

EPISTEMOLOGICAL BLINDERS: CONSTRUCTIVISM AND MAHAMUDRA

John L. Crow, Kennesaw State University

Evaluating mystical experience is difficult due to the subjective nature of the event itself. Before performing an experiential analysis, one must engage in a necessary evaluation: what epistemological basis will be used to assess the event? This is fundamental because the epistemology used to evaluate the experience predetermines the kinds of conclusions possible. In 1978, Steven Katz published *Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism* and proposed an epistemology, frequently called constructivism, in which “mystical, or more generally religious experience is irrelevant in establishing truth”¹ and is determined by the culture and ideology of the subject. The implications of this assertion are immense. Katz’s constructivism not only limits the examination of mystical claims, it also completely disregards some forms of mystical experience altogether. While Katz argues his epistemology is neutral, it actually has its own presuppositions, the very aspects Katz claims he overcomes. These presuppositions make examining claims in mystical texts difficult as they can predetermine certain claims as impossible. One such text that conflicts with Katz’s epistemology is the *Buddhist Moonlight of Mahamudra*,² by Dakpo Tashi Namgyal. This paper will summarize the constructivist position regarding mystical experience, identify those preconceptions, and illustrate how these preconceptions conflict with claims in *Moonlight of Mahamudra*. Lastly, I will assert the value of alternative ways to examine

1 Steven T. Katz, ed. Steven T. Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 22.

2 Lobsang P. Lhalungpa, trans., Dakpo Tashi Namgyal, *Mahamudra: The Moonlight: Quintessence of Mind and Meditation*, (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2006). However, for brevity, I will refer to it by the direct translation of the Tibetan title, *Moonlight of Mahamudra*, as indicated by Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche in *Essentials of Mahamudra: Looking Directly at the Mind*.

the issue of mystical experience that is at least more accommodating to the claims of the mystics themselves.

The primary claim made by Katz and the constructivists is that all experiential events are mediated. Katz writes, “*There are NO pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences.*”³ Whether by culture, ideology, or some other external basis, constructivists assert that the kind of experience possible for mystics is determined by prior experiential conditions. As Katz explains,

a proper evaluation of this fact leads to the recognition that in order to understand mysticism it is not just a question of studying the reports of the mystic after the experiential event but of acknowledging that the experience itself as well as the form in which it is reported is shaped by concepts which the mystic brings to, and which shape, his experience. (Katz 1978, 26)

Katz further states, “*all* experience is processed through, organized by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological ways.”⁴ Thus Katz contextualizes all experience within the conditions of the individual, before, during, and after the experience,⁵ and he resists any attempt to universalize or generalize experience across cultures or religions.

The reason Katz makes these claims is to refute the assertions of the perennialist philosophy which claims a single, foundational, and unmediated experience as the basis of mystical events. These experiences are then interpreted which has given rise to the various religions. Katz rejects this outright: “*There is no philosophia perennis.*”⁶ Katz’s motivation is a desire to maintain the differences between religious traditions in addition to the resistance of the reductionism present in perennial philosophy. As an example, the perennialists ultimately equate the Christian’s experience of God with the Hindu’s union with Brahman; Katz wants to retain the difference. Katz is explicit when he writes, “it is my view based on what evidence there is, that the Hindu experience of Brahman and the Christian experience of God are not the same.”⁷ As a consequence, the differences between cultures and religions not only exist in normative society but also extend to the metaphysical.

³ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 24

⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

After asserting cultural difference, Katz then argues that constructivist epistemology is neutral and contains no biases. He declares that constructivism is the only epistemology that retains an objective stance whereby all evidence is accounted for without being reductionistic. Katz writes, "Our account neither (a) overlooks any evidence, nor (b) has any need to simplify the available evidence to make it fit into comparative or comparable categories, nor (c) does it begin with *a priori* assumptions about the nature of ultimate reality."⁸ He also claims he has no dogmatic position to defend in his paper and that his conclusions are based only on the available evidence.⁹ As a result, he contends that the constructivist epistemology is the best approach to examining mystical experience.

