Studies

Sebastjan Vörös

University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Arts, Aškerčeva 2, SI–1000 Ljubljana
sebastjan.voros@gmail.com

Mahakashyapa's Smile:
Language, Silence, and Mysticism

Abstract

This paper critically examines whether, and how, mystical insights can be conveyed in language. First, the problem of mystical ineffability is briefly presented: how, if at all, is it possible to express the supposedly transrational and transconceptual (non-dualistic) mystical experience in rational and conceptual (dualistic) linguistic terms? Second, drawing on the Wittgensteinian distinction between "pointing" and "saying", it is demonstrated that language not only speaks (describes), but also acts (performs). In this sense, it is wrong to interpret mystical utterances as discursive utterances, because they do not refer to the mystical, but enact it. Yet unlike ordinary (negative or positive) performatives, which remain embedded in the conceptual framework, mystical utterances function as absolute negative performatives, i.e. as instances of radical de-conceptualisation. Finally, several means for expressing the inexpressible are outlined: two non-linguistic (silence and bodily act), and four linguistic (evocative non-sense, paradox, negation, and scriptural metaphor). The individual expressive forms are classified according to two mutually exclusive criteria: the criterion of consistency discloses whether, and to what extent, a given form is compatible with the original mystical experience, while the criterion of suggestivity shows how successful a given form is in addressing its recipient. It is argued that the two criteria form an elementary matrix for a better understanding of how mystical experience, despite its fundamental transrationality, can be coherently expressed in language.

Keywords

mysticism, ineffability, language, performative vs. descriptive language, philosophy of language, philosophy of religion

1. Jacob's ladder: Saying the unsayable

The main aim of this paper is to consider whether, and to what extent, mystics, whose experiences are supposed to be *transrational* 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

SYNTHESIS PHILOSOPHICA
58 (2/2014) pp. (387–402)

388

S. Vörös, Mahakashyapa's Smile: Language,
Silence, and Mysticism

numerous, often voluminous accounts of their experiences.[1] 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." (Quoted in Jones 1993: 101)

Our main interest lies in what Marko Uršič refers to as "the possibility of Jacob's ladder":[2]

"Is Jacob's ladder as a bridge between here- and thereafter even possible for a human being? Is there a discourse (not necessarily philosophical or theological) that would enable the mind and soul to go beyond themselves, yonder to the other shore?" (Uršič 1994: 120).

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 fragment of the Truth to us, who "see through a glass, darkly" (1 Cor 13:12)? 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?

This paper consists of three parts. First, the problem of mystical ineffability is briefly outlined: why are mystical experiences said to be ineffable and what does that mean for mystics' accounts? Second, 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 utterance, in that they do not *refer* to the mystical, but *embody* and *enact* it. In the third part, 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 how *suggestive* their internal mechanisms are, i.e. how successful they are in approaching and addressing their recipient.

2. Buddha's flower: The contours of ineffability

Let us try to approach the problem of ineffability by means of the famous *koan* of Buddha and the flower (also known as "The First Zen Story"; cf. Mortensen 2009: 6):

"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)

The main point of the story – that the "the Eye of the True Law" or the ultimate Teaching (*Dharma*) cannot be conveyed with "words and letters", but only with special knowledge "beyond all teaching" – is reflected in the Buddhist notion of two truths: the *conventional* truth, "expressible in words or depending on conventions for its existence", and the *ultimate* truth, "which cannot be expressed in words, or which is beyond verbal conventions" (Mortensen 2009: 4). The conventional truth is therefore "the truth of words" or "the truth of reason", which can "express" the Buddhist teaching and practice, but cannot enact it and is therefore inadequate. The ultimate truth, on the other hand, is "the truth of praxis" or "experiential wisdom whose depth surpasses

SYNTHESIS PHILOSOPHICA
58 (2/2014) pp. (387–402)

389

S. Vörös, Mahakashyapa's Smile: Language,
Silence, and Mysticism

intellectual understanding": "This wisdom is not the result of thinking, which is strictly conceptual, nor is it the result of 'theoretical' knowledge; it is a matter of direct, profound, and intuitive understanding that is beyond thoughts, concepts, and ideas" (Pečenko 1990: 29). The effable conceptual truth is thus merely the proverbial finger pointing at the moon and not the moon – the inexpressible ultimate truth – itself.[3]

