

FAITH AND EXPERIENCE

IV: EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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Those who take their stand on their own, or others', religious experience sometimes claim that unsympathetic critics can be dismissed simply with the plea that their lack of experience disqualifies them from offering any kind of useful critique. Ninian Smart, in his essay *Understanding Religious Experience*, shows that such a claim need not be regarded as compelling. It is possible for us to have a certain theoretical understanding of situations of which we have no experience, no "existential understanding", and this theoretical understanding, even if it is not adequate for all purposes (it will not make a man a mystic, for instance), may still be quite adequate for some kind of philosophical comment to be made. If the mystic then seeks refuge in the further claim that his experiences are so transcendent as to be utterly inexpressible and incomprehensible to the rational mind, even so we are still entitled to ask whether they are truly *totally* inexpressible and incomprehensible. If they were, then it is unclear that the mystic himself is in any better position than his critics, and, like Cratylus, he ought to confine himself to wagging his finger and give up the attempt to communicate anything to anybody, himself included. But if mystical experiences or their objects are not *totally* beyond reach of reason and language, then there is at least some common ground between the mystic and his critics, and at least some basis therefore for non-mystical comment on mystical experiences.

We shall return later to the problem of the inexpressible (which is the subject of a whole essay in our volume, by Renford Bambrough). For the moment, I want to suggest a rather more drastic retort to the mystic who claims that his experience puts him beyond reach of criticism. It seems to me legitimate to raise

the possibility that his experience, far from putting him in a uniquely good position for understanding, *might* in fact be putting him in a very shaky epistemological position. (I am not arguing that it *does*; my contention is simply that the mere fact of experience does not of itself constitute a valid claim to superior wisdom. The evidential value of any kind of experience is determined by the whole context, it is not something that any experience can determine for itself).

- 1 *I know that Australia exists. I have seen it.*
The evidential value of this is nil, because no question has been raised which requires that kind of evidence.
- 2 *I know that the Loch Ness monster exists. I have seen it.*
The evidential value of this is minimal, because the matter is too problematic.
- 3 *I know all about madness. I am mad.*
We may accept that a madman understands madness in a different way from that in which a psychologist understands it; but it is not clear that his understanding is necessarily better or more accurate.
- 4 *Stop! You're taking out the wrong tooth. THIS is the tooth that's aching.*
The patient's evidence is useful, though possibly not necessary; but it is the dentist, not the patient, who is in a position to interpret it. The patient does not know which tooth is bad.
- 5 *It's stopped hurting now.*
This may be the crucial evidence that the dentist has completely removed the nerve.

Then there is Socrates' problem in the Apology: after interviewing experts in various fields he concluded each time that none of them really knew what he was doing. They all had a kind of *knack*. All they had was experience, but no understanding (at least not in the sense that Socrates understood understanding).

In the realm of mysticism itself, it seems that St Teresa did not regard experience as constituting a very good basis for understanding; she preferred learned directors to "spiritual" ones precisely because they were more likely to understand her position.

If experience is to put someone in a position of epistemological or intellectual advantage, it cannot be simply because of some quality inhering in the experience itself; it will be because of the way that the experience he has relates to the context in which he has it.

The author of the book of Job is not just wasting our time giving us chapters 1-37. The experience which transforms Job's awareness of God only *works* because of all that has gone before. If the Lord had simply appeared in a whirlwind and said the various

things he says, Job might not have known what it was all about.

Similarly when Elijah defeated the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, the people would not have gone home convinced that his God was truly God had the problematic not been set up the way it was. The experience was an experience *of God* because of the context in which it occurred.

This is the difficulty in any attempt to ground religious belief on experience, or at least on religious experience. Pike, in his reply to MacIntyre's paper in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, concedes his main thesis that visionary experience (and the same would surely apply to other kinds of mystical or religious experience) can never establish the existence of God; the most it can do is function as an autonomous source of knowledge within an already existing theological system. It cannot establish the system.

The problem of the ultimate origins of religious concepts is, of course, a difficult one; but it seems reasonable to wonder what sense there would be in claiming that they derive from some primordial religious experience. How would it be known that such an experience was "religious", was an "experience of God"? Surely the most we could claim was that religious concepts came to birth because of a certain kind of experience, which could then retrospectively be called religious.

