

Mysticism and Language

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INTRODUCTION

THE AIM of this paper is to elucidate the correlation of mystical experience and language, thereby overcoming the often-held conviction that such experiences are either ineffable or unintelligible.

Before we pursue this matter, we must define mysticism. I will call the mystical *non-dual-experience*. "Non-dual" refers to a dimension of experience where separation between individual consciousness and the "other" is lifted. It reflects the expansion of ego-consciousness and ego-consciousness-of-objects to one of three forms of integration: (1) expansion from the ego state to an integration of consciousness and the world; (2) expansion from the ego state to an integration of consciousness and God; (3) expansion from the ego state to a form of integration beyond any distinctions or determinations. What all three forms have in common is the loss of the feeling of "separateness."

"Experience" indicates that such dimensions are concrete journeys of consciousness, *encounters* beyond abstract thought which bear the same relation to thinking as eating a meal does to the idea of a meal. The existential difference must always be kept in mind.¹

In sum, then, the mystical is the decentralization of ego-consciousness, or, experience no longer centered in ego-consciousness.² Why is this definition so broad? Why is there no mention of God, Absolute, Soul, Transcendental Consciousness? Not to exclude such ideas but to include both these and many other experiences which are too often overlooked in such a context, I have deliberately defined the mystical "negatively," because the only thing all forms of mystical experience have in common is the *loss* of ego-consciousness and duality. There is no single common

¹ Mystical experience offers a new "category" in addition to conceptual thought and physical sensation. A mystic might easily accept a Kantian analysis where (ordinary) knowledge is characterized as the abstract conceptual organization of the sense manifold, and might even accept the restriction of concepts to sensation, but he would go beyond Kant by allowing some form of trans-sensual and trans-conceptual access to the "noumenon." Non-dual-experience is neither thought nor sensation alone, because it possesses *both* the integrative capacity of abstract thought *and* the concrete immediacy of sensation.

² This formulation is taken from Erich Neumann's "Mystical Man" in *Papers From the Eranos Year-books*, Vol. 6 (Princeton University Press, 1968), pp. 375-415. Neumann adds "or not yet ego consciousness." I would prefer to exclude this addition, so as to sidestep the question of whether infants, for example, are mystics. I would like to confine this matter to mature human experience. And the most important feature of the formulation "*no longer* ego consciousness" will become evident later, when we realize that mystical experience can never be understood in isolation from non-mystical experience, that the *relation* between the mystical and non-mystical is a key to the intelligibility of mystical language.

form of mystical experience, but rather different dimensions of non-duality which correspond to the three forms of integration named above. I will call these dimensions ontic, theistic, and ontological mysticism.

1. *Ontic mysticism* refers to non-dual-experience within the realm of particular phenomena, where the ego-other or subject-object separation is bridged in certain specific experiences or range of experiences. Along with numerous examples found in religious experience and rituals, I would include in this category certain forms of instinctive activity, erotic experience, intuitive thinking, and especially aesthetic experience, i.e., any experience no longer perceived from the vantage-point of the subject-as-center or of discrete objects. At this level, experience is circular; though there always remains the possibility of polarizing experience into "consciousness" and "object," in ontic mysticism there persists a coalescence which is more properly called an *experience-field*.

Ontic mysticism can also be broadened beyond specific experiences and become *collective* (nature mysticism, pantheism) or *introspective* (soul-mysticism, e.g., Jainism and Samkhya-Yoga).

2. Theistic mysticism names the breakthrough of consciousness to a presence perceived as creator or controller. Such a presence, no matter how broadly conceived, remains a *determinate* presence, in other words, a personal God possessing qualities, e.g., love, omniscience, power, etc. Theistic mysticism can range from *organic union*, which maintains some distinction between the self and God (e.g., Augustine, Teresa, Ramanuja), to *identity*, where the self-God distinction is blurred or even suspended (e.g., certain forms of Bhakti and Sufi mysticism).

3. *Ontological mysticism* refers to a dimension of non-dual-experience unique in that it involves no relations, no distinctions and no particular range of experience. Not only distinctions between, but all characterizations of, "self" and "other" are dissolved.³ At this level even theistic mysticism is superseded in that the very being of "soul" and "God" yield to a pervasive, indeterminate ground. Such an absolute union beyond distinctions and determinations can only be expressed negatively, hence the talk of "Nothing" in ontological mysticism.

Examples of ontological mysticism are found in all major religious traditions, as well as in many Western philosophers and poets. We should distinguish two basic types: (a) *transcendent*, where the indeterminate ground is encountered apart from phenomena (e.g., Plotinus, Shankara), and (b) *immanent*, where the ground is encountered "within" phenomena (e.g., Zen Buddhism, Taoism), where the *world* is experienced as "empty." Immanent ontological mysticism can in fact be considered a meeting of the ontic and ontological forms.⁴

The mystical shows itself to be multi-dimensional, with different degrees of non-dual-experience. Furthermore, we must adopt a multi-dimensional model of reality as a whole in order to understand the relation between mystical experience and

³ Herein lies the advantage of "non-duality" over "union," in that "union" suggests the joining of two entities, which would be misleading in the context of Ontological mysticism.

