

Was Heidegger a Mystic?

Jeff Guilford

North Carolina State University

Faculty Mentor: Marina Bykova

North Carolina State University

ABSTRACT

The goal of Martin Heidegger's philosophy is to lead his readers to an experience of Being. Because Being is not conceived of as a thing, but as that which 'transcends' things, thinking and talking about it in traditional terms becomes impossible. Such a goal is strikingly similar to the goals of many of the world's most prominent mystical traditions, and prompts the question, was Heidegger a mystic? In this paper I seek to answer this question by comparing the ways in which Heidegger believes that an experience of Being may be attained to the ways that mystics from many cultures have gone about bringing themselves to an experience of the transcendent. After demonstrating the strong analogies between the methods of Heidegger and of the mystics, I conclude that Heidegger is indeed a mystic and that the experience that he hopes to help people attain is probably the same experience toward which the mystics have traditionally striven.

"There is a thinking more rigorous than the conceptual" ~Martin Heidegger

"The Tao is beyond is and is not. How do I know this? I look inside myself and see."
~Lao Tzu

Admittedly, grasping the objective of Heidegger's philosophical inquiries is not easy. When we are first approached by his question, "What is the meaning of Being," many of us smile at such a seemingly naïve question. "Being is obvious"; we laugh, perhaps pointing to a rock in order to prove our point. But according to Heidegger that rock, and indeed anything, is not Being, but a being (note the capitalization). Being is not a thing, but that which 'transcends' things, "the transcendent pure and simple" (Letter on Humanism, 251). Without Being, no thing could be. But in the very fact that being is not a thing, not an object, it becomes difficult to talk about, for the structure of language forces whatever we speak about into a state of objectivity. In the statement, the 'house is

not red,' the house is presented as an object that lacks the property of redness. Similarly, in the statement, 'Being is not a thing,' Being is presented as an object that lacks the property of thing-ness. But this is a misunderstanding, and we must learn to think differently if we want to understand and experience Being. In short, this is the primary goal of all of Heidegger's philosophizing: He hopes to lead those who will listen to him into a new mode of thinking and speaking in which Being can be fully thought and clearly spoken, and thus truly experienced. Essential to this goal is his critique of metaphysics, which he claims has been mistaken in the West for thought itself ever since the time of Plato, and which he claims can deal only with beings and never with Being. In place of metaphysical thought he proposes a different way to approach Being. But Heidegger is not the first to abandon the metaphysical project and to pursue an underlying reality through alternative means. In fact such pursuit has existed for at least as long as metaphysics itself, and has been given the name of mysticism.

Like Heidegger, mystics reject metaphysical thought as an inadequate means by which the Absolute may be pursued, and seek different routes by which this pursuit may be carried out.

In this paper I will demonstrate that the affinity between Heidegger's philosophy and mystical thought is so deep and thoroughgoing that one may accurately label Heidegger's philosophy as mystical. At their hearts, both mysticism and Heidegger's philosophy have direct knowledge of an ultimate reality as their final goal, but since both Heidegger's Being and the mystic's Absolute are held to be ineffable and transcendent, and thus impossible to express in ordinary language, a direct comparison of these goals cannot be performed. Instead I will compare the ways in which Heidegger and the mystics claim that the Ultimate may be recognized and approached. Because there are so many striking analogies between the methods of Heidegger and those of the mystics, I will conclude that Heidegger's philosophy is in fact mystical, and that it is reasonable to think that the experience of Being to which Heidegger seeks to lead us, is essentially the same as the experience of the Absolute toward which the mystics of all cultures have persistently striven.

Before initiating this comparison though, we must take a moment to clarify what is meant by the word mysticism. Often in philosophical circles the word is used as an insult for a system that is deemed vague or overly sentimental. In this paper, however, such derogatory connotations are not intended, and indeed, for a system to garner the label of mystical is, if anything, to be considered an honor, for such a label would signify that system's participation in one of the oldest and most venerable of humanity's intellectual and spiritual traditions. Perhaps Heidegger himself might have objected to being labeled a mystic, but he certainly would not have taken offense at the

appellation, for he himself once said that "the most extreme sharpness and depth of thought belong to genuine and great mysticism" (Caputo, 6).

