

On the ineffability and the noetic quality of mystical experiences. Analysis based on Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*

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Abstract

According to William James, mystical states of consciousness are characterized, among other features, by their *noetic quality*, *i. e.*, some knowledge obtained is through them. However, another common feature of mystical experiences is their *ineffability*. This raises an epistemological question: How can something be known, and yet cannot be expressed? Through the conceptual framework of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, we examine mystical experiences as sources of knowledge. In Wittgenstein's conception, the mystical is placed at a liminal and negative position: it lies outside the limits of language and of the world, and it refers to that which cannot be said. Despite the weak and problematic epistemic foundation of these experiences from Wittgenstein's early perspective, we conclude with some reflections on their pragmatic and subjective value for the religious dimension of human life.

Keywords: mystical experiences, the mystical, Ludwig Wittgenstein, limits of language.

Resumen

Sobre la inefabilidad y la cualidad noética de las experiencias místicas. Análisis a partir del *Tractatus de Wittgenstein*

Según William James, los estados místicos de conciencia se caracterizan, entre otros rasgos, por su *cualidad noética*, es decir, que algún conocimiento se obtiene a través de ellos. No obstante, otro rasgo común de las experiencias místicas es su *inefabilidad*. Esto plantea una pregunta epistemológica: ¿Cómo puede conocerse algo sin poder expresarse? A través del marco conceptual del *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* de Ludwig Wittgenstein, se examinan las experiencias místicas como fuentes de conocimiento. En la concepción de Wittgenstein, lo místico se sitúa en una posición liminal y negativa: yace fuera de los límites del lenguaje y del mundo, y refiere a aquello que no puede decirse. Pese al fundamento epistémico débil y problemático de estas experiencias desde la perspectiva temprana de Wittgenstein, concluimos con unas reflexiones sobre su valor pragmático y subjetivo para la dimensión religiosa de la vida humana.

Palabras clave: experiencias místicas, lo místico, Ludwig Wittgenstein, límites del lenguaje.

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§ 1. Introduction: Language and ineffability in the context of mystical experiences

For the modern Western mind, encounters with the term «mystical» and with accounts of so-called mystical «experiences» and «revelations» are met with a general air of skepticism, both scientific and philosophical. Indeed, for the vast majority of the secularized world, it seems that the mystics' testimony of what they «saw» and «heard» during their peculiar experiences pertaining the divine no longer bears the same effect of awe, reverence, and admiration that it had previously received during millennia within the several traditions of the major world religions, whether exoteric or esoteric. Likewise, the contemporary institutional education of philosophy has significantly drawn its attention away from the connection between mysticism, esotericism, and the arcane with the lives, works, and studies of some of the most prominent figures of the Western canon.

This does not mean, however, that mysticism has not been a subject of philosophical inquiry. After all, it would be too arrogant and self-important of philosophy to withdraw its critical examination and questioning from a rich and vital phenomenon that underwrites the doctrinal and historical development of religions and of philosophy itself. From Plotinus' ecstatic contemplation of the One as the first hypostasis, to Hildegard von Bingen's visions of God under states of wild rapture, to Saint Teresa of Jesus' overwhelming transverberation, to the intensification of the Islamic faith performed by the Sufis, to the overcoming of ego, body, and mind in the Hinduist liberation (*moksha*), to the Buddhist attainment of Nirvana through moral and spiritual transformation, mystical experiences are so prevalent and significant across history as part of the plethora of human experience — and specifically, religious ones —

that it would be ludicrous to merely apply neopositivist criteria of verification and/or falsification to easily dismiss them as delusions or as biasedly erroneous perceptions.

