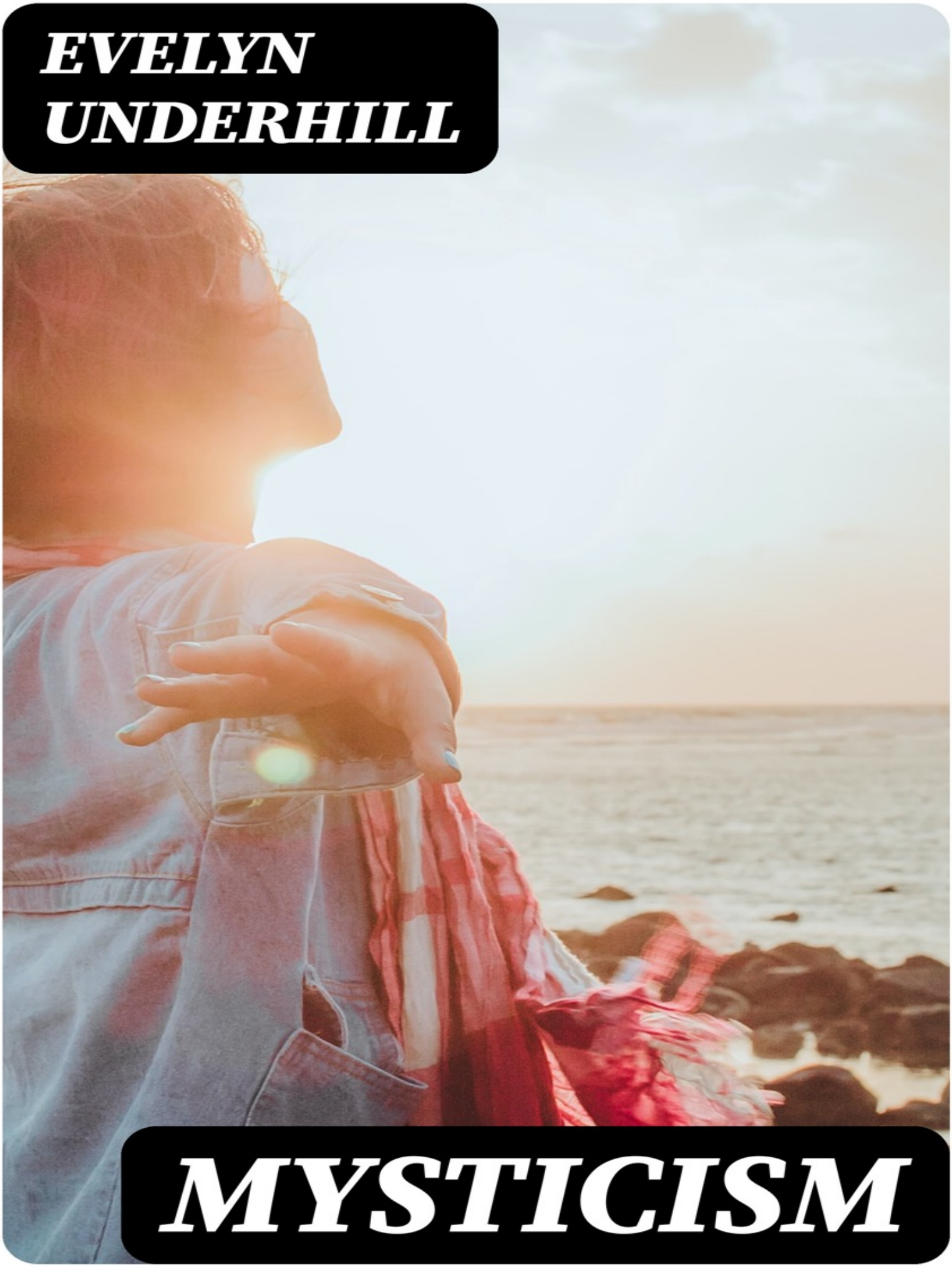
EVELYN
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MYSTICISM


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**Evelyn Underhill**

# Mysticism

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# Preface

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This book falls naturally into two parts; each of which is really complete in itself, though they are in a sense complementary to one another. Whilst the second and longest part contains a somewhat detailed study of the nature and development of man's spiritual or mystical consciousness, the first is intended rather to provide an introduction to the general subject of mysticism. Exhibiting it by turns from the point of view of metaphysics, psychology, and symbolism, it is an attempt to gather between the covers of one volume information at present scattered amongst many monographs and text-books written in divers tongues, and to give the student in a compact form at least the elementary facts in regard to each of those subjects which are most closely connected with the study of the mystics.

Those mystics, properly speaking, can only be studied in their works: works which are for the most part left unread by those who now talk much about mysticism. Certainly the general reader has this excuse, that the masterpieces of mystical literature, full of strange beauties though they be, offer considerable difficulties to those who come to them unprepared. In the first seven chapters of this book I have tried to remove a few of these difficulties; to provide the necessary preparation; and to exhibit the relation in which mysticism stands to other forms of life. If, then, the readers of this section are enabled by it to come to the encounter of mystical literature with a greater power of sympathetic comprehension than they previously possessed, it will have served the purpose for which it has been composed.

