not a little rash. I say this not in order to boast of originality, but on the contrary, because I hope that some of the deficiencies which my readers will find in my solutions may receive a more ready pardon. I could not help raising questions which appeared to be essential to the whole enquiry but which apparently did not occur to my predecessors at all. I had to struggle with them as best I could.

It should be emphasized that in so difficult a field we cannot expect “proofs,” “disproofs,” “refutations,” “certainties.” The mystic indeed does not argue. He has his inner subjective certainty. But this only raises a new and puzzling problem for the poor philosopher. At any rate, the utmost we can expect in this area is tentative hypotheses, reasonable opinions. And of course only nonscientists believe in the supposed certainty of science. Scientists know that their solutions are hypothetical only; and ours will doubtless be much more so.

The writing of this book has been generously supported by the Bollingen Foundation, which granted me a three-year fellowship, and then an extension of a fourth year. I am most grateful for their help.

W. T. S.



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