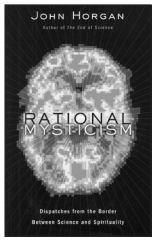
# DEBUNKING ENLIGHTENMENT




## Thomas W. Clark

***Rational Mysticism: Dispatches from the Border Between Science and Spirituality,* by John Horgan. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003, ISBN 0-618–06027-8) 292 pp. Cloth $25.00.**

The spiritual quest, as much as it seeks to achieve unity with an ultimate reality that transcends the person, is still a personal endeavor, colored by the psychology of the seeker. The longing to discover the key to existence and to reside in God, or some atheistic version of the Absolute, is driven by the problem of life: our capacity for suffering and the desire for its cessation, our insatiable drive for knowledge and meaning, and our awareness of mortality. To achieve mystical communion—the direct understanding of the Real—is to solve this problem, at least temporarily; it's to quiet the restless striving of the limited, egotistic self by experiencing its connection to the infinite. Historically, Buddhists have been the most candid in recognizing the practical motivational basis for the spiritual quest, which is simply to end the human suffering rooted in fear and craving.

The difficulty for hard-boiled rational empiricists, such as science writer John Horgan, who are unimpressed by traditional religious solutions to the problem of life, is that mystical experience might simply reflect human wish-fulfillment, not the true outlines of Existence. In *Rational Mysticism*, Horgan tests the skeptical null-hypothesis, which states that claims to enlightenment are, at bottom, empty of empirical content, even though they speak to fundamental human needs for meaning and consolation. In this wonderfully engaging narrative of encounters with modern mystics and seekers of all stripes, Horgan is the scientific knight errant who stands ready, indeed, eager, to deflate the claims of those who have supposedly seen God or his secular equivalent. He sometimes seems the personification of Daniel Dennett's "universal acid," let loose on the often dodgy constructions of those who hope to find salvation in altered states of consciousness.[1]

What makes Horgan's "inquest" (as he puts it) into mysticism so compelling is that, despite his skepticism, he nevertheless finds himself driven by the same powerful desire for transcendence that animates his targets. The book is partially an intensely personal memoir of the struggle between rationality and science on the one hand, and the thirst for spiritual salvation on the other, played out in his modern, articulate sensibility. Those who share Horgan's skepticism will enjoy his skewering of dubious knowledge claims, but some will find themselves moved by his own, sometimes anguished, search for meaning and consolation. Since the mystical quest is inevitably personal, Horgan does justice to his topic by forthrightly conceding his own stake in this project, and by his example we learn a great deal about the rewards and perils of seeking enlightenment.

At the heart of Horgan's skepticism (which almost, but not quite, wins out in the end) is a simple but devastating epistemological question: how do mystics know they're right? How can we be sure that the deep, revelatory, sometimes shattering experience of mystical union refers (and refers accurately) to anything in the world outside the person undergoing it? Part of the pull of mysticism is the noetic intuition that during such experiences we are in touch with some deep truth about the universe, but how are we to validate this intuition? Hallucinations, after all, are routinely mistaken for reality.

Horgan is well aware of the intimate connection of experience to the physical brain, and indeed a good part of his book is spent describing "mystical technologies" that seek to alter experience by modifying the neural states responsible for consciousness, either by traditional noninvasive routes such as meditation and chant, or by drugs and newfangled electronic devices. His staunch commitment to physicalism (or his bias, if you aren't a materialist) is epitomized by the title of his chapter on Zen adept James Austin: "Zen and James Austin's Brain."

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In researching the neural correlates of mystical experience, Horgan pays an extended visit to Canadian scientist Michael Persinger, who studies the effects of trans-cranial electromagnetic stimulation on consciousness, and Horgan interviews several proponents of "entheogenic" drugs, including Swiss psychiatrist Franz Vollenwieder, described as "arguably the world's leader in psychedelic research involving humans." He subjects himself to Persinger's "God-machine," but with such anticlimactic results that he wonders, as magnetic pulses play futilely on his cortex, "How will I turn this into a scene for my book?" In contrast, as vividly described in his penultimate chapter, he samples a South American hallucinogenic mixture known as *aya-*

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*huasca* and is pretty much flattened by the experience. But powerful though it is, Horgan's interpretation is deflationary: "In retrospect, all my *ayahuasca* visions seemed more like products of my own brain than transpersonal revelations." This same interpretation, of course, can be applied to any variety of mystical consciousness, however it's produced, that purports to represent reality the way it "really" is. All such states are, materialists believe, a function of the brain, so why should we suppose that it's just *these* states, as opposed to more mundane brain processes subserving ordinary cognition and perception, that get reality right? They might be earth-shattering, ego-dissolving, and imbued with deep certitude, but in retrospect, why should we suppose they are veridical?

