

SAYING THE UNSAYABLE: Mystical Experience and Language

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1. *Introduction: Uttering the Unutterable?*

The main aim of the article is to consider whether, and to what extent, mystics, whose experiences are supposed to be *transrational* (*non-dualist*) and therefore *ineffable*, can convey their insights through the medium of language. Namely, there seems to be something fundamentally paradoxical about mysticism: all great mystics have claimed that their insights transcend the dualistic structure of reason and are therefore ineffable, and yet many of them have left behind numerous, often voluminous accounts of their experiences. As Samuel Johnson puts it, not without a tinge of sarcasm:

*If Jacob [Boehme] saw the unutterable,
Jacob should not have tried to utter it.*

The key question is how can language, with its seemingly rational structure, “encode” mystical experience, which is supposed to transcend all rational and linguistic categories? Are mystics, who have — if we take recourse to Paul’s metaphor in the *First Letter to Corinthians* — seen the Truth “face to face”, forced to absolute silence, or can they — and *how?* — pass on at least a glimmer of the Truth to us, who “see through a glass, darkly” (1 Cor 13:12)?

This paper tries to approach the central issue in two steps. First, drawing on the Wittgensteinian distinction between “pointing” and “saying”, it is demonstrated that language not only speaks, but also acts. Mystical utterances are not on par with discursive utterances, in that they don’t *refer* to the mystical, but *embody* and *enact* it. Second, various means for expressing the inexpressible are presented: from silence and bodily act, through evocative non-sense and paradox, to negation and scriptural metaphor. The expressive forms are analysed according to two mutually exclusive criteria, namely according to how *consistent* they are with the nature of the experience, and

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how *suggestive* their internal mechanisms are, i.e. how successful they are in approaching and addressing their recipient.

Before proceeding to the main topic of our discussion, however, a brief outline of what is meant mystical experience would be in order. The academic study of mysticism is fraught with controversy, so any attempt to account for it exhaustively, would not only greatly surpass the scope of the article, but would most likely prove futile, as all expositions in the field are heavily “theory-laden”. Therefore, in what follows, I will draw on my previous work (Vörös 2013a, 2013b) on the subject, where the following (tentative) definition of mystical experience was advanced:

The most prominent characteristic of “mystical experience proper” seems to be the breakdown of the subject–object dichotomy, i.e. the breakdown of the sense of my being separated from the world. This breakdown, where both “the self” (interiority) and “the world” (exteriority) are extinguished or transcended, is normally associated with the experience of oneness and/or nothingness, and entails a radical transformation of one’s state and manner of being. [The term ‘mystical experience’ thus covers] a whole spectrum of experiences distinguished by how this subject–object breakdown is realized. On the one end of the spectrum, there are experiences of absolute nothingness/oneness, i.e. experiences devoid of all phenomenological content (sensations, thoughts, volitions, emotions, etc.) in which nothing but pure oneness/nothingness is present; and on the other end of the spectrum we find experiences where this nothingness/oneness is preserved in and through phenomenological content. Between these two extremes lie experiences in which nothingness/oneness is experientially/existentially realized to a lesser or greater degree (Vörös 2013a, 392–393).

To attach a name to my position — if a name should be given it — we might, for pragmatic purposes, refer to it as “weak perennialism”.¹ This provisional characterisation, albeit crude and unsatisfactory, can serve as a starting point for further discussion.

