



Intuition, Worlds, and Transcendence The Eroding Foundations of Spiritual Experience

Stephen A. Erickson
Pomona College
sperickson@aol.com

Abstract: Is it possible that the foundations and thus the grounding of the life of the human spirit are eroding? There are at least two ways in which this might happen. Both are said to have grown in strength over the last few centuries. One is epistemological. It advances through influential and self-reinforcing claims to the effect that human cognition cannot reach and therefore could not explore such foundations. Kant can be taken as a pivotal representative of this strategy. His strategy is perhaps best labeled "agnostic." The other mode of denial of the mystical as foundational is far more metaphysical. It advances through scientific and especially psychologically driven claims regarding the "nature of reality." This form of denial purports to trace the sources through which human reality is erroneously inflated in the direction of something that human reality neither is nor has valid reason to believe exists anywhere else. In so tracing such purported sources of the mystical this approach is perhaps best labeled reductive and, from most spiritual points of view, nihilistic. But might there be modes of mediated human self-encountering that offer potential avenues of liberation from each of these prevalent contemporary *culs-de-sac*?

Keywords: Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich; Jaspers, Karl; Kierkegaard, Søren; foundationalism; mysticism; receptivity; transcendence.

It has become fashionable over the last decades to claim that there are no foundations upon which either our knowledge or the meaning of our lives could be supported and nourished. This view, termed anti-foundationalism, has been taken by some to have overwhelmingly nihilistic consequences. Others, however, have viewed the path of anti-foundationalist thought as leading to liberation. Richard Rorty, for example, understands anti-foundationalism as guiding us from attempted submissions to alleged powers beyond us to the growing insight that "love is pretty much the only law."¹

Whether a thinker is found on the nihilistic or the liberationist path is probably a consequence of the underlying temperament of that anti-foundationalist traveler. In either of these cases what is rejected, cast aside and then abandoned is a particular form of reliance on the appearance/reality distinction. Belief in True Reality is eschewed, most especially if it is construed as a beyond, encounter with which would be transformative and possibly even redemptive. And it is hard not to believe that if Reality goes as is part and parcel of one anti-foundationalist project, mysticism goes as well. The notions of mysticism and ultimate reality are surely intimately intertwined.

The lineage of anti-foundationalism's ancient and enduring adversary – foundationalism itself – is easily

¹ Richard Rorty, "Anticlericalism and Atheism," in *The Future of Religion*, ed. Santiago Zabala, New York, NY: Columbia University Press 2007, pp. 29-42, here p. 40

traced. It is actually a simple story, the editorial unpacking of which has been carried out and contentiously argued over in voluminous ways over centuries. From the Greeks we have been bequeathed the notion that, ontologically and cosmologically, at least one something must be the ground of itself, unmoved yet itself the source of all motion. From the Judeo-Christian tradition we have been bequeathed the notion that the ground of all things is personal and that uniting with this ultimate reality transports us, fleetingly, episodically or eternally, to the place of our true belonging. This place, we are told, may manifest itself within the realm of appearance, but it is most fundamentally beyond all appearances. In Greek terms it is *meta*, on the far side of time and change. In Judeo-Christian tropes it is both heavenly and ineffable, a kingdom not of this world. The Greeks provided us with the god of the philosophers. Judeo-Christian encounters offered us the god of religion. These two gods, recurrently and problematically divided, or amalgamated into one over many centuries, have been the very substance and life breath of what foundationalists have sought and even relied upon for refuge and in many cases salvific hope. It is where mysticism is primarily to be found, at least in the West. If these two gods, as I have termed them, have been the metaphysico-theological destination of foundationalism, mysticism has been thought to be one of metaphysical Reality's central, if controversial modes of access.

The curse of the modern period with respect to religious matters, if it is as much a curse as I believe it to be, needs to be considered in the light of the orientation of foundationalism. In philosophy, of course, we understand modernity as beginning with Descartes and ending with either Hume or Kant. Though at least provisionally I understand the heart of mysticism to find its residence within the framework of that foundationalism that I have just sketched, might mysticism nonetheless find life within other frameworks non-metaphysical in constitution and nature? Of course it in one sense has and does. However sporadic and for many controversial, mysticism has had a continuing life into our own time.