It is probable that almost every such reader, according to the angle from which he approaches the subject, will here

find a good deal which seems to him superfluous. But different types of mind will find this unnecessary elaboration in different places. The psychologist, approaching from the scientific standpoint, eager for morbid phenomena, has little use for disquisitions on symbolism, religious or other. The symbolist, approaching from the artistic standpoint, seldom admires the proceedings of psychology. I believe, however, that none who wish to obtain an idea of mysticism in its wholeness, as a form of life, can afford to neglect any of the aspects on which these pages venture to touch. The metaphysician and the psychologist are unwise if they do not consider the light thrown upon the ideas of the mystics by their attitude towards orthodox theology. The theologian is still more unwise if he refuse to hear the evidence of psychology. For the benefit of those whose interest in mysticism is chiefly literary, and who may care to be provided with a clue to the symbolic and allegorical element in the writings of the contemplatives, a short section on those symbols of which they most often make use has been added. Finally, the persistence amongst us of the false opinion which confuses mysticism with occult philosophy and psychic phenomena, has made it necessary to deal with the vital distinction which exists between it and every form of magic.

Specialists in any of these great departments of knowledge will probably be disgusted by the elementary and superficial manner in which their specific sciences are here treated. But this book does not venture to address itself to specialists. From those who are already fully conversant with the matters touched upon, it asks the indulgence which really kindhearted adults are always ready to extend towards the efforts of youth. Philosophers are earnestly advised to pass over the first two chapters, and theologians to practise the same charity in respect of the section dealing with their science.

The giving of merely historical information is no part of the present plan: except in so far as chronology has a bearing upon the most fascinating of all histories, the history of the spirit of man. Many books upon mysticism have been based on the historical method: amongst them two such very different works as Vaughan's supercilious and unworthy "Hours with the Mystics" and Dr. Inge's scholarly Bampton lectures. It is a method which seems to be open to some objection: since mysticism avowedly deals with the individual not as he stands in relation to the civilization of his time, but as he stands in relation to truths that are timeless. All mystics, said Saint-Martin, speak the same language and come from the same country. As against that fact, the place which they happen to occupy in the kingdom of this world matters little. Nevertheless, those who are unfamiliar with the history of mysticism properly so called, and to whom the names of the great contemplatives convey no accurate suggestion of period or nationality, may be glad to have a short statement of their order in time and distribution in space. Also, some knowledge of the genealogy of mysticism is desirable if we are to distinguish the original contributions of each individual from the mass of speculation and statement which he inherits from the past. Those entirely unacquainted with these matters may find it helpful to glance at the Appendix before proceeding to the body of the work; since few things are more disagreeable than the constant encounter of persons to whom we have not been introduced.

The second part of the book, for which the first seven chapters are intended to provide a preparation, is avowedly psychological. It is an attempt to set out and justify a definite theory of the nature of man's mystical consciousness: the necessary stages of organic growth through which the typical mystic passes, the state of equilibrium towards which he tends. Each of these stages — and also the characteristically mystical and still largely

mysterious experiences of visions and voices, contemplation and ecstasy — though viewed from the standpoint of psychology, is illustrated from the lives of the mystics; and where possible in their own words. In planning these chapters I have been considerably helped by M. Delacroix's brilliant "Etudes sur le Mysticisme," though unable to accept his conclusions: and here gladly take the opportunity of acknowledging my debt to him and also to Baron von Hügel's classic "Mystical Element of Religion." This book, which only came into my hands when my own was planned and partly written, has since been a constant source of stimulus and encouragement.

Finally, it is perhaps well to say something as to the exact sense in which the term "mysticism" is here understood. One of the most abused words in the English language, it has been used in different and often mutually exclusive senses by religion, poetry, and philosophy: has been claimed as an excuse for every kind of occultism, for dilute transcendentalism, vapid symbolism, religious or aesthetic sentimentality, and bad metaphysics. On the other hand, it has been freely employed as a term of contempt by those who have criticized these things. It is much to be hoped that it may be restored sooner or later to its old meaning, as the science or art of the spiritual life.

Meanwhile, those who use the term "Mysticism" are bound in self-defence to explain what they mean by it. Broadly speaking, I understand it to be the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with the transcendental order; whatever be the theological formula under which that order is understood. This tendency, in great mystics, gradually captures the whole field of consciousness; it dominates their life and, in the experience called "mystic union," attains its end. Whether that end be called the God of Christianity, the World-soul of Pantheism, the Absolute of Philosophy, the desire to attain it and the movement towards it — so long as

this is a genuine life process and not an intellectual speculation — is the proper subject of mysticism. I believe this movement to represent the true line of development of the highest form of human consciousness.

It is a pleasant duty to offer my heartiest thanks to the many kind friends and fellow students, of all shades of opinion, who have given me their help and encouragement. Amongst those to whom my heaviest debt of gratitude is due are Mr. W. Scott Palmer, for much valuable, generous, and painstaking assistance, particularly in respect of the chapter upon Vitalism: and Miss Margaret Robinson, who in addition to many other kind offices, has made all the translations from Meister Eckhart and Mechthild of Magdeburg here given.

