



Mystical ineffability: a nonconceptual theory

Sebastian Gäb¹ 

Received: 10 August 2023 / Accepted: 24 January 2024 / Published online: 21 February 2024
© The Author(s) 2024

Abstract

This paper discusses the nonconceptual theory of mystical ineffability which claims that mystical experiences can't be expressed linguistically because they can't be conceptualized. I discuss and refute two objections against it: (a) that unconceptualized experiences are impossible, and (b) that the theory is ad hoc because it provides no reason for why mystical experiences should be unconceptualizable. I argue against (a) that distinguishing different meanings of 'object of experience' leaves open the possibility of non-empty but objectless nonconceptual experiences. I show that (b) is a valid objection but can be countered by a new theory of mystical non-conceptuality: mystical experiences are not conceptual because the specific mode of mystical consciousness prevents conceptualization. The dissolution of the subjectivity of consciousness during mystical experiences undermines the very foundation of the possibility of conceptual thought and thus renders them ineffable.

Keywords Mysticism · Consciousness · Religious Experience · Nonconceptual content

One of the most striking features of mystical experiences is their apparent ineffability.¹ Mystics of all times and cultures have claimed that their experiences can't be

¹ At least if we assume a specific understanding of mystical experiences. The term 'mysticism' encompasses a wide range of meanings, and what I will have to say in this paper won't necessarily be relevant for all of them. For example, experiences like vision or hearing voices are sometimes counted as instances of mystical experiences. At other times, any kind of spiritual life is called 'mysticism'. These phenomena exist, too, and if people want to refer to them as mystical, then it's not a philosopher's job to tell them how to use their words. But this is not the kind of mysticism I am talking about. In what follows, I will confine myself to a specific understanding of mystical experiences, namely the kind of experience Stace (1961: ch. 2) has described as the common core of mysticism. Stace distinguishes two types of this experience, the extrovertive and the introvertive, and gives a list of seven essential characteristics, which largely overlap for the two types: Unity, non-temporality and non-spatiality (for introvertive experiences) or a sense of universal life in everything (for extrovertive experiences), objectivity, positive emotional quality, holiness, paradoxicality, ineffability (Stace 1961: 131). So, when I speak about mystical experiences, I am merely speaking about experiences *like this*.

✉ Sebastian Gäb
s.gaeb@lmu.de

¹ Faculty of Philosophy, LMU Munich, Munich, Germany

put into words. To name just a few examples: Richard Bucke says about his famous experience of cosmic consciousness (quoted in William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*) that he experienced 'an intellectual illumination impossible to describe'.² Eckhart, one of the great mystics of medieval Germany, speaks about the ineffable godhead in one of his sermons and says: 'Everything in the Godhead is one, and of that there is nothing to be said.'³ Plotinus states that the experience of seeing the One is 'hard to put into words' (δύσφραστον).⁴ The *Mandukya*-Upanishad describes the state of pure consciousness (*turiya*) which we enter in deep meditation and which lies at the base of all other conscious experiences as 'not conscious, not unconscious – folk consider the fourth to be unseen, inviolable, unseizable, signless, unthinkable, unnameable.'⁵ And finally, the *Daodejing* says in its famous first words that 'the Dao which can be said (可道) is not the eternal Dao',⁶ meaning that the real Dao can only be grasped through a kind of mystical intuition that transcends the categories of language. Unsurprisingly, William James and others in his wake have declared ineffability to be one of the essential characteristics of mystical experiences.⁷

But even though mystics have more or less unanimously stated that their experiences are beyond the bounds of language, their philosophical colleagues have usually frowned upon this claim: if mystical experiences are ineffable, how come the mystics keep talking about them? Wouldn't it make more sense to just say nothing at all? And what is ineffability supposed to mean anyway? If you can experience it, why can't you express it? In this paper, I will try to defend an old answer to these questions, but with a new argument: mystical experiences, I shall argue, are ineffable because they cannot be conceptualized, and they can't be conceptualized because they involve a particular state of consciousness. First, I will outline this nonconceptual theory and address two important objections against it. Next, I will develop a refined version of the nonconceptual theory that can effectively counter these objections and explain why mystical experiences are supposed to be ineffable. My main point will be that mystical experiences are *necessarily nonconceptual* and *transcendentally ineffable* (which means that they don't fulfill one of the conditions of the possibility of expression). My argument, in a nutshell, is this: (1) If the distinction between subject and object is an essential part of intentional conscious states, and (2) if the process of conceptualization presupposes a state of mind in which one's consciousness is directed at an intentional object, and (3) if in mystical experiences the conscious self dissolves and with it the subject-object structure of intentional consciousness, then (4) the very nature of mystical experiences undermines the necessary requirements for the possibility of conceptual thought, and thus renders them ineffable.

² James 2002: 309.

³ Sermon No. 56 (Pfeiffer) in Evans 1924: 143.

⁴ *Enneads* 6, 9, 10.

⁵ Roebuck 2003: 513.

⁶ *Daodejing* 1.

⁷ James 2002: 295. Stace 1961: 132. Others have been more skeptical, e.g. Franks Davis 1989: 14–19.

