

---

## MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE, LANGUAGE, AND ONTOLOGICAL CLAIMS

by Dean Pickard

This paper will discuss some general problems of participation in concept and language use and in light of this, critically examine certain standard ontological<sup>1</sup> claims made by mystics. It will be posited that any literal interpretation of such claims is misleading and obscures insight into the mystical experience. A Zen Buddhist interpretation of these ontological claims not only removes the seeming paradoxes of mystical language, but offers a philosophy of language which, like various western philosophies, puts language into a more adequate and less misleading perspective.

**Problems.** Very often it is stated outright by mystics that their experience is ineffable. Ironically, they often proceed immediately from this position to various sorts of ontological claims based on their experience. Such claims as "no things exist," "everything is one," "duality and distinction are illusory," "universal mind alone exists and cannot be described," are examples of claims that, if taken literally, appear paradoxical. They are inconsistent with ordinary experience. If such claims are taken on the same logical level as ordinary statements like "My dog is black," without considering the difference in context, paradoxes are likely to abound.

When mystical experience is given expression in language, the religious or metaphysical presuppositions of the speaker must be made clear, and ontological claims must be seen in the context of the mystical experience.<sup>2</sup> The characteristics of language and conceptualization that would lend themselves to making ontological claims must also be made clear in order not to make the category mistake of confusing the status of ordinary empirically oriented claims and metaphysical claims, though the difference is one of degree, not kind (they are all claims within a linguistic conceptual system).

The mystics' claims are based on experience that occurs in a different psychological context than ordinary practical experience. The context is one of altered consciousness in which normal practical social distinctions break down. Self and world are experienced differently than from within the context of customs and habits of practical or intellectual concerns. This difference should immediately alert us to treating the claims associated with such mystical experience with great care when integrating them into ordinary language, just as we do with the statements from quantum physics about reverse time flow, negative weight mass, etc..

W.V. O. Quine puts it succinctly when he says, "We can only talk about what we say there is." This statement, which seems rather inhibiting, turns out on close inspection to reflect the inherent limitations of language and knowledge we constantly encounter in giving accounts of what there is.

One's ontology, *i.e.*, talk about what there is, is based on the conceptual and linguistic system one is participating in and the epistemic or other ends at stake. Consequently, we can never talk about what there is in any independent sense, only about what we say there is. What we say there is, is dependent upon our linguistic conceptual apparatus in a non-trivial, foundational sense.

---

<sup>1</sup>Ontological claims are claims about what there is.

<sup>2</sup>This may be said of all experience and ontological claims, though our concern here is mystical experience and associated ontological claims.

---

All ontological claims involve philosophical presuppositions. Being reflective and philosophically attuned is not the normal habit of mind. So we are very often not in touch with fundamental presuppositions which are nevertheless storable. But we are also not aware of the problems and the circularity of participation in a language game. This realization is more difficult and certainly more disconcerting for those of a Cartesian persuasion, *i.e.*, those in search of or who already assume some indubitable basis upon which all else rests. Where certainty is the goal one invites dogma or disappointment.

We cannot easily question the experience of the mystic, but we can question whether he is trying to use language beyond its limits in explaining that experience. If the mystic is merely waxing poetic, that may be a perfectly acceptable expression of feelings. But if he is making reality claims such as those mentioned, he needs to deepen his insight about language and concepts. Zen provides such insight.

**Zen.** Ordinary experience is thoroughly enmeshed in and made intelligible by our concepts (how we divide the world up),<sup>3</sup> and language (the expression of those divisions).<sup>4</sup> Since the mystical experience is one in which, by some design or by chance, the normal linguistic conceptual modes are temporarily overcome or abandoned, the claim of ineffability would seem justified. However, there is an insight about the world which presents itself from this mystical standpoint which, if it is to be used with some clarity when given expression in language, requires insight into conceptualization, language use, epistemology, and of course the resulting reality claims.