Sections of the MS. have been kindly read by the Rev. Dr. Inge, by Miss May Sinclair, and by Miss Eleanor Gregory; from all of whom I have received much helpful and expert advice. To Mr. Arthur Symons my thanks and those of my readers are specially due; since it is owing to his generous permission that I am able to make full use of his beautiful translations of the poems of St. John of the Cross. Others who have given me much help in various directions, and to whom most grateful acknowledgments are here offered, are Miss Constance Jones, Miss Ethel Barker, Mr. J. A. Herbert of the British Museum — who first brought to my notice the newly discovered “Mirror of Simple Souls” — the Rev. Dr. Arbuthnot Nairn, Mr. A. E. Waite, and Mr. H. Stuart Moore, F.S.A. The substance of two chapters — those upon “The Characteristics of Mysticism” and “Mysticism and Magic” — has already appeared in the pages of *The Quest* and *The Fortnightly Review.* These sections are here reprinted by kind permission of their respective editors.

*Feast of St. John of the Cross* E. U.
1910

# Part I
# The Mystic Fact

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“What the world, which truly knows *nothing,* calls ‘mysticism’ is the science of *ultimates, . . .* the science of self-evident Reality, which cannot be ‘reasoned about,’ because it is the object of pure reason or perception. The Babe sucking its mother’s breast, and the Lover returning, after twenty years’ separation, to his home and food in the same bosom, are the types and princes of Mystics.”

COVENTRY PATMORE,
“The Rod, the Root, and the Flower”

# Chapter 1
# The Point of Departure

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The most highly developed branches of the human family have in common one peculiar characteristic. They tend to produce — sporadically it is true, and often in the teeth of adverse external circumstances — a curious and definite type of personality; a type which refuses to be satisfied with that which other men call experience, and is inclined, in the words of its enemies, to “deny the world in order that it may find reality.” We meet these persons in the east and the west; in the ancient, mediaeval, and modern worlds. Their one passion appears to be the prosecution of a certain spiritual and intangible quest: the finding of a “way out” or a “way back” to some desirable state in which alone they can satisfy their craving for absolute truth. This quest, for them, has constituted the whole meaning of life. They have made for it without effort sacrifices which have appeared enormous to other men: and it is an indirect testimony to its objective actuality, that whatever the place or period in which they have arisen, their aims, doctrines and methods have been substantially the same. Their experience, therefore, forms a body of evidence, curiously self-consistent and often mutually explanatory, which must be taken into account before we can add up the sum of the energies and potentialities of the human spirit, or reasonably speculate on its relations to the unknown world which lies outside the boundaries of sense.

All men, at one time or another, have fallen in love with the veiled Isis whom they call Truth. With most, this has been a passing passion: they have early seen its hopelessness and turned to more practical things. But others remain all their lives the devout lovers of reality:

though the manner of their love, the vision which they make to themselves of the beloved object varies enormously. Some see Truth as Dante saw Beatrice: an adorable yet intangible figure, found in this world yet revealing the next. To others she seems rather an evil but an irresistible enchantress: enticing, demanding payment and betraying her lover at the last. Some have seen her in a test tube, and some in a poet's dream: some before the altar, others in the slime. The extreme pragmatists have even sought her in the kitchen; declaring that she may best be recognized by her utility. Last stage of all, the philosophic sceptic has comforted an unsuccessful courtship by assuring himself that his mistress is not really there.

Under whatsoever symbols they have objectified their quest, none of these seekers have ever been able to assure the world that they have found, seen face to face, the Reality behind the veil. But if we may trust the reports of the mystics — and they are reports given with a strange accent of certainty and good faith — they have succeeded where all these others have failed, in establishing immediate communication between the spirit of man, entangled as they declare amongst material things, and that "only Reality," that immaterial and final Being, which some philosophers call the Absolute, and most theologians call God. This, they say — and here many who are not mystics agree with them — is the hidden Truth which is the object of man's craving; the only satisfying goal of his quest. Hence, they should claim from us the same attention that we give to other explorers of countries in which we are not competent to adventure ourselves; for the mystics are the pioneers of the spiritual world, and we have no right to deny validity to their discoveries, merely because we lack the opportunity or the courage necessary to those who would prosecute such explorations for themselves.

It is the object of this book to attempt a description, and also — though this is needless for those who read that

description in good faith — a justification of these experiences and the conclusions which have been drawn from them. So remote, however, are these matters from our ordinary habits of thought, that their investigation entails, in those who would attempt to understand them, a definite preparation: a purging of the intellect. As with those who came of old to the Mysteries, purification is here the gate of knowledge. We must come to this encounter with minds cleared of prejudice and convention, must deliberately break with our inveterate habit of taking the “visible world” for granted; our lazy assumption that somehow science is “real” and metaphysics is not. We must pull down our own card houses — descend, as the mystics say, “into our nothingness” — and examine for ourselves the foundations of all possible human experience, before we are in a position to criticize the buildings of the visionaries, the poets, and the saints. We must not begin to talk of the unreal world of these dreamers until we have discovered — if we can — a real world with which it may be compared.

Such a criticism of reality is of course the business of philosophy. I need hardly say that this book is not written by a philosopher, nor is it addressed to students of that imperial science. Nevertheless, amateurs though we be, we cannot reach our starting-point without trespassing to some extent on philosophic ground. That ground covers the whole area of first principles: and it is to first principles that we must go, if we would understand the true significance of the mystic type.

Let us then begin at the beginning: and remind ourselves of a few of the trite and primary facts which all practical persons agree to ignore. That beginning, for human thought, is of course the I, the Ego, the self-conscious subject which is writing this book, or the other self-conscious subject which is reading it; and which declares, in the teeth of all arguments, I AM.[1] Here is a point as to which we all feel quite sure. No metaphysician has yet shaken the ordinary

individual’s belief in his own existence. The uncertainties only begin for most of us when we ask what else *is* .

