6-1-2010

Toward an epistemology of mysticism: Knowing God as mystery

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Abstract: While some philosophers suggest that mystical experience may provide evidence for belief in God, skeptics doubt that there is adequate warrant for even accepting the claim of a mystical experience as evidence for anything, except perhaps for some kind of mental instability. Drawing from the work of Gabriel Marcel, I argue that the pervasive philosophical skepticism about the evidential status of mystical experiences is misguided because it rests on too narrow a view about ways of knowing and about what can count as evidence for belief in the divine. I illustrate the advantages of Marcel’s approach by applying it to the respective spiritual journeys of Augustine of Hippo and Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali. I then argue that Marcel’s framework improves on contemporary analytic approaches because it captures more accurately the kind of knowledge that mystical experiences convey as reported by the subjects who claim to have them.

In our Western academic philosophy . . . it is said that religion is a refuge for those who because of weakness of intellect or character are unable to confront the stern realities of the world. The objective, mature, strong attitude is to hold beliefs solely on the basis of evidence.”
—Norman Malcolm, “The Groundlessness of Religious Belief”1
People who claim to have had mystical experiences often describe these experiences as noetic. To say that a mystical experience is noetic is to say that it conveys some kind of insight or knowledge. Monica Furlong notes that one common denominator shared by male and female mystics from across the centuries and across religious traditions is “the conviction that there is a reality, a profound meaning, behind the world of appearances. . . . They often give the name God to that reality.”2 Claims about the noetic character of mystical experiences do not fit easily into the dominant epistemological frameworks of contemporary analytic philosophy. While a small handful of philosophers have suggested that mystical experience may provide evidence for belief in God, at least for the subjects of those experiences, this suggestion is not taken very seriously in wider circles.3 Skeptics doubt that there is warrant even for accepting the claim of a mystical experience as evidence for anything, except perhaps for some kind of mental weakness or instability.

Drawing from the work of Gabriel Marcel, a twentieth-century French existentialist, I argue that this pervasive skepticism about the evidential status of mystical experiences is misguided because it rests on too narrow a view about ways of knowing and about what can count as evidence for belief in the divine.4 Although Marcel does not develop an epistemology specific to the phenomenon of mystical experience, he does argue for two very different approaches to reality that correspond to two very different kinds of knowledge about reality. We can either approach reality as composed of an infinite number of problems to solve, or we can be open to the possibility that reality contains at least some mysteries in which we can participate and that we can embrace. According to Marcel, mysteries can be a source of wisdom. Indeed, they can communicate a deep and profound knowledge about the nature of reality and of human existence. I argue that we ought to use Marcel’s epistemology of mystery to understand the noetic quality of mystical experiences.

In the first section of this paper, I discuss the difference between a problem and a mystery and explore how Marcel thinks we acquire knowledge of each of these, respectively. In the second section of the paper, I illustrate Marcel’s approach by applying it to
two particular examples of mystical experience. The spiritual journeys of both Augustine of Hippo and Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali culminate in mystical union with God. This experience takes the form of image-mysticism for Augustine and of fana, or annihilation, for Al-Ghazali. I argue that even though the content of their respective mystical experiences differs, a similarity in their epistemic approach can be discerned: each makes a transition from approaching God as a problem to embracing God as a mystery. The lesson of their respective spiritual journeys is that the knowledge of God that both of them desire can only be conveyed through an encounter with God as mystery. Marcel’s epistemology of mystery illuminates why and how this is. In the final section of the paper, I defend my use of Marcel’s framework to account for the noetic character of mystical experience in general, and of these two figures in particular.

Before proceeding, I want to provide a working definition of mystical experience and to make a few disclaimers about the scope of my remarks. I use the term “mystical experience” to refer to those experiences that have at least the following features or “marks,” as William James puts it: (1) experiences of direct, personal encounter, (2) experiences that have a noetic quality, i.e., that convey to the subject some kind of insight or truth, and (3) experiences that are ineffable, that cannot be accurately or wholly put into words, or expressed in propositions. While not all mystical experiences are religious, I mean in this paper to focus on a narrower class of experiences that are both religious and mystical. Moreover, I focus on a still narrower class of religious mystical experiences that come from the major monotheistic traditions of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity.

1. Marcel’s Epistemology of Mystery

According to Gabriel Marcel, we can see in reality an indefinite number of problems to solve as well as many mysteries to embrace. In this section, I discuss three features of what I call Marcel’s epistemology of mystery. First, I clarify the distinction between a problem and a mystery. Second, I explain the unique epistemic/moral posture that one must assume in order to be open to the possibility of mysteries and to acquire knowledge of a mystery. Third, I describe the type of rational thought that one must use in order to reflect properly
on the meaning of one’s encounters with mystery and to decipher these mysteries.

There are at least three central features of a problem-oriented approach to reality. First, a problem-oriented approach involves the separation of the investigator from that which she investigates. When I am faced with a problem to solve, “I work on the data, but everything leads me to believe that I need not take into account the I who is at work—it is a factor which is presupposed and nothing more.”7 In approaching a problem, I force it to submit to the categories, questions, and frameworks that serve my research goal. A second feature of a problem is that it requires a solution and is eradicated when a solution is found. Once the problem is solved, I can move on to a different one. A third feature is that the solution to a problem takes on a general or universal nature and is, at least in principle, publicly verifiable. Where “we can get sufficient distance from our own subjective, emotional, biographical selves in order to pose an objective problem, we can in theory get an answer which will be verifiable by all observers who will go through the appropriate procedures of observation and testing.”8

A mystery may appear as a problem at first, but reflection reveals that “in a genuine mystery the distinction between subject and object, between what is in me and what is before me, breaks down.”9 As Marcel puts it, a mystery is a “problem which encroaches upon its data, invading them as it were and thereby transcending itself as a problem” (OM, 19). I cannot place myself wholly outside of a mystery in order to investigate it, for there is no objective standpoint from which I can observe it. There is no Archimedean point qua mystery. Marcel uses the way we approach the study of reality itself to clarify the distinction between problem and mystery. For example, when we ask questions about the nature of reality or being, as the metaphysician refers to it, we often begin by taking a problem-oriented approach. We ask questions like “What is being?” and “Does being exist?” but our expectation is not what it is when we are investigating a problem. “Immediately an abyss opens under my feet: I who ask these questions about being, how can I be sure that I exist? (OM, 15–16). From a problem-oriented approach, the I (i.e., the subject who is working on the “problem” of being) should be able to
remain outside of the problem. Yet the more I reflect on the “problem” of being, the more I realize that there is nowhere outside of being for me to stand. I cannot separate myself from the object of my investigation, i.e., being, in order to analyze and study it. Being is presupposed by my ability even to formulate questions about it. This is what Marcel means when he says that the problem “encroaches upon its own data,” thereby “transcending itself as a simple problem” (OM, 19). When I ask questions about being, I cannot help but be asking about my being and about my reality. This is to be in the presence of what Marcel calls the mystery of being, or the ontological mystery (OM, 16–18).

