

Mystical Claims and Embodied Knowledge in a Post-Metaphysical Age¹

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Introduction

Those who study or use Ken Wilber's Integral Theory, Andrew Cohen's Evolutionary Enlightenment, or derivative frameworks face conundrums as they try to hold and disseminate the more mystical and metaphysical aspects of these works and explain or justify them within the culture at large (or some targeted audience), outside of the company of fellow integralists.

Consider the following quote from Wilber's Excerpt A of the in-progress Volume 2 of the Kosmos Trilogy. Wilber describes "the great morphic field of evolutionary potential...pulling all manifest holons back to their ever-present Ground as Spirit--a Kosmic field of Agape, gently pulling evolution into greater and greater consciousness, embrace, inclusion. [...] The reality, suchness, or isness of every holon is actually Spirit...a drive which ultimately wants to embrace the entire Kosmos itself. [...] This ultimate realization [is] of the ever-present, spaceless and therefore infinite, timeless and therefore eternal, formless and therefore omnipresent, Condition of all conditions and Nature of all natures and radically groundless Ground of all grounds."

Wilber and Cohen, and others following them, are unabashed in making claims about ultimate reality, the infinite, and the primeval or primordial. They follow the lead of spiritualists and mystics throughout history who have set a precedent for definitive-sounding metaphysical statements. In a recent audio dialogue with Alan Combs, Wilber uses such phrases as "infinite vastness," "open suchness," "infinite peace," "true self," and "always already liberated" (one is tempted to put all of these in capitals)². One of Wilber's primary students and colleagues, Clint Fuhs, says that "...perspectives are primordial, which is to say they are the most fundamental or primeval elements of reality, existing at

¹ This is an extended version of a paper presented at the 2013 Integral Theory Conference. Paper and slides can be found at www.perspegrity.com/papers.

² From a audio dialogue between Wilber and Coombs titled "Adventures in the Wilber-Combs Matrix" available at integrallife.com.

or from the beginning of time" (2010, p. 1). Jeff Carreira, a student and colleague of Andrew Cohen's, uses phrases such as "the dimension of the profound," "mystical deeper reality," "timeless present," "eternal now," and "infinite spaciousness" in an audio dialogue with Patricia Albere.³

The statements above are not poetry or metaphor, nor are they sage advice about life, morality, or spirituality—they are truth claims about reality. They have some of the flavor of esoteric mysteries offered by spiritual authorities from 19th century occultism, yet are offered in the context of sophisticated post-post-modern frameworks of reality and knowledge building. They invite forms of “magical thinking” and “misplaced concreteness,” even if those offering the claims do not succumb to them.

I have great respect for the overall teachings and accomplishments of both Wilber and Cohen (and others quoted above). Mystical claims can spring from sublime and esoteric experiences, and may hold intuitions or wisdom that is difficult to put into words. One can hear such ideas, feel inspired, and resonate deeply with what they are pointing to or where they are coming from. But how does one hold what seems valuable and true about such statements, coming from admired teachers and colleagues, in a way that honors a level of reflectivity and critical thinking which is required for ideas to seem legitimate, intelligent, careful, and respectful in contemporary (post-post-modern) dialogue?

How does one speak to and of such ideas in a way that honors their importance, usefulness, and deep meaning to oneself (and others), while yet acknowledging fallibility and remaining open to revision and critique? If one wants the important philosophical perspectives offered by Wilber and Cohen to find their way into the wider culture, how can one expect those not "in the choir" to take them seriously, if mystical truth claims come wrapped in the bundle? In trying to share such ideas, how do we avoid the extremes of speaking with unjustified confidence and arrogance; or feeling tongue-tied and inarticulate regarding why we believe; or sounding like naive devotees of the One Revealed Truth? We cannot expect to be taken seriously by those we wish to collaborate with or influence if we unreflectively conflate wisdom concerning values and the human condition with universal knowledge claims about the nature of external reality.⁴

My inquiry here is partly about the *individual's* struggle to open to mystical "truths" while keeping an appropriately critical and objective stance; and also about the *collective* project of knowledge building and sharing within a community that values self-reflective and complex multi-perspectival reasoning (as the integral community does). In this article I will explore the nature of metaphysical, and especially mystical, ideas; describe why they are problematic in a post-metaphysical philosophical era; and suggest some heuristics for working productively, reflectively, and ethically with such beliefs.

Why should we integralists reflect on and discuss the nature and limitations of mystical beliefs? Why should the modes of certainty, explanation, and justification used with such beliefs matter to us? First, more self-reflective and self-critical modes of reason are more agile and responsive to multiple perspectives and new information. Second self-reflective and self-critical reasoning is ethically self-emancipatory, in that it supports

³ From the audio called "Miracle of We Mysticism" from archives of the 2012 Enlightenment Conference, <http://www.theenlightenmentconference.com/fe/26088-patricia-albere-and-jeff-carreira>.

⁴ Though we can and should reflect upon the nuanced interrelationship between facts and values.

one's liberation from personal and cultural forms of bias and systematic distortion of thought (Habermas, 1971; Murray, 2011).

Third, Integralists are called to enact their principles and values, and, in taking a philosophical approach to important life questions, to perform self-reflective and "construct-aware" modes of communication. In "Embodied Realisms and Integral Ontologies: Toward Self-Critical Theories" (Murray, 2013), I offer what I call "The Idea Portability Principle:" that *understanding and dealing with the indeterminacy of ideas is more important the greater the distance between the world views or beliefs of interlocutors*. Encountering more divergent idea spaces calls us to open up even more, even though part of us may want to tighten down and hold on even more. In that article I focused on *ontological* beliefs, and here I focus more on *mystical* beliefs. From that article:

Why is [knowledge fallibility and] concept indeterminacy important for integral theorists and practitioners to consider and understand? As long as one is developing and using integral theories and models within the community of the enculturated (preaching to the choir), these issues seem inert. But when one tries to (a) cross disciplinary boundaries to interact with other communities, (b) apply these ideas and explain one's purposes to stakeholders, or (c) have a constructive dialogue with others who don't agree with some aspect of the theory or model—that is, when the integral world view needs to reach across and communicate with other world views or conceptual frames—then the ontological issues of [knowledge fallibility and] concept indeterminacy are critically important to understand (and ameliorate or cope with). And of course, such reaching out to, positively affecting, and being affected by individuals with other conceptual frames is the real end goal of integral theory and practice.