My recommendation, however, is that we view these manifestations of mysticism somewhat guardedly and even skeptically. This is because they may at their legitimate best be but distributaries—distributaries issuing from that which is their mainstream source and benefactor, something itself resourceful in ways its downstream issuances can never be. Again, it is this

source that I believe is most appropriately called "the mystical."

One way to understand mysticism's distributaries is as what Isaiah Berlin would have called "inner citadels," places to which one might retreat.² How and why so? In the modern period a clear-cut, if nonetheless surprisingly opaque distinction is made between the inner and the outer, mind and matter, perception and conception, emotion and thought. Mysticism then gets construed as something inner that is mental, a species of perception that transcends reason and may best be located and mapped—though, to be sure, not yet adequately defined—by means of its emotional resonances. The prime mystical datum thereby becomes an inner content. If so, virtually the first concern becomes the mechanism of the arrival of such a datum in the inner sanctum of what soon came to be called consciousness. Did it come from God, or was it imagined, or was it generated by means of an extremely infrequent set of neurochemical episodes? I believe that indexing mysticism in this manner, locating and then attempting to enhance its clarity and derive its legitimacy through causal explanation, is the curse laid upon mysticism by modernity. But is there a story to be told that at least in part serves to justify this assessment? I will hope to offer a preliminary draft of such a story.

At its most alluring extreme, the region of mystical consciousness has become an honorable object of scientific investigation in our late, very late post-modernity. Research oriented entrance into its territory is very tempting, especially so given the productive and often accelerated advances of cognitive and neuroscience. But—reluctantly and only heuristically adopting modernity's own, bifurcating distinction between subject and object—some troubling questions do arise. Is the careful objective study of the mystical translatable into elements that have viable resonances with respect to the lived experience of human beings? And is the so-called subjective dimension of mystical consciousness transportable into those scientific frameworks that so successfully capture conceptually our late modern life? As some have asked, in part rhetorically, what it might be like to "be a bat," we might ourselves revive once more the recurring question: what is it like to be a mystic, or, less confidently, what might it be like to be a mystic?

² Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press 2003, pp. 166-217, here pp. 181f.

In fact, an alternative orientation and pathway to the more objectifying mode of neuro-scientific research does offer itself. If reflected upon, it may well provide the itinerary for a journey upon which one could credibly embark. As will soon be noted, however, this course of action will initially appear to be unusual, even strange, for it depends upon an age-old distinction between agency and patienthood, acting and undergoing, spontaneity and receptivity. It will also and crucially depend upon our giving pride of place and thereby precedence to the latter of each of these dualities, thus to patienthood, undergoing, and receptivity, not to agency, action, and spontaneity. And this will be a significant departure from the trajectory of philosophical modernity.

The last of these three contrasts, that between spontaneity and receptivity, provides us with an historical point of departure. Stemming from Immanuel Kant, it insists on the distinction between interpretation and encounter. Whether Kantians or not, we are well aware of the critical philosophy's claim that interpretation precedes encounter on the level of cognition. What we may not sufficiently appropriate in our comprehension of this circumstance is that encounter, too, is a necessary part of the experiential transaction. Encounter is something that we undergo rather than do. It happens to us rather than our bringing it about—though various preparatory steps may be helpful, even necessary, though not thereby sufficient for a particular encounter to take place. In the Kierkegaardian sense we are patients, not agents in such situations.

The development of this divided and transactional nature of our experiencing, as the history of philosophy testifies, turned decidedly one-sided as philosophy in the West moved forward. Encounters came increasingly to be understood as mere occasions, losing thereby more and more of their philosophical force and significance. What encounters came to be viewed as occasions for—and this was virtually all that assured their relevance—were complex conceptualizations capable of further analyses and systematization. But this left a crucial part of the West's very epistemological story out of the range of investigation and reflection.