Similar ideas can be found in mystics from other religious traditions. Meister Eckhart, who claims that in the Godhead "everything (…) is one, and of that there is nothing to be said" (Jones 1993: 101), is in full accord with Shankara, who describes Brahman as "unspeakable (*avacya*) and inexpressible (*anirukta*)" (ibid.); and the words of Dionysius Areopagita, which read that those who enter the "super-essential Darkness", "the Darkness which is above the

---

[1]
The academic study of mysticism is fraught with disagreement and controversy, so it is almost impossible to provide a "theoretically neutral" definition of mysticism and mystical experience. In what follows, I will draw on my previous work 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. 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 present *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). Mysticism, in turn, could be understood as: "the *general platform* where mystical experiences are developed, i.e. as a set of different practices, beliefs, values, etc. (characteristic of a religious tradition in which the whole process takes place) that help the practitioner realize experiential and existential transformations associated with mystical experiences [cf. 18]. Although individual practices, beliefs, etc. may differ from one religio-cultural context to another, they bring about the same type of experience. Particularly important, and in need of special mention in this context, are *meditative/contemplative practices* that are considered to

play a particularly important role in the overall process" (ibid.: 393). These provisional characterisations, although far from satisfactory, can serve as a general guide for our further discussion.

[2]
"Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran. When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the Lord, and he said: 'I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.' When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, 'Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.' He was afraid and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.' Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz. Then Jacob made a vow, saying, 'If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's household, then the Lord will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth.'" (Gen 28:10–22)

[3]
For a more in-depth analysis of the notion of two truths in Buddhism see Vörös 2012.

SYNTHESIS PHILOSOPHICA
58 (2/2014) pp. (387–402)

390

S. Vörös, Mahakashyapa's Smile: Language,
Silence, and Mysticism

intellect", find themselves "reduced not merely to brevity of speech", but even
to "absolute dumbness both of speech and thought" (Rolt 1920: 101–102),
resonate with the opening lines of the ancient *Dao de jing*:

"The tao that can be told

is not the eternal Tao

The name that can be named

is not the eternal Name" (Mitchell 1988: 1)

How are we to understand this "inexpressibility"? What do we mean when we
say that the mystical is ineffable? Moreover, does not everyday language also
point at the objects it refers to? In what sense does *pointing* in the mystical
context differ from the pointing in the everyday context? Let us first consider
what 'the ineffable' in the mystical context *does not* mean:

"To be 'ineffable' cannot mean merely that something cannot be described adequately. Such an
attribute can be ascribed to anything, and thus when applied to the mystical is too vague to be
very illuminating. Nor can ineffability mean that no words apply to the mystical: 'ineffable' at
least applies even if the mystical were not extensively discussed. Nor does it mean the mystical
is not directly experienceable by other people." (Jones 1993: 103)

If 'ineffable' does not refer to any of these possibilities, the obvious inference
is that it means at least "that something is in some way not communicable
with words" (ibid.). But why? What is about the mystical that cannot be put
into and brought forth by words? It is our contention that the main reason for
this inexpressibility is not so much *language itself*, but *the specific theory of
language*. If we conceive of language as an extension of reason, then "putting
into words" must be structurally similar to "conceptualising" and consequen-
tially dependant on the subject-object dichotomy: "[L]anguage can operate
only where distance is placed between the seer and the seen; a 'space' for
encoding is required" (ibid.: 104). Language and thought place a distance be-
tween the person who speaks/thinks and the object which is spoken of/thought
about – a distance which, in mystical experience, is transcended and negated.
And since mystical non-duality can be attained merely by unifying/nullifying
the duality in which language discloses itself, it seems that mystics are bound
to silence. But is this truly the case?

In his discussion of the relationship between mysticism and language, Jones
notes that it is in the nature of language to differentiate, i.e. to "conceptually
isolate the item under consideration by contrasts and comparisons" (ibid.:
104). *Omnis determinatio est negatio*, as Spinoza would say: "To say 'This
is *x*' or 'Do *y*' necessarily entails not saying 'This is not *x*' or 'Do not do *y*'.
(ibid.)" According to Jones however, this *dichotomising* function of language
becomes problematic only when it is accompanied by the *objectification* of
grammatical structures. In this case, "we let the grammatical status dictate
the ontological status of the referents", i.e. we move "from the fact that de-
noting terms are distinct to believing in a world of Humean 'loose and sepa-
rate' entities, each real and independent" (ibid.: 105). In other words, we start
to believe that words correspond to the actually existent things in the world
(e.g. that the word 'house' corresponds to an appropriate object 'house [in the
world]').

