

DEMYSTIFYING CONSCIOUSNESS WITH MYSTICISM? COGNITIVE SCIENCE AND MYSTICAL TRADITIONS

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ABSTRACT

The article considers whether, and how, current scientific studies of consciousness might benefit from insights of mystical traditions. Although considerable effort has been expended towards introducing mysticism into mainstream cognitive science, the topic is still controversial, not least because of the multifariousness of meaning associated with the term (from “illogical thinking” through “visions” and “raptures” to “paranormal” and “psychopathological phenomena”). In the context of the present article, mysticism is defined as a set of practices, beliefs, values etc. developed within a given religious tradition to help the practitioner realize the experiential and existential transformations associated with mystical experiences, i.e. experiences characterized by the breakdown of the subject-object dichotomy. It is then examined in which areas mysticism so defined might provide beneficial for consciousness studies; broadly, three such areas are identified: *phenomenological research* (mysticism as a repository of unique experiential material and practical know-how for rigorous phenomenological analyses), *the problem of the self* (mysticism as a repository of experiential-existential insights into one’s fundamental selflessness), and the so-called *hard problem of consciousness* (mysticism as a unique experiential-existential answer to the mind-body problem). It is contended that, contrary to popular belief, cognitive science could benefit from insights and practices found in mystical traditions, especially by way of grounding its findings in the lived experience and thereby (potentially) demystifying some of its self-imposed abstract conundrums.

KEY WORDS

mysticism, philosophy of (cognitive) science, phenomenology, consciousness, epistemology

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INTRODUCTION¹

The main goal of this article is to consider whether current studies of consciousness, conducted under the aegis of cognitive science, might benefit from insights of mystical traditions. It is our contention that the answer to this question is in the affirmative, and we will try to substantiate this claim by briefly sketching why, where, and how this exchange between cognitive science and mysticism might take place. Before proceeding, however, it should be noted that this paper makes no pretence of being a comprehensive study of the suggested “points of contact”, but is merely a preliminary sketch intended to provide food for additional thought (no more, no less).

Although considerable effort has been expended towards introducing the insights of mystical traditions into mainstream cognitive science (cf. [1-3]) the topic is still likely to raise many a sceptical eyebrow. Since the term “mysticism” is frequently used as a synonym for “religious experience, mythology, miracles, schizophrenia, hallucinations, trances, altered states of consciousness, alleged psychic powers such as levitation, visions, parapsychology, and in general anything considered irrational, unintelligible, or occult” (e.g. [4]), some of the readers with a more “conventionally scientific bent” might feel ill at ease – and rightly so! – with the prospect of introducing such seemingly obscure topics into what is believed to be a rigorous scientific discipline. To alleviate these worries, however, we would like to point out that this ordinary or “folk” understanding of the term is in stark contrast to how it is normally used in academic circles, particularly in religious studies and philosophy of religion, where it *typically* refers to a particular *set of trans-confessional and trans-cultural experiences* that are said to possess a *unique set of phenomenological characteristics* and are capable of instigating *a profound existential transformation in the life of a mystic*². In order to get a better understanding of what *mysticism* (in the proper sense of the word) stands for, it is therefore necessary to get a better understanding of what *mystical experience* stands for, i.e. to see whether it is possible to elucidate its main phenomenological features.

We will try to do this in two steps. Firstly, it is important to consider what mystical experiences *are not*. Some unusual experiences are frequently associated with mystical experiences, but should not be confused with them; these include: visions, auditions, locutions, trances, ecstasies, paranormal phenomena (telepathy, precognition, clairvoyance etc.) [5-7]. Although these experiences *can* and *do* occur on the “mystical path”, they do not qualify as mystical in the strict sense. Different mystics tend to interpret such “accompanying experiences” differently: most frequently, they are perceived as hindrances and thus as something to be avoided or at least ignored; occasionally, however, they are depicted as helpful, but tricky and potentially dangerous guides on one’s spiritual journey. Either way, they are normally delineated from mystical experiences *proper*. The words of Grace Jantzen on the status of visions, auditions etc. in Christian mysticism are instructive in this regard: Some of them, like John of the Cross or the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* give grave warnings against all such experiences, advocating that we should treat them all as demonic in origin and saying caustically that they make people behave ‘like sheep with the brain disease’. Others, like Teresa of Avila and Julian of Norwich, are grateful for the visions they have had, and recognize in them the source of much spiritual teaching. Yet even those who are most affirmative of the experiences they have had never see them as essential to spiritual growth, never advocate that others should try to have them too, and certainly never see them as central to what union with God is about [4; p.70].

