Curricular Clouds of (Un)Knowing:
Learning About Mystery From the Mystic Traditions

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Abstract:

Curricula have traditionally been concerned with proposing intentions and expectations for the teaching and learning of knowledge. What if curriculum conversed not only with the known, but the unknowable—with mystery? In this work, I investigate mystic traditions to learn about mystery. I come to a characterization of mystery as the dialectical condition of knowing while at the same time *not* knowing. Mystery is also an epithet of ultimate reality—a wholeness, which, all the while not completely knowable, nonetheless, attracts the utmost attention in its possibility for wisdom and meaningful transformation. The mystic traditions remind that mystery is an ineluctable feature of any metaphysical theory that aims to explicate ultimate reality, and because of this, belief is an inherent aspect of any metaphysical understanding. Furthermore, because metaphysical belief underpins our understanding of knowledge, a curriculum that invites mystery invites exploring, discerning and acting on existential beliefs. The mystic traditions proffer a way to approach mystery, namely the contemplative pathway, which can be engaged as both epistemological model and method. Mystic traditions also demonstrate how to deal with paradox, one of which is engaging reason to prepare for revelation. Thus, I conclude my essay with a poetic inquiry.

Keywords: mystery; philosophy of education; phenomenology; poetic inquiry; creational dialectics; curriculum; metaphysics; epistemology; truth and unknowability; ultimate reality; mystic traditions; contemplative pathway; illumination; aporia; paradox; cataphatic; apophatic

Nuages curriculaires de (l'in)connaissance : Faire connaissance avec le mystère à partir des traditions mystiques

Résumé :

Les programmes d'études se sont traditionnellement attachés à formuler des intentions et des attentes relatives à l'enseignement et l'apprentissage du savoir. Mais que se passerait-il si le curriculum entrait en dialogue non seulement avec ce qui est connu, mais également avec l'inconnaissable – avec le mystère ? Dans cette étude j'explore les traditions mystiques afin d'appréhender le mystère. J'en viens à le caractériser comme une condition dialectique consistant à savoir, tout en ne sachant pas. Le mystère constitue également une désignation de la réalité ultime – une totalité qui, bien qu'elle ne soit pas complètement connaissable, suscite néanmoins une attention soutenue en raison de son potentiel à offrir la sagesse et la transformation. Les traditions mystiques rappellent que le mystère est une caractéristique inévitable de toute entreprise métaphysique visant à expliquer la réalité ultime, et pour cette raison, la croyance est un aspect intrinsèque à toute compréhension métaphysique. De plus, dans la mesure où la croyance métaphysique sous-tend nos systèmes de connaissances, un curriculum qui s'ouvre au mystère invite à explorer, discerner et mettre en œuvre des croyances existentielles. Les traditions mystiques proposent une modalité d'approche du mystère, soit la voie contemplative, qui peut être envisagée à la fois comme modèle épistémologique et comme méthode. Elles offrent également des outils pour appréhender le paradoxe, notamment en faisant appel à la raison pour se préparer à la révélation. Ainsi, je conclus cet essai par une enquête poétique.

Mots clés : mystère; philosophie de l'éducation; phénoménologie; enquête poétique; dialectique de la création; curriculum; métaphysique; épistémologie; vérité et inconnaissabilité; réalité ultime; traditions mystiques; sentier contemplatif; éclairage; aporie; paradoxe; cataphatique; apophatique

We are the flesh that fast decays,
but first we sing the dawn,
and chase the day and sell our wings,
and tell our tales all darkness long.

—Holly Tsun Haggarty

But now you will ask me, "How am I to think of God . . . ?" and I cannot answer you except to say, "I do not know!" For with this question you have brought me into the same darkness, the same cloud of unknowing where I want you to be!
    —*Cloud of Unknowing* unknown author's translation of unknown author Dionysius' *Mystical Theology* (Wolters, 1978, pp. 217-218)

O dark of night, my guide!
night dearer than anything all your dawns discover!
O night drawing side to side
the loved and lover—
she that the lover loves, lost in the lover!

—John of the Cross (1577/1979[1])

Scope of the Work: Questions and Methodology

I begin with a question: What if curriculum looked not only at the known, but reached to the unknown, to mystery?

In this essay, I address the themes of mystery, world and curriculum. I wonder what mystery is and how grappling with it might further the comprehension of self, other and world—of Being and Reality. To the same end, I wonder how the acknowledgement of mystery might affect how a curriculum is theorized, and how a curriculum might invite and grapple with mystery.

But can we ever explicate an essence of mystery? We can try, and in this essay, I explore what we might learn about mystery from the mystic traditions and how such gleanings might be of benefit in the theorization of curriculum. What I mean by *mystic* traditions are those long-standing customs of beliefs that are marked by a grappling with metaphysical mystery—and which, for their profundity in doing so, are often referred to as wisdom traditions (e.g., Grace, 2011b, p. 114; Gunnlaugson et al., 2014, pp. 5-6). Though not solely defined by mysticism, all the major world religions include *mysticism*, by which is meant not only the belief in transcendent metaphysical mysteries, but that these mysteries may be accessed and experienced. Note that in this work I focus on Western

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[1] This is an excerpt from a book of the poetry of John of the Cross, with translations by John Frederick Nims. I appreciate that his interpretations maintain the lyricism of the source. Here is the original Spanish: "O noche que guiaste / o noche amable mas que el aluorada / o noche que juntaste / amado con amada / Amada en el amado transformada" (see pp. 20-21).

expressions of mysticism and curriculum. I do so, not out of an attitude of exclusivity, but because it is the tradition I am situated in, and therefore most comfortable to describe. Nonetheless, I consider myself a novitiate, even of this tradition in which I dwell. Furthermore, because a comparative approach can be fruitfully synoptic or dialectic, I do make references to other expressions, deferring to the sources providing the information.

Methodologically, my inquiry is one of *creational dialectics*, an arts-integrating research approach that connects to and adapts a framework of hermeneutic phenomenology, and which may be summarized as *interpreting essence* through *artful dialectic* (Tsun Haggarty, 2021, 2024). As an inquiry practice, creational dialectics is philosophically and poetically focused. It is especially useful in examining existential issues through contrasting or contradictory positions, which it does by observation, description and analysis, coupled with intuitive art practices, to interpret essential features of a phenomenon. In this work, I look both deeply and wonderingly at a phenomenon that we humanly experience, that of existential mystery. This is not a study that looks for evidential certainty. Rather, as with all hermeneutical approaches, I ask enduring questions anew, re-engage prior voices and texts, offering my interpretations to the historical and ongoing dialogue of Western philosophy and of the mystic tradition. A dialectic, hermeneutic phenomenology is a particularly apt methodology for a study of mystery through the mystic tradition, as much prior work of mystic theologians and philosophers of metaphysics also follow such approaches (as will be seen at various moments in this work).

Curriculum, Knowledge and Mystery: Initial Horizons

Here's a traditional Western definition of curriculum, which I've compiled from several sources (including Eisner, 1994b, pp. 56-83; Flinders & Thorton, 2022; McKernan, 2007, pp. 3-36; and the Oxford English Dictionary [OED], 2023a):

> Curriculum refers to a course of study, often within a specific academic program, completion of which is required for matriculation, and which includes as objectives and outcomes the mastery of a domain of knowledge, the acquisition of cognitive or practical skills, and/or the demonstration of desired values or attitudes.

The key element of this definition is *knowledge*, the teaching, learning, acquisition and demonstration thereof, which, of course, prompts the question: What is knowledge?

In response to that, I delve into our Western tradition, to ancient Greek philosophy, from where many of our philosophical notions (and terms of reference) derive. Firstly, I recall that Plato famously proposes knowledge as *justified true belief* (Plato, 380-360 BCE[2]/1997c, *passim*). And I recall that this notion is followed up by Aristotle, whose works on logic (collected as *The Organon*) explicate how a proposition (a statement of belief) may be justified. Aristotle offers as elemental his *principle of non-contradiction*, that a thing cannot be *both* true and false, it may only be *either* true or false: "To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that

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[2] When dates are approximate, as with the writings of ancient philosophers, this is indicated in the reference list, but for brevity the "circa", or "ca.", designation is not included in the citations. Also, note that *passim*, from the Latin word *pandere*, meaning "to scatter", is used to indicate that the element cited occurs throughout a text.

it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true" (Aristotle, 350 BCE/1908, *Metaphysics*, Book 4/Gamma, Section 7*).*

The works of Plato and Aristotle further expound their concepts of knowledge. For example, Plato proposes degrees, or realms, of knowledge, using an image of a divided line to describe a hierarchy that ascends from fantastical conjecture to conviction of belief to discursive reasoning to intuitive, unmediated apprehension of universal truth (or *noesis*; Plato, 380-360 BCE/1997b, *Republic*, Book VI, Sections 509-511; see Grondin, 2012, pp. 35-38[3]). And Aristotle categorizes knowledge into three types: *episteme*, apodictic knowledge; *techne*, proficiency of skill; and *phronesis*, judgement (Aristotle, 350 BCE/1925, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI). Notice how these three types of knowledge parallel the three aspects in the definition of curriculum, which refers to content, capabilities and values.

