Religious Experience, Imagination and Interpretation: A Case Study

Peter Cheyne

'What is beyond all question is that in the field of religion, imagination must be accorded an enormous role, seen as an indispensable agency without which the claims and teachings of religion could never be communicated at all – far less arrestingly or memorably expressed.'
Ronald Hepburn, 'Religious Imagination' (1992)

'You Scottish theologians are always talking in parables.'
R. D. Laing

1. Hepburn on Religious Imagination and Interpretation

Without imagination, Ronald Hepburn argued, we cannot move from our ordinary concerns in their familiar, transient setting, to thoughts 'on a cosmic scale and with a cosmos-transcending being'.[1] Whether through icons, metaphors, or symbols, imagination is in this view a necessary power for the life – and not merely for the discourse – of religion and religious experience. Yet this very strength as a mode of relating to the transcendent, a mode that sees in and through surroundings – thereby gaining an elevated, symbolic significance – is also the root of what makes imagination a liability, being 'too ready to leap abysses in understanding and argumentation'.[2]

Hepburn adhered to an essentially Kantian understanding of imagination, furthered by an appreciation of S. T. Coleridge's famous distinctions concerning the concept. In Immanuel Kant's philosophy, the 'necessary' imagination[3] is needed for the perception of an external, orderly world. This imagination synthesizes both a priori concepts (such as being and causality) and empirical, learned concepts (such as dog and table) with what is intuited in sensation.[4] For Kant, this synthesis of intuition and concept requires imagination in a mysterious process that he called transcendental schematism, being 'a hidden art [*eine verborgene Kunst*] in the depths of the human soul, whose true operations we can divine from nature and lay unveiled before our eyes only with difficulty.'[5] Kant's synthesis necessary for meaningful experience is therefore for him an 'effect of the imagination, of a blind though indispensable function of the soul, without which we would have no cognition at all, but of which we are seldom even conscious.'[6] Beyond this necessary imagination is the more creative, aesthetic imagination, which can aim beyond all possible phenomena towards a view of ultimate reality. This aesthetic imagination can envision sublime ideas to represent – and stimulate – the rational ideas of God, free will, the immortal soul, and other such metaphysical entities or ideas (noumena) that have always been fundamental to religion.[7]

For Coleridge, these two degrees of imagination become the primary and the secondary imagination, alike distinguished in kind from the mere fancy, which for the British poet-philosopher renders the artificial manipulation of 'dead' images and concepts. The primary degree is for him the deeper, more spontaneous mode of imagination necessarily possessed by every human being as the 'living Power' and 'prime agent of perception'; the secondary exists in artists and thinkers who are conscious of symbols in their work and who exercise a more voluntary control over this capacity than that required for the primary degree.[8] Coleridgean primary imagination infuses into human experience not only quotidian empirical concepts such as 'dog' and 'table', or a priori ones such as 'triangle', but also what Coleridge refers to as 'divine ideas', providing what Hepburn would later refer to as a 'cosmic scale' with thoughts moving towards 'a cosmos-transcending being'. Coleridge's primary imagination not only provides that Kantian intuition–concept synthesis necessary for meaningful experience, it also appears as the *imago dei*, the quality or capacity in the human mind that is most similar to God, enacting 'a repetition in the

1 Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Religious Imagination' in Michael McGhee (ed.), *Philosophy, Religion and the Spiritual Life* (Cambridge, 1992), 127–43, 127.
2 Ibid.
3 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (1781; Cambridge, 1997), 239 (A120 n). Strawson discusses what is necessary, and what imaginative, in Kant's necessary imagination. P. F. Strawson, 'Imagination and Perception' in idem, *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (1974; London, 1992), 50–72.
4 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 240–1 (A123–5).
5 Ibid., 273 (A141, B180–1).
6 Ibid., 211 (A78, B103).
7 Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (1790; Cambridge, 2000), 193 (*Ak.* 5: 315).
8 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, vol. 1*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (1817; Princeton, 1983), 304.

finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM."[9] This profoundly ontological imagination reaches towards ideas and noumena beyond empirical and transcendental ('substance', 'cause', etc.) concepts and can imbue an infusing sense of transcendence.

Hepburn similarly describes imagination heading for these higher reaches. Thus,

> in its insatiable *nisus* for going beyond – 'transcending' – imagination does not draw back from seeking to transcend the entire phenomenal world, the world of lived experience: at the very least to animate and keep alive the thought that, although such transcendence is literally and necessarily inconceivable, it is nevertheless an insuppressible extension of imagination's concept-transcendence.[10]

Yet while, Hepburn argues, it is incoherent to refuse the kind of transcendence involved in inferring other minds from people's behaviour, there is no 'comparable incoherence' if we 'refuse to transcend world, to God'.[11] This asymmetry means that religious imagination is not 'necessary' in the way that coherent, everyday perceptual and socially interactive imagination is. Neither is religious imagination, in Hepburn's Kantian view, the best road to ideas experienced or intimated in their sublime aspects.

For Kant, ideas of reason are transcendental components of the mind that do not necessarily have real correspondences. They represent the traditional metaphysical entities and powers, including the self, freedom, the cosmos, God, eternity, infinity, etc. As non-empirical, organizing concepts they serve to regulate knowledge. The situation as Hepburn gives it, however, is not quite so simple as saying that reason and the free, moral self succeed in thinking the rational ideas where imagination would be overwhelmed and humiliated. For in order to stimulate the ideas of reason into activity and experience their power and significance as beyond phenomena, it is necessary that imagination throw its hands in the air, so to speak, with the person undergoing the experience feeling this as a defeat of the human imagining and anticipating powers. As Hepburn acknowledges, in experiences that transcend a readily graspable whole, 'Imagination […] is (notoriously) thwarted and overwhelmed'.[12] Yet

9 Ibid.

10 Hepburn, 'Religious Imagination', 129.

11 Ibid.

12 Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Findlay's Aesthetic Thought and its Metaphysical Setting' in Robert Cohen, Richard Martin, and Merold Westphal (eds), *Studies in the Philosophy of J. N. Findlay* (Albany, 1985), 192–211, 202.

without the attempt of imagination and its concession of defeat, there is no appreciable, living sense – no experiential cognition – of what it means to transcend and be transcended. Kant, too, acknowledges the role of imagination in sustaining these rational, non-empirical objects, as he sees these regulative but non-constitutive ideas as 'entirely outside the bounds of any possible experience', with each idea serving as the '*focus imaginarius*'[13] for hope in justice, for example; for a moral reality; for the possibility of a unified science; for perpetual peace instituted in a kingdom of ends; and for the possibility of divine recompense for eternal souls.