Hence, in the effort to examine mysticism critically from a philosophical standpoint, I suggest looking into what contemporary philosophy has to say about it. In this case, the analytic tradition shall be my general framework of analysis and interpretation. In particular, I propose an approach from the perspective of Ludwig Wittgenstein's early work *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, for its analytic philosophy of language and epistemology include the mystical as a liminal category of analysis for the logical limits of thought and language. Through an examination of this category, I intend to provide a first approach to answer the following questions: What is the noetic value of mystical experiences? Can they be trusted as epistemologically valid sources of knowledge? How can these ever be expressed? What can they possibly mean? With this in mind, I then propose that, while rationally valid, Wittgenstein's conception of the mystical as a purely negative concept derived from the logical limits of language and of the world does not fully satisfy the human spiritual yearning for the Infinite through the mystical —a disposition which may not be scientifically demonstrated by reason alone, yet still strongly appeals to the human spirit and to the religious experience.

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§ 2. Is a mystical experience a valid source of knowledge?

The terms «mystic» and «mysticism» have been the object of such a variety of interpretations, misuses, and simplifications, that at least a working definition is required to avoid obscurity. As a basic operational set of definitions, I understand «mysticism» as «The doctrine that special mental states or events allow an understanding of ultimate truths» (McClenon, 1998: 316), whereas «mystical experiences» are a subcategory of the broader concept of «religious experiences», and can be described in general terms as:

[...] interior, immediate, fruitful experiences, which take place at a level of consciousness that exceeds that which governs during ordinary and objective experience, of a union —regardless of the

form in which it is lived— of the core of the subject with the Whole, the Absolute, the Divine, God, or the Spirit.¹ [Velasco, 1999: 23]

Derived from their out-of-the-ordinary experiences, mystics across cultures and throughout history have made knowledge-claims about the ultimate structure of reality (metaphysical) and the true nature of the divine (theological), as well as value-claims about the meaning of life, the highest good to seek and goals to achieve, and the ways in which we should orient ourselves towards them (ethical). As Bertrand Russell explains, the first outcome of the mystics' moment of «illumination» or «union» or «unveiling» is the «belief in the possibility of a way of knowledge which may be called revelation or insight or intuition, as contrasted with sense, reason, and analysis» (1986: 27).

In relation to this, it is worth referring to William James' (2002: 295-296) highly influential work *Varieties of religious experience*, wherein he proposed the four main features of «mystical states of consciousness»: *ineffability* (such that their contents cannot be adequately articulated, reported, explained, or described through discursive/propositional language), *noetic quality* (such that knowledge is gained, *i. e.*, truths are attained through some kind of insight, illumination, or revelation), *transiency* (such that they cannot be sustained for long, *i. e.*, they are bound to fade), and *passivity* (such that the mystic feels as though they were grasped or held by «some power;» their will kept in abeyance.) Although many other relevant properties could characterize these experiences, for the purposes of this inquiry I shall focus on their ineffability and their noetic quality, for both of them directly point towards the issue of the possibility of the expression of some kind of knowledge — whatever that may be.

From a philosophical standpoint, one of the major points of discussion pertaining to mystical experiences is the epistemic challenge that they display: some knowledge is claimed to be gained through them, and yet it seems that such cannot be expressed. But how can one say to *know* something, and yet be effectively *unable* to communicate it? Is communicability not an essential property of truth? Epistemically, one of mystics' main struggles is, indeed, that language seems to be simply too limited to

¹ Translated by the author.

comprehensively convey the true content of the knowledge they claim to have mysteriously acquired. As W. H. Stace points out, they «feel that language is inadequate, or even wholly useless, as a means of communicating their experiences or their insights to others. They say that what they experience is unutterable or ineffable» (1961: 277).