First, as we will explore in more depth, such highly abstract ideas are bound to a high level of indeterminacy that belies high confidence. Second, the principle of "adequatio" (Bateson, 1979) states that ideas can be productively explored only within a community of interlocutors (explorers) who share similar experiences (which, following Wilber's "Three Strands" model of knowledge validation (Wilber, 1997), might be arrived at after following similar actionable injunctions). Adequatio implies that those who do not have the capacity to experience (or perceive) such things can never really understand them, and are bound to misunderstand them if they try to take them on. But the community of the "enlightened" (i.e. those who have stable access to such experiences) is indeed small, and even for the community of those who have tasted these experiences, the question of "idea portability" is important.

Third, one could say that those claiming mystical beliefs in fact have a sophisticated, nuanced, and humble understanding of them and the hermeneutic issues of communicating the ideas, and that the certainty with which they offer mystical claims is a strategic move meant to inspire, convince, and motivate. But this raises ethical concerns of how actions (speech acts) reflect one's values in terms of transparency, integrity, self-reflection, and co-evolution.⁵ The mode of one's speech (the "illocutionary force") can convey more than its content and can leave a more lasting impression. At any rate, this

⁵ This is not a simple question. Speech always has a strategic component, and one is limited in the amount of nuance or transparency that is communicable to certain audiences.

article is targeted not to the Wilbers and Cohens of the world, but toward the rest of us who must interpret, digest, modify, and pass on ideas from leading thinkers. For us, understanding the sources of belief fallibility provides an important perspective. More generally I am interested in how the wisdom discovered in deep spiritual and contemplative pursuits can be offered to those with strong scientific or critical bents by appropriately (or strategically) framing the more metaphysical aspects of this wisdom.

Along similar lines, the differences between modern, pre-modern, and post-modern ideas is not so much about what one believes as how one believes, which, following Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action (1984), concerns the modes of explanation and justification that one uses (or is prepared to use) to back up ones' ideas. A developmental view of reasoning suggests that there are levels of sophistication in one's belief-holding.⁶ Integralists value the enactment and support of higher levels of self-reflective awareness and thus are called enact more developed modes of explanation and justification.

There is a tension here that mirrors a more general tension between spiritual, esoteric, new age, or mystical forms of belief, and scientific/rational forms of belief. "Modernist" perspectives on knowledge clash with both pre-modern and post-modern perspectives on knowledge (for there are both pre-modern and post-modern elements in mystical and metaphysical ideas). Examples of pre-modern and "conventional" modes of justification are: "its simply The Truth everyone knows it" or "the scripture (or authority figure) tells us so." Integralists are called to embrace and coordinate (transcend and include) all of these perspectives, rather than choose any one and reject the others.⁷

In this paper I will explain some sources of fallibility in mystical and metaphysical thinking. I will begin a conversation on how to honor, use, co-create, and promulgate mystical and metaphysical ideas that avoids the most serious implications of their fallibility. I will apply concepts explained in Murray (2010, 2012, 2013), including Embodied Realism, indeterminacy analysis, epistemic drives, and meaning-generative claims, specifically to the domain of mystical/metaphysical claims.

⁶ The lowest level is unreflective belief in which a person does not recognize the need to explain or justify ideas, and is incapable or unwilling to do so. At a "conventional" (or pre-modern) level beliefs are justified in terms of authority figures such as parents or religious leaders, sacred texts; or peer or cultural norms (either implicitly or explicitly); or an uncritical reference to personal experience. At a "modernist" or scientific level logical entailment, meritocracy and expertise, and the reliability of sources and instruments of observation come into play; and the nature of explanation and justification itself is considered. At a "post-modern" level the inherent fallibility, indeterminacy, and bias of all knowledge, belief, methodology, understanding, and communication take the foreground, often at the expense of any practical outcome. At a post-post-modern level, one understands the role, importance, and place of each of the prior modes, and reflectively moves between and integrates them, taking a pragmatic stance that works with but is not frozen by fallibility.

⁷ This reflects so-called "integral" modes of thought, also called, or including: post-post-modern, post-rational, "second tier," vision logic, and construct aware modes that embrace increasing levels of complexity, depth, nuance, discernment, and perspectives, while maintaining a grace and "simplicity beyond the complexity." As "post-rational" suggests, this level of development does not reject or violate logic or rationality, but acknowledges the limits of reason and the role of non-rational and non-symbolic thought.

Metaphysics and Mysticism

The metaphysical claims we are concerned about here tend to have a mystical bent. In "Mysticism and Logic," Bertrand Russell offers a useful description. He describes metaphysics as "the attempt to conceive the world as a whole by means of thought" (Russell, 1917, p. 6). He says that metaphysical claims are based on a mixture of mystical and scientific impulses, with some philosophers leaning definitively in one direction or other, while other philosophers who use both must struggle to reconcile these very different modalities. Russell says that "great philosophers" achieve an "intimate blending" of these modalities, a union which is "the highest eminence...that it is possible to achieve in the world of thought" (he gives Heraclitus and Plato as examples).

Scientific thinking is synonymous with logical/rational thought, and is usually grounded in sense experience. He describes several common characteristics of mystical knowledge, which I summarize as follows:

- Mysticism has "a certain intensity and depth of feeling in regard to what is believed about the universe." It has a sense of "certainty and revelation." Though it sometimes uses logic to justify beliefs, the claims seem to come from "a way of wisdom, sudden, penetrating, coercive, which is contrasted with the slow and fallible [process of scientific reasoning]."
- Mystics are attempting "an articulation upon the inarticulate experience gained in the moment of" what is called insight or intuition.
- There is a "sense of a mystery unveiled [and] revelation" of "a reality behind the world of appearances and utterly different from it." Truth and essence is found through profound introspective thought, not through sense experience.
- Mysticism can be expressed in deeply poignant, poetic, or metaphorical prose.
- It often plays with opposites and paradox, pointing beyond them to knowledge that resolves or harmonizes them (as in Heraclitus' "Good and ill are one.").
- It often deals with universals, infinities, essences, or foundational truths.
- There is a common "belief in unity, and its refusal to admit opposition or division anywhere"—that "reality is one and indivisible." There is also commonly a belief that reality, or ultimate reality, is beyond time and space. This relates to the above mentioned resolution of opposites, as past, present, and future are one.