⁴ Such an ontological-ontic connection is crucial in my estimation because a philosophy of mysticism must pursue a reconciliation of the mystical and the "worldly." Zen Buddhism in fact represents such a reconciliation; its practices confound any interpretation which fundamentally distinguishes between mystical and so-called "ordinary" experience. In Zen, the deepest truths of ontological mysticism are realized *in* such concrete activities as tea-making, flower-arranging, gardening, poetry, archery, and martial arts. Zen is a prototype for both the essence and range of a mystical world-view.

ordinary consciousness, as well as the function of language in mysticism. There is obviously existential continuity between the mystic's ordinary state of awareness (ego-consciousness of discrete objects, what I will call subject-object-ivity) and the different possible states of non-dual-experience. We can therefore posit a single spectrum of experience with different dimensions, broadly speaking numbering four: (1) subject-object-ivity, (2) ontic, (3) theistic, and (4) ontological mystical states.⁵ The problem is that although these are different dimensions of one and the same reality, they are each a different mode of awareness, each with its own "rules." The most obvious dimensional shift is that between subject-object-ivity (with its logic of subject-object distinctions, space-time causality and objective distinctions grounded in the principles of identity and non-contradiction) and the mystical dimensions where the laws of objective consciousness are suspended. But we must recognize that the mystical dimensions are no less meaningful and therefore no less logical within their appropriate limits. What is needed is the idea of a "state specific logic"⁶ which admits that reality does not always "behave" in the same way, along with an openness to the importance of such alterations. Mystical experience shows that what is fragmentary and separable in one dimension is unitary in another. The difficulties we have in understanding mystical experience are therefore usually cross-dimensional confusions. A successful philosophical study of mysticism should seek to map out the different dimensions of experience, recognize their specific forms of intelligibility, and above all adopt a pluralistic attitude which permits their coexistence and thereby overcomes the reductionism so often practised by both mystics and positivists (in evidence when each calls the other's domain an "illusion").

Given our general characterization of the mystical, and the multi-dimensional model of reality, we can proceed to the question of language and mystical experience.

THE PROBLEM OF INEFFABILITY

Many commentators as well as many mystics themselves hold the view that mystical experience is essentially ineffable, i.e., that language either cannot apply to or falls short of unitary states of consciousness. As a result, positivists tend to reject the importance of mystical experience, and mystics tend to reject the importance of language. But perhaps both are wrong about *language*. We must ask about "ineffability," and about the limits and role of language in mysticism. Although mystical experience supersedes object-language and conventional concept-language, it does not abandon other uses of language. We will conclude: not only is language essential to the mystic in different ways, but mystical experience is shaped by language, no less than ordinary experience is shaped by language. Our aim, however, is not to reduce mysticism to ordinary language, but to recognize extraordinary (mystical) dimensions of language.

⁵ The alterations of consciousness are of course more various than the number of mystical forms I have identified. Stanley Krippner recognizes twenty altered states of consciousness. For a discussion of these states, and the necessary references, see Pelletier and Garfield, *Consciousness East and West* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), pp. 38-45.

⁶ The idea of "state-specific science" is developed by Charles Tart in *States of Consciousness* (New York: Dutton and Co, 1975), especially chapter 16.

When mystical experience and language are judged to be incompatible, it is usually because of the following assumptions: (1) non-dual-experience suspends distinctions; (2) language creates distinctions; (3) therefore language cannot apply to mystical experience. Many mystics recognize that even the notion of "The One" is understood as "not many," and therefore even the broadest concept cannot do justice to absolute-unity-without-distinctions. Many mystics thus prefer silence, or at best negative language. Non-dual-experience itself is considered ineffable, that is, an indescribable mystery, characterized by indeterminacy and formlessness.

But in terms of mystical *experience*, only the ontological type could be considered "ineffable" (indeterminate) in this way. (Later, we will ask if perhaps the "negative" uses of language are essential even to ontological mysticism, thus arguing against even *its* absolute ineffability). Theistic and ontic mystical experiences must still be considered linguistically shaped. Communion with "nature," even identification with "God" cannot claim indeterminacy and hence ineffability in the strict sense. Even though there is union in theistic mysticism, a divinity will take a "shape," be it love, fullness, power, etc. In my view a formless god is a contradiction (cf. the Hindu distinction between *Nirguna* and *Saguna Brahman*). Similarly, to be one with nature is not a purely indeterminate experience. If someone said: "my limbs are the trees, my lap the wide grass," such a statement could be appropriate to a specific experience and quite expressive as well.