Another point merits a brief excursion, namely the question of the relationship between mystical and *ecstatic* experiences. Although it has become commonplace, at least in everyday language, to equate the two experiential categories, the matter is far from trivial. In mystical experience the mystic is said to *transcend herself and the world* — i.e. transcend the subject–object/self–world barrier –, and this, in turn, is reminiscent of the original meaning of the term “ecstasy” as *ek-stasis*, i.e. *to be or stand outside oneself*. However, it is crucial to examine how this “standing outside oneself” is understood. If

1 In the academic study of mysticism two theoretical positions have been established: *perennialism* claiming that there exists a phenomenological core of mystical experiences that is identical across cultures, traditions etc., and *constructivism* claiming that no such core exists and that all experiences are culturally constructed. The limits of space prevent me from engaging in this interesting, if frustrating, debate, so the validity of the weak perennialist position will simply be *assumed* here; I have argued for it at length elsewhere (cf. Vörös 2013, esp. ch. 1).

it is taken to denote, as it often is, something akin to dissociation, i.e. a process where a person is said to leave her body, watch it from a distance and/or enter the realm of spirits, angels, etc., then the two categories must be kept separate. If, on the other hand, it refers to escaping not only from the confines of one's body, but *from the confines of one's very self*, then mystical and ecstatic experience might be said to share a common ground. In the former sense of the word, the self is merely *transformed* and *disembodied*, whereas in the latter it is *transcended* and *discarded*. In other words, mystical experience can be said to be ecstatic, only insofar as it is construed as *dissolution*, and not as *dissociation*, i.e. only insofar as it is characterized not as standing outside *oneself*, but primarily as standing outside *one's self*.

2. *(Un)Saying as (Un)Doing: Of Mystical Language*

Let us now go back to the central theme of our discussion, and try to discern the links that (un)bound the chains of language to the mystical body, starting with Wittgenstein's (1961/2007) distinction between saying and pointing. In light of traditional (especially analytical) interpretations of *Tractatus*, one might be surprised to learn that it contains words like "sense", "God", and — "mystical". If it is true that "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world" (5.6) and that "what we cannot speak about we must pass in silence" (7), shouldn't we, of all things, be silent about precisely *these things*? Upon closer inspection, one learns that "mystical" appears in three different propositions in *Tractatus*:

It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists. (6.44)

Feeling the world as a limited whole — it is this that is mystical. (6.45)

There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical. (6.522)

The mystical, thus, is *inexpressible*, but it can be *shown*. This is why Wittgenstein opened *Tractatus* by saying that the main aim of his book is "to draw a limit of thought, or rather — *not to thought*, but to the *expression of thoughts*" (second emphasis mine). For in order to draw a limit of thought, "we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable (i.e. we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought)", which doesn't make sense. Yet it *does* make sense to *speak* about both sides of the limit of thought, although the acceptable expressive forms on "this" side are bound to differ from those on the "other" side: unlike thought, which is unable to un-think itself, speech can un-speak itself, i.e. *transcend* its conceptual network and *point* to "the other side". Wittgensteinian "pointing" therefore doesn't take place *inside* of language — on the level of *meaning* –, but *through* language — on the level of *doing*. Put differently, it is not related to *intralinguistic reference*,

but to *translinguistic transference*. What language points at is not only disclosed but also transferred to us: it *manifests* in us and thereby *transforms* us.

Through this self-transcending “crack” in the conceptual edifice of language we have thus clambered from a *descriptive* onto a *performative* level. Think of the phrase “I do”, (m)uttered at the altar. Once (m)uttered, it drastically changes our self-perception and our subsequent actions (Forman 1999, 96–97). Similar examples include: “You are under arrest!” or “I quit [this job]!”. In these examples

it seems clear that to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it. (...) I propose to call [a sentence of this type] a *performative sentence*. (...) The name is derived, of course, from “perform”, the usual verb with the noun “action”: it indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action — it is not normally thought of as just saying something” (Austin 1962, 6–7)

A “performative” is a *verbal extension of bodily action*; it is a linguistic type of behaviour aimed at achieving or doing something. And if *positive* performatives *con-join*, i.e. “tie a knot”, then *negative* performatives *dis-join*, i.e. “untie a knot”: the opposite of “I do” is “I don’t love you anymore and am leaving”. What was connected in the first example (marriage), became *disconnected* in the second (divorce). Put more generally, positive performatives *entangle* their referents into a conceptual framework, whilst negative performatives *disentangle* them from this network.