Jones calls the combination of *differentiation* and *objectification*, coupled
with the belief that the deep structure of language and the world share the
same form, "grammatical realism" or "the mirror theory of language" (after
Arthur Danto) (ibid.), and finds it to be the main culprit for the inexpressibility
of the mystical: "The problem is that of using something – language – which

SYNTHESIS PHILOSOPHICA
58 (2/2014) pp. (387–402)

391

S. Vörös, Mahakashyapa's Smile: Language,
Silence, and Mysticism

supposedly mirrors the structure of what it refers to in order to depict something essentially alien to that structure." Since "any word denoting the mystical has the identical grammatical structure as terms denoting objects […], the mystical is reduced to one differentiated object among other objects". In other words, "because we take most denotative words to refer to *objects,* all must", and this, according to Jones, is why the mystical – which cannot and should not be objectified – "is declared ineffable" (ibid.: 106–107).

Here, two points merit special emphasis: First, it is not at all clear whether *objectification* is indeed the main culprit for the inexpressibility of mystical insights, since *differentiation*, situated at the very heart of language, seems equally, if not even more problematic. As Jones points out, all distinctions and classifications made within language call our attention "to those features of reality which a culture deems most important, necessary for survival, or just convenient" (ibid.: 104). Linguistic differentiation therefore should not be construed as neutral and contingent, as it reflects social, cultural, rational, emotional, etc. conditionings which serve as a fundamental interpretative framework of human beings in their relations with the world. And it is precisely these structures that become *un*-learned ("de-automatised" [Deikman 1963, 1966]) in mystical experience. What is more, mystical insight transcends even – and *foremost!* – the fundamental dichotomy between the subject and the object which is a *sine qua non* of conceptual language *as such*. It is thus arguably "wholly other" not only in regards to *the contents* (specific conditionings), but also in regards *to the form* (linguistic structure): the problem of ineffability is not the result of objectification, as Jones claims, but first and foremost of differentiation.

Second, in order to measure the scope of language and determine whether there might be any "points of contact" between "the effable" and "the ineffable", we will try to identify these points against the background of what Jones refers to as "grammatical realism". In other words, we intend to look for a "crack" in the descriptive and discursive fabric of language, a crack, *in* and *through* which "wording" might transcend itself and move from conceptuality to non- or trans-conceptuality. Jones names as one of the foremost advocates of "grammatical realism" Ludwig Wittgenstein, who in the preface to his famous *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* wrote that "the aim of the book is to draw a limit of thought, or rather – not to thought, but to the expression of thoughts: for in order to be able to draw a limit to 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)" (Wittgenstein 1961/2007: 3). Given that these are precisely the questions that are essential to our discussion, it seems but natural to start with a brief stroll through the Wittgensteinian philosophy of language.[4]

3. The conceptual crack: Of pointing and saying

One of Wittgenstein's most famous propositions (5.6) reads: "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world". Yet how far do these limits actually extend? *Tractatus* opens with the proposition (1): "The world is all that is the case", where the expression "that is the case" denotes "totality of

---

4

Note that, in what follows, we focus *explicitly* on the "early" Wittgenstein (epitomised in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*); for

an interesting account of religious experience in light of late Wittgenstein philosophy see Andrejč 2013.

SYNTHESIS PHILOSOPHICA
58 (2/2014) pp. (387–402)

392

S. Vörös, Mahakashyapa's Smile: Language, Silence, and Mysticism

facts" (1.1.). But facts fall under the aegis of science and the primary tool of science is logic, so it would seem that (1.1) entails (5.61): "Logic pervades the world: the limits of the world are also its limits"; or to put it the other way around, the *world ends* where *logic ends*. If these propositions are coupled with the well-known proposition (7), "What we cannot speak about we must pass in silence", it seems as if we have landed flat-faced – as correctly indicated by Uršič – in the "'hard' logical positivism of the so-called Vienna school (Carnap, Schlick, etc.)" (Uršič 1994: 127). According to this "positivist" reading, the limits of my world are determined by language and logic – everything that cannot be expressed *clare et distincte*, mysticism included, simply does not exist. However, it quickly becomes clear that at the very heart of the "problem" also lies (admittedly a faint glimmer of) a solution: although firmly rooted in logic, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* houses ladders leading to "the mystical" (ibid.).

