Religious Awe: Potential Contributions of Negative Theology to Psychology, "Positive" or Otherwise

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Abstract

A hallmark of Christian mysticism is negative theology, which refers to the school of thought that gives prominence to negation in reference to God. By denying the possibility to name God, negative theology cuts at the very root of our cognitive makeup—the human impulse to name and put things into categories—and thereby situates us "halfway between a 'no longer' and a 'not yet'" (Iser, 1978, p. 213), a temporality in which "the past is negated, but . . . the present is not yet formulated" (Iser, 1978, p. 217). The affective corollary of this "no longer" and "not yet" state is the "dark night of the soul" that mystics are known to have bouts of. One particular variant of the "dark night of the soul" is awe, which will be the focus of this paper. My investigation starts with an introduction to the two primary themes of negative theology—negativity and self-reflexivity, followed by a critique of Keltner and Haidt's model of awe, which is compared with Rudolf Otto's phenomenology of mysticism in general and religious awe in particular. In the concluding section, I examine the relevance of religious awe to contemporary life on the one hand, and to emotion research on the other.

The soul's greatness takes its measure from its capacity to achieve the flaming vision by which the soul becomes at home in pain. (Heidegger, 1971, p. 18.)

Negative theology refers to the school of thought that gives prominence to negation in reference to God. St. Augustine's statement is a fine example: "God is wise *without* wisdom, good *without* goodness, powerful *without* power" (quoted by Derrida, 1992, p. 113). This mode of thinking and speaking has been a hallmark of Christian mysticism, in which: "Negation is both a means of distinguishing mystical experience from other acts of cognition—"unknowing" from "knowing," for example—and a corrective to misleading propositions about the being of God" (Lees, 1983, p. 7). How do we understand this "ascendancy of negative over affirmative values" (Lees, 1983, p. 137) in negative theol-

ogy?   Philo, the "Father of negative theology," explains that mystics use negation to emphasize the fact that God is beyond all predicates and categories:

> While a host of words may be derived from God's activities, when we aspire to speak of the essence, the only words we may use are negative ones–God is unseen, uncreate, incomparable, incomprehensible, ineffable. In truth, he is unnameable: it is due to our weakness in needing a name that we are given the title "God of Abram, Isaac and Jacob" to use. (Williams, 2000, P. 16)

Note that the negation in negative theology is self-reflexive in that it does not pertain to the essence of God so much as our assumptions of the same. By denying the possibility to name God, negative theology cuts at the very root of our cognitive makeup—the human impulse to name and put things into categories. To the extent that this self-reflexive negativity forces us to go back to the drawing board, to question our basic assumptions of reality or God, it raises to a higher notch what is referred to by Piaget as "accommodation."   The fact that this radical accommodation requires the failure of assimilation as its prelude is best captured by the temporality of negativity which, as Iser points out in the context of literature, situates us "halfway between a 'no longer' and a 'not yet'" (Iser, 1978, p. 213), a temporality in which "the past is negated, but . . . the present is not yet formulated" (p. 217). The affective corollary of this "no longer" and "not yet" state is, I believe, the "dark night of the soul" that mystics are known to have bouts of. The fourteenth century mystic Johannes Tauler (c.1300-1361) is wont to wax eloquent on this subject:

> An extremely rough path lies ahead of him, dark and lonely, and as he is led through it, God deprives him of everything He had given him before. The man is now left so completely on his own that he knows nothing at all of God; he is brought to such desolation that he wonders whether he was ever on the right path, whether he has a God or not, whether he really exists . . . . (Shrady, 1985, P. 143)

   One particular variant of the "dark night of the soul" is awe, which will be the focus of this paper. The following investigation starts with an introduction to the two primary themes of negative theology—negativity and self-reflexivity, followed by a comparison of Keltner and Haidt's model of awe (in press) with Rudolf Otto's phenomenology of mysticism in general and religious awe in particular. In the concluding section, I examine the relevance of religious awe to contemporary life on the one hand, and to psychology of emotion on the other.

A Self-Reflexive Turn of Negativity

Negative theology consists of two inter-related themes: negativity and self-reflexivity. The former is self-evident, whereas the latter requires some explanation. Self-reflexivity refers to the doubling back of consciousness or language such that it refers to (talks about, being aware of) itself. In technical terms, self-reflexivity is defined by Hofstadter as "a strange loop, an interaction between levels in which the top level reaches back down towards the bottom level and influences it, while at the same time being itself determined by the bottom level" (1979, p. 709). He points out that "where language does create strange loops is when it talks about itself, whether directly or indirectly. Here, something *in* the system jumps out and acts *on* the system, as if it were *outside* the system" (p. 691). Let me first start with a mundane example of self-reflexivity in literature. As Iser points out, self-reflexivity is essential to the reading experience: "The ability to perceive oneself during the process of participation is an essential quality of the aesthetic experience . . . [the reader] is involved, and he watches himself being involved" (1978, p. 134). Due to this self-reflexive consciousness, "as we read, we react to what we ourselves have produced" (Iser,1978, p. 128). Thus, when discrepancies arise between our expectations and the text, we cast a doubting glance less likely toward the text than self-reflexively at our own assumptions, in the words of Iser, "the discrepancies produced by the reader make him dispute his own gestalten" (1978, p. 131).