Because of these aesthetic, imaginative connections between images and transcendent ideas, religious experience, even as a mystical encounter with (or impression of) the transcendent, need not itself be utterly inexpressible beyond any chance of articulation and communication. The experience consists largely in impressions, emotions, spontaneous interpretations, and any of these, though difficult to convey – given the extraordinary nature, by definition, of the experience – can nonetheless be accorded careful, if usually tentative, expression. The worry of betraying – blaspheming against, or trivializing – the encounter or impression can prompt the narrating experiencer to correct turns of phrase that are misleading or else inappropriate to the mood or some other quality in the experience. In the recounting, there is also an intellectual duty to question not only any subsequent interpretation, but also one's more or less immediate, spontaneous interpretations at the time. Whether one is culturally Roman Catholic, Jainist, Mahayana Buddhist, Shintoist, or Australian Aboriginal, the experiencer will have spontaneous interpretations and associations related to his or her background knowledge and upbringing given a group of sensations, mental images, direction of thoughts, and so on within some physical and social situation. Moreover, whether one is theist, atheist, or agnostic, there will be a further level of interpretation when one subsequently recollects the experience. As Hepburn says, 'a religious commitment may be initiated, animated, and renewed by vividly felt and lived-through personal participation', though, because of '[h]uman fallibility', that 'experience may have to be sifted, respectfully but critically appraised'.[14] It should also be noted that for some, religious experience can *lead to* conversion or

13 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 591 (A699/B697).

14 Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Religious Experience' in Adrian Hastings et al. (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* (Oxford, 2000), 608.

confirmation, as it did for me, rather than stemming from prior doctrinal commitment.

The difficult yet important task regarding subsequent self-interpretation of religious experience is, as Hepburn says: 'To hold to, not to betray, the unconceptualizable, unimageable transfigurations of experience, neither forcing them into alien moulds nor ruthlessly rejecting them: this can be seen as faithfulness to an inner religious logic, not an expression of scepticism.'[15] Hepburn's language here is charitable, understanding the great value of the religious experience, and giving it the requisite leeway between being forced 'into alien moulds', such as inadequate though familiar stereotypes, and being rejected, presumably as nonsense. Between these two points, beyond which the experience is either abandoned or compromised beyond recognition and rendered bereft of its original meaning, the recounting of the experience still has a good deal of space for approximation, retaining room to play with possible expressions and a wide but not unfeasible field for interpretation.

Aiming for an optimal latitude like that suggested by Hepburn, I shall attempt to steer between treating religious experience as either 'raw' and uninterpreted, or as necessarily soaked with theoretical, doctrinal understanding – both interpretive constructs that I take to be hypothetical extremes. My account therefore opposes constructivist views such as those of Steven Katz, the champion over many years of the latter type of view. Katz argues that so-called mystical experience could never support religious beliefs since any way of characterizing it already draws on some such belief.[16] While I agree that even spontaneous experience is to some extent shaped through concepts, memory, education, culture, and so on, and is therefore mediated by an inevitable degree of interpretation, much of the experiencer's background religious doctrine, whether imagistic or abstractly conceptual, can be bracketed out of the narrator's account, as I shall attempt to do in section 2, returning to discuss the ramifications of that bracketing in section 4. In section 3, understandably the longest, I outline possible interpretive content and theoretical perspectives, 'added layers', that have been bracketed from the account itself. For the remainder of this essay, then, within a leeway licensed by Hepburn, I shall recount and examine – in itself and in relation to relevant theories – a religious experience of my own, which at the time and for many years after I thought

15 Hepburn, 'Religious Imagination', 132.

16 Stephen T. Katz, 'Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism' in idem (ed.), *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (Oxford, 1978), 22–74; and idem, *Mysticism and Language* (Oxford, 1992).

I should never share publicly for fear of misrepresenting or demeaning it. I relate it now with a view to seeing how close we may get to the original and valuable essence of the experience without becoming caught up in the tangles of interpretation.

2. The Account: Ripples Fine and Far Spreading

From my late teens and throughout my twenties, I had experiences that I find entirely natural to describe as mystical. The first time, my every nerve, thought, and tendency seemed to shoot in all directions throughout the universe, instilling a *physical* sense of interconnection. Since then, the interim periods of ordinary life appeared comparatively mundane, yet were nonetheless enriched. I have ever since remained convinced that all of life's episodes potentially comprise one mystical experience. 'One', not separate – these experiences seem to establish key nodal points of intensely significant transcendence, whose pulses persist as an undercurrent through the stages of life. This conviction can be found defined in the dictionary under *sacramentalism*, as the 'theory that the natural world is a reflection or imitation of an ideal, supernatural, or immaterial world' (*OED*).

An occasion around five years later, perhaps the most significant, was not of this outward expansion from within, but of being touched, seized rather, from without, as if by an intelligent ray of light, yet there was nothing visual to the experience. The presence was felt on my soul, and my body-soul, and the spirit-matter weave of my mouth, tongue, and lips were perilously caught up, as if I were a fish hooked. The presence had the power, I felt, to unravel entirely the thread of my existence and that of the whole universe in one prolonged tug. My soul stood long moments beside what I sensed to be a divine, living ideal, terrified I deserved no place in its awful and perfect presence. A tactile, non-visual image came to me of a perfect line, like a ray of silver light whose perfection, a rectitude in a moral and in a mathematical sense, made me cower in my own crookedness. I feared it would test me, and, if I were found to be a failure, overly in error through my own willed defects, I would be entirely unravelled, and perhaps the entire world with me. Though this seems a grandiose thought, a Talmudic saying occurred to me: that if to save one soul is to save the world entire, then perhaps the obliteration of a soul might entail the annihilation of the universe. This fear was illustrated to me in a very physical sensation, anticipating what seemed to be the possible

disentanglement of my whole being from all earthly attachment. The feared anticipation was of my soul-body becoming unravelled like wool pulled from a knitted jumper, first slowly, then faster so that the total knitted fabric of the universe would unravel with it, everything, in all its patterned colour, variety, and interconnections returning to the one perfect straight line to which it owes its existence. I stiffened, resisting the pull of this thread on my tongue and mouth, attempting to straighten my back and neck, mimicking an image of rightness, hoping that bodily correction could help straighten out my inner dialogue and attitude too. Here, more centrally within and realer than anything else, was this presence. The term 'inner' had no meaning with respect to this presence, for it was present to inner and outer alike. Pausing on this mystery, my lips warmed and I felt a pulse of its being.

No cleverness or sophistication could stand up to this presence, so my only attitude before it was one of a childlike sincerity that has given up trying to hide any deception or guilt. But then, as soon as my resistance softened, a gentler form came to me. But that is not quite right; rather, I turned in fearful hope, and it was there. I felt loved, however unworthy, as if my soul's head were on its bosom. Yet still afraid of another encounter with the awful, perfect, rectilinear form, a third appeared, giving enthusiasm to renew my optimism and energy to stand again in the stark presence of the Supreme. Moving from one to the next, I tick-tacked in a smoother, knitting-together reverse of the feared tick-tack unravelling of my self and world. This joining series of movements seemed to stem from the forgiving, loving being who encouraged me to turn to the energizing, inspiriting enthusiasm, whose inspiration moved me in turn to stand for a few moments before the original, fearful, perfect being. I persisted in this triangular motion from one to the next for some time, moving back and forth between the soft, loving form and the inspiring, energizing one before I had the courage and confidence to face the fearful first.

