

Toward an Anthropology of Consciousness

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I

In March of this year, my father was diagnosed with cancer. As he underwent treatment with chemotherapy, he felt the need to make sense of his life and his possible death in ways that went beyond intellectual understanding. What he was looking for was not a theoretical understanding about the meaning of life, but rather a real and immediate sense of peace and a connection with something larger than himself. He was looking for an experiencing, a way of being, that went beyond the mere personal. He turned to books written by people who value these experiences for inspiration; people we might refer to as mystics. His reason for studying them, however, was not academic—he couldn't care less about cultural and historical backgrounds, about whether or not what these people write about represents some common core at the heart of all religions, or whether it is the result of conditioning, something Robert Gimello refers to as “a pattern of psychosomatic or neural impulse signifying nothing.”¹ Reading these books, and, more importantly, getting a flavor of what they try to describe or try to bring about, was, for him, quite literally, a matter of life and death.

II

One person he might have turned to is Suzanne Segal. In 1996, Blue Dove Press, a small publishing press based in San Diego, California, published a modest book by this Jewish American woman. The title of the book is *Collision with the Infinite: A Life Beyond the Personal Self*, and in it the author describes a powerful transformative event that occurred to her in 1982, and her subsequent attempts to come to terms with it.

In May of 1982, Segal was living in Paris, with her French husband. She had just been to a class for pregnant women at a clinic across town from where she lived. She writes: “it was the first week of my fourth month of pregnancy, and I had just begun to feel the faintest stirring of my daughter's tiny movements, like being brushed with a feather from the inside.”² The sun felt warm on her head and face while she was waiting for a bus at the bus stop on the Avenue de la Grande Armée. The bus arrived and she walked up to it:

I lifted my right foot to step into the bus and collided head-on with an invisible force that entered my awareness ... blowing the door of my usual consciousness open and off its hinges, splitting me in two. In the gaping space that appeared, what I had previously called “me” was forcefully pushed out of its usual location inside me into a new location that was approximately a foot behind and to the left of my head. “I” was now behind my body and looking out at the world without using the body's eyes.³

After a few months what little sense of self was left slowly disappeared as well and “there was literally no more experience of a “me” at all. The experience of personal identity switched off and was never to appear again. The personal self was gone, yet here was a body and a mind that still existed empty of anyone who occupied them.”⁴

Segal makes a number of strong claims about the nature and fabric of reality, both on the human level, and on a more general ‘existence’ level. I will briefly highlight three. The first of these claims is that there is no personal self and so also no personal doer: “all of life is accomplished by an unseen doer who can never be located. The presence of an “I” who was doing was totally illusory. The personal “I” had never been the doer.

Everything continued as before, only the person who used to think she was doing was absent.”⁵

The second claim is that, as she puts it, “the infinite emptiness I knew myself to be was now apparent as the *infinite substance* of everything I saw.”⁶ She refers to this as the “vastness.” In more detail:

This life is now lived in a constant, ever-present awareness of the infinite vastness that I am. In this state, there is absolutely no reference point, yet an entire range of emotions, thoughts, actions, and responses are simultaneously present. The infinite—which is at once the substance of everything and the ocean within which everything arises and passes away—is aware of itself constantly, whether the mind and body are sleeping, dreaming, or waking. In every moment, this body-mind circuitry is consciously participating in the sense organ through which the infinite perceives itself. There is never a locatable “me.” In fact, the non-locatability of the vastness is the predominant flavor of the experience, and the infinity of this non-locatability is forever revealing itself to be more and more infinite.⁷

The third claim, finally, is that the dropping away of the sense of self is not causal, and can therefore not be brought about: “The question of who can do what to get to where you already are seems absurd.”⁸

Segal’s claims have direct bearing on a number of academic fields, most obviously the study of religion, psychology, theology, and philosophy, but also fields such as education, political science and sociology, and even physics, biology, and chemistry. If we accept her claims about the nature of reality as true, it would be nothing short of revolutionary: common orientations to what it means to be human and live in this world would change in drastic ways.