If such experiences are called "indescribable," that might refer to the inadequacy of ordinary (object) description. What is really meant by "ineffable" in these cases is "extraordinary." If there persists a context of meaning or presence, be it God or nature, language has not been abandoned. The theistic mystic may call God a mystery, but he still speaks of God. Some other mystics do not. In other words, "God" is not an *absolute* mystery, but a mystery in relation to subject-object-ivity. "The Nothing" would better qualify as absolute mystery. "God" is a relative mystery.⁷

The guiding assumption of this paper is that language and world are coextensive. "World" is a context of meaning, and meaningful experience is coextensive with language. Mystical union with God or nature remains a world, a context of meaning, albeit a radically altered meaning. Joy, love, power, beauty, etc. remain essential aspects of such experiences and are so expressed. "Indescribable joy" is misleading; there is *joy*. Furthermore, different mystical experiences cannot be dissociated from the cultural-linguistic contexts, expectations and assumptions the mystic brings to his experience. It is very difficult if not impossible to argue for pure, unmediated experience, in view of mystics' own use of and dependence on doctrinal contexts.⁸

However, in view of the fact that mystics are often innovative and revolutionary it will not do to say the mystic is entirely culture-bound. He may often cross cultural-linguistic boundaries or present new boundaries. But in general we must say that if the mystic's experience is of God, then non-dual-experience has taken a "shape," and the word "God" is not merely a label but the *disclosure* of that shape. It is true

⁷ Of course a mystic may have an ontological experience and yet use theistic language, but in fact he is no longer talking about "God." Cf. Eckhart's struggle with this problem.

⁸ See Steven Katz's "Language, Epistemology and Mysticism," and Peter Moore's "Mystical Experience, Mystical Doctrine, Mystical Technique," both in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, edited by Steven Katz, (Oxford Univ. Press, 1978).

that most forms of language are not appropriate to mystical experience (hence the possibility of denying language arises). But it does not follow that language is entirely absent or inappropriate.

As far as mystical *experience* is concerned, *some* mystics enter into the “shapeless,” the indeterminate, but not all. Ontic and theistic mystical experience remain linguistically shaped. Moreover, even the negative language characteristic of ontological mysticism is meaningful and expressive in its way. Here language renounces itself, in *language*. We conclude: no form of mysticism may be said to be strictly ineffable. It is true that experience in ontological mysticism is indeterminate. But such indeterminacy is *meaningful* to the mystic. Negative language shows the *difference* between form and the formless, and formlessness has an *effect* on the mystic’s view of the world. A life of detachment is an example of the *meaningfulness* of the experience of indeterminacy. We have proposed the idea of a continuous range of experience with different dimensions. Even ontological mysticism is a dimension of experience in *relation* to other dimensions, and it is in view of this relatedness that the *meaning* of “that which transcends all meaning” (indeterminacy) is intelligible.⁹

In effect, the only truly ineffable experience would be one which took the mystic from our midst, never to be seen or heard from again. Even if a mystic chose never to speak again, this would be a “statement.” Silence is significant only as a renunciation of speech, it “says” there is no answer, and in the context of mystical experience this *is* an answer. To view the world with a sense of awe and mystery is another example of the *meaningfulness* of indeterminacy, in *relation* to determinate dimensions. Here the absence of “answers” is a *positive state of being* (as opposed to “confusion,” for example). Therefore, although ontological mysticism encounters the indeterminate, it cannot be said to be strictly ineffable. If the different dimensions of experience are recognized and seen to be essentially related to each other, the key to the intelligibility of mystical language is at hand.

But why do mystics of all types so often speak of ineffability and mystery? We cannot simply ignore this. Our answer: given the multi-dimensional character of experience, one level of language (mystical) can be a mystery to another level of language (subject-object-ivity). “Ineffable” does not mean “nonlinguistic.” Rather it refers to the confrontation and tension between different grammars reflecting the different dimensions of experience. Mystical language is indeed a mystery compared to ordinary descriptive language (objects of sensation) or conceptual language (abstract organizations of sensation). Furthermore, the multi-dimensional thesis forces us to see such terms as “irrationality,” “nonsense” and “incommunicability” in a different light. Mystical language is irrational, nonsensical or incommunicable *only* cross-dimensionally.¹⁰

Mystics can communicate with each other. If there is communication, then there is language—something “makes sense.” Mystical communication may not be the same as ordinary communication, it may be more difficult, require more care and

⁹The meaning of a mystical dimension can be either intrinsic or relational. Ontic and theistic types have both intrinsic and relational meaning, the ontological type has relational meaning, but no intrinsic meaning (being indeterminate).

¹⁰“Esoteric” mystical traditions, where the uninitiated are forbidden access to secret teachings, exemplify and can themselves be better understood in the context of cross-dimensional ineffability and irrationality.

subtlety, but if there is agreement concerning the importance of altered experience, a grammar is possible. (In India, mystical language is considered quite "in order.") If one dimension of experience tends to dominate (subject-object-ivity) then there may naturally develop the idea that mystical experience is in itself irrational, incommunicable, or ineffable. But the key to these conclusions is ideological domination, not the nature of the mystical.

