

1992

Review of: STEVEN PAYNE, O.C.D. *John of the Cross and the Cognitive Value of Mysticism: An Analysis of Sanjuanist Teaching and its Philosophical Implications for Contemporary Discussion of Mystical Experience*, 1990

Elizabeth Wilhelmsen

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, ewilhelmsen1@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/modlangspanish>

 Part of the [Spanish Literature Commons](#)

Wilhelmsen, Elizabeth, "Review of: STEVEN PAYNE, O.C.D. *John of the Cross and the Cognitive Value of Mysticism: An Analysis of Sanjuanist Teaching and its Philosophical Implications for Contemporary Discussion of Mystical Experience*, 1990" (1992). *Spanish Language and Literature*. 136.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/modlangspanish/136>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Modern Languages and Literatures, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Spanish Language and Literature by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

CARMELUS

INSTITUTUM CARMELITANUM
Via Sforza Pallavicini, 10
00193 ROMA

STEVEN PAYNE, O.C.D. *John of the Cross and the Cognitive Value of Mysticism: An Analysis of Sanjuanist Teaching and its Philosophical Implications for Contemporary Discussion of Mystical Experience*. 1990, xx, 243 p. (The New Synthese Historical Library: Texts and Studies in the History of Philosophy, 37). Kluwer Academic Publishers. P.O. Box 989, 3300 AZ Dordrecht, The Netherlands. Dfl. 150. ISBN: 0-7923-0707-0.

In this study Steven Payne argues that mystical states have objective cognitive content and that consequently mysticism "has a significant bearing on the justification of religious faith ..." (p. ix). The book is divided into two main sections: the first is dedicated to the life and teachings of St John of the Cross; and the second is an attempt to "justify belief in the cognitive value of mystical and religious experience" by means of what Payne calls an "explanatory inference" (p. xiii).

In the first chapter Payne makes the point that John of the Cross is an intelligent and careful author who is recognized today, by Christians and non-Christians alike, as one of the foremost authorities on mysticism, and whose works can be regarded as a reliable account of a broad range of contemplative phenomena. Distinguishing between John's analysis of the fundamental *structure* of the human subject and his exposition of the *dynamics* involved in advancing toward union with God, P devotes the second and third chapters respectively to said issues. With respect to the structure, it is noted that John of the Cross in essence follows the scholastic psychology of his day but with certain modifications. In P's outline of John's thought, the human soul comprises a "sensory part," which is in immediate contact with the body, the exterior senses and the interior senses; and a "spiritual part", which includes the intellect, the will, the memory, the "spiritual senses" and the "substance of the soul". In examining the various interpretations of this issue in the Carmelite thinker, P is critical of those who have "erred by assuming too readily that John was fundamentally a Thomist" (p. 17). Among those who have incurred such an "error," Payne lists Frost, Maritain, Garrigou-Lagrange

and a few others, including the present writer. Without entering at present into the details of this complex issue, it would be more accurate to say that analysts have shown that the psychology of St John of the Cross is reconcilable with, though not identical to, that of St Thomas Aquinas. It also should be pointed out that by the author's own admission the section on memory relies heavily on André Bord's *Memoire et espérance chez Jean de la Croix* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1971). The question is of some importance because Bord's interpretation on John's views on the memory is debatable (Cf. my "La memoria como potencia del alma en San Juan de la Cruz", *Carmelus* 37 [1990], 88-145).

Chapter Three traces the successive stages of spiritual development. P indicates that John of the Cross distinguishes between an "essential or substantial union with God" and the "union of likeness" (p. 52; *Ascent* II, 5, 3). The former, described as natural, is present in all souls, and by means of this union God preserves them in being. The latter, a supernatural union, is a conformity of wills, brought about primarily by the Christian virtue of charity. However, as P observes, contemplation begins as an almost imperceptible sense of peaceful recollection, and gradually develops in intensity culminating in a state of "almost continual mystical consciousness which, in the case of Christian mystics, generally has a phenomenally theistic character" (p. 216). Such a state carries with it intuited, wholly spiritual, objective, cognitive content; in P's term, "perception-like" content. Yet it is also characterized by an affective dimension, an acute sense of personal communion. Furthermore, progress in contemplation is associated, over the course of time, with moral and psychological development. Payne adds that if John is correct on this point, "it is difficult to dismiss mysticism as a purely pathological phenomenon" (pp. 215-6).

In the following chapter, the author evaluates certain contemporary accounts of mysticism's identifying characteristics in the light of the information derived from St John of the Cross. The two representative descriptions chosen are the highly influential theories of William James and W. T. Stace. P argues forcefully against Stace's claim that all introvertive states are universally the same, consisting only of an undifferentiated awareness of pure unity, a state of consciousness without content. Drawing from the texts of John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, P illustrates how Christian mystics testify to a diversity of intuitive cognitive experiences which, though transcending the senses and the capacities of language, have positive theistic content and are intelligible.

The author goes on to address several contemporary philosophical objections to mysticism based on issues such as the testability of the experiences and the inter-subjective agreement between mystic and non-mystic and among mystics themselves. P's response to the first objection is to indicate that mystics and mystical theologians do in fact employ a whole variety of criteria, including both empirical tests and considerations of logical coherence, to determine the veridicality and/or authenticity of mystical states. However, he finds it more difficult to deal with the sharp disagreements among mystics of different cultures, such as the

allegation of Christian mystics to have been united with a personal God versus the flat denial of some Eastern mystics to have encountered God at all. P refers to this type of irreconcilable report as "an embarrassing fact" for the defender of mysticism (p. 169). In a footnote, he brings up the possibility that there might be "some genuine differences" between the experiences in question (p. 171, n. 16), but in our judgment he does not explore such a possibility sufficiently.

The final chapter is dedicated to applying to mysticism a pattern of reasoning called "the explanatory mode of inference," derived principally from Peter Achinstein's *Law and Explanation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971). In this exercise the author compares the hypothesis that contemplation is a cognitive mode of experience with psychoanalytical, psychological, physiological and sociological accounts of mysticism, all of which are, of course, reductive. Payne admits in his concluding remarks that despite his attempts the skeptics are likely to remain skeptics. This is indeed the case, for accounts of mystical experiences rely on human testimony and are therefore, strictly speaking, not verifiable. Payne does a fine task of showing that, in contemporary thought there are dozens of reductionist razors applied to sublime mystics. However, the testimony of mystics is a weak tool to justify "religious belief" (p. 217). The traditional proofs for the existence of God contain immensely more demonstrative certitude.

ELIZABETH WILHELMSSEN