Not surprisingly many theologians and philosophers have objected to the constructivist epistemology. The first difficulty with the constructivist epistemology is that it creates certain kinds of knowing as the only valid means of knowing. Yet, as Martin Adam notes, many philosophers recognize that "sense experience has a direct nonpropositional knowledge";¹⁰ this direct knowledge is sometimes referred to as "the given." Consequently, the experience is direct and gives no reason for the subject to doubt the truth of the event. However, if Katz's claims are true, this kind of knowledge is rendered invalid: there is no given, there is only culture mediating experience.

In addition to only recognizing certain kinds of knowledge, Katz requires an objective basis to evaluate the experience and thus uses the descriptions provided by the individual subjects. By means of Kantian categories, constructivists create a structure to evaluate claims. These categories require objective classification and preclude subjective evaluation. This is one area that Katz is clear about; it is only the publicly available information that matters, not the private experience itself. Even if the subject has had a mystical experience, the observer or theologian studying the event cannot know about anyone else's experience, e.g. 'get inside the subject's head.' In a conversation with John Horgan, Katz stated that he has personally had mystical experiences but that his experiences were irrelevant and that, "all I have available of the authentic or lack of authentic mystical experiences of Eckhart, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Shankara, is what they have written. I have no access to their minds.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁰ Martin T. Adam, "A Post-Kantian Perspective on Recent Debates about Mystical Experience," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 70, no.4 (2002), 802.

So personal experience doesn't count very much in this."¹¹ The difficulty presented by this position is that it reduces the experience to the interpretation; which then collapses into one continuous process of structuring by the subject's culture or ideology. Examination of this process must be through external, objective phenomena because there is no access to the subject's mind and no way to determine the validity of the claim. In fact, Katz begins his 1978 paper by immediately stating that verification of mystical experiences is simply impossible.¹² As for verification, Katz defines it as "the strong thesis that independent grounds for the claimed event/experience can be publicly demonstrated."¹³ This definition alone precludes any form of personal or subjective confirmation. The indisputable "truth" of an experience comes into question and the experience's interpretation is evaluated against the preexisting "cultural experiences" already contained within the tradition.

Most philosophers and theologians make a distinction between experience and interpretation but Katz collapses the distinctions to simply events mediated before, during, and after by culture; he renders experience to nothing but the event as reported. "That is to say, there is an intimate even necessary connection between the mystical and religious texts studied and assimilated, the mystical experience had, and the mystical experience reported."¹⁴ This approach disqualifies any claim of experiential subjectivity: the experience is based on the known tradition, encapsulated within it, and results in supporting the tradition's conclusions. This removes the event from the unique and subjective and places it in the context of culture or tradition and conforming to previous experiences of others within the tradition. Katz notes that within every tradition the adherents elevate certain individuals and their experiences are privileged and seen as a model. "Such individuals become Ideals; their individuality becomes categorical; their biographies become didactic."¹⁵ By reducing the experience of the subject to simply an imitation of the model, Katz renders the special qualities as seen by the subject, to simply a conditioning that strengthens the bonds of the subject with the community.¹⁶

11 John Horgan, *Rational Mysticism: Dispatches from the Border Between Science and Spirituality*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003), 43.

12 Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 22.

13 *Ibid.*

14 Steven T. Katz, ed., Steven T. Katz, "The 'Conservative' Character of Mystical Experience," *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1983), 6.

15 *Ibid.*, 43.

16 *Ibid.*

Another result of placing the experience within the framework of a culture or tradition is the shift of focus from the subject to the group. It is impossible to know if an experience is actually true. Katz writes, “there can be no grounds for deciding this question, i.e. of showing that they [experiences] are true *even* if they are, in fact true.”¹⁷ Thus, if there is no basis to evaluate the private nature of experience, Katz resorts to only examining the public interpretation. Again, Katz continues there is “no philosophical argument [that] is capable of proving the veracity of mystical experience.”¹⁸