Probably we have to say, at some stage, that people just *do* have certain concepts, they just do, as the Stoics said, have certain innate ideas.

The choice, then, cannot be between a self-justifying fideistic system and an entirely presuppositionless system. Some kind of fideism, Wittgensteinian or otherwise, is inevitable. The question is whether we are just going to be fatalistic about it, and let any system be reckoned as good (or bad) as any other, or whether we are going to accept that there can be argument. And where there is argument, there is the risk of conversion, and conversion is always liable to mean, not just the acceptance or surrendering of particular items of belief, but the restructuring of a whole system. Argument does not require there to be no presuppositions, or even that there should be agreed presuppositions, it requires that we believe it to be possible for us sometimes to come over to a whole new way of looking at things. (We may sometimes only realise afterwards that such a conversion had taken place). In extreme cases this will mean that there is almost a complete break, a complete discontinuity, between the way we saw things before and the way we see things now. More often it will mean that we move into a more comprehensive way of seeing things, in which previous ideas can continue to operate, but they will operate in a subtly different way.

So far it does not seem that mysticism has really thrown up any epistemological problems peculiarly its own. Pike shows that

it is possible to maintain that visions can be an autonomous source of knowledge within a religious system, but not that they can be an autonomous principle of validation of the fundamental premisses of the system. But this would seem to be true of any system of knowledge whatsoever.

Mavrodes, on the other hand, undertakes to show that none of the principles used by St Teresa to distinguish between true and false visions is absolutely watertight. If the Devil can disguise himself as an angel of light, he can also, for instance, disguise himself as a bishop assuring her that some alleged revelation is in accordance with sound doctrine. If he can manipulate the human sense organs to produce an impression of something which is not really there, he can carry on doing this every time the visionary applies any test at all to explore the reliability of his vision. There is absolutely no point which is systematically protected from every possibility of error.

Mavrodes concedes that there may in fact be some other way in which Teresa knows that certain things are genuine manifestations of God; but he insists that there is no logically infallible starting point which would lead to a wholly safe epistemological conclusion. And he is surely right. Only this serves merely to show that mystical experiences are liable to the same dangers as any other kind of experience. It is always possible to doubt. It is simply a practical necessity that you have to stop doubting somewhere; total doubt would be self-defeating. If everything we see is an hallucination, then the word no longer serves any purpose. The whole point in calling some experiences hallucinatory is that we refer to others as being non-hallucinatory. If it is to be possible to say anything at all about anything, we have to stop doubting somewhere. All that we are ever going to get in any system of knowledge is working hypotheses plus the hypothesis that they are in fact working. But this is at least a more workable hypothesis than the contrary proposal that we are being deluded the whole time.

It is only within some kind of system that criteria of reliability can function. Mavrodes asks the most radical question; but it is perhaps not the most rewarding question. Pike is more interested to see what can be salvaged within the kind of epistemological system implicit in the writings of such mystics as St Teresa. And he concludes that quite a lot can be salvaged. Though visionary experience cannot validate the whole system, it nevertheless can contribute positively and independently within the system to the development of knowledge and understanding. And this is patently an attractive view; it suggests that, once we have made our basic doctrinal option (that we believe in the Catholic faith, let us say), we can then proceed empirically, discovering experientially what it all means, rather than being confined to dreary intellectual theologizing.

But the position is rather more complicated than Pike allows. At least within the domain of Catholic mystical theology (which is Pike's chosen example), it is not really certain that any kind of mystical experience could ever be sufficient to establish any advance in knowledge or understanding. It might indeed be the *occasion* for such an advance, but the advance would only be legitimized when it could be shown that the alleged new doctrine fitted previously existing and accepted doctrine. And this is a stricter requirement than Pike realizes. Against MacIntyre he rightly reminds us that the canonical criteria for the authenticity of a vision are (1) that there is good reason to believe that it comes from God, and (2) that it is in conformity with established doctrine. Pike points out rightly that (1) cannot simply be reduced to (2), and that (2) does not mean that a vision is only to be accepted if it simply *repeats* previously known doctrine. The requirement of conformity is only a requirement of non-contradiction. However the essential onus of proofs rests on (1). (2) by itself can only operate negatively. The fact that an alleged vision contradicts received doctrine is not sufficient reason for accepting it. If a vision clears (2), then, it still needs to be confirmed positively. This might be done by simply showing that the proposed doctrine is a viable and helpful development of received doctrine, but in that case it will not be true that the vision is, strictly, the source of the new doctrine, as the new doctrine could have developed out of existing doctrine by the ordinary processes of theological reflection. The vision would be no more than the existential occasion for such a development to take place.