Our multi-dimensional thesis explains why mystics so often deny language and yet inevitably speak to us and therefore seem to *need* language. Why do mystics themselves so often refer to ineffability, incommunicability, and irrationality? Because such terms are both appropriate and inappropriate. They are appropriate cross-dimensionally, inappropriate within the altered dimension of the mystic, or to one who knows the different dimensions and their alterations. The positivist may deny mystical language because he doesn't know or appreciate the alterations of experience. The language *is* nonsense to him. But when the mystic denies language, he inadvertently overlooks the value of *language* alterations, because he may implicitly agree with the positivist and think that language is equivalent to the objective dimension alone.

LANGUAGE AS PRESENTATION

The key to solving the "problem" of language and mysticism is the overcoming of the signification theory of language, which maintains that words are "signs" that represent "objects." If language is thought to be signification, then: (1) those who limit reality to the world of objects (positivists) think that mystical language is nonsense; and (2) those who affirm a non-objective dimension of experience (mystics) think that language is inadequate for this level of reality, because words "objectify" experience. But in this way positivists and mystics are hampered by a limited view of language. What if not only experience, but language too were seen in the light of different dimensions?

I take the path of Heidegger, whose reflections on language and poetry can serve us well here.¹¹ For Heidegger, language and world are coextensive. Language is *disclosure*, it allows the appearing of meaning out of concealment. The problem with the signification theory of language, where words designate objects, is that "object" is a linguistic event. A world of "objects" has to be disclosed as such, and this too by means of language (shown in the history of Western thought and its struggle with and eventual conquest of mytho-poetic language). We can never escape the linguistic circle. Any explanation of language or talk of pre-linguistic "objects" is still language. Outside of language, there is in fact "nothing." Any recognition of "meaning" or "existence" or "experience" is an event of language. Language is disclosure out of concealment; and concealment is the "nothing" that is the limit of language. (Later we will consider the significance of this limit.)

Language is not primarily re-presentation (signification) but *presentation*. The world "is not" unless presented in language. In this way language can be meaningfully associated with a non-objective dimension. Language as signification fol-

¹¹ See "Letter on Humanism," translated in *Basic Writings*, edited by David Krell (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), *On the Way to Language*, translated by Peter Hertz (Harper and Row, 1971), and *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter (Harper and Row, 1971).

flows from an object-ideology. But since “objects” need presenting as such, then objects are not the irreducible foundation of reality. Consequently, other forms of presentation are not only significant, but may even be *more* fundamental than objective re-presentation. Heidegger emphasizes poetry as the form of language which enacts original presentation out of concealment (its *creative* base overcomes the snag in the signification theory, i.e., “objects” alongside language). Later we will follow up this lead and connect mystical language with poetry.

If language and reality are correlative, then not only must the positivist revise his attitude toward reality, but the mystic must revise his attitude toward language. The problem before a philosophy of mysticism is that the mystic *needs* language and yet he so often considers language to be expendable. But if language is presentation, then the mystic’s fears about “objectifying” his experience may be unfounded. Representation implies a distinction between that which is represented (object) and the representation (word). But with presentation, since outside disclosure there is “nothing,” there can be no clear distinction between the utterance and that which is uttered. In this way subject-object-ivity is overcome, and therefore language itself in this respect can be seen to be mystical.

Mystical meaning needs disclosure. Language cannot be considered deficient or merely incidental to mystical experience. Just as the signification theory falsely assumes pre-linguistic “objects,” mystics and commentators too often assume non-linguistic or meta-linguistic “experiences.” We have seen that although ontological experience has no “content,” if this absence of content is to have *significance*, there must be “expression.” The mystic is not inclined to be absolutely silent, especially when he *speaks* of silence. Even *being* silent “says something” (e.g., the Buddha’s “Flower Sutra”).

If language and world are coextensive, and the mystic has an “experiential world” (God, nature, transcendence) then language is still in effect, perhaps in extraordinary forms, but in effect nevertheless; and if language is in some way essential to mysticism, then mystical experience must in some way be intelligible.

Different forms of language can be said to exhibit different grammars. Grammar is shown whenever language “makes sense” to a group of users, or displays certain patterns of structure which can shape future uses consistent with past uses, or gives a reference for judging other utterances (distinguishing sense from nonsense), in sum: when a field of experience comes to have “meaning,” when chaos becomes cosmos (order). Even myths show a certain grammar, especially considering the fact that myths have served to disclose a (meaningful) world for entire cultures and have been the foundation for education, training, prediction, legality, etc. A philosophy of mysticism must argue against the ideology that there is or should be a univocal logic, that the world does or should make sense in only one way, i.e., that logic is “law,” a universal, invariable pattern. Such a logical ideology is in fact a translation of an ideology of *experience* (subject-object-ivity).