In light of traditional (especially analytical) interpretations of *Tractatus*, the reader 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" and that "what we cannot speak about we must pass in silence", should not we, of all things, be silent about precisely *these* things? Moreover, how did such an enigmatic word as 'mystical' find its way into a philosophical work with such exact formal structure, a work whose aim is to "draw a limit of thought"? '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)

Barrett points out that the word 'mystical' in the proposition (6.44) denotes "a marvel, a miracle, an astonishing thing", and stands as a synonym for 'marvellous', 'remarkable', 'inexplicable', also 'mysterious' (Barrett 1991: 72). This understanding of the word is related to the proposition (6.52) which reads: "We feel that when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched". Scientific theories tell us "*how* the world is" and explain "*how* it comes to be as it is", but they do not tell us "*why* it is, *why* there is this world and not any other kind". This question of *why* – the question of *sense* – eludes science: "The sense of the world must lie outside the world" (6.41), "The solution of the riddle of life in space and time lies *outside* space and time" (6.4312) and "How things are in the world is a matter of complete indifference for what is higher" (6.432). In the context of science, Leibniz's famous question asking *why there is something rather than nothing* remains unanswered. If, however, we can speak merely of things *in* the world – i.e. of things *within the reach of logic and language* – which "sense" definitely *is not*, why does Wittgenstein even bother mentioning it? As Uršič puts it succinctly:

"If we understand the proposition (7) literally, we are forced to remain silent about the sense of the world; moreover, if we want to be really consistent, we are not even allowed to say that the sense is 'outside of the world', let alone try to explicate what this 'outside' denotes" (Uršič 1994: 127).

Namely, if we *did* want to explicate it, we should have to – to paraphrase Wittgenstein – "find both sides of the limit explicable (i.e. we should have to be able to speak what cannot be spoken)". But is this truly the case?

SYNTHESIS PHILOSOPHICA
58 (2/2014) pp. (387–402)

393

S. Vörös, Mahakashyapa's Smile: Language,
Silence, and Mysticism

To get to the bottom of this riddle let us have a look at the some further propositions from *Tractatus*:

"The facts all contribute only to setting the problem, not to its solution." (6.4321)

"When the answer cannot be put into words, neither can the question be put into words. The *riddle* does not exist. If a question can be framed at all, it is *possible* to answer it." (6.5)

"The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem. (Is not this the reason why those who have found after a long period of doubt the sense of life became clear to them have been unable to say what constituted that sense?)" (6.521)

From these and previous propositions we might draw the following (tentative) conclusions (cf. Barrett 1991: 73–74):

1. The mystical, unlike the scientific, has nothing to do with questions and answers. Although "Why is there a world?" may look like a real question, this is merely an illusion, because it does not have an answer in the same way that the scientific question "Why does the Earth revolve around the sun?" has an answer.

2. These pseudoproblems are problematic in that they leave us with a feeling that when all scientific problems will have been solved the most important pseudoquestion – i.e. the question of sense: "Why is there anything at all?" or "What sense does it all make?" – will be left unanswered.

3. These pseudoquestions cannot be answered in the same way that scientific questions can be answered. The "solution" namely consists of the realisation that the problem is actually a *pseudo*problem, i.e. that things *are* the way they are because they *have to be* the way they are.

4. However, this type of "solution" is not a matter of reasoning but of *experience* – of *insight* or *intuition*.

5. The "solution" to the problem of sense is therefore its *dis*solution, its disappearance – to see it for what it truly is: a *pseudo*problem.

6. This is the marvel, the miracle, the wonder – this is the mystical experience, as Wittgenstein understands it.

The mystical is "inexpressible", but "it can be shown" (ibid.: 75): "There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical" (6.522). 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". 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 does not make sense. On the other hand, 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 the ones on the "other" side: of *here*after language *speaks*; at *there*after it *points*. In other words, unlike thought, which is unable to un-think itself, speech can – "paradoxically, but not contradictorily" (ibid.) – un-speak itself, i.e. *transcend* its conceptual network and *point* at "the other side". Wittgensteinian "pointing" therefore does not take place *inside* of language – on the level of *meaning* –, but *outside* of language – on the level of *doing*. Put differently, it is not related to *intra*linguistic *reference* (e.g. P refers to S, etc.), but to *trans*linguistic *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 clambered from a *descriptive* onto a *performative* level, from *rep-*

SYNTHESIS PHILOSOPHICA
58 (2/2014) pp. (387–402)

394

S. Vörös, Mahakashyapa's Smile: Language,
Silence, and Mysticism

resenting to *doing*. The realisation that words not only describe but also act is neither particularly novel nor particularly remarkable. 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 and similar 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)

When I say "I do", or hear "You are under arrest!", my (social) role, identity, and consecutive modes of behaviour, etc. change drastically. A performative is a *verbal extension of bodily action*; it is a 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" (Forman 1999: 97). What was connected in the first example (marriage), became *dis*connected in the second example (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. The phrase "I do" performs an act only if I know what it means to "get married", "become a man/wife", etc. Similarly, the phrase "I'm leaving you" only rings a bell if I know what it means to "get a divorce", "end a relationship", etc. What distinguishes mystical speech from ordinary performatives is the fact that its transcendentality is *radical*: 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" (ibid.: 100).