It is only on the basis of criterion (1) that a vision could be alleged to be, in any strict sense, a source of doctrine in its own right.

And it is not clear that (1) could ever be firmly established. If we accept Karl Rahner's very thorough analysis of the whole matter (in *Visions and Prophecies*), it is never possible in principle to make a completely sure analysis of which elements in a vision are directly produced by God, and which are due to the limitations and conditions of the visionary. This means that no specific formulation or image can be accepted simply on the basis of the experience itself, because in no case will it be absolutely clear how much of the visionary experience is actually guaranteed by God even where a genuine act of God is involved.

It might still be possible to maintain that though no new doctrine can ever be sufficiently validated by experience, nevertheless old doctrine can be confirmed by it, or, if not confirmed, at least made more vital to the person who has the experience.

But even this runs into difficulties. Can I ever really know that the experience I am having is an experience precisely of whatever point of doctrine it might be? I might be quite certain that I am ex-

periencing grace; but can I ever *know*? St Thomas, at any rate, would answer that I cannot.

This means that it may be legitimate in some circumstances to accept a vision or some other kind of experience as consolation and encouragement, but never as an epistemological criterion of the truth of any particular doctrine. As Rahner brings out well, it is in at least nearly every case going to be quite impossible to determine whether the objective reality is exactly coincident with what I feel. This usually does not matter, in all probability, for the purposes of piety; but it does matter if I start deriving beliefs from it, which are not already in principle available to me independently of my experience.

In fact, in some cases it is not at all clear what it would mean to establish that my experience was in full coincidence with an objective reality. Let us take the case discussed by Mavrodes, of seeing Christ at my side. St Teresa herself insists that the actual glorified body of Christ has never appeared on earth since he appeared to St Paul. So clearly she would not claim that he was literally and physically there in any ordinary sense in which bodies occupy a certain position in space and time.

Thus far we are in the excellent company of Rahner's well-documented study. But we must go on – since our interests are different from his – to tackle another difficulty. What would it mean to say that Teresa was *wrong* to see Christ at her side? Would we mean that he was not really there? But surely he is everywhere.

Are we to say, then, that he is always there, but not always visibly there? But is he “visibly” there even when Teresa sees him? If she is correct to take such visions as imaginary, it is not strictly true to say that he was “visible”, only that her senses were affected *as if* he were there visibly.

Rahner's analysis brings out the various possible ways we might account for her experience: it might be simply an hallucination or a particularly vivid imagination. Or it might be that Christ is directly manipulating her sense organs. Or it could be that he is directly manipulating something in her, which overflows into a kind of sensory experience. Or it might be that her state of grace has in some way rarefied her perceptions so that she senses spiritual realities in a way not unlike the way in which psychic people sense spiritual realities, and that on occasion this psychic or spiritual sensitivity results in an apparent sense experience. (For this last possibility we might refer to St Vincent Ferrer, who alleges that at a certain point of spiritual purification we will begin to “see angelic spirit, then divine”. He seems to think that this is a natural development of spiritual perception, not requiring further specific acts of God to lead to some kind of spiritual vision).

It is very unclear what kind of epistemological question we can really ask in face of all of this. It seems that the only question we

can ask is: what difference is it going to make if any one of the possibilities listed is true? And it is unclear that there is any difference that is going to be epistemologically interesting. It will become interesting if, for example, the visionary not only sees Christ present but also sees or hears him bidding him *do* something. If we accept the suggestion that Christ is actually manipulating the sense organs directly, then presumably the 'sense' content of the experience can be taken to be divinely guaranteed. If the apparent sense experience is merely a kind of overflow from what is in fact only an 'inner', non-sensory act of Christ, then the visionary details are supplied by the recipient of the experience and do not have independent authority.