To this I, this conscious self “imprisoned in the body like an oyster in his shell,”[2] come, as we know, a constant stream of messages and experiences. Chief amongst these are the stimulation of the tactile nerves whose result we call touch, the vibrations taken up by the optic nerve which we call light, and those taken up by the ear and perceived as sound.

What do these experiences mean? The first answer of the unsophisticated Self is, that they indicate the nature of the external world: it is to the “evidence of her senses” that she turns, when she is asked what the world is like. From the messages received through those senses, which pour in on her whether she will or no, battering upon her gateways at every instant and from every side, she constructs that “sense-world” which is the “real and solid world” of normal men. As the impressions come in — or rather those interpretations of the original impressions which her nervous system supplies — she pounces on them, much as players in the spelling game pounce on the separate letters dealt out to them. She sorts, accepts, rejects, combines: and then triumphantly produces from them a “concept” which *is,* she says, the external world. With an enviable and amazing simplicity she attributes her own sensations to the unknown universe. The stars, she says, *are* bright; the grass *is* green. For her, as for the philosopher Hume, “reality consists in impressions and ideas.”

It is immediately apparent, however, that this sense-world, this seemingly real external universe — though it may be useful and valid in other respects — cannot be *the* external world, but only the Self’s projected picture of it. [3] It is a work of art, not a scientific fact; and, whilst it may well possess the profound significance proper to great works of art, is dangerous if treated as a subject of analysis. Very slight investigation shows that it is a picture whose relation

to reality is at best symbolic and approximate, and which would have no meaning for selves whose senses, or channels of communication, happened to be arranged upon a different plan. The evidence of the senses, then, cannot be accepted as evidence of the nature of ultimate reality: useful servants, they are dangerous guides. Nor can their testimony disconcert those seekers whose reports they appear to contradict.

The conscious self sits, so to speak, at the receiving end of a telegraph wire. On any other theory than that of mysticism, it is her one channel of communication with the hypothetical “external world.” The receiving instrument registers certain messages. She does not know, and — so long as she remains dependent on that instrument — never can know, the object, the reality at the other end of the wire, by which those messages are sent; neither can the messages truly disclose the nature of that object. But she is justified on the whole in accepting them as evidence that something exists beyond herself and her receiving instrument. It is obvious that the structural peculiarities of the telegraphic instrument will have exerted a modifying effect upon the message. That which is conveyed as dash and dot, colour and shape, may have been received in a very different form. Therefore this message, though it may in a partial sense be relevant to the supposed reality at the other end, can never be adequate to it. There will be fine vibrations which it fails to take up, others which it confuses together. Hence a portion of the message is always lost; or, in other language, there are aspects of the world which we can never know.

The sphere of our possible intellectual knowledge is thus strictly conditioned by the limits of our own personality. On this basis, not the ends of the earth, but the external termini of our own sensory nerves, are the termini of our explorations: and to “know oneself” is really to know one’s universe. We are locked up with our receiving instruments:

we cannot get up and walk away in the hope of seeing whither the lines lead. Eckhart's words are still final for us: "the soul can only approach created things by the voluntary reception of images." Did some mischievous Demiurge choose to tickle our sensory apparatus in a new way, we should receive by this act a new universe.

William James once suggested as a useful exercise for young idealists, a consideration of the changes which would be worked in our ordinary world if the various branches of our receiving instruments exchanged duties; if, for instance, we heard all colours and saw all sounds. Such a remark throws a sudden light on the strange and apparently insane statement of the visionary Saint-Martin, "I heard flowers that sounded, and saw notes that shone"; and on the reports of other mystics concerning a rare moment of consciousness in which the senses are fused into a single and ineffable act of perception, and colour and sound are known as aspects of one thing.[4]

Since music is but an interpretation of certain vibrations undertaken by the ear, and colour an interpretation of other vibrations performed by the eye, this is less mad than it sounds and may yet be brought within the radius of physical science. Did such an alteration of our senses take place the world would still send us the same messages — that strange unknown world from which, on this hypothesis, we are hermetically sealed — but we should interpret them differently. Beauty would still be ours, though speaking another tongue. The bird's song would then strike our retina as a pageant of colour: we should see the magical tones of the wind, hear as a great fugue the repeated and harmonized greens of the forest, the cadences of stormy skies. Did we realize how slight an adjustment of our organs is needed to initiate us into such a world, we should perhaps be less contemptuous of those mystics who tell us that they apprehended the Absolute as "heavenly music" or "Uncreated Light": less fanatical in our determination to

make the solid “world of common sense” the only standard of reality. This “world of common sense” is a conceptual world. It may represent an external universe: it certainly does represent the activity of the human mind. Within that mind it is built up: and there most of us are content “at ease for aye to dwell,” like the soul in the Palace of Art.

A direct encounter with absolute truth, then, appears to be impossible for normal non-mystical consciousness. We cannot know the reality, or even prove the existence, of the simplest object: though this is a limitation which few people realize acutely and most would deny. But there persists in the race a type of personality which does realize this limitation: and cannot be content with the sham realities that furnish the universe of normal men. It is necessary, as it seems, to the comfort of persons of this type to form for themselves some image of the Something or Nothing which is at the end of their telegraph lines: some “conception of being,” some “theory of knowledge.” They are tormented by the Unknowable, ache for first principles, demand some background to the shadow show of things. In so far as man possesses this temperament, he hungers for reality, and must satisfy that hunger as best he can: staving off starvation, though he many not be filled.