MYSTICAL GRAMMAR

The claim that mystical experience is ineffable follows from certain assumptions: either (1) one has assumed object-language to be the only legitimate language; or (2) since in mystical experience the emergence of meaning and language so strains the ordinary object-dimension, one assumes that words “fall short,” or that words

should be considered deficient “pointers” which eventually should be abandoned altogether. But I have suggested that what is thought to be “ineffable” is really “extraordinary.” Consequently, mystical experience is bound up with the creation or discovery of an *appropriate* language of a new order, of a new grammar of experience. Mystics, in their compulsion to speak to us, have been instinctively evolving a new grammar (some with more success, i.e., some mystics are more “articulate” than others).

For our purposes we will call grammar: patterns for distinguishing sense and nonsense based on a mode of agreement in the context of experience. Let me now suggest certain possible modes of mystical grammar, i.e., patterns for distinguishing sense and nonsense within the context of experience no longer centered in ego consciousness.¹²

1. *Conversion grammar*, i.e., deliberate “violations” of subject-object-ivity grammar.

a. *Self-limitation* (of object-language). Mystical multi-dimensionality implies that the principle of non-contradiction has limited use; therefore it is not a “law,” but a *rule* governing a *particular* set of propositions. For this reason the mystic can employ negation and paradox in the mode of an “inverse logic,” with its own (inverse) rules for intelligibility. For example, in ontological mysticism the form of “not this, not that” can serve to *critically judge* such statements as “the absolute is God” or “the absolute is one” (e.g., Nagarjuna’s dialectical critique of all truth claims about nirvana). Along these same lines, a mystic can conclude that “the absolute is and is not” is more “accurate” than “the absolute exists” (since “existence” is too reminiscent of object-language).

Mystical “paradoxes,” e.g., the following reference to Brahman in the *Isa Upanisad*: “It moves, it moves not,” are *not* irrational. The irrational reflects a *one-dimensional* coincidence of opposites, a violation of the principle of non-contradiction. An object cannot have a nature other than its own, cannot be what it is not. But this is *not* what we find in the passage referring to Brahman. The mystical philosophy of the Upanisads proposes *one* reality with *many* dimensions, exhibited in the different levels of Brahman-consciousness: the waking state, the dream state, the sleep state and the transcendental state (*Mandukhya Upanisad*, 2-7). In waking consciousness Brahman moves (as the sense world); in transcendental consciousness Brahman is indeterminate and hence does not move. Given these dimensions (shown in normal and meditative states of awareness), the passage is quite consistent. If such mystical language is to be intelligible to a non-mystic, two assumptions are necessary: (1) reality is multi-dimensional; (2) concepts are one-dimensional (even “The One” means “not-many”). Consequently the mystic, the one who “traverses” the different dimensions, may need two or more often conflicting concepts to adequately present the *whole*.

b. *Identification*. Non-dual-experience also shows subject-object distinctions to be of limited use. Identification grammar is evident when, for example, a theistic mystic might decide that “I am God” makes sense while “I see God” or “I am conscious of God” does not. Identification grammar is frequently misunderstood when it is seen as a version, rather than a conversion of object-grammar. For example, when the Sufi mystic Hallāj proclaimed “I am God,” he did not mean that the in-

¹²Our “grammatical” approach is obviously indebted to the philosophy of Wittgenstein.

dividual and the universal are identical (“*I personally* am God”), but that in the process of mystical experience individual consciousness shatters its boundaries and is no longer individual as such. A cross-dimensional grammar is in effect. Consequently his statement can be clarified: I (ego-consciousness) am (becomes) God (lost in divine presence). Far from glorifying himself, Hallāj was renouncing himself by proclaiming the ego-annihilating expansion of experience. His contemporaries, however, did not “hear” him properly, and he was killed. It is conceivable that a grammatical critique could have saved his life. Another mystic could have pointed out to Hallaj that according to the experience, his statement was misleading. He meant “I am nothing” but his choice of words was too suggestive of object-grammar (e.g., “I am king”). The possibility of such a critique demonstrates the grammatical and hence intelligible nature of mystical experience and language.

2. *Trans-objective grammar*, i.e., neither object grammar nor conversions of object grammar, but rather forms of language appropriate to the alterations of experience.

a. *Description*, e.g., emptiness, fullness, unity, power, love, etc. Though description in this regard is of a different order than sense description, nevertheless we must recognize that mystics have experiences to which certain descriptions are deemed fully adequate. Language discloses the meaning of the experience. Even “emptiness” can in fact be considered descriptive. “The glass is empty” makes sense within a certain grammatical context: the empirical recognition of a glass either containing or not containing a liquid, for example. “The world is empty” also makes sense within a grammatical context: the “empirical” (meditative) recognition of the difference between the experience of objects and qualities, and an experience in which such determinations recede. “Empty” means experience without the qualities of thought or sensation. Here language discloses its limit. I may doubt such an *experience*, if I have never encountered such a state, but I should not overlook the fact that the mystic is quite satisfied with his account.