In their writings, both philosophers extend their reflections on knowledge beyond an analysis of the requisites for truth to considerations of ways, realms, sources and purposes of knowledge. And as it was, so it continues to be. Questions asked by Plato and Aristotle about the nature of truth, and about knowledge and knowing, continue to be asked, and continue to guide systems of education. For, in as much as curricula are routes to knowledge, they are guided by theories regarding knowledge. What can we know of reality? How do we know something is true? How do we know what is good or right? Responses to such questions vary, and with them, expectations of curriculum.

Knowledge may be considered, *inter alia*, as something universal, ideational, perceptual, immanent, individual, relative, imposed. Compiled from Eisner (1994a) and McKernan (2007), here is a list of some dominant conceptions of knowledge and how they have been taken up into curricular models:

- Rationalism asserts that knowledge comes via reason, a formulation which links to a scholastic curriculum focused on the development of critical thinking, of the ability to debate one's point or position.
- Empirical positivism asseverates that knowledge is evidenced by correspondence to physical reality, a conception which links to a behaviourist curriculum, focused on pre-set objectives, which are evaluated by measurable observations.
- Constructivism construes knowledge as constructed, individually and interactively, and links to a pluralist curriculum focused on discursive experiences.
- Constructionism, on the other hand, avows that knowledge is an effect of power, and links to a critical curriculum focused on correcting social oppressions and imbalances.

Epistemological and curricular theorists work diligently to figure out what knowledge is and how we might encourage knowing. Yet, every theory of knowledge has lacunae, of opacity, oblivion, neglect. What should a curriculum do about that which we do not know—and moreover, about that of which we can never be certain? There are many unknowns in life. Why was I born? When will I die? Why is there something rather than nothing? What am I? You? We all have questions which we cannot

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[3] In citations, I show my hermeneutic process in that I often follow the citing of a "primary" source with exegetical sources thereof, though in all cases they are considered interpretations.

unassailably answer. How might a curriculum deal with such obscurities or perplexities? And what would be the value of doing so?

Why Study Mystery?

To me, the most obvious reason for integrating mystery into curriculum is to acknowledge its ineluctability. Whether in developing or studying curriculum, I think it is important to avoid pretending that certainty is certain (indisputability assured), to avoid reducing education to only that which is ascertained, and to find ways to deal productively with mystery.

What is *mystery*? I reject a notion of mystery as a puzzle not yet solved. I reject mystery as knowledge deliberately withheld, as with sects of secrecy. I also reject the characterisation of mystery as something obtuse or esoteric or irrational or idiosyncratic. Rather, I heuristically suggest mystery as a condition of knowing and at the same time *not* knowing, a designation I continue working on through this essay. Furthermore, I suggest that mystery of most particular interest to curriculum is existential in scope.[4]

I propose that curricular theorists or practitioners wanting to incorporate mystery into their curricular model or practice could learn much from the mystic practices of various traditions that have long and productively grappled with mystery. Furthermore, I see that Western mystic understandings have been forgotten or ignored in contemporary curriculum studies, which have tended to portray traditional Western thought as a dualist, positivist (and antiquated) enterprise.

The Western Mystic Tradition, Historical Sources

This section offers a cursory overview of some significant mystic figures in the Western tradition, whose life, ideas and examples may contribute to the conceptualization of a (Western) curriculum that would acknowledge and invite mystery. (Non-Western sources are described as they relate to discussions in this essay.)

Although the Western mystic tradition is largely associated with Christianity, it is important to note that it precedes Christianity and processes from it. Mysticism in Judaism courses into that of Christianity, as the Hebrew Bible (the *Tanakh*) carries over into the Old Testament of the Christian Bible. In its Hellenist outreach, Christianity engaged constructs of Platonic thought to help explicate its theology. The Western mystic tradition has influenced and continues to influence modern philosophers (as discussed further along in this essay).

Jewish scriptures and the Old Testament offer numerous stories of the revelation of God, but the most repeated and impressive are those of Moses. Moses has three mystic encounters with God, the first time in a burning bush in the desert (Exodus 3:1-12), the second and third times at the top of Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:9-18; Exodus 34:1-9, 27-35), where God is revealed through fire and cloud and voice. In these encounters, Moses learns of the name, nature and plan of God—of Sacred Reality (Miller, 2010; Poirier, 2004). In Christianity, the person Jesus is revealed as the *Son* of God. This occurs

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[4] For example, *that* humans cannot see the infra-red or ultra-violet is an incidental mystery; *why* our perceptions are limited is an existential mystery.

first in public, after his baptism by his cousin John, an event described mystically in the synoptic gospels (Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22), with the spirit of God descending like a dove upon Jesus and the voice of God addressing him as Son (Bockmuehl, 2012). A subsequent and monumental revelation occurs at the event of his transfiguration on the mount, when, according to the synoptic gospels (Matthew 17:1-9, Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36), Jesus appears before a trio of disciples (Peter, James and John), shining with radiant light as again the voice of God addresses him as Son (Nicolaides, 2020).

How is Plato, a fourth century BCE Athenian, conceived as a mystic? I note that while Plato the dialectician is keen on parsing the reasoned evidence of statements made by his interlocutors, what they discuss concerns transcendental aspects of humanity, such as virtue, love, justice, happiness and knowledge. Plato places his understanding in an ontological framework—for him, questions of knowing always recur to questions of being (Grondin, 2012). Plato's onto-epistemology is probably best laid out in the *Republic*, in his cave allegory and exegesis thereof (Plato, 380-360 BCE/1997b, *Republic,* Book VII, Sections 516-517; Wood, 1990, pp. 135-138).

In this allegory, Plato analogizes the sensible world as a dark cave in which its human dwellers are chained—imprisoned in an obscurity of knowledge. The only light comes from a fire, which casts shadows of their bodies on the cave walls. Perceptions of these shadows provide only incomplete knowledge of their world. Complete knowledge can only come from leaving the cave, where the sun makes visible the world beyond. The images in Plato's allegory—cave, fire, shadow, sun—can be interpreted analogically as representing Plato's degrees of knowledge. The allegory also points to the ultimate reality of a transcendent source, which Plato refers to as the Good, and which he describes as First Principle (*Logos*), that is, an eternal, universal and fundamental realm of being, reason and worth, the features of which the intelligible, sensible world partakes (Plato, 380-360 BCE/1997b, *Republic,* Book VI, Sections 507-508; Grondin, 2012, pp. 38-45; Wood, 1990, pp. 140-146).

In Plato's onto-epistemology, the Good is the arch-*Idea* (or *Form*) that draws all other Ideas/Forms into it in a unifying whole (Plato, 380-360 BCE/1997b, *Republic,* Book VI, Sections 507-508; Hampton, 1989). This is the mystic kernel in Plato's thought, which prompted the uptake of his thought by other mystics, and notably by the third century philosopher Plotinus, considered the founder of Neoplatonism (Grondin, 2012, pp. 67-72; Kenney, 2016). While Plato's conception of the Good is unifying (by way of participation), it is not causative. Plotinus, however, elaborates a complex metaphysical system oriented around a transcendent Oneness from which reality emanates.

This Neoplatonism of causative procession was helpful to the theological expositions of early Christian leaders, such as fourth century Augustine of Hippo and sixth century Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (henceforth cited as Dionysius[5]). Augustine follows Plotinus' description of the soul aching for reunion with the transcendental One, the source of being, but while Plotinus' One is an abstraction beyond being, Augustine accepts (and evangelizes) Christianity's naming of Oneness as

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[5] Where some scholars have seen this Dionysius as imposter, labelling him "Pseudo-Dionysius" for his use of a pseudonym—in fact an allonym, naming himself and his interlocutor after personages from the epistles of Saint Paul—what I see is the effective rhetorical use of a fictional narrator and interlocutors and deliberate self-effacing.

Divine Being, God, incarnated in Jesus, paralleling the embodiment of the human soul (Augustine, 400/2008; Kenney, 2005, 2016). Dionysius engages not only Plato's metaphysics, but also his dialectical method. I also see that Plato's commitment to dialectic engagement of contraries, even if they lead to aporia, is taken yet further in Dionysius (as discussed further along in this essay).

In the early Christian tradition, Plato is the philosopher most used in theology. Perhaps one reason for this is the loss of much of the writings of his compatriot Aristotle, which returned to Europe by way of 13th century Arab philosophers. Aristotle's empirical and rational perspective was a major influence on Thomas Aquinas, who also interacted with the metaphysical thoughts of Plato, Augustine, Dionysius and Avicenna (Grondin, 2012, pp. 95-101; Wood, 1990, pp. 177-204). Aquinas synthesized a dense and systemic theology, the *Summa Theologiae*, as he philosophized the nature of human and divine being. Notably, after the Arab philosopher Avicenna, Aquinas distinguishes essence and existence, the *what* and the *that* of being, but theologizes that while, with humanity, essence precedes existence, with God, they are unified[6] (Aquinas, 1254/1968; Grondin, 2012, pp. 95-101; Wood, 1990, pp. 177-204). Because of his work as a systematic theologian, Aquinas is not always appreciated as a mystic. But ultimately, his theology is based on a mystic sense of God and the mystic belief of creation as the real-ization of the thought/Word of God (Pieper, 1940/1963, p. 51).