III

How would we study Suzanne Segal? Few would think of her as a philosopher, a psychologist, or as a religious leader. Many would be content to describe her as a mystic, given the nature of her experiential truth claims. If we look for a methodology to study her as a mystic however, we come up terribly empty handed. On the one hand, we could *use* her as support for the existence of a “pure consciousness event,”⁹ and perhaps even claim that experiences like these lie at the heart of all religions. On the other hand, we could study her as the product of her time, culture, and specific upbringing, and *use* her to show that there is no such thing as “pure unmediated experience.”¹⁰ Both approaches, essentialism or neo-essentialism and constructivism or contextualism, fail to consider the truth claims she makes and can only study her in the context of their own agendas.

IV

There are two specific problems with the study of mysticism, having to do with language and power. The problem with language is that the words ‘mysticism’ and ‘mystic’ mean different things to different people. Already in 1899, Dean Inge listed twenty five definitions of mysticism.¹¹ Scholars define mysticism in vastly different ways. An additional complication is that the word is often used in popular culture to refer to what Webster’s Dictionary defines as “vague speculation.” It is often more revealing to find out *why* a certain author defines mysticism a certain way than *what* exactly she means by it. As Derrida would point out, all writing, all texts, have their own hidden agenda.

Foucault brings this issue into sharper focus by asking: “Posing for discourse the question of power means basically to ask whom does discourse serve?”¹² In a society that is characterized by a “political economy of truth,” as Foucault puts it, of which scholars

are an integral and important part, there is much at stake in accepting or rejecting the kind of truth claims made by people like Suzanne Segal. Segal poses a threat to monotheistic religions because of the pantheistic or monistic nature of her claims. Her claims also undermine authority; not only the authority of mainstream monotheistic religions, but also the authority of academic specialists and theorists in a variety of fields. Finally, the authority of the self, the main building block of capitalist economies, is questioned. In the study of mysticism, discourse serves to protect the interests of those who stand to lose power when challenged by radical assumptions such as Segal's.

The constructivist/contextualist agenda is to relegate all things mystical to the realm of culture and history. Mysticism is safe there, because what is historical can be explained away in terms of cause and effect, influence, and culture—we don't have to take the ideas expressed seriously, we are freed from having to address the challenges put to us by people like Segal, we no longer need to verify the truth claims arising out of their experience. The essentialists on the other hand aim to preserve the sacred (whether in monotheistic or monistic form) and promote their own worldview and (religious) power. Both discourses are in the first place political, and are only marginally connected to the subjects they are trying to make sense of.

Many of those who do away with the ideas of mystics do so by using the ideas of philosophers. It is telling that, when discussing philosophers, we highlight the ideas they are known for, while, when discussing mystics, we highlight the religious, cultural and historical background. There is an assumption that rational thought is more free from conditioning factors than experience, that thought is pure. When we say that there are no pure, unmediated experiences, does the same hold true for thoughts and knowledge? And if knowledge is mediated, can *it* be true in ways that experience cannot?

V

Given the shortcomings of current methodologies in the study of mysticism, a new approach is needed, one that has the capacity to deal with as many aspects of the people studied as possible. In putting this approach together, we can learn from anthropology and consciousness studies.

In his book *Path Toward a Clearing: Radical Empiricism and Ethnographic Inquiry*, anthropologist Michael Jackson outlines a methodology for the study of other cultures that can easily be applied to the study of people like Segal. Jackson is interested in an “open-ended, ongoing conversation with others,”¹³ rather than in large theories about life: “it is the character of lived experience which I want to explore, not the nature of man.”¹⁴ His methodology is one of “interexperience,” arising out of a two-way relationship between the knower and the known, subject and object. As does Frits Staal in his book *Exploring Mysticism*,¹⁵ Jackson argues that “we make ourselves experimental subjects and treat our experiences as primary data,”¹⁶ in addition to studying subjects from the outside.