b. *Metaphor*. The advantage of metaphor for a mystical utterance is that in this case language is a presentation which “transcends” its literal meaning. But there remains a positive presentation, where the *form* of the metaphor discloses the meaning of the experience. Metaphor offers a positive description pointing beyond itself. But we must be careful not to think that in mysticism the metaphor “stands for” some determinate nature, as in the following example: “The river runs” stands for “the river flows.” In this case the metaphor re-presents the motion of the river. In mystical language we should perhaps be forced to conclude that metaphors are irreducible, i.e., as far as mystics are concerned the experience cannot be rendered any better, there is no “literal” account hiding behind the metaphor. The metaphor *presents* the experience, though the limit of (literal) language remains part of its effect. An example is the metaphor of “marriage” used by Christian mystics. The form of the marriage metaphor discloses elements of the experience: union, love, devotion, care, even the possibility of separation. The grammar of such a metaphor is shown in its implicit criticism of identification-language (1b), or certain nonsensical extensions of the metaphor (e.g., sexual connotations, or “We’re thinking of having children”).

c. *Mytho-aesthetic grammar*. Myth and art forms also serve mystical expression well because they too allow the presentation of meaning without object-reification. The creative foundation of myth and art (the bringing-forth of form out of non-

conscious formlessness), as well as the creative response to these forms, in other words, the openness to something inexplicit is what makes mytho-aesthetic expression *appropriate* to the non-objective dimension of mystical experience. In India, during religious festivals, villagers will fashion elaborate images of a god and shower it with gifts, praise, and worship with an emotional intensity indicative of idolatry. But at the end of the festival the villagers will ceremoniously carry the god to the river and drown it. A mystic would find such a practice grammatically significant. The image both is and is not the god. This is why mystical traditions so often turn to mytho-aesthetic presentation. We will have more to say later about the aesthetic character of mystical language.

d. *Exaltation*, i.e., direct exclamations announcing or glorifying a transformed state. Sacred names are an example of a use of language which is purely presentational and not descriptive.

e. *Guidance*, i.e., language presenting a “direction” to those pursuing mystical experience. Some examples: (1) “critiques” of ordinary consciousness (e.g., multiplicity as “illusion”), meant to *stimulate* the search for another dimension; (2) the “direction” of experience (e.g., “turn within” establishes the turn from sensation); (3) technique-language (much of mystical language which sounds strange theoretically is in fact appropriate to practical procedures of meditation—e.g., the dualism and subsequent separation of *purusha* and *prakrti*, spirit and matter, in classical Yoga); (4) even philosophical “systems” (e.g., a hierarchy of Being) seen in conjunction with mystical *experience* begin to make more sense (as stages of mystical experience rather than deductive metaphysics). Guidance language discloses its grammar and is appropriately interpreted when it is seen as a “map” of experiential “territory.”

f. *Evocation*, i.e., language meant to express or encourage a way of life. Examples include frequent calls for the suspension of desire or action. When the Buddhist is called upon to “desire nothing” the Christian or Hindu (in the *Bhagavad Gita*) to surrender one’s action to God, the Taoist to follow “non-action” (*wu-wei*), a non-mystic might easily judge such a path to be either an irresponsible denial of life or a flight from the world, or at least an impossible demand (only death can terminate action). But such calls do not in fact express utter non-action, but action no longer centered in ego-consciousness. For a mystic there can persist a field of activity in which the ego no longer controls but “receives.” With the multi-dimensional model, such language becomes intelligible when seen in reference to a specific dimension of experience—ego-consciousness (i.e., it is the *ego* which ceases to act). Much mystical talk of “nothingness” can be read as an evocation of *humility*, i.e., the suspension of all attempts to confine truth to human understanding.

3. *Grammar of practice*, which refers to action and not simply language, and which is therefore the enactment of evocation grammar. A great deal of mystical language needs to be properly interpreted as a declaration of a way of life which conforms to and therefore expresses a mystical experience. For example, Buddhist detachment and Zen spontaneity follow from and express the decentralization of ego-consciousness. Christian love follows from and expresses the perception of union. One reason why so much language is dedicated to such ways of living is that detachment, spontaneity, and love are visible “signs” of these unusual and hidden experiences.

To sum up the meaning of mystical grammar: even given the rarity of mystical ex-

perience, there can and does arise language which could be recognized as “right” or “wrong.”

A most revealing example of mystical grammar is found ironically in a tradition most often thought to disdain language—Zen and its use of *Koans*, those puzzling riddles and answers that emerge in the master-student relationship. Suzuki calls *Koans* “utterances of *Satori*.”¹³ Interestingly, *Ko-an* literally means “public record.” Given the non-conceptual nature of Zen experience (its immediacy, its suspension of ego-consciousness and deliberation), the combination of nonsense and spontaneity characteristic of Koan answers *shows* the master when the student has experienced *satori*, and therefore verifies it. The master is trained to recognize both the meaning of the answer and the psychological behavior of the student. In this case nonsense has grammatical significance, but *deliberate* nonsense would betray ignorance. Some Koans give an apparently irrelevant answer to a deep question (“What is Buddhahood?” “The cyprus tree in the garden.”) which in fact expresses the surprise, simplicity and concreteness of Zen experience. If the conscious, “logical” mind is suspended in *satori*, then spontaneous nonsense or assaults on abstraction are meaningful measures of that experience. A successful Koan response would combine an inverse logic (1a), some form of trans-objective grammar (especially 2c and d) and a grammar of practice (sometimes “punctuated” by physical contact!), all recognized by a sensitive expert as a “public record” of enlightenment.