In the language of mysticism self-reflexivity tends to go hand in hand with negation. A good example is found in the following comments by Gregory of Nyssa (c. 330-93) concerning the name he gave to Christ, "O thou whom my soul loveth": "This is the name I give Thee, for Thy name . . . is inexpressible . . . . But this name expresses Thy goodness and *the attitude of my soul towards Thee*" (Lees, 1983, p. 63, emphasis added). What seems to be happening here is that with the awareness of divine transcendence (the "inexpressible" nature of Christ), language has taken a self-reflexive turn—instead of referring to the object of emotion, it refers to the emoter himself. As Lees points out with respect to the mystics' use of divine names: "A shift in the function of nominal epithets has taken place here, so that they are no longer directly descriptive of the nature of their object which is Christ, but rather indicate obliquely his relationship with humanity" (1983, p. 63).

In this self-reflexive turn of language a chiasmatic crossing over of the positive and the negative has also taken place: the mystic starts out with negation of the possibility to name God, but ends up with the "loving speech" of encomium—"O thou whom my soul loveth." Indeed as Williams points out, negative theology is particularly committed to "loving speech" (2000, p. 218). For instance, Pseudo-Dionysius, the eminent mystic in the tradition of negative theology,

preferred to "'praise' the divine rather than to describe it" (Williams, 2000, p. 80).

To understand the self-reflexive nature of this "loving speech" of the mystics, let us examine some mundane expressions of love. "At peak moments of love, the lover . . . may say over and over, 'I love you.' And this he says not as narrating a fact . . . but rather as an exclamation, not so much to communicate a fact to the loved one as simply to give expression to love . . . . Thus he may exclaim it even at times when there is no one to hear him, neither the loved one nor any other." (Toner, 1968, pp. 150-151) In this quotidian example of "loving speech," language is behaving rather strangely. The statement "I love you" in the above scenario is not information meant for the beloved, but information for the emoter him or herself—as Gendlin (1997/1962) points out rightly that in order to experience meaning, we need to tell ourselves what we mean. In other words, information has taken a self-reflexive turn. "What is even more common and more significant is the exclamation of the beloved's name over and over . . . . George MacDonald once remarked somewhere that all prayer can be summed up in the words, 'Oh God!' So also in romantic songs and poetry, the lover at the highest pitch of love finds that one word, the beloved's name, says all, as 'Maria' (*West Side Story*) . . ." (Toner, 1968, p. 151). "Maria" is not used as predication, information, or proposition about the object of one's love. Rather, it is an exclamation of love, a confession for the ears of no one else but the lover himself.

But "loving speech" alone is not enough—it is it's inextricable connection with negation that makes the mystic's encomium unique. Derrida opines that the encomium is a more suitable expression for transcendence because it "celebrates and names what 'is' . . . beyond Being" (1992, p. 137). Marion claims that it is in the distance brought about by the awareness of transcendence that "the reversal of denomination into praise becomes inevitable" (1991, p. 76). He goes on to say that "Distance neither asks nor tolerates that one fill it but that one traverse it, in an infinite praise that feeds on the *impossibility* or, better, the *impropriety* of the category [categorical statement concerning God]" (Marion, 1991, p. 76, emphasis added). What are the implications of negative theology for a psychological model of awe?

A Psychological Model of Awe

The "Prototypical Model of Awe"

Keltner and Haidt (in press, hereafter K & H) have proposed a model for the prototypical cases of awe, which consist of two central themes: "perceived vastness and a need for accommodation." This model also specifies "eliciting situations" consisting of social elicitors (such as powerful leaders), physical elicitors (such as grand vista), and
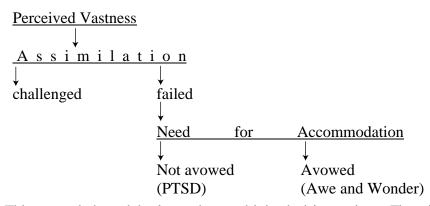
cognitive elicitors (such as grand theory), and peripheral or "flavoring" features of the eliciting stimuli, such as threat, beauty, supernatural, and so on. Notably marginalized in this model are the two central themes of negative theology: negativity and self-reflexivity.

According to K & H's model of awe, negative valence is an optional feature of awe, depending on whether the "flavoring" feature of "threat" is in the picture or not—and of all the eliciting-situations, only tornado is unambiguously assigned the feature of "threat." Equally marginalized is self-reflexivity. The primary focus of the model is analysis of eliciting-stimuli, ranging from the primary feature of "vastness" to the "flavoring" features of threat, beauty, etc. In contrast, analysis of response—"need for accommodation"—is relatively weak.

Although negativity is a component in the authors' definition of the "need for accommodation"—"prototypical awe involves a challenge to or *negation* of mental structures when they fail to make sense of an experience of something vast" (Keltner & Haidt, in press, emphasis added)—it is not taken seriously enough in this model to address the following issues: a. when mental structures fail to assimilate new experiences, there is the possibility of trauma, and the question needs to be addressed as to what tips the balance between awe and pathological reactions to failed assimilation such as PTSD. b. There is no evidence of failed assimilation, let alone accommodation, in the core phenomenon of awe referred to by Keltner and Haidt as the "primordial awe." Following Weber and Durkheim, the authors suggest that "the primordial form of awe is the feeling a low status individual feels towards a powerful other. This feeling is likely to involve reverence, devotion, and the inclination to subordinate one's own interests and goals in deference to those of the powerful figure, or group" (Keltner & Haidt, in press). To the extent that "fearful submission to power" is a biologically based response to the cues of social dominance, as the authors have suggested, and to the extent hat "awe reinforces and justifies social hierarchies," we are dealing with scenarios of assimilation, not its negation and failure.