It can be seen that there exists a certain structural similarity between performatives and mystical “pointing”. In both cases, one enters the realm of *activity* by transcending the realm of *conceptuality*, but this is merely the first half of the story. Performatives, whether positive or negative, still operate in the domain of *meaning*: the action that is performed by the issuing of an utterance connects or disconnects the referent to or from a specific conceptual framework. Performatives, by their very definition, *act*; but these actions are still *rooted in description*: individual speech acts are meaningful, only insofar as they are rooted in concepts and meanings. What distinguishes mystical speech from ordinary performatives is the fact that its transcendentality is *absolute*: while positive performatives *entangle* their referents *into* a conceptual framework and negative performatives *disentangle* them *from* a conceptual framework, “mystical performatives” *disentangle the very act of entanglement*, i.e. they sever the performative dimension of a language from its descriptive dimension. In this sense, mystical “pointing” might be termed an “absolutely negative performative” in that its *pointing* takes place precisely through the *dis-appointment* of the concept. In other words, mystical language acts *through inactivation* of the conceptual language, i.e. it enacts a radically negative performative function whose goal is to project the subject beyond the limits of his or her linguistic system.

Language, thus construed, is no longer a *hindrance* for the mystic, but might actually *assist* her on her spiritual path and serve as an effective extension of contemplative/meditative practices she is engaged in. Mystical language loosens the grip of rational structures and enables the mystical to “shine through”, wherefore mystical literature from different religious traditions can, despite vast differences in dogmatic wordings, enact the same experience: its goal is not to *say* anything, but to *un-say the very saying* (Sells 1994). In words of Robert Forman,

Mystical experiences don't result from a process of [conceptual] building or constructing mystical experience (...), but rather from an *un-constructing* of language and belief. It seems to result from something like a *releasing* of experience from language. Some forms of mysticism, in other words, should be seen as *decontextualised*. (Forman 1999, 99)

There is little doubt that the overall (conceptual, dogmatic, etc.) background against which mystical experience develops is of utmost importance, but in the last analysis, it is merely a helpful guide and therefore can, and has to, be transcended:

I would contend that the mystic's knowledge is part of the necessary path that brings him or her to the place where that knowledge can be given up. It is a Hegelian *Aufhebung*, the simultaneous transcending and destruction of a state, which recognizes that state was necessary for the higher one to take place. (Janz 1995, 93)

Mystical experience, instantiated in mystical un-saying, deconstructs conceptual language: It doesn't speak *about* experience, but rather — as already pointed out by Otto in his classical study of numinous experiences (Otto 1958) — *in* and *through* experience. It *evokes* it, i.e. re-creates and re-enacts it here-and-now.

3. *Ways of the Unsayings: Between Silence and Metaphor*²

So what *concrete* possibilities are open to the mystic in her attempts to express the inexpressible? In order to evoke mystical experience it is not enough for the expressive form to be *consistent* with the nature of experience; it also needs to be sufficiently *suggestive* so as to approach and address its recipient. Mystical texts are therefore usually a combination of *evocative* elements, trying to re-create and re-enact the non-dual experience, and *descriptive* elements, trying to frame the non-dual experience in dualist terms. The mystic is thus always torn between two extremes — *consistency* with

² Some of the ideas presented in this section draw on Jones (1993), yet digress substantially from some of his classifications and interpretations.

the experience and *suggestivity* of the narrative. Both sides have their snares and pitfalls: the more suggestive (descriptive) a given form, the greater the danger of it becoming objectified and therefore understood literally; the more consistent (evocative) a given form, the greater the danger of it being completely inaccessible. This is probably why, in mystical traditions, the spoken (unmediated) word has precedence over the written (mediated) word: it enables the mystic to be in direct contact with the addressee and to therefore manoeuvre more skilfully between available expressive forms.