While problems are met with universal or generalized solutions, mysteries do not admit of generalized solutions. We cannot secure a solution to a mystery that can then be directly communicated to others, and mysteries are not publicly verifiable. The only way to “verify” both that something is a mystery, and the insight that mysteries can convey is through direct personal encounter with mystery. With “regard to the knowledge of a mystery every person must begin anew. . . . There may be a witness in which one person calls out to another and testifies to the meaning he has found in an encounter” with mystery, but “there can be no direct transmission of the creative assurance which such relations generate” (Keen, Gabriel Marcel, p. 21). Subjective involvement and participation is essential for gaining knowledge of a mystery.

Examples of mysteries include the meaning of life, freedom, fidelity, and God. For example, in asking about the meaning of life, I cannot help but be involved in the question and have a personal stake in the answers that I discover. To pose a question about the meaning of life as if it were a mere object to be analyzed is to act as if the answers had no bearing on my own life. Yet surely the pursuit of figuring out what makes human existence valuable and meaningful bears tremendously on my particular existence (OM, 30). Questions about the nature of reality or the meaning of life “can never be decided on the basis of verifiable evidence which I can get apart from my willing, feeling, and deciding self,” in the way that solutions to problems can be so decided (Keen, Gabriel Marcel, p. 20).
Marcel is not critical of the problem-oriented approach as such. Scientific and technological advancement are important for helping us cure illnesses, build bridges, fly airplanes, and so on. Rather, he objects to the rampant misuse of a problem-oriented approach, which he sees as increasingly characteristic of contemporary society (OM, 13). Marcel’s concern is that “intellectual and moral confusion results” when a problem-solving approach to the world “becomes imperialistic and claims the right to judge all knowledge and truth by criteria appropriate only to the aspect of the objective” (Keen, *Gabriel Marcel*, p. 19). There are at least two mistakes associated with a monopoly by the problem-oriented approach to reality. The first is an epistemological mistake. A problem-oriented approach simply will not yield knowledge of mysteries. If it becomes the only or the dominant method of inquiry for all domains, we are denied the opportunity to know important truths that can only be conveyed through encounters with mystery. The second problem involves a moral mistake. The severe over-use of a problem-oriented approach to reality leads to what Marcel calls a functionalized world. In a functionalized world human beings tend to view themselves and others as reducible to their functions: I am a ticket collector, a doctor, a wife. Personal identity or who I am essentially becomes merely a matter of what I do (OM, 9–12). The rampant misuse of a problem-oriented approach to reality encourages us to treat everything, including human beings, as objects or functions rather than as presences.

Marcel’s notion of presence is an essential aspect of the epistemology of mystery and so requires some explication. Marcel thinks that in order to approach reality as containing at least some mysteries and to be open to the possibility that mysteries can be sources of wisdom, one must be able to assume an epistemic/moral posture of presence, which is quite different from the epistemic posture one assumes for problem solving (OM, 38). To approach another as a presence rather than an object is "to recognize him as a person, a unique free subject, someone whom I would not simply call ‘he’ but would address more familiarly as ‘thou.’" In order to participate in mystery, the knower must be open to the possibility that some others may present themselves to her as presences rather than as objects, and she must in turn be capable of being present to others.
Marcel clarifies the notion of presence through the concepts of availability and unavailability. When someone is present to me, she is available to me in the sense that she is at my disposal when I am in need or desire to confide in her (OM, 39). By “available” Marcel does not mean that we should simply allow ourselves to be used by other people. Rather, availability “involves responding in complete freedom to a direct appeal” and “being receptive to an appeal addressed directly to me as a person, not as an object.” Being available has little to do with good intentions, or even with outward gesture or behavior. “The most attentive and conscientious listener may give me the impression of not being present; he gives me nothing, he cannot make room for me in himself, whatever the material favours which he is prepared to grant me” (OM, 40). For example, a highly competent doctor may listen to my needs and never fail to order the appropriate procedures or tests. Yet if I remain for her merely a diagnosis or a disease to treat rather than a person, she is not present to me no matter how capably she treats me. Presence is expressed in I-thou relationships as opposed to I-it relationships, and one distinctive feature of I-thou relationships is that they are reciprocal. “Presence involves a reciprocity which is excluded from any relation of subject to object or subject to subject-object” (ibid). Rather, presence expresses a relationship of subject to subject and an intimacy that, for a moment, blurs distinctions and boundaries between self and other.

On the contrary, to be unavailable or incapable of presence is to be “in some manner not only occupied but encumbered with one’s own self” (OM, 42). At the heart of being unavailable is a deep self-centeredness, a preoccupation with the self that makes it impossible to transcend the boundary between self and other. Marcel characterizes this self-centeredness that prevents one from being available or present as pride. Pride “consists in drawing one’s strength solely from one-self. The proud man is cut off from a certain form of communion with his fellow men” (OM, 32). Rather than approaching the other with openness, allowing the other to reveal herself, the proud person takes it upon herself to “create” the experience, to be in control of the experience, to make it happen. Pride involves an inward turn whereby a person tries to be totally self-reliant.
One can contrast a problem-oriented approach and a mystery-oriented approach in terms of presence or lack thereof. When studying a problem, I need not be present or personally available to the object, the “it,” that I am investigating. Rather, I am self-reliant in creating and directing the investigation, in order to discover the facts of the matter through my own efforts and capacities. As an approach to mystery, this simply will not do. In order to acquire knowledge of mysteries, I must assume an epistemic posture of presence. I must adopt an attitude of unknowing, and I must be somewhat vulnerable to the other and patient, allowing space for the other to reveal herself to me. Moreover, I must allow that I might be changed, or acquire self-knowledge, in virtue of an encounter with mystery.

