TRANSCENDENT EXPERIENCES

Phenomenology and Critique

Louis Roy, O.P.

Transcendent Experiences

Phenomenology and Critique

LOUIS ROY, O.P.

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO PRESS
Toronto Buffalo London

Toronto Buffalo London
Printed in Canada

ISBN 0-8020-3534-5

Printed on acid-free paper

Toronto Studies in Philosophy
Editors: James R. Brown and Calvin Normore

National Library of Canada Cataloguing in Publication Data

Roy, Louis, 1942–
Transcendent experiences : phenomenology and critique

(Toronto studies in philosophy)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-8020-3534-5

1. Experience (Religion). 2. Infinite. 3. Transcendence (Philosophy). I. Title. II. Series.

BL53.R69 2001 291.4'2 C00-933274-X

This book has been published with the help of a grant from Boston College

University of Toronto Press acknowledges the financial assistance to its publishing program of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council.

University of Toronto Press acknowledges the financial support for its publishing activities of the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP).

TRANSCENDENT EXPERIENCES
Phenomenology and Critique

Acknowledgments

This work has been long in the making. In the spring of 1990 Boston College gave me a grant and a leave of absence that allowed me to begin researching and writing on the topic. My sincere gratitude goes to students and colleagues, especially to Professors Charles C. Hefling and James M. Weiss, who have found my views on transcendent experiences interesting and have voiced both words of encouragement and pertinent criticisms.

For having passed comments on earlier drafts of parts of this book, I thank Mr William Gregory, Dr James LeGrys, Professors Henry A. Blackwell, Oliva Blanchette, Richard Cobb-Stevens, Harvey D. Egan, S.J., Thomas J. Owens, Patrick J. Ryan, S.J., and John E. Thiel. I am also greatly indebted to the UTP's readers for their useful suggestions and corrections on the whole manuscript. The index is Mr Michael Mothes's much appreciated contribution. For the many books that I was able to obtain through the Interlibrary Loan Department at O'Neill Library, Boston College, I am very grateful to Ms Margaret J. McDonough and her first-rate staff.

The publisher and I are thankful to the editors and publishers of the following periodicals, where parts of this book are foreshadowed. Chapter 3 is an expanded version of 'Kant's Reflections on the Sublime and the Infinite,' *Kant-Studien* 88 (1997): 44–59 (Walter de Gruyter); chapter 4 incorporates two sections of 'Consciousness according to Schleiermacher,' *Journal of Religion* 77 (1997): 217–32 (University of Chicago Press).

Introduction

Sociological surveys report that a significant percentage of the Australian, British, and North-American population (from 35 per cent up to 50 per cent) recall having had a transcendent experience at least once in their life.[1] A transcendent experience can be characterized as an event in which individuals, by themselves or in a group, have the impression that they are in contact with something boundless and limitless, which they cannot grasp, and which utterly surpasses human capacities. While many reach a positive judgment regarding the status of what has been apprehended, others discount such incidents as purely subjective and as not indicative of anything real. In contrast to this dismissive attitude, I should like to look at such experiences favourably and interpret them in accord with thinkers who envision the human self as essentially open to the infinite.[2]

It must be conceded, at the outset, that transcendent experiences are of unequal value and that several are fraught with psychiatric problems or wild theories. However, the fact that mentally ill people are sometimes attracted to poetry or mysticism should not invalidate these realms of human excellence. It is precisely because of this ambiguity that the literature of the great religious traditions offers guidelines enabling their practitioners to recognize and often escape the pitfalls.

Every time one pronounces on the validity of a particular case, traditional criteria of discernment must be applied. This book, however, is concerned with the validity of transcendent experience *in general* – that is, with the basic reasons why it *can* be non-illusory. To meet this concern we must answer a number of questions: How is a transcendent experience conditioned and prepared? What is the role of feeling? Can we identify a core discovery that has a cognitional content? Is there

such a thing as an initial, quasi-ineffable apprehension, different from subsequent interpretations? Must mystical events be mediated?

Underlying all such inquiry is the principal question, can there be a human experience of the infinite? In this book, I argue for an affirmative answer, and base that argument on a clarification of transcendent experience as we find it at its best. I try to explain why such experience can be a most valuable component of human existence. I contend only that it *can* be so, even though popular religion often makes it very ambiguous indeed.