But if mystical experiences are not to be confused with visions, auditions etc., then what *are* they? Several portrayals of mystical experiences have been proffered, and although they

differ in particularities, they tend to agree in generalities. 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.

For lack of space, I am unable to go into a more detailed phenomenological analysis of mystical experiences (see [8; Ch.1, 8; Ch.3] for a more detailed account), but suffice it to say that the term seems to be covering 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 emptied 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. I will refer to the first type of experience as the (experience of) *transcendental (introvertive) Oneness-Nothingness* (TON; corresponding approximately to Forman’s Pure Consciousness Event), and to the second type as the (experience of) *lived (extrovertive) Oneness-Nothingness* (LON; corresponding approximately to Forman’s Unitive Mystical State), cf. [9, 10]. It seems that most mystical traditions (*contra* Stace, *pro* Forman) put greater value on LON, seeing it as the pinnacle of their spiritual/religious/existential striving.

Now that we have a general (albeit admittedly very sketchy) understanding of mystical experiences it is time to consider how they are related to mysticism in general. In the context of the present article, mysticism will 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. [11]. 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.

POINTS OF CONTACT

Armed with the basic understanding of mysticism and mystical experience, we are now in a position to move on to the central part of our discussion and try to provide a tentative outline of the possibilities for establishing a potentially fruitful and mutually enriching dialogue between mysticism and cognitive science in the field of consciousness studies. This outline will consist of two major parts. In the first part, we will try to elucidate how experiential insights and practical know-how gained and developed by mystical traditions might contribute to current phenomenological research. In the second part, we will then go on to suggest how mysticism might help scientists confront two metaphysical conundrums that have been bedeviling modern cognitive science: the problem of the (unified) self and the so-called hard problem of consciousness. It will be argued that mysticism may provide interesting, if challenging and perhaps even controversial contributions to the study of consciousness, ones that should not be dismissed on *a priori* grounds but deserve full attention.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH

The first area where “mystical lore” might prove of great value is *phenomenological research*. In recent years, the importance of phenomenology in cognitive science has steadily increased, and it has now become generally acknowledged that phenomenology (*pace* cognitivism) is indispensable for the study of consciousness: “For consciousness is essentially an *interior* phenomenon, something we experience *as* subjectivity. Thus if we were not able to identify the subjective phenomena of consciousness directly, that is, subjectively, we would have no way to know which externally observable phenomena were relevant to what phenomena of consciousness, or in what ways” [3]. There are at least two possible ways in which mysticism could contribute to phenomenological research.

EXPERIENTIAL ASPECT

Mystical accounts (written and oral) abound in descriptions of unique experiential (i.e. mystical) states that are (i) normally not present in our ordinary lives and (ii) exhibit surprising phenomenological similarities across cultural and religious traditions. It would seem, then, that they provide precious material for the study of the utmost recesses of consciousness that are unreachable for most. But why should this, aside from sheer intellectual curiosity, matter? What, if anything, consequential can these experiences contribute to our understanding of the normal waking consciousness? There seem to be at least two good reasons for pursuing this type of research. The first reason is best exemplified by drawing a parallel with *pathological experiences*, i.e. experiences that accompany specific physiological or psychological abnormalities. It is an established fact that the scalpel of a disease, albeit usually limited to very few, can be extremely useful in revealing the normal functioning of our mind-body; and it seems plausible to assume that extraordinary experiential states that are *not* abnormal (there are actually good grounds for calling them *hypernormal*) would be equally if not even more revealing in that sense. In words of Robert Forman: From the *pathology* of a very few we have learned a great deal about the relationship of one side of the brain to the other, of two kinds of knowing, of information storage and retrieval, of impulse control etc. Indeed it is common practice to take data about a few unusual individuals and generalize it to the many. Here again we are studying the data of a few. But rather than the pathological, we will be studying people ... who are not ‘pathological’ but unusually self-actualized [1; pp.363-364].

