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Three Modes of Recovering Mysticism
Responses to Procyshyn, Erickson, and Eh

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Abstract: Philosophical mysticism is in the process of being rediscovered. In contrast to mysticism's traditional formulations, recent articulations of it emphasize the rational potentials of coming to terms with human finitude. By way of engaging the three mystical perspectives opened up by the contributions of Edmond Eh, Stephen Erickson and Alexei Procyshyn, the essay addresses a specifically modern sense of mystical wisdom: mysticism consists in decentering oneself in light of inner-worldly experiences of wonder.

Keywords: Jaspers, Karl; Tugendhat, Ernst; existentialism; limits of language; limits of reason; mysticism; rationality; wonder; wisdom; gift; sublime.

Mysticism can be defined in terms of its focus on the diverse modes in which human beings relate to a universe in which they are not at the center, but form just one, relatively speaking, minor part. Thus understood, mysticism responds to the existential need to relate to that which exceeds an agent's limited epistemic insight and practical control. The three contributions gathered here attest to the growing significance of mysticism in coming to terms with existential limits. In spite of drawing on different sources and highlighting diverse dimensions of this perennial and cross-cultural phenomenon, the authors are united in their attempt to rehabilitate mysticism as an existentially compelling and intellectually serious human potential. This endeavor at a recovery of mysticism is far from evident considering the objections raised in its academic reception. In its long tradition, mysticism has frequently been criticized for the assumption of extrasensory experiences that cannot be objectified or articulated in language.[1] The gesture toward the mystical has been repeatedly equated with a dangerous affirmation of obscurity and irrationalism. To take two twentieth-century examples, Bertrand Russell warned against mystical positions that embrace paradox and contradiction at the expense of scientific inquiry,[2] and Karl Popper interpreted mysticism as waging an attack against the open society.[3] The ongoing philosophical revival of mysticism to which the papers by Edmond Eh, Stephen Erickson and Alexei Procyshyn contribute calls into question such warnings. The authors aim at rethinking and challenging the misleading equation of mysticism with obscurity and irrationalism.

[1] A helpful summary of this critique is given in Peter Heidrich and Hans-Ulrich Lessing, "Mystik, mystisch," in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie, Bd 6 Mo-O*, eds. Joachim Ritter and Karlfried Gründer, Basel, CH: Schwabe Verlag 1984, pp. 268-279.

[2] Bertrand Russell, "Mysticism and Logic," in *Mysticism and Logic and other Essays*, London, GB: George Allen & Unwin LTD 1917, pp. 1-32.

[3] Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, London, GB: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1945, p. 314.

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It might strike the reader as surprising that it is not primarily classical mystics such as Meister Eckhart, who presuppose a mystical sense as they search for ways of overcoming individual will in light of divine will, which form the backdrop of the recent renaissance of mysticism. The contributions gathered here have in common that they turn to philosophers (Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Immanuel Kant and Ernst Tugendhat) not commonly associated with the assumption of ineffable experiences of a union with the divine. Instead, these philosophers underscore the rational capacities of human beings to relate to their limits in meaningful ways. It is not accidental that rationalist positions are being revisited in the attempt to recover the unique potentials of mysticism in coping with human finitude. In spite of otherwise differing philosophical agendas and methodologies, the defenders of a rational pursuit of encountering limits object to obscurity and emphasize a responsive as well as responsible engagement with existential finitude. Their emphasis is on the potentials of human beings to come to terms with being essentially perspectival creatures who share a sense of playing a relatively minor part in the grand scheme of things.

Mystics who are committed to uphold human reason for achieving clarity approach a mystical dimension in their lives by means of engaging in rational deliberation and a commitment to communication. All three contributions illustrate that mysticism and enlightenment do not need to be incompatible. Following the rationale of Johann B. Metz, the positons presented here can be conceived as a mysticism of open eyes—as opposed to a mysticism of closed eyes (the original etymological meaning of the term "mysticism").[4] A mysticism of open eyes has passed through the Enlightenment tradition and its striving for transparency and the use of reason in a publicly shared world and overcomes previous forms of mysticism that contend themselves with resorting to private experiences of subjective illumination that cannot be articulated in a public vocabulary. Mysticism has been a heterodox and highly diverse movement with different albeit overlapping expressions in Eastern and Western traditions. Ernst Tugendhat notes that a shared feature of culturally specific expressions by mystics is their emphasis upon the need for cultivating humility in light of the limits that arise from the particular human condition. Speaking in relative terms, humans are rather insignificant while at the same time possessing the capacity of putting themselves into perspective and thereby seeing beyond their existential provincialism.[5] The mystical attempt of overcoming—or at least taming—the egocentric tendency of inflating one's subjective perspectives need not aim at a self-annihilating union with a distant God, as it was for Meister Eckhart. Indeed, the recent focus on the rational potentials of mysticism frequently involves a turn away from orthodox conceptions of the deity of revealed religion.

