

THOUGHTS ON THE INEFFABILITY OF THE MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT: Ineffability has been proposed as an important feature of the mystical experience. Various psychological processes may contribute to this ineffability, including: expansion of awareness from center to margin of the field of consciousness (building on thoughts of William James and Frederic Myers); an attentional shift from a discrete figure to a large, complex, novel ground; limitations imposed by the nature of the “object” of the experience and by our vehicles of perception and cognition; difficulties of memory transfer from mystical to ordinary states of consciousness; and constraints imposed by brain structures, culture and tradition, and self-fulfilling prophecies. This focus on the limitations of vehicles of expression does not deny that exposure to a transcendent realm may also account for aspects of ineffability.

Suddenly God enlarged the field of his insight; He showed him the firmament and the stars and made him understand their quality and quantity, or to speak more clearly, their beauty and immensity. When he returned to himself he was not able to explain anything to us; he said simply that this knowledge of creation had been so perfect and so intoxicating that no tongue could express it.

Related of Herman Joseph
(cited in Pratt, 1934, p. 408)

Moreover, something is or seems,
That touches me with mystic gleams,
Like glimpses of forgotten dreams—

Of something felt, like something here;
Of something done, I know not where;
Such as no language may declare.

Alfred Lord Tennyson
The Two Voices
(Tennyson, 1833/1971, pp. 63-64)

A student went to a great Indian sage and said, “Reverend sir, teach me Brahman.” The sage remained silent, and the student said again to him, “Reverend sir, teach me Brahman.” He still remained silent. When asked by the student a third time, he said, “I do teach thee Brahman. I am silent.”

Raynor Johnson
(1953, p. 329)

While I stood there I saw more than I can tell and I understood more than I saw; for I was seeing in a sacred manner

Black Elk

(Neihardt, 1961, p. 43)

The foregoing quotations illustrate the difficulty, or perhaps the impossibility, of describing the mystical experience. Indeed, William James and others have proposed *ineffability*—that “no adequate report of its contents can be given in words”—as one of several important defining characteristics of the mystical experience (James, 1902/1985, p. 380). In this respect, the mystical experience is not unlike the many bodily, sensory, intuitive, and feeling experiences whose nature and specific qualities are difficult to convey, precisely, to others—especially to those who may not already have had identical or similar experiences.

Wordlessness distinguishes many feeling-like experiences and states of mind from intellectual, conceptual ones. However, it could be argued that the ineffability of the mystical experience may be even more complete or extreme than that of other word-defying conditions. Even the root meaning of the term *mystical* strongly suggests this wordlessness. The word *mysticos* (μυστικός) derives from the verb *muo* (μύω), which means *to close* or, more specifically, *to close the eyes*. The meaning can be extended to the closing of the *mouth*, as well. The closing of the mouth, in turn, may have double meanings—what *should* not be spoken or divulged (wherein the initiate is enjoined to remain silent about mysteries that have been revealed) and what *cannot* be spoken (due to its essential inexpressibility). If we conclude that mystical experiences are exceptionally ineffable, why might this be so? Possible answers to this question are explored in this essay. Even if it should be discovered that mystical experiences, per se, are no more ineffable than are other subjective experiences, some of the processes mentioned herein may help increase our understanding of a variety of these non-intellectual, non-cognitive events.

In mentioning various *psychological* processes that may contribute to the ineffability of the mystical experience, by no means do I wish to reduce the latter to something that is *nothing but* these processes. The processes I will mention may simply serve to constrain particular forms of expression of a class of experiences that are far more complex and profound than might be suggested by the processes themselves.

Extension of the Field of Consciousness Beyond the Margin

In one of his last articles, written just before his death, William James (1910/1980) proposed a model that might account for the mystical experience. James’ suggestion was that

states of mystical intuition may be only very sudden and great extensions of the ordinary “field of consciousness”. . . an immense spreading of the margin of the field, so that knowledge ordinarily transmarginal would become included, and the ordinary margin would grow more central. . . . A

fall of the threshold [of conscious awareness] . . . would . . . produce the state of things which we see on an unusually flat shore at the ebb of a spring-tide. Vast tracts usually covered are then revealed to view, but nothing rises more than a few inches above the water's bed, and great parts of the scene are submerged again, whenever a wave washes over them.

Some persons have naturally a very wide, other a very narrow, field of consciousness. . . . When . . . the threshold lowers . . . so that the field widens and the relations of its center to matters usually subliminal come into view, the larger panorama perceived fills the mind with exhilaration and sense of mental power. It is a refreshing experience; and . . . we only have to suppose it to occur in an exceptionally extensive form, to give us a mystical paroxysm.