The first *non*-linguistic expressive form is — *silence*. Take, for instance, the following quote by Meister Eckhart:

And in the same ground, where He has His own rest, we too shall have our rest and possess it with Him. The place has no name, and no one can utter a word concerning it that is appropriate. Every word that we can say of it is more a denial of what God is not than a declaration of what He is. A great master saw that and it seemed to him that, whatever he could say in words about God, he could not really say anything which did not contain some falsehood. And so he was silent and would not say another word, though he was greatly mocked by other masters. Therefore it is a much greater thing to be silent about God than to speak. (Eckhart 2009, 223)

Similarly, Shankara recounts an Upanishadic story about

a person who approached a sage Bahva and sought from him instructions regarding the nature of the Brahman. Bahva did not speak. He was asked a second time; still he did not speak. Yet again he was asked, but still he did not speak. When the inquirer became annoyed by this, Bahva told him that he was, from the first, by his silence telling him how Brahman was to be described; Brahman is silence and so cannot be represented in speech. (Dasgupta 2008, 19)

Silence is *the most consistent and the least suggestive* of the expressive forms; it is the mystic's nod of approval to Wittgenstein's proposition (7): "What we cannot speak about we must pass in silence". If we can't (conceptually) speak about the mystical, then the best thing to do is *not* to speak about it. However, since silence speaks to but few people, mystics of all creeds have devised other ways to express its "empty fullness".

The second non-verbal form that tries to remain *consistent* with the original experience, while simultaneously broadening its *suggestive* dimension, is *bodily act*. Take, for instance, the famous koan of Buddha and the flower:

Once when the World-Honoured One, in ancient times, was upon Mount Grdhrakuta, he held up a flower before the congregation of monks. At this time all were silent, but the Venerable Kashyapa only smiled. The World-Honoured One said, "I have the Eye of the True Law, the Secret Essence of Nirvana, the Formless Form, the Mysterious Law-Gate. Without relying upon words and letters, beyond all teaching as a special transmission, I pass this all on to Mahakashyapa." (Blyth 1974, 76)

Sometimes this particular means of expressing the inexpressible takes on a rather dramatic form, as in the case of the koan of Gutei's finger:

Whatever he was asked (concerning Zen) Gutei simply stuck up one finger: At one time he had an acolyte, whom a visitor asked, “What is the essential point of your master’s teaching?” The boy just stuck up one finger. Hearing of this, Gutei cut off his finger with a knife. As the boy ran out of the room screaming with pain, Gutei called to him. When he turned round his head, Gutei stuck up one finger. The boy suddenly became enlightened. (*ibid.*, 57)

Because of its non-dualist (embodied) nature, mystical experience seems to have greater affinity with *body* than with reason. It is therefore more appropriate (i.e. consistent with its “nature”) to evoke mystical experience by means of non-dualist bodily activity than by means of language. The bodily act — be it in its subtler or harsher forms — is rooted firmly in the living present (*the here-and-now*), and has tremendous potential for breaking through the rational/conceptual meshwork. In a sense, it is “a silence with a twist”, but a “twist” that is potentially treacherous, as it is open to grave misunderstandings. Bodily acts “speak” to those with high “spiritual acuity”; to others, they might seem as a witty masquerade (at best) or tasteless nonsense (at worst).

All this finally brings us to — *language*. If the mystic wants to “convey” her experience to broader audience, she is obliged to take recourse to language. But what linguistic means are available to her? The first expressive form of the linguistic type is what we might call *evocative non-sense*, a “communication amphibian” of sorts, which falls into the *linguistic* category regarding its *form* and into the *behavioural* category regarding its *contents*. The examples abound in Zen koans, e.g. in the koan about Joshu’s dog:

A monk asked Joshu whether a dog had the Buddha nature or not.
He said “[Mu!]” (Blyth 1974, 22)

Joshu’s answer is *semantically* vacuous but *transformatively* potent. *Mu*, not unlike bodily activity, transcends the everyday rationality and enables the recipient to taste or even enact the mystical non-duality. Words in evocative non-sense don’t speak but act — they “compensate” or “stand in” for sudden hand movements, blows, and other activities from the previous category; they are not a *reply*, but a *reaction* — an (en)action performed *in* and *through* words. However, what looks like an advantage from one point of view is a disadvantage from another; because of its embeddedness in activity, the evocative non-sense seems to be appropriate only for “advanced acolytes”, while others may find its radical illogicality strange or even bizarre.

