

Conceptualizing and Defining Mysticism: A Dialectical Exploration of Cataphatic and Apophatic Approaches

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Abstract

This paper investigates the intricate process of conceptualizing and defining mysticism by engaging in a dialectical exploration of cataphatic and apophatic approaches. Cataphatic mysticism, characterized by attempts to describe the divine through affirmative language and imagery, is contrasted with apophatic mysticism, which emphasizes the ineffability of the divine through negation and silence. This article examines historical and contemporary instances of each approach, analyzing how they contribute to the understanding of mystical experiences and their significance within theological contexts. By employing a dialectical method, the paper harmonizes these seemingly opposing perspectives, revealing how they can complement and enrich each other to create a more nuanced framework for defining mysticism. The analysis underscores the importance of embracing both the expressive and transcendent dimensions of mystical experience, providing a comprehensive understanding that accommodates the limits and potentials of language and human understanding. This advances the dialogue surrounding mysticism.

Keywords: Mysticism, Mystical Experiences, Cataphatic, Apophatic, Theology of Mysticism

1. Introduction

Mystical experiences have been a topic of profound interest and debate across various philosophical, theological and psychological disciplines. In addition to the dialectics of: naturalism and realism, deontology and consequentialism, objectivity and subjectivity; phenomenon and noumenon another dialectical approach to understanding these experiences are cataphatic and apophatic. The cataphatic approach emphasizes the positive assertion of qualities and experiences found in the divine or the transcendent, while the apophatic approach focuses on the ineffability and the negation of such qualities. This paper aims to explore these seemingly disparate methodologies, examining their implications for conceptualizing mysticism and their broader discourse on spirituality and the divine.

2. A Cataphatic Approach

The cataphatic approach is characterized by its affirmative language and the assertion of what can be known about the divine. This methodology finds its roots in various religious traditions that emphasize direct experience and the creation of an understanding of God or the transcendent through positive affirmations. Cataphatic theology often employs metaphor, analogy, and descriptive language to convey spiritual truths [1]. For example, many religious texts use imagery to describe God as light, love, or a shepherd, drawing from human experiences

and perceptions to articulate divine qualities. One of the key strengths of the cataphatic approach is its accessibility. By using relatable language and imagery, it allows individuals to connect with their experiences of the divine in more tangible ways. This can be particularly important for those seeking to understand their mystical experiences within a community or framework that values shared beliefs and teachings. However, the cataphatic approach also has its limitations. By attempting to articulate the divine using human language, it risks confining the ineffable nature of mystical experiences to finite concepts. Critics argue that this can lead to a misunderstanding or oversimplifying of complexities inherent in spiritual experiences, potentially undermining the depth of these encounters. For instance, a participant might erroneously extrapolate a personal experience as an absolute truth about the nature of existence or of the divine. Misinterpretations may result in spiritual bypassing, where unresolved psychological issues are externalized through distorted spiritual narratives.

A cataphatic interpretation of mystical experiences facilitated by psychedelic substances in the cultural context of the 1950s and 1960s frames these as rich and meaningful encounters with the divine or the transcendent. Psychedelics enabled profound mystical experiences that were not only personal revelations but also informed broader spiritual and cultural movements. This period of time marked a significant shift in societal attitudes towards

psychology, spirituality and drug use. Amid the backdrop of post-war existential uncertainty and the burgeoning counterculture, researchers such as Timothy Leary and Aldous Huxley advocated for the use of psychedelics as tools for self-exploration and spiritual awakening [2]. This period saw an intersection between scientific inquiry and mystical experience, where psychedelics became a means to access heightened states of consciousness, often described in explicitly cataphatic terms. Additionally, such an interpretation should draw from contemporary psychological theories, particularly those elucidated by William James in “The Varieties of Religious Experience”, juxtaposing them with the theological insights of mystics such as Meister Eckhart and St. Theresa of Avila in order to reveal continuities [3]. A cataphatic framework emphasizes affirmative descriptions of God and experiences of the divine, allowing for the articulation of psychedelic experiences in terms of personal transformation and connection to a transcendent reality.