The return of mysticism as a serious mindset and mode of existence signals nothing short of a transformation of the form of religious consciousness in modernity.[6] Mysticism becomes an attractive option again precisely at a time when both traditional religion as well as one-sided forms of atheistic skepticism and scientism have been exhausted. It is an appealing existential option for a post-secular society.[7] The open-

[4] Johann Baptist Metz, *Mystik der Offenen Augen: Wenn Spiritualität aufbricht*, Freiburg, GER: Herder Verlag, 2011. In a related manner, Robert Musil speaks of a mysticism as bright as the day (*taghelle Mystik*) when characterizing the insight of the protagonist Ulrich that illumination does not consist in a turning away from discursive language, but is realized in communication and by seeing the world for what it is. Robert Musil, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften, Vol. 2*, Adolf Frisé, Reinbeck, GER: Rowohlt Verlag 1978, p. 1310.

[5] Ernst Tugendhat, *Egocentricity and Mysticism: An Anthropological Study*, transl. Alexei Procyshyn and Mario Wenning, New York, NY: Columbia University Press 2016, p. xix. [Henceforth cited as *EM*]

[6] Peter Sloterdijk has diagnosed a correlation between the return of mysticism and the functional transformation of religion in modern times. Mysticism gains new importance precisely when the doctrinal content of religion has seized to be convincing to many contemporaries who nevertheless continue to be interested in spiritual fulfillment. "Der mystische Imperativ: Bemerkungen zum Formwandel des Religiösen in der Neuzeit," in *Mystische Zeugnisse aller Zeiten und Völker gesammelt von Martin Buber*, ed. Peter Sloterdijk, Munich, GER: Diederichs 1994, pp. 9-42, here p. 26.

[7] Elsewhere I have argued that the post-secular sentiment is open to phenomena of wonder and reenchantment without thereby claiming privileged forms of ineffable experiences of an absolute transcendence to an entity beyond reason and communication. See Mario Wenning, "The Fate of Transcendence in Post-secular Societies," in *Transcendence, Immanence,*

eye-mystic does not leave this world behind, but is ready to perceive and to engage with persons and significant objects in this world in a transfigured mode. Philosophy has not been immune to such experiences of immanent transcendence. This openness to unique encounters of the mystical is informed by rational modes of communication, including the reflection on the limits that constrain the use of rationality and language when confronting limit situations.

What then is the relationship between existential philosophy and mysticism? Iris Murdoch points out that, whereas there are many overlaps between these two responses to human finitute, their respective heroes differ substantially:

> The virtue of the mystical hero is humility. Whereas the existentialist hero is an anxious man trying to impose or assert or find himself, the mystical hero is an anxious man trying to discipline or purge or diminish himself. The chief temptation of the former is egoism, of the latter masochism.[8]

Murdoch's juxtaposition reveals the complimentary and mutually corrective nature of the respective virtues and vices prone to an existential and a mystic mode of living. There has been an intimate relationship between mysticism and some philosophical positions associated with the existentialist tradition. For example, Carl Michalson argued that "Existentialism has become a kind of secularized mysticism."[9] While this equation of existentialism and mysticism might be an exaggeration, existential philosophy has attempted to shed light on the essentially limited condition of humans, for example by recognizing that human beings are essentially finite and experience their finitude most vividly in their exposure to limit situations such as the abyss of death and mortality. However, in contrast to traditional Christian expressions of mysticism, the focus on human existence in existential philosophizing has not postulated the necessity of an ultimate divine addressee. Rather than fleeing the world as a response to human finitude, human existence harbors the potential of discovering meaning as it is revealed in unique and fleeting everyday experiences.