But how on earth could we determine which was which? Presumably we shall in fact make our decision on the basis of what we think of the alleged command. St Jerome's famous dream is a case in point. Taking it at first as a true vision of Christ, true even in detail, he felt himself obliged to abandon his beloved classics. Later he could dismiss it as just a dream. But he could, surely, quite properly have continued to maintain that there was a genuine act of God there, warning him to devote himself more to scripture and less to Cicero; only he had at first overinterpreted it.

Another case in point is provided by the apparition at Fatima. People sometimes talk as if we had been absolutely commanded by our Lady to append that rather ugly little prayer to each decade of the Rosary, so that any refusal to do so is flagrant disobedience to her. The alternative, they would say, is to deny that it was an apparition of our Lady at all. Of course we are perfectly free to make such a denial if we want to. Ecclesiastical approval of Fatima has no *dogmatic* authority. But there is in fact a third possibility, which is perhaps more attractive: we may accept that our Lady was in some way making herself known to the children, but regard the details as due to them and not to her.

But apart from such cases, where a decision has to be made as to what we are to do about something contained in a vision by way of precept or prohibition, surely the only question we can profitably ask is: what effect has such and such a vision had? And that is not an epistemological question at all, because it is perfectly possible for us to abuse a genuine gift of God, and also perfectly possible for us to make good use of something which is actually demonic in origin.

It does not seem, then, that any kind of visionary experience can by itself validate any particular doctrinal development or option. And the same must surely apply to any other kind of religious experience too.

Mavrodes in his article makes a distinction between what he calls "intentional experience" (by which he means experience *of* something) and what he calls "sign experience", by which he

means the kind of experience which leads us to *infer* that something is going on – for instance a diabetic may know that a certain kind of feeling indicates hypoglycaemia. In the religious sphere, he proposes similarly that we distinguish between the kind of experience which contains directly some kind of object (such as a vision of Christ), and the kind of experience which leads us to infer some kind of presence or act of God (Rolle's experience of heat springs to mind as an illustration). He treats only of intentional experience.

Our analysis so far, however, suggests that this distinction is not nearly as clear with regard to religious experience as it is in other fields. Even if I "see" an archangel standing distinctly by my waste-paper basket in the corner of my room, I would not be entitled to claim that he was simply "there" for me to see in just the same way that the waste-paper basket is there. If we take it that my experience is veridical, we must mean by that that I am responding to something which is truly going on. But surely the same can be said of someone who truly senses a particular act of God in the form of a sensation of heat. There is indeed a distinction to be made in the sense that I do not exactly "infer" the presence of the archangel from my vision of him, whereas I do infer the act of God from the sensation of warmth. But the epistemological problem in each case would seem to be identical. (Granted that Austin is right to object to my saying that I *infer* the presence of cheese when I see a plate of cheese in front of me, the concept of sense-data or some equivalent would seem to be useful when I am dealing with preternatural visions, because there is a real puzzle on any account about the relationship between my experience and objective reality).

It seems that whatever kind of "sense" I may have of a supernatural presence, the objective correlative of it cannot simply be said to be a "real presence". It must in some way be a real *act*. The theoretical distinction we may make (though even this is not wholly clear) is not between seeing Christ when he is there and seeing him when he is not there, for he is always there (or, with rather more complexity, between seeing an archangel when he is there and seeing when he is not there, because it is far from clear what it means for an archangel to be or not to be there – St Thomas, anyhow, understands the presence of an angel in some particular place to mean that he is *active* there – Ia q.52 art. 1; Quodl. 1,3,1). The distinction must be between seeing (or sensing) a presence of Christ which is in accordance with some way in which he is really showing himself, and seeing him in some way which does not accord with any particular act of his.

This means surely that the essential epistemological question (this is brought out excellently by Pike) is: by what criteria do we judge that we are truly dealing with an act of God?

I do not wish to go into the traditional answers to this question; they are excellently presented by Pike, and indeed by Mavrodes, though he points out the whole way through that none of them can ever provide absolute certainty, because even if the criteria are sound (and how can we be sure that they are?), can we ever be certain that we are applying them correctly? But they are probably never meant to give us more than a rule of thumb.

I want rather to look at two elements in the traditional criteriology which seem to me to be more puzzling than they are sometimes given credit for.