For this reason, many mystical texts adopt a weaker version of evocative non-sense, namely *paradox*. Paradox typically connects two opposite predicates, e.g. “God is everything and nothing”, “The mystical is here and there”, etc. The *Kena Upanishad*, for instance, depicts “the final realisation” with the following words:

It [Brahman] is conceived of by him who does not conceive it. Who conceives it does not know it.

It is not understood by those who understand it.

It is understood by those who do not understand it. (in Jones 1993, 114)

Similarly, in Meister Eckhart we read: “When the soul is blind and sees nothing else, she sees God, and this must be so” (Eckhart 2007, 141).

In contrast to evocative non-sense, mystical paradox is not a nonsensical utterance but a “conscious use of what is strictly contradictory, that is, any statement asserting the conjunction of one claim, *a*, with its logical negative, not-*a*” (Jones 1993, 114). Jones believes that mystical paradoxes of this sort are paradoxical only “on the surface” (*ibid.*, 115), as the two key terms are used in two different senses (*ibid.*, 116). For example, if we say that mystical insight is “unknowing knowing”, this would mean that it is “an unknowing” from the dualist perspective and “a knowing” from the non-dualist perspective. According to Jones, a real paradox “results only when a statement refers to one subject in a contradictory manner”; which is not true for mystical utterances, as these express “different views on the world:” they don’t express differences between, say, “the shape versus the color of an object, but what is perceived in normal awareness and what is realized in mystical awareness”. For this reason, it is possible to provide non-paradoxical paraphrases for mystical utterances without any loss of their “assertive import” (*ibid.*, 117).

Jones’ interpretation, although interesting, is completely off the mark. Namely, the *meaning* of the key terms in a mystical utterance is of *secondary* importance: what is crucial is not so much what the individual word refers to, but *the semantic clash* between two antonyms (“everything and nothing”, “here and there”, “always and never”, etc.). *Neither* of them *expresses* the mystical: instead, what the mystic tries to achieve through the direct confrontation of contradictory notions is to push the recipient towards the limits of rationality and, by exhausting the semantic field of all alternatives (“everything *and* nothing”), *point* to the possible “crossing”. Here again, the language doesn’t speak, but *acts*: it is the means which enables the “susceptible addressee” to *en-act* the experience of the mystical. However, it should be noted that, in the mystical paradox, this “acting” is less obvious than in the previous expressive form (evocative non-sense): A paradox is slightly *more suggestive* (descriptive), but therefore *less consistent* (evocative), as it is more firmly rooted in conceptuality.

Even more “word-bound” is the next expressive form, namely *negation*, in which “every possible positive description of the mystical is denied” (*ibid.*, 112). This approach to the mystical is expressed vividly in Dionysius Areopagita:

We therefore maintain that the universal Cause transcending all things is neither impersonal nor lifeless, nor irrational nor without understanding; in short, that It is not a material body, and therefore does not possess outward shape or intelligible form, or quality, or quantity, or solid weight; nor has It any local existence which can be perceived by sight or touch; nor has It the power of perceiving or being perceived; nor does It suffer any vexation or disorder through the disturbance of earthly passions, or any feebleness through the tyranny of material chances, or any want of light; nor any change, or decay, or division, or deprivation, or ebb and flow, or anything else which the senses can perceive. None of these things can be either identified with it or attributed unto It.