It is doubtful whether any two selves have offered themselves exactly the same image of the truth outside their gates: for a living metaphysic, like a living religion, is at bottom a strictly personal affair — a matter, as William James reminded us, of vision rather than of argument.[5] Nevertheless such a living metaphysic may — and if sound generally does — escape the stigma of subjectivism by outwardly attaching itself to a traditional School; as personal religion may and should outwardly attach itself to a traditional church. Let us then consider shortly the results arrived at by these traditional schools — the great classic theories concerning the nature of reality. In them we see

crystallized the best that the human intellect, left to itself, has been able to achieve.

I. The most obvious and generally accepted explanation of the world is of course that of *Naturalism,* or naive Realism: the point of view of the plain man. Naturalism states simply that we see the real world, though we may not see it very well. What seems to normal healthy people to be there, is approximately there. It congratulates itself on resting in the concrete; it accepts material things as real. In other words, our corrected and correlated sense impressions, raised to their highest point of efficiency, form for it the only valid material of knowledge: knowledge itself being the classified results of exact observation.

Such an attitude as this may be a counsel of prudence, in view of our ignorance of all that lies beyond: but it can never satisfy our hunger for reality. It says in effect, “The room in which we find ourselves is fairly comfortable. Draw the curtains, for the night is dark: and let us devote ourselves to describing the furniture.” Unfortunately, however, even the furniture refuses to accommodate itself to the naturalistic view of things. Once we begin to examine it attentively, we find that it abounds in hints of wonder and mystery: declares aloud that even chairs and tables are not what they seem.

We have seen that the most elementary criticism, applied to any ordinary object of perception, tends to invalidate the simple and comfortable creed of “common sense”; that not merely faith but gross credulity, is needed by the mind which would accept the apparent as the real. I say, for instance, that I “see” a house. I can only mean by this that the part of my receiving instrument which undertakes the duty called vision is affected in a certain way, and arouses in my mind the idea “house.” The idea “house” is now treated by me as a real house, and my further observations will be an unfolding, enriching, and defining of this image. But what the external reality is which

evoked the image that I call “house,” I do not know and never can know. It is as mysterious, as far beyond my apprehension, as the constitution of the angelic choirs. Consciousness shrinks in terror from contact with the mighty verb “to be.” I may of course call in one sense to “corroborate,” as we trustfully say, the evidence of the other; may approach the house, and touch it. Then the nerves of my hand will be affected by a sensation which I translate as hardness and solidity; the eye by a peculiar and wholly incomprehensible sensation called redness; and from these purely personal changes my mind constructs and externalizes an idea which it calls red bricks. Science herself, however, if she be asked to verify the reality of these perceptions, at once declares that though the material world be real, the ideas of solidity and colour are but hallucination. They belong to the human animal, not to the physical universe: pertain to accident not substance, as scholastic philosophy would say.

“The red brick,” says Science, “is a mere convention. In reality that bit, like all other bits of the universe, consists, so far as I know at present, of innumerable atoms whirling and dancing one about the other. It is no more solid than a snowstorm. Were you to eat of Alice-in-Wonderland’s mushroom and shrink to the dimensions of the infra-world, each atom with its electrons might seem to you a solar system and the red brick itself a universe. Moreover, these atoms themselves elude me as I try to grasp them. They are only manifestations of something else. Could I track matter to its lair, I might conceivably discover that it has no extension, and become an idealist in spite of myself. As for redness, as you call it, that is a question of the relation between your optic nerve and the light waves which it is unable to absorb. This evening, when the sun slopes, your brick will probably be purple, a very little deviation from normal vision on your part would make it green. Even the sense that the object of perception is outside yourself may

be fancy; since you as easily attribute this external quality to images seen in dreams, and to waking hallucinations, as you do to those objects which, as you absurdly say, are *‘really there.’”*

Further, there is no trustworthy standard by which we can separate the “real” from the “unreal” aspects of phenomena. Such standards as exist are conventional: and correspond to convenience, not to truth. It is no argument to say that most men see the world in much the same way, and that this “way” is the true standard of reality: though for practical purposes we have agreed that sanity consists in sharing the hallucinations of our neighbours. Those who are honest with themselves know that this “sharing” is at best incomplete. By the voluntary adoption of a new conception of the universe, the fitting of a new alphabet to the old Morse code — a proceeding which we call the acquirement of knowledge — we can and do change to a marked extent our way of seeing things: building up new worlds from old sense impressions, and transmuting objects more easily and thoroughly than any magician. “Eyes and ears,” said Heracleitus, “are bad witnesses to those who have barbarian souls”: and even those whose souls are civilized tend to see and hear all things through a temperament. In one and the same sky the poet may discover the habitation of angels, whilst the sailor sees only a promise of dirty weather ahead. Hence, artist and surgeon, Christian and rationalist, pessimist and optimist, do actually and truly live in different and mutually exclusive worlds, not only of thought but also of perception. Only the happy circumstance that our ordinary speech is conventional, not realistic, permits us to conceal from one another the unique and lonely world in which each lives. Now and then an artist is born, terribly articulate, foolishly truthful, who insists on “Speaking as he saw.” Then other men, lapped warmly in their artificial universe, agree that he is mad: or, at the very best, an “extraordinarily imaginative fellow.”