My argument includes the following considerations. First, that the question of the infinite, in its various forms (scientific, artistic, philosophic, religious), is an intelligent one that must not be brushed aside. Second, that human intentionality is an intersubjective capacity for reaching out to what exists; when such intentionality feels that it is in the presence of the mystery, it does encounter a reality. Third, that as it accompanies knowing, emotion enhances a person's response to reality. The feeling of being in touch with something absolutely transcendent is the affective side of an intentionality oriented toward the mystery. Finally, that in light of so many mystical texts – across world religions – which display a sense that an incomparable gift has been offered to the human race, we ought to say that most of the time transcendent experiences are vehicles of grace. Each of these four convictions will be argued, particularly in the last two chapters.

As will be evident, my views are coloured by the fact that I am a Roman Catholic. However, my deepest wish is to bring together the long-standing interest of Protestant writers in concrete religious experiences and the more recent thoughts on this issue by contemporary Catholic thinkers. In order to facilitate this encounter, I have decided not to write a theological book but rather to make a contribution to the philosophy of religion, because it is in this area that much of the dialogue can more easily take place.

More precisely, part 1 will start with the phenomena, or lived experience, and provisionally bracket out the issue of the existence of the infinite.[3] In narratives, we will discern recurrent elements and basic types, and thus develop a phenomenology of transcendent experience.

Christian theologians who prefer to begin with christology should consider the openness of the fourth type of transcendent experience to the mediation of Christ. Note also that the distinction (explained in chapter 1) between spontaneous and later reflection on the meaning of spiritual events allows any of these to be reinterpreted in the light of a

particular religious figure (Moses, Buddha, Jesus, and so on). The thrust of my enterprise is clearly in the direction of a theology of the Holy Spirit, as Karl Barth suggested in his final appreciation of Schleiermacher.[4] Phenomenological reports and analyses of transcendent experience may be seen by many Christians and non-Christians alike as fleshing out their intimations of the Spirit's action in our contemporary world.

A clear distinction will also be made between transcendent experiences and the personal transformation that sometimes ensues from them. This transformation or conversion, which may be called the fruit, is the ultimate element of the whole process. Abstracting from it (except in part 1 and in the conclusion, where its importance is underlined) will simplify our effort to record, classify, and interpret the recurrent features of transcendent experiences in themselves.

In part 2 of this book, a review of historic contributions will commence with Kant, who constitutes a watershed in Western thought. After Kant, we set forth the positions of subsequent works which are considered classics on the experience of the infinite. This section will not be the comprehensive survey offered by historians. Useful volumes exist which connect great thinkers with the culture of their epoch. My aim is different: to propound what I think are major visions seeking to account for the significance of the human approaches to the infinite; to uncover the dialectic at work among the most typical modern philosophers and theologians who have written on the subject matter; and to build up my own argument in dialogue with them. Consequently, I do not treat all possible writers on the topic.[5] Perhaps some readers will be disappointed by the absence of non-Westerners in this book. Although I have done extensive readings in Eastern mysticism, presenting their views here would render this discussion too long.[6]

I say little about the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century attempt to make up for the diminishing cogency of demonstrating the existence of God or the immortality of the soul. As atheism and agnosticism spread in the Western world, many had recourse to religious experience as an intuitive certainty which could reassure doubting believers. We find this suggestion in Arthur Abell's interviews with great musicians, in some of the narratives transcribed by William James, and in Rudolf Otto's reflections on the numinous.[7]

Personally, I forego any affective proof such as the ones these authors suggest, although this study *will* establish how the emotional side of a human intentionality essentially open to the transcendent fits in with

its intellectual side. Inspired by the thinkers who will be introduced in part 2, I try, in part 3, to ground the human openness to the infinite in transcendental anthropology. The attainment of this goal entails an elucidation of the basic concepts that make up a philosophy of religious transcendence: experience; transcendence and intentionality; indefiniteness; our finitude-infinitude and the infinite; feeling and discovery; interpretation; and mediated immediacy. Accordingly, in part 3, we move from what Paul Ricoeur calls the phenomenological discourse (adopted in part 1) to what he calls the ontological discourse.[8] The latter is required whenever one wants to assess the validity of the categories that underpin lived experience and to tackle the question of whether the infinite to which we claim that the human person is open actually exists.