What to say regarding encountering itself? Must it be in a broad or narrower sense sensible, grounded in sensibility? Following David Hume and the mainline tradition in this regard, Kant clearly thought so. But are there in fact and in historical reality alternative ways to open up and to explore receptivity? Might encounter

benefit from a more meditative probing of its nature and scope? Philosophy with and after the Modern period has a sparse record of pursuit with respect to these possibilities. Is it that they are not philosophical or that philosophy itself may have underestimated its resources?

My underlying hunch is that a probative appreciation of mysticism as it is found in our time will benefit from a further reprise of anti-foundationalism. Having arrived on the historical scene in the late nineteenth century, anti-foundationalism was, as we know, first and foremost a philosophical reaction to traditional metaphysics and theology. Insofar as mysticism needs foundationalism in order to thrive, the arrival of anti-foundationalism bodes poorly for the viability and wellbeing of mysticism. It threatens its present and future. Or so it must seem. Thus it is with anti-foundationalism and its other, foundationalism itself, that I have needed to begin and will now briefly continue.

By so doing I hope to locate mysticism provisionally at the intersection of two closely related dynamics, one epistemological and the other existential. Succinctly conveyed, I will hope to adumbrate mysticism as both epistemological and existential ways of being. Though these two ways of being may seem inseparable, I am suggesting that mysticism as an epistemological mode depends upon foundationalism, but that just possibly mysticism as an existential mode does not.

First, again, foundationalism: for someone to qualify as being a foundationalist I suggest that at a minimum that person must adhere to the following theses:

(1) that a fundamental bifurcation separates appearance from Reality; (2) that Reality is that upon which appearance rests; (3) that Reality itself is not accessible by normal everyday means nor by discursive analytical means either; and (4) that contact with Reality not only sheds light on why and how appearances are as they are, but that such contact is potentially transformative—theologically stated, that it is potentially redemptive.

Many believe that the *locus classicus* of the foundationalist view is found most accessibly in Plato, particularly through the fusion of his allegory of the cave with his account of the divided life. Each of these passages, as we know, is located in *The Republic*. Here, in fact, we find a central dimension of the so-called "perennial philosophy." Schematically conveyed in a quite abbreviated manner, it is Plato's claim that there

is the possibility of knowledge of the eternal and unchanging as well as our actual acquaintance with the temporal and changing. Our reason can make the former available; our senses routinely confront us with the latter. And of course the eternal, Reality itself, is understood to be the metaphysical foundation of the temporal, the realm of the apparent.

There is more, of course, and it bears decisively on the logic and dynamics of mysticism. Taken together, having the capacity for sight and being in the presence of the physical world of appearances, do not in and of themselves bring about actual seeing. A third thing, the sun, is needed to make what is to be seen visible.

By analogy, knowledge of the (metaphorically) invisible realm, foundationalism's most viable metaphysical residence, requires not just discursive rationality and, in Plato's paradigmatic case, Forms, for example. Such knowledge also requires its own mode of illumination, which is, following Plato again, the Good—itself a modality of light, though not in any physical nor restrictively rational sense. (It is well worth noting that the removal of one of the two o's in Good gives us the philosophical transfer ticket that leads us to the metaphysical theology of Augustine, Meister Eckhart and many others, including portions of Paul Tillich, and possibly even Karl Barth).

What happens, subsequently, if metaphysical reality in its foundationalist sense is construed far less as unchangingly rational (and rationally unchanging) and is construed far more as meditatively rhythmic and vibrant—not thereby having become "irrational," but rather largely non-rational? What sort of "light," what illuminating medium might then be appropriate? The Hegel of *The Phenomenology of Spirit* would have characterized such an alternative medium as "disporting of Love with itself."³ In fact he did. Of course Hegel then hastened to say, surely correctly, that such modes of expression could and did influence their users in the direction of the insipid, if discipline was not established in a careful way.

But exactly to what extent and how precisely is this true? And might there not be alternative ways of illuminating that very illumination itself that brings the spiritually foundational, mysticism's true home, to light? Are there avenues of rescue from the potentially insipid that need not lose credibility, but do not gain

it either through discursive and, almost inevitably, reductive means? Questions such as these reside at a very compelling, if also highly problematic and controversial philosophical frontier.