Once more, ascending yet higher we maintain that It is not soul, or mind, or endowed with the faculty of imagination, conjecture, reason, or understanding; nor is It any act of reason or understanding; nor can It be described by the reason or perceived by the understanding, since It is not number, or order, or greatness, or littleness, or equality, or inequality, and since It is not immovable nor in motion, or at rest, and has no power, and is not power or light, and does not live, and is not life; nor is It personal essence, or eternity, or time; nor can It be grasped by the understanding since It is not knowledge or truth; nor is It kingship or wisdom; nor is It one, nor is It unity, nor is It Godhead⁵³⁸ or Goodness; nor is It a Spirit, as we understand the term, since It is not Sonship or Fatherhood. (...) (Rolt 1920, 103)

“The negative way” or *via negativa*, as exemplified by the Upanishadic *neti neti* and St. John of the Cross’ *nada nada* (“not [this] not [this]”), points towards the unthinkable by stripping it of all its attributes: the mystical is non-*X*, non-*Y*, etc. This approach is somewhat more suggestive, as it is ingrained in the domain of meaning, but is also open to serious misinterpretation: when confronted with evocative non-sense and paradox, one “senses” the radical otherness of the mystical (the reason “runs up against its limits”, so to speak); the negative way, on the other hand, may mislead one into thinking of the mystical as “bare nothingness” (i.e. if the mystical cannot be explicated, then it doesn’t exist). In other words, evocative non-sense and paradox are open to wonder, ridicule, or dismay, but their *a-* or *trans-*rationality restricts false *semantic* interpretations. This, however, is not the case with negation: *via negativa* can be (falsely) interpreted as *radical negation*, the mystical can be (mis)interpreted as “sheer Nothingness” and not as “positivity-in-negativity”. In words of Alen Širca:

What is crucial here is that, in the end, negation has to negate itself, i.e. it has to self-negate, conceal itself. This brings forth a new order of positivity which is beyond all affirmation and negation, a radical alterity which — despite the drift from negation to self-negation, i.e. to negation negating both itself and the object of its negation — remains a Mystery, an ineffable, unknowable Transcendence. (Širca 2007, 21)

However, interpretative difficulties are even more pronounced in the next, and last, linguistic form. This form tries to outline the mystical in

positive terms and thus avoid the pitfalls of *via negativa* — i.e. a potential descent into the abyss of being–nothing–at–all — by showing that the mystical is *not* “sheer Nothingness”, but has “a positive aspect” as well. Yet — is it truly possible to *affirm* anything whatsoever of the Secret that lies “on the other side of the border”? The answer to this question is to be found in the so–called *scriptural metaphor*³:

One of the major characteristics of holy scripture is its metaphorical nature. Unlike referents in a theoretical discourse, referents in holy scripture are not logically and semantically pre–determined or “fixed”, but are “loose” and “adrift”. (Uršič 1994, 150)

The “multi–layered meaning” enables scriptural metaphors to transcend the “limits of silence” and, through their “effability”, disentangle the “paradoxes of ineffability”.

A metaphor, formally speaking, is always a relation between two referents; what is special about scriptural metaphors, however, is that the first referent is rooted in the hereafter, while the second referent is (supposed to be) “located” in the thereafter, i.e. beyond the bridge between “here” and “there”. (*ibid.*)

Scriptural metaphors belong to a special category of “transcendent metaphors”:

A scriptural metaphor points *through* and *over* itself, but it is not transparent, as is, for instance, an allegory. Holy scripture is not allegorical, as it doesn’t portray “the abstract world in a concrete form”, which is a common definition of allegory. Scriptural metaphors do not “substitute” abstract ideas (...), but are what Karl Jaspers refers to as “ciphers of transcendence”: keys and signposts into the Kingdom of Heaven, which are themselves the *topoi* of this heavenly kingdom. (*ibid.*, 151)

Scriptural metaphors *enact* the “Kingdom of Heaven” *in* and *through* themselves, and in this sense, they are not so much re–*presentations* (images) as re–*enactments* (embodiments) of the mystical. However, they are perceived/experienced as such only by those who have already undergone this process of re–enactment; for others, they are but “keys” and “signposts”, “prisms” dispersing faint glimmers of the mystical: “A metaphor used to communicate any experience only becomes clear after the intended experience has occurred” (Jones 1993, 121).

