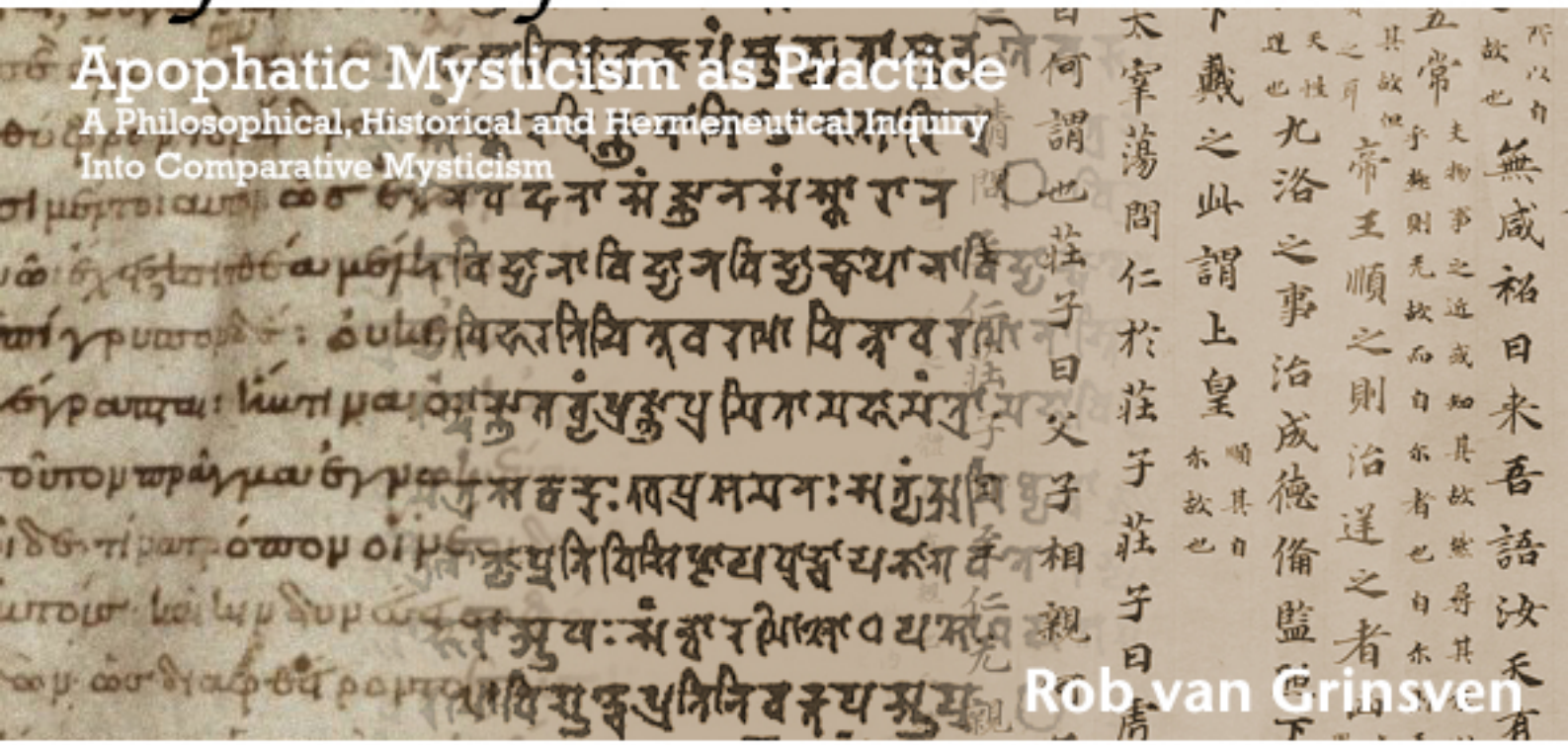
Beyond Rafts & Ladders



Apophatic Mysticism as Practice

A Philosophical, Historical and Hermeneutical Inquiry Into Comparative Mysticism

Rob van Grinsven

Beyond Rafts & Ladders

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BEYOND RAFTS AND LADDERS

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R.v.G.

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Preface

While doing my philosophy undergrad I was struck by the fact that the truly important questions that seemed once to have been so central to philosophy were no longer being raised, let alone answered. Although I learned many intellectual skills, at an existential level I did not feel satisfied with the study. As a result of looking 'elsewhere' an interest for Asian philosophy started to emerge. I began practicing meditation in a local zen community and as I read the texts of zen for the first time I was struck by the directness and depth of those words on paper. I began deepening my knowledge of zen and, on a broader scale, of so-called *negative* or *apophatic* currents from both eastern and western traditions. However, it was not until I started intensive meditation retreats that I began to 'understand' what this 'zen' was all about.

On September third 2012 I set foot in the Japanese monastery *Sogen-ji* in the Okayama prefecture. For one and a half years I worked, lived and meditated there. On an average of six hours meditation per day, and on intensive weeks (each month) thirteen hours for seven days straight, I got what I wanted. It goes without saying that it was an intense and important period in my life. It also re-ignited my curiousity in (the origin of) western philosophy. I started to read the classics, and especially those authors with 'mystical' tendencies like Plato, Plotinus, Boethius, Augustine, etc.

When I returned from Japan I discovered that the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen had a specialized master program focusing on mystical, esoteric and gnostic currents. It was here that I deepened my knowledge of the field of comparative mysticism. This thesis is the result of that study. It is essentially the reflection of over four years of engagement with different mystical traditions, both in practice as well as in research.

I have shown you how the Dhamma is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping.[1]
—Gautama Buddha, *Majjhima Nikāya*

It is not impossible for the man who has ascended to a high place by a ladder to overturn the ladder with his foot after ascent.[2]
—Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Logicos*

Introduction

For a long time the debate within the field of comparative mysticism has been centering around the opposition between perennialism and contextualism.[3] Perennialists claim that all mystical experiences have the same core. Contextualists, on the other hand, claim that all mystical experiences are formed by their context and thus deny such a core. The more the discussion progressed, the more the mystics and the mystical texts themselves ended up marginalized.[4] Of course scholars still quoted original sources but most of the discussion had become a philosophical one regarding arguments of the possibility of 'pure experience' or the necessity of the continuous influence of 'conceptual schemes'. Eventually the debate stalled epistemologically unsettled with both 'camps' continuing doing research from their own preferred presupposition, although one can say the contextualist perspective became the most dominant one.

A decade or so we saw relatively little development in the debate, but starting from the beginning of the millenium some new perspectives began to appear of which the most interesting one definitely is the revaluation of emic epistemological

[1] *MN* 22.13-14. Bhikku Ñāṇamoli & Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.), *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya. Translated from the Pāli.* 1995. 4th Ed. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2009, p. 229.
[2] Sextus Empiricus, *Adv. Log.* II.481. R.G. Bury (trans.), *Against the Logicians.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935, p. 489.
[3] See for a recent discussion: Randolph T. Dible II, "The Philosophy of Mysticism: Perennialism and Constructivism" *Journal of Consciousness Exploration & Research* 1, no. 2 (2010): pp. 173-174.
[4] See for an implicit critique of this development Donald Evans discussion "Can Philosophers Limit What Mystics Can Do? A Critique of Steven Katz" Religious Studies 25, no. 1 (1989): pp. 53-60.

perspectives given by Jacob Sherman and especially Jorge Ferrer.[5] This perspective "argues for an *enactive* understanding of the scared, seeking to approach religious phenomena, experiences, and insights as cocreated events."[6] I agree with both authors in so far as I too will advance an argument for approaching mysticism *as practice*.

In this thesis I will focus on mystics who advocate a so-called *apophatic* technique, i.e. a method of negation more commonly known in western traditions as the *via negativa* or *via negationis*. It is a method that deconstructs or removes inner 'obstacles' that prevent one from having a direct insight of 'the absolute/divine/etc.'[7] (At this point this is still somewhat broadly defined, but I will discuss it more fully in the first chapter.) In rise of a contextualist critique, however, authors like Steven T. Katz argue that the *via negativa* is in fact

> *not* an *un*conditioning or *de*conditioning of consciousness, but rather it is a *re*conditioning of consciousness, i.e. a substituting of one form of conditioned and/or contextual consciousness for another, albeit a new, unusual, and perhaps altogether more interesting form of conditioned-contextual consciousness.[8]

The core question of this research centers around this claim. Is 'to build something' the same as 'to break it down'? Is to construct the same as to deconstruct? Is the operation of adding the same as subtracting? Is affirmation the same as negation? In short, is the mystical technique of apophatism indeed not a deconditioning of consciousness but rather a case of implementing another form of consciousness as Katz claims?

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[5] E.g. Jorge N. Ferrer, *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory: A Participatory Vision of Human Spirituality.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002; Jorge N. Ferrer & Jacob H. Sherman (eds.), *The Participatory Turn: Spirituality, Mysticism, Religious Studies.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008. The introductory chapter to this bundle gives a very good overview of the historical developments in philosophy and religious studies for comparative mysticism.

[6] Ferrer & Sherman, "Introduction", *Participatory Turn*, p. 34.

[7] I will not capitalize words like 'christianity', 'islam', 'gnostic' or 'mohism' etc. because I believe that like 'philosophy', 'ethics', 'atheism' or 'mathematics' they do not belong to a special category that justifies capitalization. I will also not capitalize currents like 'kantian' or 'neoplatonism' for the same reason. Nor will I capitalize concepts like 'nirvāṇa', 'ego', 'god', 'brahman', etc. Sometimes, for instance in referring to the neoplatonic One or Absolute, or when in gnostic texts abstracts are used as name (e.g. the Self-Generated as translation of Autogenes), I will use capitalization because the meaning may otherwise become unclear. In general I will only capitalize names of persons (when used as a name, not as a school of thought), countries, titles (of books or paragraphs). I do not think, however, that these capitalizations are justified for much the same reason (neither is the capitalization of 'I'), but I conform to convention in this regard to keep the text readable.

[8] Steven T. Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism" In Steven T. Katz (ed.), *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis.* London: Sheldon Press, 1978, p. 57.

A Structure in Two Parts

I will investigate this question in two parts. In the first somewhat deductively structured (top down) part,[9] I will engage with a broader range of discussions which have implications for the study of comparative mysticism in general.

In the first chapter I will investigate the most essential terms of our subject. What is 'apophatism'? How does it relate to its opposite 'cataphatism'? What do we understand by 'mysticism'? How does it relate to 'experience' and 'mystical experience' in particular? And how does this relate to the notion of 'consciousness'?

In the second chapter I will place the discussion of comparative mysticism in a broader perspective. Firstly I will look at presuppositions regarding the method of 'comparison'. What actually is comparative research? What are 'different' or 'similar' 'conceptual frameworks'? How can we compare them? And what *are* we comparing? Are these different traditions not *incommensurable* to begin with? And what about the problem of translation or subjective biases of cultural upbringing?

I will propose to look at apophatism through the lens of pyrrhonian scepticism. I have chosen to do so for three reasons: (i) What we understand scepticism to be nowadays is coloured by a modern interpretation. I will show that *originally* scepticism (a version of which we would now refer to as pyrrhonian scepticism) was not just about negation but it was a method or tool in much the same way as the practice of the *via negativa*. (ii) Pyrrhonian scepticism, like many apophatically inclined mystical traditions, observes the limits of language. The way it uses language as a method against itself is illustrative of some of the more recent discussions in philosophy of language and logics and can therefore help to place the comparative mysticism debate in a larger context. (iii) The point of this critique on language is to deconstruct rational argument, not out of some kind of nihilist arrogance, but by thereby evoking a tranquillity of mind. In the same way as the stoics argued (and Plato for that matter), pyrrhonism tries to separate experience and our opinion about it. Subjective experience being probably the most uncontested element central to the different

[9] Of course in methodological terms pure 'deduction' or pure 'induction' never really takes place. It is always a back-and-forth of both inductive and deductive reasoning: generating themes on the basis of sources and validating/verifying those themes by again looking at the sources. In fact, the centrality of Sextus Empiricus' pyrrhonian scepticism in this first part can actually be considered inductive. Furthermore, must of the first part, although deductively structured, is actually the result of an inductive engaging with these philosophical sources. The point is, however, to present a model in which we can better understand the central issues of apophatic mysticism and for this reason we can call it deductive.

mystical traditions, is therefore the third reason why I believe engaging with pyrrhonism helps us to better understand apophatism.

To recapitulate: the first part will start with the perennialist-contextualist debate in comparative mysticism but I will then place this discussion in a larger historical frame of philosophical debates. By subsequently looking at how pyrrhonism already addresses the 'problem of nihilism/scepticism' I try to argue how apophatism is actually an approach which is very similar to it (or in my view an instance of it). The point of this chapter is essentially philosophical and theoretical. I will set out the parameters of the discussion.

The second inductively structured (bottom-up) part[10] is more historical and hermeneutical. I will reintegrate the discussion of the first part with a focus on apophatic mystical texts themselves. As claimed earlier primary mystical sources have in my view become marginalized. I will therefore present an in-depth reading and representation of some mystical sources. I have chosen to quote extensively in order to show the way these different texts 'speak' of their themes. Of course I am aware that in the end it is still my selection and, to some degree, my interpretation. The most important thing to remember, however, is that my purpose is to give the mystical texts a more central position.

To limit the field of research, I focused only on those mystical strands in 'western' and 'eastern' thought that have apophatic, negative, tendencies. It did cross my mind to focus only on the 'west' *or* the 'east', but in the end I dropped this option because the discussion within comparative mysticism spans both fields. To neglect one of them is to severely limit the range of conclusions I could reach, and it furthermore would not be representative of the discussion within the field of comparative mysticism itself. Neither did I want to limit myself to just one author or one text from a single tradition, because it might result in losing sight of the bigger picture. Since it is *exactly* this bigger picture that I address in the first part, it needs to be accompanied by substantial data in the second.

I selected six bodies of texts and divided them somewhat traditionally as 'west' ('gnostic', 'neoplatonic', 'christian') and 'east' ('mahāyāna buddhist', 'daoist', 'chán') in order to first compare them to their geographically and historically related counterparts, and secondly to compare both of them with each other thereby going

[10] Idem.

beyond those geographical boundaries. This also requires an explanation of the historical background of how these texts and traditions developed. In a short historical sketch, the last chapter of the first part, I especially focus on historical arguments of supposed 'contact'. I will also address the nature of 'similarities' in this discussion, and how we can understand them.

Although the categories of 'west' and 'east' are mostly flawed—as will be discussed—they do justify a divide at certain moments in time when contact seemed to be (almost) nonexistent or at other times indirectly mediated by Persian, Muslim and other in-between empires. Because of this lack of contact in certain periods of history the comparison becomes more interesting. Like different schools of logic, atheist or materialist views, the apophatically inclined mystical traditions within the different regions developed to some extent in similar ways while not having any kind of actual historical relationship, let alone direct contact.

Mysticism as Practice

What became apparent during my research was that I had to approach these texts, and actually mysticism in general, as a (result of) *practice*. Many of the mystics are religious practitioners. Many of these texts consequently are instructions of and a guide to leading a 'mystical' life and in most cases even related to a monastic or sectarian context. The point has been made before but it cannot be repeated enough. Although many mystics emphasize the need to practice and not only to intellectualize, Frits Staal already observed in 1975 that

> students of mysticism have, in their field, left all such things undone. Content with mere speculation and talking, they have not even considered the possibility of travelling themselves that part of the road that appears to be within reach – even though the road may not be very well paved.[11]

Apophatic mysticism consequently needs to be viewed as a *practice of negation*. It is not just a theoretical discourse on the impossibility of describing the divine/absolute/sacred/etc. This becomes especially clear in those texts which even deny the method of denying, since denial itself can become something which one uses to 'grasp' instead of 'letting go'. Although personal practice cannot, or can only to a limited extent, be

[11] Johan F. Staal. *Exploring Mysticism.* London: Cox & Wyman, 1975, pp. 128-129.

part of scholarly research, it can indeed be—and if we would follow the instructions of the mystics, *should* be—of indispensable importance in the study and interpretation of these texts themselves. I therefore agree with Ferrer and Sherman that we need to critically rethink the dichotomies of etic/emic, outsider/insider, academic/ practitioner etc.[12] This however, will not be something I will engage in within this thesis.

The quotations at the beginning of this introduction are also the source for the title of this work. Like the ladder in the metaphor by Sextus,[13] and the raft in the metaphor of the Buddha, the technique of sceptism needs itself to be left behind once its purpose is fulfilled. The point therefore is not so much to *end* the discussion, but *to go beyond* it.

[12] Ferrer & Sherman, "Introduction", *The Participatory Turn*, pp. 9-10.
[13] Which is probably more famously known in Wittgenstein's version from the *Tractatus*.

Part I

Setting Out the Parameters

On the key terms, the central debate and its relation to the broader context.

FEU.

«DIEU d'Abraham, DIEU d'Isaac, DIEU de Jacob»

non des philosophes et des savants.

Certitude. Certitude. Sentiment. Joie. Paix.

DIEU de Jésus-Christ.

Deum meum et Deum vestrum.

«Ton DIEU sera mon Dieu.»[14]

—Blaise Pascal, *Le Mémorial*

I. Comparative Mysticism

The debate in comparative mysticism can be analysed as operating between the discussion of *the myth of the given*[15] and *the myth of the framework*.[16] The myth of the given is Wilfrid Sellars' famous epistemological critique on the view that language, our concepts, derive their meaning from our experience. It is essentially a critique of a *correspondence theory of truth* (the notion that truth or falsity depends on language

[14] What has become known as "Le Mémorial de Pascal" is a scrap of paper which supposedly records Pascal's 'mystical' experience on one night in 1654. The paper was found in the lining of his coat after his death. I present here the complete text of "The Memorial" in the English translation by Elizabeth T. Knuth: "The year of grace 1654, / Monday, 23 November, feast of St. Clement, pope and martyr, and others in the martyrology. / Vigil of St. Chrysogonus, martyr, and others. / From about half past ten at night until about half past midnight, / FIRE. / GOD of Abraham, GOD of Isaac, GOD of Jacob / not of the philosophers and of the learned. / Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace. / GOD of Jesus Christ. / My God and your God. / Your GOD will be my God. / Forgetfulness of the world and of everything, except GOD. / He is only found by the ways taught in the Gospel. / Grandeur of the human soul. / Righteous Father, the world has not known you, but I have known you. / Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy. / I have departed from him: / They have forsaken me, the fount of living water. / My God, will you leave me? / Let me not be separated from him forever. / This is eternal life, that they know you, the one true God, and the one that you sent, Jesus Christ. / Jesus Christ. / Jesus Christ. / I left him; I fled him, renounced, crucified. / Let me never be separated from him. / He is only kept securely by the ways taught in the Gospel: / Renunciation, total and sweet. / Complete submission to Jesus Christ and to my director. / Eternally in joy for a day's exercise on the earth. / May I not forget your words. Amen." Blaise Pascal, "Le Mémorial de Pascal" Elizabeth T. Knuth (trans.), Rev. Olivier Joseph [2 August 1999], accessed 19 April 2016 http://www.users.csbsju.edu/~eknuth/pascal.html

[15] Wilfrid Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" In *Science, Perception and Reality.* 1963. Rev. ed. California: Ridgeview, 1991: pp. 127-196.

[16] Karl R. Popper, "The Myth of the Framework" In M.A. Notturno (ed.), *The Myth of the Framework: In Defence of Science and Rationality.* London: Routledge, 1994, pp. 33-64; framing the debate in these terms is done by Jorge N. Ferrer, *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory: A Participatory Vision of Human Spirituality*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2002, pp. 143-144.

accurately describing or corresponding with the world).[17] This would be in line with a contextualist approach as we shall see in the second chapter.

Karl Popper's myth of the framework is his critique on the position that conceptual frameworks are *incommensurable*; that these frameworks make us unable to communicate and that they in fact structure different 'subjective worlds' altogether. Popper argues, similar to Donald Davidson whose article I will also discuss in the second chapter,[18] that people with different frameworks *can* and *do* engage in dialogue and that actually *these* discussions are likely to be the must fruitful. Davidson argues, as we shall see, that there is a fundamental contradiction lying at the bottom of this position. Popper's critique is, by playing down the importance of the conceptual framework, more in line with perennialism. It is between these two positions that the field of comparative mysticism is operating. However, before I can discuss this debate in-depth, I first need to address key terms central to my research. I have been talking about 'mysticism', 'mystical experience', 'apophatism' and other terms; I believe that at this stage it is appropriate to discuss these essential terms.

1.1 Clarifying Key Terms

What do we understand exactly with 'apophatism' and its supposed opposite 'cataphatism'? Where do these terms originate? And how do they relate to each other? What is understood by 'mysticism'? Where does this term come from? What was it originally referring to? Does it have the same meaning in modern use? And how does it relate to the notion of 'mystical experience'? In this part I will argue that the notion of mystical experience is central to any definition of mysticism.[19] However, I will propose to reconceptualize it as *mystical consciousness* following terminology of Philip

[17] This 'picture theory of language' can already be found to a certain extent in Plato (mostly his *Cratylus*), but it has become most famous in Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), the 'Wiener Kreis' (Vienna circle), and the logical positivist current that, in the tradition of Auguste Comte and later the mathematicians/ logicians Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell and Rudolf Carnap, tried to find both the mathematical foundation in logic (e.g. Russell and Whitehead's *Principia Mathematica* (1910-1913)) as well as arguing for the logical structure of the world (e.g. Carnap's *Der logische Aufbau der Welt* (1928) which in argument is similar to passages of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*). In its most extreme form it states that words correspond one-on-one to reality. Next to Sellar's critique of 'the myth of the given', we can also think of Richard Rorty's formulation as the critique on the idea of language as a 'mirror of nature': *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature.* New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979.

[18] Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 47 (1973-1974): pp. 5-20.

[19] It will become clear that I do not agree with the critique that putting mystical experiences central in the study of mysticism is *only* the result of the construction of this subject by William James. Cf. Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and 'The Mystic East'.* London: Routledge, 1999, p. 161.

Merlan and, especially, an argument made by Bernard McGinn. Before I will analyse this term I will briefly discuss the origin and meaning of the words apophatic and cataphatic in relation to the practice of the four ways (*quattuor viae*).

1.1.1 Apophatism, Cataphatism and the Four Ways

The terminology of apophatic (negating) and cataphatic (affirming) as opposite pair comes from the neoplatonist Proclus.[20] Through his writings it became introduced into christian theology by the author who wrote around 500 CE under the pseudonym Dionysius the Areopagite (whom I will discuss in the second part of this thesis).[21] These two terms are intimately connected. Both Proclus and pseudo-Dionysius argue that although some words can describe better than others what the divine 'is', to say that words actually cannot express this, is to come *even closer* to the divine.[22]

Although the term originate with pseudo-Denys, these two 'models' of affirmation and negation of the divine can already be traced back to the Old Testament as well as classical Greek philosophy.[23] Indeed the method of negation can be traced all through philosophy.[24] To better understand this pair I will place it in relation to the distinction of the four ways, which eventualy became convention in medieval christianity. Alcinous (c. 2nd century CE) in the tenth chapter of his *Didaskalikos* famously wrote that there are different ways in which the highest principle can be approached according to Plato: by abstraction of attributes (i.e. by negation),[25] by analogy,[26] by ascending in degrees,[27] and in the 28th chapter he adds to these: by imitation.[28] They have become known as *via negativa* (also *via abstractiones*), *via analogiae*, *via eminentiae* and *via imitationis*. John Turner further differentiates the category of the *via negativa* by arguing that this process usually starts with a radical affirmation of transcendent principles (we could call it the *via affirmativa*) which then, combined with

[20] Andrew Louth, "Apophatic and Cataphatic Theology" In Amy Hollywood & Patricia Z. Beckman (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 139.
[21] Louth, "Apophatic and Cataphatic Theology", p. 137.
[22] Idem, p. 140.
[23] Idem, pp. 137-146.
[24] Richard T. Wallis, "The Spiritual Importance of Not Knowing" In Arthur H. Armstrong (ed.) *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality: Egyptian, Greek, Roman.* New York: Crossroad, 1986, pp. 460-480. See also: Raoul Mortley, *From Word to Silence. Vol. 1: The Rise and Fall of Logos.* & *Vol. 2: The Way of Negation Christian and Greek.* Bonn: Hanstein, 1986, which is the standard work on western apophatic traditions.
[25] Cf. Plato, *Parm.* 137c-166c; *Plato in Twelve Volumes,* Harold North Fowler et al. (trans.) Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1921-1969; see also: Eric R. Dodds, "The *Parmenides* of Plato and the Origin of the Neoplatonic 'One'" *Classical Quarterly* 22, no. 3-4 (1928): pp. 129-142.
[26] Cf. Plato, *Rep.* VI 508-509.
[27] Cf. Plato, *Symp.* 201d-212c.
[28] Cf. Plato, *Theaet*. 176ab; Alcinous, *The Handbook of Platonism* (*Didaskalikos*), 1993, Repr. John Dillon (trans.) Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, XX 5-7, pp. 18-19; XXVIII 1-4, pp. 37-38.

the *via negativa*, in effect becomes what he calls a *via oppositionis* of the form 'it is neither x nor non-x… but superior'.[29] It short: it uses paradox to go beyond even affirmation and negation.

In my analysis in the second part of this thesis we will see how these different ways (approaches) can be found in mystical texts. For now the most important thing to realize is that all of them are practices of approaching the divine. Apophatic mysticism in the end seems to favour negation, but it will become clear that in its opposition and its negation of negation it tries to point beyond and thereby absolutely affirms. Although the manner in which these 'ways' relate to each other can become vague at times, I would like to argue that they are best understood by seeing them as different approaches to the divine. Although we will touch upon all of them, this thesis is primarily focused on mysticism of the apophatically inclined kind.

1.1.2 On Mysticism

What do we understand by 'mysticism'? The Greek μυστικός (*mystikós*) comes from the verb μυω (*myō*) meaning 'to close (the lips)'. In its earliest use we find it in relation to the mystery cults in which the essential rites were kept hidden from all except the initiated. It therefore initially referred to a purely ritual secret, which is why μυω can also be translated as 'to conceal'.[30] The meaning of the word 'mystical' gradually shifted as Louis Bouyer argues in his seminal article:

> For the Greek Fathers the word "mystical" was used to describe first all the divine reality which Christ brought to us, which the Gospel has revealed, and which gives its profound and definitive meaning to all the Scriptures. Moreoever, mystical is applied to all knowledge of divine things to which we accede through Christ, and then by derivation, to those things themselves. Finally the word, evolving always in the same direction, comes to describe the spiritual reality of worship "in spirit and in truth," as opposed to new life by the coming of the Savior.[31]

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[29] John D. Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition.* Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2001, pp. 487-488.

[30] Pierre Chantraine, *Dictionnaire Étymologique de la Langue Grecque: Histoire des Mots.* 1968. Rev. ed. Paris: Klincksieck, 1999, s.v. "μυω"; see also: Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987, pp. 7-11.

[31] Louis Bouyer, "Mysticism: An Essay on the History of the Word" In Richard Woods (ed.), *Understanding Mysticism.* New York: Doubleday, 1980, p. 47.

The word transitioned from a solely biblical context, to a sacramental (eucharistic) context, and finally to a more experiential dimension.[32] Indeed the first usage of 'mystical' in the sense of perceiving or experiencing the christian god *directly* can be found in Origen, however this is always in relationship to exegesis of scripture.[33]

The most important figure for our contemporary understanding of the word is pseudo-Dionysius, whom used this word in reference to an ineffable mode of experiential knowledge of divine things.[34] He invented the term *theologia mystica* ('mystical theology' also the title of his most influential work).[35] It is because of this work that the term mystical theology started to denote approaches that we now classify as mystical or mysticism. Our modern derivative mysticism, however, stems from a much later time. At the earliest from the seventeenth century as *la mystique* in French,[36] and in English from the mid eighteenth century.[37]

1.1.2 On the Concept of Mysticism[38]

Although the use of this specific term originates with pseudo-Dionysius' treatise, the concept of an ineffable mode of experiential knowledge of the absolute/divine/etc. can be traced back to even before the beginning of Greek philosophy.[39] The same function of this word is for instance expressed by a term like *epopteia* (ἐποπτεία) which refers to the highest stage in the Eleusinian mystery cult.[40] In Plato's dialogues, especially in *Symposium*, in reference to the mystery cult of Eleusis, Plato uses the term to express the vision of highest beauty.[41]

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[32] Bouyer, "Mysticism", p. 47.
[33] Idem, p. 50.
[34] Idem, pp. 51-52.
[35] Bernard McGinn, "Mystical Consciousness: A Modest Proposal" *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 8, no. 1 (2008): p. 44.
[36] Bernard McGinn, "Appendix A: Theoretical Foundations" In *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism. Vol. 1: The Foundations of Mysticism.* New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1991, pp. 311-312; McGinn, "Mystical Consciousness", p. 44.
[37] Leigh Eric Schmidt, "The Making of Modern 'Mysticism'" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, no. 2 (2003): p. 277.
[38] For this remark I am indebted to Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta.
[39] See: Arthur H. Armstrong (ed.) *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality: Egyptian, Greek, Roman.* New York: Crossroad, 1986. Especially the articles by Skemp, Saffrey (on neoplatonist spirituality), Schroeder, Corrigan, Manchester, and Wallis.
[40] Henry George Liddell & Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon.* Rev. Ed. by Sir Henry Stuart Jones & Roderick McKenzie. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940, s.v. "ἐποπτεία". Cf. Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, p. 69.
[41] Diotima describes the vision of highest beauty in *Symposium* (210e-212c): "suddenly he will have revealed to him, as he draws to the close of his dealings in love, a wondrous vision, beautiful in its nature; and this, Socrates, is the final object of all those previous toils. (…) so that in the end he comes to know the very essence of beauty." *Symp.* 210e, 211cd; cf. Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, p. 92.

It can also be found at the end of the allegory of the cave in *Rep.* 516b; in *Phdr.* 247c-248b; and in the much debated 'philosophical digression' of the *Seventh Letter* 342a-987d, of which Burkert also claims is a clear reference to the Eleusinian mysteries (*Ancient Mystery Cults*, pp. 76-77). Many of these passages contain scepticism towards

The Greek word *theōria* (θεωρία) also originally has a similar meaning. The verb *theōrein* translates as 'to look at', from *thea* meaning 'a view' (cf. theatre) and *theōros* (spectator; overseer).[42] In classical Greek society the *theōroi* ('overseers') were delegates sent on special missions to do religious duties for the state, usually to take witness in religious festivals and sacred rituals.[43] *Theōria* in this ordinary (civic) sense encompassed the entire journey from dispatchment until the final return of the *theōros*.[44] Plato used this model to conceptualize the philosophical journey.[45] This notion of *theōria* in the sense of 'contemplation'[46] was appropriated by Aristotle, who famously contrasts it with *praxis*. In his *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle makes clear that it is the highest activity:

> it is the activity of this part of us in accordance with the virtue proper to it that will constitute perfect happiness; and it has been stated already that this activity is the activity of contemplation [θεωρία, RvG]. And that happiness consists in contemplation may be accepted as agreeing both with the results already reached and with the truth. For contemplation is at once the highest form of activity (since the intellect is the highest thing in us, and the objects with which the intellect deals are the highest things that can be known), and also it is the most continuous, for we can reflect more continuously than we can carry on any form of action.[47]

It was this use of the word which was continued in the (neo)platonic thought of Plotinus (c. 204-270),[48] Porphyry (c. 234 - c. 305), Iamblichus (c. 245 - c. 325), Proclus

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language; see also Plutarch *De Iside* 328de: "For this reason Plato and Aristotle call this part of philosophy the epoptic or mystic part, inasmuch as those who have passed beyond these conjectural and confused matters of all sorts by means of Reason proceed by leaps and bounds to that primary, simple, and immaterial principle; e and when they have somehow attained contact with the pure truth abiding about it, they think that they have the whole of philosophy completely, as it were, within their grasp." (trans. Frank C. Babbitt)

[42] Liddell & Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. "θεωρία".

[43] Chantraine, *Dictionnaire Étymologique de la Langue Grecque*, s.v. "θεωρός".

[44] Andrea Wilson Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy. Theoria in its Cultural Context*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 68.

[45] Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth*, pp. 4-5. According to Nightingale specially so in his middle dialogues (p. 73).

[46] In Latin both the word 'theoria' as well as 'contemplatio' were used as 'translation' of the Greek term.

[47] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*: *Aristotle in 23 Volumes, Vol. 19* H. Rackham (trans.) Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975, *Nic. Eth.* Book 10, Chapter 7, Lines 1-2 (1177a.1).

[48] In many passages of the *Enneads* Plotinus refers to these mystical experiences e.g.: *Enn.* I 6.7; I 6.9; III 8.9-10; IV 8.1; V 5.4; V 8.11; VI 7.31; and especially the last chapter of the last *Ennead* VI 9. And according to Porphyry, who gives a biography in addition to the compiled *Enneads*, Plotinus attained 'unity' at least four times in the presence of Porphyry, who himself attained it once in the presence of his master; *On the Life of Plotinus and the Order of his Books*, 23. *Plotinus in Seven Volumes*, A.H. Armstrong (trans.) Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966-1988.

