



The subject that is not one: On the ethics of mysticism

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Abstract

Any anthropological approach to ethics that gives a central place to subjects and the positions they might occupy is obliged sooner or later to address an apparent paradox, instances of which are widespread. They occur in those many ethical systems that valorize a condition that can hardly be characterized without equivocation: the subject that is not one. We commonly think of such a (non-)subject as a mystic. A useful starting point in coming to terms with the mystic rests in the distinctive place in which he or she typically stands in relation to any given ethical domain – a place decidedly not at the center, at the axial conjunction that the ethical Everyperson occupies. Victor Turner's treatment of liminality provides a useful analytical precedent, but it does not of itself adequately clarify either the specific ethical difference or the specific ethical function of mysticism as such. Crucial to both is the mystic's generation in practice of what turns out to be a very real paradox of self-reference, the thinking and acting out of the proposition that 'this ethics is not an ethics'. The upshot is that the mystic as (non-)subject confronts the ethical system in which or by which he or she resides with its logical and its social incompleteness. No wonder, then, that mystics are rarely beloved of ethical absolutists, whose absolutism – by their very being, and whether or not wittingly – they call into question. No wonder, on the other hand, that moral-ethical liberals so often find them beyond the pale. The ethical paradox of the mystic is insuperable – but all the more socioculturally significant in being so.

Keywords

Desubjectivation, ethics, John of the Cross, mysticism, paradox of self-reference

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Anthropologies of moralities and ethics are still emerging, but several common topoi are at this point well established. Among these are freedom, often simply conceived as the ability to pursue alternative courses of thought or action, but always with the proviso that it is not and cannot ever be realized in an unconditioned mode (Faubion, 2001, 2011; Laidlaw, 2001, 2013). This is one juncture at which anthropologies of ethics diverge from philosophical (and much social-theoretical) precedent, for which absolute freedom and the absolute lack of it have so often served as foundational opposites. Another topos is practice (Lambek, 2010; Faubion, 2011), the analytical prioritization of which marks another departure from philosophical precedent, which has tended to give pride of place to doctrine and the logic of decision-making. Virtues, whether characterological or intellectual, can be added to this list (Hirshkind, 2006; Mahmood, 2005; Pandian, 2009). Perhaps the most epistemologically inevitable motif of all is the subject itself: the locus of freedom and practice and the virtues.

Well before anyone explicitly identified himself or herself as plying an anthropology of ethics (or of morality (Zigon, 2008, 2011), or moral anthropology (Fassin, 2012) or what have you), anthropologists had of course widely recognized that whatever the subject might ultimately, really be, its socio-culturally specific ontologies were variable: individualist in some places and times (Dumont, 1986), dividu-*al*ist in others (Marriott, 1976, Mosko, 2010), holographic (Wagner, 2001), hierarchical (Dumont, 1970), porous (Smith, 2012), cyborgic (Strathern, 1991), liberal or neo-liberal (Davis, 2012) – quite the (often overlapping) array. The substantive pluralism of the anthropology of ethics is one of the cardinal consequences of the substantive pluralism of what has usually passed as the anthropology of the self.

Any anthropology of ethics that assigns an epistemologically central place to the ethical subject – which is to say, more or less every anthropology of ethics, and my own very much included – must, however, sooner or later confront an apparent paradox. The paradox in question is not an exception to some prevailing rule. Its instances are instead widespread. They occur in those many ethical systems – in any event, systems that we have no reason *prima facie* to regard as anything other than ethical – that valorize a condition that can hardly be characterized without equivocation: subjectless selfhood? selfless subjectivation? However characterized, the position often has a spiritual, a transcendental cast – but then, we should expect nothing else. It is exalted in the Indic traditions. Hinduism knows it as *moksha*. Buddhism knows it as *nirvana*. Orientalists tend to diagnose it as mystical, though the preparatory askêsis required for its realization is often of the most rigorously ascetic, self-renunciatory order. Buddhist askêsis has drifted west, of course, sometimes carrying its mysticism in train. Shi'ite Islam sustains a mystical tradition of its own. If for any reason we should wish to label the telos of such exercises as themselves 'self-renunciatory', we should nevertheless acknowledge that they are exercises that proceed beyond the juncture at which there is any longer any self to renounce. The relevant opposition is thus not between the active and the passive subject; it is rather between the subject – whether active or passive – and its thoroughgoing ontological negation.

The exaltations of subjectlessness are not, however, of an exclusively eastern provenance. Primarily occupied with evangelicals and Pentecostalism, the recent contributors to the anthropology of Christianity have yet to have much opportunity to attend to such exaltations (a partial exception is Bialecki, 2011), but they are by no means absent from the past or the present of Christianities of western provenance. St Augustine exalts and (by his own account) achieves something very like it in his garden. St Bonaventure articulates a method – phenomenological *avant l'heure* – for its attainment. Appealing to the authority of Athanasius the Great and Maximus the Confessor among others, the Orthodox Church continues to grant to its spiritual virtuosi the possibility of *theôsis*, a self-transcending ‘deification’ or ‘divination’ or union with the divine. Eroticists from William Blake and Walt Whitman to Georges Bataille have pursued their own, more secular, versions and visions of what Bataille for his part explicitly conceived as the loss of the self and the subject alike.