A movement of the threshold downwards will similarly bring a mass of subconscious memories, conceptions, emotional feelings, and perceptions of relation, etc., into view all at once; and that if this enlargement of the nimbus that surrounds the sensational present is vast enough, while no one of the items it contains attracts our attention singly, we shall have the conditions fulfilled for a kind of consciousness in all essential respects like that termed mystical. It will be transient, if the change of threshold is transient. It will be of reality, enlargement, and illumination, possibly rapturously so. It will be of unification, for the present coalesces in it with ranges of the remote quite out of its reach under ordinary circumstances; and the case of *relation* will be greatly enhanced. Its form will be intuitive or perceptual, not conceptual, for the remembered or conceived objects in the enlarged field are supposed not to attract the attention singly, but only to give the sense of a tremendous *muchness* suddenly revealed. If they attracted attention separately, we should have the ordinary steep-waved consciousness, and the mystical character would depart. (pp. 215-217; italics in original)

In writing of this extension of the field of consciousness beyond its usual margin, James was elaborating the concept of a *subliminal self* that had been proposed by the classicist and psychical researcher Frederic W. H. Myers and that had preoccupied Myers from 1880 until his death in 1901.¹ Myers had been advancing the theory that in addition to the *superliminal self* of which we typically are fully aware, there existed a larger *subliminal self*. This subliminal self normally was below the threshold of awareness; however, under special conditions it could communicate its contents to the superliminal self via processes such as sleep, dreams, hypnosis, sensory and motor automatisms, paranormal experiences, and manifestations of genius.² Access to such novel content occurred through the lowering of the threshold separating the two “selves” or through what Myers called *subliminal uprushes*.³ It may be seen that *subliminal or ultramarginal consciousness* is but a translation into spatial, topological form of the very definition of a mystical experience—the consciousness of a Beyond.

The Sense of a Tremendous Muchness

In the James quotation above, the phrase of greatest relevance to the issue of ineffability is “the sense of a tremendous *muchness*” that is experienced during the subliminal or ultramarginal expansion of the field of consciousness. The vast, freshly uncovered content of the subliminal, ultramarginal realm is immediately apprehended *as a whole*, rather than as a succession of distinct and limited objects of attention (as in our ordinary condition of consciousness). Here, a passage in Spinoza (1677/1952) becomes relevant and provides a clue as to why certain forms of knowing may become tacit, in the first place, and remain so.

I will briefly give the causes from which terms called *Transcendental*, such as *Being*, *Thing*, *Something*, have taken their origin. These terms have arisen because the human body, inasmuch as it is limited, can form distinctly in itself a certain number only of images at once. If this number be exceeded, the images will become confused; and if the number of images which the body is able to form distinctly be greatly exceeded, they will all run one into another. . . . If the images in the body, therefore, are all confused, the mind will confusedly imagine all the bodies without distinguishing the one from the other, and will include them all, as it were, under one attribute, that of being or thing. (p. 387)

An excessive number of features—“a tremendous *muchness*”—may be one cause of ineffability. The novel content of the subliminal, ultramarginal realm, freshly exposed, may simply be too rich, complex, and extensive to articulate in words. As an analogous example of this process, consider a human face. Its features are numerous and complex. Although the face as a whole may be apprehended in a holistic, gestalt, “right-hemispheric” manner and may be recognized and distinguished from other, even very similar, faces, the informational content of the facial features may be too great for the more analytical, verbal, “left-hemispheric” function to handle. The latter blurs all of the features into a single attribute—Mary’s face. Its specific features, being too numerous, have become tacit—ineffable. Letting the analytical, verbal, conscious psychological processes work with single features or a small number of features—as with the selections of eyes, noses, and mouths that sketch artists may provide—gives it materials within its handling capacity and the features—part by part—may now be articulated. Without such an analytical aid, the characterization of a face must remain silent.⁴

The limitations of speech, in the face of perceptual complexity, were concisely described by the physician, physiologist, natural scientist, poet, and scholar, Albrecht von Haller (1768):

Nature connects its genera in a network, not in a chain; whereas men can only follow chains, as they cannot present several things at once in their speech. (quoted in Hanson, 1965, p. 69)

One of my own encounters with “a tremendous *muchness*” occurred in the context of an experience of timelessness that I reported in an earlier paper (Braud, 1995). In the following excerpt, the reader will be able to discern concrete illustrations of the processes

suggested above. The experience began with my deliberate attempt to create an experience of timelessness. At a certain point, however, the experience took on a life of its own, beyond my direction or control.

I get up and walk to the kitchen, thinking about what a timeless experience would be like. I direct my attention to everything that is happening at the present moment—what is happening here, locally, inside of me and near me, but nonlocally as well, at ever increasing distances from me. I am imagining everything that is going on in a slice of the present—throughout the country, the planet, the universe. It's all happening at once. I begin to collapse time, expanding the slice of the present, filling it with what has occurred in the immediate "past." I call my attention to what I just did and experienced, what led up to this moment, locally, but keep these events within a slowly expanding present moment. The present slice of time slowly enlarges, encompassing, still holding, what has gone just before, locally, but increasingly nonlocally as well. By now, I am standing near the kitchen sink. The present moment continues to grow, expand. Now it expands into the "future" as well. Events are gradually piling up in this increasingly larger moment. What began as a thin, moving slice of time is becoming thicker and thicker, increasingly filled with events from the "present," "past," and "future." The moving window of the present becomes wider and wider, and moves increasingly outwardly in two temporal directions at once. It is as though things are piling up in an ever-widening present. The "now" is becoming very thick and crowded! "Past" events do not fall away and cease to be; rather, they continue and occupy this ever-widening present. "Future" events already are, and they, too, are filling this increasingly thick and full present moment. The moment continues to grow, expand, fill, until it contains all things, all events. It is so full, so crowded, so thick, that everything begins to blend together. Distinctions blur. Boundaries melt away. Everything becomes increasingly homogeneous, like an infinite expanse of gelatin. My own boundaries dissolve. My individuality melts away. The moment is so full that there no longer are separate things. There is no-thing here. There are no distinctions. A very strong emotion overtakes me. Tears of wonder-joy fill my eyes. This is a profoundly moving experience. Somehow, I have moved away from the sink and am now several feet away, facing in the opposite direction, standing near the dining room table. I am out of time and in an eternal present. In this present is everything and no-thing. I, myself, am no longer here. Images fade away. *Words and thoughts fade away. Awareness remains, but it is a different sort of awareness. Since distinctions have vanished, there is nothing to know and no one to do the knowing* [italics added] "I" am no longer localized, but no longer "conscious" in the usual sense. There is no-thing to be witnessed, and yet there is still a witnesser. The experience begins to fade. I am "myself" again. I am profoundly moved. I feel awe and great gratitude for this experience with which I have been blessed. (pp. 64-65)