Still the question remains, what exactly is mysticism? Doubtlessly, giving a concise definition of this rich and multi-cultural phenomenon will result in over-generalization, but unfortunately the boundaries of this paper demand that we treat the subject briefly, and, therefore, I offer the definition that was put forth by a prominent expert on the subject, Evelyn Underhill, who says that "what the world calls 'mysticism' is the science of ultimates... The science of self-evident Reality, which cannot be reasoned about'..." (25). A mystic is one who yearns for firsthand knowledge of that which is Ultimate, but one who recognizes that this Ultimate may not come to be known through the use of the intellect alone. Rational thought is, as a general rule, seen by the mystics as an inadequate guide to the spirit, and so they employ other types of mental activity in order to approach the elusive Absolute. Every culture has its share of mystics, and though the names given to the Ultimate and the means by which it is sought vary, the core of each tradition remains true to Underhill's definition. Vedanta Yogis seek Moksha (the realization of the soul's oneness with Brahman) through ascetic and meditative practices; Zen Buddhists seek to attain Satori (cosmic consciousness) through strict meditation in which dualistic thought is willfully eliminated from the practitioner's mind; Sufis seek to experience the "transport of the soul" (direct experience of the divine) through lives of solitude, poverty and piety, which are intended to "[detach] the heart from all that is not God" (James, 455); and Catholic saints, seek the Unio Mystico (unification of the soul with God) through prayer, contemplation, and fasting. These are only a few of the most well-known branches of mysticism, but the list could be

extended indefinitely. The question now is whether Heideggerians, whose seek to experience the Truth of Being through “meditative thought”, disentanglement from the world of things, and distinction from *das man*, also participate in the mystical tradition (Discourse on Thinking, 46). A more detailed comparison of Heideggerian and mystical thought should yield our answer.

The first strong analogy that exists between the mystical quest for the Ultimate and the Heideggerian quest for Being is that even before a true understanding and experience of the Transcendent is attained, it may be sensed in a preliminary, partial way. It is this initial “taste” of the Transcendent that motivates the subsequent, ardent, often life changing search for total attainment of it. In the mystical tradition and in Heidegger’s thought there are two ranks of these preliminary experiences of the Ultimate, a lesser one, which is mild but commonly experienced, and a greater one, through which the person’s entire perception of the world is transformed and a strong desire for an even more complete experience is kindled.

In her general study of mysticism, Evelyn Underhill calls “the power to perceive the transcendent Reality” “a power latent within the whole [human] race” and says that “few people pass through life without knowing what it is to be touched by the mystical feeling” (Underhill, 73). Be it triggered by the sight of the sun on distant mountain peaks, the sound of a symphony, the embrace of a long missed loved one, or the sight of a suffering beggar, this “transcendental feeling wells up from another part of the soul and whispers to Understanding and Sense that they are leaving something out” (74). But though this feeling is familiar to many, the mystics are distinguished from the common folk by their exceptional attunement to it. While for the common person this feeling may be momentarily edifying, it remains at most a

supplement to a life otherwise centered in the natural world. For the mystic, on the other hand, the experience of this feeling is so intense that when it occurs it initiates a total reorganization of her world view and a reorientation of her priorities around the transcendental Reality that the experience reveals to her. Underhill calls this acute experience awakening, and says that this is almost always the catalyst of the mystic’s journey from “things of the flesh ... to things of the spirit”. She describes it in the following way:

The awakening usually involves a sudden and acute realization of the splendor and adorable Reality of the world—or sometimes of its obverse, the Divine sorrow at the heart of things—never before perceived. Insofar as I am acquainted with the resources of language, there are no words in which this realization can be described¹. It is so of so actual a nature that the normal world of past perception seems but will at best. Consciousness has suddenly changed its rhythm and a new aspect of consciousness rushes in. The teasing mists are swept away and reveal the sharp outline of the Everlasting Hills (178).