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 primordial mystical non-duality 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*

SYNTHESIS PHILOSOPHICA
58 (2/2014) pp. (387–402)

395

S. Vörös, Mahakashyapa's Smile: Language,
Silence, and Mysticism

saying (Sells 1994). Mystical experience, instantiated in mystical un-saying, deconstructs conceptual language:

"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)

The conceptual context is highly important in all mystical traditions, 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)

In mystical experience language sheds its conceptual armour and becomes the platform in which mystical non-duality enacts itself. Mystical language, writes Michael Sells, "does not describe or refer to mystical union but effects a semantic union that re-creates or imitates the mystical union" (Sells 1994: 9). In other words, mystical language does not 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. Now we are finally able to understand why conventional (effable) truth in Buddhism is said to be the proverbial finger pointing at the ultimate (ineffable) truth: it is not that conventional truth speaks *of* the Real (i.e. describes it, refers to it, etc.), but that it speaks *in* and *through* It (it enacts, performs, etc. It). In such a (non-)context, language

"does not serve a descriptive function but rather an *evocative* one: it is designed to help bring about a process of *dropping* one's pre-formations. It is intended to help bring him to a new state by deconstructing the old automatized perceptual patterns." (Forman 1999: 101)

4. Mystical pointing: Between silence and metaphor

It is time to consider the *concrete* possibilities that are open to the mystic in her attempts to express the inexpressible.[5] We will start our investigation with two "expressive forms" that are *not* linguistic in nature, but are nonetheless of utmost importance for our discussion, as they provide a "substratum" for all subsequent linguistic forms. In analysing individual categories we will use the two mutually exclusive parameters of consistency and suggestivity. In order to evoke a mystical experience it is not enough for the expressive form to be *consistent* with the nature of the 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 degree of expressivity needed to realise the desired effect is dependent on the "spiritual acuity" of the listener – the closer she is to the "goal", the more consistent (evocative) the expressive form needs to be; the further she is from the "goal", the more suggestive (descriptive) the expressive form needs to be. The mystic is thus

---

5
My analysis was initially inspired by Jones' work (1993), but its assessments, emphases, and conceptual categories differ substantially from those of Jones.

SYNTHESIS PHILOSOPHICA
58 (2/2014) pp. (387–402)

396

S. Vörös, Mahakashyapa's Smile: Language,
Silence, and Mysticism

always torn between two extremes – consistency with 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: they enable 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*. Shankara for instance refers to 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 sill 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)

Similar words can be found in 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)

Silence is *the most consistent and the least suggestive* of the expressive forms. We have seen that it is possible to express the mystical non-duality in linguistic terms, but because of the inherently dualist nature of (conceptual) language there is high likelihood that the recipients would "miss the point". Silence is the mystic's nod of approval to Wittgenstein's proposition (7): "What we cannot speak about we must pass in silence". If we cannot (conceptually) speak about the mystical, then the best thing to do is not to speak about it. Silence, however, addresses very few people, so mystics of all creeds have tried to find other ways to express its "empty fullness". All of these alternatives, however, are grounded in this "primordial silence". In words of Alen Širca:

"Mystical experience, which is beyond affirmation and negation, lies in the realm of silence. This silence, however, is not something a mystic achieves at the end of his ascent, but something that is seamlessly interwoven into the very fabric of speech. The language tries to grasp the ineffable, but always fails short – and the mystery remains unspoken." (Širca 2007: 25)

The second non-verbal form that tries to remain *consistent* with the original experience, while simultaneously broadening its *suggestive* dimension, is *bodily act*. We have already encountered this interesting possibility in the koan of Buddha and the flower, but it is also the central theme of several other stories. Sometimes it takes on a very 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." (Blyth 1974: 57)

Because of its non-dualist (embodied) nature, mystical experience seems to have greater affinity with *body* than with reason. It is therefore more appropri-

SYNTHESIS PHILOSOPHICA
58 (2/2014) pp. (387–402)

397

S. Vörös, Mahakashyapa's Smile: Language,
Silence, and Mysticism

ate (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, firmly rooted in the living present (the here-and-now), has tremendous potential for breaking through the rational/conceptual network. In a sense, it is "a silence with a bonus", but a bonus that is potentially treacherous, as it is open to numerous misunderstandings. Bodily acts "speak" to those with high "spiritual acuity"; to others, they might seem as witty or tasteless nonsense.