While Plato and Aristotle were helpful in engaging reason to explicate the transcendental and, as such, mystic theology of Christianity, these Greek patriarchs are certainly not the only sources of mysticism in the Western tradition. As mentioned already, a Jewish mystic tradition predated and processed into the Christian mystic tradition. The earliest Christian mystics—besides Jesus and his relations—were the third century desert monks, such as Antony of the Desert, who withdrew to the arid wilderness to fast and pray. Here, I see an (unintentionally ironic) upset of Platonic thought—in this case, caves are entered in order to withdraw from the sensible world, as a means of access to the transcendent (Merton, 1960/1970). From these mystics came the monastic tradition of Christianity, with its contemplative practices and ascetic way of life, which has always served as a dwelling place for mysticism.

Christendom is replete with mystics, but we know only of those whose renown caused stories to be written of them, or whose accounts of their mystic experiences and understandings became renown. Sometimes sainted and sometimes condemned, these mystics were sought because their intimate experiences of God, of Sacred Reality, were found valuable by others. A litany of such mystics might include, not only those mentioned above, but many who succeeded them, for example, Hildegard of Bingen (1100/2001), Francis of Assisi (1200/1976/1999), Meister Eckhart (1300/1979/2009), Julian of Norwich (1400/2011), Teresa of Avila (1565/1987), John of the Cross (1577/1942/1959; 1577/1942/1962), Thérèse of Lisieux (1898/1957), Edith Stein (1950/2002) and Thomas Merton. The latter was a 20th century Trappist monk who has prompted an outpouring of

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[6] These ideas are explicated throughout the tract, but this quotation sums it up: "Now, every essence or quiddity can be understood *without* knowing anything about its being. I can know, for instance, *what* a man or a phoenix is and still be ignorant *whether* it has being in reality. From this, it is clear that being is other than essence or quiddity, unless perhaps there is a reality whose quiddity *is* its being" (Aquinas 1254/1968, Chapter IV, Section 6, p. 55; italics added).

interest in the mystic traditions (both Western and Eastern) with his numerous writings on this topic (e.g., Merton, 1948/1968; 1951; 1960/1970; 1967/1987; 2003). Merton is also an example of ecumenism, of the belief in a transcendent unity among the diversity of wisdom traditions, a belief which inspires this essay.

Key Features of the Mystic Traditions
(and their relevance to a curriculum that would invite mystery)

In this section, I present my gleanings from my readings in and of the mystic traditions that I think are pertinent to a discussion of mystery in curriculum. They are organized into the following four topics: the nature of mystery; the aims of the mystic traditions; the epistemological methods of mysticism; and mystical approaches to aporia. For each topic, I will describe my findings and then consider curricular connections.

Reflections on Mystery and Knowing the Unknowable

In becoming familiar with the mystic traditions, we can learn from past elucidations of the nature of knowledge and mystery. I have already noted that strong Western definition of knowledge as justified *true* belief—formalized as the clear, singular, incontrovertible, uncontradictable proposition. What is the opposite of knowledge? Lack of knowledge? I suggest *unknowability*, a term I've acquired from Aquinas scholar, Joseph Pieper (1940/1963), who notes that unknowability could be considered a deficiency of the subject of knowing—such as ultra-violet colour being unknowable to humans; or, that unknowability could refer to the object of knowing, that the object of knowing may, in itself, be fundamentally not knowable—such as ultimate reality (pp. 59-60). From this, I can reiterate my understanding of mystery as *not* that which is not yet known (in time, place, person), but that which has the attributes of truth as well as unknowability. That is, a mystery is a belief commonly experienced and held as true, although the truth of it cannot be justified by incontrovertible evidence or uncontradictable logic.

But what is truth? A dictionary definition of truth as that which conforms to reality (OED, 2023c) seems to equate with Augustine's words: "That is true which is" (Augustine, 386/1888, *Soliloquies*, Book II, Section 15). I note that Augustine's words highlight the *onto*-logical understanding of truth as inextricable with Being (Grondin, 2012, pp. xxi, 13). In traditional Western thought, truth ultimately draws from a meta-physics, a "first principle", an absolute identity or ground of Being (Grondin, 2012, p. 40). But since this absolute can only be conjectured, cognized, *believed*—glimpsed, ineffably experienced though never entirely grasped—unknowability, mystery, remains.

A metaphysical conception always and ultimately rests on belief, not certainty (Grondin, 2012, p. xvii; see also Crotty, 1998, pp. 7, 10-11). I've already discerned a sense of mystery as truth and unknowability, a condition of knowing and not knowing. Now, I advance my designation of mystery as that aspect of reality which exceeds our usual perceptions and thinking. And that aspect is Reality

itself, in its ultimate, absolute wholeness.[7] The mystic is one who desires apperception of ultimate reality, even though the mystic accedes it as both knowable and unknowable—as mystery.

> Jean Grondin, metaphysician, asserts:
> A philosophy devoid of mysticism and scepticism would not live up to its name because it would not measure up to the mystery of Being itself. . . . We never cease speaking of it and we are of it. To inquire metaphysically is therefore to strive to express Being which embraces and envelopes us. (2012, p. xxii)

For those interested in exploring the meaning of mystery and its place in curriculum, studying works of the mystic traditions prompts a scrutiny of metaphysical foundations, an examination of one's of beliefs regarding reality and being, and the relation of such beliefs to theories of knowledge (to epistemology). Studying mysticism shows that some metaphysical and epistemological orientations are compatible with mystery, while others are not. An acceptance of mystery is not compatible with an expectation of certainty, as seen with strict versions of rationalism and empiricism (e.g., logical empiricism, in which truth must be grounded by empirical fact or else it is nonsense; see Stumpf, 2003, pp. 424-433). Nor is mystery compatible with truth as idiosyncratic (with the relativism, for example, of radical constructivism, that reality is only what is construed; Crotty, 1998, pp. 42-65). Furthermore, mystery is not compatible with nihilism, with the rejection of truth (Pratt, n.d.). The mystic traditions offer insights as to which metaphysical foundations *do* invite mystery.

Aims and Outcomes—Common Features Among the Mystic Traditions

In becoming familiar with the mystic traditions, we can see common features across time and place, features which may bear on a curriculum of mystery. One commonality I see is that, for mystics, the desire for awareness of ultimate reality is never mere curiosity; there is an over-arching aim in doing so—to *connect with* the metaphysical absolute. This understanding of mysticism is reflected in the following definitions by scholars of mysticism. Writer Evelyn Underhill (1915) writes that mysticism is the "art of union" with ultimate reality, and that "the mystic is a person who has attained that union in greater or less degree; or who aims at and believes in such attainment" (p. 7). Historian and theologian Bernard McGinn, in his 1991 treatise, proposes:

> The mystical element in Christianity is that part of its belief and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct *presence* of God. (p. xvii; italics added)

John Michael Talbot, musician and mystic, puts it more simply:

> A mystic is someone who believes there are realities to life that are beyond what can be perceived by our rational minds or described in words. Further, a mystic not only believes this in the abstract but desires to practice it in the concrete, allowing these deeper realities to *permeate* his or her life. (Talbot, 2005, pp. 3-4; italics added)

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[7] For while there are many mysteries we experience as we live our lives—the wonder of a tree erupting in green flame, the inscrutability in a dog's gaze, the untold secrets of life in the womb—all these recur to the mystery of Being itself.

Varying terms for ultimate reality, such as the One, the Good, the Real, the Absolute, the Godhead, God, Sacred Reality, or Being (engaging the uppercase), reflect varying metaphysical conceptions, resulting in varying understandings of connection or union.[8] Thus,

- in Platonic mysticism, ultimate reality is the intelligible realm of the Ideas (also referred to as the principle of intelligibility, as *Logos*), and the mystic aim is to *turn toward* its eternal truths (Plato, 380-360 BCE/1997b, *Republic,* Book VI, Sections 507-508; Cimakasky et al., 2021; Stachowski, 2021);
- in (Plotinus') Neoplatonism, ultimate reality is the One, and the aim is the *return* of the spiritual soul to this reality (beyond being) from which it emanated (Grondin, 2012, pp. 67-72);
- for Western Christian mysticism, ultimate reality is God, and the aim is *presence*, to participate with divine love (McGinn, 1991, Merton, 2003);
- for Orthodox mysticism, ultimate reality is God, and the aim is *deification* (or *theosis*), to *partake* of divine nature (Lossky, 2002);
- for Islamic mysticism, ultimate reality is God (Allah), and the aim may involve a rational reach to transcendent mystery—as with the philosopher Avicenna—or an ascetic and gnostic path towards *experiencing* the divine—as with the Sufi poet, Rumi (Fakhry, 1997; Aminrazavi, 2021; Ahmed, 2017);
- for Hinduism, the ultimate reality is Brahman, and the aim is *absorption* into this cosmic unity (Sivananda, 1953/2012; 1959/2013); and
- for Buddhism, the ultimate reality is Nirvana, and the aim is *dissolution* to the nothingness that is (Narada, 1933/1982).[9]

"When my bier moveth on the day of death . . . Do not weep for me . . . For the grave is a curtain hiding the communion of Paradise," promises Rumi (n.d./1898, p. 95). You may wonder *when* connection or union to ultimate reality may be attained. For many religious traditions, death is seen as the primary passage to the ultimate, to the transcendent beyond that is the source and principle of life. But this passage is not an assurance, because, in the Abrahamic traditions, death might not bring the presence of God, which is Paradise, but, rather, the absence thereof, which is Hell. And in Eastern traditions, death is expected to bring rebirth to most, except for those Blessed few who are released from the cycle of *samsara* and pass into union with the ultimate beyond (Narada, 1933/1982, p. 7).