The first is the argument from miracles. Pike does not deal with this, but it features several times in Rahner's discussion. It is alleged that any revelation which calls for serious public attention will normally be confirmed by the evidence of miracles. But this would seem to require that we can always easily and with certainty recognise a miracle when we meet one. And is this true? What counts as a miracle? Evidently it must be something startling, something which attracts our attention as being unusual and hard to explain. But if a miracle is to attest the validity of a revelation—which means confirming that we really have to do with an act of God—it can only be counted as such if it is not only puzzling, but unambiguously due to an act of God. And it is hard to see how anything at all could be unambiguously an act of God. Even if we were to witness an act of creation *ex nihilo*, how could we tell empirically that that is what we were witnessing? Of course a startling display of power, such as the healing of a hundred cripples, could serve to attract attention, which might provide the occasion for effectively convincing preaching. But that is, to put it bluntly, advertising rather than argument. It may be practical, but it could never amount to a conclusive philosophical argument. If we are on the side of Elijah, we may be glad that he was able to convince the people of the truth of his religion. We may even wish to say that there was an act of God there. But all that Elijah actually *proved* was that he had access to some power which the priests of Baal could not get access to. That power need not be God. Similarly when Moses was in competition with Pharaoh's magicians, he defeated them all right, but that could never prove that it was God at work through him. His success might indeed be a reason for listening to what he had to say. But it would not of itself prove him right about matters theological.

All that could ever result strictly from any strange phenomenon is the awareness that science cannot yet explain everything. I do not see how you could ever, by merely empirical investigation, conclude that there was something there that could only be due to an act of God. And that means that a miracle, in the sense of a wonderful work *produced by God*, can never be demonstrated to have occurred. And this means that strange happenings can never,

by themselves, prove that anything else, such as a revelation, is an act of God.

A possible way round this conclusion might be to argue that if somebody invokes the name of Jesus Christ, and an apparent miracle results, then we ought to take it as reliable because God would not allow us to be deceived. The invocation of the name of Christ, which is the name by which we are saved, will protect us from deception.

To this there are several replies. First, we would have to concede that this argument would never be conclusive except within a context of belief in Christ. It could never count as a proof for the world at large.

And secondly, it need not be taken as conclusive even for a believer, as there is no reason to believe that the invocation of the name of Christ does in all circumstances offer a total guarantee of protection from deception. The gospel warns us that there will be those at the last day who prophesied in the name of Christ and are yet disowned by him.

And thirdly, is it so self-evident that God himself could never deceive us? It is an important argument in much theological and spiritual writing that God does not deceive. It is used, for instance, by Karl Rahner. But Pike is quite right to ask, in an appendix to his article, whether it is really necessary to believe it. It is, of course, in a general way perfectly possible to conceive of a God who goes out of his way to deceive people. I understand that the Seventh Day Adventists explain all the archaeological evidence for evolution as being due to a trap set by God to mislead unbelievers, and this is not incompatible with some of the nastier things ascribed to God in the bible. For instance he claims to have given his people bad laws, by which they shall not live (Ezek. 20:25f), a text which is important in some early Christian attempts to make sense of the Old Law.

Possibly we regard this kind of thing as only applicable to God in a highly figurative sense. As philosophers we may not feel obliged to take it seriously. But there is a much more interesting way in which the problem of divine deception comes at least into Christian theology. Origen suggests that there are some situations in which God deceives people because that is the best way to educate them. If he were, so to speak, to declare himself honestly, people would misunderstand him.

There is, perhaps, a certain element of deception inherent in the very idea of any revelation of God, in the sense that whatever God does to manifest himself to us, we can only receive it in accordance with our own capacity, and that will always to some extent be liable to distort the message. But this does not involve deception in the sense that a deliberately wrong impression is given, where a right impression could have been given. If God

reveals himself as being like an old old man (the Ancient of Days), of course it is correct to say that that is not really what he looks like. But then what does he really look like? For that matter, what does anything really look like (Austin's problem)? What does a banana really look like? It all depends on how far away from it I am, what angle of vision I adopt, and so on.

But in the case of a banana, if I am interested enough, I could build up a tolerably complete visual impression of what it looked like, by studying it from various angles and from various distances, by examining it by daylight, by candlelight, by moonlight, and so on. What would it mean to do this to God? Surely there is something almost contradictory about the idea that I could get round God (comprehend God) like this.