It must be added that the paradox – such as it is – troubles more than anthropologists alone. Religious scholars – the mystics among them included – cannot agree on whether the experiential and material being of the mystic falls outside of the ethical domain or falls squarely in the center of it. Jeffrey Kripal rests with the proposition that where precisely he or she falls has everything and only to do with how one defines the ethical domain itself (personal communication). He has added in published reflections that there is likely always to be a tension between the mystical way and the practical forms of ethically inflected life (Kripal, 2009). The former is a reasonable position – but it cannot serve as an anthropologically regulative idea. The latter is an analytical stimulus. The question of what ethics is must rest not with aprioristic semantics but first and foremost on empirical grounds. Nor should the anthropologist seek to reduce the ambiguities of ethical thought, ethical practice and ethical experience to a philosophical clarity that does not befit them. The ethical ambiguity of the subject that is not one is a social fact for a great many natives, scholarly and non-scholarly alike. A useful starting point – Kripal directs us to it – in the pursuit of coming interpretively and explanatorily to terms with such ambiguity rests in the distinctive regard that natives who do locate the subject that is not one within the ethical domain have of that subject (that is not one) as such. What is distinctive of that regard – and to my knowledge, without exception – is precisely that natives to the many traditions at issue do not see him or her or it as being squarely at the ethical center of things, at the axial conjunction that is the ethical Everyperson. The condition is instead always an eccentric condition – because it is not or should not be available to just anyone and everyone or, if available, then available only now and then, cyclically, punctually or fleetingly.

On desubjectivation: St John of the Cross

Because of the geographical limitations of my scholarly competence, I must remain within the historical west. The west, again, has had and still has its share of mystics

and would-be mystics. If they do not in all respects resemble their eastern fellow travelers – precisely *because* they do not in all respects resemble their eastern fellow travelers – they are anthropologically instructive. For my purposes here, they are in fact especially anthropologically instructive. In what might, at least for the sake of argument, be deemed their typically western effort to put mystical experience into practice, they often hypostatically exemplify a sempiternal collective dynamic of ethical transvaluation to which Nietzsche, Dionysian and reformer, owes more of a debt than one could possibly imagine him admitting. Very few figures exemplify that dialectic as thoroughly and as dramatically as St John of the Cross.

To be very brief: St John was born Juan de Yepes y Álvarez in 1542 in Fontiveros, Spain (Brenan, 1973: 3). The immensity of his empathy was impressive even from his early childhood. His intellectual gifts also garnered attention. At the age of 17, he entered one of the schools of the recently founded Jesuit order, laboring in the hospital it had founded and studying humanities. In 1564, he was established in the Carmelite order and entered the University of Salamanca (Peers, 1953: xxvi). He was ordained a priest in 1567 and in the same year met St Teresa of Avila, whose reformist efforts to impose a stricter discipline (and going barefoot, or ‘discalced’) on the Carmelites he would soon embrace and actively champion (Brenan, 1973: 9). Teresa officially christened him San Juan de la Cruz (Brenan, 1973: 14) when he committed himself to her program. They were successful recruiters – much to the displeasure of the unreformed. In December of 1571, a Carmelite court kidnapped him and confined him to a Toledo prison (Brenan, 1973: 28), although he was soon released under papal edict (Peers, 1953: xxvi). In 1577, he was kidnapped and confined again. He managed to escape some nine months later and in due course would return to vigorous pursuit of Teresa’s mission (Peers, 1953: xxvii). In 1591, he contracted and shortly thereafter died of erysipelas. He was canonized in 1726. Two hundred years later, Pope Pius XI (mystically inclined) declared him a Doctor of the Church – and the only Catholic *Doctor mysticus* to date (Peers, 1953: xxiii).

Esteemed as co-founder of the Discalced Carmelites, St John owes his more universal stature to his writings, which are among the most highly regarded in Spanish literature, but – since 1926 in any event – also an official chapter of the Catholic Canon. He is a poet and a commentator on his own poems. His poetry and commentaries alike are widely regarded as being intimately grounded in his own experience, particularly his experience of prison; in 1577, or very shortly afterward, he begins to write *The Spiritual Canticle*, which many literary scholars consider his greatest poetic achievement (Peers, 1953: xxvii). In prison, or perhaps shortly afterward, he begins *The Dark Night of the Soul*, and shortly after that *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*. The latter two works are his mystical *summa* and the *summa* of the *via negativa*. They are eminently worthy of sustained appreciation, and they have been so appreciated (Dombrowski, 1992; Cooley, 2011). My approach to them is entirely schematic. I restrict myself to John’s own schematization of the process of coming to communion with the divine – to ‘deification’. That process is for the most part a clear case of the sort of askêsis – exercise, training – to

which Foucault (1986) accords a central place in ethical subjectivation, the process of becoming a subject and maintaining the subjecthood of the subject thus realized. John's askêsis is not, however, an askêsis of subjectivation that culminates in subjecthood, much less maintains or sustains it. It is instead an askêsis of a countervailing process, which Foucault rarely identified as such but which clearly pre-occupied him throughout his career (Faubion, 2013). It is an askêsis of desubjectivation – and in its plenitude, beyond the reach of askêsis as such.

John is learned, philosophically and theologically, as his commentaries and other prose works amply demonstrate. Stylistically and in some respects ontologically, his poems – the *Canticle* directly and the *Ascent* and *The Dark Night* only a bit less directly – echo *The Song of Songs*. Their mode is allegorical. They are explicitly (to some readers, scandalously) erotic, perhaps obliquely homoerotic. With the *Canticle*, the *Ascent* and *The Dark Night* are infused with longing, with a conatus that drives the feminine soul (*psykhê* in the Greek Bible, *anima* in the Latin – both feminine in grammatical gender) toward a Christianized *hieros gamos*, a sacred marriage with her divine beloved. The *Canticle* is more searching, its early stanzas a lament. The *Ascent* and *The Dark Night* are more joyous, though John elaborates on the trials and deprivations and bitterness that the poems elide in his commentaries on them. In fact, the poems that serve as the point of departure for each commentary are identical; only the commentaries themselves differ. The *Ascent* treats at length the sensuous soul, embedded in the world, engaged with worldly desires that distract her from her true quest and capable of progress only through the most rigorous labors of purgation and the cultivation of detachment. The broad repertoire of the ascetic cultivation of 'contempt for all things' (John of the Cross, 1953: 29) and the 'mortification' of desire (p. 49) must be at her disposal. The monastery is her gymnasium; prayer is the medium of her increasing fortitude; her spiritual superiors are her gymnasiarchs. Under their guidance, she must work her way in and through two dark nights: the first an 'active' night of the senses; the second an active night of the faculties – understanding, will and memory – of her higher, rational spirit. Progress through the darkness of the second night rests with the cultivation of the cardinal Christian virtues of faith, hope and charity. Faith effects an emptying of the understanding, a childlike ignorance in accord with St Paul's edicts (p. 26). Hope dissolves the memory and so all of the soul's 'possessions'; and charity causes emptiness in the will and detachment from all affection and from 'rejoicing in all that is not God' (p. 80). Even if successful, the union with God that she might realize is at best 'transitory' (p. 75). It is a union of 'likeness' only, of an analogical accord between the love that abides in the soul and the infinite love that is its divine counterpart (p. 76). It is 'natural', a thing of this world (p. 76).