Other occasions, on different calendar dates, were of a heightened sense of the repercussions of actions. Even acts of attention, discernment, and perception that would ordinarily seem minute were revealed as filled with potential for good or ill. They imparted a sense of the seemingly infinite significances and moral weight of how we face, perceive, and act with respect to our immediate surroundings, and the wider, living world. Ordinary life is afterwards transformed, but a normality of sorts returns. Familiarity, as it flows gradually back, becomes revealed as a less intense mode of the connection and meaning experienced in the powerful, elevated modes. It is therefore difficult to count or separate mystical experiences, at least in the terms that my personal account

suggests. But it seems that periods of forgetfulness of the intensity can be used to mark extraordinary experiences, one from another. They are, nonetheless, connected below the surface, with that ordinariness being like the sea that only apparently separates islands in an archipelago.[17]

Like ripples, the experiences of connection felt closer to ultimate reality, but still a way off. They impressed me with the sense that I have much to learn; the reason to believe that there is indeed much to learn; and the conviction that it all matters, even in the apparently slightest details. Those experiences felt like they were the more real, and the mundane experiences were inescapably a part of them. The intense mystical episodes are as wave crests of the rippling liquid, with the periods of mundane living, the plateaus. Yet the plateaus of ordinary time have their infinitesimal ripples too: fine and far-spreading, and shimmeringly beautiful. Only their intensity, not their substance, is lesser, and these same 'particles' rise also, into the higher peaks.

People do not usually talk about these things. How many does one sit and sup with, not knowing they too have experienced something like this? It seems now that in the lengthening plateau periods, one ought to be bringing up, educating and orienting, the here where and when one is, children, students, and so on, but also one's physical surroundings, one's own feelings even, in aesthetic sense, sense of humour, enjoyment, desire, and fun, so that nothing is turned away from the cultivating light.

3. Added Layers

The sense of these episodes being one mystical experience – life itself with its peak moments, yet all one substance and being – is for me a given. Such claims concerning the profound insight and interconnectedness with each other of mystical encounters stand, I suggest, in the category that Ludwig Wittgenstein calls 'propositions that hold fast', 'hinge propositions' about which a world picture turns and is articulated, but which cannot be removed without the whole thing coming apart. Such propositions do not simply stand in isolation. Wittgenstein talks rather of a 'nest of propositions [*Nest von Sätzen*]', with his

17 In a parallel description, relating art to ordinary experience, John Dewey says: 'This task is to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience. Mountain peaks do not float unsupported; they do not even just rest upon the earth. They *are* the earth in one of its manifest operations.' John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934; New York, 1958), 3.

expression emphasizing, it seems to me, the sense of what one holds onto as forming a habitation, a tenable base from which we live our lives and view the world: 'When we first begin to believe anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions. (Light dawns gradually over the whole.) […] What I hold fast to is not *one* proposition but a nest of propositions.'[18] The oneness, for me, of religious experiences would remain a central article of faith irrespective of there being support for it beyond my experience. This conviction sits within a nest of propositions, some of which are indicated by Hepburn, that includes the oneness of 'ordinary' experience within the nodal points of the extraordinary. I said article of *faith*, but would not say of *belief*, for this lived revelation of the oneness of religious experience and the consequent, more gradual revelation of the oneness of ordinary experience with it, is too experientially indubitable to be believed or disbelieved. External agreement in the views of others, then, does not so much confirm, or even support, as lend a sense of spiritual community, providing opportunities for further, discursive and contemplative exploration.

Talk of the spiritual here in no way implies a physically detached or cerebral modality of experience. As I noted, the impressions and sensations in my experience were intensely physical and tactile, and hence were very much 'bodied'. As such, I view them in the light of what Hepburn, after Karl Jaspers, called the 'immanent transcendent', which I shall discuss at the end of section 4. I was pulled; tugged; felt an initial unravelling, or a tangible anticipation of this; tried to straighten out; intuited enveloping or nearby presences as soft, harsh, rectilinear, etc. There was nothing essentially visual to the experience, and this lack of visual orientation attests to a more primordial kind of event. There is a mystical tradition, exemplified, for instance, in the writings of Jakob Böhme, in which tact and taste are on the top of the hierarchy. The prioritizing of these internal senses emphasizes a more proximal, intense, qualitative dimension that contrasts as more inner and primitive against the distal, spatially extended aspects given in primarily visual experiences (e.g. in 'visions'). I am drawn to add that it seems inappropriate to use the past tense in relation to the experience. The sense is that it remains and ought to remain in the permanent now, the mood of the present tense that is most fitting for mathematics, for example. While biographically the past tense here is natural, the series of religious experiences leaves me with the abiding impression that they are 'one' and that they are not merely in 'the past'.

18 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (1950; New York, 1972), 21, 30 (§141, §225).

The sense of these religious experiences being connected in such a way as to comprise *one* mystical experience relates in obvious ways to my earliest mystical episode, where I felt as if every nerve were shooting out in an array of cosmic interconnection. This kind of experience is related to what philosophers and poets such as Plotinus, Coleridge, and Wordsworth have called 'the One Life' – to which Hepburn also refers positively[19] – and the feeling of connection that humans, co-evolved with this vibrant cosmos, have with it.

Plotinus believed that '[Some part or other of the intelligible world] is present in everything.'[20] Continuing, he asked: 'But how, then, is it [i.e. the intelligible (noumenal) world] present? As one life. For life is not in the living being only up to a point, being then unable to reach all of it; but it is everywhere.'[21] In harmony with my experience of rays of energy radiating as if from every nerve and reaching through the cosmos, Plotinus – whom I had neither read nor heard of aged seventeen, when that early experience occurred – illustrates the unity of forms in 'the One' when he describes how:

> the lines which touch the centres themselves […] are nonetheless each a centre, which is not cut off from the one first centre […] and yet they are all together one. […] If then we liken all the intelligibles to the many centres, leading back to the one centre where they are all unified, they appear many through the lines, not because the lines have produced them, but because they reveal them. […] [They provide] us with an analogue for those things which by contact with the intelligible nature appear to be many and to be present in many places.[22]

In a wonderfully intellectual-aesthetic response to his neo-Platonic studies, after reading, especially, the Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth, Coleridge affirms this Plotinian one life, proclaiming:

> O! the one Life within us and abroad,
> Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,
> A light in sound, a sound-like power in light,
> Rhythm in all thought, and joyance every where…[23]

19 Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Nature Humanised: Nature Respected', *Environmental Values*, 7 (1998), 267–79, 269.