These qualities are quite evident in the quotes above from Wilber, Cohen, and others. Russell argues that, though the merging of the mystical and the scientific is a great achievement, it is difficult to do well, and poses number of dangers.⁸ One danger is a tendency for the passion of the mystic to conflate "the good with the truly real" (i.e. conflate fact with value, which he claims Plato does all too often). Aristotle, for example said "earth and sun seek their proper path in the sky." Contemporary philosophers understand that fact and value have a complex relationship and that fact and value are never completely separate in any utterance, yet the injunction to be wary of how one's

⁸ I would add that, even if the mystic does it well, it is problematic for his/her followers to articulate this merging convincingly in a (post-) modern context. Again, this article is less about how an great mystic might communicate their insights, but about how a community of theory/practice, inspired by great thinkers, does so without needing to lapse into pre-modern or authoritarian language modes.

values influence what one claims as truth ever important. A second danger is that those who "are capable of absorption in an inward passion" can experience "the loss of contact with daily things [and] common objects." An ability to think free of enculturated beliefs is a key component of inspiration and creativity, but some can become trapped in a private world of ideas, drunk on an elixir of certainty, and become unable or uninterested in coordinating with other perspectives.

A variation of this problem is a focus on pure logic to the exclusion of experiential information or exterior perspectives. Russell mentions one strain of mystical thought (from Parmenides to Hegel and his disciples) that points to reality as having an essentially "uncreated, indestructible, unchanging, indivisible" nature that is beyond time and space. These attempt to make logical arguments for such ideas, for example "...for it is not possible for what is nothing to be." Russell says that "logic used in the defense of mysticism seems to be faulty as logic" and "[renders such] philosophers incapable of giving any account of the world of science and dialy life" (p. 15).

Russell, though considered one of the great Western philosophers, was writing a century ago before certain perspectives and differentiations were widely acknowledged in philosophy, including a fuller working out of the embodied nature of thought, the limitations of language described by the post-modernists, and the post-metaphysical perspective on truth developed by Habermas and others. I use Russell for his clear articulation of the elements of mystical thinking and his pointing to some of the problems of basing metaphysical truth claims on mystical thinking. Here we consider the metaphysical and mystical beliefs encountered in the integral community, and to propose some perspectives on how we can acknowledge the types of validity they entail, while not denying the fallibilities of metaphysical and mystical beliefs.

Russell actually reaches a similar conclusion to mine, though I will take a more contemporary (and post-post modern) path, and will offer more specific conceptual tools to approach the issues. In "Mysticism and Logic" Russell concludes that "while fully developed mysticism seems to me [a mistaken outcome of the emotions], I yet believe that by sufficient restraint, there is an element of wisdom to be learned by the mystical way of *feeling*, which does not seem to be attainable in any other manner [and which is] to be commended as an *attitude* toward life, not as a creed about the world" (p. 12; emphasis is mine).

Preliminaries: On Experience, Concepts, Skills, etc.

At this point I will introduce some terms and distinctions that I will use throughout the article. First, drawing on the points made in "On the Development of beliefs vs. capacities: Post-metaphysical implications of second tier skillfulness" (Murray, 2010), it is useful to differentiate **beliefs** vs. **skills/capacities**. This distinction is similar to the declarative or verbal knowledge (*know-that*) vs. procedural knowledge (*know-how*) distinction made in cognitive psychology. Developmental narratives within the integral community often conflate the development of *skills* (or capacities) with the development of *beliefs* (including values, knowledge, and worldviews). I suggest that describing and promoting human development be more oriented around what people do (and can do), i.e. the skills or capacities that they have, than around the ideas (models, theories, principles, facts) that they hold.

Skills include reasoning skills such as perspective taking, self-reflection skills, communication skills, and metacognitive reasoning, that progress developmentally. In contrast, a *belief* can become an attractor for individuals at many developmental (i.e. skill) levels, and the use and interpretation of a belief may depend on skill level. While mystical or spiritual *skills* are universally useful, spiritual *beliefs* can be biased or incorrect. Beliefs, but not skills, and have the potential of creating cultural barriers between in-group and out-group.

In general I believe that one's effort is better spent supporting higher level thinking/feeling/doing skills than in persuading and inculcating beliefs in others (such as the AQAL model, the existence of a non-dual reality, or the belief that "the universe and spirit is evolving through us"). Unfortunately skill building requires practice, application, and feedback cycles, and can be slow and effortful; which belief propagation is usually much easier. In this paper I discuss mystical and metaphysical *beliefs*, and the *skills* that are useful in holding and communicating such beliefs.⁹

The second, related, distinction is between two types of belief: explicit ("espoused") belief vs. implicit (enacted or "in use") belief (as introduced in Argyris, 1985). For example, one may believe in equal treatment of ethnic groups, and believe that one holds no ethnic prejudice, but in action may reveal unconscious beliefs to the contrary. In differentiating skill vs. belief above, I was referring only to espoused belief ("espoused theory" in Argyris). A "theory in use" is actually pointing to a skill set, capacity, or trait.

Next, it will be useful to differentiate several types of belief or knowledge as in the following figure (taken from Murray, 2013):

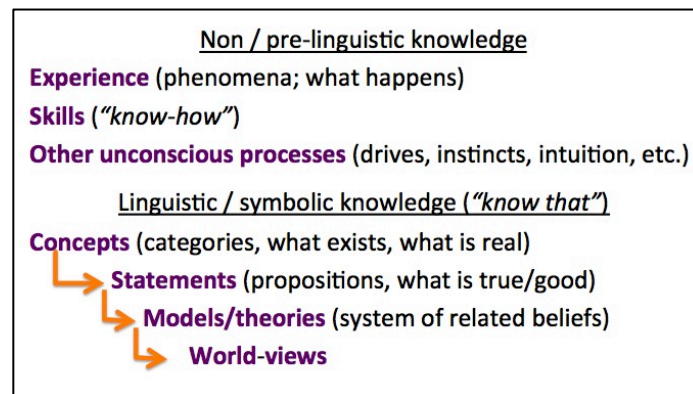


Figure 1: Categories of Knowledge/Belief

Non/pre-linguistic knowledge includes experience, skills, and other unconscious or implicit phenomena. These form the basis of the linguistic/symbolic types of knowledge in the lower part of the figure. Examples from this category include pre-verbal beliefs, e.g. to know that this is a tree or that I should take that job, before these ideas manifest as verbal or conscious thought. Included in this category are "intuitions" before

