

Conceptualizing and Defining Mysticism: A Exploration Through the Lenses of Naturalism and Realism

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Abstract

This paper delves into the complex and multifaceted concept of mysticism, aiming to construct a comprehensive definition by examining it through the philosophical frameworks of naturalism and realism. It highlights how these perspectives can provide a balanced understanding that respects both the empirical and transcendent dimensions of mystical experiences. The naturalistic lens offers insights into the psychological underpinnings of mystical states, while realism emphasizes the objective nature of these beyond subjective perception. Through a synthesis of these viewpoints, this paper proposes an integrated approach that address the epistemological and ontological challenges inherent in defining mysticism. This not only clarifies the concept but also contributes to broader theological discussions on the nature of consciousness and reality.

Keywords: Mysticism, Naturalism, Realism, Mystical Experiences, Theology of Mysticism, Theology

1. Introduction

This paper considers how naturalism and realism can both illuminate and constrain our understanding of mystical experiences as well as the ethical implications of such. Pertaining to the former, both deontological and utilitarian interpretations potentially obscure detrimental aspects of the mystical and rituals carried out in service of such encounters. Notwithstanding the mechanisms by which interpretations of mystical experiences are positively skewed, a fulsome appreciation must not overlook idealization or unrealistic expectations, spiritual bypassing, and the reduction of mysticism to a commodity.

Mysticism, often defined as a spiritual practice that seeks direct experiences of the divine or ultimate reality, presents a complex interplay between subjective and objective philosophical, theological and psychological inquiry. Mysticism encompasses a variety of experiences and practices that individuals report as transformative encounters with a transcendent reality. Within the past decade there has been a resurgence of interest in psychedelics. Research carried out by Dr. Roland Griffiths at Johns Hopkins University, more specifically, his 2006 article titled Psilocybin can occasion mystical-type experiences having substantial and sustained personal meaning and spiritual significance, is credited as catalyzing a psychedelic renaissance. Traditionally, definitions of mysticism have emphasized three key components: the ineffable nature of mystical experiences, the unity of existence, and the transformative aspects of such experiences. Mystical experiences

are frequently described as beyond verbal expression, challenging the ability to articulate their essence adequately. Another common theme in mystical accounts is the perception of unity—where the boundary between the self and the cosmos dissolves, leading to a sense of belonging to a larger reality. Mystics often describe their encounters as profound insights that transcend ordinary consciousness, leading to a sense of oneness with the universe or a direct communion with the divine. In contrast to traditional notions of transcendence that involve a deity or an absolute presence outside the world as we perceive it, this paper adopts Don Cupitt's non-realist definition. Cupitt offers that transcendence can be understood as a subjective and relational experience, an orientation toward a depth of meaning and experience within human life [1]. Mystical experiences are often described as leading to significant changes in the individual's worldview, values, and overall sense of self. Additionally, these have a noetic quality. Many mystics report gaining special knowledge or insight during their experiences that often feels more profound than ordinary understanding [2,3]. Amongst the definitional challenges are those that arise from the distinction between the phenomena and the noumena.

The Kantian epistemological concepts of phenomena and noumena are relevant to examining mysticism in the contexts of naturalism and realism. In Kant's view phenomena are the things as we experience them – as they appear to us through our senses and perceptions. Noumena, on the other hand, refer to objects or experiences as they exist independently of our subjective perception

and experience. For example, God, the soul, the and the cosmos. Naturalism holds that everything can be explained through natural causes and laws, often relying on empirical evidence and scientific inquiry. From a naturalistic perspective, phenomena would be the focus, as they are the observable aspects of reality that can be studied and understood via the scientific method. Realism posits that the world exists independently of our perceptions or beliefs about it. Realists may assert that both phenomena and noumena exist, advocating that our perceptions (phenomena) can reflect or correspond to a reality (noumena). In this sense, realism acknowledges that while our understanding of reality is mediated by our senses (the phenomena), there is an objective reality that exists beyond our perceptions, consistent with the concept of noumena. Both naturalism and realism emphasize the existence of an objective reality, naturalism does so through a strictly empirical lens, while realism allows for a broader understanding that can include non-empirical claims.

