

Transcendental Semiotics II:

Phenomenological Hermeneutics as Methodology within an Epistemology of Spiritual Experience

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Abstract

The author continues his first article on this topic, which was published in issue 2/2011 of JSTP. The approach discussed there understanding spiritual experiences as a sign of a different reality is continued here in a more methodologically way stressing the problems and opportunities of individual case analysis. A hermeneutics adapted to the needs of psychological analysis of the individual case is presented as the appropriate methodology to investigate spiritual experiences. An inductive (or abductive) generalization of single cases to a construct level here remains largely untouched but is implied.

Keywords: Spiritual experience, extraordinary experience, hermeneutics, psychological methodology, psychological epistemology

Why do we need a spiritual epistemology?

One may assume that the problem exists in all human cultures either implicitly or explicitly: how to understand experiences that are beyond the physical and material reality? If in a hunting culture a young man for the first time had the vision of a stag deity telling him where to find the best hunting grounds, then his community was perhaps confronted with the question whether the young man had the gift of communicating with the world of spirits and ancestors or whether he just fantasized. Decisions important for the survival of the clan were made by such dreaming of the shamans. Explicitly, however, the question of distinction

between a simple dream and a real vision probably did not arise, because the whole community was naturally in contact with the animistic and personal otherworld, so that everyone already had prior knowledge about what dreams, visions or inspirations were. The difficulties probably arose with the advent of an intellectual theology, which moved away from direct spiritual experience and made sure that the numinous had to be explained by a priestly caste. The direct contact with God was still possible for man and woman in the Garden of Eden, as the Bible teaches. They needed no intermediary, no scriptures, no teachers, and no interpreters of prophecy. Only after degustating from *knowledge* man was estranged from his immediate experience, only after the intellect had come between the immediate revelation of the divine and the human, they had to decide what originated from the Divine and what not, had to set up rules and commandments, had to create an erudite class and a canon of mandatory religious beliefs to separate the right from the wrong spirituality. From now on, the question how to distinguish real from false mysticism appeared explicitly.¹

Behind this standard, we moderns can only partially go back. Fortunately for us, in a reduced extent they still (and now again increasingly) exist: the shamans, seers and mystics, being aware of other worlds directly. But today, after the so-called Enlightenment, where the dominance of the intellect is so strong that it is no longer regarded as a mere tool of our mental equipment, but as a life purpose in and of itself, we can no longer assume naively and without purposefully using our mind that their visions simply speak of a higher reality, just because that is what these people are experiencing. We cannot be so naive to buy into everything that they tell us. This verification process we have taken out of the hands of the religious priesthood with their ordeals and mantic interrogations, and placed into the hands of the priests of science. We believe only them, without checking their statements ourselves: Out of sheer helplessness, for no one can check the testimony of a scientist as a scientist of the same area. So it was with the priests once, too: No one could check the biblical interpretation of the medieval clergy before the first translations of the Bible into vernacular languages, if not another cleric, and no one could dare to declare invalid (or valid) the sacred action of a Brahmin priest of the Vedic period but another Brahmin.

¹ Cf. the endeavour of a systematic investigation from a psychiatric perspective by Jean Lhermitte (1952): *Mystiques et faux mystiques*. Paris: Bloud et Gay.

Interestingly, there are quite different tendencies in the Christian churches: The Catholic magisterium examines single cases tending to an open (sometimes surprising) result, while the large Protestant churches tend to consider all mysticism as pure nonsense, and charismatic independent churches regard all changes of consciousness states during a divine service as a mystical revelation.

We may have good or bad reasons for having learned to push the mind between us and our experience and distrust the immediacy of it. In a complex society, it is reasonable that reason, the cognitive faculty of logical thinking and argument, shall check again everything that we hear or see in a secondary process. It is clear that we cannot accept at this stage of the evolution of our culture as a socially determined individual and as a whole society that something should be "true" that is contrary to our reason. And the highest standard of reason, we created in what we call "science". The theory, which deals with the possibility of a scientific knowledge of spiritual experience, we call an *epistemology of spiritual experience*, and the study of the possible methods to obtain such knowledge, we call its *methodology*.

Many social scientists consider only such a methodology as useful that follows the logic of the experiment, because this form of study design has the greatest degree of "evidence". Without discussing the many possible objections against favouring this one methodological model, we must at least state one thing: There are no per se good or bad methods for a research in accordance with reason. There are only methods that are appropriate or inappropriate to a question by reasonable criteria. The experiment is a good method in order to prove something. However, it is virtually impossible to create an *experimentum crucis* in the social sciences, which might provide a watertight solid evidence for a thesis. Therefore, it is completely pointless trying to convince a person, who is convinced of the non-existence of a paranormal or transcendent reality, by an experiment. It would, however, reversely be likewise impossible to convince a Berkeleyian spiritualist of a material reality by an experiment. We therefore need not to approach the question, whether there is a world beyond the physical and material reality or not, with scientific methodology: We can either axiomatically reject it, as the majority of scientists do today, or affirm it axiomatically, as we would suggest, for a change. We therefore do not need the experiment as the primary research methodology to answer the questions of interest to us. There are more useful research methodologies if it is not meant to prove a claim, but to gain a better understanding of a subject. These methodologies of the humanities (maybe it is a bit boring to emphasize again, but unfortunately not quite superfluous) are just as "scientific" as those quantitative methods defined in the natural sciences, because their application is as highly compatible with rational arguments like these, even if their ideal field of application and their results differ.