But the mystic traditions proffer the possibility of connection, or even complete union with the absolute, while still living! And why is this connection desired? As already mentioned, it is not for the sake of satisfying curiosity, rather, from a longing to be permeated by the absolute, and as such for one's very human nature to be trans-formed. The absolute is envisaged as perfection, and so, to be permeated by the absolute, is to be charged by that perfection. Thus, another commonality among

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[8] Note that in this essay, I use the upper case to reflect transcendent or sacred senses of mystery, though when I speak generically, across traditions, I use lower-cased words such as "ultimate reality", "the absolute", "the transcendent beyond" or "the divine".

[9] I recognize that these spiritual traditions have been interpreted via multiple paths. Here, respecting the mystical appreciation of unity, I focus on commonly attributed and defining metaphysical thrusts.

the mystic traditions is the expectation that an encounter with the mystery that is the ultimate is to be changed for the good. Thus,

- Plato speaks of care of the soul, of virtue that comes from wisdom (e.g., Plato, 380-360 BCE/1997a, *Apology*, Sections 30a-b; see Christensen, 2000);
- Christian mystics stress that to know God is to love God, and to love God is to know God (1 John 4: 7-8), hence transformation involves a *metanoia*, a con-version toward the light of God, and a re-creation of the self by the grace of God (Bertucio, 2015; Talbot, 2005); and
- Eastern apologists say that *enlightenment* brings bliss—*ananda, nirvana, samadhi*—a state of serenity that is encouraged by and prompts the virtues of compassion—*ahimsa*—and loving kindness—*metta* (Narada, 1933/1982; pp. 23-24 & 27-28; Sivananda, 1953/2012, pp. 58-60).

How might these aims and outcomes of mysticism—to perceive, to connect and to be transformed by the absolute—relate to a curriculum that invites mystery? Mysticism involves a conceptualization of Reality, of Being, and with it the *import* of this understanding. Thus, mysticism is eschatological, teleological and axiological.[10] Likewise, as curriculum scholars inviting mystery, and wondering about the absolute, we are drawn to reflect on the purpose or point of our existence and the value of our actions—and to muse about how this might enter the development of programs of study.

Methods for Glimpsing Mystery

Another commonality among the mystic traditions is the recommended method for perceiving and connecting to the mystery that is ultimate reality—namely, *contemplation*. Note that the very word "contemplate" derives from religious practices, specifically from the ancient Greek divination practices of an augur in a temple (hence *con*, with, and *templum,* the space delimited for this purpose; OED, 2024). While, as a secular term, contemplation refers to attentively observing or reflecting on something, the religious sense continues to refer to a practice of prayer in which one directly experiences (or seeks to directly experience) the divine (OED, 2024). In the mystic tradition, a contemplative pathway is one that brings the individual to the point of contemplation, and it may involve a number of preparatory or anticipatory practices, as will be described in this section.[11]

When I first read *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a medieval tract on Christian mysticism, written by a 14th century rural English monk, I was struck by how closely the advice mirrored that given to me in a course on meditation in a Hindu ashram. Both recommend a practice of withdrawing the senses as well as thought, of locating solitude and silence, and of engaging a silent mantra (chant) to direct one's focus to the transcendent. The *Cloud of Unknowing* author was greatly influenced by Dionysius—he also translated Dionysius' work *Mystical Theology* into Middle (Chaucerian) English. In

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[10] As Heidegger (1927/1962) notes in *Being and Time*: "Dasein is an entity which does not just occur among other entities. Rather it is ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an issue for it" (p. 32).
[11] Note that in the Christian mystic tradition, contemplation is understood as more encompassing than meditation, which is considered a specific, preparatory act of concentration, towards the goal of contemplating the divine. However, in Eastern traditions, the opposite hierarchy is understood (cf. Merton, 2003 with Sivananda, 1953/2012, 1962/2018). In this essay, I follow the usage of the Western tradition.

doing so, he developed the locution "cloud of unknowing" to vividly represent "darkness of unknowing", the more common translation from the Greek (Wolters, 1978; Dionysius, 500/1987, MT, Chapter 1, 1000D, p. 137).

Dionysius, in turn, was influenced by his mystic predecessors (e.g., the Neoplatonists, Plotinus and Proclus, the patristic theologians Clement and Origen, the Cappadocian Fathers and, of course, the scribes of scripture) in discerning his mystical theology (Koukourdinos, n.d.). Dionysius' work *The Celestial Hierarchy* initiated the terminology and description of the threefold scheme of *purification, illumination* and *union* that formed the basis of what has become known as *the contemplative pathway*.[12] This threefold scheme has been interpreted richly and deeply, in various ways, by spiritual writers and theological scholars over the centuries.[13] The three elements can be understood either as a sequence or a hierarchy of mystic practice. I will describe these elements further and then discuss their relation to a curriculum that invites mystery.

As one cannot see through lenses that are clouded or sullied, the first step of a contemplative pathway involves a withdrawing from that which obscures and a turning to that which brings clarity. In addition to withdrawing from activities and senses, purification may engage rituals: lighting candles, abluting with holy water or smoke, practicing yoga poses and breath patterns, walking a labyrinth, reading a text through the repetitions of *Lectio Divina*, repeating a chant, maintaining focus on a devotional object or symbol, or just closing one's eyes and sitting in silence. Such acts of purification relate to the etymology of the words "mystic" and "mystery", which derive from the Greek roots *mýstis* and *mystírion*, meaning "to close the eyes and/or lips" and "enter the secrets" (OED, 2023b; OED, 2022).

I note that the term *purgation* is likewise used to describe this phase (e.g., Underhill, 1911/1974, *passim*). This term suggests stronger efforts, more difficult and unpleasant. In the Christian tradition, it is noted that what keeps a person from connection to God may not just be distractions of the environment, but inner impediments. Saint Paul, Dante Alighieri and C. S. Lewis all warn of the obstinate obstacle of pride (1 *Corinthians* 4; *The Divine Comedy*, Purgatorio; *Mere Christianity*, pp. 109-112). Mystics east and west warn of the suffering that comes from desires for transient things.[14] What does purgation involve? Traditionally, monks and yogis incorporate

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[12] Dionysius' (500/1987) third term is translated as "perfection" rather than "union" by Luibheid et al., yet Dionysius explicates it in a unitive sense (e.g., CH, Chapter 3, p. 154; EH, Chapter 5, p. 239).

[13] Laporte (2017) discusses how the threefold paradigm of spiritual development was interpreted by a great number of Christian apologists including Saint Paul (in his letter to the Romans, Chapters 5-8). McColman (n.d.) begins with Origen's interpretation of the biblical wisdom books as symbolic of three stages of spiritual development. Underhill (1910/1974) uses the term "Mystic Way" and expands on the threefold path to include awakening to mystery and experiencing the darkness thereof (e.g., pp. 167-170). Sivananda (1953/2012) describes an eightfold path, but it includes many overlapping elements, such as purification, discipline, restraint, non-attachment, awareness and union. Narada (1933/1982) also includes these elements as he describes the Buddhist "Noble Eightfold Path" and its common division into three parts, namely, morality, concentration and wisdom (pp. 23-26), which I think parallel the Western three-fold scheme.

[14] John of the Cross (1577/1962, Chapter 6, para. 6) writes that "the desires weary and fatigue the soul; for they are like restless and discontented children, who are ever demanding this or that from their mother and never contented" (Chapter 6, para. 6). Thanissaro (1997) translates from the *Dhammapada*, a Buddhist scripture: "When a person lives

purgation into an ascetic way of life. "Ascetic" and related words, "ascesis", "acscetism" and "asceticism" derive from the Greek word *áskisis* meaning exercise or training (OED, 2021). Ascesis often involves abstaining from physical urges (for food, water, sleep or sex), toiling, instead, to prayerfully focus on the spiritual. (Campbell, 1907; Caribaldi Rogers, 2002). The Vedantic eightfold path enumerates restraints or disciplines for the yogi, starting with the *yamas*, moral injunctions such as non-violence and non-covetousness, continuing with *niyamas*, spiritual practices such as *asanas*, yoga poses, to eventually get to a place of *dharana*, concentration, and *dhyana,* meditation, from which the yogi hopes to achieve *samadhi*, enlightenment (Sivananda, 1953/2012).