One of the most profound experiences of presence according to Marcel is the experience of love. When I am in a genuinely loving relationship I see the other as a gift, not as inevitable or arbitrary, but as the result of an act of generosity. Love “does not experience the beloved as a separate object” and “it refuses to reduce the other to a collection of specifiable characteristics.” A loving relationship is not experienced as created by me but as presented to me; it is a mystery. I cannot understand or know love until I experience it, and when I do experience it, I am granted profound knowledge about the value and meaning of one important aspect of human existence. A pre-condition for experiencing any mystery, including love, is an epistemic/moral posture of presence whereby the ego must “break out of self-imposed imprisonment and enter into fully personal relationships.”

Even though knowledge of a mystery is experiential in the sense that it can only be acquired through individual, personal experience with mystery, and only by assuming an epistemic/moral posture of presence, Marcel argues that it is also the “essence of the mysterious to be approachable by a type of rational thought.” Reflection is required for coming to know both problems and mysteries, but there are two very different kinds of reflection that correspond to these two very different aspects of reality. Marcel refers to the kind of rational thought involved in knowing mysteries as secondary reflection. He distinguishes secondary reflection from primary reflection, which is the kind of rational thought involved in problem-solving. "While primary reflection seeks to gain clarity about the world of abstraction,
objectification, and verification, secondary reflection seeks a wider and richer understanding of the meaning of human existence by a return to the unity of experiences such as appreciation, fidelity, and faith within which the mystery of being is apprehended.”16 Whereas primary reflection seeks to dissolve the unity of experience in an act of analysis, secondary reflection seeks to recapture or reclaim the unity of experience; it is “recuperative.”

In order to illustrate the difference between primary and secondary reflection, Keen considers the following example: When I ask about the significance of my faith in God, primary reflection searches for clarity by standing off from the experience, abstracting and looking for universal explanations for faith. . . . In all of this, however, an essential element of faith has been left out. It is my faith that is being investigated. Secondary reflection, therefore, will seek to recover the unity of experience by asking from within the experience of faith what meaning it has for me.17

In secondary reflection I do not stand outside of my faith experiences to deconstruct and analyze them. Rather, through memory I gather together the important experiences of my life and view them in a unified way as my experiences. As I do so, I am also capable of recognizing that I am not identical to my life, but that I am able to take up a position with respect to my life without being entirely outside of or separate from the experiences that constitute my life. For Marcel, then, questions about whether or not it is rational to believe in God are mysteries, not problems. Marcel was ambivalent about the traditional proofs for God’s existence precisely because the proofs take a problem-oriented approach to God: they treat God as an object and aim to demonstrate the existence of this object.18 Even if this approach can yield some intellectual beliefs about God for some people, Marcel thought that the reason for the notorious inability for the proofs to persuade non-believers was that the proofs actually presuppose faith. That is, the proofs can only really confirm for believers what is already given to them in faith experience.19 In contrast to this, Marcel’s approach is phenomenological. In order to investigate questions about God, philosophers should start from concrete human experience. The divine is not experienced as an object or as a problem to solve, but
rather as a mystery. The existence of God is not to be asserted as the result of a syllogism, but the person of God is to encountered as a “thou.” For Marcel, however, this does not mean that God is unknowable. Mysteries are knowable, but only through personal, concrete experiences in which the knowing subject assumes an epistemic/moral posture of presence, and only by bringing secondary reflection (as opposed to primary reflection) to bear on those experiences.

Philosophical skepticism regarding the evidential status of mystical experiences results, at least in part, from a monopoly by the problem-oriented approach within contemporary epistemology. Marcel’s epistemology of mystery offers an alternative, and in my view better, framework for philosophical understanding of the noetic character of mystical experiences. In the following section, I consider two particular examples that illustrate the value of Marcel’s approach. The spiritual journeys of both Al-Ghazali and Augustine of Hippo bear out the Marcelian lesson that a problem-oriented approach to God is misguided and remains insufficient for knowing God. Using Marcel’s epistemology of mystery as an interpretive framework, I trace the spiritual journeys of both Augustine and Al-Ghazali from skepticism, through intellectual certainty, to mystical union with God.

2. The Spiritual Journeys of Al-Ghazali and Augustine

Both Augustine’s *Confessions* and Al-Ghazali’s autobiographical essay, the “Deliverance from Error,” can be characterized in Marcel’s language as exercises in secondary reflection. Neither Augustine nor Al-Ghazali abstracts from the particularities of their experiences in order to produce generalizable solutions to the “problem” of mystical experience. Rather, through acts of remembering each of them recollects his experiences of the quest to know God, re-presents these experiences in the text as a unified journey, and is able to take up a position with respect to these experiences and to make judgments about them, all the while standing within the experience. Thus, both autobiographies begin where their respective spiritual journeys end, with the lessons that each has learned about how to come to a knowledge of God. Augustine states: “So too let him rejoice and
delight in finding you who are beyond discovery rather than fail to find you by supposing you to be discoverable” (I.10). Similarly, Al-Ghazali states: “Whoever thinks that the understanding of things Divine rests upon strict proofs has in his thought narrowed down the wideness of God’s mercy” (DE, 24). Putting it in Marcel’s language, both figures discover that God is not a problem to solve but a mystery to embrace. I begin with an account of Al-Ghazali’s story and then turn to Augustine.

Al-Ghazali’s autobiography begins as a treatise directed to those who have asked him to testify about his journey through radical skepticism, an investigation of the four classes of seekers, and ultimately mysticism. He traces his journey from the “plain of naïve second-hand belief to the peak of direct vision” (DE, 17). As a youth, Al-Ghazali’s “thirst for the comprehension of things as they really are” drove him to question all of the beliefs that he had taken on mere authority. Inherited beliefs, he tells us, “ceased to hold me and . . . lost their grip on me” (DE, 19). He noticed that the children of Christians grew up Christian, the children of Jews grew up Jewish, and so on. Moreover, he drew from the tradition related from the Prophet that people are born with an original nature that is sound the implication that it is parents and other adults who disrupt this soundness by making children Jewish or Christian. These thoughts inspired a deep desire to know “what this original nature really was and what the beliefs derived from authority of parents and teachers really were, and also to make distinctions . . . between the true and the false in them” (ibid.). Al-Ghazali’s desire for knowledge becomes a quest for certainty about what he believes, and it requires more than a mere appeal to authority can provide. The goal was to achieve the kind of knowledge in which “the object is disclosed in such a fashion that no doubt remains along with it, that no possibility of error or illusion accompanies it, and that the mind cannot even entertain such a supposition” (DE, 19–20).