A more substantial, an 'essential' union with God is unavailable to the active soul. The soul's quest for it is not, however, utterly Sisyphean. Mentioned frequently in the commentaries of the *Ascent*, that quest is the more sustained subject of *The Dark Night*. John of course offers no assurances. He can provide only guidance – but it is truncated. His commentary in *The Dark Night* is only half complete. His intention is clear enough. The poem is intended to elaborate the

passage of the spiritual tyro into spiritual 'progressive' and the progressive toward 'the state of the perfect, which is that of Divine union of the soul with God' (1953: 330). That passage begins with the terrible contemplative recognition that the soul is incapable through her own powers of liberating herself wholly from her worldly condition. A second, much darker night falls. It is a phase of passivity, in which the soul can only wait – with faith, with hope and with charity – to receive the uncertain, improbable gift of divine grace. It is also a phase of radical skepticism, not least of the soul's doubt of the adequacy of its own love of and in God. The second night has its own two moments: one again of the senses; the other again of the faculties. Many of the spiritually adept might find themselves in the first of those moments. Those who find their way out of it may never see their way out of the half-light in which they find themselves and into the horrors of the passive night of the spirit, a night of the soul's expurgation of all its habits and the surrender of the last of its powers. If it reaches its end, love must first reignite and prove a beacon. That beacon, too, might fail, but the soul who follows it in faith and the purest surrender of self can sing the song of her 'night more desirable than the dawn' and her consummation in the lover with whom she merges:

O dark of night you joined
 Belovèd with belov'd one,
 Belovèd's one in Belovèd now transformed!
 Upon my flowering breast,
 Entirely kept for him and him alone,
 There he stayed and slept
 And I caressed him
 In breezes from the fan of cedars blown.
 Breezes on the battlements –
 As I was spreading out his hair,
 With his unhurried hand
 He wounded my neck
 And all my senses left suspended there.
 I stayed, myself forgotten,
 My countenance against my love reclined;
 All ceased, and self forsaken
 I left my care behind
 Among the lilies, unremembered. (John of the Cross, 1973: 145–47)

Many are called; exceedingly few are chosen.

Lines of descent

Needless to say, John's testament has its ambiguities – and not simply because it is incomplete. The 'I' that remains present in the poetry is difficult to explicate in the face of the saint's ontological construal of union with the divine as a dissolution of

self. However ecstatic, the imagery of the erotic encounter between a lover and the Belovèd is difficult to reconcile with a substantialist and essentialist ‘metaphysics of participation’ (Mondello, 2010: 20). Troubled by the tension between both imageries, Geoffrey Mondello is tempted to resolve John’s conception of the soul into a soul that exists ‘in a *quasi*-eternal present – but it is a present that has not yet, and never will, culminate in a terminus of its becoming such that it is a being whose being has been totally and completely enacted and can become no more than it is’ (2010: 253–4; cf. Cooley, 2011: 11). Thus qualified, the soul is at best a ‘speculum’ of the divine *Esse Ipsum*... the finite image of what is’ (Mondello, 2010: 254). Mondello is well aware, however, that John’s actual arguments at best only partially support his own.

I cannot pretend to be able to mediate. It is sufficient at this juncture simply to note two other of the ambiguities not merely of John’s corpus but also of his practices that vex at least some of the prevailing typological distinctions that social theorists have brought to the religious, and so – if only implicitly – to the ethical domain. The first of these ambiguities lies precisely in the saint’s ascetic mysticism or mystical asceticism. The same ambiguity presents itself in the works and days of other Christian saints – St Teresa is prominent among them – but also in the works and days of mystics elsewhere, whose practices and quests are untouched by any Christian influence. Max Weber was aware of such cases in formulating his ideal-typical distinction between mysticism and asceticism (1946a), but seems not to have been unduly troubled by them, for what may have been two primary reasons. The first of these was that the dominant trajectory of the theology and the practical devotions of Western Christianity tended away from mysticism and toward variations of asceticism, if some of them considerably more demanding than others. For the theorist of the role that a Calvinism ethically committed to sensuous self-denial and theologically committed to a radically transcendent God played in the ascendance of industrial capitalism, the dominant trajectory merited being granted typological pride of place. The second reason was that the cases of mysticism that he treated as exemplary – Hindu and Buddhist – themselves register a distinction between the ascetic and the mystical, though encoding it into the unfolding of the course of life, a life passing (potentially, and for the chosen few) from regular labors and the roils of passion into the ontological serenity of Nothingness. On the classical Buddhist version of that passage, no one is more lucid than Stephen Collins (1994).

John for his part was not, however, a theologian of a radically transcendent God. Nor – and here’s the other remaining ambiguity – did he conceive of the soul’s quest as an ascetic regimen that would ultimately and fully give way to an other-worldly point of no return. Whenever and however often he may have experienced union with the divine, he did not sustain his rapture, even in the confines of his cell. Crusader for the discalced Carmelites, he also accepted increasingly elevated appointments within the order’s hierarchy. He served as Vicar of El Calvario and as Rector of the Carmelite college at Baeza. In 1581,

he was appointed Third Definitor (an official steward) and Prior of the house of Los Mártires and, later, Second Definitor at Lisbon. He continued to establish new Carmelite communities. In 1588, he was appointed Prior of Segovia, the hub of the reformist movement. The list continues (Peers, 1953: xxvi–xxvii). John was, in short, a mystic, a mystic who by his own account was transformed by and into the subjectlessness of divine love, but who was also determined to return, subjecthood well intact, to the *ordo saeculorum* and to the tasks that awaited him there.