Another reason for the study of mystical experiences relates to the possibility of their being a more “fundamental” mode of experiencing, i.e. a mode that *underlies* our everyday (waking) consciousness. This is probably best seen in TON (also called “pure consciousness [event]”), a state of consciousness that is characterized by absolute absence of all phenomenological content. Just as biologists try to get a better understanding of a complex biological phenomenon (e.g. a living organism) by looking at its simplest form (e.g. *E. Coli*), so cognitive scientists might learn a lot about consciousness by looking at its most rudimentary representatives. And since TON, unlike our everyday consciousness, which is a “an enormously complex stew of thoughts, feelings, sensations, wants, snatches of song, pains, drives, daydreams”, is characterized by a state of absolute stillness in which one “neither thinks nor perceives any mental or sensory content”, and is therefore completely “perception- and thought-free” [1; pp.360-361], it seems to be the perfect candidate for the job. Moreover, mystics claim that mystical experiences lift an (experiential) veil and reveal that our ordinary (dual) way of perceiving things is actually *secondary and derivative*, i.e. superimposed on a more rudimentary (non-dual) experiential mode. If this were true – and it is a hypothesis that cannot be discarded on *a priori* grounds – it would mean that studying mystical experiences

(in all their guises) provides crucial insights into “the ground, structure and dynamics of consciousness” [3; p.190].

However, not only mystical experiences as such, but also *accompanying* experiences (visions, trances, raptures etc.) can prove immensely valuable. Brian Lancaster has argued convincingly that the study of Jewish, Taoist and Buddhist mysticism might provide useful insights into the nature of everyday consciousness, as these traditions contain rich phenomenological descriptions and practical means of experientially accessing what is normally referred to as “preconscious” or “preattentive” cognitive processes: Research in cognitive neuroscience and depth psychology indicates that normal, mundane, consciousness arises from a complex stage of information processing during which diverse associations to the stimulus (be it sensory, object, a memory or a thought) are accessed preconsciously. ... Put simply, mystical practice seems to entail a shift in the “leading edge” of consciousness such that elements previously obscured (preconscious) enter the clarity of consciousness [2; p.253].

Moreover, texts such as the Buddhist *Abhidharma* contain detailed phenomenological accounts of different conscious states and could therefore help us map the vast and rugged terrain of consciousness. Also, several authors (see e.g. [12, 13]) have pointed out phenomenological similarities between states encountered on a mystical journey and in certain psychopathological states (esp. psychosis). Since mystics seem to be able to successfully master phenomena that overwhelm psychotics (hallucinations, ego-death etc.) a better understanding of processes involved in meditative/contemplative life can have not only *theoretical* (i.e. providing a clearer understanding of how such phenomena occur), but also *practical* implications (i.e. illuminating ways and methods of preventing and/or alleviating such occurrences in psychotic patients).

PRACTICAL ASPECT

This last remark brings us to the next domain in which phenomenological research could be coupled, and thereby enriched, with insights from mystical traditions. Several authors have stressed the need for a skilful application of improved practical methods that would enable a more rigorous and systematic approach to the study of human experience. Shear and Jevning, for example, point to a “significant asymmetry” present in current neurophysiological approaches to consciousness: For while their objective side employs sophisticated scientific methodologies, capable of isolating and evaluating variables completely outside of ken of ordinary sense perception, their subjective side typically uses mere everyday sorts of introspection, capable of isolating only ordinary internal phenomena such as sense perception, imagining and verbal thought ... The need for systematic first-person methodologies here is thus starkly apparent” [3; p.109].

Similarly, Francisco Varela calls out for “a systematic exploration of the only link between mind and consciousness that seems both obvious and natural: *the structure of human experience itself*”, and emphasizes the need for investigating “the concrete possibilities of a disciplined examination of experience” [14; p.330, 14; p.335].

Rich and multifarious meditative/contemplative practices developed in different mystical traditions seem to be particularly useful in this regard as they provide “a repository of contemplative and phenomenological expertise” for obtaining “precise and detailed first-person accounts of experience”. Contemplative mental training “cultivates a capacity for sustained, attentive awareness of the moment-to-moment flux of experience” and could thereby improve our overall understanding of the phenomenological domain [15; p.216, 15; pp.228-229]. Note that the diversity of approaches in different traditions is by no means a hindrance, but an added value, for it is possible that a given tradition “may have gleaned some valuable

knowledge or developed some practice that is not found elsewhere” [16; pp.498-499]. In other words, although meditative/contemplative practices may induce phenomenologically identical experiences, they may differ significantly in their inner dynamics, i.e. in ways how they bring these experiences about, and each tradition could therefore offer unique insights into the structure and dynamics of consciousness.