The scriptural metaphor is thus *the most suggestive*, but also *the least consistent* of the expressive forms: on the one hand, and because of its “transcendent descriptivity”, it may serve as our first contact with the mystical, but on the other hand, the non–mystical mind runs the danger of iden-

3 The term “scriptural” doesn’t necessarily relate to the Christian Bible, but is, following Uršič, used as “a ‘typified’ label for a discourse on the Holy/Divine, which also encompasses Buddhist sutras, Vedic Upanishads, Koran suras, Delphic oracles, apocryphal gospels, etc.” (Uršič 1999, 147–148).

tifying the “thereafter” with one of the “signposts” from the “hereafter” and thus fall prey to idolatry (if *appreciative* of spirituality) or to heated debates over a straw man (if *critical* of spirituality). The “spirit” of the metaphor (the transconceptual and unimaginable non-duality) may thus solidify into an image, leaving the metaphor, whose aim was to transduce “the Beyond”, opaque and obscure. Instead of letting us see the Truth “from face to face”, it moves, even forces us to perceive it “through a glass, darkly”.

To recapitulate briefly: Having outlined a conceptual framework for tackling the issue of language and mystical experience, we focused on six means for expressing the inexpressible: two *non-linguistic* (silence and bodily act) and four *linguistic* (evocative non-sense, paradox, negation, and scriptural metaphor). Although the first two “expressive forms” are *not* linguistic in nature, they nonetheless prove to be of utmost importance, as they provide a “substratum” for all subsequent linguistic forms. The two determining parameters — consistency (evocativity) and suggestivity (descriptivity) — are *inversely proportional* to one another: the more descriptive and suggestive a given form, the less evocative and consistent it is and therefore open to grave misinterpretation (even more radically, *every* interpretation is already a *misinterpretation* — the mystical either discloses itself or does not; there is no point debating the issue). Silence is the most consistent, yet the least suggestive form, and thus inappropriate for initial addresses; scriptural metaphor, on the other hand, is the most suggestive, yet the least consistent form, and thus open to the perils of objectification; other expressive forms (bodily act, evocative non-sense, paradox, and negation) lie somewhere in between. The greater the suggestivity, the lesser the capability of cultivating the experiential silence about the “mystical Secret”; and conversely, the greater the consistency, the lesser the capability of enacting the mystical in and through posture, actions, or words.

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Abstract

SAYING THE UNSAYABLE: MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE AND LANGUAGE

The article considers whether, and to what extent, mystical experience, which is supposed to be *transrational (non-dualist)* and therefore *ineffable*, can be conveyed in language. The article consists of two parts. First, drawing on the Wittgensteinian distinction between “pointing” and “saying”, it is suggested that language not only speaks, but also acts. Mystical utterances are thus not on par with discursive utterances, in that they don’t *refer* to the mystical, but *embody* and *enact* it. Second, different means of expressing the inexpressible are outlined: from silence and bodily act, through evocative non-sense and paradox, to negation and scriptural metaphor. The expressive forms are analysed according to two mutually exclusive criteria, namely according to how *consistent* they are with the nature of the experience, and how *suggestive* their internal mechanisms are, i.e. how successful they are in approaching and addressing their recipient. It is suggested that the two criteria are *inversely proportional* to one another: the more descriptive and suggestive a given form, the less evocative and consistent it is and therefore open to grave misinterpretation.

KEYWORDS: mysticism, mystical experience, language, ineffability, silence, paradox, negation