The fruit of the acts of purification (or purgation) might be illumination. Illumination has been described by scholar Evelyn Underhill (1911/1974) as "consciousness of the absolute" or a "sense of the presence of God" (p. 241). Underhill notes that this consciousness may come as a heightened or expanded awareness, as an inexpressible conviction of meaning, and via altered states of consciousness, such as trances, visions or auditions (pp. 240-241). At times, illumination brings a state of rapture, an ecstasy of exquisite joy, as was the case with Teresa of Avila (Teresa, 1565/1987, *passim*[15]). On the other hand, as the *Cloud of Unknowing* author and others stress (Wolters, 1978; McGinn, 1991; Underhill, 1911/1974, Chapter 9), this phase may also involve obscurity, doubt, darkness—though *profoundly* so. Mystics often describe painful struggles.[16] John of the Cross (1577/1942/1959), despite severe and lengthy imprisonments, which only compounded his inner torments of feeling the absence of God, ultimately validated his experiences as valuable and genuine, explicating them mystically as the "dark night of the soul", as a time of setting aside all he had hitherto assumed or believed about God, in preference to a *revelation* of divine love.[17] While some mystics are able to eloquently describe their mystic experiences, apperception of sacred reality often comes with a sense of ineffability, something William James' 1901/2002 work *Varieties of Religious Experience* reports as a common feature of the mystic experience (along with transiency, passivity and the noetic; see pp. 414-415).

Union is akin to illumination in that both involve an apperception of ultimate reality, but the latter is characterized by a sense of completion and perfection. The phase of union may be described metaphorically as being wedded to God, as spouse to bride (John of the Cross, 1577/1942/1959, p. 105), or as the birth of God in the soul (Eckhart, 1300/1979/2009). Or, union may be described with more abstract metaphors, such as being *integrated* into the Supreme Self (Sivananda, 1953/2012, p. 25), or being finally *delivered* from cycles of earthly suffering (Narada, p. 10), depending on one's metaphysical understanding of self and reality. Plotinus' works seem to indicate that union is only

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heedlessly, his craving grows like a creeping vine. He runs now here & now there, as if looking for fruit: a monkey in the forest. If this sticky, uncouth craving overcomes you in the world, your sorrows grow like wild grass after rain" (Chapter 24, verses 334-336).

[15] The rapture depicted by the famous sculpture of Bernini is described in Chapter 29, Section 13, p. 252.

[16] And their very stories of struggles to find meaning draw us; it was Merton's (1948/1968) confessional autobiography that catapulted him into fame.

[17] For example, he writes that "from what has been said we shall be able to see how this dark night of loving fire, as it purges in the darkness, so also in the darkness enkindles the soul. . . . for cleanness of heart is nothing less than the love and grace of God" (Chapter 12, para. 1).

possible with the casting off of the material body. However, in the Christian tradition, mystics believe that with union, the divine comes to dwell fully within the human self, a transformation that bears fruit in this world (e.g., of charity; Laporte, 2017). How does one know if and when one has attained this state of union? In Vedantic traditions, this state of union is referred to as Enlightenment, and it may not be something that a person self-identifies, but something that others recognize regarding a person, who may then be acknowledged as so blessed (Vedanta Society of Southern California, 2016).

Lighting the Curricular Path?

Mystic traditions of purification, illumination and union offer *contemplative practices* in a hierarchical route towards grasping metaphysical mystery, as well as examples and reflections of those who have used them in this regard. Can we relate the traditional contemplative path to contemporary curriculum? I think we can, although I imagine a reactive dialectic of protest—both against the traditional pathway, and against contemporary reworkings.

Firstly, aspects of the traditional contemplative path seem excessive to our contemporary ethos. At the term "purgation", images of bloody flagellants and starving anorexics come to mind. We can be mortified by mortification, but we can also try to learn from the motivation for it. For example, I try to imagine what would motivate an anchorite such as Julian of Norwich to have a stone room built around her, in which she would spend the rest of her life, not once leaving. This seems so remote to my lived experience. Can purgation go too far? Indeed, say the mystics, if taken on when one is neither ready nor capable in body or spirit (Teresa of Avila, 1588/1987, p. 118, p. 123; John of the Cross, 1577/1942/1962, prologue), or with the wrong attitude, such as competitiveness or braggadocio, because this would only alienate the seeker from the goal of connection with the divine (John of the Cross, 1577/1942/1962, Chapter IX). However, it often seems to mystics that their human efforts do not go far enough to bridge the gulf between themselves and the divine. The *Cloud of Unknowing* author suggests some incredible efforts to traverse the vastness. He says that we must put beneath us a "cloud of forgetting" and above us a "cloud of unknowing" (Wolters, 1978, p. 66). The cloud of forgetting is a letting go of the "whole created world" (p. 66), even thoughts and images of God, because ultimately it is only love, "the sharp dart of longing love" (p. 68), that will pierce the cloud of unknowing. (His suggestions seem impossibly arduous, and yet the monk says the work can be easy and quick—by the grace of God; p. 61). This brings up the enigma of preparing so assiduously for that which can only be granted as a gift of divine grace. Teresa of Avila (1565/1987) uses the metaphor of watering a garden to explain the necessity of the discipline of ascesis: a gardener who trusts in the eventual delights of her travails is prepared to put every effort in watering her garden, collecting and watering each plant by hand, if needed, not expecting nor demanding, but graciously receiving the beneficence of rain (Chapter 11, Sections 6-17, pp. 112-119).

Approaching the traditional contemplative path with perspicacity allows us to find much that we may interpret to a contemporary curriculum. The path follows metaphysical maps that we may study. It arises out of the many prior narrations of others' lived experiences of mystery, which we may (hermeneutically) dialogue with and reinterpret. It offers a lexicon of vocabulary to use when

speaking of mystery, which is very helpful, for we soon realize that, in speaking of mystery, the vocabulary traditionally used to speak of knowledge does not work (due to its associations with empirical or rational certainty). Perhaps we cannot speak of "knowing" mystery, but we may speak of "glimpsing", "becoming aware", "observing", "experiencing", "perceiving", "apperceiving"—or "contemplating" mystery. Furthermore, the path offers up time-honoured practices to employ in our exploration of mystery. It reminds us that to glimpse mystery, we must first invite it, prepare ourselves for it and open ourselves to it. Thus, I don't just look at the classroom door and hope it will miraculously open to mystery. As curriculum theorist, I consider what this phenomenon of mystery is, how it relates to the wonder of reality and being and living. As an educator, I set up opportunities for mystery to be experienced. For example, I facilitate contemplative practices, as described above. I welcome participants to share insights arising. I'm aware that the experiences of mystery may be very profound and life-changing—and interior, so I respect silence. The traditional contemplative path offers a scheme which I or others (e.g., Grace, 2011a) might productively follow.

I note that just as the notions of ascesis, purgation or purification may prompt protest, so may curricular reworkings of the contemplative path. I recognize the burgeoning fields of contemplative pedagogy and contemplative studies, which situate discussions on some of the concerns of this essay. Contemplative pedagogy and inquiry are usually distinguished from religious practices or devotions, presenting as secular and academic (e.g., Gunnlaugson et al., 2014, Introduction). The field often focuses on contemplation as meditation and on the educational benefits arising from improved motivation, cognition or comportment (e.g., Hart, 2004). Nonetheless, this very secularization draws critiques of disrespectful appropriation, of substituting a banal "Mcmindfulness" for the profound wisdoms of the traditions from which the contemplative pedagogy is drawn (Houck, 2019). In my work as a yoga teacher and meditation facilitator, I encounter such tensions: the appropriation of yoga asanas merely as fitness moves ("yoga for a six-pack"), the frivolous talk of yoga benefits ("the best poses to prevent cancer"), the unacknowledged sources and metaphysical import of mindfulness practices (such as surrendering, emptying, holding nothing but the moment). I also see that even when meditation is limited to a brief time of quiet, focused breathing, participants may struggle to find discipline for this task.

I think it is of great value for a curriculum that would invite mystery to also invite contemplation and contemplative practices, and that a curriculum can do so more fully (and responsibly; Simmer-Brown, 2011) by acknowledging and exploring the sources of contemplative wisdom. We don't have to agree with everything we encounter—the traditions don't always agree. And I am certainly not saying that the traditional contemplative path is the only way for a curriculum to explore existential mysteries; many other approaches have been suggested, including engaging critical thinking (Baker, 2020) or theorizing from the mystery of love (Zajonc, 2006). But I do think that exploring the contemplative path of the mystic traditions not only gives context and depth to a curriculum that invites mystery, it also highlights that to seek to grasp mystery is to embark on a profound, demanding and transformative existential journey. That very awareness is highly motivating.

An additional issue in proposing the contemplative pathway as an epistemic path to grasping mystery is that of validity and evaluation, an issue for any curriculum theory (Flinders & Thorton, 2022). How has the validity of contemplative practices traditionally been ascertained? Again, to a contemporary ethos, descriptions of mystic outcomes, of moments of illumination through locutions, visions, experiences of ecstasy or rapture may seem far-fetched or hallucinatory. But I note that even historically, from within the mystic tradition, perceptual illuminative phenomena have been considered sceptically (Talbot, 2005, pp. 146-147; Underhill, 1911/1974, Chapter 5). John of the Cross (1577/1942/1962) reproved them generally as "imagination and fancy" (*passim*), even "spiritual gluttony" (Chapter XI), and he considered them what Kourie (2016) terms *epiphenomena*—neither essential to, nor the point of the contemplative journey to union. Similarly, during retreats at a Hindu ashram, I've been warned against "vision gluttony".