This eccentric among Renaissance men also has modern successors. As poet, he is the precedent in voice, style and in some measure the argument of TS Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1943). He has another admirer in Allen Ginsberg, or so Ginsberg's brief mention of him in *Howl* would suggest (1975: 136). As some commentators have recognized (Cooley, 2011), his theology also bears more than passing comparison to the work of Canadian Jesuit Bernard Lonergan, who died in 1984. Like John's, Lonergan's theology is grounded in quest and that quest grounded in desire. Lonergan's locutions are often Aristotelian: the desire, the 'primordial drive' that directs human concern, is the 'drive to know' (1997: 54; cf. 190–1). Its object (there's a Heideggerian tonality here) 'is what is intended in questioning and becomes known in answering questions': hence Lonergan's epistemological 'intentionalism' (Lonergan, 1975: 121). If darkness marks the quest for knowledge, it marks it most at its outset. If the pilgrim has any light there at all, she has it through a glass darkly, a glass obscured by the limitations of personal experience, the constraints of cultural and social conditioning and the distractions of mundane preoccupations. Lonergan does not emphasize – in contrast to John – the sufferings of the way forward. The pilgrim in her intending occupies a condition 'between ignorance and knowledge' (1997: 452), but the path is one of self-correction and of 'the gradual cumulation and conjoining of partial elements' into an ever more encompassing synthetic whole (1975: 127). In an evocation not of Kant but instead again of the classical philosophical tradition, Lonergan characterizes the guideposts of that path as 'transcendentals', and the transcendentals a tetrad composed of 'the intelligible, the true, the real, the good', which 'apply to absolutely every object' (1975: 128). The tetrad in its dynamics unfolds as stages – and at this juncture, especially in Lonergan's 'The Natural Knowledge of God', which I have already been citing – the Renaissance Carmelite begins to reappear in the modern Jesuit, if very much in the latter's own at once classicizing and modernizing colors:

the intending subject intends, first of all, the good but to achieve it must know the real; to know the real, he must know what is true and grasp what is intelligible; and to grasp what is intelligible he must attend to the data of sense and the data of consciousness. (Lonergan, 1975: 128)

The theologian does not, however, want us to suppose for a moment that this is the end of the matter.

The tetrad condenses synthetically into a triad: the intellectual, the moral and the religious. The triad is again a triad of ‘three successive stages of a single achievement’ (1975: 128). In her final synthesis of absolutes – should she ever achieve that synthesis – the pilgrim achieves nothing other than ‘self-transcendence’ (1975: 128). The pilgrim is inescapably finite, but nevertheless ‘actuates to the full the dynamic potentiality of the human spirit with its unrestricted reach’, an actuation ‘that occurs in this world but heads beyond it’ (1975: 129). She finds ‘peace, the peace the world cannot give, abiding joy, the joy that remains despite humiliation and failure and privation and pain’ (1975: 129). Her being is religious in essence; ‘religion is complete self-transcendence’ (1975: 129). Lonergan does not invoke John but instead St Paul in offering an exegesis of his conception. John’s undertones are nevertheless unmistakable (and absent in Paul). Complete self-transcendence has its fulfillment in love:

That love is not this or that act of loving but a radical being-in-love, a first principle of all one’s thoughts and words and deeds and omissions, a principle that keeps us out of sin, that moves us to prayer and penance, that can become the ever so quiet yet passionate center of all our living. (1975: 29)

In the hyphenations of ‘being-in-love’, I see a gesture at least toward a monistic metaphysics of participation. Whether or not as monist, Lonergan remained an academic – though a very active one – throughout his life. His influence has been diverse. I note merely his incorporation into nursing theory, which has been concerned with self-transcendence since its origins (Haase et al., 1992). For at least one recent author, Lonergan holds the ‘key’ to the ‘integration of nursing theory, research, and practice’ (Perry, 2004; Thompson, 2010), the practice of an ethics of the care of the other that – speaking, I think, not strictly for myself – definitely isn’t for everyone.

Anti-structure and normativity

Eccentric, above the fray even while being within it, the subject that is not one has certain characteristics in common with the archetypes of continuous *communitas* that Victor Turner treats in *The Ritual Process* (1969). Discussing the ‘poets’ of the ‘love both divine and slightly illicit’ that he deems a symbol of *communitas* (1969: 157), Turner in fact nods to John and St Teresa, though only to contrast their purely 13th and early 14th-century European examples to Caitanya, the figurehead of the Bengali Vaishnava movement. One might well beg to differ with the contrast drawn, especially in St Teresa’s case. In any event, he regards St Francis as another of his poetic cases in point; the saint ‘sang of his Lady of Poverty’ much as medieval troubadours sang of their ‘fair ladies far-off’ and ‘wedded to another earthly mate’ (1969: 157), which hardly makes any literal sense. Among the chief attributes of Turner’s hypostases of permanent *communitas* is, however, their ‘habit of thinking in “primary, visual images”’ (1969: 145), a concrete experiential literality that

he distinguishes in another context from allegorical and mystical interpretations of the 'drama of the individual soul or as the spiritual fate of the true church on earth' (1969: 154). He seems to have his eye squarely on John, and on St Augustine before him. Caitanya and Francis are poets 'of devotional religion, humble and simple, living [their] faith rather than thinking about it' (1969: 158). Their counterparts are 'theologians and philosophers', doctors of their respective movements who would translate imagery into formal doctrine and instate structure and *societas* along with it (1969: 153, 158–9). So much, again, for John (and Augustine).