This all leads 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 him? The first expressive form of the linguistic type is what we might call *evocative non-sense*. Evocative non-sense is some sort of a "communication amphibian" in that it falls into the *linguistic* category concerning its *form* and into the *behavioural* category concerning its *contents*. Excellent examples can be found 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* pregnant. *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 do not 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 contain 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* 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).

Unlike 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"; and this is not true for mystical utterances, since these express "different views on the world:" they do not express differences between, say, "the shape versus the color of an object, but what is perceived

SYNTHESIS PHILOSOPHICA
58 (2/2014) pp. (387–402)

398

S. Vörös, Mahakashyapa's Smile: Language,
Silence, and Mysticism

in normal awareness and what is realized in mystical awareness". For this
reason, it is possible to provide non-paradoxical paraphrases for mystical ut-
terances without any loss of their "assertive import" (ibid.: 117).

Jones' interpretation, although interesting, is completely off the mark. Name-
ly, the exact *meaning* of the key terms 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"). *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 ex-
hausting the semantic field of all alternatives ("everything *and* nothing"),
point to the possible "crossing", i.e. throw the recipient into a situation in
which she can truly open up to the experience of non-duality. Here again, the
language does not speak, but *acts and points*: it is the means which enables
the "susceptible addressee" to enact 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: A paradox is slightly *more suggestive*
(descriptive), but therefore *less consistent* (evocative), as it is more firmly
rooted in conceptuality than evocative non-sense.

Even more verbal and sense-oriented is the next expressive form, namely
negation, in which "every possible positive description of the mystical is de-
nied" (ibid.: 112). This approach to the mystical is expressed vividly in Di-
onysius 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 Godhead 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* (both mean "not [this] not [this]"),
points towards the unthinkable by stripping the mystical of all its positive at-
tributes: 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 misinterpretations: when confronted with evocative non-sense and
paradox, one immediately "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 nothing-
ness" (i.e. if the mystical cannot be explicated, then it does not exist). In other
words, evocative non-sense and paradox are open to wonder, ridicule, or dis-
may, but their *a-* or *trans-*rationality restricts false *semantic* interpretations.
This is not the case with negation: *via negativa* can be (falsely) interpreted as

SYNTHESIS PHILOSOPHICA
58 (2/2014) pp. (387–402)

399

S. Vörös, Mahakashyapa's Smile: Language,
Silence, and Mysticism

radical negation, i.e. the mystical can be (mis)interpreted as "sheer Nothingness" and not as "positivity-in-negativity". Širca explains:

"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 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 non-duality in positive terms and 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*:[6]

"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 "transcendental 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 *topos* 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 the process of the 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 identifying

6
The term 'scriptural' does not 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).

SYNTHESIS PHILOSOPHICA
58 (2/2014) pp. (387–402)

400

S. Vörös, Mahakashyapa's Smile: Language,
Silence, and Mysticism

the "thereafter" with one of the "signposts" from the "hereafter" and thus fall prey to idolatry (if appreciative of spirituality) or to unreasonable struggles with 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". A darkened metaphor no longer points, but only speaks; and it speaks untruth, trivialities, and lies. Since the mystical can no longer speak in and through the objectified metaphor, others speak in its stead, which often – as history so vividly records – leads to violence, suffering, and death.

Silence, bodily act, evocative non-sense, paradox, negation, and *scriptural metaphor*: such is the scope of possibilities for expressing the inexpressible. 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 all kinds of misinterpretations (even more radically, *every* interpretation is already a *mis*interpretation – the mystical either discloses itself or not; there is no point debating it). 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 unwanted 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.

In parting, let us turn once again to Johnson's verse quoted at the beginning of our discussion. The problem, it turns out, is not so much that Boehme and other mystics wanted to express the inexpressible – a formidable, yet *achievable* task – but that the world was unable to lend an ear to what they were saying – and this, one might add, holds true to this very day.

Literature

Austin J. L. (1955). *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Andrejč G. (2013). "Eksistencialna občutja in verski jezik: pozni Wittgenstein in protestanska teologija mističnega". *Poligrafi* 18 (71–72): 93–119.