Traditionally, descriptions of illuminative experiences were believed if they offered a fullness of sense, if they showed cohesion to established doctrine (spiritual knowledge), and if they prompted a transformation to the good in the mystics or their followers (Underhill, 1911/1974, Chapter 5). This is why the incredible perceptual experiences of Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich and Teresa of Avila were believed. I find parallels from these traditional criteria to discussions of epistemological validation in qualitative research, for example to the famous "trustworthiness" criteria that Egon Guba and Yvonne Lincoln (1994) put forth (in lieu of scientific criteria of validity) of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (p. 114). To consider Teresa of Avila, as an example: in reading her autobiography, we hear a voice that is humble, yet passionate and convicted, honestly and accurately describing mystic experiences. The saint integrates her mystic experiences (her perceiving of mystery) into her spiritual (metaphysical) understandings. She is believable, even should one not share her beliefs. In perusing experiences of the traditional contemplative path, we can find strategies and criteria for evaluating and "valuating" (Tsun Haggarty, 2021, pp. 74-82) a curriculum that invites mystery, along with intuitive, interior experiences thereof. We can relate (or perhaps dispute) these ideas with those found in the literature (e.g., Simmer-Brown & Grace, 2011, which includes discussions of professor and program evaluation) and in current curriculum documents (e.g., Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario, 2012, pp. 36-47; 2016, pp. 31-37).

To sum up this section on using the contemplative path as a means to glimpse mystery, I propose that the contemplative path offers a time-honoured route to this aim. The contemplative path suggests disciplinary practices to prepare (to train) the self for metaphysical insights, which are received as gifts, and which prompt an individual to live according to the goodness accessed. The mystical tradition has left us a vast legacy of accounts of mystics' experiences of their contemplative paths. These accounts present both their illuminations as well as the obstacles and setbacks they encountered, and they model how we might travel and what we might find on our own journeys to understand mystery and the metaphysical. As with such accounts, I think that inviting mystery to curriculum, we can never be apodictic, but must accept aporia.

Umbrations and Adumbrations: Approaches to Knowing the Unknowable

God who is the cause of all [things] is none of the things we can understand. . . . When we attribute something to him, or deny any or all of the things which he is not, we do not describe him or abolish him, nor in any way that we can understand do we affirm him or deny him. For the perfect and unique cause of all is of necessity beyond compare with the highest of all imaginable heights, whether by affirmation or denial. And this surpassing non-understandability is "un-understandably" above every affirmation and denial. (*Cloud of Unknowing* author's translation of Dionysius' *Mystical Theology*, Wolters, 1978, pp. 217-218)

God, the Absolute of Sacred Reality, is both apprehensible and unknowable, assert mystics. But despite this paradox, and all the while maintaining its aporia, the mystic traditions are characterized by unceasing efforts to contemplate the absolute. In this section, I'll describe two contrasting approaches to conceiving the divine, the *cataphatic* and the *apophatic*, because they are so informative in understanding the nature of mystery and in dealing with paradox, and with paradox, enigma or aporia.

The cataphatic approach, also called the *via positiva*, is a conceptual strategy of affirmation. The cataphatic approach is found throughout sacred texts (such as the Torah, the Bible, the Upanishads, the Dhammapada), which use various literary approaches, including poetry, parable and aphorism, to illustrate the nature and mystery of the divine or the absolute. Commentators on sacred texts often use these same strategies, in addition to propositional argument (the sine qua non of cataphasis).[18]

The apophatic approach, also called the way of darkness, or the *via negativa*, is a conceptualization strategy of denial or negation: to come to what *is* by asserting what is *not*. The apophatic is often found in the writings of mystics or mystic theologians. Ironically, in order describe the divine by way of denial or negation, this approach also tends to engage literary devices such as metaphor or analogy, though in ways that may be startling or contradictory.

The apophatic cannot be well understood without its contrary, the cataphatic. Both terms were first engaged by Neoplatonist Proclus (Koukourindos, n.d.). "Apophatic" derives from the Greek adjective *apophatikós* meaning "negative", and the Greek noun *apophasis*, meaning "denial" (OED, 2018a). "Cataphatic" derives from the Greek adjective *kataphatikós* meaning affirmative and the Greek verb *kataphinai* meaning "to assent" (OED, 2018b).

Both terms were productively taken up by Dionysius in his writings, the shortness of which belies their weight (see Dionysius, 500/1987; note that the Greek terms are anglicized in translation). Dionysius' approach is both expounded and exemplified in his works on cosmology, on naming God, and on knowing God. In all of these, he uses both conceptual and structural hierarchies, which he

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[18] For example, Teresa of Avila (1565/1987) tells the story of her life. John of the Cross (1577/1959, 1577/1962) writes and explicates his poetry. Sivananda (1953/2012, 1962/2018) teaches through aphorisms. As an aside, I note that, according to Hamza Andreas Tzortzis (n.d.), because believers of the Qu'ran take this scripture as a direct transcription of the Word of God to the Prophet Muhammed, they would classify as neither poetry nor prose.

descends and ascends. In *The Celestial Hierarchy* (CH), Dionysius (Neoplatonically) describes creation as processing downward from the creator to the multiplicity of created beings (who nonetheless are reunited to oneness in their ascent back to God). In *The Divine Names* (DN), Dionysius describes attributes of God, beginning with the most exalted, and working his way downward. In *Mystical Theology* (MT), Dionysius works the other way around: from progressive denial (of symbols, names and concepts of God), he works his way upward to the transcendent, where he notes, his approach must falter and grow silent (Chapter 3, Section 1033C, p. 139).

Dionysius works with both the cataphatic and the apophatic, though he believes that ultimately, because of the unknowability of God, the apophatic is superior (DN, Chapter 8, Sections 981A-B, pp. 129-130). Nonetheless, it is important to point out the following qualifiers (Dionysius, 500/1987; Koukourdinos, n.d.; McGinn, 1991, pp. 158-182). Firstly, Dionysius notes that even negations must be negated (MT, Chapter 5, Section 1048B, p. 141). Secondly, Dionysius does not equate negation with privation, absence. (MT, Chapter 1, Section 1000A, item 2, p. 136). Thirdly, Dionysius encourages the use of what he calls dissimilar similarities (CH, Chapter 2, pp 147-153), for their ability to upset complacency, to encourage awareness of the unknowability of God, all the while encouraging dwelling on God's truth.

In his emphasis on logical inquiry, Aquinas may be proffered as an example of the cataphatic approach. However, early in his treatise on the nature of God, Aquinas (1265-1274/1947) emphasizes the unknowability of God, saying "because we cannot know what God is, but rather what He is not, we have no means for considering how God is, but rather how He is not" (Summa, Part I, Q. 3, prologue[19]; see Pieper, 1940/1963, pp. 37, 64). And then Aquinas slowly enunciates the most summative description ever of how we might know God! Throughout his *Summa Theologiae* (or *Summa*), in his logical style of scholastic disputation (question, objections, counterproposal and rebuttal), Aquinas uses negation repeatedly, correctively. He also uses negation in an apophatic sense, as in his consideration of the attributes of God (Summa, Part I, Q. 3) and the names of God (Summa, Part I, Q. 13). Aquinas points out that we cannot assume human attributes match that of God, even though he engages, as a principle, that the effect displays attributes of the cause (Summa, Part I, Q. 8, article 1). However, and this is where he switches to a cataphatic approach, Aquinas proposes *analogy* as a means of knowing God. In particular, he enunciates the transcendentals—being, unity, truth, goodness and beauty—properties of Being which exist perfectly in God and imperfectly in humans, but which, by their very presence, analogically reflect the nature of God (Summa, Part 1, Q. 4, article 3; Summa, Q. 13, articles 2 & 5; Wood, 1990, pp. 191-201). Intriguingly, Aquinas never completed his Summa. After experiencing a mystic vision, he told his amanuensis that all he had hitherto written was but straw, and that he would henceforth be silent (Chesterton, 1933/2011, p. 76; Pieper, 1940/1963, pp. 38-41). But do not think this "silence" was one of resignation or defeat! This was a silence that embraced an experience of the divine beyond what could be expressed in language.

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[19] Note: the source I am using is online and unpaginated.

Silence was a key feature of a Dominican mystic who succeeded Aquinas, namely Meister Eckhart. Eckhart may be proffered as an example of a mystic who clearly preferred the *via negativa,* the apophatic. In his descriptions of the Godhead, Eckhart (1300/1979/2009) repeatedly emphasizes that anything we say or name of God will always be inadequate. He speaks of God through many fascinating, contradicting negations. He describes God as "neither this nor that that one can speak of" (p. 316), as "one All without everything" (p. 303), as a hidden Word—and he says that "there must be a stillness and a silence for this Word to make itself heard . . . [for] there we can hear it, and there too we will understand it aright—in the unknowing" (p. 43). I did not describe Eckhart in the description of the threefold contemplative path because he largely eschews it in favour of a stance of utter detachment (i.e., *Gelassenheit*), before the divine, insisting that "all God wants of you is for you to go out of yourself in the way of creatureliness and *let God be* within you" (p. 110; italics added). And yet, in my reading, this very apophatic mystic waxes emphatically cataphatic when he presents the love of God as a fountainhead, ceaselessly overflowing into all things (e.g., pp. 456, 543), and that this effusion is a necessity, something God must do (e.g., pp. 97-98).