It is quite helpful and in a number of its dimensions illuminating to bring Karl Jaspers' thinking to bear on themes that are mystical in their resonance. Let me begin by stating that I find Jaspers immensely diverse in his reflections. He was as much an explorer as a systematizer. His views developed and altered over a long career not given over to self-discipleship. He was dynamic, at times eclectic, but never narrow or static. If a continuum were drawn, at one end of which would be found scholars and at the other end creative thinkers—an oversimplified schema to be sure—Karl Jaspers should be located in a number of places. In important ways he was a highly suggestive, derivative thinker, richly repaying reflection, but not frequently breaking a great deal of new ground.

These remarks set the stage for a number of observations I wish to make regarding Jaspers' writings and the pathway toward and of mysticism.

Under the influence of Søren Kierkegaard, Jaspers is open, even supportive, of the "leap of faith." Note what this means, however. It is sometimes misunderstood. In Kierkegaard, specifically Christian belief is an offense to human reason. The theological foundation of Christian faith is structured plainly and simply by fundamental contradiction. Note, however, that the two keywords I have employed in explicating this aspect of Kierkegaard, belief and faith, have cognitive dimensions, at least echoes of them. Belief sounds propositional, and faith cannot help but resonate of the doctrinal.

What Kierkegaard most fundamentally offers and advocates, however, is what he articulates as an "Absolute relationship with the Absolute."⁴ If we also factor in Kierkegaard's reflections in his *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, such a relationship is only made possible through a bestowal from beyond that human being who has been chosen to be in the Absolute relationship. Speaking for a moment transcendently and thereby in a manner somewhat analogous to Kant, it is just and only this bestowal that makes the relationship possible. But quite contrary to Kant, and this is utterly crucial, such a bestowal does not and could not issue from within the subject of what

³ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, transl. Arnold V. Miller, New York, NY: Oxford University Press 1977, p. 10.

⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, transl. Sylvia Walsh, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press 2006, p. 61.

we might then call an "experience," as if the bestowal were a set of structurally constitutive criteria ingredient in the encounter forming the Absolute relationship. This would make the bestowal immanent and the bonding encounter it enabled significantly intelligible through rational means. But in accordance with Kierkegaard's own account of the matter, an Absolute relationship with the Absolute is very much beyond Reason. In any rational sense, thus, it cannot be intelligible. In a very problematic way—problematic because there are no criteria available for its recognition, verification, and confirmation—this relationship must thereby and unavoidably be mystical.

To overcome this deepest of difficulties, and to avoid a vacuous and altogether undifferentiated mysticism, one would need convincingly to provide an account of non-rational intelligibility and thus a non-rational means of identifying whatever might be encountered in the Absolute relationship. If such an account is not possible, would we not then need to conclude that any Absolute relationship to the Absolute was preposterously unavoidably mystical? At the same time, it would seem equally preposterous to categorize anything that was incomprehensible as thereby mystical. For one thing, it would give the mystical so much scope and range as to make it largely vacuous. For another thing, "incomprehensibility" is basically an epistemological notion. The incomprehensible has a time stamp that places it on a continuum leading from the currently known to the not yet, but perhaps soon or at least eventually comprehended. On such an analysis the mystical, construed as a notion, becomes a marker of current ignorance. But it is by no means obvious or even plausible that the dynamics of mysticism can be made to reside in the objectivizing and program-oriented matrix of epistemology.

Note as we continue that once "mysticism" is placed in a relationship setting such as propounded by Kierkegaard, and given tacit approval, if not altogether wholeheartedly endorsed by Jaspers, it begins to look different. It provokes different sets of concerns than when it is locked into an experience-perception framework as became dominant in the philosophy of the moderns.

If bestowal is granted and thereby dispensed from beyond the subject-recipient of an Absolute relationship, what is bestowed is probably best construed as a way of life grounded in a foundational involvement and subsequent commitment, a responsive commitment. Significantly this involvement would be far more

undergone than acted upon. So the degree that it is acted upon, the relevant human activity presupposes and would be guided by the underlying undergoing. In short, the responsive underwrites and overrides the active.