⁹ Like all such classification schemes, the skill/belief dichotomy is heuristic for the purpose of clarifying an argument—there are some phenomena that lie in a fuzzy area between these categories. "Knowledge" is usually interpreted as a type of certain or justified belief as it is in this paper, though the related term wisdom is more likely to include skills.

they are conceived in words and symbolic categories. The category is a rough heuristic kitchen-sink that points to all the mental processes *not* in the symbolic/linguistic categories. It includes both ideas and phenomena that we sense consciously, and a huge set of complex un- or pre-conscious mental processes.¹⁰

In discussing metaphysical and mystical beliefs and knowledge, it is important to distinguish experience, which can lead to a knowing that can not ever or easily be put into words, from verbal/explicit/linguistic claims (beliefs). Such beliefs can be articulated by one experiencing something, or, more distantly, can be learned from another who has experienced something. As mentioned in the discussion of Adequatio, a linguistically learned belief may not be a very accurate representation of the pre-verbal insight or experience within the one who originated it.

The lower part of Figure 1 illustrates verbal/explicit belief or knowledge. **Concepts** (constructs or categories) can be thought of as the words or terms, especially (but not only) nouns and verbs. They are the building blocks of language and verbal thought. They work to break the world into categories—conifer vs. not conifer; democratic vs. not democratic; subjective vs. not-subjective (or objective), etc.¹¹ **Statements** (propositions, claims, beliefs, etc.) are built up from concepts, and give relationships among them. Examples are "conifers are..." "all liberals should..." and "the cognitive line leads other lines." **Models and theories** are systems of related statements (including beliefs). Examples of models/theories include AQAL, Spiral Dynamics, Freud's theory of the unconscious, and Einstein's Theory of Relativity. I include "World View" in the diagram to point to even larger scale belief systems, composed of many models, theories, concepts, etc.

In our discussion of the sources of fallibility of knowledge, we will see that each level has different epistemic concerns and types of fallibility, and that succeeding layers accumulate the fallibilities and indeterminacies of layers they are built upon. In a sense, statements are claims about what is *true* while concepts regulate the ontological questions about what is *real* (both what is part of reality and what can be counted as a distinct object of consideration). Metaphysical and mystical statements are often ontological in nature, concerning the fundamental nature or essence of reality.

There is another important point about Experience vs. Knowledge in light of our discussion of mystical and metaphysical thinking. Though we treat an experience such as the *taste of chocolate* as mundane, and an experience such as a meditative state of witness-consciousness or non-dual oneness as sublime, they share many properties, along with all experiences. They are essentially indescribable to any who have not experienced anything similar. Something is lost in the movement from experience into language describing the experience. Concepts and abstractions built upon the taste of chocolate are not so different than concepts and abstractions build upon sublime spiritual experiences in that they are equally susceptible to indeterminacies. Both experiences are equally beyond words and in that sense mysterious. The main difference is that tasting chocolate is common whereas advanced meditative states are not common and thus knowledge

¹⁰ I will offer no detailed or scientific treatment for this vast category (though many exist; see Martin Heidegger; Jason Brown; Antonio Damasio), but name it to point out that all attempts to ground knowledge, belief, or mutual understanding draw upon this level.

¹¹ Example *experiences* include the taste of chocolate; a gut certainty; a meditative state; riding a bike; and what it is like being a parent or a Hindu in Algeria.

based on these experiences is esoteric. Most interlocutors have more intersubjective agreement about the taste of chocolate than the non-dual experience—i.e. there is less ambiguity about what one means when they speak of it. Because of our tendency to take abstractions too seriously (see misplaced concreteness below) it seems to us that that the concepts, ideas, and theories about meditative states are particularly sublime, esoteric, and special. However it seems more accurate to say that it is only the experience that is sublime and special.

The final useful distinction I will introduce is that of **abstract concepts**. George Lakoff's work on conceptual structures (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999) shows that the indeterminacy of *concepts* becomes progressively worse the more abstract they are, i.e. the further removed from concrete sensory experience and exemplars. Similarly, Chris Argyris says about the level of *statements*: "the likelihood of differences in the interpretations of different observers increases the higher one goes on the ladder of inference" (1995, p 58). Rungs along this "ladder" are inferential steps that can represent increases in abstraction, complexity, or contingency that lead one ever further from concrete facts. Esbjörn-Hargens (2010) uses the term "epistemological distance" (from Carolan, 2005) to describe differences along this ladder of inference or abstraction.

To summarize: the distinctions described above that will be useful in the rest of the paper include: beliefs vs. skills/capacities; explicit ("espoused", linguistic/symbolic) beliefs and knowledge vs. implicit (non/pre-linguistic, enacted, "in use") beliefs and knowledge; types of knowledge: concepts, statements, models/theories, and world-views; and abstract concepts and statements vs. (more or less) concrete concepts and statements.

Post-metaphysics and problems with metaphysical knowledge

Metaphysics concerns the fundamental, ultimate, or essential nature of reality. *Ontology* is often treated as a branch of metaphysics and focuses more on the level of concepts, i.e. on what is real, as opposed to what is true (i.e. statements). Ontology can also concern how we name and categorize aspects of reality.¹² *Mysticism* is a type of metaphysical pursuit that draws its conclusions from (purported) direct experience with (or communion with) ultimate reality, and draws conclusions using intuition, instinct, or insight. (As noted by Russell, some metaphysical inquiries are more based on abstract reason than experience, suggesting a type of rationalist/empiricist division of metaphysical methods.)