This quote highlights three essential aspects of the awakening experience: it is sudden and powerful; it leads to a detachment from worldly concerns; and motivates an intense drive toward further knowledge of that which has been revealed in the experience. It is important to remember that while the awakening experience is often described as joyous and liberating, it can also be a fearful and sorrowful realization. Two examples, one joyous, one anguished, will serve to illustrate this phenomenon. The first is that of a little known monk named Brother Lawrence, who reported that in his youth, as he was “seeing a tree stripped

1 Heidegger’s anxiety also is a phenomenon that occurs beyond the realm of language. He says that “Anxiety robs us of speech. Because beings as a whole slip away, so that just the nothing crowds around, in the face of anxiety all utterance of the ‘is’ falls silent” (What is Metaphysics? 103).

of its leaves and considering that within a little time the leaves would be renewed ... he received a view of that Providence and Power of God, which [had] never since been effaced from his soul" and that "this view had set him perfectly loose from the world..." (190-191). The second is that of St. Catherine of Genoa, whose "inward revelation" was characterized by ... "its anguish and abruptness, its rending apart of the hard tissues of I-hood and the vivid disclosures of the poverty of the finite self." Catherine herself describes this experience as the "wound of Unmeasured Love" (196). An additional example of an awakening experience from a nonwestern source is that of The Buddha, who after seeing earthly manifestations of age, sickness and death, realized the ephemeral nature of worldly pleasures and gave up his luxurious life as a prince to practice asceticism in the forests of India. These three examples show that the awakening experience is triggered suddenly, can be either rapturous or unpleasant, and leads one away from material, worldly pursuits, toward spiritual work.

Heidegger also describes two levels of experience in which Being itself may be revealed, which can be seen to be highly analogous to the awakening experiences described by Underhill. Of the lesser, more common experience he says that an "average and vague understanding of Being is a fact" and defines Da-sein² as the being that has "a relation to the question of Being itself" (Being & Time, 5). Elsewhere he says that care, which is an essential

characteristic of Da-sein, tends nowhere else but "in the direction of bringing man back to his essence" and this essence is called "the ecstatic inherence of the Truth of Being" (Letter on Humanism, 245) So, for Heidegger, every human being has an instinctual notion of Being and a drive to experience the Truth of Being, i.e., to grasp "the transcendens pure and simple" (Letter on Humanism, 251). This is strongly analogous to Underhill's observation that humanity has an instinctual attraction toward the Ultimate.

Heidegger also speaks of a greater type of preliminary transcendental experience, calling it "original anxiety" which "reveals the nothing" lying 'within' all inner-worldly beings (What is Metaphysics, 103). This type of experience can be seen to be strongly analogous to the experience of awakening as described by Underhill, and could be considered an example of it. Like awakenings, original anxiety is a sudden, often unexpected occurrence, which causes a withdrawal from worldly things and often results in the long term rearrangement of a person's activity toward transcendental goals. Original anxiety, he says, "Can awaken in existence at any moment [and] needs no unusual event to arouse it" (108). During this experience beings "become wholly superfluous", "slip away" and "pure Da-sein is all that is there"³ (103). During such an experience there is only there-being. It is precisely during this sudden and unsettling occurrence, when beings slip away, that Da-sein awakens to a new understanding of reality and of its potentialities within it. "In the Clear night of the nothing of anxiety", for the first time, Da-sein

2 Da-sein is an important, but confusing term in Heidegger's philosophy. It literally translates to here-being or there-being, and he believes that Da-sein is the essence of a human being. What is special about humans is that they are capable of being here, in a situation, in relation to other things. He also believes that Da-sein stands in relation to Being itself, but that this relation is usually veiled by our everyday mode of relating to things in the world.