The nonconceptual theory of mystical ineffability

Mystics say that their experiences are ineffable, that much is true and can hardly be disputed.⁸ But *why* are these experiences ineffable? A classic and widespread⁹ answer is the *nonconceptual theory* of mystical ineffability which says that ineffability results from the breakdown of conceptual thought in mystical experiences. Therefore, the experiential content of mystical experiences can only be nonconceptual and thus inexpressible. According to Walter Stace in his seminal work *Philosophy and Mysticism*, virtually all mystics throughout times and cultures have subscribed to the nonconceptual theory. This is what they mean when they talk about their experiences being ‘above understanding’ or ‘beyond reason’ – what they refer to is our capacity for conceptual thought:

*The usual account of the matter asserts that mystical experience is inherently incapable of being conceptualized. It can be directly experienced, this theory states, but it cannot be abstracted into concepts. But since every word in language, except proper names, stands for a concept, it follows that where no concepts are possible no words are possible. Therefore mystical experiences being unconceptualizable are also unverbalizable.*¹⁰

The nonconceptual theory of mystical ineffability consists of two claims:

- (I-1) Only conceptual content can be expressed linguistically.
- (I-2) Mystical experiences have no conceptual content.

I will not discuss the first claim here, as it is rather a question for philosophers of mind and language than of religion.¹¹ My focus will be on the second claim: What does it mean that mystical experiences don’t have conceptual content and why should we believe this? The answer, for Stace and many others, can be found in the unitive character of mystical experiences: The mystic has a sense of being one with God, the universe, or nature. There are extrovertive experiences, in which all things

⁸ Well, of course it can be disputed. For example, Stephen Katz has argued that even though the word ‘ineffable’ and its cognates in other languages appear frequently in mystical texts, we cannot simply assume that they always express the same idea (Katz 1978: 46). The ineffable God of Pseudo-Dionysius and the ineffable *nirvana* of the Buddha are not the same. Therefore, those who believe in some kind of universal mystical ineffability must already presuppose a common core in mysticism. But this can’t be simply assumed and needs to be backed by evidence. I will not argue for this thesis here (but see Forman 1999: Ch. 3; Hood 2006; Gäb 2021). Suffice it to say that my argument should be understood as hypothetical: *If we assume that there is such a thing as mystical ineffability*, how can we explain it?

⁹ Pletcher 1973, Kellenberger 1979, Arthur 1986, Danto 1973 and Jones 2016 all subscribe to some variety of the nonconceptual theory. Katz 1978 and Proudfoot 1985 reject it; Jonas 2016 doesn’t explicitly talk about mysticism but still rejects the idea that ineffable content is nonconceptual.

¹⁰ Stace 1961: 285.

¹¹ I will note, though, that most of them have taken (I-1) more or less for granted, for example, Donald Davidson: ‘The dependence of speaking on thinking is evident, for to speak is to express thoughts.’ (Davidson 1975: 7). Toribio 2006: 446 also notes that expressibility is usually accepted as an essential feature of conceptual content.

are perceived as one; and there are introvertive experiences, in which the mystic's mind is completely empty and the distinction between self and other loses its sense. In both, the multiplicity of objects found in our everyday experience is replaced by an undifferentiated unity. But, Stace argues, concepts can't be meaningfully applied to an undifferentiated unity. He says: 'The essential point is here clearly made that concepts depend on multiplicity and can therefore find no foothold in an experience which is wholly unitary.'¹² So, mystical experiences are ineffable because they cannot be conceptualized, and they cannot be conceptualized because they are unitive. Is this a good argument? Probably not. Let's take a look at two objections to this theory, a bad one and a better one.

The constructivist objection

The first argument against the nonconceptual theory is based on a constructivist understanding of mystical experiences, which is most notably supported by Stephen Katz. Constructivists like Katz argue that all experiences are interpreted through concepts, so a nonconceptual, i.e. uninterpreted experience is impossible. For the constructivist, talking about the mere content of an experience as if it could be separated from the concepts through which we interpret it is absurd. The experience is an indivisible whole. We don't start with some unprocessed raw mental content that enters our mind and is then subsequently interpreted through concepts. Rather, as soon as we experience something, the experience is already conceptualized—experiencing something just is interpreting it. There can be no such thing as an uninterpreted, nonconceptual mental content. As Stephen Katz puts it:

*There are NO pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences. [...] all experience is processed through, organized by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological ways. The notion of unmediated experience seems, if not self-contradictory, at best empty.*¹³

Like the nonconceptual theory, the constructivist objection can be broken down into two separate claims:

- (C-1) To interpret an experience is to conceptualize it.
- (C-2) Uninterpreted experiences are impossible.

I will first say something about why (C-1) is true and then explain how the truth of (C-1) can help us see why (C-2) is not exactly wrong, but too simple. So, what does it mean to interpret an experience? One might think of interpretation as a two-step process: first, I have an experience of something, then I apply concepts to it and interpret it as an experience of this or that. This is the account of interpretation that the constructivist objection attributes to the nonconceptual theory, and if

¹² Stace 1961: 286.