In this sense, could this perceived communicational limit be nothing but an extension of the practical human difficulties of expressing our emotions clearly? Could this be because, psychologically speaking, mystical experiences are nothing but alternate, subjective states of consciousness, some special kind of *emotions* that are felt, and that, unlike other «everyday» emotions like anger or sadness, are particularly much more elusive in their transmission through words and sentences? With regards to these questions, it should be noted that emotionality and its derivative psychological and subjective manifestations do not fully integrate the true depth and meaning of mystical experiences. This is so because mystics themselves do not affirm to have simply *felt* an emotion or *perceived* something empirically, but rather that they have acquired *knowledge* out of these experiences. That is, even though their experience required their subjectivity to manifest and unfold, it was still the source of some truth, and not merely a peculiar mental state. Hence its *noetic quality*. Indeed, «If mysticism were merely a matter of emotion, mystics' claims would not be of great interest to most philosophers. But mystics claim to have experienced some fundamental reality in a way that is not open to normal experiences» (Jones, 2016: xvii). Now, this unusual way of experiencing «some fundamental reality» could be explained by postulating the existence of a special innate natural human sense, different from the empirical senses, that allegedly endows us with the capacity to know God or to have an immediate awareness of the nature of Deity — *a sensus divinitatis*, as Calvin posited (2006: 43-44), and as Alvin Plantinga later defended and revised as part of his Reformed epistemology (2000: 172-186). However, this theological alternative does not really answer anything regarding the noetic quality of mystical experiences or of some other possible types of immediate knowledge of the divine; it merely begs the question by speculatively introducing a new human sense that conveniently fits within the justification of *certain* religious beliefs.

Leaving that aside, let us consider that, since the knowledge that mystics declare to have obtained serves as answers to some of humanity's greatest philosophical and spiritual concerns about the meaning of life and the ultimate principles of reality, the task of analytical philosophy is thus to carefully assess the truth, coherence, and rationality of such lofty claims and of such peculiar way of knowledge. That is to say, that the philosophical approach of the analytic tradition ought to aim at clarifying and understanding the beliefs and claims of mystics in relation to the knowledge they purportedly gain from their experiences. In order to conduct such clarification, a logical analysis of language and of the possibility of expressing knowledge must be conducted first. And that is precisely what Wittgenstein offers us. The key question here is then: What can the statements and testimonies of mystics tell us about reality? As we shall see, Wittgenstein shows that the logical answer to this question is: «Nothing».

§ 3. Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and the limits of language from an analytic perspective

3. 1. *The picture theory of language: A logical mirroring between thought, language, and reality*

In the preface to the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein states that the whole book might be summarized as follows: «what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence» (2001: 3). Similar to the spirit of Kant's gnoseological enterprise determining the scientific limits of pure reason and of metaphysics by subjecting pure reason itself to its own conditions of possibility, Wittgenstein attempts to draw the clear scientific limits of language as an expression of thoughts about the world *by using language itself and its formal —i. e., logical— conditions of possibility*. In other words, the limits of language —and also, those of the world (*ibidem*: 68)— must be drawn from *within*, in such a way that everything propositionally expressed within those limits can bear some sense (*Sinn*) and thus have an empirically verifiable truth value, whereas everything beyond them is just nonsense (*Unsinn*).

What, then, can be said about the world? To address this question, Wittgenstein proposes that we look at the logical structure of language instead of the empirical data that we perceive from nature. His notion of the world is then that of a totality of facts (*Tatsache*), not of things, insofar as facts are the mere existence of certain atomical states of affairs (*Sachverhalt*), each of which is composed of the combination of objects or things (Wittgenstein, 2001: 6-9).

Within this atomistic metaphysics, built over logical (and not material) foundations, reality is then divided into discrete simple objects, yet the emphasis made is not on the mere existence of such objects, but rather on the way they are related to each other within a certain logically possible configuration. In order to talk meaningfully about such configurations, Wittgenstein posits that each arrangement of things (each state of affairs contained within the logical space of the world) must correspond to a certain proposition whose truth value relies solely on whether it correctly represents (*darstellen*) that single atomic fact (2001: 26). This general proposal is based on what is now known as the picture theory of language. It is called as such, because it conceives of language's main function as that of picturing or imaging facts. Since language expresses thoughts that say something about the world, then each possible proposition of language must serve as a picture or model that figuratively depicts (*abbilden*) a single possible combination of objects in a state of affairs. In Wittgenstein's terms: «A proposition [Satz] states something only in so far as it is a picture [*Bild*]» (*ib.*: 26). But in order for a proposition to suffice as a picture of the world, *i. e.*, for it to be attached to reality, there must be some logical connection between the elements of the picture and the things related to the atomical fact that it represents. Just as it occurs between the sets of a relational function in a point-to-point mathematical projection, there must be a logical bridge, a basic representational commonality, something shared and identical between the *picture* (language) and the *pictured* (world) that links them both.