3 Similarly to St. Catherine's experience, the experience of pure anxiety undoes "I-hood," for as Heidegger says, "we ourselves ... slip away from ourselves. At bottom therefore it is not as though 'You' or 'I' feel ill at ease; rather it is this way for some 'one'" (What is Metaphysics? 103).

experiences beings as they really are, as things that are distinct from the nothingness that it has just witnessed. Additionally it reveals to Da-sein that it itself is not a mere being, but is instead a transcendence of beings in that it is a “being held out into nothingness,” or, as Heidegger puts it in a later work, “a standing out in the clearing of Being” (What is Metaphysics, 105; Letter on Humanism, 248). Thus it is only through original anxiety that man can realize Being for the first time, realize his “ensnarement” among beings and his “forgetfulness of Being”, and then to begin to take up an “authentic” relation to Being itself. From all this, it should be clear that what Heidegger calls original anxiety can accurately be labeled as an awakening experience as described by Underhill: it is a sudden acute experience; it reveals the relative unreality of worldly beings; and opens one to a transcendent reality, often motivating one to attempt to relate oneself to this reality more fully.

This leads us to our next point of analogy between Heideggerian and mystical thought. In both types of thinking the transcendent reality that the awakening reveals is understood as being unattainable by means of traditional rational or metaphysical thought, because it is beyond any relational concept which such thought may seek to enclose it within. Underhill says that:

The mystics find the basis of their method not in logic but in life: in the existence of a discoverable ‘real’ spark of true being within these seeking subjects, which can in that ineffable experience which they call the ‘act of union’ fuse itself with, and thus apprehend, the reality of the sought Object. . . In mysticism that love of truth which was the beginning of all philosophy leaves them merely intellectual spheres and takes on the assured aspect of a personal passion. Where the philosopher guesses and argues, the mystic looks and lives. . . Hence, whilst the Absolute of the metaphysician remains a diagram—impersonal and unattainable—the

Absolute of the mystic is lovable, attainable and real (Mysticism, 24).

In a similar tone, appealing to philosophers on behalf of all mystics, Coventry Patmore says:

Leave your deep and absurd trust in the senses, with their language of dot and dash, which may possibly report fact but can never communicate personality. If philosophy has taught you anything it has taught you the length of its tether, and the impossibility of attaining to the doubtless admirable grazing land which lies beyond it. One after another, idealists have arisen who, straining frantically at the rope, have announced to the world their approaching liberty; only to be flung back at last into the world of sensation. . . Philosophy tells you that it is founded on nothing better than sensation and the traditional concepts of the race. Certainly it is imperfect, probably an illusion; in any event, it never touches the foundation of things (Mysticism, 24-25).

Mystics from every tradition can be seen to be in agreement with the two above quotes, and acknowledge the impotence of conceptual thought in bringing the individual into contact with the Ultimate. The Sufi writer Al-Ghazali says:

I recognized that what pertained most exclusively to the Sufi’s method is just what study cannot grasp, but only transport, ecstasy and the transformation of the soul. . . Just as the understanding is a stage in human life in which the eye opens to discern various intellectual objects uncomprehended by sensation; just so in the prophetic the sight is illumined by a light which uncovers hidden things and objects which the intellect fails to reach (The Variety of Religious Experiences, 439-441).

The Neoplatonic philosopher Plotinus agrees, saying: “In seeing God, what sees is not our reason, but something prior to and superior to our reason” (458). St. John of the Cross does also: “We receive the mystical knowledge of God clothed in none of the kinds of images, in none of the sensible representations, of which our mind makes use in other circumstances” (444). As does Lao Tzu: “The Tao is ungraspable/ How

can [the master] be at one with it? Because she does not cling to ideas," and "My teachings are easy to understand ... yet your intellect will never grasp them" (Tao Te Ching, 21, 70)⁴. This list could be extended indefinitely, for the Mystics are nearly unanimous in their decision against the path of reason as one that can possibly lead to the summit of the Holy Mountain.