¹³ Katz 1978: 26.

this really is the picture of interpretation the nonconceptualist has in mind, then the constructivist objection is correct: Yes, experience and interpretation are not separate acts, and any theory of experience that splits them into two steps of a single process is misguided. A better approach to interpretation is to understand it as a kind of Wittgensteinian *seeing-as*. Imagine, says Wittgenstein, a drawing of a cube in a textbook which can be seen as a box, a brick, or a wire frame: ‘Each time the text supplies the interpretation of the illustration, but we can also *see* the illustration now as one thing, now as another. So we interpret it, and *see* it as we *interpret* it.’¹⁴ Understood this way, Interpreting an experience simply means to see whatever it is I’m experiencing *as* something: I don’t just see the lines of the drawing and then interpret them, I immediately see them *as* a box or brick. Likewise, if I look at the cup of coffee in front of me, I don’t just see something white and something brown, I see coffee in a cup (because I see the white thing *as* a cup and the brown stuff *as* coffee). But this is just what seeing is—it’s not something that happens separately or in addition to the act of seeing itself. If by interpretation we mean this activity of seeing something (as something), then the act of interpretation is ingrained into the experience itself, and Katz is right that there is no such thing as pre-interpretational experiential content.¹⁵

Wittgenstein himself wanted to restrict the term *seeing-as* to cases like the famous duck-rabbit that can be seen as more than one thing and thought it absurd to say that you are seeing the thing in front of you on the table as a fork—you simply see a fork. But clearly, *seeing-as* is an essential part of all kinds of experiences because every experience can be conceptualized differently. For example, if I invite you to dinner and hand you a fork, but you have never seen a fork before (maybe because you come from a culture that doesn’t use forks), you will ask: ‘What is this thing?’, that is: you’ll conceptualize it simply as ‘thing’ because you have no other, more suitable concept at hand. But if I then tell you that it is a fork, show you how to hold it, and how to use it to pick up food, you will learn what a fork is. Then the next time you see forks, you will recognize them as forks and will now apply the concept ‘fork’ to them. By learning to identify things as forks and to use the word ‘fork’ correctly, you have grasped the *concept* of a fork. So, learning to see something as a fork means learning to interpret your experience through the application of the concept ‘fork’.¹⁶ Generally, you can only see *x* as *y* if you possess the concept of *y*. When you see a cup of coffee, you see the black liquid as coffee because the concept ‘coffee’ informs your experience. If you don’t have this concept, you can look at the cup and see some black stuff, but you can’t see *coffee*. So, (C-1) is correct—interpretation is conceptualization, and if Katz’s point was to claim that every experience of an object is necessarily conceptual in nature because it requires that we see the object as something, then there is nothing wrong with that.¹⁷

¹⁴ Wittgenstein 2009: 203 (PI pt. II, §116).

¹⁵ For a defense of this account, see Mandelbaum 2017.

¹⁶ Agam-Segal 2014.

¹⁷ The point in this paragraph is discussed more thoroughly in Gäb 2021.

But what about (C-2)? Does it actually follow from (C-1) that there are no uninterpreted experiences? It's important to remember that interpretation is a two-place predicate: we interpret *something* (x) as *something else* (y). Interpretation trivially requires an object x that is interpreted. But this trivial fact is precisely what raises a problem for defenders of (C-2). To see why, we need to take a closer look at the relation between object and conceptualization in the process of seeing-as.¹⁸ Take a look at Wittgenstein's famous duck-rabbit. You can see this picture either as a duck or as a rabbit because you can switch between the concepts informing your experience. The picture itself, obviously, doesn't change at all – all that happens in the switch between duck and rabbit is a change in concepts. But if there is something that remains unchanged in the process of switching from duck to rabbit, then this something must be a nonconceptual element¹⁹; in this case, it's the black lines that are seen as either a duck or a rabbit. This is not some further kind of experiential content in addition to the conceptual content – the nonconceptual element is an aspect of an otherwise conceptual experience. Within the conceptual experience ('I'm seeing a drawing of a duck'), there is a nonconceptual aspect, but this nonconceptual aspect is not experienced separately. Rather, it is postulated in a theoretical analysis of this experience to make sense of the switch between duck and rabbit. So, there is a nonconceptual element in experiences, even if this element doesn't exist apart from the conceptual experience as a whole (and therefore it's not a pure 'given', or raw content). This nonconceptual element doesn't mean that the experience itself is uninterpreted, of course. Whatever we see, duck or rabbit, we see *something* – not just the black lines.

But this analysis of experiences reveals an important ambiguity in the term 'object of experience': on the one hand, 'the object of experience' might refer to the conceptualized content of my experience, for example, the duck I see when I say: 'It looks like a duck.' If experiencing-as means experiencing x as y , then in this sense, the object is the y . On the other hand, 'the object of experience' might refer to what is conceptualized or seen as a duck and is itself nonconceptual (the black lines) – in this sense, the object of experience is the x . Within the particular experience of seeing the drawing of a duck, these two are de facto merged into one. But clearly, there still is a distinction between the nonconceptual and the conceptual sense of 'object of experience'. Let's distinguish these two by calling the nonconceptual object (x) object₁ and the conceptual object (y) object₂. Then it is clear that only objects₁ can be conceptualized, and by being conceptualized, they become objects₂. But if this is correct, then (C-2) is too strong! (C-2) states that uninterpreted experiences are impossible, or, as we might put it now, that there are no object₁-experiences without

¹⁸ Another strategy at this point could be to simply argue against the constructivist by pointing out the possibility of nonconceptual content per se, that is: by explicitly refuting (C-1). I'm not going to do this here because my main point doesn't hinge on (C-1) being false. But there is an extensive debate in the philosophy of perception about whether there could be experiences with nonconceptual content. For a short introduction see Bermúdez 2009; for a comprehensive overview see Schmidt 2015.