The problem: Are true propositions about idiosyncratic experiences possible?

How can we know if an experience is really what it seems? How do we know whether we actually see an oasis in the middle of the Sahara or whether it is a mirage? How do we know whether the other night when we were risen from sleep by a strange gleam of light, have we seen in the door to our bedroom an apparition from another world² or have we not just dreamed or suffered a neurological abnormality? The issue of consistency between what we think we see and what it "really" is, can nowhere be answered with such great difficulty as within the spiritual experience where we do not know what this actually "real" is and even less, how it should thus be tested. We do not even know what "a being from another world" is, even if we were quite sure that such was in our bedroom. How much less can we assert its reality, if only it appears to us?

Normally we use the criterion of intersubjective comparison in case we doubt our perception: "Have you also seen this?" is the first question, if we want to know if there is a physical or a different type of perception. Many spiritual experiences are of that different type of perception and rarely (but sometimes) can be confirmed intersubjectively. And even if once a punctual intersubjectivity of a perception should be given, we do not know whether more than one person at the same time is deceived. So several people can simultaneously mistake a mirage in the desert for a lake – or a reflection in the sky for an appearance of the Madonna. Therefore, without a physical object, a direct external criterion to test their authenticity is missing. Mostly, all possible criteria coincide with the phenomenon itself (i.e., what is subjectively appearing): It is what it seems, not what someone else can check. We must thus firstly rely on a radical phenomenology instead of inserting it into an external world: "The person has had a vision at night" is verifiable or falsifiable by any external criterion, because "No, I was there, and there was nothing" is no acceptable negation of a phenomenon that existed for the person only. At the same time, this singularity does not necessarily indicate a mental illness. Singular phenomena can take place within the range of individual perception without that this lack of a "point-shaped" intersubjectivity must indicate a pathological state of mind. So for us it means that for our consideration only the phenomenon itself remains, which we can first of all know only as a verbal testimony out of the mouth or the pen of the concerned person. We must therefore abandon the outdated epistemological model of cor-

² No, I, the author, did never see such a thing, but all that are not concerned with spiritual experience may be told, that the examples, I use here, are derived from authentic (and not unique) reports of real persons.

respondence of truth as "*adaequatio rei et intellectus*", the congruence of thing and intellect that presents its difficulties in the assertion of an external reality existing independently of the mind. In the case of spiritual experiences, this theory of truth does not help us further. We need a radically phenomenological-constructivist approach: For the person who encounters a being of light in her bedroom in an apparently awake state of consciousness, this experience is "true". For us and s/he it is in need of explanation, but our statement is "true" only if it, as a construction of reality, also satisfies the experiencing person like it satisfies us. A different notion of truth we cannot establish in the study of spiritual experience, and therefore we need first to turn to individual cases and understand them acceptingly. But then, has it any meaning at all, if we ask ourselves: "Was this incident real or not?". Apparently, pure ideational terms such as "the German" (an abstraction of millions of concrete individuals) or "love" (an abstraction of many single bodily sensations, situations, action patterns and their evaluation) are very effective realities, even if we do not directly and intersubjectively perceive them. In this sense, every experience, even an only internal one, is a reality that has an effect. We will see that the "Wirklichkeit" of an experience (a German expression of Meister Eckhart, meaning that, which "works") can be very well considered, even if its reality (from the Latin *res*, the *thing*, that which is tangible) is not examinable.³

Besides the "*point-shaped*" *inter-subjectivity*, which means that several persons perceive something in the same space-time-point, there is a *syndromic intersubjectivity* with which we will deal later, i.e., the fact that we – as in the combination of observable facts called "symptoms" to cognitive entities called "syndrome" like in (psycho)pathology – can compare several phenomenal reports, which contain similar issues, and thereby form "syndromes". This syndromic intersubjectivity can be constituted by an observing expert or by an affected system. We can speak of a *practical expertise*, if the person who classifies the phenomenon has internal comparables himself, i.e., has experienced the same or similar occurrences. Most social scientists, on the other hand, refer to a *theoretical expertise* when they investigate human experience: We must never have been even slightly psychotic in order to know what a psychosis is.⁴ This can be seen

³ Cf. the so called Thomas-theorem: „If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.“ (William & Dorothy Thomas. *The Child in America: Behavior Problems and Programs*. New York 1928).