In a similar manner, Heidegger comes to denounce representational and metaphysical thought as wholly incapable of leading man to an experience of Being. This attitude is perhaps most clearly seen in Heidegger's condemnation in his later works of his early work *Being and Time*, in which he sought to lead readers into an understanding of Being. In this work, Heidegger sought to remain within the "language of metaphysics," in order to "make the attempt at thinking recognizable and at the same time understandable for existing philosophy..." (Letter on Humanism, 246, 263). But he later acknowledges that such language "falsifies itself" and fails because it "does not think the truth of Being and so fails to recognize that there is a thinking more rigorous than the conceptual (263)". In his later works he recognizes the inadequacies of traditional philosophical thought which leads to his saying: "philosophy ... always follows the course of metaphysical representation; it thinks from beings back toward Being," which "means that the truth of Being ... remains

concealed from metaphysics" (248). This realization in turn leads him to conclude that "in order to learn how to experience the ... essence of thinking purely ... we must free ourselves from the technical interpretation of thinking" (238). What new type of thinking must replace the technical in order that the truth of Being may be thought will be discussed in the subsequent paragraphs, but what should be noted now is that the transcendental experience that Heidegger seeks to lead us toward is ungraspable by conceptual thought, just as the mystic's Absolute is ungraspable.

Now the question arises, how should one go about seeking and attaining the Transcendent if not by means of traditional philosophical inquiry? Both Heidegger and the mystics propose similar answers to this question: entering into a meditative mental state in which the dualistic judgments of reason are muted and openness to the Transcendent is cultivated. Underhill calls this state "contemplation," and labels it "the education which tradition has ever prescribed for the mystic..." (Mysticism, 302). She describes this as a "humble receptiveness, [a] still and steady gazing, in which emotion, thought and will are lost and fused ... [in which occurs a] breaking down of the surface-self and those deeper levels of personality where God is met and known 'in our nothingness'..." (304)⁵. The revelation of the Ultimate through this state of receptiveness is central to all mystical traditions. St. Theresa reports such a revelation saying "One day, being in orison, it was granted to me to perceive in one instant how all things are contained in God..." (Varieties of

4 Another relevant passage: "Above it isn't bright/ Below it is not dark/ Seamless, unnamable/ It returns to the realm of nothing/Form that includes all form/ image without an image/ subtle beyond all conception/ Approach it and there is no beginning/ follow it and there is no end/ You can't know it, but you can be it/ at ease in your own life/ just realize where you come from/ This is the essence of wisdom" (Tao Te Ching, 14). It should be known that Heidegger was extremely interested in Taoist thought and at one point even attempted to translate the work into German, but abandoned the project having only completed the first 8 chapters. This fact helps to explain the striking affinities that exist between Heidegger's later thought and Taoism.

5 An additional aspect of contemplation that Underhill notes is that it requires practice. "In its early stages," she says, "contemplation is voluntary, deliberate and difficult" (Mysticism, 302). Similarly Heidegger says that meditative thought, "does not just happen by itself any more than does calculative thought. At times it requires a greater effort. It demands more practice" (Discourse on Thought, 47).

Religious Experience, 448), and St. John of the Cross confesses similarly "that a single hour of meditation had taught him more about heavenly things than all the teachings of the doctors..." (447). Al-Ghazzali describes a similar process, saying, "The first condition for a Sufi is to purge his heart entirely of all that is not God. The next key of the contemplative life consists in humble prayers which escape from the fervent soul, and in meditations on God in which the heart is swallowed up entirely" (440). An additional similar state is clearly recommended by Lao Tzu when he asks, "can you coax your mind from its wandering, and keep to the original oneness... can you step back from your own mind and thus understand all things," and again when he asks, "Do you have the patience to wait till the mud settles and the water is clear" (Tao Te Ching, 10, 15). In all these varied instances of contemplation, the operations of the ordinary mind are suppressed, in order to create an openness to a greater reality which the ordinary mind cannot perceive.