¹⁹ Peacocke 2001: 240–42. More specifically, this is a variation on the fineness-of-grain argument for nonconceptual content: the way in which certain properties are given (e.g. the black lines are given as duck), is part of the experience, too, and exceeds its conceptual content.

object₂ – if there is an object₁-experience, then there must be an object₂-experience. But this doesn't follow from (C-1). All that follows is the reverse: if there is an object₂-experience, there must be an object₁-experience. So, it doesn't follow that *all* experiences are object₂-experiences. The distinction between two kinds of objects of experience leaves open the possibility of objectless experiences (object₂-less experiences, that is). Conceptualization is an essential part of the construction of an object₂ of experience, but if there is no such object, it doesn't make sense to say that the experience was interpreted, either. But *could* there be such an objectless (i.e.: object₂-less) experience at all? As we will see below, this is not only possible but also the key to defending the nonconceptual theory of mystical experience. But before we delve into this, we must first address another objection.

The ad-hoc-objection

So, the constructivist objection fails. While emphasizing an important point about experience in general, it doesn't rule out the possibility of nonconceptual experiences per se—and couldn't it be that mystical experiences are just the proof of concept? But this leads to the second, and more serious, objection: *why* should mystical experiences be unconceptualizable? No actual reason has been given so far. All that Stace says is that mystical experiences are inherently incapable of being conceptualized. But what is it about them that makes them unconceptualizable? It's not enough to simply declare that mystical experiences can't be conceptualized—we also need a reason for why they can't. If no such reason is given, then it seems as if the non-conceptual theory was invoked only to explain the alleged ineffability of mystical experiences. But if there is no link between the specific properties of mystical experiences and their ineffability, how is this not just an ad hoc hypothesis?

Stace does in fact offer an explanation: mystical experiences are unitive, he claims, and concepts can only be applied to a multiplicity of objects.²⁰ This sounds like a good explanation, but then again, one might ask, why should concepts only apply to multiplicities? What about a concept like 'even prime number' that only applies to a single thing? Regrettably, Stace himself doesn't address this question. But one might support his solution by invoking the *Generality Constraint*, a widely accepted principle that governs the possibility of conceptual thought.²¹ This principle states that just as words can be freely combined to form new expressions, concepts can be mentally rearranged to create new thoughts:

*Any thought which we can interpret as having the content that a is F involves the exercise of an ability – knowledge of what it is for something to be F – which can be exercised in indefinitely many distinct thoughts, and would be exercised in, for instance, the thought that b is F.*²²

²⁰ Stace 1961: 285.

²¹ Evans 1982: 75.

²² Evans 1982: 103.

For example, if I can think of a red apple, I must in principle be capable of thinking of a red car, or a red sunrise, too, applying my concept *red* to different things. If I couldn't, then I can hardly be said to possess the concept of redness. But different parts can only be recombined if there are different parts to begin with—I must be able to distinguish *redness* from *apple*, *car*, or *sunrise*. If I can't, the Generality Constraint becomes impossible to satisfy. A concept must in principle be applicable to different objects even if (like 'even prime number') it happens to apply truly to just one thing in particular. And so, a concept that could never be separated from the experience as a whole and applied to different objects in other experiences isn't a concept at all. But if mystical experiences are unitive, their content cannot be broken down into different parts that could be rearranged. So, in mystical experiences, our concept-forming capacities have nothing to get started on in the first place, just as State claimed—the experience is inherently incapable of being conceptualized.

Unfortunately, this explanation doesn't solve the problem. The Generality Constraint only demands that concepts can be rearranged freely among *different* experiences, not that a single experience itself must have rearrangeable parts. If you are standing in a completely dark room, you will see nothing but black—an indivisible unity of blackness. Still, you can apply the concept 'black' to your experience because you can encounter blackness in another, different experience. An actual violation of the generality constraint would require a wholly unique experience that has nothing in common with anything else we have ever experienced or could ever experience.²³

But maybe that is precisely what mystical experiences are? Don't mystics often say that their experiences are so different from anything else they have ever experienced that it is impossible to describe them? Yes—but it's important to understand this claim correctly: is it *contingently* or *necessarily* impossible for the mystic to express their experience? An experience is contingently ineffable if it is ineffable due to insufficiencies in the language used to describe it; it is necessarily ineffable if it is ineffable due to the nature of the experience itself.²⁴ Suppose mystical experiences are just contingently ineffable: then these experiences should in principle become expressible once a mystic becomes more acquainted with them and expands their conceptual resources. When you're young and in love for the first time, the experience of being in love will be wholly different from anything you have experienced so far, and you may think that what you're feeling is inexpressible. But as you grow older and become more familiar with the experience of falling in (and out of) love, you'll be able to broaden your range of concepts and develop ways of expressing these feelings. Likewise, experienced mystics should at least make progress in their struggle for adequate words—but remarkably, they don't. For more than two millennia, mystics have consistently repeated the claim that their experiences are ineffable, with no apparent sign of progress. The tenacity of this ineffability claim might suggest that mystical experiences are not contingently ineffable, but

²³ Although someone like McDowell might even argue that even in this case, we could form singular, demonstrative concepts like '*this* experience'. (cf. McDowell 1994: 224).

²⁴ For an elaborate analysis of this distinction between two types of ineffability, see Gäb 2020.

necessarily so. If this is true, then the problem lies not on the side of our expressive abilities which somehow happen to be inadequate to describe this particularly unique kind of experience (maybe because human languages didn't happen to develop the concepts necessary to describe them); rather, it seems to lie on the side of the experience itself.²⁵ But even though the apparently ineradicable ineffability of mystical experiences points towards the conclusion that it is *necessarily* impossible for the mystic to express their experiences, it's not enough to prove it.²⁶ Perhaps mystics are just stuck in a semantic dead end and haven't found a way out yet. To show that mystical experiences are necessarily ineffable, we would need an argument that explains what it is about the nature of mystical experiences that renders them necessarily nonconceptual and ineffable. In the next section, I will develop an argument like this.