⁴ Since Karl Jaspers' postulate of non-understandability of psychoses, this sentence can be discussed diversely. You could interpret it as "knowing" in Diltheys sense of "explaining" something that is just

quite well in the desert example: Only when an experienced person is among the hikers, who has seen plenty of mirages him/herself (*practical expertise*) or knows some distinguishing criteria of mirages and water retention (*theoretical expertise*), we can afford to deliver a judgment. Experts of both practical and theoretical nature are the teachers of the spiritual traditions in the spiritual realm, and if they were accessible to us (which they are often not), we should also include their judgment for not mistaking mirages as water reservoirs or vice versa. So we can win criteria out of the study and the comparison of different experiences and existing theoretical knowledge. Here we get into a circular process: Only when we have compared many experiences of the same type, we can combine them into categories and give them a name.

But now we have only a grouping by similarity and expertise that provides criteria for determining when a certain kind of experience is present. We know when we are concerned with a mirage and when we are dealing with water, but cannot make any statements about the consequences of this classification. We do not yet know whether it is good or bad to meet a mirage in the desert as long as we do not have the knowledge of the meaning of this phenomenon. We have to augment our construct of a mirage with empirical knowledge about its consequences to capture not only its meaning in its demarcation against other concepts, but also its *meaning for us*. This can only be won by examining the classes of experience in terms of their effects. So today, it is quite clear that particularly intense near-death experiences result in positive changes in the view of life and death for the majority of affected persons. Such a criterion of consequences can therefore distinguish pro-development experiences from pathological ones. William James, who hoped to found a new evidence-based religiosity out of a spiritual psychology,⁵ regarded the good and the bad consequences of spirituality as a criterion for its value, but insisted that both types of experience can be spiritual in nature. We will come back to the question of the consequences soon.

Spiritual experiences are not only difficult to test inter-subjectively, they are often difficult to express, because our language is derived from the functional relationship of a shared sensory world. Over time, the societies have derived abstractions out of these concrete sensuous concepts that are not learned deictically (by pointing on something) but inferentially from multiple contexts, in which they occur. The European languages, however, seem to be poor in terms

externally cognizable (and that is what Jaspers meant). I, in contrast, think that this postulate is wrong and that an understanding form of empathy is possible without being psychotic oneself.

⁵ Cf. Harnack, Edgar W. (2009): Experimentelle Religion – Transpersonale Psychologie als „Religionswissenschaft“ im Sinne von William James. *Journal für Psychologie* 17 (1)

of mystical states of being – and even where they exist, they are hardly applicable in the right way for those who never or just for the first time have experienced what they mean. How can we hope to understand truly what another person has experienced when it comes to an experience that has no equivalent in my own memory and language formation so ever? Apparently we must construct an idea of this experience by analogy, remaining as close as possible to what the other means.

To construct this close idea, we can go into a process of dialogue with the rapporteur, use a constructivist methodology, in which we express hypotheses and wait to see if they can be confirmed or denied by the other person. This means, we try to construct a picture of the perception, of all accompanying, preceding, and following emotions, thoughts and circumstances in us. Before all abstraction, we need to gain the greatest possible certainty that we have grasped all facets of what belongs to this experience. A thorough analysis of the single case is the prerequisite of all continuative analyses. Knowing what other people have told us about similar situations, enriches the understanding of the current narrative. Similarly, we could do if we have not a person, but a written report in hand. We circle the true content of experience repeatedly in an asymptotic process until we get as close as possible to it, which may never come (without psychic talent) to a total identity of my perception and the experience of the other person.

A spiritual experience?

Let us look at the questions that arise while reading an experience, which the person experiencing has kindly added to my collection of spiritual experiences:

"In December 2008, I stood in front of a stage of a small Christmas market and looked at a performance of Christmas carols. Quite unexpectedly the whole scene got something unreal (super-real?), became somehow transparent, but at the same time got something brilliant, incredibly powerful (divine and holy?). As if everything consisted of a translucent material (like thin paper) and would be irradiated by a single massive light source. Although I cannot define these terms in more detail, it has more of a feeling, not in the sense of emotion, but maybe in the sense of 'non-thinking'. Everything perceived was suddenly an empty backdrop and this empty scenery was DIVINE. The dancing divine emptiness, so to speak. And this 'DIVINE' can not be capitalized enough. It was simply overwhelming. It does not seem to be bearable for a human being. It is somehow not enough space to house it. No idea, what would have happened, if it had taken

longer. Feeling so overwhelmed, tears came, and for a moment, I had the impression I could hardly stand. I had similar experiences before and after, but not at this intensity."⁶

According to the process just described, we now address questions to the text, where we first bracket all our previous knowledge consciously to approach the report naively and fresh, before we unwrap our knowledge again in a second step reviewing the report with it. In our example, the following thoughts could arise in a dialogue form:

Initial spontaneous Question: *Can I imagine this experience at all, or is it so far beyond my imagination that I trivialize it in my own mind, diminish it to my own level of experience, and therefore do not really understand what the writer has experienced?*

First impression: *It seems to me, the idea is difficult to grasp while reading. When I read the words of the writer superficially, I actually absorb them just as a banal fantasy.*

Second reading for consideration: *The writer, however, experiences the incident as overwhelming. Tears come to her eyes, and she has the feeling that she can barely stand on her feet. The experience has an impact on her bodily sensations, just like a very strong emotional impression. The assumption that it was a banal fantasy has to be rejected. Here something happens that is beyond ordinary imagination, it happens, and cannot be made.*

Content Analysis: *This perception she describes in the following conceptual categories:*

Non-reality (super-reality); transparency and light (seems to belong together) (beaming, coming out of a single light source, all materials are transparent, like thin paper); emptiness (only like a scenery); Divine / Holy (divine emptiness, powerful, not capitalized enough, not bearable for a single human being). Here, these terms belong all together, while the terms on the side of her psychological reaction are "overwhelming" and "non-thinking".

Comparison with previous knowledge: *These terms recall other mystical experiences. The impression that the world of the rapporteur seems empty (without substance) and transparent, that a light shines through it and the quality of an indescribable power manifests, can also be found in the detailed descriptions of other people that interpret their experience as a result of long meditation practices or as spontaneous mystical occurrence. Perhaps this experience even corresponds to what is called in Buddhism a direct view of emptiness (while there are probably*

⁶ Translated reproduction of a report (file no. 2013-03-30-01) of my collection of spiritual experience reports. I am thankful for all further contributions.

still other variants of how to experience this). Anyway, nothing in the experience indicates a psychopathological component.

Do we also have information apart from the experience? *We only learn so much that she had similar, less intense experiences before and after this one. Apparently, there is something in her so as a disposition to such experience.*

Which currently unanswerable questions ultimately remain for me?

1. *How is it principally possible for human beings to make such an experience?*
2. *Does the subject experience a more proper or just another dimension of reality? Is this experience, thus, "higher" than the everyday perspective?*
3. *Can and should the person use (expand) her ability to have such experiences or consider it only as a "gift"?*

When we have reached an initial understanding of the text, we want to understand the experience more deeply. But what is meant by understanding an experience, depends mainly on the question we address to a report. The initial question, whether there is a genuine spiritual experience, turns out to be quite imprecise: What is a real and what a false spiritual experience? If the experiencer tells us "I want to understand what I experienced there", we can help her only as far as she can clarify her questions. "What exactly are the consequences of the experience for me" is a completely different question than: "Is behind this hidden an unknown power?". While we may call the former a *pragmatic* question, behind the latter is a question of the nature of the cosmos, thus an *ontological* question. Unfortunately, at the present state of a spiritual science, we are hardly able to answer such a question. We moderns then like to grab the most absurd of all hypotheses and call the inexplicable a coincidence, keeping away the unease of an effective something, which we cannot control. If we consider, for example according to the Buddhist Madhyamaka philosophy⁷, the world as a great net of interdependence, in which all our life depends (among other things) on our own minds, it is not so much about what is "out there". What the spiritual experience teaches us refers to the person. Then each such experience tells us something about the person who makes them – and contains a message about their inner spiritual psychology. We could look at the spiritual experience in this sense as a sign of their spiritual readiness, their spiritual development, etc.

However, as in psychopathology, a real danger in a spiritual science is to fall into the fallacy of reification. Especially in circles of practitioners of eastern spiritualities, one can hear this kind of chat: "Ingo had a satori experience. I'm sure. But Paula says it's a kensho. And if it was a samadhi?". Here, the phenomenon of

⁷ Corresponding somehow with the Western epistemology of radical constructivism and being even exceeded by its sister, the Cittamatra School, in this respect.

reification can be observed, in which we pretend something was outside of us, which in fact is just a way of describing something inside ourselves, spider web-like constructions of our mind, in which an experience shall be captured. Since there is no satori and no depression in the same sense as there is a sunflower, but only in the way a GNP or a moral obligation exists, we are focussing wrongly if we argue about concepts. The question is less "Is it an apple or not" and more "Is this fruit healthy or not". Spiritual experiences are something not directly and intersubjectively sensually detectable, and if we disagree on terms that have as their conceptual extension something not directly sensually graspable, we should become aware that we are arguing only about expected conditions and consequences of these terms, but the term is not "real" (a *res*, thing). So although satori does not exist as an object, satori exists as something that has different conditions and consequences as non-satori.