20 Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. George Boys-Stones et al. (Cambridge, 2017), VI.5.11.42.

21 Ibid., VI.5.12.1–3.

22 Ibid., VI.5.5.12–23.

23 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'The Eolian Harp' in *The Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor*

Soon after, Wordsworth, one of Hepburn's favourite poets alongside Coleridge, echoes the latter's thoughts on 'the one Life', with his:

> sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean, and the living air,
> And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,
> A motion and a spirit, that impels
> All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
> And rolls through all things.[24]

A year later, in his first ('Two-Part', 1799) version of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth wrote how 'in all things / I saw one life, and felt that it was joy'.[25] This sense of connection and oneness is an instance of what Hepburn called the human '*nisus* toward the unitive'.[26] Among many others, it was shared also by Romain Rolland, whose famous 'oceanic feeling' – reductively analysed by Sigmund Freud – was felt physically as a merging with the material universe. Yet it connects also with whatever is in and behind that material universe, Spinoza's *natura naturans* (nature naturing, creative nature) that Coleridge once characterized as making 'the great book of […] Nature', in his interpretation, 'likewise a revelation of God',[27] with 'the Language of Nature […] a subordinate Logos'.[28]

Concomitant with the sense of cosmic interconnection in the mystical experience I recount, and the added theological thoughts it set off, there was a strong sense of self-discovery as a moral being, and what it is to be such a being. As in Kant's account of the sublime in the third *Critique*, my being overwhelmed by impressions of magnitudes and forces led to a deeply felt discovery of the realm of reason and ideas and of being a moral being. In the intensity of the experience, I grasped in a most vivid way that we are

Coleridge, vol. 1 (1795–6; Princeton, 2001), 233, l. 26, these lines inserted in the addendum to *Sibylline Leaves* (London, 1817).

24 William Wordsworth, 'Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey' in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798; Oxford, 2013), 89, ll. 96–103.

25 William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, 1798–1799* (Ithaca, NY, 1977), Book 2, ll. 446–64.

26 Hepburn, 'Findlay's Aesthetic Thought', 210.

27 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'The Statesman's Manual' in idem, *Lay Sermons*, ed. R. J. White (1816; Princeton, 1972), 70.

28 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lectures 1808–1819: On Literature, vol. 1*, ed. R. A. Foukes (Princeton, 1987), 429.

responsible for the ramifications of even our apparently tiniest intentions and it occurred to me that these intentions are acts of the mind in motion that align one's moral orientation with the good or else tip it further out of alignment. This central responsibility belongs to the free self that not only responds to questions (from oneself or others) and situations with verbal answers or practical actions, but which also adjusts its orientation to attempt to evade responsibility or return to it through changes in what Martin Heidegger called comportment and mood, and in attitudes of what Jean-Paul Sartre called good and bad faith. Shifting my outlook and attitude while sensing how this veered towards and away from honestly facing the fearful presence of the absolutely morally right left me with a sense of the impossibility of being a merely passive or unengaged being, since every physical or attitudinal movement that one can enact or leave undone lies within the self's sphere of action.

On the human attitude before deity, Kant observes that:

> In religion in general submission, adoration with bowed head, and remorseful and anxious gestures and voice, seem to be the only appropriate conduct in the presence of the Deity, and so to have been adopted and still observed by most people. But this disposition of the mind is far from being intrinsically and necessarily connected with the idea of the *sublimity* of a religion and its object. Someone who is genuinely afraid because […] he is conscious of having offended […] a power whose will is irresistible and at the same time just, certainly does not find himself in the right frame of mind to marvel at the greatness of God, for which a mood of calm contemplation and an entirely free judgment is requisite.[29]

The logic is attractive, but the disjunction around which Kant composes his description does not quite align with my account. In my mystical experience, I could anticipate with a natural fear my possible disintegration, and perhaps that of the whole physical cosmos. Yet the justice and unwavering rectitude of the fearful presence was also intuited, and in an attitude of marvel and reverence. This perspective from which one may see through and beyond fear to marvel at absolute rightness is a self-overcoming whereby the moral orientation is discovered in a pure form. Yet in my experience, it was not reached by the stoical rigour that Kant recommends, but rather from a humility that accepts that

29 Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 146–7 (*Ak*. 5: 263).

one's whole self and world be unravelled as the cost of setting right wrongs. In retrospect, that aspect of my experience seems like an Abrahamic test of faith, walking up the mountain to the moment of sacrifice only to find it has instead been a test to reveal to the experiencer the inner nature and undertaking of faith.[30]

Kant goes on to say that:

> when [one] is conscious of his upright, God-pleasing disposition […], those effects of power serve to awaken in him the idea of the sublimity of this being, insofar as he recognizes in himself a sublimity of disposition suitable to God's will, and is thereby raised above the fear of such effects of nature…[31]

It was not, however, stoical rectitude or uprightness in myself that I found to be pleasing to the fearful presence, since in comparison to this absolute rectitude, I could not pretend to be correct. As Søren Kierkegaard wrote, in the title to his concluding, religious section of *Either / Or* (the brief 'Ultimatum', or last word): 'in relation to God we are always in the wrong.'[32] The God-pleasing disposition found within was rather the combination of three states: awe at the absolute rightness of the fearful presence; an outflowing of love and trust before the kind, forgiving one; and enthusiasm for life, taking encouragement effusively from the inspiriting form.

Another compelling coincidence between my experience and that of others is a similarity of image and expression to C. S. Lewis's account of his religious conversion in his autobiographical *Surprised by Joy* (titled after a Wordsworth sonnet). While I describe a 'presence […] felt on my soul', with 'the spirit-matter weave of my mouth, tongue, and lips […] perilously caught up, as if I were a fish hooked', Lewis says: 'And so the great Angler played His fish and I never dreamed that the hook was in my tongue.'[33] Lewis's image seems to be entirely metaphorical, though it is perhaps a condensed parable, alluding to Christ's image of the disciples being called to God's work to become 'fishers of men'.[34] In the experience I underwent, however, my mouth, tongue and lips literally were the focal point of a tactile experience, though I do not doubt,

30 Genesis 22:1–19.

31 Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 147 (Ak. 5: 263).

32 Søren Kierkegaard, *Either / Or*, Part 2, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (1843; Princeton, 1987), 339.

33 C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (London, 1955), 199.

34 Matthew 4:19.

on reflection, that, however mysteriously, these sensations and their intimated meaning were effected at a subconscious level through the imagination. But was imagination the source or the medium?