That Karl Jaspers' work in particular reveals a complex and often ambivalent relationship to the worldview of mysticism has been addressed by Alan Olson.[10] Starting with his early *Psychology of World Views*, Karl Jaspers reconstructs forms of mysticism that subscribe to the ideal of a mystic union with God, a *unio mystica*. Mysticism, on Jaspers' interpretation, aims to overcome the world. This world-fleeing and world-negating tendency of mysticism, Jaspers shows, threatens to abandon the task of engaging one's self in this world through communication with others as it undermines the possibility of inner-worldly transcendence. Jaspers thus distinguishes between a path of mysticism that threatens to abandon communication and a path of reflection. While the former emphasizes the unity of subject and object, the latter encounters fragmentation. In spite of this early psychological reconstruction of a mystical attempt to negate and abandon the world, mystical elements have been ascribed to Jaspers. For instance, Tsuyoshi Nakayama talks of a mystical tendency (*mystische Tendenz*) in Jaspers' philosophy of existence that is mentioned in writings by Hajime Tanabe.[11] From the perspective of philosophical faith, Jaspers aims to recover a mysticism open to a this-worldly transcendence that is not reducible to natural science while at the same time it also does not rest on appeals that are commonly found in doctrines of religious faith and revealed religion. Jaspers' existential mysticism, thus understood, points to distinctive modes of opening up oneself to the transcendence of the encompassing (*das Umgreifende*). Jaspers seeks for rational ways of combining a commitment to the encompassing without thereby abandoning the world, since the world "has a mystical resonance that transcends both mere objectivity and mere subjectivity" (*TH* 91). In this endeavor of an opening towards cyphers of transcendence, there is a

and Intercultural Philosophy, eds. Nahum Brown and William Franke, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan 2016, pp. 259-82.

[8] Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Peter Conradi, New York, NY: Penguin Books 1999, p. 227.

[9] Carl Michalson, "Existentialism is a Mysticism," *Theology Today*, 12/3 (October 1955), 355-368, here p. 356.

[10] Alan M. Olson, *Transcendence and Hermeneutics: An Interpretation of the Philosophy of Karl Jaspers*, The Hague, NL: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers 1979, pp. 91-108. [Henceforth cited as *TH*]

[11] Hajime Tanabe, *Zenshū, Vol. 9*, Tokyo, JP: Chikuma Shobo 1963, p. 460; cited in Tsuyoshi Nakayama, "Jaspers und die Mystik," in *Karl Jaspers's Philosophy: Rooted in the Present, Paradigm for the Future*, eds. Richard Wisser and Leonard H. Ehrlich, Würzburg, GER: Königshausen and Neumann 2003, pp. 179-84, here p. 179.

need, indeed a duty, to relate mysticism to the realm of language, communication, and rational truth claims. The distinctive forms of mystical experience need to be taken seriously from the perspective of a philosophical emphasis on rationality and communication. For this reason, Jaspers maintains in *Way to Wisdom*:

> We cannot doubt the existence of mystical experience, nor can we doubt that mystics have always been unable to communicate what is most essential in their experience. The mystic is immersed in the Comprehensive. The communicable partakes of the subject-object dichotomy, and a clear consciousness seeking to penetrate the infinite can never attain the fullness of that source. We can speak only of that which takes on object form. All else is incommunicable. But its presence in the background of those philosophical ideas which we call speculative constitutes their content and meaning.[12]

What the mystic cannot speak of forms the necessary background condition for the content and meaning of existential philosophy. Mysticism and philosophy share that they both set out from a sense of wonder or astonishment about the world that borders on the limits of communicability. In *Truth and Symbol* Jaspers writes:

> The world and everything that occurs in it is a mystery. The crudeness of finding everything to be self-evident through force of habit and the mania for mystery to the point of the sensational and the superstitious must disappear where genuine astonishment begins. Philosophy illuminates the mystery and brings it completely into consciousness. It begins with astonishment and increases the astonishment.[13]

One key existential possibility of human beings is to encounter and respond to the mysteries in this world in the mode of wonder. This is also the common starting point for philosophers who are focused on illuminating the mysteries of human existence by turning to the tradition of mysticism.