Metaphysical and mystical questions call out for answers from deep within the human psyche, and metaphysical and mystical themes often involve the most generalized, foundational, or essentialist claims, infused with the deepest sense of meaning. Yet philosophical arguments trying to establish the reality or nature of constructs such as time, space, causality, god, soul, ego, evolution, freedom, consciousness, being, or life

¹² This gives Ontology some overlap with Epistemology, or the study of knowledge. In modern thought it is widely acknowledged that the way a given group's vocabulary conceptually slices up the world has a significant impact on what is given salience and importance. The "ontological legislation" of giving things names, and thus tendering more reality to the objects they denote, whether it happens culturally (organically, bottom up), or through the power structures of institutions (top down sanctioning), partitions the buzzing booming chaos of reality into things of importance, those of lesser importance, and that which can barely be considered or known to exist.

have been famously thorny, convoluted, or inconclusive throughout history. I will note three areas of concern. Below, at the level of *statements*, I will discuss problems in making definitive truth claims on mystical topics, drawing on Habermas. In the next section I will discuss problems at the level of the underlying *concepts* used to build up metaphysical claims, drawing on research in cognitive psychology as argued by George Lakoff. Third, in the penultimate section, I will approach the issue at the level of *experience* and phenomenology and bring in the idea of epistemic drives. Finally, in the conclusion I will suggest one way to redeem the value held in mystical claims.

First, the abstract constructs (concepts, terms, or objects) that metaphysical claims are built up from are fundamentally problematic.¹³ A substantial segment of philosophical text labors to work out the hermeneutic issues of what others mean by their terms, and a surprisingly large proportion of arguments (in mundane conversation and in scholarly writing) hinge on categories, classification, definitions, and choice of exemplars (and see Lakatos, 1976). So many academic authors bemoan, in their introductory paragraphs, that one of the problems needing to be addressed in their field is insufficient agreement or excessive ambiguity about the meaning of the key terms of the field.¹⁴ The fallibility of metaphysical constructs such as those listed above is explained in part by their high level of abstraction, which, as mentioned, exacerbates indeterminacy. (Later we will cover Lakoff's Embodied Realism, which explains this indeterminacy of abstract ideas in terms of cognitive science.)

Second, Metaphysics is often about objects or phenomena that are said to exist both outside physical reality (the physical world of concrete objects, sensory experience, and causal mechanism) and independently outside the subjective (or intersubjective) realm of human thought forms (which Roy Bhaskar (1975) calls intransitive objects). Scholars have developed methods and conventions, including the scientific paradigm, for justifying and testing claims about physical reality. They have also developed methods and conventions, albeit less rigorous, for justifying and testing claims about subjective realities. But on what basis does one justify a metaphysical claim, one that points to a reality beyond both mind and matter?¹⁵

These and related problems with metaphysics lead historically to so-called post-metaphysical approaches. In *Integral Spirituality* Wilber (2006) says that "[arguably,] metaphysics...ended with Kant [who realized that] we do not perceive empirical objects in a completely realistic, pregiven fashion; but rather, structures of the knowing subject import various characteristics to the known object. [...] Metaphysics is then a broad name for the type of thinking that can't figure [out that] reality is not a perception, but a conception...thinking that falls prey to the myth of the given." (p. 231). In terms of philosophy, Wilber says that post-metaphysical approaches avoid "postulating fixed, eternal, [ahistorical,] independently existing archetypes" [or Platonic Forms] (p. 247).

¹³ Note that while the answers to core ontological questions seems ever problematic, the investigations into those questions are often fruitful.

¹⁴ Many areas of scholarly work are, as Michael Shermer puts it, "notoriously fraught with definitional disagreement" (Shermer, 2011a).

¹⁵ Here "matter" includes all real, concrete physical phenomena, including those that science has yet to discover, but are amenable to empirical investigation. Thus metaphysics is in neither the interior nor exterior categories in Wilber's AQAL model, and lies outside, and not somehow in between them.

Jürgen Habermas, the acknowledged expert on the topic of post-metaphysics, says that the main task of philosophy is not in establishing infallible truths, but in "rationally reconstructing the intuitive pre-theoretical knowledge of competently speaking, acting and judging subjects" (Habermas, 1992, pg. 38). Cooke (1994) summarizes Habermas' notion of post-metaphysical philosophical trends as having "replaced foundationalism with fallibilism" with regard to valid knowledge and how it may be achieved. The types of mystical claims by Wilber, Cohen, and others noted above chafe with the principles of a post-metaphysical stance because they veer into foundationalism and ultimate truths and speak with an illocutionary force of certainty that ignores fallibilism. Wilber and Cohen do appreciate and embody the principles of post-metaphysics in much of their work, but here we consider the many instances in which they do not.

Wilber, Cohen, and many of their followers, use terms such as infinity, timeless, omnipresent, primordial, non-dual, and universal in their claims about the essential nature of reality. It seems impossible to validate such claims using modern reasoning, especially to those who do not share the sublime experiences or states that inspired them. It seems they can only be justified in terms of special access to knowledge from authorities via "intuition." Such foundational statements are not beholden to principles of experience, logic, nor deliberative consensus (they are non-falsifiable in the Popperian sense (Popper, 1979)).

There is little problem with this for individual belief and discourse "within the choir," but again our concern is about broader discourse. According to Cooke (1994, p. ix) unexamined personal or cultural assumptions about the nature of reality can lead to "repressive metaphysical projections," and this is one reason to value truth claims that are framed to naturally invite open and critical discourse. The "epistemic drives" toward deep meaning and definitive knowledge about the essential or fundamental nature of reality can over-function to create biases, errors, and ethical problems, including, in more extreme cases, grandiosity, hegemony, elitism, and "proto-fascism."

The post-metaphysical pill can be a hard one to swallow. It can be difficult to relax the need for the certainty, essentialism, and purity often associated with metaphysical ideas. Here (as I have in more detail in Murray 2013) I argue that, though rigorous efforts must be made to clarify terms (concepts) and justify claims (statements), one must also acknowledge that indeterminacy in concepts, statements, and models/theories is, to some degree, natural and *unavoidable*, and a great deal of this fallibility must be "coped with" rather than solved or debated. In the post-post-modern milieu sources of fallibility should be made transparent and woven into discourse rather than ignored or marginalized.

The "post-metaphysical turn" in philosophy and culture can be understood as a product of an "epistemic turn" of increasing human understanding of the nature and limitations of human thought processes in the production of knowledge and belief, which is described next. It characterizes what is called a post-post-modern or Integral phase of embodied intellectual development (according to Habermas and Wilber, respectively).