An Expanded Model of Awe

Incorporating negativity and self-reflexivity into K and H's model, I propose an expanded model of awe, as outlined by Figure 1 below:

<u>Perceived Vastness</u>
↓
<u>A s s i m i l a t i o n</u>
↓   ↓
challenged   failed
↓
<u>Need   for   Accommodation</u>
↓   ↓
Not avowed   Avowed
(PTSD)   (Awe and Wonder)

This expanded model of awe has multiple decision points. First, it makes a clear distinction between challenged and failed assimilations. The type of awe that stems from "fearful response to power" falls under the category of challenged but reinforced assimilation, which consists of a temporary threat to the extant knowledge structure, and subsequent reinforcement of order and hierarchy of the familiar world. The function of emotion in this scenario is regulative, as the authors point out that awe "designates the subject's subordinate status vis-à-vis others" (Keltner & Haidt, in press). In this scenario the "need for accommodation" does not arise. The expanded model of awe postulates that it is not until assimilation is not only challenged but also fails that warrants the "need for accommodation" with its concomitant "dark night of the soul" syndrome.

Failed assimilation leads to another decision point: if the need for accommodation is not avowed, there may be impotent submission to raw power, resulting in PTSD or related symptoms. If the need for accommodation is avowed, we may witness the emotional syndromes of awe and wonder. These multiple decision points bring into sharp relief the two factors that loom large in negative theology, namely negativity and self-reflexivity—the former accentuates the failure of assimilation; and the later brings the emoter back to the drawing board for a radical revision of his or her model of the world (successful accommodation). They also show graphically the prominence given to the subject pole over the object pole of perception: further processing beyond the challenged assimilation phase consists primarily of processing one's own responses—the failed assimilation and the felt need for accommodation—rather than the attributes of the eliciting condition. This focus on the subjective pole of perception makes it possible for us to distinguish between individuals whose knowledge structure is reinforced after being temporarily challenged and those whose model of the world is expanded or radically revised. This difference explains why some people become more rigid, whereas others more flexible after a traumatic experience. According to the expanded model of

awe, the difference between these two responses to challenge—reinforced assimilation versus radical accommodation—is a difference in degrees of self-reflexivity. This is consistent with the thesis of Buchanan who argues in the context of AI that higher degrees of self-reflexivity, which is referred to as the "metalevel" of cognition, lies at the very core of creativity: "I believe the key to building more creative [AI] programs is to give them the ability to reflect on and modify their own frameworks and criteria. That is, I believe that the key to creativity is at the metalevel" (2001, p. 13).

Is this model compatible with the insider's (mystic's) experience? We turn to Rudolf Otto's phenomenological analysis of mysticism in general and religious awe in particular for an answer.

Otto's Phenomenology of Mysticsm and Awe

Radical Negation of the Self

According to Otto the defining characteristic of mysticism is "self annihilation," otherwise referred to as "self-depreciation" which he considers as "one of the chiefest and most general features of mysticism"(1970/1923, p. 21). Also referred to as "creature-consciousness" or "creature-feeling," self annihilation expresses "the note of submergence into nothingness before an overpowering, absolute might of some kind " (p. 10). Otto gives as an example Abraham's exclamation in Genesis: "Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes" (Gen. Xviii. 27, cited in Otto, p. 9). Another example is Job's response after his dialogue with God: "I knew of thee then only by report, but now I see thee with my own eyes. Therefore I melt away; I repent in dust and ashes" (*The new English Bible*, 1970, Job, 42: 5-6). What becomes immediately apparent in these anecdotes of self annihilation is the centrality of two themes in negative theology—negativity and self-reflexivity. It is when negation takes a self-reflexive turn that one arrives at the most radical form of accommodation: "I melt away," as Job puts it. This syndrome of self annihilation is consistent with Deikman's claim that "the loss of self" is central to mysticism (1966).

Attributes of the Holy

Otto claims that the flip side of the "nothingness" of the self is the overwhelming Other: "It is especially in relation to this element of majesty or absolute overpoweringness that the creature-consciousness. . . comes upon the scene, as a sort of shadow or subjective reflection of it" (1970/1923, p. 20). This is consistent with Keltner and Haidt's hypothesis of perceived vastness as an essential condition of awe, except that Otto focuses on the "threat" aspect of "perceived vastness." The "holy" has many epithets, one of which is "mysterious."

"The mysterious," writes Otto (1970/1923), "is that which lies altogether outside what can be thought, and is . . . the utterly and 'wholly other'" (p. 141). Another epithet of the "holy" is "numinous." This "numinous something," says Otto, refers to "an entity from beyond the borders of 'natural' experience" (p. 127). Furthermore Otto claims that the "holy" "eludes our understanding," because it is "a baffling 'exception' to law . . ." (p. 147). In a nutshell, the "holy" refers to that which is an exception to law, or outside the natural order of things, and therefore necessarily shocks the mind, because it far exceeds all known mental schemes to comprehend it with.

By focusing on the "threat" component of the stimuli (the holy), Otto calls our attention to the affinity between awe and trauma, which also involves an overwhelming encounter with that which far exceeds the capacity of the mind to comprehend, let alone integrate into self knowledge. This affinity with trauma is evident in the connection between religious "awe" and fear. When Otto writes that "the awe of holiness" is not itself "*simply* 'fear' in face of what is absolutely overpowering, before which there is no alternative to blind, awe-struck obedience" (p. 51, emphasis added), he is not denying the fact that awe nevertheless does contain the element of fear or anxiety. Thus we need to address the question raised by Averill: "What tips the balance so that spirituality rather than anxiety or depression is experienced?" (1998, p. 117). Averill speculates that it is the mystic's openness to or avowal of ("embrace") their own experience that makes the difference: "When cognitive structures are threatened with collapse, a person can seek to escape; give up in despair; or embrace the dissolution as a sign of union with a more encompassing reality. Depending on which tendency predominates, the result may be anxiety, depression, or a spiritual experience" (1998, p. 117). To investigate this possibility, we take a closer look at self-reflexive avowal.