In the essay already mentioned, MacIntyre in fact suggests that there is something logically improper about the idea of any experience of God. And if by experience of God we meant that we somehow grasped God as he really is in himself, then MacIntyre may well be right. But there is not necessarily any logical objection to the idea of a finite experience of something that is in itself infinite. I can claim to have seen the Indian Ocean even if I have not examined its every inch and every fathom. The little bit that I have seen stands for all of it. And if anyone (except a very cantankerous philosopher) objected that I had not *really* seen it, I should assume that he meant that my very mild acquaintance with it was nothing in comparison with some other, richer kind of acquaintance ("You have not really seen the Indian Ocean unless you have seen it by moonlight from Durban beach on a warm summer's night . . .").

There is no strict logical objection to the claim to experience God provided that this is understood to mean no more than a claim to partial experience. As Moore points out, experience can never prove *all* theological claims, as God is always "more than could be confirmed by the data of . . . experiences".

But what is going to count as even a limited experience of God? In one sense, obviously, we can say that we experience God in experiencing creation precisely as creation (as not self-generating not ultimate, and so on). We can also say that we experience God in the sacraments and in our own morally good deeds and decisions. But these would seem to fall short of what we mean by mystical experience. (Maybe we ought to ask ourselves, though, whether these less mystical experiences may not be more important. It is surely more important to perform a charitable act than to have even an authentic vision).

If we want to talk about a simple presence of God in creation, in the sacraments, in the heart and mind and will of the believer, even there we must remember that what we mean by presence must always include an element of God's act (cf Ia q.8; Quodl.

11, 1). When we are dealing with more mystical types of experience, it is even more essential to relate them to the act of God, rather than to a mere "presence" (which could be regarded as purely passive before my experiencing, like a tree merely being looked at).

God is not present, then, simply as the object of authentic mystical experience; he is present as an agent. And this being so, there are surely two different ways in which we might find ourselves wanting to speak of a genuine act of God, while at the same time maintaining our right to criticize.

One possibility is that explored by Karl Rahner, that God acts in a spiritual way upon some deeper level of a person's being, and the person reacts by producing some kind of sensory or imaginative experience which is not itself guaranteed by the act of God. This allows us to say that in some circumstances people are seeing or saying things which are not strictly true in response to an authentic movement of grace. It allows us, for example, to accept that the "shewings of divine love" experienced by Julian of Norwich did genuinely come from God, without having to commit ourselves to the belief that there was actually a cold wind blowing in Jerusalem on Good Friday.

But there is another possibility, that God, so to speak, accepts our terms and operates within them, that he translates himself into the terms which our minds and imaginations can grasp, even if there could have been, in principle, a better way of disclosing himself. To take a fictitious but canonical example, God declares in no uncertain terms that he is going to destroy Nineveh, which he in fact has no intention of doing. Jonah is, in a way, quite right to feel cheated.

This allows us to say that there may be authentic acts of God which are nevertheless not to be taken as endorsing anything at all as absolutely right and true. For instance, we may want to say that God revealed to the Israelites the principle of "an eye for an eye". We may also want to say that it is an inadequate and even erroneous principle.

Perhaps the paradoxical concept of God's permitting will could be used here, to express the belief that God is in some way involved in a situation as its First Cause, but not in such a way that the result can be taken as an immediate expression of God's will. If people insist on viewing God as a kind of sugar-Daddy who gives them whatever they pray for, he may consent to work at least to some extent within their frame of reference. It does not mean that they would be entitled to infer from the "success" of their prayers that theirs was the true understanding of what either God or prayer is all about.

For Origen the essential key to the understanding of the diverse and sometimes deceptive ways in which God reveals himself is

the concept of providence and divine paedagogy. I suspect that this is the only way in which we shall really be able to make sense of the whole problem of the reliability of religious experience. The problems we have been considering in this article make it very difficult to see how any kind of experience could ever have any genuine epistemological significance by itself, as a source or even as a confirmation of any doctrinal option or position. But a belief in divine providence would allow us to view at least some kinds of experience, in certain circumstances, as being reliable as part of a whole programme of education and formation, in which we are subjectively prepared for a fuller apprehension of God.

The epistemological question then shifts to what grounds we have for believing in providence, but that is tantamount to asking what grounds we have for christian belief as a whole, and that is at least a more frequented and surer path of enquiry than that of mystical epistemology.

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