A Brief History of Belief Fallibility

The history of human thought, knowledge, and belief (at least in the West) can be told as a story about increasing understanding of the nature and limitations of human thought (including reason, emotion, memory, intuition, etc.); and an increasing humility

in and decentering of our reasoning capacity. The "Age of Reason" (including the scientific revolution beginning during the Enlightenment) was motivated by an increased understanding of the influence of emotion and bias on belief and knowledge. Reason, as opposed to appeal to authority, passion, common knowledge, instinct, or intuitive insight, gained value and the methods of logic and science were further articulated (following their beginnings in the Classical period).

During this period there was an ongoing philosophical battle (which persists today in some corners of philosophy) between those who thought reason should be based on sense experience (roughly speaking, the Realists and Empiricists) vs. those who believed that logic and "pure reason" was paramount (roughly speaking, the Idealists and Rationalists). The former emphasized the fallibilities of thought (pointing to how reason can lead to contradictions and beliefs not borne out in reality), while the latter emphasized the fallibilities of sense data (pointing to how the senses can mislead and err). Kant was the first to reconcile (though incompletely) these disparities, by noting how both sensation and logic were indeed fallible, and how the underlying structures of thought systematically distorts and sets limits on both experience and reason.

It seemed for a moment that Reason could thus be saved. But philosophers from the Romantic tradition, valuing emotion and intuition, continued to point out how reason alone was an insufficient and impoverished tool for addressing the deeper issues of life and experience. They noted how scientific materialism had created various social ills. Their complaints, though seen as valid from a more integral perspective, were not persuasive because, unlike those to come, were more articulating a different set of values (or an aesthetic or ethic) than attacking reason itself in any new (or rational) way.

Then came Freud, who exposed the unconscious and its unsavory and unavoidable influences on reason and belief; and Darwin, who's work allowed one to see reason not as a divine or pure capacity, but as a practical and somewhat arbitrary set of cognitive tools cobbled together as animals evolved to meet the changing demands of survival and reproduction. Postmodernists (and post-structuralists) including Derrida and Foucault, continued the dethroning of reason by exquisitely showing (1) how it is deeply biased by invisible cultural norms and historical contingencies, and (2) how language and symbolic thought, the basis of knowledge production and reproduction, have grave indeterminacies and logical inconsistencies. The final shove in the rumble to decenter reason, and the one I focus on in this paper, comes from cognitive science. Rigorous empirical studies have illustrated deep fallibilities in memory, sensation, awareness/attention, and rationality, including a litany of "cognitive biases" that even the most advanced scholars, intellects, and spiritual adepts are not immune to.

This view of the progression of philosophical thought and the evolution in the epistemic sophistication of cultural ideas about the mind provides a context for our investigation of mystical and metaphysical beliefs.

So...what to do now—now that there can be no certainty in knowledge or belief? Thinkers in the Pragmatist tradition were working things out along side Freud, Darwin, Derrida, and Foucault (Habermas and Wilber draw from this tradition). First, we must note that, it is not acceptable or even possible to "revert" (or regress) to non-rational modalities of thought.¹⁶ We live in an age, as mentioned above, in which one is expected

¹⁶ In dealing with disagreements or contradicting metaphysical ideas it can be easy to back into a relativistic (or even so-called "non-dual") stance and claim that the truth is subjective, perspectival, unknowable, or

to offer reasonable justifications and explanations of beliefs.¹⁷ Thus we must face fallibility directly and reflect on and reason with and about it, rather than deny, ignore, or wallow in it. Pragmatists see little value in establishing how certain things are really true (or real or good), and are satisfied with investigating how and why they appear to be real to competent reasoners. They ask how the answers to such questions affect human inquiry and life conditions.

Embodied Knowledge and the Symbolic Impulse

Thinking and knowledge production are embodied activities. This might seem obvious to some, but according to Lakoff & Johnson its implications have gone unnoticed throughout the history of philosophical thought. In their explanation of "Embodied Realism" and their critique of most of the history of philosophical thought, they say:

Reason is not disembodied [but] arises from the nature of our brains, bodies, and bodily experience [such that] every structure of reason... comes from the details of our embodiment, [from] the same neural and cognitive mechanisms that allow us to perceive and move around. [...] Reason is not 'universal' in the transcendent sense; that is, it is not part of the structure of the universe. It is [however] a structure shared universally by all human beings... there is no Cartesian dualistic person with a mind separate and independent from a body. [...] Reason] is not radically free [and] we have no absolute freedom in Kant's sense... no full autonomy... the utilitarian [economically rational] person does not exist... phenomenological introspection alone [can not] discover everything there is to know about the mind... there is no... decentered subjective... poststructuralist person... for whom all meaning is arbitrary, totally relative, and purely historically contingent, unconstrained by body and brain. (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999 pp. 4-8.)

The embodied nature of mind leads to a number of sources of fallibility and indeterminacy (uncertainty, unknowing, imprecision, and systematic error) that directly impact mystical and metaphysical claims, and the definiteness with which they can be made. We increasingly understand how the mind acts as a lens or filter in its perception and understanding of reality. This understanding can lead to a humility and the "negative capability" to tolerate (and even enjoy) uncertainty, unknowing, ambiguity, and paradox; to support a knowing that there is much that we don't and will never know. This understanding can also, in a compatible way, allow for new levels of awareness, wisdom, and self-correction (a "positive capability"); as if knowing the shape of the lens or the color of the filter that one is looking through empowers one to make adjustments, or at

meaningless. This can serve the positive functions of supporting humility, opening to new ideas, or releasing attachment. But, it can also become a cavalier or defeatist move away from a topic or interlocutor to avoid the conflict—missing opportunities that a disagreement may tender. Similarly the postmodern deconstructivist approach, if taken too far (or actually, if not taken far enough) can lead to relativism, intellectual paralysis, and nihilism.

¹⁷ Given the dethroning of classical concepts of reason, this can include the post-rational methods of (1) bracketing claims and beliefs with an analysis of possible limitations and sources of indeterminacy (see "indeterminacy analysis" in Murray, 2012) and (2) explicitly referring to non-rational modalities such as sentiment or intuition in a way that is sophisticated and still "rational" (i.e. reasonable under contemporary norms for sound argument).

least to include useful information about possible sources of error and uncertainty along with one's claims. Here I will mention some of these sources of fallibility and indeterminacy that allow for a more sophisticated treatment of metaphysical and mystical beliefs (and all beliefs).