We should be aware with regards to Plotinus that until Ficino's translation of the *Enneads* in 1492, both the christian authors (like Augustine) as well as the Arabian-speaking world, used texts which contained compilations of parts of the *Enneads* but mostly of parts of Proclus' *Elements of Theology* in the version of the *Liber de Causis* book.

(412-485),[49] amongst others, and it concurrently/subsequently influenced gnostic traditions[50] and the early christian writings of Origen (184-254), Gregory of Nyssa (c. 355 - c. 395), Augustine (354-430), Boethius (c. 480-524) and of course also the work of pseudo-Dionysius.[51] Therefore, although Dionysius first *used* the term 'mystical theology' from which our modern term mysticism stems, it stands in a history of concepts like *theōria* and *epopteia* who refer to a similar notion.

1.1.3 From Experience to Mystical Experience

It is this notion we would in contemporary expression refer to as *mystical experience*. In the last century there have been proposed numerous, and to some extent quite diverse, lists of what the concept of mysticism encompasses.[52] Almost all attempts at defining it boil down to defining what *mystical experience* is.[53]

Let me then first investigate the notion of *experience*. A quote of Johann Gottlieb Fichte can illustrate what the problem of describing any experience is:

> *Spirit.* Thou knowest then what red, blue, smooth, rough, cold, and warm, really signify?
>
> *I.* Undoubtedly I do.
>
> *Spirit.* Wilt thou not describe it to me then?
>
> *I.* It cannot be described. Look! Direct thine eye towards that object:—what thou becomest conscious of through thy sight, I call red. Touch the surface of this other object:—what thou feelest, I call smooth. In this way I have arrived at this knowledge, and there is no other way by which it can be acquired.[54]

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[49] Proclus, *The Elements of Theology,* E.R. Dodds (trans.), 1933. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963.
[50] Cf. John D. Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition.* Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2001.
[51] Thomas Bénatouïl and Mauro Bonazzi (eds.), "Part III: The Christian Reception" in: *Theoria, Praxis and the Contemplative Life after Plato and Aristotle*, Leiden: Brill, 2012, pp. 213-257.
[52] Some key publications in chronological order: William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902); Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*. (1911); Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige: Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen* (1917); Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*. (1945); Robert C. Zaehner, *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane.* (1957); Walter T. Stace, Mysticism and Philosophy (1960); Ninian Smart, "Interpretation and Mystical Experience" *Religious Studies* 1, no. 1 (1965): pp. 75-87; Johan F. Staal, Exploring Mysticism (1975); Steven T. Katz (ed.), *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*. (1978); Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*. (1985); Sallie B. King, "Two Epistemological Models for the Interpretation of Mysticism" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56, no. 2 (1988): pp. 257-279; John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (1989); William Alston, Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience. (1991); Jess Byron Hollenback, *Mysticism: Experience, Response, and Empowerment*. (1996).
[53] Which itself can be considered a subclass of the larger (and vaguer) 'religious experience'. See: Robert H. Sharf, "Experience" In Mark C. Taylor (ed.), *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 95.
[54] "*D.G.* Du weisst sonach, was das ist: roth, blau, glatt, rauh, kalt, warm?/*Ich.* Ohne Zweifel weiss ich es./*D.G.* Willst du mir es nicht beschreiben?/*Ich.* Das lässt sich nicht beschreiben. – Siehe, richte dein Auge nach diesem

We cannot transmit experience to others, we can only transfer words and knowledge. That is not to claim that we cannot *communicate* experiences, or that we cannot *understand* or *feel* what someone is experiencing; it is just to point out the *explanatory gap*[55] between the *subjective*, to which we *only* have access ourselves, and *descriptions* of this experience, which we use to communicate or which we use to create conceptual schemes.[56] This difference has been distinguished in many languages: γνωναι and ειδεναι (*gnonai* and *eidenai*), *(cog)noscere* and *scire*, *kennen* and *wissen*, *connaître* and *savoir*.[57] Bertrand Russell has famously called it the difference between *knowledge by acquaintance* and *knowledge by description*.[58]

Although it is true that we unconsciously assume that words describe the way the world 'really is' (which is exactly 'the myth of the given' to which we will return in the next chapter), it is also true that we already know that words are completely different from our *direct experience* of the world.[59] The success of any description depends on the supposition that other people have had a similar perception. For example: we cannot communicate our experience of seeing to someone born blind. Nor do we fruitlessly try to describe the taste of a strawberry (pun intended), rather, we just hold out a strawberry for tasting. So this boils down to the fact that the nature of subjective experience reveals the impossibility of transmitting it in language.[60]

Gegenstande; was du durch das Gesicht empfinden wirst, indem du ihn siehst, dies nenne ich roth. Betaste die Fläche dieses anderen Gegenstandes; was du dann fühlen wirst, dies nenne ich glatt. Auf dieselbe Weise bin ich zu dieser Kenntniss gelangt, und es giebt keine andere! sie zu erwerben." Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The Vocation of Man.* 1800. William Smith (trans.). London: John Chapman, 1848, p. 57.

[55] Joseph Levine, "Materialism and Qualia: The Explanatory Gap," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 64 (1983): pp. 354-361; also known as 'Leibniz's gap'.

[56] That is why 'pain' is not the same as 'C-fibers firing' although the last can be considered a description of a physical correlate in the brain associated with the pain-experience.

[57] John Dewey, *How We Think*. Boston: D.C. Heath & Co, 1910, p. 120.

[58] Bertrand Russell, "Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 11 (1910–1911): pp. 108–128. Although the word 'knowledge' in my view connotates too much of an discursive property. 'Knowledge by acquaintance' is still *knowledge*, we need to distinguish 'knowledge' from 'acquaintance'.

[59] The latter claim is not strictly the same as 'empiricism' since this is already a theory that bases knowledge (i.e. propositions, claims etc.) in sense experience. That is to say, this conceptual framework is not fully aware that it itself is still *only* a conceptual framework. It does not clearly see the difference between 'language' and 'experience' and therefore presupposes a correspondence theory of truth.

[60] Indeed because of this fact we can never experience 'what it is like to be a bat' nor what it is like to be any other person. We only 'know' this by comparison. Or as Thomas Nagel says: "our own mental activity is the only unquestionable fact of our experience", see: Thomas Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" *The Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (1974): pp. 435-450. I do not agree with Nagel's 'realist' position on the relation between 'concepts' and 'facts'. His position on experience, however, explains why we will never be able to bridge the 'explanatory gap' between so-called 'subjective' experience and 'objective' description.

Subjective experience has been the object of wonder throughout all times and places: the biblical god who presents its name to Moses as "I am who I am";[61] the hindu insight that ātman is brahman in the saying "You are that";[62] Aristotle's (as well as Plato's) "that we are perceiving or thinking is to be conscious that we exist";[63] Augustine's "if I am deceived, I am";[64] and, arguably most famous in our times in this part of the world, Descartes' "I think, therefore I am".[65] Although these sayings are not identical in meaning, they show an interesting preoccupation with subjective awareness. But citing these authors and understanding what they are saying is still within the discursive domain. We do not need a Plato, Fichte, Descartes or Russell to *argue* that we are aware—we experience this instantaneously.

However, not only does the subject have a privileged access to his or her experience, we could even say it *is* experience. Although I can differentiate between sensations of objects around my body and objects within my body (emotions, feelings, pains, thoughts), both of them occur in, what we can describe as, *my field of consciousness*. To differentiate between 'inside' and 'outside' *is not to differentiate subjective consciousness itself*. 'Objective experience' is what different subjects can verify for themselves, or which can be measured (i.e. which is communicable). But this 'objective experience' is still only, in the end, subjectively experienced. 'Objective experience' in this sense becomes a *contradictio in terminis*. There is only subjective experience, consciousness, and only in the continuous *now*. (At the most we can argue

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[61] "God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" (*Exodus* 3:14) The Hebrew אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה (*Ehyeh Ašer Ehyeh*) can also be translated as "I am what I am" or "I will be what I will be".

[62] □□□□□□□□□ (*Tat tvam asi*), also translated as "That art thou" or "Thou art that" (*Chandogya Upaniṣad* 6.8.7).

[63] Aristotle, *Nic. Eth.* 1170a25.

[64] "[S]ed sine ulla phantasiarum uel phantasmatum imaginatione ludificatoria mihi esse me idque nosse et amare certissimum est. Nulla in his ueris Academicorum argumenta formido dicentium: Quid si falleris? Si enim fallor, sum." / "But, without any delusive representation of images or phantasms, I am most certain that I am, and that I know and delight in this. In respect of these truths, I am not at all afraid of the arguments of the Academicians, who say, What if you are deceived? For if I am deceived, I am." (*De Civitate Dei contra Paganos*, Philip Schaff (trans.), XI, 26)

[65] In his *Discours de la Methode* (1637) René Descartes wrote the famous "Et remarquant que cette vérité, *je pense, donc je suis*, étoit si ferme et si assurée, que toutes les plus extravagantes suppositions des Sceptiques n'étoient pas capables de l'ébranler, je jugeai que je pouvois la recevoir sans scrupule pour le premier principe de la Philosophie que je cherchais" / "And as I observed that this truth, *I think, therefore I am*, was so certain and of such evidence that no ground of doubt, however extravagant, could be alleged by the Sceptics capable of shaking it, I concluded that I might, without scruple, accept it as the first principle of the philosophy of which I was in search." (emphasis in original) (AT IV 1, CSM). Following this, in his Latin treatise *Meditationes de Prima Philosophia* (1641) he wrote: "ego sum, ego existo" / "I am, I exist" (AT VII 25, CSM II 16-17), and finally in his *Principia Philosophiae* (1644) appears for the first time: "ego cogito, ergo sum" / "I think, therefore I am" (AT I 7, CSM).

Note that Descartes in his *Discours* goes from 'thinking' to 'existing', while in *Meditationes* he just hits bedrock at "I am". It would seem to me that 'am-ness' or 'being' comes even before 'thinking'; indeed your existence is primary. Also, the awareness of 'I' is not necessarily deduced from 'being'. Descartes seemed to be aware of this to some extent (e.g. "But I do not yet have a sufficient understanding of what this 'I' is, that now necessarily exists", *Med.* AT VII 25, CSM).

for intersubjectivity.) This is why some philosophers conclude with solipsism, but Ludwig Wittgenstein expresses it clearly when he writes:

> 5.62 (…) what the solipsist *means* is quite correct; only it cannot be *said*, but makes itself manifest.
>
> The world is *my* world: this is manifest in the fact that the limits of *language* (of that language which alone I understand) mean the limits of *my* world.
>
> 5.621 The world and life are one.
>
> 5.63 I am my world. (The microcosm.)[66]

So it is important to see clearly what the difference between subjective/objective actually is. Experience is always subjective in the sense that it is 'tied to' a first person perspective. In the end only language (idea's, concepts, etc.) are transmittable (and even this to a certain degree), experiences are not—not even the non-mystical one. They are only communicable to the extent that we *share* in these experiences.[67] The point is that the fact that I exist (that I am conscious) is the basis of everything else I want to 'prove'.[68]

1.1.4 From Mystical Experience to Mystical Consciousness

This focus on experience seems pivotal for the concept of mysticism. The combination of the words 'mystical' and 'experience', however, have not been made before the nineteenth century.[69] What *mystical experience* now tries to denote was always referred to, as we discussed earlier, as *mystical theology*,[70] and even before that in other terms like

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[66] "5.62 (…) Was der Solipsismus nämlich *meint*, ist ganz richtig, nur läßt es sich nicht *sagen*, sondern es zeigt sich./Daß die Welt *meine* Welt ist, das zeigt sich darin, daß die Grenzen *der* Sprache (der Sprache, die allein ich verstehe) die Grenzen *meiner* Welt bedeuten./5.621 Die Welt und das Leben sind Eins./5.63 Ich bin meine Welt. (Der Mikrokosmos.)" Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 5.62-5.63.

[67] This also true for alterations of consciousness (i.e. without a referent in the world outside of our subjective experience) caused for instance by the use of substances like alcohol, marihuana, lsd or psilocybin. Again, one can communicate about these experiences and understand each other in this communication when both parties used the substance of which the effects are discussed at least once. This even goes for 'natural' subjective experiences like orgasms. Some women have never had this experience, so when the first time it happens, how do they recognize it? They experience it as something they have never experienced before, yet in some way it resemblances the descriptions of others. In general we could say this initially was the case with all 'feelings' or 'emotions' only they have become so 'normal' to us we do not even remember this.

[68] I am always struck by the observation that people seem to have lost their amazement of the fact that they are conscious. Unless, of course, I am the only conscious entity in the world, which is the only thing I can really absolutely deduce, which then would explain why people take their consciousness for granted (i.e. because they have none), however, I do not *believe* this is very likely.

[69] McGinn, "Mystical Consciousness", p. 45.

[70] Idem, p. 45.

theōria and *epopteia*. Bernard McGinn, in an article from 2008, shows that mystics did not understand *experientia* in the same way as modern investigators.[71] For this reason McGinn makes an interesting proposal to use the term *mystical consciousness* instead:

> Mystical consciousness makes claims beyond those put forth by the ordinary exercise of consciousness. All forms of consciousness involve both the consciousness *of* the objects intended by operations of feeling, knowing, and loving, as well as the consciousness or self-presence of the agent *in* such acts, either directly and implicitly as "I," or reflexively and in an objectified manner through the self-appropriation of one's acts of intending. Mystical consciousness, however, adds another dimension that transforms the usual components. This third element might be called a consciousness-*beyond*, or "meta-consciousness"[72]

This is an interesting proposal, which actually goes back to Philip Merlan's *Monopsychism, Mysticism, Metaconsciousness*.[73] Much of the discussion between scholars of mysticism seems to presuppose that *mystical experiences* are to some extent like *all experiences* we have. It is the term *experience* which suggests this, but the combination of the words is a nineteenth century construction. The mystical experience in the sense of mystical theology does not so much seem to be an experience as in *an object of my consciousness*, but more *an alteration of consciousness* (of that which experiences).

[71] McGinn, "Mystical Consciousness", p. 45; A similar argument has been made with the Japanese terms for experience, *keiken* and *taiken*, which rarely are to be found in premodern Japanese (zen) texts, see: Robert H. Sharf, "Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience" *Numen* 42, no. 3 (1995): p. 249.
[72] Idem, p. 47. McGinn then continues to specify meta-consciousness as "the co-presence of God in our inner acts". Although this may generate some insight into what he means, terms like 'God' have become so confused, vague or heavily connotated, that I would choose to refrain from using this term.
[73] Philip Merlan, *Monopsychism, Mysticism, Metaconsciousness: Problems of the Soul in the Neoaristotelian and Neoplatonic Tradition.* The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963.

1.2 The Perennialism-Contextualism Debate[74]

We might say that from all debates within comparative mysticism the perennialist-contextualist debate is the most prevalent one. Not only so in its explicit discussion, but also—and moreover—as epistemological positions which have become implicitly supposed. In this section I will discuss what the arguments are and how we should evaluate them.

1.2.1 Perennialism and the Idea of the Perennial Philosophy

The term *philosophia perennis* refers to a notion that arose during the renaissance which affirms that there is a universal, permanent and all-encompassing philosophy. Although generally thought to originate from Gottfried Leibniz, Charles B. Schmitt traces the term to Agostino Steuco's *De Perenni Philosophia* from 1540.[75] Steuco, bishop of Kisamos and librarian of the Vatican, coins this term in reference to Marsilio Ficino's *prisca theologia* or *philosophia priscorium*, which was a philosophical synthesis of christianity and (neo)platonism.[76] Steuco defines the perennial philosophy as the only true philosophy, a single truth, a single wisdom which has existed since the beginning of the human race.[77] According to him this *sapientia* is attainable: (i) through the study of the tradition, or (ii) through direct use of the intellect in philosophical contemplation.[78]

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[74] To some extent this debate is similar to the exclusivism-inclusivism-pluralism debate in the philosophy of religion, since pluralism is a form of perennialism. Exclusivist perspectives hold that there is only one 'true' religion, and one way to its religious' end (soteriology). Inclusivist perspectives agree with the exclusivist, but they add that people from other religious traditions may come to the same (or similar) end(s) without them knowing this is due to the underlying principle of the tradition the inclusivist adheres to (Karl Rahner speaks in this regard of 'anonymous Christians', Murtaḍhā Muṭahharī of 'dispositional Muslims'). Both inclusivism and exclusivism are thus argued from *within* the conceptual framework of a tradition. It is unclear to me how one can ultimately legitimize the choice of any of these conceptual frameworks over the others, and for this reason I believe both positions are too substantially *a priori* biased. See: Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith.* New York: Seabury, 1978, p. 176; Murtaḍhā Muṭahharī, *Islam and Religious Pluralism.* Sayyid Sulayman Ali Hasan (trans.) Stanmore: World Federation of KSIMC, 2006, p. 49.

This is different from the third position in this discussion, pluralism, because it operates on a different conceptual level. John Hick tries to give "an hypothesis to explain how it is that the great world religions, with their different concepts of the Ultimate, nevertheless seem to be equally effective (and of course also equally ineffective) contexts of the salvific human transformation" (John Hick, "Possibility of Religious Pluralism: A Reply to Gavin D'Costa" *Religious Studies* 33, no. 2 (1997): p. 163). He argues that all religions tap into the same real/ultimate, and that all differences among traditions are due to cultural, social and historical developments. No tradition, however, will be able to grasp 'the real' as it is in itself according to Hick. Here he makes use of the kantian distinction of the noumenal and the phenomenal, see: John Hick, *John Hick: An Autobiography*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2002, p. 69.

[75] Charles B. Schmitt, "Perrenial Philosophy: From Agostino Steuco to Leibniz" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 27, no. 4 (1966): p. 506.

[76] Ferrer, *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory*, p. 73.

[77] Schmitt, p. 522.

[78] Idem.

Steuco was heavily influenced in his views by Ficino, Pico della Mirandola and the neoplatonic tradition and to a lesser degree by the *Corpus Hermeticum*, Augustine and pseudo-Dionysius, as well as other 'mystical' writings.[79] There is also substantial evidence of influences of Ibn Rušd (Averroes) and jewish as well as christian kabbalah.[80] Again, although Steuco is probably the first to use the term *perenni philosophia* it seems to have grown out of an interest of synthesis and universalism.[81] In Steuco's definition, however, *sapientia* is not only attainable through direct insight but also by studying the 'tradition'. The notion of the perennial philosophy, therefore, is also *discursive* in nature.

Leibniz picked up the term and though the American transcendentalists shared similar perspectives, the term disappeared until it was reintroduced by Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society and later by René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon.[82] It subsequently was popularized by Aldous Huxley's 1945 publication *The Perennial Philosophy*.[83] What began to characterize this form of perennialism was its focus on *the mystical traditions as the core* of the world religions.[84]

Huxley's argument can also be found in *The Doors of Perception* (1954), which was heavily criticized by Robert C. Zaehner in his *Mysticism: Sacred and Profane* (1957). The Huxley-Zaehner dispute is representative of what the debate between perennialism and contextualism has become at large.[85] This debate in comparative mysticism centers around the premise that there is an essential core or unity in all mystical experiences. The position labeled as 'perennialism' (also universalism, essentialism, decontextualism, and traditionalism) considers this to be so while 'contextualism' (also constructivism, intentionalism, pluralism or anti-perennialism) considers this to be false.[86] Within comparative mysticism, then, the claim is not that there is some perennial *expression* or *teaching* underlying all philosophies (like the concept of the perennial philosophy of Steuco in part entails) but that there is a *perennial mystical experience* underlying all descriptions of experiences with the divine in the world's different religions and philosophies.

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[79] Schmitt, p. 506-507.
[80] Idem, p. 513.
[81] Idem, pp. 508-515, 532.
[82] Ferrer, *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory*, p. 74.
[83] Idem.
[84] Idem.
[85] Richard Woods, "Introduction" In Richard Woods (ed.), *Understanding Mysticism.* New York: Doubleday, 1980, p. 9.
[86] Randolph T. Dible II, "The Philosophy of Mysticism: Perennialism and Constructivism" *Journal of Consciousness Exploration & Research* 1, no. 2 (2010): pp. 173-174.

1.2.2 Contextualism: A Critique of Perennialism

Although people like Rufus Jones and Robert Zaehner have criticised perennialist perspectives, it did not really became the common view. Indeed, before the 1978 publication of *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, edited by Steven T. Katz, perennialism was more or less the dominant and presupposed view by scholars who investigated mystical traditions. Katz in his seminal article "Language, Epistemology and Mysticism" argues at length why perennialism is false. He points out biases, inconsistencies and problematic generalizations. Because his article has had such a huge influence I will discuss it at length.

Katz questions certain epistemological presuppositions of perennialists. He starts off with the remark that he does not want to argue that mystical experiences do not exist, or that they are "mumbo-jumbo,"[87] but that his "entire paper is a 'plea for the recognition of differences'".[88] Katz wants to understand why mystical experiences are the experiences they are, and makes his initial point of departure quite clear:

> let me state the single epistemological assumption that has exercised my thinking and which has forced me to undertake the present investigation: *There are NO pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences.* Neither mystical experience nor more ordinary forms of experience give any indication, or any grounds for believing, that they are unmediated. That is to say, *all* experience is processed through, organized by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological ways. The notion of unmediated experience seems, if not self-contradictory, at best empty. This epistemological fact seems to me to be true, because of the sorts of beings we are, even with regard to the experiences of those ultimate objects of concern with which mystics have intercourse, e.g. God, Being, nirvāṇa, etc. (…) A proper evaluation of this fact leads to the recognition that in order to understand mysticism it is *not* just a question of studying the reports of the mystic after the experiential event but of acknowledging that the experience itself as well as the form in which it is reported is shaped by concepts which the mystic brings to, and which shape, his experience.[89]

[87] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism", pp. 22-23.
[88] Idem, p. 25.
[89] Idem, p. 26, emphases in original.

Katz then continues to discuss many examples from different traditions like kabbalah, buddhism, ṣūfīsm, daoism, hinduism, zen, christianity and neoplatonism. He criticizes influential scholars like Stace, Underhill and Zaehner who, according to him, have presupposed too much of the perennial idea. For Katz to make his argument credible he needs to question the differentiation between 'raw experience' (or 'pure consciousness'[90]) and 'interpretation' and argue—quite in a postmodern fashion[91]—that "belief shape[s] experiences, just as experience shapes belief".[92]

Sometimes it appears that Katz actually makes a softer claim, as when he nuances that experiences are "at least in part, [the *result*] of specific conceptual influences".[93] But most of the time he sticks to the line of argument as found in the extensive quote above. Katz states that for the mystic "images, beliefs, symbols, and rituals define, *in advance*, what the experience *he wants to have*, and which he then does have, will be like."[94] Indeed Katz puts great emphasis on the external (doctrinal) conceptual framework in which the mystic is raised, and also on the practice of the teacher-student relationship prevalent in many mystical traditions.[95]

For Katz there is no way to go beyond the conceptual 'wall', and he therefore cannot acknowledge such claims as apophatic mystics make. With regards to the *via negativa* Katz thus argues that

> Properly understood [it] is *not* an *un*conditioning or *de*conditioning of consciousness, but rather it is a *re*conditioning of consciousness, i.e. a substituting of one form of conditioned and/or contextual consciousness for another, albeit a new, unusual, and perhaps altogether more interesting form of conditioned-contextual consciousness.[96]

This is a claim which, in the light of this research, is especially important to look at, but which can only be properly addressed after the second part. However, all these arguments should be reckoned with. I will now briefly evaluate some of the claims of Katz and discuss some counter-arguments that have arisen since.

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[90] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism", p. 58.
[91] Cf. Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and 'The Mystic East'*. London: Routledge, 1999, pp. 170-171.
[92] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism", p. 30.
[93] Idem, p. 62, emphasis in original.
[94] Idem, p. 33, emphases in original.
[95] Idem, pp. 42-43.
[96] Idem, p. 57.

1.2.3 A Critique of Contextualism

Katz has had an important influence in the scholarly field. He asks scholars to be more precise, more nuanced, to integrate historical context and to be cautious with over-generalised conclusions. He has also refocused the research to look at *a priori* ontological and, especially, epistemological assumptions that might predetermine the outcome. While the contextualist perspective has by now become the dominant approach in the field, Katz' critique has not been unequivocally accepted. Indeed there are some major problems with the contextualist approach, some of which I will discuss here.

The most problematic of all his claims is what he himself acknowledges to be his 'single epistemological assumption': that there is no pure, unmediated, experience. This is a particularly dubious starting point, given that it is *exactly this* what he wants to prove! To claim that perennialists *a priori* assume the similarity of pure mystical experience is just as biased as to assume *a priori* the impossibility of pure experience. Katz has merely asserted by definition that *all* experience is mediated, but as an argument this is circular, and subject to the same objections as perennialism and therefore is invalid.[97]

Although one might think of a contextualism in which *aspects of experience* are contextually influenced, as a more moderate alternative, the contextualist in fact argues that *no direct experience can be allowed*. This is so because otherwise he would have to admit to *a part of experience that is not influenced by context*. A moderate contextualism would indeed not contradict perennialism. "Thus—and this is key—the best way (perhaps the only way) to protect the pluralist hypothesis", as Robert Forman states, "is through a complete constructivism."[98] By 'pluralist hypothesis' Forman means that contextualists focus on the differences and are therefore able to claim that this "position is able to accommodate *all* the evidence which is accounted for by non-pluralistic accounts without being reductionistic".[99] This is of course hardly a virtue, since the perennialist would claim that there are both differences *and* similarities as well as proposing a hypothesis why this is so. While the contextualist in fact cannot

[97] This is also what Donald Evans in his somewhat messy essay has argued "Can Philosophers Limit What Mystics Can Do? A Critique of Steven Katz" *Religious Studies* 25, no. 1 (1989): pp. 53-60; see also: Robert K.C. Forman, "Of Desserts and Doors: Methodology of the Study of Mysticism" *Sophia* 32, no. 1 (1993): p. 36; Sallie B. King, "Two Epistemological Models for the Interpretation of Mysticism" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56, no. 2 (1988): pp. 257-279; Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion*, pp. 169-182.
[98] Forman, "Introduction", *Problem of Pure Consciousness*, p. 14.
[99] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism", p. 66.

admit *any similarities* of experience, since this would threaten his absolute claim. This defence of *pure consciousness events* (PCE's) as given in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness* edited by Forman is one of the most important counter-arguments to say that 'strong' contextualism makes an almost untenable claim.

Other arguments made by Katz also have their problems: (i) If all experience is influenced by concepts, and the mystic actually generates the experience that he expects, how then should we deal with mystics who claim the experience is beyond those descriptions?[100] (ii) Although Katz claims there is no deconstruction of the conceptual framework possible (only reconstruction), this does not account for those apophatic mystics that describe their experience as such. Does Katz know better than mystics who have had those experiences what they have experienced?[101] (iii) If we suppose that all experiences are conceptually influenced by the tradition in which one is embedded, this would logically entail that because of the neoplatonic and neoaristotelian influence on all three abrahamic systems, there would, according to the conceptualist critique, be a similar conceptual influence that could therefore generate the same or a similar mystical experiences in those three religions.[102] Yet Katz maintains that there is only difference and no similarity between these traditions. This seems incoherent, if not completely contradictory. But as we observed earlier Katz needs to adhere to a strong version of contextualism to be able to maintain contextualism at all. (iv) Katz claims that given the immersion of mystics within their own system "they talk only about their traditions, their 'way', their 'goal': they do not recognize the legitimacy of any other"[103] but again this is clearly not the case, for instance, the ṣūfī Ibn al-ʿArabī (1165-1240 CE)[104] as well as the christian Eckhart von Hochheim (c. 1260-1328),[105] both of them huge authorities within their tradition,

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[100] Katz tries to deal with this argument by giving examples of how mystics also stay in line within their tradition. Steven T. Katz, "The 'Conservative' Character of Mystical Experience" In Steven T. Katz (ed.), *Mysticism and Religious Traditions.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983.

[101] And if so, based on what?; cf. Evans, "Can Philosophers Limit What Mystics Can Do?".

[102] Philip C. Almond, "Mysticism and Its Contexts" In Robert K.C. Forman (ed.), *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy.* New York: Oxford Univeristy Press, 1990, p. 215.

[103] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism", p. 45.

[104] "My heart has become capable of every form: it is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks,/And a temple for idols and the pilgrim's Kaʿba and the tables of the Tora and the book of the Koran./I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love's camels take, that is my religion and my faith." Ibn al-ʿArabī, *The Interpreter of Desires* (*Tarjumān al-Ashwāq*). R.A. Nicholson (trans.). London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1911, p. 68.

[105] Eckhart refers to many non-christians both direct (e.g. Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Seneca, Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), Maimonides) as well as indirect (by formulas like '…die meister sprechent…' in his vernacular works). See: Bernard Mc.Ginn "Appendix: Eckhart's Sources" In *The Mystical Though of Meister Eckhart: The Man from Whom God Hid Nothing.* New York: Crossroad, 2001, pp. 162-182; Alessandro Palazzo, "Eckhart's Islamic and Jewish Sources: Avicenna, Avicebron, and Averroes" (pp. 253-298), and Yossef Schwartz, "Meister Eckhart and Moses

have no problem in acknowledging the legitimacy of other traditions.[106] In fact, these and other reasons are why some mystics have been considered heretics by authorities of their own traditions.

Forman and Almond have argued that the reason perennialism came into disfavour was not so much because of research in the field, but because of an ongoing poststructuralist and postmodernist shift in humanities and the social sciences.[107] Also, Katz perspective has been identified as unmistakably neo-kantian.[108] Both these observations are important for this discussion. In the next chapter I will place the perennialism-contextualism debate in the larger context of this shift in humanities and (the problem of accepting any) epistemological perspectives.

Could it be that the discussion between perennialism and contextualism is an instance of the endless debate between essentialism and relativism, between idealism and realism, between induction and deduction, between modernism and postmodernism, between, what Isaiah Berlin called, the hedgehog and the fox?[109]

Maimonides: From Judaeo-Arabic Rationalism to Christian Mysticism" (pp. 389-414), both in Jeremiah M. Hackett (ed.), *A Companion to Meister Eckhart.* Leiden: Brill, 2013.

[106] Which is not to say that they would have approved every claim attached to the other doctrine, however, neither would they approve every claim attached to their own doctrine.

[107] Robert K.C. Forman, "Introduction" In Robert K.C. Forman (ed.), *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy.* New York: Oxford Univeristy Press, 1990, p. 4; Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion*, pp. 169-182.

[108] Anthony N. Perovich, Jr., "Does the Philosophy of Mysticism Rest on a Mistake?" In Robert K.C. Forman (ed.), *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy.* New York: Oxford Univeristy Press, 1990, pp. 237-253.

[109] Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History.* London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1953. The title is a reference to Archilochus: πόλλ' οἶδ' ἀλώπηξ, ἀλλ' ἐχῖνος ἓν μέγα ("a fox knows many things, but a hedgehog one important thing") and refers to thinkers who approach reality with either a single defining idea or through a broad variety of ideas. (The question I would ask is: Is this theory itself a product of a hedgehog or a fox?)

Mit Worten läßt sich trefflich streiten,
Mit Worten ein System bereiten,
An Worte läßt sich trefflich glauben,
Von einem Wort läßt sich kein Jota rauben.[110]
—Mephistopheles in Goethe's *Faust I*

II. Conceptual Diversity

At the end of the last chapter I already hinted at the possibility that the debate within comparative mysticism can be analysed as part of a larger development within the humanities.[111] After a brief examination of some of the key terms and the discussion between the two positions of perennialism and contextualism, I will now in this chapter take a step back and investigate some discussions that can be considered to be prior to this debate.

I will start by discussing the problem of diversity of 'worldviews' or as I will call them 'conceptual frameworks'. Subsquently I will go into issues concerning comparative philosophy. One could ask, for instance: What are these 'conceptual frameworks' that we are comparing? And what *is* this 'method' of comparing? I will argue that a very important aspect of these conceptual frameworks is their *discursiveness*. And I will claim that it was in fact the so-called *linguistic turn* that fueled the contextualist position. It is important to be aware of the way language works. Many mystics have been concerned with language, be it affirmative in the poetical brilliance of expressing the relationship with the divine, or in the negative by positing limits on language in describing the *ineffable*.[112] What we believe, we usually express in language. These beliefs structure how we act and therefore how we *interact* with our environment. Of course our experiences also construct our beliefs. From a nominalist

[110] "With words fine arguments can be weighted,/With words whole Systems can be created,/With words, the mind does its conceiving,/No word suffers a jot from thieving." Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust: Parts I & II*. A.S. Kline (trans.), *Poetry in Translation*, 2003, lines 1994-2000.
[111] Cf. Forman, "Introduction", *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*, p. 4; King, *Orientalism and Religion*, pp. 169-182.
[112] Cf. Steven T. Katz (ed.), *Mysticism and Language.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

position I approach claims and descriptions as a discursive reduction, or conceptualization, and hence interpretation of experiences.