We conclude that language and mysticism are not contraries, nor are they separable. Many interpreters separate the experience (an “inner” realm) from language and expression (an “outer,” public realm). Under such an assumption, however, many conclude that mystical experience is essentially “subjective” and therefore beyond the realm of inquiry, analysis, or intelligibility. But in pursuing a mystical grammar we discover not only the correlation of language and experience, but consequently we are shown the non-subjective feature of these experiences that mystics themselves insist on (“It isn’t just ‘me’ . . .”). Though we must be careful, we can conclude that there is a “public” aspect of mystical experience, since mystics can communicate, disagree, judge, etc. But “public” cannot mean objective publicity in the ordinary sense, as if, for example, one were to claim that mystical meaning can *only* be a function of behavior, i.e., that non-egotistical behavior is the *only* meaningful expression of mystical experience. Furthermore, “public” cannot mean ostensibility, the capacity to intersubjectively verify simultaneous experiences of an independent object. Mystical experience (e.g., meditation) tends to individuate. But because there is a grammar of mystical experience, where individuals can talk sense to one another, then we must reject the notion that such an experience is private; rather we should say the mystic experiences an altered *world*, with its own possibilities of expression, communication, disagreement, etc., though the “rules” of the game may have changed (compared to subject-object-ivity). Without acknowledging a grammar, we cannot understand the mystic when his experiences evoke not subjective but “ontological” claims.¹⁴ I have been trying to suggest a context for mystical

¹³ D. T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, Second Series (New York: Samuel Wiser, Inc., 1970), p. 110.

¹⁴ The same problem arises in aesthetic experience. Someone who appreciates a work of art recognizes the futility of attempting to objectify aesthetic meaning. And yet one is quite unwilling to conclude that the effect of the work is purely subjective.

grammar. The problem, of course, is that we are faced with a grammar which must often sacrifice predominant modes of intelligibility. But we must simply recognize that there is no one form of grammar appropriate to all forms of experience.

Mystical language, like all language, displays its meaning in a community of use. If we recognized this simple fact, we could avoid the single biggest error committed by interpreters: overlooking the fact that almost without exception, mystics are not speaking to the man in the street or philosophy professors or linguists but to *other mystics*. Most mistakes in the analysis of mystical language can be traced to the imposition of inappropriate criteria by "aliens."

The advantage of a "grammatical" approach to mystical language is that we avoid the question of whether mystics speak the "truth," i.e., whether their language corresponds to "reality." Even though mystics have made such claims, if we view language as a "grammar of presentation," then what follows is a non-metaphysical, pluralistic sense of "truth." In other words, we replace "truth" or "reality" as some standing essence, which is to be "matched" by language, with that which is *shown* in the language-uses of various communities. Therefore, we want to look *no further* than the meaning of mystical language for mystics.

MYSTICAL LANGUAGE AND AESTHETIC SACRIFICE

Mystical experience involves the sacrifice of language. But sacrifice does not mean the annihilation of language. A sacrifice is both a surrender and an offering. Mystical language speaks the recession and renunciation of object-language. Language too can transcend "thinghood" if it is not meant to be reification. The examples of mystical grammar given in this paper all renounce reification by attempting to reach beyond language *through* language. Mystical language is an evocation of either: (1) the formless in form, or (2) unity in diversity. The clearest example of (1) is found, I think, in Haiku poetry, the aesthetic principles of which are directly expressive of and meant to evoke a state of awareness inspired by Zen. The grammar of this evocation is shown in the deliberate simplicity, economy, suggestiveness, and surprise tactics characteristic of Haiku poems, features which are meant to reflect the formless in form by sabotaging the clutter, explicitness, and complacency of subject-object-ivity. With respect to (2), the diversity of words does not violate non-dual-experience, first because mystical grammar often deliberately plays against diversification, and second because mystical language often assumes the experience and hence intends not to "inform" the listener but *excite* his sensitivity. Given the experience of divine presence, even a sacred name can have an evocative charge and impact. I think Pound's definition of poetry, "language charged with meaning," might well fit mystical language. Of course, the sensitivity of both speaker and listener is a crucial element in these altered dimensions of language. When the *attitude* toward language is appropriate, then language does not violate but rather presents mystical experience.