Horgan not only engages his subject at the direct experiential level, but does an excellent job of surveying the intellectual, cultural landscape of contemporary mysticism and its rationales. The book is laid out as a first-person tour of the experts in the field, and it's great fun to sit on his shoulder as he does battle, courteously for the most part, with the system-builders and philosophers of spirituality such as Ken Wilber and Huston Smith. Horgan is self-admittedly cantankerous, predisposed to see the guru as manipulator and charlatan, always looking for weaknesses in arguments and assumptions and always ready to second-guess the experts and even himself as he digs into the philosophical complexities and the psychological pitfalls of the mystical quest. But despite his indefatigable fault-finding, he comes away with considerable respect for many of those interviewed. In particular, he admires British philosopher Susan Blackmore, whose relentless skepticism fits well with Horgan's temperament. Indeed, Blackmore's scientific critique of the paranormal in books such as *In Search of the Light* (Prometheus Books, 1996), is a model for Horgan's thorough debunking of enlightenment in this volume.

Following the author through his many encounters, both inter- and intra-personal, the reader will have enjoyably learned a great deal about the theory and practice of mysticism. But what, finally, is to be concluded from this tour, conducted by an inquisitor both smart and vulnerable? Horgan discovers that for himself the only reliable consolation to be had in the face of the Infinite is in human companionship. Unity with the One, it turns out, is too impersonal and too lonely, ultimately, to be psychologically sustaining, even if we judge it authentic. The One, Horgan half-seriously surmises, must have split into the Many just to keep Itself company.

Such speculations about the "motives" of ultimate reality reinforce the poignant fact that, in confronting the immensity of extrahuman creation, we necessarily read into that encounter our deepest personal fears and hopes. Mystical experience, Horgan says, presents two existentially opposite possibilities, one in which the self is transcended in blissful unification, the other in which we are threatened with dissolution by the uncaring, impersonal abyss that surrounds our fragile human consciousness. The first possibility promises to solve the problem of life: to end (literally) self-induced suffering by losing the self and putting its problems permanently in abeyance. The second, of course, is the prospect of death as it's often conceived: the end of the self and its world followed by the onset of nothingness. The first is what we most want, the second what we most fear—the complementary halves of the human condition.

But neither is a real possibility. Current theories in the philosophy of mind suggest that, although the phenomenal sense of self is a construct of a complex, neurally instantiated representational architecture, it's functionally essential for the organism. Consciousness nearly always gets stuck with a "me," since, as philosopher Thomas Metzinger among others has pointed out, a robust sense of self is the organism's way of being successfully egotistic.[2] The self's temporary deconstruction in mystical experience is possible and perhaps even desirable, but we are always destined to reappear, our projects and problems still to be dealt with. Equally, the end of the organism and its consciousness is not, as Horgan sometimes seems to think, to be faced with nothingness; it is not the ego's plunge into the black abyss. As Epicurus put it long ago, "when I am, death is not, when death is, I am not." So as much as we fear death, we need not fear the prospect of inhabiting eternal darkness.[3]

A rational mysticism consistent with science wouldn't demand, impossibly, that the organism relinquish its self, nor would it suppose that consciousness is pitted against the void. It would seek out mystical experience—the temporary suspension of adaptive selfhood—while acknowledging that such experience isn't a direct cognitive apprehension of reality. Rather, the mystical state is understood to be a function of an intentionally altered brain, and as such can be welcomed as a reinvigorating, noncognitive experiential *affirmation* of what scientific theories show to be unquestionably the case: our essential and complete naturalistic connection to the universe. The organism, its self, its consciousness—the works—all arise out of the physical world, so the mystical intuition of unity, albeit noncognitive, reflects this empirical truth about ourselves.

Such an approach to spirituality would also drop the disdainful dismissal of the physical as "mere" matter typical of many of those Horgan interviews, who think the categorically spiritual exists on a higher, more exalted plane. Such dualism, after all, creates the problem of traditional spirituality in the first place: since what's most real and good is nonmaterial Mind, we must somehow (but how?) transcend the corruptible flesh and join the otherworldly Spirit. Once it is seen that consciousness, selfhood, and our aesthetic, moral, and cognitive capacities are all potentially explicable within a physicalist framework, and thus consistent with being entirely material creatures, then matter becomes not so "mere" after all. Its organization, for instance in the form we take, is the marvelous (although not literally miraculous) source of all that we most value, and indeed of valuing itself. That Horgan doubts that consciousness will ever be understood scientifically (see his *The Undiscovered Mind*, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1999) might help explain the fact that he never quite reconciles the apparently conflicting demands of science and spirituality.