And that is what Wittgenstein calls *the pictorial form*: «the possibility that things are related to one another in the same way as the elements of the picture» (*ib.*: 10). This form is not spatial, but rather *logical*, and the assumption here is that this form of language is also the form of reality (*ib.*: 11). If that were not so, then there could not be a connection between the world of facts and the linguistic realm of propositions that

represent their possibility —a basic connection that allows us to reasonably assume that names of things have meaning, and elementary propositions have sense (*ib.*: 76).

The logical form is thus what links together both language and the world, and as the general structure of propositions, it is both the essence of the world and of the language that describes it (Wittgenstein, 2001: 56-57). Furthermore, since thought is what is expressed in propositions with a sense (*ib.*: 13; 22), then the triad of fundamental correspondence is closed within Wittgenstein's system: language, thought, and being are inextricably tied together through the means of an underlying logical blueprint, which is, in its essence, the transcendental mirror-image of the world (*ib.*: 59; 78)—the *a priori conditio possibilitatis* for the construction of a positive scientific language that correctly and truthfully describes the facts that constitute the world. *What can be put into words can thus be said clearly.* But what, then, can we not talk about? What surpasses the logical limits of language?

3. 2. The 'said' and 'shown' distinction

In order to understand the role of the mystical within Wittgenstein's logical theory of language, we must consider one of the key conceptual distinctions made in the *Tractatus*: the difference between that which can be said (*gesagt*) and that which can only be shown (*gezeigt*). In essence, what can be said is that which lies within the discursive limits of language: it can be expressed or put into words as a proposition with a sense, and thus possess a certain truth value in relation to an atomical fact of the world that it depicts through the combination of its semantical elements. The logical form, as we have seen, is what makes this pictorial representation possible. However, there are two limits to this representation, one internal and one external. These limits pertain to what can only be shown, indicated, or displayed.

The internal limit is derived from the logically problematic phenomenon of self-referentiality. Namely, the self-referentiality of language, and of the basic structure that it shares with the world. As Wittgenstein explains: «A picture can depict any reality whose form it has [...] A picture cannot, however, depict its pictorial form: it displays it» (2001: 11). The logical form of reality is not *in itself* an object of reality, but rather a transcendental *a priori* of language. And since the realm of discourse and

referentiality of language is that of the totality of facts that comprise the world, then this form simply lies outside of this realm, and thus it cannot be expressed by means of language, but merely *shown* (*ib.*: 31). In other words, language cannot use itself to refer to the way it itself operates to represent a reality. Or as Wittgenstein puts it succinctly: «What *can* be shown, *cannot* be said» (*idem*).

The difference, then, lies between the possibility of a reference to reality. What can be said refers to a state of affairs in the world; whereas, internally, what can only be shown has no reference to reality, only to the form that, *precisely*, allows things to be said about it. Inside language, it can merely indicate or display the very form which connects propositions to the world. But what lies outside language? What is the external limit of this pictorial representation?

3.3. The concept of «*das Mystische*» as that which cannot be put into words (*Unaussprechliches*)

In the context of these considerations, it is then that the concept of the mystical (*das Mystische*) becomes a relevant notion for the understanding of the *external* limits of language. Within the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein only refers to this concept on three separate occasions. Let us examine them. After stating that propositions can only bear a truth value in relation to states of affairs of the world, Wittgenstein points out that how things are (the way they exist and relate to each other in facts) is a matter of complete indifference to what is higher (2001: 88). That is, that the descriptions that the propositions of natural science can provide for us about the truth of the way things objectively are in reality do not answer the philosophical questions that we still pose about the world when we view it from an elevated standpoint, considering it not as how it is, but rather from the very awe that is awakened by the realization *that it is*—the sheer admiration and curiosity before the mere existence of the world. With this, the meaning of the first definition of the mystical becomes readily clear: «It is not *how* things are in the world *that* is mystical, but that it exists» (*ib.*). The following proposition remarks: «To view the world *sub specie aeterni* is to view it as a whole—a limited whole. Feeling the world as a limited whole—it is this that is mystical» (*id.*).