With difficulty, and unsatisfactorily, I was able to describe the early phases of this experience. At a certain point, however, the experiential content became “tremendously much,” distinctions and boundaries dissolved, and words failed.

Carmody and Carmody (1996) offered similar thoughts about the difficulty or impossibility of expressing the very large.

The mystic, like the sage, tends to realize that we need the whole if we are to describe or estimate any part correctly. The mystic also tends to realize that the whole is simply beyond us. We are finite in mind and heart as well as in body. What we meet in mystical experience, as in sagacious reflection at the end of life, is too much for us; it is infinite, without borders or endings. It stretches on and on, even though it may also condense into utter simplicity. We cannot get our minds, or imaginations, our feelings, even our radically simple selves around it. It is the measure; we are the measured. So we die not knowing where we came from or where we are going. Not even the most vivid mystical experience solves this problem because we seek an articulation of the experience that lets us imagine it and feel it. However, no articulation can be infinite. Only ultimate reality, radically inarticulate, can “answer” our most profound questions. (p. 19)

Attentional Shift from Figure to Ground

The shift in awareness from the center or focus of the field of consciousness to its margin or fringe resembles a shift in attention from figure to ground. Whereas a figure is discrete and has features that are relatively easy to articulate, the background can be more complex and less readily described. In fact, the ground could conceivably be everything that is not figure—again, “a tremendous *muchness*.” If a mystical experience were to involve a shift from figure to a ground that is extremely rich and extensive, such a shift could also result in an ineffable experience (see above). Because the ground, in this case, would involve an extremely complete and interrelated “*muchness*”—in this case, an “everythingness”—this inclusive, interconnected quality of the ground could add an aspect of fullness, unity, and interconnectedness to the experience. Such experiential qualities, of course, are themselves hallmarks of the mystical experience.

How might a shift from figure to ground come about? Several possibilities come to mind. The first of these possible occasions for, or triggers for, a shift is a process of *satiation* with respect to the figure, such as might occur under conditions of monotonous exposure or excessive repetitions of the figural stimulation. It is known that such continuous, repeated stimulation is associated with the growth of inhibitory processes in the nervous system. The resultant inhibition—at both physiological and psychological levels—may be experienced as a fading and even an eventual disappearance of perception and awareness of the figure. As the figure fades in awareness, nonfigural stimuli—and even the background itself—may present themselves in heightened intensity. Familiar instances of these inhibitory processes include the disappearance from awareness of a monotonous

sound (such as the adaptation or habituation to the sound of a dripping faucet), contrast phenomena in which overstimulation by a particular color or directional motion occasions the perception (either concurrently or as a compensatory aftereffect) of the complementary color or “illusory” motion in the opposite direction (as when the repetitious upward scrolling of motion picture film credits is followed by an downward movement of anything to which attention is turned, thereafter), or the loss of meaning that is experienced upon repeating a name or word (the so-called *semantic satiation* effect). Of course, attention also can be shifted from figure to ground deliberately and volitionally. In addition, such shifts could occur spontaneously, even in the absence of the precipitating conditions mentioned.

A closer examination of processes of visual perception might further illuminate the proposed figure-ground shift. In the visual realm, the way one focuses on a figure determines how much of the background or context one might also observe. The greater the focus on the figure—e.g., the closer one is to it, the more one is involved with its details—the less background or context will be available. Under these conditions, a shift from figure to ground might not occur readily. One becomes so involved and concentrated on the trees that one misses the forest. On the other hand, by distancing oneself from the focal object of attention—e.g., by moving away from it, by changing the magnification or depth of field of one’s observing lens, so to speak—more of the background or context comes into view. One’s attention becomes less like a spot light and more like a flood light. Here, a shift from figure to ground might occur more readily. An attitude of distancing oneself from the focal object of study, perception, or thought—through a strategy of *witnessing*, of *decreased attachment*—could reduce over-investment of attention in a narrow object and facilitate a shift of attention to a more global ground. Such a witnessing stance could occur transiently, during conditions of meditation or contemplation, or in a more permanent, trait-like manner in long-term practitioners of these disciplines.