2. Empirical Approaches to Mysticism: Naturalism

Naturalism posits that everything arises from natural properties and causes, suggesting that mystical experiences can be understood through psychological and neurological frameworks. This perspective prioritizes empirical evidence and scientific explanation over supernatural or metaphysical interpretations. Ontologically naturalists believe that knowledge is acquired through empirical observation and scientific methodology. They hold that the only reality is what can be observed and tested through experiments. From a naturalistic viewpoint, mystical experiences can be analyzed as phenomena rooted in human cognition and neurobiology. Researchers have employed contemporary tools, including functional MRI (fMRI) and EEG, to study the brain's activity during meditative and mystical states [2]. Studies have shown that certain brain areas become activated during these experiences, often correlating with feelings of unity and transcendence. For instance, the phenomenon of temporal lobe activation has been associated with mystical experiences, as described by neuroscientist Andrew Newberg [4]. Such findings suggest that what has traditionally been classified as mysticism could be closely tied to specific cognitive processes and brain states, pointing to a naturalistic framework for understanding these profound experiences. Contiguous with scientific interrogations of the mystical, Kevin Young is critical of sensationalist narratives and emphasizes the importance of critical thinking and skepticism, particularly in an age where distinguishing truth from falsehood becomes increasingly challenging [5]. Part of the appeal of naturalist frameworks is the distillation of disprovable personal accounts into objective generalizable truths.

If one embraces the perspective that all human knowledge begins with experience, which includes sensory perception mythical experiences could be viewed as part of the phenomena we encounter in our empirical lives. They may be seen as culturally-mediated narratives or symbolic representations of human experience, emotions, and moral lessons. By extension, and with respect to transcendental idealism, our understanding of the world is shaped by the structures of our mind. Mystical experiences therefore,

might be interpreted as reflections of fundamental aspects of human understanding and moral intuition. The moral implications of such are to interpret if not appraise mystical experiences based upon the extent to which they uphold rational moral principles. Returning to Kantian lenses, mystical experiences may serve as a means of conveying moral truths aligned with his categorical imperative. Given that reason is limited concerning metaphysical speculation, arguably mystical experiences can inspire and provide meaning, yet should not be seen as empirical or rational truths.

3. Limitations of Naturalism

While naturalism offers valuable insights into the psychological and neurobiological aspects of mysticism, it may inadvertently reduce the richness of mystical experiences to mere brain states or psychological constructs or morality-infused utilitarianism. Such reductionism overlooks the transformative and existential dimensions that many mystics attribute to their experiences. As John Hick suggests, mysticism's value might be diminished if viewed solely through a naturalistic lens that neglects the subjective quality and perceived significance of the encounters [3].

4. Empirical Approaches to Mysticism: Realism

Realism, in contrast to naturalism, focuses on the existence of an objective reality independent of perception. Realists might argue that mystical experiences, while subjective, provide genuine insights into the nature of reality itself. This perspective allows for the possibility that personal encounters with the divine or ultimate truths can reveal aspects of an objective reality that transcend empirical observation. With respect to mysticism as a path to understanding reality; from a realist perspective, mystical experiences can be considered legitimate sources of knowledge about the ultimate nature of existence through direct experience, investigation or rational deduction. Philosophers such as William James and Friedrich Schleiermacher emphasize that the felt experiences of mystics can serve as valid pathways to understanding reality, akin to scientific inquiry. James, in particular, argues that mystical experiences should be taken seriously, as they reflect profound insights into human existence, regardless of their subjective nature [6].

5. Limitations of Realism: The Tension between Subjectivity and Objectivity

Despite its merits, the realist perspective is not without its challenges. The subjective nature of mystical experiences raises questions regarding their epistemic validity. If mystical experiences are inherently personal, can they provide universally applicable insights? This tension highlights the difficulties in reconciling personal insights with objective knowledge claims about reality. The phenomenon is essential for knowledge of mystical experiences but is not sufficient for understanding the entirety of these. While we can observe and learn from the natural world, there is a realm beyond our sensory experience, the noumena, that we cannot access directly. Thus, we must acknowledge the role of phenomena without reducing all aspects of mystical experiences to purely naturalistic explanations.

Phenomena relate to naturalism by focusing on observable aspects of reality, while noumena are more aligned with realist concepts that assert the existence of reality beyond perceptions, which can be acknowledged but not directly accessed. Both frameworks explore how we understand reality and the limits of our knowledge. Naturalism confines itself to natural explanations and dismisses supernatural ones, while realism can include both dimensions of reality. Realism can accommodate various beliefs, including the existence of non-empirical entities.

6. Integrating Naturalism and Realism in Mystical Studies

Given the strengths and limitations of both naturalism and realism, an integrative approach may offer a more comprehensive understanding of mysticism. By acknowledging the validity of empirical investigations alongside the existential significance of mystical experiences, scholars can develop a nuanced perspective that appreciates both the psychological factors at play and the deeper truths that individuals find within their experiences. Mysticism encourages an exploration of the spiritual and transcendent aspects of life that are not easily measured or defined by physical parameters. As such, and as noted in my previous paper, a more comprehensive understanding of the fundamental principles and experiences that characterize mystical practices can be gained by integrating interdisciplinary and cross-cultural perspectives.