It is important to emphasize here that, by framing the mystical now as a *feeling* of the world from the perspective of eternity, Wittgenstein is thus implying that the semantic realm of the mystics' claims lies outside the scientific field of knowledge expressed through propositional language, and instead belongs to that of intuition, emotionality, and sentiment. With this there is no attempt to undermine the importance of the concerns and problems that mystics address in the answers they provide based on their experiences. Rather, it is merely an acknowledgement that, strictly speaking from the perspective of this logical framework of analysis, the mystical gives answers to questions that lie *outside* the limits of logic, and thus *beyond* the conditions of language and the world. To be precise, their claims are not even real answers, because «when the answer cannot be put into words, neither can the question be put into words» (2001: 88). For Wittgenstein, then, the solution to the questions raised by the mystical is not to rationally appraise and examine the answers that have been provided, but rather to reasonably retort that the questions themselves are nonsensical, thus dissolving the answers as absurdities or as mere empty words. From this line of thought, the external limits of language demarcate that the mystics say *nothing* about the world, because the issues they refer to can only be answered from a perspective outside of it. But since language is bound to refer only to the facts of the world, then at most the mystical *shows* us something without telling us anything—and it does so because they could not otherwise; its ineffability imposes such restriction (*ib.*: 89). Hence the problematic, weak, and flaky status of their noetic quality.

Under this light, the concept of the mystical in Wittgenstein's thought is rather a liminal and negative one—it simply refers to that which cannot be said, by virtue of its location beyond language, the world, and the logical structure that binds them both. The mystical is thus a frustrated possibility of language, a realm in which analysis fails, a mere impossibility wherein the grasp of logic and symbolic expression fall short.

§ 4. Conclusion

Is the epistemic value of the mystical simply too obscure to be taken seriously? Should we turn our backs on the mystical? How to grapple with the reasonably presumable lack of meaningful noetic content in mystical experiences? For

Wittgenstein, natural science has taken over the exclusive prerogative of saying meaningful things about the world, in such a way that philosophy is now bound to become an activity of clarification, *i. e.*, a critique of language (*Sprachkritik*) that elucidates the propositions of science (2001: 29). This method of doing philosophy, while strictly correct and «therapeutic» for the correction of our misunderstandings of language and for the dissolution of pseudo-problems (*i. e.*, questions that are nonsensical because their answers cannot be put into words), is nonetheless unsatisfactory for the human spirit. In the face of the seemingly enigmatic quality of the mystical, Wittgenstein imposes a stern silence that looms wearily over our heads: «What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence» (*ib.*: 89). Must we, though? *Must* we limit ourselves to a suspension of judgement, to a wise exercise of skeptical *ἐποχή* over that which can merely be shown? Paradoxical as it may sound, perhaps that which we cannot speak about is precisely what we should most resolutely seek to understand.

Even if we accept Wittgenstein's claims about the mystical lacking any logical foundation—thus rendering it nonsensical—, I think that such acceptance does not necessarily eclipse the pragmatic value and importance of mysticism as part of the human experience. What reason can think and say does not always align with what the spirit silently yearns. At least to a certain extent, I am inclined to side with Schleiermacher's Romantic notion of religious experience as the basis for all other forms of religious activity, in such a way that religious consciousness is some sort of sense or yearning or striving towards the Infinite. If we acknowledge that such a yearning cannot ever satisfy the requirements of reason, should that deter us from the free exercise of our religious sentiment, which aims at something higher than itself and the world? I think that reasonably limiting the semantic realm of language within the bounds of logic should not, in turn, also limit the human disposition to do metaphysics, to perform a *gnosis*, and to open itself to mystical and overall religious experiences. However, we should still be careful not to conflate the realms of discourse. We should then clearly establish the scope of what is scientifically meaningful and what lies solely in the dark, fruitful trenches of belief. Embracing this limitation, we can leave aside pretensions of absolute truth, and then rejoice and try to

find personal and subjective meaning in our spiritual practices and religious experiences —nonsensical as they may be.

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