An interesting set of findings from early Russian research on conditioning and learning and “higher nervous activity” is also, perhaps, relevant to a shift from figure to ground. These findings involved anomalous patterns of reactions to stimulus events—patterns that Ivan Pavlov and his co-workers called the *hypnoidal phases*. Descriptions of these phases can be found in Pavlov’s early writings (Pavlov, 1927, 1928), and their possible relevance to human behavior has been described, more recently, by William Sargant (1961). The normal and anomalous response patterns can be briefly summarized as follows. Under ordinary conditions, a conditioned organism (Pavlov, of course, worked chiefly with dogs as his experimental animals) discriminates the class of positive (reinforced) stimuli from the class of negative (nonreinforced) ones; within the positive class, the *law of intensity* holds—increasingly strong positive stimuli elicit increasingly strong reactions. Under special conditions (to be described below), this pattern breaks down, as the organism progresses through a series of hypnoidal stages. In the first of these stages—called the *equivalent phase*—the gross discrimination of positive and negative stimuli remains intact, but the law of intensity breaks down so that the organism reacts similarly to positive stimuli of various intensities. Next occurs the *paradoxical phase*, in which the organism reacts more strongly to weak than to strong positive stimuli. Then occurs the *ultra-paradoxical phase* in which even the major discrimination breaks down; the organism now responds to negative stimuli but not to positive ones—the gross

discrimination reverses. The organism might then progress to an even further hypnoidal phase of falling asleep. Pavlov understood these changes in reactivity in terms of the progressive growth and spread of a hypothetical neural process that he called *protective or transmarginal inhibition*.⁵ Pavlov's thoughts about this inhibitory process are quite interesting but cannot be covered in this paper. Also quite fascinating, but beyond the scope of this paper, is how transmarginal inhibition and progression through the hypnoidal stages vary according to, and interact with, the organism's type of nervous system (see the three works already cited and also Gray, 1964 and Pavlov, 1928).⁶

It is important, however, to mention some of the conditions that provoked the hypnoidal stages. These conditions included increasing stress (and memories of stressful events), overstimulation, over-work, fatigue, repetitive and monotonous stimulation, difficult discriminations, rapid alteration of stimuli, and certain drugs (notably, central nervous system depressants). Notice that there are correspondences between these conditions and conditions associated with some mystical experiences. Some of the latter conditions are extreme (e.g., physical and psychological conditions associated with the practice of austerities); others are milder and more subtle (e.g., the sensory deprivation and repetitive, monotonous stimulation association with certain forms of meditation and prayer; certain forms of cognitive work with paradoxical koans). If processes analogous to those occurring in the ultra-paradoxical phase do, indeed, occur in association with the various conditions just mentioned, could such an ultra-paradoxical phase be manifested in subjective experience as a major attentional shift away from the discrete figures that ordinarily occupy attention and toward a much larger, encompassing (back)ground, and could the "tremendous *muchness*" of the latter prevent the articulation of this novel and extensive "object" of attention?

Pavlov and his co-workers discovered yet another phenomenon of higher nervous activity that is relevant to the topic at hand. Under unusual conditions similar to those described above, there occurred a shift from what the Russian investigators called the *second signaling system* (involving meanings, words, abstractions, and generalizations) to a form of functioning that emphasized the *first signaling system* (involving sensations, perceptions, and direct, concrete impressions of the world).⁷ Some (e.g., Bridger, 1967) have suggested that second signaling system processes may be associated with neocortical activity, whereas first signaling system processes may be associated with limbic system activity. Should similar shifts—from the symbol to what is symbolized—occur in the context of mystical experience, the resultant decrement in second signaling system functioning could account for at least some of the experience's ineffability.

Some readers may find it strange to see Pavlovian and other physiological and behavioral processes mentioned in the context of a discussion of "higher human potentials" such as mystical and other transpersonal experiences. In my view, however, the discipline of transpersonal studies is one to which these words of Rudolf Arnheim (1972)—used in the context of arguing against separating perception and the arts from cognition and the sciences—apply: "It is in the nature of such an enterprise that it suggests connections where distinctions are cherished by many" (p. vi). I believe that many, if not all, of the more fundamental laws of physiology, learning, memory, motivation, and perception

continue to operate in us, even in contexts of “higher” functioning, although there may be instances in which such principles of operation are superseded by other, possibly emergent, principles. Who has not witnessed the clear operations of conditioning processes (especially as these involve the emotions and connotative meaning), of the laws governing approach-avoidance conflicts (see, e.g., Dollard & Miller, 1950), or of Skinnerian schedules of reinforcement in ourselves and others? To the extent that transpersonal psychology aims to address the whole person, it would seem unwise to exclude such processes from its attempts to provide complete descriptions and explanations of its subject matter.⁸

Conscious and unconscious events tend to be complementary—some would suggest that they are also compensatory—in terms of their contents and their principles of operation. The features of figures and grounds tend, also, to be complementary. If this is so, and if at least some of the ineffability of the mystical experience is attributable to a shift from figure to ground—or a shift from center to margin of the field of awareness—then we would expect to find that mystical experiences contain content and processes that complement those of ordinary consciousness. This, indeed, appears to be the case. In our ordinary consciousness, our experiences tend to be describable; our sense of self appears to be local, separate, and isolated from others; and our ways of knowing, being, and doing seem to depend on and be limited by ordinary sensory and cognitive content and functioning. In mystical consciousness, on the other hand, our experience tends to be less describable; our sense of self seems less bounded, more interconnected with others and with all of nature, and nonlocal; and we seem to have increased access to nonsensory, nonrational experiences, and to be in more intimate contact with what some have called Mind at Large. These sets of contraries match, to some degree, the complementary *action mode* and *receptive mode* of functioning described by Arthur Deikman (1971).