Barrett C. (1991). *Wittgenstein on Ethics and Religious Belief*. Oxford UK, Cambridge: Blackwell.

Blyth R. H. (1974). *Zen and Zen Classics. Vol. IV: Mukonkan*. Tokyo: The Hokuseido Press.

Dasgupta S. N. (2008). *Hindu Mysticism*. Radford: Wider Publications.

Deikman, A. J. (1963). "Experimental Meditation". *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 136: 329–343.

Deikman, A. J. (1966). "Deautomatization and the Mystic Experience". *Psychiatry* 29: 324–338.

Eckhart M. (2009). *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*. New York: A Herder & Herder Book.

Forman R. K. C. (1999). *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*. Albany: New York Press.

SYNTHESIS PHILOSOPHICA
58 (2/2014) pp. (387–402)

401

S. Vörös, Mahakashyapa's Smile: Language,
Silence, and Mysticism

Jones R. H. (1993). *Mysticism Examined*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.

Mitchell S. (1988). *Lao Zi: Tao Te Ching*. New York etc.: Harper Perennial.

Mortensen C. (2009). "Zen and the Unsayable". In: D'Amato M., Garfield J. L. & Tillemans T. J. F. (ed.). *Pointing at the Moon: Buddhism, Logic, Analytic Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 3–12.

Otto R. (1958). *The Idea of the Holy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pečenko, P. (1990). *Pot pozornosti: osnove budistične meditacije*. Ljubljana: Domus.

Rolt C. E. (1920). *Dionysius the Areopagite: On the Divine Names and the Mystical Theology*. Montana: Kessinger Publishing Company.

Sells M. A. (1994). *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Širca A. (2007). *Teopoetika: študije o krščanskem mističnem pesništvu*. Ljubljana: KUD Logos.

Uršič M. (1994). *Gnostični eseji*. Ljubljana: Nova revija (zbirka Hieron).

Vörös, Sebastjan. (2012). "Misel in neizrekljivo v budistični logično-epistemološki šoli: Nov pogled na teorijo dveh resnic pri Dignāgi in Dharmakīrtiju". *Azijske in afriške študije* 16 (3): 77–100.

Vörös S. (2013a). "Demystifying Consciousness with Mysticism". *Interdisciplinary Description of Complex Systems* 11(4): 391–399.

Vörös S. (2013b). *Podobe neupodobljivega*. Ljubljana: KUD Logos & Založba Filozofske Fakultete.

Wittgenstein L. (1961/2007). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London & New York: Routledge.

Sebastjan Vörös

Mahakashyapin osmjeh: jezik, tišina i misticizam

Sažetak

Ovaj članak kritički ispituje mogu li i na koji način mogu mistički uvidi biti izraženi putem jezika. Prije svega se ukratko predstavlja problem mističke neizrecivosti: kako je moguće, ako je uopće moguće izraziti navodno transracionalna i transkonceptualna (nedualistička) mistična iskustva u racionalnim i konceptualnim (dualističkim) jezičnim terminima? Drugo, na temelju vitgenštajnovske razlike između »pokazivanja« i »govorenja«, pokazuje se da jezik ne samo govori (opisuje) nego i djeluje (izvodi). U tom je smislu pogrešno interpretirati mistične iskaze kao diskurzivne iskaze jer oni ne označuju ono mistično, nego ga iznose. No za razliku od običnih (negativnih ili pozitivnih) performativa, koji ostaju ugrađeni u konceptualni okvir, mistički iskazi djeluju kao apsolutni negativni performativi, tj. kao instance radikalne de-konceptualizacije. Konačno je skicirano nekoliko načina za izricanje neizrecivog: dva nejezična (tišina i tjelesni čin) te četiri jezična (evokativna besmislica, paradoks, negacija i skripturalna metafora). Pojedine ekspresivne forme klasificirane su na temelju dvaju međusobno isključivih kriterija: kriterij konzistencije otkriva je li i u kojem je opsegu dana forma kompatibilna s originalnim mističnim iskustvom, dok kriterij sugestivnosti pokazuje koliko je dana forma uspješna u obraćanju njenomu recipijentu. Tvrdi se da ova dva kriterija oblikuju osnovnu matricu za bolje razumijevanje toga kako mistično iskustvo, usprkos temeljnoj transracionalnosti, može biti koherentno izraženo u jeziku.