Following Kant and, along with many others, Kierkegaard himself, Jaspers claims that we cannot altogether escape the subject-object mode of thinking and cognition. This cannot but mean that any Absolute relationship with the Absolute, if there could be such, could not be thought through and understood. If it has authentic standing at all, it can only be lived. Why, then, would this not be construed as a mystical relationship, incommunicable though decidedly real for those who are in it? Note again, and most pivotally, that there is no compelling reason—only a set of contingent historical circumstances—why mystical as a notion need be tied only or even primarily to experiences and the attendant epistemological maneuvers that tend to overload them. The notion of the mystical may in fact more foundationally be construed as applicable to certain special relationships. To advance this route would be to grant pride of place more to the Homeric and Biblical than to the Cartesian or Russellian. The existential thereby comes to take precedence over epistemology.

An obvious reaction to this line of thinking would most likely take the following form: to be in such a unique relationship must involve the experiencing of that relationship. Experience, thus, is at least as fundamental as any relationship in which it finds life, and it has to be understood as more fundamental. After all, one has to experience a relationship to know that it is there. Must epistemological concerns not take precedence after all?

But there is a further and contrarian consideration: to focus upon the experiencing of such a relationship is to shade more toward a spectator mode. It is less directly and fully participant than when one is completely in the relationship. In terms of this dynamic, the experiencing mode or dimension is somewhat dilutive.

To place this response in an historical context, we might liken it to Heidegger's claims that "knowing" is a founded mode of being in the world and with others, and that "experiencing" involves distancing, a flight to epistemological interiority and its varying mentalistic contents. Of course such a Heideggerian analogy is not altogether convincing. A phenomenological experiment, though not in itself definitive either, might prove of further help. Are the various relationships you are in more lived than observed, one might ask, and

does the observational experiencing of them enhance, diminish or exist neutrally in relation to them? Further, to what degree are the significant dimensions of various human relationships effable?

Let us now refocus on our most recent concern, one we might choose to label Kierkegaardian. If there is genuine cogency to the claim that an Absolute relationship (to the Absolute) would be ineffable, meaning cognitively inaccessible, why would the term "mystical" not helpfully apply to it, if only provisionally? Why there is hesitation, I believe, is because in philosophically modern times, from the early seventeenth century onward, we have been conditioned to construe the mystical as relevant and therefore applicable primarily, if not exclusively, to experiences. Such experiences in turn got construed as those of a cognitive subject, detached from, yet also connected to an object to be known, an object which, though in one sense encountered, cannot in fact actually be known because it can neither be described nor analyzed in sortal, that is, conceptually justifiable ways. This has been thought by many to be a complete dead end.

But is such a paradigm for encounter with and (possibly) understanding of the mystical inescapable? Is it not primarily the dispensation of philosophical modernity and, if so, must we stay locked in this modernity when exploring the parameters and dynamic of mysticism? Though I do not particularly recommend it, were an alternative historical precedent desired—if only to serve as a springboard into the mystical—would the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime not prove a more fertile point of departure? Snaking its way through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries especially, this aesthetically fruitful distinction offers resonances with the immediate, the overpowering and the transformative. And it does not lend itself in any conventional way, if at all, to subject-object analyses. Resonances such as it offers are hard to dismiss, if some sort of analogical grounding, some partial illumination through oblique similarity, is sought for the spiritually adumbrated texture of mysticism.

Jaspers himself was known to read and take considerable interest not just in Kierkegaard on such matters, but also in the so-called medieval mystics and especially Meister Eckhart. His sustained appreciation of Eckhart proves highly if somewhat surprisingly instructive. And it certainly illumines and further highlights a dimension of mysticism well worth reminding ourselves regarding. In his writings Eckhart

refers to God at times—depending on context and translation—as "the Nothing" or simply as "Nothing" or the "Divine Nothing." Let us now overlap this, anachronistically to be sure, with an oracular remark attributed to Wittgenstein. It resides in that strange territory where the confounding and the haunting meet: "Better to call something a nothing, than to call it something about which nothing can be said." Elsewhere, and compatible though not identical with this Delphic utterance, Wittgenstein refers to that which cannot be spoken, but which nonetheless shows itself, something which Wittgenstein unapologetically would have called the mystical.