Rowland Haynes (1907) proposed a process somewhat similar to the attentional shifts described above in his psychological treatment of the “metaphysical concept of infinity” (p. 601). Haynes suggested that there was a relationship between the concept of infinity (in the sense of the unlimited and unconditioned) and the physiological and psychological conditions of *intellectual fatigue* and the concomitant *smothering, fatigue, or diffusion of attention*. He argued that content images that represent infinity invariably have an *undifferentiated character* [similar to the undifferentiated or extremely complex background considered above] and that the latter induced a smothering (fatigue) of attention. He also pointed to the experience of oneness with the infinite as a prominent feature of mystic states and suggested that conditions of minimal sensory stimulation, cumulative fatigue after “prolonged nervous work or excitement” (p. 604)—which he considered to be associated with the mystic experience—could make the smothering of attention especially likely and “would make the organism fallow for suggestions of the infinite” (p. 604).

Other Processes That Might Contribute to Ineffability

As was suggested above, an excessive number or complexity of features may be one cause of ineffability. On this view, ineffability could be considered a function of *how much is*

perceived—in the margin (ground) or in any other manner. If this is so, there may be *degrees* of ineffability, reflecting different densities or extents of content. For example, in Myers' (1903) initial expositions, he suggested that the subliminal self or transmarginal region included various strata. It may be the case that, because of their nearness to the usual center or figure of attention, their familiarity, and their smaller number or extent, certain strata may be articulated more readily than would the content of more “distant,” less familiar, or more numerous or extensive strata.

A complementary consideration is that ineffability is related to *the nature of what is to be accessed*, rather than how much is to be accessed. In Myers' schema, for example, perhaps certain of the strata are more accessible and more readily articulated than others. In more modern schemata (those of Freud, Jung, Assagioli, Grof, Wilber, and others) there continues to be heterogeneity of structure and content in realms that are not readily accessed during conditions of ordinary consciousness. Some of this content—inhabitants of the subliminal, transmarginal realm, as it were—could include ordinary occurrences of insufficient strength to have crossed the threshold of awareness, forgotten events, actively suppressed events, personal unconscious content, collective unconscious content or potentials, various transpersonal events or processes, and various transcendent events or processes. Some of these contents may not be expressed simply due to their novelty; we may well possess the means of accessing these but have not yet had sufficient experience with them to label them and thus communicate them to ourselves or to others. While not yet expressed, these are nonetheless expressible, given the requisite familiarity. A failure of adequate labeling of aspects of mystical experience may be due not only to the difficulties of the process itself, but also to the devaluing of these and related experiences in many cultures and times. The devaluing of mystical and related experiences, in turn, may be due to an insufficient recognition of the possible adaptive significance of such experiences. Without the requisite incentives or honoring of these unusual experiences, there is minimal motivation for developing and practicing the necessary skills.

In another context (a treatment of visual thinking), Rudolf Arnheim (1972) reminded us that “experience indicates that it is easier to describe items in comparison with others than by themselves. This is so because the confrontation underscores the dimensions by which the items can be compared and thereby sharpens the perception of these particular qualities” (p. 63). To the extent that the contents of mystical experiences are novel, and have not yet been sufficiently interrelated with other experiences, the former will be difficult to describe. On the basis of this consideration, one would expect a progressive decrease in ineffability with repeated mystical experiences and with repeated opportunities to interrelate their content with other experiences.

Other content may not be describable because, although we may have encountered this content previously, we may not have been able to apply verbal labels. Arthur Deikman (1966), for example, has suggested that some mystical experiences are ineffable because they may be based on memories or imaginations of preverbal (e.g., infantile) or nonverbal sensory experiences, or because the revelations experienced therein are too complex to be verbalized. Deikman (1963, 1966) also has suggested that a process of *deautomatization* may account for some of what is observed in mystical experiences. In automatization,

attention is withdrawn from intermediate steps of a process and these steps disappear from consciousness. There is a concomitant transfer of attention away from sensations, percepts, and actions and towards abstract thought activity. This process is similar to a shift away from first signaling system (Pavlov) or primary process functioning (Freud) and toward second signaling system (Pavlov) or secondary process functioning (Freud).

Deautomatization reverses automatization by reinvesting the percepts and actions with attention. Active thinking and categorizing are replaced by receptive perception. There would occur a shift away from second signaling system, secondary process (thought-based, language-based) activities—hence, an increase in ineffability. Deikman suggests that deautomatization may be fostered by the contemplative meditation practices that often are associated with mystical experiences.

For other “content,” we may not possess the means for apprehending it—our available means or vehicles of knowing simply do not suffice. This is, indeed, a restating of an orthodox view of the mystical experience—that the latter is a direct encounter with a Beyond or a transcendent “something, I know not what” that we are inadequately prepared to access or appreciate. Because we cannot apprehend it, we cannot express what we confront. Because ordinary mentation was not involved in the original confrontation, such mentation is not able to express what was experienced.