Then, what is left as an irreducible and valid criterion for assessing the experience is that criterion, which the philosopher and psychologist William James made the basis of his epistemology: the question of the pragmatic meaning of a situation for the individual. And this criterion is of real importance, as we can easily see if we talk to Ingo, who claims to be an enlightened one. This is not uncommon nowadays. What should we tell this person if we, after a thorough examination, actually do not find anything that stands against this assumption (supposed he is psychological integer and his exceptional experience meets the criteria that some would call an temporary enlightenment experience). The only thing we can say reasonably is: Observe further what your enlightenment experience is doing with you. If it improves your life and your environment, nothing is wrong with it. On the other hand, if it promotes directly (not as a result of negative social reactions) depression, anxiety or psychosis rather than balance, harmony and joy, then something is wrong. Maybe that sounds too simple, but for now it is sufficient to watch the "By their fruits ye shall know them", a Bible quote that also uses the pragmatist William James.

The first question formulated in such a pragmatic approach, therefore usually concerns the demarcation of psychopathological and ("real") spiritual experience. It also often is the first categorical classification experiencers expect from professionals (like psychic advisors, pastors, or psychiatrists). The question implies at least a prior knowledge about the concept of the spiritual. We can here – again with a pragmatic precondition – call an experience spiritual that we can cannot understand as well if we take a materialist viewpoint as a basis and

understanding it is more successful in the context of a transcendental reality.⁸ To decide this in turn requires an understanding of the different possible interpretations. In other words, in order to answer the "big question" of a spiritual psychology ("Is it something spiritual?") we must know first, what an understanding of the occurrence is possible in the context of a materialist worldview and what it is on a spiritual basis. Here we inevitably come into a circular movement of thought: If we assume it is the manifestation of an intangible reality within the sensory perception of the rapporteur, the appearance of a mystical world, then we have already answered the question so that we have taken the experience for a spiritual one. Suppose we consider it a semi-psychotic state, maybe some physiologically triggered neurotransmitter imbalance or even as an indication of a transient ischemic attack, then we have answered the initial question also very quickly. So, what was it *in reality*?

While it is a useful approach to consult external criteria, but contrary to all expectation, this question cannot thus be answered, for example by putting the person into a "brain scan". Even if we, by the latest technology, could demonstrate an inhibition of dopamine reuptakes after the event, we do not know for sure if the neurotransmitters shift was the consequence or the cause of the experience. In addition, we also need multiple measurements in order to know what is the normal individual amount of free dopamine in the synaptic cleft for this person. We cannot even know whether an abnormal blood vessel found in the area of the visual cortex in MRI has caused an ischemic insult at the time of experiencing, or whether it is an independent finding. Even if we can simulate such experience under laboratory conditions by applying magnetic fields, administer drugs or otherwise affecting the brain directly, we only know that we can create that same experience on the way from matter to consciousness, but we do not know whether it is under normal circumstances produced on the reverse path from consciousness to matter. In short: We will always be able to find arguments for a materialistic and a spiritual causality as well.⁹ Thus, we can say: Both causal models are complementary; i.e., they complete each other mutually.

⁸ Premises in this regard can be found in other articles like Harnack, Edgar W. (2011): Investigating God Instead of Proving God. Methodological Preliminaries of Transcendental Research. *Journal for Spirituality and Transcendental Psychology* 1 (1), 120-136

⁹ We can avoid this by speaking of consciousness = matter instead of consciousness → matter, assuming that consciousness is always just the experienced expression of matter, a materialistic monism, in which consciousness is called an epiphenomenon of physiological processes. This philosophical position, aiming at supporting the primacy of neuroscience over science of consciousness, is just a postulate, that has to be rejected by a spiritual science, naturally.

Instead of searching for the true primary cause, it makes more sense to look for the true impact of different reality constructions. Therefore, an epistemology of spiritual experience necessarily has a pragmatist and constructivist feature: Not the causal correctness of any explanation, but the effect an experience exhibits can serve as a reasonable criterion for the fitting re-construction of its being. Of course, it has as important consequences when we miss a brain tumor in the rapporteur, as when we miss a spiritual experience and on the basis of conservative psychopathological misperceptions set them at worst under drugs a lifetime. But how can we, before the consequences have fully developed, know whether we should treat a potential medical disorder or not?

Here we can rely on an almost obsolete, but meaningful medical model: the idea that diseases can be classified diagnostically on the basis of symptoms. Experiences (be they spiritual, psychotic, or usual) are – apart from their neurological basis – pure phenomena ("appearances"), nothing else than symptoms, without that we could find an underlying "bacterial infection". The most useful way to gather information on the subject of experience, therefore, lies in the study of the "symptoms" of the phenomenon itself. We need a system of such experiences in order to deduce similarities, by means of which we can better predict the consequences, which arise for the individual from such an experience. At the present state of knowledge, we can already say that the biggest part of the experiences of the nature of the above given do not lead to psychopathological problems. It even remains entirely without consequences, except perhaps for the positive impact on our "station in life": the experiencing person under the principle of spiritual interpreting gets the positive impression of being part of a vibrant, still mysterious world – not a physical causality fully explained by science, experiencing a moment of deeper back-bonding and outlook on something else, which – if s/he is able to take it seriously and integrate it – can give them meaning and support in other circumstances as well. The differences between a spiritual and a psychopathological interpretation can be subjectively very important. But do we know now what it *really really* was?