In traditional epistemological terms an obvious and securely sober and intelligent response to this sort of discourse—perhaps especially as coming from a rationally incisive twentieth century philosophical genius—is of course to dismiss it. It could be viewed in generous terms as the self-indulgence of a highly gifted genius. One is reminded of Bertrand Russell's *Mysticism and Logic*, an investigation itself more indulged than taken seriously.

Note that there is a somewhat sophisticated, if by now quite worn philosophical parlor game that typically comes into play in circumstances such as these oracular Wittgensteinian ones. It is well worth mentioning: What exactly, an opponent will ask, could Wittgenstein—or Bertrand Russell for that matter—actually be talking about? Well, as already claimed and calmly confessed, you simply cannot say. No articulate response is possible, and this must be a transcendental not an empirical point, or just possibly both. If you could in fact say, it would no longer be that which Wittgenstein was unambiguously adumbrating. Have we now not arrived in a hopeless philosophical *cul de sac*?

Though it is, again, easy for some to dismiss exchanges such as these as mere gambits in that often clever and intricate repartee that is at times a useful dimension of philosophy or, for some, dialectic, it is still well worth asking why dismissal comes to mind as a compelling response. Is what is getting eschewed simply philosophy's capacity with respect to a particular domain, a domain thereby construed as transcending the limits of philosophy? Or is the very domain itself, not just the incapacity of philosophy to reach and comprehend it, that which is being rejected as non-existent? Given the large, sincerely embraced and very comprehensive claims philosophy has made regarding itself as conceptual overseer—what Kant

referred to in a letter to Henrietta Hertz as the rational duty of engaging in the metaphysics of metaphysics—it is all too easy to understand how philosophy might far more naturally deny a domain than confess its own limitations with respect to it.

At the end of his *Tractatus* Wittgenstein says that "what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence."¹⁵ To remain silent, of course, is not one of the major occupational hazards of those of us involved in the philosophical enterprise. But it may nonetheless be a temperamental bias relevant to that subset of humans justly labeled *homo philosophicus* not to take that which engenders our silence as seriously as we probably should.

But let us now turn our attention to still another, related consideration. There is a further, alternative explication of the mystical modality that is available to us, however controversially, and it, too, is well worth our exploration. It somewhat innocently overlaps what we have explored to this point. Its advantage is that it brings our reflections into clearer, if spiritually fraught focus.

If, following Leibniz, the most basic question of metaphysics regards why there is something rather than nothing, surely one of the two most fundamental questions of philosophical anthropology is just this: How do we come to issue forth, arrive into existence, as human beings? Historically speaking and as a statistical trend we can say that belief in a gradual evolutionary development has rapidly been gaining ascendancy over the last century and a half or so. Belief in creation as a discrete and (definitionally) prehistorical act of God has, correspondingly, been on the wane—especially among those who are somewhat problematically labeled as being the educated elite.

There is a nuanced alternative to these, part theological, part scientific options, however. Presaged in the reflections of Hegel on recognition in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, though implied in St. Augustine's *Confessions* and elsewhere much earlier than this, it is perhaps best conveyed in the writings of the American philosopher of science Wilfred Sellars. Published in the nineteen sixties, it is this account I will now undertake to paraphrase.

A human being can be comprehended in terms of

two, potentially complementary images, the manifest and the scientific. The former, the manifest one, is the image in terms of which humans first came to have an encounter with themselves. In more striking and metaphysically relevant words, this image is said to have provided the historical medium, the mirror, through which human reflexivity, for instance human self-relatedness, came upon the scene. This coming on the scene was in the crucial and decisive mode of (meaningful) awareness, awareness capable of a cognizant encounter—not altogether deep, comprehensive nor encompassing, to be sure—with itself.

