

# COMMUNICATIONS

## IN DEFENSE OF A MYSTICAL ONTOLOGY

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In a recent article<sup>1</sup>, Norman Melchert, while adopting a very sensitive and aware attitude towards mystical experience, nevertheless argues that ontological claims arising from unitive experience are unwarranted; and this for two reasons. Firstly, he maintains that to move from the fact that there is an experience of loss of the sense of the particularity of self to an ontological assertion of the nonindividuality of the experience is to make an invalid leap. And secondly, he argues that this mistaken leap into ontology arises from an error in epistemology, *viz.*, that knowledge is characterisable as a state of the knower *alone*.

In this note, I shall argue that (1) Melchert has not shown that an epistemological error has occurred, and that therefore (2) the assertion that ontological claims arising from unitive experience are unwarranted is an unjustified one.

Melchert's demonstration of the epistemological error in mysticism may be summarised in the following series of propositions:

- (1) "knowing that p" entails that "p is true"; which means —
- (1a) epistemic validity entails ontical status as determined by the criteria of onticity inherent in physical realism;
- (2) but for the mystic, the entailment relation is denied (or read incorrectly) and knowledge is viewed as solely characterisable as a state of the knower;
- (3) therefore, the mystical state is not an epistemic one.

Melchert's argument as it stands is certainly valid. But, let us approach it from the perspective of a traveller on the mystic way (thereby allowing *him also* a measure of partisanship). With respect to proposition (1a), the traveller will certainly wish to deny that ontical determinations are dependent upon the criteria of physical realism, that is, sensuous and perceptual experience. If he does not wish to reject them altogether as illusory, he will at least only accord them a relative epistemological value, and not an absolute value.

This rejection of the ultimacy of the criteria of physical realism will entail the rejection of proposition (1), or if not its rejection then its reformulation. For, proposition (1) is merely a disguised version of proposition (1a), the latter revealing the assumption of physical realism inherent in the former. This is not to assert that the traveller denies the necessity of a relationship between epistemology and ontology, but rather it is to maintain that the traveller denies any relation of entailment between the two. But, this does not imply, as *is* implied by proposition (3), that therefore knowledge is viewed as solely characterisable by the state of the knower. Rather, since there is in the unitive experience no longer any distinction between knower, known, and state of knowing, the distinction between epistemology and ontology is dissolved,

knowing and being are one.

This closing of the gap between epistemology and ontology during the unitive experience also closes the gap between e.g. the loss of the sense of the particularity of the self and the post-experiential ontological assertion of the nonindividuality of the experiencer. For, in the state of normal consciousness subsequent to the unitive experience, proposition (1) is perfectly acceptable. If p is the statement "Ultimately I am one with the Absolute", then knowing that p does entail the truth of p, for the truth of the latter is verified by the prior experience.

Therefore, by the closing of the gap between epistemology and ontology in the unitive experience, the gap between such experience and ontological claims made on the basis of it is also thus closed.

In conclusion, my aim has not been to argue that all ought to be travellers on this particular way, but only to show why those who have set out ought not to return for the reasons offered by Melchert.

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*Footnotes*

1. N. Melchert, "Mystical Experience and Ontological Claims" in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 37, 1977, pp. 445-463.