In epistemological sense it is therefore important to look at how we justify these claims, because the comparative mysticism debate is in essence an epistemological discussion. In order to discuss the justification of claims I will use the work of pyrrhonian sceptic Sextus Empiricus and discuss his view of the impossibility of such ultimate justification. Sextus is important because he brings the sceptic argument from language to experience, showing the limits of language and rational argument by using it against itself and thereby demonstrating in my view an apophatic method. We should understand clearly that the purpose of pyrrhonian scepticism is not just to simply *deny* everything like the nihilist does. Rather it is based on the experience that suspension of judgment brings a tranquillity of mind that makes philosophical problems *dis*solve. Sextus' scepticism is a *practice of negation* that gives a clear model of how to understand the *via negativa*.

2.1 Diversity of Conceptual Frameworks

2.1.1 What are Conceptual Frameworks?

Any contemporary philosophy has to take into account that within our world there exist an endless multiplicity of conceptual frameworks.[113] This diversity consists of both *living* conceptual frameworks as well as (to most degrees) *extinct* frameworks.[114] Furthermore, we should acknowledge that there is an unlimited possibility to juggle these varieties: creating new ones, discarding old ones, using ideas, constructions,

[113] Or worldviews, philosophies, rationalities, belief-systems, discourses, language games, paradigms, practices, cultures, contexts, life-forms, etc. Of course all these different terms are not synonymous. The choice for the one rather then the other result in pros and cons because each of them highlights some aspects but leaves out others. Words like 'worldviews' and 'philosophies' underline the all-encompassing influence such frameworks have on our experiencing and therefore structuring of our world.

Words like 'belief', 'rationality', 'thought' and even 'discourse' invoke a more intellectual or theoretical connotation. On the other hand words like 'practice' or 'culture' or 'life-form' merely seem to address the lived expression of certain cultural conceptions. Practices are, however, intertwined with beliefs, and because I want to stress the discursiveness of beliefs I have chosen for 'conceptual frameworks' (mind the plural!). This term also has its own set of problems. The word 'conceptual' for instance is, much like 'belief' and 'thought', primarily associated with notions of theory and intellect. 'Frameworks' seem to imply that we consciously construct them, or in the singular that we only have one, while I would like to stress that through time we internalize a variety of different conceptual frameworks (parts of) which can contradict with each other.

The framework that overarches all these and tries to keep all different conceptual frameworks together is our 'self' or 'identity' or 'personality'. So-called 'existential crises' happen when (parts of) our conceptual frameworks clash (this is always *intra*, within ourselves, but of course is in many cases invoked by clashes *inter*, between us and others), because the overarching framework of the self is forced to acknowledge the contradiction that arises within.

[114] Like classical Greek 'religion', Aztecan 'religion', Chinese mohism, diverse gnostic traditions etc.

concepts from one framework to another, creating diverse practices based on the same ideas, creating different ideas based on the same practices and so on.[115] With our poststructuralist, postmodernist and social constructivist 'common' knowledge of modern day academia, we should understand these frameworks as *historically and culturally relative*; that is, they are constantly changing over time and place, and are not as uniform or monolithic as the simple words that try to convey them tend to suggest (e.g. 'hinduism', 'islam', 'analytic philosophy', 'religion', 'atheism', etc.). The content of any conceptual framework is therefore *fluid*. Frameworks are only 'bordered' to the extent that we have demarcated them as such in daily parlance or in (academic) analysis try to border them. Meaning is therefore also historically relative, or diachronic, as we saw when I presented a genealogy of the key terms of this research. However, at any moment in time there is *always a limit to what counts as the proper use of a word*, if this was not so we would not be able to communicate at all. Indeed the word 'term' itself comes from the Latin *terminus* meaning boundary or limit. So there are demarcations, although they are not absolute, nor in all instances unambiguous.

After considering all these conceptual difficulties and relativizing remarks I will tentatively understand conceptual frameworks as any set of *ideas* (beliefs, claims, concepts…) and *practices* (dependent on individual and group actions) that have a internal logic (coherence and consistency)[116] and which are considered to belong to a

[115] Notions of 'difference' and 'sameness' are already very problematic. Is anything ever the same? Most philosophers make a distinction in sameness as *numerical* and *qualitative*. Numerical sameness is an absolute identity which only occurs when we use different names for the same object ('morning star' and 'evening star' both refer to the planet venus). Qualitative sameness is what we usually mean when talking about sameness: we say that 'this apple' and 'that apple' are both 'apples'. In this aspect (which is a token/type distinction) they are the same but they are not numerical/identical the same. For the original type/token distinction see: Charles S. Peirce, "Prolegomena to an Apology for Pragmaticism" *Monist* 16 (1906): pp. 492–546.

However, it is quite unclear if numerical sameness really exists, except maybe only as a mathematical abstract entity but even this is disputed. Is the apple I eat today the same as that apple yesterday? Am *I* the same as I was yesterday? What about two years ago? Is the 'morning star' really the same as 'evening star', since the word implies a moment in the day in which it is observed (and indeed for a long time people did not know they were in fact the 'same' planet venus)? Although not right in his correspondence theory of language Ludwig Witggenstein in his *Tractatus* saw correctly this problem of identity. In 5.5303 he writes: "Beiläufig gesprochen: Von *zwei* Dingen zu sagen, sie seien identisch, ist ein Unsinn, und von *Einem* zu sagen, es sei identisch met sich selbst, sagt gar nichts." / "Roughly speaking, to say of *two* things that they are identical is nonsense, and to say of *one* thing that it is identical with itself is to say nothing at all." Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. 1921. D.F. Pears & B.F. McGuinness (trans.). Rev. ed. 1974. London: Routledge, 2002, 5.5303.

[116] Which does not mean that all claims or actions within a framework are coherent and consistent. Indeed all frameworks contain paradoxes and contradictions, but these systems and its proponents in general *give the presumption* that the frameworks have coherency. Also, with logics I do not mean any particular 'western' nor 'eastern' style of syllogisms. I just want to express that any conceptual framework is build upon certain notions (axioms and relationships between terms (for instance what is considered necessary and/or sufficient), i.e. 'a structure'); it has, in this sense, its own 'logic'.

certain domain,[117] although the limits of any domain are relative to historical, cultural as well as subjective perspectives.

2.1.1.1 Internal and External Frameworks

Conceptually I would discern two kinds of frameworks: *Internally,* we build-up many kinds of frameworks. The framework that overarches all these and which attempts to keep a cohesion of all different sub-frameworks we can call our *self*, *identity* or *personality*. This framework is more or less ones general notion of life, or world-view.

Externally, the abstract frameworks are nothing but a systematization and generalisation of a combination of individual frameworks 'reified' in society, both in the way we structure it, as well as in general debates and the terms of agreement. These externalised systems are nothing but an outward construction of a collection of individual frameworks, some more influential than others, but these individuals are themselves also shaped by the pre-existing systematised practices and ideas in society.

So, although the external frameworks are *primary* to the individual (they already exist before you were born), it is all these individuals together that *maintain and change* (parts of) the externalized frameworks in the end. In this way societies reflect the way we think about the world, truth, and values. Revolutionaries try to reshape systems. They either try to do away with all of them, or, in most cases, revolt against the dominant one by coming up with a new proposal. However, we can also see that these counter-systems to a large degree are already products of, significantly shaped by and are therefore dependant upon the earlier existing frameworks to which they respond.

The internal-external distinction is one of *conceptual* differentiation, a matter of degree with on one end the individual frameworks in question and on the other end 'culture' at large. It is important to stay aware that internalised and externalised conceptual frameworks are mutually constructive.

2.1.1.2 Abstractness of Terms

We should also acknowledge that our label-ascriptions, our designations of external conceptual frameworks, are under constant debate. Although there are limits to

[117] This is what makes us ascribe for instance the label 'christianity' to one conceptual framework, and 'islam' to another, although the limits of those particular frameworks are hard to define; we could argue that the islamic framework for instance is a product of the christian etc. But we do not randomly assign a word to a framework. The fact that we utter sentences as 'comparing islam with christianity' already presupposes a distinction and this is a product of language (it does not mean the distinction is *real* in all degrees, it only presupposes it).

ascribing terms to practices as has been said, most of the time these limits are not clear. This is so because the more abstract the term becomes—that is, the larger the conceptual framework it tries to denote—the less clearly its boundaries are discernable. In fact many of the single terms that denote a certain conceptual framework, like 'christianity', 'islam', 'stoic', 'confucianism', 'analytic philosophy', but also geographical 'identities' as 'India', 'Germany', 'Europe', 'the west', 'the east', only appear as something uniform at first sight but "as one looks at the matter a little more closely the difficulties begin."[118] One will on further investigation discover that these simple notions harbour many varieties, versions, interpretations, histories, emphases, etc., which, moreover, are all continuously changing over the course of time. This is one of the reasons some scholars argue we should instead speak in the plural (christianitie*s*, philosophie*s*, mysticism*s*, etc.) while others even assert we should, after deconstructing and unmasking these terms, do away *completely* with large generalizing concepts in academic discourse; for again and again they unconsciously instil within us a notion of general coherence and therefore underexpose the huge variety that is actually present.

I agree with both positions. If we want to make (academic) claims we should do so with as much nuance and precision as possible, however in the end, language is never equal to what actually *is*, and this is necessarily so. Depending on the domain or the purpose some descriptions may be more suitable than others, that is, they describe a certain aspect of reality in a way that seems more in accord with the way reality behaves (in fact this is what we want proper 'science' to be).[119] *But it never hits bedrock.* In general we could say that the larger the concept, the more imprecise it becomes, and it thereby also becomes more prone to incoherent and inconsistent meaning.

2.1.2 Comparing Conceptual Frameworks

The observation of *diversity* of conceptual frameworks results naturally in the possibility of comparing them and with this arises the potential conflict among (parts of these)

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[118] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge.* 1969. A.M. Sheridan Smith (trans.). London: Routledge, 2002, p. 25.

[119] To acknowledge that Newton's theory was, to some degree, superseded by Einstein's theory of general relativity and this theory, again to some degree, by quantum mechanics is to understand how we adjust our descriptions depending on what we actually see in the world around us. We can therefore not interpret Kuhn in the way that all paradigms are equally functional in its description. However, *to equate this theory with reality* is to adhere to a correspondence theory of truth, but how do you know that this is not superseded also in a certain domain by yet a better description? Furthermore, the distinctions between the formal-, natural-, and social-sciences and humanities is important, because these different fields operate with different way's to structure what is considered 'knowledge'.

frameworks. The confrontation with different systems is nothing new. In fact it is inherent to any framework. It has happened on large scales throughout history. The beginning of the common era, for instance, is usually regarded as a time in which the Mediterranean area was a melting pot of different identities, cultures, philosophies and religions—I will discuss these historical influences in chapter three. We can argue, however, that never before were we able to have access to such an amount of different conceptual frameworks.[120] However, before we can even start to look at these different frameworks we need to address what it actually means to compare.

2.1.2.1 What is Comparative Philosophy?

We will now look at discussions that have been going on in the field of comparative philosophy, also cross-cultural philosophy, because this is relevant to the (presuppositions of) positions within any comparative field including comparative mysticism.

In *Doing Philosophy Comparatively* Tim Connolly introduces and summarizes the current state of debate of comparative philosophy.[121] The first part is concerned with what comparative philosophy is and the second discusses (fundamental) problems in using 'comparing' as method. Connolly distinguishes two dimensions of comparison: *descriptive* (using comparison to understand particular philosophers, texts and traditions) and *evaluative* (making constructive progress on specific philosophical problems or issues by comparing different responses to them).[122] Of course, any description is already to some degree evaluative in so far as it presents and structures 'the facts'. However, just comparing to make descriptive lists does not progresses our understanding of, and dealing with philosophical questions. This thesis uses evaluative

[120] Confronted with this fact, it becomes even more curious that most universities and schools still choose to focus only on European and American history and philosophy. See for substantive critique: Robert C. Solomon, "'What is Philosophy?' The Status of World Philosophy in the Profession" *Philosophy East and West* 51, no. 1 (2001): pp. 100-104; Karsten J. Struhl, "No (More) Philosophy without Cross-Cultural Philosophy" *Philosophy Compass* 5, no. 4 (2010): pp. 287-295.

See for recent discussion of academics entering popular discourse e.g. Myisha Cherry & Eric Schwitzgebel, "Like the Oscars, #PhilosophySoWhite" *Los Angeles Times* [4 March 2016], accessed on 12 May 2016 http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-0306-schwitzgebel-cherry-philosophy-so-white-20160306-story.html; Jay L. Garfield & Bryan W. Van Norden, "If Philosophy Won't Diversify, Let's Call It What It Really Is" *The New York Times* [11 May 2016], accessed on 12 May 2016 http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/11/opinion/if-philosophy-wont-diversify-lets-call-it-what-it-really-is.html?partner=rss&emc=rss&_r=0

[121] I will speak now of 'comparative philosophy' since this is the way Connolly addresses the problem, but I want to stress that this is an inherent problem of *all comparing of 'conceptual frameworks'*, and not necessarily only of those frameworks that we label 'philosophic'. However, philosophy usually is very self-critical, that is, it tends to question the foundation and justification of its own framework more. In this sense philosophy ends up being confronted with all kinds of problems in 'comparing' more often, because of questioning the foundations and justifications of claims.

[122] Tim Connolly, *Doing Philosophy Comparatively*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015, pp. 28-45.

comparison in the first and third part, and descriptive (to the extent that this is possibile) in the second hermeneutical part when we will do close-readings.

The point of comparing, according to Connolly, is not to project a 'western' notion of 'philosophy' on other frameworks: "[t]he goal is not to take a single idea, Philosophy, and stamp it onto other cultures, but to enrich an already diverse set of conceptions of philosophy and philosophical practices."[123] That is to say, in doing so, we discuss the boundaries of *our* concept of philosophy; a term which itself already did not have a consensual definition.[124] And while indeed all types of philosophy everywhere involve comparison,[125] one cannot conclude from this that the adjective 'comparative' adds nothing to the concept of philosophy.[126] Comparing is one of many tools philosophers and scholars alike, use, and, like any method, it has its own set of problems.[127]

2.1.2.2 Problems in Comparing Conceptual Frameworks

Connolly distinguishes three groups of problems: (i) the problem of incommensurability (linguistic, foundational and evaluative);[128] (ii) the problem of one-sidedness; and (iii) the problem of generalization.[129]

He discusses three varieties of *incommensurability*:[130] *linguistic incommensurability* is the idea that languages cannot be translated into another; *foundational incommensurability* is the idea that the foundation of traditions are so vastly different that members from different traditions cannot understand each other; *evaluative incommensurability* is the claim that there are no rational grounds for deciding whether one view is superior to another.[131] I will now discuss these three forms.

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123 Connolly, Doing Philosophy Comparatively, p. 16.
124 See also: Johan F. Staal, "Is There Philosophy in Asia?" In Gerald J. Larson & Aliot Deutsch (eds.), *Interpreting Across Boundaries: New Essays in Comparative Philosophy.* New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988, pp. 203-229.
125 Robert E. Allinson, "The Myth of Comparative Philosophy or the Comparative Philosophy Malgré Lui" In Bo Mou (ed.), *Two Roads to Wisdom? Chinese and Analytic Philosophical Traditions*. La Salle: Open Court, 2001, pp. 269-292.
126 Connolly, *Doing Philosophy Comparatively*, pp. 22-23.
127 Idem, pp. 24-25. I can imagine that this argument has probably influenced the decision of using the title 'Doing Philosophy Comparatively' rather than 'Comparative Philosophy'.
128 In this he follows the distinction made by David B. Wong in "Three Kinds of Incommensurability" In Michael Krausz (ed.), *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation*. Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 1989, pp. 140-159.
129 Connolly, Doing Philosophy Comparatively, pp. 67-146.
130 The term, originally coming from mathematics, literally means 'incapable of being measured together'. It was introduced and popularized in the philosophy of science by both Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962; Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge*. 1975. Rev. ed. London: Verso, 1988.
131 Connolly, *Doing Philosophy Comparatively*, p. 72; also Wong, "Three Kinds of Incommensurability".

The fact that some terms in certain languages are untranslatable is undeniable. You only have to be substantially familiar with two languages to have had this experience. This of course applies *a fortiori* to puns and poetry. In an academic context we could mention examples like translating the Pali term *dukkha* as 'suffering' or the Sanskrit *buddhadhātu*, buddha-nature, as 'soul'. We could also stay closer to 'european' history and mention many Greek terms that are not easily translatable with any modern equivalent, like 'logos' (λόγος) or 'energeia' (ενέργεια).

With 'untranslatable' we, however, usually seem to mean 'untranslatable with any single term'. The fact that we can *discuss* the supposed untranslatability of some term, already shows that the problem is not as insuperable as we may think.[132] Could it not be more a problem of *mis*translation? Perhaps some translations of a single word need a description, clarification, annotation or even a neologism? The problem is also not something peculiar from one language to another, but also within a single language.[133] It depends on the complex connotative network a term is placed in, given that this network determines part of the meaning which is untranslatable. However, again this can be pointed out, we can discuss this, and therefore it does not form an insurmountable obstacle. The critique actually seems to be more a call for careful translation (i.e. nuance, completeness, etc.).

In the seminal article "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" American philosopher Donald Davidson discusses both *linguistic* as well as *foundational incommensurability*.[134] Davidson argues that when we interpret others we already assume that they are not incomprehensible. If we want to understand others this *principle of charity* is a necessity rather than an option, however, this principle "is not designed to eliminate disagreement, nor can it: its purpose is to make meaningful disagreement

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[132] Donald Davidson makes a similar claim with examples of how Benjamin Lee Whorf uses the English language to explain that some Hopi sentences cannot be translated and how Thomas S. Kuhn can communicate perfectly clear "what things were like before the revolution using – what else? – our post-revolutionary idiom", Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 47 (1973-1974): p. 6.

[133] *Of course* this problem is the same, cause where does one language stops and another one begins?

[134] Foundational incommensurability would be similar to Kuhn's incommensurability of 'paradigms'. The Latin 'paradigma' and Greek 'paradeigma' literally mean 'to show side by side', from 'para-' (beside) 'deiknynai' (Gr.)/'dicere' (Lat.) (meaning: 'to show'). These terms are traditionally used mostly in relation to grammar, in this case meaning 'pattern', 'model', 'example'. *Online Etymology Dictionary*, Douglas Harper (ed.), "paradigm (n.)", accessed on May 24, 2016, http://www.etymonline.com/

I would like to remark that it is interesting to see that even concerning the etymology of the word it already presupposes *different* models in order for any comparing to be possible. There is never only one 'paradigm' there are numerous ones besides each other, in which some in certain places at certain times may be more dominant.

possible, and this depends entirely on a foundation—*some* foundation—in agreement."[135]

Davidson goes on to argue that these foundations cannot be incommensurable, because if this were the case, we would be unable to interpret the other *at all*, we would, in other words, have no way of concluding that bases are different since we lack a method of concluding this.[136] That is to say that "[t]he 'very idea' of incommensurable conceptual schemes—whether based on language, culture, explanatory paradigms, or anything else—is an incoherent one."[137]

Now this leaves us with *evaluative incommensurability*, that is, the fact that in many cases we *do* disagree and that we seem to keep score in very different ways. This is so because different traditions may start from different principles (axioms, ideals, values…) that themselves admit of no further justification (but as I will argue later *this fact needs to have consequences for your argument*). This claim seems especially strong with regard to *moral* judgment. However I agree with Connolly when he, quite pragmatically, stresses that while we should be aware of different cultural standards

> this does not mean giving up our role as philosophers who make evaluative judgments. Philosophical progress means scrutinizing others' views and opening our own views up to scrutiny. To engage with problems that affect people all over the world, we must be prepared to navigate between the many opposing cultural perspectives that are present, saying which parts of a given cultural perspective help or hinder their solution.[138]

In sum: what the critique of *incommensurability* should remind us of, is that we should be *careful* and also *aware of projecting*, that we should have the *openness* not only to consider *other perspectives as legitimate*, but also to *continuously question our own*. The real problem, then, is not incommensurability but: *one-sidedness*, projecting our own fixations and biases (asymmetrically favouring philosophical categories, concepts and discourses);[139] and *generalization*, i.e. categories may be too large, or the inductive reasoning not

[135] Davidson, "Conceptual Scheme", p. 19; as said earlier, this critique is similar to Popper's critique on Sellars' 'myth of the given'. Karl R. Popper, "The Myth of the Framework" In M.A. Notturno (ed.), *The Myth of the Framework: In Defence of Science and Rationality*. London: Routledge, 1994, pp. 33-64.
[136] Davidson, "Conceptual Scheme", p. 20.
[137] Connolly, *Doing Philosophy Comparatively*, p. 78.
[138] Idem, p. 99.
[139] Idem, pp. 106-113.

representative enough, etc., the problem is not so much what we *include* in generalizing (since we cannot escape to do so to some degree) but what we *exclude*.[140]

2.2 Conceptual Frameworks and Language

2.2.1 Theory-Ladeness of Observation

Analyzing language and conceptual frameworks is important because the way we behave and act depends on what we think, believe and know. And the latter—except when inferred from our actions—is characteristically expressed in discursive form. Note that this does not presuppose that what we think we believe necessarily corresponds to the way we act; if there seems to be a contradiction[141] (because our beliefs do not correspond with our behaviour), this only shows that we are *just not really aware of what we actually manifest*.

Most of the time we are unaware of how our beliefs structure our behaviour and it is therefore important to note that our frameworks literally *frame* our perspective. They influence how we *view* the world, and consequently determine the way we *structure* society around us. *I am therefore not just talking about abstract ideas, but about the way those ideas are embodied within our daily lives.* This is what both postcolonialism as well as gender studies have relentlessly tried to point out and this is also the view the contextualist adheres to.

Within the philosophy of science, in the context of the debate on the (im)possibility of a *neutral/objective* scientific standpoint, this has been called the *theory-ladeness of observation*.[142] It is clear how the theory-ladeness of observation may easily

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[140] Connolly, *Doing Philosophy Comparatively*, p. 137; Connolly discusses different strategies to counter one-sidedness like *contextualization* (integrate and understand the text in the historical setting in which it was composed), *differentiation* (to try to get rid of our own concepts (as far as possible) and try to understand the general assumptions of the cultural tradition in which the text was written), and *bridge concepts* (neutral terms that do not carry whole frameworks with them). We could make some objections like: to what extent do 'neutral terms' exist?, and what is the use of historical context for the validity of an argument? With regards to generalization Connolly argues that it in itself is not a problem, as long as it is done as a result of exhaustively detailed study. Again we see a call for carefulness and completeness (see pp. 114-143).

[141] In 'reality' there exists no contradictions, since what exists at a certain moment in place and time cannot be thought *out* of existence, and what does not exist and a certain moment in time cannot be thought *into* existence. We have to be aware that negation is a property of propositions, i.e. language. Indeed this is what the term actually means: 'contra-diction'. We should also be aware not to confuse contrariety with contradiction. Only affirmation and its negation are contradictions. Negation is a logical operation (not an experience). How could my action be a contradiction of anything? It can only be described in someway 'X' and then be a contradiction of a proposition that I have claimed (i.e. '¬X').

[142] The term is from Norwood R. Hanson, *Patterns of Discovery: An Inquiry into the Conceptual Foundations of Science.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958, e.g. p. 19. This is primarily a term from the discussion within the philosophy of science but to my view it is just as relevant for the philosophy of language, and, actually, to the whole

structure a culturally specific 'morality', because it is ingrained in the whole of culture. Actions, traditions, ways of living our daily lives etc., are not consciously structured beforehand by each individual. They are a product of the history which we, as individuals, have lived. We do the things we do, and think the things we think, in many cases *just because* we have been raised in a certain cultural environment, and gone through all kinds of situations. We are of course born into an already organized way of living, which has been shaped by the countless individuals before us. We accept or deny (parts of) these frameworks for all kinds of different reasons, but we have to look critically at our own presuppositions, because in the end it are these that are mirrored in society at large.

2.2.2 Language as Use and Denomination

Analyzing conceptual frameworks, then, is in part analyzing language, but as Wittgenstein has argued ever since departing from his logical view of language: words are used in all kinds of ways and "what confuses us is the uniform appearance of words when we hear them in speech, or see them written or in print. For their *use* is not that obvious."[143] For the later Wittgenstein, meaning depends on the *use* of the words within a language community.[144] This departs from meaning as solely denotation and adds the notion of language as speech-act.[145] Although I fully agree with this critique, we should infer two things from this point of view.

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of philosophy. Arguments of the theory-ladeness of observation have been made by, amongst others, Thomas S. Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), Imre Lakatos' "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes" (1970), Paul Feyerabend's *Against Method* (1975, rev. ed. 1988) and, to some extent, Pierre Duhem's *La théorie physique: Son object et sa structure* (1906) and Willard van Orman Quine's "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" (1951), conflated in the heavily debated Duhem-Quine thesis (see for this debate: Donald Gillies, "The Duhem Thesis and the Quine Thesis" In *Philosophy of Science in the Twentieth Century: Four Central Themes.* Oxford: Blackwell, 1993, pp. 98-116).

[143] "Denk an die Werkzeuge in einem Werkzeugkasten: es ist da ein Hammer, eine Zange, eine Säge, eine Schraubenzieher, ein Maßstab, ein Leimtopf, Leim, Nägel und Schrauben. – So verschieden die Funktionen dieser Gegenstände, so verschieden sind die Funktionen der Wörter. (Und es gibt Ähnlichkeiten hier und dort.) Freilich, was uns verwirrt ist die Gleichförmigkeit ihrer Erscheinung, wenn die Wörter uns gesprohcne, oder in der Schrift und im Druck entgegentreten. Denn ihre *Verwendung* steht nicht so deutlich vor uns. Besonders nicht, wenn wir philosophieren!"/"Think of the tools in a toolbox: there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screwdriver, a rule, a glue-pot, glue, nails and screws. – The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects. (And in both cases there are similarities.) Of course, what confuses us is the uniform appearance of words when we hear them in speech, or see them written or in print. For their *use* is not that obvious. Especially when we are doing philosophy!" Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen/Philosophical Investigations* (*PI*). G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (trans.). Rev. 4th ed. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, 11, pp. 9/9e-10/10e.

[144] "Man kann für eine *große* Klasse von Fällen der Benützung des Wortes "Bedeutung" – wenn auch nicht für *alle* Fälle seiner Benützung – dieses Wort so erklären: Die Bedeutung eines Wortes ist sein Gebrauch in der Sprache. Und die *Bedeutung* eines Names erklärt man manchmal dadurch, daß man auf seinen *Träger* zeigt."/"For a *large* class of cases of the employment of the word "meaning" – though not for *all* – this word can be explained in this way: the meaning of a word is its use in the language. And the *meaning* of a name is sometimes explained by pointing to its *bearer*." Wittgenstein, *PI*, 43, p. 25/25e.

[145] J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words.* London: Oxford University Press, 1962; John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language.* Cambridge University Press, 1969.

The first, with the later Wittgenstein, that definition is problematic because (i) words define each other and (ii) seemingly uniform usage, as for instance with the word 'game'[146] is applied to such a great variety that 'what a game in essence is' (an order of words which in itself is already highly problematic) becomes indefinable: it leaves out too much, or it includes too much, hence, describing the way (these) words 'work' as *family resemblances*.[147]

The second point, however, is that utterances *still have* denominative and connotative meaning, that is, words and sentences *are* means of communicating. This is what I earlier referred to as the 'borders' or 'limits' of what any word can mean at any point in time. When in case of the death of the mother of your friend you say: 'She is now with her love', this phrase can be interpreted as a way of comforting (speech-act). The intention of the sentence in this case springs from a feeling of compassion, it does not necessarily imply a belief in an hereafter. However, even without the *conscious intention* of the speaker, words carry meaning beyond the subjective into the intersubjective. Regardless if it actuallt *is* an expression of the belief of the speaker,[148] *it can still have this meaning* because of the words used in this order, that is, because of *syntax* and *semantics* (though any meaning is always historically and contextually, i.e. intersubjectively, determined: it is this context which determines which interpretations are suitable).

I believe it is an equally wittgensteinian view to regard philosophy as a critique of language,[149] which has the aim of showing the fly the way out of the fly-bottle,[150] that is to say to clear misunderstandings that arise mainly when language *goes on holiday,*[151] because of the (mis)use of language. We can clarify problems by pointing to the incoherency of claims, the (mis)use of language, or the sloppiness of description (not nuanced, precise or complete enough). These problems are then not so much

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[146] Wittgenstein, *PI*, e.g. 3, p. 3/3e; 7, p. 5/5e.
[147] Idem, 67, p. 32/32e; 108, p. 47/47e; 179 pp. 72/72e-73/73e; the critique is similar to the buddhist critique of language tricking us into 'essentialism'.
[148] The argument is that language has intersubjective meaning, regardless of what the speaker *tries* to communicate. To claim the intention is primary in understanding language is to make the intentional fallacy, see: William K. Wimsatt & Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy" *The Sewanee Review* 54, no. 3 (1946): pp. 468-488. From this perspective it also makes sense to say that someone expresses him or herself improperly, i.e. incomprehensible.
[149] "Alle Philosophie ist 'Sprachkritik'" / "All philosophy is a 'critique of language'" Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 4.0031.
[150] "Was ist dein Ziel in der Philosophie? – Der Fliege den Ausweg aus dem Fliegenglas zeigen." / "What is your aim in philosophy? – To show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle." Wittgenstein, *PI*, 43, p. 110/110e.
[151] "Denn die philosophische Probleme enstehen, wenn die Sprache *feiert*." / "For philosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday*." Wittgenstein, *PI*, 38, p. 23/23e.

solved as *dis*solved, i.e. recognized as non-problems.[152] This will become important when I will discuss the justifications of claims according to pyrrhonian scepticism.

2.2.2 On Religious Language

But first I want to bring up the 'status' of religious claims. I would argue that the problem of diversity is not a *different* issue within and between what we have come to denote as 'religions'. I do not agree with the argument that a religious claim is anything *sui generis* compared to any other claim. (Indeed I am even sceptical towards the use of grand concepts like 'religion' and what it *tries* to denote.[153]) Although what we denominate as 'religion' has its limits, this does not mean that language within this domain suddenly transcends the use of language as compared to other domains. I can understand from the perspective of the emic/etic discussion why philosophers like Paul J. Griffiths in his *Problems of Religious Diversity* would say that

> the questions raised or sharpened by religious diversity will often look very different when viewed from inside a religious form of life than they will when viewed from outside. Likewise, answers to them that prove satisfactory to someone who is religious will very likely not so prove to someone who is not.[154]

But even if this is so, we need to ask the question how such ways of life come into existence in the first place. Are all religious utterances, symbolical expressions? And if they are symbolic, what are they symbolic *of*? Is there no claim at all? How does this account for theological discussions that can be found in all 'religions'? Does a buddhist monk not *believe* that the Eightfold Path towards cessation (nirvāṇa, 'blowing out') of

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[152] "Wir wollen nicht das Regelsystem für die Verwendung unserer Worte in unerhörter Weise verfeinern oder vervollständigen. Denn die Klarheit, die wir anstreben, ist allerdings eine *vollkommene*. Aber das heißt nur, daß die philosophischen Probleme *volkommen* verschwinden sollen." / "We don't want to refine or complete the system of rules for the use of our words in unheard-of ways. For the clarity that we are aiming at is indeed *complete* clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear." Wittgenstein, *PI*, 133, p. 56/56e.

[153] There is many literature on the deconstruction of large concepts. In the case of the notion of the term 'religion' I would like to refer to the excellent, if to a certain degree somewhat dated, analysis of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion.* New York: Mentor Books, 1964; and the more recent Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013.

[154] Paul J. Griffiths, *Problems of Religious Diversity.* Oxford: Blackwell, 2001, p. 19. Griffiths view is to a certain extent informed by a wittgensteinian notion of religious language which is generally considered as a form of fideism: religious language is not a structure of empirical claims and judgments, but a symbolically expressed commitment to a way of life. See: Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Lectures on Religious Belief" In *Wittgenstein: Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*. Cyril Barrett (ed.). Oxford: Blackwell, 1966, pp. 53-64. See also the introduction to this text by the editors. This lecture is compiled on the basis of notes made by students of Wittgenstein.

desire and craving is possible? Does it really make sense to say that when a muslim says the šahāda *no belief is involved*? (Within Islam the sincere intention (or *niyyah*) is actually considered pivotal for reciting the šahāda!).