Curricular Clouds and Clearings

The cataphatic and apophatic approaches give much insight into dealing with paradox, which I've found is an integral element of mystery. In the Western philosophical tradition, with our inheritance of propositional logic and the principle of non-contradiction, we are accustomed to conceiving of knowledge as a positive thing. The negative is thought of as an absence. The positive is the correct thing; the negative is the incorrect thing. The principle of non-contradiction works well in the concrete, measurable, empirical domain, but not for that which transcends it.

Mystic ways of thinking suggest other ways to look at contradiction and opposition. With apophatic thinking, instead of looking at negation as privative, negation is considered productive. Negations offer the opportunity to consider "dissimilar similarities" as provocative contraries rather than impossible contradictions. With cataphatic thinking, analogy allows for possibilities, ways to connect dis/similarities and extend the connections. Furthermore, with mystic thinking, negation works in tandem with affirmation, the apophatic with the cataphatic, as shown in the examples of Dionysius, Aquinas and Eckhart. To me, this is like artwork, in which the negative and positive spaces work complementarily, not duelling to the annihilation of one and the victory of the other, nor collapsing contrary positions to a weak, muddling intermediate.

Mystic ways of thinking suggest that a way to deal with paradox is to place the contraries or contradictions into dialectic tension and, instead of trying to solve the puzzle, to let it reverberate. This is how koans are used in Buddhist meditation (Kourie, 2016; Merton, 1967/1987). And I think this is what *The Cloud of Unknowing* author does. For example, in his work, he opposes the cloud of forgetting with the cloud of unknowing. As such, the "forgetting/darkening" of earthly preoccupations helps to "remember/see" the transcendent. Moreover, the author says to put cloud of forgetting *beneath* yourself and the cloud of unknowing *above*, but later acknowledges these positions as metaphorical, and that they can be re-thought:

I do not want you to be outside or above, behind or beside yourself either!

"Well," you will say, "where am I to be? Nowhere, according to you!" And you will be quite right! "Nowhere" is where I want you! Why, when you are "nowhere" physically, you are "everywhere" spiritually. (Chapter 68, p. 142)

Mystic writing is replete with oppositions, such as the following, which I've noticed in my readings of mysticism: inner/outer, dark/light, sleep/awake, betrothal/marriage, spirit/body, separation/union, ascend/descend. Here are three examples of how such oppositions can be productively dealt with. Firstly, I note, oppositions can work by mutuality and complementarity. Religion scholar Celia Kourie (2016) offers the opposition of nocturnal and solar to represent the apophatic and cataphatic, respectively. In my reading, I've noticed that male mystics (such as John of the Cross) tend toward renunciation and negation, while female mystics (such as his Carmelite colleague Teresa of Avila) tend toward illumination and affirmation. Yet, I notice their mutuality, just as night gives way to day, day gives way to night. Secondly, oppositions can offer possibilities for productive inversions. Was the anchor-hold of Julian of Norwich a lifetime coffin or a spiritual womb? Is God everywhere or nowhere, all in all or no-thing at all—can Eckhart's oppositions ring concomitantly? Thirdly, I see that oppositions need not be thought of linearly, a structure which only promotes the idea of a fighting match with sparring players on opposing sides. The dialectic process can be considered instead as a spiral, a figure which can both ascend (to clouds of unknowing) and descend (to the labyrinth of the heart). Indeed, McGinn (1991) describes his epistemological approach as a "hermeneutic spiral" (p. xv). The spiral was also famously used by evolutionary scientist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1960) to describe his mystic journey.

Because of their willingness to exceed traditional logic, the mystic traditions offer ways of dealing with paradox, with enigma and with aporia, strategies that can be helpful in conceptualizing curriculum itself, or in theorizing or developing a curriculum that invites mystery. However, that willingness to exceed the rational does not mean that a mystic tradition is one of denying reason (Merton, 1951). Mysticism is not a leap into nonsense. John of the Cross marries lyric with logic. Eckhart is very intentional in his contradicting analogies and enigmatic aphorisms. Aquinas is exceptional in enunciating a cataphatic understanding of sacred reality through careful disputation. Dionysius' work, likewise, is thoroughly thought through, and extremely well organized. All offer both mystic theology and rigorous metaphysics. Underhill, McGinn and Merton are also exceedingly systematic in their studies of mysticism. They model something very useful for a curriculum that invites mystery: engaging reason as a route to mystery.

Underhill (1915) proposes that "the visionary is a mystic when his vision mediates to him an actuality beyond the reach of the senses. The philosopher is a mystic when he passes beyond thought to the pure apprehension of truth" (p. 9). This latter is something I find very common in phenomenology, which I find to be a bastion of mysticism. Phenomenology is also commonly used as an epistemological framework in research (Crotty, 1998). As a discipline of philosophy, phenomenology began with Edmund Husserl, in his efforts to move beyond the objectifying of scientific empiricism and toward an apodictic knowing of consciousness. Yet phenomenology glimmered beforehand with Immanuel Kant, in his project to, again apodictically, elucidate

conditions of knowing. Kant notes that phenomena manifest their own intentions, and he posits a dual world of the phenomenal and noumenal. The noumena is the realm beyond human knowing, Kant claims, and yet not quite—for he also says that it is an ineluctable condition of humanity to desire to understand and explicate this realm: "Human reason . . . inexorably pushes on driven by its own need to such questions that cannot be answered by experiential use of reason and of principles borrowed from such a use" (Kant, 1781/1998, p. 147).

Husserl's work leads him to suggesting the phenomenological reduction (or *epoché*), a meditative process of bracketing ("enpocketing") preconceptions in order to see a phenomenon as it manifests (Husserl, 1931/1960). In terms of the threefold contemplative path, I think the phenomenological reduction corresponds to an act of purification, of allowing the inquirer to set aside distractions and come to a place of being able to see with wonder.

But is this seeing apodictic? Husserl's work is described as reaching an impasse (e.g., Kauffman & Gare, 2015), but I think of his work, rather, as reaching an abyss. And in that abyss, he comes to mystery. Furthermore, I see the same shift in phenomenologists who succeeded Husserl. I see it in the mystery of Buber's *Thou*, Levinas' *Other*, Merleau-Ponty's *flesh* and Marion's *gift* (Moran, 2000), as well as Stein's *rational* mysticism (Nolan, 1993). In all of these cases, in attempting to consider the phenomenon of being (their "ontological turn"), and in turning away from the objectification of naturalism, all the while trying to elaborate the ground, the principle, of the thing as it manifests itself, the philosophers come to an abyss, from which they leap into an expression of the mystery of Being, a mystic sense of more-than or other-than or not-this-but-something-else. They all demonstrate the movement of the contemplative path from purification to illumination; they gain a glimpse of ultimate reality. Space does not permit an exploration here of their conceptions, and of the senses of mystery that emerge. I will make note of two phenomenologists of particular relevance, though.

Martin Heidegger is often referred to as a mystic thinker (e.g., Caputo, 1974, 1975). In looking at the phenomenon of Being, Heidegger (1927/1962) initially writes of *care* and *death* as core elements of the human condition. But, in his phenomenological explorations, Heidegger decides that Western culture has forgotten Being itself, has ignored its mystery. He concludes that, ever since Plato, Being has been understood a principle of thought, a principle ascribed to the highest being— God (Heidegger, 1935/2000, p. 5). And he accuses such "onto-theo-logical" thinking of delimiting truth to what can be justified by rational logic (Heidegger, 1957/1969, pp. 42-74). More problematically, he feels that with such thinking Being has been rendered a thing that can be harnessed as a tool and destructively dominated (Heiddeger, 1993/1977). So, Heidegger's subsequent projects involve rethinking Being. Ultimately, Heidegger elaborates a depiction of Being (a metaphysical depiction, despite his decrying of "metaphysics") that greatly parallels Eckhart's apophatic mysticism—something theologian John Caputo (1974, 1975) has thoroughly analyzed. As with Eckhart's description of the Godhead, Heidegger (1935/2000) reimagines Being as a mystery that both comes to presence and remains hidden. "Heidegger's Being is a ground without ground, as Eckhart's God is 'principle without principle'", notes Caputo (1975, p. 75). What is more, Heidegger

also takes on Eckhart's term *Gelassenheit*, suggesting that our attitude should be one of releasement—to just let *Being* be (see Heidegger, 1959/2010; Caputo, 1975).

Jacques Derrida agreed with Heidegger that the Western tradition of thought is one of oppressive ontotheology (e.g., Derrida, 1967/2011, pp. 87, 88, 102, 115; Derrida, 1972/1981, p. 41). Derrida is opposed to closure and fixity, and he counters the *Logos* (of rational thought, as explicated in rational statement) with his assertion that ontologically, there is no ultimate ground (Derrida, 1967/1978, p. 289) and that human words have no stable meaning, but rather defer endlessly to other words (Derrida, 1972/1982, "Différance", pp. 3-27). Derrida's notion of deconstruction, that texts inevitably embody contradictions is put forth insistently, not as method, but as an existential paradox: "Ça se deconstruit" (Derrida, 1985, p. 3). I see Derrida in opposition to Plato, but by saying so, I'm certainly not applying the principle of non-contradiction, saying that one must be right, and the other wrong. I think of Plato as an exemplar of the cataphatic, and Derrida as an exemplar of the apophatic. Dionysius suggests that even negations must be negated. And I think that Derrida, through his long careering enunciation of paradoxes—of *trace*, *erasure*, *stutter*, *haunting*, and so on—not only negates, but negates negation, and in so playing and being played, never arrives at emptiness, but empties into presence. Caputo (1997) particularly sees a negative theology in Derrida's returning to his Judaic roots and in his writings of messianic hope. Derrida's apophatic messianism has inspired the postmodern project of Richard Kearney (2001) to find *The God Who May Be*.