But then, so much indeed: John does not conform fully to Turner's model, any more than does Allen Ginsberg, Bernard Lonergan or (so far as I know) the nurses currently at work in our hospitals. To be sure, Turner's general framework, which opposes *communitas* and *societas* as the polar reference points of the phasics of collective life, encloses a continuum. One could probably find a place – or more precisely, places – for Ginsberg, John and Lonergan along and within it. It might be useful to place them so, but I think the use of doing so would be limited. First of all, the poles are insufficiently extreme. Liminality might well be construed as a ritual phase or more enduring state at once of selflessness and subjectlessness. I have previously construed it in just these terms (Faubion, 2011: 97). So construed, it is clearly a step removed and a step beyond *communitas*, a phase or state in which Turner's own illustrations evince subjects in positions of relatively unambiguous mien – abbots, bishops and charismatic leaders, none of whom are distinguished for their egalitarianism.

But this is a minor point. Of more import is the overarching oscillatory logic of the framework itself. Turner's bow to structuralism is part of the problem. An avuncular urge to appease the worried parents of their rebellious children at the height of the student movements – 'it's just a phase' – is perhaps another part (Faubion, 2008). The lingering functionalism of the Manchester graduate is, I think, yet another part, even if the function of the eternal return to the liminal (and out again) is cast in *The Ritual Process* as being as much psychological as collective. Now we celebrate our common humanity; then we go back to social business as usual (or not): whatever the problem, an anthropologist so acutely sensitive to conflict and to the historical change it can bring about as Turner leaves us with very few specific tools with which to approach the sociocultural vibrancy of mysticism. The concept of the social drama that one might appropriate from his earlier and later writings is too formal and not general enough (Turner, 1957, 1974b). The concept of the liminoid is once again of narrow scope and not obviously a tool of clarification (Turner, 1974a). Turner's framework, in short, remains in spite of his own apparent aims enclosed within the enduring problematic of sociocultural reproduction. It does not afford an unbroken view of the dynamics of what I what I would like to suggest is the enduring and enduringly ethically irritating role of mysticisms in the history of ethical transvaluation as a consequence.

Even so, Turner's separation of imagist from philosopher suggests – if only suggests – an alternative approach to those dynamics. I have attempted to develop

such an approach in *An Anthropology of Ethics* (2011). Seeking a point of departure from which an analysis of ethical value and the dynamics of transvaluation could be developed, I have posited a ‘primal scene’ at which ethical value exists only indeterminately and from which ethical practice is altogether absent (Faubion, 2011: 81). The star of the scene is Weber’s ideal-typical charismatic leader. His (or her, or its) heuristic relevance lies precisely in the chrism, the extraordinary anointment, with which his followers understand him (her, it) to be endowed. I cannot repeat my argument at length here, so will simply reiterate my conclusion: the primal scene of charismatic authority is an anethical scene because, by Weber’s own reckoning, the charismatic leader is the archetypical sovereign, a figure who refuses to recognize any compromise or sharing of power within the realm he (in spite of many empirical counterexamples, following Weber’s gendering here and in what follows) claims as his own (Weber, 1946b: 250; Faubion, 2011: 83–4). He is a law unto himself, a potentially radical revisionist, a revolutionary. Hence, Weber’s frequent invocation of the pivotal rhetorical formula of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:7): ‘It is written... but I say unto you...’ (1946b: 250). The ‘I’ is also figural, the figuration of a supersubjective trans-subject who acknowledges and can acknowledge only the powers with which he is invested, whether by a god or in essence. The charismatic leader of course sustains a relationship with his following. A relationship there must be, since charismatic authority is a social fact, not a psychological one. The followers nevertheless abide in an ethically abject mode. They may bask in the leader’s aura, but they are granted no comparable aura of their own. No dissemination of the aura, no ethical other. No ethical other, no ethics.

The problem with this portrait is that it is too muscular, too activist a portrait to be fully inclusive of all of the modulations of charismatic authority itself. It suits the ‘warlord’ and his ‘heroic deeds’ (Weber, 1946b: 249). It suits the Jesus who delivers the Sermon on the Mount. It is not, however, an accurate representation of the Jesus who dies on the cross. Even less is it an accurate representation of the virgin mother who mourns him. It does justice to George the Dragon-slayer and to Joan of Arc leading the battle charge during the siege of Orleans. It does much less justice to Joan the martyr, or to her fellow martyrs and saints (and avatars and sages) whose charismatic distinction lies not in their rhetorical or military victories but primarily in their visions, the intensity of their religious devotions and their sacrifices of the self. Granted, the Catholic saint must be credited with miracles (cf. Weber, 1946b: 249) – but this is a post-mortem accreditation that is of more relevance to the sociology of the church as an institution than it is to the sociology of charismatic authority on the ground. If John of the Cross or Bernard Lonergan are revolutionaries at all, they are revolutionaries of a much more Gandhian, pacifistic sort.

The other cardinal feature of the Weberian scene in fact brings the Gandhian legion into clearer view. Within it, the chrism is notable for its fundamental lack of definition. Like charismatic action itself, it is fundamentally unroutinized. It is a floating signifier. To my mind, it is as good a semiotic marker as any of the

extraordinariness, the auratic sublimity, of ethical value as such. It becomes a functional sign of ethical value, however, in its extension to and anointment of an ethical other, more or less abstract and far-reaching from one case to another. Charismatic leadership accordingly gives way to ethical iconicity. In the ordinary course of things, within the domain of everyday ethical practices, the extension of the chrism is also its routinization. Enter Turner's theologian. Enter his philosopher. Routinization here is semiotic reduction, and with it in every case goes at least some of its semantic and pragmatic complexity as well as at least some of the scope of the ethical imagination (Faubion, 2011: 114). Merely in the historical west, we know such reductions in many forms: the rational being; the being of dignity; the being who resides in the Kingdom of Ends or is an end-in-itself or an end-for-itself or indeed a transcendental Other (Levinas, 2003; Løgstrup, 1997); the creature capable of suffering; and so on (Faubion, 2011: 90).