Cognitive science is documenting intrinsic sources of error at all of the levels mentioned in Table 1. At the level of *experience* (and perception), studies of sensory illusions and biases in memory expose fallibilities at the pre-linguistic level (Travis & Aronson 2007; Wilson 2002). We will skip the level of *concepts* here because we focus on it in detail below. At the level of *statements*, studies of "bounded rationality" and cognitive biases show how peoples' conclusions and inferences are prone to a large number of systematic errors and biases (for example, "loss aversion" and "confirmation bias") such that our supposedly rational and logical thought processes are neither (see Kahneman et al., 1982; Gigerenzer & Selten, 1999; Gladwell, 2002; Meyers, 2002; Sunstein, 2002; Shermer, 2011b). For work specifically addressing how emotions influence reason see Goleman (1995), Damasio (1999), Matthews et al. (2002), and Fischer et al. (1990). There are also analyses of fallibility at the level of *models and theories* (e.g. Kuhn's (1970) study of paradigm shifts in science, and Latour's (1993) ethnographic studies of the scientific method).

All of this scholarship shows that no thought process or speech act is purely "rational" in the classic sense and that unconscious and emotional processes introduce systematic distortions into reason and decision-making. Importantly, research shows that academics, experts, highly intelligent people, and, one must assume, philosophers and mystics, are not at all immune from these fallibilities. (Most of the biases can be compensated for in some way—in fact this is one purpose of the scientific method—but their influence cannot be eliminated completely.)

Fallibility at the level of *concepts* is particularly important to an understanding of the nature of metaphysical and mystical beliefs. Researchers have shown how the nature of concepts differs from what we normally assume about them. Conceptual categories split the world into parts, simultaneously joining parts into categories. When we employ the knife or the glue of the concept, important truths or nuance can get left on the cutting room floor, so to speak, and troublesome grey areas can be ignored. The mind (or we could say, the symbolic nature of language) has a tendency to treat conceptual boundaries as black-and-white.¹⁸ As Bateson says: "[the] world begins by making splits, then drawing boundaries, then solidifying these boundaries. Then we fool ourselves into believing what we have made ourselves see. Solidifying boundaries is very comfortable, because it allows us to deny our experience... We miss the whole system" (1979).¹⁹ We treat conceptual categories as if they were well-defined boxes that things either fall within or outside of—but this is almost never the case. Research reveals concepts to be "graded," meaning they have fuzzy boundaries and, especially for the abstract concepts

¹⁸ In part such categorization is the mind's attempt to establish a comfortable condition of certainty, and avoid dissonance-producing states of uncertainty and ambiguity. Definitive categorizing enables definitive decision and action. In evolutionary terms, quick and certain categorization means catching the prey or avoiding the predator.

¹⁹ This "symbolic impulse" compels us to, for example in integral studies, to classify some phenomena as a state phenomena vs. a stage phenomena, or neither, but not both; or to classify a performance as being on the cognitive line or the ego line or some other specific line, when the phenomena in question may more accurately be said to exist between categories, outside of them, or in more than one category.

brought up in metaphysics, admit to a "metaphorical pluralism" in which different metaphorical senses make up the full understanding of a concept (Mervis & Rosch 1981; Lakoff & Johnson 1999). The metaphors that underlie a particular concept can be incompatible or contradictory and yet we unreflectively jump from one metaphorical basis to another.

Lakoff and Johnson show how philosophical treatments of time, causality, truth, consciousness, ethics, freedom, etc., are radically indeterminate because at every turn the metaphorical sense of the word is swapped out to fit the argument being made. The *symbolic impulse* is thus a tendency of thought that biases one to perceive or interpret phenomena as conceptually simple and determinate in structure, despite the graded and pluralistic nature of concepts. The symbolic impulse is exacerbated in contexts that involve emotional charge, importance, or ego attachment, and in any context that "downshifts" cognition to more primitive processing.

These conclusions from cognitive science illustrate the "fallibility" of knowledge that underlies the post-metaphysical stance and problematizes metaphysical claims.

Epistemic Drives

The symbolic impulse to treat the conceptual boundaries between abstract concepts as simple and definitive is one of a number of tendencies that I will call "epistemic drives"—natural and universal tendencies of thought that influence what we think is true or real (see Murray, 2013). The term *drives* calls attention to the embodied nature of reason. These drives are unconscious and pervasive, yet manageable. As with biological drives to eat (or over-eat), sexually flirt, become angry when challenged, etc., our lives are improved when we reach a stage of development in which we are aware of and can control or compensate for epistemic drives (i.e., when subject becomes object for any given drive). As with biological drives, we never completely outgrow or eliminate epistemic drives; since they can raise their heads unexpectedly in many contexts, calling for an ongoing awareness and cognitive management.

As shown with misplaced concreteness, epistemic drives are like emotional drives in that we become aware of and learn to manage them at ever deeper and more nuanced levels, but meanwhile they keep showing up in ever subtler ways, so the developmental learning process continues indefinitely. In addition to the *symbolic impulse*, I will describe other epistemic drives below that bear directly on metaphysical and mystical beliefs (note that these drives are interrelated, not distinct.) (See more on epistemic drives in Murray, 2012.)

Misplaced concreteness is the tendency to treat an abstract concept as if it had physical reality (Whitehead, 1929). It is a consequence of the fact that the development of the human mind has its foundation in concrete physical interactions and needs (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Clark 1996; Varela et al. 1993). There seems to be something deep and strong within us that wants to treat abstract concepts (e.g. democracy, African-American, god, ego, compassion, spirit, evolution, Eros, subjectivity) as if they somehow really existed in the way that we perceive them, or that they represent a-priori categories in nature. We then make great efforts (unconsciously) to adjust our perceptions to our constitutes, rather than the other way around. Misplaced concreteness underlies the "myth of the given" and the "map/territory confusion" often mentioned by Wilber.

Metaphysical thinking is also infused with epistemic drives such as the *desire for certainty* (and the avoidance of uncertainty and cognitive dissonance) and the ubiquitous *need to make meaning* from our experiences and information. We can imagine an interior ecology of epistemic drives at work, competing for attention and keeping each other in check (as do classical "drives" for things such as hunger, status, comfort, reproduction, territoriality, etc.). We can assume in others, but more importantly feel within ourselves, additional drives toward oneness, completeness, wholeness, generality, essentiality, permanence, predictability, perfection, and purity at work in mystical claims such as those mentioned above. We can also identify opposing drives toward multiplicity, partiality, concreteness, change, specificity, and differentiation, that operate within the overall "ecology" (which philosophers such as Latour and Derrida emphasize). However, it is the former list that seems most energized in metaphysical claims.