Our apprehension of the One does not partake of the nature of either understanding or abstract thought as does our knowledge of other intelligible objects, but has the character of presentation higher than understanding. For understanding proceeds by concepts, and the concept is a multiple affair, and the soul misses the One when she falls into number and plurality. She must then pass beyond understanding and nowhere emerge from her unity. (Plotinus, *Enneads* VI, 9, quoted in Bakewell, 1907, p. 367)

How, then, are we to speak of the one? How can we speak of it at all, when we do not grasp it as itself? The answer is that though the One escapes our knowledge, it does not entirely escape *us*. We have possession of it in such a way that we speak *of* [italics added] it, but not in such a way that we can express it. (Plotinus, *Enneads*, V, 3, 14, quoted in Caird, 1904, pp. 218-219)

We receive this mystical knowledge of God clothed in none of the kinds of images, in none of the sensible representations, which our mind makes use of in other circumstances. Accordingly in this knowledge, since the senses and the imagination are not employed, we get neither form nor impression, nor can we give any account or furnish any likeness, although the mysterious and sweet-tasting wisdom comes home so clearly to the inmost parts of our souls. Fancy a man seeing a certain kind of thing for the first time in his life. He can understand it, use and enjoy it, but he cannot apply a name to it nor communicate any idea of it, even though all the while it be a mere thing of sense. How much greater will be his powerlessness when it

goes beyond the senses. (John of the Cross, quoted in Johnson, 1953, p. 328)

The eyes of my soul were opened, and I beheld the plenitude of God, wherein I did comprehend the whole world, both here and beyond the sea, and the abyss and ocean and all things. In all these things I beheld naught save the divine power, in a manner assuredly indescribable. . . . She sees Him more clearly than one man sees another. For *the eyes of the soul behold a plenitude of which I cannot speak: A plenitude which is not bodily but spiritual, of which I can say nothing.* [italics in original] And the soul rejoices in that sight with an ineffable joy; and this is the manifest and certain sign that God indeed dwells in her. And the soul can behold nothing else, because this fulfils here in an unspeakable manner. This beholding, whereby the soul can behold no other thing, is so profound that it grieves me that I can say nothing of it. It is not a thing which can be touched or imagined, for it is ineffable. (Angela of Foligno, quoted in Underhill, 1911/1949, pp. 252, 282)

Related to the notion of a confrontation with a transcendent realm is the view that, in the mystical experience, one may encounter a *Divine Darkness* or an *Unknown Nothing*, beyond the apprehensive capabilities of senses, images, thoughts, words and self, and reachable only through unknowing, surrender, and grace. Akin to the *emptiness* (*sunyata*) aspect of Buddhist doctrine, this is mysticism's *apophatic* path, whose rich heritage, in the West, includes such figures as Plotinus, the Pseudo-Dionysius, Gregory of Nyssa, the anonymous author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, Meister Eckhart, and John of the Cross. As its very name implies (*apo phasis*: away from speech), this negative way (*via negativa*) advocates the cultivation of a contentless, still, silent, voided, dark, desolate form of consciousness or being as a way of emptying oneself so as to be passively infused with another, more ultimate reality. The resultant experience has been called a *pure consciousness event* (Forman, 1990, 1999)—a form of *consciousness without an object* (Merrell-Wolff, 1973) that epitomizes ineffability. Words are of no avail because all of their supporting vehicles have disappeared.

You should, in the purposive practice of mystic contemplation, escape the senses and lay aside the guidance of the intellect, leaving behind, indeed, all that belongs to the sensual and the intellectual spheres, escaping alike what is and what is not, and rise upward toward union with Him Who is above all knowing and all being. By a continuous and total abandonment of your self, and withdrawal from all things, relinquishing all and freed from all and thus purified, you will pierce to the region of Divine darkness transcending all essence. . . . Then one is free and unhampered by things that are seen or by seeing, and one enters into the essential mystical darkness, the cloud of unknowing, from which knowledge is shut out, abiding in that which is intangible and invisible, absorbed into Him Who is beyond all things. Now one belongs no longer to any, neither to the self nor to any other, but is united at the highest point to Him Who is above knowing. The soul, because

of its complete unknowing, grasps Him in a manner above mind or understanding. (the Pseudo-Dionysius, quoted in Cheney, 1945, pp. 165-166)

Go you, and sweep out the house of the heart/mind. Make ready the station and place of the beloved. (Mahmud Shasbistari, quoted in Levenson & Khilwati, 1999, pp. 253-254)

If you want to witness the beauty of the Real and to find your way to the secret of divine Unity, first go and sweep the house of the heart/mind which, swept of the weeds and thorns of “other than the Real,” is the locus of the Court of Divine Splendor; and prepare the station and place of the Beloved, which is the heart/mind cleared of the dust clouds of otherness, and throw out the thorns of the self and commit the house of the heart/mind to service of the Real. (Mohammad Lahiji, quoted in Levenson & Khilwati, 1999, p. 254)

Thus, ineffability may represent both an inadequate word-based description of something perceived and an adequate description of the prehension of what is beyond words (and also beyond sensations, images, thoughts, self, and typical content) in the first place. An adequate encounter with this reality requires abandoning of the eyes of flesh and mind and using, instead, the eye of the spirit (eye of contemplation, of soul, of heart).⁹

We have seen how ineffability might be occasioned by the peculiar “content” of the mystical experience and by the peculiar means that are necessary for accessing such content. Still another contributor to ineffability may be the absence of sufficient transfer of what is experienced, learned, or remembered from the conditions of the mystical experience to those of our more ordinary states of consciousness. A well-known psychological principle is that experiences, learning, and memories are formed against particular background conditions and in a particular context. To some degree (which degrees differ according to the nature of what is learned), the learning is supported by the background or context. If the latter change drastically, difficulties in retrieval (selective amnesia) may ensue. In these cases, the learning and memory are said to be *state dependent*. Transfer of knowledge and adequate expression of this knowledge occurs most readily across identical or similar background, contextual conditions. Poor transfer of expression of what was experienced in a mystical “state” may be, in part, attributable to the physiological and psychological differences between the mystical state of consciousness in which the knowing occurred and the ordinary state of consciousness in which retrieval and expression of this knowledge are attempted.

