

Legacy Lost: The Ecstasy Deficit in Modern Philosophy

Western philosophy has a vital inheritance from mythological cults that emerged out of Shamanic mists. This legacy provided ongoing inspiration for philosophy as a way of living. Over time, however, philosophy progressively inclined toward purely intellectual endeavor. It left aside the core experiential connection cultic ritual evoked and developed into its modern post Cartesian exercise. The direct spiritual experience that inspired philosophy significantly became shunned as magic of a primitive age.

F. M. Cornford's classic *From Religion to Philosophy* maintains that religion developed when people ceased to find complete and immediate satisfaction in the mimetic rites of primary sympathetic magic and needed something to represent the emotional experience they could no longer achieve in collective tribal activity. "The representation [men like Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes] called *physis*, and conceived as the ultimate living stuff out of which the world grew, could be traced back to an age of magic...." (Cornford, 1957, p. 124) Cornford thought analytical speculation about *physis*, the "animate and divine substance," which he considered the basic datum of religion, yielded philosophy, although philosophy remained haunted by religion.

Our contemporary knowledge, due to anthropological discovery which was unknown in Cornford's time, understands that what Cornford characterizes pejoratively as "savage" magic are practices that are now properly called animism or shamanism. They are activities fully deserving the name of religion.

I think that philosophy is "haunted" by religion because it has distanced itself from ecstatic, direct experience of animate and divine substance (*physis*). Instead of distancing itself, I submit that philosophy needs to be informed by that ecstatic, direct experience.

Shamanic experience

There were numerous "mystery religions" extant during the development of Western philosophy that stretches from the Milesians through Plato. The origins of the mystery religions lie in shamanism. From modern anthropology we see that the details and methods of shamanism vary as widely as the tribes that practiced them. Common to all was a concern with spirits or the "other world." The methods of shamanic practice served to provide experiences of a spirited world. Their aim was non-ordinary experience. In the time preceding the development of ancient Greek philosophy, mythological elaboration of shamanic rites evolved mystery religions, particularly around the figures of Orpheus and Dionysius.

Orpheus and Dionysius

Orpheus, musician, prophet, musician invented the Mysteries of Dionysus. Dionysian practice sought ecstasy from inebriation with wine, particularly at the decanting of the new wine. An important progression of Dionysian practice led ultimately to the great tragic plays. The term "tragedy" etymologically derives from *trageos* "goat skin." Another thread of Orphic

development led to Pythagoras and subsequently to Plato, who considered himself a Pythagorean.

Both Orpheus and Dionysius were distinguished by having descended into Hades and returned. Orpheus, however, failed to bring back his own wife from Hades after she died from a snake bite, because he made the mistake of looking back while leading her out. He subsequently would have nothing to do with women, although he revered Persephone, because she had escaped from Hades. She, too, had made a mistake by eating some pomegranate seeds while in Hades and consequently had to return there every winter. She and her mother Demeter were central to the Eleusinian mysteries. Orpheus died when his music so excited Thracian women celebrating Dionysius that they tore him to pieces in their ecstasy.

Two essential characteristics of Greek Mysteries

Two important aspects of the Greek mysteries are significant for philosophy. First is ecstatic ritual involving an experience of death and rebirth, which promotes dramatic insight into the nature of things, seeing the world with new eyes. Second is the association of a way of life with the celebrants of the mysteries.

