

LANGUAGE AND EXPERIENCE IN THE COGNITIVE STUDY OF MYSTICISM — COMMENTARY ON FORMAN

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Forman's theory outlined in 'Mysticism, language and the *via negativa*'¹ reacts against an earlier account of mysticism which he calls 'constructivism'. Constructivism grew from a book of collected papers, *Mysticism and philosophical analysis* (1978), contributed to and edited by Steven Katz. According to Forman, 'the constructivist approach is, roughly, that of the historian [of ideas]' (p. 39). But this characterization is much too generous.

Katz himself thought he was using philosophy although, as anyone who looks at Katz's book can see, it goes no further than applying the most standard, narrow and lifeless forms of analytic/linguistic philosophy to mystic utterances. Whatever value analytic philosophy may have elsewhere, it would be difficult to find a tradition more inherently alien to the problems raised by mysticism. Mystic experience may or may not be totally beyond words, but virtually all mystics agree that language is especially resistant to capturing mystic insights; yet nothing could be more language-bound than the method Katz adopts.

Relative to Katz & Co., Forman makes a great leap forward. Forman wants to get the *experience* back into the analysis of mysticism; he tries to make experience primary and linguistic aspects secondary — in this respect he makes a figure/ground reversal of Katz's position. Unfortunately, Forman's theory pays a high price for having constructivism as its foil. Too much has rubbed off, and Forman's concern with language is still, I think, obsessive.

In Katz, mystic experience is the *consequence* of a pre-existing linguistic system: Katz's direction of analysis moves from concepts to experience, and Forman's analysis moves in the same direction. In both cases, language-encoded concepts power the system, and mystic experience occurs as a kind of output.

The difference lies in Forman's notion of how the linguistic engine is supposed to work: '*Via negativa* language serves a negative performative function: it seems designed to push the subject outside the limits of his or her linguistic system.' (p. 45) So while both theories focus on the linguistic activity supposedly preceding mystic experience, the *via negativa* model treats certain concepts as if they were like a computer virus: concepts relevant to mysticism can be introduced into the system, but they then work to disable the system which contains them. In general, *via negativa* 'language cannot be said to lend "content" to perception. Rather these utterances only serve to *stop* us from supplying content.' (p. 44, Forman's emphasis) The language of the mystic:

serves not a descriptive function but rather an *evocative* one: it is designed to help one drop one's pre-formations . . . this language must be self-annihilating. It serves to undercut and stop the employment of all language, including itself. (p. 46, Forman's emphasis)

It seems to me that this gives the linguistic approach, however 'negative', far more importance for the study of mysticism than it deserves. In any case, we do not need to use the *via negativa* to establish serious problems with Katz's hyperlinguistic theory (see

¹ Robert Forman (1994), '“On capsules and carts”: mysticism, language and the *via negativa*', *J. Consciousness Studies*, 1 (1), pp. 38–49. Page numbers in parentheses refer to this article.

Forman himself, pp. 41–2). Nor, on my reading, is Forman able to show the power of the *via negativa* when analysing a specific text. To make his case he tries to show that what seem to be ‘positive formative utterances’ in mystic language refer to nothing at all in mystic experience. So to say one has experienced Brahman as ‘the formless One’ or as the ‘unity of the supreme Imperishable’ (p. 45) is, on the *via negativa* account, to utter nothing but self-annihilating phrases having no reference to something actually felt.

Yet after developing the *via negativa* in order to counter Katz’s linguistic theory, Forman goes on to acknowledge (p. 46 ff.) that true *descriptions* of mystic experiences are still possible after the fact, with the proviso that these descriptions are to be seen as ‘not necessary but contingent’ (p. 48). Here Forman moves towards the position that we *can* rightly entertain the possibility that a phrase like ‘the formless One’ does refer to an experience and, in some minute way, does describe it.

What, then, awaits us if we get out of the morass created by language-focused approaches to mysticism? What if we do take mystical experience to be a distinct phenomenon reflected *by* language, and not simply a set of propositions imprisoned *in* language?

From the standpoint of cognitive science, the answers here may be substantial. Given the new cognitive interest in consciousness, mystic experience is likely to be taken seriously, both as a topic to examine and, if possible, to explain. Mystic encounters, whatever else they may be, would seem to manifest an extreme state of consciousness; and the investigation of an extreme or limiting state of a phenomenon often yields some of the most telling information about it.

As with any science, the science of cognition will build from the known to the unknown. Many people see mystic experience as the great Other, as something quite beyond the range of rational explanation. But research will naturally search out points of resonance, not difference, between mystical experience and cognitive features of a more humble sort. Perhaps the most obvious point of resonance is that of ‘unity’. From perception research to the binding problem to concepts of the self, the problem of unity is the great leitmotif of cognitive research; and what is more common in mystical experience than the feeling of an all-pervading unity?

By curbing the linguistic obsession found in so much later twentieth-century thought, and by fostering a concern for experience, we are better able to incorporate the work of earlier thinkers into current cognitive research. William James, of course, had much to say about consciousness and mysticism, and was one of the first to work out a profile of typical features in a mystical experience (James, 1902/1920). Bertrand Russell, also no friend of the linguistic tendency in later English-speaking philosophy, framed a similar list of his own (Russell, 1914/1957). Indeed, it is remarkable how often certain recurrent themes show up in mystic texts. They are present, for example, in the two short passages quoted by Forman from the Maitri Upanishad:

That which is not thought, [yet] which stands in the midst of thought
The unthinkable, supreme mystery! —
Thereon let one concentrate his attention (p. 44)

When a person sees the brilliant
Maker, Lord, Person, the Brahma-source,
Then, being a knower, shaking off good and evil,
He reduces everything to unity in the supreme Imperishable (pp. 45 f.)

Over and over again, descriptions of mystical experience typically refer to what I call its ineffable, unistic and noetic aspects — a feeling of unity or coherence that cannot be

adequately captured by words, but which, nevertheless, seems to involve profound spiritual knowledge. I have myself proposed a cognitive theory which handles these features of experience in some detail (as part of a more general account of conscious/non-conscious interaction; see Mangan, 1991, 1993). But I am sure many other applications of cognitive science to the study of mysticism are possible.

References

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