A theist who believes that at least some mystical experience involves being touched by God might claim that here divinity acts upon the human imagination. A more agnostic approach would be to emphasize activity on the human side, viewing mystical experience as an imaginative seeing of profound meaning and interconnectedness in the cosmos. This latter describes Hepburn's position. While carefully emphasizing an agnosticism that sees such experience as 'possibly involving illusion', Hepburn acknowledges that 'mystical experience […] yields profound insight into the fact of an ultimate cosmic unification achieved eternally in a single divine intuitive vision'. Consonant with my account, Hepburn is drawn to claim that the peak, mystical moments punctuating the plateaus of the ordinary – which he calls the 'everyday, attenuated experience of the world'[35] – are irresistibly found by the mind, or interpreted by the aesthetic imagination, to express 'one and the same' ontological state. Thus he formulates 'the thought that the (to us) distinct moments of heightened awareness are to be *linked* in the mind as insights into one and the same unitive mode of being. When they occur, these strands impart particularly high solemnity to the total experience.'[36] At the imaginative level – often held, by Kant and Coleridge, among others, to involve subconscious operations – is a gap into which any number of theoretical approaches can be inserted to interpret and explain the experience, its images, and its meaning. A Freudian psychoanalyst, for example, would interpret the episode as a straightforward though intense cathexis of fixated psychosexual energy (libido) that gave only a subjective impression of being fixed by a higher, transcendent power, God. That impression would be explicable, according to the psychoanalyst, as a secondary revision that helps to keep repressed whatever early childhood, oral-stage trauma (breast weaning, perhaps) was making itself felt through being remembered and reinterpreted on the body.

Indeed, with just this sort of explanation, Freud interpreted Rolland's mystic sense of oneness with the universe, described by Rolland as a '*spontaneous religious sentiment*', '*the feeling of the "eternal"*' that gives to oneself and

35 Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Restoring the Sacred: Sacred as a Concept of Aesthetics' in Pauline von Bonsdorff and Arto Haapala (eds), *Aesthetics in the Human Environment* (Lahti, 1999), 166–85, 141.

36 Hepburn, 'Findlay's Aesthetic Thought', 208.

the world an 'oceanic' sense of existing 'without perceptible limits'.[37] Rolland insisted that 'the experience is imposed on me as a fact. It is a *contact*.' Freud, however, offers an alternative interpretation, because for him:

> The idea of men's receiving an intimation of their connection with the world around them through an immediate feeling which is from the outset directed to that purpose sounds so strange and fits in so badly with the fabric of our psychology that one is justified in attempting to discover a psychoanalytic – that is, a genetic – explanation of such a feeling.[38]

In Freud's alternative, psychoanalytic interpretation, the solidity of our ego felt as something apparently permanent with 'clear and sharp lines of demarcation' is in reality a fragile and 'deceptive' construct, because the ego actually merges into the unconscious out of which it is formed and 'for which it serves as a kind of façade'.[39] The state of being in love, felt almost as a pathology in respect only of its difference from the normal sense of the ego as clearly distinct from others, is both a reversion, Freud says, to a prior state of ego indistinctness, and a revelation of mental continuity with the id. Love, he continues, and the 'oceanic feeling' described by Rolland, enact a return to the primal unity experienced at the breast as the normal state of being at one with the mother.[40] Given a Freudian analysis, then, my experience would be interpreted along the lines of the 'oceanic feeling' of ego dissolution combined with the sharp pain (the penetrating, potentially world-dissolving tug on the mouth and tongue) of the threatened permanent removal of the breast. Yet Freud's reductive interpretation which tells what he thinks the oceanic feeling *must* amount to can readily be criticized as prejudicially foreclosed from its outset on the grounds that his prior assumptions are innocent of the experience itself. Taking this line of criticism is not to assert that only first-person accounts may reach an understanding of the experience, but rather that any inquiry into experience must be open to first-person accounts as further insight into the phenomenon itself and its effects. The naturalistic approach

37 Romain Rolland's letter to Sigmund Freud (5 December 1927) in William B. Parsons, *The Enigma of Oceanic Feeling: Revisioning the Psychoanalytic Theory of Mysticism* (Oxford, 1999), 173.

38 Sigmund Freud, 'Civilization and its Discontents' in idem, *Civilization, Society and Religion*, trans. James Strachey, ed. Albert Dickson (1930; London, 1985), 253.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid., 253–4.

of putting aside the first personal as subjective and epistemically irrelevant gives only an illusory impression that the alternative is thereby more objective and true. The remarkable aspects of the experience speak for themselves and thus their descriptions are, though assertoric for the hearer, apodictic for utterer if they are formulated as accurately as possible. Therefore, even if agnosticism regarding ultimate commitments is replaced by a sterner scepticism, aspects of mystical encounter such as unity, perspicuity, and the sense of their interconnection remain. That is, as Hepburn affirms, since no scepticism 'compels the sabotaging of the[se] aspects […] the mysticism will be attenuated but not destroyed'.[41]

As if anticipating Freud yet opposing his atheistic assumptions, Coleridge also provides an account drawing from early childhood of 'the Origin of the Idea of God in the Mind of Man'.[42] He argues that nature evolves everywhere from within, in a synthetic process that is 'opposite to the analytic and reflective processes of the mechanical understanding.'[43] With such a psychosynthesis, if we may so call this theoretical opposite to psychoanalytical explanation,[44] Coleridge traced to the infant at the breast, without slipping into naturalistic assumptions, the human sense of cosmic connection and the yearning for a divine beyond. Commencing in the infant's 'first Week of Being, the holy quiet of its first days […] sustained by the warmth of the maternal bosom', he conceived the 'first dawnings of its humanity […] in the Eye that connects the mother's face with the warmth of the […] bosom', and the 'thousand tender kisses' that 'excite a finer life in its lips', where 'language is first imitated from the mother's smiles.'[45] Anticipating Jacques Lacan's Freudian mirror stage,[46] in which the infant's first recognized 'self' is that of the mother and not of itself as a separate being, Coleridge notes that: 'Ere yet a conscious self exists, the love begins; and the first love is love of another. The Babe acknowledges

41 Hepburn, 'Findlay's Aesthetic Thought', 208.

42 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Opus Maximum*, ed. Thomas McFarland and Nicholas Halmi (MS *c.*1819; Princeton, 2002), 119.

43 Ibid., 120.

44 It should be noted that Coleridge coined the word 'psycho-analytical', in the context of describing the 'accurate understanding' required 'to conceive the *possibility* […] & *passion*' of the Greco-Roman polytheistic faith. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, vol. 2*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (Princeton, 1962), entry no. 2670, 15 September 1805.