Moreover, even this unique world of the individual is not permanent. Each of us, as we grow and change, works incessantly and involuntarily at the re-making of our sensual universe. We behold at any specific moment not “that which is,” but “that which we are”, and personality undergoes many readjustments in the course of its passage from birth through maturity to death. The mind which seeks the Real, then, in this shifting and subjective “natural” world is of necessity thrown back on itself: on images and concepts which owe more to the “seer” than to the “seen.” But Reality must be real for all, once they have found it: must exist “in itself” upon a plane of being unconditioned by the perceiving mind. Only thus can it satisfy that mind’s most vital instinct, most sacred passion — its “instinct for the Absolute,” its passion for truth.

You are not asked, as a result of these antique and elementary propositions, to wipe clean the slate of normal human experience, and cast in your lot with intellectual nihilism. You are only asked to acknowledge that it is but a slate, and that the white scratches upon it which the ordinary man calls facts, and the Scientific Realist calls knowledge, are at best relative and conventionalized symbols of that aspect of the unknowable reality at which they hint. This being so, whilst we must all draw a picture of some kind on our slate and act in relation therewith, we cannot deny the validity — though we may deny the usefulness — of the pictures which others produce, however abnormal and impossible they may seem; since these are sketching an aspect of reality which has not come within our sensual field, and so does not and cannot form part of our world. Yet as the theologian claims that the doctrine of the Trinity veils and reveals not Three but One, so the varied aspects under which the universe appears to the perceiving consciousness hint at a final reality, or in Kantian language, a Transcendental Object, which shall be, not any one, yet all of its manifestations; transcending yet including the

innumerable fragmentary worlds of individual conception. We begin, then, to ask what can be the nature of this One; and whence comes the persistent instinct which — receiving no encouragement from sense experience — apprehends and desires this unknown unity, this all-inclusive Absolute, as the only possible satisfaction of its thirst for truth.

2. The second great conception of Being — *Idealism* — has arrived by a process of elimination at a tentative answer to this question. It whisks us far from the material universe, with its interesting array of "things," its machinery, its law, into the pure, if thin, air of a metaphysical world. Whilst the naturalist's world is constructed from an observation of the evidence offered by the senses, the Idealist's world is constructed from an observation of the processes of thought. There are but two things, he says in effect, about which we are sure: the existence of a thinking subject, a conscious Self, and of an object, an Idea, with which that subject deals. We know, that is to say, both Mind and Thought. What we call the universe is really a collection of such thoughts; and these, we agree, have been more or less distorted by the subject, the individual thinker, in the process of assimilation. Obviously, we do not think all that there is to be thought, conceive all that there is to be conceived; neither do we necessarily combine in right order and proportion those ideas which we are capable of grasping. Reality, says Objective Idealism, is the complete, undistorted Object, the big thought, of which we pick up these fragmentary hints: the world of phenomena which we treat as real being merely its shadow show or "manifestation in space and time."

According to the form of Objective Idealism here chosen from amongst many as typical — for almost every Idealist has his own scheme of metaphysical salvation[6] — we live in a universe which is, in popular language, the Idea, or Dream of its Creator. We, as Tweedledum explained to Alice in the most philosophic of all fairy tales, are "just part of the

dream.” All life, all phenomena, are the endless modifications and expressions of the one transcendent Object, the mighty and dynamic Thought of one Absolute Thinker, in which we are bathed. This Object, or certain aspects of it — and the place of each individual consciousness within the Cosmic Thought, or, as we say, our position in life, largely determines which these aspects shall be — is interpreted by the senses and conceived by the mind, under limitations which we are accustomed to call matter, space and time. But we have no reason to suppose that matter, space, and time are necessarily parts of reality; of the ultimate Idea. Probability points rather to their being the pencil and paper with which we sketch it. As our vision, our idea of things, tends to approximate more and more to that of the Eternal Idea, so we get nearer and nearer to reality: for the idealist’s reality is simply the Idea, or Thought of God. *This,* he says, is the supreme unity at which all the illusory appearances that make up the widely differing worlds of “common sense,” of science, of metaphysics, and of art dimly hint. This is the sense in which it can truly be said that only the supernatural possesses reality; for that world of appearance which we call natural is certainly largely made up of preconception and illusion, of the hints offered by the eternal real world of Idea outside our gates, and the quaint concepts which we at our receiving instrument manufacture from them.

There is this to be said for the argument of Idealism: that in the last resort, the destinies of mankind are invariably guided, not by the concrete “facts” of the sense world, but by concepts which are acknowledged by every one to exist only on the mental plane. In the great moments of existence, when he rises to spiritual freedom, these are the things which every man feels to be real. It is by these and for these that he is found willing to live, work suffer, and die. Love, patriotism, religion, altruism, fame, all belong to the transcendental world. Hence, they partake more of the

nature of reality than any “fact” could do; and man, dimly recognizing this, has ever bowed to them as to immortal centres of energy. Religions as a rule are steeped in idealism: Christianity in particular is a trumpet call to an idealistic conception of life, Buddhism is little less. Over and over again, their Scriptures tell us that only materialists will be damned.