Religious utterances, like any other type of utterance, includes claims that in most cases are intended to have meaning; even if these utterances are poetic, symbolic, metaphoric or have several layers of meaning. This is so because the way language works is not specific to religious language per se but applies to the whole of language—in denomination, connotation[155] as well as speech-act. The predicate 'religious' only designates that we have assigned it to a certain domain, discourse or practice that we have come to denote as such.

2.2.3 Trapped in the Discourse

Philosophers like Wilfrid Sellars, Richard Rorty, Michel Foucault, Thomas Kuhn and also Ludwig Wittgenstein to some degree, remind us again and again of the traps of language. But their views, although more sophisticated than isolated quotes like "the myth of the given",[156] "there is only the dialogue"[157] and "[t]he limits of my language mean the limits of my world"[158] would suggest, all of them seem to stop *exactly at that limit*. We supposedly are not able to go beyond this *wall of language*,[159] or operate outside of a *paradigm* or a *discourse*. One could argue this is a product of a tradition of thinking in western philosophy that goes back at least as far as the epistemological investigations of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.[160] Constructivism is not

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[155] The importance of connotation for meaning in semiotics was a critical addition of Roland Barthes on the model of signs as 'merely' signifier-signified of Ferdinand de Saussure.

[156] Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind".

[157] "That is why I think we need to say, despite Putnam, that "there is only the dialogue," only *us*, and to throw out the last residues of the notion of 'trans-cultural rationality.'" Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?" In *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers, Volume 1.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 32

[158] "*Die Grenzen meiner Sprache* bedeuten die Grenzen meiner welt.", Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 5.6.

[159] The metaphor comes from Jacques Lacan. After growing up in a language community (or what Lacan calls *the symbolic order*) *le mur du langage* stands in-between us and direct access to *the Real*. The metaphor is quite clear, but I stop here, since I have come to the conclusion that almost all the rest of his work is not.

[160] One of the most quoted sentences from this book that arguably expresses the core-thought is: "Gedanken ohne Inhalt sind leer, Anschauungen ohne Begriffe sind blind." I prefer the original German since the English "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind." is arguably subject to mistranslation because of key terms like 'concept' and 'intuition'. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*, B75/A51. The whole passage continues: "Daher ist es eben so nothwendig, seine Begriffe sinnlich zu machen (d. i. ihnen den Gegenstand in der Anschauung beizufügen), als seine Anschauungen sich verständlich zu machen (d. i. sie unter Begriffe zu bringen). Beide Vermögen oder Fähigkeiten können auch ihre Functionen nicht vertauschen. Der Verstand vermag nichts anzuschauen und die Sinne nichts zu denken. Nur daraus, daß sie sich vereinigen, kann Erkenntniß entspringen. Deswegen darf man aber doch nicht ihren Antheil vermischen, sondern man hat große Ursache, jedes von dem andern sorgfältig abzusondern und zu unterscheiden." (B75-76/A51-52) One could argue that Kant is saying that there is no way to separate our experience and our conceptual framework. However passages like B122-123/A89-91 and B145 seem to contradict this interpretation. The solution is to place this remark in the context of the larger project of the *Critique*: "that intuitions and concepts are cognitively

denying 'reality' (it is not external world scepticism) but it seems to claim, similar to Kant's view of the impossibility of having access to *das Ding an sich*, that after being introduced in a language community there is no going back.[161] This view still has a tremendous influence. It is essentially the claim that a conceptless view of reality is impossible. This is an all-encompasing variant of *the theory-ladeness of perception*. Indeed Foucault writes:

> One is not seeking, therefore, to pass from the text to thought, from talk to silence, from the exterior to the interior, from spatial dispersion to the pure recollection of the moment, from superficial multiplicity to profound unity. *One remains within the dimension of discourse.*[162]

Although reality is not denied it is pushed back to the limits of our language, the limits of our conceptual frameworks, because *perceptions without concepts are blind*. Reality is out there but it is inaccessible because a wall of language blocks-off unmediated access. Humans, from this perspective, never seem to be able to have a unmediated experience of 'reality'. This of course is the locus of the epistemological position of contextualism in the comparative mysticism debate.

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complementary and semantically interdependent *for the specific purpose of constituting objectively valid judgments.*" (emphasis in original) Robert Hanna, "The Togetherness Principle, Kant's Conceptualism, and Kant's Non-conceptualism." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [2013], accessed on 3 May 2016, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-judgment/

[161] Of course for Kant this is not due to language alone but due to the way our cognitive faculties structure the noumenal (we should be aware of this deviation from Kant!). Reality appears to us as phenomena, but we have no clue as to what reality-in-itself (noumena) is; cf. e.g. *KdRV* A256/B312. Kant clearly does not on all occasions seem to claim that a conceptless view of the world is impossible as remarked in the note above.

[162] Foucault, *Archaeology*, p. 85, my emphasis.

2.3 From Language to Experience

Pyrrhonian scepticism has struggled with similar problems (of for instance the diversity of conceptual frameworks) but instead of ending up trapped in the discursive it ends up, like apophatism, by disclosing the limits of language, thereby bringing us back to experience. I will discuss Sextus Empiricus through the lens of modern critiques on scepticism to show why pyrrhonism is mistunderstood, and that it can be approached better as a version of the *via negativa*. But first we have to briefly introduce the basics of pyrrhonism.

2.3.1 Absolute Justification in Pyrrhonism

Pyrrhonism is a tradition of scepticism based on the teachings of Pyrrho of Elis (c. 365-275 BCE). Through Timon of Phlius we know that he taught that in order to find happiness (εὐδαιμονία) one must pay attention to three questions: (i) What is the nature of *pragmata* ((ethical) matters)?; (ii) What attitude should we adopt towards them?; and (iii) What will be the outcome for those who have this approach?

> As for *pragmata* 'matters, questions, topics', they are all *adiaphora* 'undifferentiated by a logical differentia' and *astathmēta* 'unstable, unbalanced, not measurable' and *anepikrita* 'unjudged, unfixed, undecidable'. Therefore, neither our sense-perceptions nor our 'views, theories, beliefs' (*doxai*) tell us the truth or lie [about *pragmata*]; so we certainly should not rely on them [to do it]. Rather, we should be *adoxastous* 'without views', *aklineis* 'uninclined [toward this side or that]', and *akradantous* 'unwavering [in our refusal to choose]', saying about every single one that it no more is than it is not or it both is and is not or it neither is nor is not.[163]

In answer to the third question Timon says that it will lead first to *aphasia* (non-assertion) and next to *ataraxia* ('non-disturbance' mostly translated as 'quietude' or 'tranquillity').[164]

The sceptical works of Sextus Empiricus (c. 160-210 CE) are the most complete surviving works of pyrrhonian scepticism. It is an extensive discussion of the

[163] Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* as quoted in Chrisopher I. Beckwith, *Greek Buddha: Pyrrho's Encounter with Early Buddhism in Central Asia.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015, p. 23. See also: Richard Bett, "Pyrrho", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [2014], accessed on 20 May 2016 http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pyrrho/
[164] Bett, "Pyrrho".

philosophical positions that philosophers, scientists and physicians in that time could adopt.[165] Sextus separates these positions into three types, which he labels 'dogmatic', 'academic' and 'sceptic'.[166] The main argument of his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* is that in the light of the impossibility of any ultimate justification of claims, we should suspend judgment (*ἐποχή, epoché*, 'suspension'). I will first discuss this argument and next I will go deeper into pyrrhonism by discussing it from a modern perspective.

According to Sextus, the later sceptics used five *tropes* (or *modes*, *turnings*) that show why ultimate justifications are impossible. He lists them as: *discrepancy*, *relativity*, *hypothesis*, *infinite regress*, and *circular reasoning*.[167]

Discrepancy consists of the observation that with regard to the object presented, there has arisen an 'interminable' conflict between common people and philosophers alike.[168] This is what I have called 'diversity of conflicting conceptual frameworks'. *Relativity* is the view that things derive their 'meaning' in relation to other things (i.e. 'long', 'hard', 'heavy' etc. is determined with relation to things that are 'short', 'soft', 'light' etc.), this is similar to the later wittgensteinian critique of language, the result is that these aspects are not *fundamental* or *essential* to the object we ascribe them to.[169]

Now, the trilemma of justification arises because claims only seem justifiable in the following three ways:[170] *hypothesis* (also dogma or axioma), *infinite regress*, and *circular reasoning*.[171] All three of them are unsatisfactory. One can accept or start from a certain proposition as 'true' (without proof), this is axiomatic. It is an arbitrary point at which one decides to start. You want this to be an *evident* point, but philosophers have argued about the validity of these starting points (indeed the difference of opinion was itself already observed). Despite this discussion, it is furthermore *logically* unsatisfactory to simply start at a random point. We want to have proof for this initial proposition. One

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[165] As a note: again be aware of what these terms 'philosopher', 'scientist' and 'physicians' mean and we will see that the content of these concepts in those times are definitely not equal with (though also not completely different from) the contemporary 'meaning' of these terms.

[166] Better understood as: 'dogmatism', 'academic scepticism' (or 'dogmatic scepticism') and 'pyrrhonianism' or 'pyrrhonian scepticism'. What we in modern day language understand as 'scepticism' is actually the 'academic' version of it and not the 'pyrrhonian' one Sextus advocates.

[167] Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (*PH*), I.164-165. R.G. Bury (trans.). Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933, p. 95. For my discussion I switched the order in which Sextus' originally lists them.

[168] Sextus, *PH,* I.165, p. 95.

[169] Idem, I.167, p. 95.

[170] According to Diogenes Laertius these three objections (the first two Sextus mentions are not included) can be ascribed to Agrippa the Sceptic, it is therefore also known as 'Agrippa's trilemma' or, through German philosopher Hans Albert, as 'the Münchhausen trilemma', referring to Rudolf Erich Raspe's fictional character of Baron Münchhausen who saved himself from being drowned in a swamp by pulling himself and his horse out by his own hair. Note that one may criticize this list because the so-called 'transcendental arguments' are missing. However, it has been very difficult to proof that any argument is a transcendental argument (except for maybe the awareness of your own consciousness, which is exactly the point at which we will end (or start for that matter)).

[171] Sextus, *PH*, I.166-169, p. 95.

can do so by providing a proof, but this again needs to be proven *ad infinitum*.[172] This of course is also unsatisfactory since its result is endless. The last option then is to prove something which in fact was already presupposed by the initial proposition. This is called a circular argument. This is of course is considered a fallacy, but still, in complex arguments we often seem to argue this way unconsciously.[173]

2.3.2 From Pluralism to Pyrrhonism

Nicholas Rescher in his *Pluralism: Against the Demand for Consensus* is, like I am, searching for a response to the problem of diveristy of frameworks. I will discuss his position, and this will also make clear why I introduced scepticism in the first place. My point is to look at the *purpose of pyrrhonism* through the commonly made mistake of interpreting it the way Rescher does.

Rescher, like myself, starts from the observation of diversity of conceptual frameworks. He furthermore acknowledges, like me, the *foundationlessness* of all these systems.[174] So far we get along quite well. But he does not seem to acknowledge that this last step should have consequences for your argument. Instead Rescher starts looking for, what he describes as, 'a sensible middle ground' between scepticism (rejecting all positions) and syncretism (accepting all positions). According to him there exist four options to deal with conceptual diversity:

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[172] This is the reason why Russell and Whitehead needed several hundred pages of the *Principia Mathematica* just to 'prove' the proposition that '1+1=2'. But, as Gödel has showed, to deliver this proof is impossible.

[173] It is important to make note of a few modern developments in foundationalism within logics which seem in some regard very similar to what Sextus has been doing. The first two developments in mathematics are mirrored to some extent in (theoretical and experimental) physics. It is however important to be aware that within logics the crucial step of *negation of negation* is not made, its purpose is not to bring you back to experience.

(1a) The development of logical consistent non-euclidean geometries in which the parallel postulate does no longer hold; (1b) Albert Einstein's theory of relativity in which space is described as non-euclidean;

(2a) The development of L.E.J. Brouwer's and Arend Heyting's intuitionistic logics which is logical consistent although the principle of excluded middle (*tertium non datur*) is rejected (and therewith that double negation equals affirmation ($\neg\neg p \Leftrightarrow p$), as well as that conclusions can be drawn from argument ad absurdum); (2b) the discovery of wave-particle duality in quantum mechanics;

(3) But especially: Kurt Gödel's two incompleteness theorems in which he proved that there are limits of provability in formal axiomatic theories: for any formal system there will be statements on natural numbers that are true but which cannot be proved to be true in that system (i.e. it is *incomplete*); *or*, if a system can be proved to be complete using its own logic (and axioms) then there will be a theorem (termed '*the Gödel sentence*' which is of the form 'G cannot be proved within the system F') in the system that is contradictory (i.e. it is *inconsistent*). With these two theorems, which were originally directed at Russell and Whitehead's *Principia Mathematica*, Gödel proved that the *Principia Mathematica* as well as any other attempt to create this foundation would never be able to achieve its goal;

(4) And: Willard Van Orman Quine's 1951 article "Two Dogma's of Empiricism" in which he argued that (i) the distinction between analytic and synthetic statements is ungrounded and (ii) that reductionism refers exclusively to immediate experience. This has resulted in a scepticism towards the analytic/synthetic distinction as well as distinctions of an *a priori/a posteriori* kind which is arguably based on a similar notion.

[174] Nicholas Rescher, *Pluralism: Against the Demand for Consensus*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993, pp. 124-125.

1. accept none: reject all, ours included;
2. accept one: retain ours;
3. accept several: conjoin others with ours;
4. 'rise above the conflict': say 'a plague on all your houses' to the available alternatives and look elsewhere—to the 'ideal observer', to the 'wise man' of the Stoics, to the 'ideally rational agent' of the economists, or some such (in *these* circumstances) idealization.[175]

He dismisses the first option as self-referentially incoherent, the third as rationally unfeasible (since different bases do not combine), and the fourth as utopian and unrealistic in much the same way as Katz. For Rescher only the second option makes any sense. He calls this position *perspectival rationalism*.[176] It is the view that

> only one alternative should be accepted, and this acceptance has a basis of rational cogency, albeit this basis may differ perspectivally from group to group, era to era, and school to school[177]

According to Rescher one accepts the perspective that to us seems to be the most coherent and logical one, but this is only subjective rationality, which in the end cannot be ultimately based.[178] Although Rescher does seem to leave space for a dialectical process of deciding ones perspective,[179] it is unclear to me how this actually works, especially in relation to the impossibility of rationally justifying one's own viewpoint.

But if no single perspective can ever be completely rationally justified, nor can we ever decide which version corresponds to the way things 'truly' are,[180] then my question would be: *why stick to any perspective at all*? In my view Rescher discards the first option of scepticism all to easily![181] In his discussion, while referring to Sextus, he

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[175] Rescher, *Pluralism*, 1993, p. 101.
[176] Idem, p. 64.
[177] Idem, p. 80.
[178] Idem, p. 110.
[179] "How can I maintain this agreement between my position and that of 'all sensible people'? Not, surely, because I seek to impose *my* standard on *them*, but because I do—or should!—endeavour to take account of their standards in the course of shaping my own. Co-ordination is achieved not because I insist on their conforming to me, but because I have made every *reasonable* effort to make mine only that which (as best I can tell) ought to be everyone's." Rescher, *Pluralism*, p. 111.
[180] Rescher, *Pluralism*, pp. 124-125.
[181] As well as the third, since we, with Davidson, could argue that such a presupposed incommensurability of bases is incoherent to begin with.

discards it by using the standard critique of self-referential incoherency, i.e. to claim that there is no truth is to make a truth-claim, which leads to a contradiction.[182] However, when we read the work of Sextus we see that he is actually very aware of this critique and indeed agrees with it in the case of *academic scepticism* (for they make a dogma out of negation). But this is definitely not the kind of scepticism Sextus adheres to, and we could say then that Rescher presents a straw man. In the fourth chapter, 'What Scepticism Is', of his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* Sextus writes:

> Scepticism is an ability, or mental attitude, which opposes appearances to judgements in any way whatsoever, with the result that, owing to the equipollence of the objects and reasons thus opposed, we are brought firstly to a state of mental suspense and next to a state of "unperturbedness" or quietude.[183]

There is a clear *purpose* of this scepticism, which becomes even more evident in the anecdote described in chapter twelve 'What is the End of Scepticism?':

> The Sceptic, in fact, had the same experience which is said to have befallen the painter Apelles. Once, they say, when he was painting a horse and wished to represent in the painting the horse's foam, he was so unsuccessful that he gave up the attempt and flung at the picture the sponge on which he used to wipe the paints off his brush, and the mark of the sponge produced the effect of a horse's foam. So, too, the Sceptics were in hopes of gaining quietude by means of a decision regarding the disparity of the objects of sense and of thought, and being unable to effect this they suspended judgement; and they found that quietude, as if by chance, followed upon their suspense, even as a shadow follows its substance.[184]

The emphasis on the experience of tranquillity is inescapable—something Rescher passes over. To suspend judgment, to let go of ones opinions, results in the *experience* of *ataraxia*. This form of scepticism is not self-referentially incoherent since scepticism in

[182] Rescher, *Pluralism*, pp. 80-88.
[183] Sextus, *PH,* I.8, p. 7.
[184] Idem, I.28-30, pp. 18-21.

this sense is only *a method*, *a tool* which can be thrown away after *ataraxia* happens.[185] The argument is essentially that a sceptical argument "after abolishing every proof, can cancel itself also".[186]

Indeed this may sound similar to the philosophy of the stoics who argue in their *philosophy as practice* for the clear separation of those things that are under our control and those things that are not:

> Under our control are conception, choice, desire, aversion, and, in a word, everything that is our own doing; not under our control are our body, our property, reputation, office, and, in a word, everything that is not our own doing.[187]

It is our judgments which distress us, not what has actually happened.[188] Rescher not only negates the first of his four options, namely scepticism, all to easily, but consequently denies the possibility of the fourth option 'rising above the conflict'. Like the stoic wise is quieted in emotions (*apatheia*) the sceptic wise is quieted from worry (*ataraxia*). According to Sextus this naturally follows a process of continuously denying ones' tendency to grasp 'reality' with judgments. To not accept *as well as* to not discard.

My thesis, then, is that it is this *scepticism as method* that is the basis of the *apophatic way* (the *via negativa*). Could it be that Rescher's first option (scepticism) can lead us to the fourth (namely, rising above conflict)? Does, contra Katz's contextualist claim, this way of negation as Sextus offers, show us a way out of the discursive?

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[185] Indeed what nowadays has been called the 'Wittgensteinian ladder' from his remark in 6.54 of the *Tractatus*, has been used by many different philosophers like Hegel (*Phenomenology of Mind*, Preface, Chapter VII.26), Schopenhauer (*The World as Will and Idea,* Vol. II, Chapter VII) and, through him (?), Nietzsche (*Human, All-Too-Human*, Chapter I.20). The most early source of this metaphor is, how could it be different?, Sextus' *Adv. Log.,* II.481: "just as it is not impossible for the man who has ascended to a high place by a ladder to overturn the ladder with his foot after ascent, so also it is not unlikely that the Sceptic after he has arrived at the demonstration of his thesis by means of the argument proving the non-existence of proof, as it were by a step-ladder, should then abolish this very argument." Cf. the simile of the raft in buddhism (*Majjhima Nikaya* (*MN*), *The Middle-length Discourses:* 22).

[186] Sextus, *Adv. Log.*, II.480-481; For the reason that this quiets the mind, this type of scepticism has sometimes been called 'therapeutic'. This approach can be found in many different versions. Gautama Buddha's *middle way* can be considered such a version in reference to the 'raft'. Indeed Beckwith in his book *Greek Buddha* argues that Pyrrho possibly was influenced by buddhism. It, however, can also be found in daoism. For an interesting comparison, see: Paul Kjellberg, "Skepticism, Truth, and the Good Life: A Comparison of Zhuangzi and Sextus Empiricus" *Philosophy East and West* 44, no. 1 (1994): pp. 111-133.

[187] Epictetus, *Discourses, Books 3-4. Fragments. The Encheiridion.* W.A. Oldfather (trans.). Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928, *The Encheiridion* 1, p. 483.

[188] Epictetus, *The Encheiridion*, 16, p. 495.

Oh, East is East, and West is West,
and never the twain shall meet,
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at
God's great Judgment Seat;
But there is neither East nor West,
Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face,
tho' they come from the ends of the earth![189]
—Rudyard Kipling, *The Ballad of East and West*

III. Historical Influences

Before I move on to analyze six different cases of mystics grouped into two *triads* of 'east' and 'west' respectively, I will firstly look into the historical context and especially investigate the historical ties between these traditions. By 'western' I will understand European, Middle Eastern and North African traditions (i.e. Asia-European, Arabian-North African) and by 'eastern' I will understand more specifically South East Asian traditions (i.e. Indian, Tibetan, Chinese, Korean, Japanese). Although the conceptual division of traditions in east and west is quite abstract, in this case I think it can be justified as signifying two separate areas which at certain points in time were geographically separate.

The purpose of this chapter is to place this research in an historical and cultural continuum, which will form the backdrop against which our analysis of apophatic mysticism takes place. To compare conceptual frameworks and at the same time to neglect historical evidence could result in making the wrong connections as the contextualist critique has aptly shown. It is therefore important to investigate what possible influences there have been between these different traditions.

[189] Rudyard Kipling, "The Ballad of East and West" In Edmund Clarence Stedman (ed.), A Victorian anthology, 1837–1895; selections illustrating the editor's critical review of British poetry in the reign of Victoria. Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1895, lines 1-4. The poem has become a cliché in the context of this kind of research, however, most of the time only the first line is quoted, but I think especially the third and fourth give an interesting shift towards the meaning of the whole stanza. The difference between 'east' and 'west' is both affirmed as well as negated.

3.1 Brief Overview of Historical Influences

3.1.1 'Influence' in the 'West'

The exchange of cultures and ideas within the mediterranean area are undeniable.[190] The influences of Plato and Aristotle (and, of course, other pre and post-socratic philosophers) on subsequent hellenic culture,[191] early christianity,[192] islam,[193] and later judaism[194] are also clearly documented. More specifically for the purpose of our study, traditions of early, middle and neoplatonic thought as well as neoaristotelianism for mystical traditions in both Roman catholic as well as eastern orthodox christianity, islam and judaism have been convincingly pointed out.[195] Other research on influences of mystical traditions in the 'west' of diverse religions has been on cross-cultural contact in later times,[196] as well as the influence of heterodox currents.[197] This is not to say that it is always completely clear *who* influenced *who* exactly, but it is undeniable that there was a complex intermingling, influence and exchange between all these cultures.

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[190] E.g. Walter Burkert, *Die orientalisierende Epoche in der griechischen Religion und Literatur.* Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1984; Charles Penglase, *Greek Myths and Mesopotamia: Parallels and Influence in the Homeric Hymns and Hesiod*. London: Routledge, 1994.

[191] E.g. Philip Merlan, "Greek Philosophy From Plato to Plotinus" In: Arthur H. Armstrong (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967, pp. 14-132.

[192] E.g. Inglis P. Sheldon-Williams, "The Greek Christian Platonist Tradition From the Cappadocians to Maximus and Eriugena" In: Arthur H. Armstrong (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967, pp. 425-533; Arthur H. Armstrong & Robert A. Markus, *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy.* London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1960; Christopher Stead, *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

[193] E.g. Richard Walzer, *Greek Into Arabic: Essays on Islamic Philosophy.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962; Richard Waltzer, "Early Islamic Philosophy" In: Arthur H. Armstrong (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967, pp. 643-669; Majid Fakhry, "Greek Philosophy: Impact on Islamic Philosophy" In Edward Craig (ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy.* London: Routledge, 1998, pp. 155-159.

[194] E.g. Martin Hengel, *Judentum und Hellenismus: Studien zu ihrer Begegnung unter Berücksichtigung Palästinas bis zur Mitte des 2 Jh.s v.Chr.* Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1973; Victor Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews.* New York: Atheneum, 1975; Peter Schäfer, *Geschichte der Juden in der Antike: Die Juden Palästinas von Alexander dem Großen bis zur arabischen Eroberung.* Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1983.

[195] E.g. Philip Merlan, *Monopsychism, Mysticism, Metaconsciousness: Problems of the Soul in the Neoaristotelian and Neoplatonic Tradition.* The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963; Philip Merlan, *From Platonism to Neoplatonism.* 1953. 3rd Rev. ed. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975. And the whole collection edited by Armstrong, *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, is essentially arguing for this.

[196] E.g. Lenn E. Goodman, "Crosspollinations: Philosophically Fruitful Exchanges Between Jewish and Islamic Thought" *Medieval Encounters* 1, no. 3 (Brill: Leiden, 1995): pp. 323-357; Michael McGaha, "The Sefer Ha-Bahir and Andalusian Sufism" *Medieval Encounters* 3, no. 1 (Brill: Leiden, 1997): pp. 20-57; Moshe Idel & Bernard McGinn (eds.), *Mystical Union in Judaism, Christianity and Islam: An Ecumenical Dialogue.* New York: Continuum, 1999; Harvey J. Hames, "A Seal Within a Seal: The Imprint of Sufism in Abraham Abulafia's Teachings" *Medieval Encounters* 12, no. 2 (Brill: Leiden, 2006): pp. 153-172.

[197] E.g. Eric R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965; John D. Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition.* Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2001, we already mentioned.

3.1.2 'Influence' in the 'East'

The area that we are referring to with the term 'east' is (i) much larger, (ii) spans a greater period of time, and (iii) applies to different geographical locations which developed independently until certain points in time.

The *vedic* ritualistic traditions (c. 2000-1500 BCE) and *vedantic* (*upaniṣadic*) emphasis on subjective inner insight (c. 800-500 BCE) became part of the brahmanical base of what we now demarcate using the problematically vague term of 'hinduism'.[198] Next to these brahmanical traditions there arose by approximately 500 BCE diverse *śramaṇa*[199] individuals and groups, of which buddhism and jainism became the largest. The buddhist teachings, on which I will focus here, spread from the east of India to Sri Lanka by the third century BCE,[200] to south-east Asia around the first centuries CE,[201] and to what is now Burma and Thailand by the fifth century CE.[202] Specifically mahāyāna buddhist currents began entering China's Han empire (206 BCE - 220 CE) in the first century of the common era, most likely via ancient trading routes through central Asia.[203] During this time of the Han dynasty, both the traditions of confucianism[204] and daoism[205] were firmly established. By the third century there had been established a mahāyāna buddhist community,[206] and their doctrine would begin to penetrate the educated elite by the fourth century CE.[207] However, while traditional scholarship was quite unanimous in the claim that

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[198] Richard King discusses the creation of the *myth of 'hinduism'* as an orientalist invention. Indeed such a large abstract term, first used in the nineteenth century 'west', is not able to meaningfully address all the diverse (even non-vedic and brahamic) traditions that where and are part of this umbrella term. King actually concludes that "[t]o continue to talk of "Hinduism" even as a broad cultural phenomenon is as problematic as the postulation of a unified cultural tradition known as "Westernism."" Richard King, "Orientalism and the Modern Myth of "Hinduism"" *Numen* 46, no. 3 (Brill, Leiden, 1999): pp. 146-185; Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and 'The Mystic East'.* London: Routledge, 1999; Will Sweetman shows that this term was actually the result of a process that started already in the seventeenth century, Will Sweetman, *Mapping Hinduism: 'Hinduism' and the Study of Indian Religions, 1600-1776.* Halle: Franckesche Stifungen zu Halle, 2003, pp. 154-155.

[199] Lit. 'one who strives', it belongs to technical vocabulary of Indian religions as to refer to 'one who strives religiously or spiritually', hence it is also translated sometimes as 'ascetic'. These traditions, to which buddhism and jainism amongst others are categorized, have been called 'renouncer tradition' (saṃnyāsin). This is the phenomenon of individuals renouncing their 'householder' role in society to devote themselves to a spiritual life. By the fifth century BCE this phenomenon was both widespread and varied. See: Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 9-10.

[200] Rupert, *Foundations*, p. 253.

[201] Idem, p. 256.

[202] Idem, p. 256.

[203] Idem, p. 257; Paul Demiéville, "Philosophy and Religion From Han to Sui" In Denis Twitchettt & John K. Fairbank (eds.), *The Cambridge History of China. Volume 1: The Ch'in and Han Empires 221 B.C. – A.D. 220.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 821.

[204] Originating in the famous philosopher Kǒng Zǐ, lit. Master Kǒng, more commonly known in his Latinized version as Confucius (551-479 BCE).

[205] Originating in the *Dàodéjīng* (also the *Lǎozǐ*) by an author referred to as Lǎo Zǐ (c. 6th/5th century - 531 BCE), lit. 'Old Master', and the writings called the *Zhuāngzǐ* after 'Master Zhuāng' who's own name was Zhōu (c. 369-286 BCE).

[206] Demiéville, "Philosophy and Religion From Han to Sui", p. 823.

[207] Idem, p. 808.

mahāyāna buddhist concepts were 'matched' with daoist concepts in early translations,[208] modern scholarship has began to question the importance of *geyi* (*matching concepts*) as a modern scholarly construction.[209] This does not mean, however, that the reciprocal influence between buddhist currents and daoist ones is questioned, indeed there is too much evidence for this early mutual influence.[210] We know for instance that the influential Chinese buddhist monk Sengzhao (c. 378-413 CE) combined insights from the *Lǎozǐ*, *Zhuāngzǐ* and mahāyāna buddhist scriptures.[211] And that the buddhist Dàoshēng (c. 360-434 CE) because of his focus on sudden enlightenment has been called 'the actual founder of *chán*' (zen) by some.[212] Both of these were students of the famous Kumārajīva (344-413 CE), who translated buddhist texts from Sanskrit to Chinese. Especially interesting in this case is the early fifth century daoist text *Inner Explanations of the Three Heavens* (*Santian neijie jing*) in which the legend is described of Lǎo Zǐ leaving China in the 9th century BCE to go to India and being reborn there as Gautama Buddha, by way of arguing that buddhism was originally daoist.[213] In *chán* a similar move is made by placing Bodhidharma in a direct lineage of the Indian masters to the later Chinese patriarchs.

Summarizing this we can say that with respect to the Indian and Asian traditions scholars generally agree that the buddhist *śramaṇa* counter-movements developed in opposition to traditional brahamanic/vedic traditions in 500 BCE, that

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[208] A process referred to as *geyi* or *ko-i*. Cf. Demiéville, "Philosophy and Religion From Han to Sui", p. 825: "The first translations are full of Toaist expressions to which the Chinese collaborators had recourse in order to translate technical Buddhist terms: *yoga* or *bodhi* became *tao*, (the Way); *nirvāṇa* became *wu-wei*, (quiescence, or "no-ado"); the absolute (*tathatā*, "suchness") became *pen-wu*, (nonbeing); and the Buddhist saint (*arhat*) was transformed into a Taoist immortal (*chen-jen*). In this way Buddhist gnōsis was assimilated to Taoist gnōsis, which was called the study of the mysteries (*hsüan-hsüeh*)."

[209] Victor H. Mair, "What is *Geyi*, After All?" In Alan K.L. Chan & Yuet-Keung Lo (eds.), *Philosophy and Religion in Early Medieval China.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010, pp. 227-264.

It is worthwhile to discuss this article briefly because it addresses a very prevalent misconception in most of academic as well as popular works on the relationship between Indian buddhism and Chinese daoism. Mair argues that when you "gather all of the available references to *geyi*, both inside and outside the Buddhist canon, then translate and annotate each one of these references in context (…) it emerges clearly that *geyi* had nothing whatsoever to do with translation, but that it was instead a highly ephemeral and not-very-successful attempt on the part of a small number of Chinese teachers to cope with the flood of numbered lists of categories, ideas, and so forth (of which Indian thinkers were so enamored) that came to China in the wake of Buddhism." (p. 227). According to Mair translating 'geyi' as 'matching concepts' is wrong, it should be 'categorizing concepts' (231). It was an "exegetical method" (p. 232) and actually "a short-lived phenomenon, as it was roundly repudiated by the very next generation of Chinese Buddhist teachers" (p. 233). He in other words argues that "*geyi*, as now understood, is a thoroughly modern construction" (p. 227).

[210] The standard study on this topic is Daijō Tokiwa, *Shina ni okeru Bukkyo to Jukyo Dokyo* (*Buddhism in China in its Relation to Confucianism and Taoism*) 1930. 2nd ed. Tokyo: Toyo Bunko, 1966; cf. Kang-nam Oh, "Taoist Influence on Hua-yen Buddhism: A Case of the Sinicization of Buddhism in China" *Chung-Hwa Buddhist Journal* 13, no. 2 (2000): pp. 277-297; Christine Mollier, *Buddhism and Taoism Face to Face: Scripture, Ritual, and Iconographic Exchange in Medieval China.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008.

[211] Heinrich Dumoulin, *A History of Zen Buddhism.* 1959. Paul Peachey (trans.) New York: Pantheon Books, 1963, pp. 58-61.