To sum up, our procedure will expand according to three stages: phenomenological, historical, and systematic. The first part of the book analyses the elements intrinsic to transcendent experience, introduces a fourfold classification, discusses other typologies, and presents narratives. The second part ponders the reflections of some modern Western thinkers on the sense of the infinite. While assessing their differing views, we will think our way through to a resolution of the basic epistemological problems that must be faced. Finally, the third part endeavours to cull and weave together the various points that were made in dialogue with the selected authors.

Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction xi

Part 1: A Phenomenological Approach

1 Constituents and Classification 3

Definition and Elements 4
Types 9
Other Typologies 10

2 Narratives 14

An Instance of Aesthetic Experience 14
An Instance of Ontological Experience 16
An Instance of Ethical Experience 20
An Instance of Interpersonal Experience 22

Part 2: Historic Contributions

3 Kant and the Sublime 27

Phenomenology 28
The Mediation of the Mind 31
The Unfolding of the Mathematical Sublime 37
The Concept of Infinite 40
Summary 45

4 Schleiermacher and Absolute Dependence 47

In the Wake of Kant 47
A Tripartite Division of Human Life 49
Feeling 51
Mediatedness 54
Absolute Dependence 57
The Awareness of the 'Whence' 59
Experience and Objectification 64
Summary 67

5 Hegel and the Dialectic of the Infinite 69

The Rejection of Kant's Infinite 70
Assessment of Hegel's Criticism of Kant 77
The Rejection of Schleiermacher's Absolute Dependence 82
Assessment of Hegel's Criticism of Schleiermacher 86
Summary 87

6 William James and Religious Experience 89

The Four Marks of Mysticism 90
Feeling and Thought 92
The Pragmatic Method 95
The Divine as an Undubitable Object 99
The Will to Believe 101
Summary 103

7 Rudolf Otto and the Numinous 105

Feeling or Emotion? 106
Uniqueness and Ineffability 109
The Non-rational and the Rational 111
The Holy as an A Priori Category 116
A Faculty That Perceives the Numinous 120
Summary 123

8 Maréchal, Rahner, and Lonergan 125

From the Transcendental to the Transcendent 125
Fascination with the Mystery 128
Examples 130

Four Levels of Consciousness 132
Feeling 135
Immediacy and Mediation 137
Religious Experience and Conversion 139
Summary 140

Part 3: The Validity of Transcendent Experiences

9 Basic Concepts I 145

Experience 146
Intentionality and Transcendence 151
Indefiniteness and the Infinite 156
Summary 160

10 Basic Concepts II 161

Feeling and Discovery 161
Interpretation 166
Directness and Mediation 175
Summary 181

Conclusion 184

Notes 189
Selected Bibliography 211
Index 217

PART 1

A Phenomenological Approach

Chapter 1

Constituents and Classification

The phenomenon to be highlighted has been diversely identified: the feeling of absolute dependence (Schleiermacher), cosmic consciousness (Bucke), religious experience (James), the sense of the numinous (Otto), the experience of transcendence (Rahner), peak experience (Maslow), the dimension of ultimacy (Gilkey), signal of transcendence (Berger), ecstatic experience (Tracy), and so forth.[1] This kind of experience is neither a particular increase in insight and knowledge nor a helpful pious affection, although these are also part of religion. Rather, it consists in discovering afresh, as if taken by surprise, an uncanny dimension of reality, an uncircumscribed realm to which one feels open. It is the awareness of being in contact with something that lies beyond one's normal control, power, or understanding.

In this book, *transcendent experience* will refer to this phenomenon. It partially overlaps with religious, mystical, and praeternatural phenomena. Yet, it differs from religious experience because, for church members, the latter covers a larger spectrum of religious acts and does not always include the affective recognition of something ultimate (which, in my opinion, is typical of transcendent experience). However, from the perspective of people with no denominational affiliation, the difference would be that transcendent experience is broader, since it may occur either within or outside a religious context (understood as a matter of interpretation and practice). Furthermore, transcendent experience is only the beginning of mystical life and therefore should not to be equated with mysticism. If, in the course of our survey of the numerous meanings that transcendent experience takes on, the adjectives 'religious' and 'mystical' are employed, they will simply conform with the usage of authors who actually mean what the adjective 'transcend-

ent' here conveys. Finally, transcendent experiences are not the same thing as praeternatural phenomena. Following R.C. Zaehner, a distinction will be made between transcendent experiences and 'visions, auditions, locutions, telepathy, telekinesis, or any other praeternatural phenomenon.'[2] In a parallel fashion, Andrew Greeley distinguishes 'the parapsychical' and 'the mystical'; the former includes 'Déjà Vu, Extrasensory Perception, and Clairvoyance' (his chapter 2) and 'Contact with the Dead' (his chapter 3).[3]