An integrative approach encourages an interdisciplinary investigation that combines insights from neuroscience, psychology, phenomenology, and religious studies. Such a framework allows for a more holistic understanding of mysticism—embracing the empirical study of the brain while recognizing the intrinsic value of the lived experiences that shape individuals' connections to the divine, however they define that. While both naturalism and realism ground themselves in the materially observable, mysticism opens up to subjective experiences and spiritual insights that are considered equally real despite being accessed through meditation, contemplation and ecstatic experiences.

Building upon the broader understanding of mysticism, it is essential to explore the unique religious and spiritual experiences of women. Such an integrated analysis can reveal how gender influences these practices, their interpretations and significance both in historical and contemporary contexts. Bednarowski describes how women pragmatically approach and integrate faith experiences in ways that reflect their subjective realities [7]. In relation to Bednarowski's work, one might argue that women's religious imagination often incorporates both naturalism and realism in positioning theological and spiritual concepts in the practical realities of their lives. Women have often had to adapt and interpret religious doctrines and experiences to align with real-world challenges and social conditions, which can be seen as a form of pragmatic realism. They often draw upon their personal experiences, struggles, and societal roles to re-imagine religious practices and narratives that make sense in the context of their lives.

Similarly, Hugh Urban's work tends to engage with themes that

challenge strict naturalism and realism [8]. His examination of Western esotericism, altered states of consciousness and the significance of magic illustrates that practitioners find meaning and transformative power through subjective experiences which do not align exclusively with a purely naturalistic understanding of mystical experiences. Urban explores how modern Western esotericism often incorporates themes of sexuality and magic as transformative tools for achieving liberation, both individually and collectively. Much like discourse on psychedelic-induced mystical experiences, Urban addresses the ways in which these esoteric traditions challenge mainstream religious and cultural views, proposing alternative beliefs that emphasize personal experience and inner transformation as pathways to liberation.

Despite variations between naturalism and realism a common theme in mystical expressions is a reduction to moral laws and of mystical experiences as a means to self-improvement. This over-emphasis on positive outcomes could be seen as a utilitarian argument whereby the spiritually and psychologically health-promoting ends justify anxiety-provoking, emotionally distressing means characteristic of "bad trips". Arguably both utilitarianism and the categorical imperative obscure dark or deleterious aspects of the mystical encounters. Utilitarianism often seeks to be scientifically informed about happiness and welfare, aligning it with naturalistic approaches to ethics. While utilitarianism does not traditionally make claims about moral truths existing independently of our beliefs about them, some versions of utilitarianism could be interpreted as asserting that certain actions objectively lead to greater happiness. Hence, one may argue for a kind of moral realism that aligns with utilitarian principles. Both utilitarianism and naturalism focus on real-world consequences. Naturalism promotes a view that moral truths should be understood through the lens of human nature and empirical evidence, which is compatible with utilitarianism's focus on the outcomes of actions on overall happiness. With respect to mystical experiences, and particularly those sought through the use of psychedelics, individuals set an intention to achieve transcendent states referred to as 'ego death' in service of realization of their 'authentic self' and awareness of their position relative to noumena. Scales such as the Mystical Experiences Questionnaire are arguably a form of moral naturalism in that the outcomes of mystical experiences are conceptualized such that they have objectively measurable impacts upon well-being.

One reason for challenging utilitarian conceptualizations of mystical experiences is to guard against justifying morally questionable actions if they are rationalized as being in service of a greater overall good. This raises important questions about the relationship between empirical measures of well-being and moral imperatives. An exploration of such is beyond the scope of this paper. In summary, positively skewed conceptualizations of mystical experiences can pose several dangers, including: overlooking potential negative outcomes such as psychological distress, anxiety or confusion that can accompany these experiences; unrealistic expectations about what mystical experiences led to and subsequent disappointment or self-doubt when practitioners

or participants do not have a shift in perspective on themselves, the world and their place in it; spiritual bypassing such that individuals avoid dealing with emotional pain and in so doing hinder personal growth and reducing mystical experiences to spiritual or lifestyle trends and consumable practices rather than as profound events that require integration [2].

Failing to acknowledge the complexities of mystical experiences may interfere with individual's abilities to integrate these into their daily lives. Neglecting the need to position these experiences drawing on both naturalist and realist viewpoints can lead to fragmentation, confusion and disorientation. Overall, mystical experiences can indeed be profound and transformative, a balanced perspective that recognizes the phenomenological and noumenological as well as potential benefits and challenges is crucial for a holistic understanding of mystical experiences. Arguably, those attempting to understand mystical experiences must endeavor to become connoisseurs of where the innate meets the empirical and where the darkness meets the light [9-12].

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