[212] Dumoulin, *History of Zen*, pp. 61-66.

[213] Mollier, Buddhism and Taoism Face to Face, p. 8; cf. Dumoulin, History of Zen, p. 55.

this buddhist currents travelled south and that specifically mahāyāna buddhism gained ground between the first and fourth century CE in Han dynasty China. Because of an exchange between mahāyāna buddhism and daoism the peculiar tradition of *chán* was able to take shape.

3.1.3 'Influence' Between 'West' and 'East'?

Naturally, there was much more going on in these parts of the world during this extensive period of time than I have described. I have briefly discussed the influence so we can place the texts in the second part of this chapter along these lines. However, we still have to look at the possibility of these two strands *intersecting* each other. I will examine some of the substantial historical evidence available on this subject.[214]

Already by 600 BCE nomads had spread on horseback across the Eurasian steppe.[215] And by 400 BCE these nomads were responsible for bringing the 'west' and 'east' together.[216] However, we should be clear about what we mean by 'together'. During the Han dynasty, Chinese silk and other trade goods were transported by nomads through a network of commercial routes on both land and sea that in modern time came to be known as the *silk road*.[217] Various peoples from China to the Mediterranean were thus connected, *but not directly*: the merchants travelling the lands between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf profited from trade along the silk road, and had the most to lose from any contact between the Chinese Han government and Rome.[218] Although markets and products of the Han, Kushan, Parthian and Roman empires 'created' the silk roads, the trade only reached full maturity after most of these empires had collapsed at the beginning of the third century CE.[219] The direct contact between China and ancient Greece or even Roman civilisation was therefore limited in these early times.

Contact, however, also came from the opposite direction. By 326 BCE Alexander III of Macedon, better known as Alexander the Great (356-323 BCE), campaigned across modern Afghanistan, eventually penetrating north-west India as

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[214] Of course considering the linguistic theory of language-families, at a certain time in history, a group of people were all interconnected speaking an indo-european proto language of the sorts. Regardless of the fact if this hypothesis is true, my point is that at different times in history all these peoples have become quite separated and we will therefore look at the historical evidence of contact between these cultures in the hundred of years before and after the common era in which first encounters seem to have taken place.
[215] Xinru Liu, *The Silk Road in World History.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 1.
[216] Liu, *Silk Road*, p. 1.
[217] Idem, p. 10; a problematic term since it seems to denote 'one' 'road'.
[218] Idem, p. 19.
[219] Idem, p. 63.

far as the east bank of the Indus (which forms the eastern border of modern Pakistan).[220] Most of this area had already been annexed by the Persians. To Alexander 'Asia' probably meant the empire of Darius I and 'India' the country surrounding the Indus.[221] What lay further east, like the Ganges, the eastern part of India, Sri Lanka and China were unknown to them at that time.[222] It was not until the Roman empire began to trade, albeit indirectly, with the Han dynasty of China, that they would know about 'China'.[223]

The question one might ask is: is there evidence of any contact before these trading routes began? Not with China, but there is some evidence of contact with India. The *gymnosophists* (γυμνοσοφισταί, or 'naked sages') was the name the Greeks used to refer to Indian ascetics. Strabo (c. 64 BCE - 24 CE) even mentions *brahmins* and *śramaṇas* in reference to Megastenes (c. 350-290 BCE);[224] Philo of Alexandria (c. 25 BCE - 50 CE) mentions the gymnosophists twice as example of virtuous and therefore free men;[225] Plutarch (c. 46-120 CE) writes of an encounter by Alexander the Great with ten of these ascetics;[226] Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215 CE) mentions the Indians, the śramaṇas and the Buddha himself;[227] Hippolytus of Rome (170-235 CE) writes about the brahmins and their 'god' (presumably brahman);[228] Porphyry (c. 234-305 CE), the philosopher who edited Plotinus' *Enneads*, like Strabo, mentions the division of

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[220] James Romm & Pamela Mensch (eds. trans.), "Map: Alexander's Asian Campaign" In *Alexander The Great: Selections from Arrian, Diodoris, Plutrach, and Quintus Curtius.* Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2005, pp. xxviii-xxix; see also Chapter 7: "The Invasion of India" pp. 114-148.

[221] Donald F. Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe. Vol. 1: The Century of Discovery. Book One.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965, p. 8.

[222] Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe*, p. 8.

[223] Idem, pp. 12-17.

[224] "Megasthenes divides the philosophers again into two kinds, the Brachmanes and the Garmanes." etc., in Strabo, *Geography*, H.C. Hamilton & W. Falconer (trans.), XV.1.59.

[225] "And among the Indians there is the class of the gymnosophists, who, in addition to natural philosophy, take great pains in the study of moral science likewise, and thus make their whole existence a sort of lesson in virtue." XI.74; "(…). Calanus was an Indian by birth, one of the gymnosophists; (…)" etc., XIV.92-94; both in Philo of Alexandria, *Every Good Man is Free*, C.D. Yonge (trans.).

[226] "He captured ten of the Gymnosophists (…)" etc., in Plutarch, *Parallel Lives*, "Life of Alexander", Bernadotte Perrin (trans.), 64.1.

[227] "For Numa secretly showed them that the Best of Beings could not be apprehended except by the mind alone. Thus philosophy, a thing of the highest utility, flourished in antiquity among the barbarians, shedding its light over the nations. And afterwards it came to Greece. First in its ranks were the prophets of the Egyptians; and the Chaldeans among the Assyrians; and the Druids among the Gauls; and the Samanaeans among the Bactrians; and the philosophers of the Celts; and the Magi of the Persians, who foretold the Saviour's birth, and came into the land of Judaea guided by a star. The Indian gymnosophists are also in the number, and the other barbarian philosophers. And of these there are two classes, some of them called Sarmanae, and others Brahmins. And those of the Sarmanae who are called Hylobii neither inhabit cities, nor have roofs over them, but are clothed in the bark of trees, feed on nuts, and drink water in their hands. Like those called Encratites in the present day, they know not marriage nor begetting of children.

Some, too, of the Indians obey the precepts of Buddha; whom, on account of his extraordinary sanctity, they have raised to divine honours." Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, William Wilson (trans.), I.15.

[228] Hippolytus of Rome, *Refutation of All Heresies*. J.H. MacMahon (trans.), I.21.

brahmins and śramaṇas;[229] and finally Diogenes Laertius (c. 3rd century CE) speaks of Pyrrho the sceptic who apparently received his philosophy from these gymnosophists,[230] which brings to mind our earlier reference to the scholarly claim that this form of scepticism is similar to buddhist teachings.[231] That being said, it is important to bear in mind that these connections only began with Alexander's conquest.

There has however also been extensive debate about whether the neoplatonist tradition, and mostly Plotinus (c. 204-270 CE), was influenced by Indian philosophy.[232] Frits Staal in his *Advaita and Neoplatonism*, in a meta-review of all arguments made in the literature present at that time, argues that the similarities in Plotinus can be explained by Greek influences.[233] He does leave open the *possibility* for Plotinus to have known something of the teachings of the *Upaniṣads*, albeit in an extremely general sense.[234] In the case of Plato, Staal claims Indian influence has never been seriously defended, but it may be possible that the pre-socratics were influenced by aspects of Indian thought which in turn have had an influence on classical Greek philosophy.[235] Again however, it is important to point out that "[w]hat once may have been plain threads of transmission were broken long ago in the cataclysms which befell the

[229] "For the polity of the Indians being distributed into many parts, there is one tribe among them of men divinely wise, whom the Greeks are accustomed to call Gymnosophists. But of these there are two sects, over one of which the Bramins preside, but over the other the Samanaeans. The race of the Bramins, however, receive divine wisdom of this kind by succession, in the same manner as the priesthood. But the Samanaeans are elected, and consist of those who wish to possess divine knowledge. (…)" etc., in Porphyry, *On Abstinence From Animal Food*, Thomas Taylor (trans.), IV.17.

[230] "[Pyrrho of Elis] even forgathered with the Indian Gymnosophists and with the Magi. This led him to adopt a most noble philosophy, to quote Ascanius of Abdera, taking the form of agnosticism and suspension of judgment. He denied that anything was honourable or dishonourable, just or unjust. And so, universally, he held that there is nothing really existent, but custom and convention govern human action; for no single thing is in itself any more this than that." IX.11.61; "He would withdraw from the world and live in solitude, rarely showing himself to his relatives ; this he did because he had heard an Indian reproach Anaxarchus, telling him that he would never be able to teach others what is good while he himself danced attendance on kings in their courts. He would maintain the same composure at all times (…)" IX.11.63; both in Diogenes Laërtius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, "Pyrrho of Elis", R.D. Hicks (trans.).

[231] Chrisopher I. Beckwith, *Greek Buddha: Pyrrho's Encounter with Early Buddhism in Central Asia.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015; see also: Everard Flintoff, "Pyrrho and India" *Phronesis* 25, no. 1 (1980): pp. 88-108.

[232] See also Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe*, pp. 18-19. This was a hypothesis first expressed by Émile Bréhier in his *La Philosophie de Plotin.* Paris: Boivin, 1928, mostly in the seventh chapter: "L'orientalisme de Plotin", pp. 107-134. It has, however, little to none historical proof. See also: Martin L. West, *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971; and for a recent meta-analysis of all the available evidence Suzanne Merchand, "'What Did the Greeks Owe the Orient?' The Question We Can't Stop Asking (Even Though We Can't Answer It)" *Archaeological Dialogues* 17, no. 1 (2010): pp. 117-140.

[233] Johan F. Staal, "Appendix: The Problem of Indian Influence on Neoplatonism" *Advaita and Neoplatonism: A Critical Study in Comparative Philosophy.* Madras: University of Madras, 1961, pp. 235-249.

[234] Staal, "Appendix", p. 249.

[235] Idem, p. 249; Martin L. West, "The Gift of the Magi" *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971, pp. 203-244.

ancient world"[236] indeed "[t]he fragments which remain are scanty and tenuous enough to encourage doubts that they ever were connected."[237] The ancient world was certainly widely interconnected, but not by very strong direct links. Direct relations between 'east' and 'west' ceased in the last years of the Roman empire, and after the rise of muslim power in the seventh and eighth centuries trade with Asia almost completely stopped.[238]

3.2 Methodological Considerations on Influences and Similarities

In the above section we have been talking substantially about 'influences'. More than once I have placed the word between apostrophes to show that it is still quite unclear what is actually meant by this term. In this last paragraph I will briefly discuss different ways of 'influencing' and what it means to describe the phenomenon of similarity by the effect of 'influence'.

When we study conceptual frameworks we are mostly interested in ideas and how they are materialized in societies. Needless to say, discovering were certain ideas come from is a tricky business. How do we decide who influenced whom? Might there also exist a scale of influence between 'exact imitation' and 'creative appropriation'? We should be aware of the fact that the cultural context always changes the concepts to the situational needs, as Alberto Bernabé has argued at length.[239] Indeed, when we use the word 'influence' it can mean both 'stimulating into the same direction' (as in 'motivated', 'persuaded', 'shaped', 'determined') as well as 'going into the opposite direction' (as in 'turned', 'moved', 'changed', 'altered'). 'To influence', then, does not say something about the outcome, it only says anything about the transferal of a certain line of thought or practice. When one actively *resists* one is just as influenced as when one accepts.

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[236] George P. Conger, "Did India Influence Early Greek Philosophies?" *Philosophy East and West* 2, no. 2 (1952): p. 127. Cf. Suzanne Merchand, "'What Did the Greeks Owe the Orient?' The Question We Can't Stop Asking (Even Though We Can't Answer It)" *Archaeological Dialogues* 17, no. 1 (2010): pp. 117-140.

[237] Conger, "Did India Influence Early Greek Philosophies?", p. 127. Cf. Merchand, "'What Did the Greeks Owe the Orient?'".

[238] Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe*, p. 22.

[239] Alberto Bernabé, "Influences orientales dans la littérature grecque: quelques réflexions de méthode" *Kernos* 8 (1995): pp. 9-22; Alberto Bernabé, "Hittites and Greeks: Mythical Influences and Methodological Considerations" In R. Rollinger & C. Ulf (eds.), *Griechische Archaik Interne Entwicklungen: Externe Impulse.* Berlin: Akademischer Verlag, 2004: pp. 291-310.

An obvious method of discovering influences is to look at to whom certain authors are directly referring. However, ideas can also be transferred without direct reference. Furthermore, it is not always clear *to what degree* certain influences took place. We should also bear in mind that 'influence' is not a stable category. Someone could at a certain point be a complete platonist while at a later time radically eschew from this position. The original *ideas* themselves are also not fixed, that is to say, we should investigate the extent to which they actually are incorporated *or* perhaps adjusted. This also presupposes that we can easily find out what the original author meant.

Besides direct intellectual influence, most ideas influence *indirectly*, that is to say, most ideas that originate somewhere travel through history in a way that is not easily discernable. Can somebody be influenced by Plato without even knowing or having read any of his work? I would certainly think it possible, but then your strategy has to be to discern Plato's influence on culture at large, which at times may become quite a speculative enterprise.

However, there seems always no methodological considerations to the *explanation* of similarities and parallels. In my view, ideas and practices can be similar because they are (i) directly transferred (i.e. historically proven causally), (ii) because the context of life (certain dispositions, certain environments, certain problems etc.) trigger the same or similar solutions, (iii) which in some sense points also at the similarity in human 'nature' (that is, to a certain extent we are similar psychological, biological, social, (a)logical, phenomenological, cognitive and existential beings), (iv) it could therefore also be that similarities do not occur because of influences, but because of similar or parallel developments.[240]

I would propose thus a scale ranging from direct historical influence (which often is difficult to prove, if not only *the extent to which* influence has taken place) to parallel but non-influenced similarities, which could be triggered by our internal makeup as well as the external conditions. This is the range within which similarities can be explained.

[240] An alternative 'explanation' of similarities in parallel developments has been given by Karel Jaspers' notion of the 'axial age' ('Achsenzeit') in his *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (1949). This seems a somewhat hegelian idea of progress. In modern spiritualist terms it could be explained as humanity proceeding into higher states of consciousness. This may be possible, but to our current state of knowledge of the facts, this does not explain anything but only *a priori* establishes a metaphysical assumption of progression.

Part II

Mystics From Different Contexts

An analysis of six different bodies of mystical texts

I reached the very gates of death and, treading Proserpine's threshold, yet passed through all the elements and returned. I have seen the sun at midnight shining brightly. I have entered the presence of the gods below and the presence of the gods above, and I have paid due reverence before them.[241]

—Lucius in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*

IV. Apophatic Mysticism in the 'West'

I have now come to the part in which I will study primary works from different apophatically inclined traditions.[242] Firstly I will discuss a small selection from the *Nag Hammadi* codices (c. 1st to 4th century CE). Then I will look at the works of pseudo-Dionysius who combines neoplatonic and christian thought (c. 6th centuriy CE).[243] And lastly, I will delve into the vernacular works of Eckhart von Hochheim, better known as Meister Eckhart (13th century CE). Again as I have argued all of these texts should be approached from the perspective of the religious *practice*. Because all of these texts from this section come from/were used in a practical (i.e. monastic, sectarian) context.

In quoting extensively from these works I will hopefully allow the texts to highlight the main themes as much as possible, thereby providing some tentative insight into 'the' apophatic mysticism of this large area across a vast time span. But since it is only a small selection conclusions made on the basis of this analysis need to be made cautiously.

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[241] Lucius Apuleius, *Metamorphoses (The Golden Ass)*, Tony Kline (trans.), *Poetry in Translation*, 2013, *Metamorph*. XI: 20-23. The quote is from the famous passage in *Metamorphoses*—better known by the title given by Augustine: *The Golden Ass*—in which the protagonist Lucius gets initiated in the secret Isis-cult. It precedes by an very interesting aside: "And now, diligent reader, you are no doubt keen to know what was said next, and what was done. I'd tell you, if to tell you, were allowed; if you were allowed to hear then you might know, but ears and tongue would sin equally, the latter for its profane indiscretion, the former for their unbridled curiosity. Oh, I shall speak, since your desire to hear may be a matter of deep religious longing, and I would not torment you with further anguish, but I shall speak only of what can be revealed to the minds of the uninitiated without need for subsequent atonement, things which though you have heard them, you may well not understand. So listen, and believe in what is true."

[242] For the standard work on the western (neoplatonic) apophatic tradition see: Raoul Mortley, *From Word to Silence. Vol. 1: The Rise and Fall of Logos.* & *Vol. 2: The Way of Negation Christian and Greek.* Bonn: Hanstein, 1986.

[243] Indeed Mortley calls pseudo-Denys "the most crucial writer of all" because with him "the most complete synthesis of the Greek and Christian negative way occurs." Mortley, *From Word to Silence, Vol. 2*, preface; cf. Chapter XII. "Pseudo-Dionysius: A Positive View of Language and the *Via Negativa*", pp. 221-241.

One who knows everything but lacks in oneself lacks everything.[244]

—Jesus, *Gospel of Thomas*

We are happy. While we were in the body, you have made us divine through your knowledge.[245]

—*The Prayer of Thanksgiving*

4.1 Nag Hammadi Scriptures[246]

The *Nag Hammadi Codices* (c. 1st - 4th century CE) is a collection of thirteen papyrus codices that were buried near the Egyptian city of Nag Hammadi, most likely in the second half of the fourth century CE, and which were discovered in 1945.[247] It is thought that the *NHC* was buried in response to Athanasius' Easter letter in 367 CE ordering to reject all "illegitimate and secret books".[248] Many of these works were considered heretical by ecclesiastical authorities. Texts such as the *Secret Book of John*, the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Truth* were mentioned and denounced by Iranaeus and Hippolytus.[249] So although this collection was only 'recently' discovered we can say that these currents, ideas and texts have shaped the different philosophical and early christian developments.

These works extracts from a mixture of thomasian christian,[250] sethian,[251] valentinian[252] and hermetic[253] schools of thought.[254] However, not all of the texts can be neatly placed in the aforementioned categories.[255] Some of them are also clearly

[244] All quotations from the Nag Hammadi Codices are from Marvin Meyer (ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The International Edition.* New York: HarperCollins, 2007; *Gospel of Thomas*, NHC II.2 #67, p. 148.
[245] *Prayer of Thanksgiving*, NHC VI.7: 64,14-16.
[246] Quotations may contain … and <> which are blanks and corrections made in the translation. Only (…) and [] show omissions and displacements by me.
[247] James M. Robinson, "Preface" In Marvin Meyer (ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The International Edition.* New York: HarperCollins, 2007, p. xi.
[248] Athnasius, *Festal Letter*, 39 as quoted in Meyer & Pagels, "Introduction", *Nag Hammadi*, p. 6.
[249] Meyer & Pagels, "Introduction", *Nag Hammadi*, pp. 5-6.
[250] Marvin Meyer, "Thomas Christianity", *Nag Hammadi*, pp. 779-783.
[251] John D. Turner, "The Sethian School of Gnostic Thought", *Nag Hammadi*, pp. 784-789.
[252] Einar Thomassen, "The Valentinian School of Gnostic Thought", *Nag Hammadi*, pp. 790-794.
[253] Jean-Pierre Mahé, "Hermetic Religion", *Nag Hammadi*, pp. 797-798.
[254] "Epilogue: Schools of Thought in the Nag Hammadi Scriptures", *Nag Hammadi*, pp. 777-778.
[255] "Idem, p. 777.

influenced by early christian and even platonic thought.[256] However, in order to represent the different currents which the *Nag Hammadi* codices offer, I have chosen to select four relatively short but important texts from each 'movement'. In doing so, I have tried to give, within the limits of this research, a more or less representative selection. This does not mean that all 'movements' are equally spread throughout the codices: the hermetic treatises, for instance, are relatively small in number. With the discussion of these texts I hope to offer a somewhat representative case for the *Nag Hammadi* works in general.

From the thomasian movement I will discuss what is probably the most famous text of the whole collection the *Gospel of Thomas* (NHC II.2). It consists of 114 'logia' (sayings) without any narrative. The *Three Steles of Seth* (NHC VII.5) is a short text representing the sethian branch. The *Gospel of Truth* (NHC I.3), which, according to some, may have even been written by Valentinus himself[257] will represent the valentinian tradition. And, lastly, I will analyse the *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* (NHC VI.6) as part of the hermetic tradition within the *NHC*.

4.1.1 Gospel of Thomas[258]

The *Gospel of Thomas* (NHC II.2) is a collection of 114 sayings attributed to Jesus, which focus mostly on salvation. The *Gospel* does not mention a crucifixion or a resurrection, nor is Jesus presented as an unique or incarnate son of 'God'. Instead the text is presented as the teachings of the *living Jesus*.[259] Of all the texts of the *Nag Hammadi* collection, the *Gospel of Thomas* has proven to be the most celebrated, influential and provocative.

The first saying of the collection already sets the tone: "Whoever discovers the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death."[260] Immediately followed by: "Let one who seeks not stop until one finds. When one finds, one will be troubled. When one is troubled, one will marvel and will reign over all."[261] So where do we search? The third logion answers that question. It is neither in heaven nor in the sea

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256 Robinson, "Preface", *Nag Hammadi*, p. xi. There is even a short text that later was identified as a (highly corrupted) passage of Plato's *Politeia* (*Republic*).
257 Einar Thomassen, "Introduction", *GosTruth,* NHC I.3, XII.2, p. 34.
258 Concordances in the NT Gospels are given in the footnote, after the reference of the *GosThom* logion.
259 *GosThom.*, NHC II.2 "Prologue", p. 138. Cf. *Matt* 1:1; *Mark* 1:1.
260 Idem, #1, p. 138. Cf. *John* 8:48-59.
261 Idem, #2, p. 138; cf. #94, p. 151. Cf. *Luke* 11:9-13; *Matt* 7:7-11, 21:18-22; *John* 14:12-14, 15:16-17, 16:20-28; *Mark* 11:20-25.

> Rather, the kingdom is inside you and it is outside you. When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will understand that you are children of the living Father. But if you do not know yourselves, then you dwell in poverty, and you are poverty.[262]

After just three logia, then, the reader knows beginning and end, the purpose and the path; indeed "where the beginning is the end will be".[263] All the rest seems to expand upon these three logia with much weight being put on looking first and foremost at ourselves:

> You see the speck that is in your sibling's eye, but you do not see the beam that is in your own eye. When you take the beam out of your own eye, then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your sibling's eye.[264]

This also suggests that you cannot 'help' others before you have 'helped' yourself, because "[i]f a blind person leads a blind person, both of them will fall into a hole."[265] This extends to a sceptic attitude towards traditional authorities: "[t]he Pharisees and the scholars haven taken the keys of knowledge and have hidden them. They have not entered, nor have they allowed those who want to enter to do so."[266] They appear to be more of an obstacle than a help.

How to proceed with looking at ourselves then? The *Gospel* gives some practical guidance, urging us not to lie or to do what we hate,[267] to heal the sick and eat what our hosts serves us[268] "[f]or what goes into your mouth will not defile you; rather, it is what comes out of your mouth that will defile you."[269] Jesus says: "Let someone who has found the world and has become wealthy renounce the world."[270] All this does not seem to imply a negative view of the world or of the body, yet only a detachment to anything, since in logion 112 Jesus says: "Woe to the flesh that depends

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[262] *GosThom.*, NHC II.2 #3, p. 138. Cf. *Luke* 17:20-21, 17:22-25; *Matt* 24:23-38; *Mark* 13:21-23.
[263] Idem, #18, p. 142.
[264] Idem, #26, p. 143. Cf. *Luke* 6:37-42; *Matt* 7:1-5.
[265] Idem, #34, p. 144. Cf. *Luke* 6:39; *Matt* 15:10-20.
[266] Idem, #39, p. 144; cf. #102, p. 152. Cf. *Luke* 11:53; *Matt* 23:13, 10:16.
[267] Idem, #6, p. 140. Cf. *Luke* 11:1-4, 6:21, 8:16-17, 12:1-3; *Matt* 6:2-4, 6:5-15, 6:16-18, 7:12, 10:26-33; *Mark* 4:21-22.
[268] Idem, #14, p. 141. Cf. *Luke* 11:1-4, 9:1-6, 10:1-12; *Matt* 6:2-4, 6:5-15, 6:16-18, 10:5-15, 15:10-20; *Mark* 6:7-13, 7:14-23.
[269] Idem, #14, p. 141. Cf. idem.
[270] Idem, #106, p. 152.

on the soul. Woe to the soul that depends on the flesh."[271] This suggests that it is the *intention* and not (potentially sacred) eating customs, nor clinging to the flesh or the soul that will help us. The argument concerning customs around food is similar to an argument against (the custom of) circumcision: "If it were useful, children's fathers would produce them already circumcised from their mothers. Rather, the true circumcision in spirit has become valuable in every respect."[272] This is a metaphorical interpretation of customs as referring to a practice of cutting attachments inwardly.

The disciples presented in the *GosThom* are still confused. They ask what the kingdom is and how they will be able to enter it. "What you look for has come, but you do not know it"[273] Jesus replies. Throughout the *Gospel* Jesus tries to point its listener in the right direction:

> When you make the two into one, and when you make the inner like the outer and the outer like the inner, and the upper like the lower, and when you make male and female into a single one, so that the male will not be male nor the female be female, (…), then you will enter[274]

This passage indeed seems to suggest the need to go beyond dual categories, like a new born child that has no notion of *this* or *that*.[275] Because "if one is <whole>, one will be filled with light, but if one is divided, one will be filled with darkness."[276]

The sayings of the *Gospel of Thomas* provides guidance for interpreting them in 'the right way', only then 'will you not taste death'. One must, however, continuously *seek it within* since what one searches *seems to be already there*. Rituals or holy customs will not help us, nor the advice of the learned—they actually obstruct us. Instead it consists of an inwardly directed process which is ethically bound to our actions and speech. Alongside the profusion of cataphatic advice, the *Gospel* also apophatically urges us to detach us inside from notions like 'the world', 'the flesh' and even 'the soul'. This all is not an endless process. If one seeks thoroughly one will eventually find this 'knowledge'. This core message, and the way to get there, are the basis of the *Gospel*.

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[271] *GosThom.*, NHC II.2 #112, p. 153.
[272] Idem, #53, p. 146.
[273] Idem, #51, p. 146. Cf. *Luke* 17:20-21, 17:22-25; *Matt* 17:9-13, 24:23-28, 9:9-13; *Mark* 13:21-23.
[274] Idem, #22, pp. 142-143; cf. #106, p. 152. Cf. *Luke* 9:46-48, 18:15-17; *Matt* 18:1-4, 19:13-15; *John* 3:1-10; *Mark* 9:33-37, 10:13-16.
[275] Idem, #46, p. 145. Cf. *Luke* 7:24-30, 18:17; *Matt* 11:7-15, 18:3, 10:15.
[276] Idem, #61, p. 147. Cf. *Luke* 17:26-35, 10:21-22; *Matt* 24:37-44, 11:25-27; *John* 3:31-36, 13:1-4.

4.1.2 Three Steles of Seth

Sethian gnosticism has an elaborate myth of origins that is connected to Seth, the third son of Adam (*Gen.* 4:25). A feature of sethianism is a clear use of apophatism in describing the divine. The *Apocryphon of John* (NHC II.1; III.1; IV.1; BG 8502.2), of which many varieties widely circulated in antiquity, most famously describes the sethian cosmogonic myth.[277] The many names and the relationship between them may at first be somewhat confusing. For our purposes the most important thing to understand is that the sethian trinity of Father—Mother—Child are the Invisible Spirit[278]—Barbelo[279]—Autogenes (literally: the Self-Generated). Autogenes is also identified as Christ,[280] and of him came forth Pigeradamas (or Geradamas, Adamas, Adam), the first Perfect Human, and the father of Seth.

The *Three Steles of Seth* (NHC VII.5) is a short text which presents a simplified version of the doctrines and techniques found in *Zostrianos* (VIII.1) and *Allogenes* (NHC XI.3).[281] The 'steles' (or 'stones,' 'tablets,' 'bricks'), which in most of the varieties of the myth only mention two steles, in this version speak of three. The steles record the hymns that Dositheos received in a revelation by Seth. The end is especially interesting, since it explains that the hymns accompany a spiritual ascent to and descent from divine realms. We will briefly go through these steles and end with a quotation from the last section.

The hymn in the first part of the first stele is directed to Pigeradamas, father of Seth, to whom Seth says, "I am your son / and you are my mind".[282] Seth then continues with addressing Autogenes in praise: "You are unborn, / you have appeared to reveal eternal things. / You are the One Who Is, / so you have revealed those who really are."[283] These two parts are written in the first person singular. The last part of the hymn is written in the first person plural, from the perspective of both Seth and Pigeradamas, in praise of Barbelo.

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[277] However, there are many different versions of these myths, so it is impossible to speak of a general 'sethian system'.
[278] Also: The One, God, Parent, Father, who is "incorruptible, that is pure light at which no eye can gaze. The One is the Invisible Spirit. We should not think of it as a god or like a god. For it is greater than a god, because it has nothing over it an no lord above it." *Apocryphon of John*, NHC II.1 2,33-3,1, p. 108.
[279] Or the First Thought, the image of the Spirit, the universal womb. *ApocryJn*, NHC II.1 5,4-10, p. 110.
[280] *ApocryJn*, NHC II.1 7,1, p. 112.
[281] John D. Turner, "Introduction", *Three Steles of Seth*, NHC VII.5, p. 524.
[282] *3StSeth*, NHC VII.5 118,30-119,1, p. 526.
[283] Idem, 119,22-27, p. 527.

The second stele continues this praise: "You are wisdom / you are knowledge / you are truth. / Because of you is life, / from you is life. / Because of you is mind, / from you is mind. / You are mind, / you are a world of truth."[284]

The third stele praises the Invisible Spirit. It starts with: "We rejoice, / we rejoice, / we rejoice. / We have seen, / we have seen, / we have seen what really pre-exists, / that it really exists / and is the first eternal one."[285] And it continues:

> You know the One: / we cannot speak of this unity, / which belongs to you everywhere. / Your light enlightens us. / Command us to see you / that we may be saved. / Knowledge[286] of you is the salvation of us all. / Command! / If you command, / we have been saved. / Truly we are saved. / We have seen you through mind.[287]

After the hymn ends, a short instruction is given at the end of the third stele which we shall quote in its entirety:

> Whoever remembers these things and always glorifies will be perfect among the perfect and free of suffering beyond all things. They all praise these, individually and collectively, and afterward they will be silent.
>
> As it has been ordained for them, they ascend. After silence, they descend from the third. They praise the second, and afterward the first. The way of ascent is the way of descent.[288]
>
> So understand as those who are alive that you have succeeded. You have taught yourselves about things infinite. Marvel at the truth within them, and at the revelation.[289]

As we have seen, Seth addresses Adam as 'mind'. In the second stele Barbelo is also addressed as the cause of mind as well as mind itself, indeed also as the cause of life and life itself. Barbelo is knowledge, truth and wisdom. But only in the last stele it appears to really become a description of mystical consciousness. It starts off with

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[284] *3StSeth*, NHC VII.5 123,16-23, pp. 531-532.
[285] Idem, 124,17-21, p. 533.
[286] 'Gnōsis'.
[287] *3StSeth*, NHC VII.5 125,7-17, p. 534.
[288] Cf. "As above, so below!" an hermetic maxim from *The Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus*, and Herakleitos' "Ὁδὸς ἄνω κάτω μία καὶ ὠυτή.": "The way up and the way down is one and the same." (DK B60, John Burnet (trans.)).
[289] *3StSeth*, NHC VII.5 127,6-26, p. 536.

rejoicing and exclaiming: 'we have seen, we have seen'. But it becomes clear that we 'cannot speak of this unity'. It is gnōsis which brings salvation, and it comes through the mind. However, it may also depend on the command given by the Invisible Spirit. When one practices these things one will be perfect and free of suffering, the passage at the end tells us. In silence one ascends and one praises all three of them equally. The ascent is the way of descent.