METAPHYSICAL DILEMMAS

In addition to phenomenological research, mysticism could also engage in a fruitful exchange with cognitive science in addressing certain theoretical puzzles that have persistently bedevilled consciousness studies. Although several such problems exist, we will focus on two that are particularly pressing, i.e. the problem of the (unified) self and the hard problem of consciousness.

THE PROBLEM OF THE (UNIFIED) SELF

It has long been recognized that the notion of a unified, discrete, (semi-)autonomous entity called “the self” is all but unproblematic: On the one hand, even a cursory attention to experience shows us that our experience is always changing and, furthermore, is always dependent on a particular situation. ... Yet most of us are convinced of our identities: we have a personality, memories and recollections, and plans and anticipations, which seem to come together in a coherent point of view, a center from which we survey the world, the ground on which we stand [17; p.59].

The currently *predominant* attitude in cognitive science seems to be that this elusive “ego”/“self” is a *beneficial illusion*, a *useful construct* with no independent existence. In words of Daniel Dennett: But the strangest and most wonderful constructions in the whole animal world are the amazing, intricate constructions made by the primate, *Homo sapiens*. Each normal individual of this species makes a *self*. Out of its brain it spins a web of words and deeds, and, like the other creatures, it does not have to know what it is doing; it just does it [18; p.416].

The idea is that mental life in its entirety consists of nothing but *sub-personal* mental processes, and that the sense of self is merely a useful superimposition on this array of unconscious events. To quote Dennett again: So far as I can see, however, every cognitivist theory currently defended or envisaged, functionalist or not, is a theory of the sub-personal level. It is not at all clear to me, indeed, how a psychological theory – as distinct from a philosophical theory – could fail to be a sub-personal theory [19; pp.153-154].

The main problem with this view, however, is that it seems to contradict our everyday experience: although there might be good *scientific* reasons to claim that there are no egos/selves (i.e. that all there exists are unconscious mental [neural?] processes), there seem to be even more persuasive *phenomenological* reasons that such entities do in fact exist. In other words, despite the fact that recent scientific studies seem to indicate that there are no unified selves, *I* still have *the seemingly indelible feeling* of being such a *self* my-*self*.

Mystical traditions based on meditative/contemplative practices concur with scientific claims about the non-existence of unified selves, but do so on different grounds: they claim that “an untrained mind is inevitably deluded over the real nature of mind and consciousness” and that it takes strenuous mental discipline for the “elements previously obscured (preconscious) [to] enter the clarity of consciousness” [2; p.249, 2; p.253]. In other words, mystical traditions claim that it is not only possible to *think* (reflect) on the non-existence of the self, but to actually *make it a living experience*. TON and LON are examples of conscious ego-less states, i.e. experiential states not referring/belonging to any self, and thus provide a phenomenological counterpart to scientific findings with potentially valuable insights into the true nature and origin of the (sense of) self (how and why it emerges, is it possible to live without it etc.). This is the

reason why Varela, Thompson and Rosch felt the question of the self to be “the meeting ground” of (cognitive) science, philosophy and meditative/contemplative traditions: “[A]ll reflective traditions in human history ... have challenged the naïve sense of the self” [17; p.59]. And it is our contention that they have done so in different, yet mutually enlightening ways.

THE HARD PROBLEM

Another important area where mystical traditions could prove of value is the so-called “hard problem of consciousness”. Chalmers explains: The really hard problem of consciousness is the problem of experience. When we think and perceive, there is a whirl of information-processing, but there is also a subjective aspect. ... This subjective aspect is experience. ... It is undeniable that some organisms are subjects of experience. But the question of how it is that these systems are subjects of experience is perplexing. Why is it that when our cognitive systems engage in visual and auditory information-processing, we have visual or auditory experience: the quality of deep blue, the sensation of middle C [20; p.201]?

At the bottom of the hard problem lies the notorious “explanatory gap” [21] between *subjective, phenomenal* and *objective, physiological* aspects of consciousness.

Several solutions have been proposed throughout the years, but none of them met with unanimous support and approval. One of the suggestions maintains that the problem cannot be solved by a set of conceptual/theoretical “fixes”, but demands a radical (existential) reorientation of our attitude towards it. In other words, the hard problem is not so much an intellectual, as it is an *experiential-existential* question: it is dependent on a specific (dualistic) manner of experiencing. To put it more precisely: From Descartes on, the guiding question in Western philosophy has been whether body and mind are one or two distinct substances (properties, levels of description etc.) and what the ontological relationship between them is. ... We are suggesting that Descartes’ conclusion that he was a thinking thing was the product of his question, and that question was a product of specific practices – those of disembodied, unmindful [i.e. rational, abstract] reflection. ... [But] theoretical reflection need not be mindless and disembodied ... the mind-body relation or modality is not simply fixed and given but can be fundamentally changed [17; p.28].