I think that Heidegger is a preeminent example of moving from a rational to a mystic conceptualization of Being. With Derrida (*pace* Derrida), I think we have a fascinating story of moving from utter apophaticism, from a nihilistic negation of meaning to a recognition of mystery, of unknowability and truth. Heidegger and Derrida both demonstrate possibilities and concepts for exploring mystery philosophically, and within an academic discipline such as curriculum studies, with which they are already well connected. At the same time, the engagement of historical mystic thinkers in their works, and in the exegeses of their works, maintains the value of the mystic way.

Closings and Openings

I began this essay by reflecting on common Western understandings of curriculum and knowledge. I've noted that our curricula have traditionally focused on knowledge as "justified true belief". In doing so, our curricula narrow attention to the already known. I've wondered how a curriculum might invite mystery, and I've looked to the mystic traditions, particularly the Western mystic tradition, for guidance.

In this essay, I have described four major aspects of the mystic traditions: i) the nature of mystery; ii) the mystic aim of transformative connection to ultimate reality; iii) epistemological methods of the mystic traditions; and iv) the mystical approach to the paradox of knowing and not knowing. For each topic, I've reflected on their value to a curriculum that invites mystery.

Firstly, I've noted that our mystic tradition offers an understanding of mystery itself as holding the attributes of both truth and unknowability. It shows that notions of mystery, as with any notion

of knowledge, ultimately connect to metaphysical beliefs. Therefore, to study mystery, curriculum inquirers must consider their own beliefs about reality and how (or whether) the mystery of Reality and Being can be funnelled into epistemologically useful conceptions. Secondly, from the notion of mystery as onto-epistemological comes the goal of desiring to know the mystery of Reality, in order to connect or be unified with that which is the most whole or sacred. This goal projects the apperception of ultimate mysteries as an effort of transformative good, something we surely desire from a program of study. Thirdly, the mystic traditions proffer a path toward mystery, toward perceiving ultimate truth or meaning. The mystic traditions, both east and west, offer contemplation as method and elaborate many contemplative practices, thus suggesting possibilities for existential mystery to be interpreted in contemporary curriculum development. Fourthly, our mystic tradition shows two major and contrary approaches to knowing Ultimate/Sacred Reality, the way of affirmation and the way of negation. These ways work dialectically, and in doing so offer a model of how to approach paradox, contradiction and doubt. This rationalist/post-rationalist model has been very useful for philosophers and can also be very useful for curriculum scholars.

I recognize this work as just a beginning, a prolegomenon. While I hope that this essay might inspire and inform other theorists desiring to invite mystery to curriculum, this study of the mystic traditions has been a project aimed not just for readers, but for myself. I also reflect on what I have learned and might yet learn from the mystic traditions. That knowledge is buttressed by metaphysical belief and that elucidating an epistemology requires examining these beliefs have been core premises of my ongoing scholarly quest. Elsewhere, I've studied metaphysical beliefs in arts-integrating research methodologies (e.g., Tsun Haggarty, 2021). In doing so, I have scrutinized my own metaphysical beliefs, and how they connect to my choice in research methodology. I've put forth an alliance with a *metaphysics of participation* (that reality is given as a gift to co-create with) and a methodology of *creational dialectics*. Looking at the mystic traditions offers me suggestions for further dialectical re-cycling as I continue to consider how a curriculum might invite mystery. The ancient writers, Augustine, Aristotle and Aquinas, continue to astound me with their insights into the nature of Being—and its meaning. Husserl and Heidegger and their phenomenological successors, such as Marion (1989/2020) and Stein (1950/2002), encourage me to apprehend the mystery of Being in conceiving qualities such as giftedness, openness and inwardness. The mystics such as Dionysius and Eckhart invite me to step beyond conception and simply dwell with mystery. As such, I am inspired by the mystic notion of *epektasis*, first suggested by fourth century theologian Gregory of Nyssa (Meawad, 2019), and similar to Ekhart's notion of the ebullience of God. This is a notion of essential incompleteness, that Reality, Ground, Goodness or God, is a boundless mystery that cannot ever be reductively solved, and that this very attribute offers an unending path of struggle and of joy.

The writings of mystics and mystic scholars show ways that mystery might be studied by engaging rational devices, even though accessing mystery requires a leap beyond the rational. The works of religious mystics offer narrations of lived experience as well as aesthetic portrayals of mystery. Together, they parallel research methodologies of analytical and arts-integrating inquiries. Together, they offer a creational dialectic, which I hope that the reader might find as productive as I do. To engage that dialectic, I finish this essay with a poetic reflection.

Poetry allows a more aesthetic and intuitive ideation than analytic discourse. The following poems interpret notions of mystery discussed in this essay. Here's what I see in the poems, though I encourage your own readings. The poem "Rites" aesthetically describes an experience of mystic purification, engaged in the hope of accessing metaphysical mystery. The poem "Seven Psalms Enumerating One" uses human, poetic language, to explore the revealing/concealing nature of mystery (its truth and unknowability). And while this poem travels a via mostly *positiva*, the subsequent poem retreats to "*Via Negativa*". And the fourth poem (first published in Tsun Haggarty, 2021) breathes in awe at the "Inexhaustible" knowing of mystery.

Rites

Sometimes we're late and clatter up the stone steps to the atrium, but as soon as we pass
through the inner doors, we are enveloped in silence, so we pause, sigh

and slide over to our niche of warm wood, worn to a curved fit, and our bodies,
too, slip into the familiar gestures, we clasp our hands, we bow our heads, we kneel

in supplication, we touch forehead, lips, heart, willing the entry of sacred word
to mind, to voice, to heart, even as we wonder over what we hear, story and verse,

spoken and gathered in time and place and language long ago, today retold, returned,
relit, like candles in the soul, and our small flames glow, the hard wax warms, softens,

melts, and the scented smoke drifts, halo to halo, as the organ calls and carries our hymn
up to the dark peaks, while the sun shines through the coloured glass below, casting

a mosaic that softly ripples as it flows along walls, into corners and cracks, as babies stare
open-mouthed, and children hush, and mothers and fathers are fathered and mothered,

for, though cathedral be large as game-field, we come, not to run and kick and win,
but to loose tight fists and clenched jaws, to lose what keeps us from the One.

Seven Psalms Enumerating One

i
You are the Ground, the roots from which the tree emerges. Generations circle around the
heart, sprouting young and eager, maturing to give fruit. How puny each leaf. Should we try to
uproot, cut ourselves off, we wither to dry brown chaff.
ii
You are the Height of Heights, the sky into which spires, green or golden, point. As children we
build with bright-painted blocks of wood. As adults our towers are rods, rules. Yet our mortar
is pastiche; how quickly they tumble down.

iii

You are the Abundance, the plenty, the excess, the ever-renewing roadside raspberries, the sandwich trays at the food line, the community garden. An hour's wage is a frothy cappuccino. Or the grateful partaking of bread.

iv

You are the Thought of Being, Word in dialogue with World. Soil inhales presence and exhales prayer. Winds whisper and whistle and wail and roar. Waves rock and sing and surge. (While we bemoan, berate, bargain, forget to breathe back in).

v

You are the End, two planks to hell, to nothingness, the void we do not understand. For even as we retreat from pain, hide in small, close burrows, fear of death overwhelms and in nightmare panic we grasp for solace, hearts clamped in the press of night.

vi

You are the Mystery, that in death comes the point of life, in the point where nails were piked, at the point where life emptied. Out of that nothing came creation.

vii

You are the Beginning, the morning, the world's daily re-creation, sun rising, light spilling behind blackout blinds. Promise dawns. We get up, butter toast, come to table.

Via Negativa

We only know what a god is not,
that a god is not a king,
that a king is not a god—
nor is a god those who killed a king—

nor is a god those who killed a god who was not a king—
so by all rights, decapitate,
but not by axe,
for if you execute your god,
three more will take its place;

better fashion your god a crown of thorns
to pierce the ordinance of power,
better doubt eclipsed by death,
as clout caves in;

and if god is reborn
(Oneness reformed),
may the return be as Child,
a foundling, naked, mewling,
begging.

Inexhaustible

The divine is inexhaustible as sky.
(We thought we had rendered the heavens finite
with poisonous smogs and rocket blasts,
but the sky remains, impregnatable and impregnated.)
Sky is an excess, un-emptiable, ever-new,
shining beatifically each and every day
raining beneficence to the waters below, in ever-changing hues
and we are invited to dive in deep.

And what are we asked in return?
Nothing,
for the divine has no necessity of gratitude or praise,
and all our paeans, our odes, our rituals at the sacramental fount,
are how we splash our way
to immersion with the One.

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