4.1.3 Gospel of Truth

The *Gospel of Truth* (NHC I.3, XII.2) is a work that can be attributed to the valentinian gnostic traditions. It discusses the person and work of Christ. Its cosmogony, however, does not follow exactly the traditional valentinian systems as we know them, and subsequently it develops a slightly more negative and dualistic view of the cosmos.[290] This could be due to it being written down before these systems were fully developed.[291] Scholars agree that there is a strong possibility that this tractate was written by Valentinus himself, or at least by someone who had substantial authority in this tradition.[292]

The *Gospel of Truth* begins with saying that the *Word* (*logos*) has come from the *fullness* (*pleroma*) of the *Father*.[293] It then articulates the human condition:

> All have sought for the one from whom they have come forth. All have been within him, the illimitable, the inconceivable, who is beyond all thought. But ignorance of the Father brought terror and fear, and terror grew dense like a fog, so that no one could see. Thus Error grew powerful. She worked on her material substance in vain. Since she did not know the truth, she assumed a fashioned figure and prepared, with power and in beauty, a substitute for truth.[294]

The divine is described in superabundance and negations. It is also 'beyond all thought'. It is important to note that *error* and *forgetfulness* are as nothing compared to the *inconceivable one*.[295] Indeed 'error has no root',[296] it is 'empty' there is 'nothing

[290] Einar Thomassen, "Introduction", *Gospel of Truth*, NHC I.3, XII.2, p. 34.
[291] Idem, p. 34.
[292] Idem, p. 34.
[293] *GosTruth*, NHC I.3 16-17, p. 36.
[294] Idem, 17,4-20, p. 36.
[295] Idem, 17,22, p. 36.

within her'.[297] Error even created a 'substitute for truth'. It did not come into being under the Father but it did came into being because of him (like everything). But only knowledge comes into being *within* him.[298] "Forgetfulness came into being because the Father was not known, so as soon as the Father comes to be known, forgetfulness will cease to be."[299] Jesus' purpose is to guide the people:[300]

> When he entered the empty ways of fear, he passed by those stripped by forgetfulness. For he encompasses knowledge and perfection, and he proclaims what is in the heart … <He> teaches those who will learn. And those who will learn are the living who are inscribed in the book of the living. They learn about themselves, receiving instruction from the Father, returning to him.[301]

This knowledge, coming from above, is easy to recognize: "[t]hose who have knowledge in this way know where they come from and where they are going. They know as one who, having become intoxicated, has turned from his drunkenness and, having come to his senses, has gotten control of himself."[302] This knowledge, as is continuously being repeated, is 'knowledge of the living book' which means that it is

> Not merely vowels or consonants, so that one may read them and think them devoid of meaning. Rather, they are letters of truth; they speak and know themselves. Each letter is a perfect truth like a perfect book, for they are letters written in unity[303]

This difference is important. The *Gospel of Truth* seems to emphasize that Christ's teaching is a practice which should be realized in daily life, it is not just words on paper. But how should one proceed? The *Gospel* says that there should be no envy and strife,[304] and we should help others.[305] It also emphasizes to

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[296] *GosTruth*, NHC I.3 17,29, p. 36.
[297] Idem, 26,26, p. 41.
[298] Idem, 18-18,6, p. 37.
[299] Idem, 18,7-18,11, p. 37.
[300] Idem, 19,17-23,17, pp. 37-39.
[301] Idem, 20,34-21,7, p. 38.
[302] Idem, 22,16-20, p. 39.
[303] Idem, 23,3-15, p. 39.
[304] Idem, 24,25-26, p. 40.
[305] Idem, 33,1-10, p. 43.

> Focus your attention upon yourselves. Do not focus your attention upon other things—that is, what you have cast away from yourselves. Do not return to eat what you have vomited. (…) Do not be a place for the devil, for you have already destroyed him. Do not strengthen what stands in your way, what is collapsing, to support it.[306]

This will lead to a definite end: "[t]he end is the recognition of him who is hidden"[307] and then "[t]heir own place of rest is their fullness".[308]

> They rest in one who rests, and they are not wary or confused about truth.
>
> They are truth. The Father is in them and they are in the Father, perfect, inseparable from him who is truly good. They lack nothing at all but are at rest fresh in spirit.[309]

All have come from the one and search for him, but error and forgetfulness grew. Although we are in error, error itself has no root, it is empty and therefore no threat to the Father. When the Father comes to be known, forgetfulness ceases to be. To those to whom this knowledge comes, it is instantly clear. Jesus teaches this knowledge of the living book. We should in daily life give up envy and strife, help others and, above all, focus attention upon ourselves. This will lead to the end, which is resting in the one who rests, in the truth, in the Father.

4.1.4 Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth

The *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* (NHC VI.6) is a short dialogue between a 'father', sometimes called Hermes[310] or Trismegistus[311] and a disciple who wants to pass through the last stages of spiritual perfection, the *eighth* and *ninth* stage. It is an interesting text because it is written in a way that makes you feel as if you were present; as if it was written down at the moment the conversation was happening.

The text begins with the disciple asking the master to be instructed to take his mind to the *eighth* (*ogdoad*) and *ninth* (*ennead*) stage, as the father apparently had

[306] *GosTruth*, NHC I.3 33,11-23, p. 43.
[307] Idem, 37,38, p. 45.
[308] Idem, 41,13-14, p. 46.
[309] Idem, 42,21-33, p. 47.
[310] *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth*, NHC VI.6 58,28, p. 416; 59,11, p. 416; 63,24, p. 418.
[311] *Disc. 89*, NHC VI.6 59,15,24, p. 417.

promised the day before.[312] The disciple says: "I understand nothing else than the beauty I have experienced in the books."[313] This underlines that he has been instructed in book-knowledge but has not yet experienced the last stages. The teacher acknowledges that these go beyond *teachings* and instructs that "it is fitting for us to pray to God with all our mind and all our heart and our soul and to ask him that the gift of the eighth reach us, and that each receive from him what belongs to him."[314] In other words one should engage with full personal involvement.[315] Next they start a prayer:

> We have walked in <your way> / <and have> renounced <evil>, / so the vision may come. / Lord, grant us truth in the image. / Grant that though spirit may see / the form of the image that lacks nothing, / and accept the reflection of the Fullness[316]

Fullness is here the translation of *pleroma*. Both of them continue to pray and when the prayer finishes the father receives the vision:

> My child, let us embrace in love. Be happy about this. Already from this, the power that is light is coming to us. I see, I see ineffable depths. How shall I tell you, my child? <We now have begun to see> … the places. How <shall I tell you about> the All? I am <mind and> I see another mind, one that <moves> the soul. I see the one that moves me from pure forgetfulness. You give me power. I see myself. I wish to speak. Fear seizes me. I have found the beginning of the power above all powers, without beginning. I see a spring bubbling with life. I have said, my child, that I am mind. I have seen. Language cannot reveal this. For all of the eighth, my child, and the souls in it, and the angels, sing a hymn in silence. I, mind, understand.[317]

The disciple asks what he sees but the father answers: "I say nothing about this. It is right before God for us to remain silent about what is hidden."[318] Then also the

[312] *Disc. 89*, NHC VI.6 52,1-8, p. 413.
[313] Idem, 55,10-23, p. 414.
[314] Idem, 56,27-57,8, p. 415.
[315] Jean-Pierre Mahé, "Introduction", *Disc. 89*, NHC VI.6, p. 409.
[316] *Disc. 89*, NHC VI.6 58,10-23, p. 414.
[317] Idem, 57,26-58,21, p. 416.
[318] Idem, 59,11-14, p. 417.

disciple sees the same light, the eighth, the ninth and the one.[319] The master immediately states that: "From <now on> it is good for us to remain silent, with head bowed. From now on do not speak about the vision."[320] The text ends with an instruction for preservation of the text and is followed by *The Prayer of Thanksgiving* (NHC VI.7).

What is quite striking in the *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* is the description of the direct contact between teacher and pupil. It guides the reader, as it were, to the eighth and ninth stage. It becomes immediately clear that this ascent is not easy to achieve. Not only is it the result of a long period of preparation by means of the teachings, one must also 'pray to God' with 'all mind, heart and soul,' and hope that he responds. The vision itself is accompanied by feelings of joy but also fear. The master sees 'ineffable depths' which language cannot reveal. Nevertheless he concludes 'I, mind, understand'. The proper way of dealing with the gift of such visions is humility. One should not talk about these things, for they are hidden for a reason.

4.1.5 Summary

We will now compare these four texts. Of course they demonstrate clear differences, mostly in their form and the amount of metaphysical speculation (the *GosThom* does not even formulates an explicit cosmology). But there are also clear similarities, of which the clearest is that all of them focus on experiential 'knowledge' (*gnōsis*). This is not too surprising, since it is probably the reason why these texts were bundled in the first place and have been subsequently labelled as *gnostic*.

The *Gospel of Thomas* stresses the necessity to focus upon yourself. This text is the one which puts most emphasis on a kind of ethical instruction, what we can call a *via imitationis*, and in this way it ressembles the *Gospel of Truth* in that it also instructs us in ethical behaviour. The latter differentiates practice radically from book knowledge. This is also similar to the *Discourse* in which the distinction between discursive knowledge and the vision of the last stages is made abundantly clear.

The *Disc. 89* and the *Three Steles* talk about different *stages* of gnōsis (*via eminentiae*), which in this regard is not something we can find in the other two texts. But what *does* sound similar is the resulting experience of *wholeness*, *fullness*, *light* and the

[319] *Disc. 89*, NHC VI.6 59,26-60,1, p. 417.
[320] Idem, 60-60,5, p. 417.

oneness of going beyond dualism. In all cases this understanding is intimately bound to *subjective experience*.

With regards to the *via negativa* we can say that *GosThom* most explicitly talks about a method of detachment. The other three texts use negation to characterize the (experience of the) divine. The *GosTruth* even uses it in combination with the *via affirmativa* to create a *via oppositionis*. Especially *3StSeth* and *Disc. 89* emphasize silence and humility.

An interesting discovery for me was that although most of these texts do not go into the nature of *error*, the *GosTruth* remarks that error is not a fundamental property of reality, it is not part of the divine. We can connect this with the *GosThom* in which it is said that the kingdom *is already here*, only we do not know it. In this formulation, ignorance can be acknowledged as something that stands between us and what we are looking for but is in fact already *here* to begin with. This anticipates to some extent the neoplatonic notion of evil as *absence of good*, and differentiates it from gnostic currents which have a negative view on the 'creation'. The *GosThom* remarks that the beginning is like the end, or as is said in the *GosTruth* the ascent is the descent.

> We must not dare to resort to words or conceptions concerning that hidden divinity which transcends being[321]
>
> —Dionysius, *Divine Names*

4.2 Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite

The writer whom we have come to refer to in contemporary times as pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, or in short pseudo-Denys, was probably a Syrian monk[322] conveniently using the name of Dionysius who was an Athenian member of the Areopagus and was converted to christianity by Paul according to *Acts* 17:34.[323] In earlier times, pseudonyms were often used as a rhetorical device, known as 'declamatio', to give authority to texts.[324] If not only for their innate brilliance, the name Dionysius eventually gave an almost apostolic authority to the *corpus areopagiticum*, which consists of four tractates[325] and nine letters, other works which Denys refers to are either fictitious or lost.[326] These writings had great influence on early christian thought.[327] However, even at the time these writings began to appear (fifth century CE) some questioned their authenticity.[328] Nevertheless, it would take until the renaissance to definitively dismantle the dionysian authorship.[329]

Besides obvious christian influences[330] there are clear influences of platonism, through Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus and most notably Proclus. Indeed, it was

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[321] *The Divine Names* (*DN*) 588A, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, Colm Luibheid & Paul Rorem (trans.) New York: Paulist Press, 1987, p. 49.
[322] Rites mentioned in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* are similar to Syriac rites. See: Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite.* London: Continuum, 1989, pp. 52-77.
[323] Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, p. 1; cf. "Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others." *Acts* 17:34. This was Paul's second mission in approximately 51 CE.
[324] Kevin Corrigan & L. Michael Harrington, "Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite" *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [2014], accessed on 20 June 2016, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pseudo-dionysius-areopagite/
[325] The Divine Names (DN), The Mystical Theology (MT), The Celestial Hierarchy (CH), The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy (EH).
[326] Corrigan & Harrington, "Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite".
[327] On 'eastern christianity' through, amongst many others, Maximus the Confessor, John of Scythopolis and Gregory Palamas; and 'western christianity' through, idem, Thomas Aquinas, Johannes Scotus Eriugena and the subsequent German mysticism of the 13th century.
[328] Like Thomas Aquinas, Peter Abelard and Nicholas of Cusa. Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, pp. 1-2.
[329] By especially Lorenzo Valla and Erasmus; Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, pp. 1-2.
[330] E.g. Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Basil of Caesarea. Pseudo-Denys also refers on numerous occasions to his 'famous teacher' Hierotheus, supposedly Hierotheus the Thesmothete, the disputed first bishop of christian

because of some passages in the Dionysian corpus which seemed remarkably similar to passages from Proclus' work, that the Areopagite's authorship in the nineteenth century was dated by scholars to the period between 485 CE (Proclus' death) and 512-528 CE (first quotation of Denys by Severus of Antioch).[331] Pseudo-Denys has been regarded as a direct student of Proclus.[332]

4.2.2 The Mystical Theology and the Divine Names

The work of Denys that definitely had the most influence is the *Mystical Theology*, as we already remarked in discussing the origin of the word mysticism. In this section we will primarily focus on this work and his *Divine Names*. I will also sparingly place these passages in relation to some of his other writings.

4.2.2.1 Beyond Cataphatism and Apophatism

Throughout Denys' texts the relationship between affirming (cataphatic) and negating (apophatic) has an important role. To understand his negative theology we have to proceed from the cataphatic to the apophatic: "[w]hen we made assertions we began with the first things, moved down through intermediate terms until we reached the last things.", Denys writes, "But now as we climb from the last things up to the most primary we deny all things so that we may unhiddenly know that unknowing which itself is hidden".[333] And he continues by saying:

> The fact is that the more we take flight upward, the more our words are confined to the ideas we are capable of forming; so that now as we plunge into that darkness which is beyond intellect, we shall find ourselves not simply running short of words but actually speechless and unknowing.[334]

According to Denys our words are confined to the ideas we are capable of forming. This is an important remark: it links ideas and words. Our capability of forming ideas *confines* our words. Ideas here are associated with the intellect, which is why Denys

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Athenians, and his supposed work *Elements of Theology* (note Proclus' most famous work bares the same name!). This teacher is clearly part of the overall fiction of the pseudonym (e.g. *DN* 681A, p. 69).

[331] Corrigan & Harrington, "Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite".

[332] Idem.

[333] *MT* 1025B, p. 138; this of course is clearly platonic.

[334] *MT* 1033BC, p. 139.

urges his reader to go *beyond*. This, however, does not mean that affirmations are useless or that all affirmations are equally suitable:

> when we deny that which is beyond every denial, we have to start by denying those qualities which differ most from the goal we hope to attain. Is it not closer to reality to say that God is life and goodness rather than that he is air or stone? Is it not more accurate to deny that drunkenness and rage can be attributed to him than to deny that we can apply to him the terms of speech and thought?[335]

This relationship between affirming and negating is crucial for understanding Dionysius' teachings. He acknowledges a hierarchy in these symbols. The goal of a hierarchy "is to enable beings to be as like as possible to God and to be at one with him."[336] A scale of ever more 'right' affirmations form the stepping stones, but from here we should negate all these affirmations, since it surpasses all being. However, "we should not conclude that the negations are simply the opposites of the affirmations, but rather that the cause of all is considerably prior to this, beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion."[337] This is a crucial point: Denys does not want us to use negation to merely go beyond every assertion, but *to go beyond every denial as well*. Or as he writes:

> It is beyond assertion and denial. We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it, for it is both beyond every assertion, being the perfect and unique cause of all things, and, by virtue of its pre-eminently simple and absolute nature, free of every limitation, beyond every limitation; it is also beyond every denial.[338]

The distinction between affirmations and negations even disappears at a certain point because the absoluteness of any terms one uses to describe the divine like *the transcendently good* or *the transcendently existing* "concern a denial in the sense of a

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[335] *MT* 1033CD, p. 140.
[336] *CH* 165A, p. 154; This of course is directly in line with Plato's thoughts, cf. *Gorg.* 5234a-527e; *Phaedo* 113d-115a; *Rep.* 614a-621d; *Phdr.* 248c-249c; *Tim.* 90a-92c; *Laws* 904c-905c.
[337] *MT* 1000B, p. 136.
[338] *MT* 1048B, p. 141.

superabundance."[339] Such absolutes cannot be truly understood since they have no reference to our empirical reality, and in this sense their function is similar to that of negation.

4.2.2.2 On the Purpose: Unity

So what could be the purpose of the technique of negation? "With these analogies we are raised upward toward the truth of the mind's vision, a truth which is simple and one."[340] This unitative aspect of the mind's vision, or *henōsis* (ἕνωσις), reoccurs in many of Denys' descriptions: "we reach a union superior to anything available to us by way of our own abilities or activities in the realm of discourse or intellect."[341] One indeed

> breaks free of them, away from what sees and is seen, and he plunges into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing. (…) Here, being neither oneself nor someone else, one is supremely united to the completely unknown by an inactivity of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing.[342]

So this *unity* even seems to go beyond the awareness of subject and object. It does not depend on 'the realm of discourse and intellect', it is in fact 'beyond the mind' and it happens by 'unknowing', by 'knowing nothing'. Although this may sound like a trip to insanity, Denys reassures us that

> The man in union with truth knows clearly that all is well with him, even if everyone else thinks that he has gone out of his mind. (…) He knows that far from being mad, as they imagine him to be, he has been rescued from the instability and the constant changes which bore him along the variety of error and that he has been set free by simple and immutable stable truth.[343]

It seems, therefore, that what one strives for is instantly recognized upon attainment: there is no doubt in the mind of the person *in union*. And although Deny affirms that

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[339] *DN* 640B, p. 60.
[340] *DN* 592CD, p. 53; cf. Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride*, 382de.
[341] *DN* 585B-588A, p. 49.
[342] *MT* 1001A, p. 137.
[343] *DN* 872D-873A, p. 110.

"knowledge is not for everyone",[344] he points at the scale of individual capacity: "the soul is brought into union with God himself to the extent that every one of us is capable of it."[345] The description as he gives it also seems to suggest that this experience to some extent is a state of permanence, or at least a scale of becoming more and more in union, although some of his words seem to leave no space of gradual union but suggest either complete attainment or non-attainment.

4.2.2.3 Evil, Good, Truth and Error

The instant mystical recognition has a relationship to *truth* and the *good*. The emphasis on truth as releasing us from error can indeed easily invoke (neo)platonic connotations.[346] In *Divine Names* Denys discusses at great length the recognition of *truth* and *error*, and the relationship between *good* and *evil*. "All beings," Denys says, "to the extent that they exist, are good and come from the Good and they fall short of goodness and being in proportion to their remoteness from the Good."[347] Again this sounds reminiscent of Plato's and Socrates' legacy.[348] According to this position all things participate in the good:

> Anger too has a share in the Good to the extent it is an urge to remedy seeming evils by returning them toward what seems beautiful. Even the person who desires the lowest form of life still desires life and a life that seems good to him; thus he participates in the Good to the extent that he feels a desire for life and for what—to him at least—seems a worthwhile life.[349]

The argument is very similar to the one Augustine makes in several places.[350] Denys diverts from Plotinus' somewhat negative view of matter as the source of evil and is, in this regard, clearly influenced by Proclus.[351]

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[344] *CH* 140B, p. 149.
[345] *DN* 981B, p. 130; cf. *CH* 177C, p. 156; *EH* 392A, p. 200.
[346] In Plotinus evil is the privation or absence of good: "In general, we must define evil as a falling short of good" *Enneads*, III 2.5.25-29. Cf. Augustinus', *The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love*, Chapter 11 "What is Called Evil in the Universe is But the Absence of Good".
[347] *DN* 720B, p. 87.
[348] "I am fairly sure of this—that none of the wise men considers that anybody ever willingly errs or willingly does base and evil deeds; they are well aware that all who do base and evil things do them unwillingly;" *Prot.* 345d-346a. Cf. *Gorg.* 475e, 488a, 509e; *Meno* 77e, *Alc. 1* 118a, *Tim.* 86d, *Laws*, V 731c, 734b; X 860d.
[349] *DN* 720C, p. 87.
[350] His 'privatio boni' of course is placed in relation to doctrines of the Fall and the 'creatio ex nihilo'. But the point is this view of 'evil' does not depend on such christian doctrines. Indeed Augustine took it from the neoplatonic tradition. John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love.* 1966. 2nd ed. Reprint. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp. 37-46.

> There is no truth in the common assertion that evil is inherent in matter *qua* matter, since matter too has a share in the cosmos, in beauty and form. If matter lacked these, if it were inherently deficient in quality and form, if it lacked even the capacity to be affected, how could it produce anything?[352]

4.2.2.4 Religious Practice

Again, we should bear in mind that these texts have been read in monastic settings. Indeed, Dionysius himself supposedly was a Syrian monk. His *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* especially, is a text which concerns rites, the clerical hierarchy, doctrines and contemplation, which again stresses the daily practice of the religious practitioner. After starting off with a prayer, the *Mystical Theology* even directly addresses a student named Timothy:

> For this I pray; and, Timothy, my friend, my advice to you as you look for a sight of the mysterious things, is to leave behind you everything perceived and understood, everything perceptible and understandable, all that is not and all that is, and, with your understanding laid aside, to strive upward as much as you can toward union with him who is beyond all being and knowledge. By an undivided and absolute abandonment of yourself and everything, shedding all and freed from all, you will be uplifted to the ray of the divine shadow which is above everything that is.[353]

Many of the themes which I have discussed come together in this passage, which is the opening of the *Mystical Theology*. I want to emphasize that for Dionysius all this is not just philosophical speculation, not just metaphysics. These texts functions as guides to the religious life and their purpose is *mystical*, i.e. the focus lies on *henōsis*.

At times the method of apophatic teaching may seem vague. In reference to *Phil.* 2:7 Denys calls it an empyting of self (κένωσις, *kénōsis*).[354] "We should be taken wholly out of ourselves and become wholly of God, since it is better to belong to God rather than to ourselves."[355] But, this still might sound impossible, because "[i]f God cannot be grasped by mind or sense-perception, if he is not a particular being, how do

[351] Jan Opsomer, "Proclus vs Plotinus on Matter ("De mal. Subs." 30-7)" *Phronesis* 46, no. 2 (2001): pp. 154-188.
[352] *DN* 792A, p. 92.
[353] *MT* 997B-1000A, p. 135.
[354] *DN* 649A, p. 66; eastern christianity has eversince build up a tradition around the practice of 'kenosis'.
[355] *DN* 865D-868A, p. 106.

we know him? This is something we must inquire into."[356] Dionysius stresses that we should focus the practice upon *ourselves*, and here again we can hear clear platonic, socratic and Delphic echoings:

> The universal Cause, by knowing itself, can hardly be ignorant of the things which proceed from it and of which it is the source. This, then, is how God knows all things, not by understanding things, but by understanding himself.[357]

This is described as "to be at peace with itself, to be at one, and never to move or fall away from its own existence and from what it has."[358] And we can do this when we "learn from [Christ] to cease from strife within ourselves, against each other and against the angels."[359] The importance of practice becomes apparent when Denys argues passionately that

> Whoever wrongfully dares to teach holiness to others before he has regularly practiced it himself is unholy and is a stranger to sacred norms. (…) if God's inspiration and choice have not summoned one to the task of leadership, if one has not yet received perfect and lasting divinization, one must avoid the arrogance of guiding others.[360]

Again this receiving of 'perfect and lasting divinization' is a fundamental point. Throughout the dionysian corpus it is stressed over and again.

4.2.3 Summary

In Dionysius the christian and the (neo)platonic view of primarily Proclus find a complete integration. The proper affirmations of the divine are steppingstones to superabundant affirmations which in themselves work like negations. Apophatism, then, takes us even closer to the divine. We should, and this is crucial, also deny negations, as the divine is wholly beyond both assertion *and* denial. The *via negativa* and the *via affirmativa* again lead to a *via oppositionis* which at the same time proceeds in

[356] *DN* 869C, p. 108.
[357] *DN* 869C, p. 108.
[358] *DN* 952BC, p. 123.
[359] *DN* 953A, p. 124.
[360] *EH* 445AB, p. 223.

scales (*via eminentiae*) *and* it is becoming *like* and *one* with 'god' (*via imitationes*). Pseudo-Dionysius is a good example to show that these 'ways' can become quite entangled.

The purpose of his teaching is to hand some kind of method to reach *unity*, the truth of the mind's vision. One goes beyond all knowledge, discursiveness, words and concepts. One even goes beyond the dual awareness of subject and object, and instantly knows that this is the truth, that one is now free from error. The way up through negations strips us of our remoteness from the good; because evil is just a privation of good it is therefore nonexistent. This means that, according to Denys, even certain emotions (anger), or matter itself participate in the good. These things can even urge us to return towards the good.

This all should not be understood *solely* as a metaphysical speculation but first and foremost as a guide to the spiritual life. Dionysius emphasises the practice of the religious life as becomes clear when he dimisses inappropriate mastership. All of his works show a clear embeddedness within a contemplative practice.

Therefore let us pray to God that we may be free of God that we may gain the truth and enjoy it eternally, there where the highest angel, the fly, and the soul are equal, there where I stood and wanted what I was, and was what I wanted.[361]

—Eckhart von Hochheim, *Sermon*

4.3 Eckhart von Hochheim

The Dominican Eckhart von Hochheim (c. 1260 - c. 1328), better known as Meister Eckhart,[362] has been one of the most famous and also controversial of the christian mystics. This infamy came as a result of the condemnation of 28 sentences from Eckhart's Latin and German works, of which 17 were judged heretical and 11 suspect, in the 1329 papal bull *In Agro Dominico* by John XXII.[363] However, following this condemnation his works experienced an even wider diffusion, both in and outside the Dominican order.[364] Eckhart's works are generally divided into his Latin and his

[361] All English quotations will be accompanied by the middle German original in the footnote. "Her umbe sô bitten wir got, daz wir gotes ledic werden und daz wir nemen die wârheit und gebrûchen der êwiclîche, dâ die obersten engel un diu vliege und diu sêle glîch sint in dem, dâ ich stuont und wolte, daz ich was, und was, daz ich wolte." Josef Quint, *Meister Eckhart: Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke. Herausgegeben im Auftrage der deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft. Die deutschen Werken. Zweiter Band.* Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1936, Q52, pp. 493-494; Franz Pfeiffer, *Deutsche Mystiker des 14. Jahrhunderts II. Meister Eckhart.* 1875. Leipzig, Aalen, 1962, Pf4, pp. 28-29; Maurice O'Connell Walshe (trans.), *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart.* New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009, W87, p. 422.

Usually in Eckhart studies scholars refer to the critical edition of Quint and the edition of Pfeiffer. Since I will use both these sources for the Middle German sermons as well as the English translation by Walshe and since all of them use different numeration for the sermons I will abbreviate by giving Q for Quint, Pf for Pfeiffer and W for Walshe, followed by the page numbers.

[362] 'Meister' is the German for the Latin title 'Magister', the highest title possible in the Dominican order, that Eckhart received at the University of Paris in 1302 and again in 1311, a rarity which only happened once before him to Thomas Aquinas. Bernard McGinn, "Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher" In *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism. Vol. 4: The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany.* New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2008, p. 99; see also Walter Senner OP, "Appendix: Dominican Education" In Jeremiah M. Hackett (ed.), *A Companion to Meister Eckhart.* Leiden: Brill, 2013, pp. 711-723.

[363] Fiorella Retucci, "On a Dangerous Trail: Henry Suso and the Condemnations of Meister Eckhart" In Jeremiah M. Hackett (ed.), *A Companion to Meister Eckhart.* Leiden: Brill, 2013, p. 587; Maurice O'Connell Walshe, "Introduction. Note C: Articles Condemned in the Bull of John XXLL" In *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart.* New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009, pp. 26-28.

[364] Joseph Koch, "Meister Eckharts Weiterwirken im deutsch-niederländischen Raum im 14. und 15. Jahrhundert" In *La Mystique Rhénane. Colloque de Strasbourg 16–19 mai 1961.* Paris: 1963, pp. 133-156; Retucci, "On a Dangerous Trail", *A Companion to Meister Eckhart*, p. 587.

(Middle) German or vernacular works.[365] Of the Latin works, which are generally treatises, it is easy to affirm authorship. The situation with the vernacular works, most of them sermons, is somewhat different because there is such a wide diffusion and fragmentation of these texts.[366] It was Josef Quint, whose critical edition is still the basic reference in Eckhart studies, who was first to recognize the function of the trial material in deciding which works were authentic.[367] So, in an ironic turn of history it was Eckhart's condemnation that made his work even more popular and in modern times one of the key elements to determine their authenticity.

In this section I will make use of Eckhart's vernacular works. The four sermons that are numbered by Quint as 101-104 (Pf1-4; W1-4) are centered around the topic of the *eternal birth* (*êwige geburt*), that is, the birth of 'God' in the soul. These four sermons contain many of the different themes of Eckhart's teachings and because of this I will primarily cite from them. In addition, I will also make use of sermon Q68 (Pf69; W69).[368] Like to other texts we discussed Eckhart's sermons embedded within a religious practice. They are specifically addressed to monks, nuns and laymen, guiding them in their spiritual development.

Because Eckhart's works were written in a much later era than the other two bodies of texts we have looked at, and because Eckhart drew on a wide variety of sources,[369] it might be helpful to briefly mention the sources that influenced him. His most often cited source is unmistakably the Bible.[370] Some of the non-christian authorities he cites are Plato, Aristotle (twice as much as any other non-christian), Plotinus through Macrobius, Proclus, and of the jewish thinkers Maimonides and Ibn Gabirol (Avicebron), and of the muslims Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) and Ibn Rušd (Averroes).[371] Of the christian authorities he most regularly refers to Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Boethius, Gregory the Great, Jerome, Chryostom, Bernard, Origen, pseudo-Dionysius and John Damascene.[372]

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[365] Allesandra Beccarisi, "Eckhart's Latin Works" In Jeremiah M. Hackett (ed.), *A Companion to Meister Eckhart.* Leiden: Brill, 2013, pp. 85-123; Dagmar Gottschall, "Eckhart's German Works" In Jeremiah M. Hackett (ed.), *A Companion to Meister Eckhart.* Leiden: Brill, 2013, pp. 137-183.
[366] Gottschall, "Eckhart's German Works", *A Companion to Meister Eckhart*, p. 138.
[367] Idem, pp. 138-139.
[368] If not from Q101-104, most other quotes are from Q68/Pf69/W69. Of sermons Q5b/Pf13/W13b and Q52/Pf87/W87 I have taken one quote to make a stronger case for an argument that could already be build on quotes from the other five sermons.
[369] Bernard McGinn, "Appendix: Eckhart's Sources" In *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart: The Man from Whom God Hid Nothing.* New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2001, p. 162.
[370] McGinn, "Eckhart's Sourches", *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, p. 162.
[371] Idem, pp. 168-174.
[372] Idem, p. 174.