Response to Alexei Procyshyn

In his detailed reflections on Ernst Tugendhat's *Egocentricity and Mysticism*, Alexei Procyshyn wonders about wonder. More specifically, he is unconvinced by Tugendhat's discussion of wonder as a kind of cure for humans who suffer from a structural form of egocentricity. We might wonder why a given person or painting exists at all, rather than simply wondering about what it is or how it might or might not be useful for our concerns. In wonder we let go, or so it seems, of propositional language use and also of rational inquiry. In his reconstruction of Tugendhat's anthropology informed by the philosophy of language, Procyshyn argues that

> Tugendhat's account of our propositionally structured deliberative capabilities is at odds with the kind of skilled coping he attributes to our experience in wonder[14]

and he diagnoses a "performative contradiction" in the function attributed to wonder. According to Procyshyn's reconstruction of Tugendhat's position, the super-perspective of an allness (Jaspers would have called it the encompassing, *das Umgreifende*) that humans experience of wonder is an antidote to the existential stress commonly felt by egocentric I-sayers. Propositional language enables humans to abstract from their concrete context while it also condemns I-sayers to remain bound to the egocentric predicament. Wonder, according to Procyshyn's reconstruction of Tugendhat's argument, is supposed to solve—or resolve—this tension since it does not rest on propositional content and thereby promises to overcome—or at least alleviate—the existential stresses connected to the egocentric predicament. Since the reader might not be familiar with Tugendhat's work, my comments will focus primarily on the substantive objections raised by Procyshyn.

The person who wonders that something exists, Tugendhat suggest, does usually not, or at least not necessarily, perform an automated skill such as bike riding and even less so one of mere coping. Rather than being linked to an immersion of a pre-reflective skill that has been habituated, wonder, for Tugendhat, is a form of meditative attentiveness of the kind one finds when being drawn in by a unique work of art or when one is amazed by the very existence of a person that is significant to one. These modes of being drawn in by wonder, I agree with Tugendhat, are not forms of coping. Indeed, the spell of wonder consists in interrupting the habituated mechanisms human beings have cultivated

[12] Karl Jaspers, *Way to Wisdom: An Introduction to Philosophy*, transl. Ralph Manheim, New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1964, p 37.

[13] Karl Jaspers, *Truth and Symbol*, transl. Jean T. Wilde, William Kluback, and William Kimmel, Albany, NY: New College and University Press, Inc. 1959, p. 37.

[14] Alexei Procyshyn, "Wonder and Tugendhat's Mysticism," *Existenz* 12/2 (Fall 2017), 1-9, here p. 1.

in order to navigate within a complex world.

Wonder, like aesthetic experience, has the power of interrupting our ordinary ways of navigating and cognizing the world. The person who wonders brackets the ordinary forms of relating to the world such as, for example, employing skills, including the skill of assigning categories, and making use of propositional language. Some forms of art—think of sound poetry's foregrounding of phonetic over semantic and syntactic aspects of speech—play on this interruption of skill and automated sense-making mechanisms in language. Our established reflexive categories break down in wonder and leave us with a sense of awe.

While I share Procyshyn's concern about situating mystical experience in a space inaccessible by means of discursive reasoning, I do not share his characterization of Tugendhat's position as implying that wonder and the practice of giving and asking for reasons necessary exclude each other. Tugendhat distinguishes (i) an Aristotelian tradition in which wonder is being replaced by the philosophical practice of reason giving from (ii) a Platonic tradition in which an initial sense of wonder will trigger higher forms of wonder (*ekplexis*) connected to the ascent to the ideas (*EM* 129). I take Tugendhat's position to be closer to that of Plato than to that of Aristotle in that he emphasizes that wondering does often give rise to a sense of curiosity and thereby triggers further processes of engaged inquiry. One might add that, in contrast to Plato, we do not need to share the assumption that wondrous deliberation moves us further away from the objects in this world to the level of disembodied ideas. Where the practice of reason giving encounters its limit in wonder occurs when one is amazed by the very existence of the object or subject of wonder. The quiddity of a singular work of art, a significant human being or a specific emotion is ultimately inexhaustible in reason-giving practices. However, the sense of wonder could be increased and intensified in an attempt to inquire deeper into what makes a singular phenomenon so unique. We might try to understand the artwork or person better and inquire into the context of the work's creation or, as much as this is possible, how the world appears when seen from that person's background and point of view.