In the more extraordinary course of things, however, the chrism remains indeterminate even in its extension to the other. Or perhaps it isn't quite so extraordinary after all – if only by default. The evaluative dynamics internal to some – perhaps the great majority – of ethical domains are the dynamics of competing determinations of ethical value and with them the dynamics of the charismatic indeterminacy that lingers in even the most semiotically systematic of collective ethical imaginations. All these dynamics come into better focus through the lens of what can be conceived as an economy of ethical evaluation, of the distributive organization of its modes and forces within any given ethical domain. One part of such economies is ethical complexity, and a complexity that has two dimensions. One of these is the dimension of the plurality not merely of conceptions of ethical value but also of ethical subject positions themselves. More or less everywhere, and as much in the past as in the present, in whatever might be the west as whatever might be elsewhere, different subject positions invite or demand that the same subject occupy them, and the different standards they encourage or impose are often very difficult to reconcile. Good mother, good daughter, good spouse, good neighbor, good friend, good professional, good citizen: it can all make for quite the ethical blur. It is an auratic blur in its way – but the ethical Everyperson typically doesn't like it.

A second dimension of indeterminacy comes precisely from the subject who accepts the chrism but refuses to or cannot define its substance. The priest confers his or her blessings on such a subject and with them that great floating signifier, 'grace'. The medium bridges for such a subject the distance between the mundane world and a world invisible or beyond. The oracle and the speaker of tongues channel the divine for such a subject. Such subjects are legion – and they have a legion of secular counterparts. We often deem those counterparts geniuses. Not all mystics – whether sacralized as saint or secularized as poet – offer their chrism to the other. As already noted, the mystical quest can be radically private and its telos effectively a vanishing point. John, however, and Lonergan and perhaps many a nurse gesture outward and, qua mystics at least, what they offer is perhaps the greatest and most enduring of the floating signifiers that the historical west, from

Christianity forward, has ever known: love. This said, the semiotic excesses and semiotic recalcitrance of love, whether divine or not divine at all, can surely go without saying.

Ethical eccentricity and the domestication of charisma

Do we need our charismatics in the ordinary course of things? Once again, Weber and his ideal-typifications can open the discussion:

The provisioning of all demands that go beyond those of everyday routine has had, in principle, an entirely heterogeneous, namely, a charismatic foundation; the further back we look in history, the more we find this to be the case. This means that the 'natural' leaders – in times of psychic, physical, economic, ethical, religious, political distress – have been neither officeholders nor incumbents of an 'occupation' in the present sense of the word, that is, men who have acquired expert knowledge and who serve for remuneration. The natural leaders in distress have been the holders of specific gifts of body and spirit; and these gifts have been believed to be supernatural, not accessible to everybody. (Weber, 1946b: 245)

Weber's diagnosis delineates the charismatic limit case and such anthropologists as Anthony Wallace have rearticulated it, if not regularly appealing to Weber's own language in doing so (Wallace, 1956). The same diagnosis also suggests precisely why the ethical Everyperson tends to embrace the charismatic only in small doses. Overflowing its containments, charismatic authority is a threat to established order, precisely because it is opposed to the routine, opposed to the established and the establishment. Escaping subjectivation, it can become not merely extra-institutional but counter-institutional. It begins to take on just that Janus-face that Turner ascribes to the liminal persona: exaltedness, but also 'dangerous, inauspicious, or polluting to persons, objects, events and relationships' (1969: 108). At its ideal-typical extreme, it can become 'revolutionary' (Weber, 1946b: 250). Should it do so, the *conscience collective* turns suspicious. It suspects a hoax; it suspects charlatanry. In psycho-medicalized environments, it is likely to diagnose the charismatic leader who is out of bounds as pathological, mad, and his (or her or its) followers as brainwashed. To the good citizen, the 'cult' – religious or secular – frequently comes first to mind. Where there is a cult, there are – as we good citizens all know – the seeds of violence. When they grow, they inspire the collective urge in even the most liberal citizens to trample them. The Branch Davidian Koreshites of my past research are an especially lurid object lesson (Faubion, 1999, 2001). Yet, whatever the scale of distress, and whether in times of wholesale crisis or in everyday life, the ameliorative vanguard cannot be positively conceived as having gifts that might be the possession of just anyone and everyone. The *conscience collective* may be in tatters – though not in such tatters as those who pronounce that all that is solid has melted into air or that things have fallen apart and the center lost its hold seem to believe. It is still vigorous enough to retain its cunning.

It systematically refuses to countenance charisma run wild. The collective result would be too complex for mere mortals to tolerate. It would be chaos and mere mortals themselves – in Clifford Geertz's apt phrase – 'basket cases' (Geertz, 1973: 49).

Should the charismatic subject (that may not even be one) be accorded collective esteem, it must 'be hedged around with prescriptions, prohibitions, and conditions'. So Turner says of the liminal subject that has wandered beyond the bounds of the 'liminal context' (Turner, 1969: 109). His observation is generalizable to the ethical domain through all its constants and all its variations, whether activist or pacifist or passive. It leads directly to the beginnings of an account of the typical eccentricity of the charismatic subject – or rather the charismatic subject that is not one. Turner resorts to Mary Douglas' treatment of classificatory ambiguity in elucidating the liminal persona on the loose as a 'dangerous and polluting' *éminence grise* (1969: 109), but as he is surely aware, succeeds in illuminating only the darker side of its double visage in doing so.

His resources in illuminating the brighter side of that visage are grandly psychological (and rather spiritual as well); the exaltation of the liminal persona is due to its recalling to all of us our common humanity, our fundamental *communitas* (1969: 105). Nor is it merely that we need reminding. We need a periodic return to *communitas* itself in order to relieve ourselves of the burdens, the strictures and the inequalities that beset the *societas* in which we usually find ourselves, and to renew ourselves as 'men [sic] in their wholeness wholly attending' (1969: 128). In any event, Turner does go some of the way toward the articulation of a supplement to Weber's diagnosis of charismatic authority itself. Yes: 'the natural leaders in distress have been the holders of specific gifts of body and spirit; and these gifts have been believed to be supernatural, not accessible to everybody.' But there is more. Weber's crucial connection is the connection between the charismatic and 'distress', the charismatic and crisis. Some crises are vast in scope; there, following Weber, we can expect the charismatic to come to the forefront – and in fact only slightly less today than in the past, at least if the scale is vast enough. Crisis, however, admits of many scales, and is often of small scale, and at that scale is not at all foreign to what we usually think of as everyday life.