Another potential roadblock to such reconciliation, made explicit in the very last section of the book ("Free Will and Other Consolations"), is that Horgan

thinks we must believe we have free will. Although his conception of free will isn't clearly articulated, one popular version is the notion that human beings, alone of the known denizens of the universe, have the capacity to choose their character and their actions without being fully *caused* to choose. Such contra-causal, supernatural freedom, many suppose, is what gives us dignity, makes us morally responsible, and allows us to be rational knowers of reality. If this is Horgan's notion of free will, then of course there's no way to square such freedom with science, since science presents no evidence for such a capacity, nor could it. And the self, thus defined, becomes an exception to nature and so ultimately cannot be joined to the rest of existence, whatever spiritual technologies and systems we bring to bear.

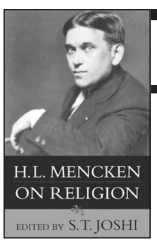
On the other hand, if the free will Horgan wants is simply, as he puts it at one point, to have "more choices to consider and select from," such freedom is clearly consistent with being creatures entirely caught up in the natural causal matrix. Our capacities for cognition, rationality, and morally responsible choice don't have to be uncaused to be efficacious or to be truly ours.[4] Indeed, any sort of causal disconnection of such capacities from antecedent or surrounding circumstances would merely introduce an element of randomness, lessening both their utility and their proper ascription as *our* capacities that eventuate in *our* choices. Such freedom, clearly, presents no metaphysical obstacle to realizing, both cognitively or experientially via mystical states, that we are fully included in the natural order.

In his last paragraph, Horgan says that he "can't be sure that free will exists," which leads me to suspect that, ultimately, he harbors contra-causal intuitions about free will. After all, there is no doubt we are free in the second, causality-compatible sense. Were he to divest himself of any lingering suspicion that we are causal exceptions to nature, then the consolation he seeks in free will wouldn't come at the cost of a metaphysical dualism that categorically separates the self from its circumstances.

Since Horgan's admirable skepticism and commitment to science seem to fail him at the very end (he says "I have no choice but to choose free will"), the true connection between science and spirituality is not, finally, clinched in the way that a fully naturalistic understanding of ourselves might permit.[5] Nevertheless, Horgan has given us an insightful, gripping, and, yes, enlightening account of the spiritual quest, one that I highly recommend, even for (and especially for) the most skeptical among us. fi

Notes

1. Daniel Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), p. 63.
2. Thomas Metzinger, *Being No One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), p. 339.
3. Thomas Clark, "Death, Nothingness, and Subjectivity." *The Humanist* 54, no. 4 (1994).
4. See, for instance, Daniel Dennett's *Freedom Evolves* (New York: Viking, 2003), chapter 4, "A Hearing for Libertarianism" and my "Science and Freedom," FREE INQUIRY, Spring 2002.
5. On the affinity between naturalism and spirituality, see Ursula Goodenough's *The Sacred Depths of Nature* (Oxford University Press, 1998) and my "Spirituality without Faith" in *The Humanist* 62, no. 1 (2002).




# THE PASSION ACCORDING TO HENRY

## Thomas Larson

H.L. Mencken On Religion, edited by S.T. Joshi (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2002, ISBN 1-57392--982-4) 330 pp. Cloth $29.

The pith and purity of his prejudices, the grit and grace of his language, the dazzle and buck of his outrage: Does it really matter what H.L. Mencken attacked? Politics, literature, culture? We read him now as we have always read him, to see *how* and how *hard* he hit whatever he targeted. When it came to religion, Mencken's view of Christian Science was not much different from his view of, say, evangelicalism. "Sewers of superstition," he called them all, practice and practitioner. For Mencken, those who think the divine intercedes in or rules human affairs were boobs whose "sin" is not belief but the piety with which their belief is lacquered.

S.T. Joshi's anthology, *H. L. Mencken on Religion*, brings together seventy likebiled excoriations from Mencken's most fertile period—as editor of *The Smart Set*, (1914–1923) and *The American Mercury* (until 1933). Most of the essays fall squarely within a twelve-year frame: the Coolidge and Hoover years. In 1925, Mencken reached fever pitch in a series of editorialized dispatches (the former effacing the latter) while covering the Scopes trial. A quarter of this collection concerns that trial, with Mencken flaying small-minded Dayton, Tennessee, and the "Fundamentalist Pope," William Jennings Bryan.

Joshi's introduction is superb, and his skill as an organizer is top-notch. But to traverse the territory of Mencken's opinions one will endure much scenery and much repetition. As the book works through its nine headings, among them "Religion and Science" and "The Beliefs of an Iconoclast," its progress is static, like a Baroque opera—too much recitative and too few arias. This is not a criticism of Joshi. Rather, it says that, over

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