45 Coleridge, *Opus Maximum*, 121.

46 Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience' in idem, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (1966; New York, 2005), 75–81.

a self in the mother's form years before it can recognize a self in its own.'[47] This development leads to 'Faith, implicit Faith, the offspring of unreflecting love […] the antecedent and indispensable condition of all its knowledge'. Love of the mother may be, for Coleridge, the archetype, or original model, of all future knowledge and relationship, yet he does not commit the genetic fallacy of assuming that all possible experience of faith and similar intuitions of oceanic oneness indicate nothing more than this innocent state of blissful infancy. Instead, he argues from this individual yet universalizing first love that the 'reverence of the invisible, substantiated by the feeling of love […] is the essence and proper definition of religion, is the commencement of the intellectual life, of the humanity'.[48]

While both interpretations commence from theories of infantile development, Freud's approach is to analyse a presumed illusion, whereas Coleridge provides a phenomenology of faith. The hermeneutic problem appears not to be the naively construed riddle of how to reach, per impossibile, experience that is free of interpretation and self-reflexive attitudes, but rather the puzzle of prising apart the added layers of secondary revisions, to borrow a Freudian term – and indeed tertiary ones added by academic discussion – from the fundamental experience and its related 'propositions that hold fast'. Beyond what the subject takes to be the indubitable core of the experience, a great multiplicity of often contradictory ramifications branches out in a potentially dizzying array of divergent metaphysical, doctrinal, and other interpretive possibilities. Underlying this confusing plurality, as Hepburn reminds us, we must not forget the deepest layer of complication, namely, that while the mystical 'felt immediacy may be striking, […] it may implicitly draw upon already learned concepts'.[49] At this point, the hermeneutic circle seem to spin without friction, as if confirming the distinction (to be discussed at the end of section 4) between multiple, undecidable interpretations in the humanities and the grounded method and decidable facts in the natural sciences. In order, then, to focus on a more achievable goal, I shall attempt not to settle on any ontological level as fundamental, but rather to consider whether removing the tangles of secondary interpretation affords a greater degree of clarity. Granting that primary interpretation is always made as the experience occurs, and is therefore probably impossible to disentangle, one should still expect that disentangling secondary revision would allow the essence of the experience to

47 Coleridge, *Opus Maximum*, 121.

48 Ibid., 127.

49 Hepburn, 'Religious Experience', 608.

be revealed in its own imaginative logic, so it can be fairly assessed on its own merits, shorn of illustrative details and potentially falsifying literary devices – such as personification – added after the event.

4. The Strange Vitality of the Symbol

Wittgenstein remarks: 'Philosophy unties the knots in our thinking; hence its result must be simple, but philosophizing has to be as complicated as the knots it unties.'[50] As a metaphor for simple versus tangled thinking, straight and knotted string is a usefully intuitive, hands-on image. The unknotted string, free of tangles, is flexible, and can easily be followed from one end to the other. However, the knotted string is substantially the same as the unknotted one, except that it has become confused, caught up in itself. Knots and tangles – the latter a looser variety of complication than the former – in string and in thinking are possible because of the inherent flexibility of the string and of the mind, and their reflexive ability to double up and wrap around themselves. We shall keep this imagery in mind as we think about religious experience and its self-interpretation by the experiencer.

While there are demarcating, salient points about religious experience,[51] they share with every other kind of experience the fact that, however beyond ordinary temporality they seem, they are dateable, occurring within a series anywhere between the birth and death of the individual human being. This does not detract from the fact that time itself is understood, intuited, or inwardly constructed very differently during a religious experience (and sometimes thereafter, though less intensely), suggesting concepts such as Meister Eckhart's 'eternal now'.[52] In the kind of religious experience I am concentrating

50 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford, 1967), §452.

51 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902; Cambridge, Mass., 1985), 302. James outlines 'four marks' of mystic experience with the first two always present, namely 'ineffability' – 'no adequate report of its contents can be given in words' (in conveying my own account, I optimistically disagree) – and a 'noetic quality' that provides 'insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect'. The next two marks of the mystic, James says, are often, but not always present in religious experiences: transiency – 'Mystical states cannot be sustained for long'; and passivity – 'the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance […] as if he were grasped and held by a superior power.' These qualities (save for my reservations about ineffability) are found in the experience that I related in section 2.

52 Meister Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, trans. and ed. Maurice O'C. Walshe, rev. Bernard McGinn (New York, 2009), 68, 79, 193, 262, 394.

on, this shift in the experience of time is accompanied by what is taken to be a noetic quality, or intellectual intuition, that connects to eternity. Within the cognitive, intuiting, self-interpreted flow between birth and death, the religious experience arises in its particular form as an outstanding phenomenon – a shining showing, or *phainómenon*, as that which shines forth, from '*phainō* […] to place in brightness', as Martin Heidegger correctly etymologized;[53] the word 'revelation' has the same sense. Nonetheless, such extraordinary appearances and impressions are composed from the same stuff of life as even the most ordinary, common-or-garden experience. Everything available to consciousness is something immanent, though the experience is felt to add up to one of transcendence.

An image from Coleridge is helpful here, related to the knotted and unknotted string metaphor, but more fluid and energetic. The knots in a string are its salient features, though composed of the same stuff as the rest of it; likewise, impressive patterns, eddies for instance, in a flowing river are composed of the same water as the smoothly running stretches. In these and similar kinds of looping pattern, the salient feature or phenomenon is created by a reflexive action of the substance upon itself. In Coleridge's Heraclitean cum romantic-sublime image of a pattern repeatedly forming in a rapidly flowing river, there is a good metaphor, or rather symbol, of the salient experiences that arise in the flux of life. For the romantic poet-philosopher, the epiphanic can be revealed in the everyday through the power of universal symbols viewed through what Hepburn called the religious or metaphysical imagination:

> River Greta near its fall into the Tees – Shootings of water thread down the slope of the huge green stone – The white Eddy-rose that blossom'd up against the stream in the scollop, by fits & starts, obstinate in resurrection – *It* is the life *that we live*.[54]

Four years later, he revisits both the scene and the image:

> The *white rose* of Eddy-foam, where the stream ran into a scooped or scalloped hollow of the rock in its channel – this shape, an exact white rose, was for ever overpowered by the Stream rushing down in upon it, and still obstinate in resurrection it spread up into the Scollop by fits and starts, *blossoming* in a moment into full Flower. – Hung over the Bridge, & musing considering how much of this Scene of endless variety in Identity was Nature's – how much the living organ's![55]

Coleridge's meditation, musing as he hung over the bridge, gets to the quick of the question concerning the imagination and interpretation involved in transformative experience. The Christian idea of resurrection is brought into his experience of the eddy-rose, yet the phenomenon is itself an instance of obstinate, perpetual resurrection (resurgence), and not merely a metaphor. The effervescent water, always, repeatedly, on the edge of solidifying for a moment into a glassy rose, always then breaking down again, can represent the persistence through constant change of human institutions, projects, selves, and the living, changing body. Yet it is itself a persisting whole that can be perceptually and conceptually picked out, albeit one composed of ever-fleeting particles. This ratio of sameness and difference is precisely what makes it a *symbol* – perhaps even a symbol of symbolism itself – rather than a metaphor or artificial analogy. The symbol does not just represent something by analogy, inevitably requiring displacement or separation of tenor from vehicle. Rather, the phenomenal object in the symbol is itself a member of the set of that which it symbolizes in one epitomizing and arresting image – in Coleridge's example, the perpetual resurrection of form through constant change.