From a mystical perspective, most important in this process of wondering about a phenomenon, is that a thinker interrupts an otherwise prevalent tendency of universalizing one's perspective and seeing oneself to be at the center of things. The position as an epistemic and practical agent recedes to the background, a background from which one can be amazed by the very existence of a phenomenon whose existence cannot be exhausted by processes of inquiry provided that these processes are meaningful ways of getting to know better the focus of a specific experience of wonder. Tugendhat interprets the mystical sense of wonder as alleviation from the stresses that come with being a speaker of propositional languages. This raises the question concerning the mystic's relationship to language, and in particular to propositional language. Procyshyn is hesitant to radically detach mystical experience from communication and I share his concern (as does, I think, Tugendhat). This being said, what is at stake in the mystical attitude cannot be reduced to reasoning or imparting information by way of propositional language use—just as it cannot consist in a skilled coping with the world in the mode of strategic problem solving. Mysticism often involves a reflection on the limits of deliberation and language. In different traditions we find diverse modes of expressing the paradox of trying to go beyond deliberation and language use by means of reflection and words. The rationale for Zen Buddhism's employment of Koans, riddles, is that they aim to overcome the spell of being caught up in regimented forms of reflection. Reason that challenges rationality also occurs in the meditative recitation of phrases that seek to break open from within the hold that propositional language has on the language user. The self-transcendence of language by means of language occurs in paradoxical statements that are both denying and affirming language use. Thus, the Daoist classic *Daodejing*, which is crucial for Tugendhat's inquiry into the relationship of mysticism and peace of mind, famously begins with the paradox: "The Dao that can be spoken of is not the eternal Dao" (*Daodejing*, poem 1). It reminds the reader of the fact that what one is about to read is not to be equated with knowing the Dao, the structuring principle of the cosmos. In the other Daoist classic, the Zhuangzi, we find the paradox of the fishnet allegory:

> The fish trap exists because of the fish. Once you've gotten the fish you can forget the trap. The rabbit snare exists because of the rabbit. Once you've gotten the rabbit, you can forget the snare. Words exist because of meaning. Once you've gotten the meaning, you can forget the words. Where can I find a man who has forgotten words so I can have a word with him?[15]

[15] Zhuangzi, *Basic Writings*, transl. Burton Watson, New York, NY: Columbia University Press 2003, p. 302.

Paradoxical passages such as these present reflective insights that remind the person who engages with them that reflection ought not to be made into an absolute, while it might nevertheless be necessary to express their meaning. In particular, such paradoxes suggest that propositional knowledge ought not to be confused with living a life open to mystical insights. These passages serve, at best, as an invitation to a praxis that remains conscious of the limits, to use Kantian vocabulary, of its own conditions of possibility.

Another concern highlighted by Procyshyn regards the analogy of wonder and the sublime. Admittedly there are parallels between experiencing wonder and being confronted by the sublime; these are nevertheless not identical. Reflecting upon the sublime reconfirms the subject's moral authority over an otherwise terrifying nature; in contrast, wonder does not—or at least not necessarily—entail this threatening and self-assertive dimension. Wonder is usually directed outward and it is this outward-directedness at the very existence of something or someone special that can lead to a decentering that alleviates a subject from his fixation on egocentric concerns (*EM* xix). An additional difference between wonder and the sublime can be identified in the respective objects of wonder and the sublime. The sublime, at least in Kant's dynamic sublime, is associated with the experience of vastness, especially the vastness of nature. As mentioned earlier, Tugendhat's account of wondering draws on examples of persons or artworks such as Rembrandt's portraits that capture the attention of the spectator. These works or persons make the spectator wonder at the very possibility of the existence of this special person or this unique painting. To juxtapose wonder with the sublime, let us draw on Kant's examples. It is not a vast landscape that defies order or the seemingly infinite starry skies that exceed the limits of ordinary experience and cognition, but rather a concrete work or person. In wonder, one does not reconfirm one's egocentric position by giving up the possibility or the real existence of objects deemed worthy of wonder. Instead, the focus is taken off one's sense of self owing to being drawn toward a different center that brings forth curiosity and one's desire to talk to it, listen to it, meditate on it, or simply watch and feel it.[16]