Whenever praeternatural (also called parapsychical or psychical) phenomena convey a clear sense of the unbounded, they coexist with transcendent experiences. The same overlapping may take place with near-death experiences, which sometimes are transcendent.[4] In this enquiry, I have chosen not to enter into the intricate problems of praeternatural phenomena, so as to centre on *ordinary* events – sometimes sober, sometimes vivid – that open up to the infinite.

This chapter comprises three sections. First, a working definition of transcendent experiences will be offered and their components spelled out in such a way that readers may appreciate their richness. Second, a typology will be presented, so that we can realize how varied they are. Finally, other typologies will be discussed.

Definition and Elements

A full explication of transcendent experience will be made in part 3 of this book. Yet, the elucidation of our phenomenology requires a provisional definition here: *Transcendent experience is an apprehension of the infinite through feeling, in a particular circumstance.* It is an apprehension – that is, some sort of awareness or intuitive knowledge – which captures an individual's or a group's attention because it is driven home by a peculiar kind of feeling. Feeling colours our response to something that looks immense. When we get in touch with an infinite quantity or quality, we may have the impression that this dimension goes beyond the limits of 'normal' life, that it cannot be artificially restricted and that it should command utter respect.

Awakening may result from a void or a fulfilment. It is preceded by a period of rumination on some vexing issue. More directly, it proceeds from a psychological and existential situation, is associated with some circumstance, and is sparked by a specific occasion.[5] It is conditioned and channelled by an interpretive and emotional frame of reference, and it may be followed by a significant change in one's life. These

observations suggest that transcendent experience encompasses six elements: the preparation, the immediate occasion, the predominant feeling, the discovery, the interpretation, and the fruit. Let us go on to a more analytical characterization of these six elements.

First, the *preparation* is the cognitive and affective setting that conditions – without inflexibly determining – the forthcoming experience. It is constituted by the lifestyle, personality views, concerns, problems, and questions of an individual or a group. Such a frame of mind orients what will eventually happen. Before the decisive event takes place, one is under the influence of some anticipation, which Rudolf Bultmann calls a *Vorverständnis*, a 'pre-understanding.'[6] This basic predisposition has to do with one's possibilities, openness, ability to receive a certain revelation about one's existence.

The preparation is both long and short range. Its span may encompass years, weeks, or only a few days, during which time something has been fermenting in the personal life of the recipient of transcendent experience. However, the experiencers' readiness is also enhanced by the psychological and existential situation – often marked by uneasiness, tension, or even struggle – in which they find themselves, immediately before the occasion is given.

Second, the *occasion* is that which sets off the experience. It can be an action, a person, a vista, a painting, a musical piece, a vision, a dream, a phrase heard or recalled, a shock, or good or bad news. Walter Houston Clark refers to such things as 'triggers.' He sees them as 'internal events physiological and neurological in character' and mentions sensory deprivation, exhaustion, fasting, the use of a special diet, and even certain drugs.[7] To adopt a metaphor taken from chemistry, the occasion functions as a precipitating factor. It can bring about a sudden release of tension and thus facilitate the emergence of a strikingly novel feeling. The occasion belongs in our everyday world. As Peter Berger says, 'By signals of transcendence I mean phenomena that are to be found within the domain of our "natural" reality but that appear to point beyond that reality.'[8] At this phenomenological stage of our presentation, it would be premature to ask whether the causes are suprahuman. This question will be considered in our last chapter.

Third, to describe the kind of *feeling* that lies at the core of transcendent experience, I shall cite the French phenomenologist Mikel Dufrenne.[9] Although he does not envision transcendent experience, the aesthetic feeling that he describes is nevertheless, in my opinion, what is closest to the feeling of transcendence. We may therefore start with this anal-