In Idealism we have perhaps the most sublime theory of Being which has ever been constructed by the human intellect: a theory so sublime, in fact, that it can hardly have been produced by the exercise of “pure reason” alone, but must be looked upon as a manifestation of that natural mysticism, that instinct for the Absolute, which is latent in man. But, when we ask the idealist how we are to attain communion with the reality which he describes to us as “certainly there,” his system suddenly breaks down; and discloses itself as a diagram of the heavens, not a ladder to the stars. This failure of Idealism to find in practice the reality of which it thinks so much is due, in the opinion of the mystics, to a cause which finds epigrammatic expression in the celebrated phrase by which St. Jerome marked the distinction between religion and philosophy. “Plato located the soul of man in the head; Christ located it in the heart.” That is to say, Idealism, though just in its premises, and often daring and honest in their application, is stultified by the exclusive intellectualism of its own methods: by its fatal trust in the squirrel-work of the industrious brain instead of the piercing vision of the desirous heart. It interests man, but does not involve him in its processes: does not catch him up to the new and more real life which it describes. Hence the thing that matters, the living thing, has somehow escaped it; and its observations bear the same relation to reality as the art of the anatomist does to the mystery of birth.

3. But there is yet another Theory of Being to be considered: that which may be loosely defined as

*Philosophic Scepticism.* This is the attitude of those who refuse to accept either the realistic or the idealistic answer to the eternal question: and, confronted in their turn with the riddle of reality, reply that there is no riddle to solve. We of course assume for the ordinary purposes of life that for every sequence a: b: present in our consciousness there exists a mental or material A: B: in the external universe, and that the first is a strictly relevant, though probably wholly inadequate, expression of the second. The bundle of visual and auditory sensations, for instance, whose sum total I am accustomed to call Mrs. Smith, corresponds with something that exists in the actual as well as in my phenomenal world. Behind my Mrs. Smith, behind the very different Mrs. Smith which the X rays would exhibit, there is, contends the Objective Idealist, a transcendental, or in the Platonic sense an ideal Mrs. Smith, at whose qualities I cannot even guess; but whose existence is quite independent of my apprehension of it. But though we do and must act on this hypothesis, it remains only a hypothesis; and it is one which philosophic scepticism will not let pass.

The external world, say the sceptical schools, is — so far as I know it — a concept present in my mind. If my mind ceased to exist, so far as I know the concept which I call the world would cease to exist too. The one thing which for me indubitably *is,* isthe self's experience, its whole consciousness. Outside this circle of consciousness I have no authority to indulge in guesses as to what may or may not Be. Hence, for me, the Absolute is a meaningless diagram, a superfluous complication of thought: since the mind, wholly cut off from contact with external reality, has no reason to suppose that such a reality exists except in its own ideas. Every effort made by philosophy to go forth in search of it is merely the metaphysical squirrel running round the conceptual cage. In the completion and perfect unfolding of the set of ideas with which our consciousness is

furnished, lies the only reality which we can ever hope to know. Far better to stay here and make ourselves at home: only this, for us, truly is.

This purely subjective conception of Being has found representatives in every school of thought: even including by a curious paradox, that of mystical philosophy — its one effective antagonist. Thus Delacroix, after an exhaustive and even sympathetic analysis of St. Teresa's progress towards union with the Absolute, ends upon the assumption that the God with whom she was united was the content of her own subconscious mind.[7] Such a mysticism is that of a kitten running after its own tail: a different path indeed from that which the great seekers for reality have pursued. The *reductio ad absurdum* of this doctrine is found in the so-called "philosophy" of New Thought, which begs its disciples to "try quietly to realize that the Infinite is really You."[8] By its utter denial not merely of a knowable, but of a logically conceivable Transcendent, it drives us in the end to the conclusion of extreme pragmatism; that Truth, for us, is not an immutable reality, but merely that idea which happens to work out as true and useful in any given experience. There is no reality behind appearance; therefore all faiths, all figments with which we people that nothingness are equally true, provided they be comfortable and good to live by.

Logically carried out, this conception of Being would permit each man to regard other men as non-existent except within his own consciousness: the only place where a strict scepticism will allow that anything exists. Even the mind which conceives consciousness exists for us only in our own conception of it; we no more know what we are than we know what we shall be. Man is left a conscious Something in the midst, so far as he knows, of Nothing: with no resources save the exploring of his own consciousness.

Philosophic scepticism is particularly interesting to our present inquiry, because it shows us the position in which "pure reason," if left to itself, is bound to end. It is utterly

logical; and though we may feel it to be absurd, we can never prove it to be so. Those who are temperamentally inclined to credulity may become naturalists, and persuade themselves to believe in the reality of the sense world. Those with a certain instinct for the Absolute may adopt the more reasonable faith of idealism. But the true intellectualist, who concedes nothing to instinct or emotion, is obliged in the end to adopt some form of sceptical philosophy. The horrors of nihilism, in fact, can only be escaped by the exercise of faith, by a trust in man's innate but strictly irrational instinct for that Real "above all reason, beyond all thought" towards which at its best moments his spirit tends. If the metaphysician be true to his own postulates, he must acknowledge in the end that we are all forced to live, to think, and at last to die, in an unknown and unknowable world: fed arbitrarily and diligently, yet how we know not, by ideas and suggestions whose truth we cannot test but whose pressure we cannot resist. It is not by sight but by faith — faith in a supposed external order which we can never prove to exist, and in the approximate truthfulness and constancy of the vague messages which we receive from it — that ordinary men must live and move. We must put our trust in "laws of nature" which have been devised by the human mind as a convenient epitome of its own observations of phenomena, must, for the purposes of daily life, accept these phenomena at their face value: an act of faith beside which the grossest superstitions of the Neapolitan peasant are hardly noticeable.