Timothy Leary and his colleagues at Harvard University, did not consider themselves mystics, yet they focused their efforts on investigating the therapeutic and spiritual benefits of psilocybin. Participants in their study reported experiences characterized by feelings of oneness, profound love, and clarity of purpose—elements that can be articulated through a cataphatic lens. For example, Leary’s advocacy for the “conscious expansion” model illustrates how psychedelics were perceived as gateways to understanding one’s divine nature. Huxley’s literary account of his mescaline experiences serves as a rich narrative for exploring cataphatic interpretations. His descriptions of encountering vibrant colours, profound insights into beauty, and a sense of interconnectedness echo cataphatic affirmations of a more meaningful reality. Huxley’s work invites readers to embrace psychedelics not merely as chemical substances but as catalysts for profound spiritual experiences. The 1960’s also saw an increased interest in Eastern philosophies and religious practices, particularly Buddhism and Hinduism. Explorations of meditation and yoga during this era illustrate a cataphatic interpretation of mystical experiences, whereby practitioners described attaining states of enlightenment or satori through the facilitation of psychedelics [4].

Psychedelic research during this period initially promised significant advancement in psychiatric treatment, yet it ultimately precipitated a complex stigmatization of these substances. As recreational use surged during the counterculture movements, the sensationalist portrayal of psychedelics in the media and political discourse framed them as associated with deviance and social unrest. This societal backlash culminated in the criminalization of psychedelic compounds driven by fears of their potential for abuse and harm. Consequently, the stigma surrounding psychedelics not only hindered future scientific inquiry but also ingrained a narrative in public consciousness that equated these compounds with irresponsibility, significantly delaying the resurgence of research into their therapeutic potential in subsequent decades.

In 2006, a landmark study led by Dr. Roland Griffiths at Johns Hopkins University examined the effects of psilocybin, the active

compound in magic mushrooms, on the psychological well-being of participants. This study is credited with having sparked what is colloquially referred to as the psychedelic renaissance – a resurgence of interest in psychedelic compounds for therapeutic and medicinal purposes. This study found that psilocybin can produce profound mystical experiences and has the potential to alleviate psychological distress, particularly in patients with cancer-related anxiety and depression. This research, along with subsequent studies having administered methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA) and lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), has contributed to the growing recognition of the therapeutic benefits of psychedelics, leading to increased funding and interest in clinical studies [5-7]. The health-promoting effects demonstrated by these studies align with cataphatic interpretations of mystical experiences. The second-wave of research exploring psychedelics seems less motivated by challenging social norms in favour of a care-centred rationale. Advocates for and practitioners of psychedelic-enhanced psychotherapy do however continue to challenge current legislative barriers to individuals’ access to psychedelic compounds. Such lobbying under a banner of human rights, is contiguous with aspects of the counter-culture in the fifties and sixties and are consistent with a health-promoting, cataphatic framework.

3. An Apophatic Approach

On the opposing end of this theo-methodological spectrum, the apophatic approach, often referred to as a negative theology, posits that God or the divine is ultimately beyond human comprehension. This perspective argues that any attempt to describe or define the divine inherently limits it, as human language and concepts are inadequate to encapsulate the true essence of the transcendent. Key figures in this tradition, such as Christian theologian Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna, emphasize the necessity of negation in understanding the divine. They posited that the true nature of reality can only be approached through what it is not, leading to a liberation from the constraints of linguistic description.

The apophatic approach offers a profound depth of understanding regarding the limitations of human perception and language. It invites individuals to engage with the mystery of existence and the divine through silence, contemplation, and indirect experiences. This method can yield transformative insights, as individuals confront this inadequacy of their categorization, moving beyond the binary of knowing and unknowing. However, the apophatic approach is not without its challenges. Its indeterminate nature can make it more difficult for individuals to articulate or share their mystical experiences within a community. The emphasis on negation may also be perceived as a denial of the richness found in affirmative experiences. Arguably while it provides a necessary corrective to the overreach of cataphatic assertions, it may also lead to a nihilistic understanding of spirituality.

