

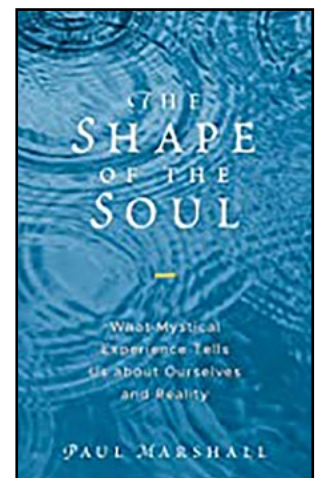
The Soul Divine¹

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A Review of *The Shape of the Soul: What Mystical Experience Tells Us about Ourselves and Reality*, by Paul Marshall. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019. Pp. x + 425. \$30.00. (Hardcover). ISBN 978-1-5381-2477-2

In this book, Paul Marshall asks the reader to seriously consider the possibility that mystical experiences are veridical. Marshall distances himself from those who respect the phenomenology of mystical experience but bracket any claim to its ontological status, and from those who accept the reports of mystical experience as truthful indicators but of a distorted encounter with reality often claimed to be rooted in neuropathology. Some may be tempted to dismiss as absurd the claim that a single personal experience (extensively described in Chapter 2) can carry such evidential force.



Paul marshalls an amazing range of evidence from across disciplines to defend the thesis that individuals have access to the ultimate nature of reality through mystical experience. He asserts that he has and his book is an effort to provide an explanation of what otherwise might appear as an absurd claim. Expanding on his earlier work (Marshall, 2015) he notes that difficulties with metaphysical variations in the interpretation of mystical experiences across traditions (religious or spiritual) are not insurmountable. The solution is to focus upon reflexive accounts of mystical experiences rather than elaborated interpretations. What then is revealed is that the entire universe is to be found within, in the self or soul (p. xii). Can such a claim be taken seriously?

Marshall's work is part of the research he belatedly joined headed by Edward Kelly at Esalen's Center for Theory & Research. Esalen scholars fundamentally challenge modern psychology and its commitment to mind as either derivative or an emergent of brain states. Mind is assumed fundamental, "irreducible" and from this bold claim, much of contemporary psychological science is challenged as a category mistake (Kelly et al., 2007).

Although Marshall would have us work through Gottfried Leibnitz and critical versions of monadology, the discussion is no detour into philosophy. Monadology provides insights not only into mysticism

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but into some of the apparent conundrums of quantum physics. We contain the entire universe not as isolated selves, but as interconnected monads in a cosmic unity that is our divine self. The unifying force is love. Few readers are likely to have enough expertise to evaluate the grand claims of this book. Boldly, Marshall asserts that mystical experience reveals the literal shape of the soul. Like Jung (admittedly admired by Marshall), he does not simply believe, he knows. Furthermore, open to dialogue with mainstream science he considers how his claim is both empirical and falsifiable. However, in order to test Marshall's insights one must follow others who found physicalism unsatisfactory, as have the scholars in the Esalen group.

William James's *Principles of Psychology* (1890) is widely acknowledged as founding psychology as a natural science. However, upon reflecting on his achievement in the abridgement of that classic text, *Psychology the Briefer Course* (1892), he bemoaned that little had been achieved worthy of deep reflection. He concluded that the restrictive assumptions of a narrowly conceived naturalism were but provisional for the emerging psychology of the 20th century. It was James and others (especially F. W. H. Myers) who relied upon data from parapsychology to defend a transmissive theory of mind, compatible with the psychology the Esalen group sees as appropriate for the 21st century (Kelly et al, 2007).

Marshall's book is a *tour de force* on method, rooted in mystical revelation of reality and in methods that may occasion it. The proof is in Marshall's willingness to consider alternate claims to reductionist views. He systematically refutes each in turn. Convinced that a nuanced monadology is correct he invites the reader to be open to the limits of physicalism and to the reconciliation of science and spirituality championed by the Esalen group (Kelly et al., 2015). How far Marshall has revealed the shape of soul can be debated. Where relevant Marshall admits to speculation but nothing in the book is absurd. Marshall's vision is empirically falsifiable but only if our provisional views of the physical world (brains included) are explored as a product of mind seen as fundamental, divine, and loving.

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