Ineffability and subjectivity

Maybe we have been looking in the wrong place. The theory as we have interpreted it so far rests on the claim that concepts don't apply to mystical experiences—which inevitably provokes the question: why not? And so far, no one has really offered a good answer to this question. It can't be because they are unitive, and merely stating that they are beyond our expressive capacities without an explanation why they are, is not enough. But if these previous attempts turn out to be dead ends, then we should start looking somewhere else for the source of mystical nonconceptuality. Stace has been looking for this source in the content of the experience—in contrast, my suggestion is that the nonconceptual character of mystical ineffability must be explained through their nature. It's not their *content* that explains why these experiences are ineffable, it's their *mode* of experience. By 'mode', I mean the specific conscious act in which the content of the experience is given. For example, the difference between *seeing* your best friend in person, *remembering* meeting them, and *imagining* meeting them, is a difference in experiential modes. The content of these three experiences is the same, but the mode in which this content is experienced, is different.²⁷ To put it differently: it's not *what* the mystics experience that makes their experience ineffable, it's the particular and unique *way* in which they are conscious of what they experience. Mystical experiences are a distinctive mode of consciousness one of whose essential properties is its ineffability.

To see why, we first need to give up the idea that mystical experiences are fundamentally a kind of perception in which a mystically significant object is encountered. Rather, we should think of them as states of altered consciousness. Thus, what

²⁵ As, e.g. Kellenberger affirms: '[T]he cause of the inapplicability of our concepts clearly lies with the concepts themselves, not with human limitations of expression.' (Kellenberger 1979: 309).

²⁶ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

²⁷ This is analogous to the distinction between the matter and quality of conscious acts introduced by Edmund Husserl in his *Logical Investigations* (Husserl 2001: 119–122). The difference is that for Husserl, all conscious acts are tokens of a single type of consciousness, while in my terminology, modes represent different types of consciousness.

characterizes them is not a special kind of object (like God, *Brahman*, or emptiness), but the particular way in which the mystic is conscious of an object—whatever it may be. Virtually anything could be an object of mystical experiences: a blade of grass, consciousness itself, or a dirty backyard.²⁸ What makes these experiences mystical is not their content, but the mode in which this content is presented in the mystic's consciousness. So, the specific structure of this type of conscious state—not the metaphysical properties of the objects of experience—should make it understandable why mystical experiences are ineffable.

But what is the specific structure of mystical consciousness and how does it differ from ordinary modes of consciousness? Crucially, it is a state of consciousness without a subject. The mystic experiences a conscious state but the subject to which conscious states are given disappears (let's call this the 'no-subject theory'). This seems to be the phenomenal reality behind the widespread claim that mystical experiences universally involve a dissolution of the self.²⁹ One might reply that this is impossible because the very idea of consciousness presupposes a subject. 'Subjectless consciousness', the critic might say, is as nonsensical as 'shapeless object'. More precisely, the critic might argue that a central property of conscious states is their intentionality: the fact that consciousness is always consciousness of something. I don't simply see, but I see people in front of me, I don't just hear, but I hear sounds from the street outside...³⁰ Being directed at an intentional object is the fundamental mark of the mental. But intentionality not only means being directed at an object. It also requires a counterpart: a subject to which the object is given. Otherwise, the concept of directedness wouldn't make any sense, because it is a two-place relation: *x* is directed at *y*.³¹ So, the critic concludes, if mental states are necessarily intentional, and intentionality presupposes a subject, then subjectless mental states are inconceivable, and the no-subject theory must be false:

- (1) All conscious states are intentional.
- (2) All intentional states have a subject.
- (3) Therefore: there are no conscious states without subject.

Is this a convincing argument? At first, it might be tempting to attack premise (1), since there is a lively debate in the philosophy of mind whether all conscious

²⁸ Stace 1961: 72 quotes an account of a mystical experience in which an actual decrepit back yard is experienced as incredibly beautiful, alive, and in harmony with the universe.

²⁹ Stace 1961: 111 presents this dissolution of individuality as the universal core of mysticism. Examples for the loss of individuality and the disappearance of boundaries between self and world in Marshall 2005: 60–65. See Jones 2016: 191–199 for arguments against an ontological interpretation of the dissolution of individuality.

³⁰ Whether or not this object is real and exists independently of my mind doesn't matter. I could be hallucinating, or just imagining it. But even then, my consciousness would still be directed at an object, although a fictional one.

³¹ Among others, Edmund Husserl has defended this point in his *Cartesian Meditations* (Husserl 1970: 171). Coming at it from a different angle, Peter Strawson in his *Individuals* (1959: 97) reaches the same conclusion.

states are indeed intentional.³² What about, for example, a headache or a feeling of tiredness? Those seem to be conscious states in which no intentional object is given. I won't enter this discussion here but suffice it to say that even if it's true that there are conscious states without intentional objects, this won't be enough to refute the critic's argument against the no-subject theory. For even if we grant this controversial point, it doesn't follow that these non-intentional conscious states will also be states without a subject. The critic could then simply drop premise (1), revise the argument, and claim that since all *conscious* states have a subject, there are no subjectless conscious states.