Initially Al-Ghazali adopts a problem-oriented approach to knowledge of God. He begins by doubting all of those beliefs that it is possible to doubt, including beliefs he has acquired from sense perception and even beliefs about necessary truths. Yet, instead of leading him to a secure foundation for knowledge, all of this doubting
leads Al-Ghazali into a deep skepticism. He refers to his skepticism as an illness or malady in which he doubts even the possibility of knowledge. He is seriously disturbed by this state because he claims that the only remedy is demonstration, and yet demonstration involves combining first principles and necessary truths, and in his skeptical state he denies even these. After about two months, Al-Ghazali eventually “recovers” from this radical skepticism and decides that acquiring knowledge of God is possible. Yet his approach to knowledge of God is still noticeably framed by problem-solving.

Al-Ghazali’s next strategy is to investigate the four classes of seekers. Each class claims to have knowledge of God, and so Al-Ghazali decides it is worthwhile to explore both what they claim to know and how each class pursues knowledge of God. He considers respectively the paths of theology, philosophy, the Bat iniyah, and finally mysticism. Although Al-Ghazali finds theology important and useful for its rather narrowly defined task of defending the Sunnite creed and tradition from heretical attacks against the faith, he nonetheless discovers that theology is insufficient for rationally grounding belief in God. Theologians make explicit the contradictions of their opponents but base “their arguments on premises which they were compelled to admit by way of naïve belief, or the consensus of the community, or bare acceptance of the Quran and Traditions” (DE, 28). Thus, the theologians cannot help the one who accepts nothing as certain but necessary truths; they cannot provide the kind of certain foundation for his beliefs that Al-Ghazali seeks.

Al-Ghazali turns next to the philosophers and proves to be, on the whole, quite condemnatory of philosophy. Even though he thinks that philosophy is capable of leading to certain foundational and necessary truths about the natural world, he finds in all of the philosophers a mixture of both truth and falsehood, primarily because they all posit doctrines that contradict revealed knowledge. The philosophers are dangerous because, “mingled with their teaching, are maxims of the prophets and utterances of the mystics” and thus many people who read them conclude uncritically that the philosophers must speak the truth (DE, 43). Even though Al-Ghazali is not fond of philosophy, he is even less fond of the Bat iniyah. The Bat iniyah are the class of seekers who make claims to knowledge of the truth based
on instruction from infallible Imams. At length, Al-Ghazali condemns this group because they rely entirely on appeal to authority, an authority that they cannot even demonstrate to be worthy of such an appeal; they “have nothing to cure them or save them from the darkness of mere opinions” (DE, 54). His dissatisfaction with these three potential ways of seeking knowledge of God leads him lastly to the mystics.

When Al-Ghazali begins his study of mysticism, he knows that it differs from the other three paths in that it includes both intellectual belief and practical activity, which aims at “getting rid of obstacles in the self . . . and vicious morals, so that the heart may attain to freedom from what is not God” (DE, 56). Al-Ghazali finds the intellectual belief much easier to grasp and indicates that at this point he remains more comfortable with taking a problem-oriented approach to God. After reading all of the books of the mystics, he comprehends “their fundamental teachings on the intellectual side” and progresses “as far as possible by study and oral instruction, in the knowledge of mysticism” (ibid.). Indeed at this point, Al-Ghazali claims to achieve the intellectual certainty that he craves regarding the three essential creedal principles of faith in God, in prophethood, and in the Last Day.

Yet the certainty that he eventually secures through a problem-oriented approach to God remains deeply unsatisfying, and does not move Al-Ghazali to act and to live the kind of spiritual life that he desires to live. He soon realizes that the mystics seem to possess knowledge of God that “cannot be apprehended by study, but only by immediate experience . . . and moral change” (DE, 57). In Marcel’s language, Al-Ghazali finally realizes that there is a kind of knowledge about the divine that cannot be attained through problem-solving, but only through an experiential encounter with the divine nature. Al-Ghazali draws an analogy to health: “What a difference there is between knowing the definition of health . . . and being healthy” (ibid.). Al-Ghazali realizes that there is a difference between knowing definitions of God and creeds, and knowing God. God is a presence rather than a problem, a “thou” to enter into relationship with rather than an “it” to investigate.
Moreover, he discerns that the knowledge of God that the mystics possess requires moral change on the part of the seeker. He must “sever the attachments of the heart to worldly things,” and this can only happen by “turning away from wealth and position and fleeing from all time-consuming entanglements” (DE, 58). To use Marcel’s language, Al-Ghazali discovers that the kind of knowledge that the mystics possess requires an epistemic/moral posture of presence. He must become present, or spiritually available, to God by “getting rid of obstacles in the self . . . and vicious morals, so that the heart may attain to freedom from what is not God” (DE, 56). And yet he remains unable to do so. He states:

I considered the circumstances of my life, and realized that I was caught in a veritable thicket of attachments. . . . One day I would form the resolution to quit Baghdad and get rid of these adverse circumstances; the next day I would abandon my resolution. I put one foot forward and drew the other back. . . . Worldly desires were striving to keep me by their chains just where I was, while the voice of faith was alling, “To the road! to the road!” (DE, 59)

For six months Al-Ghazali “tossed” about in this state, unable to become spiritually available to God until eventually he has what one might describe as a severe mental and physical breakdown, for which “the only method of treatment is that the anxiety which has come over the heart should be allayed” (DE, 60).

Al-Ghazali’s initial inability to assume an epistemic/moral posture of presence can be attributed, in Marcel’s language, to pride. Al-Ghazali struggles to become present to God because he continues to rely on himself to “create” a relationship with God and to have the strength to turn away from the world; he remains encumbered with himself and thus unavailable to God. It is not until Al-Ghazali realizes that, left to his own devices, he simply cannot overcome this malady and lead the life that he wishes to live until he finally begins to become present to God. He states: “I sought refuge with God most high as one driven to Him, because he is without further resources of his own” (ibid.). In this moment of surrender, he begins to overcome his pride by taking refuge in God and by being open to the possibility of encounter with divine presence. The encounter occurs and is life-changing. As Al-Ghazali states: “He made it easy for my heart to turn
away from position and wealth, from children and friends” (ibid.). Al-Ghazali spends ten years in solitude, during which time he claims that “there were revealed to me things innumerable and unfathomable” (DE, 63). In attempting to describe the kind of knowledge conveyed in his mystical encounters, he remarks: “it is hard to describe in language; if a man attempts to express these, his words inevitably contain what is clearly erroneous. In general, what [mystics] manage to achieve is nearness to God” (DE, 64).