Ključne riječi

misticizam, neizrecivost, jezik, performativni vs. deskriptivni jezik, filozofija jezika, filozofija religije

SYNTHESIS PHILOSOPHICA
58 (2/2014) pp. (387–402)

402

S. Vörös, Mahakashyapa's Smile: Language,
Silence, and Mysticism

Sebastjan Vörös

Mahakashyapas Lächeln: Sprache, Stille und Mystizismus

Abstract

Der vorliegende Artikel untersucht kritisch, ob und auf welche Weise mystische Einsichten durch Sprache vermittelt werden können. Zuerst wird das Problem der mystischen Unausdrückbarkeit kurz vorgestellt: Wie, wenn überhaupt, ist es möglich, die angeblich transrationalen und transkonzeptuellen (nicht dualistischen) mystischen Erfahrungen durch rationale und konzeptuelle (dualistische) linguistische Termini zum Ausdruck zu bringen? Zweitens, indem man auf wittgensteinsche Unterscheidung zwischen „Zeigen" und „Sagen" zurückgreift, wird dargelegt, dass die Sprache nicht nur spricht (beschreibt), sondern auch handelt (ausführt). In dem Sinne ist es falsch, mystische Äußerungen als diskursive Äußerungen zu interpretieren, weil sie sich auf das Mystische nicht beziehen, sondern es darstellen. Doch im Gegensatz zu den gewöhnlichen (negativen oder positiven) Performativen, die im konzeptuellen Rahmen eingebettet bleiben, funktionieren mystische Äußerungen als absolute negative Performative, d. h. als Instanzen radikaler De-konzeptualisierung. Schließlich werden mehrere Mittel zur Ausdrückung des Unausdrückbaren umrissen: zwei nicht sprachliche (Stille und körperlicher Akt) und vier sprachliche (evokativer Unsinn, Paradox, Negation sowie skripturale Metapher). Die einzelnen Ausdrucksformen werden nach zwei sich gegenseitig ausschließenden Kriterien klassifiziert: Das Kriterium der Konsistenz offenbart, ob und inwieweit die gegebene Form mit der ursprünglichen mystischen Erfahrung kompatibel ist, während das Kriterium der Suggestivität zeigt, wie erfolgreich die gegebene Form bei der Auseinandersetzung mit ihrem Rezipienten ist. Es wird behauptet, dass diese zwei Kriterien eine elementare Matrix zum besseren Verständnis dessen bilden, wie mystische Erfahrung, trotz ihrer grundlegenden Transrationalität, in der Sprache kohärent ausgedrückt werden kann.

Schlüsselwörter

Mystizismus, Unausdrückbarkeit, Sprache, performative gg. beschreibende Sprache, Sprachphilosophie, Religionsphilosophie

Sebastjan Vörös

Le sourire de Mahakashyapa : Langage, silence et mysticisme

Résumé

Cet article examine de manière critique si, et comment, la connaissance mystique peut se communiquer par le langage. On présente d'abord le problème de l'ineffabilité mystique : comment, si du tout, est-il possible d'exprimer une expérience mystique transrationnelle et transconceptuelle (non-dualiste) en termes linguistiques rationnels et conceptuels (dualistes) ? Deuxièmement, s'appuyant sur la distinction wittgensteinienne entre « montrer » et « dire », il est démontré que le langage non seulement parle (décrit), mais également agit (se produit). Dans ce sens, il est faux d'interpréter l'énoncé mystique comme énoncé discursif car il ne se réfère pas au mystique, il l'énacte. Et pourtant à la différence des performatifs ordinaires, qui demeurent incorporés dans le cadre conceptuel, les énoncés mystiques fonctionnent comme des performatifs négatifs absolus, c'est-à-dire comme instances d'une dé-conceptualisation radicale. Enfin, sont exposés plusieurs moyens d'exprimer l'inexprimable : deux non-linguistiques (silence et acte corporel) et quatre linguistiques (non-sens évocateur, paradoxe, négation et métaphore scripturale). Les formes expressives individuelles sont classées selon deux critères qui s'excluent l'un et l'autre : le critère de consistance révèle si, et dans quelle mesure, une forme donnée est compatible avec l'expérience mystique originelle, tandis que le critère de suggestivité montre la réussite que connaît une forme donnée lorsqu'elle aborde son récepteur. On affirme que les deux critères forment une matrice élémentaire pour mieux comprendre comment l'expérience mystique, malgré sa transrationalité fondamentale, peut s'exprimer de manière cohérente dans le langage.

Mots-clés

mysticisme, ineffabilité, langage, langage performatif vs langage descriptif, philosophie du langage, philosophie de la religion