To the extent that mystical experiences can be remembered, we would expect psychological processes such as *leveling* (minimizing) or *sharpening* (accentuating) of the distinctive features of the experience and *cognitive dissonance reduction* (enhancing the value of the experience to make it more commensurate with any great efforts that may have been expended in attempting to attain it) to modulate the mystical experience’s content and, in turn, affect its articulation.

There have been those who have attempted to account for the ineffable character of the mystical experience by suggesting that the primary brain structures involved in that experience may be other than those that subserve language. Among such nonlinguistic structures are the right hemisphere (e.g., Fenwick, 1996), interacting ergotropic and trophotropic systems (Fischer, 1971), and, more recently, a set of more specific structures in which are implicated the right prefrontal cortex and posterior-superior parietal lobule, the right hippocampus and amygdala, ventromedial hypothalamus, lateral hypothalamus, and medial forebrain bundle (d'Aquili & Newberg, 1993).

Finally, individual, social, and cultural expectations could play a role in determining whether or not the mystical experience is experienced or reported as ineffable. Those who align themselves with a *contextualist* view of mystical consciousness have argued that one's beliefs and expectations (influenced by one's prior exposure to cultural, philosophical, religious, and spiritual views and traditions that bear on mystical experience) can influence not only how a mystical experience is interpreted and reported, but even the nature of the initial experience itself (see, e.g., Gimello, 1983; Hollenback, 1996; Katz, 1978).¹⁰ Such predisposing influences could extend not only to the content of the experience but also to its ineffability. If one believes and expects—based on the experiences, words, writings, and actions of others with whom one is familiar—that mystical experiences are ineffable, such an expectation may be self-fulfilled. That such a process may, indeed, play a role is seen in the observation that persons within *apophatic* traditions experience and value relatively content-free mystical experiences, whereas those within *cataphatic* (*via positiva*) traditions have and report experiences that are relatively full of describable imagery and other content (see, e.g., Hollenback, 1996).

The Psychedelic/Entheogenic Connection

Experiences occurring under the influence of psychedelic or entheogenic chemicals may have a pronounced character of ineffability. These may be reported as “hopeless to describe in language” (Mitchell, 1896, p. 1625). Pahnke (1970) wisely uses the term *alleged ineffability* to describe these instances, because the experiencers do, nonetheless, go to great lengths in attempting to describe their “ineffable” experiences in words (e.g., Huxley, 1954, 1956).¹¹ Pahnke suggests that “perhaps the reason [for this wordlessness] is an embarrassment with language because of the paradoxical nature of the essential phenomena” (p. 151). Sometimes, the resistance to languaging can be overcome through increased familiarity with the experience and through the support of a verbal community having a common history of such experiences.

Really, when I first took LSD, I didn't know how to describe what had happened. It was intense and important, very much so, but there were no words for it. But after talking with others who had taken it, I could see that they were talking about the same thing. They did have words for it—“transcendental” was one—and so I started using those words myself. An interesting thing happened to my wife. After I gave her LSD she said very little about it. For a whole month she hardly said a word about her

experience. But then I introduced her to some others who were taking the drug, and it wasn't more than a few days before she started talking a blue streak; you see, she'd learned how to talk about it from them. (Blum & Associates, 1964, p. 16)

Krippner (1970) has described some of the ways in which expressive language may be modified during and after psychedelic experiences. Further studies of the phenomenology, psychology, and sociology of psychedelic/entheogenic experiences could contribute to our understanding of the mystical experience, especially given claims of the similarities of psychedelic and mystical conditions (see Clark, 1970; Doblin, 1991; Huxley, 1954, 1956; Pahnke, 1970; Smith, 2000; Watts, 1970; Zaehner, 1957).

Additional Considerations

I have addressed several psychological processes that may contribute to, or be involved in, the ineffability of the mystical experience. These proposals point to the limitations of the various means or vehicles through which we might access or express what occurs in the mystical experience. It is, of course, important to recognize possible differences between direct experiences and perceptions and the expression of these experiences to others. Although some of the processes mentioned may indicate limitations of the perceptual and noetic aspects of the experience, most of the processes reflect constraints of *our means of expression*. It would be unwise to conclude that processes that govern its expression also explain, account for, or produce the mystical experience itself.

Throughout this essay, there has been an emphasis on mystical experiences, and accounts of these experiences, as *products*. We have seen the limitations of such products. An alternative approach to conveying, to others, the nature, meaning, and understanding the mystical experience is to emphasize *process*, and to encourage first-hand appreciations of the experience by offering *injunctions* which, if adequately followed, can yield direct experiences, rather than descriptive accounts that may point to, but only imperfectly reflect, the fullness of the experiences in question. This alternative strategy would be one that seeks to evoke, rather than to explain—to show, rather than to tell.