Procyshyn convincingly objects to the idea that the person who experiences such kinds of wonder goes beyond the practice of reason-giving. It is hard to deny that the giving and asking for reasons can be sparked by a sense of wonder. Ideally, wonder triggers, rather than silences, a sense of curiosity and could sustain extensive forms of attentiveness and inquiry. We might think of an astrophysicist who marvels at the existence of a black whole and who is, as a consequence, inspired to engage in observations and to conduct experiments to test, revise or reconfirm current theories concerning gravity. However, as important as these rational activities might be, wonder both utilizes as well as transcends rationality. While it is essential for gaining knowledge, the practice of giving and expecting reasons does not exhaust wonder. Reasoning tends to be directed at questions that require explanation or justification rather than at an amazed pondering about the very existence of something unique, mesmerizing, awkward, or strange. Discursive knowledge may depart from a sense of wonder or feed into it and thereby intensify, but it cannot completely capture and exhaust such a sense of wonder.

Similar to experiences of beauty, a sense of wonder might be shared, but not by way of making inferences. I am inclined to take my sense of wonder in front of a painting to be universal. This judgment, just as a reflective judgment of beauty, is not based on the application of concepts and rules. By extension, my judgment entails the expectation that other people ought to experience the sunset as beautiful or worthy of admiration as I do, but there are no universal or even contextual reasons that could make such judgments and their corresponding attitudes necessary to others. At best we can invite others, through communication and evocation, to be co-wonderers.

Finally, Procyshyn suggests that wonder might not perform the assigned function of overcoming egocentricity. Tugendhat argues from a linguistically informed anthropological perspective that for humans, as speakers of propositional language, the egocentric predicament indeed can never be fully overcome, but at best transformed and softened. One reason for this, one may contend, is that the sense of wonder cannot be sustained infinitely as much as it can be rediscovered, intensified, and deepened on occasion. Experiences of wonder sometimes can trigger meta-reflection, for example when wondering about our capacity to wonder. However, such reflective forms of wondering might have the power of bringing the mystic, who is an

[16] The importance as well as the difficulty to achieve a real form of attentive looking is emphasized by Iris Murchoch, *The Sovereignty of the Good*, New York, NY: Routledge 2014, p. 89.

expert in experiencing wonder, into a transformed state of mind and, more importantly, a transformed mode of existence. The contents of self-reference, of someone who has experienced profound wonder, are shifting ones' sense of self. Being spellbound and decentered by wonder might not eliminate, but can tame epistemic pretensions of being at the center of things.

The person who wonders about the quiddity or the very existence of a specific object or a unique person in the world undergoes a process of irreversible decentering that is commonly associated with increased awareness and maturity of a person. Rather than to marvel at one's own egocentric standpoint, different phenomena that are significantly larger or smaller are encountered, or other manifestations of meaningful existence that differ from oneself. These perspectives take on a contingent character and are experienced as such. At the same time, one learns to see these phenomena as distantly familiar in that they too present viable, even if contingent, perspectives on a shared world. These experiences allow the mystic to see the diversity of possible perspectives on the world as a corrective to perceiving his contingent perspectives as the only viable ones. Seeing both the limits—and thereby also a bit beyond the limits—determined by first-person perspectives allows the mystic to see and feel the multitude of a range of other perspectives as a motivation to expand his knowledge about the complex, inexhaustible, and thus mysterious reality.

Response to Stephen A. Erickson

In his elegant and thoughtful essay, Erickson identifies anti-foundationalism as a primary reason for the gradual disappearance of mysticism which he attributes to eroding foundations of spiritual experience. While I find his depiction of spiritual experience compelling, I am less convinced by the explanation of why such experience is supposed to be in a state of crisis. Do we need to have a conception of ultimate foundations, as Erickson contends, to have mystical experiences? I tend to believe that we do not. I also question whether we need to point to a God of religion or philosophy in order to cultivate a *mystische Einstellung* as Jaspers calls the mystical attitude in his *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*.