Sellars claims that the occurrence of this encounter, what Heidegger had called an event (*Ereignis*), constituted that moment at which human beings became human beings. Without such a self-encounter, however ineffable, there would be no humanity—just as, had that encounter been of a decidedly different nature, we humans would have come into existence as different sorts of beings, different in fact than we turned out historically to be. (In passing note that this is a foundational variant of the far more discussed and culturally far-ranging claim that people who speak different languages live in different worlds.)

It was through this encounter, then, so Sellars contends, that human beings were catapulted into existence as the historical beings they thereby became. Because, on this controversial Sellarsian view at least, such an encounter would have to have been in terms of an undergirding and radically fundamental conceptual framework—and, further, because such a framework could not have been generated over time and in partial and piecemeal ways out of its retrospectively stipulated constituents—the coming about of humans would have to have been abrupt and discontinuous, disconnected from its pre-human antecedents, its pre-cognitive ancestral components. Here epistemology and paleontology would be driven to the same conclusion. By any accessible, worldly standard that which we came to call and appropriate as human had just to have happened. (In Heidegger's terms, Being was the happening that had us.)

Sellars himself had the unshakable—though strenuously contested—belief that the scientific image of our emergence as human being, the allegedly complementary, yet contending alternative to the manifest image that I have just sketched, would eventually allow for—in fact persuasively establish—an account that would remove those elements of

⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, transl. David F. Pears and Brian F. McGuinness, New York, NY: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1975, pp. 30-1.

discontinuity, abruptness, and mystery that are core components of the manifest image and its account.

True to the programmatic strain in so much of the philosophy enterprise, Sellars was fond of the phrase "promissory note," and the promissory note that he issued at this juncture of his myth-of-origins argument was that a fully exhaustive and discursive, evidence-based and verifiable account of our human nature would fall into place at the asymptotically projected endpoint, the final phases of scientific inquiry. Leaving aside this most controversial and in fact scientifically faith-based Sellarsian manifesto, however, I believe that we can elucidate aspects of the manifest image of the origins of our human existence to the highly plausible, if not altogether provable benefit of mysticism, that mysticism that is far more existential than it is epistemological.

Let us begin with the phenomenological notion of a world, a notion very much at home in the writings of Husserl and Heidegger, but of which Jaspers was well aware in his own reflections as well. We encounter and experience what we become aware of in terms of a world, what Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason* was inclined to call "the fundamental form of experience" and later phenomenological thinkers often chose to call a background structure, horizon or "in-terms-of-which." Such an in-terms-of-which is said to engender cognizant access to each and every something that falls within its purview. Existentially troped, it should be added that access is thereby granted not just to something or anything but also to nothing as well, that is, to varying dimensions of absence or emptiness that are first made possible in terms of an undergirding and emergent matrix, a world of possibilities.

At this point we are confronted with a deep paradox, however. This underlying and subtextually constitutive in-terms-of-which—this background structure, horizon or world—will in the nature of its position and meta-function have no access to itself. If it did, it could only do so by means of a more expansive and inclusive in-terms-of-which, regarding which the same self-exclusion with respect to its self-comprehension capability would apply. The question, both critical and rhetorical, that Hegel asked of Kant's transcendental standpoint—whether a weighing machine could in fact weigh itself—is the issue in question. And as weighing machines cannot serve this function with regard to themselves, so neither could phenomenologically adumbrated worlds be self-referentially disclosive. They must remain the undisclosed background of each

and every foregrounding, and if they themselves were to get foregrounded—if this were ever possible in an adequate way—such worlds could only reach this condition and status on the basis of a newly emerging, yet itself then indecipherable background. As indecipherable this new background could itself then only be glimpsed by means of Jaspersean ciphers. More negatively stated and in short, were a new background, a new (allegedly more disclosive) world itself in turn to be foregrounded, it would also, as would be the case with its predecessor backgrounds, be focused upon, and virtually unavoidably so, through objectifying and thereby interpretive distortion. We are confronted with at best an elusive, if not altogether ineffable and encompassing horizon, on the basis of which all particular and specific understandings and groundings are able to take place.