As noted above the 1950s and 1960s marked a significant turning point in cultural and spiritual paradigms heralding a new era of exploration into human consciousness and spirituality. Apophatic existentialism provides insights into the nature of reality, the divine

and the self, rooted in the idea that God or the divine can only be described through negation. Apophatic interpretations of mystical experiences not only shaped the understanding of psychedelics but also provided a framework for existential inquiry during this zeitgeist of radical transformation. Psychedelics can be viewed as mediators of apophatic experiences as numerous individuals reported mystical experiences under the influence of psychedelics that included feelings of unity, transcendence and encounters with palpable divine presence [8]. Research studies, particularly Walter Pahnke's Good Friday experiment, provided empirical support for the notion that psychedelics could evoke altered states of consciousness analogous to mystical experiences described in many religious traditions [9]. The paradox of attempting to articulate the inexpressible aligns closely with apophatic theology. As pioneer psychedelic users such as Aldous Huxley and Timothy Leary described their experiences, they frequently emphasized the limitations of language. That "words are but tools for expressing the unwieldy chaos of the ineffable" is contiguous with apophatic tradition, invoking an understanding that true knowing resides beyond the limitations of propositional language and articulated thought [10].

Many accounts of psychedelic experiences during this period highlight themes of ego dissolution and the transitory nature of the self. This is particularly relevant to apophatic interpretations, emphasizing the belief that the self, as a construct, is ultimately illusory. The psychedelic induced mystical experience often allowed individuals to profoundly confront their relationship with their own identities, leading to reframing of ethical perspectives and spiritual models. Individuals would encounter the notion that true knowledge and connection to the divine arise only through the relinquishing of preconceived schemas and attachments.

Figures such as Richard Alpert, later Ram Dass, championed the spiritual use of psychedelics promoting ideas central to personal and liberation. However, less attention was paid to the darker implications, as the societal narrative around psychedelics tended to emphasize blissful, transcendental experiences and during the psychedelic renaissance, a cure for mental illness [11,12]. From the 1950s to present the phenomenon of ego dissolution is often heralded as a key benefit of psychedelic-induced mystical experiences, promising transcendence beyond the self and a resolution of mental illness [13]. However, this experience can also yield significant psychological distress, particularly for individuals with pre-existing mental health issues. Studies indicate that for some, the dissolution of self can lead to frightening encounters with chaotic internal landscapes, where the individual may confront profound feelings of despair, or existential dread [14].

4. Comparative Analysis

The collision of cataphatic and apophatic theological understandings of mysticism within the context of psychedelics requires acknowledgement of the paradox of liberation and confinement. While psychedelics are often presented as gateways to salvation, they simultaneously may entrap users within their own minds or psychosis.

When comparing the cataphatic and apophatic approaches, it is essential to recognize that they serve different purposes and may resonate with various individuals depending in part upon their unique spiritual or healing journey. The cataphatic approach offers a framework for understanding and articulating experiences of the divine that can foster community and shared belief systems. Conversely, the apophatic approach invites individuals into a profound encounter with the mystery of divinity that transcends language and conceptualization. Moreover, these two approaches can be seen as complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Many spiritual traditions incorporate elements of both methodologies, recognizing that the divine as well as mental health can be approached through both affirmation and negation. For instance, a practitioner may affirm the presence of divine love in a mystical experience while also acknowledging the limitations of language in describing that love's fullness. Furthermore, one may experience mental health as the absence of illness.

5. Conclusion

Cataphatic and apophatic interpretations of mystical experiences occasioned by psychedelics impact the continuing dialog surrounding psychedelics in psychology, theology and related disciplines. Cataphatic approaches to understanding mystical experiences within the context of healing and growth mechanisms challenge the stigmatization that arose post-1970. The potential for renewed understanding of psychedelics as facilitators of health-promoting mystical experiences – a perspective that resonates with the cataphatic methodology – provides fertile ground for future inquiry into the synthesis of science, spirituality and healing. This however should be tempered by delving into the darker dimensions of psychedelic induced mystical experiences through an apophatic lens and the existential risks it identifies.

Mystical experiences described in the 1950s, 1960s and the psychedelic renaissance are not solely illuminating. They carry significant risks that have been historically marginalized. An apophatic approach enables a critical examination of psychedelics as tools which can, paradoxically, lead to both spiritual insight and existential crisis. Herein lies the potential to explore the sinister side of psychedelics – marked by psychological distress and ontological confusion – revealing not only the limits of these substances and they experiences they occasion but also the limits of human understanding and expectation. This tension reveals a critical boundary; the mystical highs are often accompanied by substantial lows. The incursion into the "other" or the "divine" must be approached with caution, as the boundary between enlightenment and despair is perilously thin [15-23].

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