At least some of the anti-foundationalists mentioned in Erickson's essay do seem to object to such presuppositions. Anti-foundational mysticism is not only a plausible option, but signals the emancipation from foundationalist metaphysics. It first and foremost allows a specific kind of mysticism to flourish. For instance, Richard Rorty, whom Erickson cites as the arch-anti-foundationalist, argues for a combination of anti-foundationalism and a secular version of mysticism. Rorty's mysticism remains idiosyncratic and ironic to be sure. He likes to provoke by throwing the search for a ground that would provide a secure metaphysical basis for knowledge overboard. Positively stated, one consequence of the abandonment of a metaphysics of ultimate grounds is a radically secular non-foundationalist form of mystical life. Rorty recollects the sense of awe that accompanied his childhood when coming across certain wild flowers:

> in the woods around Flatbrookville (and especially in the presence of certain coralroot orchids, and of the smaller yellow lady slipper), I had felt touched by something numinous, something of ineffable importance.[17]

For Rorty, a public commitment to solidarity and justice does not, or at least not necessarily, overlap with one's private sense of being touched by a singular encounter with a beautiful object such as a coralroot orchid (or, whenever nature is far away, a captivating novel). If Rorty's account is convincing, has it not been precisely in modern times, times in which the search for an ultimate ground is no longer regarded as necessary or even convincing, that such experiences of innerworldly mysticism become possible? With the worship of a god or of the supremacy of reason increasingly becoming optional instead of being a mandatory prerequisite in society, humans could see and be touched by the beauty of a singular orchid without regarding it as a symbol of something else, be it knowledge, morality, or divine creation. Rather than deducing a general rule, a moral command, or a divine origin from such experiences, a modern mystic in a society that is significantly shaped by secular reason comes to appreciate the singularity and uniqueness of phenomena worthy of awe and wonder. Whether it is necessary or even possible for modern mystics to relate to an allness that encompasses everything (in Jaspers' terminology, *das Umgreifende*) rather than concrete experiences of relative otherness in wonder is a legitimate challenge for the foundationalist mysticism Erickson appears to be defending.

The main focus of Erickson's essay is that of

[17] Richard Rorty, "Trotsky and the Wild Orchids," in *The Rorty Reader*, eds. Christopher J. Voparil and Richard J. Bernstein, Malden, MA: Blackwell 2010, pp. 511-9, here p. 503.

mystical or, as he also calls it, spiritual experience and existence. He suggests that mysticism creates inner citadels. These are places of inner retreat in which significant experiences of transcendence become possible. The inwardization of the mystical is confirmed by the etymological root of the concept "mysticism." The Greek verb *myein*, which literally means to close one's earth, mouth, and eyes, suggests a turning inward by shutting oneself off from an overflow of external sensuous stimuli. Erickson maintains that an inner mystical sense involves epistemological and existential dimensions. He privileges the latter over the former and writes about mystical experience: "If it has authentic standing at all it can only be lived." In what sense can mysticism be lived authentically? Granted, asking for a manual for an authentic mystical existence would be self-defeating. Yet, it would be intriguing to pursue the question whether the insights that the mystic can attain by turning inward harbor implications for an authentic form of life that includes an outward social dimension. Differently put, can Jaspers' concern mentioned earlier, namely that mystics flee from the world, be dissipated? To answer this question one would need to connect mysticism to forms of deliberation, attentiveness and world affirmation. Secondly, it needs to be shown that the metaphorical drinking of the fountain of the inner citadel, the insight into and experience of nothingness that Erickson evokes in a festive tone of voice, can lead to a transformed existence within society.

Erickson suggests that the mystic would be less of an agent and more of a recipient. I take this to mean that the person who is living out his spiritual experiences has learned to cultivate the capacity of patience, receptivity, and equanimity. In other words, such a person is capable of looking, listening, and letting be rather than rushing into plans of action. In the process of spiritual transformation, the agential registers of initiating and orchestrating give way to the passive competencies of receiving, attending, and acknowledging. This raises the question what it is that the mystic is being opened up to in this transformation from an active to a purely contemplative mode of existence. Jaspers points to dangers that he finds to be inherent in a mystic's passivity when he writes: "The emphasis on nondoing and passivity leads to a lack of responsibility….Not acting and irresponsibility seems self-evident to him."[18] A contemporary recovery of mystical inwardness and receptivity that takes Jaspers worry seriously would need to elaborate how the passive virtues enabled by a retreat to the inner citadel do not need to contradict the pressing task of engaging the world in responsible ways.

[18] Karl Jaspers, *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*, Berlin, GER: Springer Verlag 1960, p. 454, my translation.