Implicit in Zen,<sup>5</sup> though it eschews intellectualism, is a philosophy of language which can shed light on the claims of mystics. "The finger pointing at the moon should not be mistaken for the moon," is a famous Zen epigram which, as many other Zen sayings do, illustrates this implicit philosophy of language and meaning. It points to the common failure of people to differentiate their words and concepts or meanings from the objects to which they refer. Further, it is pointed out that it is the discriminating mind which creates its object from cultural training and habit combined with desire or need.

Many western philosophers after Hume and since Kant's "Second Copernican Revolution" have been sensitive to the active role of consciousness in constructing its object, whether based on a priori structures, empirical cultural conditioning, or unavoidable participation in language and meaning systems. Nietzsche taught us that all understanding is interpretation. Interpreting is a fundamental activity in man, one he cannot make allowance for except by being aware that this is what he is constantly doing. Zen also attempts to make us aware of this discriminating interpreting activity to see it for what it is, an important and practical activity, yet potentially very misleading.

Zen is meant to remedy not only an everyday, literalist misunderstanding of the relation of language and the world, but also mystical and religious literalists' misunderstanding as well. Common mystical pronouncements can all be given simple non-paradoxical interpretation yet still retain the mystic's sense of unity and transformation. The claims "there are no things" or "nothing whatever exists" are not to be taken in the absurd sense that things we perceive are not there, but in the sense that the division into discrete entities reflects human habits of thought and language which are not im-

<sup>3</sup>Briefly, concepts are the meanings we give the world.

<sup>4</sup>This is an admittedly oversimplified view of language but serves the purpose of the point being made.

<sup>5</sup>Zen is a sect of Japanese Buddhism derived from Chinese Ch'an Buddhism, a mixture of Indian Buddhism and Chinese Taoism emphasizing meditation over scripture.

---

mediately apparent. "Everything is one" does not mean that things are not distinct for us, but that these distinctions arise in our own creative mode as thinking beings. The unity or oneness is found not in an already conceptually diffracted "world," but rather in the consciousness that precedes and underlies the conceptual diffracting.

Our various notions of the world are human constructs projected by us for our own ends and design. That the world will support many sets of distinctions, often mutually incompatible, can point equally to a linguistic rather than the paradoxical interpretation of "the world." Experience can be accounted for in many ways and seeming contradictions can be pursued by looking carefully at our ways of conceptualizing and expressing rather than first taking those distinctions as real and then trying to make them ultimately compatible in an ontology that is either paradoxical with or denies common experience. There are many ways of logicizing "the world" and even more ways of expressing those sets of distinctions. The notion of reality itself is shaped by abstraction. What it refers to overflows the boundaries of reflection. Some philosophers have therefore deemed it a derivative or secondary concept, replacing it with the notion of being, fundamental reality, etc..

The irony of language and abstract thought is that it allows us to project far beyond immediacy, to create and build "our world;" yet these are the very limits that we are confronting in our purview, the ones we have built in. The irony for us is that no conceptual limit is absolute or fixed, yet fixed limits are necessary to see beyond. To see beyond means to see beyond some set of limits, as Einstein, with the help of two hundred years of physics, saw beyond the boundaries of Newtonian mechanics, and contemporary theorists have expanded beyond Einstein.

Much of Zen literature has been devoted to attempting to counter the buildup of metaphysical explanation on the central insight of the Buddha about self and world. We interpret and project onto the world our concepts and viewpoints according to our feelings and our epistemic ends. The point is not to deny or destroy this world but simply to see that it is a projected interpretation. Pain and pleasure and objects are in the world, but as our projections of the world, *i.e.*, it is the world for the self. If there is no self then these distinctions dissolve. That is the central Buddhist insight.<sup>6</sup> Not that there are literally no things nor that the void is somehow ontologically fundamental. Enlightenment is not some special state of mind to be *achieved*, where the world is seen in its essence as utterly void. That is metaphysical jargon indicating the very mistake, the reification of concepts, which Zen attempts to overcome. Language is a tool. The classic texts are tools. Literalism and reification destroy their potential use in overcoming misleading implications of language.