4.3.1 Silencing the Faculties Within to Experience the 'Eternal Birth'

What can we understand by the *eternal birth*? How and where does this *birth* takes place? Eckhart says that "this eternal birth occurs in the soul precisely as it does in eternity, no more and no less, for it is *one* birth, and this birth occurs in the essence and ground of the soul."[373] By placing it in the soul Eckhart makes clear that "[i]t is all within, not outside, but wholly within."[374] "You need not seek Him here or there, He is no further than the door of your heart; there He stands patiently awaiting whoever is ready to open up and let Him in".[375]

But how do we let him in? Well… by creating *space*. Eckhart urges his brothers and sisters to "cast aside all your deeds and silence your faculties".[376] This silencing of the faculties means letting go of the external and giving yourself completely to the divine:

> withdraw from all things in order to concentrate all our powers on perceiving and knowing the one infinite, uncreated, eternal truth! To this end, then, assemble all your powers, all your senses, your entire mind and memory; direct them into the ground where your treasure lies buried. But if this is to happen, realize that you must drop all other works – you must come to an *unknowing*, if you would find it.[377]

This *birth* is to *perceive*, *to know*, the one infinite, uncreated, eternal truth. This will only be possible if we psychologically withdraw from everything, by coming to an *unknowing* (*unwizzen*). And we should not understand this as passive inner reflection but as concentrated effort: "none assuredly can experience or approach this birth without a mighty effort. (…) This must be done with force; without force it cannot be done."[378] Eckhart uses the word *gewalt* which can also be translated as power, control or

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[373] "disiu êwige geburt heschiht in der sêle in aller der wise, als si geschiht in der êwikeit, noch mînre noch mê, wan ez ist ein geburt, unde geschiht disiu geburt in dem wesenne und in denne grunde der sêle." Q102; Pf2, p. 10; W2, p. 39.
[374] "Es ist zemâle inne, niht ûze, sunder allez inne." Q101; Pf1, p. 6; W1, p. 35.
[375] "Dû endarft in niht suochen weder hie noch dâ: er enist niht verrer denne vor der tür des herzen, dâ stêt er unde beitet unde wartet, wen er bereit vindet, der im úf tuo und in în lâ." Q104; Pf4, p. 28; W4, p. 58.
[376] "slahen [abe] alliu dîniu were unde tuon swîgen alle dine krefte" Q102; Pf2, p. 16; W2, p. 44.
[377] "enziehen von allen dingen under samenen alle unser krefte ze schouwende unde ze bekennende die einige unmêzige ungeschaftene êwige wârheit! Her zuo samene alle dine vernunft und allez din gehügnüsse: daz kêr in den grunt, dâ dirre schatz inne verborgen lit. Sol diz geschehen, sû wizzest, sû muostû allen andern werken enpfallen unde muost komen in ein unwizzen, soltû diz vinden." Q102; Pf2, p. 13; W2, p. 42.
[378] "niemer kein mensche sicherlîche bevinden dise geburt noch derzuo genâhen, ez engeschehe denne mit grôzer gewalt. (…) Disem allem sament muoz gewalt geschehen, ez engât anders niht zuo." Q103; Pf3, p. 16; W3, p. 46.

violence. So there is no mistaking that it takes a lot of effort. However, one should not despair in thinking that the task is impossible:

> No one should think it is hard to come to this, even though it sounds hard and a great matter. It is true that it is a little difficult in the beginning in becoming detached. But when one has got into it, no life is easier, more delightful or lovelier[379]

This is also because in the end one cannot fulfill this quest wholly by oneself. When you sincerely give everything you have, then God will help: "when the mind strives with all its might and with real sincerity, then God takes charge of the mind and its work, and then the mind sees and experiences God".[380] Again Eckhart emphasizes that the end is to *see* (*schouwen*) and *experience*, *to undergo* (*lîden*) 'god'. Indeed "the very instant the spirit is ready, God enters without hesitation or delay."[381]

4.3.2 No Images, No Means, No Methods, No Teachings

Emptying oneself means to eschew all images, conceptions, or concepts of 'god' because "God works without means and without images, and the freer you are from images, the more receptive you are for His inward working, and the more introverted and self-forgetful, the nearer you are to this."[382] This cannot depend on being in a church, he argues, "for God is equally in all things and all places, and is equally ready to give Himself".[383] It cannot depend on any method whatsoever as Eckhart emphasizes throughout many sermons:

> Indeed, if a man thinks he will get more of God by meditation, by devotion, by ecstasies, or by special infusion of grace than by the fireside or in the stable—that is nothing but taking God, wrapping a cloak round His head

[379] "Nieman sol denken, daz swêre sî hie zuo ze komen, wie wol ez swêre liutet und ouch swêre ist in dem anevange und in dem abscheiden unt sterben aller dinge. Aber swenne man dar în kumt, sô wirt kein leben lîhter noch lustlîcher noch minneclîcher;" Q68; Pf69, p. 223; W69, p. 355.
[380] "swenne sich aber der geist üehet in rehter triuwe, sô underwindert sich got des geistes unde des werkes unde denne sô schouwet unde lîdet der geist got." Q103, Pf3, p. 17, W3, p. 47.
[381] "sô der geist bereit ist, sô gêt got în âne ûfzichen und âne beiten." Q104; Pf4, p. 27; W4, p. 58.
[382] "Got wirket âne mittel und âne bilde. Ie mê dû âne bilde bist, ie mê dû sines înwerkennes enpfenelicher bist, unde ie mê dû îngekêret undo vergezzener, ie dû disem nâher bist" Q101; Pf1, p.7; W1, p. 34. This passage is directly influenced by pseudo-Denys since a few lines before Eckhart refers to him ("Dionysius sprichet…"). Cf. *DN* 913BD, p. 117.
[383] "want got ist gelîch in allen dingen und iu allen steten und ist bereit gelîch sich ze gebenne" Q68; Pf69, p. 222; W69, p. 353.

> and shoving Him under a bench. For whoever seeks God in a special way gets the way and misses God, who lies hidden in it. But whoever seeks God without any special way gets Him as He is in Himself, and that man lives with the Son, and he is life itself.[384]

The purpose of this statement seems to be to turn our attention away from the means, the doctrines, the methods, the so-called 'holy' ways. Because if we forget that they are just a means of getting to 'god' then we might end up focusing only on the means and thereby missing the purpose, or as Eckhart says, we 'get the way but miss God'. Eckhart takes this point even further, since he claims that at a certain point one even does not need teachings anymore:

> in whatever soul God's kingdom dawns, which knows God's kingdom to be near her, is in no need of sermons and teaching: she is instructed by it and assured of eternal life: for she knows and is aware how near God's kingdom is[385]

4.3.3. On the Certainty of This Experience

One can easily imagine that monks and nuns living a pious life in a monastery may wonder if this experience of the *eternal birth* already has taken place. Eckhart seems to say that as long as this 'if' question is asked, you can rest assured that you have not fully penetrated the depths of your soul:

> so long as the intellect does not find true being and does not penetrate to the ground, so as to be able to say, 'this is this; it is such and not otherwise,' so long does it remain in a condition of questing and expectation; it does not settle down or rest, but labors on, seeking, expecting, and rejecting. And though it may perhaps spend a year or more investigating a natural truth, to see what it is, it still has to work long again to strip off what it is *not*. All this

384 "Wan wærlîche, swer gotes mê wænet bekomen in innerkeit, in andâht, in süezicheit und in sunderlîcher suovüegunge dan bî dem viure oder in dem stalle, sô tuost dû niht anders dan ob dû got næmest und wündest im einen mantel umbe daz houbet und stiezest in under einen bank. Wan swer got suochet âne wise, der nimet in, al ser in im selber ist; und der mensche lebet mit dem sune, und er ist daz leven selbe." Q5b, p. 91; Pf13; W13b, p. 110.

385 "In welher sêle gotes riche erschinet unde diu gotes riche erkennet, der darf man niht predien noch lêren: si wirt dâ von gelêret unde versichert des êwigen lebens. Der weiz und erkennet, wie nâhe ime gotes riche ist" Q68; Pf69, p. 221; W69, p. 353.

> time it has nothing to go by and makes no pronouncement at all, as long as it has not penetrated to the ground of truth with full realization[386]

This *full realization* (*wârem bekantnüsse*; *true knowing*) implies that one is able to differentiate between what is true and what is not. The signals that indicate that we have not penetrated to the ground of the soul are that we remain in a state of expecting, searching, unrest, laboring, rejecting. Indeed as long as one doubts one can be sure that one is not there: "I am as certain as that I am a man, that nothing is so close to me as God. God is closer to me than I am to myself: my being depends on God's being near me and present to me."[387] Interestingly this *birth* does not seem to have the character of a coming and going (at point x^t you have it, at point x^{t+1} you have have lost it). It seems more like a continuous growth with certain key moments:

> I am often asked if a man can reach the point where he is no longer hindered by time, multiplicity, or matter. Assuredly! Once this birth has really occurred, no creatures can hinder you; instead, they will all direct you to God and this birth. (…) In fact, what used to be a hindrance now helps you most. (…) All things become simply God to you, for in all things you notice only God, just as a man who stares long at the sun sees the sun in whatever he afterward looks at. If *this* is lacking, this looking for and seeking God in all and sundry, then you lack this birth.[388]

When this birth has occurred what used to be an obstacle now helps you even more by experiencing 'god' in all things. If this is not the case then you may be sure that this birth has not yet been completely realized inside. And though this all may seem hard to understand, Eckhart ensures his following that

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386 "Alsô lange diu vernunft des wesennes wârheit eigenlîche niht envindet noch daz si den grunt niht enrüeret, alsô daz sî müge sprechen: diz ist diz und ist alsô und anders niht, alsô lange stet si allez in eime suochende und in eime beitende unde neiget sich niht noch enruowet, si arbeitet noch allez unde leit abe alsô suochende und beitende. Und alsô ist si etewenne ein jâr oder mê in erbeiten und in einer nâtiurlichen wârheit, waz ez sî; si muoz joch lange arbeiten in eime abelegenne, waz ez niht ensî. Rehte alsô lange stêt si âne allen enhalt unde ensprichet ouch kein wort von dekeinen dingen, die wile si den grunt der wârheit niht hât funden mit wârem bekantnüsse." Q103; Pf3, p. 20; W3, p. 50.

387 "Ich bin des sô gewis als ich lebe, daz mir kein dinc alsô nâhe ist als got. Got ist mir nêher denn ich mir selber bin, min wesen hanget dar an, daz mir got nâhe unde gegenwertic sî." Q68; Pf69, p. 221; W69, p. 352.

388 "Man vrâget mich dicke, obe der mensche dar zuo komen müge, daz in diu zît niht enhindere noch menige noch materie? Jâ in der wârheit! wene disiu geburt in der wârheit geschiht, sô enmügent dich alle crêatûre niht gehindern, mêr: sie wîsent dich alle zuo gote unde zuo dirre geburt. (…) Ja daz dir vor ein hindernüsse was, daz fürdert dich nû alzemâle. (…) jâ alliu dinc werdent dir lûter got, wan in allen dingen sô enmeinest dû niht denne lûter got. Rehte as ob ein mensche die sunne lange an sêhe, waz er dar nâch sêhe, dâ bildete sich diu sunne inne. Swâ dir diss gebristet, daz dû got niht ensuochest noch enmeinest in allen dingen in eime iegelichem dinge, dâ gebristet dir dirre gebürte." Q104; Pf4, p. 28-29; W4, p. 59.

> If anyone cannot understand this sermon, he need not worry. For so long as a man is not equal to this truth, he *cannot* understand my words, for this is a naked truth which has come direct from the heart of God.[389]

4.3.4. Summary

Eckhart speaks of an *eternal birth* in the soul, which is the perceiving and knowing of the 'one infinite, uncreated, eternal truth, that is God'. This does not depend on the divinity, but on our own effort to make space inside to 'let him in'. Eckhart gives a *via negativa* when he says we can achieve this by *unknowing* (*unwizzen*) all our works and what we think we know. To detach us from this may be difficult at the start, but when one has gotten into it 'no life is easier or more delightful'.

However, there is no single method or teaching to realize this. It does not depend on being in holy places or reading holy sermons, at least not in the sense of being an end in themselves. They are just *means* on your way of coming to this *birth in the soul* which requires both inner and outer detachment. But when you are ready 'god' will immediately enter. Unmistakably, when this birth takes place, you will know. There appears to be no more seeking, expecting, rejecting, or other restless behaviour. In fact, what once formed an obstacle now helps you the most. It then becomes impossible *not* to see 'god' in all things.

[389] "Wer dise rede niht enverstât, der enbekümber sîn herze niht dâ mite. Wan als lange der mensche niht glîch enist dirre wârheit, als lange ensol er dise rede niht verstân; wan diz ist ein umbedahtiu wârheit, diu dâ komen ist ûz dem herzen gotes âne mittel." Q52, p. 506; Pf87; W87, p. 425. Note that Walshe translates 'âne mittel', 'without mediation', as 'direct'.

4.4 Apophatic Mysticism in the 'West'

The intermixing of (neo)platonism, (neo)aristotelianism and 'gnostic' histories can be clearly discerned in the texts we have studied.[390] The oldest, *Nag Hammadi*, are the conceptualy most diverse of the texts I analyzed. They range from ethical guidelines (*via imitationis*) to descriptions of scales (*via eminentiae*). Although in all of them we can find negation as a way to 'describe' (the experience of) the divine, the *GosThom* is the one that also stresses detachment as a practice.

However, what is particulary interesting are two related notions: (i) that *error* has *no root* (*GosTruth*), i.e. that forgetfullness is why we do not know the 'father', that what we look for *is already there* (*GosThom*); and (ii) that it therefore can be found *within* (*GosThom*, *3StSeth*, *GosTruth*, *Disc. 89*). This notion of the subjective, ones own experience, can be found in all these texts. Echoes of Socrates, Plato and the Delphic principle of *know thyself* can thus be heard.

The works of Dionysius bring the *via negativa* to its fullest form. It states that there are ways to 'describe' the divine effectively (cataphatism) resulting in absolutes, which, according to Denys himself, function like negations. Much like Sextus, Dionysius uses language to self-referentially show its limits, since negation (apophatism) comes *even closer* to 'describing' what the divine is, for it acknowledges that *it cannot be described*. And he continues to say that even *this* should be denied. The divine is beyond both assertion *and* denial. However, again this teaching has a function. It is not just a discourse of negating. Its purpose is *henōsis* (*unity*) and this is done by a practice of negation, namely *kénōsis* (*emptying oneself*). Dionysius relates to Plato, and (neo)platonic thought when he describes that *evil* is only *remoteness from the good*. This is what we can also find in the *Nag Hammadi* texts that we discussed.

Eckhart too describes his method as *unknowing* (*unwizzen*) which is a 'method' to reach *unity*, the truth of the mind's vision, the *eternal birth in the soul*. But this negation can best be conceptualized as a *methodless method* in the sense that trying to use *any* method (meditation, contemplation, devotion, ecstasies, bible reading, etc.), according to Eckhart, runs the risk of focusing on the *way* and missing the *purpose*. To focus

[390] Merlan, *Monopsychism, Mysticism, Metaconsciousness*; Merlan, *From Platonism to Neoplatonism;* Merlan, "Greek Philosophy From Plato to Plotinus", *Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, pp. 14-132; Sheldon-Williams, "The Greek Christian Platonist Tradition From the Cappadocians to Maximus and Eriugena", *Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, pp. 425-533; Armstrong & Markus, *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy*; Stead, *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity*; Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition.*

relentlessly on yourself is essential in Eckhart's teaching. 'God' is ready, it is us who are not. Stripping away images and concepts, emptying ourselves clears space for 'god' to enter. Here the terminology of Dionysius can be clearly discerned.

The *via negativa* in terms of a practice that, as with *epoché* in pyrrhonism, itself is a tool to be thrown away after its purpose has been achieved, can be clearly discerned in the works of Dionysius and Eckhart. However, within the four texts from the *NHC* there is also a clear tension between language, books, teachings, that is, the domain of the discursive, and the vision, gnōsis or experience of unity.

I have shown you how the Dhamma is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping.

When you know the Dhamma to be similar to a raft, you should abandon even the teachings, how much more so things contrary to the teachings.[391]

—Gautama Buddha, *Majjhima Nikāya*

V. Apophatic Mysticism in the 'East'

In this chapter I will analyse three different 'eastern' texts. I will start off with the short, but central mahāyāna buddhist *Diamond Sūtra* (2nd - 4th century CE). Subsequently we will focus on daoism, on a text originating before the influence of buddhism in China, i.e. *Nèipiān* or *Inner Chapters* of the book *Zhuāngzǐ* (c. 4th century BCE). Lastly I will look at what eventually became part of mahāyāna buddhism albeit with daoist influences, namely Chinese chán and the *Platform Sūtra* of Huìnéng (c. 7th century CE).

These three texts are of great importance to their own traditions. In addition, the *Diamond Sūtra* has also become one of the fundamental texts of chán buddhism. Like the three bodies of text I discussed in the preceeding chapter, there has been cross-pollinations between these traditions. However, as said, daoism for some time developed on its own before it came into contact with buddhism.

After the analysis I will give some conclusions that can be drawn by comparing all three texts. That will be the last step before we continue to the final part of this thesis.

[391] Majjhima Nikāya 22.13-14. Bhikku Ñāṇamoli & Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.), The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya. Translated from the Pāli. 1995. 4th Ed. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2009, p. 229.

Thus shall ye think of all this fleeting world:
A star at dawn, a bubble in a stream;
A flash of lightening in a summer cloud,
A flickering lamp, a phantom and a dream.[392]
—Gautama Buddha, *Diamond Sūtra §32*

5.1 The Diamond Sūtra

The *Diamond Sūtra* (*Vajracchedikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, meaning something like the *Perfection of Wisdom Text that Cuts Like a Diamond*[393]) is one of the important mahāyāna sūtra's of the prajñāpāramitā kind, belonging to the branch of the *perfection of wisdom*. The date of the Sanskrit version(s) is uncertain. After much debate, scholars have dated it somewhere between the second and fourth century CE.[394] The first Chinese translations began to appear in the early fifth century, of which the translation of Kumārajīva (344-413 CE) is still the most widely used. The text is, like many sūtra's, a dialogue between the Buddha and a disciple. Xiāo Tǒng (who's emperor name is Zhāomíng (501-531 CE)) divided the sūtra into 32 chapters and gave each one an apt title that has since become part of the Chinese translations in particular.[395] The *Diamond Sūtra* is a difficult sūtra and I have therefore made use of two translations.[396] Though the sūtra is short, and repetitious, it would be presumptuous of me to claim to have penetrated through to its exact meaning. However, just as in the analyses of the other texts, I will quote extensively to try to show the way the text presents itself.

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[392] A.F. Price (trans.), "The Diamond Sūtra" In A.F. Price & Wong Mou-lam *The Diamond Sutra & The Sutra of Hui-neng.* Boston: Shambala Classics, 2005, §32 ('The Delusion of Appearances'), p. 53. "How, Lord, should one who has set out on the bodhisattva path take his stand, how should he proceed, how should he control the mind?" Paul Harrison, "Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā: A New English Translation of the Sanskrit Text Based on Two Manuscripts from Greater Gandhāra", *BMSC Vol. III.* Hermes Publishing: Oslo, 2006, §53. *University of Oslo: Faculty of Humanities.* [2007], accessed on 20 June 2016 https://www2.hf.uio.no/polyglotta

[393] The Sanskrit 'vajra' is an almost untranslatable term referring to a divine and indestructible weapon (like a discus or thunderbolt), and is associated with its hard cutting properties, hence the translation of 'diamond'. Gregory Schopen, "Diamond Sūtra" In Robert E. Buswell Jr. (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Buddhism. Vol. 1.* New York: Macmillan Reference, 2004, p. 227.

[394] Schopen, "Diamond Sūtra", *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, p. 227.

[395] I will add the chapter name in parentheses behind the § in the note.

[396] The most recent translation is Paul Harrison (2006), which is a critical edition based on Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan versions. I have used this one to compare it with the excellent translation of A.F. Price (1947). In general Price has made a sublimely straightforward and clear translation of the sūtra though he obviously did not have access to the compiled version Harrison made. I will only use the parts of Price's translation where both semantics and syntax do not differ substantively from the Harrison translation, the latter I will also add in the notes.

5.1.1 Anattā: No Self

The sūtra begins with the Buddha who, after entering the city to beg from door to door, sits down in front of an assembly of many. Out of them the elder Subhūti comes forth and asks a question:

> World-Honored One, if good men and good women seek the consummation of incomparable enlightenment, by what criteria should they abide and how should they control their thought?[397]

The rest of the sūtra is a reply to this question. The Buddha's immediate answer, not to cherish "the idea of an ego entity, a personality, a being, or a separated individuality"[398] gets expanded in the following chapters. As in the sixth paragraph:

> if such men allowed their mind to grasp and hold on to anything they would be cherishing the idea of an ego entity, a personality, a being, or a separated individuality. Likewise, if they grasped and held on to the notion of things as devoid of intrinsic qualities they would be cherishing the idea of an ego entity, a personality, a being, or a separated individuality. So you should not be attached to things as being possessed of, or devoid of, intrinsic qualities.[399]

Men and women who seek *enlightenment* should not hold on to ideas of things as having an essence, like a 'ego entity' or a 'separated individuality' *nor* should they conceive of them as being devoid of essence (i.e. neither essentialism nor nihilism). This is *the middle way* of the buddhist teaching of *anattā*,[400] which means *no-self*. It is not a denial of *self* per se, but a denial of *anything* as existing independently and essentialy

[397] Price, "The Diamond Sūtra", §2 ('Subhūti Makes a Request'), p. 18. "How, Lord, should one who has set out on the bodhisattva path take his stand, how should he proceed, how should he control the mind?" Harrison, "Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā", §2.
[398] Price, "The Diamond Sūtra", §3 ('The Real Teaching of the Great Way'), p. 19. "the idea of a living being (…), or the idea of a soul or the idea of a person" Harrison, "Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā", §3.
[399] Price, "The Diamond Sūtra", §6 ('Rare Is True Faith'), p. 22. "If, Subhūti, the idea of a *dharma* should occur to those bodhisattvas, for them that would constitute seizing upon a self, it would constitute seizing upon a living being, seizing upon a soul, seizing upon a person. If the idea of a non-*dharma* should occur, for them that would constitute seizing upon a self, seizing upon a living being, seizing upon a soul, seizing upon a person. Why is that? One should moreover not take up any *dharma*, Subhūti, or any non-*dharma*." Harrison, "Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā", §6.
[400] Which is a Pāli word for 'no-self'; Sanskrit: 'anātman'.

unchanching, *including* a notion of a stable self, whom in this regard forms the source from which the idea of independent stable essences arise.[401]

5.1.2 No Teaching

The sixth paragraph concludes that "[m]y teaching of the good law is to be likened unto a raft. The Buddha-teaching must be relinquished; how much more so mis-teaching!"[402] In the famous simile of the raft, from *Majjhima Nikāya* 22, Buddha compares his teaching with a raft: once one has crossed the river there is no need to take the raft with you.[403] So the teachings of the Buddha should be done away with, let alone teachings that do not teach you to do away with any teaching. This is the crux of the matter. It highlights the difference between apophatism as a practice of negation compared to cataphatic doctrines *and* apophatism as a dogmas of negation. Therefore, "what is called 'the religion given by Buddha' is not, in fact, buddha-religion."[404]

Again and again this sūtra points out that we should not hold on to names (ideas, or in a modern equivalent *concepts*). This even applies to time: "it is impossible to retain past mind, impossible to hold on to present mind, and impossible to grasp future mind."[405] Not accepting, nor denying an idea of either self, world, the teachings, nor past, future or present.

> Therefore, Subhūti, bodhisattvas[406] should leave behind all phenomenal distinctions and awaken the thought of the consummation of incomparable enlightenment by not allowing the mind to depend upon notions evoked by the sensible world—by not allowing the mind to depend upon notions evoked by sounds, odors, flavors, touch contacts, or any qualities. The mind

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[401] In short this is the third of the *three marks of existence*: (i) "sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā": "all saṅkhāras (conditioned things) are *impermanent*"; (ii) "sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā": "all saṅkhāras (conditioned things) are *unsatisfactory*"; (iii) "sabbe dhammā anattā": "all dhammas (conditioned or unconditioned things) are *not self*"

[402] Price, "The Diamond Sūtra", §6, p. 22. "It was therefore with this in mind that the Realized One said that those who understand the round of teachings of the Simile of the Raft should let go of the *dharmas* themselves, to say nothing of the non-*dharmas*." Harrison, "Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā", §6.

[403] The same point as Sextus Empiricus makes with his metaphor of the ladder in *Adv. Log.* II.481.

[404] Price, "The Diamond Sūtra", §8, ('The Fruits of Meritorious Action'), p. 25. Note that Price has chosen to translate 'dharma' as 'religion' which is a rather unfortunate translation. "The so-called '*dharmas* of a Buddha,' Subhūti, are indeed devoid of any *dharmas* of a Buddha." Harrison, "Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā", §8.

[405] Price, "The Diamond Sūtra", §18 ('All Modes of Mind Are Really Only Mind'), p. 39. "one cannot apprehend a past thought, one cannot apprehend a future thought, one cannot apprehend a present [thought]." Harrison, "Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā", §18.

[406] Bodhisattva literally means 'whose purpose (sattva) [is] enlightenment (bodhi)'. It referred in earlier buddhism to the past lives of Gautama Buddha up untill his moment of enlightenment in the body of Siddhartha Gautama. In mahāyāna buddhism it is the ideal of the one who's goal it has to become to assist all beings in awakening.

should be kept independent of any thoughts that arise within it. If the mind depends upon anything, it has no sure haven.[407]

The *consummation of incomparable enlightenment* occurs by *not* depending on anything; externals or internals. The sūtra makes a sharp distinction between a concept, name, or word, and the thing it names: "words cannot explain the real nature of a cosmos. Only common people fettered with desire make use of this arbitrary method."[408] Indeed "[a]s to any truth-declaring system, truth is undeclarable; so 'an enunciation of truth' is just the name given to it."[409] Through its negation however, the teaching does point to *something*: "*This* is altogether everywhere, without differentiation or degree; wherefore it is called 'consummation of incomparable enlightenment.'"[410]

The Buddha asks Subhūti if he understands: "Subhūti, what do you think? Has the Tathāgata[411] attained the consummation of incomparable enlightenment? Has the Tathāgata a teaching to enunciate?" and Subhūti answers:

> As I understand Buddha's meaning there is no formulation of truth called consummation of incomparable enlightenment. Moreover, the Tathāgata has no formulated teaching to enunciate. Wherefore? Because the Tathāgata has said that truth is uncontainable and inexpressible. It neither is nor is not.
>
> Thus it is that this unformulated principle is the foundation of the different systems of all the sages.[412]

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[407] Price, "The Diamond Sūtra", §14 ('Perfect Peace Lies in Freedom from Characteristic Distinctions'), p. 32. "For that reason, then, Subhūti, a bodhisattva and mahāsattva should conceive the aspiration for supreme and perfect awakening after eliminating all ideas, he should not conceive an aspiration which is fixed on forms, he should not conceive an aspiration which is fixed on sounds, smells, tastes, or objects of touch, he should not conceive an aspiration which is fixed on *dharmas*, he should not conceive an aspiration which is fixed on non-*dharmas*, he should not conceive an aspiration which is fixed on anything. What is the reason for that? Whatever is fixed is indeed unfixed." Harrison, "Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā", §14.

[408] Price, "The Diamond Sūtra", §30 ('The Integral Principle'), p. 51. "seizing upon something solid is a *dharma* which is beyond linguistic expression, Subhūti, which is ineffable. It has been taken up by foolish ordinary people." Harrison, "Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā", §30.

[409] Price, "The Diamond Sūtra", §21 ('Words Cannot Express Truth; That Which Words Express Is Not Truth'), p. 42. "As for the so-called 'teaching of the *dharma*,' Subhūti, there exists no *dharma* whatsoever which can be apprehended called the teaching of the *dharma*." Harrison, "Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā", §21.

[410] Price, "The Diamond Sūtra", §23 ('The Practice of Good Works Purifies the Mind'), p. 42. "that *dharma* is the same as any other (*sama*), and there is nothing at all different (*vi□ama*) about it. That is why it is called 'supreme and perfect (*samyak*) awakening." Harrison, "Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā", §23.

[411] This is a title the Buddha uses to refer to himself which can either mean 'one who has thus gone' (tathā-gata) or 'one who has thus come' (tathā-āgata) it refers to crossing the river which is both a coming and going.

[412] Price, "The Diamond Sūtra", §7 ('Great Ones, Perfect Beyond Learning, Utter No Words of Teaching'), p. 24. "Lord, as I understand the meaning of what the Lord has preached, there is no *dharma* whatsoever that the Realized One has fully awakened to, nor any *dharma* whatsoever that the Realized One has taught, as supreme and perfect awakening. Why is that? The *dharma* which the Realized One has taught is ungraspable, it is ineffable, it is neither a *dharma* nor a non-*dharma*. Why is that? Because the Noble Persons are distinguished by the power they

In this reply by Subhūti we see that any truth, or teaching is *uncontainable* and *inexpressible*. There is '*no formulation* of truth *called* consummation of incomparable enlightenment', or as Harrison translates, '*no* dharma whatsoever which can be *apprehended called* the teaching of the dharma'. However it then ends with 'thus it is that this *unformulated principle* is the foundation of the different systems of all the sages' or, with Harrison, 'because the Noble Persons are distinguished by the power they derive from the *unconditioned*'. The last statement would seem contradictory because although it has been negating all principles at this stage it is acknowledged that there is an 'unformulated principle'. From this unconditioned foundation all the sages, or noble persons, base or derive their teachings.

Indeed the Buddha replies: "Just so, Subhūti. Through the consummation of incomparable enlightenment I acquired not even the least thing; wherefore it is called 'consummation of incomparable enlightenment.'"[413] The paradox here is that the purpose of negating, detaching from all thoughts and qualities leads to the consummation of incomparable enlightenment, which however, is not just an idea or a name but a genuine *experience*.

5.1.2 Summary

I have tried to draw on a representative selection of the *Diamond Sūtra*, which fortunately is rather short. I divided the topics under just two headings because the *Diamond Sūtra*, more so than any other text we have discussed thusfar, continously repeats this central point: to get to the other side of the shore of incomparable enlightenment you must do away with everything, including notions of doing away with everything, that is, including the raft (the teaching) itself. In terms of the *four ways* it can be described as placing the *via affirmativa* against the *via negativa* to make the *via oppositionis*.

derive from the unconditioned." Harrison, "Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā", §7. Especially the last sentence sounds different in meaning.

[413] Price, "The Diamond Sūtra", §22 ('It Cannot Be Said That Anything Is Attainable'), p. 43. "Quite so, Subhūti, quite so. Not even a fine or minute (*a□u*) *dharma* is to be found or apprehended in it. That is why it is called 'superfine or supreme (*anuttarā*) and perfect awakening.'" Harrison, "Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā", §22.

> Once Zhuang Zhou dreamed he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn't know he was Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly he woke up, and there he was, solid and unmistakable Zhuang Zhou. But he didn't know if he were Zhuang Zhou who had dreamed he was a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming he was Zhuang Zhou.[414]
>
> —Zhuāng Zou, *Zhuāngz□ (Nèipiān)*

5.2 The Zhuāngzǐ

About the author Zhuāng Zǐ ('Master Zhuāng') after whom this next work is named, we only know that he was called Zhuāng Zou and lived in the fourth century BCE (c. 370 - c. 290 BCE). The *Zhuāngzǐ* is not a book in the sense that most people would understand. Rather than developing an argument, it is a collection of separate pieces, anecdotes and dialogues, with several reoccurring themes such as: mockery of logic, a (therapeutic) scepticism,[415] fascination with nature, the value of non-action (*wúwèi*), the relativity of rituals and customs, and the acceptance of death.[416] Burton Watson, translator of *Zhuāngzǐ*, goes so far as to say that the "central theme of the *Zhuangzi* may be summed up in a single word: freedom."[417] It is generally agreed upon that the first seven chapters known as the *Inner Chapters* (or *Nèipiān*) are the oldest;[418] they are mainly written in the same distinct, though difficult, often humerous and poetic style that can be attributed to the brilliance of one mind.[419] Of the following fifteen *Wàipiān* (*Outer Chapters*) and eleven *Zápiān* (*Miscellaneous Chapters*) scholars still question Zhuāng Zǐ's

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[414] Burton Watson (trans.), "Introduction", In *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2013, §2, p. 95.
[415] Paul Kjellberg, "Skepticism, Truth, and the Good Life: A Comparison of Zhuangzi and Sextus Empiricus" *Philosophy East and West* 44, no. 1 (1994): pp. 111-133.
[416] Angus C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China.* Illinois: Open Court, 1989, pp. 173-175; see also: Bryan W. van Norden, "Competing Interpretations of the Inner Chapters of the 'Zhuangzi'" *Philosophy East and West* 46, no. 2 (1996): pp. 247-268.
[417] Burton Watson (trans.), "Introduction", In *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2013, p. 14.
[418] These are: '1. Free and Easy Wandering'; '2. Discussion on Making All Things Equal'; '3. The Secret of Caring for Life'; '4. In the World of Men'; '5. The Sign of Virtue Complete'; '6. The Great Anerable Teacher'; '7. Fit for Emperors and Kings'.
[419] Watson, "Introduction", *Zhuangzi*, pp. 32-33.

authorship. However, the complete compilation of this work as we have it now, stems from no later than the second century BCE.

5.2.1 Little and Great Understanding

The first chapter starts with some parables of animals who judge other animals, like the quail who laughs at the bird who rises up and flies long distances.[420] This represents what Zhuāng Zǐ calls *little understanding* and which "cannot come up to great understanding".[421] He characterizes both of them: "[g]reat understanding is broad and unhurried; little understanding is cramped and busy. Great words are clear and limpid; little words are shrill and quarrelsome."[422] He describes how *little understanding* manifests in people, it resonates as a description of the *condition humaine*:[423]

> With everything they meet they become entangled. Day after day they use their minds in strife, sometimes grandiose, sometimes sly, sometimes petty. Their little fears are mean and trembly; their great fears are stunned and overwhelming. They bound off like an arrow or a crossbow pellet, certain that they are the arbiters of right and wrong. They cling to their position as though they had sworn before the gods, sure that they are holding on to victory.[424]

Little understanding is clinging to positions, it is the language of discussion. Zhuāng Zǐ's daoism in this regard responds to the schools of thought of his time, like mohism and, particulary, confucianism.

> When the Way relies on little accomplishments and words rely on vain show, then we have the rights and wrongs of the Confucians and the Mohists. What one calls right, the other calls wrong; what one calls wrong, the other calls right. But if we want to right their wrongs and wrong their rights, then the best thing to use is clarity. (…) Therefore the sage does not proceed in such a way but illuminates all in the light of Heaven. He, too, recognizes a 'this' but a 'this' that is also 'that,' a 'that' that is also 'this.' His 'that' has

[420] Watson, *Zhuangzi*, §1, p. 64.
[421] Idem, §1, p. 65.
[422] Idem, §2, p. 76.
[423] As Kristoffer Schipper so aptly descrined it, *Zhuang Zi. De volledige geschriften: Het grote klassieke boek van het taoïsme.* Amsterdam: Augustus, 2007, §2.2, note 7, p. 55.
[424] Watson, *Zhuangzi*, §2, p. 76.