The spiritual journey that Augustine of Hippo recounts in his Confessions is strikingly similar to Al-Ghazali’s spiritual quest. Augustine’s search for knowledge of God is also a pursuit of certainty in regard to what he believes. Augustine initially assumes a problem-oriented approach to God that leads him first into a deep skepticism, but eventually he comes to the secure foundation for his beliefs that he craves. Like Al-Ghazali, Augustine discovers that what knowledge of God he achieves through a problem-oriented approach remains deeply unsatisfying because God is not an object to investigate but a subject to love—a mystery.

As a youth, Augustine did well in school. Although he did not always enjoy his studies, he did always “delight in the truth,” even in the smallest of matters (I.31). While in Carthage, this initial love of wisdom deepens and matures when Augustine is introduced to Cicero’s Hortensius and Aristotle’s Categories. He claims that Cicero taught him to love wisdom itself, wherever it might be found, rather than to adhere dogmatically to particular scholars or schools of thought (III.8). Augustine is so influenced by Aristotle that he tries to conceive of everything that exists, including God, under the ten categories (IV.29). Here it is quite clear that he assumes a problem-oriented method of inquiry concerning questions about God. Augustine approaches God as an object, an “it” to investigate through the categories of philosophical analysis.

At Carthage Augustine becomes deeply influenced by the Manichees, an affiliation he continues as he journeyed to Rome and Milan. While in Rome, one “problem” that Augustine struggles with is a version of the problem of evil. He wrestles with how the existence of a single, infinitely good God might be made compatible with the
existence of evil in the world. The Manichees offer a plausible solution to this problem by holding that reality is fundamentally composed of two substances, one infinitely good, the other infinitely evil, which resolves the difficulty of attributing evil to one omnibenevolent creator (V.20.). Augustine is not only won over by Manichee arguments about the nature of the divine but also persuaded by the Manichees that Catholic doctrines are false and that Catholic scriptures are full of contradictions and absurdities.

Augustine travels from Rome to Milan where he becomes acquainted with Ambrose, who delivers what Augustine takes to be tremendously compelling arguments against the Manichees. Ambrose persuades Augustine that their arguments are unsound by interpreting scripture in a way that resolves the apparent contradictions. Yet Ambrose remains unable to provide the kind of certainty about Catholic teachings that Augustine seeks. Augustine states: “I wanted to be as certain about things I could not see as I am certain that seven and three are ten. . . . I desired other things to be as certain as this truth, whether physical objects or spiritual matters” (VI.6). Ambrose’s arguments cannot provide this kind of certainty.

Consequently, though Augustine begins to question Manichee doctrines, he remains unconvinced that he should accept Catholicism. He states:

Granted it could have educated people who asserted its claims and refuted objections with abundant argument and without absurdity. But it was not sufficient ground to condemn what I was holding. There could be an equally valid defence for both. So, to me the Catholic faith appeared not to have been defeated but also not yet to be the conqueror. (V.25)

This lack of certainty about any doctrine launches Augustine into a deep skepticism about the possibility of gaining knowledge of God at all. Augustine believes that God exists and cares for his creatures. Yet he wants to understand the nature of God’s substance and to achieve certainty in what he believes. His quest for this certain knowledge of God, framed by a problem-solving approach, has led instead to radical skepticism (VI.8.). He states: “Accordingly, after the manner of the Academics . . . I doubted (V.25).
After his encounter with Ambrose and his decision to suspend all judgment, the first major turning point in Augustine’s spiritual journey occurs through acquaintance with Platonic philosophy. Augustine credits the Platonists with leading him even further down the “path toward God” by teaching him to seek for wisdom in immaterial truth rather than in the changing contingencies of this world: “after reading the books of the Platonists and learning from them to seek for immaterial truth I turned my attention to your ‘invisible nature understood through the things which are made’” (VII.26). Indeed, Augustine claims that his study of the Platonists eventually led him to achieve the kind of intellectual certainty needed to ground his belief and to live a life of faith: “I was certain that you are infinite. . . . I was sure that you truly are, and are always the same; that you never become other or different in any part or by any movement of position” (VII.26). Yet, despite the intellectual certainty he achieves at this point, he remains unmoved: “of these conceptions [of God] I was certain but to enjoy you I was too weak” (ibid.). And again at the beginning of Book VIII, “all doubt had been taken from me. . . . My desire was not to be more certain of you but more stable in you” (VIII.1). His intellectual doubts are completely quelled, and yet a change of heart does not come. It is at this point that Augustine’s language betrays his frustration most forcefully. He discusses the absurdity he feels at having intellectual certainty about God and yet remaining completely unmoved to live a life of faith in God (VIII.1). Being now absolutely certain of the truths of Christianity, his mind commands itself to believe and to make a total conversion, and yet the mind that commands itself does not obey its own command. He exclaims: “What causes this monstrosity, and why does this happen?” (VIII.21). “I no longer had my usual excuse to explain why I did not yet despise the world and serve you, namely, that my perception of the truth was uncertain. But now I was indeed quite sure about it” (VIII.11). What Augustine realizes at this point is that intellectual knowledge of God is insufficient for conversion. He finally discerns “the way which leads to the home of bliss, not merely as an end to be perceived but as a realm to live in” (VI.26, emphasis mine). Using Marcel’s language, we could say that Augustine finally realizes that God is not a problem to solve or object to investigate (“an end to be perceived”) but a mystery to embrace (“a realm to live in”). The
knowledge of God that he seeks can only be had in an encounter with the divine, which requires moral change. In Marcel’s terms, Augustine realizes that he must assume an epistemic/moral posture of presence and become available to God. Yet, left to his own devices, he remains unable to engender the moral change required.

Augustine’s frustration peaks when he hears Ponticianus tell a story about uneducated men who have followed the example of Anthony and are ardent believers on fire with love for God. These uneducated men have achieved what Augustine, with all of his education and study, cannot achieve and this realization causes Augustine to cry out in anguish. Augustine turns to his dear friend Alypius and exclaims: “What is wrong with us? . . . Uneducated people are rising up and capturing heaven . . . and we with our high culture without any heart—see where we roll in the mud of flesh and blood” (VIII.19). Augustine’s prolonged inability to assume an epistemic/moral posture of presence required for genuine conversion can be attributed, in Marcel’s language, to pride. Augustine remains encumbered with himself and continues to rely on himself to “create” the experience of God.