In this view, the hard question is a *practical* question: by applying a set of skills/methods that can change our manner of experiencing it is possible to change (“answer away”) the nature of the problem: the problem remains problematic only as long as it is *experientially* persuasive, as long as our way of experiencing presents it *as* a problem. “[T]he mind-body issue is not simply a theoretical speculation but is originally a practical, lived experience, involving the mustering of one’s whole mind and body. The theoretical is only a reflection on this lived experience” [17; p.28].

It was mentioned that mystical traditions, by cultivating a specific set of practical know-how, can induce radical and long-lasting transformations in our general way of being and experiencing. This is especially prominent in LON where subjectivity and objectivity are experienced non-dualistically, i.e. as “oneness in duality, duality in oneness”. In this state, the mind and the body are said to be working as an integrated whole, so the hard problem does not even arise. This, however, introduces an intriguing turn into our discussion. We started off by fearing that mysticism might be something *too obscure*, too out-of-worldly (not rooted in solid, verifiable facts) to be of interest to cognitive science; now, in the face of the hard problem, it seems that it is cognitive science that might be *too abstract*, too out-of-worldly (not rooted in concrete, lived experience) and thus incapable of realizing that some of the problems it struggles with are (perhaps) the creations of (abstract, disembodied) premises it endorses, premises that are derivative on and secondary to the (non-dual, integrated) lived

experience. Could it be that the greatest gift that mysticism could give to cognitive science is to save it from some of its own metaphysical spectres that haunt it – and thus help demystify it?

REMARKS

¹A more in-depth analysis of interrelations between cognitive science and mysticism is given in [8].

²I am fully aware that such a claim is all but trivial. In the academic study of mysticism two general positions have been established: *perennialism* claiming that there exists a phenomenological core of mystical experiences that is identical across cultures, traditions etc., and *constructivism* claiming that no such core exists and that all experiences are culturally constructed. Limited space prevents me from engaging in this interesting and multilayered debate, so I will simply *assume* the validity of a weak perennialist position, a position that I have argued for at length elsewhere (cf. [8], especially Ch.1).

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DEMISTIFICIRANJE SVJESNOSTI MISTICIZMOM? KOGNITIVNA ZNANOST I TRADICIJA MISTICIZMA

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SAŽETAK

Rad razmatra mogu li se, i kako, sadašnja istraživanja svjesnosti unaprijediti uvidima u tradicije misticizma. Iako je znatan napor uložen za uvođenje misticizma u vodeći tok kognitivne znanosti, ova je tema i dalje kontroverzna, ne samo zbog višeznačnosti tog pojma (koja obuhvaćaju značenja od „nelogičnog razmišljanja“, preko „vizija“ i „ushita“ do „paranormalnog“ i „psihopatoloških pojava“). U kontekstu ovog rada, misticizam je definiran kao skup radnji, vjerovanja, vrijednosti i sl. razvijenih u okviru dane religijske tradicije kao pomoć praktičarima za provođenje iskustvenih i egzistencijalnih transformacija u skladu s mističnim iskustvima, tj. iskustvima koje karakterizira uklanjanje podvojenosti subjekta i objekta. Zatim je razmotreno u kojim se područjima može ovako definiran misticizam pokazati korisnim za proučavanje svjesnosti. U glavnim crtama, tri takva područja su izdvojena: fenomenološka istraživanja (misticizam kao repozitorij jedinstvenog iskustva i praktičnih tehnika za rigorozne fenomenološke analize), problem suštine ličnosti (misticizam kao repozitorij iskustveno-egzistencijalnih uvida u vlastitu fundamentalnu nesebičnost) i takozvani tvrdi problemi svjesnosti (misticizam kao jedinstveno iskustveno-egzistencijalni odgovor problema duha i tijela). Utvrđeno je kako, suprotno uvriježenom stavu, kognitivnoj znanosti mogu koristiti uvidi i prakse mističkih tradicija, posebno za uklapanje njenih zaključaka u proživljena iskustva a time i (potencijalno) demistificiranje nekih postavljenih apstraktnih problema.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI

misticizam, filozofija (kognitivne) znanosti, fenomenologija, svjesnost, epistemologija