Eleusis

The rites at Eleusis may be the most significant Greek mystery. They lasted for two millennia, from the Mycenaean period until Constantine. Nilsson suggests they served “to elevate man above the human sphere into the divine and to assure his redemption by making him a god and so conferring immortality upon him.” (Nilsson, 1947, pp. 42-46) Sophocles, Plato, and Pindar were initiates, as were many others of the most notable Greeks. Pindar said,

Blessed is he who has seen these things
before he goeth beneath the earth;
for he understands the end of mortal life,
and the beginning (of a new life) given of God. (Fragment 102) (trans. Sandys, 1915, pp. 591-2)

Important Romans were initiates. Cicero lauded Eleusis:

...beloved Athens has brought to birth, and contributed to human life, many outstanding and divine creations, and nothing better than those mysteries. Thanks to them we have become mild and cultivated, moving from a rough and savage life to a state of civilization; we have learned from so-called ‘initiations’ things which are in fact the first principles of life, and we have been taught a way of living happily and also of dying with brighter hopes. (Laws, Book Two, 36)

After the Sarmatians sacked the Temple of Demeter In 170 AD, Marcus Aurelius rebuilt it and was the first person outside the priesthood allowed to enter the temple’s most sacred precinct. Julian, who was the last pagan emperor of Rome, was also the last Roman emperor initiated.

Ancient Philosophers

Pythagoras

Pythagoras's mysticism and his insight into the nature of the octave suggest that music may have been part of Pythagorean way of life. That would be a consistent derivation from Orphic rites. Peter Kingsley (Kingsley, 1997) supports this suggestion by tracing Pythagorean music and Empedocles's hymns down to southern Egypt, and to the Sufi practice of music and dance for achieving mystical ecstasy. Kingsley also remarks on the common Orphic themes of death and rebirth for the Pythagoreans and Empedocles.

Plato

Plato's initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries testifies to direct, ecstatic experience as an essential complement and purpose of the intense mental focus that yields his intellectual endeavor. The power and range of that work gives Whitehead to say that the best generalization of subsequent Western philosophy is as series of footnotes to Plato. Plato in my experience is not always taught with comprehending sympathy for his concern for direct, ecstatic experience.

Phaedrus

In *Phaedrus* he describes it as a "madness that is heaven sent." (244b) It is an attainment of the highest mental effort at the extreme of the soul's toil and struggle. "It is there that true being dwells, without color or shape, that cannot be touched; reason alone, the soul's pilot, can behold it, and all true knowledge is knowledge thereof." (247c) (Hamilton & Cairns, 1961)

Symposium

In the *Symposium* Plato has Socrates describe clearly and in detail Diotima's method of meditation for attaining direct, ecstatic experience. It is a process that compares to the stepped mental training of Tibetan Buddhist monks. The method has seven steps:

1. Love one body.
2. Consider how related one body's beauty is to another's.
3. Love every lovely body but no particular one.
4. Grasp that bodily beauty is nothing compared to that of the soul.
5. Contemplate the beauty of laws and institutions.
6. Contemplate science—the beauty of every kind of knowledge.
7. Achieve the final revelation, where

There bursts upon [the candidate for initiation] that wondrous vision which is the very soul of the beauty he has toiled so long for. It is an everlasting loveliness which neither comes nor goes, which neither flowers nor fades, for such beauty is the same on every hand, the same then as now, here as there, this way as that way, the same to every worshiper as it is to every other.

Nor will his vision of the beautiful take the form of a face, or of hands, or of anything that is of the flesh. It will be neither words, nor knowledge, nor a something that exists in something else, such as a living creature, or the earth, or the heavens, or anything that is—but subsisting of itself and by itself in an eternal oneness. (210e-211b) (Hamilton & Cairns, 1961)

Letter VII

In his *Seventh Letter* Plato speaks to the ineffability of this final revelation:

I certainly have composed no work in regard to it, nor shall I ever do so in the future, for there is no way of putting it in words like other studies. Acquaintance with it rather must come after a long period of attendance on instruction..., and of close companionship, when, suddenly, like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark, it is generated in the soul and at once becomes self-sustaining. (341c-d) (Hamilton & Cairns, 1961)

Plotinus

Although the method of the *Symposium* has usually been approached intellectually by modern commentators, the ancients viewed it as a meditation practice. Porphyry testified that Plotinus used it that way for the effect Plato suggested: “by meditation and by the method that Plato teaches in the *Banquet* [*Symposium*]” Plotinus “lifted himself ... to the first and all-transcendent divinity.” (O’Brian, 1975, p. 16)

In Plotinus’s words:

Roused into myself from my body—outside everything else and inside myself—my gaze has met a beauty wondrous and great. At such moments I have been certain that mine was the better part, mine the best of lives lived to the fullest, mine identity with the divine. Fixed there firmly, poised above everything in the intellectual that is less than the highest, utter actuality was mine. (IV, 8) (O’Brian, 1975)

Porphyry not only affirms Plato’s method as a meditation practice, but he and Plotinus testify to its effectiveness.