But could there be conscious states (intentional or not) without a subject? Premise (2) denies this. But why should we accept premise (2)? There is something like a standard argument for the claim that there is no (intentional) consciousness without subjectivity. Here is a version given by Sartre in his *Being and Nothingness*: Conscious experience, says Sartre, is not simply there like a tree in a field. A tree is a tree no matter whether someone is looking at it or not, but an experience that is not experienced by someone is not an experience at all; rather, it's simply nothing. So, if something is a conscious event, it must be conscious for someone—this follows directly from the concept of experience. Sartre calls this the self-givenness of the experience. This self-givenness is no further fact about an experience, but it is what constitutes any experience *as an experience*. If conscious experiences lacked this self-givenness, they would not be conscious experiences in the first place. So, consciousness necessarily presupposes an immediate self-consciousness, or a subject to which the conscious state is given:

*This self-consciousness we ought to consider not as a new consciousness, but as the only mode of existence which is possible for a consciousness of something. Just as an extended object is compelled to exist according to three dimensions, so an intention, a pleasure, a grief can exist only as immediate self-consciousness.*³³

Before we can assess this argument, we must take a closer look at the term 'subject'. It's important to note that this subject doesn't need to be metaphysically real, like a Cartesian soul—conscious states don't require *this* kind of subject. All that is meant by 'subject' is a structural property of the state of consciousness: that experiences are conscious states *for someone*. More precisely, we should say that all intentional states have a subject insofar as they exhibit *subjectivity*. This is not to say that all consciousness presupposes an explicit act of self-consciousness. It merely means that within every conscious experience, there is an immediate and pre-reflexive awareness of myself as the subject (in a very minimal sense)³⁴ of this experience. This quality has sometimes been called the 'mineness' of experiences: the fact that in every conscious experience, there is an immediate and pre-reflexive awareness

³² See e.g. Searle 1983: 1. For a defense see Crane 1998.

³³ Sartre 1956: liv.

³⁴ See Nagel 1986: ch. iv and Strawson 2011 on the idea of a minimal self.

that *I* am the one having this experience.³⁵ If I see the cup of coffee on my desk, I can't be in doubt about who is seeing the cup. Rather, I am immediately and implicitly aware that it is I who is seeing it. Of course, I can reflect on my experience and make its mineness explicit, but this explicit recognition doesn't create the mineness. It only manifests what has been there all along. So, premise (2) is not a metaphysical claim, but a claim about an essential phenomenological feature of consciousness.

Granted now that Sartre's conclusion is only that all conscious experiences have a quality of mineness (and not a metaphysically real subject)—is this still a good argument, and should we accept premise (2)? I don't think so. For one, it's not actually an argument, but rather a rephrasing of the original claim. If Sartre says that consciousness without a subject is impossible because it is necessary that consciousness is consciousness of itself, no new information is provided. The question remains: *why* is this necessary, and as long as we have no answer to this question, the standard argument doesn't support the no-subject theory but simply states that it is wrong. But what's more, the mystic will flat-out deny Sartre's claim: You may say that there are no subjectless states of consciousness, but my experience says otherwise! If we believe the mystics, the immediate mineness of conscious states is not a necessary condition for consciousness per se, but only for the particular state of consciousness we usually experience in everyday life that we usually confuse with consciousness itself. Making the same point, William James remarks that mysticism teaches us that 'our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different.'³⁶ And what distinguishes these mystical states of consciousness from other, mundane states may well be their lack of mineness. The difference between normal and mystical consciousness, then, is that in mystical consciousness, the subjectivity of consciousness is lost.³⁷

So far, we have established that no successful argument has been provided for the claim that subjectless conscious states are impossible; and we have seen that there is reason to assume that mystical experiences actually are subjectless conscious states. From here, it's only a short way to an explanation of why mystical experiences can't be conceptualized and thus are ineffable:

- (4) Conscious states without subject must also be objectless.
- (5) Concepts can only be applied to objects.
- (6) Therefore, concepts can't be applied to conscious states without a subject.

³⁵ As Dan Zahavi (2005: 119) puts it: 'One common feature is the quality of mineness, that is, the fact that the experiences are characterized by a first-personal givenness that immediately reveals them as one's own. When I [...] am aware of an occurrent pain, perception, or thought from the first-person perspective, the experience in question is given immediately, noninferentially and noncritically as mine.'

³⁶ James 2002: 300.

³⁷ This is also the best way to refute an obvious objection to subjectless states of consciousness: 'But who is having these experiences if there is no subject?' – You are! That is, the specific person you happen to be, but these experiences are not presented to you as *your* experiences.

Let's first take a look at premise (4)—how could we justify it? To begin with, we need to see that premise (4) doesn't mean that objectless states are contentless (because if they were, they wouldn't be conscious states in the first place). Rather, it means that their contents are not presented in a mode of consciousness that instantiates a subject-object-structure. Remember that intentionality is a two-place relation between a phenomenal subject and a phenomenal object.³⁸ But subject and object are mutually dependent: an object is only an object insofar as it is an object for a subject, and a subject is only a subject insofar as it is the subject of an object-experience. Compare this to the relation between a mother and her child: The mother is only a mother insofar as she has a child, and the child is only a child insofar as she has a mother. Therefore, if the phenomenal subject dissolves, the phenomenal object will vanish, too. Not in the sense that the object of consciousness is destroyed, though; rather, it ceases to have the property of being a phenomenal object. Again, compare this to a married couple getting divorced: The divorce doesn't mean that they have ceased existing, but that they are not spouses anymore. They have lost the property of being spouses that depended on them standing in a particular relation to each other.³⁹ Likewise, in a conscious state without a phenomenal subject, the content of consciousness will lose the property of being a phenomenal object (it won't be experienced as object anymore). Therefore, in this sense, subjectless states will also be objectless.