From pragmatic interpretation to the question of causality or intentionality

If we call the attempt of understanding the spiritual experience a *transcendental semiotics* (theory of signs), it is because we can look at the empirical data, which we obtain from the recording of spiritual experiences, as a sign for something else. It is now crucial that we can think of such a semiotic character of an experience in two ways: Either in terms of a relationship of a purely theoretical con-

struct. Then the experiences are the observation data, generating hypotheses lying behind a construct named "transcendence" and enriching this construct with each new, subsumed experience, making it more and more complex. On the other hand, it could also be that the spiritual experience is not merely formally subsumed into one instance, which we can name the divine, using a primarily void concept, but in the manner that this principle is also *principium*, the principal efficient cause of the experience and endowing that experience with meaningful intent. Behind the question "What does this experience mean?" often the assumption of an active, intelligent divine is hidden, which pursues a goal for us with the gift of an experience. In this case, the idea of semiotic character is meant in a more anthropomorphic sense as an actual utterance of an effective principle or a divine person, which addresses us very directly and means us.

In the one case, the experience has a character of something intentionally made for me, in the other case the character of something important – in terms of something larger, of which my life is a part, and if it was only a cosmic law (in no case, however, it has the character of something merely accidental, which is assumed in the materialistic worldview, in the absence of a better explanation). Both cases, however, are compatible on the methodological and the lifeworld level: They probably form a complementary relationship, so not one *or* the other is true. Rather, it should be a matter of perspective whether an item is to be regarded as causally determined or as teleological (intended). The same is true in turn for each experience. Every experience – including the mere fact of our existence on this planet – can be understood both as carmically conditioned as well as divinely intended – and both positions can be confirmed in each case by spiritual experiences. For the concept of experience as a sign this means that *every* experience is a sign for a transcendental (spiritual) theory of signs, which not only provides information about the functioning of the physical but also the spiritual world, which like another field of effects seems to be layered behind the material. Whether we view this semiotic character as mere indication or as a conscious verbal expression, as a message of the other side of the world, is arbitrary or "ambivalent" (an adjective that expresses that the proposition: "Given: $A \cup B$ " obtains the logical value 1). There must be a later essay addressing the semiotic character of the whole world (a theory of signs, as it is envisaged in Augustine or the philosopher Georg Friedrich Meier). Here suffices the statement that from such ontological premise follows that we have to assume that an experience is a spiritual experience only in a relative way (relative to less spiritual experiences), never in an absolute manner. Therefore, it is pointless to prove the spiritual content of an experience. We can abstain from an ultimate proof

against materialism, as it will never accept such because everything is material for them, as for us everything can be spiritual. On a relative level, however, it may be very useful to be able to distinguish *rather* spiritual from *rather* worldly psychological experiences.

At the same time, we should not determine the boundary between understanding and explanation at the distinction between causality and intentionality, as Dilthey did. We must try to understand both on a different level than that of external determination of the natural science. The transcendental factor, which we call the divine, can appear to us in a causal and in an intentional way, but we should strive first of all to understand it in the consideration of individual cases, before we are capable of deriving causal statements from it. Only when we rid ourselves from our permanent attachment to explaining, to solve the How, What and Why of such a numinous experience, only then we can temporarily leave behind us all categorizing and judging of the experience in order to integrate it into our learned cognitive schemata. Only then are we free to understand what is so different in the experience that we are not able to get it out of ourselves. We need the liberation of conceptual schemas already available for us into the space of creative potential of the not yet thought, the direct phenomenal apperception of the unprejudiced mindfulness described by Husserl as phenomenological epoché and reduction, or even in meditation practice with their own ability to repeat their content. Real understanding must not stop at the formation of categories that help us to answer preliminary questions, but should be open to the possibility that we do not know what it is that works in the person and through him or her. And yet we can strive for its exploration by – in the first sense of the semiotic character – abstracting the forms and effects of spiritual experiences into general principles.

Hermeneutic-phenomenological methodology

In the above example, we have touched some methodological paradigms. E.g., we have found that our knowledge develops often in a circular motion from pre-knowledge to knowledge, which becomes pre-knowledge again (etc.). This mode of cognition is known as the hermeneutic circle. We will therefore in the following regard the gain of the hermeneutical methodology for a science of the spiritual experience. Then we have emphasized that we need to consider the phenomenon itself, if we want to gain inside into the nature of experience, and thereby have to exclude our pre-knowledge as pre-judgement primarily. Hereby we move on the foundation of the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, which cannot be the subject here. We also have repeatedly encountered William James'

pragmatism, though here I must omit the discussion of this interesting theorist, too.