Self-reflexivity

Let us go back to Abraham's statement in Genesis cited before: "Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes" (Gen. Xviii. 27). Otto's analysis of this passage is consistent with the prototypical model of awe, which we recall, consists of the dual appraisal of "perceived vastness" at the object pole and "need for accommodation" at the subject pole of perception: "Thus, in contrast to 'the overpowering' of which we are conscious as an object over against the self, there is the feeling of one's own submergence, of being but 'dust and ashes' and nothingness," writes Otto (p. 20). But Otto does not stop with the observation of "the emotion of a creature, submerged and overwhelmed by . . . that which is supreme above all creatures." He goes on to say that Abraham is overwhelmed not only by the presence of the "holy" but also by his own "nothing-

ness." He writes: "It is the emotion of a creature, *submerged and over-whelmed by its own nothingness* in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures" (p. 10, emphasis added). This marks the self-reflexive turn, by which, to borrow a delightful phrase from St. Thomas, "the understanding turning upon itself with a full turn" (cited in Gendlin, 1997/1962, p. 182), so as to contemplate on the very basis of one's own being. In light of the distinction made by the literary scholar Hartman (1964) between perceptions "visionary " and visual, we may call this reflexive mode of perception "visionary," in the sense that Abraham sees, not "with" his sense perceptions, but "through" them, his own mode of being as nothing but "dust and ashes." This "inward sinking or turning," so characteristic of the "reflexive con-sciousness" is referred to by Hartman (1964), in his analysis of Word-sworth's poetry, as "doubled shock." Commenting on Wordsworth's poem, "The solitary reaper," Hartman writes, "There is an inward sinking, as if the mind, having been moved by the Highland girl, is now moved by itself. The mystery lies in that sudden deepening, or doubled shock" (pp. 6-7). Note the recursive loop in the "mind" being "moved" by its own responses to the stimuli.

This self-reflexive turn is also evident in Abraham's self-deprecia-tion. Having been overwhelmed by the "wholly other," Abraham is now overwhelmed by his own feelings of "nothingness." Thus the mind seems to be "shocked" twice in the mystical contemplation. The first shock is involuntary, but the second one is voluntary–the "doubled shock" is a trauma avowed and owned by the self in its "inward sinking." Whereas involuntary trauma results in symptoms, the avowed shock in contemplative thought harbors the possibilities of healing, an experience usually referred to by the mystics as "a new heaven and new earth." To illustrate this point, let us turn to the story of Job.

Since it is well known, the story of Job can be quickly adumbrated as follows: Job is a righteous man who suffered greatly. Having lost eve-rything he had—property, children, and health–Job wanted to know why. Claiming his innocence, and rejecting the law of retribution pro-fessed by his pious friends, Job demanded an answer from God Him-self. It was after rounds of futile debate between Job and his pious friends, "against the juridicalism of [their] accusation and justification, [that] the God of Job speaks 'out of the whirlwind,'" writes Ricoeur (1974, p. 309). What did God say? Otto points out that God did not argue along the lines of: "My ways are higher than your ways; in my deeds and my actions I have ends that you understand not . . ." (1970/1923, P. 78). Otherwise put, the divine revelation was not cast in the propositional or conceptual framework. Instead, it was cast in image-ries that, as Otto puts it, "express in masterly fashion the downright stupendousness, the wellnigh daemonic and wholly incomprehensible

character of the eternal creative power; how, incalculable and 'wholly other', it mocks at all conceiving but can yet stir the mind to its depths, fascinate and overbrim the heart" (P. 80).

A concrete example of the divine rebuttal may be helpful. Consider the following questions posed by God:

> Who has cut channels for the downpour
> And cleared a passage for the thunderstorm,
> for rain to fall on land where no man lives
> and on the deserted wilderness,
> clothing lands waste and derelict with green
> and making grass grow on thirsty ground? (*The new English Bible*, 1970, Job 38: 25-27)

In these rhetorical questions of God, Job is confronted with the vision of a world that concerns him not, a world that is totally irrelevant to his objectives and interests. It renders irrelevant the "main evaluative issues" of both "primary appraisal"—"Am I in trouble or being benefited, now or in the future, and in what way?" and "secondary appraisal"—"What if anything can be done about it?" (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984, P. 31). Similarly losing anchorage in relevance are all three "primary systems" of emotion (Oatley, 2000): the attachment system with its need for protection, the assertion system with its concern for power and dominance, and the affection system with its concern for affiliation. This scenario is the epitome of "need for accommodation."

As predicted by the expanded model of awe, Job's response to this "perceived vastness" is self-depreciation, "I knew of thee then only by report, but now I see thee with my own eyes. Therefore I melt away; I repent in dust and ashes" (*The new English Bible*, 1970, Job, 42: 5-6). While the ego is also overwhelmed in trauma, Job's experience differs from trauma in that his "melting away" is willingly avowed. Thus Otto draws the distinction between "inward convincement" and "impotent" submission to superior power–the former presumably resulting in a new vision, whereas the latter most probably in trauma. Otto writes,

> . . . Job avows himself to be overpowered, truly and rightly overpowered, not merely silenced by superior strength. Then he confesses: 'Therefore I abhor myself and *repent* in dust and ashes.' That is an admission of inward *convincement* and conviction, not of impotent collapse and submission to merely superior power. (1970/ 1923, p. 78)

In the framework of the expanded model of awe, Job may be said to have been overpowered twice: the first time by external circumstances, under which he lost everything in his possession; the second time by the overwhelming encounter with God, on which occasion he

lost his recriminating, judging consciousness. Otherwise put, Job experienced failed assimilation twice: the first time when he lost everything in his possession; the second time when he was confronted with a vision that was as grand as it was absurd to the very core. As Otto has noted, there is a world of difference between these two traumatic episodes. In contrast to his first shock, Job's second, "doubled shock" was "avowed," which signifies a decisively self-reflexive turn in consciousness, shifting attention from the emotion eliciting stimuli to his own responses. The upshot of all this is a new vision, which according to Otto entails a reconciliation: "this strange 'moment' of experience that here operates at once as a vindication of God to Job and a reconciliation of Job to God" (p. 78). And healing: "For latent in the weird experience that Job underwent in the revelation of Elohim [Yahweh] is at once an inward relaxing of his soul's anguish and an appeasement . . . " (p. 78).