In this midst of this monstrosity, Augustine has a vision of Lady Continence, who gently tells him that if he will only stop relying on himself and “make the leap without anxiety, he [the Lord] will catch you and heal you” (VIII.27). The vision reveals multitudes of people who have “made the leap,” and Lady Continence gently admonishes Augustine: “Are you incapable of doing what these men and women have done? . . . Why are you relying on yourself, only to find yourself unreliable” (VIII.27, emphasis mine). In Marcel’s terms, this vision invokes Augustine to stop being so proud and to stop relying wholly upon himself to “create” the conversion experience, but instead to allow God to respond with love. Once Augustine overcomes his pride and becomes open to the mystery of God, his monstrosity is overcome. At this point, Augustine literally breaks down in sorrow. He throws himself under a fig tree and lets his tears flow freely (VIII.28). As he sobs, he hears a voice prompting him to pick up the scriptures and read. He opens to a passage from Romans, and upon reading the “first passage on which [his] eyes lit,” he states: “At once, with the last words of this sentence, it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety
flooded into my heart” (VIII.30). Shortly after this experience, Augustine returns to Ostia to visit his mother. While in Ostia, Augustine and his mother have a mystical encounter in which their “minds were lifted up by an ardent affection towards eternal being itself . . . to attain to the region of inexhaustible abundance” (IX.24). He describes it as a direct encounter with wisdom, which he was able to touch “in some small degree by a moment of total concentration of the heart” (IX.29).

The mystical encounters of both Al-Ghazali and Augustine are ultimately experiences of love in which even the duality of an I-thou relationship is overcome as the self merges in union with God. For Augustine, union with God is expressed in image mysticism in which a trace, or image, of the trinitarian God is “seen” in the trinitarian soul of the human being. For Al-Ghazali, union with God is expressed in fana or annihilation in which the self literally becomes absorbed into God. Although the content of their mystical experiences differs, we may use Marcel’s epistemology of mystery as an interpretive framework to reveal that the epistemic/moral approach leading to these experiences is the same: Augustine and Al-Ghazali both make a transition from approaching God as a problem for resolution to embracing God as a mystery, and in so doing each finally comes to know God. I do not mean to suggest that approaching God as a mystery caused their respective mystical encounters. Rather, their prolonged inability to know God by approaching God as a problem to solve reveals the inadequacies of a problem-oriented framework. Their respective spiritual journeys affirm that God is a mystery, not a problem, and that an epistemic/moral posture of presence is required in order for one to acquire the wisdom available in a mystical encounter. The lives of these two figures illustrate the usefulness of Marcel’s epistemology of mystery for a philosophical understanding of the noetic quality of mystical experience. However, a rigorous defense of Marcel’s approach requires more than merely illustrating his framework through the lives of two believers. In the following section, I defend the radical import of Marcel’s epistemology of mystery for explaining the noetic quality of mystical experiences in general, and of these two figures in particular.

3. A Defense of Marcel’s Epistemology of Mystical Experience
There is a pervasive skepticism within analytic epistemology regarding the noetic quality of mystical experiences. One notable exception to this tendency is to be found in the work of William Alston. Remaining squarely within the frameworks of contemporary analytic epistemology, Alston defends the evidential status of mystical experience for grounding certain beliefs about God. Alston argues that subjects who have mystical experiences are, on the basis of those experiences, rationally justified in believing certain propositions about God. His strategy is to demonstrate that Christian epistemic practice is prima facie no less reliable than ordinary perceptual practice. Using sense experience as the standard, he investigates the extent to which the belief-forming practices of mystics measure up to this standard. Alston concludes that, by and large, belief-forming practices on the basis of mystical experience are epistemically comparable to belief-forming practices on the basis of ordinary sense perception. Insofar as beliefs based on sense experience are rational, then in the absences of significant defeaters, belief in God on the basis of mystical experiences is also rational. One virtue of Alston’s approach is that he assume the terms of the philosophical skeptic (at least those willing to take sense experience as a paradigm of empirical knowledge) and attempts to show how, using those terms, one can defend and explain the noetic quality of mystical experiences. If this approach is successful, then why posit the need for an alternative epistemology of mysticism that relies on Marcel’s work? Alston offers a more moderate approach by granting the skeptic’s relatively uncontroversial philosophical starting points; Marcel does not, and instead presents a fairly radical shift to a new epistemological framework. So why isn’t Alston’s strategy more promising than Marcel’s approach, especially for persuading the non-believer or the skeptic?

Alston is operating within an empiricist framework that takes propositional knowledge derived from sense experience as paradigmatic. On his approach, questions about the noetic quality of mystical experiences become questions about the extent to which a subject is warranted in believing certain propositions about God on the basis of these experiences. Indeed, Alston explicitly characterizes the epistemic value of mystical experiences in terms of conveying
important information about God. In the introduction to *Perceiving God*, Alston states:

At the outset I should make it explicit that though I will be concerned with the epistemic value of the perception of God, I by no means suppose that to be its only, or even its most important, value. From a religious point of view... The chief value of the experience of God is that it enables us to enter into personal relationships with God... But my topic in this book will be the function of the experience of God in providing information about God and our relations to Him.26

What I want to emphasize here is how Alston distinguishes the epistemic value of these experiences from their personal value. Alston assumes that the epistemic value of mystical experiences, while obviously related to their personal value, can be separated out for the purposes of analysis. For Alston, the epistemic value is the propositions that one can garner from these experiences—*information about God*—and his task is to show that one is justified in believing certain propositions on the basis of these experiences. The personal and religious aspects of mystical experiences, while important, are distinct from the noetic aspects of these experiences, or if related to the noetic aspects, they can and should be distinguished for the sake of analysis.

By remaining firmly within the framework of traditional empiricism, Alston treats mystical experiences as problems that require a solution; he submits mystical experiences to the categories of analysis that this tradition allows. While this strategy is a virtue of his account in one respect, it is a significant weakness of Alston’s approach in another respect, and in my view this latter aspect is more important. The problem is that Alston’s approach does not capture accurately the noetic quality of mystical experiences as reported by the subjects who have them. The epistemic value of mystical experiences is not that the subject comes to know about God, but rather that the subject comes to know God. That is, the noetic quality of mystical experiences cannot be separated from the personal, relational aspects of these experiences: the epistemic value is in the personal encounter, and the ability after the encounter to claim “I know God,” and not just that “I know things about God.” It may be
true that subjects come to affirm certain propositions about God on the basis of mystical experiences. Yet the epistemic value of these experiences is not reducible to (nor even primarily involving) the acquisition of information about God. This is precisely what the spiritual journeys of Augustine and Al-Ghazali reveal: the epistemic value of their respective mystical experiences does not consist in gaining more propositional knowledge about God, or even greater certainty or justification for the propositions they already believed about God. Indeed, their pursuit of propositional knowledge frustrated their ability to know God. The epistemic value of their respective mystical experiences was in coming to know God as a subject in an encounter that altered dramatically the course of life for both of these figures. Alston’s approach is limited because he remains within a problem-oriented framework, and as such his analysis fails to capture accurately the kind of knowledge that is conveyed in these experiences. The lesson from the spiritual journeys of Augustine and Al-Ghazali is that we need alternatives to “problem-oriented epistemologies” in order to explain the noetic character of mystical experiences because a fundamentally different kind of knowledge is conveyed in these experiences than propositional knowledge of God. Marcel’s epistemology is just such an alternative, and it can explain the noetic quality of mystical experiences in the terms of the subjects who claim to have them rather than in the terms of the philosophical skeptics who doubt them.