The unroutine routine

In fact, we – mere mortals – do need our charismatics in everyday life. We need figures whose specialties lie with the extraordinary in the everyday, in coping with our littler and our larger crises, in reining things in when things get out of hand. To the bolder and the more brave of them, we tend – and no less if we are rationalized, disenchanting moderns – to grant them a good measure of charismatic authority, even if their calling is a matter of occupation. We heroize the bystander who rushes in to save a child from an oncoming truck. We heroize the common citizen who wrests a gun from a murderer's hands. We also heroize firefighters and self-sacrificing soldiers. We grant a measure of charisma to physicians, to emergency

medical technicians, to hospital chaplains and, indeed, to nurses, sometimes to police officers, to lifeguards of other precincts. Let's not forget mothers, either.

Again, we need our charismatics. The question that persists, however, is whether we need mystics among them. Before turning to that question, I offer an ideal-typification of my own, a typification of the economy of moral valuation at a considerable remove from any of its particular empirical manifestations. At that remove, semiotically and sociologically, the economy looks bipolar, or more precisely a bipolar continuum. At one extreme sits ethical value at its least determinate. Its denizens are ideal-typical charismatics and ideal-typical mystics alike. At the opposite extreme sits ethical value at its most rigorously determined and domesticated. Its denizens are philosophical purists of one or another stripe, of which very few if any actual philosophers are genuinely representative. Between the two, most of the rest of us actually reside. The monistic sublimity of moksha and nirvana are the spiritual correlates of the first extreme. The obedience of the ethically most submissive is the spiritual correlate of the second. John is very near the former, as are most mystics in the Christian tradition. Lonergan is one further step toward the latter. Nurses – or at least some nursing theorists – are a further step beyond that and our heroes of everyday life a step further still. The first extreme has what appears to be its most stable normative accommodation in a sort of ethical exile – if often self-imposed. Its denizens may thrive, but they belong to the uninhabited forest and desert, in caves and isolated enclaves, in the religious city-state that is Mt Athos or on the barely accessible basalt spires of Meteora. Their ethical status is maximally ambiguous in being so far abstracted from the normativity required of the ethical practices of the mundane ecumene in which the ethical Everyperson makes his or her or its home. Moving toward John, exile gives way to sociological house arrest, again often – and certainly in John's case – self-imposed. Less severe ethics of the care of and for the other are of more liberal ambit. Proper ethical liberals and their utilitarian antagonists enjoy (or suffer from) even greater freedom. The closer one moves toward the second extreme, however, freedom recedes and an ever more refined social control takes its place. The second pole is disciplinary in Foucault's technical sense of the term. If it is maximally ethically ambiguous in its own right, this is because it isn't clearly an ethical pole at all (read *Discipline and Punish*: Foucault, 1977). It is instead an extreme at which ethical subjectivation begins to look very like anethical subjugation, and the actor to look very like a slave.

Collective exile, house arrest: What collective cunning finds cause to make even merely semiotic room for the charismatic and the mystic to ply their exercises of desubjectivation? I have already offered a partial answer: we need our charismatics. The answer is, however, very partial. One cannot infer from it any need for the charismatic without limits. One cannot infer from it, either, the need for that particular charismatic without limits that is the mystic. Weber's developmental model of 'religious rejections of the world and their directions' is of little additional help. It raises the same question, if in slightly different terms: Why tolerate – much less venerate – the world-rejecter, even in exile? Turnerian psychologism is even less

helpful, not least because it is aprioristic. It is not at all empirically obvious that human beings generally find social life so burdensome that they require periodic pan-humanist liberation from it. Nor do the charismatic and the mystic conform to the Turnerian pattern. Their vacation from *societas* – such as it is – is permanent, or at the very least permanent in principle or as *telos*. And why should any collectivity tolerate (much less venerate) that? The question must, moreover, be answered on the collective plane if it can be answered at all. Rites of passage are universal but radical charismatics and, among them, radical mystics are not. I have previously summoned the conscience collective – but I admit that my doing so has been misleading. Or rather, it has been misleading if and to the extent that it has been understood as reviving a homeostatic structural-functionalism. I leave aside here the rectitude of the interpretation of Durkheim's social theory as a theory whose foundations are those of systemic homeostasis. Whatever the correct interpretation might be, the ethical domain is for its part not a domain merely of systemic homeostasis. It is also dynamic.

Just so, the ethical domain is the precise correlate of systemic autopoiesis, which is itself a process not merely of systemic reproduction but also of systemic revision and readjustment and recoordination. The environments that systems inhabit change; systems must change with them or perish. Systems themselves can grow recalcitrant, inflexible; they are at autopoietic peril should they do so. Collective systems have a double constitution: one part structural and organizational; the other part code. Mystics may be far removed – in *moksha*, in *nirvana* – from the first part. Even in their remove, they have a place in the second. The more muscular mystics, John among them, conform more closely to Weber's politically inflected portrait of the charismatic. They have a foothold in both parts of systemic autopoiesis. They are individuals, but they are also concrete personifications – hypostases – of processes of a revision and readjustment and re-coordination of a supra-individual order. They are thus figures, in thought and in action, of the systemic imperative of undoing:

in reaction-formation, an attitude is taken that contradicts the original one; in undoing, one more step is taken. Something positive is done which, actually or magically, is the opposite of something which, again actually or in imagination, was done before. . . . The idea of expiation itself is nothing but an expression of belief in the possibility of magical undoing. (Fenichel, 1946: 137–8)

This is a psychoanalytical formulation, but I borrow it from Harold Bloom's poetics (1973: 80–1) and hardly need to emphasize its astonishing resonance with the pilgrim's desubjectivating progress through *The Dark Night of the Soul*. Pace Durkheim, the collective has nothing analogous to a personality, but experience – fantastical experience included – is symbolic, the symbolic collective, and the collective thus susceptible to poetic elucidation.