Seeing 'the life that we live' in the eddy's resurging rose pattern is no mere projective identification. Natural pattern here symbolizes a persevering *poíesis* that is exemplified also by the self's holding together through life's vicissitudes. Neither pattern (eddy rose or human life) is necessarily the more ontologically basic, and this helps us avoid anthropomorphism, as the universal form itself – namely, persistence through constant change – is what is fundamental to both. Coleridge's symbol of the white eddy-rose in the river as 'the life that we live' can symbolize also the salient, extraordinary moments, episodes, or 'peak experiences' which Abraham Maslow described as those: 'rare, exciting, oceanic, deeply moving, exhilarating, elevating experiences that generate an advanced form of perceiving reality, and are even mystic and magical in their effect upon the experimenter.'[56]

53 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (1927; New York, 1996), 25.

54 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, vol. 1*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (Princeton, 1957), entry no. 495, October 1799.

55 Ibid., entry no. 1589, October 1803. The *OED* notes that while a 'scallop' is a certain form of shell-fish (or else its shell), and that 'to scallop' is 'to shape or (cut) out in the form of a scallop shell', the variant 'scollop' is now confined to 'an object of the shape of a scallop shell'.

56 Abraham H. Maslow, *Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences* (London, 1964), 21.

Both ordinary experience, and the extraordinary, rare plumes that arise within its stream, are composed of the same plain water, so to speak. The life-changing consequence is that once experienced, glimpses of the extraordinary in less spectacular, smaller fractals can appear ever onward in what was previously considered plain, normal, even insignificant. From the foregoing, I shall finally hazard a definition free of denominational doctrine. Religious experience is ordinary life reaching or perceived in an intense pitch of significance that surpasses the personal or biographical with a sense of cosmically wide-reaching correspondences and implications that present an insight or revelation into universal reality beyond the ordinary limits of perception. Doctrinally uncommitted (the insight could be illusory), this characterization is consistent with Hepburn's view that such experience can 'carry one well away from the self-confining' and into the '*nisus* toward the unitive'. Expressing this agnostically, he argues that if

> the 'upper world' is to be seen as an imaginative construction from the aesthetic and mystical experience here and now, then it is man's remarkable task to be witness to […] the mystically transformed vision of the world.[57]

From plain and pressure-patterned water, we return to both religious and ordinary experience as being composed from the stuff of life, which, on the phenomenological level, takes the immanent form of sensations, suggestions, memories, maxims, principles, hopes, fears, allusions, presentiments, and so on. All of these are perhaps inevitably subject to interpretation, often at the very moments they occur, rather than, say, 'emotion recollected in tranquillity' to be rekindled, as Wordsworth considered the origin of poetry. Even spontaneous thoughts and sentiments can be reflected in the moment or in an immediately successive train of consciousness. Sensations themselves – a nagging pain, a tickling feeling, grit in the shoe – can alter in significance and in the way they affect our mood if we change our attitude toward them, as in the fairly simple case of learning to enjoy running through a stitch. Amid such considerations, it soon becomes clear that there is no such thing as the plain, naked sensation untouched by the patterns or tangles of self-interpretation.

Religious experience and the insights of what Hepburn called 'cosmic imagination' are, it seems, inevitably filtered through one's understanding

57 Hepburn, 'Findlay's Aesthetic Thought', 210.

and prejudices by exposure or adherence to a particular religious tradition and its traces in the surrounding culture, such as the romanticism that deeply influenced Hepburn. As Hepburn says, cosmic imagination in its 'mental appropriating' of phenomena displays not only 'ingenuity and unconscious resourcefulness' but also a 'proneness to illusion' as we find and use symbols to articulate 'our own scheme of values'.[58] Thus most readers of my account of my own central religious experience will likely have read suggestions of the Christian Holy Trinity into the three person-like forms that appeared in it, namely the fearful, perfect rectilinear presence that seemed like it could unravel the entire universe in one sustained tug of the cosmic thread being the Father; the softer, forgiving figure in whom I could find rest and familiar love being the Son; and the encouraging, inspiriting force of enthusiasm being the Holy Spirit. Yet names and visible appearances were not given in the experiential flow, and, to use Edmund Husserl's term for his phenomenological method of getting 'back to the things themselves',[59] I *bracketed* cultural and religious knowledge from my account of the actual occurrence, save any that was active in the experience itself at the time. It could well be that at the time of the experience, my imagination subconsciously constructed, using Kantian syntheses of concepts and intuitions, elements of thought and sensation along pre-schematized lines of Christian thinking. Such preconfiguration would, however, be impossible to bracket out, these schemata being received by the experiencing subject from the other end of the filter, and not added by the conscious subject. Thought-inflected or concept-saturated perception, to borrow an image from Peter Strawson,[60] deriving from simple sensations to relatively more conceptual structures, ought not to be bracketed out if it appears in the experience itself of the account. Yet, to return to Wittgenstein's analogy, just as a knot can be loosened by twisting tight one end of the string to free it from a self-looping constriction, knots in our thought can be loosened by tightening our descriptions to make them more precise and less expansive (narrowing one end of the string), thereby making room to push through the self-reflexing coil.

Given the inevitability of this kind of conceptual, culturally relative construction, one might argue that the practices, tenets, and discourse of

58 Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Values and Cosmic Imagination' in Anthony O'Hear (ed.), *Philosophy, The Good and the Beautiful* (Cambridge, 2000), 35–51, 35.

59 Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations, vol. 1*, trans. J. N. Findlay (1900; London, 2001), 168.

60 Strawson, 'Imagination and Perception', 62.

and around a particular religion get too much in the way of even the direct experience, let alone its recollection, for it to count as anything other than subjective interpretation. That rather pessimistic view of the value of religious experience freely accords it existential value, perhaps allowing it even the very highest. But that is an easy concession from the objective, methodical point of view, for which existential value is entirely subjective and counts for little. Subjective evaluation in that sense is relegated to the secondary category of the interpreted, and even, with all the complexities and lack of objectivity it entails, to the more problematic category of the self-interpreted.