Katz is not alone in this kind of approach to knowledge, Kant’s categories creates a similar structural framework with which to approach the known. Summarizing Kant, Rothberg writes, “there is no direct, unmediated knowledge of reality; all knowledge and all human experiences are structured by human categories and the forms of human sensibility.”¹⁹ Kant’s categories require objective conceptual structures and if the experience is embedded in the consciousness of the subject then it is not available to another to evaluate. While a subject may have an experience and know it in some way, that knowledge is not verifiable until expressed in a way others can evaluate. Moreover, not only must there be an external, objective interpretation, there must be a concept applied.²⁰ The conceptualization process interprets, differentiates, categorizes, structures, and objectifies the experience. For Katz, the external interpretation is the only part that another can evaluate. This is because, according to Katz and Kant, the subject cannot know about the experience until the application of conceptual structures place the experience within the framework of external categories. This creates a direct mediation of the experience through the conceptual framework. Hence, any claim of unmediated experience is not subject to evaluation, not available to the subject, and thus does not allow knowing.

Katz labels his epistemology as neutral because he claims it does not privilege any one interpretation of ultimate reality or make any a priori assumptions about ultimate reality. Yet, this neutrality comes into question when his epistemology radically negates the claims of certain mystical traditions. While he makes no conjecture about the nature of reality, he does make a priori assumptions of what constitutes knowledge. For him,

17 Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” 22

18 *Ibid.*

19 Rothberg, “Contemporary Epistemology and the Study of Mysticism,” 172.

20 Adam, “A Post-Kantian Perspective on Recent Debates about Mystical Experience,” 804.

21 Horgan, *Rational Mysticism: Dispatches from the Border Between Science and Spirituality*, 47.

knowledge is only empirical and objective: it can only exist in an external empirical structure. Katz wants to retain the difference between traditions and sees perennialism as trying to fit mysticism into a procrustean bed.²¹ Nonetheless, in the process of retaining the difference of traditions, however, he fits experience into a different procrustean bed based on a narrow form of empirical observation, e.g. his epistemology. Katz also removes the difference between experience and interpretation. In other words, in his attempt to resist perennialist omission of traditional differences, he eliminates experiential and interpretive difference.

The necessity of retaining the differences between experience and interpretation becomes clear upon the examination of experiences denied by Katz's epistemology. Many Buddhist practices claim to culminate in experiences of "pure consciousness." These practices use a series of meditative steps to achieve the target meditative state. Within each step, the subject obtains different forms of consciousness on the way to the state described as pure consciousness. This pure consciousness is claimed to be unmediated in any way. One example of this kind of mystical practice is the Buddhist Mahamudra.

Mahamudra is a Tibetan Buddhist practice from the Kagyu tradition. It claims to lead the subject to a level of consciousness that is non-dual, non-conceptual, non-structured, and devoid of content. *Moonlight of Mahamudra* supports these claims by way of an explicit process of obtaining this state, as well as what it is and what it is not. The *Moonlight of Mahamudra* text explains,

the essence of mind is beyond meditation. Therefore, one does not meditate about it. To indulge in such meditation is to engage in intellectual exercise, objectify mental images, discriminate perceptions, or cling to dualism. Therefore, such meditations cannot represent either the perfect vision of or the perfect meditation on the abiding nature of mind.²²

The text explicitly states that the process of attaining this conscious state is beyond any kind of intellectual categorization. The *Moonlight of Mahamudra* text also asserts this view, "the abiding nature of the mind transcends intellectual perception."²³ If we adopt Katz's constructivist position, then we have to look at these claims from the Buddhist mystics as

²² Namgyal, *Mahamudra: The Moonlight: Quintessence of Mind and Meditation*, 277.

²³ *Ibid.*, 279.

mistaken and false. However, there is good reason to think otherwise which challenges the constructivist epistemology. Many separate traditions within Buddhism alone claim the attainment of states labeled “pure consciousness.” These multiple claims in Buddhism and similar claims in other traditions cannot simply be classified as invalid and impossible without examining how they approach knowledge and experience. Constructivism requires knowledge to be explained by causal or naturalistic regularities and also interpretation based on external artifacts like texts, cultural norms, or ideologies. Based on the description in *Moonlight of Mahamudra*, the pure consciousness target state does not meet these constructivist requirements: the nature of the experience presents a different kind of knowledge that some label noetic.²⁴ When the subject experiences an event without structuring or a conceptual framework, or one that lacks dualism or content, the subject experiences an internal sense perception that is true and self evident though nearly impossible to externalize and quantify. There remains a question of what kind of knowledge is obtained during this experience, but regardless of its nature, Katz denies its possibility.

