

Anthony J. Steinbock

Phenomenology & Mysticism: The Verticality of Religious Experience.

Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 2007.

328 pages

\$49.95 (cloth ISBN 978-0-253-34934-7); \$28.00 (paper ISBN 978-0-253-22181-0)

Anthony Steinbock, a Professor of Philosophy at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, describes his account of human experience as ‘vertical givenness’ or ‘verticality’ and explores its philosophical implications in this monograph. He does this by analyzing three exemplary mystics of the Abrahamic tradition: St. Teresa of Avila from Christianity (ch. 2), Rabbi Dov Baer from Judaism (ch. 3), and Rūzbihān Baqlī from Islam (ch. 4). Steinbock emphasizes that he is not intending to discuss the idea of God; rather he focuses on *epiphany* as a means of revelation, suggesting that this revealing and being revealed ‘qualifies a dimension of experiencing as religious’ (15–6). He argues that traditionally this has been named ‘givenness’ and suggests a predisposing of the self in order to experience the self-giving that is being given. (2–3)

In the first chapter Steinbock discusses ‘The Religious and Mystical Shape of Experience’ (21–43), laying out the ideas of thinkers such as Rudolph Otto on the numinous, the sacred, and the holy which attempt to describe mystical experience, after which he turns to discuss the meaning of lived mystical experience—a phenomenon, he argues, which is open to every human being. Edmund Husserl’s phenomenological method investigating life experience offers Steinbock the opportunity to explore the concerns relating to what is real or true, or to put it another way the quest for the evidence for the essentiality of life, including enquiring into the integrity of first-hand mystical experiences. Steinbock builds on the important thoughts of others in the field of phenomenology such as Augustin Poulin, Gerda Walther, and Nelson Pike, he also argues against what he describes as ‘lamentably facile approaches that are merely reductive’. The balance of this first chapter clarifies Steinbock’s choice of the Abrahamic tradition rather than others which are equally important, suggesting similarities between the three Abrahamic traditions which point to a mode of givenness or verticality which directs towards a path leading to a unity of revealed experience.

The following three chapters offer Steinbock the opportunity to discuss the growth of mystic experience within the three Abrahamic traditions. In each of the three Steinbock outlines the course or pathway to responding or conforming to God (54), abandoning oneself to God (90), and ‘liberating [oneself] from physical and spiritual materialism’ (68). Placing each tradition within its historical context, Steinbock reveals his aim as being that of experiencing for himself (or walking with) each mystic in his attempt to apprehend and understand. This he shares in the succeeding chapters.

Arguing that religious experience may only be authenticated or repudiated by reference to religious experience itself, Steinbock suggests that personal testimony of the mystics themselves enable him to describe the mode and structure of epiphanic givenness and its kind of evidence’ (116). The fifth chapter, ‘Matters of Evidence in Religious Experience’ (115–47) scrutinizes

closely each of the ways in which the holy is given as revealed by the three mystics. Steinbock subjects prayer, ecstasy, and unveiling to a critique which reveals the various tests proposed by the mystics themselves to reveal the authenticity of or deny a revelation. In the last section of this chapter Steinbock examines the nature of self-evidence: its validity or corroboration in the absence of confirmation through repeated experience. He asks: “If religious experience is so ‘singular’, one may wonder whether the so-called idiosyncrasy of the mystics is really not just a sign of their pathology, or whether psychoses are not really just what religiously inclined folks want to call ‘mystical experiences’” (140). Steinbock answers this by referring a reader to an historical argument by Freud on Shreber’s experience (140–1), by discussing the religious life as ‘optimal-izing [and] normal-izing in the dynamic sense’ (141), and by clarifying the religious experience as ‘fundamentally open, “generative”, and not closed’. He argues that “religious experience is not susceptible to a definitive clarity. (142)

At the conclusion of chapter 5, Steinbock asks profound and searching questions: ‘What is the concrete form of epiphany in human experience’; ‘What characterizes its unique kind of movement’; What does epiphany mean for the individual [person, specifically in terms of “individuation”]; ‘How is idolatry given in relation to epiphany’ and ‘How does it arise as a problem’. In the following chapters, ‘Epiphany and Withdrawal’ (ch. 6), ‘On Individuation’ (ch. 7), and ‘Idolatry’ (ch. 8), Steinbock sets out to discover (or uncover) definitive answers to these questions. This he does by appealing to and reviewing Heideggerian premises (ch. 6); by drawing distinctions between Myself and Self, Thisness, Singularity, Uniqueness, Person to Person and Solidarity (ch. 7); and by commenting on Pride, Secularism and Fundamentalism, and Delimitation (ch. 8). All this is before concluding that his objective has been to show that there are aspects of human experience which do not conform to rational empiricism. In the epilogue, ‘On the De-Limitation of the Religious and the Moral’ (241–3) Steinbock reiterates that his focus has been on “epiphany, a vertical givenness that opens the religious dimension of experience... a quality of existence that is determined on its own level and in its own terms”.

A single short review of this treatise suggests a light approach which does not justice to this profound work. The thoughts and insights gathered and proposed by Steinbock provoke an equally concerted response and offer topics for discussion on many different disciplinary levels. I trust that Steinbock’s challenge to reflect and respond will be taken up.

Jennifer Davis
University of Sudbury