Mystical language is "sacrificial" language, that is to say, language which recognizes either the limit of object-language (ontic and theistic mysticism) or the limit of language itself (ontological mysticism). It is precisely this self-limiting feature of mystical language, its "sacrificial" nature, that mirrors the sacrifice of ego-consciousness in mystical experience. In this way mystical language "corresponds" to mystical experience. One should read a mystic as one reads a poet. A

poem does not inform, it evokes a response. A poem is often ruined when too much is said. The effect of a poem is always more than the words alone, and yet the words present (*are*) the “more.” In poetry, language and the unsaid belong together. So too in mystical language. Herein lies the special character of language in the region of art and mysticism: here language does not exhaust meaning, it evokes a meaning beyond language through language. Aesthetic (and mystical) language is neither language alone nor silence; it simply loosens the confinement of object-language and presents in words something that rings deeper than words alone.

The correlation of language and mysticism must admit extraordinary forms of language to present extraordinary experience. In mysticism, not only experience but language is deepened, and the result is a conflict with the surfaces of ordinary, matter-of-fact language. In relation to matter-of-fact familiarity, the mystical requires innovative speech to disclose heretofore *hidden* aspects of experience. Therefore, mystics have a problem with language not because it is inadequate, but because “deepened” language involves a creative struggle.

The experience of artists is often quite similar to that of mystics, especially the suspension of ego-consciousness in the creative process. Since artists so often attest to their work as arising from non-conscious origins, and yet somehow from “within,” we can call the creative process itself a multi-dimensional mystical phenomenon. The mystic may differ from the artist only in the range, depth, and scope of altered experience, the decentralization of experience. And perhaps those mystics who disdain language should take a lesson from the artist: in the face of altered experience the point is not to abandon expression but to pursue the labor of creating an appropriate expression.

Since mystical expression is usually verbal, we can call mystical language poetry. The reference to poetry is not meant to introduce formal characteristics such as rhyme, meter, etc., but rather the aesthetic atmosphere of poetic language: the creative process which involves the transcendence of ego-consciousness, and the bringing-forth of form from formlessness. Consequently, by suggesting the aesthetic character of mystical language we contribute these features to our analysis: (1) The creation of a “world” from something which “transcends” the world as such (the formless not-yet) and hence the idea of different dimensions and the inclusion of forms within a “greater” whole; (2) the role of the creator contributes the identification of consciousness with this process and therefore includes the expansion of consciousness; (3) the significance of art is deepened; (4) the idea of the mystical is broadened.

Perhaps the mystic is an “ontological artist,” who discloses the whole that transcends ego-consciousness; and the artist is an “ontical mystic,” who discloses creative events from within this transcendence. Mystical poetry serves both tasks, which explains why the domains of the mystic and artist often overlap.

Mystical poetry is language which recognizes and encourages the recognition that there is something that cannot be said (ontological mysticism) or objectified (ontic and theistic mysticism). But language is no less important to the mystic than the poem is to the poet. It is true that in mystical experience the limit of object-language and language itself is reached. Therefore a key element of the mystical is the awareness that *language isn't everything*. But, as we have seen, this does not mean that language is unessential to mysticism. Language is *always* emerging out of and in the midst of its limit. Since the encounter with limits is the *essence* of mystical ex-

perience, rather than say the mystic encounters the end of language, perhaps we should say he is at the *brink* of language, where language *arises* out of its limit.

The mystic is in need of language, to gather his experience into a "shape," and not only for others but for himself as well. In other words, the mystic is compelled to speak not only to "report" the experience, but to understand it himself, to "gather" its meaning from confusion. Language gives the mystic "bearings" in an *otherwise* overwhelming dimension of experience. One should not forget that mystics often tell of the fearful quality of their experience, given its shattering effect on ordinary consciousness. Therefore language, far from being deficient or incidental to the experience, in fact shelters the mystic from being overwhelmed, and strikes a balance between form and annihilation. Only now can we fully understand the mystic's "compulsion" to speak.

Mystical language is a "bearing," which is a useful word because of the following connotations: (1) a reference of meaning in an overwhelming experience ("finding one's bearings"); (2) the creative process ("bearing a child"); (3) enduring the disintegrative character of mystical experience ("bearing the storm").

In sum, we shall call mystical language *the poetic bearing of a sacrifice*, the purpose of which is to: (1) gather experience into a meaning; (2) announce (present) the experience; (3) guide others to that experience; (4) organize a world-view according to that experience.

Language is neither the "fall" from nor even the "interpretation" of an ineffable experience, but rather the presentation of that experience (*as* an "experience," as opposed to an overwhelming annihilation). In mysticism language is *recognized* as being in the midst of a limit, and its grammar is meant to present and evoke this recognition.

The mystic does not escape language. Being in the claim of primordial experience, he is in the service of primordial language. The mystical is not the absence of language but its *origin*. In characterizing the mystical as the origin of language, first of all we can more easily understand why mystics (even the ontological type) seem "compelled" to speak, and secondly we are prepared to overcome not only the separation of mysticism and language but also the ideological separation of mysticism and "worldliness."