The fulcrum through which vindication and reconciliation, anguish and hope converge is the self-reflexive consciousness. This point can be illustrated by Fingarette's analysis of Job. It starts with the usual "perceived vastness"-"self annihilation" theme: "We are allowed [in the *Book of Job*] a vision of existence as inexhaustibly rich in creative energies. We see life and death, harmonies and discords, joys and terrors, grace and monsters, the domestic and the wild. We are as nothing as measured against the whole; we are puny, vulnerable, and transient" (Fingarette, 1991, p. 215). Then as self-reflexivity enters the picture, our consciousness turns around, along with Job, to another plane of being, resulting in a dramatic transformation of ourselves from rags to riches, from awe to wonder: "As mere beings we can only be humble. But as beings who *are conscious of* this miracle, who participate however humbly in it, we are transcendently elevated and exhilarated. We are like unto the angles." (Fingarette, 1991, p. 215, emphasis added). This chiasmatic crossing over thereby awe and wonder elide almost imperceptibly into each other is the epitome of "emotional blends" which are considered by Averill (1999) to be one of the hallmarks of emotional creativity. Indeed, emotional blends abound in mysticism. A few examples from Tauler should suffice here: "You ought to seek joy in sadness, detachment in the midst of disaster, and comfort in bitterness . . ." (Shrady, 1985, p. 75); and again, ". . . they dwell in peace in the midst of strife, and they possess joy in sorrow" (p. 48).

The Question of Relevance

A Contemporary Scene

Otto's phenomenology and Keltner and Haidt's application of Durkheim represent two very different versions of awe, one religious and the other secular, a distinction that Keltner and Haidt failed to make in

the data they presented. It may be argued that religious awe belongs to a bygone age and that the contemporary notion of awe is more in keeping with the secular version of Durkheim's. To settle this question, let us explore some modern day examples of awe.

> The most profound and thorough labour of the intellect, the most assiduous and devoted professional toil, had gone to the construction of the great edifice, making it in all its significance and purposefulness a marvel of human achievement. . . . Utter meaninglessness seems to triumph over richest significance, blind 'destiny' seems to stride on its way over prostrate virtue and merit. (Otto, 1970/1923, p. 81)

Otto was not referring to the world trade center and its destruction in the September 11th tragedy, although he might as well. He was referring to one of the calamities in his own time—the destruction by a raging cyclone human lives and the mighty bridge over the river Ennobucht. The writer Max Eyth wrote about his visit at the scene of the disaster:

> When we got to the end of the bridge, there was hardly a breath of wind; high above, the sky showed blue-green, and with an eerie brightness. Behind us, like a great open grave, lay the Ennobucht. The Lord of life and death hovered over the waters in silent majesty. We felt His presence, as one feels one's own hand. And the old man and I knelt down before the open grave and before Him. (cited in Otto, 1970/1923, p. 81)

Can we find this type of response in the wake of September 11th? Jonathan Haidt looked and did not find any among his students: "I think our current use of the word awe has been bleached into a positive emotion, so people in my emotion class were reluctant to say they felt awe on 9/11" (personal communication, Nov. 12, 2001). But going beyond the college population, I did find a fine example of religious awe in the following statements of a professor of humanistic psychology:

> The sight of the ruin of the World Trade Towers is so very fresh. It is fresh as a makeshift graveyard suddenly called into service. . . . Allow me to relate a tale from Elie Wiesel's memoirs: "In my dream I am looking for my father, who is no longer looking for anyone. I see him leaning against the cemetery wall. He sees me and begins to cry, weakly, like the child he is becoming. He comes closer and rests his head on my lap. . . . A stranger goes before us and blows out the candles. Now it is dark. I no longer know where I am. 'Father,' I whisper, 'where are

> you?' He takes a deep breath and bends down as if to
> examine the plowed soil. I no longer see his face. Yet
> while I still know who he is, I no longer know who I am."
> When I no longer know who I am, when the disappear-
> ance is so out of proportion . . . . When the darkness
> glares so absolutely. . . that absence of knowing is where
> the sacred begins. (E. Mark Stern, 2001)

This passage reads almost like a modern translation of Pseudo-
Dionysius:

> Unto this Darkness which is beyond light we pray that we
> may come, and may attain unto vision through the loss of
> sight and knowledge, and that in ceasing thus to see or to
> know we may learn to know that which is beyond all per-
> ception and understanding (for this emptying of our fac-
> ulties is true sight and knowledge). (cited and translated
> by Lees, 1983, pp. 150-151)

The experience of Stern meets all the criteria for religious awe as pos-
tulated by the expanded model: the "perceived vastness" (the sight of
ground zero), and "need for accommodation" as evidenced by the
expressions of negativity (the absence of knowing) and self-reflexivity
("I no longer know who I am"). This response to terrorism is tinged
with so much pain, yet so refreshingly free from anger, and vengeance.
It approximates the type of response to calamities that has made Job
famous. Ricoeur sums up nicely why Job's story is worth emulating:
"Job in fact receives no explanation of the meaning of his suffering.
His faith is simply removed from every moral vision of the world. In
turn, the only thing shown to him is the grandeur of the whole, without
the finite viewpoint of his own desire receiving a meaning directly from
it. A path is thus opened: that of a nonnarcissistic reconciliation. I
renounce my viewpoint; I love the whole as it *is*" (1974, p. 351).
Ricoeur goes on to say that Job's self-transcendence is a source of con-
solation, "perhaps because consolation bears in itself the notion of
deliverance from feelings of revenge . . . . for vengeance means: 'Where
once was suffering, punishment must appear'" (p. 465). Although this
type of response to calamities may not be representative of the general
population today nor of any age, it shows the potential of religious awe
to help nations and individuals to transcend the mindset of the zero-
sum-games that the massive destruction on September-11th was a class-
ical example of.