The intellectual quest of Reality, then, leads us down one of three blind alleys: (1) To an acceptance of the symbolic world of appearance as the real; (2) to the elaboration of a theory also of necessity symbolic — which, beautiful in itself, cannot help us to attain the Absolute which it describes; (3) to a hopeless but strictly logical skepticism.

In answer to the "Why? Why?" of the bewildered and eternal child in us, philosophy, though always ready to

postulate the unknown if she can, is bound to reply only, *“Nescio! Nescio!”* In spite of all her busy map-making, she cannot reach the goal which she points out to us, cannot explain the curious conditions under which we imagine that we know; cannot even divide with a sure hand the subject and object of thought. Science, whose business is with phenomena and our knowledge of them, though she too is an idealist at heart, has been accustomed to explain that all our ideas and instincts, the pictured world that we take so seriously, the oddly limited and illusory nature of our experience, appear to minister to one great end: the preservation of life, and consequent fulfilment of that highly mystical hypothesis, the Cosmic Idea. Each perception, she assures us, serves a useful purpose in this evolutionary scheme: a scheme, by the way, which has been invented — we know not why — by the human mind, and imposed upon an obedient universe.

By vision, hearing, smell, and touch, says Science, we find our way about, are warned of danger, obtain our food. The male perceives beauty in the female in order that the species may be propagated. It is true that this primitive instinct has given birth to higher and purer emotions; but these too fulfil a social purpose and are not so useless as they seem. Man must eat to live, therefore many foods give us agreeable sensations. If he overeats, he dies; therefore indigestion is an unpleasant pain. Certain facts of which too keen a perception would act detrimentally to the life-force are, for most men, impossible of realization: *i.e.* , the uncertainty of life, the decay of the body, the vanity of all things under the sun. When we are in good health, we all feel very real, solid, and permanent; and this is of all our illusions the most ridiculous, and also the most obviously useful from the point of view of the efficiency and preservation of the race.

But when we look closer, we see that this brisk generalization does not cover all the ground — not even

that little tract of ground of which our senses make us free; indeed, that it is more remarkable for its omissions than for its inclusions. Récéjac has well said that “from the moment in which man is no longer content to devise things useful for his existence under the exclusive action of the will-to-live, the principle of (physical) evolution has been violated.”[9] Nothing can be more certain than that man is not so content. He has been called by utilitarian philosophers a tool-making animal — the highest praise they knew how to bestow. More surely he is a vision-making animal;[10] a creature of perverse and unpractical ideals, dominated by dreams no less than by appetites — dreams which can only be justified upon the theory that he moves towards some other goal than that of physical perfection or intellectual supremacy, is controlled by some higher and more vital reality than that of the determinists. We are driven to the conclusion that if the theory of evolution is to include or explain the facts of artistic and spiritual experience — and it cannot be accepted by any serious thinker if these great tracts of consciousness remain outside its range — it must be rebuilt on a mental rather than a physical basis.

Even the most ordinary human life includes in its range fundamental experiences — violent and unforgettable sensations — forced on us as it were against our will, for which science finds it hard to account. These experiences and sensations, and the hours of exalted emotion which they bring with them — often recognized by us as the greatest, most significant hours of our lives — fulfil no office in relation to her pet “functions of nutrition and reproduction.” It is true that they are far-reaching in their effects on character; but they do little or nothing to assist that character in its struggle for physical life. To the unprejudiced eye many of them seem hopelessly out of place in a universe constructed on strictly physico-chemical lines — look almost as though nature, left to herself, tended to contradict her own beautifully logical laws. Their

presence, more, the large place which they fill in the human world of appearance, is a puzzling circumstance for deterministic philosophers; who can only escape from the dilemma here presented to them by calling these things illusions, and dignifying their own more manageable illusions with the title of facts.

Amongst the more intractable of these groups of perceptions and experiences are those which we connect with religion, with pain and with beauty. All three, for those selves which are capable of receiving their messages, possess a mysterious authority far in excess of those feelings, arguments, or appearances which they may happen to contradict. All three, were the universe of the naturalists true, would be absurd; all three have ever been treated with the reverence due to vital matters by the best minds of the race.

A. I need not point out the hopelessly irrational character of all great religions: which rest, one and all, on a primary assumption that can never be intellectually demonstrated, much less proved — the assumption that the supra-sensible is somehow important and real, and is intimately connected with the life of man. This fact has been incessantly dwelt upon by their critics, and has provoked many a misplaced exercise of ingenuity on the part of their intelligent friends. Yet religion — emphasizing and pushing to extremes that general dependence on faith which we saw to be an inevitable condition of our lives — is one of the most universal and ineradicable functions of man, and this although it constantly acts detrimentally to the interests of his merely physical existence, opposes “the exclusive action of the will-to-live,” except in so far as that will aspires to eternal life. Strictly utilitarian, almost logical in the savage, religion becomes more and more transcendental with the upward progress of the race. It begins as black magic; it ends as Pure Love. Why did the Cosmic Idea elaborate this