Now, what about premise (5)? Its truth follows from the account of conceptualization given above. Conceptualization is an essential part of constituting an object₂ of consciousness: If I hear the sound of a car passing by on the road outside, I have already applied the concepts 'sound', or 'car' to my perception thereby constituting 'the sound of a car' as the object of my conscious state. To be a phenomenal object (an object₂) is to be interpreted through concepts.⁴⁰ But if mystical experiences are objectless, then there is nothing to conceptualize. In fact, if it is the nature of the mystical mode of consciousness to exclude both phenomenal subject and object, then this very nature precludes any conceptualization. Why? Because conceptualization is only possible for objects of consciousness—but mystical experiences are subjectless states, and a subjectless state is also objectless. No objects, nothing to conceptualize.

So, finally, this interpretation of mystical experiences as subjectless states of consciousness allows us to explain (a) the sense of unity the mystics report, and thereby (b) why mystical experiences are ineffable.

³⁸ 'Phenomenal' because nothing is entailed about the metaphysical reality of either object or subject beyond the conscious state.

³⁹ This is a somewhat liberal interpretation of a claim Kant makes in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, that a unified subject of consciousness is a necessary condition of objects of consciousness per se: 'The synthetic unity of consciousness is, therefore, an objective condition of all cognition. Not only do I myself need this condition in order to cognize an object, but every intuition must be subject to it in order to become an object for me. For otherwise, and without that synthesis, the manifold would not unite in one consciousness.' (Kant 1998: 249/B 138).

⁴⁰ Again, Kant (1998: 249/B 137, my emphasis) concurs: 'An object, however, is that in the *concept* of which the manifold of a given intuition is united.'

(a) If mystical experiences are states of subjectless consciousness, then the sense of unity can be explained as the phenomenological result of entering a state of consciousness in which the phenomenal subject dissolves. Mystical unity doesn't mean that some metaphysically real object we could call 'the self' disappears or merges with some other entity. It means only that the mystic's consciousness switches from a mode that instantiates a subject-object structure to a different mode in which this structural element vanishes. There is no metaphysical loss of self, just a phenomenological shift from one type of conscious state to another. Thereby, the necessary condition for the possibility of conceptualization isn't fulfilled anymore because, without a phenomenal object, the process of conceptualization has nothing to get started on. As a consequence, mystical experiences are still experiences and not nothing (which will come as a surprise to Husserl, Strawson, or Sartre), but since they don't instantiate a subject-object structure, they are not being experienced as *my* experiences. Once the property of subjectivity is lost, the mystic will have a feeling that their self is becoming boundless and all-encompassing, making any distinction between subject and object impossible.⁴¹ You might worry (together with those who reject the no-subject theory) that this is plainly absurd. But we should remember that mystical experiences are often described as inherently paradoxical. This paradoxical character makes sense now, too: it is the result of an incompatibility between mystical and normal modes of consciousness. Normal consciousness instantiates a subject-object structure, and this distinction between subject and object is lost in mystical consciousness. So, mystical experiences are untranslatable into our normal mode of consciousness; given their different phenomenological structures, the two modes are incommensurable.⁴²

(b) Now, finally, we can wrap it all up and explain why mystical experiences are ineffable. As we have seen, to express verbally what I have experienced, I must be able to conceptualize the contents of my experience. For concepts to work, we need a phenomenal object (an intentional object of the conscious experience) to which they can be applied. But objects of consciousness presuppose a mode of consciousness that instantiates a subject-object structure. Mystical states of consciousness

⁴¹ Current empirical research on the neuroscience of mysticism supports this interpretation. Newberg and d'Aquili have shown (Newberg/d'Aquili 1999: ch. 6) that states of mystical unity are typically correlated with a remarkable reduction of activity in an area of the brain they call the 'orientation awareness area'. This area is responsible for determining our position in physical space and with regard to other objects around us. In a way, this is where the boundaries between self and other are drawn – a shutdown of this area might well lead the brain to feel as if there is no distinction between self and other and that all things are one. Similarly, Carhart-Harris (2012 and 2014) has shown that mystical experiences induced by psilocybin are characteristically accompanied by a reduction of activity in the default mode network, the brain's control center where various ongoing processes are organized and integrated into a whole, the self. When the self as the center of neural gravity collapses, the result is a disorganized state of consciousness which is experienced as a loss of self. In his test subjects, Carhart-Harris found a striking correspondence between the feeling of selflessness and activity in the default mode network: the stronger the feeling, the stronger the reduction.