While the Mahamudra practice challenges Katz’s epistemology, Mahamudra could be seen as supporting the perennialist position about the centrality of unmediated experience in regard to the plurality of religious traditions. However, this would be a mischaracterization of the practice. The target state in Mahamudra is not the end goal of Buddhism; it is simply a means to attaining a greater understanding about the ultimate nature of reality. Therefore the place of the practice within the tradition is important; perennialists will want to make it the central goal, Buddhists, will simply see it as a means to an end.

Similar to the pure consciousness, there is an additional process that overcomes and eventually eliminates the mediation of knowing. In other words, these practices deconstruct mediation and at their conclusion, deconstruct themselves. Katz denies this is possible. Instead he claims these subjects do not deconstruct, they only reconstruct the mind, “substituting one set of expectations and beliefs for another.”²⁵ Nevertheless, these mystics claim a process of deconstruction and de-conditioning that allows the attainment of an unmediated consciousness. Using Robert Forman’s ideas of attaining this state as “forgetting,” Donald Rothberg writes, “In

²⁴ Rothberg, “Contemporary Epistemology and the Study of Mysticism,” 190.

²⁵ Horgan, *Rational Mysticism: Dispatches from the Border Between Science and Spirituality*, 46.

this process of ‘forgetting,’ there is an intentional dropping of desires, ideas, conceptual forms (including those of one’s tradition), sensations, imagery, and so on.”²⁶ The Buddhists assert a process of deconstruction in which they use practices such as intellectual investigation of phenomena, discerning insights into the nature of mind and self, and realizations about the process of conceptualization to obtain a state whereby these structures are dismantled temporarily. In other words, the de-conditioning process, as Rothberg notes, paradoxically uses conditioning to undue itself.²⁷

An example of this process can be found in the preliminary practices of *Moonlight of Mahamudra*. Once the subject has begun the meditative practices, analytical examination of all phenomena is encouraged. This includes external objects, emotions, and eventually thoughts themselves. The goal of this process is to demonstrate to the subject that all phenomena is without essence. “By so examining, he will understand that thoughts—crude or subtle—are unreal, devoid of shape, color, base, support, and identity.”²⁸ The deconstruction process leads to a knowing that removes all forms of mediation during the target experience. Obviously, this claim is in direct opposition with the constructivist claim that all experience is mediated. Thus, the constructivist epistemology is inadequate to explain the deconstructive process.

While these problems with Katz’s epistemology are present, Martin Adam does note that Katz’s position does preserve the distinctness of each tradition: it “carries with it the logical implication of subjectivism, and therefore, the philosophical irrelevance of mystical experience in general.”²⁹ Indeed, if all mystical experience is cultural, it dismisses the need for the theologian and the investigation of mystical experiences becomes the domain of anthropologists. Also, there are even deeper questions regarding the whole empirical process in general. Horgan notes that Katz’s epistemology “echoed the philosopher Thomas Kuhn’s proposal that all scientific theories are to some extent products of a particular mindset, or ‘paradigm,’ that implicitly constrains the questions and answers that scientists formulate.”³⁰ If Kuhn is right, it does raise the question if any epistemology can ever satisfy all inquiry into the nature of

26 Donald Rothberg, “Contemporary Epistemology and the Study of Mysticism,” *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy*, Robert K.C. Forman, ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 184.

27 *Ibid.*, 186.

28 Namgyal, *Mahamudra: The Moonlight: Quintessence of Mind and Meditation*, 201.

29 *Ibid.*, 810.