Hermeneutics is the effort to understand an individual case. In contrast to the establishment of general laws and the world's explanation out of them, called "nomothetic" by the philosopher Wilhelm Windelband, the investigation of a single case (the "idiographic" methodology) requires a different procedure. Understanding a single case is difficult just because of its singularity. Exploring an individual case always requires knowledge of general concepts that can be applied to this particular case, and thus is never without presuppositions. The former circumstance – the reciprocity of individual cases and general terms in the individual case study – is (probably first formulated in 1808 by Friedrich Ast) known as the hermeneutic circle. The second fact – that we are to approach an individual case from a philosophical basis and therefore can never start without assumption – was addressed in the hermeneutics of 20th Century as historical relativity of every hermeneutic perspective (e.g., any historical analysis is always refracted through the prism of its own historical position). We are better speaking instead of a historical perspective in a wider sense of the ideological pre-determination of any consideration of a spiritual phenomenon. As we will see, the historical-critical method is an attempt to meet this historicity of all texts.

The investigation of individual cases of our kind must be in the first phase in the way that the credibility of the statements has to be checked. This test therefore differs largely from the question, which follows the hermeneutic method in other cases. In spiritual experiences, we are more concerned with an approach based on the model of criminal investigations in this first phase: Amazingly, such a police investigation can decide on a whole life – it can bring a person forever in prison, and in some semi-civilized nations even cost their lives – and despite its enormous pragmatic relevance it seems to be less reliable than the methods of exact sciences – but not because our police systems work so badly, but because a single case investigation needs totally different tools. We can, however, be sure that the production of knowledge in the social sciences is in no way more reliable regarding an individual case as the method of carefully working detectives, because the accumulated data of social science studies (for example, the findings of neuroscience, or empirical research-based psychiatry) are – if they have any general validity at all and will not be overstated from the outset – transferable to individual cases only in terms of probability statements. For the question of credibility initially just signs are at our command, which we can obtain from the repertoire of forensic testimonial psychology.

Something else distinguishes our subject from the usual hermeneutics of social sciences: Each extraordinary experience has the character of a perception, in that it for the subject comes into consciousness by any sensory quality (which may also be an internal or bodily sense) and appears not as self-produced, but as received. A spiritual experience taking place more or less completely in the mental or verbal realm,¹⁰ must therefore be of a perceptual character as well, e.g., a unusual insight or the emergence of inner voices, which still are perceived as loud thoughts, but already as autonomous, or the phenomenon of automatic writing, which is also more perception than action because it is not controlled autonomously by the individual. It is often difficult to distinguish whether it is an inner or outer perception and: both occur and both are perceptions and not actions or behaviours.

Qualitative (hermeneutic) psychological methods, however, mostly imply the category of action. Verbal or physical expressions of people are investigated for the intentionality and motivation, and the involvement in social regulation systems underlying that action. This has produced the social science methodology of hermeneutic sociology of knowledge (Soeffner) or objective hermeneutics (Oevermann). But action sequences are something different and follow a different logic than perception sequences. The same is true of other approaches of a “understanding psychology”, which mainly focuses on purposeful activity and not on perceptions that just outside the consciousness of the experiencer have their origin and their intentionality or causality is frequently unclear.

The experience is then embedded in cognitive categories that are available for the experiencing individual interacting with the given linguistic terms. From these concepts results the transcription of the experience into a verbal communication with the objective of providing it for an uninvolved other person. Finally, the message depends already in the encoding process on the image of the recipient, because the sender of course selects not only parts of the factual information, but also his choice of words, the length, the style and the material form of his message depending on the receiver. Added to this must be context features of the communication such as the privacy, time or content restrictions in telling the experience and the like. So the message will be very different, depending on whether it is given in the admission interview on a crowded closed psychiatric ward, on a Sunday excursion with your partner, or within a scientific interview.

This process now in turn forms a significant difference to the objects of traditional hermeneutics. Hermeneutics as a methodology has initially (in ancient

¹⁰ In Buddhist philosophy, by the way, thoughts are generally categorized as perceptions.

times) developed from philological and literary interests, then from questions of the theological interpretation of Scripture, and finally, in the modern times, of historical and philosophical needs. The focus of interest then was on the interpretation of single, important texts, only since Schleiermacher also on the comprehension of spoken speech. Always – even in its application in today's social science – the hermeneutic analysis of texts focussed on three issues: Firstly, the historical and social *context* of an utterance; secondly, questions of the *linguistic form* (grammatical and text-critical issues); and thirdly, questions of the history of concepts and ideas, of the historical categorization of the *contents*. These issues, however, may not entirely be irrelevant for the subject of spiritual experiences, but are much less important than in written literary texts. For example, it is quite irrelevant for understanding an extraordinary experience, which grammatical structure or spelling errors a written report, authored by the experiencer, contains. Although formal aspects of language form (style and grammatical correctness) may add information – to a very limited extend – about the rapporteur or the situation of drafting the report (whether the person seems to be more or less educated, for example, and whether they drafted it thoroughly). But are these essential questions at a person who claims to have had, for example, something like an angel apparition?