The distinctly ethical import of undoing is not, however, merely figural (and John not merely a poet). It belongs to the economy of ethical valuation and its role

in that economy is best assessed through the lens of its polar opposite. That pole is a pole of ethical absolutism. It is also a pole of ethical standardization, of an ethical normalization whose enforcement demands the organization and expenditure of prodigious collective energies and comes very close to putting the ethical domain itself under erasure (again, read *Discipline and Punish*). The libertarian protests it. The mystic does much more than that. Mystical exercises of desubjectivation and the monistic illuminations at which they arrive – whether actually or fantastically doesn't matter – are categorically antithetical to the normativity of ethically absolutist regimes. They constitute an absolutism as well, but an absolutism that trumps its counterpart. They give first-order expression to a collective paradox of self-reference: 'this ethics is not an ethics' – or in any case, not an exhaustive ethics, not the only ethics possible. Mystical absolutism is in just this respect the original articulation of what will later emerge as the second-order declaration of the contingency of all ethical values, from Nietzsche forward to such similarly ambiguous – relativist? nihilist? perhaps even mystical? – manifestologists of the contingency of ethical values as Pierre Bourdieu and Niklas Luhmann.

Paradoxes of self-reference might be evaded at the second-order, and it would be uncharitable to call all of them a matter of artifice. Nor are such evasions (or blocks, or cut-offs) restricted to such set theorists as Ernst Zermelo (see Kanamori, 2004) or such social theorists as the early Bourdieu (1977: 2–4) and the ever-resolute Luhmann (1994: 111) alone. Collins offers a compelling analysis of such a cutting-off in the Theravāda tradition, which incorporates into Buddhist cosmology the Hindic hierarchization of a more mundane, 'primary' ontology and its metaphysically loftier, 'secondary' counterpart (1994: 72–3).

So perhaps we need our mystics after all – except (not to be paradoxical) when we don't. The early Iberian renaissance in any event may have had particular need of them. The Spanish Inquisition commenced in 1480, but became increasingly draconian in the aftermath of the royal decrees of 1492 and 1501 pronouncing that Jews and Moriscos who did not convert to Catholicism would be expelled from the peninsula. The hunt for crypto-Jews and crypto-Muslims thus began. Crypto-Jews were its first target, and its chief target until about 1530, when its attention seems to have shifted to the Mariscos. Jewish converts would come under scrutiny again beginning in the 1560s and well into the 18th century. John was in his early 20s at the time. His Carmelite elder Teresa was in her middle 40s. Teresa's grandfather was a Jewish *converso*, but her parents thoroughly Christianized. She deeply regretted her ancestry, whom she and so many others of her time and place regarded as a 'race of deicides' (Brenan, 1973: 95). Her regret seems to have been ardent even at a very early age. When she was seven, she set off with her brother to lands still occupied by the Moors to sacrifice herself for the glory of Christ. Her exercises of undoing were evidently not consciously motivated by any sympathy for the Jews. This aside, her career did not meet with the Inquisitor's favor. Her writings came under inquisitorial review on several different occasions. John's parents – for whom he seems to have had great love – were 'probably' conversos (Kavanaugh, 1987: 8). Scholars are in any event in greater consensus about the

theological tradition that most influenced him. I have already mentioned *The Song of Songs* – an Old Testament text. The Medieval Jewish Kaballah seems to have made a similarly profound impression on him (Swietlicki, 1986). He did not attract the inquisitors during his lifetime, but after his death his writings, too, fell under the inquisitorial gaze. They had eloquent defenders and survived censure. As we have seen, they have long endured in the economy of ethical valuation, Christian and non-Christian. System-theoretically, this has only been to the advantage of autopoiesis. The Inquisition – and in particular, the inflexibly axiomatic ethics of daily action and thought that it rather desperately sought to enforce – was symptomatic of autopoietic retrenchment, and (system-theoretically speaking) far more counter-autopoietic than were most of the heretical revisionists (mystics among them) who came under its stern and sometimes fatal review.

This is not to heroize (or condemn) mystics or mysticism – certainly not system-theoretically. It is rather to underscore that mystics and their mysticism are systemic irritants. From a functionalist point of view (I adopt it here without compunction), a bit of systemic irritation is a good thing, at least to the extent that it generates or provokes the enhancement of the systemic capacity to cope with complexity and so to respond and adapt more flexibly to whatever environmental conditions might arise. On the other hand, mystics and their mysticism can – *in potentia* – carry their irritations too far. By teaching or example or both, mystics effect (or, if you want, conjure) proofs that the axiomatics of any given determinate tablet of practical ethics neither constitute nor lead to the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the ethical truth. Their irritations (usually in the form of ‘wisdom’, but sometimes in forms more muscularly charismatic) are first and foremost irritations of coding – and if they don’t go too far (a.k.a. aren’t allowed to go too far) into meddling with organization and structure, just to that extent they tend to meet with esteem. The structural and organizational disruptions they might bring about, however, increase in direct proportion to the degree to which they have a revisionary and so relativizing impact on the going ethical axiomatics. Put mystics at the center of things organizational and structural and such things run the ever more precipitous risk of falling apart, their centers not holding.

This, I would suggest in concluding, accounts in some (good, I think) measure for the double-edged regard in which mystics are universally held (a regard always inflected by the social position of the viewer, to be sure). The same analytical perspective facilitates as well an account of why, by and large, mystics reside at and also so frequently breach the sociocultural margins of mundane (and autopoietical) practical affairs. Just so, mystics, these subjects who are not one, must figure prominently into any anthropology of ethics worthy of the name. It’s not a matter of their intentions (which can as often be conservative as they are reformative). It’s a matter, again, of ethical irritation, and of the metrics of the scope of ethical irritation that we (whoever that might be, from one place and time to the next) might or might not bear. And so – it’s a matter of research, and research as yet undone.

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