Epicureanism and Stoicism

A recent compilation and translation of works by Pierre Hadot (Hadot, 1995) demonstrates the persistent importance of direct experience for philosophy through the Roman period and into the Middle Ages. Hadot laments that, “In general, historians of philosophy pay little attention to the fact that ancient philosophy was, first and foremost, a way of life.” (Hadot, 1995, p. 269)

For the Stoics and Epicureans direct experience was significantly realized in a way of life, without particular emphasis on ecstatic transcendence. The way of life, however, was based on spiritual practices that undertook transcendence of the ordinary world. The Stoics and Epicureans compare notably in this respect to Zen and similar Buddhist sects, in contrast to Tibetan Tantric Buddhists.

The Stoics ... declared explicitly that philosophy, for them, was an “exercise.” In their view, philosophy did not consist in teaching an abstract theory ... but rather in the art of living. It is a concrete attitude and determinate lifestyle, which engages the whole of existence. (Hadot, 1995, pp. 81-2)

Stoics and Epicureans, to the extent that they attended any intellectual philosophical activity, had different bases for their attitudes, but they entertained “the same awareness of the power or the human self to free itself from everything which is alien to it.” (Hadot, 1995, p. 266) This is an

attitude of transcendence quite like Zen. It is procured similarly by an absolute “concentration on the present moment,” as Marcus Aurelius invokes,

Everywhere and at all times, it is up to you to rejoice piously at what is occurring *at the present moment* to conduct yourself with justice towards the people who are *present here and now*, and to apply rules of discernment to your *present* representations, so that nothing slips in that is not objective. (Hadot, 1995, p. 84)

On the surface this seems terribly sober in contrast to Dionysian ecstasy, but it is simply the profoundest contrast of transcendence—the contrast of ever sober Socrates at the *Symposium* recounting to drinking friends Diotima’s steps to ecstasy.

In his own soberness Aurelius recounts an ecstatic vision:

The rational soul ... travels through the whole universe and the void that surrounds it ... it reaches out into the boundless extent of infinity, and it examines and contemplates the periodic rebirth of all things. (Hadot, 1995, p. 183)

Devolution to modern intellectual activity

Over time philosophy forsook the core experience that cultic ritual had evoked and focused instead on the sort of rational, intellectual endeavor that had been one result of the intense mental focus fostered by direct ecstatic experience. From providing service to medieval scholastic theology, philosophy devolved into its modern post Cartesian exercise.

The Middle Ages

With the advent of Medieval Scholasticism ... we find a clear distinction being drawn between *theologia* and *philosophia*. Theology became conscious of its autonomy *qua* supreme science, while philosophy was emptied of its spiritual exercises which, from now on, were relegated to Christian mysticism and ethics. Reduced to the rank of “a handmaid of theology,” philosophy’s role was henceforth to furnish theology with conceptual—and hence purely theoretical—material. When, in the modern age, philosophy regained its autonomy, it still retained many features inherited from this medieval conception. In particular, it maintained its purely theoretical character, which even evolved in the direction of a more and more thorough systematization. Not until Nietzsche, Bergson, and existentialism does philosophy consciously return to being a concrete attitude, a way of life and of seeing the world. (Hadot, 1995, pp. 107-8)

Descartes

Although Descartes’s central insight into the nature of things seems to have emerged while he was in a situation comparable to the isolation tank of late 20th century use, his intellectual explication of it laid the ground of the mind-body problem that has bred endless contention in modern philosophy.