Would our current reflections not be even more applicable to the notion of an historico-ontologically constitutive self-encounter out of and, yes, in-terms-of which human being has come into existence as human being. And there is more. Might it not prove to be a highly plausible inference to draw that how the human has come into existence will have a decisive bearing on how the human could be sustained in its existence? To bring these two questions more into focus, and thereby hope to adumbrate the ineffably mystical as truly foundational with respect to our human existence, we should pursue this line of reasoning a few steps further.

Consider what has frequently been labeled the doctrine of Special Creation, the claim that we humans were created in a unique manner. This doctrine is said to harbor the deepest of paradoxes. A human being, traditionally referred to as "man," would have had to have had a self-encounter to have become man in the first place in order to have come into being as human. On the other hand, however, and as a contrarian insight, this creature would also have to have been man already—in the first place, so to speak—in order for it to have this anthropologically and metaphysically constitutive encounter at all. Otherwise, how could such an encounter have been possible? A human would have had to come into being, so it would seem, *ex nihilo*—at the very best, an awkward conclusion.

How could we embrace this paradoxical dynamic at the very heart of the emergence of the human, of the metaphysico-historical constitution of human being? On the assumption that we can not avoid the paradox of Special Creation except, perhaps, through promising a scientifically established future replete with

breakthrough discoveries on the far horizon, what is the most plausible strategy for any reflective-meditative understanding of the arrival of man? Whatever one's response, this question is surely unavoidable.

I believe that the most appropriate and even foundational response is to open oneself further—seeking in this manner to reach beyond traditional notions of sensibility and receptivity—and thereby to cultivate a potentially transfigured sensitivity to what might be quite profitably conflated in the terms of Karl Jaspers as Transcendence and the Encompassing. This could not be an intellectual program in any ordinary discursive or analytical sense, nor could it be a rational program in any easily extendable sense. It is far more likely, and perhaps unavoidably so, to be a meditatively guided process of undergoing in terms of which we would be far less agents and far more patients. It is this route, of course, that I have recommended earlier.

I believe that the significance of the agent-patient distinction cannot be overemphasized with respect to any exploration of mysticism. One way to convey this truth is through distinguishing between perceptual acts and modes of being. Perceptual acts find their fit within the compelling frameworks of (especially modern) epistemology. Their analysis and comprehension rest upon an objectifying standpoint coupled with critical analyses that are often transcendently motivated in the Kantian sense. If, existentially speaking, mysticism entails encounter, a dyad at a bare minimum, this epistemological mode, especially its inescapable mentalism, tends not toward a dyadic condition, but toward the monadological, even the solipsistic. The noun—mysticism—erodes in favor of the adjectival

"mystical," and thereby a relational reality, an I-Thou, begins to give way to a quality or feature of a subject.

Modes of being, in sharp contrast, have far less of an epistemological orientation, if they have one at all in any but an *ex post facto* sense. When Hegel claimed that one could not learn to swim prior to getting into the water—and Heidegger similarly claimed that we are already in-the-world in a present perfect *a priori* sense—they were insisting on something inherent to what we have been exploring as one of the foundational, if not the very most fundamental dimensions of mysticism: it happens to us in the sense of giving itself, rather than being something that we do. It is thus something that at least some people undergo existentially, not something amenable to the more restricted and detached mode of critical activity that is in the service of knowing.

Is such an account feasible, emphasizing the experientially concrete and lived over the detached and philosophically critical? One simply cannot know in any a priori way, nor will the possible pathways engendered on the basis of what are essentially spiritual recommendations be amenable to the currently accepted range of epistemological analyses and certifications. But, nonetheless, the sort of journeying now recommended would surely be what is called for, and we need to ask ourselves a profound, yet also simple, and transitionally somewhat destabilizing question: might not this route, this sort of anticipatory immersion in mysticism as fundamental form of personal being, be the most mystical ground of all? If so, such a ground could only be appreciated through its fruits—and far less so, if at all through its philosophically sanctioned roots and conceptually engendered derivatives.