This sceptical attitude, which I touched on at the end of section 3, can be found in various philosophical sources. Perhaps Wilhelm Dilthey exemplified it most starkly with his strong distinction between *Verstehen* – 'understanding' in the humanities or human ('spiritual', in Dilthey's German) sciences, *Geisteswissenschaften*, sense of subjectively grasping the import and implications of life situations, culture, poetry, and so forth – and *Erklären*, 'explanation' and 'clarifying' that provides a causal account arrived at through an objective methodology such as that epitomized in the natural sciences.[61] The inevitable 'prejudices' entailed by the subjective perspectives of humane knowledge can be taken, however, in Hans-Georg Gadamer's positive view that far from closing off experience, 'the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices […] constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience […] our openness to the world […] whereby what we encounter says something to us.'[62]

Further, as I hope I have gone some way in showing, the knots entailed by the reflexivity of self-interpretation can be loosened by making experiential description as precise and phenomenologically bracketed as possible. This approach is to mitigate, not deny, the self-reflexive complications that impinge not only on subjective, humane knowledge as science, but also as history. The path I steer, then, is between the Scylla of constructivist, projectivist scepticism and the Charybdis of interpretive charity. To follow this course is to aim for a synthesis of *Verstehen* and *Erklären*. Such a synthesis in the description and examination of religious experience can proceed through three stages, as I have done in this case study. First, one removes, where possible, the accreted

61 Wilhelm Dilthey, *Introduction to the Human Sciences*, trans. Michael Neville et al. (1883; Princeton, 1989).

62 Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem' in idem, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge (1966; Berkeley, 1976), 3–17, 9.

secondary and tertiary revisions of first-person accounts. The next step is to identify symbols in the experience and assess how they apply to personal and social life, nature, and cosmos. Third, one then examines similarities with other accounts in mystical writings; literary and mythical narratives; and scientific (including psychological) and philosophical discourse. The comparison is not to collapse mystical accounts reductively into literary and mythical ones, but to discover and explore underlying forms, as, for instance, in the Jungian analysis and discussion of archetypes, or in the existential interpretation of religious texts, whether in demythologized form or by remaining with the symbols (or 'ciphers') of religious myth.[63] Such methods can help us to 'hold to […] the unconceptualizable, unimageable transformations of experience' that Hepburn saw as the correct attitude to religious experience in a logic that 'negates all substantializing and localizing of transcendence, all repetition in the transcendent of the concepts and categories of the life-world' and, 'to hold to, to stay with, the strange vitality of the symbol'.[64]

This symbol, with its strange vitality, is how Hepburn refers to what Jaspers calls 'the cipher', being 'that in which transcendence and a mundane being are unified at one time'.[65] Here, transcendent reality 'shows in the cipher and stays hidden all the same'. Human action, Jaspers affirms, with its directedness towards value and its essential incompleteness, is the cipher in which transcendence 'shows most directly and clearly'.[66] Dropping much of its existentialist terminology, Hepburn adopts and adapts this outlook of the historical, situated individual experientially, aesthetically, and intellectually encountering intimations of transcendence with varying degrees of directness and intensity. Like Jaspers,[67] Hepburn emphasizes both the lack of proof of objective transcendence and the importance, nonetheless, of intimations of transcendence, especially, for him, in mystical-aesthetic encounters with nature that engage the metaphysical imagination. Discussing 'glimpses of the eternal,

63 Karl Jaspers and Rudolf Bultmann, *Myth and Christianity: An Inquiry into the Possibility of Religion without Myth*, trans. Norbert Guterman (1954; Amhurst, 2005). Bultmann promotes the modern demythologizing of religion, whereas Jaspers argues for the necessity of myth as a 'cipher' that indicates the transcendent that cannot be directly communicated.

64 Hepburn, 'Religious Imagination', 132.

65 Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy, vol. 3*, trans. E. B. Ashton (1932; Chicago, 1971), 123.

66 Ibid., 111, 113.

67 *'There is nothing demonstrable about a metaphysical experience*, nothing that might make it valid for everyone.' Ibid., 114.

"spots of time", or visionary moments as basically transformations in our apprehending of the temporal self', Hepburn argues that:

> It is possible […] that these aesthetico-mystical phenomena afford a clue to the understanding of the mystical in a wider sense. The central feature of mystical experience, on such a view, would be seen as that *nisus* to the ever more concentratedly unified, freer of brute inexpressiveness; together with the surmise that progress in this direction is necessarily incompletable. As essentially a set of transformations of the here-and-now, it is altogether dependent upon here-and-now materials.[68]

Returning, as he so often does, to the experience of the nisus[69] – the yearning drive – toward the transcendent and the unitive, Hepburn finds it an undeniable datum present not only throughout philosophical and religious traditions, but also in peak aesthetic experiences. Though the nisus drives toward experiences 'freer of brute inexpressiveness', where the opaque given becomes translucent with a transcendence directly apparent to the experiencer, one never reaches a perfect transparency – the 'direction is necessarily incompletable'. With his sense of transcendence rooted in aesthetics, that is, in his analysis of the experience of feelings and encounters (especially in nature), and not in doctrine or any metaphysics of substance, Hepburn insists that 'the only transcendence that can be real to us is an "immanent" one.'[70] Here he again refers to Jaspers, for whom 'the possibility of experiencing being proper requires an immanent transcendence', since 'it takes reality to reveal transcendence. About transcendence we can know nothing in general; we can hear it only historically, in reality. Experience is the font of transcendent ascertainment'.[71] The stuff of the experience is always the stuff of the world, diaphanous but never dissolved. Reminiscent of Kant telling Plato that his speculative dove needs the resistance of an earthly atmosphere for its wings to

68 Hepburn, 'Findlay's Aesthetic Thought', 209.

69 In his 'Aesthetic Experience, Metaphysics and Subjectivity: Hepburn and "Nature-mysticism"' (published in this volume), David E. Cooper notes that 'Several of Hepburn's responses to this "nisus" or transcendental urge remain constant throughout these papers [on aesthetics], covering almost forty years.'

70 Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Optimism, Finitude and the Meaning of Life' in Brian Hebblethwaite and Stewart Sutherland (eds), *The Philosophical Frontiers of Christian Theology: Essays Presented to D. M. MacKinnon* (Cambridge, 1982), 119–44, 142.

71 Jaspers, *Philosophy, vol. 3*, 118, 114.

cleave the air and ascend,[72] Hepburn emphasizes that 'without […] particular modes of earthiness, there would exist no such ethereal, emotional quality' in even the highest aesthetic encounters.[73] The ripples and the plateaus are made of the same plain water, and not a drop of it can be said to truly, empirically transubstantiate, to shake off its mundane substantiality. The stuff of experience remains immanent, Hepburn is rightly adamant, but its sparkle, he admits, and our imaginative transport with it, is an immanent transcendence.[74]

Shimane University

72 'The light dove, in free flight cutting through the air the resistance of which it feels, could get the idea that it could do even better in airless space. Likewise, Plato abandoned the world of the senses because it posed so many hindrances for the understanding, and dared to go beyond it on the wings of the ideas, in the empty space of pure understanding. He did not notice that he made no headway by his efforts, for he had no resistance, no support, as it were, by which he could stiffen himself, and to which he could apply his powers in order to get his understanding off the ground.' Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 129 (A5/B8–9).

73 Hepburn, 'Findlay's Aesthetic Thought', 209.

74 I am grateful to J. Gerald Janzen, Michael McGhee, David E. Cooper, Yuriko Saito, and Endre Szécsényi for perceptive comments which have improved this essay.