30 Horgan, *Rational Mysticism: Dispatches from the Border Between Science and Spirituality*, 42.

knowledge or experience. In this context, the constructivist epistemological endeavor does not preserve the differences of religious traditions but instead negates any claims that a religion is anything but a collection of cultural phenomena. In other words it preconditions all religious experience as subjective, relativistic, and conventional. Constructivism removes any way of really knowing and simply regulates “truth” to tradition and societal preference. Rothberg writes “without a more sophisticated epistemology, Katz’s epistemology flounders in the *aporia* created by affirming that all viewpoints are situated and mediated while implicitly affirming that his own approach is an exception.”³¹ As Rothberg states, a more sophisticated epistemology is necessary, one that allows cross-traditional evaluation, retains some form of objective evaluation, but also creates a space for the evaluation of mystic’s claims based on their terms, not a priori notions of knowledge.

Another option towards a more sophisticated epistemology is to examine the claims of knowing made by the mystics. They claim that the noetic knowledge derived from the experience is different from conventional knowledge. Perhaps the difference is that no knowing is actually taking place during the unmediated experience. In other words, the moments before and after the pure consciousness experience are mediated and thus knowledge is attainable, but during the actual experience of unmediated consciousness, no knowledge is obtained, consciousness simply exists without structure, content, or conception. This possibility was suggested by John Dunne³² and is similar to the explanation offered by Daniel Brown. Rothberg explains Brown’s assertion:

Brown holds that a kind of constructivist analysis makes considerable sense of the extent to which the different philosophical perspectives guiding the ... traditions examined continue to structure experience up to the first moment of enlightenment and in succeeding moments of enlightenment.”³³

If Brown is right and this describes the process of events for the mystic, he conflicts with the constructivists because they assert that structuring never stops. The benefit of this approach is that it retains a form of objective evaluation of the interpretation, but also allows the mystic to have the experience and define it without a priori requirements such as Katz’s

31 Rothberg, “Contemporary Epistemology and the Study of Mysticism,” 182.

32 John Dunne. (lecture, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, December 7, 2006).

33 Rothberg, “Contemporary Epistemology and the Study of Mysticism,” 185.

epistemology which collapses the experience into the interpretation. By opening a space for the separateness of the experience and the interpretation, the structure of his culture does not confine the mystic; he may have experiences that are unmediated, but then allow placement of the interpretation within the context of the tradition. Indeed, this space allows for the unmediated experience but also recognizes the place of culture and tradition with the interpretation. The Buddhist uses the processes and practices within his tradition to obtain the target state, but while temporarily in the state, he “forgets” the tradition and then emerges back in the tradition where upon he uses its language and texts to explain the experience to others.

This kind of space also allows for a form of perennialist philosophy, although it is not explicit. Perennialists want to reduce all the religions of the world to a single core experience. While this may be possible in the position that I advocate for, it does not explicitly state that this space equates perennialism. Theoretically, mystics can have unmediated experiences, but there is nothing explicit to indicate that all unmediated experiences are the same nor that all traditions have achieved states of unmediated experience. This space simply opens the possibility, it remains to be seen if each tradition or mystical experience is the same at its core.

As a result, giving space to the mystic and the recognition of the possibility of unmediated mystical experience does not preclude the objective evaluation of a mystical experience nor disregard the place of culture or tradition. Regardless of how one attempts to give space to acknowledge any kind of unmediated experience, Katz’s epistemology immediately precludes the effort. If one is to take the claims of the mystics as valid, acknowledge the importance of traditional difference, and maintain the separation between experience and interpretation, a refined epistemology must be developed. The constructivist approach is simply too limiting with its procrustean empiricism.

References

- Adam, Martin T. “A Post-Kantian Perspective on Recent Debates about Mystical Experience,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 70, no.4 (2002): 801-818.
- Dunne, John. (lecture, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, December 7, 2006).

Horgan, John. *Rational Mysticism: Dispatches from the Border Between Science and Spirituality* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003).

Katz, Steven T. "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism." in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, edited by Steven T. Katz, 22-74. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.

———. "The 'Conservative' Character of Mystical Experience." in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, edited by Steven T. Katz, 3-60. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1983.

Namgyal, Dakpo Tashi. *Mahamudra: The Moonlight: Quintessence of Mind and Meditation*, translated by Lobsang P. Lhalungpa (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2006).

Rothberg, Donald. "Contemporary Epistemology and the Study of Mysticism." in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy*, edited by Robert K.C. Forman, 163-210. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.