⁴² Stace himself hints at a similar explanation of the paradoxical character of mystical ineffability: mystical experiences are not conceptualizable *during* the experience, but *afterward*, only then the mystics realize that their experiences were inherently paradoxical and can't be put into words *now* (Stace 1961: 297f.).

don't instantiate this structure. They thus lack the property of subjectivity and are objectless – not because they are empty or contentless but because to be an object of consciousness at all depends on a subject of consciousness. In mystical states, there is no subject and therefore, no object. And no objects mean nothing to conceptualize, which in turn means nothing to express. As soon as my consciousness is not consciousness of some object anymore (or something that is experienced as an object), there is nothing left to speak about. So, the nonconceptual theory of ineffability turns out to be correct, just not for the reason that is usually given. The problem is not (as Stace suspected) that the object of mystical experiences is an undifferentiated unity—it is that they have no object in the phenomenal sense of object at all. Mystical experiences aren't nonconceptual because we happen to lack the concepts to understand them. Rather, they are states of consciousness that can never be conceptualized because their very nature makes any attempt at conceptualization futile. They are *transcendentally* nonconceptual: the phenomenological character of mystical experiences undermines the conditions for the very possibility of conceptualization.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL. The author declares none.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares none.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Agam-Segal, R. (2014). When language gives out. Conceptualization, and aspect-seeing as a form of judgment. *Metaphilosophy*, 45, 41–68.
- Arthur, C. J. (1986). Ineffability and intelligibility: Towards an understanding of the radical unlikeness of religious experience. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 20, 109–129.
- Bermúdez, J. L. (2009). The distinction between conceptual and nonconceptual content. In B. McLaughlin (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Mind* (pp. 457–473). Clarendon.
- Carhart-Harris, Robin, et al. (2012). Neural correlates of the psychedelic state as determined by fMRI studies with psilocybin. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the USA*, 109, 2138–2143.
- Carhart-Harris, Robin, et al. (2014). The entropic brain. A theory of conscious states informed by neuroimaging research with psychedelic drugs. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2014.00020>
- Crane, T. (1998). Intentionality as the mark of the mental. *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements*, 43, 229–251.
- Danto, A. (1973). Language and the tao: some reflections on ineffability. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 1, 45–55.

- Davidson, D. (1975). Thought and talk. In G. Samuel (Ed.), *Mind and language* (pp. 7–24). Clarendon.
- Davis, F. (1989). *Caroline: The evidential force of religious experience*. Clarendon.
- de Evans, C. B. (1924). *Meister Eckhart*. John Watkins.
- Evans, G. (1982). *The varieties of reference*. Oxford University Press.
- Forman, R. (1999). *Mysticism, mind, consciousness*. SUNY Press.
- Gäb, S. (2020). Ineffability: The very concept. *Philosophia*, 48, 1825–1836.
- Gäb, S. (2021). Mysticism without concepts. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 90, 233–246.
- Hood, R. (2006). The common core thesis in the study of mysticism. In M. Patrick (Ed.), *Where God and Science meet. Bd. III: The psychology of religious experience* (pp. 119–121). Praeger.
- Husserl, E. (1970). *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology. An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*. Translated by David Carr. Northwest University Press.
- Husserl, E. (2001). *Logical Investigations*. Translated by J.N. Findlay. Routledge.
- James, W. (2002). *Varieties of religious experience. A study in human nature*. Routledge.
- Jean-Paul, S. (1956). *Being and Nothingness*. Transl. by Hazel Barnes. Philosophical Library.
- Jonas, S. (2016). *Ineffability and its metaphysics*. Palgrave.
- Jones, R. (2016). *Philosophy of mysticism. Raids on the ineffable*. SUNY Press.
- Kant, I. (1998). *Critique of pure reason*. Translation by Paul Guyer/Allen Wood. Cambridge University Press.
- Katz, S. (1978). Language, epistemology, and mysticism. In S. Katz (Ed.), *Mysticism and philosophical analysis* (pp. 22–74). Oxford University Press.
- Kellenberger, J. (1979). The ineffabilities of mysticism. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 16, 307–315.
- Mandelbaum, E. (2017). Seeing and conceptualizing: modularity and the shallow contents of perception. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 97, 267–283.
- Marshall, P. (2005). *Mystical encounters with the natural world*. Oxford University Press.
- McDowell, J. (1994). *Mind and World*. Harvard University Press.
- Nagel, T. (1986). *The view from nowhere*. Oxford University Press.
- Newberg, A., & d'Aquili, E. (1999). *The mystical mind*. Fortress Press.
- Peacocke, C. (2001). Does Perception have nonconceptual content? *Journal of Philosophy*, 98, 239–264.
- Pletcher, G. (1973). Mysticism, Contradiction, and Ineffability. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 10, 201–211.
- Plotinus. (1988). *Ennead. Volume VI: 6-9*. A. H. Armstrong (Ed.), *Loeb classical library 468*. Harvard University Press.
- Proudford, W. (1985). *Religious experience*. University of California Press.
- Roebuck, V. (Ed.). (2003). *The Upanisads*. Penguin.
- Schmidt, E. (2015). *Modest Nonconceptualism. Epistemology, phenomenology, and content*. Springer.
- Searle, J. (1983). *Intentionality*. Cambridge University Press.
- Stace, W. (1961). *Mysticism and Philosophy*. Macmillan.
- Strawson, G. (2011). The minimal subject. In S. Gallagher (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Self* (pp. 253–278). Oxford University Press.
- Strawson, P. (1959). *Individuals. An essay in descriptive metaphysics*. Routledge.
- Toribio, J. (2007). Nonconceptual content. *Philosophy Compass*, 2, 445–460.
- Wittgenstein, L. (2009). *Philosophische Untersuchungen. Philosophical investigations*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Zahavi, D. (2005). *Subjectivity and Selfhood. Investigating the First-Person Perspective*. MIT Press.