Sensation vs. *physis*

The nature of experience is another major issue of modern philosophy, brought to the fore by the British empiricists. As a consequence of their fixation on what Whitehead terms perception in the mode of presentational immediacy, mainline modern philosophy has developed a concern for sense experience rather than ecstatic experience, for *aesthesis* rather than *physis*.

Experiential Illumination of Understanding

Philosophy is no longer a way of life that cultivates practice in service of the experiential illumination of understanding. The primary way of life for the modern philosopher is that of the professor. The professor has become more and more a specialist, and the province of the philosopher has shrunk to a smaller and smaller fraction of the academy.

Direct Experience

Philosophy on the scale that Whitehead engages it has become less and less fashionable, but it is Whitehead's expansive concern for experience, in contrast to the narrowness of Humean empiricism, or the attenuated intellectuality of Kant, that provides an opportunity to revive the ancient understanding of the importance for philosophy of the direct experience "that crowns the 'life and motion' of the soul." (Whitehead, 1933, p. 367) The eruption of existentialism out of the turmoil of 20th century Europe confronted the narrowness and attenuated intellectuality of academic philosophy, but it lacked a broad metaphysical perspective. Without metaphysics to give individual experience a context, philosophy falls short of realizing its ancient heritage.

Experience of the Whole

One hope for philosophy is that it might access its ancient experiential heritage to recapture something of the "old time religion," that primitive exercise Cornford disdains. Ironically, though he disdains "primary sympathetic magic," Cornford perfectly identifies its importance as availing "a real fact of human experience, namely the collective consciousness of a group in its active and emotional phase." (Cornford, 1957, p. 124) Is it beyond the pale to expect that someday the halls of an APA conference will be rocked by ecstatic dance?

Beyond Orthodoxy

Religion that could supply the experiential deficit of modern philosophy would have to broaden way beyond contemporary dogmatism and orthodoxy to comprehend the solitariness that constitutes "the heart of religious importance." (Whitehead, 1926, p. 9) The experience of that solitariness is paradoxically a fruit of the collective consciousness and needs collective support, lest it produce only martyrs.

Whitehead appeals to that collectivity at the close of his address to the Educational Section of the International Congress of Mathematicians, meeting at Cambridge, England in 1912 by claiming, "The essence of education is that it be religious," and explaining that

A religious education is an education which inculcates duty and reverence. Duty arises from our potential control over the course of events. Where attainable knowledge could have changed the issue, ignorance has the guilt of vice. And the foundation of reverence is this perception, that the present holds within itself the complete sum of existence, backwards and forwards that whole amplitude of time, which is eternity.” (Whitehead, 1929, p. 14)

Spiritual Technology

Today we can know philosophy not just as an intellectual endeavor, but as a legacy of Greek mysteries and spiritual practices. Modern anthropology reveals a variety of spiritual technologies practiced by tribes from around the world. We know also of ecstatic prayers, Sufi dance, Zen meditation, Kundalini yoga, and so on. By understanding its own spiritual origins philosophy might reinvigorate itself as well as revive mainstream religions that have lost the spark of spirit their forebears lit.

Critical to spiritual development in the world is the understanding that there are many potentially effective spiritual technologies. Equally critical is the understanding that no spiritual methodology is inherently privileged in respect to any other. The value of a methodology consists solely in its capacity to provoke transcendence and to foster a way of life that realizes that transcendence, rather than buttresses any orthodox canon.

We need new developments of spiritual technology that speak to us in ways that fit the patterns of modern behavior, but lift us beyond its constraints. It is not enough simply to practice rites from other cultures. Taken out of the context of their cultures they cannot support a way of life in the modern world. We need to find ways in which the mystical experience of totality can provide science and health and economic well-being not polluted with materialism and foster reverence for our tiny spaceship planet in its cosmic evolution toward the nousphere.

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