In contrast to hermeneutics and its historical-critical method, we are not concerned with the analysis of historically distant written records. What we intend is not a historical-critical, but a psychological-critical methodology. In this, the long-ago historical *context* (for example) of a biblical text is replaced by the individual context of the subject (his personality), her or his actual social life, the nature of social interaction as effective force on his personality and as an expression of the same. The analysis of the *text itself*, the manner of presentation, its generic form, its handing down, is reflected in the analysis of the peculiarities of expression, content, consistency, credibility, and possibly also of the context and the social history of the text ("Where and to whom was this experience told with which putative intent – now and earlier?"). And the *content* that the historical text conveys, and which normally is compared with other similar or contrasting ideas in the analysis of the history of ideas and narrative motifs, is reflected in the analysis of the experienced situation itself: How are other similar reports constructed, how does this report fit into a pattern and where is it original?

Accordingly, we analyze a text, which is the report of a psychological experience, in light of the psychological-critical method in three ways: in terms of the reporting *person* as the context of origin of the text (and not as a means to gain knowledge about the person), in terms of the *form* of the text itself, and in terms

of the *content* that is reported in comparison with similar contents from other texts. Finally, on a higher, fourth-level, conclusions out of this three-part analysis can be made, which in turn – in the sense of the hermeneutic spiral process – serve as a standard and as a generated common pattern in the consideration of subsequent texts. This fourth level, the generalizations that arise from a variety of similar texts can be described as the ultimate goal of our form of text analysis – quite according to the nomothetic ideal of science.

That is the whole idea of a psychological-critical methodology of spiritual experience in a transcendental psychology: to generate empirical knowledge in an inductive first phase of theory formation, which can be examined for patterns. Here, a spiritual or transcendental psychology differs significantly from theology and its historical-critical method in the overall intention: Theology, especially the Protestant mainstream, assumes that in the object of interest (Biblical texts) the revelation of the divine exists in a unique, historically unrepeatable form and that therefore only the explicit and implicit meaning of this text matters. At the same time, the process of construct formation in the Church's dogmatics or doctrine of God is already largely completed and always reflecting on the early Christian councils, which are practically non-revisable. The transcendental psychology regards – spoken in Christian terminology – the revelation, however, as permanent and never-ending process, and the same applies to the construct creation, from which statements about "the divine" or "the workings of the spiritual world" derive, so that each new single witness has its place as part of a process of further differentiation of the construct. The value of a biblical text such as St. John's Apocalypse is, on the background of an empirical religion (*sensu* William James), therefore, not greater than that of a modern doomsday vision, especially because in the latter the three factors of person, content and form of the text are better examinable.

For hermeneutics, it is essential that it as idiographic methodology in the first place regards the individual case, the single utterance only. In it, however, is already given a second level of knowledge that is included in the hermeneutic circle – the level of general concepts, under which the individual case, however, should not simply be subsumed: It deals with the difficult process of differentiation of the degree of belonging to several possible general concepts and thereby not to abolish individuality through subsumption, but to accent it compared to other single-issues. Our psychological-critical method assumes a circular process, but does not stop there, but is augmented by construct formulation.

The interest of a science of the spiritual cannot be limited to the understanding of a single utterance. This restriction applies to the holy scriptures of the religions, to texts of fictional literature or philosophical treatises, which are con-

sidered as unique accomplishments and therefore are of interest as such. The same applies to historical circumstances with their uniqueness, which Windelband had in mind with his distinction of nomothetic and idiographic methods. But spiritual experiences are just as unique as any other psychological situation: Unique as *token* in the biographical and historical uniqueness of their occurrence, but not (necessarily) unique in their underlying structure, i.e., as *type*.¹¹ And unlike cultural achievements that stand for themselves, the individual case (unfortunately) is not essential for us regarding psychological utterances of historically unknown persons, but only the general conditions and structural similarities, which can be derived from several such statements. In other words: A psychological-critical hermeneutics is interested in the level of general concepts or constructs not only in order to apply them to the individual case, but as a genuine goal of their research. The psychological-critical method is idiographic (in Windelband's pair of terms) in the first phase, but nomothetic in the second. Once we have reached this generalized stage of exploration of spiritual phenomena, we can talk about the large "void", the Divine behind the material surface, in a systematic, empirically proven (and not, as in the mythological stage of the Bible just in an anecdotic) manner.¹²

¹¹ The differentiation between token and type comes from William James' (temporarily) tutor and friend Charles S. Peirce: A cup, standing in front of me, is a token, while the concept of a cup is the type corresponding to it.

¹² A methodically not exact, but exemplary application of the here discussed principles on published spiritual experiences can be found in my article *Encounters with Immaterial Beings* in this issue.