Russell, in his appreciative critique of mystical beliefs, said that they were more about "feelings" and "attitudes" than "creeds" or truths. Some of these feelings are related to "drives" that can be sometimes useful and sometimes biasing or even have addictive qualities. We can identify these drives or urges working within us at the level of felt experience. There is a sense of ease, certainty, and mastery when we can ignore details and differences and trust a sturdy generality. We get a certain satisfaction from ordering things or collecting them into tidy groups. There is a sense of elegance and wholeness when we can embrace many things into a circle of unity, and a sense of power in understanding the essential or universal. The inquisitive and meaning-hungry mind wants to know the causal root, foundation, source, or origin of things. Acknowledging the presence of such drives does not invalidate any particular claim, but as with the star-struck lover describing the beauty of her beloved, or the known hypochondriac self-diagnosing a disease, one must take possible biases into serious account when evaluating claims. We can do the same for beliefs we hold and drives we sense within ourselves.

Conclusion: On Meaning Generative Claims

In a sense the history of metaphysical thought can be told in terms a succession of scientific understandings replacing metaphysical concepts (examples abound in physics and biology). In this interpretation metaphysics can be seen as man's attempt to make meaning of that which cannot be observed or measured. We have an extremely strong need (epistemic drive) to construct reasonable explanations for the important phenomena we observe. Since there will always be phenomena beyond our current comprehension, man will continue to adopt metaphysical beliefs, even in a so-called post-metaphysical milieu. For example, physicists have created the place-holder concepts of "dark matter" and "dark energy" in attempts to make meaning of cosmic phenomena we don't yet understand. Even the terms "life" and "disease" may someday be seen as quaint metaphysical constructs holding place for a future deeper understanding.

In the case of mystical insights into ideas that are about consciousness, subjectivity, life force, spirituality, death, and other ideas that are more about the human condition than the inanimate physical world, we may never find adequate non-metaphysical explanations. And assuming that esoteric experiences like "spiritual awakening" remain rare, we will continue to grapple with how to convey the insights gleaned in such states to others. Some mystical insights touch on the most meaningful and significant questions (life, love, death, free will, morality, etc.—what Wilber calls

"matters of ultimate concern"), and the general hunger for answers and meaning in these areas is deep.

Though metaphysical ideas will persist, we can still strive to avoid degrees or styles of certainty, bias, or foundationalism that are outmoded by an emerging, post-metaphysical, post-post-modern ("integral") understanding of the fallibility of knowledge and the embodied nature of reason. This will make important insights less easy to dismiss and ignore. In the post-metaphysical milieu we can no longer allow for the possibility of *direct* contact with "reality" or "true knowledge" by some privileged few. We can, however, allow for rare experiences of, or perspectives on, unusual or "deeper" aspects of reality that are acquired through esoteric practices or through extraordinary skill or capability. We can allow that some have greater ability to minimize bias and distortion in perception and reason, and thus can be trusted to understand reality more clearly (though none are immune from the many sources of bias and distortion inherent in embodied thought). From the vantage of many who study Perennial Philosophy and spirituality it would appear that spiritual adepts (and other great thinkers of history) are experiencing similar phenomena and having similar insights. They seem to share the taste of that "chocolate" that is the "one taste" that Wilber refers to. But one must give primacy to the experience over its (symbolic) interpretation. The metaphysical essences and phenomena, and the conceptual models built using them, are of course imperfect maps, still useful to guide new experience and understanding.

Integralists often note that "the map is not the territory" and then go on to explain how we need good maps to navigate our complex world. This admission of fallibility or indeterminacy is too often a closure to preempt common concerns, and to rarely an opening into deeper questions. Here I have explored embodiment and indeterminacy so that one can more deeply and precisely exactly understand *how* (and why) maps and the abstract objects they are built up from differ from the territory. Thus we can be more skillful makers and users of such maps and more post-metaphysical consumers of mystical knowledge. In the above I offer perspectives that argue for both the value and the fallibility of mystical statements. However, I have yet to describe ways to understand and communicate their value in a post-metaphysical milieu.

To that end, as a final brief topic I suggest that "meaning generativity" can be used as a type of validity mode where scientific/evidential modes of validation do not apply (see Murray, 2012).²⁰ Most metaphysical and mystical claims are not so much arguably true (*nor* ethically right nor aesthetically beautiful) as they are highly meaning-generative for an individual or group. That is, they have significant explanatory force or ability to generate meaning. The concept of meaning-generativity can help one assert and promote metaphysical and mystical ideas with sufficient forcefulness while still communicating a post-metaphysical or reflective stance that acknowledges the fallibility of ideas.

For example, I happen to "believe in" reincarnation, though I have no direct empirical experience supporting it. Reincarnation counteracts existential despair, is held by people I admire, and coordinates well with a number of other beliefs and intuitions I have. I do not expect to or need to convince anyone that reincarnation is real, nor justify

²⁰ In Murray 2012a I describe how meaning-generative claims differ from and complement the classical partition of validity claims into truth, ethical, and aesthetic claims; each of which calls for a different form of justification and explanation.

how it works. The same approach can be taken with the teleological "evolutionary spirituality" perspective on human development promulgated by Wilber and Cohen, i.e. that "the universe is evolving—through us." This Eros-based belief has strong meaning-generative power for many. But to have to "prove" it in any logical way is impossible and beside the point. It is not merely a moral/ethical/normative claim, it has the flavor of a truth claim.

The suggestion here is not to de-valorize rigor but to provide a valid alternative justification mode that allows us to differentiate when we need scientific rigor (or modernist forms of rationality) and when we don't. In this way one is not forced to abandon meaning-rich metaphysical insights just because they can not be argued for in classically rational ways. Explicitly opening up meaning-generativity as a way to justify metaphysical beliefs may help ease the important dialogues that need to take place between the scientifically-oriented and the spiritually/mystically-oriented (individuals and parts of ourselves). It removes the hard claims about reality that repel the scientific minded and gives them a palatable frame for considering the wisdom available in metaphysical beliefs.

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