In order to experience Being, Heidegger prescribes the same sort of mental exercise, which he sometimes calls meditative thought, in contrast to calculative thought. Whereas calculative thought "computes ever new, ever more promising... possibilities... races from one prospect to the next... [and] never stops, never collects itself," meditative thought, "contemplates the meaning which reigns in everything that is" (Discourse on Thinking, 46). This form of thought, he says, need not be "high-flown," but can consist simply in "dwell[ing] on what lies close to us and meditate[ing] on what is closest..." (47). Elsewhere, Heidegger says of the kind of thought that allows for the entering into the Truth of Being, that "because there is something simple to be thought in this thinking it seems quite difficult to the representational thought that has been transmitted as philosophy, but this difficulty is not a matter

of indulging is a special sort of profundity and of building complicated concepts; rather, it is concealed in the step back that lets thinking enter into a questioning that experiences..." (Letter on Humanism, 255). In yet another work, Heidegger describes the kind of thought which alone allows access to Being, as a kind of will-less waiting, or as he says, a kind of "releasement," and says that only through this kind of thought can that-which-regions⁶ be experienced (Discourse on Thought, 62, 66). It should be clear from these few descriptions that the kind of thought that Heidegger proposes to be the means by which Being can be experienced is very similar to the contemplative method of the mystic.

Let us now look back upon what has been established. Three essential aspects of mysticism are, a sudden awakening to the Transcendent in which worldly beings fall away, the acknowledgement that logical thought is incapable of bringing about a full experience of this Transcendent, and the prescription of a non-conceptual type of mental activity, which stresses receptivity, as a means by which the Transcendent can be attained. Heidegger's thought can be seen to be strongly analogous to mysticism on all three points: he speaks of original anxiety as the experience by which *dasein* is revealed to itself in its transcendence; he condemns representational, metaphysical thought as capable only of thinking of beings, never of Being, and he proposes meditative openness and dwelling-with as a means by which Being itself can be experienced. From these strong analogies we can conclude that the transcendental experiences, which both mystical and Heideggerian thought seek to approach,

6 In Heidegger's later thought this term, "that which regions," seems to have replaced the idea of the "clearing of being" but functions similarly to it. So to experience purely that-which-regions can be identified with the old goal of experiencing Being.

are probably identical. Though there are surface differences between Heidegger's thought and the various forms of mysticism, there are similar surface differences between all the other forms of mysticism as well⁷. And though Zen's Satori and Christianity's Unio Mystico are described in totally different terms, the means by which they are attained are essentially the same,

and, therefore, we may conclude that these experiences are of essential equivalence as well. I have shown the method by which Heidegger seeks to experience the truth of Being to be essentially the same as the method by which the mystics seek to experience the Ultimate, and therefore we are justified in concluding that the two experiences are probably one and the same.

7 One important disanalogy between Heidegger and mysticism that deserves further study is that while all mystics affirm that the Ultimate is absolutely ineffable, one of Heidegger's main goals is to bring the Truth of Being to language. Does this mean that Heidegger's goal is different than the mystics? Possibly, but I rather think that it is simply a reflection on the fact that Heidegger seeks to restructure language so that it can speak the truth of being, which is simply a task that no mystic has ever thought to take upon himself. In terms of ordinary language both are in agreement, that such talk never touches upon the Absolute.

WORKS CITED

Caputo, John D. *The Mystical Elements of Heidegger's Thought*. New York: Fordham University Press. 1986.

Heidegger, Martin. (1926). *Being and Time*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh. New York: State University of New York Press. 1996.

Heidegger, Martin. "What is Metaphysics?" *Basic Writing: from Being and Time to The Task of Thinking*. Krell, David Farrell. New York: Harper & Row Publishers. 1977.

Heidegger, Martin. "Letter on Humanism." *Basic Writing: from Being and Time to The Task of Thinking*. Krell, David Farrell. New York: Harper & Row Publishers. 1977.

Heidegger, Martin. *Discourse on Thought*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers. 1966.

James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. New York: Modern Library. 1902.

Lao Tzu. *Tao Te Ching*. Translated by Stephan Mitchell. Perennial Classics. 1988.

Underhill, Evelyn. *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications. 1911.