However, trading in Alston’s analytic approach for Marcel’s phenomenological framework may generate a second possible objection. One might worry that my application of Marcel’s epistemology of mystery to mystical experiences misappropriates his framework. In order to see why, it is important to understand the context within which Marcel discusses questions about the rationality of belief in God. Marcel contends that it is within the scope of philosophy to affirm rational belief in God, but that the strategy of the traditional proofs is misguided. The proofs are ineffective because they presuppose belief and because they rely on a kind of category mistake by treating God as a problem that requires a solution. However, mystical experiences are also not ideal starting points for a philosophical discussion of the rationality of belief in God, as opposed to a theological discussion, because these experiences are private,
non-discursive, not universally experienced, and typically colored by the particular creedoal or faith-commitments of the subject. As Tom Anderson notes, Marcel’s distinctive strategy is to ground the rationality of religious belief in “nothing less than non-mystical encounters with God,” which nonetheless involve a revelation of divine presence.27 In short, Marcel’s epistemology of mystery is offered as an alternative both to the traditional proofs and to mystical experiences as ways of rationally grounding belief in God.

Marcel’s approach is phenomenological, and so he seeks to ground belief in God in experiential encounters with divine presence. Yet he aims to find common, universally available experiential ground that even the non-theist could accept as a philosophical starting-point. In this respect, then, Marcel’s approach does not seem so unlike Alston’s strategy. The difference between the two is that Alston relies on sense-experience and remains within a problem-oriented framework. Marcel shifts the terms of the discussion by relying on a fundamentally different kind of experience, the experience of mystery. Yet mysteries, and the divine presence revealed in them, are not reserved for the mystic or even just for the theist, but are central aspects of ordinary human existence.

Thus, Marcel’s own philosophical discussion of how one might come to affirm the existence of God through mysteries does not emphasize mystical experiences where those are understood as direct encounters with God. Instead, Marcel emphasizes that mysteries are essential aspects of human life and are experiences with other human beings through which God’s presence can be revealed. For Marcel, the possibility of affirming God’s existence is open to believer and non-believer alike because certain fundamentally human experiences, e.g., love, fidelity, and promise-making, presuppose the existence of the divine, the “Absolute Thou.” God is encountered in these experiences through ordinary human interactions, for “we are aware of God’s presence in and through the experience of that which is not God. . . . The encounter with or experience of God, then, is mediated through the experience of creatures. It is not an immediate ineffable experience involving depth of insight into the ultimate nature of Being as in mysticism.”

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International Philosophical Quarterly, Vol 50, No. 2 (June 2010): pg. 221-241. Permalink. This article is © Philosophy Documentation Center and permission has been granted for this version to appear in e-Publications@Marquette. Philosophy Documentation Center does not grant permission for this article to be further copied/distributed or hosted elsewhere without the express permission from Philosophy Documentation Center.
Moreover, Marcel distinguishes clearly between philosophy and religion on the basis of the kinds of mysteries that are within their scope. Religion “deals with mysteries, such as the Incarnation, available only through revelation ‘which no effort of thought bearing on experience can enable us to attain.’ Philosophy, however, deals with mysteries ‘which are enveloped in human experience as such,’ and are therefore, accessible to philosophical reflection.”29 Thus, for Marcel, the “presence of God, which the philosophers should recognize and become witness of, is ‘enveloped’ in more mundane human experiences” and does not involve particular creeds or religious beliefs.30 In being concerned with mysteries that are “enveloped in ordinary human experience,” it may seem that philosophy is not particularly well-suited to investigate mystical experiences. So, on the one hand, Marcel’s approach is preferable to Alston’s strategy because the epistemology of mystery more adequately captures the kind of knowledge that is conveyed in mystical experiences. On the other hand, Marcel neither derives nor applies his framework to mystical experiences, and indeed seems to offer the epistemology of mystery as an alternative to mysticism for rationally grounding belief in God, at least from a philosophical perspective.

There are at least three points that support my use of Marcel’s epistemology of mystery to explain the noetic quality of mystical experience from a philosophical perspective. First, while mystical experiences are certainly not ordinary or common, they are nonetheless experiences that human beings have. Unlike mysteries of religious faith, such as the Incarnation, which “no effort of thought bearing on experience can enable us to attain,” mystical experiences do have a basis in human experience. Moreover, the difference between the mediated revelation of divine presence through mysteries of ordinary human life, and the immediate revelation of divine presence through mystical experiences, is a difference in degree rather than kind. The revelation of divine presence in experiences of human relationships of love or fidelity is but a vague, unspecified, and incomplete glimpse of the clear, definite, certain experience of divine presence revealed in mystical encounters. Both are of divine presence or Absolute Thou; the difference is in how, and the degree to which, divine presence is encountered. Marcel’s own distinction between what
we might call philosophical faith and religious faith underscores this point.

Marcel distinguishes between “faith affirmations of God’s reality which is philosophical in nature, which he calls ‘faith in general’ and . . . a ‘concrete’ faith involving particular creeds, religious beliefs, or ecclesiastical contexts.”31 Philosophical faith involves no particular religious creeds or belief; it is “faith in general” and is available to anyone who opens herself to the possibility of mystery and assumes the kind of epistemic/moral posture required to experience the mysterious in ordinary human life. In contrast, religious faith is concrete and informed by particular creeds or beliefs, and often by revealed truths that are not accessible through reflection on human experience. However, for Marcel philosophical or “general faith” and religious or “concrete faith” are both “the result of, and hence only possible because of, revelation” of divine presence.32 A person does not have to have “concrete faith” in order to have access to divine presence. Thus, on Marcel’s account, the divine presence experienced in mystical encounters, while certainly different in degree, and different in the details, is not fundamentally different in kind from the divine presence revealed in more ordinary human experiences of mystery.

