



Review article

Mysticism and schizophrenia: A phenomenological exploration of the structure of consciousness in the schizophrenia spectrum disorders



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ABSTRACT

Mysticism and schizophrenia are different categories of human existence and experience. Nonetheless, they exhibit important phenomenological affinities, which, however, remain largely unaddressed. In this study, we explore structural analogies between key features of mysticism and major clinical-phenomenological aspects of the schizophrenia spectrum disorders—i.e. attitudes, the nature of experience, and the ‘other’, mystical or psychotic reality. Not only do these features gravitate around the issue of the basic dimensions of consciousness, they crucially seem to implicate and presuppose a specific alteration of the very structure of consciousness. This finding has bearings for the understanding of consciousness and its psychopathological distortions.

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1. Introduction

Mysticism and mental illness are two very different categories, located in distinct conceptual spaces. Yet, there are some superficial connections, e.g., both categories concern consciousness (subjectivity) and unusual experiences. Psychiatric literature has to some extent explored similarities between mystical states (often designated as ‘altered states of consciousness’), hallucinogenic drug-induced states, and global alterations of consciousness, typically ecstatic-confusional or dreamlike conditions encountered in some cases of acute-onset schizophrenia (Buckley, 1981; Deikman, 1971; Gouzoulis-Mayfrank et al., 1998; Nelson & Sass, 2008; Oxman, Rosenberg, Schnurr, Tucker, & Gala, 1988; Podvoll, 1979; Škodlar & Ciglenc̃ki, 2015). By contrast, the literature on mysticism is keen to distinguish between genuine mystical states of ‘unio mystica’ (i.e. an experience of ineffable, boundless sense oneness with the Absolute) and a host of other, often pathological mental states such as euphorias, illusions, delusions, hallucinations, visions, raptures, and trances (Stace, 1960).

In this article, we strive to go beyond the superficial and occasional similarities and explore the structural analogies between the features of unio mystica and major clinical-phenomenological aspects of schizophrenia, notably the disorders of the self, a long lasting focus of our research (Parnas & Henriksen, 2014). Our phenomenological approach is eclectic and not bound to any specific authority or school of thought. Rather, we seek to exploit and integrate different, mutually compatible approaches to achieve a cohesive psychopathological grasp of subjectivity in schizophrenia.

Initially, we wish to emphasize that we do not entertain the absurd position that mystics suffer from schizophrenia (or psychosis) or vice versa. However, mystical states entail profound and complex alterations of waking consciousness that may offer a possibility of a comparative enlightenment, enabling a better grasp of the phenomenological vicissitudes of conscious life in schizophrenia. Such psychopathological understanding may not only have an intrinsic theoretical value but also pragmatic ends such as improving therapeutic efforts and indicating new areas of pathogenetic research.

In this study, we focus exclusively on experiences of unio mystica, leaving aside other mysticism-related phenomena. For the sake of clarity, we address separately three characteristics of mysticism and schizophrenia, i.e. attitudes, nature of experience, and the ‘other’, mystical or psychotic reality, although these characteristics are, in fact, highly interdependent. As we shall see, the issue of self or consciousness is crucially at stake in the discussion of the three characteristics and therefore, in the final section of this essay, we explicitly address the issue of self and structure of consciousness in schizophrenia and mysticism.

2. Attitudes in mysticism and schizophrenia

On the basis of mystics’ self-reports, Steinbock (2007) identified certain typical behavioral and mental attitudes that are adopted by mystics to facilitate the emergence of the mystical experience across history and religious traditions. These attitudes include a distancing from and disinterest towards reality and practical life, a suspension of ordinary ontological assumptions (i.e., phenomenologically speaking, to suspend the ‘natural attitude’ by effectuating the epoché [cf. Overgaard, 2015]), spiritual solitude, and a weakening of one’s sense of self (*dés-istement de soi-même* [Depraz, 2001]). In a seminal work, Stace (1960) also pointed to the cross-cultural and temporal invariance of such attitudes. Most importantly, Stace (1960) argued that for the mystical experience to emerge, it is usually necessary to reach a specific state of mind or, using an old Chinese term, a state of ‘no-mind’ (*wu-nien*), i.e. sort of meditative tranquility in which all sensuous content, imagery, emotions, thoughts, etc. are obliterated from the mind, which thus is empty. Consistently, the Christian mystic Eckhart argued that only by the way of ‘pure detachment’ (2009, pp. 566–575), i.e. by fully freeing oneself from all needs, affections, and interests toward oneself, others, and the world, can the mind become completely empty and receptive of God. Eckhart quotes in this context St. Augustine: ‘The soul has a secret entrance to the divine nature, when all things become nothing for it’, and for Eckhart, ‘this entrance is nothing but pure detachment’ (2009, p. 573).¹

The motif of self-annihilation is a recurring idea in many religions—to obtain an immediate experience of God or to reach salvation or liberation (*nirvana*) as it were, the self must be destroyed. This motif is aptly articulated in Kierkegaard’s religious philosophy: ‘all religion (...) aims at a person’s total transformation and wants, through renunciation and self-denial, to wrest away from him all that, precisely that, to which he immediately clings, in which he immediately has his life’ (Kierkegaard, 1998, p. 248) or, in a more condensed form, ‘self-annihilation is the essential form for the relationship with God’ (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. 984). Remarkably similar considerations can be found in recent philosophical studies of religious experience of the Absolute (Bagger, 2007; Lacoste, 2004; Morgan, 2013). For example, Lacoste described a series of ‘liturgical’ steps involved in facilitating the desired contact with the Absolute. Lacoste based his analysis on Heidegger’s ‘topological’ notion of ‘place’, as inherence in a non-spatial locus of intersecting vital and existential coordinates. The liturgical procedure is a ‘transgression’ because it ‘subverts the dynamics of place’ or, as Lacoste also puts it, “Being-there” [*Dasein*] is bracketed and transformed as being-towards (eschaton) (...). Liturgical experience no longer enables us to identify in ourselves a carnal dimension... confined within this world’ (Lacoste, 2004, p. 39). In brief, emergence of contact with the Absolute (God) requires also here a series of attitudes, particular ways of disposing of ‘self’ and ‘place’ (e.g., isolation, denial of place [*dépaysement*], prayer).

¹ Eckhart’s mystical path does not preclude suffering for, as Schürmann (2001) puts it, ‘the logic of detachment somehow reflects the logic of the way of the cross’.

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