Implications for Emotion Research

Self-reflexivity and Attention to affect
   Investigations on self-reflexivity have traditionally been conducted
along the lines of "psychological mindedness" or "introspection." The

data presented here suggest new directions for research. The mystic's penchant for self-reflexive contemplation seems to be related to the phenomena of "absorption," which is defined by Gohm and Clore (2000) as "the tendency to get immersed in sensory or emotional experiences, to be open to experiencing feelings, and to attend to one's internal state and processes" (p. 683). Otto shows a similar under-standing when he refers to emotions associated with mystical exper-iences as "pure contemplative feeling"(1970/1923, p. 149). He claims that "The experience [of cognizing the holy] must come . . . by pure *contemplation*, through the mind submitting itself unreservedly to a pure 'impression' of the object" (p. 168). He goes on to quote Schleiermacher that "Wherever a mind is exposed in a spirit of absorbed submission to impressions of 'the universe', it becomes capa-ble . . . of experiencing 'intuitions' and 'feelings' of something that is, as it were, a sheer overplus, in addition to empirical reality" (cited in Otto,1970/1923, p. 146). This description of the contemplative experi-ence is in perfect keeping with Tellegen and Atkinson's definition of absorption as "episodes of total attention that fully engage one's repre-sentational (i.e., perceptual, enactive, imaginative, and ideational) resources" (cited in Gohm & Clore, 2000, p. 683).

More important, the data on self-reflexivity calls attention to "atten-tion to affect," which is referred to by Gohm and Clore as "the extent to which individuals monitor their emotions, value their emotions, and maximize their experience of emotion" (2000, p. 684). As an emotion processing strategy, attention to affective cues has its unique proper-ties. It signifies an internal focus on the subject pole of perception which concerns one's own emotional response, in contrast to external focus on the object pole of perception which concerns the affect-elicit-ing stimuli. Conceptually, the external focus finds support in the received wisdom that emotion is about an object; attention to one's own affective response, on the contrary, entails a self-reflexive notion of emotion as experience becoming aware of itself, or in the words of Dorsey, "emotionality is all about itself" (1971, p. xiii).

Attention to affect has ramifications for coping strategies. Pribram and McGuinness (1975) have made a distinction between "readiness" and "effort"—the former refers to the ability to "respond meaningfully to the input," whereas the latter to "the absence of readiness" and the attempt to "shut out all further input" (p. 123). One direct conse-quence of valuing and maximizing experiences of emotion seems to be "readiness." This "readiness" approach can best be understood as "letting be," which is very different from conventional coping mecha-nisms. Coping is part and parcel of the stress model (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), a model that is concerned with freedom from stress. "Letting be," in contrast, is concerned with a different kind of free-dom–the "freedom for" Being or God. The essence of freedom made

possible by "letting be" can be illustrated by the mundane activity of reading literary works. According to the literary critic and philosopher Blanchot, reading literature is not geared toward gaining knowledge or productivity. Rather, the essence of reading is "letting be," or "freedom," as he puts it:

> Reading does not produce anything, does not add anything. It lets be what is. It is freedom: not the freedom that produces being or grasps it, but freedom that welcomes, consents, says yes, can say only yes, and, in the space opened by this yes, lets the work's overwhelming decisiveness affirm itself, lets be its affirmation that it is–and nothing more. (1982, P. 194)

This receptive attitude toward experience is hypothesized to be, as we may recall, the decisive factor that differentiates religious awe from PTSD and related symptoms.

Negative Theology and Cognitive Appraisals

One important consequence of negative theology for the mystics is their extension of the notion of ineffability from God to emotions. Buttressed by their skepticism toward predications and rational deliberations, mystics tend to refrain from advanced cognitive appraisal of emotional situations. This move finds support in theories that argue for a possible dissociation between the relatively simple and more advanced cognitive appraisals (Oatley, 1992; see also O'keefe & Nadel, 1978). For instance, Weiner (1985) claims that certain "primitive" emotions, based on "primary appraisal" are "*outcome dependent-attribution independent*, for they are determined by the attainment or nonattainment of a desired goal, and not by the cause of the outcome" (p. 560). Clore and Ketelaar claim that the two cognitive systems— "categorization" and "calibration"—are indeed separable (1997, p. 110; see also Clore & Ortony,1991, and 2000), and cite priming effects as supporting evidence of such a dissociation. The mystics who espouse negative theology constitute another analog of such a dissociation. Let us review some evidence.