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
 When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before
 me,
 When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and
 measure them,
 When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with
 much applause in the lecture-room,
 How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
 Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,
 In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
 Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.
 -- Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855/1960, p. 226)

An inclusive approach, of course, would welcome both product and process, telling as well as showing.

As mentioned in this essay's Introduction, even if we ultimately should discover that the mystical experience really is no more ineffable than are other "noncognitive," nonlinguistic experiences, some of the processes described herein may have value in increasing our understanding and appreciation of a wide range of subjective and meaningful human experiences.

Notes

1. F. W. H. Myers presented his theories and findings in a series of papers published in the *Journal and Proceedings of the [British] Society for Psychical Research* and in the classic, two-volume work, *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death*, published two years after his death. In these works, Myers introduced the notion of the unconscious—framed as the *subliminal self*—to the English-speaking world. Myers also proposed his own version of a *spectrum of consciousness*, antedating Ken Wilber's version by nearly a century. At about the same time, the German philosopher Karl Du Prel (1889) was advancing similar notions about two modes of consciousness—sense-based and transcendental. Alfred North Whitehead (1929) suggested that the European philosophical tradition consisted of a series of footnotes to Plato. It might not be inappropriate to suggest that much within the traditions of psychical research and of explorations of the unconscious, since 1901, is but a series of footnotes to Myers and Du Prel.

2. Myers' thoughts about subliminal processes or contents that must cross a *threshold* or *limen* to enter conscious awareness are related to similar constructs that had been suggested earlier by Leibnitz, Herbart, Hartmann, and Fechner, and that also were being advanced by Karl Du Prel and Pierre Janet.

3. Myers' *subliminal uprushes* resemble what the scientist-turned-mystic, Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) called *influx*, in which something from a higher realm flows into a lower realm and restructures the latter to correspond to the former (see Van Dusen, 2001, pp. 86-90).

4. It is well known that memories (indications of familiarity and prior exposure) are much more readily revealed through techniques that call simply for *recognition* of what has gone before. Reconstruction (reproduction) of a memory is more difficult, and free recall (which verbalization would require) is even more difficult and demanding.

5. The coincidence of the term *transmarginal* in the James/Myers and Pavlov contexts is curious and interesting.

6. Pavlov identified four basic types of nervous system. He called these the *strong excitatory*, *lively*, *calm imperturbable*, and *weak inhibitory* types. These types resemble, respectively, the four temperaments—choleric, sanguine, phlegmatic, and

melancholic—that Hippocrates had identified long ago. Hippocrates’ typology was based on the relative predominance of four bodily fluids (humors). Pavlov’s more sophisticated typology was based on the interaction of three major characteristics of the nervous system—the absolute *strength* of excitatory and inhibitory neural processes, the relative *balance or equilibrium* of these two processes, and the speed and ease of shifting from excitation to inhibition or vice versa (*lability or mobility*).

7. Pavlov’s first and second signaling systems have correspondences with Freud’s *primary process* and *secondary process*, respectively.

8. It is not impossible that even some of our ostensibly highest or noblest values and motives may be disguised or exquisitely subtle variations or octaves of “lower” processes—e.g., cognitive dissonance reduction may play a role in highly valuing the spiritual; there may be rich secondary gains or incentives for some of our noble motives and actions; altruistic attitudes and behaviors toward others because they are interconnected or one with one another (in a manner suggested by “tat tvam asi” [“that thou art”]) may be forms of a higher Selfishness, and so on. I suggest these as provocative possibilities to explore, rather than conclusions to cavalierly accept. In exploring such issues, we should be aware not only of the possibility of errors similar to those already acknowledged in the so-called *pre/trans fallacies*, but also that our very eagerness or reluctance to examine such issues carefully may, itself, be motivated by biases and preferences.

9. The “eyes” metaphor (or is it more than a metaphor?) appears in Plato’s dialogues, including the *Phaedo* and *The Republic*, wherein the *eye of the mind* and the *eye of the soul* are mentioned. In the Middle Ages, before the disciplines of theology, philosophy, and psychology had split and gone their separate ways, the metaphor of the *three eyes* frequently was used to describe different modes of knowing. Scholars, contemplatives, and visionaries such as Boethius, the Victorine mystics (Hugh of St. Victor, Richard of St. Victor, Thomas of St. Victor), Bonaventure, and others wrote of the *eye of the flesh* (or of the senses), the *eye of reason* (or of the mind), and the *eye of contemplation* (or of the heart or spirit). Similar distinctions were made within the Islamic and Sufi traditions by al-Ghazzâlî, Ibn al-‘Arabî, and others. These three modes of knowing correspond to, respectively, sensation and empirical knowing; thinking and rational knowing; and knowing directly and immediately through feelings, love, compassion, intuition, inspiration, revelation, and becoming or being what is to be known.

10. The constructivist view is to be contrasted with the *essentialist* or *perennialist* view that persons of different cultures or traditions have extremely similar or identical core mystical experiences but may differ in how they interpret or report those experiences (see Forman, 1990, 1999; Smith, 1976).

11. *Alleged ineffability* might more accurately describe the mystical experience, as well, because, through the centuries and in many different traditions, mystics have had great success in describing their experiences, especially through the vehicles of metaphor, poetry, and art, but not excluding conventional prose.

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