Response to Edmond Eh

Eh's reflections on wisdom in the *Nicomochean Ethics* as well as in Thomas Aquinas' commentary of this Aristotelian text indirectly calls for an inclusion of thinkers in the mystical canon who are usually not considered mystics in any orthodox sense of the tradition. Similar to Procyshyn and Stevenson, Eh stresses the rational component of mysticism as well. He does so by speaking of a state of union with the divine achieved through contemplation. Rather than addressing whether this specifically monotheistic—and perhaps exclusively Christian—notion of mysticism as a union with the divine can be equally applied to traditions that are not monotheistic, I shall turn to an observation that strikes me as a particularly fruitful starting point for rethinking mysticism: the connection between wisdom and mysticism that is the focus of Eh's essay.

Considering wisdom as a means of mystical achievement suggests that the union with the divine not only is open to cognition, but crucially depends on it. Mysticism, according to Eh's reconstruction of Aquinas, is made possible through contemplation and insight rather than taking leave from reason. Eh demonstrates that an essential addition to Aristotle's conception of wisdom was made by Aquinas in terms of considering wisdom not only as a natural virtue with moral and intellectual components, but as a divine gift. This raises the question what kind of gift wisdom is.

There are at least three dimensions in which the rich notion of gift could be employed to characterize the mystical understanding of wisdom: first, wisdom, as much as it can be cultivated, is not a faculty that humans have created by themselves; secondly, Eh suggests that the gift presupposes a giver and a recipient; and, thirdly, the recipient of the gift takes on certain responsibilities qua having received the gift. While I want to leave aside the contentious question of whether gifts, including the gift of wisdom, presuppose a giver, it is intriguing to reflect on what is involved in receiving the gift of wisdom as, in a closely related manner, has been done by Derrida in his deliberation about the impossible task

of receiving the gift of death.[19]

If insights into the highest ends of knowledge and action depend on intuition that is being passively received, what kinds of responsibilities arise from insights being given, rather than being the author or originator of such precious insights? In addition, if the gift of wisdom, as Eh suggests, is being received in a disproportionate degree by particularly gifted church leaders who disseminate what they have received through their leadership to less gifted believers, in what sense are the disciples, or the leaders for that matter, free to receive or deny the gift? In other words, what is the relationship between the, I take it, egalitarian notion of freedom and the unevenly distributed gift of wisdom? These questions identify the most pressing challenges facing Eh's untimely project of approaching wisdom from a theological perspective as a quasi-religious gift that is distributed unevenly.

Gifts are not always wanted. They can be an imposition and appear as a burden to their recipient. Some gifts come with unwanted responsibilities for their intended or unintended recipients. For Aquinas, the gift of wisdom does not belong into the category of poisonous gifts since it opens up the path to perfect beatitude. What is involved in the transition from Aristotelian *eudaimonia* to Thomistic perfect beatitude? Aristotle was careful not to claim that the practice of virtue, including the highest virtue of wisdom by which humans partake in the divine, would lead to perfect happiness. We should, he argued, consider humans blessed with happiness only insofar as happiness applies to humans (*ut homines*), which means that humans can never rely on receiving or retaining happiness even if they have conducted their lives well. Their fate depends to a significant degree on luck. There are good reasons to follow Aristotle in remaining cautious about aligning wisdom with perfect happiness. As Aristotle emphasizes, human existence, including the contemplative life, remains dependent on external goods and is thus always subject to potential frustrations in case these external goods are not readily available or are being jeopardized due to uncontrollable factors. In a world of contingency, complexity, and flux, prudence and judgment become indispensable. Aquinas' suggestion that the wise person is indeed happy in an absolute sense seems closer to Stoic or Epicurean positions than to that of his Aristotelian model. Aristotle's weaker claim that humans can only approximate human happiness seems like the more convincing option if one admits of the view that happiness depends at least to some degree on the contingent existence of external goods, in other words: on luck. This is no reason to despair. Consolation, contentment and especially the virtue of hope might be better candidates to characterize the state of mind that the mystic, whether religious or not, can indeed achieve. Absolute happiness in the sense of perfect beatitude does not seem to be a realistic or even desirable goal, especially for human beings who are, as Eh suggests, gifted with wisdom.

In conclusion, philosophical challenges notwithstanding, each of the three perspectives discussed here has revealed untapped potentials of mystical perspectives today. They jointly attest to mysticism's continuing significance as a persistent possibility of human existence open to the experience of wonder and transcendence of this world.

[19] Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2008.