Although some writers in Zen have tended to denigrate abstract thought because of the pitfalls involved with abstractions, it is by no means an integral part of Zen as such thinking may be in some other Buddhist and other Eastern religious thinking where, ironically, philosophizing and metaphysical conceptualizing abound.

In Christianity there has often been the tension between faith seeking understanding and sterile scholasticism, between faith and reason. Faith alone was not enough. The rationalization for much of the supposed proof and reasoning with regard to deity and world, creator and created, is that non-believers must be persuaded as well as the faithful strengthened through the lesser mode, that of reason. Unfortunately, this mission to persuade had often become a passion, with the need to prove "the truth" the central

---

<sup>6</sup>A central insight of the western phenomenological tradition from Brentano and Husserl is the view that objects are always *for* consciousness. The relation of subject and object, consciousness and world is one of reciprocal implication. One is necessary for the other. Their appearance presupposes their fundamental unity.

---

motive. The need to "know" with certainty overshadowed the centrality of simple faith, whereupon orthodoxy often burgeoned into a stifling repository of scholastic rhetoric.

The long tradition of Buddhist logic, in contrast to Christianity, has aimed at showing how all distinctions about world and deity are artificial, that is, artifacts of human reasoning,<sup>7</sup> and advises non-attachment to such an overlay of an intellectual grid upon experience.

Despite the history of intellectual cul-de-sacs and excesses, to denigrate the intellect is certainly not the answer, especially when it is now very often the mode of introduction to mystical discipline and insight, and later can enhance deepening of experience. But to exalt the intellect is equally disastrous. One must be cognizant of the inherent limitations of conceptualization and distinction expressed in language with all its potential pitfalls.

When language is operating smoothly it helps us get on in the world, educate the young (and old) and generally helps organize our experience. When misused it leads us into faulty organization and representation of self and world which leads to greater conflict and suffering. Part of becoming educated and mature means using language to undo and correct fallacious reasoning. Ludwig Wittgenstein saw that we can use insights about language to overcome problems arising from improper language use. With an understanding of language, many of the problems associated with misunderstanding and conflict disappear.

The interpretative nature of thought and language is not to be embraced nor rejected, rather simply observed and noted. Zen at its best neither repudiates reason nor is open to its potentially disastrous excesses. Reason is used effectively when it does not interfere with but rather enhances deepening of insight.

These insights from Zen about language, self, and world are at least partly derived from and enhanced by the practical technique of meditation. Meditation is the practice of samadhi, i.e., calming or stilling the mind. This allows then for prajna, the development of an increasingly subtle sensitivity and awareness. The effect of this on ordinary discriminating consciousness can be therapeutic in softening up or releasing one from the normal habits of mind which lead to unnecessary conflict and distress. The ability to observe without judging is greatly enhanced. There can more readily be a sense of compassion for others, and one's enhanced powers of insight can be used in the service of helping others.

The practice of meditation is relevant here in that it leads to the realization that the world and all its distinctions and pain and pleasure are bound up in the creative, projecting, interpreting processes of consciousness.

Even if one is unusual enough to be intellectually immunized against making absolute ontological claims, meditation can further enhance seeing the world without such assumptions of absolute perspective. Freedom, according to Zen, is in seeing the projecting, interpreting sense of self for what it is. An important step in that direction is understanding the nature of language and conceptual distinction, which is a concern of both western and eastern philosophers.

---

<sup>7</sup>In some ways the arguments in the tradition of Buddhist logic are similar to Hume's scepticism about our notions of self, world, God, etc., and Kierkegaard's view that reasoning is a tool or system that can finally generate only its own most fundamental suppositions.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Blocker, Gene, "The Language of Mysticism" in *The Monist*, 59. NO. 4, (Oct. 1976), 551-561.
2. Melchart, N., "Mystical Experience and Ontological Claims," in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 37, (June 1977), 445-463.
3. Moore, A., "Mysticism and Philosophy" in *The Monist*, 59. No. 4. Oct. 1976, 551-561.
4. Staal, F., *Exploring Mysticism*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1975.