Otto claims that mystical experiences have no need for explications and explanations. This skepticism toward advanced cognitive appraisals is evident in his running commentary on Jacob's statement in Genesis: "How dreadful is this place! This is none other than the house of Elohim [Yahweh]" (Gen. xxviii, 17, cited in Otto, p. 126). "The first sentence," writes Otto, "gives plainly the mental impression itself in all its immediacy, before reflection has permeated it, and before the meaning-content of the feeling itself has become clear or explicit . . . . There is no need, that is, for the experient to pass on to resolve his mere impression of the eerie and awful. . ." (1970/1923, p. 126). The

implication is that mysticism, not unlike priming, is at its best when its emotional information processing is unconstrained by more advanced cognitive appraisals. Thus Jacob's second statement ("This is . . . the house of Elohim") is considered by Otto to be removed from the mystical experience because of its reliance on "explication and interpretation"(p.127), which function to contextualize the affective experience of "dread." The dissociation between the simple and advanced stages of appraisal is near complete, when Otto claims that "the object of religious awe or reverence—the *tremendum* and *augustum*, cannot be fully determined conceptually" (1970/1923, p. 59), but "can be firmly grasped, thoroughly understood, and profoundly appreciated, purely in, with, and from the feeling itself" (p. 34). A similar view is expressed by the fourteenth century mystic Johannes Tauler. Speaking of people who approach desire (for God) "with natural reason, with images borrowed from it, and with high speculations," Tauler writes, "They stifle this desire by trying to understand what is happening to their souls" (Shrady, 1985, pp. 46-47).

Do the mystics practice what they preach? Otherwise put, does this cognitive bias show up in the mystics' verbal expressions of emotions? To investigate this question, let us derive a preliminary measure from the foregoing two statements of Jacob in Genesis: "How dreadful is this place! This is none other than the house of Elohim" (Gen. xxviii, 17). The first statement centers on an affective experience of the place; this will be referred to as Type A statement. The second statement centers on inferences made to provide explanations for the affective experience; this will be referred to as Type B statement. Type A and Type B statements correspond roughly to two dimensions of cognitive appraisal referred to by Mauro, Sato, and Tucker (1992) as "primitive" and "complex" respectively–Type A statement is based on simple and basic appraisals of valence, whereas Type B statement entails more advanced cognitive appraisals, such as causal attributions and evaluation of blameworthiness (see Scherer, 1986). A testable prediction may be proposed as follows: in processing emotional information, mystics can produce long and continuous strings of Type A statements without interference of Type B statements. Let us test this hypothesis against a lengthy quotation from Tauler:

> An extremely rough path lies ahead of him, dark and lonely, and as he is led through it, God deprives him of everything He had given him before. The man is now left so completely on his own that he knows nothing at all of God; he is brought to such desolation that he wonders whether he was ever on the right path, whether he has a God or not, whether he really exists; he is so strangely afflicted, so deeply afflicted, that he feels that the whole wide world has become too narrow for him. He can

> neither taste God nor know Him, and since everything
> else is insufficient, he feels himself hemmed in between
> two walls with a sword behind him and a sharp spear in
> front. What is he to do? Both ways are blocked. Let him
> sit down and say: "Welcome, bitter affliction, full of
> grace!" To love and to be denied the object of one's love
> surely would seem worse than any hell, if there could be
> one on earth. Whatever one could say to such a man
> would be of no more comfort than a stone. One cannot
> speak to him of God, and even less of creatures. The
> stronger his experience of God was before, the stronger
> and more intolerable is now the bitterness and pain of
> loss. (Shrady, 1985, P. 143)

The above passage of Tauler is composed of long strings of Type A
statements. To wit, words such as "lonely," "deprivation," "desola-
tion, "loss," etc. entail relatively simple appraisals of goal block and its
hedonic valence (see Scherer, 1986). Glaringly absent from this pas-
sage are causal attributions. The statement of agent—"God deprives
him of everything He had given him before"—does not elaborate on
the cause for suffering. A bona fide causal attribution was indeed
made by Tauler in a preceding paragraph, where he claims that suffer-
ing is "coarser food" given by God when we come of age spiritually:

> When God has . . . fortified him with spiritual sweetness,
> then he is offered coarser food; for he now is a man and
> has become of age. For a grown man, a stronger diet is
> welcome and good; he no longer needs milk and soft
> bread. An extremely rough path lies ahead of him, dark
> and lonely . . . (Shrady, 1985, P. 143)

These are Type B Statements, and they can be found either before or
after but not within the target passage that flaunts long strings of Type
A statements.

Equally absent are the cognitive appraisals of coping. Tauler's "Wel-
come, bitter affliction, full of grace!" is a classical example of "letting
be"—it takes the emoter right back to the emotional episode, rather
than taking him out of it, as coping would. To wit, Tauler ended where
he started—loss and deprivation ("the bitterness and pain of loss"). In
this light, it may be said that the "welcome . . ." was used by Tauler to
forestall till later the "coping" question ("What is he to do?"), which
was indeed taken up again, and answered more fully ("Cling to the
rock of the true and living faith") in the next paragraph following the
target passage:

> But be of good cheer. The Lord is not far away. Cling to
> the rock of the true and living faith. Your anguish will
> soon be over, though in this state your poor soul cannot

> conceive that this insufferable darkness could ever give
> way to light.   (Shrady, 1985, P. 143).

