Although everybody has them, ‘experiences’ belong to the concepts that are most difficult to define and apply academically. In a long and complex discussion, philosophy, sociology, psychology, neurology, theology, and the academic study of religion have established a multitude of models that aim at understanding and interpreting what is actually going on when people have experiences. When it comes to ‘religious experience’ the discussion is even trickier because theological and ideological normativities are entering in, along with subjective categories that are difficult to standardize or catalogue.

Ever since the nineteenth century, and particularly after William James’ The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature (1902), the category ‘religious experience’ has been closely related to the category ‘mysticism.’ Mystical experience has repeatedly been described as an individual encounter with the divine by means of dissolution of boundaries, be they physiological, categorial, or emotional. From a scholarly point of view, the major academic problem with mysticism and experience, then, is the fact that the experiences themselves are inaccessible for unambiguous academic scrutiny, particularly if we leave the experimental frameworks of analysis and turn to historical sources.

These sources are texts, images, or material objects that communicate and—in the case of texts—report mystical experiences. Consequently, research into experience and mysticism has turned to issues of narrativity and social construction in order to explain the dynamics of religious experience, thus leaving behind earlier ontological or

---

1 See the overview in Sharf, “Experience.”
2 See Wilke, “Mysticism.” A search on “experi* AND mysti*” in the university library database of the Netherlands rendered 677 titles in July 2008. A Google search on “mysticism AND experience” gave more than 2,700,000 hits. In October 2009 the numbers were 707 and 1,980,000, respectively.
3 This does not mean, of course, that the results of cognitive science or experimental psychology cannot be applied profitably to historical issues. But even then our analysis is limited by the narrative nature of most sources, with the exception of visual sources, such as analyzed in chapter 8 below.
phenomenological approaches.\(^4\) The power of explanation that these approaches provide by far exceeds the problematic search for ‘understanding religious experience.’

For the purpose of this book, however, it is not necessary to enter the complicated debate about the nature of religious or mystical experience. In a discursive analysis, it is not the content or nature of religious experiences that is at stake but the very fact that people claim them. With regard to esoteric discourse, we can say that experiential knowledge has repeatedly served as a mode to affirm perfect knowledge of the world.\(^5\) In the present chapter, I will illustrate this dynamic with reference to a number of historical examples, ranging from late antiquity to the seventeenth century.

**Neoplatonism and Theurgy in Late Antiquity**

Concepts of knowledge and cognition are a recurring issue of ancient philosophical debate. Despite considerable differences in detail, Epicureans, Stoics, and Skeptics basically agreed that all theories of knowledge have to be based on sensual perception.\(^6\) Humans are born as a *tabula rasa* that receives sensory impressions; by applying their cognitive, rational capacities they differentiate ‘true knowledge’ from ‘mere belief’ and ultimately assent to reliable knowledge of the world.\(^7\) Zeno, for instance, stated that we know something if we have grasped or apprehended it in such a way that our grasp or apprehension cannot be dislodged by argument.\(^8\) Perception, thus, is a mental act that enables human beings to attain reliable, even if contested, knowledge. Rationality and language are prerequisites for this concept of knowledge.

---


\(^5\) For an analysis of narratives of experience in twentieth-century esotericism see Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 331–453.


\(^7\) The Skeptics even doubted the human capacity to distinguish ‘imagined reality’ from ‘true facts.’

\(^8\) *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* 1, fragment 68.