Victor Turner and Edward Bruner edited a collection of essays called *The Anthropology of Experience*, in which experience itself is made the object of anthropological study. In one of the essays, Frederick Turner explores Thoreau's *Walden* as an early example of this methodology. He writes: “[Thoreau] was, so to speak, the anthropologist, the object of anthropological study, and the fieldwork all rolled into one.”¹⁷ For Thoreau, experience was an activity, “the inner equivalent of scientific

experimentation.”¹⁸ *Walden* was both an effort to observe and report on Walden Pond’s environment as well as an attempt to observe and report on the state of his inner life. The two were intimately connected for Thoreau, and, according to Turner, he “discovered in the relations between the knower and the known, when the same person is both, a mystical conception of the human experience of time that intimately connects it with the evolutionary process of nature as a whole.”¹⁹

Michael Jackson proposes a methodology for the study of lived experience, which is one of equality between scholar and subject, and takes into account the scholar’s own experiential world. Frederick Turner shows us that it is possible to make one’s own experience the subject of study *and* that we can study people who have done so. Both approaches blur the boundaries between scholar and subject, between self and other, and both stay away from political/theological truth claims about pure versus conditioned experience.

A final clue for a new approach to the study of mysticism comes from consciousness studies, which is a relatively new field of study that investigates consciousness from a variety of angles, including philosophy, psychology, religious studies, history, anthropology, biology and science. Jensine Andresen and Robert Forman write in the introduction to a *Journal of Consciousness Studies* issue devoted to religion and religious experiences:

This issue offers new and exciting approaches whereby our understanding of religion and religious experiences may be enhanced by reference to methods stemming from cognitive science, neuropsychology, developmental psychology, philosophy of mind, anthropology and the myriad other fields that have joined together to investigate the phenomenon of consciousness.²⁰

They are proposing a multidisciplinary approach to the study of religion in general and to the study of religious experience in particular, which, combined with the methodologies of Jackson and Turner, holds the promise for a new way to study mysticism: an anthropology of consciousness.

VI

My father’s cancer went in remission as a result of his treatments, and his burning questions and the need for a connection with something larger than himself are starting to fade. Suzanne Segal died of cancer, a brain tumor, a few years after the publication of her book, fuelling speculation about the relationship between her disease and her religious experiences. We cannot know for certain as scholars whether or not she touched the mystery of life and had a clearer experience/understanding of it than we do, nor can we know exactly what connection my father was seeking. We *can* make sure that in trying to make sense of other people’s religious longings, experiences, and words we include as many perspectives as possible.

It is important that we study not only the historical and cultural background of a person like Segal, but also that we take her truth claims seriously, as seriously as those of the great philosophers, and test them against our knowledge of psychology, philosophy and science, as well as against our own experience. To do Segal full justice as scholars, we need to study her employing the respectful pluralistic approach proposed in this paper, and, at the same time, as people who will one day die, remain open to the possibility of being touched by the mystery of her life and words.

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- ¹ Robert Gimello, “Mysticism and Meditation,” in Steven T. Katz, Ed., *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (London: Sheldon Press, 1978), p. 62.
- ² Suzanne Segal, *Collision with the Infinite: A Life Beyond the Personal Self* (San Diego, CA: Blue Dove Press, 1996), p. 48.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 54.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 65.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 130; her italics.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 137-138.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 162.
- ⁹ See for example: Robert K. C. Forman, Ed., *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).
- ¹⁰ See for example: Steven T. Katz, Ed., *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (London: Sheldon Press, 1978).
- ¹¹ As quoted in Denise Lardner Carmody and John Tully Carmody, *Mysticism: Holiness East and West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 6.
- ¹² Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader* (Paul Rabinow, Ed.) (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), p. 57.
- ¹³ Michael Jackson, *Path Toward a Clearing: Radical Empiricism and Ethnographic Inquiry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 14.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- ¹⁵ Staal: “If mysticism is to be studied seriously, it should not merely be studied indirectly and from without, but also directly and from within.” [When one studies perception, one does not] “study perception only by analyzing reports of those who describe what they perceive, or by looking at what happens to people and their bodies when they are engaged in perceiving. What one would do when studying perception, in addition, if not first of all, is to observe and analyze one’s own perceptions.” In Frits Staal, *Exploring Mysticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 123-124.
- ¹⁶ Jackson, *Path Toward a Clearing*, p. 4.
- ¹⁷ Frederick Turner, “Reflexivity as Evolution in Thoreau’s *Walden*,” in Victor Turner and Edward M. Bruner, Eds., *The Anthropology of Experience* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), pp. 74-75.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 77-78.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 83.
- ²⁰ Jensine Andresen and Robert K. C. Forman, “Methodological Pluralism in the Study of Religion,” in *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 7, No. 11-12, 2000, p. 7.