Let us insert this coping response into the juncture where the coping
question was posed ("What is he to do?"): suppose instead of "letting
be" (Let him sit down and say: "Welcome, bitter affliction, full of
grace!"), Tauler opted for the coping response, we would have had the
following hypothetical passage (with interpolations underlined):

> He can neither taste God nor know Him, and since every-
> thing else is insufficient, he feels himself hemmed in
> between two walls with a sword behind him and a sharp
> spear in front. What is he to do? Both ways are
> blocked. . *But be of good cheer. The Lord is not far
> away. Cling to the rock of the true and living faith. Your
> anguish will soon be over, though in this state your poor
> soul cannot conceive that this insufferable darkness could
> ever give way to light.*

No more would Tauler process further the anguish of soul's depriva-
tion, and no more would we have the rich and nuanced Type A state-
ments in the following:

> To love and to be denied the object of one's love surely
> would seem worse than any hell, if there could be one on
> earth. Whatever one could say to such a man would be of
> no more comfort than a stone. One cannot speak to him
> of God, and even less of creatures. The stronger his expe-
> rience of God was before, the stronger and more intolera-
> ble is now the bitterness and pain of loss. (Shrady, 1985,
> P. 143)

Luckily, Tauler knew better. "Welcome, bitter affliction, full of grace!"
marks the decisive point, where Tauler exhorted himself to attend to
his emotional experience, and we are grateful that he did. But seri-
ously, why did Tauler go back to where he started, and why did he not
take the exit of "coping"? I see in Tauler's doubling back, made possi-
ble by the "letting be" of "Welcome . . ." an unmistakably inward
movement, a "sudden deepening," which, as Hartman points out in the
context of Wordsworth's poetry, "allows the emotion its own life and
delights in new accesses of thought and feeling" (1964, p. 6).

  The mystic's preference for relatively simple over advanced cogni-
tive appraisals has important implications for emotion research.   It
confirms Frijda's claim that "emotions can arise from cognitively rela-
tively poor antecedents . . . even for emotions that are fairly articulate,
in terms of behavior or of experience" (1993, p. 359). It also challenges
the received wisdom that cognitive complexity is a necessary condition
for complex emotions. For instance, Weiner claims that "increasing
cognitive complexity generates more differentiated emotional experi-

ence" (1986, p. 296). Another related assumption is that emotions with more cognitive complexity are somehow more characteristically "human." For instance Smith and Ellsworth state that "When we think of emotions like *anger* and *guilt*, it seems that some dimension more human and 'cognitive' . . . must be involved " (1985, p. 819). Likewise, Jacobs and Nadel's research on phobia (1985) confirms the importance of higher level cognitive involvement by painting a pathological picture of emotional states unbridled by context specific cognitive appraisals. While these accounts are correct in and of themselves, they foster the unfortunate assumption that emotions with relatively simple cognitive structures are bound to be "crude" or "primitive." In contradistinction to this prevalent emphasis in the field on cognitive complexity, the data on mysticism have shown that emotions low in cognitive complexity can be not only highly differentiated, and richly nuanced, but also capable of illumination of the highest degree. This idiosyncratic processing priorities of the mystics—privileging "categorizing" over "reasoning" or "attention" over "attribution"— can make a significant contribution to emotion research, as Ellsworth points out rightly, "it would be very useful for an understanding of emotion to turn our attention to emotional sequences that do not fit the standard theories" (1991, p. 155).

Another potential contribution of mysticism in this respect lies in the fact that it offers many points of contrast with alexithymia (see Sundararajan, 2000). Alexithymics seem to be impaired in precisely the areas where mystics excel: introspection and attention to affect (Taylor, 2000; Sundararajan, 2001). Furthermore, mystics and alexithymics seem to be the mirror image of each other in their respective information processing strategies: While mystics are reluctant to parse all the way, alexithymics seem to capitalize on attribution at the expense of attention to affect. Mayer and associates point out that in alexithymia, "individuals supplant emotional feelings with thoughts about coping or with the denial of feelings as part of a regulatory process. The goal of this process seems to be to minimize the experience of emotion" (Mayer, Salovey, Gomberg-Kaufman, and Blainey, 1991, p. 102). Henry Krystal also speculates that in alexithymia, "the diminished ability to recognize, name, and use their emotions as guides to self-monitoring results in an overdependence on and overutilization of reasoning" (1988, p. 243).

Finally the foregoing analysis leads to testable predictions. Other things being equal, individuals with the following personality traits are predicted to be more likely to have the experience of religious awe in crisis situations:

> a. Capacity for introspection, which can be assessed by
> various measures (see Conte, et al.,1990; and Fonagy, et

al., 1991), and is negatively correlated with the externalizing dimension of alexithymia (Taylor, 2000).

b. Attention to affect, a trait that can be assessed by tests measuring levels of emotional awareness (Lane, Ahern, Schwartz, and Kaszniak, 1997), and emotional creativity (Averill,1999). It is also negatively correlated with measures of alexithymia (Taylor, Bagby, & Parker, 1997).

c. Cognitive appraisal strategies that privilege attention over attribution. Based on the observed difference in cognitive appraisal strategies between mystics and alexithymics (Sundararajan, 2000), I predict that those who are capable of religious awe should be able to produce long and continuous strings of Type A statements without interference by Type B statements, whereas alexithymics or those suffering from PTSD will show pervasive interference of Type A statements by Type B statements. A relevant measure is a pattern-matching word count program currently under construction (Sundararajan & Schubert, 2002) to assess individual differences in verbal expression of emotions.

Summary and Conclusion

This paper presented a phenomenological analysis, *a la* Rudolf Otto, of a subtype of awe prevalent among Christian mystics, a subtype that challenges the prototype. The data presented calls into question certain basic assumptions and fills certain lacunae in the prototypical model of awe proposed by Keltner and Haidt (in press), resulting in an expanded version of the same. The expanded model of awe reiterates the "ascendancy of negative over affirmative values" (Lees, 1983, p. 137) in negative theology by demonstrating the centrality of self-reflexive negativity as criterion of the "need for accommodation." In conclusion, these preliminary findings on mysticism in general and religious awe in particular invite us to entertain the vision of a psychology that takes seriously the "labor of the Negative" as Hegel puts it: "The life and knowledge of God may doubtless be described as love playing with itself, but this idea sinks into triviality, if the seriousness, the pain, the patience and the labor of the Negative are omitted" (1931, p. 81).

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