> both a right and a wrong in it; his 'this,' too, has both a right and a wrong in it. So, in fact, does he still have a 'this' and 'that'? Or does he, in fact, no longer have a 'this' and 'that'? A state in which 'this' and 'that' no longer find their opposites is called the hinge of the Way.[425]

Zhuāng Zǐ wonders if you could actually say that such a person still has a 'this' and 'that'. Little understanding brings quarrels. Clarity is the great understanding, it is the hinge of the Way. We should reach that state in which 'this' and 'that' are no longer opposites, it goes beyond dualism. Right or wrong should both be abandoned:

> Right is not right; so is not so. If right were really right, it would differ so clearly from not right that there would be no need for argument. If so were really so, it would differ so clearly from not so that there would be no need for argument. Forget the years; forget distinctions. Leap into the boundless and make it your home![426]

It is impossible to ultimately claim who is right or wrong, because if it would really be that evident, there would be no discussion. As a solution, Zhuāng Zǐ encourages us to forget dinstinctions and 'leap into the boundless', the clarity, the great undersanding, that is the Way (*dào*). To go beyond discussions or even language, as when he says: "[t]he Way has never known boundaries; speech has no constancy"[427] or even more directly: "[t]he Great Way is not named; Great Discriminations are not spoken; (…) If the Way is made clear, it is not the Way. If discriminations are put into words, they do not suffice"[428] thereby echoing the famous opening lines of Lǎo Zǐ's *Dàodéjīng*.[429] Indeed "understanding that rests in what it does not understand is the finest."[430] And what it does not, and cannot understand is the unity, or fullness of the 'dào':

> The Way doesn't want things mixed in with it. When it becomes a mixture, it becomes many ways; with many ways, there is a lot of bustle; and where there is a lot of bustle, there is trouble—trouble that has no remedy! The

[425] Watson, *Zhuangzi*, §2, pp. 79-81.
[426] Idem, §2, p. 94.
[427] Idem, §2, p. 86.
[428] Idem, §2, p. 87.
[429] "The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal name." Lǎo Zǐ, *Dàodéjīng*, Jane English & Gia-Fu Feng (trans.), I.1.
[430] Watson, *Zhuangzi*, §2, pp. 87-88.

> Perfect Man of ancient times made sure that he had it in himself before he tried to give it to others. When you're not even sure what you've got in yourself, how do you have time to bother about what some tyrant is doing?[431]

So all mixed things lead to trouble for which there is no remedy. The end is also particularly important. It seems to suggest that this great understanding needs to be firstly realized by yourself before you can even start to bother about anything external.

5.2.2 Walking Two Roads

Hence *little* and *great understanding* relate to the inner and the outer. The proper attitude towards things inside, and towards things outside takes a central place in Zhuāng Zǐ's philosophy. In the parable of the monkey trainer, master Zhuāng tells us of a trainer handing out acorns to his monkeys. He tells them they get three in the morning and four at night. The monkeys are furious. So he tells them they get four in the morning and three at night. The monkeys are all delighted. It ends in saying that this is the way in which one should live in the world: "the sage harmonizes with both right and wrong and rests in Heaven the Equalizer. This is called walking two roads."[432] In chapter four 'In the World of Men' he describes clearly this disposition:

> suppose I am inwardly direct, outwardly compliant, and do my work through the examples of antiquity? By being inwardly direct, I can be the companion of Heaven. Being a companion of Heaven, I know that the Son of Heaven and I are equally the sons of Heaven. Then why would I use my words to try to get men to praise me or to try to get them not to praise me? A man like this, people call The Child. This is what I mean by being a companion of Heaven.
>
> By being outwardly compliant, I can be a companion of men. Lifting up the tablet, kneeling, bowing, crouching down—this is the etiquette of a minister. Everybody does it, so why shouldn't I? If I do what other people do, they can hardly criticize me. This is what I mean by being a companion of men.[433]

[431] Watson, *Zhuangzi*, §4, p. 107.
[432] Idem, §3, p. 83.
[433] Idem, §4, pp. 110-111.

What is described as *walking the two roads* is being inwardly (one with the *dào*) as well as outwardly compliant (following conventions).[434] However, it is important to keep in mind that Zhuāng Zǐ does seem to place the inner as primary. As when he says that "[t]here must first be a True Man before there can be true knowledge."[435]

5.2.3 Detached Like A Mirror

This true knowledge consists in a complete detachment, not a physical but a spiritual one. The point is not to become a hermit, because in doing so you will probably only continue to carry around the opposites of sacred and profane within yourself; you would still be passing judgment on the world. Zhuāng Zǐ recommends *a certain kind* of detachment:

> Just go along with things and let your mind move freely. Resign yourself to what cannot be avoided and nourish what is within you—this is best. What more do you have to do to fulfill your mission? Nothing is as good as following orders (obeying fate)—that's how difficult it is![436]

However, there appear to be degrees to this attainment. As Zhuāng Zǐ looks around him he sees lots of wise men, but none that were completely free. Sòng Róngzǐ, who could be praised or condemned and "it wouldn't make him mope"[437] drew a clear line between the internal and external, yet "there was still ground he left unturned".[438] The same goes for Lièzǐ who "could ride the wind (…) but he still had to depend on something to get around."[439]

> If he had only mounted on the truth of Heaven and Earth, ridden the changes of the six breaths, and thus wandered through the boundless, then what would he have had to depend on?

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[434] Cf. Watson's analysis of the introduction: "He remains within society but refrains from acting out of the motives that lead ordinary men to struggle for wealth, fame, success, or safety. He maintains a state that Zhuangzi refers to as *wuwei*, or inaction, meaning by this term not a forced quietude but a course of action that is not founded on purposeful motives of gain or striving. In such a state, all human actions become as spontaneous and mindless as those of the natural world. Man becomes one with Nature, or Heaven, as Zhuangzi calls it, and merges himself with Dao, or the Way, the underlying unity that embraces man, Nature, and all that is in the universe." Watson, "Introduction", *Zhuangzi*, pp. 18-19.
[435] Watson, *Zhuangzi*, §6, pp. 145-146.
[436] Idem, §4, p. 118.
[437] Idem, §1, p. 65.
[438] Idem, §1, p. 65.
[439] Idem, §1, p. 65.

> Therefore I say, the Perfect Man has no self; the Holy Man has no merit; the Sage has no fame.[440]

The perfect man has no self, cares nothing for merit, gain and loss, fame and shame. In the last paragraph of the last chapter of the *Nèipiān* Zhuāng Zǐ uses an interesting metaphor which later became popular in Chinese chán. He instructs:

> Embody to the fullest what has no end and wander where there is no trail. Hold on to all that you have received from Heaven, but do not think you have gotten anything. Be empty, that is all. The Perfect Man uses his mind like a mirror—going after nothing, welcoming nothing, responding but not storing. Therefore he can win out over things and not hurt himself.[441]

The metaphor of the mind as mirror, which reflects but neither adds nor subtracts anything is what it means to have *an empty mind*.

5.2.4 Summary

The *Zhuāngzǐ* can be a difficult and mysterious text at times while at other moments it is simple and practical. Zhuāng Zǐ differentiates between little and great understanding and he gives clear examples of what is what. Little understanding results in discussing, quarrelling, opinions, opposition of *this* and *that* which is caused by clinging to a position. This is his critique on the 'scholarly' debate of the mohists and the confucians. He recommends not to proceed in this way but go beyond both altogether, where oppositions no longer exist (*via oppositionis*). Yet still being able to recognize the difference between *this* and *that*. Here he points to the clarity of the boundless Way (*dào*). The sage makes sure he has this *within* himself. That is the distinction between inner and outer. Inwards you are one with the *dào*, outwards you comply to conventions in a detached way, like a mirror just reflecting not adding anything. Zhuāng Zǐ calls this 'walking the two roads'. However, we should be completely sincere in this. It is possible that we have come quite far but have not yet completed it, implying that there are still things we hold on to (*via eminentiae*).

[440] Watson, *Zhuangzi*, §1, pp. 65-66.
[441] Idem, §7, pp. 179-180.

When Bodhidharma was converting Emperor Wu of Liang, the emperor asked Bodhidharma: "I have spent my whole life up to now building temples, giving alms, and making offerings. Have I gained merit or not?" and that Bodhidharma answered saying: "No merit."[442]

—Bodhidharma in Huìnéng's *Platform Sūtra*

5.3 The Platform Sūtra

The Chinese *chán* (Jp. *zen*)[443] tradition evolved in the beginning of the sixth century CE out of a reform movement seeking to recover the experiential origins of its tradition.[444] Embedded within mahāyāna buddhism with a special focus on the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*[445] and the *Diamond Sūtra*, *chán* combined this with its Chinese roots in daoism.[446] The first references to a *chán* school appeared in the late eighth century.[447] It is quite difficult to reconstruct the history of the school and lineage because *chán* has construed its own. Like the biography of Huìnéng (638-713 CE), the *Platform Sūtra*[448] was part of a legend in the making during the rise of *chán* in the eighth century.[449] This included the fabrication of a direct lineage tracing back, through more than twenty patriarchs in India, to Gautama Buddha, as well as canonizing the first six patriarichs in China, of whom Bodhidharma would be the first and Huìnéng eventually the sixth, and last.[450] Some historical documents seem to speak of an original *Platform Sūtra* that quickly

[442] Philip B. Yampolsky (trans.), *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch: The Text of the Tun-Huang Manuscript.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1967, §34, p. 357.
[443] 'Chán' is a transliteration of the Sanskrit 'dhyāna' (meaning: 'meditation'). 'Chán' became transliterated in Korean as 'sŏn', in Vietnamese as 'thiền' and in Japanese as 'zen'. John R. McRae, "Chan" In Lindsay Jones (ed.), *Enclyclopedia of Religion,* 2nd ed., vol. 3 Farmington: Thompson Gale, 2005: p. 1520.
[444] Daniel L. Overmyer & Joseph A. Adler, "Chinese Religion: An Overview" In Lindsay Jones (ed.), *Enclyclopedia of Religion,* 2nd ed., vol. 3 Farmington: Thompson Gale, 2005: p. 1601.
[445] Yampolsky even speaks of an 'Laṅkāvatāra school' in these early times: Yampollsky, "Introduction: Ch'an in the Eighth Century", *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, pp. 38-74.
[446] Overmyer & Adler, "Chinese Religion: An Overview", p. 1601.
[447] Idem, p. 1601.
[448] Full titel: Southern School Sudden Doctrine, Supreme Mahāyāna Great Perfection of Wisdom: The Platform Sutra preached by the Sixth Patriarch Hui-neng at the Ta-fan Temple in Shao-chou, one roll, recorded by the spreader of the Dharma, the disciple Fa-hai, who at the same time received the Precepts of Formlessness.
[449] Yampolsky, "Introduction", *The Platform Sutra*, p. 223.
[450] Idem, pp. 46-50.

became corrupted.[451] The sūtra in general seems to borrow much from other works.[452] Nevertheless both Huìnéng and the *Platform Sūtra* gradually took center stage in the *chán* movement. Like the first patriarch Bodhidharma, he is now considered a founder of the school.[453] The subsequent importance of this text and the authority of the sixth patriarch Huìnéng within the tradition warrants a close reading, despite the its history subject to a significant degree of historical construction.

5.3.1 Meditation as Practice in No-Thought

In Huìnéng's teaching, like in much of subsequent *chán*, meditation forms the basis: "Never under any circumstances say mistakenly that meditation and wisdom are different; they are a unity, not two things. Meditation itself is the substance of wisdom; wisdom itself is the function of meditation."[454] Doing meditation is to be in wisdom. He emphasizes that this is not an object of study but of sincere practice: "[t]he practice of self-awakening does not lie in verbal arguments. If you argue which comes first, meditation or wisdom, you are deluded people."[455] And it cannot be just reciting either: "This Dharma must be practiced; it has nothing to do with recitations. If you recite it and do not practice it, it will be like an illusion or a phantom."[456] The core is that is has to be practiced:

> The deluded person merely recites; the wise man practices with his mind. There are deluded men who make their minds empty and do not think, and to this they give the name of 'great.' This, too, is wrong. The capacity of the mind is vast and wide, but when there is no practice it is small. Do not merely speak of emptiness with the mouth and fail to practice it.[457]

The distinction between reciting and practicing, between speaking with the mouth and becoming one with the training, is of central importance. In the above quote Huìnéng warns us that, although meditation is central, it is also deluded to just sit

[451] There us a document in which a disciple of the Sixth Patriarch laments the condition in which the Platform Sūtra now exists. The work apperently already by that time had been vulgarized, changed, and added to, so that "the sacred import has been distorted, that this has created confusion among students who have come later, and that therefore the teaching is threatened with destruction." Yampolsky, "Introduction", *The Platform Sutra*, pp. 250-251.
[452] Yampolsky, "Introduction", *The Platform Sutra*, pp. 291-292.
[453] Yampolsky, "Preface", *The Platform Sutra*, p. 25.
[454] Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra*, §13, p. 324.
[455] Idem, §13, pp. 324-325.
[456] Idem, §24, p. 342.
[457] Idem, §25, p. 343.

down and clear your mind. But if this is not proper meditation, what is? To experience the *vast and wide mind*. We can come to this by cutting the train of thought:

> Successive thoughts do not stop; prior thoughts, present thoughts, and future thoughts follow one after the other without cessation. If one instant of thought is cut off, the Dharma body separates from the physical body, and in the midst of successive thoughts there will be no place for attachment to anything. If one instant of thought clings, then successive thoughts cling; this is known as being fettered. If in all things successive thoughts do not cling, then you are unfettered. Therefore, non-abiding is made the basis.[458]

Becoming unfettered, not abiding, attaching, clinging to thoughts, does not depend on *where* you do this, or if you are monk or layman. It all depends on the individual effort you give to it:

> if you wish to practice, it is all right to do so as laymen; you don't have to be in a temple. If you are in a temple but do not practice, you are like the evil-minded people of the West. If you are a layman but do practice, you are practicing the good of the people of the East. Only I beg of you, practice purity yourselves; this then is the Western Land.[459]

The *western land* in buddhism is the land of ultimate bliss, where people are free from suffering, which in the above quote is used metaphorically. Huìnéng says that there is no difference between monks and laymen, between meditation and wisdom. Likewise there is no difference between the deluded and the awakened:

> If the deluded person understands and his mind is awakened, then there is no difference between him and the man of wisdom. Therefore we know that, unawakened, even a Buddha is a sentient being, and that even a sentient being, if he is awakened in an instant of thought, is a Buddha.[460]

[458] Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra*, §17, pp. 327-328.
[459] Idem, §36, pp. 363-364.
[460] Idem, §30, p. 350.

5.3.2 On the Original Nature

According to Huìnéng wisdom can be found within yourself, it is experiential and does not dependent on words. This is so because "in the original nature itself the wisdom of prajñā exists, (…) by using this wisdom yourself and illuminating with it, there is no need to depend on written words."[461] The original nature, or buddha-nature, or buddhahood, buddha-wisdom, is what one aims to realize in meditation: "Since Buddha is made by your own nature, do not look for him outside your body."[462] So consequently "[i]f your own nature is false, the Dharma body is without merit."[463] This does not mean that this nature itself could actually be false:

> If people think of all the evil things, then they will practice evil; if they think of all the good things, then they will practice good. Thus it is clear that in this way all the dharmas are within your own natures, yet your own natures are always pure. The sun and the moon are always bright, yet if they are covered by clouds, although above they are bright, below they are darkened, and the sun, moon, stars, and planets cannot be seen clearly. But if suddenly the wind of wisdom should blow and roll away the clouds and mists, all forms in the universe appear at once.[464]

Huìnéng compares the original nature with the sun and the moon, who are always bright but sometimes they are covered by clouds. This means that the *purity* one searches for is already there. The practice, then, is not attaining the pure but *undoing the unpure* that covers it. "It is just because the mind is deluded that men cannot attain awakening to themselves."[465] But we should not despise delusion for it shows us where our faults are: "the pure nature exists in the midst of delusions".[466] So his advice is: "see for yourselves the purity of your own natures, practice and accomplish for yourselves. (…) by self-accomplishment you may achieve the Buddha Way for yourselves."[467]

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[461] Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra*, §28, p. 347.
[462] Idem, §35, p. 362.
[463] Idem, §34, p. 358.
[464] Idem, §20, pp. 333-334.
[465] Idem, §12, p. 323.
[466] Idem, §36, p. 365.
[467] Idem, §19, p. 332.

5.3.3 Self Observation

Throughout the *Platform Sūtra* Huìnéng points us towards ourselves. When we go and ask 'what is the Way?' or we want our teacher to help us, then we know we are firmly deluded. When Shénhuì went to the sixth patriarch and questioned if he really did *see through mind*, he responded:

> Your mind is deluded and you cannot see, so you go and ask a teacher to show you the way. You must awaken with your own mind and see for yourself, and you must practice with the Dharma. Because you yourself are deluded and you do not see your own mind, you come asking me whether I see or not. Even if I see for myself, I cannot take the place of your delusion; even if you see for yourself, you cannot take the place of my delusion. Why don't you practice for yourself and then ask me whether I see or not?[468]

He asks us, in other words, to take responsibility, for Huìnéng cannot do Shénhuì's job as Shénhuì cannot do Huìnéng's.

> Good friends, each of you must observe well for himself. Do not mistakenly use your minds! The sutras say to take refuge in the Buddha within yourselves; they do not say to rely on other Buddhas. If you do not rely upon your own natures, there is nothing else on which to rely.[469]

Huìnéng makes a clear distinction between within and without. One should take refuge in the Buddha *within* yourself, and not rely on Buddhas without. This extends to the relationship between your mind and your behaviour and the mind and behaviour of the other: "[t]he wrong in others is not your own crime, / Your own wrong is of itself your crime. / Only remove the wrong in your own mind, / Crush the passions and destroy them."[470] It becomes also clear that according to Huìnéng this is associated with the passions. The distinction, in the end, is one that depends on within and without:

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[468] Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra*, §44, p. 381.
[469] Idem, §23, p. 341.
[470] Idem, §36, p. 367.

> If within and without you are not deluded then you are apart from duality. If on the outside you are deluded you cling to form; if on the inside you are deluded you cling to emptiness. If within form you are apart from form and within emptiness you are separated from emptiness, then within and without you are not deluded.[471]

Form and *emptiness* are a fundamental pair in buddhism.[472] In this case *form* is associated with everything outside that can delude us. However, inside we can also be deluded. According to Huìnéng, this is what it means to be 'clinging to emptiness'. Whenever we are attached to anything, outside of us or inside of is (like teachings on *emptiness*), then we are deluded. Therefore one should empty oneself of emptiness. But do not think words can really transfer this state of mind: "[i]gnorant persons cannot understand completely. Although explanations are made in ten thousand ways".[473]

5.3.4 Summary

Huìnéng, and *chán* in general, focus on the practice of meditation. Clearly it is not just about reciting or reading, but it is about realizing our *vast and wide mind*. Huìnéng speaks of cutting through successive thoughts. Although this no-thought meditation takes a central place, we can also get stuck in this form. In this case, one believes meditation is about stilling the mind. Being deluded inside, you are deluded by your *concepts of emptiness*. Meditation should be used to realize our *original nature*. This is the buddha nature, which is always pure, like a sun shining behind the clouds. If we can cut through our small mind in sincere practice we will experience the vast and wide mind that lies behind it. Huìnéng urges us to see and practice this for ourselves. Whether one will be succesfull does not depend on being in a temple or not, being a monk or not, rather it depends solely on our practice.

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[471] Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra*, §42, p. 376.
[472] Cf. one of the most famous passages of the Heart Sūtra: "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form. Form is not other than emptiness; emptiness is not other than form."
[473] Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra*, §36, pp. 364-365.

5.4 Apophatic Mysticism in the 'East'

What can we conclude about 'the' apophatic mysticism of the 'east' on the basis of these three texts? Of course, like in the case with our conclusions on 'the west', we can only assume that what we have found in these texts can also reasonably be said about other apophatic texts of eastern traditions. Naturally, we should not make sweeping generalizations.

But what striked me first and foremost was the clear distinction all three of these texts make between the discursive and practice. The *Diamond Sūtra* again and again states that it is not about the teachings, *any* teachings, and also not *this* teaching. No so-called truth-declaring system can declare truth, because 'truth' is undeclarable. The Buddha's teaching is like a raft to get to the other shore, but you do not need to carry the raft with you when you are there. Similarly Zhuāng Zǐ differentiates between the *little understanding*, which causes discussing, quarrelling, opinions, and the scholarly debates of the mohist and the confucians, and *great understanding*, which is broad and unhurried. It is a state in which *this* and *that* no longer find their opposites. A state in which you reflect like a mirror not adding or subtracting anything to it. And according to *chán* the *original nature* can be found within yourself, there is therefore no need to depend on reading and reciting.

Yet this is still a difficult practice. The *Diamond Sūtra* says we should not cherish the idea of a separate self, however, we should also not cherish the idea of a not-separate self. Neither the *via affirmativa* nor the *via negativa* will do, so it seems. One should not depend on anything external or internal, if you depend on anything you will not find a sure haven. Indeed, the question with which the sūtra started was how to find incomparable enlightenment, but the sūtra states there is no such thing as 'incomparable enlightenment', because this is just a word.

Likewise the *dào* cannot be named, but it is always there, like the unformulated principle which is the foundation of all systems in the *Diamond Sūtra*. Or again similar to the parable of the sun shining behind the clouds. It are these clouds, our thoughts, that we should cut in meditation according to *chán*. However, again this is nuanced, because Huìnéng says there are people who just sit still in meditation, they are using it as a 'concept', in this way it becomes a trick. True meditation, sincere practice, is nothing else but wisdom. Similarly, people get deluded inwards by the concept of

emptiness, or by the dualism of delusion/awakening. There is not opposition between sentient beings and the Buddha, Huìnéng says.

In conclusion we can say that all of them bring 'responsibility' back to ourselves. 'Seek the Buddha inside! Do not mistakenly use your mind!' Huìnéng shouts. 'Be empty, that is all.' says Zhuāng Zǐ. 'Don't let the mind depend upon any notion' the *Diamond Sūtra* instructs us.

Part III

Drawing (Some) Conclusions

On apophatic mysticism of six different bodies of texts

Those who are already wise
no longer love wisdom.[474]
—Socrates in Plato's *Lysis*

Those who know do not talk.
Those who talk do not know.[475]
—Lăo Zĭ, *Dàodéjīng*

A Comparative Conclusion

This research is the result of an attempt to clearify for myself what is at stake within the comparative mysticism debate. It has become clear to me that in this discussion many philosophical debates come together. This is also the reason why it is a difficult debate. Because comparative mysticism has been centering around the question if there is or is not a perennial mystical consciousness underlying all the different descriptions of the world's mystics, it is concerned with, amongst other things: the way language works, the way language structures our conceptual frameworks, what the influence of these conceptual frameworks are on our experience of the world, what (subjective) experience is, what consciousness is and what mystical consciousness is. In short: almost all of the big philosophical questions. Yet, although the discussion has become much clearer to me, I at the same time feel I have failed to answer any of these big questions conclusively.

In all the mystical texts I discussed, much emphasis was placed on knowing yourself, on going within. This confirmed for me the centrality of the subjective experience. We can indeed only start from *our own field of consciousness*. And from there we can immediately infer a difference between *description* and between *acquaintance* (the taste of a strawberry or the description of its taste). All of the mystics we discussed support this division between words and experience. However, we can also

[474] Plato, *Lysis*, 218ab; cf. *Symp.* 204a. *Plato in Twelve Volumes,* Harold North Fowler et al. (trans.) Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1921-1969.
[475] Jane English & Gia-Fu Feng (trans.), *Tao Te Ching.* New York: Vintage Books, 1997, II.56.

acknowledge that our observation *is indeed* theory-laden: we immediately put labels on everything. What we belief determines the way we act, and therefore how we structure society. Yet the mystics might also agree on this observation. According to Huìnéng if we think evil, we practice evil, if we think good, we practice good, all teachings are in this way within our nature.[476] Or as Eckhart says "whoever seeks God in a special way gets the way and misses God".[477] More importantly, they might affirm it *indirectly* because in their *apophatism* they urge us to empty ourselves of all notions: "leave behind you everything perceived and understood, everything perceptible and understandable, all that is not and all that is".[478]

Of course, here lies the *crux of the matter*: If we acknowledge that we have a theory-laden observation, can we ever go beyond it? As I have tried to argue, Katz's contextualist critique that apophatism is "*not* an *un*conditioning or *de*conditioning of consciousness, but rather (…) a *re*conditioning of consciousness"[479] is based on: (i) a neo-kantian epistemological assumption, something he himself acknowledges;[480] and (ii) a much larger shift ('the linguistic turn') within the humanities and social sciences of poststructuralism and postmodernism.[481]

Now the first observation is a problem because if perennialism is an epistemological assumption, so is contextualism. This does not say anything about how things actually are, only what is *presupposed*, which simply disqualifies *both* perspectives. The second observation is not a problem, it just shows that Katz is contextually influenced, of course this is also what he claims. However, he should then also consider the possibility that another contextual perspective is *just as legitimate*, since there is no way to determine what context is 'right'. So again the debate remains unresolved.

Now we are stuck with the problem that we have all kinds of perspectives, but no idea how to evaluate them. This has become a problem that I have called the problem of diversity of conceptual frameworks. This is the impasse that postmodernism brought us. Rescher argues that we have only four options to deal

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[476] Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra*, §20, p. 333.
[477] Eckhart, Q5b, p. 91; Pf13; W13b, p. 110.
[478] Dionysius, *MT* 997B-1000A, p. 135.
[479] Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism", p. 57.
[480] "let me state the single epistemological assumption that has exercised my thinking and which has forced me to undertake the present investigation: *There are NO pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences.*"Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism", p. 26, emphases in original; see for this critique: Perovich, "Does the Philosophy of Mysticism Rest on a Mistake?".
[481] Forman, "Introduction", *Problem of Pure Consciousness*, p. 4; King, *Orientalism and Religion*, pp. 169-182.

with this problem: accept none, accept one, accept several or rise above the discussion.[482] Now he claims that we can only accept one, although this perspective cannot have any ultimate justification.[483] To this last claim Sextus Empiricus, the pyrrhonian sceptic, would agree (as well as modern logics[484]), because we can only justify claims by axioma, infinite regress or circular reasoning—all of those options are unsatisfying.[485]

However Sextus offers an interesting proposal of resolving this problem of the diversity of conceptual frameworks. Contrary to what Rescher claims, pyrrhonian scepticism can be a legitimate option, because Sextus' scepticism is proposing a *suspension of judgment* (*epochê*), and not a self-referentially incoherent denialism, which Sextus calls 'academic scepticism'. Now what is the difference? The pyrrhonian argument is essentially that a sceptical argument "after abolishing every proof, can cancel itself also"[486] like a man who has ascended by a ladder can "overturn the ladder with his foot after ascent."[487] Or "similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over".[488] But this cannot be all there is, or it would only be a smart argument. The point of pyrrhonism is to make it *a way of life*, *an integrated practice*, which, according to Sextus, will eventually lead to *ataraxia*, quietude, rest.[489] This will not solve the debate on conceptual diversity but *dissolve* it: one will rise above the conflict.

And this, I claim, is the way we should understand apophatic mysticism: as mystical traditions that have a *practice of negation*. This practice of negation (or *via negativa*) is no nihilism, it is a *spiritual path*, a quest, with a clear purpose: this purpose lies within the experiential domain, of which we have determined that it is not so much a mystical *experience* (which is an object of my consciousness) but a *mystical consciousness* (which is a transformation of consciousness itself) that is aimed at.[490]

Within western traditions I have traced 'mysticism' to the beginnings of Greek philosophy. Terms like *epopteia*[491] and *theōria*[492] expressed a similar kind of mystical consciousness. These terms traveled through (neo)platonic and (neo)aristotelian

[482] Rescher, *Pluralism*, p. 101.
[483] Idem, p. 110.
[484] See note 171.
[485] Sextus, *PH*, I.166-169, p. 95.
[486] Idem, *Adv. Log.*, II.480-481, p. 489.
[487] Idem, II.481, p. 489.
[488] *MN* 22.13-14, p. 229.
[489] Sextus, *PH,* I.8, p. 7.
[490] McGinn, "Mystical Consciousness", p. 47.
[491] Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, pp. 69, 92; Plato, *Symp.* 210e, 211cd. Cf. Plutarch *De Iside* 328de.
[492] Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth*, pp. 4-5. Aristotle, *Nic. Eth.* Book 10, Chapter 7, Lines 1-2 (1177a.1).

thought,[493] heterodox currents[494] and the early christian writings,[495] eventually rephrased by pseudo-Dionysius in the words of *mystical theology*.[496] Similarly the practice of negation can be traced all through western philosophy and christianity.[497]

We can conceptually discern two apophatic descriptions. The first is negative discourse, in which the experience of the transformation of consciousness is described in negations: it is ineffable, unknowable, undefinable etc. The second is that the path towards this *mystical consciousness* is itself one of negation. Both in the western as in the eastern traditions we have encountered negative discourse and negative method. Within the western tradition this is, especially in the cases of the (neo)platonically influenced Dionysius and Eckhart, described as an emptying of onself (*kénōsis*) with an experience of unity as a result (*henōsis*). In the eastern sources this is described as empty mind, cutting the train of thought and being like a mirror. What is especially interesting is the multiple negations both traditions use to describe the method: it is "beyond every denial, beyond every assertion."[498] "[Y]ou should not be attached to things as being possessed of, or devoid of, intrinsic qualities."[499] In both cases this can lead to the denial of the teachings, i.e. of the method itself, like in Sextus' case.

So, what is the *via negativa*? What is the *apophatic way*? It is not this, not that. The moment the *via negativa* becomes simply denial, it is actually an *via affirmativa*. In a similar way as pyrrhonism that becomes dogmatic scepticism. The *apophatic way* is much more subtle: it is the method of *not getting stuck on anything*, including on not getting stuck. It is the *methodless method*. Which means it is a constant creative process of detaching, of being open, of being free. Which apparently can result in quietude, unity, enlightenment and all the other soteriological terms that we have read about in this thesis.

Now the question is not if these forms of consciousness are the same or not. They may very well be, they may very well be not. There is no way to be sure about this, because as is clear, we have no access to any other consciousness except our own. The question is: if experiences without concepts are really blind? Is the mystical

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[493] Merlan, *Monopsychism, Mysticism, Metaconsciousness.*
[494] Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition.*
[495] Bénatouïl & Bonazzi, "Part III: The Christian Reception", *Theoria, Praxis and the Contemplative Life*, pp. 213-257.
[496] Bouyer, "Mysticism", pp. 51-52.
[497] Wallis, "The Spiritual Importance of Not Knowing", *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality*, pp. 460-480; Mortley, *From Word to Silence. Vol. 1-2.*
[498] Dionysius, *MT* 1000B, p. 136.
[499] Price, "The Diamond Sūtra", §6, p. 22.

technique of apophatism indeed not a deconditioning of consciousness but rather a case of implementing another form of consciousness, as Katz claims?

We know that language does not accurately describe reality (the myth of the given).[500] We also know that the notion of incommensurable conceptual frameworks is contradictory (the myth of the framework).[501] We have seen that mystics in both traditions make a clear separation of the discursive and the experiential. We have also seen that in both traditions the apophatic method is described as an emptying or an opening up; or in the case of the eastern traditions specifically, a becoming without thought. These are even parallel similarities that most likely were not influenced by one or the other. I came to the remarkable, yet in hindsight quite logical, discovery, that in both traditions there exist a conception of the goodness/pureness of the original nature of humans (and everything else). This makes sense, since in a negative methodology you are not *adding* something to yourself, you are not *becoming something*, but you are *subtracting* from yourself, you are *unbecoming* what you are not.

Considering all this, I believe that the epistemological assumption of it being indeed possible to *undo* yourself of (parts of) the conceptual framework deserves as much, if not *more* consideration as the neo-kantian idea that this is not possible. If all is determined by the context of our conceptual upbringing, it may well be time we recognize that western 'postmodern' philosophy has not been able to see through the favouring of western epistemological models like this kantian construction, and has in fact in this regard never fully become post-modern.

[500] Sellars, "The Myth of the Given".
[501] Popper, "The Myth of the Framework"; Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme".

Epilogue

Don't waste your time in arguments and discussion
attempting to grasp the ungraspable.

Each thing revels the One,
the One manifests as all things.
To live in this Realization
is not to worry about perfection or non-perfection.
To put your trust in the Heart-Mind is to live without separation,
and in this non-duality you are one with your Life-Source.

Words! Words!
The Way is beyond language,
for in it there is no yesterday
no tomorrow
no today.

Jiànzhì Sēngcàn, *Xīnxīn Mín* (*Verses on the Faith-Mind*). 1973.
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