The third point is that the epistemic/moral posture of presence and availability that makes one open to the possibility of mysteries in ordinary human life is the same posture that makes one open to the possibility of mystical experiences. It is true that mystical encounters are sometimes reported to happen to a subject who may be previously unavailable or closed to such possibilities. One might think here of St. Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus. Yet for someone to embrace the mystery revealed in a mystical encounter, rather than being dismissive of or skeptical about it, requires that one assume an epistemic/moral posture of presence and availability to the mysterious. The subject of a mystical experience must still decide how to interpret the experience and whether to accept it as a genuine experience or to write it off as delusion. She must decide how to integrate the experience with all the other experiences and encounters of her life.33 So, even though mystical experiences may be immediate and may overwhelm a subject in the moment, in order for one to understand or
accept that experience as revelation of divine presence requires an epistemic/moral posture of presence that makes her at least open to the possibility that reality contains mysteries. The upshot of all three points is that the central features of ordinary mysteries are analogous in important respects to the central features of extra-ordinary mystical encounters of the divine, and thus, in my view, can be understood philosophically through the same framework: the epistemology of mystery.

One other possible line of objection to my use of Marcel’s framework to account for the noetic quality of mystical experience involves a long-standing debate over whether and to what extent we can claim that mystical experiences are similar enough to consider under a single category. My argument that we apply Marcel’s epistemology of mystery to explain even a narrow class of mystical experiences across the three monotheistic traditions assumes that mystical experiences are in some sense comparable. In order for there to be an epistemology of mysticism, we must be able to characterize mystical experiences as more or less the same kinds of experiences. Whereas the previous objection was over whether or not ordinary mysteries and mystical experiences are comparable, this objection concerns whether mystical experiences across traditions are comparable.

Steven Katz has issued a forceful argument against this possibility. Katz argues that mystical experiences across traditions—and perhaps even within them—are incommensurable, and that the belief that mystical experiences can be accurately captured under a single category is false. The force of Katz’s position can be felt when one considers that the particular details of mystical experiences across traditions are, at best, radically diverse and, at worst, contradictory. Even the two mystics whom I compare in this paper have seemingly incompatible experiences of the divine: Augustine experiences a Trinitarian God, whereas Al-Ghazali experiences annihilation as the self being literally absorbed into God. Given such differences in the content of mystical experiences across traditions, in what sense is an epistemology of mysticism a legitimate project?
One easy, and perhaps too easy, response is that this objection, taken too far, falls back into treating mystical experiences as problems that require a solution. Worries about whether or not mystical experiences can be rigorously compared, assumes an approach whereby inquirers stand outside of these experiences and analyze them by breaking them into component parts in order to find some kind of generalizable, universal content. We treat these personal experiences of others like data by forcing them to submit to the categories of our disciplines to see how well they fit. Yet if mystical experiences are mysteries, then a problem-oriented approach will not yield knowledge of them, and it will not do to raise objections from within a problem-oriented framework. However, I think a more substantial response is in order and can be offered.

It is true that the content of particular mystical encounters are typically colored by the subject’s background beliefs and context. Christians, for instance, often claim to have Christian mystical experience, Muslims have mystical experiences colored by Islam, and so on. Yet, this is not unlike encounters with mysteries in ordinary human life. For example, no two experiences of love are alike in their particular details. Moreover, the experiences of love by people from diverse religious and cultural contexts will be colored by the background beliefs that shape their particular tradition. In one sense, then, experiences of mysteries in ordinary human life are not comparable. Each person must begin anew, for mysteries cannot be communicated through demonstration but can only be known through concrete, personal experience. Yet the essence of mysteries, and the revelation of divine presence that can be encountered in mysteries, is in some sense the same. The similarities discerned from the testimony of those who encounter mysteries in ordinary human experiences is not offered as irrefutable proof either of the existence of the divine or that the divine has certain properties. Rather, such testimony is offered as a “witness, in which one person calls out to another and testifies to the meaning he has found in an encounter.” So too in the case of mystical experiences: mystical experiences often take the shape of particular religious creeds or traditions. An epistemology of mystery applied to mystical experience is not meant justify a particular view of God. Nonetheless, testimony from those who have these experiences reveals some similarities in experience. One important
similarity in testimony about mystical experiences across traditions is "the conviction that there is a reality, a profound meaning, behind the world of appearances." That is, one similarity in experience is that mystical encounters are noetic. Marcel’s epistemology of mystery provides a framework for understanding the kind of knowledge conveyed in these experiences, and the epistemic/moral posture one must be willing to assume in order to acquire this kind of knowledge.

4. Conclusion

Even though Marcel does not develop an epistemology specific to mysticism, his epistemology of mystery provides a radical new framework for understanding the noetic quality of mystical experiences as reported by the subjects who claim to have them. Marcel’s framework improves on contemporary analytic approaches because it captures more accurately the kind of knowledge that mystical experiences convey. Moreover, applying his epistemology of mystery to mystical experience is perfectly consistent with Marcel’s own philosophical discussions of the rationality of belief in God. Most importantly, however, revitalizing Marcel’s epistemology of mystery and extending it in new directions helps resist the monopoly of a problem-oriented approach to all domains of inquiry. Marcel’s epistemology of mystery is valuable because it broadens our understanding of the kinds of knowledge that are possible, and that should be desirable, given the complexity and profundity of human life.

Notes

1I wish to thank Frederick Denny, Tom Anderson, Franco V. Trivigno, and anonymous reviewers at IPQ for very helpful comments on this paper. See Norman Malcolm, “The Groundlessness of Religious Belief” in Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and Anthology, ed. Brian Davies (New York NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), p. 184. Here Malcolm is stating, though not agreeing with, the commonly held view that religious belief is irrational because there is no good evidence for it.


Ibid., p. 20.


Anderson, p. 68.

Ibid., p. 69.

Keen, *Gabriel Marcel*, p. 33.

Ibid., p. 22.

Ibid.

Ibid.


20 Ibid., p. 236.

21 Saint Augustine, Confessions, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991), all references to Augustine are from this translation.


26 Ibid., p. 2, emphasis mine.


28 Ibid., p. 237.

29 Ibid., p. 233.

30 Ibid., pp. 233–34.

31 Ibid., p. 234.

32 Ibid., p. 235.


36 Keen, Gabriel Marcel, p. 21.